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"For Glory, for Grandeur"

Sports Entertainment Narratives and the Construction of Gender Ideologies in Professional Wrestling

vorgelegt von

Jessica Koch

Erstgutachter: Prof. Dr. Ralf Schneider

Zweitgutachter: Prof. Dr. Wilfried Raussert

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For my academic mother A.,

my dearest Dandelions,

and my adventuring companions from Aderra.

Thank you for all the inspiration, for all those Tuesdays,

and for saving my life.

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1. Introduction – Narrating in Wrestling Entertainment

> The pinnacle. The apex. For every man who enters this battlefield, it is the desire for she that courses through their veins, that inspires their every move, and pushes them to the very brink. Her seductive siren song for glory, for grandeur, for gold. But the path to immortality is perilous. For while her capture is glorious, her preservation is precarious […].
>
> (Promotional Segment, *Night of Champions* 2010)

Captured in one single promotional segment for World Wrestling Entertainment's (WWE's) pay-per-view event *Night of Champions* in 2010 is the creed that can be said to be the synthesis of professional wrestling's spirit. Meant to summarize the conflict between the six protagonists in the week-long struggle for the WWE Championship belt, as well as to advertise the climactic battle about to take place in the ring, the short promotional DVD segment exemplifies the agglomeration of various themes and issues that permeate professional wrestling as a narrative performance art: questions of gender and race, power relations and hierarchies, of social and cultural prestige, of success and failure, are being addressed. The whole display is wrapped in the cloak of the epic journey at which end lies the capture of a glorious reward for the one who overcomes all obstacles and adversaries: a story familiar to many cultures around the globe and thus easily decoded by a broad audience.

The narration here performs several tasks: First of all, the narrative quality, the dramatization through words, contextualizes the bout in a socially and culturally meaningful framework. The viewers are about to witness the apogee of an epic struggle between six men, all of which are embodiments of different types, varying in motivation and ethics: "a charismatic warrior", "a ravenous zealot", "a rash narcissist". The clash of these men means a clash of principles that is played out before our eyes as a straightforward spectacle, a display of athletic ability, as well as a grand metaphor.

Secondly, the pompous narrative makeup of the event is part of a media regime that marks it decisively as play. This marking as 'make-belief' is arguably a new element that occurred relatively late in the history of professional wrestling: While

the retaining of 'kayfabe'[1] – the sticking to one's character, i.e., the wrestling gimmick, and the storyline in all public situations so as not to break the illusion of wrestling being 'real' rather than make-belief – used to be central to the performance until around the 1980s, the maintaining of the illusion became less important with the rise of the new media which became a major tool in the hands of dedicated fans who could not be blinded any longer by any rhetoric that would cast professional wrestling as a legitimate competition. Via tweets, forums, commentary sections, as well as professional and semi-professional internet journalism, fans connect and exchange information on the latest events, discuss viewpoints and opinions and via their online visibility also influence the company's decision-making processes when it comes to how storylines are going to play out. Especially with the countless opportunities the internet provides, true kayfabe has indeed succumbed to a metaphorical three-count, not least because the major companies, too, have started to make use of social media to promote their events by having their wrestlers oscillate online between their stage persona and their 'actual, private self'. Social media like twitter are now being used by larger wrestling companies, especially WWE, and have an influence on the shaping of storylines as well as on the display of what happens behind the curtains and after the arenas are closed.

This notion brings us directly to the third key function of narratives in professional wrestling that forms the central aspect from a production point-of-view: the narrative framework that contextualizes the spectacle as an allegorical battle of larger-than-life proportions draws in paying audience on a large scale. While other performance arts that make extensive use of different variants of storytelling, like theatre, opera, or ballet, tend to draw in a target audience with a specific background when it comes to income, educational status, and habitus, professional wrestling as a mass entertainment in the 21st century aims at a demographically broad audience (Mazer 1998: 3) much like other mass sporting events like American football, soccer, or even boxing. These sporting events that we might want to call 'genuinely competitive' in nature, increasingly make use of more or less schematic *narrative* contextualizations

[1] The origins of the term 'kayfabe' are unclear. The OED suggests that it either originated in U.S. carnivals as a slang term for the imperative 'Be fake!', or stems, at least morphologically, from pig Latin word construction, although it is unclear which words might have been used as a basis (*OED* "kayfabe").

to heighten the sense of an epic display being provided[2]. However, professional wrestling is one of the few athletic events which exists through and for storytelling as a (maybe *the*) prime means of construction.

Though similar in this respect, wrestling fans are not engaging with a classic sports event in which the focus is on determining who is the fastest, strongest, or fittest when watching professional wrestling events or programmes. Rather, as the outcomes of matches are entirely scripted, professional wrestling shifts the focus from the end result of a sporting event to its procedure, its narrative, so to speak, and, most importantly, the issues tackled therein. These issues circle around questions of gendered identities (especially those of men, but also of women in relation to men and, more recently, of women to women), but also around intersecting identity issues like age, race and nationality, social class, group affiliations, general ethics and morality, individual and social ideals, dreams, and motivations.

So far professional wrestling has mostly been looked at from the perspectives of theatre and performance studies or from perspectives loosely informed by gender or postcolonial studies. The actual mechanisms of narrative construction, the narratives themselves and their implications have seldom been addressed with much theoretical depth. By moving beyond the established research framework of wrestling as a theatrical performance spectacle and subjecting its narrative make-up to close scrutiny from discourse- and ideology-sensitive perspectives as well as (film-) narratological approaches, this study aims at unravelling the intricate and oftentimes paradoxical relationship between the abovementioned social and cultural topics that wrestling negotiates. With a particular focus on gender, I want to show that narratives in professional wrestling operate recurring topoi of gender(ed) existence and experience that perpetuate certain aspects of heteronormative public discourses. Furthermore, it will be shown how professional wrestling manages to contain potentially subversive representations of gender(ed) existence within its own

[2] Several examples come to mind: Weigh-ins of MMA fighters or boxers and the press conferences preceding the fighting events often show an interesting mélange of genuine dislike between the combatants as well as the ritualized mechanics of narratives of antagonism often produced via commentators and journalists. Furthermore, different nationalities will cast different lights on the combatants in their advertising prior to the fights, thus creating different stories around the fighters depending on the status of the combatant within that particular socio-cultural sphere. Another example of storytelling in sports apart from professional wrestling can be found for instance in the commentary of soccer games. For this, please see: Jisuk Seo and Wachholz (2014).

narrative frameworks while at the same time self-reflexively revealing its own body and gender politics as informed by hegemonically organised ideologies that are at play in society as a whole.

The turn toward an ideology-sensitive narratological approach is necessary since it facilitates complex readings of professional wrestling that go beyond already established analytical routes and works as a testing ground for ideas in theoretical narratology that has been the focus of renewed research interest in the recent past. In his influential *Wahrheit und Erfindung: Grundzüge einer Allgemeinen Erzähltheorie* (2012), Albrecht Koschorke points out that while the evidence that leads to the three key reasons for the anthropological omnipresence of narrative formats – namely the management of fears and anxieties as well as the provision of meaning and orientation – are adequate but not sufficient to explain the sheer plethora of narratives produced by *homo narrans* (Koschorke 2012: 10-11). His argumentation sheds a light unto not only the omnipresence of narratives but also on the diversity of their functions for humanity, their complex mechanisms that serve a great variety of purposes, and how they, despite arguments to the contrary, are not just producing consistency but also, in fact, experiences of contingency (ibid.). It is this interplay of conflicting tendencies within narratives and between narratives, the coexistence and sometimes simultaneousness of attempts at reaffirmation and subversion, coherence and unintelligibility, that serves as the connection between narratological research interests and discourse-sensitive readings of professional wrestling.

1.1 State of Wrestling Research – A Brief Survey

Despite the large impact of professional wrestling on fan cultures and despite its status as a (re-)productive agent of cultural discourse, wrestling has drawn little attention of researchers so far. This may partly be due to its seemingly simplistic, repetitive, soap-opera-like artificiality, its status as 'low-brow entertainment', and its overdone flashiness. Moreover, wrestling has often been attacked for the alleged threat that it poses to civilised societies. As Nicholas Sammond observed in his introduction to *Steel Chair to the Head* (2005):

> […] that is the claim often laid at the booted feet of professional wrestling today: that it is both cause and symptom of the breakdown of American social and cultural life. The same warning cries were made about burlesque in its heyday in the middle of the nineteenth century, about vaudeville at the turn of the twentieth century, and about rock 'n' roll in their first proud incarnations. What all of these forms share with professional wrestling, and what is lost in viewing Greek (or French, or Shakespearean …) drama as simply a literature, is the very carnality they expressed, their celebration and contestation of people and ideas as embodied.
>
> (Sammond 2005a: 2)

While its make-up seems to suggest a lack of complexity, professional wrestling as a cultural product and its analysis and interpretation hold much to be uncovered.

Researchers who did engage with professional wrestling have put their focus on a variety of aspects. Roland Barthes wrote about French wrestling in his essay collection *Mythologies* in the late 1950s that he saw wrestling as a negotiation of the meaning of justice and an embodiment of the metaphorical struggle of Good vs. Evil. Although of course culturally and historically somewhat removed from our contemporary North American spectacle, some of his observations still describe in surprising accuracy what we can still witness in today's wrestling events. He calls professional wrestling a "spectacle of excess" (Barthes 1972 [1957]: 15) which demands of its participants the use of grand gestures and moves to give their meanings larger-than-life proportions, easily recognizable and boldly emphasised. For this purpose, the wrestlers' bodies take centre stage in a signifying process that creates a vivid image of passions in conflict. Barthes also makes a point in revealing wrestling's resemblance to theatre (ibid. 18), an idea which would later on be explored in more detail by researchers like Morton and O'Brien (1985), Mazer (1998), and Kutzelmann (2014).

Starting with Barthes' essay, the already mentioned edited volume *Steel Chair to the Head* (2005) offers manifold glimpses into different ways of analysing and interpreting wrestling. The contributions analyse wrestling as melodrama (Jenkins 2005), with a focus on socio-cultural stratification and class (Sammond 2005b; Battema and Sewell 2005), on gender and sexuality (Rahilly 2005; Salmon and Clerc 2005), and with regard to questions of race, nationality, and ethnicity (Levi 2005;

Serrato 2005; Monsiváis 2005). A particularly prominent branch of research on varieties of professional wrestling has been conducted on Mexico's *lucha libre* with a special focus on the connection between athletic spectacle, character construction through masking and un-masking, and national identity (for instance Möbius 2004; Levi 2005 and 2008).

Other accounts of wrestling have been given in the form of a few monographies. In terms of exploring the history of professional wrestling, several important publications deserve special attention. First of all, Gerald W. Morton's and George M. O'Brien's diachronic survey *Wrestling to Rasslin': Ancient Sport to American Spectacle* (1985) traces the modern performance art back to the roots of grappling sports in ancient Egypt and Greece and points out modern professional wrestling's connections to ancient theatrical conventions and practices[3]. Dissatisfied with what he perceives to be a dismembering, "standoffish" sociological approach to wrestling (Beekman 2006: vii), Scott M. Beekman's *Ringside: A History of Professional Wrestling in America* (2006) claims to "rescue wrestling from this sad fate […] by providing it with the basic cloak of respectability granted through possessing a written history" (ibid. viii). Though not unproblematic from a post-structuralist point-of-view, Beekman does provide an insightful collection of historical cornerstones in the development of professional wrestling in North America, especially for the period past 1800. A detailed history of the development of the National Wrestling Alliance in the 20th century is provided by Tim Hornbaker in *National Wrestling Alliance: The Untold Story of the Monopoly That Strangled Pro Wrestling* (2007), while his *Capitol Revolution: The Rise of the McMahon Wrestling Empire* (2015) focusses on the development of the WWF and WWE under the McMahon family.

Opening up an entirely new perspective to the research of professional wrestling is Chad Dell's *The Revenge of Hatpin Mary: Women, Professional Wrestling and Fan Culture in the 1950s* (2006)[4]. Dell's contribution elegantly bridges the gap between historiography, socio-cultural analysis and interpretation, taking into consideration a broad spectrum of media available to women at that time, – television, the press, fan

[3] See also chapter 2.
[4] See also chapter 4.

bulletins – and sheds light on the often side-lined role of women wrestlers and female audience in the development of sports entertainment. Dell argues that the 1950s female wrestling fan was able to use wrestling as a way of expressing desires, reversing the roles of observer and sexualised object in taking and showing their pleasure while looking at male athletes, all the while finding a community with other (female) wrestling fans (Dell 2006: 121-122). Their consumption of wrestling as a product was fuelled, as Dell argues, by their experiences as workers in times of war and the growing prosperity and opportunities for leisure time for society as a whole in post-war America (ibid. 124).

Apart from tracing historical developments in professional wrestling, researchers in this field also published on the structural makeup of wrestling as a pop-cultural and artistic product and its meanings. In *Professional Wrestling as Ritual Drama in American Popular Culture* (1990), Michael R. Ball, *inter alia*, puts emphasis on a number of stereotypical characters which, he argues, re-occur in wrestling matches. While these rather formalistic categorisations are valuable to some extent as analytical categories for the unravelling of story-building mechanisms in wrestling (especially for mid- and lower-card matches and storylines), they also obscure and oversimplify other aspects of character construction and development in larger storylines (Seliger 2014: 40) which, often, tend to be more complex and more ambiguous as we will see in later chapters.

Sharon Mazer's seminal *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle* (1997) gives insights into how wrestling is learned and practiced and uncovers some principles und logics which underlie the spectacle. Her approach includes an analysis of wrestling in Bakhtinian terms of Rabelaisian carnival (e.g., Mazer 1997: 19, 106ff.) but also covers reports and anecdotes from her observations made at ring side. Being without a doubt one of the most important contributions to the analysis and interpretation of professional wrestling, Mazer stresses the cultural importance of professional wrestling as an event which draws in a broad audience that is not, as is often assumed, limited to working-class audiences. She also stresses that "[r]ather than simply reflecting and reinforcing moral clichés, professional wrestling puts contradictory ideas into play, as with its audience it replays, reconfigures, and

celebrates a range of performative possibilities" (Mazer 1997: 3). The fact that professional wrestling exists as an intricate interplay between performers and audience is picked up again by Philipp Kutzelmann.

In 2014, Kutzelmann published *Harte Männer: Professional Wrestling in der Kultur Nordamerikas*, which prioritises two main aspects: the analysis of bodies in terms of Erika Fischer-Lichte's approach to performativity and wrestling as a genuinely North American cultural practice. His approach focusses on events up to the end of WWE's so-called Attitude Era, which ended in the early 2000s. Professional Wrestling makes use of formulaic structures which Kutzelmann subsumes under the term performative grammar (*performative Grammatik*) (Kutzelmann 2014: 54). Influenced by De Garis'[5] notion of the logic of professional wrestling as a performance art, Kutzelmann emphasizes the historical development, as described by Beekman in *Ringside*, through which this set of specific performative conventions comes into being. The fruitful liaison between professional wrestling and TV, which developed in the postwar period and opened up new possibilities of broadcasting in the 1970s and 80s, paved the way for professional wrestling as the athletic narrative performance art known today. Editing recorded show material allowed promoters to develop more and more elaborate storylines and backgrounds for their wrestlers and, as Kutzelmann argues, generated an emphasis on the heel/face pattern (Kutzelmann 2014: 61; also, Beekman 2006: ix).

Several important observations can be made when surveying the literature available on professional wrestling. First of all, a strong focus on historiography on the one hand and gender-related aspects on the other hand dominate the bulk of academic contributions in Western academia. Aspects of race and ethnicity follow close behind. Seldom is a connection being established between these three aspects[6] to show how various categories of socio-cultural interest interact and influence each other in a particular era. Secondly, though close readings of professional wrestling exist, they often focus on singular events or bouts, or on individual wrestlers and their bodies and gimmicks. Close readings of entire storylines, the reading of

[5] See De Garis (2005).
[6] Notable exceptions, of course, need to be acknowledged; for instance: Möbius (2004).

characters in context and in relation to one another over a longer period of time, are almost non-existent. This poses a problem aside from the already low number in example analyses: Although general observations about characters and their functions in the spectacle from singular analyses may be transferable, professional wrestling is changing rapidly and thus demands frequent re-evaluation, both by acknowledging the change in the subject that is professional wrestling, as well the changes in academic perspectives. Thirdly, though gimmicks and characters have been the focus of analysis in many academic contributions, especially in connection with the theatrical spirit in the performance, and although it is frequently mentioned that professional wrestling is indeed telling stories, tales of heroes and villains, there has been relatively little interest in the narrative makeup of characters and plots and how they create, shape, and transmit certain ideas about the two central identity markers wrestling makes use of: gender and race[7]. These are some of the starting points for research on professional wrestling from which I would like to venture an exploration of the narrative aspects of the construction of professional wrestling as a cultural practice and how they contribute to the shaping and distribution of hegemonic discourses that pertain to important markers of identity.

1.2 Hegemonic Discourses in Professional Wrestling

To investigate the cultural impact of professional wrestling narratives on topics of gender, race and other categories associated with identity formation and social categorization, we need to define, at least in broad strokes, the fundamental terms with which we can attempt to grasp the intricate relationships of what is being said and shown in wrestling events and which potential meanings can be derived from them. I am taking my cue for this endeavor from the extensive and diverse toolkit provided by modern cultural theories and criticisms that investigate the questions of cultural production and power[8]. With a strong focus on narrativizations of social and cultural categories in professional wrestling, however, a closer look at two thinkers

[7] Professional wrestling makes use of even more identity markers next to these two most important ones: age comes to mind, as well as class, and health/ability. See also chapters 3, 4, and 5.

[8] The body of literature reviewing the multitude of theories and approaches is plentiful. Most notable in this regard is Hall (1996). Various aspects have also been dealt with, for instance, in: Thompson et al. (1990); Stoddart (2007); Storey (2009).

within cultural studies who have provided central terminology for the analysis of power, Antonio Gramsci and Michel Foucault, is necessary before we can venture into an analysis and interpretation of wrestling from a narrative perspective. Though writing from different historical and philosophical positions and although their theories diverge on a number of issues, Gramsci and Foucault[9] share a common interest in the mechanisms behind the production and maintenance of social and cultural power (Daldal 2014: 166).

Gramsci's idea of hegemony departed from classical Marxist theory which put the concept of ideology in the foreground to explain how bourgeois dominance was maintained in terms of economic interest and, subsequently, power. The term ideology, however, was "treated […] as a relatively stable body of knowledge that the ruling class transmits wholesale to its subordinate classes" (Stoddart 2007: 192), a far too static explanation that brings with it at least two implications: First of all, the term ideology as used by proponents of early Marxism, paints social navigation exclusively as a top-down process in which the leading economic strata of society dominate the lower classes. Following from this, Marxist theory understands the economic and, by inference, socio-cultural power exercised through the implementation of ideologies as a mechanism of oppression and exploitation, which would, eventually, lead to a self-liberation of the oppressed (Steenson 1991: 263). Power, in Marxism, is essentially an asset that is derived from the control of means of production and can be in the possession of a certain group of people. The term ideology has since then taken on a more flexible meaning in cultural studies as discourse formations became the focus of interest. Instead of narrowly denoting a conscious effort of those in power to shroud systems of inequality, the term is now more frequently used to describe a wide range of mechanisms that naturalize discourses and thus shape everyday existence in particular fashions. As Dick Hebdige argues: "Since ideology saturates everyday discourse in the form of common sense, it cannot be bracketed off from everyday life as a self-contained set of 'political opinions' or 'biased views" (Hebdige 1979: 12). Most importantly, "[…] there is an

[9] Considering Gramsci and Foucault together has produced a rich body of literature that has acknowledged how both complement each other. One of the most recent contribution is David Kreps's edited volume *Gramsci and Foucault: A Reassessment* (2015).

ideological dimension to every signification" (ibid. 13). To understand the mechanisms by which certain ideologies are held in place, Gramsci's concept of hegemony provides meaningful direction.

Though not in principle parting with the idea of class oppositionality from Marxism, Gramsci circled around the question of why capitalism as a whole is able to exist in relative stability if indeed the non-ruling classes are oppressed by the mechanisms of economic ideological power formations. He formulated the idea that social hegemony in general, and capitalism as the primary hegemonic formation, is able to remain stable through its great flexibility, i.e., its capability to incorporate potentially subversive demands into its own formation to retain its powerful position. He thus implicitly rejects the more static notion of ideology in early Marxist theory. Gramsci discerns two major "subaltern functions of social hegemony and political government" (Gramsci 1971: 12) with which the political body can rule what Gramsci refers to as the "civil society": the consent of the population for the dominant groups' perceptions and interpretations of the world, their ideas, plans, and endeavors on the one hand, and on the other hand the state's means of coercion with which an enforcement (predominantly via non-violent means) is possible (Gramsci 1971: 12). More broadly speaking, hegemony is the power to make civil society believe in the dominant groups' version of "reality", not just in terms of economic necessities, but also with regard to other social formations (Hall 1982: 65; Hearn 2004: 61).

Gramsci's notion of hegemony has henceforth found its way into other academic research fields, most notably into gender studies. Most influential in the promotion and critical expansion of the idea in connection to gender in general and masculinity in particular is Raewyn Connell. In *Masculinities* (2005 [1995]), she echoes Gramsci by saying that hegemonic masculinity is "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees […] the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (Connell 2005 [1995]: 77). A decade later, Connell and James Messerschmidt revisited the idea of hegemonic masculinity for some reformulations to acknowledge and incorporate aspects of diversity within hegemonic

constructions of masculinity as well as potential agency of groups and individuals subjected to processes of hegemonic formation (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 847-848)[10]. With regard to professional wrestling, the liaison between gender studies, masculinity studies[11] and Gramsci's concept of hegemony can be a useful tool to understand wrestling's role in the (re)production of particular ways of thinking gender, especially in connection with an idea of how discourses work as shaping mechanisms of socio-cultural realities.

To use the term hegemony to illuminate the fostering of ideals concerning gender in professional wrestling is in no way entirely new: Philipp Kutzelmann already argued that textual and somatic features of wrestling performances work together to foster the "hard body" as the predominant ideal of (white, American) gendered existence. However, I do believe that this is not enough. While Kutzelmann makes an excellent point in carving out the theatrical components involved in shaping the dichotomy of "hard" and "soft" bodies in the historical context of post-war professional wrestling, and wrestling during the 1980s and 1990s, the sole focus on the reproduction of "hard bodies" misses out on nuances regarding both wrestling's multimodal makeup and, more strikingly, the variety of representations of masculinity in wrestling performances that fall "in-between" the "hard" and "soft" dichotomy and defy the narrative categorization of the classic "heel/face" scheme. Also, the switch from the bloody Attitude Era to the more family friendly PG Era and subsequent marketing decisions in professional wrestling's major company, WWE, has led to changes – some subtle, some more striking – in the way gendered existences are negotiated and reproduced in 21st century performances. After all, it is hegemony's flexibility and capacity for the incorporation of subversive demands that secures the prevalence of dominant ideologies and their profiteers' social power position.

[10] Connell and Messerschmidt have, of course, not been the last to engage with hegemony and gender. Other notable contributions include for instance Hearn (2004). Groundbreaking and exceptionally detailed work has been done by Ronja Waldherr in an endeavor to make the concept of hegemony fruitful for the analysis of the social construction of femininities (in preparation). For the connection of hegemony and the study of race, see Hall (1986).

[11] For an illuminating overview of the interdisciplinary facets of masculinity studies, see *Mönnlichkeit: Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch* (2016), edited by Stefan Horlacher, Bettina Jansen, and Wieland Schwanebeck.

Foucault, breaking with the structuralist notion of a straight-forward designatory relationship between signifier and signified, called for the necessity to conceive of discourses "as practices that systematically *form* the objects of which they speak" (Foucault 2010 [1972]: 49, emphasis added). He thus puts a strong emphasis on the socio-political power constructions that are enforced by certain discourses and asks for the conditions under which certain discourses produce "knowledge" and "truth" (Foucault 2010 [1972]: 181ff.). Using the example of the clinical discourse of the nineteenth-century, Foucault asks for the role of individual agents, groups, and institutions that produce and reside in socio-cultural frameworks, how the establishment of discourses is achieved via authorities that are in turn reinforced and validated via the discourses they produce (Foucault 2010 [1972]: 50-51). Discourse, in other words, asks who is allowed and capable to talk about what in which way and why, and wants to know how socio-cultural realities come into being through the shaping of "knowledge" about the world as discourses produce it rather than just represent it. Power, for Foucault, is not something to be had. Rather, individuals as well as groups are the "effects" of power, produced in discursive practice: "The individual which power has constituted is at the same time its vehicle" (Foucault 1980: 98). There is thus no definite, superordinate source of "power" or superordinate source of the discourses it produces and is produced by. Foucault, rather, conceptualizes complex relationships between agents and elements within discourse formations which are dependent on one another.

When I am, in the following, speaking of hegemonic discourses of, for instance, ideas of gender and gender practices, I am speaking of styles of rhetoric, physical styles, and acts which contribute to the production, reproduction, fostering, negotiation, and deconstruction of powerful socio-cultural notions of what it means to be of an (un)certain gender. Taking my cue from Nicholas Sammond who argued that "[w]ether professional wrestling is progressive, transgressive, or regressive (or all of these at different moments) depends on how it serves the social goals of its producers, performers, audiences, and critics – not just what it *means*, but who shapes that meaning and to what expected end" (Sammond 2005b: 133-134, original emphasis), I am thus asking for the position of professional wrestling and its

individual agents in the field of cultural production and which contribution they make to shape and reshape socio-cultural realities in general, and our imaginings of gender in particular. The following chapters will investigate the intricate relationships of professional wrestling, cultural production, and imaginings of gender and other aspects of socio-cultural categorization with the help of narrative analysis and narratology.

1.3 Wrestling in the 21st century – A Multimodal and Multimedial Narrative

The discourses wrestling takes up in its spectacles have been looked at from a variety of different theoretical and methodological perspectives. As we have seen already, strong focus has been put on the analysis of gender and race through looking at aspects of, for instance, theatrical performance or fan-athlete interaction. While within these research endeavors, we often find that wrestling research proclaims an interest in the stories professional wrestling tells about men and women, race and nationality, sex and intimacy, and other topics of continual relevance for human existence, it is seldom (if ever) done with an actual focus on the toolkits that literary and film studies can provide for the analysis of narratives. Wrestling narratives can be dissected and understood by conducting storyline analysis and character categorization but also by acknowledging and researching its multimodal character: As I have argued elsewhere, by fusing a variety of different sign systems – body language and aesthetics, performance, dialogue, music, lighting, merchandise, fan interaction, pyrotechnics, etc. – wrestling narratives create a complex ‘machine’ of discourse production and evaluation (Seliger 2014). It is surprising that, although the importance of TV for the development of wrestling as an entertainment business has often been acknowledged, the focus has more often than not been put on its effects as dramatic (live) performance rather than its filmic elements. The way camera and editing heavily influence the aesthetic and textual experience of the product needs to be taken into consideration: film narratology provides an array of useful terminology for this venture. Furthermore, the last decade has seen a major shift in this branch of the entertainment industry. Not only did professional wrestling’s major company, WWE, make a move toward a more family-friendly entertainment by adopting a PG

rating and thus changing the aesthetics of its product to a large extent, but the industry as a whole realized the potential of the new media in promoting and spreading their brands across the globe. Professional wrestling thus needs research focusing on its narratives as they unfold through multimodality and multimediality to complement the existing body of research.

For the purpose of the discussion of gendered characters in professional wrestling, I want to focus on exactly that player on the market who, in Foucauldian terms, can be considered a prime driving force in the discursive (de-)construction and negotiation of gendered identities in sports and popular entertainment: World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE). Echoing and broadening Simone de Beauvoir in her pursuit of identifying what woman is and how she became the Other (de Beauvoir 1952: 37), this thesis is concerned with exploring what negotiating social life in specific cultural contexts (here: wrestling and sports entertainment) has made of men and women. To do so, we need to examine if and how the notion of diametrical gender constructions is fostered in popular cultural products and if there are instances in which heteronormative and hegemonic notions of gender are subverted or, at least, to some extent questioned and marked as constructs subject to change and inextricably linked to individual and collective struggles for power.

Being professional wrestling's largest and economically most successful company, WWE has expanded across the Atlantic and broadcasts its shows and pay-per-view events via TV and its WWE Network across the globe. Additionally, WWE recruits athletes from wrestling schools in the UK, Japan, Germany and other countries in Europe. Only recently, in April 2015, Axel Tischer, a young Westside Xtreme Wrestling (wXw) talent, had been hired by WWE's young talent programme NXT to perform in U.S. shows (Link 2015). His draft to NXT has sparked great interest among the German wrestling community and is just one example of how young wrestlers in Europe and countries around the world look toward a career within the WWE brand.

WWE has been an economically and culturally prevalent competitor in the entertainment industry since the 1960s and has gained greater leverage over the market from the early 2000s onwards. When WWE programmes became PG-rated in

2008, it aimed at becoming family-friendlier and more acceptable to an even broader audience, now marketing not only to adults, but also specifically to children – much to the dismay of PG critics. While other wrestling companies and their shows do prevail in the business (e.g., TNA's *Impact Wrestling*), WWE holds its competition in a chokehold when it comes to economic success, audience numbers and range of cultural impact. As of 2019, their live and TV audience can watch three events per week (*Monday Night RAW*, *SmackDown* and *NXT*) in addition to twelve or thirteen pay-per-view events each year, culminating in *WrestleMania* every spring since 1985. Additionally, WWE hosts off-air promotional live shows and charity events, its own reality soap-opera *Total Divas!* and several other programmes on the WWE network. Its stars and executives are available on social media platforms advertising their events. DVDs, video games[12], clothing and other merchandise are available online, with an additional online shop directed toward the European market. WWE's biggest stars like John Cena, Randy Orton, or The Big Show appear regularly in action movies or comedies and have guest appearances in TV shows. The dominance of WWE on the sports entertainment market becomes evident once one acknowledges that surveying the material that has been published since the turn to a PG rating becomes almost impossible.

The corpus selected here for the purpose of analyzing narrative and character constructions in WWE events stretches from the early 2000s to 2017, marking the end of the so-called Attitude Era in wrestling and the dawn and implementation of PG ratings in WWE TV shows. The corpus generates itself from a twofold rationale: The period selected must be considered a watershed in the history of the industry, marked not only by the change in name, from WWF to WWE, but a shift from wrestling as the bloody "Raw is War"-type of wrestling, to the company's expansion in the mid-2000s, to the family friendlier PG Era. This shift brought about distinct changes in style and rhetoric of the events and received mixed reactions from fans, critics, and athletes alike. Furthermore, most academic analyses conducted on the field of professional wrestling deal with wrestling before and during WWE's Attitude

[12] There is already a whole range of research being conducted on the ways in which video games and other media contribute to the growing body of transmedial storytelling products. See, for instance, Harvey (2014).

Era (1990s up to 2002). Since I am convinced that the turn from Attitude to PG has had distinct consequences for the way discourses around gender are produced in WWE events, a closer look at newer wrestling material will shed a light on aspects of wrestling as a cultural practice which have not been covered by research in this field before. Furthermore, the vast amount of material generated by WWE alone serves as a marker of cultural prevalence and power and therefore makes it reasonable to take a closer look at the products fans get access to and see which narratives and ideas about gender and other socio-cultural categories embedded therein they might purport. A sidenote on using DVD material, however, is necessary: The using of canned heat (negative fan reactions to a wrestler which are added to a recording before release) and other possible interventions from WWE management make analyzing DVD material of live events especially problematic. It is therefore important to note that just as theatre performances will differ from each other and to any film recording of one exemplary performance, DVD recordings of a wrestling event do not grant unlimited access to the experience of audience of a given storyline and wrestlers' performances. What we get is a snapshot in time, edited to lesser or greater extent by WWE officials to produce exactly that product which, according to their opinion, provides economic success and favorable fan reactions.

Although good ground has been covered by previous publications, professional wrestling remains an under-researched area, especially since its popularity among fans worldwide is undeniably growing through the success of American, European and Asian wrestling companies and the media expansion of WWE, which grants a wider range of people access to its products. My project aims at contributing new insights into professional wrestling as a cultural practice that influences discourses about gender and intersecting identity markers such as class, race, nationality, and age. Several aspects of wrestling events will be covered in this thesis to carve out the specific features of wrestling discourses which contribute to the underlying and, as I will argue, often conflicting idea(l)s of men and women as displayed by wrestling narratives.

In chapter 2, I will attempt to relocate wrestling as a transcultural phenomenon. Despite its Franco-European (cf. Barthes 1957) and Mexican heritages (see, for

instance, Monsiváis 2005; Levi 2005; Serrato 2005), professional wrestling is still conceived of as a genuinely North American cultural practice (Kutzelmann 2014), not least because of WWE's status as a powerful player on the global entertainment market. Yet, professional wrestling's complex development throughout ancient and modern history and its recent expansion mark it as more than a North American phenomenon. Keeping Kutzelmann's and others' analyses of professional wrestling and its complex relationship to North American cultural issues in mind, I am going to argue that professional wrestling, by drawing on a multitude of traditions from various grappling sports, by recruiting athletes from all over the world, by creating specific storylines, and by employing particular marketing strategies to promote their products for more than the U.S.-American market, can also be conceived of as a transcultural practice which feeds on a variety of cultural discourses and thus exports a product that is charged with ideas about gender and race relations to every corner of the world. Wrestling can be read as a complex discursive system, which, promoted through WWE as sports entertainment's dominant company, is invested with powerful tools to try and (re-)shape, endorse, deconstruct, parody and, of course, sell ideas and ideals about male and female bodies, race, class and other aspects of identity formation across U.S.-American borders.

I will then go on to define wrestling as a narrative cultural practice and thus marry the facts of wrestling's socio-economic and discursive impact with a narratological toolkit. Two aspects will be of interest here: First, principles of story and plot construction will have to be taken into account, especially well-known quest plot structures and their status as constitutive elements in wrestling narratives. How these basic plot structures are used to relate to (wo)men's experiences as gendered beings and to make those tangible, can be seen, for instance, in the discussion of experientiality according to Fludernik (1996). It will be shown how wrestling storylines make use of metalepsis and other narrative devices and various storytelling traditions (e.g., oral storytelling, epic, etc.) to form complex and often ambiguous narratives and storyworlds. Since professional wrestling today has become this multimedia spectacle, an analysis of its narratives will require a purposefully selected, yet nevertheless eclectic toolkit to do justice to the narrative aspects of this

complex performance art. This requires an adaptation and re-working of several narratological approaches to make them applicable to the analysis and interpretation of wrestling narratives. Furthermore, an incorporation of terms from film narratology will be necessary.

Second, my aim is to show how the construction of characters within these narratives contributes to the way the stories unfold as transmitters of (gender) discourses. Since bodies are central to wrestling as a performance art, wrestlers' gimmicks, the characters they play, shape the narratives they inhabit. The way their characters' identities unfold is determined by several aspects which intersect with gender, race, ethnicity and nationality, but also social status, class, age, health and political affiliation.

Chapter 3 will be dedicated to the analysis of men's storylines and performances in professional wrestling. I will start the chapter by first looking at individual bodies and their situatedness within wrestling. I will deal with the various ways in which men and masculinities are portrayed in wrestling narratives and how gender discourses are created, tested, deconstructed, parodied, and/or propagated. The importance of narrative practices becomes evident in the ways bodies, environments and storylines are shaped both physically and verbally. To unravel the ways in which discourses around men and masculinities are constructed in professional wrestling, this chapter will have a closer look at the construction of male bodies and fitness, body semiotics and their function inside larger narrative structures. Environments (arenas, rings, cages, backstage rooms) will be analysed as central objects of narrative procedures in wrestling events. Furthermore, stock narratives, narratives of men and monsters, ethnicity, race, and age will play a role in the analysis of how masculinities are constructed through multimodal events in wrestling narratives. This will include a closer look at gender in uncanny WWE characters. Wrestlers such as the Undertaker, Kane, the Boogeyman, Paul Bearer, or Papa Shango formed wrestling events with elements of the supernatural, the magical, mystical and the creepy. Although often little more than remnants from the Attitude Era, characters such as the Undertaker and Kane have survived in PG wrestling and continue to be fan favourites. With the introduction of the Wyatt Family in 2013, a new mix

between the uncanny and the insane entered the wrestling ring, portraying an indeed very American nightmare. While this lunatic cult and other uncanny, mystical, or insane characters threaten the established order within the fictional realm they inhabit, these characters enrich wrestling storylines with elements of the fantastic and narrative unreliability which bear on both the construction of these specific characters, as well as the ideological implications of these characters for the understanding of masculinities within the whole framework of WWE storylines.

Since race, ethnicity and nationality are so prominent in professional wrestling and play an important role in how gender is represented and understood in these characters, chapter 3 will also take a closer look at the way wrestling narratives deal with the representation of cultural identities. Race, ethnicity, and nationality have always played an important part in ritualistic and competitive sporting events[13]. Not only do two individuals or teams fight against each other in races, games, fights, or matches: They most often represent their country of origin or their ethnic group. Clashes in sports between two individuals of different race, ethnicity or nationality, then, are also clashes of these superordinate identity markers. Professional wrestling makes extensive use of these markers to construct certain storylines around issues of race, ethnicity and nationality that are often tightly bound to questions of masculinity, integrity, loyalty, and socio-cultural hierarchy. Special spotlights need to be put on the representation of U.S.-Americans, Mexicans, Canadians, as well as English and Irish characters. In parts, this chapter, as well as chapter 5, will draw and elaborate on interpretations and results from my MA-Thesis from 2014.

In chapter 4, the even more under-researched aspect of women and professional wrestling will be approached. So far, little has been said about the constructions of femininities and the roles of women in professional wrestling. It can be argued that in the past years the visibility of women in wrestling events and their relative importance in them has drastically increased. This is in part due to Stephanie McMahon's rise to power, in both the wrestling industry as well as in WWE's storylines, but also because of a greater focus on storylines involving WWE's female wrestlers, especially in their NXT and *Total Divas!* programmes. Although the

[13] See chapter 2.

construction of female characters revolves around a similar usage of sign systems as in the male division, discourses around femininities, especially femininities in a (fictional) world dominated by men, have special characteristics. The complex positions of women in contrast to and combination with men within the narrative framework of WWE events needs to be put under close scrutiny to work out the construction of discourses of gender and the relation between men and women as proposed by the cultural product at hand.

Moving from the seemingly clear-cut dichotomy of male and female wrestlers, chapter 5 will be concerned with aspects of cross-dressing and gender bending in professional wrestling. Both aspects have a long-standing tradition in wrestling events as carnivalesque entertainment (see, for instance, the performances of Adrian Street, the Adorable Adrian Adonis, Charlie Haas disguised as Beth Phoenix, Vito, Goldust, or Santino Marella disguised as his fake twin-sister Santina). By focussing on theoretical approaches to gender bending and cross-dressing by Garber (1992), Entwistle (2000) and Flanagan (2008), as well as Butler's perspective on gender performativity and drag (1993, 2004), I want to explore the role of cross-dressing and gender bending in wrestling and investigate to what extent these performances can constitute subversive elements within the framework of narrativized gender discourses in professional wrestling.

2. Narrative Practices in Wrestling's Past and Wrestling's Present

> Every relationship of 'hegemony' is necessarily an educational one and occurs not only within a nation, between the various forces of which the nation is composed, but in the international and worldwide field, between complexes of national and continental civilisations.
>
> (Gramsci 1971: 350)

The endeavor of writing a history of professional wrestling on the one hand, and the pursuit of sociological interests in professional wrestling as ritual, performance, and cultural product on the other hand, have lived in a rocky marriage. Where attempts have been made to give an account of the historical development of wrestling as sport and entertainment, the result has either been predominantly descriptive, wary of sociological research interests in professional wrestling and often unaware of poststructuralist criticisms of history as the study of 'facts in time' (as in the case of Beekman's *Ringside*[14]), or consciously delineative and selective (as in Morton and O'Brien's *Wrestling to Rasslin': Ancient Sport to American Spectacle*). While Morton and O'Brien are not always (and expressly do not claim to be) critical of wrestling's socio-cultural impact in their observations, *Wrestling to Rasslin'*, by pointing out obvious connections between certain grappling practices and established fields of academic studies, provides helpful suggestions and starting points for bridging the gap between history and other disciplines such as sociology, theatre studies, or literary studies, all of which have shown tentative interest in professional wrestling[15]. With *Ringside* and *Wrestling to Rasslin'* the questions of 'What?' and 'When?' may have been answered to some extent, yet the culturally and socially

[14] While there is no doubt that Beekman's *Ringside* is an important contribution for the contextualization of wrestling as a historical cultural practice, I contend that despite Kutzelmann, who lauds Beekman's efforts as an objective chronology of wrestling history (Kutzelmann 2014: 16), this form of historiography too is an instance of discursive narrativization which, by definition, is the result of subjective processes of selection and evaluation. This idea is, of course, in no way new: As Hayden White proclaimed in his seminal *Metahistory* (1973) and later in *The Content of the Form* (1987), historiographic writing is, in fact, writing and as such in no way objective since it is always the subject of narrative meaning-making processes. Though, of course, contested on various levels by historians and cultural researchers, White's contribution to history is the stripping of historiography from the nimbus of objective truth. He instead points towards the importance of individual and collective imaginings and narrativizations of the past as central building blocks of history as we experience it and as historians write it. This needs to be considered when talking about Beekman's *Ringside* or, in fact, any written history of professional wrestling.

[15] As, for instance, shown in *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling* (2005) edited by Nicholas Sammond.

relevant question of "To what effect?" often remains unexplored. This is where sociology, cultural criticism, media studies, and, maybe surprisingly, literary studies can provide further insights into potential meanings of professional wrestling.

Histories by Western academics of professional wrestling in Western academia have also predominantly focused on this form of sports entertainment in North American culture. Accounts of professional wrestling in other parts of the world are either dealt with in the introductory chapters on the development of ancient grappling sports or receive episodic attention as sidenotes[16] when contemporary North American wrestling needs to be justified as an object of scientific interest for its historical rootedness[17]. However, although the focus has been on the North American cultural context, the equally general and anecdotal histories available so far reveal the importance of diverse grappling sports around the globe and across history. The almost exclusive focus on North American culture for its predominant influence on the worldwide sports entertainment market precludes an understanding of wrestling that goes beyond the nationally particular. This is in part due to the linear, sometimes teleological foundation of written histories and, of course, our prevalent interest as 'Western' academics in everything 'Western'. Nevertheless, taking into account postcolonial and congeneric theories with their focus on the social and cultural manifestations and processes of power relations, alternative writings or readings of professional wrestling history can be conceived of. Doing so shifts the attention to wrestling as a set of concurrent cultural practices which, especially in times of globalization, do not exist in isolation but are aware of and influence each other. I would like to propose in this chapter a new way of connecting historical knowledge about wrestling that has been provided by thorough research in the last four decades with a socio-cultural interest that is fueled by poststructuralist assumptions about the

[16] In this context, the issue of language barriers in scholarly research needs to be addressed because it has a bearing on this paper as well: Though grappling sports are dealt with academically in several disciplines in English, literature written in languages which do not hold the status of a lingua franca in global academic discourses tend to be sidelined or eclipsed. This may contribute to an underrepresentation of variant forms of grappling sports in Western academia. This research project, too, is subject to some of these limitations.

[17] Notable exceptions are, of course, in existence: Janina Möbius's *Und unter der Maske… das Volk: Lucha Libre – Ein mexikanisches Volksspektakel zwischen Tradition und Moderne* (2004) explores lucha libre as a wrestling tradition connected to but crucially distinct from North American professional wrestling. Also, Allen Guttmann and Lee Thompson put particular focus on intercultural relationships between Japan and North America with (sumō) wrestling as one example in *Japanese Sports: A History* (2001).

connection of cultural power and efficacy (*Wirkmacht*) of professional wrestling as a transcultural phenomenon.

To do so, we will need to look at wrestling from two perspectives: A cursory review of the status quo of research into wrestling history in the form of a conservative, linear historiographical approach to wrestling provides an opportunity to examine wrestling's development from a competitive sport to a theatrical entertainment performance as well as to carve out global developments of grappling sports with regard to elements of *narrativization* for various purposes which coalesced over time to form the ritual practices of wrestling known today. The latter aspect will be the starting point to the second perspective I would like to propose: While wrestling history has hitherto been understood in terms of an almost teleological conceptualization in which North American professional wrestling forms the preliminary terminus of a long historical development, a review of wrestling history across cultural borders will highlight another fundamental aspect of wrestling as a cultural practice. Pointing out concomitant sets of practices of grappling sports across history and the contemporary focus on global networking in wrestling industries will depart from the idea of professional wrestling solely being a particularly North American entertainment form and instead relocate wrestling as a *transcultural* phenomenon under the influence and comprised of hegemonic discourses that produce a repetitive act of narrativization[18] taking place in the performances unfolding between wrestlers and the audience. This perspective can help to heighten our understanding of cultural power relations practiced, fostered, and exemplified by professional wrestling and its agents across cultural and national borders.

[18] In the sense of a fictional storyworld that is being built and in which both individuals and embodied concepts perpetually attempt to resolve conflicts.

2.1 Narrative Construction and Ritual Function in Genuinely Competitive Grappling Variants

Professional wrestling as it exists today can only be understood in the context of the development of various grappling sports[19] in history. Those who assume that professional wrestling, with its scripted drama at the heart of the performance, has little to nothing in common with older forms of grappling sports like Egyptian wrestling, Greek pankration, Icelandic glíma[20], or Japanese sumō, because it is not a competitive, 'real' sporting event, is misled by a monolithic categorical understanding of sporting events. While one must not fall for the alluring idea of any kind of unbroken historical continuity when it comes to wrestling, different grappling practices still show a wide variety of features that they share with today's professional wrestling, among them a strong focus on narrative contextualization in the form of accounts of verbal abuse preceding or following a bout, a strong focus on witnessing, and, of course, a variety of physical practices that have been present throughout history. Some of these similarities can be seen as historically coincidental, yet they reveal universals in human development in which grappling in early societies served to establish power relations between individuals and settle disputes. The ritualization of these disputes in later stages of social development might have served the preservation of the species in general and groups of individuals in particular (Decker 1987: 78). As Morton and O'Brien have pointed out:

> Evidence of wrestling, an instinctive and natural sport, is also widely found as an activity imposed on youths to develop agility, balance, strength and wit. Together with running, the other instinctual sport, wrestling requires no special equipment or even initial training for participants. For these reasons, it was the best of prole sport in antiquity and has remained so to modern times. (Morton and O'Brien 1985: 6)

[19] Sport, in itself, is of course a widely discussed term that evokes a variety of denotations and connotations that are dependent on historical contexts. The term 'sport' in the modern sense of the word, i.e., physical exercise not exclusively but often in combination with play and competition, came into being relatively late and has its origins in the development and institutionalization of English pastime events such as boxing, tennis, and a variety of ball games in the nineteenth century. One needs to be aware of a certain anachronism in transferring the term to events in antiquity and other historically and culturally removed events. For a detailed discussion see, for instance, Behringer (2012) and Decker (1995).

