

Felon Fights: Masculinity, Spectacle and Suffering

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Abstract

Felony Fights is a website and set of DVDs depicting 'no rules' combat between male former convicts and a range of opponents. In these, the spectacle of violence serves to obscure the profoundly unequal relations of power that shape their production and viewing appeal. In *Felony Fights*, embodied marginality and poverty are presented as evidence of the animal brutality and the carceral character of the fighters. This resonates with populist explanations for criminality and male violence, and the punitive sentiments that are linked to law and order thinking about the failure of the penal system to adequately punish and inflict suffering on dangerous criminals.

Introduction

An important body of contemporary social theory suggests that post-industrial societies with a new emphasis on leisure and consumption are heavily focused on the fostering of public spectacle and that this is often reflected in the formats of new media (Debord 1994). This thinking usually regards the carnivalesque aspects of contemporary popular culture that involve levels of transgression, liminal time out or rule breaking as affording pleasure for both social actors and onlookers, and as a progressive or culturally egalitarian development (Presdee 2000). In a darker but related vein, Katz (1988) argued that the pleasurable sensual attractions of wrongdoing or even what he called evil delight in criminal acts had to be taken more seriously by researchers.

These wider debates about cultural trends and order form the backdrop to concerns about an apparent shift towards more explicit depictions or enactments of serious violence. This has occurred in a series of marginalised and reviled, but growing and commercialised forms including the promotion of dangerous fights as leisure events, bouts in public arena, producing and selling related videos, DVDs, music and merchandise, and organising email listings and threads that involve combatants, promoters, producers, fans and other commentators. A public interest in such full-contact violence as boxing, wrestling, and mainstream martial arts has now extended to embrace less respectable and more explicitly brutal forms in an American globalising and internet-driven shift.

Cage fighting, and extreme fighting with limited rules and possible use of dangerous weapons, have an evident underground aspect to them. These are now more popular activities for participation or viewing among the socially excluded white poor and working poor of the contemporary United States. Critical criminologists may have reservations about joining in the debate about theorisation of the 'underclass' in contemporary capitalism and whether or not that is a legitimate label for a large cluster of working-class people. Yet this is not just a debate about terminology. This descriptor has reality in relation to a major social class segment in rust-belt cities and former farm-belt regions of the US. These locations derived no benefit from two decades of neo-liberal economic restructuring resulting in mass blue-collar retrenchment, bankruptcies and mortgage failure. Sociologists have done brilliant ethnographic studies of this social milieu and its links to rising support for White Power, revived Klan and armed militia groups (Fine et al 1997; Ferber 2004). It is not coincidental that these movements and groups all incorporate a mix of covert and overt violence and hatred into their rhetoric and defensive frames of understanding their social world.

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The commercialisation of the trend towards extreme fighting as a popular leisure, which began in the 1990s and early 2000s, has been rapid. The commodified violence of new fight sports such as kickboxing and mixed martial arts in non-Asian nations, coupled with the rise of the internationally televised Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) has notably expanded (Garcia and Malcolm 2009). But the organised aspect of these new sports and their bodies that eventually seek legitimacy and respectability may also be feeding a further cultural interest in even more marginal and dangerously violent events. The mass use of the internet and popular and inexpensive video equipment are also key aspects of this. The closeness of the internet and its mostly privatised viewing spaces are host to the collective unconscious and an (overwhelmingly male) fascination with sex and violence. The internet now hosts a great deal of do-it-yourself pornography, and in a similar way it has quick links to many amateur films of spontaneous conflicts between men and between women in a range of public spaces like bars, streets and schoolyards. Different, more staged or planned, acts of violence are also found on dedicated fighting/violence sites. A quick internet search can find many amateur films of 'underground' fight matches. The advent of mobile phone cameras has brought on the phenomenon of 'happy-slapping', where physical assaults between young people are planned with the intention of distributing the digital recording online (Saunders 2005).

