



How Gladiatorial Movies and Martial Arts Cinema Influenced the Development of The Ultimate Fighting Championship

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Abstract

The *Ultimate Fighting Championship* (UFC) was born as a marketing tool for the Gracie family to publicize their style of martial arts, in spite of the fact that it did not fit the image of what a martial art should look like according to cinematic representations. The success of the Gracie family in UFC contests forced the martial arts world to revise long cherished stereotypes regarding what constitutes an effective fighting style. The UFC, however, came under attack when several politicians, including presidential candidate John McCain, campaigned to ban what they considered a 'blood sport' reminiscent of the ancient Roman gladiatorial games. Even after the UFC was able to gain widespread acceptance, it continued to market itself using gladiatorial iconography. This article considers the ways in which the cinematic representations of ancient Roman gladiators as well as martial arts movies have both influenced the UFC, and how they have been influenced by it. Over time, UFC promoters modified the rules in order to encourage the kind of fighting seen in movies, and martial arts films modified their choreography to include the type of techniques performed by UFC fighters. This article shows that a similar relationship exists between UFC and gladiatorial films.

Contributor Note

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Introduction

Two men are engaged in single combat in front of thousands of spectators. At times, their violent performance features blood flowing freely. The loser can signal defeat with a simple gesture of his hand.¹ The fighters have intimidating nicknames (Dunkle 2008: 124).² And like most of their colleagues, they are seen as sex symbols, ultimate specimens of alpha males and the objects of passionate desires among female spectators, and likely among many males as well (Shadrake 2005: 218, 222).³

It would be easy to guess that the men we are speaking of were ancient Roman gladiators, since they fit all of the above descriptions. But the same also holds true for competitors in the modern

combat sport of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA).

Other scholars have noted the parallels between ancient gladiatorial spectacles and modern sports (Baker 2000 and Shadrake 2005). As we will soon see, in no sport are the parallels as dramatic and appropriate as between gladiatorial games and the sport of Mixed Martial Arts. But what this essay intends to do is more than simply underscore this existing connection. Rather, it aims to show how the cinematic representations of ancient Roman gladiators as well as martial arts movies have both influenced the development of Mixed Martial Arts, and have been in turn influenced by it.

Before addressing the connection between cinema and the genesis of Mixed Martial Arts, let us at least briefly indicate the interplay existent between martial arts movies and films about Roman gladiators, since both of these genres are equally influential in shaping the destiny of Mixed Martial Arts' main organization – the *Ultimate Fighting Championship* (UFC).

Most martial arts movies as well as movies featuring gladiators usually include some climactic sequences of individual combat for the entertainment of an audience.⁴ In a sense, despite their differences regarding the specific time periods and cultures portrayed, what both genres represent on the screen is a theater of violence – a context in which

¹ Gladiators could signal submission and ask for mercy by lifting their finger to the sky, as is depicted in the Colchester vase, Martial *De Spectaculis* Epigr. 29, and as seen multiple times in the Starz' TV Series *Spartacus*. Similarly, Mixed Martial Arts fighters can signal defeat by 'tapping out' (tapping with an open hand the mat or the body of the opponent at least three times).

² A cursory look at MMA websites containing the statistics for each fighter (such as Sherdog.com) can show an identical patterns among MMA fighters.

³ In *De spectaculis* 22, Tertullian writes, 'Men give them their souls, women their bodies too'. Also see Petronius' *Satyricon* 126. In *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, in the section *Life of Marcus Aurelius* it is reported that Faustina, the wife of Emperor Marcus Aurelius, was sexually obsessed with a gladiator. See also Cyrino (2005), Baker (2000: 3, 22). The same theme is also a classic component of gladiator movies such as *Demetrius and the Gladiators* (1954), *Gladiator* (2000), *Spartacus* (2010), *Empire* (2005), *Rome* (2005), etc. Similarly, in their respective autobiographies, MMA champions Tito Ortiz and Chuck Liddell make it abundantly clear that the same holds true for MMA fighters (Liddell and Millman 2008; Ortiz 2008).

⁴ Individual duels in front of an audience are the textbook definition of ancient gladiatorial combat. Similarly, many martial arts films include scenes of fighting in a 'tournament' setting in front of an audience. See for example *Warrior* (2011), Bruce Lee's *Enter the Dragon* (1973), Jean Claude Van Damme's *The Quest* (1996), *Lionheart* (1990), *Kickboxer* (1989), and *Bloodsport* (1988) and Jet Li's *Cradle 2 The Grave* (2003), *Fearless* (2006), Donnie Yen's *Ip Man* (2008), and the iconic *The Karate Kid* (1984).

the brutality and drama of human combat mixes with aesthetic beauty. Both of them often include highly unrealistic scenes of the hero of the story easily defeating multiple opponents.⁵ The fighting choreography in both cases is typically visually pleasing but not particularly realistic, since acrobatic moves that appear spectacular on screen are favored over the economy of motion characteristic of most applicable fighting techniques.

