

Genre and Film Markets: Is The Matrix a Martial Arts Film?

**Implications of Orientalism and Racism In the
Modern Hollywood Martial Arts Film Cycle**

JD Pirtle | 2006

In the 1999 Hollywood blockbuster, *The Matrix*, the main character “Neo” encounters a mythic revolutionary leader who teaches him martial and combative arts. Neo then goes on to learn that he is prisoner in a cruel world, and wages war against his captors. He finds a master who vows to enlighten him so that he may fulfill his destiny and defeat their mutual enemy.

The above description would understandably lead many readers who were previously unaware of *The Matrix* to conclude that it was a film that would easily find a home in the Martial Arts film genre. Though these structures comprise a large majority of the film’s content, *The Matrix* is widely regarded as an Action/Sci-Fi Thriller. Other popular genre classifications for this film are Future Noir, Cyber Thriller and Tech Noir (IMDb). This strange contradiction begs several questions: Why is study in the martial arts film genre so difficult? Why is *The Matrix* regarded as a Martial Arts film solely on a referential level? What role have studios, critics and audiences had in defining the genre?

Martial Arts film genre studies are difficult due to pervasive racism and Orientalism in the way that many of the films are created, promoted and criticized, both historically and currently. This dynamic stems from a negative mythology surrounding martial arts in the United States and a tradition of the defamation of Asians and Asian Americans in popular media. *The Matrix* would most likely be considered a Martial Arts/Sci-Fi/Action Thriller if it had been produced by a Chinese film studio, featured an all-Asian cast and was marketed using conventional techniques to a Western audience. Centuries of the negative portrayal of Asians and Asian Americans in text and decades of equal treatment in cinema and television make many types of genre study impossible. To mitigate this situation, the genre theorist must engage each Martial Arts film from a semantic/syntactic approach, using a pragmatic technique to examine the film on a discursive level and bridge the gap between the two. Therefore, Rick Altman’s semantic/syntactic/pragmatic approach, as described in *Film/Genre*, is the most ideal for use in martial arts genre study, but it is not enough. The genre theorist must also utilize history, psychology and sociology to properly examine the martial arts film genre. In other words, the genre theorist must subject each martial arts film to macroscopic and microscopic scrutiny simultaneously, dissecting the minutiae that comprise the film while understanding the broader sociological and historical contexts in which the film exists.

Historically the term Orientalism has been used to describe qualities or styles related to people or cultures of west, east and central Asia (Wikipedia). Since the 1978 publication of the controversial work *Orientalism*, by Edward Said, the term has been used to describe the way in

which certain Asian and Middle Eastern cultures, races and creeds have been negatively or stereotypically portrayed. One of the most fundamental points Said purports in *Orientalism* is that all cultural discourse is inherently ideological (133). If this is true then what approach to martial arts genre study is most effective in the presence of such capacious ideology? One cannot simply disregard theoretical and historical meaning in martial arts genre studies.

Orientalism can also describe artistic affectations that have been identified as being derived from west, east and central Asia, and in some cases, the Middle East. *The Matrix* is a fine example of modern Orientalism in Hollywood. Mainstream use of styles loosely modeled on motifs borrowed from west, east and central Asia is more common in modern Hollywood than in any other era. Though literal negative stereotyping is broadly frowned upon in the current Hollywood political climate, the superimposition of Asian culture and styles can be seen in box office performers such as *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace* and *Kill Bill: Volumes I and II*. While these styles and affectations are enormously popular, Asian and Asian American actors enjoy few leading roles in modern Hollywood production. This dichotomy is a large component of modern Orientalism and of the complex problem facing critics and theorists when approaching the Martial Arts genre.

As long as audiences and critics alike regularly took the practice of use-as-directed to imply use-as-planned, we needed to be reminded of the difference between the two (Altman, 214).

To understand the myriad reasons films such as *The Matrix* are so perceived by Western audiences, we must first briefly examine the state of Hollywood and Chinese martial arts film cycles. At best, films produced in Hollywood have portrayed Asians and Asian Americans as an innocuous race of hard working people who occupy a necessary niche in the American industrial complex. At worst, Asians and Asian Americans have been derided through racism and negative stereotyping in hundreds of popular films. Therefore, Western audience perception has been shaped irrevocably by decades of such treatment. In many Hollywood martial arts films, the martial artist is a mystical guru and disciplined practitioner of an exotic art that enables him to engage in effective vigilantism, furthering the popular Hollywood ideology of “one man versus many.”

