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NARRATIVE CHANGE IN PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING: AUDIENCE ADDRESS AND
CREATIVE AUTHORITY IN THE ERA OF SMART FANS

by

CHRISTIAN NORMAN

Under the Direction of Nathan Atkinson, PhD

ABSTRACT

This dissertation project provides a methodological contribution to the field of critical rhetoric by positioning narrative theory as a powerful yet underutilized tool for examining the power dynamic between producer and consumer in a participatory media context. Drawing on theories of author and audience from rhetorical narratology, this study shows how producers of media texts provide rhetorical cues to audiences that allow them to reassert their power in the form of creative authority vis-à-vis consumers. The genre of professional wrestling serves as an ideal text for examining such power dynamics, as WWE has adapted to changing fan participatory behaviors throughout its sixty-year history. Focusing on pivotal moments in which WWE altered its narrative address to its audience in order to reassert its control over the production process, this study demonstrates the utility of narrative theory for understanding how creative authority shows power at work in media texts. Further, this study situates rhetorical narratology in conversation with theories of rhetorical persona, scholarship on subcultures, and the discursive construction of the “people.” In so doing, I show how a nuanced understanding of

author and audience augments critical rhetorical scholarship's focus on power. Finally, by applying narrative theory as a method for both close textual analysis of single texts as well as a tool for piecing together a critical text from narrative fragments, I also address questions of the role of the text in rhetorical criticism and the role of authorship in an era when audiences exert influence on media texts as they are produced.

INDEX WORDS: Narrative theory, Critical rhetoric, Creative authority, Professional wrestling,
Author, Audience, Participatory fan culture

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CHRISTIAN NORMAN

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2016

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2016

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December 2016

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to Juliet and Priscilla Norman. You are a constant reminder of what is good in this world. In every way that matters, you make my life better.

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1 INTRODUCTION

“Times changed. Just telling a story and people accepting that storyline for what it is, as a storyline, is gone.”

-Triple H

Paul “Triple H” Levesque, current Executive Vice President of Talent/Live Events/Creative for WWE,¹ made the above statement on the February 2, 2015 episode of the “Stone Cold Podcast” when asked about the difficulties of running a professional wrestling company in an age when fans have become smarter about the product.² Triple H’s comments highlight the way current fan culture has influenced the stories that the professional wrestling industry tells. Today’s wrestling fans know more about the behind-the-scenes goings on in the business than earlier fans. They are not content to simply accept the stories as given to them by WWE writers. Instead, they engage the creative process through modes of participation that extend beyond cheering and booing of face (good guy) and heel (bad guy) wrestlers. Rather than accepting the story at face value, fans now voice their pleasure or discontent at the decisions of the writing team and the bookers—the people who make the decisions about who wins and who loses. Fans have specific ideas about the stories they want told to them, and reject those that do not meet their expectations. In short, it is no longer enough to tell a story to the fans. The professional wrestling industry must now tell its story with the fans.

¹ WWE has gone through a variety of name changes over the years, with the most recent change dropping the name “World Wrestling Entertainment” to officially be known just as “WWE.” For simplicity’s sake, I will consistently refer to the company as WWE, even if it was known by a different name at the time to which I am referring. In direct quotations, I will keep the name of the company used in the original quotations.

² Steve Austin and Paul Levesque, *The Steve Austin Show – Unleashed 192*, podcast audio, WWE COO Triple H, MP3, 1:36:11, February 5, 2015, <http://podcastone.com/pg/jsp/program/episode.jsp?programID=436&pid=482164>.

Fans, scholars and even performers on WWE television use the term “Reality Era” to describe this new fan-producer dynamic and the ways the wrestling narrative has adapted to it.³ Although important, this shift to the Reality Era is only the most recent change in the dynamic between fans and wrestling producers in the history of wrestling, which has evolved over the years in response to the demands of an audience with progressively increasing access to information about the production of media texts. This evolution exemplifies what scholars in media studies recognize as a general trend toward audience participation in the media industry.⁴ However, while media scholars have looked extensively at the ways fans participate in this changing media context, scholars are now seeking to understand the ways producers of media texts have adapted to changes in audience participation as the lines between production and consumption blur.⁵ This dissertation marks my contribution to this effort—a contribution that is decidedly rhetorical in perspective, but also respectful of, and indebted to the work done by scholarship in media and cultural studies.

The history of professional wrestling serves as an ideal case study for understanding how the producers of texts adapt their rhetorical strategies to negotiate the changing dynamics of power between rhetor and audience in the contemporary media landscape. In what follows, I will argue that such an analysis provides insights on how authors of texts construct authorial and narrative audiences to negotiate power dynamics with fans, and to create texts appropriate to a changing media landscape. To accomplish this, I draw on rhetorical theories of narrative to

³ David Shoemaker, “Pro Wrestling for Auteurs,” *Grantland*, May 23, 2012, <http://grantland.com/features/how-documentary-films-explain-wwe-reality-era-preview-weekend-limit-pay-per-view/>. Shoemaker originally coined the term “reality era.”

⁴ Henry Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 2.

⁵ Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green. *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 5.

analyze how WWE has altered its address to audiences in response to the challenges posed by a more participatory media culture. Through this analysis of wrestling narratives, I will argue three distinct eras of professional wrestling, namely the Kayfabe, Entertainment, and Reality eras, reflect three distinct patterns in WWE's address to its audience. And through this argument, I will speak to broader concerns in rhetoric and media studies about the textual construction of audience in narrative and the negotiation of power between producers and consumers of popular entertainment in contemporary media. Specifically, I will look at the power of consumers and producers to influence the creative direction of textual production, what I will call creative authority. While media scholars are correct in asserting that contemporary audiences have become smarter and more participatory, I will show that the negotiation of creative authority between producers and consumers of professional wrestling has occurred throughout history, and that this negotiation is best understood through the close analysis of narrative. In so doing, I prove my dissertation's central argument, which is that narrative theory is a powerful, but nevertheless underutilized part of critical rhetoric's methodological toolkit.

In making this argument about the value of narrative theory as methodological resource, I will touch on a variety of questions and concerns in critical rhetoric, and rhetoric in general. I position narrative theory as a useful tool for understanding the role of texts in critical rhetoric, showing that a narrative understanding of audience is useful for both close textual analysis and for forming a critical text from fragments of discourse. I also address questions of the role of authorship in an era when audiences exert influence on texts as they are being produced. Narrative provides a method for examining textual strategies used by authors to reassert control over the production process even as fans exert pressure on them. I also address concerns about

how to reconcile the structuralist commitments of rhetorical narratology with the post-structuralist commitments of critical rhetoric.

1.1 Critical Rhetoric and Narrative Theory

The present study positions narrative methodology as an underutilized tool for critical rhetoric in examining the creative authority of producers and consumers of media content. The critical turn in rhetoric focuses on the power relations at work in texts. Critical scholars seek textual cues to understand the ways power emerges discursively and influences social relations. In this way, critical rhetoric should aim at recognizing powerful vested interests in harming life and make an attempt to find alternatives.⁶ Drawing from Marxist theories of power and ideology, critical rhetoric encourages critics to make moral/ethical judgments about how rhetorical texts empower or constrain people. Because moral judgments are not necessarily to be found in strict methodology, critical rhetoric demands a more active role on the part of the critic. Edwin Black argued that rhetorical theorists are not scientists, and therefore objectivity is not a desired outcome of rhetorical scholarship.⁷ In this way, critical rhetoric differs from traditional rhetorical criticism dating back to the 1920s.⁸

Critical rhetoric emerged in opposition to rhetorical criticism that seeks to determine the success of a text in persuading a particular audience within a particular situation. Scholars of critical rhetoric were not the first to reject this framework, which Edwin Black called “neo-Aristotelian”⁹ for its strict methodology derived from Aristotle and criticized for its formulaic

⁶ Phillip Wander, “The Ideological Turn in Modern Criticism,” *Central States Speech Journal* 34 (1983), 7.

⁷ Edwin Black, “On Objectivity and Politics in Criticism,” *American Communication Journal* 4 (2000), 1.

⁸ Herbert A. Wichelns, “The Literary Criticism of Oratory,” in *Readings in Rhetorical Criticism, 4th Edition*, ed. Carl R. Burgchardt (State College, PA: Strata Publishing, 2010), 3-27.

approach to criticism.¹⁰ Following Black, several scholars began to argue against the Aristotelian approach and to advocate for a more assertive role for the critic. This led to a debate during the 1970's over the role of the critic, exemplified by the exchange between Forbes Hill and Karlyn Kohrs Campbell in the pages of *Quarterly Journal of Speech*. Hill argued against placing one's own moral standards within criticism of a historical speech, and for a return to judging the effectiveness of the speech on the particular audience.¹¹ He claimed that making ethical judgments on the truthfulness of a text placed the scholar on shaky ground. Campbell, who had been criticized in Hill's article for making ethical claims about the truth of Nixon's speech in question, replied by defending her stance and citing the need to such claims due to the effect such lies have on real people.¹² Later, Phillip Wander would claim that this debate illustrates the basic difference in opinion about the role of the critic in rhetorical scholarship.¹³ Hill sees the critic as an arbiter of defined parameters of excellence. For Campbell, the critic must take a more active role. Wander agrees with the latter, arguing that Hill's focus on better persuasion makes him more of a "public relations consultant" than a rhetorical critic.¹⁴ This leads Wander argue that rhetoric can and should take an "ideological turn" by acknowledging that texts have the power to reinforce systems of dominance, and seeking to expose those power relations in the service of freedom.

⁹ Edwin Black, *Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 27.

¹⁰ Craig A. Baird and Lester Thonssen, "Methodology in the Criticism of Public Address," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 33 (1947), 134-38.

¹¹ Forbes Hill, "Conventional Wisdom – Traditional Form – The President's Message of November 3, 1969," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 58 (1972), 373-86.

¹² Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, "Conventional Wisdom – Traditional Form – Rejoinder," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 58 (1972), 451-54.

¹³ Wander, "Ideological Turn," 7.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Raymie McKerrow forwards a similar, though theoretically distinct, account of critical rhetoric. Where Wander rooted his critique in Marxist conceptions of ideology, McKerrow based his in a Foucaultian perspective that focused on “the dimensions of domination and freedom...exercised in a relativized world,” and calls for a break from Platonic ideals of rhetoric still seen even in the “New Rhetoric.”¹⁵ McKerrow argues that rhetoric has too long labored under Plato’s criticism that rhetoric defied truth by making “the worse reason appear the better.”¹⁶ As a result, rhetorical scholars used appeals to reason and universal truths to justify rhetoric.¹⁷ In contrast, McKerrow adopts the position of Robert Hariman that critical rhetoric should focus on doxa, or commonly held beliefs, which Hariman argues work through acts of concealment.¹⁸ Thus, McKerrow argues that, “Rather than focusing on questions of ‘truth’ or ‘falsity,’ a view of rhetoric as doxastic allows the focus to shift to how the symbols come to possess power – what they ‘do’ in society as contrasted to what they ‘are.’”¹⁹

Like Wander, McKerrow calls for a critique of domination that examines the rhetorical means of maintaining repressive relations of power. However, McKerrow argues that a critique of repression, or “domination,” is insufficient without a “critique of freedom” resulting in an orientation of “never-ending-skepticism” of all forms of power.²⁰ For this reason, McKerrow calls for a “critique of freedom” focused on “the discourse of power which creates and sustains

¹⁵ Raymie E. McKerrow, “Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis,” *Communication Monographs* 56 (1989), 91.

¹⁶ Raymie E. McKerrow, “Research in Rhetoric: A Glance at our Recent Past, Present, and Potential Future,” *The Review of Communication* 10 (2010), 199.

¹⁷ Richard Weaver, *The Ethics of Rhetoric* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1953/1995), 28; Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1958), 22-28; Stephen Toulmin, *The Uses of Argument* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1958), 255-6.

¹⁸ Robert Hariman, “Status, Marginality and Rhetorical Theory,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 72 (1986), 49-50.

¹⁹ McKerrow, “Critical Rhetoric,” *Communication Monographs* 56 (1989), 104.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 96.

the societal practices which control the dominated.”²¹ Thus conceived, power is not a thing to be wielded, but rather a relationship existent throughout the social body.²² This leads McKerrow to argue that rhetorical critics must, “attend to the ‘microphysics of power’ in order to understand what *sustains* social practices.”²³ In other words, McKerrow takes seriously Foucault’s insight that resistance is often part of a larger system of domination maintained in discourse and should be approached accordingly. After all, Foucault argues that “power is everywhere”²⁴ because it is constantly re-inscribed in the very social fabric of every social relation. Therefore, a critique of domination can never truly “free” subjects from power because every new social relation is also implicated in a new power dynamic. That is, even as individuals are liberated from repressive domination, the new status quo is still implicated in a system of power and ideology that must, in turn, be subject to critique. Due to its focus on power, critical rhetoric is useful in examining the power dynamics between producers and consumers as fan consumption behaviors become more participatory.

Critical rhetoric as a praxis has also stirred debate on whether it has an obligation to theory. One way to understand this concern is through James Darsey and Roderick Hart’s debate over the necessity of rhetorical scholarship to make a contribution to theory. Therein, Hart argued that when rhetoric contributes to theory-building, it can help scholars understand central tendencies about the way rhetoric functions rather than simply give insight into an isolated

²¹ Ibid., 92.

²² Michel Foucault, *Knowledge/Power: Selected Interviews and Other Essays*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 119.

²³ McKerrow, “Critical Rhetoric,” 98. Emphasis included in the original.

²⁴ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction* (New York, Random House, 1978), 93.

instance.²⁵ In response, Darsey argued that not all criticism needs to build theory, and stressed the need for multiple justifications for scholarship including the historical importance and/or artistic achievement of a particular text.²⁶ More recently scholars took up the question of critical rhetoric's obligation to theory in a special edition of *Western Journal of Communication*. Within this debate, many scholars argued that critics do have an obligation to theory so that they may produce "enduring criticism"²⁷ that provides implications for the "macro level."²⁸ However, others argued that theory need not be the focus of critical scholarship, including Stephen Hartnett, who countered that rhetorical criticism that addresses a topic of sufficient political salience should be justified without needing to build theory.²⁹ Summing up the contributions to this debate, Celeste Condit asserts that rhetorical criticism must engage a scholarly conversation and that, most of the time, the easiest way to do so is by making a contribution to theory, but criticism can also engage conversations on activism and resistance, the complexity of rhetorical phenomena, and/or better communication strategies.³⁰ This dissertation seeks to implicate narrative theory into conversations in critical rhetoric, thereby showing that rhetoric can illuminate power relations without having to resort to "high theory." By showing how authors

²⁵ Roderick P. Hart, "Contemporary Scholarship in Public Address: A Research Editorial," *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 50 (1986), 283-84.

²⁶ James Darsey, "Must We All Be Rhetorical Theorists?: An Anti-Democratic Inquiry," *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 58 (1994), 164-81.

²⁷ Valerie R. Renegar, "Critical/Cultural Scholarship and the Responsibility for Building Theory: Enduring Criticism Revisited," *Western Journal of Communication* 77 (2013), 509.

²⁸ Barbara A. Biesecker, "The Obligation to Theorize, Today," *Western Journal of Communication* 77 (2013), 520.

²⁹ Stephen John Hartnett, "On Postmodern Intellectuals, Implied Obligations, and Political Constituencies," *Western Journal of Communication* 77 (2013), 523.

³⁰ Celeste Michelle Condit, "How Ought Critical Communication Scholars Judge, Here, Now?," *Western Journal of Communication* 77 (2013), 558. Condit draws on arguments from others in the journal, including: Raymie E. McKerrow, "Criticism is as Criticism Does," *Western Journal of Communication* 77 (2013), 546-49; Charlotte Kroløkke, "What is the Obligation to Theory? From Lego Blocks to Critical Scholarship," *Western Journal of Communication* 77 (2013), 542-45.

use narrative means to assert power over audiences, this application gains insight into communication strategies for managing power in real life situations.

While critical rhetoric often deals with narrative texts when interrogating power dynamics, it rarely draws on narrative theory and its associated methods. Although critical rhetoricians have employed elements of narrative theory in various forms, it has never been deployed as a systematic framework for exploring these types of power dynamics. In this way, critical rhetoric has followed rhetorical studies generally in deemphasizing narrative despite its “ubiquity” and “utility” as a model of communication.³¹ In the section that follows, I will discuss the relationship between narrative theory and critical rhetoric in order to explain how this happened, and to set up my argument for a return to narrative. First, I will show that strands of critical rhetoric deal with concerns and concepts derived from narrative theory, including rhetorical theories of persona. Next, I turn to debates about the text’s role in criticism to argue that it contributed to the turn away from narrative theories of author and audience. I then turn to examples of critical rhetoric to show that critical scholarship often deals with narrative texts, but not through the lens of narrative theory. Having shown that narrative theory is underused in critical rhetoric, I then turn to theories of discursive audience construction to show how rhetorical narratology can benefit critical scholarship by illuminating the narrative means producers of media content use to reassert their dominance in creative authority vis-à-vis the consumer.

1.1.1 Narrative and Theories of Persona

Once, there was a close, mutually influential relationship between narrative theory and rhetorical theory and criticism. In *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Wayne Booth approached fictional

³¹ Kevin McClure, “Resurrecting the Narrative Paradigm: Identification and the Case of Young Earth Creationism,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 39 (2009): 189-90.

narratives as rhetorical texts, expanding the field of rhetoric to study a broad range of narrative texts previously ignored.³² In this account, Booth developed an early understanding of author and audience that influenced later works in rhetorical theory. He pointed out that the text of a narrative suggests characteristics of authorship and audience that may or may not correspond with the subjects actually playing those roles. Thus, Booth argued that a real author might differ drastically from the author implied in a text.³³ Similarly, Booth reasoned that the author assumes much about the implied audience when constructing a text, assumptions which are present in the text itself. From these observations, Booth provided rhetoric with concepts of the implied author and audience. Booth's insights into narrative's rhetorical capacity influenced rhetorical theories, including theories of persona.

Similar to Booth's implied author, Edwin Black posited that rhetoric had long accepted that "the author implied by a discourse is an artificial creation: a persona, but not necessarily a person."³⁴ Black called this subject position the first persona. Black extended this analysis to argue for a "second persona," referring to the implied auditor, the audience understood to be addressed by the text.³⁵ Black argued that "rhetorical discourses...will imply an auditor, and that in most cases the implication will be sufficiently suggestive as to enable the critic to link this implied auditor to an ideology."³⁶ Black saw the implied audience as a textual element integral to moral judgments of rhetorical critics. Similarly, Booth reasoned that the author assumes much about the implied audience when constructing a text, assumptions which are present in the text

³² Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 154-55.

³³ *Ibid.*, 70-72.

³⁴ Edwin Black, "The Second Persona," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 56 (1970), 111.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 112.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

itself.³⁷ Black extends Booth's claims about the rhetoric of fiction to other nonfictional texts. Thus, the first and second personas owe much to narrative theory stemming from Booth's work on fictional rhetoric.

Although scholars in critical rhetoric adopted and extended Black's theory of persona, they also weakened the link between rhetoric and narrative theory. Following Black's insights into audience, the critical turn in rhetoric shifted the focus from how a text shapes the relationship between rhetor and audience to the power relations at work in those texts. For example, Phillip Wander argued that rhetorical criticism should aim at recognizing powerful vested interests in harming life and make an attempt to find alternatives.³⁸ Taking a cue from Black, he identified a "third persona" in rhetorical texts, namely the audience excluded by the text.³⁹ By paying attention to those the text ignores and/or excludes, Wander's "third persona" shows power relations at work. Excluding certain people from a rhetorical vision of the audience positions them as outsiders, a "them" to an understood "us."⁴⁰ This, in turn, offers insight into the ideological dimensions of rhetorical discourse.

While the concept of the third persona enriched rhetoricians' conception of audience, the tendency has been to emphasize ideology over the role of narrative in its production and maintenance. This likely owes to the tendency in critical rhetoric, inherited from Black and strengthened by the discursive turn, to reject structuralism in favor of a more fluid approach to rhetorical criticism. I would argue, though, that a typology of author and audience is useful for illuminating how producers of media texts can use narrative means to address particular groups

³⁷ Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction*, 70-72.

³⁸ Wander, "The Ideological Turn," 7.

³⁹ Phillip Wander, "The Third Persona: An Ideological Turn in Rhetorical Theory," *Central States Speech Journal* 35 (1984), 200-201.

⁴⁰ Barbara Perry, *In the Name of Hate: Understanding Hate Crimes* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 54.

of people into both the second and third personas, and by extension to how we understand texts as a reflection of power dynamics within a culture.

The fourth persona, as developed by Charles E. Morris III, is the audience addressed by implicit textual cues; “a collusive audience constituted by the textual wink.”⁴¹ This wink is irreducible to the “structure” of the text per se, and might therefore seem even further from the narrative roots of persona studies. However, I would suggest that narratological theories of audience have important implications for Morris’s concept of fourth persona. Essentially, the fourth persona is the audience that is able to pick up on textual cues that other members of the audience would not be able to understand. Morris describes those embodying the fourth persona as “clairvoyants,” as opposed to “dupes.”⁴² Morris even borrows from rhetorical narratologist Peter Rabinowitz’s work on “rhetorical passing” and implied audiences, which, as the latter explains, requires simultaneously two types of authorial audiences: a “gullible authorial audience,” who is ignorant of the subtext, and a “discerning authorial audience,” who “not only understands the subtext, but also realizes, and even relishes, the ignorance of the first audience.”⁴³ Thus, the narrative concept of the authorial audience underwrites the theory of the fourth persona. It is my contention that by elaborating connections like this, we can develop a richer account of concepts in critical rhetoric like the fourth persona (as seen in chapter two), while at the same time gaining insights into the relations of power manifest in mass media texts.

⁴¹ Charles E. Morris III, “Pink Herring & the Fourth Persona: J. Edgar Hoover’s Sex Crime Panic,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 88 (2002), 230.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Peter J. Rabinowitz, “Betraying the Sender: The Rhetoric and Ethics of Fragile Texts,” *Narrative* 2 (1994), 203.

1.1.2 The (Narrative) Text of Rhetorical Criticism

Another possible reason for narrative theory's absence in critical rhetoric is the ongoing debate over the status of the text as an object for analysis. This debate is exemplified by the exchange between Michael Leff and Michael Calvin McGee. For his part, Leff forwarded a model of rhetorical scholarship based on "close textual analysis" of single texts.⁴⁴ Because Leff's program privileges the text, it is clearly compatible with narrative theory and other structural and formalist approaches to criticism. In contrast, however, McGee argues that there are no fully formed texts to analyze but only textual fragments that a rhetorical critic must use to create a text.⁴⁵ McGee asserts that critics choose what fragments, or pieces of sources, culture, and influence constitute a text to analyze. This position is difficult to square with approaches emphasizing narrative. It is worth noting that Celeste Condit argues that both Leff and McGee go to their respective extremes regarding the role of the text as a response to the advent of "audience studies."⁴⁶ She further argues that both responses lead to two different "voids" of criticism that both misrepresent audiences. To Condit's critique I would add that this leads to a lack of attention to the narrative construction of audience. Further, I argue that rhetorical narratology can benefit both models of scholarship by providing a more sophisticated account of audience that helps each avoid their respective "voids."

Leff's program of close textual analysis privileges the text at the expense of both author and audience. Leff argues that a "preoccupation with abstract theories and methods" led

⁴⁴ Michael Leff, "Textual Criticism: The Legacy of G.P. Mohrmann," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 72 (1986), 380.

⁴⁵ Michael Calvin McGee, "Text, Context, and the Fragmentation of Contemporary Culture," *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 54 (1990), 274.

⁴⁶ Celeste Michele Condit, "Rhetorical Criticism and Audiences: The Extremes of McGee and Leff," *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 54 (1990), 333.

rhetorical critics to disengage with careful interpretation of texts as sites of rhetorical action.⁴⁷ Therefore, Leff advocates a close “reading and rereading of the text” as opposed to a reliance on formulaic methods based on Aristotelian theory, Burkeian dramatism, or any other such rhetorical methodology.⁴⁸ Leff spurred on a line of criticism based on his idea of close reading.⁴⁹ These scholars centered the text within their criticisms to come to vastly different conclusions about a wide range of texts. The close textual analysis model of criticism retreats to the text to avoid the problems of trying to understand the audience. Further, the model avoids the problem of authorial intent fallacies by seeking out “the responses that were ‘invited’ by a text.”⁵⁰ Condit argues that Leff’s program assumes invitations are universal regardless of the specifics of the audience. Rhetorical narrative offers a nuanced understanding of particular types of audience addressed by narrative texts. Further, rhetorical narratology allows critics to attend to different types of author, showing how narrative can provide a polysemic text.⁵¹

Whereas Leff privileged the text in his critical model, McGee largely abandons the text in favor of concentrating on audiences. McGee argues, “critical rhetoric does not *begin* with a finished text in need of interpretation; rather, texts are understood to be larger than the apparently

⁴⁷ Michael Leff, “Interpretation and the Art of the Rhetorical Critic,” *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 44 (1980), 338.

⁴⁸ Leff, “Textual Criticism,” 380.

⁴⁹ Edwin Black, “Gettysburg and Silence,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 80 (1994), 21-36; Michael Leff, “Dimensions of Temporality in Lincoln’s Second Inaugural,” *Communication Reports* 1 (1988), 26-31; Michael Leff and Andrew Sachs, “Words the Most Like Things: Iconicity and the Rhetorical Text,” *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 54 (1990), 252-273; Stephen Lucas, “The Stylistic Artistry of the Declaration of Independence,” in *Readings in Rhetorical Criticism, 4th Edition*, ed. Carl R. Burgchardt (State College, PA: Strata Publishing, 2010), 205-220; Richard Olsen, “Fifty-Eight American Dreams: The NBA Draft as Mediated Ritual,” in *Case Studies in Sport Communication*, eds. Robert S. Brown and Daniel J. O’Rourke III (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 171.

⁵⁰ Condit, “Extremes,” 333.

⁵¹ Leah Ceccarelli, “Polysemy: Multiple Meanings in Rhetorical Criticism,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 84 (1998), 395-415.

finished discourse that presents itself as transparent.”⁵² McGee claims that consumers and producers switch roles, as producers provide audiences with fragments that “cue *them* to produce a finished discourse in their minds. In short, *text construction is now something done more by the consumers than by the producers of discourse.*”⁵³ Thus, McGee responds to theories of a more participatory audience, and McGee’s work remains the benchmark for scholars seeking to understand the role of audience in the production of texts while at the same time making it difficult to define a text.⁵⁴ Indeed, this is what Condit observed when she worried that McGee’s approach risks rendering rhetoric “formless” by imagining the audience as hopelessly individual and texts as always ephemeral.⁵⁵ In response to Condit’s concerns, and to Leff and McGee’s insights, I suggest developing a method of critical narratology that can offset these risks by emphasizing the ways in which texts, both as discrete moments of address and as a collection of fragments define audiences through explicit and implicit discursive cues. To that point, rhetorical narratology’s typology of audience provides a method for avoiding the chasms into which Condit argues both Leff and McGee fall due to its nuanced conception of audience.

1.1.3 Narrative Constructions of The People

Another important strand of critical rhetoric examines how discourses call subjects into a group collectivity, thereby constituting audiences. McGee argued the “people” addressed in rhetoric are a creation of discourse, writing, “‘The people’... are not objectively real in the sense that they exist as a collective entity in nature; rather, they are a fiction dreamed by an advocate

⁵² McGee, “Fragmentation,” 279.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 288. Emphasis in original.

⁵⁴ Kent A. Ono and John M. Sloop, “The Critique of Vernacular Discourse,” *Communication Monographs* 62 (1995), 23. For example, see Ono & Sloop’s work on vernacular discourse.

⁵⁵ Condit, “Extremes,” 339-340.

and infused with an artificial, rhetorical reality by the agreement of an audience to participate in a collective fantasy.”⁵⁶ McGee points out that the audience must participate in a rhetorically crafted collective identity, stressing that features of texts enable and constrain the process and outcomes of participation.

Maurice Charland builds upon McGee’s understanding of the people, positing that a people who previously had no public collective identity can be rhetorically formed by calling them into being as a coherent group by crafting a narrativized identity and interpolating subjects as agents. Charland begins his argument by following Burke’s notion that rhetoric is about identification rather than persuasion.⁵⁷ Charland also builds upon McGee’s understanding of the people, arguing that “audiences do not exist outside rhetoric, merely addressed by it, but live inside rhetoric.”⁵⁸ Charland uses the notion of “interpellation” from Althusser to examine the specific case of the *Peuple Québécois*, showing how a “people” can be constituted through a piece of rhetoric.⁵⁹ Basically, a text can call “a people” into being by offering a narrative in which individuals recognize themselves as part of a collective or “public” with a potential for agency. Importantly, Charland argues that constitutive rhetoric features three ideological effects: the formation of a collective subject, the positing of a trans-historical subject, and providing the illusion of freedom for the protagonist. Thus, Charland ties his theory intimately to narrative

⁵⁶ Michael C. McGee, “In Search of the People: A Rhetorical Alternative,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 61 (1975), 240.

⁵⁷ Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 301.

⁵⁸ Charland, “Constitutive Rhetoric,” 147.

⁵⁹ Charland borrows the term “interpellation” from the work of Louis Althusser. Althusser argues that interpellation is the act of being “hailed” through language and is the way in which subjects come into being. A subject is hailed into differing social situations depending on the symbolic nature of the social situation. The same person has multiple subjectivities in multiple social settings. Think of the difference between a subject being “hailed” by a three-year-old daughter as a father and that same person later being “hailed” by a boss as a worker being reprimanded. The person occupies drastically different subjectivities. See note 76.

theory, stating, “constitutive rhetorics are ideological not merely because they provide individuals with narratives to inhabit as subjects and motives to experience, but because they insert ‘narratized’ subjects-as-agents into the world.”⁶⁰ Thus, rhetorical narratology is useful for critical rhetoric as a method for exploring how authors hail particular types of audiences into collective group identities.

1.1.4 Narrative Texts in Critical Rhetoric

Within the field of rhetoric, the concept of narrative is often equated with the work of Walter Fisher. In his article, “Narrative as Human Communication Paradigm,” Fisher proposed the “narrative paradigm” as an alternative to the rational world paradigm, which is based on reason and argumentation.⁶¹ In that article and articles to follow, he argued that because people are naturally story-telling beings who make sense of the world and the events therein through narrative, rhetorical critics must evaluate discourse according to the criteria of narrative coherence (whether a story holds together) and fidelity (how a story rings true with our own beliefs and experiences), as opposed to logical coherence or evidence, to explain why some sense-making stories are accepted and others rejected.⁶² The narrative paradigm as described by Fisher was influential, in part, because it called attention to the narrative quality of rhetorical texts that may not, at first glance, appear to be narrative in nature. Thus, Fisher’s narrative paradigm inspired studies using his concepts of narrative fidelity and coherence to analyze

⁶⁰ Charland, “Constitutive Rhetoric,” 143.

⁶¹ Walter Fisher, “Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case for Public Moral Argument,” *Communication Monographs* 51 (1984), 1-22.

⁶² Walter Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1987), 47.

texts.⁶³ However, many in the field criticized the narrative paradigm for its simplicity and lack of proposed universal applicability.⁶⁴ Further, in the last few decades, narrative theory has largely fallen out of favor within rhetoric as a critical methodology, especially within critical rhetoric.

Following the critical turn, scholarship in rhetoric has largely approached narrative as a means to mystification. That is, scholars seek to expose the ideology behind narrative texts. This scholarship is reminiscent of Roland Barthes' concept of the "mythologist" who is able to see how the signifying processes communicate certain moralities to an audience in the service of power.⁶⁵ McKerrow further argues that the effects of discourse are material.⁶⁶ Such material effects may include conditions of poverty and also the range of agency one has in the social order. Scholars following in this vein point to the material effects of narrative discourse.⁶⁷ Ironically, even as scholars in critical rhetoric sought the material effects of power within narrative texts, the field began to lose its connection with narrative theory as a method. So, although the field of critical rhetoric often deals with narrative subject matter, it does not often utilize narrative theory in analyzing texts. Again, this owes something to McGee's argument that there are no fully formed texts and that audiences are more responsible for creating texts from fragments than traditional authors.⁶⁸ It is also likely related to critical rhetoric's commitment to

⁶³ William G. Kirkwood, "Narrative and the Rhetoric of Possibility," *Communication Monographs* 59 (1992), 30-47; Herbert W. Simons, "From Post-9/11 Melodrama to Quagmire in Iraq: A Rhetorical History," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 10 (2007), 185.

⁶⁴ Robert C. Rowland, "Narrative: Mode of Discourse or Paradigm?," *Communication Monographs* 54 (1987), 264-75; Barbara Warnick, "The Narrative Paradigm: Another Story," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 73 (1987), 172-82.

⁶⁵ Roland Barthes, "Myth Today," in *Mythologies* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 160.

⁶⁶ McKerrow, "Critical Rhetoric," 103.

⁶⁷ Ron Greene, "Another Materialist Rhetoric," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 15 (1998), 21-41; Dana L. Cloud, Steve Macek, and James Arnt Aune, "'The Limbo of Ethical Simulacra': A Reply to Ron Greene," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 37 (2004), 188-206.

⁶⁸ See note 48.

poststructuralism, which is, at first glance, incompatible with rhetorical narratology, which is highly structuralist in nature. And yet, much of the scholarship within critical rhetoric deals with narrative texts (films, literature, etc.) and draws on concepts that originated in or developed through narrative theory.

Within the field of rhetoric, scholars have examined how popular culture artifacts affect audiences and power by focusing on the text. The reason for this, as McKerrow argues, is that rhetorical criticism that ignores popular culture leads to “sterile forms of criticism” unable to challenge the status quo.⁶⁹ And, as Barry Brummett argues, mass media texts, such as popular film and television, reflect and inflect the aspects of social life most shared by the public.⁷⁰ Moreover, rhetorical scholars have used textual analysis to provide insights into society by looking at these texts.⁷¹ This scholarship follows Fredric Jameson’s assertion that narratives are always political in nature.⁷² Nevertheless, many of these scholars refrain from using a systematic analysis of narrative to account for the political power negotiations. For example, Derek Beuscher and Kent Ono examine the narrative of the Disney movie *Pocahontas* to show how the film justifies colonialism by co-opting liberation discourses in the service of a light-hearted

⁶⁹ McKerrow, “Critical Rhetoric,” 101.

⁷⁰ Barry Brummett, *Rhetorical Dimensions of Popular Culture* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1991), 5.

⁷¹ Kent A. Ono, *Contemporary Media Culture and the Remnants of a Colonial Past* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2009), 1; . Dana Cloud, “Hegemony or Concordance? The Rhetoric of Tokenism in ‘Oprah’ Winfrey’s Rags-to-Riches Biography,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 13 (1996), 115; Thomas W. Benson and Brian J. Snee, *Michael Moore and the Rhetoric of Documentary* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2015), 1; Claire Sisco King, *Washed in Blood: Male Sacrifice, Trauma, and the Cinema* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 7. These studies barely scratch the surface of the literature in critical rhetoric dealing with popular culture texts.

⁷² Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 9.

romantic tale between protagonists.⁷³ While the authors acknowledge the rhetorical power of narrative in their analysis, they do not employ any systemic narrative methodology apart from analyzing the characters and plot generally. Ono has used similar analyses to critique popular culture narratives including *Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Star Trek*.⁷⁴ Each of these analyses falls short of using a systematic narrative methodology.

Some critical scholarship comes closer to using a narrative framework. In his analysis of the movie *The Big Chill*, James Jasinski turns to the work of James Boyd White to argue that the film constructs persuasive communities to critique the “politics of intimacy.”⁷⁵ Jasinski pays close attention to the narrative conventions of theme, character and hermeneutics. Even so, Jasinski pays more heed to Hannah Arendt’s concepts of *eros* and *philia* as themes embodied by the characters than on a systematic account of how the narrative functions rhetorically.⁷⁶ Jasinski is concerned with the political implications of narrative themes in film, but less concerned with the way authors negotiate power with an audience.

Jeffrey Bennet also adheres closer to a narrative methodology in his work on personal narratives of “ex-gays” who went through reparative therapy.⁷⁷ In his analysis, Bennett combines narrative methods with the theoretical concept of performativity as advanced by Judith Butler.⁷⁸ Bennett’s work provides a close analysis of personal narratives to account for notions of

⁷³ Derek T. Beuscher and Kent A. Ono, “Civilised Colonialism: *Pocahontas* as Neocolonial Rhetoric,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 19 (1996), 150.

⁷⁴ Ono, *Contemporary Media*, 17-19.

⁷⁵ James Jasinski, “(Re)Constituting Community through Narrative Argument: *Eros* and *Philia* in *The Big Chill*,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 79 (1993), 467-468.

⁷⁶ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1958), 35-65.

⁷⁷ Jeffrey A. Bennett, “Love Me Gender: Homosexuality and ‘Ex-Gay’ Performativity in Reparative Therapy Narratives,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 23, no. 4 (2003), 345-346.

⁷⁸ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 43-44.

authenticity and performance. In so doing, he shows the usefulness of a close reading of narrative strategies to forward a particular view of sexuality, with obvious implications of power for those in marginalized communities. Still, Bennett's research centralizes the concept of reading a text over the way the narrative texts work to construct a particular audience in the service of renegotiating power. Similar to other work analyzing narrative texts, Bennett provides a reading of the text that exposes thematic distinctions, but does less to focus on the process of production of narratives.

In the present study, I build on this scholarship by developing a framework for criticism that integrates theories of narrative with concepts native to the project of critical rhetoric. In essence, I contend that critical rhetorical scholarship could benefit from a return to narrative methodology in order to examine the power dynamics in narrative texts. Like the scholars mentioned above, I maintain a focus on issues of power in media texts by examining the dynamics of creative authority. In particular, I am concerned with how producers of narratives attempt to hail particular audiences through rhetorical choices embedded in their narratives.⁷⁹ To do so, I turn to structural accounts of narratology focused on the rhetorical nature of narrative.

While structural accounts of narrative as method has declined in critical rhetoric, Kevin McClure argues that it has "become more significant in literary studies" scholarship.⁸⁰ James Phelan argues that narrative is "not just story, but also action," in that a narrative is told from an author to an audience for a purpose.⁸¹ Focusing on the purposeful nature of narrative allows Phelan to utilize a structural account of the narrative's rhetorical potential. Phelan and

⁷⁹ Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes toward an Investigation," in *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, ed. Louis Althusser (London: New Left Books, 1977), 170-171.

⁸⁰ McClure, "Resurrecting," 189.

⁸¹ James Phelan, *Narrative as Rhetoric: Technique, Audiences, Ethics, Ideology* (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 1996), 8.

Rabinowitz further distinguish that “texts are designed by authors (consciously or not) to affect readers in particular ways...conveyed through the occasions, words, techniques, structures, forms, and dialogic relations of texts as well as the genres and conventions readers use to understand them.”⁸² Thus, rhetorical narratology utilizes the systematic analytic tools developed in structuralist narratology to point to the purposive persuasive elements in a narrative.⁸³

1.2 Method

I first wish to describe the overall type of narrative analysis I will employ before going into the terminology specific to the current study. When working with narrative theory in rhetoric, many immediately turn to Fisher’s “narrative paradigm.”⁸⁴ However, I will not lean heavily upon the narrative paradigm. Fisher’s work is useful for showing how rhetoric that is not typically considered narrative can actually be fruitfully examined by looking at them according to the criteria of coherence and fidelity. However, terms like coherence and fidelity only apply if the narrative attempts to convince the reader that it is a valid representation of the “real world” outside the text. This function is not always present in wrestling texts, where the onscreen narrative is presented as coextensive with the off-screen narrative. That is, the story of a wrestling match is not told after the fact, but as it happens. Further, Fisher’s narrative paradigm, while moving rhetoric away from a purely logical/argumentative focus, still theorizes the audience as a relatively passive target for persuasion, just one with a different set of criteria for being influenced.

⁸² James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz, *Narrative Theory: Core Concepts & Critical Debates* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2012), 5.

⁸³ Michael Kearns, *Rhetorical Narratology* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 3.

⁸⁴ Walter Fisher, “Narration as Paradigm,” 1-22.

I must also attend to the distinction between performance and traditional narration. Deriving from the work of Gérard Genette, a common approach in narrative scholarship is to distinguish between the acts of “showing” and “telling.”⁸⁵ This distinction draws a sharp divide between “dramatic fiction” and “narrative fiction.”⁸⁶ Under Genette’s formulation, the text of professional wrestling would naturally fit into the former category due to its performative nature and lack of a traditional “narrator.” However, within wrestling, the performers nonetheless address the audience directly in “promos,” and the presence of commentators who mediate the performances and interpret the meaning of the action for the audience more closely mirrors the narrator function.

While some narrative theorists subscribe to Genette’s sharp divide between showing and telling, other narrative scholars have criticized the limited scope of narrative. Wayne Booth criticizes the clear cut distinction between showing and telling by pointing to the combination of showing and explicit commentary.⁸⁷ Seymour Chatman furthers this critique, arguing that narratology should extend to dramatic performance. He argues that, “plays and novels share the common features of a chrono-logic of events, a set of characters, and a setting. Therefore, at the fundamental level they are all stories. The fact that one kind of story is told (diegesis) and the other shown (mimesis) is of secondary importance.”⁸⁸ Manfred Jahn breaks the divide down further in arguing that, “Plays have a narrative world (a ‘diegesis’), which is not distinct in

⁸⁵ Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 45.