The most dramatic example of a cinematic moment in which these parallels are explicitly drawn, clearly connecting both genres, is the homage paid by Bruce Lee to gladiatorial combat in the 1972 film *The Way of the Dragon* (aka *Return of the Dragon*). There, in fact, the final fight sequence pitting Bruce Lee against Chuck Norris takes place in Rome's Coliseum. This choice seems to be hardly a coincidence. And as we will soon see, both of these related genres played a crucial role in the birth of the real life sport of Mixed Martial Arts and its premiere organization, the *Ultimate Fighting Championship* (UFC).

The Gracie Dilemma: 'Movie Martial Arts' and the UFC

When martial arts master Rorion Gracie decided to migrate from his native Brazil to the United States, he realized he had some big problems on his hands – both of them at least partially caused by martial arts movies.

Being Brazilian was his first obstacle. The entire martial arts genre had impressed in the American imagination that the

deadliest martial arts masters were invariably Asian or, at the very least, the pupils of an Asian instructor. Bruce Lee was (and still is) the most famous actor/martial artist on the planet, and he was Asian. After the initial 1970s influx of the Asian genres of martial movies, US productions such as *The Karate Kid* (1984) continued to contribute to shaping the popular archetype of the old, wise Asian master who is the keeper of secret knowledge that is unknown to his younger, and more athletic Western counterparts (for example, the 'evil' Karate instructor of the *Kobra-Kai*).

Far from being an exception, *The Karate Kids* Mr. Miyagi (Pat Morita) is only the most famous in a long list of cinematic Asian martial arts masters who take a Western pupil under their wing and school him in the secrets of the fighting arts. Jean-Claude Van Damme is shown apprenticing under a Japanese master in *Bloodsport* (1987) and a Thai one in *Kickboxer* (1989). Pai Mei, the very stern master in *Kill Bill 2* (2004), is both ancient and Asian. The same is true for the master in the seminal US TV Series, *Kung Fu* (1972-1975). Later, Chuck Norris is trained by a Japanese master in *The Octagon* (1980); and in another movie, featuring Norris, *Sidekicks* (1992), a Chinese master oversees the training of the lead character of the film.

Orientalism can be said to be very much at the roots of these representations. It is not enough that the master is Asian and old, but these qualities are regularly over-emphasized to suggest that the master's ethnic identity and his age are inevitably linked to a certain aura of spirituality and mysticism. As Edward Said suggested in his seminal work, *Orientalism*, this romanticizing of 'the Orient' depicts it as essentially foreign, exotic and mysterious (Said 1978). For

⁵ This is as true for *Gladiator* (2000), *Rome* (2005) and *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* (2010) as it is for *Fist of Fury* (aka *The Chinese Connection*, 1972), *Fist of Legend* (1994) and *Ip Man* (2008).

example, a characteristic that is common to all of the cases mentioned above is their speech pattern. In every single one of these instances, the martial arts master speaks with a heavy accent and in broken English, but despite this (or perhaps because of this) projects an air of calmness and wisdom. Even native English speakers such as Pat Morita were asked to modify their speech in order to sound 'more Asian'. This fact underscores that, far from being a coincidence, this is a conscious choice on the part of the filmmakers in order to emphasize the Asian identity of the master. Implicitly, the message is that the master belongs to a foreign culture, and is the bearer of a secret fighting knowledge and philosophical wisdom missing in the West.

Even though it is doubtful that Rorion Gracie was worrying about the finer points of Said's thesis, it was certainly true that he did not fit at all the archetype of the martial arts master popularized in martial arts films. He was not Asian, nor was he old. And to make things worse, he could not even claim to have received his martial training from an Asian master. He had learned his family's version of Jujitsu from his father, who in turn had learned from his brothers, who had studied for a few brief years with a Japanese Judo and Jujitsu master (McCarthy and Hunt 2011: 120; Liddell and Millman 2008: 60-3). Not only was the connection far too distant, but complicating things further was the fact that his family had openly changed what they had learned to the point of considering their art a *Brazilian* martial art, and accordingly had changed the spelling from 'Jujitsu' into the Brazilian spelling, 'JiuJitsu'. So, when Gracie began advertising classes in 'Brazilian JiuJitsu' most Americans did not know quite what to make of it.

His second and perhaps even more serious problem was also intimately connected to the cinematic representations of martial arts. The choreography of martial arts movies was almost invariably highly spectacular, and focused on the most flamboyant techniques such as flying kicks. The 'knockout' regularly administered by the movie heroes against their antagonists was always the climactic moment that, in the minds of many viewers, had become synonymous with martial arts mastery. Gracie's family art was the exact opposite of all this. To begin, the art was entirely grappling based and did not include the typical striking techniques that could result in a knockout blow. Furthermore, the Gracie family had discarded the crowd-pleasing high-elevation throws typical of Judo in favor of a near complete focus on ground-fighting techniques, which were anything but spectacular. For this reason, the response to the Gracie family style was far from enthusiastic.

