

BOOK REVIEW

The Somatic Joys of Kicking

Benjamin N. Judkins

Paul Bowman, *Mythologies of Martial Arts* (London and New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).

Paul Bowman's latest book sets a new standard for exploring the cultural, sociological and ideological criticism of the martial arts within modern society, posing two crucial questions. First, what is 'Martial Arts Studies'? Secondly, what does it have to do with Roland Barthes?

While such questions may, at first, sound trivial (the relevance of Barthes' *Mythologies* [1957] seems obvious), they are at the heart of Bowman's current project. Martial Arts Studies can be described as a new interdisciplinary research area that engages with cultural, historical, sociological and media studies arguments (among others) examining the origins, function and social significance of these fighting systems. While Martial Arts Studies has made great progress in recent years, gaining the institutional respectability that comes from the creation of journals, a book series, international conferences, the awarding of grants, and publications with prestigious university presses, the entire field remains, in Bowman's judgement, 'pre-paradigmatic' (p. 118). Students have yet to come to agreement on the types of questions that are the most interesting, let alone how researchers should approach them.

In 2015 Bowman outlined why scholars should consider the possibilities of creating an interdisciplinary field, rather than continuing the project through more traditional disciplines lines, in *Martial Arts Studies: Disrupting Disciplinary Boundaries*.¹ That volume produced a focused theoretical discussion of what such a field might look like. In his second book in as many years, Bowman turns his attention to addressing the pre-paradigmatic nature of this project. While the present volume does not attempt to present a hegemonizing view of the field (on the contrary it

references and engages with work from a surprisingly broad range of conceptual orientations), it very strongly argues that critical theory can and will make important contributions to this endeavor. Bowman's strongest efforts in this area often take the form of cautionary discussions regarding the sorts of de-mythologizing efforts that have previously characterized this literature. It is not enough to ask whether an assertion is true or a myth; we must go on to wrestle with what that type of 'knowledge' does. What are the cultural and social implications of not just the martial arts themselves, but the many types of discussions, debates and engagements that surround them?

This brings us to our second question. What does Roland Barthes have to do with this larger project? Bowman asserts that Barthes has always been at the heart of Martial Arts Studies, even if he, and a good many modern researchers (even some of those approaching the topic from a critical theory perspective) may not have realized it. While the discussions of Barthes' contributions are the most explicit at the beginning and end of this volume (see Chapters 1, 10 and 11), his shadow looms large over the entire book. One can sense his hand not just in Bowman's persistent focus on the ways in which the doubled meanings of symbols are used to diffuse or hide sources of social tension (always in *seemingly* apolitical ways) that might otherwise lead to conflict, but even in the physical organization of the volume itself.

This homage starts quite self-consciously in the first chapter where Bowman turns to Barthes' memorable discussion of 'real wrestling', by which he meant the sorts of staged professional spectacles popular in France at the time. He famously demonstrated that these seemingly plebeian displays were rich in symbols (or mythologies) that were not just intelligible, but were in many ways equal to those found in the era's high culture. It was this foundational insight that helped to unleash a flood of interest in the interpretation of popular culture, contributing in time to the creation of the discipline of Cultural Studies. Barthes paved the way for many of the questions that are now being asked about the social meaning of hand combat systems in the modern world. In that sense, he is ensconced within the 'DNA' of Martial Arts Studies.

Bowman begins his attempt to replicate this act of origination by asking what Barthes allowed to pass unsaid and unexamined regarding Judo, one of the two foils he used to come to grips with 'real' (fake) wrestling. We can also see Bowman pushing back against empiricist understandings of the

field when he takes issue with ongoing attempts to formulate definitions of the traditional martial arts. Bowman argues that such efforts are doomed from the start as these cultural institutions are always more than mere fighting systems. Their ‘supplements’ are too rich, and they touch on too many constantly shifting types of identity and meaning to be easily pinned down.²

So how does Bowman understand Barthes, and what vision of his work does he attempt to advance in his own creative quest? There are many ‘Bartheses’, but the Barthes of *Mythologies* is well known and, today, generally liked. His is the insight that myth can be understood as motivated signification, and his memory is directly invoked in the very title of this volume. But there are more troubling versions, such as the Barthes that told of ‘The Death of the Author’, who advanced a deconstructive theory of politics. In Bowman’s work we see both the semiotic and the deconstructive Barthes working side by side, though the latter is often found in implied partnership with Derrida, Foucault and Hall. But is Barthes (and a conceptual framework rooted in the 1950s) up for the task of structuring a newly emerging academic field today? Bowman addresses this question only in the last few pages of the volume. The fact that such a central issue might still be gnawing at readers speaks to what may be one of the few weaknesses of this volume.

While there is some conceptual development between chapters, in truth this volume can just as easily be treated as a collection of short, engaging and surprisingly accessible essays. It will surely find a place on many syllabi, and will reach a wide variety of readers, precisely because it touches briefly on so many topics – from martial arts humor to the somatic joys of kicking and the weirdness of weapons training – in compelling ways. This work is clearly Bowman’s most accessible statement on Martial Arts Studies to date. Yet readers of these essays will note that Bowman, while providing them with a new analytical lens, always leaves them with many more questions for future consideration than answers.

There is a certain wisdom in leaving it to the reader to apply these frameworks for themselves. *Mythologies of Martial Arts* might be the monograph that launches a thousand doctoral dissertations as students across a variety of disciplines and intellectual traditions take up the questions strung throughout. Yet there is also wisdom in the advice to ‘show, don’t

tell', particularly when asserting a very specific point, such as the value of Barthes in the current scholarly environment.

I felt this frustration most acutely in Bowman's penultimate chapter dealing with the paradoxes of weapons training in the modern martial arts. Bowman's theoretical background and his personal experience in the Filipino martial arts indicate that he would be the ideal person to go beyond suggesting a framework that might be useful. Ultimately what is needed is an exhaustive discussion demonstrating to the reader the rich insights that Barthes can generate when applied in a finely grained discussion of a specific martial art tradition and its cultural representations in the current era.

Rather than wrestling with the value of Barthes on the last few pages, another formulation of this project might have put that question squarely in the introduction and attempted to demonstrate, rather than to suggest, his value throughout. Still, such a book would have been very different in tone, character and accessibility than the one that readers received. If Bowman's many questions succeed in sparking the enthusiasm of a new generation of researchers, his argument that Barthes resides within the DNA of this emerging field will soon be recognized as a manifest reality.

Notes

¹ Paul Bowman, *Martial Arts Studies: Disrupting Disciplinary Boundaries* (London and New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).

² Bowman, *Mythologies of Martial Arts*, pp. xvi-xix, 120-22; see also Paul Bowman, 'The Definition of Martial Arts Studies', *Martial Arts Studies*, 3 (2017), 6-23.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Benjamin N. Judkins holds a doctoral degree in political science from Columbia University, taught at the University of Utah and is a visiting scholar at the Cornell East Asia Program. He is the co-editor of the interdisciplinary journal *Martial Arts Studies* and the co-author of *The Creation of Wing Chun: A Social History of the Southern Chinese Martial Arts* (SUNY, 2015). He is also the author of the long-running martial arts studies blog *Kung Fu Tea: Martial Arts History, Wing Chun and Chinese Martial Studies*.

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