LSU Doctoral Dissertations   Graduate School

2016

Professional Wrestling: Local Performance History, Global Performance Praxis

Neal Anderson Hebert
Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_dissertations

Part of the Theatre and Performance Studies Commons

PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING:
LOCAL PERFORMANCE HISTORY, GLOBAL PERFORMANCE
PRAXIS

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The School of Theatre

By
Neal A. Hebert
B.A., Louisiana State University, 2003
M.A., Louisiana State University, 2008
August 2016

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation would not be possible without the help freely offered by the members of my committee, past and present: Alan Sikes, John Fletcher, Leigh Clemons, Femi Euba, and Jon Cogburn. Their help has been appreciated, their feedback substantive and necessary.

But there are other people who contributed to this who need to be recognized: my Ph.D. classmates past and present, whose insights and conversations shaped this document in ways small and large; the casts and crews of *How I Learned to Drive*, *The Shape of Things*, and *Stupid Kids*—the first production put on by my theatre company Bang Bang You're Dead Theatre—who challenged me artistically as much as my committee challenged me scholastically; the numerous scholars in my discipline who offered words of encouragement throughout this process, solicited or otherwise; and the more than 1000 students I've been fortunate enough to teach in the Departments of Theatre and Philosophy who constantly forced me to refine my thoughts, explain my research, and convince them why they should care about it (not that the latter happened particularly frequently, but the practice was appreciated).

Most of all, though, I want to acknowledge my parents' sacrifices and patience. My mother died while I was in the final stages of finishing this document, and my father and I still mourn her loss and celebrate her ten year struggle with aphasia and partial paralysis. My parents are my heroes. Without them, I would never have made it to college in the first place—and I certainly wouldn't be here now.

ABSTRACT

Professional Wrestling: Local Performance History, Global Performance Praxis, is a work of interdisciplinary scholarship (combining elements of theatre history, performance studies, and philosophy) that addresses an area of performance currently under-researched within the liberal arts and humanities: professional wrestling. My dissertation directs much-needed attention to the fact that professional wrestling is the only kind of live drama many Americans ever see (or even want to see). Although it is no doubt easy for theatre historians and performance theorists to dismiss this performance practice because of its location somewhere between "illegitimate sport" and "lowbrow popular entertainment," I contend that United States professional wrestling is a sophisticated performance form that boasts a rich history whose study yields vital insights about how movement-centric performances are staged in commercialized spectacles. My dissertation archives the history of Louisiana professional wrestling and sheds light upon the repertoire of performance practices passed down from one generation to the next. In this dissertation I argue that the death of Louisiana professional wrestling provides an archetype for how the performance of professional wrestling transitioned from a local performance practice viewed live in a community to a televised, globalized product watched around the world. I argue that this transition can best be understood through the lenses of analytic philosophy of dance and the establishment of mass art forms in tandem with the development of mass technologies, rather than through primarily semiotic analyses popularized during the 1960s by Roland Barthes.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The End of Southern Wrestling at the New Orleans Superdome

It is April 2, 1989. More than 5000 people have turned out to the Louisiana Superdome

for the National Wrestling Alliance's sixth "Clash of the Champions" event.[1] The NWA,

once a confederation of regional promotions located around the world and concentrated

in the United States was a frequent business partner of Louisiana's Mid-South Wrestling,

---

[1] The National Wrestling Alliance was a formal organization of numerous regional wrestling territories that eventually grew to be a national promotion. The establishment of the National Wrestling Alliance in 1948 effectively created a monopoly on professional wrestling performances in the United States wherein regional promoters formally allied with each other to ensure that they could prevent rivals from encroaching on their territories within the United States. While there were promotions in Florida, Louisiana, New York, California, Missouri and assorted other states, the promoters pooled their resources to protect each others' businesses in each state, recognized (and voted upon) a single world champion who toured all territories, and traded talent between each other.

   Because of anti-trust laws in the United States, there were non-NWA alliances such as the World Wide Wrestling Federation (formed by Vince McMahon, Sr. in 1963 when McMahon withdrew from the NWA and created his own champion due to disputes with other promoters) and the American Wrestling Association (formed by Minnesota's Verne Gagne in 1960 when Gagne became frustrated that other promoters deemed him too small to be NWA Heavyweight Champion) that were not challenged. NWA promoters did not actively compete or blacklist these promotions because there were no NWA promotions in direct competition in those regions. For the curious, this situation is why Vince McMahon, Jr.'s purchase of World Wide Wrestling Federation and formation of the World Wrestling Federation in 1983 had an huge impact on professional wrestling as a whole rather than just being a small power struggle in the New York area: McMahon took his company national, effectively declaring war on all other territories in the United States and breaking the "gentleman's agreement" that kept wrestling regional, successful throughout the United States, and sustainable as a business. For more on the history of the NWA and its formation, refer to Scott M. Beekman, Ringside: A History of Professional Wrestling in America (Westport: Praeger, 2006), as well as a series of podcasts available on the Wrestling Observer Website by Karl Stern specifically dedicated to wrestling from this era: Karl Stern, "DragonKingKarl Classic Wrestling," *Wrestling Observer*, last modified 7/10/16.

although Mid-South Promoter "Cowboy" Bill Watts never formally joined the confederation, was the only remaining national wrestling promotion capable of competing with Vince McMahon's ascendant World Wrestling Federation. The crowd, a far cry from the sellouts that used to fill the Superdome throughout the 1980s, had turned out to see a veritable "who's who" of former Mid-South professional wrestlers return to the Superdome for a final supercard. The card was stacked with former Louisiana-based talent. Although not every match featured performers from Louisiana's heyday as the hotbed of regional professional wrestling—Keiji Mutoh, or "the Great Muta" from Antonio Inoki's NWA affiliated New Japan Professional Wrestling was a special attraction who never appeared on a Mid-South show—performers such as the Midnight Express, Sylvester "The Junkyard Dog" Ritter, "Hacksaw" Butch Reed, Bob Orton, Dick Murdoch, "Dr. Death" Steve Williams and Mike Rotunda were prominently featured on the card.

Former Mid-South majordomo Jim Ross, when asked to characterize what it was that set so-called "old school" Southern wrestling apart from the sorts of performances fans have seen since the death of the regional territories, claimed that Southern wrestling "sold emotion, reality, and passion. The same wrestling that made wrestling good in the South made it good in a lot of other territories that damn sure aren't Southern. Last time I checked, Minnesota's AWA [Verne Gagne's American Wrestling Association] wasn't in the South."[2] But even though, as Jim Ross notes, regional professional wrestling was good around the United States, it was—like fried chicken, barbecue, and pecan pie—

---

[2] Jim Cornette and Court Bauer, *The Jim Cornette Experience Episode 5*, podcast audio, The Jim Cornette Experience, MP3, 27:8, accessed December 20, 2013, http://mlwradio.libsyn.com/jim-cornette-experience-6.

always best in the regional south of the United States. Jim Cornette, the manager of the

headlining villainous tag team the "Midnight Express" and later promoter of Tennessee's

Smokey Mountain Wrestling, concurred: "Southern wrestling was the most successful

[form of] wrestling, if you look back. When you look at wrestling history and see what

were the most successful wrestling promoters and what were the most successful

territories, where were the places that drew bigger crowds on a consistent basis over

longer periods of time it was the Southern, the Southeastern, and the Southwestern

United States."[3] On paper, Clash of the Champions VI promised to deliver exactly the

kind of emotion, reality, and passion Southern fans expected, and the strength of the

lineup seemed to be a sure-fire box office success. In addition to featuring numerous

Southern wrestlers from the heyday of Louisiana wrestling—few have ever lost money

marketing nostalgia to fans of professional wrestling—the National Wrestling Alliance

had become the standard bearer of Southern wrestling. This de facto national promotion

had grown out of Jim Crockett's Georgia Championship Wrestling, and Crockett had

purchased the Mid-South territory from Mid-South owner "Cowboy" Bill Watts in 1987

after Watts's failed bid to nationalize his own promotion under the moniker of the

Universal Wrestling Federation.

  The emotion, reality, and passion of Southern professional wrestling was a clear

point of differentiation from the style of wrestling promoted by Vince McMahon's World

Wrestling Federation[4], the NWA's national competitor. McMahon built his promotion on

---

[3] Jim Cornette and Court Bauer, *Jim Cornette's Drive-Thru #1*, podcast audio, Jim
Cornette's Drive Thru, MP3, 27.8, accessed December 20, 2013,
http://mlwradio.libsyn.com/jim-cornette-s-drive-thru-1

[4] The World Wrestling Federation, or WWF, was the name of Vince McMahon, Jr.'s
northeastern wrestling promotion from 1979 until 2002. Prior to McMahon Jr.'s purchase

the wide shoulders of Terry "Hulk Hogan" Bollea, a 330 pound, 6'8" blonde strongman

with off-the-charts charisma and limited technical wrestling skill. Where NWA

heavyweight championship matches showcased athleticism and speed, Hogan's matches

focused on giants and superheavyweight (300 pounds or greater) wrestlers slowly beating

him up for 7 to 10 minutes only until his inevitable superman comeback allowed him to

shake off all the damage he had sustained and soundly defeat his opponents.[5] Compared

to matches elsewhere in the United States, the WWF's in-ring product was slow, easy to

understand for adults and children new to professional wrestling, and filled with

characters who had the complexity of the cartoon characters children watched each

Saturday morning.

The NWA, by contrast, marketed and sold southern style wrestling. On the

evening of April 2, 1989, a glance at the empty New Orleans arena was sufficient to tell

you that the NWA had done a suboptimal job marketing and selling the style of wrestling

so beloved in the city of New Orleans just four years earlier.

---

of the promotion between 1979-1980, the promotion was called the World Wide Wrestling Federation, and was promoted by Vincent McMahon, Sr. From 2002 until the present McMahon Jr. renamed the company the World Wrestling Entertainment. Throughout this document I refer to Vince McMahon's company as the WWWF if I am referring to events that occurred between the company's establishment in 1963 and its name change in 1979, the WWF if I am referring to events that occurred between 1979-2002, and WWE if I am referring to events that occurred between 2002 and the present. The body of Regal's work during his time with McMahon's company stretched from its time as the WWF until past the name change to World Wrestling Entertainment, but his most significant work occurred prior to 2002 hence the abbreviation. For more on the history of the WWE and its formation, refer to Scott M. Beekman, Ringside: A History of Professional Wrestling in America (Westport: Praeger, 2006).

[5] Hogan's "superman comeback" was actually invented by Jerry "The King" Lawler for Memphis wrestling, where Lawler used it from the 1970s until the present. For one example of Lawler performing Hogan's Superman Comeback, refer to Jerry Lawler and Jerry Jarrett, *Memphis Championship Wrestling*, Televised show, Jerry Lawler and Ric Flair (1982, Memphis, TN, Memphis Championship Wrestling, 2010), Youtube.com, accessed on 7/10/16, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PzkDzOfqDfc

The failure of this card to sell much more than 5000 tickets is not without context, however. Mid-South Wrestling's relationship with the NWA was complex throughout the company's existence from 1979 until 1987. Mid-South began as the NWA Tri-State Wrestling circuit, an NWA affiliate, but when Watts bought the territory from the region's long term promoter—and Watts's onetime business partner—Leroy McGuirk in 1979 Watts immediately withdrew from the National Wrestling Alliance. Watts's Mid-South remained close with the various promoters who worked with the NWA, even trading talent with NWA promoters, but throughout the 1980s it marched to the beat of its own drum, outside the formal auspices of NWA membership.

The promotion's independence is matched by its then-iconoclastic style of promotion. Taping its exciting episodic Mid-South Championship Wrestling TV show biweekly at the Shreveport, Louisiana Irish McNeill Boy's Club—a show syndicated throughout Louisiana, Texas, Mississippi and Oklahoma—Mid-South Wrestling's success on television would always be used as a way to promote its biggest untelevised shows at the Louisiana Superdome which could only be seen live and its untelevised spot shows (also called "house shows") that were the major revenue producer of the promotion. The revenue generated from these untelevised shows could float the entire territory: Sylvester "The Junkyard Dog" Ritter, Watts's biggest star, headlined his first Superdome show in 1980 in front of 30,000 passionate fans, a number that far exceeded the usual Mid-South arenas that presented shows around the circuit to crowds of only a few hundred professional wrestling enthusiasts. Given Louisiana wrestling fans' proven desire to attend professional wrestling in large numbers throughout the 1980s, the NWA's Clash of the Champions VI super show, a mere nine years later and with much of

Watts's former main event talent, drawing only 5,300 fans to the arena Louisiana

wrestling made famous was nothing short of a disappointment.[6]

Although attendance might have been a disappointment, the fans in attendance

were anything but disappointed. While many of the attractions that made Mid-South

wrestling famous were not featured prominently on the card—Ritter, the African

American performer whose personal popularity caused so many arenas throughout

Louisiana to be filled to capacity, worked in the third match on the card—the main event

of the Clash of the Champions was gearing up to be legendary.[7] Ricky "The Dragon"

Steamboat, the working class family man hero to millions of men and women around the

world, was defending his newly-won National Wrestling Alliance World Heavyweight

Championship against former five-time champion and ultimate villain the "Nature Boy"

Ric Flair. This match should have been an easy sell to Louisiana's enthusiastic fan base

that had been large enough to make the state a wrestling hotbed only a few years earlier.

That it did not do so is peculiar. I argue throughout this dissertation that gaining the tools

to understand this change is vital for the performance studies, theatre history, and

---

[6] Please note that these numbers are publicly available on fan-curated Web sites dedicated to archiving wrestling attendance.

[7] A "card" is a term in wrestling's carnie argot used to refer to an evening of professional wrestling matches. For more information on carnie, the argot that developed around circus performers in the late nineteenth century and is still spoken by wrestlers, there are several sources available that provide foundational knowledge of the development and usage of this dialect. One excellent primer is Carol Russell and Thomas Murray's "The Life and Death of Carnie" (2004); another is George Kerrick's illustrative analysis of the specific terminology employed in the strain of carnie spoken by wrestlers, "The Jargon of Professional Wrestling" (1980). One proviso, however: Kerrick's essay contains a brief analysis of how the verb "to sell" is used. Please note that his account differs from that given above in certain small respects. This is, I suspect, due to the fact that the terminology has drifted slightly in the thirty-six years since his publication, but his insights regarding the continuity between wrestling argot and capitalism remains fundamentally valuable to scholars interested in the argot today.

philosophy scholars to understand exactly what happened in Louisiana between the collapse of Mid-South Wrestling and the NWA's legendary card on April 2, 1989.

1.2 Literature Review

Although many are familiar with Roland Barthes's seminal essay "World of Wrestling" as the primary work of philosophy—specifically, semiotics—about professional wrestling, there is a small but rich discourse within the traditions of performance studies, sociology, and philosophy about professional wrestling that does much to enhance our understanding of wrestling beyond Barthes's semiotic lens. In this section of my introduction, I draw attention to a representative sample of scholars whose work on professional wrestling has done much to move the philosophical discourse forward while nonetheless remaining distinct from my own project in this dissertation. I also point interested scholars toward the existing fan-curated, general public repositories of information about professional wrestling.

First, there exists a great deal of assiduously assembled information about the history of wrestling online. Frequently, these fan-curated databases such as those found on a variety of wrestling results Web sites (cited throughout my dissertation) are of great interest to scholars looking for historical information such as match results, publicly reported attendance figures and gates, and things of that nature. For title histories of different wrestlers, frequently databases such as Wikipedia or obituaries found on Dave

Meltzer and Brian Alvarez's Web site *The Wrestling Observer* are invaluable.[8] Moreover, numerous journalists like Meltzer and Alvarez—as well as wrestling superfans and actual professional wrestlers—have increasingly turned to the medium of podcasting to create oral archives and discursive communities about professional wrestling. I cite many of these podcasts throughout the body of my dissertation. Also of note are the numerous biographies and works of popular history that have become increasingly popular (and lucrative) since the publication of Mick Foley's autobiography *Have a Nice Day: A Tale of Blood and Sweatsocks* created an entire market around wrestling literature.[9] In the years since the release of Foley's book, numerous wrestling-centric biographies covering much of the wrestling stars' of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s have appeared in print—and throughout this dissertation I cite these works of history when relevant. That being said, given the nature of these fan histories, I attempt to use these works sparingly for corroboration given their tendency toward hagiography and, in cases where Vince McMahon's World Wrestling Federation assumes publishers duties, an attitude toward territorial wrestling history that is best described as revisionist.

Scholarship of professional wrestling can broadly be divided into three distinct categories: 1) scholars who import performance studies' theoretical lenses into understanding the conditions of production behind professional wrestling as well as enriching our understanding of performances; 2) scholars in sociology who import

---

[8] Dave Meltzer and Bryan Alvarez, "Wrestling Observer." *Wrestling Observer*, last modified 7/10/16.
http://www.f4wonline.com
[9] Mick Foley, *Have a Nice Day: A Tale of Blood and Sweatsocks*, New York: HarperCollins, 2000.

qualitative and quantitative data analysis to determine observable facts about wrestling

shows or fandom; and 3) scholars interested in wrestling and its history.

Most frequently, performance studies lenses are imported onto professional

wrestling—and these approaches dominate the assortment of articles found in peer-

reviewed scholarly journals. Representative examples of these sorts of scholarly

approaches include John W. Campbell's "Professional Wrestling: Why the Bad Guy

Wins," which uses Barthesian semiotics as the foundation for an analysis of performance

reception of wrestling,[10] and William Lipscomb III's Louisiana State University

dissertation "The Operational Aesthetic in the Performance of Professional Wrestling,

which examines the spectacle of professional wrestling through four distinct sites of

production: the historical archive, the live event, the televised event, and the Interent fan

communities dedicated to wrestling fandom.[11] Danielle M. Soulliere's "Wrestling with

Masculinity: Messages about Manhood in the WWE" investigates the World Wrestling

Entertainment's messages about ideal or performed masculinities in professional

wrestling by analyzing 118 WWE Programs on cable television and PPV performances,

opening the discuss up to performances of masculinity of great interest to scholars who

work on gender studies.[12]

I would like to dedicate sustained attention to two authors whose performance

studies work is extremely valuable in opening up the discourse of wrestling into the field

of physical theatre studies: that of Broderick Chow and R. Tyson Smith. By engaging in

---

[10] John W. Campbell, "Professional Wrestling: Where the Bad Guy Wins," *Journal of American Culture*, Volume 19, No. 2, (Summer, 1996), 127-132.

[11] William Lipscombe III, "The Operational Aesthetic in the Performance of Professional Wrestling," Dissertation, Louisiana State University, 2005, 5.

[12] Danielle M. Soulliere, "Wrestling With Masculinity: Messages about Manhood in the WWE," *Sex Roles*, Vol. 55, 2006, 8.

wrestling training and undertaking to gain the knowledge of wrestling as performers, these scholars' works greatly enhance scholarly understanding of exactly how these performances are embodied.

Broderick Chow's "Work and Shoot: Professional Wrestling and Embodied Politics" is an auto-ethnographic work that parallels Chow's growing awareness of wrestling as a theatre of the body with a distinct embodied politics that emphasizes, despite its performances to the contrary, a distinct care for the other. Chow undertakes his study of professional wrestling by training in the performance practice for more than a year at a wrestling school in East London.

Particularly illustrative is the way that Chow grounds his understanding of the carnie term "work" with the physical knowledge he gains as a practitioner learning the embodied politics of care required to safely wrestle a match. In his treatment of training to become a professional wrestler, Chow notes that

> wrestlers are not called "wrestlers," but "workers." One "works," that is, attacks, a specific body part. One "works" the crowd, "selling" the staged violence as real, a usage that reveals the origins of wrestling's argot in the confidence tricks of traveling carnivals, fairs, and medicine shows. Most significantly, "working" is a physical improvisation in which one worker responds to another's somatic, visual, and aural cues. "Work" in this sense, really means "working together."[13]

All of these different senses of work unite in the performance practice of professional wrestling in ways that are difficult for outsiders to that practice to understand. Chow

---

[13] Broderick D. V. Chow, "Work and Shoot: Professional Wrestling and Embodied Politics," *TDR: The Drama Review*, Vol. 58, No. 2 (Summer 2014), 74.

reminds readers that knowledge of performance is as valuable to scholars of this performance practice as knowledge of that performance practice can be, and his effort to refocus the academic discourse in performance studies to knowledges of the body reminds scholars that narratives that deprivilege the body in their discussions of wrestling are quite literally missing a crucial aspect of the performance.

R. Tyson Smith's earlier essay "Passion Work: The Joint Production of Emotional Labor in Professional Wrestling" is similar to Broderick Chow's essay insofar as Smith is concerned with the ways in which performers jointly create the text of a match. Smith, when defining the labor that occurs in a wrestling match, notes

> The performance is an enactment of a duel between two or more fighters who are, in actuality, colluding with one another. Unlike other emotional work (where, for example, an individual worker serves customers, or an individual professor teaches students), pro wrestlers do joint emotional labor with one or more fellow opponents.[14]

Like Chow, the attention devoted solely to the phenomenology of performance and the vagaries of training enables scholars to understand exactly how wrestling in performance is produced by performers working in tandem with each other to create the illusion of noncooperation and strife.

Like these scholars, I am interested in professional wrestling as a site of performance. Unlike these scholars, however, I attempt to theorize these performances through work done in the tradition of analytic philosophy. Given the sustained attention paid to wrestling as a performance event, I believe that my account of the metaphysical

---

[14] R. Tyson Smith, "Passion Work: The Joint Production of Emotional Labor in Professional Wrestling," *Social Psychology Quarterly*, Volume 71, No. 2, 2008.

and ontological nature of these performances strengthens the types of performance analyses that comprise much of the discourse on professional wrestling. My attempt to examine the style and structure of professional wrestling works in tandem with these works of performance studies to better understand the type of performances professional wrestling is.

The scholarly articles that take a sociological approach to professional wrestling tend to focus on qualitative and quantitative research on televised professional wrestling entertainments so that sustained attention can be paid to exactly what is going on in the televised presentations of these works. Michael Atkinson, in "Fifty Million Viewers Can't Be Wrong: Professional Wrestling, Sports-Entertainment, and Mimesis," provides an excellent entry into the sociological discourse for scholars more attuned with Barthesian philosophy on wrestling or performance studies work; Atkinson uses Barthes as a point of depart ure to show how sociologists use professional wrestling as an object of study.[15] Tom Phillips's "Wrestling with Grief: Fan Negotiation of Professional/Private Personas in Response to the Chris Benoit Double Murder-Suicide" uses qualitative data gathered through online surveys to chart how fans of professional wrestling negotiated their own memorialization narratives in the wake of Chris Benoit's murder-suicide.[16]

Of these sociological articles, Daniel Glenday's presentation "'Look at that Hunk of Man': Male Body Image and Gay Internet Fantasies as Sexual Politics in Professional Wrestling Today" interrogates both masculinity and homoeroticism in professional

---

[15] Michael Atkinson, "Fifty Million Viewers Can't Be Wrong: Professional Wrestling, Sports-Entertainment, and Mimesis," *Sociology of Sport Journal*, Vol. 19, 2002, 48.
[16] Tom Phillips, "Wrestling with Grief: Fan Negotiation of Professional/Private Personas in Response to the Chris Benoit Double Murder-Suicide," Unpublished Essay, University of East Anglia,19.

wrestling (much like performance studies scholars do) but through a sociological lens. Glenday's paper provides a heuristic for homoeroticism in the art form, noting that because not every professional wrestling match is a homoerotic spectacle it is helpful to provide the identity conditions for homoeroticism in wrestling—in particular through sustained analysis of the WWE wrestlers John Cena and Mike "The Miz" Mizanin.

Glenday's paper has a tripartite focus. Beginnning with the identity conditions for homoeroticism in professional wrestling, Glenday then turns his attention to two further distinct goals:

> I need to establish why sexy, good looking young men wearing skimpy
>
> trunks who now predominate in the WWE/TNA are not a turn-on to gay
>
> men and have become a source of frustration for many straight female fans.
>
> Here I will introduce the 'Metro Male', a term I recently coined to
>
> describe the virulent heterosexual 'pretty boy' of professional wrestling
>
> today. Lastly, the stage will be set to describe the recent explosion of gay-
>
> related video, visual and textual materials directed at a sub group of gay
>
> men who happen to be sexually tempted by a particular brand of
>
> professional wrestling.[17]

This sociological account of desire and temptation connects to aspects of camp within the performance of professional wrestling, and draws explicit parallels between the professional wrestling matches presented on mainstream cable television and the

---

[17] Daniel Glenday, "'Look at that Hunk of Man': Male Body Image and Gay Internet Fantasies as Sexual Politics in Professional Wrestling Today," (Conference Presentation, American Sociological Association, July 31, 2008).

emerging subcultural movement of gay professional wrestling matches that mix elements of wrestling with elements of soft-core pornography.

Like the sociological works addressed here, I am interested in importing extra-performance studies disciplinary lenses to the analysis of professional wrestling—in the hope of providing a more solid foundation for the types of performance analysis I engage in later in this dissertation. Unlike these works, however, I rely more heavily on oral histories, ongoing critical discussions so prominently featured in the podcasting community of wrestlers and critics found online.

The scholarly articles that are most clearly historical in scope rounds out my literature review of non-monograph works on professional wrestling. By and large, these historical works attempt to locate contemporary trends in professional wrestling's origins in throughout the past 150 years of professional wrestling history—whether that history chronicles wrestling as a worked, predetermined performance or its earliest days as shoot competition. John Rickard's 1999 essay "'The Spectacle of Excess': The Emergence of Modern Professional Wrestling in the United States and Australia" traces the development of professional wrestling from the shoot wrestling of the early 20th century—paying careful attention to the fact that many of the noteworthy names in the development of American professional wrestling also worked in Australia during the same time period.[18] Ted Butryn's essay "Global Smackdown: Vince McMahon, World Wrestling Entertainment, and Neoliberalism" directs attention to the globalized corporation World Wrestling Entertainment and the ways in which the processes of

---

[18] John Rickard, "'The Spectacle of Excess': The Emergence of Modern Professional Wrestling in the United States and Australia," *The Journal of Popular Culture*, Volume 33, Issue 1, pages 129-137, Summer 1999.

globalized capitalism and neoliberalism inform both the corporate culture of the WWE as well as the storylines and characters found within WWE broadcasts. [19]

I would like to direct sustained attention to Louis M. Kyriakoudes and Peter A Coclanis's "The 'Tennessee Test of Manhood': Professional Wrestling and Southern Cultural Stereotypes." Kyriakoudes and Coclanis connect the broad cultural tropes that go into the creation of wrestling characters—focusing specifically on Southern performers—with a history of professional wrestling that both challenges critics' exclusions of wrestling from the theatrical canon. Kyriakoudes and Coclanis's account does this by situating the centrality of specifically southern performers and audiences within the larger performance tradition of professional wrestling since the initial peak of televised professional wrestling in the 1960s.

Kyriakoudes and Coclanis pay special attention to the way Roland Barthes's own account of wrestling within "World of Wrestling" stipulates the difference between regional French wrestling and the wrestling developing concurrently in the United States as a battle between good and evil.

> While wrestling's dramatic conflicts occur within this morality play
> framework, every wrestling match does not end in the defeat of evil.
> Villainous characters pack the venues, and a skillful wrestling promoter
> will stage a rivalry between two wrestlers that can last a season or more
> and is only ended in a well-attended "grudge match." Wrestlers' personas

---

[19] Ted Butryn, "Global Smackdown: Vince McMahon, World Wrestling Entertainment, and Neoliberalism," as in Louis M. Kyriakoudes and Peter A. Coclanis, *Sport and Neoliberalism: Politics, Consumption and Culture*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2012, 281.

can move between good and evil, and it is not uncommon to wrestle as a

villain in one regional territory and as a hero in another.[20]

Kyriakoudes and Coclanis, like I do, are quick to point to American wrestling's

differences in content and form from that discussed by Barthes throughout his essay;

moreover, their focus on the centrality of style in those performances as extra-semiotic

content is also noteworthy.

Like the scholars interested in wrestling as a foundation for historical analysis, my

dissertation assembles an historical account that is ripe for historiographic analysis. Much

like Butryn, I am particularly interested in the way that economic and cultural interests

affect the presentation and creation of professional wrestling in Louisiana, and attempt,

like Rickard, to assemble an archive of Louisiana wrestling history. Unlike these

scholars, however, I attempt to use the history I am assembling as a foundation for

philosophical inquiry to show how metaphysical changes are a part of that history and are

central in understanding how that history would subsequently unfold when wrestling

transitioned from a regional performance viewed live to a globalized television

performance.

Finally, I would like to conclude my literature review by directing sustained

attention to Sharon Mazer's monograph *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle*, and

Nicholas Sammond's edited anthology *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain*

of Professional Wrestling. I will begin with Mazer's work.

---

[20] Louis M. Kyriakoudes and Peter A. Coclanis, "The 'Tennessee Test of Manhood'" Professional Wrestling and Southern Cultural Stereotypes," *Southern Cultures*, Volume 3, No. 3, 1997, 10.

Mazer uses her ethnographic training in the discipline of performance studies to chronicle her experiences as a scholar and as a witness of wrestler training in the field of professional wrestling. Noting that wrestling "is a sport that is not, in the literal sense of the word, sporting, a theatrical entertainment that is not theatre," Mazer connects the content of professional wrestling matches with the spectacles of the carnival and the moral lessons of the medieval passion play.[21] Mazer's analysis runs the gamut from that of a fan observing the spectacles of professional wrestling with enthusiasm to that of a not-quite-insider given access to the carefully-guarded training regimens throughout the early 1990s.

Mazer's work eschews historical analysis in favor of providing a solid take on how performances of professional wrestling are constructed on the independent level (with which Mazer, given her involvement at Johnny Rodz's wrestling school located at Gleasons gym, is intimately familiar) as well as on the largest stages possible in Vince McMahon's then-World Wrestling Federation and Ted Turner's World Championship Wrestling. Grappling with issues such as real and fake, masculine and feminine, and wrestling's participation in the carnivalesque, Mazer marshals her experiences as a performance studies scholar and an enthusiast of nontraditional performances to provide a general primer into how professional wrestling can be understand through the lens of performance studies.

Nicholas Sammond's edited anthology *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling* is a collection of performance studies essays tackling performances of professional wrestling. After Sammond's introduction, the anthology

---

[21] Sharon Mazer, *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 4.

reprints Barthes's essay "World of Wrestling" and then presents a further 12 essays that each address different aspects of professional wrestling performance.

Several of the essays engage in the performance of masculinity within professional wrestling: Henry Jenkins III's "'Never Trust a Snake': WWF Wrestling as Masculine Melodrama," Douglas Battema and Philip Sewell's "Trading in Masculinity: Muscles, Money, and Market Discourse in the WWF," and Lucia Rahilly's "Is RAW War? Professional Wrestling as Popular S/M Narrative" all locate the role masculinity plays in a variety of contexts and matches within globalized professional wrestling. Also included are two essays focusing exclusively on the roles of masking in lucha libre wrestling from Mexico: Carlos Monsivais's "The Hour of the Mask as Protagonist: El Santo versus the Skeptics on the Subject of Myth" focuses specifically on the mask of El Santo, the most famous professional wrestler to perform in Mexican lucha libre, while Heather Levi's "The Mask of the Luchador: Wrestling, Politics, and Identity in Mexico" looks more broadly at the role of the mask within lucha libre. Also noteworthy is Sharon Mazer's essay "'Real Wrestling'/'Real' Life" which, unlike her monograph discussed earlier, uses an infamous moment from professional wrestling history—in this case, the attack of *60 Minutes*'s John Stossell by the wrestler David Schultz on February 21, 1985—as an invitation to historicize the embodied discourses of reality and fakery within professional wrestling by chronicling fan reactions to various moments in wrestling history where real life and fictional storyline blended together in ways difficult for fans to parse.

All of these representative works create a theoretical framework in which professional wrestling is proven to be a fertile ground for performance studies, historical,

and sociological research. As I hope to prove in this dissertation, I hope to, like these

scholars, prove that professional wrestling can also be a fertile ground for research in the

tradition of analytic philosophy and historiography. I hope that my intended audience of

philosophers of art and theatre historians find my approach of philosophizing history

explanative for the ways in which contemporary wrestling history is, in many ways, the

history of a metaphysical/ontological shift in performance norms from live performance

to televised product.

1.3 Wrestling Style: Southern Style, WWF Style

As I will demonstrate throughout this dissertation, the history of Mid-South Wrestling is

more than just the history of regional Louisiana wrestling. Archiving the demise of

Louisiana wrestling has value to scholars interested in the history and metaphysical

transformation of this performance practice around the United States—and, indeed,

around the world from a practice primarily watched live to a performance seen on

television, pay per view, and the Internet. I argue that the collapse of Louisiana wrestling

during the 1980s is the archetypal story of how regional United States (and international)

professional wrestling companies that struggled to adapt to the evolution and attenuation

of wrestling as a performance practice would eventually die out or be supplanted by their

larger globalized competitors.[22] In Mid-South Wrestling and the Universal Wrestling

---

[22] There are significant exceptions to this pattern, most notably promotions in Mexico and
Japan. Scholars such as Sharon Mazer and critics such as Dave Meltzer suggest in their
work that this may be due to wrestling fans in these locations being more in tune with
their regions' iterations of wrestling style.

Federation one can see that these regional performances were successful as live performances within their region, but as larger companies (or companies from more economically successful regions of the country) leveraged their television into a vehicle for national expansion, the goodmaking features of regional performance practices became impediments to expansion even as the performances being sold nationally changed from those that were sold live in every territory in the United States.[23] As I will show later in this dissertation, concrete local practices, when transitioning from a local performance to a global commodity, are subject to attenuation as the audience becomes more removed from the region that gave birth to a given company. Attracting mass or globalized audiences requires a style and a product designed to appeal to such audiences, and this style and product would by necessity be promoted in a different way than wrestling was traditionally promoted.

Mid-South Wrestling and the Universal Wrestling Federation's collapse, along with the collapse of nearly all other regional promotions throughout the United States, is a historical fact. Although one can disagree about the specific historical events that gave rise to of each of these collapses throughout the 1980s—and perhaps should disagree since each promotion's collapse was the result of a confluence of local events as well as the overarching shifts in audience taste—the basic narrative underwriting all of these collapses is the same. The professional wrestling industry changed such that smaller

---

[23] Please note that the term "goodmaking" is a term I import from discourses in philosophy of art. Goodmaking features are those features by which the quality of a work of art can be judged. Goodmaking features are frequently necessary to claim a work of art belongs to a given genre of artworks, but this is not always the case.

promotions could not weather the normal ups and downs (or "cyclical nature"[24]) of

promoting professional wrestling at the regional level, and all regional promotions, either

through bad timing, insufficient capital, or a lack of promotional will, lacked the

resources to transform their business sufficiently in order to compete at the national level

with Vince McMahon's World Wrestling Federation.

Just as the history of Mid-South Wrestling had yet to be historicized, I argue that

the collapse of regional wrestling has yet to be adequately theorized. This theoretical

lacuna persists, in part, because traditional theoretical approaches to interpreting

professional wrestling are ill-suited to explain the death of regional professional wrestling

and the attenuation of wrestling styles as a physical performance.[25] Wrestling styles are

empirical phenomena, and one can see in the types of performances produced by Mid-

South Wrestling a difference in content from those performances generated by later

promotions interesting in catering to a global audience.

Consider the style on display in Ric Flair and Ricky Steamboat's April 2, 1989

championship match in New Orleans—the match with which I begin this dissertation,

labeling it the final performance of Southern Style wrestling in the New Orleans

---

[24] My use of "cyclical nature" is somewhat tongue-in-cheek. Wrestling promoters
throughout the 20th century would cite wrestling's cyclical nature to explain a given
promotion's failures to make money consistently. Although promotions did have hot
periods and cold periods that are empirically verifiable by looking to things like
attendance figures, ticket sales revenue, television ratings, and so on, this is perhaps less a
function of wrestling promotion necessarily being cyclical than it is that promoters,
bookers, and performers can lose box office appeal after prolonged exposure to
audiences, necessitating a change in at least one of the above. Dave Meltzer frequently
discusses the fallacy of the "cyclical nature of promotion" on his podcast, *Wrestling
Observer Radio.*
[25] In chapter 2 of this document I concretize what "style" refers to in the context of
professional wrestling by borrowing frames from philosophy of dance.

Superdome.[26] Although I dedicate 3.6 through 3.8 to an extended narrative of a match conducted in the Southern Style, it is worth providing a preview of a moment of that match so that readers can better understand how a given style can be understood in performance.

Traditional semiotic accounts of professional wrestling would analyze a match as a series of signs in an overarching sign system. Drawing on the scholarship of Roland Barthes as expressed in his seminal essay "World of Wrestling," the signs on display in professional wrestling would be coded as signs of Suffering, Defeat, and Justice.[27] To understand what is going on in any given instance of professional wrestling, an observer must understand both the signs on display in a match as well as the sign system in which these signs inhere.

Barthes argues that professional wrestling functions primarily as a sign system nested within a performance practice, and this sign system is of extreme importance to professional wrestling's identity as an art form while also directly informing professional wrestling's spectatorship. This spectatorship, for Barthes, involves correctly decoding both the specific signs on display in performance as well as the system of signification in which these signs inhere, distinct from yet parasitic upon the other sign systems that impact subjectivity (including, but not limited to, language, attire, media, and so on). For Barthes, however, the semiotic nature of this spectatorship is hardly unique to

---

[26] Jim Crockett Promotions, *Clash of the Champions VI: Ragin' Cajun*, Televised Special, Ric Flair and Ricky Steamboat (1989; New Orleans, LA; Jim Crockett Promotions; 1989), WWE Network Streaming.
[27] Roland Barthes, *A Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2009).

professional wrestling or to any other form of entertainment.[28] One could charitably

apply the above description to the spectatorship of most entertainments, irrespective of

whether the entertainment in question is a boxing match, football game, Broadway play,

or big-budget Hollywood extravaganza.[29] What separates professional wrestling from

these other semiotic activities is its status as a "spectacle of excess," a theatre that

"partakes of the nature of the great solar spectacles, Greek drama and bullfights: in both,

a light without shadow generates an emotion without reserve."[30]

Unlike Barthes, however, my performance analyses do not rely upon semiotics in

the way that many post-Barthesian analyses do. Indeed, I am not reading a match as a

collection of signs at all: rather, I engage in performance analysis of professional

wrestling as a primarily narrative form. In the case of regional wrestling styles, these

narratives are complex in ways that Barthes's semiotic analysis does not account; in the

---

[28] Readers curious to see how wide-ranging Barthes's approach can and should refer to Barthes's *Mythologies* (1957). This collection of essays uses semiotics to read the way that bourgeois French culture imbricates itself into material products and cultural products throughout society: professional wrestling, theatre, wine-tastings, literature, and even tourism ad campaigns, according to Barthes, can all be understood through the lens of semiosis.

[29] As I am no doubt sure most sports fans can and will attest, understanding the rules of a sport are of paramount importance to an informed spectatorship. A football game simply does not make sense if a viewer does not understand why it is necessary to get a first down; why kicking the ball sometimes results in a change in position, three points being added to the scoreboard, or one extra point; or why only certain members of a team get the ball thrown to them. One member of my dissertation committee finds mixed martial arts matches utterly confusing, citing that he cannot get past the fact that these fights look more like deleted scenes from the HBO prison-drama *Oz* than an athletic competition: he can see the moves but does not understand either 1) how skilled grappling fights should be watched or 2) why positioning in these fights should be coded as anything other than sexual aggression.

[30] Roland Barthes, *A Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2009), 16.

case of globalized wrestling styles, the narratives in question resemble the sorts of erotetic narratives Nöel Carroll deems as fundamental for works of mass art.

At the beginning of the Flair/Steamboat match, both grapplers—the blonde villain Flair in black trunks, the dark-haired hero Steamboat in skin-tight white pants—circle each other, searching for chinks in their opponent's defenses. When Steamboat extends his hand to shake Flair's hand and start the match off with a display of sportsmanship, Flair pretended to reciprocate before pulling his hands away and running them through his long blonde hair while loudly screaming "Woo!" to further incense Steamboat and the crowd. The first contact between the two men occurs almost a minute in, when Steamboat and Flair begin fighting for control over a "collar and elbow tie-up"—a maneuver that involves both men struggling to control their opponent's upper body while both remain standing, arms entangled—that ends with Steamboat in control. Flair grabs the ropes while defending against the hold, which forces the referee to demand that Steamboat break the hold. Flair pushes Steamboat after Steamboat releases the hold; without hesitation, Steamboat slaps the larger man across the face with a loud and satisfying crack that could be heard throughout the entire Superdome.

As scholars interested in the history of professional wrestling can attest—particularly several of those scholars listed in my earlier literature review—the first two minutes of the championship match are exceedingly complex, a far cry from the erotetic narratives on display in the simpler, more cartoonish style of globalized professional wrestling performed by the WWF. Quite simply, there is a great deal of business filling the opening of the match: the exchanges of holds and momentum, embodied characterizations of pride and humility, as well as admitting of a practice that dates back

to the earliest histories of professional grappling in America through the inclusion of a collar-and-elbow tie-up as the opening move of the match, which is the move synonymous with the earliest grappling in the United States in the mid-1800s (of which more is written in Chapter 4 of this document).

Contrast this opening with Hulk Hogan and King Kong Bundy's main event at Wrestlemania II, just two years earlier.[31] As the match begins, the announcers note that Hogan's ribs are taped up from a prior encounter with Bundy that left him hospitalized. The men circle each other for five seconds, tease the collar and elbow tie up to begin the match, but instead both men begin to club each other in the head with punches. Hogan gets the better of this exchange, but no matter what he throws at Bundy he cannot get the giant to fall down. Hogan's offense thus far has consisted solely of punches, chops, and kicks, with an occasional Irish Whip to move Bundy from one side of the ring to the other where Hogan administers more punches, chops, and kicks. There is no subtlety, and the repertoire of maneuvers on display is much smaller than that seen in Southern Style wrestling. As I will demonstrate in Chapter 3, these features of the WWE Main Event Style represent the metaphysical shift that wrestling will undergo as it transitions from a regional performance seen live repeatedly week after week to a televised performance featuring matches that fit neatly between one of two commercial breaks. These metaphysical shifts arise from the economic forces behind McMahon's attempt to promote nationally, which transforms wrestling into what Nöel Carroll terms a mass art.

---

[31] World Wrestling Federation, *Wrestlemania II*, Pay Per View, Hulk Hogan and King Kong Bundy (1987; Los Angeles, CA; Titan Sports; 1987), WWE Network Streaming.

1.4 Explanation of Chapter Order

Chapter 1 of this document has been structured to give a non-expert reader a way into both the theatrics of professional wrestling and the actual moves from which a match is constructed by examining in brief two competing wrestling styles: the Mid-South Wrestling Southern Style, and Vince McMahon's World Wrestling Federation's Main Event Style. These styles largely prime the pump for the remainder of the dissertation: I believe that, if I can get a reader to consider professional wrestling a type of performance akin to other theatrical performances, then that reader will be able to understand the urgent need for both accounting for the type of performance that professional wrestling is and understanding why the importation of ontological analyses in conventional philosophical analyses of this art form is illustrative in explaining the metaphysical shifts that resulted from the history of American professional wrestling. As such, the remainder of this dissertation is dedicated to two separate but interconnected projects: 1) to propose a framework of understanding wrestling that relies upon theoretical lenses imported from American analytic philosophy of art; and 2) to use Louisiana's Mid-South Wrestling as an archetypal case study in explaining professional wrestling's metaphysical transition from live regional performance to global, televised performances.

Unlike some works of historiography where a scholar attempts to historicize philosophical accounts to better understand the intellectual tenor of the time period that produced philosophical works, I intend to philosophize the history of professional wrestling. I believe that my approach is of interest to theatre historians and philosophers of art insofar as my work grounds metaphysical transformations of works of art as part of

the historical record: my metaphysical analysis arises from historical events that occurred

between 1979 and 1988, and both the philosophy and the history included in this project

inform each other such that each aspect of the analysis is needed to make sense of the

whole.

