

## A Sport, A Tradition, A Religion, A Joke: The Need for a Poetics of In-ring Storytelling and a Reclamation of Professional Wrestling as a Global Art

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### Abstract

Though professional wrestling offers a variety of unique and highly stylised in-ring dramas, the actual process of this dramatic construction is frequently overlooked, misunderstood, or undervalued. This paper questions the seeming uniformity of much Western cultural analysis of professional wrestling and proposes a specific engagement with the poetics of in-ring dramatic construction – rather than an exclusive focus on the surrounding spectacle of the wrestling show itself – to appropriately contextualise professional wrestling beyond the rigid constraints of monopolistic and monolithic promotions. With a focus on poetics in line with David Bordwell's "poetics of cinema," and drawing on a number of wrestlers' descriptions of their own artistic processes, professional wrestling emerges as a unique and multi-faceted dramatic construction and as a global art-form that continually recreates itself through reflexive international and inter-cultural influences.

### Keywords

Wrestling, WWE, poetics, historical poetics, narrative, dramaturgy

"As talent and technique have declined in the United States, they have advanced in Japan," Laurence de Garis, PhD, aka professional-wrestler "Professor" Barry Brisco (de Garis 211)

"Japanese fans appreciated the actual art form of wrestling – they study the matches instead of just watching them. They pay more attention to the nuances of the performance rather than just scream and yell," Chris Jericho (Jericho and Fornatale, *A Lion's Tale* 354).

"I was the perfect contrast to [Hulk] Hogan, especially to fans who were sick of his all too familiar act. If Hogan was the Elvis of wrestling, I was the Robert De Niro," Bret "Hitman" Hart (Hart 303).

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### **Wrestling Without Wrestling: Cultural Analysis and a Global Art**

Though professional wrestling is a highly stylised drama, the actual process of its dramatic construction is frequently overlooked and undervalued in Western academic or cultural analysis, with the art-form itself relegated to being a signifier of anti-drama or broad (and often base) cultural norms rather than a complex and unique constructed dramatic form in its own right. While popular and literary cultures continue to make frequent dalliances with each other, wrestling as an art-form or a theatre still tends to be viewed in academic and pseudo-academic study primarily – often almost exclusively – from the lofty heights of cultural studies, either lovingly held up as a representative of working class entertainment and aspirations or being roundly condemned for its perpetuation of damaging ideas, ideals and stereotypes.

One summation of Lucha Libre (Mexican Wrestling), for example, conceptualises it as a tension between a “political counter-theater” and a “tool of commerce”:

It seems to me that its capture as a tool of commerce empties its use as political counter-theater.... What meaning is it to have when it is consumed by the Mexican middle class (whether as *mexicanidad* or as *kitsch*)? How does it change as a signifying practice when it travels to the United States to be consumed as yet more Mexican *kitsch* and then is shipped back to Mexico as Spanish-language versions of ‘*Mucha Lucha*’ and ‘*Nacho Libre*’? (Heather Levi, quoted in Arellano)

Chris Hedges is particularly damning in his *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle*, summoning professional wrestling to open his book with an image of cultural regression, and later suggesting comparisons to pornography and US abuse of prisoners in Abu Ghraib, pointing out:

the language of porn, professional wrestling, reality television, music videos, and corporate culture. It is the language of absolute control, total domination, racial hatred, fetishistic images of slavery, and humiliating submission. (Hedges 73)

Further cultural, social and developmental interpretations of professional wrestling can be found in (to name a few, and in no particular order) Bernthal and Medway, Soulliere, Soulliere and Blair, Mondak, Maguire and Wozniak, Levi (“Lean Mean Fighting Queens”), Alvermann, Huddleston and Hagood, Waxmonsky and Beresin, and many of the essays in Sammond.

These cultural and social conceptualisations remain an important part of academic analysis, but while wrestling continues to be examined as part of a broader cultural framework, this can nevertheless leave the artistic construction of professional wrestling as a means of presenting a number of a specific

dramas and performances un- or under-explored. Cultural analysis can “explain” without necessarily engaging directly with the form itself – the underlying instinct (or necessity) to alienate oneself from the form under consideration when examining ideological constructs is perhaps never easier than in professional wrestling, an art-form that maintains a notable and enduring “low-brow” popularity but has perhaps still never entirely established itself as a mainstream and accepted presence in Western culture.

Such alienated application can result in a kind of uniformity when broad trends and the general nature of spectacle are explored without simultaneously examining specific, individual dramatic texts, or without the ability to position such analysis in relation to a loose canon of representative (and divergent) texts. As a result, it is easy to highlight passing examples that particularly suit the aims of the theoretical framework; Hedges, for example, provides only a few – admittedly unappealing – selective examples in linking professional wrestling to pornography and torture. Unlike other areas of study such as film or, to a lesser extent, television, professional wrestling does not have a body of already-analysed and broadly-accepted ‘canon’ texts to provide some kind of guiding context; the work of academic cultural analysis has essentially preceded a body of mainstream literary analysis and canonic elevation.

