

Wrestling and Popular Culture

Dalbir S. Sehmbly
University of Alberta

Follow this and additional works at: <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), and the [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#)

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, **Purdue University Press** selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: [<clcweb@purdue.edu>](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)

Recommended Citation

Sehmbly, Dalbir S. "Wrestling and Popular Culture." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 4.1 (2002): [<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1144>](https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1144)

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

PURDUE

UNIVERSITY PRESS <<http://www.thepress.purdue.edu>>

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 

ISSN 1481-4374 <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>>
Purdue University Press ©Purdue University

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series*. Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

Volume 4 Issue 1 (March 2002) Article 5

Dalbir S. Sehmy,

"Wrestling and Popular Culture"

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss1/5>>

Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 4.1 (2002)**

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss1/>>

Abstract: In his paper, "Wrestling and Popular Culture," Dalbir S. Sehmy investigates a phenomenon of television culture. Wrestling has been for a long time now a main feature of television with a sizable audience. However, scholars in popular culture, audience studies, or television studies have paid little attention to this phenomenon and Dalbir argues that the study of wrestling in popular culture ought to be of interest to scholars of culture. In his discussion, Dalbir addresses notions of high art versus low art along with notions of high television versus low television. He continues with a discussion of the recent history of professional wrestling in order to illustrate how wrestling developed a fraudulent reputation. In Dalbir's view, television wrestling is considered an uncomfortable activity, a performance, and a television feature located between sport and drama, between masculine narrative form and feminine narrative form, between a sexual and non-sexual display of the human body, and between documentary reality and creative fiction. In his study, Dalbir also explores aspects of the spectacular excesses of wrestling along with its media-hybrid form.

Dalbir S. SEHMY

Wrestling and Popular Culture

Bring professional wrestling up in a conversation and someone is bound to say, "It's sooo fake." And it is not only the faultfinders that use the phrase, even sincere fans find themselves using the phrase, if only to clarify to the world that they have enough sense to comprehend that wrestling is "fake." Culturally, when we think of art, we do not think of professional wrestling. Television and art have a contested relationship already, so professional wrestling and art have a much harder time. Through both scholarly work and viewing enthusiasm, however, television programming has become recognized as an important twentieth-century medium. However, in average text, reference, or encyclopedia on television, wrestling remains conspicuous by its absence. This, despite the fact that one of television's first hits was the Dumont Network's wrestling shows and some of television's first celebrities were wrestlers. Furthermore, fifty years later, wrestling remains a constant staple of North American television programming. However, for scholars of television, there has been disdain for wrestling. Specifically, professional wrestling's seedy reputation stems from five basic factors: its status as low art, its historical development, its liminal existence, its spectacle of excess, and its form of hybrid media. Ultimately, by acknowledging its low status and by articulating entertainment to be a type of permissive deception, the producers, performers, and the fans reappropriate wrestling's con-game status, destroying the notion of a hierarchy of popular art forms and thus heralding all entertainment as a successful illusion, or "fake."

Before looking into the specific reasons of the negative reputation of wrestling, the general notion of working-class art versus upper-class art must be addressed. High culture, such as ballet, opera, and classical music, is regarded as aesthetically complex and intellectually appealing. High aesthetics have been and continue to be critically delineated and appraised within universities, colleges, and in society at large. Historically, however, the elitist applause for high art has come at the expense of lower-class art. Distinctions in art go hand in hand with distinctions between class, taste, and overall aesthetic standards within our culture. John Fiske, in *Understanding Popular Culture* (1996), explains Bourdieu's main argument about class distinction and art in the following way:

culture is used to distinguish among classes and fractions of classes, and to disguise the social nature of these distinctions by locating them in the universals of aesthetics or taste. The difficulty or complexity of 'high' art is used first to establish its aesthetic superiority to 'low,' or obvious, art, and then to naturalize the superior taste and (quality) of those (the educated bourgeoisie) whose tastes it meets. A critical industry has been developed around it to highlight, if not actually create, its complexity and thus to draw masked but satisfying distinctions between those who can appreciate it and those who cannot. Artistic complexity is a class distinction: difficulty is a cultural turnstyle -- it admits only those with the right tickets and excludes the masses. (121)

In broad terms, high culture applauds upper-class art, creating specific standards of quality and taste. However, the critical industry surrounding high art has often overlooked the merit of what may be termed low, working-class, or popular art. Because popular culture is popular or because mass media is of the masses, by its very nature and owing to traditional boundaries of taste, popular mass media exist in opposition to the more critically acclaimed high art. In order to sustain a critical industry around high art, studies of art made for the masses, such as television, are avoided. Mass media scholar Robert Abelman in *Reaching Critical Mass* (1998) outlines several reasons why television is not considered high art. For instance, among his reasons he includes that televiewing has not been embraced by the intellectual community, that television is too accessible, and that television is considered nothing but a popular commodity. Specifically, Abelman points out that elite art is perceived "to be unique, technically and thematically complex, and produced by an identifiable artist of stature and personal vision" (13). In contrast, popular art "strives to be familiar, common, and conventional and is typically produced by unknown and unrenowned artists for commercial distribution and consumption on a large scale. It is often created for profit and, as a form of artistic expression, is devalued by its very popularity" (13). In other words, television is a form of popular and profitable art and thus is not considered as aesthetically complex or creatively original as elite art. As a result, television programs are also not considered as aesthetically

complex or creatively original as their elite counterparts. Nonetheless, not fulfilling the qualifications of elite art does not dismiss the richness available within a popular television program.

