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ABSTRACT

Actors of Violence: Staging the Arena in Mixed Martial Arts

Through ethnographic participation in a Swedish mixed martial arts club, this article investigates the interrelationship between theatre and mixed martial arts. Concepts taken from theatre are applied to an analysis of what is constructed in the mixed martial arts arena. Mixed martial arts (MMA) is a growing sport where competitors, in a ring or a cage, utilize elbows and knees as well as kicks and other strikes and submission techniques to defeat opponents. The constituents of MMA are similar to those of American wrestling; the main similarity being a staged fight. The distinction is that MMA involves ’authentic’ fights. Yet the activity surrounding the event is staged, like in American wrestling, structured and constructed as a public happening, thus, a directed play of sorts. Mixed martial arts competitions (galas) are full of cheering crowds of fans. Music plays and the fighters’ artistic handlers are presented as the fighters enter the arena, dancing down the ramp while advancing towards the centre of the stage – the ring. Through data gathered from fieldwork with MMA practitioners as well as participant observation in an MMA club, I explain in this study, interviewing ten key informants, the components of acting and drama-performance that are integral to the production of an MMA fighter’s entrance into the arena. I explore how fighters’ bodies, through acting and re-enactment of performative staging, become sites of meta-theatrical happenings. I also look at how MMA fighters transform themselves into bodily artists while dramatizing their performance of violence. A fighter’s character is transformed into a concept of a warrior-figure in that the fighter’s habitus is modelled and then reconstructed in relation to the audience and the evenness of the happening; that is to say, the show and the violent performance on stage.

BIOGRAPHY

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Actors of Violence: Staging the Arena in Mixed Martial Arts

MAGNUS STENIUS

WAITING FOR HELLBOY
I am standing in a gym, in Sweden. I and sixteen other people are waiting for "Hellboy", the instructor. The majority of the people there are barefoot, dressed in T-shirts and shorts. When a fit and tall man enters the gym, the atmosphere changes. Hellboy begins an enthusiastic warm-up session where he shouts: "Come on, guys. Let's train". I start imitating their routines. Suddenly, without warning, I am thrown onto the canvas floor. Face down I can hear Hellboy yell at me: "Fight, use your body to pull your opponent off". After two hours of exercise I am exhausted, thinking that I will never recover from this. Hence, face up, this article was conceived in and through gym experiences like this one.¹

INTRODUCTION
Mixed martial arts (MMA)² is a full contact sport that, until recently, was unknown to the Swedish community. In one of Sweden's major newspapers, Dagens Nyheter (DN), seven professors in Clinical Neurology at the Karolinska Institute (KI) wrote a debate article in which they strongly condemned MMA, arguing that violence against the head leads to brain damage.³ The debate continued on Swedish television during the fall of 2009 and culminated in the programs Debutt⁴ and Uppdrag Granskning.⁵ The main focus in these TV programs was a continuation of the analysis of the bodily medical risk-takings of practicing MMA. In only focusing on medical risk-takings the debate did not touch on the concept of violence in MMA from a cultural or a social perspective.

Academic research previously undertaken on MMA has concentrated primarily on its relation to violent masculinity. Maarten van Bottenburg and Johan Hellbron⁶ emphasize the progress of how fighters are integrated into systems of rules and conduct as part of the sports industry.⁶ Raul Sánchez García and Dominic Malcolm⁷ have studied the international development of MMA, arguing that MMA emerged as a result of the ascendancy of professionalism over amateurism.⁸ Akhilo Htoo and Kay Kel-ho Pili⁹ Dale Spencer¹⁰ and Dan Bousfield¹¹ have all studied how MMA is built on the construction of a violent, masculine-gendered habitus. Greg Downey analyzes how pain is produced and received through techniques and technologies in MMA contexts.¹² At the same time Downey does not examine how fighters' bodies develop these fighting techniques.¹³ Seungmo Kim, Christopher Greenwell, Damon Andrew, Janghyuk Lee and Daniel Mahony have studied the spectator's motives in an analysis of MMA fans. Their article on spectator's motives shows that the highest rated motive among audience members watching MMA, interestingly enough, is that there is a fascination with the dramaturgy of fighting set in a theatricalized space.¹⁴ These studies have not, however, touched on MMA fighters as artists of a specific dramatic bodily performance.
AIM

