

The Ideologies of the Octagon: The Ultimate Fighting Championship as a Manifestation of the Postmodern Phenomenon

Jany P. Berame

The postmodern moment creates paranoia in the grand narratives of patriarchy, masculinity, and heteronormativity. This paranoia is called pomophobia, the fear of the shift the postmodern moment created and continues to create in the hegemony. In response, the dominant views, particularly patriarchy, have regrouped themselves and created hegemonic masculinity present in athleticism, especially male-driven sports such that of Mixed Martial Arts. This study looks closely at Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) as portrayed in the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) and how its components exhibit self-reflexivity, to the point that it asserts rebuttals to the very ideologies it advocates. This study looks at MMA in UFC as a counterproposal to the meta-narratives of patriarchy and the universality of truths and how it manifests the postmodern phenomenon.

Keywords: Ultimate Fighting Championship, Mixed Martial Arts, Postmodernism

Introduction

Postmodernism attempts to take absolute hegemony off the controlling system (Felluga, 2011) and celebrates the concept of difference as a productive device. This is evident in the birth of various movements, particularly feminism, and the rise of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ) rights movements. The progress (and some success) of these movements resulted in equalization of emphasis on the achievements of sexes, and this destabilized the meta-narrative of patriarchy. It is believed that men are pushed to the fringes “by the very group that they marginalized” (Hogan, n.d., para. 2) for so many years, creating a paranoia, particularly towards the feminine encroachments. These tenets of postmodernism incite fear to the formerly dominant order (patriarchy, heteronormativity, etc.), a fear called pomophobia (Byers, 1995), the fear of significant shifts and collapse of master narratives signaled by postmodernity.

In response, men “regroup” or “reorganize” themselves (Savran, 1998), thus the rise of hegemonic masculinity. In brief, hegemonic masculinity is a set of strategies meant to reinforce subordination of women (Donaldson, 1993), which changes depending on the current social arrangements. It is described as

“exclusive” and “anxiety-provoking,” which reflects the men’s paranoia of female encroachments. It is connected to brutality and violence, and concerned with the feeling of dread for women, and the flight from them (Donaldson, 1993). This set of strategies include “taking risks, dominating other men and/or women, flaunting wealth, or showcasing athleticism” (Mayeda, 2011, para. 4). Sports serves as a venue where “countless examples of hegemonic masculinity” (para. 5), can be found, especially those male-driven ones, like Mixed Martial Arts, commonly known as MMA, a fighting style that integrates techniques from various fighting styles: Karate + Jiu-Jitsu + Kickboxing + “X” fighting style = MMA.

Among all MMA organizations around the globe, the Ultimate Fighting Championship or UFC is the most familiar and has existed since 1993 (Swain, 2011). Though other MMA organizations exist, UFC remains as “the predominant MMA organization” (p. 8), mainly through its highly popularized televised fights, and other supplementary venues, such as brand promotions and related television series (i.e., *The Ultimate Fighter*).

The concept of mixing, multiplicity, and hybridization evident in MMA are important concepts of postmodernity itself. Thus, this study will focus on reading UFC including its components (sports, arena, fighters, etc.) in the postmodern perspective, and will explore the possibility of MMA, as presented in UFC, as an inadvertent advocate of the postmodern phenomenon, as opposed to the former belief that it is a stage for hegemonic masculinity.

The “Pre-Fight”

The concept of masculinity as one of the subjects in gender studies is relatively young compared to feminist studies, which has helped spawn various movements. In fact, feminist studies emerged first, focusing among other things, how women “experience” the power of men in society. Studies on masculinities are one of the reactions to these feminist understandings.

Back in the 1970s, just about the time when the women’s movement was beginning to gain momentum, men started writing about how they find it difficult to express their emotions, and how young men are made and expected to be tough and competitive (Coltrane, 1994; Goldberg, 1976; Nichols, 1978). These may be seen as attempts at making men understand their own sensitivities.

Since then, the main understanding about masculinity has been “defined more by what one is not rather than who one is,” or simply “not being a woman,” (Kimmel, 1994, p. 126) which stems from the universalizing conceptions of masculinities in history. But then, more books were written theorizing about masculinities, including the view that masculinity is not an essence; rather, it is socially formed and constructed.