Unfortunately, in attempt to validate media studies, critics have created a hierarchy of their own. For example, live television dramas from the 1950s have been compared to the high art of theater and thus within such high company are argued to be worthy forms of popular art. Or consider America's Public Broadcasting Station (PBS), renowned for its array of quality and educational programming. PBS garners much fewer ratings points than the major American networks and yet it is critically appraised. This combination of low ratings and high critical praise is almost a cliché in television; unfortunately then, television programs with high ratings are often deemed unworthy of critical or academic attention. So, within television criticism, there is a distinction between high-quality and low-quality programming that originally drew upon the standards set by comparable forms of high art.

This ranking within television criticism exists even today. The very categorization of the 1950s as the Golden Age versus the trash television era of the late 1990s, for instance, illustrates the distinction between high and low television. Yet even during the 1950s, professional wrestling was situated lower upon television's hierarchy. Milton Berle and his variety show are recognized for bringing television into the homes of viewers across America, while "Gorgeous" George and the communal spectacle of professional wrestling are not awarded such recognition. This despite the fact that wrestling would have greater general appeal across America than Berle's show for two reasons: the proliferation of wrestling programs in television's early days and the wide appeal of wrestling spectacle itself. According to David Hofstede in *Slammin': Wrestling's Greatest Heroes and Villains* (1999), wrestling first aired on 30 July 1948 on Dumont and shortly thereafter, from 1949 to 1951, ABC, CBS, and NBC all broadcast wrestling bouts and Hofstede writes that "the first channel surfer could find wrestling shows six nights a week" (9). It seems more plausible that a good versus evil spectacle would reach more people across America than a New York based comedian with a clear urban slant to his humour and in my opinion wrestling is more capable of translating across regional, ethnic, and class differences than Berle's variety show. Thus, wrestling has an unduly low status, being not only a television program, but also holding a low position within the television hierarchy -- illustrative by its lack of recognition as even an existent genre.

Historically, wrestling is both folk and mass entertainment. Its origins are folk, stemming from traveling carnivals and vaudeville-type shows. In terms of both its audience and its performers, such traveling shows occupy the lowest rung on the artistic scale. Performers begin their training through traveling venues, graduating to more respected and static stages, such as Broadway, where the audience comes to see them. Professional wrestling is linked to folk traveling shows via the nomadic nature of the business; that is, entertainers try to gather audience from town to town. What remains from its folk roots is the huckster element: traveling shows are associated with a form of advertising that brands both the entertainer and the spectator with negative connotations. In television today, wrestling's promotional bits, posters of upcoming arena events, and pay-per-view commercials preserve the carnival's call for a crowd and promises of exotic entertainment. In addition to the low status of the entertainer, the low social status of the spectator remains a fact. At best, the wrestling viewer is not unlike the folk spectator paying for the low artistic form of traveling entertainment. At worst, by purchasing tickets to see a fraudulent sport, the wrestling viewer is like the folk audience being suckered into a spectacular con. Via such a reputation of salesmanship and conning, the categorization of the audience as the "uneducated masses" takes yet another layer of meaning.

With a history consisting of county fair hustling, an athletic contest fraught with controversy, and an incident of inadvertently revealing the winners before a major event, professional wrestling secured a fraudulent reputation and its viewers an "uneducated" one. That is, the wrestling show is a con and the viewer is too dumb to realize he or she is being conned. Owing to its traveling carnival roots, wrestling gained a reputation as a scam and not as entertainment art. According to the documentary, *The Unreal Story of Professional Wrestling* (1999), Sharon Mazer's *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle* (1998), and Gerald Morton and George O'Brien's *Wrestling to Rasslin': Ancient Sport to American Spectacle* (1985), professional wrestling's seedy reputation is

also connected to the efforts of American Civil War veterans to profit from their fighting skills. To pass the time between military battles, American Civil War soldiers would wrestle one another and ex-soldiers brought their skills to county fairs and traveling shows where they would challenge anyone in the local crowd to an impromptu fight, waving a healthy bet as financial temptation. Motivated by pride and lured by money, an eager local would take up the challenge only to end up embarrassed by the professional. And as legend has it, to lure people into the fight, the carnival wrestler would sometimes have a "plant" in the audience. The "plant" would put up a good fight and barely lose, convincing the audience that they would be able to finish what the "plant" almost could. Then, like a pool shark, the strongman would defeat the eager local and walk away with the money. It is important to note that during the nineteenth century these carnival cons existed parallel to wrestling as a legitimate athletic contest. Sealing its status as athletic entertainment, the sport and the carnival con merge into what we know as professional wrestling.

At the turn of the century, an incident involving Frank Gotch and George Hackenschmidt further tarnished wrestling's status as a legitimate sport. Wrestling as a spectator sport begins as just that, an athletic contest. In the early days of professional wrestling, accomplished athletes would compete with one another in the amateur style of the game and in North America and Europe, Gotch and Hackenschmidt were two of the most popular and capable athletes of their day. According to *The Unreal Story of Professional Wrestling*, in a rematch between the two, the American Gotch hired a "hooker," a wrestler who is capable of physically crippling an opponent, to injure Hackenschmidt in a training bout. Hackenschmidt's knee was torn and Gotch easily won the rematch. Later news got out that Gotch had hired someone to injure Hackenschmidt and wrestling's legitimacy as a fair sport was further tarnished and the high profile of the Gotch-Hackenschmidt incident is a major reason why wrestling sporting contests would no longer be a viable sell to sports fans. Further, since the final bout between Gotch and Hackenschmidt was not even staged for clear dramatic entertainment, wrestling did not clearly define itself either as a legitimate sport or as a spectacular stunt show.