The aim of this article is to examine how MMA fighters perform a theatricality of violence and as a result, in relation to the audience, establish an embodied meta-contract of staged 'fighting-performances' between each other. In studying the dramaturgy of MMA the most important analytical concepts are flow, theatricality, spectacle, mask-use, role-play, acting and double consciousness, in order to analyze the performance of fighters. The analysis is focused on the theatrical space, the octagon of the MMA phenomenon, as a context where the fighters’ bodies become artistic figures by the use of disciplined self-control and actor-oriented staged performances. In the article I will argue that MMA fighters can be regarded as ‘actors of violence’ as they dramatize their bodies.

PARTICIPANT PERFORMANCE IN MMA

The empirical data I present in this article has been gathered through an analysis of martial arts fieldwork where I took part in twenty MMA training sessions, five competitions and three galas. The method is based on participant observation in an MMA club and in-depth interviews with ten fighters, where I use a qualitative cultural-analytic approach in examining their MMA performances. The study focuses on ethnographic research that has turned towards studies in which the performance of a body is a central feature of a particular arena or staged setting.

EVENTNESS EXCITEMENT AND THEATREALITY

There is an ongoing debate between researchers undertaking field studies in combat sports, whether violent production in martial arts is determined by the culture of the sport, if it is a process of barbarianism (fighting derives from the combat style of Panhron in ancient Greece, where fighters used fists, knees, kicks as well as grappling – wrestling techniques to defeat their opponents), or, just pure brutalization. One model of interpretation, advanced by Downey, is that mixed martial arts exhibit symptoms of exaggeration, violent-fiction and de-sportization. In contrast to this approach, the model of interpretation that will be used here turns to theatre and performance studies in order to acquire different types of interpretive tools. More specifically, I will use Willmar Sauter’s notion of the theatrical event to: “represent the essential or possible characteristics of theatre as an art form and as a cultural phenomenon”, and Eugenio Barba’s theory of fictive bodies in the performance process.21

In Eventness, Sauter discusses the objectives of theatre studies by focusing on the communicative encounter between performer and spectator. Turning to Sauter and Barba, I argue that alongside the violent masculine and sporting motives that have been put forth by others so far, MMA can also be read in terms of a theatrical event. Judged from this perspective, the fighters’ sporting instruments only appear brutal and aggressive in their outward manifestation producing the accompanying message of an authentic fight. In other words, it is more a question of audience belief in these shows as nothing but pure raw fights. Contrary to this idea of authentic fighting, I stress that it is quite the opposite taking place, it is the external rawness that the fighter’s feed from but the act of simulating rawness as part of a theatrical show of violence, as a meta-brutal play. In order to expand on this, I draw on Victor Turner’s performance theory (“ambivertures are performed within the liminal frame, then generated in roles and relationships”) to suggest an alternative explanation of why MMA fights are viewed to be so violent and to become increasingly more so; that is to say, it illustrates processes of both dramatization and the chase for theatrical excitement through its public ritual.

I argue that the categorization of fights’ staged violence can be divided into four entities. Firstly, the stage, that is to say the internal, where the second entity the play (the fight) takes place, and furthermore, the external where the third entity, the audience, takes part. Added together, these three entities make up a fourth, a dramatic multi-vocal and meta-violent place for a theatrical meta-space. The polarization between being a brutal fighter and/or a sports athlete on stage is to be in an ambiguous place. As MA David Ching and PhD and MMA fighter David Mayeda observe, there has been an
unexpected lack of interest in the emergence of the combat activities we might broadly term martial arts. Instead, he has noted that there has been an increase in the display of artistic bodily violence. The arena has developed into a platform of theatre, changing the martial arts phenomena into a scene of "dramatized staged fantasy contests". In this perspective the fighters go from combat-warriors towards turning in to artistic 'bodily figures', conceptualizing themselves as 'stars in a violent genre', and, as a result are interpreted as embodied meta-warriors. Therefore, I approach the ongoing debate concerning trends in theatrical violence through an examination of the appearance of MMA practitioners as a phenomenon of 'eventness', extreme happenings as a performance as a simulated street fight, and thereby acting as artists of violence.

