MARTIAL ARTS STUDIES

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SELF-DEFENCE AS IDEOLOGY: MYTH, MASCULINITY, AND THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF IGNORANCE

ABSTRACT

This article poses the question of the relationship between self-defence and ideology. It situates self-defence in relation to several vignettes that seek to evoke salient aspects of contemporary masculinist ideology. In dialogue with Peter Katz's recent work (especially his article published in this issue), I entertain Katz's proposition that self-defence discourse may rest on an 'epistemology of ignorance' and may (like certain martial arts) tend towards fascism. Picking up this theme, I discuss two Hollywood 'self-defence' films, and propose that the proliferation of certain 'messages' about masculinity and self-defence constitutes a seam of 'coercive mimeticism', i.e., reiterated social 'nudges' that 'tell us' what we should 'be like'. Connecting this back to Katz's critique of the ever-present risk of emergent fascism, I problematise some of his worries, but conclude by reaffirming the need for critical vigilance about the ethics and politics that can emerge from (or 'stick' to) our practices.

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KEYWORDS

coercive mimeticism; ideology; masculinity; post-feminism; self-defence

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> *The strategic adversary is fascism… the fascism in us all, in our heads and in our everyday behavior, the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us. It's too easy to be antifascist on the molar level, and not even see the fascist inside you, the fascist you yourself sustain and nourish and cherish with molecules both personal and collective.*
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> Michael Foucault, Preface to the English edition, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1984, p. xiii)

INTRODUCTION: TWO VIGNETTES

After a mass shooting at a school in Florida in February 2018, no less a prominent social commentator than President Donald Trump suggested that school security guard Scot Peterson had been a coward for not taking more action to try to prevent the tragedy. Later, Trump said: 'I really believe I'd run in there, even if I didn't have a weapon'. Perhaps seeking to flatter his audience into agreement, he followed this up with: 'I think most of the people in this room would have done that, too'. Then, with an uncharacteristic dash of philosophical caution, he added: '[But] You never know until you're tested' (BBC News, 2018).

In the 2021 Hollywood action comedy, *Nobody*, protagonist Hutch Mansell (played by Bob Odenkirk) fails to take decisive action against two burglars, allowing them to escape from his house with cash, a watch, and his daughter's bracelet.[1] He fails to take the most obvious self-defence action (*striking a blow*) even though his teenage son has tackled one burglar to the ground and is holding them down, enabling Hutch to raise a golf club into an ideal position to strike the other gun-weilding burglar over the back of their head. Instead, he decides to let them go.

The scene then shifts to the arrival of the police:

> *Police Officer*: 'So that's how they got in, huh? Using a pizza box [to jam the garage door open]?'
>
> *Hutch Mansell*: 'Yeah'.
>
> *Police Officer*: 'And the golf club? Did you even take a swing?'
>
> *Hutch Mansell*: 'She had a, uh…'
>
> *Blake Mansell (son)*: 'Could've taken her, dad'.
>
> *Police Officer*: 'Look, you did the right thing, Mr. Mansell. [But] You know, if that was *my* family…'

The implication is clear: even though, in one way, Hutch 'did the right thing', in another way, the police officer clearly deems him a coward.

From here, Hutch's public shaming grows. The next moring, his neighbour sees him and says: 'Heard you had some excitement last night'. Hutch tries to reply, 'Yeah, it was just…', only to be rudely cut off mid-sentence: 'Man, I wish they'd have picked my place, you know? Could've used the exercise'. Then, at work, his brother-in-law asks: 'Why didn't you take them out? I mean, shit, it's child's play!' To this, Hutch replies, 'I was just trying to keep damage to a minimum'. His brother-in-law jeers, 'Oh, yeah? How's that working out for you?'

THE SUBJECT OF SELF-DEFENCE

With these introductory vignettes, I have juxtaposed two rather different texts.[2] One is from the 'real world'. The other is from 'fiction'. I have done this not simply because I can. It is possible to juxtapose anything with anything. One might find *coincidental* (i.e., irrelevant) similarities between things drawn from unrelated contexts (see Chow, 2004). A swastika in 1930s Germany may, in a superficial way, be 'the same' as a symbol on a shrine in Asia, but it is a very different thing. The Third Reich expropriated the Hindu symbol and imbued it with radically different meanings.

However, in juxtaposing these texts I have not wrenched two unrelated things together. Rather, my claim is that they both speak to a certain 'self-defence' morality, or ideology – related to heroism/cowardice, direct action as right action, masculinity, and more – one that I argue expresses something central to the hegemonic ideology of our time.

My theoretical proposition is that the 'transparency' or 'obviousness' of certain issues is always enabled by an 'atmosphere' that encourages related values to thrive across heterogeneous scenes – from words spoken by a president to dialogue in an action film. My animating hypothesis is that the alignment of self-defence discourse with hegemonic ideology means that self-defence accrues the status of a 'node' that contains, reflects and expresses the atmosphere or ethos of a larger ideological 'conjuncture'.[3]

Phrased differently: the subject of self-defence might offer something of a 'royal road' that takes us into a deeper understanding the dynamics and values of what Stuart Hall would have called our particular ideological 'conjuncture' (see Hall et al., 1996). To the extent that the forces and values of a particular cultural context permeate different social, cultural, discursive and ideological levels, spheres or atmospheres, from the macro to the micro, this would be felt and lived as part of what Raymond

1 This article was written before the sequel was released – indeed, before I was aware that there was going to be a sequel.

2 Foucault also proposes that the 'art of living counter to all forms of fascism, whether already present or impending, carries with it a certain number of essential principles' including the need to organise 'action, thought, and desires by proliferation, juxtaposition, and disjunction' (Foucault in Deleuze & Guattari, 1984, p. xiii)

3 In this, I align my work entirely with Katz's reading of Foucault's 'Society Must Be Defended' (Foucault, 2003).

Williams would characterise as a 'structure of feeling'.[4] In this light, my argument is that some key social and cultural issues are condensed into the subject of self-defence. In what follows, I will broach some of these.

