Universalism and Particularism in Mediatized Martial Arts

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Introduction

Whenever Bruce Lee was asked questions like 'which martial art is best?' he would answer with words to this effect: as a species, humans only have two hands and two feet; so really, how many ways to fight can there be?[1] The implication here is that there should be only *one* universal martial art. But Lee preferred to say that he was against styles. Styles 'separate and divide us', he would say.

In our terms, Bruce Lee was against *particularisms* – whether local, regional, national, institutional, traditional, or disciplinary. He was *for* universalism. He was *for* rational 'scientific' experimentation; for testing and verification; for *working out what worked best*. He was against 'tradition without reason', and rejected the idea of *necessary* or *inevitable* differences between cultures, styles or traditions in martial arts. To him, these signalled only limitation (Lee 1971).[2]

In effect, Lee believed that martial arts *plural* should be universalised as martial art *singular*. Regional, ethnic or disciplinary styles should be overcome, and *one* set of – *human* – parameters and potencies should be uncovered. The proper route to this would be through research and

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[2] The Prezi presentation of this talk is at: http://prezi.com/z9xrvvo56xo2/mediatized-martial-arts/

experiment. This would necessarily be iconoclastic, colour-blind, transcultural, and universalist (Miller 2000).[3] However, in his apparent belief in the *one*, the *ultimate*, the *universal*, both history and theory reveal Lee's theory to be *idealistic*: its inevitable failure illustrates what Ernesto Laclau would term the mutually constituting and reciprocally subverting relations between universalism and particularism (Laclau 1996; Zerilli 1998; Laclau 1992).[4]

I will say more about this. But first, I want to insist: I am not merely going to use (or abuse) Bruce Lee to '*prove*' this or that point of political theory. Instead, I want to *explore* Bruce Lee (and other issues) in order to reveal some *limitations* of political theory. Mainly, I want to suggest that the political theory from which we draw such terms and concepts as universalism and particularism may have only very limited applicability to postcolonial media or cultural studies[5] – at least until such terms have been in some sense translated[6] and reconstituted, within very different paradigms.[7] But, I'd also like to suggest that perhaps political theory itself has only very limited applicability, *even when used to analyse politics.*

All of this might seem 'theoretical'. But it *matters* in two directions: first, insofar as any kind of *politicised* media or cultural studies *needs* concepts of politics and the political; and second insofar as political studies surely also needs concepts or understandings of media and culture.

Given the necessity of political concepts, it may seem reasonable for media or cultural studies to import them directly from the field of political theory (Bowman 2007). But, can we actually *trust* concepts of politics and the political built in political theory? Do they actually *work* in (or for) media and cultural studies? Are they the best? Should they be universalised? Or are they particular or singular to political theory?[8]

For instance: what if (as I would argue) political theory (even poststructuralist political theory) were shown to be fundamentally logocentric, phonocentric, anthropocentric, realist, and metaphysical?[9] If it were, then what status would its concepts have when our concerns lie with media and culture? Such 'fields' are not necessarily dominated or driven by written or spoken words, or by intentionality, demands, assertions or collective wills, and they do not necessarily entail self-present entities and identities demanding things of each other. In other words: media and culture must be part of what Laclau calls the (contingent and therefore political)

'discursive terrain' (Laclau and Mouffe 1985) – which means that media and culture are therefore strangely *crucial* for 'politics' – even if Laclau never seems to have stopped to think about them (Mowitt 1992; Bowman 2007).

Accordingly, by focusing on the mediatization of martial arts, I want to highlight some differences between the 'ways of looking' (or paradigm) of political studies, on the one hand, and the paradigm of 'politicized' media or cultural studies, on the other. This exercise might be read either as signalling the extent to which disciplinary particularisms and limitations are inevitably involved in the building of any theory; or it might be read as the effort to establish a field, topos, or site of cross-disciplinary *disagreement*, which (to the extent that anyone notices it) *may perhaps* constitute a contact zone that might creatively modify both fields.[10]

In short, my overarching question is: what happens when we think about universalism and particularism not in terms of 'political processes proper' but by way of things that traverse the putatively distinct – but entangled – realms of media, culture, body, *psyche*, and which maybe even supplement politics – such as mediatized martial arts?[11]
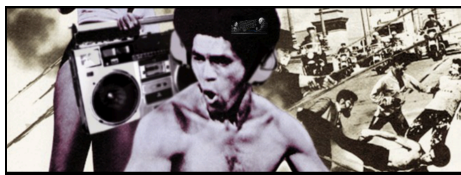
Media Ties

How might mediatized martial arts supplement politics? Many commentators have argued that Bruce Lee was immediately a pole of what Bill Brown calls 'cross-ethnic identification' (Brown 1997). Moreover, both T. M. Kato and Vijay Prashad argue that Lee functioned as a key player in decolonisation struggles – specifically what Kato (following Jameson) calls the struggles to decolonise postcolonial consciousness (Kato 2007; Prashad 2001). Lee's amazing choreographies redirected transnational multi-ethnic desires towards an Asian set of activities ('Oriental' martial arts), and he was the first major male alternative to the ubiquitous white Western movie hero (Bowman 2010b, 2013a).[12] Moreover, what Bill Brown calls Lee's 'generic ethnicity' and the emotive 'ethnic-underdog-versus-the-oppressor' plots of his Hong Kong films offered a kind of imminently politicizing (albeit fundamentally fantasy) vision of agency. (Nevertheless, for these reasons alone, Bruce Lee should be written into any kind of postcolonial media history.)

Of course, Lee himself must be situated in the flows between a hypercapitalist Hollywood and a colonial Hong Kong. But the *effects* of his texts were arguably felt most powerfully in postcolonial and ghettoized/racialised contexts. What was *seen* in the spectacle there was received as *somehow political* in ways that were not necessarily perceived elsewhere (Bowman 2013a).[13] But what else was 'seen'? What was 'shared' by most viewers?

