

Neal Hebert & Jon Cogburn

KAYFABE NATION

PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING,
DONALD TRUMP, AND
THE NEW CYNICISM



KAYFABE NATION

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Fig. 1. Detail from Hieronymus Bosch, *Ship of Fools* (1490–1500)

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We dedicate this book to our dear friend Ian Crystal, the inspiration for Chapter 1's interminable critic. Having passed in November of 2012, just after Barack Obama's reelection, Ian did not live to see our sometimes heated discussions about wrestling come to fruition. He also did not live to see the failure of the Obama coalition and the global rise of autocracy. We know that Ian's sadness about this would have been tempered with his ability to find humor and humanity in the strangest places. With respect to this book, these include being the inspiration for a somewhat mocking fan archetype as well as the extent to which this project's inception traces to an evening twenty years ago when, in a smoke-filled apartment on Chimes Street, Neal opened a box of old VHS tapes and asked whether he or Jon had ever seen wrestling from Japan.

Ian's academic specialization was Ancient Greek philosophy. It was he who told us that Plato's actual name was probably Aristocles, and that it is not completely implausible to hold that "Plato" (from the Greek word *platus*, which means "broad") was actually Aristocles's in-ring name given him by his wrestling coach. If Plato was a face, "broad" referred to his shoulders. To the extent that he was a heel, it must have referenced his forehead. In any case, "Plato" is to "Aristocles" what "Ric Flair" is to "Richard Morgan Fliehr" or "Dusty Rhodes" is to "Virgil Riley

Runnels Jr.” And so we now begin to understand the extent to which Western philosophy is a series of footnotes to wrestling.

INTRODUCTION

Vince McMahon's Apprentice

The connections between Donald Trump and professional wrestling — or, to be more precise, that style or genre of wrestling described as sports entertainment — are both stranger and deeper than they might first appear.¹ Trump has been an avid watcher of professional wrestling since he was a child.² From the 1980s into the early 2000s, he parlayed his celebrity to insert himself into the industry, so much so that he was inducted as a

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- 1 Although many readers would assume that the terms “professional wrestling” and “sports entertainment” are synonyms, professional wrestling properly refers to the simulated performances of conflict that have occurred in bouncy boxing rings since the late nineteenth century, while sports entertainment refers to the specific type of professional wrestling promoted by Vince McMahon upon taking over the New York professional wrestling territory from his father Vincent J. McMahon. Critic of McMahon’s vision of professional wrestling Jim Cornette — a former member of McMahon’s creative team in the Attitude Era, an accomplished professional wrestling performer in the 1980s, and promoter himself in the 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s — once quipped that professional wrestling was an art form beloved and watched by millions of people all across America for more than a hundred years, while sports entertainment was a bastardization of that art form watched by slightly fewer than two million people worldwide. There can be no doubt as to where Cornette’s sympathies and preferences lie.
 - 2 Abraham Josephine Riesman, *Ringmaster: Vince McMahon and the Unmaking of America* (Simon & Schuster, 2023), 158.

member of the World Wrestling Entertainment (wwe) Hall of Fame in 2013. His television appearances on *Monday Night Raw* in the early 2000s peaked with his participation in the “Battle of the Billionaires” match with wwe owner Vincent Kennedy McMahon in 2007’s “Wrestlemania XXIII.”³ Trump did not wrestle, but Bobby Lashley, Trump’s selected proxy for the match whom Trump accompanied at ringside, defeated McMahon’s proxy Umaga (Edward Smith Fatu).⁴ As per the match

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- 3 The World Wrestling Federation, or wwf, was the name of Vince Kennedy McMahon’s northeastern wrestling promotion from 1979 until 2002. Prior to McMahon’s purchase of the promotion between 1979–1980, it was called the World Wide Wrestling Federation, and was promoted by his father, Vincent J. McMahon. In the wrestling industry, these men were often, to Vincent Kennedy McMahon’s chagrin, referred to as “Vince Sr.” and “Vince Jr.” despite their different middle names. In this monograph, we follow Vincent Kennedy McMahon’s preferences of nomenclature. In every instance where we refer to “McMahon” or “Vince McMahon” with no initial, we refer to Vincent K. McMahon. In 2002, McMahon renamed the company World Wrestling Entertainment, or wwe. This change was not McMahon’s choice; that year the World Wildlife Fund successfully sued McMahon and his company for trademark violation. According to a deal McMahon had signed with the World Wildlife Fund, the initials “wwf” were the exclusive trademark of the World Wildlife Fund within Europe. McMahon’s website, wwf.com, and company logo from 1999–2002 both violated this agreement, and the company was ordered to change its trademarking. Throughout this book, we usually follow current wwe practice and refer to the company as wwe no matter its point in history, but for clarity also sometimes refer to it according to how it was called at the time: wwwf if we are referring to events that occurred between the company’s establishment in 1963 and its name change in 1979, wwf if we are referring to events that occurred between 1979 and 2002, and wwe if we are referring to events that occurred between 2002 and the present. Much of the historical information about wrestling presented in this book can be found in greater detail in Neal Hebert, “Professional Wrestling: Local Performance History, Global Performance Praxis” (PhD. diss., Louisiana State University, 2016). For questions about historical instances of professional wrestling before 2006 — such as questions about the territories, wrestling’s origins, and pre-wwf/wwwf history — we defer to Scott Beekman and his superb *Ringside: A History of Professional Wrestling* (Praeger, 2006).
- 4 McMahon’s selection of Edward Smith Fatu (Umaga) as his heavy is a choice rife with historical significance to fans of professional wrestling. For decades, some of the heaviest hitting “big men” in McMahon’s promotion have been Samoan heels, the vast majority of whom have been members of

stipulation, McMahon's head was shaved on live television when his wrestler lost the match.

In the *Monday Night Raw* buildup, Trump cut “promos” — wrestling speeches and interviews to promote upcoming matches and shows — where he humorously insulted McMahon in the standard manner of WWE performers. Here is a transcript of one:

You know, Vince, you never really showed your appreciation for the *Raw* audience. Never once did I see that appreciation. I'm going to do stuff that's never been done before, never been seen before. People have been watching *Raw* for seventeen years. And they deserve something special. You've made a lot of money off of these people.⁵

It's uncanny to watch such footage now and see Trump's characteristic hand gestures, the isolation of one villain (here WWE's owner), and his typical oversell of the promise to do something so wonderful that it's never been seen or done before. While Trump himself never competed in a match as a wrestler, he did receive a stunner⁶ from Stone Cold Steve Austin and later performed a clothesline⁷ against McMahon. WWE Creative wrote skits and TV segments that portrayed Trump as the “good bil-

the Fatu family. For more on the importance of representations of Samoan identity, see Theo Plothe, “Samoan Submission Machines: Grappling with Representations of Samoan Identity in Professional Wrestling,” *Professional Wrestling Studies Journal* 2, no. 1 (2021): 1–24.

- 5 See Wrasslinews, “Donald Trump's Best WWE Promo,” *YouTube*, April 22, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RmKoVc6-2xI>.
- 6 A stunner can only be performed when the opponent is behind the wrestler and facing their back. The protagonist then grabs the opponent's head and pulls their jaw over the protagonist's shoulder before pulling them down and dropping into a seated position. For a description and video of Austin delivering the stunner to Trump, which Trump botched, see Travis Waldron, “The Definitive History of That Time Donald Trump Took a Stone Cold Stunner,” *Huffpost*, February 14, 2017, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/donald-trump-wwe-wrestling_n_58a35601e4b094a129ef8c46.
- 7 For a video and description of the buildup to it, read Christina Wilkie, “That Time Donald Trump Clotheslined Vince McMahon on ‘Wrestlema-

lionaire,” including one where Trump was shown as engineering the dropping of money onto the studio audience and one where Trump is presented as responsible for an advertisement-free episode of *Monday Night Raw*.

Trump’s string of appearances on the weekly *Monday Night Raw* show throughout 2007 leading to the most lucrative Wrestlemania up to that time were, prior to his presidency, the culmination of a much longer history with WWE. As far back as 1988, he was falsely presented on television as hosting “Wrestlemania IV” in his now-shuttered Atlantic City casino, Trump Plaza. In 2009, WWE produced a storyline claiming that Trump was the new owner of WWE.⁸ More recently, World Wrestling Entertainment’s co-owner Linda McMahon donated seven million dollars to Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign.⁹ Trump subsequently nominated Linda McMahon to be the twenty-fifth administrator of the United States Small Business Administration, a position she held from 2017 until 2019, at which point she stepped down to head the largest Pro-Trump superPAC in the 2020 Presidential election.¹⁰ In 2007 and 2009, the McMahons donated five million dollars to Trump’s now shuttered fraudulent family foundation, which was more than they gave to their own foundation (in 2009, zero dollars were added), something they have never been able to explain to reporters.¹¹ In 2024, Linda McMahon contributed over ten million dollars to his campaign,

nia.” *Huffpost*, February 23, 2016, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/donald-trump-wrestlemania_n_56ccedcfe4b041136f18b745.

- 8 This itself was a characteristic grift. The WWE related events presented on television as being held at Trump Plaza or Trump Taj Mahal were really held in the Atlantic City Convention Center. As far as the storyline in 2009, the WWE’s press release announcing that Trump had purchased the promotion made Wall Street question the direction of the WWE, since they weren’t sure whether or not the purchase was actually real. A second press release was sent out once the stock valuation sharply dropped because of the first press release. Riesman, *Ringmaster*, 159, 167–68, and 184.
- 9 See “Linda McMahon Donated \$7 Million to Help Elect Trump,” *CBS News*, December 9, 2016, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/linda-mcmahon-donated-7-million-to-elect-trump/>.
- 10 Riesman, *Ringmaster*, 341–43.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 340.

led the pro-Trump America First Action Super PAC, helped lead the Trump-centered American First Policy Institute, serves on the Board of Directors of Trump's social media platform, Truth Social, and as we make finishing edits to this manuscript has become co-chair of Trump's transition team.

The connection between the forty-fifth President of the United States and the owner and CEO of the sports entertainment promotion who managed to reduce twenty full-time televised wrestling promotions across the United States in the 1980s to just one large company by mid-2001 cannot be explained merely by the economic contiguity in the United States that results from people of the same economic class (here oligarchic billionaires) only having social relations with one another.¹² Though even in these respects, their connection is astonishing.¹³ Trump is widely reported to only have had private conversations with two people during his presidency: Russian dictator Vladimir Putin and WWE CEO Vince McMahon.¹⁴ In her recent study, *Vince McMahon and the Unmaking of America*, Josie Riesman writes,

Vince is likely the closest thing to a friend that Donald Trump has. So intimate are the former WWE CEO and the forty-fifth president that Vince is said to be one of the only people whose calls Trump takes in private, forcing his retinue to leave the

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- 12 In Larry DeGaris, "The Money and the Miles," in *Professional Wrestling: Politics and Populism*, edited by Sharon Mazer et al. (Seagull Books, 2020), DeGaris writes about what it was like to wrestle during the period when there were still multiple promotions competing for talent through the time when they were bought out by WWE.
- 13 Michael Scibilia makes an excellent case for these connections being deep, substantive, and relevant to understanding Trump and his brand of demagoguery. See, for example, Michael Scibilia, "Squared Circle, Oval Office: Vince McMahon and U.S. Politics," *Professional Wrestling Studies Journal* 1, no. 1 (2020): 1–22.
- 14 See Adam Taylor, "Trump Has Spoken Privately with Putin at Least 16 Times: Here's What We Know About the Conversations," *The Washington Post*, October 4, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/10/04/trump-has-spoken-privately-with-putin-least-times-heres-what-we-know-about-conversations/>.

room so the two old chums can chat in confidence. There are profound differences between them, to be sure, but they've each been heirs to difficult fathers and share both a disregard for respectable morality and an uncanny habit of bouncing back from defeat. For more than three decades, Trump has watched and admired Vince's product. He has been both host and performer at many of Vince's wrestling extravaganzas, honing his abilities as a rabble-rouser. Through Trump, Vince's wrestling infused mentality has reached the highest levels of the American system.¹⁵

Hypotheses about why Trump does not want his conversations with Putin and McMahon to be overheard are speculative. A not implausible one, however, is that these are two of the only people on the planet Trump is deferential to, something he cannot stand other people witnessing. The difference between Trump's mannerisms and behavior in public around Putin versus other world leaders is so pronounced that it became a journalistic trope. In contrast with his caddish behavior towards other world leaders, Trump does not grab Putin's hand, pulling the dictator towards himself, and grasp it for an uncomfortable period of time. He does not interrupt Putin and does not cut in line in front of him. Instead, his body language calls to mind a beta male chimpanzee's obsequiousness before the pack alpha.¹⁶

Prior to his relationship with the Russian dictator, Donald Trump spent decades carefully crafting his fundamental being-in-the-world so that it apes McMahon's in multiple ways. Longtime McMahon consigliere Jim Ross, a legendary ring announcer who also served as McMahon's head of talent rela-

¹⁵ Riesman, *Ringmaster*, 5.

¹⁶ See, for example Michael Goodwin, "Trump Bordered on Being Deferential in Putin Meeting," *New York Post*, July 16, 2018, <https://nypost.com/2018/07/16/trump-bordered-on-being-deferential-in-putin-meeting/>, and Marshall Cohen, "37 Times Trump Was Soft on Russia," *CNN*, August 4, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/11/17/politics/trump-soft-on-russia/index.html>.

tions, noted that this could be seen in Trump's very first political rallies.

The manner in which The Donald works — works up? — his audiences while stumping is vintage wwe. Watch the mannerisms. Walk to the mic, and the crowd quiets. Walk away, and the decibel level rises. Step back to the podium, step away, all the while pumping up a throng that is ready to hang on every word and thought.¹⁷

Ross points out that Trump's billionaire bravado exactly mirrored McMahon's physical performances on *Monday Night Raw*. Like Vince, Ross says, "Trump is a natural-born communicator, a showman who seamlessly integrated into the wwe lexicon by playing himself."¹⁸ Indeed, Trump's catchphrase "You're fired!" on his television show *The Apprentice* was an echo of McMahon's own televised use of the phrase several years earlier.¹⁹

The parallels continue. McMahon's propensity for deflecting criticism and scandal by publicly attacking the media predates Trump's.²⁰ McMahon is one of the few people in American history, prior to Trump, to successfully use national media to publicly mock and belittle prosecutors charging him with crimes.²¹ McMahon's disturbing public relationship with his daughter, including his penchant for kissing her on the lips and scripting

17 Jim Ross, "How Donald Trump's wwe Character Shaped His Political Persona," *Fox Sports*, March 16, 2016, <https://www.foxsports.com/stories/wwe/how-donald-trumps-wwe-character-shaped-his-political-persona>.

18 Ibid.

19 Riesman, *Ringmaster*, 25.

20 With respect to McMahon, see Riesman, *Ringmaster*, 204 and 327. On Trump, see Leonard Downie Jr., "The Trump Administration and the Media," *Committee to Protect Journalists*, April 16, 2020, <https://cpj.org/reports/2020/04/trump-media-attacks-credibility-leaks/>.

21 With respect to McMahon, see Riesman, *Ringmaster*, 236. On Trump, see Nicholas Riccardi and Gary Fields, "Trump's Promise of Payback for Prosecution Follows Years of Attacking Democratic Traditions," *Associated Press*, June 15, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/trump-retribution-indictment-documents-biden-american-democracy-5a8ec37b359fee85d-of0956139d79f51>.

her into wrestling storylines that involve her being the victim of sexual violence, predates Trump's own penchant for publicly discussing his own daughter Ivanka in sexual ways.²² Both men have as of this writing escaped anything approaching legal, social, or professional sanction commensurate with their history of sexual predation and other illegal behavior.²³ Both have a history of business failures and bailouts teeming with connections that journalists and historians may never be able to fully penetrate.²⁴ More recently, both Trump and WWE have benefited

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- 22 With respect to McMahon, see Riesman, *Ringmaster*, 310 and 319. With respect to Trump, see Adam Withnall, "Donald Trump's Unsettling Record of Comments About His Daughter Ivanka," *Independent*, October 10, 2016, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/donald-trump-ivanka-trump-creepiest-most-unsettling-comments-a-roundup-a7353876.html/>, and Arwa Mahdawi, "Donald Trump Was Allegedly Creepy About Ivanka — But Will His Fans Care?," *The Guardian*, July 1, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/jul/01/donald-trump-ivanka-miles-taylor-book-claims>.
- 23 With respect to McMahon, see Riesman, *Ringmaster*, 135–37, 337, and 355. On Trump, see Meghan Keneally, "'Horseface,' 'Crazy,' 'Low IQ': Trump's History of Insulting Women," *ABC News*, October 17, 2018, <https://abc-news.go.com/Politics/trumps-long-history-calling-women-crazy-attacking-appearances/story?id=48348956>.
- 24 On McMahon, see the discussion in Riesman's *Ringmaster* of the Evel Knievel snake river canyon jump, McMahon's WWF and XFL, his reporting involving the one million dollars that McMahon used to purchase WWF, as well as Riesman's discussion of the role of Saudi money in propping up the WWE. On Trump's bankruptcies, see Michael Hiltzik, "A Lengthy List of Trump's Disastrous Business Deals — Compiled by His Newest Business Partners," *Los Angeles Times*, May 18, 2022, <https://www.latimes.com/business/story/2022-05-18/trump-business-partners-outline-his-failed-deals>. On Trump and the mafia, see Gabrielle Bruney, "Netflix's Fear City Hints at Trump's Mob Connections: The Real Story Goes Even Deeper," *Esquire*, July 22, 2020, <https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/tv/a33350476/fear-city-new-york-mafia-donald-trump-tower-mob-ties-explained/>. On money laundering, see Alison Durkee, "Trump's Media Company Reportedly Under Federal Investigation for Money Laundering Linked to Russia," *Forbes*, March 15, 2023, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/alisondurkee/2023/03/15/trumps-media-company-reportedly-under-federal-investigation-for-money-laundering-linked-to-russia/>, and Jonathan Landay and Warren Strobel, "Sales of Trump Properties Suggestive of Money-Laundering: Researcher," *Reuters*, January 19, 2018, <https://www>.

immensely from Saudi Arabian largesse that from the Saudi perspective does not make sense as business investments seeking to maximize a purely financial return.²⁵

Astute followers of wrestling need not know about Trump's history as a wrestling fan and how that fandom seems to have shaped every aspect of his personal, business, and political life to appreciate the extent to which Trump is the *real* apprentice — to Vince McMahon. The specific tenor of Trump's insults, braggadocios, and fact-free tirades can only have come about as a result of watching and sometimes crafting professional wrestling promos.²⁶

In this book, we shed light not just on the malevolent genius of McMahon and his best student, but also on the brand of performative right radicalism gaining ascendance across the planet. One of the key takeaways from our investigation is that the struggle against autocracy cannot be separated from the struggle for truth both in the public sphere and our own souls. Part of Trump's rise to power has been as a result of his sneering at politics as fake, in contrast to his own claimed authenticity coupled with his constant, and mostly unchallenged, lying. The reason his supporters accept his fact-free tirades has to do with his success in turning the United States into Kayfabe Nation, a place where belief is suspended and lies have the ring of truth. Thus, understanding the connection between WWE and Trumpism allows one to understand how a specific kind of postmodern

reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-russia-fusion/sales-of-trump-properties-suggestive-of-money-laundering-researcher-idUSKBN1F727X.

- 25 With respect to McMahon, see Riesman, *Ringmaster*, 342. On Trump, see Peter Wade, "Profits from Trump and Kushner's White House Connection to Saudi Prince Continue to Roll In," *Rolling Stone*, February 12, 2023, <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/trump-kushner-saudi-prince-money-conflict-interest-1234678351/>. With respect to Saudi Arabia, see Adam Nicholas Cohen, "WWE and Saudi Vision 2030: Professional Wrestling as Cultural Diplomacy," *Professional Wrestling Studies Journal* 1, no. 1 (2020): 57–72.
- 26 For more on Trump and his demagogic rhetoric, see Amy E. Mendes, "Digital Demagogue: The Critical Candidacy of Donald J. Trump," *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 6, nos. 3–4 (2016): 62–73.

denigration of truth, one Riesman refers to as “neokayfabe,” has been a necessary precondition for this global autocratic turn.²⁷ Though our tracing of the ramifications of the postmodern turn to neokayfabe in wrestling and politics takes some strange turns (how could it not?), and in spite of the fact that both of us love professional wrestling, everything we write here is in the service of advancing the cause of truth *against* this now pervasively global neokayfabe.

In Chapters 1 and 2, we begin by exploring the idea of traditional kayfabe, which was the holy code of people in the professional wrestling industry not to reveal that the outcomes of matches are predetermined.²⁸ Kayfabe’s degeneration into

27 The word “global” occurs twenty-nine times in this text. In passing, we note that that part of the to-wrestling-fans unsatisfactory style of much WWE professional wrestling during its heyday comes not merely from how anabolic steroid and human-growth hormone abuse produces bodies less able to execute the kind of athleticism that true fans associate with Mexican and Japanese versions of the artform, but also from WWE’s attempt to produce a style accessible to a global audience of countries, unlike Mexico and Japan, where there is no widespread antecedent tradition of professional wrestling. Space and dialectical considerations prevented us from interrogating this second claim here, though see the discussion in Hebert, “Professional Wrestling,” which is very important in light of the connection between WWE and ascending global autocracy. A starting point for this project now must be James R. Ball III, *Theater of State: A Dramaturgy of the United Nations* (Northwestern University Press, 2020) with its incisive discussion of the dramaturgical and political aspects of global spectatorship.

28 The ever-changing understanding of kayfabe is something we explore throughout the book. Although it is not included in our narrow definition of kayfabe as the code among insiders not to reveal fictional aspects of the performance, our broader conception of the role this code plays in wrestling owes much to Eero Laine’s conception of kayfabe as a sort of “shared theatricality” uniting performances of professional wrestling with traditional theatrical spectacles such as plays and musical theater. Kayfabe is, ultimately, lots of things; but this shared theatricality, regardless of whether it is concealed or celebrated, is a central aspect of kayfabe’s function, which we build on in our analysis of neokayfabe. See Eero Laine, *Professional Wrestling and the Commercial Stage* (Routledge, 2020), 19. We should also note that another guidepost for our discussion is Lisa Jones, “All Caught Up in the Kayfabe: Understanding and Appreciating Pro-Wrestling,” *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 46, no. 2 (2020): 276–91.

Riesmanian neokayfabe can best be understood by analyzing what has become known as the “Montreal Screwjob,” the signal event in the transition from the period where kayfabe was rigorously enforced by wrestling promotions to our current time where everyone must pretend that kayfabe exists even though the performance practice in question only makes sense if one presupposes that it does not.²⁹ Neokayfabe creates a paradoxical moment where everybody is in on a secret, everybody knows that everybody is in on the secret, yet it is still treated as a secret. As a result, to be a wrestling fan after the Screwjob is to constantly track two plots, the fictitious, soap-operatic narratives scripted by WWE around the wrestling characters and the “real” life events involving the company and performers “behind the scenes.” More cynical viewers realize that the “real” stories are also often a kind of ersatz reality television, just as controlled and shaped by the promotion and its numerous writers as the fictional ones. These chapters raise the worrisome possibility that maintaining wrestling fandom during the era of neokayfabe ends up not being much different from supporting an authoritarian on the simple justification that it is acceptable to support a liar because all politicians are liars.

This being said, the most interesting connections between neokayfabe and the authoritarian mindset don’t follow from the breaking of kayfabe itself, but rather from what WWE had to do to survive after kayfabe was broken and all wrestling fans became cynics.³⁰ Thus begins our discussion of four authori-

29 Indeed, this sea change has also caused a rise in fans and performers aggressively deriding the contemporary product as inferior to the wrestling of the past. While this is, of course, a seemingly minority opinion, it has proven to be lucrative for podcasters attempting to monetize this cynicism through their own nostalgic merchandise. For the best example of this, refer to Jim Cornette’s podcast on the Arcadian Vanguard Network, *The Jim Cornette Experience*.

30 While we favor the passive construction “kayfabe was broken,” a nontrivial number of people in the wrestling industry cite any number of performers and promoters as being “the” person who irrevocably broke kayfabe. Given the existence of tell-all reporting revealing that wrestling is predetermined and matches are “fixed” throughout the twentieth century, the passive con-

tarian tropes that characterize both WWE and authoritarian regimes: cynicism, buffoonery, sexism, and the invention of conspiracy theories.

Cynicism, though arguably never completely absent from WWE, ramped up after kayfabe was decisively broken during a live pay-per-view. Following that event, it was by no means obvious how WWE could sustain viewership. Who wants to watch something that everyone knows is fake?³¹ Again, though this is getting ahead of ourselves, why vote when neither political party intends to fulfill the promises relevant to one's actual situation? We show how, not unlike ascendent paranoia in the era of the QAnon conspiracy theory, WWE negotiated the transformation to a paradoxical universal kayfabe in large part by portraying the business of the promotion as the workings of a malevolent group of insiders controlling it.³²

Chapter 3 explores the phenomenon of buffoonery in authoritarianism by beginning with a study of its manifestation in WWE. Vince McMahon subjected his own character to a shocking amount of humiliation, including having his head shaved, having his prize Corvette destroyed, wetting his pants, failing a lie detector test, being kicked in the testicles by his angry wife, and kissing the backside of the wrestler Rikishi. McMahon's performances were of a piece with the manner in which the clownishness of the aspiring autocrat is part of the replacement of politics as a collective effort to increase the public good with something very much like sports entertainment.

struction seems the optimal way to describe kayfabe and all of its deaths prior to Montreal shattering it once and for all.

- 31 This is the ever-present doubt that wrestling fans have had to contend with ever since matches stopped being legitimate sport — a doubt that has complicated the spectatorship of fans for the past 150 years. As far as we can tell, the “smart marks” (“mark” is the pejorative carnie term for somebody who spends money buying tickets to the fictional sport) of every generation get to decide that wrestling is (1) a predetermined performance and (2) worth watching anyway. Neokayfabe is then the weird situation where everyone is a smart mark.
- 32 Wrestlers especially beloved or hated by the fans are said to be “over” in wrestling's carnie argot.

In doing all of this, McMahon instantiated one of the strangest, least studied authoritarian tropes: the strong man as buffoon. Modern authoritarians almost universally present themselves as objects of ridicule. Prior to the crackdowns following the invasion of Ukraine, Vladimir Putin's weird shirtless photos were widely mocked on Russian Twitter with no censorship. Trump's entire political career has involved weird affects including painting himself orange and greeting each day with a cemented combover, and odd behavior such as dancing badly to the Village People, hugging flags, and incessantly inveighing on celebrities as the United States' social media gossipmonger-in-chief. Naturally, he became a constant punchline on evening television shows. Or consider Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro, a walking weird magnet, like Trump constantly talking in ways to establish toxic male dominance while embodying the affect of a *Looney Tunes* cartoon character. Randomly encountered animals like an emu bested Bolsonaro on multiple occasions. The weakness of Bolsonaro's own body also consistently defeated him, such as when he was hospitalized for ten days for hiccupping or the period during which he could not wear pants due to the rare skin condition erysipelas.

In this regard, the role that McMahon's own humiliations played with respect to capitalizing on audience reaction against himself is highly instructive. WWE's continued growth after an event that many of us at the time feared could destroy the industry required McMahon to play a character and in so doing manifest four of the main autocratic characteristics — cynicism, buffoonery, conspiracism, and misogyny — that would, within a decade, be perfectly combined in the persona of McMahon's best student, Donald Trump.

In Chapter 4, we cover WWE's third authoritarian trope, the kind of performative sexism found most prominently in WWE during the "Attitude Era" of the late '90s and early aughts, where the only truly constant storyline has been fictional subjugation

tion and humiliation of women wrestlers.³³ Recent academic research has begun to explore the central role misogyny plays in the political power exercised by leaders such as Trump, Benjamin Netanyahu, Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, Jair Bolsonaro, Viktor Orbán, Vladimir Putin, Narendra Modi, Rodrigo Duterte, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.³⁴ While this amplification of misogyny is a throughline in contemporary autocracy, there is no simple story to explain the global patriarchal backlash under which we currently suffer. We hope that our study of how this backlash was enacted in WWE during the Attitude Era will increase our understanding of why violence and subjugation of women is sometimes politically successful.

Sexism easily leads to the misconception that structural problems admit to easy solutions if only the right people are

33 Given the ubiquity of racism and ethnic hatred among authoritarian movements, we initially sought to include a chapter tying MAGA racism to the complicated and often outmoded way that race is performed in WWE. However, we did not find the analogies clear enough to merit discussion in one chapter. Though mid and sometimes top of the card Black wrestlers such as Booker T have often gained heat by performing negative racial stereotypes, there have been Black and multi-racial superstars at the very top of the wrestling card not playing to these stereotypes since before professional wrestling was mainly a televised spectacle, including: Ernie Ladd, Sylvester Ritter (the Junkyard Dog, discussed in Chapter 1), Jimmy “Superfly” Snuka, and Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson. The increasingly multi-racial and international fanbase for professional wrestling determined that by the time of Trump’s political rise, the percentage of Black wrestlers on the card was steadily increasing and the performance of racial parables in storyline steadily decreasing. However, by saying this we don’t mean to be dismissing the importance of this topic; see especially the essays in Aaron Horton, ed., *Identity in Professional Wrestling: Essays on Nationality, Race and Gender* (McFarland, 2018); Sean Buckelew, “Toughest Men in the South, Greatest Athletes in the World: Gender, Race, and Modernity in Southern Wrestling” (PhD diss., University of Southern Mississippi, 2023); Scibilia, “Squared Circle, Oval Office”; and Mario Alonzo Dozal, “Playing the Savage: Professional Wrestling’s Portrayal of the Exotic through James ‘Kamala’ Harris,” *Professional Wrestling Studies Journal* 1, no. 1 (2020): 41–55.

34 In this context, see especially Nitasha Kaul, “The Misogyny of Authoritarians in Contemporary Democracies,” *International Studies Review* 23, no. 4 (2021): 1619–45.

punished. This strategic placing or setting up of scapegoats is the cornerstone of the kind of conspiratorial thinking that arises in a society where all legitimating metanarratives have been robbed of their power. It is also our last authoritarian trait, again, set up by McMahon and aped by Trump. In professional wrestling, McMahon's buffoonery was always part of a larger plot trope involving setting up mock authority figures who can easily be punished. The "General Managers" of *Smackdown* and *Raw* were in fact performers with no actual executive power, performers who could be foiled in the storylines by good guys. Chapter 5 covers this transition in society and in professional wrestling. In combining the results of the earlier chapters while extending a deconstructive approach to narrative associated in performance studies with Clare Birchall's 2006 *Knowledge Goes Pop: From Conspiracy Theory to Gossip*, we are able to set up a philosophical intervention that guides this book's conclusion. We first explicate what philosophers call the "Quine-Duhem problem" to explain why it is nearly impossible to empirically falsify conspiracy theories, and then show how offering a competing narrative (as opposed to individual fact checks) insulates one from this very problem.

In our concluding chapter, we build on this idea of narrative truth as the antidote to postmodern or neokayfabe, in the process trying to provide a little hope for the future, in wrestling and beyond. Our first five chapters concern cases where real life became more compelling than fiction, and WWE responded by inconsistently changing the fictional narrative in ways that allowed them to monetize their own fans' discontent. However, in a few core cases involving the death of wrestlers, WWE has actually changed the reality for the better in a successful attempt to reflect the narratives by which fans insisted on remembering those wrestlers. We use these instances in Chapter 5's discussion of narration as a solution to the Quine-Duhem problem to show why narratives are better weapons against conspiratorial thinking than mere falsification of individual absurd claims put forward by conspiracists.

The connections that we reveal between sports entertainment and Trumpism all rest on the specific strategies WWE employed during the period when Trump was most centrally involved with the promotion: (1) universally breaking kayfabe, (2) McMahon playing a fictional version of himself who was constantly humiliated in storylines, (3) curating the fiction so that the only consistent throughline is the vicious affirmation of traditional gender roles through parables of male domination, and (4) telling stories that encourage viewers to ignore the actual material conditions involved in producing the entertainment product in favor of fictions involving powerful individual actors.

The result of the McMahonian tropes is that in the WWE universe: (1) nearly every mark thinks that they are in on the con, (2) people who dislike WWE's iteration of the artform of professional wrestling are placated by chances to see McMahon ritualistically humiliated, (3) male viewers bond through the rebarbative treatment of women in WWE storylines, and (4) watchers of WWE are able to ignore the true economic imperatives governing the manner in which the company has immiserated their own talent who receive neither health benefits nor retirement in a job that at least until recently reliably killed wrestling performers in their early forties.³⁵ While we hope that readers can already start to suspect the extent to which the core tics and tenets of MAGA were crafted in WWE, we are confident that by the end of this book they will be convinced.

But our goal is not merely to use WWE to understand Trumpism and the related autocratic turn in countries as diverse as El-Sisi's Egypt, Putin's Russia, Erdoğan's Turkey, Modi's India, Bolsonaro's Brazil, Orbán's Hungary, Netanyahu's Israel, and of course Trump's America. This book is both a work of performance studies and an instance of philosophical polemic, the latter a category that goes at least as far back as Søren Kierke-

35 These facts are corroborated by Robert Evans's research, presented in "Part 2: Vince McMahon, History's Greatest Monster," *Behind the Bastards* podcast, May 18, 2023, Cool Zone Media.

gaard's *The Present Age* all the way through Herbert Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man*. This book is a defense of truth, both against the lie that culminates in the widespread adoption of self-defeating conspiracy theories among the political constituency of the right, and against the idea, popular in corrupted center-left parties across the planet (including every country mentioned at the start of this paragraph) that political success comes down to adopting better rhetorical strategies, strategies that exist in part to cover over their abandonment of New Deal and socialist horizons, horizons where the material conditions of their supposed constituencies actually improve.

This is all to say that if the "postmodern" distrust of meta-narratives meant disavowing better narratives (where by better we mean narratives that better embody the true, the good, and the beautiful) in favor of rhetorical tricks, then becoming post-modern would be synonymous with surrender to the liars and bullshitters. But our analysis of narration as a response to the Quine-Duhem problem shows that this surrender is not inevitable.

“It’s Still Real to Me, Damn It!”: The Metaphysics of Professional Wrestling

Understanding the connection between Trumpism and wrestling requires fully understanding the profound transformation in professional wrestling that would lead to WWE’s “Attitude Era.” This is an entirely appropriate name for the period when Donald Trump, serving as Vince McMahon’s apprentice, began to form the ideology and ideas that Trump would later use to start the MAGA movement. Pre-Attitude Era wrestling died with neither a bang nor a whimper, but rather a Screwjob. But to understand the transformation, and its political salience, we must first go backwards to understand what was lost in the transition.

Work, Shoot, Match, Kayfabe: A Brief Primer on Professional Wrestling’s History and Idiolect

The entertainment of nineteenth-century traveling carnivals often featured simulated fights between an evil strongman and a carnival employee pretending to be a local resident who would defend the honor of the locale in which the carnival was performing. Much of the way wrestlers and fans talk about wres-

ting stems from this historical origin. “Kayfabe” probably came from the carnie pig Latin word for “fake,” and in carnivals even today a “work” is any performance or trick that constitutively involves the audience’s ignorance.

The exact meaning of “kayfabe” is so widely discussed within professional wrestling studies that we must begin with a brief survey.¹ However, let us repeat that we define kayfabe as the code among people in the industry to not reveal to fans and people outside of the industry that elements of the performance are fictional. The most central element is the fact that the outcomes of the matches are actually predetermined. Though this definition seems to put us at odds with other academics who define kayfabe differently, we are not sure that this is always a difference that makes a difference. We can accommodate much of what we see in other definitions by noting that the writer isolated a key way in which kayfabe (as we define it) manifests itself in the performance practice (politics and wrestling) in question.

In any case, correctly understanding kayfabe is key to correctly understanding Trump. In *Donald Trump and the Kayfabe Presidency: Professional Wrestling Rhetoric in the White House*, Shannon Bow O’Brien makes a very strong case for professional wrestling as a whole and kayfabe in particular as being vital to understanding Trump’s rhetorical methodology as a populist leader. When comparing the manufactured realities of Disney and Trump, O’Brien notes that,

each create spaces where they set and orchestrate the rules. Disney parks use suspension of disbelief as the standard. In these manufactured spaces, control of expectations is para-

1 In addition to the recent inclusion of the word “kayfabe” in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the most up-to-date summary of the discourse we have found is presented in Jessica Fontaine, Eero Laine, and Michael J. Altman, “Toward a Work-Shoot Approach to Kayfabe in Professional Wrestling,” *Professional Wrestling Studies Journal* 3, no. 1 (2022): 1–15. For those interested in an etymology of the term, refer to Eero Laine, *Professional Wrestling and the Commercial Stage* (Routledge, 2020), 26–32.

mount. When people accept them as the truth, they surrender control of their own rational thought process.²

This being said, though we agree with O’Brien that audiences must suspend their disbelief and agree not to analyze outside of the fictional world while watching wrestling or visiting a Disney park, kayfabe requires something more of both viewer and performers.

With respect to its manifestation, kayfabe has two principal “actors” who mutually constitute and co-create it: the first is the performer, and the second is the audience for whom a performance is performed. This is not a merely semantic difference. Where O’Brien’s rhetorical analysis focuses on Trump’s kayfabe creating “an insular world of his own making” with audiences surrendering “a modicum of their skepticism in exchange for an attempt to recapture the wonder of their childhoods,” we see a complex negotiation between performer and audience wherein audiences choose to buy into what the performer is selling to ensure that the performer’s reality is the operative reality in question for the duration of the performance.³

Terrance Griep, who performs as Tommy “The SpiderBaby” Saturday, notes that the understanding of kayfabe plays out *differently* for wrestlers and for fans. For a wrestler, preserving the suspension of disbelief during a match or around fans is vital. For a fan, kayfabe is the commitment to suspending disbelief for the duration of the match/card/show/etc. Most importantly, however, Griep contends that the opposite of kayfabe is “[a]nything that is going to interfere with the fans’ enjoyment of what we are presenting,”⁴ which is constant across all iterations

2 Shannon Bow O’Brien, *Donald Trump and the Kayfabe Presidency: Professional Wrestling Rhetoric in the White House* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2020), 12. In this context, see also Paweł Surowiec and Christopher Miles, “The Populist Style and Public Diplomacy: Kayfabe as Performative Agonism in Trump’s Twitter Posts,” *Public Relations Inquiry* 10, no. 1 (2020): 5–30.

3 O’Brien, *Donald Trump and the Kayfabe Presidency*, 13.

4 See CarrieLynn D. Reinhard et al., “Defining Kayfabe: A Dialogue Among Pro-Wrestling Professionals and Academics,” *Professional Wrestling Studies*

of kayfabe, be they postmodern or otherwise. He notes that traditional kayfabe extended to the wrestlers' conduct outside of the ring, at least in public, and included not being seen riding in a car with a wrestler who was supposed to be your enemy. As a wrestler, he finds the conduct of wrestlers who don't stay in character insulting because audiences want to be taken in by the illusion. They know it's fake, he says, but for them to suspend disbelief, the wrestlers have to do it too.

Chris Medjesky points out that the audience is a crucial part of kayfabe and, with CarrieLynn Reinhard, labels it a "co-construction," a collaboration between wrestlers and fans. Each must play their part or the illusion is broken.

Audience members who are fooled by the work (for example those who believe that the outcomes of the staged fights are not predetermined) are known as "marks."⁵ In contemporary professional wrestling, performers are often called "workers," and the notion of a work is contrasted with that of a "shoot," wrestling content that is non-scripted and without a pre-determined outcome. When presented well, shoot content titillates audiences by showing them something that the audience "shouldn't" see — despite its presence on weekly TV shows.

At its most basic level, professional wrestling is a simulation of a fight between at least two performers. The performers are referred to as "wrestlers" — or, in the case of the WWE alone, per-

Journal 3, no. 1 (2022): 145–66.