But first, a note on the phrase 'the subject of self-defence'. To me, this has at least two meanings. The word 'subject' can mean both *topic* (the topic of self-defence) and *person* (the person involved in self-defence). In both regards, the 'subject' is not merely a matter of people in martial arts clubs working on techniques, moves and scenarios (even if such people and practices possibly *exemplify* something about culture and society more broadly. I will return to this). Rather, I propose that the subject of self-defence is not simply one in which many ideological elements cluster and condense into the specific practices called 'self-defence'. It is also a subject that is dispersed – in both 'molar' and 'molecular' ways (to echo Foucault) – across many cultural spheres and contexts.

Nonetheless, before broadening out into wider issues of culture and ideology, let us first revisit – or reappraise – self-defence discourse proper.[5]

THE DELUSIONS OF SELF-DEFENCE DISCOURSE

Across several recent works on the ideological discourse of self-defence and the politico-ideological dimensions of the aesthetics of martial arts, philosopher, historian and ethicist Peter Katz makes several novel propositions.[6] These are claims that practitioners of self-defence and martial arts may not want to accept. I draw from them here because Katz offers what I believe to be important reconceptualisations of martial arts and self-defence practices, which lay down a challenge for both scholars and practitioners (or indeed 'pracademics'). Let me sketch out just a few of his points.

First, Katz notes the delusions of masculinist self-defence discourse (especially in the US). He proposes that self-defence discourse proceeds on the basis of what he calls 'an epistemology of ignorance'. (I will say more about this soon.) Katz also notes that the word 'violence' allows for some illegitimate conflations and displacements. People use the word 'violence' for matters as different as sparring, training, competing (in contact sports), assaulting or being assaulted, and more.

It is certainly true that the meaning of the word 'violence' is far from settled. No less a theorist than Judith Butler, indeed, recently devoted a large proportion of their book, *The Force of Nonviolence*, to setting out this (intractable?) disagreement:

> 'violence' and 'nonviolence' are disputed terms. For instance, some people call wounding acts of speech 'violence', whereas others claim that language, except in the case of explicit threats, cannot properly be called 'violent'. Yet others hold to restrictive views of violence, understanding the 'blow' as its defining physical moment; others insist that economic and legal structures are 'violent', that they act upon bodies, even if they do not always take the form of physical violence. (Butler, 2020, p. 1)

I mention Butler's work here mainly to remind readers in the field of martial arts studies both that the question of violence far exceeds the confines of the intersubjective 'blow' that has been so frequently discussed by martial arts studies scholars, and that it is actually a problem with many faces and that traverses many fields.[7] Furthermore, Butler also notes:

> Whatever is called 'violence' becomes regarded as violent from a particular perspective embedded in a defining framework, but those frameworks are also defined in relation to one another and can be analyzed in relation to strategies of suppression and opposition. [Violence] is not only physical, though it often is. Even physical violence belongs to broader structures of racial, gender, and sexual violence, and if we focus on the physical blow at the expense of the broader structure, we run the risk of failing to account for those kinds of violence that are linguistic, emotional, institutional, and economic – those that undermine and expose life to harm or death, but do not take the literal form of a blow. (Butler, 2020, p. 137)

This is a huge discussion. Katz zones in on only one apparently minor but actually massively consequential dimension: the tendency for everyday users of the term violence in 'ordinary language' to conflate very different things, some of which may not actually be 'violence' at all, and others of which may be utterly beyond the speaker or writer's conceptual or experiential reach.

That is: because of the vast range of semantic and semiotic 'play' within the word 'violence', a kind of theatre-house trapdoor or 'false friend' mistranslation effect is possible, in which people in one realm believe that they can, as if by magic, pop in another,

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4 Within these paragraphs, I have casually included the terms 'structure of feeling' and 'conjuncture'. 'Structure of feeling', as used by Raymond Williams, is the source of a huge amount of debate over its possible meaning(s). It is arguably one of the two or three most complicated phrases in the entire lexicon of cultural studies. The other term, 'conjuncture' was appropriated from Marxist theory and often used by Stuart Hall. It too is an irreducibly complex term, resistant to simple definition. However, I have used them because both attempt to capture something untranslatable or singular about a particular 'nowness'. I defer a detailed discussion of their meanings (For further discussion, see for instance Hall et al., 1996; Highmore, 2018; Williams, 1977).

5 I have written about self-defence discourse 'proper' at some length before; for instance in 'The Birth of British Self-Defence: 1604-1904' (2023) and *The Invention of Martial Arts* (2021) (See also Dodsworth, 2015, 2019, 2020; Godfrey, 2010, 2012; Kurz, 1999; Light, 2017).

6 See 'Society must be self-defended: Violence, wilful ignorance, and the embodied habits of fascism' (Katz, 2025), in this issue of *Martial Arts Studies*. See also his contributions to the Martial Arts Studies Podcast (Bowman, 2023, 2025), and his 'Staging the Streets: The theatricality of science in fin-de-siècle martial arts' (Katz, 2016).

7 Katz draws approvingly on the work of Channon and Matthews (2016, 2017). There are many other iterations of this debate, but Butler's (2020) contribution is an important reminder that the violence debate expands far further than simple embodiment.

unchanged. How often do people assume that someone who practices karate or aikido or BJJ will also *more or less automatically* be able to both deal with and dispense at least some forms of non-consensual violence, such as assault, or indeed manslaughter? This everyday mode of illegitimate mistranslation or conceptual drift is one of the foundations that can lead to an 'epistemology of ignorance' (about which I will say more very soon).

From here, Katz connects such problems not only with the vagaries and vicissitudes of ordinary language but also with paradoxes arising in the founding texts of the Anglo-US sociopolitical imaginary. He discussses, for instance, Thomas Hobbes' 17th century *Leviathan*, and Michel Foucault's related reflections on 'the State'. On Katz's Foucauldian reading, Hobbes's hugely influential *Leviathan* is a text that tries to argue that society *as such* arises as a solution to the problem of *bellum omnium contra omnes* – 'the war of all against all'. However, Katz points out that one paradox that emerges in this 'solution' is that society must constantly be defended against impulses within itself: society must be 'self-defended', as Katz puts it. This generates ambiguous, ambivalent and even alternating statuses for 'the civilized man' and 'the barbarian'.