Historically, after an initial mainstream boom as an athletic contest, wrestling was no longer even validated as a socially acceptable form of entertainment. According to the *Unreal Story of Professional Wrestling*, this lack of marketability occurred for three major reasons: wrestling's tricks were revealed, the winners of a major event were made public before the event occurred, and newspaper sports columnists stopped covering wrestling. In other words, by losing its playful guise as a competitive sport, wrestling lost its mainstream audience. To explain, even if audiences knew that some wrestling matches were staged, for years newspapers devoted a section to wrestling and winners were never revealed in advance. And so, the public was allowed to be in on the fun; in other words, wrestling was socially validated. Due to events which ruined its social acceptance, it did not permit spectators to suspend their disbelief and spoiled the dramatic suspense of a major card, professional wrestling was no longer socially validated, turning mainstream fans away. Concerning the serious inquiry wrestling faced, Hofstede in *Slammin'* declares: "The first serious investigation into wrestling's authenticity was launched in January of 1934 by the New York State Athletic Commission. Accusations of 'title juggling' and 'secret agreements' resulted in a week of testimony from the top wrestlers of the day, including Londos, Ed White, and Dick Shikat. The commission outlawed syndicate agreements between promoters and also decided to ban the drop kick from competition. Nobody paid much attention to either edict" (8).

Matches faced serious criticism, but professional wrestling became too successful as an entertainment business to revert to its roots as an athletic contest. Viewing an event that was publicly regarded as a corrupt sport by media authorities, such as sports columnists, it was now embarrassing for mainstream audiences. This lack of public and critical validation exists even today. Critics or non-fans denounce professional wrestling "fake." Fans must defend what they know is sports entertainment, and scholars must explain that they know wrestling is staged. Such a dismissal stems partly from wrestling's liminal status, between sports and drama, masculine narrative and feminine narrative forms, sexualized and non-sexualized display, and reality and fiction. As neebish scholars may know all too well, North American culture has high praise for athletic skills. We value the strong, the fast, and the best. The most skillful athletic performer may even earn the

cultural status of a hero or icon, along with lucrative endorsements and vast media coverage. We believe training, dedication, and hard work make champions. And thus, perseverance, focus, and confidence are values we hold dear and see realized through our athletes. Sports figures embody the ability to overcome poverty, the desire to never give up, and some of the highest physical and mental potential of the human species. Fair athletic competitions are rituals supporting our belief in the American dream. Culturally then, we do not like it when sports are rigged, when our athletes cheat, and, in the case of wrestling, when it is all just reduced to a show. Hence, owing to its resemblance to sport, but its clear status as drama, wrestling is criticized and degraded as "fake." More importantly, by parodying the notion of hard work and ethical practice leading to success, wrestling undermines our very belief in the American dream.

Wrestling's guise as sport gives it a veil of legitimacy that, however thin, situates it within our understanding of competitive athletic contests. That is, when we watch an athletic contest, we are viewing just that, a competitive test. For instance, in a boxing match, we watch two athletes fight one another according to the rules of the game enforced by a referee. Judges on the outside assess the match and score points for proper blows and deduct points for any infraction. Each individual round is timed and the entire bout is a set number of rounds. At the end, the boxer with the most points or the one who has scored a knockout is declared the winner. Viewers watch the event unfold before us. Putting gambling odds, fight histories, and corruption aside, we do not know what is going to happen next, we do not know how long it will last, and we do not know who the winner will be. This is what gives boxing and other sports their unpredictability; so, we as spectators watch in order to see who is the better, more skilled, and more capable athlete. Thus, when viewing a sporting contest, we are caught up in a type of live documentary athletic narrative unfolding before our eyes.

Professional wrestling, by extension, builds upon this model of the legitimate athletic contest unfolding before our eyes and consequently situates wrestling within our understanding of competitive sports. In other words, by mimicking the style of a sports contest, wrestling demands the viewer to situate himself or herself as a legitimate sports spectator. However, in doing so, wrestling mocks a space that is culturally sacred, the athletic battleground. We take our sports seriously, because it is associated with our local, national, cultural, or personal pride as fans. The riots in European soccer matches, hockey fervour in Canada, total football or baseball immersion in the US, cricket in India, or the global ritual of the Olympics are just some examples of how serious we treat our sports worldwide. Sports are meant to be the space of fair competition, but wrestling proves otherwise, circulating their narratives around corruption, favoritism, and backstabbing. Furthermore, wrestling is liminal in another potentially anxiety-producing manner, by existing between masculine and feminine entertainment forms. In media studies, programming is construed masculine or feminine depending on the gender of the target audience and stereotypical gender traits represented in a program. Following such a schema, visually, wrestling is a highly masculinized program.

