Antonio J. Ferraro

Narrative Theory in the Squared Circle

While significant work has been done on the cultural, technological, and political aspects of professional wrestling, less attention has been paid to the specific strategies and methods by which narratives emerge within and across wrestling performances. This essay argues that professional wrestling can be fruitfully studied through several frameworks afforded by narrative theory, specifically related to the narrativization of nonnarrative sporting events; the rhetorics of fictionality; and the overlaps between performance, drama, and narrative. To make the case for professional wrestling's place as a fruitful object of study for narrative theory, I examine how wrestling tells its stories by identifying three primary rhetorical domains: the narrative domain, or the plot structures of matches; the fictional domain, or the creation and maintenance of invented, "kayfabe" universes; and the performative domain, or the physical moves that are vehicles for storytelling as well as meaningful actions in themselves. By examining how each of these storytelling domains work, I highlight how narrative theory's existing critical approaches can help us better understand the rhetorical complexity of both the narration and the interpretation of professional wrestling's stories. At the same time, a detailed examination of professional wrestling's unique formal qualities provides the opportunity to expand and enrich those approaches and, in so doing, ultimately affirms professional wrestling as a narratively complex phenomenon worthy of further study.

1. Introduction, or, "Let's Get Ready To Rumble!"

> "...and I thought it was true that a performance existed in the space between the work and the audience, that it existed, and was made, in that space of interpretation." – Katie Kitamura, *Audition*

Narrative theory and professional wrestling might at first seem like a strange pairing. One has its origins in fine-grained readings of the canonical masterpieces of Proust, Austen, and the great Victorian novels. The other has its origins with the grandiose exploits of performers like Farmer Burns, Bobo Brazil, and the great Gorgeous George. But I believe there are connections worth considering. For example, professional wrestling rivals narrative theory in terms of terminological abundance: if "heterodiegetic," "metalepsis," "sjuzet," and "zero focalization" are not enough, try "babyface," "cheap heat," "Dusty finish," and "worked screwjob." And professional wrestling fans, like narrative theorists, are passionate not just about stories but about story*telling*, or all of the methods by which a narrative is constructed and all of the contexts and frameworks within which it is interpreted.

My primary argument in this paper is that professional wrestling involves sophisticated, multi-dimensional narrative acts and, as a result, it is a fruitful object

of study for narrative theory. The predetermined, constructed nature of wrestling's narratives allows for matches to be "staged to ensure maximum emotional impact and a satisfying climax" (Jenkins 2007, 81). If we understand the constructed nature of storytelling in professional wrestling as a feature, rather than a failure (as many observers seem to do when they dismiss wrestling as "fake"), we can utilize the insights of narrative theory to better understand how wrestling stages complex narrative interactions between authors, audiences, and interpretive contexts. To make the case for professional wrestling's narrative complexity, I will outline what I consider to be professional wrestling's three primary rhetorical components, or the communicative and interpretive frameworks through which performers communicate to audiences and through which those audiences make sense of the performer's actions – in short, how professional wrestling tells its stories. These rhetorical elements can be broken down into three categories: *narrative* components*,* which involves the core structural elements of the story being told to the audience; *fictional* components, or the 'selling' of the match as real; and the *performative* components, or the actual commission of the moves and the audience's awareness of the physical skill required to execute them.

As a way of setting the stage for my overall argument, I will first explain why I believe professional wrestling can fruitfully be studied as a *narrative* phenomenon. I will start by gesturing towards broader trends within scholarly work on professional wrestling, which has generally shifted away from thinking of wrestling in purely visual or symbolic terms and has instead adopted a wider variety of critical frameworks: sociology, cultural studies, queer theory, media analysis, and fandom studies, among others. The homepage of the recently formed Professional Wrestling Studies Association offers this description of the scholarship's historical development:

> Scholarship on professional wrestling has previously focused on understanding the fictional nature of 'sports entertainment' and critiquing the matches, wrestlers, and promotions for being misogynist, racist, jingoist, etc. The current expansion appears to involve a range of disciplines, theories, methodologies and methods that seek to study the various aspects of professional wrestling. Recent publications have examined professional wrestling from the perspectives of performance studies, fan studies, convergence studies, political economic studies, reception studies, and so forth. ("About the PWSA")

This paper is a preliminary effort to add "narrative theory" to that "range of disciplines" now interested in professional wrestling. While recent wrestling research has been interested in the stories (broadly defined) of professional wrestling, there has been relatively little focus on formal and rhetorical components; that is, on how performers and audiences create meaning across narrative, fictional, and performative domains. Whatever cultural capital it may or may not have at a given time, wrestling is always a distinctly *narrative* phenomenon, and its narrative methods are directly related to its unique existence at the intersection of sports, narrative, theater, and performance.

After making the case for the value of a narrative-focused study of wrestling, I will explore each of the rhetorical domains: the narrative, the fictional, and the

performative. I will provide both general and specific examples of how each domain functions within professional wrestling, including how they frequently interact, such as when audiences make sense of a given 'spot' (or significant event) in a match as simultaneously a plot point in a story, an illustration of a fictional character's psychology, and as a carefully choreographed sequence. As I work through each set of rhetorical components, I will also focus on how they reflect recent trends and emphases within contemporary narrative theory, including research into narrative aspects of nonnarrative phenomena like sports, the rhetoric of fictionality, and the relationship between performance and narrative. Even as these areas of research provide helpful frameworks for understanding the storytelling strategies of professional wrestling, I will argue that wrestling complicates and expands those frameworks. What will emerge, I believe, is a better sense of the narrative complexity of professional wrestling, as well as an invitation for future narrative research into a cultural phenomenon that deserves recognition for how it both exemplifies and challenges our understanding of how stories work.

2. From Spectacle to Narrative

While I was working on this paper, I would occasionally tell a friend or colleague I was writing an essay on professional wrestling. In response, they almost universally said some variation of: "I like that Barthes essay on wrestling." They were referring to Roland Barthes's chapter "The World of Wrestling" in *Mythologies* (1972), rightfully famous as one of the earliest "serious" theoretical considerations of professional wrestling. It is also infamous among scholars of professional wrestling, as it occupies an outsized space in the general academic imagination. Barthes' interests in the chapter involve what he calls the "spectacular" nature of wrestling, or how it provides exaggerated manifestations of foundational cultural concepts like "Suffering, Defeat, and Justice" (19). The capitalized letters exemplify Barthes' belief that wrestling is a kind of dramatized mythology, a way for modern cultures to stage clashes between its core values and ideologies. In so doing, the culture can satisfactorily work out its defining tensions, simplify the world, and dramatize a "form of Justice which is at last intelligible" (25). Wrestling, for Barthes, is a moral spectacle and a collective attempt to clarify existence.