Where my introduction dwells on "Southern style" professional wrestling's last

hurrah in the New Orleans Superdome and provides a useful literature review of the

discourse on professional wrestling within the disciplines of theatre history and

performance studies, Chapters 2 and 3 introduce readers to theoretical frames imported

from philosophy of dance and aesthetic ontologies. I explain to readers that questions of

ontology and metaphysics are currently underexplored within the discourse on

professional wrestling: what sorts of objects are these performances, if they are objects at

all? To what kind of performance does the term professional wrestling refer? And what

do the answers to these questions say about the development of both the art form as such

and the art form's relationship to the society that gave birth to it? Given the changes in

the art form with both the rise of television and the globalization of the American style

since that time, answers to these metaphysical questions possess the same sorts of

urgency that Barthes's semiotic account possessed during the 1950s. [32]

---

[32] As Jon Cogburn and I note in our presentation "It's Still Real To Me, Dammit!:
Performed Ontologies and Professional Wrestling," I follow the tradition of analytic
philosophers who tend to use "ontology" and "metaphysics" interchangeably to denote
theories of the nature of reality. My preferred usage would be that "ontology" denotes
answering three kinds of questions formulated by Cogburn and I in our work: "1)
individuation (what differentiates entities of the relevant kind from each other and entities
of other kinds? 2) persistence (in virtue of what are entities of the relevant kind self
identical over time?), and 3) normativity (in virtue of what are different objects better and
worse instances of the relevant kinds?)" (Hebert and Cogburn, 2013). "Metaphysics"
should be used to denote the study of what reality must be like such that one's answers to
these questions are true. Analytic philosophers differ from Heideggerian usage, for whom

Chapters 2 and 3 provide two separate accounts in contemporary analytic philosophy of art—specifically metaphysical accounts of the type alluded to above—that theorize the type of performance that professional wrestling actually is. In Chapter 2, "Wrestling's Ontology and the Metaphysics of Dance," I turn to Adina Armelagos and Mary Sirridge's "The Identity Crisis in Dance," in particular the problem notation presents in dance to identifying the essential characteristics of a given work of dance, to provide one account for the difficulty professional wrestling has faced as a movement-intensive art form in the United States. As I demonstrate, the troubling role of style within dance is a problem that also rears its head in professional wrestling. What kinds of performances were these regional performances of professional wrestling, and why did the styles that dominated most regional variations of professional wrestling not survive into the current globalized era? Armelagos and Sirridge's insights on the challenges of notation in dance given the nature of dance apply equally to professional wrestling, and I suggest that the globalized corporatization of wrestling seen after the death of Mid-South Championship Wrestling offers a way to envision a style of movement-based performance that can (unlike dance) be notatable.

The reason for this is explained in Chapter 3 of this dissertation: "Philosophy of Mass Art." Although I do not propose to provide a definitive ontology of professional wrestling, I do argue that the form's popularity and the method through which performance-relevant norms are transmitted from performers to audiences have

---

the ontological concerns being while the merely ontic concerns particular beings. Recapitulating that debate is beyond the scope of this document; I note the above to highlight the fact that I am leveraging these terms in a way that is commonplace within analytic philosophy, but contentious to thinkers working through the continental tradition of philosophy (such as theatre historians and performance studies scholars) who are sometimes unfamiliar with the different traditions governing these terms' employment.

irrevocably shifted since the creation of Mid-South Wrestling and the death of the

Universal Wrestling Federation. This is due, in part, to wrestling's transformation from a

regional live performance to a global televisual performance of mass art: as Nöel Carroll

persuasively argues, mass (sometimes, though not always, deemed "low-brow") arts

function differently from more traditional objects of art. Given the ontological status of

these frequently-mediatized, always technologically mediated arts, it is surprising that no

one has yet to position wrestling as a paradigm example of the types of arts Carroll

studies.

Chapter 4 grounds these philosophical transitions in the history of Mid-South

Wrestling and its doomed transformation into Universal Wrestling Federation. The story

of Mid-South is the story of former amateur and professional wrestler "Cowboy" Bill

Watts's wildly successful take on what professional wrestling should be: a "legitimate"

contest filled with passion, reality, and emotion. From the Louisiana territory's

beginnings as the Sargasso Sea of wrestling promotion under Leroy McGuirk from 1950

until Bill Watts took the region over from McGuirk in 1979, through its Golden era under

Watts from 1979 until the founding of the Universal Wrestling Federation in 1986, and

until the Universal Wrestling Federation finally folded after being sold to David Crockett

in 1986, the booms and busts of Louisiana professional wrestling were a microcosm of

the macrocosmic shifts wrestling would undergo as a performance genre. As I

demonstrate, the effect of the ten year period covered in Chapter 4 is still being felt today

in the performances of professional wrestling around the world.

In Chapter 5 I close this study with a reflection on how the above theoretical

lenses allow for a more nuanced and complex view of professional wrestling as a

performance art—and in particular how the rise and fall of "Southern" wrestling is the

missing chapter of the story in the transition from men in wool tights pretending to fight

in smoke-filled carnival tents to the global corporate powerhouse that broadcasts its

television shows "in more than 150 countries and 30 languages around the world."[33] I

conclude this document by pinpointing avenues for future study, questions that my

research has raised, and ideas for where to take this research from here when

transitioning this document from a dissertation into my first scholarly monograph.

---

[33] "Live & Televised Entertainment." WWE.com. accessed December 19, 2013,
http://corporate.wwe.com/company/events.jsp.

2. Wrestling's Ontology and the Metaphysics of Dance

2.1 The Case for Re-Theorizing Professional Wrestling

In my Introduction I suggest that semiotics' utility as a lens through which to view individual performances of professional wrestling is of limited use in answering certain types of questions about professional wrestling as an art form. Throughout this chapter and Chapter 3, I suggest that a more productive framework through which to analyze professional wrestling can be found by turning to the philosophy of dance and contemporary analytic philosophy devoted to theorizing mass art. Rather than focusing on signification, I suggest throughout 2.2 that the vocabulary used by Mary Sirridge and Adina Armelagos in "The Identity Crisis in Dance" can account for the varieties of movement used in a given performance of professional wrestling, and give us the tools to answer several of the questions that ended the last chapter of this dissertation: given our concern with the concept of style and its relevance to notation, by the end of this chapter we will be able to understand both what wrestling is (ontologically speaking) as well as how style, as one of wrestling's essential features, can be communicated through notation.

Moreover, Sirridge and Armelagos note that dance (like other movement-centric performances) poses a problem to the analytic philosopher Nelson Goodman's metaphysics of performance: namely, that notatable performances are allographic, while those that are non-notatable (or singular) are autographic. This determination is significant because it determine whether an artwork can be multiply instantiated—only works that are notatable can be multiply instantiated. The stakes of this problem should

be especially clear to performance studies and theatre scholars because of the ways in which non-improvised and non-aleatory works of art are of primary concern to scholars and practitioners throughout the discipline, and these works' presumed notatability directly affects the way these disciplines work given that scripts—be they devised or traditional—are notated objects interpreted by varieties of artists at different points in time across different productions. Although these questions are common among philosophers of art, relatively little attention has been paid to these considerations within the disciplines of theatre history and performance studies; I employ Sirridge and Armelagos's work because professional wrestling, like dance, reveals that movement-intensive performances occupy a territory between works that can be adequately notated and works that cannot be adequately notated. Sirridge and Armelagos note that dance, given the importance of style to a piece and the irreducibility of style to a sign, is an autographic art in transition towards allography—and their suppositions about what would have to happen for this transition to become complete explain the attenuation of regional styles within globalized performances of professional wrestling.

2.2. "Analytic Philosophy," "Ontology," and "Metaphysics"

The discourse on philosophy of art is expansive, and as old as philosophy; aesthetic criticism is hard-wired into Plato's *Republic*, of fundamental interest to Hume, Locke, and Kant, and motivated the development of multiple (and various) art movements throughout the past twenty-five centuries. Metaphysics and aesthetic ontologies, however,

are a relatively recent phenomenon in contemporary analytic philosophy and are the subject of this chapter of my dissertation and the following chapter, Chapter 6.

But before launching into an analysis of Mary Sirridge and Adina Armelagos's work on the ontology of dance, I would like to explain to readers unfamiliar with the tradition of analytic philosophy exactly what it is I mean by the terms "analytic philosophy" as well as "metaphysics" and "ontology." For many theatre historians who are well-versed in dramatic theory and philosophy of art, dramatic theory consists of (broadly speaking) two types of works: the first type is historical accounts of the fundamental nature, aims, and goals of dramatic art that are drawn from the historical record (Plato's *Republic*; Augustine's *De Trinitate*; Lessing's *The Hamburg Dramaturgy*; Marinetti's *Futurist Manifesto*; etc.); the second type is twentieth and twenty-first century political and philosophical works usually written by European thinkers or influenced thereby (Foucault, Heidegger, Derrida, Marxist/materialist thought; post-colonial theory; etc.). In the discipline of philosophy, the former are frequently of interest to philosophical historians, while the latter are partially constitutive of the discipline of continental philosophy. Analytic philosophy, largely ignored by theatre scholars (albeit with some exceptions), is a twentieth and twenty-first century philosophical tradition that largely dominates English-speaking countries and comprises a significant amount of the scholarly output of philosophers in those countries.

Given my commitment to the relevance of analytic philosophies of art to the study of professional wrestling, the discipline of performance studies, and its importance to my proposed retheorization, it is incumbent on me to demonstrate its efficacy and provide scholars unfamiliar with the tradition's aims or goals an understanding of how this

scholarship differs from more familiar philosophical traditions. Any attempt to articulate what separates analytic philosophy from continental philosophy would, no doubt, be hotly contested by scholars from both traditions. Nonetheless, to give those unfamiliar with the distinction between analytic and continental philosophy a way to distinguish between the two disciplines, I present an account of the divide that is necessarily reductive but sufficient to orient scholars unfamiliar with these well-rehearsed distinctions within the field of philosophy proper: Frequently, a continental philosopher will attempt to express a philosophically interesting point about the world from and through the perspective of a subject living in the world, filtered through the experience of subjectivity; an analytic philosopher, by contrast, attempts to use rigorous and precise language and formal argumentation to (sometimes) posit a claim that goes beyond or is not unduly influenced by the experience of subjectivity.

Consider, solely by way of example, the distinction between the philosophical approaches of Martin Heidegger and Bertrand Russell. Heidegger, in *Being and Time*, attempts to exhaustively account for the experience of being in the world. Awareness of one's own existence and how that awareness colors and impacts the experience of being in the world constitute a point of extreme interest in Heideggerian phenomenology. There is a sense that Heidegger's approach and writing are in some ways responding to the Kantian argument that sense perception and human experience are inseparable from human thought.

Russell, by contrast, would characterize his work as being fundamentally different from that of Heidegger: rather than starting from the human experience of being in the world, Russell's work is highlighted by his interest in and commitment to clarity of

argumentation (and Russell's infamously acerbic wit). Where for Heidegger one can claim that human subjectivity is the starting point for philosophy, for Russell philosophy can—and in his estimation does—make claims that transcend the human experience through careful argument.

The above being said, analytic philosophers do not walk in lock-step, and there are numerous approaches to and ways of doing analytic philosophy. Generally speaking, though, Russell is viewed as one of the most important founders of the discourse and his work is illustrative of the sorts of scholarship that would arise within the tradition. Although there is no shortage of analytic philosophers who disagree with Russell, the analytic tradition does harness clarity of argument, precise language, and basic logic to arrive at philosophically-interesting (if not necessarily correct) conclusions. While a continental philosopher such as Heidegger or Foucault can sometimes attempt to address extremely broad topics in their work (such as being or the productivity of power in the sphere of the human) many works of analytic philosophy restrict themselves to a more narrow scholarly intervention—although that narrow intervention can have wide-reaching consequences or implications for the field as a whole. The difference in both the type of questions asked in analytic philosophy and the type of argumentation common in works of analytic philosophy can be jarring when the reader in question is more familiar with the works of different philosophical traditions.[34]

---

[34] As I noted before this short section, there are any number of philosophers who would disagree with the above. That being said, my experience with theatre scholars— particularly theatre historians and theory specialists—is that the distinctions between continental philosophy and analytic philosophy that so characterize and distinguish the works of contemporary philosophers in the academy are completely opaque to scholars outside the discipline of academic philosophy. This is, in part, due to theatre historiography's deep debt to the post-structuralist discourse (as seen in Michel de

Although I have articulated the type of philosophical work I mean by analytic

philosophy in general terms, I have yet to address what I mean by an aesthetic ontology

or metaphysics. In short, an ontology is a philosophical account of being and beings, and

when this term is used in contemporary analytic aesthetics it is frequently used to answer

certain questions about works of art specifically) and art (generally). Metaphysics is the

sub-discipline in analytic philosophy wherein questions of ontology are addressed;

generally speaking, in the analytic tradition, the words "ontology" and "metaphysics" can

even be used interchangeably. Nicholas Wolterstorff, in his canonical essay "Toward an

Ontology of Artworks," set out to systematically answer several paradigm questions that

are still vital to analytic aestheticians today: "What sort of entity is a [work of art].… Are

works of art all fundamentally alike in their ontological status?"[35] Jerrold Levinson, five

years later, asked "What *exactly* did Beethoven compose… what sort of thing is it, this

quintet which was the outcome of Beethoven's creative activity?"[36] Other aestheticians

question whether works of art are a specific kind of thing, with certain properties and

resemblances. Some critics argue that specific genres (such as a type of music) within a

kind (such as music as such) function differently as aesthetic objects than other aesthetic

Certeau's work and the interesting leveraging of Foucauldian thought by cultural
materialists like Stephen Greenblatt, queer studies and feminist scholars like Judith
Butler, and the renewed interest in Marxism that has informed the humanities since the
1970s), and the rise of interdisciplinarity that accompanied the introduction of post-
structuralist thought in the American academy. Although the above might amount to a
whig history, it is a whig history that has been helpful in explaining the relevance and
argumentative structures of non-continental philosophical works to scholars unfamiliar
with non-continental philosophical works.

[35] Wolterstorff, Nicholas, "Toward an Ontology of Art Works," Nous, Volume 9, No. 2,
(May, 1975): 115.
[36] Levinson, Jerrold, "What a Musical Work Is," *The Journal of Philosophy*, Volume 77,
No. 1, (January, 1980): 5.

objects within that kind.[37] Other critics throughout the history of analytic aesthetics ask questions about the philosophies they invent: whether (say) classificatory systems' determinations to ascribe or withhold art status from an object correspond with intuitions about art, or whether the application of a philosophy of art eliminates too many canonical artworks and includes too many noncanonical works.[38] Still others focus specifically on what it means to refer to a given aspect of a work of art, and whether that aspect of a work of art can be rigorously defined or preserved in some way. This last question is exactly the sort of question Mary Sirridge and Adina Armelagos tackle in their essay.

2.3 Ontology of Dance, Metaphysics of Movement

This last formulation is exactly the sort of question Adina Armelagos and Mary Sirridge attempt to answer in their essay "The Identity Crisis in Dance." Armelagos and Sirridge begin their account by noting that movement-based performance traditions such as dance pose a challenge to philosophers seeking to analyze those works: "Dance is perhaps the last of the art forms to rely heavily on kinesthetic and visual memory for repeated performances of works."[39] Given the instability of memory as a means of aesthetic preservation, historians and archivists have a problematic task ahead of them: unlike

---

[37] For one particularly interesting and recent account of this, refer to Andrew Kania's "Making Tracks: The Ontology of Rock Music." Additionally, attention will be paid to just such questions in Chapter 6.

[38] These sorts of questions are especially common in philosophical histories: philosophies of art have to get increasingly more expansive to accommodate different societies' expansions of which objects count as art. For one such reading of the history of art, refer to Carroll's excellent textbook: Nöel Carroll, *Philosophy of Art: A Contemporary Introduction*, New York City: Routledge, 1999.

[39] Adina Armelagos and Mary Sirridge, "The Identity Crisis in Dance," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Volume 37, No. 2, (Winter, 1978), 129.

historians of the visual arts or literature, the means of preservation is impacted by the persons who practice it, and further circumscribed by the fact that historians seeking to preserve important information about dance cannot say with authority which qualities of the art form are essential to the form (and thus must be preserved at all costs) and which qualities are inessential or incidental (allowing an archivist or performer to include or exclude them given their inessentiality). Armelagos and Sirridge's argument that traditional accounts in aesthetics which separate works of art from the specific processes that produce these works arises from the fact that

> dance is a process-art. At least part of the creative process is crucial to the identification of the work…. But in dance, the problem is complicated by the simple fact that some of the elements commonly considered incidental in the identification of a work of music or theatre are or can be integral in the identification of the dance work.[40]

The authors demonstrate this point by turning to the historical record of successful works of dance throughout the canon. For every element of a work—irrespective of whether that element is lighting, costume, the type of space the work is performed in, the talent of the performers, and so on—there are some works for which these elements are essential and other works where these elements are incidental.

Consider, for example, the Baton Rouge Ballet Theatre's yearly production of Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker,* directed and choreographed by Molly Buchmann and Sharon Matthews. Baton Rouge Ballet Theatre remounts this production on a yearly basis, but despite the changing roster of performers each year, the direction, choreography, and

---

[40] Adina Armelagos and Mary Sirridge, "The Identity Crisis in Dance," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Volume 37, No. 2, (Winter, 1978), 130.

design elements remain consistent from year to year. One could argue that each yearly set of performances is a remounting of the same work that is done in prior years given that the generative process behind the work, the choreography that informs the work, and the design elements that provide the work with local flavor remain the same; Buchmann and Matthews's production is set in Louisiana and the design elements that localize this production are important to the work's identity. It is reasonable to conclude that a production of Baton Rouge Ballet Theatre's *The Nutcracker* mounted without the specific design elements that give the work its local flavor would not be a *bad* or *poor quality* production of Baton Rouge Ballet Theatre's *The Nutcracker*; rather, it would not be a production of Baton Rouge Ballet Theatre's *The Nutcracker* at all given the essentiality of these design elements to the work.

By contrast, consider a production of *The Nutcracker* done by a group of 8-year-olds at any dance school around the world. Depending on the virtuosity of the young performers, the consistency of the music to which the performers dance and the choreography staying within the confines of ballet (rather than embracing other traditions of dance such as jazz or modern dance), each or any of the productions done by the eight-year-olds could be said to be an instance of *The Nutcracker*. Let us consider each of these three conditions. First, regarding the virtuosity of the performers, I would suggest that any ballet choreography that would preclude 8-year-olds from being in a production of *The Nutcracker* would be problematic: asking an 8-year-old dancer to perform the choreography composed for a trained adult virtuoso performer would be a severe impediment to producing an age-appropriate production of *The Nutcracker* for our troupe of children, as would composing a ballet that requires all of our 8-year-olds to be double-

jointed in their shoulders. Second, although we can imagine non-ballet performances set to Tchaikovsky's music, for a work to be a ballet performance of *The Nutcracker* then it would have to be choreographed to Tchaikovsky's music in the same way that all instances of this ballet are. Finally, to produce a ballet production of *The Nutcracker*, all of the dancers need to be sufficiently trained in dance to perform the ballet moves required of a work to be an instance of ballet; should the eight year olds only be trained in hip hop dance (or completely untrained) then they will be incapable of performing in an actual ballet without said training.

Provided that all of the above conditions are met, we will be left with a performance of Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker*. Some of these performances, no doubt, will be poor instances of *The Nutcracker* given the age and talent of the dancers involved; others, perhaps, might be extremely faithful or inspired instances of *The Nutcracker*. But as long as the dancers and choreographers retain the essential characteristics for a production of *The Nutcracker* it is not unreasonable to determine which ballet the eight-year-olds are doing and how good of a production that ballet is.

Where things get tricky, according to Sirridge and Armelagos, is when one begins to consider the role of performers in certain works. Indeed, "individual performers are of more than incidental importance" in a work of dance.[41] There exist works of dance that are defined primarily by the virtuosity of the performers, choreography, or both: consider several of Martha Graham's works, or Mikhail Baryshnikov's 1977 performance in the American Ballet Theatre's performance of *The Nutcracker* as the Nutcracker. Were our precocious eight year olds to attempt to perform an instance of a Martha Graham virtuoso

---

[41] Adina Armelagos and Mary Sirridge, "The Identity Crisis in Dance," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Volume 37, No. 2, (Winter, 1978), 130.

piece or the American Ballet Theatre's performance of *The Nutcracker* it would be reasonable to assert that their lack of virtuosity prevents the piece from being an instance of the work they are performing (rather than merely a poor instance of the work).

Moreover, it is unclear how they would go about determining *how* to create an instance of the work in question given the fact that dance is exceedingly difficult to notate. Unlike music or literature, an adequate score—or, to phrase this differently, a system of notation that adequately captures and records a work of art's essential properties—remains elusive in dance in part because different works of dance have different essential properties that need to be recorded to create a faithful record of the work in question.

Whether a work of art can be notated is an issue of paradigm importance to some philosophers of art since Nelson Goodman formulated the problem.[42]

> Let us speak of a work of art as *autographic* if and only if the distinction
>
> between the original and a forgery of it is significant; or better, if and only
>
> if even the most exact duplication of it does not thereby count as genuine.
>
> If a work of art is autographic, we may also call that art autographic. Thus
>
> painting is autographic, music is non-autographic or *allographic*.
>
> In sum, an established art becomes allographic only when the
>
> classification of objects of events into works is legitimately projected from

---

[42] Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art*, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1968).

an antecedent classification and is fully determined independently of

history of production, in terms of a notational system.[43]

Autographic works, for Goodman, are works that cannot be duplicated; these works deny or resist being multiply instantiated. The cathedral at Notre Dame is one such example of an autographic work of art. If I were to create a stone-for-stone copy of the cathedral at Notre Dame I would not have created multiple instances of Notre Dame cathedral; rather, I would have created two buildings with identical floor plans. The existence of a second building made with an identical floor plan to the cathedral at Notre Dame would not meaningfully affect the art-hood of the first building, given that part of the identity condition for the work "Cathedral at Notre Dame" is to have had its first stone laid in 1163, as well as to have been subjected to nearly 900 years of weathering at its site in Paris and associated other qualities that are non-transferable to a copy. By contrast, an allographic work is a work that can be multiply instanced: my copy of R. Scott Bakker's novel *The Darkness that Comes Before* in my messenger bag is neither more nor less an instance of this novel than any other printing of the novel, although infelicities of printing might make my copy a less faithful instance than Bakker's finished manuscript. The same holds true of sheet music for a musical work, printings of books of poetry and drama, and the like. But where the allographic status of a work such as a novel is easy to parse, things get much more difficult in ascribing allographic status to any work of art that involves live performance: remember, any record of an allographic work requires a notation of that work which is sufficient for replication in performance independent of any performance history.

---

[43] Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art*, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1968), op cit. p. 113.

This is important to scholars of dance because dance is "an art form in transition to being allographic [rather than] an art form inherently autographic."[44] Notational schema[45] for dance do exist, and choreographic scores are employed in dance, of course, but none of these notations is adequate to preserve all essential features of a work of dance. Indeed, it is unclear that dance notation in its current state can even record *some* of its essential features. Regardless of whether an incidental element is essential in a given work, there is, according to Sirridge and Armelagos, an aspect of style in dance choreography—particularly the style that accompanies movement on an individual or company level—that that thus far defies notation.

"Dance style," for Sirridge and Armelagos, "is a double-aspect, two-level phenomenon"[46] that is always present in a work of choreography.[47] By double-aspect, Armelagos and Sirridge argue that choices within a piece's "spatial imagination" (or the ability to imagine or compose movements such that a specific space-time interval can be filled) result in two aspects of the piece that must be understood to make sense of a dance piece: "kinesthetic motivation" and "spatial vocabulary".[48] These two aspects of dance have meanings on two distinct levels of the dance: the performance level (i.e., regarding

---

[44] Adina Armelagos and Mary Sirridge, "The Identity Crisis in Dance," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Volume 37, No. 2, (Winter, 1978), 138.

[45] These notational schema include, but are not limited to, labanotation, ethnochoreology, Benesh Movement Notation, Eshkol-Wachman Movement Notation, and DanceWriting in the Western world.

[46] Adina Armelagos and Mary Sirridge, "The Identity Crisis in Dance," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Volume 37, No. 2, (Winter, 1978), 131.

[47] Armelagos and Sirridge on p. 136 of their piece note that instances of aleatory choreography (i.e., improvisational choreography done only in the moment) does not necessarily cohere with this understanding of style. There is a sense that aleatory performance should be considered separately from traditional non-aleatory arts given the potential difference in goodmaking features between the instances of each of these arts.

[48] Adina Armelagos and Mary Sirridge, "The Identity Crisis in Dance," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Volume 37, No. 2, (Winter, 1978), 131.

the choices or movements of the piece and all performers therein, or $style_1$) and the

performer level (i.e., regarding the choices or movements of a single performer, or $style_2$).

Kinesthetic motivation in $style_2$ is the originating impulse of the movement, stresses, and

transitions from one movement to another; in $style_1$ (as viewed by an audience or critic

separate from the piece), it is the general direction of movement exhibited throughout the

duration of the piece. Spatial vocabulary, by contrast, refers to the repertoire of

acceptable bodily positions within the performer's role ($style_2$) and in the dance piece as a

whole ($style_1$).

Both styles, $style_1$ and $style_2$, are present in every work of choreographed dance.

"Every dancer has a personal $style_2$, an individual internalization of [a piece's] general

$style_1$ constraints; but we tend to notice its presence only when personal $style_2$ is

exceptional."[49] This seems consonant with paradigms of dance spectatorship, where the

$style_2$ of the individual is immediately apparent but the $style_1$ of the piece as a whole is

only discernible after grasping the different elements that unite all of the dancers' $style_2$s

into a cohesive $style_1$ for the piece as a whole. Consider Marvin Hamlisch, Edward

Kleban, and James Kirkwood's 1975 musical *A Chorus Line*: individual numbers of the

musical sung and danced by the various performers in the piece showcase each

individual's virtuosity, but the musical as a whole ends with the Broadway staple "One,"

a piece that subsumes each individual performer's virtuosity into the unity of a company

stepping and kicking in absolute unison, such that the individual is indiscernible from the

---

[49] Adina Armelagos and Mary Sirridge, "The Identity Crisis in Dance," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Volume 37, No. 2, (Winter, 1978), 131.

group.[50] Additionally, both levels of style (style$_1$ and style$_2$) are experienced by performers and audience members: on the performer's level, style$_1$ is experienced as constraints of limitations placed upon her style$_2$, while the audience "apprehends both style$_1$ and style$_2$—as the dancer does not—as qualitative external results of the dancer's activity."[51] Both levels of style are empirical, but a dancer internalizes the levels of style such that an audience can see the styles' externalizations.

The problem this poses for notation is profound, but perhaps non-obvious: given the variability of essential properties within dance, its status as a process-art, and the effect of style (both style$_1$ and style$_2$) on choreography it is not clear how dance as it is currently performed can ever be allographic in the sense required by Goodman. On the one hand, the above "incidentals" to dance (lights, sound, costume, and the like) in many pieces are far from incidental and resist notational compliance as specified by Goodman earlier. Although one could perhaps write in the margins of a score that specific lights, costumes, and whatnot are important (thus satisfying Goodman's requirement for recording) it is unclear how this type of notation would be sufficient for retrieval such that a company of dancers and choreographers could reproduce a piece "independently of history of production" of that piece.[52]

Furthermore, it unclear exactly how dance notation is capable of recording the steps that compose an instance of choreography without significant modification such that an adequate score, per Goodman, could be produced. In part, this is because of the

---

[50] James Kirkwood, Michael Bennett, Nicholas Dante, and Edward Kleban, *A Chorus Line*, (New York: Applause Theatre and Cinema Books, 2000).

[51] Adina Armelagos and Mary Sirridge, "The Identity Crisis in Dance," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Volume 37, No. 2, (Winter, 1978), 131.

[52] Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art*, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1968), op cit. p. 113.

influence of how style forces us to understand steps. Steps are precise and measurable. Indeed, several notational schema (labanotation and Benesh Movement Notation in particular) can record the steps of a dance for a record, but none of these schema (nor any other that could be widely employed) could account for the ways that the steps are subject to the considerations of style.

Consider, for example, the role spatial vocabulary in style would have on steps at both the style$_1$ and style$_2$ levels. Different architectural restrictions on a performance space can and frequently do limit the type of steps that may be deployed in a given piece. At Louisiana State University, for instance, silks work and physical theatre can only be done in spaces where it is possible to safely rig silks for performers to climb on. The architecture and physicality of a space limit the spatial vocabulary (of which steps can be considered an expression) of a piece. Moreover, the individual training and skill of performers can also affect the types of steps available to a choreographer: if a choreographer is working with someone who is only beginning to do silks work, that constrains the extent to which that performer can safely execute basic and advanced moves in mid-air, just as a dancer who cannot pirouette puts a limit on a choreographer's array of dance steps if that choreographer is dead set on using that dancer in a given work. These factors are daunting for notation of choreography but nonetheless possible given that a choreographer's style could be grasped (at least in terms of the spatial vocabulary of a piece) independent of performance history. The resulting notation would be unwieldy, difficult to learn, and uneconomical—but it could nonetheless exist.

It is in the effect of a discrete step's kinesthetic motivation where notation will fall short of Goodman's scheme at both the style$_1$ and style$_2$ levels. Although it is possible

to imagine a sufficiently expansive notational system that can account for a dancer or choreographer's spatial vocabulary, there is no sense in which a performer's or a piece's kinesthetic motivation can be understood outside the context of performance history, nor is there a functional notation system that can account for every step's precise kinesthetic motivation in a piece of choreography. Recall that, from the perspective of performers, kinesthetic motivation can be understood as a movement's originating impulse. In practice, this amounts to what part of the dancer's body leads or begins the movement for a specific step. A pirouette wherein a performer begins the movement in her head is decidedly different than a pirouette wherein the performer begins the movement in her feet, just as a dance step that begins in a dancer's hips would appear different than one that begins in his arms; this is because, as Armelagos and Sirridge note,

> A sequence of positions may be "letter perfect." Still, if there is not in addition the correct kinesthetic motivation, the sequence is quite literally wrong. Kinesthetic motivation is not at all a matter of making dancers feel or want to move in a certain way. It has to do instead with the way sequences of movement are organized…. Even rightly motivated movement may fall short of the ideals of the dance style of form. This is not because the proper motivation may be known in the abstract without being translated into movement, but because kinesthetic knowledge, like any other kind, may fail to guarantee performance if ability and training are inaccurate.[53]

---

[53] Adina Armelagos and Mary Sirridge, "The Identity Crisis in Dance," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Volume 37, No. 2, (Winter, 1978), 131.

The correct motivation can be taught in a variety of ways, of course. It could be as simple as telling a dancer to start the movement in her knee or through imparting the knowledge by way of visual metaphor (such as, "move your hips like a cat flicks its tail"), but how this could be notated and understood separate from the history of production is unclear.

The above is not to say that dance has no notations whatsoever; after all, the existence of various systems of notation suggests that choreographers understand the importance of creating historical records. But these systems of notations do not satisfy Goodman's requirements for a work of allographic art because the notations that do exist are sufficient for recording a work but insufficient to the task of allowing a separate group of performers to retrieve this work and remount it; in other words, these historical records do not exist independently of history of production. Dance is a process art, and the generative process of choreography is something that cannot be captured in the notational systems, at least as they exist now.

But as Armelagos and Sirridge note, dance is not so much an autographic art as it is an art in transition from autographic to allographic. Although there are thus far no systems of notation that can account for style at this point in time (whether one refers to their article's publication in 1978 or at the time of this writing, 2016), notational systems are improving given that notations exist sufficient for recording if not retrieval. That being said, dance "will become allographic only when either notation succeeds in capturing style, or general practice decides that style is incidental. Either might occur, but neither has to date."[54] The authors are skeptical of the likelihood of this ever happening, but they do point to the possibility that audience demand for re-performances of historical

---

[54] Adina Armelagos and Mary Sirridge, "The Identity Crisis in Dance," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Volume 37, No. 2, (Winter, 1978), 138.

works might one day lead to a notational system sufficient for recording elements of style

and the retrieval of style even if such a notation's dependence upon performance history

would make the notational schema fall far short of Goodman's requirements. Nonetheless,

market forces influencing the art form as well as the discipline's increasing

"homogenization of dancer training [that are] already underway will gradually free dance

works from the idiosyncratic control of their creators and increase the number of persons

who can adequately interpret inadequate scores."[55] Dance, as it exists now, will remain

impossible to notate, but it is conceivable to imagine changes in the art form such that a

future iteration of dance might nonetheless be notatable in the way that Goodman

demands.

2.4 Identity, Style, and Regional Performance

I contend that the state of dance at the time Armelagos and Sirridge wrote their essay is

analogous to the state of wrestling as it was performed during Louisiana's Mid-South

Wrestling. Armelagos and Sirridge's observations about the challenges dance poses to

aesthetics are equally problematic in that of professional wrestling, and their discussions

of choreography and style in dance (and the difficulty of notating either of these things)

can account for how professional wrestling developed into regional variants everywhere

the art form is performed. Given the variety of wrestling territories around the world,

there were a myriad of styles that were worked in each territory: the inability of wrestlers

to teach a single style that was worked globally was a matter of great importance to how

---

[55] Adina Armelagos and Mary Sirridge, "The Identity Crisis in Dance," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Volume 37, No. 2, (Winter, 1978), 138.

wrestling performers gained skill traveling and working in multiple territories to learn how each region's audiences were conditioned to respond to different moves. For these audiences, part of the performance of a wrestling match within each territory was the match's position within the performances done throughout the region's history—and a match's style worked to the extent that audiences of a region could interpret a performance as being of a piece with the types of matches these audiences were familiar with. This fact is significant: it builds upon the distribution of territory among NWA promoters around the country, and these promoter's preferences for certain types of wrestlers and certain types of stories ensured that wrestling would remain regional and decentralized as additional protections against competition internal to the NWA and NWA-aligned promotions. A promotion's regional style became synonymous with the identity of wrestling as a performance within that region, and both audiences and wrestlers performing in a promotion created matches that reinforced that promotion's wrestling identity.

Such a development helps theorize the state of wrestling as it was during the late 1970s and early 1980s—but it seems to militate against the ability of a single wrestling promotion becoming a national promotion as Vince McMahon's WWE did, Jim Crockett's NWA did, and Bill Watts's UWF attempted to do. Additional theoretical place setting must occur to successfully account for how such changes in style could be possible to appeal to global or national audiences: there must be a metaphysical change in that which is being promoted for such a thing to be possible.

As will become clear throughout Chapter 3, the work of Nelson Goodman will provide an ontology wherein style becomes so incidental to a work that notation becomes

theoretically possible for both dance and professional wrestling. These processes of disciplinary and stylistic homogenization in art are not merely imminent in a nonexistent and dystopic future, as they are in dance; rather, stylistic homogenization is an metaphysical function (perhaps even side effect) of art forms with mass appeal—and we can see in contemporary globalized performances of professional wrestling exactly how the transformation of a work of art from a live performance to a performance of mass art can lead to movement-based performances wherein style, both $style_1$ and $style_2$, can become an incidental features of that work. In Chapter 3 I argue that it is in the ontological transformation from a work of popular art to a work of mass art wherein we can see how these concerns about style can result in notational schema that capture in principle what is essential in works of movement-intensive performance. Furthermore, I will lay the groundwork for exactly how this sea change will impact our understanding of the transformation of professional wrestling performances from regional live performances into globalized national performances in Chapter 5, where I will concretize how both of these concerns—homogenization of style and ontological transformation—are relevant to performance studies and philosophers of art's understanding of the collapse of Mid-South Championship Wrestling and the Universal Wrestling Federation.

3. The Ontology of Mass Art

3.1 Introduction to Mass Art

Nöel Carroll, arguably the most important American philosopher of art, is a vociferous critic of art criticism and aesthetics' focus on highbrow, bourgeois art—in particular, the avant-garde work of art. Although Carroll's interest in popular mass art is most famously on display in his works specifically dedicated to mass art, one can see in Carroll's oeuvre a clear mission statement regarding why one might turn away from theorizing traditional or highbrow art:

> perusing the critical literature, one is often struck by the regularity with
> which the theory that given avant-garde artworks are said to promote
> coincides with the theory—be it aesthetic, phenomenological,
> poststructural, and so on—that the exegete upholds. This, in turn, sparks
> the suspicion, on occasion at least, that the art critic is using the avant-
> garde artwork rather in the way that a ventriloquist uses a dummy.[56]

For Carroll, the art of the elite—the avant-garde artwork—does not make arguments, but rather serves as the vehicle through which art critics advance their own arguments. A Jackson Pollock painting bears no resemblance to the sort of argument one might see in the pages of a theatre history journal or aesthetics journal: the dissonance or obscurity of its forms (part and parcel of its being an avant-garde artwork given the goals of avant-garde artwork to confound or subvert the aesthetics of popular works) prevents it from

---

[56] Nöel Carroll, "Avant-Garde Art and the Problem of Theory," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. Volume 29, No. 3 (Autumn, 1995), 2.

articulating premises, conclusions, or even standing for anything other than itself given the avant-garde's eschewal of easily understood referents.[57] Although my analysis of professional wrestling is informed by many of the movements that Carroll accuses art critics of "reading into" avant-garde artworks, Carroll's concept of mass art informs my understanding of both how wrestling developed in Louisiana and eventually how wrestling's style attenuated such that the form became a form that could be popular on a global scale—even while, simultaneously, the type of artwork being presented changed as its style changed.

In section 3.2, I use Nöel Carroll's concept of "mass art" to further explain this attenuation; where Armelagos and Sirridge provide a general outline for how regional professional wrestling would eventually yield before (or, in some cases, transform into) a globalized and unitary product with a singular controlling style, Carroll explains why this occurs from a metaphysical perspective, and exactly how the artwork has to change

---

[57] Carroll's conclusion is far more strident than these prefatory remarks. For those curious, Carroll concludes that the "avant-garde artwork is called theoretical honorifically, in an attempt, one suspects, to boost the seriousness with which it is regarded. But the avant-garde artwork is not an example of a theory, a statement of a theory, or an object lesson in a theory. It is rather an allusion to or an emblem of a theory. It does not work out or through a theory, but operates like heraldic insignia for some theory which for either philosophical, sociological, or political reasons is a theory that is antecedently held, newly held, or which is an emerging idea in the art world. The "theoretical" artwork becomes an occasion for those affiliated with the view to celebrate it communally… The 'theoretical' artwork becomes a pretext for exegetes—professional and otherwise—to rehearse their convictions. Thus, in fact, it might be better to regard such avant-garde artworks as akin to flags rather than theories—though why the art world should be so obsessed with theory and want such flags to which to pledge allegiance is a topic for another essay." Although Carroll's argument against avant-garde artwork is somewhat tangential to my own work here, his attitude toward avant-garde art and skepticism of the elites for whom this art is produced informs my own work. Readers wanting more information on Carroll's argument should refer to Nöel Carroll, "Avant-Garde Art and the Problem of Theory," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Volume 29, No. 3 (Autumn, 1995), 11.

ontologically such that a unitary style could emerge. In 3.3 I focus specifically on

Carroll's definition of mass art, explaining each necessary condition in detail as well as

why these conditions are jointly sufficient. In 3.4, I address various objections to

Carroll's concept of mass art and Carroll's responses to those definitions so that readers

can gain a deeper understanding of how this metaphysical distinction applies to existing

works of art as well as why this distinction is important to the field of aesthetics. Finally

in 3.5, 3.6, and 3.7 I direct attention to the matches I briefly discussed in the Introduction

of this dissertation: Ric Flair v. Ricky Steamboat, worked in the Southern Style, and Hulk

Hogan v. King Kong Bundy, worked in WWE's newly minted Main Event Style aimed at

a global audience. As I demonstrate, Southern Style proves to be too complex to fit into

the sorts of erotetic narratives Carroll's mass art requires, while Main Event Style proves

to be a much better fit for the ontological shift that regional practices undergo when

transitioning from regional audiences to mass audiences.

3.2 Mass Art v. Popular Art

Carroll, in "Ontology of Mass Art," argues that art that is designed for mass production—

art that is mediated through the technologies that make its dissemination through mass

media possible—functions differently than other (usually more traditional or "high") arts.

Carroll's analysis focuses on works of art such as television shows, comic books, and

other works that strive for wide appeal. I suggest that professional wrestling fits Carroll's

scheme better than any of his examples; furthermore, Carroll's scheme, when combined

with Sirridge and Armelagos's suppositions about notatability and how style in

movement-based performances must develop such that notatability can become possible, accounts for both the rise of professional wrestling as a regional art form as well as its inevitable ontological transformation as the business shifts from local performances towards a global audience. Before I can turn to the specifics of my argument, however, I would like to briefly explain why Carroll chooses the nomenclature "mass art" rather than "popular art." [58]

On this point I agree with Carroll: Carroll notes that popular art is any work of art that is widely enjoyed by audiences at any point in time. As such, popular art is an ahistorical term with exemplars throughout the entirety of human history (indeed, most cultures would have multiple types of art that could be classified as popular throughout history), while mass art is historically contingent. Rather than being a constant of human history, mass art only exists in societies wherein mass media and mass technology allow for mass distribution of aesthetic forms. Mass art is a product produced by mass society. "Mass society," Carroll notes, "began to emerge in tandem with capitalism, urbanization, and industrialization."[59] The triumvirate of capitalism, urbanization, and industrialization are important to this emergence: capitalism because it creates a market system wherein the mass production of art becomes economically profitable for artists; urbanization because it centralizes markets and people such that economies of scale sufficient for mass

---

[58] Note that Carroll's theory of mass art is developed in two places: his essay in the Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism from 1997, and the subsequent monograph devoted to mas art (*A Philosophy of Mass Art*) published by Oxford University Press. Wherever possible in this chapter, I quote from his essay given the essay's ready availability to anyone with access to the Internet. That being said, where content in the monograph significantly differs, clarifies, or substantively revises arguments made within the essay I will employ the monograph.
[59] Nöel Carroll, *The Ontology of Mass Art, (*New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 186.

consumption of capital become possible; and industrialization because the industrial

revolution introduces the technology by which mass production is physically possible

such that market demands can be met.

The combination of these three factors does not point to a specific year, which is

no accident. Carroll points to the printing press as the first example of the development of

mass art, but notes that mass art expanded beyond print with the advent of

industrialized societies in the 19th and 20th centuries, as more and more

mass information technologies developed—such as photography, sound

recording, motion pictures, radio, TV, and so on. Though we might not be

able to specify the date when the age of mass art dawned, we can certainly

say by now that we are in the thick of it.[60]

Although prior to the 19th and 20th centuries the only mass art forms available in the West

were novels or other works of art distributed widely via the printing press (given the

technological limitations of the time), in the present we are surrounded by mass art:

television, cinema, novels, podcasts, radio shows, rock music, and the like are all art

forms that could fit into Carroll's scheme.

Furthermore, Carroll's leveraging of the term mass art is divorced from the

derogatory connotations that frequently accompany the work of modernist or avant-garde

critics who attend to the art of the masses and other popular arts.[61] Rather than conceiving

of the mass audience as a bunch of feckless rubes who can be tricked into liking just

---

[60] Nöel Carroll, *The Ontology of Mass Art, (*New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 186.

