



W&M ScholarWorks

Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects

Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects


2001

The Squared Circle and that Household Box: The Relationship between Wrestling, Television and American Culture

Brian Stewart

College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/etd>

 Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), and the [Mass Communication Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Stewart, Brian, "The Squared Circle and that Household Box: The Relationship between Wrestling, Television and American Culture" (2001). *Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects*. Paper 1539626288.

<https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-ac4d-fy14>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.

The Squared Circle and That Household Box:
The Relationship Between Wrestling, Television and American Culture

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of American Studies

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

by


Brian Stewart

2001

APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts


Author

Approved, May 2001


Richard Lowry

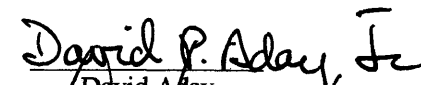
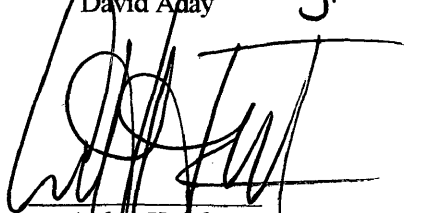

David Aday

Arthur Knight

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iv
I. HOW I GOT INTO THIS MESS AND THE MESS ITSELF: AN INTRODUCTION	2
II. TRADITIONAL WRESTLING: THE WAY THINGS WERE	7
III. CONTEMPORARY WRESTLING: THE LENGTHS TO WHICH SOME PEOPLE WILL GO TO ESCAPE A CAGE	19
IV. THE PHONE, THE MAT AND THE TV; OR THE REASON FOR THE CHANGE	36
V. CONCLUSION: FROM THE SO FAR TO THE SO WHAT	46
BIBIOLOGRAPHY	50

ABSTRACT

This thesis is meant to update and expand scholarship in the field of professional wrestling. All previous scholarship in this realm has centered itself on the theory—often attributed originally to Roland Barthes—that professional wrestling is a dramatic portrayal of good vs. evil, wherein the combatants take on opposing moral valences and then pantomime a physical encounter, the underlying purpose of which is to engage, and finally uphold, the audience’s preconceived notions of good and evil.

In recent years, though, this model of professional wrestling has become inapplicable. By using previous scholarship, this thesis discovers the basic assumptions and narrative conventions necessary for old theories of professional wrestling to be functional, then, through explications of recent matches and current fan literature, shows how these properties are no longer in use.

Instead of a morality play, this thesis shows that contemporary wrestling is an entertainment, concerned with spectacle and not good and evil. Furthermore, this thesis shows that a primary cause for the shift in wrestling’s thematic dynamics is the rise of televised competition between the two major wrestling federations, the WWF and the WCW.

Finally, this thesis touches on scholarship in the field of television, generally locating wrestling’s place within the wider culture and suggesting how its study may further the study in other areas dealing with television and culture.

The Squared Circle and That Household Box:
The Relationship Between Wrestling, Television and American Culture

1. How I Got Into This Mess and The Mess Itself: An Introduction

In 1956, my great-grandparents shared a two flat brownstone on Chicago's North side with their daughter, my grandmother, and her family. At that time, the older couple did not own a television set, and by all accounts found very little use for one. My great-grandpa amused himself with a pipe and racing form while great grandma spent her idle time listening to the radio or humiliating various family members in backgammon. When my grandmother and her family bought their first TV in the early fifties, her parents treated it as little more than a curiosity, indulging themselves mostly in the old fashioned diversions they had always enjoyed. On certain nights, though, great-grandma, then in her fifties, would creep down to her daughter's apartment, turn on the newfangled toy, and watch professional wrestling.

Given great grandma's generally gentle demeanor, the appeal of this program baffled her family. Still, there she would sit, alone on the couch, squinting at a nine inch, black and white television and working herself into what grandpa has described as a "hilarious frenzy" watching the exploits of Gorgeous George and the other prominent wrestlers of the day. She enjoyed the show with so much vigor that occasionally the yelps of encouragement she offered the men on screen became so loud they would wake my then nine-year-old mother two rooms away. When the show had ended, great-grandma would calmly shut off the TV and, being of an overwhelmingly courteous and polite nature, carefully tip-toe back up to her own apartment so as not to disturb anyone.

About the time my great-grandma was whooping in her daughter's living room, the French semiologist Roland Barthes was writing his classic essay on professional wrestling, entitled, simply, "The World of Wrestling."¹ His work dealt with the live version of the activity that was then popular in the "second rate halls" of Paris. Its general purpose was to dissect the

peculiar popularity of this spectacle. His understanding placed wrestling well within the scope of my great grandmother's tastes. Besides the appeal of half naked men throwing themselves around the ring, which perhaps should not be underestimated, Barthes would postulate that the wrestling match fulfilled a mythological script for her, giving her an event ripe with themes of justice and moral truth.

At the center of Barthes' observations lies the claim that wrestling is a drama. Unlike a sporting event, which derives much of its appeal from the uncertainty of the outcome, a wrestling match, he says, is obviously scripted, and even more than that, the script is thoroughly predictable. For Barthes, wrestling's central narrative dramatized a moral struggle. As he said, "wrestlers remain...the key which opens Nature, the pure gesture which separates Good from Evil, and unveils the form of a Justice which is at last intelligible."² The event, he says, therefore represented a cathartic experience for the audience. That is, Justice and Good were perhaps unreachable ideals in the real world of the spectators, but, in Barthes' perception, within the confines of the wrestling match, they were nothing less than expected. The spectators then could experience in the auditorium what they could not in their everyday lives, and the event offered a chance to witness, and cheer for, high ideals that might not otherwise clearly manifest themselves.

The same morality play that Barthes described in his slim, frankly interpretive, even speculative, essay was also described as occurring in America, and continued to be observed into the mid-1990's. Outside observers during this time-the social critics and academics interested in the pro wrestling phenomenon-unanimously depict a narrative centered on a paradigm of good vs. evil in keeping with the Barthes' contention. In 1972, scholars Gerald Craven and Richard Mosely, drawing their conclusions from their own watching of matches, wrote that wrestling fans witnessed "the eternal conflict of good versus evil personified in the physical struggle for

¹ Roland Barthes. *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972): 15-26

² *Ibid.*, 26

dominance by actors on a canvas stage.”³ In 1985, Gerald Morton and George O’Brien, also speaking from their own observations of the event, found that it was an “exaggerated morality play.”⁴ Even those closely connected with the event saw morality as wrestling’s central driving force as when, in 1954, Al Mayer, editor of *Wrestling World* magazine, said, “what the new wrestling public is interested in is villainy as villainy, virtue as virtue. It is very ethical.”⁵

When I arrived at graduate school in 1999, I found that my roommate was a die-hard pro-wrestling fan. He would watch all of the regular TV broadcasts (each of the two major federations had two per week) and friends would send him the Pay-per-view specials our limited cable system did not carry. Wanting to be social, I joined him. For a semester, September to December, I watched, with a shifting group of about eight others, as much wrestling as I could, even going as far as attending a live taping of the show.

Probably due to the thesis idea brewing in my mind, and my generally dispassionate nature, I never matched the same level of enthusiasm attributed to my great-grandmother, but my roommate sure did. Such wrestlers as Mick “Mankind” Foley, “Stone Cold” Steve Austin and The Rock tossed themselves about the ring and risked life threatening injury while my roommate shouted and sighed in what I think could easily be described as a “hilarious frenzy.”

The events my great-grandmother and I saw were ostensibly the same event—men crashing into each other in the center of a canvas ring—but, in actuality, they represented quite different phenomena. On the surface, they were similar but the traditional wrestling that thrilled previous generations and the contemporary wrestling that interested me represented distinct cultural entities. Wrestling, as I saw it performed over the course of several months, did not

³ Gerald Craven and Richard Mosely “Actors on the Canvas Stage: The Dramatic Conventions of Professional Wrestling.” *Journal of Popular Culture* 6.2 (1972): 332

⁴ Gerald Morton and George O’Brien. *Wrestling to Rasslin: Ancient Sport to American Spectacle*. (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press. 1985): 130

⁵ A. J. Liebling. “A Reporter at Large: From Sarah Bernhardt to Yukon Eric.” *The New Yorker*, 13 November 1954, 122.

have the same prominent moral structure, so much so that to speak of morality in contemporary wrestling becomes, if not impossible, a challenging and long-winded task.

The change from the mythological narrative structure of traditional wrestling came over such a short period of time that Sharon Mazer, in a book published in 1998, could claim, as Mayer, Barthes and Craven and Mosely might have in decades previous, “At its most visible level, then, professional wrestling performances are structured as a kind of contemporary psychomachia, or morality play.”⁶ Wrestling scholarship, then, has yet to discuss the shift that has recently occurred in professional wrestling in which the dramatization of the struggle between good and evil, once central to the show’s narrative, and, in fact, central to the show’s purpose, has been effectively removed from the its performance.

Beyond the existence of changes in wrestling’s narrative and thematic elements, the timing of these changes suggests that the medium of television was a crucial variable in bringing them about. As will be shown, the foundational tenets of wrestling only began to shift after the onset of competition between two nationally televised federations, the World Wrestling Federation (WWF) and World Championship Wrestling (WCW) and that this competition was directly related to the narrative and thematic changes that occurred. This conclusion is supported through fan sources, such as magazines and wrestler biographies, as well as through the matches themselves.

⁶ Sharon Mazer. *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle*. (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press. 1998): 27

Wrestling⁷ has existed through several generations, as my family's relationship to the event proves, but like so many institutions that can claim such longevity, it has been altered by the forces of culture and technology. In this case, the alterations have been prompted by the desire of wrestling promoters to achieve success with a television audience, a desire that, as will be explained, did not reach full fruition until the mid-1990's. Wrestling, thus, has become an event re-structured for television and the details of its structure may offer a view into current cultural trends.

⁷ There are of course many other kinds of events that can be described as "wrestling," from the Olympic form of the event to arm wrestling, to numerous others. For the purposes of this thesis, "wrestling" refers to professional wrestling, or the scripted form of the event that for most of the century has been-perhaps arguably, but I think very convincingly so-the most visible form of the event, and the one most prone to sell out Madison Square Garden. This form of wrestling developed out of the nineteenth century carnival tradition and gained prominence during the great depression by replacing "scientific wrestling," a slow moving competitive sport of strength and endurance that often had single holds last a half hour or more. For a good, brief description of the early history of professional wrestling, see David Hofstede. *Slammin': Wrestling's Greatest Heroes and Villains*. (Toronto: ECW Press. 1999): 3-13; or Lou Albano, Bert Randolph Sugar and Roger Woodson. *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Pro Wrestling*. (New York: Alpha Books. 1999):

2. Traditional Wrestling: The Way Things Were

To understand the change that wrestling has of late undergone, one must first understand the way it existed in the decades before. Every critical observer of professional wrestling has either explicitly or implicitly supported the hypothesis put forth by Barthes, and, with these writings as proof, it is clear that professional wrestling in America existed in much the same form as Barthes described in France in 1956.⁸

Two wrestlers were introduced, one which represented good, known as a “face” or “babyface” in industry jargon, and the other which represented evil, known as a “heel.” Throughout the match, the evil wrestler would use dirty tricks and illegal holds to subdue the good wrestler, who, in the name of good sportsmanship, would mostly work within the rules. Occasionally, the good wrestler would be forced to break the rules as well, but this was always in retaliation, and usually because the referee, for whatever reason, would not reign in the heel’s transgressions.⁹ At certain times in the match the nefarious character might come close to victory, usually through the utilization of tricky play, but matches generally, but not by any means always, ended with the triumph of the good wrestler.