⁸⁶ Gérard Genette, “Acts of Fiction,” in *Fiction and Diction*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 33.

⁸⁷ Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction*, 154-55.

⁸⁸ Seymour Chatman, *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 117.

principle from any other narrative world...even if they do not literally ‘tell’ their story.”⁸⁹ More recently, Ute Berns has looked at the performative elements of narratology, eschewing the showing/telling distinction.⁹⁰ Finally, Monica Fludernik argues that, in drama, “the performer and audience ‘take over’ the roles of narrator and narratee.”⁹¹ These authors all contend that dramatic performance can and should be an object of narrative criticism. I adhere closer to the latter scholars than those following in the vein of Genette. I will be using a broader definition of narrative drawing on theorists such as Booth, Chatman, Phelan and others in this analysis. I add that rhetorical contributions to the field of narratology can enhance our understanding of the specific object, and allow for claims about its implications of power.

Starting with the work of Booth, the rhetorical approach to narratology treats fictional narratives as rhetorical texts rather than rhetorical texts as fiction. Phelan remarks that such an approach emphasizes “the recursive relationships among authorial agency, textual phenomena, and reader response.”⁹² All three elements influence one another. For this study, the author of wrestling texts, through textual phenomena, addresses the audience and calls for a desired response. Therefore, I will use this approach to examine how WWE addresses the audience. Specifically, I will look to the ways the wrestling narrative addresses the audience as marks (those who believe wrestling is “real”) or smarts (those who understand it is scripted) by examining how the narrative address shifts across the three eras of wrestling. Ultimately, by

⁸⁹ Manfred Jahn, “Narrative Voice and Agency in Drama: Aspects of a Narratology of Drama,” *New Literary History* 32, no. 3 (2001), 674.

⁹⁰ Ute Berns, “The Concept of Performativity in Narratology: Mapping a Field of Investigation,” *European Journal of English Studies* 13, no. 1 (2009), 93-108.

⁹¹ Monica Fludernik, “Narrative and Drama,” in *Theorizing Narrativity*, eds. John Pier and José ‘Angel García Landa (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 365.

⁹² Phelan, *Narrative as Rhetoric*, 19.

paying special attention to the modes of audience address in the narrative, I develop a more thorough account of narrative as a means to negotiate the power dynamic between author and audience in the form of creative authority. With this in mind, I will elaborate on the terms “author” and “audience” as developed in rhetorical narratology.

1.2.1 Types of Authors and Audiences

Within the field of narratology, the author is never simply the person who wrote the book. Rather, it is a question of who tells the narrative. The question of who “tells” a narrative is often answered through reference to three distinct entities: the actual author, the implied author and the narrator. The actual author is the physical person who writes the story. Booth first coined the term “implied author” to distinguish between the flesh-and-blood person writing the text and the image of the person imbedded in that text.⁹³ The implied author is “the version of himself or herself whom the actual author constructs and who communicates through the myriad choices – conscious, intuitive, or even unconscious – that he or she makes in composing and revising a narrative.”⁹⁴ Thus, the implied author is one that is embedded in the textual choices made by the actual author and subsequently “reconstructed by the reader from the narrative.”⁹⁵

The narrator, then, is the “teller” of the story *within* the narrative text, which can take many forms including a character within the story or an omniscient narrator who seems to “see from above” the events going on in the story. The narrator differs from the real or implied authors in that the narrator is a part of the diegetic world of the narrative. Booth points out in *Rhetoric of Fiction* that the narrator may be unreliable in that he/she need not “speak or act in

⁹³ Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction*, 70.

⁹⁴ Phelan and Rabinowitz, *Narrative Theory*, 30.

⁹⁵ Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978), 148.

accordance with” the norms of the implied author.⁹⁶ Thus, the narrator may speak with a different voice than either the actual or implied authors. In the text of wrestling, the narrators are the wrestlers and commentators who perform and describe the story for audiences in the arena and at home. It is important also to note that narrative can be the actions and dialogue between characters as well as instances when the narrator directly addresses the audience.⁹⁷ Thus, in wrestling, there is one implied author (WWE Creative) but many narrators (performers on the screen).

The concept of audience within narrative theory can be broken up into a similar tripartite arrangement of the actual audience, authorial audience, and narrative audience.⁹⁸ The actual audience, much like the actual author, entails the flesh-and-blood readers of the narrative text. The actual audience is comprised of many individual readers, who are all different and complex. The “authorial audience,” on the other hand, is who the author has in mind as the reader when crafting the narrative.⁹⁹ In wrestling, the actual audience is the flesh-and-blood fans studied by many past wrestling scholars. The authorial audience is who WWE Creative are crafting the stories for when writing them, and the text of professional wrestling reveals certain assumptions about the authorial audience of the narrative that may or may not be true about the actual audience reading the text, but which nevertheless promises insights into power dynamic at work in the narrative.

⁹⁶ Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction*, 158-159.

⁹⁷ Phelan & Rabinowitz, *Narrative Theory*, 37-38.

⁹⁸ Peter J. Rabinowitz, “Truth in Fiction: A Reexamination of Audiences,” *Critical Inquiry* 4 (1977), 126-128.

⁹⁹ Wayne Booth initially conceived of the “implied audience” as a counterpart to the “implied author” but later agreed with Rabinowitz’s tripartite audience distinction in the afterword to the second edition of *Rhetoric of Fiction*. Therefore, I stick with the term “authorial audience” as coined by Rabinowitz. For a more thorough discussion of the differences between the terms, see: Dan Shen, “Implied Author, Authorial Audience, and Context: Form and History in Neo-Aristotelian Rhetorical Theory,” *Narrative* 21 (2013), 151-156.

Finally, the narrative audience refers to the audience of the narrator, the persons whom the narrator is theoretically addressing. The narrative audience is different from the previous two audiences in that the narrative audience “treats the narrator as ‘real.’”¹⁰⁰ The narrative audience is one “that exists in the narrator’s world, that regards the characters and events as real rather than invented, and that accepts the basic facts of the storyworld regardless of whether they conform to those of the actual world.”¹⁰¹ In wrestling, the narrative audience is the live and television crowd the performers in the ring are addressing in their promos and in front of whom they are wrestling. The narrative audience differs from the authorial audience in that the former is a part of the diegetic world of the narrator whereas the latter is extra-diegetic. Phelan and Rabinowitz argue that “readers typically join (or try to join) the authorial audience, the hypothetical group for whom the author writes” and also “*pretends* to join the narrative audience, the audience that receives the narrator’s text.”¹⁰² Thus, the narrative audience recognizes the narrative as an invitation to invest in the world of the narrator, usually by making an emotional connection with the elements and characters present only in the narrator’s world. In this regard, the narrative audience is a reflexive participant in the production of textual meaning.

For the purposes of this study, the distinction between these three types of audiences is crucial to understanding how producers of wrestling texts address their audience. Many studies of professional wrestling audiences have attempted to shed light on the practices of the actual audience, the “real” flesh-and-blood fans of professional wrestling.¹⁰³ These studies do an

¹⁰⁰ Phelan & Rabinowitz, *Narrative Theory*, 140.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, emphasis in original.

¹⁰³ Sharon Mazer, *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 160; Henry Jenkins, “Never Trust a Snake: WWF Wrestling as Masculine Melodrama,” in *Out of Bounds: Sports, Media and the Politics of Identity*, ed. Aaron Baker and Todd Edward Boyd (Bloomington, IN: Indiana

admirable job of showing the diverse ways fans actually consume and interact with professional wrestling texts. However, I will move away from the actual audience to focus instead upon the authorial and narrative audiences. So, for the purposes of this dissertation, I will call the fans to whom the implied authors of WWE are writing their narratives the authorial audience, and the viewers (both in the live crowd and those watching on television) addressed by the performers the narrative audience. This approach to the relationship between author and audience allows for a more nuanced account of the rhetorical tactics used by WWE to address changing audience dynamics, thereby adding to an ongoing effort in rhetorical studies to understand the power dynamic between producer and consumer of texts.

1.2.2 The Text of Professional Wrestling

For my analysis, I chose key historical moments in wrestling history in which WWE shifts its narrative address to its audience. I go in depth on the particular texts within the chapter summaries, including why each text illustrates a shift in audience address, and how it worked to enable or constrain the creative authority of fans. I supplement these textual moments with historical context, fan texts, industrial discourses, television commentary and other contemporary narrative “promos” for comparison. In the tradition of scholars studying the “second persona,” I will be looking for moments in the narrative in which the audience is addressed and hailed in a particular subject position. I will be doing a close reading of the texts in the tradition of scholars like Michael Leff, in concert with these secondary texts, to ascertain where traces of “smart” fan culture become part of the narrative texts.¹⁰⁴ I will also use a comparative analysis of the authorial and narrative audience within each “era” of wrestling to show the differences in address

University Press, 1997), 51-53; Thomas Hackett, *Slaphappy: Pride, Prejudice, and Professional Wrestling* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006): 7-30.

¹⁰⁴ For a sample of the categories I draw from, see: Jeanne Fahnestock, *Rhetorical Style: The Uses of Language in Persuasion*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

to each type of audience as time progresses. These changes, which I discuss in the language of rhetorical persona, have important implications for how relatively minor changes in how authors address audiences can have major implications to the relations of power between producer and consumer. Specifically, my analyses will consider the degree to which producers can define authorial and narrative audiences, and how audiences can occupy a more fluid subject position. To accomplish this, I will look for the moments that suggest creative authority moving from producer to consumer or vice versa; those moments when WWE yields to fan pressure, when it “draws the line,” and those moments when the fans respond in unexpected ways.

By focusing on the ways WWE as a producer of media texts addresses both the authorial audience and narrative audience differently as fans become more knowledgeable and participatory, this study demonstrates the usefulness of a rhetorical approach to understanding how producers of mass media texts negotiate a changing power dynamic between media professionals and a more participatory fan culture. Specifically, it shows that a rhetorical theory of narrative provides the insights into the dialectic of power between author and audience necessary to a robust account of fan culture past and present. In the following section, I outline the proposed chapters of the dissertation project in order to show how each will illuminate the changing power dynamics in this media landscape by focusing on the narrative audience address in WWE programming.

1.3 Chapter Outline

In the first chapter, I illustrate the utility of rhetorical narratology for critical rhetoric by examining WWE’s shift from the Kayfabe Era to the Entertainment Era. During the mid-1990’s, WWE altered the narrative address to its authorial audience in order to reassert its control over the production of wrestling narratives. Using rhetorical narratology’s nuanced conception of

author and audience, I show how WWE used narrative strategies in the service of power vis-à-vis the consumer. Specifically, WWE switched to crafting narratives for an authorial audience of smarts while maintaining a narrative audience of marks. In so doing, WWE flattered the sophistication of its authorial audience while maintaining control of the production process.

The Kayfabe Era was defined by narratives that addressed both the authorial and narrative audience as “marks.” The term “kayfabe” refers to a culture within professional wrestling of keeping the illusion that wrestling is “real.” While authors like David Shoemaker argue that most fans, even in the early days of wrestling, understood implicitly that wrestling was “fixed,” they nonetheless participated as if they took the action on face value.¹⁰⁵ WWE addressed its fans during the Kayfabe Era *as if* they were marks. This mode of address hailed the audience as Barthes observed, to “abandon itself to the primary virtue of the spectacle, which is to abolish all motives and all consequences: what matters is not what it thinks but what it sees.”¹⁰⁶ The narrative style dominant in the Kayfabe Era allowed WWE to direct the fans’ emotional response at the narrators in the ring and largely deflect criticism away from the actual authors of the narrative behind the scenes. The Kayfabe Era stretched across most of wrestling history, from the 1920s to the 1990s. However, a combination of technological and cultural changes around this time gave fans greater access to previously unavailable insider secrets and terminology,

Armed with greater information on the behind-the-scenes production of wrestling, fans in the 1990s were no longer content to remain complicit in the spectacle of wrestling. Those trying to protect kayfabe were fighting a losing battle. Further, fans largely tuned out at this time, with WWE facing a drastic fall in business. Faced with changing fan participatory behaviors, WWE

¹⁰⁵ David Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle: Life, Death, and Professional Wrestling* (New York: Gotham Books, 2013), 77.

¹⁰⁶ Roland Barthes, “The World of Wrestling,” in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 15.

shifted its narrative address, dropping all pretenses of wrestling being a legitimately contested sport, thus entering the Entertainment Era. During this time, WWE switched to addressing an authorial audience of smart fans. Never before had wrestling's texts openly admitted that they were being crafted to an audience who was "in on" the fixed nature of wrestling.

The major text for analysis in the first chapter is an address made by Vince McMahon at the beginning of the December 15, 1997 edition of *Monday Night RAW*.¹⁰⁷ During this segment, McMahon lays the foundation for the Entertainment Era's narrative style. McMahon talks directly to the viewing audience and outright admits the scripted nature of WWE programming, comparing it to soap operas and sitcoms. He also declares that WWE thinks fans are tired of having their intelligence insulted by the same old tales of good guys versus bad guys. This moment is fitting for analysis in that it is widely accepted as the on-air acknowledgement that things had changed in the way WWE did business, and because it illustrates the shift in addressing the authorial audience from that of marks to one of smarts. McMahon, faced with a more knowledgeable wrestling fan base, shifted the narrative address of his authorial audience. In so doing, McMahon alleviated pressures long felt by wrestling promoters about wrestling's fake nature by "pulling back the veil" of illusion himself. By embracing the contrived nature of the sports entertainment spectacle, McMahon renegotiated the understood relationship between producer and consumer of wrestling as a media entertainment form.

Crucially, although the implied audience addressed by WWE Creative shifted to one of smarts, the audience addressed by the narrators in the diegetic storyworld remained one of marks.¹⁰⁸ For example, while owner Vince McMahon spoke openly about telling stories that did

¹⁰⁷ A full transcript of this text is included in Appendix A.

¹⁰⁸ Chris Hedges, *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle* (New York: Nation Books, 2009), 5-6. In effect, this study extends Hedges claim that "the success of professional wrestling... lies not in fooling

not insult the fans' intelligence, wrestler "The Rock" still addressed the fans in the crowd and those watching on television as if they thought he was going to exact his revenge on his opponent in an upcoming match. As I will show, this strengthened WWE's hand by flattering fans' intelligence without giving them an avenue for exercising it.

The case study examined in the first chapter positions narrative theory as a useful method for understanding how producers reassert creative authority in their relationship with consumers. Further, it advances the goals of the dissertation by expanding critical rhetoric's methodological toolbox to include theories of author and audience derived from structural narratology. In providing a close reading of a pivotal moment in WWE history, I illustrate why a nuanced account of audience and author is key to the power at play in our modern media environment wherein participatory and knowledgeable fans exert pressure on producers. This chapter turns to how producers respond to this exigence, and thereby posits that narrative theory has the ability to provide clues as to how authors constrain and redirect audience participation.

The second chapter focuses on the shift from the Entertainment Era to the Reality Era in 2011. Within this chapter, I combine theories of author and audience from rhetorical narratology with rhetorical theories of persona to show how WWE used narrative means to co-opt and commodify an emergent fan subculture threatening its business. During the end of the Entertainment Era, WWE distanced itself from many of the conventions of professional wrestling in favor of "sports entertainment." In so doing, the implied authors addressed a second persona comprised of casual fans, while ostracizing hardcore wrestling fans.¹⁰⁹ In response, a

us that these stories are real," but rather in its willingness to cater to our demand to be fooled." However, my argument differs from Hedges in that I am less willing to ascribe the lion's share of power to the audience.

¹⁰⁹ By "hardcore wrestling fans" I mean ardent fans who desire a narrative wherein the wrestling aspects of the genre are more centralized. I do not necessarily mean fans of the "hardcore" style of wrestling popularized in the United States by Extreme Championship Wrestling, though this subgroup usually fits within the boundaries of the former definition.

subculture of indy-wrestling emerged that catered to these fans WWE ignored. As the indy-wrestling fandom grew, fans became more vocal and critical of WWE programming, both in online forums and at live events. Faced again with an exigence based on fan participatory behavior, WWE again switched its narrative audience address to renegotiate power relations vis-à-vis consumers in its favor. This time, WWE altered the narrative to address *both* the authorial and narrative audiences as smarts, thus entering the Reality Era.

The Reality Era is distinguished by a full switch to addressing the audience as smarts, both by WWE Creative when crafting the narrative and by the narrators within the diegetic world of the narrative itself. In the Reality Era, storylines in WWE include the production and creative processes as part of the diegetic rationale behind the storylines. Thus, the production of wrestling narratives became the story. Specifically, WWE made fan criticism of its narrative a part of the narrative itself.

The text examined in this chapter is CM Punk's "pipe bomb" promo from the June 27, 2011 edition of *RAW*.¹¹⁰ In this "worked shoot," which was scripted but also contained elements of usually non-diegetic talking points, Punk broke wrestling norms by directly referring to the production and creative dimensions of the wrestling industry. WWE used Punk, who was largely associated with the indy-wrestling subculture and had buy-in from its fans, as a voice for the criticisms of indy-wrestling fans. During the speech, CM Punk, engaged in a self-reflexive critique of the stories being told in WWE. He criticized why certain wrestlers were pushed over others despite being better wrestlers (using a criteria of production). Punk's rant only makes sense to the narrative audience if they understand the business and production sides of professional wrestling. Further, Punk's promo provides textual cues to hardcore wrestling fans via insider references and terminology, the subtext of which casual fan would likely miss.

¹¹⁰ A full transcript of the pipe bomb speech is included in Appendix B

Therefore, Punk “winks” at a fourth persona of hardcore fans while still engaging a second persona of casual fans. In so doing, WWE directed hardcore wrestling fans to exercise their voice in opposition to the dominant narrative style of WWE programming by engaging in consumption behaviors supporting Punk as an advocate for them. Thus, WWE managed to commodify fan discontent and co-opt the indy-wrestling subculture. This case study illustrates narrative’s utility in examining how producers of content can re-appropriate fan agency for their own goals, thus limiting the creative authority of the consumers. Further, it advances the goals of the dissertation by showing that narrative theories, in combination with rhetorical theories of persona, can provide a more nuanced account of power relations.

While WWE reasserted its creative authority in the Reality Era by commodifying fan discontent, it also laid the groundwork for an eventual increase in active fan participation in influencing the direction of narrative production. By making the creation of wrestling narratives part of the storylines themselves, WWE put its own creative choices and narrative direction on trial for the approval of the audience. WWE effectively positioned the audience as arbiters of quality narrative production and invited them to exercise creative authority in the production process, a relatively more powerful subject position. The third chapter deals with the eventual effect of this type of address. In so doing, the final case study provides insight into how authors can discursively produce a group subjectivity through narrative texts, and further, how audiences can act upon narrative cues to exercise agency over the production of texts and resist attempts at co-optation and commodification.

The third and final content chapter examines the rise of Daniel Bryan to the main event of *WrestleMania XXX* on April 6, 2014. This text not only exemplifies the Reality Era style of narrative audience address; it also illustrates the potential of narrative to empower fans to

influence the production process, thereby blurring the distinction between producer and consumer. The Daniel Bryan storyline features a feud between an undersized indy-wrestler who does not fit the cosmetic mold of a traditional WWE Superstar (Bryan) against the corporate powers that hold him back in the wrestling world, represented by Vince McMahon's daughter and son-in-law (referred to as "The Authority"). Eventually, WWE tried to end the story and shift Bryan out of the main event picture. However, at this point, fans began to "hijack" shows by voicing their displeasure at the new creative direction taken by WWE. Eventually, WWE acquiesced to fan desire and altered its narrative, centering the biggest show of the year on Daniel Bryan riding a wave of fan support to the main event and winning the World Title. In this case study, fans exercised unprecedented influence over the production process, becoming co-producers of the narrative. This chapter shows how the narrative address of the authorial and narrative audiences set the stage for fans to coalesce around a group subjectivity (the "Yes! Movement") in order to pressure WWE to alter its narrative.

Whereas the first and second chapters engage a single text through close textual analysis, the third chapter examines a longer form fragmented narrative spanning several months. In so doing, it positions rhetorical narratology as a method for assembling a text from fragmented discourse. Further, it shows the usefulness of rhetorical narratology for addressing the debate over the role of the text in rhetorical criticism. Rhetorical narratology's sophisticated account of audience provides a method for avoiding the pitfalls Condit warned of: treating audiences as falsely universal (Leff) or hopelessly particular (McGee).¹¹¹ Using narratology's tripartite typology of audience as a guide for creating a critical text from fragments of discourse avoids the tendency of over-individualizing the reader of texts. Further, by showing how the narrative

¹¹¹ Condit, "Extremes," 333.

addresses and constitutes an ersatz movement, I pay heed to Condit's argument that rhetoric is neither individual or universal, but collective in nature.¹¹²

This dissertation looks to add to conversations in critical rhetoric and cultural studies about power and media in a participatory fan culture. I will admit here that I am a wrestling fan and have been for sixteen years. I would even count myself among the "hardcore wrestling fans" spoken of in chapters two and three. I hope that my work speaks to my fellow fans, as I want to always keep an eye toward how my work provides insights into the world beyond academia. However, I do not intend this dissertation to only reach those who care about wrestling. My aim is to use wrestling as a site of power negotiation to indicate greater implications beyond the scope of this particular case study. Specifically, I hope this project appeals to scholars in critical rhetoric, for whom I argue that narrative theory should receive a greater place in critical scholarship. Further, this dissertation speaks to scholars in critical/cultural and media studies interested in fandom and the power dynamic between consumers and producers.

¹¹² Ibid.

2 CHAPTER ONE: FROM KAYFABE ERA TO ENTERTAINMENT ERA

During the 1990s, WWE embarked on a new narrative direction as a response to changes in fan consumption behaviors. Throughout the majority of its sixty-year history, WWE operated under the logic of “kayfabe,” which dictated that wrestling producers attempt to present as if the action in the ring were a “real” sporting event, unscripted and legitimately contested. The tradition of kayfabe in wrestling predated WWE by decades and was as entrenched a practice as one would find in the genre. WWE, though, bucked this tradition by openly admitting the fixed nature of professional wrestling. From that point forward, it no longer attempted to mimic traditional sports programming. Instead, WWE embraced the fictional nature of professional wrestling and promoted its entertainment value. With this, WWE left the “Kayfabe Era” of wrestling programming and entered the “Entertainment Era.” And while this move could be seen as a concession to fans, it was actually an effort to renegotiate the balance of power such that WWE maintained its control over its product: the text of professional wrestling.

Professional wrestling, since its carnival roots, has battled to be seen as “legitimate” in the eyes of the public. As early as the 1910s, the media scrutinized wrestling in exposés meant to discredit wrestling promoters.¹ In response, a culture of “kayfabe” emerged in professional wrestling, meaning that those in wrestling went to great lengths to maintain and protect the illusion of reality behind the scripted pseudo-sport. Wrestlers, promoters, announcers and crews actively worked to keep the audience of “outsiders” away from the inner-workings of the business. However, by the 1990s, the walls between producer and consumer of professional wrestling had begun to crumble. The advent of the Internet made access to trade secrets and “insider” information easier than ever. Armed with greater access to knowledge about the

¹ Thomas Hackett, *Slaphappy: Pride, Prejudice, and Professional Wrestling* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 35.

production of wrestling narratives, the fans grew restless with the traditional narrative that assumed the audience were dupes, fooled by the kayfabe practices of wrestling. Further, fans shared information more freely than ever, and this made maintaining kayfabe a nearly impossible task. Fans were no longer remaining complicit in the ruse that wrestling was legitimate sport, no longer content to “abandon itself to the primary virtue of the spectacle.”² The veil was lifted, revealing the production process of the pseudo-sport, and as fans became increasingly skeptical, companies like WWE saw a sharp decline in business.³ Whereas fans had previously participated in the culture of kayfabe by behaving in a manner complicit with the spectacle, they now began to reject it. Specifically, they went on a sort of strike, refusing to go along with the ruse and posing a threat to the sport’s existence.

In response to the change in participatory behaviors of fans during the 1990s, WWE departed from tradition. It stopped trying to maintain kayfabe, and instead embraced the staged nature of its programming. Of course, WWE could have doubled-down on claims the events were not fixed, as had happened in previous instances of resistance to kayfabe.⁴ Indeed, other wrestling promotions at the time ignored the changing fan behavior in an attempt to keep the status quo.⁵ However, WWE adapted to the fans’ growing insight into the narrative dimensions

² Roland Barthes, “The World of Wrestling,” in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972 [1952]), 15.

³ Dave Meltzer, *Wrestling Observer Newsletter*, January 20, 1993. Meltzer argues the wrestling business was “collapsing” at this time.

⁴ Irv Muchnik, *Wrestling Babylon: Piledriving Tales of Drugs, Sex, Death, and Scandal* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2007), 118. The history of wrestling is rife with examples of those within the industry going to great lengths to maintain kayfabe. In an infamous segment of 20/20 aired in December 1984, John Stossel attempted to “out” the fake nature of professional wrestling in an exposé, but bit off a bit more than he could chew in the form of WWF wrestler “Dr. D” David Schultz. In the segment, Stossel bluntly stated that he thinks wrestling is fake. In response, Schultz began pummeling Stossel with open hand slaps to both ears.

⁵ During the late 1980s and early 1990s, several competing wrestling promotions closed, including World Class Championship Wrestling, American Wrestling Association, and United States Wrestling Association. Common

of professional wrestling by dropping all pretenses of being anything but an entertainment product. From that point forward, WWE made the audience's awareness of the scripted nature of wrestling part of its narrative, and encouraged fans to embrace the entertainment value of wrestling, as opposed to asking fans to conform to the traditions of kayfabe. In so doing, WWE turned what had been a liability (i.e., the "fake" or scripted nature of the sport) into an asset.

In this chapter, I analyze the role of narrative in WWE's effort to secure the loyalty of its fans. Drawing on rhetorical theories of narrative, I provide an account of how WWE altered the narrative construction of its authorial audience in order to address challenges created by a more knowledgeable fan base dissatisfied with traditional wrestling narratives. From this analysis, I argue that WWE successfully addressed the problem of fan dissatisfaction via a shift in what James Phelan and Peter Rabinowitz call the authorial audience, that is the audience for whom the implied author crafts the narrative, as manifested in textual cues imbedded in the narrative text.⁶ By embracing the scripted nature of wrestling narrative production, a long held secret in the industry, WWE was able to flatter the sophistication of its fan base while at the same time maintaining control of the production process, and the narrative direction of the product. In later chapters, I argue that this shift had unintended consequences. Namely, by acknowledging fans as smarts, WWE opened the door to a level of fan participation that actually undermined its authority. However, in this chapter I focus primarily on establishing narrative as a key site for negotiating creative authority between the producers and consumers of professional wrestling. In so doing, I demonstrate the strength of narrative analysis as a method for identifying and unpacking relations of power as they manifest across mass media texts.

reasons cited for the failure of these companies include their inability to adapt to changes in the business like WWE and WCW did.

⁶ James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz, *Narrative Theory: Core Concepts & Critical Debates* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2012), 30.

In the pages that follow, I will first review literature on participatory fan culture in wrestling and the conceptions of author and audience, which are key to the narrative strategies employed by WWE. Next, I will provide a profile of the history and manner of narrative address particular to the Kayfabe Era and discuss why increasing fan sophistication threatened WWE as a business, and its control over the direction of professional wrestling. Having established the exigency, I turn to a representative response—WWE Majority Owner and Chairman Vince McMahon’s announcement of his company’s new direction. Drawing on Phelan and Rabinowitz’s theory of rhetorical narrative, I analyze McMahon’s address to argue that it not only marks a pivotal moment of change between the two eras, but that it illuminates the centrality of narrative in the process by which WWE and its fans negotiated, and continues to negotiate, the control over the text of professional wrestling.

2.1 Participatory Culture in Wrestling

Scholars in media studies have long investigated the process by which audiences understand themselves and their place in society relative to a particular text. As media theories of audience developed, scholarship moved from thinking of fans as passive consumers to more participatory and knowledgeable subjects capable of exercising creative authority over the production of meaning in media texts. Within this tradition of inquiry, professional wrestling programming has proven itself an apt text for analyzing the ways producers of media texts adapt to the audience dynamic changing from passive to participatory. However, to appreciate how the literature on wrestling, of which this dissertation is part, contributes to rhetoric and media studies, I offer the following, abbreviated history.

In the Frankfurt School’s pioneering studies of mass culture, audiences were largely conceived as passive consumers of media texts, their subject positions determined by the

ideologies reflected by the objects of mass culture. This conception of audience reflects Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's "culture industry" approach to media and society, in which mass culture texts short-circuit individual thought and judgment to perpetuate the dominant ideology.⁷ Similarly, Siegfried Kracauer examined the role of cinema and entertainment forms in distracting the masses from social and political realities in the service of nationalistic ideals.⁸ Adorno and Horkheimer's work inspired a wave of media "effects" research that emphasized how media influenced audiences to act. These scholars argued that media negatively influenced violent behavior,⁹ juvenile delinquency,¹⁰ excessive consumerism,¹¹ education and literacy¹² and the degradation of democracy.¹³ However, this scholarship largely ignored the possibility that audiences might participate in the production of textual meaning, or do much of anything beyond passively accepting the ideas of the ruling class.

As media scholarship developed, it began to conceive the audience not as passive consumers but as potentially resistant readers of media texts. Representing the Birmingham School, Stuart Hall argued that audiences take a more active role than previously theorized by

⁷ Theodor Adorno & Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2002[1944]); Theodor Adorno, "Culture Industry Reconsidered," in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (London: Routledge, 1991). Adorno and Horkheimer point out that the "Culture Industry" is different from "mass culture" because it presents a false idea of democratic production. They argue that the culture industry sells consumers on this democratic ideal and ultimately defrauds the masses.

⁸ Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film (Revised and Expanded Edition)*, ed. Leonardo Quaresima (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 5-8. Kracauer also saw the potential for this distraction to provoke radical change. See: Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 326-327.

⁹ Carmen Luke, *TV and Your Child* (London: Angus and Robertson, 1990)

¹⁰ Fredric Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent* (New York: Rinehart & Company, 1954)

¹¹ Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1976)

¹² Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Viking, 1986)

¹³ Robert McChesney, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy* (New York: The New Press, 2000).

looking at moments of encoding and decoding.¹⁴ Hall argued that audiences often decode media texts in a resistant manner that rejects the intended notion of the producer of the media. Hall's focus on "determinant moments" of decoding led to a series of empirical studies about the reception of television programs by different audiences.¹⁵ Among these studies, David Morley's *The Nationwide Audience* became a seminal text that studied audiences as active readers of media texts (in this case the current affairs program *Nationwide*).¹⁶ Although media scholars disagree on the extent that audiences have agency in resisting the intended meaning in texts, the debate suggests an assumption of an active audience absent from earlier scholarship.¹⁷ Indeed, media scholars including Ien Ang, John Fiske, John Tulloch, and Huimin Jin use an active audience model to examine how audience members decode messages in everyday life.¹⁸

The emphasis on moments of active encoding and decoding in the everyday life of audiences led several scholars to undertake ethnographic studies of media audiences. Pertti Alasuutari argues that this shift to ethnographic studies marked a "second generation" of media reception studies that switched the focus from program content to the uses and functions of those programs. Alasuutari writes that when conducting this type of research, "one studies the role of the media in everyday life, not the impact (or meaning) of everyday life on the reception of a

¹⁴ Stuart Hall, *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse* (Birmingham, England: University of Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies, 1973): 507.

¹⁵ Pertti Alasuutari, "Introduction: Three Phases of Reception Studies," in *Rethinking the Media Audience*, ed. Pertti Alasuutari (London, SAGE, 1999), 4.

¹⁶ David Morley, *The Nationwide Audience: Structure and Decoding* (London: British Film Institute, 1980), 3.

¹⁷ For a sample of the debate on audience agency, see: John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989); Ien Ang, *Living Room Wars: Rethinking the Audience for a Postmodern World* (New York: Routledge, 1996); John Tulloch, *Watching Television Audiences: Cultural Theories and Methods* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

¹⁸ See note 10; Also see: Huimin Jin, *Active Audience: A New Materialistic Interpretation of a Key Concept of Cultural Studies* (Bielefeld, Germany: [transcript] Verlag, 2012), 18.

program.”¹⁹ For example, Henry Jenkins challenges prior media conceptions of audiences as passive consumers of media texts in his formulation of participatory culture.²⁰ Jenkins argues that fans actively become co-participants in the construction of texts. Fan participation may manifest in online pressure on producers to alter content or fan-created narratives that circulate with the original media content, for example.²¹ While participatory culture highlights the myriad ways fans blur the power distance between producer and consumer, Jason Sperb criticizes Jenkins for forcing critical scholarship on fans’ democratic potential into a troubling binary of “critical pessimism or critical optimism.”²² Sperb points out that Jenkins overemphasizes the utopian view of participatory culture for leading to a greater power for consumers. More recently, critics have looked at the tension that arises between consumers and producers of media content and the power dynamic between them as fans become more participatory, pointing out ways that producers attempt to co-opt and/or fight against participatory consumption behaviors.²³ Turning to rhetorical studies of media and popular culture can aid in this task by calling attention to the text as a site of power relations between rhetor and audience.

Within the field of rhetoric, scholars have examined how popular culture artifacts affect audiences and power by focusing on the text through methods derived from the literary tradition as opposed to the social sciences. Raymie McKerrow argues that rhetorical studies that ignore

¹⁹ Alasuutari, “Three Phases,” 5.

²⁰ Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992): 3.

²¹ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 184.

²² Jason Sperb, “Reassuring Convergence: Online Fandom, Race, and Disney’s Notorious Song of the South,” *Cinema Journal* 49, no. 4 (2010), 27.

²³ Annissa M. Graham, “A New Kind of Pandering: *Supernatural* and the World of Fanfiction,” in *Fan CULTure: Essays on Participatory Fandom in the 21st Century*, ed. Kristin M. Barton and Jonathan Malcolm Lampley (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2014), 131.

popular culture lead to “sterile forms of criticism.”²⁴ Rhetorical scholars have used textual analysis to provide insights into power by looking at these texts, which Brummett argues involve the aspects of social life most shared by the public.²⁵ These scholars have used textual analysis to describe and evaluate power relations embedded in a variety of popular culture texts including fictional films,²⁶ television shows,²⁷ documentaries,²⁸ and comic books.²⁹ Rhetoric scholars have also used textual analysis methods to examine how less obviously literary texts affect power, including sports³⁰ and popular art.³¹ Within this critical cultural lens, rhetorical scholars show the power of attention to text in illuminating systems of power.

²⁴ Raymie E. McKerrow, “Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis,” *Communication Monographs* 56 (1989), 101.

²⁵ Barry Brummett, *Rhetorical Dimensions of Popular Culture* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1991), 5.

²⁶ Derek T. Beuscher and Kent A. Ono, “Civilised Colonialism: *Pocahontas* as Neocolonial Rhetoric,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 19 (1996), 150; Claire Sisco King, *Washed in Blood: Male Sacrifice, Trauma, and the Cinema* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 7; Claire Sisco King and Joshua Gunn, “On a Violence Unseen: The Womanly Object and Sacrificed Man,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 99 (2013), 200-208; Thomas S. Frenz and Janice Hooker Rushing, “‘Mother Isn’t Quite Herself Today’: Myth and Spectacle in *The Matrix*,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19 (2002), 64; Brian L. Ott and Diane Marie Keeling, “Cinema and Choric Connection: Lost in Translation as Sensual Experience,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 97 (2011), 363.

²⁷ Dana Cloud, “Hegemony or Concordance? The Rhetoric of Tokenism in ‘Oprah’ Winfrey’s Rags-to-Riches Biography,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 13 (1996), 115; Kent A. Ono, *Contemporary Media Culture and the Remnants of a Colonial Past* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2009), 71.

²⁸ Thomas Rosteck and Thomas S. Frenz, “Myth and Multiple Readings in Environmental Rhetoric: The Case of An Inconvenient Truth,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 95 (2009), 1-19; Thomas W. Benson and Brian J. Snee, *Michael Moore and the Rhetoric of Documentary* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2015).

²⁹ William Earnest, “Making Gay Sense of the X-Men,” in *Uncovering Hidden Rhetorics: Social Issues in Disguise*, ed. Barry Brummett (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2008), 215-232.

³⁰ Barry Brummett and Andrew W. Ishak, *Sports and Identity: New Agendas in Communication* (New York, Routledge, 2014); Michael L. Butterworth, *Baseball and Rhetorics of Purity: The National Pastime and American Identity During the War on Terror* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2010); Thomas P. Oates, “The Erotic Gaze in the NFL Draft,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 4 (2007), 74-90; Kent A. Ono, “America’s Apple Pie: Baseball, Japan-Bashing, and the Sexual Threat of Economic Miscegenation,” in *Out of Bounds: Sports, Media, and the Politics of Identity*, eds. Aaron Baker and Todd Boyd (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997), 81-101; John M. Sloop, “Riding in Cars Between Men,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 2 (2005), 191-213; Nick Trujillo, “Hegemonic Masculinity on the Mound: Media Representations of Nolan Ryan and American Sport Culture,” in *Reading Sport: Critical Essays on Power and Representation*, eds. Susan Birrell and Mary G. McDonald (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000), 14-39.

Thus far, the scholarship on wrestling has taken an approach more consistent with media studies than with rhetoric. That is, it is focused less on the text and more on the psychology and behaviors of fans. Moreover, the underlying notion in much of this research on professional wrestling (especially social scientific research) is that wrestling is indicative of Adorno and Horkheimer's "culture industry."³² Scholars sought to see the effect of the violent imagery on audiences. Much academic research on wrestling assumes that audience members passively accept the morality of the stories being told in the ring, and thus worry about the effects of violence, misogyny, heterosexism, etc. in wrestling performances.³³ As professional wrestling texts changed thematically from epic tales of good versus evil to pushing the boundaries of appropriateness, the attention remained on media effects that theorized the audience as passive.

While these studies conceived the audience as passive, several scholars have focused on participatory culture as identified by Jenkins with regard to professional wrestling. Catherine Salmon and Susan Clerc looked at female wrestling fans' sometimes erotic fan fiction on web forums.³⁴ Thomas Hackett studied fans' participatory efforts at live events.³⁵ Shane Toepfer argued that fans playfully engage in production through fantasy booking events within the

³¹ Claire Sisco King, "American Queerer: Norman Rockwell and the Art of Queer Feminist Critique," *Women's Studies in Communication* 39 (2016), 157-176.

³² Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 129.

³³ Sut Jhally, Jackson Katz, and Ronit Ridberg, *Wrestling with Manhood: Boys, Bullying & Battering*, Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation, 2002; Danielle M. Soulliere, "Wrestling with Masculinity: Messages about Manhood in WWE," *Sex Roles* 55, no. 1 (2006), 8; Ron Tamborini et al., "Talking Smack: Verbal Aggression in Professional Wrestling," *Communication Studies* 59, no. 3 (2008), 255.

³⁴ Catherine Salmon and Susan Clerc, "Ladies Love Wrestling Too: Female Wrestling Fans Online," in *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling*, ed. Nicholas Sammond (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 167-168.

³⁵ Hackett, *Slaphappy*, 7-30.

“Internet Wrestling Community.”³⁶ These studies all show that the wrestling audience is changing from a passive audience to a more participatory audience.

Sharon Mazer, in her extensive ethnography of wrestling fans, posits that wrestling fans have a fascination with trying to determine what is a “work” (a scripted element of the story) or a “shoot” (unscripted elements that come from real life). Fans take pride in knowing which injuries are real and which are faked for story purposes as well as knowing as much as they can about the wrestlers' real lives outside the ring.³⁷ This work identifies the difference between wrestling fans as “marks” who believe the wrestling is unscripted, and “smarts” who “know the inside of the business and the secrets behind the ruses – what is real and what is staged both in terms of storylines and moves.”³⁸ Marion Wrenn also points to the wrestling term “smarks,” a term that combines “smart” and “mark” to signify the fan that is privy to the fake nature of wrestling but who still can be engaged by the performance.³⁹ If marks are the naïve fool and smarts are the dubious critic, smarks are those that are neither fully duped nor fully distanced through skepticism. When smarks are able to lose themselves in the spectacle of the performance and willingly suspend their disbelief, they are said to be “marking out.”⁴⁰ Mazer’s work, conducted

³⁶ Shane Toepfer, “The Playful Audience: Professional Wrestling, Media Fandom, and the Omnipresence of Media Smarks,” (PhD diss, Georgia State University, 2011), 192.

³⁷ Sharon Mazer, *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 160.

³⁸ Eero Laine, “Professional Wrestling: Creating America’s Fight Culture,” in *American History through American Sports: From Colonial Lacrosse to Extreme Sports, Volume 2*, ed. Daniell Sarver Coombs & Bob Batchelor (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2013), 226.

³⁹ Marion Wrenn, “Managing Doubt: Professional Wrestling Jargon and the Making of Smart Fans,” in *Practicing Culture*, ed. Craig Calhoun and Richard Sennett (New York: Routledge, 2007), 160.

⁴⁰ Barbie Zelizer, *About to Die: How News Images Move the Public* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 14-15. The acting “as if” the spectacle were real and the address to an audience “as if” they were marks works rhetorically by using the “subjunctive voice.”

during the 1990s, highlights the type of participatory consumption that challenged WWE's ability to maintain kayfabe.

