

# CELLULOID KATAS

## MARTIAL ARTS IN THE MOVIES

### ~ A PRACTITIONER'S PREJUDICES

JAMES GRADY



"Karate is a form of martial arts in which people who have had years and years of training can, using only their hands and feet, make some of the worst movies in the history of the world."

~Dave Barry

"For most Americans, experience and knowledge concerning the martial arts is obtained passively. The ideas of such 'armchair martial artists' are shaped by movie and television portrayals."

~John Donohue, 1994:114-115



Stumble into a video store in America and most likely you'll bump into a section hawking "martial arts" movies.<sup>1</sup> What that phenomenon means in terms of both the martial arts and movies is a question that needs clarification more than an answer; undertaking either effort first requires a disclosure: For a working screen writer to criticize others' cinematic efforts veers close to a conflict of interest and *wanna be* armchair quarterbacking; for a feeble student of martial arts to pontificate about them borders on the absurd and the insulting. These are truths I admit — and have the gall to proceed anyway.

For "martial arts," I want to limit the discussion to the concept suitable for this journal — Asian martial arts. A number of stunning movies have been made about Western boxing — *Raging Bull*, *Requiem For A Heavyweight* — but to include them in this discussion requires a different author and more space than the *Journal of Asian Martial Arts* provides.

Similarly, I do not wish to discuss movies in which the characters' prowess is defined through weaponry. Once a protagonist employs technology, the boundary of our category blurs: *The Seven Samurai* sword fest slashes straight to its Western remake, *The Magnificent Seven*, where gun-fighter Steve McQueen's assertion that "We deal in lead . . ." echoes into Clint Eastwood's *Dirty Harry* cop with a hand cannon hissing, "Do you feel lucky, punk?" a question whose answer rockets to a cowboy hat waving, yee-hawing Slim Pickens riding a hydrogen bomb to its target in the movie *Dr. Strangelove*.

All of which leads to a crucial point: In our Anytown, America, video store, the only category defined by the protagonists' "prowess" is martial arts.<sup>2</sup> Excellent movies have been made about musicians and their music—*Amadeus*, *Bird*, *'Round Midnight* — but those movies are shelved under a "drama," not "musician" category.

THE BEST FIGHT SCENE MOMENTS FROM *BAD DAY AT BLACK ROCK*. THAT'S SPENCER TRACY DOING THE FLIP ON A BAR ROOM BULLY.

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With good reason. Movies tell stories, and stories are created by drama, the conflict and cohesiveness between characters. Drama uses an infinity of “means” to express such conflict-cohesiveness; thus, martial arts, endeavors centered on conflict, are gold for cinematic exploitation. The very term “motion pictures” explains another value of martial arts for screen writers and directors: “motion” — dynamic, devastating, ingenious motion — is endemic to martial arts and translates wonderfully through drama onto film and into entertainment. That entertainment may or may not qualify as “art,” but often it equals profit, and profit is the pulse of Hollywood.

Beyond such pocketbook practicalities, as Donohue noted in his seminal work, *Warrior Dreams*: “Americans from a broad spectrum find an attraction to the martial arts, precisely because, as art forms, they answer a variety of psychic needs” (1994:3). Such needs include lone, stoic heroism responding to an internal code rooted in either mentored tradition or noble philosophy, redemption gained through arduous education and experience, then ratified by confrontation — and victory. And it is American movies spawned by Hollywood that this essay focuses on, although the “genre” of martial arts movies is most exemplified by movies created in Hong Kong and other Asian cinema centers, products created from cultural imperatives too complex to be discussed here (Glaessner, 1974; Meyers et al, 1985; Dannen & Long, 1997).<sup>3</sup>

Those primarily Asian movies dominate the “martial arts” section of Anytown’s video store, and while they portray the concept of martial arts movies, they also exemplify the weakness of such a genre and the failings of movie makers.

Martial arts can be a fine *means* to dramatically effect the *end* (“end” as in “sum total”) of a good movie. But precisely because martial arts means are so “filmable,” so useable, they are often cinematically perverted, and the means becomes the end of a movie — and its demise as an interesting work of art.

