CONTRIBUTOR

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FIGHTING OVER BRUCE LEE
PAUL BOWMAN

ABSTRACT

This article responds to Kyle Barrowman's polemic in this issue against my work on Bruce Lee. Part One of my response sets out the overarching problems with Barrowman's misreading of my work and of poststructuralism. Part Two sets out some of the arguments I have actually made about Bruce Lee, as opposed to those Barrowman imputes to me. Readers principally interested in my own take on Bruce Lee could skip Part One. However, in both sections, the difference between Barrowman's caricatured representations and my actual arguments about Bruce Lee should become clear. In the end, the article assesses Barrowman's call for a rejection both of poststructuralism and of the tendency to read Lee as a proponent of East Asian philosophy.

PART ONE
STRAW BARROWMAN

Preliminary Note: *Kyle Barrowman is an exceptionally vibrant, likeable and intelligent person, a former student with whom I have a longstanding friendly, collegial and respectful relationship. However, based on the tone and content of his article ('Bruce Lee and the Perfection of Martial Arts (Studies): An Exercise in Alterdisciplinarity'), to which the following is a response, readers may not guess any of that. Anyone interested in the specifics of our disagreement should read on through this section (Part One). Readers who are more specifically interested in what I have to say about studying Bruce Lee may prefer to skip straight to Part Two.*

INTRODUCTION
MEMES VERSUS QUOTES

Recently, while looking for visual aids to use in an undergraduate lecture on deconstruction as a tool for cultural analysis, I made a slight error in my search terms. I wanted to find some visually striking quotations from Jacques Derrida, so I decided to see whether any useful memes of Derrida quotations were available online. I duly typed 'Jacques Derrida memes' into my browser and searched for images. Unfortunately, what appeared were pictures of Derrida combined with supposedly hilarious or incisive jokes, such as: 'Deconstruction is when you spell stuff wrong and the wronger it is the deconstructioner it is', and '[Derrida] Thinks language is unable to clearly communicate ideas – writes books to prove it'. There were also pictures of Derrida with captions such as 'I don't always speak in paradoxes, but when I do, I don't', and pictures of celebrities apparently making non-comprehending or amusing statements about deconstruction. Mixed in with these results were memes about other philosophers too – my favourite being a picture of Ayn Rand with the caption: 'Believes collectivism is morally wrong. Thinks everyone else should, too'.

I quickly realised I had used the wrong search terms: what I actually wanted were *quotations*, not just any old 'Derrida memes'. In other words, I had literally asked the wrong question and hence found the wrong thing. So, I searched for Jacques Derrida *quotations*. This provided me with pictures of Derrida alongside actual quotations from his written work.

I begin with this anecdote because, when it happened, it occurred to me that reading Kyle Barrowman's account of poststructuralism – and of my own work on Bruce Lee in relation to it – indeed, of my own work taken as an example of poststructuralism – was rather like reading the unfiltered 'Jacques Derrida memes'. More precisely, it was like reading the work of someone who had *only* encountered such memes, taken

them at face value, believed them to be an accurate representation of Derrida's *actual* arguments (or philosophical, political or ethical positions), and felt the need to challenge and clear away such a silly thing.

Needless to say, the ludicrous caricature of Derridean deconstruction and/or poststructuralism that would arise from reading 'Jacques Derrida memes' would indeed be something deserving of refutation. But the problem with it would be that it would not be the refutation of Derridean deconstruction. It would be the refutation of a caricature – what in times gone by would be called a 'straw man' – a metaphor that is today routinely actualised in the form of memes.

In other words (spoiler alert), the best way to make sense of Barrowman's critique is to be aware that he is, first and foremost, working with and against, and seeking to refute, a *caricature* of poststructuralism. The baseline problem here is that not only does he not seem to realise that it is a caricature, he also does not seem to realise that it is a caricature that he himself has drawn. He may well have read Derrida's work and my own, but he has obviously seriously misunderstood it all, and then made matters worse by extrapolating a horribly off the mark argument from that misunderstanding.

Put simply: *everything* about it is wrong: from the opening claim that Luke White introduced the 'scriptural reading problem' (White is actually evoking my own treatment of that idea in the paper I gave at the Bruce Lee conference); to his own deployment of Derrida's disagreement with Foucault as a prelude to the claim that poststructuralists cannot disagree with each other; to his inexplicable belief that I regard Bruce Lee as a poststructuralist; to the claim that 'alterdisciplinarity' involves a 'claim to community'; to his twisting of my empirically verifiable observation that there is no *immutable* metalanguage into a caricature in which I supposedly claim that there is no metalanguage *at all, ever*; to his eccentric claim that 'two of the fundamental presuppositions of poststructuralism are that the concept of objectivity is an illusion and that the corollary concept of truth is … "metaphysical"' (it is quite simply an abuse of reading to misrepresent poststructuralist or postfoundational ontology like this); to his association of poststructuralism with the argument that 'power regimes' are 'repressive' (Foucault organised an entire book – his most famous work – around an explicit refutation of the 'repressive hypothesis' argument); to his claim that I cannot 'refute a claim made by Derrida' (I can and will); to the idea that I ever suggested that people *cannot* talk to each other across disciplinary boundaries; to his claim that there is *one* simply and unequivocally objectively knowable objective reality that everyone across all disciplines, cultures and contexts can agree upon; to the idea that my (quoted) arguments about the contingent, complex

and contextual character of the notion of 'effective' or 'best' in combat somehow disagrees with certain (quoted) statements of Dan Inosanto, in which we literally argue much the same thing as each other; and way beyond: *everything* about it is wrong. How and why does this happen?

STRAW METHODS

The becoming-meme-like of 'Jacques Derrida', 'poststructuralism' and 'Paul Bowman' in Barrowman's polemic takes place by Barrowman tendentiously curating a heterogeneous array of quotations, simplifying their possible meanings, and then working them over with hyperbolic adjectives and adverbs. Bits and pieces from here and there are thrown together with no respect for any protocols of thoroughgoing or sustained reading. This particularly postmodern form of abuse of context is bolstered by quotations from an array of authors who are explicitly opposed to an imagined mass delusion or undifferentiated entity called 'poststructuralism'. These fragmented caricatures are then deployed as if they coalesce to constitute some kind of evidence, specifically in order to make generalisations about what 'all' poststructuralists do and do not, can and cannot 'logically' argue.

Against this backdrop, 'Bowman' is taken as a representative of some imagined unity called 'poststructuralism' and/or 'all poststructuralists', and the formula is applied. Hence, we keep hearing that 'Bowman *cannot* say A about B, because X says Y about Z'. As if this form of argument were not problematic enough, Barrowman does all of this in a declared attempt to solve some unspecified and yet supposedly terrible problem. We don't know what that problem is, but it is something to do with a herd of sheep called poststructuralism. To make matters even more murky, not only does Barrowman not spell out what the problem is, nor does he clarify the stakes and consequences. Rather, he stages an attempt to wrench together Ralph Waldo Emerson, Ayn Rand and Bruce Lee as 'Western philosophers' (in earlier iterations of this paper, the privileged term was 'American philosophers') – as if this offers any kind of a solution to anything.

This alleged trio are not then deployed to somehow beat poststructuralism by way of a direct confrontation or engagement with it, nor with anything poststructuralism sought to engage, nor indeed anything about poststructuralism at all. Rather, they are yoked together to argue that this trio themselves are all part of a very particular tradition of 'Western philosophy', an individualist and objectivist one; one that is presented as somehow universalist, individualist, true and objectively right, and at the same time somehow *not* local, contingent, contextual or indeed nationalist.

In the end we are presented with what we are told is a 'paradigm' comprised of a collection of mutually incompatible tenets, such as the idea that to be ethical we must all be independent minds and recognize no authority higher than our own perception of objectivity. This is allegedly because there is only one possibly true objectivity and one true unchanging metalanguage about it. All else is 'subjective relativism', or part of the 'paradigm subjectivity argument' (which – although it is apparently the cornerstone of Barrowman's argument – is at no point defined, specified or discussed in the article. Readers are simply referred to other articles to find out what the term 'paradigm subjectivity argument' might possibly mean).