[61] One example of such a critic would be the aforementioned modernist critic Clement Greenberg, or Theodor Adorno of the Frankfurt School ("On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening," 1938).

about anything that corporate interests commodify and sell, Carroll is quick to point out

that his use should be understood as a rejection of concerns expressed by scholars in

cultural studies: "Scholars in what is now called cultural studies worry that in speaking of

mass art, *mass* culture, or *mass* anything, one is buying into an elitist view of society, and

perhaps even conspiring with it."[62] Carroll is no conspirator; rather, he is attempting to

classify mass art rather than evaluate it. Thus,

> When I use the term *mass art*, I do not intend any derogation of its
>
> consumers. I simply mean that it is art made on a mass scale, i.e., art that
>
> is, first of all made by and distributed by means of a mass
>
> technology….But here mass is used in a strictly *numerical* sense. It is not
>
> used in the pejorative… sense. Nor are the numerical masses that I have in
>
> mind reducible to the masses in the class sense of the term—to the
>
> proletariat, to the working class, to blue-collar workers, to the lumpen-
>
> proletariat, or to the underclass. Mass art is designed to seek out a mass
>
> audience, irrespective of its class.

This idea of mass as a numerical value rather than an evaluative tool or pejorative

dismissal is used only to distinguish between the types of art one sees in popular culture

throughout history from the historically contingent arts. These contingent arts are only

made possible through developments in human society that allow for mass production of

artworks that function through the economies of scale accompanying urbanization and

industry.

---

[62] Nöel Carroll, *The Ontology of Mass Art, (*New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 186.

3.3 What is Mass Art?

But what is mass art, as Carroll defines it? Carroll's formula is simple, and establishes

three necessary conditions of a work's mass art status that are also jointly sufficient for

ascribing mass art status to a work:

> x is a mass artwork if and only if 1) x is a multiple instance or type
>
> artwork 2) produced and distributed by a mass technology, 3) which
>
> artwork is intentionally designed to gravitate in its structural choices (e.g.,
>
> its narrative forms, symbolism, intended affect, and even its content)
>
> towards those choices that promise accessibility with minimum effort,
>
> virtually on first contact, for the largest number of relatively untutored
>
> audiences.[63]

For readers unfamiliar with analytic philosophy and its argumentation conventions,

Carroll's definition is a useful place to see firsthand exactly how definitions are

structured within the discipline. To refer to a set of statements (in particular, claims 1-3 in

the above definition) as necessary conditions and jointly sufficient is to make a claim

about the relationship between a given set of statements.[64] In Carroll's above definition,

---

[63] Nöel Carroll, "The Ontology of Mass Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. Volume 55, No. 2 (Spring 1997), 190.

[64] I am indebted to my friend Mark Norris Lance for an explanation in ordinary language of how this works. As Lance notes in his 12/18/2014 correspondence with me, "a necessary condition for something is a condition (or conditions) without which that thing cannot exist. A sufficient condition is a condition that guarantees that thing will exist if that condition (or those conditions) is present." One extremely traditional example of this would be the concept of "bachelor." To be a bachelor one must be an adult unmarried male. The concepts "adult," "married," and "male" are each necessary for bachelorhood but together are jointly sufficient for bachelorhood. A married man is not a bachelor because he possess only two of the three necessary conditions for bachelorhood (adult

to ascribe 1-3 with the status of necessary conditions is another way of saying that an

object of mass art, to be an object of mass art, is to be an object such that statements 1-3

will be features of that object. To state "x is an object of mass art" is to state that

statements 1-3 will be true about that object. To say that statements 1-3 are jointly

sufficient is to declare that for any object to which statements 1-3 apply, the applicability

of 1-3 is sufficient cause to consider that object an object of mass art. Hence the use of

the phrase "if and only if" in the definition. To those trained in logic, the presence of "if

and only if" (often abbreviated as "iff") tells us the precise relationship between the

above statements: namely that the statements are either jointly true or jointly false.[65]

I would like to pause for a moment and focus on each of the three statements

identified as necessary in Carroll's definition. Consider the first statement: "x is a

multiple instance or type artwork."[66] This first statement serves two important purposes.

First, it limits the range of objects that can be a work of mass art to artworks such that

other objects of popular culture (news programs, televised sporting events such as the

Olympics or Monday Night Football, or anything that is artlike but nonetheless not art)

are excluded from consideration. Second, it excludes works of art that, metaphysically

speaking, could never be works of mass art because they cannot be multiply instanced,

---

and male) but not the third (unmarried). An adult, unmarried female also possesses two of
the necessary conditions for bachelorhood but, because she is not a male, she would be a
bachelorette. Other permutations of this would play out similarly such that only
possession of the three necessary conditions for bachelorhood is sufficient to correctly
declare someone a bachelor.

[65] There are numerous introductory first-order logic textbooks that cover these concepts,
but I always default back to the newest edition of the book used in my first logic class:
Patrick Hurley, *A Concise Introduction to Logic: 12th Edition*, (Boston: Cengage
Learning, 2014).

[66] Nöel Carroll, "The Ontology of Mass Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art
Criticism*. Volume 55, No. 2 (Spring 1997), 190.

and thus could not be widely distributed. Carroll notes that this sort of move is useful also in terms of the types of content that will result from the above. Because "mass artworks are not avant-garde, there should be little problem classifying items in terms of whether or not they fall into already entrenched art forms—such as drama or song—or in terms of whether they discharge classically recognized artistic purposes like representation or expression."[67]

Thus, for Carroll, it is quite easy to determine whether a product of popular culture meets the first necessary condition because the work in question will be noticeably similar to other, accepted types of artworks that are defined as artworks without much disagreement.[68] Second, it harkens back to the work of both Nelson Goodman as well as that of Armelagos and Sirridge throughout Chapter 5: multiple instance or type artwork can also be thought of as a work of allographic art, wherein "multiple instances" transmitted through "types" can be understood as analogous to notatable scores.

The second necessary condition notes that this work must be "produced and distributed by a mass technology."[69] As noted at the beginning of 6.2, Carroll links the emergence of mass art in societies to the historical events that make mass production and mass distribution possible: from the printing press to daguerreotypes, photography, record players, motion pictures, televisions, and assorted other technologies emerging

---

[67] Nöel Carroll, "The Ontology of Mass Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. Volume 55, No. 2 (Spring 1997), 191.

[68] Video games, by this account, could be considered art because they utilize narrative and graphical representations; scripted or improvised narrative TV shows could be considered art given the works' similarities to traditional theatre and literature; televised concerts given the experience's similarity to attending a live concert; and so on.

[69] Nöel Carroll, "The Ontology of Mass Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. Volume 55, No. 2 (Spring 1997), 190.

thereafter. This consideration is important insofar as it renders Carroll's distinction between mass arts and popular arts definitional. As Carroll notes, "[m]ass art emerges historically… [and] is not popular art *simpliciter*. It requires a mass production and distribution technology where such a technology is defined as one that is capable of delivering multiple (or at least two) tokens of a mass artwork type to more than one reception point simultaneously."[70] Carroll's statement here is unsurprising given the relationship between notational accuracy and a medium that allows for the development of multiple instances to be distributed simultaneously to multiple audiences at multiple reception points.

This bears more scrutiny, however. For instance, consider the difference between theatrical productions of Gore, Pitchford, and Cohen's *Carrie: The Musical*, Stephen King's novel *Carrie*, and Brian De Palma's film adaptation of *Carrie*. A single production of the musical could never be produced in multiple spaces such that multiple audiences could see the piece at multiple reception points at the same time. A set of actors cannot be physically present at two places at the same time, and at best a musical could tour multiple cities night after night, or send multiple road companies out to different cities.[71] Each of these performances would be performed for single audiences arrayed in seats around the theatre. The differences in perspective caused by seats being

---

[70] Nöel Carroll, "The Ontology of Mass Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. Volume 55, No. 2 (Spring 1997), 191.

[71] I will allow that, in the case of a single production featuring multiple touring companies, this gets difficult to parse—and some reasonable colleagues might dispute the idea that these multiple touring companies are different works of art. That being said, I as a director am not willing to grant that the physical reality of which specific actors are cast in a show is an inessential aspect of a theatrical work—a belief that one would have to espouse in order to argue for exactly that point. Other scholars are welcome to that contentious claim, and the disagreements that will follow.

located in different places within a single theatre would not constitute multiple reception

points but, rather, a single spatially continuous reception site with similar orientations of

perspective shared by audience members. Neither King's novel nor De Palma's film is

limited in this regard. Two people could go to Barnes and Noble bookstores in Lafayette

and Baton Rouge Louisiana and begin reading their copies of *Carrie* at 3:00 PM on

December 18, 2015 without issue, just as audiences all over America in 1976 saw De

Palma's film in movie theaters around the country at different (sometimes simultaneous)

times. It would be inconceivable to say (barring infelicities of the technology making the

transmission of the multiple instances or tokens possible such as the film projector

breaking down or the printing press's copy having an ink imbalance) that the reader in

Lafayette was reading a different novel than *Carrie*, or that cinephiles in Duluth saw a

different movie by De Palma than fans in Scranton.

> The final necessary condition for Carroll's definition of mass art, which reads
>
> 3) which artwork is intentionally designed to gravitate in its structural
>
> choices (e.g., its narrative forms, symbolism, intended affect, and even its
>
> content) toward those choices that promise accessibility with minimum
>
> effort, virtually on first contact, for the largest number of relatively
>
> untutored audiences[72]

is necessary because it is possible to produce non-mass art for which 1) and 2) are true.

Carroll notes that the films of avant-garde filmmaker Stan Brakhage[73] are 1) multiply

instanced and 2) distributed or produced through the technological processes that make

---

[72] Nöel Carroll, "The Ontology of Mass Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. Volume 55, No. 2 (Spring 1997), 190.
[73] Representative films include Christ Mass Sex Dance (1991), Passage Through: A Ritual (1990), and his unfinished Stan's Window and Work in Progress (2003).

the dissemination or production of these works possible, but his films decidedly do not

meet 3). Indeed, many of Brakhage's films are accompanied by short lectures by the

filmmaker to educate audiences on how the films should be experienced or understood.

The same could be said for works of conceptual poetry by Christian Bök and Kenneth

Goldsmith[74], or about Umberto Eco's extremely popular novel *The Name of the Rose*.[75]

The above addresses why works can possess the first two essential features but

not the third; that being said, it is also necessary to explain why mass art artworks must

have this feature. Carroll sets this distinction up earlier in his essay when he claims that

"avant-garde art is esoteric, [while] mass art is exoteric."[76] In layman's terms, avant-

garde works function by virtue of the fact that they are difficult to understand, while mass

arts function by virtue of the fact that they are easily apprehensible to a wide variety of

people. For Carroll, mass art's focus on exoteric content seems to result from a

combination of the audience for which a work of art is released as well as an economic

---

[74] I am indebted to my friend Shea Matthew Fisher for bringing these poets to my attention and their relevance to my dissertation.

[75] Carroll deploys an analogous novel in his essay: Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic* Verses. I concede that Carroll's argument in "The Ontology of Mass Art" which states that, despite *The Satanic Verse*'s sales success, it is reasonable to believe that the book was bought by far more people than could have possibly been sophisticated enough to read it. This is a bold claim to make, and I would suggest instead that we turn to Umberto Eco's postscript to *The Name of the Rose* instead to find a more charitable example of how confounding art such as Rushdie or Eco can achieve mass sales success: "After reading the manuscript, my friends and editors suggested I abbreviate the first hundred pages, which they found very difficult and demanding. Without thinking twice, I refused, because, as I insisted, if somebody wanted to enter the abbey and live there for seven days, he had to accept the abbey's own pace. If he could not, he would never manage to read the whole book. Therefore those first hundred pages are like a penance or an initiation, and if someone does not like them, so much the worse for him. He can stay at the foot of the hill." Umberto Eco, "Postscript to *Name of the Rose*," trans. by Harcourt Brace and Co., (Orlando: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1984), 516.

[76] Nöel Carroll, "The Ontology of Mass Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. Volume 55, No. 2 (Spring 1997), 190.

incentive to the market system in which mass arts are released: "insofar as mass art is meant to capture large markets, it gravitates toward the choice of devices that will make it readily accessible to mass, untutored audiences."[77]

At this point, it might be helpful to consider Carroll's archetypal examples of works of mass art: comic books, commercial movies, and television. Each of these works is noteworthy insofar as they privilege pictorial representation as the primary means of narration within a work. Each of these types of artworks is widely popular, and none of them require literacy from natives of the cultures in which these artworks were made (and for some cultures these works are exported to). Even with comic books, literacy is not a barrier for appreciating the work. Superhero comics, by far the most popular comics published aside from comic strips in newspapers, are perfectly intelligible in many cases without recourse to literacy—Spider Man's aerial exploits and fights against costumed supervillains are just as appealing visually as they are literarily, if not moreso. Furthermore, some of the most aesthetically interesting comic books in print eschew words altogether in favor of pictorial representation alone.[78] The reason for this, according to Carroll, is simple: "Picture recognition requires no appreciable training. Thus, mass artforms that rely on pictures as basic constituents will be accessible in a fundamental way to virtually unlimited audiences."[79] Carroll notes that pictorial

---

[77] Nöel Carroll, "The Ontology of Mass Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. Volume 55, No. 2 (Spring 1997), 190.

[78] One example worth considering is Shaun Tan's graphic novel *The Arrival*, which eschews the use of words entirely to best capture the experience of immigrating to a country where no on speaks the immigrant's language. The novel is narrated solely through pictorial representation of facial expressions and "silent" panels. Shaun Tan, *The Arrival*, New York: Arthur A. Levine Books, 2007.

[79] Nöel Carroll, "The Ontology of Mass Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. Volume 55, No. 2 (Spring 1997), 190.

representation is so fundamental that a part of childhood education consists of learning what things in the world are like from pictures. Kindergarteners frequently learn what a zebra or an elephant is from pictures of these things, and then employ these pictures to make sense of the sorts of things they encounter in a zoo.

It is also no coincidence that the search for broad appeal results in a certain homogeneity of structures, content, or genres within mass art. Consider the types of television shows and films most popular in contemporary America: AMC's *The Walking Dead*, the big-budget release of *Captain America: Civil War*, *Game of Thrones*, the newest James Bond movie, and so on. The reason is the same in these mass arts as it is in comics: "Action/adventure scenarios are so serviceable for the purposes of mass art because physical competition between the starkly defined forces of good and evil is easier for almost everyone to track than are complex psychological dramas."[80] These narrative structures, deemed "erotetic narratives"[81] by Carroll, are narratives that pose questions and subsequently supply answers to those questions throughout the narrative so employed.

---

[80] Nöel Carroll, "The Ontology of Mass Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. Volume 55, No. 2 (Spring 1997), 190.

[81] These sorts of narrative structures are more commonly deployed in the types of television shows that critics such as Alan Sepinwall refer to as part of the Television Renaissance that began with HBO's *The Sopranos* and continues into the present. Although Carroll alludes to this concept within his work on Mass Art, to read the full development of exactly what is meant by erotetic narratives refer to Carroll's 1988 monograph *Mystifying Movies*. Nöel Carroll, *Mystifying Movies: Fads and Fallacies in Contemporary Film Theory*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.

3.4 Objections to Carroll; Carroll's replies

There are, of course, objections to Carroll's claims; although I find Carroll's arguments convincing, his arguments are not unassailable. Scholars find fault both with Carroll's definition of mass art as well as his underlying assumptions regarding the aim and goals of what he deems mass art. These objections to Carroll—and his replies to these objections—allow Carroll to further develop his philosophy of mass art while also serving to position how and why these terms are of use to the theorization of professional wrestling.

Kathleen Marie Higgins, in "Mass Appeal," her review of Carroll's monograph, finds several aspects of Carroll's concept concerning. As she notes,

> I question four features of Carroll's analysis: (1) his focus on narrative as
> the paradigm structure for mass art; (2) his dismissal of the argument that
> mass art encourages viewer passivity; (3) his rejection of the view that
> mass art is having a pernicious impact on our perceptual habits; and (4) his
> optimism about mass art's actual impact on morality.[82]

Of these claims, both (1) and (2) bear further analysis, while claims (3) and (4) are ultimately immaterial to both my project as well as Carroll's given that mass art is primarily a metaphysical question rather than a moral problem that must be addressed.

Higgins agrees with Carroll that, of the examples and genres he has included within the rubric of his term "mass art," narrative seems to be of utmost importance to understanding the works in question. Claims that narrative is irrelevant to the

---

[82] Kathleen Marie Higgins, "Mass Appeal," *Philosophy and Literature*, Volume 23, No. 1 (April 1999), 200.

appreciation and understanding of, say, Stephen King novels or Steven Spielberg movies are clearly nonserious from Higgins' point of view. But there are other probable categories of consumer culture that could be ascribed mass art status—in particular, architecture such as the design of McDonalds restaurants or contemporary fashion design—that Higgins claims have little to do with the sorts of simple narratives to which Carroll claims mass art gravitates. For Higgins, there seems to be little or no narrative to which an audience could respond, at least in the cases so mentioned. More troubling to Higgins is the fact that these seemingly non-narrative mass arts engender audience passivity. Because audiences are not actively engaged in the participation of mass artworks—instead, Higgins notes, audiences simply receives these artworks uncritically—audiences are more inclined to accept the theoretical conclusions of these works of art without reflection. Higgins recapitulates the historical arguments of Adorno and Horkheimer that Carroll's concept of mass art is designed in part to refute. This passivity on the part of audiences results in an elision in the distinction between advertisement and aesthetics: passive audiences are more likely to accept the ideas expressed by art creators than to think for themselves, and works such as fashion and corporate architecture are designed to work in just this way.[83]

Advertising, in particular to Higgins, is problematic insofar as it seems to be an example of mass art that uses the passivity of its audience to further economic goals in late capitalism: for Higgins, consumers of (for instance) the FOX series *Glee* were

---

[83] In this respect, Higgins directly echoes claims explicitly made by Adorno earlier in the 20th century. For those curious, refer to Theodor Adorno, "On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening," in *The Philosophy of Art: Readings Ancient and Modern*, edited by Alex Neill and Aaron Ridley, 110-117, (New York: McGraw-Hill Humanities/Social Sciences/Languages, 1994).

primarily viewed as potential purchasers of iTunes versions of the songs performed on
the show. Furthermore, Higgins notes that Carroll

> is too quick to dismiss the connections between mass appeals and class
>
> status. Mass art objects often do reveal class aspirations, but typically in a
>
> manner that is not forthright. Because class distinctions are ideologically
>
> denied by most Americans, for example, the use of aesthetic objects as
>
> markers for class affiliation in the United States is not acknowledged.[84]

If Higgins is correct, Carroll's insistence that mass art is a non-ideological/technological
concept is threatened by virtue of the fact that class awareness in the United States is
actively repressed in popular culture—and by mass art's silence on the matter of class it
reifies existing muted appeals to class that are prevalent throughout American society.

Carroll begins his response to Higgins's criticisms by noting that attacking the
passivity of mass audiences is extremely puzzling to him. In part, this is due to Carroll's
attempts to reject historical examples of blanket objections to mass art on aesthetic and
moral grounds.

> mass artworks can and should be assessed on a case-by-case basis. This
>
> will result in some mass artworks turning out to be good, some bad and
>
> some indifferent. That is, mass art possesses a spectrum of values, just like
>
> any other sort of art. Mass art, despite what many philosophers have said,
>
> is not all bad as a consequence of its very nature, and mass artworks are
>
> best evaluated—morally, politically and aesthetically—one at a time. It is

---

[84] Kathleen Marie Higgins, "Mass Appeal," *Philosophy and Literature*, Volume 23, No. 1
(April 1999), 203.

not the case, for example, as is often said, that all mass art is pseudo-art because it induces passivity in consumers (whatever that means).[85]

This passivity is puzzling to Carroll in large part because it seems unclear that passivity of audiences is a unique feature of mass art at all. Numerous works of art that are not mass artworks advance an ideological position as part of their narratives to little or no objection. For example, no one seems to take issue with the fact that audiences of Moliere's *Tartuffe* or *School for Wives* will inevitably when confronted with high quality and faithful productions leave these productions with the intuitions that religious charlatans or patriarchal institutions, respectively, are perhaps not an entirely good thing. Nor do cinema scholars resent Erroll Morris's *The Thin Blue Line* for creating incredibly precise reenactments of the testimony and archival interviews in the court case that convicted Randall Adams of the murder of a Dallas police officer. The film's argument— that Dallas convicted a homeless grifter to death as a cop-killer on extremely thin evidence—was considered so compelling that Adams was freed from prison on the basis of the documentary, even if the use of reenactments during a documentary in 1988 was nonstandard in documentary filmmaking (and included in this film solely to further the filmmaker's argument).

Passivity and persuasion, then, can be taken to be a part of much art accepted within the canon of artworks (be they mass, popular, high, or anything else). Carroll states this quite baldly in his response:

The generic urge to be persuasive is not a unique failing of mass art, or of anything else. Rather, it attempts in particular to persuade the need to be

---

[85] Nöel Carroll, "Defending Mass Art: A Response to Kathleen Higgins's 'Mass Appeal,'" *Philosophy and Literature*, Volume 23 No. 2, (October 1999), 379.

assessed positively or negatively one by one with respect to individual

philosophical arguments and, likewise, with respect to individual

specimens of mass art.[86]

Higgins's normative objection is judged to be exactly that by Carroll; as such, Higgins's

objection concerns whether artworks are either good or bad, rather than the matter of

individuation that Carroll's ascription of "mass art" addresses within aesthetic ontologies.

Regarding works of fashion or commercial architecture, Carroll is similarly

unconvinced. Although it may be the case that some works of fashion or commercial

architecture are works of mass art (provided that they fit the definition laid out by

Carroll), it remains unclear why these works would refrain from participating in narrative

in some way, or, alternatively, why these works require audience passivity in a negative

sense. As Carroll points out, given the existence of fashion journalism and numerous,

competing fashion or architectural designers it seems self-evident that for some

consumers these works of mass art (if mass art they are) are anything but passive, and

that assemblages of clothes or buildings can engage in the sorts of narrative enthymemes

that Carroll deems to be understandable to large numbers of people such that mass

marketing or mass distribution is possible.

As for Higgins's concerns that Carroll's dismissal of classist features of mass art

is too hurried given the intricacies with which elements of class and elements of mass

marketing are interrelated, once again Carroll grants that Higgins may well be correct.

That being said, he disputes that her objection is at all germane or material to the matter

at hand.

---

[86] Nöel Carroll, "Defending Mass Art: A Response to Kathleen Higgins's 'Mass Appeal,'" *Philosophy and Literature*, Volume 23 No. 2, (October 1999), 379.

I do not think that such observations compromise the general claims I

made about mass art and its capacities to cross class boundaries. Of course,

I do not deny that class associations can be manipulated by mass art.

Rather, I only contest the claim that the difference between mass art and

avant-garde art is reducible without remainder to matters of class

differentiation.[87]

Carroll further notes that matters of class can be relevant to taste in the art that one

prefers, but this is perhaps a function of correlation rather than the sorts of causation

Higgins seems to imply. Carroll points out that in his Philosophy department all of the

professors holding PhDs despise avant-garde art; I note that my own attitude toward non-

commercial works of art is quite different than that of some of the scholars who comprise

my dissertation committee. Taste might well be affected by one's economic or social

class, but questions of taste are altogether different than questions of ontology: once

again, Higgins's normative claims have little bearing on Carroll's interest in

individuation.

David Novitz, in "The Difficulty of Difficulty," poses a much more sustained

critique of Carroll's concept of mass art by disputing the ease with which Carroll

attempts to distinguish between "mass art" and "popular art." Although Novitz notes that

Carroll spends much time throughout his monograph attempting to debunk what he

collectively deems "elimination theories of art"—theories of art that contend the

differences between popular art and avant-garde art rely on non-formal or non-structural

qualities such as social or economic class of the people for whom the art is intended—

---

[87] Nöel Carroll, "Defending Mass Art: A Response to Kathleen Higgins's 'Mass Appeal,'" *Philosophy and Literature*, Volume 23 No. 2, (October 1999), 379.

Novitz contends that Carroll's attempted debunking throughout Chapter 3 of *A Philosophy of Mass Art* is far from successful. Indeed, Novitz argues that Carroll's definition relies too much on difficulty and ease of understanding; in Carroll's view, difficulty and ease of understanding are (or, to be fairer, at least in some cases can be) functions of the structure of a work, while Novitz insists that appealing to the structure of the work of art to explain the work of art's reception is suspect.

Novitz begins his objection in earnest when he notes "I have elsewhere criticized a good deal of this on the grounds that difficulty and ease of comprehension are determined not just, if at all, by structures or formal characteristics but by available cultural knowledge."[88] For Novitz, the notion that certain structures are inherently more or less simple for audiences to understand is deeply problematic. There is nothing about pictorial representation, shape, mass, and so on that can be understood without significant cultural tutoring. Moreover, tutoring affects how or to what extent these structures or forms are received by an audience. "The claim that any mass work of art is necessarily designed to be accessible, and so contains structural features that promise to make it accessible to 'untutored audiences' is straightforwardly wrong," even considering Carroll's stipulation that accessibility be understood as time-indexed (i.e., occurring within a given time period, which presumably has a non-passing relationship with how accessibility should be understood).

Novitz's objection to Carroll relies on the fact that the structures and forms that comprise a given work of art are never crafted outside of time: for every work of art, an artist at some point in time created that work of art within time, presumably informed in

---

[88] David Novitz, "The Difficulty of Difficulty," *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Volume 34, No. 2, (Summer, 2000), 8.

some way by a culture at the time of creation.[89] Furthermore, every audience interacting

with a specific work of art is also doing so in a time-dependent way. Audiences are (1)

aware of the differences in time between the work's inception and that work's

appreciation by an audience, (2) solely judging an artwork in terms of the culture of the

audience at the time the work is appreciated (with no regard for the artist's culture at the

work's inception), or (3) are responding to the work somewhere in between (1) and (2).

When writing, there is no sequence of words that will be inherently more complex than

some other sequence of words solely because of the letters one uses; in painting, there is

no shape or color that will be more or less difficult than other shapes and colors if

included.

Now, in both cases, there may be more difficult colors, shapes, or words that an

artist could employ, but this has little to do with the words, shapes, or colors themselves.

Rather, this is because

> the significance that such shapes or sounds or properties have, and how
>
> easy it is to grasp their significance, is almost invariably a function of the
>
> cultural conventions that govern their use. The significance of any work—
>
> if by that is meant its semantic properties—are culturally emergent. They
>
> are not natural properties, which is what they would have to be if difficulty

---

[89] By this logic, every work of art created by an artist is in some way affected by the culture(s) operative at its time of creation. Whether this results in mainstream art, challenging art, avant-garde art, or anything else, the extent to which creators are complicit in the cultural processes to which they are reacting seems to be a constant.

or ease of comprehension was a function solely of the structural properties

of a work.[90]

In the case of a novel, certain combinations of words or word choices may well be more difficult than others—but this difficulty results from the obscurity of the words so employed in the receiving audience's culture in relation to the culture of the author in question.[91] The same holds true for shapes: the obscurity or ease that accompanies colors and forms is only obscure or easy if the employment of these colors and forms is consistent between the culture of the artist and the audience that happens to be receiving the work.[92]

This objection is quite formidable, in large part because it can be applied to both Carroll's work on mass art as well as his prior research on the formal properties attending the crafting of avant-garde works of art. For Novitz, the vast majority of intrinsic structural qualities of a work simply do not apply to the work's reception. As Novitz notes,

even if we allow that what Carroll calls "difficulty" is in fact necessary for

avant-garde art, and that accessibility (or the promise of it) is always

necessary for mass art, neither are formal qualities of the work—if by that

---

[90] David Novitz, "The Difficulty of Difficulty," *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Volume 34, No. 2, (Summer, 2000), 9.

[91] I am reminded, here, of my decision to use the word "autochthonous" in an early draft of my essay "Capital City Camp: Gay Carnival and Capitalist Display," published by Oxford University Press. An early reader of the paper noted that the word's obscurity brought to mind the exploits of Captain Kirk in a far region of the galaxy rather than the precise concept I was hoping to communicate. The note was duly taken, and the resulting essay was much stronger.

[92] Antonin Artaud argues something similar within "Theatre and the Plague," noting that whiteness means purity in the Western tradition but is more frequently associated with death in some Eastern traditions.

is meant intrinsic structural qualities of the work. Such features are

culturally emergent; they require certain cultural conventions which make

particular arrangements of marks or sounds difficult or easy to

understand.[93]

Novitz uses the example of Shakespeare's theatre as an example of exactly how this

works. Although aspects of Shakespeare's dramaturgy—certain turns of phrase, patterns

of imagery, or structural and performance conventions—were certainly accessible to

English Renaissance audiences at the time these works were written, the extent to which

these works remain accessible in the 21st century are in large part a function of an

audience's expected education level: in particular, the extent to which works from

Shakespeare and his contemporaries is available for regular consumption in an area of the

world, whether these works are being done in English or translation, and so on. It is

entirely possible that a fluent English speaker (or French speaker, or Italian, and so on)

could attend a work by Shakespeare that retains Shakespeare's language but is

nonetheless indecipherable to contemporary audiences, for whatever value contemporary

holds.[94]

---

[93] David Novitz, "The Difficulty of Difficulty," *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Volume 34, No. 2, (Summer, 2000), 9.

[94] As readers may no doubt remember, contemporary audiences and artists during the English Restoration felt the need to update the rhyming schemes of Shakespeare's works from 100 years prior. More personally (and contemporarily), my father—a lifelong Cajun gentleman who's seen several works of Shakespeare because of my involvement in the productions—can speak English fluently, reads voraciously, but finds Shakespeare's works indecipherable regardless of whether the works are written, performed live, or performed on video. I had a similar experience in junior high school on my disastrous date with a young lady named Melissa: having to translate every line of Baz Luhrman's *Romeo + Juliet* is one of the most painful memories from a painful time in my adolescence (much more so than my embarrassing penchant for wearing black and writing awful poetry about my own alienation).

There are, of course, some intrinsic structural qualities of a work that are not culture-bound or culturally emergent for Novitz; he allows for the fact that some intrinsic structural qualities, insofar as these structural qualities are qualities our brains are "hardwired" to understand, could be satisfactorily deemed intrinsic. Carroll's insistence on mass art's relationship to pictorial representation is, in part, designed to combat this objection. If decoding pictorial representation is hardwired into human perception as a necessary feature of human thought, then art that works without recourse to anything but pictorial representation would be free and clear to work as Carroll describes.[95] But as Novitz notes,

> it may be true that humans are hardwired to recognize certain pictures—
> the picture of a face, for instance. But it seems unlikely that we are
> hardwired to recognize a picture of a face as servile rather than imperious,
> pious rather than irreverent, or as modest rather than proud. Here it seems
> that a good deal of the significance of a pictorial work of art depends on
> "tutoring" of one sort or another—although, in fairness to Carroll, it is not
> yet clear that the "tutoring at issue involves training in specialized
> background knowledge" (PMA, 227). It is the absence of a need for such
> specialized tutoring, he thinks, that is necessary for mass art.[96]

This idea that, even if pictorial representation is easily understood the nuances thereof might still remain not so easily understood, is complicated by the fact that "ignorance is

---

[95] Perhaps it would be more productive for Carroll to employ pictorial representation as a type of mimesis given how foundational mimeticism is to human learning, but such a refinement would likely be nearly as fraught as pictorial representation unmodified.
[96] David Novitz, "The Difficulty of Difficulty," *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Volume 34, No. 2, (Summer, 2000), 9.

unevenly distributed throughout any population."[97] This claim of uneven distribution of knowledge is, in part, an appeal to privileges associated with class distinctions. Because of this, it might be the case that what is easy to understand for some segment of the population might not be so for other segments of the population—and thus, which intrinsic structural qualities of a given work of art require specialized tutoring rather than unspecialized tutoring are unclear.

Moreover, the very difference between specialized and unspecialized tutoring is unclear. In my philosophy of art classes, for instance, although students were capable of reading comic books without much training, certain aspects of the genre—such as the way that time is spatially distributed between panels on both x and y coordinates, and that priority is given to unevenly-shaped panels that begin higher on the y coordinate than unevenly shaped panels that start at a different and lower level of the y coordinate—is not readily apparent to students without some amount of coaching, despite comic books' ubiquity in contemporary American culture. The same, of course, could hold true for the conventions of other genres of art, and determining whether these conventions require specialized or unspecialized tutoring may well be spurious. This objection is potentially devastating to Carroll in large part because it reveals that the third necessary condition of mass art established by Carroll requires a social explanation rather than a structural or formal explanation.

Novitz further notes that a significant subset of mass art is specifically designed with something other than ease of consumption of audiences in mind. Consider the case of heavy metal music (generally) or death metal music (in specific). When I was a

---

[97] David Novitz, "The Difficulty of Difficulty," *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Volume 34, No. 2, (Summer, 2000), 10.

depressed seventh grader, part of what I loved most about the Liverpudlian grindcore/melodic death metal band Carcass was that it was perplexing to my parents and teachers. What sounded like screams of agony were, in fact, moribund lyrics about bodily functions and gruesome murders; the guitar work of the band was both classically inspired and remaining to some audiences an undecipherable wall of sound. For a more contemporary example, the mass popularity of contemporary video games that privilege difficulty, environmental storytelling, and obscure narrative exist in stark contradiction to the sorts of games one can download in the iPhone app store (or the incredibly accessible phenomenon that is *Minecraft*, which is basically a digital lego simulator with zombies): the pioneer of this sort of game is Japanese developer From Software, and its multiplatinum releases *Demon's Souls*, *Dark Souls*, and *Bloodborne* distinguish themselves from the competition by virtue of the fact that these games are niche games with grueling difficulty, and these features allow audiences to self-select themselves by virtue of whether difficulty and narrative obscurity are goodmaking features.

Furthermore, these games are structured in such a way that the games tutor players in how to understand and play these games. In other words, part of what makes these art works the works they are is the way in which these works create an oppositional group identity. They are preaching only to the converted and bewilder those from outside the congregation.

Carroll, for his part, asserts that all of these claims by Novitz are irrelevant. Regarding intrinsic structures, Carroll seems confused as to why he has to separate forms and structures from cultural conditions that affect their reception: "showing that certain social factors are involved in mass art—such as shared cultural literacy—does not entail

that mass art is simply an affair of social differentiation."[98] Novitz is absolutely correct to point out, in Carroll's estimation, that reception of works is governed by cultural or social differentiation (including, but not limited to, class); indeed, the structures and forms required by Carroll's definition of mass art are the results of cultural facts about reception. But cultural facts dictating which forms, shapes, colors, and the like are not a problem for Carroll's definition: mass art relies on social phenomena that govern which forms are widely understood, but that does not mean that mass art is solely about the social differentiations that give rise to these social phenomena. Nowhere does Carroll state that these structural choices must exist independently of social factors.

The social phenomena governing the structural features of mass artworks and the differences in social classes that produce them are especially important given existing evidence about the empirical qualities of works of art that rely on mass technologies for their distribution. Indeed,

> mass artworks like the film, *Titanic*, are massively successful. What would they have to be like in order to command international audiences? I submit that the best explanation is that such works must be able to exploit some structures, such as editing structures and forms of narrative exposition, that strike a common chord in large numbers of diverse people with little or no formal background training in how to decipher or decode the structures of the work. [99]

---

[98] Nöel Carroll, "Mass Art: The Debate Continues," *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Volume 35, No. 3, (Autumn, 2001), 16.
[99] Nöel Carroll, "Mass Art: The Debate Continues," *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Volume 35, No. 3, (Autumn, 2001), 16.

This line of defense is decidedly empirical, albeit a bit outside Carroll's ontological

playbook: a defense coherent with the sorts of interventions analytic philosophers make

in their work (as described in 5.1). It is a matter of fact that certain works of popular art,

distributed through mass technology, are widely experienced across the earth despite in

many cases extreme cultural differences that seemingly present a difficulty for reception.

Examples of works of art and difficulties for certain audiences to receive those works

productively include, but are not limited to: my father and works of Shakespeare, my

introductory theatre and philosophy students at LSU and *shingeki noh* performances, and

so on. But the global successes of works such as *Titanic*, *Star Wars*, *The Girl with the*

Dragon Tattoo, and the like are a matter of public record. Indeed, as Carroll notes, "it

would be a statistical anomaly that there are so many mass art blockbusters on a regularly

recurring basis if they did not have this formal feature of accessibility. And it is on the

basis of arguments like this one that I rest my full case for the importance of structural

features in identifying mass artworks."[100]

Furthermore, if these features really are stealth requirements for facts about social

differentiation, it remains entirely unclear how these facts about social differentiation can

be communicated to societies so quickly. To put this defense another way: how is it that,

say, middle-class citizens learn which types of art to like and dislike upon achieving

middle-class status? Is there something about opera that appeals to the wealthy, and

NASCAR that appeals to the poor? Why do white, cis-gender women love Starbucks'

peppermint lattés? If so, how are these attitudes about types or genre of art transmitted

sufficiently quickly throughout these social strata to consistently affect patterns of

---

[100] Nöel Carroll, "Mass Art: The Debate Continues," *Journal of Aesthetic Education*,
Volume 35, No. 3, (Autumn, 2001), 16.

consumption? Do those with aspirations to transition from middle class to elite social strata self-consciously change their aesthetic preferences? Do those who move from rural communities to urban communities do the same? The consistency of these patterns of consumption strike Carroll as deeply suspicious:

> Clearly there must be something about the [aesthetic] object that will allow me to classify it. It cannot be class consumption all the way down, especially when one considers the high levels of convergence one finds in people's ability to sort mass artworks from avant-garde artworks. That formal, structural, and affective features do the differentiating work here surely seems like our best bet.[101]

Much better, then, for one to acknowledge that social phenomena impact cultural reception of certain aspects of art, without insisting whole hog that demography functions monolithically in determining these sorts of things. It seems much more likely that social attainment allows individuals to classify artworks as good or bad based on whether a given artwork possesses certain aesthetic forms, rather than Novitz's insistence these aesthetic forms are mere shibboleths communicating facts about social attainment to individuals.

John Andrew Fisher, writing for *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, levels a complaint against Carroll's project that is directly relevant to my work in this dissertation. He notes that Carroll's definition of mass art is meritorious insofar as it ascribes art status to episodes of *I Love Lucy*, given Lucille Ball's skills as a comedic actress, but holds that Carroll's definition is overbroad because it includes as works of art

---

[101] Nöel Carroll, "Mass Art: The Debate Continues," *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Volume 35, No. 3, (Autumn, 2001), 16.

events that Fisher cannot countenance: professional wrestling. Fisher notes, "it is not

plausible to think that matches on WWF Smackdown are artworks. However, I suspect

that Carroll is constrained to say they are."[102]

Carroll's defense of this point bears quoting in full:

Fisher also mentions a third counterexample—the *World Wrestling*

Smackdown. This is a complicated case whose adjudication calls for more

factual knowledge than I have at my disposal. But let me say this: if, as I

suspect, these wrestling matches are staged, then I would have no

difficulty in classifying them as artworks. They would fall into the

tradition of theatre where a number of genres, including Chinese Opera

and various other dance forms, are a matter of stylized, fictionalized

martial combat. Thus, if that is what is going on with the World Wrestling

Federation, then, if its spectacles meet the other conditions of my theory,

they would qualify as mass art—that is, as mass media productions that

are, in addition, artworks.[103]

Carroll, as we can see, notes that professional wrestling must be mass art insofar as it

meets his definition—and that Fisher's claim that something like professional wrestling

simply cannot be art because it is professional wrestling is simply unserious. But there is

one way that professional wrestling exemplifies Carroll's concept of mass art that we

have yet to examine: the specific ontological features of a mass artwork that allow it to be

---

[102] John Andrew Fisher, "On Carroll's Enfranchisement of Mass Art as Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 62, No. 1, (Winter, 2004), 57.
[103] Nöel Carroll, "Mass Art as Art: A Response to John Fisher," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 62, No. 1 (Winter, 2004), 62.

transmitted through a mass technology. I will address this feature in the final section of this chapter, 3.5.

3.5 The Ontology of Mass Art

Carroll explains the ontological qualities that allow mass art to be mass art by explaining the differences between works of theatre and works of film—live performances as opposed to mediatized, recorded performances. He does this by providing us with a hypothetical situation:

> Say that there is a performance of *The Master Builder* tonight at eight
> o'clock at the local repertory theatre, and a performance of *Waterworld* at
> the same time in the neighborhood cinema. One might go to either. In both
> cases, we are likely to be seated in an auditorium, and each performance
> might begin as a curtain rises. But despite these surface similarities, there
> are ontologically profound differences between the two performances.[104]

As Carroll notes, the similarities between the two seem to be sufficient to note that both of these performances are (to use language common in analytic aesthetic discourses) tokens of a type. What that means is that both seem to be multiple instance artworks: a given performance is merely a token (or instantiation) of a type (that which allows a multiple-instance artwork to be multiply instanced, such as a script of a play or the score of a piece of music). As Carroll notes, the destruction of any token does not equal the

---

[104] Nöel Carroll, "The Ontology of Mass Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. Volume 55, No. 2 (Spring 1997), 192.

destruction of the work itself because of the continued existence of the type that allows for tokens.

The problem with this formulation is that, while it is true, it does not possess sufficient detail to actually explain the differences between a performance of theatre and a performance of film. To do so, Carroll suggests, we have to look at the path a given token of a work of film goes through such that it can transition from a type to a token.

> To get from a film-type to a token performance, we require a *template*; to
>
> get from a play type to a token performance we require an interpretation.
>
> Moreover, the different routes from type to token performance in theater,
>
> versus from film-type to film performance, explains why we regard
>
> theatrical performances as artworks in their own right, while, at the same
>
> time, we do not regard film performances (i.e., film showings) as
>
> artworks.[105]

As shall be made clear, the distinction between templates and interpretations is substantial.[106] Think of interpretations as recipes that are cooked by a collection of different chefs: the various designers, directors, and actors working in concert to create a repeatable set of tokens (a production) that can be repeated if necessary. Because this production of Henrik Ibsen's play is a work of art in its own right, it also serves as a type, and each performance of this production is a token of that production as type.

---

[105] Nöel Carroll, "The Ontology of Mass Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. Volume 55, No. 2 (Spring 1997), 192.

[106] Note that this is more complex with plays because a play is an artwork in two distinct ways: the script as a token of the type literary work, the performance as a token of the type performance work. Both Carroll and I are focused on plays as the latter rather than the former in this instance.

Film works very differently from this: "a film is a type whose token performances are generated by templates that are themselves tokens [not types]."[107] This is because a film's recipe produces interpretations of various artists that are "non-detachable constituents of the same artwork."[108] What this means is that in theatre, a given production is both a token and a type, since a given performance can be repeated with various degrees of felicity during definable space-time coordinates; a film performance is a single interpretation that cannot be repeated by artists separate from that interpretation without generating a different work of art (such as a remade movie).

This is because the interpretation of a film is transmitted to audiences through a template:

> The film performance is generated from a template—standardly a film
> print, but it might also be a videotape, a laser disk, or a computer program
> coded in a physical medium. Such templates are themselves tokens; each
> one of them can be destroyed and each one of them can be assigned a
> spatial location, though the film-type—*Waterworld*—cannot. Nor is the
> negative of the work the film-type. It is one token among others. The
> original negative of Murnau's *Nosferatu* was destroyed as a result of a
> court order, but the film still exists.[109]

Every showing of a film is a token of a film-type, and every token of a film gives us access to that film-type. But the only way to generate a token performance of a film is by

---

[107] Nöel Carroll, "The Ontology of Mass Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. Volume 55, No. 2 (Spring 1997), 193.
[108] Nöel Carroll, "The Ontology of Mass Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. Volume 55, No. 2 (Spring 1997), 193.
[109] Nöel Carroll, "The Ontology of Mass Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. Volume 55, No. 2 (Spring 1997), 192.

virtue of a template that is also a token of that film-type, through routine technical procedures (such as left-clicking the play button on Netflix, or inserting a DVD into a DVD player, or running a film reel through a movie projector). Generating a film performance is a matter of craft, not art: it is a record of art that was already done, but the act of going from template to token is mechanical, not creative.

Were there only one such place to see a template transformed into a token performance, then films would not be mass art. But as we know, there are untold millions of televisions around the world. As such, we can deem works of art that function ontologically in the way that films, some photographs, television shows, music, and the like mass art if "they can simultaneously afford a multiplicity of token reception instances of the same work—[such as] a song or drama—in reception sites that are geographically distinct from each other."[110] In cases such as this, the template would likely be the transmission signal that is created from the source of the message through coding, and is decoded through reception devices like TVs or radios.