The main theme of a wrestling match, then, was justice. Justice, of course, can refer to any number of different processes, legal, divine, natural, poetic, and probably uncountable other variations, many of which could possibly be applied as a working model for the form used in traditional wrestling. Perhaps in its simplest construction, wrestling most resembled what would commonly be called “divine justice” or, specifically, Catholic divine justice, with the crowd

⁸ This is my own conclusion based on readings of Barthes and other observers of traditional wrestling, which include: Liebling, Craven and Mosely, Mazer, Hendricks, Morton and O’Brien, Campbell, Freedman, and Modak. Any description of the general nature of wrestling before 1996 should be considered a composite of these writings, unless otherwise noted.

⁹ For a further account of the intricacies allowed with in the generally binary ethical structure of traditional wrestling, see Thomas Hendricks. “Professional Wrestling as Moral Order.” *Sociological Inquiry*. 44.3

taking the place of the clerical hierarchy interpreting the word of God, with God Himself replaced by the generally accepted public opinion of right and wrong. This Catholic construction is particularly useful because, as many of the observers of traditional wrestling describe, wrestlers would often change sides. A bad wrestler could become good-he can repent, that is-and be sanctified by the clergy-the crowd cheers him like a hero. Also, a good wrestler could become evil-become a heretic-and be vilified by the clerical authority-the crowd began to boo him.

This analogy is perhaps too speculative and underdeveloped to pass as a true working definition, but the precise existing paradigm of justice to which wrestling corresponds is likely irrelevant anyway. It is only important to realize that traditional wrestling was narratively focused on the theme of justice, the main components of which were a binary moral code¹⁰ and the judgment of a witnessing crowd. In this way, cruelty and bad sportsmanship in a wrestler's performance were punished with boos, and their opposites were exalted with cheers. The response of the crowd was not so much shaped by the quality of the performance-how well a character was evoked-but, rather, by the quality of the characters involved.

New Yorker writer A.J. Liebling, known as one of the best boxing writers of his day, describes a typical night of wrestling entertainment in his 1954 article, "A Reporter at Large: From Sarah Bernhardt to Yukon Eric."¹¹ His account is especially informative because the match he witnessed was neither a particularly important match nor a particularly special one. It represents something of a random sampling of wrestling at the time.

(1974)

¹⁰ It is possible to argue that wrestling actually had three moral categories, good, evil and neutral, the last of which would include any category of behavior, like violence or bravado, that is employed by most wrestlers regardless of their implied ethical valence. On closer inspection, though, I think the third category melts away, as things are subdivided into good and evil within the neutral category. For instance, violence in general is employed and encouraged by the crowd in both good and evil characters, but the type of violence used is ethically specific. As any of the observers I quote in this thesis describe, an evil wrestler will use underhanded tactics, like hair pulling, to gain an advantage, while the hero will utilize his athletic skills. For everything, it seems from the descriptions, there was a right and a wrong way to do them. In this way, traditional wrestling becomes a proponent of the age-old parental adage: "it's not what you do, it's how you do it that counts."

¹¹ Liebling, "A Reporter at Large: From Sarah Bernhardt to Yukon Eric," 114-133

The preliminary matches Liebling describes follow the standard traditional wrestling formula in which the face, who the audience can identify through mere physical appearance as a sportsman and hero, defeats his villainous opponent outright. The main event of the evening, though, a tag team bout, proved more complicated. The heels in this case were also the champions, leading Liebling to wonder “how [the evil wrestlers] would contrive to remain champions without defeating the heroes.”¹² Liebling here is aware that the heels could never actually defeat the heroes—the mythical structure of wrestling would not allow it—but it might be possible for them to somehow hold the title despite a defeat. This was what finally occurred. As the match reached its time limit, no clear victor had emerged and the nefarious combatants held on to their title, though the heroes were sure to have won the match had it continued. Liebling says of the match’s finale, “the eleven hundred old men and women just booed. So did I. It had stepped up our metabolisms, softened our arteries, strengthened our faith in the invincibility of right and built up a hell of a rematch.”¹³

Besides supporting Barthes’ thesis of a moral drama in wrestling (“strengthened our faith in the invincibility of right”), Liebling’s account uncovers an important aspect of traditional wrestling: audience participation. Audience participation has not disappeared from wrestling today, but in the traditional wrestling era, audience reaction was part of the progression of the narrative. To reach its finale, a wrestling match in traditional wrestling required audience judgement.

For this reason, the hero did not always have to win the match in order for it to have its theme of justice. While the usual progression of a wrestling narrative involved the victory of the forces of good, the villain had to occasionally win in order to create drama in later matches. As Thomas Hendricks wrote in his 1974 article “Professional Wrestling as Moral Order,” “The villains in these [championship] matches must prove an adequate test for the hero’s moral

¹² Ibid., 130

¹³ Ibid., 133

courage, for in religious terms, if Satan is trivial, what is the power of the Christian who overcomes him?”¹⁴ Hendricks feels that the moral order was restored when a string of villainous victories was finally overcome by a hero’s success in a championship match, but even in the lesser matches where the heel wins, justice triumphant still existed in the form of audience judgement.

In her book, Sharon Mazer describes just such a match involving Gorgeous George, one of the most popular wrestlers of the 50’s and 60’s, who antagonized crowds with a feminine, narcissistic persona, and Larry Moquin, “the strait man, wrestling in earnest.”¹⁵ She writes, “The powdered one [Gorgeous George] breaks the rules one minute and accuses Moquin of hair pulling the next. He minces and primps and then, in flashes of athleticism, demonstrates astonishing wrestling prowess, although his victory in the end is ill-won as any heel’s should be...his flaunting, taunting performances provoked loud, exuberant expressions of apparently homophobic antipathy from the audience.”¹⁶

Mazer uses her description mostly for a discussion of masculinity in wrestling, but it is also a perfect example of how an audience’s moral judgement was incorporated into the match. George, “the powdered one,” flaunted societal norms, and was thus a villain. He may have won the match, but the crowd’s rejection of his victory, their “homophobic antipathy,” allowed the sense of justice to remain. The viewers collectively refused to accept the legitimacy of George’s victory and their unanimous hatred of him supported each other’s belief that the values he represented were wrong. The justice came in the crowd’s moral judgement of the unfolding events, and that judgement was thus integral to the match’s narrative.¹⁷

¹⁴ Hendricks, “Professional Wrestling as Moral Order,” 181

¹⁵ Mazer, *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle*, 93-94

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 94

¹⁷ For another example (this one from the eighties) of a heel winning and the crowd’s booring completing the match’s narrative see the Randy Savage/George Steele match on *Wrestlemania 2*. Coliseum Video. 1986. (Video)

This is what Liebling means when he describes the crowd's reaction to the heels' success in the final match of his evening at the arena. His quote not only contains the expectation of the final hero's victory ("and built up a hell of a rematch"), which Hendricks talks about, but also shows how the audience members still created justice in the particular match at hand. By booing the undesirable ending, they strengthened their "faith in the invincibility of right," even though right had officially lost the match in question. Like in the Gorgeous George/Larry Moquin match, the judgement of the audience, the thumbs up/thumbs down verdict it gave the outcome, rounded off the show's narrative, and thus proves itself an essential part of the structure of traditional wrestling.

In traditional wrestling, the wrestling match was a cathartic event for the audience, meaning it gave them the opportunity not just to watch justice unfold on stage, but also, by their cheering the good wrestler and jeering the bad, to participate in it. While in their normal lives the process of justice might be too abstract or too subtle to identify, wrestling fans could find it in an accessible form in the wrestling ring.

Gerald Morton and George O'Brien write in their 1985 book-long history of the event, *Wrestling to Rasslin*, "the fans who attend the matches are able to release their hostilities," going on to say, "They see the foreman who gave them a bad day, the rude telephone worker, the customer who wrote the false check."¹⁸ Here the catharsis is one of hostility. The audience members could work through their anger and frustration at the day's disappointment. However, it wasn't just that the audience members were "releasing its hostilities" by watching wrestling and mentally substituting their own enemies for the beaten competitor in the match, it was that these hostilities were being re-channeled into a civilized ideal, that of justice. For the wrestling viewers it was not just that the foreman, the rude worker and the scamming customer had made them angry, it was that these people were wrong. They had committed evil deeds and deserved to be

¹⁸ Gerald Morton and George O'Brien. *Wrestling to Rasslin: Ancient Sport to American Spectacle*: 128

punished for them. Wrestling was an outlet for that feeling of justice yet undone, not just of frustration unexpressed. The catharsis that occurred was one of justice, not just one of revenge.

The judgment was probably made easier by the visceral nature of the performance. The event's focus on the body made it accessible to even the most uninitiated viewer. A viewer need not know the specific histories of the wrestlers involved in a match to discern the hero or the villain. The wrestler appeared in tight, scanty clothing with either finely defined muscular bodies, meaning he was a face, or fat, grotesque ones, indicating that he was a heel. Also, an audience member need not be familiar with the specific rules and scoring procedures of a bout. The participants threw each other about the ring, dove off of turnbuckles, and generally bashed each other senseless. Without past experience with or specific knowledge of professional wrestling, the traditional form of the event could be easily understood by everyone.

While wrestling seemed to be all parts physical, the truth was that the physical part only acted as an entry into the spectator's inner assumptions and beliefs. The corporeal nature of the show probably also helped the audience to detach themselves from their normal lives and internalize the performance. Good and evil, as defined in social and cultural terms, were simplified and set against each other in a clear and easily understood way. The highest ideals of society were thus being expressed in the most primal way. A spectacle existed that distilled a moral message to its essence. Spectators were not expected to contemplate the good vs. evil dynamic for its intricacies; they were expected to feel it. Traditional wrestling was not a performance meant to persuade, it was a physical manifestation of what were already widely accepted beliefs. Wrestling was not a conversion; it was a revival. It was not Nietzsche; it was a knee to the jaw.

For this to be true, the ideology at stake in the wrestling ring had to be one that the audience, as a body, agreed upon. Or said in another way: for there to be no ambiguity in the performance, there could be no ambiguity in the ideology of the audience. To do this, wrestling

had to present a hyper-simplified version of real life, so that complicated issues became clarified into mano y mano ring conflicts.