No consideration is given to such elementary and pedestrian matters as what might happen when one independent mind objectively perceives things differently from another independent mind, or of how such claims might measure up to the objectively perceptible cacophony of claims and counterclaims, proofs and counter-proofs, beliefs and counter-beliefs that – in and of itself – constitutes objective and all other simultaneously existing forms of reality. Instead, via an elementary confusion of *signifier* and *referent*, compounded by a radical disavowal of *context*, Barrowman simply asserts rhetorically that 'scholars must be able to acknowledge that there *is* an objectively perceivable reality that serves as our common frame of reference'. Unfortunately, even if things were so simple, the question remains one of whose or which mode of apprehension, measuring, quantifying, demarcating, distinguishing, and discussing reality we are supposed to obviously, objectively, necessarily, ineluctably, and without disagreement, remainder or problem *choose*. Indeed, by the end of his article, Barrowman explicitly advocates quelling and quashing all other perspectives and voices than his own.[1]

STRAW TRUMPING

This is just scraping the surface, the tip of the iceberg of the world of things that are wrong in Barrowman's article. I could go further in

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1   He does so while at the same time trying to argue that scholars such as Qays Stetkevych, Janet O'Shea and Alexander Antonopoulos are somehow in agreement with him, even though there is considerably more evidence that, ethically, politically, theoretically and practically, each of these scholars is explicitly aligned against any such 'all or nothing' positions as the one Barrowman is naively arguing for. In any case, in the works referred to by Barrowman: O'Shea was explicitly advocating the 'antagonistic pluralism' argument of Chantal Mouffe, which is a work of poststructuralist political theory; Antonopoulos's work was based on an exploration of the work of the (yes, indeed) poststructuralist Michel Foucault; while the historian and linguist Qays Stetkevych opposes himself to any 'jargon' that gets in between the reader and the writing, including, without a doubt, the terms and preoccupations of any and all capital-P 'Philosophy' or other 'Positions'.

this manner, but I want to avoid a simple point-by-point refutation here. Instead, I want at least to try to make this relevant and pertinent for a wider readership. And I propose to do so by identifying some of most potentially serious dynamics and implications of this situation. These boil down to its intellectual and institutional politics and ethics (rather than the interpersonal psychodynamics or psychoanalytics of the argument between Barrowman and Bowman).

Let me put it like this. In an ideal world, I would like to just stop here, walk away from and ignore what is essentially an over-egged and half-baked intellectual mess. However, I fear that Barrowman's parody of an argument against a caricature of poststructuralism – one organised by a systematic misreading and misrepresentation of my own work on Bruce Lee – is not simply something that should be ignored. This is because, although it may appear on first glance as merely the eccentric and regrettable outburst of an over-zealous and hasty young scholar, I fear it may also represent the first tentative foray of a certain kind of ideological project into the world of martial arts studies. Consequently, I feel it may be important to say something about what that impulse may be and what is troubling about it, before finally turning to answering and hopefully correcting Barrowman's sustained misreading of my own work on Bruce Lee.

So, to be clear, again: Barrowman's account both of my work and of poststructuralism is wrong. It is wrong in every single respect. It is wrong in terms of what Barrowman says about deconstruction and what he says about my own work, and this wrongness takes the form of twisting what I and other authors have literally and explicitly said and replacing it with meme-like caricatures. 'Poststructuralism' is set up to be ridiculed and destroyed. What is worst in all of this is that it occurs on the basis of a sustained and systematic abuse of elementary processes of reading. To be clear once more: I do not mean 'reading' in any extended or complex theoretical sense (such as you might find championed in the work of a Paul de Man or a J. Hillis Miller). Rather I mean reading as basic competence in information gathering – the kind of 'comprehension skills' that are taught from primary school age onwards.

In the face of this, the question that engages me most is *why*: Why does a particular kind of sustained and consistently incorrect twisting, misreading and misrepresentation of some of the most simple and direct statements I have made about Bruce Lee take place throughout Barrowman's article? To begin to broach the question of why such a kind of 'coherently incoherent' misreading of me and/as poststructuralism is taking place, the first place to look for evidence is within Barrowman's text itself.

One thing that characterises this text is the sheer volume and vehemence of hyperbolical all-or-nothing formulations, adjectives and adverbs used to tarnish me and characterise me as a timid, woolly-brained, unthinking sheep.[2] This is a consistent feature throughout the diatribe sections of Barrowman's article. A range of ad hominem insults are presented as 'engaging' with not just me as an individual, but with me taken as a good example of an entire intellectual tradition. Here, Barrowman calls that tradition 'poststructuralism'. Other polemicists, such as Slavoj Žižek or Jordan Peterson (who are each supposedly 'on the left' and 'on the right' respectively, but who are in most respects two indistinguishable sides of the same coin) have termed the enemy 'cultural studies' or 'postmodernist, deconstructionist cultural studies', and similar terms.[3]

To use his own words, Barrowman calls me his 'whipping boy of choice'. Certainly, lashing out at (while not actually managing to whip) me is an integral part of his project, whose aim is to take down the entire tradition that I am said to represent, and to replace it with something else. That 'something else', as already noted, is a bizarre hybrid mishmash whose mode of address is polemic, and which is supposedly encapsulated or exemplified in the writings of Ayn Rand, an eccentric moralist who championed heroic individualism, was bitterly opposed to collectivities and was a celebrant of capitalism, regarding its ideology or ethos as the font of all ethics. Unsurprisingly, Rand is popular among contemporary proponents of right-wing thought. *And no one else at all.*

The question is: is Rand just any old philosopher – someone who may *just happen* to be a darling of the mainstream white conservative American right, but who Barrowman *just happens* to have chosen *for entirely unrelated reasons*, to single out and prioritise, individually, unilaterally, and independently, via free and rational choice, in ways that are totally unconnected to today's resurgent reactionary right-wing ideology? Or is there something else going on?

Closer inspection of other authors and authorities that Barrowman cites to try to underpin, support and justify his positions reveals one other conspicuous name: Jordan Peterson. Peterson is today instantly recognisable as the contemporary poster-boy of the right-wing North

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2   Earlier versions were worse. The final published version has fewer hyperbolical adjectives and adverbs in it than earlier, more febrile drafts.

3   I have written about Žižek's polemics against all of this at length. I have not yet been moved to engage with Jordan Peterson's reactionary versions of the same – but that is essentially what they are, albeit 'lighter and whiter'.

American backlash against any and all caring, communitarian, or left-leaning thinking. Peterson's enemies, too, are exemplified by such demonic spectral bogeymen as 'cultural studies', 'poststructuralism', 'feminism' and 'Jacques Derrida'. Peterson himself explicitly demonises fields such as women's studies, ethnic studies, cultural studies, and approaches such as poststructuralism, along with thinkers such as Jacques Derrida (who is singled out for particular opprobrium in Peterson's writings). This is because all of these examples allegedly engender outlooks that revel in victimhood. And here is Peterson, in the footnotes of Barrowman's text. Perhaps he is just a mere extra in a crowd-scene. Or perhaps he is more like Cassius in *Julius Caesar*, the witches in *Macbeth*, or 'Little Finger' in *Game of Thrones*.

Of course, the obvious retort to my implied connection of Rand, Peterson, and contemporary reactionary right-wing conservativism is that while Rand may indeed be much beloved of the modern American right, Peterson on the other hand is merely an innocent individualist, who, like Barrowman, openly avows that he would follow no crowd. Yet, at the same time as this, Peterson's 'philosophy'[4] of individual rationality *just happens, every time, on every occasion, in the face of every issue*, to align itself with the position of the dominant socioeconomic class of wealthy white North American males.[5]

In other words, it seems there are grounds to propose that there may be an ideological agenda subtending and exceeding Barrowman's publicly-stated aim of elevating not only Emerson but also Rand and, of course, Bruce Lee to the status of Great Western Philosopher. Whether Barrowman is conscious of this and whether his alignment is intentional or not is another question. But the available textual evidence suggests that reactionary conservative nationalist impulses may be at work in and through his project, if not his conscious intention. My own sense is that Barrowman may principally be drawn to self-help psychologists like Peterson (and indeed Emerson and Bruce Lee) because they seem to offer a corrective to some of the supposed

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4   I put this in inverted commas because it is not a philosophy, it is a psychology. Actually it is **psychologism**.

5   Of course, this class, much like Peterson himself, does not believe in class or accept the primacy of class as a concept. This is because, to this class, class-thinking is, at worst, immanently communist and, at best, opens the door to 'identity politics' via the idea that identity is communal. This logic wants to consign all identity politics to the demonic category of 'self-victimising herd-mentality communism'. Yet, at the same time, the invisible non-class of 'self-made-men' and other individualists frequently claims that it/they/we/ society is under attack from this or that degraded and degrading class – whether that be immigrants, women, intellectuals, lefties, queers, blacks, Muslims, or whomever.

excesses of politically correct scholarship, which emphasizes 'others', 'community', and other apparently terrible terms over such supposedly self-evidently obvious positives as 'self-reliance' and 'independence'.

In what follows I will challenge this ideological orientation. And I will do so by clarifying, in terms that are as simple and direct as possible, what I have actually argued about Bruce Lee. This is very different from what Barrowman claims I have argued. In the end I will come back to some of the ways in which this approach must be regarded as academically, intellectually, morally and ethically superior to any based upon the assorted ideas of self-help pop psychologists, whether left- or right-leaning. It is superior simply because it is more rigorous, respectful of detail, actuality, fact, reality and indeed objectivity than the simplistic reductivism of that old misnomer, 'objectivism'.

PART TWO
COMPLICATED LEE

INTRODUCTION
ARTICULATING BRUCE LEE

To begin again ('same but different'): I have always believed Bruce Lee to be a hugely influential and transformative cultural figure. However, when I was doing my graduate work in the field of cultural studies, I noticed that many of my academic peers did not perceive him in the same way – writing him off as 'merely' a 1970s action film star. So, my initial interest in writing about him was in redressing this situation. This is what drove me to write my two main books that focused on him, *Theorizing Bruce Lee: Film-Fantasy-Fighting-Philosophy* [2010] and *Beyond Bruce Lee: Chasing the Dragon through Film, Philosophy, and Popular Culture* [2013].