To be clear, wrestling *is* a spectacle, and it is especially spectacular (in a material sense) now that it has grown into a billion-dollar industry. And wrestling certainly does tend to distill complex geopolitical or cultural conflicts into simplistic binaries. The affective and ideological intensity that Barthes ascribes to wrestling's spectacular performances is indeed a major part of professional wrestling's DNA. What could be more emblematic of a pure mythology being

worked out live and in-person than Hulk Hogan glistening with sweat and waving around an American flag as he prepares to beat his Soviet nemesis Nikolai Volkoff in a WWF "Flag Match" in 1985?[1]

But Barthes' sense of the cultural functions of wrestling paints only a partial picture. By framing wrestling as a spectacle, in which, like all spectacles, "nothing exists except in the absolute," Barthes misses the narrative work that has always gone into the delivery and appreciation of a wrestling match (24–25). Barthes treats wrestling matches as simplistic (but powerful) stories, the meanings of which are static and overdetermined. In reality, matches often involve, both as part of broader storylines and as self-contained dramas, the elements that are usually associated with narrativity rather than with spectacularity: tension, uncertainty, surprise, reversals, causality, intentionality, temporal and spatial extension, the arousal and thwarting of expectations, etc. What's more, the absolute meanings that Barthes ascribes to wrestling matches are often flexible, self-reflective, and even indeterminate. Audiences are rarely simply passive recipients of these meanings. Wrestlers change identities, attitudes, and personas, even from one performance to another, and the values that play out in a match are not always coherent or consistent. Nikolai Volkoff, for example, would eventually "defect" to America during the Gulf War in response to the (rather inexplicable) transformation of Sgt. Slaughter (an uber-patriotic military-commander character) into an Iraqi sympathizer. These were never fully complete or "absolute," in that Sgt. Slaughter maintained his military identity (so he could inevitably return to his status as an American patriot) while Volkoff's Soviet identity morphed into a vague Russian backstory that was "foreign" enough to allow him to remain a curiosity but apolitical enough to let him adopt multiple storytelling functions as he faded in and out of WWE's promotion over the next few years.

Not only are the identities and gimmicks of wrestlers often internally incoherent and subject to rapid remixes, but the distribution of the supposedly absolute values that Barthes highlights as touchstones of wrestling is often situational and strategic. David Shoemaker points out that "until the 1960s black wrestlers were almost always cast as good guys because the promoters worried that black villains would incite fans to riot" (2013, 145).[2] Heroism, villainy, and even identity have long been radically flexible attributes in professional wrestling narratives, sometimes affirming cultural values and sometimes ironically subverting them, as in Shoemaker's example. Sharon Mazer further notes that professional wrestling matches, while perfectly capable of exemplifying singular or simple values, are also capable of destabilizing those values: "Rather than simply reflecting and reinforcing moral cliches, professional wrestling puts contradictory ideas into play, as with its audience it replays, reconfigures, and celebrates a range of performative possibilities" (1998, 3). To describe a wrestling match as simply a spectacular contest between ur-concepts like "Good" and "Evil" misses the degree to which the actual conflicts taking place in the ring, and the values that inform the audience's response to the conflicts, are complex and dynamic. Wrestling's conflicts are accordingly crafted as part of broader narrative projects and reflect specific, rather than universal, rhetorical and cultural contexts.

All of this is to say that scholarship on professional wrestling has moved beyond Barthes' fascination with wrestling's spectacles. As Nicholas P. Davidson argues,

> Barthes' spectacle of excess is the construction of clearly defined and cemented roles that present themselves to audiences in the immediate moment, as opposed to subtle nuances that develop their roles that require engagement from audiences outside of the actual wrestling show. (2021, 14)

In moving past Barthes, scholars have investigated a wide variety of material, historical, and cultural dimensions of professional wrestling. These studies have explored how wrestling audiences created robust information networks through journals, newsletters, and amateur zines that helped shape modern sports coverage.[3] As mentioned, substantial work has also been done on the cultural politics of professional wrestling's characters and storylines, identifying how these storylines often reflect reductive and harmful stereotypes while also complicating them in surprising ways.[4] And scholars have also explored the development of online communities, noting that wrestling fans were among the first to embrace the internet as a tool for the creation of interactive digital spaces and the collective negotiation of fan identities.[5] A broad, detached critical interest in spectacularity has given way to detailed, fine-grained explorations of how wrestling works: as a business, as a cultural mirror, and as a shaper of communities.

Less attention has been paid, however, to the narrative dynamics and formal features of matches themselves, both as discrete events and as chapters within broader stories. This paper is indebted to the cultural criticism of scholars working on professional wrestling, and to the overall effort to move past the 'spectacular' as the guiding principle of wrestling analysis. But understanding how wrestling works should, I believe, also involve paying closer attention to wrestling's formal and rhetorical qualities, ideally in conjunction with cultural, technological, and sociological research. In other words, it should involve the kind of close attention to storytelling that narrative theory provides. Narrative theory's theoretical frameworks can help us answer questions such as: How does a professional wrestling match narrate a story? How does it mobilize the knowledge and attitudes of audiences as a rhetorical resource? How does it make use of an audience's simultaneous awareness of the match as part of a story, as a symbolic fiction, and as a series of physically performed actions? To adapt James Phelan's rhetorical definition of narrative,[6] this paper explores precisely how performers and wrestling promotions tell their audiences, on some occasion and for some purpose, that something *is happening*. What's more, it investigates the interpretive frameworks through which audiences make sense of those rhetorical gestures, and how an audience develops the right interpretive protocols that allow wrestling stories to emerge as coherent and meaningful.

3. Rhetorical Elements of Professional Wrestling: Narrative, Fictional, Performative

3.1 Narrative Elements

Most narrative analyses of sporting events agree that they are fundamentally nonnarrative. However, most also agree that we experience them *through* narrative, meaning we often narrativize the events in order to make them more meaningful and engaging. Few fans, in other words, are simply experiencing sporting events as a series of physical events. We apply narrative shape and meaning to a competition's outcome, often aided by the work of sports journalists and networks (for example, the "Hero's Return" narrative arc that was used to describe Lebron James' 2016 NBA championship victory with the Cleveland Cavaliers). Philippe Carrard and Marie-Laure Ryan both suggest that sport narratives occur as the result of commentary, or the discursive choices made by commentators relaying a game's live events and by beat writers providing recaps. The events can be narrated in "the present of the broadcast refer[ring] to the moment in time experienced as NOW by the speaker" (Ryan 1993, 139, capitalization in original) or retrospectively narrated, focusing on the meaningful presentation of events rather than the experiencing of them. As viewers and fans, we can also mediate the events of a sporting match through past events or through anticipated future events. Carrard notes that newspaper reports of baseball games often frame a given play or outcome (a batter gets a hit, for example) as continuations and resolutions of past events (the hitter had previously gone hitless), thus turning them into connected narrative moments (Carrard 1988, 52). We therefore interpret events as conclusions to narrative sequences and anticipate further resolutions or complications. Brian Upton accordingly identifies anticipation as a foundational component of playing and experiencing games: "We take our knowledge of the rules, the current state, our capabilities, the knowledge and capabilities of our opponents, and we use that information to imagine how the game will unfold in the future" (2015, 75). Not only are current events framed as the resolution of past events, but we often imagine multiple possible future outcomes (a come-from behind victory, a stunning series of mistakes), each defined by the current circumstances of the game and each providing different types of narrative resolution.