In 1989, Jeffry Mondak implicitly supported this hypothesis in his article “The Politics of Professional Wrestling,” when he found that “each of wrestling’s peaks of popularity [in the early 30’s, early to mid 50’s, and the mid 80’s] occurred during a period in American history when political events had fostered widespread feelings of isolationism or nationalism among the American public.”¹⁹ Even Barthes notes that in America, politics played an important role in the mythological performance of wrestling. While in France, the bad guy merely represented a personal ethical valence, in the United States it had a political one as well. He reports that often the villain was meant to be seen as a communist and a foreigner, usually of some indistinguishable Eastern European origin.²⁰

Mondak and others go beyond Barthes though, indicating that villains were not limited to communist imitators. Performers used any cultural prejudice they could to show the audience which performer should receive cheers, and which should receive taunts. Gerald Morton and George O’Brien point out that bad guys were not only Eastern Europeans, but also foreigners in general.²¹ Modak reports that in the wake of WWII, Nazis, such as Hans Schmidt, Hans Herman, Hans Schwarz and Ach du Lieber Kurt Von Poppenheim, were popular villains, as were Japanese, the most infamous of which was Oyamo Kato.²² He reports that in the 80’s, the most notorious heels “were the Iron Sheik, an ‘Iranian’ and a group of ‘Russians.’”²³ In America, wrestling was being used not just to punish certain ethical infractions, but to promote a political and cultural ideology as well. When the nation hated Germans and Japanese, those groups were used as villains; when the nation hated Russians and Iranians, it was they who were cast as heels.

¹⁹ Jeffry Mondak. “The Politics of Professional Wrestling.” *Journal of Popular Culture* 23.2 (1989), 145

²⁰ Barthes, *Mythologies*, 23

²¹ Morton and O’Brien, *Wrestling to Rasslin: Ancient Sport to American Spectacle*, 130

²² Mondak, “The Politics of Professional Wrestling,” 144

²³ *Ibid.*, 141

Mondak writes that wrestling was popular in the early 1950's because "professional wrestling utilized an ethical system bearing striking resemblance to McCarthy's simplistic dichotomy."²⁴ He places responsibility for the resurgence of wrestling popularity in the 1980's on the Iranian hostage crisis and the reinvigoration of the cold war under Ronald Reagan.²⁵ And Morton and O'Brien write, "The release of this hostility [against the evil foreigner character in wrestling] by the fans well relieves the frustrations Americans have felt because of trying international situations."²⁶ In times when America created a political image of itself as the good champion of democracy opposed to evil dictatorships, either in communist Russia or in the Ayatollah's Iran, its citizens simultaneously popularized a spectacle with a binary ethical structure.

But it was not as if promoters cast these characters as villains because of their personal political beliefs; they did it because that was what they felt their audience accepted. Complicated situations, like American foreign policy, were simplified until audience consensus on the relevant issues could be guaranteed. That is why Mondak sees wrestling popularity peaking when it did. The country was relatively unified in its opposition to an outside threat. In the sixties and early seventies, for example, American foreign policy was a source of great debate between different factions of the country's population. It was likely difficult, therefore, for a wrestling promoter to find consensus enough among the crowd to shape a popular foreigner villain (which is likely why there are no famous Vietnamese heels mentioned in any wrestling literature). Mondak suggests that it was easier to simplify cultural beliefs into a believable binary morality at times when the nation was galvanized behind certain assumptions.

Promoters did not need all audience members to hate Iranians so that the Iron Sheik could become a popular villain. The events in the ring were cartoon versions of the events of reality. Some wrestling viewers might have realized that our involvement in Iran was more complicated

²⁴ Ibid., 143

²⁵ Ibid., 141

than evil them/good us, but promoters were working with a cultural shorthand, using the wrestler's outward appearance and actions to show his inner evil. It seems like promoters and performers were using villains' ideology, nationality and personal demeanor as symbols of moral rot. The audience, then, did not just hate them for what they did in the ring necessarily, but they hated them for who they were. The best way for a performer to aggravate this hatred, and entertain the audience, was to tap into already existing stereotypes, and to tap into the stereotypes with the most universal dislike.

This implies a certain homogeneity in the audience's make up, and many of the sources bear this out. Liebling gets a lot of comic mileage from the fact that the entire audience at the match he saw were old, presumably white couples of a similar middling economic status. J.W. Campbell, writing in 1996, observed that the viewers at the matches he attended were all of the same lower socio-economic status. Business week reported in 1950 that 90% of wrestling's at home TV audience was female.²⁷ It seems that the audience for wrestling was of a shifting homogeneous make-up. While it was not the same over time, audiences for particular matches were constituted by people of similar backgrounds. It is likely that the sort of morality play wrestling represented appealed to different groups at different times. While a study of these viewer shifts may prove edifying in its own right, for the purposes here it is enough to note that there was a similarity in audience attitudes, which seems to have manifested itself in a similarity in the audience members' physical situations.

To properly tap into the similarities in their viewers' opinions, traditional wrestling performers seemed to make sure that their characterizations were unambiguous, so that no audience member would be confused as to what his response to the performance should be. One viewer might hate Iranians because the news showed that nation taking American hostages, and therefore automatically hate the Iron Sheik just on the basis of nationality, while another,

²⁶ Morton and O'Brien, *Wrestling to Rasslin: Ancient Sport to American Spectacle*, 130

²⁷ Business week. (1950) "It Pays to Sponsor Television Corn." October 7. 25

realizing the complications of the international situation in the middle east, could hate the Iron Sheik for his in ring deeds. Heels were to be seen as evil, and faces to be good, and they produced these appearances by engaging both personal and political stereotypes.

Evil in traditional wrestling, then, can be seen as meaning any deviation from the perceived norm in cultural standards. Morton and O'Brien quote Hendricks' description of wrestling as an "exaggerated morality play fervently manipulating the prejudices of the audience as quickly as it could perceive them" and add that in their own observations, they found "the basic conflict of professional wrestling is between good and evil, depending upon the current generation and what they see as being good and evil."²⁸ Good and evil in traditional wrestling were simply what the promoters thought their audience thought they were.

This is why performers who played villains were often as popular as those who played heroes. The role of the evil wrestler was to draw audience hatred. Each and every member of the audience had to want the villain's defeat otherwise the justice narrative had no significance. An audience's enjoyment of the show was based in large part on the heel's ability to antagonize them. When a performer could do this well, he was very much in demand.

Not that American culture in either the 50's or the 80's was all that simple. Other strains of thought besides pure anti-communism existed, but wrestling supported the dominant ethos. As a cultural manifestation, wrestling was sort of the anti-Beats-to continue to focus on the fifties-representing undiluted conformity, a conformity so serious and pervasive, that to move outside it was to find oneself bludgeoned and pinned before a live studio audience. And since the moral message was tied to political and social factors, which were used for easy characterization, wrestling existed as the spokes-event for the dominant culture. Audience members watched to feel connected simultaneously with each other and cultural norms. They were allowed to judge cultural deviants, by cheering and jeering the results of the match, and, on good days, witness them being beaten to a bloody pulp.

And all this conformity was delivered with a racy nonconformist jolt. After all, the show did involve half naked men smashing each other against the ground. And it wasn't just an athletic display, but one of violence. The combatants beat on each other and threw each other to the ground as a regular course of events. In many cases, the performance didn't end until one of the characters was pinned or unconscious. Some of the participants were quite athletic, true, but the athleticism was almost exclusively directed towards violent means. As violence was the most prominent part of the participants' performance, then so was it the most prominent part of a wrestling performance as a whole.

Wrestling, with the body as its centerpiece, and violence as its mode of discourse, could allow its viewers to feel raw and disconnected with civilization while simultaneously reinforcing the dominant cultural assumptions. All the sweat and flesh and fisticuffs evoked a primitivism that was unavailable to the spectators in their daily lives, perhaps much like boxing or any other physically combative sporting event. Like viewers of other brutish displays, a wrestling audience could become swept up in the visceral display of the contest and engage their baser tendencies—"release their hostilities" as Morton and O'Brien say. And yet, when it was over, in wrestling, it was justice that triumphed, and the show became a function of civilization again. In boxing, only a combatant's physical attributes matter, so that a saint and a rogue have the same chances of winning, if their abilities as a boxer are equally matched. This is not true of professional wrestling. In wrestling, the distinction between saint and rouge directly determines the one between winner and loser. In a traditional professional wrestling match, unlike in boxing, everybody flew about and smashed into one another, but in the end, order was its object and subject.

So, traditional wrestling was built on the idea of audience judgement, and balanced itself on the contradiction between the theme of social order and the violent way this theme was delivered. Contemporary wrestling, as will soon be explained, has undone this foundation.

²⁸ Ibid., 106

Violence is now both theme and mode of delivery and judgement, of a moral or ethical nature, has disappeared from audience response.

3. Contemporary Wrestling: The Lengths to Which Some People Will Go To Escape a Cage

Wrestling is currently more popular than it has ever been. *Business Week* estimates that the WWF, one of the two main national federations, is a \$1.3 billion company, and reports that its weekly shows are consistently the highest rated programs on cable TV.²⁹

And yet it is hard to identify any “widespread feelings of isolationism or nationalism among the American public,” at least none on par with anti-Nazism, anti-Communism or anti-Iranianism, which Mondak identified in 1989 as a necessary ingredient to widespread wrestling popularity. Also, certain staples of wrestling characterization, particularly the evil foreigner character, which all critical observers of traditional wrestling describe as an important part of an evening of wrestling entertainment, has disappeared from the WWF ring.³⁰ Considering wrestling’s current popularity along with the lack of certain conditions observers have identified as key to such popularity, the question becomes: were the writers about wrestling wrong about its appeal, or has there been a change in the event to render their speculations obsolete?

Starting in the mid-1990’s critical discourse concerning wrestling began to change. In 1996, J.W. Campbell published an article in the *Journal of American Culture* entitled “Professional Wrestling: Why the Bad Guy Wins,” in which, while still insisting on a binary ethical system, he recognizes a change in the clear good guy/bad guy distinction of traditional wrestling. He observed from his own attending of matches that wrestling fans came from the bottom of the socio-economic strata. He also noticed that, at that time, most of the fans identified more heavily with the evil wrestler, who must cheat in order to win. He concludes that the economically challenged wrestling fans saw the villain as sharing a similar lot as them. Like

²⁹ Pam Moore. “Kinder, Gentler Sex and Violence.” *Business Week*. 13 December 1999, 52

³⁰ In the time I watched wrestling regularly-September 1999 through December 1999-I saw only one avowed foreigner wrestle-a sumo character named Rikishi-about whom most commentary by ringside announcers and other wrestler focused on his girth rather than his stated nation of origin.

them, the heels had to cheat in order to win against the more advantaged, and more physically attractive, faces. Campbell states of wrestling in general, “for the aforementioned losers [of society] it is a chance to celebrate these differences through the carnival and the spectacle...And that’s another reason why...the bad guy often wins.”³¹ He also concludes, “wrestling as a sport may not make much sense for those who hold the dominant ideology.”³²

If he’s right, this is an inversion of traditional wrestling, which was specifically designed to make sense to the dominant ideology. Yet, he still argues for the same binary ethical system that had existed for decades, if in an altered form. In his conception, the moral order in wrestling still exists, even if it is reversed. (After all, if there are no good guys or bad guys, how can a bad guy win?) And even this altered form is somewhat expected by previous writers on the subject. Morton and O’Brien did say, as quoted before, that good and evil in wrestling depended “upon the current generation and what they see as being good and evil.” The system Campbell describes is the same as traditional wrestling, or at least one that could easily fit into the traditional wrestling rubric; it was just that, in Campbell’s view, wrestling fans in 1996 were viewing good and evil the opposite way as earlier generations. The structure had not changed, just its position in society.

