

***FINISHING THE GAME:
MEDIATIONS BETWEEN
REALITY AND REPRESENTATION***

Mass Communication Theory

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Spring 2008

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Finishing The Game: The Search for a New Bruce Lee, is a 2007 mockumentary focusing on the production of Bruce Lee's final film, *Game of Death*, which was to be a showcase of his Jeet Kune Do fighting style. Lee died before the film's completion, leaving only 12 minutes of actual fight footage. Never willing to miss a chance for profit, opportunistic studio executives cast stand-ins for Lee and rewrote the script to release a complete version of *Game of Death*. The film features, most notably, Lee wearing the iconic yellow and black jumpsuit during the famous duel with Kareem Abdul-Jabbar.

Finishing the Game satirizes the audition and casting process involved in finding the "new Bruce Lee." The auditions are attended by a motley assortment of candidates vying for the role, including a Middle-Eastern doctor and a Caucasian Asian-wannabe. In fact, most of the hopefuls are not Chinese, and bear no resemblance to Lee. The film is less about Lee than it is a lampoon of Hollywood in the 1970s, exposing behind-the-scenes farces and racism ingrained in the industry. The story follows the struggles faces by Asian-American actors of the time to meet ethnic stereotypes, and the film specifically takes aim at the "chop socky" characterizations of Asians and the "delivery-boy" role carved out for Asian actors. Along the way, the film presents a variety of depictions and assessments that may be examined under through the lens of postmodern film theory.

A key postmodern theme of the film is identity. The characters, although comprised mostly of Asians, hail from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. As they are revealed, each

character is realized to be decidedly unique. The good-natured Cole Kim is naïve and unconfident, still seeking his big break. Breeze Loo is an egomaniacal Bruce Lee mimic, has appeared in 14 low-budget martial arts movies. Raja, a martial arts stuntman of Indian descent, seeks Hollywood fame after completing medical school. Troy Poon is a disillusioned TV-actor-turned-vacuum salesman, desperate to return to the screen but wary of the stereotypes. Tarrick Tyler claims to be “half-Chinese”, embraces Buddhist philosophy despises being called “white.” Finally, MC Hammer portrays Roy Thunder, a black talent agent who specializes in roles for “actors of color,” because yellow is a color, too.

The Asian characters are distinguished by distinctly different personalities. Korean Cole Kim is the traditional dreamy southerner, reflective and idealistic. Troy Poon, who is Vietnamese, never displays a bit of his Asian heritage. Breeze Loo, who might be Chinese, is starkly American, self-obsessed and devoid of ideological coherence, hiding the pain of his deluded passion. These characters, played by Asian actors, challenge the audience’s conventions of encoding and decoding through the reversal (or upheaval) of denotative and connotative systems of signification (Hall 136). The characters appear Asian, but each defies the typical role given to Asians in cinema to the point that the characters “feel” white. In this sense, their identities become ambiguous as they attempt to express individuality while being painfully typecast. Even Caucasian Tarrick Tyler suffers reverse discrimination in his quest to be accepted as Chinese.

More than their differences, the similarities between Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean, Laotian, Filipino, Indian, Caucasian and black ethnicities are brought to light through their love and respect for Asian culture and their desire to make it in Hollywood. This dichotomy, the differences between people of the same race, is played on numerous times in the film, not only through the stereotypes the audience expects but also from the character of the producer, who profoundly claims that it doesn't matter who is cast in the role of Lee, as the film is really "made in the editing room." The joke here is obvious: Although a veritable rainbow of Asian personalities is presented, in the end, everyone knows that all Asians really just look the same.

This kind of tongue-in-cheek depiction of the underlying and blatant racism in Hollywood borrows from Stam and Spence's theories of race, although somewhat distorted to fit Asian cultural stereotypes. Specifically, Stam states that "Many oppressed groups have used 'progressive realism' to unmask and combat hegemonic images (Braudy & Cohen, 882)." Of course, it is important to note that the producer, Marty Kurtainbaum, is himself simply a stereotype of an opportunistic, profit-hungry Jewish studio executive.