However, before all of that, the very first – tentative, exploratory – written academic engagement that I ever staged with Bruce Lee was a conference paper titled 'Enter the Derridean: The Martial Architecture of Taoism as Contemporary Cultural Theory'. I presented this at a conference called 'The Architecture of Philosophy and The Philosophy of Architecture' in 2004. In my abstract I wrote:

> This paper deconstructs the architecture of the Žižekian-Marxist argument that such diverse formations as 'New Age' Western Buddhism, cultural studies, neoliberalism and postmodernism are equivalent reaction formations to 'capitalism'. That is, bluntly stated: in a Žižekian-Marxian paradigm, the 'success' of deconstruction and anti-essentialist cultural theory and politics is equivalent or even identical

to the 'success' of Bruce Lee, his deconstructed kung fu, and his own anti-essentialist theory, politics and strategy, as encapsulated (all too easily, as it were) in the film *Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story*. The paper analyses the architecture of paradigms that draw such differences into equivalence as Derrida and Bruce Lee, Taoism and neoliberalism, and – exemplarily – capitalism and cultural studies. It asks the 'ontological question' that Žižek claims both cultural studies and deconstruction absolutely forbid: What do these things *really* '*have*' in common? And it asks the more 'proper', anti-essentialist question of what does the perspective which sees such equivalence itself project or set up in order to see it? Fundamentally, then, this work reconsiders the architecture of the arguably essential theoretical concept of '*articulation*'.

This was subsequently written up and published under the different title of 'Enter the Žižekian: Bruce Lee, Martial Arts, and the Problem of Knowledge' [Bowman 2006]. I was not entirely happy with this title, but the editor wanted it (because Žižek was popular at that time), so I agreed. But the title was misleading because what I was actually arguing *against* was Žižek. This is because Žižek fostered dismissive and disparaging views of the political and cultural value of anything that was not explicitly 'radically anti-capitalist'. I was certainly neither a disciple of Žižek nor uncritically accepting of his perspectives or arguments. Rather, I wanted to subject them to critical inquiry.

Nonetheless, many people read books by their covers – indeed, by their titles. So, this title (along with that of a book I co-edited, called *The Truth of Žižek* [Bowman and Stamp 2007]) put out the idea that 'Bowman is a Žižekian'. Ironically, anyone who reads 'Enter the Žižekian' will eventually arrive at its conclusion, the final words of which are:

> … the mistake that Bruce Lee made was to believe that what he constructed actually succeeded in going 'directly' and 'immediately to the heart of things'. That is, Lee too (like Žižek) falls into the trap of believing that his own constructions are 'objective', free from 'institution', free from belief, from theory, from myth and fiction – as if simply 'true'. But there is no getting away from the contingency of institution, the contingency of culture. Everything is instituted. And institutions are consequential. As we have clearly seen, Bruce Lee was from the origin a postmodern, interdisciplinary, multicultural and – despite Žižekian dismissiveness of such things – *consequential institution*. The 'event' of Bruce Lee was clearly not simple. Perhaps not 'deep' or 'enigmatic' in any romantic sense, it was nevertheless multiple and complex,

simultaneously mythic and real, both theoretical and practical, equally imaginary and institutional. So, *vis-à-vis* the martial arts and questions of cultural knowledge more widely, what is clear is that the approach must always be supplemented with the awareness that 'An institution … is not merely a few walls or some outer structures surrounding, protecting, guaranteeing or restricting the freedom of our work; it is also and already the structure of our interpretation' [Derrida 1992: 22-23]. So the question will always remain: what's your style?
[Bowman 2006: 36]

All of this was subsequently expanded and developed into the first chapter of my first book on Bruce Lee, *Theorizing Bruce Lee* [Bowman 2010]. Admittedly, the paragraph above was polished and refined; so, for instance, the sentence in which Lee *himself* was said to have been a '*consequential institution*' was changed to the more nuanced claim that Bruce Lee was a '*consequential founder of many forms of institution*' [Bowman 2010: 64]. But the argument was the same.

After publishing *Theorizing Bruce Lee*, I found that I still had more to say about Lee – or rather, more questions and problems that I wanted to explore by way of thinking with, through, for and against the life and times, films and words, and – of course – combat training innovations of Bruce Lee. So, more questions were posed, more papers were written, until ultimately *Beyond Bruce Lee* was born [Bowman 2013c]. However, it was never my desire to become an 'expert' on Bruce Lee, or to claim to offer the definitive last word on him or his legacies. Rather, it was all about *how interesting* a case study he was, as a prism for refracting issues in film-, media-, cultural-, political-, and ultimately martial arts-studies. Bruce Lee was my muse, my anchor and my acid test: my way of thinking and testing the relationships between (claims about) film and culture, fantasy and practice, institution and innovation, etc. He was (and remains) inexhaustibly fascinating to me.

The point is, my academic interest and orientation was always exploratory and experimental. I *used* what I had seen and read of his life and times, work, interventions and achievements, and what had been done with his name, image, ideas, texts and legacies, to *test* different academic theories, propositions, positions and arguments about culture, society and ideology (such as those of Žižek, with which we began). I did this to establish where I stood in relation to the topics, themes and issues that philosophers and cultural studies academics were exploring in their own ways via their own examples.

As my first ever abstract (quoted above) about Bruce Lee shows, I sought to take seriously Žižek's proposition that the 'architecture' of contemporary cultural theory was part and parcel of the same

ideological movements that had produced what he termed 'Western Buddhism' and 'Western Taoism' [Žižek 2001; Bowman 2007a]. Among the reasons I took seriously Žižek's claim that this was all a kind of intellectual mush was because among the things I really did take seriously were Daoism (in my life), poststructuralist-informed cultural theory (in my intellectual formation), cultural studies (as a 'project' that I believed in), martial arts (as serious and valuable practices) and Bruce Lee (as a massively important cultural event and text). I was also intrigued by a question once raised by Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick, who pondered whether she had been drawn to deconstruction because she accepted the anti-essentialist worldviews of Daoism and Buddhism or whether she had been drawn to Daoism and Buddhism because she accepted the anti-essentialist ontology of deconstruction [Sedgwick 2003].

My aim was to use sensitive and well-informed readings of and reflections on Lee as a way to explore the value of academic arguments and philosophical positions. So, I was relating 'Philosophy' or 'Theory' back to the reality (or evidence field) of culture, and testing scholars' claims by analysing Lee, whom I was treating as a considerably more subtle and complex example than many of them would tend to do themselves, for any number of reasons.

None of the thinkers that I entangled in my reflections were pigeon-holed, simplified, stereotyped, disparaged, denounced or dismissed. None were polemically placed in an enemy camp. I used descriptive terms (such as 'poststructuralist', 'Lacanian', 'Marxist', and suchlike), but these designations were never analytically relevant: I never bundled diverse thinkers together and beat them with damning adjectives or adverbs. The work was never simply to pitch 'poststructuralism', say, against 'Marxism' [on which matter, see Peters 2001]. It was rather to discern the most salient arguments of specific thinkers and assess their validity by applying them in the analysis of 'Bruce Lee' in terms of specific questions relating to such matters as invention, institution, innovation, encounters, events, identities, values, and so on.

I am spending the time to explain this in the hope that it illustrates the fact that my approach was clearly *very* different from anything Barrowman either appreciates or carries out himself, as he evidently prefers constructing and polemicizing against straw men, not in order to learn anything about culture, politics, society, or indeed even just Bruce Lee, but rather in order to (appear to) score points against an imagined academic enemy.

POSTSTRUCTURALIST LEE

I have set out these key coordinates of my early academic engagements with Bruce Lee to set the record straight and in the hope that the alert reader will see immediately the abusive mistreatment and misrepresentation of the situation that takes place in Barrowman's diatribe. However, in case this is not yet shining through, and in order to ward off the hugely tempting but possibly petty point-by-point refutation of Barrowman's claims, let me merely focus on one core misreading.

It is this: Barrowman regularly claims that I attempt to read Bruce Lee as a poststructuralist thinker. He writes, at the very beginning, 'my challenge in this essay will be to argue for what I have conceived of as a perfectionist Bruce Lee over and against that which Bowman has conceived of as a poststructuralist Bruce Lee'. He maintains this charge against all evidence to the contrary. In my texts, I have identified ways in which Lee *fails to measure up* to the quality of thinking required to fall into such a category. I have painted him as a multiculturalist postmodern individualist, and also an anti-institutionalist self-help hippy – very much of his era – and there is such ample evidence for such characterisations that I unreservedly stand by them. However, none of the terms I have applied to Bruce Lee necessarily have anything to do with poststructuralism.

Bruce Lee was not a poststructuralist, nor – to be entirely clear – have I ever claimed that he was one. My exploration of Bruce Lee in relation to poststructuralism (or, as I would prefer, deconstruction) starts and ends with questions of institutions. Deconstruction involves the critical interrogation and critique of institutions – institutions of interpretation, principally: instituted ways of reading, ways of interpreting, ways of constructing arguments, and so on. Bruce Lee was intellectually interesting to me in this regard as he was not only a brilliant, ingenious and inspirational onscreen martial artist, but also an anti-institutional thinker. What initially interested me most in this regard were two points: first, the historical specificity of his radicalism (1960s California); and, second, the ways he tried to navigate the paradoxes and problems that arise when one wants to break away from institutionality, and at the same time go on to form another – different – kind of pedagogical relationship or (anti-)institution.

