For the past five Marches, World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) has produced an awards show which honours its aged former performers, such as Jimmy "Superfly" Snuka and Ricky "The Dragon" Steamboat, as pro-wrestling Legends. This awards show, according to WWE, is "an elegant, emotional, star-studded event that recognizes the in-ring achievements of the inductees and offers historical insights into this century-old sports-entertainment attraction" (WWE.com, n.p.). In an episodic storyline leading up to the 2009 awards, however, the real-life personal shortcomings of these Legends have been brought to light. During Jericho's assault on the Legend Jimmy "Superfly" Snuka at the March 02 WWE Raw event, a SomethingAwful forum thread on "SomethingAwful" logged over sixty posts all reflecting variations of "gently caress me—Jericho is amazing" (Jerusalem, n.p.). This is despite the community's passive-aggressive and ironically jaded official line that they indeed are 'a bunch of faggots for watching men hug each other in fights. Thank you for not telling us this several times' (Hulkamaniac, n.p.). Why were these normally cyberspace fans of WWE enthusiastically expressing their love for the Jericho-Legends feud? In order to answer this question, this paper argues that the feud articulates not only the ideal of the "giving wrestler", but also Roland Barthes's version of jouissance. Consuming and commenting on WWE texts within the SomethingAwful community is further argued to be a performative ritual in which informed wrestling fans distance themselves from audiences they perceive as uncritical and ill-informed cultural dupes. The feud, then, allows the SomethingAwful fans to perform jouissance on two interconnected levels: they are not only able to ironically cheer on Jericho's morally reprehensible actions, but also to genuinely appreciate the present-day in-ring efforts of the Legends.

The Passion of the Spectacle

To properly contextualise this paper, though, the fact that "pro wrestling is fake" needs to be reiterated. Each match is a choreographed sequence of moves. Victory does not result from landing more damaging bodyshots than one's opponent, but instead is predetermined by scriptwriters—among whom wrestlers are typically not numbered—backstage. In the 1950s, Roland Barthes thus commented that pro wrestling is not a sport, it is a spectacle (Mythologies 13). Yet, pro wrestling remains popular because of its "display of spectacle" (Barthes). One of the reasons for its success is the "emotional intensity", but refers to the physically tortured heroes of medieval passion plays as well—giving it an advantage over the legitimate sport of amateur wrestling: "It is obvious that at such a pitch, it no longer matters whether the passion is genuine or not" (Mythologies 16). The spectacle is the image of passion, not passion itself (Mythologies 16). The observation still holds true in today's WWE. On one hand, the SomethingAwful fans go 'gently caress Jericho, [Superfly] will MURDER you' (Jerusalem, n.p.) in disappearow of Jericho's on-screen actions. In the same thread, they, though, simultaneously fret over him being slightly injured from an "off-screen real life accident. Jericho looks busted up on his forehead. Dang' (Carney, n.p.).

However, Barthes's observations, while seminal, are not the be-all and end-all of pro wrestling scholarship. The industry has undergone a significant number of changes since the 1950s. Interviews and speech segments are now as essential tools for furthering storylines. Correspondingly, they are given ample TV time. At over ten minutes, the Jericho-Superfly confrontation from the March 02 Raw is longer than both the matches following it, and a fifteen minute conversation between two top wrestlers capstones these two matches. Henry Jenkins has thus argued that pro wrestling is a male-targeted melodrama. Its writers emphasize many traits that [legitimate sports such as] football share with melodrama—clear opposition between characters, the sharp alignment of audience identification, abrupt shifts in fortune, and an emotionally satisfying resolution (Jenkins, "Never Trust a Snake" 81). Unlike football, though, the predetermined nature of pro wrestling means that its events can be "staged to ensure maximum emotional impact and a satisfying climax" (Jenkins, "Never Trust a Snake" 81). Further, Jenkins notes that shouting is preferred over tears as an outlet for male affect. It "embodies externalised emotion", a "difficult, possibly even dangerous, emotion" (Jenkins, "Never Trust a Snake" 80). Pro wrestling is seen to encourage this outlet for affect by offering its viewers spectaculars of male physical prowess to either castigate or cheer. Jericho's assault of the Legends, coupled with his half-screaming, half-shouting taunts of "Hall of Famer? Hall of Famer of what? You've a has-been! Just like all the rest!" could be read to fit within this paradigm as well.