What this can ultimately suggest is that professional wrestling is fundamentally a monolithic and substantially authorless cultural entity rather than a dramatic art-form with a history pre-dating most modern media and that has expanded and continues to expand in a multitude of forms and styles across the globe. Though cultural and ideological readings remain valid, they can also be misleading in that they frequently ignore the individual ideological reaffirmations, tensions and conflicts that may be invoked by a variety of individual and varied textual producers, whether they be the wrestling companies providing the larger narrative framework, or the individual performers (who we will come to see as textual authors in their own right) around whom the contextualising narrative revolves. At the core of the overall spectacle of the “show” that *appears* to define professional wrestling, are a number of individual and unique narratives that are constructed each and every time two (or more) wrestlers enter the ring. It is not just the overall spectacle of the entire wrestling show (the presentation of the “card”) that requires our attention, but, perhaps more interestingly and uniquely, the narrative that takes place within the ring itself: the unique, carefully-negotiated, and often semi-improvised mini-dramas that take place from “bell to bell.”

### **Japan, Canada, Mexico, America: A Sport, A Tradition, A Religion, A Joke**

Further disrupting the implied uniformity is the fact that what is commonly referred to as “professional wrestling” in the West generally refers to the output

of a single company: the WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment, formerly known as the WWF or World Wrestling Federation), essentially a monopoly in mainstream, mass-exposure professional wrestling since it overtook the fragmented territory system of wrestling's earlier days and finally bought out the lone remaining competitor of its stature (Ted Turner's World Championship Wrestling) in 2001.

The competition produced in an era such as the "Monday Night Wars," when WCW and WWE were directly competing, may not have demonstrated notable ideological differences between the companies' products, but the methods, styles and approaches of textual construction were nevertheless directly altered by the presence of another dominant voice in the industry: in some ways heightening, and in some ways diminishing, their production and textual differences.

At the same time, smaller promotions like ECW (Extreme Championship Wrestling, based in Philadelphia), though never reaching a point of comparable mainstream success or exposure, similarly had an influence on how professional wrestling was to be presented and perceived, both by fans and textual producers. As one online writer describes the response to a retrospective ECW dvd (released by new owners WWE, after ECW's bankruptcy), ECW confronted dominant images of wrestling's power sources while also providing an international and inter-territory amalgam of styles, values, techniques and dramatic forms:

... the fact that the DVD is being so well received by wrestling fans nationwide is a testament to the fact that professional wrestling is a free form vehicle of entertainment that exists best when not seen as a corporate entity.... It was Memphis meets Florida meets Georgia meets San Francisco meets Puerto Rico meets Japan, with a heaping spoonful of dramatic pathos to round out the mixture. (*Wrestling Oratory*)

This awareness of diversity in textual production is especially important when wrestling is placed in its appropriate global perspective. Though pro wrestling is often viewed from a US-centric perspective, its adoption in other global regions and the reciprocal influence that results further complexifies the notion that wrestling can be approached with a relatively uniform ideological framework.

Wrestler Chris Jericho received a similar understanding of cultural difference from veteran wrestler and WWE agent Pat Patterson when his early WWE career was faltering: "His first piece of advice was to stop working like I was in another country. He helped me to understand that every territory I worked in was different. Mexico was different from Japan, which was different from Germany, which was different from ECW, which was different from Smoky Mountain" (Jericho and Fornatale, *Undisputed* 32). The advice of course

not only points to the international and inter-cultural variation at play in presenting wrestling dramas, but also the fact that such variation is consciously quashed within the near-monopoly of the WWE (whereas it may be embraced elsewhere, as in ECW as noted above).

Nevertheless, even from a US-centric perspective, Japanese wrestling is one example of a powerful outside influence on American wrestling's overall construction of in-ring narrative, even though it may itself have come into being as an offshoot. As suggested by Laurence de Garis, "as talent and technique have declined in the United States, they have advanced in Japan" (211). Jericho noted the disparity in fan cultures when describing his early match experience in front of often silent Japanese audiences: "they understood the moves and the reversals of moves and appreciated the craft of the business. They respected the art of wrestling" (Jericho and Fornatale, *A Lion's Tale* 288). That "Japanese fans appreciated the actual art form of wrestling – they study the matches instead of just watching them" (Jericho and Fornatale, *A Lion's Tale* 354) was the explanation Jericho gave to a concerned WWE production team on one occasion in Japan (including owner Vince McMahon), although more familiar crowd responses were later added to the show's television broadcast to replicate the typical US atmosphere and understanding of the unfolding narrative.