Virtually all viewers, the world over, were seeing what they believed to be *ancient* martial arts, from China and Japan.[14] Of course, these were only ever, at most, 'invented traditions' (Anderson 1991; Said 2005), or even Baudrillardian simulacra (Baudrillard 1994). Indeed, the very *object* or *field* called 'martial arts' was effectively invented in popular cultural discourses *through* these cinematic '(re)presentations' or simulacra.

Accordingly, this mediatized discourse arrived fully-formed, and as if it were ancient and timeless. Moreover, it had our opening question already inscribed within it: *which style is best?* This question was there from the start, and it *remains* the animating problematic of discourses about martial arts. And from the start, it was always a question that was really asking: Which *national* style is best? Which *regional* style is best? Which *ethnic* style is best?

On first glance, this kind of ethno-nationalist ordering may seem to be yet another variant of *Western* orientalism, or of the 'area studies' mind-set (Said 1995; Chow 2006). But, in fact, nationalising martial arts can very often be traced to historical efforts to make the colony or the postcolony into the nation, or to strengthen the nation, by producing 'a people' through structures of feeling involving national or cultural 'pride'.[15]

It is easy to see how this can lead to *essentialism* and to all of the problems that flow from that. But I want to propose that – more and more explicitly nowadays – martial arts practice can practically deconstruct the ideas and the structures of nationalism and ethnic essentialism. This

is because martial arts are irreducibly *pedagogical*, and because their contexts are increasingly global, mediatized and transnational.

Learning a particular martial art inevitably reveals that the supposed *essence* of the particular culture of the martial art is actually a *property, produced by particular training practices* (Foucault 1977). In other words: physical cultural migrants learn that *essences are learned*, and that *anyone can learn anything* (Rancière 1991) – anyone young enough, at least.

Put more provocatively: perhaps *The Last Samurai* (in which Tom Cruise effectively becomes a Samurai through a kind of 'immersion course') or even *Bullet Proof Monk* (in which the lead [white] character masters martial arts by mimicking the moves in films) could be regarded as offering profound insights into cultural pedagogies and human propensities.

Admittedly, this is not the usual sort of interpretation of such 'Eurocentric' Hollywood films (Tierney 2006). In fact, critics have always denounced the fact that Hollywood does things like whitening and domesticating 'Asian' martial arts. For instance, after Bruce Lee, US films quickly depicted more and more black and white actors as masters of martial arts (Krug 2001). The white Chuck Norris and the black Jim Kelly were among the first Westerners to be depicted by Hollywood as masters of Korean and Japanese martial arts. And the opening of one Steven Seagal film actually depicts him teaching aikido in Japan, in Japanese, to Japanese students, whilst Japanese elders look on, impressed. Now, Seagal has claimed that this movie scene is actually *autobiographical* (perhaps thereby making this film into a different case of what

Rey Chow calls 'false documentary' (Chow 2013)).[16] But it is easy to see why many critics read such texts as either orientalist or just plain offensive.[17]

However, what guides such offence-taking, I think, is a problematic conceptualisation of culture. Namely: culture seems to be conceived as the *particular property* of a *particular group*. So, when Hollywood depicts Uma Thurman as the best student of Pei Mei or Tom Cruise as more Samurai than the Samurai – some critics take offense. But they do so because they evidently hold the conviction that, *really*, only a Chinese person could be the superlative kung fu student, and, *really*, only a Japanese person could embody Samurai ideals. But which is the more problematic position: the one that shows *anyone mastering anything*, or the one that implies that only ethnic and national specimens can master ethnic and national practices?

Rey Chow calls this latter position 'coercive mimeticism' (Chow 2002). She proposes that coercive mimeticism is an interpellative process, in which ethnic stereotypes are enforced or pushed onto a subject as if the ethnic stereotype is the ethnic subject's obligation. And I don't dispute the widespread reality of this process (Bowman 2013b). But I want to suggest that when culture is apprehended as being a *property*, it can initiate a range of interpretations and relations. Certainly, if a property is regarded as an *essence*, then this ushers in essentialism. But if a property is regarded as something *produced* through contingent practices and relations, this is very different. For, as all martial artists know, you can only do and be what you have been *taught* and what you have *practiced*. Your being and your abilities are tied to your practices. And this means that, in such relations – pedagogical relations – *properties* are not conflated with *essences*. Rather, properties are regarded as *proper-ties*. And ties can be *untied* and *retied*, differently (Bowman 2001).

Culture Unbound

The diasporic dissemination of Asian martial arts around the world and the massive movement of martial arts pilgrims to centres like Hong Kong, Hunan, Tokyo and Seoul can be regarded as

two sides of one vast process of *tying, untying* and *retying* (or indeed *entanglement* (Chow 2012)) that has inevitably produced the enormous proliferation and mutation of martial arts (and everyday lives) worldwide. Chow follows Vattimo and Nietzsche in regarding such flows and contacts as cultural translations, involving both the fabling and the weakening of traditions and borders (Chow 1995).

But, I would add: such processes also provoke resistance (Bowman 2010a), and there are sometimes surprising twists, torques, inversions, and even startling property disputes: as in the curious case of one nominally Japanese martial art: when practitioners in Japan promoted someone, in Japan, to a tenth-*dan* grade *without asking the American-based authorities of the 'institution' for permission, the Americans were furious*! (Krug 2001)

To echo Derrida in the essay 'Différance', the desire to build a kingdom is irresistible, but so is the inevitability of that kingdom's subversion (Derrida 1982). There will always be kingdom-building *and* property disputes. But I want to add: property disputes are also *proper-tie* disputes: disputes about *the proper* as much as disputes about the *ties*. For, if *properties* are produced through the establishment of *proper-ties*, then to change the ties (the relations and contexts) is also to change *the proper* ('the thing itself').[18]

In martial arts, these transformations are tied perhaps now more to mediatization than to human movement and migration. One need no longer find a little old Chinese man to learn martial arts. One merely needs YouTube and a training partner. Moreover: even if one *has* been trained by an authentic/ethnic representative of some 'ancient and traditional' art, the very existence of the world of mediatized discourses cannot but impact upon one's practice. But more fundamentally still: in any case, it is almost certain that it was a *film* or a *computer game* that led most contemporary martial arts practitioners to seek out the nominally or notionally 'authentic thing' in the first place.[19]

To borrow a phrase from Donna Haraway: the mediatization of martial arts has led both to the deconstruction and to the intensification of particularisms (Haraway 1991). The desire for authenticity and tradition (or 'primitive passions' (Chow 1995)) remains strong (in places – especially films). Accordingly, 'traditional' martial arts still flourish. However, there is no

guarantee that so-called traditional styles (or should we now call them brands?) of regionally specific martial arts will (or could) survive forever (Judkins 2012-). Most were only ever invented traditions anyway (Chan 2000).