Sharon Mazer similarly upholds the traditional wrestling system while simultaneously noticing changes in it. As noted earlier, she still sees wrestling “at its most visible level...structured as a kind of contemporary psychomachia, or morality play,” but she also realizes a change, writing, “professional wrestling’s presentations of virtue and vice are more ambiguous than might be apparent at first glance, the event more carnival than Mass.”³³ The realization here is of the loosening of the rules, of a pulling away from strict adherence to the

³¹ J.W. Cambell. “Professional Wrestling: Why the Bad Guy Wins.” *Journal of American Culture* 19.2 (1996): 131-132

³² *Ibid.*, 131

³³ Mazer, *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle*, 3

archetypal displays that marked traditional wrestling. But Mazer still identifies the structure as being intact.

In the years since Mazer finished her research (she concerns herself with the period 1989-1994 mostly, but uses some fan sources from 1996-1997)³⁴ and Campbell published his paper (1996) a more fundamental transition has occurred within professional wrestling. The Barthian structure of good vs. evil has drained out of the event, having been replaced by one more spectacle driven and one with no reference to moral struggle.

A prime example of this is the match between the Undertaker and Mankind in the 1998 WWF Pay-per-view special “King of the Ring.”³⁵ During the pre-match hype, the Undertaker is referred to as “the black angel” and announces that he is “the lord of darkness” and “the reaper of wayward souls.” In tradition wrestling, this kind of identification would have marked him as a clear heel. But similar things are said of his opponent. Of Mankind’s place in the WWF stable of stars, ring side announcer Jim Ross says that “none are more deranged then Mankind.” Later, when Ross says of the Undertaker, “I hate to say this but he’s almost Satanic in his attitude,” to which his announcing partner Jerry “the King” Lawler, responds, “No, you talk about satanic, you’re lookin’ at it right there: Mankind.” As the match was promoted, then, the audience is not expected to identify either a good or bad character, but instead to realize that the competition consists of two men who may just be worse than one another. Already, this has violated the Barthian tenets of wrestling by not outlining a clear moral valence for the participants.

This is not unique to the Undertaker/Mankind match. Almost all of the WWF stars are promoted in such a way that they would be considered heels within traditional wrestling. “Stone Cold” Steve Austin has a character patterned after serial killer Richard “The Ice Man” Kuklinski.³⁶ Kane, the Undertaker’s brother, has many of the same personality traits as his

³⁴ Ibid., 179-186

³⁵ The match can be seen in its entirety on *King of the Ring* 1998. Titan Sports Inc. 1998 (Video). All subsequent quotes referring to this match have been taken directly from this video unless otherwise stated

³⁶ David Hofstede. *Slammin’: Wrestling’s Greatest Heroes and Villains*. (Toronto: ECW Press. 1999): 18

“satanic”-as Jim Ross put it-sibling.³⁷ The Rock, one of the most popular wrestlers in the WWF-he opened television coverage of the Republican National Convention in 2000-is vain and self-absorbed, traits that in traditional wrestling marked a certain heel.³⁸

In fact, in The Rock’s autobiography, he explicitly talks about the change from the moral structure of traditional wrestling. He says that early in 1997, “the World Wrestling Federation was experiencing a dramatic attitudinal shift” placing responsibility for the shift on the character created by wrestler Steve Austin. He continues, “Steve was just starting to become the popular antihero then. He was giving the finger, saying ‘ass’ on television and generally exhibiting behavior that in the past would have made him a total heel. But the fans loved it!”³⁹

The Rock further describes how his character at the time, who was “very traditional, very typical of a babyface in the 1970’s and 1980’s,” would receive boos from the crowds and taunts of “Rocky sucks!” and “Die, Rocky, die.” He says, “the fans would look at Rocky in his nice pretty blue outfit and then look at Stone Cold Steve Austin cursing and giving the finger and popping open cans of Budweiser and they’d say ‘Rocky...Forget it!’”⁴⁰

While its clear from this evidence that the idea of a heel has changed, there is still the use of the heel/face labels within wrestling circles. For example, in an internet discussion prior a recent match, a fan wrote, “there are some huge possibilities for this match because so many different people could possibly make a face-heel turn,”⁴¹ which indicates that he feels there are differences between faces and heels, and that a wrestler may switch sides. But this terminology no longer has any meaning. The same fan goes on to say, “And Kurt could turn face, it’s possible, if he isn’t already.” Conceptually the heel/face distinction comes from the confrontation between

³⁷ This was explained to me by my roommate while I watched my first Kane match, and later corroborated by statements by ringside announcers and other wrestlers

³⁸ Gorgeous George for one example, but for others: “the Narcissist” Lex Luger (Mazer, *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle*, 96-97) and Paul “Mr. Wonderful” Orndorff (hear the crowd when he is announced in a tag team match on *Wrestlemania’s Greatest Matches*. Coliseum Video. 1989. (Video))

³⁹ The Rock with Joe Layden. *The Rock Says...* (New York: Regan Books. 2000): 151-152

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 152

⁴¹ excerpted from <http://iowrestling.com/columns/1361.shtml>

the two; they only exist in opposition to each other. Yet, here a knowledgeable fan says “if he isn’t already,” indicating that he cannot tell whether a wrestler is a villain or a hero.

This same contradiction can be found in the rhetoric of the wrestlers themselves. The Rock, while discussing dying fan interest in a rivalry between himself and Steve Austin, says, “Regardless of what people say and how the industry has evolved, I think there are some basic tenets to which you must adhere. One of them is this: People want to boo somebody, and people want to cheer somebody.”⁴² This seems to imply a belief in an unchangeable necessity of heels and heroes, so that the fans can have someone to boo and someone to cheer, yet later, while describing his character’s “turn from heel to babyface” he says, “in the end, even a babyface version of The Rock had to exhibit all, or at least most, of the vile characteristics that made the heel version of The Rock so compelling.”⁴³

This last comment simply does not make sense within the standards of traditional wrestling. In the Barthian form of the event, a babyface could have no vile characteristics. The moral structure of wrestling depended on an unambiguous separation between the good and the evil. Even if The Rock is right, and audiences need someone to boo and someone to cheer, it is clear by his own description of character development that the fans’ determination of which wrestler deserves which response no longer has any relation to a wrestler’s moral valence.

One could argue that the morality within wrestling has just become more nuanced in recent years, and Sharon Mazer says as much when she writes, “Yet, the apparent moral clarity of wrestling is not so clear after all. Professional wrestling’s moral universe is, in fact, imbued with essential contradictions within and between the fiction of the play and the fact of the business.”⁴⁴ Perhaps this is true to some extent, and the removal of morality from professional wrestling was likely a slow and subtle process. But at a certain point, something becomes so nuanced as to make the original labels completely inapplicable. Such is the case with wrestling. At the time

⁴² The Rock with Joe Layden. *The Rock Says...*, 274

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 274

Mazer was writing about, the event was likely in a transition phase, when the morality was indeed becoming more complicated. By the time of the Undertaker/Mankind match, the terms of good and evil are completely unrelated to the world of wrestling. Even if they are still used, as the Rock still uses "heel" and "face," the terms have become hollow, and no longer connect with societal assumptions of morality.

For one representative example, the use of homosexuality in wrestling performance illustrates the shift away from a moral framework in narrative performance. In traditional wrestling, homosexuality was used as a cue to the wrestler's distasteful character. In Sharon Mazer's description of Gorgeous George's victory over Larry Moquin, the one that ended with the audience's "homophobic antipathy," George's effeminate persona underlined his status as a heel. The homosexuality, the mincing and primping, told the audience that George was a bad guy. He used it to further his identity as a rule breaker by flaunting societal conventions.

Part of the effectiveness of the performance lay in the contrast with George's opponent, Moquin, an ultra-manly type who just wants to fight without any additional posturing. Moquin, then, played strait man to George's fool, and the entertainment value of the match, as measured by the screaming crowd that watched it, was related to the separation between these personalities. The two characters are pitted against each other, each on display for the crowd to cheer or jeer, and each used their sexuality as a signifier of moral valence. Moquin signals the audience through his manliness that he is a face and Gorgeous George signals them through his homosexual posturing that he is a heel.

Not that homosexuality was the only cue used in traditional wrestling. In some matches, the wrestlers might have been morally separated by political ideology. As Morton and O'Brien point out, the heel was often a foreigner while the hero was a true believer in the American way. The exact category of separation was not important, what was important was that the combatants were clearly separated. They were not just different from each other, but polar opposites. The

⁴⁴ Mazer, *Professional Wrestling: Sport And Spectacle*, 153

representation of sexuality was being used as a cue to George's inner evil, and in order to cue the audience response unambiguously, there could be no melding of the different sexualities.

In contemporary wrestling, homosexuality is used for domination, and the moral valence no longer applies. One contemporary wrestler, known as "Road Dogg" Jesse James uses simulated homosexual rape to prove his superiority over opponents.⁴⁵ During his introduction speech, which is familiar enough to fans that audience members often deliver it along with him, Road Dogg refers to his wrestling as "Doggy style", a clear sexual innuendo, but not necessarily a homosexual one. During the intro, he is building up his masculinity, using his potency and sexuality as a metaphor for his ability in the ring. The diatribe implies that not only are his wrestling skill and sexual prowess related, but in fact may actually be the same thing. During the match, this implication becomes explicit. Once Road Dogg gains the upper hand over an opponent, he bends the opponent over and simulates anal sex with him while looking to the audience for approval. The crowd, then, responds with shouts of encouragement.

The viewers are not encouraging homosexuality, a practice many of the audience members might, in fact, find repulsive, but, rather, they are cheering for domination. Road Dogg's simulated homosexual encounter is acceptable because the pleasure he derives from it is not sexual. He is merely proving his superiority over another man in what he seems to feel is the most humiliating way possible. He is not gay, he is merely treating his opponent like he would treat a woman, and this allows him to keep his heterosexual prowess while eliminating that of his opponent.

Road Dogg's performance is not unique among wrestlers. One known as X-Pac has a signature move, called a Bronco Buster, which suspiciously looks like he is forcing his opponent to give him oral sex.⁴⁶ A sumo performer, Rikishi, humiliates his competition with the Stink Face, a move that has him rubbing his barely covered rear end on his opponent's nose. Over and

⁴⁵ This display is common and occurred often in the time I watched wrestling on TV. For a videotaped example, see *Unforgiven*. Titan Sports Inc. 1999. (Video)

over, homosexual sex is used to establish a wrestler's domination, and in each case this performance is cheered by the crowd. In traditional wrestling, homosexuality was used to provoke a negative response from the crowd. A performer like Gorgeous George acted vaguely effeminate, and thus the crowd hated him. Now a full pantomime of homosexual intercourse occurs, but the crowd makes no judgement. A poll of wrestling fans would probably find that a great majority of them oppose sexual assault, that most feel uncomfortable about acts of sodomy, and that many despise any sort of homosexuality. Yet they cheer for all three when Road Dogg does it in the ring.