Smarts vs. Marks

WWE has repeatedly highlighted its scripted nature in recent years. During a 2007 CNN interview, for instance, WWE Chairman Vince McMahon constantly refers to his product as "entertainment" and laughingly agrees that "it's all story" when discussing the wrestlers' screen interactions with his long-time friend and former performer Roddy "Theoretically, I don't believe in this fake thing" (Griffin, n.p.). These overt acknowledgments that WWE is a highly choreographed melodrama have boosted the growth of a fan demographic referred to the "smart" in pro-wrestling art. This "smart" fan is a figure who for whom the fabricated nature of pro-wrestling necessitates an engagement with the WWE spectacle as an audience. The "smart" not only follow[s] the WWE not just to see the shows, but to keep track of what "the Fed[s]" are doing (Mcbrie and Bird 170) with regards to off-camera events, but also has "knowledge of the inner-workings of the wrestling business" (PW Torch, n.p.). One of the few "GOLD"-rated threads on the SomethingAwful smart forums, accordingly, is titled "WWE News and Other Top Stories, The Insider Thread", and has nearly 400,000 views and over 1000 posts. As a result, the smarts are in a subject position of relative insider-ness. They consume the WWE spectacle at a deeper level—one which functions roughly like an apparatus of capture for the critical/cynical affect mobilised around the binary of 'real' and 'fake'—yet ultimately remain captured by the spectacle through their autodidactic enthusiasm for knowledge which uncovers its inner workings.

For contrast, there is the category of the "mark" fan. These "marks" are individuals who remain credulous in their reception of WWE programming. As cutesygirl writes regarding a recent WWE storyline involving brotherly envy: I LOVE JEFF HARDY!!!!!!! I cried when i heard his brother say all the crap about him!! kinda weird but i love him and this video is soo cool good!! JEFF Hardy loves his fans and his fans love him no matter what he does I'll always love JEFF HARDY!!!!!!!!!!!! (n.p.)

This untrustworthy faith in the on-screen spectacle is understandable insofar as WWE programming trades upon powerful visual effects—near-holographic bodies, sweat, painted facial expressions—and complements with the adrenaline-producing beats of thrash metal and hard rock. Yet, smarts look down upon marks like cutesygirl, seeing them as Frankenstein School-era hypnotised sots for whom the WWE spectacle is 'the common ground of the deceived gaze and of false consciousness' (Debord 117), and additionally as victims of a larger media industry which specialises in mass deception (Horstheimer and Adorno 41). As Lawrence McBride and Elizabeth Bird observe:_marks appear to believe in the authenticity of the competition—Smarts see...
Perhaps feeding into the antagonistic binaries drawn by WWE programming, there exists an “us vs them” binary in smart fan communities. Previous research has shown that fan communities often rigidly police the boundaries of “good taste”, and use negatively constructed differences as a means of identity construction (Fiske 448; Jenkins, “Get a Life” 432; Theodoropoulos 321). This ritual Othering is especially important when supporting the WWE. Smarts are aware that they are fans of a product designed by first Superstars to cater to second-rate fans (McKinely, n.p.). As Matt Hills finds, fandom is a mode of performance centred on the self’s identification with an identity which is (dis)claimed, and which performs cultural work (Hills xi). Belonging to the SomethingAwful smart community, thus, exerts its own pressures on the individual smart. There, the smart must perform ‘audience knowledge, knowing that other fans will act as a readership for speculation, observation, and commentary’ (Hills 177).

Wrestling, then, is not just to be watched passively. It must be analysed, and critically dissected with reference to the encyclopedic knowledge treasured by the smart community. Mark commentary has to be piloried, for despite all the icon disaffection characterising their posts, the smarts display mark-like behaviour by watching and purchasing WWE programming under their own volition. A near-existential dread is hence articulated when smarts become aware of points where the boundaries—both internal and mark/overlap, that the creators that lurk on seedy...carry on, as if we do (rottingtrashcan, n.p.). Any commons of identity and marks must thus be disavowed as a surface resemblance: afterall, creatures are simply unthinking appetites, not smart epicures. We’re better than those plebs; in fact, we’re nothing like them any more.

