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THE LEGACY OF PANKRATION: MIXED MARTIAL ARTS AND THE POSTHUMAN REVIVAL OF A FIGHTING CULTURE (online 2013, version 2014 2.0)

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Abstract

This article is based on fieldwork conducted over several years with deep participant observation in a mixed martial arts (MMA) club. The study uses the concept of cultural performativity to analyze the close relationship between MMA and the ancient sport of Pankration. Informed by social scientific ideas assembled from what is generally known as the performative turn in cultural theory, and advancing a notion of the posthuman, I explore the bodily performances of MMA fighters engaged in combat fighting. In terms of the violence represented in MMA, the article asks what knowledge has been integrated from the legacy of Pankration and what impact it has had on contemporary cultures and societal norms. The explicit goal of the training sites is to recode the body, increasing the somatic potential to affect, and to be affected. Practitioners (or researchers) of martial arts must immerse themselves in an entire world of meaning, that is, a new cosmological order composed of movement, senses, emotions, fluidity and inter-subjectivity. Therefore, this article provides a philosophical account of MMA, in which I briefly touch on epistemological and ontological questions related to the legacy of Pankration in our time. Finally, in conversational deep interviews, I discuss fighters’ views on the subject.

Key words: ancient, fighting, Greece, MMA, ontology, Pankration, post-phenomenology, posthuman theory, new materialism, post-masculinity

Introduction

Every Tuesday around 8:00 pm, I go to the local MMA gym in my city. The gym is located in a basement that has been turned into a colorful place with red painted walls and blue mats on the floor – reminding me that the sport itself is quite vibrant in color. Before the class starts, I and the other fighters sit against one of the red walls watching the advanced session, where fighters with a professional record compete against one another. At this club, two fighters have records of competing in the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC). Sitting there, all of us keep silent as a way of showing our respect for the professionals.

When it is our turn to practice, the instructor orders us to start running in circles. “OK, you can start to carry each other on the back”, David (who is the main coach today at the
gym) screams out loud. After two minutes he adds, “OK, shift partners and carry another partner.” This drill continues for what seems to be an eternity, and after some 25 minutes of warm-ups, I am exhausted and have a hard time breathing because my mouthguard restricts my inhalation immensely. My body is shaking and my muscles are really drained out. David then sits down on the floor in the middle of the gym and gathers everyone around him. He explains how to pass and cross someone’s half-guard when in a dominant position as a means to mount the opponent (to sit on top of your opponent’s chest and strike with fists onto the head). He uses one of the most adept fighters in the class and then demonstrates how to perform a full-mount technique; shifting his arms and legs, he uses his elbows to press the combatant’s head down onto the mat. David reflects, “Just like the old Greeks used to do it.” A big smile spreads over his face, “Great work, guys, we will practice these grappling techniques more next week. We’re finished for today. Thanks, everyone.” And with those final words pointing back in time several thousand years, that week’s Thursday training session is over.

After taking a shower, I walk back home thinking about Greeks, fighting and ancient warfare, Pankration, and the link to the UFC. I start writing down notes from the gym’s “jotting”, fighting sessions, and spontaneous conversations as soon as I sit down at my desk. While transcribing my data, I realize the need for this topic to be told.

Aim and Purpose of the Study

Over the last two decades, martial arts practice and fighting combat sports have been seriously reassessed due to the extreme popularity of MMA has attracted since 1993, when the first “modern” battle took place in Denver, Colorado. What does this have to do with Pankration? Why has combat fighting in huge events come back in our own “hypermodern” time (a symbolic hyper-simulacra)? The explicit aim in this article is to point out the attitudes, performances and ideas about MMA and Pankration that (partly) my informants give in their expression of how they understand the body and the violence associated with the sport. In doing this trajectory mapping, I will explain the connection in between the two theoretically and put forth the informants’ conceptions.

Method and Data

This article is based on fieldwork that has been carried out for more than three years. In one of the Swedish MMA gym field sites in particular (I have been to gyms in the US, Japan, Hong Kong and Macau and lately in Brazil), I conducted auto-ethnographical work, which means that I am explaining the field from two directions. One direction centers on my own presence there in relation to the field site and the other one its juxtaposition with the stories the informants are telling me. Interviews in and after training, both spontaneously and semi-structured, were made in advance, as well as fully unstructured. I am basing this article on both participant observation and on the interviews concerning empirical material encompassing Pankration, MMA and combat sports as a whole. I extracted the subjective answers based on six informants and, in particular, from two key informants with UFC records. The observations in this study are mainly taken from the Renyi Gym, in Umeå, Sweden. I have had full access to the gym and I have taken part in the mid-advanced course on Tuesdays and Thursdays every week.
for a total of 4 hours a week. During this intensive fieldwork, I have gathered data both writing and taking field notes, using audio and video recording and also extracted empirical data from my physical experiences in the gym.