Genre martial arts movies are often lazy exercises in choreography—carefully practiced scenes of “fighting” strung together with a plot perhaps beyond nonsense and cosmeticized by melodrama as opposed to drama. Commercial logistic skills rather than creative talent are necessary to make such movies: round up a cast of flexible bodies who won’t freeze up in front of a camera (acting ability is optional), some trampolines, nets and mats for flying kicks and long falls, some wires to help leaden mortals soar, fake blood; a good sound-effects post-production man, and a camera that can be over-cranked for slow motion shots; then pick sufficient words from the following menu to give you both your title and . . . *umm* . . . plot: *Dragon, Temple, Revenge, Fist, Shaolin, Heart, Death, Ninja, Warrior, Secret*, an animal that might have a wushu or gongfu style named for it, *Master, Tournament, Ultimate, Son/Daughter/Bride, Monk, Game, Fury*.

Instead of being a product of or tribute to martial arts, such movies are huckstering mockeries of martial arts. They are also the models for what the public thinks of when terms like “martial arts” and “movies” appear in the same breath — or on the same video shelf.

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Lest anyone doubt the effect of such movies on American culture, leave Anytown’s video store and watch the role-playing mayhem of a grade school playground during recess, where sloppy but stinging acted-out spinning, front and back kicks fly<sup>4</sup> or consider the scene I witnessed in my now-nine-years-old son’s taekwondo school. As an upper-belt children’s class gathered, a well-dressed mother showed up with her seven-year-old son in tow. She approached the school’s founder, John Holloway, a Pan American Games Heavyweight champion, a sixth-degree black belt and Vice President of the U.S. Taekwondo Union to ask about classes for her son:

He can do all that stuff you see in the movies, so you’ll probably just give him a black belt or whatever right away, I mean, he’s so into it. Every morning, he gets out of bed, pops in the video cassette for that movie *Bloodsport*, and does all the moves they do. By the way, he’s A.D.D. [attention deficit disorder]: do you think you can handle him?

After Holloway patiently explained how martial arts education works, how he’d taken two A.D.D. kids all the way to black belt, and gave her a packet of printed material, the woman and her son left — never to return.

Leave aside why anyone would let any seven-year-old child repeatedly watch a movie called *Bloodsport*, why a child would be encouraged to pop in a video first thing every morning even if he didn’t have A.D.D., and a picture of the nexus between martial arts movies and martial arts education is still all too clear.

The nexus between martial arts movies and “reality” becomes bizarre when considered on a global scale. Terms and concepts already mauled by movie makers are adopted, adapted and transformed yet again in a truly Frankensteinian fashion: according to the October 18, 1997, *Washington Post*, one of bands of “militiamen” battling for control in the Congo Republic called themselves “Ninjas” (other bands were Mambas, Koy-Koy, and Cobras). Perhaps those “militiamen” learned about ninjas from an extensive study of Japanese culture.

That distorted nexus shows up in Hollywood movie development, too, thus spinning the circle. I’ve been in TV- and movie-development meetings where producers or writers, groping to “build” a character, come up with “he’s like a ninja kung fu killer type guy.” Other writers have telephoned me for the “right” terms to describe the martial arts prowess and background of the characters they’re creating — with no understanding as to the effect on a person’s character such training could actually have. Actors who’ve come from a perceived martial arts background and/or once worked in such a movie can find themselves so rigidly stereotyped that, no matter what their talent, they must battle to convince “the system” to let them play characters who don’t know or who in scene after scene don’t use martial arts.<sup>5</sup> To show the exotic or action-based dramatic environment of the movie, directors often put a dozen gi-clad black belts in the background of a scene and have them break boards or practice techniques on each other as the hero walks past — for example, when James Bond visits the armorer Q to get his latest lethal gadgets.

When martial arts is portrayed in the standard action or genre movie, fantasy is too pretty a word. To bolster their “character” as tough or brave, or for less coherent reasons, characters stand still to accept repeated kicks and punches from supposedly highly conditioned and trained opponents. Superstar action heroes absorb three or four clean kicks to the head, then go on to defeat the villain. Even Muhammed Ali in his *When We Were Kings* battle with George Foreman did not accept that degree of punishment when he tricked Foreman into “punching himself out” so Ali could triumph. Movie fight scenes are “action packed” and trash the furniture, but until the “stop action” punch lands, almost no human damage materializes. Try falling down the stairs — no, try being *thrown* down the stairs, then getting up to fight. Anyone who’s spent a month with a competent martial arts teacher and who’s been attacked by a thug, when envisioning any future non-instructional violent encounter, *prays* to be able to deliver just one blow as *clean* as movie characters *routinely* absorb.