If we perceive a competitive sporting event as a narrative, it is because we turn it into a narrative by consciously engaging with it *as* a narrative. If a player misses a potential game-winning shot, we assume they did not miss it because they felt that would be more narratively satisfying. The core actions of a competition – plays executed or not, points scored or not, a team winning or not – are not intentionally designed by authors to be presented as meaningful to audiences, and therefore any meaning we ascribe to sporting events is external to the events themselves (aside from the event's relevance to scoring systems). It is not

'told' by the competitors but rather transformed into a story by those chronicling it, documenting it, or experiencing it in the moment.

Professional wrestling doesn't work this way. Its events are, in fact, 'told' to the audience. The telling is not retrospective, and it is not solely provided by commentators. Although commentators are an important part of televised wrestling matches, they often provide background information about characters and storylines, connecting what is happening to ongoing narratives within the professional wrestling universe. In this way they supplement, rather than transform, the narrative events taking place in the ring. It is ultimately the performers themselves who are telling the story, creating a narrative through their physical actions.

In part, this is because the relationship between sport and story is reversed in professional wrestling. Instead of a story grafted onto a sporting event, professional wrestling is a story told through the simulation of a competitive sporting event. This is one reason why the WWE refers to its product as "sports entertainment" (the other being the avoidance of sporting regulations). As such, its purposes are different: a sporting event is a competitive event and the competitors are trying to win, with no real regard for storytelling value. The choices a professional athlete makes are made in light of their effect on the outcome of the game. Professional wrestlers are not trying to win in the same way, as the outcomes of matches are predetermined. Instead, they are making choices in light of their ability to communicate a story to an audience. A punch in a boxing match is an effective punch in so far as it damages the opponent and tallies points in the judge's card, no matter what narrative meaning an audience ascribes to it. By contrast, a punch in professional wrestling is an effective punch only if it creates the right kind of *narrative* meaning.

How does a punch become a meaningful narrative event, a significant moment within a temporarily extended and deliberately created plotline? As I will explore in later sections, this happens partly by the performers referencing or creating a fictional universe in which, for example, the punch of a particular wrestler is superhumanly powerful, and partly by the performers coordinating the action so that it *appears* physically powerful and can therefore be appreciated by the audience as a successfully executed maneuver. But performers also communicate with audiences through the linking of physical events to recognizable narrative structures. Laurence de Garis suggests this is key to the very logic and intelligibility of wrestling: "Each move is not inherently intelligible, as Barthes seems to suggest. Rather, *in a good match*, it is made intelligible by the performers, who include it in a consciously and carefully crafted series of signifiers. In a bad match, each moment is unintelligible" (2005, 204, emphasis in original). In other words, a punch is not just meaningful because it resolves a physical conflict or is expertly delivered, but also because it is performed and interpreted as a legible conclusion to a sequence of events. It is meaningful precisely because it accomplishes narrative, rather than competitive, ends.

An illustrative example of this is how wrestlers communicate that a match is likely coming to an end. This is not something that professional athletes have to

do: some sort of external rule-system or time constraint dictates a competition's end. In wrestling, however, the performers will often communicate to the audience that the narrative is approaching its conclusion, inviting the audience to respond to their actions as acts of closure and resolution (in addition to the fictional and performative aspects they might focus on, each of which will be discussed in later sections). For instance, the Undertaker often signaled the impending end to a match by making a "throat-slash" gesture, meaning that his signature finishing move, the Tombstone Piledriver, was imminent. Similarly, Kane would raise his arm into the air, prefiguring his chokeslam; Shaun Michaels would "tune up the band" by slamming his foot into the ground to prepare for the delivery of his signature "Sweet Chin Music" superkick; and Hulk Hogan would famously "hulk up" (it is as silly as it sounds), roaring and flexing and shaking, as a way of signaling an impending pivotal turn in the match.

These gestures help the audience understand the events of the match as narratively meaningful sequences. They suggest forthcoming resolutions as well as significant alterations in a match's trajectory, even if those resolutions and outcomes can be delayed and complicated. A signature move might be interrupted; a sequence of events that usually results in a match's conclusion can somehow be withstood by an opponent.[7] Audiences might be shocked by a "false finish," or surprised by a quick and unexpected resolution, or thrilled by a match that lasts much longer than anticipated. But regardless of their reaction, they are reacting to these events as *story events*, sequences within the broader 'plot' of the match that is carefully communicated by the performers themselves.

This last point is essential to understanding the narrative domain of professional wrestling storytelling. As discussed earlier, the narrative meaning of professional sporting events is created by agents external to the physical actions. The athletes might be the ones competing, but they are not the 'authors' of the narrative we experience. Rather, the commentator, or the sports journalists, or we as fans in the stand are responsible for the narrative shape and its meanings. In wrestling, the performers are authors, narrators, and characters. They communicate the overall structure to the audience through gestures indicating the general shape of the match; they guide audiences to understand the significance, both fictional and physical, of given maneuvers and in-ring moments; and they act within predetermined identities and personas, manifesting the physical and emotional consequences of the narrative. In this sense they are enacting a form of what Dorrit Cohn calls the "absolute focalization" of simultaneous narration, in which there is a "continuity…between outer and inner reality, report and reflection" (1999, 107). Report, reflection, and action are all concurrent in professional wrestling, and the meaning of this unique form of simultaneous narration is further supplemented with announcer and performer commentary. This mixture of immediacy and mediation is a key component of wrestling's appeal, as well as one part of the rhetorical strategies the genre uses to elicit and sustain the qualities we most commonly associate with narrativity: suspense, curiosity, and surprise. As narrative theory continues to think through how nonnarrative

events become narrativized, I therefore believe it would benefit from engaging with professional wrestling as an example of, and limit case for, existing theories.

3.2 Fictional Elements

The central fiction of professional wrestling is the maintenance of "kayfabe," or the illusion that what is happening in the ring is *really* happening. This applies to both characters and actions. Within kayfabe, the villain truly hates the hero and a wrestler's roundhouse kick actually hits the opponent in the head. Kayfabe is a term that initially referred to the act of maintaining a kind of professional silence regarding the tricks and illusions used by performers. Scott Beekman writes that in the earliest years of professional wrestling, promoters

> developed a carnivalesque perception of paying customers as dupes to be financially swindled. To maintain a veil of secrecy concerning their moneymaking machinations, carnival workers invented a secret slang language…[and] adopted the notion of keeping the business secret. (40)

This "secret slang language" was crucial to the practice of "hippodroming," or the creation of "supposedly authentic athletic contests engaged in solely as a means of making money by drawing a large gate" (26). For these promoters, audiences needed to believe in the fiction of the performance. Kayfabe was a strategy for keeping audiences *out* of the know.

