

Saved By the Bell

The two semioticians, Don and Simon, took to watching the UFC in Don's grubby basement. Don's partner, Jimmy, found the fights themselves uninteresting, but the semioticians' fascination with them amusing.

Before proceeding further, we will need to clarify some technical vocabulary.

The UFC stands for the Universal Fight Championship. Almost anything is allowed. The fighting takes place in an octagon whose border is a chain link fence. One frequent tactic to force an opponent into submission is to pin his head and neck at an awkward angle on the mat and against the fence.

Fights end one of four ways: submission (a fighter taps his hand, signaling to the referee that he needs the fight to end in order to avoid serious injury), knock out, technical knock out, or decision by the judges.

When the fighters are upright at the beginning of rounds, they look like kick boxers. They punch and chop at each other with their hands, and chop short kicks to their opponent's legs, and high kicks to the head. They wear gloves that protect their knuckles, but leave their hands open for wrestling and grappling.

At some point in every round one fighter usually attempts to take-down another. Perhaps he dives in head first, grabs his opponent's legs, and drives him to the mat on his back. That is called a double leg take down. A single leg takedown is less dramatic, and less violent. One fighter pulls an opponent's leg up, so that he is balancing only on one leg. He loses balance, and eventually falls.

Finally, the most violent take down has no technical name: one fighter just lifts the other onto his hip or even his shoulder, then slams him down onto the mat. Usually, his head bounces on contact.

Once on the floor the fighters engage in techniques derived from wrestling, jujitsu, and street fighting: the latter is called 'ground and pound'. One fighter sits on top of the other and tries to punch him into submission or TKO.

It is hell. Hell, it is life.

So these two semioticians watched the UFC on downloads they received from an internet site they both subscribed to.

Simon and Don watched in the grubby basement of Don's house: in the winter the hum of both the space heater and the dehumidifier caused them to turn the TV volume up high. During the other seasons, they only had to worry about the dehumidifier.

A canvas heavy bag hung from the main house beam. The men, after stretching and warming up on an exercise bike, practiced various punches and kicks on it. Neither desired to fight, but they felt they could understand the sport better if they had some idea of what it felt to engage in it.

There were many books in the basement, thrown on shelves and still stored in half-empty, crumbling boxes. Bare bulbs gave off a harsh light; when they watched fights, they pulled the short string hanging beside the bulbs to turn them off.

Dust was everywhere.

They liked to drink gourmet root beer made with pure cane sugar. Paradoxically, they liked to eat cheeseballs and Ritz crackers with the root beer. Don liked to gasp at the blood, the heavy hits, the merciless take downs, the blood. Simon was more disinterested and analytical.

When fighters who had been cut were on the mat, battling it out like wrestlers, their blood smeared all over each other and the mat.

The semioticians discussed what it meant. What it all meant.

The octagon girls who strode across the ring between rounds wearing only bikinis and holding signs that announced the next round — 2, 3, or, in the case of title fights, 4 or 5. The sodden audience, signaling and screaming and sticking out their tongues when the camera swept their section. Excruciating submissions. The injuries.

Here's a typical conversation:

Don (with his elbow on the arm of his easy chair and his pudgy hand holding his head up from beneath the jaw) — “The whole appeal of this sport centers around one issue: that any slight mistake can bring horrific pain or even terrible injury. In chess, for instance, a

mistake can cause you position and ultimately even the game. And you might leave the chessboard frustrated and mentally exhausted. But you are physically intact.”

Simon (scowling in concentration, sitting with one long leg crossed over the other) — “I am usually averse to reducing the appeal of any cultural event to merely one core issue. There’s almost always a complexity, sometimes a complexity that even contains contradictions, at the so-called core of a cultural moment. Think of a baseball game as an example. A friend of mine is a devout, religious vegetarian. Except when he goes to a ballgame. Part of the experience is the foot-long with relish and a beer chaser. And some nuts, of course.(pause) The bigger contradiction with baseball is that a fan sits through a three hour game only to see about 20 minutes of true action: How long does it take a left fielder to make a spectacular diving catch? Five seconds? How much time did it take from the last exciting play to set up this one? 15 minutes?”

Don (turning his pudgy face toward Simon) — “But before committing to your hypothesis we need to test it more rigorously. Is there any evidence for contradictions and complications when it comes to this sport? Are the motivations, for instance, of the spectators and the contestants and so on all of a kind? A fighter may be motivated by adulation and stature, a desire to overcome a childhood of being picked on, a desire to dominate others, a sincere wish to test his limits, or a simple desire to attain a goal. Why do fans come? Perhaps to identify with a fighter in order to get a visceral feeling of toughness. To see human contact sport pushed to the extreme. To come up with ideas, and this is unfortunate, for fights among their friends. As an ecstatic event combining drunkenness, group vitriolics, blood and so forth. It’s almost religious.”

