Imagined Somaesthetics and the Analysis of Embodied Ideology

Paul Bowman

Abstract

Richard Shusterman's theory of somaesthetics offers a valuable way for scholars to understand the body in practice, one that is particularly valuable for martial arts studies. However, I suggest, Shusterman does not fully engage with the dimension of the imagination in bodily practices. This, I argue, means that the theory of somaesthetics is unfinished or incomplete in relation to analysing the practicing body in relation to external cultural influences and ideologies. To address this, I draw from Edward Said's theory of 'imagined geography' and Benedict Anderson's theory of 'imagined communities', plus Lauren Berlant's affect-focused insights into the relationships between the body and ideology, in order to enrich the theory of somaesthetics for martial arts studies. I term this expanded concept 'imagined somaesthetics'. After doing this, I draw from my own research into contemporary practices of 'Indian club' training, to propose a method for exploring imagined somaesthetics, that I call soma-semiotics.

Keywords

Imagined somaesthetics; Ideology; Soma-semiotics; Affect; Exbodiment; Indian Clubs

Bio

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Introduction: From Fantasy to Imagination

In well over a decade of researching and writing about martial arts, I have always sought to explore the generative relationships between media representations, cultural discourses, embodied practices, and aspects of the imagination that sustain such practices, including fantasy and desire. One of my first publications in this area was chapter three of my book *Deconstructing Popular Culture* (2008), which squarely connected the desire to practice martial arts with fantasies generated by media representations. My first book of martial arts studies, *Theorizing Bruce Lee* (2010), was made up of four long chapters, two of which were titled 'Film–Fantasy' and 'Fantasy–Fighting'. Similarly, my chapter in Farrer and Whalen-Bridge's seminal collection, *Martial Arts as Embodied Knowledge: Asian Traditions in a Transnational World*, was titled 'The Fantasy Corpus of Martial Arts' (2011). However, it was not until late 2024 that I explicitly formulated a theory of this *media-fantasy-practice* nexus. I call this *imagined somaesthetics*. In what follows, I set out the nuts and bolts of this theory for researchers of physical culture, especially martial arts, to evaluate. After doing so, I then sketch the outline of one possible method or methodology for exploring this 'media-embodiment' (or indeed *exbodiment*)[1] theory. I call this soma-semiotics. Because of word limitations, and because the main work of this article consists in making the case for the importance of imagined somaesthetics, when it comes to introducing the method of soma-semiotics, I can make only brief reference to examples drawn from my most recent research, which focuses on the martial-arts-adjacent field of Indian club, heavy club, and mace training.

[1] Brian Klaas defines 'exbodiment' as 'the transfer of knowledge from our brains to external repositories and tools, which can be shared, iteratively improved, and transferred across space and time' (Klaas, 2023). David C. Krakauer argues that 'exbodiment describes mind outsourced to engineered matter and how matter reeducates mind' (Krakauer, 2024). According to Klaas, without exbodiment, 'culture, cultural evolution, global cooperation, and the accumulation of knowledge across generations would be impossible. Through linguistic offshoots, such as writing, we are able to practice a unique phenomenon: *exbodiment*, in which byproducts of our cognition can be captured, stored, shared, and passed through generations' (Klaas, 2025). Given the historical prominence of the term 'embodiment' within all kinds of physical cultural studies, including martial arts studies, I believe exbodiment may constitute a valuable addition to such research. After all, *embodiment* is clearly intertwined with technology (such as, say, dumbbells or punchbags). But, given the contemporary intertwinement of our bodily practices with media technology (such as smart phones and social media platforms), this clearly suggests that embodiment, today, is intertwined with widespread new (21st century) processes of exbodiment.

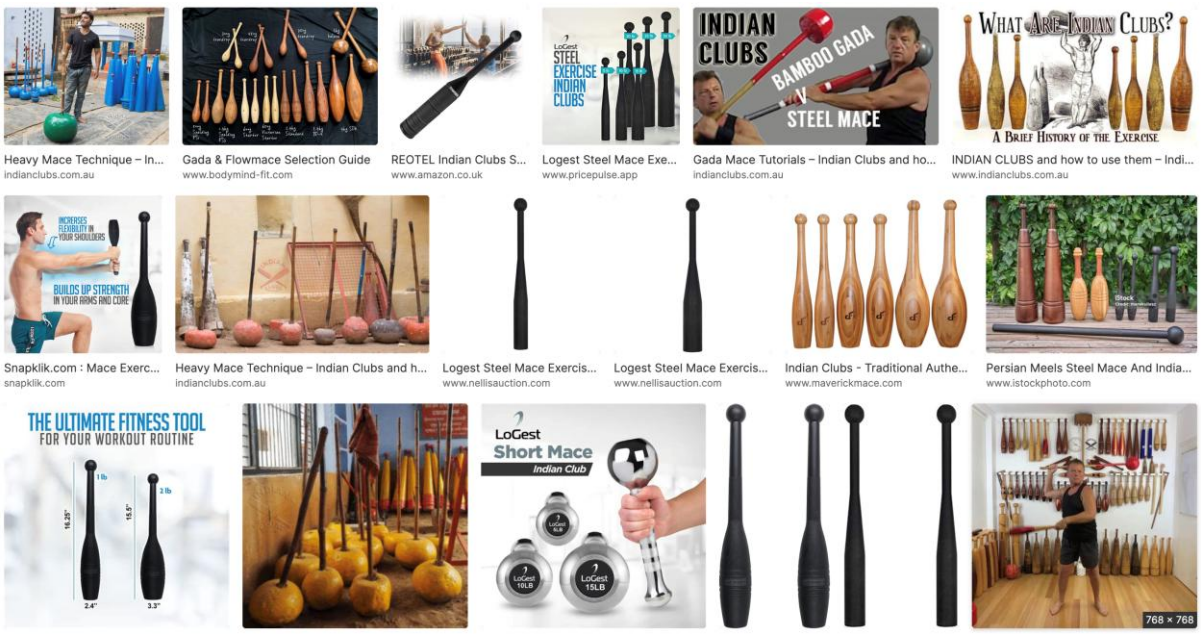

Figure 1: Screenshot from an Ecosia search engine image search for 'Indian Clubs Heavy Clubs and Mace'. Accessed: 3rd September 2025

In what follows, I do not dig into any one specific martial art in particular. Rather, I elaborate a theory and propose a method for the study of the 'reality-imagination' interface that is central to all martial arts practice (or performance) in general.