I was always interested by his desire to escape – and to encourage others to escape – from what he regarded as the stultifying effects of hierarchical, convention-bound pedagogical institutions, especially when coupled with his simultaneous desire to continue to operate in the world of teacher-student pedagogical relations [Lee 1971, 1975]. This seeming contradiction reminded me very much of Jacques Rancière's

thinking on pedagogy and politics [Rancière 1991], so I explored both Lee and Rancière in terms of each other [Bowman 2010, 2013c, 2016b].

Lee clearly wanted to break away from *something* to do with conventional martial arts teaching and learning (specifically, the militarized, hierarchical, robotic, production-line approach, historically rooted in the first half of the 20th century, and its end results). But *not everything*. He clearly enjoyed playing the oriental sage. This was noted by many of his contemporaries and subsequent biographers [Hyams 1979; Preston 2007; Inosanto 1994]. Barrowman himself even quotes Lee reciting a Zen parable – unprompted. Bruce Lee often orientalised himself.

Given such self-orientalising tendencies, along with the kinds of books we know that Lee possessed and his habit of passing off the words of his favourite authors as if they were his own, it is clear that Lee preferred to align himself with a vision of the teacher as sage, guru, wise man, inspiration and guide, rather than the drill-sergeant figure that was then-current in the world of martial arts pedagogical institutions (particularly within Japanese and Korean martial arts, at least in the USA at the time [Krug 2001; Nitta 2010]. The authors he most liked to quote, paraphrase or borrow from were primarily interlocutors of East Asian philosophical ideas, such as Jiddu Krishnamurti, Alan Watts, and the unsung author of his all-time favourite expression ('walk on'), Christmas Humphreys [Humphreys 1947; Bishop 2004; Bowman 2013c]. He clearly wanted to be seen as an East Asian wise man. As Barrowman's own mention of Lee quoting a Zen parable shows, he put in considerable work, in interviews, articles and on-screen, *to make sure* that viewers and readers would view him, precisely, as an Oriental Sage (and *not* an 'American' or 'Western' philosopher).

I myself explored Lee's words and recorded deeds not in relation to the national or cultural 'ownership' of Lee but in relation to various problematics, such as those around pedagogy, institutions, knowledge and mastery. I did so via deconstruction not because I thought Bruce Lee was 'doing poststructuralism' but because I thought that the deconstructive approach to the question of what was going on here was most illuminating. In doing so, I sought to cast light on similar histories and problems as they were encountered in different but equivalent ways by other pedagogical institutions, such as the university – the world in which I worked.

What I wanted to do was work out the ways that such institutions as universities dealt with challenges to stability and change. This is because, unlike Žižek, I believe that if you change society's institutions this way or that, there will be significant, meaningful and consequential knock-on effects. Some changes will be predictable,

others unpredictable [Bowman 2007b]. Institutions radiate planned and unplanned effects both within and beyond their own formal spaces and demarcations. If society's institutions become more infused with certain values or principles, this constitutes a significant ethical and political change.[6]

I sought to line up Bruce Lee with and against certain other thinkers, movements and milieu of the 1960s and early 1970s – '1968' was a key evocative date – because it seemed both provocative and responsible to try to historicize Lee's outlooks, beliefs, ideologies, actions and efforts in terms of broader historical contexts and movements. To fail to historicize or contextualise in this way is a mistake, even if such figures or such texts go on to have diverse – even contradictory – effects in multiple contexts around the world and over time. Failing to historicise and contextualise is undoubtedly part of what has led some people to regard Lee as some kind of transhistorically unique genius and to produce hagiographies that seem unaware of the lack of originality of many of 'Bruce Lee's' ideas, skills and innovations.

CONTEXTUAL LEE

When you historicise and contextualise someone's work and words and projects, it often makes them look less than unique, and much more of the zeitgeist. Such is definitely the case with Lee. He lived in a time and place where questioning tradition was in the ascendant. Admittedly, many Westerners who were questioning Western traditions were turning East and walking into precisely the kinds of martial arts clubs that Bruce Lee was critiquing. This irony is what led to a simultaneous erosion and intensification of 'traditional' Asian martial arts practices.

This was also the era of the formation of both deconstruction and cultural studies – along with many other things. So, in my work, I lined up Lee with cultural studies and deconstruction for comparative (and contrastive) reasons. Via this gesture to a historical period, and the possibility or proposal of a shared milieu or zeitgeist, I sought to place Bruce Lee into a context. The context I constructed, as shown in my very first quotation at the start of this discussion, was one suggested by the Žižekian-Marxist challenge that all such things are symptomatic responses to a certain stage of capitalism.

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6   This is an approach to culture and politics that owes much to Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony – a theory that provided the bedrock for the political theory of cultural studies as it emerged in the British context, also during the 1960s. 'Radical' thinkers such as Žižek, in their worst moments, regard anything less than complete proletarian revolution on the basis of the class antagonism to be 'epiphenomenal' or 'interpassive' non-change. I have written about and against this position at length elsewhere [Bowman 2007b, 2008].

I could have formulated the context and the question in other ways, could have posed other questions about it, and could have included other items as part of that context. Any context can be reformulated and reworked on the basis of adding, removing or reconstruing bits of information, regarding it from different positions, premises or values, and having different aims and objectives. The objective inevitability of perspectival variation (context as constructed) is the ontological condition of possibility for deconstruction. It is also the reason why so much can be said and thought about so many things, including someone (or something) like Bruce Lee: what does he become if we are aware of this or that, if we place more significance on this and less on that, if we interpret this word or deed or decision this way or that?

As mentioned, the Žižekian-Marxist critique posed a stark challenge to the political and intellectual value of many of the things that I held dear: cultural studies as a 'political' project [Hall 1992], deconstruction as a 'method' of cultural studies (despite what Derrida repeatedly said about deconstruction not being a 'method' and not having anything to do with cultural studies [Cohen 2003; Bennington and Derrida 2008]),[7] and Bruce Lee as an agent of cultural change. Putting these things under the microscope of Žižek's challenge forced me to ask difficult questions about them. As part of the same process, I was able to put Žižek's own approach under the microscope too.

I have said all of this, many times before. I even say it quite clearly in the passages that Barrowman cites as evidence that I said either the opposite or some caricatured version of it. But, most certainly, Bruce Lee was *not* a poststructuralist. Nonetheless, to add something to my earlier arguments: it remains possible to argue that his energies and orientations can be interpreted in line with an analysis offered by Rey Chow of the status of poststructuralism and postcolonialism as academic fields emerging in more and more universities from the late 1970s.

In her assessment, poststructuralism and postcolonialism in the universities can be seen as part of the long march through social institutions of certain movements and struggles that had started elsewhere – specifically, in post-colonial contexts. So, although Bruce Lee is neither a poststructuralist nor a postcolonialist, the anti-institutional and anti-status quo impulses and energies of both popular and academic movements cannot be cleanly disentangled. A whole lot was changing and emerging at that time (as ever!). Nothing was or is clean or pure. Everything is intermingling, intertwining – although in my visualisation of this situation, I see it all as being less 'like water' and more like what you see when you look at a lava lamp.

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7   Hopefully this answers Barrowman's peculiar question: 'Can Bowman refute a claim made by Derrida?' The answer is, of course, yes. Deconstruction can and does generate a range of methods.

POSTSTRUCTURALISM VERSUS POSTSTRUCTURALISM

I just mentioned Rey Chow. Readers unfamiliar with her work should know that Chow is a superlative and exemplary practitioner of poststructuralist thinking, who is nonetheless often highly critical of many of the arguments and positions of other cultural critics and analysts, including those that certain simplistic and simplifying approaches would lump together as (if) one and the same entity, called 'poststructuralism' or (worse) 'the poststructuralists'. For instance, she has explicitly, and in some depth, disagreed wholeheartedly with arguments made by the likes of the early Kristeva [Chow 1991], Derrida [Chow 1995a], the early Foucault [Chow 2002], and many others. In my own work – especially my work on Bruce Lee but also on martial arts and martial arts studies more generally – Chow has played a huge role, arguably much more significant than Derrida or perhaps anyone else.

It was in Rey Chow's work on the transnational circulation of film and other media, on the problems with and problematics of cultural studies, postcolonial studies, film studies, Chinese literary studies, and more, that I found a subtle and sophisticated set of theoretical tools necessary to make sense of someone – or something – as complex as 'Bruce Lee' (as 'he' exists in and as texts and discourses). And it was also Chow who taught me a huge amount about how to read, use *and critique* such vital and vitalising theoretical forces as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Gayatri Spivak, Slavoj Žižek, Julia Kristeva, and so on. The key is not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. That is, one might say, to absorb what is useful, reject what is useless and add what is specifically your own. The way to do that is through close reading, careful steps, and precise conclusions [Bowman 2013a], not through the production of all-or-nothing binaries which tend to feed a polemical or polemicizing bloodlust (*polemos*) at the expense of relating sensitively (*eros*) to the true complexities and nuances of actual situations and relations [see also Derrida 1996/1998, 1998].