5 While there is no doubt that carnival marks were regularly tricked by these sorts of performances, given the widespread practice of the grift around the United States, there remains real doubt regarding the extent to which audiences were fooled by the spectacle that is professional wrestling. Anecdotally, while we suspect almost every fan of professional wrestling has encountered the presumably-rare species of fan who believed that the matches and storylines were real, we are equally confident that adult members of the audience usually consist of fans who suspect or know wrestling isn't on the up and up but like it anyway. Our experience as scholars digging into the archives of professional wrestling news stories and fan accounts lends credence to this. On this, see also Benjamin Litherland, "Notes on Kayfabe," *Professional Wrestling Studies Journal 3*, no. 1 (2022): 123–28.

formers are called “Superstars” — while the simulation is commonly referred to as a “match.”⁶ Within each match, wrestlers frequently subject one another to strikes using their feet, hands, and joints (such as elbows and knees); submission holds that appear to put performers’ limbs and joints under stress; and assorted other performed attacks, often referred to as “moves.” Wrestlers typically pull their strikes, feign submission holds’ lethality, and fall in such a way that the impact of their flesh on the canvas is evenly distributed throughout their body and thus less painful. Regardless, this is far from a painless event. While wrestlers minimize the damage done to one another’s bodies, no amount of care can prevent injuries from accruing given the nature of the performances.⁷

These maneuvers are read as having a certain “meaning” in the match, largely determined by a move’s place within the fictional context of the match’s story. Take the punch as an example. In American, though not Japanese, professional wrestling since the mid-1990s, punching has been a “legal” maneuver — mean-

6 From April 9, 1999 until “Wrestlemania 32” in 2016, women performers in the WWE were referred to as “Divas.” This nomenclature began with a promo from WWE wrestler Sable when she claimed to be a real diva on *Monday Night Raw*, but was retired once the decision was made to present women wrestlers as athletes instead of sex symbols. In an act rife with symbolism, the WWE Diva’s Championship was retired and replaced with the WWE Women’s Championship.

7 There is, ultimately, no truly safe way to wrestle given the types of performances that occur in matches. Although wrestling’s travails with steroids and other performance enhancing drugs have made news since the late 1980s, less attention has been paid to the chemical dependency issues that plague both active and retired wrestlers. Among former WWF/WWE performers alone, more than fifty wrestlers as of 2015 have died before reaching the age of fifty. In many (if not most) of these cases, the cause of death, when one is released, is typically either steroids, prescription pain pill overdose, or a combination of the two. Brian Jansen, “‘It’s Still Real to Me’: Contemporary Professional Wrestling, Neo-Liberalism, and the Problems of Performed/Real Violence,” *Canadian Review of American Studies* 50, no. 2 (2020): 302–30, builds on the work of Laurence DeGaris by redirecting scholarly attention to exactly this point: that the drama of professional wrestling often obscures the fact that wrestling happens only in virtue of the bodies that perform it.

ing that it can be done even while the often-inattentive referee is paying attention — and a staple of most professional wrestling matches. In All Japan Professional Wrestling’s June 3, 1994 match between Toshiaki Kawada and Mitsuharu Misawa for the Triple Crown world championship, however, Kawada only punched Misawa after thirty minutes of wrestling. Although this move frequently began any number of other matches — albeit, in Japan at the time, without the refs seeing — given the context of the championship match in Tokyo and the pride of both performers, the move meant something decidedly different than it would have had it opened the match. On that night and at that time, Kawada punching Misawa — the only punch in the nearly forty minute match — demonstrated his desperation to hurt his opponent. It was only part of a sequence of moves wherein Kawada used every offensive strike in his arsenal of maneuvers to try to hurt his rival, and the crowd in the Tokyo Nippon Budokan grew so excited upon realizing that Kawada would risk an illegal strike to injure his opponent that the thousands of fans in attendance began stomping their feet on the concrete floor in appreciation.

A match typically occurs before a live audience, although this is not always true.⁸ Usually, these performances involve at least one other performer who simulates officiating the fictional athletic contest by enforcing its at times nebulously defined rules: the referee. Matches that are presented as “unsanctioned” matches, certain “street fights,” “lights out” matches popular in Florida in the 1970s and 1980s and All-Elite Wrestling (AEW) today, or matches that are otherwise “too dangerous” for a com-

8 In the Memphis territory, Memphis Championship Wrestling, Jerry “The King” Lawler and Terry Funk had one of the most famous matches that did not take place in front of a live crowd: the “Empty Arena” match of 1981 that was only aired on television. In 1999, Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson and Mick “Mankind” Foley had a similar match that was taped in an empty arena and aired during the 1999 Superbowl’s halftime show on television only. And during the COVID-19 lockdowns of 2020, WWE wrestlers routinely performed to empty auditoriums at the WWE Performance Center and in the empty arena that WWE named its Thunderdome.

pany to allow to appear on their television, sometimes do not even have a referee. The lack of officiation and the attempt to separate these matches from the presentation of the rest of the show preserves the illusion that these ostensibly unsanctioned matches are solely to settle a private issue between performers rather than just a part of the entertainment content of the show — even if the matches air on television or pay-per-view. Obviously, this is a fiction within the storyline, since these allegedly unsanctioned matches are invariably integrated into sanctioned shows. When real life backstage fights between performers happen they are rarely captured on camera or referenced on television.⁹

Matches almost never occur in isolation. Single matches might have been put on as complete performances in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when championship matches could last up to four hours. Presently, however, companies almost always produce a slate of matches that are jointly labeled a card, and audiences buy tickets to see a group of matches performed by a single producing entity.¹⁰

9 Numerous real backstage fights have happened between performers. For example, WWE announcer Michael Cole once knocked out his broadcast partner John Bradshaw Layfield behind the scenes for bullying him, former UFC champion and NCAA Heavyweight Wrestling Champion Brock Lesnar took on several other former amateur wrestlers in backstage shoots, and, in 2022, then-AEW Champion CM Punk started a fight with three of the promotion’s Executive Vice Presidents: Kenny Omega, Matt Jackson, and Nick Jackson (a trio of performers called “The Elite”). Although in many cases these real fights did impact the presentation of the show, because these fights were not part of the entertainment content of the show they were never mentioned on camera — unlike the “unsanctioned” matches described above.

10 The practice of holding more than one wrestling match on a given slate of performances that takes place in a given night is popularly attributed to the 1920s’ Gold Dust Trio: world champion Ed “Strangler” Lewis, Joseph “Toots” Mondt, and Billie Sandow. Dubbing their new style “Slam Bang Western Style Wrestling,” the trio used their stylistic success at box offices around the United States to effectively take over the North American wrestling industry. The Gold Dust Trio’s format of multiple, shorter wrestling matches featuring a variety of performers was far more exciting than the single match, multi-hour grappling contests that preceded it, and the

The producing entity is understood to be a company or “promotion” by audiences. Since the WWF destroyed the previous nationally regulated cartel of promotions, performers are usually now (to their economic detriment) signed exclusively to a given promotion, and their matches can almost always only be seen on shows that are produced by that promotion. This promotion — whether through a single storyline writer (called “booker” in wrestling’s carnie argot) or through an entire writing team dedicated to this purpose — determines a wrestling company’s creative direction. This means that the situations that lead to matches, the results of the matches, and the characters portrayed by the performers in matches are almost always predetermined by the promotion, either singly or in improvisational collaboration between a promotion and a talent. The booker or writing team decides which wrestlers are champions, whether matches are championship matches (matches where such designations along with the large, trophy-like belts that symbolize them, can change hands), and why any number of wrestlers are “feuding,” wrestling one another rather than anyone else (in prior eras performers engaged in a long-term program would refer to this phenomenon as being “married” to each other). Most matches are not championship matches, but wrestlers often wrestle one another for the chance to wrestle a champion. Currently in WWE there are fifteen titles, also known as “currently active belts” held by wrestlers, for example the WWE Universal Championship, the WWE Championship, the WWE Intercontinental Championship, the WWE United States Championship, the WWE Raw Women’s Championship, the WWE Smackdown Women’s Championship, the WWE Women’s Tag Team Championship, etc. The WWE’s competitors, Tony Khan’s promotion, a combo of All Elite Wrestling and Ring of Honor, clock in with fourteen different championships defended across all of the company’s shows.

“Slam Bang Western Style Wrestling” format of promoting events replaced almost all competing formats in North America within a year of its inception.

Although a given card might have eight matches, each of those matches is — on a well-booked show — expected to serve a different role. An opening match is frequently designed to excite the crowd through acrobatic maneuvers, the pace at which the wrestlers do maneuvers, or by showcasing a fan-favorite wrestler. Using an eight-match show as a hypothetical example, subsequent matches would feature virtuous wrestlers (“babyfaces”) in contests against villainous (“heel”) wrestlers. After the opening match, the show will “slow down” by featuring less-exciting matches for a while to avoid exhausting the crowd. Following this beginning sequence, subsequent matches consistently crescendo until the final match of the evening to ensure that the main event match receives the strongest reaction.¹¹

Matches, however, are not all one sees at a live event or on television. The wrestlers’ entrances to the arena to wrestle a match or to simply appear before a crowd are also an integral part of professional wrestling. Music, masculinist or feminist posturing, pyrotechnics, and dance are all synthesized into the short performances that accompany wrestlers’ appearances on stage. Moreover, sometimes wrestlers perform direct address monologues to the crowd or verbally duel a future opponent. Wrestling’s carnie argot dubs the act of performing a monologue or an improvised scene “cutting a promo.” Shows fre-

11 Note that this style of presentation is no longer the only way to promote or structure wrestling cards. The rise of promotions such as AEW and the rise in popularity of West Coast independent federation PWG and New Japan Pro Wrestling have proven that other philosophies behind match lineups and orderings are viable. PWG, a promotion that caters to die-hard fans, might have an entire night where every match on the card is worked like a main event, and the enthusiastic crowd will throw wadded up paper currency into the ring after particularly impressive matches. All Elite Wrestling sometimes does this as well; like New Japan, these promotions have the desirable problem of featuring so many great wrestling matches on a show that it is hard to find down-points more than once or twice in the evening of matches. Neither approach is “right” in an absolute sense; what’s “right” is whatever works for a given crowd. This is a sentiment that causes significant conflict between fans of older styles of wrestling and fans of current wrestling, but, in fairness, there are always generational debates regarding what is “right” and what is “wrong” to do in professional sports.

quently supplement the matches with such improvised skits between multiple wrestlers either backstage or in the ring, as well as advertisements for wrestling-related merchandise (such as replica championship belts, apparel, DVDs of past wrestling events, or subscriptions for streaming services affiliated with the wrestling promotion), video packages that summarize prior storylines, and assorted other things. Given all of the above, it becomes possible for someone to say that they watched wrestling for three hours despite there being, perhaps, only a few minutes of actual wrestling in a ring during the program. All of these non-wrestling events are opportunities to advance the storylines, create drama, and otherwise contribute to the fictional/nonfictional universe.¹²

The Metaphysics of Professional Wrestling

When analytic philosophers attempt to provide an “ontology”¹³ of some genre of art, they are trying to isolate the features of

12 Broderick Chow and Eero Laine provide an excellent account of how all of the above work — not just as a performance, but as physical labor that is performed on and by bodies in space. The role of audience affirmation to this labor is what separates both the work and the analysis of the work of the professional wrestler from that of the actor on a stage. Broderick Chow and Eero Laine, “Audience Affirmation and the Labour of Professional Wrestling,” *Performance Research* 19, no. 2 (2014): 44–53. R. Tyson Smith, “Passion Work: The Joint Production of Emotional Labor in Professional Wrestling,” *Social Psychology Quarterly* 71, no. 2 (2008): 157–76, provides an ethnographic account of all of the above that usefully grounds readers in the experience of what it is like to be a participant in this artform. See also R. Tyson Smith, *Fighting for Recognition: Identity, Masculinity and the Act of Violence in Professional Wrestling* (Duke University Press, 2014).

13 One can make all sorts of Whig histories leading up to the current resurgence in metaphysics among analytic philosophers. One canonical text that occurs in perhaps all such histories is P.F. Strawson, *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics* (Routledge, 1990). Strawson’s “descriptive metaphysics” is an attempted articulation of the picture of reality supposedly presupposed by our common conceptual scheme. He contrasted this with “revisionary metaphysics” which might seek to change the way we think about the world. *Pace* Strawson, we find *all* metaphysics proper to be at least potentially revisionary, just because the metaphysician is interested

entities that make them instances of categories relevant to that genre. Isolating such features typically requires answering three questions: (1) questions of individuation (what qualities differentiate entities of the relevant kind from one another and from entities of other kinds?), (2) questions of persistence (in virtue of what quality or qualities are entities of the relevant kind self-identical over time?), and (3) questions of normativity (in virtue of what quality or qualities are different objects better and worse instances of the relevant kinds?).

While these clearly do not exhaust all of the questions one can and should ask about various artworks, proponents of the centrality of ontology think that these questions are fundamental. Answering other questions, then, requires addressing ontological issues first. For example, consider the debauched immoralist who claims movies that celebrate cruelty should be aesthetically cherished in virtue of the fact that these movies celebrate cruelty. An ethicist responding to this will do a much better job if they are familiar with the genre-relevant properties of movies. Are films really the kind of things that celebrate or encourage character traits such as cruelty? Is it even possible for a film to have this kind of property? Assuming that there is a subgenre of films that manage to do this, what differentiates instances of those films from other kinds of films? These are questions of individuation and persistence. Finally, addressing normativity questions will give us insight into the genre’s aesthetic successes and failures. Answering these questions will not automatically determine where we should stand on issues of moralism and immoralism (or whether we should take a stand at all), but they are prerequisites for the debate to get started.¹⁴

in *what* there is as well as *how* it is and how it *should* be. And following Friedrich Nietzsche’s original programmatic hermeneutics of suspicion, our explanatory job with respect to an age’s common sense might very well explain why its presuppositions are both widely held and *false*.

14 See Berys Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 2009) for the recent canonical discussion of philosophical problems raised by possibly immoral art.

Before continuing, we should note that the looseness, imprecision, and pragmatic infelicity of many applications of fundamental ontological categories such as individuation, identity, and normativity are neither bars to doing ontology nor something on their own that requires replacement via a more precise language such as logic. Rather, the proper *metaphysical* response to varieties of under-determination is to try to discern what reality must be like such that our non-philosophical and ontological discourses involving identity, individuation, and norms succeed *and fail* in exactly the way that they do. For example, what must the world be like so that we can communicate *as if* word meanings individuate in determinate ways, given that they manifestly do not?¹⁵ But we cannot really understand the relevant kinds of under-determination unless we vigorously study the way individuation, identity, and normativity work or fail to work with respect to these kinds.

The overlapping genres and subgenres of art for which noted contemporary analytic philosophers have penned recent book-length ontologies include mass art, horror movies and literature, film more generally,¹⁶ fiction,¹⁷ jazz,¹⁸ dance,¹⁹ and video games.²⁰ But alas, professional wrestling has yet to find its metaphysi-

15 Mark Wilson's *Wandering Significance: An Essay on Conceptual Behavior* (Oxford University Press, 2008) is the canonical discussion of just this issue. See also the discussion of paradoxico-metaphysics in Jon Cogburn, *Garcian Meditations: The Dialectics of Persistence in Form and Object* (Edinburgh University Press, 2017).

16 For the first three, see Noël Carroll's canonical *A Philosophy of Mass Art* (Oxford University Press, 1998), his more focused *The Philosophy of Horror: Or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (Routledge, 1990), as well as *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures* (Blackwell, 2007).

17 Most recent work in some manner responds to Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Harvard University Press, 1993).

18 See Robert Kraut, *Artworld Metaphysics* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

19 See Graham McFee, *Philosophical Aesthetics of Dance: Identity, Performance and Understanding* (Dance Books, 2011).

20 For a Waltonian account, see Chris Bateman, *Imaginary Games* (Zero Books, 2011.) For an account rooted in capacity metaphysics, see Jon Cogburn and Mark Silcox, *Philosophy through Video Games* (Routledge, 2009).

cal apologist. To provide a satisfactory ontology of professional wrestling, one would need to begin by rigorously addressing the three questions just outlined with respect to the technical concepts described in the previous section of this chapter. That is not the purpose of this book. However, from our discussion thus far we almost already have enough on the table to show the radical aesthetic novelty of contemporary professional wrestling. We must only complete one more bit of ontological stage setting.

By the time Nicholas Wolterstorff published his canonical 1975 article “Toward an Ontology of Artworks,” analytic metaphysics of art had already developed a set of broadly shared positions concerning the manner in which identity and individuation conditions play a role in differentiating genres of art.²¹ According to one part of the consensus view, art genres divide into whether the artwork in the genre is a “performance-work” or an “object-work.” Performance-works can be multiply performed, meaning that the same object (say a composition, dance, or play) can be instantiated in different performances occurring at different spaces and times. Performances themselves are discrete events spread out vaguely over possibly discontinuous chunks of space-time. A particular performance, in its particularity occupying a region of space-time, is not repeatable. What is repeated is the performance-work, which is an abstract type shared by all of its performance instances. Wolterstorff notes that, “The ontological status of performances is relatively clear, however, while that of performance-work is

21 As evidence of a consensus having developed on certain key connections between genre and individuation conditions, Wolterstorff cites R.G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (Clarendon Press, 1938); Margaret MacDonald, “Art and Imagination,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 53, no. 1 (1953): 205–26; René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*, (Harcourt, Brace & World, 1956); Charles L. Stevenson, “On ‘What is a Poem?’” *The Philosophical Review* 66, no. 3 (1957): 329–62; Joseph Margolis, *The Language of Art & Art Criticism* (Wayne State University Press, 1965); and Andrew Harrison, “Works of Art and Other Cultural Objects,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 68, no. 1 (1968): 105–28.

immensely perplexing,” and spends most of his classic article trying to discern an ontology of performance-works.

For our current purposes, we need not address any deep metaphysical issues involving the relation between abstract kinds and their instances. Nor do we need to explore the related distinction between an object-work (such as a painting, building, or sculpture) and copies and castings of such works. Nor do we need to discuss the manner in which literary works might be taken to be both object-works and performance-works.

Perhaps the most metaphysically interesting thing about professional wrestling is the manner in which the word “match” is systematically ambiguous, denoting incompatible ontological types depending upon the stance taken by the spectator towards what is occurring. To illustrate this, let us introduce two fictitious spectators, Bubba and Ian, who represent places in the dialectical space we are carving.²² Bubba grew up in Montgomery, Alabama during the bucolic 1970s. Every Saturday morning, he watched locally promoted wrestling on television and argued vigorously with friends at Brewbaker Junior, and then Jefferson Davis High School, who thought the outcomes of the matches were fixed.²³ If you go to a chicken wings restaurant that shows professional wrestling pay-per-views or other special events, you might end up listening to Bubba discourse extensively about how the wrestlers of his childhood (Ric Flair, Harley Race, and Dusty Rhodes) could soundly defeat the entire card of the pay-per-view you are currently watching.²⁴ Bubba is

22 Full disclosure, most of the properties ascribed to Bubba, including having attended Jefferson Davis High School and not realizing that wrestling is scripted until well into his putative adulthood, are true of one of the authors of this book. As noted in the acknowledgments of this book, “Ian” names our dear friend Ian Crystal.

23 While we were writing this book Jefferson Davis High School was renamed JAG High School, for civil rights icons Judge Frank Johnson, the Rev. Ralph Abernathy, and the Rev. Robert Gratz.

24 It is worth pointing out that, since two of the three names listed as favorites of Bubba were all prominent bookers of professional wrestling while active performers, such beliefs seem to be empirically justifiable given how tough these wrestlers appeared to be throughout their careers.

being sincere. He either has no idea that the outcomes are predetermined and many of the skits are scripted performances written by one or more people, or he has so internalized kayfabe that he will not give himself over to doubt. Fans like Bubba are sadly an endangered species, though they have been common enough in the past for us to give them their own sobriquet: “Southern Fan” (SF). Southern fans are delightful to talk with because they have so little aesthetic distance from the spectacle. They have not suspended disbelief, because there is nothing to disbelieve, dammit.

Now consider Ian. Ian grew up in somewhat reduced circumstances in Montreal, Canada. Some of his happiest memories are of his father taking him to watch “Géant Ferré” (who would later become WWF superstar and international headliner “André the Giant”) crush opponents in the Montreal Forum. Ian is delighted when you tell him that when at the age of twelve the real-life André Roussimoff’s acromegaly rendered him too big to fit on the school bus in his childhood home of Grenoble, France, his neighbor Samuel Beckett — yes, *that* Samuel Beckett — drove him to and from school. Ian has a PhD now and still enjoys the plays of Beckett, but when you have him over to your house to watch pirated videotapes or DVDs of Japanese professional wrestling, he just responds to the spectacle by saying things like “that’s so fake” and laughing.

While the Southern Fan has no disbelief to suspend, Ian’s response to wrestling now is that of the Interminable Critic (IC) who brings the hermeneutics of suspicion to bear on everything. The IC is often a lovely person in all sorts of ways, but their grasp of the material preconditions for many performance practices often interferes radically with their ability to enjoy those practices. The IC is as stuck in disbelief as the SF is in belief.

Thus, we can sum up the two kinds of fans we have introduced so far. The SF believes wrestling is real and the IC does not believe wrestling is real. Thus, the SF is the original mark

That we felt impelled to include this footnote unwittingly shows the extent to which one of us remains a Bubba.

for kayfabe, while the IC refuses to be taken in by it. But the vast majority of wrestling fans (F) instead suspend their disbelief. Like the wrestlers themselves, then, the F agrees to the conditions of kayfabe — that is, they accept the fictions and agree to be marks. But the F can also put on the SF or IC hat depending on the situation. Thus, the F might engage in a discussion about whether André Roussimoff could actually beat up a modern wrestler in real life and then happily return to watching a match and rooting against the bad guys.

While this is perhaps the most pronounced with professional wrestling fans, it is not unique to wrestling. Most people distinguish Orlando Bloom from the character he plays in *The Lord of the Rings*, Legolas, and the ontologies relevant to performer and character are different. But one must look to the far corners of postmodern meta-fiction to find a genre of art where the two stances recursively interact in the manner in which they now standardly do in professional wrestling.²⁵

Here is a way that professional wrestling is not like film. If a film equivalent of the SF — say someone who thinks *Pirates of the Caribbean* is veridical history — talked about their experience watching the film, their ontological presuppositions about the individuation conditions of films are no different from that of the film equivalent of the IC. The film SF would describe watching a cinematic dramatization of real historical events, while the film IC would only be interested in talking about how much history is falsified by the film. But nothing is to be gained from the claim that the SF and the IC mean something systematically different by “film” because both seem to agree that the work in question, historical or ahistorical, is nonetheless an example of a film.

25 In fiction, one twenty-first century paradigm example of just this is Jeff VanderMeer, *City of Saints and Madmen* (Spectra, 2007). The book’s type-setting, illustrations, and strategies of text delivery all work in concert to draw attention to the formal properties of literature as a discursive body of texts and the physical book’s status as an object-work. The literary works of Mark Danielewski go even further in this regard.

This is *not* the case with professional wrestling. For the SF, a match is a particular performance in Wolterstorff’s sense. It is a unique individual event composed of and related to other events, all with finite though vague and possibly discontinuous boundaries in space-time. But to the IC who focuses on the non-fictional elements of the practice of professional wrestling—including the material preconditions and the actual states of the world that the viewer might consider to be represented by the work—a match is a performance-work. This, of course, has real bearing on how we understand professional wrestling. Although most fans in the present are conditioned to believe that the only results that matter occur on television, this was not always a norm of professional wrestling performance.

To best understand how the SF and IC have different ontologies of professional wrestling, note that in the 1970s and throughout much of the 1980s, wrestling television shows were not a revenue stream for the companies producing them because, unlike today, promotions did not receive money from TV stations to put on a wrestling show. Rather, television shows were most frequently a loss leader—a wrestling promotion would pay a carriage fee to get their television show on a local network, then use that show to promote and sell tickets to nearby live events. Thus, on TV “The Nature Boy” Ric Flair and Ricky “The Dragon” Steamboat might have had a confrontation that led to a title match. But to see the title match, fans had to buy a ticket to the promotion’s next local event. Interestingly, however, this title match could occur at a number of local arenas. Thus, fans in Charlotte, Atlanta, and Charleston might all have seen Ric Flair lose his NWA heavyweight championship to Ricky Steamboat. Indeed, if a fan bought tickets and traveled to all three shows, they would have seen Ric Flair “lose” his title three separate times because the same match (even if, analogously to musical and dance performances of songs that also include improvisation, some of the moves are different) was repeated at each show, and according to local or area-specific television, each of these

individual shows was the “real” match between Flair and Steamboat.²⁶

This constitutive bifurcation of matches into performances and performance-works is very much still with us. For example, many WWE matches at monthly “premium live events” (in the past, pay-per-views) have been previously performed one or more times at an untelevised house show (“dark shows”) prior to the matches’ final performances on television or at a special event. From the perspective of performance-work the match is performed more than once. But within the fictional universe of WWE, a match is not a performance-work; the televised match is the only match. This is firmly in the tradition of Flair and Steamboat doing the same televised match multiple times, with each match described in storyline as if it could only be performed once.

It is clear that, unlike in the case of the two analogous kinds of film spectators, the SF and IC have two ontologies which are inconsistent with each other in how they interpret the individuation conditions of what is perhaps the key category of professional wrestling: the match. This ontology builds on, but is distinct from the IC’s recognition that individual matches are performance-works (that can be repeated many times), not, as the SF believes or claims to believe, individual performances (that are not repeated, as in that whatever one the SF watches is the “real” match). The IC and SF’s opposing beliefs about this are part of their belief about the ontology of professional wrestling as a whole.

As a reminder, in the idiolect of professional wrestling, “work” describes wrestling content with a predetermined out-

26 This gets even more peculiar when one considers the wrestling territories from the 1980s and the often-Byzantine process by which television stations received tapes from wrestling promoters. Mid-South Wrestling and other promotions would often cover large geographic areas, and would have to keep track of which week of television a local area received from the promotion. Ric Flair could lose his title seven or eight times across the territory, with house shows cards potentially repeating for several weeks based on which episode of TV was most current.

come and “shoot” content is not predetermined (a wrestler “shoots” a match when they fight “for real.”) Thus, since the SF believes, among other things, that each match is a performance, they have a “work ontology” picture of wrestling. This is an account of the way the world would be if the fictional elements in wrestling were not fictional. In contrast, the IC, who believes that matches are performance-works and can be (and are) repeated at different times, has a “shoot ontology” of wrestling, which is an account of the way the actual world is such that the fictional elements of wrestling can be performed. The SF is a mark who does not distinguish work from shoot. The IC is stuck on the fact that the work is a work, and appeals to facets of the shoot ontology in their refusal to suspend disbelief.

In virtue of the above, the wrestling fan’s suspension of disbelief has always had to be more complex than that of viewers of other performance arts.²⁷ There is just too fundamental a metaphysical clash between the reality viewed by the disbeliever and the fictional reality presupposed when that disbelief is suspended.

Of course, as noted earlier, the standard fan (F) is able to put on both hats depending on the context. And thus, our three kinds of spectators (SF, IC, F) form a recursive hierarchy of aesthetic distance. The SF has no aesthetic distance. The IC only has aesthetic distance. The F is able to be distanced from their distance, suspending their disbelief for the purpose of enjoying the spectacle. And for wrestling prior to its postmodern turn, these three stances were exhaustive.

The Montreal Screwjob and the Birth of Metanarrative Cynicism

On November 9, 1997, the 20,593 professional wrestling fans who packed Montreal’s Molson Centre — plus approximately

²⁷ Terrence Grieb, the wrestler Tommy “The SpiderBaby” Saturday, gestures toward this complexity and sophistication of spectatorship in Reinhard et. al., “Defining Kayfabe.”

another million fans viewing from around the globe on television — watched the World Wrestling Federation’s “Survivor Series Pay-Per-View.” Most of the show proceeded as expected with nothing amiss. Viewers saw the standard progression of matches, improvised skits, and direct address monologues that jointly comprise the spectacle of contemporary professional wrestling. Sometimes the heroes prevailed against villainous adversity, and sometimes they failed to overcome the odds against them but nonetheless vowed revenge. Things changed, however, in the marquee match — hereafter called “main event” — of the show. The outcome of the main event pitting Canadian hero and reigning WWF Champion Bret “The Hitman” Hart against “The Heartbreak Kid” Shawn Michaels would change professional wrestling forever. This event, later christened The Montreal Screwjob, would make explicit the implicit conditions of possibility for the instantiation of professional wrestling’s fictional ontology and in so doing radically alter the practice and social role of professional wrestling.²⁸ The word

28 In the interest of clarity (if only so that academic snipers can get a clearer bead on our parachutes), we should note a few things. First, throughout this book, we follow analytic philosophers who tend to use “ontology” and “metaphysics” interchangeably to denote our theories of the nature of reality. Analytic philosophers differ from Heideggerian usage, for whom the ontological concerns being qua being while the merely ontic concerns particular beings. What Martin Heidegger actually meant by “the problem of being” is rich and multi-faceted enough to name several distinct philosophical problematics, cf. Herman Philipse, *Heidegger’s Philosophy of Being: A Critical Interpretation* (Princeton University Press, 1998). In contrast with Austrian phenomenologists who saw their labor as a necessary precursor to metaphysics, Heidegger and the French phenomenologists who followed him came to be sharply critical of “metaphysics,” though they tend to identify this with a manner of thinking that historically leads to an overly reductionistic scientific world view. For an excellent discussion of how Heidegger’s critique of this is central to the so-called *Kehre*, see Mark Okrent, *Heidegger’s Pragmatism: Understanding Being, and the Critique of Metaphysics* (Cornell University Press, 1991). So, second, to forestall confusion we should note that we both endorse Heidegger’s critique of objective presence and the manner in which this critique undermines scientific reductionism, but, with Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Open Court Press,

“screwjob” itself makes clear what changed in that moment. It means a case in which a performer thinks they are slated to win the match, but instead their rival “shoots,” in other words, goes off script and fights for real, defeating them.

Even prior to the Screwjob, anyone who knew that the outcomes of the matches were predetermined was forced to view a professional wrestling performance through the lenses of the work and real life wrestling drama, which could often be inconsistent with the official storyline.²⁹ Viewers of the 1997 “Survivor Series Pay-Per-View” would have known that Hart, despite spending more than a decade with Vince McMahon’s World Wrestling Federation, had been released from his WWF contract and would soon wrestle exclusively for the rival wrestling promotion World Championship Wrestling (hereafter WCW).³⁰ Although less than a year before Hart had given an emotional speech live on *Monday Night Raw*, affirming that he

2002), we do not think that either of these things undermines ontology or metaphysics understood in the traditional manner. Rather, Heidegger’s great meta-philosophical achievement, one of which he himself was insufficiently aware, was showing that normative questions lie at the very heart of correct metaphysics. Our discussion is entirely consistent with this.

- 29 See David Bixenspan, “Thirty Years Ago, WWE Admitted It Wasn’t a Sport to Try and Dodge Regulation,” *Deadspin*, February 15, 2019, <https://deadspin.com/thirty-years-ago-wwe-admitted-it-wasnt-a-sport-to-try-1832640826>.
- 30 World Championship Wrestling was owned by Ted Turner from its inception in 1990 until its acquisition by Vince McMahon’s WWF in 2001. This purchase became possible when Jim Crockett Promotions (JCP), a wrestling promotion based out of North Carolina that eventually controlled the international National Wrestling Alliance, went bankrupt attempting to challenge McMahon’s newly formed, newly national World Wrestling Federation. Turner purchased JCP because wrestling programming had been a key ingredient to the success of Turner Broadcasting Service’s TBS Superstation throughout the 1980s. At the time of the Screwjob, WCW, and its ascendant executive producer Eric Bischoff, had been given unlimited financial resources by TBS and Time Warner to directly compete with the WWF. Bischoff and other decision makers in WCW would often speak publicly of their desire to drive the WWF out of business. Again, more complete discussions of much of the historical information about wrestling presented in this book can be found in Neal Hebert, “Professional Wrestling: Local Performance History, Global Performance Praxis” (PhD

had signed a WWF contract guaranteeing his employment for the next twenty years (with a rumored salary of \$1.5 million per year as the downside guarantee), WWF chairman Vince McMahon released Hart from his contract, citing a lack of revenue. As such, Hart was allowed to enter negotiations with Eric Bischoff, then in charge of Ted Turner's now defunct World Championship Wrestling, and to jump promotions without a non-compete clause — which meant Hart could immediately begin appearing on television for the rival wrestling company.

After receiving an offer of \$2.5 million each year of guaranteed money from World Championship Wrestling, Hart gave his notice to the WWF while he was WWF champion. This put the WWF in an awkward position because, per his contract, Hart now had veto power over any storyline and match outcome during the final sixty days of his employment with McMahon's WWF. During this time, the real-life promotional war between WWF and WCW had caused numerous wrestlers to jump from one promotion to the other. Hart was by far the highest profile performer to change companies since Hulk Hogan, Scott Hall, and Kevin Nash signed with WCW several years earlier.³¹ Other wrestlers who had switched promotions while holding championships had done storylines disgracing the belts, and McMahon reportedly feared Hart would do the same.³²

To prevent Hart from leaving the promotion while still holding the belt, in the main event of “Survivor Series 1997,” McMa-

diss., Louisiana State University, 2016), and R.D. Reynolds and Bryan Alvarez, *The Death of WCW: 10th Anniversary Edition* (ECW Press, 2014).

- 31 Hogan signed exclusively with WCW in 1994, while Hall and Nash signed with the company in 1996.
- 32 Deborah Anne Micelli, who wrestled as Madusa (shortened from “Made in the USA”) in the American Wrestling Alliance, the National Wrestling Alliance, and World Championship Wrestling, and as Alundra Blayze in the World Wrestling Federation, did just that when she jumped ship from the World Wrestling Federation to World Championship Wrestling. On the December 18, 1995 edition of WCW's *Monday Nitro*, Micelli threw her WWF Women's Championship belt into a garbage can on live television. Micelli wrestled for WCW until 2001, then began a separate career as a monster truck driver.

hon and members of the WWE creative team colluded with referee Earl Hebner and Michaels to double-cross Hart during the match. Hart believed he had been booked to win the match, but when Michaels placed him in Hart’s own signature submission maneuver, the Sharpshooter, McMahon signaled the ref to end the match prematurely, ensuring Hart’s defeat and guaranteeing that Hart would not leave WWF as its heavyweight champion. Hart, furious and disbelieving, began destroying the ring, set, and cameras surrounding the ring to the crowd’s vocal approval. Before the pay-per-view went off the air, Hart spit in the face of McMahon — who was in WWF storylines then only an announcer rather than an authority figure — and began tracing “WCW” while standing in the WWF ring surrounded by the property he had just destroyed.

None of the above likely sounds particularly unusual to most individuals casually familiar with professional wrestling — wrestling shows always have heels cheating to defeat babyfaces. Unlike these other scripted incidents, however, the Montreal Screwjob was not part of the show’s planned storylines and Hart was not aware of what would happen. Instead, the Screwjob — the most famous in-ring double-cross in professional wrestling history — was “real” life played out in ring and onscreen. Unlike prior true double-crossings³³ where the public could never definitively figure out that something untoward happened, the actual double-cross behind the Montreal Screwjob was openly acknowledged on WWF television and became a key storyline after the incident. Its subsequent influence on the

33 There are numerous examples of this throughout wrestling history. Two famous ones help historicize this event: the 1985 WWF women’s championship match between then-WWF Women’s champion Wendi Richter and The Spider Lady (legendary wrestler and “shooter” The Fabulous Moolah under a mask) that ended when the Spider Lady rolled up Richter in a move called a small package and the referee quickly counted to three despite Richter “kicking out” of the pinfall attempt; and the 1925 championship match between Stanislaw Zybyszko and Wayne Munn, which Zybyszko won after “shooting” on Munn, legitimately pinning the world champion after agreeing to lose to him in the behind-the-scenes negotiations for the match.

performance of professional wrestling is impossible to misinterpret, and this event's later incorporation into storylines led to the WWF's greatest successes in attendance, TV ratings, and ticket sales.

If we return to our trinity of pre-Screwjob spectator types, we can see how the F's distanced distance is considerably complicated by the way professional wrestling fandom works after the Montreal Screwjob. Just as there are two notions of "matches," there are two kinds of ontology relative to "rooting." The SF simply roots for their favorite characters to win their matches, just as one would for a favorite sports team. And while he might be above such displays, even the most intractable IC, Ian from Montreal, can have happy memories about individual performers such as André Roussimoff. For example, when Roussimoff convincingly played a gentle giant in Rob Reiner and William Goldman's *The Princess Bride* and was then reinvented as a wrestling babyface, Ian was ecstatic. Though there was a strict upper limit on how many pirated recordings of his classic André the Giant wrestling matches Bubba could get Ian to watch, Ian continued to root for André Roussimoff's success and was genuinely sad when the health problems from Roussimoff's acromegaly ended his life prematurely.

Normal wrestling fans usually end up combining the SF's rooting for the characters to win their matches with rooting for the performers to "get over." For example, a fan of the wrestler Ric Flair could, on the one hand, want Ric Flair to win his matches on television. On the other hand, a fan of Ric Flair could want the performer who plays Ric Flair, Richard Fliehr, to be a successful performer who excels at his craft on television. This might involve winning a given match, but it could extend to cover such things as being happy when Fliehr performs an effective promo, being pleased when Fliehr loses in such a way that the performance of the character is strengthened, or even being happy that other fans are beginning to cheer for Richard Fliehr's character. Ric Flair might "get over" by winning a title, but Richard Fliehr could also "get over" when his character becomes more central to the stories being told on television

or when other fans begin expressing their love or passionate hatred for Fliehr’s performance as the character. This happens with fans of films also rooting for actors to be successful in their personal lives and in their ability to get good roles. But it is not a constitutive part of the aesthetic experience for film. Indeed, a fan who was rooting for or against Orlando Bloom while watching *Pirates* would have a degraded aesthetic experience, since it would intrude on their imaginative complicity with respect to the fiction.

Prior to the Montreal Screwjob, it was possible to be a *sf* and not miss anything going on in the fictional world. After the Screwjob, this is no longer the case. For any fan to understand why Vince McMahon, the shoot owner of the *wwf* but work announcer employed by the *wwf*, could go on television in the weeks following the Screwjob and discuss contract negotiations, they must understand that there was a truth beneath the “truth” of storyline, and that this truth had never been referenced on television prior to the Montreal Screwjob.³⁴ McMahon’s ability to end a match prematurely required a fan to understand that, beyond the match itself (the performance-work), the work ontology (which in wrestling includes the pre-determined match as well as the fictional storylines around the characters) was, at heart, fictional. As we show in much greater detail in the following chapters, the storyline that naturally developed around McMahon as an evil corporate executive who hates the working class could only make sense if fans were aware that, at some level, there is currently and always has been something going

34 Note that this doesn’t mean the *wwf*/*wwe* invented the worked shoot — many smaller wrestling companies had experimented with these types of storylines in the past, including *wcw*’s New World Order storyline where the company pretended that the members of the *nwo* were not employees of *wcw* but, rather, invaders from the *wwf*. While understanding this storyline did not require the multiple ontologies we describe above, numerous storylines in Paul Heyman’s Extreme Championship Wrestling in the mid-to-late 1990s were excellent prototypes for the kinds of nuance wrestling spectatorship would universally require.

on outside the work ontology that informs the gaps within that ontology. We call fans with this awareness Postmodern Fans.

Consider the 2012 return to wrestling of former Ultimate Fighting Heavyweight Champion Brock Lesnar, an outstanding amateur and professional wrestler who left wrestling for mixed martial arts. Lesnar, as UFC Heavyweight Champion, became the biggest non-boxing pay-per-view draw in combat sports history after his heavyweight championship match against Frank Mir headlined the pay-per-view event “UFC 100.” After retiring from mixed martial arts and returning to professional wrestling in the WWE, Lesnar was brought in with a contract that gave him unparalleled control over the marketing of his character. Lesnar’s wrestling attire retained the corporate sponsorships he received while a mixed martial artist, and his gear emblazoned with the Jimmy Johns corporate logo was striking on WWE television, given WWE’s unwillingness to allow any other performer to receive corporate endorsements.

When Lesnar began his first feud with John Cena in 2012, the WWE worked carefully to preserve the illusion that Lesnar was a fighter rather than a professional wrestler. Interview segments with Lesnar intentionally imitated the cinematography of Ultimate Fighting Championship’s “UFC Countdown” specials. While heavyweight champion, Lesnar would throw real elbows at Cena in an attempt to cut Cena’s face and lip so that blood would appear on television, and so on. The final match between Cena and Lesnar was similarly challenging. Throughout its fifteen minutes, Lesnar was clearly hitting Cena with real punches, knees, and elbows. Although the ending of the match was predetermined and Cena was victorious, everything that preluded the finish of the match was uncomfortably real. To quote Lesnar’s fictional one-time manager Paul Heyman, “Brock Lesnar is for real.”³⁵

What follows from Brock Lesnar being “for real?” At minimum, at least some other performers are not for real, and this makes Lesnar’s matches in the ring must-see events because

35 WWE, *WWE: Brock Lesnar: Here Comes the Pain* (2003, WWE), DVD.

they remained something different from everything else on the professional wrestling card.