Simon — “I hadn't thought of that before, but you have something with that religious idea.” (Simon leans back in his chair with his hands intertwined at the top of his head.) Notice how often the fighters pray before and after fights. There is something religious going on here. For sure.”

Don — “But what, exactly? We need to ask why the religious expression is taking this form rather than communal prayers. I have to admit that I, myself, feel a kind of ecstasy when viewing these fights. I lose myself into them. And it’s far different from losing yourself into an absorbing book or a hobby you’re interested in. You feel a part of a seething whole, bigger than you, stronger than you. It’s as if a blood sacrifice occurs in the ring. We thrill for the pain and the blood. It signifies the bursting of our little worlds. We become other than ourselves.”

Simon — “You know, that is exactly what the scholar Rene Dubois discusses in his work on the way violence is the founding act of all religions. Christianity's central symbol, of course, is a man dying a horribly painful, bloody death. (pause) Do I feel the same way as you while watching these fights? I don’t think so, but I am not sure the sport appeals to me on a visceral level in the same way it does you. You speak of an almost frenzied blood sacrifice, but I’m afraid I see it in a much different light. It is an extremely controlled event masquerading as an uncontrolled one. Begin with the cage. While it is, on the one hand, supposed to signify the wildness of the sport, as if the fighters are caged like animals, it is also a neat octagon that clearly separates the contenders from the crowd. It keeps the fight from spilling over, from transgressing boundaries. Next, you have the referee and the doctor making sure nothing gets as far as a ‘blood sacrifice.’ But finally, and most importantly, you have notions of honor and respect. Unlike boxing, the fighters in this sport are almost all respectful and honorable toward their opponents. This mutual respect plays against notions of unbridled violence.”

Don — “You’re right about everything. Our difference is that I believe the sign of sacrifice and violence, not the reality, is what people respond to. A sacrifice is meaningless unless it takes place within a larger ritualistic context. The audience at these events are praying — a communal prayer. This is decidedly extraverted — a way to lose the self into a seething whole. Individual fans no doubt do things at these fights that they would never do in another context.”

Simon — "Very interesting. That is in keeping with Freud's ideas in Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego."

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Simon called Don in his office. “Did you hear? I can’t believe it. I can’t believe it.”

Don — “What?”

Simon — “I can’t believe it. Shit. I can’t believe it.”

Don — “What?”

Simon — “Frank ‘The Finisher’ Dunlop was using razors. He never had the special punch. He was using frickin’ razors. I am heartbroken.”

Don — “No way. ‘The Finisher’? No way. He’s the gentleman of the sport. Everyone loves him.”

Simon — “Not any more.”

Don (louder than he intended) — “What are you talking about?” Don noticed some people in the hall outside his office giving him strange looks, so he told Simon to “hang on” and then shut the door. He returned to his desk chair and sat intently with his elbows on his desk. “O.K., I’m ready.”

Simon — “You know how ‘The Finisher’ was famous for cutting opponents?”

Don — “Of course. There was all that speculation about his punching techniques. Some compared him to Ali in terms of his ability to cut opponents due to his slashing style of punch.”

Simon — “Yeah, well you can forget all of that now. He had razors in his gloves. At last night’s fight a fan thought he saw some unusual attention being paid to ‘The Finisher’s’ gloves. Immediately after the fight, during which ‘The Finisher’ bloodied his opponent, as usual, officials entered the ring and cut off his gloves. Sure enough, embedded at an angle into the leather of the glove were tiny cut up razors. Apparently, he would punch at an angle that would push the razor into the glove while it scraped his opponent’s face. There might be felony charges for assault.”

Don — “My gosh! All the fight magazines will be leading with this story for months. How widespread do you suppose it is? Is this an anomaly, or is the curtain just being raised on the seedy underside of this sport?”

Simon — “It’s a good question. If any sport would seem not to have a seedy underside, it would be this one. Everything is explicit: the organization promotes all aspects of each fight, unlike boxing, and by its very nature it is an explicit, seemingly anything-goes action.”

Don — “This will necessitate a semiotic analysis. I dislike that it happened, but I am excited about the work it opens up for us.”

Simon — “Obviously. Finding out that ‘The Finisher’ is a fraud is a little like hearing that George Washington never chopped down the cherry tree.”