This research challenges suggestions that the increase of violence in MMA is diagnostic of a decivilization and/or an obsessional with a masculine process, arguing instead that the expansion of MMA is best explained with reference to the individual fighters' and spectators' need for action, drama and spectacle. Furthermore, I suggest that MMA emerged as a worldwide bodily phenomenon as a result of the dominance of public happening in the display of artistic combat styles, and due to the participants' desire to create increased levels of staged combat in order to produce theatrical excitement. I argue that MMA represents an arena where (mostly) young men demonstrate a violent show in a controlled and defined setting while interacting with spectators to enhance bodily excitement as part of an event that is of extreme measures.

MIXED MARTIAL ARTS

The phrase MMA is used to exemplify sports activities based on the combination of barehanded Oriental martial arts and Western combat sports techniques. The most common forms of MMA are called ultimate fighting contests (UFC), and Pride. Fights are decided by knockout or submission. The combination of American UFC and Japanese Pride, with a shared set of competition rules, has facilitated the interchange of techniques and standardization of contests, as has the influence from American Wrestling, with its hyper-theatrical outcome. The connection exists between the historical 'street fight' and the move into the 'drawing room', changing the amateurs' fight into a dramatized spectacle of action.

COMBAT AND STAGING

During the development of MMA, Van Bottenburg and Heilbron argue, "Technique and style were subordinated to the sensation that the fights had to offer as 'spectacles of brutalization'". This sensation was achieved by deliberately increasing the level of staged 'violence'. Something that emphasizes that violence is performed 'to stress' that it is: "predicated on an exaggerated portrayal of violence in these events". And as a consequence of that, the audience believes a street fight is occurring. MMA is frequently perceived to be comparatively violent since there is always a demand and a quest for this excitement. Adjustments in relation to the display of violence in MMA implies that evenness, theatricality, performance and the quest for excitement offer explanations in support of these new anomalies, reversing the conclusion of the earlier models of explanation. In this regard, performance studies have also analyzed perceptible cases of similar spectacles of martial arts, pointing out 'thrilling' sensational experience as fundamental to the martial arts. In particular, David E. Jones offers an overview and explanation in specific martial arts milieux, which underlines the fact that a change in the paradigm between acted and instrumental violence is performed in an environment where fighters exercise significant control over the pressure and force they apply. MMA's drive towards excitement accounts for these dramatized developments, and it is important to view MMA in the light of these wider performative processes. In this respect, the examination of suitable strain stability in combat sports as part of a search for excitement, evenness and spectacle provide a fuller acceptance of the developmental route of fighters in the discourse of MMA.

Jones claims that the violent tension is generated in combat sports through the performance of
and the utilization of fighting skills. As such, open and forceful staged and dramatized violence characterizes MMA as encompassing performative bodily motives. MMA fights, in displaying a wider set of combat techniques than kickboxing and being closer to 'real' fighting, situate the concept of real versus feigned fighting in a meta-theatrical way.

In the name of authenticity, changes premised to conciliate MMA's critics put in jeopardy the subordinate parameters of the tension balance for fighters. That is why I maintain that the contradictory developments are not simply through 'real' restrictions on violence, but also through superficial changes such as the use of controlled security as fighters are triggered to become furious in order to enter into a state of rage. Thus, in popularizing these fighting events, 'mock fights' were made to appear more 'real' by using spectacle, implicitly recognizing that embodied theatricality is connected to the hunt for excitement and the insinuation that it was one step closer to 'authentic' fighting. To do this, MMA engaged in the creation of a dramatic apparatus, such as wrestling in a cage instead of simply a ring, representing the fighters in a polarization of either heroes or bandits, and specializing in 'revenge' matches. I contend that this is essential to the field of MMA. Therefore, the spectacle aspects of MMA intensified when UFC introduced further changes, which both increased fighter safety and embellished combatants.

PERFORMING FIGHTING AND STAGING
Regardless of the public portrayal of MMA fighting as a brutal and violent phenomenon, I would like to emphasize the considerable self-control that characterizes the dramatic violence that the fighters embody on stage. A self-control that also the fighters themselves are keen to point out, exemplified in the following dialogue with the fighter Alex:

Magnus: Do you ever feel that it is violent on stage?

