

***Forced to Fight* (1991): American Martial Arts Movies and the Exploitation Film Tradition**

Andrew Willis, University of Salford, UK

The focus of this article is the 1991 American martial arts film *Forced to Fight*. Directed by Oley Sassone, *Forced to Fight* is a vehicle for former kickboxing champion Don "the Dragon" Wilson, specifically designed to showcase his martial arts skills. In order to understand *Forced to Fight*, and the place and role of martial arts action and martial arts movies within the American cinema, I wish to argue that it is necessary to place them into the context of exploitation cinema, which is the arena where they have been most consistently produced. I will consider the place of martial arts films within the exploitation tradition, arguing that this specific context enables us to see why martial arts action appears to be suitable for inclusion in a range of films from different genres. However, the idea of "exploitation cinema" itself must be tightly defined if this context is to reward such an approach.

Exploitation Cinema: Some Definitions

The term exploitation cinema is certainly not easy to define. Whilst there may be some clear elements that make a film "exploitation", the limits of the term and the political potential of exploitation films has made it slippery. Indeed, the relationship of exploitation films to the so-called mainstream is probably the most difficult element of this struggle for definition. I therefore want to spend some time considering what an exploitation film is, before going on to consider martial arts films as exploitation cinema.

Thomas Doherty (1988) argues that the term "exploitation" operates in three distinct and sometimes overlapping ways within the American film industry. Firstly, it refers to "the advertising and promotion that entices an audience into a theatre" (p. 3). However, he argues that the film industry generally operates in this exploitative way. Its advertising and promotion is clearly aimed to entice an audience to its product. This point is reflected in Justin Wyatt's (1994) work on "high concept", in which he argues that contemporary Hollywood is marked by this type of exploitation,

The high concept films therefore depend upon the visual representation of their marketable concepts in advertising. Advertising is the key to the commercial success of these films through representing the marketable concepts of the films, but, more basically, advertising as a medium of expression is fundamental to the very construction of the high concept films.

(23)

As has traditionally been argued with regard to exploitation films, Wyatt argues that the importance of marketing, advertising and promotion has gone so far as to impact upon the

actual construction of the films themselves. This definition of "exploitation" therefore becomes limited as it does not distinguish exploitation films from those produced within the so-called mainstream. Other uses of the term exploitation are more focused on creating a distinction between legitimate mainstream products and those that are produced within the less central parts of the industry. Jim Hillier (1992) argues that,

The term "exploitation" differentiates a certain kind of overly exploitative product from the supposedly non-exploitative product of the majors, and implies that movies thus labelled take advantage of their audiences, for example by promising more than they deliver - in effect by cheating. (40)

This links with Doherty's second way in which the term exploitation operates within the American film industry, "the way the movie endears itself to that audience." (3) Whilst again he argues that this type of exploitation was present in the Hollywood film industry generally, in so much as "the wise moviemaker 'exploited' what he knew about an audience by catering to its desires and meeting its expectations" (6), it is this manipulation which Doherty sees as particularly exploitative. The marketing of exploitation movies therefore demands a certain level of mutual knowledge on behalf of the filmmakers and their audience. The promotional materials produced for exploitation films had to create a sense of dialogue between filmmaker, film and potential audience. This dialogue was dependent upon the marketing departments knowing who their potential audience was in some detail. Hillier picks up on this point when he explains that exploitation movies were able to be targeted "not at a general audience but rather at the youth market that the majors, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, were failing to cater for". He also discusses the ways in which new outlets for exploitation pictures impacted upon their reaching particular audiences in this period. For instance, downtown movie houses now became an important outlet for the exploitation product because it "attracted a predominantly male, working-class audience." (40)

Hillier argues that another significant way in which certain films and their production exploit is in terms of personnel. He argues that due to the high levels of unemployment and the large number of people hoping to gain entry into the industry, independent producers were able to pay non-union rates and work with small crews. This type of exploitation meant that smaller independent companies could produce films much more cheaply than the majors.