Yet, in one of the few forms of direct address in the glossary of smart newsletter PW Torch, to “mark out” is to enthusiastically be into (a storyline) or match as if you (emphasis added) were “a mark”; to suspend one’s disbelief for the sake of enjoying the spectacle. Yet, they are more than just a text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of boredom), unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological pre-suppositions, the primitively filmed wrestling matches of the 1950s notable for their static camera shots. However, WWE wrestlers yet follow this theatrical aesthetic. In the match immediately following Jericho’s bullying of Superfly, Kane concedes to jump on the legs of the opponent instead of simply laying him down. In the ring, Kane throws Superfly to the canvas, who then sits up. Instead of slamming him to the ground and following through with his planned attack, Kane instead gets up and begins to celebrate.

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The girlfriend of the Legends are then framed in high angle camera shots, making them look even more much more than the prior to Jericho’s assault. Hence the smart statements gushing that ‘generly caress me Jericho is amazing’ (Jerusalem, n.p.) and that Jericho’s actions have garnered a “rear end in a top hat chant” from the crowd. It has been FOREVER since I heard one of those. I love Chris Jericho (Burruto, n.p.).

Jouissance and “Marking Out”

This uninhibited “marking out” by normally cynical smarts brings to mind Barthes’s observation that texts are able to provoke an enjoyably liminal privileged position between that of defensively ironic critic and that of credulous dupe, one where smarts can stop their performance of cooler-than-thou fatigue and enthusiastically believe that there is nothing more to WWE than spontaneous alarms and excursions. The bodily reactions of the Legends in response to Jericho’s physical assault helps foster this willing naiveté. These reactions are a disquieting break from the generic visual conventions set forth by preceding decades of professional wrestling. As Barthes argues, wrestling is as much concerned with images of spectacular suffering as with narratives of amazing triumphs:

The wrestler who suffers in a hold which is reputedly cruel (an arm-lock, a twisted leg) offers an excessive portrayal of Suffering; like a primitive Peta, he exhibits for all to see his face, exaggeratedly contorted by an intolerable affliction. It is obvious, of course, that in wrestling reserve would be out of place, since it is opposed to the voluntary ostentation of the spectacle, to this Exhibition of Suffering which is the very aim of the fight. (17)

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then you eventually came to the ring with a Komodo Dragon. Literally spitting fire like the circus freak you'd become. It was pathetic. But hey, it's all right as long as you're making a paycheck, right Steamboat? And then when you decided to retire, you ended up like the rest of you down here and out. Down and broken. Beaten down. Dysfunctional family. You applied for a job working for the WWE, you got one working backstage, and now here you are. You see, Steamboat, you are a life-long exit. And now, with the Hall of Fame induction, the loyal dog gets his bone. (WWE)

Here, Jericho demonstrates an apparent unwillingness to follow the company line by not only acknowledging the NWA, but also by disrespecting a current WWE backstage authority. Yet, wrestlers having onscreen tangles with their bosses is the norm for WWE. The most famous storyline of the 1990s had “Stone Cold” Steve Austin and the WWE Chairman brutalising each other for months on end, and the fifteen minute verbal exchange mentioned earlier concerns one wrestler previously attacking the Raw General Manager.

Rather, it is Jericho’s reinterpretation of Steamboat’s career trajectory which gives the storyline the intensely pleasurable uncertainty of jouissance. His confrontational speeches nurture the celebratory nostalgia of the montages, forcing smarts to apply extra-textual knowledge to them. This is especially relevant in Steamboat’s case. His montage was shown just prior to his meeting with Jericho, ensuring that his iconic status was fresh in the audience’s memory. Vera Dika’s findings on the conflict between memory and history in revisionist nostalgia films are important to remember here. The tension that comes from the juxtaposition of the coded material against the historical context of the film itself...encourages a new set of meanings to arise” (Dika 91). Jericho cynically views the seemingly virtuous and heroic Steamboat as a corporate cyophant preying on fans to enrich his own selfish ends. This viewpoint is bolstered by the in-ring support, provided by the non-WWE-produced extra-textual knowledge, allowing for a meta-level melodrama to be played out.