Typically, athletic men shout at one another, battling physically for pride, honour, and a gold championship. Women also wrestle, but they are the less typical combatants; nonetheless, when the bell rings, they too settle their dispute or display their prowess in an aggressively athletic manner. Wrestlers are not average men and women either; rather, they are often muscled, strong, and capable of dangerous athletic feats. The wrestling match itself is a highly masculinized narrative: there is little or no talking; two individuals fight one another; there is a clear beginning, middle, and end. In a wrestling match, when the opening bell rings, the talking usually stops. Or, typically, the honourable hero stops talking and starts fighting, while the villain may be more likely to stop and talk or complain. In a match, there is a clear time limit, where the two combatants struggle physically. And, the victory is sealed with the final three-count and ending bell sound, giving the narrative a clearly defined beginning, middle, and end. Exemplified by the dynamics of the match itself, wrestling is a highly masculine narrative form. Simultaneously however, wrestling as a series of matches and ongoing narratives is highly feminine in form. In his article "Never Trust a Snake: WWF Wrestling as Masculine Melodrama" (1997), Henry Jenkins argues that serial fiction, such as soap opera, exemplify a feminine aesthetic; however, wrestling does not fit neatly into the

scholarly television tradition that separates masculine from feminine narrative form: "Television wrestling runs counter to such a sharply drawn distinction: its characteristic subject matter (the homosocial relations between men, the professional sphere rather than the domestic sphere, the focus on physical means to resolve conflicts) draws on generic traditions which critics have identified as characteristically masculine; its mode of presentation (its seriality, its focus on multiple characters and their relationship, its refusal of closure, its appeal to viewer speculation and gossip) suggest genres often labeled feminine. These contradictions may reflect wrestling's uneasy status as masculine melodrama" (50).

Wrestling is a serial fiction displaying men expressing emotion. It is a sports opera, a melodrama where story twists and turns occur abundantly. Also, like its soap opera counterparts, wrestling has developed a whole industry of gossip on the internet, in fan magazines, and through 1-900 telephone information lines. Another feminine aspect can be illustrated in wrestling's routine melodramatic expression of emotion. The wrestlers and all the other characters openly express their feelings in hyperbolic and excessive ways, be it anger, fear, humiliation, sadness, or happiness. And although they most often express anger, wrestlers verbalize a great deal, arguing, protesting, and even bickering. So, wrestling is also a highly stereotypical feminine form, as exemplified by the serial story structure, the melodramatic emotional expressions, and the verbalization of personal feelings. In addition, wrestling displays the human form for both the male and female gaze in both sexual and non-sexual ways. Unlike the clearly objectified female or clearly objectified male, wrestling bodies are presented in a marginal manner. With regard to the gaze, Laura Mulvey writes in her paper "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1992) that "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly" (750). Applied to the situation in wrestling, this is enacted when there are scantily-clad, heavy-busted women who accompany wrestlers to the ring as managers, girlfriends, and so on. Their role is to satisfy the heterosexual male viewer's sexual gaze. Yet, at the same time, male wrestling bodies are abundantly available for the heterosexual female gaze. In fact, the minimal dress for any wrestler is colourful underwear. In wrestling, male and female forms are available for both the heterosexual female and heterosexual male gaze. Furthermore, the human body is also on display for the homosexual gaze of males and females as well; male wrestlers battling with one another and female wrestlers battling with one another provide possibilities for homosexual viewing pleasure. However, there is more to wrestling than sexual gazing.

Male and female bodies in wrestling are also enjoyed for non-sexual gazing: wrestlers may wear very little and some may be well-built, but by the commonness of their clothing and musculature, wrestling bodies do not exist purely, if even predominantly, for the sexual gaze. More typically, the heterosexual/homosexual male and the heterosexual/homosexual female watch wrestlers engaged in athletic combat for the sake of stunt skill and story. For example, a heterosexual male can watch and enjoy two men fighting one another for their moves/prowess, and then sublimate the homosexual gaze. He may watch a match to simply discover the winner of an ongoing story line. Since wrestling by convention consists of scantily clad men and women, the bareness of two men in athletic combat will not be necessarily interpreted as sexual for the heterosexual/homosexual male/female fan. As is apparent, the combination of viewing strategies can be as numerous as the type of viewer. The ability of an individual to alter his or her viewing strategies at any given moment can make for an innumerable amount of viewing strategies. In mainstream sports male and female bodies are offered to viewers along a distinct line between sexual and non-sexual gazing. Female cheerleaders in revealing clothes with bubbly expressions perform along the sidelines and are forbidden to participate upon the clearly demarcated athletic ground. The cheerleading dance is largely gratuitous to the competition, while the actions of male athletes are primarily related to the context of the game and any dancing or gratuitous physical displays are typically connected with signals of victory or intimidation. Antithetically, in wrestling, the boundaries between female and male bodies collapse, as male and female bodies exist for both sexual and non-sexual gazing, simultaneously.