'This is not fighting', commented a rival martial artist: 'This reminds me of watching two worms tangled with each other. If after years of studying I could do no better than throwing myself on the ground, I'd ask my instructor for my money back' (Drukerman 1997). Later, boxing promoter Bob Arum accused the grappling approach favored by the Gracie to be a thinly veiled excuse for homosexuality (Russell 2009). Similarly, Jim Buzinski, the publisher of Outsports.com, went on to refer to it as 'intrinsically homoerotic' (Russell 2009), a sentiment echoed by boxing champion Bernard Hopkins who referred to grappling as, 'grown men with panties on, sweating, [with] nuts in their face.... It's a porno. It's an entertainment porno' (Russell 2009).

All of this left Rorion Gracie in the precarious position of trying to 'sell' a martial art that was neither Asian nor visually impressive; and perhaps even more troubling, an art that was as far from the heroic macho image of what 'real fighting' looked like that countless martial arts movies had imprinted in the collective American psyche.

The fact that his problems were caused by the impact that movies have had on the Western popular imagination is something Gracie openly acknowledged. As he declared: 'Martial arts movies have everything to do with the creation of UFC' (Personal interview with Gracie 2007).

Oddly enough, however, Gracie found in martial arts movies the very solution to the problems caused by martial arts movies in the first place. Specifically, as indicated earlier, one of the recurring elements of the martial arts movie genre (as well as martial arts video games) is the tournament pitting practitioners of different styles against each other to crown an undisputed champion. A brief experience serving on a task force of martial artists created by the Los Angeles Police Department in the wake of the 1992 LA Riots, with the goal of creating a curriculum in restraint techniques, turned on the proverbial light in Gracie's head. After witnessing first hand how most martial arts masters in the United States were very vocal about claiming the superiority of their art over all others, Gracie felt like it would not take much to convince them to participate in the type of tournament that appeared so often in the movies – the very type of tournament that would give them the opportunity to prove the value of their fighting style (McCarthy and Hunt 2011: 33). Gracie's motivation was simple: if he or another member of his family could enter the tournament and defeat all challengers,

then the American public would be forced to take his ground-fighting style more seriously. The only way to convince people that an effective martial art could look different from what movies had taught them was for that martial art to dominate in actual competition. Then and only then would people be willing to look past Brazilian Jiu-jitsu's lack of flying kicks and other spectacular strikes.

The role that cinema played in Gracie's decision to create this new form of martial competition can clearly be seen in his choice of creative helpers for this endeavor. In addition to an advertising executive named Art Davie, Gracie recruited the expert services of film director John Milius, the man who had directed movies such as *Conan the Barbarian* (1982), *Red Dawn* (1984), *Big Wednesday* (1978) and *The Wind and the Lion* (1975), and written the first two *Dirty Harry* films (the 1971 *Dirty Harry* and the 1973 *Magnum Force*) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979). Milius was named 'creative director' of this project, which was initially named 'War of the Worlds' (an obvious reference to the H.G. Wells' novel and associated film adaptations) (McCarthy and Hunt 2011: 123; Liddell and Millman 2008: 60-3).

The reason why Gracie saw Milius' help as essential was his desire to create more than a simple sporting event. The *Ultimate Fighting Championship* was to be a show, a grand spectacle, a performance capturing the public imagination. And Milius – according to Gracie – was the perfect man for the job. His *Conan the Barbarian* (1982) contained both the type of gladiatorial and martial arts movie references that Gracie wanted to characterize this tournament (Personal interview with Gracie 2007). In an extended sequence of the film, for example, the protagonist

finds himself fighting as a gladiator – not in ancient Rome, but in a fantasy, Mongolian-inspired context. And as a tribute to his skills, after winning many contests and dispatching plenty of opponents, he is allowed the honor of training under Eastern sword masters – an obvious tribute to Asian martial arts, and an attempt to link the two popular genres of gladiatorial movies and martial arts films.

Milius' passion for gladiatorial combat, incidentally, continued to follow him throughout his creative career: he went on to co-create and produce the *Rome* TV series (2005), which includes several gladiatorial scenes.

Milius' influence in the birth of the *Ultimate Fighting Championship* can be seen in some very meaningful choices. His, for example, was the decision to stage the competition within an octagonal enclosure. Specifically, Milius was intrigued with the idea of having fighters compete within a cage for the sake of giving a more dramatic, cinematographic touch to the proceedings. Boxing had made the use of a ring with ropes too familiar for Milius' taste. The use of a cage, on the other hand, was unprecedented. No combat sport had ever employed anything like that. And the visual impact of martial artists being locked in a cage would make the competition appear more like something that one could picture in a movie like *Conan* rather than a more sober sporting contest. Accordingly, along with Jason Cusson, Milius developed the octagonal cage that has since become one of the visual icons associated with MMA in general and the *Ultimate Fighting Championship* in particular. The message Milius was trying to convey was that this competition was more dangerous and barbaric than any modern, 'civilized'

sport. For this reason, initially the plan had been to surround the cage with a moat full of alligators or to electrify the chain-link fence, but these ideas were eventually abandoned due to the extreme danger for the competitors, and possible lawsuits that could derive from this (McCarthy and Hunt 2011: 123).