From Guts to Intellect

My starting point is a well-worn knotty one: the problem of putting into words what happens during physical cultural practices such as martial arts training. Loïc Wacquant once famously posed this in the form of a rhetorical question: 'How [do we] go from the guts to the intellect, from the comprehension of the flesh to the knowledge of the text?' This he deems 'a real problem of concrete epistemology about which we have not sufficiently reflected' (Wacquant, 2009, p. 122). To move towards solving the problem, he proposes, will require 'a complete overhaul of our way of writing social science' (p.

122).[2] Here, I first want to add: this is not only a problem for social science. Social science does not have a monopoly on the scholarly writing about embodiment, enskillment, experience, phenomenology, or affect. Rather, I propose, *all* genres of academic study – all disciplines – are challenged if and when it comes to translating matters of the living, experiencing, striving, performing, desiring, developing body into words. And there is arguably no escaping from words: academic disciplines are still dominated by the imperative to translate non-linguistic phenomena into words, whether for classroom or laboratory discussion, or as articles, chapters and research monographs.

There are many possible solutions to the problem of 'translation' from the embodied (soma) to the linguistic (or semantic and semiotic) realm, as identified by Wacquant. In his own writing, Wacquant himself adopts the approach of flipping between different styles of writing – description, analysis, confessional, autoethnographic, etc. – in order to try to capture and convey as many dimensions of experience as possible (discussed in Bowman, 2015; see Wacquant, 2004, 2009). Elsewhere, performance scholars such as Spatz have attempted to expand the realms and forms of writing about the body by expanding and developing the potentials of the video essay (Spatz, 2015). However, rather than advocating either the use of cutting edge AV technology to help develop embodied research or advocating the mastery of multiple styles of communicating, here I want to suggest that the problematic abyss between 'the guts' and 'the intellect' can be bridged by way of drawing on only two things: first, an appropriate field of conceptuality, made up of appropriate, descriptive and suggestive terms and concepts; and, second, a clear, achievable (and of course affordable) methodology.

Soma-Semiotics: the Study of Imagined Somaesthetics

[2] I have engaged with Wacquant's approach to this issue before (Bowman, 2015). Back then, I suggested that Wacquant's approach leaves itself open to a Derridean critique regarding the unavoidable intrusion and complexity of language into the realm of what Wacquant calls 'carnality'. I argued that Wacquant seems to treat language as a 'tool' to be used to achieve objectivity, rather than a medium that inherently shapes and displaces 'truth' or 'things themselves'.

In the spirit of offering fresh approaches to the eternally returning problematic of (to put it crudely) translating 'practical feeling' into 'academic words', I introduce here the theory of *imagined somaesthetics*. In addition, I trace the outlines of what I believe is a useful method for exploring imagined somaesthetics, a method that I propose to call *soma-semiotics*. However, the term 'soma-semiotics' has already been coined and exists as a theoretical resource that currently operates at the intersection of studies of embodied cognition and somatic studies across several disciplines. It is typically deployed to address how bodily experiences function as meaningful signs that can be interpreted and understood. It exists in somatic psychotherapy (Wilberg, 2010), and in some approaches to media studies and embodiment. At the nexus of media and physical culture studies, the conceptual field opened up by the notion of soma-semiotics becomes valuable for exploring how embodied practices in, for example, sport, dance, and movement cultures generate 'sense' (Fingerhut, 2021; Silk et al., 2017; Violi, 2008).

Here, I propose to pitch soma-semiotics as a *method*, one that works in the service of amplifying the realm of *imagined somaesthetics* that I regard as core to physical cultural practices such as martial arts. My proposal is that the method of soma-semiotic analysis in the exploration of imagined somaesthetics is of current and arguably enduring value for various kinds of study of embodiment, physical practices, performance and physical culture, especially as these interact with, express, or contest ideology.

I will say more about 'ideology' and the other key terms I have introduced, in due course. First, I will expand on what is meant by 'imagined somaesthetics'. To do so, I will explain how other uses of these two words ('imagined' and 'somaesthetics') have inspired my thinking about and linking of the two. In my usage, the word 'imagined' is best understood in relation to Edward Said's concept of *imagined geography* (Said, 2005) and/or Benedict Anderson's concept of *imagined community* (Anderson, 1991), while 'somaesthetics' derives directly from Richard Shusterman's concept (somaesthetics) (Shusterman, 2008), albeit in a form modified by the preceding word 'imagined'. Allow me to take each of these in turn.

Imagined Geography

Said's notion of imagined geography relates to the connotative, evocative, affective force of *ideas* of a place (or ideas *about* a place), rather than anything objectively, naturally or neutrally true about that place. *Ideas about places* endow discourses about them with values and potential passions as they become, for different groups, evocative entities, 'covered entirely with symbolic associations' (Said, 2005, p. 260). The poetic rendering of a place can arise for many reasons – whether religious (Said treats at length the various religious renderings of 'the Holy Land'), philosophical (think of the status of sublime landscapes for the Romantics), commercial (think: tourism), etc. (Culler, 1990). But it is not just poetic renderings that create passions, attachments, revulsions, and so on. Even the supposedly cold hard discipline of history has long played a key role in the construction of spatialised economies of value. In Said's words:

> Far from being a neutral exercise in facts and basic truths, the study of history, which of course is the underpinning of memory, both in school and university, is to some considerable extent a nationalist effort premised on the need to construct a desirable loyalty to and insider's understanding of one's country, tradition, and faith. (p. 257)

Nationalist discourses, for instance, often amount to 'a method for using collective memory selectively by manipulating certain bits of the collective past, suppressing others, [and] elevating still others in an entirely functional way' (p. 259).