At the same time, the obverse desire – the desire for a different type of authenticity – a more *authentic authenticity*, free from culture – the desire to *invent* some 'ultimate' martial art, through iconoclastic and non-traditional alchemy – has produced some dramatically *detraditionalizing* developments. My term for it all is '*Fight-club-ization*'. Most notable among this has been the trail blazed by the Ultimate Fighting Competition (the UFC) and the emergence of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) (Green 2011).

But I have no time to discuss the UFC. Suffice it to say that its declared drive to get to the *real* and the *ultimate reality* – or indeed, the universals – of unarmed combat was tragically flawed by its being necessarily shackled and subordinated to the injunctions and imperatives of mediatization. The society of the spectacle wants its spectacles spectacular and hyperreal, and advertisers want their ad-breaks every ten minutes (Debord 1994; Baudrillard 1994). So, MMA and the UFC – perhaps the most brutal and supposedly therefore 'real' of televised sport combat – were mediatized and hyper-realised *from the start*, in a way that echoes what happened with the celluloid mediatization of martial arts in the 1970s (Green 2011).[20]

Since the 1970s, at least, mediatization has always both fuelled and impeded – or skewed – the evolution or development of martial arts (like the Lacanian object-cause of desire). The drive to answer the question 'which style is best?' via the institution of ostensibly no-holds-barred competitions such as the UFC first deconstructed and even seemed to jeopardize the very idea of particular styles surviving. But over time 'mixed martial arts' inevitably became just one style among others. Moreover, as brutal and efficient as MMA is, people now know that it is fundamentally a *sport*. And sport – surely – is a very different thing to the martial. Accordingly,

those looking for the ultimate *martial* art continue to look. And one place they look is to the unequivocally martial practices of the military.

Universal Soldier, Postcolonial Particularism

The most well-known military martial arts styles currently available in some form to civilians include the US Marine Corps Martial Arts Programme (MCMAP), the Russian military style called *Systema*, the Israeli martial art, *krav maga*, and Filipino martial arts, variously called *arnis*, *kali* or *escrima*. There are others. However, none of these martial arts are anywhere near as well known as the arts disseminated cinematically in the 1970s.[21] This difference likely arises because military styles are often ugly, bloody, brutal, necessarily painful and unpleasant to practice, plus they have no immediate sporting interpretation or application. So they cannot easily be branded as either pleasant or uplifting. Indeed, to extend arguments made by both Bill Brown and Slavoj Žižek at different times: these arts cannot easily be *existentialised* or ideologically recuperated as 'spiritually uplifting' or as 'paradoxically peaceful' (Reid and Croucher 1984) or 'self-improving' practices (Brown 1997; Bowman 2010b, 2013a).

Nevertheless, one such military martial art was selected to be the style of fighting used by a Hollywood action hero in a film that immediately transformed mainstream movie fight choreography by setting a new standard. This was the Filipino art of *kali* or *escrima*. It was chosen as the style of fighting used by Jason Bourne in the *Bourne Identity* trilogy. And, in the film, it looks like this.[22]
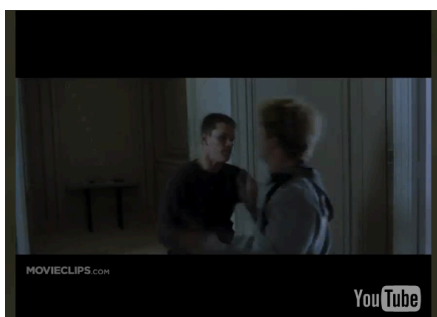
With all this in the picture there are two threads that I want to pick out, by way of a conclusion. The first relates to the first part of our conference title: universalism and particularism. The second relates to the second part of our title: postcolonial, media, theory.[23]

First: universalism and particularism. In Laclau, the universal is an empty place that is variously hegemonized by *words* – by *claims* – or, in Laclau, *demands* (Laclau 2005). These words, claims, demands and assertions are always traceable back to complexly-articulated political wills. So a demand can always be tied to a particular entity, an entity that Laclau regards as having come into existence with and through and in the formation of the demand. The aim of the group/demand is to universalise or hegemonize the demand until it is satisfied and they/it can recede into the slumber of realisation/satisfaction. 'They' will only persist as an entity to the extent that they are implicit, because hegemonic – or should they need to wake from the slumber of their satisfaction in order to defend their achievements.

So far, so logocentric. I do not have the time to show my working out here, but one can read virtually *any* passage of Laclau and you can see that his political theory is phonocentric, anthropocentric and metaphysical. However, what I hope to be able to suggest in the light of the cases of the mediatization of martial arts that I have mentioned is the way that what we might call *mediatized universals* (in our case, the *performance* of the superiority of various particular martial arts at particular times via complexly articulated technological platforms, relations and contexts) do not necessarily arise as the result of some simple claim. Claims can be and are made. But the visual spectacle (and the textual complex) is not reducible to the logic of consensus or dissensus that hegemonizes political theory (Laclau 1992, 1996).

Moreover, in relation to the political theory claim that universals are produced through the political constitution of the group, let us recall that all of the major popular fashions in martial arts of the world have a complex and shifting relation not only to media but also to colonialism and postcoloniality. However, they cannot be simply attached to any one identity or any one claim.