Clarifying even further the importance that movies held in Rorion's opinion was his attempt to recruit as competitors some of the top martial arts actors in the United States. The reason why he approached both Chuck Norris and Don Wilson (who, incidentally, turned him down) was his belief that his family would gain credibility by defeating the 'faces' of martial arts in the popular imagination (McCarthy and Hunt 2011: 124; Gracie 2007). These men, after all, were among those that – due to the movies – the American public associated with martial prowess.

This same logic was still at play years later when the *Ultimate Fighting Championship* considered having a 'celebrity fight', pitting TV personality, UFC commentator and Brazilian Jiu-jitsu expert Joe Rogan against action movie star and martial artist Wesley Snipes (Rogan 2011).

By the time the first *Ultimate Fighting Championship* was over, things had turned out exactly as Gracie had envisioned. His younger brother Royce had won the tournament utilizing his family's ground fighting techniques. And thousands of people watching on pay-per-view received a lesson destined to change popular perceptions about the effectiveness of martial arts styles. Noting that the fights looked nothing like the choreographed action scenes in martial arts movies, and that flamboyant strikers had been picked apart by grapplers, commentator Jim Brown summarized

the night's event in a one-liner reflecting the surprise most viewers had felt in realizing that their preconceived notions about martial arts were sadly mistaken: 'What we have learned here is that fighting is not what we thought it was (Shamrock and Hanner 1997).

UFC Marketing, Modern Day Gladiators and Political Backlash

The *Ultimate Fighting Championship* tactic of openly marketing their martial arts competition as a modern day version of ancient gladiatorial contests definitely attracted attention. The event was a commercial success with tens of thousands of pay-per-view sales plus a sizable live audience. But it didn't take long to attract a backlash by people disgusted by what they considered a barbarous exhibition that had no place in a civilized society. Oddly enough, both its supporters and its detractors consistently compared the *Ultimate Fighting Championship* to ancient Roman gladiatorial combat, but with very different implications. While supporters praised the spectacle and the excitement, detractors used the comparison to emphasize the bloodlust and cruelty of the sport (Hill 2013, also Hickey 2013).⁶ The *Ultimate Fighting Championship* was not shy about marketing itself as a semi-gladiatorial event. Rather than trying to sell the UFC as a legitimate sport, UFC executives pushed a barbaric, primal image – as if it were something from a *Milvus* movie. They figured that gore and extreme violence had worked well for the ancient Romans, so there was every reason to think they should work again. As *Ultimate Fighting Champion* long-time Light Heavyweight champion Chuck

Liddell wrote, the UFC early owners believed that 'selling blood and gore was the best way to go' (Liddell and Millman 2008: 85).

The fact that the referee wore a shirt on which was written the slogan 'there are no rules' speaks volumes about these marketing tactics. But even more blunt were the actual words of *Ultimate Fighting Championship* executive Campbell McLaren who went on ABC's *Good Morning America* and explained the rules of the event by saying 'you can win by tapout, knockout, or even death' (McCarthy and Hunt 2011: 173-4).

This extreme marketing, however, was a double-edged sword. Self-appointed defenders of public morality quickly began thundering against the evil that the *Ultimate Fighting Championship* represented in their eyes and – as wannabe censors always do when faced with something they find distasteful – campaigned to ban it. Unmoved by the notion that consenting adults should be free to do what they want as long as they don't affect others, they wanted to stamp it out of the face of the earth.

After watching a couple of matches from the early editions of *Ultimate Fighting Championship* Republican Senator and future presidential candidate John McCain had become the leader of the anti-UFC movement. In his own words, 'some of this is so brutal that it is just nauseating... It appeals to the lowest common denominator in our society. This is something that I think there is no place for' (Shamrock and Hanner 1997).

Comparing it to 'human cockfighting' and calling it 'a brutal and repugnant blood sport... that should not be allowed to take place anywhere in the U.S.' (Silverman 1998, Couture and Hunt 2009: 112), he sent letters to governors

⁶ See for example Hill (2013), and for the opposite viewpoint Hickey (2013).

and senators in every state urging them to close their doors to the *Ultimate Fighting Championship*. Joining him in this effort was another Republican politician, Colorado Senator Ben Campbell. Despite being a lifelong martial artist to the point of having competed in the 1964 Olympics in Judo, Campbell also called for a ban against the Ultimate Fighting Championship (Friend 1996: 40). Several of their political colleagues quickly heeded their call. For example, just a few months before Couture made his debut, in February of 1997 Republican New York Governor George Pataki had convinced his athletic commission to outlaw the UFC within his state (Iole 2011; Liddell and Millman 2008: 85). Republican New York State Senator Roy Goodman had gone on record to speak of the *Ultimate Fighting Championship* as a 'disgraceful, animalistic, and disgusting contest, which can result in severe injuries to contestants and sets an abominable example for our youth' (Beston 2003; McCarthy and Hunt 2011: 217).