Of course, crude binaries can arise and exert a real influence, even when and where we least expect them – and even when we actively want to militate against them. Derrida, for instance, always insisted that we should resist the temptation to reduce difference to opposition. And yet, as his first translator, Gayatri Spivak, noted in her Translator's Preface to *Of Grammatology*, Derrida himself drew a very strong distinction between written European languages with alphabets and the pictographic written language of Chinese. This constituted an inaugural gesture in Derrida's text, one that Spivak immediately problematized [Derrida 1967/1976]. Put differently, the inaugural gesture of deconstruction in *Of Grammatology* is both *undeconstructed* and *non-deconstructive*, and is one that Derrida's very first translator, in the opening pages of this influential text of deconstruction/

poststructuralism *disagrees with and challenges*. (Very many people have noticed this. It is telling that Barrowman missed it, or that he or his paradigm is not equipped to do anything with it.)

A simplistic or simplifying thinker might conclude from this that because Derrida himself engages in the 'othering' of Chinese writing, and that rather than interrogating this gesture he turns instead to study many canonical works produced in Europe, 'therefore' this is a performative self-contradiction that means deconstruction is 'illogical' and cannot 'logically' exist. (Barrowman is clear: it is our responsibility 'to refuse to countenance performative contradictions or to confer rationality onto self-refuting arguments'. Let's remember that.)

A slightly more sophisticated assessment of the situation, however, might note that although this enabling gesture of deconstruction is undeconstructed and non-deconstructive *in that moment*, and although it is clearly possible to see that Derrida himself turned much of his early attention to influential texts in the European tradition in order to unpick and problematize the ways they were constructed and oriented, this certainly does not make him or his work Eurocentric. Nor does it make deconstruction illogical, self-contradictory, hypocritical or impossible. In actual fact, the approach to reading and analysis developed in *Of Grammatology* is widely acknowledged as having stimulated and orientated a huge amount of anti-Eurocentric work, in the field of postcolonial studies in particular, and more widely [Chow 2001, 2011].

As many (myself included) have argued, one of the key aims of any deconstruction is the drawing into visibility of cultural, intellectual and institutional biases. It is from this that all of the claims about poststructuralist politics and ethics derive. Necessarily, the person who delivers a critique of another's text, position or institution will themselves be creating or relying on a text, position or institution from which to stage the critique. Because it has been *constructed*, this means that it itself can be *deconstructed*. It will be constructed in a time, a place, from investments, ideas, theories, beliefs, ideologies, targets, hostilities, resentments, and all the rest of it. People from other times, places, contexts, and situations *will* see, think, perceive, feel, imagine and theorise *differently*.

There is no 'beautiful soul', looking down, hovering purely, over and above, outside of and uncorrupted by the real low-down dirt and messiness of all manner of social, cultural, ideological and institutional forces and factors. This goes for me as much as it went for Bruce Lee as for Jacques Derrida as for Kyle Barrowman. The spread, success and infamy of Derridean deconstruction at a certain time cannot be divorced from social, cultural and institutional transformations that it both

reflected and was part of. In many ways 'deconstruction' and 'Derrida' (not to mention 'cultural studies' and 'media studies') became scapegoats for moral panics about cultural values and the crisis of the humanities and/or university and/or/as society [Derrida and Weber 1995; Hall 1992, 1990]. Similarly, although there are plenty of hagiographies of Bruce Lee which paint him as a progressive revolutionary and saviour [Little 2001; Bolelli 2003; Bishop 2004; Lee and Little 2018], he has also been held by figures (eminent and otherwise) from Smith and Draeger to many modern-day bloggers, vloggers and online commentators, as having caused a terrible decline, corruption and bastardization of the martial arts [Smith 1999].

INFLUENTIAL LEE

What is clear is that each of the items I initially singled out for comparison and contrast in terms of Žižek's critique – Bruce Lee, deconstruction, cultural studies – had profound and wide-ranging effects in the world. The impacts of Bruce Lee on martial arts cultures and practices are still being felt. His intervention is impossible to measure objectively, because it cannot be demarcated or quantified. The impacts of the inter- and anti-disciplinary approaches of cultural studies and deconstruction (among other things) have similarly reconfigured many academic contexts. There were positive and negative, affiliative and hostile reactions to all of the above. How we *feel* about them is irrelevant. Whether we like them or not, they happened. My interest was in trying to establish and assess their political and cultural significance.

In their respective realms and in different ways, we could say that poststructuralism, cultural studies and Bruce Lee each *altered disciplinarity*. Bruce Lee wanted to rationalise martial arts practices, moving away from 'tradition without reason' and towards a drive for effectiveness and efficiency. Deconstruction wanted to unpick the unarticulated biases that structured Western philosophical traditions. Cultural studies wanted to rethink cultural values and hierarchies in all manner of social and institutional contexts. But (with the possible exception of deconstruction vis-à-vis 'philosophy') they did not proceed in the manner that I once proposed to call 'alterdisciplinary'.

Nonetheless, Barrowman engages with alterdisciplinarity by jamming my *earlier* theorisation of one possible logic or tactic of academic 'political' (qua institutional) intervention into a discussion of my *later* treatment of Bruce Lee. However, alterdisciplinarity was a neologism that I coined (others may have used the term but I cannot find an earlier published usage than my own) as the culmination of a long process of trying to work out how academics in cultural studies might seek to make an effective intervention into any context other than their own

disciplinary confines. In other words, it was the end result of one of my earliest and longest running problematics. It was not the starting point of my entry into what we now call martial arts studies. Both are different. Alterdisciplinarity was animated more by *polemos*; martial arts studies more by *eros*.

As Barrowman notes, I developed my argument about alterdisciplinarity out of frustration with many cultural studies academics' faith in the value of 'critique' as a way to intervene into debates and issues in other academic and cultural realms. Stated bluntly: what is the point in publishing an article about economic theory or policy in a cultural studies journal that is not read by economists or policymakers – especially an article laden down with the arguments of and quotations from more or less obscure theorists, philosophers and scholars they may not know or care to know?

My suggestion was simply that if people such as 'radical' cultural theorists really do care about the political and economic issues that they incessantly hold forth about, then shouldn't they make some effort to engage with the most relevant constituencies – economists, policy-makers, scientists, etc. To be *heard* by people who work in other fields, I argued, you have to *speak in their language*, use *their* arguments, *their* terms, and show – *in their own terms* – or rather, via a persuasive deconstruction of their own terms – how their conclusions may be wrong and why other conclusions should be reached.

It's a simple argument and it may indeed be naïve or impractical, but I proposed it in the context of an ongoing discourse within cultural studies, cultural theory and political theory about 'intervention'. It was offered as a challenge to those who often claimed cultural studies to be a political project and hence sought to intervene into the wider social, cultural and political world. 'Alterdisciplinarity' theorised academics as being streamed and enclaved into discrete disciplinary networks, which do not necessarily bleed into each other or connect up directly (or in terms of the content and knowledge that they produce) with other social and political institutions.

Each discipline has its technical languages and concepts, established processes and protocols of conduct, shared points of reference, residual, dominant and emergent paradigms, methodologies, and metalanguages, and so on. In short, each discipline has its own language-games. My argument theorised communication across such professionalised and enclaved borders and boundaries as being tricky, precisely because of the differences in all of these matters. Technical languages, metalanguages, disciplinary-specific protocols and standards of verification and proof, and so on, may all work to oil the wheels of communication between people who share the conventions, the

insider-knowledge, and the investments and values of the shared projects of the disciplinary discourse. But the flipside of a shared technical language and investment in a project is that none of it is necessarily transparent to those who are not fluent in it all. Sharing in common, the production of an 'inside', also produces an exclusion, an 'outside'.

Communication across disciplinary boundaries is tricky. In my mind I had images of unapologetic high theorists arguing the toss with quantum physicists and neuroscientists about the kinds of things cultural theorists want to argue about, such as 'phallologocentricity', for instance. While it is not impossible, even today, to argue that something is phallologocentric, it would involve quite a labour of explanation and translation to explain it thoroughly to anyone outside of psychoanalytically-informed cultural theory. This is because different discourses and different communicative communities and contexts have different paradigms, languages and metalanguages. There is not one paradigm and not one metalanguage. There are many. Which means that there is not one overarching one, but there are several, some of whose adherents may even believe that they are following the one true paradigm, the one true approach. Barrowman's misunderstanding of all of this really is truly spectacular.

Barrowman believes that he has found, or constructed, his own personal one true paradigm with his hybridisation of Rand and Emerson and his claim that their 'philosophies' are in line with each other, and that Bruce Lee's 'philosophy' is in line with theirs too. Certainly, we have already established that Bruce Lee's thinking is organised by an anti-institutional impulse (along with a few other impulses, such as the drive to self-orientalise, to self-aggrandize, to play the wise old sage or guru, to publicly disparage all other approaches to martial arts than his own, and so on). We have also established (as we always knew) that his thinking falls far short of the form, content and quality of poststructuralism.[8] Does this mean he measures up to or can be aligned with Barrowman's newly minted hybrid seam of American philosophy?