Given condition 3 of Carroll's account, we can begin to understand what it is about wrestling that keeps fans coming back to the shows year after year. Furthermore, the successful metaphysical transition occasioned by a work of live performance transitioning to a work of mass art gives us an understanding of why one promotion (the WWE) was eventually more successful than both Mid-South Wrestling and the Universal Wrestling Federation: the stylistic transition that wrestling underwent such that it could be a mass art dramatically increased the number of people who could understand the content of a wrestling match without substantial tutoring in different regional styles. This

---

[110] Nöel Carroll, "The Ontology of Mass Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. Volume 55, No. 2 (Spring 1997), 194.

metaphysical transition also lets us see why business could improve and decrease and explain why matches in one region could differ from those of another region.

Thus Carroll gives us the specific qualities that distinguish live performances (which are usually not mass art due to the fact that there are insufficient reception sites for them to qualify as mass) from mass artworks. As such, we finally have the theoretical tools needed to explain the ontological transformation wrestling performances underwent during the transition from regional to national and global performances, and how business practices had to change just as the object they were selling changed.

One proviso, however: please note that professional wrestling's movement toward mass art status is further example of how professional wrestling is transitioning from a work of art that is absolutely autographic to a work of art that is potentially allographic, not that it is definitively allographic. I state this because it might be preferable to understand the distinctions between autographic and allographic artworks as existing on a kind of continuum where site-specific singular artworks like the Notre Dame cathedral occupy one extreme, and romance novels and videogames occupy the other extreme. I invoke video games here quite intentionally: one of the most popular series of video games released each year is dedicated to Vince McMahon's World Wrestling Entertainment (*WWE Smackdown* being the most popular), and each year the option for players to create their own unique wrestler becomes more appealing given the digitization of wrestling's repertoire of moves.[111] This development is increasingly possible because regional wrestling's gradual dying away has allowed for the WWE Main Event Style to be the only style that needs to be incorporated into a wrestling game to allow for the

---

[111] 2K Sports, *WWE 2k17*, Video Game, 10/11/16 is the newest installment in the WWE video game library, and will represent the best digital repertoire of moves yet produced.

creation of original matches and the digital recreation of famous WWE matches from throughout the promotion's history.

In Chapter 5, I synthesize Carroll's concept of mass art with Armelagos and Sirridge's insights into dance such that I can explain the stylistic and ontological transformations that signaled the death of Mid-South Wrestling and Universal Wrestling as the business of wrestling promotion changed. From this, I can posit why the collapse of Louisiana regional wrestling is archetypal of the collapse of regional wrestling throughout the United States.

3.6 Steamboat v. Flair, Fall 1

Before proceeding to the history of Mid-South Wrestling, I need first to do some stylistic place-setting now that a firmer understanding of Carroll's aesthetic terminology is possible. In 3.6 and 3.7 I revisit the match between Ric Flair and Ricky Steamboat that I labeled the last instance of Southern Style wrestling in the New Orleans Superdome, and in so doing I demonstrate that the narrative of the match is simply too complex to fit into Carroll's concept of an erotetic narrative: the number of reversals, "inside" references to wrestling history, and array of maneuvers are spectacular, but betray the inherent complexity of regional styles that required audiences to gain familiarity with the performances through routine live attendance to events. I contrast this match with the main event of the World Wrestling Federation's Wrestlemania II: Hulk Hogan defending his WWF championship against King Kong Bundy. The simpler moves, shorter match time, and less complex story of the match fits neatly into the erotetic narratives labeled by

Carroll as required of a work of art to be a mass art, and the WWF's participation in

erotetic narrative explains exactly why other regional promotions attempting to promote

nationally had stylistic disadvantages to drawing mass audiences.

I begin with Ric Flair v. Ricky Steamboat.[112]

As the match began, announcers Jim Ross and former NWA Heavyweight

Champion Terry Funk remarked upon the Louisiana crowd's reactions to the spectacle

about to unfold in the wrestling ring: the crowd booed the introduction of the blonde

bombshell Ric Flair, and reacted with rapturous joy when the ring announcer turned his

attention to the Hawaiian Steamboat. This card was Steamboat's first major match in

front of Louisiana fans; Flair, although never a champion in Mid-South throughout the

1980s, had defended his NWA World Heavyweight Championship at the Superdome on

numerous cards promoted by Watts's organization.[113] Unlike prior matches on the show,

this main event would not be contested under professional wrestling's ordinary rules:

rather than two men competing until one man scored a pinfall, submission, or

disqualification victory over the other, or a time limit draw with no winner declared (with

the provision that championships could not change hands as the result of a

disqualification or a draw), this match would be awarded to the man who won two out of

a scheduled three falls before the 60 minute time limit assigned to the match elapsed. The

---

[112] Jim Crockett Promotions, *Clash of the Champions VI: Ragin' Cajun*, Televised Special, Ric Flair and Ricky Steamboat (1989; New Orleans, LA; Jim Crockett Promotions; 1989), WWE Network Streaming.

[113] Watts was not an official NWA promoter, and told the organization his refusal to join the NWA but commitment to work with them only strengthened the organization against anti-trust lawsuits. Watts's agreement to not compete with the NWA territories allowed him to book the NWA champion for big card, provided that the champion and the NWA got a percentage of the gate or agreed-upon fee. For more information, refer to Bill Watts and Scott Williams, *The Cowboy and the Cross: The Bill Watts Story: Rebellion, Wrestling, and Redemption* (Ontario: ECW Press, 2006).

crowd was electric—Flair and Steamboat's last match at the February 20, 1989 Chi-Town Rumble was an instant classic when the underdog Steamboat cleanly defeated Flair to become the new NWA World Heavyweight Champion, and the rematch in New Orleans promised to be just as good as their prior outing.

The match began with the two grapplers—the blonde villain Flair in black trunks, the dark-haired hero Steamboat in skin-tight white pants—circling each other, feeling each other out for chinks in their defenses. When Steamboat extends his hand to shake Flair's hand and start the match off with a display of sportsmanship, Flair pretended to reciprocate before pulling his hands away and running them through his long blonde hair while loudly screaming "Woo!" to further incense Steamboat and the crowd. The first contact between the two men occurs almost a minute in, when Steamboat and Flair begin fighting for control over a "collar and elbow tie-up"—a maneuver that involves both men struggling to control their opponent's upper body while both remain standing, arms entangled—that ends with Steamboat in control. He pushes Flair into the corner, and breaks the hold before the referee counts to five; Flair had grabbed the ropes, which per the rules of professional wrestling requires Steamboat to break the hold or risk disqualification, which would cause him to lose the first of three falls. Flair pushes Steamboat after Steamboat releases the hold; without hesitation, Steamboat slaps the larger man across the face with a loud and satisfying crack that could be heard throughout the entire Superdome. The announcers loudly react into their microphones for the benefit

of the millions of fans watching the match at home around the nation; "Steamboat will not be intimidated by the Nature Boy," announcer Jim Ross exclaims.[114]

After this heated exchange, Flair and Steamboat stand still, glaring at each other as the crowd works itself into a frenzy cheering the (admittedly sparse) action they have seen thus far. The men begin circling each other again, quickly settling into another collar and elbow tie up. Flair appears to get the better of Steamboat in this exchange, but in the blink of an eye the two men have reversed positions—and the crowd cheers enthusiastically as both men begin exchanging holds and counterholds from amateur wrestling to gain an advantage. The speed of Steamboat quickly begins to turn the tide, and Flair is forced to grab the ropes to stop Steamboat's assault before it gains too much momentum. Once again, when referee Tommy Young calls for Steamboat to break the hold, Steamboat releases the hold only to slap Flair in the face just as loudly as he did

---

[114] Announcing will be referred to periodically throughout this document, given the importance of commentary to the televised presentation of professional wrestling. Jim Ross, noted in the introduction of this dissertation as the majordomo of Mid-South Championship Wrestling (Ross started his career as the stenographer for Bill Watt's business partner Leroy McGuirk, and was charged with only writing down for McGuirk the things that Watts wanted McGuirk to know), is widely considered as of this writing to be one of the two greatest announcers in professional wrestling history; the other, Gordon Solie, is who Ross insists is the best of all time. In numerous interviews, assorted professional wrestlers (most notably, "Stone Cold" Steve Austin), promoters (such as Court Bauer of Major League Wrestling and World Wrestling Entertainment or Jim Cornette of Smokey Mountain Championship Wrestling), or wrestling historians (such as Bryan Alvarez and Dave Meltzer of the Wrestling Observer/Figure Four Daily and Wade Keller of the Pro Wrestling Torch) argue that the role of the announcer in the televised presentation of professional wrestling cannot be overstated. Ross explains what he does as analogous to performing music: a set of wrestlers write the song, and it is his job on commentary to write the lyrics that go with that tune (Jim Cornette and Court Bauer, *The Jim Cornette Experience Episode 5*, podcast audio, accessed December 20, 2013.). Good lyrics can make a mediocre song more catchy and affecting, but are not sufficient for a given song to be musically successful. By contrast, a great tune can be ruined by awful lyrics. All of this being said, however, the announcer is only important to matches that are televised—live attendees of a given show never hear the announcing since it is not broadcast over the speakers of the arena (if that arena has speakers).

minutes before. Unlike the prior exchange, Flair's swagger is gone; the camera zooms in for a close-up of the Nature Boy's face so viewers at home can see that Flair's customary cockiness has given way to fear.

When the match restarts again, the two men return to a collar and elbow tie up; Flair tries to tie up Steamboat's knee, but Steamboat counters with a headlock to remain standing. The headlock broken, Flair uses an overhead wristlock—both of Flair's hands wrap around Steamboat's wrist and push the wrist back behind Steamboat's head—and forces Steamboat to arch his back and open himself up to the audience, ensuring that the crowd can see the suffering written plainly across Steamboat's features as he grimaces and groans. The torque Flair appears to exert on Steamboat's wrist drops Steamboat to his knees, allowing Flair to crank the move harder and open himself up to the crowd in the arena and the cameras taping the match. Both men's faces are now clearly visible: Steamboat's a mask of pain, Flair's distorted with sadistic glee. When Steamboat powers out and reverses the hold, Flair once again manages to grab a rope and break the hold— but this time, he rolls outside the ring to the area between the canvas and the barricade separating the performers from the fans attending live. The referee follows Flair outside, and Flair complains that Steamboat pulled his hair to reverse the hold and gain an unfair advantage; every fan in the arena knows Flair is lying, but the referee's professionalism requires him to take the complaint at face value. As the referee returns to the ring to admonish Steamboat, Flair remains outside to rest and regroup.

For fans of contemporary wrestling—particularly that of World Wrestling Entertainment, broadcast around the world each Monday and Friday night in 2014 (the time of this writing)—the type of performance going on in the ring would seem quite

strange: Jim Ross on commentary notes that Flair's strategy thus far has been to "select a body part and continue to work on it," presumably to weaken that part sufficiently that he can score a pinfall or submission. This aspect of professional wrestling, a hallmark of Southern style, has faded as a relic of the 1980s; in the globalized present, matches are shorter, frequently have high impact, high-risk maneuvers executed from the top rope, and are timed such that a typical match lasts just long enough to fill the time between commercial breaks on national cable television. Given these time constraints governing contemporary matches, matches' stories are simply too rushed to allow for sustained attacks on a single body part leading to a logical conclusion.

Unlike these contemporary matches that would, at 5:00 minutes into the performance, have reached their climax (if the match even has a climax) and would be working towards their conclusion, the first five minutes of this match have been devoted to establishing characters through physicality: Steamboat, dark-haired and clad in white, is the smaller hero whose speed, intensity, and repertoire of holds will overcome the bleached blond villain in black, provided that the match is fair. For months prior to this match, interviews of the sort that fill contemporary wrestling shows have decidedly set the stage for this contest: Flair is a millionaire playboy who "entertains" a different woman in every city and believes money is no object, while Steamboat has condemned Flair's lascivious ways and conspicuous consumption on moral grounds. These interviews—along with fans' knowledge that Flair and Steamboat both learned the art of professional wrestling at Verne Gagne's Minnesota training camps in the 1970s, broke into the business together in Georgia, and wrestled each other thousands of times

(literally) in Georgia Championship Wrestling while rookies[115]—provide context for the story of the match, but the match itself is, on the level of performance, the story that matters most because it is the thing that people are willing to pay (or, in this unfortunate case, not pay) to see.

When the match restarts once again, both men consider a test of strength before returning to yet another collar and elbow tie up. Rather than grabbing the ropes, however, Steamboat turns the maneuver into an Irish whip: he throws Flair toward the ropes at speed, and Flair bounces back towards Steamboat and hits him with a shoulder tackle that drops Steamboat to the canvas. Flair runs into the ropes again, only this time to run into Steamboat who turns the maneuver into a hip toss that forcefully throws Flair to the ground. Steamboat capitalizes on his advantage and places Flair in a side headlock, which he then uses to spin Flair to the ground with Steamboat on top of him in a pinning position. Six minutes into the match, Steamboat attempts the first pinfall: and comes up with a two count instead of the required three to win the first fall when Flair kicks out of the attempt.[116] Steamboat follows up with a headlock, but Flair keeps using Steamboat's

---

[115] Ric Flair and Keith Elliot Greenberg, *Ric Flair: To Be The Man*, (New York: World Wrestling Entertainment), 2004.

[116] A "kick out" is something that is routine in professional wrestling matches. Regardless of how physiognomy, anatomy, or physics actually work, a wrestler can and does escape from attempts to pin his or her shoulders to the mat by kicking his or her leg out to break the hold. Sometimes, the logic of this is obvious in the match: many wrestlers, when attempting to go for a pin, snag the downed wrestler's leg to increase the leverage of the pinning attempt, and kicking the leg is a valid way of breaking the hold. That being said, not all pins feature a leg lock—but most attempts to break a pin still involve the downed wrestler kicking. Even attempts to break the pin that do not in any way involve a kick out are nonetheless referred to as "kick-outs" in commentary. I will occasionally retain this parlance throughout my thick description of this match, and virtually every match with English commentary will retain this terminology. For an early example, refer to Chicago Film Archives Presents Wrestling From Chicago, "Gorgeous George vs. Hans Schnabel

grip on Flair's head to spin Steamboat onto his back, seemingly improvising a hold that allows him to attempt to pin Steamboat and from which Steamboat always seems to barely escape with the headlock still intact on the prone Flair before the referee counts to three. For the next several minutes, despite all of the changes in maneuvers and momentum (including Flair's signature knife edge chops[117], dropkicks, and assorted other high impact acrobatics), the performers inevitably return to this visual: Steamboat with his arms wrapped around Flair's head, squeezing Flair with all of his strength trying to earn a submission victory.

In exchange after exchange, Steamboat dominates Flair. Ten minutes into the match, Steamboat stands above Flair with his fists clenched while Flair, on the mat, scoots away from Steamboat with his hands clenched before him in prayer, loudly

---

(11/03/1950)," Gorgeous George and Hans Schnabel, (1950; Chicago; Chicago Film Archives; 2014), Youtube Streaming.

[117] A brief note on the importance of the chop. Although contemporary wrestling television is replete with professional wrestlers throwing punches throughout their matches (frequently badly, as high definition televisions and slow motion replays on the shows reveal), a staple of Southern wrestling like that of the NWA of Mid-South Championship Wrestling is that punches are forbidden under the nebulously-defined but internally consistent rules of professional wrestling. This is because professional wrestling, in the fiction of the performance, is to amateur wrestling what the NCAA is to the NFL: a major league iteration of a beloved sport featuring professional athletes competing to win championships. Because of professional wrestling's relationship to amateur wrestling, certain rules of amateur wrestling are carried over into the performances. This tradition was strong in Louisiana in part because of Mid-South Championship Wrestling's promoter Bill Watts is a noted amateur wrestler who, while promoting in Louisiana, prized performers with legitimate athletic backgrounds like his own above all else. As professional wrestling has moved away from simulating an athletic competition and towards being an athletic performance, this rule and others like it have been consigned to history.

screaming at Steamboat to show mercy and give him a moment to recover. Flair drags himself to the hard-camera's[118] left turnbuckle[119] while still begging for mercy.

Once Flair returns to his feet, the referee admonishes Flair for stalling the action. When Steamboat moves in closer, Flair kicks him in the stomach and presses his advantage with an illegal punch, the first of the contest. Steamboat recovers with an array of high-flying, lightning fast moves, and, within a few moments, Steamboat has regained the advantage with yet another headlock. Flair regains his feet and fights his way to the far right turnbuckle only to get repeatedly chopped in the chest by Steamboat; the crowd goes crazy as Flair walks a few steps out of the turnbuckle after being chopped only to fall flat on his face. This particular reaction to being hit, called selling in wrestling's carnie argot, is known to fans of wrestling as the Flair Flop given Flair's penchant for selling this way in his matches, and the crowd roars its enthusiasm once he hits the ground.

Given the crowd's passionate response to what is, at heart, a man with bleached blond hair in bikini briefs taking three steps before taking a pratfall, I would like to pause

---

[118] The "hard camera" refers to the stationary camera positioned on one side of the ring that offers a full view of the entire ring. Unlike many of the handheld cameras employed during a wrestling match that can zoom in or be moved into position to get closeups of the wrestlers, this camera has been a hallmark of professional wrestling as a televised property since its inception in the 1950s. Given the ubiquity of territorial wrestling during the early and middle of the twentieth century, television stations found wrestling an ideal product to fill broadcast time when television was an emerging art form (in some markets, television stations even had minority ownership stakes in certain territories, such as in Memphis). Fortuitously for early television, all one needed to produce a televised professional wrestling show was a single hard camera that was set up such that it could record all of the action in a ring. Again, refer to Chicago Film Archives Presents Wrestling From Chicago, "Gorgeous George vs. Hans Schnabel (11/03/1950)," Gorgeous George and Hans Schnabel, (1950; Chicago; Chicago Film Archives; 2014), Youtube Streaming.
[119] A turnbuckle is the technical term used to refer to the point where ring ropes intersect at each corner of the ring.

for a moment and revisit Jim Ross's earlier claim that Southern wrestling sold emotion, reality, and passion. For a spectator who is unfamiliar with professional wrestling as a performance practice, I suspect that thus far little reality has been placed on display for the attending fans: what could be a bigger sign of the contest's falsity than something as ridiculous as the Flair Flop? The Flair Flop, upon closer examination, is exactly the sort of campy, over-the-top maneuver that manages to bring all three of these traits together for an in-the-know-spectator. Rather than being the sort of thing one would see in professional combat—there are no Flair Flops in the now-ubiquitous Ultimate Fighting Championships, a promotion that specializes in promoting non-predetermined, non-staged mixed martial arts matches in the manner professional wrestling used to be promoted around the world—the Flair Flop is a sign (in the Barthesian sense of the word) of a hated villain's suffering and a suggestion that justice can be meted out upon the defeat of a hated villain. Its unreality is a goodmaking feature of the maneuver: when Flair sells in this way every spectator, no matter how large the arena, will see a real manifestation of his pain.

Reality, here, is something altogether different than what one would expect from the types of performances we have called "realist"[120] throughout theatre history: rather

---

[120] For the purposes of this dissertation, please note that by realism I refer to a specific set of theatrical practices aimed at "representing" life on stage by presenting audiences with an array of everyday objects; at some point, a tipping point is reached and a sufficient number of details exist such that a given theatrical representation is deemed realistic by a given artist. Many of these practices originated in late-19th century Europe, and my conception of realism as an example of theatrical modernism is informed by Clement Greenburg's "Modernist Painting" (1960) as well as Nancy Kindelan's work positioning realism as a modernist praxis (1996). Readers interested in seeing how and where theatrical realism fits in with other avant-garde performance practices can find an excellent overview in Cardullo's *Theater of the Avant-Garde, 1890-1950: A Critical Anthology*.

than searching for a recreation or simulation of reality that closely mimics a fight, the exaggerated gestures and posing employed in professional wrestling externalize the ways spectators react to such contests and thus become the text of the performances.[121] Professional wrestling, to a very real extent, is less a performance of a fight than it is a representation of a certain type of emotional response to conflict—and the emotions a spectator feels when seeing a fight are fashioned into a performance intended to represent these sorts of emotions reliably.

The match continues as Steamboat picks up the pace of the exchanges; he whips and whirls Flair around the ring, forcing the wounded ex-champion to repeatedly bounce off the ropes into Steamboat's open-handed strikes with satisfying thwacks accompanied by the striking visual of sweat flying off of Flair's tanned, glistening chest. Steamboat repeatedly attempts to pin Flair and end the first fall of the match, but every attempt is thwarted when Flair somehow finds the energy to kick out before the referee's hand strikes the mat three times in succession. The exchange ends when Flair escapes the ring, takes three steps, and immediately performs another Flair Flop to the delight of the fans in the Superdome.

The fans' delight quickly turned to outrage as Flair stood and began to walk out

---

[121] Steve Austin makes just this point in his interview with Peter "Taz/Tazz" Senercia on his podcast, "The Steve Austin Show." Both men were discussing the booking (wrestling lingo for "writing" or "promotional") philosophy of former WWF, WCW, and Total Nonstop Action (TNA) booker Vince Russo, in particular Russo's claims that the hard and fast distinction between good guys and bad guys were no longer relevant to the practice of professional wrestling. Austin and Senercia disagree with this assessment: both men note that, were they to see a big man and a little man fighting on the side of the road during rush hour traffic they would start cheering if the littler man survived the bigger man's initial onslaught and started fighting back, eventually winning the fight. Austin claims that such responses are genetic; a charitable reading of this suggests that Austin does not mean this claim literally, but is, rather, speaking to cross-cultural norms surrounding spectatorship and combat.

the arena. The referee angrily forced Flair back into the ring, and the ensuing test of strength between Flair and Steamboat ends with the recovered Flair using his size advantage to pummel the smaller Steamboat. But as the announcers note, what matters in professional wrestling is not the size of the dog in the fight but, rather, the size of the fight in the dog—and Steamboat's tenacity and courage allow him to shrug off the pain and regain the advantage against his rival. Steamboat uses his momentum to showcase the first amateur wrestling throw of the match 17 minutes into the contest: a suplex, delivered with such impact that Flair's limp body shakes the ring when he crashes to the mat. But Steamboat presses his advantage too hard, and a flying leap onto Flair's prone body is countered by Flair bringing up his knees; both knees slam into Steamboat's ribs, sending him to the mat clutching his torso in pain.

Throughout the next exchange Flair takes control, repeatedly targeting Steamboat's ribs with stomps, kicks, suplexes, and assorted holds that target Steamboat's torso. Every crushing blow is followed by pinfall attempts that come one after another, and with every kick-out Steamboat prevents the disaster of losing the first of three falls but further injures his ribs given the core strength these repeated kick-outs require. But Steamboat is a hero, and the cheers of the working class men and women filling the New Orleans Superdome lend him the strength to "kip up" (or jump to his feet from flat on his back) and recover the advantage.[122] As the men exchange strikes and maneuvers,

[122] Although physiologically speaking a person with an injured torso in professional wrestling would lack the core strength to execute a jump that takes them from flat on their backs to standing upright, the conventions of the performance form make such unbelievable comebacks dramatically necessary for the fans—cheering a hero gives him or her the strength to exert his or her body well beyond what a normal man or woman could, and this trope encourages fans to vocalize their desires (and thus remain engaged in the match). For a recent example of this refer to World Wrestling Entertainment, *NXT*

Steamboat attempts the highest risk move of the match thus far: a dropkick.[123] Sadly, the

assault on Steamboat's ribs has slowed Steamboat down sufficiently for Flair to avoid the

dropkick, and Steamboat crashes to the mat, broken. Flair, like a shark sensing blood in

the water, gestures his hands to the crowd to indicate that it is time for Flair to use his

signature hold, the figure four leglock, and end the fall with a submission victory.

The concept of a signature maneuver (now frequently referred to as a finishing

move) is integral to professional wrestling, and deserves further scrutiny before I

continue with the above narrative. By the middle of the twentieth century, many featured

professional wrestlers had maneuvers that they performed so well that crowds would buy

tickets to see these maneuvers: in recent years, Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson had a litany

of moves that fans in the tens of thousands would pay impressive sums of money to see

live. Fans who attended television tapings were assured of seeing Johnson's "Rock

Bottom" slam, but "The People's Elbow," Johnson's electrifying finisher, would only be

successfully performed on Pay Per Views—which required fans to either spend $60 to

see in their homes on TV or commensurately higher ticket prices to attend the event live.

Takeover: Dallas, Shinsuke Nakamura and Sami Zayne, (2016; Dallas; WWE Network, 2016), Streaming. Both men are babyfaces, and the crowd wills both men back into the action periodically throughout the match.

[123] Dropkicks, even moreso than kickouts, have no basis in amateur wrestling and defy the laws of physics. To perform a dropkick, a wrestler leaps straight up in the air (from either a stationary position or running) and thrusts both of his or her legs forward. The wrestler receiving the dropkick has to somehow maneuver his or her body such that he or she ensures the person throwing his or her legs out will connect with the strike. In certain respects, the dropkick is the wrestling move par excellence: it is flashy, is frequently performed too quickly for viewers to notice the impact (or lack thereof) which puts the onus of the reception of the move on the wrestler being kicked's exaggerated selling, and the maneuver only works when both performers are working in concert to ensure that the move goes off without a hitch. For a perfectly executed dropkick, refer to New Japan Pro Wrestling, *Wrestle Kingdom 10*, Kazuchika Okada and Hiroshi Tanahashi, (2016; Tokyo; New Japan World, 2016), Streaming.

When this practice began is unclear, in part due to the origins of professional wrestling as a performance art. Professional wrestling's roots can be traced to the interrelations between two distinct occurrences: prize fights in the 19ᵗʰ century, and carnie grifts. The grift tended to work as follows. Trained grapplers would pin local strongmen in matches, charging locals for the attempt in exchange for a cash prize for whoever was sufficiently skilled to win these matches. Frequently, a smaller gentleman secretly employed by the carnival would volunteer for the first attempt and the grappler would take it easy on his fellow employee, letting the smaller gentlemen almost win to entice larger men in the crowd (unaffiliated with the carnival, of course) to try their luck. This notion of cooperative imitation of amateur wrestling became known as working in wrestling's carnie argot, and the reliability of results it created transferred to early performers and promoters in early grappling shoot fights. After all, the most successful wrestlers could prolong their careers if they agreed to take it easy on each other in the frequently three to four hour bouts common in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century; both men would get paid a portion of the gate, and neither would be too injured to continue to ply his trade. One consequence of this collaboration was that the business of professional wrestling and the reliability of matches became more entertaining than real (or "shoot") wrestling matches, and worked professional wrestling became ubiquitous across the United States by the early twentieth century.[124]

---

[124] This history may, in the end, amount to little more than a Whig history; the culture of silence surrounding early professional wrestling, as well as the lengths to which performers went to protect the "legitimacy" of their business (which frequently included gambling on match results) make documentary information extremely limited, and the received narratives that have been passed down to the performers of today may well be false. I assembled the above narrative based on conversations with Dave Meltzer, the curator and author of the Wrestling Observer newsletter (and the most respected

Signature maneuvers and finishing moves, however, do not fit neatly into the above narrative. Given wrestling's status as a performance that was presented as a legitimate athletic contest despite its predetermined contests, the idea that certain maneuvers could be performed reliably and with similarly devastating results, strains credulity and risked exposing the business as fake. To a contemporary audience such a concern seems trivial: Vince McMahon, the owner and promoter of World Wrestling Entertainment, announced in February of 1989 that professional wrestling was not an athletic contest in a bid to avoid the jurisdiction of the New Jersey Athletic Commission (and thus deny New Jersey a 10% tax levied on all televised sporting events in the state). Even by 1989 wrestling's predetermined nature was an open secret: exposes of professional wrestling started in the 1920s, and smart fans have suspected that wrestling was fake since the beginning of worked matches. After all, people in attendance week after week had to wonder how men could be beaten up so regularly but almost never to the point that they could not return to the matches the next week (in most situations).

Despite this fact of informed and repeated spectatorship, however, to many practitioners the preservation of the "integrity" of the business was not unlike the work of theatre actors, directors, and designers to preserve the suspension of disbelief during a commercial theatrical production: although audiences know that the actors are not really the characters they play on stage, the production goes to great lengths to obscure the artificiality of the experience for the duration of the piece. At some point, the norms of wrestling spectatorship—whether because of promoters of wrestling, fans in attendance,

journalist/historian in professional wrestling) and Karl Stern, a Mississippi historian. Refer to their podcasts *Wrestling Observer Radio* and *DragonKingKarl Classic Wrestling*, both accessed on http://www.f4wonline.com.

particularly gifted performers, or some combination of the above—changed such that finishing maneuvers did not call attention to the essential artificiality of the event in question.

Flair's signature maneuver is, like many signature moves, visually spectacular while, in reality, relatively safe to perform on someone. The figure four leglock is applied to a downed opponent: Flair grabs one of his opponent's legs, spins around it such that his and his opponent's calves intertwine. Then, Flair grabs his opponent's other leg and bends it such that the two legs form a shape approximating the number four. Flair places his remaining leg over the bent leg, securing the outline by placing the bent leg's foot behind his own knee, and falling backward. The resulting image has both men on the ground, legs entwined, crotch to crotch. Should the opponent being subjected to the move try to sit up, Flair can chop their chest and knock them back down (thereby placing them at risk for a pinfall loss). Flair can make the move more damaging by thrusting his pelvis upwards: the resulting pressure from Flair's upward thrusts causes the wrestler being attacked to scream in pain and lie back. But the figure four has a weakness: if the person being attacked can turn both himself and Flair over, the pressure is reversed once Flair is facedown on the mat in a submissive position.

Flair's use of the maneuver is not without context. The figure four leglock's efficacy as a finishing move is well-established within professional wrestling. Indeed, Flair's adoption of the move is a gesture toward the history of professional wrestling; the move was made famous by the first bleached-blonde wrestler to call himself the "Nature Boy," Buddy Rogers. Flair began calling himself "Nature Boy" in 1978 as an upcoming star in the National Wrestling Alliance's Georgia territory to goad Rogers into wrestling

Flair; when they finally met in the ring Flair defeated Rogers, an encounter that was thematized as Flair conquering the past in order to become the future of the business.[125]

Thus, when Flair signals to the crowd that he is going to attempt to go for his signature finishing hold, the crowd is aware that the match has changed gears once again—the constant ebb and flow of momentum shifts that governed the first twenty minutes of the match were coming to an end, and the match's first fall would be decided shortly. This awareness that the performance had shifted gears is apparent given the following short exchange: Flair attempts to apply the leglock, Steamboat counters the application by attempting to pin Flair with a spinning toe hold into a small package pinfall only for Flair to reverse the reversal into a successful pin, awarding Flair the first of three falls in the match.

The crowd, is of course, vociferous in its boos of Flair when the ring announcer announces Flair's victory in the first fall, but whether the result is surprising is an open question. Given Flair's status as a villain (or "heel" in wrestling's carnie argot) and Steamboat's status as a good guy (or "babyface") champion, this result was the most logical outcome: the story of a big match such as this usually involves a babyface overcoming insurmountable odds to achieve an unlikely victory, and Steamboat winning the first fall would have resulted in a match where sympathy would go to Flair's attempts to come back from the edge of defeat and his resultant quest to beat Steamboat two falls straight. By contrast, the scenario employed in this match—the cocky former champion taking an early lead—creates a story wherein, win or lose, the babyface will be even

---

[125] Coverage of their feud can be found by referring to Eddie Mac, "This Day in wrestling History (June 26): Ali vs. Inoki," *SB Nation*, June 26, 2016, http://www.cagesideseats.com/2016/6/26/11982396/this-day-in-wrestling-history-june-26-ali-vs-inoki.

more beloved: if he retains his title he came back from the brink of defeat and achieved

victory over one of the best wrestlers in the world two falls straight, while if he loses the

title after putting up the fight of his life he can be presented as more heroic because of his

Sisyphean task. These sorts of stories are the stories wrestling is best-suited to tell: visual,

simple, and because of this understood nearly universally.[126]

Steamboat v. Flair, Falls 2 & 3

After taking a sixty second break to allow both men to regain their breath (and for the

TBS Superstation televising the event to show advertisements), the contest for the second

fall begins. Both men are wary to start, and the grappling action commences with yet

another collar-and-elbow tie-up. Although Flair begins the second fall aggressively

bullying the smaller Steamboat, Steamboat briefly regains control with speed and

quickness. The early going of the second fall is highlighted by Steamboat displaying

---

[126] I use the term "nearly universally" quite intentionally: professional wrestling is successful in every culture to which it has been presented, irrespective of whether that culture is industrialized, developing, Western, or non-Western. The reasons for this are, no doubt, complex. On the one hand, professional wrestling spread from America and Europe throughout the 1940s and 1950s as decolonization efforts were ongoing around the globe, and the wrestling seen in numerous non-Western cultures such as India and Japan was promulgated by Western performers (such as the announcer of the match being discussed now, Terry Funk, who helped train several of Japan's top wrestling stars in the 1970s and worked matches in Japan until he was 69 years old) who either trained non-Western performers or earned money by being brought in to lose to native non-Western babyfaces. On the other hand, Nöel Carroll's earlier claims about the ontological status of mass arts explains the popularity of popular entertainments such as professional wrestling and other mass performances (be they "low culture" or otherwise). It is worth noting that these two alternatives are neither mutually exclusive nor the only explanations for the wide-spread popularity of professional wrestling: as Thomas McEvilley (1993) notes, the temptation of essentialist theorizing about art is that it displaces or obscures the socio-historical context that makes such theorizing possible.

more aggression than earlier in the match; for almost a full minute he repeatedly attacks the knee of Flair with vicious kicks to set up a figure four leglock of his own. Flair, in his own maneuver, screams in pain and slowly drags his way to the ropes to break the hold; his reprieve is short, as Steamboat drags Flair back to the center and applies another leg lock to Flair: the Boston crab, a vicious leg lock that requires Flair to be facedown on the mat while Steamboat grabs both of Flair's legs in his arms while sitting atop Flair's posterior. When Flair again reaches the ropes, Flair screams "Oh my God!" in pain directly into the camera that had moved into Flair's face for a close-up shot.

Steamboat attempts to continue the assault, but his aggression draws admonishment from the referee: Flair has a 20 count to regain his feet or the second fall would end in a technical knockout (or TKO) victory for Steamboat.[127] Unfortunately for Steamboat, the 20 count is sufficient to give Flair enough time to recover and take control of the match 27 minutes in. Where in the first fall each wrestler would quickly transition from offense to defense such that there were repeated reversals of momentum, in this second fall each wrestler maintains control for longer. Their selling on offense and defense has also gotten more marked: a maneuver that would have elicited a grunt in the first fall now causes the receiving wrestler to scream in pain, and each man's physicality is more exaggerated and slow. The first fall introduced the themes of the match, reinforced the stakes and created the narrative that the rest of the match would follow: with the second fall, the performers clearly trust their prior work sufficiently to slow down their reversals and let the maneuvers they do slowly push their physical score

---

[127] Unlike many other of the conventions of wrestling that originate from amateur wrestling, this is taken from professional boxing.

106

forward. Although there are fewer reversals and fewer maneuvers than in the first fall, the moves that are employed elicit much greater responses from the attending crowd.

Things get even more heated when Flair clearly begins to transgress the rules of sportsmanship 28 minutes into the match: he throws Steamboat outside the ring and begins throwing him into steel guardrail separating the ringside area from the ring. The ringside crowd rushes to Steamboat to encourage him to recover, but Flair is relentless in his assault and takes full advantage of the 10 count he is afforded outside the ring to bodyslam Steamboat to the floor of the arena. Rather than allow Steamboat to be counted out, Flair returns to the ring and rolls back out; per the rules of the professional wrestling, this resets the count to zero and gives Flair time to continue throwing Steamboat into the steel railing. Although Steamboat recovers and re-enters the ring without being counted out, Flair has taken full control of the match thirty minutes into the contest, and the only contribution Steamboat is making to the match is taking punishment. This is no small thing, however: Steamboat's selling of the punishment requires him to appear almost (but not quite) beaten, always on the verge of disaster but showing just enough fire and life to remain competitive. As Flair continues his offensive flurry he begins outright breaking the rules of the match with impunity: every time the referee turns his back, Flair resorts to an illegal move. When the ringside crowd begins protesting this rulebreaking, Flair stops and screams at them to stop lying to the referee about what he is doing—a tactic that of course gets the crowd more invested in loudly protesting Flair's wrong-doing.

After a few minutes of selling, however, Flair makes a mistake that allows Steamboat to launch a renewed assault on Flair's weakened back. Steamboat repeatedly drives his elbows, legs, and clenched fists into Flair's back. Finally, Steamboat forces

Flair's arms behind Flair's back, laces his own arms through Flair's, locks his hands together and hoists Flair off the ground; this maneuver, a chickenwing hold, suspends Flair in the air and places all of Flair's weight on his wounded back. For the smaller Steamboat to pull off a move like this showcases the babyface's strength and conditioning. After holding Flair up for a full minute Flair screams his submission to the referee, who stops the match and awards the second fall to Steamboat as the crowd roars its approval of the result. After 35 minutes of action, each man has captured one fall apiece—which means that whoever wins the third fall will win both the match and the title, provided that the 60-minute time limit is not exceeded.

The final, deciding fall has already begun by the time the commercial break has ended. The first visual of the action is of a dominant Steamboat striking Flair, who immediately performs yet another Flair Flop, still selling the beating that forced him to submit at the end of the second fall. Steamboat, too, is winded, and the two men—though barely able to stand—use the ropes to hold themselves up while chopping each other's chests. Both men's chests, by this point, are covered in red welts. The spectacle may be predetermined, but the chops are legitimate strikes; as former WCW[128] and WWE United Kingdom-based wrestler Darren "William Regal" Matthews notes in his 2005 autobiography, the key to performing believable strikes in professional wrestling is to hit

---

[128] World Championship Wrestling (hereafter WCW), was owned by Ted Turner from its inception in 1990 to its purchase by Vince McMahon's WWF in 2001, and it was a national promotion built from the performers and creative talent behind the National Wrestling Alliance shortly after it went national to compete with McMahon. For more information, refer to Scott M. Beekman, Ringside: A History of Professional Wrestling in America (Westport: Praeger, 2006), as well as a series of podcasts available on the Wrestling Observer Website by Karl Stern specifically dedicated to wrestling from this era: Karl Stern, "DragonKingKarl Classic Wrestling," *Wrestling Observer*, last modified 7/10/16.

one's opponent extremely hard in places on the body that are relatively safe, such as the chest, shoulders, or back.[129] Both men's reactions to the strikes are exaggerated for the purposes of conveying their emotion to the crowd—but these reactions are exaggerations, not fictions, despite their role in a fictional contest.

Where the second fall was slow such that each maneuver could take center stage of the performance, the third fall is much faster paced; 37 minutes into the match, attentions could slip if the action is anything other than arresting. The wrestlers both transition from offense to defense much more quickly. Flair begging for mercy on his knees quickly becomes Flair on offense as Steamboat hesitates, and the crowd seems thus far to still be excited about the spectacle in the ring given the volume of their responses to every move and transition. Both men's game plans for the third fall are clear: they each employ more high-impact maneuvers than in prior falls targeting a specific body part. Steamboat focuses his aggression on Flair's already-injured back, while Flair repeatedly attacks Steamboat's legs to set up a possible figure four leglock submission. Flair's first application of his signature maneuver causes Steamboat to quickly scramble for the ropes, and when Flair does not let go of the hold quickly enough for the referee's tastes the referee and Flair engage in a shouting match that ends with the referee refusing to back down from Flair's threats, much to the delight of the crowd.

Announcer Jim Ross, taking in the action, notes that Flair had bragged in pre-match interviews that "he could be the dirtiest player in the game when he wants to be," and reminded the audience at home that Flair had no compunctions against cheating to win when his skills were insufficient. Given Flair's assault on Steamboat's leg, it seemed

---

[129] William Regal, *Walking a Golden Mile*, (Stanford: World Wrestling Entertainment, 2005).

unclear how much Flair would need to cheat; Steamboat's left leg was weak, causing the hero to limp around the ring. Every time Steamboat begins to gain momentum in the match, his leg gives out and stops him in his tracks, allowing Flair to continue to attack the leg. Each application of Flair's figure four leglock brings Steamboat closer to defeat, and as the match progresses Steamboat's escapes become narrower and narrower.

The basic dynamic of the final portion of the match is the villainous Flair physically dominating Steamboat, the babyface in peril. Steamboat makes occasional comebacks far more heated and vicious than at any earlier point in the match, but every time Steamboat begins to achieve momentum one of two things happens: Flair attacks Steamboat's leg to put the champion on defense once again, or Steamboat's leg gives out and gives Flair an opening to stop the babyface's rally.

Nearly 48 minutes into the match, after a variety of near falls and close escapes, both performers return to the hold that characterized so much of the early goings of the match: a headlock. But unlike in the first 15 minutes, Flair is the one applying the hold to Steamboat—clinging to Steamboat's back like a monkey, both arms wrapped around Steamboat's head and squeezing with all of his might. Where earlier the headlock was used to demonstrate Steamboat's technical prowess, this late in the match Flair uses the hold to accentuate his size advantage over Steamboat by forcing the smaller man to bear his weight. Flair's size tells, and Steamboat, after fighting valiantly, is dragged down to the canvas while Flair continues to apply the hold.

Because the headlock applies pressure to the head and jaw Steamboat is unable to communicate his submission, which allows the referee to employ another trope of wrestling: raising an injured wrestler's arm into the air three times to check for physical

responsiveness. The first two times this is done Steamboat's hand drops lifelessly to the mat, as always happens whenever a referee is forced to do this; but on the third attempt, Steamboat's hand shoots back up before it hits the mat, signaling to the referee that he was not submitting and to the crowd that their cheers could give him strength to fight off the hold. Once again this always happens in professional wrestling, but crowds always respond to it so the trope remains.

The crowd, through their cheers and force of will, allows Steamboat to break the hold and regain his wind; all of Flair's offense becomes a temporary blip in the Steamboat comeback with ten minutes remaining before the match is declared a draw. As Steamboat climbs to the top rope to deliver a brutal kneedrop to the downed Flair, announcer Jim Ross reminds viewers at home of the virtues of Southern wrestling over its always present but never explicitly mentioned opposite, the WWF's "rock and wrestling" style epitomized by Hulk Hogan: "[Steamboat and Flair] have wrestled, and I'm not talking about coming out to music and walking around the ring and posing. I'm talking about wrestling for 50 minutes!" Sadly, Steamboat misses the maneuver, crashing and burning to the canvass on his injured leg. Flair, beaten and bruised, begins stalking Steamboat like a lion chasing a wounded gazelle. All seems lost for the heroic champion in the waning moments of the match.

But no matter how hard Flair hits Steamboat, Steamboat will not stay down. On one leg with a chest bright red from the strikes he has endured, Steamboat fights on waging what must be his final comeback. Finally, after capitalizing on an error by Flair with six minutes remaining before the match ends in a draw, Steamboat gets behind Flair and cinches in the chicken wing hold one more time. Flair falls backward, on top of

Steamboat, but both men's shoulders are flat on the mat. The referee's hand slaps the mat once, twice, and a third time to end the third fall—but fans are unsure of who the winner is, or if there is a winner at all. Both wrestlers are on the ground, motionless. After the timekeeper at ringside rings the bell, the referee walks over to both downed men. He pauses, then kneels down and grabs Steamboat's hand and raises it—signaling to the crowd that Steamboat had managed to raise his shoulder from the mat before the referee counted three, and remained the NWA World Heavyweight Champion. The crowd goes crazy with delight. Women and children were crying in the New Orleans Superdome, and the crowd of 5300 made enough noise that someone in attendance live could believe that they had gone back in time to 1980, when Mid-South Wrestling packed 30,000 men, women, and children of all ages, races and creeds into the building to see Southern wrestling at its finest.