Discussing Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's arguments about the large scale British 'invention of tradition' through the 19th century (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983) – i.e., the expansion and manipulation of myths and their deployment to function in the service of biopolitical population management – Said emphasises the implications that this theory has for notions of *place*. As he argues, *ideas about places* have been key tools in the history of colonial and national management. Like Hobsbawm and Ranger,

Said emphasizes that cultural memory is never neutral or simply objective, but should rather be understood as something that all sorts of agents and agencies ('historians as well as ordinary citizens and institutions') inevitably manipulate as 'something to be used, misused, and exploited, rather than something that sits inertly there for each person to possess and contain' (p. 259).

Alongside this, and through numerous institutional and media channels, the ways that different places are rendered (or depicted) often 'touch very significantly upon questions of identity, of nationalism, of power and authority' (p. 257). While Hobsbawm and Ranger focus on the 19th century, Said goes both further back in time (to the Crusades) and closer to the present day. He proposes that, as cultures became increasingly media-saturated, globalised and fragmented through the 20th century, the status of *place* grew in significance and importance, in new ways. The age of mass media involved elements of cultural homogenization and fragmentation that also gave birth to 'an era of a search for roots, of people trying to discover in the collective memory of their race, religion, community, and family a past that is entirely their own, secure from the ravages of history and a turbulent time' (Chow, 1995; Said, 2005, p. 258). In sum, for Said, while actual geography is of course real, so is imagined geography. Sometimes it is arguably more powerful.

Imagined Communities

As well as Said's contention that imagined geography constitutes a powerful affective force in the real world, my own use of the word 'imagined' also alludes to Benedict Anderson's notion of 'imagined communities'. Anderson elaborates the significance and dynamics of the notion of imagined community in his famous study of the history of the origins and spread of nationalism (Anderson, 1991). In this work, Anderson traces the impact that the printing press had on the emergence of nationalism, first via the production of print forms of local national languages. For the first time in history, he argues, local languages became 'faster' and hence more powerful on a day-to-day basis than church Latin. Ultimately, this snowballed into the weakening of Papal power and

the establishment of regionally and linguistically organised and disseminated forms of group identity and identification, most prominently via the spread of print news media. Against the backdrop of numerous other historical power struggles, Anderson argues that the printing press, and the new power of regional languages via associated print media were prime movers in the establishment of the 'imagined community' of the nation.

What is crucial to note is that, in both Said and Anderson, the meaning of the word 'imagined' as they use it does not mean 'non-existent' or untrue. Rather, it means functionally and effectively real – existing in reciprocal and mutually strengthening relationships, alongside, in and through laws, policies, institutions, borders, and so on. All such elements make what is at root an 'imaginative leap' (identifying with countless numbers of strangers, most of whom one will never meet) into something that is lived as very real. Nonetheless, both community and place are very much imagined inasmuch as (every) one has to be told about 'us and them' and 'here and there' before such *deictic markers* (us/them, here/there) have any existence. No one is born knowing where 'here' ends and 'there' begins, nor where 'we' end and 'they' begin. The manipulation of such vague, imprecise yet irreducibly evocative notions as here, there, we and they is crucial to all identity discourse. Simply put, 'here' in distinction to 'there' and 'us' distinguished from 'them' is rarely a matter of objectively referential categories. All such terms are loaded, and they are constructions, invocations, with shifting values. Indeed, linguistics sometimes calls these 'shifters' or 'deictics' (Weber, 1987, 2001). Their work is what rhetoricians might call the production of *hypotyposis* or *catachresis* – terms that literally mean 'putting a face on that which really doesn't have a face' (De Man, 1986). The notions of us, them, here and there do not have a 'face' or an identity until we compose one for them. These are all imagined categories whose contents can vary radically (Laclau, 2007).

Imagined, Imaginary, and the Imagination

This point is important to emphasize: the notion of the imagined in such uses does not mean 'not real'. Rather, what such uses tap into is the power of imagined or imaginative dimensions to forge various kinds of senses of self and connections between self and other. Upon these are built various other kinds of functionally real forms of linkage, such as national languages, laws and shared rights. Thus, in the work of Said, Anderson, and other scholars who are directly or loosely connected with the approaches of poststructuralist scholarship, the imagined must be understood to function as very much part of effective and affective reality.

At the psychoanalytic end of such scholarship, it became common through the 1980s to speak of various kind of 'imaginaries' – 'the political imaginary', 'the social imaginary' (or cognates such as 'the dominant fiction'), and so on. This use was broadly derived from the work of the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, for whom human existence was dispersed across three realms – the symbolic order (the world of language, communication, values, signification), the imaginary (daydreamlike states of imagination and fantasy), and the real (which, paradoxically, is that which resists, exceeds or happens outside of symbolization).