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8 Nonetheless, it is only in one footnote that Barrowman notices that in one free-standing book chapter I argue explicitly and at length that Bruce Lee and Jacques Derrida could not possibly be said to be aligned in their approaches, styles, ethics, pragmatics or conclusions. It is perhaps only because that book chapter is focused so entirely, for so long, and so explicitly on the question of what kind of martial art deconstruction would be if it were really a martial art, that my argument finally, briefly, gets through what otherwise appears to be a form of reading (or refusal to read) characterised by a hypertrophic confirmation bias. Unfortunately, in perceiving it, Barrowman classifies what is actually the tip of an iceberg as being a small piece of floating ice, and he deems it to be yet another instance of Bowman contradicting himself – when in actual fact it is consistent with everything I have ever argued in that regard.

BRUCE LEE, AMERICAN PHILOSOPHER

Occasionally, Barrowman paints an interesting and significantly different picture of Bruce Lee to any that have been painted before. In a paper he gave at the 'Bruce Lee's Cultural Legacies' conference in July 2018, he went even further than he does in the present article, lining up passages from thinkers such as Emerson, Rand and others alongside passages penned by Lee, suggesting that they share so many similarities in form, tone and content that they often feel as if each could have been written by any of the others. Then as now, Barrowman made this claim in order to situate Bruce Lee's manner of thinking and writing in relation to an *American* tradition, rather than – as is the more usual tendency – to associate Lee with *East Asian* thought and philosophy.

All of this is extremely provocative and stimulating, although I feel he may be trying to do too much at once in asking readers to (1) revaluate the status of Emerson, (2) accept Rand's thoughts and arguments as being of equal status to those of a revalued Emerson, and (3) place Bruce Lee on the same newly-mainstreamed level, as a bona fide American Philosopher.

So, let us start from the more modest and defensible observation, that Bruce Lee's words often read a lot like Emerson or Rand. This in itself gives ample food for thought. From my own perspective, although I have often reflected on Lee's reliance on Western-authored, English-language treatments of East Asian philosophies as the sources of many of 'his' ideas, I had never reflected on the similarities between Lee's ways of thinking and writing and *any* figures in one or another American tradition. So, Barrowman's argument struck me as hugely interesting, adding extra dimensions, and raising extra sets of questions. Thanks to this argument, Lee proves himself to be unfolding once again as an 'object of knowledge' rather than an 'object of consumption': a text that is never finished, never exhausted, and from which ever more meanings and significances can be produced [Knorr-Cetina 1981; Spatz 2015].

Although I had long read Bruce Lee's texts as being aligned with (or as trying to be aligned with) a Daoist orientation, via his self-conscious identification with a Daoist tradition of thought – in other words, *although I had read Bruce Lee's texts with absolute fidelity to his own explicitly declared and perceptibly obvious intentions and other actions* (such as teaching courses on East Asian philosophy to Linda's class at college, etc.) – Barrowman's repositioning of Lee as aligned with an American philosophical tradition reads him against the grain of his own authorial intention. This is ironic because, relentlessly railing against 'the poststructuralists' (especially Roland Barthes), Barrowman has always argued for the primacy and sanctity of authorial intention as being the first and last word on what a text means and how it should be

read. Yet his own reading of Bruce Lee (to use one of his own phrases) 'shockingly and affrontingly' transgresses all of that. In providing a 'corrective' reading, he constructs a completely foreign and 'other' Bruce Lee.

This 'American othering' of Lee unarguably goes against Lee's own authorial intention. Admittedly, authorial intention is often tricky to establish (to say the least), especially in the modernist literary texts that Barthes studied [Barthes 1977] or across the vast historical, linguistic and cultural chasms from Plato/Socrates to the present that Derrida discussed [Derrida 1987]. Consequently, any claim we make about the intended meanings of authors must derive from assessing all of the available, relevant and most pertinent *textual* evidence. Things may become even more difficult when we have to deliberate what is relevant and what not, what is pertinent, what constitutes evidence and how that evidence is to be read. But in this case, things are pretty clear-cut.

Deconstruction's obsessive attention to such crucial matters has led to it being written off as too digressive or too excessive to be 'useful' in some fields [Akerstrøm Andersen 2003]. However, by the same token, it is also what has led to it being regarded as of the utmost usefulness and practicality in other fields, such as law, legal studies and jurisprudence [see Critchley in Bowman 2003].

Barrowman's rewriting of Lee goes against his authorial intention insofar as this can be reconstructed from historical evidence and thereby undermines Barrowman's premises so completely that it not only blunts but actually breaks all of the axes he ceaselessly grinds against poststructuralism. We will see whether, upon reading this, Barrowman will immediately implode in a puff of scuppered logic, which of course should happen if, as he regularly asserts, it is simply impossible to continue whenever something logically contradictory appears to have happened. Or maybe – just maybe – the world (or at least the process of theory development) doesn't work like that.

In any case, Barrowman seeks to paint Lee as a successful or perfectly fine example of a certain American tradition of thinking and writing. This proposed 'tradition', itself running from Emerson to Rand to Lee, may strike some readers as either controversial, or entirely invented in Barrowman's own mind, or motivated by some agenda. But in aligning Lee with these 'Americans', he evidently feels that it satisfactorily redresses 'my' painting of Bruce Lee as a poststructuralist and everyone else's painting of him as a champion of East Asian thought. Of course, I never painted Lee as a poststructuralist. Indeed, I have always – from the outset – painted Lee as a rather limited critical thinker, considerably inferior to any recognisably poststructuralist thinker.

Against this, the fact that Barrowman regards Lee's thought as apparently unproblematic once it is read as a kind of Emersonian or Randian philosophy should raise alarm bells about rigour. If the cool-sounding, vaguely Daoist, largely borrowed, self-help new-age formulations of this egocentric 1960s hippy Hollywood wannabe can somehow pass as high-level critical thinking in the Emersonian or Randian tradition, then, frankly, that should tell us everything we need to know about this tradition or paradigm. It is 'lite'.

Appropriately but unfortunately enough, we see this 'lite' approach to thinking, analysis, and communication reflected in Barrowman's work. After 'poststructuralism' has been filtered through the simplifying binarizing prism and against the drag factor of his own organising rubric, we hit rock bottom with claims such as 'the fundamental presuppositions of poststructuralism are that the concept of objectivity is an illusion and that the corollary concept of truth is … "metaphysical"'. This is absolutely incorrect, as is virtually everything else Barrowman says about 'poststructuralism'. There is not space to give another 'Deconstruction 101' lecture here.[9] But put it this way: in my own most sustained engagement with 'poststructuralism' – or my own most 'poststructuralist' moment – in the pages of *Post-Marxism versus Cultural Studies* [2007] – the word 'illusion' occurs twice, and never in relation to objectivity, truth, or reality.[10]

So, let me be clear, for readers who have not read a lot of poststructuralist work: Barrowman's caricature of a poststructuralist position or argument *categorically* bears *no* resemblance to *any* argument of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, or any other poststructuralist thinker. Period. It does however have all the hallmarks of the most febrile and reactionary, confused and uncomprehending first wave of responses to the first English-language translations of certain French thinkers, especially, of course, to the work of Jean Baudrillard.

But Baudrillard was a *postmodernist* thinker, a rather pessimistic thinker of the media age, and was working within a different discourse and different set of problems. This is not to say that Baudrillard should be dismissed, of course. Many of our most contemporary social and political, pragmatic and epistemological problems seem to have been predicted, theorised and analysed by the work of thinkers like Jean Baudrillard in the 1980s. Think of the claims and counterclaims about what is and what is not 'fake news' and indeed what 'fake news' *is*, which emerged around the time of the election of Donald Trump as president of the USA. Perhaps we have written off Baudrillard too soon.

Nevertheless, let's stick with Derrida. Derrida responded repeatedly and at length to the frequent accusations of his nihilism, of his alleged lack of belief in reality or objectivity, and so on, all the way through the 1980s and after [Bowman 2013b, 2015, 2016a]. At great length, he laid out the ways in which these accusations were misguided and misconstrued. Derrida *can* be said to have 'believed in' reality, in the real world, in real people, in having face-to-face conversations with people, in closely studying the texts he loved, in arguing for the social, political, ethical and educational causes he believed in and against people, positions, projects and problems he disagreed with, and all the rest of it. Indeed, he *often* said as much. And he frequently clarified that his ontological proposition was merely that we always have to *read and interpret* the world that we encounter – we always do anyway, whether we're conscious of it or not – so our encounters with everything, including ourselves, are in a sense the same as our encounters with texts. There is nothing to Derrida outside of that.

Importantly, no one is exempt from the necessity and inescapable inevitability of interpretation and of working out how to make sense of things, *particularly* not arbiters of objectivity like scientists and judges [Godzich in De Man 1986: xiv–xvii; Godzich 1994; Bowman 2007b: 43–44]. In fact, the social institutions of 'the scientist' and 'the judge' each require the ever-greater technical refinement of ways of measuring and interpreting reality [Lyotard 1984: 44–46; Bowman 2007b: 21–23]. Hence, the scientist seeks out better technologies to measure and establish the properties of aspects of reality, the judge calls on experts, psychologists, psychiatrists, criminologists, who are regarded as having the technical ability to know the truth or reality of a subject, along with 'reliable' character witnesses regarded as having a requisite level of moral probity to be trusted, and so on.