Whilst these points lead to an understanding of why certain films exploit both the audience and production staff, it is Doherty's third use of the term exploitation within the Hollywood film industry that is most relevant in relation to martial arts films. He argues that it is used to define "a particular kind of movie" (3) and that by the 1950s this kind of movie was commonly seen in a negative light. According to Doherty this related closely to subject matter that was "timely and sensational". This linked to a growing appetite amongst certain elements of the audience for "the bizarre, the licentious, and the sensational" and led to the growing division between exploitation films and the more "serious" products of the Hollywood majors, which in turn fostered the idea that exploitation fare was certainly a less serious product. Doherty argues that in the 1950s the exploitation formula had three strong elements that often contributed to its being seen as a lesser form of filmmaking: (1) controversial, bizarre, or timely subject matter amenable to wild promotion (exploitation potential in its original sense); (2) a substandard budget; and (3) a teenage audience. Movies of this ilk are triply exploitative, simultaneously exploiting sensational happenings (for story value), their notoriety (for publicity value), and their teenage participants (for box-office

value). Around 1955-56, "exploitation film" in this sense had become fairly common usage within the industry. (8)

Roger Corman, one of the most famous producers of exploitation movies, began his career in the 1950s as the term gained currency within the industry. Corman provides a direct link between the approach adopted in the 1950s and the production of American martial arts movies in the 1990s.

Roger Corman, Exploitation Films and Martial Arts

Roger Corman is often seen as the king of the exploitation movie. Indeed, he himself has promoted himself in such a way, calling his biography *How I Made a Hundred Movies in Hollywood and Never Lost a Dime* (1990). In 1970, after a career in the exploitation field, Corman formed a production company, New World Pictures, with his brother Gene and Larry Woolner. Since then, Corman and New World have become the focus of some of the most important academic work on the exploitation field (Hillier and Lipstadt, 1981, 1986; Hillier, 1992) which provides some useful insights into the links between traditional genres and the exploitation "cycles" favoured by production companies such as New World. One of the most significant aspects of the company was that from the outset it was concerned with distribution as well as production. The control of both areas was of particular concern to Corman, who had been pushed towards the formation of the company in an attempt to prevent what he perceived as the mishandling of his pictures by others. This position had certainly been arrived at following the fact that his film *Gas-s-s* (1970) had been re-edited against his wishes by its distributor American International Pictures.

The early development of New World between 1970 and 1973 set certain important trends for the company that, it may be argued, are still typical of the practices of exploitation production companies more generally. New World's first film, *Student Nurses* (1970) proved to be an enormous success, and according to Hillier and Lipstadt, encouraged the company to initiate a series of films that dealt with "groups of professional (and of course reputedly titillating sexually) women. All featured three or four heroines and dealt with their professional/romantic problems; all ran between 81 and 87 minutes; all were set in the present, usually in California; all were rated R" (1981: 3). During this period New World also initiated a series of women in prison films following the success of *The Big Doll House* (1971). The importance of prison films to the exploitation tradition generally and Corman's companies in particular is something that would later link with an interest in martial arts based films.

The importance of cycles within exploitation cinema is noted by Aaron Lipstadt (1981) who argues that a cycle,

has a life of its own; it appears, as indicated by the definition of exploitation films, on the heels of an event or successful movie. Several independent companies, and maybe even some of the majors, will quickly commission a script and shoot a film which apes the prototype, particularly in the details that are thought to contribute to its success. Speed of production and widespread bookings are typical, especially in the summer months when school is out, the drive-ins are open, and the kids are looking for excitement. (10-11)

The exploitation of mainstream success, however, is no longer simply the realm of the so-called exploitation companies. The major studios now also attempt to create financial success out of models that have in the past proved successful for others. This partly explains the continual promotion of sequels to even moderately successful major productions. Often these sequels are put into production before the financial success of the original has been fully calculated.

The quick follow up of success is also evident within martial arts film production, and this aspect places it firmly within the exploitation tradition of filmmaking. This is particularly evident in relation to martial arts film production in the late 1980s. For example, the success of Cannon's Jean-Claude Van Damme vehicle *Blood Sport* (1987) led to the production of a large number of films that used the martial arts competition to structure their narratives. This then subsequently forms a "cycle" in the manner outlined by Lipstadt. Certainly this is supported by the fact that Pyramid Entertainment exploited the success of the earlier film by quickly producing another Van Damme film that focused on a martial arts competition, 1989's *Kickboxer*. Other films that "exploited" the success of *Blood Sport* in particular and Van Damme's image more generally include *Death Match* (1993), *King of the Kickboxers* (1993), *Rage: Ring of Fire II* (1994), and *Savate* (1994). Indeed, the competition narrative played an important, but not singular, role in the narrative of Van Damme's next film *AWOL* (1990) (a.k.a. *Lionheart* and *Wrong Bet*). Again, this shows how once initiated a cycle can have a longevity well beyond the period of the initial film or films success. In the case of martial arts films, competition narratives were still being produced well into the late 1990s. It is this emphasis on cycles and the fact that production companies demanded the inclusion of certain "vital" ingredients and little else, that potentially allowed space for those involved in exploitation filmmaking to, should they wish, explore a number of what might be broadly labelled "political" issues within their productions.