Thus, the definition of masculinity has been fluid, constantly changing, moving from one sociopolitical terrain to another, where women-men relationships are imagined and executed.

Through the acts of redefining masculinity, a new kind of masculinity emerged—hegemonic masculinity. This conjures up the image of men who hold power that is achieved by continuously defending it from threats of femininity and women, and homosexuality and gay men. This hegemonic masculinity can be regarded as a reaction to the end of the modern society—the onset of the postmodern—as it tries to maintain a linear, absolute meaning of masculinity amidst the postmodern celebration of instability and difference.

Analysis

The Sport: Mixed Martial Arts

The postmodern era celebrates the concept of multiperspectivity, fragmentation, and hybridization of meanings, resulting in the destabilization, and the (eventual) collapse of the so-called meta-narratives. These meta-narratives are the universal truths constructed in the modern era: the single chronological history, the empirical infallibility of science, (and) or the omnipresence of religion. In the postmodern perspective, these super-ideas, though they have been part of the collective consciousness, are as questionable as any other ideas.

These recognized notions of postmodernity are evident in MMA, not just in the UFC, but also in other MMA organizations around the globe. As the name implies, Mixed Martial Arts is an unarmed combat style that incorporates various techniques from different fighting forms. Some common techniques are borrowed from Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, Greco-Roman Wrestling, Kickboxing, Muay Thai, Judo, Karate, and Taekwondo, among many others.

In this sense, single fighting styles in the martial arts world are the meta-narrative that has lost its general validity because of the birth of mixed martial arts. Various fighting techniques used single-handedly somehow lost their prominence because they have merged into a “new hybrid form” (Lehrzeit, 2012, para. 2) of combat. The hybridization of fighting styles happens differently with each fighter, thus creating multiperspectivity, that is, there is no one form of hybridity, and each different form is accepted in mixed martial arts.

Aside from the fighting style and techniques, it is also important to note that the culture behind the MMA also takes a fragmented form. This fragmentation stems from the idea that MMA does not have a clear center from which it operates or originates. Although UFC appears to be the seat of power for MMA, other MMA organizations exist in various places around the globe. Also, it may seem that although the United States brought the young sport in the international spotlight through television, it is still important to note Japan and/or Brazil as its country of birthplace, which may or may not be accepted by dedicated audiences, further supporting the multiplicity of truths.

The Arena: UFC's Octagon

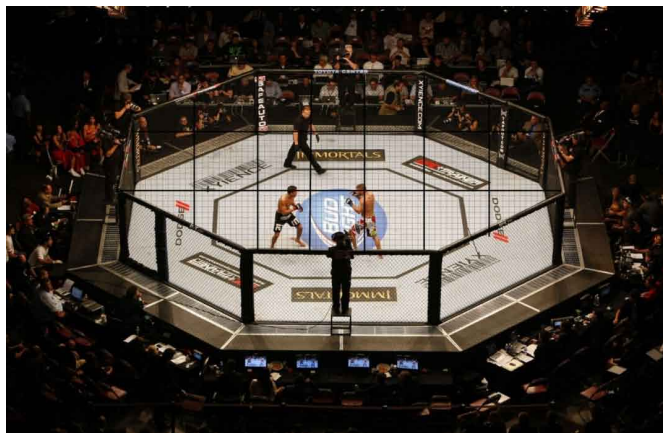


Figure 1. The Octagon. (Octagon, 2013)

Each sport has its own arena, and the eight-sided cage is MMA's. It was called “the cage,” thus the name “cagefighting” for MMA during its pre-UFC years. The terms “cage” and “cagefighting” were somehow viewed as derogatory because they emphasized the violent and “uncontrolled” nature of the sport, so promoting it as MMA by UFC and renaming the cage as the *Octagon* helped positively in the reception of the sport. In fact, the UFC emphasized the Octagon’s “safety” in its website (“The Octagon,” 2013):

The 750-square foot Octagon measures 32 feet across and 6 feet high, and was created with both safety and fairness in mind. Its walls and padded surfaces protect fighters from falling out (or getting thrown out). The wide angles prevent fighters from getting stuck in a corner with no way out. (para. 1)

A Simulacrum of History

A televised fight opens with the montage of the Octagon, followed by a “Tale of the Tape,” where the opposing fighters are introduced to the crowd, to the judges, and to the audience. This coverage of the fight recalls the imagery of the arenas and gladiators, a famous sport and form of entertainment during the Roman Empire, where the “violence of sports is a spectacular violence” (Swain, 2011, p. 69) made for the viewer’s entertainment, and the image of gladiators is constructed as heroes fighting not for survival, but for honor and glory.