In the Hong Kong martial arts film cycles, though many of the film plots are equally formulaic, there is little or no negative portrayal of Asians. Golden Harvest, the extremely

influential Shaw Brothers production company, enjoyed great autonomy and creative freedom in film production. Unlike their Hollywood counterparts, The Shaw Brothers employed vertical integration to much success in the production of their films, thus dramatically decreasing costs and enjoying greater control over content (Thompson/Bordwell, 776.) Lacking rigid censorship, the Shaw brothers were able to explore new genres and create new cycles to satisfy the ravenous Hong Kong audiences (Thompson/Bordwell, 778.) The innovative producer Tsui Hark mixed New Hollywood techniques (e.g. wire work, intense special effects) and martial arts to create what has been termed the “supernatural kung fu” genre, further leading to the perception of martial arts films as unrealistic (Thompson/Bordwell, 777.)

Another major factor in the current state of the Hollywood martial arts cycle is the relationship between the audience’s ritual values and the ideology of modern Hollywood. Asians and Asian Americans now enjoy freedom from racist organizations such as the Asiatic Exclusion League, which attempted to prevent immigration by Asian peoples into the United States and parts of Canada in the early twentieth century. Similarly, though the rampant bigotry that was seen in many twentieth century films is no longer accepted or popular with American mainstream cinema, the effect on audience perceptions and expectations remain. The power of film is such that years of negative portrayal of Asians and Asian Americans has left many artifacts in the audience’s collective psyche. The power of film works in two distinct ways, individually and demographically—large demographics have directly led to the enormous power many Hollywood studios enjoy (McGinn, 197.) The mammoth power of film studios in America has been consolidated in part due to the fact that the mass appeal of films is intensely cross-cultural. This wide appeal coupled with cinema’s power to reinforce prevailing ideologies (e.g. that Asians and Asian Americans are servants or martial arts masters) leaves an indelible imprint on the subconscious minds of the audience (McGinn, 198.) Though Hollywood is not simply a monstrous audience-manipulator or a reflection of audience demands (Altman, appendix, 2), films change perception and reflect audience wants and expectations (McGinn, 201.) Therefore, major American motion picture companies are wary of promoting any film as a pure martial arts movie in an attempt to attract a wider audience.

In *Rush Hour* (1998), Jackie Chan’s character is focused, disciplined and in possession of secret knowledge that is slowly revealed throughout the duration of the film. Chris Tucker, who portrays a bumbling cop duped into escorting Jackie Chan’s character around Los Angeles, assumes that his charge is a moron: uninitiated in American culture and language. As the film

progresses, Tucker's character is positively changed through his contact with the character portrayed by Chan, whose arc transitions from a foreign straight man enabling Tucker to educate/mock him regarding all things Western into a wise teacher with incredible depth.

One may account for the significant variations in how martial arts films are perceived due to differences in advertising techniques used to promote films to Eastern and Western audiences. Before Bruce Lee thrilled American audiences in the television crime series *The Green Hornet*, roles for Asians in films were strictly bit parts and menial roles, such as that of a servant (Roensch, 32). Though Lee's breakthrough film was entitled *The Big Boss* (1971) when it was released in Hong Kong, it was released in the United States under the title *Fists of Fury* with the description "Karate Kung Fu...The Oriental sensation--Now gives America the action it's been waiting for! Every limb of his body is a lethal weapon in *Fists of Fury*" (Roensch, 42). For marketing purposes, action and violence were seen as the most effective tools when promoting to Western audiences. Similarly, his next film was released in Hong Kong under the title "Fist of Fury" and released in the United States as "The Chinese Connection" with the description, "Unstoppable! Unbelievable! Unbeatable! Bruce Lee: The Master Of Karate/Kung Fu Is Back To Smash You Up, Break You Down And Kick You Apart" (Roensch, 43). Notice no distinction is made in either description between the vastly different arts of Japanese *Karate* and Chinese *Kung Fu*, and that the prominent feature marketed to Western audiences is the presence of "in your face" violence (Roensch, pp. 33-34).

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (2000), directed by Ang Lee, was released to Western audiences to wide acclaim and won numerous awards, among them four Oscars. Despite the popularity of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, reviews indicate that many Western viewers found certain aspects to detract from believability, such as the copious use of Hollywood-style wirework (IMDb). Again, this film is considered an Action/Adventure/Drama/Fantasy (IMDb), though many classical aspects of martial arts films are present (e.g. the paradigm of master-student, a mythical quest for an ideal embodied by the Sword of Green Destiny, revenge and unrequited love.) Of all of the films discussed in this paper, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* contains every element expected from a modern martial arts movie, yet it was never marketed as such and many still argue that it is a Fantasy/Romance with incidental martial arts content.