Finally, Katz considers the transformation of karate[8] into a key node in the network (or cog in the machine) of Japanese militarism and fascism in the early 20th century. In this, Katz attends to the relationships between the aesthetics and political ideologies of such practices, not only in the 1920s, but also in the 2020s. Katz's concern is that, both aesthetically and in other ways, many of our martial arts (even when approached as recreational, 'self-improvement' or sporting practices) might *still* be regarded as 'immanently' (or 'becoming') fascist. (Hence my epigraph from Foucault.)

'Arts' like shotokan karate bear heavy visible traces of the fascist ideologies of their origins, and Katz wonders and worries about their possible reactivation in/as fascist forces today. For Katz, as a longtime practitioner and lover of karate, this is a matter that has both 'molar' (i.e., macro/social) and 'molecular' (i.e., deeply personal) dimensions. In today's worrying 'conjuncture', in which the US State seems to be taking an unprecedented lurch into authoritarianism, Katz's concern is with the question of the interimplication, imbrication or possible 'contagion' that might spread across social levels, realms, institutions and practices – hence his turn to Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, in their most expressly anti-fascist works.

This kind of reflection may well be one that martial artists and self-defence practitioners might want to brush off, dismiss out of hand, or even perhaps feel a visceral aversion to. However, Katz's argument also includes another challenge (especially to any who might want to avoid this discussion). This is the challenge that the desire to avoid such questions might actually be evidence of people preferring instead an 'epistemology of ignorance'.

AN EPISTEMOLOGY OF IGNORANCE

For Katz, an 'epistemology of ignorance' is a certain kind of 'knowledge' that is contingent on not knowing. This concept is drawn from the work of Charles Mills's analysis of white ignorance of Black people's experience and pain. Crucially, this kind of 'not-knowing' is not merely a *lack* of knowledge. It is rather a structured *way* of knowing that relies on actively avoiding or denying certain things. Katz refers to Elizabeth Spelman's reading of James Baldwin, in which she argues that it is not enough for someone not to believe that something is true; they must also *not want* to believe it. This leads to the *active avoidance* of thinking about certain uncomfortable realities, and also a kind of constitutive inability to see or understand things as they are.

Furthermore, this kind of ignorance is not accidental. It is deliberately cultivated. In it, a gap in knowledge – even and especially a logically inevitable gap – is filled not by an acceptance of the inevitability of that gap, but rather by ultimately imaginary or fantasy solutions. We might think here of the 'self-defence expert' who has never actually been in anything like any of the self-defence scenarios they teach – or, worse, the self-defence expert who hypothesizes scenarios and accordingly teaches strategies, tactics and techniques for them.[9]

This is an almost exemplary illustration of one Marxian definition of ideology, in which ideology is defined as imaginary solutions to real problems. When faced with perceived problems, any lack of knowledge about them calls out to be filled. If the issue, however, is *constitutively unknowable*, then all solutions are ultimately based on an epistemology of ignorance. Any 'knowledge' produced is not produced on the basis of, well, knowledge, but rather (at best) on calculation, probability, wager, or speculation – from the pure snake oil of the ignorant self-defence expert to the weighing of supposed probabilities of the battle-hardened retired soldier-*cum*-entrepreneur. (In the terms of ancient Greek philosophy, this intersects with the difference between *apodicticity* [certainty] and *phronesis* [calculation based on probability, wisdom or experience]. An epistemology of ignorance would dwell at the very far end of respectable phronesis.)

I should add that *perceived* problems may not actually be 'real'. They may be imagined – or ideological. Arguably, many 'self-defence scenarios' are themselves fantasies, based not on knowledge, fact, or statistical likelihood, but rather on images

[8] I would also add *kendo*. See, for example, Bennett's discussion of kendo's 20th century history (Bennett, 2015), Chow's discussion of the Nanjing Massacre (Chow, 1995), or Oleg Benesch's study of the invented tradition of the samurai (Benesch, 2014, 2016).

[9] Self-defence writer Rory Miller engages this *aporia* well, explaining (like Katz) that terms like 'self-defence' have numerous (possibly innumerable) meanings, and that in 'self-defence' one should never generalise beyond one's personal experience, and that, in fact, one should not even generalise about oneself, even based on one's *own* past experience, because *everything* is so variable (Miller, 2008).

from popular culture, vague memories of schoolyard bullies, fantasies about duels, conflations of sport with assault, and so on.

It is of more than anecdotal interest to mention that a friend of mine with a security company in a southern state of the US once told me that a church requested his services to provide a security plan, to prepare for potential terrorist attacks. My friend tried to propose (based on evidence-based likelihood, or phronesis) that by far the greatest security risk to the church, and anyone in or around it, in such a suburban, overwhelmingly white, Christian, gun-owning community as theirs, was considerably more likely to come from jilted lovers or aggrieved victims of extramarital affairs, rather than terrorists. *But this is not what the potential clients wanted to hear* (epistemology of ignorance). Based on media 'moral panic' discourse, what they *perceived* as the pressing risk at that time was 'Al Qaida' (see also Massumi, 2010).

This is related to something else Katz draws on: Shannon Sullivan's theorisation of 'ignorance/knowledge'. Here, existing, often biased, 'knowledge' about a group or situation can override perception (and even logic), leading to judgments based on unchallengeable premises. Studies in this area have focused on race: ignorance/knowledge, or an epistemology of ignorance, involves relying on 'knowledge' about how, say, Black people's minds, bodies, or communities 'work', rather than attending to their actual experiences or evidence not filtered through a biased perception.