This attempt of UFC at MMA as the modern conception of the Roman gladiatorial arena and using its narratives and images of history is a resurrection on the screen, a reliving of the myths the congealing society has lost (Baudrillard, 1994)—a simulacrum of the history of Rome.

The Ultimate Fighting Championship’s association with these narratives and images takes “history, rob[s] it of its significance, and create[s] a new

image” (Swain, 2011, p. 73), unrestricted by the previous context of what the Roman history carries. In this manner, history is “reinjecte” or “given back” but without value. It is just another relation—“a nostalgia for a lost referential” (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 44).

History then, in this sense, is drained of its original meaning and deduced to another referent of a larger system of representations in the popular culture.

Death is Escapable

In the gladiatorial arena, death was an absolute state of the self, and it was inevitable and necessary. In the Ultimate Fighting Championship’s Octagon, death is presented as not “always possible, and assuredly necessary” (Swain, 2011, p. 80), but something that can be conquered. Death is escapable, as demonstrated by the fighters who could defeat this absolute concept through victories. Death is not absolute; rather, it is escapable.

A “Hyper” Arena

According to Baudrillard (1994), in the postmodern moment, the capitalist culture has conquered our ways of thinking, to the point that this sense of exchange-value and advertising has strained our conception of reality. This conception can be seen in the Octagon.

As the UFC fights begin, the Octagon becomes more than just an arena. It becomes an emblem that represents not just the sport but the organization and the fighters as well. However, the Octagon can also be considered as a representation of the hyperspace, a hypermarket of hypercommodities, and a hypercommodity itself.

In every UFC fight, the Octagon serves as the center of activity—a nucleus where everything moves around, and that includes the flux of signs and symbols of the capitalist culture.

First, the Octagon is a hypermarket of violence. The arena packages violence as something acceptable, which the audience consumes through watching the show (both live and in television). The Octagon can be perceived as the representation of the Beauborg structure, or Centre Pompidou, a superstructure built in the 1970s in Paris, France. The structure is meant to ‘resemble the more richly layered cities of the past’ (Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners LLP, 2005, para. 2), an attempt in securing and preserving history. In the same way, the Octagon provides a (false) sense of security not just to the audience but to the fighters as well, and assures a system of maximum security or a protective zone of control to a sport that is violent and uncontrollable (Baudrillard, 1994).

This “acceptable” violence can also be traced back to the concept of implosion of meanings. The continuous duplication of reality—hyperreality—creates meanings that are “more real than the real” (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 81), which leads to the termination of the real. The same way that it does to history

and its relation to the "historical real," violence is exhausted into something that is not real, but a simulacrum that is very familiar. The unending production of simulacra legitimizes violence, which is accepted and consumed by the audience.

Second, the Octagon is a hypermarket of bodies. In this sense, the fighters are seen not as "dominant" males, but as commodities for the audience to consume. Their bodies are treated as objects that carry the signs and symbols of the advertisers, which are exhibited through their singlets as they fight inside the cage. Brand logos mark their attires, making the body as just another referential that continues the endless production of exchange-value significations.

Moreover, the Octagon itself is a hypercommodity. It performs simultaneity of functions, such as a paid venue, an advertising space, and a promotional/publicity material.

The audience (both in live fights and televised ones) consume violence; the audience (in the form of ratings) is consumed by the advertisements; and advertisements are consumed by the organization and the audience, too. Thus, the Octagon encapsulates the centralization and redistribution of integrated circuits of meanings—everything is reduced to a referendum of another, and vice versa, contributing to the perpetual flux of signs and symbols.