Kurtainbaum, his director/son Ronney, casting director Eloise and assistant Cassie represent Dyer's traditionally-white power structure (Dyer, 143). They make all the important decisions based on pitiful mischaracterizations and misinformation, reminiscent of Baudrillard's concepts of capital and ideological moral superstructure (Baudrillard 173). The talent agency that represents Breeze Loo and Troy Poon is white-

only as well. *Finishing the Game* also challenges and reinforces the notion of the white power structure by introducing Ron Jeremy (as himself) in the role of an adult film producer. When guileless Hollywood hopeful Cole Kim arrives at an audition, unaware that the film is pornography, he finds Jeremy waiting to cast him as “the Asian guy.” Even in the dregs of the film industry, it seems the white power structure is entrenched.

Finishing The Game is interestingly conventional in its depiction of women. Women are featured as power players in the film, particularly casting director Eloise, whose method of choosing the film’s cast is based on “fuckability.” Assistant Cassie has the responsibility of crowd control during auditions. Together they hold the reigns where the inept rookie director Ronney is lacking in vision. The third prominent female character is Saraghina Rivas, the girlfriend/manager of Cole Kim. Her role is constantly in flux as love interest, muse, confidant, supporter, manager and disciplinarian.

In a secondary plotline, Cole and Saraghina split up, and Saraghina becomes the manager of Cole’s hero/rival, Breeze Loo. In each instance, the role of the female represents the possibility of castration. Eloise’s experience in casting threatens Ronney’s authority as director. To an extent Eloise and Cassie control the destiny of the auditioning actors as well. Cole’s career, relationship, and to an extent, sense of happiness, revolve around Saraghina. For each male, the female identity represents lack. Cassie and Saraghina are represented as sexual objects, also but authority figures to be feared. In this sense, the film obeys Studlar’s assertion that “the tension between attraction and fear is an ambivalence underlying much of cinema’s representation of the female (Studlar 780).”

Several instances of pastiche are prominent throughout the film, the foremost being the traditionally “corny” representation of the 70s. The production design is complete with tight-fitting pants, afros, butterfly collars and leisure suits. Each of the characters, in trying to fit well-defined ethnic Asian stereotypes, represent a sort of pastiche. Breeze Loo, a “spaghetti” actor, mimics Lee’s signature style and pose, but claims to have “never seen the cat’s work.” Another striking pastiche/homage is the famous yellow and black track suit that each character wears to audition. The film also features a sequence depicting the auditions, with each character uttering the infamous line, “You offended me, you offended my family,” with varying degrees of inflection and hilarity. Each instance of pastiche serves a purpose, whether to emphasize irony or to remind the audience about discrimination, ethnic stereotypes and unequal opportunities.

Finishing The Game specifically pays attention the “mediations which intervene between reality and representation,” a concept mentioned by Stam (Braudy & Cohen, 884). The emphasis on racial identity in the film is presented in the context of a specific genre, Martial Arts and the film adheres to realistic representations, showing the unique qualities, specific interests and flaws of each of the characters; they are definitely not walking stereotypes. The irony is that the deeply carved and realistic feel of the characters is in stark opposition to the one-dimensional Asian characters found in Hollywood in the 70s. This sense of mediation becomes prominent during the film’s only real “action” scene, which is not the choreographed Kung-Fu that the audience might expect. Rather, Cole blind-sides Breeze with a sucker-punch. In the non-fictional fight,

there's no concern for martial code of honor, and "You offended my family" is never spoken.

Finishing the Game stands out, particularly, as a postmodern text. The format of a hypothetical documentary is in itself a fragmentation of reality, a presentation of fantasized events. Each of the characters attempts a simulation of Bruce Lee that would honor Baudrillard. They are called to duty only out of the fact that Lee himself has passed away. In the audition, beheld by the white power structure, they are embraced, and with dismissal they are abandoned. The actors, stand-ins for Lee, are presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that Lee is real and still alive. "It is no longer a question of false representation of reality (ideology), but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real (Baudrillard 172). Baudrillard might characterize the concept of *Game of Death* as a hyper-realistic presentation. When the real object has been effaced or superceded by the signs of its existence--when everyone is a simulation of Bruce Lee—the real, Lee, no longer exists.

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