For one final night in the 1980s, the New Orleans Superdome turned back the clock and gave the people of Louisiana Southern wrestling once again. Despite the advent of the now-entrenched World Wrestling Federation and its New York style of wrestling, Southern wrestling's emotion, reality, and passion ruled the television airwaves. There was a difference between the type of performances that were once routine in Louisiana and the "rock and wrestling" being sold around the country like a traveling circus. It was so clear that even a child could see it. I should know. I was that child. I was there that night, 9 years old, when Ricky "The Dragon" Steamboat retained his title against the five-time former NWA Heavyweight Champion "The Nature Boy" Ric Flair. After the match, my dad placed me on his shoulders and carried me to the Superdome's aisle where Steamboat would make his exit and, like every good babyface, give his adoring fans

thronging next to the entrance ramp high fives as he walked back to his dressing room, triumphant. He touched me, and from that moment on I knew that I would never lose my love for the art form of professional wrestling.

Moment of truth: I wasn't actually there. My father is a disabled war veteran with only one leg, so even if I had been there he would not have been able to carry me anywhere beyond our seat. I'm sorry if I've offended you; I wasn't so much lying as I was trying to "work" you as my reader. "Working," as other scholars have noted, is just wrestling parlance, and I was doing what any good worker would do in a wrestling ring. In wrestling, telling a good story and staying in character is more important than literal happenings, and working is something you do *for* an audience to help them invest in the story being sold. Although ethics (and my committee) requires me to be honest, the fact that I was not actually in New Orleans the night Southern wrestling had its last hurrah of the 1980s in some way makes the story worse: actual reality cheapens the moment, giving it the kind of complicated ending that is a hallmark of veridical reality rather than the sorts of stories professional wrestling is best-suited to tell.

When I was nine years old my entire exposure to professional wrestling was mediated through video games (such as the original NES's *Professional Wrestling*) and an occasional advertisement I barely noticed on local TV. It was not until 1993, shortly after my parents got their first satellite dish—we lived in a rural area where cable was unavailable—and I saw an advertisement promoting an April pay per view match between Flair and the surfer-meets-bodybuilder babyface Sting that I first asked my parents to watch professional wrestling at all; my father, a staunch boxing fan, insisted that it was fake and no one should want to watch it. That, of course, was all the

encouragement a 13-year-old needed to become a die-hard fan, and later that summer I

began to watch the World Wrestling Federation's flagship television show Monday Night

Raw. My dad was not amused when my mother decided to watch an episode with me to

assess whether she would allow me to buy the upcoming World Wrestling Federation's

pay per view Summerslam; he was even less pleased when she became a die-hard fan

herself after watching a cage match between Rick and Scott Steiner, "The Steiner

Brothers," and "The Million Dollar Man" Ted DiBiase[130] and his personal accountant

Irwin R. Schyster (whose initials *just happen* to read IRS) for the WWF tag team

championships. Although my mother was in large part unimpressed by the action, the

finish of the match featured Ted DiBiase getting his trunks pulled down to render him

immobile and allowed his mostly bare bottom and thong to be caught on camera—and

because my mother liked what she saw, my fandom was licensed, if not endorsed outright.

3.8 World Wrestling Federation Main Event Style

I, despite being a lifelong resident of Louisiana, missed the heyday of Southern

Style wrestling; instead, as mentioned earlier, I grew up watching the World Wrestling

Federation. It proved an ideal entry point for me in the 1990s; wrestling rarely toured

Louisiana, so I could see wrestling shows live only once every few years. Television was

---

[130] DiBiase began his career as a "carpenter" (or fundamentally skilled professional wrestler) in Mid-South Championship Wrestling and was involved in some of the promotion's most famous angles (read as: "storylines"). DiBiase's stint at the "Million Dollar Man" is what he is most famous for, but Vince McMahon only offered DiBiase the chance to play the character based on his consistent work as an extremely hated heel in Mid-South. For more information on DiBiase, refer to World Wrestling Entertainment, *Legends of Mid-South Wrestling*, BluRay, (2013, Stanford: WWE Home Video, 2013.). Bluray.

my only exposure to the art form, and the World Wrestling Federation's iteration of the art form was sufficiently simple as to ensure that an audience member completely untutored in the nuances of wrestling could enjoy the spectacles immediately with no prior exposure to wrestling.

The main event of WWF's Wrestlemania II is the perfect example of the types of main event matches I routinely saw as a child.[131] Hogan, the tall, muscular strongman faced King Kong Bundy, a 400 plus pound monster managed by Bobby "The Brain" Heenan. The feud between Bundy and Hogan was an extension of manager Heenan's storyline hatred of Hulk Hogan, and throughout much of the 1980s Hogan's greatest rivals were a sequence of monsters managed by Bobby Heenan; the actual heel wrestler was of secondary importance to the fact that his manager was Bobby "The Brain" Heenan.[132]

The match, a grudge match, would take place in a reinforced steel cage to keep both men inside the ring and to ensure that the match would have a definitive winner. Elvira, Mistress of the Dark, was the guest ring commentator for the match. The guest ring announcer was the manager of the Los Angeles Dodgers Tommy Lasorda, and he introduced the referee and timekeeper before introducing the wrestlers competing for the title. Bundy entered the arena first accompanied by his manager Heenan; unlike other wrestlers, Bundy entered without entrance music, showered in boos from the fans in attendance. Hogan entered next, tanned, muscular, and to a chorus of cheers as the strains

---

[131] World Wrestling Federation, *Wrestlemania II*, Pay Per View, Hulk Hogan and King Kong Bundy (1987; Los Angeles, CA; Titan Sports; 1987), WWE Network Streaming.
[132] Refer to Wrestlemania I through IX for various iterations of the Heenan/Hogan feud, as well as numerous WCW PPVs from 1994 through 2001, all available through the WWE Network streaming service.

of "Real American," Hogan's entrance music, thundered over the loud speakers in the arena.

As the match begins, the announcers note that Hogan's ribs are taped up from a prior encounter with Bundy that left him hospitalized. The men circle each other for five seconds, tease the collar and elbow tie up to begin the match, but instead both men begin to club each other in the head. Hogan gets the better of this exchange, and no matter what he throws at Bundy he cannot get the giant to fall down. Bundy attempts to escape the cage, but Hogan catches him and chokes him with his tights while the commentators note that in a steel cage match there are no holds barred. Hogan's offense thus far has consisted solely of punches, chops, and kicks, with an occasional Irish Whip to move Bundy from one side of the ring to the other where Hogan administers more punches, chops, and kicks.

After several minutes, Bundy punches Hogan in the ribs and takes control of the match. He uses an assortment of punches, kicks, and body slams to target Hogan's ribs repeatedly. But every time Bundy hurts Hogan and leaves him laying, his attempted escape through the cage door to win the title is foiled by a desperate Hogan grabbing Bundy's legs to keep Bundy from escaping the ring. After several minutes of offense, Bundy removes the tape from around Hogan's ribs and begins using the tape to choke Hogan and tie him to the ropes. But even this nefarious maneuver is insufficient to keep Hogan down, and after removing the tape tying him to the ropes Hogan takes over on offense again after several eye rakes. Hogan's punches and kicks stagger Bundy, and after throwing Bundy face-first into the cage Bundy falls to the canvas for the first time, his face cut open and bleeding.

With Bundy bleeding, Hogan continues his comeback by repeatedly slamming Bundy into the cage and raking Bundy's back with his fingernails. Bundy's bloody forehead becomes a target for Hogan's punches, but Hogan's momentum is arrested when he attempts to body slam the helpless Bundy but collapses under Bundy's weight, unable to hold Bundy up. Bundy capitalizes and attempts to exit the cage yet again, only to be cut off by Hogan—who uses the medical tape to choke Bundy and drag him back inside the cage. Hogan's comeback is short-lived as Bundy punches and Irish Whips Hogan into the corner and connects with his finishing move The Avalanche, a running shoulder tackle into the corner. He hits the downed Hogan with a second Avalanche and attempts to escape, but Hogan shoots up like lightning and arrests Bundy's escape again. After another Irish Whip and another Avalanche, Hogan no-sells the move and stares at Bundy in anger. Hogan counters the Irish Whip and sends Bundy into the corner, and as Bundy staggers out of the corner the enraged Hogan picks Bundy up and successfully body slams him as the crowd goes wild. Hogan then connects with his finishing move, the running leg drop, and attempts to escape the cage. Bundy, injured, manages to prevent Hogan from climbing over the top, but a kick from Hogan to Bundy's head drops Bundy to the canvas. Hogan successfully escapes the cage over the top before Bundy can drag himself to the door, and the match concludes with a victorious Hogan getting his revenge on Bobby Heenan inside the steel cage.

As should be evident, this main event match featured a minimum of maneuvers when compared to Flair's match with Steamboat. Although there were several momentum shifts during the match, the entire match was perhaps ten minutes long (not including entrances and after match posing). Given the types of moves used in the match,

wrestling in the Main Event Style seemed to be a simple matter of strength and heart. Although the teased collar and elbow tie up at the beginning of the match was a familiar nod to wrestling history, the move was aborted in favor of an exchange of punches—a clear sign that the WWF was interested in forging its own way forward. Although the above may sound like a criticism, I do not intend this to be such: this type of wrestling was perfect for getting a 1990s kid interested in wrestling, and after a few years of spectatorship I became more interested in more complicated styles of wrestling—such as those on display in Mid-South Wrestling, All Japan Professional Wrestling, and New Japan professional wrestling. McMahon's stylistic gambit proved successful in that his product's style was the perfect gateway drug into wrestling in the age of mass media.

In the next Chapter I will provide a history of Mid-South Wrestling and the failed attempt to compete with McMahon's WWF on a national stage. In so doing, I will demonstrate the stylistic shifts that Mid-South Wrestling underwent, and how these shifts failed to account the changing metaphysical status of professional wrestling as it transitioned from a regional performance to a mass art.

4. Cowboys, Blind Men, and Junkyard Dogs: History of Mid-South Wrestling

4.1 The Development of Professional Wrestling: Earliest Days

Scott M. Beekman, the author of the excellent *Ringside*: *A History of Professional Wrestling*, notes that what we now call amateur wrestling—descended either wholly or apocryphally from the ancient Greek free-fighting style of *pankration*—was brought to America by Irish immigrants in the mid-19th century.[133] This style, colloquially referred to as "scuffling," could more precisely be termed collar-and-elbow fighting: like the repeated tie-ups between Flair and Steamboat described in Chapter 1, this stance was the required starting position of these fights which alleviated size differences between performers and ensured that (somewhat) fair fights could occur, unlike the fights spectators had seen in boxing matches of the time period.[134]

Although collar-and-elbow was practiced throughout the United States wherever Irish immigrants would settle, Beekman notes that it is in southwestern Vermont where collar-and-elbow began its fifty-plus year transformation into what would become

---

[133] The importance of Beekman's historical work cannot be overstated: it is the only academic history of professional wrestling in print. To make a contentious analogy, it is to professional wrestling history what Brockett's *Theatre: A History* is to theatre history. That being said, however, Beekman's achievement is by no means exhaustive: although he has created a history of wrestling from its inception in the United States to the present, he does not cover all territories in the United States. Mid-South Championship Wrestling and its precursor, Tristate Wrestling Association, are mentioned exactly once during the work. There is significant room in the academy for historians to fill in the gaps of Beekman's account, and this chapter is an example of how such lacunae in wrestling scholarship can be filled.

[134] Although it might seem strange to single out a Ron Howard film for praise in an academic work, the 1992 Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman film *Far and Away* does a good job of illustrating the size differences seen in 19th century bare-knuckles fighting in the United States.

professional wrestling. A mixture of official license to compete, settler temperament, and

frequent opportunities to practice the fighting style resulted in a wrestling Renaissance in

Vermont.

> The Vermont Irish, in particular, were ministered to by a cadre of Irish
>
> Catholic priests who had also wrestled as youths. Chief among these was
>
> Father Thomas McQuade, who recognized that scuffling was not only a
>
> healthy pastime to keep his flock occupied but also a means of peacefully
>
> diffusing the disputes that frequently emerged among Irish immigrants
>
> from different counties.[135]

This combination of official sponsorship of the activity, frequent matches, and numerous

competitors led to the creation of a region of the United States where wrestling culture

could establish itself as a sport and as a practice passed down from one generation to the

next.[136]

Throughout the final decades of the 19th Century scuffling was replaced by two

different non-worked wrestling styles: Greco-Roman wrestling and catch-as-catch-can

wrestling, both of which spent time as the preeminent style of athletic wrestling contests

---

[135] Scott M. Beekman, Ringside: A History of Professional Wrestling in America (Westport: Praeger, 2006), 10.

[136] In some ways, this may strike readers as reminiscent of the growth of gymnasium cultures in proto-Germany during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. There are fundamental differences between the Catholic practice of scuffling/collar-and-elbow and the primarily Protestant gymnasium movements, however. It is in the ascendance of Greco-Roman wrestling in the 1880s and 1890s (along with the rise of muscular Christianity) where better parallels to the German gymnasium movement can be seen in the development of professional wrestling in America. For more, particularly on the way the Protestant gymnasium culture actively shaped German attitudes toward masculinity and masculinist culture, refer to George S. Williamson, "What Killed August von Kotzebue? The Temptations of Virtue and the Political Theology of German Nationalism, 1789-1819," *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 72, No. 4 (December 2000).

during the 19th century. Eventually, however, practitioners of both Greco-Roman and catch-as-catch can wrestling began increasingly turning to worked fights: both Greco-Roman and catch champions ran out of legitimate contenders to wrestle in marquee matches, and promoters began to rely on presenting mismatches as legitimate contests or, in some cases, entirely fabricating the credentials of challengers and trusting the champions to carry these challengers through matches that looked legitimate.[137]

After a promotional war in the early 20th century between New York promoter Jack Curley and his former star Ed "Strangler" Lewis, worked professional wrestling similar to the matches seen today became the norm in the United States. Lewis, along with Joe "Toots" Mondt[138] and Billy Sandow,[139] was responsible for professional wrestling transitioning into a spectacle that featured main events as well as undercard matches. Lewis, Mondt, and Sandow, later called the Gold Dust Trio, revolutionized the wrestling industry; "seeing wrestling" transitioned from audiences paying for a single match or two on a given night in a single style like Greco-Roman, collar and elbow, or

---

[137] Note that this practice is still done today in professional combat sports. One can refer to any boxing or mixed martial arts card for confirmation of this. In boxing, an educated fan can pick the winner of fights based on prior records and relevant statistics with a great deal of accuracy. Although MMA contests are less predictable given the number of maneuvers that are legal in every given MMA match (in comparison to boxing), there is sometimes a disconnect between how good a fighter is and how much fan interest there is in a fighter. For one concrete example of this, refer to the promotion of the July 11, 2009 mixed martial arts match held at UFC 100: Frank Mir v. Brock Lesnar. The rivalry between Lesnar and Mir came from Lesnar losing to Mir in his debut fight with the UFC a year prior in an absolute fluke, and Mir was presented as a more dominant fighter than his past record since a 2004 motorcycle injury affected his training and style as a fighter. Although Mir had success against an early-career Lesnar, Mir could do little to stop Lesnar in the rematch.

[138] Mondt eventually became a co-promoter of the World Wide Wrestling Federation, the precursor to Vince McMahon Jr.'s World Wrestling Federation.

[139] Sandow was a professional wrestler and, more famously, the manager of Ed Lewis and other performers.

catch-as-catch-can, to audiences paying to see multiple matches that might feature a variety of performers at a variety of weights.

The history of the Gold Dust Trio is sufficiently influential to generate its own separate monograph, but in the interest of brevity (and due to this history's tangential relationship to my own material), I would like to gesture toward its importance briefly here. Some historians claim that it was the Gold Dust Trio's first association in 1919 that changed wrestling from being a legitimate sport into a predetermined contest; one can consult Beekman's excellent monograph and see that this is simply not the case. Regardless, there is no disputing that wrestling style in the present certainly owes a direct debt to Mondt, Lewis, and Sandow: Mondt's vision of wrestling combined elements of Greco-Roman and catch wrestling, lumber camp tough man fights, and boxing within the confines of a boxing ring. Moreover, the Trio's touring company—due in no small part to both the rule changes and the connections of Lewis, Mondt, and Sandow throughout the industry—revolutionized the wrestling business within a year. By 1922, what Mondt called "Slam Bang Western Style Wrestling" had utterly defeated its stylistic rivals and laid the groundwork for wrestling promotion in the United States for the next 60 years: a single, strong coalition of promoters who worked together to protect the business.[140]

The Gold Dust Trio retained sole power until 1930 when the establishment of various "trusts" of promoters became de rigueur; these trusts would inevitably fall apart when promoters would betray each other and compete directly against each other for territory, thus violating the trust in multiple ways. Out of this trust system and increasing

---

[140] John Rickard, "'The Spectacle of Excess': The Emergence of Modern Professional Wrestling in the United States and Australia," *The Journal of Popular Culture*, Volume 33, Issue 1, pages 129-137, Summer 1999.

threats by the United States to regulate wrestling, the trusts gave way to the National

Wrestling Alliance and the endorsement of its first heavyweight champion, Lou Thesz,

and its first Junior Heavyweight Champion, Leroy McGuirk, upon its foundation in 1948

under the leadership of Sam Muchnick of St. Louis, Missouri. As noted earlier, the NWA

was an evolution of Curley's mono-promotion established earlier in the 20th century: but

unlike Curley (and later Lewis), this power was divided among numerous promoters who

elected a president from among their own ranks. The NWA allowed an array of smaller

promotions to effectively hold performance monopolies on their region of the country: no

promoter could compete with any other promoter, and all promoters swore to band

together and unite against any "outlaw" promoters that challenged the NWA's territorial

dominance.[141]

4.2 Tri-State Wrestling: Shooters and Hookers

Leroy McGuirk, more than any other figure from this time period, became the figure

most important to the birth of Mid-South Wrestling in 1979; McGuirk promoted

Louisiana as part of his Tri-State Wrestling promotion, founded upon his retirement from

active competition in 1950 until the creation of Mid-South Wrestling in 1979. McGuirk's

home base was in Oklahoma, and McGuirk was a headliner in that territory from the

1930s until his retirement in 1950. McGuirk, a former NCAA champion amateur wrestler

out of Oklahoma A&M (now known as Oklahoma State University) turned professional

wrestler who ran shows in the region after his retirement, promoted the Louisiana,

---

[141] Scott M. Beekman, Ringside: A History of Professional Wrestling in America (Westport: Praeger, 2006).

Mississippi, north Texas and Arkansas areas as an extension of the highly profitable Oklahoma market. Revenues from Oklahoma and North Texas were so strong that the gates from these areas essentially subsidized the steady business in the remainder of the territory. This state of affairs suited McGuirk perfectly: he lived in Oklahoma, and he was able to stay close to where the territory's events drew best.

McGuirk did what many promoters do when called upon to promote wrestling after his career as a performer ended: he found and promoted wrestlers similar to himself. McGuirk was a legendary Jr. Heavyweight, and as a promoter his favorite stories to book were feuds over his old title: the NWA Jr. Heavyweight championship. McGuirk's territories were for decades the place where smaller-sized wrestlers would come to compete for McGuirk's old title, the most prestigious championship reserved for competitors who weighed 220 pounds or fewer in North America. Although this title was a secondary attraction throughout much of North America, in McGuirk's territories the Jr. Heavyweight title was king for years: McGuirk, who transitioned directly from wrestling into promoting after "a car accident" permanently blinded him and forced him to retire, was the man who unified the National Boxing/Wrestling Association's World Jr. Heavyweight Championship with the National Wrestling Alliance World Jr. Heavyweight Championship into the still-extant NWA World Jr. Heavyweight title defended today.[142]

---

[142] McGuirk was a junior heavyweight champion for more than 11 years: he won his first title (the National Wrestling Association World Jr. Heavyweight Championship) on June 19, 1939, unified this belt with the National Wrestling Alliance World Jr. Heavyweight Championship in December 28, 1949, and vacated the newly-unified title after the "car accident" on February 7, 1950. "Car accident" was the reason publicized by the NWA when their reigning Jr. Heavyweight Champion had to retire without losing the belt. But oral histories of the time period all indicate that McGuirk's "accident" was not

It was in McGuirk's territory that amateur wrestling star Danny Hodge became a top attraction, raising the profile of the NWA Jr. Heavyweight to be even more respected than the title was during McGuirk's twelve-year championship reign. Hodge is a legendary amateur wrestler. Like McGuirk, Hodge was a product of Oklahoma State University; until the signing of 1996 Olympic gold medalist in freestyle wrestling Kurt Angle by the World Wrestling Federation in 1998, Hodge was also the most accomplished amateur wrestler to ever transition into professional wrestling from amateur competition. From 1955 until 1957, Hodge went undefeated in intercollegiate competition in his weight division. A three-time NCAA champion (who pinned all three of his opponents in the finals of each year), Hodge was an Olympic silver medalist in amateur wrestling. Furthermore, Hodge was never taken down from standing position during his collegiate career and was the only amateur wrestler to ever receive the cover of Sports Illustrated. Since 1995, W.I.N. Magazine and Culture House have awarded the Dan Hodge trophy each year to the most outstanding collegiate wrestler in any weight

---

accidental; in truth, McGuirk was blinded in a bar fight but, as a headlining wrestler and hero, the truth was buried to protect McGuirk and the NWA's reputation. Refer to *DragonKingKarl's Classic Wrestling* podcasts and Jim Cornette's *The Jim Cornette Experience* for more details on McGuirk and other wrestlers from this early era of American wrestling.

Also note that McGuirk's title and other NWA titles still exist today, although its prestige is much reduced from McGuirk's era. The NWA brand in the United States has long been inconsequential since the NWA, then controlled by Jim Crockett of Jim Crockett Promotions in North Carolina, morphed into Ted Turner's World Championship Wrestling in 1988. Five years later, the NWA resurfaced in 1993 as a regional United States promotion with little influence and little renown. This reputation in the United States is separate from the organization's reputation in Japan: for decades, Japanese professional wrestling thrived on bringing the touring NWA or AWA champion into Japan to challenge Japanese superstars, and throughout the 1970s and 1980s there were several short stints where Japanese performers captured these belts only to lose them at the end of the tour.

division; the Hodge trophy has become the amateur wrestling equivalent to the Heisman trophy given for excellence in collegiate football.[143]

Danny Hodge transitioned from amateur wrestling to professional wrestling under the tutelage of Leroy McGuirk and Ed "Strangler" Lewis in 1959. Hodge could not have had better teachers: his transition into wrestling was seamless, and his ascendance to the Jr. Heavyweight title was inevitable upon his 1959 debut. Within a year of his debut, Hodge held the belt McGuirk made famous and defended it in both McGuirk's territory and other NWA affiliates around the world.

Hodge was the first big star to come out of McGuirk's territory, and his amateur credentials were exactly the sort of background that the NWA loved in its champions. Indeed, McGuirk built his territory around Hodge and his Jr. Heavyweight belt. Hodge was NWA Jr. Heavyweight champion on eight separate occasions: his first two runs with the belt began in Oklahoma City, the heart of McGuirk's territory in the 1960s. By the 1970s, however, Hodge's three runs with the belt all kicked off in Shreveport, Louisiana—and Hodge's retirement due to a car accident in 1976 prevented him from being featured on McGuirk's first ever Superdome super show in New Orleans, Louisiana.

Although Hodge served as McGuirk's NWA Jr. Heavyweight champion from 1960 through his retirement in 1976, Bill Watts was McGuirk's biggest moneymaker as an attraction from 1963 on, and McGuirk's eyes opened to the money-making potential

---

[143] The Dan Hodge Trophy is given to candidates who excel at seven different aspects of collegiate wrestling: win-loss record, number of pins, dominance, past credentials, quality of competition, sportsmanship and citizenship, and heart.

of heavyweight wrestlers within his territories.[144] Watts, a 6'3" 300-pound heavyweight

and Oklahoma native, was a main event star from his debut in 1963 until his retirement

from full-time competition during the 1970s. Watts's success with McGuirk was due in

no small part to being a big man in a small man's territory, at least at first. According to

Dave Meltzer, Watts's "size, toughness and gift of gab" allowed him to main event

anywhere in North America, and Watts would frequently take bookings elsewhere in the

United States to supplement his earnings in Oklahoma.[145] Watts's main event

opportunities outside of McGuirk's territory prevented him from being McGuirk's "ace"

performer (an honor that was Hodge's despite Watts's superiority at the box office).

Bill Watts had main event runs in McGuirk's Oklahoma against a variety of

wrestlers, Vince McMahon Sr.'s World Wide Wrestling Federation against Bruno

Sammartino, and also worked main events in Washington DC against the city's local

African American hero Bobo Brazil.[146] Watts challenged for the NWA Heavyweight title

on multiple occasions throughout his career; he was even in the running to be NWA

Heavyweight champion after Gene Kiniski opted out of the title in 1969. Watts received

one vote from the NWA Board of Directors[147]—McGuirk's—but was passed over

---

[144] This can be seen in publicly available attendance figures of these shows on various fan-curated Web sites.

[145] Dave Meltzer, "September 12, 2005 Wrestling Observer Newsletter." *Wrestling Observer,* September 12, 2005.

[146] Watts revealed in a 2014 interview with Jim Ross that he was scheduled to be the heel that ended Bruno Sammartino's years-long run as the WWWF heroic champion, but had to leave the territory because of legal action against his home promotion.

[147] Since its official formation in 1948 and throughout many eras of the organization (including the period after the organization was subject to the Consent Decree of 1956 established in *United States v. N.W.A.*), the regional promoters serving as constituent members of the Nation Wrestling Alliance would collectively vote on the man who would serve as the National Wrestling Alliance Champion. Although numerous factors were considered (such as the education level of the man who would hold the belt and the

because Watts was hesitant to do 60 minute draws in the ring given his limitations as a ring technician.[148] Despite Watts's success outside of Oklahoma, McGuirk nonetheless sought to keep Watts affiliated with the Oklahoma territory. According to Watts, Leroy McGuirk "ran a little operation in a big area. He called me and he said, 'You need to come home.' He said, 'I need some help.'"[149] McGuirk offered Watts a minority ownership (10%) in McGuirk's territory to keep Watts tied to the area, and Watts began to transition from being more of an active wrestler into a businessman effective both in the ring and behind the scenes.

Although McGuirk gave Watts a 10% stake in McGuirk's territory, that did not mean McGuirk owned the remaining 90% of the territory outright. Wrestling territories in that era were complex businesses with often-Byzantine arrangements to allow promoters the space to promote wrestling in similar areas without directly competing with each other. Given McGuirk's proximity to both Texas and the Mid-West, Texas promoter Fritz

---

moral reputation of the individual), of primary importance was the ability of a potential champion to protect the perception of each regional champion as a potential future NWA champion: the stereotype of the villainous champion who would cheat to keep his belt or retain the title on the technicality of a time limit draw was first established in the NWA and continues to be a trope within wrestling into the present.

[148] The wrestler selected to receive the NWA Heavyweight Championship in 1969, Dory Funk Jr., was the son of legendary Texas promoter Dory Funk Sr. and brother of the future NWA Heavyweight Champion Terry Funk. Funk Jr., like Watts, was more than 6' tall; unlike Watts's 300 pound frame, however, Funk Jr. clocked in at a more modest 240 pounds. Where Watts would have been significantly larger and stronger than most of his opponents in the 1960s and 1970s, Funk's stature was only slightly bigger than that of most of his opponents. Funk became legendary as a heel champion because of his ability to have electrifying matches with opponents from around the world that could last for 60 minutes and end in a draw; given Watts's size and the importance of his size to his style of wrestling, it was unlikely that Watts could have maintained his weight and size while working such long matches around the country. Matches from this era can be found on "NWA On Demand," *NWA On Demand*, accessed on 7/10/2016, www.NWAondemand.com

[149] WWE, *Legends of Mid-South Wrestling* (2013; Stanford, WWE Home Video; 2013, Bluray).

Von Erich and American Wrestling Association[150] promoter Verne Gagne each received

a percentage of the profits earned by McGuirk's territory. Although the other promoters

tried to give Watts the short end of the deal since he was the most junior of the partners,

Watts—through a series of confusing and questionably-legal business moves that remain

unclear to this day—ended up with majority control of the territory. According to Jim

Ross and Bill Watts, Watts bought out his competitors by giving them their own

money.[151]

As Watts tells the story on Jim Ross's podcast, this quasi-legal defrauding of his

business partners is both one of the greatest stories in the history of professional wrestling

as well as the first sign of Watts's genius as a promoter.

I came back from Florida[152] and decided it was time to take over

Oklahoma so naturally I appealed to Leroy by saying "Leroy, you're not

---

[150] As noted in the very first footnote of this dissertation, Verne Gagne's formation of the AWA was the result of Gagne seceding from the National Wrestling Alliance to form a regional territory with Gagne as world champion. Because Gagne was an NWA promoter before seceding, the NWA was unable to effectively blacklist or compete with AWA markets in the Mid-West, and a truce was eventually declared between the two organizations. Each respected the territory of the other, and neither would challenge each other's primacy within their respective territories. For more, refer to Scott M. Beekman, Ringside: A History of Professional Wrestling in America (Westport: Praeger, 2006).
[151] Stories like this are relatively common in recent professional wrestling history; reportedly, Vince McMahon, Jr. did much the same when purchasing the World Wide Wrestling Federation from his father Vince McMahon, Sr. and other business partners. Despite the apparent illegality of doing this, Watts and McMahon both accomplished this feat successfully and neither have been the subject of legal action after the fact. Refer to Jim Ross, The Ross Report Episode 31: Cowboy Bill Watts, Podcast audio, Jim Ross's The Ross Report, MP3, 27.8, Accessed January 14, 2015.
[152] Watts went to Florida to work with Florida promoter Eddie Graham, widely regarded by historians such as Meltzer, Jim Cornette, and Karl Stern as the best "finish man" in recent wrestling history. Graham's booking style and promotion influenced most promotions and bookers in North America, and Watts's time under Graham no doubt contributed to Watts's promotional preferences for hard-hitting matches that prioritized red-hot angles that helped audiences preserve their suspension of disbelief.

getting paid enough." And boy, he jumped on that one! And I said,

"Neither am I. We got partners and we gotta split—we have dividends

with them but it doesn't say anywhere that we have to pay them. We can

hold dividends in case the economy is down and we can certainly pay

ourselves any salary we want to." So I changed it to where a lot of the

money was going out to him and I, his salary, and I quit issuing dividends.

That really worked out great because then Verne and Fritz weren't getting

any money.[153]

McGuirk and Watts's ploy worked. By withholding dividends to protect against future

financial exigencies, McGuirk and Watts managed to increase their own salaries while

starving both Fritz Von Erich and Verne Gagne of their shares of the promotions'

earnings. Both Von Erich and Gagne were well-established promoters by this point in

history, and neither were the sort of businessmen who would continue to invest in a

losing business opportunity. Eventually, the four men agreed to meet in Las Vegas to

discuss Watts and McGuirk's requests to buy the other men out of the partnership.

As Watts notes, the discussion quickly escalated into macho posturing. Although

McGuirk was blind and Fritz Von Erich was getting older, Verne Gagne was a well-

respected shooter—a term used to denote a professional wrestler who also possessed

amateur wrestling bona fides—who loved to grapple at any occasion.[154] Gagne

---

[153] Jim Ross, *The Ross Report Episode 31: Cowboy Bill Watts*, Podcast audio, Jim Ross's The Ross Report, MP3, 27.8, Accessed January 14, 2015.

[154] To call a wrestler a shooter is to state that he or she can handle him or herself in a real fight. Typically this term was used to indicate amateur wrestling, catch as catch can, or (after the rise of mixed martial arts in the 1990s) shoot-fighting experience. Before Vince McMahon's national expansion, wrestlers who could also shoot were especially viable candidates to be the champions of a promotion because, in the event of a double-cross

immediately suggested that he and Watts fight for majority ownership. Watts remembers
that

> Verne had a lot of guts and he was a tough guy. And he said to me, "Why
>
> don't we shoot for it? I've always been wanting to try you." And I said
>
> you know, "Gosh, it's fine with me. I thought I was gonna have to buy you,
>
> I guess I'm gonna get it free." So we started peeling off our gear right
>
> there and we were ready to hook 'em up and Verne decided that's not
>
> what he wanted.[155]

This decision was likely due to Watts's size and amateur wrestling credentials: Watts was

significantly bigger than Gagne.[156] Watts was a trained amateur wrestler and football

player from the University of Oklahoma who was unusually strong for the time period;

after suffering an injury in a car wreck that would allegedly end his athletic career, Watts

was ordered by doctors to drink beer and weight train to speed his recovery. During the

1950s and 1960s, college athletes were encouraged to drop as much muscle as was

possible given the conventional wisdom of the time period that held that gaining muscle

mass slowed athletes down, decreased their coordination, and hindered their ability to

play sports effectively. To go from the "Mayo Clinic Diet"[157] so beloved by coaches of

---

during a match, the champion could outfight his opponent and retain his title even when
that opponent ceased cooperating in the ring.

[155] Jim Ross, *The Ross Report Episode 31: Cowboy Bill Watts*, Podcast audio, Jim Ross's
The Ross Report, MP3, 27.8, Accessed January 14, 2015.

[156] Again, Gagne's secession from the NWA to form the AWA was due in no small part
to the fact that he was considered too small to be NWA Heavyweight champion. For
more, refer to Scott M. Beekman, Ringside: A History of Professional Wrestling in
America (Westport: Praeger, 2006).

[157] Interestingly enough, although there are many references to the Mayo Clinic Diet
throughout the 20th century, the Mayo Clinic did not officially endorse a diet until 2005;
every diet associated with the Mayo Clinic prior 2005 were apparently fad or weight-loss

the era to dedicated weight training (as was common in the United States Marine Corps in that era) left Watts significantly bigger than athletes in previous eras.

Watts's enthusiasm to shoot for the territory reflected his frustration as a businessman. Consider this exchange between Watts and Ross:

> Bill Watts: I'm not saying I think he was afraid of me, he just wasn't sure of me—and I think there's a big difference. I mean, I think that makes the difference when you're not sure of somebody.
>
> Jim Ross: Yeah, but here's the deal, Bill. He had made his money. You hadn't made yours yet.
>
> Bill Watts: They didn't think that way. They thought they were like God and I should be happy with whatever I was gonna get. So I had to deal with all that and Leroy McGuirk, too.[158]

As the above indicates, it was not long before Watts believed he could promote better than McGuirk, as well. "After about three years of dealing with him, I was just exhausted dealing with Leroy [and his friends]. They'd go over all my booking, and everything I would do, and they'd try to pick it apart. It made me have to be so much more prepared over where I was going and why."[159] While the two men were capable of co-existing and co-promoting for a number of years, their partnership was doomed to fail once Watts

diets that appropriated the Clinic's name. Weight loss diets were popular from the 1930s through the 2000s (when the Atkins Diet exploded in popularity), and various diets involving grapefruits and other dietary restrictions were dubbed the Mayo Clinic Diet at points throughout the 20th century. For a short analysis of this phenomenon, refer to Diet.com's Web site devoted to this effect (http://www.diet.com/g/mayo-clinic-diet-fad-diet).

[158] Jim Ross, *The Ross Report Episode 31: Cowboy Bill Watts*, Podcast audio, Jim Ross's The Ross Report, MP3, 27.8, Accessed January 14, 2015.

[159] WWE, *Legends of Mid-South Wrestling* (2013; Stanford, WWE Home Video; 2013, Bluray).

began drawing huge houses in New Orleans, Louisiana's Superdome and he began to understand the demographics of the crowds attending these shows. Watts's decision to take Louisiana and Mississippi—a region of the territory McGuirk's wrestlers hated to work and deemed being booked there as a punishment—gave Watts a territory of his own to promote as he pleased. Watts formed Mid-South Wrestling shortly after the two men went their separate ways. McGuirk's refusal to give up the Oklahoma and Texas market meant Watts would be stuck with a region in North America that never drew money in the past, and widely contributed to the perception that Watts would have to close his territory shortly after beginning to promote the area.

Bill Watts set the territory on fire within a few months of taking over, and professional wrestling in Louisiana—to most fans of a certain age—is synonymous with Watts's achievements as the promoter of Mid-South Wrestling.

4.3 On the Imminent Demise of Mid-South Wrestling

There are three reasons, according to the journalist and wrestling historian Dave Meltzer, why promoters and professional wrestlers in the 1970s all knew that Bill Watts's decision to start Mid-South Wrestling was doomed to fail before a single arena was booked. This knowledge was so widespread that seemingly everyone in the wrestling industry "knew" these three things would come to pass as soon as Watts announced his decision to break away from Leroy McGuirk's Oklahoma territory and promote wrestling without McGuirk. That none of these three proved to be significant causes of Mid-South Wrestling's eventual death is both unfortunate for conventional/received wisdom of past promoters,

and exactly the sort of irony that attends the complex and contested histories of professional wrestling in both the United States and around the world.

The first reason figures within the professional wrestling industry believed Mid-South was doomed was simply geographic: Louisiana was a promotional no man's land, a place where no wrestling promoter had ever made consistent money when running professional wrestling shows there. McGuirk, Watts's business partner and the man who gave Watts a territory to promote, kept all of the lucrative markets for himself, leaving Watts with the promotional dregs of the former Tri-State Wrestling territory. As wrestlers from the 1970s and earlier would loudly attest, Louisiana was professional wrestling's Sargasso Sea—and Mississippi was even worse. In McGuirk's territory in the decades before handing off the region to Watts, wrestlers assigned to work dates in Louisiana widely believed the assignment to be a punishment handed down by McGuirk. This is in large part due to the way wrestlers earned their pay. Wrestlers typically received either a flat fee (for undercard or "underneath" performers) or a percentage of the gate drawn to a given evening of matches (for main eventers and other central figures in the promotion of the show); given the region's poor attendance, talent working in Louisiana and Mississippi typically received poor payoffs given the awful house gates.[160]

The second reason experts believed Watts was sure to fail was the culture of corruption endemic to wrestling promotion in Louisiana. There was no state in the United

---

[160] A house's gate is another word for its ticket revenue. Sometimes this figure is the result of ticket sales combined with merchandise sales and concessions, but arrangements varied from region to region and promoter to promoter. Public records curated by fans exist online for many of the biggest shows in professional wrestling history, and all records for Mid-South Superdome Events are available at "Mid-South Wrestling," *Online World of Wrestling*, accessed July 10, 2016, http://www.onlineworldofwrestling.com/results/mid-south/.

States with as storied and public a history of corruption as Louisiana, and this culture of

corruption would create roadblock after roadblock for Watts as a promoter. Indeed,

Louisiana was plagued with numerous local officials who essentially amounted to the

landed gentry of a medieval fiefdom rather than the appointed public servants they

purported to be. This is in part due to the legacy of Huey Long, and many of these de

facto sinecures can be dated back to the spoils system instituted by the Long machine in

the early and middle twentieth century. These "local promoters" were government

officials who received a percentage of every wrestling gate from every wrestling event

these promoters promoted in their territory, even when said event promotion was largely

ceremonial or entirely nonexistent. Because local promoters were given a cut of the gate

in exchange for doing absolutely nothing, any wrestling promoter who counted on the

actual involvement or concrete assistance of a Louisiana official—or failed to give a

Louisiana local promoter his or her cut of the gate—would soon be out of business. This

history of corruption combined with the demography of the local promoters presented a

seemingly unwinnable gamble for Watts: the local promoters would drain money from

the promotion and potentially interfere with the creative vision of Watts's company in the

event the content of Watts's shows was deemed problematic.[161]

---

[161] Louisiana's complex political history deserves mention, here. Although the state has long boasted a Democratic Party registration advantage among its electorate, traditional splits between liberal and conservative have not held constant throughout the history of the state. No Republican held statewide office in Louisiana since the Reconstruction until 1979, the year Mid-South opened its doors. That being said, the differences between Louisiana conservatives and Louisiana liberals were not reflected in party affiliation until the 1990s. Thus, it was possible to understand that Louisiana was a reliable hotbed for Democratic statewide politicians (in part due to the legacy of Huey Long and the Long Machine, that continued through the era of Edwin Edwards's dominance of the state party until the 1990s) without itself being a reliably liberal state when it comes to laws or

The third reason was wrapped up intimately in the demography of what was to

become Watts's territory and builds upon local promoter interference in the event of

potentially problematic content. Mid-South Wrestling would be based in the heart of the

former Confederacy, and centuries of racism could not be ignored by a promoter looking

to promote in that territory. It was well-known within the wrestling industry that Watts

intended to build his new promotion around a black performer, in part due to the success

of African American performers such as Ernie Ladd and Claude "Thunderbolt" Patterson

at early New Orleans Superdome shows co-promoted by Watts and McGuirk. Although

black athletes had achieved great success elsewhere in the country, the regions in which

those performers worked were frequently more racially progressive regions of the

country than Louisiana and Mississippi (or, barring that, were more demographically

favorable to black performers given a region's larger potential black audience base, such

as Washington, D.C.). Surely, if there were ever a place where black wrestlers had to play

villains it would be in the territory Watts was given by McGuirk to promote. Indeed,

every promotion built around black performers in the 1960s and 1970s had much more

diverse crowds for wrestling than Watts would ever be able to draw in Louisiana.[162]

As I demonstrate throughout this chapter, although Mid-South Wrestling did fail,

its failure was far from preordained and far from predictable in the buildup to Watts's

demography. For more information, refer to Wayne Parent, *Inside the Carnival: Unmasking Louisiana Politics* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006).
[162] Watts's booker and undercard heel Ernie Ladd was a main eventer everywhere during his career due to his fame in AFL football. Bobo Brazil, a marquee opponent for Watts, was a main event star for years in Washington, DC. Thunderbolt Patterson, a wrestler blacklisted for both attempting to unionize the industry and working for a non-NWA "outlaw" promotion run by Ann Gunkel, was also a significant star throughout the US, although his blacklisting made his influence more limited than perhaps it deserved to be. The fate of Ann Gunkel and other "outlaws" in professional wrestling has been discussed on numerous podcasts, such as Dave Meltzer's *Wrestling Observer Radio*.

break from McGuirk in 1979. It would be easy to look at the course of events and conclude that these naysayers were always right: Watts did, eventually, go out of business, and these criticisms were not totally off-base given the way recent history progressed. Indeed, at first glance it would even appear that some of these complaints would be borne out: Louisiana, in the end, could not support a promotion of the size Watts needed to remain in the wrestling business. Moreover, the bribes Watts had to pay to local promoters and building owners were, indeed, costly over and above the money needed to promote (and the true expense of these bribes is something that, for obvious reasons, was never officially recorded in the business dealings of the company). And finally, as Watts would learn, the formula of running with a black performer as the lead babyface was not a winner in the long term; although it worked spectacularly with Sylvester "The Junkyard Dog" Ritter, attempts to recapture Ritter's appeal with subsequent black performers always resulted in diminishing returns, and the promotion's greatest creative and financial successes came after Ritter's departure from the company for Vince McMahon's World Wrestling Federation. Despite these facts, however, I argue that analyses that put too much weight on the doubts expressed by industry insiders prior to 1979 will misinterpret Watts's role in Louisiana sports history; in short, they mistake correlation for causation, and the actual causes of Watts's business folding were not predicted by industry insiders prior to Mid-South Wrestling opening its doors for business. Working these narratives into an analysis of Watts's failure to stay in business runs the risk of missing the forest for the trees, of letting one's knowledge of Watts's eventual failures unduly color our understanding of Watts's prior astonishing successes.

As I will demonstrate throughout this chapter, Watts's unparalleled successes as a promoter in the Louisiana and Mississippi region—as well as his eventual failures—were simply the result of the changing nature of wrestling promotion in North America. Indeed, Watts's rise and fall mirrors that of numerous other wrestling promotions in North America. No combination of a promotion's successful creative direction and popular regional television could work against wrestling's slow progression toward becoming a global/national performance produced by large promotions on a global/national scale. As wrestling promotion became (once again) the province of entities more like the circus that comes to town once per year than the regional performances promoted by Watts and countless other regional promoters around the United States, even Watts's attempts to go national like McMahon proved to be too little and too late.