Another interesting cause-and-effect circle of martial arts and movies spins through American culture. What Americans are willing to learn, study and believe is related to what they see on the screen — and what they see on the screen is dictated by the demands of the motion picture medium. When writers and directors in the 40’s and 50’s discovered judo — an art that creates big and dramatic motion — *seoi-nage* (shoulder throw) and *tomoe-nage* (a falling-backwards, foot-in-the-opponent’s-stomach throw) became movie fight scene staples, so much so that I’ve heard more than one judo sensei describe *tomo-nage* as “the cowboy throw.” In the ’80’s and ’90’s, despite any realistic arguments to the contrary, kicks — especially high crescent or spinning kicks — became the movie martial artist’s technique of choice. Why? Because, as one producer explained to me, “A hand technique just moves too small and too fast for the camera to catch.”<sup>6</sup>

Thus, taekwondo and Northern Shaolin systems and techniques are more likely to be portrayed in movies — no matter what they’re called on screen — and, I conjecture, martial arts schools that *do not* emphasize kicking will have a hard time holding students. Judo and aikido may make great cinematic moments,<sup>7</sup> but, though those arts attract an American student body, they will never dominate the martial arts field, in part because they won’t “look real” to cinema-schooled consumers and in part because the first technique students of each art must learn is *falling*, a physically challenging and ego-deflating education.

There is a chance for improvement in Hollywood martial arts portrayals as more writers, directors, and producers (*not* more actors) who’ve studied martial arts assume Tinsel Town power.<sup>8</sup> What becomes of this chance . . . we’ll see it on our silver screens.

Given all this, what “good” then can be said about martial arts movies?

That first — and last — thing to say is that “good” comes not from martial arts movies, but martial arts used well in good movies.

The examples of that are sometimes “small” and often surprising.

With Donohue (1994:96-97), I would argue that history’s most commercially successful, entertaining and artistic movie influenced and perme-

ated by martial arts is . . . George Lucas’s *Star Wars* saga, the first three parts of which have raked in millions of global fans. The saga is imbued with a concept called “the force” — a martial and life- and health-enhancing power capable of being harnessed by judicious instruction and dedicated study, an entity that pervades the universe and all life. Such a description smacks of qi/ki and Dao with a dash of zen, concepts underlying many Asian martial arts.

Beyond the grand scale of *Star Wars* are a number of movies in which — if only for a few heartbeats — martial arts plays a key role and is portrayed in at least an entertaining, non-insulting fashion. The criteria for my boldly proffered list is simple: the quality of the movie, not the *wow*’s of the martial arts portrayed. I’m sad to say that filling the list sometimes meant stretching the definition of quality.

Before my list, two names must be dealt with, names that appear on martial arts video shelves but who also stand apart from the categorization: Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan.

Bruce Lee is the symbol of martial arts movies, and while none of his movies stand alone as even near great, they created — or were used to create — the very topic addressed here. Not that there aren’t good moments in any Bruce Lee film, for example, in *Enter The Dragon*, when he says of a martial arts dominated, evil cabal: “Why doesn’t somebody just pull out a .45 and end it?” he is asking the question that challenges the credibility of every martial arts picture. In that same movie, the sequence in which he stalks a foe through a maze of mirrors is as cinematically wonderful as the split screens pioneered by Elvis Presely in *Jailhouse Rock* (perhaps the only “good” movie starring that karate student). Whatever one thinks of Bruce Lee as a movie maker, actor or martial artist, he has become a larger-than-life cultural force. Ironically, the “best Bruce Lee movie” is not one he made, but rather one made about his life, and discussed below: *Dragon — The Bruce Lee Story*.

Jackie Chan is an artist — a movie artist, an innovator and cinematic risk taker akin to the genius Buster Keaton. While Chan’s movies may be too slapstick for action junkies or “serious” movie buffs, they dare to chase art as entertainment — a race in which he puts his life as well as his reputation on the line. Most importantly, Jackie Chan forces martial students to laugh at ourselves. For that alone, he’s worth the price of a ticket.

Western audience have been buying tickets to movies that expose them to Asian martial arts since *Outside Woman*, a 1921 flick featuring a jujitsu-skilled, Japanese manservant. Heroes and villains used “judo chops” and other martial arts techniques from then on, including in the string of “big” action films starring various characters, such as *Bond*, *James Bond*. But at least one critical source dates the emergence of martial arts as a force in American movies to the 1972 movie *Billy Jack* (Corcoran & Farkas, 1968).