The focus on audience has, however, led to a lack of attention to the text as a site of discursive production. That is, they do not investigate how media texts reflect the efforts of producers to address the demands of the active consumer—texts as reflections of the push and pull between producer and consumer that blur the line between author and audience. This approach is in keeping with Alasuutari's call for a "third generation" of reception studies that takes a constructionist view of audiences. "The third generation brings the media back to media studies, but conceives of the media and media messages in a broader sense than just as an encoded text to be then decoded by a particular 'interpretive community.'"⁴¹ In short, a robust account of the audience demands focused attention on the content and production of media texts.⁴²

In the following section, I will show that rhetorical theory of audience through a narrative lens provides this focus, and that it does so by calling attention to the text as a site of power relations between rhetor and audience. By paying close attention to the way WWE addresses the audience within its narrative, we can see how WWE attempted to adapt to the more informed audience by addressing them as such. In so doing, WWE managed to take back a level of power and control over the creation of its narrative product, even as it empowered the audience, or fans, to influence the creative process.

⁴¹ Alasuutari, "Three Phases," 7.

⁴² Ibid., 5. See also: Laurence Grossberg, "Wandering Audiences, Nomadic Critics," *Cultural Studies* 2 (1988), 377.

2.2 Author and Audience in Professional Wrestling Narrative

As professional wrestling fans became more knowledgeable and vocal in the 1990s, WWE addressed the changing power dynamic between producer and consumer through narrative means. By changing the authorial audience for whom they crafted its narrative texts, WWE managed to reassert its creative authority over wrestling narratives. In order to understand the importance of this narrative shift, I will first review the concepts of author and audience as developed in a narrative theory deeply influenced by the rhetorical tradition. Next, I discuss how theories of narrative fell out of favor within the field of critical rhetoric, and argue that a return to such narrative theories could prove beneficial to both bodies of literature. Finally, and as a first step toward advancing my dissertation's larger argument about the value of narrative to critical rhetoric, I introduce the tripartite understanding of author and audience derived from rhetorical narratology as a method for understanding how WWE reasserted its position of power within the dynamic between producer and consumer.

As we saw in the intro, rhetorical theory and criticism once had a mutually influential relationship with narrative theory. Wayne Booth's theorization of implied authorship in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* influenced later rhetorical theories of speaker.⁴³ Influenced by this concept, Edwin Black coined the term "second persona" to refer to the implied auditor, the audience understood to be addressed by the text.⁴⁴ Black argued that, "rhetorical discourses...will imply an auditor, and that in most cases the implication will be sufficiently suggestive as to enable the critic to link this implied auditor to an ideology."⁴⁵

⁴³ Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 70-71.

⁴⁴ Edwin Black, "The Second Persona," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 56 (1970), 112.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

In the years following Booth and Black's early contributions, scholars in rhetoric continued to use ideas derived from narrative theory to examine texts for insights into relationships of power between author and audience. During this period, theories of audience, persona, and authorship continued to develop. Walter Fisher argued for the centrality of narrative for understanding how humans reasoned in opposition to rational argumentation,⁴⁶ leading some rhetorical scholars to use his concepts of narrative fidelity and coherence to analyze texts.⁴⁷ However, in the last few decades, narrative theory has largely fallen out of favor within rhetoric as a critical methodology, especially within critical rhetoric.

The field of critical rhetoric often deals with narrative subject matter, but does not often utilize narrative theory in analyzing texts. Kevin McClure points out that, despite the ubiquity of narrative and the utility of narrative models of communication, "in rhetorical theory and criticism narrative and the narrative paradigm have become virtually dead subjects."⁴⁸ The rise of poststructuralism hurt the image of rhetorical narratology, which is highly structuralist in nature. Similarly, Michael Calvin McGee's argument that there are no fully formed texts and that audiences are more responsible for creating texts from fragments than traditional authors provided a decline in critical rhetoric's systematic attention to narrative texts.⁴⁹ Despite this evolution in approach to critical rhetoric and the general suspicion of structuralism, much of the

⁴⁶ Walter Fisher, "Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case for Public Moral Argument," *Communication Monographs* 51 (1984), 1-22.

⁴⁷ William G. Kirkwood, "Narrative and the Rhetoric of Possibility," *Communication Monographs* 59 (1992), 30-47; Herbert W. Simons, "From Post-9/11 Melodrama to Quagmire in Iraq: A Rhetorical History," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 10 (2007): 185.

⁴⁸ Kevin McClure, "Resurrecting the Narrative Paradigm: Identification and the Case of Young Earth Creationism," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (2009): 189-190.

⁴⁹ Michael Calvin McGee, "Text, Context, and the Fragmentation of Contemporary Culture," *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 54 (1990), 274.

scholarship within the field deals with narrative texts, (films, literature, etc.), and draws on concepts that originated in or developed through narrative theory.

Critical rhetoric is a branch of rhetorical studies that seeks to make moral/ethical judgments about the political and social implications of rhetorical texts. Rooted in Marxist theory, critical rhetoric seeks to expose the way rhetorical texts work to create systems of dominance through ideology. Critical rhetoric sits in opposition to rhetorical criticism that simply evaluates the effectiveness of text at persuading an audience or creating a canon of great speeches. Critical rhetoric is also rooted in a stance of skepticism and constant critique.

McKerrow argued that critical rhetoric should contain two complementary perspectives: a critique of domination and a critique of freedom.⁵⁰ The critique of domination is similar to Wander's focus on power and ideology in the service of controlling people, and his call to critics to advance the goal of "freedom from" repressive forms of power and hegemony. McKerrow, though, also argued that a critique of domination "is not an exhaustive account of the potential discourses of power" without also including a critique of freedom.⁵¹ Drawing on Foucault, who argued that power is ubiquitous, and that one cannot ever enter a situation free from power,⁵² McKerrow calls on critical rhetoric to take on a stance of "never ending skepticism" of all forms of power, which includes the belief that it is possible to escape the dialectic of domination and resistance, or, in other words, to be free.⁵³ McKerrow, again following Foucault, further notes that the Marxist goal of demystification of "false consciousness" no longer serves as a telos for critical rhetoric because truth and power are always intertwined. Therefore, even as individuals

⁵⁰ McKerrow, "Critical Rhetoric," 92.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁵² Michel Foucault, *Knowledge/Power*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 119.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

are liberated from repressive domination, the new status quo is still implicated in a system of power and ideology that must, in turn, be subject to critique.

The practice of critical rhetoric, as outlined by McKerrow, led to debates within the field about the teleological goals of rhetorical criticism. Dana Cloud argues that critical rhetoric becomes relativist in claiming that discourse creates reality. She goes on to state that this relativism prevents critics from taking a “credible position to adjudicate the truth or falsity of discourse, or to speculate about whose interests are served by a particular set of texts.”⁵⁴ Similarly, Maurice Charland argues that, absent a telos of what is critically good, the rhetorical critic would have no reason to prefer one form of power over any other, rendering the critique of domination an empty gesture.⁵⁵ Kent Ono and John Sloop, however, argue that a critical rhetorician must, at the point of putting pen to paper, commit to a telos as if it were “Truth,” but upon lifting the pen, abandon that telos to skepticism.⁵⁶

For the present study, critical rhetoric can illuminate how the producers of media content (WWE) used narrative means to control the production of content and how the fans brought about a change in the system, bringing an end to the Kayfabe Era. But also, this study engages in continued critique by showing how the new status quo in the Entertainment Era still represented a dynamic of power in which the producers largely retained control. In this way, it is both a critique of power and critique of freedom. And, in keeping with Ono and Sloop, it is a provisional critique that aims to further larger conversations in rhetoric about media texts as sites of power relations.

⁵⁴ Dana Cloud, “The Materiality of Discourse as Oxymoron: A Challenge to Critical Rhetoric,” *Western Journal of Communication* 58 (1994), 153.

⁵⁵ Maurice Charland, “Finding a Horizon and a Telos: The Challenge to Critical Rhetoric,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 77 (1991), 71-74.

⁵⁶ Kent A. Ono and John M. Sloop, “Commitment to Telos – A Sustained Rhetoric,” *Communication Monographs* 59 (1992), 53.

The present study also positions narrative methodology as an underutilized tool for critical rhetoric in examining power relations between producers and consumers of media content. Within narratology, a three-part understanding of authorship works to complicate the notion of who “tells” a narrative. I use the terms actual author, implied author, and narrator in order to distinguish the three subjectivities of authorship. First, the actual author refers to the flesh-and-blood person(s) who write the narrative. Seymour Chatman points out that a narrative may have many actual authors.⁵⁷ Indeed, the narratives crafted for WWE programming include a myriad of actual authors, including all those who have a say in the construction of the wrestling narrative. This includes the owner Vince McMahon, wrestlers, commentators, and bookers (who decide who wins and loses and the overall direction of storyline feuds).

The second teller of a narrative is the implied author, or the image of the author imbedded within the narrative text.⁵⁸ As mentioned in the introduction, the implied author is “the version of himself or herself whom the actual author constructs and who communicates through the myriad choices – conscious, intuitive, or even unconscious – that he or she makes in composing and revising a narrative.”⁵⁹ Wayne Booth’s work in implied author shows that the implied author is distinguishable from the actual author in that a single actual author may imply multiple versions of an implied author in different texts.⁶⁰ Further, Chatman explains that, unlike the actual author, only one image of a singular implied author is presented in a given narrative

⁵⁷ Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978), 149.

⁵⁸ Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction*, 70.

⁵⁹ Phelan and Rabinowitz, *Narrative Theory*, 30.

⁶⁰ Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction*, 71.

text.⁶¹ Therefore, the implied author of WWE narratives is the amalgamation of the various actual authors embedded in the text. This implied author is the vision of “WWE” that the storylines being told present to the world referred to as “WWE Creative.”

The narrator differs from the real or implied authors in that the narrator is a part of the diegetic world of the narrative. The narrator “tells” the story from within the narrative text itself. Narrators may take many forms. Genette describes two types of narrators: heterodiegetic and homodiegetic narrators.⁶² Heterodiegetic narrators are those that narrate the events from outside, who seem to “see from above” the events going on in a story. Within the world of wrestling, commentators serve as heterodiegetic narrators who observe the action in the ring and promos going on in the wrestling narrative and interpret those events for the audience. Homodiegetic narrators, on the other hand, narrate events as a participant of the events in the narrative. The wrestlers themselves serve as homodiegetic narrators when they cut promos to the audience and through their physical storytelling during matches. Another dimension that sets the narrator apart from the other conceptions of authorship is the possibility that the narrator may speak contrary to the views of the actual and/or implied author. Booth explains that in this way narrators may be reliable or unreliable.⁶³ An unreliable narrator is one that expresses views that differ from those of the implied author. Thus, in wrestling, the narrators are commentators and wrestlers who may or may not speak in accordance with the views of the implied author of WWE Creative.

The tripartite structure of narrative authorship is mirrored in the tripartite account of audience developed in rhetorical narratology, which includes the actual, authorial, and narrative audiences. The actual audience is similar to the actual author in that it is comprised of the flesh-

⁶¹ Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 149.

⁶² Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 228-29.

⁶³ Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction*, 158-159

and-blood readers of a narrative text. This audience is a set of many, varied and complex individual subjectivities. Within wrestling, the actual audience is the actual fans who watch the narrative presented by WWE. As was pointed out earlier, most wrestling scholarly studies focus on the actual audience to provide a nuanced understanding of the various ways the flesh-and-blood fans interact with wrestling narratives. Within the present case study, I discuss the behaviors of actual audiences in order to account for why WWE changed its narrative addresses to the authorial and narrative audiences.

The authorial audience differs from the actual audience in a manner similar to the way the implied author differs from the actual author. Booth initially discussed the “implied audience” of a text as the counterpart to the implied author. Booth later adopted the term “authorial audience” from Peter Rabinowitz, who describes it as the hypothetical audience for whom the author crafts his/her narrative.⁶⁴ Dan Shen explains the author of a narrative will craft a narrative using textual choices to a “contextualized or historicized” authorial audience.⁶⁵ The authorial audience is evidenced in the textual choices the author makes when crafting the narrative. In wrestling, the authorial audience is the audience WWE Creative has in mind when creating their wrestling narratives. This audience may or may not reflect the actual beliefs and behaviors of the actual audience. Looking to the way WWE addresses the authorial audience provides insight into WWE’s attempt to reassert its dominance in the power dynamic between producer and consumer, because in shifting from the Kayfabe Era WWE altered its address primarily to the authorial audience.

⁶⁴ Peter J. Rabinowitz, “Truth in Fiction: A Reexamination of Audiences,” *Critical Inquiry* 4 (1977): 126.

⁶⁵ Dan Shen, “Implied Author, Authorial Audience, and Context: Form and History in Neo-Aristotelian Rhetorical Theory,” *Narrative* 21 (2013), 152.

The narrative audience refers to those addressed by the narrator within the storyworld of the narrative itself. The narrative audience differs from the authorial audience in that the former is a part of the diegetic world of the narrator whereas the latter is extra-diegetic. The narrative audience is one “that exists in the narrator’s world, that regards the characters and events as real rather than invented, and that accepts the basic facts of the storyworld regardless of whether they conform to those of the actual world.”⁶⁶ Thus, the narrative audience recognizes the narrative as an invitation to invest in the world of the narrator, usually by making an emotional connection with the elements and characters present only in the narrator’s world. In wrestling, the narrative audience is the live and television crowd the performers in the ring are addressing in their promos and in front of whom they are wrestling.

The distinction between the narrative audience and the other types of audience is integral to the present study because even though WWE shifts its address to the authorial audience between the Kayfabe Era and the Entertainment Era, it maintained the same mode of address to the narrative audience. As the next chapter will show, WWE eventually altered its address to the narrative audience, too. However, the present chapter focuses on the earlier shift in address to audience. Specifically, I argue that WWE recrafted its narrative in leaving the Kayfabe Era and entering the Entertainment Era by addressing the authorial audience as knowledgeable of wrestling’s scripted nature (smarts) while maintaining its primary form of address to the narrative audience.

2.3 The Kayfabe Era

While it is correct that professional wrestling of the sort practiced and promoted by WWE is fake, the earliest iteration of professional wrestling actually came out of a legitimate

⁶⁶ Phelan and Rabinowitz, *Narrative Theory*, 6.

sporting contest, specifically amateur (Greco-Roman) wrestling. Thomas Hackett traces American professional wrestling to Civil War veteran William Muldoon, who would make money by wrestling local “tough guys” at New York City bars. At this point, the action was presumably real, but would soon turn to a scripted product when legitimately tough wrestlers, adept at “catch-as-catch-can” style of fighting and “hooking” techniques began travelling with carnival shows.⁶⁷ David Shoemaker points out that the carnival days began the “sham” of professional wrestling through a decidedly narrative strategy.⁶⁸ The wrestler would challenge audience members to wrestle for money. During the pitch, a plant in the audience who was intended to look of average physical stature would volunteer and defeat the wrestler, or at least perform well enough to give the other audience members hope. Once others in the audience paid up, the wrestlers would either legitimately defeat the would-be challenger or use duplicitous tactics to gain victory.⁶⁹

On larger stages, some professional wrestlers began to have exhibition matches with one another, mirroring the boxing matches of the time. By the turn of the century, wrestling promoters began creating championships and sanctioning bodies as a way to legitimize the sport. During this time, most of the contests were legitimately contested. However, certain “spots” began being worked into matches to entertain audiences and draw bigger crowds.⁷⁰ Eventually,

⁶⁷ “Catch-as-catch-can” style is a term denoting a form of grappling that combined traditional Greco-Roman wrestling with various other fighting styles from around the world. “Hooking” is a term for wrestling holds that stretch an opponent’s body parts in order to make the opponent submit, also sometimes called “stretching” an opponent.

⁶⁸ David Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle: Life, Death, and Professional Wrestling* (New York: Gotham Books, 2013), 1-2.

⁶⁹ Shoemaker gives the example of wrestlers positioning an opponent next to a curtain so that an accomplice could strike the opponent with an object.

⁷⁰ Karl Stern, *The Pioneers of Wrestling* (Haleyville, AL: DragonKing Pro Wrestling Press, 2002), 7. One of the more frequent spots during this time was to have a wrestler throw his opponent into the crowd area. Wrestling

promoters and wrestlers found that scripting wrestling matches and feuds maximized their profits.

By the 1930s the last vestiges of legitimate sport had disappeared in the business of professional wrestling, ushering in the “Kayfabe Era.” The term kayfabe refers to the practice of maintaining the illusion that wrestling is unscripted and a “real” sporting event. During this time, wrestlers started exhibiting colorful personas, falling into roles as either “faces” (good guys) or “heels” (bad guys). The scripted character of professional wrestling, as Henry Jenkins observes, guarantees a level of drama lacking, or less obvious, in traditional sporting events.⁷¹

Over the next several decades, kayfabe would largely define the wrestling business and its relationship to the fans. The culture of kayfabe in professional wrestling dictated business practices, wrestling performances, and the outside lives of the workers. During this time all parties involved in wrestling were responsible for maintaining kayfabe to protect the business. Wrestling insiders closely guarded information that could jeopardize the illusion. Those wishing to become professional wrestlers were subjected to rigorous training and physical harm at the hands of veteran wrestlers intended to weed out those who would not commit to the business.⁷² Promoters often put title belts on “shooters,” wrestlers trained in real grappling and stretching techniques in case a challenger attempted to go against the storyline and steal a victory against the champion. Further, many promoters “pushed” (a wrestling term for the amount of support a wrestler is given by the company in storylines) either themselves or close family members and/or

chronicler Karl Stern theorizes that the first instances of such events may have been accidental but were repeatedly “worked” into matches due to crowd reaction.

⁷¹ Henry Jenkins, “Never Trust a Snake: WWF Wrestling as Masculine Melodrama,” in *Out of Bounds: Sports, Media and the Politics of Identity*, ed. Aaron Baker and Todd Edward Boyd (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997), 51-53.

⁷² Hulk Hogan famously describes his first foray into professional wrestling involving trainer Hiro Matsuda breaking his leg in a sparring session.

friends as the top stars in their companies because they wanted someone they could trust on top. Wrestlers and commentators alike performed as if the action in the ring and the feuds portrayed on wrestling programming were real. The performance of kayfabe did not stop at the arena doors either. Since the feuds portrayed in wrestling were supposed to be real, promoters instructed faces and heels to avoid interaction outside the ring. Even more importantly, promoters would warn against going to bars alone because if a local tough beat up a star wrestler, the illusion of legitimacy was lost.

2.3.1 Authorship and Audience in the Kayfabe Era

During the Kayfabe Era, WWE addressed its audience, both authorial and narrative, as marks oblivious to the hidden truth of wrestling's scripted nature. In so doing, WWE addressed fans as a spectatorial audience that accepted the narratives presented as unscripted and spontaneous. WWE relied on mythic narratives of virtue and vice embodied by face and heel narrators to elicit emotional reactions to the results of narrative matches and feuds.⁷³ Under this older audience-author relationship, the fans exhibited a distinct lack of creative authority over the content of wrestling's narrative. After all, if the results of the matches were not scripted by WWE, as they tried to convince fans, the opinions of fans logically would have no bearing on altering these results within the narrative. The fans may boo when a heel wrestler beat a face wrestler, but this emotional response was directed at the character and not WWE as authors.

The audience in this relationship did, of course, exert a modicum of influence through its consumption habits. Though WWE did not openly admit it, they nonetheless made creative decisions based on what "drew" money from audiences. Wrestlers and/or characters that did not help WWE in its monetary goals were quickly dropped from the programming. This type of

⁷³ See note 69.

influence via consumption is not unique to wrestling, as nearly every form of entertainment, including sports, makes choices due to monetary goals. WWE though, attempted to minimize this audience influence by never openly admitting that the opinions of fans made WWE change decisions on who won and who lost in matches.

WWE's effort to hide the true nature of the actual author of wrestling content from the fans was a defining narrative strategy of the Kayfabe Era. By denying the existence of an actual author scripting wins and losses behind the scenes, WWE channeled fan emotional reactions toward the "competitors" rather than those responsible for deciding the narrative direction of matches and feuds. This narrative move obscured the fact that actual author(s) in professional wrestling are the flesh and blood people who script the wrestling matches and feuds. Within wrestling, many people are usually part of the authorship of the overall narrative presented to the fans. This fits with Seymour Chatman's argument that narratives may have multiple actual authors.⁷⁴ In WWE, the main actual author is Vince McMahon, the majority owner of the company since 1982.⁷⁵ McMahon is a hands on owner, making and changing content decisions frequently and even on the spot during a WWE live broadcast. While others have creative roles in the company, McMahon has the final say on most decisions. WWE also employs a group of writers, or in wrestling terms "bookers," who script the interviews, verbal confrontations and match results. Finally, the commentators largely wrote or ad-libbed their own dialogue as a means to narrate and interpret the action and storylines to the audience. The combination of owner, bookers, agents, wrestlers and commentators came together to create a narrative

⁷⁴ Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 148.

⁷⁵ McMahon bought the company in 1982 from his father Vince McMahon Sr.

performance for the fans. The narrative was delivered to the fans primarily in three modes: the in-ring action, promotional interviews (henceforth referred to as “promos”), and commentary.

During the Kayfabe Era, WWE attempted to hide the role many actual authors played in the scripting of the wrestling narrative, and instead offered a veiled image of the implied author, one derived from traditional sports genres, in order to keep the scripted nature of professional wrestling hidden from fans. This move served to keep fans from directing their judgments about the narrative direction of storylines within wrestling to behind-the-scenes figures. The implied author is the image of the author imbedded in the choices put into the narrative to be decoded by the audience. Booth points out that the author implied by a narrative text may differ significantly from the actual author.⁷⁶ Within the narrative presented to the audience during the Kayfabe Era, authority figures were largely kept off camera. Vince McMahon, while the owner of the company, acted as a simple commentator on camera, not acknowledging his role behind the scenes.

While WWE attempted to hide the role of many actual authors in crafting an image of the implied author, they still presented an image of the company through its narrative production, one consistent with other sports organizations like the National Football League. WWE attempted to show fans that those behind the scenes merely sanctioned and promoted the action, which was legitimately contested by the wrestlers themselves. During this period, WWE used figurehead “president” characters like Jack Tunney and Gorilla Monsoon to be the on-screen decision makers for matches, though these figures were seldom seen on television. Further, this type of authorship is more akin to the image of traditional fighting sports like boxing than the reality going on behind the scenes of WWE at the time. The authority figures only appeared when a “controversial decision” occurred in a match and a decision needed to be made for the

⁷⁶ Wayne Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction*, 158-59.

future. Again, this move positioned WWE in a relatively powerful position vis-à-vis the fan in that the fans logically could not fault the implied author of WWE for undesirable results if the matches were not pre-scripted. This would be akin to being angry at the NFL if a rival sports team beat the home team in a football game. Instead, the emotional reaction of the fans was directed at the wrestlers as embodiments of virtue (faces) and vice (heels).

Because the narrators during the Kayfabe Era were the characters played by wrestlers and commentators in WWE, there was an inherent conflation of narrator and implied author during that period. That is, wrestlers and commentators spoke as if they were the real identities of the performers outside the ring, and acted as though by their own accord, as opposed to according to the roles assigned by a behind-the-scenes author. If wrestling were unscripted and legitimately contested, then logically the matches were determined by the skill of the competitors in the ring, meaning fans should presume the narrator characters were also responsible for the direction of feuds (the role of the implied author). By maintaining this impression, WWE further directed the participatory behaviors of fans upset at the results of the wrestling narrative toward the wrestlers. This, in turn, channeled fan participation toward ends favored by WWE. This allowed WWE to maintain a relatively powerful position vis-à-vis the fans primarily because they presented the results of the competition as beyond the control of the company, and thus fans could not influence the narrative direction of wrestling by appealing to the actual authors. In the next few paragraphs, I will elaborate on how and why this worked in order to better understand why and how it stopped working.

First, the wrestlers presented the in-ring persona to the audience as their own personalities both in and out of the arenas. Unlike an actor playing a role, the wrestling performers in this era had to maintain their wrestling persona for fans even when not “on the

clock.” Similarly, WWE presented the characterological attributes of the wrestling personae as actual personality traits possessed by the wrestlers themselves. Again, WWE desired the fans to interpret the feuds as a result of the wrestlers’ personal vendettas rather than as a storyline crafted by writers and bookers, thus deflecting attention away from those who actually controlled production of wrestling narratives. One striking example features “Mr. Wrestling” Tim Woods, who went to extreme lengths to protect his persona. In October 1975, Woods along with fellow wrestlers Ric Flair and Johnny Valentine were all seriously injured in a plane crash.⁷⁷ The problem for Woods is that he was the only face wrestler traveling with a group of heels. Since Woods was wrestling at the time under a mask as “Mr. Wrestling,” he faked his identity to the medical personnel in order to maintain the illusion that he had real personal animosity against the heels who were known to be involved in the crash. Moreover, when rumors started circulating that Mr. Wrestling had been involved in the crash, Woods wrestled for weeks with multiple injuries including a compression fracture in his back so as to “prove” that he wasn’t involved, all in an effort to protect kayfabe.⁷⁸

WWE also encouraged fans to believe that the results of the matches were due to the competitive prowess of the wrestlers, thereby conflating narrator (wrestling persona) with the implied author (the figure responsible for the narrative of the match). The in-ring performers were certainly responsible for crafting the ebb and flow of action in a match. However, the implication of the narrative was that the better athlete won the competition (or a heel cheated to win despite being overmatched physically) and not an agreed upon choreographed match. When heel wrestler King Kong Bundy arrogantly asked for a “five count” when pinning his opponents,

⁷⁷ Johnny Valentine would never wrestle again do to the severe spinal injuries he suffered, and the pilot passed away from his injuries.

⁷⁸ Ric Flair & Mark Madden, *Ric Flair: To Be the Man* (New York: Pocket Books, 2004), 75. Ric Flair went as far as to claim that Woods “became the man who *saved* wrestling.”

it was in effort to show how dominant he was physically as an athlete. Hulk Hogan was positioned as the best wrestler in the company based on his ability to defeat all challengers for the World Title.

Thus far I have examined how WWE used narrative means to veil the role of the actual authors behind the production of wrestling narratives. WWE attempted to conflate the roles of narrator and implied audience to present fans with a narrative that was supposedly unscripted and therefore not subject to change due to fan pressure. I now turn to the three-part conception of audience in Kayfabe Era wrestling narratives to show how audience address played into WWE's ability to maintain a relatively powerful position in the dynamic between producer and consumer.

Changes in the actual audience eventually led to the decline of the Kayfabe Era, but for the majority of wrestling history, the actual audience were complicit in the ruse of kayfabe. The actual audience for WWE wrestling during the Kayfabe Era included the flesh-and-blood fans who watched either in person or on television. Whether the actual audience members truly believed professional wrestling was real or not is difficult to answer. David Shoemaker argues that wrestling audiences have generally always been savvy to its scripted nature but still acted in accordance with the idea that it was real anyway.⁷⁹ Roland Barthes argues that fans are uninterested in whether the contest is rigged.⁸⁰ Christopher Hedges likewise argues that, "The success of professional wrestling, like most of the entertainment that envelops our culture, lies not in fooling us that these stories are real. Rather, it succeeds because we ask to be fooled. We

⁷⁹ David Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle: Life, Death, and Professional Wrestling* (New York: Gotham Books, 2013), 77.

⁸⁰ Barthes, "World of Wrestling," 15.

happily pay for the chance to suspend reality”⁸¹ All these authors suggest that actual wrestling fans, whether truly marks or not, act the part dictated to them by the narrative of wrestling.

The behaviors of fans throughout much of wrestling history indicates that the actual audience was more than willing to play the role of the mark. Certainly, the Kayfabe Era includes several examples of audiences acting the part of marks to a remarkable degree. In 1964, heel tag team The Fabulous Kangaroos so enraged an audience in Winnipeg with their cheating tactics that fans threw steel chairs into the ring causing serious injuries to the wrestlers. When the duo hid under the ring, the crowd attempted to light the ring on fire to smoke them out.⁸² Longtime heel manager Jim Cornette frequently tells stories of having to fight his way through angry fans trying to hurt him and the wrestlers he managed.⁸³ In 1991, WWE felt the need to change the venue for *WrestleMania VII* in Los Angeles due to death threats against wrestler Sgt. Slaughter, who played an Iraqi sympathizer. These examples all show wrestlers getting real “heat” from fans, a wrestling term denoting emotional response from the crowd. The behaviors of actual audience members suggest that the narrative strategies of WWE successfully encouraged fans to direct their emotional responses at the implied authors and narrators portrayed in the ring and not at the actual authors behind the scenes. This left the actual authors free to control their narratives with little direct pressure from the fans.

In short, whatever the actual audience members believed about wrestling’s scripted nature, WWE during this era crafted the narrative for both an authorial and narrative audience of marks by creating storylines and matches that presumed that the authorial audience believed the

⁸¹ Chris Hedges, *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle* (New York: Nation Books, 2009), 5-6.

⁸² Shoemaker, *Squared Circle*, 214.

⁸³ Cornette stated on his podcast that he began carrying a tennis racket to the ring partially as protection from rowdy fans.

action was real. This presumption can be seen in the choices the actual authors made when crafting the wrestling narratives. During the Kayfabe Era, WWE also cast the narrative audience, or the audience addressed by the narrators from within the diegetic storyworld, as marks. During this era, the narrative addressed both the authorial and narrative audiences the same, as if they were in fact the same audience. This makes sense given that WWE conflated the narrators with the actual persons playing the characters during this time. While the later shift from Kayfabe Era to Entertainment Era moved the *authorial* audience to smarts, WWE would continue addressing the *narrative* audience as marks in the Entertainment Era. Thus, marking the distinction between the way the narrative addresses these two audiences is key in understanding how the shift in narrative strategies worked for WWE. Phelan and Rabinowitz argue that the reader “*pretends* to join the narrative audience, the audience that receives the narrator’s text.”⁸⁴ Within the Kayfabe Era, we can see how WWE cast both the authorial and narrative audience as marks by looking to the how the narrators engaged the live and televised audience through in-ring action, promos, and commentary.

During the Kayfabe Era, the actual authors of WWE crafted matches that played out more believably than in later eras in order to address the authorial audience as marks. Wrestlers placed a great deal of emphasis on believability when choreographing the moves used to stage a match. Laurence de Garis, who briefly worked as a professional wrestler during this time, argues that wrestlers of that era needed to think through logically why each move was performed as if they were in a real fight.⁸⁵ Therefore, the moves used by wrestlers were usually simple strikes and “holds” like headlocks, armlocks, and leglocks. For example, one of the most hyped matches

⁸⁴ Phelan and Rabinowitz, *Narrative Theory*, 6. Emphasis in original.

⁸⁵ Laurence de Garis, “The ‘Logic’ of Professional Wrestling.” In *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling*, ed. Nicholas Sammond (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 194.

in the history of WWE saw Hulk Hogan use a simple bodyslam on Andre the Giant in its most climactic moment.⁸⁶ Importantly, the simplistic in-ring style of wrestling during the Kayfabe Era was meant to make the authorial audience believe the fights were legitimately contested. The moves were meant to be those that a wrestler would actually utilize if he were in a non-scripted wrestling match or fight outside the ring. Using believable moves helps hail an authorial audience of marks who could suspend their disbelief to think the matches were not pre-scripted by actual authors, keeping the fans' attention on the narrators.

The in-ring product also addresses a *narrative* audience of marks. Wrestlers worked at the art of "selling" their opponent's offense, a term referring to acting as if the moves actually hurt. During matches, wrestlers contort their faces in agony while in submission moves. Wrestlers also sell the after-effects of damaging moves by, for example, wincing when putting their weight on a leg that had been targeted by an opponent. In his analysis of professional wrestling, Barthes noted that the wrestlers' bodies become "instantly recognizable" signifiers for the audience.⁸⁷ He paid special attention to the way wrestlers sold pain and struggle within matches for the crowd. Selling moves and making them appear real for the live audience worked to invite the narrative audience into the subject position of marks who believed the action was real. Further, when wrestlers won or lost matches, they would display emotional reactions even though the result was pre-planned. Acting in the moment as if wins and losses mattered added to the idea that the competition was real and challenging, and also served to keep the narrative audience engaged with the narrators as they tried to overcome the challenges they faced in the ring.

⁸⁶ Even the more "exciting" matches like Randy Savage vs. Ricky Steamboat from earlier in that same card mostly featured amateur-style catch wrestling and not a great deal of high-flying dives.

⁸⁷ Barthes, "World of Wrestling," 15.

On a broader scale, the dramatic flow of matches encouraged the narrative audience to react emotionally to the narrator characters themselves. Laurence de Garis argues that the basic logic of a wrestling match remained unchanged for decades.⁸⁸ This common structure includes three parts: the shine, heat and comeback. In the opening moments of a match, the face wrestler usually exhibits his prowess by dominating the heel in convincing fashion. This segment is meant to get the face “over” with the crowd and get them cheering. Eventually, the heel will take over on offense, usually by underhanded means, in the heat segment. Here, the heel attempts to antagonize the audience while the face sells the idea that he is in danger of losing. The heat segment is meant to get the audience upset at the heel and desire to see him get his comeuppance. Finally, the comeback segment sees the face overcome the heel’s offense and bring the match to the climactic finish. Hulk Hogan used a recognizable comeback in which he would “Hulk up,” not selling punches from his opponents as if adrenaline was making him nearly invincible. The comeback is meant to get the audience emotionally invested in seeing the face character win. Once the face initiates the comeback, the match can finish in a variety of manners, including the face winning, the heel cheating yet again to “steal” a victory, or interference from a manager to cause a disqualification finish. Still, the narrative conventions of plot worked through the shine, heat and comeback segments are meant to invite emotional reactions from the narrative audience in support of the face characters. This basic match sequence encourages the audience to direct their participatory behaviors at the face and heel characters as an outlet for their emotional reaction.

Second, promos during the Kayfabe Era also encouraged the authorial audience to believe the legitimacy of the “sport” and conflate characters with implied authors. When scripting promos, the actual authors made choices that highlighted the belief that the audience

⁸⁸ de Garis, “Logic of Wrestling,” 205-206.

thought the action, feuds and the characters involved were real. One frequently used tactic illustrates this point well. When face wrestlers were injured (either legitimately or only in storyline), the character often appeared onscreen to thank fans for their “outpouring of support” including cards and letters actually mailed to the company. This type of promo worked on the idea that the fans were genuinely concerned about the physical welfare of the wrestler. While the promoters undoubtedly exaggerated the amount of such letters, the idea that fans were supposed to show such support for the faces suggested to the authorial audience that they too should be concerned and believe that wrestling was a high-risk endeavor.

Many wrestlers also directly called on fans for support during promos, thereby directing fan participatory behaviors toward the narrator characters. Hulk Hogan famously used the phrase “Hulkamaniacs” to describe his fans as a cohesive unit with a collective identity built around supporting the person of Hulk Hogan and the ideals he represented. The wrestlers themselves were not only embroiled in personal rivalries against other wrestlers, they were mythic representations of qualities to be admired or shunned. Henry Jenkins argues that virtues like loyalty, humility and bravery are common face attributes, while heels typically embody such traits as ambition, arrogance and vulgarity.⁸⁹ Promos during the Kayfabe Era hinged upon fans recognizing the good versus evil dynamic and acting as if they truly supported the wrestler embodying the virtuous qualities. Thus, the narrative encouraged fans to direct emotional reactions to the characters as embodiments of good and evil rather than at the creative decisions made by the actual authors.

Working as narrators, the wrestlers’ promos worked to address the narrative audience as marks by promoting the illusion of authenticity, thus keeping fans engaged emotionally with the

⁸⁹ Jenkins, “Never Trust a Snake,” 51-53.

narrator characters. Wrestlers often promised their fans that they would beat their opponents during their promos, positioning the action as legitimate sport. For example, in the lead up to *WrestleMania III*, Andre the Giant's manager Bobby Heenan cut promos vowing that Andre would defeat Hulk Hogan and "destroy Hulkamania" because Andre had never lost before.⁹⁰ When Hogan beat Andre, Hogan used the victory to promote the notion that he was physically and athletically superior to all other wrestlers. Wrestlers also hyped the personal and thematic reasons for upcoming matches in their promos. When taking on Iraqi sympathizer Sgt. Slaughter at *WrestleMania VII*, Hulk Hogan cut promos saying that the match was "personal" because Slaughter had insulted the USA, which Hogan symbolically represented.⁹¹ Maintaining the illusion of legitimate match results and character motivation kept the narrative audience emotionally invested in the diegetic world of the narrators.

Finally, the commentators during the Kayfabe Era served as mediators between the other elements of the narrative for fans watching on television.⁹² Commentators helped interpret the action in the ring into recognizable themes for fans. They also reacted to promos with indignation or admiration depending on if it was done by a heel or a face. Thus, the commentary accentuated many of the narrative elements found in the ring and promos. Commentators in this era would draw attention to the credentials of the wrestlers as tough guys. They hyped backgrounds in contact sports like football and amateur wrestling accolades. Commentators drew the audience's attention to the supposed damage inflicted by the moves executed by wrestlers in

⁹⁰ In fact, Andre the Giant had lost several times in various promotions around the world, but the story leading to the big match against Hogan relied on fans not having seen these matches, which mostly occurred outside WWE.

⁹¹ Hogan's theme music even began with the line "I am a Real American."

⁹² Fans at live events did not hear the commentators. Therefore, the live fan reaction took place separate from the suggestions of commentary. However, the live fans did not come in as blank slates. They had likely been exposed to commentary in past events on television that primed them to interpret the action and react to it in predictable manners.

the ring. The commentators wanted the audience to believe the moves were realistic and would often exaggerate their own reaction to the moves as if they themselves believed the moves hurt. Thus, the commentators served as extra-diegetic narrators interpreting the action “from above” for the narrative audience. Further, commentators directed fan emotions (e.g. outrage at a favorite wrestler being attacked from behind) at the narrator characters themselves (e.g. the heel wrestler who made the attack). Again, the commentary accentuated and interpreted the narrative elements present in the wrestling matches and promos for the live fans.

Though fans in the actual audience played the role of the mark for much of wrestling history, changes in fan consumption and participatory behaviors eventually provided WWE with an exigence for changing its narrative strategies. The Kayfabe Era began in the early days of wrestling and stretched through the vast majority of its history. For decades, wrestling promoters worked with this same sort of narrative logic hinged around the protection of secrets so that fans would believe the action was real. However, by the 1990s, fan consumption behaviors changed to the extent that WWE saw a need for a change in this narrative structure.

2.3.2 Kayfabe in Crisis

Technological developments in the 1990s played a major role in the decline of kayfabe. The growing prominence of the Internet during this time period gave fans greater access to behind-the-scenes information than ever before. Wrestling fan sites sprung up on the web giving insider scoops on the happenings in the business. Further, access to previously guarded wrestling terminology and jargon spread among the common fans. Access to the language used by those in the business gave fans and fan websites subcultural capital, a term used by Sarah Thornton to describe the attainable knowledge and commodities acquired by members of a social group to

raise their status within a subculture.⁹³ With access to personal and professional information heretofore largely kept secret from the masses, fans started questioning the storytelling decisions of wrestling bookers. In short, the Internet made fans more restless with the past kayfabe-style narratives and this could be seen in their reactions to characters and stories in the mid-nineties. Those attempting to keep kayfabe were fighting a losing battle

WWE's own business practices also led to a decreased focus on maintaining kayfabe. Because wrestling purported to be a legitimate contact sport, state athletic commissions required wrestling promoters to pay fees to sanction its events in the same manner as a boxing match. In 1989, Vince McMahon coined the term "sports entertainment" to get out of paying these fees, in effect admitting the fixed nature of professional wrestling in WWE to officials. While many in the wrestling industry vilified McMahon for this breach of kayfabe, the storylines in WWE programming still maintained kayfabe in the following years, and the matches reflected this in their mode of narrative address.

While WWE may not have openly admitted to fans that wrestling was scripted, they nonetheless gained a reputation for using more colorful characters considered too "cartoonish" for other wrestling companies. The cartoony nature of WWE programming diminished the ability of fans to believe that wrestling was real. Characters like The Undertaker, who occasionally exhibited supernatural abilities like summoning lightning (portrayed through special effects) did not appear as authentic personas. As a result, fan buy-in became more difficult. During the early 1990s, WWE struggled to maintain fans, as is evidenced by a period of low

⁹³ Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1996). 5. Thornton's concept is adapted from Pierre Bourdieu's notion of "cultural capital." See: Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

television ratings and attendance figures for live events.⁹⁴ Many in the industry argue that fans no longer wanted to act as marks for the sillier aspects of WWE's narrative. The dwindling audience of willing participants provided an impetus for change. But WWE, rather than returning to the past portrayals of realistic "tough guys" in an effort to maintain kayfabe, decided instead to embrace the fans' knowledge of the staged nature of wrestling.

Finally, the inner workings of the WWF spilled out into the narrative product in what many consider to be the most infamous moment in WWE history: the "Montreal Screwjob." Due to a contract dispute between WWE and wrestler Bret "The Hitman" Hart, Vince McMahon broke script during a live pay-per-view broadcast of the *Survivor Series* on November 9, 1997. The show's main event match saw Hart defend WWE's top championship against onscreen and off-screen rival Shawn Michaels. The original scripted ending, as shown in the documentary *Hitman Hart: Wrestling with Shadows*, was to be a draw, allowing Hart to leave the company without losing face.⁹⁵ However, McMahon, paranoid of Hart's potential to damage the company's credibility after leaving, conspired with Michaels and the referee to change the ending to have Michaels win the title.⁹⁶ Before this event, WWE only acknowledged Vince McMahon as a commentator. But after the Montreal Screwjob, McMahon openly admitted his behind-the-scenes power in the company and took on playing an exaggerated caricature of himself onscreen. The "Mr. McMahon" character as he has come to be known exemplified a tyrannical and power hungry boss and would become a central heel character in the years to

⁹⁴ Dave Meltzer, *Wrestling Observer Newsletter*, November 17, 1997.