The Fighter's Body

The Body as a Point of Convergence

It is previously mentioned that, among other spaces, hybridization happens in the fighter, in his body. The basic manifestation of this hybridity is that most of the fighters' origins are fragmented, in the sense that they do not originate from a single country, ethnicity, and/or race. In fact, most of them are of various descents, like Benson Henderson, one of UFC's Top Ten Fighters of 2012, who is the son of an African-American father and a Korean-American mother.

Aside from fragmented cultural backgrounds and the multicultural nature of learning, the sport brings various truths into one vessel, that is, the fighter's body. The fighter serves as the convergence of different cultures exhibited in the various fighting styles the fighter has learned and/or mastered. This brings forward the concept of "decentralization," because the clear center is blurred; more so, destroyed.

These fragmented origins (race and ethnicity) also destabilize the "standard" masculinity of the dominant culture that is defined as "white, middle-class, middle-aged, heterosexual men" (Kimmel, 1994, p. 124).

But the idea of the body as the vessel of man is problematic in the postmodern perspective, as it somehow cages the soul, because it is absolute and universal in some levels of understanding. This results in the conception of transcending the body, which will be further discussed in the subsequent section.

The Self is not the Body

The conceptions of masculinity are deeply rooted in the body, and it is viewed as a whole from its beginning—composed of body and soul—outward appearance, and inward virtue. The body and the soul should be taken as one harmonious whole, which dwells in the idea that it is a perfect entity, and which parts fall in the right places (Mosse, 1996).

The body is the habitat of man, of the soul, but because it is so, it should be terminated. The body is an absolute vessel and an inescapable habitat, thus the need for it to be destroyed.

In UFC (as well as other MMA organizations), the image of the fighter is often portrayed as heroic, achieving a certain degree of celebrity status because of the spectacular “exploits in the arena” (Swain, 2011, p. 75), but it is important to note that this image is just simulacrum and behind these images are fighters that are human, that get bruised and feel pain, and who undergo rigorous processes in order to achieve a “better self.”

A fighter is expected to train with a partner (who has never competed), whose job is to “beat [the fighter] up” (Morin, 2011, para. 10), in order to do better in the next fight inside the Octagon. They spar nonstop, beating one another, laying fists, kicks, and jabs. Later after the session, the fighter, “far from feeling angry at the people who have just pummeled” (Morin, 2011, para. 10) him, will sincerely show them gratitude for helping him in his training.

This process indicates the need to ignore that the self is a living body, by ignoring pain. This is the same with the actual fight, where fighters combat nonstop with each other. Pain is redefined as something in the mind (the self) and not within the body, and separating the self from the body will make it easier to ignore pain. The body is ignored. In fact, it is not just the fighter’s own body that is ignored, but also the body of the opponent.

By ignoring pain, it can be assumed that a good MMA fighter, needs to ignore the body. The fighter should not live as “an integrated body” (Morin, 2011, para. 15), rather the body becomes the disjointed version—the self is not the body; that the body is separate from the self.

The Capitalist Body

In Baudrillardian Postmodernism, the concept of exchange-value is defined as the loss of material reality; the society thinks of lives in terms of money. It is assumed that interest in the real things, in the things that are tangible, is lost. Rather, society thinks in terms of how things can be exchanged for the universal equivalent—money (Felluga, 2011).

This exchange-value is exhibited in the image of the UFC fighters as the archetype of masculinity in popular culture, and to its dedicated fans around the globe. The image of the fighter is described as having “thick necks, tree trunk legs, v-shaped backs, even strong jaw lines” (Morin, 2011, para. 7). This

body type results from the long hours of training with the best coach, sparring partners, and facilities and equipment, funded by UFC, and such investments are expected to lead to winning fights.

In this sense, it is also through the fighter's body that they are "sold" to the audience. Their physique, accompanied by hero narratives, is marketed by UFC and consumed by the audience. These fighters are "extraordinary physical specimens" (Morin, 2011, para. 7) that the consumer society suggests as ideal.

Thus, the fighter's body becomes the capital body, which is exchanged for money, to make the fighter become "fully himself" (through winning fights), and to make his employers, the Ultimate Fighting Championship, "fully themselves" (through profits from winning fights). This still leads to the postmodernist view of destroying the body because it dictates the "ideal," a meta-narrative that should be blurred or more so, terminated.