Once again, when considering film cycles, exploitation and political content, New World provide a useful case study. Lipstadt argues that the way in which a company like New World adhered to cycles derived from their own successes or the successes of others allowed for a certain amount of flexibility or freedom for their filmmakers. He quotes John Sayles, who worked as a screenwriter for Corman at New World, who puts it thus,

When you write for Roger Corman, you know exactly what's expected of you. Like with *Piranha*. They said, "You're going to rewrite *Piranha*. Make sure you keep the main idea, the idea of Piranhas being loose in North American waters." I said "Okay, how often do you want an attack? About every fifteen minutes?" They said "Yeah, but it doesn't have to be an attack. Maybe just the threat of an attack - but some sort of action sequence about that often to keep the energy going." I said "Anything else?" They said, "Yeah. Keep it fun." And that's a story conference at New World. It takes about twenty minutes. After that you're on your own. You can come up with any story, any location, so long as you fulfil what was agreed upon: keep the fish in the country and keep it fun. (Sayles quoted in Lipstadt, 1981: 13)

Within this restrictive yet loose format directors and writers were allowed to infuse their work with some elements of social comment. The fact that this most commonly takes place within the exploitation sphere of the American film industry has also allowed the makers of martial arts movies to create works that on occasion are politically forthright whilst closely adhering to the conventions of a particular cycle, and satisfying audience needs on a range of

levels. One of the clearest attempts to create a martial arts film that is also politically engaged is *Forced to Fight* (1991) (a.k.a. *Bloodfist III*) produced by Roger Corman's company Concorde Pictures and directed by Oley Sassone. One of the ways in which it is able to do this is by setting the film within prison. In relation to this setting I now want to examine the political potential of this particular cycle to make social comment.

On a variety of occasions the prison film has proved itself a useful form for exploitation filmmakers. Certainly the setting of these films allows for the sensationalist approach that Doherty argues marks out low budget exploitation films from the 1950s onwards. More particularly, the prison setting also provides the opportunity for the social commentary that Lipstadt argues marks out some of the more interesting examples of the women in prison cycle produced by New World in the mid-1970s.

However, the social comment offered by prison films is often lacking in clarity. For example, when writing about the cycle of women in prison films produced in the late 1950s, Anne Morey argues that, "prison is presented as an agent to return women to domesticity...while domesticity is valorized as an appropriate aim (and women who try to avoid their womanly roles are castigated), prison is the site of contradictions." (1995: 80) The sensationalist cycle in this instance is used to try and argue that women would be happiest in the domestic arena. However, their traditionalist position is undercut by the creation of female characters who cannot easily be assimilated into patriarchal society and yet cannot simply be read as negative because of this.

For New World Pictures in the early 1970s films about women in prison also proved to be financially very successful. Following the success of *The Big Doll House* (1971), which was shot cheaply in the Philippines, New World embarked upon the production of a cycle of women in prison films. As Lipstadt observes once again in this case the politics of exploitation films is far from straightforward. In clearly attempting to appeal to a young male audience through the titles and promotion of these films, New World emphasised the potential sexual content and encouraged the audience to seek titillation from their product. However, the films themselves often also attempted to work against the expectations of this audience, making observations and comments about the wider institutions within American society. Lipstadt discusses Jonathan Demme's *Caged Heat* (1974) in this light, arguing that,

the prison stands in for the institutions that repress women, especially minority women...The movie insistently uses sexual symbols, and is centrally concerned with women's independence and solidarity. It seems torn between its responsibilities, on the one hand it is sympathetic to the struggles of the characters, while on the other, it indulges in grotesque stereotypes and exploits the sadism to which the characters are subjected. (18)

As Lipstadt puts it, the film ends up "serving two masters" - on the one hand the production company's desire for a product that they can sell and on the other the desire on behalf of the filmmakers to engage politically with a number of social issues. This duality is also a concern when considering the ways in which some martial arts films attempt to engage with contemporary social issues, and comment upon them. Certainly like other exploitation films martial arts movies are structured around a series of events that satisfy the primary expectations of their target audience. In this case, violent scenes that display a range of martial arts skills. Again, as has been outlined in relation to prison films, beyond this necessity it is possible for certain martial arts filmmakers to attempt to create works that are

socially and politically engaged. *Forced to Fight* is certainly an example of this, and provides a useful case study through which one can explore the ways in which a conventional martial arts film may also attempt a certain level of social and political comment.