**Mixed Martial Arts and Pankration**

During interviews, the practitioners often bring up how MMA is based on an ancient fighting style borne out of unarmed combat called “Pankration.” For example, “Jim” (pseudonym), one of the fighters with a professional record of competing in the UFC, turns to me during one of my field sessions and explains:

> Violence between people, in the world has always existed, men have always fought other men and it’s just a part of our nature, that’s how we are, what we do and what is just inside of us, in our bodies. I don’t see any problem in that MMA fighting exists today, it’s just a part of a natural progress. The difference today is just that it is regulated. MMA is just a normal continuation of something that has been going on since thousand of years. No one can stop it, it is here to stay.

Indeed, the original form of Pankration no longer exists, though it is an influence on various other forms, for example, Brazilian jiu-jitsu, kickboxing, karate, sambo, shoot, savate, the recent trend in no-holds-barred bouts, etc. Likewise some sports in Asia like the Japanese Kumetei from the 1920s, Thailand’s Muay Thai boxing and onward came to model themselves after Pankration. Most of all, Pankration has influenced MMA to the extent that UFC, as well as other similar MMA events, seem to be modeled after this ancient Greek combat sport.

Pankration is a Greek word deriving from “pan” and “kratos,” meaning “all” and “powers” and was in its time famous for requiring the application of both athletics and warfare [1]. Considered a sport, it is a combination of Hellenic boxing and antique wrestling melded into a freestyle fighting form that integrates striking and grappling techniques. Controlled, focused and disciplined on the one hand, it also allowed fighting in an all-out, brutal way, involving, for example, hair-pulling, kneeling, and elbowing [2]. According to records, the only things that were barred were biting and gouging [3].

Furthermore, Pankration may be among the oldest of martial art forms [4] Not only did it feature at the 33rd Olympiad in 648 B.C., for centuries it served as the prestigious final event, indicating exactly how revered a sport it was [5].

Like its predecessor competitions, MMA is surely an “all” “powerful” combat sport which sets, “two contestants wearing only trunks, small gloves and a mouth guard in a cage, and unleashes a multitude of full-force punches, elbow strikes, knee strikes, kicks, stomps, neck chokes, body throws and other grappling techniques against each other” [6]. An MMA fighter seeks victory by concussing an opponent into defenselessness, causing syncope by way of a neck choke, or by coercing an opponent into submission by any variation of these methods [7]. Given this description, it is perhaps not surprising that it has upset critics who argue that MMA is too brutal. Despite the heavy criticism, the sport is attracting many fans, much the same way that ancient gladiators were celebrated and turned in to stars. MMA, then, attracts a similar kind of large attention where, as in old times, it can fill an entire public stadium by gathering fighters with all kinds of backgrounds along the social, ethnic and fighting latter [8]. For this reason, one
important link between MMA and Pankration can be said to be the splendor of ontological large-scale fighting.

Nonetheless, although the large-scale feature and the splendor connects MMA and Pankration in a fundamental way, MMA is a hybrid sport inspired by many different kinds of fighting styles and contexts. Discussing these topics after one of my gym sessions, “Greg”, one of the resident coaches, tells me that MMA, regardless of being a brutal sport or not, is, in his words, the following:

G: I got to say it, even though I know it is not totally true on the whole, without …[1980s movie starring martial arts icon Jean-Claude Van Damme] “Kickboxer”, or this idea that you can sort of make a person unconscious by just staring at them or putting your hand in someone’s forehead and making them drop dead in a split-second, MMA fighting could probably not exist….There has always been this fairy tale kind of picture of men in fantasy, in movies, in media and in history since the Romans, that men should have the potentiality to knock some one out.

M: By this you mean that mixed martial arts fighting is what today?

G: Well, in relation to history, I myself, I love history, man, I know a lot from reading, it is just not fake, it is totally real, in that it is proven that men needed to learn how to fight to survive. Today, MMA is a living proof of that in our own culture.

M: OK, but there are different cultures with different martial arts styles and histories and backgrounds so…

G: Yes, but the thing is that MMA could not have existed without the f*cking Neanderthals, they also had to survive (they did die out 28,000 years ago because of homo sapiens invading Europe) fighting us, when we came and took land from them! The point is that fighting, in life and death, has been around since the birth of mankind, the Romans, the Greeks and the Vikings also fought with bare hands, MMA would not have existed since, all people have developed their own style of defense all over the globe, and MMA is a result of that.

M: I got your point and it is really interesting.

G: Yeah, I am not like you, a scientist, but I can explain this in an easier way without using any theories like you have to do. I mean, that this is the result, MMA, it is the coming together of so many hundred years and different martial arts practices around the globe that finally led to this. The moves, the style has transferred to here now.

A Performative and a Representative Return

While reading the books Pankration, The Traditional Greek Combat Sport and Modern Mixed Martial Art, edited by Jim Arvanitis (2003) and No Holds Barred, The Complete History of Mixed Martial Arts in America, by Clyde Gentry (2011), I observed how frequently the authors use terminology taken from anthropology and performance studies [9]. More specifically, the authors speak in terms of performance and ultra-modern fighting cultures, or, as Jim Arvanitis explicitly puts it: “mixed combat and the modern world’s version of fighting performances” [10, 11]. Gentry, in turn, wrote of extreme performances of bodies that clash into each other in a postmodern society [12]. Here my informant Greg’s notion of MMA history and practice fits in in a reasonable way.