Quite probably true, but *Billy Jack* is a far cry from a good movie — overly sincere and self-important, even though (sadly) it may be as entertaining as a fifth of the features playing at any given 1990’s cineplex. Hapkido — an effective martial art — is hero Billy Jack’s specialty. But the

character's ability to absorb punishment without lasting injury, plus the way his opponents circle him and then wait their turn to be battered (paraphrased by Robert Smith's saterical observation that when Billy Jack takes his boots off to do battle in a park, no doubt strewn with broken glass, sharp rocks and foot-stomping bad guys, "he shows everything he knows about real fighting") keep the movie from my "good" list. But that dramatic act of taking off his boots is *precisely* the kind of character- and suspense-building visual "business" that movie makers (with good cause) *love*. So, too, do audiences: even with the artistry of Hollywood accounting, the bargain basement budget *Billy Jack* grossed an estimated \$32 million — in 1970's cash (Corcoran & Farkas, 1968).

That combination of bad and unrealistic plot, flawed character development, over-stated seriousness, self-importance, and/or glib condescension to the audience keeps a number of famous martial arts laced movies off my list — for example, the entire *Lethal Weapon* series (at least, to date). Also, in that series, although Mel Gibson and Danny Glover are wonderful actors in charming combination, and Gibson's ass-kicking paramour in the third movie is a great touch, the martial arts "used" in the movie show . . . *umm* . . . an interesting knowledge of the field: in the first movie, Glover "builds" the lethality of Gibson's character by telling him that according to his file: "You're also heavy into martial arts, t'ai chi [taiji] and all that killer stuff." Well, t'ai chi can face its challenge as the "supreme ultimate" martial art, but nothing in Gibson's character supports a devotion to t'ai chi; indeed, his commando cop techniques are pure hard style and often egotistically applied. The serial plots of these movie sequels strung together . . . Embrace them at your intelligence's peril. The three movie series grossed *hundreds* of millions of 1980's dollars.

The works of America's 1990's major martial arts star Steven Seagal make but one appearance on my list (and a qualified one at that) and an important caveat highlighted in Note 8 following this article. Though he can "fill" a screen in much the way John Wayne or Clint Eastwood can, aikido expert Seagal's movies all too often go way "over the top" with self-righteousness, directorial conceits, or plain awful plotting: in *Above The Law*, his cop hero uses Chicago mob-type relatives to fight CIA-linked heroin pushers. The Chicago Outfit as anti-heroin good guys insults the 1,081 victims of unsolved gangland homicides in that city since 1920 (Moldea, 1996:327). Seagal's first movie, for its multitude of flaws, filled me with expectant hope for him as a major, high quality, martial arts background movie force: I've been exhaling for several cinematic years. The body of Seagal's movies in the 1990's will probably gross close to a *billion* dollars.

But Seagal — who in February, 1997, was named a reincarnated Tulku (roughly, "important teacher") of the Nyingma lineage of Tibetan Buddhism (*Time*, 1997:74) — has avoided one curious and troubling cinematic element: in many post-Bond, American martial arts laced movies, the martial arts character is quite often an *a priori* morally reprehensible individual: a professional killer, an urban mercenary, an anti-social (and thus egotistical) rogue, a lethal vessel in search of a soul worth having. Heroes use martial

arts and (*of course*) defeat often "superior" martial artist villains, but well-balanced martial arts characters worthy of a heartfelt bow are rare in contemporary American movies. As *Washington Post* movie critic and author Stephen Hunter noted about "action" movies in the 1990's:

Ultimately, the philosophy of the Nietzschean superman and the philosophy of this dominant type of American movie boil down to the same unsettling principle. Both preach a kind of coolness that is beyond morality. We may, in the end, understand that one side nominally represents "good" while the other is inherently "bad," but those distinctions are effectively meaningless. The strong win, not the just.

— Hunter, 1997:G1

In defense of "martial arts movies," they often profess that the weak and just can, through diligent striving within some martial art, become the strong and just.

What must be remembered when seeing any dramatic movie is that whatever is portrayed is false: "action" means "act," as in "execute a scripted, rehearsed, artificially lit and staged performance." You can tell almost nothing about a martial art or an actor performing martial arts in any non-documentary movie. What you see is what they're giving you, not what anyone has the ability to do *if and when* they walk down the wrong alley or toe the *kumite* line in any dojo. As anyone who's been there knows, reality writes its own script.

Judging movies is next to impossible to do well: there are simply too many movies in existence to be sure you've viewed them all. Some movies with technically "good" martial arts segments and what should be a winning dramatic combination somehow fall apart, perhaps from bad direction, bad acting, bad script, or bad *mojo* — for example, *Passenger 57*. Other movies simply don't "feel" like they belong in our dramatic category — for example, *Iron and Silk*, a story that's part autobiography, part drama, part travelogue, part wonderful and wholly . . . not there. Where "there" is . . . Well, it's not on my list.