Ironically, despite having sat at ringside when boxer Jimmy Garcia was killed as a result of a fight with Gabriel Ruelas in 1995, McCain remained a loyal fan of boxing and neither considered the sport barbaric nor ever questioned its legal status. Due to this seeming double standard, quite a few people have speculated that McCain's opposition to the *Ultimate Fighting Championship* was born less from self-righteous moral indignation than from his connections to Anheuser-Busch, which was boxing's largest corporate sponsor: he owned millions in their stock and his father in law was one of their largest wholesalers in the country (McCarthy and Hunt 2011: 201). But whatever McCain's motivations for his crusade, the result remained the same: fewer and fewer states were

willing to license *Ultimate Fighting Championship* events. McCain's arguments found a receptive audience among a large segment of the American public (Rossen 2010).⁷ As former Ultimate Fighting Light Heavyweight champion Tito Ortiz stated, 'the public perception was that it was a barbaric sport, stuck in the Dark Ages. Ultimate Fighters were considered crazy guys who did crazy shit' (Ortiz 2008: 201).

This negative stigma would remain attached to the *Ultimate Fighting Championship* for a long time. Even today, it is not rare to run into comments by journalists and politicians expressing their disgust with Mixed Martial Arts competitions. For example, reporting for ABC News about the life of Tamerlan Tsarnaev, the man who along with his brother bombed the 2013 Boston marathon, Michele McPhee wrote:

Tsarnaev, the alleged bombing mastermind who died in a fierce gun battle with police early Friday morning, had been training with one of the 2011 murder victims in an attempt to transition from boxing into a possible career in the brutal sport of mixed-martial arts. (McPhee 2013)

In this passage, McPhee managed to draw an implicit connection between dedicating oneself to a 'brutal sport' such as Mixed Martial Arts and becoming a terrorist.

⁷ For a sample of public support for the notion of banning UFC, see Rossen (2010). Here is a sample of comments reported in this article: 'I wish this would be banned... In the cesspool that is MMA, egregious behavior is the whole point... This 'sport' is analogous to dog fighting and gladiatorial brutality reminiscent of the Roman Empire'. 'This is not a sport. It's assault and battery'. And 'I would not watch this disgusting sport if you paid me'.

With equal disgust, in his blog, Republican South Dakota State House Representative Steve Hickey referred to Mixed Martial Arts as the 'child porn of sports' (Iole, 2013). In Hickey's own words:

I hope you'll agree that MMA is over the line of what should be tolerable with regard to 'violent entertainment' as child porn is clearly over the line with regard to 'adult entertainment'. MMA Cage Fighting is the child porn of sports. (Hickey 2013)

In predictable fashion, he drew the usual comparison between Mixed Martial Arts and Roman gladiatorial games: 'In Rome they'd gather in colosseums (sic) and bring out prisoners and entertain themselves by making them fight to the death' (Hickey 2013). Later in his essay, Hickey even suggested that the *Ultimate Fighting Championship* could eventually lead to competitions with weapons and a return to the gladiatorial games. According to his line of thinking, much like marijuana is supposed to be a gateway drug leading to the consumption of harder drugs, Mixed Martial Arts is the gateway to a return to Roman values. This attitude toward Mixed Martial Arts is still widespread enough that some countries around the world continue to ban MMA events to this day (mmaweekly.com 2013).

If this is true today, it was even truer in the days when McCain was waging his crusade against the *Ultimate Fighting Championship*. When McCain was elected chairman of the Committee on Commerce (a congressional committee charged with overseeing the cable industry), he made sure that the *Ultimate Fighting Championship* would be blacklisted from cable. Without cable, the outlook on the long-term survival of the

Ultimate Fighting Championship was dubious at best (McCarthy and Hunt 2011: 223-4; Liddell and Millman 2008: 86; Green 2011: 377-96).

It was only years later that new owners were able to regulate *Ultimate Fighting Championship* competitions, change the image of the sport and gain mainstream acceptance (Liddell and Millman 2008: 129-30). But even after embracing a more family-friendly approach, the UFC continued to appeal to the public's fascination for gladiators by repeatedly reinforcing the connection between *Ultimate Fighting Championship* fighters and gladiators (Dervenis and Nektarios 2007). As author Sam Sheridan wrote: 'The UFC uses images of a gladiator in its promotional videos, making the point that these are the modern-day versions'. (Sheridan 2010: 276). The most explicit example of this is the introductory sequence featuring a Roman gladiator that opened all *Ultimate Fighting Championship* pay-per-view events until 2012.⁸ This segment was a very obvious homage to the Ridley Scott movie *Gladiator* (2000). Epic music furnished the soundtrack to images showing a Roman gladiator in battle gear touching the sand (an unforgettable reference for anyone who ever saw *Gladiator*), picking up his weapons and walking up to the gates opening toward the arena.

