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, and subsequently mocked in one-on-one interview segments with WWE’s Superstar of the Year 2008, the dastardly Chris Jericho. Jericho caps off these tirades by physically assaulting the Legends with handy stage props.

Significantly, the performances of Jericho and his victims have garnered positive attention not only from mass audiences unaware of backstage happenings in WWE, but also from the informed community of pro-wrestling fans over at the nihilistic humour website SomethingAwful. During Jericho’s assault on the Legend Jimmy “Superfly” Snuka at the March 02 WWE Raw event, a WWE-themed forum thread on SomethingAwful logged over sixty posts all reiterating 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 tights. Thank you for not telling us this several times’ (HulkaMatt, n.p.). Why were these normally cynical 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 enthusiasm 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 Superfly

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 bodyslams than one’s opponent, but is instead 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 this theatricality allows for the display of spectacular excesses of passion—here Barthes not only means “an intensity of emotion”, 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. What the public wants is the image of passion, not passion itself’ (Mythologies 16). This 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 disapproval of Jericho’s on-screen actions. In the same thread,
though, they 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. Speeches and interview segments are now seen 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—the 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; it is aggressive and noisy. Women cry from a position of emotional (and often social) vulnerability; men shout from a position of physical and social strength (however illusory)’ (Jenkins, “Never Trust a Snake” 80). Pro wrestling is seen to encourage this outlet for affect by offering its viewers spectacles 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’re 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 his on-screen interactions with his long-lost midget “son” (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 argot. This “smart” fan is a figure for whom the fabricated nature of pro-wrestling necessitates an engagement with the WWE spectacle at a different level from mass audiences. The “smart” not only ‘follow[s] the WWE not just to see the shows, but to keep track of what “the Fed[eration]” is doing’ (McBride 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 autodidact enthusiasm for knowledge which uncovers its inner workings.

By contrast, there is the category of the “mark” fan. These “marks” are individuals who remain credulous in their reception of WWE programming. As cuteygrl08 writes regarding a recent WWE storyline involving brotherly envy:

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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 soooo good!! JEFF hardy loves his fans and his fans love him no matter what he does i’ll always love JEFF HARDY!!!!!!!!!!! (n.p.)
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This **unstinting faith in the on-screen spectacle** is understandable insofar as WWE programming trades upon powerful visual markers of authenticity—nearly-bare bodies, sweat, pained facial expressions—and complements them with the adrenaline-producing beats of thrash metal and hard rock. Yet, smarts look down upon marks like cuteygrl08, seeing them as Frankfurt 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 (Horkheimer and Adorno 41). As Lawrence McBride and Elizabeth Bird observe:

Marks appear to believe in the authenticity of the competition—Smarts see them as the stereotypical dupes imagined by wrestling critics. Smarts approach the genre of wrestling as would-be insiders, while Marks root unreflexively for the most popular faces. Smart fans possess truly incredible amounts of knowledge about the history of wrestling, including wrestler’s real names and career histories, how various promotions began and folded, who won every Wrestlemania ever. Smart fan informants defined a Mark specifically as someone who responds to wrestling in the way intended by the people who write the storylines (the bookers), describing Marks with statements such as “Kids are Marks.” or “We were all Marks when we were kids.” Smarts view Marks with scorn. (169)

Perhaps feeding on 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; Theodoropoulou 321). This ritual Othering is especially important when supporting the WWE. Smarts are aware that they are fans of a product denigrated by non-fans as ‘trash TV’ (McKinley, n.p.). As Matt Hills finds, fandom is a mode of performative consumption. It is ‘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 ‘audiencehood, knowing that other fans will act as a readership for speculation, observation, and commentaries’ (Hills 177).

Wrestling, then, is not just to be watched passively. It must be analysed, and critically dissected with reference to the encyclopaedic knowledge treasured by the smart community. Mark commentary has to be pilloried, for despite all the ironic 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 between smart and mark overlap, that ‘the creatures that lurk the internet ... carry some of the same interests that we do’ (rottingtrashcan, n.p.). Any commonalities between smarts 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 *PWTorch*, 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 to a greater extent a match or [a storyline]’ (PWTorch, n.p.). The existence of the term “marking out” in a smart glossary points to 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 distressing 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 Pieta, 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)

Barthes was writing of 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 considersably jumps the last two feet into a ringside turnbuckle after Mike Knox pushes him into its general vicinity. Kane grunts at the impact while the camera cuts to a low-angled shot of his back—all the better to magnify the visual of the 150 kg Knox now using his bulk to squash Kane. Whenever Jericho himself traps his opponent in his “Walls of Jericho” submission manoeuvre, both their faces are rictuses of passion. His opponent clutches for the safety of the ring ropes, shaking his head in heroic determination. Audiences see Jericho tighten his grip, his own head shaking in villainous purpose. But the Legends do not gyrate around the set when hit. Instead, they invariably slump to the ground, motionless except for weakly spasming to the rhythm of Jericho’s subsequent attacks.