This performance terminology refers to the performative turn, a methodological approach adopted by the social sciences and humanities that became particularly fashionable during the 1990s [13]. The performative turn is an urge to conceptualize how human physical practices relate to their contexts in a heuristic way going beyond traditional approaches to culture and society [14]. Above all, theories associated with the
performative turn and the body emphasize sensory experience [15]. Another typical feature of the performative turn is an interest in how things are done vis-à-vis what they are. The performative turn simply focuses on doings of all kinds – that is, of performances. A performance is to act with agency in space and time.

In spite of being considered a phenomenon of the 1990s, the performative turn stems from two strands of 1940s and 1950s theory, that is, an anthropological/ sociological strand connected with names such as Kenneth Burke, [16] Victor Turner, [17] and Erving Goffman, [18] and a second strand from the philosophy of language connected with names such as John Austin [19] and John Searle [20]. From the 1970s on, the concept of performance has been integrated into a variety of theories in the social sciences [21] and humanities, such as poststructuralist thought, phenomenology, critical theory, semiotics, Lacanian psychoanalysis, deconstruction, feminism, and recently, new materialism and posthumanism [22].

Though these different theoretical frameworks have integrated performative turn concepts, they are frequently incompatible, one being a critique of another, and so on. Yet they all seem to be compatible with the ideas and the terminology of the performative turn. Why is this so? What is it about the performance concept that can strike such an ore in so many different types of thought about culture, society, and the human being? My point here is that if the concept of performance can bridge new scientific knowledge to this extent, what is there to learn from and about MMA performances and the legacy of Pankration? Many of the informants regard MMA to be just that, a performance of both mind and body. This observation is exemplified by UFC fighter “Mickey”, 28 years of age with a record of two fights in the UFC organization, who claims legitimacy for MMA as being, “based on historical facts and ancient times”. I ask him how come he regards MMA being based on old structures rather than new ones, as it was founded in Denver, Colorado in 1993?

Mickey: Yeah, it is what is, no one can change it, and it has been around in our society for a long time, not just since a thousand years back in time when gladiators and Hellenic fighters killed one another every single day, I mean that, for instance, Vale Tudo [Brazilian fighting contests] and the Brazilians black slaves’ more symbolic dance martial art of Capoeira proves this. Not only in Japan but in all of Asia, martial arts have existed, ok, I am sure that it has connections between folk and people over far distances. People of Okinawa probably travelled, right? Anyway, I want to tell people that contact sports such as MMA are not something that were invented in 1993! They go far beyond that, man, listen, ok, it came together in 1993 under the name of mixed martial arts, but seriously, didn’t warriors before Jesus already fight each other in a total fight that included wrestling, striking, kicking, and any body technique one can imagine? I am so sure that it of course was the case!

Magnus: So by saying these things, what’s your main conclusion of MMA, gladiators, Pankration and fighting culture over all?

Mickey: I would, arguably hmm, keep to, um, that, eh, men of all kind, in all of time throughout history needed basic skills in body combat to survive and this has been carried on to next generation and to the next and so on...

**Mixed Martial Arts’ Physical Reality**

MMA is first and foremost a physical reality. It is a corporeal existence about which one cannot gain adequate knowledge unless one lives through and experiences it. For example, during preparation, the fighter’s body balances several components like
dehydrating in order to make a certain weight, working out a pre-advanced game plan, matching against similar fighters during camp training and so on.

Despite these various processes, MMA is usually characterized by a narrow focus on polarized oppositions, for instance, between winning and losing. The polar idea is that the fighter is ready to sacrifice his or her corporeal self in order to achieve victory. When thinking in these terms, fighters approximate archetypal representatives, turning into a culturally induced stereotype.

Part of the instrumental rationality of MMA violence takes an affective form that is fueled by the confrontational tension between fighters, but is most of all built around the body’s autotelic potential to perform according to habituated reflexes [23]. At the same time, fighters do this with a great knowledge of combat, as well as the mimetic experience associated with sports in general, that is, that anything can happen [24]. “Jay”, a dental student and a professional Thai boxer, emphasizes that:

J: In MMA, anything goes and can suddenly happen, and that is the fantastic part of MMA, it is a natural sport, and that is why people love it so much. People love to watch the sport and to take part in fighting that is semi-controlled, because it shows our skills in a modern society that is more or less fucked up in that everyone can join in an fight someone like a battle jam on the street.

M: OK, but MMA is more of a controlled sport, right…?

J: Well, yeah, but it has this reputation, as it comes from a very real and brutal background, it was founded to use in attacking people in the most hard way there is.

M: So, what is the meaning of all of this talk on MMA and its background then?

J: That it is just there and that it has been around for ages, simply as that. It’s not a new thing come on! This is a Kumite thing, too, and Thai boxing in stadiums, it has been around for centuries, it wasn’t invented yesterday! If you believe so, you’re wrong as hell. Mixed martial arts is the new name, but the ancient name is Panchrase - fighting, that’s it.