Social Comment, Politics and the Martial Arts Film: The Case of *Forced to Fight* (1991)

The production of Jean-Claude Van Damme's *Death Warrant* in 1990 was almost certainly the main motivation behind the making of Concorde's *Forced to Fight*. Starring former martial arts champion turned actor, Don "the Dragon" Wilson, the film exploits the prison setting of the Van Damme film. The prison movie clearly serves the interests of those producing martial arts films in a number of ways, the most obvious being that it often involves fights and the forms of combat most commonly shown within this type of film are unarmed, or only involve knives and clubs. Prison films therefore provide the primary expectation of audiences for martial arts films, fights. However, as I have already observed, the prison film also provides the potential for political engagement. It is this aspect of *Forced to Fight* that I now want to focus on.

Forced to Fight tells the story of Jimmy, played by Don "the Dragon" Wilson, who finds himself in a prison that is being used as a testing ground for new surveillance methods by a politically ambitious governor. After witnessing the rape and murder of a young black inmate Jimmy kills Luther, the leader of the gang who committed the act and finds himself transferred to cell block C, home to the most dangerous criminals in the prison. Here the main body of the film unfolds as Jimmy avoids the attempts at revenge plotted by Blue, someone who had drug links to Luther. Whilst in cell block C Jimmy is placed in a cell with Sam Stark (Richard Roundtree), a politically committed prisoner, with whom he forges a mutually respectful relationship. After a series of fights, detailed in lengthy combat sequences, Jimmy manages to survive in the cell block, and thanks to Stark the old racial antagonisms are replaced by a more positive, less divisive and more collective political perspective. At the end of the film Stark is released and he hands his law books to Jimmy who in taking them accepts the mantle of the cell block's political leader from his new friend.

First and foremost however, *Forced to Fight* is a martial arts film. The film's opening sequence shows Wilson going through various elements of martial arts training. This is certainly a convention that is associated with martial arts films produced in Hong Kong in the 1970s and 1980s which often had training sequences as pre-credit sequences or under the credits. In this case as the credits appear Wilson works out and performs a variety of martial arts moves, showing the audience that he can actually perform the moves and kicks that they expect will appear in the main body of the film. The authenticity of Wilson's skills are further reinforced by the fact that on the credits he is listed not simply as Don Wilson, but as "Don 'the Dragon' Wilson, World Kickboxing Association world light heavyweight champion". Again, this works to conform Wilson as a "real" martial arts practitioner, and one who has performed at the highest level. In terms of the film's exploitation origins the prison setting further reinforces the expectation that Wilson will systematically be called upon to show his martial arts prowess throughout. The narrative of the film delivers on this level as Wilson's character Jimmy is involved in a number of situations that demand he engages in hand to hand combat.

However, once the film has delivered this most exploitable element, as in the New World pictures of the 1970s, the filmmakers attempt to create a work that is also political in that it

includes strong elements of social comment. As an example and in order to suggest how this occurs I will focus on the way in which *Forced to Fight* handles issues of race within its institutional setting. As Lipstadt argues with regard to *Caged Heat*, the exploitation prison film is often clearly critical of the institutions that make up American society. Within *Forced to Fight* the political aspirations of the Governor link the actions within the prison to the wider political picture. In the film's opening sequence he is seen making political mileage out of his policies within Wingate Penitentiary. He presents an economically driven (less men needed to supervise prisoners due to new surveillance technologies) rationale for his changes to the prison's structure, and clearly sees this as part of his wider campaign to become State Attorney General. The best interests of the prisoners are therefore clearly subservient to the political ambitions of the Prison Governor. The film's engagement with racial issues also appears in the opening sequences. Intercut between the Governor's politically motivated speech to the media and their walkabout in the prison, is a far more brutal event - a young black prisoner is attacked, raped and murdered by a gang of black prisoners. The racial divide between those in control (white) and those controlled (black) is clearly established from the outset.

The issue of race is also central to the way in which the film establishes its central relationship between Jimmy and Sam Stark. Within the narrative, once Jimmy has been transferred to the high security cell block C he is placed in a cell with Stark. The space of the cell becomes very important as it provides an opportunity for the characters to talk and through their discussion establish important connections between them in relation to issues of race. For example, when Jimmy asks Stark if he can borrow a book from him he is handed the biography of Malcolm X. Jimmy returns the book, but instead of rejecting it as we might suspect he says that he has already read it. This shared political knowledge is the beginning of a mutual respect between the two men. The mise-en-scene used to show the cell clearly reinforces the politicised nature of Stark as it highlights the posters of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela that are within it.