Far from being an isolated example, this attempt at connecting Mixed Martial Arts and gladiators is a running theme that reappears frequently. The Ultimate Fighting Championship's most famous referee, the iconic John McCarthy, tells of standing in the midst of the Octagon along with other fighters and trainers the day before an event, and yelling the famous line from *Gladiator*, 'Are you not

⁸ It was only in 2012 that this introductory sequence was discontinued.

entertained?' to the empty chairs (McCarthy and Hunt 2011: 308). Similarly, former UFC champion Josh Barnett used the exact same line to address a real audience during an interview at the end of a match (vigilantemma.com 2013).

Even more significant than the occasional quote from the Ridley Scott's film is the extremely high number of Mixed Martial Arts organizations whose names contain the word 'gladiator' or 'coliseum' or something similar.⁹ Quite a few Mixed Martial Arts fighters sport gladiator tattoos, but none is quite as extreme in his attempt to connect with the Roman past as Alessio 'Legionarius' Sakara, who sports a large 'S.P.Q.R.' tattoo.¹⁰

So, how did a sport branding itself as the modern rendition of the gladiatorial games manage to overcome all the initial objections and gain mainstream acceptance? Accepting to regulate the sport through various state athletic commissions was certainly the necessary first step, but this made Mixed Martial Arts legal, not mainstream (McCarthy and Hunt 2011: 243-299). Mainstream acceptance only happened thanks to a savvy use of the media by the *Ultimate Fighting Championship* public relations machine. In 2004, *Ultimate Fighting Championship* president Dana White decided to gamble on producing a reality TV show for Spike TV entitled 'The Ultimate Fighter', which would follow the lives and fights of sixteen promising fighters over a period of weeks as they competed for a UFC contract. The media exposure instantly

gained the *Ultimate Fighting Championship* hundreds of thousands of new fans intrigued by the drama (partly staged and partly real) offered by the show (Penn And Morrow 2010: 230; Liddell and Millman 2008: 217-40; Green 2011: 377-96). As former *Ultimate Fighting* champion and coach on the first season of the show Chuck Liddell wrote, MMA 'was breaking through on basic cable TV, just a few years after it had been declared dead and less palatable to broadcasters than porn' (Liddell and Millman 2008: 237). The result was dramatic. As Liddell explained, the power of media to transform the image of the sport was powerful and nearly immediate: 'Before TV I was a fighter in a thug sport. Now I was a recognizable face on this cool new show' (241) – which leads him to conclude that 'there's no better pitchman than television' (242).

The fact that *Ultimate Fighting Championship* gained overnight success thanks to the media is quite ironic considering the image of martial arts popularized in media until that point had worked against the *Ultimate Fighting Championship* since its inception. By showing what 'real' fights looked like, the *Ultimate Fighting Championship* was clashing with the public's perception of martial arts developed through decades of exposure to martial arts films. *Ultimate Fighting Championship* fights looked nothing what was typically seen on the big screen. Rather than being treated to dramatic strikes, and acrobatics moves, spectators were served a harsh dose of close contact grappling and techniques lacking the beauty and finesse of the carefully choreographed fighting routines seen in movies.

As noted earlier, this was as big a problem for the *Ultimate Fighting*

⁹ See the Fight Finder database of the most popular MMA website www.sherdog.com

¹⁰ S.P.Q.R. stands for *Senatus Populus Que Romanus*, the initials often used in Roman times to refer to the Roman state, its people and republic.

Championship as the political opposition of moral crusaders. To put it simply, *Ultimate Fighting Championship* fights did not possess the aesthetic appeal of movie martial arts. And the public was slow to accept that 'movie martial arts' were not 'real martial arts'. During the very first *Ultimate Fighting Championship* event, for example, when Ken Shamrock defeated Pat Smith (a kickboxer who had flamboyantly demonstrated a passion for hyperbole in advertising his fighting record as 250-0), the crowd began chanting 'bullshit, bullshit' since they did not understand what they had witnessed. Shamrock had forced Smith to give up by applying a heel hook – a painful grappling technique designed to break the opponent's knee by twisting the lower leg and executed when both fighters are in close quarters on the ground; an excellent technique, no doubt, but one that was recognizable only by people with a solid understanding of submission grappling (McCarthy and Hunt 2011: 131).

The Triangular Relationship between MMA, Martial Arts Movies and Gladiatorial Films

The triangular relationship between Mixed Martial Arts, martial arts movies and gladiatorial films, however, became considerably more complicated in the years to follow.