A similar situation can be found in *House of Flying Daggers* (2004). Though an enormous amount of this film includes martial arts combat, it is classified as Action/Adventure/Drama/Fantasy (IMDb). The plot is a typical love triangle that involves two

policemen, Leo and Jin, and their investigation of/love for Mei, a member of The House of Flying Daggers, posing as a dancer. Using broad genre classification enables the studio to draw fans of martial arts “Action” and those who might find appeal in the other genre classifications “Adventure/Drama/Fantasy.”

In *Kill Bill: Volumes I* (2003) and *II* (2004), we see a predominately Caucasian cast of murderous martial artists amidst a backdrop of concepts and images borrowed from many famous martial arts films. These films are categorized as Action/Crime/Drama/Thriller despite the presence of many, if not all, of the classical components of martial arts films (IMDb). Why, with the mainly Caucasian cast and director, are these films simply stamped as “Action” with no reference to the enormous amount of martial arts content? This is a perfect example of the presence of Orientalist and racist artifacts that pervade Hollywood practice and audience ideology. To present a new martial arts film marketed to Western audiences is to commit advertising suicide: due to ever-present stereotypes in audience ideology, the martial arts label narrows a film’s appeal to such an extreme that studios refuse to label them as such. Modern films that contain a large percentage of martial arts elements must be labeled “Action” or “Adventure” or even “Romance,” but never “Martial Arts” in order to be accepted by American audiences.

A clear example of discrepancies in how films are marketed and released to Western and Eastern audiences can be found in the 2002 film *Hero*. Originally released in Asia in 2002 with much success, the film was released to American audiences in 2004. The plot of this film follows three assassins and the king who fears them, utilizing flashbacks to tell the story. For Western release, certain details of the plot were obscured during script translation for English-speaking audiences. In *Hero*, the King of Qin fears assassination, and those who would prevent his assassination do so because he has the power to finally unite all Chinese lands into one kingdom. The word used in the film to describe this is *tianxia*, which translates as “all under heaven,” referring to the fact that all of China belongs to the king. The English subtitles in the film, however, translate this term as “our land,” to better suit Western audiences (Wikipedia.) According to University of Washington Cinema Studies instructor, Wang Zhuoyi, “this ideal makes the idea to let the king do more killings to unite China much easier for the audience here (America) to accept.”

Hollywood does not simply lend its voice to the public’s desires, nor does it simply manipulate the

audience (Altman, appendix, 6).

In the conclusion of *Film/Genre*, Altman suggests that a new approach to genre studies must be employed that unites semantic, syntactic and pragmatic genre study techniques into a hybrid approach in an attempt to mitigate the weaknesses of each method and find a unified theory of genre studies. Altman suggests that the problem with each approach is finding the border between each approach and compartmentalizing each (Altman, appendix, pp. 13-15). Each of the three methods are useful when examining a particular situation, yet each falls short when one attempts to examine the greater context and meaning of particular structures. For example, the semantic syntactic approach may function extremely well when analyzing isolated aspects in any given film, but fails to provide theoretical and historical understanding (Altman, 207). In other words, one may take a frame or a scene from *The Matrix* and subject it to scholarly scrutiny using the semantic/syntactic approach and find aspects that would argue for or against it belonging to a certain genre or cycle, but that approach will not shed light on the broader implications and effects of this film on the pragmatic level. It is not possible to explain why a film like *The Matrix* is classified and promoted as Action/Sci-Fi Thriller (IMDb), or which specific trends and policies in the Hollywood martial arts film cycle are responsible. Conversely, it is difficult to isolate and explain specific aspects of a film employing a solely pragmatic approach.

Cycles and genres, nomads and civilizations, raids and institutions, poachers and owners—all are part of the ongoing remapping process that alternately energizes and fixes human perception (Altman, 212).

The current state of the Hollywood martial arts film cycle is a product of the American perception of martial arts, which stems from conventional Western ideas of Asia, Asians and Asian Americans as an exotic enemy that is perfectly acceptable when placed in the proper context (e.g. in the role of servant, chauffeur or martial arts master). From this complex relationship flow many of the problems involved with martial arts film genre studies.