Further away from psychoanalytic theory and at the more philosophical end of poststructuralism, however, Jacques Derrida was also very interested in the topic of imagination, and especially its relation to truth and reality. As he once explained:

> I think that the case of the imagination is enlightening in many ways. Several things drew me towards the question of imagination, in various forms and languages (imagination in Aristotle is not the productive imagination in Kant or in Hegel). First of all, there is something about it that has made it a threat to truth, intellect and reality – yet a resource as well. It could easily be shown, in fact, in Plato as in others, that imagination has an ambiguous nature: on one hand, it is that which threatens truth and the idea – the image is inferior to the idea; and, on the other, it has a positive function – it is philosophically and pedagogically necessary. It is the locus of fiction, but also of a certain synthesis, a place of mediation – especially in Kant where imagination is precisely the third term, the 'third'. […]. This third term

> can be taken as the mediator that permits synthesis, reconciliation, participation; in which case that which is neither this nor that permits the synthesis of this and that. But this function is not limited to the form it has taken in Hegelian dialectic, and the third of neither-this-nor-that and this-and-that can indeed also be interpreted as that whose absolute heterogeneity resists all integration, participation and system, thus designating the place where the system does not close. It is, at the same time, the place where the system constitutes itself, and where this constitution is threatened by the heterogeneous, and by a fiction no longer at the service of truth. What particularly interests me here is that which participates in participation and non-participation. (Derrida & Ferraris, 2003, p. 5)

I quote this dense passage at length because there is so much going on in it. Cutting it back any more than I already have (by removing subclauses, parenthetical asides, and allusions to different thinkers and issues) felt brutal. Nonetheless, I must be selective and not let all of the possible avenues opened up by Derrida about the status of the imagination in relation to reality and different kinds of systematicity, theory and practice derail my focus. (So, I leave them hanging there for others to ponder, as I believe they may feed critical, theoretical, philosophical and practical imaginations in productive ways.)

For my primary purpose here, the key point is that, within different philosophical traditions (especially in their thinking of ontology), the imagination is both *necessary* yet also a *threat*. The imagination – as we have seen in terms of community and place – can bind things together. But it is also the source of their potential undoing. The imagination can affirm sameness, identity and connection. But it is also the crucible of ideas of difference, change, dislocation and transformation. Put differently: the imagination is at once a necessary supplement and a 'dangerous supplement' (Derrida, 1976, 2001). It adds that certain something that sutures things together. But it is also the potential ground zero of their disconnection and transformation.

This is why I want to add the word 'imagined' to 'somaesthetics': to emphasize the role of *that which is added* to our somaesthetic sense – that certain something extra, that

must be present in order to bind together our sense of self and body in practice or performance, but which is also the pulling of that sense into a certain direction or field – or, indeed, ideology.

From Somaesthetics to Imagined Somaesthetics

The second word in my formulation 'imagined somaesthetics' derives directly from the work of Richard Shusterman. Across the pages of several major books, including *Practicing Philosophy: Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life* (1997), *Performing Live* (2000) and *Body Consciousness* (2008), Shusterman develops and elaborates his notion of somaesthetics.

At the beginning of *Body Consciousness*, Shusterman observes:

> The body is not only the crucial site where one's ethos and values can be physically displayed and attractively developed, *but it is also* where one's skills of perception and performance can be honed to improve one's cognition and capacities for virtue and happiness. (xii, emphasis added)

As the copula 'but it is also' indicates, it is the content in the second half of this sentence that is of most interest to Shusterman. Indeed, for Shusterman, the term somaesthetics names a *discipline* (p. 1), one that is 'concerned with the critical study and meliorative cultivation of how we experience and use the living body (or soma) as a site of sensory appreciation (aesthesis) and creative self-fashioning' (Shusterman, 2008, p. 1). However, *imagined* somaesthetics, I want to suggest, is more focused (at least, at first) on such matters as those indicated by his opening words: what it *means* – and how it comes to be – that the body can be a 'crucial site' in and on which 'ethos and values' (or indeed, *ideologies*) can be both 'displayed' and 'developed'.

Interestingly, in *Body Consciousness*, Shusterman has little to say about imagining, the imagined, the imagination, or the imaginative. To be clear again, this is not to suggest

that Shusterman *couldn't* say much about the imagination in somaesthetics, or the imagination and somaesthetics. It is merely to observe that he doesn't pursue the question of the role of imagining in somaesthetics. In fact, out of well over 30 occurrences of variations of the word 'imagine' only a few relate at all to the place of the imagination within somaesthetic embodiment itself. One occurs in a discussion of the relationship between 'representational and experiential somaesthetics' (p.26). Another occurs during a reflection on the place of language in 'somaesthetic insight' in the work of William James (p.164). I will quote each of these passages at length, both to illustrate Shusterman's engagement with imagination and also to give the reader a further taste of Shusterman's rich thinking and elegant writing.

First, on the relationship between representations and experiences:

> The distinction between representational and experiential somaesthetics is one of dominant tendency rather than a rigid dichotomy. Most somatic practices have both representational and experiential dimensions (and rewards), because there is a basic complementarity of representation and experience, outer and inner. How we look influences how we feel, and vice versa. Practices like dieting or bodybuilding that are initially pursued for representational ends often produce inner feelings that are then sought for their own experiential sake. The dieter becomes an anorexic craving the inner feel of hunger; the bodybuilder becomes addicted to the experiential surge of 'the pump'. Moreover, somatic methods aimed at inner experience often employ representational means as cues to effect the body posture necessary for inducing the desired experience, whether by consulting one's image in a mirror, focusing one's gaze on a body part like the tip of the nose or the navel, or simply visualizing a body form in one's imagination. Conversely, representational practices such as bodybuilding use acute awareness of experiential clues (e.g., of optimal fatigue, body alignment, and full muscle extension) to serve its sculptural ends of external form, helping to distinguish, for example, the kind of pain that builds muscle from the pain that indicates injury. (p.26)

Next, on the place of language in processes of somaesthetic insight:

> Still another technique [that William James discusses] for sharpening our attention to a feeling we are trying to discriminate is by preparing for or anticipating its perception, since 'pre-perception … is half of the perception of the looked-for thing' […]. With respect to somatic introspection, such preparation (which in itself heightens interest) can take different forms. One can prepare oneself to discriminate a feeling by conceptualizing where in one's body to look for it or by imagining how it will be induced and felt there. Such conceptualization and imagining clearly involves linguistic thought, which means that language can be an aid to somaesthetic insight, though it can also be a distracting obstacle when the range of language is assumed to exhaust the entire range of experience. While emphasizing the limits of language and the importance of nameless feelings, James realizes that language can improve our perception of what we feel. (p.164)

As these fascinating passages show, Shusterman's emphasis is very much on the body, on bodily knowledge, on experiential affective maps and mechanisms 'within' the body, in 'developing' the body, in one or another way. My own interests, however – and, I would argue, the main interests and questions that have structured the field of martial arts studies to date – have related more to the interfaces and interactions of bodies as participants in larger ideological and cultural processes. The body is, as Shusterman's early sentence clearly states, 'the crucial site where one's ethos and values can be physically displayed and attractively developed'. And this display and development involves elements that *must* be imagined.