Each of these – both the technological and moral aspects – is organised by a paradigm and a theory within a paradigm. A piece of scientific kit is in one sense the physical manifestation of a certain theory about which way to visualise and measure what that theory deems analytically pertinent. An expert is schooled in one or more disciplinary approach

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9   For any who desire a point-by-point breakdown of Barrowman's misreading of deconstruction, Evelina Kazakevičiūtė is currently working on a chapter of her PhD that carries this out. This work will in due course appear on Cardiff University's open access repository (ORCA).

10   One occurrence is this: 'secretly Rorty buys into the philosophical illusion that philosophy is a subversive and dangerous activity' [Bowman 2007: 132]; the other is a quotation from Lola Young, in which she says 'It is an illusion to believe that cultural studies could ever become something other than institutionalized once it set foot inside an institution: there is little scope for transgression or operating outside of disciplining structures and practices in most universities' [Young quoted in Bowman 2007: 187].

to a subject. All of these are *contingent, historically specific, and variable.* A different expert may well have a different paradigm and methodology, and hence produce different results that point to different verdicts.

None of this ever stays the same. The history of science is littered with discarded theories and methods that were once regarded as objective truths and realities [Kuhn 1962]. Psychological paradigms and methods of establishing reality vary widely, even wildly [Foucault 1976, 1995; Ronson 2011]. And this ineluctable truth, it seems, is true of all things. If there is one objective reality that we can somehow prove to be true, then how is it that there is no global consensus on such matters as the best diet, the best exercise regimen, the best way to teach, the best way to train, the best way to fight, the best way to think, the best way to understand things – anything?

To bring this back to Bruce Lee: readers will most likely be aware that he famously posed the rhetorical question: as we only have two hands and two feet, how many ways to fight can there be? His answer: one, obviously! We just need to work it out. The actual empirical answer given by the world, however, is this: thousands, possibly millions, possibly billions, in ever-expanding, ever-changing permutations and permeations.

Given Lee's limited and often faulty reasoning, a 'logical'/Barrowman (Boolean) option might be to discount, dismiss and trash Lee's [*insert hyperbolically judgemental adverb here*] way of thinking and entire project, *tout court.* My way, however, has always been to stage a close analysis of the argument, the logic underpinning it, explore its vicissitudes, assess it in terms of a sense of its historical and cultural contexts, the grudges or problems that seemed to inspire it, the imperatives it seemed to be animated by, and (in the case of Bruce Lee) the fact that, whether right or wrong, idealistic or simplistic, it was so hugely influential in the ongoing movements of the martial arts world.

In other words, I have explored Bruce Lee's thinking and its very real cultural consequences or legacies. There is no need to cover the same ground again here. Similarly, this is not the place to discuss jurisprudence, science or objectivity 'in general'. I have done so at some length elsewhere, too, in work that was informed by multiple poststructuralist scholars [Lyotard 1984; De Man 1986; Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Weber 1987; Godzich 1994; Bowman 2007b]. One wonders why Barrowman neglects to discuss me or any of the other authors on whom my own work relies on any of the points he raises.

One also wonders about the status of 'objectivity' in his work. For instance, he neglects to provide a single example of a pertinent unchanging universally known objective truth. Claims about the

objective obviousness of observations and perceptions, derived from a 'philosopher', without even cursory reference to anything outside of her texts (such as studies of perceptions in relation to objectivity, perhaps, or Boolean versus fuzzy logic) quite frankly fly in the face of science – indeed scholarship – itself. To claim that *objectivity is obvious and that obviousness boils down to a perception* is to occupy a fundamentally *anti*-intellectual and *anti*-philosophical stance. It amounts to anti-science, anti-scholarship, and an anti-intellectualism that not only opens the door but actively encourages hostility towards dissenting voices, such as those based on different perceptions.

In Barrowman's rendition, 'objectivism' can be said to boil down to a range of refusals. It is all about what you *cannot* think or say, what is *not allowed* to be countenanced or taken seriously. Much like Barrowman's inability to perceive that I really have not depicted Bruce Lee as a poststructuralist, or indeed to perceive that there isn't really *one* poststructuralism, the 'philosophy' of objectivism appears to be working as a shield against looking at actual examples or fields in which the constitution of objectivity is explored as a possibility, such as any branch of science, whose paradigms, as we know, frequently change.

Is this because science is perfectionist? Maybe. 'Perfectionism' in the sense of always striving to close the asymptotic curve between knowledge of the real and the real or reality 'itself' could be one way of expressing a certain ideal of all science. Similarly, of course, the poststructuralist political philosophy of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (whose work has always informed my own 'poststructuralist' thinking but which Barrowman never engages) discusses the idea of 'perfectibility' in the democratic realm on multiple occasions and in great theoretical depth [Mouffe 1996, 2005]. But so fully has any counter-example that might problematise his own picture been pushed down (repressed?) that nothing like this ever surfaces in his work. Rather, throughout his work, Barrowman directs his attention to a philosophy of *human* self-perfection. In other words, this 'philosophy' is apprehended and applied by Barrowman as little more than a repository of superego injunctions, prohibitions and self-help mantras. Yet this seems appropriate: for this entire 'philosophy' actually really only has the hallmarks of pure pop psychologism.

PERFECTIONIST LEE

Bruce Lee was a perfectionist, we are told. In 'philosophical' terms, this is said to involve the tenet that humans are already immanently 'perfect' and should be judged on the basis of their individual decisions and the moral use of their intellect. In psychological terms, perfectionism is a character trait, sometimes associated with obsessive compulsive disorders. The philosophical tenet that individuals should strive to

actualise their perfection would seem to translate rather easily into the world of self-help mantras, sayings and platitudes of the type often employed and clearly enjoyed not only by Bruce Lee but also by contemporary television adverts for anything from buying insurance to wearing trainers to buying sanitary towels.

Appealing to a self-actualisation ethos has been picked up and used by everyone from pacifist post-Spinozan philosophers to the 'be all you can be' advertising slogans of the military [Brown 1997], to 'thought for the day' soundbites of all orders, and way beyond. It is certainly not the exclusive property of any one philosopher, and certainly not Ayn Rand. If anything, over the last few decades, one might say that, philosophically- and objectively-speaking, this terrain has been occupied by philosophers and theorists informed by the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze. Indeed, it is very hard to find *any* positive feel-good messages in Rand, whose work is made up principally of embittered rants against a world that is regarded resentfully as being not as it 'should' be.

But enough of Rand, for the moment. Let's return to Bruce Lee. Bruce Lee was certainly physically and choreographically astonishing. But *perfect*? Or *becoming* perfect? *Physically, intellectually or morally*? There are so many issues and problems with these propositions that I am going to have to limit myself to merely posing some questions – questions whose explorations would lead us in some very different directions to those of people who want to read Bruce Lee as either objectively or subjectively perfectionist.

For instance, if Lee was on a path of perfectionism, how do we square this with the fact that he had surgery to remove the sweat glands from his armpits *for entirely cosmetic reasons* (to look good on film), took steroids (again, for reasons of cosmetic vanity), would not stop taking recreational drugs despite doctors' orders, reputedly had extramarital affairs, *over*-trained and also trained so incorrectly as to encounter a potentially life-changing injury while performing what should have been a straightforward and uncomplicated lift? He was also reputedly constantly frustrated that, despite his own best (self-invented) efforts, he could not add muscle mass to his legs. What kind of perfectionism is *any* of this? It all seems to align 'being perfect' with immense narcissism, surgical self-modification for vanity, chemical experimentation, and conscious and deliberate infidelity (aka 'hypocritical self-contradiction'), transgressing vows one consciously made, uncoerced, by oneself.

Of course, none of this is relevant to *my* reading of Bruce Lee, which is focused on exploring the cultural impact of his films and texts; but it is hugely significant to Barrowman's approach, which focuses on a fetishized individual called Bruce Lee, someone we are encouraged to believe we could possibly have unmediated access to the truth of, and who we are enjoined to place on a pedestal.

More pertinent to me, or my approach, is using what we know of Lee and his effects to think through issues, questions and problems within culture, or at least within cultural studies. One of these may perhaps be the question of 'individualism'. Barrowman wants to read Lee as an exemplary neoliberal self-entrepreneurial subject. And that's fine: such subjects exist, and Bruce Lee's time and place was arguably their ideological crucible.

Yet, on the matter of Lee's perfectionist, moral, self-determining individualism – and, reciprocally, on not following the pack, it needs to be asked: if Bruce Lee was an individualist, how did he become obsessed with being famous – as famous as Steve McQueen? And how could it possibly be said that Lee's 'personal' or 'individual' drive for fame was not an expression and outcome of the shared dream for fame that is fostered in a culture that worships celebrity? Objectively speaking, how many people have flocked, like Lee, individually yet *en masse* to Los Angeles, with a shared dream of making it big in Hollywood? Individualism is a collective phenomenon. It is mass produced. And it cannot be consistent or coherent all the way down or all the way through. All individuals are constituted collectively, reliant on others, in and of, within or from, and always in relation to a group.

And finally: if Bruce Lee was such a great objectivist thinker, then how come the reality of combat has never come to be universally agreed as being simple and direct? Or, put differently, how come no one can agree on what 'simple' and 'direct' looks like, means, or is enacted in any or every context? How come jeet kune do itself had *multiple* strategies for entry, and exists in so many competing forms across different schools? Shouldn't there be only one 'obviously' true manifestation of JKD?