⁹⁵ *Hitman Hart: Wrestling with Shadows*, Web Video, directed by Paul Jay (1998; High Road Production and The National Film Board of Canada; 1998), retrieved from National Film Board of Canada website, http://www.nfb.ca/film/hitman_hart_wrestling_with_shadows/.

⁹⁶ In the aftermath, Hart physically confronted McMahon backstage, reportedly punching him. Several WWE wrestlers, including Hart's brothers-in-law Jim Neidhart and Davey Boy Smith left WWE in protest of McMahon's actions. The event is still talked about today on wrestling websites.

come. In the aftermath of the Montreal Screwjob, WWE saw an uptick in ratings for its programming in the following weeks. The intrigue created by breaking kayfabe actually worked for WWE rather than hurting business.

The combination of technological and cultural changes of the 1990's ultimately led to the death of kayfabe and a drastic restructuring of the way in which wrestling texts addressed the audience for its narratives. Responding to the "exigence" of a changing fan culture, WWE embarked on a new narrative strategy by disavowing the pretenses of kayfabe altogether.⁹⁷ WWE could no longer keep fans as "outsiders" to be duped by the conventions of the last century of wrestling. Fans were undeniably "smarts" now, and WWE shifted its narrative to an authorial audience indicative of that change.

2.4 Pivotal Text: McMahon Introduces the Entertainment Era

On December 15, 1997, WWE owner and chairman Vince McMahon openly admitted to the television audience that wrestling is scripted, effectively ending the practice of kayfabe. This address ushered in the Entertainment Era, and it represents a major shift in the narrative address to an audience of smart fans and changes the dominant metaphor of the narrative from sport to entertainment. In what follows, I conduct a close textual analysis of the address, revealing how the change from the Kayfabe Era to the Entertainment Era redefined the dynamic between producer and consumer in WWE. Michael Leff argues that a "close reading and rereading of text" is necessary to understand how it works rhetorically.⁹⁸ The text for this analysis, McMahon's address, serves as a "representative anecdote" for the way Entertainment Era

⁹⁷ Lloyd Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 1 (1968), 4.

⁹⁸ Michael Leff, "Textual Criticism: The Legacy of G.P. Mohrmann," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 72 (1986), 380.

narratives distinctly address a particular configuration of authorial and narrative audience.⁹⁹ In this way, McMahon's address reveals how WWE switched the authorial audience for which it crafted its narratives. Further, WWE reasserts its dominant position as producer of wrestling narrative texts while at the same time acknowledging a more knowledgeable audience not content to participate in the traditional manner.

WWE's flagship program *RAW* started in an unusual fashion on December 15, 1997. Before the usual matches and promos, owner Vince McMahon appeared in a pre-taped segment addressed to the viewing audience.¹⁰⁰ The whole segment lasted just over two minutes but would mark a significant change in the narrative address of WWE programming. In the segment, McMahon walks into view of the camera in front of a plain gray backdrop. He then directly addresses the fans, giving them a rare window into how WWE conceives itself, the state of professional wrestling, and its fans.

McMahon appears in this segment as a representation of authority in WWE. His use of personal pronouns like "we," "us" and "our" signify that he is speaking on the company's behalf, and not in the role of a narrator. In fact, he explicitly states "We in the WWF think..." midway through the segment. While McMahon represents an authority figure in the company during this segment, his portrayal is a vast departure from the "Mr. McMahon" heel character he played on WWE programming at the time. The "Mr. McMahon" character exuded a self-righteous arrogance on screen. In this segment, McMahon smiled at the camera in a jovial manner that suggested he was a nice guy. Further, the segment aired before the show properly began, signifying that it was not a part of the regular programming and that McMahon is communicating in an extradiegetic fashion. Thus, McMahon already breaks kayfabe convention

⁹⁹ Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1945), 59-60.

¹⁰⁰ A full transcript of this address is included in Appendix A.

by recognizing the difference between Mr. McMahon as a character and himself as a person and corporate representative.

McMahon symbolically moves out of the role of overt narrator and into the role of implied author in this segment. Chatman points out that an overt narrator is one who diegetically tells the audience what occurs in a narrative.¹⁰¹ McMahon served as an overt narrator during his time as a play-by-play commentator. He also fulfilled the role onscreen as a character within the storyworld of WWE who cut promos in which he addressed the narrative audience about the events of the Montreal Screwjob. In this segment, however, McMahon pulled himself out of character, and thus signified that his statements were not to be interpreted as part of the diegetic world of feuds and matches. Instead, McMahon addressed the fans as the embodied representation of the storytellers in WWE. By taking himself out of the diegetic storyworld, McMahon, who is the top of the hierarchy of actual authors in WWE, attempts to show himself as a person to the audience in a positive light, hence embodying the role of the implied author. Thus, this segment gives us a rare (at this point in wrestling history) glimpse into the thoughts of those in WWE Creative as to the type of narratives they construct and their perception of the fans and themselves.

The first major theme of McMahon's address is that WWE is above all else an entertainment company. McMahon acknowledges that the term sports entertainment is so-called "because of the athleticism involved," but downplays the importance of any semblance to sport by clarifying that "the keyword in that phrase is 'entertainment.'" By explicitly emphasizing entertainment as the focal point of the company, McMahon distances himself and his company from past attempts to legitimize professional wrestling by mimicking traditional sports. McMahon then explains that entertainment in WWE "extends far beyond the strict confines of

¹⁰¹ Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 218.

sports presentations.” Describing sports presentation as having “strict confines” casts the new creative direction as a freeing opportunity rather than one forced upon WWE. Here McMahon positions the switch away from kayfabe conventions as his own choice, downplaying the exigence of fan pressure. By deemphasizing the role of sport in WWE, McMahon was no longer beholden to the conventions of the past.

While McMahon distanced WWE from sports presentations, he simultaneously attempted to tie the entertainment form to other recognizable forms of televised entertainment. McMahon states that WWE borrows from variety of programs including soap operas, music videos, talk shows, cartoons, and sitcoms. Henry Jenkins argued in an article published that same year that professional wrestling was a form of “male melodrama,” drawing similarities between it and soap operas.¹⁰² McMahon rhetorically attempts to make connections between professional wrestling and these myriad forms of entertainment. Notably, the entertainment forms McMahon mentions are openly scripted, with the possible exception of daytime talk shows. By drawing similarities to these genres, McMahon openly drops the pretense of kayfabe. Also telling is that McMahon ends the list of entertainment forms with the phrase, “...and other widely accepted forms of television entertainment.” In this manner, McMahon draws attention to the fact that these television genres are accepted despite (or because of) their scripted nature. The implicit argument here is that professional wrestling should not be ashamed of its own scripted nature and should be accepted by the audience as such. In this way, by “lifting the veil” of wrestling’s nature, McMahon hopes WWE will gain acceptance.

During the segment McMahon directly addresses the fans, again using personal pronouns like “you.” For example, McMahon states that he is speaking to “...you, the audience.”

¹⁰² Jenkins, “Never Trust” 51.

Nevertheless, it remains unclear who the audience is, exactly. McMahon seems to be addressing the actual audience, the real people watching the program. But given his other statements about what the audience desires from sports entertainment programming, we can decipher much about who WWE Creative thinks the audience is, for whom they craft their narrative. By addressing the audience directly, McMahon hails the audience into inhabiting a position he perceives as the type of audience WWE has and for whom it creates its programming.¹⁰³

In addressing the audience, McMahon gives two major clues into the new position he invites them to inhabit. In a key moment of the address, McMahon states, “We in the WWF think you, the audience, are quite frankly, tired of having your intelligence insulted.” This line comes directly after McMahon compares WWE programming to other forms of scripted entertainment instead of being held to the confines of sports programming. In this line McMahon switches the authorial audience from marks who believe the action is real to smarts who are in on the fixed nature of wrestling. The similarity of the terms smart and intelligence is likely purposeful. McMahon insinuates that Kayfabe Era narratives were insulting and needed to be discarded. In acknowledging that the actual fans’ consumption habits had changed, making them a more informed audience than those in the past, McMahon opens the doors to the fans to be “in on” the culture of wrestling previously closed off to them. Fans were now permitted access to insider language and the production aspects of WWE.

McMahon also gives insight into the authorial audience encouraged within the narrative by suggesting a thematic switch in WWE narrative. In the very next sentence, McMahon states, “We also think you’re tired of the same old simplistic theory of ‘Good Guys vs. Bad Guys.’ Surely the era of the superhero who urged you to say your prayers and eat your vitamins is

¹⁰³ Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes toward an Investigation,” in *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, ed. Louis Althusser (London: New Left Books, 1977), 170-171,

definitely passé.” Notably, while McMahon refers to good guys and bad guys, he switches his vocal tone, mocking the “simplistic” concept. Here McMahon shows that WWE narratives will no longer fit the old mythic type of representation. The remark about the superhero being passé would have been instantly recognizable to most wrestling fans as a direct reference to Hulk Hogan, who was WWE’s top star during the 1980s and early 1990s but had left the company for rival WCW in 1994. Hogan served as a symbolic representation of Kayfabe Era’s mythic thematic. WWE recognized that fans during this time were no longer cheering faces and were overwhelmingly supporting heel characters like Steve Austin and D-Generation X.

McMahon does make a statement indicating the authorial audience was not completely monolithic. Later in the message, McMahon advises parents to exercise discretion in allowing younger viewers to watch the late night shows *RAW* and *WarZone*.¹⁰⁴ McMahon assures parents that WWE programs in time slots more accessible to children would not feature much of the adult-oriented content as those in late night slots. Dave Meltzer, author of the *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* and noted wrestling journalist, argued this address was a “pre-emptive strike” against an upcoming *Los Angeles Times* article deriding WWE for its adult-oriented programming aimed at young audiences.¹⁰⁵ McMahon states, “We are responsible television producers...” after encouraging parents to exercise their own discretion about their children’s viewing habits. This phrase directly acknowledges the author function of WWE creative. No longer was the content of interviews and matches portrayed as a result of the choices of individual performers. McMahon now admitted the existence of producers behind the scenes

¹⁰⁴ At this point, “RAW” referred to the first hour of WWE programming on Monday nights. The second hour of the program was called “WarZone” despite the two basically being one continuous program. WWE would later drop the “WarZone” name after the events of September 11, 2001.

¹⁰⁵ Dave Meltzer, *Wrestling Observer Newsletter*, December, 22, 1997.

responsible for the content of its programming. This statement also provides an invitation to the audience to engage in the judgment of WWE narrative on the basis of production of content.

McMahon closes the segment by making clear WWE is entering a new era of programming. He states that WWE has been around for so long because they change with the times, marking the present period with an exigence in need of addressing by changing directions. McMahon uses many adjectives to describe the new direction including “innovative,” “contemporary,” “invigorating,” “new,” and “vibrant.” Further, this segment was the first to use a revamped company logo, making a visual departure from the previous era. McMahon also states that the new creative direction has resulted in “a huge increase in television viewership.” Meltzer argues that this statement is quite an exaggeration based on a “few week trend” caused by the controversy surrounding the “Montreal Screwjob” finish.¹⁰⁶ Meltzer further points out that the *RAW* and *WarZone* ratings were back down to normal levels during this show, which was well below their biggest competitor WCW.¹⁰⁷ Still, the comments about increased viewership in combination with thanking the audience for watching serve as a reminder of the bottom line focus of the company. McMahon ends the segment by calling *RAW* and *WarZone* the “cure for the common show.” This phrase visually appeared at the beginning of the segment as a sort of title card for the segment. The catchphrase is somewhat ironic given McMahon’s prior attempts to tie the shows to other common forms of television entertainment. However, given the new direction of WWE programming, the phrase makes sense if the “common show” is understood to be the traditional type of wrestling presentation in the Kayfabe Era. By calling the new direction a “cure,” McMahon casts the old narrative tactics as an illness in need of remedy.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ *RAW* and *WarZone* received a combined 2.71 rating and 4.14 share compared to WCW’s Monday Nitro program’s 4.11 rating and 6.30 share. Both shows were competing with a particularly strong edition of Monday Night Football.

2.5 The Entertainment Era

Vince McMahon's address on *RAW* served as a significant departure point from the Kayfabe Era of wrestling, and marked WWE's entrance into the Entertainment Era. The new direction McMahon spoke of altered the narrative address in WWE and professional wrestling in general for the next ten to fifteen years. In this new era, WWE reimagined its authorial audience, from marks to smarts. In so doing, they flattered the sophistication of its fan base and assuaged criticisms of wrestling being "fake." During the Entertainment Era, WWE continued to address the narrative audience as marks, though. This move reasserted the WWE's dominant position as creators of wrestling narrative content by encouraging fans to embrace the entertainment value of wrestling. I will now examine how the conventions of author and audience within the Entertainment Era differed from those in the Kayfabe Era, and how these differences allowed WWE to renegotiate the power dynamic with fans in its favor. However, I will also note that by admitting the scripted nature of wrestling, WWE opened the doors for fan participatory behavior to criticize the authors of the narrative when they became discontented with the creative direction of the narrative product.

Contrary to the fears of those in the wrestling business for decades, by exposing the lie of kayfabe, WWE managed to increase its standing with fans and in the popular culture. Unlike Marxist ideas of demystification, it was through revealing the lie of its production that WWE attained success. WWE effectively removed the most common attack against it (wrestling is fake) by openly admitting that wrestling is an entertainment form and comparing it to other scripted forms of entertainment. This tactic is reminiscent of the concept of "enlightened false consciousness" forwarded by Peter Sloterdijk.¹⁰⁸ In his *Critique of Cynical Reason*, Sloterdijk

¹⁰⁸ Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 5-6.

argues that ideology is no longer about unmasking the lie but a matter of knowing the lie and our contribution to it but acting on it anyway. Taking Sloterdijk's work as a launching point, Slavoj Žižek explains that a "double disavowal" occurs in which the symbolic order disavows its own ideological role, arguing that it is in laying out the artifice of production that postmodern ideology is able to work.¹⁰⁹ Given these insights, it is not surprising that when the WWE "laid bare" the mechanism of its production to the authorial audience, the actual audience responded by openly accepting the entertainment function as posited by McMahon.

In the Entertainment Era, the audience was "in on" the fixed nature of wrestling, yet the actual author in the Entertainment Era remained the same as it had been in the Kayfabe Era. The narratives in WWE were still crafted by the same combination of owner, writers, bookers, wrestlers, commentators and agents. The major difference between the two eras involved the degree to which WWE acknowledged the role of actual authors to the public outside of the ring. In the Entertainment Era, WWE publically admitted that the stories and matches were crafted by many backstage influences, and not just the result of the wrestlers alone involved in real competition. Vince McMahon no longer appeared as just a commentator, but as the owner of the company. Other backstage figures like writer Vince Russo gained a level of fame during this time as well. Fans largely already knew these actual authors existed by this time, so admitting the role of actual authors flattered the knowledgeable fans. Nevertheless, and as I will discuss in the next chapter, by admitting that the actual authors behind the scenes had control over the narrative direction of the matches and feuds, WWE provided a target for fan discontent later in the Entertainment Era.

In making public the production processes that go into making a wrestling narrative, WWE did, however, alter the implied author of the narratives. Because WWE openly admitted

¹⁰⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London, Verso, 1997), 102.

the existence of the various actual authors, the implied authorship was acknowledged as the conglomeration of “WWE Creative,” the official name for all those involved in crafting the narrative story directions in the company. In his address before *RAW*, Vince McMahon used personal pronouns like “we” to evoke an image of the company WWE as an implied author of the wrestling programming. This continued into the Entertainment Era in promotional videos and commentary with statements like, “We here in WWE want to give you the fans the best show possible.” Unlike in the Kayfabe Era, WWE now went beyond simple promoters of athletics to crafters of narrative entertainment. In so doing, WWE implicitly revealed that the direction of the narrative was in the control of management and subject to pressure from fans.

In the Entertainment Era, WWE no longer conflated the role of narrator with that of the implied or actual author. The characters portrayed by wrestlers were understood to be creations of the narrative’s authors rather than the true personality of the performers. Fans were no longer expected to believe that Steve Williams and Dwayne Johnson actually hated each other just because the characters they played, “Stone Cold” Steve Austin and “The Rock,” were involved in a storyline feud. Wrestlers no longer had to stick to the strict guidelines of kayfabe in order to keep up appearances. Even though The Rock was a heel character in WWE storylines, he appeared on talk shows as a nice guy who played a role on television and even became a top star in Hollywood. While the authorial audience was now privy to the distinction between performer and character, WWE would still attempt to direct the narrative audience’s emotional reaction to the narrator characters, much as they had during the Kayfabe Era. Having detailed how the various types of author switched in the Entertainment Era, I now turn to the tripartite conception of audience in the Entertainment Era.

The actual audience during the Entertainment Era did, however, create the exigence for a change in WWE's narrative direction, and specifically its address to audience. As previously mentioned, scholars have adequately shown that actual consumption habits changed during the 1990s due to a greater access to previously guarded information. McMahon's own comments show his understanding that these consumption changes provided an exigence for change in the way the company told its stories. Of course, the fans participatory behaviors continued to change. For example, recall Mazer's observation that wrestling fans during this time derived pleasure from trying to decipher the worked elements in wrestling from shoots.¹¹⁰ WWE used this type of fan participation to engage fans at the diegetic level, thereby keeping fans largely out of the production process.

During the Entertainment era, WWE switched the address to the authorial audience from marks to smarts. McMahon's comments ushered in the new norm of recognizing that audiences were aware of wrestling's scripted nature. During the years that followed, WWE Creative crafted stories for an audience who they assumed did not need to be convinced that the action was real. First, WWE during this time no longer required performers to maintain character outside the ring. Further, outside the weekly wrestling programming, WWE launched reality television shows like *Tough Enough* that took a backstage look at what it took to become a WWE superstar. In the show, a group of men and women competed in a reality show format to win a contract with WWE. The show featured training sessions with WWE wrestlers showing the rookies how to make moves look believable, how to sell, and how to not hurt one another while doing moves. WWE Films also released documentary-styled films about the behind-the-scenes lives of performers and defunct wrestling companies WWE had bought out. These films regularly went behind the scenes to show bookers and agents at work in the wrestling business.

¹¹⁰ Mazer, *Professional Wrestling*, 160.

The documentaries also regularly showed performers in their daily lives, often juxtaposing images of family life with the characters they portrayed in the ring. These types of extradiegetic communication with fans played to fan knowledge of the production process behind the creation of wrestling narratives and showed the effort required to perform in the ring despite wrestling's scripted nature. By dropping the conventions of kayfabe, WWE positioned wrestling as an entertainment art form worthy of greater respect in an entertainment culture.

The switch from a mark authorial audience to a smart authorial audience led to changes in the narrative production in the ring as well. WWE used the shift in narrative to provide a more exciting product. No longer needing to convince fans that the action was real, WWE decreased its emphasis on realistic action in the Entertainment Era, turning to a more exciting in-ring style with a greater focus on pageantry. Wrestling moves in this era became much more exaggerated and flamboyant. For example, The Rock, one of the most popular wrestlers during this time used a move he called "The People's Elbow" to finish off opponents. In executing the move, The Rock would stand over a fallen opponent, look to the crowd while raising one eyebrow ("The People's Eyebrow"), perform a series of flashy gestures with his arms, run from one side of the ring to the other hitting the ropes twice, come to a full stop when next to his opponent, raise one leg slowly in the air, and finally drop to his back with his elbow landing on his opponent's chest. Wrestling audiences had seen countless wrestlers hit elbow drops on their opponents with minimal damaging effect in the past. But "The People's Elbow" was not about the illusion of damage, but about the entertainment value of the pageantry involved. Commentators called the move "the most electrifying move in sports entertainment." Note the focus in this name is on the effect the move has on the crowd, not on The Rock's opponent. Moves like the People's Elbow stressed entertainment value over believability because the authorial audience already knew the

action was not legitimately contested sport. Further, the more dramatic matches drew in a larger casual fan base who were less interested in the believable wrestling competition of the Kayfabe Era.

WWE during this time also played to the fans knowledge and consumption habits in its narrative. By crafting narratives to make fans wonder if the narrative moved “off-script,” WWE directed fans’ participatory nature toward spotting these moments instead of critiquing the creative choices of the actual authors. As previously mentioned, Mazer argued that fans derive pleasure from trying to decipher what is a work and what is a shoot in wrestling. WWE, with the understanding that fans know the action is scripted, attempted to play with this consumption tendency by playing up the violence and injury angles. WWE often attempted to fool fans into thinking a wrestler had suffered a legitimate injury to gain interest in a match. While on the surface this move seems reminiscent of kayfabe selling, the injury angle only worked with the knowledge that most matches did not result in significant damage to a wrestler. Ring crews and announcers would often play up the seriousness of an injury angle as if they were going “off script,” which necessarily admits the existence of a script in the first place.

Promos during the Entertainment Era were designed with the understanding that fans were now smarter. WWE programming during this era also increased the allotted time on its programming for segments not involving wrestling matches. Wrestlers would cut longer promos, have more backstage comedic segments, and bring in outside elements like musicians and celebrities, thereby decreasing the amount of time spent in actual matches. During a podcast hosted by former wrestler Steve Austin, Vince McMahon pointed to segments in which Austin played guitar in the ring and sang a song mocking his opponents as examples of how the

business changed from the old wrestling conventions to sports entertainment.¹¹¹ Decreasing the focus on the in-ring action in favor of entertainment segments drew in a more casual audience, benefitting WWE financially. However, this move also eventually led long-term hardcore wrestling fans to feel excluded from WWE's target audience as the Entertainment Era progressed.

It is important to note that although WWE shifted to addressing the authorial audience as smarts, they kept addressing the narrative audience as marks. By maintaining a narrative audience of marks, WWE more closely mimicked the narrative style of other narrative entertainment genres like sitcoms and soap operas, just as McMahon said during his pre-*Raw* address. This move assuaged fan criticism of wrestling being “fake” because these other genres were also scripted but did not lose legitimacy within the broader culture. Further, addressing the narrative audience as marks still directed critical fan response toward narrator characters, much as WWE's narrative had during the Kayfabe Era. Remember that the narrative audience is the subject position the fans take when being addressed by the narrator(s). Phelan and Rabinowitz argue that people pretend to enter the diegetic world of the narrator in taking on the role of narrative audience.¹¹² The narrator characters in the diegetic world of wrestling during the Entertainment Era still addressed the crowds as if their feuds were real and the matches were legitimate battles. This type of address makes sense given the type of televised programming McMahon compared WWE with in his address. Sitcoms, for example, operate under the same narrative logic. Sitcom writers understand that the viewers do not think the characters and the dramatic storylines on the show are real; the authorial audience is “smart” enough to understand

¹¹¹ Sean Ross Sapp, “Vince McMahon Talks to Steve Austin about CM Punk, Randy Savage in WWE HOF, Shane, More,” *Wrestling Inc.* December 1, 2014, <http://www.wrestlinginc.com/wi/news/2014/1201/585342/live-coverage-of-vince-mcmahon-on-steve-austin-podcast/>.

¹¹² Phelan & Rabinowitz, *Narrative Theory*, 140.

that. However, the characters in the show behave under the logic of the storyworld being reality for that character. In examples of fictional programming that has characters directly address the viewing audience (e.g. Zack in the show *Saved by the Bell*), the character usually does not think the goings on in the show are fake. Additionally, the in-ring character-narrators used similar narrative tactics as were used during the Kayfabe Era. Ultimately, the matches of the Entertainment Era retained the dramatic flow of the Kayfabe era. As described by de Garis, this included the shine, heat and comeback segments that defined the genre. Thus, WWE still encouraged the narrative audience to emotionally invest in the narrator characters, thereby directing participatory fan behavior toward booing heels and cheering faces.

This tendency extended to the promos, in which Entertainment Era wrestlers continued to address a narrative audience of marks. The top star of the late 1990s and early 2000s in WWE, “Stone Cold” Steve Austin, in his promos referred to himself as the “toughest S.O.B.” in the company. While the wrestlers no longer mythically embodied traditional virtues as Hulk Hogan had in the Kayfabe Era, the narrator characters still positioned themselves as successful due to their physical prowess. Steve Austin would proudly tell the narrative audience that he planned to physically beat his opponent, often saying that he would “stomp a mudhole in [his opponent’s] ass and walk it dry.” For the live fans, the performers still acted as if they were in a real fight just as an actor in a sitcom would keep in character while filming a scene before a live studio audience.

The commentary during this time also served to continue addressing the narrative audience as marks. Much like the previous era, the commentary accentuated and interpreted the narrative concepts present in the other facets of professional wrestling. For example, Jim Ross, a popular commentator during this time for WWE, when describing the storyline feud between

Steve Austin and The Rock would stress, in the moment, Austin's "tough S.O.B." moniker to the television audience. Ross also famously added drama to Mick Foley's fall from the cage in 1998 by dramatically yelling "Good God almighty! Good God almighty! That killed him! As God as my witness, he is broken in half!" Again, the narrator function of commentators addressed the narrative audience as marks. WWE, by shifting the authorial audience to smarts while keeping the narrative audience as marks, effectively shifts to a narrative structure more reminiscent of sitcoms and cartoons than sport presentation, just as McMahon intended.

By switching its narrative to address an authorial audience of smarts while maintaining a narrative audience of marks, WWE effectively addressed the change in participatory behaviors from the actual audience of fans during the 1990s. WWE faced an exigence in that the actual audience was no longer content to play the mark role as it had in the past. The actual audience, armed with unprecedented access to knowledge about the production behind wrestling narratives, became increasingly dissatisfied with the Kayfabe style narrative of WWE. Further, fans openly discussed the insider secrets and criticisms with each other on wrestling fan websites. Faced with a knowledgeable audience no longer content with Kayfabe style narratives, WWE used narrative means to reestablish a power dynamic in which they maintained control over the production of wrestling texts. Nevertheless, it continued to address the *narrative* audience as marks.

By admitting to the authorial audience that the wrestling was scripted, but at the same time addressing the narrative audience as marks, WWE was able to have it both ways. It could flatter the audience while continuing to direct fan criticism at the narrator characters. WWE now encouraged fans to cheer or boo the wrestlers based on the way the narrative cast them as sympathetic heroes or deplorable villains. The authorial audience was now knowledgeable enough to recognize the performers merely played a role, but the desired fan response was still

the same. Further, no longer beholden to maintaining an illusion of realism in its depictions of violence, WWE was able to increase the dramatic pageantry in its presentation, thereby drawing in a larger casual audience than before.

Even as WWE benefitted from the switch to the Entertainment Era, the narrative conventions therein paved the way for fans to engage the authors through more participatory behaviors as the era wore on. By openly admitting the role of implied authors behind the scenes in producing the narrative content of wrestling, WWE left open the idea that these authors could be influenced by fan pressure to alter its narrative direction. Jenkins argued that fans may actively become co-participants in the construction of texts through exerting pressure on producers to alter content.¹¹³ Because WWE now admitted that they had control over who gets pushed as top stars, they positioned fans as able to exert such pressure on the actual authors during the Entertainment Era. Further, as the narrative style of WWE programming became more entertainment focused, the company tried to distance themselves from the more wrestling-centric elements of the narrative. By doing this, WWE crafted narratives for an authorial audience of casual fans to attract broader appeal. These two implications combined to create problems for WWE later in the Entertainment Era, as a contingent of hardcore wrestling fans felt alienated from the narrative and exerted increasing pressure on WWE to alter its narrative direction.

This case study demonstrates the usefulness of narrative theory for augmenting critical rhetoric. WWE responded to changes in fan participatory behavior during the 1990s by altering the narrative construction of its programming. WWE renegotiated the power dynamic between producer and consumer in its favor by reconstructing its narrative address to its authorial audience while maintaining a more traditional address to its narrative audience. Using the typology of author and audience derived from structural narratology provides a nuanced account

¹¹³ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 184.

of how WWE's narrative changed to address particular types of audiences differently in service of reasserting its control over the text of professional wrestling narratives.

3 CHAPTER TWO: FROM ENTERTAINMENT ERA TO REALITY ERA

“In anybody else’s hands, this is just a microphone. In my hands, it’s a pipe bomb”

-CM Punk on *Monday Night RAW* July 11, 2011

In the summer of 2011, WWE presented a storyline that would dramatically alter the narrative landscape of professional wrestling. At the close of the June 27th episode of *Monday Night RAW*, wrestler CM Punk cut a promo that blurred the lines between scripted narrative and backstage reality. The promo, later called the “pipe bomb promo” by wrestling journalists, fans and even on WWE television, ushered in the next major era of WWE narrative address. The pipe bomb promo serves as a pivotal moment in which WWE left the Entertainment Era that began with Vince McMahon’s public admission of wrestling’s scripted nature and entered the Reality Era—an era in which WWE’s production process became an integral part of the narrative storyworld, and in which WWE correspondingly addressed the narrative audience as smart.

The previous chapter examined the first major shift in the way WWE addressed its audience, as it moved from the Kayfabe Era to the Entertainment Era. As discussed, changes in fan participatory behavior made the old logic dictating kayfabe practices untenable. In response, Vince McMahon and WWE chose to do away with the vestiges of kayfabe and address the authorial audience (i.e., the audience the implied author addresses through the narrative as evidenced by textual decisions in the narrative) as smart fans who were “in on” the fixed nature of professional wrestling. In so doing, WWE recast itself as primarily an entertainment company as opposed to a more traditional sports organization. By removing the illusion of legitimately contested sport, and by foregrounding the narrative dimensions of professional wrestling, WWE addressed the fans as potential arbiters of the final text, capable of assessing its entertainment value. Despite worries from those in the business that abandoning kayfabe would alienate fans

and ruin the business, the move proved popular with fans, and financially beneficial for WWE. However, it also created a contradiction between the audience of smarts addressed by the implied author through the text, and the audience of marks addressed by the narrator within the text. In a sense, WWE created an audience divided within itself, at once smart to the scripted nature of the text yet simultaneously addressed by the in-story narrators as marks.

In this chapter, I argue that the contradiction between authorial and narrative audience led to a new period of fan unrest, and that this unrest led to the next major shift in how WWE addressed its audience. To make this argument, I connect theories of persona in rhetoric to the framework for narrative analysis developed in the previous chapter in order to examine the transition from the Entertainment Era to the Reality Era, which WWE effected by matching its address to the authorial audience with its address to the narrative audience. As was the case in the shift from Kayfabe Era to Entertainment Era, WWE made the move to the Reality Era in an attempt to renegotiate the power dynamic between producer and consumer. During the Entertainment Era, many fans grew frustrated with what they perceived as an emphasis on entertainment and spectacle at the expense of integrity and hard work. From this frustration emerged an “indy-wrestling” sub-fandom that WWE saw as a threat to its market dominance. To neutralize the threat, WWE shifted its mode of narrative address to make the fans’ critiques part of the televised storylines. Specifically, WWE addressed fans as participants within the narrative with the potential for exercising agency in the creative and production process. In so doing, it coopted fan disapproval of the dominant WWE narrative to maintain its traditional place of creative authority in the production process.

Through this case study, which approaches the “pipe bomb” promo as a text representative of WWE’s response to fans, I advance my argument that narrative theory can

work in concert with concepts from critical rhetoric. Specifically, by combining rhetorical theories of persona with a narrative typology of author and audience, I offer an account of how WWE managed to co-opt the subcultural discourse of indy-wrestling and reassert its power toward its own monetary goals. Recall that during the Entertainment Era, WWE crafted a narrative for a second persona of casual fans. Hardcore wrestling fans, then, were excluded from the authorial audience and relegated to the third persona. These hardcore fans led to an indy-wrestling subculture that threatened WWE's bottom line. In response, WWE reconfigured its narrative to rhetorical personas to co-opt the indy-wrestling subculture. WWE accomplished this by working with a narrator character from within the subculture, CM Punk. In the "pipe bomb" promo, Punk created a fourth persona for hardcore fans—a persona "in on" what was really at stake in the wrestling industry. In so doing, WWE managed to placate hardcore fans while continuing to cater to a second persona of casual fans.

In order to better understand the rhetorical and narrative devices that effected the shift from the Entertainment Era to the Reality Era, I will first review the connection between rhetorical theories of persona and narrative theories of author and audience. I then track the progression of WWE's narrative and business practices during the Entertainment Era. By focusing on the actual, authorial and narrative audiences during the latter stages of the Entertainment Era, I show how WWE addressed a second persona of casual fans, excluding hardcore wrestling fans. Next, I turn to the emergence of the indy-wrestling subculture, which cohered around an alternative wrestling narrative style and provided an exigence for WWE to alter the address of the narrative audience within its own narrative. I then provide an analysis of the pivotal text in the shift to the Reality Era: CM Punk's pipe bomb promo from the June 27th episode of *Monday Night RAW*, which initiated the Reality Era by hailing the narrative audience as smart fans. In this analysis I

provide implications for authorship, audience, rhetorical personas, co-optation of subcultural discourse, and the negotiation of creative authority in the new media context. I conclude with implications for the power dynamic between producer and consumer in the Reality Era, showing how WWE directed fan discontent toward the company's own goals but also how it, perhaps unintentionally, allowed for greater creative authority from the audience in the co-creation of wrestling narratives—a consequence I explore in the next chapter.

3.1 Personas and Narrative

In addition to advancing my argument that narrative theory offers a useful framework for doing critical rhetoric, this chapter makes the case for rhetorical theories of persona as an important but often neglected link between rhetorical and narrative theories of address. Tracing the concept of audience as it develops in the history of rhetorical studies reveals a consistent focus on the power dynamic between producer and audience in discursive contexts. Theories of rhetorical personas especially illuminate the ideological ramifications of addressing a particular audience and not others. The early theories of persona were indebted to narrative theory, deriving concepts from narrative theorists like Wayne Booth and fitting them for a rhetorical context. However, as critical and poststructuralist rhetoric took hold within the discipline, the connection between theories of rhetorical persona and narrative theory weakened. In this section I intend to put these two bodies of literature back into conversation with one another. In this way, I will show that both can add nuance to our understanding of power dynamics between producer and consumer in our new participatory media environment.

The first persona, as defined by Edwin Black, is clearly tied to concepts from narrative theory. In fact, I would argue that these personas fit well within the typology of author and audience forwarded by Phelan and Rabinowitz used in this chapter and throughout the

dissertation. The first persona refers to the implied author of a work. For Black, this persona was really a taken for granted in rhetorical studies, which traditionally paid close attention to the persona of the speaker.¹ As argued in the introduction, Black's notion of the first persona is derived from Wayne Booth's concept of the implied author.² The implied author is "the version of himself or herself whom the actual author constructs and who communicates through the myriad choices – conscious, intuitive, or even unconscious – that he or she makes in composing and revising a narrative."³ Thus, the implied author is one that is embedded in the textual choices made by the actual author and subsequently "reconstructed by the reader from the narrative."⁴ Complicating this notion, Booth points to the narrator as a third "teller" of narrative rhetoric who may differ from either the actual or implied author.⁵

The second persona is likewise indebted to narrative theories of audience. Black coined the term "second persona" to refer to the implied auditor, the audience understood to be addressed by the text.⁶ Black argued that, "rhetorical discourses...will imply an auditor, and that in most cases the implication will be sufficiently suggestive as to enable the critic to link this implied auditor to an ideology."⁷ Thus, Black saw the implied audience as a textual element integral to moral judgments of rhetorical critics. Similarly, Booth reasoned that the author

¹ Edwin Black, "The Second Persona," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 56 (1970), 111.

² Wayne Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 70-72.

³ James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz, *Narrative Theory: Core Concepts & Critical Debates*, ed. David Herman, James Phelan, Peter J. Rabinowitz, Brian Richardson, and Robyn Warhol (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2012), 30.

⁴ Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press (1978), 148.

⁵ Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction*, 158-159.

⁶ Black, "Second Persona," 112.

⁷ Ibid.

assumes much about the implied audience when constructing a text, assumptions which are present in the text itself.⁸ Booth initially used the term “implied reader” as a counterpart to the implied author to refer to the audience for whom the author crafts his/her narrative. Booth later adopted Peter Rabinowitz’s term “authorial audience” because it better illustrated the difference from the actual and narrative audience.⁹

The third persona grew out of concerns about ideology in critical rhetoric, and the role of persona in the maintenance of ideology. Following Black’s insights into audience, the critical turn in rhetoric shifted the focus from how a text shapes the relationship between rhetor and audience to the power relations at work in those texts. Taking a cue from Black, Phillip Wander identified a “third persona” in rhetorical texts, namely the audience excluded by the text.¹⁰ The third persona, when combined with rhetorical narratology’s focus on types of author and audience, gives rhetoricians a rich typology of audience with which to examine the power dynamic between producer and consumer. Nevertheless, the tendency in critical rhetoric to reject structuralism seems to have prevented this typology from being deployed in concert with concepts from narrative theory.

Building on the previous theories of personas, Charles E. Morris III argued that a “fourth persona” exists as an audience that recognizes the subtext of cues that others would not recognize.¹¹ As pointed out in the introduction, Morris borrows from narratology in his

⁸ Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction*, 70-72.

⁹ Dan Shen, “Implied Author, Authorial Audience, and Context: Form and History in Neo-Aristotelian Rhetorical Theory,” *Narrative* 21 (2013), 151.

¹⁰ Phillip Wander, “The Third Persona: An Ideological Turn in Rhetorical Theory,” *Central States Speech Journal* 35 (1984), 200-201.

¹¹ Charles E. Morris III, “Pink Herring & the Fourth Persona: J. Edgar Hoover’s Sex Crime Panic,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 88 (2002), 230.

theorization by using Peter Rabinowitz's work on the two types of authorial audience involved in such rhetorical passing.¹² Thus, the fourth persona is derivative of the narrative concept of the authorial audience. Indeed, Morris points out that the fourth persona is similar to the second persona in that it is a type of implied audience.¹³ But Morris adds to this idea by explicating the ways the fourth persona can simultaneously serve as a "welcome beacon of safety" or a "haunting" presence for the passer.¹⁴

Taken together, rhetorical theories of persona and narrative theories of author and audience can complement each other as tools for understanding the power dynamics reflected in and across rhetorical texts. Specifically, Phelan and Rabinowitz's typology of author and audience augments rhetorical theories of persona by adding a framework for tracking how authors define, or fail to define their audience. Similarly, theories of persona allow for a more ideologically informed brand of rhetorical narratology and close reading by accounting for how the same text can imply multiple authors and narrators, and hail multiple audiences. To demonstrate the value of this approach, I turn now to my next case study, in which I apply the theories of persona, author and audience to WWE narrative in the Entertainment Era to show how it led to a growing discontent among fans, eventually leading to the emergence of a counterculture within wrestling fandom based around an alternative narrative style.

3.2 Narrative and Persona in the Entertainment Era

During the period following Vince McMahon's famous address on *Monday Night RAW*, WWE saw a significant increase in business. The beginning stages of the Entertainment Era were

¹² Peter J. Rabinowitz, "Betraying the Sender: The Rhetoric and Ethics of Fragile Texts," *Narrative* 2 (1994), 203.

¹³ Morris, "Pink Herring," 230.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 230-232.

some of the most profitable years in the company's history.¹⁵ Rather than harm business, WWE dropping the conventions of kayfabe and admitting the scripted nature of professional wrestling created a renewed interest in the product. During this period, WWE was also driven to make bold creative choices due to strong competition from rival wrestling promotion World Championship Wrestling (WCW).¹⁶ Along with the move to put aside kayfabe conventions, WWE began to rid itself of the more cartoonish characters that had been its modus operandi since the 1980s in favor of more risqué adult oriented programming.¹⁷

By the early 2000's, WWE had bought out all major competitors in the wrestling business, achieving market dominance.¹⁸ WWE no longer had the stress of having to compete weekly for ratings with a company who publically stated that it was trying to run WWE out of business.¹⁹ However, without any true competitors, McMahon and WWE struggled to maintain cultural relevance and popular interest present during the "Monday Night War" period. Many fans and wrestling journalists argued that WWE became increasingly creatively complacent,

¹⁵ Douglas Batemala and Philip Sewell, "Trading in Masculinity: Muscles, Money and Market Discourse in the WWF," in *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling*, ed. Nicholas Sammond (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 278-79.

¹⁶ The competition between WWE and WCW is popularly called the "Monday Night War" because both companies vied for ratings with their flagship shows on Monday nights. The WCW outperformed WWE for 84 consecutive weeks before changes in the Entertainment Era turned the tide in WWE's favor.

¹⁷ In the early to mid-1990s, WWE roster included a plethora of characters aimed at children such as Doink the Clown (a wrestling clown), Duke "The Dumpster" Droese (a wrestling garbage man), Bob "Spark Plugg" Holly (a wrestling NASCAR driver) among others. These cartoonish characters seemed silly juxtaposed weekly with the more realistic wrestlers on WCW's *Nitro*. In the Entertainment Era, McMahon "pushed" younger wrestlers like "Stone Cold" Steve Austin, The Rock, and D-Generation X as major stars while WCW relied on older stars with name value like Hogan and Savage.

¹⁸ WWE ultimately won the Monday Night War, buying out WCW on March 23, 2001. WWE also previously bought out Extreme Championship Wrestling (ECW) earlier that year. While wrestling promotions arose in the following years, including Total Nonstop Action (TNA) and Ring of Honor (ROH), these companies lacked the funds to truly compete with WWE on a national scale.