That was well over a hundred years ago, however, and, as David Shoemaker points out, audiences "have been in on wrestling's ruse for a century" (2013, 25). Nowadays, kayfabe is how audiences get *in* the know. Modern audiences are now by and large composed of "smart marks," or, in Shoemaker's words, "modern metafan[s] steeped in Internet rumors and insider info" (2013, 334). Audiences know that the outcomes of matches are predetermined, they know that the scowling villain is not actually a monster in real life, and they're quite aware that a double underhook suplex is only really possible if both performers coordinate to make it happen.

Kayfabe has not disappeared, however. Instead, it has become one part of wrestling's rhetorical repertoire, one lens through which audiences respond and interpret the events of a match. As Benjamin Litherland argues, the historical changes in how kayfabe functions means that "we should avoid speaking of kayfabe as an unchanging, universal quality that belongs to all professional wrestling in precisely the same way at the same time. The meaning of kayfabe, for performers and audiences alike, shifts over time" (2022, 125). Kayfabe is no longer a means of duping an audience, but rather an agreement, or what Effron, McMurry, and Pignanogli describe as the "collaborative construction" between author and audience (2019, 337). Audiences now hold two awarenesses at once – an awareness of the performers and events as really happening and an awareness of them as characters within a fictional universe – and they are prepared to circumstantially activate, suspend, and mix these awarenesses.

The distinction between the kayfabe of the early carnivals and hippodromes and the kayfabe of later forms of wrestling is akin to the distinction between lying and fictionality, specifically fictionality understood as a strategically deployed rhetorical resource. A lie is an attempt to deceive; fictionality is an invitation to a temporary engagement with something that one knows is not true. Rather than trying to fool audiences, professional wrestling performances have for decades now been asking viewers, at various moments and for various reasons, to engage with fictions of all kinds as a way of 'selling' the story of a match and the impact of moves and maneuvers.

Thinking about the fictionality of wrestling necessitates asking about the *rhetoric* of wrestling's fictionality. It involves asking: when, why, and how does the fictional aspect of a performance become most salient for an audience? As Henrik Skov Nielsen, James Phelan, and Richard Walsh argue in their influential "Ten Theses on Fictionality," a rhetorical approach to fictionality allows us to understand it as a scalar, dynamic, and contextually valuable resource, distinct from lying (or hippodroming):

> Fictive discourse is clearly distinct from lying since lies are designed to be taken as referring to actual states of affairs. Fictive discourse neither refers to actual states of affairs nor tries to deceive its audience about such states. Instead it overtly invents or imagines states of affairs in order to accomplish some purpose(s) within its particular context. (2015, 63)

Fictionality can be more or less apparent or present at different times and in different ways. Accordingly, "fictionality is therefore relative to communicative contexts rather than intrinsic to the discourse itself" (2015, 66). In wrestling, deployments of fictionality involve characters, narrative events, and physical actions. Characters are perhaps the most obvious means by which wrestling performers invite audiences to respond through the lens of fictionality. The annals of professional wrestling lore are filled with outrageous characters and gimmicks that audiences understood to be outrageous. But even if the characters are not outlandish, they still have motivations, desires, and identities that audiences accept as real (or at least as meaningful) within the fictional universe of wrestling, even as they understand that the actual person performing the character may not share those motivations, desires, and identities (or is not actually a zombie, a military general, or a giant turkey).

Fictionality can help build out storylines and the universes of wrestling promotions by pitting characters against one another, aligning some characters as allies or partners, or by creating conflicts that need to be resolved. But fictionality can also be deployed within individual matches. A performer might make a signature gesture or use a recognizable catchphrase and, in doing so, invite the audience to react (with boos or cheers) to the performer's *character*, that is, to the despicable villain or the lovable hero or the brave underdog. The performer might also execute a maneuver that is known to be "protected" within kayfabe, which means that the move almost always results in a victory. The move may or may not be striking or bombastic or even particularly impressive. But if the move

is repeatedly identified as unbeatable within the broader universe of the promotion, and if the commenter properly highlights the move's power within the match, and if the performers cooperate to execute the move to make it seem truly devastating, then the audience is invited to engage with the move through the lens of fictionality.

For example, the finishing move of the Dudley Brothers, one of the most famous tag-team partnerships in American professional wrestling across multiple promotions, was known as the Dudley Death Drop and was strongly "protected" throughout their career. The move itself does not look any more painful or dangerous than other finishing moves. It involves one of the Dudley brothers lifting their opponent over their head as part of a flapjack suplex, and the other Dudley brother performing a leaping cutter, or a move in which the opponent's head is grabbed in midair and appears to be slammed into the ground. But the impact of the move does not lie in how complicated, violent, or even impressive it is. Instead, the storytelling around the move, including the degree to which its protected status was frequently noted by commentators and other performers, ensured that the finisher was interpreted by fans as being fictionally unbeatable. Nobody kicked out of a Dudley Death Drop, and this was understood by audiences as a fictional fact.

Understanding how fictionality works within professional wrestling requires a recognition that it is a resource, something strategically emphasized in certain moments and minimized in others. It can be momentarily suspended within matches, resulting in curious moments where the fictionality of the match is both emphasized and disavowed. An example of this is Samoa Joe's move "Nope." The move relies on the audience's familiarity with a typical wrestling routine, one that is dependent on an embrace of contextual fictionality. Wrestlers will often "stun" their opponent and then run to the top of a corner turnbuckle. While the opponent is conveniently stumbling around, the active wrestler will leap from the turnbuckle and deliver a body slam, flying elbow, or some other move. This sequence requires a deployment of fictionality: audiences have to accept that the other wrestler is not just stunned but stunned to the degree that they will stand in precisely the right place for precisely the right amount of time to allow the opponent to get into precisely the right position to execute their move. This is referred to as 'selling' a move, or making sure that it appears legitimate and coherent within the story of the match and the fictional universe of professional wrestling as a genre.

"Nope" interrupts this fictional logic. This move occurs when Samoa Joe, having been stunned by his opponent, stands in the middle of the ring, performing the usual display of confusion and immobility. However, when his opponent launches off the turnbuckle, Samoa Joe casually walks away (usually with a dismissive smirk or even a raised middle finger), forcing his opponent to crash land into the mat (see Figure 1). From one perspective, this move shatters the co-constructed fictionality of the match. Samoa Joe refuses to participate in the invention required by both performers and audience for the sequence to work. At the same time, this rejection of fictionality also contributes to the fictionality

in a different sense, as it reinforces a component of Samoa Joe's fictional persona, specifically his mischievousness and arrogance. But rather than completely short-circuiting the entire premise of the match, the break in one type of fictionality (the invention required for the execution of a certain move sequence) becomes a rhetorical reinforcement of another type of fictionality (the invented characterization of the Samoa Joe persona within the fictional universe). Fictionality within professional wrestling is therefore not just something that is emphasized to greater or lesser degrees in different moments, but also a resource that can be self-reflexively deployed to multiple effects.