Wrestling is also liminal and anxiety-producing because of its playful status between reality and fiction. Typically, Western spectators are attuned to a privileged viewing status. The spectator is in a position of safe knowing; that is, we watch the characters develop and the events unfold within a clearly demarcated fictional story world. Wrestling shifts spectator position to a less privileged one, thus distorting traditional fictional boundaries. Like sports viewers, wrestling spectators watch action unfold live, where mistakes and other markers of live television reveal themselves. At the same time, they follow a scripted fictional narrative with known conventions. Thus, the wrestling spectator occupies a marginal space, between non-fiction and fictional modes of watching, for wrestling itself occupies a marginal space, between non-fiction and fictional modes of telling. Such marginality places wrestling as metadrama. As Richard Hornby argues in his *Drama, Metadrama, and Perception* (1986), metadrama is "drama about drama; it occurs whenever the subject of a play turns out to be, in some sense, drama itself" (31), with varieties of overt metadrama as the play within the play, the ceremony with the play, role playing within the role, literary and real-life reference, and self-reference (32). Following this line of thought, in professional wrestling every type of overt metadrama exists routinely. Further, when describing a play within a play, Hornby points out that in order to be metadramatic fully, the outer play must have characters and a plot and that these elements "must acknowledge the existence of the inner play; and that they acknowledge it as a performance. In other words, there must be two sharply distinguishable layers of performance" (35). In wrestling, when a form of play within a play occurs, it is most commonly not revealed as metadrama until later in the narrative (as a surprising twist) or if it is revealed as a premise, then it is a play within a play through parody. For instance, in one World Championship Wrestling (WCW) Nitro program, Bret Hart goes through a heart-felt revelation that he must fight for the fans once again and stand up to the then villainous Hollywood Hulk Hogan. Finally, at the climactic end of the match, Hart and Hogan wrestle strenuously, luring another hero, Sting, into the ring to help Hart against the cheating Hogan. However, at that point, Hogan and Hart join forces and attack Sting, collapsing the entire narrative and revealing their match to be "fake." In other words, within the narrative, Hogan and Hart were wrestling a "fake" match in order to lure and injure Sting. The play within the play is also evident in wrestling parody. For instance, in the WCW during the late 1990s, the New World Order (NWO) arrived to take over the organization. The NWO would interrupt a WCW program to broadcast NWO wrestling matches; however, their matches were clear parodies of wrestling poetics. Their broadcast parodied the ring entrance of the wrestlers, the role of the referee who does not enforce any rules, and the announcers who build up excitement over the action.

Essentially, the play within a play is fundamental to wrestling, because wrestling openly presents itself as a "work." A "work" is an old term still used by fans and promoters for whom a "work" refers to the ability of the wrestlers in a match to con the spectator into believing its reality. Hence, every wrestling show is a successful "work" if the audience is caught up in the show and believes the emotion and fighting to be real. However, this believability is not just in the dramatic suspension of disbelief sense; rather, the ultimately successful "work" makes the viewer actually believe or doubt what is real and what is not real. Increasing the interpretive pleasure of viewers, the legendary notion of a "shoot" match is central in wrestling parlance. A "shoot" is an actual wrestling bout where the wrestlers are in a sporting contest with one another. Theoretically, since any match can be a "work" or a "shoot," a choreographed bout may through accident or through an actual conflict between the performers, turn into a "shoot." Thus, within the fictional domain, the play within a play exists either as a climactic narrative twist or as a premise for parody. Slipping out of the fictional domain, a match may have moments of accidental or deliberate violence. Whatever the case, wrestling constructs a spectator position of marginality, along an axis of unknowing. Opposed to the traditional spectator position of privileged knowing, the wrestling spectator takes on a discomfiting role, teetering along the margins of fictional knowing and nonfictional uncertainty.

Next, Hornby says that the ceremony with the play "involves a formal performance of some kind that is set off from the surrounding action. As with play within plays, however, a certain blurring occurs when one tries to categorize ceremonies within plays" (49). Like drama, wrestling

shows have a ceremonial quality of their own, without necessarily being full ceremonies. And so, a ceremony within a wrestling program blurs the distinction between the spectacular ritual of wrestling and the ritual ceremony within the narrative. For instance, when heroes are crowned champions, there may be an impromptu ceremony reflecting the victorious showers of champagne and team revelry characteristic of legitimate sporting events. The locker room empties and the new champion is carried on the other wrestlers' shoulders, while the hero straps on his belt, dramatically. And concerning role playing with a role, Hornby suggests that "When a playwright depicts a character who is himself playing a role, there is often the suggestion that, ironically, the role is closer to the character's true self than his everyday, "real" personality" (67). In wrestling, the best example of role playing within a role can be seen in the World Wrestling Federation (WWF) with Vince McMahon's change of persona before and after an infamous incident with Bret Hart. Before McMahon's actual double-cross of Hart, McMahon was as a generally friendly promoter, bringing entertainment into people's homes. After the behind-the-scenes double-cross is documented and released by the National Film Board (NFB) documentary *Wrestling with Shadows* (1998), McMahon's character switched into an evil promoter, intent on controlling the careers of his talent.