Most notable, the transgressive sadistic appeal of much of this internet material has drawn recent middle-class public attention and a critical response to the staging and filming of 'bum fights' involving acts of violence and self-mutilation that homeless men are paid to perform on each other, and/or physical assaults and humiliations directed against vulnerable homeless people. A respectable revulsion about this phenomenon was demonstrated in mainstream public, media and legal reactions. Organising, filming and marketing of bum fights led to the 2005 jailing of two members of a group of young white Californian men producing these clips after they refused to comply with the community service orders imposed on them for conspiracy to stage illegal fights. In their defence, the producers claimed that all homeless men depicted in their films consented to appear and some were compensated for their participation (Squires 2002).

This paper is focused on a less publicised but more extreme example of this marketed violence that has echoes of ancient gladiatorial combats and is attractive for its moral edge. It is shocking to mainstream sensibilities but at the same time also often choreographed and increasingly commodified. The cultural shift towards more explicit depictions or enactments of disturbing real violence has mostly been reviled but is happening in growing popular commercial forms that include a DVD genre with ambiguous emphasis on violent carceral white male identities.

Felony Fights is a range of DVDs and related merchandise generally built around arranged 'no rules' conflicts between two or more men.² These conflicts have a mix of combatants that include Hispanic and African-American men. Nevertheless, a key feature of this genre which confounds simple understandings of privilege based on colour, is the marked involvement of white, working class (or underclass) and poor young men with class origins that are evident in working class accents and speech and frequently heavy tattooing. Most interestingly, the regular favourites among fight participants that give the title designated to these film clips are recently released prisoners or 'felons'.

The Spectacle of Male Carceral Violence

The concept of *Felony Fights* was developed in 2004 by its owner, Michael Lynch, a white American and ex-prisoner who sought to popularise underground 'fight clubs' in which amateur men fought one another in unregulated bouts for money (Wachter 2008). The 'con versus con' format is uneven and evolving but in its rounded example, the narrative structure of each clip (which usually lasts

² In early 2010, the author viewed the *Felony Fights* clips available on *YouTube* (<http://www.youtube.com>), a video-sharing website that enables users to upload, share and view videos. It is common for *Felony Fights* clips on *YouTube* to attract hundreds of thousands of views and some have been viewed over half a million times. Other users have appropriated the term 'Felony Fights' and used it in the title of unrelated fight clips. This may indicate that the term 'Felony Fights' is becoming a general term associated with fight clips. However, it was relatively simple to differentiate *Felony Fights* clips from other fight clips due to the characteristic format that often sported a www.felonyfights.com watermark in the bottom right-hand corner.

around ten minutes) commences with mock celebrity interviews with combatants who are typically shirtless and displaying an array of tattoos. Many of them are blotchy and amateurish in appearance and presumably acquired during a period of incarceration. Interviewees are given set questions and reply with their name, a précis of their criminal history (especially as regards any extreme violence), and they are encouraged to make some bragging mention of the better known and brutalising prisons they have been in and survived. The interview is completed with a final verbal affirmation that the interviewees are intent on real violence and harm to their opponents.

This interviewing is followed by a fairly ritualised fight sequence that usually occurs between two or more men and an escalating deployment of hard kicks, punches, lunges, wrestling, stomping and biting. Novelty weapons in use can include poles, swords, and kung fu sticks. The striking absence of guns appears to have been deliberately imposed because the quick outcome of mutual firearm use would detract from the length or interest of such conflicts. Usually these fights are carried out in austere landscapes that both enhance focus on the fighting action and suggest the hidden form of filming. Concrete canals, empty fields and very empty desert settings that for some viewers might resonate with *Mad Max* or prison planet-style science fiction films are used most often.

Only a few clips feature audience members who barrack and bay for more brutality. Instead, the clips usually appear to just involve the combatants and a production crew of occasionally visible young males. These contests can lead to substantial injury for some or all and typically only end with immobilisation from serious injury. It has been claimed that participants are typically paid \$US800 each and taken across the Mexican border to minimise any law enforcement intervention or legal liability (Wachter 2008). Quite obviously, such an amount of money is a paltry and exploitative sum for involvement in dangerous and often disfiguring contests that occur well removed from any emergency medical assistance.