Thus, for Katz, an epistemology of ignorance is both deliberate, yet often in part nonconscious, and an often embodied system of 'not-knowing' that is actively constructed and maintained to support ideological frameworks. Drawing on Foucault's work, along with Deleuze/Guattari and others, Katz specifically connects all of this to the risk of 'becoming-fascist', both in terms of what Foucault termed the ever-present 'micro-fascism of everyday life', and also the macro 'becoming-fascist' of states under the alibi of defending themselves – what Giorgio Agamben, following 9/11, called the increasing normalisation of 'states of exception', or the authoritarian curtailment of freedoms on the pretext of protecting freedoms (Agamben, 2021).

Katz focuses on the immanent ideological and political trajectories of the aesthetics of martial arts practice. However, I want to focus on the discursive line or ideological vector that I have suggested runs from Trump to *Nobody* through to, well, potentially everybody – especially perhaps those most inclined to indulge in the manosphere-style rhetoric of heroic toughness and direct action. This is arguably exemplified by the subject of self-defence.

THE PEDESTRIAN REALISM OF SELF-DEFENCE

The actual discourse of interpersonal self-defence almost always takes a form that I call 'pedestrian realism'. I call it this for a few reasons. First, it is 'pedestrian' in the pejorative sense of plodding, mediocre, boring, and unsatisfactory. It is 'pedestrian' in this way because, in it, 'reality' or 'real life' is always figured as the ground zero of face-to-face and hand-to-hand contact zones of physical interaction. Most commonly this takes the form of some mythological or fantasy 'street'. The narrative or syllogistic logic of this fantasy self-defence scenario runs: 1) Pedestrians walk on the street. 2) Assailants jump out of dark alleyways. Therefore 3) Pedestrians must be prepared to defend themselves on the street. Elsewhere, I have called this fixation on the street 'street fetishism' (Bowman, 2008).

At the same time, pedestrian realism is built on an epistemology of ignorance exactly as described by Katz. It is infused with fantasy, mythology, popular culture, 'common-sense' moralism, and more; but it effaces this and presents itself as based solely in and on 'reality'. However, the street fetishism and pedestrian realism of self-defence discourse is based on often spectacular popular cultural texts, no matter how drab and dingy its imagining of the street may be. Indeed, the dark streets and alleyways imagined in self-defence discourse first rose to prominence as fantasy scenarios in Victorian moral panics about middle class people being robbed by working class and Irish 'hooligans' or colonial 'thuggees' (Godfrey, 2010, 2012).

For these reasons (and more), self-defence discourse should not be engaged in its own terms, or on its own ground. To do so would risk producing pedestrian scholarship, or displacing the epistemology of ignorance into the academic realm. To combat this, and because of self-defence discourse's reliance on unacknowledged and disavowed debts to the messiness and non-knowledge of popular cultural sources and discourses, I prefer here to discuss self-defence and ideology via cinematic and other popular cultural 'sources'.

The world of potential film and media textual sources and resources about self-defence that I could draw upon is of course vast. Here, I will have to limit myself to the one I began with (the film, *Nobody*, which was released in 2021). I will also add a film that many identify as a key intertextual precedent for *Nobody*. This is the 2005 David Cronenberg film, *A History of Violence*. There are many other more or less related films, novels, television series that could be discussed. But time and space demand selectivity, so I hope film and media culture historians will forgive me for my many omissions.

THE WILD AT HEART GOOD MAN

In the genre of films into which *Nobody* and *A History of Violence* can be placed, a peace-loving family man is forced into retaliatory self-defence. It turns out he is very good at it. Too good at it. This is because, before he became a peace-loving husband and father, he had a 'professional' violent past. He was either a violent criminal, or some kind of secret agent. In the influential 2005 David Cronenberg film, *A History of Violence*, peace-loving family man, Tom Stall (played by Viggo Mortensen) is a diner owner who is forced to defend himself and his customers from a pair of murderous criminals. He dispatches them quickly, and is hailed a

hero. However, in the ensuing media attention, his former associates see him on television, seek him out, and ultimately reveal to his family that he was originally a mob hitman named Joey Cusack.

To be clear: *A History of Violence* was not the first iteration of this kind of story or theme. It was itself a deliberate reworking of a 1990s graphic novel. Plus, before that, there were already a range of American films featuring family men with a secret former life, including (in different ways) *The Stepfather* (1987), *Lone Star* (1996), arguably also in a way *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1999), and *Second-hand Lions* (2003). Another variant on the theme – and a film widely regarded as influenced by *A History of Violence* – is *The Drop* (2014). There is also *The Family Plan* (2023), and – my second main example here – *Nobody* (2021). This list could go on, forwards and backwards in time, and across different media. There are many variations on this theme.

Nobody stars Bob Odenkirk as Hutch Mansell, a seemingly mild-mannered family man whose secret past as a deadly military assassin comes to light in the wake of a bungled burglary and his subsequent actions.

There have been many insightful and engaging reviews, discussions, critiques and academic studies of such films. These often focus on their treatment of themes such as gender politics (especially masculinity and domesticity), morality, violence, heroism, the American dream, the subversion or expansion of film genre, and more. It is not uncommon for such essays to connect films like *A History of Violence* and *Nobody* (among others) with broader ideologies of violence – from interpersonal violence all the way up to US-focused international geopolitics.

In this section, I take my inspiration from these and from Katz's connection of the immanent ideological trajectories of martial arts aesthetics and epistemologies of ignorance that permeate popular self-defence discourse. But I want to dig deeper into what Stuart Hall called culture's 'relations and effects' (Hall, 1992). As I have tried to suggest from the outset, there is not 'reality' on one side (the words of a president) and 'unreality' on the other (film dialogue). These, and many other types of sources, are all part and parcel of the discursive mush that makes up a fully expanded sense of reality. This more adequate sense includes words, ideas, affects and intensities from all kinds of sources. This is what Jacques Derrida meant by 'there is nothing outside the text' (Derrida, 1976, p. 58, 1981, pp. 158–159).