[20] Literature on glíma is almost non-existent. See the very brief introduction to the development of glíma by Einarsson (1958) and, for perspectives from active participants, Kautz (2000).

It is assumed that grappling as a means of problem solving, physical exercise, and pastime is as old as humanity itself. Via inference from anthropological knowledge, it is safe to say that different varieties of grappling have existed in almost all cultures across the globe and across history. It is therefore by no means implausible to argue that grappling in all its forms has been an anthropological universal (Morton and O'Brien 1985: 6). Egyptologists, archeologists, and historians have pointed out the importance of grappling sports in ancient Egypt (between the third millennium B.C. until Alexander the Great conquered Egypt in 332 B.C; see Decker 1987: 10). Wrestling in the Nile Valley during this period is surprisingly well documented and permeates Egyptian culture throughout the dynasties. Particularly interesting for the research on ancient grappling sports are the murals depicting wrestlers, as for instance in the tomb of Ptahhotep (late 25th century B.C.): As the Egyptologist and sport historian Wolfgang Decker has pointed out, these early depictions already show complex throws and the wrestlers being allowed to grab their opponent anywhere on their body, a fact which reveals a similarity between ancient Egyptian and today's freestyle wrestling (ibid. 82)[21].

Of particular significance are the depictions of wrestlers in four of the tombs at the burial site in Beni Hasan[22] (~ 2000 B.C.) because they are among the earliest and most detailed depictions of ancient grappling still preserved. Similar to other versions of wrestling known today, the scenes show wrestlers with their typical ring gear in the form of grappling belts (ibid. 83). The illustrations reveal great details about holds and movements while inscriptions found at the burial site give insights into the socio-cultural contexts in which these events were to be held. In the tomb of Baqet III, a long array of wrestling depictions has been described as a kind of wrestling manual (Morton and O'Brien 1985: 7; Behringer 2012: 34-35). The murals also disclose even more information that shows a clear resemblance to modern day professional wrestling and other sporting events:

[21] For reprints and elaborations on the original murals in Beni Hasan and other sites, see: Decker (1987), as well as Decker and Herb (1994).
[22] Descriptions and interpretations of the murals found at Beni Hasan abound. See for instance Diem (1971: 118ff).

> Written taunts accompanying the mural suggest the ancients tried to 'psyche out' opponents too: 'I'm going to pin you.−I'll make you weep in your heart and cringe with fear.−Look, I'm going to make you fall and faint away right in front of the Pharaoh.' (Morton and O'Brien 1985: 7)

The bout as it is related here already shows the importance of the embedding of sportive grappling events in narrative settings of conflict and conflict resolution and reveal that grappling is never just about which one of the opponents wins an encounter: grappling is used to negotiate individual boundaries, as well as to gain social prestige and recognition. It is about building the ego by having victories witnessed by others. It is also a verbal act that heightens the immediate threat of shame and degradation that could potentially be suffered: If a fighter announces how he will grind his opponent into the ground, and is then defeated, the shame connected to this loss is proportionately higher. The verbal dialogue proleptically anticipates the actual fight and its outcome[23].

Examples of newer forms of taunting and its specific functions in the narratives of contemporary professional wrestling will be addressed in later chapters since they fulfil important functions for this particular cultural practice as a whole. For the moment it shall suffice to say that the resemblance is crucial inasmuch as it points towards the much-acknowledged fact that sporting events, no matter whether they are genuinely competitive or scripted for dramatic purposes (or somewhere on a scale between these two extremes), share certain features that are often at least partially based on or rooted in the ritualistic nature of sporting events. Taunting is no exception[24].

Furthermore, the importance of wrestling in the context of ritualistic and festive activities becomes apparent especially in later periods. Wrestling becomes part of tribute celebrations in which the Pharaoh as the embodiment of divine providence and stability always takes center stage (Behringer 2012: 34). Interestingly enough,

[23] I thank Angela Stock for her input on this specific matter.

[24] Geared towards the media, boxing, for instance, has begun to include more and more narrative elements that make use of 'trash talking' to generate animosity between the opponents. This focus on animosity between combatants can be witnessed almost exclusively in sports which have single competitors face each other in direct contact. Other sports, for instance running or most varieties of team sports, as of now, do not seem to have the proclivity for violent verbal contextualization between individual athletes.

the activity itself is often depicted as a means of reaffirming the ruler's position of power as well as the cultural supremacy of Egypt. The mortuary temple of Medinet Habu, for instance, shows depictions of wrestlers engaged in what appears to be a truly international event: Each of the seven bouts depicted appears to be between one Egyptian and one foreign wrestler (Decker and Herb 1997: 539-540) while the whole scenery is surveyed by the Pharaoh and foreign dignitaries who, as it appears, have to watch their wrestlers fall as the Egyptians are always depicted victorious (Decker 1987: 88). These and other examples show clearly that sport, wrestling in particular, fulfilled important cultural, social, and ritual functions in Ancient Egypt, and how closely connected physical fitness, competitive power, and symbolic practice truly are. In American professional wrestling, the tradition of conflicts between nations embodied by two competitors lives on to this day and participates in shaping the discourses revolving around gendered and national identities.[25]

Where Egyptian cultural practices seem relatively remote, Greek sports have often been perceived as culturally closer to our Western conception of physical exercise, competitiveness, and style. It comes as no surprise that Ancient Greece shaped our modern-day perception of wrestling as a competitive sport. The notion of *agon* (i.e., competition or contest, but also a coming together of men for important business) shows the direct connection between sports and important gatherings for social and political purposes (Decker 1995: 15, 39). Wrestling holds an important place in Greek history which is showcased, *inter alia*, in the Greek word for the center of the gymnasium, the wrestling ring, *palaestra* (παλαίστρα) (ibid. 79). The gymnasium was one of the central places in which the connections between the study of rhetorics, philosophy and physical exercise were explored, learned and celebrated (Behringer 2012: 45). Different styles of wrestling were known throughout antiquity, some highly stylized, some rougher and less regulated (Decker 1995: 81). One of the most prominent styles, pankration, was less regulated and more brutal than other styles inasmuch as it allowed fighting on the ground and did not prohibit holds below the waistline (ibid. 91-92). This fighting style was later on taken over by the Romans and turned into a spectacle proper (Beekman 2006: 4; Behringer 2012: 47-49).

[25] See chapter 3.

Greek sporting festivities produced a culture of veneration for athletes[26] that took on epic proportions. Extraordinary feats were praised in songs or became inspiration for fictional and semi-fictional depictions in literature. One example of semi-fictional nature in which wrestling variants play an important role are odes of victory composed by poets like Pindar, who wrote poetry in the 5th century B.C. His poetry was mostly commissioned by the nobility and, as Decker argues, was less a matter of sports coverage than an idealization of victories gained in order to make more general statements about the nature of glory and cultural values (Decker 1995: 198). Of the 45 games Decker lists whose victors Pindar praised in his odes, 18 deal with wrestling, boxing, or pankration (the rest almost exclusively with winners of chariot races).

Two literary examples in which wrestling plays a central part in important socio-political meetings can be found in Homer's *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. While the latter describes wrestling as part of the games held at the Phaeacian King's palace (ibid. 34), in the former wrestling takes place as part of funeral games in honor of the slain Patroclus (ibid. 27-28). In the match between Aias and Odysseus, we already get a feeling for how important the narrative framing of action and dialogue is to sporting events in general and wrestling in particular:

> […]
> *when the tied match began to bore the soldiers*,
> Aias muttered: 'Son of Laertes, royal
> Odysseus, master mariner and soldier,
> hoist me, or I'll hoist you. What happens then
> is god's affair.'
> At thus he heaved him up.
> But Odysseus had his bag of tricks: he kicked

[26] Athletes in general and wrestlers in particular were subject to a process of mystification that was brought about by the notion that sporting activities always stand in for larger principles. Wolfgang Decker notes: "Das Herzstück der gymnischen Agone bildeten die Kampfsportarten. Wettkämpfe Mann gegen Mann, das bildeten die Attraktionen für die Zuschauer, dafür kamen sie von weit her angereist. Stiegen in Gestalt der muskulösen riesigen Kontrahenten nicht die Heroen der mythischen Zeit selbst in die Arena? Verkörperte ein Modellathlet wie Milon, Theogenes oder Poulydamas […] nicht den Halbgott Herakles […]? Nicht von ungefähr woben sich Legenden um die Ringer, Faustkämpfer und Pankratiasten; nicht ohne Grund genossen einige ihrer berühmtesten Vertreter kultische Ehren." (Decker 1995:74). Contemporary professional wrestling displays a similar principle and, maybe even more so, makes use of it by building its characters' make-up around concepts that invite glorification and mystification (see chapter 3).

> behind the knee, knocking his legs from under him,
> and down went Aias backward, as Odysseus
> dropped on his chest. *The onlookers came alive*,
> looked hard and marveled at the fall. […]
> (*Iliad,* Book XXIII, p. 415; emphasis added)

Whether the renewed action induced by Aias is a reaction to the audience's boredom or just coincidentally happening at the same time remains open to interpretation. However, what becomes clear is that ancient Greek wrestling events as shown by Homer in this fictional example put an emphasis on the bout in the context of performance and audience reaction: the bout only gains in meaning when it is observed. The substantial amount of taunting that is involved in these events shares similarities with the Egyptian taunting we have already seen, as well as modern-day professional wrestling's extensive 'trash-talking', an important aspect of how athletic display is turned into an epic narrative event. However, the importance of wrestling in both of Homer's epics has often been overemphasized by historians who tried to make a point about professional wrestling's historical origins: While wrestling does feature in the *Iliad,* Book XXIII does put a much larger focus on the chariot races than on the combat disciplines (boxing and wrestling) and in the *Odyssey,* the actual action of fighting is dealt with in utmost brevity; only after the wrestling bout took place is Odysseus being invited, or rather taunted into participating in the games although he does not wrestle himself (*Odyssey,* Book VIII).

Other cultures display similar proclivity for epic narrativizations of wrestling as the Greek did: In epic narrative traditions from Germanic cultures, the hero needs to emphasize his prowess by entering a verbal bout with his human or monstrous opponents (e.g., in *Beowulf*). We can find other instances of taunting in the Sumerian Gilgamesh epic or in the ancient Indian Mahabharata (Behringer 2012: 78). Wrestling becomes a metaphor for struggles of epic proportions between Gods and between Gods and men. One prominent example from Abrahamic mythology can be found in the depictions of Jacob's struggle with the Angel in Genesis. Already interpreted as one of the central Christophanies depicted in the Old Testament, this episode inspired a number of 19th century painters, ranging from Gustave Dorré to

Alexander Louis Leloir and Léon Bonnet. Paul Gaugin's *The Vision After the Sermon* from 1888, however, may be the most interesting example in this array since it moves the focus away from the figures of Jacob and the Angel and to those who stand by as the bout occurs: In Gaugin's version of the confrontation, Jacob and the Angel wrestle far away in the distance, their figures located in the top right corner of the painting, while in the foreground a number of female worshippers are deep in prayer. Here the focus is not so much on the physical observing of the bout but rather on the spiritual witnessing. The devout audience are seen grasping the event not on its physical, violent level but are more concerned with its underlying spiritual significance. The physicality of the bout is a vehicle for significance beyond the individual and singular event. The connection to modern day professional wrestling is obvious: Grappling is extraordinarily well-suited for embodying and depicting metaphorical struggles that define conceptualizations of human existence, i.e., what it means do be human, how one can overcome great obstacles, and which values are shared within a society that are believed to be worthy of aspiring to.

Returning to cultural and historical varieties of wrestling, this kind of grappling sport has also developed in African and Asian cultural spheres. Ancient Greek wrestling is comparable, for instance, to today's grappling practices in the Sudan (Decker 1995: 80). We also find vibrant wrestling traditions in Senegal where it has become a national sport with prominent theatrical, ritualistic, and symbolic elements (Bromber, Krawietz, and Petrov 2014: 396). Different varieties of wrestling have also developed in Siberia (Buryat wrestling) and Mongolia (Krist 2014: 423 ff.). Practices among these peoples, too, are highly ritualistic and fulfil symbolic functions in the socio-cultural communities.

Japanese sumō as a special form of grappling is particularly interesting in this respect, not least because of its early connections to North American wrestling in the 19th century (Beekman 2006: 29-30). While the earliest traces of sumō as a practice are often assumed to come from between the third and sixth century (Guttmann and Thompson 2001: 14), with first detailed descriptions of sumō as a wrestling practice from the eighth and ninth century (ibid. 16), the term first came up in a different context than we would anticipate:

> The earliest use of the term "sumo" actually refers to matches among women. […] It should be noted however, in this earliest written use of the term "sumo", that the activity itself was not described. Whatever it was, the sight of women naked except for their waistcloths […] was obviously a sexually provocative spectacle. As such, it has been an embarrassment to modern historians who want to make a case for sumo's religious origins.
>
> (ibid. 14-15)

Despite the assumption that its original denotation was erotic in nature, sumō as a wrestling practice has been understood as deeply linked to religious and ritualistic practices and used to be a side entertainment at temple festivals (ibid. 16). At state events, sumō wrestlers were sent from widely dispersed territories as an acknowledgement of imperial power (ibid. 17).

We could go on listing and examining more examples of wrestling practices around the globe[27]. What such a broad historical overview has shown is that grappling is never 'just' a leisure activity or physical exercise: it is and always has been a practice that functions as a mechanism of cultural regulation and signification. As such grappling practices are and always have been ideologically central to the negotiation of power within societies and cultures. Symbolic, ritualistic, and theatrical performance elements are by no means exclusive to professional wrestling but permeate grappling sports on a large scale. The importance of these practices can be felt across cultural borders and throughout history. Practices of wrestling have prevailed in many different cultures and developed to some extent independently from one another while in some cases cross-cultural fertilization did take place long before professional wrestling developed out of traditional grappling sports. While processes of sportification have led to the development of competitive practices of grappling (e.g., Olympic wrestling or sumō) on the one hand, a reinvigorated interest in the narrative aspects of wrestling have led, on the other hand, to the development of performance arts such as North American professional wrestling or *lucha libre* (Fig. 1).

[27] For more examples of wrestling styles and their development in times of modernization and globalization see, for instance, Bromber et.al (2014).

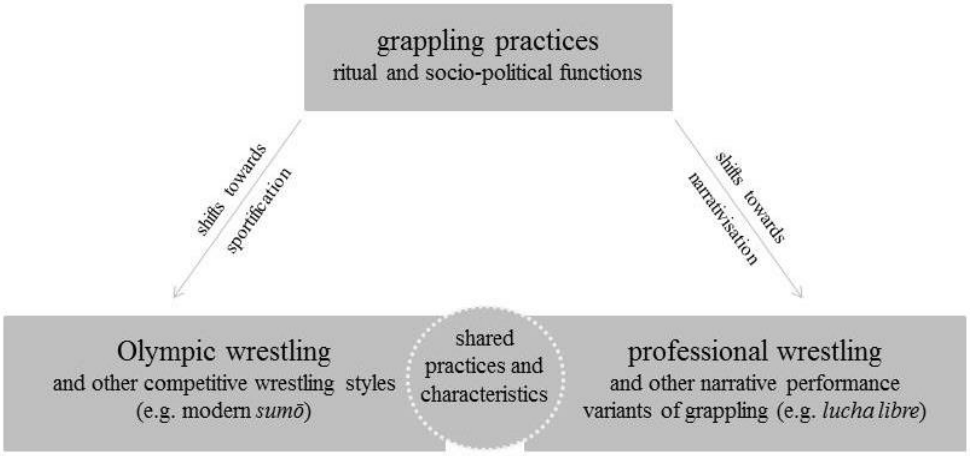

Figure 1: Professional wrestling in the context of different variants of grappling practices.

The move away from the genuinely competitive that professional wrestling has taken cannot be evaluated as a degenerative process (cf. Kutzelmann 2014: 17). Rather, as I would argue, professional wrestling puts a stronger focus on narrative aspects of meaning making processes that have already been present to some degree in other grappling practices and are, as we have seen, still or again at work in present day competitive grappling sports. Looking at the development of grappling sports in general and modern professional wrestling in particular reveals that the tendency towards cross-cultural exchange of practices and ideas has naturally increased in times of globalization.

2.2 Wrestling Narratives in the Globalized World

Despite the rich history of wrestling variants with their varying degrees of interest in narrativization, it remains obvious that the U.S. hold a special place in the production and reception of grappling sports as it is the country which has produced the most wide-spreading and successful version of narrativized grappling. While grappling sports did exist among Native Americans long before the first settlers arrived (Morton and O'Brien 1985: 19), it was English and Irish immigrant pugilists who shaped the basis for what we know today as the spectacle that is professional wrestling. Especially Irish immigrants and their descendants defined North American grappling with their competitive, rough style (ibid. 20; Beekman 2006: 10).

Civil War America saw the spreading of wrestling practices (particularly the Irish collar-and-elbow style) across the country in an attempt to regulate camp-life among Union soldiers and promote regulated violence rather than bloody bouts to solve conflicts among men and provide physical entertainment (Beekman 2006: 11). This interest in physical clashes between men as a form of mass entertainment persisted after the Civil War and saw fights between locally known wrestlers take place all over the country (Morten and O'Brien 1985: 23). The business depended on a network of travelling wrestlers and promoters that would bring fresh faces and styles to other regions of the states to increase and keep the interest of their audience. It is no surprise, then, that often wrestlers would join vaudeville and travelling circus shows in the late 19th century to keep their business alive (ibid. 31).

The connection between North American grappling sports and show business on the one hand, and transcultural influence within grappling on the other, is undeniable when reviewing this development. As Morton and O'Brien state, "the search for a clear, clean line between sport and show in professional wrestling is in vain, for there was none" (ibid. 37), yet what is true for the connection between show and sports, is also true for the transcultural entanglement in the development of the sport as spectacle. Emigrating European settlers (working as both wrestlers and promoters) proved to be the agents in a process of mixing grappling styles that would form the basis for athletic aspects in what we now know as professional wrestling (cf. Beekman 2006: 13ff).

While Postbellum America saw the development of a variety of grappling practices and their mixtures under the influence of particular immigrant groups, the 20th century brought about the full split in grappling between those practices that would continue as a genuinely competitive sport and those practices that would favor shaping a spectacle along the lines of narrative design (as in Fig.1). The advent of television opened up new possibilities to the entertainment business of reaching and marketing to audiences beyond the local arenas and wrestling promotions eagerly seized the opportunities the new medium provided (Morton and O'Brien 1985: 47). This decisively shaped the event experience audiences know today: The time slots of bouts are never much longer than ten minutes and if they are, wrestlers have learned

to be careful to introduce slow-paced parts into their matches to make room for commercial breaks between slots (ibid. 49). The option to record and edit certain segments or whole bouts led to a transition from professional wrestling as an exclusively live entertainment to a display with a highly managed narrative that is receptive to new developments of technological broadcasting and marketing strategies to further its reach in the United States and the world. At the beginning of the 21st century, these new technologies of course include new social media.

The successful export of professional wrestling as an entertainment product across the globe within the last few decades demonstrates that the product sold is highly flexible and adaptable when it comes to moving across cultural and national borders. WWE especially has managed to expand its business and turn itself from a national into an international player on the entertainment market. The network it has established in two ways serves the transcultural endeavor of wrestling headed by the U.S. American WWE as its spearhead: While WWE is able to adapt to the growing international market by constantly developing its products to suit the needs of the customers, e.g. by setting certain bouts between fan-favorites in certain matches overseas that would not work as well on U.S. soil[28] and thus constantly acknowledging the cultural specificity of certain characters and plots, WWE and other wrestling companies enrich their own portfolio by putting under contract wrestlers from all over the globe. As Kutzelmann points out, other wrestling promotions serve as stepping stones in the careers of young wrestling talents, who then often seek the opportunity to be part of WWE[29] in order to receive attention on a major stage and establish themselves as prominent figures in the business

[28] WWE's Antonio Ceasaro (Claudio Castagnoli) can be named as one example: While his character had a longer history as a heel on American television, he was a fan-favorite during his bout against Dolph Ziggler in Braunschweig/Germany in 2014: His ability to communicate with the German fans in their language and his background with the German wrestling promotion wXw instantly gave him time on the microphone.

[29] Up-and-coming wrestling talents also seek out connections to Total Nonstop Action Wrestling (TNA) whose program Impact Wrestling manages to offer alternatives to WWE as the most prominent and dominant player on the market. It cannot be considered a coincidence that TNA came into being just a year after WWE's (then WWF's) only competitor on the market, WCW, was rendered economically immobile and finally saw its assets sold by AOL Time Warner to Vince McMahon in 2001 (cf. Beekman 2006: 139; also: Kutzelmann 2014: 76). It must be argued that TNA filled a vacuum, if not of power, then of alternative, which WCW left behind and would have rendered WWF programs without real, widely available alternatives. However, between 2015 and 2016, rumors of the company being insolvent spread fast through internet news platforms and social media. It appears that WWE has Impact Wrestling, too, in a chokehold, although as of May 2017, Impact Wrestling has not been sold to WWE.

(Kutzelmann 2014: 76). This principle also applies to wrestling talents and rookies from other parts of the globe, as has been shown by wrestling talents like Axel Tischer and Tim Wiese from Germany or Bin Wang from China who signed contracts with WWE in 2015 and 2016.

Wrestlers from different countries bring with them a unique style in body and performance. Promotions will attract and sign those talents who they deem suitable to their style of wrestling and rhetoric or are malleable to fit the style(s) the promoter wants for their product. Although the influence of the promotion on the wrestler's individual body and performance must not be underestimated, the seeping in of styles, rhetoric, and, most importantly and obviously, bodies from other socio-cultural backgrounds from different parts of the world, must be taken into account: Bodies (usually) can only be altered up to a certain point. Bodybuilders know that certain basic shapes are hard to change and for a promotion to want a talent usually means to "buy" the body type as it is. Also, other idiosyncratic markers of personality on the body (like tattoos) cannot be subjected to the promoter's shaping of the wrestler's gimmick – except, of course, whenever a full bodysuit is involved. On the other hand, promoters do influence the style, rhetoric, and body of their wrestlers to a large extent by putting them in specific storylines, giving them stylized ring gear, and crafting certain dialogue for them that will re-shape not the body itself but its perception and interpretation by the audience. What it boils down to is the constant struggle for supremacy over signifying processes between the individual athlete, the company (in the form of promoters), and the audience, who may resist intentions held by athletes and promoters.

As WWE exports its narratives in a variety of different shapes and through a multitude of channels – their TV programs, websites, network programs social media, live events, etc. –, it now stands to reason to ask for the ideological implications for the rest of the world. As the economically most successful and also most popular company in the business, WWE was able to solidify its prominent position on the entertainment market. For 2016, the company reported an increase in revenues by 11% to $ 729.2 million (WWE Report Press Release 2017). This increase included revenue from the WWE Network, TV broadcasts, Live Events, and

Merchandise sales both online and at local venues. Internationally, the company performed equally well and was able to increase revenue by 11% to $189.3 million (ibid.). To understand wrestling's impact on other cultural spheres of the globe, we need to turn to the concepts of media imperialism and transculturality.

Summarizing Fred Fejes assessment of media imperialism between First and Third World countries, John Tomlinson outlines a twofold distinction that is still useful to us as a point of departure from which to disentangle the mechanisms of cultural production of ideological discourses in professional wrestling today:

> On the one hand there is that cluster of issues which has to do with the ownership and control of the media worldwide: with the manner in which media products – TV programmes, advertisments, news – are produced and distributed, and particularly with the market dominance of the powerful multinational corporations. On the other hand, there is the question of the *implications* of this market dominance for the people on the receiving end of these cultural goods. How does the consumption of foreign TV programmes and so forth affect the patterns of culture within a society? Does it significantly alter cultural values, for example spreading Western 'consumerism'? Does it destroy, swamp or crowd out authentic, local, traditional culture? (Tomlinson 1991: 36, original emphasis).

While the notion of media imperialism[30] might appear too generously applied to a product that is still often viewed as a negligible niche-pastime, I would argue that because of the large media variety that professional wrestling has started to use to expand the business beyond national borders, new ways of cultural influence have opened up that often go unnoticed. Mel van Elteren argues that the problems of "cultural globalization" are not to be found in some sort of envisioned homogenization but rather "in the global spread of the institutions of capitalist modernity tied in with the culturally impoverished social imagery […] which crowd out the cultural space for alternatives" (van Elteren 2003: 183). Furthermore, van Elteren attests that "[t]he practices of transnational corporations are crucial to any understanding of the concrete activities and local effects of globalization" (ibid.).

[30] It has often been highly and quite rightfully criticized as a concept too limited to grasp modern socio-cultural entanglements, processes of hybridization, and transcultural developments. See, for instance, Morley (2006).

The notion that professional wrestling and WWE in particular are a negligible footnote in entertainment history has somewhat obfuscated the fact that wrestling is, indeed, omnipresent, not just in North America, but all over the globe where U.S.-American products are being sold: We find John Cena, WWE's current poster boy, in an episode of Disney's *Hannah Montana*, see Stone Cold Steve Austin starring in *The Expendables* right next to Silvester Stallone and Jason Statham, have Triple H feature as an evil vampire in *Blade Trinity*, remember Hulk Hogan and Mr. T for their acting careers as movie and TV stars and Dave Bautista for his role as the assassin Mr. Hinx in the James Bond movie *Spectre* and as Drax in *Guardians of the Galaxy*. Germans will have read about former footballer Tim Wiese's short stint with WWE in 2016 which was covered by quite a number of prominent newspapers[31]. We also have professional wrestling in many TV shows that have nothing to do with wrestling in the first place[32]. A lot of TV series and movies that are produced for an U.S.-American audience find their way to a European and even broader international audience.

When we ask questions about the mechanisms of power (in the Foucauldian sense of power) within and between cultures, we need to acknowledge not only the product but also the context of its production and reception. WWE has managed to develop a prominence and dominance of North American professional wrestling that shapes American, European, and maybe global understanding of what wrestling is, and has gained considerable signifying power when it comes to defining gendered existences, as I will argue in later parts of this thesis. Put to the extreme, WWE has turned contemporary North American professional wrestling into *the* form of wrestling. All other types of wrestling, either historical or contemporary, are variants in the cultural

[31] On the 4th of November 2016, for instance, Lukas Rilke published an article entitled "Wieses Wrestling-Debüt: Die Maschine hält mit" for *Spiegel Online*; David Digili published "The Weird Wiesenator" for the *TAZ*. One day earlier, Sandra Mooshammer published "Tim Wieses erstes Opfer: Wortwitz" on *Sueddeutsche.de*, while the FAZ ran a dpa story titled "Die Maschine ist da, um zu zerstören", to name just a few stories that were included that year in German media. The tone in these and other articles ranged from relatively prosaic or Wiese- and wrestling-friendly (*Spiegel Online* and the center-left *TAZ)*, to sarcastic or even patronizing (especially in the case of the more conservative *Süddeutsche*). No matter the take the different media outlets had on Tim Wiese's debut, the promotion WWE received in Germany through Wiese's short detour into the world of professional wrestling is not to be underestimated.

[32] For example: *Supernatural*, Season 11, Episode 15; *Southpark*, Season 13, Episode 10; *Family Matters*, Season 5, Episode 18, just to name a few. *Tvtropes.org* even dedicated a whole article on their website to professional wrestling appearing in other media.

imagination of North America and Europe. To acknowledge this signifying power is vital as it points to the necessity to analyze and elaborate on what kind of products this company sells across the globe and ask for the possible meanings that can be derived from the product in the sense of a reading informed by literary and media criticism and the impact of discourses and ideologies on varying cultural contexts. However, as I have already mentioned, we must also not forget the varying degrees of agency that the audience, the consumers, bring to the table when it comes to shaping the product they want to see. Through coming together in forums and comment sections on official websites of professional wrestling companies or other online platforms, fans have added an additional dimension to the participatory practice that was already common in professional wrestling at live events where fans engage with wrestlers in a constant loop of performative feedback (Kutzelmann 2014). The internet with its numerous sites and applications now generates new possibilities for fans to voice their opinions and exchange them on a larger scale that transcends cultural and national borders.

For the purpose of exploring the cross-cultural dimensions of wrestling, it is necessary to introduce a framework in which culture, as the elusive term that it is, can be used to explore the impact and importance of wrestling's inherent ideological makeup. In his essay "Transculturality: The Puzzling Form of Cultures Today" (1999), Wolfgang Welsch argues that the understanding of culture as a clearly delineated, homogenous sphere as proposed by Johann G. Herder, is not only obsolete but an inherently dangerous metaphor that could potentially and did actually contribute to the limitations for the development of tolerance and acceptance toward perceived cultural 'others' (Welsch 1999: 195-197). Instead of arguing for concepts like interculturality or multiculturality, which mean to change the understanding of cultural contact but operate on the same metaphor of cultures being spheres or islands and come as such with similar problems as the original model proposed by Herder, Welsch made a case for understanding cultures as not clearly delineated but rather as determined by mechanisms of constant traversing. Cultures, he says, have "assumed a new form, which is to be called *transcultural* in so far as it *passes through* classical cultural boundaries. Cultural conditions today are largely characterized by mixes and

permeations" (ibid. 197). The interconnectedness of cultures, he argues, serves to make disentanglement of cultures and the retaining of the idea that cultures can be imagined as distinct spheres unfeasible. Rather, cultures need to be understood, especially in the era of increased global levels of migration of not just people, but also goods and information (see, for instance, Schachtner 2015: 231-232), as characterized by hybridity and change rather than by the confines of national borders (ibid. 198-199). One important point Welsch raises about the mindsets and products that are shaped by transculturality has an impact on our discussion of professional wrestling in global contexts:

> […] there is no longer anything absolutely foreign. Everything is within reach. Accordingly, there is no longer anything 'own' either. Authenticity has become folklore, it is ownness simulated for others – to whom the indigene himself or herself belongs. To be sure, there is still a regional-culture rhetoric, but it is largely simulatory and aesthetic; in substance everything is transculturally determined. (Welsch 1999: 198)

For professional wrestling, this means that while we may be able to trace roots of grappling practices historically to certain localities and peoples, and while Beekman and Kutzelmann point out the relative importance of North American culture in shaping professional wrestling as we know it today, the classification of wrestling as a genuinely North American product is to be viewed as somewhat overgeneralizing. The interconnectedness of wrestling companies across the globe, the frequent exchange of wrestlers, the subsequent seeping in and mixing of wrestling styles, as well as the growing influence of global fan communities which connect and interact on a historically large scale via the new media[33], all of this gives reason to think about wrestling not just in nationally particular, but also in transcultural terms.

The second implication here links simulation back to Foucault's concept of discourses via questioning the notion of authenticity and cultural belonging. Borrowing from Baudrillard's idea of the simulacrum, Elisabeth Kraus and Carolin Auer argue that North American culture in particular is permeated by simulatory practices and products that are meant to veil the loss of 'the real' as proclaimed by

[33] See also: Schachtner (2015) on the transcultural networks established through virtual publics.

poststructuralists, and instead foster a sense of stability of the relationship between sign and referent: Consumption of products that are able to signify distinction and belonging play an important part in this nostalgic fantasy (Kraus and Auer 2000: 2-3). The idea of the link between notions of simulations and hyperreality to wrestling is in no way new: Sharon Mazer described American professional wrestling as a "celebratory appropriation of signs of both sporting and theatrical performance practices [that] produces a parodic effect that is ultimately self-referential" (Mazer 1998: 19-20) and made the link to Baudrillard and Eco. When Eco describes the difference between American and European wax museums, one of the chief sites of observable hyperreality, one would be indeed hard pressed to ignore the striking similarities to displays in professional wrestling:

> The moment you enter you are alerted that you are about to have one of the most thrilling experiences of your life; they comment on the various scenes with long captions in sensational tones; they combine historical reconstruction with religious celebration, glorification of movie celebrities, and themes of famous fairytales and adventure stories; they dwell on the horrible, the bloody; […]. (Eco 1986: 12-13)

While Eco's and Baudrillard's focus on North American culture in their work has to be read in the context of a cultural criticism that was particularly interested in the influence of cultural imperialism and consumer culture, this does not necessarily imply that the simulation of the real is a purely North American phenomenon, nor does it lead to the conclusion that productions of the hyperreal are a *modus operandi* foreign to other parts of the world. Mazer does not explore the connection between simulation, hyperreality and wrestling much further or with greater focus on the different mechanisms that comprise professional wrestling and their relation to simulatory practices. We will come back to the link between simulation, the hyperreal, and different forms of narrativization later on in this chapter.

Let us briefly summarize what we know about the historical development and the cross-cultural significance of wrestling as a narrative practice and product so far. We have established that grappling sports appear across history and across cultures for a variety of purposes. What many of these varieties shared and still share is a strong

connection to practices of witnessing and narrativization: grappling is never just two men brawling; it is also almost always an elaborate allegory for more abstract struggles. In that respect, genuinely competitive grappling sports and professional wrestling share some ground beyond their athletic makeup.

We have also seen that the historical developments of a variety of grappling sports can be read as more than the preliminary teleological endpoint of an evolving sports entertainment genre. Professional wrestling has always been a transcultural endeavor. While ancient findings may merely suggest that transcultural fertilizations in terms of grappling style are possible (for instance in Egyptian wrestling), we know for sure that a variety of grappling sports in North America were highly influenced by immigrants from Europe, particularly English and Irish wrestlers, who brought with them their own fighting styles and often competed in matches with other foreigners, for instance from Japan (Beekman 2006: 29). It was the honing, mixing, and repurposing of these variants that provided the athletic groundwork that would form professional wrestling as an epic, athletic display. The transcultural makeup of professional wrestling becomes even more prominent in the beginning of the 21st century, which saw rapid developments in the business: Where Television had already begun to help professional wrestling reach audience beyond North American borders, it was the internet and in particular social media that catapulted wrestling into a new age. While the power brokers of the business discovered the potential of these new media to increase their transnational visibility and how they could be used for wide-spread marketing schemes, fans and critics, despite being separated by national and cultural borders and great physical distances, fuel each other's interest by coming together online, sharing and discussing their viewing experiences and shaping the business in the process.

What I suggest is that we read professional wrestling in the 21st century in general and WWE's programs in particular, as transcultural, neo-capitalist endeavors which draw their growing appeal partly from their successful fusion of athletic and ritual practice[34] while maintaining and developing the spectacle's narrative qualities not just despite but rather through the emergence of the new media and the subsequent

[34] As seen in chapter 2.1.

deconstruction of kayfabe, i.e. the constant upholding of the notion that what is shown in professional wrestling shows is 'real' and the dogma that all wrestlers must behave as their stage selves in all public circumstances. We must not confuse, however, the agent (in this case WWE) with the discourses it produces and is produced by: While I would purport that as of now WWE holds a dominant position on the global sports entertainment market and has power over defining the trade as it is at once a benchmark and a foil against which minor companies around the globe can create their own profile, this does not render each of their presentations of gender or other markers of identity formation a hegemonic one. We must acknowledge that professional wrestling – as many other cultural practices – is complex and often paradoxical in the ideas it represents: It is capable of being reaffirming when it comes to notions of masculine prowess and female inferiority, or of racial and ethnic stereotypes, while, at the same time, undermining these very hierarchies in other segments of their programs (or, sometimes, even in the same one). Professional wrestling, I would argue, is one cog in a larger (trans-)cultural machine that takes up, negotiates, reshapes, and disseminates particular ideologies that create dominant patterns of thought, a larger and highly complex transcultural hegemony. At the same time, cultural products can be reclaimed and repurposed intentionally through the agents of production or more or less unintentionally through the decoding of its practices through consumers. The power that generates and is generated through hegemonic discourses then is never stable or permanent (Hebdige 1979: 16). Its versatility and flexibility are part of professional wrestling's and particularly WWE's success.

The questions that I would like to tackle in this exploration of connections between different academic angles on professional wrestling tie back to the issue of discourses (especially with respect to gender) in these entertainment displays. I would like to put forward the following questions as launch positions from which my further examination takes its cues: What kind of values and 'truths' about the world does wrestling, as the odd mixture of reality TV, soap opera and sports that it is (Jaswal 2005: 2; Deeter-Schmetz and Sojka 2004 :132), simulate and sell as 'real'? How does the display veil these 'truths', these ideologies, in its discourse? More

importantly: When does wrestling as a display and performance point to its own hyperreal, simulatory mechanisms and reveal itself as the ideological transmitter that it is?

Modern professional wrestling is both an athletic spectacle and an elaborate allegory. It is an utmost civilized display (with an emphasis on play in the sense of drama), a representation and negotiation of human existence. The complex and sometimes contradictory meaning(s) of this display is interactively created between companies, wrestlers and spectators and its prime means is that feature which shapes humanity and its thought processes, that very feature we have seen come to life in artifacts and cultural products from ancient times onwards until today: I am speaking, of course, of *narrativization*.

2.3 Modern Professional Wrestling as a Narrative Practice

So far, we have discussed the mechanisms with which professional wrestling is capable of spreading its products across the globe: The investigation of the relationship between producers, product, and fans on a transcultural and historiographical level has shown that professional wrestling's central feature appears to be a strong tradition of narrativization of conflicts and their solutions, i.e., the elevation of a physical bout to stand in for more abstract concepts and social conflicts. I would now like to zoom in from the global perspective and look at the specific artistic makeup of professional wrestling as put on display by WWE to unravel how story world, narration, characters, and consumers come together in creating wrestling as a narrative performance art.

Professional wrestling provides researchers with a variety of different angles from which to start an investigation into its narrative construction and the discourses it participates in. This is largely due to its multimedial and multimodal makeup. The variety of media and modes involved in the production and reception of wrestling as an entertainment sport requires researchers to make use of an eclectic array of methods and terminology borrowed and adapted from a variety of different fields. While research into professional wrestling has predominantly focused on wrestling's existence as performance art and for this reason especially makes use of terminology

and methodology borrowed from theatre studies (see, for instance, Mazer 1998; Kutzelmann 2014), I would like to focus my investigation on elements of representation through storytelling as a superordinate field of study to unravel wrestling's ideological implications. For this purpose, I propose a combination of textual and visual analysis tools that fruitful collaborations between literary studies (especially narratology) and media studies have worked on in the past decade. I will argue that quite a number of the observations that other researchers have made with regard to wrestling's performance of bodies as signs in a discourse that revolves around gender and other identity markers can be traced back to the narrative structures that underlie not just oral or literal textual formats, but all theatrical performances as well. I will also show how the reception of wrestling events is shaped by its varying modes of access to the performance: live, through TV, or on DVD.

The natural propensity for telling stories for various purposes must indisputably be regarded as an anthropologically universal feature of humanity. Narratives are a resilient yet flexible elemental material in the construction of collective identities and socio-cultural meaning making (Heinen and Sommer 2009: 4). Mark Turner attests in *The Literary Mind* (1996) that "[n]arrative imagining – story – is the fundamental instrument of thought. Rational capacities depend upon it. It is our chief means of looking into the future, of predicting, of planning, and of explaining. It is a literary capacity indispensable to human cognition generally" (Turner 1996: 4-5). To show how literary capacities in the human mind are essential to everyday processes of conceptualizing the world, Turner uses the concept of the parable as an example: He shows how the creation of and thinking in stories and the allegorical and analogical nature of projection are connected and serve to imagine and interpret human existence. Although we cannot dive into the intricate details of literary cognitive science, Turner's approach provides us with major insights that serve as points of departure to understand professional wrestling as a narrative practice: Narrative imagining is one of the central building blocks of human cognitive capacity; it cannot be circumvented and as a constantly running cognitive function decisively shapes our way of not just seeing the world but *making* it as we think and speak about it. This

has a decisive impact on *all* storytelling practices – oral storytelling, literary production, theatre, film, and all mixed art forms in between.

Furthermore, narrative imagining fulfils several key functions, among them explanation, prediction, and – most importantly in our context with regard to the mechanisms of discourse and ideology – evaluation (Turner 1996: 9). While Sharon Mazer argued convincingly that professional wrestling "ultimately serves as a metaphor for social structures and meanings" (Mazer 1998: 7), we can go further in our analysis of wrestling narratives: Wrestling not just reflects but negotiates and also adds to social discourses through processing these discourses in its narratives (see Fig. 2). This is particularly important to note since professional wrestling has gained far-reaching notoriety across the globe. By making extensive use of new media to promote their storylines across national borders, professional wrestling in the shape of WWE as its major company has managed to gain access to a global market, catering to an increasing number of international fans. This implies that whatever discourses WWE's storylines may participate in, their evaluations of socio-cultural existences will have an influence on the imagining of these existences for a vast fan culture.

The endeavor implied in asking how, by what means and to what end professional wrestling tells various stories may be the academic equivalent to the herding of cats, at least when taking into account the ongoing discussion of different theoretical and methodological approaches in the overlapping fields of literary, media, and cultural studies. Although from the point of view of the day-to-day business of interpretative practice at universities the above-mentioned are probably the most basic research questions in literary studies, their coming together, on a theoretical level, pairs up several conceptually distinct research paradigms theorists have tried to draw together in the past: narratology, hermeneutics, and discourse theory. Classical narratology, often criticized for its focus on finding out about common textual features as proposed by its underlying positivist agenda of structuralism and its neglect of interpretative dimensions (Pettersson 2009: 14-15, also: Heinen and Sommer 2009: 2), has given way to a conglomerate of different interdisciplinary and transmedial academic endeavors (Alber and Fludernik 2010: 5ff.) under the header of

Postclassical Narratology to *inter alia* highlight contextual and interpretative dimensions often neglected by classical structuralist narratology[35]. The bringing together of classical narratology and aspects of interpretative and contextualizing practice is seen as problematic. As Bo Pettersson observes:

> […] there are two main obstacles in trying to combine narratology and hermeneutics. The problem with narratology […] is its unwillingness to concede that it entails interpretative decisions. For one thing, focusing on the formal features of a narrative usually leads to a neglect of its thematic and ideological aspects. What is more, an emphasis on narrative chronology and the representation of consciousness is itself the result of interpretative decisions – evidence enough that insights into some aspects of a literary work entail blindness to other. (Pettersson 2009: 16).

He goes on:

> The other obstacle is that even when hermeneutics has analysed particular literary works (and on these rare occasions they have tended to be fictional), it has not notably used narratological tools in doing so (ibid. 16-17).

In other words, hermeneutics and narratology are, at least when we take into consideration their underlying makeup, interests, and aims, difficult to reconcile on a theoretical level[36].

Yet however difficult it seems to bridge the chasm between those two approaches to narratives, interpretative practice more often than not involves processes informed by an eclectic approach that draws on methodology and terminology from different schools of literary and cultural studies. Though I would argue that Pettersson's idea of contextual intention inference as primarily author-centered in its approach is too limited in its scope, he still makes an excellent point in emphasizing the necessity to aim for a context-sensitive and interdisciplinary reading of literary fiction. While classical narratology can deliver terminology and tools for the analysis of texts and postclassical narratology provides the focus on contextualization (Pettersson 2009: 21) in interpretative processes, a broader scope for the connections between

[35] For an extensive introduction to this topic see Alber and Fludernik (2010).
[36] See also Heinen and Sommer (2009).

mechanisms of literary meaning making in specific examples and their ideological implications on a larger scale can be established by going back to Foucault and his idea of discourse. With his strong focus on power relations that are at once produced, fostered, and perpetuated in language and socio-cultural practices, Foucault can provide the critical perspective on narratives as mechanisms of power generation that is not present in classical narratology[37] and has already taken root in the recourse of Feminist criticism to narratology as proposed by Lanser (1986) and proponents of postclassical narratology to greater or lesser extents.

Professional wrestling as it is known today inherits a variety of structural and aesthetic features from audio-visual media like film and TV. This fact calls for a broadening of the toolkit with which we engage with professional wrestling as a cultural product in academic research: While a variety of researchers have approached this topic from a theatre and performance studies perspective[38] and have often ignored the fact that they were often not at all engaging with live performances but with recordings of live performances, I would like to propose an additional access point to the research on professional wrestling that is able to include a sensitive approach to the multimodality and multimediality of wrestling, particularly its filmic components and the editing that is implied. The inclusion of a toolkit that we can borrow and appropriate from narratology may shed new light on the meaning-making processes inherent to the narrativization of conflict as we see it in professional wrestling. Professional wrestling under the lens of narratology is in need of a combination of context- and ideology-sensitive as well as transgeneric approaches (as described in Nünning and Nünning 2002) and as a multimodal and multimedial narrative practice calls to be approached by a multifocal perspective that takes into consideration its structural makeup, its historical and cultural contexts, as well as its ideological implications. While of course the analysis of wrestling as a live spectator

[37] To argue, however, that narratological tools and terms such as focalization or the unreliable narrator are able to be entirely objective in what they can say about a narrative is misleading. Narratological terminology may be apt to describe certain textual phenomena but in doing so also always frames these phenomena in a particular way by, for instance, giving precedence to perspective or framing certain types of represented experience as untrustworthy. For more on the ideological implications of narratological terminology see, for instance, Pietsch and Zybura's *Childhood in Literature: Critical Perspectives and Analytical Tools* (working title, in preparation).
[38] See: Introduction.

sport and theatrical performance still holds promise and appeal, a shift in perspective might add new ways of thinking about wrestling.

In the following, we will have to look at four distinct elements of professional wrestling: world construction, characters, plotlines, and perspective. To disentangle the processes that create and link these elements, I will propose an extensive use of terminology provided by poststructuralist approaches and the philosophy of world-building and -knowing (i.e. Foucault, Baudrillard), (post-) classical narratology and, since wrestling does now more frequently than ever appear on screen, film narratology. It will be shown that these approaches combined with an ideology- and context-sensitive reading can get us far in understanding professional wrestling not only in terms of theatrical and dramatic performance, but also in terms of a multimedial and multimodal narrative practice that is informed by and informs us about socio-cultural conventions of meaning when it comes to the understanding of gender and gendered relationships.