The kung fu craze of the 1970s emerged from what Rey Chow has taught us to regard as the highly complex location of colonial Hong Kong (Chow 1998) and it flared up first (and most) in a range of particularly politically and socioeconomically complex urban centres and ghettoes, the world over. The first US martial arts actors were trained in the Japanese and Korean arts that they had learned as a direct consequence of American military action and occupation in

these areas (it was Japanese and Korean arts that were first imported to America *en masse*, by returning servicemen (Krug 2001)). *Karate-do* itself had already been reconstructed *as Japanese* by its 'founder', Funakoshi Gichin, who actually *took* the art from Okinawa to Japan in the early 20th Century. In Okinawa, it had long been called not 'karate-do' (which was Funakoshi's *Japanification* of the name, meaning as it does *empty-hand-way*), but '*China hand*' – a name that registers the multiply-colonised status of the Ryukyu Islands themselves (Funakoshi 1975).

There are many other examples of complex processes and relations between martial arts and the moves from colony to postcolony to nation. In Brazil, for instance, there is the case of *capoeira* – which was first an art of African slaves and then a martial art of the Brazilian underclass. All kinds of authorities have, by turns, tried to outlaw it, to sportify it, to gentrify it, to standardize it and otherwise to domesticate or nationalise it (Assuncao 2005; Downey 2005). There have been similar cases in Shanghai with *Jing Wu*, in China generally with *wushu*, in Indonesia with *pencak silat*, in Europe with fencing, and so on and so on (Eichberg 1983; Wilson 2009).

The point I want to make here is that each of these arts clearly in some sense hegemonized various cultural, countercultural and mainstream scenes, but no audible *claim* has been made arising in formation with them. This is doubtless why critics like Žižek and a number of people discussed by Bill Brown regard the constitution of identities via martial arts films to be symptomatic of *failed class* longing (Brown 1997). But, I would add: when we are dealing with the forces or flows of media and culture, the matter of collective or political identity constantly moves and recedes, and never seems to be fully or properly present (like the parallax of a rainbow).

But (I hear the complaint) media and culture are not politics. Yet (I reiterate) they must have *some* relation to politics. As Laclau himself argues: the universal is an empty place, variously filled with hegemonic contents and contestations in the discursive terrain. Media and culture *are* the Laclauian discursive terrain.

So what, then, might we make of the curious centring and erasing of Filipino martial arts in *The Bourne Identity* films? I say centring *and erasing* because at no point in the films is the *Filipino*

character of Jason Bourne's fighting style ever indicated. Quite the contrary, in fact: Jason Bourne is the ultimate product of the US Government. His fighting style is presented as a pinnacle only attained by the most elite soldier of the *US military*. In other words: a Filipino particularism is passed off as American dominance.

In Laclauian terms, the universal is always a particularism that has become hegemonic. But here, *US* universalism is represented by a *Filipino* particularism ('under erasure' or '*sous rature*', as they used to say). This is something that Laclauian theory seems ill-equipped to deal with. Furthermore, this hegemonic particularism does not *literally* or '*really*' relate to or reflect the achievement of any kind of Filipino demand or to reflect any kind of Filipino political entity. Indeed, if we were to regard culture as property, then it would be easy to come to the conclusion that a nasty white Hollywood has once again expropriated the cultural heritage of one of its own former colonies. This would be an anti-colonialist mode of reading, again. And, again, it would be premised on a belief in property rights.

I do not want to disparage claims of lineage or heritage. Far from it. I am aware that the Filipino martial arts are in a complex and ongoing dialogue with processes of nation-building, community-building, culture construction, heritage preservation, and so on, in much the same way as many other martial arts and sports the world over. I am equally aware that many Filipino martial arts masters have died in poverty and that unknown numbers of family schools and styles and lineages have vanished without trace (Wiley 1996). And it is for these reasons and more that I also feel uneasy when I see clips on YouTube of martial arts classes in shiny clubs in the USA or Europe in which students are dressed up in traditional Filipino outfits to practice the art.

But, at the same time, I have also heard Filipino masters state (*again*, on YouTube) that the situation is simply this: as soon as Westerners get into something, they dominate it, they master it – and not in a bad way: they dominate it through love, time, effort, and commitment. The

vast majority of people in the Philippines do not have the money or time to devote to these arts. Affluent Westerners do. Which is why the martial arts themselves travel, become diasporic, and are much more mobile than the people of the places from whence they come. They are often, so to speak, paradoxically *disembodied bodily diasporas* – physical practices moving from body to body without physical contact.

Reciprocally, in response to the mainstreaming of Filipino martial arts in Hollywood choreography, new drives have been initiated both in the Philippines and in diasporic Filipino communities to embrace and showcase *their* martial arts. Documentaries are being produced, traditions are being constructed, reconstructed, (re)invented, fleshed out, fabulated. The postcolonial Philippines and Filipinos are not simply victims. No one has been duped or non-duped (Chow 1993). In fact, the translation between cultures that is occurring here, in and through and around – because of – the image, constitutes the bringing into visibility of that which may otherwise have remained occluded.


Of course, the main text of the *Bourne* trilogy makes absolutely no reference to the Filipino dimensions of Jason Bourne's fighting style. But one need not be Sherlock Holmes[24] to find out about the choreographic style.[25] A quick Google search will suffice. And as the many 'making of' clips on YouTube and the 'how to fight like Jason Bourne' websites that have sprung up all let us know: it is *Filipino Kali*.[26]

So what can we see here – or not – in this simple action film? What is happening in it, through it, or because of it? I would suggest: we can see some ways in which non-literal, non-direct, and constitutively mediated transactions between cultures can both take place *and* not take place. Western appropriation, here, may not be so unequivocally despicable. The fake image, the simulation, can also be a source of cultural encounter. Cultural dialogues can be non-logocentric. The forging of cultural relations can be both between or across cultures, *and between a culture and itself*, and on both sides of the spectacle. The film can be read

simultaneously as yet another moment of the 'internal' relationship Hollywood has with itself, and with other cultures, *and* as a moment of the 'internal' relationship that a postcolonial culture can come to have with itself and its others and its own otherness through the processes of mediatization. It is a cultural translation.

'If translation is a form of betrayal, then the translators pay their debt by bringing fame to the ethnic culture' (Chow 1995: 202).