With those cautions carved in your heart, here are two fistfuls of movies featuring martial arts worth watching:

## PUSHING HANDS

*Pushing Hands*, written and directed by Ang Lee, 1992. From the fade-in moment of an old man's hands slowly rising in a classic taiji opening, this movie does martial arts proud, or rather, martial arts helps make a movie worthy of admiration, the first movie from the man who went on to direct the Oscar winning *Sense And Sensibility*, as well as *The Ice Storm*, *The Wedding*



LUNG SHIHUNG  
CONFRONTED BY  
CO-STAR DEB SNYDER  
IN *PUSHING HANDS*.

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STAR LUNG SHIHUNG  
PERFORMING TAIJIQUAN'S  
"SINGLE WHIP/TIGER'S MOUTH"  
IN *PUSHING HANDS*.

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Fox Searchlight Productions.

*Banquet and Eat, Drink, Man, Woman*. Ang Lee's story about the septegenarian taiji expert Chinese father (played by Lung Sihung, a masterful actor starring in other Ang Lee stories) who flees post-Red Guard China for Manhattan's suburbs to live with his son, grandson and neurotic novel-writing American wife, is a gem few Americans have discovered. The movie explores Ang Lee's recurring themes of family, fatherhood — and fun, all the while using taiji's "pushing hands" as the story's metaphor. "Pushing hands?" asks the totally, like, American wife. "Yeah," explains her Chinese husband. "It's like taiji for two. A way of keeping your balance while unbalancing your opponent." She replies, "Like marriage." As Lung Sihung's character discovers, "Attaining carefree nothingness isn't easy." As he struggles, we see love lost and triumphant, external "hard style" martial arts, "expelling energy" demonstrations, rooting, and push hands adapted to defeat a quintet of Chinatown thugs. The actors speak both English and Chinese (with subtitles), and while the movie may be hard to find on video cassette, it's worth the hunt.

### THE KILLER ELITE, 1975

*The Killer Elite* is a Vietnam-Watergate era blast of Cold War nihilism, conspiracy, paranoia and existential rage (in that category, see also the espionage wonder *Scorpio*, whose actors crossed paths with the real Watergate burglars, *Nashville*, *The Parallax View*, and *Three Days of the Condor*). Sheer talent shotgunned through *The Killer Elite* saves this movie from itself (though just barely). Directed by Sam Peckinpah of *The Wild Bunch*

fame, *Killer Elite* haphazardly mixes clichés and concepts. It is story about the power struggle of unspecified "Asians" featuring Chinese gongfu and ninjas battling their way through San Francisco in search of safety and/or freedom. A "taiji master" teaches a style with hard strikes, gi's with colored belt levels, and weapons. A hand-to-hand orgy of battle at the airport is at least plausible because of the difficulty in smuggling weapons past security. Fundamentally, this is the story of two hired guns, once partners, now enemies, settling their own score against the backdrop of privatized espionage. The movie paired two *Godfather* stars, James Caan and Robert Duvall (who energizes every frame of film he's ever been in). Bo Hopkins underplays and thus makes us believe him as the psycho marksman clichéd in a hundred other movies. Before *The Killer Elite* degenerates into absurd action and smug self-righteousness, there's a great scene in which the daughter of the Asian political leader whom Caan and his team are protecting in a hideout along the docks puts on a ninja suit. Caan asks, "What the hell are you doing?" The maiden replies, "Going out to use the night." Caan tells her, "Hey, look, I got a maniac out there with a thirty-ought-six [rifle]. He's gonna blow you apart if you take ten steps." Snaps the maiden, "He'll have to see me first." "Look kid," says Caan, "do me a favor and go over there and do the Tiger Claw and the Crane Stance and the Chicken Wing and all the other crap in the corner, because out there it's no good."