The treatment of Lesnar’s character may well be a paradigm example of post-Screwjob wrestling, where the recursive intertwining of levels of distance gained another level. While the F experienced little tension in inconsistently presupposing both ontologies while rooting simultaneously for character and performer, the postmodern fan (PF) was made acutely aware of the inconsistencies precisely because propositions about the shoot ontology (e.g. “Brock Lesnar was a top rated UFC fighter,” “WWE attempted to incorporate UFC styles into their performer’s choreography,” “John Cena has no training in Brazilian jiu jitsu,” etc.) become presupposed in the fictional universe of the work ontology (“Paul Heyman loathes John Cena,” “John Cena defeated Brock Lesnar,” etc.). Some people, including one of the authors of this book, hated the entire angle because in a “real fight” Lesnar would have destroyed Cena. His fictional loss was just too inconsistent with the real facts, facts which WWE brought into the fictional story by having Lesnar perform himself as a UFC champion!

The Postmodern Fan (PF) then, is distinguished by their necessary suspension of the suspension of disbelief, which is not the same as disbelief. To recap, the SF believes, the IC does not believe, and the F suspends disbelief (most of the time). But then the PF must, in order to follow modern wrestling, suspend their suspension of disbelief at least part, if not most of the time. This stance is distinguished from IC partially by attitude. While IC does not really care about wrestling since “it’s not real,” the PF knows and does care. But to understand the sport, the PF cannot naively watch matches. If the F must distance themselves from the IC’s aesthetic distance, the PF must again distance themselves from the F’s distanced distance.

This bizarre aesthetic complication is a common requirement of fandom in post-Screwjob professional wrestling. With the internet increasing access to news, dedicated newsletters such as Dave Meltzer’s the *Wrestling Observer* and Wade Keller’s *Pro-Wrestling Torch*, Twitch streams, and the recent rise

of Patreon-funded news aggregators such as Sean Ross Sapp's *Fightful Select*, too many fans are now obsessively following the shoot ontology, and often the shoot ontology's "storyline" (an attempted description of the performer's actual lives) is much better than what the writers are coming up with in any wrestling company.³⁶ When this tension between work and shoot ontologies becomes too great, WWE writers simply contradict the previous work storyline, something that only works if the few remaining Southern Fans are too enthralled by their fandom to focus on the obvious contradictions thus introduced into the fiction, and if every Fan has become a Postmodern Fan.³⁷ The incorporation of kayfabe's opposite into the fans' post-Screwjob suspension of disbelief is what requires us to transition from a modern kayfabe to the postmodern understanding of kayfabe, what we call neokayfabe.³⁸

36 Much of Hebert's "Professional Wrestling" addresses the ways that what we call the shoot ontology has complicated the performance and reception of professional wrestling throughout the twentieth century. Gender performativity, labor relations, the status of immigrant identities within the larger United States community, as well as numerous other issues have all been embodied in rings irrespective of whether they were ever acknowledged within the work ontology.

37 Although we chart throughout this monograph the different ways neokayfabe has resulted in negative consequences in the world, it is worth pointing out here that some would argue that the possibilities of neokayfabe are not necessarily negative. Carlos Cruz, "The Meta-Fan Era: Examining Kayfabe on UpUpDownDown's *Battle of the Brands*," *Professional Wrestling Studies Journal* 3, no. 1, (2022): 39–61 is a wonderful account of how fandom can flourish and be enriched after the universalization of kayfabe into neokayfabe. What we call neokayfabe, Cruz dubs "kayfabe within kayfabe" (40).

38 Fontaine, Laine, and Altman, "Toward a Work-Shoot Approach," further refines the already fraught and contentious discourse on kayfabe by refocusing the debate around the complex interplay between shoot and work. They note that "there is not a dichotomy between work and shoot, but rather an interplay and co-constitutiveness that makes up kayfabe. In wrestling (and in life), something is never entirely worked or fictional nor is it entirely a shoot, truth telling, or actual enactment" (5). This is consonant with our own understanding of kayfabe and neokayfabe throughout this monograph.

Examples of this distanced distance are numerous. Consider the WWE storylines in 2005 which we discuss in Chapter 4. Viewers who followed WWE wrestler Matt Hardy were aware that he and fellow performer Amy “Lita” Dumas were a couple in real life. Their engagement was publicly acknowledged on Matt Hardy’s website, and he routinely engaged with fans online through his website’s forum. In early 2005, readers of his website learned that Dumas had been having an affair with WWE performer Adam “Edge” Copeland for months. Hardy outed her on his personal website and broke up with her. The WWE, unhappy with Hardy’s online behavior, released him from his contract.

Edge and Lita were not supposed to be villains (at least at first), but fans with knowledge of the behind-the-scenes details of Hardy’s firing as well as Edge and Lita’s affair began reacting to the work babyfaces as shoot heels. Fans of Hardy began chanting, “You screwed Matt!” at Dumas. Copeland, previously a fan favorite, was suddenly booed at every arena where the WWE held shows. The WWE eventually just went with the fan reaction and turned the duo into heel. Several months later, the WWE quietly rehired Matt Hardy to perform a “worked shoot” wherein real-life events were incorporated into the fiction of the show’s storylines. Prior elements of the storyline were invalidated by the real-life details of Hardy, Copeland, and Dumas’s actual antagonism, and this invalidation required fans to understand both the inexistence of relevant past fictional events along with the present reality of the storylines that were now part of the show and, thus, recognizable as storylines.

Examples of audience interaction changing creative direction of media companies is usually the kind of thing that academic “critical theorists” get very excited about, as if the consumer’s ability to influence media were a kind of democratic political action.³⁹ But, as our discussion below and specifically in Chapter

39 In dissertations, monographs, and conference presentations, the null hypothesis is almost always that audience participation is a good thing, and the amount of enthusiastic performance studies scholarship on this and the related school of reader-response literary theory is mammoth. See for example Gareth White, *Audience Participation in Theatre: Aesthetics*

4 with respect to performative sexism makes very clear, it is also often extraordinarily problematic. The sexist hatred directed at one of the WWF's top female wrestlers in history, and WWE's pandering to that hatred in storyline, had negative consequences on her career and her mental health — ultimately forcing her out of the industry and in the process morally degrading everyone involved in the production and consumption of the spectacle. And this blurring of fiction and reality pioneered by WWE would prove to be dangerous in ways that as far as we know nobody realized in 1997.

of the Invitation (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). On reader-response theory, see Mark Silcox and Jon Cogburn, "Computability Theory and Literary Competence," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 46, no. 4 (2006): 369–86. We should make clear that one can find the general conceit that participation is automatically a good-making aesthetic or political feature to be fatuous without finding the scholarship on audience participation which to varying levels presupposes this to be so.

“Incredulity toward Metanarratives”: Neokayfabe, Postmodernism, and the New Cynicism

Kayfabe Nation

In the early 1980s, “Cowboy” Bill Watts, owner and promoter of Mid-South Wrestling (later, Universal Wrestling Federation), engineered the first babyface championship run for a Black performer in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Oklahoma. Sylvester Ritter, who wrestled for Mid-South as the Junkyard Dog, was so popular that his audience chant, “Who dat think they gonna beat that Dog,” was appropriated and transformed by fans of the New Orleans Saints football team.

When it was time for Ritter to become the unquestioned top babyface of Mid-South Wrestling, Watts decided that, to turn him into not only a great babyface but a folk hero for the Louisiana fans, he would have to do a big angle.¹ As such, he decided to copy a now legendary (but not widely seen in pre-internet

¹ As usual, the verbiage here is influenced by the way words taken from wrestling’s carnies argot are inserted into ordinary English. One can “use” an angle to make money when performers “do” that angle at wrestling shows.

days) angle from a Los Angeles match in 1971: the blinding of “Classy” Freddy Blassie by his hated rival John “The Golden Greek” Tolos.

Blassie, a beloved fan favorite, was receiving a fan-voted “wrestler of the year” award the night after Tolos had defeated Blassie for the Americas Heavyweight Championship. In his obituary of Tolos, Michael Carson explained that while Blassie addressed his fans:

Tolos reached into the ring doctor’s bag, left conveniently open, and threw powder into Blassie’s face. Blassie fell to the mat screaming, covering his eyes, while Tolos destroyed his trophy and the television announcer Dick Lane yelled that Blassie had been blinded. The ring doctor explained that Tolos had thrown Monsel’s powder, used to staunch cuts in boxing before its toxicity to the eyes saw it banned, and that Blassie might lose sight in one eye. In reality, it was talcum, and Blassie, face bandaged, went into hospital [*sic*] for a scheduled knee operation. [...] After Blassie miraculously regained his sight [three months later], they met on 27 August in the Los Angeles Coliseum, and 25,847 fans, still the California record, saw Blassie bloody Tolos with more biting, then win by smashing a chair over his head.²

Unfortunately though, a straight copy of the Tolos/Blassie angle would never fly in Mid-South Wrestling. Watts refused to do anything in his promotion that might go too far towards inhibiting a fan’s suspension of disbelief. He believed that his Louisiana and Mississippi fans would think any promotor would simply fire a heel who intentionally blinded his opponent. After all, a football or basketball player who intentionally blinded another

2 Michael Carlson, “John Tolos: Wrestler Celebrated as One of the Finest Ring Villains,” *Independent*, June 29, 2009, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/john-tolos-wrestler-celebrated-as-one-of-the-finest-ring-villains-1724492.html>.

athlete would face a lifetime ban from organized sports in addition to likely criminal prosecution.

Watts decided on a modified version of the angle. First, Ritter would win both the Louisiana and Mississippi heavyweight championships. Second, Ritter would team with Buck Robley, a veteran babyface with strong chops as a technical worker, to capture the Mid-South Tag Team championships from the hated heel tag team and their manager, the nefarious trio the Fabulous Freebirds — Terry Gordy and Buddy Roberts, managed by Michael “P.S.” Hayes who was also an active participant in many Freebirds matches.³

The title change set up a rematch between the teams of Robley/Ritter and The Fabulous Freebirds. The heat between the teams was off the charts during the June 9, 1980 rematch. After the thirty-seven-minute “no disqualification” match ended with the Freebirds victorious, Michael Hayes, clutching special “hair removing” powder that he had obtained from his often in-ring enemy Paul Orndorff, approached Robley with the intention of throwing the powder in Robley’s eyes. The Junkyard Dog, seeing his partner about to be maimed, charged the ring and grabbed Hayes from behind, causing Hayes to lose control of the powder and accidentally blind him.

The Mid-South angle clearly established the heels’ intent to do something despicable. It also emphasized the selflessness of The Junkyard Dog, who blinded himself while intervening to protect his friend and mentor. Watts as promoter even had an (admittedly still ludicrous) out for letting off Hayes. The accidental nature of the Junkyard Dog’s injury supposedly tied Watts’s hands so that the heels got off scot-free on a technicality. The fact that fans were not furious at Watts for this implausibility shows the extent to which they remained complicit in the fic-

3 Robley was also one of Watts’s bookers for Mid-South; Ladd replaced Robley, who kept his place as an undercard babyface. Later in life, Robley took credit for creating The Fabulous Freebirds, Bruiser Brody, and Ted DiBiase even though fans “thought I was just a big, ol’ dumb rasser.” Greg Oliver, “Buck Robley,” *Slam Sports*, May 28, 2013, <https://slamwrestling.net/legend/buck-robley/>.

tion, and the extent to which kayfabe only worked as part of an implicit contract between performer, promotion, and spectator. The act, and Watts's weaselly appeal to a technicality, established all participants as even bigger babyfaces or heels than they were going into the match, and the aftermath of the match sold the deal.

Like Blassie before him, Ritter was not allowed to leave his house for fear that people would discover that he was not, in fact, blinded. Sympathy for Ritter was enhanced by reports on television detailing his lack of recovery and the threat that he might never again make a living as a professional wrestler. By an accident of timing, Ritter's first daughter, LaToya, was born after the June 9 rematch, on June 19, 1980. The TV announcers milked the story that the Junkyard Dog's sight was not returning, emphasizing that he would never get to see what his daughter looked like or visually witness her first steps.

Fans bought it so completely that many sent "money in envelopes to Mid-South Headquarters, desperate to help the Dog in his fictional plight."⁴ Fans loved their babyfaces and hated their heels so much that,

there were fights in the crowd weekly [even before this storyline]. If a fan tried to attack a wrestler, the police would beat him up [...]. In 1984, when job guy Tony Zane was stabbed at a show in New Orleans early in the night, Jim Cornette, who had incredible heel heat at the time, screamed that he didn't want to go out [and perform], saying "They just stabbed one of the job guys, they're going to kill me."⁵

4 Wet Socks Entertainment, "The Fabulous Freebirds vs. Junkyard Dog: Race, Riots and Realism," *YouTube*, November 3, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xDop6xt5fFc>.

5 Dave Meltzer, "September 12, 2005 Observer Newsletter: UFC & WWE Rivalry Heats Up, Hurricane Katrina and Pro Wrestling in New Orleans," *Wrestling Observer/Figure Four Online*, October 23, 2022, <https://www.f4wonline.com/news/other-wrestling/september-12-2005-observer-newsletter-ufc-wwe-rivalry-heats-up-hurricane-katrina-and-pro-wrestling-in-new-orleans/>.

In professional wrestling during the 1980s, performance and audience norms were very different than in wrestling today. Wrestlers were expected to protect the business (again, by maintaining kayfabe) at all costs. Watts routinely fired performers who did not obey his rules about the strict separation of baby-faces and heels in public (no riding in the same car or socializing in public was allowed), who lost a bar fight to a local, or who acted in such a way that fans’ suspension of disbelief could not be maintained.

This is an important point worth reiterating. Preserving kayfabe in this precise sense—as the code of people in the industry to not reveal that the outcomes of matches are predetermined—was so important in professional wrestling through the mid-1980s that breaking kayfabe in front of fans was enough to get one fired from any major wrestling promotion. Everyone involved assumed that to be successful as entertainment, wrestling, like magic, had to preserve the illusion of reality. However, just as audiences do really know that magic isn’t real but, in a sense, choose to pretend otherwise, audiences of wrestling, even in those days, were complicit in their own ignorance. For the entire history of professional wrestling, fans have had to explain away why a performer acts as if he or she is injured when it was clear that the opposing wrestler failed to land the punch. At some point, the most dedicated fans notice that a local heel still has all his teeth even after having one of them knocked out in a match.⁶

And it is just this willingness to suspend disbelief that makes the connection between kayfabe and contemporary politics so

6 One of the go-to moves of the Texas wrestler Babe Akkerman, Cogburn’s maternal grandfather, was to hold a tooth-shaped piece of chalk in his mouth throughout the match and then to spit it out after a harrowing late match slap by his opponent. When as a small child Cogburn visited Akkerman on his death bed, during the morphine delirium Akkerman sometimes slipped into his wrestling persona, even though at that point, in the mid 1970s, over thirty years of petroleum engineering and family life separated him from his wrestling career.

interesting.⁷ Perhaps audience complicity in maintaining kayfabe helps us make sense of Donald Trump's success and by extension the success of autocrats around the world who resemble him. To what extent are fans of politicians complicit in their own susceptibility to bullshit? To what extent do they actually realize that they are being bullshitted?

In an influential *New York Times* article from 2017, sociologist Nick Rogers uses kayfabe to explain the phenomenon of conspiracy theorist Alex Jones, the host of internet radio show *InfoWars*, who profits by selling nutritional supplements and apocalypse preparation food to his unvaccinated listeners.

Alex Jones's audience adores him because of his artifice, not in spite of it. They admire a man who can identify their most primal feelings, validate them, and choreograph their release. To understand this, and to understand the political success of other figures like Donald Trump, it is helpful to know a term from the world of professional wrestling: "kayfabe." Although the etymology of the word is a matter of debate, for at least 50 years "kayfabe" has referred to the unspoken contract between wrestlers and spectators: We'll present you something clearly fake under the insistence that it's real, and you will experience genuine emotion. Neither party acknowledges the bargain, or else the magic is ruined.⁸

7 We follow Benjamin Litherland insofar as we believe, like Litherland, that the central ways kayfabe manifests itself is a bit of a moving target, constantly in flux. As such, we "avoid speaking of kayfabe as an unchanging, universal quality that belongs to all professional wrestling in precisely the same way at the same time. The meaning of kayfabe, for performers and audiences alike, shifts over time." Benjamin Litherland, "Notes on Kayfabe," *Professional Wrestling Studies Journal* 3, no. 1 (2022): 125. Litherland's claim is consistent with our taking the unchanging definitional core of kayfabe to be the code of people in the industry to not reveal the fiction to people outside of it. However, the practices around this code have shifted in the ways thematized by Litherland and the process of its death and resurrection as neokayfabe might be argued to involve a change in the concept itself.

8 Nick Rogers, "How Wrestling Explains Alex Jones and Donald Trump," *The New York Times*, April 25, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/25/>

For Rogers, kayfabe is tied to political subjects finding that “feelings are inherently more trustworthy than facts.” In this manner, professional wrestling was a forerunner to the idea that intuition and feelings are ultimately more reliable guides to truth than empirical data.

The interesting idea here is that classic kayfabe had to be so zealously maintained because in some inchoate, not fully conscious, way, many fans knew, feared, or suspected that the outcomes were predetermined. Such fans went along with kayfabe, suppressing or forgetting about the fact that the outcomes are predetermined because the heels represent things the fans hate and their defeat in the ring represents a kind of deeper emotional truth.

This understanding of how classic kayfabe could be maintained in the face of cognitive dissonance among wrestling fans tracks very closely to a common trope during Trump’s rise that “the press takes him literally, but not seriously; his supporters take him seriously, but not literally.”⁹ Reporters found that due to his perceived authenticity, Trump’s followers were not bothered when Trump’s lies were corrected. Academic and professional wrestler Larry DeGaris likens this to the phenomena of audiences responding more powerfully to wrestlers performing characters that draw from aspects of their own personality:

The irony of pro-wrestling gimmicks (‘characters’ in today’s parlance) is that it’s the most “authentic” wrestlers that get over the most in a fake sport [...]. In that respect, Trump was

opinion/wrestling-explains-alex-jones-and-donald-trump.html. Alex Jones has recently been found guilty in multiple defamation lawsuits with hundreds of millions of dollars of damages. If a book is ever published about the transition from neo- to post-kayfabe, these judgments will figure prominently in them. See Dave Collins, Michael Hill, and Jake Bleiberg, “\$1B Judgment against Alex Jones Not the Final Word,” *AP News*, October 13, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/business-shootings-connecticut-conspiracy-theories-alex-jones-fbb3ae82129f39e71989839f6074c356>.

9 Salena Zito, “Taking Trump Seriously, Not Literally,” *The Atlantic*, September 23, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/09/trump-makes-his-case-in-pittsburgh/501335/>.

a breath of fresh air in the political landscape [...]. In contrast to the other Republican candidates' polished personas, Trump's crudeness came across as authentic. Even to people who think he's a racist, lying sack of shit, he *really* is a racist, lying sack of shit. Even for supporters, he might be a liar, but he's not a phony.¹⁰

According to DeGaris, we can understand Trump by noting how wrestlers appealed to viewers during the era of classical kayfabe precisely because Trump is an example of how fans who might entertain doubts about whether the matches were fixed could still feel passionately enough about performers to resort to violence.

Perceived authenticity, it seems, has little to do with the truth for many people. Cliff Sims, former White House communications aide under Trump, told CNN reporter Anderson Cooper in 2019 that even though Trump lies constantly, he is "perhaps the most authentic" of any US President. According to the *Washington Post*, Trump made over 8,150 false or misleading statements during his first two years in office. Trump's authenticity, Sims claims, comes from his candor about himself. "He's pretty much exactly the same behind the scenes that he is out in public and I think that resonates with some people," Sims said. "So even the things you hear about him that are bad, it's not like anyone's surprised."¹¹

Of course, Trump lies about himself just as much as he does about anything else. Witness his claims to have given "the greatest speech" ever made to the Boy Scouts of America, that he was named Michigan's Man of the Year, or that he didn't know about

10 Larry DeGaris, "The Money and the Miles," in *Professional Wrestling: Politics and Populism*, ed. Sharon Mazer et al. (Seagull Books, 2020), 217.

11 Alexandra Hutzler, "Donald Trump Is 'Perhaps the Most Authentic' President Ever, Despite Constantly Saying Things that Aren't True, Former White House Aide Cliff Sims Says," *Newsweek*, January 30, 2019, <https://www.newsweek.com/former-white-house-aide-calls-trump-most-authentic-president-1311447>.

a payoff to Stormy Daniels.¹² So what does Sims mean about Trump presenting himself exactly as he is to the American people? We think it's not that he doesn't lie about himself. It's rather that Trump's "this is who I am" is also saying "I'm letting you in on the secret. I don't believe this story either." Trump's incessant recognition of the fakery of contemporary politics is itself paradoxically a political act. Thus, his claimed authenticity comes from acting as if he is going beyond kayfabe to postmodern or neokayfabe. His stance is neokayfabe in the sense that he claims to create the paradoxical condition of universal kayfabe, where everyone is supposed to be in on the secret.

Through Neokayfabe, Wrestling Becomes Postmodern Performance

Since cognates of the fraught word "postmodern" occur forty-nine times in this book, it behooves us to detour slightly to explain what we take it to mean and why we consider the era of Trumpian autocracy to be the pinnacle of postmodernity. We hereby apologize for the extent to which this is a Whig history, albeit one that culminates in something that should not inspire pride.

In the 1980s, academics used the term "postmodernism" in at least three distinct ways.¹³ In John Fiske's *Reading the Popu-*

12 See Daniel Dale, "The 15 Most Notable Lies of Donald Trump's Presidency," *CNN*, January 16, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/01/16/politics/fact-check-dale-top-15-donald-trump-lies/index.html>.

13 Another sense of "postmodern" we will not consider comes from what one might extrapolate from Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Harvard University Press, 1993). For Latour, modernity would be the condition where nature and culture are understood to be wholly distinct, and postmodernity would be whatever is after that. But Latour shows that the modernist, in this sense of modern, has never succeeded in the first place. We endorse Latour's critique and in fact utilize Latour, "Why has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2004): 225-48, in what follows. Nonetheless, it will become clear that the notion of modernity most helpful for thinking about wrestling is one that is more defensible in the philosophy of art, where modernism arises when theory or criticism about

lar, it referred to the way academics had begun to see positive political valence in the consumption of mass-produced art such as movies, horror novels, and popular music. Prior to this, academics had tended to participate in the period of high modernism with the study of writers such as T.S. Eliot and James Joyce, whose works are for the most part inaccessible to what was then called the “reading public.” But after Fiske, academics who once explained *difficult* works to one another and their students would now explain *popular* works to themselves and their students.

The second meaning of “postmodernism” came from François Lyotard’s short 1984 book *The Postmodern Condition*, which defined postmodernism as incredulity or distrust towards “metanarratives.” Metanarratives are political stories such as communism or capitalism, or metaphysical stories such as the triumph of science over religion, stories that are teleological and end up explaining so much that they also explain themselves.¹⁴ For example, belief in “communism” during the Cold War oriented individuals’ beliefs towards everything else: for example (all else being equal), music, food, religious narratives, the transition in the West from feudalism to capitalism, and, most importantly, what all of us should be doing to realize the story’s happy ending. Readers of Lyotard saw the end of the Cold War not as a momentary victory of the capitalist metanarrative, but rather as an instance of the end of metanarratives themselves.

Lyotard was never clear about the extent to which postmodernism only required the assent of cultural elites such as university professors, or whether this was an analysis of the death of

a discipline becomes central to the practice of that discipline, in the way abstract painters internalized anti-representational theories of art. Postmodernism arises when this rendering of the meta non-meta breaks the practice in question. This is the genesis of neokayfabe in wrestling and politics. We thank Michael Ardoline for helping us get clear about these distinctions.

- 14 In this regard, metanarratives function similarly to Roland Barthes’s conception of myths as second order signifying systems in “Myth Today.” See Roland Barthes, “The World of Wrestling,” in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers, (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972).

belief in the culture at large.¹⁵ But for postmodernism to be fairly characterized as a historical epoch, as Lyotard himself did, the distrust of metanarratives must be something pervasive in the population, which was a hard sell at the time Lyotard was writing. In fact, during the early aughts period of the United States’ War on Terror, a common trope supporting various war efforts was that Americans had rediscovered the masculine virtue of believing wholeheartedly in the America story. Skepticism was both unpatriotic and feminine, prompting defensive reactions by journalists, such as the *Los Angeles Times* article “A Skeptical Journalist Isn’t an Unpatriotic One.”

Academic critics also showed how Lyotard’s argument was subject to a self-reflexive paradox. In their 1997 *The Postmodern Turn*, Marxist philosophers Steven Best and Douglas Kellner argued that Lyotard’s definition of postmodernism failed in part because his story of the death of metanarrative is itself a metanarrative. Best and Kellner presciently foresaw an era when celebration of “the end of history” — by enthusiastic readers of Francis Fukuyama’s 2012 book of the same name — would be not a celebration of the end of metanarrative but rather the spiking of the football by those who would most benefit from the (temporary) victorious metanarrative of neoliberal capitalism.

Lyotard’s practice of invoking mathematical limitation results was also widely mocked by other academics. For Lyotard,

15 The biggest issue with Lyotard’s analysis concerns the extent to which such legitimating metanarratives influence anything. At one extreme, the answer is not at all, as economic facts (what Marxists call the “base”) determine historical and societal trajectories. Narratives here are just epiphenomenal effluvia. On the other hand, even Marxists tend to admit a “reciprocal interaction between base and superstructure” with the competing narratives of the ideological superstructure having *some* causal power. But just how much is an open question that has bedeviled us through the writing of this book. To the extent that neoliberalism just does create monopolies, it just is the case that if individual oligarchs such as Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, Vince McMahon, and Donald Trump did not exist, they would have been invented. Nonetheless, when one studies for example, McMahon, one can’t help but think that there is *something* right about the “terrible man” theory of history.

Kurt Gödel's second incompleteness theorem — that any consistent axiomatization of number theory is incomplete — was a clear instance of our inability to craft a certain kind of totalizing theory of mathematics. Lyotard took this failure of a totalizing mathematical theory to imply that no complete theory of anything was possible and therefore, metanarratives could not explain the world in the way proponents of them claimed. In this sense, contemporary mathematics actually supported Lyotard's distrust of metanarratives.

Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont's influential 1998 *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science* castigated a shooting gallery of important continental philosophers (including Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Bruno Latour, Jean Baudrillard, and Gilles Deleuze) for their too-hasty invocation of limitation results in physics and mathematics to support their own philosophical theses. Sokal and Bricmont inaugurated an academic debate that continues to this day, with philosophers Paul Livingston and one of the authors of this book much more carefully examining the non-trivial philosophical and political ramifications of limitation results such as the incompleteness theorems and Bertrand Russell's eponymous paradox.¹⁶

Lyotard's appeal to Gödel interestingly suggested a third approach to postmodernism coming out of the way the term "modern" was used by art critics such as Clement Greenberg and Clive Bell, and more recently Arthur Danto, who characterized modern painting as the culmination of a history where artists used their knowledge of painting history and criticism to influence their own choice of subject matter (or lack thereof) and style.¹⁷ In this account, the essence of the modern was the way in which knowledge *about* the history, material precondi-

¹⁶ See Paul Livingston, *The Politics of Logic: Badiou, Wittgenstein, and the Consequences of Formalism* (Routledge, 2011) and Jon Cogburn, *Garcian Meditations: The Dialectics of Persistence in Form and Object* (Edinburgh University Press, 2017).

¹⁷ Greenberg and Bell are undergoing a revival of sorts, in part motivated by Graham Harman's rethinking of this tradition in Graham Harman, *Art and Objects* (Polity, 2020).

tions, and critical reception of a given practice becomes constitutive of the knowledge involved in performing that practice. The postmodern moment then occurs when this modern meta-knowledge gives rise to knowledge about the constitutive limits of that practice. We will not belabor the point by showing here that this interplay of self-reflection and limits is indeed almost a perfect mirror of what happened in mathematics and logic with Gödel’s proofs of incompleteness.¹⁸ Note that Lyotard’s “incredulity towards metanarrative” can be seen as an instance of realizing the constitutive limits of modern narratives that both justify and as such help constitute social orders, in a sense analogous to modern artists being guided by critical knowledge of their genre.

Notice how Best and Kellner’s criticisms of Lyotard don’t quite land against this third kind of postmodernism, self-reflection plus total limits, precisely because mathematical limitation results always involve the derivation of paradox from the way a mathematical formalism can be shown to apply to itself. The totalizing Russellian set of all sets that are not members of themselves is by self-application either a member of itself or not a member of itself. Russell’s argument shows that it is paradoxically both, which is exactly analogous to the postmodernist having to distrust their own metanarrative about distrusting metanarratives.

In professional wrestling, the turn from kayfabe to neokayfabe is the moment when wrestling becomes postmodern performance in this third sense. Like modern painters, modern wrestling industry insiders and smart marks did use their meta-knowledge about professional wrestling — that is, knowledge about the material preconditions that make possible the fictional performances — to respond to and craft those performances. But at the point when everyone became a smart mark, the consistency of the fictional universe exploded. If everyone is a smart mark, then everyone is charged with upholding kayfabe

¹⁸ On this, see the extended discussion of Gödel’s proof in Jon Cogburn and Mark Silcox, *Philosophy through Video Games* (Routledge, 2009).

and as a result kayfabe is universal. But to universalize kayfabe is to destroy kayfabe. A secret that everyone knows isn't really a secret, even if we must continue in so many ways to pretend that it is. In this sense, professional wrestling incorporates the central insight of philosopher Jean Baudrillard:¹⁹ If everyone believes that everything is fake, the concept of fakeness loses its meaning since there is no longer any real to contrast with the fake.²⁰

Note how Lyotard is now also saved from the other concern with his work, that his form of postmodernism describes an academic style, not a historical epoch. Neokayfabe, that is the paradoxical death of kayfabe through its universalization, is, we argue, the central political and cultural issue of our time.²¹

Neokayfabe and Autocracy

One of the distinctive facets of the contemporary age is the way the Reagan administration's 1987 destruction of the Fairness Doctrine, combined with very high standards required to prove libel in the United States, has led to people living in alternative

19 While we focus throughout this monograph on the relationship between hyperreality and kayfabe, Nicholas Ware extends this connection from wrestling to professional wrestling videogames. See Nicholas Ware, "Wrestling's Not Real, It's Hyperreal," in *Performance and Professional Wrestling*, ed. Broderick Chow, Eero Laine, and Claire Warden (Routledge, 2016).

20 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman (Semiotext(e), 1983) remains Baudrillard's canonical text in this regard.

21 A complete discussion would put our analyses of postmodernism and neokayfabe into discussion with Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Rebel Press, 1992). Briefly, Debord's "recuperation" is the process in which supposedly radical, oppositional moments in culture get reabsorbed into that culture, in the sense of Johnny Rotten singing a Nike commercial or Dave Chapelle reinventing himself as a sexist rich dude. Our discussion of Christopher Grobe's blistering critique of the academic apotheosis of "transgression" connects most closely with Debordian recuperation. This is to be contrasted with Debord's "détournement," which is the manner in which a spectacle can be disrupted in a way to turn the capitalist system against itself. Neokayfabe then is, arguably, the recuperation of détournement itself. We thank Michael Ardoline for this insight.

information bubbles that cater to their unfounded prejudices. Under the Fairness Doctrine, any information source that operated on public airwaves, such as radio and pre-cable television, had to provide equal time to opposing political views. After the Fairness Doctrine was abandoned, first talk radio shows such as *The Rush Limbaugh Show* and then cable channels such as Fox News progressively blurred information and editorial content so much that the editorial content came to dictate the selective presentation of (dis)information. The resulting flood of faux news spread to newsprint, for example with the “Moonies” (the Unification Church–owned *Washington Times*) or the editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal* doing their part to create an army of citizens insensate to important truths, such as the facts that tax cuts for the wealthy do not create jobs, human activity is rendering the climate inhospitable to life, and the stated *casus belli* for the Iraq War was false.²²

As Eli Pariser argued in *The Filter Bubble: How the New Personalized Web is Changing What We Read and How We Think*,²³ the rise of social media and monetization of search algorithms by monopolies such as Google and YouTube greatly exacerbated this trend.²⁴ The ability of users to select and spread misinformation that props up their deeply held worldviews or just in some

22 See, for example, David Folkenflik’s “Study Hits War Views Held by Fox Fans,” *The Baltimore Sun*, October 24, 2003. In 2003 Fox viewers were four times as likely as National Public Radio listeners to believe the then-decisively disconfirmed allegations that: (1) Saddam Husain was linked to the September 11 attacks, (2) weapons of mass destruction were found in Iraq, and (3) world opinion favored the US invasion of Iraq. As of 2015 more than half of Fox news viewers continued to believe that WMDs were found in Iraq. See Kendall Breitman’s “Poll: Half of Republicans Still Believe WMDs Found in Iraq,” *Politico*, January 7, 2015, <https://www.politico.com/story/2015/01/poll-republicans-wmds-iraq-114016>.

23 Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: How the New Personalized Web is Changing What We Read and How We Think* (Penguin Books, 2012).

24 See also Benjamin Litherland, “Breaking *Kayfabe* Is Easy, Cheap and Never Entertaining: Twitter Rivalries in Professional Wrestling,” *Celebrity Studies* 5, no. 4 (2014): 531–33.

sense feels good for them to believe,²⁵ combined with algorithms that amplify posts designed to generate anger, has resulted in an astonishing portion of the electorate organizing themselves into information bubbles where dissenting opinions are not allowed. The social cost of this became most clear during the COVID-19 crisis, especially of 2020–2021. By late 2021, the death rate from all causes in US counties that strongly voted Republican was *over three times* what it was in heavily Democratic counties, largely as a result of misinformation about vaccines on right wing talk radio channels funded by “nutritional supplements” advertised as alternatives to actual medicine such as vaccinations. And of course it did not help that this misinformation was amplified by the forty-fifth President of the United States, Donald Trump.²⁶

Even prior to COVID-19 misinformation and Trump’s “stop the steal” lie that Joe Biden had secured the 2020 election through voter fraud, astute commentators saw the rise of information

25 Thinking deeply enough about these phenomena provides support to theorists like Donovan Schaefer who reconceptualize rationality in terms of the primacy of affective process. See especially Donovan Schaefer, *Wild Experiment: Feeling Science and Secularism after Darwin* (Duke University Press, 2022.). A sequel to this book would have a chapter integrating our major claim that one only fights conspiracy theories with better theories with Schaefer’s account of how affective considerations play into things like theory choice. A lazy reading of Schaefer would lead one to think that this is just a rhetorical issue, where the only improvement concerns presentation of theory, as opposed to trying to present a theory that is both true and compelling. But fully incorporating Schaefer’s work would in effect require giving a good account of the connection between affect and the classic Thomistic transcendentals of the good, true, and beautiful, which is itself a book-length exercise. This being said, our concluding chapter could be read as a step in this direction.

26 See Daniel Wood and Geoff Brumfiel, “Pro-Trump Counties Now Have Far Higher COVID Death Rates: Misinformation Is to Blame,” *NPR*, December 5, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2021/12/05/1059828993/data-vaccine-misinformation-trump-counties-covid-death-rate>. On the philosophical ramifications of these developments, and how Graham Harman’s object-oriented ontology presents a third way between irrationalism and scientism, see Jon Cogburn and Niki Young’s extensive “Editor’s Introduction,” in *The Graham Harman Reader*, ed. Jon Cogburn and Niki Young (Zero Books, 2023).

bubbles as part of a deeper, more philosophically interesting connection between Trump and wrestling. These commentators began tying Trump’s proclivity at “bullshitting,” that is his skill at persuading with no regard for actual facts, with professional wrestling’s fraught relationship with the truth.²⁷

In the broader context of the years following the first presidency of Donald Trump, however, what is most significant is the analogous ways that the paradoxical postmodern moment of universal kayfabe is increased and weaponized by autocrats. The most central of these weapons involves the relationship between cynicism and autocracy. In his great work, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, Peter Sloterdijk analyses the manner in which social dislocation and economic precarity under Weimar Germany led people to passively accept the rise of Adolph Hitler.²⁸ To be clear, Sloterdijk is not saying that the most immiserated people supported Hitler. They did not, any more than the poorest Americans support Trump. They do not. But for Trump to win, it is simply enough that they do not vote. This is one of the ways that in situations of general dislocation, precarity, and democratic

27 The resurgence in popularity of the masterful philosophical treatise, Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit* (Princeton University Press, 2005) during Trump’s rise was surely no accident. Frankfurt describes bullshit as the facility to accomplish things with words while being completely insensitive to truth.

28 In what follows we run the risk of not taking seriously enough Sloterdijk’s account of the role the threat of state violence plays in creating this cynicism. Indeed, had the insurrection of January 6 been successful, it is almost certain that while the US military would have professed neutrality and done nothing one way or the other, overwhelmingly pro-Trump local police and sheriff departments would have secured the coup by simply amping up the brutality already manifest in their response to the Black Lives Matter protests. Nonetheless, it is not at all clear to us that levels of cynicism and conspiracism in the United States in any way track the extent to which state violence is likely to be visited upon the cynics in question. This creates a kind of bad faith that one sees in Alex Jones for example, who constantly engages in fevered, fact-free, conspiratorial fantasies about the threat of a (socialist!) “new world order” police state but then simultaneously enthusiastically cheers, for example, actual police violence and immigration policies that would only be possible in a dystopian police state.

unresponsiveness to economic dislocation, it is much easier for a coalition of the economic elite, small business owners (many of them relatively wealthy), and government workers involved with policing and war (in Germany the *Freikorps*) to end the periodic peaceful transfers of power.

Cynicism, Laine says, is the combination of the knowledge that reigning narratives are not true combined with an intense awareness of the inability to change the reality mischaracterized by the legitimating narratives. He notes that:

The impossibility of an enlightened critique in what Žižek has termed via Sloterdijk “these cynical times” is posited in the subject who already knows, who recognizes the overlay of theatricality in all interactions, who is already enlightened to problems and contradictions in contemporary society but is seemingly powerless to change everything.²⁹

Indeed, Sloterdijk’s understanding of cynicism has been instrumental for the current generation of scholars attempting to understand the dysfunctional political culture in Vladimir Putin’s Russia. For example, in a recent piece for *New Eastern Europe*, Paul Shields writes:

Cynicism is useful for authoritarian leaders as it eliminates the imagined possibility of alternatives. Any proposed alternative, no matter how idealistic or appealing, is undermined by a distrust of motivations. The political cynic reasons: if politics is all the same and nothing ever changes, why should I do anything? Why should I be involved? Such thinking disinhibits taking political action at the individual level, limiting any bottom-up political challenge to the regime before it can develop.³⁰

29 Eero Laine, “Kayfabe: Optimism, Cynicism, Critique,” in *Professional Wrestling: Politics and Populism*, ed. Sharon Mazer et al. (Seagull Books, 2020), 200.

30 Paul Shields, “Russia’s Spiral of Cynicism,” *New Eastern Europe*, October 5, 2021, <https://neueasterneurope.eu/2021/10/05/russias-spiral-of-cynicism/>.

A recent article by Shields published in *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* shows that propaganda in Russia and China does not need to be remotely convincing to contribute to authoritarian stability. The ubiquity of transparently bad propaganda in favor of the regime reinforces “a preexisting cynical attitude toward politics — an attitude that makes the collective action necessary for bottom-up reform hard to contemplate, let alone organize in an authoritarian context.”³¹ If the fix is already in (in the sense that, as in wrestling, the outcome is pre-determined), as the ubiquity of clearly stupid propaganda seems to intimate, resistance to the fix (meaning political action against the government or other attempts to make anything at all better) is further disempowered.³²

Shields’s analysis of the role of propaganda in a population that is already universally cynical forces us to revise the classical notion of propaganda as leading people to believe things that are not in their interests. In Jason Stanley’s *How Propaganda Works*, he defines bad propaganda in a way that is *logically* consistent with Shields’s account, but is nonetheless in tension with it. Consider:

31 Paul Shields, “Killing Politics Softly: Unconvincing Propaganda and Political Cynicism in Russia,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 54, no. 4 (2021): 54–73.

32 From conversations with Michael Ardoline, it is clear to us that a complete discussion of this would dig deeply into Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Zero Books, 2022), which discusses the manner in which all political imagination has been reduced to neoliberal solutions: “It is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism” (Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 2). There are structural reasons for this which Fisher perhaps does not thematize enough. In the United States for example, as a result of neoliberal policies the richest eleven percent of the population now lives off of investment income, and as a result both parties must work to raise stock markets to even more absurd (by the historic valuation as a result of price/earning ratio) heights. This so constrains fiscal, monetary, and foreign policy as to very possibly preclude anything like a return to the New Deal social contract.

Undermining propaganda: A contribution to public discourse that is presented as an embodiment of certain ideals yet is of a kind that tends to erode those very ideals.³³

This kind of propaganda happens, for example, when ideals of safety are invoked to support policies that make us less safe. Arguments made by commentators on Russian news stations in favor of the invasion of Ukraine often invoke the ideal of safety from foreign intervention, something Russia is arguably now much less safe from because of the invasion. However, this kind of analysis can be misleading about the mechanisms by which propaganda succeeds in Russia, not merely in terms of convincing people to have destructive beliefs about the issues being propagandized but also by nurturing a politically disempowering cynicism.