¹⁹ Bryan Alvarez and R.D. Reynolds, *The Death of WCW, Kindle Ed.* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2014), ch. 5.

causing the wrestling business to cool off dramatically during the 2000s.²⁰ In response, WWE attempted to recreate a sense of competition by splitting its talent roster and creative staff into two separate “brands” named for the two major shows of the time, *RAW* and *SmackDown!*, each with its own set of champions and storylines, but this artificial competition did not spur on business the way it had during the Monday Night War.²¹ Former wrestler Steve Austin argued in his podcast that the current roster of wrestlers has become timid in speaking their mind because WWE is the “only game in town” if you want to make a lot of money in the wrestling business.²² Thus, WWE narrative began to creatively stagnate during the 2000s and fans began to criticize the company for its lack of creativity and general appeal.

Another contributing factor to growing fan discontent during this time concerned Vince McMahon’s attempts to distance himself and WWE from its professional wrestling roots. During the Entertainment Era, Vince McMahon attempted to dissociate his company from wrestling despite it being the major crux of WWE’s revenue generation. During the 1980s, McMahon switched to using the term “sports entertainment” in lieu of “professional wrestling” to get out of paying sports commission fees. But the sports entertainment moniker proved more than just a means to financial loopholes, as McMahon envisioned his company as more than a wrestling company.²³ McMahon showed a distaste for the term “wrestling” when he appeared on the *Stone Cold Podcast* hosted by former wrestler Steve Austin. McMahon stated that wrestling was what his father (the former owner of WWE) did and not what WWE currently does.

²⁰ Bryan Alvarez, *Figure Four Weekly*, December 6, 2004.

²¹ WWE eventually quit the brand split in 2011, but reintroduced it again on July 19, 2016 in an attempt to increase ratings for *SmackDown*.

²² Steve Austin and Paul Levesque, *The Steve Austin Show – Unleashed 192*, podcast audio, WWE COO Triple H, MP3, 1:36:11, February 5, 2015, <http://podcastone.com/pg/jsp/program/episode.jsp?programID=436&pid=482164>.

²³ McMahon stated that, when Ted Turner purchased WCW, Turner called McMahon to let him know he was now “in the wrasslin’ business” to which McMahon replied, “That’s nice. I’m in the entertainment business.”

Indeed, the distinction between “sports entertainment” and “professional wrestling” drove many of the business and narrative practices of WWE during this time. As discussed in the previous chapter, the primary difference between the Kayfabe Era and the Entertainment Era concerned the authorial audience, which Phelan and Rabinowitz describes as the audience for whom the narrative is crafted, as evidenced by textual cues imbedded in the narrative. During the Entertainment Era, WWE shifted to addressing the authorial audience as smarts as opposed to marks. In so doing, it began to craft its narratives for an audience it assumed was “in on” the fixed nature of professional wrestling. This change in authorial audience marked the major narrative change from the preceding Kayfabe Era. At first, the change resulted in an upsurge in popular attention to WWE narrative by explicitly addressing the fans as knowledgeable about the production of WWE narrative. However, eventually, the same change authorized the audience to criticize the narrative offered to them by WWE.

These criticisms, as alluded to earlier, developed from WWE’s emphasis on entertainment. Over time, this emphasis, as manifested in WWE’s address to the audience, alienated a group of wrestling fans who saw themselves not as consumers of entertainment generally, but as fans of wrestling particularly. Using the rhetorical theories of persona, we can see how the dominant narrative style in WWE contributed to this alienation, and to the later emergence of a counterculture within wrestling fandom. The first persona in WWE’s sports entertainment narrative refers to the implied author of the narrative content. In this case, Vince McMahon and WWE Creative addressed the audience in a manner that suggested their distance from traditional professional wrestling, and emphasized their role as entertainers. The second persona refers to the implied auditor of the text, and this, as noted, coincides with the authorial audience. In this case, WWE crafted its narrative to appeal to casual fans and mainstream appeal by distancing

itself from conventions of “professional wrestling.” Finally, the third persona refers to the audience that is excluded and silenced by the text. WWE, by emphasizing entertainment at the expense of wrestling, positioned fans who desired a more wrestling-centric product outside the bounds of the second persona and into the third persona. In response, these fans eventually sought out alternative wrestling narratives in a subculture of “indy wrestling.” But before I delve into indy-wrestling and WWE’s response to it, I want to show how WWE’s sports entertainment narrative effected this shift from second to third persona. To do so, I will turn to the concepts of authorial and narrative audience from rhetorical narratology.

3.2.1 Authorial Audience in the Entertainment Era

By looking at the ways WWE addressed the authorial audience through extra-diegetic means, in-ring performance, promos, and commentary, we can better see how the narrative strategies employed during the Entertainment Era addressed a casual audience as the second persona while pushing wrestling fans to the third persona. Further, understanding how conventions of authorship and audience in the latter stages of the Entertainment Era created these personas adds to my account of how the Reality Era narrative differs in its address to the audience, and to what effect. In short, by looking closely at author and audience in the Entertainment Era, we can see why and how WWE used narrative to address the new participatory behaviors of consumers during this period.

The implied author of WWE Creative engaged the authorial audience through extra-diegetic means that made clear their narrative was designed for more casual fans and not hardcore wrestling fans. McMahon’s distinction between “sports entertainment” and “professional wrestling” drove many of WWE’s business decisions during the Entertainment Era. McMahon attempted various side ventures including the World Bodybuilding Federation

(WBF), XFL (intended to rival the NFL), and the more recent WWE Films to expand the entertainment function of WWE. Still, the wrestling product is responsible for the vast majority of WWE's income and none of these side ventures proved profitable.²⁴ McMahon's focus on WWE becoming an entertainment company prompted a rising sentiment of discontent among wrestling fans who resented the negative stigma McMahon seemed to associate with the professional wrestling genre.²⁵ McMahon positioned wrestling as subservient to broader entertainment, thus addressing fans who valued wrestling outside the bounds of the second persona.

WWE also engaged in extra-diegetic communication to its authorial audience through remarks about the fans made by major figures in the company. For his part, McMahon and WWE in general considered wrestling fans who disapproved of WWE's product a "vocal minority" for much of the 2000s.²⁶ McMahon's apparent disregard for the importance of fan opinion in general only served to motivate fans to insist on change more vociferously. Comments like these served as a means to attempt to silence or minimize the voice of discontented fans, making clear that these wrestling fans occupied the third persona excluded and silenced by WWE's narrative style. Put another way, these remarks ostracized hardcore wrestling fans from the authorial audience addressed by the sports entertainment narrative style.

During the 2000s, WWE underwent some major changes in business practice that affected the narratives in a way that further alienated fans more interested in the sporting half of the sports entertainment equation. First, WWE became a publically traded company on the New

²⁴ Chris Mueller, "WWE Weekly 5: The Failed Ventures of Vince McMahon," *Bleacher Report*, January 16, 2012, <http://bleacherreport.com/articles/1022003-ww-weekly-5-the-failed-ventures-of-vince-mcmahon>.

²⁵ Shane Toepfer, "The Playful Audience: Professional Wrestling, Media Fandom, and the Omnipresence of Media Smarks," (PhD diss, Georgia State University, 2011), 241.

²⁶ Kevin Sullivan, *WWE 50* (Indianapolis: Brady Games DK Style, 2014) 210.

York Stock Exchange starting in October 2000.²⁷ The corporate interests of WWE started to influence the on-air product to a greater degree. WWE gradually began to phase out some of the edgier elements popularized in the 1990s such as blood, adult language, and “excessively violent” depictions like chair shots to the head and choking. In 2008, WWE fully shifted its programming to meet TV-PG standards, pushing a more family-friendly approach in its content. WWE also partnered with organizations such as Susan G. Komen and GLAAD in an attempt to raise its public perception. Justifiably or not, some fans began to decry the TV-PG programming and family friendly narratives as a major reason for the downfall of creatively intriguing storylines.²⁸ Adult fans argued that the company was reverting back to some of the more cartoonish elements from the 1980s and early 1990s. McMahon and WWE found themselves stuck between appeasing longtime fans and its corporate mandate to reach as wide an audience as possible. Again, corporate interests and popular casual fandom was centered as the target audience for WWE narrative, (i.e., the second persona), while wrestling fans were pushed to the margins and took on the third persona.

Ultimately, WWE’s emphasis on entertainment addressed an authorial audience of casual fans while simultaneously excluding hardcore wrestling fans through the narrative product in the ring. During the Entertainment Era, WWE spent increasingly less time on wrestling matches in its programming and more time on backstage vignettes, long promotional interviews, comedy bits, and other fixtures of sports entertainment. Further, WWE gradually decreased the importance placed on the results of matches that made television. Wrestlers who lost matches frequently got higher profile positions than those who won. Wrestler John Cena gained a level of

²⁷ Battema and Sewell, “Trading in Masculinity,” 277-78.

²⁸ Justin LaBar, “How Good or Bad is TV-PG?,” *Wrestle Zone*, October 8, 2010, <http://www.wrestlezone.com/news/173821-video-how-good-or-bad-is-tv-pg-wwe-ever-change>.

infamy to fans online for saying he wasn't mad about losing his WWE Heavyweight Title at the *Fatal-4-Way* event in 2010 because "those things come and go."²⁹ The decrease in focus on the sporting elements of wrestling furthered the perception among wrestling fans that WWE was crafting a narrative for casual fans and not those who truly valued the wrestling aspect of the narrative.

Promos and commentary, which directly addressed the fans, were designed by WWE for an authorial audience of casual fans, further implicating more ardent wrestling fans into the third persona. As previously mentioned, WWE placed a greater emphasis on elements of the narrative other than wrestling matches, and it devoted more programming time to them. Promos became longer during the 2000s. For example, the flagship show *RAW* often began with an in-ring talking segment usually lasting somewhere between fifteen to twenty-five minutes. WWE also began including longer comedy segments rather than focusing on the wrestling matches themselves. These choices fit well with the company's push toward being an entertainment company rather than just a wrestling company. Further, this focus on entertainment tailored the narrative to a casual audience and not a hardcore wrestling audience.

Moreover, the style of promo in the latter stages of the Entertainment Era were crafted for a casual fan authorial audience. WWE's move to TV-PG initiated a shift in promo styles that would be more family-friendly. Whereas late 1990s WWE promos pushed the limit of acceptability due to adult language and themes, promos during the late 2000s avoided such material. Instead, wrestlers would often resort to "childish insults and potty humor" to remain under the guides of TV-PG.³⁰ Top star John Cena became the posterchild for this style of promo, leading to widespread rejection from hardcore wrestling fans but still maintaining popularity

²⁹ Dave Meltzer, *Wrestling Observer Newsletter*, June 28, 2010.

³⁰ Karl Stern, *Dragon King Karl Show*, March 12, 2016.

with younger kids and casual fans. Further, during this time McMahon's influence over the verbal product increased the divide between casual and hardcore wrestling fans.

During the Entertainment Era, WWE shifted to scripted promos to exert more control over the narrative content of its programming. In the past, wrestlers usually worked off a general outline or major theme during promos. Now, the writers backstage had greater authorial control over the verbal content of the narrative. Further, WWE at this time sought out writers who had little to no background in wrestling, preferring instead writers from other entertainment genres.³¹ Bryan Alvarez, author of *Figure Four Weekly*, as well as many others in the wrestling industry, fault the overly scripted nature of promos during this period for the lack of connection with wrestling fans.³² Thus, by giving authorial control of promos to wrestling outsiders, WWE catered its narrative in these promos for a casual audience and not a hardcore wrestling audience.

The in-ring dimensions of the narrative also positioned ardent wrestling fans outside the bounds of the second persona in its focus on style over substance. In switching to the Entertainment Era, WWE deemphasized the sporting aspects of the narrative, and, therefore, the in-ring action lost a dependence on realistic grappling and violence. WWE started to place greater emphasis on spectacle and less on mimetic combat. This change made sense considering the authorial audience was now addressed as smart fans who did not believe the matches were legitimately contested. However, wrestling fans often criticized the in-ring action in WWE for its lack of athleticism and "work rate." The terms "work rate" and "worker" were used throughout the 1900s as insider jargon for the quality of labor performers brought in the ring. Work rate is largely a combination of physicality, stamina, technical proficiency and believability. A wrestler

³¹ Andrew Goldstein, "Wrestling with a Dream Job: How a Regular Guy Became a Writer for the WWE," *Complex*, May 17, 2016, <http://www.complex.com/sports/2016/05/wrestling-with-your-dream-job>.

³² Bryan Alvarez, *Figure Four Weekly*, July 5, 2011.

whose matches included less “rest holds” like headlocks and more exciting maneuvers would gain a reputation for better work rate.

During the 2000s, crowd responses to WWE’s in-ring product exhibited a level of discontent with the “work rate” on display by characters within WWE narrative. For example, chants of “You can’t wrestle!” followed certain wrestlers like The Great Khali, who certainly looked the part of a larger-than-life gladiator standing at a purported 7ft 4in. But due in part to Kahli’s size, he was limited in terms of athleticism in the ring. WWE crafted a narrative for casual fans who would be content to revel in the spectacle of the superior physical specimens, but the narrative also excluded diehard wrestling fans who expected more action and higher work rate in its matches.

Along with criticisms of work rate, fans during this time also pointed to WWE’s focus on visually impressive physiques as evidence of a dependence on hypermasculinity.³³ WWE relied heavily on a narrow view of masculinity in which visual spectacle was more important than competitive prowess. Danielle Soulliere argues that the type of masculinity depicted on WWE programming problematically reinforced dominant ideals of hypermasculinity.³⁴ WWE’s dependence on hypermasculine physiques indicated a second persona of a casual audience whose eye might be dazzled by the visually impressive aesthetics, yet blind to the lack of substance.

³³ The portrayal of scantily clad, muscular bodies being beaten and often bloodied calls to mind Claire Sisco King’s observation of hegemonic masculinity’s abject nature, a discussion of which would constitute its own full treatment beyond the bounds of the current project. See: Claire Sisco King, “It Cuts Both Ways: *Fight Club*, Masculinity, Abject Hegemony,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 6 (2009), 371.

³⁴ Danielle M. Soulliere, “Wrestling with Masculinity: Messages about Manhood in WWE,” *Sex Roles* 55, no. 1 (2006), 8.

The emphasis on physique, as opposed to work rate, further alienated longtime fans, who viewed it as detrimental to the quality of matches.³⁵ Wrestling journalist Dave Meltzer expresses these concerns when he writes that performers who are short (under 6 foot) and/or lack muscular definition are not given the same opportunities as their taller, more toned counterparts, even when the smaller wrestlers are better workers in the ring.³⁶ He further cites McMahon's own interest in bodybuilding as a driving force in the preference for a particular body type. Throughout the 2000s, the vast majority of wrestlers positioned in top spots within the company were those that also could appear on muscle and fitness magazine covers.³⁷ Meanwhile, fans now had the ability to contrast the spectacle of hypermasculinity on WWE programming with combat sports like mixed martial arts.³⁸ Effectively, by focusing on a wrestler's image over ability, WWE added to the perception that its narrative product was not intended for hardcore wrestling fans, positioning them in the third persona.

Commentary during the latter stages of the Entertainment Era also reflected WWE's authorial audience of casual fans over wrestling fans. During this period McMahon exerted

³⁵ While WWE made some positive changes to its depiction of masculinity during the early parts of the Entertainment Era, by the late 2000s, the company returned to its dependence on the "larger than life" physical specimens of the 1980s and early 1990s. While the change to smaller stars like Bret Hart and Shawn Michaels in the 1990s was in part due to WWE no longer needing to pretend that their wrestlers were the biggest and toughest fighters any longer, the move was also spurred on by Vince McMahon being indicted on charges of distributing steroids to performers. WWE wanted to deflect attention from the bulging muscular features of wrestlers while the company was suspected of promoting performance enhancing drugs. Once the legal battle died down, WWE again started to push performers based largely on physical appearance.

³⁶ Dave Meltzer, *Wrestling Observer Newsletter*, February 15, 2016.

³⁷ John Cena, The Rock, Chris Jericho, Batista, Triple H, Brock Lesnar, and even Vince McMahon himself have all been on the cover of *Muscle & Fitness* magazine.

³⁸ The rise in popularity of the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) in the 2000s served as an alternative for some fans who wished to see competitors actually compete in legitimately contested fights for titles, similar to boxing but with a greater range of combat styles. The top stars in UFC were not necessarily the biggest and/or strongest competitors. Further, some of the best fighters and top stars in the UFC fought in the smaller weight classes. For example, the UFC's top male draw last year, Conor McGregor, fought as a featherweight (136-145 lbs). Comparatively, WWE's smaller stars (cruiserweights) could still weigh up to 225 lbs. Even then, WWE did away with its Cruiserweight Championship in 2008 due to lack of attention from WWE Creative.

control over commentary by controlling the very language the commentators could and could not use. McMahon required commentators to avoid verbiage that called to mind the wrestling genre. He instructed the commentators to avoid the terms “wrestling” and “wrestler” in lieu of the terms “sports entertainment” and “superstar.”³⁹ Along with the directives from above to avoid common wrestling terminology, McMahon increasingly took an active role in directing commentary in the moment. Commentators often got moment-by-moment instruction from McMahon through their audio headsets.⁴⁰ Thus, fans began to see commentators as an extension of the authorial voice of McMahon and WWE Creative. McMahon used the commentators as mouthpieces to direct audiences to interpret the narrative in particular ways. For example, during the 2000s, many fans began to openly express disapproval of top face star John Cena, booing him during promos and chanting loudly “Cena sucks!”⁴¹ In response, McMahon instructed commentators to repeat the phrase, “Whether you love him or hate him, Cena gets a reaction” whenever this occurred. McMahon attempted to recast criticism of the dominant narrative as emotional buy-in from fans through the commentary. Thus, the commentary attempted to silence the voice of those in the third persona: the hardcore wrestling fans.

3.2.2 Narrative Audience in the Entertainment Era

Thus far I have focused on how WWE’s narrative created a second and third persona by addressing an authorial audience of casual fans and in so doing excluded diehard wrestling fans.

³⁹ Despite McMahon’s best attempts, the terms never caught on with the greater public. Bryan Alvarez points out that no one makes statements like “I am going to the sports entertainment show tonight.” Instead, wrestling is still used in common parlance.

⁴⁰ Richard Deitsch, “WWE Broadcaster Michael Cole on Preparing to Call Wrestlemania,” *Sports Illustrated*, March 22, 2015, <http://www.si.com/more-sports/2015/03/22/michael-cole-wwe-wrestlemania-march-madness-tv-ratings-jaymee-sire-espn>.

⁴¹ These chants were often contrasted with younger fans chanting “Let’s go Cena!”

Now, I will turn to the narrative audience to show the narrators of WWE further alienated a certain constituency of fans. The narrative audience, according to Phelan and Rabinowitz, is one “that exists in the narrator’s world, that regards the characters and events as real rather than invented, and that accepts the basic facts of the storyworld regardless of whether they conform to those of the actual world.”⁴² This distinction is important because WWE in the Entertainment Era still configured the narrative audience as marks, much like it had in the Kayfabe Era. Thus, by paying attention to the difference in address between the authorial audience and the narrative audience, we can see that the disconnect between these two forms of audience address helped lead to growing discontent among wrestling fans.

First, in shifting the authorial audience to smarts and departing from conventions of professional wrestling, WWE created a larger disconnect between the authorial and narrative audiences. The narrative audience was still supposed to regard the action as real even as WWE distanced itself from the sporting aspect of the genre. WWE still held to many of the narrative devices found in the Kayfabe Era with regard to the narrative audience, as shown in the previous chapter. In the ring, the wrestlers still sold their opponent’s offense as if it really hurt. However, WWE’s attempts to move away from the vestiges of legitimate sport meant that the in-ring results mattered less to the outcome of storylines. In promos, the wrestlers attempted to get fans to care about their matches and feuds while simultaneously WWE Creative was sending messages that the wrestling aspect of the narrative was relatively unimportant to the overall narrative.

Second, WWE’s own diegetic story started to mirror reality for dissatisfied fans. During the Entertainment Era, Vince McMahon began playing a heel character based on his actual position in WWE, which I will refer to as “Mr. McMahon” to avoid confusion. The Mr.

⁴² Phelan & Rabinowitz, *Narrative Theory*, 6.

McMahon character is largely considered a success because it served as a villain for the most popular wrestler of the time, Steve Austin. In the diegetic story told during this time, Mr. McMahon, the evil boss of WWE, wanted to hold Steve Austin back and went to great lengths to stop Austin from winning the World Title. While the Mr. McMahon character shared many similarities with the actual Vince McMahon, the actual audience understood that the two also differed in important ways. Actual smart fans understood that Vince McMahon wanted to push Steve Austin as the top star in WWE because Austin was a top merchandise seller and draw for tickets. The authorial audience, being addressed as smarts, also recognized that WWE presented a story for entertainment purposes that ultimately was not true “behind-the-scenes.” But the narrative audience was presented with a Mr. McMahon character that knew fans liked Steve Austin and wanted to stop the fans from getting what they desired. The diegetic story thus positioned the Mr. McMahon character as an antagonist not only to Austin, but also to the fans.

The Mr. McMahon story told to the narrative audience, in conjunction with the ways WWE addressed the authorial audience, combined to create an image of the implied author as one who was “against the fans.” This only exacerbated the growing discontent amongst hardcore wrestling fans already alienated by a narrative that assigned to them the third persona. In promos, the Mr. McMahon character would often tell that audience to “shut up,” and, over time, wrestling fans began to note similarities between the narrator character of Mr. McMahon and common perceptions of WWE Creative (the implied author of WWE narrative). Further, these fans saw WWE Creative pushing a narrative of sports entertainment over a more wrestling-centric narrative as evidence of the actual McMahon purposely not giving the fans what they want. Shane Toepfer, in his ethnographic study of wrestling fans, quotes many fans in online forums

during this time expressing these views⁴³ Further, after leaving the company, former member of the WWE writing team Freddie Prinze, Jr. openly admitted McMahon did not listen to fans and argued that he was correct in doing so.⁴⁴ In response to McMahon not appeasing fan desire, many of these disgruntled fans sought a narrative that positioned the wrestling fans as the second persona of the authorial audience.

3.3 The Rise of the “Indy-Wrestling” Narrative Subculture

The dominant narrative style of WWE during the latter stages of the Entertainment Era focused on sports entertainment over professional wrestling. In so doing, WWE crafted its narrative for an authorial audience of casual fans and mainstream entertainment appeal. WWE positioned these casual fans in the role of the second persona, the audience for whom the text is crafted. Simultaneously, and as Wander might suggest, necessarily, WWE narrative created a third person of excluded hardcore wrestling fans who desired a more wrestling-centric narrative. As a result, wrestling fans exhibited their discontent at the narrative direction of the company, eventually leading to the rise of a subculture within wrestling fandom centered around an alternative “indy-wrestling” narrative style.

Returning to the conception of audience from rhetorical narratology, a segment of the actual audience of wrestling fans, who at this point felt excluded from the authorial audience, became increasingly active in trying to voice frustrations. While this participatory behavior eventually provided WWE with an exigence for changing its narrative address, it initially helped

⁴³ Toepfer, “Plalyful Audience,” 240.

⁴⁴ William Windsor, “Freddie Prinze, Jr. on Vince McMahon Rightly Putting WWE Title on Bigger Stars, Vince Ignoring Fans,” *Wrestling Inc.*, June 19, 2016, <http://www.wrestlinginc.com/wi/news/2016/0619/612792/freddie-prinze/>.

lead to the emergence of the indy-wrestling subculture. The actual audience of wrestling fans expressed their discontent with WWE's narrative direction in a variety of ways.

Most notably, wrestling fans expressed frustration with the narrative product of WWE by simply not engaging with the product at all. Ratings during the beginning parts of the Entertainment Era were overwhelmingly positive, as were other market indicators like merchandise sales and pay-per-view buy rates.⁴⁵ However, during the next decade, these numbers continually dropped as fans stopped watching the WWE product. Further, during the 2000s, many small independent (non-nationally televised) wrestling promotions began to pop up across the country as an outlet for many of the young wrestlers who were trying to get into the business, having watched the Monday Night Wars in their youth. Many of these "indy" promotions placed a greater focus on the wrestling aspect of their narrative. Among the indy-wrestling promotions, Ring of Honor (ROH) stood out due its purposeful departure from the dominant narrative strategies of WWE. ROH attempted to set itself apart from other wrestling promotions through a focus on superior in-ring action. Fans who felt that WWE departed too much from its wrestling roots found ROH a refreshing narrative alternative.⁴⁶ While WWE's sports entertainment narrative style positioned wrestling fans in the third persona, the indy-wrestling narrative catered to an authorial audience (and second persona) of hardcore wrestling fans.

Fans also expressed their displeasure by actively critiquing WWE narrative strategies. Wrestling fans congregated online to discuss wrestling, eventually adopting the moniker of the Internet Wrestling Community (IWC). Wrestlers on the independent circuit were called "internet darlings" both online and by McMahon himself. Fans not only voiced displeasure with the

⁴⁵ See Note 19.

⁴⁶ Toepfer, "Playful Audience," 218-219.

narrative direction of WWE online; they also vocally expressed themselves at live WWE events. The actual audience during the 2000s used chanting during matches and in-ring segments as a form of participatory behavior to show their opinions with the creative direction of the company. More than simply booing or cheering, the fans in this time directed their chants at the narrative itself. For example, chants of “You can’t wrestle!” emerged during this time directed at performers who did not meet up to fans’ expectations of athleticism in the ring, even when those performers were positioned as dominant in the diegetic storylines. Here, fans reappropriated the term “wrestling” as an alternative to the sports entertainment narrative style of WWE.

In opposition to the dominant narrative offered by WWE, an indy-wrestling subculture emerged, centered around an alternative style of narrative used in independent promotions like ROH. As Dick Hebdige observes, subcultures tend to bring together likeminded individuals in a manner that serves as a “noise” against the ruling ideology.⁴⁷ In this case, the indy-wrestling subculture coalesced around a “homology”⁴⁸ of style defined by a particular narrative style, and positioned this alternative narrative style in opposition to the dominant narrative of WWE. To better account for how the alternative indy-wrestling narrative style differed from the dominant sports entertainment narrative style of WWE, I apply the typology of author and audience from rhetorical narratology. In so doing, I will show that the narrative choices made in the construction of indy-wrestling narratives brought wrestling fans into the second persona, and also positioned them in a relatively more powerful position *visa-vis* the producers of the narrative content.

⁴⁷Dick Hebdige, *Subculture, the Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979), 133.

⁴⁸ Barry Brummett, *A Rhetoric of Style* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 11. This term, originally used by Claude Levi-Strauss, has been utilized by scholars to describe the readable performance of style in which symbolic markers denote a readable subcultural identity to other members.

3.3.1 Authorial and Narrative Audience in Indy-Wrestling Narratives

In many ways, the “indy-wrestling” narrative style worked similarly to that of Entertainment Era WWE narratives. These independent wrestling promotions still addressed the authorial audience as smarts and the narrative audience as marks. Most promoters across the board recognized that they could not viably return to kayfabe conventions because fans were no longer content to play the role of the believer. However, while the address of authorial and narrative audience remained similar to that of the dominant narrative style of WWE, indy-wrestling promotions like ROH attempted to embed within its narratives key differences from WWE in order to draw in fans who were alienated from the dominant narrative product. Thus, the indy-wrestling promotions attempted to project a different implied author in the way they narratively addressed their authorial audience. Specifically, the indy-wrestling narrative sought to appease fan desire for a return to some of the sporting elements of professional wrestling now absent in WWE programming. In so doing, the indy-wrestling narrative positioned hardcore wrestling fans into the second persona. Further, this narrative gave fans relatively greater influence over the creative direction of the narrative product by hailing them as arbiters of talent and successful execution of wrestling narrative. The indy-wrestling narrative not only presented an entertainment product for the fans, it told the fans that their opinion of what was “awesome” mattered to the authors (both actual and implied) of that narrative.

Because promotions like ROH attempted to appease fans who desired a more wrestling-centric narrative, indy-wrestling storylines differed significantly from WWE. While WWE devoted increasingly less time to matches, ROH shows featured many longer wrestling matches and much less of the out-of-ring extras. Because these shows were not as bound by television formatting, they were able to allow wrestlers to improvise matches and feature longer bouts.

Many matches in ROH exceeded thirty minutes in length. The time spent on backstage segments and in-ring promos was negligible compared to WWE. Further, ROH attempted to place greater importance on wins and losses in an effort to highlight the sporting aspect of the genre. Wrestlers who won frequently were held in higher regard than those that lost. As a result, when a top star did lose, the matches seemed more noteworthy. Thus, the indy-wrestling narrative squarely positioned wrestling fans into the position of the second persona.

More than anything else, ROH prided itself on having superior in-ring action than WWE. The implied authors behind the indy-wrestling narrative tried to distinguish their wrestling narrative by focusing on a style of in-ring narration that differed greatly from the one offered by WWE. The commentators claimed ROH featured the best “wrestlers” in the world, with the connotation that their performers were better at creating realistic and athletic matches. Whereas Vince McMahon eschewed the terms wrestling and wrestlers in favor of “sports entertainment” and “superstars,” ROH embraced these terms as markers of its own rival narrative. The reappropriation of terms like “wrestling” helped create the indy-wrestling subculture’s homology of style. While the action in ROH was still scripted, the performers in Ring of Honor were known for their superior work rate. Additionally, indy-wrestling promotions like ROH incorporated a greater variety of styles into their performances. Indy-wrestlers gained attention for utilizing techniques from mixed martial arts, *lucha libre* style from Mexican wrestling, and “strong style” from Japanese professional wrestling. The high-flying *lucha* style added to the overall athleticism, featuring impressive flips and dives to the outside of the ring. Strong style and MMA influences added a sense of realism to the in-ring product largely lacking in WWE’s dominant narrative. Wrestlers began to use jiu-jitsu submission techniques that fans who had watched UFC would recognize as effective techniques in an actual combat situation. Further,

many indy-wrestlers began training in striking martial arts to make their kicks, punches and elbows look more realistic in the ring. The effect of these narrative moves was to tailor the indy-wrestling narrative to an authorial audience (and second persona) that valued the substance of wrestling as opposed to the common criticism of WWE as “style over substance.”

The indy-wrestling narrative also catered to a hardcore wrestling authorial audience by positioning the performers (or “workers” in wrestling terminology) as heroes who labored for the acceptance of the audience. Indy-wrestling’s focus on in-ring ability and high work rate forwarded an alternative narrative style that privileged fans’ opinion of talent and narrative production. Fans within the indy-wrestling subculture exhibited what Sarah Thornton calls “subcultural capital”⁴⁹ by showing that they know great wrestlers that the casual fans of WWE would not recognize. Additionally, fans showed their subcultural capital through their ability to rate the quality of matches. Shane Toepfer details how ROH fans use a star-rating system honed by wrestling journalist and historian Dave Meltzer, with a five star rating the highest a match could get, quarter-star increments (a match might get ***1/4) and some matches falling into negative star rating.⁵⁰ Meltzer’s own *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* ranks most of the major wrestling matches across the world with very few ever earning the prestigious five-star ranking. Fans of ROH claim that the wrestling matches in that promotion regularly outperform the more popular WWE matches. Indeed, relatively few WWE matches have earned five stars.⁵¹ Indy-

⁴⁹ Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1996), 5.

⁵⁰ Toepfer, “Playful Audience,” 52.

⁵¹ “Top Rated Matches of All Time,” *The Internet Wrestling Database*, last updated June 19, 2016, <http://www.profightdb.com/top-rated-matches.html>. Meltzer has only awarded five-stars to five matches in WWE since he began rating in 1983. While Meltzer has awarded only four matches in ROH five-stars, the company received them in a much shorter time period, only starting in 2004. In the same period, WWE has only one five-star match: the John Cena vs. CM Punk match detailed in this chapter.

wrestling fans coalesce into a subcultural identity partially by recognizing what constitutes “good wrestling.” The indy-wrestling narrative invites fans into the position of arbiters of in-ring wrestling talent.

By addressing fans as arbiters of the creative production of wrestling narratives, the indy-wrestling narrative diverged from that of WWE, in part by enabling them to influence the creative process. In *Rhetoric*, Aristotle identifies two major types of audiences.⁵² The first type is the passive audience of the observer addressed primarily in epideictic rhetoric. The other type of audience identified by Aristotle is the active audience of the judge, who must render a decision.⁵³ WWE narrative style positioned fans into the role of the former while the indy-wrestling narrative positioned them as the latter. The indy-wrestling narrative hailed fans as judges who render a decision rather than as passive spectators. Thus, indy-wrestling fans were empowered to influence who received “pushes” (booking a wrestler to win more frequently and hopefully become more popular) within the narrative based on their judgment.

Positioning fans as active judges of talent within the indy-wrestling narrative also provided a contrast to WWE’s dominant portrayal of hypermasculinity. WWE valued a larger-than-life look in its “superstars,” leading to the company pushing overly muscular bodybuilder types as top faces and “monstrous” stars of massive height and/or weight as top heels. In contrast, the indy-wrestling promotions often placed smaller wrestlers with more athleticism in top positions. The average height and weight of ROH World Champions is a mere 5 foot 11 inches and 222 pounds. Admittedly, indy-wrestling promotions often had to push smaller wrestlers because they could offer far less money than WWE to the physically larger performers.

⁵² Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts, accessed July 20, 2016, <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/rhetoric.2.ii.html>, book 1 part 3.

⁵³ Aristotle, *The Organon, or Logical Treatises of Aristotle*, trans. Octavius Freire Owen (London: George Bell and Sons, 1889). Here, Aristotle identifies a third type of audience, the interlocutor.

Still, these promotions showed that the smaller wrestlers exhibiting a more athletic in-ring style could get “over” with fans. Moreover, the fans were put into the privileged position to decide if a performer was worthy of attention, no matter how big or small, based on their wrestling performance ability. In contrast, fans critical of the mainstream WWE narrative often complained that their opinions on talent were ignored in favor of pushing wrestlers based on their “look.” Meltzer argues that Vince McMahon consistently pushes talent based on “cosmetics” rather than on fan approval. Again, the indy-wrestling narrative places fan support in a relatively stronger position in terms of content appraisal. Fans supported smaller athletes who were better workers and ROH focused its attention on those wrestlers in its narrative.

Further, fans were able to better identify with the wrestlers in indy-wrestling, adding to the idea that the workers in these promotions were heroes who labored for the fans. WWE focused on physically impressive specimens to make its “superstars” stand out from the common person. In contrast, the indy-wrestling narrative highlighted wrestlers who looked and acted more like the fans. This served to create a sense of identification between the fans and the performers, which Burke points out is the major goal of rhetoric.⁵⁴ For Burke, rhetoric is not a one-way process through which a rhetor influences a passive audience. Instead, Burke uses the term “consubstantiality” to refer to a process wherein the rhetor attempts to achieve identification with an audience. Indy-wrestlers further attempted to identify with the audience by interacting with fans before and after shows, and often by talking about their own experience as wrestling fans. The indy-wrestlers thus were positioned as “one of” the fans who happened to perform in the ring. This sense of identification further positioned the fans within the second persona of the authorial audience of the indy-wrestling narrative.

⁵⁴ Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1950), 39.

The indy-wrestling narrative style further positions fans in a relatively powerful position by embracing the terminology of fans in the verbal address to its audience. Within promos, commentary, and promotional materials the wrestlers and commentators actively embrace the lingo of professional wrestling. Within these promotions, the terms “wrestling” and “wrestler” are uttered as a mark of pride. Wrestlers and commentators used this reappropriated terminology as a form of subcultural capital to increase their identification with hardcore wrestling fans. Whereas many in the IWC think that McMahon does not care what fans think, indy-wrestling promotions like ROH go to great lengths to show fans that they are trying to give them what they want. As a result, fans generally responded in kind. The oft heard chant of “This is wrestling!” signifies matches that exceed the normally expected work rate, and simultaneously exclude the typical WWE match from the fan definition of wrestling.

Finally, the indy-wrestling narrative style differs from WWE’s with respect to the consumption-production dynamic. Specifically, the indy-wrestling narrative places greater importance on the participatory behaviors of the fans voicing their opinion of the product. WWE places value upon the concept of “drawing power,” a term denoting a wrestler or storyline’s ability to “draw” money by increasing viewership for shows and/or ticket sales for live events and merchandise sales. Under this criterion, Hulk Hogan was a great success because he drove sales up during his prime despite having a reputation as a poor “worker” in the ring. Indy-wrestling promotions place less emphasis on drawing power largely because these promotions generate so much less income than WWE. Therefore, narrators in indy-wrestling often place more importance on “getting over,” a term that indicates the level of interest a wrestler has from the fans.⁵⁵ A good face should be cheered whereas a good heel should be booed. Note that

⁵⁵ Toepfer, “Playful Audience,” 222-261. Toepfer provides a more detailed explanation of the difference between drawing and getting over.

booing a heel (getting “heat”) does not necessarily mean that a fan does not appreciate the performance of the wrestler. In privileging “getting over,” the indy-wrestling narrative again positions the fans in a position of relatively high creative authority by placing importance in their judgment of the creative work in the wrestling narrative.

As the indy-wrestling subculture grew, the dueling narrative of indy-wrestling worked its way into fan participation behaviors during WWE productions. As the independent promotions gained more prominence, fans became more vocally critical of the narrative offered to them by WWE. For example, fans expressed disapproval of WWE’s top star John Cena by singing “John Cena sucks!” to the tune of his entrance music.

Slowly, WWE began to recognize this change in fan consumption as an exigence in need of remedy. Recently, Paul Levesque, part-time wrestler and current Executive Vice President of Talent, Live Events and Creative, admitted on an episode of the “Stone Cold Podcast” that this group is no longer a minority, but exhibits significant sway with the general wrestling audience.⁵⁶ Levesque’s comments illustrate that, as fans continued to exert pressure on WWE through participatory means, the company gradually began to recognize these pressures as an exigence “marked by urgency,” as Lloyd Bitzer describes.⁵⁷

3.3.2 WWE’s Response to the Exigence

WWE could have responded to fan disapproval in a variety of ways. It could have interpreted fan opposition to “sports entertainment” and preference for “professional wrestling” as a call to return to a prior mode of audience address. While a full return to kayfabe conventions was unlikely considering the knowledge of modern fans, WWE could have attempted to return to

⁵⁶ Levesque wrestles under the name “Triple H.” He was a major star during the bulk of the Entertainment Era. He also is Vince McMahon’s son-in-law, having married Stephanie McMahon.

⁵⁷ Lloyd Bitzer, “The Rhetorical Situation,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric 1* (1968), 4.

some of the trappings of sport it had left behind in shifting to the Entertainment Era. The company could also have simply tried to mimic the narrative style of indy-wrestling to appease fans. Indeed, WWE did begin to show some signs of including indy-wrestling narrative tactics by the end of the decade. The company hired a few indy-wrestlers like CM Punk and Bryan Danielson, who gained notoriety for their work in ROH. However, many fans felt like WWE never really committed to these figures or the differences in narrative present in the indy-wrestling promotions.

Ultimately, though, WWE co-opted the subculture by making fan criticism of its narrative product a part of the diegetic storyworld of wrestling itself. As if taking a cue from Hebdige, who warned that ruling ideologies and market factors work to co-opt and remove the authentic power from some sub-culturally relevant symbolic markers, WWE co-opted indy-wrestling's criticisms of its product by bringing them into the diegetic world of its dominant sports entertainment narrative.⁵⁸ As part of this effort, WWE shifted the way its narrative addressed its audience. So, where the shift from the Kayfabe Era to the Entertainment Era involved changing the conception of WWE's authorial audience from marks to smarts, this next shift, from Entertainment Era to Reality Era, continued that trajectory by addressing the narrative audience, too, as smarts. By actively including the creative process within the diegetic narrative, WWE hailed the narrative audience, those addressed in the moment by the diegetic narrators, as smart fans. In effect, the business of storytelling became the story. In the next section, I conduct an analysis of what many consider to be the pivotal moment when WWE entered the Reality Era, and what I consider its earliest representative text.

⁵⁸ Hebdige, *Subculture*, 133.

3.4 Representative Text: CM Punk’s “Pipe Bomb”

On June 27, 2011, WWE wrestler CM Punk dropped a “pipe bomb” on the wrestling genre when he cut a “worked shoot” interview on *Monday Night RAW* that ushered in the Reality Era in WWE.⁵⁹ The term “Reality Era” was first used to describe the current narrative product in WWE by Grantland wrestling journalist David Shoemaker in reference to the changes brought on by this angle.⁶⁰ CM Punk’s promo was influential because he voiced many criticisms commonly held by wrestling fans about WWE narrative creative direction. As a “worked shoot,” the promo was a pre-approved monologue mostly scripted by WWE Creative to blur the line between the narrative storyworld and the “real world.”⁶¹ Moreover, it was featured as a part of the narrative world of wrestling, delivered by a narrator character for the narrative audience. In this manner, Punk’s pipe bomb addressed the narrative audience as if they were “smarts,” which marked a major shift in WWE’s dominant narrative mode, and ushered in the Reality Era of professional wrestling.

In addition to highlighting the major narrative shift from the Entertainment Era to the Reality Era, the pipe-bomb promo also co-opted the rhetoric of the emergent indy-wrestling subculture. WWE did not simply present a watered down version of the indy-wrestling narrative to appease hardcore wrestling fans. Instead, the pipe bomb promo made the business of wrestling and the creation of wrestling narratives a central part of the narrative itself. In so doing, Punk’s promo hailed the narrative audience as well as the authorial audience as smarts, in on the fixed

⁵⁹ The promo became known as the “pipe bomb” after CM Punk later stated that in his hand the microphone becomes a pipe bomb on a later episode of *RAW*.