Fig. 1: Samoa Joe turns his back on his opponent during his "Nope" move. "Samoe Joe Nope 1" by Latin 915 is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.

Generally, studies of the rhetoric of (non)fictionality have focused on instances where, for example, a global nonfiction (graphic memoir, documentary film, campaign speech) strategically deploys fictive discourse to aid in the global work's purposes. Phelan, Nielsen, and Walsh argue that in such cases the use of "fictive discourse is not ultimately a means of constructing scenarios that are cut off from the actual world but rather a means for negotiating an engagement with that world" (2015, 63). In these examples, the local deployment of fictionality is recognizably distinct from the broader nonfictional discourse, even though both rhetorical gestures are working towards a similar goal, that of "engagement with that world." However, in the case of "Nope," it is difficult to precisely define the 'ultimate' goal of the manipulation of fictionality, and it is equally difficult to pin down the 'global' genre against which the use of nonfictionality works. If the global fiction's goal is to create a meaningful and enduring fictional universe, "Nope" would seem to be working against that goal. However, as we have seen, "Nope" actually reinforces certain components of the global fiction even as it disrupts others: it breaks kayfabe as a way of strengthening it. Additionally, the deployment of nonfictionality is shot through with fictionality. Although Samoa Joe is operating within the realm of real-life logic (refusing to participate in the

maneuver), the opposing wrestler continues the move and often writhes on the ground in exaggerated, kayfabe agony, thus maintaining fictionality. If "Nope" is local nonfictionality, it is *hyper*local, representing a small portion of a small moment within a large narrative that is itself defined by multiple discursive logics. In short, what maneuvers like "Nope" illustrate is that professional wrestlers are constantly negotiating between rhetorical deployments of fictionality and nonfictionality in contexts that are atypically dynamic and ambiguous relative to the global genres typically studied within research on the rhetoric of fictionality.

In addition to how they 'sell' (or don't) physical maneuvers, performers can also blur the line between what's real and what's kayfabe as part of their character work, as in the example of a "worked shoot," or a monologue that seems to be delivered by the performer speaking as themselves but, in reality, is part of a scripted storyline. A famous example is the "pipe bomb promo" delivered by performer CM Punk, in which he criticized the management and creative decisions of the WWE. It was well-known among fans that Punk had genuine creative disputes with WWE leadership, and this monologue played on these real-life tensions in order to suggest that Punk was going "off-script." However, the promo was, in fact, kayfabe. While the behind-the-scenes tensions were real, the promo and its fallout were scripted. What this suggests is that nothing within professional wrestling should be defined as "inherently" fictional or nonfictional.[8] The fact that a wrestler is speaking poorly about management is not in and of itself evidence that a promo or monologue is 'real.' Anything, at any time, can be made part of the fiction, and how audiences make those distinctions depends on the strategies and intentions of the performers.

Analyzing fictionality within professional wrestling involves asking questions about how performers are framing and presenting their identities and physical actions to audiences, who in turn respond to, interpret, and judge those identities and actions as being successful or not *as fictions*. Professional wrestling audiences are like the readers of novels or viewers of films who, in Lasse Gammelgaard's words, determine "what interpretive assumptions regarding any communicative phenomenon will help…maximize relevance instead of to what generic or ontological category a certain speech act belongs" (2022, 5). While studies of the rhetorics of (non)fictionality have to date focused almost entirely on textual examples, I hope this brief overview suggests that such rhetorical deployments are also significant parts of many performance genres, and in professional wrestling they are crucial to the storytelling enterprise. Without an audience's ability to recognize a gesture as fictional, and to respond to it within that framework without losing their awareness of its strategic fictionality, professional wrestling would simply be a series of lies, one-sided cons pulled on suspecting dupes. Instead, it is a performance that requires performers to actively create, and audiences to recognize, the boundaries between reality and kayfabe, as well as the moments in which those boundaries are transgressed and blurred.

3.3 Performative Elements

Performance, drama, and theatricality in general have been understudied within narrative theory. This is due in part to narrative theory's origins in studies of novels, and, even more specifically, studies of written texts. As Ansgar Nünning and Roy Sommer point out, "[since] the majority of existing narratological models were developed on the basis of and for the analysis of fiction, some areas such as the nature and potential of performance time have been neglected" (2008, 349). Gérard Genette, for example, viewed narrative as primarily a textual phenomenon. For Genette, even though we might productively discuss the thematic content of a story in a film or play, proper analyses of narrative discourse must focus on written texts as the "specific characteristic feature [of narrative] is the *verbal* transmission of fictional stories" (Nünning / Sommer 2008, 344, emphasis in original). Even beyond this original textual bias, there has been a historical critical tendency to view narrative and staged performance as conceptual opposites. Narratives, the theory goes, tell a story; performances simply *are* the story. Even further, some theorists view the distinction between narrative and performance as not just conceptual but existential, even ethical. Josette Féral argues that performance is fundamentally defined by, and culturally valuable due to, a lack of narrative: "[the] absence of narrativity (continuous narrativity, that is) is one of the dominant characteristics of performance," and performers / performance artists do their best work when they resist the "temptation of narrativity" (1982, 179).

Despite these historical antinomies, there has been work in recent years to bridge the gap between narrative studies and studies of dramatic performance. Nünning and Sommer suggest that keeping in mind the "narratological distinction between mimetic and diegetic storytelling in drama," or the distinction between the imitation of action and the recounting of events, "is the first step towards a diachronic analysis of the cultural functions of dramatic storytelling, linking narratology with concepts of performativity" (2008, 348). Rather than thinking of performance as nonnarrative, as Féral and others do, performance can be considered a form of storytelling with a dominant emphasis on imitative action (although still fully capable of deploying techniques normally associated with diegetic narrativity). Brian Richardson and Christine Schwanecke also argue for narrative theory's engagement with performance, emphasizing that performance can be fruitfully studied through narrative frameworks, if performance's distinct formal and cultural qualities are kept in mind.[9]

These studies have primarily focused on drama, and usually on the written texts of plays and performances. But narrative theory has also tried to think through the narrative aspects of live performances themselves. Jan Alber has argued live performances can be understood as narratives through a conscious interpretive choice; that is, "by narrativizing them, i.e., *by approaching them* as narratives" (2017, 360, emphasis mine). We can focus on and interpret the physical actions of the performer – what Alber calls the "visual and acoustic stimuli that are used in actual performances" (2017, 360) – and we can additionally ask how

these actions invite reflection on all of the elements that we usually associate with narrative and narrativity: changes in physical, mental, temporal, and spatial states; the enactment and resolution of conflicts and desires; and the representation or immediate display of dynamic experiential realities.