I therefore postulate that Altman's syntactic/semantic/pragmatic approach, coupled with a strong understanding of the history of the larger context from which the genre is spawned and continually renewed, is the only accurate way to understand the broader, discursive nature of the Martial Arts genre. In the conclusion to *Film/Genre*, Altman states that the

syntactic/semantic/pragmatic approach entails four important qualities (Altman, 214):

•*Addresses the fact that every text has multiple users*: Martial arts films, though often relegated to a small corner of the larger Action genre, enjoy wide and diverse use throughout the world. A majority of modern martial arts films are made outside of the current Hollywood martial arts film cycle, recent high-grossing films, such as *Kung Fu Hustle* (2004), have been very successful in the United States.

•*Considers why different users develop different readings*: different users perceive Genre differently. With the acceleration of digital technology and the proliferation of the World Wide Web, martial arts films now enjoy a larger audience than ever before. Audiences throughout the world perceive martial arts films and their content in diverse and conflicting ways, just as American audiences do. Each user's perception of a certain film is the product of personal and societal distillation of ideologies related to the film and its contents, and this perception is as diverse and complex as each individual.

•*Theorizes the relationship among users*: It can not be overstated that the nature of genre perception is a direct product of the users that engage in them, and the sum of their experiences viewing films and processing their content and the broader aspects therein. The effects of a worldwide audience communicating through dynamic forums implied by the Internet means greater and greater discourse between users in widely different settings.

•*Actively considers the effects of multiple conflicting uses on the production, labeling, and display of films and genres alike*: As greater and greater numbers of users choose alternatives to traditional theatrical film viewing, film use will become more and more competitive. The nature of this competition will undoubtedly result in widening diversity in film use and the conflicts surrounding their production, labeling, and display.

In the appendix of *Film/Genre*, Altman includes a brief conversation between two critics in which it is implied that the presence of Elvis Presley in a musical contradicts a film's status as a musical (Altman, appendix, 7). The implication is that despite the presence of diegetic music related to the narrative, an Elvis Presley musical is not a musical at all. This is an excellent

example of the duality of film perception. A film starring Fred Astaire with diegetic music related to the narrative is indeed a musical, whereas a film with similar content starring Elvis Presley cannot be a musical. The parallel to this phenomenon in the martial arts genre is the enormous number of films that contain acknowledged elements of a martial arts film (e.g. the paradigm of master-student, revenge and unrequited love), yet are not considered martial arts films. Whether this is due to the fact that these films are set in the future rather than the past, include a cast of mainly Caucasian actors or contain aspects of other genres (e.g. Sci-Fi), the overall effect of this way of thinking is that many films that belong in the martial arts genre are labeled as “Action.”

Another example from the appendix of *Film/Genre* is Jean Mitry’s conception of a Western as a “film whose action, situated in the American West, is consistent with the atmosphere, the values, and the conditions of the existence of the Far West between 1840 and 1900” (Mitry, pp. 12-13). Altman then outlines Marc Vernet’s semantic model of a Western. Vernet claims the atmosphere of a Western is made up of basic elements (“earth, dust, water and leather”), has archetypal characters (“the tough/soft cowboy, the lonely sheriff, the faithful or treacherous Indian, the strong but tender woman”), and employs certain technical elements (“use of fast tracking and crane shots”) (Altman, appendix, 10). One can easily trace a connection between these two conceptions of a Western and present-day critical perceptions about martial arts films.

Using Mitry’s conception to describe the dynamic that exists today in the perception of the martial arts film genre, it could be said that American audiences and critics expect a martial arts film to occur in pre-1900 Asia, with Asian Actors, speaking any Asian language, using period martial arts weapons.

Superimposing expected martial arts content on Vernet’s semantic model, we could say that a martial arts film must have basic elements (an exotic land, Asian architecture styles, blood, hand weapons), employ typical characters (master, novice, the evil emperor, a woman made unattainable by social taboo), and contain expected technical elements (wide-angle setups and use of special effects, especially wirework, to portray supernatural physical ability).

The myth of the American West and its relationship to the Hollywood Western is an accurate analogue to the Americanized myth of Asia, Asians and Asian Americans and its relationship to the modern Hollywood Martial Arts film. Just as the American West was mythologized to serve a broader psychological and sociological dilemma, vis-à-vis public acceptance of “Manifest Destiny” and the implications of American colonialism and imperialism,

so has Asia been mythologized in order to perpetuate the paradigm of the “exotic enemy.”