### COMMANDO CLASHES

As Donohue and other experts note, the only martial artists indulging the full amplitude of their skills are soldiers, cops, and killers. Hundreds of "war" dramas show recruits being taught hand-to-hand mayhem — not *martial arts* with uniforms and bowing and respect, *martial homicide* as best expounded by W.E. Fairbairn. Many of these "war epics" are cans of clichés, but some of them are entertaining and portray hand-to-hand combat in an interesting fashion. Two of the better such movies are *The Devil's Brigade*, a 1968 story about the raiders who were the forerunners of America's modern Green Beret Special Forces, starring William Holden, a movie set in World War II and shot in the midst of the Vietnam war, and one that perhaps consequently ends on an anti-war note. Steven Seagal's 1992 *Under Siege*, with its Navy SEAL hero aboard the hijacked American battleship, is his best movie, in no small part because of wonderfully extreme performances by Tommy Lee Jones and Gary Busey. Seagal's character makes minimal and often unnecessarily graphic use of martial arts and commando skills before filling his hands with high caliber firepower (and thus evolving by our definition beyond this genre), but that progression gives a reality to the movie, one that I bet some executives in Hollywood wanted to ignore by having an unarmed aikido expert Seagal take out a roomful of fully-aware men armed with machine guns. An almost-made-it in this category should be noted: James Cagney's 1946 movie *13 Rue Madeleine*, a story of the Office of Strategic Services, the World War II forerunner of the Central Intelligence Agency, has some great judo/commando tactics moments.

## THE KARATE KID, 1984

*The Karate Kid* kicks itself above the sickeningly sweet swamp that drowned its three awful sequels precisely because no one expected the first movie to be so commercially successful. Forget about all its flaws, like the absurdly conceited, supposedly “no can beat” crane stance technique (that fails in the sequel), making the Japanese *sensei*/mentor of our hero, a Congressional Medal of Honor winner, a cardboard, square-jawed villain. *KK* succeeds because it winks at itself and at such martial arts staples as belts, because it dares to explore the student-teacher relationship with respect but not too much piety, and because it portrays the pains of adolescence without worshipping that trip. *KK* is memorable for those of us who remember the pre-pad days of light contact tournaments, when precision and control counted more than brute force. The movie also debuted a star whose light could be seen even in those early days: believable virginal heartthrob Elizabeth Shue, way, way before she was *Leaving Las Vegas*. And if you think the obscene competitiveness portrayed in *KK* is fiction, stand ringside at a martial arts tournament where trembling, padded, seven-year-old boys and girls toe the sparring line and listen to their mothers scream *KK*'s villainous mantra: “No mercy!”

DRAGON ~

## THE BRUCE LEE STORY, 1993

As previously noted, this is the best movie linked to the cultural icon who has everything from restaurants to pirate crews in cyberpunk novels named after him. Remember, this is a dramatic production, not a biography, a production about a legend at that, and thus by definition is a far leap from “just the facts.” But there are some wonderful touches: for example, the actor chosen to play Yip Man, Lee's Wing Chun teacher, looks like he stepped out of pictures of the real Yip Man. The choreography is as good as any martial arts dramatization, and the lead actors are a fresh faced, appealing lot, regardless of their skills. The movie portrays martial arts, Hollywood, and the subtleties of racism in ways that can hold the interest of a TV-numbed American audience. Perhaps most unexpectedly, the movie shows the slip-slide from reality to hallucinogenic vision and dreamlike states with power equal to a more “artistic” movie like *Slaughterhouse Five*.

## THE MECHANIC, 1972

Charles Bronson plays a burnt-out Mob assassin, who seeks rebirth through training a protégé. The metaphor for Bronson and the movie is played out in a segment at the karate dojo where Bronson trains, when a Japanese “master” comes to show a tough American student that “new ways” of karate are insufficient and unworthy. Let me betray the *you-would-never-have-predicted-it* surprise and tell you that the dojo battle between the greying karate master and the upstart student mirrors the struggles between Bronson and his protégé. Although morally hollow and of shaky realism (mob killers do not work this way), the movie's sum is greater than the holes of its parts.

## THE MANCHURIAN CANDIDATE, 1962

This movie from the Richard Condon novel ranks as one of the better American movies ever made. *Period*. A pulse-pounding attack on McCarthyism and Communism encouraged by President John Kennedy, a scathing attack on image-only politicians, and a classic, suspenseful espionage story, *Manchurian Candidate* is a movie worth owning. Frank Sinatra stars as the commander of an Army squad kidnaped and brainwashed by the enemy in the Korean war. The scenes in which Sinatra “remembers” the brainwashing he went through (scenes at a ladies' garden party interspersed with homicide) are chilling and brilliant. Years later, when a haunted Sinatra knocks on the door of the man he thinks can save him from what he supposes to be madness, he encounters a face from that nightmarish past, Henry Silva (an “ethnic” actor whom clumsy Hollywood casts here as Korean, elsewhere as Italian, Mexican and American Indian). Sinatra instinctively throws a punch, and the ensuing brawl is a totally believable madhouse of martial mayhem. Indeed, Sinatra broke the little finger of his right hand during the fight scene; the injury gave him a permanent crook in that digit. Also, Sinatra's cross-block of Silva's kick is “real” because Silva kicked with his “wrong” foot. “I wanna tell you something,” said Sinatra in a discussion with the movie's director John Frankenheimer and screenwriter George Axelrod that was filmed and tagged onto the video cassette released twenty-eight years later, (when Silva kicked with the opposite foot of the one he'd used in rehearsal) “I never moved so fast in my whole life.”