However, this is not a 'media effects' work, certainly not of the 'hypodermic needle' or 'monkey see, monkey do' variety. But it is something of a 'media affects' work. My thinking is steeped in poststructuralist discourse theory, and also affect theory. Our relation to the world is one of 'thrownness' into certain contexts, contexts which affect us, mould us, constitute us, change us – albeit not necessarily in any programmatically predictable ways. It is from these fields that I draw the rest of the concepts I will use to analyse the films, particularly the ideas of 'post-feminism' and 'coercive mimeticism'.

FROM 'BELLUM OMNIUM CONTRA OMNES' TO 'BELLUM HOMINIS CONTRA SE IPSUM'

In considering films such as *A History of Violence* and *Nobody*, my starting position is defined by a sense that these films are: 1) strongly 'post-feminist' (Brunsdon, 1997); and 2) forces of 'coercive mimeticism' (Chow, 2002). They are 'post-feminist' to the extent that, in a way, they register *something about* feminism, they arguably even pay lip service to feminism, or otherwise bear the traces of some of the demands, lessons and good sense contained within the ethico-political claims of certain kinds of feminism. Yet, they are also in a larger sense (and in greater measure) a reaction to (against) feminism, yet without ever settling down into an explicitly anti-feminist position.

Post-feminism is deeply problematic feminism. Figures like Beyoncé are arguably post-feminist. Such figures are steeped in feminist (-sounding) attitudes, and slogans about female agency, independence, etc. Yet, these soundbites come from arguably anti-feminist values, in virtually every other respect. This is why, for instance, no less an esteemed scholar of race and gender than bell hooks actually deemed Beyoncé a 'terrorist' *vis-à-vis* feminism (FORA.tv, 2014).

My other term, 'coercive mimeticism', was offered by Rey Chow (2002) to name the mechanisms by which minority (and) ethnic subjects (in contexts such as American universities and other social and cultural spaces) are coaxed and cajoled into occupying the positions that 'such subjects' are *expected* to have. Coercive mimeticism refers to macro and micro nudges, encouragements, solicitations, and interpellations, organised by stereotypical thinking, that urge people deemed to be specific 'types' of subject to fit into 'their' specific 'types' of position. As in: 'you're black, so you must know about/be into x, y or z', or 'you're an Asian woman, so you'll know all about…', etc.

As a scholar of ethnicity in the US context, Chow focuses primarily on the forces that come to bear on Black and Asian students in the USA. However, given that coercive mimeticism names a generalised, low-level, almost background-interference kind of 'interpellation' process (Althusser, 1971), one based on stereotypes, there must necessarily be further affordances in the term, relevant to more groups and identities than marginalised ones. The suggesting, assuming, implying, coercing, urging, expectant 'messages' that Chow theorizes as active, affective and effective forces (constantly 'at work on' subjects, trying to make them conform to their socially allocated 'type') need not only be applied to the consideration marginalised ethnic, gender or class subjects. The force and work of coercive mimeticism may just as usefully be applied to a consideration of the forces at play on other subjects too – even such ostensibly hegemonic ones as propertied heterosexual white men.

I do not argue this in order to imply that straight white men are some kind of minority or victimised group in countries like the USA. Such an argument is preposterous – and symptomatic of

today's so-called 'manosphere' (on which I will say a little more soon). Rather, I make it because the presence of tacit and explicit coercions (pressuring us to be or act in specific ways, stereotypically deemed appropriate to our race, class, gender, sexuality, and so on) can be understood as acting on *all* identities.

To return to the films: both involve former 'professional' killers (or, indeed, *mass murderers*) who are forced to redefine their place within the domestic sphere.

In the 2005 *A History of Violence*, husband Tom fully conceals his former life as killer Joey Cusack from his wife Edie (Maria Bello). Edie does not know anything about her husband's former life, and he later admits that he spent three years before he met her creating his new persona and identity. In the later comedic 2021 film, *Nobody*, Hutch's wife Becca (played by Connie Nielsen) was evidently always aware of his former life. Seemingly, they had both either tacitly or explicitly agreed that Hutch must renounce his former violent life and reinvent himself as peaceable in order to become a parent.

The key event in *A History of Violence* occurs when Tom expertly dispatches two attackers. It is during the ensuing media celebration of Tom as a hero, that people from his earlier life recognise him. Meanwhile, in *Nobody*, Hutch is *prevented* from dispatching two burglars. As he is about to fell one of them with a golf club, he perceives that the gun she is brandishing is not loaded. This causes him to pause and decide not to continue via violence, as the burglars pose no immediate mortal threat. Presumably, this decision was also in part informed by a desire not to attract attention to himself in any way.

However, whereas in *Nobody* Hutch was able to make a choice, in *A History of Violence*, Tom/Joey is afforded no such room for reflection. The armed robbers are about to 'show' that they are 'serious' – by killing a woman. Hence, Tom acts swiftly, in what is hailed as a morally righteous violence. It is the subsequent media celebration that leads to the undoing of his persona. Hutch, however, did not act 'heroically' in the moment, and while it was certainly the case that, in the moment, to echo Shakespeare's Falstaff, his 'discretion' was 'the better part of valour', nonetheless, his moral decision soon exacts a heavy toll. First the policemen, then his son, and then a neighbour, and so on, all deem Hutch to be a coward.

Hutch is prepared to pay this social shaming price. But when his daughter announces that along with the petty cash that was stolen during the burglary her bracelet has also gone missing, Hutch decides to take action. He tracks the burglars down, and is about to retrieve the item and extract some kind of punitive revenge only to discover that the burglars' crime was motivated by the need to care for their seriously unwell child. Thus, moral complication intrudes once again and Hutch finds himself unable to act with violence in clear conscience.

This generates enormous frustration, and in the next scene we see Hutch repeatedly but impotently punching a brick wall, full force, with his bare fists. Somewhat spent, but dejected, he then takes a bus ride home (travelling by bus has been established from the start as a key way of signifying Hutch's symbolic emasculation). But, on the bus, he encounters a gang of thugs targeting a young woman. Hutch realises he has found a morally acceptable outlet for his rage, and with evident glee begins fighting them. Unfortunately, the gang turn out to be foot soldiers of a Russian crime boss, something that pulls Hutch back into the retributive cycles of a life of violence.