And in the words of Rey Chow: 'If translation is a form of betrayal, then the translators pay their debt by bringing fame to the ethnic culture' (Chow 1995: 202).
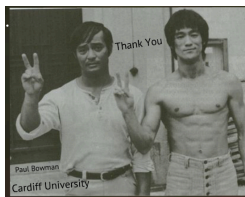
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[1] However, when he was younger, Lee would try to convey specific differences between martial arts. For instance, he once said that being hit by a Japanese martial artist was like being hit by a metal bar, whilst being hit by a Chinese martial artist was like being hit by a metal chain with a metal ball on the end of it.

[2] His unfinished film, *Game of Death*, was clearly intended to be one long lesson about emancipation from disciplinary stultification.

[3] Like science. However, Lee didn't use the term martial *science*. He retained the term martial *art* – because, for him, every individual practitioner should find their own way to 'honestly express' themselves. His belief in the inevitability of *individual* difference (but *not* cultural difference) is why, for Lee, hand-to-hand combat remained *art* and not science: there is no 'one size fits all' formula; there is only *feel* and *flow* and degrees of effectiveness, and no simple objectivity: *what works* is what *you* can *make* work. As he once reputedly put it, 'the fastest punch is the one that lands first'. So, Lee's universalist humanism allowed for *singularity* (i.e., *individual* uniqueness) but not *particularity* (i.e., local, regional or institutional *cultural* uniqueness).

[4] When I hear the words *universalism* and *particularism* I reach for my Ernesto Laclau. But when I hear the word *postcolonial*, I don't. And when I hear the term *media theory* I certainly wouldn't normally make an automatic connection with the kinds of theories that would speak of universalism and particularism. Indeed, before reading this conference title ('Universalism and Particularism in Postcolonial Media Theory'), I have perhaps never even juxtaposed the words *postcolonial* and *media theory* in my own head, let alone work through what the term 'postcolonial media theory' might possibly mean – and let alone combining it all with the political-theoretical problematics of universalism and particularism. But being invited to do so by the provocative combination of our symposium title has led me re-engage with some vexed problems in cultural studies.

[5] Over twenty years ago, John Mowitt asked cultural studies to hesitate before adopting what was then called the post-Marxist discourse theory paradigm that had become popular in the wake of Laclau and Mouffe's 1985 book, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Mowitt 1992). He asked us to hesitate before diving into the conceptual universe organised by terms like discourse and hegemony and articulation and antagonism and equivalence and difference and the particularity, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* and so on that ultimately followed (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek 2000). He did so because – to put it into extremely simplified terms – there is a lot that this sort of paradigm is *constitutively incapable of seeing*.

[6] One beauty of Laclauian theory is that the argument about hegemony can so readily be translated into so many other realms, fields and registers. This is because hegemony is a relational concept. It offers a way of

conceptualising relationships and hierarchies, values, norms. Thus, there can be hegemony in styles, in fashions, in sartorial norms; in conventions; there can be hegemony in activities, in interpersonal relationships, and of course – indeed, first and last – hegemony in representations. Which is where the notion of *cultural* politics comes into its own, or where the notion of hegemony at once illustrates and conceals or flattens out an entire field. Another way of saying this is that Laclauian theory is literalist and realist. For instance, it says that an antagonism will produce an entity or identity in and through and as the production of a demand. Or, it says that cultural particularities will contest and compete with each other for dominance or universalization, *aka* hegemony. All of which implies a very anthropological understanding of a group having its own proper identity – no matter how deconstructed and deconstructive this approach seeks to be. They may not be permanent and they may not be total, but Laclauian theory's ultimate interest is in the fact that political identities are constituted through the antagonism and the demand. Accordingly a postcolonialist scholar or theorist may worry that therefore this paradigm remains deaf and blind to all but the noisiest and most present of entities and identities. What of the subaltern? What of the silent or silenced? The unseen? The unheard? The postcolonial media theorist might want to ask: what if the element expropriated from the silent or the silenced is actually showcased and moved centre stage? What if what becomes universalised – what becomes hegemonic – in the mainstream of the mainstream – in other words, hegemonic in the hegemony – is something from the subaltern place, context, people, community? Needless to say, I'm thinking of the incorporation of Filipino martial arts into the choreography of *The Bourne Identity* trilogy.

[7] Of course, it is perhaps obvious (once it has been noted) that, just like any other signifier, the meaning of any and all of these terms of philosophy, theory and politics – universalism, universality, particularism, particularity, etc. – are to a greater or lesser extent *up for grabs anyway*. Nevertheless, as soon as they are ushered in as a *cluster* of terms (rather than individual isolated words), their clustering means that they may tend to pre-determine, to imply, to associate with, pre-empt, conjure up and reciprocally reinforce each other's likely meanings. But still, their precise or particular meanings remain up for grabs. There certainly seems to be very little evidence of any universal or even particular consensus on the meanings of universalism and particularity. Disagreement, slippage, play, drift, *virement*: all are inevitable. According to Jacques Rancière, such is the nature of disagreement: disagreement is not necessarily when two people argue different things, argues Rancière; it is more fundamentally when two people argue the same thing, but mean very different things by the same words. We see this, for instance, in the pages of the millennial collaboration between Butler, Laclau and Žižek – the co-authored book which became a series of quite serious disagreements between erstwhile putative theoretical allies, entitled *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek 2000). One of the main consequences of this book was that what had beforehand appeared to be a kind of theoretical collectivity, or community, pretty much fractured and fragmented – not least because they couldn't agree on their own apparently central terms and concepts.

[8] I use *seeing*, above. With it I mean to evoke the wide range of senses the word seeing has: from comprehending to grasping to perceiving, detecting, and encountering, and so on, back down to literal or actual *seeing*. So, what – we might ask – can a Laclauian paradigm not see? One polemical answer might be this: it cannot *see* what we call *culture*; it cannot *see* the complexities of *media*. And it cannot *see* any of this because this theory – these sorts of theory – and the terms and concepts that organise them – are essentially *political* theories; and they are political theories in the most literal – that is, logocentric – sense.