At one point, a wrestler's actions were tied to a moral valence. Good wrestlers did Good things, and evil wrestlers did Evil things, so the cheering and jeering of the crowd was connected to some judgement. People yelled to encourage a good performance, but how they yelled tied them to a larger cultural and social structure. Gorgeous George, the wrestler, was popular for being good at playing a character, but Gorgeous George, the character, was jeered because his attitudes did not match those of the audience. In contemporary wrestling, the audience is alienated from moral judgement. They cheer for a fine performance, but do not discriminate between a performance of good or evil. Now, Road Dogg, the wrestler, is cheered for being good at his job, but there is no judgement on Road Dogg the character. The audience still acts as a unit-as it did in traditional wrestling-cheering for Road Dogg with a single voice, but the intermediary step of moral judgement has been removed. Since the moral judgement of the audience members is not being engaged, their connection to a higher cultural code is not being tapped. Wrestling fans are not alienated from the event they are watching-in fact, judging from the high popularity of the event, they enjoy it very much-but they are not connecting with a greater moral sense as those who watched traditional wrestling did.

One might claim that domination in itself had become a moral good within contemporary wrestling. It may be possible, after all, that the crowd only cheers for Road Dogg because they

⁴⁶ Same as previous footnote

value the clear defeat of an opponent even more than they dislike the homosexual context in which it is achieved. Even if this were true, there is still a tension between moralities; wrestling fans must at times choose which morality is most important to them. Watching Road Dogg's performance, or those of X-Pac or Rikishi, a viewer must decide whether the wrestling good of domination outweighs the societal bad, in some people's perception, of homosexuality. Also, there are times, as will be discussed below, when the crowd still cheers for the losing wrestler, which makes the audience's opinion of victory and defeat seem, in some cases at least, ambivalent.

The type of match in which the Undertaker and Mankind participated further separates the contemporary style of wrestling from its Barthian predecessor by emphasizing spectacle rather than moral struggle. The two competitors in this case were set to battle each other in a "Hell in the Cell" match, so named because a 16-foot tall cage was lowered onto the ring and the two performers were then locked inside. The stated purpose of this type of match was for the combatants to inflict serious injury on each other, a fact explicitly laid out in the pre-event commentary by Jim Ross and Jerry Lawler. "It is a perverse, vile, diabolical structure," Ross says. To this, Lawler adds the adjectives "satanic" and "hellish" before concluding, "It is custom built for injury."

This kind of back and forth closely matches the usual hype wrestling commentators inject into a match. Their job is to add excitement to a match by reminding the audience of what is at stake. In a match between bitter rivals, announcers will remind the audience just how much the combatants hate each other. In a title match, they will remind the audience just how much the wrestlers want to be champion. In the case of the Undertaker/Mankind match, they continually reminded the audience just how likely it was that someone would be seriously injured.

Traditional wrestling fans were witness to a drama that gained effectiveness through the utilization of simplified behavior. Violence was used to engage the crowd on an emotional level,

but it was always used as a means to an end. The Undertaker/Mankind match, being sold as it was as pure violence, was all means.

Fans also engage in rhetoric that proves this point. In preparation for the latest Hell in the Cell match, a six-man competition that occurred on December 10, 2000, fan discussions suggest that pure violence has replaced morality as the centerpiece of wrestling narrative. Here is one particular online exchange as an example:

Weakner: Definitely, I think the big question is though: who'll take the huge bump?

Brian: I was thinking HHH but with this back injury I'm not too sure now.

Shaun: None of the guys in this match will take huge bumps.

Weakner: The only people who can are Angle or Rikishi, really.

John: Angle might honestly though, I'd rather not see it. Look at where HBK and Foley⁴⁷ ended up after their big bumps. That's right early retirement.

Brian: Yeah that's very true. We don't want to see these great wrestlers risking parts of their careers for just one match.⁴⁸

Just who would risk major injury with a spectacular stunt-just who would take "the huge bump"- is as much a part of the speculation prior to big matches as who the winner might be.⁴⁹ Even if one of the fans involved in the conversation worried about the health of the wrestlers, violence and injury, real violence and injury, have become an expected part of televised wrestling. The very fact that fans discuss possible career ending injuries prior to a match-whether it is with concern or anticipation-suggests the importance of real violence in wrestling.

The WWF's own web site, wwf.com, began its description of this match with the headline, "Hell in the Cell was the most brutal and barbaric match of the year -- and featured Rikishi's death-defying fall off the Cell!"⁵⁰ As a headline, this statement is designed to pique reader interest. The use of words like "brutal" and "barbaric" and the mention of "Rikishi's death

⁴⁷ The name "Foley" is a reference to the Undertaker/Mankind Hell in the Cell match

⁴⁸ excerpted from <http://iowrestling.com/columns/1361.shtml>

⁴⁹ Possible outcomes of the match are discussed elsewhere on this webpage

⁵⁰ <http://www.wwf.com/news/headlines/> (December 12, 2000)

defying fall” show that the makers of the website -employees of the WWF-feel that violence, violence without any stated moral purpose, was the main selling point of the match. The prominence of violence is not limited to the headline. From the WWF’s description of the match: “Stone Cold [Steve Austin] repeatedly grated Triple H’s face against the steel grating of the cage, busting him open [making him bleed]. In fact, [Steve Austin] walked completely around the cage, grating [Triple H’s] face against the steel the whole way, and busting him open wider and wider!” “[Triple H] recovered, and threw Austin through a car window, busting [him] open!” “The Rock tried to give Triple H a Rock Bottom on top of a car, but [Triple H] hit a low blow on [The Rock] and hit him with a Pedigree on top of the car -- causing The Rock to bleed!” “As the crowd buzzed, all four men battled atop the cage, where the Undertaker busted Angle open!”⁵¹

Besides Rikishi’s “death defying fall,” four of the five other competitors had visibly bleeding wounds by the end of the match. More than just bleeding, though, their pain became an essential part of the show’s narrative, becoming a good portion of the federation’s official description of it. Also, these moments are punctuated by exclamation points, showing the excitement the WWF believes these moments deserve, and include such phrases as “as the crowd buzzed,” implying that the live audience enjoyed and encouraged the display they were witnessing.

Generally speaking, wwf.com is rather subdued on these issues. For example, its biography of the Undertaker, who Jim Ross referred to as “satanic,” reads in full:

The Undertaker is perhaps the most awesome presence the Federation has ever seen. The American Bad Ass has finally returned after an almost yearlong absence from the ring. When he enters arenas with the thundering sound of his motorcycle, everyone stops to see what will happen next.

The Undertaker has been a haunting force since he entered the Federation at the 1990 Survivor Series. He has since transformed into a frightening power. He promises he will dominate all those who oppose him and so far he has more than lived up to those words.⁵²

⁵¹ <http://www.wwfarmageddon.com/results11.html>

There is no mention of his being “the black angel” or “the lord of darkness,” as he is called in his 1998 Hell in the Cell intro. The bio uses words like “haunting” and “frightening,” hinting at the kind of adjectives that preceded his Hell in the Cell intro, but they do not have the same magnitude. (A house cat caught in the right light can be frightening, but it is nothing compared to the lord of darkness.) Only the word “dominate” denotes the sort of violence that occurred in the match mentioned above. The internet arm of the WWF seems purposely subdued, possibly in response to attempts to censor both professional wrestling specifically and the internet as a whole, so it is very telling that wwf.com would describe the most recent Hell in the Cell in such violent terms. Even presented in this toned down forum, the fact that wrestlers get “busted open” plays a large role in the match’s narrative. Characters bleeding and falling large distances are not spice, not something that can be edited out. Rather, it is the central driving force in the match, its reason for being.

Hell in the Cell matches are not the only variety that focus on violence. Later in the same night as the Mankind/Undertaker match, a First Blood Match was staged between “Stone Cold” Steve Austin and Kane for the WWF title.⁵³ The purpose of this match was for the combatants to fight until one of them began to bleed. In order to script the ending, the eventual loser, Steve Austin, was required to surreptitiously cut himself across the forehead with a concealed razor blade.⁵⁴ Before the event Kane, declared that if he lost he would set himself on fire,⁵⁵ an announcement which led Jerry Lawler to shout, “Its a win-win situation as far as I’m concerned. Either we’ll have a new WWF champion tonight or we’re going to get to see a guy set himself on fire. It’s great either way.” Like in the Hell in the Cell, The First Blood Match focuses on

⁵² <http://www.wwfsuperstars.com/index.html>

⁵³ This match can also be seen in its entirety on *King of the Ring 1998*. Titan Sports Inc. 1998 (Video) and all subsequent quotes referring to this match come from the video, unless otherwise stated.

⁵⁴ First Blood Matches aren’t the only matches where participants cut themselves with concealed razor blades. In the first Hell in a Cell (which can be seen in its entirety on *Bad Blood 1997*. Titan Sports Inc. 1997 (Video)) Shawn Michaels visibly blades himself on the forehead to enhance the effect of being rammed face first into the cage.

⁵⁵ Setting himself on fire is common for Kane-in the time I watched weekly WWF broadcasts, I saw him do

violence-even more so, in fact. In the Hell in the Cell, injury is hoped for, even expected, but the First Blood Match doesn't end until an injury occurs.

The performers in these matches are not expected to enact a moralistic fable. Instead they are set up to be instruments of violence. In the Hell in the Cell match, announcers established the combatants as deranged men without conscience who like to inflict pain. And this wasn't even the title match, meaning that not even the stated material goal of professional wrestling, the championship belt, was at stake. All that remained to propel the match's narrative was blood lust. In the First Blood Match, in which there was a title at stake, blood signaled the end of the event-so that the rules of the match required a blood lust, if the performance was ever to end.

In terms of blood lust, the Undertaker/Mankind match was not a disappointment. Within the first two minutes, Mankind, who circumvented the rules by climbing to the top of the cage to begin fighting, was thrown from the top of the structure, crashing through an announcers' table sixteen feet below. Despite a serious concussion and a separated shoulder-these were real injuries, not just part of a storyline-Mankind, whose real name is Mick Foley, continued to wrestle. He climbed back on top of the cage where he was almost immediately thrown through the roof, landing on the mat twelve feet below just ahead of a steel chair that fell squarely on top of his face. Then, despite being knocked unconscious for the second time in fifteen minutes and suffering with a bruised kidney and a broken tooth that had somehow gotten lodged in his nose-again, real injuries-Mankind continued to wrestle. After a few comparatively incidental exchanges of blows, the match finally ended when the Undertaker pinned Mankind, but only after lifting him off his feet and slamming him onto a pile of thumbtacks. Battered, bleeding internally and floating on the edge of consciousness-actually battered, bleeding and woozy-Mankind

refused a stretcher and, leaning heavily on fellow wrestler Terry Funk, walked out of the arena as the crowd chanted in unison, “Foley! Foley! Foley!”⁵⁶

The decision of the crowd to chant Mankind’s real name reveals their attitude toward the match. All sense of fiction had been broken. In the contest, the fans did not witness a fictional character receiving symbolic justice but, rather, watched a real man really falling off a really tall structure. The crowd appreciated Mick Foley’s willingness to participate in what was, in effect, his own televised suicide attempt. The character of Mankind, therefore, became immaterial.

In contemporary wrestling it seems an understanding exists between the wrestlers and the audience that the stunts that occur within the ring are scripted, but also real. Promoters and performers may invent the feuds and alliances between different characters that drive the narratives forward, but the crowd realizes that it is real people who feel the pain.