FRANK  
SINATRA  
BATTLES  
HENRY SILVA  
IN THE  
MANCHURIAN  
CANDIDATE.

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of Photofest.

## BAD DAY AT BLACK ROCK, 1954

A sage once noted that all drama starts with the following concept: *a stranger comes to town*. Seldom is that truth better exemplified than when one-armed Spencer Tracy appears in the windswept nowhereville called Black Rock, stepping off the train into a 1950's sweep of guilt, romance, conspiracy and courage while on a mission that turns out to save his life. When the bad guys finally push Tracy too far, his martial arts counter-attack stuns both the audience and the villains. *Bad Day At Black Rock* was a controversial movie for its time, daring as it did to challenge post-Pearl Harbor, Cold War America's self-righteous image.

## GROSSE POINT BLANK, 1997

A savage, scathing satire, *GPB* is the story of professional hitman John Cusack returning to his tenth-year high-school reunion in search of himself and his teenage sweetheart. Cusack *commands* this movie, a dominance of a highly luminous every-day star, and enormously talented actor that probably was responsible for keeping the picture a pure delight. The movie never backs down from its original *hypermoral* premise, a courage that must have



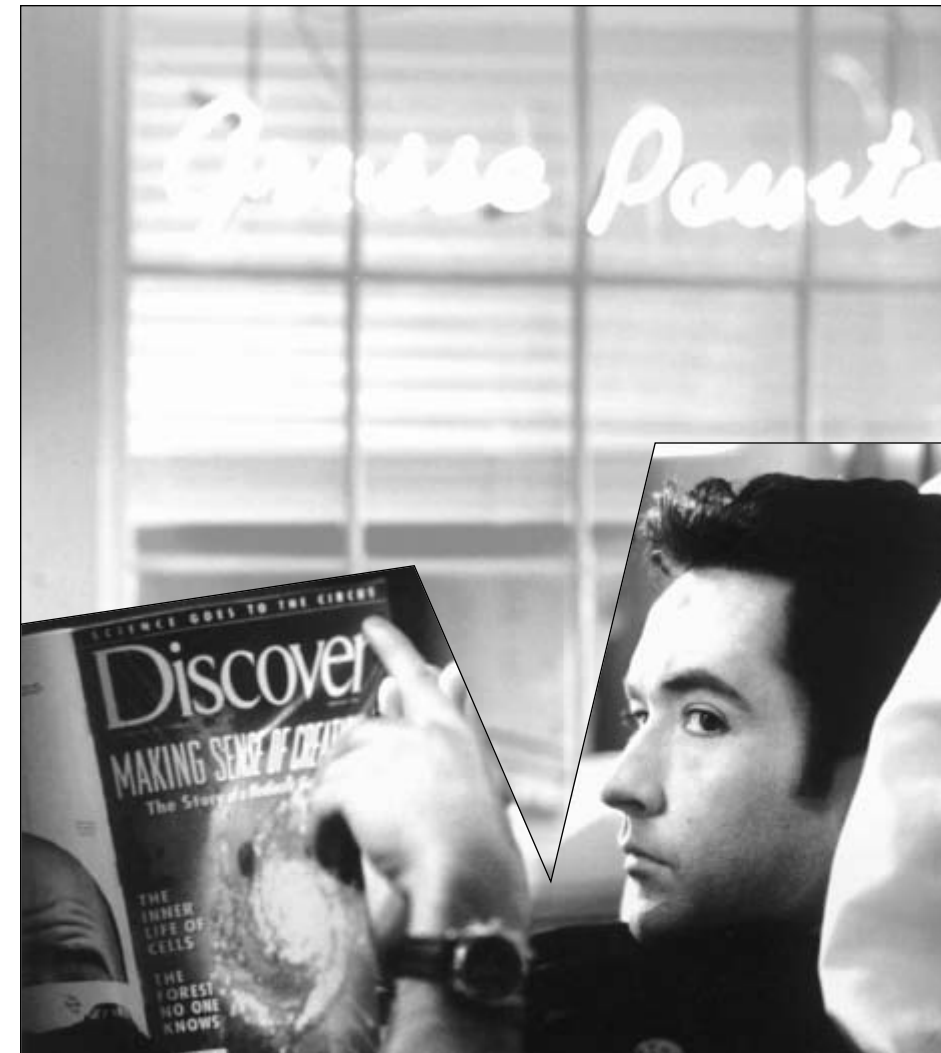
made studio marketing executives tremble. *GPB* has two great martial arts moments. The first occurs when Cusack, now a truly lethal weapon, encounters the bully who'd stuffed him into trash cans during high school, an encounter staged in the very halls where the bully had once reigned supreme. What a glorious moment: Cusack can clearly exact revenge that some might call justice; indeed, the loutish bully threatens and taunts him. But Cusack, in a display of maturity, self-discipline and cosmic consciousness, "educates" the bully to the folly of such violence and gets the bully to reveal a gentle side of his soul — all without a whiff of sappiness. That "non-action" reflects the power and responsibilities of choice that can be earned through martial arts study. Moments later, Cusack is attacked by a rival assassin. Their lethal duel in the high school hall is furious, dramatic and realistic — the battle ends in grappling on the floor, as do many true, violent, hand-to-hand encounters, and in an exhibition of penmanship not covered in the average American educational institution. The dialog reflects a sophistication and intelligence rare in modern movies, and is so cleverly machine-gunned through the story that the audience's laughter often drowns out wonderful lines.