[9] I understand this pair to have come from philosophy and to have taken up residence in political theory. Moreover, as I have said, the approaches to universalism and particularism that I know of (at least in political theory) are what Jacques Derrida would call *logocentric*: they are words about words; and moreover, words which presume that *what matters* – whether *exclusively* or *most* – are arguments (about arguments) about 'consensus'. However, my example here is visual and mediated (as well as bodily and cultural), and it is clearly quite a few stages removed from any discourse of *consensus*, *dissensus*, *rights*, *claims* or *demands*, and all of the other stuff of political theory. In using such words – especially the word 'consensus' – I am surely obviously (or inevitably) evoking Habermas. But my point is that it is not just Habermas that I want to specify a disciplinary or paradigm distance from: Habermas-bashing is easy (even obligatory) in poststructuralist circles (Mouffe 1996). Rather, I *also* want to specify a uniquely poststructuralist problem with even some uniquely poststructuralist constructions of universalism and particularism. This is because, in '*being* poststructuralist', one might expect that they, more than other approaches, should be sensitive to the poststructuralist critique of metaphysics and logocentrism that informs so much 'political' and 'politicized' discourse. But my point is not to critique logocentrism for the critique of logocentrism's sake. Rather, my point is that, to the extent that any kind of 'politicized' media studies, cultural studies or postcolonial studies (and particularly any *poststructuralist* incarnation of these) is reliant upon concepts taken from political theory, they really ought to think about what they are relying upon.

As I have argued numerous times: perhaps the most influential yet under-acknowledged political theory picked up by cultural studies was 'found' by Stuart Hall in the work of Ernesto Laclau from the 1970s (Slack 1996; Bowman 2007). By the mid-1990s, Laclau had this to say about the 'dominant tendencies' in the approaches to questions of universalism and particularism, as he saw it:

> We could say, with reference to the contemporary scene, that the dominant tendencies have been polarized around two positions. One of them unilaterally privileges universalism and sees in a dialogical process a way of reaching a consensus transcending all particularism (Habermas); the other, dedicated to the celebration of pure particularism and contextualism, proclaims the death of the universal (as in some forms of postmodernism). (Laclau 1996: viii)

What I want to note here is that Laclau's formulation of the problematic and of the field is dominated (or hegemonized) by the idea of 'consensus', and specifically of whether consensus is possible or impossible. As such, this discourse is logocentric. As I have already suggested, perhaps this is necessarily the case with *all* political studies, *per se* – given that political studies is a field so structured by *words about words about actions* that the discourse of politics is, as Martin McQuillan once suggested, surely the *most metaphysical* of all discourses. What this means for us here, first of all, is that we might start to wonder about the extent to which such a discourse can help us to think about – let alone to 'understand' – the 'political' dimensions of media and culture – whether national, transnational, global, postcolonial, postmodern, neo-colonial, or whatever.

To put this more plainly: we have to wonder whether Habermas or Laclau can help us to think about Hollywood fight choreography. I would propose that in one sense they can't; *and yet*, if we still want to think about what we might still want to think of as the *political* dimensions to media and culture and embodiments and practices, surely we have to concede that in some sense we *need* the metaphysical and logocentric discourse of politics and political theory.

Obviously, not all approaches to questions of universalism and particularism are organised or dominated by logocentrism or by the injunctions of the discourses of disciplinary political science – disciplinary discourses which would try to have us accept that everything and anything '*is*' (only to the extent that it '*is*') either a 'normative claim' or a 'rational choice', or some other such disciplinarily fabricated distinction. Obviously, the discourses of feminism, postcolonialism, queer studies, cultural studies, and others, have long demonstrated that universals and particularities can be (and perhaps primarily are) *cultural*, to the extent that sometimes they may never even have had a literal spoken, written or even fully conceptualised existence before the academic discourse which came along to give them one. (One of Derrida's observation in *The Truth in Painting* (Derrida 1987) springs to mind: namely, that it really is peculiar that academics and others persist in asking *what* art objects *mean* – as if sensual and aesthetic constructions and events *need* to *have* a *meaning*.)

[10] So, to begin: before we get to matters of either *politics* or *media*, let's start with *culture*. And to begin, let's note that – despite repeated and ongoing efforts to realise Bruce Lee's universalist ambition, the vision or dream of a kind of global levelling in martial arts practice has not yet come to pass. There have certainly been drives towards it, as the emergence of 'Mixed Martial Arts' (or MMA) attests. But *one* 'universal' martial art has never been found. However, this failure is not, as Bruce Lee believed, because martial artists are too blinkered and conformist and shackled to this or that particular tradition or stricture to 'break free' from the fetters of 'style' and to 'liberate [themselves] from classical [disciplines]', etc. (Lee 1971). It is rather because, as Ernesto Laclau has argued, each and every *universalism* – each and every sense or theory or claim of *universality* – is constituted from some *particularism* or *particularity*: there is no escape from contingency; context is everything. Difference happens.

Bruce Lee's own particular ideas of universality were based on a belief in the superiority of directness and straight lines in attack. But, as every martial artist knows, once your opponent knows *how you fight*, then your techniques, moves, strategies and tactics can be comprehended, anticipated and combatted by counter-moves, strategies and tactics. There are no objectively superior techniques. Indeed, *if* there is any 'essence' to fighting, it is not (as Lee once argued) that it is 'simple and direct'; it is rather that fighting is a bit like the game 'rock, paper, scissors', or the Chinese idea of the 'five elements': *A* might beat *B*, but *C* can beat *A*, and *B* can beat *C*, and so on and so on – in a potentially endlessly moving, morphing, modifying and modulating process. In fact, Lee's belief in the superiority of simple directness was arguably little more than a reflection of the extent to which his own thinking about combat had been hegemonized at an early stage by the theory underpinning the art of *wing chun* kung fu.