First, it is worth considering how over time Mixed Martial Arts fighters began adapting their style to the iconography of martial arts films. Author Sam Sheridan remarked that being entertaining is a prime consideration for any fighter looking for a big payday (Sheridan 2010: 275). Former *Ultimate Fighting* champion Chuck Liddell noted how the desire not simply to win, but to entertain the

audience has changed how many Mixed Martial Arts competitors approach fighting. Liddell refers to this new approach as 'sprawl and brawl' – which means using wrestling defensively in order to keep the fight standing and using strikes to look for a knockout (Liddell and Millman 2008: 251). A major reason for this switch is the *Ultimate Fighting Championship's* not-so-subtle efforts to convince fighters to cater to the demand of an audience accustomed to the spectacular choreography of martial arts films. *The Ultimate Fighting Championship* accomplished this by introducing a substantial monetary prize for 'knockout of the night' and by giving lucrative contracts to fighters considered 'exciting'. Other Mixed Martial Arts organizations often adopted the same tactics. Pride Fighting Championship executive Yukino Kanda, for example, declared she would never hire very successful champions like Matt Hughes since:

all he can do is win. He doesn't captivate the audience. There's no show in his style; no flare, no spectacle. Ours is sport but is also spectacle. And we can't ever forget that or we'll end up with a great sport but no audience. Our sport needs to dazzle viewers or it will not last long. So, I'll never hire fighters who are not entertaining. (Kanda 2004)

Similarly, she stated she would always keep under contract fighters like Kazushi Sakuraba, no matter how many times he lost, because his fighting style excited the spectators. In her opinion, it was extremely important for fighters to make the audience feel 'like they are watching a movie' (Kanda 2004).

In quite a few cases, this desire to appropriate a cinematic visual flare has

prompted fighters to explicitly utilize combat techniques drawn from martial arts cinema. The Crane Kick, for example – the highly acrobatic, and quite improbable technique used at the very end of the iconic movie *The Karate Kid* (1984). Back in 2003, fighters Duane Ludwig and Genki Sudo were about to conclude a very hard fought match. They had clearly won a round each, and they had split the third round more or less evenly. In the final seconds of this razor-close fight, Ludwig struck ‘the karate kid pose’ just before the sounding of the bell. The audience roared its approval for this act of showmanship. When a couple of minutes later it was announced that the judges had ruled in favor of Ludwig, quite a few people wondered whether the deciding factor had been Ludwig’s *Karate Kid* ‘quote’.¹¹ Even more dramatically, Shotokan Karate stylist Lyoto Machida utilized this very technique (despite the extremely low likelihood of being able to successfully apply it at the highest level of competition due to its difficulty) not simply as a ‘quote’ but to knock out the legendary multi-division champion Randy Couture, thereby putting an end to his fighting career in 2011. So, both Ludwig and Machida were able to apply a particular famous technique seen in martial arts cinema to obtain a victory in a real Mixed Martial Arts competition.

Another clear example of the choreography of martial arts cinema finding its way into real fighting is offered by a technique displayed during a 2010 match between Anthony Pettis and Benson Henderson. During the course of this match, at one point, Pettis jumped off the cage to spring into a flying kick to Henderson’s face. Fans immediately dubbed it ‘the matrix kick’ since the

movement seemed like it had been lifted straight out of the choreography of the movie *The Matrix* (1999). Similarly, in the case of a technique executed by Anderson Silva in 2006, there is no need to wonder whether movies had directly influenced it. Silva said so himself. In his telling of the tale, after seeing the Thai film *Ong Bak* (2003) he decided to utilize a particular uppercut-elbow strike that was part of one of the film’s fighting sequence. Silva’s coaches repeatedly begged him not to attempt it, since they believed it was too flashy and dangerous a move to work in real life. Silva refused to listen to them and promptly executed it, knocking out his opponent in spectacular fashion (Silva, Cordoza et al 2008).

The relationship between martial arts cinema and Mixed Martial Arts, however, is not a one-way street. As much as the choreography of martial arts films has influenced the actual fighting of Mixed Martial Arts competitors, the reverse is also true.

The first obvious example of this is the creation of a subgenre of martial arts movies dedicated to Mixed Martial Arts. The most notable among them are *Cradle 2 The Grave* (2003),¹² *Redbelt* (2008) and *Warrior* (2011). Inevitably, since these movies are marketed to fans of the sport; their fighting choreography includes grappling techniques that would have otherwise rarely been featured in a martial arts movie, prior to the emergence of the sport.¹³

Furthermore, these movies as well as other action films decided to cash in on

¹¹ Ludwig himself states that this may have been the case. Personal interview, January 15 2013.

¹² *Cradle 2 the Grave* (2003) features many scenes of MMA combat but the plot does not focus on it as much as it is the case for *Redbelt* (2008) and *Warrior* (2011)

¹³ Bruce Lee attempting an armbar in *Game of Death* being an exception.

the popularity of Mixed Martial Arts champions by hiring them as actors. Former UFC champions Tito Ortiz and Chuck Liddell, for example, battled each other in *Cradle 2 The Grave* before they actually fought for real in an Ultimate Fighting Championship match (Ortiz 2008: 123). Other fighters such as Ken and Frank Shamrock, Anderson Silva, Cung Le, and Georges St. Pierre, as well as several others, were similarly hired to play the roles of 'movie fighters'. But in at least a couple of cases, Mixed Martial Arts champions were hired to interpret non-MMA key roles in action films. Randy Couture was cast in the Sylvester Stallone's movies *The Expendables* (2010) and *The Expendables 2* (2012), and as the villain in *The Scorpion King 2* (2008). Female Mixed Martial Arts icon Gina Carano starred in the spy thriller *Haywire* (2011), and has since abandoned competition to pursue an acting career.