2.4 Complicating World Construction – Multimedial and Multimodal Storytelling

Summarizing Victor Perkins' notions of world-building in movie fiction, Ian Garwood proclaims in *The Sense of Film Narration* (2013) that "[…] each film presents the viewer with material that insinuates a larger fictional world and that offers a particular vantage point from which to judge the events that take place within it" (Garwood 2013: 25). That is, to some extent at least, true for wrestling recordings as well: Wrestling events take place in a real-world location, a sports arena or a similar locality in different cities. Within this setting, however, a fictional world is being created that is intricately linked to both the 'outer' world of the real-world location, as well as bound to its own, 'internal' laws and rules that may or may not overlap with real-world logics and laws.

Dealing with WWE narrative material (i.e., live events, TV programs, DVD recordings or WWE programs online) further complicates the world-building in the narrative that is presented. The boundaries between actor and spectator, for instance, are not quite clear: While WWE presents a fictional narrative world that is indeed a

closed-up world with its own, sometimes bizarre social conventions and laws which spectators look at from the outside (especially TV audience), it also generates a world of which the spectator is an integral part. The WWE Universe, as this world is called, exists both on the fictional narrative level, in which the spectators inside the arena are participating actively and are referred to constantly by wrestlers and commentators alike, and on the superordinate level of 'the real world', in which WWE is an entertainment franchise kept alive by the reciprocal relationship between audience, athletes, and promoters.

Additionally, the perception of the narratives presented highly depends on the spatio-temporal location of the audience: Today, wrestling is no longer predominantly a live event that can be grasped by approaches that tend to focus on its live performance and live audience reaction (i.e., for instance, approaches from theatre studies). Consumers of WWE programs and events can do so live at the event location as well as in front of their TVs or via the internet, the latter also being able to watch certain programs live or much later on DVD, via WWE.com or the WWE Network. This portion of the audience is both temporally as well as spatially removed from the action inside the ring. As Kutzelmann and other researchers have pointed out, the live audiences at the arenas do have some influence on the narrative as it plays out in front of them and will have an impact on the narrative as it can be sold and spun later on. TV audiences do not have the same option. Also, viewing matches and storylines with some spatio-temporal distance will make for an entirely different experience for the audience. This is due in equal parts to the editing process required for the publication of DVD and online material after the event, as well as the medium-specific features with regard to, for instance, perspective. The audience at the arena see the events unfold from their unmoving position within the arena's seating arrangements. The audience at home in front of the TV will be guided in their visual experience by the cameras' selected perspectives and the commentator's narration. Audience in general serve a double function, especially when they are at the arena during a wrestling event: They are, at the same time, spectators consuming a product created for them and an audience that is part of the fictional world and its stories they witness as it unfolds (see Fig. 3).

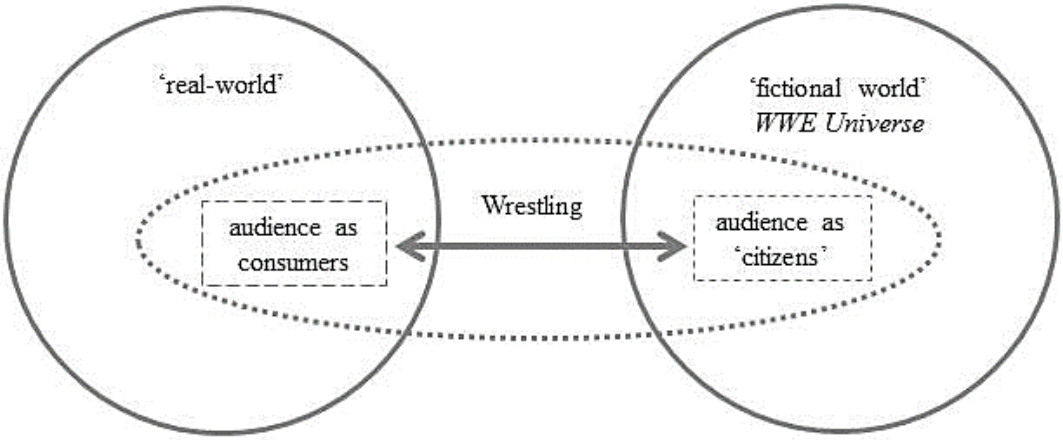

Figure 2: The double position of the audience in wrestling.

The entanglement of different communicative levels within wrestling is a crucial component in the make-up of wrestling as a narrative product: Not only do audience members occupy two positions that seem incompatible, but other agents in this field of cultural production do as well. As Figure 4 illustrates, company executives, wrestlers and other agents involved in the production of wrestling events often appear in several functions simultaneously. Vince McMahon, for example, is both 'real world' and 'fictional world' chairman and CEO of WWE. He simultaneously exerts control over the company as a 'real world' business that promotes wrestling programs, events and merchandise, *and* the fictional company which, by appropriating the principle of Roman colosseum entertainment, has men compete in battles of epic proportions in which not only championships are at stake but the competitors' very lives and livelihoods. This double-existence is never resolved but is, to a greater or lesser extent, always present in both in-ring action and promotion across different media. Audiences, then, always have to navigate two levels of existence at the same time to be able to make sense of the display that is generated in wrestling entertainment, while the paid actors – wrestlers and promoters alike – constantly navigate both spheres of existence simultaneously in live events, on screen and social media.

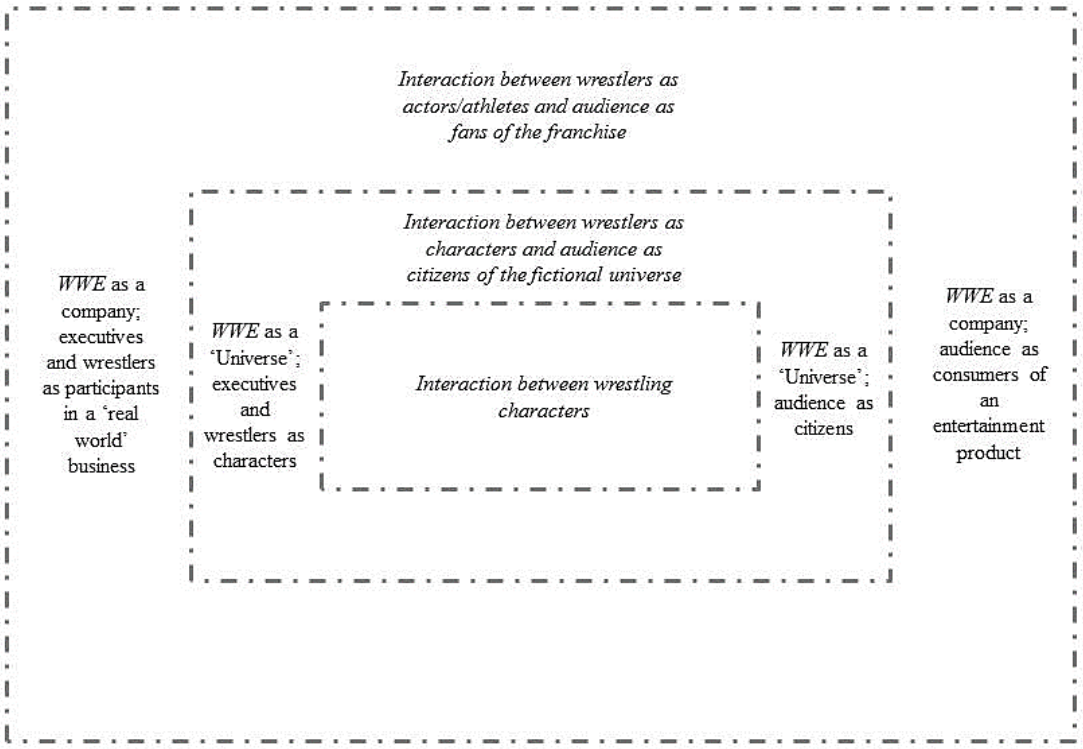

Figure 3: Professional wrestling's double-situatedness. Compare this to the model of narrative communication for novels and other prose fiction in Jahn and Nünning (qtd. in Meyer: 2011 [2004]: 68).

The transgression of world boundaries between the fictional universe and the imagined 'real world' community is maybe best captured by the term metalepsis. While classically the term as such seems to denote a metaphorical movement that transgresses from one fictional world into another or from an implied 'real world' into a fictional world (Thoss 2015: 4), metalepsis in wrestling becomes an aesthetic constant as actors in the field are in a perpetual state of double-situatedness. They are at once fictional agents and real-world actors. As Gerard Genette argues that metalepsis is indeed a "game" of transgressions, acts that "by the intensity of their effects, demonstrate the importance of the boundary they tax their ingenuity to overstep, in defiance of verisimilitude – *a boundary that is precisely the narrating (or the performance) itself*: a shifting but sacred frontier between two worlds, the world in which one tells, the world of which one tells" (Genette 1980: 236; original emphasis). Central to the aesthetic effects of metalepsis is, according to Genette, a fundamental sense of disruption, the "unacceptable and insistent hypothesis, that the

extradiegetic is perhaps always diegetic, and that the narrator and his narratees – you and I – perhaps belong to some narrative" (ibid.). This indicates the necessity for some essential caveats to the analysis and interpretation of wrestling events that tie back to our investigation of 21st century wrestling earlier on: While for quite some time the wrestling business was dominated by the preservation of the illusion as 'real' (keyword: kayfabe) both within wrestling's own productions as well as in real-world promotions, the introduction of wrestling as entertainment rather than competitive sport, the transition from the Attitude to PG Era in WWE productions, and, most importantly, the incorporation of new media into the production and marketing of wrestling narratives necessarily led to a break with the tradition of true kayfabe. Metalepsis is more than a device in wrestling narratives. Rather, it has become its very mode of existence.

2.5 Live Performance and Filmic Representation

I have already argued that the fact that professional wrestling shows in general and WWE events in particular cannot be understood solely on the grounds of theatre and performance studies but rather that literary and film studies can add a toolkit to the structural analysis and socio-cultural interpretation of mechanisms of power and ideology in professional wrestling. The spatio-temporal distance of TV and WWE Network audiences makes for a unique experience of wrestling events that will differ to some extent from the experience that live audience will be able to have. The often heavily edited quality of certain scenes and the insertion of post-production segments enrich the narratives of conflict that are being presented. In the following I would like to focus on some facets of audiovisual storytelling in wrestling and specifics of representation that shape the way audience, especially TV audience, can experience the central conflict presented as well as individual subjectivity of individual characters. I will do so by looking in particular at promotional segments with which producers of professional wrestling try to shape the direction of their storylines.

Perspective is an important point in wrestling narratives since the medium's turn toward being both a live spectacle and recorded TV-event. While live audiences can experience the display with the limitations of their own spatial situatedness within an

arena, TV audience are guided through the narrative via the camera. This has a definite impact on the shape of the narrative as it is presented since camera technology, cuts and other editing processes can generate visual and auditory effects that the live audience simply will not have. As Jens Eder has argued in his examination of the specifics of audiovisual narration, conventions for the representation of perspectives ("*Standardkonventionen der Perspektivierung*", [Eder 2009: 23]) in popular film most often resemble what in literary fiction is described as omniscient narration. In those filmic narrations, the camera takes on the position of an observer capable of generating approximations of characters' psychological interiority via genre-specific means which have to be decoded by the audience to make inferences about the characters' emotional life (ibid.). Processes that come into play when wrestling segments advertising bouts are being produced often include adding so called "canned heat", i.e., favorable fan-reactions, but also music, voice-overs and color-grading to produce promotional segments that are being aired before important bouts. While voice-overs are a frequent means used to create a direct access to characters' minds and experiences, more frequently other means like collage or montage of images and music, certain cuts or other means in postproduction are being employed to create an effect that Jan-Noël Thon describes as "(quasi-)perceptual point-of-view" (Thon 2014: 74-75). This (quasi-) perceptual point-of-view suggests that even in situations in which the camera is not taking over the actual spatial position of one character, what is being shown is actually a representation of one or more characters' actual perception. One example for this can often be observed whenever 'insane' characters appear in promotional segments.

Randy Orton, former protégée of Triple H who turned bitter and vengeful after being betrayed by his former stable, ventured on a slow descent into madness in 2009, heralding a new development in his character. The once cocky and over-confident youngster begins to hear voices in his head that push him toward more brutal and vicious attacks against his opponents, particularly the McMahon family, who bar him from the recognition and position in the WWE universe he feels he deserves. In the cinematic prologue to the *Royal Rumble* 2009, a pay-per-view event which traditionally determines which wrestler will headline *WrestleMania* the

following April, several different wrestlers' faces are being shown underscored by the energetic title song of the event, "Let It Rock" by Kevin Rudolf feat. Lil Wayne. The mood changes abruptly as Orton's heavily distorted title song "Voices" disrupts the promotion of the event. Orton's face, color-graded in a bleak greyish hue appears (*Royal Rumble 2009*, DVD 1/1, 00:01:18). In a recapitulation of the events of *RAW* the week preceding the *Royal Rumble*, we see Vince McMahon speaking to Orton before the latter attacks and finally punts McMahon in the head and the screen takes on a reddish tint. The lyrics of Orton's title song underscore the deed: "They [i.e., the eponymous voices in his head] counsel me", "They tell me things that I will do / They tell me things I'll do to you", "They talk to me". Orton's madness that will ever increase over the course of the next few months, is signaled here by the use of specific lyrics, distorted audio, and color-grading that makes TV audience understand that it was this exact moment in which Orton's madness first took shape in the form of actual voices (Seliger 2014: 93). This (quasi-) perceptual point-of-view reoccurs with Orton's character throughout this storyline and also appears frequently with other wrestlers whose characters' perception of reality needs to be presented as twisted, distorted, or deranged. This specific filmic segment does not only summarize or synthesize the storyline or the specific angle for promotion purposes; it also creates, to some extent, the narrative that has unfolded since the generation of meaning from past events occurs in part *post hoc*. Segments that TV and network audience can see preceding a bout of two or more opponents usually make use of two types of visual material: recordings from previous live events and material recorded specifically for the use in a recorded promotional segment. Let us look at another example from WWE to illustrate how different filmic elements enrich the multimodal storytelling capacity of professional wrestling.

2007's pay-per-view *Unforgiven* circled around themes of retribution and vengeance and promoted the return of the Undertaker as the main event. The Undertaker would have to face Mark Henry at whose hands he had suffered brutal defeats in the past. Quite fittingly, the event's theme song, Alter Bridge's "Rise Today", thematically fits the return of the Deadman. The introductory clip to the pay-per-view starts with a variety of images in rapid succession: We see Undertaker's

face and young, laughing girls in light dresses playing skipping rope, then rats, a throne, a dark cross in front of a black and violet sky, lightning, a graveyard, and images of being buried alive. Then the Undertaker's silhouette is shown in a dimly lit corridor, cold, blue light illuminating him from behind. A young girl's voice can be heard in a whispered voiceover: "Did you hear the one about the man who can't be destroyed? He was buried alive," she says as we see a bulldozer putting earth on Undertaker's grave at one of his past Buried Alive matches. "He was set on fire. They carried him away. But he keeps [pause] coming [pause] back." The screen turns black, and the voice suddenly appears to be much closer as she whispers: "Don't be afraid. Be terrified."

This first part of the introductory clip is heavily drawing on conventions from horror and thriller films: The fast cuts between scenes suggest the kind of terrifying insecurity of dealing with an entity that essentially eludes understanding, whose power goes beyond the realm of the natural. The girls and their attire are certainly reminiscent of the depiction of the rope skipping children in Wes Craven's 1984 horror classic *Nightmare on Elm Street*. Evoking the connection to the Freddy Krueger franchise, the Undertaker is characterized along similar lines: Like Krueger, the Undertaker is capable of defying death. Though once living creatures, both Krueger and the Undertaker share the supernatural ability to return as vicious, vengeful entities whose existence inspires fear in whoever finds themselves at the receiving end of their dark and destructive desires. The Undertaker is cast as a mysterious and essentially indestructible power, an entity that can be beaten but never destroyed, whose eerie existence will always reassert itself by haunting those who have dared to challenge the Deadman. The main theme here is of course resilience, which we will be coming back to at a later point[39].

In the second part of this introductory clip, the music sets in again. We see a road sign in the middle of the desert reading "Death Valley", the Undertaker's alleged birthplace (Shields and Sullivan 2012: 354). The camera captures hooded figures (*Unforgiven 2007,* DVD 1/1, 00:02:10) in a low-angle shot that makes use of the hemispheric distortion produced by a fisheye lens effect. The hooded figures stand in

[39] See chapter 3.

the desert with torches and dig up a small casket. They open it and reveal a variety of snakes wrapped around the Undertaker's sigil (*Unforgiven 2007,* DVD 1/1, 00:02:16) that is then lifted from the casket by one of the figures. Suddenly, a deep male voice rings out: "He has risen." The camera then fast-forwards low over the desert ground before coming to an abrupt halt. A child whispers: "Did you hear that?" and the male voice answers: "He walks again." In a shot that is both reminiscent of the zombie movie trope and Undertaker's first Buried Alive match in 1996, a hand bursts forth from the desert sands (*Unforgiven 2007,* DVD 1/1, 00:02:27). In a fast succession of images, we are presented with a carriage drawn by black horses, children dancing, snakes, lightning, and graveyards, all interspersed with a variety of images showing the Undertaker before, finally, we are presented with the pay-per-view's theme uttered in a child's whisper: "Unforgiven".

As this short introductory clip to this specific pay-per-view exemplifies, looking at the performance aspect of wrestling at live events is simply not enough to understand the complex multimedial and multimodal construction of storyworlds, characters and narratives. Clips like this one make use of a variety of different cinematographic techniques that contribute to the narrative makeup of bouts as presented in-ring. These clips also tie together a variety of sign systems that co-create specific effects in their narrative contexts by which characterization of wrestlers takes place. Music and voiceovers together with collages from already existing material recorded at live events and purposefully cinematographically stylized parts are able to activate a variety of different media- and genre-specific templates (narrative templates associated with insanity, horror, revenge, etc.) that influence how these characters are being understood. This crafting of characters and storylines utilizing mechanics of live performances as well as cinematography is of course not apolitical: The artistic choices made that are undoubtedly meant to enhance the spectacle beyond its performative in-ring elements participate in shaping the very discourses wrestling promotes. The question then is: What is the purpose of bringing into being such characters and who benefits from this depiction? In order to answer this question, we need to zoom out again from our investigation of media-specific mechanisms of storytelling and move back onto the level of theory.

2.6 Storylines, Characters, and the Emerging (Gendered) Subject

It has been noted in many previous publications[40] that wrestling makes use of a variety of stock character stereotypes and recurring plot elements and patterns in order to generate the sportive spectacle. One very widespread narrative arrangement that Patrick C. Hogan identifies in his essay "Characters and their Plots" is the fundamental building block recognizable in a vast number of wrestling storylines:

> Three narrative patterns recur prominently across cultures and across historical periods. These are romantic, heroic, and sacrificial tragi-comedy. […] The heroic plot has two components. The first includes the usurpation of legitimate social leadership (often by a relative of the rightful leader), the exile of the rightful leader, and the ultimate restoration of that leader. The second treats a threat against the home society by some alien force. Commonly, the displaced leader is restored in the course of defending the home society against the alien threat. (Hogan 2010: 135)

The heroic plot is unsurprisingly a common feature in professional wrestling storylines and can be found, for instance, in the 2010 storyline of John Cena and his WWE Superstars vs. The Nexus, led by NXT rookie Wade Barrett. Originating from the NXT rookie program, the members of the Nexus, led by the charismatic Brit Wade Barrett, wreaked havoc on the WWE Universe through sheer force and dominance, trying to establish themselves at the top of the food chain. Indeed, the Nexus is a good example for those storylines in which larger groups of characters band together and instead of winning fairly in one-on-one matches to prove their capabilities and prowess (and, thus, their masculinity), opt for a less honorable entry by brutally beating John Cena during the 7th of June episode of RAW in 2010 and thus beginning their spree of brutal attacks on the WWE Superstars. Generally being "unresponsive to authority" as a narrator in a segment for RAW, 7th of June 2010, states, these rookies went for a look that is reminiscent of authoritarian regimes with all of them sporting the same ring gear emblazoned with the yellow-on-black Nexus "N" (Seliger 2014:110; see: *SummerSlam 2010*, DVD 1/1, 02:08:11 for visual reference). It is their uniformity, their lack of individuality, and their seemingly

[40] See, for instance, Michael Ball's *Professional Wrestling as Ritual Drama in American Popular Culture* (1990).

unshakable loyalty toward their spokesman and leader Wade Barrett that emphasize how much they go against the notion of 'every man for himself' that in WWE is so positively connoted through its power to signify true masculinity. It is only through individual heroes, Cena and the all-star WWE team he brings together despite their differences – among them the two heel characters / anti-heroes Edge and Jericho, who, eventually, will threaten the unity and with it the success of the team-up –, that the Nexus can be pushed back at least for a while.[41]

One of the longest and more elaborate storylines in recent years, the Superstars vs. the Nexus, exemplifies how the positionality of characters within a storyline is in fact highly context-dependent: Heel and face characters, i.e., villains and heroes, are not fixed in their roles within wrestling plots but rather come into being by being juxtaposed with other characters in different storylines. Sharon Mazer points out that

> [o]pposing each other are not simply representations of virtue and vice. Rather professional wrestling presents a range of positive and negative stereotypes of men whose relationship to each other, to the officials and other players, and to the spectators is constructed from and articulates a relationship of underlying assumptions of what real men are and do. Because these masculinities – from the flamboyant feminine to the lumpen macho – may be positioned on either side of the morality line at any given time, what is always defined and placed at risk along with truth, justice, and the American way are shifting idea(l)s of manliness itself. (Mazer 1998:104-105)

I have argued in a different context that what Mazer conceptualizes as a "morality line" is in fact a relational and gradual scale (Seliger 2014: 109). In 2010, before the appearance of the Nexus, this moral heel-face-continuum (or 'heel-o-metre', [ibid.]) saw WWE's poster boy and 'goody-two-shoes' character John Cena at one end of the spectrum, whereas other Superstars like villainous, narcissist, and self-absorbed Canadians Chris Jericho and Edge occupied a position at the opposite end. The introduction of the Nexus, however, provides a crucial change in characters' relations and their positions within the narrative, with Edge and Jericho suddenly appearing much less ignoble and malicious than their upstart opponents (ibid. 110).

[41] The storyline morphs into a personal feud between Cena and Barrett that will only come to an end in 2010. For a more detailed analysis, see chapter 3.4.

Stories like these are well known in WWE. They are an acting out of the stereotype of the overly eager upstarts who get ahead of themselves[42] and threaten the established order by attempting to topple it altogether – at least this is how it is being framed. It is suggested to the audience that the Nexus is triggering something that is indeed undesirable. During the trailer-esque beginning of 2009's *SummerSlam*, a voiceover narrator notes that

> [t]here is a change coming. It's in the air. It's all around. And tonight [music intensifies] it's here. […] Tonight, change threatens to alter the foundation of our universe as these seven upstarts have decided it's their time.[43]

It is obvious that change in the form of these wrestlers usurping a dominant position within WWE is constructed as a breach of procedure, of how men are meant to establish a pecking order among themselves, and therefore a threat to the universe and its order as a whole.

This notion of a system being threatened and justly defended by hero characters is, however, a mirage: In fact, the story only works exactly because the Nexus, despite all affirmations to the contrary and Barrett heralding the "start of something much, much greater", adheres to the rules of the game. Identity, masculinity, positions within the hierarchy are always assumed to be formed through the assessment of men, testing them for their rhetorically and physically violent capabilities. It is this basic rationale that always remains uncontested, no matter which storylines and no matter which constellation and configuration of characters we are being presented with. What these storylines effectively foster is the idea that these principles are in fact not a matter of continuous ideological reproduction but 'natural'. I will discuss these mechanisms of hegemony to naturalize principles of man-making further in chapters 3 and 4.

Right now it is important to point out the influence of WWE's reproduction of storylines that leaves this basic premise untouched and unquestioned on our general

[42] See chapter 3.6 for a more elaborate account of storylines revolving around rookies and veterans.
[43] This is a reference to John Cena's title song "My Time is Now" further emphasizing the notion that the Nexus intends to ruin the established order and 'dethrone' Cena as the wrestler most closely associated with being the face of the company (cf. Seliger 2014:116).

understanding of how (gendered) subjects come into existence. In Althusserian terms, WWE works as an Ideological State Apparatus. While Repressive State Apparatuses denote, for instance, the police or other coercive institutions, Ideological State Apparatuses include, but are not limited to, abstract cultural institutions such as the press, television, arts, and sports (Althusser 1971 in Storey 2009 [1994]: 302). These institutions operate substantially on the principles of hailing and interpellation in order to "produce in people a tendency to behave and think in socially acceptable ways" (Fiske 2008 [1992]: 311). As Fiske elaborates further:

> Althusser uses the words *interpellation* and *hailing* to describe this work of the media. These terms derive from the idea that any language, whether it be verbal, visual, tactile, or whatever, is part of social relations and that in communicating with someone we are reproducing social relationships. (Fiske, 2008 [1992]: 312; original emphasis)

Fiske also argues that:

> At the unstated level of ideology, however, each institution is related to all others by an unspoken web of ideological interconnections, so that the operation of any one of them is 'overdetermined' by its complex, invisible network of interrelationships with all the others. (ibid.)

This has several implications for our investigation of WWE storylines on the microlevel and their connections to socio-cultural reproductions of gender ideologies on the macrolevel: On the latter we can analyze how WWE as a global business contributes to a perpetuation and fostering of the "unspoken web of ideological interconnections" between itself and other social agents and sites of cultural production. On the former, we can use Althusser's terminology to see how characters amongst each other reproduce the very discourses that constitute them as subjects in the first place, as Fiske argues that "[t]he individual is produced by nature, the subject by culture" (ibid. 312).

For our investigation of the underlying ideologies of professional wrestling it is crucial to conceptualize individual subjects as determined by the discourses and performances they are part of, rather than simply viewing them as the originators of

these discourses and performances. Judith Butler argues in her essay "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" that

> [t]hough phenomenology sometimes appears to assume the existence of a choosing and constituting agent prior to language (who poses as the sole source of its constituting acts), there is also a more radical use of the doctrine of constitution that takes the social agent as an *object* rather than the subject of constitutive acts.
>
> (Butler 1988: 519, original emphasis)

Butler argues here that the very language we use to describe practices of embodiment, the fact that we need a sentence subject to iterate that "one does one's body" (ibid. 521), is problematic inasmuch as it assumes a pre-existing agent to the act of performance. Rather than seeing the subject as preceding the discourses and performances it engages in, it is formed by these discourses. In other words, the hailing of characters (and audience members) and their subsequent 'turn', i.e., the adequate reaction and response, is what turns them into socially readable subjects in the first place. Agents acting out performances participate in the repetition of these very performances and their underlying ideological foundations. One could even argue that these performances are not simply underpinned by ideology but rather are in themselves the very ideology they perform.

By using these Althusserian notions of hailing and interpellation and by adding her idea of performativity that consists of a variety of "constituting acts" that form "a compelling illusion" (ibid. 520) of identity as something determined, natural and fixed, Butler explores the mechanisms that structure social conceptions and productions of gender and sex. The practices of embodying a certain sex and thus a gender identity – as these are intricately linked to one another in the cultural imaginary – make use of certain strategies "or what Sartre would perhaps have called a style of being, or Foucault 'a stylistics of existence'. This style is never fully self-styled, for living styles have a history, and that history conditions and limits possibilities" (ibid. 521). This means that individual performances are never

idiosyncratic[44] but rather informed by a socio-ideological framework. The way that agents form themselves as sex-gender-distinct subjects is only made possible through a set of coded repetitive performances of style: movements, attire, speech, and so on all form this coded rhetoric of the body made legible and knowable. These acts of subject-making are "shared experiences" and indeed a collective endeavor (ibid. 525): Only if the code is clear to society as a whole can bodies become readable.

Butler does not only call into question the presupposition that the subject precedes the body it stylizes or that the body as 'readable' is a given but also deconstructs the notion of a divide between what is commonly thought of as the sex/gender-divide according to which sex is a fixed natural given and gender the culturally determined adequate performance that logically follows from it. She rather suggests that "[…] if gender is the cultural significance that the sexed body assumes, and if that significance is codetermined through various acts and their cultural perception, then it would appear that from within the terms of culture it is not possible to know sex as distinct from gender" (ibid. 524). The categorization of sexes into discreet categories is, as she purports, the very mechanism by which 'sex' is produced in the first place. Norms that come together throughout history that form what Butler refers to as "a sedimentation of gender norms" (ibid.) that assembles and cultivates certain corporeal styles that determine through performance what counts as a natural, readable body, and how bodies relate to one another in a dichotomous contrast. From these sedimentations arise "prevalent and compelling social fictions" (ibid.) about 'real' men and 'real women' that serve to further push the hegemonic idea of natural sex and compulsory heterosexuality, i.e., sexed bodies which perform the corresponding gender identities which organically and 'naturally' develop desires toward the opposite sex (ibid. 524). The individual agent is limited in their performance by the history of the performance itself, by what the body can traditionally and historically signify, and thus only has limited options to make their

[44] Butler states in the very same article that "[t]he act that gender is, the act that embodied agents are inasmuch as they dramatically and actively embody and, indeed, wear certain cultural significations, is clearly not one's act alone. Surely, there are nuanced and individual ways of doing one's gender, but that one does it, and that one does it in accord with certain sanctions and proscriptions, is clearly not a fully individual matter" (ibid. 525), thus further elaborating on the connections between individual performance and collective understanding of sex and gender.

own body readable. Since this process "has cultural survival at its end, the term '*strategy'* better suggests the situation of duress under which gender performance always and variously occurs. Hence, as a strategy of survival, gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences" (ibid. 522; original emphasis). The individual has no way to opt out of this signifying process if they do not want to fall into cultural in-significance, that is, into a state in which they become the abject, that which does not signify and therefore is either to be neglected or perceived as potentially threatening the established order.

Professional wrestling, then, must be understood as a collective didactic endeavor that is taking part in the socio-political system that Althusser calls the Ideological State Apparatus. Professional wrestling as a cultural product reproduces within its storylines performances that indeed "render social laws explicit" (ibid. 526) and thus serve the socio-political endeavor to stabilize reified notions of heteronormative sexuality. However, Butler further argues that this very forced repetition of performance is also where the possibility of resistance to these latently ideologically and politically marked performances lies: "[…] the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style" (ibid. 520). She thus is very close to Foucault who maintains in his *History of Sexuality I* that

> […] discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines it and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it (Foucault 1990 [1978]: 100-101).

What Butler points out when she says that in the very fact of gender performance being a performance "resides the possibility of contesting its reified status" (Butler 1988: 520), is the fact that subject formation is not an individual process but one that only works within the boundaries of a social context against which and within which

a subject can be formed. In the possibility to change the performance and de-naturalize it lies the subversive potential of gender performativity.

I have argued earlier in this chapter that wrestling is inherently marked by a constant struggle over signification and meaning-making processes between the different actors in the field: athletes, promoters, and audience alike participate in this process and I have argued that it is possible for the audience to resist intended meanings and challenge the discourses transported in wrestling shows. However, we need to acknowledge that the practices we observe in professional wrestling include interpellative mechanisms that render audience members powerless to resist certain discourses since it is not only the athletes and characters who are being turned into readable subjects through performance. I will revisit this idea in chapter 4.

WWE is part of what Fiske calls an "unspoken web of ideological interconnections" (Fiske 2008 [1992]: 312) that shapes how subjects can come into being. WWE reproduces mechanisms of interpellation to reaffirm the boundaries of what a subject is, what it can be like, and which individuals will remain outside and unreadable, i.e., which individuals become abject. WWE's narratives play out interpellations that reaffirm already existing notions of gendered subjectivity and thus take part in the socio-cultural exercise of representing ideologically acceptable ways of being, thus stabilizing them by engraining them even deeper into the collective consciousness. In other words, wrestling naturalizes ideas of an essential (wo)manhood by repeating performances of gendered existence in conflict. The act of repetition and the usage of narrative patterns that are easily and readily recollected are central to this play of interpellations. The socio-cultural work of wrestling is reassurance through repetition.

I have argued earlier that professional wrestling, because of its globalized nature, needs to be understood as a neo-capitalist and transnational endeavor. The cultural and socio-political impact that its spreading and perpetuation of certain discourses regarding relations of gender, race, and other aspects of identity formation has on the fan community becomes much more apparent with this fact in mind. Professional wrestling, through the growth and internationalization of its major competitors, has become a notable cog in the pop-cultural machinery that stabilizes discourses and

concomitant hegemonic structures of thinking about the world and its inhabitants. Wrestling's influence and stabilizing effect as a part of the mass media market should not be underestimated despite its reputation as a fringe entertainment.

A few final caveats that directly derive from the market-related implications listed above need to be made before we can move on to an in-depth investigation of several examples that show how these hegemonic discourses are reiterated through performance in wrestling. While the type of analysis of examples that I am about to use in the following chapters is directly informed by practices of literary and cultural close-reading, the focus on specific examples cannot be looked at in isolation from production contexts. Golding and Murdock, for instance, argue in "Ideology and the Mass Media: The Question of Determination" that "the ways in which the mass media function as 'ideological apparatuses' can only be adequately understood when they are systemically related to their position as large scale commercial enterprises in a capitalist economic system, and if these relations are examined historically." (Golding and Murdock 1979: 205). They go on to say that

> "[h]owever well conceived and executed, textual readings remain a variety of content analysis and as such they suffer from the familiar but intractable problem of inference. It is one thing to argue that all cultural forms contain traces of the relations of production underlying their construction, and of the structural relations which surround them. It is quite another to go on to argue that an analysis of form can deliver an adequate and satisfactory account of these sets of relations and of the determinations they exert on the production process. They can't."
>
> (Golding and Murdock 1979: 207)

They argue that textual readings as done by Stuart Hall have been dominating sociology to its disadvantage and that sociology can only thrive as a meaninful academic endeavour if it moves some of the focus away from textual analysis of cultural products and instead puts it on the intricate socio-economic relations and structures of cultures (ibid). While I would argue that sociology and cultural studies have never quite eclipsed these aspects in the first place, and that since the 1970s and 80s much has been accomplished in terms of a more balanced and sensitive analysis of social relations in the social and cultural studies departments, Golding and

Murdock's criticism of Hall's work still remains an important reminder of how crucial it is to combine textual analysis of cultural artefacts (a mass media product, in this case) within its socio-economic production processes, especially in times of increasing globalisation and internationalisation of media companies (ibid. 208). For the analysis of wrestling, this provides us with two important caveats that arise when we take the socio-economic context into account before venturing into an analysis of ideology via textual analysis:

(1) While the conclusions drawn from textual readings can often be generalised for many promotions (the theatricality, the basic storylines and character types), what is often glossed over is the often ambivalent reception of WWE products by the wrestling fan community as well as the paradoxes and polyvalences of wrestling as an entertainment form that can only be seen when comparing wrestling forms with one another. These divergences in terms of ideological implications, style, taste and related economic success can give insight into the underlying hegemonies of ideas that are influenced and in turn influence economic viability of promotions. They, too, give some indication of which players on the market can exert the most authority in terms of fostering ideologies and, in turn, which kinds of ideologies are most or least accepted in any given socio-cultural context.

(2) I would argue that WWE's cultural prevalence on the North American and European market puts smaller promotions in a reactive position: They are almost automatically put into a position in which their product is defined in relation to something bigger, more economically successful, and more influential than their own. This, as is the case in other cultural spheres as well, has turned into a distinguishing feature of smaller promotions who can either define themselves as talent pools for the big player on the market, or as indie wrestling communities with emphases on aspects of wrestling that are not, or seemingly not, part of the mainstream wrestling events (for instance, a more hardcore take on matches or a style that is closer to Asian wrestling than

WWE wrestling). It is crucial to acknowledge that this might very well be a Western-centered viewpoint as the Asian markets, for instance, have their own prevalent promotions (All Japan Pro Wrestling, for instance), although they, too, are very much linked in their history to Northern American wrestling and its current prevalent promotions.

In the following chapters, I would like to investigate some noteworthy examples to show what kind of discourses of gendered existence and intersecting elements of identity the repetition of acts of interpellation in connection with a variety of storytelling devices reiterates and fosters. I will show that the frequently echoed observation of the domination of hard bodies in wrestling is just one aspect of the multimodal display of gendered existences that are exemplified by wrestling's characters. It is the plethora of characters that (try to) break heteronormativity and the hegemony of an essentialist notion of gender that makes the reiteration of these ideals possible in the first place and it is the collision of characters with and their acknowledgement of systemic boundaries of what is socially and culturally acceptable that makes them readable as subjects.

3. Stories of Man(kind) – Defining Men in Multimodal Character Constructions

> In contrast to the body, embodiment is contextual, enwebbed within the specifics of place, time, physiology and culture that together comprise enactment. Embodiment never coincides exactly with 'the body', however that normalized concept is understood. Whereas the body is an idealized form that gestures toward a Platonic reality, embodiment is the specific instantiation generated from the noise of difference. Relative to the body, embodiment is other and elsewhere, at once expressive and deficient in its infinite variations, particularities, and abnormalities.
>
> (Hayles 1993: 154-155, qtd. in Young 1999: 214)

Writing about issues and negotiations of masculinity is the sine qua non of research on professional wrestling and rightfully so: Despite women's prominent involvement in professional wrestling both out- and inside of the ring, wrestling has always been and still fundamentally is concerned with the male body and representations of masculinity. Sharon Mazer argues in her seminal *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle* (1998) that even expressions of masculinity that are considered heteronormative and hegemonic are "constantly undermined through the parodic, carnivalesque presentation of its opposite" (Mazer 1998: 4) or through conservative masculine ideals turning into parodies of themselves in professional wrestling performances that reflect upon their own status as gendered (Seliger 2014: 26). Wrestling does not simply put men on display in the sense that it mimics a 'natural' way for men to exist, although it does pretend that this is the case. Rather, it participates in creating and upholding the very myth (to borrow from Roland Barthes' "Myth Today" [1973: 109ff.]) of a stable, identifiable masculine identity that is to be had through – ironically – certain performances that are themselves narrativized as being natural and inherent.

Judith Butler, who commented on Simone de Beauvoir's idea of gender as a social construction, argues that "[t]o be a gender, whether man, woman, or otherwise, is to be engaged in an ongoing cultural interpretation of bodies and, hence, to be dynamically positioned within a field of cultural possibilities" (Butler 1986: 36). It is this exact positioning and interpreting of bodies and its possibilities, or, rather, its limitations of signification that wrestling is concerned with. As she attests, the body as a natural, fixed phenomenon that determines the validity of gender expressions

must be viewed as a highly problematic understanding of the relationship between anatomy and identity. Hence Butler argues that "[t]he limits to gender, the range of possibilities for a lived interpretation of a sexually differentiated anatomy, seem less restricted by anatomy itself than by the weight of the cultural institutions which have conventionally interpreted anatomy" (Butler 1986: 45). Butler's focus on the way in which institutions determine ways of reading and making bodies connects well with Foucault's question of how institutions participate in the cultural machinery of discourse production and power regulation (cf. Foucault 2010 [1972]: 50-51) – the leap to using this as a vantage point from which to look at how professional wrestling produces bodies and thus participates as an institution in these very processes is not a far one. Butler further argues that, despite the rightful claim of contemporary academic discourse to conceive of gender as a social construction rather than a natural given, "it remains necessary to ask after the specific mechanism of this construction" (Butler 1986: 36).

Following this call, I will elaborate on the way in which professional wrestling discursively constructs the body as a natural site of gender and how and by what means these bodies are performing certain gendered existences that are understood as socially acceptable despite wrestling's image as an entertainment industry that potentially threatens conservative notions of gendered existence and family life. I will therefore also attempt to partially deconstruct Sharon Mazer's assertion that next to the heteronormative expressions of masculinity depicted in wrestling are also always alternative ways of performing gender which "proposes a community of men that is inclusive of a wide range of identities and behaviors […]" (Mazer 1998: 107). I will show that while it is true that non-heteronormative representations and narrativizations of masculinity do exist in professional wrestling, their mere presence does not simply allow for the assumption of the envisioning of an inclusive community of men in which all performances are equally valid. More precisely, I will argue that while wrestling always reveals there to be an option of modifying performances of gender, it also, at the same time, clearly highlights the hierarchies between these performances and the men they make, and also puts strong emphasis on the negative repercussions that potentially subversive performances entail.

3.1 Body Counts - Body Semiotics and Stylization in Professional Wrestling

The body is the prime site of signification in professional wrestling and has therefore been the object of much academic debate. Rather than seeing the body as a fixed, stable sign, analyzing professional wrestling as the performance art that it is highlights the way in which bodies are, in fact, being made. Katherine Young argues in her essay on the narratives of medical bodies that, "[i]n each discourse, the body invents itself" (Young 1999: 212):

> The body does not so much dissolve into its signs, its discourses, into a virtual body, as it constitutes or discovers itself there. And it finds itself not as an essential modernist whole arising out of its own interiority but as a jagged, fragmentary, disjunctive, partial locus or figuration occasioned by circumstance. This is not the perverse postmodernist view that the props have been knocked out from under everything so that discourses of the body no longer have anchorages in the real, but its obverse, that the real has its anchorages in the body, that the real is fabricated out of the body. (Young 1999: 212)

In other words, the body is not only where gender, class, or racial identities are being played out in the sense of a 'reveal', but it is at once the site where these identities are being forged and where, in return, the body itself is being produced. Like gender that Butler described as "a process of constructing ourselves" (Butler 1986:36), the body, too, is more than a fixed essence from which our own selves are being formed. Butler points out that the body is at once "a material reality" and also a "situation of having to take up and interpret that set of received interpretations" that has been imposed upon the body as a material reality by socio-cultural contexts (Butler 1986: 45). The body is thus revealed as "already clothed" (ibid. 49), and as "a *field of interpretative possibilities*, the locus of a dialectical process of interpreting anew a historical set of interpretations which have become imprinted in the flesh" (ibid. 45, original emphasis).

So far, this more radical view has not been the primary focus in research on professional wrestling. Its actor-athletes have been looked at through the lens of body stylization and its connections to masculinity multiple times in the past, especially with a focus on the 'hard body'. The development of the hard body ideal, its historic

links to U.S.-American imaginations of masculinity and the importance of these concepts for professional wrestling between the Second World War and the 1990s has already been elaborated on by Kutzelmann in *Harte Männer: Professional Wrestling in der Kultur Nordamerikas* (2014: 89ff.). Referring to Bederman (1995) and Martschukat (2011), who analyze the connections between civilizing social powers and the construction of gendered bodies in which the working body, both in physical as well as economic terms, plays an important part, Kutzelmann again points out how textual and somatic associations in wrestlers' bodies and their performance enact differences which establish and perpetuate the heel/face pattern of classic wrestling performances (Kutzelmann 2014: 111 ff.).

Although the hard body ideal, as Kutzelmann points out, emphasizes the possibility of transformation from 'neurasthenic' to muscular (Kutzelmann 2014: 93), there is no wholesale translation of this implication into professional wrestling. Rather, as the analysis of the material at hand reveals, the audience are presented with a body that is the product of a long training process; a process which is – usually – not included in the narrative material. The wrestler's body is presented as given, not as an object of processual modelling and modification. Meta-features of wrestling as a business, athletes' social media posts, for instance, much more frequently point towards the 'becoming body', the body as it is shaped by the athlete, all the while making use of discourses reiterating prominent assumptions of masculine prowess and resilience. John Cena's posts on Twitter come to mind in this context as just one example: The WWE's poster boy and main face character can often be seen on his Twitter account posting photos and short video clips of himself weightlifting, hitting new personal records, and generally living up to his character's motto "Hustle, Loyalty, Respect".

On the internet in general and on social media platforms in particular, the industry's concept of kayfabe becomes less rigorous without losing its potential narrative power. The boundaries between the wrestler as (fictional) gimmick and the wrestler as (real-life) athlete are blurred as they make use of their social media platforms to promote themselves as both their gimmick and their personal self. Whereas before maintaining kayfabe in professional wrestling was arguably the

topmost imperative of the business, the increasing expansion of wrestling as a business onto the internet and the high fan participation in forums and on social media platforms has changed the demands upon wrestlers and their self-portrayal in the ring and online[45].

Following Winkler and Degele (2009), Kutzelmann argues that calling a specific body "hard", (i.e. dominant and powerful), or "soft" (i.e. subordinate or submissive and less powerful or even powerless), always carries implications as to which position the body holds inside the social power structure it resides in (Kutzelmann 2014: 97). The way bodies signify is encoded in the way they differ from other bodies, which reflects basic notions of world-making in language constructions as pointed out by de Saussure and Derrida. Although his observation is important for wrestling inasmuch as it points towards the underlying processes of meaning making triggered by body semiotics in historic contexts, he misses to acknowledge a central factor in the way bodies are able to signify: having pointed out the textual and somatic associations, as Kutzelmann calls them, with which masculinity is signified in professional wrestling, he does not return to the significance of audience participation in the meaning making process. His "performative grammar" (Kutzelmann 54) of wrestling then appears prescriptive inasmuch as he does not come back to integrate the impact of immediate and mediated performance feedback by fans into his theory of the hard body ideal in wrestling. The narrative framework is much more complex and textual as well as somatic associations do not reside in or with the body: rather, more or less static signs (such as the body itself, but also clothing, hair etc.) and performative show elements (e.g. action sequences inside the ring, interviews, backstage segments etc.) are subject to discursive evaluations by the audience themselves. Although a suggested 'reading' may be aimed at by the promoters and writers of the shows, fans have agency in 'buying' or resisting these

[45] WWE is making an increasing effort to get away from the always-kayfabe scheme by introducing formats for the WWE Network which are meant to give an 'authentic' insight into backstage life and training of established as well as up-and-coming Superstars. *WWE Breaking Ground*, which launched in October 2015, is one of these formats. The advertised style of this exemplary show, though focusing on the life of the athlete rather than the scripted act of the wrestler persona, makes use of a similar narrative rhetoric as the scripted storylines do.

readings[46].The reaction of fans to particular characters is highly contextual, not just in the sense of an historic context and its dominant issues as enacted in professional wrestling, but also the individual and social contexts in which each audience member is situated. This will often lead to diverse and distinct displays of not only approval or disapproval of a character's behavior, but also, on a meta-level, of an athlete's performance, the promoter's choices, and the actions of other fans in the arena.

Furthermore, these two levels of interpretation often cannot be told apart in the way fans react to a certain performance. The recognizable "culturally specific, contemporary discourses" (translated from Kutzelmann 2014: 80) enacted in professional wrestling shows which mean to provoke an audience's active participation in the performance are just one element in a series of signification processes. These processes lead to a variety of different readings of the display as a whole; readings which may or may not be intended by the promoter and may or may not be favored by different fan groups.