The farrago of lies from the Trump administration operates more in the manner of Shields's analysis, with Trump's advisor Steve Bannon famously having said in 2018, "Democrats don't matter. The real opposition is the media. And the way to deal with them is to flood the zone with shit."³⁴

Darrell West, author of *Divided Politics, Divided Nation: Hyperconflict in the Trump Era*, is shocked by the amount of division in the country and the extent to which misinformation has exacerbated the problem. He points to false claims circulated during the first Trump administration related to the wearing of masks, fraud from mail-in ballots, and Joe Biden's victory in the election. West shows how this kind of willfully spread misinformation divides the country and poisons the political environment.³⁵ Again, the point of this kind of propaganda is not to convince anyone of anything but rather to produce a state

33 Jason Stanley, *How Propaganda Works* (Princeton University Press, 2015), 34.

34 First reported in Michael Lewis, "Has Anyone Seen the President?," *Bloomberg*, February 9, 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2018-02-09/has-anyone-seen-the-president>.

35 Darrell M. West, *Divided Politics, Divided Nation: Hyperconflict in the Trump Era* (Brookings Institution Press, 2020).

of disempowerment with respect to all possible authoritative sources of information, a state similar to what Shields reports in a more fully realized existing authoritarian dystopia.

What Shields describes in his papers is just universal kayfabe, neokayfabe, the prison of Baudrillard’s hyperreality³⁶ where viewing everything as fake undermines the very distinction between fake and real.³⁷ In such a context, Laine’s cynicism becomes so all-encompassing that it devours critique. Indeed, the distinction between cynicism and critique arguably then disappears, and the philosophical “view from nowhere” becomes, in the guise of universal critique, a sneer. When Mark Fisher bemoaned the primacy of this affect in the early academic blogosphere, it was almost as if he had read Laine and feared what would happen:

In many ways, the academic qua academic is the Troll par excellence. Postgraduate study has a propensity to breed trolls; in the worst cases, the mode of nitpicking critique (and autocritique) required by academic training turns people into permanent trolls, trolls who troll *themselves*, who transform their inability to commit to any position into a virtue, a sign of their maturity (opposed, in their minds, to the allegedly infantile attachments of The Fan). But there is nothing more adolescent — in the worst way — than this posture of alleged detachment, this sneer from nowhere. For what it disavows is its own investments; an investment in always being at the edge of projects it can neither commit to nor entirely sever itself from — the worst kind of libidinal configuration, an

36 We are not the only scholars to notice this commonality between kayfabe and hyperreality. See also CarrieLynn D. Reinhard, and Christopher J. Olson, eds., *Convergent Wrestling: Participatory Culture, Transmedia Storytelling, and Intertextuality in the Squared Circle* (Routledge, 2019); Broderick Chow, Eero Lane, and Claire Warden, eds., *Performance and Professional Wrestling* (Routledge, 2016); and Brian Jansen, “‘Yes! No! ... Maybe?’: Reading the Real in Professional Wrestling’s Unreality,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 51, no. 3 (2018): 635–56.

37 See Baudrillard, *Simulations*.

appalling trap, an existential toxicity which ensures debilitation for all who come into contact with it (if only that in terms of time and energy wasted — the Troll above all wants to waste time, its libido involves a banal sadism, the dull malice of snatching people’s toys away from them).³⁸

Fisher died in 2017, having lived just long enough to see this condescending affect become the new norm in neoliberal democracies where everyone is now a cynic, where kayfabe died by universalizing itself.³⁹

38 Mark Fisher, “Fans, Vampires, Trolls, Masters,” *k-punk*, June 12, 2009, <http://k-punk.abstractdynamics.org/archives/011172.html>.

39 We would be remiss not to mention David S. Moon, “Work, Kayfabe and the Development of Proletarian Culture: Professional Wrestling as Potential Proletkult,” *Professional Wrestling Studies Journal* 3, no. 1 (2022): 17–37. Where we focus on the present moment’s universalization of kayfabe into the phenomenon we call neokayfabe, Moon looks to kayfabe as a potential vehicle of human liberation, drawing compelling parallels between traditional understandings of kayfabe and Russian *Proletkult*. Building upon the embodied and cooperative nature of professional wrestling as expressed in the work of Broderick Chow, Eero Laine, and Claire Warden, Moon finds within the act of professional wrestling a potential for emancipation. We admire Moon’s vision of wrestling as a potential launching point for the emancipation of labor by the appreciation of the labor inherent in a match, but we are uncertain to what extent Moon’s vision of the potential of kayfabe for positive change necessarily falsifies our assessment of neokayfabe’s appropriation of narrative in the service of right-wing authoritarianism.

“My President Is a Cheeto!”: Buffoonery as Business and Political Strategy

Post-Screwjob, Vince McMahon and his creative team attempted to navigate a perilous dilemma. They had to turn the CEO of WWE into a heel while preventing the company he ran from becoming a heel as well.¹ And they came up with the perfect solution: McMahon allowing a somewhat ridiculous fictional version of himself to be periodically humiliated in storyline, thus effectively neutralizing fan hatred towards WWE. Many of his humiliations were silly, such as being taunted with a sock puppet or having his head shaved, some featured simulated violence and injury, and some involved simulated loss of economic decision making, such as when a victorious performer was

1 The extent to which McMahon and his creative team successfully navigated the horns of this dilemma is a subject of considerable debate. Former WWE wrestler and backstage agent Lance Storm posited on numerous episodes of Bryan Alvarez’s *Figure Four Daily* podcast that McMahon’s failure to thread this needle contributed to the WWE’s ratings decline from 2003 until 2021, citing two decades of storylines where various figurehead leaders of the company — from McMahon to his daughter Stephanie McMahon, Eric Bischoff, and his son-in-law Triple H — were all heels who reliably oppressed every babyface in the company who got the least bit popular as a main event performer.

given the meaningless prize of becoming the “general manager” of *Smackdown* or *Raw*.

And there was a lot of discontent to monetize. Wrestling fans who grew up watching live and televised wrestling in the promotions the then-wWF replaced, killed, or took over — as well as those who followed Japanese, British, Canadian, and Mexican wrestling — never connected with the new style of wrestling that WWE promoted, which was often derided as “WWE style” by industry insiders, journalists, and performers. Under Vince McMahon’s leadership, WWE tended to hire and promote much larger athletes than those seen in other promotions around the world. Their size prevented these wrestlers from doing the sorts of ballet-like moves perfected by generations of professional wrestlers trained in Japan and Mexico.² Many, if not most, WWE wrestlers from the 1980s had to use anabolic steroids and human growth hormones to achieve the look the McMahon and the promotion rewarded. It was nearly impossible for a wrestler to be in or win a title match without looking like one of Vince’s bodyguards. As a result, many of the fans’ favorite wrestlers died in their forties — in many cases either during or less than a dec-

2 One of McMahon’s corporate misfirings was attempting to start a bodybuilding promotion analogous to professional wrestling. Commentators connect the size fetishism manifest in this quixotic endeavor with the WWE style, though to be fair the limited repertoire of moves possible by McMahon’s giants did support a style of wrestling legible to a global audience that had not grown up watching wrestling in the American territories. We think that these different perspectives are in the end consistent with one another. For the former kind of analysis, see Ryan Dilbert, “Vince McMahon’s Failed Attempt to Take over Bodybuilding,” *Bleacher Report*, November 27, 2015, <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/2542941-vince-mcmahons-failed-attempt-to-take-over-bodybuilding>. For the latter, see Neal Hebert, “Professional Wrestling: Local Performance History, Global Performance Praxis” (PhD diss., Louisiana State University, 2016). Hebert shows that a major part of the WWE big guys style was, whether they knew it or not, a perfect storm to attract the attention of children and people new to wrestling. While this style is easier to hook people new to wrestling, it explains why so many older fans never got with the wWF in the 1980s, since it was essentially both an amalgamation of multiple territorial styles and a devolution that reduced these styles’ complexity.

ade after the prime of their careers. But, post-Screwjob, viewers still tuned in twice a week to *Smackdown* and *Monday Night Raw* to watch the fictional version of McMahon, usually presented in storyline as the reason fan favorites were losing matches, being ritually humiliated. Though we hated McMahon and, in some ways, even the promotion he led, we stayed on our couches and in the arena, buying “Stone Cold” Steve Austin merchandise and tickets to live events in larger numbers than at any other time in professional wrestling history.³

“Say Hello to Mr. Socko!” On the Ritual Humiliations of Vince McMahon

In the wake of the Montreal Screwjob, McMahon was initially surprised to find himself playing a heel on television. According to Dave Meltzer in the *Wrestling Observer* newsletters from the time period, when McMahon sat down with Jim Ross and gave his infamous interview on November 17, 1997, he believed the fans would take his side and perceive the company as the real babyface, while Bret Hart’s decision to leave the wwf for Ted Turner’s rival World Championship Wrestling without dropping the wwf World title in Montreal would make Hart the heel. After all, Hart had been the heel in wwf storylines since March of 1997, so it seemed an easy fix for Vince McMahon and his booking team.⁴ For those familiar with the aftermath of the Screwjob, however, it is perhaps unsurprising to learn that McMahon did not come across sympathetically when given a forum to speak.⁵ Dave Meltzer’s “November 24, 1997 Wrestling

3 According to wwf’s tax filings and financial statements, even at the time of this writing Steve Austin’s merchandise often sells multiple millions of units more than many of the promotion’s current stars.

4 In the United States, the Canadian Hart Foundation were hated heels who spewed bile about how awful the United States of America was, but in their home country of Canada and everywhere else in the world the Hart Foundation were babyfaces speaking truth about America’s global footprint and annoying patriotism.

5 McMahon has a long history of coming across as boorish and aggressive in interviews.

Observer Newsletter” highlights exactly why this interview did not have the intended effect:

McMahon, on the 11/17 *Raw*, without actually using the words, tried to imply that Hart was unprofessional because he had refused to drop the title in the ring. The wording McMahon used is that Hart failed to honor a time-honored tradition of the business (you do jobs on the way out of a territory). For those with memories longer than two or three years, the realization is that any discussion of McMahon and time-honored traditions of the wrestling industry is worthy of not a chapter, but an entire book. The only true time honored [*sic*] tradition of this business is that everyone in power lies and manipulates to get people to do things that are often against their best interest, or top talent with leverage agrees to do jobs, then holds up promoters at the last minute to squeeze money or promises out on that end. And then everyone pretends to like each other, and that’s not a digression from the actual issue.⁶

McMahon may have been in a war for survival with Ted Turner’s World Championship Wrestling, but despite this fact, Hart’s departure did not sour fans on Hart. How could it? The entire world had seen the footage of McMahon ordering a match to end, and watched wwf referee Earl Hebner and wwf Superstar Shawn Michaels, Hart’s opponent, double-cross Hart. They cheated. No matter what McMahon and Ross tried to say about the last pay-per-view, an arena of Canadians booed McMahon and the wwf out of the hall because they broke the “rules” of wrestling and denied fans a real finish to a highly anticipated premiere match.

6 Dave Meltzer, “Nov. 24, 1997 Wrestling Observer Newsletter: The Montreal Screwjob, Pt. 2,” *Wrestling Observer/Figure Four Online*, November 10, 2017, <https://www.f4wonline.com/newsletters/wrestling-observer-newsletter/nov-24-1997-wrestling-observer-newsletter-montreal-screwjob-pt-2-246101/>.

The buildup to the pre-recorded interview between Vince McMahon and Jim Ross attempted to frame the story as a simple case of a disgruntled wrestler refusing to lose on the way out of the promotion. The TV audience watching *Monday Night Raw* on November 17, 1997 saw footage of Bret Hart destroying WWF camera equipment and the ringside area. The show cut to McMahon and Ross in a studio. Ross asked McMahon, “Seven days ago at the Survivor Series, did you, or did you not, screw Bret?”⁷ McMahon’s famous response:

Some would say I screwed Bret Hart. Bret Hart would definitely tell you I screwed him. I look at it from a different standpoint. I look at it from the standpoint of, the referee did not screw Bret Hart, Shawn Michaels certainly did not screw Bret Hart, nor did Vince McMahon screw Bret Hart. I truly believe Bret Hart screwed Bret Hart. He can look in the mirror and know that.⁸

It is hard to read a transcript of McMahon’s interview with Ross and conclude that Vince McMahon could say this and believe he would be perceived as sympathetic. Unfortunately for McMahon at the time, the interview gets far worse, building to McMahon claiming, “I have no sympathy for Bret whatsoever. No sympathy for a guy not doing the right thing for the business and the fans that made him. Bret made a selfish decision and he has to live with it for the rest of his life.”⁹ At the time, concerns about who was the real-life babyface and heel consumed fan discussion boards and specialty newsletters such as Meltzer’s *Observer* and Wade Keller’s *Pro-Wrestling Torch*. But in retrospect, what clearly mattered most was that fans decided that McMahon was

7 Kevin Dunn, dir., *Monday Night Raw*, November 17, 1997, for broadcast television, WWE Network on Paramount.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

personally at fault for this decision. Mr. McMahon, evil CEO of WWF, was born.¹⁰

For years afterward, wrestling fans tuning in to *Monday Night Raw* (and, starting in 1999, *WWE Smackdown!*) would grow very familiar with the antics of the evil CEO intent on terrorizing his employees. McMahon, accompanied by his “corporate stooges,” former pro-wrestlers and backstage producers Gerald Brisco and Pat Patterson, became the chief antagonist to babyface main eventer “Stone Cold” Steve Austin from December of 1997 until “Wrestlemania x7” in April of 2001, when Austin turned heel and joined forces with McMahon. This turn is regarded in hindsight as the biggest booking misstep in perhaps the entire history of professional wrestling. Austin’s fans were willing to watch anything on their televisions except, it turns out, Austin becoming a corporate stooge after building his entire babyface persona and wrestling identity as the opposite. From 2001 until 2022, WWF/WWE ratings declined from their peak in the 1999 — “The Undertaker vs Stone Cold Steve Austin” on June 28 featured an audience of 10.5 million viewers — to fewer than two million fans two decades later. After decades of

10 People familiar with WWF history from the 1980s and early 1990s were less surprised. McMahon had long had an obsession with a CEO-like character coming in and purchasing belts, “corrupting” wrestling through participation in capitalism. In a shoot interview conducted with RF Video, Ted DiBiase, when relating the pitch that convinced him to jump to the WWF in the 1980s, was told that to find out his character he would have to sign the employment contract to work for the company. Pat Patterson, the intermediary between DiBiase and the WWF, was told two things: it was a guaranteed main event role, and that McMahon was so excited and invested in this character that he would “put on the boots” and play it himself if he could. DiBiase’s character, “The Million Dollar Man,” was a huge hit, and, at least in terms of storylines and eventual feud with Hulk Hogan, served as a kind of accidental test run of what was to come with Austin more than a decade later. In the 1990s, as a favor to Jerry Lawler and Memphis Championship Wrestling, McMahon played a corrupt evil billionaire wrestling promoter obsessed with defeating the local babyface who would pay wrestlers to come in and wrestle the champion. Neither iteration of the character that McMahon would eventually play gave any indication of exactly how big this would become.

promotion, McMahon discovered that he himself was the biggest drawing heel in wrestling history, and his rivalry with Austin defined wrestling fandom for generations.

Week to week, however, the promotion found ways to keep McMahon and Austin apart from each other. They were adversaries, but McMahon's status as the evil CEO character meant Austin could never reliably defeat his boss. Other wrestlers and feuds were woven in and out of the rivalry between McMahon and Austin. Some weeks, Austin would one-up McMahon's stooges, or McMahon's allies in “The Corporation,” McMahon's heel faction of evil wrestlers who sold their services to the CEO in exchange for increased opportunities to depose Austin as world champion. The Rock (the in-ring name of the actor Dwayne Johnson during his career with WWF/WWE) was Austin's biggest in-ring rival at the time, and their matches did strong business for several years. It was the addition of Mick Foley as “Man-kind” to the Austin/McMahon rivalry as an Austin rival, then ally, however, that led to McMahon's biggest humiliations.

On the October 5, 1998 episode of *Monday Night Raw*, McMahon found himself at a “local medical facility” recovering from a broken ankle suffered weeks before.¹¹ Throughout that evening's episode of *Monday Night Raw*, McMahon was filmed in a hospital bed wearing a gown, hooked up to a completely unnecessary vital signs monitor, wearing an equally useless oxygen tube, and attended by a nurse.

The now-legendary clip began with WWF lead announcer Jim Ross announcing that they had cameras in McMahon's convalescence room. McMahon's nurse tremulously told him, “a really, really big fellow wants to come see you,” adding that the visitor

11 Kevin Dunn, dir., *Monday Night Raw*, October 5, 1998, for broadcast television, WWE Network on Paramount. McMahon, when running the creative division of WWF/WWE, famously was obsessed with language, banning some words from his announcers' vocabularies. One such banned word was “hospital.” The reason actually has some basis in kayfabe: since *Monday Night Raw* traveled around the country from week to week, McMahon did not want announcers to claim someone was sent to the hospital in a city or town without access to a full hospital.

was “really big” and “threatening staff” while McMahon passionately insisted he did not want to see any visitors aside from his immediate family. A terrified McMahon braced himself to be ambushed by Austin like an avenging angel when Mankind arrived with gifts and well-wishes.

Mankind, played by Mick Foley, is one of the most famous professional wrestlers of the past thirty years. The author of the first blockbuster professional wrestling autobiography *Have a Nice Day! A Tale of Blood and Sweatsocks*, Foley ranked behind only Austin, McMahon, and, later, the Rock, as a ratings and ticket mover. Though he was initially cast as a deranged psychopath to feud with the Undertaker and Shawn Michaels, Foley’s strength on the microphone became the key to his massive popularity in WWF as a babyface.

When Foley entered McMahon’s room with a promise to “turn that frown upside down,” McMahon’s expressive face transitioned from abject fear to utter disgust at seeing the masked Mankind. Upon opening the heart-shaped box Foley brought as a get-well present, McMahon muttered, “You know I’m in a lot of pain?” Foley promised that the chocolates were delicious, as was the surprise guest he brought with him. “Someone who really wants to see you bad!” Foley said, unwittingly rekindling McMahon’s fear that Austin was going to track him down.

But instead of Austin, Foley brought in a clown named Yurple who presented McMahon with a rainbow balloon animal and promised him that brighter days were ahead. Meanwhile, Foley blew a slide whistle to McMahon’s intense irritation. Foley’s request that Yurple make a dog balloon animal caused McMahon to reiterate that he didn’t want chocolates or balloon dogs — he wanted to convalesce.

Foley, oblivious to the reception he and Yurple were receiving, promised a third and final guest. Foley crawled under the bed while McMahon screamed at him, once again thinking Austin was on the way. Instead, Foley produced a sock-puppet named Mr. Socko, which gave McMahon’s broken ankle what Foley called a big kiss. McMahon screamed in irritation and belatedly called for a nurse to get Yurple and Mankind out of his hospital

room. McMahon slapped at the balloons and threw the chocolate across the room while the camera zoomed in for a close-up as the defeated man repeated “Mr. Socko!” in disbelief.

McMahon, the autocratic CEO, the billion-dollar man and genetic jackhammer, was never afraid of losing his heat by participating in storylines that made the crowd laugh at his humiliation, including several where wrestlers physically defeated him. However, in something of the same way that successful autocrats become less and less comical, the glory days of seeing McMahon humiliated are long gone. Every time WWE has returned to this well over the last twenty years, it has born diminishing returns in TV ratings.

“My President Is a Cheeto!”

It is stunning that societies verging into autocracy often include politicians who lend themselves to public humiliation and mocking derision by their opponents. As far as we can tell, this happens in part because public buffoons can be underestimated until it is too late, and in part because an atmosphere of public humiliation and mockery works well as a replacement for genuine politics. Just as disempowered wrestling fans continue to participate in wrestling fandom to watch McMahon’s humiliation, people continue to participate in a political process that has no bearing on their livelihoods to watch the humiliation of the opposing side — their political enemies.

The cathartic, though ultimately disempowering, role of mockery in dying democracies has been staring us in the face for some time. This is especially clear to readers of novelist Friedrich Reck’s *Diary of a Man in Despair*, one of the signal historical documents of the rise of Adolf Hitler. Reck himself died in October 1944 in the Dachau concentration camp, either from typhus or being shot. He had been sent there after being convicted of the absurd crime of having insulted the German currency when he complained about inflation in a letter to his editor.

Reck's diary was preserved only because he had the foresight to keep its entries hidden in a tin box in the woods of his estate. His novelistic powers allowed him to express his hatred of Hitler and the Nazis via savagely funny anecdotes and putdowns, such as claiming that Hitler was the only person he knew more humorless than philosopher Oswald Spengler, whom Reck claims once ate an entire goose without sharing any with his dinner guests during the near famine conditions at the end of World War I. Reck condescendingly refers to Hitler as a "fore-locked Gypsy type," "middle-class Antichrist," "Machiavelli for chambermaids," "effigy of Bismarck who would certainly have had to go to bed for four weeks if he had ever tried to eat just one of Bismarck's breakfasts," "vegetable Genghis Khan," "head-waiter closing his hand around the tip," and "poor dung face." Though he was a famous enough novelist to have met Hitler a few times, Reck's most quoted description of Hitler comes after viewing him through binoculars:

There he stood, the most glorious of all, in his usual pose with hands clasped over his belly, looking, with his silver-decorated uniform and cap drawn far down over his forehead, like a streetcar conductor. I examined his face through my binoculars. The whole of it waggled with unhealthy cushions of fat; it all hung, it was all slack and without structure — slaggy, gelatinous, sick. There was no light in it, none of the shimmer and shining of a man sent by God. Instead, the face bore the stigma of sexual inadequacy, of the rancor of a half-man who had turned his fury at his impotence into brutalizing others.¹²

In his description of his first meeting with Hitler, Reck mocks the aspiring dictator's clothing, the way Hitler did not understand the elegant ironic speech of his aristocratic hosts, and how he talked to the other guests in bombastic oratory, addressing

12 Friedrich Reck, *Diary of a Man in Despair*, trans. Paul Rubens (New York Review Books, 2013), 29, 59, 180, 38, 36, 59, and 86–87.

them “like a division chaplain in the Army.”¹³ Worst of all, Reck noted that being in Hitler’s presence was like finding oneself next to an insane person on public transportation. Hitler was not the only prominent politician who found himself a target of Reck’s razor wit. He called Hitler’s chief propagandist, Paul Goebbels, a “limping haberdashery salesman,”¹⁴ and after being questioned by Nazi Chief of Police and Interior Ministry Heinrich Himmler, Reck mocked Himmler’s historical ignorance of Joseph Fouché, Napoleon Bonaparte’s Minister of Police.

Reck credulously reports falsehoods about Nazi leaders such as the claim that the drug-addled Hitler (whom he also called “the Chief Eunuch”)¹⁵ maintained a seraglio of underage girls. The diary abounds with Reck’s eye for ever-increasing incompetent absurdity under totalitarians, such as Brown Shirts during the Röhm Putsch (also called the Night of the Long Knives) killing every Schmidt they could find in a local phone book to “make sure they got the right one” or the manner in which performance enhancing drugs caused impotence among the very German athletes held up as a paradigm of masculinity.¹⁶

The ubiquity of humorous putdowns in Reck’s diary provides support to Freudian theories of humor as a kind of often sublimated aggression.¹⁷ The salience of this connection between humor and aggression is in fact greatly increased when one considers the other way that humor was deployed during the

13 Ibid., 37.

14 Ibid., 68.

15 Ibid., 94.

16 Hebert has a work-in-progress that builds on this point, elaborating more on the connection between performance-enhancing drugs, professional wrestling, and nationalism. The last presentation of the in-process work was “Embodied Patriotism and Extraordinary Performing Bodies: ‘Real’ Americans, Evil Foreigners, and Anabolic Steroids in U.S. Professional Wrestling,” presented at the American Society for Theatre Research’s Working Session “Extraordinary Players: Sports, Physical Training, and Performance” in November 2017.

17 Other approaches see humor as release and humor as incongruity. For a description of all three approaches and a compelling argument that they are complementary, see chapter 3 of Salvatore Attardo, *The Linguistics of Humor: An Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2020.)

Third Reich, for the commission of what philosopher Jonathan Glover calls the “cold joke.” The cold joke is only ever told by the powerful while harming others; it is the reverse of the powerless mocking their oppressors. In *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century*, Glover recounts how civilians helping murder Jews almost uniformly found it necessary to mock and deride those they were killing. Weirdly, the cold joke doesn’t have to actually be clever to be funny to the perpetrators of violence. It doesn’t even have to make sense. One of the school shooters in the Columbine massacre in the United States laughed after asking his next victim if he thought he looked cool in those glasses.

From the non-cold joke perspective of the humor of the powerless, it is depressing to contemplate the false sense of empowerment felt by millions of people while previously apolitical late-night shows such as Stephen Colbert’s *The Late Show* and nationally syndicated radio programs like the *Howard Stern Show* regularly began to include funny bits at Trump’s expense. The tens of thousands of jokes coming from the almost certainly false claim that the fastidiously germophobic Trump paid prostitutes in Moscow to urinate on a bed slept on by Barack Obama are a strange historical footnote to Reck simultaneously believing that Hitler was impotent yet kept a harem.

Many of these contemporary routines were genuinely funny, mostly because Trump’s self-presentation is so transparently clownish. He does not hide his identity as an obese, orange narcissist who publicly squandered the fortune left to him by his father, while at the same time bragging about his health and his prowess in fields financial and sexual. The strange celebrity-obsessed tangents of his speaking style are often very funny in a laughing-at-not-with-him kind of way. The plurality of Americans who watched him being mocked weekly by actor Alec Baldwin (who perfectly captured Trump’s weird physical mannerisms) and then James Austin Johnson (who captured

Trump’s digressive speaking style) found the impressions to be funny because they are.¹⁸

In the way of all autocrats, though, it’s funny until it isn’t. In *The Revolution Betrayed*, the exiled former head of the Red Army, Leon Trotsky, famously mocked Stalin as the personification of bureaucracy. It seemed much less funny to Trotsky’s acolytes after a Soviet agent killed him with an icepick in Mexico City. Recent reevaluation of Stalin by Simon Montefiore has shown the extent to which Stalin was aware of this impression and actually used it to portray himself as far less competent than he was. This is part of the secret of how the romantic poet and daring revolutionary described in *The Young Stalin* became, at least with respect to his public face, the dour cypher of *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar*. The entire early revolutionary leadership of the Soviet Union, survivors of a civil war that killed up to nine million people, underestimated Stalin until it was too late.

As Montefiore shows, in this, and thankfully only this, respect, Nikita Khrushchev was Stalin’s best student. Not unlike Claudius in the court of the emperor Caligula during a similar era of proscriptions and extrajudicial killings, Khrushchev stayed alive by convincing Stalin and everyone else in his court that he was far less competent than he in fact was. Khrushchev’s competence served him well as he orchestrated the defeat of Stalin’s chief torturer and serial rapist, KGB director Lavrentiy Beria, after Stalin’s own death. Khrushchev remains the last leader of Russia who is beloved in part because of the comparison with what came before and after him, but also in part because the

18 There remains a sense of the carnivalesque about Trump’s clownish performances. As noted in Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Indiana University Press, 1984), the festival of misrule served as both a suspension of the recognized social order and then, in the carnivalesque aftermath, a reification of conventional power structures. While during the festival of misrule the “least deserving” gets to be ruler for a day, making frivolous laws for their peers to follow that serve to satirize and mock existing power structures, at the end of the festival the “correct” social order is always reinstated, with everyone the happier for having let off some steam and enjoying their license to break the rules, even if only for a little while.

Russian public found the particular way he instantiated the autocrat's clownish public persona to be endearing.

Perhaps unlike with Nikita Khrushchev, whose legacy continues to be debated by historians, it is not obvious that the constant public humiliation of Donald Trump has served any good purpose. Perhaps the best that can be said is viewers of *Saturday Night Live* took some solace in bonding with other viewers who similarly loathed Trump. But the thought that widespread awareness of the ludicrous nature of Trump would have some political effect was naive. During that period of slacktivist social media habits, many Americans really did feel that if everyone just started calling him by his ancestral name, "Drumpf" — as comedian John Oliver encouraged us to do on the late-night show *Last Week Tonight* — the collective ridicule would somehow either shame Trump and those in his orbit into submission or at least embarrass his supporters into rejecting him.

It never happened.

Remember that Trump learned at the knee of Vince McMahon, who was well aware of the jokes made at his expense. Trump watches, on his own admission, hours of television every day. So when he allowed himself to be photographed hugging and kissing the American flag, gleefully sitting inside a "big boy" truck, staring at a solar eclipse, or saluting a North Korean general, he knew exactly what he was doing and how it would be mocked.¹⁹

It is impossible to have witnessed the rise and reign of Donald Trump without considering the extent to which autocrats, at least on their way up, actually might invite impotent ridicule. With respect to professional wrestling, in the postmodern era of universal kayfabe, portraying Vince McMahon as a buffoon was a very solid business strategy for WWE. And even if it wasn't strategy but serendipity, the fact remains that it still worked. So, at the very least, attention to WWE during the Attitude Era leads us to ask what it is about contemporary material conditions that

19 See David Mack and Brandon Wall, "82 Stupid Things from the Trump Era You Probably Forgot About," *Buzzfeed News*, January 20, 2021, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/davidmack/dumb-trump-moments>.

gives rise to so many clownish leaders such as Trump, Silvio Berlusconi, Jair Bolsonaro, Benjamin Netanyahu, Vladimir Putin, Narendra Modi, Rodrigo Duterte, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

Football Town as Cruel Optimism

Moviegoers in the early 2010s remember well the “Football Town” commercial for Coca-Cola that seemingly aired in every theater before the trailers of every movie. The ad cycles through scenes of jubilant fans and players while a combination of fans addressing the camera say:

In football town, I know my team needs me.
In football town, I know painting my face means a win.
In football town, we know how to celebrate a score.
And without my voice, the game could be lost!
From Friday night through Saturday and into Sunday afternoon I know I can make a difference.

As the generic, radio-friendly country music reaches a crescendo, a player in the locker room addresses the movie audience:

I know fans can win the game. I’ve seen it. I’ve felt it. I’ve tasted it. I know you make the game.

Even though the purpose of the commercial is to sell soft drinks, on the big screen it looks like a piece of Orwellian propaganda, and perhaps would be if there were a Big Brother who wanted us to entertain the hypothesis that fan reaction has any measurable impact on who wins football games. The ubiquity of this commercial provides a fitting coda for data about the futility of democratic politics with respect to public policy in the United States. And Football Town is doubly absurd, first, because the claim that fans control the game wouldn’t have to be repeated so many times in the commercial if it were remotely plausible, and second, because who wins or loses a football game is unimpor-

tant. As a general rule, to “make a difference,” the difference in question must actually make a difference.

“Football Town” is the myth of responsiveness to public will in neoliberal democracies writ small. And one would expect nothing less from a sport run by the National Football League, a monopolistic cartel that renders fans morally complicit in the maiming, mostly through chronic traumatic encephalopathy, of its own players. To the extent that viewers believe that their fandom exerts magical psychic powers over the outcome of the games, they might feel a sense of empowerment in a social context where they have none.

Unlike in the NFL, in the WWE such a “Wrestling Town” optimism actually is plausible as a fundamental orientation since the smart mark knows that wrestlers who get big crowd responses actually are, in virtue of that response, more likely to have successful title runs. The smart mark then assumes that they themselves are empowered to affect the outcomes of matches. However, Laine points out that this optimism is cruel because,

To understand kayfabe is to understand that the story can be rewritten, but it is also to understand that one is rarely in a position to do so oneself.²⁰

While Laine focuses on audience interaction, his focus is not naively optimistic (and in this sense he prefigures much of the critique of this book), and he cites Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism* to suggest that an individual’s inability to affect reality is related to their recognition that American myths such as that of widespread upward mobility do not describe the actual world.

Laine’s key insight here concerns political inefficacy. With the optimist, it is initially the inability to actually on their own affect the things that they think they can, and then the dawning

20 Eero Laine, “Kayfabe: Optimism, Cynicism, Critique,” in *Professional Wrestling: Politics and Populism*, ed. Sharon Mazer et al. (Seagull Books, 2020), 198.

realization of just how circumscribed the possibilities of individual or collective action are.

One might then think that the issue is whether audience interaction in professional wrestling “makes a difference” to the promotion’s booking choices. But how much does it matter whether the company allows fan favorites to win matches if the promotion has abused lax anti-monopoly enforcement and arcane facets of the tax code to run all the other promotions out of business? What does it matter whether the company allows fan favorites to win matches if the company makes them work a style that the promoter wants to see, but leaves the people buying tickets consistently underwhelmed? What difference does it make if the favorite wins when the company is forcing that favorite to undergo work routines that cause that performer to risk early death through a stunt or move gone wrong?

There is no extant empirical data suggesting that professional wrestling fans are more prone to magical thinking than non-fans. Wrestling fans only believe in Wrestling Town because they are sensitive to the actual material processes that go from fan support for a wrestler to promotions scripting the matches so that that wrestler has a successful title run. But all this is to say that Wrestling Town only exists to the extent that traditional kayfabe is dead. And as the implications of the Montreal Screwjob have reverberated outwards across time, we see just how this has played out. In a sense, Football Town actually does exist in well-functioning wrestling promotions. However, this just illustrates the radical circumscription of anyone’s ability to “make a difference.” The promotion will remain insensate to crowd desires that might hurt share price or in any way impugn the neoliberal social contract that exists between empowered management and immiserated labor.

Just as fans of professional wrestling were not surprised by the election of Trump, the myth of Football Town conveyed nothing new. While WWE’s initial response to fan displeasure over the Montreal Screwjob involved McMahon’s periodic humiliations while playing himself as a heel, in the decades since, this strategy has morphed into one where the promotion as a whole

is periodically humiliated via having to put championship belts on wrestlers such as CM Punk, Daniel Bryan, and Kofi Kingston, all of whom have been presented as hated by WWE corporate.²¹

Eric Kennedy's recent essay "What's Best for Business': Professional Wrestling and Capitalist Appropriation" is a trenchant examination of the "fan revolt" leading up to Bryan Danielson's (who competed in the WWE as "Daniel Bryan") third, and extended, run as World Heavyweight Champion starting with his victory in 2014's "Wrestlemania xxx." Bryan is in many ways typical of the kind of wrestler that WWE would let participate in main events — even let become a champion — but would never commit to promoting as "the guy" the promotion revolved around, à la Hulk Hogan, Steve Austin, John Cena, or, most recently, Roman Reigns. Most of Danielson's career prior to 2014 was spent in independent promotions such as Ring of Honor where his energetic ring style and charisma led to him having an enthusiastic fan base.

But at five feet, seven inches tall, Danielson is much shorter than most male performers on the WWE roster. Though many fans and insiders regard him as the best wrestler in the world, for most of his WWE career he cycled up and down the cards, never wearing a belt for long. During this time, more and more fans would boo when Bryan lost, but it was clear they were booing WWE for not promoting Bryan as the top star. Storylines had him butting heads with "the Authority" who pretended to be WWE management:

21 While we direct attention to the storylines of CM Punk and Daniel Bryan in this monograph, special mention of Kofi Kingston and his 2019 title reign bears further mention. Kingston, the second Black person to hold the WWE Championship over sixty-five years, was given a title reign that combined some elements of the CM Punk and Daniel Bryan "unworthy champion" storyline with the WWE's complicated attempt to grapple with its own history of race and racism. The storyline deserves scrutiny; although so doing is outside the scope of this monograph, we direct attention to DiArron M., "Wrestling with Race: #Kofimania as Social Movement and Kayfabe as Discursive Space," *Professional Wrestling Studies Journal* 3, no. 1 (2022): 81–103.

In many ways, the Daniel Bryan-Authority storyline that ran through the autumn of 2013 was a simple re-tread of the Austin McMahon feud fifteen years earlier. According to this narrative, because Bryan was not seen by those in power as a main-event level talent due to his size and wrestling style, they denied him opportunities and relentlessly placed obstacles in his way. Again, the narrative blurred reality and fantasy and appropriated both corporate language and culture while making liberal use of the WWE fanbase through the read of the newer marketing-research tool of social media and already-established internet communities. All of this was best displayed in the Authority’s labelling of Daniel Bryan on the 19 August 2013 RAW as a “B-plus player” while calling his primary in-ring opponents for the feud, Randy Orton, the “face of the WWE” and “what a sports entertainer would look like” if built from the ground up.²²

While wrestling fans who disrupted WWE events were ecstatic with Bryan’s Wrestlemania victory in 2014, the ultimate winner was, as always, WWE:

With the “Yes! Movement,” WWE was able to play to the collective counterculture that formed against them and profit on it through onscreen storylines, social-media promotions and numerous articles of merchandise that aped imagery from subversive political countercultures. The culmination of the narrative [...] allowed for the 2014 edition of *Wrestlemania* in 2018 to boast these stats: a live attendance of 75,167, with a ticket revenue of \$10.9 million; a \$142.2 million economic impact on the city of New Orleans; over 600,000 network subscribers and a total of 690,000 pay-per-view buys worldwide.²³

22 Eric Kennedy, “What’s Best for Business? Professional Wrestling and Capitalist Appropriation,” in *Professional Wrestling: Politics and Populism*, ed. Sharon Mazer et al. (Seagull Books, 2020), 80.

23 Ibid., 83.

Kennedy's case is considerably strengthened when one realizes that Bryan's run is just the most successful instance of this trope. Another is C.M. Punk's employment at WWE from 2006 until 2014, which manifested everything Kennedy describes as happening with Bryan, the only difference being that Punk's 434-day reign as the holder of the WWE World Title consisted in part of incessant complaints and challenges from Punk about management in promos, interviews, and social media posts that were presented as "breaking kayfabe." He did not whine about unfairness, as heels do, but rather insulted and critiqued WWE's business practices in ways that fans took to be genuinely hostile to his employer. Again, whether they really were is immaterial. Bryan's and Punk's victories were vehicles for WWE's recycling and profiting from the revolt of their subjects.²⁴

Neoliberal Decline and Politics as Sports Entertainment

Vince McMahon perfectly illustrates what is essential about the rise of Donald Trump and the broader global rise of neoliberal post–New Deal authoritarianism. First, the authoritarian publicly recognizes and becomes associated with the recognition that the neoliberal left and right reliably do the opposite of what they claim to want to do. The burgeoning authoritarian becomes in this sense an avatar of global cynicism. But when everything

24 Kennedy is not the only scholar to focus his insights on the "Yes" angle. Gino Canella uses the storyline as a vehicle to examine traces of the carnivalesque in the WWE's commercialization of the "Yes" movement. Like Kennedy, Canella persuasively argues that the angle successfully created the illusion of fan agency. Eero Laine connects the reception and success of the Daniel Bryan story to stock valuations of the WWE in 2014. Wilson Koh, expanding his analysis to include a similar angle to the "Yes" Movement involving the performer Phil "CM Punk" Brooks, situates these narratives within the context of post-millennial worked shoots. See, respectively, Gino Canella, "Occupy Raw: Pro Wrestling Fans, Carnavalesque, and the Commercialization of Social Movements," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 49, no. 6 (2016): 1375–92, and Wilson Koh, "'It's What's Best for Business' — 'Worked Shoots' and the Commodified Authentic in Postmillennial Professional Wrestling," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 34, no. 5 (2017): 459–79.

is fake, nothing is real. So then, after we have all become smart marks, instead of engaging politically as a part of collective endeavors to increase our wellbeing, we focus on politics as a spectacle along the lines of rooting for a sports team, and, at least with respect to any politics that might mitigate the grinding neoliberal decay, with the same amount of impact.

As we have previously noted, journalists who cover politics have begun to understand the manner in which authoritarians weaponize cynicism with respect to Trump’s conman ability to make marks feel like they are part of the con, especially in the case of Trump advisor Steve Bannon’s strategy of “flooding the zone,”²⁵ and with respect to the role of corrosive social mistrust and skepticism in Putin’s Russia.

Brendan Nyhan, a professor at the University of Michigan who studies misinformation and trust in the media, explores how Trump’s strategy in part involves calling anything besides himself “fake.” Nyhan argues that Trump’s statements about “fake news” and “fake books” are designed to confuse his supporters about what the truth really is. The best his supporters can do when everything is “phony” is become cynics.²⁶

As we argued in the previous chapter, Trump’s strategies of making marks feel like they are in on the con, calling everything from politics to the news media “fake,” and pointing out that political parties and leaders fail to fulfill their promises are simply versions of the first aspect of McMahon’s response to the Screwjob. The political leader who openly admits that politics is fake, and indeed openly embodies aspects of the fakery, is now seen as more on the side of people who hate some subset of the elites.