These are just some of the many questions that occur to me, but there is neither time nor space to examine properly here. Nor is there really any need to do so, as I have already discussed almost all of these matters before, in great detail and at great length, across several books and multiple chapters and articles.

CONCLUSION
FACING UP TO REPRESSIONS

In conclusion, phrased as simply as possible to try to limit the possibility for misinterpretation, let me say that I agree that we could and should reflect further on the status of Bruce Lee as emerging from, within and feeding into different discourses, confluences, contexts, impulses and orientations. As I have argued before, to borrow a formulation from Roland Barthes, Bruce Lee is eternal to me and others not because he means one thing to many people but because he means many things to any one person. Barrowman sometimes expresses annoyance or irritation at the claiming of Bruce Lee for this or that group or identity – whether that be an ethnic, class, regional, national, or any other kind of group or identity. *And yet* he wants to somehow address that mistake or crime by making exactly the same (re)claiming move himself: by claiming Bruce Lee for a very particular seam of American thought – a seam that Barrowman seems to want to claim he has merely 'discovered', but which he is clearly keen on inventing and establishing, himself.

It is well known that historical knowledge is never neutral. Historical facts do not just sit there, inert and innocent. Quite to the contrary, historical material is always worked over, always configured in certain ways, always called into the service of this or that narrative, this or that identity, ethos or project [Said 2005]. Derrida called it *teleiopoeisis*: the manipulation of ideas of history to paint a picture of the imagined journey we have taken from the past to the present, an imagined journey that implies an identity for 'us', an orientation, and a trajectory – history is always used as a story about where we should be going [Derrida 1997; Mowitt 2003].

So where have we been – or where do we think we have been – and where 'therefore' do we think we should (or could) be going? I agree we have often associated Bruce Lee's thought and ideas with Eastern philosophy – or, in my own reading of the situation, with Western translations, interlocutors and interpreters of Eastern philosophy. Yet, couldn't we – shouldn't we – articulate his thinking with an American tradition? If not, why not?

If we want to do this, then we have a responsibility to ask *which* venerable American philosophers would seem to be appropriate, and we have a responsibility to give reasons for why we are doing this work. Barrowman proposes that he chooses to compare Bruce Lee to Emerson and Rand for two reasons: first because Lee's words seem to suggest that he has a 'profound affinity' with these 'arch-individualists'; and second because Emerson and Rand have been 'repressed' within the scholarly world. Barrowman implies that both Emerson and Rand, and therefore, by the same token, Bruce Lee, have been 'repressed' by the university

academic environment because of the vindictive power of a left-leaning politically-correct consensus.

However, I would propose that the real reasons for the 'exclusion' of Emerson and Rand from the grand canon of American Philosophy are somewhat more prosaic – and we can see this clearly if we accept Barrowman's argument and add Lee to their number. Doing so helps to clarify why these thinkers may have been excluded from the university philosophy syllabus. Looking at all three in terms of each other, the question emerges clearly: might it be that they never made it onto Philosophy 101 primary reading lists *because they are not very good thinkers?*

But, the retort will come: judged by what standards? Academic standards are always biases. Choosing a canon or writing a reading list for a syllabus always involves choosing what one believes to be the best and excluding things deemed inferior, irrelevant, or otherwise not pertinent. So, posed a different way, the question is: why *would* anyone expect texts by arch-individualist perfectionist objectivist 'philosopher' Bruce Lee to appear on any university syllabus? While this arch-individualist may have offered cutting edge 'zeitgeisty' anti-institutional formulations in a single martial arts magazine article, this does not constitute adequate grounds for becoming part of a great canon of philosophers. The fact that Lee actually – shall we say – seemed to 'borrow' most of his ideas from other sources does not help either. Where are we left when we realise that this self-help individualist simply helped himself to the work of others?

To be clear, then: maybe this is precisely why Emerson (perhaps) and Rand (definitely) are excluded from the philosophy syllabus: *because what they tout is neither challenging philosophy nor even very stimulating moralistic pop psychologism.* To attribute blame to a politically correct cultural studies consensus is to rely on concepts already rejected (e.g., 'hegemony'), to overlook the fact that political correctness is relentlessly interrogated, debated and disputed within cultural studies itself, and to blame *one* disciplinary field (cultural studies) for the exclusion of something (Emerson, Rand, Bruce Lee) from *another* disciplinary field (philosophy). Indeed, it is also to misrecognise a friend as an enemy. Cultural studies is one of the very few disciplinary fields likely to have the capacity, inclination and ethical orientation *vis-à-vis* 'difference' to offer the slightest hospitality to Rand, just as it has been hospitable to Bruce Lee.

But if we do feel the need to respond to Barrowman's demand to approach Bruce Lee in terms of the resources of an American Western – rather than East Asian or European – tradition, then we also have to ask what other resources there might be. Who are the most appropriate American philosophers to use or to 'relate' (or *articulate*) Bruce Lee to?

The first American philosopher that springs to my mind is Richard Rorty – who, like Lee, argued for pragmatism in all thinking and the eradication of all pompous or pseudo-profound ideas.[11] Or, if we have to go back to an earlier time, before American thought became corrupted by European influences like poststructuralism, perhaps Barrowman might allow himself to accept Charles Sanders Peirce's arguments about our complex linguistically determined and hence contingent and cultural access to reality.

From a slightly different angle, there are also thinkers like Donna Haraway, whose interest in the postmodern technological production of the human relates so directly to Lee's interest in different technologies (weights, electric charges, supplements, chemicals, etc.) to expand 'human' potentials. Or perhaps Judith Butler, whose interest in processes and ideas of social and self-becoming clearly chime with those of Bruce Lee. What about Seyla Benhabib in relation to migration? Or Lauren Berlant's notion of the 'combover subject' – the way we all have of covering that thing about ourselves that we desperately try to hide from public view?

I could go on. There are multiple American thinkers and indeed 'American' traditions. Why choose the ones we do? What is the nature of our investments? How might they themselves be historicised, contextualised, psychoanalysed? In my own work on Bruce Lee, I have always tried to give reasons why – and to interrogate the reasons why – I was exploring this or that thinker or this or that question in relation to Bruce Lee. I have never stuffed my texts full to the brim with adjectival and adverbial *ad hominem* denunciation or hagiographic praise for real or imagined groups, sects, factions, or schools, *en masse* or *tout court*. I have always tried to respect both basic and more advanced protocols of reading (from simple semantics through to semiotics and on to deconstruction), so that I maintain a justifiable sense of what people's positions and meanings actually are, based on the words they say or write, rather than ignoring some and stretching others out of their most obvious – i.e., literal and explicit – senses, whether 'ordinary language' or not. That has been my style and part of my way of trying to be responsible.

But sometimes, especially when faced with a polemical opponent who publicly ties their flag to the mast of the primacy of a crude Boolean 'logic' and declares the irredeemable hypocrisy of any 'performative self-contradiction' – especially one so fixated on an 'all or nothing' approach – it may be necessary to try harder to be simple and direct. If I were to do so in this context, I might start by asking where we are left,

'logically', when we are given the information that Ayn Rand – who railed so much and so bitterly against the supposed evils of reliance on others, on the welfare state, on communal interdependence, on collectivity, and so on – herself took welfare payments? For, what this would mean for an all-or-nothing 'logical' reader is that, despite her entire 'philosophy', by taking welfare payments, Ayn Rand enacted the most perfect performative contradiction of them all: the one that most efficiently, objectively and aesthetically not only practically but also symbolically proved the absolute and unmitigated wrongness of her thinking, and by the same token the true value of the collective, the community, the group, the institution.

So, we can wave goodbye to Rand. She does not qualify to be here. She does not pass muster. Neither according to my standards of rigour, coherence, or value, nor according to Barrowman's own demand for sudden-death exclusion at the slightest whiff of 'performative contradiction'. Good. I am glad. I do not like Rand's writing, nor its nasty implications. But does this mean that I want therefore to shut the door on anything I don't like – to kick Rand and her (performatively self-contradicting) followers out of my life, along with every other approach that I disagree with, until I am smiling and alone with the last woman or man standing?

Absolutely not. Insight, innovation, improvement, development, advance, strengthening, and so on, in the intellectual and academic worlds, all require listening closely and engaging thoroughly and respectfully with others. In this belief, Barrowman and I are actually aligned. It is just that I do not think that one should always try to beat the other. Nor do I even think that one can ever simply or truly know how to 'absorb what is useful, reject what is useless and add what is specifically your own'. Rather, I think that the best one can do is to try to reflect on *why* what seems useful strikes us as such, *why* what seems useless does so (particularly if others do seem to think it is useful), and why one wants to add what one wants to add – and whether that is, in fact, simply one's own.

Put differently, and to mine the reserves of one of Bruce Lee's favourite Zen-style expressions: whereas Barrowman seems to want first to 'fill his cup' with a sense of rightness and righteousness, before beginning, and to empty it only by pouring it down onto his opponents, I tend to think that deconstruction may offer a way to help us empty our own cups, in order to begin.

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[11] See also George Jennings' article in this issue, which links Bruce Lee to philosophical pragmatism.

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