The intense variation in cultural value attached to the spectacles and the numerous in-ring narratives is noted in an oft-quoted saying among internationally-aware wrestling fans: "in Canada it's a tradition, in Japan it's a sport, in Mexico it's a religion, and in the United States it's a joke."

Though essentially a Western export – as Levi notes, in Europe and America "professional wrestling seems to have developed from local traditions" (Levi, *The World of Lucha Libre* 22) whereas it is essentially an imported art-form elsewhere – the actual interaction between wrestling cultures is far more complex than this understanding may suggest: particularly the complementary influence on *in-ring* story-telling. Origin, of course, does not demonstrate anything as precise as ownership; as the maxim of international values suggests, wrestling has become integrated into local cultures in entirely different ways, creating their own local resonances even as they feed from each other. Of particular importance to understanding professional wrestling is not simply being aware of the cultural borderlines, but also being aware of the continual influence these various understandings of the art have on each other. Even if corporate promotions appear rigid, the inter-cultural tensions and influences may still nevertheless be played out on the mat.

Mexican Lucha Libre has taken on the aura of an entirely different sport, re-emerging in America as an entirely new form of a seemingly established culture: this international confluence of styles and values was noted in an article in *The Economist*, pointing out that promoter Antonio Peña Herrada:

is also trying to expand *lucha libre* outside Mexico. The sport's popularity in the United States is growing. Thanks to a handful of Japanese wrestlers in Mexico, Mr Peña has managed to sell television rights in Japan, as well as staging the occasional match there. ("Latin Lovers for All the Family")

Though brought to both Japan (Thompson 14) and Mexico (Levi, *The World of Lucha Libre* 22) by Americans, these expansions of the art-form feed each other reciprocally rather than staging an imitation of a central source in the United States. Thompson outlines pro wrestling's phenomenal popularity in Japan, assigning professional wrestling a key role in the popular take-up of television (Thompson). As with the example of Peña above, there is considerable motivation to export Japanese company New Japan Professional Wrestling (NJPW) into the US to compete with the WWE after a recent change of company ownership, although the variation in form may be a potential hindrance.

At a press conference on 1/31, he [Takaaki Kidani] talked about international expansion, which previous owners tried without success as unlike American culture, Japanese culture doesn't export into foreign markets well, particularly in wrestling hotbeds like Mexico, Australia, the U.S. and Europe. (*Wrestling Observer* newsletter, as quoted in "New Japan Wrestling – YUKES bows out")

Writer, poet and wrestling analyst John Wiswell further suggests an underlying difference in match structure (rather than a simple cultural difference in response to a single match type), writing of a Japanese Pro Wrestling NOAH match (14 June 2008) that "American and European wrestling fans still mystified by how Japanese pro wrestlers connect to crowds would be well-served to study the structure and execution of this match" (Wiswell, "Riren 100 Finale").

Though currently the WWE rarely acknowledges other promotions, in re-introducing a former WWE wrestler, now re-packaged as "Lord Tensai," WWE took the unusual step of acknowledging the Japanese experience of the wrestler, bypassing its usual policy; in conjunction with this, the WWE included a photo gallery of Japanese stars with WWE involvement over the years, labeled "Japan's Best Exports," including:

current WWE wrestler Yoshi Tatsu, WWE Hall of Famer Antonio Inoki, Giant Baba, Masahiro Chono, Genichiro Tenryu, Tiger Mask, Shinjiro Otani, Great Kabuki, Tajiri, Great Sasuke, Ultimo Dragon, Taka Michinoku, Funaki, Great Muta, Jushin Liger, Kaz Hayashi, Mr. Fuji, Sonny Onoo, Mr. Yamaguchi, Toru Tanaka, 1990s WWF gimmick wrestler Hakushi (Kensuke Shinzaki), The Orient Express, Dick Togo, and

women's wrestlers the Jumping Bomb Angels, Bull Nakano, Aja Kong, and Akira Hokuto. (*WWE.com* list compiled in Caldwell)

Notably, the majority of the names have had little to do with the WWE for years or decades; while this speaks to the culturally monolithic "ownership" of wrestling that dominates the promotion, it also speaks to the importance of cultural interplay and Japanese connection and formal exploitation that is a key part of its history.