This *particularism* would remain actively dominant in Lee's theory and practice, even though later on he would come to say that he had abandoned Chinese kung fu *as such* – precisely because he rejected *particularism*. Indeed it is clear that his own approach (*jeet kune do*) is indebted much more to the principles of European fencing and the approach to punching as advocated by boxers such as the Welsh Jim Driscoll than to anything specifically or necessarily Chinese (which is not to say that these same principles are not present in specific Chinese martial arts) (Tom 2005). Rather, the point I want to emphasize is that Lee's avowed abandonment of his formative *wing chun* kung fu approach still retained quite a residue – quite strong traces – of the preference for certain of *wing chun*

principles and preferences, at least (Inosanto 1994). In other words, despite Lee's convictions about *universality*, what we can see is that his thoughts and practices were *hegemonized* throughout by one very precise sort of contingent *particularity*.

[11] Let's begin by saying that Lee's particular theory of universality has never become universal despite the unprecedented and relatively universal explosion of Bruce Lee and Lee-inspired choreography onto cinema screens the world over since 1973. The ground-breaking East-West collaboration, *Enter the Dragon* (1973) has been widely acknowledged as a major international cinematic and popular cultural event, which precipitated not only the proliferation of Bruce Lee's global fame, but also the birth, constitution and mediatization of martial arts *discourse* in contexts where there had been nothing (or next to nothing) of such a discourse before. In short, the mediatization of martial arts through Bruce Lee and related films makes Bruce Lee into what Foucault might term a 'founder of discursivity'.

[12] Obviously, there was a lot more going on in and through and around and because of the emergence of a popular cultural discourse of martial arts in the wake of the wave that Bruce Lee not only rode but defined. (I myself have filled two entire books with discussions of this 'more'.) But what seems pertinent to mention here is the place that the cinematic text, via its global distribution, has played in cross-ethnic and postcolonial cultural processes – I hesitate to say 'cultural politics' here: so let's just say processes.

[13] But one irony of the emergence of martial arts as a popular cultural discourse through its mediatization in the 1970s can be seen in the disjunction between Bruce Lee's written and spoken words about matter of particularism and universalism, on the one hand, versus his cinematic contributions, on the other. For, Lee's extra-cinematic *words* (his magazine articles, interviews and notebooks) are *universalist* (in the ways mentioned above) while his films are strongly ethnonationalist. (It is true that after his ultra-nationalist second film, Lee's character voices the opinion in his third film, *Way of the Dragon*, that it does not matter where an art comes from as long as the practitioner puts his whole body and soul into it; but nevertheless, *Way of the Dragon* is still organised by the jubilant demonstration of *Chinese* superiority in unarmed combat.) This meant that, at the moment of its Western mainstreaming, martial arts discourse was organised by the idea that *Chinese* martial arts were the superior and the superlative of the new discovery called 'Asian martial arts'. (Put differently, you could say that Bruce Lee has to be implicated in establishing the very binary he claimed to disagree with.) Of course, China never really had an ideological or even mythological monopoly here. Japanese martial arts quickly burst onto the cinematic scene in their own right. And this is hardly surprising, given the fact that, 'on the ground', Japanese martial arts had always had a stronger foothold as practices in the West than Chinese martial arts. Indeed, before Bruce Lee and the TV series of the same name *Chinese kung fu* had to be referred to in the USA as *Chinese karate* – which indicates that Japanese arts were much more widely known. The familiarity of the USA with Japanese martial arts is a direct consequence of the American occupation of Japan post-WWII combined with the relative *closure* of China to the West, at least until Nixon's visit in 1972.

[14] Of course, no matter how 'old' or 'young' these arts may 'really' have been, the martial traditions, first of China and then of Japan were thoroughly mediatized – by Hollywood, Hong Kong, Japanese and other regional film industries – throughout the 1970s. But the term 'real' is problematic here: for, with Lee, we were not *really* seeing ancient Chinese arts, but rather his own hybrid style; just as with the Japanese enemies in his films, we were not *really* seeing *real* Japanese arts, but rather those arts as imagined in Hong Kong.

[15] In fact, one can look at more or less any currently or recently popular martial art style and uncover a close *formative* connection with some kind of state nationalism or nation-building cultural project of the 20th Century. Funakoshi Gichin's *Japanification* and *nationalisation* of Okinawan Shotokan karate is perhaps the most famous example. But similar processes have taken place in countries like Korea (with *taekwondo*), Indonesia (with *pencak silat*), The Philippines (with *arnis*, *kali*, or *escrima*), Vietnam (with *viet va dao*), Thailand (with *muay thai*) and China (with *jing wu*), not to mention the famous case of *capoeira* in Brazil.

[16] See Rey Chow, 'After the Passage of the Beast': "False Documentary" Aspirations, Acousmatic Complications', in Paul Bowman, ed., *Rancière and Film*, Edinburgh University Press, 2013, pp.34-52.

[17] One version of the complaint takes the form of asking why, in the films and fictions of the West, the West is always depicted as the best. But to me this is a 'no brainer' – and it makes me wonder whether such complainants have ever seen the depiction of Westerners in Hong Kong or Japanese martial arts films (especially those that were made with Asian rather than global markets in mind). The same rules of simplifying and stereotyping apply, just using different (but equivalent) cultural material.

[18] In martial arts, since their mass mediation, there has been a massive mashing and mushing and slewing and slushing of martial arts practices, often trading under a relatively limited number of names. There have of course been new names coined, and new amendments, modifications, hyphenations and supplementations to erstwhile entities and identities; but mostly this circulation of the same few names conceals profound loosening, weakening, translation and transformation in practices themselves. Of course, as Nietzsche pointed out, we always use one

word ('leaf') for things that are always different from each other ('leaves'). But I mean something specific: These transformations are tied to mediatization.

[19] Put differently: it is equally remarkable to note that in the age of increasingly precise digital audio-visual capture and reproduction, martial arts styles and forms and practices still drift away from former states and mutate. Alteration over time was surely inevitable in the past, when pedagogy was almost exclusively a process of ongoing mimesis – of copying the master in an ever-ongoing, ever-doomed effort to constrain the drift away from the desired pure repetition/replication and towards the loathed impurity of imperfect reiteration/alteration. But the capture of masters performing routines and moves perfectly on DVDs and MP4s has not halted the inexorability of this. If anything, it has amplified it. For, as Derrida wrote (or reiterated) in *Dissemination*, now any sign is cut off from its guarantors, its stabilizers, its 'proper ties', and can be picked up and used by anyone.

