The Body in Pain and Pleasure
An Ethnography of Mixed Martial Arts

Magnus Stenius

Akademisk avhandling

som med vederbörligt tillstånd av Rektor vid Umeå universitet för avläggande av filosofie doktorsexamen framläggs till offentligt förvar i Hörsal G, Humanisthuset,
fredagen den 25 september, kl. 10:00.
Avhandlingen kommer att förvaras på svenska.

Fakultetsopponent: Professor emeritus i etnologi, Orvar Löfgren,
Institutionen för kulturvetenskaper/Lunds Universitet, Lund, Sverige.
Abstract
Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) is a sport on the rise within the field of martial arts in which competitors fight in a cage and utilize full-contact movements using their fists, elbows, and knees as well as kicks, other strikes, and submission techniques to defeat their opponents. MMA has become a modern social movement in combat sports that has become globalized in a short time and is the fastest growing sport in the world.

MMA encompasses disciplines from various martial arts and Olympic sports such as boxing, kickboxing, karate, kempo, jiu-jitsu, Muay Thai, tae kwon do, wrestling, sambo, judo, etc. The rounds are five minutes in length and there are typically three rounds in a contest, unless it is a championship fight in which case the contest lasts five rounds.

The aim of this study is to analyze the bodily constructions and productions within the MMA culture and especially the constructed human violence associated with the sport. Based on autoethnographic participation in three Swedish MMA clubs, as well as shorter fieldwork case studies conducted in Hong Kong, Japan, Macau, Brazil, and the US, this thesis investigates the interrelationship between MMA, excitement, sensationalism, and the spectacular physical violence that stains the participants’ bodies.

Concepts taken from performance ethnography are applied to an analysis of what is reconstructed bodily. This is followed by an analysis that attempts to outline what body-violence means and how this understanding of the informants' bodies, as well as of the researcher's body-knowledge, reconstructs the definitions of MMA.

A phenomenological approach to the concept of fighting is also included in relation to the MMA landscape. Thus, I present how the body learns the cultural enactments in fighting and how these forces shape the fighters' gender, habitus, and way of resisting the discourse of critical opinions on MMA practice.

Moreover, in trying to grasp the inner sense of MMA, I argue that the physical phenomenon of MMA is dependent on an intersubjective engagement and on the control of one's inner coordination, which teaches a fighter how to deal with power, pain, suffering, aggression, and adrenaline flows.

Keywords
abject, adrenaline, anthropology, athletes, autoethnography, body, combat arts, culture, desire, embodied, enculturation, ethnology, fieldwork, field-making, flow, fighting, full-contact, gender, harm, homosociality, intercultural, interobject, intersubjectivity, martial arts, materiality, masculinity, MMA, method, pain, personal, performance, performativity, phenomenology, pleasure, posthuman, postmodern, power, ritual, risk-taking, rush, self-reflexive, sportive, sport, stained, struggle, suffering, thrill, UFC, violence.