The bottom line in this argument is the following: If we want to talk about the way wrestlers' bodies create meaning through body semiotics and performance, we need to take into consideration that they are not doing so on their own authority or the authority of their promoters: The way fans may read and evaluate the signs they are offered vary widely and are not limited in their vehemence to current historical issues being enacted. This means that any reading from an academic point of view which is not based on empirical studies concerning fan behavior and fan interpretations of show events remains one reading among many – although, if done with care and attention to detail and context, a convincing one. This realization which to researchers may be self-evident since the cognitive turn in literary and cultural studies nevertheless is an important premise and limitation to any engagement in the study of wrestling as a cultural product, including this one.

Having set the theoretical limits of readings of the body in professional wrestling, I would now like to turn toward the body as a site of meaning making and its

[46] For instance, Salmon and Clerc (2005) show how female wrestling fans analyze and interpret different aspects of wrestling performances and "camera-constructed narrative" (ibid. 181) to "explore issues of sexuality and attraction" (ibid. 188) between men and generate readings in which "the oozing machismo of the hypermasculine is tempered by tenderness for, and by, the characters – a far cry from what Vince McMahon thought he was putting on screen, and from what most male fans perceive as going on" (ibid. 188-189).

involvement in the multimodality of wrestling events. Soulliere argues that representations of masculinity in professional wrestling affirm notions of violence, physical prowess, resilience, and fortitude and that these "messages about manhood presented by WWE programs leave little room for alternative expressions of masculinity" (Soulliere 2006: 9), implicitly leading to the conclusion that there is little to no variety in the way men perform masculinity in WWE narratives. Upon closer inspection of men's bodies in WWE, this might sound like an oversimplification since body types, shapes, and the characters' features performed through these bodies come in every imaginable permutation. While the V-shaped body type reminiscent of Greek athletes has come to be favored in Vince McMahon's vision of wrestling, main heroes and villains are never constrained to their roles through body types.

I have argued elsewhere that body semiotics in wrestling are a conglomerate of different sign systems – body type, posing, maneuvers, weapons, ring gear and clothing, etc. – and that these sign systems in conjunction work together to develop a character's state of mind and his relationship to other characters (Seliger 2014: 42). I have also argued that the multimodality that is at the center of narrative character construction in professional wrestling not only serves to repeat already existing, stereotypical character types, but also, by means of narrative re-contextualization and changing signifiers, produces more complex, evolving characters who struggle with their identity as (sports)men in discursively incremental and elaborate ways (ibid.). Through this process, I would argue, professional wrestling unintentionally and despite its interest in stabilizing the myth of an essential body that determines gender expression and desire in line with heteronormative demands, "reveals the body as already clothed, and nature's surface as cultural invention" to borrow again from Butler's reading of Simone de Beauvoir (Butler 1986: 49).

3.2 "Feed Me More" – Men as Monstrous Beasts

One of the basic tropes that reappear in professional wrestling narratives dealing with the relationships of and conflicts between men is the trope of the beast, the energetic monstrous nature that is conceived of as – essentially and in essence – always part of

men's selves. Characters like Ryback with his catchphrase "Feed me more!" (e.g., at SmackDown, 28th September 2012) or Batista and his nickname "Animal" make use of such rhetoric explicitly to highlight men's bestial nature and violent inclinations: While Ryback's catchphrase metaphorically portrays his ever-growing hunger for combat and competition, Batista's "Animal" effectively reduces the way in which masculinity can be viably expressed to what is perceived to be men's natural, violent selves that are perceived to be deeply entrenched in a prehistoric biology. I would argue that it is not the men that are othered in this way by rendering them 'non-human' or 'super-human', but rather that such gimmicks seek to paint any attempt at 'civilizing' men by making them less violent and less aggressive as unnatural and against men's inherent biological traits.

Men's savage nature is not only produced performatively through their physical conduct and their gimmicks, but also through the environments in which they can be seen in professional wrestling narratives (Seliger 2014: 65 ff.). Particular stipulations for matches (i.e., the infamous 'Tables, Ladders, Chairs' matches, 'I Quit' matches, or 'No Holds Barred') assist the plot in producing inspiring feats of male resilience, strength, willpower, and ferocity that are portrayed as worthwhile aspiring to (ibid. 66). Of particular interest in the context of deconstructing discourses of natural and inherent violence in men are those match environments that put opponents in confined spaces: Hell in a Cell and the Elimination Chamber (ibid. 69).

Hell in a Cell is described as "the most brutal structure ever created" (promotional segment for *No Way Out 2009*) and commentators in all of the eponymous pay-per-views go out of their way to describe it as a fearsome environment to have to brawl in. At *Hell in a Cell 2009*, commentator Michael Cole describes the structure as "a human flesh grater" that has been "reinforced" and "designed […] to keep people inside" (cf. Seliger 2014: 70). The promotional segment that introduces the pay-per-view in 2009 has a narrator describe the cage as it is being lowered unto the ring as Hell itself that "will open her fetid jaws to smack on the stench of defeat" and consume "all the demons who dare risk their souls" in her confines. In the background, the pay-per-view's title song for 2009, Skillet's "Monster", is being played, the lyrics only adding to the overall idea of men as caged animals and

ferocious beasts. In the song, the speaker reveals that a monstrous entity with sharp fangs is about to take him over despite his attempts at controlling and containing it: "So stay away from me, the beast is ugly / I feel the rage and I just can't hold it […] I feel it deep within, it's just beneath the skin / I must confess that I feel like a monster". Hell in a Cell, I have argued elsewhere, is a place in which the monsters inside men are let loose (Seliger 2014: 70). As such, it reinforces the idea that men are indeed inherently dangerous, essentially and naturally animalistic, and that outer appearances of civilization and containment are little more than a thin layer of veneer: According to the logic of wrestling, the monster lurks indeed "just beneath the skin", ready to strike at any given moment, overwhelming the thin outer layer of civilized, peaceful humanity.

The second structure, the Elimination Chamber, has been dubbed "Satan's vacation house in Hell" by commentator Jim Ross, personified as "an iniquitous structure with a diabolical personality" (*No Way Out 2009*). It is designed to hold four wrestlers in separate small plexiglass chambers while two wrestlers start off the match in a large, black cage made from solid chains. The whole structure invites the image of a horror movie inspired torture chamber (cf. Jerry Lawler at *No Way Out 2009*; Seliger 2014: 70). One by one, each of the wrestlers contained by the glass chambers is released into the larger structure until all six combatants are participating in the bout. While the personification of the Elimination Chamber as a "psychotic structure" and "ten-ton solid-steel bully" (ibid.), the commentators also make a point of inserting sexual connotations to matches taking place within it when they say that a wrestler has been "kissed by that steel" (Striker at *No Way Out 2010*). The DVD's main menu that shows the face of Vladimir Kozlov behind the chains that make up the Elimination Chamber contributes to the notion of men being violent beasts that need to be caged to contain their wild, animalistic nature. Men's relationship to the Elimination Chamber is thus an ambivalent one, fearing it for its destructive qualities but also loving it because of its ability to help them in providing the ultimate proof for their supremacy over other men, or, as it were, lesser animals who are not strong enough to withstand the structure's demands. (Seliger 2014: 70).

The idea of inherent male ferocity is further highlighted in storylines that focus on two protagonists that exhibit not only great physical prowess and a bulky frame, but who also tend to have a serious approach to competition. Those types of characters often come into contact with one another preceding a pay-per-view match, usually either at a contract signing event or through one opponent's intervention in one of the other's matches. The 'spontaneous' brawls that unfold during such a confrontation are usually more ruthless, aggressive, highly personal from the point of narrative embeddedness, and often lead to a significant number of referees, staff, and fellow wrestlers having to come forward to separate the two brawling opponents. One of the many cases can be seen during an episode of RAW on the 9th of April 2012: During a confrontation between on-and-off wrestler Brock Lesnar and his opponent, the face of the WWE, John Cena, their altercation becomes physical at which point more than a dozen men – among them other wrestlers – flood the ring to break up the unofficial brawl[47]. While the crowd reacts favorably to the scene and Cena smiles gleefully through bloody teeth, the other men have a hard time containing Cena and Lesnar, who both break free several times and attack each other despite the presence of so many people in the ring (for visual reference, cf. *The Best of RAW and SmackDown 2012*, RAW episode on April 9th, 2012, DVD 2/3, 00:05:40). The ring as a confined space only highlights the fact that this mass of strong men is incapable of separating these two opponents from one another, and, consequently, strengthens the narrative that frames these two men as full of energetic wrath and thus especially dangerous when unleashed.

This segment also highlights another aspect that may contribute to the understanding of the relationship between performance and audience. While the male body in particular is subject to intense scrutiny in wrestling, the body type does not necessarily predetermine whether the role the wrestler may play in any given storyline is a heroic or a villainous one, nor does any given body type automatically render a wrestler's persona 'unmanly'. Indeed, the great variety of body types in professional wrestling is remarkable. What the brawl between Cena and Lesnar

[47] A similar incident occurred, for instance, during a RAW episode in July 2015 in a confrontation between Brock Lesnar and The Undertaker.

shows is that – while both men are of similar physique and are portrayed as equally powerful and capable of violence – audience react very differently to them both. Cena especially always invokes a mixed reaction from audience members even though his status as the company's main face has been uncontested for over a decade now. His goody-two-shoes attitude and his strong focus on respect and loyalty make him extremely popular with young children, women, and men in various age categories, but crowd observation leads me to believe that particularly young men do not favor this character for exactly this heroic attitude and clean image. A character like Brock Lesnar, who is being portrayed as extremely limited in the range of emotional expression and thus represents a more unsentimental, hard masculinity is often favored by young male audience members, presumably because masculinity with 'hard edges' lends itself far more easily to identify oneself as a manly fan. This is not least because of prevailing socio-cultural stereotypes about men's emotional capabilities that suggest that men – naturally – are generally limited to being hungry, angry, or horny. Tender and nuanced emotions are often perceived as making expressions of masculinity less secure in their signifying power and are therefore not seen as valid and 'truly masculine'. This is made abundantly clear by the crowd's exuberant reaction to Lesnar, cheering loudly for him and holding up signs that read "Brock Rocks" and "Here Comes the Pain".

Lesnar's gimmick as 'The Beast' has been relatively stable over the years in which he has been active in WWE and has been used on numerous occasions. After defeating the Undertaker at *WrestleMania XXX* in 2014, effectively ending the Undertaker's hyped undefeated streak at WWE's main pay-per-view, Lesnar was cemented as an almost unbeatable force and a predator at the top of the metaphorical food chain. The tropes used to portray his character only escalated further in terms of hyperbole afterwards. At *WrestleMania XXXII* in 2016, the promotional segment for Lesnar's match with Dean "The Lunatic Fringe" Ambrose, he is cast as a force of biblical proportions:

> And behold I stood upon the sand and saw a beast rise out of the sea. The beast which I saw was like a lion, its speed like that of a leopard, its strength like that of a bear. And the beast was given a mouth to utter proud words. And he was doing great wonders so

> that he make fire come down from Heaven in the sight of man. And they looked up at it saying: 'Who is able to wage war with the beast?'. (*WrestleMania XXXII*)

By invoking the language and images of the Book of Revelations, the narrator of the promotional segment casts Lesnar not only in the light of a monstrous entity, but one that is beyond human comprehension for whose description comparison is necessary but inadequate.

Depictions of ferocious attitude and emotional stoicism in professional wrestling are often contrasted by parodies of emotional, non-violent, non-aggressive communication, as can for instance be seen with the 'Anger Management' angle (as seen during RAW on the 27th of August 2012) that featured wrestlers Kane and Daniel Bryan as tag team Hell No. Trying to deal with their aggressiveness, Bryan and Kane begrudgingly join an anger management self-help group, whose group mediator and therapist leading the conversation in the group is portrayed as particularly soft-spoken, inviting, and – in contrast to both Kane and Bryan – completely non-aggressive and unimposing, therefore, according to the inherent logic of the segment and its context, less masculine. I would purport to read this and other segments as parodies of the attempt to teach 'real men', i.e., creatures perceived to be naturally and inherently violent, communicative strategies that would ensure non-violent relationships and conflict resolutions.

Indeed, characters that exhibit features that would potentially suggest non-violent conflict resolutions (such as high intelligence or empathy) are often portrayed as effeminate, are being lampooned by their own performance, and mocked by the audience. Wrestler Damien Sandow, the so-called "Emperor of Enlightenment" (comment by Michael Cole at SmackDown, 7th Sept. 2012) serves as a good example in this context. During a segment at RAW, July 23rd, 2012, at the reunion of renegade Attitude Era faction D-Generation X (Triple H, Shawn Michaels, Road Dogg, Billy Gunn and X-Pac), Sandow disrupts the festivities. The contrast could not be any more pronounced: D-Generation X enter the arena clad in cameo trousers, their signature shirts, and on a military off-road vehicle. Michael Cole comments that "on August 11th, 1997, it was the birth of the most controversial, outspoken, racy, attitudinal, sarcastic, rebellious group in history that changed the entire attitude of

WWE". D-Generation X's gimmick focuses on breaking established structures, on seemingly chaotic dominance, hypermasculinity and on self-mocking humor that, paradoxically, always backs up rather than deconstructs heteronormative notions of masculinity. Damien Sandow, on the other hand, enters to Georg Friedrich Händel's "Hallelujah!" from the *Oratorio Messiah*, holding is microphone like a wine glass as he addresses the five men inside the ring and the audience:

> Sandow: Allow me to beg your indulgence for one moment. My name is Damien Sandow and I am the intellectual savior of you, the unwashed masses. [the audience boos him]
>
> Triple H: Hey, listen, pal –
>
> Michaels: [to his comrades] No, wait, wait, wait! I'd actually like to hear him out. I mean, let's face it. We are, we are pretty scuzzy. [to Sandow] So, go ahead. Go ahead. I'd like to hear you.
>
> Sandow: This is what RAW, the WWE, and society at large has disintegrated to. Common degenerates, whose sophomoric and disgusting behavior has plagued humanity and brainwashed the masses into revering thus type of crass conduct. [crowd shouts "What?!"]
>
> Michaels: Alright, I gotta be honest. That's true about me. [He sobs dramatically] I'm going back home. I'm going straight to church and I'm asking for forgiveness. Again. Great.
>
> Sandow: Now, I understand that you barbaric buffoons could easily eviscerate me and dispose of me like common trash. [crowd cheers] However, if you do so, I will not be a victim. I will be a martyr. [crowd shouts "What?!"] A martyr for anyone who appreciates a sophisticated mind. [crowd shouts "What?!"]
>
> Triple H: You – you do have a good point. We're gonna need to discuss this as a group. We've been apart for a little bit. And figure out exactly what we're gonna – Hold on, just let us – wait for a sec… […] [DX starts whispering among themselves, forming circle]

When they finally address Sandow again, it is only to hit him with their finishing maneuvers, effectively taking him out, before shouting their signature "Suck it!" which the crowd celebrates enthusiastically. Like many other segments, this exchange is in effect the acting out of a revenge fantasy against not only a perceived

to be conceited intellectual elite but also, I would argue, against underlying social insecurities regarding non-violent expressions of masculinity. Sandow is portrayed as a stereotypical representative of philosophically educated intellectuals that behave almost aristocratic in their demeanor and hold in contempt all those they deem to be uncivilized, unmannered, and uneducated. The fact that he shows awareness of his own inability to withstand an attack by any of the DX members heightens the comedic effect of the scene: Sandow represents an inferior type of man, one that is far too concerned with refining his intellectual capacities and thus becomes unable to compete against other men. In other words, WWE narratives like these reinscribe the hierarchy of masculinities by showing that masculinity based on physicality, strength, and stamina will, eventually, always be able to prevail against other types of masculinity.

Another example that showcases this is Damien Sandow's match against Randy Orton at SmackDown, Sept. 7th, 2012. While Sandow chastises the audience for their behavior on social media, Orton interrupts him. Sandow asks him what he could possibly "add to this discussion", to which Orton answers: "My name is Randy Orton and I'm not here to add to the discussion. I am here to fight." The crowd's reaction – annoyance at Sandow's rhetoric and appreciation for Orton's call for a brawl – is, of course, another layer of performance, a way in which the audience is hailed implicitly by the plot to position themselves within the ideological framework that is offered here. To cheer Orton and his behavior is, however, the only viable option[48].

The aggressive, violent, bestial, feral, or even monstrous nature that is assumed to be innate to men is not a cultural discourse unique to professional wrestling. In a 2014 piece titled "Why it's not sexist to say boys should never play with dolls" for the *Express*, conservative journalist James Delingpole argued that expressions of gender identity indeed have their grounds in genetic and evolutionary mechanisms and that the attempt to raise children in a gender-neutral or gender-flexible manner is therefore a futile "attempt at social engineering". Delingpole writes:

[48] See my discussion on women's performances, audience reactions, and interpellation in chapter 4.

> Give a girl a doll and she will cuddle it and nurture it. Give a boy a doll and he will either torture and dismember it or use it as a hand grenade. Is this really such a bad thing? (Delingpole 2014)

Delingpole, while writing from within the English context, picks up a transnational debate on the nature of gender and sex that is very much *en vogue* in conservative media across the Atlantic. The 'boys will be boys'-mantra is still widely repeated and just recently garnered more explicit attention with the controversy over a Gilette's TV advertising campaign that called out toxic masculinity and was subsequently met with heavy criticism[49]. As I have already argued in chapter 2, WWE narratives not only mimic discourses already present in society but actively participates in configuring discourses and thus the way we experience reality. Wrestling's constant focus on and repetition of the destructiveness of men, their inherent bestial nature that can barely if ever be contained by the constrains of society, contributes to a harmful perpetuation of stereotyping that limits men in their performances of gender because of the inherent hierarchies it brings with it: Not only 'will boys be boys' but boys can only be boys when they fit the mold pregiven by a presumed natural order that is in fact itself a social design. Other performances of masculinity that do not depend on violence, aggressiveness, and constant strive for competition, are rendered less viable and non-hegemonic, sometimes even abject through the logic inherent to these discourses.

3.3 Making the Cultural Other, Forging the Cultural Self - Narratives of Race and Nationality

Race, nationality, and ethnicity have always played a crucial role in professional wrestling narratives. The categories not only work as roots for conflict between different characters and provide readily available frameworks for characterization and character development, but also serve to further the notion of men in general – no matter their heritage – adhering naturally to the same presumed anthropological given: all men, no matter where they hail from and no matter how different their

[49] For an overview of media reaction to the ad and its controversy, see for instance the articles by Topping, Lyons and Weaver (2019), Kelly (2019), Wolf (2019) and Taylor (2019).

concepts of masculinity may be, are willing and mostly capable of dealing with personal issues inside a ring and solve conflicts with violence in face-to-face situations (Seliger 2014: 49).

Professional wrestling often builds its gimmicks and feuds on easily recognizable cultural stereotypes. During a Tag Team Turmoil match at *New Year's Revolution 2007*, the teams of the kilt-and-fur-clad Highlanders with their bagpipe-heavy entrance music brawl against the American redneck-types Trevor Murdoch and Lance Cade and the urban gangster team of Cryme Tyme, whose reputation is encapsuled in one of the fan signs that reads "CRYME TYME STOLE THIS SIGN" (for visual reference, cf. *New Year's Revolution 2007,* DVD 1/1, 00:44:40). Matches that are built on these stereotypical representations of cultural concepts – the rural, white redneck; the urban, African American gangster, etc. – often see no real narrative built-up or character motivations. Rather, the clash of stereotypes with different backgrounds is deemed enough of a conflict to warrant physical altercations. In doing so, professional wrestling not only perpetuates already established discourses of the cultural 'other' and the social 'inferior', but also reduces socio-political and economic realities to easily readable formulas, which in effect, I would argue, depoliticizes much of the representations for the sake of comic relief and entertainment. The othering of non-Americans is particularly striking in this context.

One of the most interesting and also blatant examples of how foreign wrestlers are being othered by rhetorically and performatively framing them as savage beasts, is the wrestler Umaga, especially in his 2007 storyline with company babyface John Cena. After a harrowing defeat for the champion at *New Year's Revolution,* an injured Cena is checked out by a doctor backstage at the *Royal Rumble 2007*. Cena coughs and flinches but assures the doctor that he must fight when a gleeful Vince McMahon interrupts the discussion. What transpires then is Cena being goaded by his boss into fighting Umaga yet again and defending his championship despite his abdominal injury. In the event's promotional segment for the bout, the audience see how Armando Estrada, Umaga's manager, announces that their match at the *Royal Rumble* will be a Last Man Standing match. Tinted a greyish yellow, the camera

shows a flashback of how Umaga used his full strength and body weight to crush Cena the last time they met. The scene cuts to the contract signing event and Cena telling both Estrada and his protégé "You actually think I'm crazy enough to sign this? Well, there's two things you should know about me: One is I am crazy enough to sign this. Second is that I also will surprise you!", before he jumps across the table to attack Umaga right then and there. In a voice-over that accompanies the scene, Cena states: "Nothing is impossible, and nothing will stop me from fighting like hell and walking out the WWE champion!"

The feud is set up in such a way that the relatively unmarked Cena – unmarked because he is the American, white, middle-class 'soldier' type – is being set against the foreign savage, a creature unable to speak English that instead opts for using his native language and barbaric, unbridled violence to challenge Cena for his title. The fact that he was able to injure Cena, one of the best wrestlers at that time, in such a devastating fashion sets up the bout in a way that is typical for narratives in the upper tier of matches: The hero has to be put at a significant disadvantage and be set against a recognizably evil or depraved foe to make his eventual victory seem all the more glorious. The greater the contrast between the two opponents, both on the physical as well as the moral level, the better. When Umaga enters the ring that day at *The Royal Rumble* (for visual reference, cf. *Royal Rumble 2007*, DVD 1/1, 01:08:09), he threatens fans at ringside, shouting at them in his native language. He is accompanied by the sound of wild drums that are meant to highlight his Samoan background. It is the drums that commentator Jerry Lawler focuses on: "Every time I hear these drums it reminds me of the old King Kong movie on Skull Island where they summon Kong but I think Umaga is scarier than King Kong." The parallel he draws between Umaga and King Kong, between a man and a monstrous beast – a creature that is, in fact, out of proportion – not only reinscribes the idea of men as beasts that I already discussed earlier on. It removes this body from the realm of the civilized and instead reads it as deeply rooted in a primal nature that is uncontrolled, feral, primitive, and thus latches onto already established colonial discourses of savagery and barbarism – a connection that is missing from framings of other men who are also regularly depicted as beastly (e.g., Brock Lesnar).

Umaga's primeval nature is further highlighted during the bout itself. The commentators at ringside point out that Umaga's manager is constantly telling him where to strike and to hit Cena in places where he is already critically injured. The fact that Cena is bandaged heavily around the waist only reinforces the implicit notion that Umaga is simply not smart enough to know himself where to strike and that he needs outside assistance to make critical strategic decisions. His ineptitude to plan ahead and to be careful is further underlined by him almost getting pinned a few times through his own miscalculations: When Umaga carries a set of steel steps into the ring, Cena reacts quickly, picks it up and flings it at his opponent who is still outside the ring. Another steel-step setup goes awry when Umaga wants to tackle Cena while propped up on one and Cena simply ducks out of the way. When Umaga wants to hit Cena on the commentator's table later in the match, Cena again ducks out of the way, Umaga taking the brunt of the impact and further solidifying the idea that he is unable to learn from past mistakes. Finally, his manager loosens a turnbuckle for him and instructs the confused brute to hit Cena with it, which also backfires when Cena uses the weapon against him. Umaga's ethnic savageness is contrasted by Cena's American endurance and willingness to sacrifice himself to beat the ferocious enemy he encounters. As such, Umaga serves as little more than a foil for the American hero's tale of victory won through resilience, determination, intelligence, and harnessed power.

The trope of the uncivilized, bestial savage is further cemented by commentator's saying that "Umaga is one motivated maneater" (commentator at *Backlash 2007*), and fan-made signs contribute to Umaga's characterization: One fan holds up a sign reading "Umaga has rabies", another reads "Deport Umaga" (*New Year's Revolution 2007)*. By invoking ideas of cannibalism, migration, and illness associated with feral beasts, both fans and commentators make use of already established discourses that are inherently racist and informed by colonial notions of otherness. The cultural other is reproduced here as barbaric in its practices and demeanor, uncultured, uncivilized, and unmistakably dangerous in its otherness.

Even when Umaga's character is being referenced in a way that suggests meta-commentary on professional wrestling itself, the discourse quickly returns to the

framing of the cultural other as dangerous and the cultural self as endangered: When John Cena is being interviewed by Todd Grisham backstage at *New Year's Revolution 2007*, this becomes abundantly clear.

> Grisham: John, tonight you attempt to do something that no one's been able to do, be it Triple H, Shawn Michaels, Kane – the list goes on and on. No one has been able to beat Umaga. It's clear that the Samoan bulldozer wants some. Will he [pause] get some?
>
> Cena: [laughs] I see what you're trying to do. This is the pre-match interview. You want me to talk a little trash to hype up the match, right?"
>
> Grisham: Yeah, sure.
>
> Cena: Okay, okay, here goes: [Cena's voice drops lower as he uses an exaggerated stage voice] Tonight the irresistible force meets the immovable object! In one corner the undefeated Umaga and in the next the WWE champion John Cena! Something's got to give! There can only be one! I will hit the ring with the strength of a thousand men, lightning will shoot from my ass and when the dust settles Umaga will say his first words: [he imitates Umaga in a way that suggests savage babbling more than speech], which everybody knows is Samoan for "I just got the crap beat outta me!" [returns to his normal voice] Was that kinda what you were looking for?
>
> Grisham: That was pretty good.

Cena's obvious meta-awareness is not uncommon in speeches given by characters in WWE[50]: it shows how slim the line between character and actor, wrestling gimmick and athlete truly is and points out the artificiality and scriptedness of the events (Seliger 2014: 76). In this interview in particular, Cena's meta-awareness of his task during such a pre-match interview – the task to "hype up" the match and create suspense for the upcoming confrontation – is coupled with the sarcastic and exaggerated style of his rhetoric which includes an over-the-top representation of Umaga himself. The segment could be read as a humorous take on wrestling's tendency towards excess and hyperbole which would include Umaga's representation by an American wrestler. However, the meta-reflexivity of this part of the interview

[50] See, for instance, Cena's comments on statistics at *Night of Champions 2010* or CM Punks criticism of the audience cheering for known drug addict Jeff Hardy at *Night of Champions 2009*.

does nothing to mitigate the negative and stereotypical depiction of Umaga as a monstrous savage, especially because the interview goes on:

> Grisham: That was pretty good.
>
> Cena: Yeah, it was good but it's not the truth. You see, the truth is tonight I face a man who's never been pinned. Tonight, I face a man who's never been forced to submit. A man who's almost never been in danger, a man who's – who's almost never left his feet. Tonight, my opponent is a man who has decimated every single thing in his path and now, unfortunately for me, has his sight set on the WWE championship. What the hell do you want me to do? Tell him no? Go hide under a rock and hold out the WWE championship: "Hey, take it, man! Just don't hurt me!" – No. Tonight, I'm gonna do the only thing I know how to do. You see, Todd, I'm not undefeated. I'm not unstoppable but everybody out there knows that I am damn proud to call myself the WWE champion. […] Nothing is impossible, and nothing will stop me from fighting like hell and walking outta Kansas City the WWE champion. [he salutes and strides off]

Not only does this show how much Cena himself subscribes to 'the rules of the game' in which true masculinity must constantly be proven by combat and competition[51], but also that Cena as an American hero-style character is being threatened in his position by a foreigner, an outsider. While Umaga is being represented as a type of undefeated behemoth who dominates and "decimates" other men through sheer brute force, Cena's own brand of strength is derived from his superior (and undoubtedly American) attitude: The will to fight even when the odds are stacked against him and the will to fulfil his perceived duty as a man in this narrative setting, i.e., to defend his title against a brute savage like Umaga.

Umaga, however, is not the only character cast in such a way. Many other non-white characters in professional wrestling are stereotyped similarly. The Great Khali, for instance, needs a translator as well, as seen for instance at *Judgment Day 2007* or at *One Night Stand* that same year. At *WrestleMania XXIII*, Jerry Lawler comments that Khali "[doesn't speak] any English. There is no way to reason with him. He just

[51] See chapter 3.5 for further elaboration.

goes into the ring, he just wants to hurt people" and thus invokes the notion of the ignorant and illiterate primitive, who, with his 420 lbs. and size 20 shoes, is "a monstrous human being" as Jim Ross points out. The fact that Khali, who is simply billed as coming "from India"[52], is able to defeat the other 'monster' in the ring, the "Devil's Favorite Demon" Kane, emphasizes the brutal savageness of Khali and cements the position of the cultural other as something that, if it cannot be made fun of, needs to be feared.

For the era of the WWF, the precursor of the WWE that existed from the late 1970s to the early 1990s, Henry Jenkins points out that the othering of wrestlers who are non-Americans serves the purpose of defining what is actually 'truly American' and attests that there was

> a strong strand of nativism in the WWF's populist vision. When we move from national to international politics, the basic moral opposition shifts from the powerless against the powerful to America and its allies (the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand, Canada) against its enemies (especially Arabs and the Communists, often the Japanese).
>
> (Jenkins 1997 [2005]: 60; cf. Seliger 2014: 49)

This 'nativism' is still present in WWE narratives, even if only in a diluted and less pronounced form that is economically more viable for an entertainment format like wrestling in times of greater calls for social justice and equality. In the past decade, WWE wrestling saw not only what I have called an inglorious renaissance of villains from the United Kingdom and Ireland in the form of wrestlers like Drew McIntyre, Sheamus, William Regal, or Wade Barrett (Seliger 2014: 54), but also the comeback of heels from the former Soviet Union: the "Bulgarian Brute" Rusev, who made his debut in 2014 used to be accompanied by his Russian "social ambassador" (Sullivan, Pantaleo, Greenberg 2016: 99) Lana, or the "Moscow Mauler" Vladimir Kozlov, whose signature move is called "The Iron Curtain" (ibid : 373), are just two examples for this category of heel characters. It needs to be noted, however, that despite their regular debuts as incredibly strong, heinous, and challenging competitors, these

[52] The unspecificity of Khali's place of birth when compared to other wrestlers only contributes to him being framed as both exotic and marginal: His character is not interesting because of who he is, but because of what he represents, i.e., a cultural 'other' that threatens the supremacy of an American hero.

foreign heels quite often and quite quickly turn from truly difficult men to defeat into comic relief characters: Vladimir Kozlov became tag team partner of Italian wrestler Santino Marella, whose success in WWE mostly depends on luck and favorable circumstances. Both are known, for instance, for their slapstick tea party in front of a UK audience at RAW, 9th of November 2010 (for visual reference, cf. *Best of RAW 2010*, DVD 3/3, 01:51:40). The Great Khali too, once defeated by Cena and other big names in the business, loses his status as wild threat to American homeboyism and is used in more and more comic relief storylines[53].

More ambivalent in WWE's narratives is the depiction of Mexican wrestlers or those drawing on *lucha libre* tradition, like wrestling veteran and fan favorite Rey Mysterio: Though announced as coming from San Diego, California, there is no doubt that no other American wrestler is as synonymous with *lucha libre* as the "masked marvel" (Sullivan, Pantaleo, Greenberg 2016: 286). Central for this character is, of course, the mask and its complex symbolism. His mask, as commentator Todd Grisham points out, is "part of his soul, it is what the essence of Rey Mysterio is all about" (Grisham at *The Great American Bash 2009*; cf. Seliger 2014: 50). The mask symbolizes heritage, tradition, national pride, and, in a less immediate but crucial way, the wrestler's capability to fight: Since his face must not be seen under any circumstances to protect the anonymous wrestling persona of the heroic *técnico* (cf. Möbius 2004: 123-124), the loss of his mask means having to cover his face with his hands which essentially renders him defenseless until his mask is returned to him[54] (Seliger 2014: 50). Stripped of his ability to fight, the mask-less wrestler is also effectively emasculated. The mask then is not simply the essence of Mexican heritage and masculinity, but rather the physical reminder that masculinity cannot exist if it is not signified and that such a vague, yet culturally significant concept greatly depends on the sign system it makes use of (ibid.).

Other storylines involving Mysterio put strong focus on his loyalty towards those he deems family – a concept that is tied again to a sense of national heritage, to what

[53] See chapter 5.
[54] See, for instance, the match between Rey Mysterio and Chris Jericho at *Extreme Rules 2009*.

is considered a general Hispanic cultural value. When Mysterio reunites with Dave Batista to form a tag team at *Hell in a Cell 2009*, he explains that

> We are not recreating magic tonight. We are reuniting *familia*. You see, Batista is like my big brother. And when he called me and asked me to team up with him, to go after the tag team titles, it was something I had to do. [He looks at Batista] Dave, you know I got your back, dog. Always. Always.
>
> (Mysterio in an interview with Josh Matthews backstage at *Hell in a Cell 2009*)

Mysterio uses the word *familia* – not family – and thus makes evident the connection between his cultural background and the notion of kinship expressed in this segment. His loyalty to someone he includes in this concept and his willingness to immediately join the fray whenever a member of his extended family calls, are central character traits of Mysterio that mark him as a devoted face who derives much of his positive attitude – and fan reception – from his cultural heritage[55] (Seliger 2014: 50).

Exemplifying the ambivalent representation of Mexican wrestlers is the character of Alberto Del Rio, whose gimmick as a self-absorbed, vain Mexican millionaire stands in stark contrast to Mysterio's down-to-earth, hard-working attitude. While both characters go to great lengths to reference their cultural heritage and show their pride in it, the way their heritage is being embedded narratively is quite different from one another: While Mysterio is frequently put into situations in which he has to defend his mask and, by proxy, himself (as the mask is "part of his soul"), Del Rio's storylines seldom circle around him defending his cultural identity against others – even if he is challenged because of his Mexican nationality. The fundamental difference between Del Rio and Mysterio is not one of culture but lies in how cultural heritage is being signified and used to support their claim to a masculine identity: Mysterio has come to represent a true defender of Mexican tradition and is a likeable

[55] Mysterio's role as a beloved face in WWE narratives has not been this way from the beginning. As Phillip Serrato argues quite rightly in his article "Not Quite Heroes: Race, Masculinity, and Latino Professional Wrestlers" (2005), Mysterio's affiliation with The Animals – a hard-partying and hypersexual group consisting of himself, "Latino Heat" Eddie Guerrero and Konnan – made him part of storylines that not only reaffirmed misogynist discourses but also "reproduced the rather stale cliché of persons of color as embodying unbridled libidinal energy, a sexuality which ruled their bodies and minds" and "provided fans permission to revel in regressive sexual excess while reducing Latino men to a less-than-human status in which their appetites won out over any higher aspirations they might have had" (Serrato 2005: 255).

Latino "because of [his] commitment to 'American' values of hard work and honesty" (Serrato 2005: 239). Del Rio, on the other hand, especially during his debut and first few years at the company, is cast as a modern aggressor whose power lies as much in his physicality as it does in his wealth. His Mexican heritage is used like his wealth: to set himself apart from other men in the ring. While Mysterio's notion of nationality and cultural heritage is ideational, Del Rio appropriates it as a utilitarian tool. This aggressive utilitarian approach to culture is often used by heels whose opponents are cast as defenders of worthy principles and men who would not challenge another's heritage and masculine identity out of their own accord (Seliger 2014: 51-52).

It is only when pitted against someone more controversial that Del Rio takes on the position of the face, yet not because his Mexican heritage is threatened to be taken away from him but rather because his belonging to and celebration of the United States and its values is being called into question. At *WrestleMania XXIX* in 2013, a promotional segment for the match between Del Rio and the "All American American" Jack Swagger is eerily foreboding in pre-Trump America. The segment starts with a warning sign that reads "The following video contains opinions that are solely those of Zeb Colter and Jack Swagger". Zeb Colter, Swagger's manager and "proud Vietnam veteran" with "passionate views on such controversial issues as freedom of speech and immigration" (Sullivan, Pantaleo, Greenberg 2016: 413), can be heard in a voiceover as sweeping images of Mount Rushmoore and American landscapes grace the screen: "Fellow Americans, I got a question for you: What is wrong with America? I see people with faces not like mine; people crossing our borders illegally, sneaking across our borders." As he speaks, images of people watching him on TV screens appear: people in a living room, a barber shop, a barn, a mine. Then we are presented with a road sign that reads "One Way – DO NOT ENTER". Speaking while the audience are presented black-and-white footage of hard-working, all-white Americans in past decades, Colter goes on to say that

> [t]hey take our jobs and our resources. Let's forget all the politically correct crap. How do we get rid of them? America was built as the land of opportunity where decent, law-abiding, respectful citizens could provide a better way of life for their families.

> Somewhere along the way that land of opportunity has turned into a desert of despair because if our government won't do anything to help us, I know someone who will. We will not stand idly by and watch this country self-destruct. Jack Swagger is gonna capture the World Heavyweight title and he's gonna reclaim America. [Swagger is shown with one hand over his heart, the other pointing at the WrestleMania logo suspended above the ring] We the people!
>
> (Promotional Segment at *WrestleMania XXIX*)

Colter's character (for visual reference, cf. *WrestleMania XXIX*, DVD 1/3, 01:23:21) resonates with and becomes intelligible through tensions between the progressive left and the conservative right in the United States and the socio-political discourses that negotiate these tensions. His character embodies the far-right conservatism whose political rhetoric is built on patriarchal language, nativism, patriotism, and fear of immigration: His speech mimics that of right-wing pundits and politicians who see foreigners as an invading force threatening to take America away from "decent, law-abiding, respectful citizens" and portrays the only way of defending oneself against these invaders as picking up arms oneself militia-style.

By making use of the much-cited opening of the United States Constitution, Colter and Swagger turn into representatives of a tyrannical exegesis of the founding principles of the U.S. and are thus evocative of the political struggles within this democratic society. Colter and Swagger use the phrase "We the people" to denote not merely the cornerstone of democracy – the idea of Lincoln's "government of the people, by the people, for the people" –, but rather the idea of extreme and self-righteous vigilantism by men who 'take fate into their own hands'.

I do not contend that this depiction is trying to justify right-wing ideologies as legitimate: Nicholas Sammond points out that "to consider the 'politically incorrect' narratives and representations of professional wrestling as a potentially legitimate expression of social and political discontent is not equivalent to accepting the acts portrayed as legitimate, or to condoning a return to repression and disenfranchisement" (Sammond 2005a: 19). He emphasizes the interpretative processes that the audience need to and do undertake to evaluate the morals to be learned from any given narrative presented to them. However, I would like to point

out that the way the characters of Zeb Colter and Jack Swagger are being presented in 2013 and subsequent years – their racist, exclusionary rhetoric and aggressive demeanor – does not only inspire negative reactions from the crowd despite them being so firmly cast as heels in the storyline: "We the people" has turned into a fan-favorite chant that inspires a sense of community and common purpose in the audience, not only as an expression of a shared national identity, but also as an expression of the audience's power over the WWE universe – another element that shows the metaleptic quality of WWE events. This taking up of the phrase that in professional wrestling circles has become so deeply connected to a character who is essentially a racist bigot must be, at least, read as a complex and problematic instance of discursive entanglement that makes drawing the lines between wrestling as "playful, irreverent, aggressive commentary" (Sammond 2005a: 19) and it actually fostering and reinscribing the very subject of its narrativization a hard and maybe impossible feat to accomplish.

Colter's and Swagger's encounters with Del Rio do not in any way resolve this issue or bring the underlying moral issues to a conclusion. Del Rio is presented in the *WrestleMania XXIX* promotional segment as a reverent immigrant who respects and cherishes the principles of modern America. Staring at the Statue of Liberty in the distance, he states that she is "[a] mighty woman with a torch" before reciting the lines on her plaque: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free". He says that he "was born in Mexico but made in America" and that "[w]e are here for the same reason, we want to provide our families with a better life". WWE, despite the patriotic sentiment that the narrative attempts to convey through Del Rio's portrayal, seems to dismiss the character's own backstory as a Mexican millionaire. This very fact creates a narrative discrepancy between what audiences' know to be true about the character and what moral is attempted to be conveyed through him. With Del Rio as their opponent, Swagger's and Colter's arguments for fighting him seem to have much greater legitimacy as was probably intended by the writers of this storyline. In the very same segment, Colter states that "Alberto Del Rio is not one of us. A man who only came into this country to reap the

rewards of our motherland. He needs to leave this country. […] You're part of the problem and we the people are gonna fix the problem".

This storyline makes one issue with representations of racial, national, or ethnical conflicts in WWE narratives very clear: Instead of addressing the actual roots of the animosities and conflicts that are being embodied by the clashes of different wrestlers, professional wrestling – by design and default – only focuses on the characters' present sentiments and the eventual resolution of the conflict by combat. It may be, as Sammond points out, "playful, irreverent, aggressive commentary" but it is one that is essentially toothless since it is solely preoccupied with the *status quo* rather than with the deconstruction of the prerequisites that led to the state of affairs in the first place. In other words, wrestling's primary effect is not the exposal of social and political issues via its commentary, but rather a catharsis through letting the audience partake in these conflicts in a form that is socially acceptable. Under the guise of carnival and theatre, a safe space is being created that does not automatically allow for critical involvement with the content of what is being presented but rather invites celebration of the spectacle as such.

The fact that Del Rio wins the match at *WrestleMania XXIX* via Swagger tapping out is rendered inconsequential for the overall assessment of whether discursive practices that WWE engages in effectively always reproduce the dichotomy of 'us vs. them', although it may seem to be an inclusive, merit-based universe. In fact, nationality is simply substituted for a less palpable and less delineated set of grand (American) values that mark the in- and out-groups of characters: Del Rio states himself that he was "born in Mexico but made in America".

Just as Del Rio's narrative framing for his face-turn when in a storyline with Colter and Swagger is paradoxical when considering his character's backstory, so did Colter and Swagger undergo a strange transformation that is not at all uncommon for WWE characters. In 2015, Colter would return to WWE alongside Alberto Del Rio "to create a proud MexAmerica" (Sullivan, Pantaleo, Greenberg 2016: 286) before that alliance, too, would eventually break apart as alliances in WWE always do. Swagger, on the other hand, turned into a beloved character the moment he entered

into a feud with "the Russian Menace"[56] Rusev, showcasing how heels can turn into face characters by challenging or taking on even greater heels, i.e., by juxtaposing them with other characters whose morals are even more questionable and who exhibit a greater level of corruption or cultural alienation than the heel himself (cf. Seliger 2014: 108-109).

Nationality, race, and cultural heritage thus become an integral part of how character constellations work in WWE narratives that showcases how culturally diverse characters are either vilified and ridiculed or gradually harmonized with American values and work ethic through the hegemony of discursive practices that favor American principles and lifestyles – or those values that are monopolized by American cultural self-conception – over any other and is thus overly concerned with representing the cultural 'Other' as different, bestial, underdeveloped, or in need of an attitude adjustment in the form of 'white assistance'[57].

3.4 His Old Man - Age and Aging in Wrestling Narratives

Gender and race, however, are not the only markers of identities that are produced in ideologically problematic ways in WWE narratives: Age in connection with other aspects of identity formation – especially sex and gender – often feature in WWE programs. Professional wrestling in general and WWE wrestling in particular have an ambiguous relationship with the representations of aging and the elderly, both venerating veteran wrestling characters for their wisdom, dedication, and experience, as well as oftentimes using them for parodistic purposes in which the bottom of the joke are often the elderly or senior wrestlers themselves. One of the frequently

[56] Rusev was first billed as hailing from Russia, however, this quickly changed after the appeal of the cold war revival plot waned. We can observe similar cultural re-shapings of characters in WWE over the course of the past decades: Kofi Kingston, for instance, started his career as a character coming from Jamaica (including the fun and light-hearted attitude stereotypically associated with island nation). Later, he was billed from Ghana, a reflection of the actor's family roots as Ghanaian-American (cf. Seliger 2014: 55). The change of his nationality was reflected in his storyline as well: Commentator Michael Cole at *Hell in a Cell 2009*, when Kingston first performed as a Ghanaian wrestler, said that he still was "heavily influenced […] by the Caribbean lifestyle". Kingston himself said at *Survivor Series 2009* that he only pretended to be from Jamaica to pay respect to the Jamaican culture (Seliger 2014: 55-56). I have argued in this context and do maintain that what these cases show is that origin and nationality, while important to character construction, are not always essential to these men. Instead, the choice of nationality is often governed by external factors like fan or press reaction and internal factors like character constellation and demands put upon character design by developing storylines (ibid.).

[57] See also research on Critical Whiteness that deconstructs the position of 'Whiteness' as an unmarked category in discourses of race; for instance, McIntosh (2016) and Allen (2012 [1994]).

recurring plot-generating tropes or points of conflict is that of the young upstart trying to bully his way up by verbally or physically attacking a much respected senior wrestler. No matter whether the latter had been dominantly known during his career as a villainous heel and opportunistic go-getter, this plot almost never fails to establish the older wrestler as a character worthy of veneration for his decades of contributions to the spectacle.

When Heath Slater enters the stage during the 1000th episode of RAW on June 11th, 2012, he takes the microphone and says that he is "the one-man-band" and that it makes no sense celebrating the heroes and superstars of the past when he is right here. Vader, a former main-eventer of RAW and guest for the celebratory episode, of course, is met with cheers and the respect from the crowd and puts Slater in his place. WWE is a lot about respecting your elders, the father, the past. These matches in which old wrestlers return for one night to face insolent youngsters is all about the acknowledgement of the past that shapes wrestling's present. It feeds on nostalgia while at the same time reassuring everyone that continuous competition is always ensured and that if one only competes long and hard enough, one will eventually attain respect and legend status. Similarly, when the rookie upstarts that formed the Nexus attacked veteran legend-status wrestlers (among them Jerry "The King" Lawler and Ricky "The Dragon" Steamboat) during RAW on the 28th of June 2010, it was used to further the characterization of the Nexus individuals as completely irreverent and, essentially, "savage" in their disregard for ritualized practices of celebration of past accomplishments.