The *Felony Fights* brand website also features a paying member's area where more explicit images of violence are made available. Fight-related merchandise includes tattoo designs, music and DVDs, as well as a range of street-wear that includes the 'Future Felon' T-shirt for young children. In addition to the mostly male-on-male attacks, images and streaming of brutal conflicts between mostly white young women (with unstated criminal histories) are also available. These are included via a line of DVD 'Chick Fights', or those that are specifically made available on a link to 'Sick Fuk' television.³

There are apparent elements here of class protest and the masculine claim on social honour and respect that can be made from surviving dangerous violence. Gauging any reaction to this material brings to mind the criticisms of such leisure activities as organised cruelty towards and fights between animals, and multiple forms of sporting hooliganism. Yet this and similar genres of fight clips are hard to celebrate as debased forms of carnival. The cruel use of animals as violent entertainment is frequently deemed exploitative by virtue of the moral problem of non-consent. A moral indifference to *Felony Fights* seems more possible within the liberal myth of open reasoned choice in private contract work. Here, the marketplace reduces the labour power of working-class and poor males to nothing more than the destructive sinew and muscle of their bodies. Yet it is an ostensibly free market.

Superficially, the *Felony Fights* website looks like a welcoming natural home for hardened members of an economic underclass and their despised world view and ways of living. It does not visibly judge them and it caters to openly vulgar violent and sexual interests. A regular minority of participants and fans proudly reveal swastikas and other racist tattoos that in other social contexts would be regarded as shameful. The violence of these clips and the social rebelliousness evident in raucous heavy metal and thrash music, obscene language and sexist imagery could be intended to

³ Websites associated with the *Felony Fights* (<http://www.felonyfights.com>) brand now also include:

- *Cons vs Cons* (<http://www.consvscons.com>): An online platform for *Felony Fights* products and subscription services;
- *Cons vs Cage* (<http://www.consvscage.com>): A recent but less successful initiative by the producers of *Felony Fights* involving trained MMA fighters, in which combatants with prison histories are pitted against combatants with more reputable hegemonic masculine backgrounds, such as former police officers or fire fighters;
- *Queen of the Hood* (<http://www.queenofthehood.com>): A related *Felony Fights* venture involving fights between women.

offend or reject middle-class sensibilities. Even a frequent need for criminal justice assistance is addressed on site by advertising from specialist criminal lawyers and easy bail bond lenders for those in trouble with the police.

Within the clips many combatants treat their own serious wounding as a mark of personal status. A sensual enjoyment of violence merges with the apparent masculine status claim of most victors or even the amused glee expressed by the vanquished at end of clips. This winning and losing of violent encounters should not be mistaken for the successful attainment of any significant male social power. In Connell's terms this is an obvious example of a protest masculinity struggling for recognition against marginal status and limited or no real relational, material or institutional power (1995:116).

A key question that begs critical consideration here is how can the focus on the criminality and history of imprisonment of the fight participants in this genre of DVD be explained? Incarceration in the harshest American prisons and an apparently innate destructive violence are both conflated aspects of participant identity. The fighter's violence is the essential core of their permanent carceral character. Having 'served time' for a judicially determined period is irrelevant to the notion that the fundamental aspect of fighter identity is as a felon, a prisoner or 'con'. Words, images and action here display a fixed, violent male identity that is marked corporeally by tattoos, wounds and scarring, and a presumed personal history of extreme brutality that overrides reasoned apprehension of risk in such physically dangerous conflicts. It is not coincidental that the impossibility of genuine positive change for the mass of incarcerated felons is a key aspect of populist criticism of the courts and penal systems in most industrial nations in recent decades (Pratt et al 2005).

Simon (2007) powerfully suggests that the contemporary punitiveness and mass incarceration that is the result of the war on crime in most of the United States has itself spread fear of crime and is tantamount to a war on the underclass in its destructive impacts on impoverished, African American and Hispanic communities. Of course, this is in many respects also a divisive war within the working class. A major outcome of the war on crime is a reduced belief in the rehabilitative ideal. Law and order rhetoric insists on firm individual responsibility for crime ('do the crime, do the time') but also has a contradictory commitment to the idea of fixed criminal or penal types. This renewed public trend to view most crime as the activity of pathological types has also mixed with the new popularity of brands of evolutionary psychology that suggest male violence is inevitable as it is genetically imprinted as a primitive form of masculine competition.