Don — “I hadn’t thought of that, but it’s true. He is almost the Father of the UFC. It’s a shame. I haven’t checked, but I imagine that he easily outdistances any of his opponents in terms of his picture being on fight magazine covers.”

They paused for a moment.

Simon — “We should apply for a grant so that we could have a conference at our university. We could call it ‘The Finisher.’ We are far from the only semioticians interested in this aspect of the culture.”

Don — “Yes. But we should spread the discursive practices more broadly. We should invite some sports journalists, historians of sport, and so on. The perspective of only semioticians can get dry.”

Simon — “Our profession’s take on the matter always benefits from some augmenting. It helps to keep our thinking supple and flexible.”

Don — “OK. As far as logistics go, getting a grant for this sort of thing should be a cinch. The UFC is the most watched sport in America now. It could use some understanding. In fact, even those horrified by it might want to learn more about it, perhaps just to combat it.”

Simon — “Yeah, we’ll get a grant from the Christians!”

Don — “Don’t doubt it. (pause) We should do a little research. Could you bring over some razors and a few pairs of gloves this evening? Let’s figure out how he does it.”

Simon — “Yeah, I have a couple pair. I like to study the shape and other specificities. Is the glove a purely practical device, or does it serve other purposes as well, perhaps aesthetic or symbolic, or even institutional?”

Don — “Bring over the gloves and some razors. Let’s figure out how he does it.”

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Don put a glove on and expanded and contracted his fingers until it felt snug and serviceable. Simon slid some of the bits of razors at an angle into the glove. He told Don to take it easy as he slid punches into the heavy bag. He would hate to see Don’s hands split open by the razors.

Don warmed his pudgy body up by popping the bag a couple. Then he copied, as best he could, ‘The Finisher’s’ devastating “slashing blow” that opened so many wounds on opponents. He missed the center of the bag, making it spin, which wasn’t surprising, and his hand did feel an unusual, deep jolt, but nothing alarming happened.

He threw another glancing blow, this time with the right. And this time he screamed in pain and fell to his knees. Simon tried to pull the gloves off, but Don only screamed more. Jimmy, Don’s partner, came down. “What are you idiots doing, fighting?”

Simon was yelling, “What should we do, what should we do?” Jimmy grabbed some scissors and carefully cut off the gloves. On each hand, a couple shards of razor were embedded into the soft tissue around the knuckles. He was bleeding profusely.

When they tried to pull out the razor shards he howled even more.

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At the emergency room no nurses even bothered to smile at them. They waited three hours. Don’s hands were wrapped in towels, and he was white as a sheet. Perhaps they were not seen earlier because the nurses thought that they were members of this bizarre fighting cult that was featured on the news a few days earlier.

The men in the cult fought one-on-one with clubs, razors, nets and knives, among other implements of mayhem, until one of them quit or was unconscious. However, breaking the bones of or killing an opponent led to immediate disqualification.

The result? Attempts to knock people out by hitting their chin hard (without breaking their jaw). But more often, let's face it, torture. Some fighters actually drew designs with razors into the flesh on the face of their opponents. It would produce a scar, a humiliation permanently etched into his competitor's face, showing he was tortured into submission.

This strange, underground sport drew tremendous crowds. Many well-known politicians, sports figures, and celebrities bet on and attended the matches. Instead of ropes, as in boxing, or a cage as in the UFC, forming the edge of the ring, other fighters waiting for a match squatted and knelt in a circle around the combatants, who, if they pushed up against this ring of men, were pushed back into the center.

It was not surprising that the nurses associated the men with the cult. Don looked like the kind of chubby businessman who would attend such events. Simon and Jimmy were about six feet tall and well-built — perhaps combatants. Simon was quite handsome in a classic way: square jaw, strong nose, eyes set back but not too far, high cheekbones, a full head of sandy blonde hair. Don and Jimmy were both balding: Jimmy didn't even worry about it. He just kept combing his thinning hair straight back, letting the world see his predicament. Don disliked the strip of black hair that ran around the lower part of his skull, and he kept it closely cropped. He couldn't stop talking about a hair transplant, to the point where he drove Jimmy nuts. "I like your hair the way it is," he said. "Who would you be getting the transplant for?" Don just felt that it would help with his general self-confidence. All Jimmy could muster in response was an eye-rolling "whatever."

At the hospital, Jimmy took Simon aside and heatedly told him that he knew something like this would happen, that they should get back to analyzing literature. In defense, Simon argued that they didn't 'like' the UFC so much as they saw it as a nerve center of cultural fetishes, concerns, repressions, and meanings. Jimmy rolled his eyes. It all seemed so pointlessly pompous. "You guys should act like yourselves. You're eggheads. It's stupid that we even have a punching bag downstairs. And your 'ideas' are making my partner suffer."