On the January, 2001, issue of *Pro Wrestling Illustrated*, “Stone Cold” Steve Austin was pictured above the words, “Who Does He Really Hate? Someone Will Pay for Austin’s Pain.” The article inside by the same title revealed that the pain to which this referred was not the fictional pain of a story line, but real pain resulting from “the neck and spinal injuries that nearly cost him his career.” But the author of the article also expects Austin to take the frustration of his eleven-month absence out on his wrestling competition, asking, “who would pay for the year he spent away from the ring?” The article concludes with a few viable options, all of which are explained in terms of story line, and not personal animosity.⁵⁷ Like with Mankind, a permeable division exists between the real physical situation of a wrestler and that wrestler’s narrative situation.

Not all magazines present this ambiguous approach to wrestling’s reality. Many have a pronounced bias one way or the other. Some treat wrestling strictly as a drama. *World of*

⁵⁶ The reports of Mankind’s injuries come from his autobiography, Mick Foley. *Have A Nice Day! A Tale of Blood and Sweatsocks*. (New York: Regan Books, 1999): 477-484

⁵⁷ David Rosebaum. “Who Does He Really Hate? Someone Will Pay for Austin’s Pain.” *Pro Wrestling Illustrated*. January 200, 130-131

Wrestling Magazine, for example, includes articles discussing the popularity of certain wrestling characters⁵⁸ and detailing the WWF's possible vulnerability in its ratings war with the WCW.⁵⁹ The emphasis here is on wrestling as television, and readers of this type of periodical are interested in the craft of producing the show. Other magazines treat wrestling characters and their exploits as if they were real. For example, a recent issue of *Inside Wrestling* contained an article asking of wrestler Kurt Angle (whose character at the time was attempting to steal the wife of another character), "What kind of man would passionately kiss Mrs. Triple H on national TV for 10 seconds then pass it off as a completely innocent act?"⁶⁰ Here the author is interested in the details of character, and while there is no moral judgement made about his attempts to steal another man's wife, the article does bring into question the honesty of Angle's claim that "nothing happened." The tone of the piece suggests that the author, and by extension his readers, is curious about the inner workings of Angle's psyche as if he were a real person. There are thus two distinct ways in which wrestling fans interact with the event

Wrestler biographies, too, present this dichotomy. Autobiographies like the ones written by Mick Foley and The Rock offer their readers a behind the scenes look at the business of professional wrestling. Fans who enjoy this literature want to know what personal and economic pressures precipitated the creative decision to have a certain match. Other biographies treat the events in the ring as real. *The Story of the Wrestler They Call "Stone Cold"* by Dan Ross, for example, includes a passage in which "Steve was also angry when WWF commissioner Sergeant Slaughter stripped him of his intercontinental title." It also claims that "When Vince McMahon suggested he be patient and work within the system, Austin used a [wrestling move called the] Stone Cold stunner on McMahon."⁶¹ These quotes imply that the wrestling narrative is real and that "The Story of the Wrestler They Call 'Stone Cold'" is what happens in the ring. Readers of

⁵⁸ Anderson, Steve. (2000) "40 Fast Facts about Vince McMahon." *World of Wrestling Magazine*. 2.8 46

⁵⁹ Dave Conroy. "WWF Chocked with Talent." *World Wrestling Magazine*. 2.8 (2000), 24-25.

⁶⁰ David Rosenbaum. "What Angle is Kurt Working?" *Inside Wrestling*. January 2001. 35-36.

⁶¹ Dan Ross. *The Story of the Wrestler They Call "Stone Cold."* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers,

this type of literature are interested in the emotional state of the characters. They use wrestling like a person might use any type of literature: to investigate the details of human relationships.

Since fans can receive more than one of these types of literature, and devoted ones most likely do, the reality of the events in the ring is presented to them ambiguously. They are invited, by the conflicting tone both across the spectrum of fan sources and within some of the sources themselves, to view wrestling both as reality and as fiction.

The fuzzy distinction between fiction and reality further distances wrestling fans from moral judgement, as proven by the conclusion to the Mankind/Undertaker Hell in the Cell match. In the end, the crowd cheered Mankind's departure from the ring, chanting his name and giving his performance its approval. But the crowd also cheered when he was pinned. The character Mankind's defeat received the audience's approval, which in traditional wrestling would have meant that he was the heel, but the person of Mick Foley also received cheers.

One interpretation might be that at one moment, Foley was both hero and villain, a great wrestler and an evil character. In this case, the morality of wrestling may still be intact, while the fan's involvement has become more savvy than it was in previous generations. It is certainly possible for an audience to separate character from performer, and judge each by different criteria. This may not have been routinely done in traditional wrestling, but that may be the only difference between the two styles.

This interpretation does not explain, however, how Mankind could have been defeated by The Undertaker, a character who, within the internal dialogue of the program, is described in similar terms as his opponent. Both characters, in their intros, are described in similar moral terms. Thus the ambiguity at the end cannot be simply attributed to a more complicated play between reality and fiction. As the match is set up, and as the narrative is framed, there is no morality at stake, so at the event's conclusion, when the crowd cheers for Mankind's defeat, it is not making a judgment on the quality of the outcome, they are only speaking to the quality of the

show. So it is not that Foley is seen by the audience to be at once hero and villain, it is that he is at different moments seen as a single entity. When he is being defeated and when he is triumphantly walking from the arena, he is Mick Foley, superb wrestler. The audience, it seems, is not cheering his defeat, and then cheering his performance. At both moments, it is the performance that is receiving approval. For the crowd, the match proceeded as promised, two men with small respect for human life fought, and one was left seriously injured. Thus the crowd responded favorably. All expectations were filled, and the crowd was pleased. Who precisely won the match remained only a matter of trivia.

After the First Blood Match later in the evening, with Steve Austin, the loser, standing dejected against the ropes, a cascade of blood from his open forehead wound running down his face, the crowd began chanting, "Austin! Austin! Austin!" For the second time in the evening the crowd cheered for the losing man, who also happened to be the man actually injured during the show. Winners and losers had no significance as long as the show itself was worth watching. If Kane had lost, the crowd probably would have cheered as he set himself on fire.

4. The Phone, the Mat and the TV; or The Reason for the Change

Noticing a change in the thematic and narrative structure of wrestling is not enough. In order to tie wrestling to other institutions, and thus get a better view of American culture as a whole, one must look at what conditions facilitated this change.

By the end of the 1980's, Vince McMahon Jr. sat alone at the height of the professional wrestling business. He had spent the preceding five years securing this position. By using the emerging cable TV markets and, with what some considered underhanded tactics, systematically raiding his competition's stable of talent, McMahon's World Wrestling Federation (WWF) had a near monopoly over the industry.

Inevitably, perhaps, someone appeared to fill this vacuum of competition. Billionaire Ted Turner, who had himself made a fortune exploiting the cable television explosion, starting such networks as CNN and TBS, saw the profits McMahon was turning and decided he wanted a piece.

Wrestling legend has it that in 1988, Turner famously called his rival after buying a near defunct wrestling company, which he renamed World Championship Wrestling (WCW). "I just got into the 'rasslin' business," Turner said. "That's good," McMahon replied, "we're in the entertainment business." Then Vince hung up.⁶²

McMahon faced competition to his televisual wrestling empire for the first time and the old, Barthian style of wrestling became a liability. Up until that point, television had been used only as a delivery device, and its effect on the central tenants of wrestling narratives was mostly cosmetic. Until McMahon's arrival on the scene in 1983, in fact, it was mostly used to promote live auditorium shows, and wrestling's concessions to broader television culture were slight. And

⁶² Lou Albano, Bert Randolph Sugar and Roger Woodson. *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Pro Wrestling*. (New York: Alpha Books. 1999): 36

even McMahon had no interest in actually changing the form. As the only true national television power in the industry, viewers basically had a choice between his federation or nothing at all. The competition between McMahon and Turner provided the catalyst for the change that occurred in wrestling during the 1990's.

That competition has brought about significant thematic changes in wrestling is explicitly understood within the industry. In his autobiography, Mick Foley writes of the months after his Hell in the Cell match with the Undertaker, "Running a weekly two hour wrestling program head to head against well financed competition is exciting and often makes for good television, but the speed with which some issues are rushed sometimes leaves creative casualties behind."⁶³ By "good television" it seems that Foley means entertaining television, or more precisely-and with some irony-he means ratings-getting television. He was upset by the direction the WWF was taking and felt, despite his success in the Hell in the Cell performance, that the new style of wrestling did not fit him. He writes, "I had always been able to adapt to changing elements but the wrestling phenomenon had gotten so big, so fast that a guy like me had gotten trampled in the dust."⁶⁴ Foley would eventually make peace with his place in the WWF, mostly thanks to his "reputation for enduring more pain than anyone,"⁶⁵ as his bio on [wwf.com](http://www.wwf.com) puts it. Still, at the time he is writing about, he was a wrestling insider, one who had been in the business for fourteen years, who not only noticed a change in the industry-a change that left traditional wrestlers like himself feeling left out-but who ties the change to the making of "good television."

Other evidence for the relationship between television and the changes in wrestling is less explicit. The Rock positions "a dramatic attitudinal shift" in the WWF in late 1996, early 1997.⁶⁶ At the same time Turner's WCW had a wide lead over McMahon's federation in the Nielson

⁶³ Foley, *Have A Nice Day! A Tale of Blood and Sweatsocks*, 474

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 488

⁶⁵ <http://www.wwfsuperstars.com/index.html>

⁶⁶ Rock and Layden, *The Rock Says...*, 151

ratings.⁶⁷ It seems like more than mere coincidence that the changes in wrestling should occur in a federation precisely when that federation is lagging in viewership; the pressures of competition forced those changes.

The way wrestling changed is related to a heightened sensitivity to viewer response. Wrestling would not have changed if fan response, in the form of both cheering crowds at live tapings and increasing numbers of fans tuned in at home, had not supported the transformation. As The Rock says, “a key to success in our industry is listening to the crowd.”⁶⁸ He describes how fan response convinced the WWF creative team to change a planned rivalry between himself and Steve Austin. At the time, The Rock was an up-and-coming star building popularity through a feud with Austin, who was the most popular wrestler in the WWF. At a match in Philadelphia prior to the 2000 pay-per-view special *WrestleMania XV*, the crowd cheered for The Rock and Steve Austin equally, causing the federation’s creative team to conclude that the two performers had become too popular to battle each other. The WWF felt the two wrestlers would be better utilized in separate matches, that way the crowd could see both of them victorious in a single night’s entertainment. The Rock relates it this way: “The original plan had been for *WrestleMania* to be the first of four blockbuster events. The story line would stretch out over several months...That arc simply wouldn’t work now. With their support of The Rock in Philadelphia...the fans had cast their vote...We decided to have just one more Rock-Austin Pay-Per-View.”⁶⁹ ⁷⁰ Similarly, the changes that started in 1996 met with fan approval, and therefore continued.

Wrestling has always been sensitive to its fans. As Barthes says, “the function of the wrestler is not to win; it is to go exactly through the motions which are expected of him.”⁷¹ In

⁶⁷ Conroy, “WWF Chocked with Talent,” 24

⁶⁸ Rock and Layden, *The Rock Says...*, 273

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 273-274

⁷⁰ For another example of fan response changing a story line, see Mick Foley’s description of the birth of Mr. Socko, Foley, *Have A Nice Day! A Tale of Blood and Sweatsocks*, 492-495.