In this chapter, I first explain the centrality of the Louisiana Superdome to the development of Mid-South Wrestling in Louisiana. Second, I argue that although the television Watts created was groundbreaking in North America, Watts's promotion of wrestling (and use of television in that promotion) was utterly traditional. Then, I chronicle the rise and eventual fall of The Junkyard Dog before concluding with an analysis of Mid-South Wrestling after the Dog left to promotion and conclude with the doomed attempt to go national as the Universal Wrestling Federation. Analyses of Mid-South Wrestling that claim the promotion lived and died with Ritter's performances, as I demonstrate, do not withstand sustained scrutiny. In fact, according to the testimony of Watts and that of longtime observers of the industry, Watts's strongest promotional years in terms of revenue were the years after the departure of Ritter and Watts's subsequent importation of white tag team performers from Jerry Jarrett and Jerry Lawler's Memphis-

based promotion.[163] It was the traditional booking of Watts's business as well as the

changing economic realities both within Louisiana and in the country at large regarding

the promotion of professional wrestling, rather than regional, political, and content

concerns that doomed Watts's company.

4.4 Superdome Super Shows and Mid-South Opens its Doors

Watts's eventual achievements as a promoter did not come out of left field. The evidence

that money was being left on the table in Louisiana and Mississippi was there for anyone

to see, provided that observers knew what to look for. Even Watts's decision to go all-in

with an African-American headliner was motivated by the empirical analysis of box

office revenue. In the four years leading up to Watts's separation from McGuirk, the two

men jointly promoted the New Orleans Superdome for several high profile shows—and

these shows' gates clearly justified Watts's eventual approach to promotion within the

state.

Watts and McGuirk first jointly promoted the Superdome on July 17, 1976. The

event officially drew 17,000 fans to the arena and earned a $75,000 reported gate.[164] Both

the number of fans in attendance and the reported gate are noteworthy. According to

---

[163] For those puzzled by this claim, please note that there tends to be a delay between a
promotion doing the equivalent of "jumping the shark" and the financial ramifications of
that incident. In the past thirty-five years, this has happened time and time again: the
momentum gained by a promotion from a boom can sustain that promotion's popularity
for a year or two before the fallout from creative mismanagement or losing talent affects
the bottom line of a promotion. For other notable occurrences of this phenomenon, refer
to Dusty Rhodes's tenure as booker of NWA Wrestling throughout the late 1980s, the
slow death of Ted Turner's World Championship Wrestling in 1998, and the fallout from
Steve Austin becoming a villain in Vince McMahon's WWF in 2001.
[164] As noted earlier, due to New Orleans's history of corruption the actual attendance and
revenue figures are not available.

Dave Meltzer, "outside of a city like New York, Philadelphia, Montreal or Toronto, that sized crowd was virtually unheard of in pro wrestling, let alone in a market known for being dead."[165] The expenses of the Superdome had made McGuirk hesitant to run the arena in the past. On this occasion, however, the television station WWNO of New Orleans—the station that aired McGuirk's televised wrestling show—agreed to heavily promote the show on their airwaves in exchange for a percentage of the gate. Unlike many of McGuirk's shows, the Superdome clearly had Bill Watts's fingerprints all over it: the NWA Jr. Heavyweight Champion Nelson Royal only worked sixth from the top of the card (in the third of nine matches), and the final four matches all featured large heavyweight wrestlers. Although the main event featured Terry Funk defending the NWA Heavyweight Championship against Bill Watts, the match credited with drawing the gate for the house was the Karl Kox v. Dick Murdoch match.[166]

Watts's influence was even more pronounced on the second New Orleans Superdome event from April 1, 1978: the event prominently showcased black professional wrestlers Ernie Ladd and Thunderbolt Patterson in both Mid-South championship matches featured on the show. The decision to showcase Ladd and Patterson was what caused Watts to believe that the wrestling industry's approach to

---

[165] Dave Meltzer, "September 12, 2005 Wrestling Observer Newsletter." *Wrestling Observer,* September 12, 2005.
[166] The complete card is as follows: Pat Barrett b. Tom Jones; Ted DiBiase & Jay Clayton b. Randy Tyler & Bobby Jaggers; Nelson Royal b. Ron Starr; Grizzly Smith b. Sigfried Stanke; Bobo Johnson & Farmer Pete b. Little Tokyo & Billy the Red; Dick the Bruiser DDQ (double disqualification) Abdullah the Butcher; Andre the Giant & Buck Robley b. Ken Patera & Bob Sweetan; Dick Murdoch b. Killer Karl Kox in a "Jim Bowie" death match wherein both men were blindfolded; and Terry Funk TKO (referee stoppage, or technical knockout) Bill Watts to retain the NWA Heavyweight Championship. The complete results are available at the Web site Professional Wrestling History (http://www.prowrestlinghistory.com/supercards/usa/misc/midsouth/cards.html, Pro Wrestling History. Accessed on 2/17/2015).

presenting black wrestlers was outdated. For decades, black wrestlers were promoted as if

their race was their defining feature—or worse, the entirety of their gimmick. Just as each

territory needed only one cowboy, plumber, or lumberjack, prevailing wisdom within the

industry held that a territory or promotion needed only one black performer at most:

"blacks were a gimmick in wrestling, with many companies keeping one around largely

as a token with the belief they'd draw black fans, but if there were too many, it would

keep the whites away which was one of the theories why the NBA was dying at the

time."[167] Ladd's popularity as a villain, combined with Patterson's connection to fans in

the area, suggested to Watts that money was being left on the table when it came to the

presentation of minority wrestlers to the fandom of professional wrestling.

The two Superdome shows in 1978, in addition to teaching Watts about the

presentation of race in wrestling, proved to be a proof of concept for Watts's eventual

approach to professional wrestling as a solo promoter. The April 1 show drew 20,102

fans for a $100,435 gate, while the second show on July 22 drew 23,800 fans for a

$142,675 gate.[168] These New Orleans numbers are almost certainly falsified in some way.

Unlike other wrestling events around the world throughout history, however, these

numbers are likely substantially smaller than the actual figures drawn on the shows in

question. Dave Meltzer notes that, as opposed to "most gate figures that are released as

records, most likely, this number was lower, probably significantly, than the real figure

---

[167] Dave Meltzer, "June 15 1998 Wrestling Observer Newsletter." *Wrestling Observer*, June 15, 1998.

[168] According to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, adjusting these numbers to account for inflation makes these numbers even more impressive. The April 1 show, when converted into 2015 currency, made the equivalent of $361,569.08. The July 22 show was obviously even more successful: when converted to 2015 numbers, the company made $513,634.38 gate in a single night. "CPI Caluculator," *Bureau of Labor Statistics*, accessed April 15, 2015. http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl.

with all the off the top [unreported] cash political payoffs that were part of doing business in that city."[169]

These numbers, impressive for the time period, likely need further contextualization for contemporary scholars. Because wrestling companies around the United States have drawn similarly big houses and drawn similarly big money on an infrequent basis for much of the 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s, to contemporary eyes the distinction between quarterly Superdome shows and monthly pay per view events is likely quite subtle. According to Bill Watts, however, Mid-South Wrestling was in a different industry than the wrestling companies such as WWF and WCW that came after it. Watts's business model with Mid-South Wrestling employed televised events to encourage fans to buy tickets to untelevised local shows around the region and to commute to New Orleans quarterly to spend more money on the super fights presented at the New Orleans Superdome. Later promotions made money directly off of television rights fees, turning television into a money-making enterprise in and of itself, and used that television to prompt fans to purchase pay per view cards of the biggest monthly shows that featured the culminations of every storyline seen on TV and that would encourage fans to return to watch more television to see the fallout from these stories' denouements. In some markets in Watts's era, promoters had to pay local television networks to run their television shows, rather than using television shows as a revenue driver as has been common practice since the 1990s.

---

[169] Dave Meltzer, "September 12, 2005 Wrestling Observer Newsletter." *Wrestling Observer,* September 12, 2005. Also note that, in this quote, Meltzer uses the term "political" to denote playing politics with business leaders as well as making payments to minor government officials.

Unlike modern promoters who had revenue streams that were simply unavailable to promoters of earlier eras, Watts and his contemporaries in the promotion of regional professional wrestling had to put all the focus on in-ring performances and the promise of unique chances to see more of these performances live to maximize revenue. This is why the sorts of performances presented by Mid-South and in territories where Watts worked throughout his career resulted in performances with radically different goodmaking features from the performances featured after the demise of regional promotions. The types of stories Watts specialized in telling were different from the types of stories popularized in the decades after Mid-South Wrestling ended given the differing contexts surrounding the promotion of the art forms. Indeed, Watts's business model was not unusual for the time period, even if the territory he promoted was unusually successful; promoters around the United States used the same techniques (albeit with frequently inferior television promotion given Watts's strength at producing serialized television, a topic which will be discussed later in this chapter) to achieve their regional successes.

As noted earlier, Watts first promoted on his own in Louisiana and Mississippi, where the Superdome shows fueled further promotional successes around the territory. Mid-South Wrestling drew sizeable, sustainable crowds week after week in the same towns located around Watts's 2000-mile territory. Whether this was in the weekly New Orleans shows at the Municipal Auditorium, the Shreveport television tapings at the Irish McNeill Boy's Club, or any of the numerous small towns in the territory, Mid-South Wrestling's survival was predicated upon on telling the kinds of stories in its rings that would convince fans to attend every week. That these performances were successful at the box office is undeniable. Indeed, the shocking amount of revenue generated in

Louisiana and Mississippi by Mid-South Wrestling eventually allowed Watts to buy out the remainder of McGuirk's northern Texas and Oklahoma territories just three years after taking over Louisiana and Mississippi in 1979.

4.5 Enter: The Junkyard Dog

Given the nature of the business Bill Watts wanted to run, Mid-South Wrestling had to find an attraction who could shine on television, draw audiences into arenas, then keep them coming back for more to really capitalize on the hidden strengths of his Louisiana and Mississippi territory and leave Watts with a successful promotion. Watts, along with his matchmaker the Louisiana native (and former college and AFL football superstar) "The Big Cat" Ernie Ladd, realized as early as 1978 that the key to promotional success in Louisiana was mobilizing the black fan base of Louisiana wrestling that had traditionally been underserved by past promoters. Because of the fragmentary nature of wrestling histories, it is impossible to absolutely state that Ladd was the first black performer trusted as the head booker of a territory, but my research suggests that Ladd's promotion by Watts to booker was the first time this occurred in professional wrestling.

Indeed, Jim Ross, after Ladd's 2007 death from colon cancer, confirmed that Ladd's appointment as booker of Mid-South was a huge achievement in the wrestling industry. Moreover, Ladd was a brilliant matchmaker, using his experience as a black athlete who became an unlikely civil rights leader and a leading proponent of integration and desegregation during his time in the AFL to mold Ritter from a green journeyman wrestler into a legitimate top star. As Ross noted,

Ernie overcame several racially charged, alpha male, white wrestling stars

who had issues with taking orders from a black man [during his tenure as

Mid-South Wrestling booker]. Ernie used his common sense and street

smarts to craft believable story lines that the ticket-buying public could

understand and with which it could relate. Soon, Ladd's detractors were

earning more money than many had done previously, and the racial

conflict wasn't the issue that it had been. This included a top star or two

that were card-carrying members of the KKK.[170]

Ladd had a mind for business and an unparalleled insight into what it took to connect

with fans as a black performer; one of the first black men promoted as a heel, Ladd was

money both behind the scenes and as an active performer.

The previously-discussed July 22, 1978, Superdome super show was proof of this:

the show "drew 23,800 fans and $143,000 in the same building, the record audience

swelled by a huge African-American walk-up. Both were indoor records at the time."[171]

Although the event was headlined by Dusty Rhodes against "Superstar" Billy Graham,

the match responsible for the walk-up business was a grudge match between the African-

American wrestlers Ray Candy and Ladd. If an undercard match featuring a black

babyface and heel could set attendance records in a city only two years removed from

being a promotional no man's land, Ladd and Watts reasoned, imagine how much money

could be made if this audience was given a black hero promoted as the biggest star in the

company.

---

[170] Jim Ross, "Ernie Ladd was one cool cat on gridiron, in wrestling ring," FoxSports.com, February 11, 2014.
[171] Dave Meltzer, "September 12, 2005 Wrestling Observer Newsletter." *Wrestling Observer,* September 12, 2005.

Enter "the Junkyard Dog," Sylvester Ritter.

Ritter wasn't the first choice. Ray Candy was popular, big, and tough, but lacked the charisma needed to main event and carry an entire wrestling territory. Ladd, a legitimate giant and sports legend, was too old and beaten up to last as a main eventer working a main eventer's schedule around the 2000 mile territory Watts promoted. Thunderbolt Patterson had the talent and charisma, but his blacklisting from the NWA and reputation as a troublemaker in the wrestling industry made him a figure who could not be trusted with a territory.[172] There seemed to be no one who could fit the bill required by Watts and Ladd until Grizzly Smith, a veteran wrestler partnering with Watts and Ladd at the beginning of Mid-South Wrestling, got a call from his son (and future Mid-South and World Wrestling Federation star) Jake Roberts informing Smith that Stu Hart's Calgary-based Stampede Wrestling might have a guy who could fill the role Watts needed to be filled: Sylvester "Big Daddy" Ritter who, at 300 pounds and completely gassed on steroids, stood out as a possible main eventer.

Sylvester Ritter, a 26-year old former small college football player at

Fayetteville State University, who was at one point a good enough athlete

---

[172] As mentioned in an earlier footnote, Thunderbolt Patterson's enthusiasm for unionizing professional wrestlers is still taboo more than three decades later. The topic of unionization is tangential to my argument here, but note there is considerable controversy regarding whether professional wrestlers as employees actually fit the definition provided in American jurisprudence for "independent contractors," an argument wrestling companies rely upon to deny performers health insurance and to discourage wrestlings from unionizing. Furthermore, the obstacles to unionization are not merely legal; typically, the biggest stars in wrestling, generally speaking, oppose unionization because it would result in lowering their paychecks (which are a percentage of the gate combined with a downside guarantee of some sort). Without the presence of the biggest stars in a potential union, the mid-tier and undercard talents have no leverage to force wrestling companies to recognize their unions—and companies are free to blacklist anyone agitating for unionization just as was done in the past with Patterson.

to be drafted by the Houston Oilers, was working in Calgary for Stu Hart.

He was doing a white womanizing black stud heel gimmick as Big Daddy

Ritter, a gimmick that years later made Badnews Allen an area legend.[173]

Ritter was not exactly what Watts and Allen were looking for: although Ritter had the

charisma, the work ethic, and the connection with the fans required to main event the

territory, there was one problem: Ritter stunk in the ring.

Again: Ritter was an awful professional wrestler.

Understand that this is not merely a subjective value judgment that I make with

the benefit of hindsight: it simply isn't the case that I, as a scholar writing in 2016, am

looking back at history and assessing it by criteria that were not operative within the time

period during which Ritter was an active performer. By any metric in any time period

within which wrestling was promoted, Ritter was a bad performer from bell to bell.

This was, in fact, how Ritter got noticed by Stampede Wrestling. Canadian

performers, from the 1970s through the 1990s, would routinely get booked to work

assorted wrestling tours throughout Germany.[174] In August of 1978, the performers sent

to Germany were two of Stampede Wrestling's biggest attractions: Bruce Hart, the son of

Stampede Wrestling promoter Stu Hart and elder brother of the future legendary

performer Bret "The Hitman" Hart, and Tom "Dynamite Kid" Billington. Hart was a

solid hand in the ring, but Billington, in particular, was a masterful in-ring performer. As

---

[173] Dave Meltzer, "September 12, 2005 Wrestling Observer Newsletter." *Wrestling Observer,* September 12, 2005.
[174] It remains unclear which German company was sponsoring the events featuring Ritter I describe above. Given the time period, it is likely the events were sponsored by Germany's now-defunct Catch Wrestling Association, which would hold both traditional shows and biyearly tournaments: these events, called the Euro Catch Festival, would be held each summer in Graz, Austria, and each winter in Bremen, Germany.

the Dynamite Kid, Billington and his frequent opponents Bret Hart, Satoru "Tiger Mask" Sayama, Bruce Hart, and Davey Boy ("British Bulldog") Smith, redefined the working style of professional wrestling during this time period to feature faster-paced matches, more high flying, and stiffer strikes. When Billington and Hart arrived for the tour in Germany, Ritter was being fired in the middle of the wrestling tour that Billington and Hart had just joined—something unheard of in wrestling in Germany. According to Dave Meltzer, Hart noted that Ritter "must have been really bad because that area, at that time, was filled with lousy wrestlers."[175]

Fortunately for Ritter, however, Stampede Wrestling's top heel, Kasavubu had given notice and left the territory. The gimmick of Kasavubu, played by African-American wrestler Jimmy Banks of Ohio, was a stereotypical African savage character whose name was based on Joseph Kasa-vubu, the first president of Congo-Leopoldville, now the Democratic Republic of Congo. This left Kasavubu's loquacious manager John Foley without a client to fill the main event heel slot, and the promotion was convinced it needed a black performer in that role: Ritter had the right look, was the right race, and just happened to be able to start with the promotion immediately because of his firing in Germany.

Why Stampede Wrestling went with Ritter over other candidates remains slightly unclear. Dave Meltzer attributes it to timing, with Ritter meeting Hart and Billington at the perfect time for him to get a job with Stampede. Others attribute it to Ritter's background as a big football player. Stu Hart, the owner of Stampede and famous trainer of professional wrestlers, had a well-publicized love of taking large former football

---

[175] Dave Meltzer, "June 15 1998 Wrestling Observer Newsletter." *Wrestling Observer*, June 15, 1998.

players into The Dungeon beneath the Hart family mansion to stretch and torture them while teaching them submission wrestling.[176] Although later in life Ritter would claim that his time in Stampede Wrestling was his first exposure to the wrestling business, and that throughout his first weeks in the territory nobody bothered to tell him that professional wrestling was worked so he fought all of his opponents in the ring for real, Ritter was smartened up to the business before arriving in Canada. Under Stu Hart's tutelage,

> Ritter quickly became a reasonably good heel interview, although he showed no signs to anyone of impending superstardom, and with the foursome of Ritter, and a nearly as green version of Jake Roberts generally facing the likes of a green Bret Hart, along with Dynamite Kid who was already a super worker, the Calgary territory did reasonably well in late 1978 and early 1979.[177]

Ritter eventually won the Stampede Wrestling North American Heavyweight Championship, the promotion's premier singles title, and defended the title for five months. He captured the title on December 1, 1978, dropped the belt to Jake Roberts four

---

[176] This is not hyperbole. Stu Hart was a famed trainer of professional wrestlers, and all of his sons confirm that a part of growing up in the Hart family home was listening to Stu bring area tough guys, former football players, and aspiring professional wrestlers over to The Dungeon where Hart would systematically stretch these men until they screamed in pain and begged him to let them go. All eight of Hart's sons who went into professional wrestling—Smith, Bruce, Keith, Wayne, Dean, Bret, Ross, and Owen—as well as dozens of other wrestlers were products of Hart's Dungeon. Hart's practice of stretching men until they could take no more pain was Hart's way of teaching wrestlers to endure the kinds of pain that wrestlers go through both on the road and in their matches. Refer to *Hitman Hart: Wrestling with Shadows*, directed by Paul Jay (1998; Los Angeles; TriMark, 1998), DVD.
[177] Dave Meltzer, "June 15 1998 Wrestling Observer Newsletter." *Wrestling Observer*, June 15, 1998.

months and five days later on April 6, 1979, and recaptured the title from Roberts on July

27, 1979, in what is believed to be the first ladder match in professional wrestling.[178]

Ritter, after losing the belt on August 11, 1979, to Larry Lane, left the territory at the

urging of Jake Roberts shortly after the death of Ritter's two-year-old son. Both men

were determined to get in on the ground floor of Bill Watts's Mid-South Wrestling after

being promised a spot in the promotion by Roberts' father Grizzly Smith.

When looking at the history of Mid-South Wrestling, most observers agree that

Watts's boldest decision was the transformation of Sylvester "Big Daddy" Ritter into

JYD, the Junkyard Dog.[179] The name was derived from the classic Jim Croce song "Bad

Bad Leroy Brown," which notes "He's bad, bad Leroy Brown / Meanest (baddest) man

(cat) in the whole damn town / Badder than old King Kong / And (He's) Meaner than a

---

[178] Ladder matches became extremely popular after Vince McMahon's World Wrestling
Federation featured a ladder match between Shawn "The Heartbreak Kid" Michaels and
Scott "Razor Ramon" Hall at Wrestlemania X on March 20, 1994, reportedly at the
urging of Bret "Hitman" Hart given the gimmick's popularity in Calgary. Ladder matches
are typically reserved only for matches in which a title is at stake. The championship belt
is suspended from a hook above the ring, and ladders are placed around and under the
ring. To win the match, a wrestler must set up a ladder beneath the hook, climb the
ladder, and successfully retrieve the belt from the hook. Ladder matches achieved peak
popularity during the late 1990s, in part due to the three way rivalry between the teams of
Adam Copeland and Jay Reso ("Edge and Christian"), Matt and Jeff Hardy ("The Hardy
Boys", and Mark "Bubba Ray" LoManaco and Devon "D-Von" Hughes ("The Dudley
Boyz"). With six men in the ring incorporating high flying action and multiple ladders
into the match, the stunt show qualities of these matches escalated both the spectacle and
the injury rate of the participants. All of these matches are available through the WWE's
streaming service, the WWE Network.
[179] It is worth noting here that Ritter may not have been the first "Junkyard Dog" in
professional wrestling; Terry Funk, who worked and promoted in West Texas, dubbed
Buck Robley "Junkyard Dog" several years earlier. Robley worked for Watts when the
decision was made to rebrand Ritter. Due to the fragmentary nature of wrestling history, I
have only heard this claim made third-hand on Dave Meltzer's *Wrestling Observer Radio*
and cannot source the place where Funk allegedly claimed this.

junkyard dog."[180] Mid-South's first iteration of the Junkyard Dog gimmick was a takeoff

on the popular sitcom *Sanford and Son*: like the character played by Redd Foxx, Ritter's

Junkyard Dog was supposed to be a junkyard owner who eventually became a

professional wrestler. He would come down to the ring pushing a wheelbarrow filled with

assorted items from a junkyard, and after beating his opponents with his signature "thump"

(a standing scoop powerslam) he would place them in the wheelbarrow and push them

back to the dressing room like garbage.

The character clicked with fans—especially the black fans who would turn out in

record numbers in New Orleans—and Watts decided to pull the trigger on the character

and make him the unquestioned top babyface in the promotion.

In 1980, Watts made what was actually considered a revolutionary

decision within pro wrestling to make [Ritter] the unquestioned and

unbeatable top babyface star of the promotion, a black Bruno Sammartino.

Other promoters from around the country thought he was nuts, believing

that white fans would never support a pro wrestling show where the top

babyface of the company is black. The wheelbarrow was dumped,

replaced with a dog collar, and added to the mix was his entrance music,

"Another One Bites the Dust."[181]

In the promotion of professional wrestling around the country, these racial tensions were

most often expressed by older white people when seeing black men being cheered for

beating up white men; promoters worried that a black lead babyface would exacerbate

---

[180] Jim Croce, "Bad Bad Leroy Brown." In *Life and Times*. ABC Records: New York
City, 1973.
[181] Dave Meltzer, The Wrestling Observer's Tributes: Remembering Some of the World's
Greatest Professional Wrestlers (Ontario: Winding Stair Press, 2001).

these tensions once this became the promotion's featured attraction. Both black and white fans would watch performers in black vs. white matches around the country, but many of those black performers were playing villains who could only beat white wrestlers through a combination of cheating and other unsportsmanlike conduct. The role of entrance music will be addressed shortly, but first, it is important to spend some time addressing what it means to create a "black Bruno Sammartino."

"The black Bruno Sammartino" is a phrase that makes perfect sense to historians of wrestling familiar with the booking of the World Wide Wrestling Federation territory in the 1960s and 1970s, but likely needs more context for nonexperts. Bruno Sammartino's run as the undisputed, unbeatable babyface champion in Vincent J. McMahon's New York-based territory became the prototype of how to draw big business around the country and was influential in Watts's decision to go with a black performer as his top act. Sammartino, an Italian immigrant whose family fled fascist-controlled Italy during World War II, was a bodybuilder strongman type wrestler who connected with the Italian community of New York to an unparalleled degree: Sammartino's first run with the belt lasted from May 17, 1963, until he lost it to Ivan Koloff in January 1971. Sammartino was the champion for 2,803 consecutive days, a record still unmatched in the World Wrestling Entertainment promotion. Sammartino's second run with the belt began on December 10, 1973, and ended when Sammartino lost the title (after suffering a real-life broken neck) to "Superstar" Billy Graham on April 30, 1977. Sammartino remained the top draw throughout his 11 years as WWWF champion, with supporting roles being played by other ethnic babyfaces; indeed, during the interim between Sammartino's two reigns, Pedro Morales, a wrestler of Puerto Rican descent, anchored the company as its

top ethnic draw to increase Latinx attendance in the region. Attendance was boosted

throughout by Bobo Brazil's reign as WWWF United States Heavyweight Champion,

drawing black fans to supplement the promotion's base of Italian and Latinx fans.

Promoters like Watts, seeing firsthand the successes of the New York territory when he

performed against Sammartino as a top heel, decided to try to emulate that success by

presenting a product that micro-targets his territory's demographic composition.

Despite Watts's commitment to the sensible promotional orthodoxies of other

successful territories, Watt's presentation and use of entrance music were considered

revolutionary. The earliest documented instance of the use of entrance music within

professional wrestling is likely that employed by "Gorgeous" George Wagner, who

would enter the ring to Elgar's "Pomp and Circumstance Military March," but until Mid-

South Wrestling presented Michael "P.S." Hayes, Terry "Bam Bam" Gordy, and Buddy

"Jack" Roberts as the heel trio "The Fabulous Freebirds," with the group entering to the

song "Freebird" by Lynyrd Skynyrd sporting Confederate flags as do-rags, the practice of

incorporating contemporary rock music into wrestling had not been tried in the United

States. Although entrance music was not the invention of Watts, no United States

promoter before Watts employed rock music as part of the spectacle of professional

wrestling.[182]

---

[182] Classical music was frequently de riguer when employed in professional wrestling
before Mid-South Wrestling: aside from the aforementioned Gorgeous George, Randy
Savage also used Elgar's march as part of the spectacle of his entrance. Ric Flair, of
NWA, WCW, and WWF/E fame, used Strauss's "Sunrise" from "Thus Spoke
Zarathustra, op. 30" for decades, and his daughter Charlotte uses a techno remix of
"Sunrise" to this day in WWE as a female performer and sometime champion. The first
reported use of rock music in wrestling was from outside the United States: Chris Colt, a
wrestler for George Cannon's Ontario, Canada promotion Superstars of Wrestling, was
using Alice Cooper's "Welcome to my Nightmare" as early as 1976.

The Fabulous Freebirds were more than just the innovators of entrance music in

Mid-South; they were also the opponents Watts used when he decided to fully commit to

pushing Ritter as the undisputed top act within his territory. As mentioned earlier in 3.1

of this chapter, this move was not without controversy: local promoters in Louisiana and

Mississippi were outraged at the prospect of having to promote shows with a black man

as the top hero, especially against white "good old boys" like the Freebirds.

> Some of them didn't like it because they thought it would hurt them
>
> politically to be running shows with a black man portrayed, and who at the
>
> time looked the part, of a veritable superman among men on top,
>
> particularly since JYD's appeal crossed over all demographic lines which
>
> only made some uneasy since he was becoming enormously popular
>
> among white children [as he ascended to the top of the cards].[183]

Indeed, the problems Watts faced with local promoters—and the promotion's response to

these problems—is best epitomized by the story of George C. Culkin, a promoter in

Mississippi whose purported views on race relations seem to be outright racist to

contemporary eyes. Culkin would call Watts and demand that JYD not be booked for

shows in Jackson, Mississippi despite the fact that Ritter was the top attraction in the

territory. Watts refused, and Ritter and Jim Ross, the producer of local promos inserted

into Mid-South Wrestling television, would outright mock Culkin on television: in

interviews filmed for the Jacksonville market house shows, JYD would promise that,

after coming to Jackson, Mississippi, he would go "over to his good friend promoter

George C. Culkin's house before the matches to eat watermelon and fried chicken before

---

[183] Dave Meltzer, "June 15 1998 Wrestling Observer Newsletter." *Wrestling Observer*,
June 15, 1998.

kicking whomever [sic] behind later that night at the Coliseum."[184] Culkin, reportedly, would furiously call Watts to demand that both Ritter and Watts be fired for claiming that he would ever allow a black man into his home.

From 1980 until the end of Ritter's run as a babyface in 1984, the key storylines in Mid-South Wrestling tended to follow the following pattern, which established Mid-South Wrestling's first regional style. The Junkyard Dog would form a tag team with another, usually white, professional wrestler. This wrestler was almost always a very strong in-ring performer, such as Ted DiBiase, Paul Orndorff, or "Mr. Olympia" Jerry Stubbs. Sometimes the duo of JYD and his partner would win the Mid-South Tag Team championship, other times they would be title contenders; no matter what, though, the tag partner would be expected to work the majority of the tag team wrestling matches because of JYD's weakness in the ring, with Ritter only tagging in at the end of the match (called a "hot tag") to win the match for his team with his finishing move. Regardless, shortly before a Superdome event, the wrestler whom JYD had befriended and trusted would betray the 'Dog in a match, savagely beating him down because the partner was fed up with JYD's popularity with the fans. This would set up a grudge match for the Superdome in New Orleans, and part of the gimmick of The Junkyard Dog was that he never, ever lost in New Orleans in front of his record number of black fans in attendance.

Although Ritter was kept away from the Mid-South Heavyweight Championship until 1982, the above is not intended to suggest that everything was smooth sailing for Ritter. His limitations in the ring were substantial, even to the point of key decision

---

[184] Dave Meltzer, "June 15 1998 Wrestling Observer Newsletter." *Wrestling Observer*, June 15, 1998.

makers believing that Ritter simply could not cut it as the man who carried the promotion during its infancy.

> Once on a television match, JYD was booked to go 10:00 with The
>
> Grappler [Len Denton], a good worker who they figured could carry him.
>
> They figured wrong, and the match was such a disaster that even Watts's
>
> ability to come up with something to say to mask problems couldn't
>
> overcome it. The match never aired.[185]

This contributed to booker Ernie Ladd's decision to really test Ritter's skills in the ring at untelevised shows to see to what extent Ritter could be coached to be a better wrestler; Ladd, as mentioned earlier a pioneering black performer, was frequently harder on black wrestlers than white wrestlers because Ladd understood exactly how good a black athlete had to be just to survive in professional sports and wrestling as a professional and a role model.[186]

This led to Ladd's decision to book JYD in a 20 minute match against the heel technical wrestler Super Destroyer [Scott Irwin], who would later win both Mid-South's tag team championship and the Louisiana Heavyweight Championship. The resulting match was just as bad, if not worse, than the earlier outing against Len Denton.

---

[185] Dave Meltzer, "September 12, 2005 Wrestling Observer Newsletter." *Wrestling Observer,* September 12, 2005.

[186] After Ladd passed away, Watts memorialized Ladd by noting the following: "God sent him into my life and he impacted me so dramatically. I love him dearly. He taught me so much about 'being black.' As he explained, no white man can understand, because he cannot walk in a black man's shoes. We shared so much together…he told me of growing up in the heart of racism, of his father in jail in Baton Rouge, of the rules in Louisiana and in Texas, in certain communities of no blacks allowed after a certain time of day. [There were] so many horrible racist things that this giant of a man had to deal with, and I got to see him rise above them" (Dave Meltzer, "March 19, 2007 Wrestling Observer Newsletter," *Wrestling Observer*, March 19, 2007).

That night, after the show, Ladd, who eventually became one of JYD's

biggest supporters after it turned out he could draw in spite of his

weaknesses, told Watts his vision wasn't going to work because "your guy

can't go," noting how quickly he blew up. Watts was furious, telling Ladd

his job wasn't to find out what JYD couldn't do. The decision wasn't

going to be made whether to see if he was the guy. He was the guy, and he

had to be booked in a way to protect him and keep the public from seeing

what he couldn't do.[187]

This was one of many occasions where Watts fired everyone involved in the poor

decision-making surrounding the early days of Junkyard Dog only to rehire them at the

end of the night after they apologized and acknowledged that they understood what to do

going forward. Watts was building his promotion around a certain style of match,

perfectly suited to the limited working ability of Ritter, and for this style to succeed

everyone in the promotion needed to work together to keep the promotion's style

profitable.

When it was time for Ritter to become the unquestioned top babyface of Mid-

South Wrestling, Watts decided that to turn Ritter into not only a great babyface but a

folk hero for the Louisiana fans he would have to do a big angle.[188] As such, he decided

to copy a legendary (but at that time not widely seen, given the absence of both Internet

distribution and national television) angle from Los Angeles in 1971: the blinding of

---

[187] Dave Meltzer, "September 12, 2005 Wrestling Observer Newsletter." *Wrestling Observer,* September 12, 2005.

[188] Note that verbiage here is influenced by the way words taken from wrestling's carnie argot are inserted into ordinary English. One can "use" an angle to make money when performers "do" an angle at wrestling shows.

"Classy" Freddy Blassie by his hated rival John "The Golden Greek" Tolos.[189] A straight copy of the Tolos/Blassie angle would never fly in Mid-South Wrestling, unfortunately; given Watts's imperative that there be no logic holes in the presentation of his promotion that might inhibit a fan's suspension of disbelief, Watts could not imagine a situation where a promoter would not simply fire a heel that intentionally blinded his opponent. With Watts as an announcer and the public face of Mid-South, it was difficult to imagine how his Louisiana and Mississippi fans, a group of fans notorious for their wildness and their belief in the credibility of Mid-South Wrestling, could believe that a heel acting in such a way would not be immediately fired by Watts. After all, if such a thing were to happen in football or basketball an athlete who intentionally blinded another athlete would face criminal prosecution and lifetime bans from organized sports (in addition to the real possibility of incarceration).

So the decision was made to adapt that angle for the Louisiana fanbase who would be watching it play out live in New Orleans and Shreveport. First, Ritter would win both the Louisiana and Mississippi Heavyweight championships. Second, Ritter

---

[189] Interested readers can read an account of this angle in the UK newspaper The Independent's obituary of Tolos on 6/29/2009. Blassie, a beloved fan favorite, was receiving a fan-voted "wrestler of the year" award the night after Tolos defeated Blassie for the Americas Heavyweight Championship. While "Blassie addressed his fans, Tolos reached into the ring doctor's bag, left conveniently open, and threw powder into his face. Blassie fell to the mat screaming, covering his eyes, while Tolos destroyed his trophy and the television announcer Dick Lane yelled that Blassie had been blinded. The ring doctor explained that Tolos had thrown Monsel's powder, used to staunch cuts in boxing before its toxicity to the eyes saw it banned, and that Blassie might lose sight in one eye. In reality, it was talcum, and Blassie, face bandaged, went into hospital [sic.] for a scheduled knee operation. … After Blassie miraculously regained his sight [three months later], they met on 27 August in the Los Angeles Coliseum, and 25,847 fans, still the California record, saw Blassie bloody Tolos with more biting, then win by smashing a chair over his head" (Michael Carson, "John Tolos: Wrestler celebrated as one of the finest ring villains," The Independent, 6/29/2009).

would team with Buck Robley, a veteran babyface with impeccable psychology and strong chops as a technical worker, to capture the Mid-South Tag Team championships from the hated heel tag team and nefarious trio that were the Fabulous Freebirds (Terry Gordy and Buddy Roberts, managed by Michael "P.S." Hayes who was an active participant in many Freebirds matches).[190] The title change set up a rematch between the teams of Robley /Ritter and The Fabulous Freebirds, and the heat between the teams was off the charts during the June 9, 1980, rematch. After the 37 minute "no disqualification" match ended with the Freebirds victorious, Michael Hayes, clutching special "hair removing" powder that he had obtained from Paul Orndorff, approached the triple-teamed Robley with the intention of throwing the powder in Robley's eyes. The Junkyard Dog, seeing his partner about to be maimed, charges the ring and grabs Hayes from behind—causing Hayes to lose control of the powder and accidentally blind JYD.

The advantages of this reworking of the blinding angle over the California original were clear, at least when it came to Watts's fanbase. The Mid-South angle clearly establishes the heels' intent to do something despicable and magnifies that intent by the three heels' attempt to attack Robley three on one. Second, it establishes the selflessness of The Junkyard Dog who, seeing his partner about to be crippled, selflessly intervenes to protect his friend and mentor. But JYD's altruism causes him to pay the ultimate price when Hayes, foiled in his attempt to blind Robley, accidentally blinds JYD. It gives Watts as promoter an out, stating that if Hayes had successfully blinded Robley

---

[190] Robley was also one of Watts's bookers for Mid-South; Ladd replaced Robley, who kept his place as an undercard babyface. Later in life, Robley took credit for creating The Fabulous Freebirds, Bruiser Brody, and Ted Dibiase even though fans "thought I was just a big, ol' dumb rassler" (Greg Oliver, "Buck Robley, 'one of wrestling's brightest minds,' dies," Slam Sports, 5/28/2013).

then he would have been fired, but the accidental nature of the JYD injury ties his hands and the heels get off scot-free on a technicality. It established all participants as even bigger babyfaces or heels than they were going into the match, and the aftermath of the match sold the deal.

Like Blassie before him, Ritter was not allowed to leave his house for fear that people would discover that he was not, in fact, blinded—and sympathy for Ritter was enhanced by reports on television detailing his lack of recovery. By an accident of timing, Ritter's first daughter, LaToya, was born after being blinded, and announcers on television pushed the fact that JYD's sight was not returning and that it was possible he would never get to see what his daughter looked like, her first steps, or, indeed, ever make a living as a professional wrestler again.

Fans bought it.

In fact, fans bought it so completely that "fans in the territory began sending money, mainly in $5 bills, from fans, probably most of whom were poor themselves, who treated it like a member of their family had been blinded in an accident and unable to pay his bills."[191] Events like this were why Watts was so committed to protecting "kayfabe," wrestling's code of silence that allows fans to suspend their disbelief and commit to the reality of the performances they were seeing each and every week. Fans loved their babyfaces and hated their heels, so much so that

> there were fights in the crowd weekly [even before the JYD storyline]. If a
> fan tried to attack a wrestler, the police would beat him up…. In 1984,
> when job guy Tony Zane was stabbed at a show in New Orleans early in

---

[191] Dave Meltzer, "June 15, 1998 Wrestling Observer Newsletter: Full JYD Bio, WCW Files Lawsuit Against WWF, Tons More," *Wrestling Observer*, 6/15/1998.

the night, Jim Cornette, who had incredible heel heat at the time, screamed

that he didn't want to go out [and perform], saying "They just stabbed one

of the job guys, they're going to kill me."[192]

The idea of a crowd believing in the storylines in wrestling to such an extent that

performers were getting stabbed by the live audience is likely unthinkable to fans of

contemporary professional wrestling—although fans passionately cheer and boo, bad

guys are not routinely in physical danger from crowds in the 21st century. But this sort of

reaction was actually routine in the raucous Louisiana territory—and especially in the

New Orleans Downtown Municipal Auditorium, where heels would frequently hide in

the trunks of cars driven by babyfaces to get out of the arena alive (driving to the arena

was out of the question for heels because fans camped out either before or after the event

would destroy heel wrestlers' cars by smashing them or, more insidiously, putting sugar

in the heels' gas tanks).[193]

Given the success of the "blindness" angle, it should come as no surprise that the

reaction to the announcement that JYD, still blind, was going to come to the Downtown

Municipal Auditorium to thank the fans for their support and perhaps wish them goodbye

for the final time as Ritter retired was extremely passionate. As Dave Meltzer notes, if

this happened now

this would be an angle alert, but in those days people didn't see it coming.

Naturally the Freebirds, a threesome of Hayes, Terry Gordy, and Buddy

Roberts, showed up and some sort of angle was going to take place.

---

[192] Dave Meltzer, "September 12, 2005 Wrestling Observer Newsletter." *Wrestling Observer,* September 12, 2005.

[193] Jim Ross, *The Ross Report Episode 31: Cowboy Bill Watts*, podcast audio, Jim Ross's The Ross Report, MP3, 27.8, accessed January 14, 2015.

Exactly what it was, only a few people know, because it didn't happen.

Instead, a fan hopped the rail with a gun, and aimed it right at Hayes,

screaming, "Don't worry, Dog, I'm covering you." Dog, selling he was

blind, didn't know what to do, but fortunately, security hit the ring en

masse and the gunman was disarmed.[194]

The Dog's decision to stay in character in such a situation would never be repeated in

other performance arts; as fans who have attended circus performances and physical

theatre can attest, a performer is not expected to put her life at risk unnecessarily, and

injuries would cause that performer to leave the stage and get medical attention. If a

gunman were to threaten an actor during a Broadway performance, complaints that the

show was stopped would almost certainly fall on deaf ears in the aftermath.

In professional wrestling during this time period, performance and audience

norms were quite different than those observed on Broadway or even in wrestling today.

Wrestlers were expected to protect the business (again, "kayfabe") of wrestling at all

costs. Watts would fire performers who did not enforce the strict separation of babyfaces

and heels in public. One prohibition prevented wrestlers from riding together or drinking

together after work, while losing a bar fight to a local was cause for immediate

termination. Indeed, any performer engaging in behavior that adversely affected fans'

potential suspension of disbelief was subject to termination.[195] Ritter knew his career

---

[194] Dave Meltzer, The Wrestling Observer's Tributes: Remembering Some of the World's Greatest Professional Wrestlers (Ontario: Winding Stair Press, 2001), 101.

[195] Jim Ross, *The Ross Report Episode 31: Cowboy Bill Watts*, podcast audio, Jim Ross's The Ross Report, MP3, 27.8, accessed January 14, 2015.

would be over if he did anything that would publicly reveal the predetermined truths behind Mid-South Wrestling's events.[196]

But Ritter did not crack, and the next step of the story was made clear when the Junkyard Dog, defying multiple doctors' orders in the storyline, said he might not be able to see but that would not stop him from getting his revenge against Michael Hayes. He demanded that Bill Watts and the Mid-South office book him in one final match: a dog collar match, where Hayes and Ritter would wear dog collars around their necks that were tied together. Ritter might not be able to see Hayes, but he could feel, he could smell him, and that would be enough to lick him one last time.

Ritter defeated Hayes in the first ever "Steel Cage Dog Collar Match" at the New Orleans Superdome on August 2, 1980. What was surprising was exactly how successful this event ended up being for Watts's young promotion.

To this day, the actual amount of money this event drew is unclear. The number given to Dave Meltzer and passed around in the wrestling industry about that show was a $183,000 gate—literally one of the three most profitable shows in professional wrestling history at that point in time, and once again a number probably much lower than the actual number earned given the political payoffs that happened under the table for every New Orleans event. Mid-South announced that more than 36,000 fans turned out to see the show, although given the state of professional wrestling this number was likely

---

[196] For those curious what happened to the armed fan, Meltzer speculates that the gentleman "was no doubt taken to what was known as 'the room,' a place where the police would shut the door and give horrible beatings to out of control fans, hopefully dissuading them from ever becoming part of the act. It wasn't unusual, after the police were done, for them to let the wrestler, if the fan had punched him, or Watts, who was a huge and sometimes vicious person, into the room and to close the door behind them as well" (Meltzer, *The Wrestling Observer's Tributes: Remembering Some of the World's Greatest Professional Wrestlers*, 101).

exaggerated and the real number was most likely just shy of 30,000 people according to

Meltzer, still one of the biggest crowds to ever attend professional wrestling at that point

in time.[197] This number was even more shocking when understood in its historical context

of the professional wrestling business in the United States at that point in time:

> The crowd literally stunned the wrestling industry, because unlike the few
>
> stadium shows that had been done over the previous decade usually
>
> featuring a long-time local hero like Dusty Rhodes or Fritz Von Erich
>
> challenging for the world title or a big match with Sammartino, or Blassie
>
> vs. Tolos, this show was headlined by young wrestlers.[198]

At the time of the match, Ritter was 27 years old and Hayes had just turned 21 several

months before the match. The professional wrestling maxim that it takes ten years to turn

somebody into a star—a maxim which has never held up to scrutiny at any point in

professional wrestling's history, but often repeated by veterans in the business to justify

their place at the top of the cards and treated as truth—was demonstrably and

spectacularly false, at least when it came to Mid-South Wrestling.