A: Yes, sort of; but that’s not reality, I mean, sure, it is, but we train our bodies a year before a match.

You don’t go up on stage to kill each other. It looks dramatic, and because there is blood, kicks and strikes, the crowd thinks we want to kill. We act it out like modern gladiators for them to believe in and the spectators’ enthusiasm gives your body the extra mile to enter the fighting character...in the ring.

Alex reflects on how violence does not seem violent to him due to a distinction that he makes between reality and unreality. The reason why he considers the fights to be figative is because he and other fighters rehearse their bodies to sustain a certain type of pain over a longer period of time. Reality and unreality in MMA is in this sense closely connected to levels of control rather than to an aesthetic notion of mimesis. Control is the factor establishing what is real and authentic and what is unreal and “fictitious”, displaying the ambiguity between these two factors. Moreover, while training to gain control over their bodies, the fighters also develop distinct “fighting characters”, as Alex puts it. The control extends itself to not only include a fighter’s sporting motives but also the creation of a fictive character. In performing, the audience’s enthusiasm is an important ingredient in the making of Alex appearance on stage. The fact is that fighters in general seem to use this interrelationship to raise the stakes of the drama that is battled out in the ring. Gustav, another MMA informant, addresses this point:

G: Entering the arena, walking up the ramp, I feel, this is it, you hear the crowd scream and I’m full of adrenaline, not scared, ha-ha. Seriously, as the bell rings, you become outside your body, not feeling the strikes. I feel like an idol but it takes two to tango, or actually three of a kind, the spectators are in it, too, mm. Eh I mean, that OK, we do fight, it’s there, in it, but, it’s not like a crazy street-fight...

Gustav describes how he feeds off the audience and how it empowers him. He also explains that while fighting he goes outside of his body, disembodying himself and as a consequence of that he doesn’t feel the strikes. In theatre, acting is the generally accepted concept of an actor operating his or her double consciousness while performing. The concept of double consciousness means that while executing physical actions, actors are at the same time watching their embodied actions from
the outside, analyzing both everything that they do in terms of performative actions, as well as their relationship to the audience in order to make necessary adjustments. Although the adrenaline that Gustav is describing plays a certain role, I think that the concept of double consciousness is also applicable here — pointing towards the staged aspect, the evenness of these types of violent fights, of their veiled insincerity. Like Alex, Gustav is also keen to point out the difference between a real fight, "a street fight", and what he is doing, presumably a fight that embodies elements of something previously rehearsed and then staged as real and authentic. The settings of an MMA gala are in this way very similar to those of theatrical communication; linking actors and role-play in a reciprocal system. In referring to the use of masks, Alex exemplifies aspects of both the role-play and the reciprocal system.

M: Is it violent to be on stage? Does it hurt or do you pretend that it isn't painful on stage?

A: Hmm, sometimes, but I don't see it like that. It's more of a game, the mutual respect for the person you're facing in battle. You don't want to reveal if you got hit badly, you keep the mask on...

M: What do you mean by mutual respect and to keep the mask on?

A: We are in it together, him and me, it's our game, we do this together. We create the ring action...

Several previous informants have talked about how they do not feel any pain while performing. What Alex is alluding to is that on those occasions when he does feel pain, due to a bad hit, he does not show it to his opponent. In order to hide the pain, he embodies a symbolic mask. This symbolic mask is a tool borrowed from the world of theatre, where mask-use is central, by MMA fighters to cope with and adjust to the feeling of pain. If there exists an initiated reciprocal system of evenness and role-playing, why is it that the violence of MMA is still being judged as authentic and therefore considered problematic by so many critics? I ask Jonas, what is it that people from the 'outside' can't understand about the violence in MMA?

J: Fighting can look brutal, even to me... but it's about your character, to become and appear as something, in front of the crowd and the opponent, it's a circus, a show, a freaky happening going on.

M: So does this mean that to you fighters, it is only about the appearance of violence and it is not for real?