Another instance that exhibits the repetition of rituals of veneration through narrative performance is the feud between Kenny Dykstra and WWE old hand Ric Flair in 2007. At *New Year's Revolution 2007*, Dykstra enters the arena dressed in a bathrobe-style frock that Flair would usually sport (for visual reference, cf. *New Years Revolution 2007,* DVD 1/1, 00:54:23 and 00:56:30). The commentators at ringside say that Dykstra "thinks he's Ric Flair", that be believes by owning him, he would eventually be granted the same special treatment as Flair. Dykstra then makes a great show out of recapitulating the past week's events when Flair had been attacked by the tag-team of Randy Orton and Edge (known together as Rated-RKO)

which left the older man in a weakened state. Dykstra, however, says that he will not accept that as an excuse for Flair losing against him: the villainous Dykstra portrays himself as shrewd enough to take advantage of the damage that was inflicted on his opponent by another team but at the same time wants to make sure that the outcome of the bout is still viewed as a full victory for him. Rated-RKO and Dykstra have in common that they all represent the idea of a new generation trying to obtain a prestigious social position before they have earned it: Instead of working for their success and social status, they instead call out much venerated but older and therefore presumed less threatening veteran wrestlers in the hopes of beating them and, through this process, creating a power vacuum that they themselves can fill.

Just as Dykstra says that beating Ric Flair that day will make the audience present in the arena respect him, Flair himself enters dressed in a garish pink robe. His flashy outfits are an integral part of the gimmick as the flamboyant "kiss-stealing, wheeling dealing, jet-flying, limousine-riding son-of-a-gun" (Sullivan, Pantaleo and Greenberg 2016: 288). Jim Ross comments: "Here's the man that has earned the respect of all these fans here," while Jerry Lawler declares that "Flair's the man. You gotta be a man to wear that kinda robe". Indeed, it would seem that Flair's getup has little to do with the stereotypical notion of hard masculinity that is more closely associated with muted colors (if color at all) than with garish fabrics and feather boas. However, Flair's body as well as his past accomplishments firmly root him within the confines of heteronormative masculinity. I would argue, in fact, that the style that looks like a breach of convention when it comes to the representation of masculinity, is actually the very means by which manly men do emphasize their heteronormative masculinity. This is what Lawler implies when he says that one "gotta be a man to wear that kinda robe."

Dykstra would eventually win the bout against Flair at *New Year's Revolution 2007* via a low-blow unseen by the referee and would be firmly established as the irreverent youngster in need to be reined in and put into place by others who value and honor the procedure of "earning" one's place within wrestling's system of signification. Both opponents meet again during the *Royal Rumble 2007* a few weeks later in the actual Royal Rumble in which thirty men brawl it out in a battle royale

type of match. Dykstra, again, is being put into the position of the aggressor and heel who is trying to establish himself via taking out Flair – a feat he eventually accomplishes, yet only with the help of Edge, one half of Rated-RKO. It is ironic that Dykstra is later eliminated by Edge, who, in turn, is eventually eliminated from the match by another veteran wrestler, Shawn Michaels. The generational conflict implicit in the feuds between young and old wrestlers remains in constant tension and can never be resolved: In a constant struggle over the means to signify masculinity, the young and the old pit youthful fervor against hard-earned experience, fresh vitality against warforged wisdom, to negotiate individual positionalities within the system they inhabit. While in this case, the older generation loses against the younger, there are other storylines in which the outcome is the exact opposite: Flair does win, for instance, against wrestler Carlito at *Judgement Day 2007*, in a match that essentially revolves around Carlito having disrespected Flair after the latter had taken the young man under his wing. During a Career Threatening Match at the *Royal Rumble 2008*, Flair faces wrestler MVP, whose goal to essentially put Flair out of business to further his own career is thwarted by the Nature Boy's submission hold that forces MVP to tap out. Again, a disrespectful youngster is being reined in by a more experienced wrestler, whose age has made him transition in the collective imaginary of the audience from being a multifarious, sometimes controversial character into the role of the experienced master worthy of veneration and respect by default.

However, age and the elderly are not always solely the source of inspiration and great wisdom that wrestling celebrates in its storylines. The elderly are often also the object of ridicule and mockery, particularly when it comes to the way in which elderly bodies and sexuality are being depicted. During a truly bizarre storyline in 2000 (RAW, 28th of February), then 77-year-old Mae Young was in a relationship with the much younger wrestler Mark Henry – a union that cumulated in a comically grotesque backstage birth scene of their love child. Accompanied by the disgusted retching of the attendees of the event (several backstage crew, Henry himself, a doctor, and Young's protégé, the Fabulous Moolah), the cigar-smoking Young gives birth to a single, full-sized hand covered in goo (for visual reference, cf. *The Attitude*

Era, DVD 3/3, 00:01:38 and 00:03:15). The scene is grotesque not only in the colloquial sense of 'weird' or 'appalling', but also more fittingly in the Bakhtinian sense: In his seminal *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin makes reference to the representation of laughing "senile pregnant hags" (Bakhtin 1984 [1965]: 25) which incorporate an integral ambivalence of life and death, a "pregnant death, a death that gives birth. […] They combine a senile, decaying and deformed flesh with the flesh of new life, conceived but as yet unformed. Life is shown in its twofold contradictory process; it is the epitome of incompleteness" (ibid: 25-26). Thus Young's grotesque, female body – grotesque because it is old, open, and giving birth to something that is in itself unfinished and distorted, out of proportion − stands in strong contrast to the closed, classical bodies of the male athletes. I would indeed argue that while the framework of this is a parodistic carnivalesque one, the implied potential monstrousness of the female body, particularly the old female body, and the reaction of disgust toward it, is one that carries over into public discourse and has done so for centuries. It is, essentially, another form of othering the female body and its functions.

Even when the bodies in question do not show such a vast age difference as the one between Young and Henry, does the elderly female body still provide grounds for comic relief: When Mae Young kisses Vince McMahon during a backstage segment at *Summer Slam 2007*, the CEO of WWE is clearly mortified by the experience while the audience appear to find the display truly funny. One of the advertisements for *WrestleMania 24* that can be found on the DVD for the *Royal Rumble 2008* is constructed along a similar idea: In a beach scene we see wrestler Kelly Kelly dressed as a female lifeguard in a way that is reminiscent of the TV series *Baywatch*. She rescues a man who faked drowning to receive CPR from her, i.e., tricking her into intimate physical contact with him. Enter May Young, who pushes an unsuspecting Kelly Kelly aside and leans down to perform life-saving procedures herself. For a moment the camera angle takes on the point-of-view of the swimmer who sees Young's lips and wagging tongue closing in on him, making the viewer complicit for a moment with his perspective. The disgust that he expresses while almost being devoured by her in an exaggerated representation of a kiss

becomes effectively our own as we witness him fall prey to his own backfired scheme. However, the swimmer, himself cast as a body type who within the discursive realm and logic of professional wrestling would not be able to gain Kelly Kelly's attention in the first place, moves closer into the realm of a grotesque body in as much as it is "out of shape" in comparison to Kelly Kelly's stylized youth and beauty. His and Mae Young's brief encounter then turns both of them into the bottom of the joke for the same reason: Their bodies – marked by age and unshapeliness when compared to the foil character of Kelly Kelly – disqualify them from exhibiting erotic desire. Elderly, grotesque, unstylized bodies are faced with a discursive attempt to exclude them from a legitimate participation in desire, the erotic, and sexuality, while at the same time they become the necessary 'other' that identifies the ideal and legitimate body type. It thus furthers the idea of acceptable and expected sexual frigidity in the elderly by portraying Young's interest in intimacy and sexuality as revolting and comical and the swimmer's attempts at flirtation as a grotesque misjudgment of his own position within the limitations of social discourses.

Returning to 2007's *Royal Rumble* and the character of Ric Flair, audience members can observe how generational contrast between male and female characters produces parodistic effects that cast as comical the idea of sexual desire in older people. It is his turn to determine his entrance number for the Royal Rumble in the lottery-style process backstage: He is the last one to draw his number and comments on it, to which the evening's lottery girl, wrestler Kelly Kelly, answers: "Well, Mr.Flair, you may be last but you are certainly not least" while caressing his body with interest (for visual reference, cf. *Royal Rumble 2007*, DVD 1/1, 01:36:17). Flair then engages in a somewhat bizarre dance party scene (cf. 01:36:27) with several female wrestlers who appear essentially out of nowhere as the lights dim and the reflections of a disco glitterball appear in the room. While sexual desire in general tends to be comically exaggerated in wrestling performances, this one stands out because of the contrast between Flair's clearly older body and the very young women around him. What is being invoked here, I think, is the idea of a legitimate playboy masculinity in the vein of a Hugh Heffner that, while generally being accepted in

social discourse as less problematic than the female 'cougar'[58], still is perceived as a curiosity.

Yet professional wrestling seems to suggest that success in men will always legitimize a status as a sexually active individual and that which is perceived as revolting in elderly women's behavior is generally more acceptable – sometimes even expected – in elderly men. Important here is the question of who engages in displays of desire first: While Young is cast as comical and revolting because of her sexually aggressive conduct as she chases opportunities for her own physical pleasure, in Flair's case at the Royal Rumble event, he is the one who is being approached by the much younger Kelly Kelly, whose desire seems to be sparked by Flair's sheer existence as former champion and much venerated veteran of the trade. By simply showing Flair reacting to young women's interest in him, patriarchal discursive formations about desire and age are reaffirmed: Whereas aggressive desire in (elderly, heterosexual) women is perceived as transgressive and potentially threatening to the notion of masculine sexual identity and self-assertion, desire of (attractive, young, heterosexual) women and a display of interest in (elderly, high-status) men is constructed as acceptable if curious. Under the disguise of parody, ageist and sexist discourses operate to stabilize the heteronormative order of social relations.

3.5 "Bow Down to the King": Championships and Insignia of Royalty as Ultimate Signifiers of Manhood

In spite of the differences in terms of age, class, ethnicity, etc., between the countless men who participated and still participate in WWE narratives, none of them ever truly question or deconstruct the overarching structure that dominates men's notions of self. The hegemony of thought that aims at reproducing an idea of masculinity that depends upon the will and capability to fight, to endure physical and psychological trauma, and always strive to become better, harder, faster, stronger, is always shaping the narratives we see and implicitly reveals itself in professional wrestling displays. During the Money-in-the-Bank Ladder Match at *WrestleMania XXIII* in 2007, eight

[58] See chapter 4.

very different men compete to obtain the prestigious briefcase that grants the holder a title match against the reigning champion whenever they decide to cash it in. Before they start brawling, all eight men look up toward the briefcase that is strapped to a chain and dangling high above the ring, acknowledging the power it symbolizes. The contract in the briefcase grants a certain but very limited amount of power within the narrative universe. Implicitly, however, this setup reveals the mechanisms operating to maintain hegemonic masculinities and gender formations in general. The structure regulating gender performances incentivizes individuals to keep on participating in the practices that have already been established by making small concessions that, however, uphold the system as a whole: Seeking to stabilize itself against ongoing currents of liberalization and increasingly complex conceptualizations of identity, hegemonic masculinities that are defined by an inherent and 'natural' male competitiveness and aggression reward men with tokens of power that keeps them docile and accepting of the systemic structure. This is true for the narrative level of professional wrestling, as well as the meta-level of the business. In other words, wrestling exemplifies the mechanisms of power and hegemony while at the same time upholding and reinscribing 'real-world' discourses of gender(ed) relationships.

The way in which 'true' masculinity is discursively constructed in professional wrestling events is not only problematic because of its heavy emphasis on upholding the myth of an essential, universal, and natural manhood that is very limited in the way it is allowed to be expressed, thus reinforcing the heteronormative matrix that Butler made out to be at the core of regulated gender performances. The discourses produced also isolate men and entrench them in a socio-cultural framework in which it becomes undesirable for them to rely on and care for relationships. At *No Way Out 2008*, best friends Triple H and Shawn Michaels have to face each other in an Elimination Chamber match to become eligible for a shot at the championship title. In a backstage segment before the match, the two DX members speak about the fact that while they are friends, championship opportunities are where all bonds break. Triple H says: "Listen Shawn, you don't need to apologize. We both know what this is. We both know what's at stake. Listen man, I don't wanna do it but if I gotta go through you tonight to get it [i.e. a shot at the WWE Championship], I will." Shawn

Michaels smiles and replies: “That’s why this friendship always took the test of time: We’re always on the same page.” What this segment effectively does is to normalize competition between men that supersedes male friendship and collaboration.

The “All Grown Up” segment that was used as the narrative framework for *WrestleMania XXIII* in 2007 further highlights that all men share the desire to be champion, but also that this shared desire is what drives them apart:

> [Faces of wrestlers and children who are wrestler-look-alikes accompanied by slow strings and piano music]
>
> Cena: When we were young …
>
> Edge: When we were young …
>
> Booker T: When we were young …
>
> Cena: … we dreamed of this day …
>
> Lashley: … of this opportunity …
>
> Batista: … this chance …
>
> Edge: … to shine …
>
> Michaels: … to prove to the world …
>
> Cena: … prove to myself …
>
> Kennedy: … that I am a superstar …
>
> Ashely: … a diva …
>
> Michaels: … an athlete …
>
> Batista: … more than you think …
>
> Orton: … greater than you’ve heard …
>
> Michaels: … that I’m a champion –…
>
> […]
>
> Cena: Now, I’m all grown up …
>
> Austin: … I’m all grown up …
>
> Batista: … I’m all grown up …
>
> Lashley: … We’re all grown up.
>
> Michaels: Today is my day …
>
> Batista: Tonight is our night …
>
> Cena: The stage is mine …
>
> Kennedy: … where I will show the world …
>
> Lashley: … where I prove to myself …
>
> Cena: … that I’m the best …
>
> MVP: … the most powerful …

CM Punk: … the most extreme …
Michaels: … that the kid still got it …
Orton: … the most intense …
Undertaker: … immortal.

Despite the differences in characters and plotlines that they are involved in, there is one common idea that connects these diverse men within their shared universe. All men in WWE wrestling believe in the signifying power of the championship – bound in the symbol of the belt – and its crucial role in their own understanding of themselves as men. The championship signifies more than being the best. The championship, in fact, turns into the symbol of men's transcendence. Exposing the nature/culture divide as a product of ideological processes of culture itself, Sherry B. Ortner argues in her article "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" that

> […] the cultural reasoning seems to go [that] men are the "natural" proprietors of religion, ritual, politics, and other realms of cultural thought and action in which universalistic statements of spiritual and social synthesis are made. (Ortner 1974: 79)

Constantly aiming for ways to transcend their own existence to validate themselves as creators of lasting legacies (rather than producers of new life – that which Ortner identifies within the logic of the nature/culture divide as "perishables" [ibid. 75]), male characters in wrestling narratives seek the championship not only as proof for their athletic achievements but as the ultimate symbol of masculine prowess and the only sure way to cement themselves as 'larger-than-life', as transcending the boundaries and limitations of their existence. This discourse can be seen on display at *WrestleMania XXXII* in 2016, for instance, where the opening promotional segment frames the whole pay-per-view as an event in which men can build a lasting legacy. Through a voice-over that is accompanied by images of well-known wrestlers brawling at past WrestleMania events, the idea of men immortalizing themselves is invoked:

> […] And as the dream grew, so did the legends. Legends of larger-than-life giants [footage of Andrew the Giant], and warriors who brought the world to their feet [footage

> of the Ultimate Warrior]. Legends of men made from iron [footage of Bret "the Hitman" Hart] and others who braved ladders and reached the sky [footage of Edge]. Stories of the dead rising [footage of the Undertaker] and fearless leaders [footage of Stone Cold Steve Austin] who are mightier than you could ever imagine [footage of John Cena].
>
> (Introduction to *WrestleMania XXXII*)

At *No Mercy 2007*, wrestling's interpellative function, as well as the male quest for the signification of masculinity come together in a series of matches whose outcome is foreshadowed in the promotional opening sequence. We can hear thunder and rain accompanying a black screen with a quote from Genesis 7:20. Then a male voice can be heard:

> And the waters prevailed to mightily upon the earth that all the high mountains and the whole earth were covered by this force of nature. [The screen shows John Cena beating a variety of other wrestlers and always coming out of matches the victorious WWE champion]. Alas, the rain is over [Cena fades to black and the face of Randy Orton appears] and an opportunity has emerged [Orton's face blends in with a flying dove]. Just as Noah, adrift on the sea of the great flood, released the dove to find signs of land, tonight the search for a champion begins [several eligible wrestlers are being shown on screen]. Who will take the reins? Who will rise above? Who will show no mercy? [the wresters' faces are finally covered by the image of the dove that slowly fades out to reveal the face of Orton].

The biblical reference here (for visual reference, cf. *No Mercy 2007,* DVD 1/1, 00:02:00) serves to underline not only the epic proportions of the narrative but also to show that what is at stake is more than a championship. The men involved are fighting for more than just prestige; rather, they are violently negotiating a world order in which a power vacuum has created opportunity for aspirations to turn into reality. The metaphor used suggests that John Cena, the company's main face who had to vacate the championship due to injury, is a "force of nature", a tempest that was able to sweep away with the force of its tides. The pun on the homophones "rain" and "reign" (i.e. "the rain is over" / "the reign is over") cements the notion of a throne challenged: the championship is up for grabs. Other wrestlers potentially turn into the land that was promised by divine decree and the dove is sent out to find the

one worthiest to take the champion's place and thus fulfil the heavenly promise of renewed stability. It is foreshadowed that Randy Orton will turn out to be victorious in the series of bouts that will occur at this event and will, at least for a while, hold the championship. What is being negotiated here, I believe, is the notion of eternal signification that is ordained by a natural, inalterable order (here: a divine order) in which it is impossible for men not to compete for the ultimate means of signification. It is also made explicit that the only way to obtain these means is one of violence and mercilessness: Ultimate masculinity cannot be shared or turned into something that is negotiable in what it can be.

Furthermore, I would argue, the WWE universe becomes implicitly complicit through wrestling's interpellative function: In the metaphor that is being employed by the promotional segment, the audience are represented by Noah, the one who is in search for new land, i.e., a new champion, that will mean newfound security. As such, the audience are invited to envision themselves as not simply passive onlookers, but rather as part of the performance of witnessing greatness: The only way the championship can signify is when its capturing is being seen and acknowledged by others who recognize its validity. In this case, once again, the audience serve as both: 'real-world' customers and audience within the storyworld. The metaleptical elements that fuse the WWE universe as a narrative structure with its 'real-world' counterpart is subsumed by the company's very own slogan: "Then. Now. Forever". However, it also points towards the project of transcendence that is at the heart of this cultural product, i.e., the project of men immortalizing themselves by becoming larger-than-life.

The dependency of characters on the championships and, on a macrolevel, on the WWE universe, creates a variety of issues, as can be seen, for instance, in the storyline that revolved around John Cena and the heel faction the Nexus in 2010. The feud began when the rookie faction the Nexus, led by the charismatic Brit Wade Barrett, entered the main roster forcefully on June, 7th that year and not only disrupted a match between CM Punk and John Cena, but also tore the ring apart, attacked the commentators, and pummeled the Cenation Leader in a most brutal fashion. The episode of RAW went off air with showing the shocked expressions on

audiences' faces (Seliger 2014: 110). Unwilling to wait for their turn to shine and earn a spot among the most famous wrestlers, the rookies of the Nexus had decided to force their way up the food chain by targeting important figures and famous characters in order to establish themselves as the dominant force in the WWE narrative universe. With their ring-gear reminiscent of fascist uniformity and their dominant visual impact through sheer numbers, they tore their way through the locker room and forced Cena to assemble an all-star team comprised of several, usually uncooperative wrestlers, to combat the upstart usurpers and put them back in their place (ibid.).

The confrontation between the Nexus and Team WWE first comes to a climactic head at *SummerSlam 2010*. The prologue to the pay-per-view not only summarizes the infamous rise of the heel faction to power but also dramatically narrates the stakes:

> There is a change coming. It's in the air. It's all around. And tonight it's here. [Staples Center is shown] Change is a powerful force. […] Tonight, change threatens to alter the foundation of our universe, as these seven upstarts have decided it's their time. Resentful, they are lashing out [scenes of the Nexus' s first attack on Cena], destroying everything in their sight. […] Where will their change take us? [Barrett: "What we're doing now is part of a much, much bigger picture."] These seven deadly sinners must be stopped. […] But what if they succeed? Oh, if they succeed… [footage of the Nexus standing united as the intro fades out]

The Nexus is established as a threat to the whole of the WWE universe because they go against the inherent laws all men need to abide by to establish hierarchies of masculinities amongst themselves that make themselves readable as masculine agents. As we have seen already, it is not only acceptable but actively encouraged that single combatants enter the universe and threaten individual men by attempting to beat them and thus make a name for themselves. These challengers, however, play according to the rules of the universe and, once put back in their place by veterans of the trade or by having risen to the status of champion, are incorporated into the system, their formerly disruptive influence contained (Seliger 2014:114). Nexus, on

the other hand, are challenging this established process of hierarchization by (seemingly) rejecting the ruling principles and procedures – they embody a type of change that professes to be permanent, as Wade Barrett himself states: "The balance of power here is about to shift dramatically and permanently" (promotional segment for *SummerSlam 2010*). As I have stated elsewhere (Seliger 2014: 114), by calling the Nexus "seven deadly sinners", the laws against which they rebel must, by inference, be of a religious and dogmatic nature, i.e., these laws that structure how men are allowed to challenge each other within the WWE universe represent not only a secular way of creating hierarchies, but a God-given moral framework. Violating this godly set of laws thus marks the members of the Nexus as the ultimate heels, an invading evil that seek to change the very nature of the competition. Curiously, though, the narrator leaves the possible consequences of such a hostile take-over open to the audience's imagination (ibid.), a fact that points towards the inherent paradox to this narrative setup.

Although the narrative framework that includes not only the promotional introduction at *SummerSlam 2010*, but the many matches and backstage segments during episodes of RAW that precede the pay-per-view tries hard to invoke a sense of true danger for the very existence of the WWE universe, the Nexus is indeed actually adhering very much to the underlying principles of masculine signification and thus is perfectly in line with the established discursive-performative practices of WWE. Like any other combatant, these men make use of matches to prove their dominance, need to abide by match rules and stipulations and use the well-known loopholes provided by these very stipulations to their advantage. What the Nexus is threatening is not the system at all, but rather other men's opportunities to prove themselves as they are used to on a regular basis. The Nexus does so by attempting to lay claim to the ring and by trying to monopolize championships – an attempt at usurpation that, of course, must be and will be punished by Cena and his team defending their universe (*SummerSlam 2010*). The dependency of men on the regulatory mechanisms of signification via successful combat and the attaining of championships is further problematized in the second part to the Cena-Nexus feud.

Right before and during the weeks after *SummerSlam 2010*, Cena's characterization as the fair sportsman and the embodiment of the wrestling company is pushed to an extreme: It is emphasized heavily that Cena is fully defined by his occupation as a wrestler in WWE and that this fact is testament to his dedication to the universe. When forced to join the Nexus after his match against Wade Barrett at *Hell in a Cell 2010*, the storyline focuses on the crumbling self-image of the former Leader of the Cenation. Forced to work for Barrett and the Nexus – made visible through him having to wear their shirt and sweatbands that substitute his own – Cena is stripped off his own integrity as a combatant and of his identity that was built exclusively on his motto "Hustle, Loyalty, Respect". In small moments of defiance, Cena reveals that his beliefs and convictions – the virtues of fair play, respect, personal integrity – are still within him, as for instance in his tag team fight for the Nexus at *Bragging Rights 2010* where he, in an act of small rebellion, hits his own tag-team partner and fellow Nexus member Otunga with his finishing move to deny the real heel the satisfaction of holding the tag team championships (Seliger 2014: 117).

Cena's identity crisis brought on by his involuntary membership of this heel faction, however, reaches its climax at *Survivor Series 2010*, where he finds himself in a true dilemma. Having been appointed the official referee in the match Wade Barrett vs. Randy Orton for the WWE Championship, he is given the explicit order to make the head of the Nexus champion by all means necessary or face having Barrett terminate Cena's contract with WWE which implied that Cena would have to leave the WWE forever. This forces Cena to decide between doing what is morally right and what his fans would expect of him – to stay true to his promise to "Never Give Up" and defy the villainous Barrett once more by calling the match fairly – and the job that provides him with the only way of self-identification. During the pay-per-views promotional segments for the match, Cena's thoughts about his predicament are accompanied by Jim Johnston's "Which Road", an uncharacteristically – for WWE standards – soft-tuned song that mirrors the inner conflict between integrity and self-preservation Cena has to endure: "I wanna do what's right / But is it right for me? / And if I do what's wrong / Who will I be?" (Seliger 2014: 118).

The character John Cena is shown to be incapable of envisioning an identity and a future for himself outside of the WWE universe: the prospect of being forced to leave behind the very structure which allows him to define himself through combat, the mechanisms that govern the way in which he is – and all men are – allowed to constantly prove themselves to be capable men through repeated performance and the attaining of championships, to prove himself superior to others in strength, resilience, mind and morals, casts him into an existential crisis. Calling on Butler again, I would indeed argue that Cena's inability to conceive of an identity for himself outside of WWE is echoing men's general struggle and inability to imagine themselves outside of the gendered order and masculine hierarchy they have been socialized in (ibid.). Breaking the heteronormative matrix, the regulatory fiction, as Butler calls it, that dominates how we perform gender and thus constantly *become*, is cast in these wrestling narratives as something that is inconceivable.

Cena eventually decides during the match to stick by his principles and, despite losing his job in the process, regains his freedom from the Nexus. This is not where Cena's story ends, though. As a kind of rogue, he returns to the show week after week[59] to attack the individual members of the Nexus and thwart their plans over and over again, until Barrett is finally forced to have him rehired to settle the feud once and for all. At *TLC 2010* – the infamous Tables, Ladders, and Chairs event – Cena buries Barrett both physically and metaphorically by having a whole row of steel chairs collapse on top of him, thus regaining his right to be reinstated as WWE's victorious defender. Only the character of CM Punk, renegade free spirit by trade and one of the characters with the most display of meta-awareness, gives voice to the troubling double standards that become implicit in the ending of this storyline between Cena and the Nexus: Punk raises the question of whether revenge, especially when enacted in such an unrestrained and brutal fashion, is justified, and, indeed, questions the moral standards of not only Cena, but also the audience and commentators who cheered him on in his quest for revenge. CM Punk, almost but not quite like a Shakespearean fool, becomes the voice of doubt, questioning the very

[59] Indeed, through simply buying tickets to the show and entering the ring by wading through the audience; another instance that reveals wrestling's metaleptical makeup.

mechanisms by which men in this system try to validate their own identities and existences (Seliger 2014: 19).

Punk's dissonance and the potentially disruptive, subversive influence that could unfurl from it is in true hegemonic fashion incorporated again in the narrative, as it sparks the next feud in the cycle of violence and retribution: Becoming the leader of the New Nexus in 2011, Punk will face Cena in a series of matches to 'unmask' the hero as phony, and, effectively, will continue the competition between muscular men reaching for the ultimate sign to represent their manhood: the championship itself.

However, championship belts and the associated titles are not the only way men in wrestling can signify masculinity or, more generally, their dominance within the universe. Since professional wrestling in general and WWE in particular are claimed to be genuinely North American products, it may seem odd at first to find insignia and discourses of kingship and monarchical power at work in these narrative-theatrical displays: the historical and political context of republicanism that shaped North American culture and society, however, adds an interesting background against which representations of monarchy in professional wrestling contrast vibrantly. In the following I would like to explore the complex and often paradoxical relationship between wrestling narratives and their underlying, gendered ideologies. While indeed the most apparent usage of narratives and symbols of monarchical rule is to signify masculine prowess and authority, wrestling's representations of royalty within its multimodal structure must also be read as intricate parody that is highly polyvalent inasmuch as it operates on several levels of the enactment displayed.

Insignia of kingship have a long-standing tradition in WWE. The *King of the Ring* tournament that for some time was also a stand-alone pay-per-view, began in the mid-1980s and established a crowning of a king through the winning of matches as one of the central mechanisms through which feuds between characters can be established. Unsurprisingly, kingship in WWE is not hereditary. The crown cannot be passed on and if it were, it would defy the purpose brawling has within the WWE universe. The crown is earned by someone who either through exceptional cunning and scheming or raw strength and brutal force manages to subdue his opponents.

As the name of the event already suggests, men brawl over a title that will render them supreme ruler over a territory (i.e., the ring and the arena) and the ones inhabiting it (i.e., other wrestlers and, indeed, the audience, who are citizens within this universe; see chapter 2). Kings crowned in this way, at least in late 20th and early 21st century narratives in WWE events, soon turn toward despotism. The insignia of their stand as rulers, the crowns, the ermine capes, the scepters, mark them as men with a dubious if not unjustified claim to veneration and grandeur. Often these characters will fall prey to illusions of omnipotence and undisputed power which will not only mark them as heels in the eyes of the audience, but also as targets of ridicule. They soon will be challenged by other wrestlers but not necessarily for the crown but rather in an attempt to violently reintegrate them into the order of power that is established via constant brawling over titles. Their pompous, self-important and arrogant nature marks them as men unfit to rule, and the royal insignia that are meant to be signifiers of their achievements actually turn into symbols of oppression, arrogance, and insanity.

On *SmackDown*, July 23rd, 2015, King Barrett, the wrestler formerly known as Bad News Barrett, addresses his subjects:

> Can I have some decorum, please? [audience boos him] Now this past Sunday at *Battleground* amidst all the hoopla surrounding the return of the Deadman [i.e., The Undertaker], I think all you peasants have lost sight of what is truly important and that is the greatest king in the history of WWE, the King of Bad News: Me, King Barrett! [audience boos him] Now at the King of the Ring Tournament a few months ago, I beat three top Superstars in less than 24 hours to wear this cape and this crown. And on Sunday at *Battleground*, I showed the entire world exactly what happens if you try to mock my accomplishments. In layman's terms: If you want to take a shot at this king, you better hit me right between the eyes, 'cause you will not be getting a second chance. [audience boos him] Be warned. The entire world is now on notice because this king's crowning moment is still to come. Now all hail King Barrett! [he puts on the crown as his music hits and fans boo him].

WWE has always had a peculiar relationship with people from the British Isles and in recent years English, Irish, and Scottish wrestlers have taken center stage as heels a

number of times in many storylines, especially between 2009 and 2010 (Seliger 2014: 54). Englishmen like Wade Barrett or William Regal, Scotsmen like Drew McIntyre, and Irishmen like Sheamus are perfect heel material in WWE's eyes, not least because of their 'otherness' in terms of style, accent, and demeanor. The pop-cultural self-attested claim that says that no villain is as good as one with an (British) accent is fostered in these modern displays of turpitude. Three of these men – William Regal, Sheamus, and Wade Barrett – were at one point during their careers King of the Ring, and while American wrestlers also held these titles (Stone Cold Steve Austin, for instance, or Bret 'The Hitman' Hart), it is obvious that the connection between villainy and monarchy is often established by presenting foreigners, especially British or Irish wrestlers, as despots: Their cultural and historical context as well as their often over-pronounced accents most readily allow for associations of autocratic abuse of monarchical power that contrasts with American values of individual freedom and liberty to rise beyond the limitations of socio-cultural constraint that all too often mark wrestling's baby-faced characters. Wade Barrett's short speech shows a typical way of how irony is incorporated as a central feature in WWE's scripting. While Barrett introduces his speech by demanding "decorum" on the part of the audience, his subsequent rhetoric stands in stark contrast to this call for propriety: Not only is he insulting the audience and vaunting his accomplishments in a display of rhetorical villainy that is typical for pro-wrestling heels, he is also reminding them about the violence that was involved in his rise to power. His eclectic make-up (the stereotypical crown in combination with the rather Spartan-style cape) point toward his status as a king made by violence but also one whose insignia are essentially empty: these toy insignia refer back to other insignia, the royal crowns and capes in the cultural imagination, signs that mean to signify authentic power and tradition, however, eventually, turn out to be fantasies in their own right. They are, indeed, simulacra, to speak with Jean Baudrilliard[60].

The flashy and out-of-place attire that these kings display is garish even within the context of professional wrestling where exaggeration is the *modus operandi* of mechanisms of signification. While professional wrestling is all about make-belief,

[60] See chapter 2.

exaggeration and dressing up, they often toy with the discrepancy between the real and the fictional to create humorous meta-comment. When on November 19th, 2016, at a *SmackDown* event, King Booker is offered a proper ruffle shirt by the fashion police tag team Breezango, he reacts with stern anger. Adorned himself with a crown and ermine cape, he says: "You got to dress like a champion, not some reject from the Pirates of the Caribbean". The whole segment is pointing toward the toying around with and subsequent reattribution of signs and meaning that is at the core of professional wrestling displays: Breezango in this segment provoke associations of strippers rather than police officers and thus produce a playful atmosphere. King Booker's fake regalia, as much as the fake police costumes of his interlocutors, are at once mirroring their real-world counterparts (i.e., varieties of authority) yet at the same time also involuntarily and self-reflexively point toward their own displacement: The context in which these regalia are displayed is in discord with their cultural significance; they lack socio-cultural and historic embeddedness which reveals them as essential parts to a theatrical enactment that repurposes these signifiers for its own cultural endeavor. Booker's comment underlines this by juxtaposing his angry response with his own garish attire.

Another example that shows how royal regalia are used in professional wrestling needs to be put under scrutiny as it differs from other displays of monarchical power inasmuch as it presents a specific variety of kingship that requires a different kind of contextual analysis and evaluation. For quite some time now, Triple H has championed the moniker of "King of Kings" next to "The Game". He is one of the most renowned wrestlers of the 21st century and real-life son-in-law of Vince McMahon, the virtual father of World Wrestling Entertainment. At *WrestleMania XXII* in 2006, Triple H enters the arena on a large throne, the back of which is comprised by an iron cross. Next to him are a variety of heads spiked onto flogs, as well as a warhammer adorned with a skull. He is wearing a large fur cape in brown and black, on his head sits a crown that also holds the iron cross. With this attire, Triple H embodies a barbarian variety of kingship (for visual reference, cf. *WrestleMania XXII*, DVD 2/3, 00:34:20). While the basic insignia of royalty are similar to those of the ones we have already mentioned previously – a crown, a

throne, a cape – there are quite obviously crucial differences. The iron cross, the sharpened crown, the throne adorned with skulls, but most of all the warhammer, mark him as a king of war. And while his gimmick comes in various shapes and forms (e.g. at *WrestleMania XXX* in 2014, for visual reference, cf. DVD 1/3, 00:21:56) to create variations of the basic theme or react to real-life events or other franchises[61], the intended message always seems to be the same: Triple H is the "King of Kings", as is underlined by one of the two theme songs by British rock band *Motörhead* he frequently uses during his entries: "Behold the King / The King of Kings / On your knees, dog / All hail / Bow down to the / Bow down to the King". It is this very song that is played at the beginning of Triple H's entry at *WrestleMania XXII* while in a short filmic montage we are presented with various battle scenes.

While other wrestling kings often try to mask their assumed nature as raw brawlers by veiling themselves in ermine and by crudely imitating what they perceive to be an upper-class or Shakespearean register as soon as they gain the crown, this king is rugged, hard, sharp, and cruel. The crucial difference between him and other kings in WWE narratives is that Triple H did not win this title in a bout. He is king and continues to be king because he embodies that exact raw, energetic, and undoubtedly heterosexual masculinity that in professional wrestling's own logic is the peak of male existence. Triple H, not just as the King of Kings, but also as Biker at *WrestleMania XXXIII*[62], thus makes use of and at the same time fuels a masculine fantasy of irrefutable and unalienable stable gendered existence.

The despotism of other wrestling kings will soon lead to their demise or to their conversion into objects of ridicule, and Triple H, too, has abused his power at times, has been villain and hero in various storylines. However, what distinguishes this character further from other kings is the fact that he has been stylized to be the standard by which all other men will be measured. While other wrestlers often say that they rule the game, that they will win the fights and beat the odds, Triple H *is*

[61] At *WrestleMania XXXI* in 2015, Triple H sported a crown and shoulder guards that were inspired by Arnold Schwarzenegger's Terminator, whose *Terminator: Genisys* premiered in July 2015, a few months after *WrestleMania XXXI*.

[62] In 2017, Triple H entered the arena together with his wife Stephanie on a broad Trike, escorted by several police officers on motorcycles. Triple H not only demonstrated raw masculinity that is closely connected to an American sense of freedom, but also the authority to control the state's executive power according to his wishes. For a closer look at Stephanie McMahon's role, see chapter 4.

"The Game". This nickname is closely linked to his other theme song – "The Game" by British rock band *Motörhead* – in which the following lyrics can be heard: "I am the Game / You don't want to play me / I am control / No way you can shake me". I have argued elsewhere (Seliger 2014: 61-62) that the way this song is made up puts imagined opponents of Triple H in a position in which they always have to define themselves with reference to him. The character Triple H, conversely, is put into a central position when it comes to the evaluation of masculine prowess and resilience. Triple H's display thus contributes to the naturalization of the myth that there is stable gendered identity to be achieved through signifying processes that will remain untouched by challenges from the outside.

Despite the more serious nature of Triple H's concept of kingship, I do believe that all of the examples of kings in WWE are to some extent parodies. Linda Hutcheon defined parody as a form of auto-referentiality (Hutcheon 1985: 28) which is characterized by an "activation of the past by giving it a new and often ironic context" (ibid. 5). Parody, she goes on to argue, is "repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity" (ibid. 6). WWE narratives imitate insignia of royalty, duplicate them, and ridicule them, and as such the very concept of monarchical power, by having them look extra cheap, extra tacky, extra flashy. These kings cannot be 'for real' because the historical, social, and cultural context in which they occur already disqualifies them as monarchs. This fits neatly into the artistic tradition of wrestling as a carnivalesque display[63]: Here, indeed, fools can be king for a while. What this is hiding is the fact that while monarchical power in professional wrestling in the end most often is inconsequential, dethroning, mocking, or beating a king does not mean that the system is overthrown. What the downfall of kings in WWE means is the reincorporation of a usurper into the logic of the WWE universe in which men have to brawl – constantly – for the right to signify the apex of masculine power. What these men eventually always bow to is a superordinate hegemonic structure of masculine ideals in which only the hyper-strong prevail and in which insignia of royalty are viewed with justified suspicion.

[63] See chapter 2.

3.6 Buried Alive – Uncanny and Supernatural Characters

Male characters in professional wrestling sometimes do not operate within the realm of the naturally possible but venture into the domain of the supernatural when it comes to their traits and powers. I have already mentioned The Undertaker as probably the most well-known exponent of the category of otherworldly characters that WWE has in its roster, but there are many other men who display an uncanny set of skills with which they swing the balance in their favor.

Supernatural characters are mostly (but not exclusively) used for three main purposes in WWE wrestling: (1) to advance the notion of monstrous masculinity, (2) to serve as a vehicle for parody and satire, and (3) to provide extreme obstacles for heroic face characters to overcome or to take revenge on villainous heels whose greed and lust for power qualifies them for a hellish punishment. Category (1) is probably most exemplified by the character of Kane, whose moniker "The Devil's Favorite Demon" evokes the idea of an otherworldly, monstrous creature. When fighting the Great Khali at *WrestleMania XXIII* in 2007, Kane enters to dark guitar riffs and a burning pentagram lighting up the arena on the titantron behind him while commentator Jim Ross describes both combatants as "two physical monsters" (for visual reference, cf. *WrestleMania XXIII*, DVD 1/3, 00:44:14).

Kane is also used at times as an exponent of category (2) – for comedic purposes – as seen, for instance, during his time as tag team partner of Daniel Bryan and their anger management angle in 2012. Speaking in front of other people with anger management issues in a self-help group (RAW, 27th of August 2012), Kane's life story serves to parody wrestling's very own exaggerated style of storytelling and character construction by referencing a variety of pieces of background information on the character as well as the numerous (and oftentimes ridiculous) storylines he was part of over the years:

> Well, I grew up locked in a basement, suffering severe psychological and emotional scarring when my brother [The Undertaker] set my parents on fire. From there, I shifted around among a series of mental institutions until I was grown, at which point I buried my brother alive. Twice. [Reference to their first Buried Alive matches at *Survivor Series* in 2003 and *Bragging Rights 2010*]. Since then, I've set a couple of people on fire

> and abducted various co-workers. Oh, and I, uh, once electrocuted a man's testicles. […] I've been married and divorced, broke up my ex-wife's wedding and tombstoned the priest. And for reasons never quite explained, I have an unhealthy obsession with torturing Pete Rose.

The cuts, fade-outs and fade-ins during his speech suggest that much more time elapses while he speaks and that his life story is indeed not only a lengthy one but a bloody one. His unawareness of his own motivations and the long list of the past events he was involved in point out that from the meta-level of storytelling, he is but a pawn in a game played for the entertainment of a paying audience in which no storyline is too outrageous and no character design too eccentric as long as it sells tickets and merchandise. I would also argue that this humorous self-reflexiveness and meta-awareness of the business as a whole is a mechanism that hides the problematic contributions WWE makes to overall societal discourses when it comes to gender, race, and other markers of identity: After all, it seems to argue, it is just fun and games and should not be taken too seriously.

The third category I would like to address is the category of those supernatural characters whose function is to oppose either a face character to enhance the sense of a struggle (eventually) overcome or a wicked villain that needs to be reined in. If masculinity can be signaled by dominance over other men, the obtaining of championships, and the display of raw power, then it would appear that these supernatural characters have an inherent advantage: These supernatural combatants wield otherworldly power and are able to manipulate their environment as much as their opponents' minds. The Wyatt Family, especially their leader, Bray Wyatt, exemplifies these powers quite well.

It makes sense that the imago of the charismatic cult leader is so deeply ingrained into the U.S.-American collective consciousness and that it should find a corresponding iteration in professional wrestling. It is not just because of folkloric religious gurus and self-proclaimed prophets that have become infamous in American history (e.g., David Koresh and his Branch Davidians, or Jim Jones and the mass suicide at Jonestown, Guyana, or the Heaven's Gate Community led by Marshall Applewhite and Bonnie Nettles) that the Wyatt Family resonates so well with the

audience, inspiring the right amount of terror and awe in the WWE Universe to garner interest. Rather, I would suggest that, in addition to this being an easily recallable cultural blueprint, the Wyatt Family also makes visible and thus leaves open for confrontation the possibility of a religious devotion perverted.

Targeting Daniel Bryan, Wyatt was able to indoctrinate the heroic underdog and make him part of his family. Only two weeks prior to the *Royal Rumble* event in 2014 Bryan was able to free himself and return to his senses in a performance that played out the heroes fight against corruption. At their match at the *Royal Rumble*, Wyatt enters with his goons and fellow cult members but soon dismisses them as they attempt to intervene on his behalf. The camera captures them in an intimate moment as the leader holds their necks, touches their foreheads with his, and tells them "I don't need you to fight this war for me" (for visual reference, cf. *Royal Rumble 2014*, DVD 1/1, 00:10:26). Wyatt is the father figure and caretaker of his stable, a recurring trope in WWE storylines: Randy Orton, as the leader of the 3-man-stable and heel faction Legacy (comprised of himself, Cody Rhodes, and Ted DiBiase), displays uncharacteristic tenderness and respect when dealing with his fellow teammates (for instance by sharing his spotlight with them after winning the final match at the *Royal Rumble 2009*). During a match against Shane McMahon in 2009, a bleeding Orton receives help from his stable: Both DiBiase and Rhodes come to assist him but are soon taken care of by McMahon. Orton then intervenes, buying them some time, and crawls over to DiBiase and the knocked-out Rhodes, telling the former to "take him out of here [and] make sure he's alright". DiBiase asks whether his mentor is sure; Orton then reaffirms his request (cf. Seliger 2014: 97).

The recurring trope of the harsh but caring leader of a villainous faction raises some interesting questions about the idea of men's capacity to not just care about but *take care of* others and its connection to the reproduction of ideal masculinities. It is feasible, I think, to argue that the representation of heels as nurturers frames them as different from other men in WWE narratives, whose interest in taking care of others is usually very limited. With Bray Wyatt in particular the connection to the idea of a nurturing, feminine side within him is enhanced by its more destructive counterpart,

his finishing maneuver, the so-called "Sister Abigail"[64], that is always accompanied by a kiss to his opponent's forehead.

Not only did Daniel Bryan fall victim to Bray Wyatt, but the ultimate face character John Cena, too, was targeted in an attempt to expose the Cenation leader's image as nothing but smoke and mirrors. Wyatt managed to make "impressionable minds become spellbound" by his "cryptic prose" and used his "demonic influence" to seduce fellow characters and audience members alike (Sullivan, Pantaleo and Greenberg 2016: 47). He is not only able to use his followers to intimidate and creep out his opponents but is also capable of wielding powers that clearly go beyond his manipulative skills as a charismatic cult leader.

When Bray Wyatt, called "The Eater of Worlds", faces Randy Orton at *WrestleMania XXXIII* in 2017, he is able to plague his opponent with visions of vermin that force Orton to curl up several times, holding his head in agony. These visions are represented in-ring by an image of what Orton sees projected onto the canvas of the ring (for visual reference, cf. *WrestleMania XXXIII*, DVD 1/3, 00:21:56). The cameras in the arena give us a bird's-eye view of the display that can be understood as a representation of Orton's tormented mind and could be argued to be an instance of what Thon calls a "(quasi-) perceptual point-of-view" (Thon 2014:74-75). Yet at the same time commentators and audience members are vocal about the fact that they themselves are able to see what is happening inside the ring which moves the representation out of the constraints of a display of a character's interior and into the realm of magic realism.

The most infamous example of such powers, however, is without a doubt the character of The Undertaker. This character commands fire, fog, and lightning. He is capable of appearing out of nowhere and of returning from the dead[65]. He strikes fear into the very soul of his opponents by his sheer presence and demeanor. At *Unforgiven 2007*, he enters the arena to the tune of Gregorian chants to face Mark

[64] The moves eponym, Sister Abigail, is a character that is often referenced by Bray Wyatt as a mentor in his dark and sinister development. However, she never appears in person. The fact that it was hinted at in 2017 that she is indeed a malignant spirit that can be channeled by Wyatt himself has led to a heated controversy among fans: The idea that Wyatt would essentially fight his opponent, Finn Bàlor, in drag as the spirit possesses him, was met with ridicule, and perceived as "corny, low-rate, laughable" (Dilbert 2017).

[65] The Undertaker's gimmick underwent a variety of changes over the years and only after 2004 stabilized in the form it would be known in the post-Attitude era (see: Sullivan, Pantaleo and Greenberg 2016: 364-365).