The "Steel Cage Dog Collar Match" was not a one-night only event, either. Over

the course of the next week, Mid-South presented the same storyline at each of its spot

shows around the territory in smaller towns. It is unclear how many total tickets this

angle sold when one combines the crowd at the Superdome with the crowds around the

2000-mile circuit of Mid-South Wrestling, but Ritter earned $12,000 for his week of

---

[197] Dave Meltzer, "June 15, 1998 Wrestling Observer Newsletter: Full JYD Bio, WCW
Files Lawsuit Against WWF, Tons More."
[198] Dave Meltzer, "June 15, 1998 Wrestling Observer Newsletter: Full JYD Bio, WCW
Files Lawsuit Against WWF, Tons More."

work doing the match—a figure that only the biggest stars in professional wrestling had made in their absolutely best weeks ever.

> It may have been the first monster house that he drew, but it was far from the last. When the Dog miraculously regained his eyesight and he wrestled for a while wearing protective goggles, New Orleans would usually pack [fans] in every Monday [at the New Orleans Municipal Auditorium]. When it came time to blow off the big angles at the Superdome four or five times a year, the crowds for the next few years were usually upwards of 20,000. Between 1980 and 1983 with Junkyard Dog on top, it is probable that no city in North America drew as many fans to pro wrestling as New Orleans.[199]

This established the aforementioned booking pattern that would carry Mid-South through the next three years.

<center>4.6 Exit: The Junkyard Dog.</center>

While the ascendance of the Junkyard Dog was meteoric, the fall was both more painful and more slow. Earning approximately $150,000 a year as Watts's headliner, Ritter was generous with his money: Buddy Landell, Ritter's frequent traveling companion, noted that Ritter would always give money to people around the circuit he met who looked down on their luck, going so far as anonymously paying dinner bills for

---

[199] Dave Meltzer, The Wrestling Observer's Tributes: Remembering Some of the World's Greatest Professional Wrestlers (Ontario: Winding Stair Press, 2001), 102-3.

customers who looked like they needed help.[200] Ritter was essentially being paid to work

out, travel around a 2000-mile circuit each week with his friends, party everywhere he

stopped for the night, and wrestle for 20 minutes a night—and like many performers in

Watts's territory, the strain this put on a marriage ended with Ritter divorcing his wife

(although in Ritter's case, unlike many of the other wrestlers working the same circuit,

Ritter's wife took the news so poorly that she eventually had to be institutionalized for

this and other problems).

It should come as no surprise that substance abuse became an issue given the toll

travel was taking on Ritter's mental and physical health.

> Whether it was those problems, or just the ready access from being a rich
>
> celebrity, the cocaine came at about the same time. While cocaine was
>
> becoming a tag team partner of many, if not most wrestlers on top in that
>
> era, with JYD it gained a more powerful grip. He stopped training, and his
>
> once hard body ballooned to up to around 300 pounds again. While his
>
> ring work was never good, it actually got worse.[201]

Even Watts, the most credible announcer in Mid-South, had trouble explaining this.

Assertions on television that Ritter was bulking up to face super heavyweight wrestlers

such as Kimala the Ugandan Giant and King Kong Bundy—billed as 380 pounds and 450

pounds, respectively—could not hide the fact that Ritter's matches were terrible unless he

was being carried to a good performance by a performer such as Butch Reed or Ted

DiBiase.

---

[200] Dave Meltzer, "June 15, 1998 Wrestling Observer Newsletter: Full JYD Bio, WCW Files Lawsuit Against WWF, Tons More."
[201] Dave Meltzer, "June 15, 1998 Wrestling Observer Newsletter: Full JYD Bio, WCW Files Lawsuit Against WWF, Tons More."

Although Ritter's performances were bad, business continued to be strong around the territory despite this fact because of the uniformly capable undercard performers rounding out the cards. Until that is, Ritter accidentally broke kayfabe in the Dog's Yard, the New Orleans Municipal Auditorium in a match against the veteran technical wrestler Mr. Wrestling II. The unofficial rule in Mid-South Wrestling since the Dog's ascendance to the top of the card was simple: the Dog could lose a match on the rare occasions where a bad-guy cheated, but the Dog always got his win back against his rivals to "win" the feud overall. While other matches might feature arrays of moves for which Southern Style wrestling is known, the Dog's matches were worked based on what the Dog could do. His March 12, 1984, match against Mr. Wrestling II, on paper, followed this rule perfectly. Wrestling II was a hated villain, and his finisher was a knee lift to the opponent's face. In this match, Mr. Wrestling II would defeat JYD for the North American Title using his knee lift, but he would clearly "load" the kneepad during the match with an illegal object to win by cheating.

This would have worked fine if the knee lift had actually connected with Ritter's face. Instead, it missed badly. Ritter, whether because of his substance abuse problems or because he just was not a strong technical wrestling performer, exacerbated this fact not by having Mr. Wrestling II repeat the knee lift a second time so that it could clearly hit; instead, Ritter pretended that it did hit him despite the fact that it was clear this move was had totally whiffed, and his exaggerated selling of the move made the clearly whiffed shot look even worse to the thousands of fans in attendance. The Municipal Arena, packed with Ritter's fans, never recovered as a venue from the fact that fans in attendance saw proof that their hero took a dive in a fake professional wrestling match. Though

JYD's drawing power was not hurt around the territory—New Orleans Municipal

Auditorium matches were not taped, fortunately—the New Orleans weekly shows never

recovered.

Shortly after this, Vince McMahon's World Wrestling Federation came calling, as

it was doing to regional wrestling promotions around the United States and Canada, and

they offered Ritter more money than he had ever seen in a single year to quit Mid-South

Wrestling. There was one caveat, however: Ritter would have to disappear without giving

notice to his employer Watts. In the territory days, it was customary for a wrestler to

work out at least four weeks' notice with his employer, and for main event guys six

weeks' notice was the standard so that the promoter could arrange a feud or two against

the departing star wherein the torch could be passed to the next headliner in the

territory—a tradition because wrestling is worked, and a performer leaving a promotion

in the lurch was actually taking money out of his coworkers' pockets since they spend

months or years losing to headlining guys to make sure the headliners would stay strong.

Ritter took the deal:

> with no warning, JYD simply disappeared, leaving a string of no-shows in
>
> main events against ["Hacksaw" Butch] Reed in every market on the
>
> circuit, and showed up immediately on WWF television. Watts was bitter
>
> and took to strongly burying JYD on his television, trying to protect his
>
> turf from the expected invasion of the WWF using JYD on top. Those
>
> close to him say that although few knew it, he did struggle with the
>
> decision, but the opportunity was there to earn more than double what he
>
> was making, and the way McMahon wanted things done at the time was

for guys to leave on the spot. The two men who built the company left on

the most bitter of terms.[202]

These defections were happening in every territory now that McMahon had decided to promote nationally instead of sticking to his region of the country, and Watts knew he needed new acts to present to his fans to save his territory.

Watts's immediate instinct was to make a new Junkyard Dog. He first promoted George Welles, a Canadian Football League star who Watts named Master Gee, as the first Junkyard Dog replacement. Gee destroyed Butch Reed in far easier fashion than the Junkyard Dog ever did. It only took a few weeks for the crowd to reject Gee as a crappy clone of the Junkyard Dog, and Watts gave up on Welles. His next idea was to just turn Butch Reed into his top black babyface. This was similarly unsuccessful: as Meltzer notes,

Reed was a top performer at the time, looked great, was a top worker at

the time, and had charisma. [But] Reed could never surpass "Hacksaw"

Jim Duggan as the top face or fill JYD's shoes, and tried other territories,

including AWA and Dallas, before coming back again, and it ended up not

working out after Reed's wife and Watts had issues over what he was

being paid and her wanting him home more often, leading to a blow up

where he quit the promotion. He wound up in New York [carnie lingo for

[202] Dave Meltzer, "June 15, 1998 Wrestling Observer Newsletter: Full JYD Bio, WCW Files Lawsuit Against WWF, Tons More."

McMahon's WWF] with blond hair as "The Natural" Butch Reed, and his

career faltered from there.[203]

All efforts to create "JYD 2.0" failed; but as these things frequently happen in the

professional wrestling industry, the next big thing in the promotion would look nothing

like the hot act that was being replaced.

With every attempt to recreate the promotion's success with JYD failing, little did

Watts know that he already had his most profitable year ahead of him because of a pair of

undersized tag teams and a manager he took on as a favor to Memphis promoters Jerry

Jarrett and Jerry Lawler—who already had too many tag teams. The talent acquisition

actually occurred earlier in 1984; the meeting only happened after Watts requested

feedback from Lawler and Jarrett when his June 16, 1984, Superdome show drew only

8000 fans even with the Junkyard Dog headlining. The exchange between the three men

has become a legendary story in the history of United States territorial wrestling:

> They came in and said, "Where's the blowjobs?" Watts was mad thinking,
>
> "Go get them yourselves," but what [Jarrett and Lawler] meant was
>
> "Where were the women fans?" Wrestling had changed again, and
>
> particularly in [Lawler and Jarrett's] territory, with the Fabulous One, and
>
> in Texas, with the Von Erich brothers, and a few years earlier with
>
> Tommy Rich in Atlanta, as well as in the Carolinas, lots of territories were
>
> built around good looking babyfaces, as opposed to the bigger tough guys

---

[203] Dave Meltzer, "September 12, 2005 Wrestling Observer Newsletter." *Wrestling Observer,* September 12, 2005.

that Watts, a bigger tough guy himself, had the mentality of building

around because he thought the guys would believe in them.[204]

Between the supremely attractive Rock and Roll Express, their evil rivals the Midnight

Express (managed by the legendary and frequent riot-causer Jim Cornette)[205], and the

separate acquisition of the similarly attractive babyface singles wrestlers Terry Taylor

and "Magnum" TA—Terry Allen, called "Magnum TA" because Carolinas booker Dusty

Rhodes thought he looked like Tom Selleck on "Magnum, P.I."—Mid-South had its

single best business year ever the year after Ritter left the promotion high and dry. The

faster-paced, Southern Style matches that filled out Mid-South undercards were suddenly

part of the main event scene, and the young, lighter wrestlers began to work at a pace that

was unseen anywhere else in the United States. This new iteration of Southern Style

wrestling proved to be quite successful.

For the next year, hot tag team wrestling, imported stars from other territories on

loan to Watts to help him fight McMahon's WWF, and special one-time guests such as

Muhammad Ali were used to keep Mid-South going—but by the time of Ali's

Superdome appearance the economy in Louisiana was collapsing because of the

imminent oil glut. The oil glut became the defining feature of the vast majority of local

---

[204] Dave Meltzer, "September 12, 2005 Wrestling Observer Newsletter." *Wrestling Observer,* September 12, 2005. Note that this quoted exchange is repeated nearly verbatim by both Watts and Jim Ross in various interviews.

[205] Cornette in interviews on his podcast "The Jim Cornette Experience" frequently notes that he and the Midnights would have to fight their way down the aisle to get in the ring, fight their way through a match because of the crowd trying to throw things at them (such as urine, cups, rocks, and battery acid), then fight their way back down the aisle to get to the back even with cops walking with them. Video tape footage and other wrestlers from the time period who worked the territory confirm to this day that this is in no way an exaggeration, and Cornette carried a tennis racket with him not only because it fit his character of a spoiled mother's boy, but because he could use it to deflect projectiles back into the audience.

economies in Watts's territory from 1986 until 1990. In brief, the situation arose when

oil producers (both nations and corporations) continued to produce petroleum even while

petroleum prices began to fall throughout the 1980s. Although this was devastating

primarily to countries and corporations that produced petroleum such as European

countries, the USSR, and countries within the Middle East, much of the economy of

Texas, Oklahoma, and especially Louisiana were (and in Louisiana's case, still are at the

time of this writing) dependent upon the oil industry. Jobs in crude oil development and

exploration halved from 1986 to 1987, and production jobs outside of Louisiana fared

just as badly:

> The price rout of the 1980s reduced the number of U.S. producers from
>
> 11,370 in 1985 to 5,231 in 1989, according to data from the Independent
>
> Petroleum Association of America. Among the casualties were two
>
> companies closely held by the fabled Hunt family of Texas, Penrod
>
> Drilling Co. and Placid Oil Co., which emerged out of two years of
>
> bankruptcy protection in 1988 after a deal with bankers.[206]

In other words, Watts's creative was arguably at its strongest exactly when his territory's

economy was at its weakest. Watts was left with two choices: shut down his business, or

start promoting nationally so that the oil glut would not affect his bottom line. Watts

chose to go national—the third regional wrestling promoter to do so after McMahon's

World Wrestling Federation and Jim Crockett's National Wrestling Alliance—and the

story of Louisiana wrestling ends with the fate of Louisiana wrestling's attempt at

nationalization.

---

[206] Rebecca Penty and Zain Shauk, "Crude Collapse Has Investors Braced for '80s-Like Oil Casualties," Blomberg, 1/21/15. Accessed on 3/30/16.

4.7 The Rise and (Mostly) Fall of the Universal Wrestling Federation

Although Bill Watts launched his Universal Wrestling Federation promotion in March of
1986, just a few months after the Muhammad Ali Superdome drew only 11,000 paid fans,
the seeds of Bill Watts's transition from running a regional wrestling promotion to a
national wrestling promotion likely begin two years earlier on a day that would live in
infamy among wrestling fans and promoters: Black Saturday, July 14, 1984. Black
Saturday is the day that Vince McMahon's World Wrestling Federation took his war
against professional wrestling's regional promotions from cold to hot when he purchased
the Georgia Championship Wrestling promotion so the WWF could gain a second
national syndicated professional wrestling television show: GCW's national television
that aired on Ted Turner's TBS Superstation.

Without warning, McMahon's cartoonish WWF product replaced Georgia
Championship Wrestling's southern-style show on Black Saturday, and ratings crashed
nearly immediately; shorter matches where wrestler entrances were often more exciting
than the moves occurring in the ring were decidedly not what southern fans were
accustomed to. Turner's TBS was inundated with letters and phone calls from irate GCW
fans who wanted "their" wrestling back. Citing the collapse of ratings in the timeslot and
McMahon's decision to run a largely-pretaped show filled with uncompetitive squash
matches when the GCW contract he inherited called for first-run live in-studio matches,
Turner—outraged that McMahon had found a way to get his product on Turner's network
without Turner's blessing after rebuffing McMahon's overtures earlier in 1984 due to
McMahon's other nationally-syndicated wrestling shows—made offers to McMahon's

rivals. He reached out specifically to Ole Anderson of the newly founded Championship Wrestling in Georgia and Bill Watts of Mid-South Wrestling to get national wrestling television shows of their own on the TBS Superstation. Both promoters accepted, and Championship Wrestling in Georgia and Mid-South joined WWF on the Superstation within months of Black Saturday: quickly, both shows outpaced WWF syndicated program in ratings, and Watts's Mid-South became the top-rated show on Turner's Superstation by 1985.

Given the popularity of Watts's Mid-South television product, his performance in the two-hour Sunday afternoon time block was spectacular: Mid-South Wrestling remained the highest-rated program on TBS until the former Georgia promoter Jim Barnett worked behind the scenes to get the NWA's promoter Jim Crockett, Jr.—who in response to McMahon transformed the NWA from a confederacy of regional promoters into a single national promotion under his own control—to buy the slot out from under Watts and replace the television show with Barnett's own NWA wrestling. But Watts already had all the proof he believed he needed to justify expanding Mid-South Wrestling into a national promotion: at least when it came to the televised product, Watts believed he could not only compete with both McMahon's WWF and Crockett's NWA but defeat them soundly when it came to creative direction of his product, and in March of 1986 Watts rebranded Mid-South Wrestling Association as the Universal Wrestling Federation to remove the stigma of being perceived as a geographically Southern regional promotion. UWF became the third promotion to transition from a regional promotion to a national promotion. Unlike McMahon and Crockett, Watts believed the business model he employed so successfully in Mid-South could translate nationally given the popularity of

his televised product: his television would drive house show attendance around the country as Watts slowly expanded from Oklahoma, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, and Arkansas.

Watts's first move was to do exactly what McMahon and Crockett, respectively, had done to him and other regional promoters during the 1980s: raid regional promotions for talent and attempt to put his former promotional allies out of business. Watts hired away Ken Mantell from Dallas's World Class Championship Wrestling to be the booker of the Universal Wrestling Federation. This was especially shocking given World Class promoter Fritz Von Erich's status as a minority owner of Mid-South Wrestling and Watt's own status as a minority owner of World Class, plus Mantell's position as the co-promoter of World Class Wrestling. In addition to Mantell, Watts stole every major talent in World Class not related to Von Erich (leaving Von Erich with his only surviving sons as babyfaces to hold down his Texas promotion).[207] This provided Watts with a key talent acquisition familiar to fans of Mid-South Wrestling: the return of the Fabulous Freebirds, the top heel act in Texas, to a Bill Watts-run promotion.

Universal Wrestling Federation was, throughout the middle of 1986, riding a creative hot streak. Watts had moved his base of operations out of his house in Oklahoma

---

[207] The Von Erich family is one of the most storied families in professional wrestling. Although earlier in this chapter some space was dedicated to promoter Fritz Von Erich, the Texas territory World Class exploded once Fritz began promoting his sons David, Kerry, Michael, Kevin, and Chris Von Erich as good-looking rock star babyfaces around Texas. Ultimately, the Von Erich story would end in tragedy: David died of intestinal complications (rumored to be a function of a drug overdose) in Japan, While Kerry, Michael, and Chris Von Erich all ended their lives in suicide after lengthy problems with drug abuse and an inability to deal with their status as iconic stars to the Texas public. Refer to World Wrestling Entertainment, *The Triumph and Tragedy of World Class Championship Wrestling*, directed by Vince McMahon, (2007, Stanford CT: WWE Home Video, 2007), DVD.

to an apparently expensive suite of offices in Dallas, Texas. The move was necessary because Dallas was the closest Top 20 TV market to the former Mid-South Wrestling. Mantell was a creative booker writing tons of intriguing angles for TV. Moreover, the oil glut of 1986's impact had yet to fully materialize throughout the entire country at this time, although the crashing of global oil prices and the industry surrounding it would be (at least according to Watts) instrumental in his decision to sell the UWF little more than one year after founding the promotion.

Watts's initial expansions were geographically sensible. He expanded from his initial base in Oklahoma, Louisiana, and northern Texas into the remainder of Texas and the Tennessee area, running opposition to longtime regional allies Paul Boesch and Fritz Von Erich in Texas, and Jerry Lawler and Jerry Jarrett in Tennessee. The philosophy of Universal Wrestling Federation grew after these expansions, perhaps unsustainably: the promotion would attempt to run shows in every region in the United States where it ran television, banking on the creative talent behind Mid-South to succeed in priming markets around the United States for the house shows that would be the bread and butter of UWF's business, just as they were the bread and butter of Mid-South's business earlier in the 1980s. Kris Zellner, David Bixenspan, and Dylan Hales, discussing the death of the Universal Wrestling Federation, compared the company's geographic expansion to the professional wrestling equivalent of the Eisenhower-era foreign policy, the domino theory—but substituting Vince McMahon's World Wrestling Federation for communism.[208] By the beginning of 1987, the UWF (as well as the NWA, to a lesser

---

[208] Kris Zellner, *Exile on Badstreet Episode 2: The Death of the Universal Wrestling Federation*, podcast audio, Kris Zellner's Exile on Badstreet Podcast, MP3 27.8. Accessed on March 29, 2016.

extent) refused to cede a single town to Vince McMahon's company—and expansion exploded from the surrounding areas of the south to places like California, Georgia, Minnesota and New Mexico.

Regardless of how the expansion would end, however, the entire principle of going national was predicated on Watts's experience on TBS with both McMahon and Crockett, as well as the fallout thereof: his critically-acclaimed episodic television and track record of successfully promoting on his own for a decade suggested to him that his success could easily continue given his regional style of wrestling's enduring popularity. Watts had the best announce team in all of professional wrestling: Jim Ross on play by play with Michael Hayes contributing to color commentary. More importantly—and frequently overlooked—is the quality of Watts's production team: Watts's adopted son Joel Watts was the producer of his television show, and all of its goodmaking features would continue without change. Finally, Watts's talent base was strong enough to support a national expansion: the Fabulous Freebirds were joined by Ted DiBiase, "Doctor Death" Steve Williams, Jake Roberts, and "Hacksaw" Jim Duggan as the lead babyface of the promotion. Gates were strong when the promotion launched: Oklahoma City, Oklahoma shows were drawing $100,000 each night for the main UWF television tapings, while the secondary show taped in Tulsa ("Power Pro Wrestling," which delivered "Texas-style wrestling" and was aimed at replacing Von Erich's WCCW television in those markets) would frequently draw $60,000 per taping.

But all of these advantages masked deeper difficulties. There is no disputing the sophistication and success of Mid-South's television show, the production, the announcing, and the angles featured on the show. Despite these successes, however,

booker Ken Mantell was falling into a common pattern that afflicted many bookers: he

was doing far too many angles for the amount of television time the promotion was

producing.[209] Mantell would be replaced by 1987 by the booking genius Eddie Gilbert;

although Gilbert would receive the Wrestling Observer Newsletter's Booker of the Year

award for 1988 because of his work for UWF in 1987, by this point the promotion had

already been sold and was in the process of being unified with Crockett's NWA.

Second, and building on this first point, although there was a correlation between

Mid-South's television ratings on UHF stations, there was not necessarily a correlation

between a wrestling show's performance on a Superstation and its ability to draw house

show fans in the regions of the country that receive that Superstation. The WWF was

successfully touring around the country, but McMahon had a different understanding of

the product he was selling than did Watts—and his television show featured wrestling

with a radically different style than that seen on Watts's television. Watts was trying to

run a national territory the way he would run a regional territory with television

---

[209] This was a problem that both UWF and NWA/WCW had during the late 1980s until the early 1990s: hotshotting of angles by overzealous bookers. Both Mantell and the NWA booker Dusty Rhodes were eventually relieved of booking duties because of their penchant for using a year's worth of storylines in a several month period. This is called hostshotting because bookers were believed to have limited shelf-lives as creative figures in wrestling, and wrestling television has room for far fewer big storylines than bookers can come up with at a given time. In the competing WWF, there were fewer big storylines than in its competition: Hogan, as champion, would feud with a giant heel, while whoever was Intercontinental champion would also have a smaller storyline feud (along with, occasionally, the Tag Team Champions). There would be other rivalries in the promotion, but these would receive substantially less screen team and television emphasis. This model provided WWF with a sustained "hot" period at the box office that coincided with much of Hulk Hogan's time as the undisputed top babyface in the promotion. Mantell and Rhodes, by contrast, would sometimes have several huge storylines running at once, and insufficient TV time to provide equal time to all big storylines and rivalries given the NWA and UWF's focus on presenting exciting matches in ring. For more, refer to Jim Ross, *The Ross Report Episode 31: Cowboy Bill Watts*, podcast audio, Jim Ross's The Ross Report, MP3, 27.8, accessed January 14, 2015.

promoting steady house shows, while McMahon was reinventing the business model of professional wrestling on the national level as akin to a touring circus generating house show attendance from the WWF's wide base of casual fans. The difference between the two was that McMahon's model had successful precursors given the prevalence of national touring circuses, monster truck rallies, and Disney on Ice performances. Indeed, McMahon's paradigm was likely to be even more successful than Watts's given these business models succeeding without weekly television promotion of the acts in question, and the increasing number of regional wrestling promotions going out of business around the United States. McMahon's move to go national caused wrestling to undergo an ontological transformation, and competitors were slow to figure this out. While critics and wrestling enthusiasts loved UWF television and booking, by the end of 1986 it was evident that fans who physically attended the shows had soured on the product: TV tapings in Oklahoma City dropped from $60,000 a taping to $14,000 a taping, while those in Tulsa went from $60,000 a night to $26,000 a night. By the end of 1986, Watts was losing at least $500,000 on his national territory, and he was already looking to sell the promotion.[210] McMahon's strategy of throwing a wide net with his television and filling houses the one or two times a year he traveled to a region of the United States was far more effective than Watts's strategy, which depended on narrowcasting to wrestling fans who watched television and attended events far more frequently than McMahon's fans and hoping there were enough fans around the nation to regularly attend Watts's UWF house shows and TV tapings.

---

[210] Bill Watts and Scott Williams, *The Cowboy and the Cross: The Bill Watts Story: Rebellion, Wrestling, and Redemption* (Ontario: ECW Press, 2006).

Television presented an even bigger problem than just failing to convince fans to buy tickets to live events, however. Jim Ross was in charge of television distribution and syndication sales; as Watts's long-time second in command, putting Jim Ross in a position of authority on the business end of UWF (in addition to his duties as the chief announcer) was a smart move. There was only one problem with Ross's tenure in television distribution and sales: he never actually sold the show to any station. Instead, Ross was spending money hand over fist to keep the UWF show on existing television stations: even though UWF stations might air a television show for free given the local stations' need for content, the new national superstations could charge money for slots on their stations. Paying for national television was not an unusual move for wrestling businesses at the time: both NWA and WWF did much the same thing with their television shows. The issue was that the NWA and WWF were able to use their television shows to monetize other aspects of their businesses, but the UWF simply had too many unsuccessful or money-losing areas of its business to actually stay profitable.

These problems were all exacerbated by issues with Watts's talent. There's no denying the quality of UWF's roster: Ted DiBiase was one of the greatest wrestlers alive, capable of working as both a babyface and a heel at the highest levels.[211] Jim Duggan was a legendary babyface in the mold of Bill Watts, the promoter who best knew how to promote Duggan.[212] The Fabulous Freebirds were heels with nuclear heat from their runs

---

[211] Indeed, DiBiase would achieve professional wrestling fame of iconic proportions when he joined the World Wrestling Federation and recreated himself as "The Million Dollar Man" Ted DiBiase, the human embodiment of capitalist greed whose mantra was "everybody has a price."

[212] Duggan was far less popular as "Hacksaw" Jim Duggan once he left for the WWF, a nativist country bumpkin who proudly declared "I've got my 2x4. I've got the American flag."

in Mid-South and World Class Championship Wrestling. "Doctor Death" Steve Williams

was a wrestler that fit Watts's mold for talent perfectly: star collegiate wrestler and

football player with enormous size and impeccable amateur credentials.[213] But the talent

quality dropped off quite a bit between the top tier performers and the midcarders, which

was a bigger problem for UWF than in other promotions where this was the case because

DiBiase, members of the Freebirds, and Williams all had significant commitments

overseas as contracted performers with All Japan Professional Wrestling or New Japan

Professional Wrestling. In 1986, foreign wrestlers could make huge money for working

Japanese tours, and Watts's openness to allowing his talent to maintain relationships with

Japanese promotions was a big selling point for working for UWF.

Unfortunately, this left Watts with a situation where his top stars would be

unavailable for three weeks to a month at a time during Japanese tours. This was

exacerbated by the fact that UWF had insufficient undercard talent to fill in for the

biggest stars at house shows, which led to the aforementioned drops in attendance and

house gates. Furthermore, because there were now three national promotions in the

United States, the talent level of available wrestlers to be signed was not where it was

even three years earlier; any wrestlers with major talent or headlining potential were

already exclusively contracted to one of the big three promotions.

---

[213] Steve Williams's work in the UWF is fondly remembered, but his career peaked with his run in Shohei "Giant" Baba's All Japan Professional Wrestling in the 1990s. Williams ended Mitsuharu Misawa's reign at the Triple Crown Champion, and was one of only five Americans to ever hold the Triple Crown Championship. Williams also achieved lasting fame in Japan teaming with Terry "Bam Bam" Gordy, formerly of the Fabulous Freebirds, in a team dubbed The Miracle Violence Connection. Gordy and Williams won All Japan Professional Wrestling's World Tag Team titles on five occasions.

Finally, to keep the talent he had, Watts had to sign his top stars to big money deals to keep them in the territory—which was fine at the launch of the UWF, but by 1987 with the promotion losing large amounts of money these contracts were further killing the profitability of the company. By February of 1987 both the Freebirds and Duggan had secured their releases from the company, which transformed the UWF roster from a promotion with top-tier main event talent and a largely weak undercard to a promotion that had one or two big stars and a bunch of midcarders that could not main event or draw money for the promotion.

Storylines in the UWF, for the year that Watts remained the owner of the company, typically revolved around Jim Duggan as the Junkyard Dog-style babyface of the company until Duggan received his release in January of 1987 due to the company's inability to pay him his contracted salary while remaining solvent. The money situation with Duggan was so bad that Duggan did not lose his final match before leaving the company—something unheard of in Watts's promotions and in wrestling as a whole. The UWF heavyweight title existed for approximately one year, during which time four men held the championship. Terry Gordy and One Man Gang, the first two men to hold the title, were the only champions during Watts's tenure as owner, while Big Bubba Rogers and "Dr. Death" Steve Williams both held the title after Watts sold controlling interest in the company to Jim Crockett and the NWA. The UWF Television and Tag Team Titles were also focal points in UWF television storylines.

Given the short history of UWF and the amount of money Watts began to lose by the end of 1986, it should come as no surprise that Watts began restructuring the company by 1987. Watts remained the UWF owner (solely because he had yet to find

anyone to buy the promotion), while Jim Ross became the outright decision maker for all things UWF. Mantell's tenure as booker ended with Mantell being replaced by the wrestler "Hot Stuff" Eddie Gilbert, and an earnest attempt to promote all across the United States began at this time. The UWF suddenly began expanding its promotion to Illinois, California, Minnesota, Georgia, and New Mexico; wrestlers and road agents worked nearly every day in the ring, and the plane rides across the country began to create talent attrition. Both Jake Roberts and his father, Road Manager Grizzly Smith, gave notice to depart for WWF, and match quality began to suffer without a dedicated agent exercising quality control at shows around the country.

While all of this was going on, Watts was still searching for someone to buy the company. Watts first approached Vince McMahon and the WWF to purchase the company at some point in 1986, but at that point, McMahon was riding high on the success of Wrestlemania II and beginning the storyline build for Wrestlemania III (which would be one of the most successful wrestling shows in history). McMahon was not interested in purchasing the struggling UWF, especially given the fact that McMahon could likely hire anyone of any value from the UWF whenever he wanted to do so. Rather than simply blowing off Watts, McMahon gave Watts a courtesy meeting with a WWF official—Kris Zellner claims that official was George Scott, the architect of McMahon's national expansion, but the timeline does not necessarily stand up to scrutiny given Scott's departure from the WWF to replace Ken Mantell as the booker for World Class Championship Wrestling after Watts's raid—where Watts allegedly threatened to file a federal anti-trust lawsuit against Titan Sports and the World Wrestling Federation if the WWF would not buy the UWF. Regardless of whether this threat is anything other

than apocryphal, it is a matter of fact that Watts parlayed his meeting with McMahon's organization into a meeting with Jim Crockett and the NWA where, fearing WWF interest in the UWF, Crockett agrees to buy the promotion for $4 million on April 9, 1987. This $4 million included the intellectual property, the Dallas offices, but did not include the UWF/Mid-South Wrestling tape library.

By the time the NWA purchased the UWF, any hope that UWF talent would be seamlessly integrated into interpromotional feuds with NWA stars was dashed when Crockett sent NWA midcarder Big Bubba Rogers to win the UWF title immediately. UWF stars were, by and large, presented as second-rate to the NWA wrestlers appearing on the same television shows, and the potential to do an invasion storyline or interpromotional war was quickly squandered. All that was left to do, by the end of 1987, was to fold the company. Although some of the UWF stars did get integrated into the NWA, many of the promotion's biggest stars—such as Ted DiBiase, the tag team The Sheepherders, and One Man Gang—joined Jim Duggan in McMahon's WWF.

In the end, why did the UWF fold? Although Watts maintains that the oil glut of 1986 wrecked his ability to maintain the promotion as a successful business entity given citizens' inability to purchase tickets to wrestling events regularly, there is quite a bit of evidence that suggests Watts's analysis overstates the impact of the oil glut on his fan base.[214] Of more material concern to Watts was his impending divorce from his wife that

---

[214] Ted Griggs, "Oil bust may be worse than 1986," Baton Rouge Advocate, 1/12/2016. Accessed on 3/30/2016. Throughout most of the 1980s, Louisiana's unemployment rate because of the conditions leading to the oil glut was in the double digit from 1982 until 1988; according to Griggs, "Describing a drilling company as bankrupt was practically redundant" during that time period, and this did not stop black fans from flocking to the UNO Lakefront Arena to see Ritter each week, or white fans around the Mid-South

begins in 1986; with Watts facing the possibility of losing half of his assets in the bank,

running a failing professional wrestling company along with a host of other business

interests outside of wrestling in a region of the United States that was economically

struggling was far from a priority.[215] Watts also, in the years since these events occurred,

has long claimed part of his desire to leave the wrestling industry was because he

believed the wrestling industry made him a successful promoter but an unsuccessful

Christian; as his autobiography's title (*The Cowboy and the Cross: The Bill Watts Story:*

Rebellion, Wrestling and Redemption) indicates, Watts's faith became increasingly

important to the promoter the older he became, and his returns to the wrestling industry

after the collapse of UWF became shorter and shorter-lived.

But ultimately, the main reason why Watts's promotion failed was that the

wrestling industry had changed in fundamental ways with the advent of an increasingly

globalized economy and an increasingly nationalized product. With the rise of pay per

view events, national wrestling television, and changing attitudes toward the products

presented on wrestling television, it seems fair to say that the wrestling business had

transformed from a regional art form that privileged live spectatorship to a national art

---

circuit from paying top dollar week after week to see the Midnight Express get their
comeuppances.

[215] Watts's divorce from Ene Watts becomes extremely important after the sale of UWF
to Crockett: part of Ene Watts's settlement from her husband is that the majority of the
tape library of Mid-South Wrestling and the Universal Wrestling Federation becomes her
sole property. Ene Watts remained the owner of these tapes—thus limiting the acquisition
of classic Mid-South television to the purview of the black market that is illegal wrestling
tape traiding—until selling her ownership of them to Vince McMahon's World Wrestling
Entertainment in 2012, clearing the way for the WWE to market Mid-South/UWF
footage on DVD and allowing selections from that content to be digitally available at the
launch of the WWE Network on February 24, 2014. For more on Watts's divorce, refer to
Bill Watts and Scott Williams, *The Cowboy and the Cross: The Bill Watts Story:
Rebellion, Wrestling, and Redemption* (Ontario: ECW Press, 2006).

form that privileged mediated engagement through media. As wrestling became something that was watched on television, the sorts of regional performances and styles that were popular around the United States and the rest of the world waned in popularity as McMahon's homogenized product gained popularity everywhere it was aired; moreover, wrestling became something that fans attended once per year or every few months when the promotions ran shows in fans' towns rather than a weekly or monthly event that fans would experience live. As I will demonstrate throughout Chapter 4 of this document, the established method of theoretical engagement with professional wrestling, semiotics, is ill-suited to explain this transition. Chapters 5 and 6 will create a theoretical framework that can account for these shifts in both the performance of professional wrestling and the styles of wrestling that these shifts in performance facilitate.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Attenuation Understood

In this conclusion, I advance two distinct arguments to explain the collapse of Mid-South Wrestling and the Universal Wrestling Federation. The first relates to the stylistic transition than wrestling underwent as it transformed from a business that sold tickets to regional live performances, each region featuring distinct styles of performance, into a touring company that produces performances on a national or global level. In so doing, I argue that professional wrestling's stylistic transition from a local, regional, and live performance practice with successful practitioners each participating in separate regional styles around the globe into a televised global performance practice working within a single unified style produces a type of movement-based performance that, through its participation in globalization and its ontological transformation into a mass art, admits for a notational scheme that captures style while rendering style an incidental facet of its successful performance in genre. This transformation allows us to conceive of a movement-based performance as globalized product that can serve as a model for how dance can undergo just such a transition, thus resolving Armelagos and Sirridge's 1978 dilemma that notes such performances "will become allographic only when either notation succeeds in capturing style, or general practice decides that style is incidental. Either might occur, but neither has to date."[216]

---

[216] Adina Armelagos and Mary Sirridge, "The Identity Crisis in Dance," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Volume 37, No. 2, (Winter, 1978), 138.

My second argument is parasitic upon the first argument. The stylistic transition is necessary because of the changing nature of the wrestling business: with national promotion, the older model of weekly regional tours to the same cities no longer generates sufficient revenue to sustain national promotion. Because of this, wrestling's style change facilitates its business transformation from an art not unlike community theatre into a mass art—and the stylistic change is a mandatory feature of generating a product that fits Carroll's scheme both in terms of the product that is being sold and in terms of the features of that product.

I will begin this conclusion by dwelling upon my first argument in 7.2, "Stylistic Transformation: Regional to National," wherein I walk through both how the problem of notatability of style and the integrity of style are transformed through the processes of global capitalism and the assembly of an economy of scale. I then continue in 7.3 with "Business Transformation: Regional to National" wherein I walk through the business ramifications of that stylistic transformation as well as the business opportunities the transformation into a mass art afforded promoters. Finally, in 7.4, "Further Questions, Further Research" I briefly outline theoretical and historical questions my sustained analysis raises that are suitable for further research.

5.2 Stylistic Transformation: Regional to National

I argue that professional wrestling, given its status as a movement-based performance, provides philosophers with the tools required to navigate the horns of Armelagos and Sirridge's dilemma, and sheds light on how dance is similarly transforming itself in the

present age of mass art. Professional wrestling's stylistic transition from live performance into a televised, unitary global performance produces a movement-based performance that, through its participation in globalization and its ontological transformation into a mass art, admits for a notational scheme that captures style while rendering style an incidental facet of its successful performance in genre.

First, a brief review of Armelagos and Sirridge's work. Recall that these scholars employ a notational scheme created by Nelson Goodman in his 1968 monograph *Languages of Art*. Goodman provided philosophers of art with the terminology required to understand the metaphysical differences between works of art that admit multiple instantiations—in other words, works of art which can have multiple copies—and works of art which do not admit multiple instantiations—in other words, art that can only be singular. The metaphysical feature by which art can be singular (or autographic, to use Goodman's terminology) and plural (allographic) is whether a given work of art is notatable. If a work of art can allow for a score of some sort such that copies of a work of art can be seamlessly produced, then that work can be said to be allographic; if a work does not allow for the reproduction, archival, and transmission of a work through a score, that work must be autographic.

Armelagos and Sirridge, in their essay, note that dance is a work of art that is transitioning from being autographic into being allographic—but given the centrality of style in dance, dance remains a genre of art that actively resists notation. This is because of dance practitioners and dance scholars' inability to create an adequate score: a score that allows for a dance piece to admit multiple instances between different groups of artists. In part, this is because style as Armelagos and Sirridge envision it is exceedingly

189

complex: it is a feature of dance that works on multiple levels—the individual performer and the company as a whole—and can be interpreted in a variety of ways—by style's expression in a piece, in a performer, or from the audience. Style, in other words, cannot be broken down into a basic unit such as a "step" that can be recorded; rather, steps are influenced by style. Armelagos and Sirridge argue that the exact ways in which style influences a step are nearly impossible to produce in a score such that a separate dance company can produce a faithful copy of a work of dance choreographed by another group of artists (without the literal guidance or involvement in a new piece by someone involved in the piece being copied). Given the number of ways that style works within dance, no system of notation that is at all usable by humans can record all the ways in which style affects all facets of a performance. As such, there is no faithful score that can exist. Thus, we return to Armelagos and Sirridge's dilemma: neither autographic nor allographic, dance performances "will become allographic only when either notation succeeds in capturing style, or general practice decides that style is incidental. Either might occur, but neither has to date."[217]

And indeed, this was the case in 1978 for professional wrestling as much as it was for dance. As I described in Chapter 1 and further developed in Chapter 3, Mid-South Wrestling was not unique in that it presented wrestling that appealed to audiences within the region of the country where Bill Watts promoted. Watts based the style of Mid-South off of the style he himself worked as a professional wrestler: big heavyweights with amateur wrestling credentials who could work a physically intense match, supplemented by charismatic black babyfaces to appeal to minority fans. In Memphis, by contrast,

---

[217] Adina Armelagos and Mary Sirridge, "The Identity Crisis in Dance," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Volume 37, No. 2, (Winter, 1978), 138.

everything was based for decades around booker and main eventer Jerry "The King" Lawler, a hated villain turned babyface who worked at the top of cards from the 1970s until the present day (although admittedly, Lawler's schedule since 1992 has been reduced given his hiring by the World Wrestling Federation as a performer and announcer). In Minnesota, for decades Verne Gagne was his region's champion, and the territory's focus on amateur wrestling reflected Gagne's background.

The styles in Memphis and Minnesota were both quite different from the southern style of wrestling promoted in Louisiana. Memphis's style frequently featured fast-paced action with storylines that would have been too outlandish to pass Bill Watts's Mid-South smell test: one (in)famous angle featured perennial Memphis Championship Wrestling champion Jerry "The King" Lawler in the nearby USWA promotion (which worked the Memphis style) facing off in the squared circle with LeatherFace, the star of the hit horror film *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. At one point, LeatherFace—unknown by the crowd, he was played first by Mike Samples, the by Ken Raper, a Memphis jobber who got the gig because he was the only wrestler in the area who owned his own chainsaw— destroyed the USWA announcers' desk and threatened to do the same to the babyfaces of the region. As for Minnesota, the style of Gagne's AWA was, much like Mid-South, realistic, but rather than featuring fast brawlers who hit hard, Gagne preferred wrestlers who could work matches with numerous moves drawn from amateur wrestling. Its style was demonstrably slower than that seen in Louisiana, but it also produced most of the finest professional wrestlers to practice any style of wrestling seen in the territories around the United States. Ric Flair and Ricky Steamboat were both graduates of Gagne's school, as were many of the biggest stars of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s.

Mid-South Wrestling ran into trouble after the Junkyard Dog's match with Mr. Wrestling II until Watts changed his region's style to account for a different underserved demographic once black fans were no longer interested in seeing JYD: women. Doing so resulted in Mid-South's most profitable year as a business. Indeed, at that time the state of the wrestling industry was quite strong: around the world, there were thousands of professional wrestlers performing in a variety of styles that differed from region to region and performer to performer. When a wrestler needed to freshen up his character after running his course in a territory, he could travel to a different region of the country and work for a different promotion, learning new tricks in how to work a crowd and eventually returning to the area he left a more nuanced wrestler.

Just like in dance, there were too many virtuosos and styles of performance for these types of performances to allow for a notation. Because of this, a match between Bret "The Hitman" Hart and Tom "The Dynamite Kid" Bullington in Calgary could not be recreated by "The Exotic" Adrian Street and "The Missing Link" in the Irish MacNeill Boys' Club in Shreveport, Louisiana several weeks later. The style of these regional live performances was simply too complex to notate, even if anyone had actually wanted to do this. This was more than just a problem of repeatability—it affected all aspects of performance, too. A babyface who worked for a wrestling promotion in Charlotte, North Carolina, would expect the bad guy (or heel) she punched to violently drop to the ground after every punch; a good guy in New York, or Tokyo, or California would expect it to take multiple punches to drop a bad guy. Wrestlers in the United States, the U.K., and Japan would know that the "right" way to attack a body part in a wrestling match is to target the limbs and extremities on the left side of the body (because most people are

right-handed); a performer in Mexico fluent in lucha libre's style of performance, by contrast, would know that the only right way to attack a body part is to work the right side of the body. Whether dealing with different promotions, different lineages of training of performers, or different crowds, professional wrestling was a genre of performance with a variety of regional styles that each produced different types of performance within that genre.

