

Signs and Symbols 2

“We live in a world where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning.”
— Jean Baudrillard (*Simulacra and Simulation*)

In decades past, the boxer, the black belt, the fighting monk, and Billy Jack were all characters that represented our changing martial ideals—our worldviews as to what we thought martial arts should be. Back then we were conscious that these people were symbols—idealized aspirations to stimulate our own potential accomplishments.

Today, the delineation between symbol and reality has been weakened if not dissolved so that, as Baudrillard tells us in his 1981 book *Simulacra and Simulation*, we no longer live in a world in which signs and symbols merely indicate the truth; they themselves have become the truth. A celebrity used to be someone who had accomplished something; now a celebrity is someone who has been celebrated, positively or negatively, for any reason whatsoever. In the past, notoriety was the symbol of having achieved of culturally shared values; presently notoriety itself is the value. Thus people become famous for being famous or even for trying to be famous.

Actors have often complained that fans confuse them with the characters they play. Now, we are all fans of something and we confuse the symbols of that which interests us with the thing itself. If you wore an Armani suit in the past, it was both because you had sartorial taste and could afford it. You bought the Armani not because it was Armani, but because it was the perfect suit for you. Today you can buy an Armani knock-off for a fifth of the price, thus communicating both that you have taste and can afford it when neither is the case.

As Baudrillard says, the world has no dearth of information, but that information holds less and less meaning, thus people confuse signs and symbols with whatever they are supposed to represent. Every martial artist has joked about the meaning of a black belt by suggesting that anyone can buy a black belt and strap it on. Kanai Mitsunari Sensei (and probably many other sensei) once said, “Huh, black belt. I use to hold up pants.” Surprisingly, we have come to a point in today’s society where the meaning of a black belt is only a few lessons away from buying one at the local martial arts store. Ironically, if Jonathan Sludgefist bought a black belt downtown, he might well be more equipped to defend himself than Conrad McDojo who earned his black belt after 28 lessons on the Black Belt Fast Track Plan. So, are we wrong to confuse symbol with that which is supposedly symbolized?

A simulacrum is defined both as a representation of someone or something and, secondarily, as an unsatisfactory imitation or substitute. It is the concept of “unsatisfactory” that our penchant for substitution lacks. Copying an Armani is fine, methinks, since I’d rather spend a little and look pretty good than spend a ton a look fantabulous. Fantabulosity does not hold a great worth for me. But I *do* expect that there will be a noticeable difference between the knock-off and the real thing. Either the Armani or the knock-off could be unsatisfactory depending on what one personally considers satisfactory.

If martial artists are performing a pre-arranged *kumite* drill and pat themselves on the back for doing it well, that's fine so long as they don't assume that the drill is reality. Simulacra have their places in society as long as we recognize them as such. But that's the problem, isn't it? Fewer and fewer people know how to recognize good traditional martial arts from dances in the dojo. And martial artists, their standards lowered so that they can achieve a black belt with the ease with which they purchase an Armani knock-off, don't know the difference themselves. They feel they have accumulated a lot of information—14 self-defense techniques, 34 pre-arranged kumites, 8 kata, and 9 kicks. The skill with which they use that information *must* be worth a black belt, mustn't it?