As for literary and real-life reference within a play, Hornby explains that "the degree of metadramatic estrangement generated is proportional to the degree to which the audience recognizes the literary allusion as such" (88): in terms of wrestling's references, the most obvious ones are references to other popular media, especially comic book/television characters, news events, and movies. For instance, like his comic book counterpart the *Incredible Hulk*, Hulk Hogan during the early 1980s portrayed a nice guy who, when provoked, turns into an unstoppable wrestling force, fueled by anger and striving for justice or retribution. The famous Stone-Cold Steve Austin borrows the name Steve Austin from *The Six Million Dollar Man* television series. Dwayne Johnson's persona of The Rock echoes the cultural value of Stallone's *Rocky*; this is especially evident when the crowd chants "Rocky" and The Rock styles himself as "The People's Champion." Actual references to the personal lives of wrestlers occur frequently as well. The infamous double-cross of Bret Hart by Vince McMahon sparked some of the most successful narratives of double-crossing by an evil boss in WWF history. At times, wrestlers even strip away their persona while still in the ring and communicate to fans as themselves, only to put their persona back on, using their real-life situations to build fictional narratives. Parodic self-referentiality occur as well, when, for instance, midget wrestlers put on a slapstick show, or when humorous wrestlers mock the drama of wrestling matches. For instance, Screamin' Norman Smiley is a silly wrestler who wins matches without even knowing it, through slapstick bumbblings and accidents. While seriously advising kids against the dangers of backyard professional wrestling and instructing them in the disciplined skills of freestyle amateur wrestling, Smiley defeats the twelve-year old backyard champion and runs away with the kid's tin-foil belt. In essence then, all of Hornby's major varieties of overt metadrama exist regularly in wrestling, including the play within the play, the ceremony with the play, role playing within the role, literary and real-life reference, and self-reference.

Along with being metadramatic, wrestling is a performance spectacle. As Roland Barthes made clear in *Mythologies*, professional wrestlers display "the great spectacle of Suffering, Defeat, and Justice" (19). Culturally, high art tends to be graceful, subtle, and refined; unlike wrestling's loud sweaty violence. With the standards of high art, drama that is melodramatic and excessive is looked down upon, especially if the audience is of the lower or working class. In wrestling, where the audience has traditionally been the lower or working class, the movements are grand, loud, and over-the-top. Like their operatic counterparts, wrestlers must be big. In the opera, a form of high art, there is a comparable over-the-top expression of emotion and gesture. However, since the traditional audience is higher class and more educated, opera is not categorized as low. Wrestlers need to ensure the fans in the back can see and hear them, so their matches often incorporate sweeping gestures and loud bursts of agony. Trying to communicate a dramatic story and invoke vocal audience reactions, wrestlers hold excessive facial gestures and incorporate hand signals and glances to the audience. Like the high art of traditional folk mask plays in several cultures, including ancient Greece and Japan, wrestlers without masks or painted faces must express their character and emotions in an excessive way. Unlike the refined and often subtle movements

of the ballet, which is usually performed in more intimate settings, wrestlers pound the mat and slam one another with a crude and comparably ungraceful choreography. Unlike the impassioned actor who is blown up to a larger-than-life form on the movie screen to deliver subtle and silent facial or bodily expressions and then to be praised for his nuances, the wrestler must be larger-than-life.

Wrestlers cannot utilize subtlety and silence as a sign of skill, unless they are guaranteed a close-up. And even then, the auditorium of fans would miss out on the subtlety. Besides, wrestling is not about subtlety; rather, it is about excess -- wrestling *is* excess. Watching an arena show is a multi-media event, complete with fireworks, music, and big screens. Notwithstanding wrestling's excess, a wrestling show can be complex and layered. Most importantly, unlike the actor who is told never to look into the camera and thus destroy the viewer's stance as a voyeur, the wrestler must look out to the fans and into the camera to fully express his charisma and to declare his threatening persona. In most films, the performers look at one another and interact with one another only. Preserving the fictional reality, the viewer is an outsider looking in. In wrestling, the performers look and interact with one another, but also interact with the audience in the arena and at home. Wrestlers salute fans, acknowledge placards, and deliver their messages to the fans and the other wrestlers through direct address. Put together with the traditionally working class viewer, the ungraceful noise of a match, the growls and expressions of the wrestlers, and the wrestler talking directly into the camera, are all deemed low entertainment style. As a consequence, it is no surprise wrestling is critically ignored.

Along with this style of spectacular excess, wrestling is often deemed low art within television because of its media-hybrid form. By media-hybrid form, I refer to the multitude of genres television wrestling can be compared to and thus dismissed as a clear genre of its own. Like the news, the sports game, the cartoon, the sitcom, the music video, commercials, the talk show, the soap opera, or action series, wrestling is an established and long-standing genre of television. Moreover, because it has elements resembling news, sports, cartoons, sitcoms, music videos, commercials, talk shows, soap operas, and action series, professional wrestling has not been generally regarded as an original genre of television by scholars or been referred to as a genre by even the public. Television wrestling utilizes so many elements of the medium that one program can sum up all that is on television, from silly cartoons and serial melodramas to lewd sexual innuendo and gory violence. A wrestling show is a news program in terms of its documentary style: presented live, like a news broadcast, the wrestling reporters interview wrestlers as though they are politicians arguing with other politicians. They chase down wrestlers, conduct in-depth profiles, and bring us fast-breaking events as they occur. Like a sports broadcast, wrestling is a spectacle of fireworks and pageantry, utilizing several markers of legitimate athletics, such as referees, announcers, and managers. Sometimes resembling Saturday-morning cartoons, muscular superheroes battle evil villains, the big bully torments the lovable little character, and the excessive use of chairs and tables and baseball bats are like the animated counterparts of anvils and explosions. Like a sitcom, wrestlers get into humorous predicaments or exchange comic insults. With rapid-fire editing, shaky handheld cameras, scantily clad women, and music, at times wrestling can be confused with a music program. Within a wrestling show, commercials of upcoming events, posters, toys, videos, and pay-per-views frequently appear. The fights that begin in interviews resemble trash talk show battles; the ongoing melodrama resembles soap operas; finally, the stunts resemble the fights in television action dramas. Thus, the simultaneous existence of differing television styles in one program gives wrestling its media-hybrid form, which is another reason for wrestling's lack of critical recognition as an original and distinct genre.