Thus it becomes apparent how MMA, from a posthuman point of view, shows us how the violence of “unnatural” chaotic acts becomes “natural”, mimetic, mnemonic and autotelic by the use of physical force defined in sportive terms as sites of performance [25]. What seems to be at stake here is how MMA is to be judged, perceived, and negotiated as harmful or non-harmful by its critics and by its fans. As in Jay’s quote, we can follow the idea of MMA’s “natural” existence in that has been integrated by today’s practitioners. Even though MMA is an old or a fairly new sport, previously called “Panchrase”, after Pankration, there is this basic idea that martial arts have a long tradition and history which legitimizes MMA. To perform and to use MMA as a “normal” proclivity then gives the legacy that reinstates Pankration over time, even all the way back to the “old Greeks”. As much as it sounds like the antique warfare of a bare body used as armor, MMA, in its detailed composition of different sophisticated techniques, cannot have been invented yesterday as some of my informants claim. MMA and Pankration have a very close affiliation and may be a reinvention of an ancient combat sport.

My research shows that MMA is a super-modern sport that generates a lot of money, which raises the question of whether MMA is popular because performance of this kind has not previously appeared in contemporary society. Thus MMA is a valuable tool in measuring how new subcultures and subgenres are received. In many cases, these sort of
“new” fighting contests were often seen as brutal and dangerous. MMA deals with the “total” performative direct contact between human beings, with the physical performance so turned to a violent act that the action still takes place under a strict order with fighters checked before, during, and after a contest. Yet, the answer to the “heritage” of MMA may be that, hence in what contemporary violence is received and what attributes, ideals, norms, ethics and morals that follows in its footsteps, whether or not being a new sport or not...

Though MMA is still a relatively young sport, ultimate fighting contexts are in need of research that doesn’t use oppositional logic since this might be misleading and a source of prejudice. Taking on a posthuman stance can redirect the focus on some conceded aspects in MMA earlier research.

**Posthuman Proficiency and Implementation of Legacy**

Many articles in both general media and in medical journals have criticized MMA for being too violent. This critique has resulted in an overarching focus on how to make the sport safe. On the one hand, the Nevada State Athletic Commission in the US, which has the official authority to control the sport, has instituted the necessary rules and regulations; for example, the demands on doctors checking fighters and on referees have become much stricter. The Commission has also specified what kinds of violence are allowed and what are not allowed. Moreover, breaking the Commission’s rules leads to suspension.

On the other hand, with most scholars and journalists, safety has primarily been about MMA’s disciplined violence and having full control as a fighter. One prominent idea is training the body to become like a lethal and precise weapon.

The posthuman perspective addresses the question of safety in a somewhat different manner. In the beginning of my fieldwork, one of my main informants “Jeff” told me: “I would like to urge you to step down on the mat and start practicing with us so that you can see that it is not at all that dangerous”. After I started practicing MMA myself, I came to agree. Thinkers of phenomenology and new materiality theory claim that the body is in constant flux and adaptation; it expands, contracts, and incorporates depending on what is needed, and can habituate to any extreme condition. A body that practices violence adjusts to it by accumulating relevant sensory knowledge [26] [27]. For this reason, one can say that the main safety switch is the body’s situated ability to remodel itself. As “Jeff” stresses:

> I am so confident because my body is overly disciplined nowadays, I can take so much heavy punching without taking any notice hardly. I am a bad motha-f, (joking), seriously, those who don’t seem to understand that powersport, or contact sports as martial arts practice, has been around since the birth of Christ, should have a brain check, meaning that, how else in the world could man have survived when we lived in the cages; no surprise the MMA sport is taking place in a cage today uh!

Thus, full-contact combat is a situated individual enactment of existing corporeal conceptualizations of the autotelic and the mimetic [28]. It is a relational dyad that in
many ways requires a socially based sensory experience from the research participant, that is, feeling the pain, the suffering, the sense and rhythm of combat. This indispensible, corporeal processes which MMA is founded on aims at building, breaking down, punctuating and rebuiding bodies over and over again. Seen from this perspective, the effects of fighting (smaller injuries like bruises, contusions and cardio/weight loss and a swollen lip, or a an eyebrow cut, etc.) are a given ingredient that is accounted for by MMA performers [29]. To the audience, this might appear brutal, especially when a fighter has taken a bad hit and the defeat is a fact, but it is part of the play performed. Ultimately, these materially based actions become a way of reinstating the contender’s corporeal capital in the symbolic sense. That is, MMA performance is the embodied re-actualization of symbolic systems, for example, “men fighting in a cage,” connoting aggression, fear, and violence [30]. “Jay” is keen to affirm this outward appearance and the symbolic inner logic of acting with vicious attitudes in the ring when he states:

J: It’s me and my opponent in it, in the octagon fighting each other, it’s a consent between him and me, not you, not him or anybody else [pointing around with his forefinger at the walls and the roof in a gesture of comparing with any person there]. All this talk on combat sports and MMA raising more violence and problems among youth, it’s the opposite. In here, we teach young men to handle their aggression and staying out of problems. This is where it goes on, the real revival of learning how to control yourself, your body and your nerves. We perform bodily actions in the gym that are aggressive techniques that have been going on for an eternity, it has been passed on from a person to the next one and so on.