On many occasions race is shown to be a key motivation in prison films, with inmates clearly connected to gangs that are demarcated through racial origin. Alongside this, the hero is often presented as a loner who remains outside the influence of these gangs. In *Forced to Fight* this narrative convention is challenged. Stark clearly represents a political position that is beyond these simple racial divides. As such he marks out the most positive position presented within the film. When Jimmy is first allowed to join Stark's horticultural group on the prison roof it is clearly shown as racially mixed to reinforce this point. Jimmy is introduced to the members of Sam's "gang" who span a number of the ethnic groups that populate contemporary America: it consists of Tony D'Angelo (Italian-American), Joe and Kelly Clarey (Irish-American), Clinton Dunbar and Henry Jones (African-American). The acceptance of Jimmy into this group is therefore significant.

The film explores Jimmy's racial origins in a sophisticated way. When he first arrives in cell block C a variety of racial labels are used to describe him. This works to emphasise the fact that he cannot be easily assimilated into the racial gangs that predominate the space, and they include: "chink", "China man", "Korean", "cracker", and "half-breed". When he is initially confronted by the Aryan brotherhood in the prison laundry, their leader says that "laundry is in his blood". Once again the cell that Jimmy shares with Stark becomes the area where the truth is exposed. Jimmy reveals that he is in prison for being involved in a bar fight. He suggests that he was arrested because the police "didn't like the look of my skin". He states that he is an "American born and bred" but because he is half Japanese the authorities "are

always looking side-ways" at him. As he speaks he is framed in the cell bars, suggesting that America, with its institutionalised racism, is as much of a prison as the cell block because of the ways in which the (white) police wield their power. This is an important moment as it represents the first definite acknowledgement of Jimmy's racial origin, and proves that the earlier racist assumptions about him were totally wrong. In a post-Pearl Harbour, post-Vietnam America, *Forced to Fight* is a film that attempts to tackle what is an important issue within contemporary American society. Once again the intimacy of the cell shared by Stark and Jimmy provides a thoughtful moment within the film, and reinforces it as a space for truth and contemplation. The other important space within the cell block is the roof garden where the horticultural club meets.

The roof garden acts as a sanctuary for those selected to be part of Stark's community. Here, the prisoners care for plants and prepare meals. Again, the meals reflect the pluralist approach championed by Stark as they are drawn from a range of cultural backgrounds. The mise-en-scene of the roof garden suggests an oasis within the hostile environment of the prison, transforming the wire fences that keep the men in into trellises that support the plants and flowers grown by them. The space of the garden also visually marks an escape from the racially divided prison community in general. The care taken in creating this through the mise-en-scene is particularly effective when assassins enter the roof garden in an attempt to murder Jimmy. The moment threatens not just Jimmy, but as they destroy the work of Stark's men it threatens his vision of another, more tolerant and politically committed way of living. The garden also provides the space for the final conflict between Blue, the man who wants to kill Jimmy and destroy Stark, and who through his drug dealing is representative of capitalist exploitation. Taking place in the garden, this becomes a symbolic confrontation between different political perspectives and values. It is a fight for the garden and Stark's outlook and political values.

Stark plays a pivotal political role in the film as he is used to articulate the reasons for the men's oppression. For example, he challenges those involved in gang fighting and attempts on Jimmy's life, connecting their position to the wider social context, when he says: "we were all born into a bad situation, and we've graduated into something even worse. They don't care if we live or die. So if you want to fight, fight the damn system that got you here, not each other". The broader context is a racist, white, middle-class dominated society. This is reflected in the world of the prison by the fact that figures of authority are all white: the prison guards, who are shown as vindictive and corrupt; the governor, who wears a bow-tie signifying middle-classness and hates Stark for his politically challenging views; the candidate for State Attorney, who is willing to exploit anything to gain political ground.

The finale of *Forced to Fight* successfully brings together the various political elements of the film. Stark is attacked and stabbed and we are led to believe that he is dead. Jimmy defeats Blue in a fight in the garden and there is a fade to black. We are then presented with a shot of a black man walking through the prison with the aid of a stick. Whilst it is clearly Stark, having survived the stabbing walking towards his release and freedom, the figure is strange. On closer inspection this sequence contains the film's most startlingly political image. As Stark walks through the interior of the prison the actor in silhouette is clearly not Richard Roundtree. The replacement is much taller and thinner and resembles black political leader Malcolm X. This reading seems particularly relevant as Malcolm X had appeared on the wall of Stark's cell and the book he and Jimmy discussed was his biography. The mise-en-scene here seems to directly link Stark's ideas and his commitment to those oppressed by the political system, here represented by prison, with the political beliefs of Malcolm X. This

sequence suggests the ways in which this exploitation film can offer a political perspective on the social context and setting of the action. Like the earlier New World features *Forced to Fight* demonstrates that strong, forthright political content can be woven into the structures of exploitation films, without necessarily denying audiences the elements they expect - in this case martial arts action.

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