As I have argued in the previous two sections, professional wrestling's stories are elaborated through a combination of rhetorical gestures and strategies that involve audiences recognizing events and characters as narratively and fictionally meaningful; that is, meaningful as moments within an emerging plot, and meaningful within the kayfabe fictional universe established by a given promotion. Audiences are guided to these interpretations through the "visual and acoustic stimuli" that Alber describes, especially the gestures, speeches, costumes, and physical actions of the performers. Storytelling within professional wrestling is in fact predominantly performative, in that, as described in section 3.2, a move's impact is 'sold' by how performers' bodies react to it, or a character's persona is enriched by a performer's costume, mannerisms, and even their physique.

In these ways, professional wrestling is obviously a performance genre, but it is nonetheless saturated with story and storytelling strategies, complicating even further the supposed split between performance and narrative. The physical performances of professional wrestling are its story and discourse, both the content of the stories it tells and its method of telling those stories. But even as audiences respond to wrestlers' performances as a kind of narration and therefore simultaneously interpret them as narratively and fictionally meaningful, they are also appreciating them as performances that are athletically impressive, physically difficult, and often painful and violent. It is this aspect of professional wrestling that both unites it and distinguishes it from other storytelling genres like textual narrative and dramatic performance. Like those genres, audiences often simultaneously apprehend a work's story and appreciate authorial craft. An audience member being blown away by two wrestlers successfully and seamlessly executing a series of moves and reversals is not all that different, I'm arguing, from a reader being blown away by Joyce's successful and seamless execution of the various discourses of the English language in "The Oxen of the Sun." But what distinguishes professional wrestling from these other genres is that it is not just representing actions or events but actually instantiating them. A body slam is not described or intimated – it happens. Jamie Lewis Hadley notes that, since the "the success of the wrestling match relies so heavily on the accurate and convincing performance of pain," one of the most reliable methods wrestlers have available to make pain seem accurate and convincing is to inflict real pain on each other (2017, 155).[10] And while many moves are in fact carefully coordinated and choreographed (just as scenes are in dramatic performance), a wrestling performance often involves very real pain and physical contact. As the old saying among wrestling fans goes, "you can't fake gravity."

The performance of a move can therefore be delivered to an audience with a rhetorical emphasis on its place within a narrative, its relevance within a fictional universe, *and* as an impressive physical feat, and each of these emphases can be used to different effects in different contexts: the furtherance of a story, the

elaboration of a character's identity, the display of a wrestler's skill or endurance, as well as combinations of these and other effects. To see how all of the rhetorical domains can operate simultaneously, we can observe the delivery and reception of a finishing move, since those moves invite interpretation across all three rhetorical domains: as the signal for a plot's resolution; as a demonstration of a performer's (kayfabe) dominance; and as the completion of series of physically demanding maneuvers. The Undertaker's Tombstone Piledriver finishing move illustrates this. As a relatively "protected" finishing move, its delivery signals to the audience that the match is likely over (and if it is not, this is a narrative twist). During the heyday of his "Deadman" persona, the move was also meant to result in the total defeat of the opponent as a sign of the Undertaker's unstoppable and pseudo-mystical power. A piledriver is also a physically difficult and dangerous maneuver that is rarely performed by anyone other than the Undertaker in the WWE promotion, in part due to The Undertaker's status within the company and in part due to his size and experience. Close observation reveals that the Undertaker's height and the mechanics of his delivery of the move ensures that the opponent's head is often several inches off the ground when The Undertaker falls to his knees and "piledrives" into the ground (see Figure 2). Even as audiences recognize that the move signals the likely end of the match and the continuation of a given fictional scenario, they also recognize that it is a skillfully executed sequence requiring talent, coordination, and precision. Their interpretation of and reaction to the move cuts across all three domains, each informing the other in a rhetorically complex synthesis.

Fig. 2: The Undertaker prepares to deliver his signature finisher, the "Tombstone Piledriver." "Brothers of Destruction Double Tombstone[Crop]" by Xander Hiekenis licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0.

The performances within professional wrestling are always a combination of reality and simulation, the display of artificial agony and the experience of real pain. As such, these performances are distinct from the performances in dramatic the-

ater, in which physical actions are almost always simulations or approximations.[11] They align professional wrestling with some elements of professional athletics, in that physical skill is a key component of what audiences engage with and appreciate (although the skill often becomes narrativized or incorporated into other rhetorical frameworks in wrestling, while it is usually appreciated as an end in itself in professional sports). Additionally, wrestling's reliance on the physical expressions of its performers links it to global forms of oral and embodied storytelling, which, as described by anthropologist Harold Scheub, are "sensual processes, dependent on the elaborate network of relationships that constitutes the narrative production, and image and body movement are essential links in this activity" (1977, 345). In wrestling, this elaborate network of relationships involves all the rhetorical storytelling domains discussed in this paper, including the audience's awareness of wrestling histories, the move repertoires of the performers, and all of the audio, visual, and physical generic signifiers used by performers to communicate physical states like pain, exhaustion, anger, fear, frustration, and many others.

But the physical performances, especially those that involve actual pain and contact, also bring forward a complicated topic that narrative theory has not fully engaged with: how to make sense of physical activity within narrative contexts. Dan Punday argues that narrative theory has generally minimized the human body in its analysis of written texts. As a result, "a narratology trying to correct our past neglect of the body must first ask how a narrative gives meaning to the human body, while realizing that this method will depend on the larger culture out of which this narrative arises" (2000, 229). For Punday, critics have not paid sufficient attention to how authors present and invite responses to bodies as one of the thematic emphases within their narratives. To correct this, Punday argues for more awareness of how bodies, their meanings, and their mechanisms are defined and elaborated within a narrative and within a broader culture. The focus of this "corporeal narratology" is mostly on written texts, but Punday's overall argument also applies to my claims about the physical performances in wrestling. To get at how the physical actions of the wrestler's help shape wrestling's stories, we need to explore how those actions are framed within the match, within the audience's interpretations of the match, and within the broader space of the wrestling promotion and its cultural contexts.

An audience's engagement with a wrestler's physical performance can be for its own sake, as when audiences chant "This is awesome!" after a spectacular series of dives from ladders or top ropes. But that engagement can impact the audience's interpretation of other elements of a wrestling narrative. A wrestler's ability to strategically emphasize their physical exhaustion can help structure a match's plot; alternatively, a wrestler's willingness to fully display their exhaustion can help heighten the emotional resonance of a match's conclusion. As previously mentioned, a wrestler's ability to performatively 'sell' a move for kayfabe reasons – for example, to emphasize an opponent's apparent strength, or to further 'protect' a move – influences the strength and depth of the fictions audiences are asked to engage with. At the same time, a performer's ability to actually

perform moves makes those fictions more or less robust. A prime example of this interweaving of the fictional and performative domains is the disjunct between the kayfabe power of a wrestler and their actual ability to perform that power in a believable way. This was the case with the Ultimate Warrior, a wrestler slated to replace Hulk Hogan as the face of the WWF after Hogan's departure. While the Ultimate Warrior was strong and impressively muscled, he was fairly immobile and unskilled in the ring, resulting in a tension between the fictional domain of his matches (his unbelievable power) and the performative domain (his inability to consistently collaborate with his opponents to perform any of the moves designed to exemplify that power).