M: OK, so when you talk about MMA as a revival and passing on… what is that?

J: I myself trained as a Karateka in my background, I can see and make a clear, hmm, that there is a connection with MMA, someone developed these martial arts moves centuries ago, it can’t just been born a hundred years ago, makes no sense. MMA is the natural continuation of practicing combat sports for decades.

Performance as a concept functions as a tool for framing and analyzing the construction of MMA. Accordingly, a posthuman idea consists of considering what an individual person’s body has done in an explicit performance or in a sublime performative act, and what a fighter actively does with his or her body, that is, performing martial arts practice as a civilized sport [31]. MMA fights exist as a “meta-fight” both in its performative communication to the world watching the sport as just that, a sport, and as featuring top-trained athletes and not just brutal men, but rather performing and communicating top modern bodily skilled shows.

A Combat Turn of Performativity

The scholar Dale C. Spencer has successfully applied a range of angles to the study of fighting cultures beyond ordinarily used theories [32]. The performance phenomena played out by MMA fighters are according to Spencer not about scripted imaginings, but about embodying expressive behavior. To emphasize these coded aspects of an embodied fighting culture, Spencer defines these performances as “restored practices”. Spencer distinguishes between two kinds of performance phenomena. Referring to a framed event, he argues that performance is an enactment of cultural conventions and traditions, something that he calls a, “bodily experience of performance.” Performance also refers to
the informal happenings of daily life, which implies that everyday practices are performed, something that he calls, “bodies in time and space of performance” [33].

Furthermore, Spencer suggests that one should look at mixed martial arts fighting in terms of a continuum, that is, not everything that is happening in a fight is meant to be part of the performance at the same time, the entire time or even at all. For this reason, there are moments during MMA fights, just like there are moments during a political rally, a court gathering, or any type of sport event, when the performance, that is, the restored practices, become self-contradicting.

MMA restored practices come down to the bareness of the fighter’s material body. Reading Spencer, this is what stands out to me, the naked and, in many ways, mundane struggle centering on bare bodies, that is, knuckled life forces coalescing. What makes this particular performance so attractive to audiences across time and space? In discussing the staged and event-ness of these performances, David explains:

D: Fighting, the adrenaline and the live kick of watching, taking part of something that comes so close to real fighting, it is as real as it gets, can’t get any more natural.
M: OK, hmm that I can understand, and by natural you mean that?
D: It is a human thing, inside of us, we get heated up by watching people engaged in combat, it terrifies us and at the same time it scares the hell out of us, so it’s both exciting to watch and really disgusting in a way, which I can understand so…
M: So, just because it is supposed to be a natural sport, we should accept it and see it as any regular other sport out there?
D: No, no, (long laugh), (pause), eh, let me say like this, MMA, yeah, it is new today to us, in media, in TV and among people who are not used to martial arts, but it doesn’t mean that it is not a natural part of life, to compete and fight against someone. It’s ridiculous to say that martial arts are new, see what I mean? The phenomena of fighting are as old as God has existed. It is a heroism in winning and too…eh, and a brave thing to put your body to a real test.
M: So fighting today has the same significance as a thousand years ago for example?
D: Yes, as long as it is consenting, no one should be critical, it’s a normal thing to fight.

Posthuman Bodies and Martial Arts

The legacy of Pankration is steeped in knuckled life force – which also means that the sport is balancing a large measure of physical sacrifice. It is thus valid to speak of a violent body order where the material reality is determined by a combination of what a human being can do to another body and how far one can push what one is allowed to do, namely threaten life in order to remain alive, and, in its most extreme form, kill another human being (symbolically or for real, using techniques like rear neck-choke, which can make the opponent unconscious) in order to survive (in the ring or on the battlefield).

Kicking someone in the head, striking or punching with the deliberate intention to destroy the opponent in front of a crowd, locates MMA in the terrain of ultimate fighting as being highly “violent”. Still, MMA, revived or not from ancient times, passed on throughout time from one fighter to the next, exhibits strong characters of both authentic and wild competition between its combatants. Nevertheless, MMA’s legacy as a subcultural phenomena balances in the “between-ness” of violence, sport and legitimate bodily behavior, asking how much spectators, participants or academic professionals are
ready to deal with the hyper-bodies of MMA. MMA exists today in modern forms, having been revisited to encompass sportive terms in displaying controlled and disciplined violence in real time.

When the UFC was founded, the main attraction was the appearance of no rules. As such, MMA competitions feature competitors in a ring or a caged-in area who inflict pain on their opponents by punching, kicking, elbowing, and kneeling their opponents into submission [34]. These features are undeniably similar in their materiality to the structural basis of Pankration’s “all powers” free fighting styles [35]. Yet, in the “posthuman body” of today’s MMA, the material and the virtual come together in an intricate blend [36]. Such a blending of materiality and virtuality indicates that the legacy has taken a new turn of late. David puts it like this: “MMA is the old new thing”!