Until, of course, it wasn't anymore.

As even the most casual fan of professional wrestling is aware, the halcyon days of 1978 when there were hundreds of wrestling shows happening every given week in every region of the world are long-gone. Since the mid-1980s, wrestling fans have witnessed the wholesale transformation of the wrestling industry from a work of art promoted on the regional level with a variety of regional styles into a global performance dominated by a single globalized company that purveys a singular style: Vince McMahon's World Wrestling Entertainment. Right now in 2016, for the vast majority of people on earth the only opportunity most audiences have to see professional wrestling performed live is when Vince McMahon's traveling circus comes to their part of the world once or twice a year. McMahon's current iteration of professional wrestling is a performance that possesses a singular "main event" style practiced and disseminated around the world through the widespread adoption of mass technologies under the auspices of a single corporate production company. Rather than selling live performances that fans are expected to attend, McMahon (and the vestiges of his competition) create media works that are consumed on a scale that far exceeds the wildest dreams of any promoter working in 1978.

Professional wrestling transformed itself from a live performance into what the contemporary American philosopher of art Nöel Carroll deems an instance of mass art, and it is in this transformation that we begin to see how Armelagos and Sirridge's dilemma can be navigated. Because, although dance and professional wrestling as we knew them in 1978 possessed multiple styles that were far too expansive to notate, the metaphysical shifts that a genre of art undergoes as it transitions from a live performance to a mass art allows for movement-based performances to complete their transition from autographic to allographic works of art.

Recall Carroll's simple formula and his three necessary and jointly sufficient conditions of a work of mass art:

> x is a mass artwork if and only if 1) x is a multiple instance or type artwork 2) produced and distributed by a mass technology, 3) which artwork is intentionally designed to gravitate in its structural choices (e.g., its narrative forms, symbolism, intended affect, and even its content) towards those choices that promise accessibility with minimum effort, virtually on first contact, for the largest number of relatively untutored audiences.[218]

To recast this in Goodmanian terms, mass artworks must be allographic artworks transmitted through mass technologies that appeal to vast swathes of a given public irrespective of any demographic facts about that public.

Television became increasingly important to the identity of a work of wrestling because of McMahon's decision to go national. Historically speaking, dance

---

[218] Nöel Carroll, "The Ontology of Mass Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. Volume 55, No. 2 (Spring 1997), 190.

performances and professional wrestling were broadcast on television since the device's invention without significant alteration; in other words, dance was still primarily watched live despite televised performances of dance, and wrestling was still a regional affair (even if virtually every region's UHF stations had a local professional wrestling promotion's matches to broadcast).

In the case of professional wrestling, this ontological transformation was effected by ontology and capital, a combination whereby wrestling meets the third necessary condition of Carroll's definition of mass art. The processes of globalization transformed wrestling from an occasionally-televised regional live performance seen around the world into a global touring company that sells access (primarily through mass technologies) to the mass art of its live performances to mass audiences, which differ distinctly in kind from the kinds of performances seen around the world prior to the intervention of globalized audiences and globalized markets. For wrestling to become the type of performance that can gravitate, in its structural choices, towards those choices that promise maximum accessibility with minimal effort for the largest number of untutored audiences, the different regional styles practiced by performers from around the world and mediated through the various training methods these performers received had to be replaced by a singular style and singular training course largely created and maintained by the largest professional wrestling company producing the most wide-spread performances of professional wrestling around the world. The globalized WWE, boasting a controlled style sufficiently consistent that its televised performances can be grasped immediately by children or new fans by the end of a single match beamed effortlessly into fans' homes.

In real world terms, all of a sudden fans of professional wrestling had exposure to new styles of working matches because of McMahon's decision to pay for television access in every part of the United States, and key early partnerships with MTV, Cyndi Lauper, and NBC resulted in McMahon's more cartoonish style of wrestling becoming popular and "cool" because of the bodybuilding rock musician Terry "Hulk Hogan" Bollea. Although older wrestling fans around the country may well have actively disliked this new style of wrestling (and in some regions of the country, there is proof of this in subsequent ratings of these performances) McMahon's wager to appeal to kids and relatively untutored audiences by simplifying the types of conflicts in wrestling to simple babyface and heel dynamics centered on power wrestling eventually paid dividends. By contrast, the other two promotions that went national—NWA/WCW with Jim Crockett and Universal Wrestling Federation with Bill Watts—could not significantly expand their fan base as McMahon did.

As I mentioned in my literature review in the introduction of this document, Ted Butryn's account of the role of neoliberalism in the development of professional wrestling under the stewardship of Vince McMahon highlights the way that both performers and fans of regional wrestling prior to McMahon's national expansion disliked McMahon's changes to "their" form of professional wrestling. Butryn, in discussing the attitude many performers had to McMahon's emphasis on the wrestling industry, noted that

> many are disturbed at the shift from an emphasis on live performances in
> local markets to a television-based product that eventually led to the literal
> scripting of matches, thereby, ironically and probably not coincidentally,

removing individual creativity and ad-lib communication from much of

the process.[219]

Hence the characterization of McMahon's style as much more cartoonish to that sold by

Watts: where the wrestling promoted around the United States was the result of a

complex interplay between performers, a live audience, and the performers' iteration of

their craft on display in a given match, the scripting of matches resulted in a huge change

in wrestling as it was perfomed for much of the 20th century and what McMahon was

changing professional wrestling into on a global basis. This style would become

globalized professional wrestling, and local promoters like Watts did not adapt to these

changes.

Watts sold his promotion to Crockett less than a year after going national, and

Crockett relied upon his strength in the geographic south of the United States to sustain

him until his company boomed in 1996 because of mainstream interest in a newly heel

Hulk Hogan. Five years after that, however, WCW's ratings cratered and a promotion

that only a few years prior was making $80 million each year was canceled and sold to

McMahon for only $7 million.

In essence, the narrative I have sketched out above is likely familiar to everyone

in America: the rise of the corporation, in conjunction with the spread of technology that

allows artworks to be massively multiple and aggressively allographic, has spread

artworks and transformed style into something palatable to the largest number of people

possible. Although I freely admit this story is simply a variation on the series of events

---

[219] Ted Butryn, "Global Smackdown: Vince McMahon, World Wrestling Entertainment, and Neoliberalism," as in Louis M. Kyriakoudes and Peter A. Coclanis, *Sport and Neoliberalism: Politics, Consumption and Culture*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2012, 284.

that destroyed mom and pop shops after Wal*Mart came to town, I am not arriving at an Adorno-like pessimism wherein I bemoan the rise and spread of mass taste in conjunction with mass art.[220] Rather, I believe it is important to understand that transformations in both taste and artworks in the present arise from metaphysical changes in what the art we interact with actually is. With the change in form comes a change in function, and these sorts of facts are of vital import to understanding works of art in our present world of mass media.

Bill Watts could not compete with Vince McMahon because Bill Watts was in the wrestling business and Vince McMahon was in the sport-entertainment business. Watts's television shows were widely popular on television in his territory and successfully drew audiences everywhere within the 2000 miles his territory covered. It was decidedly not crazy to believe that Watts could promote his style of wrestling at the national level, given how widely-acclaimed Watts's style of wrestling was within the wrestling industry to wrestling fans and other promoters. But what Watts did not know was that part of his product's appeal was that his television and live shows had tutored audiences to understand the types of stories Watts wanted to tell. For audiences outside of Watts's region, UWF TV may well have been too complex to appeal to people with no history of watching the type of shows Watts promoted. In addition to these stylistic barriers, there were business barriers that prevented Watts from going national for a long enough time to change the style of his product.

---

[220] Theodor Adorno, "On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening," in *The Philosophy of Art: Readings Ancient and Modern*, edited by Alex Neill and Aaron Ridley, 110-117, New York: McGraw-Hill Humanities/Social Sciences/Languages, 1994.

5.3 Business Transformation: Regional to National

The business changes facing Watts were all attendant upon wrestling's transformation from a regional live performance into a mass art, mass media performance watched on television and Pay Per View. Carroll describes this sort of transformation as a change in the art object that is being produced: recall that pre-mass art performances (such as dance, theatre, and professional wrestling) produced an interpretation that could be repeated multiple times, but was limited by either the performers involved or the number of reception points at which a given interpretation could be experienced live, while instances of mass art are "liberated" from the physical limitations that constrain either a venue's maximum occupancy or the number of nights a traditional performance can be run. Unlike dance or other performances intended to be experienced live, mass art does not admit interpretations consumed at a specific point in space-time at all. Rather, it creates templates that can be transmitted anywhere where there is a receiver that can receive that template, at pretty much any time the person in charge of transmission chooses.

Recall that at first television presented a barrier to going national that all the promotions (before McMahon went national) tacitly enforced: getting a regional show on regional UHF stations was frequently free, and some television stations (such as the station in Memphis) partly owned the town's regional wrestling promotion. But to get on national Superstations, promoters had to pay to get their shows on television. McMahon succeeded in doing this by going into debt to fund his national expansion, and banked everything on a Pay Per View live event co-promoted with MTV to get back that money

and become self-sustaining: the first Wrestlemania. Using the money from that,

McMahon turned his promotion into a money generator in every part of the country,

running multiple shows in cities all over the country. One need only compare the list of

house shows at any of the amateur Web sites maintained by wrestling fans to compare the

number of house shows in 1984 and 1985 to see how many shows McMahon was

running around the country and how his business was organized; like the circus, his show

came to town sufficiently infrequently that every performance was a rare opportunity to

see larger than life characters.

Jim Crockett, the owner of NWA/WCW, got on national television because of

Ted Turner's TBS Superstation always having wrestling on it, and Turner made sure

Crockett did not have to pay to get his shows on the air. That left Bill Watts as the odd

man out: as I note in Chapter 3 Watts tried to get on Turner's Superstation but lost to

Crockett, while attempts to get on ESPN failed because the station opted to air Verne

Gagne's American Wrestling Association. Watts was forced to pay for television in

virtually every market he expanded to, but he was unable to run sufficient house shows in

those markets to make money as McMahon did.

McMahon was selling showbiz and spectacle, while Watts was selling

professional wrestling and grudges—and it turns out that showbiz and spectacle were

exactly what fans wanted to buy on Pay Per View, another medium that McMahon

harnessed in his national expansion that Watts did not.

Please note that none of this is an attempt to discredit the very real successes of

Bill Watts, Mid-South Wrestling, and the ill-timed but groundbreaking Universal

Wrestling Federation. Indeed, the scale of Watts's successes is likely difficult to parse for

fans more familiar with the types of wrestling performances successful throughout the past thirty years. Watts, because of the timing, was unable to take advantage of Pay Per View revenue as Crockett and McMahon did. Once McMahon, Crockett, and Watts went national, wrestling promotions still had to get people to attend their biggest shows, but more of the revenue generated by these companies began to come from a national or global audience of wrestling fans willing to purchase PPVs through their cable providers (or directly from the companies themselves through the Internet) as well as television rights fees which are largely determined by the advertising revenue drawn by these shows.

It would likely be unfair to claim that companies in the 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s had an easier time making money on professional wrestling than did Watts in the late 1970s and 1980s, but the differences in the businesses and the relative importance of the biggest shows certainly gave his rivals advantages that Watts would have loved to have. The biggest shows in the late 1980s, 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s were frequently broadcast on PPV: these shows attracted audiences that were orders of magnitude greater than the tens of thousands Watts could pack into the New Orleans Superdome. This is backed up by statistical analysis. In 1985, the first year wrestling was ever broadcast on United States pay per view systems nationally, 36,340,000 Americans had access to cable television. [221] Of that number, a much smaller pool of subscribers constituted the potential pool of Americans who could purchase a wrestling event:

> Pay-per-view services are available only to companies with so-called
>
> addressable cable systems, which can control the programming to

---

[221] As in Christopher Sterling and John Michael Kittross, *Stay Tuned: A History of American Broadcast, Third Edition,* Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001, p. 871.

individual homes from a central office. Subscribers wanting to view a

particular movie must call the cable company before the scheduled

viewing time, and the company then programs the movie for their homes

and bills them. About 5 million of the estimated 36 million cable

subscribers in the United States currently are on addressable systems,

according to a spokesman for Showtime.[222]

Although 5 million might not seem like a particularly huge number given the 36 million

potential cable subscribers and the inevitable winnowing of that number down by both

the number of fans of professional wrestling and the number of those fans willing to

spend money on professional wrestling, if even 1 percent of that 5 million fans could be

convinced to order a wrestling show that would result in 50,000 purchases—a number

that exceeded the capacity of all but the largest arenas in the United States.

By contrast, the New Orleans metropolitan area (according to Census data from

1980 and 1990) had a population that ranged between approximately 1,040,000 and

1,078,000; if we assume that Watts's Superdome shows drew audiences from around the

state of Louisiana then between 4,208,506 and 4,218,973 Louisiana citizens might have

made the drive to New Orleans.[223] Assuming some fans might be willing to drive or fly in

from greater distances, I have no problem rounding the estimates up to between

4,210,000 and 4,220,000 citizens constituting the region in which Mid-South Wrestling's

Superdome shows might have been persuadable to buy a ticket. Both pay per view and

Superdome shows drew from potential audiences of millions, but Pay Per View had an

[222] "Showtime offers pay-per-view TV," *The New York Times*, November 27, 1985.
[223] All data retrieved from "Demographics and Census Geography Louisiana State
Census Data Center," Louisiana.gov,
http://louisiana.gov/Explore/Demographics_and_Geography/, accessed 4/16/2015.

undeniable advantage as a revenue driver over regional shows: the only impediment to seeing a match on Pay Per View television was the money required to have a template of the show beamed into a person's home to watch on television, while the Superdome super shows were limited by the number of seats for sale at the arena.

Although Watts, by the end of Mid-South, could have broadcast his super shows through Pay Per View like other companies for extra revenue, doing so made little sense given Mid-South's business model—and the UWF was too short lived to take advantage of the medium. Mid South's Superdome shows were super shows because all televised storylines taped at small venues such as the Irish McNeill Boys' Club in Shreveport, Louisiana built up to matches that could only be seen live at the Superdome—television was used to draw viewers to the live events around the circuit, rather than having live events building up the televised confrontations on Pay Per View so popular in the decades after Mid-South closed. Audiences bought tickets to these shows because they were promised the chance to see something that they could never see on television, and believed that the Superdome experience was something that could only be had by being in the crowd: from the establishment of Mid-South in 1979

> until the death of the company nine years later, the Superdome was promoted similarly to how the WWF would a few years later promote its PPV shows when they would do 3-5 big ones per year. It became the show that the biggest angles were saved for, and where the biggest grudge matches and stipulation matches took place.[224]

---

[224] Dave Meltzer, "September 12, 2005 Wrestling Observer Newsletter." *Wrestling Observer,* September 12, 2005.

The Superdome featured both the biggest matches and, more importantly, the resolutions to these matches' storylines, but the presentation of the event (unlike that of later PPVs) hinged upon the performances' liveness. Storylines ended and began only in front of those crowds lucky enough to attend the shows live. Mid-South television viewers interested in seeing how these stories would end would have to travel to New Orleans's Superdome super shows to see these resolutions. Indeed, the entire Mid-South product was designed to encourage audiences to travel to attend the biggest shows live.

Mid-South Wrestling's groundbreaking episodic television shows that aired from the Irish McNeill Boys' Club—and, later, the similarly excellent UWF shows—were unique because of how these shows used the medium of television to encourage audiences from around the territory to attend the territory's live events, both at the Superdome and throughout Louisiana, Mississippi, northern Texas, Arkansas, and (after the McGuirk buyout in 1981) Oklahoma. Although using television to promote live events was utterly traditional—to promote wrestling throughout most of the twentieth century was to use television, radio, and assorted other media as marketing for the live events that were a promotion's major source of revenue—the content of the shows was groundbreaking insofar as these shows were episodic in structure and were the culmination of decades of wisdom about how to promote professional wrestling. Dave Meltzer, when describing Mid-South Wrestling's creative directions noted that

> for a young enthusiastic wrestler wanting to learn, it was probably like the
> hardest year of law school with a tyrant instructor. A period that gave you
> constant headaches and nightmares and fears while it was going on, but
> one that molded all those who lived it and paid attention while there into

wrestling minds what [*sic.*] understood concepts of the business and

television that few since that time really grasped and put all of them way

ahead of the pack for years to come.[225]

Each show promoted not only the upcoming live shows but played with the medium of a

TV show to compel viewers to watch week after week in astonishing numbers; according

to Meltzer writing in 2001, the "television ratings would literally boggle the mind, like 50

shares on UHF stations."[226] Watts would famously air a match for the Mid-South

Television Title, for example, and start the match in the final ten minutes of the show.

Unfortunately for fans, however, the match might last for twenty minutes or more; as the

show is about to go off the air announcers Jim Ross and Bill Watts would feverishly

promise to "keep the cameras rolling" to record the conclusion of the match, but fans

wanting to know the results would have to wait for the next week's episode to discover

what happened next.

For wrestling fans of the time period, wrestling was something that was best

experienced live, week after week, and promotions would come regularly to the

communities in which they promoted shows. Mid-South's television shows give scholars

insight into how the business would change as the role of televising the performances

---

[225] Dave Meltzer, "June 15 1998 Wrestling Observer Newsletter." *Wrestling Observer*, June 15, 1998.

[226] Dave Meltzer, *The Wrestling Observer's Tributes: Remembering Some of the World's Greatest Professional Wrestlers* (Ontario: Winding Stair Press, 2001). For readers unfamiliar with the term, UHF stations were public access stations with limited broadcast range, while a "50 share" means that 50 percent of televisions within the broadcast range were watching the station receiving that share. To put this number in perspective, Super Bowl XX in 1986, the third most-watched Superbowl in history at that point in time, averaged a 70 share on NBC across all major markets. A wrestling show drawing 50 shares on UHF networks is the weekly equivalent of the ratings and interest of New Orleans' 1981 Super Bowl XV happening every week on a local station.

became increasingly profitable. The traditional business model that prioritized live

attendance was abandoned in the 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s given the ubiquity of pay per

view entertainment and the elimination of local promotions around the country. As

promotions became national touring brands, wrestling ceased to be something presented

week after week in a single community; rather, companies toured like traveling circuses

and only came to a town once per year. This model worked because companies retained

the big show model of Mid-South and other territories, but relied upon the distribution of

events through pay per view to be the primary driver of profits. Both tickets to live events

and pay per view revenues rose because wrestling would only come to town once per

year, and a nationwide audience of fans were capable of purchasing the biggest events

through pay per view.[227] The only ceiling for potential profits was the number of homes

with fans willing to purchase an event on pay per view. Mid-South's ceiling, of course,

was the maximum number of seats available in the Superdome and the smaller venues

around the territory in which shows were promoted.

---

[227] From 1985 to 1990, the number of pay per view capable homes tripled from 5 million
to approximately 15 million. By 1995 nearly 32 million people had access to pay per
view, and this number jumps to nearly 40 million by 1999. Furthermore, Zane Breslov is
credited for being the person responsible for increases in ticket revenue during the mid-
1990s. Breslov, a local promoter who worked with both Vince McMahon's WWF and
Ted Turner's WCW, convinced WCW executive Eric Bischoff that the best way to
increase profitability was to raise ticket prices to all wrestling events. Breslov argued that
higher prices would convince fans that they were receiving a more exclusive product,
transitioning from a family event to a premier event that families would spend a great
deal of money to attend. Breslov was correct, and WWF quickly followed suit.

Throughout this dissertation I have focused on questions of ontology and metaphysics: does our understanding of style in dance also apply to wrestling, how can wrestling be notated given what we know of style in the artform, and how can we account for the rise and fall of different styles within the artform? But as my history of Mid-South professional wrestling demonstrates, there is ample room for scholarship that continues to build on the archival work that I have done in this document, and that complicates that archive by incorporating several of the insights I introduced from the philosophy of dance. Suppose that professional wrestling is the kind of art form that does not allow for notations independent of past performances—how does that impact the way the knowledge of professional wrestling is transmitted from one performer to the next, from one generation to the next?[228]

While certainly in the past few decades the preservation of famous matches and cards has become more possible given the renewed interest in protecting recordings of these matches on video—as can be seen in the gray market of quasi-legal bootleg performances sold on a variety of different Web sites across the Internet—this recent phenomenon has only affected the performance of professional wrestling since the first generation of fans that watched these tapes came of age and become performers

---

[228] Many of the most acclaimed teachers of professional wrestling now were regional performers in past eras (such as Lance Storm and Booker T Huffman), and many of the trainers and agents working for the WWE—either on its televised shows or in its performance center—were wrestling stars of past eras. Even though wrestling is now a primarily televised entity, the success of wrestling trainers and the students they have produced indicates that even as the artform changes, the skills from wrestling's regional era are still valuable in this era of pay per view and television.

themselves.[229] The transmission of knowledge prior to the era of tape trading was a different beast insofar as it was occurring prior to there being an archive of works to draw upon.

One productive model of analyzing the transmission of knowledge from one generation to the next can be found in Diana Taylor's concept of the "repertoire"—a term that refers to performance traditions in which movements are passed down from one generation to the next through non-recorded means. Where an archive is a repository of knowledge, a repertoire is the collective performance memories of dancers' bodily positions and motivated movements passed down from one generation of performers to the next. Given professional wrestling's long history of kayfabe and the performers' dedication to protect the knowledge of the workings of professional wrestling from outsiders such that the carnie grift could continue, Taylor's repertoire may well capture the ways in which one generation of trainers would ensure the survival of the art by training the next generation of practitioners while at the same time protecting the art from malign influences.

Also deserving attention is the role that familial relation plays in the preservation of styles of wrestling within professional wrestling. Increasingly in wrestling promotions around the world, one can see numerous second- and third-generation performers who lay

---

[229] It is not unreasonable to look to the establishment of the Ring of Honor promotion's foundation in 2002 by Rob Feinstein to see the first promotion that gave young performers from this above generation a venue to perform, and the subsequent rise in popularity of independent promotions specifically catering to fans of this type of wrestling (dubbed early in 2002 as "ameresu," for the way it mixes American wrestling with elements of Japanese puroresu). Examples of promotions like this include, but are not limited to, Pro Wrestling Guerilla, Combat Zone Wrestling, and World Wrestling Entertainment's NXT developmental promotion. Interested readers can purchase DVDs from all of these companies online to see their hybrid styles on display.

claim to their families' legacies as performers as foundational to their own characters. We can see this from the earliest days of Mid-South: Grizzly Smith actively recruited and advocated for his son Jake Roberts, just as Bill Watts promoted and protected Ted DiBiase. DiBiase's father, Mike DiBiase, died while wrestling in Texas, and wrestlers who were friends of Mike did their best to ensure that Ted received opportunities in professional wrestling—just as Ted Dibiase has done for his own sons who wished to enter the wrestling business.

Throughout this narrative I have underplayed the extent to which improvisation and aleatory features affect the performance of professional wrestling. Training in professional wrestling is, in some ways, akin to learning a foreign language with complex physical vocabularies to supplement the meanings of specific words and sounds. A trained wrestler who is well-versed in the fundamentals of working is a performer who is unlikely to want to get with his or her partner(s) and choreograph out matches move for move, hold for hold; rather, the art form requires performers to deploy holds and moves in response to audiences' reactions to what the performers are doing, such that they can create an environment where the match is feeding off the audience just as the audience is feeding off the match, and elements of that match will be adjusted such that this interplay can be maximized. Elements of the discourses of improvisation as well as philosophy of language could well shine much light on how we understand the mechanics of a given match and of promotions as a whole.

Further metaphysical refinements can be made to how a match's position on the card determines qualities of that match, too. While I have discussed matches largely as if the sorts of performances one sees in a main event can be extended throughout all of

professional wrestling, in reality there is much more nuance to these performances. Although these nuances between an opening match and a main event match are largely tangential to my own intervention into metaphysics and professional wrestling, now that it is possible to explain the type of artform wrestling is, one may now undertake a sustained examination of the variegated differences between instances of professional wrestling matches could be extremely productive in gaining a more fine-grained understanding of the nuances that go into the presentation of wrestling matches on a card of multiple matches.

There are even lessons that professional wrestling has taught us about how other movement-based performances will develop under similar economic conditions. Given the shifts in professional wrestling, it follows that dance, as it is practiced now, is becoming radically different than the types of dance discussed by Armelagos and Sirridge in 1978. While there has been no Martha Graham-inflected corporation that parallels the rise of Vince McMahon's WWE, we may nonetheless be moving toward a vision of dance that mirrors the sorts of movement-based performances wrestling presents on televisions and computer screens. While the dancing of Baryshnikov and the performance that birthed modern dance with Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* remain as autographic and unnotatable as ever, perhaps we have arrived at a cultural moment when the American public's understanding of dance admits of increasingly fewer stylistic variants: could mass dance for the age of mass art be soon to follow? Although I do not deny that dance as it was practiced cannot be notated *pace* Armelagos and Sirridge, a subsequent stylistic narrowing that may arise with the repurposing of dance for mass audiences could produce a style that is simply singular. And through its singularity, we will arrive at an

understanding of style and an iteration of dance that can be freed from the horns of Armelagos and Sirridge's dilemma: in mass dance, style may simplify such that it is accessible on first contact with a large assemblage of virtually untutored audiences and, by virtue of its simplification, is thus notatable; and, given style's notatability and transformation into just one element of mass art, mass dance could admit of a practice wherein style is ultimately incidental.

Bibliography

2K Sports. *WWE 2k17*. Video Game. Available October 11, 2016.

Adorno, Theodor. "On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening."
    In *The Philosophy of Art: Readings Ancient and Modern*, edited by Alex Neill and
    Aaron Ridley, 110-117. New York: McGraw-Hill Humanities/Social
    Sciences/Languages, 1994.

Alfano, Peter. "The changing face of sports: Is sportsmanship on the decline?" *New York
    Times*, October 27, 1982.

Alvarez, Bryan. "Figure Four Weekly #613, The Big Cat passes on – March 26, 2007."
    Figure Four Online. last modified March 20, 2007.
    http://www.f4wonline.com/component/content/article/3331-figure-four-weekly

Alvarez, Bryan and Dave Meltzer. "Wrestling Observer." *Wrestling Observer*, last
    modified 7/10/16.
    http://www.f4wonline.com

Armelagos, Adina and Mary Sirridge. "The Identity Crisis in Dance." *The Journal of
    Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. Volume 37, No. 2 (Winter, 1978).

Artaud, Antonin. *Theatre and Its Double,* Trans. Mary C. Richards. New York: Grove
    Press, 1994.

Atkinson, Michael. "Fifty Million Viewers Can't Be Wrong: Professional Wrestling,
    Sports-Entertainment, and Mimesis." *Sociology of Sport Journal*, Vol. 19, (2002).

Bakker, R. Scott. "More Disney than Disney World: Semiotics as Theoretical Make-
    Believe." *Three Pound Brain*. Last modified May 18, 2015. Accessed June 1, 2016.
    https://rsbakker.wordpress.com/2015/05/18/more-disney-than-disney-world-
semiotics-as-make-believe/

Barthes, Roland. *A Barthes Reader*, Edited by Susan Sontag. New York: Barnes & Noble,
    2009.

Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*, Translated by Annette Lavers. New York: Farrar, Straus,
    and Giroux, 1972.

Barthes, Roland. "On the Death of the Author." In *The Philosophy of Art: Readings
    Ancient and Modern*, edited by Alex Neill and Aaron Ridley, 386-390. New York:
    McGraw-Hill Humanities/Social Sciences/Languages, 1994.

Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*, Translated by Sheila Faria Glaser. Ann
    Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994.

Beekman, Scott M. *Ringside: A History of Professional Wrestling in America.* Westport: Praeger, 2006.

Bell, Clive. *Art.* New York: Forgotten Books Press, 2013.

Borges, Jorge Luis. *Collected Fictions*, Translated by Andrew Hurley. New York: Penguin, 1999.

Butryn, Ted. "Global Smackdown: Vince McMahon, World Wrestling Entertainment, and Neoliberalism." In *Sport and Neoliberalism: Politics, Consumption and Culture*, edited by Louis M. Kyriakoudes and Peter A. Coclanis, 280-293. Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2012.

Campbell, John W. "Professional Wrestling: Where the Bad Guy Wins." *Journal of American Culture*, Volume 19, No. 2, (Summer, 1996).

Carroll, Nöel. *A Philosophy of Mass Art*. New York City: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Carroll, Nöel. "Mass Art as Art: A Response to John Fisher." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism.* Vol. 62, No. 1 (Winter, 2004).

Carroll, Nöel. "Art and Human Nature." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticsm*. Volume 62, No. 2 (Spring, 2004).

Carroll, Nöel. "Avant-Garde Art and the Problem of Theory." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticsm*. Volume 29, No. 3 (Autumn, 1995).

Carroll, Nöel. "Defending Mass Art: A Response to Kathleen Higgins's 'Mass Appeal.'" *Philosophy and Literature*, Volume 23 No. 2, (October 1999).

Carroll, Nöel. "Mass Art: The Debate Continues." *Journal of Aesthetic Education.* Volume 35, No. 3 (Autumn, 2001).

Carroll, Nöel. *Mystifiying Movies: Fads and Fallacies in Contemporary Film Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.

Carroll, Nöel. *Philosophy of Art: A Contemporary Introduction.* New York City: Routledge, 1999.

Carroll, Nöel. "The Ontology of Mass Art." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticsm*. Volume 55, No. 2 (Spring, 1997).

Carson, Michael. "John Tolos: Wrestler celebrated as one of the finest ring villains." The Independent, 6/29/2009. Accessed on 3/31/2016. http://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/john-tolos-wrestler-celebrated-as-one-

of-the-finest-ring-villains-1724492.html

"Championship Wrestling from Georgia chapter 15." Youtube. Accessed January 12, 2015.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mX5i3eQNa3E.

Chicago Film Archives Presents Wrestling From Chicago. "Gorgeous George vs. Hans Schnabel (11/03/1950)." Gorgeous George and Hans Schnabel. 1950. Chicago: Chicago Film Archives, 2014). Youtube Streaming.

Chow, Broderick D. V. "Work and Shoot: Professional Wrestling and Embodied Politics," *TDR: The Drama Review*, Volume 58, No. 2 (Summer 2014).

Cornette, Jim and Court Bauer. *The Jim Cornette Experience Episode 5*. Podcast audio. The Jim Cornette Experience. MP3, 27:8. Accessed December 20, 2013. http://mlwradio.libsyn.com/jim-cornette-experience-6.

Cornette, Jim and Court Bauer. *Jim Cornette's Drive-Thru #1*. Podcast audio. Jim Cornette's Drive Thru. MP3, 27.8. Accessed December 20, 2013. http://mlwradio.libsyn.com/jim-cornette-s-drive-thru-1

CPI Inflation Calculator. *Bureau of Labor Statistics*. Accessed April 15, 2015. http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl

Croce, Jim. "Bad Bad Leroy Brown." In *Life and Times*. ABC Records: New York City, 1973.

"Demographics and Census Geography Louisiana State Census Data Center." Louisiana.gov. Accessed 4/16/2015. http://louisiana.gov/Explore/Demographics_and_Geography

Desai, Gaurav and Supriya Nair, eds. *Poscolonialisms: An Anthology of Cultural Theory and Criticism*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2005.

Derrida, Jacques. *Positions*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.

Eco, Umberto. *The Open Work*. Trans. by Anna Cancogni. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989.

Eco, Umberto. *The Name of the Rose*, trans. by Harcourt Brace and Co. Orlando, Harcourt Brace and Co., 1983.

Euba, Femi. *Archetypes, Imprecators, and Victims of Fate: Origins and Developments of Satire in Black Drama.* New York: Greenwood Press, 1989.

Fisher, John Andrew. "On Carroll's Enfranchisement of Mass Art as Art." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism.* Vol. 62, No. 1 (Winter, 2004).

Flair, Ric and Keith Elliot Greenberg. *Ric Flair: To Be The Man*. New York: World Wrestling Entertainment, 2004.

Foley, Mick. *Have a Nice Day: A Tale of Blood and Sweatsocks*. New York: HarperCollins, 2000.

Glenday, Daniel. "'Look at that Hunk of Man': Male Body Image and Gay Internet Fantasies as Sexual Politics in Professional Wrestling Today." (Conference Presentation, American Sociological Association, July 31, 2008).

Greenberg, Clement. "Modernist Painting." In *The Philosophy of Art: Readings Ancient and Modern*, edited by Alex Neill and Aaron Ridley, 110-117. New York: McGraw-Hill Humanities/Social Sciences/Languages, 1994.

Griggs, Ted. "Oil bust may be worse than 1986." Baton Rouge Advocate, 1/12/2016. Accessed on 3/30/2016. http://theadvocate.com/news/14549613-65/oil-bust-may-be-worse-than-1986

Hackett, Thomas. *Slaphappy: Pride, Prejudice, and Professional Wrestling*. New York: Ecco, 2006.

Hebert, Neal. "Capital City Camp: Gay Carnival and Capitalist Display." In *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Theater*, edited by Nadine George-Graves, 840-866. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Trans. Joan Stambaugh. Revis. Dennis J. Schmidt. New York City: State University of New York Press, 2010.

Higgins, Kathleen Marie. "Mass Appeal." *Philosophy and Literature*. Volume 23, No. 1 (April 1999).

Hitman Hart: Wrestling with Shadows. Directed by Paul Jay. 1998. Los Angeles, TriMark, 1998. DVD.

The Holy Bible, King James Version. New York: American Bible Society, 1999.

Hurley, Patrick. *A Concise Introduction to Logic: 12th Edition*: Boston, Cengage Learning, 2014.

Jim Crockett Promotions. *Clash of the Champions VI: Ragin' Cajun*. Televised Special. Ric Flair and Ricky Steamboat. 1989. New Orleans, LA: WWE Network, 2013. Streaming.

Kania, Andrew. "Making Tracks: The Ontology of Rock Music." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. Volume 64, No. 4 (2006).

Kerr, Peter. "Now It Can Be Told: These Pro Wrestlers Are Just Having Fun." *The New York Times* (New York, NY), February 10, 1989.

Kerrick, George E. "The Jargon of Professional Wrestling." *American Speech*. Volume 55, No. 2 (Summer, 1980).

Kindelan, Nancy E. *Shadows of Realism: Dramaturgy and the Theories and Practice of Modernism*. New York: Praeger, 1996.

King, Jason. "From Wrestling Legend to Double Amputee, Kamala Keeps Fighting." *The Bleacher Report*. Accessed November 24, 2014. http://bleacherreport.com/articles/2267803-from-wrestling-legend-to-double-amputee-kamala-keeps-fighting

King, Thomas A. *The Gendering of Men, 200-1750: Volume 2, Queer Articulations*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008.

Kirkwood, James, Michael Bennett, Nicholas Dante, and Edward Kleban. *A Chorus Line*. New York: Applause Theatre and Cinema Books, 2000.

Kyriakoudes, Louis M. and Peter A. Coclanis. "The 'Tennessee Test of Manhood': Professional Wrestling and Southern Cultural Stereotypes." *Southern Cultures*, Volume 3, No. 3, 1997.

Lawler, Jerry and Jerry Jarrett. *Memphis Championship Wrestling*. Televised show. Jerry Lawler and Ric Flair (1982, Memphis, TN, Memphis Championship Wrestling, 2010), Youtube.com. Accessed on 7/10/16. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PzkDzOfqDfc

Levinson, Jerrold. "What a Musical Work Is." *The Journal of Philosophy*. Volume 77, No. 1 (January, 1980).

Lipscombe, William. "The Operational Aesthetic in the Performance of Professional Wrestling." Dissertation, Louisiana State University, 2005.

"List of Supercards and Tournaments." ProWrestlingHistory.com. Accessed 2/17/2015. http://www.prowrestlinghistory.com/supercards/usa/misc/midsouth/cards.html

"Live & Televised Entertainment." *WWE.com*. Accessed December 19, 2013. http://corporate.wwe.com/company/events.jsp

Mac, Eddie. "This Day in Wrestling History (June 26): Ali vs. Inoki." *SB Nation*. June 26, 2016, http://www.cagesideseats.com/2016/6/26/11982396/this-day-in-wrestling-

history-june-26-ali-vs-inoki.

Mangan, Michael. *Staging Masculinities: History, Gender, Performance*. London: Palgrave-MacMillan, 2003.

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

McCluhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1964.

McEvilley, Thomas. "what is at stake in the culture wars." In *Beauty is Nowhere: Ethical Issues in Design*, edited by Richard Roth and Susan King Roth. New York: Routledge, 1998.

Meltzer, Dave. "April 13, 2009 Wrestling Observer Newsletter: WrestleMania issue, records, Hall of Fame, Dana vs. Hunt, more." *Wrestling Observer*. Last modified April 8, 2009. http://www.f4wonline.com/component/content/article/8928-apr-13-2009-observer-newsletter-wrestlemania-issue-records-hall-of-fame-dana-vs-hunt-more-

Meltzer, Dave. "June 15 1998 Wrestling Observer Newsletter." *Wrestling Observer*, June 15, 1998.

Meltzer, Dave. "March 19, 2007 Wrestling Observer Newsletter." *Wrestling Observer*, March 19, 2007.

Meltzer, Dave. "September 12, 2005 Wrestling Observer Newsletter." *Wrestling Observer*, September 12, 2005.

Meltzer, Dave. *The Wrestling Observer's Tributes: Remembering Some of the World's Greatest Professional Wrestlers*. Ontario: Winding Stair Press, 2001.

Meltzer, Dave. "Wrestling Observer Radio." *Wrestling Observer*. Last modified 7/11/2016. http://www.f4wonline.com

"Mid-South Wrestling." *Online World of Wrestling*. Accessed July 10, 2016. http://www.onlineworldofwrestling.com/results/mid-south/.

New Japan Pro Wrestling. *Wrestle Kingdom 10*. Kazuchika Okada and Hiroshi Tanahashi. 2016. Tokyo: New Japan World, 2016. Streaming.

"NWA On Demand." *NWA On Demand*. Accessed on 7/10/2016. www.nwaondemand.com

Novitz, David. "The Difficulty of Difficulty." *Journal of Aesthetic Education*. Volume 34, No. 2 (Summer, 2000).

Oliver, Greg. "Buck Robley, 'one of wrestling's brightest minds,' dies." Slam Sports, 5/28/2013. Accessed on 3/31/2016.
http://slam.canoe.com/Slam/Wrestling/2013/05/28/20854701.html

Parent, Wayne. *Inside the Carnival: Unmasking Louisiana Politics*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006.

Penty, Rebecca and Zain Shauk. "Crude Collapse Has Investors Braced for '80s-Like Oil Casualties." Bloomberg. 1/21/2015. Accessed on 30 March 2016.
http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-01-21/crude-collapse-has-investors-braced-for-80s-like-oil-casualties

Pettigrew, David and Francois Raffoul, eds. *French Interpretations of Heidegger: An Exceptional Reception*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009.

Phillips, Tom. "Wrestling with Grief: Fan Negotiation of Professional/Private Personas in Response to the Chris Benoit Double Murder-Suicide." Unpublished Essay, University of East Anglia.

Priest, Graham. *Beyond the Limits of Thought*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

"Professional Wrestling History." *Professional Wrestling History*. Accessed on February 17, 2015.
http://www.prowrestlinghistory.com/supercards/usa/misc/midsouth/cards.html,.

Regal, William. *Walking a Golden Mile*. Stanford: World Wrestling Entertainment, 2005.

"Richard K. Fox." *International Boxing Hall of Fame*. Accessed 5/25/16.
http://www.ibhof.com/pages/about/inductees/nonparticipant/fox.html

Rickard, John. "'The Spectacle of Excess': The Emergence of Modern Professional Wrestling in the United States and Australia." *The Journal of Popular Culture*, Volume 33, Issue 1, pages 129-137, Summer 1999.

Robinson, Andrew. "Jean Baudrillard and Activism: A Critique." *Ceasefire*. February 7, 2013. Accessed on July 1, 2015.
https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/in-theory-baudrillard-14/

Ross, Jim. "Ernie Ladd was one cool cat on gridiron, in wrestling ring," FoxSports.com, February 11, 2014. Accessed on March 29, 2016.
http://www.foxsports.com/buzzer/story/ernie-ladd-jim-ross-cowboy-bill-watts-mid-south-wrestling-021114

Ross, Jim. The Ross Report Episode 31: Cowboy Bill Watts. Podcast audio. Jim Ross's The Ross Report. MP3, 27.8. Accessed January 14, 2015.

Russell, Carol L. and Thomas E. Murray. "The Life and Death of Carnie." *American Speech*. Volume 79, No. 4 (Winter, 2004).

Sammond, Nicholas ed. *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling*. Duke University Press: Durham and London, 2005.

Sanes, Ken. "Traveling Through Hyperreality with Umberto Eco." *Transparency*. Accessed 6/1/2016.
http://www.transparencynow.com/eco.htm

Saussure, Ferdinand de. Trans. Roy Harris. *Course in General Linguistics*. Peru: Open Court Press, 2000.

"Showtime offers pay-per-view TV," *The New York Times*, November 27, 1985.

Smith, R. Tyson. "Passion Work: The Joint Production of Emotional Labor in Professional Wrestling." *Social Psychology Quarterly*, Volume 71, No. 2, 2008

Soulliere, Danielle M. "Wrestling With Masculinity: Messages about Manhood in the WWE." *Sex Roles*, Vol. 55, 2006.

Sterling, Christopher and John Michael Kittross. *Stay Tuned: A History of American Broadcast, Third Edition*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001.

Tan, Shaun. *The Arrival*. New York City: Arthur A. Levine Books, 2007.

Taylor, Diana. *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.

"Terry Funk: I Am Retired For Good." *Fighting Spirit Magazine*. Last modified January 3, 2013.
http:// http://www.fightingspiritmagazine.co.uk/art/news/123/terry-funk-i-am-retired-for-good.

Walsh, Shannon Leigh. "Muscular Maternity: Progressive Era Physical Culture, Biopolitics, and Performance." Dissertation, University of Minnesota, 2011.

Watts, Bill and Scott Williams. *The Cowboy and the Cross: The Bill Watts Story: Rebellion, Wrestling and Redemption*. Ontario: ECW Press, 2006.

Williamson, George S. "What Killed August von Kotzebue? The Temptations of Virtue and the Political Theology of German Nationalism, 1789-1819." *The Journal of Modern History,* Vol. 72, No. 4. December, 2000.

Wimsatt, Jr, W.K. and Monroe Beardsley. *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1954.

Wolterstorff, Nicholas. "Toward an Ontology of Art Works." *Nous*. Volume 9, No. 2 (May, 1975).

World Wrestling Federation. *Wrestlemania II*. Pay Per View. Hulk Hogan and King Kong Bundy. 1987. Los Angeles, CA: WWE Network, 2013. Streaming.

World Wrestling Entertainment. *Legends of Mid-South Wrestling*. BluRay. 2013. Stanford, CT: WWE Home Video, 2013. Bluray.

World Wrestling Entertainment. *NXT Takeover: Dallas*. Shinsuke Nakamura and Sami Zayne. 2016. Dallas: WWE Network, 2016. Streaming.

World Wrestling Entertainment. *The Triumph and Tragedy of World Class Championship Wrestling*. Directed by Vince McMahon. 2007. Stanford CT: WWE Home Video, 2007. DVD.

Zellner, Kris. *Exile on Badstreet Episode 2: The Death of the Universal Wrestling Federation.* Podcast audio. Kris Zellner's Exile on Badstreet Podcast. MP3 27.8. Accessed on March 29, 2016.

VITA

Neal Hebert received his B.A. in Theatre from Louisiana State University in 2003 and his M.A. in Philosophy in 2008. A native of Charenton, Louisiana, Hebert currently resides in Baton Rouge. Hebert is an experienced director and dramaturg, and has presented his research at both national and international conferences throughout the past six years.