⁶⁰ David Shoemaker, “Pro Wrestling for Auteurs,” *Grantland*, May 23, 2012, <http://grantland.com/features/how-documentary-films-explain-wwe-reality-era-preview-weekend-limit-pay-per-view/>.

⁶¹ Colt Cabana and Phil Brooks, *Art of Wrestling 226*, podcast audio, CM Punk, MP3, 2:00:08, December 23, 2014. Upon leaving WWE in 2013, Punk expressed many of the same thoughts on his friend Colt Cabana’s podcast.

nature of professional wrestling. In this way, WWE adjusted its approach to narrative address to monetize and commodify fan discontent.

WWE pushed a feud between perennial star John Cena and former indy-wrestler CM Punk as the top storyline leading into the summer of 2011. The two were set to face one another for the WWE Heavyweight Title at the *Money in the Bank* pay-per-view. On an episode of *RAW* just weeks prior to their match, Punk attacked Cena during a match, then sat cross-legged on the entrance ramp and cut what would be known as the pipe bomb promo. Within the promo, Punk breaks kayfabe to the narrative audience and breaks many of the norms enforced by WWE. Punk criticized WWE for pushing certain stars over others and threatened to leave for rival indy-wrestling promotions. Punk uses these moments as textual “winks” at hardcore wrestling fans, who would likely catch his insider references. Punk’s promo further maintains a second persona of casual fans who would likely not get the subtext behind these cues but would still understand that Punk was criticizing WWE production.

By examining the pipe bomb promo, we can therefore gain significant insights into how authorship in narrative affects and reflects power between producer and consumer, and the function of personas therein. Moreover, by combining theories of audience from narrative and persona from rhetorical studies, we get a better idea of how Punk’s promo works to resituate the audience, and to set the stage for the unique style of narrative WWE employs in the Reality Era. Finally, by establishing that the promo situates the audience as judges of the narrative production process, I lay the groundwork for the third chapter, in which I argue that WWE’s efforts to co-opt the indy-wrestling narrative actually sowed the seeds for an increased level of fan influence with regard to the creative direction of wrestling narrative storylines.

3.4.1 *Authorship in the Pipe Bomb*

The pipe bomb promo is interesting, in part, because Punk's role as an authorial figure is protean. Throughout the promo he speaks from multiple perspectives and with multiple voices.⁶² On one level, Punk speaks as part of the indy-wrestling subculture. As a narrator, CM Punk used his subcultural capital accrued through years on the independent wrestling circuit to embody the common fan critiques of WWE's dominant narrative style in the form of a narrator character within that same diegetic storyworld. However, Punk also speaks as a voice of WWE, in that his promo was pre-approved by members of WWE Creative and served as a part of a storyline within the dominant sports entertainment narrative.⁶³

CM Punk, as a narrator, was a credible voice for the indy-wrestling subculture. As Sarah Thornton argues, subcultures place high emphasis on authenticity, "*not* just as a vague sensibility or aesthetic, but as a cultural value anchored in concrete, historical practices of production and consumption."⁶⁴ Punk easily met this standard. Before joining WWE in 2005, Punk gained a following among indy-wrestling fans for his work in Ring of Honor. Punk's work in ROH was well received by fans and wrestling journalists. His series with Samoa Joe in 2004 broke ROH records for DVD sales and received the promotion's first five-star rating from Dave Meltzer.⁶⁵ Punk won the ROH World Heavyweight Title during what ROH called "The Summer of Punk" in 2005. Punk left ROH for WWE's developmental territory Ohio Valley Wrestling (OVW) later

⁶² For a more thorough treatment of multiple voicedness in narrative, see: Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1975).

⁶³ Wade Keller, "How Scripted was Punk's Pipe Bomb Promo?," *Pro Wrestling Torch*, January 22, 2014, http://www.pwtorch.com/artman2/publish/Ask_the_Editor_18/article_75864.shtml#.V5T1I_krLIU.

⁶⁴ Thornton, *Club Cultures*, 5.

⁶⁵ See Note 53.

in the year and debuted on the main WWE roster in 2006. In many ways, Punk epitomized the differences in presentation between WWE and indy-wrestling narratives. He was smaller than most WWE wrestlers, was widely praised for his work rate in his matches, and was referred to on-air as an “internet darling” by WWE commentators upon arrival.⁶⁶ While Punk achieved some success in WWE in the following years, he was most often pushed at a level below that of the biggest stars, the frustration for which would become part of the pipe bomb storyline.

Not only did Punk’s background allow him to speak as an authentic member of the indy-wrestling subculture, his role as a narrator voice for the subculture was bolstered by the understanding that the speech was part of a worked-shoot. In the wake of CM Punk’s pipe bomb promo, the internet wrestling community was abuzz with speculation about how much of the promo was scripted by WWE (a work) and how much was a shoot. The criticisms Punk made about WWE during this promo were close enough to actual criticisms from those in the indy-wrestling subculture to seem like Punk could be voicing his actual opinions. For example, the final moments of the pipe bomb promo saw Punk begin a story about Vince McMahon’s hypocrisy only to have his microphone cut off mid-sentence. Cutting off the microphone made it appear as though Punk had crossed the line of what was acceptable to talk about on WWE programming when, in fact, the moment was pre-planned by Punk and McMahon.⁶⁷ As a result, the shoot catered to what Sharon Mazer describes as the wrestling fan’s interest in discerning what is a real (a shoot) from what is a part of the scripted storyline (a work).⁶⁸

So, Punk’s status within the indy-wrestling subculture combined with the “shoot” style of the promo to make Punk a fitting voice for frustrated fans. Indeed, within the storyline that

⁶⁶ CM Punk and Triple H made Punk’s status as an “internet darling” part of a feud later in 2011.

⁶⁷ See note 63.

⁶⁸ Sharon Mazer, *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 160.

followed the pipe bomb promo, Punk began referring to himself onscreen as the “voice of the voiceless.” This moniker illustrates the notion that Punk represented the previous third persona silenced by WWE’s sports entertainment narrative. The dominant narrative style of WWE addressed a second persona of casual fans while hardcore wrestling fans were excluded from the authorial audience. Now, Punk served as a narrator character who could give “voice” to the silenced persona of hardcore wrestling fans. In a follow up segment, Punk confronted Vince McMahon directly, demanding that McMahon apologize to him and the fans, saying, “You will apologize to me for them....They can’t stand up to you and they can’t let their voice be heard. I am CM Punk, and I am the voice of the voiceless.” Punk suggests that the frustrated fans needed a representative within the system to be able to voice their frustrations, denying the effect of participatory behaviors from members of the audience that likely led WWE to write this story into its narrative. This narrative move establishes Punk’s narrator character as the acceptable voice of frustration in lieu of actual participatory displays by the audience, thereby working to at once silence fans as it gives them a “representative voice” within the narrative.

While Punk spoke from a subject position that gave him purchase with the indy-wrestling subculture, his role as a narrator meant that he simultaneously spoke with the voice of WWE management from within the dominant sports entertainment narrative. Punk may have had some creative freedom in crafting the promo to include legitimate-sounding criticisms, but the major talking points were approved by Vince McMahon and Triple H. Further, the whole storyline about Punk being fed up with WWE to the point of quitting was completely fabricated at the time. Thus, Punk served as an “unreliable narrator” in Booth’s terms, as the views expressed by his character did not align with the view of the implied author.⁶⁹ Further, while the details of

⁶⁹ Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction*, 158-159.

Punk's critiques about WWE may have been believable to fans, the overall arc of the narrative served to use those views in service of the dominant narrative of WWE. Vince McMahon and the others criticized by Punk in the promo preapproved his criticisms and, as Wade Keller points out, "stayed far, far away from any number of hot-button issues."⁷⁰ The management of WWE approved criticisms that were unlikely to cause damage to the company's business interests. Further, as I detail later, WWE used those criticisms to increase sales. Therefore, Punk, while voicing legitimate criticism, simultaneously spoke as a vocal representative of WWE and their business interests.

3.4.2 Authorial Audience and the Fourth Persona

In addition to making Punk a voice for WWE, the pipe bomb promo also asserts WWE's authority as producer of narrative content. It does this by invoking the fourth persona. At one point in the promo, Punk looked directly at the camera and stated that he was "breaking the fourth wall." However, in the strictest sense, wrestling has never really had a fourth wall to break. Traditionally, breaking the fourth wall meant moving outside the space of the stage and acknowledging the existence of the viewing audience. Wrestlers, on the other hand, have always been aware of the audience and have explicitly addressed that audience in their performances. Therefore, Punk breaking the fourth wall is nothing new. More aptly, Punk is engaging in an address to a fourth persona by including a "textual wink" to a segment of the audience that is able to pick up on textual cues that other members of the audience would not be able to understand. Throughout the pipe bomb promo, Punk makes winking cues to an audience of hardcore and knowledgeable fans through the use of "insider" jargon and references to elements of wrestling outside the diegetic world of WWE's narrative and more associated with the indy-

⁷⁰ See note 63.

wrestling subculture. During the promo, Punk explicitly states, “I am the best *wrestler* in the world.” This phrase is seemingly innocuous to casual fans as it appears that Punk is merely saying that he is the top competitor, a claim not uncommon throughout wrestling history. However, for a hardcore wrestling fan, the phrase connotes a direct challenge to McMahon’s dominant sports entertainment narrative style. Remember that McMahon banned the terms “wrestling” and “wrestler” from all commentary and promos during the Entertainment Era in order to distance WWE from traditional professional wrestling. Instead, McMahon required all narrators to use the terms “sports entertainment” and “superstar.” In response, the indy-wrestling subculture reappropriated the original wrestling terminology to connote an alternative to the dominant WWE narrative style. Thus, for Punk to say that he is the “best wrestler” hails smart fans within the indy-wrestling subculture as clairvoyants who can identify with Punk as a narrator character.

Punk also provides textual winks to the fourth persona by referencing elements of the wrestling genre outside the bounds of the diegetic world of WWE narrative. Within the promo, Punk name-drops individuals associated with the indy-wrestling subculture and rival wrestling promotions, neither of which were usually allowed by WWE Creative.⁷¹ As previously mentioned, Punk looked directly into the camera and said, “Hey Colt Cabana, how you doing?” Colt Cabana is Punk’s best friend in the wrestling business.⁷² The two together held the ROH World Tag Team Titles twice. Further, Cabana is a main event caliber star in many independent promotions while relatively unknown among casual WWE fans. Again, hardcore wrestling fans

⁷¹ Again, this move serves to bolster the illusion that Punk was “shooting” on WWE, as detailed in the previous section.

⁷² Punk got Cabana a job with WWE. Unfortunately for the friends, WWE never pushed Cabana (who it called Scotty Goldman) as more than a jobber (someone who regularly loses to opponents) and Cabana left shortly after joining.

familiar with the indy-wrestling subculture would recognize the name Colt Cabana and the implication that Punk was referencing indy-wrestling competition while the casual audience would likely miss the weight of the subtext.⁷³ Therefore, while Punk called this moment “breaking the fourth wall,” he really provided a wink to the fourth persona.

Ultimately, these textual moves combine to include formerly excluded fans, effectively turning a group best understood as a third persona during the Entertainment Era into a fourth persona for the Reality Era. This allowed Punk to maintain something of his indy-wrestling ethos while simultaneously asserting WWE’s authority in the creation of wrestling narratives. This outcome is consistent with Rabinowitz’s observation that two types of authorial audiences, the gullible authorial audience and the discerning authorial audience, often coexist within a moment of narrative address.⁷⁴ Punk’s textual winks to hardcore wrestling fans allows these disgruntled fans to relish in their status as clairvoyants who are smarter than the average casual wrestling fan. Further, Punk serves as a cathartic release for fans in that he is able to voice their own frustrations from within the dominant system. However, for WWE and the casual fan, Punk serves as a safe mouthpiece for the criticisms because his remarks are subtextual, thus preserving the integrity of the second persona of casual fans.

3.4.3 Addressing the Narrative Audience as Smarts

As noted earlier, the pipe bomb promo marks a significant change in the way WWE addressed its narrative audience, ushering in the Reality Era. During the Kayfabe Era, WWE addressed both the authorial and narrative audiences as marks who were oblivious to the scripted

⁷³ Punk also explicitly references Paul Heyman, the founder of Extreme Championship Wrestling and beloved figure within the indy-wrestling subculture in a similar manner. Further, Punk references rival wrestling promotions Ring of Honor and New Japan Pro Wrestling by name. These references all work similarly to wink at a hardcore audience while keeping a casual audience ignorant of the subtext.

⁷⁴ Rabinowitz, “Betraying the Sender,” 203.

nature of professional wrestling. During the Entertainment Era, WWE altered its narrative to address the authorial audience as smarts who knew wrestling was scripted, but still addressed the narrative audience as marks. Now, in moving to the Reality Era, WWE again altered its narrative to address both the authorial *and* narrative audience as smarts. This narrative strategy allowed WWE to again reassert control over its narrative product as fans became increasingly participatory. WWE hails the narrative audience as smarts within the pipe bomb promo by foregrounding elements of production within the diegetic storyworld of the narrative, critiquing the creative direction of WWE and providing alternatives to the dominant WWE narrative.

The pipe bomb promo works to address the narrative audience as smarts because it is situated within the diegetic world and storyline of the narrative, told by a narrator character directly to the narrative audience. Punk begins the pipe bomb promo directly after attacking John Cena, his rival within the diegetic storyline feud he had been in for weeks. Punk sat cross-legged on the entrance ramp and initially addresses John Cena as a fellow narrator character, indicating that the speech fit within the diegetic storyworld of WWE. After establishing the promo as a part of the diegetic narrative, Punk then directly references the audience, hailing them into the subjective role of the narrative audience. This context is important because the pipe bomb promo differs from McMahon's address from the previous chapter. McMahon's address was set apart from the regular programming in an effort to show that the message was specifically for the authorial audience, whereas Punk's promo fits within the diegetic storyworld and is played out for the narrative audience. It is then the narrative audience that Punk addresses as smarts throughout the remainder of the promo.

Punk addresses the narrative audience as smarts by foregrounding the production of narrative texts in the story of the narrative itself. Punk directly criticized the creation process

behind the dominant WWE narrative and in so doing made the business of professional wrestling part of the narrative storyline in a way that had not been done before. Punk references the implied author role played by Vince McMahon in creating the narrative text of professional wrestling. Early in the promo, Punk claimed the only thing John Cena is better than him at is “kissing Vince McMahon’s ass.” This line breaks from the logical storyline presented to the narrative audience in that John Cena had been the most competitively successful wrestler in WWE for the past decade and for nearly all of that time his character was presented as an enemy of Vince McMahon. Thus, Punk’s statement does not cohere to the kayfabe logic presented to the narrative audience in the past. The remark only makes sense if the narrative audience understands that Punk is referencing McMahon’s role as author of the wrestling text. John Cena is only a star because Vince McMahon scripts him to be one. By referencing Vince McMahon’s role in authoring the wrestling narrative and not just as the owner of the company, Punk goes beyond previous diegetic depictions of the “Mr. McMahon” character. During the Entertainment Era, WWE depicted the Mr. McMahon character as an evil boss who would try to “screw” the top babyface stars. Now, in the Reality Era, WWE included McMahon’s role as implied author of the narrative within the narrative itself. Thus, “Mr. McMahon” as a narrator is now revealed to have an actual creative agenda that includes pushing babyface characters previously presumed to be his enemy within the storyworld of WWE. Punk, then, brings the process of production into the diegetic storyworld, hailing the narrative audience as smarts.

Similarly, Punk addresses the narrative audience as smarts by acknowledging that performance standards rather than competitive prowess dictates success within professional wrestling. Throughout the Entertainment Era, the narrators within WWE storyworld maintained a semblance of kayfabe to the narrative audience, in that the narrators ascribed their success in

the wrestling ring to their own competitive prowess. Even if the authorial audience knew the match results were scripted by writers and bookers, the narrative audience was presented a storyline in which the top stars were the toughest fighters.⁷⁵ In contrast, Punk's pipe bomb promo presented the narrative audience with a storyline in which entertainment value and work rate, not superior fighting, served as the markers of success in wrestling. Punk pointed to his own ability to entertain the crowd both in the ring and on the microphone as his evidence that he was the best wrestler in the world, attributes which have nothing to do with actually beating his opponents in competition. In a follow-up to this promo, Punk complained that Tyson Kidd, another wrestler he called a "workhorse," did not get a push in WWE. Comments like these indicate to the narrative audience that success in wrestling is not due to being the "toughest" competitor, but by convincing the authors who write the narrative of one's ability to entertain the fans. Thus, Punk hails the narrative audience as smarts who understand that wrestling is fixed.

Punk not only foregrounds production in the diegetic story, he also explicitly critiques the creative direction of WWE and provides alternatives to WWE's dominant style of narrative. During the pipe bomb promo, Punk criticized the creative stagnation of WWE's narrative by calling Vince McMahon a "millionaire who should be a billionaire...because he surrounds himself with glad-handed, nonsensical, douchebags...like John Laurinaitis."⁷⁶ Later, Punk criticizes McMahon for promoting part-time stars like The Rock over hard workers like himself. Eventually, Punk states that he will win the WWE Heavyweight Championship and may take it with him to Ring of Honor or New Japan Pro Wrestling (NJPW), rival wrestling promotions. In

⁷⁵ Granted, in some storylines, the apparently weaker fighter would win due to cheating or outside interference. However, these types of narrative arcs did not undermine the basic diegetic logic that being able to physically beat an opponent was the base criteria for success within the wrestling storyworld.

⁷⁶ At this point, John Laurinaitis worked purely backstage with no onscreen role. Shortly after, Laurinaitis took on a character somewhat similar to McMahon's heel authority figure. However, for the fans at this point, bringing up Laurinaitis only works if the narrative audience are smart fans with insider knowledge of the company.

all these examples, Punk points out to the narrative audience that WWE makes choices about the creative direction of its wrestling and who succeeds in the narrative. Further, these remarks show that the dominant WWE narrative is not the only, or the best, available narrative option for wrestling fans. While this may seem like a dangerous move on the part of WWE, Punk's promo remains a relatively safe move primarily because it remains within the confines of the narrative storyworld of WWE.

Again, while Punk's pipe bomb promo seems in opposition to the dominant narrative direction of WWE, it ultimately works in service of WWE by reasserting its own power over the narrative vis-à-vis the consumer. Punk's critique of WWE effectively works to assuage the criticisms of fans within the indy-wrestling subculture. Fans had been using participatory behavior to voice these criticisms in online forums, through chants during live events, and in turning to alternative wrestling promotions. Now, Punk voiced many of those criticisms from within the WWE narrative. Punk's promo negated the need for fans to participate in criticizing WWE during live events because he, as a narrator, was doing it for them. Further, because Punk was a part of the narrative crafted by the implied author of WWE Creative, fans were assured that WWE was aware of these complaints about its narrative direction. Additionally, because WWE narrative now included this alternative perspective, hardcore wrestling fans were hailed (as the fourth persona) by a small part of the dominant narrative, which served to engage this audience who previously sought alternative narratives. Indeed, Punk's critique did more to empower WWE by monetizing and commodifying the criticisms of the actual audience.

3.4.4 Co-opting the Indy-Wrestling Subculture

WWE used Punk's pipe bomb promo to reassert its power within the dynamic between consumer and producer by successfully co-opting the discourse of the indy-wrestling subculture.

Hebdige warned that ruling ideologies and market factors work to co-opt and remove the authentic power from some sub-culturally relevant symbolic markers.⁷⁷ WWE, facing a growing subculture within wrestling fandom, altered its narrative address in order to co-opt and remove power from this subculture. Interestingly, WWE did not simply mimic the narrative style of the indy-wrestling promotion. Instead, WWE took the criticisms of its own narrative made by those in the indy-wrestling subculture and foregrounded them within its dominant narrative. As I have shown in previous sections, this move hailed a new type of smart narrative audience. Simultaneously, it served WWE's purpose in commodifying the criticisms of fans within the indy-wrestling subculture.

The pipe bomb promo served to co-opt the indy-wrestling subculture by channeling fans' discontent with the WWE narrative into consumption behaviors that benefitted WWE. Punk's pipe bomb ultimately concerned consumption and spending as much as it did labor and production. During the promo, Punk criticized fans for buying products WWE sold without his name on them. In so doing, Punk seemingly discouraged blind consumption by the fans. However, Punk's argument actually served to encourage more consumption as an exercise in expression. Punk's major complaint was that he deserved to be marketed more by WWE due to his high quality of work. Under this line of reasoning, fans who wanted to support Punk and wrestlers like him would do so by purchasing merchandise featuring those wrestlers. Moreover, the move worked with regard to Punk's merchandise sales. Punk's merchandise sales rose dramatically in the aftermath of the pipe bomb promo. For a period, he even managed to outsell John Cena.⁷⁸ The pipe bomb promo positioned consumption and spending as the primary means

⁷⁷ Hebdige, *Subculture*, 133.

⁷⁸ Kaleb Kelchner, "CM Punk Becomes #1 in Merchandise, Set to Receive Major Push," *Bleacher Report*, October 7, 2011, <http://bleacherreport.com/articles/883335-this-week-in-wwe-news-raw-walkout-cm-punks-upcoming-push-and-more/entry/137537-wwe-news-cm-punk-becomes-1-in-merchandise-set-to-receive-major-push>.

of expression for fans who desire a change in the wrestling product. Within the storyline, the way to show the implied authors of WWE Creative they were “wrong” was to buy more merchandise of the wrestler who criticized them. Thus, WWE used Punk’s promo to more deeply ingrain the importance of consumption practices with fans and monetize fan discontent.

Additionally, in foregrounding monetary success and promotion, Punk adopted the consumption goals of the dominant sports entertainment world over the indy-wrestling subculture’s focus on getting over. Within the indy-wrestling subculture, getting over with fans (i.e. gaining the respect and support of fans) became the goal of wrestling rather than WWE’s focus on drawing money. This distinction is important because it positioned fans in a more powerful position because their opinion of the narrative was the indicator of success. However, in the pipe bomb promo, Punk reasserted the importance of drawing money and connected it to the language of the indy-wrestling subculture. Within the promo, Punk drew attention to the power of marketing and promotion to make stars in WWE. His chief complaints concerned the business side of wrestling, that he was not on commemorative programs or television shows. Both in and out of the narrative, Punk puts major emphasis on the financial success and drawing power as an indicator of worth in wrestling. Punk’s pipe bomb positioned his narrator character as interested more in drawing money than getting over with fans. He also attacks McMahon by arguing that McMahon should be making more money than he does currently, again centering the ability to draw money as the key marker of success in the wrestling business.

WWE successfully co-opted the discourse of the indy-wrestling subculture and monetized fan criticism all while still crafting its narrative for a casual audience. As noted, WWE used Punk to hail the hardcore fans through textual winks as the fourth persona. This still maintained the primary authorial audience of “dupes” as casual fans for whom the narrative is

truly crafted. WWE used Punk to give hardcore fans a token representation while maintaining many of the narrative practices fans were so critical of in the first place. In the direct aftermath of the Punk versus Cena storyline, Punk emerged as WWE Heavyweight Champion, overcoming Cena at *Money in the Bank*. However, during Punk's reign, WWE rarely booked the title matches as the main events of its pay-per-view cards, instead giving top billing to whatever match John Cena was in. WWE used Punk to placate the "vocal minority" of fans while still crafting the narrative primarily for casual fans. WWE used Punk as a voice to the criticisms of the company's creative direction, but still went ahead with those same creative decisions. Further, in January of 2013, Punk lost the title to The Rock, who largely embodied the labor criticism in Punk's pipe bomb. Ultimately, the Punk storyline did little to hinder the push of wrestlers that fit more within the dominant narrative style like Cena and The Rock.

In the wake of the pipe bomb promo, WWE has used more wrestlers from the independent circuit in its programming, but even then these performers largely get subsumed into the dominant narrative style of sports entertainment. Along with CM Punk, former independent stars Daniel Bryan, Seth Rollins, and Dean Ambrose won the WWE World Heavyweight Title. Other wrestlers who gained a following on the independent scene who WWE hired include Cesaro, Kevin Owens, Sami Zayn, Samoa Joe, and A.J. Styles. All these wrestlers had successful careers outside WWE and represent a shift in the dominant narrative strategy used by WWE. Further, WWE has also begun to look to stars from foreign promotions like Finn Bálor and Shinsuke Nakamura, who were considered smaller, high-work rate stars in Japan. Wrestling journalist Bryan Alvarez argues that WWE would not have considered many of the wrestlers it is signing a mere five years ago.⁷⁹ Still, WWE requires these performers to learn to work the

⁷⁹ Bryan Alvarez, *Figure Four Weekly*, February 15, 2016.

“WWE style” before they are given a push.⁸⁰ WWE re-trains the wrestlers to mimic the dominant style and “unlearn bad habits” from indy-wrestling promotions. Further, these wrestlers are placed within a narrative that downplays the wrestling aspect of the genre in favor of the entertainment element. Thus, WWE uses these performers to draw in fans of indy-wrestling without committing to the indy-wrestling style of narrative.

3.4.5 Potential for Fan Creative Authority in the Reality Era

While the pipe bomb promo largely worked to reassert WWE’s creative authority within the power dynamic between producer and consumer, WWE also planted the seeds for giving the audience more creative authority in the co-creation of future narratives. In foregrounding the production of wrestling narratives within the diegetic world of the narrative itself, WWE, perhaps unintentionally, hailed fans into a relatively more powerful position as arbiters of quality and creative direction. Thus, the pipe bomb promo worked to shift the narrative audience from a passive spectator audience to Aristotle’s active “judge who renders a decision.”⁸¹ Further, Punk positioned the audience as a character in the narrative with the potential to exercise agency over the creative direction of the narrative.

Punk’s pipe bomb promo sowed the seeds for eventual fan empowerment by hailing the audience as judges of creative direction in the production of wrestling narrative content. By acknowledging the criticisms of WWE’s narrative direction and pointing to the indy-wrestling narrative as an alternative, WWE positioned the fans as knowledgeable and able to discern creative choices like what wrestlers deserve to be pushed. During the pipe bomb promo, Punk foregrounded the production process behind the creation of wrestling narratives. Further, he

⁸⁰ Bryan Alvarez, *Figure Four Weekly*, January 23, 2015.

⁸¹ See note 54.

explicitly criticized the authors of WWE's narrative and the choices they have historically made in the creation of that narrative. This move places the audience in judgment of Punk's criticisms. Either the audience agrees with Punk's assertions that the narrative direction of the company is problematic or disagrees and aligns with the choices made by the implied authors of WWE Creative. Thus, the object of fans' cheers and boos is the narrative itself and not the heroes or villains within that narrative. This move invites fans to actively participate in the critique of its narrative decision making and direction as a part of the diegetic story. This invitation, in turn, invites the narrative audience to assert creative authority, as they now sit in judgment of the creative decisions of WWE. By explicitly stating that authors of wrestling narratives make decisions based on a criteria of talent, both "in the ring" and "on the mic," WWE arms the narrative audience with the basis to form their own judgments on narrative direction and participate in the moment as arbiters and potential co-creators of the narrative direction unfolding in front of them.

Finally, Punk's pipe bomb promo positioned the audience as a character within the narrative. During the promo, Punk directly addressed fans as part of the problems inherent with WWE because they were the ones "sipping on those collector cups" and "buying those programs that my face isn't on the cover of." Punk later points out that after he is gone the fans will keep on pouring money into WWE and that he is just a "spoke on the wheel" that would keep turning without him. Punk focused his complaints about the fans on their support of the dominant wrestling style forwarded by WWE. Thus, Punk pointed out how the participatory nature of the fans' consumption behaviors played a role in the creative direction the implied authors of WWE Creative decide to take. Punk intimates that if fans altered their consumption habits, WWE would alter the narrative choices it makes. Admittedly, this part of the promo led to the increase

in consumption and spending, which was likely WWE's goal. However, Punk's promo still pointed to the potential for other forms of participatory expression.

The pipe bomb promo and later Reality Era narratives hailed fans as agents within the story with potential agency in influencing the creative direction of WWE's narrative product in ways other than simple consumption behaviors. Later during his feud with Punk, John Cena cut a promo explicitly arguing that the fans are responsible for giving wrestlers opportunities. Cena told Punk that he did not get opportunities in the past because the fans did not get behind him in masse until the pipe bomb promo. Cena stated that, "if you win the fans over, you are successful," indicating that pleasing the fans was an important function in getting pushed by WWE Creative. Thus, WWE provided an invitation to fans to exercise their voice in the creative direction of wrestling narrative through participatory behavior. By hailing the narrative audience as active co-producers of wrestling's narrative direction, WWE, offers an invitation for the actual fans to exercise greater creative authority in the production of the narrative itself.

3.5 The Shift to the Reality Era

Punk's pipe bomb promo proved to be a pivotal moment in WWE narrative address, prompting the move into the Reality Era from the previous Entertainment Era. Punk's promo shifted the subject position of the narrative audience by addressing them as smarts. In the Entertainment Era, WWE admitted to the authorial audience that the product was scripted and not legitimately contested bouts. The Reality Era further broke down the logic of kayfabe for the narrative audience. We can see this shift by comparing the role of authorship and audience in the two eras and by focusing on how centering the production process involved in creating a wrestling narrative within that same narrative storyline altered the power dynamic between WWE and its fans.

This case study illustrates the effectiveness of combining rhetorical theories of persona with narrative theories of author and audience. During the Entertainment Era, WWE crafted its sports entertainment narrative primarily for casual fans, rendering hardcore wrestling fans as the third persona excluded from the authorial audience. These fans used participatory behaviors to pressure WWE to change. Thus, the actual audience provided an exigence for WWE to shift to the Reality Era.⁸² In response, WWE placed Punk (in the role of narrator) in the position of the “voice of the voiceless” as a means to manage the vocal complaints about its product. Further, WWE used Punk’s promo to provide “textual winks” at hardcore wrestling fans. This hailed these fans into the fourth persona while maintaining a second persona of casual fans. Thus, WWE was able to largely persist in the dominant narrative strategies of sports entertainment despite criticisms from the indy-wrestling subculture. In fact, by using Punk as a mouthpiece for these criticisms, WWE effectively co-opted this subcultural discourse and commodified fan criticism.

The Reality Era also switched WWE’s narrative to address the narrative audience as smarts. As shown in the analysis above, many of Punk’s remarks in his promo did not logically cohere under the narrative storyline presented to fans on WWE programming if the narrative audience were marks who thought the matches were legitimately contested. Only with insider knowledge and the understanding that wrestling is fixed could the storyline be fully understood. This is a departure from the previous era’s storytelling. Despite WWE acknowledging in the Entertainment Era that fans were not marks, the narrators (the wrestlers and announcers in the moment) spoke and acted as if the action were real, just as characters in a fiction television show typically do. However, in the Reality Era, the narrators presented the diegetic events within the storyline as elements of a fictional creative process. This would be akin to a sitcom character

⁸² Bitzer, “Rhetorical Situation,” 4.

being upset at the events in her life because the writers were against the character. Thus WWE made production of narrative the story of the wrestling.

While the production process of wrestling had entered the storylines in the Entertainment Era, the Reality Era did so in a way that shifted the focus of that creative process. During the Entertainment Era, McMahon played a heel character on air who was an exaggerated version of his off-screen role as the owner of WWE. In playing the “boss” on air, McMahon brought the production process into WWE storylines. The “Mr. McMahon” character played favorites (supporting the heel wrestlers) and attempted to keep down the heroes within the narrative. McMahon’s feud with “Stone Cold” Steve Austin centered on McMahon’s attempts to control his product by keeping the World Title off Austin. However, the storyline maintained an air of kayfabe in that Austin foiled McMahon’s plans repeatedly because he was the “toughest SOB” in the company. Within the storyline presented to the narrative audience, Austin overcame the management because he was a superior competitor to any foes McMahon could throw his way. Further, McMahon’s hatred of Austin stemmed from thinking he was a business liability for WWE due to his roughneck character. Here, the storyline differed from reality, as Austin was the most profitable wrestler in the company and McMahon pushed Austin as the top star in reality.

The production process in the Reality Era storylines helped earn this period its name. These depictions mirrored reality to a greater degree. Rather than just presenting McMahon as the boss of the company, this era placed a focus on the creative decisions McMahon and WWE Creative made for the characters themselves. Further, the marketing of wrestlers is directly tied to in-ring performance in the Reality Era. Whereas Austin’s success was tied to his kayfabe ability to “stomp a mudhole” in his opponent, Punk openly admits to the narrative audience that winners and losers are actually creative decisions not tied to athletic ability. Punk also directly

places the blame for his own lack of success in the ring on the dominant narrative direction of WWE.

The shift from the Entertainment Era to the Reality Era again renegotiated the power dynamic between producer and consumer in the business of professional wrestling. By altering its address to the narrative audience, WWE reasserted its position of power vis-à-vis the consumer. WWE managed to co-opt the discourse of the emergent indy-wrestling subculture. By engaging the narrative audience as smarts, it was able to center the creative process in the narrative and assuage criticisms regarding the narrative direction of the company. Further, WWE successfully positioned consumption as a means of fan expression. Within this process of renegotiation, WWE, perhaps unintentionally, positioned the fans in a position of judges who are capable of exerting pressure on the direction of narrative production. In the coming years, WWE fans accepted the invitation to participate in the creative process to a greater degree than ever before. In acknowledging the creative authority fans had in influencing creative choices, WWE opened the doors for fans to attempt to change the flow of storylines.

The next chapter deals with the aftermath of the switch to the Reality Era. If Punk's pipe bomb ushered in the Reality Era, Daniel Bryan's rise to the main event of *WrestleMania XXX* epitomizes the era in that the audience takes up WWE's unintentional invitation to exercise agency as co-creators of the narrative. In this storyline, the power dynamic between producer and consumer in professional wrestling is truly contested on screen.

4 CHAPTER THREE: FRAGMENTED NARRATIVE IN THE REALITY ERA

On April 6, 2014 in New Orleans, an unlikely champion found himself standing triumphant amid over 75,000 fans chanting in unison, "Yes! Yes! Yes!" at WWE's biggest event of the year—*WrestleMania XXX*. This figure, named Daniel Bryan, owed his rise, in large measure, to the efforts of his fan base. Through a series of interventions these fans compelled

WWE to alter its planned narrative, in which Bryan occupied a middling position, and to instead make him its top star. In this chapter, I examine the role of narrative address in the events leading up to this moment to argue that WWE's earlier efforts to constrain fan participation by addressing the narrative audience as smart actually invited an unprecedented level of fan participation, thereby blurring the lines between consumer and producer.

The text chosen for this examination is the rise of Daniel Bryan to the top spot in the company at *WrestleMania XXX*. The storyline of Bryan's journey to the biggest wrestling card on its thirtieth anniversary serves as an ideal text because it exemplifies the Reality Era's unique style of narrative audience address. Further, this storyline realizes the potential of the audience to embrace what Aristotle characterized as the role of the "judge who renders a decision,"¹ as noted in the previous chapter. By making the creation of wrestling narratives part of the storylines themselves, WWE put its own creative choices and narrative direction on trial for the approval of the audience. WWE effectively positioned the audience as arbiters of quality narrative production and invited them to exercise agency in the production process, a relatively more powerful subject position. In this story, the actual audience of fans exerted unprecedented influence over the creative decision making process, blurring the distinction between consumer and producer. In short, the fans exercised creative authority in helping to put Bryan in the top spot at the show despite WWE as producers not initially wanting to go that route in the narrative. In so doing, the fans blurred the line between consumer and producer.

Where the previous two chapters focused primarily on single texts representing pivotal moments in which WWE moved to a new era of narrative audience address, this chapter examines a longer, multi-text story arc during the Reality Era that developed over several

¹ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts, accessed July 20, 2016, <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/rhetoric.2.ii.html>, book 1 part 3.

months. As such, this chapter represents an important extension of my argument that structural narratology is an important but too often neglected framework for examining power dynamics at work in mass mediated texts. It does this in two distinct but related ways.

First, where the previous two chapters provided a close reading of single texts, adhering to techniques of close reading advocated by Michael Leff,² the text for this chapter is assembled from fragments of discourse that appeared over several months. In this way, it uses techniques of textual assemblage advocated by Michael Calvin McGee.³ By extending the application of structural narratology to a case in which the text is composed of multiple fragments of rhetorical address, I demonstrate that structural narratology does not presume the close reading of single, representative texts. Rather, structural narratology can function as a method for assembling a text from fragments of discourse. Through this demonstration, I explicitly extend the potential of structural narratology as a method for critical rhetoric by connecting it to larger questions about what constitutes a rhetorical text.

Second, the participatory reaction of fans during the Daniel Bryan storyline shows the power of rhetorically constituting groups of individuals into a defined “people.”⁴ As with the pipe bomb promo from the beginning of the Reality Era, WWE attempted to capitalize on fan support for Daniel Bryan by developing a story about an indy-wrestler struggling against the producers of wrestling narrative (i.e. WWE Creative). In the Daniel Bryan storyline, however, the narrators hail the narrative audience as arbiters of content and characters within the story capable of agency in influencing the narrative product. By constituting a group identity in the

² Michael Leff and Andrew Sachs, “Words the Most Like Things: Iconicity and the Rhetorical Text,” *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 54 (1990), 252-273.

³ Michael Calvin McGee, “Text, Context, and the Fragmentation of Contemporary Culture,” *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 54 (1990), 274-289.

⁴ Michael C. McGee, “In Search of the People: A Rhetorical Alternative,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 61 (1975), 240.

“Yes! Movement,” WWE defined the audience in opposition to the implied authors of WWE. Further, the shared identity of the “Yes! Movement” managed to bring together casual and hardcore wrestling fans into a united front against the creative direction WWE planned to take. In the end, WWE acquiesced to the fan pressure. And while this case study is limited in extrapolating to broader politically based social movements and constitutive rhetoric, the role of narrative in defining a group of people into a shared identity (even one rooted in consumerism and inauthenticity) shows the usefulness of such narrative methodology for critical rhetoric’s role in the formation of “peoples.”

In the pages that follow, I demonstrate the rhetorical power of narrative address by examining how the Daniel Bryan storyline led to a greater contestation of creative authority between consumers and producers of professional wrestling. In order to do so, I will first review how WWE moved from the Kayfabe Era, to the Entertainment Era, and finally to the Reality Era. In that review, I highlight how changes in WWE’s address to authorial and narrative audiences allowed it to reclaim a measure of control over the narrative direction of wrestling, and to capitalize on changing fan participatory behaviors. Next, I review the literature concerning the role of the text in rhetorical criticism to show rhetorical narratology’s usefulness for analyzing a story comprised of textual fragments. I then analyze the Daniel Bryan storyline from this perspective, showing how it exemplifies the Reality Era style of narrative audience address. From my analysis, I discuss implications for critical rhetoric’s conceptions of authorship, the discursive formation of group identity, resistance to co-optation by a dominant discourse, and the co-production of media narrative by consumers and producers. I end with a look at the lasting ramifications of the Daniel Bryan storyline for narrative, critical rhetoric, and professional wrestling.

4.1 Entering the Reality Era

The previous two chapters highlighted pivotal moments of change from one era of narrative storytelling in WWE wrestling to the next. For the majority of wrestling's history, the business operated under a logic of kayfabe. During the Kayfabe Era, WWE, like all wrestling promotions of the age, crafted its narrative for an audience of marks. The implied authors of WWE crafted narratives to maintain the illusion of legitimacy. WWE closely controlled "insider" information and access to knowledge about the behind-the-scenes creation of wrestling, keeping audiences well away from the production process. Further, by denying the role authors played in creating the narratives, WWE largely directed fan emotional reaction at the wrestlers and not the authors of the narrative. The kayfabe culture reigned in wrestling until the mid-1990s, when fan access to insider information made keeping the secrets of the industry untenable. Fans, armed with a greater understanding of the production process behind professional wrestling, became increasingly skeptical and WWE business saw a sharp decline.

In response to the more knowledgeable fan, Vince McMahon publicly moved the company from the Kayfabe Era to the Entertainment Era by openly admitting the fixed nature of the product, thus shifting the address of the authorial audience (i.e. the audience for whom the implied author crafts the narrative) from marks, who believed the action was legitimately contested, to smarts who were "in on" the fixed nature of professional wrestling. Admitting the scripted nature of wrestling allowed WWE to craft more spectacular narratives while simultaneously flattering the sophistication of its audience. While WWE began crafting its narratives for an authorial audience of smarts, it maintained its address to the narrative audience (i.e. the audience addressed by the narrators from within the diegetic storyworld) of marks. WWE moved from imitation of sports programming to an entertainment model based on other

media genres like sitcoms and soap operas. In so doing, WWE reasserted its control over the narrative product of professional wrestling. Further, the move to the Entertainment Era proved financially successful for WWE.

The second chapter showed how CM Punk's "pipe bomb" promo moved WWE from the Entertainment Era to the Reality Era by self-reflexively addressing the narrative audience as "smart" fans. During the latter stages of the Entertainment Era, WWE focused on a casual fan audience, and alienated a sub-fandom of hardcore wrestling fans. In response, these fans sought an alternative wrestling narrative style from an emergent "indy-wrestling" subculture. Again, in response to the changing fan participatory behavior, WWE shifted its narrative address, this time by altering its address to the narrative audience. The Reality Era centered the production process behind wrestling narratives within those same narratives. Thus, the business of wrestling became the story. In making the shift to the Reality Era, WWE successfully co-opted and commodified a burgeoning sub-fandom within wrestling. However, in highlighting the production process within the narrative storyworld of wrestling, WWE, perhaps inadvertently, opened the doors for the narrative audience to take a more active role in judging the creative direction of the narrative product and pressuring the producers of that content to alter course.