Imagining, it is important to reiterate, is neither a secondary, supplementary, nor optional add-on to physical cultural practices like martial arts, yoga, or bodybuilding. It is *fundamental* to them. Nor are the things that are imagined while involved in or thinking about practices purely random or individualised. They feed from and feed back into wider cultural discourses. Thus, the interactional dynamics of specific imaginings, forms of bodily activity, self-crafting or development, their affects, and the interpretations of those affects are, I propose, *ideological*.

Somaesthetics and Ideology

In terms of what is meant by 'ideology' here I follow the argument of affect theorist Lauren Berlant, who proposes: 'Affect's saturation of form can communicate the conditions under which a historical moment appears as a visceral moment' (Berlant, 2011, p. 16). In its most elementary sense, what Berlant is proposing and theorising here is the idea that we feel and respond bodily to the times themselves – the issues, anxieties, promises, threats and so on that we consciously and unconsciously intuit across many areas and aspects of our lives. Raymond Williams referred to this sensory unfolding of the present as a 'structure of feeling' (Williams, 1977).

For Berlant, this means that 'the aesthetic or formal rendition of affective experience provides evidence of historical processes' (p. 16). Referring back to one of the most influential theorists of ideology, Berlant observes that, at least since the work of Louis Althusser, 'ideology theory has been the place to which critical theory has gone for explanations of [...] how people's desires become mediated through attachments to modes of life to which they rarely remember consenting' (p. 52). Crucially, for our purposes, she adds:

> Laws, norms, and events shape imaginaries, but in the middle of the reproduction of life people make up modes of being and responding to the world that altogether constitute what gets called 'visceral response' and intuitive intelligence.
>
> Therefore, I would claim, affect theory is another phase in the history of ideology theory; the moment of the affective turn brings us back to the encounter of what is sensed with what is known and what has impact in a new but also recognizable way. (p. 53)

Certainly, Shusterman's work on somaesthetics is well-equipped to contribute to the study of the body in/and ideology. There are numerous brief discussions of ideology throughout *Body Consciousness*. Many of these are implicitly aligned with Berlant's

argument. For instance: ‘Entire ideologies of domination can thus be covertly materialized and preserved by encoding them in somatic social norms that, as bodily habits, are typically taken for granted and so escape critical consciousness’ (Shusterman, 2008, p. 22). Or, when discussing Michel Foucault, Shusterman positions him both as an archivist and theorist ‘who showed how “docile bodies” were systematically yet subtly, secretly shaped by seemingly innocent body disciplines and regimes of biopower so as to advance oppressive sociopolitical agendas and institutions’; a theorist who also went on to become an activist notable for ‘proposing alternative body practices to overcome the repressive ideologies covertly entrenched in our docile bodies’ (29).

Similarly, Shusterman engages with the political dimensions of the encoding of gender hierarchies in somaesthetics. Reading Simone de Beauvoir’s work on gender and aging, Shusterman explores her (and later feminists’) critiques of the ways that:

> social disempowerment is reciprocally reinforced by the perceived bodily weakness of women and the elderly, which seems to justify their subordinate status as natural and necessary. Fostered and inculcated by the prevailing institutions and ideologies of our culture, such somatic and social subordination is, moreover, incorporated in the bodily habits of these dominated subjects who thus unconsciously reinscribe their own sense of weakness and domination. (p. 78)

Within such explorations, Shusterman also asks such activist questions as: ‘Couldn’t a somaesthetic critique of this ideology and the development of new somaesthetic ideals be helpful for breaking out of this vicious circle?’ (p. 86) And, with a clear understanding of the political powers of representation, he also proposes that ‘dramatically different aesthetic representations of female bodies can be used to transgress and subvert the conventional notions of gender identity, thus helping to emancipate women from the oppressive constraints that the ideology of a fixed and subordinate gender essence has imposed on them’ (p. 91). Yet, Shusterman nonetheless does not focus on the important place and power of the imagination within the processes and practices

themselves. This is where a theory of imagined somaesthetics can contribute productively.

From Fantasy to Imagined Somaesthetics

Throughout my own work, for a long time, rather than on 'imagination', I preferred to draw from the closely related but more psychoanalytically inflected notion of *fantasy*. For instance, *Theorizing Bruce Lee: Film–Fantasy–Fighting–Philosophy* (2010), involves two long chapters that engage with the fantasy-imagination-agency nexus in martial arts (chapter two, 'Film–Fantasy', and chapter three, 'Fantasy–Fighting'). *Beyond Bruce Lee: Chasing the Dragon through Film, Philosophy and Popular Culture* (2013) explored various versions and receptions of Bruce Lee and argued that imagination and/or fantasy were core to these receptions. *Martial Arts Studies: Disrupting Disciplinary Boundaries* (2015) attempted to theorize the nascent field of martial arts studies, and drew more on the notion of the imagined in the sense of Said and Anderson. Subsequently, *Mythologies of Martial Arts* (2017), as indicated by the title, engages many of the mythologies involved in discourses around martial arts. These are inherently tied to the imagination in the construction of narratives, beliefs, and ideologies. Most recently, *The Invention of Martial Arts: Popular Culture between Asia and America* (2021) examines the relationship between martial arts, media, and popular culture and how representations contribute to our understanding of martial arts. The 'invention' that takes place in texts, discourses and representations is overwhelmingly a matter of imagination in constructing ideas, images, ideals, aspirations, and fantasies related to martial arts.