The second aspect of McMahon’s response to the Screwjob, playing a version of himself in the WWE fictional universe, is

25 Frontline PBS, “Trump’s Power & the Rule of Law: Steve Bannon (interview)|FRONTLINE,” YouTube, July 23, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NAgh9ocC4KI>.

26 See Tamara Keith, “President Trump’s Description of What’s ‘Fake’ Is Expanding,” *NPR*, September 2, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/09/02/643761979/president-trumps-description-of-whats-fake-is-expanding>.

also paradigmatic in neoliberal authoritarians. Public buffoonery keeps people politically engaged even in a system where their engagement makes no real difference. Note that we are not saying that McMahon had any causal power with respect to the fact that the fictions told by both political parties under neoliberalism are false ones. Postmodernism did not create the reality of national politicians personally enriching themselves with sweetheart deals and inside stock trades of companies in industries those selfsame politicians regulate, nor did it create the sinecures of consultant jobs offered to so many retired politicians at the corporations whose water they carried throughout their political careers.²⁷ Postmodernism did not create the absurd analogue of “retired” generals in the US military cashing in as lobbyists for companies that cleaned up on the privatization of aspects of the US military— aspects traditionally performed by public servants and uniformed soldiers and sailors.²⁸

When the fictional version of McMahon is defeated in storyline, nothing changes with respect to McMahon in the real world. Analogously, one might argue that politicians make more money losing elections as long as they serve corporate interests during their political careers and military officers (after they retire) make more money losing wars as more and more functions of the military have been privatized. McMahon’s innovation was the extent to which used his consistent humiliation while playing in storyline the CEO of WWE to manipulate audiences into continuing to watch his company’s programming even when the whole industry had been exposed as fake (or at least not real in the sense that the SF believes it is). In this, Don-

27 For what it is worth, journalists have covered this corruption extensively. See, for an example of articles in this genre, Brian Clark and Tala Hadavi, “Insider Trading and Congress: How Lawmakers Get Rich from the Stock Market,” *CNBC*, October 22, 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/10/22/insider-trading-and-congress-how-lawmakers-get-rich-from-stock-market.html>.

28 With respect to high-ranking officers becoming lobbyists, see especially Mandy Smithberger, “Brass Parachutes: The Problem of the Pentagon Revolving Door,” *Project on Government Oversight*, November 5, 2018, <https://www.pogo.org/report/2018/11/brass-parachutes>.

ald Trump remains McMahon’s greatest student, for Trump’s incessant public buffoonery combined with his cartoonishly evil performances to “own the libs” — parlance among the terminally-online that simply means to antagonize people with center-left or liberal political views — allowed him to function as a McMahon type figure for conservatives *and* liberals.²⁹ In the same way, people who love and many of the people who hate the real Vince McMahon were, at least prior to AEW’s offering the McMahon haters a way out, glued to the television rooting for and against the fictional McMahon.

However, one might argue that the reason why McMahon’s humiliation eventually wasn’t enough to keep viewers tuned to WWE parallels the reason why a plurality of voters in the United States now simply sit out elections.³⁰ Perhaps at some point the entertainment isn’t enough when there is no real change.

Academic theorists who find a connection between the disempowerment of consumers of professional wrestling and the disempowerment of voters tend to focus on the antimajoritarian aspects of the American electoral process. For example, Toor’s “Being Booked to Win” cites political scientist David Faris at

29 This phenomena of appealing to voters by “owning the libs” is so new that as of the writing of this chapter, there is no good empirical work with respect to how effective it really is with respect to voter preferences. Journalists have done a great job showing how prominent Republican politicians and media influencers benefit from it and describing voters most attuned to it. For example, see Derek Robertson, “How ‘Owning the Libs’ Became the GOP’s Core Belief,” *Politico Magazine*, March 21, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/03/21/owning-the-libs-history-trump-politics-pop-culture-477203>. This chapter provides a theory of why the strategy works where it does, but we realize that the significance of our analysis will rise or fall with social scientific work on just how ubiquitous the phenomena is.

30 In the 2024 presidential election, a full 36% of eligible voters did not vote (vs. 32% for team red, 31% team blue, and 1 percent for “other”). “None of the above” also beat both Trump and Biden in 2020, when 38% of voters declined to cast ballots while 32% voted blue, 29% red, and 1% “other.” Hannah Hartig, Scott Keeter, Andrew Daniller et. al, “How Changes in Turnout and Vote Choice Powered Trump’s Victory in 2024,” *Pew Research Center*, June 26, 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/feature/how-changes-in-turnout-and-vote-choice-powered-trumps-victory-in-2024/>.

length on procedural impediments to fair representation in the United States:

Democrats didn't lose a policy fight in 2016. What they did was finish losing a procedural war that has been going on since the early 1990s. Indeed, the election of Donald Trump as the forty-fifth president of the United States was such an incomprehensible development that it obscured a very simple underlying reality: that the pathological liar and delusional narcissist currently residing half-time at the White House actually lost the presidential election by several million votes and took office because of the nonsensical, undemocratic Electoral College; that Democrats scored *11 million more votes* for the U.S. Senate than Republicans only to wake up staring at a 52–48 deficit; that the national House vote was nearly even but delivered Republicans yet another overwhelming majority; that of the 230 million voting-eligible citizens of the United States, fewer than 139 million even bothered to turn out; that millions of Americans were shamefully deprived of their franchise by racist voter-ID laws and the cruel way that many states prevent current or former felons from voting; and that the United States is the only country in the entire world that holds its critical national elections on a regular working Tuesday as if we literally couldn't care less who is able take off work to cast a ballot.³¹

The question such theorists never ask, as far as we know, is why all the fingers on the scale in favor of the Republican party are only ever enough to produce divided control. For our entire adult lives, the American presidency has flipped back and forth with never more than two consecutive years of a president having unified control over the Senate and House of Representatives.

31 David Faris, *It's Time to Fight Dirty: How Democrats Can Build a Lasting Majority in American Politics* (Melville House, 2018), xi–xii.

Note that even during brief periods of unified control, the unelected Supreme Court and arbitrary filibuster in the US Senate substantially limit the possibility of either party legislating in ways that might meaningfully restore a New Deal social contract. That is, the court and filibuster reliably prevent the execution of policies involving, for example: meaningfully increasing taxes on the wealthy, businesses, or investment income; restoring the right of labor unions in so-called “right to work” states to make contracts with companies; indexing the minimum wage to inflation; undermining the stranglehold that the economically damaging rent-seeking sectors of the economy (mainly finance, insurance, real estate, but also multi-level marketing, nutritional supplements, and car dealerships) have on everyone else; preventing offshoring of the American manufacturing base; or providing meaningful regulation to either decrease monopolization or meaningfully offset its negative consequences.³² The bad faith involved in the excuses made by politicians is galling. Members of both parties routinely cite both the filibuster’s necessitating a two-thirds vote of the Senate and the Supreme Court as excuses for why they cannot pass the policies they promise to pass when running for office, even though a simple legislative majority is all that is required to amend the filibuster or alter the makeup of the court. For that matter, the executive and legislative branches are constitutionally coequal to the courts. In the context of the neoliberal gutting of New Deal and socialist horizons, the self-inflicted veto on the prerogatives of elected branches of govern-

32 There is a substantial scholarship on these connections, which themselves deserve a book length treatment. See for example Sam Berger and Alex Tausanovitch, “The Impact of the Filibuster on Federal Policymaking,” *Center for American Progress*, December 5, 2019, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/impact-filibuster-federal-policymaking/>; Wendy Brown, “American Nightmare: Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, and De-Democratization,” *Political Theory* 34, no. 6 (2006): 690–714; and Luke Winslow, Alec Baker, and Charles Goehring, “The Neoliberal Conquest of the Supreme Court,” *Communication and the Public* 3, no. 3 (2018): 205–17.

ment is, as Dana Carvey’s *SNL* “church lady” used to say, *convenient*.³³

The predictable seesaw between the parties, in addition to the entirely fictional impediments of the filibuster and court, allows each party to reliably fail to deliver those things that they promise to their voting constituencies which would in any way discomfort their campaign contributors—contributors who have a strong material interest in bolstering the structural causes of most of the problems facing those voters.³⁴ The subtitle of the book cited by Toor, *How Democrats Can Build a Lasting Majority in American Politics*, makes it clear just how little cognizance the author has with respect to how the structure of American politics is a system that virtually guarantees perpetually divided government, and that this feature of that system serves the material interests of both Republican and Democratic officeholders and their parties just as it served the interests of the slave-holders for whom many of these rules were first implemented. Any fair-minded reader of the research cited in the previous three footnotes would conclude that there are extremely strong material reasons that Democrats would very much not prefer “a lasting majority,” as it would substantially hinder their ability to promise to take actions that would restore the New Deal social contract while never sacrificing their own class interests or expending political capital to actually make good on those promises.

We gather that for most of us, scholars included, it is just too depressing to recognize the extent to which neoliberal capitalism leads to the death of politics as a meaningful activity where people collectively work to enhance the social good. But this

33 See Andrew Perez, “The Filibuster Is the Ultimate Excuse for Democrats,” *Jacobin*, June 14, 2021, <https://jacobin.com/2021/06/filibuster-democratic-party-joe-manchin-legislation>.

34 This an obvious point, but actually one difficult to subject to quantitative analysis. For a presentation of some of these challenges see Lynda W. Powell, “The Influence of Campaign Contributions on Legislative Policy,” *The Forum: A Journal of Applied Research in Contemporary Politics* 11, no. 3 (2013): 339–55.

failure of recognition leads to a misunderstanding not only of the true costs of this disenfranchisement, but also of why this kind of disenfranchisement reliably produces support for autocrats whose strange set of behaviors allow them to convince a plurality of voters that they are independent of “both sides.” This ginned up independence is so pronounced that one of the main themes of Bruce Bueno de Mesquita’s and Alistair Smith’s academic study *The Dictator’s Handbook* is the manner in which autocrats most successful at remaking their countries — figures such as Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong, and Saddam Hussein — not only portrayed themselves as moderates fighting left and right, but helped foment the division between different groups of elites they characterized as left and right so that they could exercise power by periodically breaking ties.

That is, while the issue of voter disenfranchisement raised by Faris is important, perhaps more central to the lack of voter participation is democratic unresponsiveness to policy preferences, especially about preferences highly relevant to general well-being. In his now-classic 2005 paper, “Inequality and Democratic Responsiveness,” Martin Gilens showed that when there was a substantial disagreement in public opinion in the United States between economic elites — who are, in this context, the roughly 10% of the United States that in the era of 401Ks, “shareholder democracy,” and vanishing capital gains and inheritance taxes now live primarily off of investment income — and the non-elites who receive income from labor, public policy bears no relation whatsoever to the majoritarian policy preferences of the non-elites.³⁵ Gilens’s research and that of academics following his lead have shown that, of all of the modern countries with legislatures and executives who submit to regular peaceful transfers of power, the legislatures in the United States are the least responsive to popular political will.

On every issue where laws and their enforcement might solve creeping societal dysfunction, such as gun control with respect

35 Martin Gilens, “Inequality and Democratic Responsiveness,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 69, no. 5 (2005): 778–96.

to the outrageous occurrence of murder in the United States and higher taxes and minimum wages with respect to gilded age levels of economic inequality, large majorities of American adults feel strongly that the United States should be more in line with social democracies.³⁶ And yet the United States, just as it leads in popular culture, leads the world in legislative indifference to the voters' policy preferences.

And while there is no signal event like the Montreal Screw-job to which we can point, nonetheless non-elites know that as things get grindingly worse in various respects — including most alarmingly a steadily decreasing median life-expectancy in the United States — that the stories told by national politicians don't have any bearing on whatever is bringing about the downward mobility they perceive with their own eyes. The Democratic party pretends in various ways to extend the New Deal social contract even as their support of neoliberalism only further guts its foundation. The Republican party's promises to bring back manufacturing jobs and to restore those aspects of sociality frayed by late capitalism are equally laughable when

36 The polling data on this is massive. See, for example, Leslie Davis and Hannah Hartig, "Two-Thirds of Americans Favor Raising Federal Minimum Wage to \$15 an Hour," *Pew Research Center*, July 30, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/07/30/two-thirds-of-americans-favor-raising-federal-minimum-wage-to-15-an-hour/>, and Taylor Orth and Kathy Frankovic, "After Recent Mass Shootings, a Majority of Americans Desire Stricter Gun Control Laws," *YouGov*, February 1, 2023, <https://today.yougov.com/topics/politics/articles-reports/2023/02/01/majority-americans-support-gun-control-poll>. In addition to increasing hunger in the United States by allowing the Obama era policy of universal free lunches for school children and COVID-19 era increases to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program to lapse, the Democrats did nothing with respect to the minimum wage or gun control during the period of 2020–2023 with unified control of the government, in the case of the minimum wage by blaming the decision of the Senate parliamentarian, who can be fired by the Democratic Majority leader, to not allow its passage under filibuster rules. It is not clear how many voters remember that during the last period of full Democratic control, after Barack Obama's 2008 election, the minimum wage was also not increased or indexed to inflation. They failed to do that even while having a filibuster proof majority in the US Senate.

their actual legislative, regulatory, and executive successes further undermine both of these things.

The sad reality is that having Trump in office during a part of the COVID-19 pandemic with divided government resulted in some of the Democratic Party’s stated economic policies being realized much more effectively than when Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton, Barack Obama, or Joe Biden were in office. And, contrariwise, it was during the Biden Administration that the unbelievable cruelty of American schoolchildren no longer receiving free lunches came to pass and also when the Trump era flirtation with guaranteed income — in the guise of periodic COVID-19 stimulus checks, enhanced unemployment, and “loans” to the self-employed that would not need to be repaid — ended. It was during Biden’s presidency that the Trump-era pause in paying back rapacious student loans — which, in a clownishly evil move, Biden himself ensured during his senatorial career could no longer be renegotiated during personal bankruptcy — was rescinded. It was during the Biden Administration that the Federal Reserve manipulated interest rates as a way to pull back the slight gains workers made after COVID-19 culled the labor market to rein in inflation — instead of ending unsustainable levels of corporate profit during this same period, or tackling the monopolistic power that prohibits supply and demand from efficiently dictating prices. Biden failed in his promise to raise the minimum wage which is now in real dollars lower than it has been in over seventy years, implausibly claiming that with a few more Democratic Senators this would be done, even though Barack Obama chose not to do this during the two years when the Democratic party had a supermajority in the Senate. In fact, the one successful Biden initiative with respect to economic precarity, cutting childhood poverty in half by giving parents three hundred dollars per child per month. But such measures are almost guaranteed to lapse if they are not passed with a ten-year funding window, which by US law is the threshold, such that they continue to be funded unless the Senate and House vote to overturn them. As a result of this, every Democrat in federal government knows that social welfare provisions will be

rescinded within two years (when the balance of congressional power has shifted) if they are not funded at the outset for ten years, which effectively makes them permanent. Much of the supposedly left-wing economic agenda in Biden's initial budget had no hope of becoming permanent if passed, and again every congressional Democrat who supported the doomed childhood poverty bill, including all 100 members of the Congressional Progressive Caucus who helped draft it, knew that. The only conclusion one can draw is they hoped to run against Republicans who could be blamed for the policies not being passed again in two years.

Can we be blamed for viewing this through the lens of sports entertainment?

Ironically, given that his press coverage was confused and erratic, Joe Manchin was the only voice in government telling his party to use their brief period of unified government to pass bills with a ten-year budgetary window, so that any positive changes they made to the social contract would be sustained.³⁷ And all of these rightward economic lurches under Biden guaranteed that childhood poverty increased just as interest rates were rising and free lunches were removed.

Perversely, the one area where the Biden administration experienced real success was in achieving some of what Trump had promised to do. While Trump promised both as a candidate and as President over and over again to do something that might reclaim manufacturing jobs back from China and to invest in infrastructure, he never did. Trump's one domestic policy success during the two years in which he had unified Republican control of the legislature was yet another gargantuan tax giveaway benefitting primarily the very wealthy and secondarily the ten percent of Americans — overwhelmingly upper- and upper-middle-class retirees — who live off investment income. But

37 Very few journalists explained this dynamic, *New York Magazine's* Jonathan Chait being the exception. See Jonathan Chait, "Biden Should Take Manchin's Deal Right Now," *New York Magazine*, December 20, 2021, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2021/12/biden-should-take-manchins-deal-right-now.html>.

with the passage of the CHIPS act and the policy of forcing federal contracts to purchase things made in the United States, the Biden administration actually did meaningfully increase federal investment in infrastructure spending and in various ways get the United States, by prioritizing its own industries, to depart from some of the economic orthodoxies that it, through the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and military projection, forces on much of the rest of the world.³⁸

How is it possible that the electoral narratives concerning economic policy have come to bear so little connection to reality? It should be clear that Democrats were only able to wind down the emergency economic policies of the COVID-19 era, which for a brief period looked like they might restore some aspect of the New Deal social contract, precisely because their voters were so obsessed with “defeating” the clownishly evil Trump. The consolation of Democratic voters’ vision of a humiliated Trump, in their fevered vision damned to a life of eating the nation’s wettest meat at the Mar-a-Lago Club’s buffet while barking inanities at a congeries of Florida’s most divorced plastic surgeons the table over, is not effectively different from the fictional Vince McMahon sitting dejectedly in the center of the ring moping over his now shaved head.

To be clear, nothing we say is meant to undermine just how important the peaceful transfer of power remains, nor how effective even a “democracy” that does such a bad job reflecting the properly political needs or desires of non-elites has been at ensuring periodic peaceful transfers. For now, in the United States at least, politics still prevents any group of elites from competing with another by mobilizing their clients into a civil war, the gruesome mechanism of succession during the medieval period in Europe and one particularly bloody four-

38 See, for example, the later chapters of Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin, *The Making of Global Capitalism: The Political Economy of American Empire* (Verso Books, 2013), as well as Eric Toussaint, “Domination of the United States on the World Bank,” *Committee for the Abolition of Illegitimate Debt*, February 28, 2024, <http://www.cadtm.org/Domination-of-the-United-States-on-the-World-Bank>.

year period of American history. For various reasons that are the subject of another book, this process still requires, in countries as diverse as Putin's Russia and Erdoğan's Turkey, that non-elites vote, and that politicians pretend that they are going to solve problems (at least those that voters care about) that would require governmental intervention to solve. But, as nearly every measure of material well-being—housing and job precarity, life expectancy, economic equality, birth deaths, miscarriages, etc.—gets worse for those voters year after year, and as politicians do nothing to reverse the slide, it makes perfect sense that canny politicians and oligarchs such as Donald Trump and Elon Musk have done exactly what Vince McMahon did, playacting fictional versions of themselves for public consumption. Thus, politics itself is to some extent now just a version of post-Screw-job WWE, where faces and heels take turns wielding fictional power and spectators remain enthralled as fictional versions of elites are periodically publicly humiliated.

“You Screwed Matt!”: Performative Gender Oppression in Wrestling and Politics

In his autobiography, *It's Good to be the King... Sometimes*, WWF's lead color commentator Jerry “the King” Lawler, a legendary performer from the Memphis territory who became the broadcast partner of Jim Ross during the late 1990s, openly discussed declining to hire a particular woman as his personal assistant because she refused to have sex with him. He didn't apologetically present this as one of the horrible things he had done when his life was disordered by fame, a common trope in celebrity autobiographies, but rather as if it were normal for women in the workforce to have to prostitute themselves to management. The book was published by WWE in 2002.

Lawler, in his role as a ringside announcer, frequently commented on the female performers' breasts, which he incessantly referred to as “puppies.” During the Attitude Era, the most patronizing feature of the promotion was the way storylines involving the sometimes violent humiliation of female talent consistently normalized the subordination of women to the male gaze. Michael Shane's *The Sportster* article, “10 Most Controversial Women's Storylines in the 2000s,” lists many examples. Female characters' “management services” were pre-

sented as a double entendre to indicate sex as a part of employment. Male characters humiliated their storyline girlfriends and assistants by making them wear geisha outfits, using violence to force them to strip in the ring, making them bark like dogs, mockingly humiliating them while publicly breaking up with them, and taunting them about their weight. In one case, a male character forced a woman to marry a wrestler who had raped her in storyline. Another storyline revolved around a male performer consistently harassing and possibly (the events were off camera) raping a female performer. This portrayed workplace behavior was never shown to result in termination of employment, legal sanctions, or incarceration. In some of the cases, the fictional male abuser was the person presented as the babyface.

All this should sound very familiar to anyone following the rise of Donald Trump and his famous “grab them by the pussy” line — let alone his many remarks about women’s breasts. In the WWE, would these kinds of remarks, not to mention the many charges of rape and harassment against him, make him a heel? Not necessarily.

Trump Performing the Face/Heel Dichotomy

Even before Trump’s presidency, performance studies scholars began analyzing his manifestation as a “good guy” (babyface) or a “bad guy” (heel).¹ Does the fact that Trump has gotten over

1 See especially Christopher RayAlexander, “Truth, Trump, and the Poetics of Professional Wrestling,” *Feedback*, April 29, 2016, <https://openhumanitiespress.org/feedback/theory/truth-trump-wrestling/>, and our response, Jon Cogburn and Neal Hebert, “Ontology, Trump, and the Truth of Professional Wrestling: Part I,” *Feedback*, January 31, 2017, <https://openhumanitiespress.org/feedback/theory/the-truth-of-professional-wrestling-part-i/>. RayAlexander argued against journalists such as *The Atlantic’s* Vann Newkirk who saw Trump as a heel. In our response, we argued that Trump should be thought of as an Attitude Era face or heel. The recent debate between Sharon Mazer and Heather Levi which we are about to discuss to some extent recapitulates our earlier discussion. RayAlexander’s confidence that Trump would not get over as a face with enough voters made sense when it was published, a mere fourteen days after FBI Direc-

so strongly with the majority of Republican voters mean that we should see him as a babyface? Or does the fact that he instantiates so many qualities of WWE bad guys make him a heel? Academics disagree about this.

In this context we must return to one of the most startling and still provocative conclusions of Christopher Grobe’s “The Artist Is President,” the realization of how modern right-wing parties flipped the valences of many concepts central to cultural theory:

Like Bruno Latour in “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?” I face the battlefield of Trump’s America, aware that I’m armed with the last war’s weapons — the one where our WMD was liminality, where our primary goal was to denaturalize nature, where we were fighting the bastards who naturalize intolerable things. But now that we’re led by a gleefully *unnatural* man and fighting to *keep natural* some pretty basic things, many a radical has discovered a sudden passion for norms. To my eye, this is a sign we should tag out of this fight — or stop fighting on this particular turf. It’s time to break free of that dyad (normative/transgressive) that silently structures so much performance theory, not to mention so much American cultural politics.²

tor James Comey made baseless accusations against Hillary Clinton in a nationally televised news conference, causing a slight dip in Clinton’s poll numbers from which she never recovered. The dip was just significant enough so that the anti-democratic facets of the American electoral college allowed Trump to win even while securing nearly three million fewer votes than Clinton. See especially Nate Silver, “The Comey Letter Probably Cost Clinton the Election: So Why Won’t the Media Admit as Much?” *FiveThirtyEight*, May 3, 2017, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-comey-letter-probably-cost-clinton-the-election/>.

- 2 Christopher Grobe, “The Artist Is President: *Performance Art* and Other Keywords in the Age of Donald Trump,” *Critical Inquiry* 46, no. 4 (2020): 764–805. On the absolute centrality of transgressiveness to Trump’s political success (one that further strengthens Grobe’s contentions), see Giorgos Venizelos, “Donald Trump in Power: Discourse, Performativity, Identification,” *Critical Sociology* 49, nos. 4–5 (2022): 647–67. See also Tony Perucci, “The Trump is Present,” *Performance Research* 22, no. 3 (2017): 127–35, on

For radicals whose consciousness was formed out of the 1960s revolts against staid 1950s conformity, *Épater la bourgeoisie!* worked as a decent rallying cry, and the null hypothesis was that “transgression” has a positive valence. But watching even one carnivalesque Trump rally calls that assumption into question. Thousands of people cheer and laugh uproariously at Trump’s performative transgressiveness, his jokes at the expense of the disabled, people he has sexually assaulted, civil rights activists, etc., all sandwiched between joyful fantasias of violence. After a few minutes of this, one starts to reconsider one’s stance towards the bourgeois norms that MAGA has so gleefully thrown off.

This inversion of valence has made it difficult to assess its standard bearers in terms of the categories we used prior to the inversion, such as pre-Attitude Era notions of face and heel. In contemporary performance studies, Sharon Mazer is the best representative of team face-Trump and Heather Levi makes the best case for team heel-Trump. Mazer both locates the incoherent free-for-all of Trump’s speech in the dramaturgical properties of wrestling promos and analyzes the theatrical trope of the tragic hero to show that rooting for the hero to succeed does not necessarily mean finding the hero to be conventionally moral or likeable.

Did anyone actually *like* Hulk Hogan ... As a person, not as someone to take pictures of as he posed post-match? Can anyone even imagine him as someone to invite over for a barbeque or to exchange work stories with ... Would any of us really want to have a beer with Stone Cold Steve Austin? The assumption we must like our designated hero, the babyface, or that the babyface must be likeable, is a first fallacy in the analysis that puts Trump on the heel side of the equation.³

conspiracy theories which took Trump to be an actual performance artist, posited as a way to see Trump as “not real.”

- 3 Sharon Mazer, “A Mega Power Implodes,” in *Professional Wrestling: Politics and Populism*, ed. Sharon Mazer et al. (Seagull Books, 2020), 40. See also Sharon Mazer, “Donald Trump Shoots the Match,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 62, no. 2 (2018): 175–200, and Claire Warden, Broderick Chow, and

Indeed, in good westerns, the hero is tragic because his violence renders him too dysfunctional to live in the society he restores. In this context, it is no surprise that during the Trump presidency the weird yet very large subgenre of books containing evangelical Christian relationship and parenting advice cited John Wayne movies more than they did the Christian Bible.⁴ Clearly, these books are endorsing Wayne’s brand of toxic masculinity, but more than that, he was a hero for putting people, especially women, in their place.

Contra Mazer, in “Why It Mattered” Heather Levi points to three key properties of (pre-Attitude Era) heels she argues that Trump instantiated:

Heels whine. Wrestling portrays a world in which everyone knows that authority figures are complicit with cheaters and cowards. Yet it is the heels, not the faces, who complain that they are victims of unfair treatment and make baseless claims that the system is “absolutely being rigged” (Trump 2016) against them. *Heels attack their partners* [...] Heels collaborate with one another, but their alliances are interested and provisional, and they often prove fragile. They turn on one another with the same over-the-top violence they mete out to their face opponents. And, whereas faces need to establish a friendly rapport with their fans, *heels have the freedom to antagonize the public.*⁵

Levi then ingeniously argues that Hillary Clinton, who never displayed talent at cutting wrestling promos, made a crucial error when she referred to some of Trump’s supporters as

Eero Laine’s response to that article, “Working Loose: A Response to ‘Donald Trump Shoots the Match’ by Sharon Mazer,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 62, no. 2 (2018): 201–15.

- 4 Again, on this, see especially Kristen Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (Liveright, 2021).
- 5 Heather Levi, “Why it Mattered” in *Professional Wrestling: Politics and Populism*, ed. Sharon Mazer et al. (Seagull Books, 2020), 22.

“deplorables,” because in doing so she signally failed to play a face in opposition to Trump’s heel.

Heels also, historically at least, often display stereotypically feminine traits such as the whining mentioned above, simpering, preening, and cowardice. Heel behavior thus exaggerates the already homoerotic elements of a sport that involves men in tight clothing engaging in close contact. Booing the heels arguably allows the audience to symbolically deny the male sexual aspect of wrestling and reassert their conformity to standard gender norms. Even leaving aside the recent insinuations that Trump may have had a sexual encounter with former President Bill Clinton, Trump, as we will see, certainly displays enough of these traits to qualify as a heel.

So which is it? Is Trump a face or a heel? Or is it just that people who like him see him as a face and people who don’t see him as heel? While these questions might seem intractable, attention to Grobe’s valence inversion thesis as well as to the fact that the Battle of the Billionaires took place well after the advent of the Attitude Era suggests an answer of “Yes. All of the above.”⁶

In the 1990s, WWE’s competition with Philadelphia-based Extreme Championship Wrestling (ECW) and Atlanta-based World Champion Wrestling (WCW) produced a kind of race to the bottom involving increasingly “transgressive” storylines and characters, with wrestlers enacting both the anti-capitalist fantasias of violence against characters representing WWE management as well as symbolic and actual violence against female characters. New “tweener” characters, such as those who wrestled in the WWE group D-Generation X, evinced anti-social personalities and many of the traditional traits of the heel but nonetheless generated “good heat” (a positive audience reaction) and in storyline defeated “worse” heels. In other words, the heels the fans cheered beat up the heels they disliked, much to the delight of audiences around the world.

6 For more details about the “Battle of the Billionaires” episode of *Monday Night Raw*, see our discussion in the Introduction.

The key to understanding the connection with Trump involves understanding the extent to which the fictional storylines that tweener characters enacted involved restoring both the economic and sexual social contracts of the 1950s.⁷ The time during which these sexist stories were most prominent is also the time when ritualistic violence was regularly visited on McMahon in parables of class warfare. The almost consanguinity of sexism and leftward economic progress during the continuation of the New Deal era following World War II is thus at least part of why the anti-corporate and misogynistic violence sat so well together for many of the viewers.

Donald Trump himself is clearly *both* a face *and* a heel in the style of a wrestler who possesses properties of traditional heels but nonetheless generates “positive heat” via fictional acts that can be seen by his fans as restoring a proper economic and sexual social order.⁸ Many articles such as PS Singh’s 2011 “WWE: Have the Words ‘Face’ and ‘Heel’ Become Meaningless?,” Graham Matthews’s 2012 “WWE Analysis: Is the Fine Line Between Face and Heel Slowly Fading Away?,” and Joseph Peiscl’s “Opinion: Do Heels and Faces Exist Anymore?” concern what to make of wrestlers who, like Trump, scramble the categories that existed largely unchanged in wrestling prior to WWE’s Attitude Era of the 1990s.

7 This emphasis on the social contract in wrestling matches originates in Roland Barthes, “The World of Wrestling,” in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972). We should note that this argument is the one we originally made in response to RayAlexander. See note 1 above.

8 In the original debate with RayAlexander, we were not clear enough about how faces and heels not only are presented as restoring a more egalitarian pre-capitalist social economic order, but often restore a less egalitarian gender order of the time-period prior to neoliberalism. Some of our original criticism of RayAlexander’s definition of face and heel depended on this error on our part. Our thinking about gender here has benefitted greatly from this recent rethinking, and from recent personal communications with RayAlexander, who has been characteristically generous with his time and intellect.

Sexism, the Face/Heel Dichotomy, and the Attitude Era

To watch American professional wrestling in the 1990s — and still to some extent in WWE, though not nearly as much in WWE's new competitor AEW — was to see the constant reinforcement of sexist tropes and treatment of women as objects for male viewers, not talented performers in their own right.⁹

On the one hand, since the women wrestlers did not have to take steroids to get decent booking, their bodies were in general much more capable of a faster work rate and more high-flying athleticism.¹⁰ By the early 2000s, Trish Stratus and Lita managed to break through the sexist stereotypes that required them to function as sexpots and, with the help of trainer David “Fit” Finlay, stand out as excellent wrestlers in their own right. Unfortunately, however, women were rarely booked to showcase their impressive wrestling prowess despite routinely being the best actors in the filmed segments that made up so much of *Raw* and *Smackdown* during this time period. It was not until the mid-2010s that women performers got the respect they deserved in the United States as performers just as capable of excelling as

9 For much of this chapter, we discuss instances of sexism and attendant issues with masculinity. For readers interested in wrestling and its depictions and complications of femininity, refer to Carrie Dunn, “Sexy, Smart and Powerful: Examining Gender and Reality in the WWE Divas’ Division,” *Networking Knowledge* 8, no. 3 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.31165/nk.2015.83.378>, and Dafna Lemish, “‘Girls Can Wrestle Too’: Gender Differences in the Consumption of a Television Wrestling Series,” *Sex Roles* 38 (1998): 833–49. For readers curious about intergender wrestling, see Carrie Dunn, “Most Women Train with Men, So Why Not Wrestle Them? The Performance and Experience of Intergender Professional Wrestling in Britain,” in *Performance and Professional Wrestling*, ed. Broderick Chow, Eero Laine, and Claire Warden (Routledge, 2016).

10 This was decidedly the case with Japanese women wrestlers in the 1980s and 1990s, where numerous performers reliably outshone the best men’s wrestling seen around the world. For a scholarly analysis of gender and performance in Japanese women’s wrestling, see Keiko Aiba, “The Impact of Women’s Pro Wrestling Performances on the Transformation of Gender,” trans. Minata Hara, in *Performance and Professional Wrestling*, ed. Broderick Chow, Eero Laine, and Claire Warden (Routledge, 2016). With respect to training, see Dunn, “Most Women Train.”

their male peers in no small part due to the changes in wrestler training pioneered by Paul “Triple H” Levesque at the WWE Performance Center in WWE’s developmental system.

We should also note that if a reader were to tune in to wrestling at the time of this writing, the depictions of women performers would be quite different than the past we describe here. Currently, all wrestlers in WWE are considered Superstars, and women wrestlers—at least the main event performers—will sometimes have some of the best matches on television every week. But from the late 1990s, with the hiring and push of the women performers Sable and Sunny through the Divas era until the aforementioned WWE sea change in 2015, women’s wrestling in WWE was a devil’s playground of sexist tropes and shelved athleticism.

Things had not always been this way. In the early decades of the twentieth century, women’s wrestling was promoted as an athletic event. From the 1930s through the 1950s, the National Wrestling Alliance’s World Women’s Champion Mildred Burke and her manager-turned-husband-turned-rival Billy Wolfe is the stuff of legend.¹¹ In the 1950s, that title was largely booked under the auspices of The Fabulous Moolah, Mary Lillian Ellison, trained by Burke in 1949. For decades, Moolah was the majordomo of women’s wrestling. Moolah’s too-tight grip on the practice, however, led to a steady decline in popularity of women’s wrestling in the United States.

Finally, one of Moolah’s trainees, Wendi Richter, signed with Vince McMahon’s World Wrestling Federation. Richter, appearing alongside Cyndi Lauper in 1984, ended The Fabulous Moolah’s twenty-eight-year reign as WWF Women’s Champion.¹² Richter, who famously referred to herself as “150 pounds of twisted steel and sex appeal,” would go on to lose this belt to “the Spider Lady” for the final time in 1985 after numerous

11 See Jeff Leen, *The Queen of the Ring: Sex, Muscles, Diamonds, and the Making of an American Legend* (Atlantic Monthly Press, 2009).

12 This is just part of the entertainment portion of the wrestling show. In reality, Moolah lost the title multiple times between 1956 and 1978; Richter was only ending Moolah’s seven-year run as WWF Women’s champion.

financial and creative disputes between McMahon and Richter. The victory of “The Spider Lady,” who was really The Fabulous Moolah under a mask, was McMahon’s first run at pulling off a champion screwjob. Richter thought she was slated to win, but McMahon ordered Moolah to use her considerable wrestling prowess to defeat her former trainee.

Women’s wrestling in the United States was at its lowest point of popularity at the exact moment when women’s wrestling became a national sensation in Japan. Drawing on the popularity of idol culture and the ability of women performers to wrestle at a quicker speed than their larger male counterparts, All Japan Women’s Pro-Wrestling produced megastar after megastar: the hated heels Dump Matsumoto and Bull Nakano, and beloved babyfaces Lioness Asuka and Chigusa Nagayo, known as the Crush Gals. As performers like these took the in-ring standard of women’s wrestling to new heights, attempts to rebuild the wwf women’s division during 1993 using “Alundra Blayze” Deborah Micelli — who, as Madusa, had been a high profile signing to All Japan Women’s Pro-Wrestling in 1989 — with a rotating cast of heels from Japan as her rivals produced strong matches but little interest at the box office.

When Micelli appeared on wwf’s rival wcw’s televised Monday Nitro show, she gained immense heat by tossing the wwf Women’s belt in the garbage, but then after that was booked solely as an afterthought. Meanwhile, wwf had stumbled onto several performers — Tammy Lynn Sytch under the name “Sunny” and Rena Mero “Sable” — who became massively popular “pin-up girls” right around the time the Internet made downloading racy pictures possible. From 1994 until July 13, 2015, women’s wrestling in the wwf/wwe was the province of scantily clad “Divas” engaging in matches that largely revolved around the performers getting their clothes ripped off. The wwf hired David “Fit” Finlay as a trainer after the collapse of Turner’s wcw in 2001. He was given the task of transforming Divas into wrestlers who could have a competitive match. Even as the wwf began featuring female performers who could both wrestle and model professionally — Trish Stratus, Lita, Melina, Gail Kim,

Kharma, Jazz, Paige, and numerous others — it was not until the “Diva” branding was retired in 2015 that women’s wrestling in the United States was once again presented as anything other than titillation, while the men’s matches were what really mattered.

The Divas era of WWF/WWE coincided with the greatest level of popularity the WWF had seen since the heyday of Hulk Hogan’s *Rock ‘n’ Wrestling* during the 1980s. It coincided with the Montreal Screwjob storyline and the rise of “Stone Cold” Steve Austin as the undisputed number one babyface in wrestling. Feuds were often waged over the WWF Women’s Championship in such spectacles as Evening Gown Matches, where to win, a competitor had to rip off her opponents’ clothes. WWF commentator Lawler’s banter about these performers was exclusively sexual during this time period — particularly when it seemed like the women’s lingerie or the mud in which the women wrestled might result in wardrobe malfunctions. Matches of this type eventually gave way to something more closely resembling earlier types of women’s wrestling, but the hiring guidelines for new performers during John Laurinaitis’s tenure as the Director of Talent Relations for WWE was to prioritize hiring former bikini models and training them to wrestle, showing a clear preference for looks rather than for in-ring ability.

One of the paradigmatic postmodern events in wrestling after the Screwjob in 2005 was when audiences yelled “You screwed Matt!” whenever wrestler Amy Dumas (Lita) entered the ring. The chant had nothing to do with storylines, but rather referred to Dumas having actually cheated on the beloved fan-favorite performer — and Dumas’s real-life fiancé — Matt Hardy (who wrestled under his real name) with Hardy’s real-life friend and fellow pro-wrestler Adam Copeland (Edge). Though these real-life events read like a professional wrestling storyline, they didn’t fit with the storylines WWE had been scripting for the performers. In the official storyline, the character Lita was married to Kane, a behemoth wrestler who magically commanded the powers of fire and, like his brother, the Undertaker, could rise from the dead. Kane was a face even though earlier he had

raped Lita in storyline, leading to an even more grotesque parable involving a miscarriage.

As with the Screwjob eight years earlier, WWE's storylines involving Lita, Edge, and Matt Hardy were too flatly inconsistent with the reality the fans repeatedly acknowledged through their chants at live shows. After firing Matt Hardy for breaking traditional kayfabe when he bitterly complained about Lita and Edge on social media, several months later WWE reversed course and allowed Hardy to return as a babyface, feuding with the now-heels Edge and Lita, who were romantically linked in the fiction. As with the Montreal Screwjob, WWE pivoted to a much more engaging storyline that simultaneously worked to assuage audience anger.

Just as the Montreal Screwjob did nothing to change the exploitative underlying economic reality of the WWE, no positive change with respect to the portrayal of gender dynamics or of the treatment of female wrestlers occurred as a result of widespread audience awareness of the real world, including awareness of how uncomfortable Dumas and other performers were with the performance of their sexual humiliation in the ring (such as the "Live Sex Celebration" where Edge and Lita simulated foreplay on a bed placed in the wrestling ring) and the damage to her mental health caused by how unsafe she felt with so many sexist, fanatical fans hating her. Indeed, before Dumas retired in 2007, WWE had her air several promos complaining about just this. As real-life boss Vince McMahon played himself as a boss in the fictional universe, a real life victim of a culture that humiliates successful women had to portray herself as such a victim.

