

The Cult Nature of the Extreme: Martial Arts, Gore, Camp, and Community  
*Riki-Oh, The Street Fighter, and Tokyo Fist*

[SAMPLE]

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Top 15 most insane, gory, disgusting films that will make you vomit your brains out and scream “wtf!” and call your mom in hysterics. The gore object is often found underground, on sites that you would go “incognito” to view and delete from your browser history. Underground or cult cinema is often found in the same way. You don’t always tell your mom that you watched Harmony Korine’s *Trash Humpers* on the family computer the same way you won’t tell her that you just saw someone’s head get blown off on Live Leak. In the realm of underground and cult cinema, there’s a subgenre that incorporates gore, gross-out elements, and humor: the Martial Arts film. Martial Arts and action films lend themselves to gore for obvious reasons, slashing swords, swinging fists, and deadly stares are abundant. These two genres, gore and martial arts, are intertwined. Martial arts films are often filled with enough gore to populate their own shock website. Through the lens/avenue of Gory Martial Arts films, I seek to analyze why people are drawn to cult films and films focused on extremism and violence.

In my research and analysis, I chose to focus not only on Kung Fu films from Hong Kong, but any sort of martial art (hand-to-hand combat or sword combat, etc. excluding gun fighting) from Hong Kong, Japan, and Korea. I mostly focused on the Japanese martial arts films *Tokyo Fist* (1995) and *The Street Fighter* (1974), as well as the Hong Kong film *Riki Oh: The Story of Ricky* (1991). I wanted to avoid topics and visuals like sexual violence and assault in my research as well. Avoiding this boundary turned out to be more difficult than I expected, as extremism in gore often goes hand in hand with exploitation and porn.

Martial arts cinema in the West sort of popped out of nowhere. Small exhibitions in small theaters, double features, misleading titles, poorly researched English-language dubs. Martial Arts, or more specifically Kung Fu, films began to pop up in Chinatown theaters across major US cities and metropolitan areas from Los Angeles to New York City. Martial arts films took off in the US with 1973’s *Five Fingers of Death*. Bruce Lee then became the biggest star in the United States after his films *The Big Boss* and *Fist of Fury* took off leading to the *Enter the Dragon* US/Hong Kong co-production. In an article describing the documentary film *Iron Fists and Kung Fu Kicks*, a columnist for the South China Morning Post describes this time within the United States and their humble beginnings regarding Hong Kong and Martial Arts cinema as “opportunistic US distributors promot[ing] martial arts films as salacious and exotic... to milk the movies for every last buck possible.” Martial arts films beginning in the underground film

scene feel like a humble origin story, but considering how far the genre has come in the American zeitgeist, it's not surprising that American capitalism wanted to profit off of cultural works from abroad. This rings true in the vein of Bruceploitation films that popped up following his death, but also in marketing the films as sexually explicit, when they were not, and as something very sensationalized.

This mindset and framework for pushing for profit off of films of the 'other' has not changed since the 1970s. Nowadays, with films like *Terrifier 2*, underseen films and films that have a specific style (especially films that are based on gross-out ideology and horror) are promoted online and by word of mouth as "must-see" or "you won't believe what you're watching". This idea is also brought up and understood within the context of a real-life gore video, as discussed in the opening paragraph. Oftentimes, the only times you will see people talking about this film in the mainstream is when it is causing moral issues within younger audiences (think Slenderman or *A Clockwork Orange*). In many cases of these extreme pieces of media, the attention gained through attempted suppression will garner more attention.

This idea of "morbid curiosity" seems to have led to the rise of the video nasty which led to the rise of pirating sites which led to private catalogs and servers which then finally leads to watching real-life beheadings on YouTube at the lunch table in 6th grade. These pieces from the likes of Rotten.com, Live Leak, and BestGore, are spread to this day to unsuspecting eyes. Morbid curiosity often leads people to watch these videos and show them to other people for shock value. Sometimes there's even a "run the gauntlet" feature where you can test yourself to see how much you can sit through without clicking off of the site. Horror films, splatter films, and "Gross-out cinema" are often equipped with a fan-made feature of a similar function. People love to view these things and films in the same way. Psychologically, people are often satisfied and empowered by "getting through" these horrible images presented to us. Some people, like the founder of BestGore Slovak Mark Marek, also think that by seeing these gory images we can be more adaptable to any real-life trauma that may occur, even likening the experience to a doctor performing surgery in an article for GQ. "We help desensitize people to gore, so when a real-life event involving gore happens in their lives, they won't faint, they won't freak out, they won't throw up, they won't make it worse, they will remain collected, much as a doctor is when he performs a gory surgery."