Don (in spite of his pain, overhearing them) — "Now you're getting judgmental."

Jimmy — "We'll talk about this later." Jimmy really didn't understand their research concerns. He was an engineer, through and through. While certainly not without a sense of irony or humor, he saw life pretty literally. The UFC was, to him, no more or less than some idiots beating each other up. Don and Simon's intellectual investigations he tolerated, but he had never hesitated in telling Don that they were bunk. Two guys beating each other up are nothing more than two guys beating each other up, he insisted. Jimmy felt that his work, building bridges and buildings and so on, was infinitely more important because people subconsciously trusted his calculations and plans with their very lives. Jimmy and Don had long ago decided that they would not speak about their respective jobs with each other. Together, they played chess and scrabble, and watched silly movies, so long as Don did not give into the urge to analyze their semiotics.

Simon and Jimmy begged the nurses to relent and allow Don to be seen. They were rebuffed each time with the claim that the most seriously injured patients must be taken care of first. This was obviously a lie: few people came into the emergency room that night.

Finally they were let in to see a doctor. She did not smile at the men either. "How did this happen?" she asked, while looking up at them with a knowing and disdainful look. She took out a highly specialized type of tweezers, obviously to pull the razor shards out.

Simon — "Aren't you going to administer local anesthetic?"

Doctor — "There's no need."

Don squeezed the hands of both Simon and Jimmy as the razors came out. He screamed. The doctor admonished him. "Hey, be quiet. You're a big guy. You should be able to take it."

After six shards were pulled from around his knuckles, the nurse came in and bandaged the hand. "Are you still going to fight?" she asked.

"I don't fight. I am a professor," said Don, wearily. The nurse gave him a dismissive smile and shook her head.

It was 2 a.m. when they got out of the hospital. They were taking a freeway to drop Simon off at his house. A siren sounded behind them, and Jimmy saw the light in the rear view mirror. "I'm not speeding."

The cars came to a stop on the apron of the highway. Jimmy could see two men quickly leap out of the doors and run toward his car. He slipped into drive and was about to slam his foot on the gas when his door was flung open, a knee slammed onto his upper thigh, and two hands grabbed his throat. "Put the car in park and take your belt off." Jimmy did as he was told. "Get out of the car." With his neck still held tightly, Jimmy made his way out of the car and leaned against the back door.

He could see that his assailant was wearing a mask made out of a grey fabric. It was framed by stringy, blonde hair.

From the other side of the car he heard Simon say, "We're three against your two. How will you stop us?"

First assailant — "We don't need weapons."

Don — "I know karate." He had taken a few lessons as a boy. He earned his blue belt.

First assailant — "Do you? Let me see you at it. Kick me."

Jimmy begged him not to do it. "These guys are tough," he yelled. Assailant one turned Jimmy around to force him to watch. Jimmy begged Don not to do it.

Don spun and leapt his round body into the air, and, surprisingly, his kick proved effective. It was descending quickly toward the assailant's ear, but this guy was for real. The assailant caught the leg in mid air and dropped him to the ground, then leapt on top and engaged in what the UFC called ground and pound.

Jimmy was screaming for it to stop, but his assailant had him in an arm lock, in a position that forced him to look at the slaughter. As he sobbed, Jimmy thought he could feel the ripples of laughter in the stomach of the man holding him so tight.

Finally, Simon, who was just standing there, tried to kick the man off of Don. It didn't work, and for his efforts he was slammed to the ground and pounded on. Jimmy was beyond sobbing; he was heaving. Don was moaning and rolling on the ground; since it was dark, Jimmy could only imagine how his face must be messed up.

The punches could be heard landing on Simon, who began moaning too.

Suddenly, it stopped. "I'm tired," said the assailant. "You wanna ground and pound?"

Second Assailant — "I'm not in the mood. You do it."

First Assailant — "I'm tired. Maybe I'll just kill them." He pulled out a switchblade, but it was not opening properly. "This is annoying. Forget it." He flung it into the dark. "I could just crack their necks apart. But that's pretty tiring, too."

Suddenly, the second assailant, who was still holding Jimmy's arm behind his back, yanked it up so that it snapped loudly and he screamed. He threw him to the ground and kicked him.

Second Assailant — "Let's just steal their car."

First Assailant — "Sounds good. You could drive over that guy lying in the road with the broken arm. At least we would kill somebody."