There's a clear similarity here to the performer-audience dynamics of competitive sports, in which, like wrestling, a significant amount of audience engagement is tied to appreciation of skill. But it is also important to recognize that the performative domain influences and is influenced by the other rhetorical elements of wrestling. It impacts what kind of stories are told, how they are told, and whether they resonate with audiences. And while wrestling shares with drama and performance art an emphasis on the body in motion as a key rhetorical tool for communicating narrative and thematic information, it is distinct from those genres in that the performances are not simulations or representations of actions, but rather physical acts that are often painful and genuinely dangerous. Audiences know this, and their engagements with wrestling are influenced by how the wrestlers make their stories visible on and through their bodies.

4. Conclusion

Watching a professional wrestling match is a narrative experience. It is, of course, also a profoundly sensory experience, full of colors and sounds, screaming fans and booming speakers. And it also always retains a sense of the spectacle, not just in terms of its overwhelming sensory elements but also in its emphasis on the unbelievable action, the stunning display, the singular moment of transcendent achievement that unites the strongman's feat of strength, the daredevil's leap across a canyon, and the opera singer's ascension to the top of their range. But what unites all of these elements in wrestling, I believe, is story. What transpires on the mat and across the arena is a narrative told by many means and many authors, all requiring an audience to recognize the right way to interpret what is happening.

There is a great deal that I have not covered in this essay, including relevant questions of medium (the different rhetorical dynamics of televised vs. live performance; the role of social media in the maintenance of kayfabe), character (especially the narrative, historical, and affective dynamics of performers referencing, transferring, and resurrecting personas and gimmicks within and across promotions), regional context (the unique narrative elements conditioned

by the cultural and geographic contexts and histories of a promotion), and official vs. unofficial narratives (for example, the stories and interpretations embraced or disowned by promotions and those endorsed by fan communities). As a result, I view this work as an open invitation rather than a definitive statement on the narrative qualities of professional wrestling. Certainly other scholars may qualify, contest, or outright dismiss my definitions and categories, and they may also find relevant examples that add further dimensions to some of the arguments I have made here. This would, to me, be a good thing: my goal for this essay has been to simply offer professional wrestling as a subject that deserves further attention as a narrative phenomenon due to both how it fits within and resists different narratological frameworks. There is much more to say about the narrative dynamics of professional wrestling, and it is my hope that this essay will encourage the field to step into the squared circle.

Bibliography

Alber, Jan (2017): "Narratology and Performativity. On Processes of Narrativization in Live Performances." In: *Narrative* 25 (No. 3), pp. 359–373.

Barthes, Roland (1972). "The World of Wrestling." In: Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*. New York, NY, pp. 15–25.

Beekman, Scott (2006): *Ringside. A History of Professional Wrestling in America*. Westport, CT.

Carrard, Philippe (1988): "Telling the Game. Baseball as an AP Report." In: *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 18 (No. 1), pp. 47–60.

Cohn, Dorrit (1999): *The Distinction of Fiction*. Baltimore, MD.

Davidson, Nicholas P. (2021): *Reimagining Barthes' Spectacle of Excess. The Consumption and Production of Modern Professional Wrestling on Reddit*. Dissertation. Florida State University.

De Garis, Laurence (2005): "The 'Logic' of Professional Wrestling." In: Nicholas Sammond (ed.), *Steel Chair to the Head. The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling*. Durham / London, pp. 192–212.

Diffrient, David Scott (2019): "(Arm) Wrestling with Masculinity. Television, Toughness, and the Touch of Another Man's Hand." In: *Men and Masculinities* 22 (No. 5), pp. 821–849.

Dilworth, John (2002): "The Fictionality of Plays." In: *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 60 (No. 3), pp. 263–273.

Effron, Malcah et al. (2019): "Narrative Co-Construction. A Rhetorical Approach." In: *Narrative* 27 (No. 3), pp. 332–352.

Féral, Josette (1982): "Performance and Theatricality. The Subject Demystified." In: *Modern Drama* 25 (No. 1), pp. 170-181.

Figueroa, Ever Josue et al. (2024): "'The Planet's Champion' Daniel Bryan. How WWE Uses Sport, Neoliberalism and Color Blind Ideology in Professional Wrestling Narratives." In: *Communication & Sport* 13 (No. 6), pp. 1328 l–1347.

Gammelgaard, Lasse et al. (2022): "Introduction." In: Lasse Gammelgaard et al. (eds.), *Fictionality and Literature. Core Concepts Revisited*. Columbus, OH, pp. 1–24.

Hadley, Jamie Lewis (2017): "The Hard Sell. The Performance of Pain in Professional Wrestling." In: Broderick Chow et al. (eds.), *Performance and Professional Wrestling*. London / New York, NY, pp. 154–162.

Heffernan, Conor (2021): "Richard K. Fox, the *National Police Gazette*, and Ireland's Sporting Memory." In: *Immigrants and Minorities. Historical Studies in Ethnicity, Migration, and Diaspora* 39 (No. 1), pp. 32–52.

Hughes, Charles (2017): "'Tell Them It's What Their Grandfathers Got'. Racial Violence in Southern Professional Wrestling." In: Broderick Chow et al. (eds.), *Performance and Professional Wrestling*. London / New York, NY, pp. 165–176.

Jenkins, Henry (2007): The Wow Climax. New York, NY / London.

Kitamura, Katie (2025): Audition. New York, NY.