[20] The UFC was the brainchild of Rorion Gracie, who proposed a martial arts competition with no rules, to truly establish which style was best. The first competition took place in 1993, and the first competitions were in many respects hideously brutal. However, what these first few bloodbaths nevertheless seemed to establish was that the ultimate martial art appeared to be nothing other than Rorion Gracie's own family style of *jujitsu* – *Gracie Barra Jujitsu*. And moreover, the strangest thing about this was that whilst all the other competitors would batter and bloody and break each other, Gracie Jujitsu competitors, by contrast, would essentially just shoot in, take their opponent to the ground and then, either quickly or slowly, but always with the ominous inexorability of a boa constrictor encircling some hapless mammal, they would choke and lock and squeeze the life out of them.

So, was this 'ultimate fighting' really *the* ultimate? Was this the particularism that would be universalised? If so, then the reality of real fighting – and the ultimate of ultimate fighting – seemed to be rather disappointing – or at least considerably less dramatic than many had hoped. Certainly the essential *inscrutability* of a ground fight – the lack of clarity to the viewer of what is going on when two fighters are locked apparently motionlessly in a clinch, and why nothing appears to be happening – was a problem for a television product that had from the start positioned itself as a compelling media spectacle – the spectacle of modern gladiatorial unarmed combat. The society of the spectacle wants its spectacles spectacular.

Crestfallen martial artists from styles other than Gracie Jujitsu tended to console themselves with the argument that neither the UFC 'octagon' nor any other sporting arena could really be regarded as reality. Reality takes many forms, they would say, and in very few of them is it wise to take your opponent to the ground: the ground may be covered in broken glass, for instance, or, as is highly likely, your opponent's friends will be delighted to kick and stamp on you once you are down.

But the UFC itself had a far greater problem: how to solve the problem of ultimate fighting being boring. The result was that so-called *reality martial arts* became thoroughly mediatized – from the ground up. Fighters won points for dramatic moves and lost points if clinches and holds took too long to develop into something more interesting. Rounds were introduced, to enable for advertising breaks. In other words, MMA and the UFC – perhaps the most brutal and supposedly therefore 'real' of televised sport combat – was mediatized and hyper-realised, in a way that reiterates, albeit in displaced form, the mediatization of celluloid martial arts in the 1970s.

[21] *Kung fu* and *karate* and the spectacular kicking art/sport which rose to prominence in their wake and which remains a children's favourite, *taekwondo*.

[22] The trilogy itself involved more than one director, and a very varied crew; but along with the main character, Jason Bourne (played by Matt Damon), one other crucial thing at least that remained constant in the production of the films was the films' fight choreography, and the films' fight choreographer, Jeff Imada. This is particularly pertinent because, arguably, it was in large part the fight choreography (along with the cinematography) that 'made' these films – that made them stand out, that defined them, that made them so unique and memorable. The fight choreography certainly caused ripples that reached the very heart of mainstream movie production discourse, to the extent that even action staples like the eternally returning James Bond movies reacted by changing their cinematographic and action-choreographic styles in response to the paradigm shift effected by the *Bourne* choreography.

[23] So we might ask what on Earth this conference title is doing, by combining as it does the logocentric field of *political* theory with not only *media* theory but also the problematic field of a *postcolonial* media theory? My answer is this: the title is challenging us. It is challenging us to engage with the problems of a relation that we might otherwise not see – might not perceive even as a problem – and which might have many manifestations, but among them would have to be the question of the relation between the *literal* and the *visual* – and paradigms organised by *the literal* versus paradigms which seek to engage with *the visual*, let alone the sonic, the affective, the haptic, the virtual, the visceral, the perceptual, and so on.

[24] (the archetypal fictional Western aficionado of an Anglicised Asian martial art)

[25] Now, even though I am aware that the perceived quality of any fight or action *choreography* in a film may be predominantly a product of the quality of direction and *cinematography*, I will emphasise the element of *fight*

choreography here, and not that of *cinematography*. I know this to be anthropocentric, and a focus that risks missing the fact that what we are dealing with is a *filmic text*. Nevertheless, I will maintain this focus because what Walter Benjamin pointed out so sagely many years ago still rings true: when it comes to moving images, it evidently remains the case that the moving images that fascinate humans the most are moving images of humans. And, I would add, when there is fighting in films, what people are watching – or *trying* to see (if only the cinematography, the camera angles and movements and all of the other editing techniques will allow) – is the fighting. It is certainly the case that I have never seen any spin-off or 'making of' films about *Bourne* that focus on anything other than the fighting. And there are many of these films, all over YouTube and elsewhere online: clips from the 'making of' documentaries in the DVD extras; clips about the techniques and moves of Bourne's signature fighting style – which we learn from the behind-the-scenes footage and interviews with fight choreographer Jeff Imada to be 'Filipino *kali*'; clips made into montages of fight scenes from the film; commentaries and demonstration videos made by martial artists trying to clarify or cash in on the craze; even whole new websites called things like 'How to Fight like Jason Bourne' (offering clips, essays, instructional DVDs and other training products) have sprung up.

[26] The fight choreographer, Jeff Imada tells us: Bourne does kali combined with some military stuff and – in his words – 'some Bruce Lee stuff'. Is this the casual, blasé nonchalance of an arrogant westerner who simply regards all this 'stuff' as 'stuff', and conflates it indiscriminately? Maybe. But Jeff Imada is himself the protégé of Dan Inosanto. Dan Inosanto is both ethnically Filipino and a close friend and senior student of Bruce Lee. Indeed, Inosanto is one of the very few people authorised directly by Bruce Lee to teach his martial art. After Bruce Lee's death in 1973, Inosanto continued to teach both Bruce Lee's *jeet kune do* and the Filipino martial arts; before going on to work in fight choreography. Jeff Imada, a contemporary and friend of Bruce Lee's son, Brandon, followed Inosanto into this work.