Pomophobia and the Masculine Anxiety

Antifeminism and Homophobia

As mentioned earlier, the postmodern moment creates paranoia in those privileged by the dominant ideologies that control the society. They recognize that they are becoming just mere residues of the dominating "truths" that they once were (Byers, 1995). This deep set of fears sparks antifeminist counterattacks and homophobia, present in its simplest form of unequal opportunities in the job market.

This is both exhibited in UFC as an MMA organization, through the presentation of the sport and the organization as "exclusively male." Women in the UFC are considered as objects of desire, walking inside the Octagon in skimpy attires. Although it may be argued that there are women allowed to fight in the organization, it is important to note that their exposure is minimal compared to that of the male fighters, which is highly publicized. This is apparent in UFC's official website and in its ads and promotions.

The culture of heteronormativity, as mentioned previously, is maintained and reinforced through violence and the flight from the differences. It turns to hatred and violence to ward off the deviances (which include homosexuality) that threaten its stability.

Sadomasochistic vs. Homoerotic

The postmodern moment creates fractured individuals—men who think they have been displaced and emasculated due to the shifts spawned by gender movements that have won women's and LGBT rights and have progressed in the fight for equal opportunities. This sparked "regroupings" among men, which is about reclaiming the lost, emasculated virility, thus the rise of hegemonic masculinity, among other spaces in various sports, MMA being one of them.

One way of reclaiming the alienated virile self of men is through the use of violence (which is apparent in UFC fights), and violence in the postmodern thought is a way to experience a sense of existence. It is the catharsis that the congealing society needs. Inflicting pain on the body propagates fragmentation because it disrupts the entirety of the narrative of the harmonious body. Thus, it can be assumed that UFC fights exhibit a form of masculinity called “somasochistic” masculinity (Freed, 2002).

As mentioned earlier, a skilled fighter should know how to disregard his body as a part of his “self” in order to endure pain and last for the next rounds. The process of ignoring one’s own body is self-inflicted and perpetuates the masochistic side of somasochistic masculinity, while the sadistic part stems from the need to inflict pain not only on the fighter’s own body, but also on the opponent’s.

Masculinity from this violence stems from the idea that power is achieved when an individual has the ability to portray himself as a victim, while empowering himself at the same time because he has the ability to endure pain. This redefines pain and violence as something desirable for the men, because they find this as the solution to their pomophobia.

But it is also important to note that this somasochistic masculinity of the postmodern moment is countered by the fact that Mixed Martial Arts is a very physically intimate sport, and exhibits homoeroticism at some level. This intimacy is exhibited through the actual techniques of grappling, mounting, and wrestling; with bare-chested fighters wearing only shorts or singlet that barely cover their limbs.

The process of training and actual fighting somehow opens the discourse of homoeroticism in a sport that is fundamentally male-driven. It destabilizes not just the heteronormativity of the fighters (they must possess a certain degree of security in their sexual and gender identity because of the intimacy of the sport), but also the grand narratives of masculinity and heteronormativity that



Figure 2. Grappling techniques used in MMA. (Angeles, 2011)

dominate and control society, which the postmodern phenomenon tries to blur and destroy.

Conclusion

Mixed Martial Arts as popularized by the Ultimate Fighting Championship has been criticized for its use of violence as a form of entertainment, and has sparked debates not just in the United States but internationally because of its “uncontrolled” brutality and violence, but it is important to understand that highly popularized sports like MMA can be counterproposals to the very ideologies that it advocates.

MMA’s use of violence to reclaim masculinity, in the end, is treated as another commodity to be consumed by society. The catharsis that stems from violence is again taken away from them, reduced into another referential meaning. Thus, masculinity in UFC consumes itself.

Moreover, this masculinity exhibited through violence in sports is countered by the physical intimacy of MMA as a combat sport, where fighters in the Octagon go against each other skin-to-skin. The basic skills of the sport, such as grappling and wrestling, display homoeroticism. The masculine identity in UFC retains itself by deflecting any practices of homosexuality and femininity, but this is countered by the intimacy of its own combat techniques.