Whereas being a unique North American and twentieth-century entertainment phenomenon with metadramatic aspects presented in a hybrid-media form may seem critically beneficial for any other program, such elements are widely ignored in wrestling. Like baseball, professional wrestling is an American product, springing forth from Civil War tussles and legitimate wrestling competition into carnival attractions and then stadium events. However, unlike baseball, professional wrestling is not culturally regarded as America's pastime. Yet, consider how similar metadramatic elements are praised and deemed complex and artsy in literary and film forms, but, in wrestling, they are

seen as lowly cons. Even though multimedia internet narrative forms are now being explored as new and dynamic forms of story-telling, the hybrid-media form of wrestling is hardly noticed. That is, the wrestling show is still criticized for openly tricking the viewer and playing with reality. This stems in part from wrestling's overall low status culturally, but structurally, this stems from wrestling's own blunt attitude towards entertaining. This how Sharon Mazer describes this in her book, *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle*: "Professional wrestling jargon is threaded throughout with the language of the con game. Most wrestling performances are considered 'works,' both in the sense that the wrestlers should be "working" to please the audience and in the sense that one wrestler in particular 'does a job' to 'put the other guy over.' This 'jobber' (often referred to in current fan parlance as 'JTTS' or 'Jobber to the Stars') must work to put on a good show, a convincing display of the desire and potential to win, in order to make the other wrestler -- either a star or a new wrestler that the promoter wants to 'push' -- look good to the fans. Given that the professional wrestling performance is largely improvised, the potential always exists for a 'shoot' in which the plan is forsaken, an accident occurs, or a genuine conflict erupts with violence spilling over from display into actuality" (22).

In the simplest sense, wrestling itself strips away all pretenses and refers to entertainment as a con. In a way, this is a crude but accurate description of entertainment. An actor is a liar, playing a part to fool an audience into believing his or her dialogue, emotion, and predicament as authentic. To be considered effective, the spectator must fall for the performance; the spectator must be conned into believing what he or she is being presented is authentic. Of course, as Mazer's description of wrestling jargon illustrates, the tone here towards entertaining is much less glamorous than Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief." Nonetheless, the overall aim is clear. As Martin Esslin's *Anatomy of Drama* (1976) puts it, drama is "mimetic action, an imitation of the real world as play, as make-believe. The drama we see in the theatre and for that matter on the television screen or in the cinema is an elaborately manufactured illusion" (86). So, like wrestling, all entertainment is a con. However, owing to cultural acceptance, a critical industry of praise, and a traditionally higher-class audience, certain forms of entertainment are hardly, if ever, referred to as cons. In fact, they have attained the status of art, being said to provide an alternate reality in which the spectator can become engrossed within and thus be thoroughly entertained. Wrestling's referral to itself as a con is due, in part, to its aforementioned carnival roots as a con-game. Maintaining such jargon is a type of humbling homage that reminds the wrestler and the viewer that ultimately, the glamour, plots, and spectacle being presented are, at their roots, a playful con. Being on the cusp of sports and entertainment also affords the use of the term con. A rigged sports event is known as a con. Wrestling's rigged athletics does not diminish the genuine athletic ability required. In fact, it may even enhance it. Wrestlers must be careful not to injure their opponent or themselves, yet at the same time present the illusion of dramatic violence and preserve an ongoing narrative trajectory. Without the luxury of resorting to trick camera angles and special effects, an athlete's self-control and choreography must function at its peak in order to maintain such a level of combative excitement, yet still not cause any serious harm.

Wrestling's cultural status as a con also has another purpose: it places the onus on the performer. Mazer points out that "All participants, including fans, present others with at least a bit of a *kayfabe*, a term which is taken from nineteenth-century carnival, medicine show, and sideshow practice and simply refers to a con or deception" (22). Having been historically criticized as a con, referring to wrestling as a con today is a clear acknowledgment and reappropriation of its low cultural status. As Mazer continues to explain, "most wrestlers are proud to be called kayfabians because it means they're in on the (con) game" (23). Hence, wrestling's most famous critical label is as a con, but wrestlers and fans have reappropriated the term so as to lend credence and respect for the show, while (to reiterate) still paying homage to its roots and humbly accepting that in a sense sports entertainment is a playful con. In a way, the reappropriation of the term con brings lowly wrestling a bit higher and even pulls higher forms of entertainment a bit lower. For, if high art is a mere con as well, then the entertainment playing field is all the more level.