This same theme of an irredeemable and dangerous criminality is evident in the possible interpretations of *Felony Fights* as a marginalised violent media. Indirect research cannot produce knowing evidence about the views and interests of the audience for these DVDs. Nevertheless, the site-linked discussion threads are overwhelmingly gleeful about violence and carry comments that are positive about the extra-judicial, post-release corporal punishment of obviously criminal types. The very popularity of this material is due to the way this fighter suffering can gratify punitive sentiments that are both conscious and unconscious in the contemporary public and deliberately fostered in law and order campaigns. In this way and despite their offensive material, *Felony Fights* have a degree of further legitimacy that other forms of extreme displays of violence are lacking. The level of public disgust and legal determination to block the enactment and filming of 'bum fights' has not been repeated with regard to these depictions of violence between or directed against ex-convicts.

The simple narrative structure of these clips differs from other filmic uses of violence and depictions of masculinity in crisis such as the Clint Eastwood vengeance films that emerged in the 1970s to dovetail with the political agendas of the US Right. These have been read to unconsciously but powerfully equate welfarism with collective castration and legal breakdown, and a new Reaganite militarism and neo-liberal market discipline with restoration of firm traditional male authority (Hallsworth 2004). The vicious carceral identities depicted in *Felony Fights* might be similar to the debased masculinity of the bad guys that Clint Eastwood guns down in his many vigilante roles (Hallsworth 2004). The vital difference, though, is these clips just offer viewers an ongoing loop of dangerous criminal violence and no post-Vietnam restoration of hegemonic white male authority.

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This is what makes the whiteness of fight participants significant and complicating. This genre does include named novelty fights that feature black and Hispanic men, fights between women, and conflicts that are even marketed as fights between 'normal people'. However, the whiteness of many combatants is a recurrent element of *Felony Fights*. Despite the presumed criminality and animal violence of these young men, they are not too dissimilar from millions of young working-class males initiated into the violent deployment of their bodies by simple policing and security work or military recruitment. In particular, the latter is a more legitimate and condoned channelling of violence that has served nation states in the colonial, mass warfare and post-colonial periods. These very same fighting websites also often carry icons that lead viewers to pictures of marine fights, and police and security assaults to be viewed for pleasure.

This whole range of police and military assaults might seem like the more unexpected but inevitable forms of violence necessitated by keeping civil order and readiness to fight wars and interventions in crises like contemporary Iraq and Afghanistan. These different uses of violence become elided in rhetoric and images that have a haunting presence in the culture of the contemporary US. War-making in the hostile desert settings of the Middle East that has prevailed since the early 1990s appears legitimated as a commonsense state measure of international crime control. It is merely a further dimension of the domestic war on crime. Furthermore, the redemptive potential of extreme violence and suffering enacted on the white male body is an ongoing cultural motif in the Christian West.

Because of the uncanny similarities between the mass of working-class military recruits and these fight clip combatants, *Felony Fights* may serve as a reminder of what behavioural pattern will be forthcoming from poor males without work, military or prison discipline and paternal authority. The carceral aspects of this violence suggest an illegitimate threat to hegemonic masculine authority, but ambiguously, the violent male whiteness on display here closely aligns with the more honoured military violence that underwrites state power and social order.

Conclusion

Felony Fights both revel in and disavow underclass male violence. The voyeurism and sadistic fantasies of viewing are also intertwined with class loathing and disgust as revulsion at this deliberate production of bloodshed as popular entertainment. Yet a fully critical gaze must look well past such internet sites to apprehend the full hypocrisy of this. The flipside of the civilising process has been an ongoing and widespread fascination with viewing acted and real violence (e.g. in fictional attacks and killings, war documentaries, crime news coverage, contact sport footage, etc) and the vicarious pleasure in this that now so widely permeates film, television and popular fiction.

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