Second Assailant — "Whatever. (pause) Why don't we just blow up our car instead?" He grabbed a gasoline can out of the trunk of his car and doused the entire inside, except the driver's seat. He then sat down and, with his foot on the brake, put the car on drive and aimed it straight down the highway. When he jumped out of the car, it began moving slowly, and he threw a few matches into it. It flamed up and exploded, all while rolling down the highway.

They got in Jimmy's car and drove off.

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The three men had passed out from concussions and shock. Jimmy awoke just before dawn to a dog sniffing a cut on his forehead. It leapt back and barked when he awoke. The others awoke as well. Nobody could move

A large blue Blazer turned off the road. The window rolled down. "I'm Raymond, you need help?"

Jimmy — "What does it look like?"

Raymond — "I'll call 911."

Jimmy — "Couldn't you get out of your car?" He waited to regain his breath and some energy. "Maybe you have some liquids you could give us? A cloth to wipe off some of the blood?"

Raymond — "Hey, I let professionals deal with this sort of thing. It could be a set up, you know? Besides, I don't want to be seen standing over some beat up white boys."

Jimmy (finding himself protesting for some reason) — "We're not boys."

Raymond — "All white guys look like boys to me. Can't help it."

Jimmy looked up into his dead serious face — a black man with closely cropped, greying hair. He wore a shirt and tie.

Jimmy — "Yeah, well, thanks."

The police arrived soon after. Raymond got out of his car at that point. Once they had taken statements from Raymond and the three victims, Raymond left. The police gave the three men a ride back to town. They heckled them about being beat up.

They were dropped off at the same hospital. The same nurses treated them coldly. The same doctor treated them with derision. Don and Simon had concussions and lost teeth, Jimmy a broken arm.

Nobody believed their story. Not even the insurance man. Don never got money back for his burned car.

Just the idea of suing was too traumatizing.

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Jimmy, Don, and Simon were in a group for victims of violent crime. Everybody seemed shattered. Some women described brutal rapes. A couple of men also described being raped.

With their teeth still missing, Don and Simon described the assault. They did not mention their interest in the UFC. Don cried. His mouth was swollen, and both hands were in wraps. When someone asked him about his hands, he waved them off. The group leader reminded everyone not to press people further than they were ready to go.

When Simon came over to watch the UFC, Jimmy stopped him at the door. "No more UFC in this house," he yelled. "It's all over."

Simon — "Loosen up, Jimmy. The reason we were beat so badly is because there were no rules or referees. Unlike the UFC."

Don — "He's right. The UFC has nothing to do with beating people bloody on highways at night. That's wanton violence."

Jimmy — "But it does have something to do with beating people bloody. I don't want it in my house."

Don — "It's my house, too."

Jimmy (getting emotional) — "I can't live with this. I can't."

Don — "What are you saying?"

Simon — "Maybe I should be going."

Don — "No, you're part of this. We all are."

Simon — "Don, I am not even gay. I am not a part of this. I don't even know how this sort of thing goes down for you guys."

Jimmy (angrily) — "What do you mean 'you guys'? Do gay people feel differently than you?"

Simon — "Sorry, I misspoke."

Jimmy — "I would say it's either me or this idiot." With the arm that was in a cast he motioned toward Simon. "But why don't we leave it at this: It's either UFC or me."

Don — "That's an easy choice."

Jimmy — "I imagined it would be. Now we can get on with our lives."

Don — "Yeah, we can. I choose the UFC."

Jimmy — "Ok, I'm glad. (suddenly alarmed) What did you say? You're leaving me?"

Don — "I am beginning to make a name for myself in semiotics for my understanding of the UFC. I can't give up my career." Don's nose began to bleed, which it had been doing off and on since the assault.

Simon — "I should be going."

Don — "You should be staying."

Jimmy — "No, guys, I'm leaving. I'll go to a motel. We can talk later in the week, Don. Maybe we'll be able to work this out. But I can't live with you just now."

Don shrugged, and he and Simon headed for the basement. Jimmy teared up after they left, then packed his suitcase.

He could hear the announcer, "A spectacular single-leg take-down by 'The Bomb.' Have we ever seen a more skillful wrestler in the UFC, Randy?"

"He is clearly in a class by himself. Whenever I fought him I really prepared my defense against take-downs."

"And it must have worked. My colleague announcing this fight, Randy Iotti, in case you didn't know, was elected to the UFC Hall of Fame last week."

"Oh my, 'The Bomb' is in position for 'ground and pound'. And he usually wins at this point, unless his competitor is saved by the bell...."