When an MMA fighter, as compared to a Pankration fighter more than 2,500 years ago, confronts an opponent in a full-contact unarmed battle, he or she stages not only a real material body fighting for survival, but is also broadcasted simultaneously as a virtual body fighting. In the bout, the fighter gets feedback from both the live audience and the virtual audience. The live audiences cheer out loud, give their scores in numbers, and sometimes even give thumbs up and down as in ancient Greece and Rome. The virtual audience, exemplified by high-tech viewers getting public access through iPads, IPods, PCs, TVs, etc., transfer their input to the fighters using email, twitter, UFC.com, and Pay Per-View. Live commentaries, Fox Sports channel, apps on smart phones and iPads and so on. Commentators transfer feedback and feedforward to the fighters through coaches and other camp colleagues working the direct online connections. That is hyper-media in flow.

Perceived as a posthuman cultural re-imagining of either a gladiator game or an Olympic Pankration event that blends the material and the virtual, this turns the fighting performances of MMA into a “hyper-simulacra” fueled by the very idea that the sport doesn’t follow any rules. This has more to do with masculinity issues than with understanding the sport on a global level. A “post-masculine” theory could reveal the situated “men vs. men” fighting in a postmodern world, reversed and done over again as throughout history. Hence, we can see that there is no evidence of such a linear story; all we know is that Pankration has existed and that MMA is real and authentic in our society today. Combat sports of today are “as real as it gets” (see Bollelli 2014; Downey 2014 for more reading). Nonetheless, MMA fighting on a scenic ontology scale provides a rudimentary briefing as it is possible to take part in this “ultra-modern” system of dyadic fight between men and women engaged in combat battle. As Jay sees it: “MMA is still a bodily thing and it doesn’t matter the way it has been such a huge market success. In the ring, like at Olympia a thousand years ago, you still have only your body and mind to rely on, just the same today, the same.”

**Pankration Performativity and Phenomenology**

When applying the performance concept to the analysis of MMA fighting, another useful reference point is the happening of a performativ turn within the arts, which took place in the intersection between theatre and art in the 1960s [37]. The German theater theorist and historian Erika Fischer-Lichte describes this development both from an historical and a theoretical perspective [38].
From a historical perspective, Fischer-Lichte argued that performance theory began when Theatre Studies was founded as an academic discipline at the beginning of the last century. In Germany, Theatre Studies was founded by Max Herrmann who claimed that the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators during an event, and not the dramatic text, as was earlier claimed, is what gives the theatre its distinctiveness.

One of Fischer-Lichte’s historical points was that Theatre Studies and Ritual Studies (which today for the most part is a part of anthropology) share a similar historical development in changing the focus from dramatic text to performance and event-ness – a development that happened around the same time and is at the base of a close allegiance between these two disciplines.

In terms of theorizing the performative turn in relation to the arts, Fischer-Lichte proffered a new aesthetics that rethinks how meaning is communicated between the stage and the auditorium, addressing the fact that theatre and performance art are not art objects, but are taking place as events [39]. Instead of a semiotic communication model, Fischer-Lichte proposed the idea of an auto-poetic feedback loop and based it on the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, (cf. Spencer 2012, who also uses Merleau-Ponty in an analysis of MMA), that is, the embodied and experientially based co-presence of performers and audience negotiating the meaning of the performance together. The meaning, as the performance art culture of the 1960s and onward helped Fischer-Lichte to illustrate, is negotiated on two different perceptual levels. Thus, the perceiving subject in the auditorium and the performing subject on stage oscillate between “the order of presence”, emphasizing the lived phenomenological body, and “the order of representation”, emphasizing the semiotic body [40]. Oscillating between these two perceptual orders, experiential meaning is first attained, since, consistent with Merleau-Ponty, the lived experience is what allows for reflection to occur in the first place [41].

Like theatre and performance art, MMA happenings are staged as events, although extreme ones in huge arenas, something that highlights a very important fact: the theatrical platform of event-ness provides a common ground. Consequently, it is reasonable to say that the fighters on stage as well as the audience in the auditorium oscillate between “the order of presence”, which emphasizes the lived, phenomenological, autotelic, violent body, and “the order of representation”, which emphasizes the semiotic body that can be read symbolically (for instance, it can be compared to Pankration by its fans, viewers and the participating fighters). Attending a MMA event as an onstage fighter or as part of the audience no doubt entails oscillating between these two perceptual orders. It also means that the experience of violence is a fundamental part of the later reflection on it. It is very likely that this was why my main informant urged me to start practicing MMA before writing about the sport.