In this film, the joke is that, as Hutch says to his wife towards the end of the drama, 'I may have over-corrected': he perhaps went too far into the performance of 'grey man' pacifism, and hence brought on himself many of the problems that define the story arc of the film. Certainly, if he had carried out some timely but lesser self-defence violence when the family were being burgled at the start of the film, he would not have become so angry that he ended up being pulled into enormous violence against evermore people. Thus, the film is about the renegotiation of his identity. This takes the form of making himself more obviously 'stronger' – closer to his earlier, once-renounced form of violent masculinity.

In this regard, the film is available for interpretation as a post-feminist allegory about the myth of wounded masculinity. In it, we are presented with a 'good man', who may *also* have been originally violent, but who has tried to do what they thought was the right thing (or what his wife wanted, or what domesticity and parenthood required) by renouncing violence. Unfortunately, in doing so, the man has 'over-corrected'.

To render this into the terms of a Hegelian dialectic, the structure would run thus:

1. [*Thesis*] Man is originally violent;
2. [*Antithesis*] When man comes to want woman / to do 'what woman wants', man 'overcorrects' and becomes too much the opposite of his original violent nature;
3. [*Synthesis*] To correct the overcorrection, man readmits his violent origins and forges a new identity enabling a presumably harmonious balance of violence and passivity, or strength and weakness, or indeed masculinity and femininity.

As such, this film – indeed, both films (among others) – involve the postulation and working through of what becomes a kind of mythic *faux* 'historical' dialectic: originally wild nature, pacified nature, renegotiated nature. It is the 'origin' here that is the myth – an appealing myth for some men, no doubt: *originally I was wild! I was dangerous! But I have been pacified…*

These are enough ingredients to initiate a 'wounded masculinity' type of narrative, which might be rendered thus: 'before' women (or before feminism), 'men could be real men'. Then 'women' (feminism) came along, and men 'overcorrected', subordinating themselves to the feminised sphere.

In *Nobody*, this produces frustration-generating humiliation after humiliation, until, eventually, the man explodes, reverting to his original (mythic) form. When woman finally sees this 'truth', man

and woman in effect renegotiate their domestic contract. Thus, a new order may be established, in which the true nature of man is acknowledged and understood in the domestic sphere.

Is this merely the hyperbolically simplified symbolic order of a Hollywood action comedy, unconnected to any larger social processes or forces? Some may feel so. However, the 'about' section of Amazon's (UK) listing of the text that put the word 'manosphere' into circulation – the book, *The Manosphere: A New Hope for Masculinity*, by the preposterously (pen) named pornographer 'Ian Ironwood' – has this to say about the topic of the manosphere:

> *The Men of the Manosphere aren't Right Wing thugs or mindless trolls – they are seeking thoughtful answers to difficult problems. In the process, they are revalorizing masculinity itself, adapting it to a post-modern, post-industrial, post-feminist world. It's not a world of equality, it's a world of equilibrium. It's not a world where men become better at serving women, but where men become better men. And it is not a world of sensitive new age guys talking about their feelings . . . it's a world where sweat, respect, honor and fidelity are the coins of the realm. As more and more men, married, divorced and single, 'take the Red Pill' and apply the knowledge of the Manosphere to their relationships, a wonderful thing is happening: men are growing strong, more secure in their masculinity . . . and less likely to capitulate to feminine whims on the basis of the feminine imperative.* (Amazon.co.uk, accessed 29th July 2025)

Given the already significant length of this article, we will have to postpone a larger or more direct discussion of the (so-called)[10] manosphere, martial arts and self-defence.

By comparison with *Nobody*, a far harsher version of its movement takes place in *A History of Violence*. Wife Edie was never privy to Tom's original nature, and the entire family have to witness his horrifying 'reversion to type'. Meanwhile, as Tom's fake identity is starting to fray, Tom's son, Jack (played by Ashton Holmes), is also going through something of an Oedipus crisis. Towards the start of the film we have seen him complaining about school and being bullied; but he starts to emerge from this, first by fighting and defeating the school bully and finally by shooting a mobster who is about to shoot his father. In saving (or besting) his father *by killing the man who was about to kill him*, and in then denouncing (rejecting) his father, Jack dramatizes in capsule form, a successful resolution to a metaphorical and very neat Freudian Oedipus Complex. In this way, both father and son enact different (violent) versions of 'becoming real men', more or less at the same time – Tom via a return to his renounced nature; his son via a discovery of his true nature.

The toxic manosphere base notes discernible here should not escape our notice, especially perhaps the way that Tom's wife and family simply have to accept his violent nature: the closing scene of the film sees Tom return home and reinsert himself into the domestic scene, sitting down at the dinner table with his family as they are eating their evening meal – no explanation, no apology, no asking permission: evidently simply more 'strong, more secure in [his] masculinity . . . and less likely to capitulate to feminine whims on the basis of the feminine imperative'.

What is produced by both films in slightly different ways is the *myth* of a prelapsarian masculinity, one not simply Edenic but also Hobbesian. The prelapsarian man knows the truth of 'the war of all against all' ('*bellum omnium contra omnes*'). The 'lapse' that defines the move from prelapsarian to postlapsarian is *ever having tried to be or have something other than this*: taking the forbidden fruit offered by Eve, and seeking the womblike comfort of love, family and domesticity. This puts man into conflict with his own true nature ('*bellum hominis contra se ipsum*', as it were).