These kinds of portrayals did lessen substantially when the Attitude Era wound down in the later 2000s. However, it was unsurprising to hear how remaining WWE fans enthusiastically applauded McMahon in 2023 *after* the extent of his real-life sexual predation on female WWE employees had been revealed.¹³

13 See Alfred Konuwa, "Vince McMahon Retires: A Timeline of Events Amid 2022 Probe of Sexual Misconduct," *Forbes*, July 23, 2022, <https://www.>

Fans also initially booed Stephanie McMahon a week later when she announced his retirement. She finally saved the segment by leading a “thank you” chant.¹⁴ Nor were any of us surprised when McMahon used his possession of class A stock in WWE to fire the board of directors and reappoint himself as CEO.¹⁵

Donald Trump and the Sexual Contract

Donald Trump’s behavior towards women is at least as retrograde as that of the worst face and heel Attitude Era wrestlers. Just one example is his conviction of sexual abuse in the E. Jean Carroll case. The incident occurred in 1996, and Trump was finally tried on the charge of rape and convicted of the lesser charge of sexual abuse in 2023. He was also found liable in a civil case for defaming Carroll over the allegations. According to Carroll, Trump raped her in a department store dressing room. Carroll was just one of a dozen women who accused Trump of similar behavior. Jessica Leeds and Natasha Stoyanoff, who also testified during the trial, alleged that Trump groped and kissed them without their consent.

Over the years, Trump has reacted to the charges by belittling his accusers in various ways, from commenting unfavorably on their looks to basically shrugging and admitting that he did such things. During the Carroll trial, jurors saw a 2005 *Access Hollywood* segment in which Trump talked into a hot mic about kissing and grabbing women without their consent. Did Trump learn his sexism from McMahon’s WWE in the same way he bor-

forbes.com/sites/alfredkonuwa/2022/07/23/vince-mcmahon-retires-a-timeline-of-events-amid-2022-probe-of-sexual-misconduct/.

- 14 See Scott Carlson, “Stephanie McMahon Announces Vince’s WWE Retirement, Leads ‘Thank You’ Chant,” *WhatCulture*, July 23, 2022, <https://whatculture.com/wwe/stephanie-mcmahon-announces-vinces-wwe-retirement-leads-thank-you-chant>.
- 15 See Kyle Feldscher, “How WWE’s Vince McMahon Ruthlessly Got His Job Back Despite Allegations of Sexual Assault and Misuse of Company Funds,” *CNN*, January 14, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/01/14/media/wwe-vince-mcmahon-explainer/index.html>.

rowed Vince's mannerisms and buffoon act? Maybe not, but the effect was the same. His supporters ate it up.

Just as we have argued that the Attitude Era wrestlers appealed to a segment of the American population that yearned for a return to the "good old days" of widespread sexism and racism, part of the reason Trump supporters didn't seem to respond negatively to his treatment of women was that it fit with that same kind of nostalgia. With respect to this, Public Religion Research Institute CEO Robert P. Jones has this argument:

I do think that the most important word in his slogan is that last word, "again." And what our research is telling us is that Donald Trump has been able to convert what many pundits had been talking about as "values voters" in previous elections, white evangelical Protestants, conservative Catholic, white Catholic, voters, into what I've dubbed "nostalgia voters." And what I mean by that is voters that are harkening back to a mythical golden age when working class wages paid a living wage, when conservative Christian values were more at the center of American culture. Maybe one survey question that really gets to the heart of this: We asked Americans their opinions about whether American culture and way of life had changed mostly for the better or mostly for the worse since the 1950s. White evangelical Protestant Americans, for example, 72 percent say that American culture and way of life has changed mostly for the worse since the 1950s. So I think we have a real sense of harkening back to a different time and many white evangelical Protestant voters and even conservative white Catholic voters are sensing that a cultural and even demographic world that they saw themselves at the center of is now passing from the scene.¹⁶

Left- and right-wing American voters both want to follow a hero who can restore the New Deal economic contract prior to

16 Gail Ablow, "So, Who Are Donald Trump's Voters?," *Bill Moyers*, March 12, 2016, <https://billmoyers.com/story/so-who-are-donald-trumps-voters/>.

the neoliberal reforms of the late 1970s and 1980s. But conservative voters are also strongly motivated by a desire to restore a fading racial and sexual contract. The reality of that contract is that Black people could not vote in much of the United States and — from roughly 1895 until 1965 — one Black man was publicly lynched every four days. Grown women could not secure auto or home loans without their husbands’ signatures and husbands could not be criminally prosecuted for raping their wives. Women routinely died of preventable sepsis because of inability to secure appropriate miscarriage care. Note that all of these things were only eradicated in the United States in the 1970s, the culmination of the New Deal economic and social progress and right before the dawn of neoliberalism.

To be clear, we are not offering an account of the connection between economic progress reversing just as social progress began to catch up with it. A null hypothesis, popularized in different ways by books such as Thomas Franks’s *What’s the Matter with Kansas: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* and Susan Faludi’s *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women*, would be that the progressive inclusion of women and racial minorities in the New Deal social contract in the 1960s and ’70s made it possible for elites opposed to the New Deal to bribe white men into voting against their own economic interests — bribery via what is known as the psychic wage of apartheid. This is how scholars and journalists such as Faludi and Franks characterize the successful backlash against social progress, progress that to some extent postdates (if only insofar as it represented its culmination) the New Deal and which predated and continued into our current neoliberal era.

There is much truth to this story, and it is consistent with our account of The Attitude Era’s success with their audience members, most of whom in the 1990s were white male Democrats without a college degree. However, it does not explain why center-left parties across the earth became so complicit in instituting neoliberalism. With respect to this, Nancy Fraser argues that second wave feminism itself contributed to the move towards neoliberalism in *Fortunes of Feminism: From*

State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis. She supplements the psychic-wages-of-apartheid thesis by theorizing that the successes of second wave feminism in helping women compete more fairly in the capitalist marketplace were necessary as neoliberal wage deflation made it less and less possible for families to survive on one income. To Fraser, the very success of second wave feminism helped to pave the way for further neoliberal reforms both by (1) moving women into the labor marketplace, and (2) normalizing the individualistic model of agency and human nature presupposed in much second wave feminism. In her now canonical article, “Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History,” she charts, not only second wave feminism’s

extraordinary successes but also the disturbing convergence of some of its ideals with the demands of an emerging new form of capitalism — post-Fordist, “disorganized,” transnational. Conceptualizing this phase, I shall ask whether second-wave feminism has unwittingly supplied a key ingredient of what Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello call “the new spirit of capitalism.”¹⁷

Fraser’s analysis is inconsistent with the simplistic picture of our current increase in sexist affect among politicians and sexist policies such as abortion bans as *merely* autocrats helping ensure that the psychic wages of gender apartheid are paid in full. To be clear though, her analysis is consistent with the idea that part of the appeal of the autocrat is the promise of increased backlash.

And in this respect, the analysis of Trump as a wrestling face and heel has its strongest application. As Roland Barthes argues convincingly in “The World of Wrestling,” it has been a received truism that wrestling faces restore the social contract. Many of us would view the latent ideology in, for example, John Wayne’s worst films, as transgressing contemporary norms. Wayne’s

¹⁷ Nancy Fraser, “Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History,” *New Left Review* 56 (2009), <https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii56/articles/nancy-fraser-feminism-capitalism-and-the-cunning-of-history>.

characters’ degradation and abuse of women (with their positive portrayals of forced kisses and female leads put over the protagonist’s knee and spanked), however, spoke to a country negotiating the traumatic transition from a wartime economy where American women had significantly more autonomy as workers in factories while American men killed and died overseas to an America where the soldiers who returned could expect a home and an economically dependent housewife as a reward for their service.¹⁸

The division of Americans into Republicans and Democrats likely tracks people’s responses to Wayne’s most objectionable films. Trump’s well-documented history of alleged sexual predation, which included at least nineteen public accusations of sexual assault and subsequent legal action taken with respect to multiple rape allegations, works similarly.¹⁹ Trump’s denials of these allegations have included the not uncommon rapists’ defense that the victims were “too ugly to rape.”²⁰

It was impossible for many of us to understand how our fellow citizens and family members who strongly supported the impeachment of President Clinton for lying about his sexual harassment of a subordinate could continue to support Trump after all of these allegations and his predatory response to them became public knowledge. Trump’s history of sexual assault was in bold relief during the election of 2016, as the revelations

18 With respect to how this played out in film, see Kate Marburger, “Hollywood’s Return to the Home: Taming the Post-World War II Career Woman” (Honor Scholar thesis, DePauw University, 2019). For a historical discussion, see Mellissa A. McEuen, “Women, Gender, and World War II (2016),” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.013.55>.

19 See Jeanine Santucci, Jim Sergeant, and George Petras, “19 Women Have Accused Trump of Sexual Misconduct: Carroll Verdict Bolsters Their Claims,” *USA Today*, May 9, 2023, <https://www.usatoday.com/in-depth/graphics/2023/05/09/trump-carroll-sexual-assault-similar-patterns-19-women/70197377007/>.

20 See Alia E. Dastagir, “Experts Explain Why the ‘Too Ugly to Rape’ Argument Doesn’t Hold Up,” *USA Today*, June 26, 2019, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2019/06/25/trump-calls-accuser-e-jean-carroll-not-my-type-its-rape-myth-too-ugly/1554488001/>.

were in conjunction with widespread publication of recorded conversations where he bragged about sexual assault, the additional spousal rape allegations from his first divorce proceedings, his crude sexual comments about his daughter Ivanka, his friendship with convicted sex trafficker Jeffrey Epstein, and his practice of invading the dressing rooms of adolescent children competing in Miss Teen USA while they were undressed.

But continued support of Trump by the very people who sought to impeach Clinton for his transgressions should not have surprised citizens of a country where a sizeable plurality of white people purchase relationship advice books citing the characters John Wayne played in movies. Continued support for Trump in light of all of the public evidence of his literal rapacity can only be understood as an expression of the fact that, for many of his fans, Trump's serial sexual transgressions are not transgressions, but rather a reassertion of what they take to be the normal, and normative, order.²¹ The nostalgia for an earlier sexual contract expressed in WWE storylines of the late 1990s and early 2000s is nostalgia for a world in which companies can have a work environment where Jerry Lawler could without repercussion brag about not hiring an assistant if she was unwilling to have sex with him. If Trump in his private life is the moral equivalent of Lawler, who has also faced credible accusations of sexual assault through his career, Trump as a public

21 Please take our psychologizing with a grain of salt. We are aware that people don't as a rule believe everything they say, and in most cases, there is significant indeterminacy in determining the most charitable way to interpret them. Of course, it is possible that a Trump voter morally recoils at voting for an unrepentant rapist, but still votes for one because they are convinced that having a Democrat in the national chief executive office is apocalyptically threatening. This is all underdetermined though, because attributing the sheer ignorance involved in believing something like that is maybe not that much more charitable than attributing nostalgia for gender apartheid. And the brutal unconcern for the trauma of women unable to get proper medical care during miscarriages in states that have outlawed abortion, something made possible through Trump-appointed judges, should make us sympathize a little bit less for the person asking us to pity them for how difficult a choice their vote was.

performance of himself is arguably no different from the faces and heels who assaulted women in storyline. The political function is the same.

This is a slightly more subtle point than it first seems. It is very easy to conflate it into a view that all depictions of heroes restoring a social order serve the function of disempowering the vulnerable. In academic philosophy, the best refutation of this remains Noël Carroll’s discussion of horror movies, which are similar in this respect to westerns. Though Carroll loves horror, he actually agrees that, as with Wayne’s most regressive movies, a lot of horror is morally retrograde.

[I]t might be argued that the horror genre is essentially xenophobic: monsters, given their inherently hostile attitude toward humanity, represent a predatory Other, and mobilize, in a way that interactively reinforces negative imagery of those political/social entities which threaten the established social order at the level of nation, class, race or gender.²²

He gives many examples of canonical horror that does just this. In the standard 1960s and ’70s horror genre, the “final girl” who survives is usually the only one who is not sexually active.²³ Such films seem to “have the function of scaring people into submissively accepting their social roles.”²⁴ Many 1950s horror stories are parables of anti-communism, a fear used against any form of organized labor in this country. The working class, like non-working women, should submissively accept their social role.²⁵

22 Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror: Or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (Routledge, 1990), 196.

23 See Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton University Press, 2015.)

24 Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror*, 196.

25 It’s very easy when writing about professional wrestling, whose viewership in the Attitude Era was mostly white working-class men who during that era still voted Democrat, to make the usual equivocation one finds in journalism between working class and white working class men, something we in no way intend to do. However, we are very aware that this monograph does not consider issues of intersectionality as much as

Against this though, Carroll notes that much horror works in the opposite direction, towards less regressive goals. Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* in effect argues that much of the evil that we might take to be innate is the result of someone responding to a past inhumanity visited on them. Much horror is a coded parable of revolt against members at the top of a repressive hierarchy; in horror and fantasy, vampires and evil elves are almost always stand-ins for actually existing aristocrats or oligarchs. Carroll himself gives examples of stories that critique the Vietnam war, consumerism, racism, casual cruelty, and the kind of medicalization of all aspects of life that leads us to categorize the grieving process as a mental disorder.

Carroll argues that the best argument one can find for the view that the hero narrative is intrinsically reactionary comes from Stephen King:

In his view, the deep structure of the horror fiction is a three-part movement: (1) from normality (a state of affairs in which our ontologico-value schema rests intact); (2) to its disruption (a monster appears, shaking the very foundations of the culture's cognitive map—which affront itself may be perceived as immoral/abnormal—and predictably, the monster also does forbidden things like eating people); (3) to the final confrontation and defeat of the abnormal, disruptive being (thereby restoring the culture's scheme of things by eliminating the anomaly and punishing its violations of the moral order). Within this associative constellation, order is restored not only in the sense that there's no more carnage; but, puta-

it could. In particular the manner in which the socio-normative demands relative to being a member of one group pull against the socio-normative demands of being a member of another group, can itself be part of how groups of people are symbolically erased. A book-length study on women wrestlers or Black wrestlers would have to consider the growing scholarship on intersectionality very closely. The place to begin thinking through this remains the classic anthology, Akasha Gloria Hull et al., eds., *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (The Feminist Press, 2015).

tively, the established cultural order that reigned prior to the perturbations introduced in the fiction is functioning once again.²⁶

As Carroll earlier appealed to anthropological studies of cleanliness prohibitions to make sense of the ways in which monsters are impure, here he turns to anthropological studies of “rituals of rebellion” where a social order is inverted and restored, which provide some evidence that humans for some reason reliably respond to things with the three-part structure described above, and perhaps help explain why we do so.

Against the view that all horror is as a result politically retrograde, Carroll first notes that this does not explain non-narrative horror. Second, it does not explain the popularity of horror where the disruption wins. In lots of horror the restoration of order never takes place. These points allow Carroll to make two deeper criticisms. First, King’s tripartite analysis only works as a view about the political valence of horror if one makes an awful equivocation, “more or less equat[ing] the normal — in the sense of classificatory and moral categories — with the status quo of a given political order.”²⁷ Of course, those who benefit from a given political status quo will want everyone to make this equivocation. But they are not the same.

On the one hand, “normal” may be seen to refer to the norms of our classificatory and moral schemes. On the other hand, “normal” may refer to the ethos and behavior of those who unquestionably conform to some vision of (culturally, morally, politically) complacent middle-class life — the organization man, the moral majority, the silent majority, etc.²⁸

What is politically normal in a society might be (or perhaps is likely to be in various respects) morally abnormal. This is why

²⁶ Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror*, 200.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 202.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 203.

horror, such as much of King's own, that follows the tripartite normality/disruption/restoration scheme can often instantiate a moral critique of social norms. King is most terrifying when he gets inside a monstrous person's head and shows how utterly "normal" their own self narration is. We might call this the "are we the baddies?" theme, where horror makes us confront the banality of our own evil. It, as well as the "sympathy for the devil" theme where monsters and villains are shown to not be as transparently evil after all, only makes sense because at some level, we are all aware that social norms and moral norms come apart.

The fact that a true moral order is not equivalent to a "repressive social order" entails the precise sense in which Trump can register as both face and heel. One views a performance as that of a face or a heel largely to the extent that one views the protagonist as working to restore a correct moral order, usually one recently violated by those viewed as heels. For many who think Trump is a face, the moral order with respect to sex and gender is identical to a previous more hierarchical, more repressive, social order. So his transgressions against the current social order are seen as leading to the previous moral order which supports social regimes that repress women and minorities more than currently. Those who view him as a heel just view him as transgressing the moral order.

Glamor Boys, Drag Queens, Straight Up Freaks: On the Paradox of Performative Masculinity

Now we are in a position to address what is perhaps the strangest thing about Trump. Most of what he does can be viewed as a failed performance of masculinity because he instantiates many, many tropes associated in contemporary Western culture with the feminine. He wears makeup and spends an inordinate amount of time in front of the mirror in the morning. His body is curvy rather than angular or muscular. His social media presence is obsessed with celebrity gossip, and he often contributes to it with a kind of arch cattiness one associates with the Real

Housewives of whichever city is the current season on television. He ends rallies by dancing in front of the crowd to the Village People’s gay anthem “Y.M.C.A.” None of this instantiates the kind of masculinity Trump is hailed to embody by his most devoted fans.

These are not minor contingent eccentricities for someone being presented as or presenting himself as a paradigm of masculinity, and they go deeper than one might think. For example, when computer models that consider statistical properties of speakers’ linguistic patterns to predict whether a speaker is male or female are fed Trump’s speech, the programs predict that he is female. In 2016, linguist Julie Sedivy reported on Jennifer Jones’s research about Trump’s speech patterns in this context:

For example, contrary to the common stereotype that men can’t resist talking about themselves, women are heavier users than men of the pronoun “I” whereas the reverse is true for the pronoun “we”; women produce more common verbs (*are, start, went*) and auxiliary verbs (*am, don’t, will*), while men utter more articles (*a, the*) and prepositions (*to, with, above*); women use fewer long words than men when speaking or writing across a broad range of contexts. Donald Trump is a stunning outlier. His linguistic style is startlingly feminine, so much so that the chasm between Trump and the next most feminine speaker, Ben Carson, is about as great as the difference between Carson and the *least* feminine candidate, Jim Webb. And Trump earns his ranking not just because he talks a lot about himself or avoids big words (both of which are true); according to Jones, he also shows feminine patterns on the more subtle measures, such as his use of prepositions and articles. The key then is not what Trump talks about — making Mexico pay for the wall or bombing the hell out of ISIS — but rather how he says it.²⁹

29 Julie Sedivy, “Donald Trump Talks Like a Woman,” *Politico Magazine*, October 26, 2016, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/10/trump-feminine-speaking-style-214391/>.

So it is not merely the *content* on his catty and gossipy social media feeds that fits the sides of contemporary gender binaries we tend to code as feminine but the *form* in which this content is expressed, a form that codes as feminine even when the content does not.

We do not write this to mock Trump for his lack of “masculinity,” as Reck mocked Hitler, nor even to mock him for the disconnect between his “feminine” affect and his toxic masculinity. Something much weirder and more interesting is going on, something on which professional wrestling sheds bright light. From its beginning as televised entertainment in the 1950s, professional wrestling has had to negotiate a tension between (A) the fact that easily digestible narratives about good versus evil in American society tend to reify the gender norms of American society, and (B) the practice of men rooting for barely dressed men preening in tights is starkly at odds with the gender norms of American society. In this respect, professional wrestling has always category-jammed traditional gender binaries.³⁰

In *Fighting For Recognition: Identity, Masculinity, and the Act of Violence in Professional Wrestling*, R. Tyson Smith explores the way this disconnect is central to wrestling practice itself, not as we have noted here within the souls of the audience but with respect to the performers. One of the main conclusions of his study of wrestling practice is that:

The backstaging of pro wrestling shows how the violent, hypermasculine performance onstage contrasts with the intimate, homoerotic, and choreographed behavior — arguably gay and undoubtedly effeminate — of the backstage. Paradoxically, performing violent masculinity is a nuanced,

30 There are numerous scholarly articles that cover this topic. For one of the first educational programs to explore the complex relationship between WWE wrestling and masculinity, see Sut Jhally, *Wrestling with Manhood: Boys, Bullying and Battering* (Media Education Foundation, 2016). Sharon Mazer, *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle* (University Press of Mississippi, 1998) explicitly connects discourses on masculinity to professional wrestling studies.

self-conscious, and collaborative activity. When the intent to defeat or harm is removed, rolling around on a mat with other half-dressed men is a very tenuous exercise for men who pride themselves on their adherence to heterosexual ideals.³¹

The fictional storylines in wrestling cannot be understood unless one understands the viewer as having to negotiate a similar tension. Studying the creation of the modern fop in professional wrestling through characters such as Gorgeous George, Exotic Adrian Street, and Goldust can help us better understand how this tension has been negotiated in American popular culture in three different historical eras. And doing so allows us to extend Smith’s insights by articulating what we call the paradox of performative masculinity.

Since performance itself is coded as feminine by modern gender norms, there is something intrinsically contradictory about the attempt to perform masculinity itself. This idea should be understood as a development of Judith Butler’s theory, expressed in *Gender Trouble*, that *all* gender is in an important sense performative. Her initial concept is that we become masculine or feminine as a result of how we act in everyday life. If we act in ways coded by society as feminine, we are feminine and if we act masculine, we are masculine. Our development of this, however, concerns the fact that the kind of performativity we see in theater is associated with femininity and that thus, performing masculinity in theatrical ways is always, at least in the current cultural context, paradoxical.

Note that the feminization of performance is a relatively modern development; earlier European cultures — specifically the citizens of Attic Athens and those in England — excluded women from performing out of fear that women’s moral character was too weak to withstand the effects of performance since it was seen as a kind of lying. While there were no such restric-

31 R. Tyson Smith, *Fighting for Recognition: Identity, Masculinity and the Act of Violence in Professional Wrestling* (Duke University Press, 2014), 113.

tions in the rest of Europe, women were not allowed onstage in the English-speaking world until the restoration of Charles II in 1660. That English king lifted the ban because he had developed a special love for women performers during his exile in France.

To help clarify this point, it is important to realize that Butler does not simply argue that acting feminine makes one feminine. It's more that certain kinds of repeatable practices produce a gendered body. As Li He explains the point:

The concept of performance assumes an anterior subject. A subject is in the performance. The most ordinary people think the subject exists before the performance. But Butler wants to express a reverse logic, namely performance precedes the subject, and the subject is endowed with meaning in the process of performance. This fits into the interpretation of "gender" as a kind of process.³²

So doing things like walking in a recognizably feminine fashion will turn you into someone who is recognizably a woman. And this is how, for Butler, drag performances tell us the truth about gender — it's not natural, but rather performative.

Many scholars such as Meredith Heller question the extent to which the actual practice of drag performances in a sexist society might accomplish the opposite of what Butler claims. For the way that people process drag as a man performing what it is to be a woman can't but at least "potentially directly reference the assumed biological mandate of" sex and gender.³³ Heller's worry is not meant to undermine Butler, for whom enjoying a drag performance of a man performing as a woman is to appreciate the extent to which femininity is a performance. But, especially given how circumscribed the norms are about what constitutes

32 Li He, "The Construction of Gender: Judith Butler and Gender Performativity," in *Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Contemporary Education, Social Sciences and Humanities* (Atlantis, 2017), 683.

33 Meredith Heller, "What's in a Name? Redefining the Discourse of Gender-Bending," in *Queering Drag: Redefining the Discourse of Gender-Bending* (Indiana University Press, 2020), 4.

a successful performance of drag, normal viewers coding these performances as performances of femininity are not unlikely to reinforce their view that masculinity and femininity are biologically determined.

And this worry is tied to the fact that one still needs to explain why drag performances where men act as women are so much more pervasive than the opposite. It is in this respect that the portfolio of gestures of performing femininity that go into the totality of gender performance includes *making that performance visible as performance*. This is why at least in the contemporary United States, those of us who are especially “dramatic” are called “drama queens,” and not “drama kings.” In this sense, one can endorse Butler’s contention that all gender is performative while recognizing that in some ways in our culture, the process of making performance visible as performance, what Luce Irigaray calls “mimeticism,” is gendered as feminine.³⁴

The artist Touko Valio Laaksonen, known as Tom of Finland, gives spatial expression to this very paradox. Finland’s drawings were originally featured in 1950s-era “fitness” magazines aimed at gay men. His muscular leather boys pose themselves as the apex of masculinity but in the very act of “posing” can only be viewed in our culture as also being the apex of an imperfect or incomplete masculinity, in part because the very act of presenting oneself (or rather presenting oneself as presenting oneself) was itself coded as not masculine in twentieth-century Finland and to some extent in our current cultural milieu as well.³⁵

This analysis arguably follows from philosopher Luce Irigaray’s controversial claim that “femininity” is inseparable from “being chosen as an object of consumption or desire by masculine ‘subjects.’”³⁶ This should not be read as a dialectical negation of Butler, but rather as a supplement. The political role of femi-

34 We must thank Deborah Goldgaber for extremely helpful discussions and suggestions with regards to this point.

35 For more on the artist, see Valentine Hooven, *Tom of Finland: The Official Life and Work of a Gay Hero* (Cernunnos, 2020).

36 Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (Cornell University Press, 1985), 84.

ninity in societies that maintain varying levels of gender apartheid is still performative in Butler's sense, since it involves the social construction of bodies. But privileging this perception of oneself as an object of consumption or desire in her notion of femininity leads Irigaray to suggest a slightly different role for thematizing what Butler calls the performativity of feminine gender. In a certain way of dramatizing this performativity, performing the performance,

one must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it. [...] To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it.³⁷

Irigaray explores the way that self-consciousness about the performance of tropes associated with the feminine allows women to exercise agency with respect to those tropes and begin to subvert the conditions of their subordination. But then to the extent that performance as subversion is widespread among women, it itself becomes associated in the sexist society itself with women. And perhaps then, conservatives' hatred of drag is not merely because of all of the reasons that femininity terrorizes them, but (and this explains in part the campiness of much drag) also that drag performers are not merely performing femininity but *performing the performance* of femininity, making visible not just the performative nature of gender but also the manner in which owning the performance is part of a strategy for reclaiming agency with respect to that performance.

This would also explain in part why women performing masculinity in drag is the exception. Irigaray's doubled performativity has been the strategy of the oppressed, and in modern societies gendered apartheid oppresses first and foremost women. So a man performing drag is not performing being a woman,

³⁷ Ibid., 76.

but rather performing the performance of being a woman. If Irigaray is correct and performing the performance is largely the province of the oppressed, then the opposite (with women performing the performance of being a man) simply would not scan as well to audiences acculturated by gender apartheid.³⁸ And from this we conclude that the Irigarayan double role that all actors must embody is one explanation of why theatricality itself is now coded as feminine in the global West, and to the extent that Irigaray is correct, a primary source of heterosexist panic with respect to men publicly performing.

Note that an actor is not someone who unconsciously picks up a viral behavioral trope, like overenthusiastic young male fans of the *Doors* movie who for a while, when drunk, would stumble around in an unconscious pantomime of Val Kilmer's version of Jim Morrison. An actor must normally be conscious of their performance and exert control over it to affect the audience. But this is exactly what Irigaray claims that women have done in the era of gender apartheid, not merely performing but performing the performance. Thus, in contemporary Western culture, to perform is itself always to some extent to play with mimesis and place oneself in the role of women.

And here we can see why there is no contradiction between the Butlerian claim that all gender is performative and the Irigarayan claim that “performance” is gendered feminine. Irigarayan performance is always meta, performing the performance. That is, the contradiction disappears when we note that what we really have is that all gender is performance, but that as of now performing the performance is feminine. The first claim does entail that the femininity of performing the performance is a complex product involving social relations, but given the social relations of gendered apartheid, they code as feminine

38 The term gender apartheid refers to the oppression of individuals because of their gender or sex, but despite activists' efforts is not yet recognized by the UN as a violation of international law like the more commonly known crime of racial apartheid.

perhaps just because they are part of a resistance strategy statistically connected with women.

When we take up Irigaray's analysis of mimeticism as (with respect to current cultural codes) fundamentally feminine, we begin to interpret one of Sharon Mazer's key claims about wrestling in a novel way:

Whatever a woman's formal role in the wrestling event might be, as spectator, manager, or wrestler, her function is always to affirm male heterosexual orthodoxy.³⁹

The question is *why* did male heterosexual orthodoxy need to be especially affirmed in twentieth-century professional wrestling? Our answer is because barely dressed men preening in front of large audiences was so at odds with it! They preen to perform the masculine trope of being physically lethal, more powerful than the other men, but the very act of performing that trope renders, as in a Tom of Finland drawing, the performance paradoxical with respect to that which it is performing.

One might assume, then, that when the autocrat performs masculinity, the ultimately odd and paradoxical display that results is simply part of the leader as buffoon act that we explored in the last chapter. While this might be the case, however, it's not as simply silly as Vince McMahon's reaction to Mr. Socko. Instead, as we have already briefly mentioned, appearing feminine (which acting masculine can paradoxically cause) can make someone strangely into a wrestling heel. For Trump supporters (and arguably fans of other autocrats as well), this bad guy persona can sometimes make him even more popular.

Punishing the Fop

In professional wrestling, attempting to resolve the paradox of performative masculinity requires doubling down on masculine tropes, though this doubling down always expresses itself in two

³⁹ Mazer, *Professional Wrestling*, 116.

contradictory ways: (1) doubling down on violence directed at women or male characters who are fops, and (2) doubling down on insouciance. The fop characters are almost always heels, punished in storyline by their non-fop opponents for their exaggerated departure from gender norms.

The strategy of punishing the fop in storyline fails when audiences end up cheering for the fop. Then, the fans’ masculinity can only be saved either by the performers’ doubling down on insouciance or the male wrestlers harming female wrestlers. Through this lens, we see that Trump and many of his cabinet members who, like Trump, have assaulted their spouses, are to some extent real-life examples of the pro-wrestling fop who doubles down on their “masculine” traits by physically abusing and otherwise subordinating women.

The insouciant fop who doesn’t care about gender norms in some sense codes as more masculine than the person ruining their body with steroids. This is because the fop doesn’t care, while the steroid user cares too much and is obsessed with their body, something our culture manipulates women into doing and then codes as naturally feminine. In this context, it is interesting that two of the biggest performers in history, Ric Flair and Dusty Rhodes, both had pronounced lisps, something coded queer in mainstream American culture. Their lisps forced both of them to master the art of performative insouciance. To be clear, we are not claiming that physical strength and insouciance are “masculine” in the sense that they are the proper province of the male sex. It’s rather that in much of American culture as well as in the WWE fictional universe they are, and that this is part of how WWE (like most cultural products in societies that more or less enforce gendered apartheid) reflects and reinforces oppressive gender binaries.

Neal Hebert’s 2010 conference presentation “Piledriving Panies and Ferocious Fops: Heterosociality and American Professional Wrestling,” situates foppiness or the performance of camp archetypes within professional wrestling as representing a continuation of the sorts of fribbles seen on seventeenth-century

English stages.⁴⁰ Unlike the original responses to Restoration foppery, however, contemporary wrestling audiences do not make a distinction between foppishness and same-sex attraction.⁴¹

The connection between modern foppery and violence against women in wrestling is clearest if we study a classic 1984 Mid-South Wrestling storyline featuring “The Exotic” Adrian Street.⁴² Street was neither the first professional wrestling fop nor the last, but his performances in the 1980s American South fit uneasily within the larger trend of foppery in professional wrestling. Street, like “Gorgeous” George Wagner, the first professional wrestler to employ foppery to elicit boos in the 1940s, spent a decade as an undersized heavyweight wrestler lucky to work opening matches on cards dominated by men much taller and heavier than himself. As an American, Wagner’s performances during and after World War II played on fears of men returning from war tainted by their time in decadent Europe.

The son of a Welsh miner, Street ran away from home at age sixteen and became a professional wrestler in 1957 at seventeen. Street became “The Exotic One” in 1971 after seeing the glam rock stylings of David Bowie and T-Rex on British television. According to his third autobiography *Sadist in Sequins*, he was the greatest grappler to hail from Wales, a confident ladies’ man, successful entrepreneur, successful film actor, the inventor of

40 Neal Hebert, “Piledriving Pansies and Ferocious Fops: Heterosociality and Professional Wrestling,” paper presented at Mid-America Theatre Conference, Cleveland, OH, March 2010.

41 This was not always the case, however. In the time of “Gorgeous” George Wagner, sports columnists and announcers of wrestling matches were quick to insist that George’s foppishness was not code for same-sex attraction. This distinction, however, was lost on audiences, and later foppish performers made no such distinction or implied that they were gay outright.

42 For a more substantial analysis of Adrian Street, see Stephen Greer, “King of the Ring, And Queen of It, Too’: The Exotic Masculinity of Adrian Street,” in *Performance and Professional Wrestling*, ed. Broderick Chow, Eero Laine, and Claire Warden (Routledge, 2016).

glam rock, and the performer most responsible for establishing genderbending in glam aesthetics.

Street's self-assessments, for example with respect to having invented glam rock, are untrue.⁴³ But regardless of his self-aggrandizement, certain facts seem certain. Before he discovered glam, he supplemented his wrestling income by posing for fetish photography aimed at gay audiences. He was inspired by glam to become a glam gimmick, and he only started playing a fop because crowds in Europe interpreted “glam” as code for a performer or character being gay, as crowds consistently have in Western societies since the advent of television. And his character as a drag-loving, glam-styled, queer-themed professional wrestler was firmly established in Europe before he ever traveled to America to make money in the different pre-WWE regional territories found throughout the United States.

Street worked throughout the United States, including memorable runs in Verne Gagne's American Wrestling Association and Memphis Championship Wrestling, jointly owned and operated by Jerry Jarrett and Jerry Lawler. Street was an accomplished mid-card heel by the time he traveled to Louisiana to work for “Cowboy” Bill Watts's Mid-South Wrestling, a promotion riding high on the oil boom of the 1980s and a television show that was widely considered the best weekly wrestling show in the country. Although modern audiences take the idea of cliffhangers, character development, and assorted other staples of episodic television as par for the course, Watts and his booker (head writer) “Big Cat” Ernie Ladd⁴⁴ were the first to consistently and intentionally employ these conventions in professional wrestling.

With this in mind, we turn to the event in question.

43 For a wonderful study of glam rock as personified by Marc Bolan, David Bowie, Bryan Ferry, and Suzi Quatro, see Philip Auslander, *Performing Glam Rock: Gender and Theatricality in Popular Music* (University of Michigan Press, 2006.)

44 Ladd is noteworthy because, in addition to being a main event wrestler and former professional football player, he is the first Black person to be trusted with writing duties in professional wrestling history.

On October 10, 1984, several hundred fans packed Shreveport, Louisiana's Irish McNeil Boys Club to see Mid-South Wrestling. One of the featured matches that evening was a singles match (a contest between two professional wrestlers) wherein the reigning Mid-South Television Champion, "The Exotic" Adrian Street put his championship on the line against an Englishman, "The Gentleman" Chris Adams. Street, who paired his 1970s glam attire with staples of drag performance (including on that evening what appeared to be a brassiere), primed and preened before the bell rang. Once he inspected his hair and makeup for the final time, he nestled his hand mirror in his valet "Miss" Linda's (Street's real-life wife Linda Gunthorpe Hawker) cleavage so that he could use both hands to attend to his magnificent blond hair. Adams and Street wrestled for eight minutes. Babyface Adams was clearly the better wrestler, but Street as the heel cheated repeatedly behind the referee's back to maintain the upper hand.

The match appeared to be a pedestrian affair until what turned out to be its finish. Mid-South wrestler Terry Taylor ran down to ringside, grabbed Miss Linda, and began to force himself upon her. Linda struggled and resisted, but Taylor continued kissing her. After several moments, Linda appeared to enjoy Taylor's deep kisses, and began to caress his hair.

Street, seeing this assault, forfeited the match by diving out of the ring. Street grabbed Linda by the hair and repeatedly punched her to punish her infidelity. The crowd, which had been reliably booing Street throughout (with some exceptions, given that some audience members will always cheer the bad guys), fell silent. The Mid-South announcer, Lance Russell, began screaming that her punishment was uncalled for. Unfortunately for Miss Linda, however, Russell did not demand that anyone help her. Instead, Russell announced that the promotion had to go to a commercial break, although they in fact kept the cameras rolling so fans wouldn't miss a moment.

Another example of foppery and violence in wrestling, Goldust, was a huge star in the 1990s who inspired thousands of children to join in with their parents and scream "faggot" at the

top of their lungs at wwe live events.⁴⁵ Strangely, this kind of booking is as of this writing a thing of the past, and not as a result of audiences’ growing awareness of LGBTQ2SIA+ rights. Professional wrestlers themselves no longer tolerate these storylines. Lance Storm, the former proprietor of “Storm Wrestling Academy” — the most well-regarded North American wrestling school from its founding in the 2000s until it closed its doors in 2019 — used his position as a teacher to speak out against homophobic gimmicks. In the 2011 Canadian documentary chronicling one of Storm’s training camps, *World of Hurt*, Storm informed one of his students that portraying a gay character who is only a villain because of his sexuality is simply unacceptable — especially given the number of men and women both in wrestling and outside of it who identify as either gay or lesbian.

Violence and Masculinity: “I’m not gay!”

Sadly, sexual degradation and punitive violence against women in wrestling storylines outlasted the end of the degrading portrayal of fops. Violence against woman in wrestling continued to cause audiences to cheer during the Attitude Era, even to the point where heels became faces by attacking women in front of adoring crowds, such as on March 13, 2000 when the wwf tag team The Dudley Boys power bombed seventy-six-year-old former wrestler Mae Young from the top rope of the ring through a table to the cheers of a live crowd.

The punishment of the fop character and the punishment of women around the fop character is the primary way that masculinity can be reasserted for male viewers who might experience cognitive dissonance as a result of their enjoyment of watching oiled-up, nearly nude men in tights preen and wrestle with one another. Harming women is a way for fearful men to, in effect,

45 For a more substantial analysis of Goldust and his manager, Marlina, see Janine Bradbury, “Grappling and Ga(y)zing: Gender, Sexuality, and Performance in the wwe Debuts of Goldust and Marlina,” in *Performance and Professional Wrestling*, ed. Broderick Chow, Eero Laine, and Claire Warden (Routledge, 2016).

hold up a sign saying, “I am not gay!” or perhaps just “I am not feminine!”

Trump, who, as we have argued, markedly displays certain prominent feminine characteristics, has a history of denigrating and harming women that goes far beyond the Carroll case. For example, while Trump is known for his name-calling of fellow politicians and really anyone he meets, he seems to have a special fondness for verbally attacking women. He called adult film star Stormy Daniels “Horseface.” He tweeted that Congresswoman Maxine Waters and MSNBC personality Mika Brzezinski both had low I.Q.s. He also claimed that Brzezinski “insisted on joining him” at Mar-a-Lago but he said no, since “Crazy Mika” was bleeding from a face-lift. The list goes on and on and on.⁴⁶

And here we go back to the values embodied in relentlessly masculine figures like John Wayne — men who are positioned as those who can restore the social order. As Gayle Rubin points out in “The Traffic in Women,” modern society is built on kinship relations which depend on the idea that men and women are radically different. Gender is constructed out of the exaggerated differences between feminine and masculine, which allow for no inbetween, so all the men really need to do to assert their privileged position is to compare themselves negatively to women.

The reasons for doing so through violence and humiliation are less clear. Why can’t Trump and WWE wrestlers simply jump on a scale and show how much more they weigh or display some of their body hair and be done with it? The answer is that male power comes from and embodies sex, according to Catharine MacKinnon. On her view, male power, violence, and sex are inseparable:

46 See Meghan Keneally, “‘Horseface,’ ‘Crazy,’ ‘Low IQ’: Trump’s History of Insulting Women,” *abcNews*, October 17, 2018, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/trumps-long-history-calling-women-crazy-attacking-appearances/story?id=48348956>.

Male dominance is sexual. Meaning: men in particular, if not men alone, sexualize hierarchy; gender is one. As much a sexual theory of gender as a gendered theory of sex, this is the theory of sexuality that has grown out of consciousness raising. Recent feminist work, both interpretative and empirical, on rape, battery, sexual harassment, sexual abuse of children, prostitution and pornography support it. These practices, taken together, express and actualize the distinctive power of men over women; their effective permissibility confirms and extends it.⁴⁷

MacKinnon argues that men sexualize hierarchy and that being male is wrapped up, not just with physical differences, but power dynamics. The existence of rape storylines in WWE and Trump’s record of harassment and sexual violence against women seem to support MacKinnon’s contention that proving dominance and maleness cannot, for men, be only about highlighting gender differences. Instead, “the male sexual role, this information and analysis suggests, centers on aggressive intrusion on those with less power.”⁴⁸

For WWE fans, then, perhaps it isn’t enough to show that the male wrestlers are bigger and stronger than the women. The men must also display their ability to dominate in a sexual way. Judging from the reaction of the WWE crowds and Trump’s gleeful supporters, at least some people love it, but why? The answer for MacKinnon would have to be simply that men are turned on by sexual violence, a position she argues for in her discussion of pornography as well as social attitudes towards rape.

While MacKinnon’s views must continue to provoke thinking about these issues, we don’t think the solution is quite so clear cut. In “Gender, Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be,” Sally Haslanger, in a similar manner as Luce Irigaray, argues that a person is a woman if and only if they

47 Catharine MacKinnon, “Sexuality,” in *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*, ed. Linda Nicholson (Routledge, 1997), 158.