Henry. Two bolts of lightning set ablaze two of the Undertaker's symbols on either side of the stage. A third symbol rises from below and with it the Undertaker himself in a sea of smoke and flames. When he arrives at the ring, the camera shows him at an extremely low angle, emphasizing his status and otherworldly presence. He then raises his arms and at his beckoning the lights in the arena turn back on. The camera is able to capture Mark Henry being visibly shaken when the Undertaker finally – and in a process that has turned into a ritual over the course of his career – lifts his hat and reveals his white eyes to the crowd and his opponent. Late in the match, Henry seems to have gained the upper hand and believes to have won when the Undertaker suddenly sits up abruptly as if rising from a grave, apparently unharmed and unfazed by Henry's efforts to get a three-count. Similarly, at *Cyber Sunday 2007*, Batista only barely manages to win his match against the Undertaker after the latter had managed to kick out after Batista's finishing maneuver several times – a feat that is, within the logic of WWE narratives and the importance of finishers, framed as truly incredible and a sign of superhuman levels of endurance. When trying to recapture the World Heavyweight Championship title that he was unjustly stripped off, he stakes his claim by hitting the glass display case in which the belt rests with a lightning bolt, frightening an approaching opponent in the process (*Judgement Day 2008*).

Like Bray Wyatt, the Undertaker makes use of these powers to intimidate his opponents but, in contrast to Wyatt, appears – mostly but not exclusively – in storylines that do not set him against face characters who need to prove themselves but against sly or opportunistic characters like Edge in 2008 or CM Punk in 2013. Often the theme in these storylines is one of vengeance or retaliation to punish the hubris of megalomaniacs and sophomoric characters. The Undertaker in his otherworldly and sublime (in the Romantic sense of 'terrifying and awe-inspiring') capacities turns into the great regulating force that cuts other men down to size when no one else can. His feud with CM Punk, for instance, that comes to a head during *WrestleMania 29*, is one that is built on the premise of disrespect that needs to be corrected: In the weeks preceding the bout, Punk stole and toyed with the ashes of the

Undertaker's deceased mentor and mortician Paul Bearer[66] that he kept in an urn. More than a memento, the urn has always had a strong connection to the Undertaker himself and the powers he wields (cf. Sullivan, Pantaleo and Greenberg 2016: 257). Aiming to take revenge for the disrespect he and his late mentor were shown, the Undertaker enters the arena for WrestleMania in 2013 amidst violet lightning and flames. He appears wading through dense fog as shadowy figures claw at him from below as if the souls of the dead beg for his mercy (for visual reference, cf. *WrestleMania 29*, DVD 2/3, 01:55:02). Michael Cole comments that this is "the most awe-inspiring entrance in WWE history. It is the entrance of a legend, of a man of near mythic proportions […]". CM Punk's insolence will indeed be punished that day as the Undertaker leaves the match victorious after his signature move: the Tombstone Piledriver.

This man of "near mythic proportions", though endowed with a family history and backstory, has morphed into something that has long since transcended the realm of the physical. At *WrestleMania XXIII*, wrestlers like Batista, Bobby Lashley, or John Cena are seen in short vignettes all called "All Grown Up" in which the audience are treated to visuals of the characters growing up, dreaming of becoming successful wrestlers and eventually turning their dream into reality. The vignette for the

Figure 28: The Undertaker's entrance at *WrestleMania 29*.

Undertaker stands out because it deviates drastically from the others: Whereas Batista, Cena, and Lashley are all shown as their younger selves and as children, the Undertaker is not presented like this. Although a vignette with a child-version of the Undertaker exists on the DVD as bonus material, it did not become part of the final edited show[67]. Rather, WWE opted for showing a segment titled "Undertaker: My thirst for vengeance" where the Undertaker speaks in a voiceover about his purpose: "My past has determined your future. My eternal pain will be your unspeakable

[66] William Moody, who played Paul Bearer, did indeed pass away in early 2013, a circumstance that was immediately taken up by WWE in the upcoming storyline between the Undertaker and CM Punk.

[67] Even the cut "All Grown Up" vignette for the Undertaker stands out as different from the other vignettes. While all other vignettes have a voiceover by the respective wrestler in which they talk about themselves in the first person, the Undertaker's vignette makes use of a narrator's voiceover who speaks about the Undertaker in the third person: "Born of fire, this dark soul's path was forged as a child. Tormented, everyone must suffer for his pain. And as his victims pray the agony will come to a merciful end, his desire for vengeance will always live on."

suffering. Your days are numbered. Don't fear the end. Pray for it. Unlike your own mortality, my thirst for vengeance will never die." Rather than giving an inspirational speech about his own growth, the Undertaker emphasizes his undying existence and what it means for other men. The Undertaker over the years has transformed from a cult member and creepy figure into a character that is more symbol than person: He is the epitome of the final judgement, that which men have to conquer if they want to immortalize their legacy. However, beating the Undertaker can only ever mean to have conquered oblivion, can only ever mean to have secured a spot in the memory of the WWE universe by having succeeded against "the Phenom"; within the narrative logic of WWE it never means to have gotten rid of the Undertaker.

4. The Significant Other – Women in Wrestling

> And how lucky is this record-breaking crowd here, Michael? You have the sexiest women on television right here in front of you right now. Even you gotta like this.
>
> (JBL on the Lumberjill Match at *Wrestlemania XXIII*)

While, as we have already seen, men and the constant reestablishing of masculinity as a natural given yet socially contested 'good' have been the primary focus of professional performances in wrestling since its inception, women have often played important roles inside and outside of the ring. In the following chapter, I am going to show in what respects the representations of women in WWE differ from that of men. While the portrayal of women is not fundamentally different from that of male wrestlers when it comes to its multimodality and multimediality, the changes it underwent in terms of the storylines women appear in and their marketing between 2000 and 2016 are, for one, a remarkable example of the adaptability of wrestling as an entertainment product. Even more importantly though, these changes demonstrate the way in which hegemonic ideas about women and femininity are able to incorporate potentially subversive tendencies within society into their own discourses sustaining and preserving conservative notions of gender stereotypes and gender dichotomies that are the framework for social discourses of all kinds.

4.1 Narrating Women in a Man's World

Women's history in wrestling remains one of the more neglected areas of research. However, though not as widely perceived in the public's eye as participants in and fans of wrestling, women have always played a crucial role both in- and outside of the ring. As Chad Dell points out in his book *The Revenge of Hatpin Mary: Women, Professional Wrestling and Fan Culture in the 1950s* (2006), female fans in the early years of US-American professional wrestling, particularly during the 1950s, are a testament to the fact that wrestling has never been an entertainment format that attracted an exclusively male audience. Rather, Dell argues that

> [d]espite the persistent message in the commercial media that women should remain in the domestic sphere, subservient and obedient, attractive without being sexually

> assertive, women wrestling fans felt free to express an entirely different version of femininity. Having often experienced wrestling first on television, women arrived at the arena culturally literate, knowing what to expect and what pleasures were available to them. And many women felt sexually emboldened, able to use the participatory context of the arena to engage with the attractive male athletes. Women found it easy to sexually objectify the male performers in front of them, taking them as the public objects of their pleasure. The sexual appreciation of male athletes became a common theme for female fans, a form of expression that sports itself has tended to downplay. The result was an exhibition of feminine agency on a nationwide scale […]. (Dell 2006: 122)

While I would agree that what Dell's study shows is that women indeed had significant agency as fans and were able to resist certain patterns of normativization of gender roles, what can be gleaned from his research is the way in which, despite increasing freedoms that women carved out for themselves, a real emancipation from norms of gendered existence, from heteronormative practices, remained and remains to be achieved. What we see here is that women became complicit with the very notions of objectification they themselves sought to resist. It stands to reason that in repeating what confines us, we only reinscribe the confinement in different terms. Nevertheless, Dell's study gives us a unique insight into female fan practices of the 1950s and overall remains one of very few publications dealing with women in and around professional wrestling. Women's roles in wrestling narratives in particular have been largely ignored or overlooked by academics for their seemingly minor role in the wrestling business. There are several reasons for why women's contributions to the spectacle are so easily forgotten.

(1) *Time on Screen*: Female wrestlers are in no way a new phenomenon: We do have, for instance, the Fabulous Moolah or Mae Young, both of whom were active from the 1950s to the 1980s and contributed to storylines as special guests during the Attitude Era and beyond – long after their official retirements. Both were introduced into the Wrestling Hall of Fame, Moolah in 1995 (Shields and Sullivan 2012: 121), Young in 2008 (ibid. 224). Despite these and many other important contributions to wrestling entertainment by female athletes, women's wrestling tended to be, and still tends to be, perceived as a type of fringe business in an already dismissively treated form of mass entertainment. For the longest time, women's matches during shows in WWF and WWE did not just occur less frequently and were shorter than matches between men; until recently, women were also not considered to be main event

material for pay-per-views. In 2016, for the first time in WWE history, two female athletes, wrestlers Sasha Banks and Charlotte, headed into a women's main event in a Hell-in-a-Cell match at the eponymous pay-per-view[68].

(2) *Status as Object of Strife*: The display of rites of passage – births, birthdays, weddings, retirement celebrations, funerals – is a recurring feature in wrestling narratives. The only rites of passage prominent in WWE in which women are necessarily present are births and weddings. In the narratives of these festivities, however, they rarely take on the role of the active center around which the story unfolds, i.e., they seldom, if at all, serve as the pro- or antagonists. Rather, they become the object of strife between men, tools in and symbols of the perpetuation or gaining of dominance of men over other men. The same role is often given to women in storylines about relationship quarrels and jealousy, and even in those the woman is often little more than an additional prize to be won.

(3) *Status as Witness*: I have argued elsewhere (Seliger 2014: 88ff.; also chapter 2 in this paper) that professional wrestling is all about witnessing clashes between heroes and villains, good and evil, and other dichotomies of *agon*. Women outside the ring are often put in the role of witnesses to male greatness inside the ring: This is for instance the case with Shawn Michaels' wife in his feud with JBL in 2009 (ibid.) or when Stephanie McMahon watches her brother take on Randy Orton at *No Way Out 2009* (ibid. 96). We also often see women accompany wrestlers to the ring where they essentially fulfil two purposes apart from being witnesses to the bout: They often try to whip up enthusiasm in the crowd, encouraging audience members to root for the wrestler they keep company. Women accompanying a male heel character may also partake in the wrestling match as a last resort means for the wrestler in question should he be facing defeat at the hand of his opponent. They may trick the opponent or distract the referee in their combatant's favor. In fulfilling this role, they, again, are little more than plot devices, accessories to male greatness.

(4) *Status as Eye Candy*: The fact that wrestling gear is traditionally very revealing did not just have an impact on female fan culture in the 1950s as Dell shows in his study (Dell 2006: 122). Female wrestlers' ring gear invites the male

[68] See chapter 4.3.

gaze to sexualize and objectify the woman wearing it not just (or even primarily, as I would argue) because the clothing is 'revealing'. It is revealing, of course, but to have this argument rest on the existence of clothing or lack thereof would be a gross simplification. Rather, I would like to argue that the cultural contextualization bolsters the 'reading', the perception of such ring gear, as sexual. Especially in the last years of the Attitude Era and the transitory phase between Attitude and the PG Era, this invitation to sexualize and objectify female wrestlers was particularly blunt.[69] Although the praising of female wrestlers' athleticism never quite vanished from WWF and WWE broadcasts, the tendency to underline women's sexual nature and their sexually available bodies is almost always inextricably linked to such praise. At the *Royal Rumble 2012*, for instance, in anticipation of an 8-Diva-Tag-Team-Match, commentator and former wrestler Booker T states that he is looking forward to "a lot of great moves and a lot of great curves" and later on comments that the wrestlers are "tough as well as beautiful". At *Vengeance 2007*, Jerry Lawler comments on the fight between champion Melina and Candice Michelle saying that Melina is probably jealous of Candice's status as former Playboy cover girl, despite being playboy material herself; a comment that certainly implies that one of the few legitimate pursuits women fight over is who gets to be the center of attention for the male gaze.

After having won the title from Melina, Candice Michelle has to defend the title at a Diva Battle Royal at *SummerSlam 2007*. She enters the arena in what can only be described as a skimpy, glittery pink dress while commentator Jim Ross points out that she is a former Playboy cover girl. Jerry Lawler comments that "[t]here's a lot of screaming and moaning going on" while the women fight, and later on the following conversation plays out:

> Lawler: Kelly Kelly, she's one of my favorites. She looks like my fourth wife.
> JR: Fourth wife? How many wives did you have?
> Lawler: Three!

[69] See chapter 4.3.

If there is any doubt as to how we are meant to read the Divas' bodies and their attire in this instance, the commentators are quick to point us toward the sexual nature of the display. We can see how the male gaze manifests itself in the commentators' narration and how a discourse of male privilege to 'possess' the female form whenever male spectators or participants deem fit is being perpetuated here under the guise of humor and locker room talk.

While some shifts within the representation of women in wrestling bouts and wrestling narratives have occurred since the middle of the second decade of the 2000s, an in-depth analysis and comparison between examples from these different periods in wrestling history is necessary to show how exactly these representations have changed and in how far these developments are indicative of a turn toward a more progressive, less sexist portrayal of women.

In the following, we are going to take a look at three specific categories of roles that women take in wrestling narratives: female characters who do not participate in fights for themselves but are used as plot-devices, female wrestlers in their own storylines, and women who do not wrestle but partake in storylines as powerful managers and promoters. In doing so, we will see how female characters in WWE wrestling shows are being portrayed in their various roles and in what way the depiction of women and thus the negotiation of femininity has changed in the performance practices.

4.2 Witnessing Women and Damsels in Distress

In professional wrestling narratives, women are often used as accessories or plot devices. Rather than becoming agents in their own rights, they are utilized to serve as motivation for the male hero or villain of a storyline to fight against other men. We have already established in Chapter 2 that it is the witnessing of the event that renders it meaningful as a didactic, social endeavor. Female characters who are witnesses to bouts between male wrestlers are omnipresent in professional wrestling shows. As I have discussed elsewhere (Seliger 2014), at *No Way Out 2009*, witnessing women are one of the major motifs that reoccur in men's storylines of integrity and vengeance. Wrestler Shawn Michaels, after being hit hard by the 2008 financial crisis, becomes

the hired henchman for million-dollar business mogul and heel John 'Bradshaw' Layfield, known as JBL, whose dishonesty and brutality puts Michaels in a difficult position in which he is forced to decide between his personal integrity and the demands put upon him by his contract with JBL and his desire to be the breadwinner for his family. This conflict, that spans several pay-per-views, comes to a head at *No Way Out 2009*:

> JBL: I hired you to get me to *WrestleMania* as World Champion. You failed me. [It is shown how Cena finished JBL at the previous *Royal Rumble*] And I have in mind right now to release you from your contract. Is that what you want?
> Michaels: What I want is to kick your teeth down your throat. [Heavy bass sets in]
> JBL: I make you a proposal. You vs. me at *No Way Out.* If you beat me, I will pay you everything I owe you, but if I win, I own the Heartbreak Kid, I own Shawn Michaels, and you work for me for the rest of your life. How about you bring your wife? Because I want your wife to witness first-hand what a broken, battered, old man her husband has become.
> (Promotional Segment at *No Way Out 2009*)

JBL's cruelty is revealed in his gloating over the fact that he knows Michaels' weakness lies in his desire to provide for his wife and daughters and that his pride took a serious blow when he fell on hard times and had to sell his services to the successful shareholder and brawler. The implications of being "owned" by another man are dire for Michaels: That the rhetoric is strongly reminiscent of prostitution is of course a threat to the character's masculinity, but more importantly in the context of this chapter, Michaels is faced with the prospect of suffering further humiliation at JBL's hands through being seen in such a situation by his wife Rebecca. Rebecca's presence at ringside is a reminder for Michaels that what is at stake is his very identity as a man and provider. During the pay-per-view, the camera frequently shows Rebecca's expression while seeing her husband fight (for visual reference, see *No Way Out 2009,* DVD 1/1, 01:54:28). Women as witnesses are important in storylines like this one because they not only fuel the man's motivation to win but will turn into attestants to a man's glorious victory or crushing defeat, the latter being evidence to his failed manhood (Seliger 2014: 88).

There is an overlap between the trope of the witnessing woman and the trope of the damsel in distress that, too, is heavily used in professional wrestling narratives.

Similarly to the former, the latter heightens the sense of exigency for the male wrestler and serves as narrative hook and motivation. However, these motivations are seldom (if ever) the true root of men's willingness to compete. Rather, women in wrestling narratives are more often than not incidental or marginal in their involvement in storylines focused on men's rivalries. They serve as objects of desire – often confusingly close in their use in narratives to Championship belts and other trophies – and proof of masculine prowess. In other words, their symbolic function within these narratives may be acknowledged but their status as actual character often remains negligible. Men in these narratives strive for transcendence, the building of a legacy that will outlast their mortal bodies, based on and conforming to the socially maintained idea of having to work continually on the project of becoming a man and becoming immortal. Sherry B. Ortner argues in her essay "Is Female to Male what Nature is to Culture?" that

> […] woman's body seems to doom her to mere reproduction of life; the male, in contrast, lacking natural creative functions, must (or has the opportunity to) assert his creativity externally, 'artificially', through the medium of technology and symbols. In doing so, he creates relatively lasting, eternal, transcendent objects, while the woman creates only perishables – human beings. (Ortner 1974: 75)

For our investigation of professional wrestling this implies that women in wrestling become one among many vehicles for men to strive for transcendence: they become symbols in themselves for the self-assertion of men as men as they fight against one another.

This becomes most evident in an example from 2004. Wanting to protect her boyfriend Matt Hardy from further harassment from "The Big Red Monster" Kane, wrestler Lita agrees to sleep with him – unbeknownst to Matt, who proposes to Lita just a short while after (RAW, 21 of June 2004). Not only does Matt finally discover through Kane that Lita had a one-night-stand with the monstrous fiend for his protection, but also that the baby that Lita carries is actually Kane's and not his own – news to which Matt reacts with anger, violence, and, unsurprisingly, few words for Lita. Rather than opting for a solution that would stop the cycle of vengeance and violence – a solution that, if brought up at all, would only ever earn ridicule and scorn from the WWE universe for constituting a breach of the conventions that hold

together the narrative repetition −, he challenges Kane in an attempt to salvage his pride and dignity, a move that Kane reacts to with terrifying gleefulness. It appears that Kane's main concern is not at all winning over Lita as such or her affections, but rather to get into Hardy's head and 'psych out' his rival, which is most clearly revealed during the contract signing event at an episode of RAW preceding their 'Till Death Do Us Part'-match at *SummerSlam 2004*. During the contract signing, Kane leans over the table to tell him that "it looks like I'm more man than you'll ever be" while laughing manically. As per usual in WWE, the contract signing event ends in violence when Hardy is no longer able to contain his rage and attacks Kane. The civilatory mechanisms of laws, contracts and agreements are imagined in these storylines to be unable to contain the perceived to be 'natural' urges and behaviors of men.[70]

Finally, at *SummerSlam 2004*, the two contestants meet in the scheduled fight with Lita present at ringside to witness the fate of her lover that will decide her own in turn. During the bout the discursive assertion of her powerlessness becomes particularly apparent as her body and her future stay the focus of men's discussions, desires, and wills: JR and Jerry Lawler, the two commentators, discuss her morning sickness and the fact that she endangers herself and the unborn child by being at ringside that day. Furthermore, her attempt to turn the tide in her favor by distracting the referee and bringing Hardy the ring bell to hit Kane with, fail eventually (for visual reference, see *SummerSlam 2004*, DVD 1/1, 00:25:51). Kane wins and all Lita is left with is to flee the arena while Lawler comments: "Give your future husband a kiss, come on, Lita!".

Kane, in comparison to Hardy, is displayed as a monstrous character, unfit for a relationship with Lita and unfit to be a father because of his archaic views on these matters: During their wedding ceremony at RAW, to which Lita appears fittingly in an all-black dress, Kane tells her: "I am happy to say that you are more than the woman carrying my child. You are now my property. You're mine to do with as I see fit. You will never know freedom; you will never again feel the embrace of another man […]". Lita remains defiant during her own wedding vows and it almost seems as

[70] cf. chapter 3.

if the wedding might not go according to plan as Hardy enters and attempts to literally steal the bride, a plan that is eventually foiled by Kane through supernatural means.[71] His possessiveness and opposition to Matt Hardy at the time marked Kane clearly as a heel character and yet the narrative is not resolved by letting Lita escape her fate: Rather, she is wed to Kane against her will and, over the following months, not only loses her baby to an accident at ring-side but also seemingly grows fond of Kane to such an extent that when she betrays him with Edge during a feud in early and mid-2005, she is being called out by the audience as a "slut" (RAW 6th of June 2005).

It appears that Lita's merit as a woman in these narratives − both for the men in question and the audience − is solely dependent on the status of her lover or the men she is associated with. For Kane she carries symbolic meaning as a trophy won by beating Hardy, a constant reminder of Kane's very own success in humiliating his opponent and physically taking a 'possession' away from him. Furthermore, she is marked within the narrative as little more than a potential producer of "perishables" (cf. Ortner 1974: 75) in service of the men she is associated with. Both of the male characters show little regard for her outside of her purpose as object of strife and the loss of the child later on in the storyline only serves as a convenient narrative twist to 'write-out' a baby and maybe avoid another storyline as abstruse and absurd as some from the past that also involved women giving birth.[72]

The motif of the damsel in distress is omnipresent in professional wrestling and particularly so in WWE narratives: Wrestler Eve, for instance, is a helpless onlooker in a bout between her boyfriend Zack Ryder and Kane at RAW on the 23rd of January 2012. All she is able to do is kneel next to the hole in the stage that was created by the impact of Ryder being slammed onto the ground by the Big Red Machine. She cries and asks if he is alright without ever receiving a reply. On the 28th of May that same year, Brodus Clay's sidekicks, the "Funkadactyls" Naomi and Cameron, are equally incapable of stopping the Big Show from attacking their friend. They are seen huddled together inside the ring as the two men brawl (for visual reference, see

[71] cf. chapter 3.6.
[72] See chapter 3.

RAW, 28th of May 2012, DVD 2/3, 00:54:36). It might be argued that men do become more or less helpless witnesses as well, especially in tag-team matches or when they are promoters supporting their clients at ringside. However, it needs to be noted that for the former, the option to act is always there and frequently used, either by being legally tagged into the match or by inserting themselves into the match despite not having been tagged in. For the latter, despite being confined to their role as bystanders, their helplessness never takes the form of extreme worry to the point of being reduced to tears out of fear for their client's safety and health. Men may be shocked at the carnage that has been inflicted upon a friend as for instance John Cena does at the sight of his unconscious friend Zack Ryder on the 23rd of January 2012. However, Cena shows in this very segment that men tend to have agency left: It is his appearance that makes Kane back off and recede through the crowd, i.e., it is him who stops the assault from continuing any further and prevents Kane from hurting Eve.

The case of Lita's forced wedding is also reminiscent of an earlier storyline revolving around Stephanie McMahon being abducted by the Ministry of Darkness, led by Kane's brother The Undertaker, who tries to marry her in an attempt to get back at Vince McMahon for past disputes (RAW 26th of April 1999). Here, the occult wedding is eventually stopped by an intervening Steve Austin, but the function of women remains the same: Rather than being able to rescue themselves or save themselves from being put into a situation out of their control, these women are presented as essentially helpless vehicles used in the conflicts of men, to act out revenge, increase their prestige, or prove their superiority and masculinity in the eyes of other men and thus, eventually, develop a type of transcendence. I have already discussed in chapter 3 that the notion of men's pursuit of transcendence becomes evident in male wrestlers' pursuit of recognition as a combatant and building a legacy in the business. Frequently, events will reference the series of pay-per-view events each year as part of a "journey to immortality" (*Royal Rumble 2002*) or mention the concept of immortality in similar contexts (e.g., *Night of Champions 2010, Royal Rumble 2014*). The perversion of the wedding ceremony as a rite of passage that in common cultural narratives is envisioned as a joyful occasion is an attempt to veil the

underlying narrative of women's perceived inherent weakness and their being at the mercy of men who may or may not be inclined to show them benevolence.

4.3 From Pinup Lumberjills to Female Athletes? − Women Wrestlers and Postfeminist Discourse

At the *Royal Rumble 2008*, an interesting and – from a feminist standpoint – rather problematic scene occurs that encapsulates the attitude toward the representation of women in professional wrestling in the 2000s. In a backstage segment we see wrestler Ashley knock on her colleague Maria's door to ask her for her participation in a photo shooting for *Playboy*. Maria's boyfriend, fellow wrestler Santino, opens it. The following dialogue ensues:

> Santino: Maria can't talk right now. She's preparing for the first ever high-definition kiss cam […] You see, that's my Maria: You ask her to do anything, she'll do it. She can't say no to anything or anyone.
> Ashley: That's probably why she's still with you, Santino.
> Santino: You can't talk to me like that. Let me save you the bother: Maria is not interested in you or your booby magazine, okay? […] [He slams the door behind him]

The obvious first: Santino – a character often used for comic relief, not least because of his pronounced Italian accent and his less stylized physique – is proud of Maria's tendency to be helpful whenever she can, but the sexual insinuation, while it seems to go completely over his head, is not lost on the audience. "She can't say no to anything or anyone" clearly implies that she is not only willing to be helpful with preparing a segment of the show but would also be incapable of rejecting any sexual advances made toward her. She is cast in the light of a naïve, simple-minded girl who is at the same time hypersexualized. Simultaneously, her cuteness combined with her naivety and intellectual ineptitude paint her as an almost child-like character − a combination of characteristics often used in pornography. Santino, on the other hand, is ridiculed by his own statements as he unwittingly acknowledges that his girlfriend would have no problem having sexual relations with other men, which renders him a 'horned husband' in the making. Furthermore, it casts doubt on his own masculinity. The question that is implicitly raised here is whether Maria would really be so unable

to resist sexual temptation if her boyfriend was manly enough to satisfy her sexual needs.

The whole backstage scene is a setup for the kiss cam segment that will take place later in the show. Maria comes into the arena and hosts the kiss cam event. After a few minutes, Ashely's entrance music hits as she enters the arena.

> Ashley: Maria, I'm so sorry to have to come out like this but I really had to tell you something. I got a call last week from Hugh Hefner. And he wanted to know if you were interested in posing for *Playboy*. So, what do you think?
> Maria: What –
> [Santino enters with a figure hooded in a burka that follows him to the ring]
> Santino: Stop it! Stop it! [To Ashley] Obviously you didn't get it earlier, so I'm gonna make it perfectly clear: The answer is 'no'. [Audience boos him] Nobody wants to see Maria with no clothes on. [Audience cheers. Maria is obviously delighted by the reaction] Maria, don't listen to these people. Of course, they are going to cheer. They're from New York, they have nothing else to cheer. Mets, Yankees, chokers. […]
> [Audience boos him as he continues to make fun of New York and its inhabitants]
> Ashley: Santino, wait, this is not your decision to make. This decision is for Maria. So, Maria, are you interested in doing *Playboy*? [Audience cheers]
> Maria: I don't know. I mean… Do you [points at the crowd] guys really want to see me pose for *Playboy*? [Audience cheers loudly]

This segment works in two clearly identifiable ways to stabilize a discourse around masculinities and femininities as 'naturally' tied to 'natural' bodies that, again, 'naturally' produce desires towards their opposites. As Judith Butler points out: "one way in which this system of compulsory heterosexuality is reproduced and concealed is through the cultivation of bodies into discrete sexes with 'natural' appearances and 'natural' heterosexual dispositions" (Butler 1988: 524). When men cheer for a female wrestler to have a men's magazine take pictures of her naked body, then they are reinscribing themselves as 'naturally' heterosexual especially since the options of reacting to that hailing we have seen is very limited (cf. Butler 1988: 522): While a non-answer, a refusal of the call, is technically possible, the only other option is the positive affirmation to the wrestler's question. Not only is the affirmative implied and called for in the way the question is accentuated ("Do *you guys* really want to see me pose for Playboy?"): The theoretical option to answer in the negative, to deny her approval, would implicate male audience members in a potential breach of heteronormative 'truth', namely that, in Butler's words, gender

follows naturally from sex and from gender naturally follows a specific desire towards the opposite sex. The answer to the call here, the affirmation, becomes the default, the 'natural' way of answering the call, and thus the only way to make oneself into a subject. Unwittingly, audiences thus not only produce the only viable subject position within this heteronormative framework, they also (re)produce the very hegemonic structure they themselves need to bow to in order to become a subject within this structure. This mechanism is of course closely linked to the idea of metalepsis being the modus operandi in professional wrestling (as discussed in chapter 2), the constant double-bind of the audience that in this case shows how fictional hailing is at the same time a social event that takes place both inside the fictional universe and outside it. In other words, the subject-making processes within the narrative framework have a real-life bearing on discourses and performances outside of the carnivalesque display. This interplay of interpellations calls upon the members of the audience to constitute themselves at the very least as hetero-centrist, possibly hetero-sexist subjects subscribing to or at least bending to the laws of heteronormativity.

This example of rhetorical coercion is perfidious in another way as well: The whole setup of the storyline surrounding Marie's question to the audience implies a narrativization of the postfeminist "Doing it for herself"-trope that Angela McRobbie and Rosalind Gill investigate in their works on postfeminist media culture. Postfeminism, as Gill and McRobbie understand it, is more than a simple backlash against feminist ideas and progress (Gill 2008: 442). Rather, it "suggests that by means of the tropes of freedom and choice that are now inextricably connected with the category of 'young women', feminism is decisively 'aged' and made to seem redundant" (McRobbie 2007: 27). By focusing, *inter alia*, on notions of subjectivity, individual agency and choice, postfeminism renders feminism effectively common sense in Gramscian terms (ibid. 28) and proclaims the feminist agenda as accomplished, thus triggering discourses that push back against any further feminist concerns about women's continuing oppression.

These notions have become powerful discursive tools of a new way of shaping intelligible subjects within a neoliberal social framework (Gill 2008: 436, 439). What

we find in this scene at the *Royal Rumble 2008* is an interplay of distinct elements of this discourse that mark this segment as a contribution to postfeminist representations: First of all, in trying to persuade her to pose for *Playboy*, Ashley represents the postfeminist ideal of a self-aware woman, conscious and in control of her own sexuality. She herself posed for *Playboy* for the April issue of 2007, a fact that is framed as a self-pleasing activity for Ashley. She is presented as a woman 'in the know' who initiates the naïve child-woman Maria into the world of (presumed) sexual liberation. A woman seducing a woman to follow in her footsteps and take pictures in the nude tries to veil the fact that this is still done for the purpose of being on display for the male gaze. Moreover, Ashley's dialogue further tries to frame the situation as a matter of women's choice and sexual self-determination: When Santino intervenes and tries to persuade Maria from not having her photos taken, Ashley states that "Santino, wait, this is not your decision to make. This decision is for Maria", pretending that the whole narrative set-up is not pushing the audience to be on Maria's and Ashley's side as Santino is displayed as the jealous boyfriend who tries to keep his beautiful girlfriend all to himself. Indeed, Santino, as the almost cliché horned-husband-to-be, is cast in a wholly unfavorable light: Not only is he portrayed as ridiculously over-confident in his own prowess – an idea that his performance regularly undermines and that Ashley herself has called into question in the backstage segment at the pay-per-view –, his behavior is also combined with an almost zealous dedication to keeping his girlfriend away from the influence of Ashley and the prying eyes of other men, thus marking him not only as a 'spoilsport' but also as a man oppressing his girlfriend from following her inclinations and what is painted as a viable career option. The audience, for these reasons, really has no other options within this narrative make-up but to support Maria as the only two options presented are either to side with Santino, an oppressive, controlling boyfriend, or with Ashley, who promotes the idea of Maria being allowed to make the decision for herself.

For the academic observer, all of this is of course undermined by two crucial aspects: First of all, Maria, eventually, does not make the decision by herself: She instead turns to the audience and asks "[d]o you [points at the crowd] guys really

want to see me pose for *Playboy*?". While her decision is framed as being hers and hers alone, the narrative in the end falls back on the idea that women are dependent in their decisions − especially those regarding the management of their bodies − on feedback from their social and cultural environment. As a character, Maria is yet to become a sexually aware woman, and this transition, it seems to be proposed, lies within the act of finding empowerment in the act of submitting herself to the male gaze.

A second level needs to be added as soon as we look at this scene from the extra-diegetic perspective in the 'real-world', the outer layer of the wrestling matryoshka[73]: The audience has no actual influence over whether Maria's photos for *Playboy* will be taken or not; nor do Ashley or Santino. The audience as members of the WWE universe, as well as the universe's characters are, of course, bound by real-world business negotiations between WWE, Maria (the wrestler, not the character), and *Playboy* – negotiations that, at the time this segment takes place, had most likely already been concluded in favor of having Maria pose for the men's magazine. I believe that most audience members, in their double role as paying customers of this form of entertainment and members of the fictional universe will be aware of this fact as well and will pick up on the irony of the scene at least to some extent. This, however, does not mitigate the problematic contribution this example makes to overall discourses of gender: Common public discussions often too quickly defend segments like this by calling them humorous and therefore (in their own logic) apolitical, denying the fact that such scenes are, in fact, repetitions and thus inscriptions of controversial gender stereotypes that are part of a mechanism that fosters culturally prevalent hegemonic notions of 'real' men and 'real' women.

At *WrestleMania XXIII* in 2007, Ashley and Melina face off in a so-called Lumberjill Match, the women's counterpart to the men's Lumberjack Match. In this match type, other wrestlers at ringside need to ensure that none of the combatants leaves the ring or flees the arena to force a disqualification. This match shows several of the problems with women's brawls during the 2000s. First of all, it is, as most fights between women at that time, a marginal event that is placed right before the

[73] I thank Julia Andres for the suggestion of this metaphor.

main event brawl between Shawn Michaels and John Cena. Women's matches during a pay-per-view are often placed in such a way that they obviously function as 'breather' or filler moments for the audience. It is not a rare occasion to see audience members leave the arena during these matches to get drinks, have a smoke, or go to the restroom before another important match (between men) begins. It stands to reason that this Lumberjill event at *WrestleMania XXIII* fulfils such a function here. Furthermore, it is the only women's event at this pay-per-view, which is representative of almost all shows done by WWE and other large wrestling promotions. Another feature that shows the difference between men's events and those of women is the length: While non-main event matches between men usually last from eight to fifteen minutes, and main events usually have run times between half an hour and sixty minutes, women's matches in the 2000s usually barely scratch the five-minute mark. The Lumberjill match is exemplary here with its duration of roughly three minutes.

Postfeminist elements are, of course, present in this display: Ashley, as having recently posed for *Playboy*, enters the arena while the logo of *Playboy*, the iconic bunny head, is on display on the Titantron. She is wearing a red and black patent leather top and skirt, fishnet stockings and boots, garments that obviously make little sense in the context of a brawl and are instead clearly reminiscent of stripper attire (for visual reference, see *WrestleMania XXIII,* DVD 1/3, 02:43:52). Should we be tempted to believe that this is a legitimate fight going on, the commentators of this match are quick to remind us of what we are actually meant to focus on: "And how lucky is this record-breaking crowd here, Michael? You have the sexiest women on television right here in front of you right now. Even you gotta like this" (JBL at *Wrestlemania XXIII*). The crowd's reaction reflects this attitude: Their reaction to the bout is lackluster and minimal while Ashley and Melina go one-on-one, yet as soon as the fight gets out of hand and all the lumberjills – many of them in skirts and high heels (for visual reference, see *WrestleMania XXIII,* DVD 1/3, 02:42:14) – join in, the crowd starts roaring in satisfaction. It needs a full-blown and narrative-wise meaningless catfight to produce a reaction from the crowd.

The recycling of this saga finds its pinnacle at *WrestleMania XXIV* where Ashley and her protégé Maria face off against then WWE Women's Champion Beth Phoenix and her tag-team partner Melina in a so-called '*Playboy* BunnyMania Lumberjack Match'. Master of Ceremonies for this event is none other than rapper Snoop Dogg, who is being interviewed backstage by Todd Grisham prior to the bout. Addressing the question of how he enjoys his WrestleMania experience so far, Snoop Dogg says: "I'm having the time of my life. I get a chance to see all these great, exciting wrestlers, past and present. I get to see the bunnies do their thing. You know, I like seeing that, oh boy". The binary that this statement produces is indicative of women's general status within WWE at that point in time: On the one hand, decidedly *male* wrestlers of the past and the present are showcasing their greatness at WrestleMania, while on the other hand decidedly *female* "bunnies" – not 'female wrestlers' or 'female athletes' or even 'women' – do "their thing", an indistinct umbrella term for the entertaining yet obviously deemed peripheral and therefore negligible existence of women as accessories to men's greatness.

Snoop Dogg later enters the massive WrestleMania stage with five Divas on each side whom he beckons to follow him. They obediently walk behind him in procession as he drives the long way to the ring in a fancy golf cart (for visual reference, see *WrestleMania XXIV*, DVD 1/3, 01:59:40). Most of the women are, again, dressed in attire that does in fact not easily lend itself to the task of functioning as an athlete and being a Lumberjack at ringside: They sport high heels and short skirts, cleavage and waving manes, while the audience at home hear Jerry Lawler say to his co-commentator: "Oh, my! This is what I've always thought heaven might be like, JR!". Snoop Dogg then introduces the Divas: "They're beautiful. They're glamorous. They're the WWE Divas!". He then proceeds to point out each of them as he says "I like that" over and over again, indicating that he has trouble choosing which one he prefers or, more likely, does not need to choose at all since he can have them all. The obvious inscription of the event as a 'meat market' is only highlighted by the fact that he will later on follow the proceedings in the ring from an oversized throne at ringside, forcing the reading of the performance as women aiming to please the one who rules over them.

Snoop Dogg introduces the first team of combatants as "two fly honeys who are all about the *Playboy* bunny", replicating the already established discourse of female wrestlers as little more than postfeminist icons. Their attire too, much like that of their Lumberjills at ringside, accentuates the sexual nature and the postfeminist "doing it for themselves"-rhetoric and does not go uncommented:

> Jim Ross: "Interesting combat attire, I would suggest."
> Jerry Lawler: "Yes. They get their wrestling gear at *Victoria's Secret* maybe, you think?"

Attire, just as any other sign system that is part of the mechanisms of gendered performances, is never apolitical, as I have already discussed. Women cannot just "do it for themselves" when they are being situated in a discursive framework that prioritizes the satisfaction of the male gaze over women's assertions of their own agency. Not only are the women in this display reduced again to targets of ridicule and objectification – Jerry Lawler both implicitly wonders about the inappropriateness of the getup for athletic purposes and marvels at the sexual attractiveness of the women in question that is being highlighted by the very same attire – they are also framed with a variety of the motif of the "Good Girl" / "Bad Girl" duality. In this case, Ashley and Maria are marked as "Good Girls", not least because they allow themselves and are willing to be subjected to male scrutiny (for visual reference, see *WrestleMania XXIV*, DVD 1/3, 02:04:04). In other words, they affirm the postfeminist rationale of sexual availability of women for men as a sign of female sexual liberation that is marked by an easy-going, playful approach to the objectification of one's very own body. It would be easy to argue that Maria's and Ashley's opponents are the "Bad Girls", however, Beth Phoenix and Melina are in no way less sexualized, although the *Playboy* theme is missing from their entrance.

Snoop Dogg introduces Melina and Beth Phoenix[74] as being "vicious and delicious" and the two women approach the ring flanking Santino, the shunned ex-boyfriend of Maria, who so zealously tried to shield Maria from Ashley's influence and her taking part in the *Playboy* photo shooting. It appears that the "Bad Girl" does feature in three distinct ways in WWE, two of them explicitly, one only implicitly. First and foremost, the "Bad Girl" is the "Good Girl" with experience, one that has already made the transformation into a postfeminist icon, firmly rooted in their sexuality and physicality but never threatening male dominance. The second iteration of the "Bad Girl" is the female wrestler who is sexually available but potentially threatening in her demeanor, manipulative through her sexual appetite and thus both an object of desire as well as male weariness. AJ Lee, the "Black Widow" is one of those characters. I will discuss her later on in this chapter.

The third category of the "Bad Girl" is the one that is never explicitly mentioned because it is the most threatening and potentially subversive one. It is the idea of the woman as unavailable to the male gaze and to male wish-fulfilment, those femininities that in terms of the postfeminist rationale are considered abject, 'unreadable'. It makes sense that this type of woman that defies the postfeminist agenda by refusing to be subjected to the rhetoric of "doing it for herself" and making herself available for the fulfilment of male desires is almost, maybe entirely invisible in WWE narratives. A performance format that is so much concerned with making 'readable' gendered existences by constant reiteration cannot in its current form narrate these identities in any meaningful way that would not undermine its constant focus on stabilizing an already existing and deeply entrenched social discourse of what gendered identities can and cannot be.

The *Playboy* Bunny Match at *WrestleMania XXIV* ends with Santino, Jerry Lawler, and Snoop Dogg intervening in the match: Maria would have pinned Beth

[74] Beth Phoenix is an interesting case in and of herself: With her broader, more muscular appearance that clearly marks her as closer to a female bodybuilder-type, she is both considered a beautiful specimen by the commentators, as well as a potential threat to masculine primacy. During *Unforgiven 2007*, Beth Phoenix battled Candice Michelle for the Women's Championship, a bout that was preceded by a compilation of scenes showing Phoenix destroying other Divas with her strength and force. During the match, then, the commentators at ringside Jerry Lawler and Jim Ross are having an exchange that shows how uncomfortable Phoenix's power makes them: JR asks his colleague "Wanna date a Glamazon?" to which Lawler answers flustered "Ah… I don't think so. Not – not that Beth Phoenix is not beautiful but…" before JR abruptly changes the topic.

Phoenix had Santino not pulled her away from Beth. As a fan of Maria's transformation into a *Playboy* Bunny, commentator and former wrestler Jerry "the King" Lawler intervenes and punches Santino, much to the delight of the audience. Lawler becomes the physical consequence to Santino's unwillingness to 'share' his (ex-)girlfriend with the world, i.e., with other men, which marks Santino as a spoilsport for the male wish-fulfilment fantasy. This, in the logic of this narrative, needs to be punished in some way. Santino is shown not only as unable to prevent his girlfriend from leaving him and "doing it for herself" but is also shown to be incapable of defending himself against other, more manly men. That Beth Phoenix and Melina win the bout is inconsequential for the resolution of this narrative as it was never truly about women's free choice or women's capabilities in the first place, which becomes very much obvious by the end of the match: As Maria lies on the ring floor, mocked by Santino, the Italian is clotheslined by Snoop Dogg, who then kisses Maria in the middle of the ring, further humiliating Santino and making his claim on Maria.

2008's *Cyber Sunday* is another example showcasing the status of female wrestlers in WWE shows as one marked by the invitation to ridicule and sexually objectify women while effectively negating their prowess as athletes and performers. The pay-per-view, which was organized entirely around the premise of audience choice via an internet polling system that would determine bouts and match stipulations, did not feature a women's championship match or any other event that would put women's wrestling on (if not equal then at least) similar footing with men's wrestling. Instead, in a truly bizarre event-spanning manner, sixteen Divas were put in a Halloween costume contest (for visual reference, see *Cyber Sunday 2008*, DVD 1/1, 01:44:41). The audience was allowed to pick their favorite among an array of sixteen getups ranging from the entirely predictable to the comically pornographic: Divas dressed up, for instance, as Batgirl (Jillian), a Playboy Bunny (Maria), Cleopatra (Brie Bella), and Lara Croft (Mickie James) – pop-cultural icons closely associated with a fetish-like style, sexual availability, seductiveness, and objectification. Wrestler Maryse offered the audience the almost obligatory sexy French maid costume while Natalya showed herself as sexy officer. Tiffany and

Kelly Kelly, dressed up as sexy nun and sailor/captain respectively, borrowed heavily from pornographic conventions as well. Their slogans – "I will personally take you to Heaven" and "If you vote for me, I'll let you sail my ship any day" – balance on the postfeminist tightrope between ironic sexual self-awareness and blunt reproduction of pornographic tropes. Even the comic relief costume of Victoria, who dressed up as a giant banana, only works to highlight the already obvious sexual nature of the other contestants' getup and the purpose of this contest in general: Not only does the Banana-outfit lend itself to easy ridicule, but it also contains an undeniable phallic component that emerges within the context of an already hyper-sexualized parade of female bodies.

Similarly, at *SummerSlam 2004,* in a pay-per-view that like so many others saw no single women's match on screen, female wrestlers competed in a Diva Dodgeball match that was built on equally sexist notions of women's competitions as down-time-fillers, comic relief moments, and less worthy of attention than men's events. The two teams, "Team Dream" and "Team Diva", come jogging into a gym in what is most likely a pre-recorded part of the show. While "Team Diva" wear relatively functional and uniform attire, "Team Dream" enter the gym clad in colorful swimwear and shorts, not only highlighting their difference to "Team Diva" by emphasizing their individuality, but also furthering the idea of women being supplementary rather than essential to professional wrestling as a form of entertainment. It is clear that the display can be read at best as a simple filler segment before the next bout between men, and at worst as a variant of the 'meat market' trope that is so omnipresent in professional wrestling pre-PG. Both readings reveal how women's competitions or ambitions are represented as effectively only meant playfully and emphasizes their meaninglessness within a context of brawling men striving for transcendence.

As we have seen so far, women in wrestling preceding the PG-Era are discursively situated in the same narrow navigational social space as their real-life counterparts. While sexual availability of women is the presumed default that is, at the same time, framed as an act of empowerment and autonomy that needs to be performed to become modern women in a postfeminist social framework, female sexuality can

never be allowed to go overboard when it comes to self-assertion. As Ticknell et al. point out, "[w]omen are thus always willing – 'begging for it' – but it is men who retain sexual agency in the management of their response"[75] (Ticknell et al. 2003: 57). Indeed, it appears that female characters in wrestling narratives are frequently framed as villainous or desirable objects depending on and in relation to the men they pursue or are affiliated with. AJ Lee's manipulative spiel with fan favorites and baby-faced heroes such as Daniel Bryan and John Cena, for instance, showcases her as the epitome of female sexual self-assertion that − from the point-of-view of hegemonic gender normativity − has exceeded an acceptable level since it threatens male sexual agency and thus men's status as dominant and controlling agents in the social sphere.