Hence, referring to wrestling as a con places a large emphasis on the performer and thus exalts the wrestler's ability as a live entertainer. Whereas prerecorded media entertainment relies upon

camera techniques and special effects, wrestlers must rely on themselves. Wrestling success directly stems from pleasing the audience by putting on an engaging, spectacular, and believable show. If the wrestler does not succeed in delivering a good wrestling show, the repercussions are immediate. Fans could laugh and openly ridicule the performer. Or worse, fans could walk out or not come to another show, thus reducing the size of the gate, and therefore reducing the wrestler's reputation and his or her salary. By being referred to in wrestling parlance, as a *kayfabian* (a con artist) or a worker, the active role of the wrestler (as opposed to the passive role of the viewer suspending disbelief) is quite apparent. The wrestler must work to please the audience and put on a good show; the onus is on the performer to deliver, to draw viewer interest, and to incite emotions. Of course, the viewer must play along. Without the viewer's participation, there can be no form of any sort of entertainment. However, in wrestling, the viewer's appreciation or lack of appreciation wields more direct democratic power than in other forms of entertainment. In this sense, wrestling's ability to effectively please the audience is a way of maintaining its respectful status amongst fans. The wrestler's close attention to a fan's willingness to suspend disbelief is a way of respecting the people that support the wrestling industry. Whereas higher entertainment forms can please upper class or educated audiences for their traditional merit, complexity, and insider understanding, at its roots, wrestling pleases its traditionally working class audience by empowering them with a voice and responding to their entertainment wants. The viewer must make an effort to acquire an appreciation of the subtleties or quality of a form of high art, such as classical music. In comparison, the simplicity of wrestling conflict makes it more immediately accessible to a wide range of viewers.

However, in being so easily comprehensible, wrestling creators and performers must work specifically to satisfy the narrative and character developments desired by the audience. Wrestling gives the average working-class viewer a democratic voice in his or her entertainment. The dynamics are clear, two combatants in physical battle. Everyone can understand it, because there is no barrier in terms of language or education. The working class viewer can choose to spend his or her money elsewhere, if the wrestling show does not provide what he or she enjoys. And even though nowadays, average viewers cannot actually jump into the ring and challenge the champion carnival strong man to a match, at least average viewers can voice their opinions and their cheers can push a favorite into the ring against the current champion. Therefore, despite its inclusion of high art elements, wrestling can still be referred to by critics and even fans as a con. In doing so, wrestling acknowledges its lowly status and places the onus on the performer to entertain and respect the views/support of his or her audience. Ultimately, wrestling is considered unartful, because it challenges our traditional North American worldview. We value legitimate athletics competitions because we value competition, in the capitalistic sense. Sports are a ritualistic preservation of fair competition and metaphorically, of the American dream. Wrestling undermines this by, not only playing to a working class audience, but also criticizing our naïve faith in upward mobility and thus expressing working class angst. Moreover, we as an audience do not like to be openly deceived; rather, we smugly enjoy the spectator position of privileged knowing. This knowing is reflected in our cultural tendency to categorize and label phenomena along traditional binary oppositions. Although critics praise the liminal in high art, wrestling's marginalization in television studies displays the pervasiveness of a cultural bias. Critics and viewers are made uneasy by the following liminal elements: between sport and drama; between masculine and feminine narrative forms; between its presentation of the human body for both the male and female gaze in sexual and non-sexual ways; between reality and art, as evident through its metadramatic aspects. Owing to its excessive style and traditionally lower-class audience, wrestling's loud, brash, and in-your-face approach marks it as excessive and thus uncomplicated or critically unworthy. Since wrestling programs can embody the traits of a myriad of television programs, it is not clearly recognized as an original television genre. By recognizing itself and all entertainment as "fake," wrestling reappropriates its cultural status as a con and proudly exalts the performance ability of the performers and the ability of the plots to engage audiences across the world. Moreover, wrestling asks us to recognize the falsity of boundary, between high and low, between fiction and reality. Although scholars deem this age to be postmodern, the refusal to recognize wrestling, a transgressive form

of low art, as worthy of critical study points to the continual existence of conservative critical paradigms. If anything, excluding wrestling makes poststructural media studies "sooo fake."

Works Cited

- Abelman, Robert. *Reaching a Critical Mass: A Critical Analysis of Television Entertainment*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1998.
- Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Trans. Annette Lavers. London: Jonathan Cape, 1972.
- Esslin, Martin. *An Anatomy of Drama*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1976.
- Fiske, John. *Understanding Popular Culture*. London: Routledge, 1996.
- Hofstede, David. *Slammin': Wrestling's Greatest Heroes and Villains*. Toronto: ECW P, 1999.
- Hornby, Richard. *Drama, Metadrama, and Perception*. Cranbury: Associated UP, 1986.
- Jenkins, Henry. "Never Trust a Snake: WWF Wrestling as Masculine Melodrama." *Out of Bounds: Sports, Media, and the Politics of Identity*. Ed. Aaron Baker and Todd Boyd. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1997.
- Mazer, Sharon. *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1998.
- Morton, Gerald W., and George M. O'Brien. *Wrestling to Rasslin': Ancient Sport to American Spectacle*. Bowling Green: Bowling Green State U Popular P, 1985.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Film Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen, and Leo Braudy. New York: Oxford UP, 1992.
- The Unreal Story of Professional Wrestling*. Sherman Oaks: Actuality Productions for the Arts & Entertainment Network, 1998.
- Wrestling with Shadows*. Dir. Paul Jay, with Bret Hart. Ottawa: The National Film Board of Canada and High Road Productions, 1998.

Author's Profile: Dalbir S. Sehmy is enrolled in the Ph.D. program of comparative literature at the University of Alberta where the focus of his research is in film and media studies. In his M.A. thesis entitled *Professional Wrestling, Whooo: A Cultural Con, an Athletic Dramatic Narrative, and a Haven for Rebel Heroes*, Dalbir focused on the cultural poetics of hero (con)figurations in professional wrestling and he has presented guest lectures on various aspects of professional wrestling. E-mail: <dsehmy@ualberta.ca>.