Before taking Fischer-Lichte’s theoretical understanding of performance in the ontological direction, it should be noted that this phenomenological knowledge is first and foremost lived and, therefore, cannot be communicated scientifically. I argue that the distinctiveness of MMA as an embodied performance of restored practices puts both the performers and the audience in contact with the experiential level of its violent exposure. However, whereas the fighter’s experience is based on direct, first-hand physical adjustment and adaptation, the audience’s experience is based on indirect adjustment and adaptation to violence.
Fischer-Lichte pointed out that during an event the experiences are very often not experienced as “ordinary”, but rather as “extraordinary”. This means that the event-ness of an MMA gala provides a unique opportunity to study the experience of violence, since the extraordinary experience allows for the everyday culture to stand out and appear in a new light.

**Combat Ontology**

Studying MMA in relation to a performative turn, there is much understanding to be gained pertaining not only to phenomenological theory, but also to cultural theory, that is, the posthuman [42]. As fighters’ often talk about the identity and the warrior’s symbolic life of MMA, with it’s historical backgrounds in Pankration, it is thus important to speak of and to situate combat sports in an ontological perspective. Chris an American UFC fighter claim that he’s identity as a sportsman in the UFC organization (with a record of 16 professional matches) and being a fighter in MMA is also made possible through the legacy of Pankration and the fact that he was a martial artist with background in wrestling and in Karate. Chris conversation with me in the gym in Raleigh, US, shows he’s thought clear.

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M: So, as you mentioned, what would you say is the connection between Pankration and MMA?  
C: Obviously, you know, you have people in martial arts that don’t get the whole picture of MMA, they don’t see the devotion we put into the sport. We suffer and we sacrifice so much.  
M: Who are ‘they’ you’re talking about?  
C: Fans of the UFC, around the globe, everywhere, we did this, but MMA was made already in historical terms, I did not inventive the thing man, but I can say I was there and I was a part of the sport when it became popular again.  
M: You mean that you reinvented the sport? Or simply you created an identity or what?  
C: Not like that, from scratch but from being in there in the cage when we adopted the features of it.  
M: So, this sport, I am talking about mixed martial arts now, what you are saying is that MMA has existed long ago and that the sport today, it’s symbolic world is similar to ancient times?  
C: I couldn’t know man, I all know, is that my own personal feeling is that the UFC has adopted the system from something that has been going on for a long time man. My identity as a fighter, but I could not have been a fighter without Pankration in the first place, as I guess, we do what we read into things, we try to go along with the stuff that we find very appealing to us.  
M: Ok, I get it, so basically MMA is a sport, which you consider to be a product of both ancient times and modern days, am I following you right now?  
C: Well, yes, but as I grew up training Karate in the classical Dojo, MMA, which didn’t exist back then, was something just waiting around the corner for me, and when I turned 18 there was the UFC, and everyone wanted to compete and take part of this movement that spread worldwide. I wanted to try my skills and then I learned that mixed martial arts was a new sport, but it took sometime before it clicked to me. Now, mixed martial arts is global, everywhere…  
M: So, now you describe MMA as something not existing, but suddenly being there, right out of the blue or what? Or you are saying that MMA as a movement helped martial artist identity?  
C: Haha, I see, no, here’s the deal, MMA was the name, the new modern term, but fighting, as in a gladiators game has been around several hundred years, and Pankration is the model that UFC use in their commercials, you’ve seen the pictures with men in ancient clothing fighting right? My identity as an MMA fighter is the same; I can turn into something and be this guy too…
In critical theory, the posthuman is a reconceiving of the human being, that is, an ontological being that is not a singularly defined individual, but one who can “become” or embody different identities and understand the world from multiple, heterogeneous perspectives. Collecting a number of key texts within posthumanist theory, the editors of this anthology Cecilia Åsberg, Martin Hultman, and Francis Lee include a list of words explaining the main concepts. Their main topic, posthumanism, is explained as, “theories that comment on the changing circumstances for human existence following modern transformations concerning technique, health, democracy and environment” [43].

Strongly influenced by phenomenology and posthumanist theory, Ann E. Hartzmann introduces a model for a posthuman scenic ontology in her forthcoming doctoral thesis Känsla för skådespelarkonst: en studie av hur känslor görs (Feel for Acting: A Study of How to Do Feelings). What the posthuman scenic ontology helps her to explain is the different ways in which an actor can do feelings on the theatre stage.

Hartzmann’s model for a posthuman scenic ontology is developed in dialogue with an article by the Dutch anthropologist of science and technology Annemarie Mol titled “Ontological Politics: A word and some Questions”, where Mol argues that reality is multiple and not a singular object that can be described from different positions or situations in terms of one singular reality [44]. To perceive how this multiplicity is played out, Mol relies on the performance metaphor, showing how reality is created in several coexisting versions. Between these versions of reality, ongoing negotiations take place that Mol defines as a political ontology.

Building on Mol’s notion of a political ontology, Hartzmann claims that the politics of ontology during a staged event is, in Fischer-Lichte’s terms, extraordinary rather than ordinary. Hartzmann then proposes that modern scenic ontology primarily has considered the stage along a vertical axis between heaven and hell, conscious and unconscious, and dream and objective reality. From Mol, Hartzmann collects the idea that a horizontal axis intersects the vertical axis, suggesting coexisting versions of stage reality rather than singular objective reality as the one solid reference point.