JOHN CUSACK STARS  
AS MARTIN IN  
*GROSSE POINT BLANK*.

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Photograph on previous  
page by Suzanne Hanover,  
which also is used here as a  
background for a photograph  
by Melinda Sue Gordon.



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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I wince every time I hear the word “film” as a name for motion pictures. “Film” is part of the technology that transmits the product of motion pictures. Using “film” to describe a movie is a pretension born when the art elite discovered that what was happening Saturday nights at the local Bijou could be as interesting — and lucrative — as what was displayed in the local museum. Concepts like “*film noir*” are more acceptable uses of the term film, but still, when pretension defines, personality suffers. I confess that few people seem to agree with me on this point.

<sup>2</sup> With respect and a great deal of sympathy for the qualms of my teacher Robert Smith about the terms “martial arts” and “martial artist,” nevertheless, I’ll use these terms.

<sup>3</sup> While the author does not endorse these works (Glaessner, 1974; Meyers et al, 1985; Dannen & Long, 1997), they do present viewpoints worth considering by an interested reader.

<sup>4</sup> Many grade schools now ban their pupils from “playing Bruce Lee,” “Ninja Turtles,” or other movie and TV “karate/kung fu” games.

<sup>5</sup> Conversation with Steven Seagal’s production team and conversations with the late Brandon Lee.

<sup>6</sup> David Levinson, an Emmy winning producer and writer with three decades “in the business.”

<sup>7</sup> Steven Seagal’s aikido demonstration that opens *Above The Law* exemplifies such drama. Having Seagal narrate the demonstration in Japanese was a wonderful cinematic touch. Judo was lovingly and at times accurately portrayed as a “non-sport” in *Blood On The Sun*, a 1945 James Cagney movie warning of Japanese militarism that, for all its strengths, suffers from an odd mix of racist and anti-racist morality, jingoism, good plotting mixed with absurd coincidences, and Cagney’s classic tough-guy character set against cardboard friends, femmes, and villains. Judo — identified as “Japanese wrestling” — also provided a milestone, of sorts, in Ken Russell’s 1970, highly intellectual production of D.H. Lawrence’s novel, *Women In Love*. In the movie, two bored British aristocrats square off naked in front of a roaring fireplace for a bizarre parody of *randori* that exposed American viewers to full frontal male nudity in a “major motion picture.” As to the martial arts education marketplace, according to an article in *The Washington Post* (1996:20), “Karate had the head start, but the Japanese martial art is getting outmuscled in the marketplace by a relative newcomer, Korean taekwondo [sic].” The article quotes officials from the American Athletic Union as well as karate and taekwondo organizations.

<sup>8</sup> For example, Randall Wallace, who wrote the screenplay for the Oscar winning *Braveheart* and directed the 1998 version of *Man In The Iron Mask*, is a first-degree black belt in Shotokan karate.

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