4.2 The Role of the Text in Rhetorical Criticism

Rhetorical scholars have debated the role of text in criticism for decades. One side of the debate over the role of the text in rhetorical criticism centered the text as the focal point of criticism. Michael Leff forwarded a model of rhetorical scholarship based on "close textual analysis." Leff argued that a "preoccupation with abstract theories and methods" led rhetorical

critics to disengage with careful interpretation of texts as sites of rhetorical action.⁵ Therefore, Leff advocated closely “reading and rereading of the text” as opposed to a reliance on formulaic methods based on Aristotelian theory, Burkeian dramatism, or any other such rhetorical methodology.⁶ Thus, Leff advocated an “emic” approach to rhetorical criticism that privileged the text as a particular object of study, that in turn dictates the theory the critic should apply.⁷ Leff spurred on a line of criticism based on his idea of close reading.⁸ These scholars centered the text within their criticisms to come to vastly different conclusions about a wide range of texts. The first two chapters of this dissertation could be said to follow Leff’s lead in closely reading a particular text. That is, both chapters focus on singular pivotal moments wherein WWE altered the narrative address to its audience. Therein, I argued that the application of a methodology rooted in rhetorical narratology provides insight into how these texts renegotiated the power dynamic between producer and consumer, thus exhibiting narrative’s usefulness in closely analyzing texts.

In opposition to close textual analysis, Michael Calvin McGee argued that there is no such thing as a discrete text. McGee argued, “critical rhetoric does not *begin* with a finished text in need of interpretation; rather, texts are understood to be larger than the apparently finished

⁵ Michael Leff, “Interpretation and the Art of the Rhetorical Critic,” *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 44 (1980), 338.

⁶ Michael Leff, “Textual Criticism: The Legacy of G.P. Mohrmann,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 72 (1986), 380.

⁷ Leff, “Interpretation,” 348.

⁸ See for example: Edwin Black, “Gettysburg and Silence,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 80 (1994), 21-36; Michael Leff, “Dimensions of Temporality in Lincoln’s Second Inaugural,” *Communication Reports* 1 (1988), 26-31; Michael Leff and Andrew Sachs, “Words the most like Things: Iconicity and the Rhetorical Text,” *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 54 (1990), 252-273; Stephen Lucas, “The Stylistic Artistry of the Declaration of Independence,” in *Readings in Rhetorical Criticism, Fourth Edition*, ed. Carl R. Burghardt (State College, PA: Strata Publishing, 2010), 205-220; Richard Olsen, “Fifty-Eight American Dreams: The NBA Draft as Mediated Ritual,” in *Case Studies in Sport Communication*, eds. Robert S. Brown and Daniel J. O’Rourke III (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 171.

discourse that presents itself as transparent.”⁹ McGee further clarifies that supposedly finished and discrete “texts” are part of an arrangement of fragments “that includes all facts, events texts, and stylized expressions deemed useful in explaining its influence and exposing its meaning.”¹⁰ Thus, texts are not closed pieces of discourse, but sit in relation to their sources, culture, and later influence. Further, McGee argues that as communication becomes more fragmented in our modern culture, consumers no longer approach full texts but only “discursive fragments of context.”¹¹ As a result, McGee claims that consumers and producers switch roles, as producers provide audiences with fragments that “cue *them* to produce a finished discourse in their minds. In short, *text construction is now something done more by the consumers than by the producers of discourse.*”¹² Criticism following McGee’s model pays less attention to any single text but pulls together multiple “fragments” of texts in the service of exposing how rhetoric influences power on a broader scale. The current chapter follows more in the vein of McGee by pulling together fragments of discourse spanning a larger amount of time to create a “text” for criticism. Thus, this analysis demonstrates the usefulness of structural narratology as a framework for reconstructing the “text” from fragments.

Rhetorical narratology, as a method, proves useful for both Leff’s and McGee’s models of rhetorical criticism largely due to its nuanced conception of audience. As pointed out in the introduction, Celeste Condit, in her response to the Leff/McGee debate, argues that both scholars went to their respective extremes to deal with the concept of the audience.¹³ She claims that Leff

⁹ McGee, “Fragmentation,” 279.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 287.

¹² *Ibid.*, 288 (emphasis in original).

¹³ Celeste Condit, “Rhetorical Criticism and Audiences: The Extremes of McGee and Leff,” *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 54 (1990), 333.

responded to pressure from “audience studies” by not engaging with the actual audience but instead examining “the responses that were ‘invited’ by a text.”¹⁴ Condit argues that McGee goes to the other extreme abandoning the text in favor of the audience, which she claims overplays the power of the audience.¹⁵ Condit cautions that creative decoding is not the same as textual construction.¹⁶ Further, Condit warns that both Leff’s and McGee’s treatment of audiences risks falling into “chasms” of being either falsely universal or hopelessly individual. Leff, she argues, falls into the first void by assuming “invitations” in the text are universal despite the specificity of multiple audiences. McGee, on the other hand, risks the other void, becoming hopelessly individual by reading audiences as his texts, thereby rendering rhetoric formless. Condit finally argues that both ultimately fail “because rhetoric is neither individual nor universal, but collective.”¹⁷ Rhetorical narratology’s typology of audience provides a method for avoiding the chasms into which Condit argues both Leff and McGee fall.

The first two chapters provided close readings of singular texts, identifying “invitations” from the producers of wrestling narratives to their audience. But, importantly, the analyses used the tripartite understanding of author and audience to complicate the notion of these invitations, noting what invitations were made by which type of author (actual, implied, or narrator) to which type of audience (actual, authorial, or narrative). Further, this understanding of audience provided the language for assessing the actual audience’s participatory behavior as an exigence

¹⁴ Ibid., 333-334.

¹⁵ Ibid., 339-340.

¹⁶ Ibid.; Condit’s remarks here address the debate over the ability and limits of audiences to read multiple meanings from texts. For a fuller understanding of this debate, see: Leah Ceccarelli, “Polysemy: Multiple Meanings in Rhetorical Criticism,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 84 (1998), 395-415; Celeste Condit, “The Rhetorical Limits of Polysemy,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 6 (1989), 103-122.

¹⁷ Ibid.

for change. By combining narratological theories of audience with rhetorical theories of personae, the previous chapter also avoided characterizing the invitations of WWE Creative as universal to all audiences, instead showing how WWE embedded textual cues to provide for a polysemic text.

The current chapter, in turn, uses rhetorical narratology's typology of audience as a guide in piecing together the fragments of discourse to create a "critical text." By focusing on the narrative address of the audience, and the response of the narrative audience to that address, I hope to avoid McGee's chasm of over-individualizing audiences. Further, this chapter takes Condit's suggestion that rhetoric is "collective" by focusing on the ability of audience address to discursively construct a collective subjectivity. Barbara Biesecker argues that critical rhetoric formulates the audience as a part of a complex process of signification in which rhetor, audience and text all play a role in the construction of a discursive formation.¹⁸ Thus, this chapter shows how authors (both implied and narrator) invite active responses from the audience (both implied and narrative) through the fragmented narrative address, but also how a collective subject can resist the invitations and exercise agency as a "people" to influence change in the production of narrative texts. I now turn to the case study of Daniel Bryan's rise to *WrestleMania* to show narratology's utility for analyzing a fragmented text.

4.3 Daniel Bryan and the "Yes! Movement"

The text for this chapter includes a collection of fragmented narratives involving Daniel Bryan's ascent to the main event of *WrestleMania XXX*. These fragments mostly occurred during 2013 and early 2014, but also extend back as far as 2001 and as far forward as 2016. In short, the storyline features an unlikely hero in Daniel Bryan, an indy-wrestler who did not fit the aesthetic

¹⁸ Barbara Biesecker, "Rethinking the Rhetorical Situation from a Thematic of Différance," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 22 (1989), 122-123.

of superstars WWE typically pushed. After years making a name on the indy-wrestling circuit, Bryan joined WWE only to receive marginal attention from WWE Creative. However, fans rallied behind Bryan due to his work rate and because his “Yes!” chant caught on with them. In response, WWE attempted to capitalize on Bryan’s increasing popularity by crafting a story in which he feuded with Triple H and Stephanie McMahon (known as “The Authority”) over whether Bryan was worthy to be the face of WWE. Eventually, WWE attempted to shuffle Bryan back out of the main event picture, but fans rejected this move, engaging in vocal and participatory behaviors to exert pressure on WWE to put Bryan into the main event of *WrestleMania*. WWE acquiesced to fan desire and altered its planned narrative, giving the fans a voice in the narrative direction of wrestling.

The Daniel Bryan storyline provides implications for narrative address and the discursive constitution of group subjectivity with regard to the co-production of media narrative and the power relations therein. In order to show this significance, I will first show that the storyline epitomizes the Reality Era style narrative, addressing both the authorial and narrative audiences as smarts. By doing this, WWE provides an invitation to the narrative audience to become active judges of the creative direction of the narrative. Next, I will show how the portrayal of Daniel Bryan and The Authority as narrators provides implications for authorship in empowering fans to take participatory action to influence the production process. Having shown how the narrative offered a particular invitation to the narrative audience, I argue this storyline shows how a narrative text can discursively constitute a “movement” of fans who are capable of exercising agency over the creative process. Next, I argue the Daniel Bryan storyline is notable because WWE again attempted to co-opt and commodify fan pressure, but in this case the fans’ participatory and disruptive behaviors showed the limits of WWE’s co-optation by finding ways

to pressure WWE other than through consumption. The fans exerted unprecedented influence over the narrative of the Daniel Bryan storyline, effectively blurring the distinction between producer and consumer. Finally, the Daniel Bryan storyline had lasting ramifications for the narrative construction of audience and the power dynamic between producer and consumer. With a newly empowered audience engaging in a co-production of narrative, the producers of WWE now struggle to navigate how much control to give the fans, when to acquiesce to their desires and when to stay the course. Further, the battle over creative control begun in the Daniel Bryan storyline may have prompted WWE to pull back on Reality Era audience construction.

4.3.1 Foregrounding Production for an Audience of Smarts

Daniel Bryan's storyline exemplifies the Reality Era of narrative audience address. The Reality Era is defined by an address to both an authorial audience and a narrative audience of "smarts." Like during the Entertainment Era, the implied author of WWE Creative addressed the authorial audience as smart fans in on the scripted nature of wrestling. From his first moments in WWE, Daniel Bryan's story was addressed to a smart authorial audience. WWE signed Bryan in 2009 along with a group of other independent wrestlers to launch a new program called *NXT*, a reality-television based show in which wrestlers would compete to become WWE Superstars. This show candidly described the training process behind the staged production of wrestling, and openly admitted that the contestants were engaging in scripted activities. The "rookies" as WWE called them were paired with established WWE "Superstars" as mentors to teach them how to perform in WWE. Upon his elimination from the show, Bryan addressed a smart narrative audience, saying, "Daniel Bryan never wrestled on the independent circuit...Daniel Bryan might be done. But Bryan Danielson, God knows what's gonna' happen to him." This quote defies the

notion that the in-ring personas and feuds are legitimate.¹⁹ Thus, Bryan's eventual role on the main WWE roster was already implicated in a smart fan understanding of the production process behind the creation of wrestling narratives. The Daniel Bryan storyline, though, also fit the Reality Era in that it was crafted for a narrative audience of smarts.

Daniel Bryan's feud with The Authority likewise addressed the narrative audience as smarts because it turned away from a narrative based on competitive prowess to one hinging on being a marketable star. The feud took place within the diegetic storyworld of the narrative and played out for the narrative audience, and marked a switch from Bryan's battle with Cena, which largely conformed to the diegetic logic of wrestling as a competitive sport. On the *RAW* episode the night after *SummerSlam*, Daniel Bryan confronted Stephanie McMahon about her husband's role in "screwing" him out of the WWE Heavyweight Title.²⁰ Initially, Bryan's rant seems to fit within the logic of kayfabe because his character drew on the logic of winning fairly as the criteria for success. However, within this same confrontation, Stephanie turns away from this kayfabe-type logic to a Reality Era address to the narrative audience.

In her response to Daniel Bryan, Stephanie McMahon puts forward marketing criteria as an alternative to competitive prowess for determining success within the wrestling narrative. Stephanie McMahon defended her husband's actions, explaining that Triple H cost Bryan the title because Bryan did not fit the mold of a WWE superstar who could be the public face of the company. McMahon further clarified that meant that he was not "WWE Championship material," equating the role of "face of the company" with the championship that heretofore was

¹⁹ Daniel Bryan and Craig Tello, *Yes! My Improbably Journey to the Main Event of WrestleMania* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015), 172. In his autobiography, Danielson claims that Vince McMahon was initially angry at Bryan trying to "plug" his independent career and made him redo the interview, but also that McMahon aired the original interview with the comment intact.

²⁰ In the storyline, Triple H attacked Bryan from behind soon after Bryan won the championship from John Cena in the main event of *SummerSlam*. This allowed longtime star Randy Orton to "cash-in" his contract for a title match and pin a prone Bryan with minimal effort.

understood to indicate the best competitive fighter. As evidence for her assertion that Bryan could not be the face of the company, McMahon stated, “You’re like what? Five foot, eight? Maybe two hundred pounds? And, well, we can’t all be supermodels.” While saying the last sentence, McMahon gestured with her hand to her face, indicating that Bryan’s facial features were unappealing. McMahon’s comments place favorable cosmetic looks as a requisite for success in the wrestling business, running contrary to the prior “mark” logic that the toughest fighters were the top stars. Daniel Bryan beat the champion, but because he did not look the part, he was not fit to be the top star of the company. By forwarding marketability standards as indicators of success, Stephanie McMahon addressed the narrative audience as smarts. In addressing the narrative audience as smarts, the Daniel Bryan storyline foregrounded the production of wrestling narrative within the diegetic storyworld of wrestling.

Taking a cue from CM Punk’s “pipe bomb” promo, WWE crafted a self-reflexive story involving Daniel Bryan in which the creation of wrestling narratives became the story of the feud. In so doing, WWE again addressed the narrative audience as judges of production content, a relatively more powerful position. As noted in the previous chapter, Aristotle broadly defined two types of audiences: the passive audience of the observer and the active audience of the judge who must render a decision.²¹ James Kastely argues that the latter type of audience is “more likely to be a watchful audience and to challenge understandings that run counter to its interests.”²² During both the Kayfabe Era and the Entertainment Eras, WWE addressed the narrative audience as passive consumers of content. In the last chapter I argued that WWE, perhaps inadvertently, addressed the audience as the judge who must render a decision in the

²¹ See note 1.

²² James L. Kastely, *Rethinking the Rhetorical Tradition: From Plato to Postmodernism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 12.

pipe bomb promo. The Daniel Bryan storyline similarly addresses the narrative audience as judges of content by foregrounding production in the diegetic narrative. But this time, as we will see, the fans took up the invitation from the narrative to engage in active judgment through participatory behaviors.

In the lead up to Bryan winning WWE Heavyweight Title at *SummerSlam* in August 2013, WWE centered the narrative about the match around whether Bryan was worthy of a main event push at such an important show. On screen, WWE owner Vince McMahon spoke to fans as fellow arbiters by explaining why he believed Bryan was not fit to be a top star.²³ On-screen COO Triple H, however, defended Bryan against McMahon in the storyline. McMahon's hesitation at accepting Bryan as a top star centered on Bryan's look, that he was too small and not attractive. The story thereby foregrounded the production process by portraying Vince as making creative decisions based on cosmetic reasons rather than the wrestlers' ability to beat others in the ring. Further, this story played on the common fan critique that McMahon would only push performers who fit a particular look, regardless of fan support. Thus, the build to *SummerSlam* positioned Daniel Bryan as a representative of an alternative narrative direction similar to the role Punk played in the pipe bomb promo. The narrative audience was asked to support or reject Bryan as a top contender based on their judgment of the best creative direction for wrestling narrative.

The feud between Daniel Bryan and The Authority in the aftermath of *SummerSlam* further foregrounded production and addressed the narrative audience as active judges. Bryan won the title at *SummerSlam*, defeating John Cena cleanly via pinfall. However, minutes later, Triple H turned on Bryan, leaving him prone for Randy Orton to take the title from him. The next day, Bryan confronted Triple H's wife Stephanie McMahon about her husband's actions. In

²³ Bryan and Tello, *Yes!*, 258.

her defense of Triple H's actions, Stephanie McMahon introduced a phrase that The Authority repeated throughout their storyline feud with Daniel Bryan. Stephanie McMahon explained to Bryan and the fans that The Authority, in promoting Randy Orton as the face of the company, were simply doing "what's best for business." The Authority repeatedly said that holding Bryan back from the top spot in the company made sense because it was "best for business." This phrase focused the story on the production of the wrestling narrative and prompted the fans to make a judgment on if that was actually best for business. Because Stephanie McMahon and Triple H played heel characters, the narrative encouraged fans to support Daniel Bryan, and in so doing oppose the creative direction of the implied authors of WWE Creative that held him back. Of course, WWE sought to commodify the judgment in favor of Bryan like they had done successfully with Punk, but key difference in the narrative audience address influenced fans to react with more active participatory behaviors than they had in response to the pipe bomb promo. One of the key differences involved the portrayal of authorship embodied by the narrator characters in the Daniel Bryan storyline.

4.3.2 The Authority and Implications for Authorship

The Daniel Bryan storyline featured narrator characters that acted as the implied author of WWE Creative. In so doing, WWE provided the narrative audience with a clear target at which to voice their judgments of the creative direction of the narrative. However, because The Authority served as representatives of the implied author, the fans did not stop at voicing frustrations with the characters, but directed it at the actual authors of the narratives provided to them. In the previously mentioned exchange with Daniel Bryan, Stephanie McMahon cast herself and her husband as characters representing WWE Creative. McMahon told Bryan that he had value for the company in a subordinate role. She told Bryan, "I need to manage your

expectations.” She then explained that The Authority felt that he had an important role in the company as a “solid B+ player.”²⁴ Stephanie McMahon’s remarks elicited a loud verbal groan from the crowd. This line resonated with fans because many fans perceived that Vince McMahon and the rest of WWE Creative actually felt this way about Bryan. McMahon’s comments rang true both from the narrator character and the implied author of the narrative itself. The remarks served to associate the narrator characters of The Authority as embodied representations of WWE Creative. They became the on-screen manifestation of the creative choices that often made fans upset about what wrestlers were “pushed” and what wrestlers got “buried.”

Providing an embodied representation of the implied author differed from the previous example of the pipe bomb promo by positioning the fans who supported Bryan in direct opposition to the implied authors themselves. In the storyline featuring CM Punk’s pipe bomb promo, WWE used John Cena as a narrator character to represent the dominant sports entertainment narrative style (in opposition to CM Punk as a representative of the alternative indy-wrestling narrative style). While John Cena also featured in the initial stages of Daniel Bryan’s rise, his role was quickly dropped in favor of featuring The Authority as the primary antagonists.²⁵ The difference in narrators more directly addresses the narrative audience as judges of creative direction. In the pipe bomb promo, Punk voiced criticisms against the implied authors (WWE Creative) commonly given by indy-wrestling fans and took out his frustrations about the creative direction of the company on the star those implied authors pushed most heavily (Cena). Thus, Punk encouraged indy-wrestling fans in the narrative audience to express displeasure at John Cena as a narrator character. In contrast, within the Daniel Bryan storyline,

²⁴ Dave Meltzer, *Wrestling Observer Newsletter*, August 26, 2013.

²⁵ John Cena also played a markedly different role here than he had with Punk. In the narrative, Cena handpicked Bryan as his opponent for *SummerSlam* because that was what the fans wanted to see. Thus, Cena as a narrator in this storyline was portrayed as supportive of the fans’ desire to support Bryan even if he didn’t fit the dominant WWE aesthetic of a top star.

The Authority explicitly stated that they held back wrestlers based on cosmetics despite athletic ability and/or fan desire. More than just voicing complaints, the narrator characters here played out a story that encouraged the narrative audience to view the implied author as “anti-fan.” WWE may have hoped the fans would again direct their frustrations at the narrators. But because those narrators embodied the implied author, the fans also directed their participatory behavior at the actual authors the narrators represented.

Another key element of authorship within the Daniel Bryan storyline that encouraged fans to a greater level of participation involved the portrayal of Bryan himself as a narrator within the diegetic storyworld. As a narrator, Bryan initially seems to mirror the role of Punk as an embodied representation of the indy-wrestling narrative style. Bryan made a name for himself wrestling for many small promotions in the United States under his given name Bryan Danielson and in Japan with a masked identity of “The American Dragon.” Bryan quickly established himself as a wrestler with exceptional work rate and highly rated matches. Bryan, like Punk, was a mainstay of the Ring of Honor promotion during its formative years. In September of 2005, Bryan won the Ring of Honor World Title, going on to hold the company’s top championship for well over a year. Bryan also won the top titles in other independent promotions including Pro Wrestling Guerrilla and Full Impact Pro, as well as the Junior Heavyweight Championship for Pro Wrestling Noah in Japan. He also won a tournament dubbed the “King of the Indies” promoted by All Pro Wrestling. Along with these accolades, Bryan’s exceptional work rate was lauded by hardcore wrestling fans. Danielson won the *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* award for “Most Outstanding Wrestler” five consecutive years from 2006 to 2010. After Danielson’s retirement in 2015, Dave Meltzer indicated that the award will likely be renamed for Danielson.

By the time he signed with WWE in August 2009, Daniel Bryan cemented himself as perhaps the top name on the independent scene and an “internet darling” as WWE liked to call him.

Daniel Bryan, as a narrator, not only represented the indy-wrestling style for hardcore fans, but also casual fans, since the narrative explicitly directed the narrative audience’s attention to Bryan’s indy-wrestling roots. During the aforementioned confrontation with Stephanie McMahon on *RAW*, Bryan defiantly told her that he was not afraid to be fired by WWE for challenging those in control of the company. Bryan yelled, “I will go back to wrestling in armories. I will go back to selling t-shirts out of my car. I am not afraid of being fired.” Bryan’s heated remarks call to mind his days wrestling on the independent circuit where such practices were commonplace. Thus, Daniel Bryan defiantly telling his boss that he does not fear her economic power over him suggests to the audience that the dominant WWE wrestling narrative is not the only viable option for workers, and by extension the fans as well. Whereas CM Punk couched his criticisms of WWE’s creative choices in complaints about how he himself was not making enough money, Bryan directly critiqued the idea that marketing and drawing power were the most important criteria for creative decision making.

Daniel Bryan as a narrator also encouraged fans to actively critique the narrative direction of the implied authors behind WWE narratives because the storyline that followed *SummerSlam* mimicked his personal narrative and the belief that WWE would not truly push wrestlers who did not fit a particular look. WWE presented the narrator character of Daniel Bryan as a fighter who trained at various martial arts and wrestling techniques to overcome the disadvantage of being a smaller man in a competitive environment where bigger men usually succeeded. Bryan Danielson’s journey as a performer mirrors this story in nearly every aspect. He was known in wrestling circles as a hard worker who honed his craft better than nearly

anyone else in the world, the only difference being that Danielson's craft was *pretending* to athletically compete in an entertaining manner. While WWE indeed pushed Bryan's character in the main event of shows for months following *SummerSlam*, eventually Bryan failed to win back the title and prove The Authority wrong within the narrative. Once perennial star John Cena returned from injury, WWE shuffled Bryan back into the midcard. Thus, the narrative again mirrored the criticism from fans that WWE Creative pushed stars based on cosmetic factors over fan desire.

Finally, Daniel Bryan, as a narrator, encouraged audience involvement as a response to disapproval in the creative direction of WWE. In the pipe bomb promo and the storyline that followed, CM Punk represented disgruntled fans as the "voice of the voiceless." In so doing, Punk embodied fan criticism and voiced their anger in a manner that was pre-approved by McMahon and the rest of WWE Creative. In contrast, Daniel Bryan did not serve as a voice for the fans. Instead, the narrative positioned his character as a hard worker who appreciates the fans and encourages them to voice their own frustrations to The Authority (and, by extension, the implied authors of the narrative they represent). Because Bryan did not play the role of a mouthpiece for fan dissatisfaction, this storyline encouraged the audience to engage more actively in voicing their frustrations themselves.

4.3.3 Constituting the Yes! Movement

The Daniel Bryan storyline empowered the fans not only through the construction of authorship and narrator characters, but also by discursively constructing a shared identity for fans capable of influencing the creative process. In the storyline, Bryan referred to the fans who supported him (and by extension were positioned in opposition to the implied authors of WWE) collectively as the "Yes! Movement." This move differs greatly from how CM Punk addressed

the hardcore fans. Whereas Punk winked at the hardcore wrestling fans as the fourth persona,²⁶ Bryan directly hailed them in his promos. In the pipe bomb promo, CM Punk acknowledged the hardcore wrestling fans only obliquely by referencing subtext that the casual fans would not likely understand. In contrast, Bryan, by naming the fans as a movement, gave them a collective identity by calling them into being as a coherent group. Further, Bryan moves the hardcore fans out of the fourth persona and includes them into the greater whole of the second persona.²⁷

Bryan's constituting the fans into the "Yes! Movement" works as a small-scale example of rhetorical theories of discursive formations of the "people." Arguing against prior conceptions of peoples as discrete entities engaged by rhetoric, McGee argued that "'The people...are not objectively real in the sense that they exist as a collective entity in nature; rather, they are a fiction dreamed by an advocate and infused with an artificial, rhetorical reality by the agreement of an audience to participate in a collective fantasy.'"²⁸ In the case of the "Yes! Movement," Daniel Bryan infused the narrative audience within a rhetorically crafted artificial reality as a coherent group. Further, we can see the power of constituting the fans into a shared group identity by turning to Maurice Charland's concept of constitutive rhetoric.²⁹

Charland posited that a people who previously had no public collective identity can be rhetorically formed by calling them into being as a coherent group by crafting a narrativized identity and interpellating subjects as agents. Charland begins his argument by following Burke's

²⁶ Charles E. Morris III, "Pink Herring & the Fourth Persona: J. Edgar Hoover's Sex Crime Panic," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 88 (2002), 230.

²⁷ Edwin Black, "The Second Persona," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 56 (1970), 111.

²⁸ McGee, "In Search," 240.

²⁹ Maurice Charland, "Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the *Peuple Québécois*," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 73 (1987), 147.

notion that rhetoric is about identification rather than persuasion.³⁰ Charland also builds upon McGee's understanding of the people, arguing that "audiences do not exist outside rhetoric, merely addressed by it, but live inside rhetoric."³¹ Charland borrowed the notion of "interpellation" from Louis Althusser to examine the specific case of the *Peuple Québécois*, showing how a "people" can be constituted through a piece of rhetoric.³² Basically, a text can call "a people" into being by offering a narrative in which individuals recognize themselves as part of a collective, or "public" with a potential for agency. Importantly, Charland argues that constitutive rhetoric features three ideological effects: the formation of a collective subject, the positing of a trans-historical subject, and providing the illusion of freedom for the protagonist. Thus, Charland ties his theory intimately to narrative theory, stating, "constitutive rhetorics are ideological not merely because they provide individuals with narratives to inhabit as subjects and motives to experience, but because they insert "narratized" subjects-as-agents into the world."³³ By turning back to the Daniel Bryan storyline, we can see how the narrative addresses the narrative audience constitutively.

In constituting the fans as the "Yes! Movement," Daniel Bryan fulfills all three of Charland's ideological implications. First, Bryan forms the collective subject position for the fans around the "Yes!" chant they used in support of him. Because the fans used the "Yes!" chant to raise Bryan to the main event at *SummerSlam*, it works to position the audience in a narrativized history. Further, the chant functions as an empty signifier to pull in fans to provide a

³⁰ Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 301.

³¹ Charland, "Constitutive Rhetoric," 147.

³² Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes toward an Investigation," in *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, ed. Louis Althusser (London: New Left Books, 1977), 170-171.

³³ Charland, "Constitutive Rhetoric," 143.

logic of equivalence between hardcore and casual fans.³⁴ Ernesto Laclau argues that populist movements coalesce around empty signifiers in an antagonistic frontier against a hegemonic force.³⁵ The “Yes! Movement” coalesced around the empty signifier of “Yes!” against the implied authors of WWE.³⁶ In so doing, the movement gained the illusion of freedom, in that the narrative empowered the fans to use the chant as a rallying cry to insist on change in the narrative direction of WWE. Perhaps the most powerful implication of the construction of the “Yes! Movement” was that the address to the narrative audience inserted “narratized subjects-as-agents into the world” by making the narrative audience a character within the diegetic world of WWE.

The Daniel Bryan storyline addressed the narrative audience as characters within the storyworld. Moreover, the fans were cast as fellow protagonists opposed to the producers of the narrative content as represented by The Authority. Within her explanation of why Bryan did not fit the role of the “face of the company,” Stephanie McMahon stated that, “these people here don’t understand business.” The live crowd responded to this comment with loud heckling. Here McMahon solidified the members of the narrative audience as not only characters within the narrative, but as opponents to The Authority, and thus WWE Creative direction by extension. The commentators during this storyline consistently called the fans the Yes! Movement and pushed the term by asking fans to tweet using the hashtag #YesMovement. Later in the storyline, Stephanie McMahon stated, “Do we listen to the people? Why would we?” Triple H later in the same segment added, “Everything in this arena right now including them (pointing at the crowd)

³⁴ Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (New York: Verso, 2005), 73.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 84-85.

³⁶ In fact, McMahon argued at this time behind the scenes that the fans liked chanting “Yes!” more than they actually supported Daniel Bryan as a top star. Further, crowds started doing the “Yes!” chants at mainstream sporting events wholly unrelated to Daniel Bryan or professional wrestling in general. These crowds had little to no connection to the demands of the narrative audience on the implied authors of WWE Creative.

and you (pointing at Bryan) belong to us.” These comments show the story positioning the feud around the tension between producers (The Authority as “owners” who provide a ring and a stage for everyone) and consumers (the fans who were demanding a certain story be told).

For his part, Daniel Bryan consistently stated during the storyline that the producers should listen to the fans. In response to McMahon’s line about doing what is “best for business,” Bryan retorted that it sounded like the fans had a different idea about what was best for business. Throughout the following months, Bryan would poll the audience about whether they thought The Authority were doing what was best for business or if he was worthy of being champion. In these polls, Bryan prompted the audience to respond either “Yes!” or “No!” Thus, he let the narrative audience have a voice in response to The Authority. Further, the audience is constituted as an agentic character, as a judge who must render a decision about the creative direction of the narrative. Later in the storyline, Bryan confronted The Authority about them leaving him out of the Royal Rumble match. During this confrontation, Bryan yelled, “Listen! Listen to these people!” Bryan on a later episode directly told the crowd, “You have a voice!” If the story is about what narrative direction is the best for business, and the audience is now a character situated in opposition to the implied author, then the audience is cast as an active agent in the creative decision-making process.

The clearest example of the narrative audience being cast as a character in the narrative storyworld occurred on the March 10, 2014 edition of *RAW*. This show featured a segment which narratively represented the fans’ hijacking of shows during the previous two months, known as the “Occupy *RAW*” movement. Drawing off the news coverage of the Occupy Wall Street protests, WWE staged a protest by “fans” to get Daniel Bryan into the main event of *WrestleMania*. Daniel Bryan entered the ring and stated, “Tonight we’re gonna’ make it so you

have to listen to us because tonight the Yes! Movement is in full effect. And tonight we are going to occupy *RAW!*” At this point several extras emerged, all dressed in Daniel Bryan t-shirts, filling the ring and the area around it. Dave Meltzer points out that some of the occupiers were employees of WWE in various backstage positions but some were actually fans picked for the spot.³⁷ As the “Yes! Movement” entered the ring, Bryan yelled, “We are not going to take it anymore. We are one! We stand together! We are united! And we are not going to leave this ring until The Authority give us what we want.” The visual of fans crowding the ring, in shirts that were designed to make Daniel Bryan’s image reminiscent of Che Guevera, was a striking image representing the actual dissent from fans as to the narrative direction of WWE.

Later in the segment The Authority attempted to talk Bryan and his followers out of the ring to no avail. When Triple H called for security to “throw all these people out,” Bryan responded by saying, “You want us to leave? What do think if everybody here in this Coliseum just walks out to the parking lot right now? We can set up our own ring and you can have *RAW!* in front of an arena of empty chairs.” Here Bryan points to the power of the collective audience to influence the implied authors of WWE. After security failed to move the mass of people, Stephanie McMahon told the fans that they were on a “power trip,” indicating that the participatory nature of the fans represented by the Occupy *RAW!* characters had power over The Authority. In response, Bryan told The Authority that they “underestimate the power of these people.... We own this ring!” Eventually, Triple H relented and accepted Bryan’s challenge to a match at *WrestleMania*. However, Bryan then asserted that he also wanted the added stipulation that if he beat Triple H, he would then be inserted into the main event match for the WWE World Heavyweight Title. Again, Triple H granted the request and the occupiers left chanting “Yes!” The Occupy RAW segment narrativized the power dynamic between producer and consumer

³⁷ Dave Meltzer, *Wrestling Observer Newsletter*, March 17, 2014.

leading into *WrestleMania*. The narrative constitution of the “Yes! Movement” as characters within the narrative highlights the participatory nature fans demonstrated in resisting the co-optation and commodification that occurred previously with the pipe bomb promo.

4.3.4 Hijacking Attempts at Commodification

The Daniel Bryan storyline epitomized the Reality Era’s narrative invitation to the audience to exert influence over the creative direction of the narrative through participatory behavior. Much like they had with the pipe bomb promo, WWE attempted to co-opt the fan response to Daniel Bryan and commodify it by directing fans to purchase merchandise in order to prove The Authority wrong. As previously mentioned, The Authority antagonized the narrative audience by claiming that they did not know what was best for business. This narrative move makes sense as WWE had successfully used similar tactics with the indy-wrestling subculture in the pipe bomb promo. There, Punk made his promo primarily about consumption practices, intimating that the fans should buy his merchandise to show that indy-wrestlers could be top draws in WWE.

Due to the success of the commodification of the indy-wrestling subculture, WWE again attempted to direct fans toward consumption as a means to support Daniel Bryan. The storyline held that Bryan could not be the star of the company because he did not fit the image of a true superstar. A true star, like Randy Orton, was said within the storyline to be more marketable for a wrestling company. The Authority knew that holding Bryan back was “best for business” because Daniel Bryan could not be financially lucrative despite fans’ appreciation for the performer. Of course, the logical way to prove the heel characters wrong was to show that Daniel Bryan could be marketable as the face of the company, which could be accomplished by purchasing his merchandise and other consumption behaviors. To an extent WWE accomplished

its goal of increasing merchandise sales for Daniel Bryan during the period. However, while Punk briefly overtook John Cena as the top merchandise seller in the company, Bryan never did. Partially in response to lackluster increases in consumption, WWE took Daniel Bryan out of the main event picture once John Cena returned to action. When this occurred, the fans exerted pressure on the implied authors to change their creative direction through other participatory behaviors.

The fans exerted pressure on WWE to alter its narrative plans by “hijacking” shows and segments. This behavior inspired the eventual “Occupy *RAW*” segment, which was a narrative representation of the actual behavior that pressured the producers to change their *WrestleMania* plans. The fans first used their voice to hijack WWE’s planned narrative on the December 9, 2013 edition of *RAW*! At this point, WWE had shuffled Bryan back into the midcard in favor of pushing John Cena as the top face superstar working against Randy Orton and The Authority. WWE used this feud to unify the top two championships into one title, since Orton and Cena each held one of the two belts. To promote the unification match, WWE held a ceremony in the ring in which all the former WWE Heavyweight and World Heavyweight Champions stood in the background as John Cena and Randy Orton verbally sparred with one another about their upcoming match. Daniel Bryan stood among the other sixteen former champions as The Authority talked about the importance of the championship unification. At this point, the crowd loudly started chanting “Daniel Bryan!” until Triple H stopped his monologue. When they successfully disrupted the ceremony, the crowd erupted in “Yes!” chants. Later in the ceremony John Cena brought Bryan front and center to acknowledge the fans’ support for him, an unscripted moment spurred on by the crowd “hijacking” the segment to make it about Bryan rather than the superstars WWE was attempting to push at the time.

Even more indicative of the ability of the fans to “hijack” the narrative direction of WWE was the fan response to the 2014 *Royal Rumble* pay-per-view. The main fixture of this event is a match of the same name³⁸ in which thirty superstars compete in a “battle royal,” eliminating each other by throwing opponents over the ropes and out of the ring until one man remains as the victor. Since 1993, the winner of the Royal Rumble match also earns a shot at the top title at *WrestleMania*. In 2014, many fans were hopeful WWE would use the Royal Rumble match to elevate Daniel Bryan back into the main event picture for a title shot at *WrestleMania*. However, Vince McMahon and the rest of WWE Creative had other plans. Namely, former main event superstar Batista, who had left the company in 2010, returned on January 20, 2014 vowing to win the rumble match. In his time off from WWE, Batista embarked on an acting career and WWE saw the potential for mainstream crossover appeal in pushing Batista to the main event at *WrestleMania*. WWE attempted to push Batista as the top face character who would defeat the villainous Randy Orton and The Authority at *WrestleMania*.

Fans voiced their disapproval in an unprecedented fashion at the *Royal Rumble* pay-per-view. Daniel Bryan was never publically scheduled to be in the Royal Rumble match, but fans hoped that he would still be pushed to win the event.³⁹ The royal rumble match is also notable in that it starts with two wrestlers and other competitors enter at regular intervals until all thirty have entered the match. As the match wore on and Daniel Bryan had still not entered, fans began to chant his name in advance of each entrant. Batista entered the match as the 28th wrestler and at first got a fairly positive reaction from the audience. However, minutes later the crowd actively turned on the match when Daniel Bryan did not enter. During the countdown to the final

³⁸ For clarity, I refer to the whole event as the *Royal Rumble* (italicized) and the match itself as the Royal Rumble match (without italics).

³⁹ Daniel Bryan actually opened the show in a losing effort against Bray Wyatt. But throughout the years, wrestlers had often competed in an undercard match at the event and also competed in the main event battle royal match.

entrance, the crowd was chanting “Yes!” in anticipation that Bryan would be the final wrestler. Instead, Rey Mysterio entered the match as the 30th and final competitor to a chorus of boos from the live crowd in Philadelphia. Mysterio, a longtime popular face wrestler, received the negative reaction simply because he was not Daniel Bryan.

From the point the crowd realized WWE did not include Daniel Bryan in the Royal Rumble match, they loudly voiced their displeasure at the creative decision. The crowd booed whenever Batista was on offense and repeatedly chanted Daniel Bryan’s name. When Batista eventually emerged victorious, he was met with the loudest boos of the night and more chants for Daniel Bryan. The fans rejected the proposed conquering face character. Batista himself appeared visibly shaken by the crowd reaction. After the show ended, Batista visually mocked Daniel Bryan’s poses and extended his middle finger at the crowd. The biggest story on wrestling-related websites following the event focused on the crowd “hijacking” the event and rejecting WWE’s handpicked top star. Even the BBC covered the crowd’s overwhelmingly negative reaction in an extremely rare instance of the news organization covering anything wrestling related.⁴⁰ A petition on the White House website to include Bryan in the main event at *WrestleMania* gained nearly 100,000 signatures before being taken down in the week following the *Royal Rumble*.⁴¹

WWE initially attempted to stick with Batista as the top face character, but fans continued to voice their displeasure with the creative direction. In fact, the hashtag #Bootista trended on Twitter during the weeks following the rumble match in reference to the taunts Batista received from the live audiences. After two consecutive months of overwhelming

⁴⁰ Amelia Butterly, “Royal Rumble: Daniel Bryan Blames WWE for Exclusion,” *BBC Newsbeat*, January 27, 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsbeat/article/25911039/royal-rumble-daniel-bryan-blames-wwe-for-exclusion>.

⁴¹ Dave Meltzer, *Wrestling Observer Newsletter*, February 10, 2014.

negative fan reaction, WWE showed signs of changing plans for the main event at *WrestleMania*.⁴² WWE crafted the “Occupy RAW!” segment as a narrative representation of the actual audience’s participatory behavior exerting pressure on the implied authors to change their plans. In both cases, those in charge creatively acquiesced to the fans’ desires, giving the fans a level of creative authority in the narrative production process. Thus, while WWE managed to commodify the “Yes! Movement” through things like t-shirt sales, the movement also shows the limit of WWE’s ability to oppress fans and legitimate freedom of action and influence over the production of narrative on the part of the fans.

4.3.5 Daniel Bryan and the Co-Production of Narrative

By embracing participatory behaviors beyond simple consumption, the narrative audience exerted unprecedented influence over the production of wrestling narrative. The fans exerted enough pressure on the implied authors of WWE Creative that they successfully initiated a change in the narrative. Thus, the fans blurred the distinction between producer and consumer. WWE used narrative audience address to maintain sole control over its narrative from the Kayfabe Era, through the Entertainment Era, and into the Reality Era. However, by addressing the narrative audience as smart fans and characters within the diegetic storyworld capable of judgment and agentic influence, WWE opened the door to the fans participating in the co-production of wrestling narrative.