J: Sure, media and society have a hang up about the brutal outcome in ring fighting. They don't care about the positive aspects of MMA.

M: And what are they?

J: Many. There is a social side to it, too. We train and discipline our bodies and compete together.

Once again, it is the staged appearance of realness that Jonas, like the others, is talking about. He touches on the idea of building a character to become and appear as in front of the audience, even describing the event as a circus. The difference being that at the circus or in the theatre, the play of the fictitious is part of the authenticity of the dramatic act as fiction. In an MMA fight, the authenticity claim is based on the reality of raw violence. Therefore, the audience believes that the violence is for real and not rehearsed and, as such, partly artificial. Viewed from this angle it is obvious that the contract between MMA fighters and audience is different from the contract between theatre actors and its audience. More so, as the authentic in theatre becomes something "artificial" and is thus authentic in that, MMA balances violence factitiously in between these positions. The line between real and unreal violence is blurred in MMA since they are not pretending to strike, hit and kick each other, like in a staged fight in the theatre, they do it for real like in a street fight. Yet the embodied violence is rehearsed and dramatized for control and regulation and as such 'unreal'. The gap between the fighters seeing themselves as actors of violence and the audience perceiving them as violent actors confirms this blurring of boundaries. Hence, combat sports are essentially controversial as they automatically unfold at the very border between 'authentic' and 'simulated' 'street' fighting: fighters seem to modify these parameters of real/unreal intervals simultaneously. In the conversation, Jonas also reveals that MMA fighters and their opponents...
regularly meet up before a match in the locker room and go through the fight card of the event together. On the question of how he feels about his opponent before a match he describes how there are even inexplicit rules among fighters about where on the body to hit and not to hit.

M: How do you feel about your opponent before a match?

J: I respect that he dares to go on stage fighting. We don’t hate each other; it’s just a part of the event, the act. We don’t deliberately kick at knees, as it will injure your opponent seriously...real bad...

Because so much is determined in advance, before fighting, a dramatized ‘shadow world’ alongside the ‘real world’ is constructed. This shadow world, or ‘sphere’, runs as a theatrical ‘meta’ presence in the MMA fighting context. For this reason I uphold that MMA sanctions fighters to become ‘meta-action figures’ in how they stage the arena. In a wider popular cultural perspective Alex, Gustav and Jonas are ‘toy’, created for the spectators to take part in the action and interact, play and modulate with these figures. The purpose of this self-oriented spectatorship strengthens and supports their person’s gestalt-oriented appearance in combat and demonstrates their positions as metawarriors. Johnny explains:

M: What about the artist’s name, is that more important than having a trained body in the fighting?

J: That’s theatre, you want to build a reputation as an artist, become this extraordinary figure, just the same as Beckham or Zlatan in football. You can’t only be your body, you need your fight card too.

Approached in this manner, building a fight card is very much like building a character, where the fighters arrange attributes, outward appearance and a set of embodied actions under a stage name, a nickname. Even though Jonas refers to David Beckham and Zlatan Ibrahimovic as “role models of becoming extraordinary bodies” or figures, the way MMA fighters go about transcending the sport as figures of greatness resembles more theatre acting than football in that they tune to costume, props and scenery as a complement to embodied characteristics. Or, like Jonny himself puts it: “That’s theatre.”

When the fight card is put together and the character has been built in rehearsal, in terms of outward appearance and embodied actions, then the fight card, the persona, is transferred onto the stage. As in theatre, scoring the first entrance on to the stage is fundamental in communicating the essentials of the character to the audience. Johnny explains to me about the purpose of a fighter’s entrance into the arena. He tells me that for anyone facing an opponent in total contact fighting, it is crucial to build and demonstrate a figure of believable force. The embodied approach in fighting in the ring or cage combat indicates violent signals to the audience and is therefore used to accumulate stage presence in MMA. It is not simply to be objectified as stereotypes; rather Johnny and the fighters convert into dynamic artists on stage and increase the prejudice that establishes fighters as vicious villains. Another informant, David, reflects on this:

M: How does it feel having a nickname and music walking into the arena?

D: It’s a part of the fighting. My nickname is the “slayer”, and the fans love it. Fighters behind the scenes know it is an act, a hoax, triggering the event of the fight card.