The Ultimate Fighting Championship can be assumed to be a manifestation of the postmodern phenomenon because its components exhibit important postmodern concepts such as multiperspectivity, collapse of meta-narratives, and fragmentation, to name a few.

In several ways, the “exclusivity” of the sport and the organization has holes by which the deviances it has been trying to ward off can get into. This provides opportunities for other ideologies to enter and be part of the hegemony, which can be an avenue to rethink and destabilize the claimed universal truths, and become a profusion of unstable and shifting identities.

References

- Angeles, L. (2011). Learn 3 grappling techniques from UFC star Chael Sonnen. Retrieved from <http://www.blackbeltmag.com/daily/mixed-martial-arts-training/boxing/learn-3-grappling-techniques-from-ufc-star-chael-sonnen/>
- Baudrillard, J. (1994). *Simulacra and simulation*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press.
- Byers, T. B. (1995). Terminating the Postmodern: Masculinity and Pomophobia. *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 41(1), 35–73. Doi:10.1353/mfs.1995.0008
- Coltrane, S. (1994). Theorising masculinities in contemporary social science. In H. Brod & M. Kaufman (Eds.), *Theorizing masculinities* (pp. 39–59). UK: Sage.
- Donaldson, M. (1993). What is hegemonic masculinity? In *Theory and Society, Special Issue: Masculinities* (pp. 643–657). Retrieved from <http://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1149&context=artspapers>
- Felluga, D. (2011). Modules on Baudrillard: On Postmodernity. In *Introductory Guide to Critical Theory*. Retrieved from <http://www.cla.purdue.edu/english/theory/index.html>
- Freed, R. (2002). *Violence as a reclamation of masculinity in the postmodern moment*. Unpublished masters thesis, University of Virginia, Virginia, USA. Retrieved from <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ma02/freed/fightclub/mv.html>
- Goldberg, H. (1976). *The hazards of being male: Surviving the myth of masculine privilege*. New York: Wellness Institute, Inc.
- Hogan, R. (n.d.). We are the all singing, all dancing crap of the world: Fight club and the post-modern dilemma of manhood. *www.jademyst.com*. Retrieved from <http://www.jademyst.com/essays/11.html>
- Kimmel, M. (1994). Masculinity as homophobia: Fear, shame, and silence in the construction of gender identity. In H. Brod & M. Kaufman (Eds.), *Theorizing masculinities* (pp. 119–141). UK: Sage.
- Lehrzeit. (2012). Mixed Martial Arts as a postmodern phenomenon. Lehrzeit. Retrieved March 25, 2013, from <http://lehrzeit.wordpress.com/>
- Mayeda, D. (2011). The sociology of MMA: A masculine culture of lack. *SociologyFocus*. Retrieved March 25, 2013, from <http://www.sociologyinfocus.com/2013/06/10/the-sociology-of-mma-a-masculine-culture-of-lack/>
- Morin, M. (2011, June 28). The confessions of a cage fighter: Masculinity, misogyny, and the fear of losing control. *The Other Journal*. Retrieved August 16, 2013, from <http://theotherjournal.com/2011/06/28/the-confessions-of-a-cage-fighter-masculinity-misogyny-and-the-fear-of-losing-control/>
- Mosse, G. (1996). *The image of man*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Nichols, J. (1978). *Men's liberation: a new definition of masculinity*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners LLP. (2005, February 25). *Centre Pompidou Masterplan*. Retrieved August 16, 2013, from http://www.richardrogers.co.uk/work/all_projects/centre_pompidou_masterplan
- Savran, D. (1998). *Taking it like a man: White masculinity, masochism, and contemporary American culture*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Swain, S. (2011). *MMAsculinites: Spectacular Narratives of Masculinity in Mixed Martial Arts* (Unpublished master's thesis). The University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Canada.

The Octagon. (2013). Retrieved March 26, 2013, from <http://www.ufc.com/discover/sport/octagon>

JANYN P. BERAME is a 4th year student taking Broadcast Communication at the University of the Philippines College of Mass Communication (UP CMC). (Corresponding author: jberame@yahoo.com).