This is the 'conflict' or 'problem' that the films address: finding a new way for a modified version of an old style of masculinity to thrive in a (post)feminist or domestic world – 'In the process, […] revalorizing masculinity itself…'

COERCIVE MIMETICISM

To be clear, I am absolutely not suggesting that there is or ever was such an 'actually existing' prelapsarian masculine 'state of nature'. It is a *myth*. Nor am I suggesting that it is a timeless and unshakeable or immoveable myth. *Such myths are created in and by the texts themselves. Different texts can create different myths.*

Furthermore, I am also not suggesting that everyone who watches such films will come away from them with a belief that now is the time for a renegotiation of masculinity within the domestic sphere, or a belief that before being ensnared in the world of girlfriends and wives, all young men were wild, dangerous and free. Although, having just written this, on reflection, it does not actually strike me as too preposterous, too unfamiliar, too far-fetched. Indeed, the perspectives I have just expressed actually strike me as entirely familiar, entirely everyday, entirely (if you will forgive my formulation) 'uncontroversial' views. This is because they are part of what cultural theorists used to call the 'dominant fiction' (Silverman, 1992), or what we might now call a structure of feeling characteristic of the current conjuncture.

Rather, what I am suggesting is that such myths – constructed and circulated by texts and across discursive contexts – might be regarded as moments of coercive mimeticism: performative 'speech acts' that push forward the agenda and interests of an entirely contingent kind of masculinity.

At this point, let's try to take some distance from the trees in order to try to see the woods more clearly. To do this, I will close with two different vignettes.

10 I have proposed that scholars should stop using the term 'manosphere' in favour of the more appropriate term 'manscaping'. See my blog post, 'Manscaping the Manosphere', https://substack.com/@bowmanp/p-169445924, published July 28 2025.

Vignette 3: It's toxic at the top

On Friday 22nd November 2024, MMA fighter Conor McGregor was found guilty, in a civil trial in Dublin, of violently sexually assaulting Nikita Hand in 2018. An article in *The Guardian* on 28th November noted that 'as brands and fans scramble to disown him [and] as murals are hastily painted over across the island' there were also supportive/outraged responses. One came from Andrew Tate. Himself charged with people-trafficking and rape in Romania, Tate called the judgement against McGregor a 'bullshit ruling' and claimed that it is now 'literally impossible to be a man in the western world' (Kassam & O'Carroll, 2024; Liew, 2024).

Tate's words here (as across much of his discourse) expropriate the language of victimhood in order to advance claims that masculinity is threatened or stymied by the power and influence of 'woke' ways of thinking in the contemporary world.

Meanwhile, in the same historical moment, the same rhetoric of victimhood and marginalisation was operationalised to stunning effect in the political victory of Donald Trump in the US elections. The victory of Trump arguably amounts to what Carole Cadwalladr has called the emergence of a new 'broligarchy' (Cadwalladr, 2024, 2025a, 2025b). One of Trump's visitors in the first months of his second term, in early 2025, was Conor McGregor. During this visit, McGregor sang from the same songbook as Trump, wildly denouncing immigration (BBC, 2025; O'Carroll, 2025).

I mention such globally famous and infamous figures such as McGregor, Tate, and Trump (there are many more internationally famous 'bro', 'manosphere', or *manscape* figures that could be mentioned) not to give the sense that this is a matter of celebrity, wealth, or fame. Rather, it is to give a sense of the hegemonic status of what feminist-inspired theory would once have termed toxic masculinity.

In the terms of Gramscian theory (Gramsci, 1971; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985): if the new dominant Western power bloc is indeed rightly characterised as a 'broligarchy', and if power still requires what Gramsci called *hegemony* (or active support and enthusiastic assent), then the assembling of the broligarchy as a power bloc also implies the existence of a widespread masculinist hegemony – or indeed a *he-gemony*.

In the age of globalised social media platforms, 'culture' is expanded and transformed: issues and activities flow across borders and contexts like never before. As political theorist Alan Finlayson puts it:

> Ideas, terms, phrases, arguments can just flow, immediately and very easily, between all sorts of different kinds of spaces. And you can find any as easily as finding any other. The size or status of a party doesn't necessarily make them more prominent on the flattening planes of the internet, and the most fringe view can find a platform that is essentially the same platform as the most mainstream view. So, one of the things that's happening is that the distinctions and differences between ideological positions break down, and ideas move and flow. (Finlayson et al., 2022, p. 42)

If the centre of the broligarchy is the emergent nexus of populist and authoritarian political figures supported by tech companies and prominent figures in the global media manscape, the scope and reach of the hooks and tendrils of the 'he-gemony' seems almost boundless.

Vignette 4: From centre to periphery

In early 2025, Netflix released the miniseries, *Adolescence*, to international critical acclaim. In *Adolescence*, a 13-year-old boy in a very average, nondescript northern English town is arrested for the murder of a girl from his school. Key to *Adolescence* is the subtle presence of what it is often easy – but a mistake – to think of as a characteristically US discourse about gender and masculinity. We slowly learn that the girl had called the boy an 'incel' via emojis in comments on Instagram. The police investigating the murder initially miss the meaning of the emojis – they thought the girl's comments were friendly. It took another teenager to explain their true (insulting) significance. This performance of seams of cultural literacy and values – signs felt intensely by one demographic that remain completely opaque or even invisible to another – illustrates the global discursive situation.

In one episode, the investigating officer questions one of the arrested boy's friends. Via subtle cues in a tangential discussion about physical appearance, it becomes clear that the group of friends had been influenced in their thinking about gender by online influencers. The teenagers felt clear about what *kind* of man is attractive to women and hence what they *should* aspire to be, do and become – and also what *they should think of women*: for instance, that women are, at the very least, thoroughly predictable. Andrew Tate is mentioned in the episode, but this is not dwelt upon.

Finally, towards the end of the intense, claustrophobic and desperate closing episode of the series, in a moment of shared despair between the boy's parents, they both lament their situation and berate themselves for not paying more attention to what their son was up to. They thought he was safe, gaming in his bedroom. Yet, really, he was being radicalised. Both parents try to persuade themselves that they could not have known this, that it was not their fault. At one point, the father holds out his phone and expresses exasperation *that there is no escaping from it*: 'like the time that bloke popped up on my phone!', he cries, 'I was only looking for ideas for the gym!'