M: Is it important to have these features in MMA? What’s the use?

D: It gives you authority and charisma in the ring. As a fighter you want to appear dangerous, scary.

As David emphasizes, the fighters make use of their individual fighting skills and at the same time, they enhance and trigger these skills for the sake of the audience by creating a character around a staged nickname. It is the embodiment of this fictive warrior figure that the fighters are establishing while entering the ring to the sound of loud music and the cheering crowd. The informant Eric explains it like this:

M: Entering the arena, walking down the ramp, what’s important to know? It looks central to MMA...

E: I mean that the future fighter is a decathlete. He needs to learn different styles and handle the action-drama and find his own way to enter the stage. He must find his own perfect mixture of
elements and techniques. The elements surrounding the fighting scene consist of being calm, controlled and focused in building your fighting character and to uphold certain qualities in the actual fight. Then you become one with the ring and the crowd and can go into the real battle.

In the dialogue with Eric, there are significant insights into what makes a good MMA staging and what creates the appearance of a real battle in the ring. Similar to theatre acting in order to achieve the kind of flow that in the eyes of the audience passes as authentic, fictitious acting needs to be creatively put together and rehearsed until perfected. These actor-oriented staging techniques in MMA seem to be transferred from one position to another; from the embodied knowledge of turning into an actor of violence in a staged fighting context, to, in the view of the audience, operating as a violent actor, a kind of true warrior figure. And so, in this context, a brutal actor-oriented figure seems to balance the MMA fighting appearance and the authenticity of stage presence.

THE VIOLENT ACT IN MMA

MMA includes all the components of a public event. Walking into an MMA gala is like seeing a rock concert. As a spectator you are offered a dramatized live action war. One that is, on the one hand, real, brutal, frightening and scary and, on the other hand, one that is controlled, disciplined and arranged as a directed meta-theatre play; not at all scary and ambiguous but rather connoting security in its interaction between fighters and spectators. As previously mentioned above, experienced fighters seem to use this interaction with the audience in order to increase the dramatic contrasts displayed in the various fighting scenes. One of the fighters, Jimmie, told me about this by distinguishing between acts of combat in the ring and the act of entering. Jimmie draws on his own experiences to make two important points about the rite de passage in an MMA context. The first act is situated to enhance the body and to become a mix of self-representation and character in order to meet the expectations of the spectators. The second type of act occurs when you have entered the arena and arrived in the ring. Then, you have passed the "point of no return" and are obliged to go into the battle for 'real'. But even as the fight is happening and the two opponents are going at each other, Jimmie claims that fighting is an agreement between him and his opponent, making the actions transgress into an implicit rule-bound event of violent actor-oriented staging connecting a double message; ambiguity towards the real and the unreal stage. But the rules of violent gestalt-oriented staging take time to get to know, to adjust oneself to and to be comfortable with, something that Jimmie also confesses to:

M: Tell me about the ring, how is it to walk in there?
J: The first time, I threw up. There was no pleasure. But then my coach told me not to worry, instead to see it as a game, there being a judge and everything. I always feel OK now, safe and calm. With time I have learned to relax in the ring...enjoy the feeling and pleasure of fighting, the audience boosting me...

The tension of fear seems to rest in a structure between and between the polarization of raw and uncontrolled versus controlled and solid, where separation, transition and incorporation play an important role. In this way the MMA field is neither here nor there, but rather a multi-modal ambivalence towards violent conduct. Stepping up to this ambiguity of authentic fighting, the fear of the threat is perceived by the fighters as freedom and pleasure in the furtive game of the play. Daniel explains the freedom and pleasure of the fear of the threat like this:

D: I understand people find MMA violent, but for us fighters, it's the opposite. It's kind of a faked game, but it makes you feel alive and your senses are tensed, the body excited and thrilled. You feel this is it, I am in the ring, the body is filled up by the atmosphere, the noise, cheers and the crowd.