The speeches thus speak directly to smarts, simultaneously confounding and exceeding their expectations. The comfortably pleasant memories of Steamboat’s “amazing aerial prowess” are de-emphasised, and he is further linked to the stereotypical juvenile of the pop-cultural The Karate Kid. They articulate and capitalise upon whatever misgivings smarts may have regarding Steamboat’s real-life actions. Thus, to paraphrase Dika, “seen in this clash, [the Jericho-Legends feud] has the structure of irony, producing a feeling of nostalgia, but also of pathos, and registering the historical events as the cause of an irretrievable loss [of a Legend’s dignity]” (91). “‘Come Live in the past!’ taunts Jericho as he stuffs Superfly’s mouth with a potato sack and beats him amidst the wreckage of the exactly reproduced cheap wooden set in the same way that “Rowdy” Roddy Piper did years ago (“RAW #637”, WWE). This literal dismantling of cherished memories results from WWE producers second-guessing the smarts, and providing these fans with an enjoyably uncomfortable jouissance that cleverly confounds the performance of a smart disaffection. “Marking out” —or its performance at least—results.

The Giving Wrestler

Lastly, the general physical passivity of the Legends also ties into the ethos of the “giving wrestler” when combined with the celebratory montages. In a business where performed passion is integral to fan enjoyment, the “giving” wrestler is an important figure who, when hit by a high-risk move, will make his co-worker’s offense look convincing (McBride and Bird 173). He ‘will give his all in a performance to ensure a dual outcome: the match will be spectacular, benefiting the fans, and each wrestler will make his “opponent” look good, helping him “get over with the fans” (McBride and Bird 172). Unsurprisingly, this figure is appreciated by smarts, who “often form strong emotional attachments to those wrestlers who go to the greatest lengths to bear the burden of the performance” (McBride and Bird 173).

As described earlier, the understated reactions of the Legends make Jericho’s attacks paradoxically look as though they cause extreme pain. Yet, when this pathetic image of the Legends is combined with the hypermasculine images of them in their heyday, a tragedy with real-life referents is played out on-stage. In one of Jenkins’s ‘abrupt shifts of fortune’ (“Never Trust a Wrestler...”) age has grounded these Legends. They can now believably be assaulted with impunity by someone that heyday, a tragedy with real-life referents is played out on-stage. In one of Jenkins’s ‘abrupt shifts of fortune’ (“Never Trust a Wrestler...”) age has grounded these Legends. They can now believably be assaulted with impunity by someone that

References


Chris Jericho: “[Tim Flowers] taught me some very important lessons about the wrestling biz. More specifically, he taught me how to drink like a wrestler. He took us to a bar and bought rounds of drinks for everybody. I learned to keep my thumb on the top of the beer bottle at all times because there were always guys around who thought it was funny to spike your drink with Halcion pills. After you fell asleep from them, you would be the recipient of a free eyebrow shaving and bonus Lloyd Christmas haircut. But I was a fast learner and I’m proud to say that after fifteen years of wrestling, I still have the same eyebrows I had when I was soiling my diapers. Wrestling is a hierarchy and the guys on top dictate what to do to the guys on the bottom. Chris Jericho will face Kenny Omega at Wrestle Kingdom 12. In a shocking development, wrestling legend Chris Jericho will make a special appearance at New Japan’s Wrestle Kingdom 12 on January 4th to face Kenny Omega, who is likely the biggest star in wrestling outside of WWE. So how did we get here? Jericho – who was one of WWE’s MVPs in 2016 – hasn’t appeared on WWE programming in months. On Saturday, Jericho dropped a bomb. At New Japan Pro Wrestling’s Power Struggle pay-per-view in Osaka, Jericho officially challenged Omega to a match at Wrestle Kingdom 12 – NJPW’s version of WrestleMania – at the Tokyo Dome. Omega quickly accepted, and the two will fight for Omega’s IWGP United States Heavyweight Championship.