Further, in the highly marginalised (within mainstream US wrestling) realm of women's wrestling, Japan plays a key role in informing the growth of this section of the art-form. Pioneered (Burke in Leen 243) in Japan from the US by women's champion Mildred Burke in November 1954:

Mildred Burke had given a lasting boost to women's wrestling in Japan. The next year, the All Japan Women's Pro-Wrestling Association was formed in response to the interest generated by Burke's tour... Japan would grow into the world center of women's wrestling, both professional and amateur, a position the country maintains to this day. (Leen 245-46)

The ongoing feedback from Japanese women's "joshi" wrestling back into the US counter-mainstream promotions such as independent women's promotion SHIMMER (Chicago-based Shimmer Women Athletes, founded in 2005 and associated with promotion Ring of Honor) suggests the strong inter-cultural interplay that informs wrestling styles and traditions rather than the cultural monolithic view of wrestling output. Even this was not entirely separate from mainstream promotions; in the early months of the "Monday Night Wars," the 27 November 1995 head-to-head episodes of *WWF RAW* and *WCW Nitro* featured competing joshi matches: WCW featuring Akira Hokuto and Bull Nakano vs Cutie Suzuki and Mayumi Ozaki, and WWE (then WWF) presenting Aja Kong and Tomoko Watanabe vs Alundra Blayze and Kyoko Inoue. This stylistic shift never took hold and the women's divisions stagnated and/or disappeared for a variety of (interesting) reasons, but nevertheless points to a spirit of cultural and formal exploration, experimentation and exploitation during a competitive, tumultuous and desperate era of the art-form in America.

### **Poetics and Piledrivers: The Importance of Craft and "Wrestling without wrestling"**

With the natural tendency to locate wrestling within ideological analysis, it is important to consider the tension between broader cultural analysis and the notions of craft that directly inform the production of artistic material. To begin the mammoth task of establishing a foundation of poetical analysis in wrestling, it makes sense to turn to the similar realm of film (another "cheap

entertainment” as described to Kevin Brownlow (in Tibbetts and Welsh 92), where David Bordwell suggests the importance of a “middle-level” approach, emphasising “artistry,” to dissipate this tension:

This middle-level approach allows us to merge critical analysis and interpretation with a degree of theoretical reflection, but one that remains close to the contours of film history and filmmaking practice. Artistry depends on craft, and craft is something both cinephile critics and academics have neglected. (Bordwell, “Never the Twain Shall Meet”)

It is in this context of combining “analysis and interpretation” with artistry that *poetics* become a key element required for the serious study of professional wrestling. If wrestling narratives are not addressed as unique and idiosyncratic artistic constructions as well as ideological representatives, then the study of professional wrestling risks lapsing into the application of established interpretative doctrine. While professional wrestling might seem to provide a standard system of assigning cultural value and reinforcing social norms and so on, its important that we also see these narratives as being more nuanced than the application of broad cultural theory can sometimes suggest. Just as Bordwell notes that heavily theory-based film studies can result in a study of film that involves no films, it’s fair to say that many studies of wrestling have not really involved any wrestling – the broad strokes and implications of the narratives and overall spectacles are considered, but the wrestling *match* itself is rarely explored as an ongoing and developing narrative construct in itself.

Bordwell describes this Poetics of Cinema as putting “the film as an artwork at the center of study” (Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema* 1) and “the study of the principles by which art works are shaped to achieve particular effects” (Bordwell, “Never the Twain Shall Meet”), an approach which moves beyond formalism by considering explanations:

of how films work, and why under certain circumstances they came to look the way they do. These explanations invoke a wide range of factors: artistic intentions, craft guidelines, institutional constraints, peer norms, social influences, and cross-cultural regularities and disparities of human conduct. (Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema* 1)

This is where the need to consider poetics in relation to wrestling becomes of particular importance – specifically, in this instance, in relation to the easily-overlooked and difficult to categorise construction of the in-ring mini-drama or narrative. It is this eruption of wrestling at its most idiosyncratic – the match itself inside the ring – which is most frequently neglected, overlooked, or seen as a mere byproduct of the overall spectacle of the wrestling show or event and that needs to be directly addressed through this process.



As such, Bordwell's key questions of "historical poetics" to be applied (considering, for convenience, "film" to be interchangeable with "professional wrestling" in this context only) are:

1. What are the principles according to which films are constructed and by means of which they achieve particular effects?
2. How and why have these principles arisen and changed in particular empirical circumstances. (Bordwell, "Historical Poetics of Cinema" 371)

Drawing us back to the text itself, Bordwell further explains that:

Historical Poetics is thus characterized by the phenomena it studies – films' constructional principles and effects – and the questions it asks about those phenomena – their constitution, functions, consequences, and historical manifestations. Poetics does not put at the forefront of its activities phenomena such as the economic patterns of film distribution, the growth of the teenage audience, or the ideology of private property. (Bordwell, "Historical Poetics of Cinema" 371)