In this regard, my own approach to fantasy/imagination and martial arts is far from unique. Many involved in the field of martial arts studies are equally aware of the enormous importance of the imagination in orientating practice and discourse. Across numerous studies, scholars have detailed many and varied ways in which, for instance, martial arts history and practice are imagined. There are too many to list, but I offer in

parentheses here some starting points (An & and Hong, 2018; Farrer & Whalen-Bridge, 2011; Judkins & Nielson, 2015; Wile, 1996; Wong, 2019).

Outside of scholarship, and within the realms of practice, I would wager that any reader of these words who has at any time practiced martial arts, will affirm that it was *something about* images derived directly from popular media that captured their imaginations and moved them to try a martial art, or that fuelled their enthusiasm to keep going. Many martial arts studies scholars are also practitioners (or, indeed, 'pracademics') and will intuitively grasp the place of cultural fantasies in their own personal narratives.

Of course, even without being a practitioner, there are many methodological routes available for scholars to explore the 'imaginaries' (fantasies, beliefs and value systems) involved in martial arts and other practices of physical culture. Textual analysis, discourse analysis, archival analysis, interviews, surveys, various kinds of observations, and so on, can and do all yield insightful results. However, in what follows, I will outline the method of embodied and textual research that I have long implicitly followed, but only recently started to explicitly formulate as a particular method.

As an important caveat, however, I want to make it absolutely clear that I certainly do not think that the study of one or another field or practice of physical culture *requires* that the researcher be a practitioner – just as I do not subscribe to the classic anthropological idea that the researcher should *not* be a participant, or should ideally not study their own practice (Wacquant, 2004). But I think that having some kind of embodied experience of a physical practice (just like having some kind of physical experience of a place) can add an extra dimension. This is an extra dimension that can be explored – either called upon occasionally (whether anecdotally or as an extra form of evidence) or examined more methodologically or – dare I say it (in light of our quotation from Derrida, above) – 'systematically'. The way I incorporate such experience into my media and cultural studies analyses of embodied practices such as martial arts can be called soma-semiotics.

The Soma-Semiotics of Indian Clubs

Soma-semiotics, in my use here, is an experiential and experimental method that ties introspective reflection on embodied experience to interpretation of an external field or (‘*exbodied’*) discursive context. It is not autoethnography, although it could be a part of autoethnography, but you don’t need to be doing autoethnography to do soma-semiotics. It is something I have long practised, intuitively, yet without formalising it as a method. Some readers, I know, have interpreted what I am now calling a method as my ‘personal’ tendency to occasionally adopt an intimate or confessional tone, or as a ‘personal’ penchant for anecdotes. However, I had long concurred with Meaghan Morris, who, in her influential essay, ‘Banality in Cultural Studies’, argued that anecdotes ‘are not expressions of personal experience, but allegorical expositions of a model of the way the world can be said to be working’ (Morris, 1990, p. 7).

I began to think more methodologically about soma-semiotics as a method for examining the ideological dimensions of somaesthetic experience when, in late 2024, I began researching the wide array of training tools that are often grouped under the umbrella term ‘Indian Clubs’. Indian clubs, heavy clubs, steel clubs, and other forms of clubs have grown increasingly popular among martial artists in the 21st century, as the ‘functional fitness movement’ has grown. Influential martial artists such as Scott Sonon attempted to market clubs as both the most ancient form of martial training and also the next logical step, the ‘next level’, or ‘the future’ of training for martial artists desiring ‘peak performance’.[3]

The generic term ‘Indian clubs’ refers to a cluster of training tools said to be derived from weapons, but more recently evolving into strength, stamina and skill training tools in their own right. Some styles of clubs are very ancient: such as the *gada* (गदा) or mace (a long staff with one weighted end), or large heavy clubs such as Persian *meels* (میل,

[3] I discuss all of these matters in much more depth in a forthcoming article titled ‘*Somacoloniality*: Three Figures of Embodied Postcolonial Affect (Indian Clubs, Gadas, and Heavy Clubs)’. This article is currently under review.

also *mil*), Indian *mugdars* (मुद्गर) and *joris* (जोड़ी) – which are used either singly or in pairs). Others are of much more recent provenance, such as so-called Indian clubs 'proper'. These are smaller bottle-shaped wooden clubs that were actually designed and standardised by the British military in India through the nineteenth century (Heffernan, 2017, 2024).

Figure 2: Persian Meels. Source: https://www.bodymind-fit.com/persian-meels-selection-guide/?v=7516fd43adaa. Accessed 2nd September 2025

Figure 3: 'An Introduction to Indian Gada (Mace) training. Source: https://www.bodymind-fit.com/2024/09/04/introduction-to-gada-training/. Accessed 2nd September 2025

Figure 4: 'My First Jori Clubs'. Source: https://indianclubs.com.au/indian-jori/indian-jori-tutorials/my-first-jori-clubs/. Accessed 2nd September 2025

Figure 5: 'Indian Clubs Selection Guide'. Source: https://www.bodymind-fit.com/indian-clubs-selection-guide/. Accessed 2nd September 2025

Throughout the Victorian period, British style 'Indian' clubs caught on outside of India and the British military. Exercising with them became an early craze of a nascent health and fitness movement that continues to this day (Heffernan, 2024). They were also carried as concealed weapons by Suffragettes in Victorian and Edwardian era Britain (Godfrey, 2012). During their heyday, myriad sizes and shapes of clubs were made and sold around Europe, the US, and, of course, India. For a range of reasons, their popularity waned during the first third of the twentieth century, but club training has experienced a kind of renaissance in the twenty first century thanks, in large part, to popularisers of a new style of steel clubs and 'clubbells' that emerged in the wake of the kettlebell craze of the early twentieth century. Despite their newness (Sonnon trademarked the term 'clubbell'),[4] these are promoted as forgotten ancient implements, supposedly unsurpassed in developing the (new) mythic entity known as 'functional strength', so desired by martial artists and athletes.