I mention *Adolescence* not because I regard it as 'real'; rather because it is structured by possibilities that face many in contemporary 'society'. I could have selected from any of many other accounts of radicalisations, or other discussions of such issues across journalism and scholarship. I chose *Adolescence* because it illustrates the power of the reach of radicalised manscaping discourse – from major vistas of global mediascapes

to quiet bedrooms in the sleepy suburbs of nondescript towns. It also illustrates the many ways in which such discourse can insert itself into contexts via unexpected routes (for instance, while merely browsing the internet for workout ideas), and also the invisibility or inaudibility, to certain groups, of 'dog whistles' (so called because 'we' can't hear them but 'they' can), contrasted with their affective power and force in other contexts. To borrow an image from Sara Ahmed, hegemonic ideology is 'sticky' (Ahmed, 2014), and can stick to anything, maybe everything.

CONCLUSION

This article was inspired by a reflection on the recent work of Peter Katz, who draws attention to, and urges our critical (and lived) vigilance in the face of the immanently political dimensions and trajectories that are involved in or (as Ahmed might say) that 'stick' to our everyday life practices. Katz outlines the aesthetically fascist dimensions of practices like karate, and draws attention to the conceptual and ethical *drift* involved in discourses in, around and about self-defence.

It is not uncommon to diagnose individualist obsessions like working out, practicing self-defence or martial arts as 'being ideological', or symptoms of the crises and anxieties of our time (Hakim, 2019, pp. 10–11). Scholars such as Hall (2011), Hakim (2019), and Light (2017) have each reflected on versions of the self-centred, self-improving, self-reliant, self-investing, self-defending subject implied as 'ideal' by neoliberalism.

Having been involved in many forms of working out, self-defence, and martial arts in various ways for a very long time, I most certainly *do not want to believe* that I have been in some way aligning myself with, expressing, or (heaven forbid) enhancing or expanding neoliberal or cryptofascist ideology. However, my awareness of the possibility that I may have been performing according to the playbook of an epistemology of ignorance in which I have actively avoided thinking about any of this offers a caution, a challenge, and an opportunity. These all relate to the need to maintain critical vigilance, and to remain open to the possibility that we may need to transform our practices. As my epigraph and Katz's article each insist, the 'strategic adversary is fascism … [including] the fascism in us all' (Foucault, in Deleuze & Guattari, 1984, p. xiii).

Yet surely, neither an 'immanent potential' nor the 'aesthetic alignments' of *any* practice *necessarily* lead to the production of fascism, either individually or collectively. Might the Deleuze-Guattari/Foucault 'fear-of-fascism' line involve conflating too many things, a bit like the problematic 'ordinary language' (ab)use of the term 'violence', but in reverse – one in which a heterogeneity of different terms each 'really means' (or 'immanently tends toward becoming') fascism? Might this be an over-correction?

There are many forms of over-correction, many motivated refusals to see reality clearly. In his ethnography of 'Reality Fighters', Neil Gong notes that despite the fact that scholars of violence such as Randall Collins have shown *empirically* that 'the majority of confrontations are oriented around strategies to diffuse violence', Gong himself 'never […] heard a fighter simulate a de-escalating conversation in the middle of a fight' (Collins, 2009b, 2009a; Gong, 2015, p. 10). Is this evidence of fascism, male blood lust? Or is it that the particular kind of 'reality' that 'reality fighters' want to believe in, perform and simulate is more reflective of a desire for drama and excitement than actual correspondence to reality? This would not be fascism, then, just a desire for (media inspired) excitement.

Vignette 5: Coda

Actor Mark Wahlberg had originally been booked on one of the flights that were hijacked and used in the 9/11 terror attacks. In the end, however, he had travelled on an earlier date. In an interview for *Men's Journal*, the actor subsequently claimed:

> If I was on that plane with my kids, it wouldn't have went down like it did. There would have been a lot of blood in that first-class cabin and then me saying, 'OK, we're going to land somewhere safely, don't worry'. (HuffPost, 2012; Memmott, 2012)

Such words make one wonder about the relations between not only 'fascism' and 'male fantasies' – which has been well engaged before (Theweleit, 1989, 1991) – but about the relations between fascism, (male) fantasy, and Hollywood as a driver of such fantasies. It is the 'dream factory', after all.

In a move that might make one wonder, further, about relations between self-branding and reality, Wahlberg later either 1) reflected and saw some sense, or 2) was persuaded of the need to *perform* contrition as PR damage limitation. Stepping back from his cinematic-style fantasy claims, he said:

To speculate about such a situation is ridiculous to begin with, and to suggest I would have done anything differently than the passengers on that plane was irresponsible. I deeply apologize to the families of the victims that my answer came off as insensitive, it was certainly not my intention. (HuffPost, 2012)

To me, the most enigmatic and captivating aspect of this act of contrition is the final phrase about *intention*. After all, what *was* his intention? Did he even have one? How might we work smething like that out?

Ultimately, a better and more potentially useful reformulation of the question of intention would be something more like: *what is the source of the force fuelling the 'need' to make such utterances?* Fascism? Or something else? A mandatory performance of hypermasculinity fuelled by the need to ward off possible accusations of cowardice? It seems such accusations are always likely in the US context.

But is that fascism? In a Deleuzean 'micro' way, perhaps. Yet, is this not an overzealous over-correction? Are hypermasculinity, acts of manscaping and fascism all 'the same'? Are they all 'from

the same place', the same 'family'? Are these all different names for the 'same thing'? To make such an argument feels to me like an over-correction, or even a mistranslation.

However, I am not suggesting that 'to speculate about such a situation is ridiculous to begin with'. Maybe indeed, 'you never know until you're tested'. But, to echo Alexander Pope, it is fools who rush in. Today, it is surely entirely right to feel on your pulse the urgency of the fact that the the most powerful nation in the world is in the grip of a resurgent authoritarianism, one that is almost certainly becoming fascist (Peters, 2022). Therefore, as Slavoj Žižek has argued more than once: in the face of a massive sense of urgency, what is most urgently needed – right now, and fast! – is patient and engaged reflection and analysis.

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The author affirms that no artificial intelligence applications were used in the preparation of this manuscript.

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