I strongly agree with Rick Altman’s syntactic/semantic/pragmatic approach, with the caveat that one must also employ this approach with a theoretical historical and sociological view. The state of the current Martial Arts film cycle is the result of millions of complex factors that span multiple disciplines and cannot be viewed in cross-section. The weaknesses of Altman’s syntactic/semantic approach are similar to the struggle in modern theoretical physics. The goal of modern physicists is to develop a “Unified Theory of Everything,” as Stephen Hawking calls it, to obtain a complete view of the physical world, rather than one based on individual theories that isolate certain phenomena and cannot explain others. If one aspect of the syntactic/semantic/pragmatic approach is used separately of the others, its descriptive and explanative powers are nullified.

Altman’s hybrid approach is a step toward a unified theory and understanding of genre. There are hundreds of disciplines outside of cinema genre studies that could each provide a piece of the larger puzzle that describes genre. Genre theorists and film critics can no longer employ a cloistered methodology when engaging in research; they must weave together a complex and diverse body of evidence before accurately categorizing a film. Genre theorists and film critics must also accept the reality that genre is a living entity that must inevitably evolve and devolve, and stand ready to incorporate these changes into their work.

Genre is a distillation of society and so-called civilization. It is a reflection of our values. The process that created and perpetuates the non-existence of Hollywood Martial Arts films cannot be attributed solely to one individual or group. Even powerful and vastly influential Hollywood companies that enjoy great hegemony in the world of cinema cannot be held entirely responsible for the state of the Martial Arts film genre.

As long as film studios perpetuate the practice of commonly including Asian style and elements and broadly excluding Asians and Asian American actors simultaneously, Orientalism will continue in much the same way as it did in the United States and in Europe during the Victorian era. Orientalism is a negative phenomenon that is rarely discussed in public forums. Edward Said was widely criticized for the views he expressed in *Orientalism*, yet modern theoreticians observe a continuing and worsening phenomena. Ziauddin Sardar, in his recent work, also entitled *Orientalism*, describes the current perception of Asians and Asians Americans in Hollywood cinema: “the ferociously evil oriental, who first appeared on the silver screen with the birth of the cinema, remains consistent, indeed has found a new lease of life exactly at the

point where standard Westerns became politically problematic..." (Sardar, pp. 95-96). If Sardar is correct, must the Martial Arts genre face a future of Orientalism and racism with no end in sight? Hollywood Westerns, though their popularity has waned, still arrive in theatres year after year with much the same content they always had. Though the "treacherous Indian" is more often the "Noble Savage" first envisaged by popular writers like James Fenimore Cooper, the structure of the Hollywood Western is seemingly immortal.

Many see the shift of Orientalism in Hollywood films from Asia, Asian Americans and Asians to the Muslim Middle-East. In his 1997 book *A Whole New (Disney) World Order: Aladdin, Atomic Power, and the Muslim Middle-East*, Alan Nadel describes the Middle-Eastern Muslim portrayed by characters such as Disney's *Aladdin* as "alternately a metaphor for American culture, a critique of the Muslim Middle-East, or the nominal setting for an American stage musical. It is the source of dissimulation, and/or the object of it, the origin of misrepresentation and/or the victim, the world to be escaped or to be redeemed" (Nadel, 194). If this shift is occurring, what effect will it have on the state of Orientalism in modern Hollywood? It is clear that the probability that this shift of focus will not improve aspects of the portrayal of Asians and Asian Americans in Hollywood cinema, but this shift and the deepening of the complexity of Orientalism and racism as it relates to genre studies means that genre theorists and critics must employ a discursive technique to sift through the infinite details and perceptions that accompany a societal phenomenon of this kind.

Rick Altman's syntactic/semantic/pragmatic technique in concert with interdisciplinary studies of social, psychological and historical implications gives us the qualities of both microscopic and macroscopic views of genre. It is an excellent beginning because it attempts to address the complexity of global genre, and acknowledges the impact of the competitive use of genre by billions of unique individuals.

Bibliography

Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: British Film Institute).

Colin McGinn, *The Power Of Movies: How Screen And Mind Interact* (New York: Random House, 2002).

Jean Mitry, *Dictionnaire du cinema* (Paris: Albatros, 1976), pp. 111-112.

Alan Nadel, *A Whole New (Disney) World Order: Aladdin, Atomic Power, And The Muslim Middle East* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

Greg Roensch, *Bruce Lee* (New York: Rosen Publishing Group, 2002).

Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Random House Group, 1978).

Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction* (New York: McGraw-Hill: University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1994).

Ziauddin Sardar, *Orientalism* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2000), pp. 95-96.

Wikipedia. <<http://wikipedia.org/>>

Internet Movie Database. <imdb.org>