In essence, direct historical and artistic analysis of the individual and unique text itself takes precedence over the broader cultural statements that we can make in relation to it and its broader medium or context of presentation. Film and professional wrestling are not interchangeable, but Knapp and Pence point out that the "recurring application of doctrine by some scholars" cannot be seen as a "problem unique to film studies" (Knapp and Pence 648). While the full extent of the effects of the application of "Grand Theory" to cultural and artistic texts cannot be debated here, it is reasonable to suggest in any case that professional wrestling, as a largely marginalised form, is still in need of considerable attention paid to its historical, formal and dramaturgical development (not to mention its status as a filmed or broadcast text) if we are going to make any claim to "understand" it, even if such understanding is ultimately to be considered in relation to cultural theory and ideological processes. As Brownlow rhetorically asks, "why do we need to learn another [academic] language in order to study something that has its own universal language?" (Brownlow in Tibbetts and Welsh 92). "Imposing" an external language may leave the analysed art-form "respectable" but not "based upon a solid foundation" (Brownlow in Tibbetts and Welsh 92). Without understanding "poetics, we cannot truly claim to understand what is being presented to us, even if it appears to fit the expectations of any particular theoretical framework.

Wrestling may sometimes be seen to be “primarily a matter of symbolism and imagery” (Leen 269-70), but this should not blind us to the constrained – but nevertheless functional, nuanced and active – dramas into which these symbols and images are placed.

### **“This Ain’t Ballet”: Taking Analysis into the Ring**

Unlike actual sport, there is no real competition between the participants in professional wrestling – the match outcomes and major events are all pre-determined, generally by the promotion itself rather than the participants. However, despite this, the match cannot really be compared to an intricately choreographed performance such as traditional dance: first of all, actual choreography is often limited and, in many cases, almost non-existent, with wrestlers improvising in the ring based on shared terminology they communicate in mid-match – known as “calling spots.” For Jericho, “when you work a match, the best way to do it is to call it on the fly. Have a set beginning, middle, and end and make up the rest as you go” (*Undisputed* 66). The “live” elements of the matches is also heightened, with each match essentially a “one off” event: there is no value at all assigned to the idea that wrestlers would repeat the same match with the same motions at a later date. Each match is defined as a unique moment in time rather than a repeated performance of a stable source choreography. As famously pointed out by celebrated ring-announcer Jim Ross: “this ain’t ballet.”

Just as a source “choreography” may be fairly limited, its presence is also something that generally needs to be played down in matches. Highly choreographed matches tend to be known as “spot-fests” in fan responses, referring to an over-reliance on intricate flashy moves and stunts that gain a strong audience response, but that also rely on rigid and contrived setups to properly function. The sense of an organic flow to the drama – both physically and in terms of “psychology” – is thus pursued in a problematic live and largely unrehearsed environment that doesn’t really allow for clockwork precision and preparation. Each performance is also responsive to the live audience, as performance can be tailored to play off of responses from the crowd, whether that be in the form of unexpected cheers or boos, or a sense that the crowd is getting restless or bored. Jericho describes “custom building” his matches for Japanese crowds to achieve their “unique reactions” (Jericho and Fornatale, *A Lion’s Tale* 289), and one of the most highly-praised recent WWE main events (between C.M. Punk and John Cena at “Money in the Bank” 2011) seemed to draw its high-calibre status partly from playing off of (rabidly) split reactions from the live crowd as much as any other more typical notions of narrative construction (with the wrestlers seemingly keeping the match at a slow and often near-immobile pace to let the live crowd itself provide much of the story).

While we can consider the two participants in a traditional wrestling match to be authors of their match (working within certain constraints), it is nevertheless an extremely complex notion of authorship (although we of course see similar complexity in assigning authorship in most modern media). Match outcomes, running times and key events may be assigned by external sources, but the substantial amount of time the wrestlers spend in actual simulated competition is usually a negotiation between the two performers, sometimes with assistance from what are known as the company's road agents – something like producers and stage managers. There is also certain kind of standardised etiquette at work in these negotiations for constructing the flow of the match and its narrative points, with the veterans frequently taking control over the decisions and a general rule that the “heel” – the bad guy – is the one who “calls the spots” or controls the general flow of the match inside the ring.

This very fact of personal control in (and out) of the ring is itself a key tension within the way matches are constructed and authorship is to be understood. While wrestlers' control over their matches (and out-of-ring “promos” or talking segments) may seem to be decreasing within the increasingly-corporate and politically-connected modern WWE (Foley 39, 122; Jericho and Fornatale, *Undisputed* 63; Blassie and Greenberg 256; Baines; Giri) the presentation of the drama nevertheless remains limited by the individual ability of in-ring performers to perform and construct, as well as a variety of other influences, such as pre-existing character, historical expectations, necessary improvisation and live-audience involvement and responses. Though the mini-drama can be pre-planned, it exists only insofar as it is performed in the moment – not as it is “scripted.”

