Notice of the Final Oral Examination
for the Degree of Master of Arts

of

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BA (University of Victoria, 2017)

“The Sparring Instinct: Diaries of Mixed Martial Arts”

Department of Sociology

Wednesday, April 14, 2021
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Remote Defence

Supervisory Committee:
Dr. Steve Garlick, Department of Sociology, University of Victoria (Supervisor)
Dr. William Little, Department of Sociology, UVic (Member)
Dr. Emile Fromet de Rosnay, Department of French, UVic (Outside Member)

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Dr. Alex Channon, School of Sport & Service, University of Brighton UK

Chair of Oral Examination:
Dr. Audrey Yap, Department of Philosophy, UVic

Dr. Stephen Evans, Acting Dean, Faculty of Graduate Studies
Abstract

Mixed martial arts (MMA) is a combat sport where pugilists combine various martial art forms to compete in sanctioned bouts of hand-to-hand cage fighting. Through immersive ethnographic research at an MMA gym, this thesis presents a carnal sociology that investigates rigorous human sparring as a means of human liberation. Carnal sociology is a method of embodied inquiry where the sociologist uses their own body to investigate various social phenomena. Chapter 1 reveals connections between modern sparring encounters and early religious violence as described in Émile Durkheim’s sociology. I argue that human sparring is a form of violent and primitively religious prayer that allows the sparrer to extract originary feelings of human agency that are stored in the social energies of sparring intensity. Chapter 2 explores current debates regarding gender in modern mixed-sex martial arts gyms, arguing for a more patient approach to conceptualizing gender in sparring. Despite scholars depicting the history of sparring as being saturated with violent expressions of masculinity, modern sparring practices appear to present a novel space for men and women to enter into freer associations with gender on their own terms. In Chapter 3, I expand on Dale Spencer’s (2009) concept of body callusing, arguing instead that human beings are primarily drawn to sparring to engage in something I call existential callusing, where the sparrer is driven by psychological urges to develop a mastery of the non-body in order to overcome death anxiety. Drawing on participant diary entries, field notes, and immersive ethnography, this thesis argues that human sparring is best understood as a mechanism of liberation that is undertaken by sparrers through a unique transcendental phenomenology. Sparring violence allows practitioners to overcome certain limitations embedded in everyday human thought by becoming intoxicated by especially altered states of consciousness as a means of accessing primary qualities of the human condition.

Keywords

Human Sparring, Transcendental Phenomenology, Micro Sociology, Gender, Suffering, Existential Liberation