This atypical reaction forces audiences—smart and mark alike—to re-evaluate any assumptions that the event constitutes a typical WWE beatdown. Overblown theatricality gives way to a scene which seems more related to everyday experiences with pain: *Here's an old man being beaten and whipped by a strong, young man. He's not moving. Not like other wrestlers do. I wonder...* The battered bodies of these Legends are then framed in high angle camera shots, making them look ever so much more vulnerable than they were prior to Jericho’s assault. Hence the smart statements gushing that ‘gently 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’ (Burrito, 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 two different kinds of enjoyment in their readers. On one hand, there is the text which provides pleasure born from familiarity. It ‘contents, fills, grants euphoria; [it is] the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a comfortable practice of reading’ (Barthes, *Image-Music-Text* 14). The Knox-Kane match engendered such a been-there-done-that-it's-ok-I-guess overall reaction from smarts. For every ‘Mike Knox throwing Mysterio at Kane was fantastic’ (Burrito, n.p.), there is an ‘Ahahaha jesus Knox [sic] that was the shittiest Hurrracanrana sell ever’ (Axisillian, n.p.), and a ‘Hit the beard [sic] it is Knox's weakpoint’ (Eurotrash, n.p.). The pleasant genericity of the match enables and necessitates that these smarts maintain their tactic of ironic posturing. They are able to armchair critique Knox for making his opponent's spinning Hurrracanrana throw look painless. Yet they are also allowed to reiterate their camp affection for Knox's [large and bushy beard](http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/rt/printerFriendly/143/0), which remains grotesque even when divorced from a WWE universe that celebrates sculpted physiques.
By contrast, Barthes praises the text of rapturous jouissance. It is one where an orgasmic intensity of pleasure is born from the unravelling of its audience’s assumptions, moving them away from their comfort zone. It is a text which ‘imposes a stage of loss, [a] text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of boredom), unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to crisis his relation with language’ (Barthes, Image-Music-Text 14).

In addition to the atypical physical reactions of the Legends, WWE cynically positions the Jericho-Legends segments during Raw events which also feature slick video montages highlighting the accomplishments of individual Legends. These montages—complete with an erudite and enthusiastic Voice-of-God narrator—introduce the long-retired Legends to marks unfamiliar with WWE’s narrative continuity: “Ladies and gentlemen! Rrriiicky “The Draaagon” Steeeeamboat!”. At the same time, they serve as a visually and aurally impressive highlight-reel-cum-nostalgic-celebration of each Legend’s career accomplishments. Their authoritative narration is spliced to clips of past matches, and informs audiences that, for instance, Steamboat was ‘one of the first Superstars to combine technical skills with astounding aerial agility ... in a match widely regarded as one of the best in history, he captured the Intercontinental title from Randy Savage in front of a record-breaking 93 173 fans’ (“Raw #636”, WWE). Following the unassailably authentic video footage of past matches, other retired wrestlers speak candidly in non-WWE stages such as outdoor parks and their own homes about the Legend’s strengths and contributions to the industry.

The interesting thing about these didactic montages is not so much what they show — Legends mythologised into triumphant Titans — but rather, what they elide. While the Steamboat-centred package does reflect the smart consensus that his Intercontinental bout ‘was a technical classic, and to this day, is still considered one of the greatest matches of all-time’ (NPP, n.p.), it does not mention how Steamboat was treated poorly in the WWE. Despite coming to it as the widely-known World Champion of [the NWA] rival promotion, WWE producers ‘dressed Steamboat up as a dragon and even made him blow fire. ...To boot, he was never acknowledged as a World Champion and [kept losing] to the stars’ (NPP, n.p.). The montages, overtly endorsed by the gigantic WWE logo as they are, are ultimately pleasant illusions which rewrite inconvenient truths while glamorising pleasant memories.

Jericho’s speeches, however, sharply break from this celebratory mode. He references Steamboat’s previous success in the NWA, ‘an organisation that according to this company never even existed’ (“Raw #636”, WWE). He then castigates Steamboat for being a real-life sellout and alludes to Steamboat having personal problems unmentioned in the montage:

It wasn’t until you came to the WWE that you sold your soul to all of these parasites [everyone watching] that you became “The Dragon”. A glorified Karate Kid selling headbands and making poses. Feeding into stereotypes. And 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 all the rest. Down and out. 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 sellout. 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 rupture 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 sycophant preying on fan goodwill to enrich his own selfish ends. This viewpoint, troublingly enough for smarts, is supported by their 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 juvenilia of the once-popular *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). “C’mon Legend! Live in the past!” taunts Jericho as he stuffs Superfly’s mouth with bananas 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 Snake” 81), age has grounded these Legends. They can now believably be assaulted with impunity by someone that Steamboat dismisses as ‘a snotty brat wrestler of a kid[sic] ...a hypocrite’ (“Raw #636”, *WWE*), and even in this,
they apparently give their all to make Jericho look viciously “good”, thus exceeding the high expectations of smarts. As an appreciative thread title on SomethingAwful states, ‘WWE Discussion is the RICKY STEAMBOAT OWN [wins] ZONE for 02/23/09’ (HulkaMatt, n.p.)

Conclusion

The Jericho-Legends feud culminated the day after the Hall of Fame ceremony, at the WWE’s flagship Wrestlemania event. Actor Mickey Rourke humiliated Jericho for the honour of the Legends, flattening the cocky bragart with a single punch. The maximum degree of moral order possible was thus temporarily restored to an episodic narrative centred around unprovoked acts of violence. Ultimately though, it is important to note the three strategies that WWE used The Legends were scripted to respond feebly to Jericho’s physical assault, slick recap montages were copiously deployed, and Jericho himself was allowed candid metatextual references to incidents that WWE producers normally like to pretend have “never even existed”. All these strategies were impressive in their own right, and they eventually served to reinforce each other. They shocked the SomethingAwful smart community, celebrated its autodidact tendencies, and forced it to re-evaluate pleasant memories. Such producer strategies enabled these smarts to re-discover jouissance and perform a rapturously regressive “marking out”.

References