Whatever the story-line requirements of the overall spectacle, the ring itself remains the canvas of the performers as artists who construct both the match and their own regular and recurring summoning of unique physical mannerisms, traits and idiosyncrasies: their ongoing character “narrative.” The move away from improvisation and personal control over performance – both in-ring and in “promos” (confrontations or monologues) and interviews – is pointed as a kind of degradation by de Garis: “when I started, scripting matches was a joke.... It's a downward spiral” (210). Jericho notes the important variation between companies, pointing out that “in WCW, we pretty much did whatever we wanted in the ring, but in the WWE the style was much more serious and structured” (Jericho and Fornatale, *Undisputed* 6) and that in WCW, the booker “would tell us who was winning, how much time we had, and that was about it. We were expected to do the rest ourselves” (Jericho and Fornatale, *Undisputed* 20). “Hardcore Legend” Mick Foley is blunt with his own status as individual author constrained by outside incursions when dealing with the modern-day WWE: “I just hope that they don't try to script us.... Please don't hand us a script” (Foley, *The Hardcore Diaries The Hardcore Diaries* 122).

### Storytellers and Blood-letters: A “Poetry in Physicality”

Key to this understanding of poetics is the fact that professional wrestlers can be vocal about their role as dramatic story-tellers rather than as athletes or performers of pre-prepared routines, describing their profession as that of telling a story in the ring. When wrestler Mickie James responds to be asked about entering mixed martial arts fighting, she positions herself clearly in relation to the sport: “I’m an artist, a performer.... There’s an art to what we do to the wrestling. I don’t want to really fight anybody” (Stewart). Canadian wrestler Bret “Hitman” Hart, one of the most celebrated technical wrestlers of the last few decades, is blunt about pro wrestling as a unique form of artistic and dramatic storytelling. In his writing, Hart discusses his role as a creator and storyteller and suggests the importance of helping “wrestlers learn how to tell a story in a match and get the psychology right” (Serrels). Importantly, “psychology” is one of the key terms for fan evaluation of a wrestling match, referring to the implied (and therefore crafted) sense of motivation and logic with which a performer pursues and responds to his opponent, both physically, tactically and emotionally. Discussing his floundering beginnings in the WWE, Jericho turned to veteran Patterson: “I needed to find somebody who could teach me style and psychology.... I had no idea how little I really knew about the psychology of the business” (Jericho and Fornatale, *Undisputed* 30). In a recent interview with Australia’s *SBS News*, “straight edge” (meaning no alcohol, no drugs) wrestler C.M. Punk stressed that, despite the focus on the outside theatrics, it was what occurs inside the ring that he found compelling rather than the stories that are summoned surrounding these in-ring stories:

When I was a kid, I would watch it on television and obviously I was just kind of taken aback by these larger than life men and women... I got more into the actual wrestling, the story-telling aspect of what happens just in the ring, and I’m not talking about backstage interviews or promos in the ring, *I’m just talking about in the ring.* (Tsigis; italics added)

The late Mexican-American wrestler Eddie Guerrero spoke of wrestling as a language in its own right that practitioners were able to employ effectively to surpass cultural barriers, suggesting an international and inter-cultural language in the same way that other language-surpassing art-forms such as music (Higgins) or silent cinema (Brownlow in Tibbets and Welsh 92) are often summoned:

Despite the fact that there were wrestlers from all around the world [in Japan], there was never a communication gap in the locker room or in the ring. Wrestling is a universal language.... There were times when I needed a translator to express something to one of the Japanese boys, but a true professional can communicate all he needs with body language. A wrestler

should be able to go into the ring and work with anybody. You don't have to talk to them. It's about *feel*. (Guerrero and Krugman 75; italics in original)

Like Hart and others, Foley is particularly blunt about his role as author and creator within the ring, despite the manoeuvrings that take place outside it:

All the planning, phone calls, arguing, and frustration become a thing of the past. The match is all ours. Our chance to make a difference – to create a lasting work of art on our own twenty-by-twenty piece of canvas. (Foley, *The Hardcore Diaries* 346)

Along with Foley's memoirs and "diaries," Hart's autobiography is a key text when it comes to exploring poetics in relation to match construction. Both Hart and Foley are important sources for wrestling poetics as they discuss their match preparation in detail, and Hart is likewise straightforward about his role as in-ring performer corresponding with that of author and dramatist when constructing and enacting in-ring matches as a *meaningful* narrative: "I racked my brains for weeks trying to think of a way to make the match mean anything at all. Davey [Smith, his opponent] offered nothing, relying on me to figure it all out" (Hart 376).