That women's sexuality and sexual agency are often deemed fit to be subjects of ridicule whenever sexual behavior of women threatens men's control and dominance can be seen in a variety of segments from all wrestling eras. At *WrestleMania XXVIV* in 2013, for instance, wrestler AJ Lee accompanies her new boyfriend, Dolph Ziggler, and his tag team partner Big E Langston to the ring, where the two men will face Team 'Hell No!', Kane and Daniel Bryan. Lee used to be Bryan's girlfriend until one year prior when a kiss from her distracted Bryan so much that he lost his match for the World Heavyweight Championship in only eighteen seconds. During *SmackDown* the week following *WrestleMania XXVIII*, while AJ Lee tries to reassure him about her and the fans' continuing support, Bryan then makes his priorities clear. Despite the audience's repeating his signature Yes!-chant and despite AJ Lee's attempts at making him feel better about himself, he accuses the audience of mocking him and her of having sealed his fate with that kiss, calling it "the kiss of death". She is visibly shaken when he starts yelling at her, accusing her of having stolen his spotlight and that her selfishness for wanting that kiss ruined his life, before finally telling her "Get out of my ring!" (SmackDown 6th of April 2012). One year later when her former boyfriend(s) and her current lover meet each other at *WrestleMania*

[75] Naturally taking their cue from work done by Anthony Giddens, Luce Irigaray and Angela McRobbie, Ticknell et al. focus in their analysis on girl's/women's and men's magazines in Britain to show how these publications shape contemporary practices of gendered subject constitution. While their analysis is centered on the British cultural context (e.g., British 'laddism' in the 1990s and early 2000s), many of their observations and conclusions drawn from their survey are indicative of a larger cultural phenomenon that transcends national boundaries. Finding similar if not identical mechanisms at work in gendered discourses and practices reproduced in professional wrestling should come as no surprise to avid observers of pop-cultural productions.

XXVIV, the commentators at ringside, Jerry Lawler and JBL, shame her for the fact that she has had that many boyfriends:

> Lawler: [She] has dated everybody in this match, I think. Right?
> JBL: Except for the referee.
> Lawler: She's been on more manhunts than the FBI.

With AJ Lee's character and the way her sexuality is being framed in these two segments, several points need to be made: First of all, the way her relationship with Bryan comes to an end is a reiteration of a trope that envisions men's true potential being held back by women's influence or through romantic involvement with a woman[76]. The underlying myth here is that of the siren that beckons the sailor into his own demise through her allure and her sexual power. In the logic of Bryan's narrative[77] of the events at *WrestleMania XXVIII*, AJ Lee literally prevents Bryan from succeeding in his quest objective – retaining the championship. Romantic relationships and the work that comes with them, are thus again marginalized in men's narratives about themselves and, in effect, become, to use Bryan's own words, "a dead weight". Secondly, female sexual agency and women's active pursuit of sexual and/or romantic relationships are framed as shameful under the myth of female sexual passiveness and virtue. By making the pun about "manhunts", the commentator suggests that AJ Lee is not only chasing men but actively seeking to metaphorically put handcuffs on them – an image that again reinscribes the idea that women limit men's freedom.

The punishing of women's sexual agency contrasts with the patriarchal rhetoric of women's sexual availability. At *Night of Champions* in 2009, young upstart wrestler The Miz flirts heavily with French-Canadian co-star Maryse[78], who is stretching and getting ready for her Diva's match backstage. His advances, however, end in rebuttal:

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[76] Bryan's relationship with AJ Lee is, of course, not the only example of this trope. When Booker T rushes to defend his girlfriend rather than seizing an opportunity to win his Money-in-the-Bank Ladder Match at *WrestleMania XXIII in 2007*, the commentators are quick to point out his perceived folly: "Booker! To hell with her! You have plenty of women! […] That's what women will get ya".

[77] The footage from the match at WrestleMania XXVIII suggests clearly that it was Bryan who called on AJ Lee to give him a kiss, not the other way around. However, this has no impact on the way in which the discursive framing in terms of gender relations unfolds as we can clearly see by the way Lee's character is narrativized and embodied by herself and the commentators later on.

[78] Mike Mizanin, who plays The Miz, married Maryse in 2014.

Miz: Need some help stretching?
Maryse: [laughs] No.
Miz: I can't wait to watch you in action later on tonight. It's going to be awesome.
Maryse: Well, maybe if you meet me after my match, I'll show you my other moves.
Miz: [laughs] Really? [leans in to kiss her. She stops him]
Maryse: Oh, no. You didn't win the United States Championship tonight and I don't want to be seen with a loser. [as she turns to leave, he grabs her by the arm]
Miz: A loser? Who do you think you are? I get the whole hard-to-get thing but enough is enough. I'm the Miz, I can get any girl I want and you're gonna talk to me like that? [huffs] […]
Maryse: Listen, I'm a champion, so –
Miz: [interrupts her] You're not a champion, you're a tease. And one day, you're gonna lose that championship − could be tonight – and you're gonna come crawling back, you're gonna beg to be with me. But then it's gonna be too late. You had your chance and you butchered it, just like you butcher the English language every time you open your mouth. Au revoir, Maryse.

In this segment, Miz flirts heavily with Maryse: a performance of overt male sexual desire and entitlement that reaffirms the duality of masculine self-assertion and female sexual availability. Maryse's reaffirmation of her own agency – rejecting his public advances for fear of being seen with a non-champion – is met with anger, testimony to a man's pride being hurt by her rejection. This scene does not only unintentionally reveal the fragility of hegemonic masculinities existing within the narrow confines of heteronormative performance, but at the same time frames women's relationship to men and female wrestlers' status in particular. First of all, Maryse's rejection does not automatically turn her into a favorable character. Rather, her unwillingness to be seen in his presence and to stroke his ego by being his conquest underlines her position as a heel within the diva's division: She turns into the embodiment of 'the bitch' who refuses a man because she thinks she is better than him – a factor that in turn seems to legitimize his verbally abusive response. This is only further cemented by the fact that she is not unwilling to have sex with him per se but simply refuses to as long as she, the Diva's Champion, could be seen and associated with him, a man who lost the last time he had a shot at the title. Secondly, his accusation "You're not a champion, you're a tease" and the idea that once she lost her championship she would come "crawling back" to him devalues the Diva's title by reducing it to a mere token of a second-rate competition that is always secondary to male accomplishment: He still expects her to be sexually available to him and is

infuriated by the notion that she could believe that she is better. The attempt to regulate her own sexuality, to exert agency, within this logic must be punished and her slightly dejected look captured by the camera as he leaves her standing in the hallway seems to suggest that she is indeed affected by this rhetoric. Women's sexuality, thus, is still deeply entrenched in a postfeminist discourse in professional wrestling.

4.4 Women in Charge - Stephanie McMahon and Women in Powerful Positions

And yet some people might argue that WWE especially has made a hard turn toward representing greater gender equality, not least because women − both on the level of company structure and organization as well as on the level of narratives on display – have slowly but surely become not only more prominent but have also gained more powerful and visible positions. However, to evaluate the potential for a change on the discursive level, we need to have a much closer look at the women in question, the respective roles they take on within the company and within storylines, as well as the way in which these women and characters are narrativized. In the following, I will be focusing on two specific examples from the 2000s and 2010s – that period in which WWE transitioned from its Attitude Era to Ruthless Aggression and finally to the PG Era. Within these transitions, two women − who seem to have made a lasting impact on perceptions of women in professional wrestling in- and outside of the ring − stand out for their own transformations from sidekicks and characters-as-plot-devices to aggressive and ambitious figures within the industry.

The development of these women as central figures in storylines (and often also as real-life entrepreneurs with determining influence over company decisions) is intricately linked to WWE's involvement as a company and entertainment product in the perpetuation of neoliberal agendas. As Rosalind Gill argues, "[n]eoliberalism is increasingly understood as constructing individuals as entrepreneurial actors who are rational, calculating and self-regulating" (Gill 2008: 443). While we have already seen in chapter 3 that ambitious, influential and – crucially – already economically and socially powerful characters are often viewed with suspicion and often occupy

the position of heels in WWE's storylines, the overall make-up of many narratives presented here shows a tendency toward leaving the underlying notion of neoliberal self-regulation intact despite the narrativization of these authority figures as unlikable.

Vickie Guerrero is certainly one of these female characters. Summarizing Myra Macdonald's elaborations from 1995's *Representing Women,* Rosalind Gill points out that "older women, bigger women, women with wrinkles, etc. are never accorded sexual subjecthood and are still subject to offensive and sometimes vicious representations. Indeed, the figure of the unattractive woman who wants a sexual partner remains one of the most vilified in a range of popular cultural forms" (Gill 2007: 152). The character of Vickie Guerrero certainly falls into the category of this cultural stereotype: The real-life widow of wrestler Eddie Guerrero, Vickie Guerrero became a recurring character and took on the role of talent agent for several wrestlers, including her storyline-lovers Edge and Dolph Ziggler, and also became SmackDown's General Manager (GM), a role that gave her power over rule-making and match pairings alike. In the official company-licensed *WWE Encyclopedia*, Vickie Guerrero is described as a "power-hungry witch", a "cunning GM" who "proceeded to abuse her power" (Shields and Sullivan 2012: 365). She is a "Cougar" (ibid.) – an often pejoratively used colloquial term referring to middle-aged or older women who seek sexual relationships with much younger men − and even wears a necklace with the term at all times when entering the arena. With her short stature and Pixie haircut, Guerrero contrasts starkly with other women in WWE, who, as we have seen already, are almost always younger, slim, and are – even for brawls – coiffed to perfection with long, waving manes that signal femininity and eroticism. Guerrero's character's shrill voice paired with her well-known yell of "Excuse me?!" to get the audience's attention have made wrestling fans love to hate her.

On the 4th of May 2009 at RAW, Santino Marella is seen in a backstage segment with Kelly Kelly. He uses the opportunity to viciously mock Vickie Guerrero:

> Santino: You're going to have so much fun tag-teaming with my twin sister, Santina. […] Unfortunately, she could not be here this week because last week she was breathed on by Vickie Guerrero, and she has come down with the swine flu. And that's funny because Vickie Guerrero [grunts like a pig] is pig-like. […]

[Chavo appears behind Santino]
Chavo: Are you making fun of my aunt?

The constant insults of Santino and Santina − his alter ego he sells as his sister[79] − lead to a feud between him and Vickie and her nephew Chavo. This feud essentially serves as comic relief with Santino as a character portrayed as simply not manly enough to really compete against other men and Vickie Guerrero as a truly unlikable female character whose humiliation and degradation is a constant theme reappearing in storylines during her career. At *Extreme Rules* in 2009, Vickie Guerrero gets ready for a Hog Pen Match against Santina Marella to defend her Miss WrestleMania title. In the run-up to this match, Santino won the chance to determine the re-match stipulations for that fight and decided on this type of match-up, yet Vickie, then still General Manager of RAW, uses her authority to change the odds in her favor by bringing in her nephew Chavo and thus turning the fight into a Handicap Hog Pen Match. The display begins with Jerry Lawler, dressed in white rubber boots, entering a hog pen that has been placed next to the central stage. Next to the live hogs is an area filled with what looks to be a mixture of manure and mud. The ensuing bout has Chavo reluctantly fighting for his aunt, who basically bosses him around, before Vickie tags herself in when she believes victory is hers and she can safely make the pin. However, Santino in the disguise of Santina is able to get up again and pin Vickie for the win. As Chavo and Vickie (for visual reference, see *Extreme Rules 2009*, DVD 1/1, 01:25:33) attempt to crawl out of the pen, Santina, drenched in mud and slop, is crowned Miss WrestleMania.

While certainly humorous in its intent, the whole display is extremely uncomfortable and crowd reaction is minimal. Butt of this joke are all involved, Santino/a as much as Vickie Guerrero. Her body, demeanor, and ambitions are not only always contrasted with other female performers in the company (and almost always found lacking), but she is also vilified for her attempts at trying to attain recognition as a woman in the WWE universe. Since the narratives of the time only allow women to hold two more or less 'prestigious' titles − the Diva's Championship

[79] He did so to be able to have a title shot at the Diva's Championship since he was not able to compete against the men. See also chapter 5.

and the Miss WrestleMania title for which female wrestlers are allowed to compete in a Battle Royale – Guerrero's only option to signify femininity is to win and hold either of those titles. However, the title of Miss WrestleMania becomes unable to signify 'true' femininity in the narrative's logic: Guerrero's age, body, style, and demeanor disqualify her within the discourse of gender ideology from ever becoming a feminine subject in the same way other female wrestlers can. Just as there are hierarchies within structures of hegemonic masculinity that exclude certain men and masculinities from signifying and exerting power (cf. Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), certain femininities are continuously discursively degraded in terms of their socio-cultural value, i.e., their power to signify femininity. Instead of perceiving the body as produced by social discourse and social practices – by performance, as Butler would say – female wrestling characters' bodies are said to be the cause that brings into being types of femininity that inherently, or so goes the tale, carry more or less prestige in the game of gendered existence. Within that logic, older women, women who do not fit the ideal of the sexy and willing female, or women who are perceived to overreach in their sexual lives in any way and violate arbitrary norms of social life that are deemed 'natural' need to be visibly excluded from being able to signify 'true' femininity. Guerrero with her younger boyfriends and 'Cougar' necklace, her bossy attitude and manipulative tendencies becomes the Other, not just for men but also for other women with whom she contrasts in her own performance of femininity.

On SmackDown on the 28th of January 2011, a weirdly unpleasant scene unfolds between the then Acting General Manager of SmackDown Vickie Guerrero, Randy Orton, and Dolph Ziggler. Vickie is alone inside the ring making an announcement in her usual shrill voice when Orton enters the arena and walks towards her. He is meant to team up later in the show with wrestler Edge in a bout against Vickie's boyfriend and client Dolph Ziggler and his partner The Miz, to whose WWE Championship Orton is the Number 1 Contender. The following exchange ensues (for visual reference, see "SmackDown: Randy Orton informs Dolph Ziggler he must earn respect", SmackDown, 28th of January 2011, 00:00:09):

Guerrero: Excuse me! [crowd boos] Randy, I don't understand what you are doing out here. You don't have a match until later on tonight.

Orton: Vickie, Vickie, listen to me: Just relax, okay? [crowd chants: "RKO!"] Vickie, I am only here to show my appreciation for being invited here to SmackDown. Now, I don't know you all that well, Vickie. Never really had the privilege to get to know you so [pause; he leans down toward her] you will have to excuse me [crowd laughs and cheers]. [He slowly walks around her] Vickie, you're gonna have to excuse me for what I am gonna do to your boyfriend later tonight. [cheers] Just like the Miz is going to have to excuse me this Sunday when I take the WWE Championship away from him. Now, Vickie, as for you … [he comes closer to her, putting his arm around her shoulder and looks weirdly at her head; an audience member shouts: "RKO her!"] By the way… nice hair. [crowd laughs, shouts "RKO!"] Now, as for you, Vickie, there is no excuse.

[Ziggler enters]

Ziggler: Who do you think you are? Nobody talks to the acting General Manager that way. Alright? Do you have any idea who she is? Do you have any idea who I am?

Orton: Dolph, I'm pretty sure the same guy I beat two weeks ago on RAW.

Ziggler: Actually Randy, I'm the guy who's gonna be World Champion this Sunday. So you will show me respect. [crowd boos] Just like you'll show Vickie Guerrero respect. Never again, never again will you disrespect me, my girlfriend, and everyone who stands behind us. [crowd boos] You remember that the next time you come on my show and run your mouth. After Monday, after tonight, you will have no choice but to show me respect.

Orton: Well, I'm sorry, Dolph, 'cause around here, you gotta earn your respect.

[Orton RKOs him; Vickie Guerrero then kneels next to a knocked-out Ziggler]

The creepiness of the first part of the conversation is being remarked upon by commentator Michael Cole, yet the implications of the display remain ineffective in giving the crowd pause in regard to their reactions. Vickie Guerrero is marked as the unlikable villain, the bossy woman who abuses her position of power to gain an unfair advantage for her clients and who hogs the spotlight despite the crowd's vocal displeasure at her being there.[80] Her position as a villainous, opportunistic figure within the constellation of characters in the unfolding storyline and Orton's position as a face at the time give sanction to his behavior toward her that, in fact, demonstrates a case of how powerful female characters are intimidated and kept in check by male physical prowess and wit. Orton not only degrades her by his sarcastic remarks and imitating her catchphrase – "excuse me" – but shows her actual

[80] The crowd's reaction, of course, needs to be interpreted again as a layered one because of its double-situatedness in both the narrative universe – in which the reaction signals true displeasure at her character –, and in the 'real-life' context – in which the audience as customers entertain themselves through their communal reaction to her and can relish the experience. In other words, the reaction we see here is both a marker of genuine dislike of a character and genuine pleasure that is generated through being allowed to openly and communally mock said character.

powerlessness through his towering physical presence and uninvited entering into her personal space despite her visible uneasiness. Orton is well known for attacking other male and female wrestlers and promotors out of the blue with his finisher, the RKO, and so her worry seems warranted.

Two things take place at the same time in this scene: First of all, Orton's character, while 'in the right' in terms of narrative setup and character constellation – Ziggler, Guerrero and the absent Miz are at that moment considered far more amoral, selfish and dislikable than Orton is – displays a behavior that contributes to a discursive endorsement of attitudes and practices that always favors male physical dominance over any systemic position that would allow women to exert power or dominance. While Vickie as the general manager may have the opportunity and authority to set up certain bouts and fix specific stipulations, thus shaping the men's experiences within the ring and the obstacles that they have to overcome, this scene showcases that in the end her power is not only limited to one of the WWE brands but also always extraneous when faced with male power – 'true' power by the logic of WWE's narratives. It implicitly authorizes physical and psychological violence, or the threat of such violence, as legitimate means to intimidate women, who, in this universe, are shown to be utterly helpless when confronted with such behavior. It comes as no surprise then that Guerrero's boyfriend has to come to her rescue. The fact that he, too, is unable to defend himself, and that she then has little else she can do but to crouch next to her boyfriend while Orton is celebrated by the crowd, again shows the discursive position of women in this narrative world dominated by men: She is unable to retaliate (as any wrestler would do in this situation) or to prevent Ziggler from getting hurt. She is entirely dependent on male assistance and protection and otherwise at the mercy of male dominance as soon as she enters the arena. Woman, again, is turned into the ultimate Other, that which has no access to the negotiating tools of the male space. Her attempts at contributing as more than an onlooker are doomed to fail.

Secondly, the audience, as in so many other cases, positions itself in the discourse negotiated in this scene. By calling for Orton to attack her with his finisher, the audience does not simply call for an act of punishment against a manipulative villain,

but implicitly also calls for violence against a character unable to defend herself from such an attack and openly delights in the possibility of Guerrero being forced into silence by physical means. Female power over men's physical aggression neither can nor must dominate the spheres of life in which men compete against each other, and must therefore be penalized. It stands to reason to ask the question whether this mechanism holds true for other women in powerful positions both in- and outside of the narrative framework. That is why I would like to look at Stephanie McMahon, the daughter of Vince McMahon and heir to the WWE empire.

In the *WWE Encyclopedia*, Stephanie McMahon's involvement with the company since 1999 has been summarized in a way that conflates storyworld and real-life events, as is so often the case with professional wrestling entertainment:

> Stephanie McMahon has transformed herself into one of the most powerful personalities in sports-entertainment. With an intoxicating combination of beauty and brains, she demands nothing short of excellence. If she doesn't get it from others, Stephanie isn't afraid to step in the ring and beat it out of somebody, much like her father, WWE Chairman Vince McMahon.
>
> (Shields and Sullivan 2012: 323)

McMahon is described as a sharp businesswoman "responsible for all the creative development in WWE as it pertains to television and pay-per-view programming, print, digital, and social media content", who "was recognized as one the of the 'Most Powerful Woman in Cable' by CableFAX magazine" (ibid.). Not only powerful within the narratives of WWE, but also through her prominent role as Chief Brand Officer for the company, McMahon has become somewhat of a business icon hailed for her continuous involvement with and promotional work for charity organizations and her push towards greater recognition of women in wrestling. However, her in-ring persona, while indeed one of the more powerful female agents in the narratives devised by WWE and a former Women's Champion, is often limited to the same roles and bound by the same restrictions as other female wrestlers – a fact that clearly shows how WWE is limited in its inventiveness and progressiveness by the very discourses it perpetuates.

I have already briefly mentioned one of the earliest appearances of Stephanie McMahon's character on TV when I analyzed the way in which women feature in

rites of passage, particularly wedding ceremonies, in WWE's narratives. Her abduction by the Ministry of Darkness and almost-marriage to its most well-known member, The Undertaker, is one of the most iconic representations of the damsel-in-distress motif in WWE history. Tied to a gigantic version of the cross-like symbol of the Undertaker, her only way to escape the fangs of the sinister entity was provided by Stone Cold Steve Austin, who came to her rescue and prevented the ceremony from being completed. Stephanie McMahon, however, was not the main object of strife, merely a vehicle, as is so often the case with WWE narratives in which women are involved: As Shields and Sullivan point out, Undertaker's attempt to wed the McMahon offspring was founded in his feud with Vince McMahon, Stephanie's father, who he wanted "to get to" (Shields and Sullivan 2012: 323).

Even more of her entry in the *WWE Encyclopedia* makes reference to the storylines in which her character was involved and in which she became a supplementary object in conflicts between men: Her relationship with wrestler Test became the grounds for her over-protective brother Shane staging an intervention in the form of a match between himself and Test at *SummerSlam 1999* in which the men brawled over whether the couple could stay together or not. As Shields and Sullivan put it: "In the end, Test won the match and *the right to continue his romance* with Stephanie" (ibid., emphasis added). As was the case with the Til Death Do Us Part Match between Kane and Matt Hardy for the right to marry Lita, Stephanie McMahon's own potential agency is completely negated by the discourse of male dominance and conflict solution: It is the men who get the chance to 'earn the right' to a woman and her body, and while the woman in question may be very vocal about her preferences, it is eventually not up to her to decide her fate.

Even in situations in which it appears that women take their lives and fates into their own hands, a deeply-rooted dependency upon other people – men – remains central to the narrative. Stephanie McMahon's engagement to Test is rendered null and void by the appearance of wrestler Triple H, who shows a video of him marrying a drugged-out and clearly unconscious Stephanie at a Las Vegas wedding drive-thru. Believing his daughter to be a victim of long-time thorn in the side of the WWE Chairman, Vince McMahon meets Triple H in a match at *Armageddon 1999* "[i]n an

attempt to salvage his daughter's good name" (Shields and Sullivan 2012: 323). Her involvement in the match in favor of Triple H and the subsequent reveal that they had actually planned the whole wedding as a plot for her to get back at her father for past wrongdoings is a truly interesting twist yet does not divorce her from the trope of female dependency.

While her relationship with Triple H marks a turning point for her in terms of success inside the ring, and while her status as daughter of the WWE Chairman gives her a lot of opportunities to exert power over male and female wrestlers alike, she is nevertheless limited in her role by the relatively inflexible rules that govern the representation of female characters in WWE storylines. While not limited to that year in any way, these limitations become very obvious in 2009 in the growing feud between her family and Randy Orton (cf. Seliger 2014). At RAW on January 19th, 2009, the audience cheer for Vince McMahon's return. McMahon invites Chris Jericho, who had been fired by Stephanie McMahon in her father's absence from WWE, to elaborate on his grievances. Jericho uses his time with McMahon to praise his business acumen and to disparage Stephanie for her decision to fire him.

> Vince: Well, I watched last week. Steph can be a little impulsive, impetuous sometimes. You don't believe she's made any progress at all as the GM of RAW?
> Jericho: Truthfully, Sir, I think she's regressed. She's even more of an insolent, petulant, selfish little princess than ever.

Jericho's rhetoric casts her not as a woman but as a child: With infantilization being one among many strategies used to other women, the objection to the argument that this scene disempowers her to some extent because she is perceived to be 'in the right' whereas Jericho is the narcissistic heel who is being taught a lesson in humiliation is rendered inconsequential for the interpretation of this scene: Stephanie McMahon's position as the chairman's heir is not just a source of power – a source of social capital, to use Bourdieu (e.g. 1984 [1979]: 114ff.) −, but also a factor that limits her in the gender discourse to the role of 'the daughter' whose ability to wield authority depends on her father's blessing. This becomes abundantly clear when father and daughter team up to put Jericho in his place: Vince basically allows his daughter to state the terms of Jericho's reinstatement in the company which she uses

to force him to apologize to herself and the audience, who immediately seize the opportunity to call for him to do so on his knees (for visual reference, see RAW, 19th of January 2009, DVD 1/3, 01:04:15). Visibly angry and wrestling with his pride, Jericho does as asked. She reinstates him and lets the crowd boo him all the way out of the ring. Her authority in this scene is given to her by her father's decree, who, upon his return to WWE, has naturally assumed power over the proceedings once again. One could argue that this is more due to the socio-political meaningfulness of seniority rather than gender, however, as the rest of the scene unfolds, we can see that this would be a reductive argument.

As Jericho leaves, Randy Orton enters and complains to Vince that Stephanie slapped him earlier in the evening for his perceived insolence and demands Vince to force her into apologizing to him.

> Vince: Why would I do that, Randy?
> Orton: Because I am worth more than she is [audience booing]. Because I am going to win the Royal Rumble this Sunday, go on to headline WrestleMania, making you millions of dollars because people pay to see me and not you [points at Stephanie]. And you might not want to admit this, but ever since your daughter here has popped you out a couple of grandkids [booing], she's become essentially worthless.

The openly misogynistic opinions expressed by this character to shame and devalue Stephanie in the face of her own father may appear crass and excessive even for professional wrestling, and they do produce a generally accepted and expected negative response from the audience. However, the sentiment expressed by Orton in this scene is one deeply rooted in patriarchal discourses and despite his position within this narrative as the designated heel, the utterances give credence through repetition to a sentiment that in more or less dire forms is still dominating social discourses around women.

In her article "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture", Sherry B. Ortner argued convincingly that there is indeed an "underlying logic of cultural thinking that assumes the inferiority of women" (Ortner 1974: 68) and that this logic is grounded in and perpetuated by explicit devaluations through cultural ideologies, implicit devaluation through symbolic devices, and further fostered by socio-structural

arrangements that exclude women from cultural participation on the grounds of, for instance, tradition. She argues that, while the "woman = nature / man = culture"-argument is an oversimplified one, the cultural discourse that simply finds women to be "more rooted in, or having more direct affinity with, nature" (ibid. 73) is a discourse perpetuated through relations of power that are, in turn, to insert Gramsci and Foucault again, fostered by the very discourse they produce. Thus, woman's "physiological functions have tended universally to limit her social movement" (ibid. 77). For instance, the fact of female lactation binds her to the home and the caregiver role in the cultural imaginary. While the extreme misogynistic opinion voiced by Randy Orton marks him as a heel in this segment – which is acknowledged by the audience through a loud, negative reaction – the underlying logic, I would argue, is left intact: Stephanie McMahon's role is shown to be important because she gave birth to Vince's grandchildren and remains important because of her role as mother to these children. She is also acknowledged as Vince's daughter, however not as a legitimate heir to or leader within the company. This is only highlighted by the fact that Vince sends her away to deal with Orton's audacity: Within the narrative, it is not her place to defend herself against Orton's rhetoric or to put him in his place. Instead, she is sent away by her father and in obliging defers further judgement to him instead of being allowed to or taking the right to answer Orton's accusations and delusions herself.

After Stephanie has left the arena, Vince, almost overwhelmed by anger, addresses Orton: "Who the hell do you think you are? You're standing in my ring, in my universe I created and you are privileged to be in it" (RAW, 19th of January 2009). Before Vince can terminate Orton's contract, the latter first slaps and then punts the Chairman – doing so amid the "RKO!"-chants from the audience. It is then that Stephanie returns to the ring screaming for help. As so many other women in professional wrestling do, she kneels next to her unconscious father, unable to do anything but wait for medical personnel to take care of the situation (for visual reference, see RAW, 19th of January 2009, DVD 1/3, 01:09:52). This very much emphasizes yet again how comparatively limited women's power is to be able to participate in WWE's narratives of violence, revenge, and justice, even despite

inherently authoritative positions they may occupy. It could be argued that her husband, Triple H, is later on put in the very same position when his wife is attacked by Orton on February, 16th that very year: In a scene reminiscent of the situation a few weeks prior, Stephanie first kneels over the unconscious body of yet another family member – this time her brother Shane (for visual reference, see RAW on the 16th of February, DVD 1/3, 01:16:57) – before she is being attacked herself. As paramedics enter the ring to take care of the two injured McMahons, Triple H kneels next to his wife holding her hand while looking over to Orton, who retreated with his fellow stable members to the top of the stage. First distraught by his wife's injury, his face soon turns into a grimace inflamed with rage. It is clear to any onlooker that Triple H himself will turn into the consequences for Orton's actions and that what follows will be a narrative marked not by retribution, but rather by retaliation and revenge. Whereas her husband is allowed agency within the structure and logic of the ring that grants him the means to get back at Orton and avenge his family, Stephanie McMahon, much like other women, is excluded from these acts in most, if not all instances.

Whenever women suffer from the attacks of men in these narratives, they are in need of a male family member, partner, or friend to protect them, put the culprit in his place, or seek payback on their behalf. It is neither in female characters' realm of possibilities to act on their own behalf in these circumstances, nor is it possible for them to stop the cycle of vengeance and violence by exercising forgiveness or seeking any other conflict solution strategy. They are bound by the logic of constant strife between men to reaffirm their own masculinity: The way professional wrestling narratives work to reaffirm hegemonic beliefs of what it means to be a man conversely have an influence on how women can position themselves within these narratives in relation to – and only in relation to – the masculine gender project that is being sold as being without any alternative. Neither men nor women can within this logic break with the perceived to be normal conflict resolution strategies of verbal abuse and physical violence that perform and reinscribe the bodies on display as 'readably gendered'. Any suggestion that would potentially point out the futility and harmfulness of this project is either ignored or must be met with ridicule or scorn to

delegitimize or at least disempower these approaches.[81] In other words, not only would wrestling stop being wrestling if non-violent conflict resolutions would become part of the narratives displayed: The most integral part of the project, namely its reaffirmation of hegemonic notions of gender and the heteronormative matrix, would have to be called into question and would eventually deconstruct itself in the process. The Orton-McMahon feud eventually and unintentionally is about the toxicity of socially impelled male pride, their precarious situation of beings called upon to reaffirm their gendered existence, and the restriction women's agency enforced by those same structures. It is what triggers the drama in the first place, veils that it proposes a solution for the problem itself produced: If men's identity, their subjecthood, was not constantly called into question, other means of conflict management could be conceived of and realized.

At *WrestleMania XXXII*, the main event for the WWE World Heavyweight Championship between Triple H and Roman Reigns is prefaced by a promotional segment that puts strong emphasis on the conflict between integrity and the allure of corruption as Roman Reigns first refused to join The Authority (Triple H and Stephanie McMahon) after his victory and capture of the title and then entered a feud with Triple H in the following months. Despite Reigns technically being in the position of the face character, the audience reacts negatively towards him. This might in part arise from the way Triple H is framed in WWE narratives, i.e., as an indestructible force that is appealing to audience in equal parts because of the character's resilience, strength, brutishness, unwillingness to compromised, and 'hard' image on the one hand, and his chummy, witty, self-aware humorous side on the other hand. At *WrestleMania XXXII*, the former is heavily emphasized not least because of Stephanie McMahon's introduction that leads to her husband's entry into the arena. The audience see on the Titantron a mass of clones in suits with sealed mouths that seem to suffer great pain. Standing on a throne fashioned to resemble an iron cross and wearing a skull mask, a black tiara with silver spikes, as well as a leather outfit to evoke dominance, she speaks the following lines:

[81] See chapter 3.

> Rise in the presence of The Authority and show your respect. You are merely the blind sheep who follow. You exist to serve us. We are the providers and protectors. We are the leaders and the chiefs and the generals. We are the absolute power. *We own you*. You are mere shells of humanity, hanging on to the empty notion of hope; hope for a savior, hope that someone or something will take away the pain that is your pathetic lives. But hope gets pulverized at the hands of reality and tonight will be no different, because after tonight, all hope will be gone. Because there can be only one standing in this – the coliseum of mere mortals – as the undisputed champion. Only one who takes the breath of his opponents with barbaric fortitude. Only one who wears the sharpened crown. Now bow down and grovel at his feet. He is the King, the King of Kings. The Cerebral Assassin. The Game. Triple H.

With this, Triple H enters the stage and walks down the ramp followed by his 'Queen' and several guards wearing skull masks. While her speech clearly casts her character in the light of a powerful wordsmith, an agitator, her function remains that of an adjunct to her husband's feud. She is, effectively, copying his gimmick, and, one could argue, fuses with it and becomes a narrative vehicle for her husband's feud. This incorporation of her into his gimmick will have another iteration the following year at *WrestleMania XXXIII* when McMahon and Triple H enter the arena on a black trike – of course, with him in the driver's seat and her sitting behind him (for visual reference, see *WrestleMania XXXIII*, DVD 1/3, 02:35:16).

I would argue that this one-ness, this consolidation of women into men's gimmicks, can be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, one could argue that women thus are given space in a male-dominated system of signification to which they would otherwise have no access. The danger in such an approach lies in the reestablishment of male primacy that is inherent to this process: Where man is powerful in and of himself, woman is invested with power through her affiliation with man. To put it in psychoanalytical terms, she cannot signify anything that goes beyond the concept of "man's other", i.e., "that which lacks", which becomes especially highlighted in a narrative environment in which processes of meaning making are controlled by patriarchal discourses. Rather, Stephanie McMahon's and other powerful female characters' positions within WWE narratives are always, to a greater or lesser extent, dependent on and relative to men's positions within the universe.

4.5 "Women's Revolution"?

It seems, however, that WWE is undergoing a change when it comes to the representation of women in their shows. The developments that led up to a more prominent role of women in professional wrestling narratives were triggered by several coinciding processes, both from within and from outside of the company itself. While WWE's NXT division, in which young talents could be tested before a smaller audience, quickly gained steam after its inception in 2010, drew in an ever-growing number of female wrestling talents and thus laid the groundwork for the changes in the Diva's division of the main roster, it was the hashtag #GiveDivasAChance that first forced WWE to focus on audiences' demands for a greater visibility and better representation of women in professional wrestling. #GiveDivasAChance seems to have first been around on Twitter in 2011, but only started being used widely after the infamous 30-second match on February 23rd, 2015, between the Bella Twins and their opponents, Paige and Emma. The hashtag generated much attention and trended on Twitter which led to Vince McMahon finally putting out a statement that acknowledged it and hinted at future changes.

At RAW on July 13th, 2015, Stephanie McMahon, according to WWE's YouTube page, "launches a revolution in the Divas division" by introducing new female wrestlers from the NXT program to the main roster. Inside the ring, veteran divas Nikki and Brie Bella, as well as Alicia Fox, are begrudgingly faced with young newcomer Paige and the support given to her idea of a Divas' revolution by Stephanie McMahon, who announces to the women in the ring and the audience at the arena that

> Paige is out here because I wanted her out here. […] Things are going to change right now. Now, I want this revolution here in WWE, Paige wants this revolution, but Paige, courage can't do it by itself. It takes more than that. You need backup. I know someone who has had to scratch and claw and fight for everything that they've ever gotten. Somebody who is not afraid of the fire, somebody I would want in the foxhole with me. So, joining Paige right now is Becky Lynch. [Lynch enters and is cheered by the audience] […]
> So, joining forces with Paige will be a woman who was bred for this business. Someone who is high stylin' and profilin' [mimics Ric Flair[82]], someone who has said she genetically superior: Ladies and gentlemen, Charlotte! […]

[82] Wrestling veteran Ric Flair is Charlotte's father, hence her belief that she was "bred for this business" and "genetically superior" to other female wrestlers.

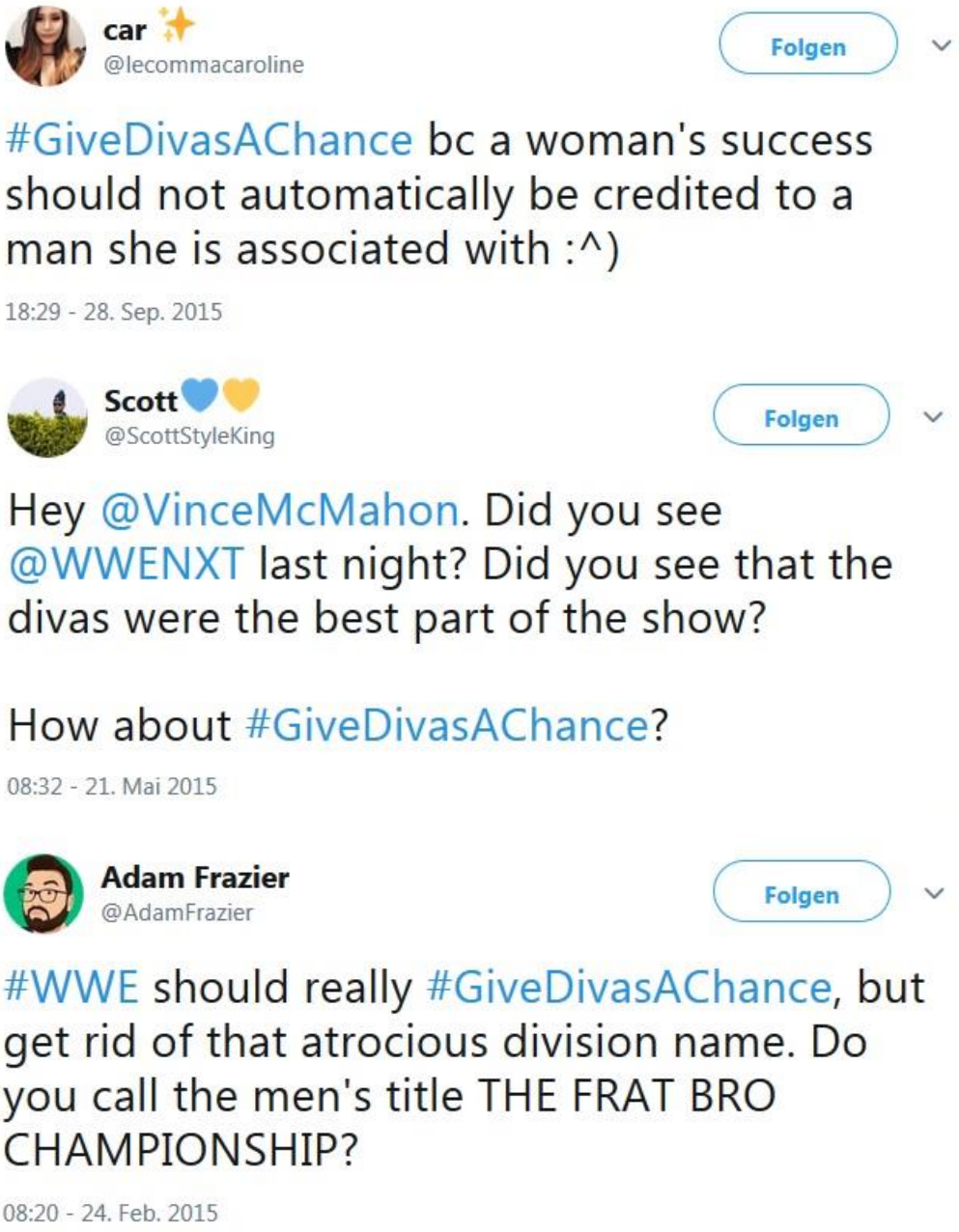

Figure 41: Three examples of tweets concerning the hashtag #GiveDivasAChance that was trending in 2015 and arguably helped push for a change in the portrayal of female wrestlers in WWE shows.

Figure 42: Fans complaining on Twitter after the 30-second Diva's match on February 23rd, 2015, and Vince McMahon's response one day later.

Also introduced to the main roster this evening is NXT women's champion Sasha Banks, whose nickname "The Boss" paired with an ambitious athletic wrestling style made her popular with audience members, who for the longest time were rather disappointed with WWE's main shows and turned towards NXT for more varied entertainment. As Lynch, the Bella twins, Paige, Fox, and Charlotte are joined in the ring by Banks and two other veteran female wrestlers – Naomi and Tamina Snuka – the crowd reacts with "This is awesome!"-chants, which testifies to how interested and passionate many fans are about the change in WWE's women's division. Having the NXT-divas being 'put over', i.e., being introduced to the main roster by being shown to dominate the veterans Fox and Nikki and Brie Bella, indeed managed to make the divas division much more interesting to the mainstream WWE audience and generated new revenue for the company. Only a year later, the Divas Championship – that was much ridiculed both for its name and its garishly childish butterfly design that was indicative of the position of female wrestlers' competition as less than secondary to men's wrestling (for visual reference, see, for instance, *SummerSlam 2010,* DVD 1/1, 00:21:00) – was eventually retired and exchanged for the RAW Women's championship in April 2016 (Sullivan, Pantaleo, and Greenberg 2016: 407).

The first match for the new Women's title indeed feels like a game changer when compared to earlier versions of women's wrestling known from the 2000s and early 2010s. The Triple Threat Match between the three former NXT rookies Becky Lynch, Charlotte, and Sasha Banks at *WrestleMania XXXII* (2016) gave audience not only a long and compelling bout between female wrestling talents, it also offered a new way of presenting women from a narrative and rhetorical perspective. The commentators at ringside have a decidedly different way of speaking the women brawling inside the ring, changing from a focus on 'beautiful Divas' to the word "Superstar" that is also used for the male wrestlers. Michael Cole says that "It's every superstar for themselves", that "the superstars [are] doing everything to win the women's championship", and that "this is the moment where these three superstars have to dig down deep – Who's got more left? Who's got what it takes to win the Women's Championship?". The change is indeed so remarkable and so deliberate

that the shift toward marketing women's wrestling in a more 'mature', less blatantly sexualized and sexist fashion must have had a conscious and purposeful impact on the commentator's choice of words – this is by no means a chance development. Furthermore, the commentators' rhetoric narrativizes the match by introducing a strong focus on resilience and perseverance that is – until that point – relatively unusual for women's matches and a trope that is normally found and much more pronounced in men's storylines. However, these are not the only changes that become apparent in this first women's match at *WrestleMania* after the announcement of the Women's Revolution.

This event is particularly interesting when analyzing the development of the representation of women in WWE because of the doubled reversal of a well-known and continuously reinscribed 'woman-as-adjunct' motif that we have already discussed. Instead of women accompanying men to the ring as little more than accessories, this match sees Sasha Banks walking down the ramp with her cousin Snoop Dogg who also introduces her musically, while Charlotte is followed by her father, wrestling legend Ric Flair. The commentators explain that Charlotte's robe that is, of course, reminiscent of her father's former garments, is also made from pieces of the robe he wore in Orlando at *WrestleMania XXIV*, calling the connection a "legacy of greatness" (JBL at *WrestleMania XXXII*). Flair will become instrumental in his daughter's victory that night when he prevents her opponent and fan-favorite Sascha Banks from breaking up Charlotte's submission hold on Becky Lynch. I would argue that this is one of the still rare but now finally conceivable ways in which professional wrestling is able to change gender performances. Butler argues that "the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style" (Butler 1988: 520), and it is indeed "a different sort of repeating" that we find in this remarkable match. Yet while 2016 saw truly interesting developments in the women's division, the transformation of women's professional wrestling in the WWE was not yet complete.

On Monday Night Raw, July 23rd, 2018, Stephanie McMahon, accompanied by her (real-life and 'kayfabe') husband, Triple H, and father, WWE mogul Vince

McMahon, announced what she called the "first-ever all-women's Pay-Per-View" for October that year. Under the title *Evolution*, roughly fifty women would participate in several matches, amongst them a match for the women's championship. The TV announcement was followed by advertising statements on several channels from wrestlers and WWE officials, amongst them the official @WWE twitter account that featured a video of the announcement. Furthermore, in early 2018, former mixed-martial arts fighter and first female UFC champion Ronda Rousey joined WWE on a permanent contract, which brought further publicity to WWE's women's division. Like wrestlers Natalya and Charlotte, who both are linked through family relations to former wrestling champions – Bret Hart and Ric Flair respectively – Rousey makes use of style elements associated with another prominent wrestling figure, in her case the late "Rowdy" Roddy Piper.

Rousey was immediately put into a storyline that teamed her with veteran wrestler Kurt Angle and pitched her against the Authority, Stephanie McMahon and Triple H, a feud that developed into a much-anticipated mixed tag-team match between the four competitors at *WrestleMania XXXIV* in April 2018. The mixed tag-team match is a rare occurrence in WWE and tried to conjure up a new way of thinking in WWE when it comes to the ways in which relationships between men and women – wrestlers in both instances – can be portrayed. The mixed match in 2018 suggests the idea of an equal partnership between two athletes of different gender, working together to reach a common goal: the reassertion of dominance over another team.

Do these developments in WWE's women's division bode well for the state and evolution of the role and representation of women in professional wrestling? It would be easy to answer this question with an – albeit timid – 'yes': The advancements made in women's wrestling have become very apparent in the past five to ten years, particularly in WWE. While theirs is by far not the only successful women's division in the world or even in North America, WWE's business's expansion via the WWE Network, its social media presence and target-audience specific marketing have placed their female wrestlers center-stage on the world entertainment sports market. Developments in WWE are always widely received and discussed, even by those wrestling fans who have rejected WWE as 'too mainstream' or 'not hardcore

enough'. That WWE – especially under the increasing influence of Stephanie McMahon behind the scenes and as the company's most prominent spokeswoman – has made and continues to make an effort to distance itself from Bra-and-Panty-Style matches[83] and narratives that represent women's existence as merely tokenistic or as second-rate motivation for the male characters to engage in combat (the prime motivation, of course, being the championship as principle signifier of masculine prowess and accomplishment), has widely been well received, particularly by female audience members. The reactions to the announcements of the first women's pay-per-view main event in WWE history and the All-Women's-PPV *Evolution* in 2018 show that female wrestling fans' desire for a more empowered representation of heroines and female heels as more than eye-candy is increasingly prominent and more vocal than ever. Being more inclusive and less blatantly sexist in the crafting of narratives for wrestling shows does not seem to have harmed the company's economic standing despite a vocal number of fans and doomsayers – men in particular – who see WWE's perceived progressive stance regarding women's representation in the business as a move of betrayal, PC-pandering, and simply bad for business. It seems thus, at least when considering these latest developments, that the argument that WWE's variant of professional wrestling has managed to come up with a better formula of representing women in an era dominated by celebrities vocally supporting feminism, #MeToo, and resurgence of the Girl-Power-Idea is not too farfetched. However, such an interpretation, I contend, would neglect some vital aspects we have touched upon in our discussion of Judith Butler's approach to performances of gender.