The elevating sensations that Daniel describes, connects him to the atmosphere of the arena, literally embodying it. As part of the spectator's expectations, it seems necessary for the fighters to actively seek the opportunity to get absorbed in the atmospheric environment of fighting gala, something that is made possible by the active and reactive use of the
double consciousness described above; subsequently not becoming the result of a feigned act. To further understand how the atmosphere is traded back and forth between audience and fighters’ expectations of authenticity vs. artificial conduct while fighting, I asked Tommy why he thinks people are attracted to MMA:

T: It’s the belief that fighters are in it for life or death. Their wishes come true, we fulfill them.

M: Why do some athletes become MMA fighters?

T: It is therapy, exercise and hard training, a challenge to measure their strength in front of a crowd, to become something else, to run away from everyday life in society... don’t know, adrenaline, the thrill perhaps...

Mary Douglas has shown in her work that excitement in relation to something like an authentic life may be generated in dangerous or unsafe situations.69 It is this performed thrill that MMA offers as a civilized form of the uncivilized. Daniel describes this dichotomy between what is perceived as civilized versus what is perceived as uncivilized by the fighters themselves:

M: Are you ever afraid of losing in the ring, before the game starts?

D: The only time I’m afraid is walking home late at night, meeting drunken young people, and the risk of getting beaten up. That’s dangerous, the fighting act in the arena is not that dangerous, it’s rather kind of safe. The violence is controlled, though extremely violent, but it is still something that I know isn’t harmful.

M: It looks really scary to many people, including me, with the blood and knockouts, so...?

D: Yeah, OK, but seriously, why doesn’t anyone get harmed as in a street fight then, where people die?

The civilizing and de-civilizing process that is a part of a theatrical MMA event is evoked by Daniel’s distinction between MMA as controlled and not dangerous versus the uncontrolled danger of a real street fight outside the arena.69 In this way the realness and the authenticity is measured in relation to amounts of control. More control means less of the real. Performing in front of an audience in the arena, through the application of control, the real violence is civilized into something not real and then dramatized into something de-civilized that comes across as a real street fight out of control. Since MMA contains staged-persona fights, similar to wrestling, this gives the fighting a meta-theatrical character.64 It consists of fighters knowing that the full contact fighting will not continue forever: there is an end to it. In this process, time disappears as such in order to make appearance and disappearance, that is to say events, possible. Its disappearance is twofold because it also disappears into events, processes, movements, things and, as such, becomes the mode of their presentation as well64 which means, as we saw above, that fighters, for instance, put on embodied masks to disguise the pain of violence. Overlapping these implications is a reduced violent outcome that instead becomes an increased theatrical input,65 dramatizing fights as being bodily meta-performances in a combat ring – featuring across of violence.

CONCLUSIONS

To view MMA as a dramatized spectacle entails the facing of several new implications and elements to the MMA phenomena. The mixture of an increased variety of acceptable violent techniques with no apparent upsurge in harm to participants suggests that MMA fighters exhibit a theatrical habitus characterized by significant self-regulation and control. By the application of control the real violence is civilized into something not real and then dramatized into something de-civilized that comes across as a real street fight out of control. It therefore appears that the violence of performance in MMA has been “exaggerated in public discourse” to sensationalize the spectacle and to intensify the violent perception of MMA fighters.64

It is possible to see that sensationalized violence and theatrical performances in MMA has changed over time as the competing interests of participants and audiences have led to a fluctuating balance. What is conceivably exceptional to later developments within MMA is the action-determined transformation of combat into spectacle, something that has served to extend the sport’s demand by dramatizing the increasing violence. Why, if this is
the case, has the expansion of MMA led to such sensationalism? More generally, this question has a far-reaching knock-on effect for how to perceive trends in dramatized and performed violence in relation to MMA. In which context I propose that the audience impact is largely independent of such measurements of violence and rather relies more on the structural characteristics of overrated combat events. Which means that they, and by extension MMA, will always exist on the limits of acting, performance and theatricality and metadimensional levels of violence. MMA fighters, martial artists and boxers distinguish themselves from ‘street fighters’ by their controlled training, tactical preparation and location within a formal framework of regulation such that they stop, or are stopped, at a specific point.63 This entails the instrumental, rational and, in Mayeda’s sense, reasonably ‘performative’ use of violence. If Mayeda and Jones are correct about the performativity of violence in MMA then the status of MMA relies upon the tension-excitement generated by the perception of these fighters as violently theatrical in their comparatively controlled characters and personas – as actors of violence. Furthermore, the study also shows how fighters are in a fictive and staged landscape in between positions of ‘true’ and ‘false’, ‘fought’ and ‘real’ violent settings while engaged in combat, entrance and staging of the arena. To sum up, these examples show how professional fighters are ‘stuck’ in between authenticity and fictitious performance in the ambiguous role-play on stage. This is carried out in a theatrical act of violence, as of a ‘real’ drama, that disguises the pain by the use of corporeal flow and mask-work.