48 MacKinnon, “Sexuality,” 159.

meet certain conditions, primary among them being systematically subordinated because of their perceived femininity, or presumed evidence of biology consistent with a female's role of reproduction. Her theory entails that the concept of "women" can't be separated from the concept of people who are systematically subjugated.

Perhaps then, men proclaim their masculinity to avoid being perceived as feminine, and thus avoid being subordinated — and the subjugation of women, too, can be seen to create or partially constitute femininity. Thus, that men who enjoy watching men in tights or who, like Trump, exhibit certain traits might be feminized could be part of the reason behind the need to perform violence against women. However, none of this quite answers the earlier question of why Trump and WWE have to assert their masculinity through sexual violence in particular. A deeper examination of this issue would be beyond the scope of this book.

Heterosexist Panic Then and Now

Though our discussion in this chapter can only end with more questions than answers, it is worthwhile to briefly assay what we have ascertained. In Chapters 1 and 2, we note that autocrats crystallize a moment when cynicism overwhelms the competing narratives told by elites to secure the political support of non-elites. For their supporters, the autocrat comes to paradoxically seem like the only real thing because he is the only one affirming that everything is fake. In Chapter 3, the pageantry of the autocrat's humiliations gives him the preternatural ability to compete in the theater of politics by being an entertaining figure of mockery to opponents and to adherents who themselves feel mocked. In this chapter, we have noted that given the autocrat's complicity in the very neoliberal economic tendencies they pretend to fight, the only restoration of the social contract they are able to deliver concerns cultural issues. We have only begun to explore those cultural issues with our examination of violence against women, but it should also include religion,

the arts, education, sexuality, and perhaps more. Though this restoration is not always merely symbolic, for example with the recent removal of the right to a medical abortion and miscarriage treatment in much of the United States, much of its appeal is exactly as the appeal was in WWE, the acceptance of a kind of “transgressive” joyful cruelty deemed to be acceptable public behavior.

As we noted, the focus on restoring the “correct” social order effectively distracts from the autocrat’s failure to deliver on the other promises. Well-paying blue collar jobs aren’t actually more available for Americans, but at least their supporters can be assured that women and other undesirables are being effectively put in their place. Thus, the autocrat can be seen as “masculine” while also a being buffoon and unable to effect real change. The carefully orchestrated push and pull between clownishness and violence (including but not limited to sexual violence) is one of the keys to success for autocrats. At least in part, it must serve to keep all eyes on the leader and away from the deteriorating material conditions under their reign.

There is some consolation in the fact that things have gotten better even in WWE, however. Perhaps the current round of heterosexist panic in American society with respect to, for example, transgender people, will soon come to be recognized as dated, retrograde, and sadistic in the way Lita’s treatment by WWE management and crowds is now seen as beyond the pale. Or at the very least, perhaps the use of it as a distraction from the real issues will cease to be effective.

“Is This True or Merely Another Conspiracy Theory?”: From Metanarrative Cynicism to Narratives of Conspiracy

We have seen that Trumpism parallels wwe’s practice of encouraging cynicism with respect to its own product, promoting a distracting public leadership style that gets observers invested in the ritualistic humiliation of the leader and parables of toxic masculinity. Throughout wwe’s history as well as that of Trump’s presidency, these tactics have been woven together into a unified narrative package whose very unity supports and encourages the strangest forms of conspiratorial thinking. In the Trump era, so far at least, a telling apotheosis or nadir of conspiracism was the strange congeries of beliefs in common held by many of the rioters who attempted to disrupt the legal transfer of power in the United States on January 6, 2021.

We are confident that none of the participants in the riot of that day, none of the organizers in and out of President Trump’s orbit, and at best a vanishingly small percentage of Americans at home watching on television or the internet had any idea of the existing scholarship on the transfer of political power. The few of us who had, for example, read Peter Heather’s *The Restoration*

of Rome: Barbarian Popes and Imperial Pretenders, were much more horrified than any of the reporters covering Trump's "stop the steal" movement leading up to the riot. Heather's book narrowly concerns why empires with the equivalent land mass of the Western Roman Empire, restored first by Theodoric, then Justinian, and finally Charlemagne in the late medieval period, always within a single generation dissolved back into a hodge-podge of competing fiefdoms. But its main theme is how the lack of mechanisms for the peaceful transfer of power doomed Europe to over a thousand years of intermittent civil war, broadly from the last hundred years of the Western Empire through the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia's ending of the Thirty Years War.

One of the worst times to be a Roman imperial subject or medieval peasant was after a sovereign ruler died. You were either likely to be drafted by one of the different claimants to the throne fighting to succeed the previous boss, or to live and possibly die violently in a village denuded by the resulting warfare. The victor always emerged politically weaker because of the tax rebates and other promises he had made to the elites who had supported his cause. Heather provocatively, though convincingly, argues that the major cause of political weakness and instability in Europe in the late Roman and feudal era was the inability of rulers to adequately tax the feudal nobility and religious potentates that put them in power. This is because the price of support against rival claimants was so often further tax cuts. The move from a civilization with public baths and roads and bridges that last for thousands of years to one where filthy people lived in thatch-roofed huts had much more to do with this weakening of public power caused by insufficient taxation than with so-called barbarian invasions. And even with respect to the Western Empire proper, invaders would have never seized control if it hadn't been wracked by over a hundred years of various emperors looting their own Italian cities as they vied to be the next Caesar.

The United States is no stranger to public infrastructure declining as a result of political leaders instantiating unsustain-

able tax cuts and other giveaways to economic elites.¹ However, when your sovereign currency is the world’s reserve, it is (at least thus far) possible to do this without *all* of the dislocations faced by late imperial Rome and feudal Europe. And peaceful transfers of federal power had been the norm for more than one hundred years in the United States. Sadly, the “strange people” — publicly praised by a President Trump who in private likened them to the costumed audience members of the 1960s game show, *Let’s Make a Deal* — trying to vitiate that tradition, as well as the plurality of Republican voters who continue to support them, likely had no idea of how central such transfers are to avoiding ongoing calamity.

Weirdly, while about a third of Republican voters continue to support the rioters, over half of Republicans believe that the chimerical leftist association “Antifa” organized the riot as a “false flag” to delegitimize Trump.² It would be comforting to

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- 1 In addition to the effects of the United States’ status as printer of the global reserve currency allowing unparalleled deficit spending, it is unclear the extent to which the decline of public infrastructure comes from the gutting of the tax base and how much of it arises from the paradoxical — given the neoliberal University of Chicago economists for whom efficiency is the only normative factor appealed to in public decision making — manner in which neoliberal privatization creates massive inefficiencies. We know of no book length study on this phenomenon, though it is one of the themes in important books such as Donald Cohen and Allen Mikaelian, *The Privatization of Everything: How the Plunder of Public Goods Transformed America and How We Can Fight Back* (The New Press, 2021). Though the corruption and inefficiency of privatization has been demonstrated economically with respect to everything privatized under neoliberalism, from education to public transportation to naval ship repair, the sort of semi-privatization of public entities contracting out “consulting services” to politically connected private companies is just now coming into focus as, for example, the reason why subway construction costs several times as much and takes so much longer in the United States than it does in countries with workable public transportation. For a good overview of this research, see Henry Graber, “Consultants Gone Wild: The Real Reason It Costs So Damn Much to Build New Subways in America,” *Slate*, February 23, 2023, <https://slate.com/business/2023/02/subway-costs-us-europe-public-transit-funds.html>.
 - 2 See Brad Dress, “New Poll Finds 33 Percent of GOP Support Actions of Jan. 6 Rioters,” *The Hill*, June 6, 2022, <https://thehill.com/homenews/>

think that these two groups do not intersect in membership, since their beliefs are flatly inconsistent with one another, but we are (neither collectively, nor individually) a consistent species. In any case, a deeper consistency is the extent to which both sets are motivated by falsehoods incessantly amplified by President Trump, first that the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 were organized and controlled by shadowy Marxist revolutionary groups intent on loot and revolution, and second that his reported 2020 loss was the result of voter fraud involving rigged machines, ballot smuggling, and even a rogue CIA computer server. Indeed, the inaugurating lie of his first term was that he had not actually lost the popular tally by nearly three million votes, since those votes were all illegally cast.

As Will Sommer notes in *Trust the Plan: The Rise of QAnon and the Conspiracy That Unhinged America*, Trump entered and surmounted politics by amplifying conspiracy theories. He began by pushing obvious lies about us President Barack Obama's birthplace, then fueled his own campaign for the Republican nomination with a series of similarly bizarre claims about his Republican opponents. He suggested that Senator Marco Rubio wasn't eligible to be President and that Senator Ted Cruz's father helped kill John F. Kennedy. And then, after defeating all his rival claimants for the nomination and achieving an unlikely victory over Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Trump in effect became the conspiracy-theorist-in-chief. His constant promotion of outlandish lies throughout his presidency gave his fans permission to dive headlong into conspiracy theories themselves. If the president really thought Cruz's father shot JFK, what was off-limits for his followers?³

state-watch/3526469-new-poll-finds-33-percent-of-gop-support-actions-of-jan-6-rioters/, and Jason Lange, "Half of U.S. Republicans Believe the Left Led Jan. 6 Violence: Reuters/Ipsos Poll," *Reuters*, June 9, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/half-us-republicans-believe-left-led-jan-6-violence-reutersipsos-2022-06-09/>.

3 Will Sommer, *Trust the Plan: The Rise of QAnon and the Conspiracy That Unhinged America* (New York: HarperCollins, 2023), 2-3.

The aspiring autocrat’s personal clownishness and amplification of cynicism works to create a false narrative where they alone can fix the problems experienced by their supporters. In this manner, conspiracism cannot be fully separated from the other autocratic quirks that Trump picked up from WWE.⁴ But this elevation of the dear leader only works to the extent that the leader’s supporters see the political arena as a place where the actions of one super heroic man can be the deciding factor in eliminating systematic problems. And this is always exceedingly improbable, for political problems tend to be systematic precisely to the extent that they are the function of economic actors collating into powerful industries and lobbies working to preserve and increase their standing in the current economic and social system (in addition to the deeper biological, psychological, geological, spiritual, historical, etc. processes that make them possible). Heroic narratives require the autocrat’s followers to think of political problems not as systematic ones that require collective action, but rather as ones caused by small groups of nefarious actors that can only be defeated by the autocratic strongman. And this is exactly why cynicism and clownishness require conspiratorial thinking, a dynamic we see executed perfectly by WWE and Trump.

WWE’s Storm

WWE’s Attitude Era was steeped in conspiratorial tropes. Not only was McMahon a member of the ritualistically humiliated elite, he was also increasingly presented as the puppet-master directing other shadowy forces. In addition to the normal Attitude Era “transgressive” or sexist tropes, the plot in the convoluted storylines involved intrepid babyfaces suffering from the

4 Fiona A.E. McQuarrie, “Response to Benjamin Litherland’s ‘Notes on Kayfabe,’” *Professional Wrestling Studies Journal* 3, no. 1 (2022): 129–31, notes an aspect of kayfabe that is highlighted throughout this chapter, our argument, and the relationship between neokayfabe and conspiracism: the necessity of secret keeping.

machinations of the hidden cabal and heroically uncovering that very cabal.

We do not think that Trump invented the QAnon conspiracy theory any more than we think that Vince McMahon authored the plots coming out of WWE Creative. But like so much about Trump, McMahon remains Trump's precursor and prototype in figuring out just how to amplify and profit from conspiratorial thinking. Unfortunately, the main Attitude Era storyline, like the QAnon conspiracy theory, is so implausible and convoluted that it's difficult to describe. But since the professional wrestling fiction of that era is nonetheless significantly less implausible and convoluted than the fictions still believed by a significant plurality of Trump's supporters, it is more helpful to begin with wrestling.

We have already dedicated space to the trials and tribulations of "Stone Cold" Steve Austin, and for good reason. Austin's era in the mid-to-late 1990s was the most popular and widely viewed wrestling in generations, in no small part due to the rise of the evil CEO Vince McMahon. But McMahon was not the only villain who challenged Austin's ascension to the highest tier of success in wrestling, becoming the WWF Heavyweight Champion. Austin needed more villainous foils to prevent the storyline from getting stale, and the soap opera of big personalities and their alliances and betrayals up and down the cards was a hallmark of the late 1990s Attitude Era. McMahon, his head writer Vince Russo, and the rest of the WWF creative team of that time adopted a style of programming called "crash TV" — a term derived from the term "car crash television," which refers to shows that got ratings via routinely depicting controversial, horrific, or disturbing imagery.

In the television episodes leading up to the October 18, 1998 WWF pay-per-view "Judgment Day," the WWF Heavyweight Championship was vacant because Vince McMahon in storyline had stripped Austin of the belt. Though Austin wasn't allowed to take part, he was allowed to referee the title match between The Undertaker and Kane, the Brothers of Destruction. Both The Undertaker and Kane possessed superhuman endurance in sto-

rylines, and the match between the two giant men — both fan-favorites — featured The Undertaker betraying his brother Kane by smashing a steel chair into Kane’s head, knocking Kane out while turning The Undertaker into a vicious heel. Austin, outraged at The Undertaker, refused to cover Kane. Instead, Austin used a chair to knock out the Undertaker. With both competitors unconscious, Austin counted to three and declared himself the new champion. Vince McMahon appeared on the big screen and told everyone in the arena to take a picture of Austin for the last time in a WWF ring. Since Austin had violated his contract as a referee, McMahon could fire him forever.

Obviously, this didn’t happen. Austin got his job back the very next night on *Monday Night Raw* by pulling a gun on McMahon, causing the Chairman to pee his pants on live TV and hand over a five year no cut contract with a guaranteed title match. Over the next year, Austin was assailed by not one but two factions of villainous wrestlers: The Corporation and the Ministry of Darkness. Vince McMahon’s Corporation, which consisted of Vince McMahon, his son Shane, the Big Boss Man, The Rock as heel champion, Ken Shamrock, Gerald Brisco, Pat Patterson, and Sgt Slaughter, was dedicated to keeping the prestigious WWF Heavyweight Championship away from rebellious wrestlers who did not respect management. The Ministry of Darkness was a group of evil, semi-mystical villains led by The Undertaker, which included Paul Bearer and the tag team The Acolytes. Over the next few months, the Ministry abducted wrestlers and brainwashed them, recreating them as more evil versions of themselves. Dennis Knight became the evil Mideon and Mabel turned into Viscera. The Brood, a trio of vampires consisting of Edge, Christian, and Gangrel, also joined the Ministry.

The Ministry–Corporation–Steve Austin storyline was interesting for several reasons. First, the Ministry would refer to their “higher power” that guided them, directing them to hit Steve Austin in the head with a shovel, attempt to embalm the still-living Austin, and eventually to crucify Austin on a T-shaped symbol (the announcers made sure to impress upon the fans

watching at home that this was in no way supposed to be understood as a cross). All the while, the Ministry and the Corporation also feuded with each other. The Undertaker insisted he wanted to own the company, while McMahon once again embraced neokayfabe and claimed that the man who played The Undertaker, Mark Calloway, had suffered a break from reality and truly believed himself to be the second coming of the Lord of Darkness — who definitely wasn't Satan.

For more than a year, the situation grew weirder and weirder, leading the Undertaker to abduct McMahon's real-life daughter Stephanie McMahon. He planned to drug and marry her so that he would inherit the company, but the Black Wedding happening live on TV was foiled by the working man's hero Steve Austin. At some point during the months leading up to this, McMahon (in a strange sort of *Citizen Kane* reference) cried when a teddy bear was burned on screen, a match was held where people had to set each other on fire, and people changed their loyalties based on who was threatened with being sent to a mental institution.

While these were in some sense all separable narratives, throughout there were strong suggestions that they were connected by a deeper hidden meaning. Finally, near the end of the story, The Undertaker and the Ministry revealed that they were not after all devils, they just took orders from a Higher Power. This Higher Power led The Ministry of Darkness to join forces with The Corporation — now under the control of Vince McMahon's son Shane — on the very first episode of *WWF Smackdown* on April 29, 1999. For months, the Corporate Ministry, as they were now called, spoke more and more emphatically about the evil they were going to do in The Higher Power's name. Finally, on June 7, 1999, The Undertaker and the Corporate Ministry revealed who their Higher Power was. Removing the cowl from his druid robes, a triumphant Vince McMahon screamed, "It's me, Austin! It was me all along!" All of the bad things in the WWF were then shown to be the result of one person's machinations.

Luckily for the WWF, a superheroic babyface was on hand to stop the evil cabal's machinations. Stephanie McMahon and Linda McMahon gave their controlling shares of WWF to Austin in storyline. He dismantled the Corporate Ministry and won the title. Finally, the calm after the storm. And at least until Darth Vince reappeared in the next sequel, fans could revel in the social contract's fictional restoration in the WWE extended universe. In a similar manner to the QAnon lore of twenty years later, the restoration would happen largely through the action of one person, a hero who could not have done it without the help of a few other “good guys” and all his rabid fans cheering him on.

All of this maybe makes for okay television, and in our current era of Disney IP, movies. But what happens when a populace thinks that the stories told by academic, journalistic, and public policy experts are no truer than Marvel Superhero movies? While the postmodern condition of universal kayfabe might produce a few enlightened beings on the model of ancient Greek philosophical skeptics whose tendency not to judge produces calm and kindness, the signal epistemological lesson of QAnon is that most humans simply are not like that. When nothing is true, or rather when all stories are equally false, that means you can believe whatever feels good. The sleep of reason breeds soap operas and monsters.

Conspiracy Theory and Neoliberal Decline

The Ministry–Corporation–Steve Austin storyline might have been convoluted, but it was simple compared to the Frankenstein-like amalgam of narratives that became known as QAnon. Sommer opens his book on the phenomena with this description of the beliefs of one of the January 6th rioters:

As [pro-Trump protestor Therese] Borgerding told me, nefarious forces led by the most powerful people in the world — titans of Hollywood, the Democratic Party, and big business — had forced these children to live in thousands of

miles of underground tunnels. Hidden out of sight, these “mole children” are terrorized by pedophiles until their bodies produce adrenochrome, a highly coveted liquid that celebrities and the world’s richest financiers drink to stay young.⁵

For some reason, this idea of immortal pedophiles murdering children has been a magnet for amalgamating previously distinct conspiratorial views, for example: that the all-controlling elites are alien “lizard people,” that vaccines cause a panoply of health conditions worse than the diseases they cure, that millions of people have died from vaccines as part of an elite plot to depopulate Earth, that the supposed ritual abuse of children involves summoning the Christian Devil to serve the elites, and that John Kennedy Junior did not die in a plane crash and would soon reappear.

Much of Sommer’s reporting is old news to listeners of the *QAnon Anonymous* podcast, where hosts Travis View, Julian Feeld, Jake Rockatansky, British correspondent Annie Kelly, and Canadian correspondent Liv Agar investigate and explain the phenomena. However, when in “Episode 220, Baby Q Rising,” Sommer went on the show to discuss his book (as well as on Will Menaker, Matt Christman, and Felix Biederman’s “*Chapo Trap House*, Episode 710, “I Believe Mole Children are our Future feat. Will Sommer”), he emphasized one of his key findings, that many QAnon adherents he talked to either faced ruinous medical debt or had themselves been traumatized by childhood sexual abuse committed by family members or friends of the family, often fellow church members. The investigative reporting of Sommer and the hosts of *QAnon Anonymous* has revealed that conspiracy theories constitutively allow people to focus the blame of their suffering. The blame settles neither on the people in their lives who actually abetted their abuse, nor on cultural and economic institutions that give rise to their immiseration—such as the patriarchal family, Christian churches, the homeschooling movement, the privatized medical system

5 Sommer, *Trust the Plan*, 1-2.

and other institutions of globalized neoliberal capitalism — but rather on a fictional cabal of a few people with the desire, will, and power to have alone caused the kind of suffering they are undergoing.

One of the puzzles that Sommers et al. attempt to understand is why so many successful middle-class women have been drawn to QAnon, especially given its overlapping adjacency to sexist and violent street groups such as pro-Trump motorcycle gangs and insurrectionist groups such as the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers. In this context, one of the most chilling recent revelations about Republican congressperson and QAnon adherent Marjorie Taylor Greene is that she was first drawn to Trump because he reminded her of her deceased father.⁶ To some extent, Sommers et al. have found that one of the psychic functions of politicians like Trump and perhaps also Bill Clinton and George Walker Bush has been to alleviate in the most unhelpful way the immense cognitive dissonance facing women who live with abusive men, either as relatives or sexual partners. All abusive relationships involve rationalizing away the fact that the abuser abuses because he enjoys abusing people.⁷ He is a good caretaker. But he loves me. He’s normally not like that. He protects me. He is a bastard, but he has a heart of gold. Indeed, as we showed in the previous chapter, the ubiquity of John Wayne quotes and movies in relationship books sold in evangelical Christian bookstores can best be understood in terms of this dynamic: legitimizing abusive men.⁸ And the star-

6 See, for example Elaina Plott Calabro, “Why Is Marjorie Taylor Greene Like This? On the Ground in the Georgia Congresswoman’s Alternate Universe,” *The Atlantic*, December 5, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2023/01/marjorie-taylor-greene-congress-georgia-election-background/672229/>.

7 For an overview of the academic literature on typical dynamics, see Zlatka Rakovec-Felser, “Domestic Violence and Abuse in Intimate Relationships from Public Health Perspective,” *Health Psychological Research* 2, no. 3 (2014): 1821.

8 See Kristen Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (Liveright, 2021).

ting omnipresence of men who violently abused their spouses in the Trump administration is further proof of this trope.⁹

The crushing irony is that the very women recruited into QAnon because they legitimately thought this placed them on the side of a struggle to stop the same abuse they suffered (“save the children” being the most common tagline in recruitment to QAnon), went on to support Donald J. Trump. We must not forget just how widely reported were Trump’s sexual assaults, crude sexual comments about his own daughter, decades long friendship with convicted child trafficker Jeffrey Epstein, or that five separate women, who as children had competed in the Miss Teen USA 1997 contest, recounted Trump invading their dressing rooms while they were undressed.¹⁰

As Sommers argues, the first aspect of conspiratorial thinking — blaming the malevolent machinations of a shadowy cabal for widespread systematic problems such as rapacious medical debt and institutions such as religious home schooling that render children much more vulnerable to abuse — in some ways makes abuse seem less intolerable. It is far less disturbing to think of abuse as caused by sinister aliens than the economic system we are taught to revere or the people in our families, churches, and schools. This fantasy coheres perfectly with the myth that the United States is a nation of flourishing independent yeoman farmers, small business owners, and entrepreneurs, distracting attention from how our economic reality is defined by the sheer number of neoliberal structural impediments that actively work against widespread flourishing.

Sommer and others argue that conspiracy theories also serve as an ideological response to economic forces beyond the pub-

9 See Tim Dickinson, “A History of Sex and Abuse in the Trump Administration,” *Rolling Stone*, February 23, 2018, <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/a-history-of-sex-and-abuse-in-the-trump-administration-202833/>.

10 See Tessa Stuart, “A Timeline of Donald Trump’s Creepiness While He Owned Miss Universe,” *Rolling Stone*, October 12, 2016, <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/a-timeline-of-donald-trumps-creepiness-while-he-owned-miss-universe-191860/>.

lic’s control. An example of this is Francis Wheen’s 2004 *How Mumbo Jumbo Conquered the World*:

The new irrationalism is an expression of despair by people who feel impotent to improve their lives and suspect that they are at the mercy of secretive, impersonal forces whether these be the Pentagon or invaders from Mars. Political leaders accept it as a safe outlet for dissent, fulfilling much the same function that Marx attributed to religion.¹¹

In her classic 2006 study, *Knowledge Goes Pop: From Conspiracy Theory to Gossip*, Clare Birchall makes two claims about conspiracy theories that are slightly upstream from these kinds of roughly Marxist analyses. First, she defines conspiracy theories in this manner:

In the simplest terms, conspiracy theory refers to a narrative that has been constructed in an attempt to explain an event or series of events to be the result of a group of people working in secret to a nefarious end.¹²

Then, one of the things that has to be explained is the extent to which

conspiracy theory appears (to varying degrees in different contexts) *both* politically engaged *and* deeply ineffectual in the realm of democratic politics.¹³

Thus, for Birchall, Marxist analyses of conspiracy theories in journalism and academia should in part be understood as hypotheses about why narratives that connect different events

11 Francis Wheen, “I Second That Emotion,” in *How Mumbo-Jumbo Conquered the World: A Short History of Modern Delusions* (Fourth Estate, 2004), 12.

12 Clare Birchall, *Knowledge Goes Pop: From Conspiracy Theory to Gossip* (Bloomsbury, 2006), 34.

13 *Ibid.*, 41.

via the postulation of a nefarious cabal arise, and why such narratives tend to tie to ineffective modes of political engagement with respect to the actual problems the conspiracists claim to be concerned about.

The rise of Trump and other authoritarian leaders across our planet as well as the January 6th riots might lead one to question Birchall's claim about the political ineffectiveness of conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theory is not just a symptom of the decline of political responsiveness brought about by neoliberalism, but to the extent that it supports authoritarianism, it might paradoxically play a causal role in speeding up this decline.

Understood correctly, Birchall's point arguably still stands though. If Trump ends up being successful in putting to sleep the American democratic experiment, this will not relieve the suffering of his constituents with the promised end of medical debt, return of industrial jobs, or any meaningful reform of homeschooling and religious exemptions that allow abusers to socially isolate their victims. While campaigning for the 2016 election, Trump promised again and again to provide a health-care system that was better than Obamacare for its users as well as to bring industrial jobs back to the Midwestern region of the United States. In office, he did nothing to bring either of those outcomes any closer. Trump has been startlingly ineffectual with respect to his campaign promises. And as terrifying as the January 6th riots were, they did not succeed in the end. The proponents of QAnon have not managed to stop "pizzagate" or take down all of the evil Democrats in office. So, at least thus far, Birchall seems to be correct about the fundamental ineffectiveness of conspiracy theory. Or perhaps time will tell differently.

The idea of Trump as savior leads into the mirror image of Birchall's nefarious cabal, a search for superheroes who have the power to defeat the evil cabal and restore a usually misremembered social order:

Q and the conspiracy theorists who support him have promised believers that a sort of utopia awaits them, if only Trump would be given free rein to deal with his enemies. The cabal

has been hoarding disease cures, so even the terminally ill will be healed once Trump launches the Storm. Since the cabal causes all wars, world peace would reign once its leaders are arrested. And because the cabal controls the financial system, a post-cabal world would mean an end to credit card and student loan debt.¹⁴

This thesis confirms Frankfurt School critical theorists Theodor Adorno's and Max Horkheimer's claims in their 1944 *Dialectic of Enlightenment* about the dangers of the culture industry encouraging people to think of reality as if it were a film — and in our era a film that would almost certainly be yet another entry in the Marvel cinematic universe — where, for example, off-shoring of American manufacturing or the radical increase in American hospital debt is not the result of capitalism's evolution into a post-New Deal neoliberal economic regime, but rather the result of a small band of maleficent supervillains who are destined to be defeated by superheroes.¹⁵

Part of what is so captivating about QAnon is that the followers of the conspiracy, like the WWE fans trying to get one over on the promotion, are encouraged to fight the power by becoming “digital soldiers.” Over and over again Sommer recounts fever-brained people who increased their social dislocation when they were unable to refrain from pestering their non-believing friends, coworkers, and family members with bits of QAnon's catechism of superhero theology. The online discussion boards, local Republican political gatherings, and new age conventions created a sense of community for people already suffering from social and economic dislocation, but the cost of this gain was proselytizing the gospel of Q to all of the remaining relatively normal people in their lives, too often in the end radically increasing the true believers' dislocation. Here, as in the case of

¹⁴ Sommer, *Trust the Plan*, 5.

¹⁵ Again, in this context, see especially Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin, *The Making of Global Capitalism: The Political Economy of American Empire* (Verso Books, 2013.)

all cults, the cure is in many ways just more of the disease that made people marks for the cult in the first place.

It is worth taking time to be just a little more analytical with respect to Birchall's and Sommer's insights. From our discussion thus far, we can posit:

The Three Theses of Post-Internet Conspiracy Theories

1. Mass suffering such as child abuse, homelessness, and increasing economic and cultural immiseration is not understood as a side effect of material contingencies and economic structures that can only be altered by collective political action, but rather blamed on the machinations of a cabal of people with maleficent ends;
2. Mass suffering is understood as an aberration that will end when the all-powerful evil cabal that is secretly in control of reality is defeated by a superhuman leader; and
3. It is understood that those who decode the evil cabal's machinations and "get the word out" are the supporting characters in the superhero film and are themselves vital to the hero's eventual defeat of the cabal.

Though Sommer does not draw his reporting together in exactly this manner, each discussion in his book reads as evidence for one or more of these theses.

Conspiracies versus Conspiracy Theories

At this point, we should differentiate a "conspiracy theory" from mere acknowledgement that there actually have been conspiracies. By conspiracies, we mean influential events, the causes of which were kept hidden from the public at large. Lyndon Johnson lied about the Gulf of Tonkin incident when citing it as a *casus belli* for the Vietnam War, as did the Bush administration about weapons of mass destruction with respect to the second

Iraq War.¹⁶ The Nixon campaign illegally conspired to get the government of South Vietnam to obstruct peace negotiations prior to the 1968 presidential election.¹⁷ The automobile companies really did illegally destroy over one hundred streetcar companies in the United States.¹⁸

But it is very important not to confuse awareness of the manner in which political and economic elites lie to one another and the rest of us about causally significant events with subscribing to a conspiracy theory as defined above. And though conspiracy theorists such as Alex Jones — who himself made hundreds of millions of dollars selling dehydrated food and nutritional supplements to an audience prepped to think the apocalypse was coming and that snake oil was a replacement for actual medicine — are skilled at citing true conspiracies to provide evidence for all of the false QAnon or QAnon-adjacent conspiracy theories they promulgate,¹⁹ there is a difference between actually existing conspiracies and fictitious ones. To some extent, this difference can be uncovered by the kind of ordinary methodologies taught in every college history class in the United States, though to another distressing extent it perhaps cannot. There is no algorithm for separating truth from falsehood.

Second, it is important to note the uncertain extent to which actual conspiracies were causally efficacious. Would Nixon have lost had he not illegally intervened as a candidate to block the peace talks? Would the United States have destroyed its pub-

16 See Edwin E. Moïse, *Tonkin Gulf and the Escalation of the Vietnam War* (University of North Carolina Press, 2004), and Craig Whitney's *The WMD Mirage: Iraq's Decade of Deception and America's False Premise for War* (PublicAffairs, 2005).

17 See John A. Farrell, “When a Candidate Conspired with a Foreign Power to Win an Election,” *Politico Magazine*, August 6, 2017, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/08/06/nixon-vietnam-candidate-conspired-with-foreign-power-win-election-215461/>.

18 See James Howard Kunstler, *The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America's Man-Made Landscape* (Simon & Schuster, 1994).

19 See “Alex Jones: Five Things to Know,” *Anti-Defamation League*, May 10, 2017, <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounder/alex-jones-five-things-know>.

lic infrastructure had the car companies not illegally purchased streetcar companies only to shut them down? It's very hard to know. We can be morally outraged by these things because they are wrong independent of the extent to which possible worlds where they were more clearly the deciding factor in bringing about the bad outcomes are like ours. But we can never have that much confidence that the actual world is one of those worlds. What happens in the actual world is massively causally overdetermined as well as sometimes the result of dumb luck, and maybe also sometimes providence. Who knows? Conspiracy theorists collapse all this messy reality into the effects of the evil machinations of a cabal.

Given that there is always some epistemic uncertainty with respect to any attempt to figure out what is really going on, it is lucky that the absurdity of macro-conspiracies such as QAnon is independent of the absurdity of each putative conspiracy it weaves together. The simplest axiom of probability theory is that the probability of two independent events is always equal to or lower than the least probable of those two events. It is not mathematically possible for it to be more probable that three coins will turn up heads than it is for one of them to turn up heads. The main reason casinos make money is that most people don't understand just how much less probable it is. Furthermore, if the coin has come up heads twice before, it is not more likely to come up tails the third time. Casinos also make money because of gamblers' failure to understand this. People tend to believe that if they keep losing, that winning must be just around the corner. This view, known in academic literature as the gambler's fallacy, leads us to think that it is possible to devise strategies to beat slot machines and games such as roulette.²⁰

Alex Jones listeners are betting with their emotional, temporal, financial, and digestive commitments on the probability of certain events happening. This is usually with respect to purchasing the products he sells, but in the case of January 6th these

²⁰ See Mark Bollman, *Basic Gambling Mathematics: The Numbers Behind the Neon* (Chapman and Hall, 2014).

listeners actually put their bodies on the line to attempt to usher in an authoritarian future in the United States. To the extent that all of the various conspiracies add together — for example the one about lizard people being descendants of space aliens, and the one about COVID-19 vaccines causing millions of men’s penises to fall off — it is almost certainly significantly less probable that both of these are simultaneously true than that one or the other is true.²¹

It is an axiom of probability theory that for a macro-conspiracy like QAnon to be remotely plausible, the various falsehoods alleged must be causally connected in some ways. For example, if you and I have the same father and I have alpha one antitrypsin deficiency, then the likelihood that we both have this is greater than if we did not have the same father. But if we are unconnected in the causally relevant ways, the probability will be less — in standard probability theories used by casinos, significantly so — since the result is arrived at by multiplying the two probabilities together, and we all learned from elementary school math that when two fractions less than one are multiplied together the product is less than either. And it is exactly here where macro-conspiracies become the least plausible, because the connective tissue tying the various conspiracies together always ends up alleging superhuman competence among actors in the shadowy cabal. The reason why modern conspiracy theories resemble the plots of Marvel superhero movies is not just because it is fun for adherents to imagine that reality is like that, but is also a matter of mathematical necessity. The only way all of the various conspiracies tie together into one theory is if the equivalent of Marvel supervillains are behind the scenes pulling the strings. Note that one can be sensitive to this kind of implausibility independent of having to prove that each individual conspiracy is false.

21 See the discussion of black goo on Travis View, Julian Feeld, and Jake Rockatansky, hosts, *QAA podcast*, premium episode 203, “Black Goo Anon,” March 3, 2023, <https://soundcloud.com/qanonanonymous/premium-episode-203-black-goo-anon-sample>.

Birchallian Deconstruction and the Christman-Grobe Fallacy

We have used basic facts of probability theory to explain one of the central facts of conspiracy theories that Clare Birchall called attention to, the way they posit a small cabal whose nefarious intent would, were the theory true, tie together vastly different and unrelated forms of human suffering. Here we want to more actively apply some of her thinking, as well as insights from Christopher Grobe, to pose a problem for critical theory, which we hope that the remainder of this book at least does a little to alleviate.²²

In the dialectical context of our theory of professional wrestling, and in the temporal context of COVID-19 and post-January 6th, the deconstruction of the political (and not just epistemic) hopes of critical theory could not be more salient. In both wrestling and society, the more Postmodern Fans there are, the more that we live in a state of universal kayfabe, the sillier the Intermittent Critic becomes. The WWE fan neither wants nor needs to

22 One of the interesting things about performance studies is the sense in which ideology is embodied, allowing for a different take on the problem of critical theory than one finds in other fields. In critical theory proper, the issue as to which academic theory might realize the good as well as the true is highly salient. With the Frankfurt School, for example, sociology and philosophy were united to try to understand the widespread support of war by the working class in World War I, and the failure of the workers and liberals in Germany to unify and defeat fascism later. But the failure of 1968 (and arguably much of the critical theory of Herbert Marcuse in the process), or more recently the global failure of the protests of the 2010s, have not motivated an analogous research program. And, given what we say about the Christman-Grobe fallacy, it's not clear what it could be. The hope we find in this manuscript involves the notion of narrative truth, but fully working that out would require following the example of performance studies scholarship such as Dani Snyder-Young, *Privileged Spectatorship: Theatrical Interventions in White Supremacy* (Northwestern University Press, 2020), which raises the issue of and studies ideology not merely as a set of propositions that one affirms or denies but as an embodied practice which can succeed or fail to engage spectators in ways that disrupt white privilege and racism. This is an importantly expanded terrain than what one gets from merely focusing on the discourse on ideology, imminent critique, and the like.

be told that the storylines don't make any sense and were inconsistently changed to incorporate real world events. They already know that. And so, one starts to suspect that neither the wealthy small business owner nor the immiserated Trump-voting white male (nor the immiserated Biden voter who sat out 2024) needs to be told that they and their children and grandchildren suffer the most from the traditional Republican *raison d'être*, redistribution of wealth upwards and the destruction of the social safety net for everyone else.

This depressing perspective was sharpened by the period early in Trump's first presidency when American liberals manically tracked the Trumpian outrage of the week across article-heavy websites such as *Slate* and *The Atlantic* and shared these articles across social media. They operated from the naive faith that the most recent outrage would be the thing that “brought him down.” Liberals who were not fans of reading their news could watch late night talk show hosts such as Stephen Colbert build comedy routines around news-junkie talking points. Indeed, one can tell the history of Trump's presidency as a history of such outrages: outrageous policy and behavior on Trump's part, and moral outrage among his critics.²³

Right-wing conspiracy theories — where it became axiomatic that the real outrages were fictional doings of bogeyman such as Bill Gates, Klaus Schwab, and George Soros with the help of the “deep state” trying to impose “one world government” — arose during the time of news-junkie liberal moral outrage on late night network television. But our analysis of wrestling's spectatorial norms shows clearly what is in common with the panicked liberal and the conspiracy nut. Both are Interminable Critics who confuse criticism with political activity.

We are not arguing that liberal and conservative social media types present equally valid perspectives. They do not. Rather,

²³ See, for example, Jeffrey Goldberg, “50 Moments That Define an Improbable Presidency,” *The Atlantic*, 2024, <https://www.theatlantic.com/unthinkable/>, which linked to fifty separate *Atlantic* articles on various Trumpian absurdities.

members of each group, both liberal news-junkies and conservative conspiracy nuts, persist in thinking that the very fact of revealing the truth about the workings of the world will lead to political change. Shouting that the outcomes in professional wrestling are predetermined will not lead to the outcomes not being predetermined. Likewise, getting the information “out there” about WWE’s corporate complicity in all the premature deaths caused by WWE working conditions or with respect to the sexual violence that McMahon is credibly accused of committing while approving so many storylines that trivialize sexual violence does not change things. The same is true with respect to public knowledge of Trump’s treatment of employees and contractors and his own acts of sexual predation. Everybody knows, but that’s just how it goes.

Matt Christman’s *Grill Stream* and Christopher Grobe’s writings critique the following fallacy, which we have named after them:

Christman-Grobe Fallacy: If people really knew what was going on, they would react in ways that led to positive political change.

In his examination of the connections between Trump and performance art, Grobe concludes that “no exposure would sully Trump’s brand, no critique could change his supporters’ opinion of him.”²⁴ This leads him to come very close to explicitly articulating the Christman-Grobe fallacy:

As a sometime scholar of reality tv, I found the shape of this rhetoric awfully familiar. Just as performance scholars love to trumpet the news (which isn’t news) that politics is performed, tv critics love to say, *Guess what: reality TV isn’t real!* In doing so, we suggest that there’s a world full of

24 Christopher Grobe, “The Artist Is President: *Performance Art* and Other Keywords in the Age of Donald Trump,” *Critical Inquiry* 46, no. 4 (2020): 789.

suckers who somehow don't know this already — or, as Mark Andrejevic puts it, we “[posit] a mysterious group of dupes who believe reality television really is *real* (in some unspecified but clearly fallacious way).” Like Andrejevic, I find this rhetoric distasteful, not only because of its smug superiority to all those dupes, but also because it can't be true. This “group of dupes” barely exists — and our pretending that it does says more about us than it does about them.²⁵

Ever since the Montreal Screwjob, professional wrestling fans' actual knowledge of “what is going on” is presupposed in wrestling fictional storylines that are somehow still inconsistent with what is going on, and it doesn't ever change anything at all. Vince McMahon is still the boss. The only difference is that he also plays an evil boss on television. That he is periodically defeated as an evil boss on television makes no difference to how he runs the company producing the television show we are watching. Nearly everyone watching WWE already knows this. The marks are in on the con!

Sadly, susceptibility to the Christman-Grobe fallacy includes that portion of humanities professors who confuse our scholarship with political activism. While “Critical Theory” technically names a tradition of scholarship arising out of neo-Marxist Frankfurt School sociologists and philosophers such as Adorno, Marcuse, and Horkheimer, all of whom either died under or fled the Nazi regime and took up residence in American universities, the term is also used to name scholarship which aims both to understand human hierarchy, domination, and oppression, and to be a part of liberating us from these very things.²⁶

25 Ibid., 796.

26 For a classic account connecting the Frankfurt School critical theorists (in particular Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, and Jürgen Habermas) to the canonical nineteenth-century practitioners of the “hermeneutics of suspicion” (Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and Friedrich Nietzsche), see David Held, *Introduction to Critical Theory: Horkheimer to Habermas* (University of California Press, 1980.)