⁷¹ Barthes, *Mythologies*, 16

these terms, though, it is the satisfaction of the single viewer that is at stake. Traditional wrestling promoters strove to give their viewers a show that fit within their expectations. With the pressures of drawing a large national television audience, contemporary wrestling promoters need to create a show that reaches the broadest possible audience. Instead of an event that die hard wrestling fans will appreciate greatly, contemporary federations present a show that anyone can enjoy at least a little. This seems to be what Mick Foley was saying: contemporary wrestling federations were making “good television” not good wrestling.

Traditional wrestling, embedded as it was with moral judgement, required a certain consensus in audience ideology. Contemporary wrestling does not require this because it is interested in spectacle rather than morality. With the flattening of the moral component of its characters, wrestling no longer becomes a staunch reinforcer of cultural norms. Audience members are not encouraged to see one wrestler as morally superior to another, so they are allowed to identify with any one they wish. In traditional wrestling, loyalty to a villain meant that a fan would always be disappointed by the outcome of the match, since the evil wrestler was either not allowed to win, or booed for his victorious efforts. If an audience member saw himself as being like a bout’s loser, he necessarily had to see himself as bad, at least by the cultural standards of the day, and identification with a defeated performer was coupled with a structural admonishment of whatever traits the viewer had in common with the wrestler.

A match now, though, contains no such admonishment. Since a viewer can be assured that a wrestler bested in today’s match has a chance at victory tomorrow, he can identify with any character freely. Unlike in traditional wrestling, all wrestlers get their chance at victory, and all wrestlers get their comeuppance, so wherever an audience member’s loyalties lie, he will eventually be satisfied. Thus, wrestling can appeal to an audience with a wider array of personal ideologies.

So why didn't wrestling change before? After all, television had been a part of wrestling for decades before the changes occurred. Several conditions combined in order to facilitate the transformation that wrestling underwent in the 1990's.

First of all, television had to become the primary tool for wrestling promotion. Prior to the early 1980's, wrestling was divided along completely geographic lines. During the pre-television barnstorming days, when wrestling shows had traveled with carnivals, promoters had carved the country into regional districts, the boundaries of which were enforced by a gentleman's agreement. While rivalries existed, the owners of these federations for the most part respected each other's sovereignty, and had learned to coexist.⁷²

Since television became an important component of wrestling promotion in the 1950's, promoters primarily used it to bolster the gate receipts at weekend live shows. They would show a mid-week bout on TV, setting up a conflict to be resolved that weekend at the live show.⁷³ To see the outcome of the main event, then, the viewer would have to leave his house and travel to the local auditorium. Promoters had an effective method of advertising their events, but they saw that as the extent of TV's effectiveness.

After the surge in national wrestling interest in the 1950's died out, the broadcasts were generally local.⁷⁴ Even on TV, wrestling had a geographically divided nature, with the different federations remaining within their region. There were individual performers who would become national celebrities, Gorgeous George being one of most prominent, but for the most part the competition between different wrestling organizations concentrated on physical territory, with television being used only as a tool for this.

For the decades between the 50's and the 80's, then, television could not alter the fundamental tenets of wrestling, because the promoters did not give the device the type of

⁷² Hofstede, *Slammin': Wrestling's Greatest Heroes and Villains*, 12-13

⁷³ Morton and O'Brien, *Wrestling to Rasslin: Ancient Sport to American Spectacle*, 49

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 47-49

promotional prominence necessary to facilitate that alteration. TV had no more opportunity to affect the thematic and narrative structure of the show than leaflets or newspaper ads.

Vince McMahon Jr., though, changed the central division between federations from a geographical one to a televisual one during the 1980's. McMahon's father and grandfather had been, in each of their respective generations, great old patriarchs of wrestling promotion, but his life story reads like a real life, wrestling version of *The Godfather*.

In 1983, McMahon took over his father's business and immediately declared war on other promoters. His World Wrestling Federation began stealing territories, raiding talent and generally making trouble for its neighbors. He wanted a single national federation under his control, and for the most part the other promoters were unable to stop him. They called Vince Sr., begging him to talk to his son and sent Vince Jr. death threats, but were unwilling to unify against him. Despite continued cash flow problems that he knew might sabotage his dreams, the youngest McMahon toppled the generations old wrestling structure in less than five years.⁷⁵

McMahon's main weapon for this takeover was television. He seemed to realize that he could garner more profits directly from TV than he could from his live shows, and he made the live show a secondary consideration. After all, there were limits to the number of people one could fit in an arena, but, in comparison, the size of a television audience was nearly infinite. He tapped into the growing cable market, using weekly TV shows to promote his upcoming spectacle, but instead of that event taking place exclusively for a live crowd, McMahon would show it on Pay-per-View, thus getting revenue not just from ticket sales, but from at home viewers as well. In this way, he made his wrestlers into national heroes and completely decimated the old guard of the industry. In 1984, there were twenty regional promoters nation wide. In 1989, there were five.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Albano, Sugar and Woodson, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Pro Wrestling*, 32

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 32-33

The second condition, though it almost counts as a sub-condition of the preceding, is the rise of cable television. By the early 1980's, when McMahon was beginning the assault on his promoters, one quarter of American homes received cable programming.⁷⁷ McMahon utilized this, creating a Sunday morning program on the USA network in 1983. Turner's TBS, too, showed a program entitled "World Championship Wrestling" around this time, though Turner himself was not then involved in its production. Cable offered the otherwise regional wrestling a chance to reach a national audience. Before it was re-christened "World Championship Wrestling" in 1982, for example, TBS's wrestling program was entitled "Georgia Championship Wrestling."⁷⁸

The original hope of cable, though, was to increase television quality by taking the pressure off of networks to appeal to such a wide portion of the population. Niche programming that, with a small but loyal following, could develop and maintain a viewership without having to bend to the economic pressures of network TV. If this hope had materialized in full, wrestling might not have needed to change to find a viewing audience. Todd Gitlin, in the 2000 edition of his book *Inside Primetime*, discusses how the original hope of cable television's courting of niche markets was already breaking down in the early eighties. At that time, cable distribution companies were becoming more consolidated, such that they were becoming as reliant on mass markets as the networks had been. The cable channels too were seeking ways to increase their market share. Gitlin says "capital demands of the new suppliers [of cable television] what it demands of the old networks: maximum achievable market shares."⁷⁹

Wrestling, which has been shown exclusively on cable in the 1990's and most of the 1980's, certainly supports Gitlin's view of things. Turner and McMahon have developed a show that seems specifically designed to appeal to as large an audience as possible, just like the old time network executives would have. Whether or not cable television as a whole has broken

⁷⁷ Todd Gitlin. *Inside Primetime*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press. 2000): 325

⁷⁸ Morton and O'Brien, *Wrestling to Rasslin: Ancient Sport to American Spectacle*, 52-54

away from the methods of maximum saturation used by network executives from the 1950's into the 1980's, the heads of the major wrestling federations have not.

The third condition for wrestling's change was a competition for a national television audience. In the 1980's television had the central place in wrestling promotion, as the WWF relied on the device for its livelihood, but since no competition existed for the television audience, the new prominence of TV had no effect on wrestling themes and narrative. From the moment the dial tone from Vince McMahon's hang up began buzzing into Ted Turner's ear, though, this supremacy was threatened. Turner's new organization was up and running by 1991 and, through the use of his cable stations, he was able to quickly create a rival to the WWF monolith.⁸⁰ With two powerhouse organizations to choose from, audience's were no longer forced to accept what McMahon had to offer.⁸¹

The forth and final condition had to do with the personalities of the men involved. McMahon was a rebel, defying tradition throughout his career as a federation owner. Another owner may not have moved television to center of wrestling promotion, and, in fact, no owner had done so before him. He is quoted as saying, "In the old days, there were wrestling fiefdoms all over the country... There were maybe thirty of these tiny kingdoms in the U.S. and if I hadn't bought out my dad there would still be thirty of them, fragmented and struggling. I, of course, had no allegiance to those little lords."⁸² Similarly, when confronted with slipping ratings in late 1996, another owner might not have allowed the fundamental structure of wrestling to change.

Ted Turner, too, did not feel a need to uphold the traditional conventions of wrestling. He had no historical connection to the event. His network, TBS, showed wrestling programs throughout the eighties, but before his purchase, he had not been a wrestling promoter himself.⁸³ To him, wrestling only represented potential profits. He saw what McMahon was making and

⁷⁹ Gitlin, *Inside Primetime*, 328

⁸⁰ Hofstede, *Slammin': Wrestling's Greatest Heroes and Villains*, 13

⁸¹ Mazer, *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle*, 16

⁸² Hofstede, *Slammin': Wrestling's Greatest Heroes and Villains*, 12

wanted in. Also, Turner had a history of overturning traditions within long established business arenas he had bought into. For example, within a year of buying the Atlanta Braves major league baseball team, the commissioner of that sport suspended him for one year for speaking out against the traditional separation between owner and player and allegedly tampering with a contract negotiation of another team.⁸⁴ Without any sort of connection to wrestling tradition, Turner was free of any sort of sensitivity to the customs of the show. He could fiddle with the program perhaps without even realizing what was happening. His ignorance put him in a position to seek ratings freely, without any compulsion to uphold old strategies and institutions.

Perhaps it is inaccurate to say that television changed wrestling; it is more precise to say that it gave wrestling a reason to change. The increased profits available to a high profile televised federation first inspired Vince McMahon and then Ted Turner, and the competition between them pushed wrestling into its new form. The way wrestling changed might have been dictated by fan response, but the reason it changed was a reliance on national television broadcasts for income, combined with the pressures of focused competition for that income. The stakes of big time wrestling promotion during the 1990's forced McMahon and Turner to loosen the restrictions on wrestling narrative and eventually this led to the spectacle driven form of contemporary wrestling.

When wrestling was first broadcast on television, promoters would stage their usual show only with cameras in the room. The differences between the live shows and the televised ones were minimal because promoters used the televised shows to advertise later live bouts, and a continuity of performance styles had to remain intact. Wrestling procedures developed in live events and were then transferred to television broadcasts. McMahon and, to a lesser degree, Turner inverted this relationship.

⁸³ Morton and O'Brien, *Wrestling to Rasslin: Ancient Sport to American Spectacle*, 52

⁸⁴ Gerald Goldberg and Robert Goldberg. *Citizen Turner*. (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1995): 186-194

A person can play a baseball game that is not sponsored by the organizers of Major League Baseball, but, in a sense, it would only be a baseball game in the ways in which it resembled what occurs on a major league diamond. Contemporary wrestling is the same. With the growing popularity of the WWF and the WCW-and the consequent decimation of the regional federations-televised wrestling has become what people most associate with the idea of “wrestling.” In this way, real wrestling occurs only on television, because that is the event that most people would identify as such. In short, McMahon and Turner changed wrestling from a show on television into a television show. Television alone could not alter the narrative structure of wrestling, but a combination of conditions over the past few years have cause television and wrestling to become intimately connected.