Alongside my historical and cultural research, I was also exercising with three different kinds of clubs as supplements to by BJJ practice. First, light 'Indian' clubs; second, heavy steel clubs; and third, maces. I learned moves and routines for each from internet sources – primarily 'instructionals' posted on YouTube. I also spent many hours browsing Instagram feeds and Facebook groups focusing on Indian clubs, watching the way people from all over the world used different clubs in different ways. I watched video essays about Indian clubs (and other Victorian era exercise styles) by historians such as Ben Miller (Miller, n.d.). I read many academic articles and chapters about

[4] Scott Sonnon filed his first clubbell patent on May 16, 2003, with patent number USD492373S1 titled 'Circular strength training apparatus'. The patent was granted on June 29, 2004, and listed both Scott Bradley Sonnon and Nikolay Travkin as inventors, assigned to the American Academy for Russian Martial Art and Combat Skill Inc. Sonnon's first book *Clubbell Training for Circular Strength: An Ancient Tool for the Modern Athlete* was published in 2003. According to the book description, in 2002 he released 'the flagship of the Circular Strength revolution – patent pending Clubbells'.

clubs.[5] One of these suggested that there had been a dialectical process of, so to speak, call and response, between coloniser and colonised, in the development of different styles of clubs (Heffernan, 2017). The argument was that after the British modified the older, larger styles of clubs used by Indians, making their own versions into a standard size and shape ('regulation clubs', as they became known), then anti-colonial Indians responded in turn by making even bigger clubs than before, as a way to assert their difference and superiority via the development of greater strength through training with huge clubs (Heffernan, 2017). I also watched videos about steel clubbells, from proponents (such as Mark Wildman) who constantly appealed to the idea of the universality of shared human physiology and biomechanics, which often invoked crypto-Rousseauian images about how humans had once been 'noble savages' with great posture, no back pain, full hip mobility and exquisite 'functional strength'. Inevitably, I took all of these sources into my training.

What struck me first was the way that exercising with light pairs of clubs seemed, as if spontaneously, to coax my posture into an archetypal or stereotypical Victorian era 'British gentleman' type of posture (see Gilman, 2018). Light clubs can be used very deftly, precisely, at full arm extension, and for duration. Any aches and pains that arise, either from endurance or over-extension, can intuitively be resolved by 'correcting' posture – standing up straighter, lowering shoulders, raising the head, expanding the chest, and so on. Indeed, such body modification felt like a kind of immanent affective potential of the clubs. I felt like I was becoming (like) an archetypal Victorian gentleman, of impeccable posture (Gilman, 2014).

[5] There are a surprising number of studies of Indian clubs across multiple disciplines, including exercise science and physiology, biomechanics and motor control research, and various kinds of therapeutic research I will not list any of these here. The works closest to my own disciplinary field – and that are most relevant for the disciplinary scope of this journal – are largely historical, anthropological and informed by issues in colonialism and postcolonialism. Notable scholars include Alter, Heffernan and Todd (Alter, 2004; Heffernan, 2017, 2019, 2024; Todd, 2003). However, none of these studies could be said to be media or cultural studies, or to broach matters such as somaesthetics, the imagination, or soma-semiotics.

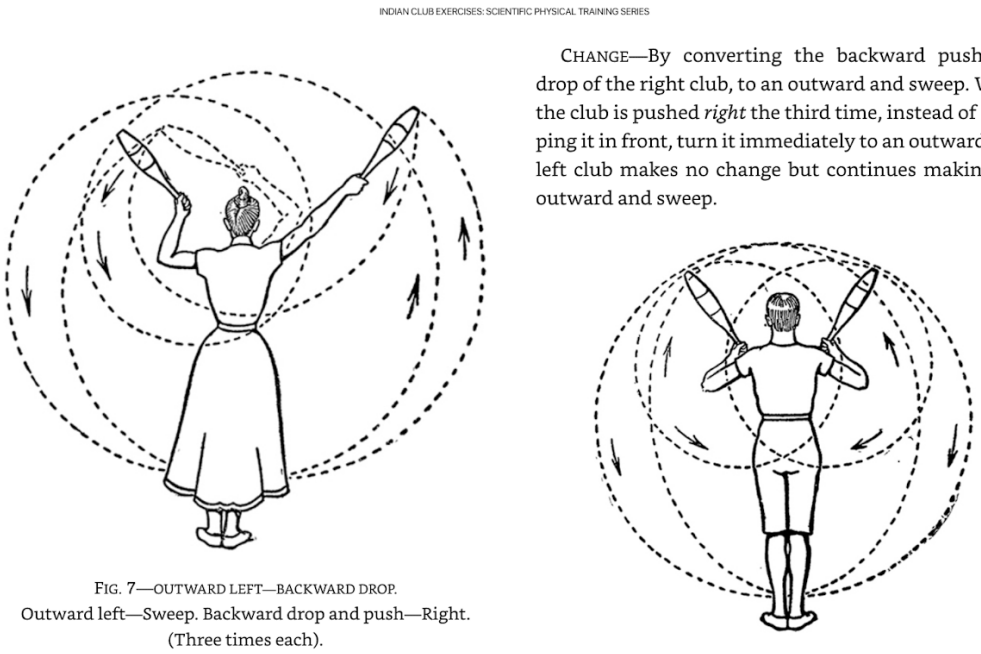

Figure 6. 'A detail from *Indian Club Exercises* (1899), by Edwin D. Warman, pages 44-45', https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=loc.ark:/13960/t9p27bb2d&seq=6. Accessed 2nd September 2025

The heavy mace (or *gada*) by contrast demands enormous exertion, powerful upper body muscular contractions and energetic swings to control its movement. I had already noticed that many YouTube and Instagram proponents more or less explicitly invoked a clear warrior iconography in their self-styling and self-presentation, across various contexts (see figure 4 for one example of a self-styled 'savage'). I began to *feel* why this might be so. The mace *feels* martial. According to one online proponent, the aptly-named Mark Wildman, '*really* maces *are* martial arts' (Wildman, 2020).