When Hart begins looking for a way to structure his match, he decides upon one of the story-telling tools that is available to few other art-forms: real blood. The presence of blood (usually drawn intentionally by wrestlers who carefully and discreetly cut themselves, or "blade") is often dismissed as excessive and gory spectacle, but Hart's use is innately structural, as is his understanding of the in-ring pacing. As a dramatist constructing a narrative, Hart describes the unfolding of the match in dramatic rather than competitive or pointedly ideological terms, specifically delivering an uneventful first half in order to build to the later dramatics:

Davey and I spent fifteen minutes building a two-part story. As I'd anticipated, in the early going the crowd was less than captivated by our storyline. After giving them an unsurprising part one... I cut high in the hairline and the blood poured hot. As Davey worked me over, my head looked like a bloody pulp and even the simplest moves popped now. People praised Robert DeNiro for his dedication when he gained 150 pounds to become Jake La Motta for *Raging Bull*. How come the same compliment isn't paid to pro wrestlers who bleed in the name of realism. After a desperate climax of false finishes, I wrapped Davey up in an old-school Oklahoma roll for the pin.... I was proud of the fact that Meltzer and none of the other wrestling fans could never say for sure that I bladed intentionally. (Hart 376-77)

Added to Hart's own authorship is the fact that blading was formally disallowed at the time of the fight – one example of a performer having to negotiate company restrictions in constructing their own in-ring drama and benefiting from the corporate taboo, comparable to Bordwell's description of cinematic style and textual effects being formed not only by pure authorial intent or ideological channelling, but also external factors that oblige and influence certain methods and techniques (Bordwell, "Never the Twain Shall Meet"). Many constraining factors and negotiations can be less obvious, such as the differences in requirements of delivering and receiving offence between companies (Jericho, *Undisputed* 22) and the implied values this gives to recurring themes of suffering, victory, resilience, emotion and so on.

In an earlier match with Smith, Hart further identifies that "the drama built, layer upon layer, as every move that came followed a logic that never detracted from the story" (Hart 294). When Smith forgets a planned post-match handshake refusal – "the last detail in this drama" that would "make them all cry" (295) – Hart points out that "he'd completely missed one of the tiny moments that can make it all the more real" (296): a careful manipulation of pre-determined constraints and available parameters into a dramatic narrative that stems as directly from the feigned competition itself as from any externally-imposed story-lines. Jericho refers to a similar understanding of the details being presented by Patterson, who explained that "it was the little details that made a good worker into a great worker: timing, listening to the crowd, giving them what they want – or don't want" (Jericho, *Undisputed* 32). Patterson may also have been a direct influence on Hart and a co-author: in a famous match between the equally celebrated performers Hart and Shawn Michaels – an "Iron Man" match that required the wrestlers to perform and maintain interest in their narrative through a main-event sixty minute match – "Pat had been brought out of retirement at the request of the two of them to be the agent on the match" (Jericho, *Undisputed* 31). Hart acknowledges Patterson as agent at the time (373, 379) but doesn't mention him in his description of the actual match authorship, instead comparing the match construction with his opponent to musicians composing together, creating a story of "the lion and the gazelle, or perhaps the wolf and the fox" (386, a story formulation that – as is common in wrestling – draws on real-world emotions as much as storyline ones):

I found Shawn at lunch-time on the day of Wrestlemania XII, and we sat down to compose our match much like musicians composing a song. I let him piece together the first twenty-five minutes together while I figured out the rest. We sat for over three hours, tweaking each spot until we could sing them in our heads. (Hart 385)

While Salmon and Clerc tie interest in the “emotional life of the performer or character” strongly to female fandom in opposition to “masculine or sports values of competitiveness or domination” (Salmon and Clerc 171), it is important to note Hart’s suggestion of an emotional core and a hint of vulnerability (“make them all cry”) at the heart of his narrative construction. While such elements can easily be gendered, these observations can hardly be suitably quantified without extensive literary and poetic analysis across a plethora of matches, styles and promotions rather than broad observations of prominent story-lines in a single company with a specific style of portraying competition (Jericho, *Undisputed* 22). Certainly, vulnerability and less-aggressive emotions can be a part of highly celebrated matches, such as the *Wrestlemania XXV* match between veteran performers Shawn Michaels and The Undertaker (MacFarlane 2010), one of the most highly-praised matches of recent times. Its rematch the following year that was promoted with effective and highly emotive use of androgynous-imaged Placebo’s cover of Kate Bush’s 1985 single “Running Up That Hill” (in contrast to the more aggressive “metal” music frequently used to fuel wrestling feuds). Emotional representation may be limited by a number of factors in wrestling promotions, but nevertheless remains a key element in authorship, if only for those select author-performers who appear to have mastered it.