5. Conclusion: From the So Far to the So What

Other cultural institutions besides wrestling have had their structural components affected by their relationship with television. In his book, *The Ideological Octopus*, Justin Lewis describes how television affects the way people understand the evening news. He found that the use of newspaper style, journalistic reporting, which most news programs utilize, is actually confusing to viewers when shown on television. Most audience members, even those who watch the show actively, find themselves unable to identify the focus of a story, and often the point of a report is lost. He says, "What a qualitative study of the news tells us...is that the meaning of television is contingent on its form—a form that alienates us, as a society, from our own history."⁸⁵ So the viewer's understanding of the wider world is being affected just by the method that he or she receives the information.

This provides something of a counter example to the case of wrestling. The news has not changed to fit on television and its form, created for the printed page, does not function properly in the televisual context. Wrestling, on the other hand, is now completely dependent on television, and in recent years has been reshaped for that device. Lewis suggests news reports would be more comprehensible if they conformed more to television conventions, and told their stories chronologically instead of in the journalistic tradition of most important information first with supplementary information following. The news should follow wrestling's example, he might say. But this has consequences. Lewis says that not changing to fit television has made the news an event that alienates its viewers from their history. When wrestling changed to suit television, it eventually became an event that separated its viewers from moral judgement. So, is it better to have a public alienated from its history, or one alienated from morality?

⁸⁵ Justin Lewis, *The Ideological Octopus: An Exploration of Television and Its Audience*. (New York: Routledge. 1991): 157

But wrestling is more than just a potential warning to those wishing to move their cultural institution to television; it offers a glimpse into American culture, or at least into a growing market share of American culture. Wrestling has always provided a mediation between its viewers and the greater society. In its traditional form, it provided an acceptable outlet for anti-social impulses while still supporting the conventions of society. At times, as Mondak proposes, this form became vastly popular for the very reason that its binary moral structure suited the nation's collective political and ideological state of mind. Traditional wrestling was not flexible enough to change along with public tastes and it experienced a lag in popularity when the national or international situation demanded a more nuanced morality. Contemporary wrestling should never experience this lag. It is created to give its viewers what they want to see. Its very nature is to be responsive, not just to the desires of long-time wrestling fans, but to as many people as possible. As such, it is a gauge by which the cultural standards of a certain portion of the population can be measured.

The earlier question, then, "is it better to have a public alienated from its history or one alienated from morality?" turns out to be an unfair one. Contemporary wrestling is not necessarily morally alienating, it just happens that at this moment, the public's taste is leaning towards amoral entertainment. In the same sense, the news is not necessarily historically alienating, just that the public watching it at the time of Lewis's study processed it that way.⁸⁶ The journalistic form of television news might, at times, make perfect sense to its audience, just as traditional wrestling at times made perfect sense to people; conditions just have to be right. Contemporary wrestling does not need to wait on conditions. In order to keep their public, and beat each other in the ratings, McMahon and Turner have created an event that conforms to its viewers tastes. Contemporary wrestling's foundation is not morality, as it once was, immorality, as some might claim it is, or even amoral violent spectacle, which it currently seems to be; it is,

⁸⁶ Lewis studied British news for a book published in 1991, so it is best not to make a direct connection to wrestling here.

instead, adaptability. The true transition of wrestling from traditional to contemporary form is the complete abandonment of structural stability. The event is unanchored and may now float freely on the tide of public taste.

Television and cultural critic David Marc muses in his book *Democratic Vistas: Television in American Culture*, “Tocqueville observed that as the total number of consumers of any product (art included) increases, the percentage of what he called ‘fastidious consumers’ decreases.”⁸⁷ Who are the “fastidious consumers” in wrestling? They are the fans of its traditional form, men like “Mankind” Mick Foley, who writes in his autobiography, “In the same way that most kids would rather scarf down a couple of greasy fast food burgers instead of enjoying an aged and seasoned filet mignon, the new breed of fan wanted satisfaction and wanted it now.”⁸⁸ Who are the fastidious consumers of television? Well judging from Marc, they are television critics, people like himself. He writes: “Like the national debt, the homeless population, gun ownership, and job insecurity, television grew prodigiously in the 1980’s...In terms of quality, programming got simultaneously much better and much worse than it had been, establishing a fresh context for the mediocrity that still dominates it.”⁸⁹

It seems one can define the fastidious consumer as someone trapped by the irony that it is often the person most invested in a thing that finds the most disappointment in it. Even as Mick Foley is defining a new style of wrestling, he is lamenting it. Even as David Marc is watching TV, he is filling books with his disdain for what it shows. But that seems to be the crux of what Tocqueville meant, at least the way Marc quotes him. Marc uses the French theorist to comment on the proliferation of poor television programming, but he might as well have been talking about wrestling. Or actually, he uses the French theorist to comment on the proliferation of poor television programming, so he is now also talking about wrestling.

⁸⁷ David Marc. *Democratic Vistas: Television in American Culture*, Revised Edition. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 1996): 183

⁸⁸ Foley, *Have A Nice Day! A Tale of Blood and Sweatsocks*, 487

⁸⁹ Marc, *Democratic Vistas: Television in American Culture*, 167

Wrestling is television now, and its example is informative because it is a recent conquest for the device. At one time, not too long ago if Sharon Mazer, publishing in 1998, is to be believed, televised wrestling was just the most visible form of an event whose structure had not changed since the early part of the 1920's. Now it is not the same; it has been turned into television.

This allows us to see two things clearly. First, looking at wrestling's story allows us to gauge the influence of television. We can see how it changes things, makes them more malleable, more superficial, how it empties them out-or frees them up, depending on your point of view. But this could be done with any cultural institution that has become intimately tied with television: sports, movies, soap opera, music, news, and politics.

The second thing that we can see in wrestling is ourselves. Unlike the other cultural institutions that have become enmeshed in television, wrestling has only recently become dependant on that common household box. The way in which wrestling has changed in recent years can show us what we are thinking-or at least what a sizeable portion of us are thinking. Discovering ourselves in those other institutions is more complicated because they have been connected with television, and therefore each other, for so long, that identifying anything clear and certain becomes nearly impossible. We can assume that wrestling will some day be like these others, but as it stands now, we can make out our own reflection behind the images on the TV screen.

And here it is what we can see: we live in a disconnected culture, one of alienation and amoral entertainment. Wrestling proves this, and even shows some of the forces that caused it, but it does not, decidedly will not, tell us how to live in it. That is up to us. If there is a moral left to be gleaned from wrestling at this moment, perhaps that is it: morality will no longer be enforced by entertainment and cultural position can no longer be dictated by the consensus of the crowd.

Bibliography

Books

Albano, Lou et al. *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Pro Wrestling*. New York: Alpha Books. 1999.

Allen, Robert, ed. *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 1992.

Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. trans. Annette Lavers. New York: Hill and Wang, 1972.

Foley, Mick. *Have A Nice Day! A Tale of Blood and Sweatsocks*. New York: Regan Books. 1999.

Gitlin, Todd. *Inside Primetime*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 2000.

Goldberg, Gerald and Goldberg, Robert. *Citizen Turner*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company. 1995

Hofstede, David. *Slammin': Wrestling's Greatest Heroes and Villains*. Toronto: ECW Press. 1999.

Hunter, Matt. *The Story of the Wrestler They Call "Hollywood" Hulk Hogan*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers. 2000.

Kael, Pauline. *Taking It All In*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston. 1984.

Kinder, Mardha. *Playing with Power in Movies, Television and Video Games*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 1991.

Lentz, Harris. *Biographical Dictionary of Professional Wrestling*. London: McFarland & Company, Inc. 1997.

Lewis, Justin. *The Ideological Octopus: An Exploration of Television and Its Audience*. New York: Routledge. 1991.

Mazer, Sharon. *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle*. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press. 1998.

Morton, Gerald and O'Brien, George. *Wrestling to Rasslin: Ancient Sport to American Spectacle*. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press. 1985.

Rock, The with Layden, Joe. *The Rock Says...* New York: Regan Books. 2000

Ross, Dan. *The Story of the Wrestler They Call "Stone Cold."* Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers. 2000.

Wallace, David Foster. *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*. New York. Little, Brown and Company. 1997.

Williams, Carol Traynor. *"It's Time for My Story": Soap Opera Sources, Structure and Responses*. London: Praeger.

Videos

Bad Blood 1997. Titan Sports Inc. 1997

King of the Ring 1998. Titan Sports Inc. 1998

Unforgiven. Titan Sports Inc. 1999.

Wrestlemania 2. Coliseum Video. 1986

Wrestlemania's Greatest Matches. Coliseum Video. 1989

Periodicals

Anderson, Steve. (2000) "Superstars Shining Brightly." *World of Wrestling Magazine*. 2.8 40-44

Burkett, Harry. (2001) "Triple H and The Rock: 10 Reasons They Should Trust Each Other, 10 Reasons Why They Shouldn't." *The Wrestler*. March. 36-39

Business Week. (1950) "It Pays to Sponsor Television Corn." October 7. 25-26.

Cambell, J.W. (1996) "Professional Wrestling: Why the Bad Guy Wins." *Journal of American Culture* 19.2 127-132

Conroy, Dave. (2000) "WWF Chocked with Talent." *World of Wrestling Magazine*. 2.8 24-25

Craven, Gerald and Mosely, Richard (1972) "Actors on the Canvas Stage: The Dramatic Conventions of Professional Wrestling." *Journal of Popular Culture*. 6.2 327-336.

Freedman, Jim. "Will the Sheik Use His Blinding Fireball? The Ideology of Professional Wrestling" in Manning, Frank, ed. *The Celebration of Society: Perspectives on Contemporary Cultural Performance*. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press. 1983

Hendricks, Thomas (1974) "Professional Wrestling as Moral Order." *Sociological Inquiry* 44.3 177-188

Kantor, Jodi. (2000) "Wham! Bam! Thanks a Bunch!" *New York Times Book Review*. Dec 3.

Liebling, A.J. (1954) "A Reporter at Large: From Sarah Bernhardt to Yukon Eric." *New Yorker* November 13. 114-133

Mondak, Jeffrey (1989) "The Politics of Professional Wrestling." *Journal of Popular Culture* 23.2 139-149

Moore, Pam. "Kinder, Gentler Sex and Violence." *Business Week*. 13 December 1999. 52

Robards, Brooks. "The Police Show" in Rose, Brian, ed. *TV Genres: A Handbook and Reference Guide*. London: Greenwood Press. 1985.

Rosebaum, Dave. (2001) "What Angle is Kurt Working." *Inside Wrestling*. January. 34-37

Rosebaum, Dave. (2001) "Who Does He Really Hate? Someone Will Pay for Austin's Pain." *Pro Wrestling Illustrated*. January. 130-133

Websites

(main or index page given only. If there is a quote footnoted in the body of the thesis, specific subpage where the quote appears will be included there)

www.iowrestling.com

www.wrestlezone.com

www.wrestling-central.com

www.wrestling.com

www.wwf.com

VITA

Brian James Stewart

Born in Chicago, Illinois on February 11, 1978. Graduated from the University of Illinois with a B.A. in History in May of 1999. Entered the College of William and Mary that September as a Master's candidate in the field of American Studies.

In May of 2000, the author completed the course requirements for his degree, but not the thesis.