Yet another way in which the popularity of Mixed Martial Arts has changed fighting choreography in movies can be seen in some films that may not belong to the martial arts movie genre, but feature fighting sequences nonetheless. One of the best examples of this can be found in a scene from the second installment in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, *The Two Towers* (2002). In this instance, Tolkien's character Gollum executes a technically impeccable rear-naked choke. To the uninitiated in the grappling arts, this move may not obviously recall a martial arts technique. But anyone with a basic knowledge of Judo or Brazilian Jiu-jitsu can recognize in this a textbook technique which includes the important detail of showing the person applying it (Gollum, in this case) putting his 'hooks' in before finishing the choke ('putting the hooks' is a Brazilian Jiu-jitsu term that refers to

hooking one's legs over the opponent's legs in order to limit his mobility. This is considered a necessary prerequisite to properly executing this choking technique).

Another excellent example of grappling techniques made popular by *Ultimate Fighting Championship* matches being incorporated in cinematic action sequences can be seen in *Sherlock Holmes* (2009). Here, the character played by Robert Downey Jr. displays excellent Brazilian Jiu-jitsu during the course of a fight, and even applies a successful armbar.

The reasons for all these changes in choreography are simple: the desire on the part of filmmakers to court the attention of Mixed Martial Arts fans, along with the fact that the popularity of MMA increased understanding and recognition of certain techniques among many moviegoers, thereby making their use more acceptable.

The same kind of exchange that has taken place between Mixed Martial Arts and martial arts movies has also happened between Mixed Martial Arts and gladiatorial films. We have already discussed how gladiatorial movies have influenced the development of Mixed Martial Arts, but the best evidence of the influence of Mixed Martial Arts on films featuring gladiators can be seen in the Starz' TV Series *Spartacus* (2010-2013).

Spartacus is the most recent, and longest ever TV series to be dedicated to gladiators. Its choreography clearly draws much inspiration from Mixed Martial Arts. Quite a few fighting scenes, in fact, have very little to do with what historians believe may have been characteristic of gladiatorial combat, but include Mixed Martial Arts techniques. For example, in a scene of the prequel to the series

(entitled *Spartacus: Gods of the Arena*, 2011) a *retiarius*¹⁴ breaks the arm of his antagonist in the arena by executing a flying armbar, which is quite possibly one of the most, if not the most, spectacular submission in the Mixed Martial Arts arsenal. The clip of Japanese fighter Rumina Sato winning a fight thanks to this rare but exciting technique is quite famous worldwide among Mixed Martial Arts fans. And *Gods of the Arena* clearly references this moment from Mixed Martial Arts history and restages it in the context of ancient Roman times during a gladiatorial contest.

Another reference that is quite clear to anyone who follows the sport of Mixed Martial Arts can be seen in the first episode of the same season. Contrary to common sense and to all historical evidence indicating that the use of swords made ground-fighting nearly impossible, a gladiator is shown finding himself struggling on the ground against a rival. In the course of the struggle he applies a triangle choke (a classic technique in submission grappling and Mixed Martial Arts, requiring the person applying it to trap one of the opponent's arms between the legs and then squeeze the opponent's neck and arm, which – if executed correctly – results in a stoppage of blood to the brain, causing unconsciousness). In this case, the opponent counters the move before it is finalized and reacts by lifting the grappling gladiator off the ground and slamming him back down. Much like the previous flying armbar, this too is a 'quote' from Mixed Martial Arts history. This exact technique and counter, in fact, were applied during a Pride Fighting Championship match between Ricardo Arona and Quinton Jackson in 2004, and

resulted in one of the most dramatic and famous knockouts in Mixed Martial Arts history, when the slam rendered Arona immediately unconscious.¹⁵ In the extra commentary available on DVD, *Spartacus'* Key Stunt and Fight Supervisor Allan Poppleton openly admits incorporating in the choreo-graphy many throws and joint-locks that people familiar with Mixed Martial Arts would be able to recognize. Furthermore, he clarifies that a major component of the boot camp for the actors in the series consisted of Mixed Martial Arts training. According to him, the reason for drawing inspiration from Mixed Martial Arts was to cash in on the popularity of the sport.¹⁶

Everything presented here points to the curious interdependence of cinematic representations of Roman gladiators, martial arts films and a modern combat sport such as Mixed Martial Arts. But probably nothing sums it up better than *Ultimate Fighting Championship* President Dana White's own words:

We owe big to gladiator and martial arts movies. Movies and video games paved the way for us. All we did was to bring fiction into reality. But judging from what I see on the screen lately, we have paid our debt to them, since they are now taking our stuff.¹⁷

¹⁴ A particular gladiator type armed with net and trident.

¹⁵ The clip of this technical sequence from the match between Arona and Jackson has been watched over five million times on YouTube at the time of writing, in 2013.

¹⁶ *Spartacus: Gods of the Arena* (2011) DVD Extra Featurette.

¹⁷ Dana White, Personal interview 5 March 2008.

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