

Put to the Ultimate Test (A Film Essay on Martial Art Cinema)

(By Toshio U.-P.)

Through the study of four martial art films with styles ranging from Karate, Ninjutsu, Kung Fu and Taekwondo, we learn how the intensive training that characters undergo is inevitably put to the ultimate test. By examining characters up against bullying, lack of safeguards, the unruly powers of the state and inner turmoil, we will show that martial arts are both critical to leading a more balanced life while teaching important lessons about pride, personal conduct and leadership.

In the popular family martial art film The Karate Kid (1), we follow teenager Daniel as he relocates from Newark, New Jersey to Receda, Los Angeles with his single mother Lucille. Upon trying to settle in at a new high school, Daniel soon clashes with bully Johnny of the local Cobra Kai karate dojo. After being badly beaten up by Johnny and his gang, Daniel is helped out by Japanese-American Karate master Mr. Miyagi, who he randomly knows through his modest apartment complex. Determined to compete in the All Valley Karate Tournament in order to make the Cobra Kai cease their recurring bullying, Daniel begins training under Mr. Miyagi's tutelage, noticing that the art of Karate is both practical and beneficial to his love life.

In martial artist Jean-Claude Van Damme's first feature film Bloodsport (2), we meet Ninjutsu expert Frank Dux, a member of the United States military who is often called upon to serve overseas with his superior combat skills. Opting to skip military duties to compete in the upcoming full-contact kumite, Frank secretly travels to Hong Kong, where he meets fellow brawler Ray Jackson, who is also a competitor in the brutal and gladiator-like tournament. Soon, Frank Dux gains special access to a treacherous Hong Kong back alley fighting ring where warriors like the notorious Chong Li don't hesitate to finish off their opponents with excessive force and trickery.

In wuxia martial art classic A Touch of Zen (3), we meet Ku Shen Chai (Mr. Ku), a man skilled in calligraphy and portraiture living with his aging mother within the ruins of the abandoned Ching Lu Fort. Soon, East Chamber agents in an alliance with the unjust Eunuch Wei begin to arrive at the old fort, seeking to capture and kill female warrior Yang Hui-ching (Miss Yang) and her runaway allies. Falling for the attractive Miss Yang, Mr. Ku decides to take the side of the outlaws of Eunuch Wei, who also have the backing of peace-keeping monk Abbot Hui Yuan. Soon, Mr. Ku puts his skills in military strategy to the test in order to lure Eunuch Wei's troops and top henchmen into the old fort at night, using traps and dummies to trick the enemy into thinking that the fort is 'haunted' and under the control of a strange ghostly guard.

In the more off-beat comedy The Foot Fist Way (4), we enter the dojang (training area) of Concord Taekwondo, located in a small North Carolina town where comical big-shot Sabomnim (Master Instructor) Fred Simmons leads his club through board breaking demos, kyorugi (sparring), poomsae (patterns) and promotion tests. While claiming to adhere to Taekwondo's traditional values of "courtesy", "self-control",

“perseverance”, “integrity” and “indomitable spirit”, Master Simmons soon reveals his inner frailties as his marriage with Suzie begins to fall apart and his credibility as a leader and “build[er] [of] a more peaceful world” is put into question.

While martial arts cinema is as honest and morally grounded as the characters depicted within the film narratives, the act of courage of taking part in a daunting tournament, a duel against an omnipresent enemy or learning moves from a questionable master, is part of the journey towards a safer future and a more noble and fulfilling direction in life.

Films:

(1) The Karate Kid (1984). Dir. John G. Avildsen. Columbia Pictures. USA. 127 min.

(2) Bloodsport (1988). Dir. Newt Arnold. Cannon Films. USA. 92 min.

(3) A Touch of Zen (1971). Dir. King Hu. Union Film and Golden Harvest. Taiwan and Hong Kong. 180 min.

(4) The Foot Fist Way (2008). Dir. Jody Hill. Paramount Vantage. USA. 85 min.