I think we need to go a step further and ask whether, in any form or fashion, WWE is actually able to challenge heteronormative structures of gender performance: Does this new way of showing women doing gender inside the ring and during backstage segments actually subvert or at least threaten to subvert

[83] To name just one example: 2007 saw a Pudding Match during the *One Night Stand* pay-per-view. Borrowing heavily from soft-porn conventions, Melina and Candice Michelle, respectively wearing a bikini and cherry-print lingerie, brawl it out in a pool of pudding. When Candice wins, Maria steps close to interview her, is attacked with pudding my Melina, and, of course, jumps right into the fray, furthering the postfeminist notion of women enjoying sexualised displays intended for the male gaze. That these match types are frequently mocked and not taken seriously, and that these matches are often used as bathroom and/or smoking breaks by the audience, adds a layer of bitter irony to the whole display.

stereotypical narratives and practices of gender? In other words, do these performances fulfil a similar function as drag does in Butler's argument? I contend that the answer to this question is in no way a straightforward one. We could formulate an argument in favor of this viewpoint by looking at the context in which these women are being displayed since the dawn of the WWE's so-called Women's Revolution: Women are being portrayed as real athletes with real prowess, occasionally even besting men during bouts, accomplishing feats of strength that are framed as truly incredible and thus falling into the same style of performance that the male wrestlers' performances do. In a sense, these women are 'in drag', appearing in circumstances and accomplishing feats that call the perceived to be natural divide between men and women into question. It is also, one could argue, just like drag, a "copy of a copy", in wrestling even more literal than in other performative acts: Butler writes in *Gender Trouble* on the socio-politically revealing character of drag that

> [i]f the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performer, and both of those are distinct from the gender of the performance, then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance. […] *In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency*. Indeed, part of the pleasure, the giddiness of the performance is in the recognition of a radical contingency in the relation between sex and gender in the face of cultural configurations of causal unities that are regularly assumed to be natural and necessary. (Butler 1990: 187; original emphasis)

In other words, drag lays bare the socio-cultural mechanisms of fiction-making by which the idea of a naturalized sex, gender and desire comes into being and thus reveals their 'unnaturalness', their 'constructedness'. In a similar fashion, women in wrestling since the turn towards PG and the 'Women's Revolution', perform their own gender by imitating performances we see in and know very well from the male division of WWE: cat fights over men's attention and beauty pageant crowns and displays of sexual availability have largely turned into brawls over title shots and championship belts and narratives of loyalty vs. integrity, allegiances vs. personal gain. In repeating and copying men's storylines, motives, styles and rhetoric – as most prominently showcased by Charlotte and Ronda Rousey's imitation of Ric Flair and Roddy Piper respectively –, the wrestlers in WWE's women's division become a

copy of a copy as they reproduce not the very thing itself but what is essentially an exaggeration – an imitation with a difference, to borrow from Linda Hutcheon – of male gender performance.

At the same time, however, it needs to be acknowledged that these changes do not, in fact, render the display truly subversive despite their similarities to Butler's description of drag. While subversive drag performances disrupt the perceived congruity between sex and gender, WWE's representations of women and their performances tend to re-naturalize these potentially subversive displays by containing it within the age-old discursive duality of the sexes. As Butler states, drag does not perforce engender subversion, "drag may well be used in the service of both the denaturalization and re-idealization of hyperbolic heterosexual gender norms", and drag has many forms "that heterosexual culture produces for itself" (Butler 1993: 85). WWE's performances of women that can certainly be read in terms of drag as seen above then exemplify this mechanism, a "ritualistic release for heterosexual economy that must constantly police its own boundaries against the invasion of queerness" (ibid. 86), and, in our case, the invasion of female protagonists into a space and practice that is used to keep alive the rigid dichotomy of male and female.

One must not, I would like to add, fall into the trap of discounting the socio-political and representational disadvantages that women have faced in the past and are still facing today by ignoring women's historical struggles. Asked by reporters about the fact that 2017's *Hell in a Cell* did not see women being the main event, Becky Lynch answered: "Say for example you had Bray Wyatt in Hell in a Cell last year – I know he is not in our division, but if he's not in Hell in a Cell match this year, it's not a step backwards. Not for him or for the brand or for the company. It's just a rotation" (Lynch qtd. in Nissim 2017). She went on to explain that "[y]ou can't overdo it, as well. Or do it for the sake of, 'Oh there's a Women's Revolution so they have to have a Hell in a Cell match'. I think that's grasping at straws and that's forcing things" (ibid.). Lynch's answers to reporters show a lack of understanding for the historical depth for women's issues that is common in public discourses about pop-cultural representations of women, discourses that are an attempt at depoliticizing the act of representation. Saying that the company must not "overdo it"

when it comes to making women's matches the main event at pay-per-views by making the argument of it being "just a rotation" assumes two things: First of all, it assumes that women's matches have historically been just as likely main events as men's matches have been. Secondly, it assumes that making greater efforts to put more women in main event matches would be "forcing things", i.e., not letting the status quo develop on its own, in a presumed 'natural', 'organic' way. Both assumptions are inaccurate, the former because the equation of men's matches and women's matches when it comes to screen time and representational balance is flawed by its neglect of historical realities, the latter because of its underlying premise that the Women's Revolution and the subsequent first main event for women at *Hell in a Cell* was a 'natural', inspired by fans, and, in essence, not politically motivated development, whereas a greater effort on the side of the company towards a true balance between men's and women's representation in main events would be, conversely, following a political and therefore untoward agenda. Is professional wrestling in general, and WWE in particular, then falling back into old patterns, placating fans and female athletes with a token effort?

If Butler is correct in her argumentation that the assumed core to gendered identity is in fact produced by compelling performative recitations (Butler 1993: xxi) that produce "*on the surface* of the body" (Butler 1990: 185; original emphasis) the very identity they are said to reveal, and hide the fact that they are indeed merely a theatrical repetition rather than the grant revealing of a natural truth, and if Butler is correct in stating that "the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style" (Butler 1988: 520), then this transformative potential must indeed be present in WWE's performances and more generally in all performances of professional wrestling, for wrestling is an entertainment form that is intensely concerned with the meta-reflection of its own performative nature and the continuous production of gender(ed) performances. It is wrestling's very awareness of its own performativity, however, that, I would argue, bars wrestling from unfolding any revolutionary threat to entrenched conceptions of gender, as its constitution persistently invokes the paradoxical, co-existing binary of

its realness and ‘made-ness’. In essence, wrestling’s hyperrealness in the postmodernist sense, its double-situatedness in and as both reality and simulation, has a strong tendency to be marked as ‘play’ rather than serious political comment or performance.

Apart from the theoretical considerations that lead me to conclude that WWE indeed cannot use its subversive potential to actually have an impact on gender discourses – an impact that would favor a deconstruction of restrictive stereotyping − there are obvious political issues that have arisen with WWE’s latest economic decisions that more readily shine a light on WWE’s stance towards women and female representation. WWE’s decision to host events in Saudi Arabia amid strongly justified allegations of institutionally sanctioned murder of US-based journalist Jamal Khashoggi, as well as WWE’s concession of not letting female wrestlers compete in shows taking place in the ultraconservative country, do not exactly inspire confidence in WWE’s rhetoric of a ‘Women’s Revolution’. Indeed, I would argue that WWE’s decision to have Saudi Arabia host special pay-per-view events (for instance *Crown Jewel 2018*), in which women are forbidden to compete in an attempt to placate religious and cultural sensitivities that undermine women’s attempts at liberation and emancipation on a larger scale, makes WWE complicit in the system of an ongoing cross-cultural patriarchal pushback against feminists’ and human rights activists’ calls for equality.

5. Wrestlers, Wigs and Wardrobe Malfunctions – Cross-Dressing and Gender Bending

> […] to understand identity as a *practice*, and as a signifying practice, is to understand culturally intelligible subjects as the resulting effects of a rule-bound discourse that inserts itself in the pervasive and mundane signifying acts of linguistic life.
>
> (Butler 2006 [1990]: 198)

I have already touched upon major issues regarding wrestlers' bodies and attire and the connection between WWE's implicitly proposed ideals of masculinity that are created by juxtaposing male, undoubtedly athletic (and often white) wrestlers with wrestlers whose bodies mark a decisive departure from this ideal either in terms of size, shape, and capability, but also in terms of sex, age, ethnicity and nationality. I would like to explore another aspect that is frequently used to define masculinity via creating an 'other' against which ideal, hegemonic types of masculinity become intelligible. I have broadly subsumed these aspects under cross-dressing and gender bending, which demands for some important interpolations to be made before venturing forward.

First, while gender-bending and cross-dressing are two phenomena in their own right, they also often imply each other. Gender-bending is mostly understood as a broad term that encompasses activist notions, i.e., conscious actions of resistance to the hegemonic gender regime. Such actions may include cross-dressing as a form of gender modification and expression of identity. Drag as a variant of cross-dressing with its unique exaggerated style often fulfills the function of parody and satire of established gender rules and allows the cross-dresser via his or her artistic performance of gender to reveal its artificiality and inherently performative character (Butler 2006 [1990]: 184-185). As Joanne Entwistle explains in *The Fashioned Body*:

> Cross-dressing reveals the arbitrariness or masquerade of gender: if femininity can be put on at will by men, and masculinity worn in the style of 'butch', or by 'drag kings', then gender is stripped of its naturalness and shown to be a set of culturally regulated styles. Gender is thus dislocated from the body and shown to be performed through style: femininity and masculinity are not the product of female or male bodies and there

> is no natural connection between female bodies and femininity or male bodies and masculinity. However, if this is the case, it is not just cross-dressers who perform gender and wear drag; we all do, since all dress has only an arbitrary relationship to 'natural' sex (Entwistle 2000: 178).

Wrestling fans have seen their fair share of variants of cross-dressing over the years, which is unsurprising considering professional wrestling's close historical ties with other carnivalesque artforms and the circus, as well as a variety of cases of different forms of gender bending. While simply flamboyant characters such as The Nature Boy Ric Flair or John Morrison (for visual reference, see, for instance, *Royal Rumble 2009,* DVD 1/1, 01:37:45) with their garish wardrobe choices never truly push the boundaries of imagined gender norms within a framework that already requires the audience to accept exaggeration as the business's *modus operandi*, other characters, in fact, do produce more outlandish effects with their performances. Characters such as the Adorable Adrian Adonis in the 1980s, Exotic Adrian Street (who never wrestled for WWF or WWE but certainly influenced ways in which non-heteronormative characters could and would be displayed in wrestling), or Goldust in the 1990s and 2000s, with their mixture of incredible athleticism and in-ring capabilities and their effeminate, highly stylised behaviour always seem to oscillate between these varying elements that constitute the ambiguity that makes for the fascination and oftentimes unease these characters were able to create in the audience.

Explicit cross-dressing has a long-standing tradition in professional wrestling as well, with wrestlers like Kloudy aka Jimmy Shoulders in the 1996 ("With a blonde wig that fooled absolutely no one […]" [Sullivan, Pantaleo, Greenberg 2016: 196]), Charlie Haas dressing up as Beth Phoenix in 2008, or Santino Marella posing as his own twin, Santina, in 2010. Cross-dressing in wrestling is frequently employed for comic relief purposes and awkwardly teeters between imitations of failed attempts at 'passing' (that is hiding one's biological sex by mimicking dress and behavior of the opposite sex) and drag proper for satirical purposes. Marjorie Garber argues that "[c]ross-dressing is about gender confusion", "the power of women", "emergence of gay identity", "the anxiety of economic or cultural dislocation", and "the anticipation

or recognition of 'otherness' as loss" (Garber, qtd. in Flanagan 2008: 19) yet not all of this can be said to be true for performances of cross-dressing in its various forms in professional wrestling. I would like to shine a light on these issues by looking at two examples: the wrestling personas of Goldust and Santino Marella.

The character of Goldust debuted in WWE (then WWF) in 1995 (although Dustin Rhodes, the man behind the face paint, debuted five years earlier and only much later adopted the Goldust persona), and soon used his flamboyant style to his advantage. Called "The Bizarre One", he would frequently put his opponents at great unease with his garish ring gear, make-up, blonde wigs, and use advances that were clearly sexual in nature to upset characters who prided themselves on their tough-as-nails, straight-as-an-arrow attitude (Sullivan, Pantaleo, Greenberg 2016: 132).

The OED defines bizarre as "at variance with recognized ideas of taste, departing from ordinary style or usage; eccentric, extravagant, whimsical, strange […]" and "at variance with the standard of ideal beauty or regular form; grotesque, irregular" (*OED Online*, "bizarre", adj. 1a and b). Goldust, indeed, even in the middle of an already exaggerated display of drama and athleticism, appears to be an irregularity, grotesque in as much as he seems to behave in an absurd, semi-comical, semi-alienating fashion. While his bodysuit seems to suggest a kind of 'closedness' that his often scantily clad opponents seem to lack at first glance, his oral fixation and fetishized hunger for gold as well as his lack of respect for physical boundaries[84] make him a modern example of the Bakhtinian grotesque body (cf. Bakhtin 1968).

During his feud with Rowdy Roddy Piper preceding the infamous backlot brawl at *WrestleMania XII* in March 1996, he produced one of the most interesting, heavily edited and truly bizarre promos of his career. On the 25th of March 1996 on RAW, he was shown to stand in a Hollywood studio lot, quoting: "Little puppet made of pine, awake. The gift of life is thine. Pinocchio, 1940". He is caressing his own chest and face. When he turns, we see that he is with a mannequin dressed up as Rowdy Roddy

[84] In a segment at *Judgment Day* 2002, he is found in bed with his then tag team partner Booker T and Booker's female lover. Much to Booker's dismay, Goldust crawled into their bed without them noticing at first to finally ask Booker why he is not returning any of his calls. As Booker leaves half-naked and angry, Goldust turns to the woman who is still lying next to him and reveals that he is wearing a nightgown over his wrestling suit, before he sulks: "I bought this nightgown for nothing!"

Piper. Goldust moves to gently touch and caress the mannequin's face and torso and continues to speak:

> President Piper, what a poor imitation, but for now it'll have to do. Ah, but yes, when you're in my backlot, President Piper, it will be the real thing, won't it? You've waited your whole life for a thrill such as this. Yes, oh yes. There have been others on this pretty pit but none of them brought out your innermost feelings. But I do. Your darkest dreams, your naughty nightmares, there's never been a taboo as forbidden as this. When we become one, President Piper, we'll be joined at the hip.
>
> (Goldust at RAW, 25th of March 1996)

It is suggested that Goldust actually goes on his knees during this promo, probably to imitate fellatio, but the scene was heavily edited for TV audience, which, despite the PG Era still being more than ten years in the future, and despite how overtly sexual and downright pornographic the Attitude Era revealed itself to be when it came to heterosexual displays, shows explicit homoeroticism on television was perceived to be much more problematic then. While it is never confirmed that the persona of Goldust is homo- or bisexual and while he is often shown to display affection towards female characters and forming relationships with them (e.g., Marlena in 1996 or Aksana in 2010), Goldust's choice of rhetoric in this case is metaphorical yet revealing, referencing anal sex and painting their upcoming in-ring activities as something dark and forbidden. The sexual nature of his speech and his gentle fondling of the mannequin (for visual reference, see "Goldust's Hollywood Backlot Interview", RAW, 6th of March 1996, 00:00:36) is contrasted by the act of violence at the end of the promo: Goldust tears apart the mannequin and leaves it in parts in the parking lot. The connection between sex and violence is prominent in many WWE feuds but the connection here is particularly problematic in as much as his highly stylized deviant sexual indeterminacy combined with his transgressive behavior is set up to be a potential threat to the heteronormative masculine ideal.

While after 2000, Goldust's cross-dressing would often be used for comic relief, Goldust's ambivalence in his feud with Piper is painted as dangerous as it is destabilizing the assumed connection between sex, gender, and desire, to borrow

from Butler. In WWE, cross-dressing and other non-heteronormative behavior is almost never left unpunished: At *WrestleMania XII* that very year, Piper will take their backlot brawl to the arena and, while physically brutalizing his opponent, will strip Goldust from his suit under which a set of women's stockings and garter belts appear. The physically dominating Piper stands above a then helpless Goldust, who at one point stretches out his hands in defense. Piper will then proceed to pull apart Goldust's legs and drive his knee to the helpless man's groin (for visual reference, see "Goldust vs. 'Rowdy' Roddy Piper - Hollywood Backlot Brawl - 3/31/1996", 00:16:47) before the Bizarre One is finally escorted form the arena by his valet Marlena, who drapes a jacket over his exposed form.

The rape connotation is especially sinister since it comes in the shape of a story of retaliating irony: Since Goldust used his promo and some of the in-ring action to threaten Piper with unwanted sexual advances, forcing himself on Piper both rhetorically and physically, the symbolic emasculation and physical pain inflicted upon Goldust's body at the hands of Piper are an act of retaliation and can be interpreted as an attempt at crippling Goldust's subversive potential for good. In the end, the rugged, foul-mouthed Rowdy Roddy Piper re-establishes a heteronormative order by physically and mentally emasculating Goldust. The dominance of the unequivocally heterosexual brawler over any other variant of wrestler (and therefore any other type of man) is reaffirmed.

While the end of the Attitude Era and the turn towards PG in 2008 brought some changes to Goldust's persona, basic tenets of his character have remained and WWE has tried to make their products more family-friendly and less offensive to various minorities, especially the LGBTQ+ community[85]. However, the fetishist aspect of Goldust's character would, albeit in somewhat mitigated form, cause some unease in

[85] Though, of course, WWE has its problems to exist without homophobic language. In 2011, when John Cena feuded with The Rock (Dwayne Johnson), Cena used homophobic slurs to discredit his opponent, which led to an official complaint by GLAAD, an NGO which monitors discrimination against LGBTQ+ people on television and other media platforms (McQuade 2011). Though Cena, the most protected babyface of the company, had before and has since then made great efforts to support the LGBTQ+ community with WWE's mandate and has spoken out against bullying and protection of and openness towards the LGBTQ+ community, homophobic and otherwise discriminating language is a *modus operandi* hard to dispose of in the business. This comes hardly as a surprise when looking at a business which has always centred around reaffirming masculine ideals of strength, resilience, and staunch heterosexuality.

WWE programmes post-2008. In a feud with young Ted DiBiase in 2010, Goldust had set his eyes on DiBiase's Million Dollar Championship, a belt which, in essence, brought no proper title to the character holding it: A gift from his father, "The Million Dollar Man" Ted DiBiase Sr., Ted DiBiase Jr. sported the belt to underline his wealth and status despite not being granted any shot at a legitimate title.

On the 4th of October on RAW, DiBiase and his then girlfriend Maryse receive strange messages via the Titantron. Letters framed in gold appear on the screen that read "You are mine". While the audience in the arena can already see what is going on inside the ring, the TV audience only see through the camera, which is focused on DiBiase's and Maryse's puzzled expressions. Only as the camera suddenly changes its position does Goldust, who is standing directly behind DiBiase, become visible to the TV audience. He attacks DiBiase, who falls to the ring floor, losing the belt in the process. Goldust crawls toward the unconscious DiBiase and tells him in a husky voice "I don't want you", before turning to Maryse, who, pressed into one corner of the ring, looks visibly distressed and repulsed. He moves right into her personal space, threatening her with his physical, definitely sexual presence. However, after telling her that he doesn't want her either, he kneels back on the ring floor and crawls toward the gold and diamond-encrusted belt and addresses it directly: "I want you". He then slides his hands over the belt, rubbing it on his chest and crawling over the floor.

Two observations need to be made here: First of all, Goldust's obsessive fixation on a belt, which, technically, within the framework of WWE's narrative make-up, holds no title value, defies the purpose of brawling within the superordinate narrative of men striving for championships as ultimate signifiers of masculine prowess and dominance[86]. In other words, his fixation on the Million Dollar Championship is irrational when judged from within the logic of the storyworld. While Ted DiBiase Jr.'s possession of the belt is a sign of his boastful nature as heir to his father's fortune and legacy, Goldust's obsession is an uncomfortable reminder of the fact that, indeed, all titles are without *actual* merit if not imbued with symbolical power by consent and authority. Goldust is not only able to implicitly reveal the performance

[86] See chapter 3.

character of gender through his cross-dressing and ambiguous sexuality but becomes unintentionally self-reflexive for the business as a whole. The fact that Goldust eventually yields the belt back into the hands of its rightful owner, Ted DiBiase Sr., mitigates, if not completely negates the potentially subversive effect of these implications.

Secondly, Goldust's fetish and focus on this particular belt perverts the object's very purpose to signify power and wealth (in the mind of DiBiase's persona) and notorious arrogance (from the audience's and other wrestler's point-of-view). For Goldust, the fight for gold[87] is fueled by sexual lust for gold: The belt is not just metaphorically a desired object but becomes the actual target of sexual desire. This perversion along with other signifiers of non-hegemonic conduct (his make-up, his attire, the wigs, the exaggerated demeanor) mark him as 'other' to heteronormative, strength-fixated masculinity, but not in the same way that women and physically non-competitive men[88] are: While these 'others' are delineated by their unambiguous identities, sexualities and capabilities, and therefore pose little to no threat to hegemonic masculinities that dominate wrestling fantasies, Goldust is one of the rare occasions of potentially truly subversive power displayed in a character that, eventually, is contained by the very product by which it was brought into existence in the first place. It is this character's quality of being, if not 'unreadable' (i.e., bizarre and undetermined), at least 'hard to read' when it comes to sexuality and gender identity that is the source of unease for the imagined hegemony within the narrative as well as the actual hegemony WWE narratives reference, modify and parody[89]. In the end, WWE falls back into its carnivalesque tradition that contains subversive potential within its regulated confines by marking it as dangerous, exceptional, aberrant, idiosyncratic, or bizarre, and definitely always worthy of being reined in to greater or lesser extent by exponents of hegemonic masculinities.

The second example I would like to turn to in this chapter is the appearance of Santino Marella's alter ego, Santina, in 2009. Unable to gain any title opportunities in the men's division, Santino devised a plan to participate in the Divas Battle Royal at

[87] As, for instance, in the narrative segment for *Night of Champions* 2010; see Introduction.
[88] As discussed in chapters 2 and 3.
[89] See chapter 3.

WrestleMania that year. During RAW on the 23rd of March 2009, Santino tries to make his case for letting him participate in the Battle Royal: "Why should I not be included? Because of my genitalia? That is sexual discrimination!" The segment, though provoking laughter in the audience, has to be subjected to critical scrutiny in terms of politics of humor: One has to wonder whether the spot of butt of the joke is shared between Santino himself, for his inability to live up to masculine standards and ideals and his inability to compete with his peers, and the women participating in the Battle Royal. Since Santino is mimicking a baseline argument brought forth by advocates of female empowerment and supported by reduction of discriminating practices without acknowledging the socio-cultural imbalance of power between the sexes that is fundamental to patriarchal societies, he mocks emancipatory efforts by reducing a central tenet of feminist criticism to a joke.

Unable that night to beat Mickie James in order to gain a spot in the Battle Royal, Santino plans to disguise himself as his non-existent twin sister, Santina, to participate and gain the title of Miss WrestleMania[90]. He actually wins the title and sees himself confronted with some serious problems in the aftermath: First of all, the women of the roster are not fooled by his charade. His girlfriend, Beth Phoenix, actually calls him out in a backstage segment at *Backlash* 2009. He, however, out of pride, denies the accusations and continues to pretend that Santina actually exists. The second problem comes in the shape of The Great Khali, who apparently fell madly in love with Santina when she won the title of Miss WrestleMania and since then wanted to kiss her in a segment he calls *Khali's Kiss Cam*. The whole segment that unfolds at *Backlash* 2009 right in the ring revolves around issues of 'passing' as another gender, authenticity, and gendered power relations.

The so-called "Punjabi Playboy", Khali, enters accompanied by Ranjit Singh, his interpreter who speaks for him: "The Great Khali says, it's springtime and love is in the air. And while he can choose any WWE Diva to be his, the Great Khali has chosen Miss WrestleMania Santina Marella. So, Santina, please come out here, honey, so the Punjabi Playboy can show you what it feels like to be a real, natural

[90] See chapter 4 for a discussion of postfeminist elements in women's wrestling and some commentary on the Miss WrestleMania title.

woman." Santino, dressed as Santina enters the arena as the following dialogue develops between the commentators Jerry Lawler and Michael Cole:

> Lawler: This may be the first time any man has ever wanted Santina.
> Cole: Miss WrestleMania!
> Lawler: I heard she's been on so many blind dates, she'll get a free dog.

Lawler further comments on how Santina looks "bashful" and "reluctant". Santino in his disguise tries to continue his charade and explains to the audience and Khali that he cannot kiss Khali because he tried "to pass as something I'm not – a single girl" (for visual reference, see *Backlash 2009,* DVD 1/1, 01:25:11). Apparently making the story up on the fly, he goes on to explain that ever since WrestleMania he has been in a relationship with Jim Ross, one of the commentators, who appears to be taken by surprise at the announcement. Santino says that JR calls him "his little slobberknocker. Yoo-hoo! Hey, Barbecue Sauce Man! JR! Jimmy! I love you so much!" as JR's fellow commentator jokes: "Has she ever given you a lock of hair from her chest?"

This first part of the segment shows one mechanism of how the potentially subversive nature of an act of cross-dressing is being reined in by the narrative it is surrounded by. The commentators make an effort to undermine the attempt at "passing" by continuously pointing out the discrepancy between form and performance. The comments by Lawler and Cole, in other words, ridicule the display for its ineffectiveness and try to ridicule Santino by emphasizing signs that 'reveal' his body to be 'naturally male'. While the commentators as well as the audience are aware of the charade that is going on, Khali and his interpreter remain unaware. The interpreter's comment to have Khali show her what it feels like to be "a real, natural woman" adds to the notion that the discourse around gender relationships perpetuated here aims at normalizing heterosexuality and its power to signify "real men" and "real women", as well as to reinscribe the belief that gender identities need to be made readable by reducing them to bodily dimorphism.

Furthermore, Santina is framed as truly undesirable. While they use female pronouns when they are speaking about Santina, it becomes clear from their

humorous exchange that they are aware that they are indeed dealing with Santino in disguise. Their conversation points to the discrepancy between Santino's male body (for instance, his chest hair) and his incapability to be convincing as a woman: While Santino as his twin sister can only go on literal blind dates to make men date her, "natural women", it is implied, would not need to do so. In humorously criticizing his performance as subpar, the comments imply what is considered "normal" without acknowledging the conflation of sex and gender performance. Indeed, I would argue, this display reveals how many WWE segments aim at naturalizing a phantasm of a "natural body" as the only signifier of identity while veiling its performative nature that is so prominent in professional wrestling's very makeup. What the commentators engage in is 'looking through' rather than 'looking at' the cross-dresser, "to turn away from a close encounter […] and to want instead to subsume that figure within one of the two traditional genders" (Garber 1992: 9).

Moreover, this segment exemplifies how from the onset, the possibility of a sexual desire between two men (with one of them in drag) is discursively rendered conceptually unthinkable: While Santino as a character is aiming to "pass" as the other sex, his efforts are ridiculed. Khali, on the other hand, becomes part of the joke as he is marked as simply unable to understand that Santina is in fact Santino, an idea that is later on pointed out by Beth Phoenix. The Glamazon enters as Santina pretends to faint after being pushed by Khali and his interpreter to prove her love for JR by kissing him. The Glamazon shows herself to be furious at Santino's continuous charade. However, since she was unsuccessful in persuading Santino from dropping the act in an earlier backstage segment, she changes her tactics and addresses Khali directly:

Beth: Khali! This is Santino! Khali, this is a man, it's a man. I don't understand how you're not understanding. Is that big cranium of yours full of rocks? Huh? What's in that head of yours? Are all women in Punjab so damn ugly that you find, you find *that* [points at Santina] to be attractive?

Santina: I'm pretty.

Beth: [at Khali] Either that, or you are literally the biggest idiot walking the face of the earth.

The joke, here, is on Khali, and again, works on the basis of physical attribution: Khali is not only cast as a foreigner unable to speak the language, he is also a giant. Both of these attributes are often used in combination in WWE performances to mark a villainous, savage brute and/or an intellectually challenged, child-like character lacking fine motor skills, tact, and sexual appeal. These men are often portrayed as uneducated, uncivilized beasts (compare Khali, for instance, to Umaga). Khali, in this segment, is othered in three ways: for his foreignness, for his alleged inability to tell apart a man's body from a woman's body, and, finally and more subtly, for his physical appearance and size. What Beth's and the commentators' remarks imply is that Khali's interest in Santina would not prevail once he understood that what he thought was a female body was actually a male one. On the story level and within the story world we find a normalization of heterosexual desire that is unaware of the performative acts that are involved in its creation and involved in perpetuating the notion of sex and gender as absolute, ontological categories: Khali's body is male, Santino's body is male, his performance cannot turn him into a woman. Bodies *are* in the rhetoric used in WWE storylines, they are not *made* although the continuous verbal and physical fighting put on display is clearly a performative act that reacts to potential threats to the imagined stability of gender identities. The continuous insistence on dichotomies in these discourses and the marginalization or demonification of characters who do not fall into the prescribed categories renders heterosexuality the undiscussed norm. This precludes the conceivable possibility that Khali could, in fact, have a continued infatuation with Santino even after he is exposed. In a cultural product that puts on stage central conflicts of human existence, as we have seen in chapter 2, and seeks to reassure the audience of a natural stability of politics and society, this display makes sense: The possibility of a man "being tricked" by another man in a female disguise must be presented as a comedic shtick in the logic of professional wrestling to ensure the stability of the heteronormative matrix of the overall cultural discourse that determines what men and women 'truly' are and how they 'naturally' behave. Santino's attempt at passing must fail and needs

to do so in a humorous fashion (cf. Flanagan 2008: 50) to ensure the deflection of a potential crisis of heterosexuality as an established norm.

In the final part of the Kiss Cam segment, Khali hits Beth over the head for her insolence, Santina covers her and thus keeps the Miss WrestleMania title for which Beth had challenged her. When Khali wants to join in Santina's celebration, she tries to flee from him. In the process, he rips off her Bra and exposes Santino's upper torso. Of course, the commentators react to the scene:

> Lawler: Wait a minute! We've got a wardrobe malfunction!
> JR: I'm blind! I've lost my sight.

Santino reacts by frantically covering his chest with his hands and runs out of the arena, screaming on the top of his lungs (for visual reference, see *Backlash 2009*, DVD 1/1, 01:28:17), while Khali walks off holding the bra in his hand like a trophy. What produces the comedic but not necessarily funny effect, is the fact that Santino as Santina feels the need to hide his chest: Commentators and audience laugh at the notion that a man has become so engrossed in his own ploy to pose as a woman that he genuinely feels exposed without having the necessary bodily features that would need hiding. What this display distracts from is the fact that the hiding of the female breasts is in itself part of a disciplinary regime regulating gendered bodies that is, in fact, itself socially and culturally constructed and in no way 'natural'. This leads us to an important caveat that needs to be made here about the disruptive potential in wrestling's drag performances.

It has often been argued that drag and other performances that self-reflexively point toward their own constructedness hold the capacity to be subversive, i.e., the power to potentially disrupt the normative regulations and reproductions in hegemonies of gender. As Judith Butler argued,

> […] parodic proliferation deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalized or essentialist gender identities. Although the gender meanings taken up in these parodic styles are clearly part of hegemonic, misogynist culture, they are nevertheless denaturalized and mobilized through their parodic recontextualization. (Butler 2006 [1990]: 188)

However, she also makes clear that parodic self-reflexivity is not sufficient for a performance to have subversive implications, as "certain kinds of parodic repetitions […] become domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony" (ibid: 189). I would indeed argue that professional wrestling, as we have seen in the abovementioned examples, actively contains and allays the subversive potential that drag performances could potentially unfold. But how exactly, if drag and even camp and macho performances (as discussed in chapter 3) "self-consciously play the signs of gender, and […] in the play and exaggeration [imply] an alternative sexuality" as Richard Dyer argues (qtd. in Brady and Schirato 2011: 72), does wrestling render these performances powerless?

I would argue that performance alone is not enough. Butler herself claimed that "there is no necessary relation between drag and subversion, and that drag may well be used in the service of both the denaturalization and reidealization of hyperbolic heterosexual gender norms" (Butler 2011 [1993]: 85). Examples of "forms of drag that heterosexual culture produces for itself" are, according to Butler, Dustin Hoffmann in *Tootsie* (1982) or Jack Lemmon in *Some Like It Hot* (1959), films in which "the anxiety over a possible homosexual consequence is both produced and deflected within the narrative trajectory of the films" (ibid.). The cross-dressing examples in wrestling most often fall into this category. Here, narrative contextualization not only surrounds the performance but informs and shapes it: On the level of the narrative presented, commentators and other wrestlers constantly point at the body ("Has she ever given you a lock of hair from her chest?"; "This is a man, it's a man. I don't understand how you're not understanding") as the prime signifier of gendered existence. The myth of the body as objective, natural and real is being reproduced in order to stabilize the regulatory fantasy that identity can be known by a 'reduction to the essentials', i.e., bodily criteria that supposedly precede the formation of gender. The objective of the narrative framework is to rid the performance of its potentially destabilizing force by shifting the focus away from the agenda of the individual cross-dressing to the supposed failure to perform properly, i.e., to follow through with a performance that follows the trinity of sex/gender/desire

within the heteronormative regime. The commentators make especially sure it becomes clear that the butt of the joke is not themselves or the audience for 'they know' about the attempt at passing and see right through it. Rather, the cross-dresser himself, who failed at passing (Santino), and those who fail to recognize the failed attempt as failed (Khali), are the center of ridicule.

On the meta-level, then, the "anxiety over possible homosexual consequence" (ibid.) is deflected away from the (TV) audience who can revel in a kind of laughter that is, indeed, the outcome of drag produced by heterosexual culture for heterosexual culture. In the end, all potentially disruptive performances of gender in professional wrestling are disciplined for their refusal to become intelligible subjects. They are subsequently reined in and disavowed as unlivable positions in order to reiterate heterosexual existence as normative and natural.[91] A 'third' that "challenges the possibility of harmonious and stable binary symmetry" (Garber 1992: 12), as Marjorie Garber proposes, is not allowed to prevail in wrestling performances. Furthermore, the cross-dressing found in professional wrestling always exists within the framework of a performative entertainment practice that is, in essence, a male domain. Similarly to Garber's assertions about on-stage cross-dressing in all-male contexts like the army of the navy, in wrestling, too, cross-dressing "is a way of asserting the common privilege of maleness" that calls into question only to reaffirm heterosexuality as a norm with rigor and engage in essentially misogynistic fantasies (Garber 1992: 60).

The irony with wrestling is that while it is a performance that constantly references its own performative nature and thus also constantly potentially reveals what it portrays as 'made' rather than 'naturally given' (bodies, gendered existence and relations, and sexuality), the narrative framework of each bout and angle forces its characters into their seemingly 'naturally male' or 'naturally female' bodies and the corresponding gender identity: No matter the shape and size presented, no matter how 'camp' or 'drag' the performance: Sooner or later, all characters need to return to a performance of gender in accordance with the heteronormative order, as in the

[91] See chapter 3.

case of Santino, or, in the case of Goldust, remain non-subjects: unintelligible, abject, bizarre.

6. Conclusion

When I went to see a WWE wrestling show in Braunschweig, Germany, in 2014, I had an interesting conversation with a man in his mid-thirties sitting right next to me. He and his friend had been shouting obscenities at the wrestlers and ring announcers and had repeatedly called wrestlers "gay" as if it were an insult and a comedic one at that. I asked them politely to stop with their harassment to which the one sitting closest to me replied with surprise and bafflement that they did not know what else to shout to get people to chant with them. The ensuing discussion I had with him while the bouts went on, as anecdotal as it may be in the context of this paper, revealed to me some striking insights into the compelling power of professional wrestling as a site of discursive reproduction for the sake of an assumed socio-cultural security that people feel the need to reaffirm. For my interlocutor, hurling homophobic rhetoric at the wrestlers he disliked was the normal, 'natural', and routine action used to position himself as an audience member and a sure-fire way of getting at least a portion of the audience to go along with a chant in order to produce a sense of unity and belonging among the crowd – one of the features of any event with a large audience that is indeed very pleasurable for any attendee. Rather unwittingly – if one assumes, for the moment, that the line between conscious and unconscious sexist, racist, and otherwise prejudicial rhetoric is a clear-cut one – the audience falls into a habit of reproducing harmful, discriminatory discourses. Further even, it shows how intricate and immediate the connection between the witnessing of characters in wrestling, who we have analysed in part as narratological categories, and the development of subject positions for audience members really is. As the example shows and as I have demonstrated in chapter 4, in engaging with wrestling performances, we as audience not only participate in reading characters and their respective subject positions, but we do, also, wrestle for our own positions by reacting to the hailing implicit in these metaleptic spectacles.

The potentially harmful discourses that are repeated through this process are not only deeply ingrained in our everyday lives, performances, and speech, and therefore find their way easily into the arenas of entertainment: They are also (re-) produced, (re-) inscribed, and naturalized through their repetition, leaving us with the moot

question for origin and first cause of such discourses. Instead of asking where these discourses originate, I have followed in this thesis two major directions of thought that provided the theoretical foundation as well as the methodological toolkit with which I approached professional wrestling as a transcultural, narrative-driven, performative entertainment form that continuously plays a role in the fostering of patterns of 'readability' of bodies and identities. My aim was to show how narratives of professional wrestling make use of already existing topoi of gender(ed) existence to effectively reproduce certain heteronormative discourses that regulate social conventions of identity formation.

Taking my cue from the established angle of theatricality and performance that has often been used in the studies of professional wrestling, I turned towards Judith Butler and the question of how discourses of gender, race, age, and class come together in wrestling storylines, how bodies 'act out' gender, and how the repetition of certain fixed performances of gender re-establishes or challenges the heteronormative matrix. Underlying Butler's idea of heteronormativity as a regulatory fiction are three major philosophical theorems that make the connection between power regulation in social systems and the position and generation of the individual subject within these systems: While Antonio Gramsci's idea of hegemony provides us with the terminological toolkit to grasp wrestling as a cultural product that through its repeated performances partakes in stabilizing established systems of thought – ideologies – by "taking one way of seeing things, and convincing people that this way of seeing things is natural" (Surman qtd. in Hearn 2004: 61), Michel Foucault's discourse theory focuses attention on the way in which power is being circulated through the agents and institutions involved and how this, in turn, produces 'knowledge' and, eventually, discursively legitimized 'truth' in the world of what it means (and cannot mean) to be a man or a woman. In order to see how, in both verbal and physical performances, wrestlers and audience members alike (re-)produce themselves as gendered beings, I followed Butler and turned towards the Althusserian notion of interpellation that serves as a central mechanism to the hegemonic processes of structural and ideological stabilization of society.

Because discursive consolidation of power in systems of thought and practice do not operate solely on the level of representation, I attempted to relocate 21st century professional wrestling as a transcultural and neo-capitalist performance art, whose global players are invested with institutional and cultural power that allows them to reproduce, for a large, global audience, implicit discourses of gender, race and other markers of identity through a fusion of athletic, ritual, and narrative practices. Professional wrestling, then, operates on various levels: it needs to be understood as a business with economic interests within a capitalist system and as an artform that aims at generating pleasure in its audience. Only when viewed in conjunction can the impact of professional wrestling on the socio-cultural imaginary and its implications for our conceptions of identity be truly understood in its complexity. Far too often literary and art scholars shy away from asking how economic interests play into the production of cultural products and their reception – if they are interested in pop-culture at all. This precludes, though, a more political-minded critique of cultural products as sites of ideological reproduction. It is professional wrestling's complex mesh of power relations on the representational as well as the commercial and global level that makes it so important to look at wrestling and which ideas about gendered existence it fosters in its products.

I have then sought to connect the ideas of hegemonic discourses with mechanisms of narrative representation as it occurs in professional wrestling. In order to talk about wrestling as a narrative performance art, it is necessary, as I have argued, to pay attention to a variety of different features, i.e., worldbuilding, the relationship between live and filmic representation, as well as character construction, constellation, and their connections to the notion of emergent gendered subjects. As far as worldbuilding is concerned, it is important to acknowledge not only the intra-narrative world (the WWE universe with its numerous characters and plot entanglements) but also the relationship between the world within the narrative and the framework of WWE as a business situated in a 'real-world' context. This highlights the reciprocal relationship between acts within the storyworld and acts outside of it and makes obvious the discursive connections that unfold in the interplay between these levels. Jürgen Link pointed out that literature works as an "elaborate interdiscourse" (Link 1988: 286) capable of

drawing on and symbolically negotiating special discourses. Professional wrestling, too, participates in drawing together a variety of special discourses that it not only mimics but, in fact, mediates and comments on. Furthermore, the spatio-temporal location of the audience in relation to the performance, as well as the double-situatedness of both audience and performers plays an important part in the analysis of professional wrestling. This transgression of world boundaries between the fictional and the imagined 'real world' is encapsulated in the appropriation of the term metalepsis that I have proposed in chapter 2. Metalepsis in wrestling is indeed an aesthetic constant as actors in the field are in a perpetual state of double-situatedness as fictional agents and real-world actors. Both audience members and performers are at once characters in a grand (series of) narrative(s) *and* participants in a capitalist market of goods and ideas. Gender becomes one of the central discourses that is being 'sold' on this market through the very performance by which it is (re-)produced.

Wrestling as a cultural product, then, cannot simply be looked at as a live performance only. Rather, since many audience members may see the performance at a later date via digital recording – since most research on professional wrestling is not conducted via live observations but rather through the viewing and analysing of recorded material – acknowledging the mechanisms and subsequent impact of film editing processes and the idiosyncratic stylistic opportunities and challenges that they entail must be addressed in an analysis of wrestling's representations of gender(ed) existence. Camera work and filters in particular are used heavily in the process of shaping and (re-)forming WWE DVD material for consumer consumption and thus have a crucial role to play in wrestling's aesthetics and discursive distribution of narratives about gender and other markers of identity, such as race and class.

On the basis of these theoretical frameworks that provide a context- and ideology-sensitive backbone for the study of professional wrestling, I sought to explore the terrain of narrative practices as they are presented in WWE DVD material. In chapter 3, I used the results from by 2014 Master's Thesis as a starting point for diving deeper into the representations of men and masculinity in professional wrestling. I have shown how in professional wrestling's narratives the body is being discursively constructed as the natural site of gender and how performers, promoters, the business as a whole,

and the audience members constantly engage in meaning-making processes. Professional wrestling in general and WWE in particular tends towards casting men as monstrous beasts whose natural inclination towards violence is only barely held at bay by a thin veneer of civilizatory laws but always ready to burst free when the need arises – and arise it does frequently since in the WWE universe, and, by discursive extension, everywhere, masculinity is a contested good that can only be laid claim to through perpetual struggle. In other words, masculinity is portrayed as precarious, constantly in danger of being lost, which consequently puts men in an oscillation between positions of defender and attacker. Additionally, race, age, and work ethics on display in these performances further increase the complexity of how bodies are being made sense of, or, rather, turned into sites of meaning that often reaffirm already existing notions of what it means to be a man. I have shown that bodies and identities are made legible in professional wrestling performances by making use of a multi-modal and multi-medial narrative toolkit by whose means it not only reflects but effectively negotiates and adds to social discourses of gender and other markers of identity.

In chapter 4, I turned towards the performances of women in WWE wrestling – an as of yet relatively under-researched area in a research field already treated with little interest by the research community in literary and cultural studies. Performances of women and women's storylines in wrestling are an interesting object of study since they exemplify not only how certain discourses around gender are being fostered and legitimized, but also how incremental development towards more progressive notions of femininity are both imagined and contained by the very performance they are being produced by. I have shown how the limited time on screen, the status as object of strife, their status as eye candy and witnesses to male victory and loss have curtailed women's role in the time preceding WWE's "Women's Revolution" in PG-Era wrestling. Furthermore, women's sexuality has often been used to vilify characters, particularly when said sexuality is perceived to be a threat to male dominance and self-assertion. Postfeminist discursive elements – such as, for instance, the "Doing it for herself"-rhetoric that justifies the visual exploitation of women's bodies for the male gaze under the pretence of female liberation – have further fossilized the position of female characters in WWE as marginalized, othered and sexualized objects of male desire

within the larger cultural discourses of gender relationships. Even such shifts in representation as shown during the process of the "Women's Revolution" in WWE's women's division starting in 2015 need to be taken with a grain of salt: Despite the fact that the production mechanisms of gender open up the possibility of "a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style" (Butler 1988:520) that would allow for a modified and more liveable discursive position of women both in wrestling and within the cultural sphere as a whole, wrestling continues to contain the potential subversiveness of such transformations.

The same holds true, as I have argued in chapter 5, for performances of cross-dressing and gender bending. Looking at examples from different eras of WWE wrestling has made clear that while professional wrestling constantly refers to its own performativity – and, thus, to the fact that the fiction of heteronormativity is indeed just that: a fiction –, the narrative framework of gender-bent performances does not allow for ambiguous and potentially subversive representations of gender to go uncommented and 'unpunished': Eventually, these characters need to either return to a heteronormative style of doing gender or, in some cases, remain unintelligible sources of unease and tension for characters and audience alike, who both are never offered a narrative that would cast these characters' performances of gender as legitimate.

Many areas of and issues within professional wrestling still remain unaddressed by the academic community. The women's division is still undergoing changes and WWE as well as other wrestling businesses across the globe will further develop their representations of female characters. It remains to be seen whether such a modification will ever be able to lead to a more gender-equal representation that does not make use of sexist stereotypes and age-old narratives of female subjugation, infantilization, and vilification. Furthermore, future research could and should focus on representations of differently abled characters and the portrayal of mentally and physically (dis-)abled men and women in professional wrestling: Characters like Eugene, the special-needs savant character who first appeared on the scene in 2004 (Sullivan, Pantaleo and

Greenberg 2016: 113), need to be the focus of analysis to unravel wrestling's contribution to social discourses of (dis)ability[92].

I hope to have shed some light on the performance art that is professional wrestling and on how its stories are more than just fables for spectacle-hungry working-class audiences. Wrestling as a product and a business taps into a well of central insecurities of life and participates heavily in the promotion of regulatory fictions of gender that make it hard for us as the recipients of such entertainment to conceive of other ways of performing gender and, essentially, of being ourselves. If, as WWE proclaims so boldly, "for glory, for grandeur" men and women need to adhere to and constantly attempt to perform an unattainable standard of gendered existence, then our everyday performances as individuals will remain a prison in which our own repetitions mark the walls that separate us from greater freedom of possibilities. Only if we change the representations, the performances, the narratives of gender will we be able to conceive of different, better ways of being ourselves.

[92] Viable starting points for such a research endeavor are, for instance, the seminal works by Garland-Thomson (1997), Oliver and Barnes (2012), as well as Dolmage (2018). I thank Teresa Turnbull for sharing her expertise with regards to disability studies with me for the purpose of this thesis.

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Jessica Koch