Tying his own match constructions to a critical understanding of the form, Hart likewise condemns the lack of “psychology” and storytelling craft in other co-authors, identifying technique as only a minor part of storytelling requirements:

I began to refer to Ric [Flair]’s style as full blast, non-stop non-psychology. He made things up on the spot and did them whether they made sense or not. As a technician Flair was one of the best, but I was baffled by how little he really knew about building a great match. (Hart 303)

The fact that these stories are told primarily physically and frequently without words or dialogue perhaps places wrestling at a disadvantage when it comes to placing it within the same context as film or television; in fact, the dominance of continuity editing and extension into “intensified continuity” (Bordwell, “Intensified Continuity”) may see us placing far less emphasis than ever on the physical role of the body as part of performance, further positioning professional wrestling as a unique, live art that is influenced but not wholly subjugated by contemporary standards of film and broadcast media (MacFarlane). Relying solely on the physical interactions between the two participants, the kind of narrative that emerges inside the wrestling ring has few real points of direct comparison in modern media or traditional art-forms.

Fan responses also highlight the importance of the construction of in-ring physical storytelling as opposed to surrounding narratives and spectacles. Wiswell writes the annual “Riren 100,” which offers short narrative analyses of his one hundred top matches of the year, exploring resonance and storytelling technique rather than the more common fan recaps or move summaries. Among his analyses, he notes a “poetry in physicality” in a New Japan match between Yuji Nagata and Hiroshi Tanahashi (Wiswell, “The Riren 100”) and the aesthetic idea of a “visual logic” in certain strikes and transitions in a Ring of Honor match between Bryan Danielson and Austin Aries (Wiswell, “The Riren 100”), also importantly emphasising a “spot” as a “moment in a match that draws attention and emotion” (Wiswell, “Top 100 Matches of the Year”) in relation to a New Japan match between Yuji Nagata and Shinsuke Nakamura. A variety of other readings highlight the nuances of the in-ring storytelling rather than the sports-based focus on quantifiable outcome. This tension is commonly translated in mainstream circles as simply a tension between “real” and “fake” rather than a process of storytelling that has no element of actual competition. Bypassing this, Wiswell delivers key steps in establishing a framework for poetic analysis and some sense of a loose “canon.”

## Conclusion

This brief analysis can only begin to suggest a need to re-engage with wrestling on the level of poetics rather than fully outline all of the methods through which these can be pursued, such as Harold Bloom’s poetics of influence (MacFarlane), or even all of the elements that conspire to construct the in-ring narrative (for example, the importance of commentary as both a contributor, detractor and, in live events, non-entity). It can suggest that cultural and ideological framings of professional wrestling may be insufficient for a complete understanding of the in-ring wrestling narrative itself, as opposed to the surrounding spectacles and ongoing out-of-ring story-lines. Such an approach almost unavoidably places an emphasis on the corporately-controlled and sanctioned “angles” and (often blatant) ideological positions delivered through monopolised spectacle, rather than the authorial process undertaken by in-ring performers who usually have little to no control over the contextual circumstances of their in-ring matches. While they cannot necessarily determine their position within the spectacle, they can nevertheless (to varying degrees) assert authorial control over the unique, one-off dramas that they construct in the ring and summon through their physical performance, presence and authorship within the ring.

It may well be that without this focus on poetics we are insufficiently prepared to chart and critically respond to the narratives that are the lynch-pins of the professional wrestling show or spectacle. Though we may be well prepared for cultural analysis, the task of formulating professional wrestling as a



suitable art-form for poetic analysis remains to those who would seek to respond to the unique and idiosyncratic nature of the wrestling match. Such an understanding can help us pursue not only the construction of an individual dramatic match, but also the ongoing process through which the performer establishes their character or “gimmick” as an inseparable part of their own persona, a distinction that is often blurred in an art-form that tends to blur the “fine line between fact and fiction” (Foley, *The Hardcore Diaries* 9). In wrestling, such characters and their progressing narratives remain closely, if not inextricably, tied to the performer themselves, defined by their personal idiosyncrasies of physicality and capacity to author in-ring narratives that are simultaneously varied and familiar. Wrestlers can never, in a sense, “start afresh” in their story-telling but are always tied up in their own progression of character storyline and personal ability. In this sense, wrestling “identity” and its close correlation with in-ring “ability” can be constructed, but it cannot necessarily be “faked.” If we do not establish a coherent understanding of in-ring poetics, then we are unable to suitably explore the inter-cultural and international influences that pervade the unique and individual in-ring dramas, running the risk of leaving us with a monocultural understanding of a multi-faceted international art-form.

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