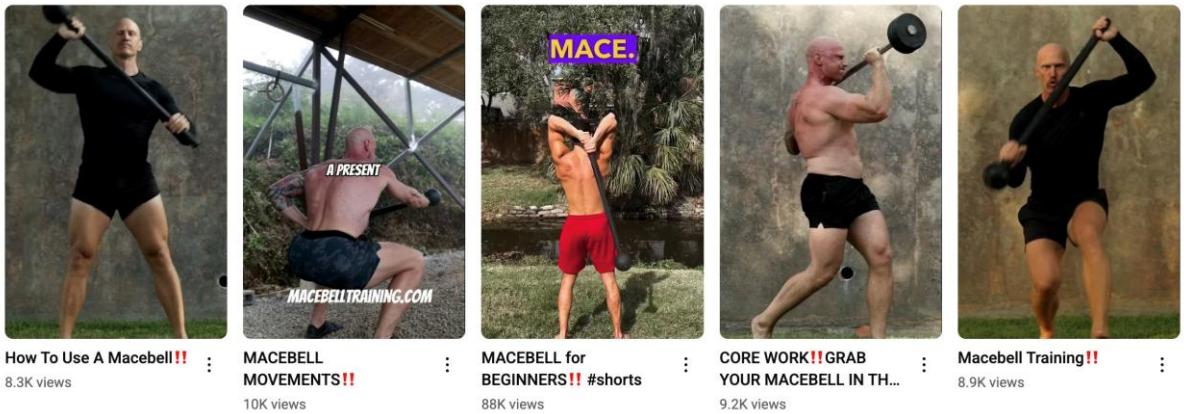

Figure 7. 'Screenshot from Savage Army YouTube Channel', https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=savage+army+mace, Accessed 2nd September 2025

There is much more to say about such matters.[6] Here, I want simply to point out that this one somaesthetic contrast (between light clubs and heavy maces) can already initiate a soma-semiotic approach able to zone in on the *imagined* component of the experience: the *feeling like* an 'upright' and genteel person; the *feeling like* a powerful warrior. Of course, correlation is not causation. The light clubs cannot be said *in and of themselves* to spontaneously produce a complete postural value system and ideology. The clubs themselves are not responsible for the stereotype or archetype of the upright English gent or lady with perfect decorum (Figure 6). Likewise, the gada or mace cannot be said to be the sole cause of Viking, 'Barbarian', Berserker, or any other kind of warrior semiotics emerging in their discourse (Figure 7). Furthermore, neither implement (nor any other) nor their practice can be said to *determine* what larger ethos, ideology, politics or discursive formations either the genteel, the barbarian or any other imagined somaesthetic figure becomes articulated with. But they are a key and functional moving part of what a Deleuzean vocabulary might call the feeling, desiring, imagining, practising machine.

We can *see* this machine, or rhizome, or discursive constellation, in only a mere few minutes spent on platforms such as Instagram, browsing what we are fed in response to search terms as simple as 'Indian Clubs'. We can *feel* it – we can feel ourselves becoming part of it – in only a few mere minutes of performing the elegant swings and stretches of Indian club 'hearts' or the powerful pugilistic style swings of 'mace 360s' or 'ten-to-twos'. Other people's social media exbodiment feeds directly into our embodiment.

Conclusion

[6] I explore these and other dimensions further in my forthcoming work, mentioned above.

Clearly, soma-semiotics in this most stripped-back form is not able to make definitive or universal statements about intentionality or causality of the order 'which came first, the discourse in which gadas connote warrior-ness, or the feeling of warrior-ness arising through gada practice?' But nor is *any* semiotic, discourse or conjunctural analysis able to make such claims. (As Stuart Hall often remarked, we have never really been able to work out what is a chicken and what is an egg in relation to the connections between cultural relations and effects (Hall, 1992).) However, what soma-semiotics is able to do is open up a vital, vitalising and living seam of the active embodied life of martial artists, and make it available for academic engagement. Soma-semiotics opens up another interface between body and society, between discourse and affect, between embodiment and exbodiment, and offers an expansion of our understanding of somaesthetics.

Berlant puts the term 'visceral response' in scare quotes when she writes 'people make up modes of being and responding to the world that altogether constitute what gets called "visceral response" and intuitive intelligence' (Berlant, 2011, p. 53). She does this because there are arguably few 'visceral responses' that are *natural*. Visceral responses, like reflexes, reactions, habits, and 'gut' feelings can be (and are) coaxed into different forms, shapes and styles, in untold numbers of ways. This points to the enduringly important function of external influences or interventions, even in the most elementary somaesthetic activity. This means that phenomenology, affect, and somaesthetics are all intricately interacting with forces and relations that are irreducibly *imagined*.

The place and function of the imagination is a crucial matter for martial arts studies in relation to questions of the ethical, political and ideological dimensions of such practices. Much work has been done on the discursive (textual, institutional) level, but much more can be done on the ways in which ethical, political and ideological imagination is functionally embodied within and exbodied across practitioners. I hope that an explicit focus on *imagined* somaesthetics and the development of soma-

semiotic methodologies will help to advance the study of this important nexus in martial arts practice and martial arts studies.

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