One can argue that fans have always exerted pressure on WWE creative choices by what they choose to spend money on. WWE have historically dropped angles and feuds when fans expressed little to no interest in the program. If the angle didn’t “draw” money, the company

⁴² Dave Meltzer, *Wrestling Observer Newsletter*, February 3, 2014. WWE had to change some plans for the big event due to CM Punk abruptly walking out on the company following the *Royal Rumble*. But by most accounts, even with Punk leaving, the main event was supposed to stay the same and Daniel Bryan was not in line for a push to the main event.

would go in another direction. In those cases, it was the *lack* of action in the form of consumption/purchasing that dictated WWE's creative choices. In the case of the Daniel Bryan storyline, however, the fans exerted pressure by acting out. In a sense, the angle was a good "draw" because fans were coming to shows for the angle and spending money to do so. However, the fans who were purchasing tickets were also the ones "hijacking" the shows. Meltzer argued that WWE changed the Orton-Batista main event because they feared the reaction from fans at the show would make the product and the company look bad, not because they feared the event would draw less money.⁴³ Thus, the fans in this time found an *active* method of influencing the creative production process even as they engaged in consumption practices that redounded to the benefit of WWE.

WWE eventually relented to fan pressure and pushed Bryan to the main event of *WrestleMania XXX*. On the February 28 edition of *SmackDown!*, Batista turned heel by responding to the fans' boos. Batista claimed he did not return to be liked and told the crowd he would win the title at *WrestleMania* without their support. Meltzer argues that as soon as Batista turned heel, the obvious direction for the main event at *WrestleMania* would be to insert a face character, most likely Daniel Bryan, into the match so that fans have someone to cheer.⁴⁴ Indeed, after the "Occupy *RAW!*" segment, WWE built the hype for *WrestleMania XXX* around Daniel Bryan and the fan support that elevated him to the main event. At *WrestleMania XXX*, Daniel Bryan defeated Triple H cleanly in the middle of the ring in the opening match, which lasted over 25 minutes.⁴⁵ After the match, Triple H attacked Bryan with a steel chair to further the idea

⁴³ Dave Meltzer, *Wrestling Observer Newsletter*, April 14, 2014.

⁴⁴ Dave Meltzer, *Wrestling Observer Newsletter*, March 11, 2014.

⁴⁵ The match got attention as a contender for "Match of the Year" for many wrestling fan websites, including the *Wrestling Observer*.

that Bryan would get “screwed” out of the title yet again. But Bryan showed up for the main event match against Batista and Randy Orton and eventually pinned Batista to win the WWE World Heavyweight Title. The biggest show of the year went off the air with Daniel Bryan celebrating in a sea of fans chanting “Yes!” repeatedly. By exerting pressure on WWE Creative through participatory behaviors, the fans were able to alter the narrative storyline of the biggest show of the year. The audience effectively blurred the distinction between consumer and producer, becoming co-creators of narrative content by influencing the creative direction of the authors of WWE narratives.

WWE managed to turn the Daniel Bryan storyline from a public embarrassment into a critical success. *WrestleMania XXX* received positive reviews from fans and wrestling news sources. Meltzer called it one of the best *WrestleManias* of all time, due almost entirely to the Daniel Bryan storyline.⁴⁶ Meltzer rated both Bryan’s matches over four stars, the two highest quality ratings on the show. The following night on *RAW*, Daniel Bryan opened the show with an address to the fans. In a moment of surrealism, the fans chanted “You deserve it!” for close to a minute with Bryan just standing in the ring holding the title belts. The chant exemplified the Reality Era’s blending of performer and character in that the fans were invested into the character Daniel Bryan’s ascent to the title but also showed appreciation for the performer Bryan Danielson’s accomplishment of finally being recognized as the top wrestler in the biggest wrestling promotion in the world. This moment blended the production (Bryan Danielson as a worker) with the narrative (Daniel Bryan as a narrator character). Bryan then told the audience that *they* deserve this because it is the “power of the fans” that beat the authority. Thus, Bryan acknowledged that fans let their own voice be heard by banding together and participating actively in the co-production of the wrestling narrative.

⁴⁶ Dave Meltzer, *Wrestling Observer Newsletter*, April 14, 2014.

While fans exerted more influence over the creative direction of the narrative storylines in WWE during this period than in any previous era, WWE did not necessarily “lose” its power in the process. Foucault argued that power should not be seen as a thing one wields over another, but as, “a more-or-less organized, hierarchical, coordinated cluster of relations”⁴⁷ Indeed, WWE, while acquiescing to the fans’ desires in the lead up to *WrestleMania*, nonetheless benefitted from the positive reception to the show and the mainstream exposure the Bryan storyline gave them. The disruptive behaviors of the fans exposes the limits of WWE’s ability to control fans and the narrative direction of its product in the face of such participatory behaviors. But, the case study also exposes the limits of such movements to work contra the interests of the dominant discourse. In staging the “Occupy *RAW*” segment, WWE used the “Yes!” chant as a floating signifier, which Laclau defines as signifiers that are suspended and reused by alternative equivalential fronts.⁴⁸ In this case, WWE used the “Yes!” chant, along with the visual of supporters in unison pointing their fingers to the sky, within their own narrative to increase sales. The “Che-style” t-shirts worn by every member involved in the “Occupy *RAW*” crowd of people associated merchandise with the pseudo-populist movement, thereby circumscribing the power the fans wielded.

Further, the long term status of Daniel Bryan calls into question the true power of the consumers in meaningfully changing long-term directions in WWE. The fans were able to sway WWE Creative into changing plans for a major show. These changes altered the narrative landscape for a few months. However, just one month after his big win at *WrestleMania*, Daniel Bryan announced that he needed major surgery on his neck and would be out of action for a

⁴⁷ Michel Foucault, *Knowledge/Power: Selected Interviews and Other Essays*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 119.

⁴⁸ Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 131.

significant amount of time.⁴⁹ Daniel Bryan never returned to the main event picture and, on February 8, 2016 he announced his retirement due to lingering health issues stemming from suffering multiple concussions throughout his career. Bryan did not become the next face of the company in the long term narrative. Thus, WWE assuaged fan protests by temporarily giving the fans what they wanted in terms of narrative direction, but only in small doses. This case study further illustrates the difficulty for fans in making meaningful change. WWE, as producers, allowed the “Yes! Movement” to gain leverage in support of Daniel Bryan, but, without a key figure around which to rally, the movement lost steam as casual fans and hardcore fans had less reason to unite against a common foe.

4.3.6 Lasting Ramifications

The need to negotiate fan approval in fear of storylines being rejected and/or shows getting “hijacked” remained a legacy more lasting than Daniel Bryan’s main event status. Due to their success in getting WWE to push Bryan, fans used similar participatory behaviors in the future. However, WWE more often stayed the course with its narrative direction despite fan disapproval. For example, WWE attempted to build up a young wrestler named Roman Reigns as the top face character in the company. However, once again, the fans largely rejected the “chosen” face challenger, this time on the grounds that Reigns was not a good enough “worker” and was too much an example of WWE pushing good-looking muscular types over mat technicians.⁵⁰ WWE temporarily halted Reigns’ rise to the WWE Heavyweight Title, but

⁴⁹ WWE stripped Bryan of the championship because he could not defend it. Wrestling insiders later reported that Bryan was originally scheduled to drop the title to Brock Lesnar at that year’s *SummerSlam* event in August. Upon his return in early 2015, Bryan found himself back on the midcard.

⁵⁰ In a baffling moment of ill judgment, WWE had Daniel Bryan return from injury right before the *Royal Rumble* event in 2015, which they planned to have Roman Reigns win. The fans again cheered Bryan heavily and were dumbfounded when Bryan was eliminated early in the Rumble match with very little hype. From that point (about half-way through the match), the crowd booed nearly everything in the match, especially any time Roman Reigns was on offense. Due to the duration of the negative reaction, that year’s *Royal Rumble* match seemed even more

eventually went back to its original plans despite fan disapproval.⁵¹ Currently, WWE is still positioning Reigns as the top star and face of the company despite continued negative reactions from fans. Reigns won the WWE Heavyweight Title for a third time by defeating Triple H in the main event of *WrestleMania XXXII*. While fans attempted to hijack the show by booing Reigns vociferously, WWE proceeded with its intended narrative. WWE now finds itself trying to navigate when to bend to fan pressure and when to stay the course. Thus, while the “Yes! Movement” shows the ability of fans to collectively influence the narrative direction of media content producers, the lack of change regarding Reigns’ push illustrates that producers will not always bend to such pressure. The case study further illustrates the implications of fan pressure in all forms of media entertainment.

The idea that fans can “hijack” shows to force their choices onto the creative direction of WWE has implications for the narrative process beyond who is the champion at a given time. WWE is not alone in having to navigate the pressures of fan expectation when creating its narratives. Fan pressure has influenced producers of narrative content in popular culture to alter their creative plans. For example, George Lucas claimed that he significantly changed his creative direction in the *Star Wars* prequels due to fan reaction after the first of the trilogy.⁵² WWE differs in that the fan pressure can come in the moment of telling the narrative, unlike when fans express frustration at a movie like *Star Wars*. The fan pressure in professional

hated than the previous year’s match. Even putting The Rock, one of the most popular stars of all time and Reign’s real-life cousin, out to endorse Reign’s victory could not stem the tide of boos.

⁵¹ Roman Reigns faced WWE Champion Brock Lesnar in the main event at *WrestleMania XXXI*. Fans in attendance vocally booed Reigns, the supposed face. During the match, heel wrestler Seth Rollins “cashed in” his title match contract to make the match a triple threat featuring all three wrestlers. Rollins quickly pinned a prone Reigns to win WWE Championship. Fans cheered Rollins’ win because it appeared WWE were again changing plans, no longer positioning Reigns as the new face of the company.

⁵² Shyam Dodge, “‘They Didn’t Use any of my Ideas’: George Lucas Says New *Star Wars* Film is not how He Envisioned It,” *Daily Mail*, January 21, 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-2920541/George-Lucas-says-new-Star-Wars-film-not-envisioned-it.html>.

wrestling is present in the narrative itself due to the live performances and the on-the-spot creative process. Like other popular culture industries, WWE now struggles with how much and how often to acquiesce to fan desire in its narrative creation choices.⁵³ As WWE has entrenched itself in a battle with consumers over narrative content direction, business is lagging, with ratings for *RAW!* and *Smackdown* at all-time lows.⁵⁴ The fate of WWE's battle with fans may have implications for other media producers regarding the danger of either giving too much or too little heed to fan desires in crafting narrative content.

This case study illustrates the potential of the narrative portrayal of authorship and audience to influence the perception of fans for or against the actual authors of content. The pushback from smart fans to the narrative story decisions have prompted WWE to self-reflexively include a response to fan desires in the storylines even if the business is lagging. The Authority regularly attempts to get heat by claiming to know better than fans how the creative decisions should be handled. Some wrestling journalists have argued that the stale direction of the heel authority figure trying to stop the fans from getting what they want has exacerbated the steady decline in viewership for WWE programming in the last several years.⁵⁵ The fans may not be able to always get their desires, but consistently not listening to fans runs the risk of actually turning fans' interest away from the product. Without seeing the heel authority proven wrong, the heat gained from belittling fan opinion turns to fan resentment. If business continues to falter, WWE may have to again reexamine the narrative choices made with regard to the role of the audience in the production process. Thus, the decision to include a narrator representing the

⁵³ Logically, WWE cannot always put over the fan favorite wrestlers. If Daniel Bryan always won because he was the favorite of the audience, the dramatic product would suffer. Part of the enjoyment of wrestling comes in hoping the face character can overcome the odds and win the prize after a long and difficult journey. Therefore, the protagonists must suffer setbacks in wrestling.

⁵⁴ Dave Meltzer, *Wrestling Observer Newsletter*, May 23, 2016.

⁵⁵ Bryan Alvarez, *Figure Four Weekly*, November 9, 2015.

implied authors within the diegetic world proved dangerous for WWE, illustrating the importance of paying special attention to narrative concepts of author within media content.

The aftermath of the Daniel Bryan storyline also provides implications for the portrayal of narrator characters as a representation of authorial intent. WWE had success rallying fans behind Steve Austin (in the Entertainment Era), CM Punk (in the Reality Era), and Daniel Bryan (also in the Reality Era) against an antagonist character representing the corporate boss of WWE. In all three cases, WWE used the story to drive up merchandise sales and sell tickets. However, with the narrative now reflecting the process of production more clearly, later attempts to work the same sort of angle failed because fans understood that the narrator characters did not match up with the behind-the-scenes production. WWE attempted to push Batista as a protagonist fighting against The Authority, but fans rejected Batista in the role. The fans recognized that Batista had the backing of the implied authors of WWE, and thus did not legitimately represent an opponent for The Authority. Similarly, current attempts to push Roman Reigns as anti-Authority are not working because fans perceive him as the “chosen one” handpicked by the implied authors of WWE Creative. In both cases, the fans have not rallied behind the supposed protagonists because they have smart knowledge of the behind-the-scenes production that betrayed the diegetic story. Because WWE foregrounded the production process in the diegetic narrative, the narrative audience made that production process a part of their interpretation of the narrative. To use a term from Walter Fisher, the narrative audience rejected Batista and Reigns as opponents of The Authority (who represented the implied authors of WWE) because the narrative provided to them lacked narrative fidelity in that it did not “ring true” to their understanding of the production process.⁵⁶ This did not happen in the Entertainment Era with

⁵⁶ Walter Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1987), 47.

regard to Steve Austin. Thus, it is by foregrounding production in the Reality Era that WWE shifted the expectations of representing the legitimate behind-the-scenes creative processes. These examples suggest that narratives which foreground production work primarily when the narrative portrayal of production more closely mirrors the actual production process. The narrative audience in this new era will largely reject narratives based on production that do not ring true.

Further, WWE now finds itself stuck in a narrative wherein the implied author is portrayed as an antagonist to the fans. In the time after the Daniel Bryan “Yes! Movement,” WWE continued pushing Triple H and Stephanie McMahon as The Authority in the role of the top heels in the company. Due to the self-reflexive nature of the stories, The Authority has continued to get heat by denying the fans what they want to see with the excuse that they are doing “what’s best for business.” This role casts WWE (as a company) as the enemy of the fans. This positioning makes sense historically within the parameters of the wrestling industry because wealthy and politically powerful characters have almost always been cast as heels against “common man” type face characters. The large corporate structure of WWE who operate as a near-monopoly in the wrestling business logically fits the wealthy and powerful heel stereotype.⁵⁷ Oddly though, outside of the on-air storylines, Triple H and Stephanie McMahon publically act as positive spokespeople for WWE, participating in charity events, interacting with fans, etc.

⁵⁷ Henry Jenkins, “Never Trust a Snake: WWF Wrestling as Masculine Melodrama,” in *Out of Bounds: Sports, Media and the Politics of Identity*, ed. Aaron Baker and Todd Edward Boyd (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997), 51-53; Thomas Hackett, *Slaphappy: Pride, Prejudice, and Professional Wrestling* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006): 7-30.

Alternative narrative construction of audience in modern wrestling show that the Reality Era style of narrative address may be a hindrance to WWE's goal of controlling the production of its narrative content. The story of heel implied authors played out on WWE television programs runs in direct contrast to the narrative told on its developmental program. Recently, WWE revived *NXT* but switched its format from a competition reality show for rookies to a developmental brand meant to give exposure to wrestlers not yet featured on the main roster. Triple H runs the *NXT* brand largely independent of Vince McMahon's input. Thus, the actual and implied authors of *NXT* differ greatly from the main WWE narrative. Triple H even arguably plays a face character onscreen for the *NXT* program because there he plays the boss of the developmental roster who is known for actually pushing fan favorites and rewarding match quality. Over the last two years, *NXT* went from a small developmental league to a major fixture of WWE corporate landscape. The *NXT* roster began touring nationally and internationally in 2015 and has sold out major arenas, evidencing the potential for such a narrative to be financially successful. Despite the success of the developmental brand, those inside WWE Creative, including Triple H himself, have claimed the *NXT* model would not work on the larger stage of WWE main roster because casual audience does not appreciate the same narrative style as hardcore fans.⁵⁸ However, as we have seen in the Bryan storyline, the potential to have casual fans identify with an empty signifier and align with the hardcore fans may allow for this type of narrative to succeed.

The *NXT* narrative provides a viable alternative to the mainstream narrative of WWE, and possibly evidences a slight shift away from Reality Era style narratives by WWE. After years of battling fans over the production of the narrative content of wrestling, WWE now shows signs of

⁵⁸ Steve Austin and Paul Levesque, *The Steve Austin Show – Unleashed 192*, podcast audio, WWE COO Triple H, MP3, 1:36:11, February 5, 2015, <http://podcastone.com/pg/jsp/program/episode.jsp?programID=436&pid=482164>.

pulling back somewhat on foregrounding production processes within the narrative. The *NXT* narrative differs from the main WWE narrative in that it does not address the narrative audience as smarts. The matches and storylines played out on *NXT* exhibit the same style found in the Entertainment Era. That is, they are crafted for an authorial audience of smart fans but address the narrative audience as marks. The major difference between *NXT* and WWE Entertainment Era narratives is that the former caters to fan response. Despite not foregrounding production, the narrative audience at *NXT* shows is known for actively participating vocally during matches. Now that fans have embraced their role as judges who are capable of influencing the creative process, they maintain that role even without Reality Era style narratives. The *NXT* model may work its way into the mainstream WWE narrative, as many believe Triple H will eventually take creative control of WWE once Vince McMahon steps down.

NXT is not the only example of wrestling narratives not addressing the narrative audience as smarts. Other wrestling promotions have seen success by maintaining a narrative address to a narrative audience of marks. New Japan Pro Wrestling has expanded its market globally in recent years with English language broadcasts. The NJPW narrative style foregrounds the competitive nature of wrestling as a sport. Importantly, in Japan, the emergence of mixed martial arts was intricately tied to professional wrestling.⁵⁹ The blending of “shoot” fighting and “worked” matches blended legitimate athletic competition with scripted narrative.⁶⁰ Notably, NJPW addresses the narrative audience as marks. The success of NJPW calls into question

⁵⁹ In response to fan pressure in the 1990s, popular Japanese wrestlers Minoru Suzuki and Masakatsu Funaki formed the Pancrase promotion. The promotion featured a hybrid of MMA and professional wrestling mostly featuring legitimately contested bouts. Unlike WWE, who embraced the scripted nature of wrestling, Japanese wrestling attempted to appease fans by abandoning the scripting of wins and losses.

⁶⁰ As NJPW embraced MMA style fighting into its in-ring product, they became known for featuring a “strong style” of wrestling. While not a legitimate “shoot” style. This style features strong strikes that actually connect with an opponent and sophisticated jiu-jitsu influenced “chain” wrestling.

WWE's narrative strategies in reasserting their creative authority over the production of the narrative. Whereas WWE attempted to capitalize on fan desire for insider information by foregrounding production in the narrative, NJPW catered to a desire for more authentic appearance in their narrative product's depiction of violence. As with indy-wrestling, WWE is already showing signs of attempting to co-opt fan support for NJPW.⁶¹ Only the future will tell if WWE will be able to successfully commodify fan desire for an alternative wrestling narrative style, and if the company will again see the new participatory behaviors of the audience as an exigence for altering its narrative address.

4.4 Implications of the "Yes! Movement"

The Daniel Bryan storyline illustrates the usefulness of rhetorical narratology as a method for organizing and analyzing a fragmented narrative text. Narratology's typology of audience shows how a producer of media content can use narrative means to address audiences (both implied and narrative) to elicit a desired response. Further, the Daniel Bryan storyline shows that these audiences are capable of exercising agency in resisting co-optation by dominant discourses. By focusing on the audience in the narrative construction of wrestling texts, this analysis avoids over-individualizing the audience as Condit warns. Thus, rhetorical narratology provides a possible link between the rhetorical models of Leff and McGee, in that it provides a better understanding of audience for both types of criticism.

The Daniel Bryan storyline also provides implications for the narrative creation of social movements, even as this one is grounded in pop culture consumption. WWE narratively addressed the fans as a collective subject called the "Yes! Movement." This movement coalesced

⁶¹ In 2016 WWE signed five major stars from NJPW, including Shinsuke Nakamura, AJ Styles, Kota Ibushi, Doc Gallows, and Karl Anderson and openly featured their Japanese wrestling background into the narratives of their characters.

around the empty signifier of the “Yes!” chant. WWE initially attempted to co-opt and monetize the “Yes! Movement” by inviting them through the narrative to defy The Authority through consumption behaviors. But in part due to the narrative construction of author and audience, the “Yes! Movement” exposed the limits of WWE’s ability to control the fans by hijacking the narrative for its own creative designs. The “Yes! Movement” is far from a true populist movement working contra a hegemonic force. But even in this ersatz movement within a popular culture fandom, the potential for “peoples” to exercise power over production can be seen in the collective participatory behaviors they exhibited. Thus, the case study shows that rhetorical narratology provides greater implications for the discursive construction of collective subjectivity beyond the scope of professional wrestling.

The narrative address in the Reality Era led to a blurring of the distinction between producer and consumer of wrestling narrative. The “Yes! Movement” exerted unprecedented influence over the creative direction of wrestling narrative. In part, this creative authority to influence change resulted from the narrative’s construction of narrator characters representing the implied author of WWE Creative as antagonists to the protagonist narrator characters representing the “Yes! Movement.” But this also led to an entrenched battle between producer and consumer over the direction of the content that ultimately left both sides unhappy. WWE found itself battling fan hijacking when trying to push certain stars and proceed with its planned narrative. Fans, in turn, have tuned out in massive numbers as the producers attempt to regain control of the narrative. The future of wrestling narrative remains uncertain, as WWE is showing some signs of pulling back from its Reality Era style of narrative address. The company may adopt narrative strategies exhibited by Triple H in WWE’s developmental brand *NXT*. Other wrestling companies have had success in crafting narratives that do not address the narrative

audience as smarts. Regardless of WWE's future narrative strategies, by foregrounding the production process in Reality Era narratives, WWE opened a door for audience participation to influence the creative process that they are unlikely able to close.

5 CONCLUSION

This project sought to reestablish the importance of narrative theory as a method for critical rhetoric, particularly by analyzing how WWE, as producers of media content, used narrative strategies to reassert their power vis-à-vis consumers, specifically analyzing creative authority over the production of content. As fans become more participatory and knowledgeable about the production processes behind media texts, producers face increasing pressure from consumers on their creative direction. Using rhetorical narratology as a method, I have shown that a nuanced understanding of author and audience in narrative texts can provide key insights into how producers manage this pressure. Further, by combining a narrative methodology with critical rhetorical theories of persona, fragmentation of texts, and the discursive construction of collective subjectivities, I demonstrated the utility of narrative for understanding how power works in these types of media texts.

The first chapter established the narrative methodology central to this project as a useful lens for illuminating how narrative audience construction can reassert power in a participatory media context. Faced with an increasingly skeptical fan base, WWE altered the way it addressed its authorial audience in order to remain relevant for more knowledgeable fans and reassert control over the production of wrestling texts. Since the 1920s, professional wrestling worked under the auspices of kayfabe, a culture that valued protecting the “secret” of wrestling’s scripted nature from the public. Narratively, kayfabe conventions kept the actual authors of wrestling content out of the public eye and relatively safe from scrutiny, as WWE denied the existence of such “behind-the-scenes” authors. Instead, Kayfabe Era narratives directed the emotional output

of the fans toward the narrators who played easily identifiable heroes and villains.¹ While this form of narrative provided producers control over the production process, by the 1990s, fans gained easy access to insider information on the business via the Internet. Armed with previously withheld knowledge, fans became restless with the status quo and unwilling to continue remaining complicit in the spectacle. WWE responded by lifting the veil of kayfabe and openly admitting the fixed nature of professional wrestling.

Responding to the exigence of a shifting fan base, WWE altered its narrative to address the authorial audience as smarts, thus entering the Entertainment Era. Vince McMahon openly admitted that wrestling was an entertainment form, comparing it to sitcoms, cartoons, and soap operas. In switching to a narrative crafted for an audience who is aware wrestling is scripted entertainment, the implied authors of WWE Creative were able to reinvigorate the product by foregrounding the entertainment aspect of the narrative without having to worry about convincing fans that the competition was real. Additionally, the narrative methodology used in this case study allows us to distinguish between the authorial audience (i.e. the audience for whom the implied author crafts the narrative) and the narrative audience (i.e. the audience addressed by the narrators from within the diegetic storyworld). While WWE switched the authorial audience to smarts, they maintained an address to a narrative audience of marks. In so doing, WWE flattered the sophistication of its fan base while simultaneously continuing to direct emotional responses toward narrator characters. Thus, a nuanced understanding of author and audience derived from rhetorical narratology provided key insights into how WWE reasserted its control over the production of its content in the face of fan pressure.

¹ Roland Barthes, "The World of Wrestling," in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 15.

The second chapter combined the narrative methodology with rhetorical theories of persona to provide a detailed account of how WWE co-opted a subcultural movement within wrestling fan culture and successfully commodified fan discontent. This case study shows the ability of narrative theories of author and audience to augment critical rhetoric, showing how power works in narrative texts to constrain choice and serve dominant interests. WWE's switch to the Entertainment Era provided a monetary boost for the company, but it also left the implied authors of the narrative content more open to criticism from fans than in the Kayfabe Era. In search of mainstream appeal, WWE began crafting its narratives in the Entertainment Era for an authorial audience of casual fans. The narratives drifted further away from traditional professional wrestling, thereby ostracizing many hardcore wrestling fans. Using theories of persona, I argued that these "sports entertainment" narratives addressed a second persona of casual fans, while relegating hardcore wrestling fans to the third persona. As a result, hardcore wrestling fans sought out alternative wrestling narratives in the form of an emergent "indy-wrestling" subculture. Within this subculture, the wrestling narratives addressed a second persona of hardcore fans. Further, members of this subculture became a "vocal minority" loudly calling for change during WWE events. In response to the growing indy-wrestling phenomenon, WWE used narrative means to co-opt the sub-fandom and profit from their criticisms.

To address the indy-wrestling subculture, WWE's implied authors crafted a narrative that foregrounded the production of wrestling narratives and openly critiqued the creative choices made by WWE. To enact this narrative, WWE chose former indy-wrestler CM Punk to play a narrator character who voiced many of the criticisms of WWE style wrestling narratives typically found in the indy-wrestling subculture. Because Punk had accrued subcultural capital²

² Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1996), 5.

in his years on the indy-wrestling circuit, he had purchase with hardcore fans. In my analysis of this case study, I showed how Punk addressed a narrative audience of smarts from within the diegetic world by foregrounding the scripted nature of wrestling within the story itself. Further, combining the narrative theory with theories of persona, I argued that Punk still largely addressed a second persona of casual fans, while also providing textual cues to “wink” at a fourth persona of hardcore fans. Without altering the primary audience of casual fans, WWE appealed to hardcore fans and directed their discontent toward consumption goals. Namely, Punk’s “pipe bomb” promo directed fans to defy WWE style narrative by supporting him as a representative of indy-wrestling through purchasing his merchandise. Combining rhetorical narratology’s tripartite system of author and audience with rhetorical theories of persona illuminated how WWE once again used narrative means toward its own financial ends and reasserted control over the production process. Further, distinguishing between the narrative and authorial audiences provides a more nuanced understanding of how personas can address different types of audiences at different diegetic levels.

The third chapter extends rhetorical narratology’s application to fragmented discourse. In so doing, I positioned the typology of author and audience as a useful method for avoiding the pitfalls of both close textual analysis derived from Leff³ and fragmented textual construction derived from McGee.⁴ Further, I connected my narrative analysis to conversations in critical rhetoric over the discursive production of collective subjectivity. In this chapter, I examined a long-term storyline featuring Daniel Bryan’s rise to the main event of *WrestleMania XXX*, due largely to an overwhelming outpouring of fan pressure on WWE to change their planned

³ Michael Leff, “Textual Criticism: The Legacy of G.P. Mohrmann,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 72 (1986), 380.

⁴ Michael Calvin McGee, “Text, Context, and the Fragmentation of Contemporary Culture,” *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 54 (1990), 274.

narrative direction. By looking at how the Reality Era's foregrounding of production addressed the narrative audience as judges, or arbiters of the creative direction of wrestling narrative, WWE inadvertently hailed the audience into a relatively more powerful subjectivity. Further, I argued that the narrators within the Daniel Bryan storyline differed in key ways from Punk's pipe bomb promo, leading to greater vocal participation on the part of fans. While WWE still managed to profit from fan support for Bryan, the fans exerted unprecedented influence over the production process, thereby blurring the distinction between consumer and producer. This illustrates narrative methodology's usefulness for criticism aimed at the discursive creation of social movements, even as this example works on a small scale within an apolitical popular discourse. Further, this case study shows the potential for narrative address to audiences to empower consumers to exert creative authority over media production.

Having shown the utility of rhetorical narratology for critical rhetoric, I wish to offer potential areas for future research. This dissertation is the culmination of a long theoretical journey for me as a scholar. This project began with a distinctly different focus. Initially, I set out to examine the question of "authenticity" in professional wrestling with an eye to questions of identity and representations of gender, race and national identity. The project eventually morphed into a methodological contribution to critical rhetoric, as those issues required attention before I could attend to my original interests. While I believe the current project provides an important contribution to critical rhetoric and media studies, I also think future scholarship should use the methods herein as a means to examining issues of identity. For example, the second chapter hints at the depiction of hypermasculinity in professional wrestling. WWE texts reinforce a hegemonic depiction of masculinity. However, professional wrestling also depicts performances of gender that run contra to typically hegemonic masculinity. Professional

wrestling features scantily-clad, shaved and oiled male bodies engaging in performances of male vulnerability and male intimacy.⁵ An examination of the narrative depictions of gender could show how authors and narrators reassert the dominance of hegemonic masculinity even as, or perhaps due to, performances of rupture in the apparently closed hegemonic depiction.⁶ Further, a focus on the audience for whom authors inscribe these depictions of masculinity could prove fruitful for showing the potential for resistance to gender norms.

An area for future research regarding the text of professional wrestling deals with my original questions of authenticity. The second and third chapters of this dissertation approaches this concept in the analysis of authorship in the storylines of CM Punk and Daniel Bryan. The Reality Era, to me, is interesting in that it shows fan desire for a semblance of authenticity in a performance genre that is, by necessity, marked by inauthenticity. Wrestling's history is marked by attempts on the part of authors to tap into a feeling of authenticity, whether by making fans believe wrestlers were really hurt, incorporating elements of performers real lives into the narrative, or including the backstage production in the storyline. I mentioned in the third chapter that attempts to position wrestlers into similar storylines as they had Daniel Bryan failed because they lacked legitimacy. This observation merely scratches the surface of the implications of authenticity in professional wrestling. Theories in critical scholarship on authenticity regarding cultural studies,⁷ identity,⁸ and performance studies⁹ all could inform such a research project.

⁵ Henry Jenkins, "Never Trust a Snake: WWF Wrestling as Masculine Melodrama," in *Out of Bounds: Sports, Media and the Politics of Identity*, ed. Aaron Baker and Todd Edward Boyd (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997), 53-54.

⁶ Claire Sisco King, "It Cuts Both Ways: *Fight Club*, Masculinity, Abject Hegemony," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 6 (2009), 371.

⁷ Thornton, *Club Culture*, 5.

⁸ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 43-44.

Another avenue for this research involves the way wrestling hails fans through the subjunctive voice.¹⁰ As mentioned in the first chapter, wrestling fans who are smart often play the role of the mark “as if” they believed in the moment that the action were real, playing the role of the “smark.”¹¹ Further, WWE at various points addressed the audience “as if” they were marks. This line of “as if” address and subjectivity brings to mind concepts such as Paul Ricoeur’s “second naïveté,”¹² Jodi Dean’s “communicative capitalism,”¹³ Peter Sloterdijk’s “enlightened false consciousness,”¹⁴ and Slavoj Žižek’s “double disavowal.”¹⁵ Tying research on professional wrestling to the feigned nature of subjectivity could prove fruitful for both bodies of research.

Professional wrestling made an ideal case study for exploring narrative’s potential to illuminate the power dynamic between producer and consumer in the modern media environment. But this methodology should prove useful for other areas in which producers face pressure from fans on the creative direction of their texts. Further, this method can augment current work studying various genres of narrative texts, working in concert with existing critical theories from those bodies of literature. For example, using rhetorical narratology to analyze serialized television shows and Hollywood film franchises in light of media theories of fan studies could prove useful in noting how producers of television and film address authorial and

⁹ Michael Mario Albrecht, “Acting Naturally Unnaturally: The Performative Nature of Authenticity in Contemporary Popular Music,” *Text & Performance Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (October 2008): 384.

¹⁰ Barbie Zelizer, *About to Die: How News Images Move the Public* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 14-15.

¹¹ Marion Wrenn, “Managing Doubt: Professional Wrestling Jargon and the Making of Smart Fans,” in *Practicing Culture*, ed. Craig Calhoun and Richard Sennett (New York: Routledge, 2007), 160.

¹² Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 349-50.

¹³ Jodi Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 147.

¹⁴ Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

¹⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London, Verso, 1997), 102.

narrative audiences through their texts. Further, rhetorical narratology could prove useful for the burgeoning field of comics studies, augmenting visual rhetorical theories.¹⁶ These genres face similar pressures from fans for future direction of narrative as does professional wrestling. While wrestling fans differ in their ability to voice their demands in the moment of telling the narrative, fan pressure in television, film and comics is felt between the production of serialized narrative. Further, this study may contribute to scholarship on reality television programming, which closely resembles the production processes in professional wrestling and questions of authenticity in production.

Rhetorical narratology could also contribute to gaming studies by working with theories of game design and function to show how these work in concert to address particular types of audiences. Game studies presents a field wherein fans directly interact with the narrative product with agency in the way the narrative plays out. Salen and Zimmerman argue that producers and consumers blend in the development of games, becoming “creayers” or “plators.”¹⁷ Thus, this field illustrates the new media environment in which producers and consumers negotiate power dynamics over production of texts in a way different from wrestling. In keeping with Gonzalo Frasca’s argument that game studies require a convergence of scholarship attuned to narrative elements of gaming as well as the structure and mechanic of gameplay,¹⁸ I argue that narratology could provide a nuanced understanding of how authors interact with audiences in such interactive texts.

¹⁶ Kathryn Cormer, “Illustrating Praxis: Comic Composition, Narrative Rhetoric, and Critical Multiliteracies,” *Composition Studies* 43 (2015), 75-104.

¹⁷ Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 11.

¹⁸ Gonzalo Frasca, “Ludologists Love Stories Too: Notes from a Debate that Never Took Place,” *Digital Games Research Conference Proceedings*, 2003, accessed July 24, 2016, http://www.ludology.org/articles/frasca_levelUP2003.pdf

Another area for future research stems from the focus on rhetorical personas in chapter two. This project connects rhetorical theories of persona with subcultural movements, complicating both bodies of research. In that chapter, I argued that the “indy-wrestling” subculture crafted a narrative for a second persona of hardcore wrestling fans that had been relegated to the third persona within WWE’s narrative address. In so doing, I point to the fluidity of movement between personas. Further, I would argue that scholarship on subcultures and countercultures could benefit from paying attention to how rhetorical personas work within these movements. Additionally, this research could provide insight into how subcultures become dominant culture. For example, the rise of “geek culture” in popular media could prove a profitable area to apply theories of persona to examine how media producers address formerly ignored audiences as either a new second persona, or possibly a fourth persona.

As a future research project, I would like to extend the application of narrative to examine the role of the rhetor in an age of participation, wherein the audience has direct input into the production process. With the advent of crowdfunding platforms like Kickstarter and GoFundMe, consumers are directly participating in the financial production of media texts. The most interesting of these platforms for me is Patreon, which links authors and audiences through monthly contributions to ongoing artistic and media projects. For a future study, I would like to examine the role of consumer funding in the production of media from musician and artist Amanda Palmer, who is the second leading creator of content on the Patreon site.¹⁹ Palmer provides interactive rewards for fans who donate specific amounts per creative project. This model links consumer and producer intimately in the production process.²⁰ Further, this project

¹⁹ “Top Patreon Creators,” *Graphtheon*, Last Modified July 23, 2016, <https://graphtheon.com/top-patreon-creators>.

²⁰ Amanda Palmer, “Amanda Palmer is Creating Art,” *Patreon*, Accessed July 23, 2016, <https://www.patreon.com/amandapalmer>.

allows for the extension of my focus on types of audience by paying closer attention to the connection between actual audience and authorial audience (and also actual author and implied author) in media texts. The Patreon model also allows for extension of the methodology to examine the role of narrative in the creation of appeals to audiences for funding. To be successful, artists like Palmer must address fans within a narrativized account of author and audience in which they identify with the implied author of the media content. Therefore, a rhetorical analysis of Palmer's appeals for funding and the resultant media texts produced through crowdfunding extends the scope of the current project with implications for authorship in an increasingly participatory media culture.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Vince McMahon's Introduction to the Entertainment Era

"It has been said that anything can happen here in the World Wrestling Federation, but now more than ever, truer words have never been spoken. This is a conscious effort on our part to "Open the Creative Envelope", so to speak, in order to entertain you in a more contemporary manner. Even though we call ourselves "Sports Entertainment" because of the athleticism involved, the keyword in that phrase is "Entertainment". The WWF extends far beyond the strict confines of sports presentation into the wide open environment of broad based entertainment. We borrow from such programs niches like soap-operas, like *"The Days of Our Lives"*, or, music videos such as those on MTV, Daytime talk-shows like *"Jerry Springer"* and others, cartoons like *"The King of The Hill"* on FOX, Sitcoms like *"Seinfeld"*, and other widely accepted forms of television entertainment. We, in the WWF, think that you, the audience, are quite frankly, tired of having your "intelligence insulted". We also think that you're tired of the same old simplistic theory of "Good Guys VS Bad Guys." Surely the era of "The super-hero urge you to say your prayers and take your vitamins" is definitely, passé. Therefore, we've embarked on a far more innovative and contemporary creative campaign, that is far more invigorating and extemporaneous than ever before. However, due to the live nature of "RAW" and the "WarZone", we encourage some degree of parental discretion, as relates to the younger audience allowed to stay up late. Other WWF programs on USA, such as "The Saturday Morning *LiveWire*", and "Sunday Morning Superstars", where there's a 40% increase in the younger audience obviously, however, need no such discretion. We are responsible television producers who work hard to bring you this outrageous, wacky, wonderful world known as the WWF. Through some 50 years the World Wrestling Federation has been an entertainment main-stay here in North America, and all over the world. One of the reasons for that longevity is: As the times have changed, so have we. I'm

happy to say that this new vibrant, creative direction has resulted in a huge increase in television viewership, for which we thank the USA Network and TSN for allowing us to have the creative freedom. But most especially, we would like to thank you, for watching. *RAW* and the *WarZone* are definitely the cure for the common show.

Appendix B: CM Punk's "Pipe Bomb" Promo

John Cena, while you lay there, hopefully as uncomfortable as you possibly can be, I want you to listen to me. I want you to digest this because before I leave in 3 weeks with your WWE Championship, I have a lot of things I want to get off my chest. I don't hate you, John. I don't even dislike you. I do like you. I like you a hell of a lot more than I like most people in the back. I hate this idea that you're the best. Because you're not. I'm the best. I'm the best in the world. There's one thing you're better at than I am and that's kissing Vince McMahon's ass. You're as good as kissing Vince McMahon's ass as Hulk Hogan was. I don't know if you're as good as Dwayne though. He's a pretty good ass kisser. Always was and still is. Whoops! I'm breaking the fourth wall! (Punk waves to the camera)

I am the best wrestler in the world. I've been the best since day one when I walked into this company. And I've been vilified and hated since that day because Paul Heyman saw something in me that nobody else wanted to admit. That's right, I'm a Paul Heyman guy. You know who else was a Paul Heyman guy? Brock Lesnar. And he split just like I'm splitting. But the biggest difference between me and Brock is I'm going to leave with the WWE Championship.

I've grabbed so many of Vincent K. McMahon's brass rings that it's finally dawned on me that there just that, they're completely imaginary. The only thing that's real is me and the fact that day in and day out, for almost six years, I have proved to everybody in the world that I am

the best on this microphone, in that ring, even in commentary! Nobody can touch me! And yet no matter how many times I prove it, I'm not on your lovely little collector cups. I'm not on the cover of the program. I'm barely promoted. I don't get to be in movies. I'm certainly not on any crappy show on the USA Network. I'm not on the poster of WrestleMania. I'm not on the signature that's produced at the start of the show. I'm not on Conan O'Brian. I'm not on Jimmy Fallon. But the fact of the matter is, I should be. This isn't sour grapes. But the fact that Dwayne is in the main event at WrestleMania next year and I'm not makes me sick!

Oh hey, let me get something straight. Those of you who are cheering me right now, you are just as big a part of me leaving as anything else. Because you're the ones who are sipping on those collector cups right now. You're the ones that buy those programs that my face isn't on the cover of. And then at five in the morning at the airport, you try to shove it in my face and get an autograph and try to sell it on Ebay because you're too lazy to go get a real job.

I'm leaving with the WWE Championship on July 17th. And hell, who knows, maybe I'll go defend it in New Japan Pro Wrestling. Maybe...I'll go back to Ring of Honor. (Punk looks at the camera and waves) Hey, Colt Cabana, how you doing?

The reason I'm leaving is you people. Because after I'm gone, you're still going to pour money into this company. I'm just a spoke on the wheel. The wheel is going to keep turning and I understand that. Vince McMahon is going to make money despite himself. He's a millionaire who should be a billionaire. You know why he's not a billionaire? Because he surrounds himself with glad-handed, non-sensical, douchebag (censored) yes men, like John Laurinaitis, who's going to tell him everything he wants to hear, and I'd like to think that maybe this company will be better after Vince McMahon is dead. But the fact is, it's going to be taken over by his idiotic daughter and his doofus son-in-law and the rest of his stupid family.

Let me tell you a personal story about Vince McMahon alright. We do this whole (anti) bully campaign...

Mic cut off.