Koh, Wilson (2009): "'Gently Caress Me, I love Chris Jericho'. Pro Wrestling Fans 'Marking Out.'" In: *M/C Journal* 12 (No. 2). DOI: https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.143.
Litherland, Benjamin (2022): "Notes on Kayfabe." In: *Professional Wrestling Studies Journal* 3 (No. 1), pp. 123–128.
Mark, Lianna (2024): *Theatres of Autofiction*. Cambridge, UK.
Mazer, Sharon (1998): *Professional Wrestling. Sport and Spectacle*. Jackson, MS.
Nielsen, Henrik Skov et al. (2015): "Ten Theses About Fictionality." In: *Narrative* 23 (No. 1), pp. 61–73.
Nünning, Ansgar / Sommer, Roy (2008): "Diegetic and Mimetic Narrativity. Some Further Steps Towards a Transgeneric Narratology of Drama." In: John Pier et al. (eds.), *Theorizing Narrativity*. Berlin / New York, NY, pp. 331–354.
Phelan, James (2017): *Somebody Telling Somebody Else. A Rhetorical Poetics of Narrative*. Columbus, OH.Professional Wrestling Studies Association: "About the PWSA." *prowrestlingstudies.org*. URL: https://www.prowrestlingstudies.org/about-the-pwsa/ (01.12.2025).
Punday, Dan (2000): "A Corporeal Narratology?" In: *Style* 34 (No. 2), pp. 227–242.
Rebellato, Dan (2009): "When We Talk of Horses. Or, What Do We See When We See a Play?" In: *Performance Research* 14 (No. 1), pp. 17–28.
Reel, Guy (2006): *The National Police Gazette and the Making of the Modern American Man, 1879-1906*. New York, NY.
Richardson, Brian (2001): "Voice and Narration in Postmodern Drama." In: *New Literary History* 32 (No. 3), pp. 681–694.
Richardson, Brian (2007): "Drama and Narrative." In: David Herman (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*. Cambridge, OH, pp. 142–155.
Ryan, Marie-Laure (1993): "Narrative in Real Time. Chronicle, Mimesis and Plot in the Baseball Broadcast." In: *Narrative* 1 (No. 2), pp. 138–155.
Scheub, Harold (1977): "Body and Image in Oral Narrative Performance." In: *New Literary History* 8 (No. 3), pp. 345–367.
Schwanecke, Christine (2022): *A Narratology of Drama. Dramatic Storytelling in Theory, History, and Culture from the Renaissance to the Twenty-First Century*. Berlin / New York, NY.
Shoemaker, David (2013): *The Squared Circle. Life, Death, and Professional Wrestling*. New York, NY.
Smith, R. Tyson (2014): *Fighting for Recognition. Identity, Masculinity, and the Act of Violence in Professional Wrestling*. Durham / London.
Upton, Brian (2015): *The Aesthetic of Play*. Cambridge, MA.

Dr. Antonio J. Ferraro
Visiting Assistant Professor of English at the University of Cincinnati, Blue Ash
E-mail: aferraro517@gmail.com

How to cite this article:
Ferraro, Antonio J.: "Narrative Theory in the Squared Circle." In: *DIEGESIS. Interdisciplinary E-Journal for Narrative Research / Interdisziplinäres E-Journal für Erzählforschung* 14.2 (2025). 19–39.
DOI: 10.25926/wb47-fn72
URN: urn:nbn:de:hbz:468- 20260127-111902-6
URL: https://www.diegesis.uni-wuppertal.de/index.php/diegesis/article/download/569/766

[1] The match is as spectacular (in Barthes' sense) as it sounds: https://www.wwe.com/videos/hulk-hogan-vs-nikolai-volkoff-wwe-championship-flag-match-saturday-night-s-main-event-october-5-1985

[2] Charles Hughes additionally notes that the heroism Black wrestlers were encouraged to embody was often "safe," that is, legible within and amenable to social structures of white supremacy: "[these wrestlers] offered a safe and smiling image of black heroism that affirmed the goodness of postwar American culture without spotlighting its racial disparities" (2017, 166).

[3] Richard K. Fox covered professional wrestling in his influential *National Police Gazette,* a magazine he joined in 1876 and subsequently transformed into one of the most popular (and notorious) sports and entertainment journals in the country (see Heffernan 2021 and especially Reel 2006). Magazines and newsletters have been a major component of professional wrestling ever since. Dave Meltzer's *Wrestling Observer* and Wade Keller's *Pro Wrestling Torch Newsletter* helped shape how modern professional wrestling is discussed: investigative details about the real lives and dramas of the promotions are mixed with reviews of matches, gimmicks, and storylines.

[4] See Sharon Mazer's *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle* (1998) and R. Tyson Smith's *Fighting for Recognition: Identity, Masculinity, and the Act of Violence* (2014) for excellent examinations of how professional wrestling's performances of gender enact traditional notions of masculinity as well as queer refractions of them. For explorations of wrestling's long, often sordid history of racialized storytelling, see Hughes (2017).

[5] For a detailed discussion of the historical developments in the consumption of wrestling media, see Davidson's unpublished dissertation *Reimagining Barthes' Spectacle of Excess: The Consumption and Production of Modern Professional Wrestling on Reddit* (2021). For work on how wrestling audiences have negotiated their identities as fans, and have often challenged the supposedly white, heteronormative nature of such fandom, see Koh (2009); Figueroa et al. (2024); and Diffrient (2019).

[6] For a comprehensive account of his definition, see Phelan's *Somebody Telling Somebody Else: A Rhetorical Poetics of Narrative* (2017).

[7] Several performers, including Bret Hart, John Cena, and The Undertaker have had versions of the Five Moves of Doom, or a predictable, linked sequence of maneuvers that usually indicates a match is coming to an end. As with any narrative genre, certain plot points and endings can become so predictable they lose their impact. See the history of the term in the *TVTropes* article "Five Moves of Doom."

[8] This would mean that, *pace* Dorrit Cohn's arguments in *The Distinction of Fiction*, there is no recognizable "token" – no clear category of narrative technique nor type of represented content – that clearly demarcates kayfabe moments from "real" moments (1999, 32).

[9] See Richardson, "Voice and Narration in Postmodern Drama" (2001) and "Drama and Narrative." (2007) For a detailed book-length account of the history of narrative and drama, see Schwaneke's *A Narratology of Drama: Dramatic Storytelling in Theory, History, and Culture from the Renaissance to the Twenty-First Century* (2022) especially Chapter 3 and in particular section 3.3, "Narrative Matters in Drama: Story and Discourse in Drama as Core Levels of Narratological Analysis and a Narratological Communication Model of Drama."

[10] Hadley gives the example of a "chop" or a slap across an opponent's chest that must be forceful enough to generate an audible "slap" sound and to create red swelling (2017, 157). The move is often performed close to the audience to heighten the physical impact of the blows. This distinguishes the chop from many other moves that involve the use of improvised audio cues, such as a superkick to the head. Those moves involve the performers doing some other action to simulate the noise (in a superkick, the kicking wrestler will slap their thigh to make sound as if they have struck the opponent).

[11] How we interpret physical actions and objects on a theater stage is a tricky philosophical problem. For explorations of this topic, see Mark (2024); Dilworth (2002); and especially Rebellato (2009), who makes the compelling case physical objects on a stage are best understood as metaphors for the people, places, and objects within the play's storyworld (Macbeth, his castle, the armies in Birnam Woods, etc.). I believe this helps sharpen the distinction between drama and wrestling. To my mind, it does not make sense to say that Kazuchika Okada's "Rainmaker" finisher is a metaphor for something else. It may be sold as being painful and deadly, even though it is performed safely, but it does not metaphorically refer to a different physical action in the way that a dramatic actor performs Macduff beheading Macbeth or simulates riding a horse. It simply *is* the "Rainmaker," with different types of meanings (narrative, fictional, performative) associated with it depending on its context.