Performing on the very border between a ‘real’ and a ‘mock’ fight as meta-figures of violence, and so on the margins of ‘normal’ martial arts, levels of control are the determining factor of what should be perceived as real and authentic and what should be perceived as unreal and artificial. Therefore, much more so than other areas of martial arts, MMA combat is in constant negotiation with the conceptualization of the, by audiences, desired realism in fighting. Ethical criticism is therefore an inevitable response to the expansion of MMA, derived as much from its structurally dramatized and performed violent character as from its specific violent substance. In the fighters’ embodiment of the atmosphere of a fighting gala, the result shows how this process of dramatization in MMA includes a peculiarly active and reactive relationship to the audience and the making of an event. It is an embodiment of atmosphere that is made possible by a fighter’s use of his/her double consciousness: going from the external (spectatorship) in and starting with the body and actions and then moving into acted situations, and, at the same time, going from the internal (fighters) out in to the creation of actors of violence. Future research should aim in the direction of analyzing the body’s agency and out-framing the performative materialization of MMA bodies while they are conducting powerful acts.

NOTES AND REFERENCES
1 I want to thank my informants at the MMA club, without whom this article would not have been possible.
2 I also want to thank PhD Candidate Ann Emirion and Dr Alois Lischinsky at the Department of Culture and Media Studies at Umeå University for checking my English and giving insightful comments on the topic.
5 http://svdebatt.se/. 23 September 2010, 10.25 a.m.
7 Ibid., pp. 262-69.


24 Here, I stress that there is a play within the 'play', a fight within the 'fight', simulated as 'real' in MMA.


27 In ethnography, a field can connote multi-vocal meanings, pointing towards many aspects.


32 Sánchez García, Malcolm, op. cit., p. 50.

33 Generally, the discourse in MMA refers to any sports group that includes a mixture of unarmed combat styles, though different forms of MMA place diverse emphasis on the specific combination of striking techniques (from disciplines such as boxing,
54 “Decathlete”: symbolic connotation, which means being multi-disciplinary in several forms of a sport or a cultural activity, all-rounded in its techniques, strength and mastering several forms of martial arts specialties.

56 In her book, Ballet Across Borders, Berg Publishers, New York 1998, social anthropologist Heleno Wulff, elaborates on the concept of “flow” and shows that dancers reject the bodily impact of e.g. pain, transcending themselves into a state of mind, characterized as flow. Internalized corporeal flow means that pain does not play a significant role. I would argue that MMA fighters can similarly elaborate in between fictitious or real fighting states using a ‘flow-mode’.


58 I assert that fighting the reallness of the fight varies in between authentic, artificial and fictitious states.


60 Hence, I argue that the bodily significance of MMA pinpoints the dramatized and performative processes, and that the developmental stages evident, so far, demonstrate sequences in the search for an appropriate tension balance in the initial stages of a ‘rite de passage’ of the spectacle.


63 In Stanley Kubrick’s film, A Clock Work Orange (1971), the scene under the bridge, where the main character mob the homeless man, is similar in theatricality to an MMA fight. Contradictory: it ranges from violent behaviour to the burlesque, very much like the fictitious manner in MMA fighting ranges from real to unreal.


65 Leic Wicquant, Body & Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer, Oxford University Press 2004

53 In regulating the MMA phenomena to preserve dramatical appeal under increasingly stringent regulation fighters have sought to make artistic charges to MMA to increase the appearance of decontrolled and glamorized theatrical violence’. Mayaeda and Ching, op. cit., p. 23.

57 A fight card is a table-card over each fighter’s specific strengths, kicks, hits, strikes and specialties.