Consistent with ontological reasoning in general, Hartzmann also discusses the actor’s being on stage, which is where my main attention lies. The ontology of being refers to the relationship between the human being and the world; on the stage, this refers to the relationship between the actor and world outside him or her. From the beginning of theatre history until postmodern theatre and acting, the actor has been perceived as in the world on stage, just like the human being is assumed to be in the real world. What Hartzmann evokes is that the actor’s being (corresponding to the audience being and seeing) on stage oscillates between at least three coexisting versions of being in relation to the world. Actors, as well as all human beings, are oscillating between being in, of, and with the world at the same time. Being of the world is an understanding collected from Merleau-Ponty, drawing on his notion of “inhabiting space”, whereas being with the world is an understanding collected from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, drawing on their notion of “becoming” [45]. To be acting of the world, consistent with Merleau-Ponty’s concept of “inhabiting space”, refers to the idea that an actor’s body and the world are fundamentally interwoven, and that he or she must use their senses to find their way to necessary understandings about, for example, a character, a stage set, or a co-actor [46]. To be acting with the world refers to the idea that there is no dividing line between the human being and the world, only a flow of connections in constant change and
transformation [47]. Moving between realities and the being in, of and with the world, that is, performativity, is the coming together of all this. Performativity rises from an actor or a group of actors managing to balance all of this at the same time in a distinct way [48].

Hartzmann writes that although Fischer-Lichte built her idea of the ordinary as extraordinary on the oscillation between perceptual orders as framed by the feedback loop and founded on the lived body’s experiential capacity, the idea itself does not fully reveal the ontological multiplicity of the process. In shifting from perceptual orders to scenic ontology, Hartzmann attempts to capture the multiple playings, deemed the extraordinary politics of scenic ontology, that are happening all at once during a staged event [49]. This multiple playing combines the insights from both Mol and Fischer-Lichte and stems from the fact that in the theatre, there is an additional line of playing going on beside between versions of reality and versions of being, that is, the playing between facticity, or the material bodies and objects and the fictive drama [50] [51].

In accordance with the ontological model developed by Hartzmann, I want to put forward the idea of an MMA fighter oscillating between being in, of, and with the fighting world on stage. More precisely, I am suggesting that how well a fighter performs will depend just as much on the balance he or she manages to strike between these three beings as on the violence he or she inflicts on an opponent. That is, the distinctly performative aspects of MMA fighting are just as important as the violence itself and a fighter’s dependence on striking a performatively [52] balance takes on the function of a self-regulating system vis-à-vis safety. With this in mind, I suggest that it is worthwhile to start talking about combat ontology [53] as a new concept. And just as “Gregg” explains: “MMA is connected to all forms of martial arts, it has been around forever, it’s just the name that is new.”

Conclusions

I want to stress that combat ontology, as taken from the point of view of posthumanist theory, offers a conceptual understanding of embodiment and situated knowledge that reveals a different MMA reality.

The point is not that the various theoretical ontological model inputs are compatible in every aspect, but rather that, in an ontological combination where they are thought of as different coexisting versions of being and reality, the inputs compliment each other. Analysis of MMA in reference to the constant political negotiations going on within combat, sports, and science, for example, whether further control and safety regulations should be passed, emphasizes that the performativity of fighting ontology is the kind of knowledge that could potentially alter the narrow focus on the violence only. Furthermore, as a kind of measurement of the violent exposure allowed, MMA already is an indicator of how to perceive sports violence. In view of the fact that the new conceptual understanding needs to be theorized further, communication with scientific scholars and MMA practitioners alike is needed.

The posthuman understanding of modern combat sports through the example of MMA shows that the phenomena of fighting cultures rest not only on violence, but also on performativity. MMA is a combat engagement where the violent body exposure is more
than just a self-destructive activity reduced to self-serving singularities. Refocusing on MMA fighting and bodies can reveal how the sport rests on a performance that has more to it than the appearance of brute aggressiveness.

The force of MMA actions involves a great deal of bodily intimacy and reciprocal exchange that can be described as dyadic. However, these forceful actions must strike a performative balance in, of and with the combat world to be effective. Posthumanly stated, performativity is what it takes to perform violence in a safe way.

Is the Pankration legacy, then, also about something more than the appearance of a brutal fight between two unarmed combatants, a similarity measured in violence? Rather than a certain type of violence, the legacy of Pankration consists of the importance of performativity, that is, the extraordinary politics of combat ontology. Following the talks with my informants, it becomes obvious that fighters regard MMA as a natural follower of an already extant martial art sport.

References


**Further reading**


Photo 1.

Fig 1. Professional MMA-Fighters in the mixed martial arts club at the fieldwork location in northern part of Sweden, Umea. The picture features trained UFC-fighters (Ultimate Fighter Organization) sparring during the advance class session on a Tuesday evening fight pass. Photo: Magnus Stenius 2012 during ethnographic observations in combat arts.