Without going deeply into this scholarship,²⁷ of which this book is an example, we can note how the very idea of “theory” as a political (albeit not as an epistemic) act commits the Christman-Grobe fallacy. In this context, Grobe writes,

As the old adage says, if all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail. Well, our hammer is denaturalizing critique. So, even the baldest, most gleefully unnatural things look (to us) like they need a good critical pounding. We fantasize that critique will bring Trump down — not because it’s true but because it’s all we’re comfortable doing.²⁸

The problem predates Trump. Consider, for example, that Paul Krugman’s *End This Depression Now* was popular enough for him to be interviewed about it in the British press and that the German translation became a bestseller in Germany.²⁹ Yet it did nothing to prevent the ruinous policies of bailing out the banks and bankers that issued bad loans while not only doing nothing for those people who received those loans but also making their lives materially worse through the adoption of austerity policies. When as a result of these policies Britain narrowly passed Brexit and growing immiseration increased support for authoritarianism throughout Europe, it was cold comfort for Krugman to be able to say, as he often has been in a position to, “I told you so.”³⁰

If an economist who is also a bestselling author with a perch on the *New York Times* editorial team is unable to have any dis-

27 For a discussion about what was right about reader response theory, the apotheosis and nadir of Fiskean empower-the-consumer type of critical theory, see Mark Silcox and Jon Cogburn, “Computability Theory and Literary Competence,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 46, no. 4 (2006): 369–86.

28 Grobe, “The Artist Is President,” 796.

29 See, for example, Phillip Inman, “Paul Krugman’s Call to Arms Against Austerity,” *The Guardian*, May 6, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2013/may/06/paul-krugman-battle-against-austerity>.

30 For a good early example of Paul-Krugman-told-you-so genre of article, see Andrew Leonard, “Paul Krugman: ‘I Told You So, Again,’” *Salon*, August 20, 2010, https://www.salon.com/2010/08/20/paul_krugman_i_told_you_so/.

cernible effect with respect to national and international economic policies during a global downturn, why should we — and we should be absolutely clear that by “we” we are indicting ourselves here — think that presenting our papers to other academics in conference hotels constitutes a brave act of political defiance? And also to be clear, the problem is not that the vast majority of published academic research is only read by the reviewers of the journal who publish it; rather, it’s that if our papers were widely read it wouldn’t make any difference anyway.

Before we make our own intervention into this issue, we must note that we are not castigating academics for failing to “make a difference.” Instead, we are following Birchall and deconstructing the presupposition that politics is the *summum bonum* of popular culture and scholarship. Birchall writes:

If popular knowledges are seen only in already decided political terms (and Big Theories, by virtue of their size, tend to grapple with big political issues), where the worth of the political intervention is pre-determined according to a political ideal, there is little room for thinking about our own relation to those knowledges and how this in turn might question the tropes of knowledge and politics.³¹

The question of politics is not, and cannot be, a political question. For both Birchall and us, the question is epistemological as much as anything else, and this realization raises the salience of other normative dimensions, such as those that normally go under the rubric of aesthetics or even (such as in the case of Bruno Latour and Graham Harman) metaphysics. Our turn to epistemology in the concluding discussion of this chapter is necessary not only to explore the normative dimension of truth, but also for understanding why conspiracy and critical theories are both “deeply ineffectual” and the extent to which anything can or should be done about this.

31 Birchall, *Knowledge Goes Pop*, 23.

Birchall divides academic and journalistic approaches to conspiracy theories into three camps, the celebratory (a tradition she traces, like we did earlier, back to John Fiske), the critical (which she associates with Karl Popper, Elaine Showalter, Gustav Le Bon, and Mark Fenster), and her own deconstructive approach. These three approaches are not logically inconsistent with one another. It is possible, with Fiske, to praise aspects of culture while at the same time engaging in critique and deconstruction. And, to be clear, deconstructive readings are parasitic upon celebratory and critical readings, since they are arrived at by reflectively applying cultural studies' critical stance normally aimed outwards to cultural studies as a cultural institution itself. The burden of proof for deconstructive readings is high, though:

In general, cultural studies [of the celebratory or critical type] is unable to acknowledge any possible resemblance on its part to conspiracy theory. Instead, cultural studies has to maintain its "critical distance" from the conspiracist text that nevertheless interests it as a form of culture.³²

In arguing against this critical distance, that is, in arguing that we need to interrogate the extent to which academic theories about conspiracy theories are themselves conspiracy theories, Birchall mobilizes a diverse group of theorists, including of course Jacques Derrida, but also significantly Bruno Latour, Umberto Eco, and Slavoj Žižek, who all drew our attention to the similarities between academic explanations of conspiracy theories and those theories themselves.

Bruno Latour is perhaps the clearest on the manner in which tropes we associate with conspiracy theories form a mainstay of academic cultural studies.

In both cases, you have to learn to become suspicious of everything people say because "of course we all know" that they live in the thralls of a complete illusion [as to] their real

³² Ibid.

motives. Then, after disbelief has struck and an explanation is requested for what is “really” going on, in both cases again, it is the same appeal to powerful agents hidden in the dark acting always consistently, continuously, relentlessly. Of course, we, in the academy like to use more elevated causes — society, discourse, knowledge-slash-power, fields of forces, empires, capitalism — while conspiracists like to portray a miserable bunch of greedy people with dark intents, but I find something troublingly similar in the structure of the explanation.³³

Birchall’s insight is to read Latour’s claim here as a case of (post-) modern self-reflection, which suggests Birchall’s own practice of using the tools of cultural studies on cultural studies itself to then reveal the manner in which the pathologies of the observed are imbricated in the observer. This is how she is able to raise epistemic questions about the role of truth itself through an interrogation of the epistemic presuppositions of political critique.

While Birchall’s deconstructionist readings of conspiracy theories and gossip lead her to raise several salient epistemic questions about how “knowledge” and “falsity” are constructed and how various beliefs become privileged or not in different contexts, for our purposes it is important to note that her opening the cultural studies door (via her reading of Derridean self-reflexive arguments) to Latour’s critique of critique is not meant to obliterate critique, but to rather shed light on the epistemological questions raised both by critique and the practices it critiques.

33 Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,” *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2004): 225–48.

Why You Can't Talk Your Family Members out of a Conspiracy Theory, Part 1: A Nation of Marks who Think that They Are Part of the Con

Anyone who wants to understand life in the United States in the late 2010s could do worse than google “Trump grift” to find articles on how Trump personally enriched himself during his six business bankruptcies, how he compulsively stiffed contractors and abused people through frivolous lawsuits, and how he monetized both his first presidency and interregnum in heretofore unacceptable ways. One common theme in many of these articles is the claim that the best grifters convince their marks that they are in on the grift.³⁴ This too is one of the marks of kayfabe nation.

It could be argued that having a grifter-in-chief contributed to the rise of the pyramid scheme and other related scams in recent years. Like conspiracy theories, participating in pyramid schemes is attractive to individuals who want the American Dream and see no way to achieve success in our current economic system. As Heidi Liu argues in “The Behavioral Economics of Multilevel Marketing,” recruiters focus on the unlikely benefits of the “businesses,” thus attracting a similar type of individual to those susceptible to the belief that Trump or another hero can save them from the cabal destroying their lives. But just how unlikely are the benefits? Are pyramid schemes really equivalent to the idea that all suffering can be attributed to an evil group of WWE-like villains? And how much do the victims of the scam really buy their own lies?

In a traditional pyramid scheme, such as Charles Ponzi's original, no real services are provided when people buy into the pyramid, and this guarantees that profit is only accrued by more people buying in. The simple math of exponentiation (such as

34 See for example Amanda Marcotte, “Trump Supporters Think They're Players — But They're Still Just Pawns,” *Salon*, July 12, 2021, <https://www.salon.com/2021/07/12/trump-supporters-think-theyre-players--but-theyre-still-just-pawns/>.

the parable of rice and chessboard) then guarantees that the only people who profit are the small number who started the scheme or who got in at the very beginning, while the vast majority just as a matter of mathematical necessity lose their investments. While such practice remains technically illegal in the United States, the Federal Trade Commission’s 1979 ruling that Amway was not a pyramid scheme removed any meaningful impediments to this kind of scam continuing to thrive during the intervening decades.³⁵

As a result of the FTC ruling, modern pyramid schemes are legal if the marks who buy into the scheme receive a good or service that they can ostensibly sell to others.³⁶ The mark cannot merely purchase a license to sell licenses to other marks. Now, in addition to the license, their bedroom or garage fills up with overpriced leggings, beauty products, energy drinks, nutritional supplements, etc. But the only people who make money are those who sell more licenses to others whose bedrooms and

35 See the FTC report “In the Matter of the Amway Corporation, Inc., et al. Final Order, Opinion, ETC., In Regard to Alleged Violation of the Federal Trade Commission Act,” *Federal Trade Commission*, May 8, 1979, https://www.ftc.gov/sites/default/files/documents/commission_decision_volumes/volume-93/ftc_volume_decision_93_january_-_june_1979pages_618-738.pdf. See also 2018 FTC guidance for multi-level marketing, “Business Guidance Concerning Multi-Level Marketing,” *Federal Trade Commission*, April 2024, <https://www.ftc.gov/business-guidance/resources/business-guidance-concerning-multi-level-marketing>.

36 The seventy percent rule was part of the justification for not determining that Amway is an illegal pyramid scheme. This rule states that people who sign into the scheme and purchase some amount of initial inventory should not be able to purchase more inventory until they have either personally used or sold seventy percent of that inventory. The thought was that these kinds of policies would somehow make the company’s profits dependent upon actual sales of the product rather than a pyramid of people kicking upwards the money they pay when they sign up. To see how this rule alone does not work, note that the rule is consistent with nearly all of the money going into the pyramid from people buying their first consignment, which they never sell. And for that matter, as of March 10, 2023, Google searches for “the seventy percent rule” yield almost only links to documents by lawyers who represent multi-level marketers giving advice about how to legally violate it.

garages fill up with crap. The end is the same as with the original, premodern pyramid scheme which often did not involve a product at all. Basic grade-school math teaches us both that the vast majority of people buying in lose money and that the very few who make money “get out” before the collapse.

What characterizes the postmodern pyramid scheme is that the Amway-exempted “product” is no longer a physical commodity. In this way, postmodern pyramid schemes are in many ways a return to form, since Ponzi’s original involved the promise of placing bets on exchange rates of postal stamps (strangely, the actual way convicted fraudster Samuel Bankman-Fried earned his initial money, through using connections to briefly exploit different exchange rates in Asia).³⁷ For many reasons, Christopher Terry’s IMarketsLive is perhaps the most notable in this regard, first because it so clearly exhibits the systemic failure of elite accountability in the United States. Though the previous company Terry was involved with, Zeek Rewards, was shut down by the Securities and Exchange Commission, the punishment did not prevent him from starting his newest venture, currently banned in other countries but, thus far, not in the United States.³⁸ Second, the goods that allow the company to at least for the time being satisfy the SEC Amway loophole are all virtual, air piled upon air, a set of instructional videos and software (known as IM Academy, now rebranded as IM Mastery Academy) enabling individual investors to engage in foreign exchange market (forex) trading, essentially making bets on changes in international exchange rates, the very kind of arbitrage that Ponzi promised with postal rates and Friedman, in part due to his

37 See Mitchell Zuckoff, *Ponzi’s Scheme: The True Story of a Financial Legend* (Random House, 2006).

38 See “SEC Shuts Down \$600 Million Online Pyramid and Ponzi Scheme,” *U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission*, June 13, 2013, <https://www.sec.gov/news/press-release/2012-2012-16ohtm>. On Terry’s partnership with financial writer and trader Linda Raschke in running her now-abolished company, LBR Group, then her involvement promoting Zeek Rewards, and then her opening IMarkets Live and FX Signals Live, see Emmett Moore, “Chris Terry: FX Signals Live and iMarkets Live,” *Trading Schools*, July 7, 2017, <https://www.tradingschools.org/reviews/fx-signals-live/>.

actual relationships with foreign bank employees, initially succeeded in exploiting.

But people who sign up for IM Academy spend most of their time on telephone and Zoom calls trying to make their commission getting other people to sign up for IM Academy. Signing up involves spending thousands of dollars on the training and software, a substantial portion of which is kicked up the pyramid.³⁹ Instead of a bedroom filled with boxes of crap, the marks get programs on their computers. The average participant in IM Academy might or might not make a few hundred dollars per year on forex trades while they fail in their efforts to recruit new people to the scheme and spend thousands of dollars annually on licensing and software.⁴⁰

Cryptocurrencies are almost at the apex of postmodern pyramidism because they lend themselves to an interesting form of recursion. The increase in the value of an NFT or cryptocurrency is, as with works of art on the international art market, not even putatively tied to the production of actual commodities that are consumed or used. As scholars have noted, this makes cryptocurrencies as investment assets in their very nature a pyramid

39 Several YouTube videos have been made explaining the scam, such as Spencer Cornelia, “Exposing iMarkets Live: The \$1.2 Billion Pyramid Scheme,” *YouTube*, May 14, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gdgP6aWzSQ8>, and Bloomberg Originals, “How a Trading Academy Ruined Thousands of Young People’s Lives|Bloomberg Investigates,” *YouTube*, July 9, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gcejYnDV-jM>. See also the Better Business Bureau’s report giving iMarkets Live (since rebranded as IYOVIA) a rating and accreditation of F: <https://www.bbb.org/us/ny/somers/profile/online-trading-school/iyovia-0121-161238>.

40 The numbers above are, if anything, too optimistic. For a breakdown on the nearly nonexistent median earnings, see “Can You Make Money with IM Mastery Academy,” *The Finance Guy*, May 13, 2020, <https://www.finance-guy.net/streeteconomic/im-mastery-academy-review>. The 2018 iMarkets Live Income Disclosure reveals that over eighty-seven percent of people who buy in — called “IBOs” or “Independent Business Owners” in IM Mastery Academy literature — never get another person to buy in, and only about one tenth of a percent of IBO’s earn a livable income.

scheme.⁴¹ Unlike publicly traded stocks, cryptocurrencies *only* increase in value if more people invest in them. This subjects the “currencies” to the same grade-school math as the traditional and modern pyramid schemes. The exponential growth of investors required for continued profitability *guarantees* that most people will lose their investment. One person only makes substantial money investing in crypto to the extent that many more people lose money.

The most postmodern of postmodern pyramid schemes then must be when services involving crypto trading are the product that allows the company to ride through the Amway loophole.⁴² We now have a pyramid scheme using another pyramid scheme as its phony product.⁴³

Using our typology of professional wrestling spectators, the Southern Fan is the person who actually believes they are going to get rich selling, or in the case of the IMarketsLive type scam, using the product or service. But who are the Interminable Critics now? In this context they clearly include the authors of this book, who find themselves not able to adequately explain basic mathematics concerning how exponentiation works over holiday dinners to family members involved in multi-level marketing. The Fans are people who are skilled at suspending disbelief, forgetting it is a scam when participating in self-help type events or trying to convince marks to sign up. The Postmodern Fan is the most terrifyingly idiotic in this context, and we suspect the most common in our current economic and political climate. They never forget it's a scam yet are nonetheless somehow still being scammed themselves. They are a mark precisely because

41 See for example, Sohale Andrus Mortazavi, “Cryptocurrency is a Giant Ponzi Scheme,” *Jacobin*, January 21, 2022, <https://jacobin.com/2022/01/cryptocurrency-scam-blockchain-bitcoin-economy-decentralization>.

42 See “Investor Alert: Ponzi Schemes Using Virtual Currencies,” *U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission*, SEC Pub. No. 153, July 2013, https://www.sec.gov/files/ia_virtualcurrencies.pdf.

43 See Rosa M. Garcia-Teruel and Héctor Simón-Moreno, “The Digital Tokenization of Property Rights: A Comparative Perspective,” *Computer Law & Security Review* 41 (2021): 105543.

they want to take advantage of other marks like themselves. And they recruit people just like themselves, where upfront the pitch is to make money by getting other people to sign up. In this respect, as we noted with respect to the most sophisticated multi-level marketing schemes such as Terry’s IMarketsLive, the grifts are transparently the ones most similar to pre-Amway Ponzi schemes.

During the Trump administration, this claim that the biggest marks are those who think that they are grifters became one of the lenses through which to view Trump supporters’ complicity in his dishonesty.⁴⁴ They are conned people who think they are “in on the con.” As Juan Williams writes, “Republican voters are being hustled so effectively that they are cheering Trump on, laughing as he rips them off.”⁴⁵ Williams goes on to compare Trump to a larger than life version of televangelists Jim and Tammy Faye Baker and of Bernie Madoff, who specialized in ripping off celebrity clients. In Trump’s case, Williams says, he convinced supporters to donate money that he is now using to pay his legal bills, and yet, mystifyingly, his standings in the polls has only increased.

While this is interesting in its own right, and clear confirmation of our thesis of the destructive aspects of living in universal kayfabe, more narrowly it has clear implications for how we should think about why it is so maddeningly difficult to talk a friend or loved one out of a conspiracy theory or pyramid scheme.

To the extent that we really do live in kayfabe nation, a nation where everyone is cynical to the point of people realizing that

44 In addition to Marcotte, “Trump Supporters Think They’re Players,” a paradigmatic instance of this genre of article is Elizabeth Winkler, “Donald Trump’s Supporters Are Willing Participants in a Long Con Game,” *Quartz*, July 21, 2022, <https://qz.com/659325/why-donald-trump-supporters-cant-or-wont-realize-theyre-being-conned>.

45 Juan Williams, “Trump Could Be the Most Successful Con Artist in American History,” *The Hill*, August 14, 2023, <https://thehill.com/opinion/columnists/juan-williams/4138348-trump-could-be-the-most-successful-con-artist-in-american-history/>.

they are being conned yet still finding ways to be complicit in that con, the traditional functions of academia and journalism can't but be subverted.⁴⁶ Our discussion above illustrates this complicity first in the case of the poor white person who will fight to the death to protect an apartheid system that also immiserates them, and second, in the scammed multi-level marketers who think of themselves as the real scammers. The general thought then would be that, to the extent that marks conceive of themselves as grifters, the journalists and academics who expose the scams are marks themselves: There is really nothing to expose since the victims of the scam already know about the scam.

Why You Can't Talk Your Family Members out of a Conspiracy Theory, Part 2: The Quine-Duhem Problem

In light of our discussion of the Christman-Grobe fallacy, one of the most philosophically interesting things about the QAnon conspiracy theory is the manner in which members are able to rationalize continued adherence after predictions in the “Q drops” do not come to pass. These falsified predictions include: (1) that prior to January 20, 2021, Joe Biden's eventual inauguration, the then-president-elect along with tens to hundreds of thousands of members of the “deep state” and “Democrat party” would be arrested and/or executed by “white hats” working with Trump; (2) that Trump would return to the White House on March 4, 2021; (3) that Arizona election audits would prove that Trump had really won the 2020 vote; (4) that in November of 2021 John F. Kennedy Jr. was not only still alive but would return to the site of his father's execution; and (5) that on November 5, 2021 the United States would revert from the Gregorian to Julian calendar, turning November 5 to October 23.⁴⁷

46 We do not claim originality for these theses, as they are made or presupposed regularly by Matt Christman, one of the hosts of *Chapo Trap House* and his own *Grill Stream* podcast.

47 See Anders Anglesey, “5 QAnon Predictions in 2021 That Unsurprisingly Didn't Happen,” *Newsweek*, January 1, 2022, <https://www.newsweek.com/>

How do people keep believing in something when it’s proven wrong over and over and over again? Over and over and over again QAnon members have had to confront incontrovertible evidence that what they had predicted has not come to pass. A reasonable person would move on to something else, but adherence to QAnon remains so strong that we’ve seen Republican members of the United States Congress pander to the very conspiracy theory that, had things gone slightly differently on January 6, could easily have led (and for all we know might still lead) to their deaths.⁴⁸

Philosophers of language have long understood just how easy it is to maintain logical consistency in light of evidence that most of us would take to lead a reasonable person to revise certain beliefs. The ability to do this is has a name in analytical philosophy:

*Quine-Duhem Thesis:*⁴⁹

Since an individual hypothesis only entails empirical predictions with sets of auxiliary hypotheses and a description of the experimental apparatus, it is always possible to consistently respond to disconfirmed predictions by continuing to believe in the hypothesis and rejecting either an auxiliary hypothesis or some aspect of the description of the experiment.

Put more simply, if your hypothesis leads you to make a false prediction, there are always multiple ways to revise other beliefs to make the hypothesis consistent with the observed outcome. For example, in actual experiments, one always must assume

qanon-prediction-2021-that-unsurprisingly-didnt-happen-1664031.

48 On Republican pandering, see Jason Linkins, “The QAnon Style of Politics Is Taking Over America,” *The New Republic*, April 2, 2022, <https://newrepublic.com/article/165949/qanon-hawley-grooming-political-violence>.

49 See Willard van Orman Quine, *From a Logical Point of View: 9 Logico-Philosophical Essays* (Harvard University Press, 1953), for the first arguments that entailed the thesis.

that one has isolated the physical properties under question, but then if the experiment yields evidence inconsistent with the prediction, one arrives at via the hypothesis, one can always say that this is a result of not having isolated the properties being tested. In actual science, this is often the desired course, as Nancy Cartwright showed in *How the Laws of Physics Lie*. This however makes it very hard to determine when empirical evidence should be treated as disconfirming a hypothesis and when it should not, an issue which has generated an enormous amount of literature in the philosophy of science.⁵⁰

QAnon conspiracy theorists are a limiting case of unknowingly committing pathological instances of the Quine-Duhem thesis. For example, adherents not uncommonly hold that the prophecy in question did actually come true, but that we only think that it did, not because the people in question had been replaced by “body doubles.” On this view, for example, the “Storm” (the day QAnoners believed that Trump would arrest and kill Democratic politicians and others supposedly involved in a pedophilic cabal) did happen, and the real Joe Biden and Pope Francis actually are in Guantanamo prison. All of the evidence that this did not happen is accommodated by revising beliefs about whether a person is that person or a body double of that person.

There are less obvious ways to continue, after the Storm has failed to come, to hold onto the basic QAnon theology of a world mostly controlled by a cabal of Satanic pedophiles who will be defeated by Trump, digital soldiers, and Q-aligned resisters. One is just to say that the timing of the prediction is off, but it will still come to pass. Another is to tinker with the meaning of the central claims in the prediction, usually to make the prediction less imminent.⁵¹ Either of these allow adherents to assert the prediction without it having been disconfirmed.

⁵⁰ See, for example, Thomas Bonk, *Underdetermination: An Essay on Evidence and the Limits of Natural Knowledge* (Springer, 2008).

⁵¹ See Michael Barkun, “Failed Prophecies Won’t Stop Trump’s True Believers,” *Foreign Policy*, November 8, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/11/08/failed-prophecies-wont-stop-trumps-true-believers/>.

Contemporary French philosopher Tristan Garcia is forced to consider precisely this strategy when confronted with Holocaust deniers who respond to evidence that six million Jews were murdered by saying things like, “Oh I’m not denying that people died, lots of people died in World War II.”

For example, historical revisionism is typical of the strategies wielded against truth. A fact is not denied, but everything that enters into this fact is dissected, dissolved and contested to such an extent that truth becomes a *weakening force*. [...] Above the formal flat world, truth is the cement that solidifies certain connections at the expense of others. But by safeguarding certain relations (for example, the fact that the Nazi authorities planned and accomplished mass exterminations of Jews in World War II), one immediately weakens the relational terms. The fact is accepted, but each object that enters in those relations is weakened. Why only mention extermination “of Jews”? What does one mean by “mass”? Was there really a “plan”? It is not falsehood that opposes truth here, but the weakening of terms in the reinforcement of relations.⁵²

This kind of thing can be explained as an instance of the Quine-Duhem thesis, with the Holocaust denier asserting that the Holocaust happened while still nonetheless being a Holocaust denier because the compensatory adjustments they have made in their beliefs means that their assertion that the Holocaust happened does not mean that the Holocaust happened. “Surely,” we can imagine the denier saying, “a holocaust happened. But that’s far short of proving *the* Holocaust happened.”

But Garcia’s point is broader, that these kinds of revisions are not in the service of maintaining a logically consistent, though morally abhorrent, set of beliefs, but rather in maintaining an affective stance that is in some sense prior to language and propositional truth. For Garcia, the moral of the Quine-Duhem

52 Tristan Garcia, *Form and Object: A Treatise on Things*, trans. Mark Allan Ohm and Jon Cogburn (Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 346–47.

thesis is that the antisemite, the racist, and the sexist are not to be characterized in terms of what they believe but rather of an (un)ethical stance concerning the existence of race- and sex-based hierarchies and how people higher in the hierarchy should be permitted to treat those lower in the hierarchy. And we have seen how in the Trump era this fundamental orientation in favor of oppressive hierarchy expresses itself using gender domination and violence against women.⁵³

Narration as a Response to Quine-Duhem

People of a philosophical mindset rehearse in their heads what they might say to convince a rational person of good will of the falsehood of a lie, and likeminded people often share these reasons with one another. Yet, we have demonstrated the philosophical reasons why rational argumentation almost never works against people with a strong psychological or material interest in believing falsehoods. Since our expectations are a function of many, many beliefs, we can exercise radically divergent options to revise our belief in light of frustrated expectations. Recall the Quine-Duhem Thesis. The problem then is that even if you convince either a partisan ideologue or conspiracy theorist of some fact that a reasonable person would take to disconfirm their theory, they can always consistently accept the correction while holding on to the heart of their mistaken ideology. And this problem really would render rational discourse about achieving the good entirely futile were it the case that

53 Some analytical philosophers have attempted to circumvent problems caused by the Quine-Duhem thesis by reconfiguring philosophy as “conceptual engineering,” crucially concerned with improving the concepts by which we articulate truths and falsehoods. Unfortunately, this very attempt is subject to a newer and more powerful version of the thesis, called by one of the authors “Cappelen’s Paradox.” See Jon Cogburn, “Review of Herman Cappelen’s *Fixing Language: An Essay on Conceptual Engineering*,” *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, November 13, 2019, <https://ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/fixing-language-an-essay-on-conceptual-engineering/>.

rational discourse is merely a matter of presenting one another with discrete pieces of evidence. But it is not.

During his discussion of the skeptical argument made by Saul Kripke in *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Languages*, philosopher Neil Tennant (in *The Taming of the True*) provides some arguments which might show that, pace Quine-Duhem, in some conditions retconning to maintain consistency is actually much harder to do than philosophers have assumed. Tennant noticed that in revisions of belief that are highly relevant to the meaning of terms used in articulating those beliefs, consistency requires a cascading set of revisions that threaten intelligibility itself.

Kripke considered what one might say to a person who continues to believe that fifty-seven plus sixty-eight is equal to five by insisting that by “plus” they had always meant normal addition except for what you get when you add numbers greater than fifty-six.⁵⁴ This is a good philosophical version of the person who responds to the supreme pontiff of the Roman Catholic church’s continued appearance after the Storm — during which, according to some QAnon conspiracists, the Pope was to be imprisoned in Guantanamo Bay — by saying that the Pope we are seeing in Saint Peter’s is a body double. Kripke’s original discussion concerned trying to figure out what facts of the matter we might obtain about this person so that we could determine how they could come to the correct answer. As Kripke showed, seemingly obvious responses, such as appealing to the person’s dispositions prior to defending the wrong result and simplicity of arithmetic over the new perverse, bent rule, simply don’t work.⁵⁵

54 See Saul A. Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (Wiley, 1984).

55 A common philosophical response, for example that of Robert Brandom, is that society determines the rules in question. This clearly does not work though, unless “society” is another word for magic, as Kripke’s paradox can easily be run at the level of the rules society follows. See Jon Cogburn, “Critical Notice of Robert Brandom’s *Between Saying and Doing: Towards an Analytic Pragmatism*,” *Philosophical Books* 51, no. 3 (2010): 160–74, and

Tennant's ingenious response is to show that, contra Quine-Duhem and Kripke, the person defending the bent answer as not being mistaken will, to the extent that they are consistent, have to bend nearly the entirety of their language. For example, in the case of addition, they will have to radically alter beliefs, inferences, and behaviors involving counting heaps, "laws of arithmetic such as associativity, and in particular the occurrence of the universal quantifier within those laws,"⁵⁶ the connection of standard arithmetic to other areas of math such as matrices and modular arithmetic, etc. An obstreperous person, in the sense revealed by the Quine-Duhem problem, defending a claim central to the meaning of the terms in those claims, in order to maintain logical consistency, will have to radically revise their theory until it is no longer usable.

Tennant's argument clearly applies to the libertarian defending policies which would lead to serfdom if they could be imposed on a populace without revolt. The libertarian road to monopoly is based on the claim that the only legitimate role the government has is ensuring people's negative rights, that is, rights not to be interfered with. But then, as James Sterba argues, the government *a priori* cannot do anything to promote positive rights such as the right to have enough food, medicine, housing, or education.⁵⁷ In the libertarian utopia, if one person has inherited all of the arable land, then nobody else has a right to any of the food grown on that land, and the proper role of the state is to utilize the state's monopoly on violence to protect the one landowner. This is how, for example under the reign of Catherine the Great, Grigory Potemkin could own over 300,000 of the fifty or so million serfs in the country, culling attractive female children to be trained as ballet dancers (in some cases at huge expense in Western Europe) who served as prostitutes for

Jon Cogburn, "Robert Brandom, *Reason in Philosophy: Animating Ideas*," *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 45 (2011): 465–76.

56 Neil Tennant, *The Taming of the True* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 110.

57 James Sterba, "From Liberty to Welfare," in *Ethics: The Big Questions*, ed. James Sterba (Blackwell, 1998), 238.

nobles.⁵⁸ Throughout Russia prior to the Bolshevik revolution, if adult serfs wanted to avoid landowners taking away the land essential to their survival, they had to prostitute their daughters.⁵⁹

Contemporary libertarianism is just the dual ridiculous fantasies that (1) universal “deregulation” and neoliberal state disempowerment could end in anything but feudalism, and (2) that neo-feudal monopolistic social organizations, devoid of any truly collective measures to ensure positive rights, could end in any other way than it did in revolutionary Russia.⁶⁰ To the libertarian claim that taxation to promote positive liberty such as redistribution of wealth or land is always theft, Sterba replies:

What is at stake is the liberty of the poor not to be interfered with in taking from the surplus possessions of the rich what is necessary to satisfy their basic needs. Needless to say, libertarians would want to deny that the poor have this liberty. But how could they justify such a denial? As this liberty of the poor has been specified, it is not a positive right to receive something, but a negative right of non-interference.⁶¹

58 See Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Potemkin: Catherine the Great's Imperial Partner* (New York: Vintage, 2005).

59 See Jennifer Homans, *Apollo's Angels: A History of Ballet* (Random House, 2010).

60 When pressed about these things, libertarians evince a touching, if not always sincere, faith in the power of markets to undermine both monopolies and social ills such as racism. But they are wrong and this is a stupid thing to believe. For a discussion, see for example Nancy MacLean, “How Milton Friedman Aided and Abetted Segregationists in His Quest to Privatize Public Education,” *Institute for New Economic Thinking*, September 27, 2021, <https://www.ineteconomics.org/perspectives/blog/how-milton-friedman-aided-and-abetted-segregationists-in-his-quest-to-privatize-public-education>, and John Jackson’s “Milton Friedman’s Economic Racism,” *Economics*, June 23, 2019, <https://economics.com/milton-friedmans-economic-racism/>.

61 James Sterba, “From Liberty to Welfare,” in *Ethics: The Big Questions*, ed. James Sterba (Blackwell, 1998), 238.

Sterba shows that given other commitments *they do not want to give up*, the libertarian actually has no argument for the government preventing the forcible redistribution of wealth. In fact, the government's preventing this is actually, from the perspective of the libertarian, the government's illicit protection of the positive rights of the wealthy to wealth, again much of which is inherited, stolen during the period of *de jure* colonialism, the result of rent-seeking behavior, or profiting off of public externalities such as pollution. So the libertarian who tries to give *a priori* arguments against social welfare benefits is in fact in principle committed to what they support in practice, a government empowered to support the positive rights of wealthy against those of everyone else. Which, again, to the extent that monopolies replace competition, is just feudalism.

Tennant's and Sterba's approach to conspiracy theories then is to follow the logic of the Quine-Duhem problem wherever it goes and to note how in many cases a different story comes out the other end. In Sterba's argumentation (assuming, of course, his argument is sound) it leads to a story where an informed person of good will could not continue to be a libertarian. Here we see how Theodor Adorno's concept of "immanent critique" remains the strongest weapon of academic critical theory. It is a kind of explanation that results when the critical theorist hypothetically accepts aspects of those ideologies told by elites to justify their own social position and then either uncovers internal contradictions in those ideologies or shows how empirical facts contradict them.⁶² The defender of the oppressive ideology has to make some revision to maintain consistency. However, this just illuminates the other response an ideologue can have, and that is just to continue to be inconsistent! The approach taken by Tennant and Sterba only works if the interlocutor is committed to logical consistency. And, sadly, the logical force of consistency is nowhere near sufficient on its own to compel human beings to surrender their position in a social hierarchy. On

62 For the best contemporary explication and defense of immanent critique, see Titus Stahl, *Immanent Critique* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2021).

the other hand, human obstreperousness does not on its own preclude modes of social organization where consistency has a positive causal power.

Donald Davidson, for example, argued independently that to the extent that consistency is not a shared norm, speech reduces to meaningless word salad.⁶³ Davidson’s insight was that one can only have a false belief if one is logical enough to make expected inferences from that belief and also if one has many true beliefs relevant to the meaning of the terms involved in articulating the false sentence. For example, if I utter “the gun is loaded” and you know it’s unloaded, you will have reason to think I have a false belief. But if I go on to utter that “the gun is a good source of vitamin C and does not exist in our space time continuum since becoming a fully spiritual being,” it’s not clear if I even have any beliefs at all at that point. The end result is that there are only so many false beliefs one can have without just uttering word salad. The positive claim that follows from Tennant and Davidson is then that widely shared narratives do, to the extent that consistency is a norm, constrain retconning. Moreover, consistency tends to fall out as a shared norm precisely as the retconning might reduce a widely shared narrative to meaningless word salad.

Of course, any sufficiently critical attendee at a Trump rally knows that for many people the reduction of political speech to word salad is not experienced as a bug. And our example of the Montreal Screwjob shows just how skilled we all are at dealing with inconsistent narratives. This is exactly the challenge that the form of postmodernism we have articulated in this book poses to critical theory.

A Better Narrative

Nonetheless, Davidson and Tennant do represent a significant step forward with respect to dealing with the reality of the

63 See especially Donald Davidson, “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge,” in *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, ed. Ernest Lepore (Blackwell, 1986).

Quine-Duhem thesis. This is because narratives are not merely disconnected sets of logically independent propositions such that all modifications in light of inconsistency are equally preferable. For example, just as the concept of addition is so central to cognition that we cannot easily give it up without a cascade of unmanageable revisions, the political right in the United States cannot give up the Jeffersonian narrative of a nation of independent yeoman farmers, as this mythology underlies both the appeal of libertarianism and the cult of the “small business owner” that functions as a throughline from Ronald Reagan to Trump.

For our purposes, the most important implication of Davidson’s and Tennant’s arguments is that while pointing out a single inconsistency is never enough, the presentation of a better narrative is not the same as pointing out a single inconsistency. Perhaps the inability of critical theorists to do this is in part due to the narratives they have uncritically accepted. During the heyday of critical theory, liberal academics were — no matter what we said to the contrary — heavily invested in the meritocratic myth that legitimated our then-position in the professional management class, and as such were the ultimate marks for the Clintonian “creative class” narrative wherein newly immiserated workers needed merely learn to program computers so that they could join the professional managerial class as its newest members.⁶⁴ In this respect, many of the academic liberals arguing on social media with Trump fanatics had a presupposed commitment to a Clintonian narrative that actually made no more sense than the conservative yeoman farmer fantasy. In fact, a world where everyone codes, teaches university classes, or supports themselves creating “content,” was just another, albeit more condescending, iteration of that same fantasy.

64 If one had to nominate a single book as being the Clintonian Bible, it would be Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class* (Basic Books, 2019.) One of the authors of this book used to present a PowerPoint based on the 2002 version of Florida’s book to various “advisory committees” raising money for his home academic institution. It was pretty effective.

With respect to the Quine-Duhem problem, furthered by Garcia, as a challenge to critical theory, we might turn to Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, in particular the differentiation between normal and revolutionary science. Interestingly, normal science always has anomalies, which are observations known to be inconsistent with or not predicted by the reigning narratives. Practicing normal science requires the ability to dismiss or explain away these anomalies in different ways. During a period of normal science, there would be no point whatsoever in incessantly harping on the anomalies. As the theory improves, at some point it will be shown to apply to them. Or, as Nancy Cartwright showed in *How the Laws of Physics Lie*, they are dismissed as “noise,” the presumed result of not being able to sufficiently design experiments correctly. Kuhn argued that a reigning paradigm—a more or less connected set of stories about the world and widely accepted experimental procedures—can only actually be rejected when a better paradigm is on offer.

In science, a new theory must be better than the previous one in the sense that the new theory gets everything right that the previous theory got right while also getting things right that the previous theory also got wrong. In mathematically rigorous subareas of science this is expressed by saying that fundamental equations of the new theory must reduce in some limit to those of the older theory.⁶⁵ It is not yet clear the extent to which there is an analogue with respect to the stories we tell that give us a sense of the kind of creatures we are and what (if anything) we are here to do and how we might collectively do that. This being said, we hope that our discussion here represents progress.

65 For a particularly readable and philosophically fascinating account of this, see Robert Batterman, *The Devil in the Details: Asymptotic Reasoning in Explanation, Reduction, and Emergence* (Oxford University Press, 2002).

“Never Forget!”: Narratives of Memorial and the Possibility of Positive Change

Death inspires terror in biological creatures, but anyone with a modicum of wisdom and self-awareness knows that the alternatives — being an eternal shuffling zombie, ancient alligator-still vampire, or gibberingly mad Lovecraftian “elder one” — are worse. And the Japanese aesthetic ideal of *mono no aware* (the pathos or suffering of things) is centered on the shared cultural norm that there is no beauty without finitude. Everything that has meaning, including the cherry blossoms and clipped sunflower, has a story, and every story has an end.¹

The closest we can come to making sense of our own deaths is making sense of others’ deaths. How do we remember them? What sense did their lives make? Did they live their lives such that when they looked back it was all worth it? How does remembering them inspire me to act so that I should be remem-

1 We must again cite Christopher Grobe, “The Artist is President: *Performance Art* and Other Keywords in the Age of Donald Trump,” *Critical Inquiry* 46, no. 4 (2020): 764–805, which concludes with a powerful meditation on Emma González’s funeral oration for her fellow students who died in the February 14, 2014 shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida.

bered? To the extent that their death was the result of injustice, moral or natural, does it inspire me to right the torn fabric of the cosmos, working with others to ensure that this very injustice is lessened for others? That is, we remember the dead in part because we owe them our sorrow and in part because we owe them our resolve. We cannot bring them back, but to the extent that we can mitigate similar wrongs to those that they suffered, we can give meaning to their struggles.²

Our finitude is such an all-encompassing facet of what it is to be the kind of beings we are that we might expect that if we were to find any place in professional wrestling that clearly works against the mostly depressing story of this book thus far, it would involve how fans and industry insiders make sense of the death of performers. And we do. That is, while professional wrestling is still a very dangerous occupation, the deaths of Owen Hart on May 23, 1999, Eddy Guerrero on November 13, 2005, and Chris Benoit on June 24, 2007 did result in industry-wide reforms with respect to staging dangerous gimmicks and the virtually forced abuse of anabolic steroids and human growth hormone by performers. The sense that we have all tried

2 Sometimes this process goes haywire, and our memory of the dead is cynically exploited. We can remember them narcissistically, using our identification with them to nurture grievance, wallowing in our own sense of victimization. And we can remember the dead to legitimize injustice, telling ourselves false stories about why they died and what must be done to set it right. And, in the reverse direction, sometimes it is too much and we try to forget. If for each of us our own death's horizon is the radical presence of absence, sometimes when we find the death of others too present, we must institute rituals of absence, we must remember to forget. When the reality of death intrudes on the fictional world of professional wrestling storylines, in the form of national trauma or performers dying, the responses often reveal the extent of the narcissism and hollowness of our reactions to the things we hypocritically claim to hold most sacred. A fuller discussion of this would make connections between the hypocrisy, tackiness, and bad faith of WWE's "Never Forget!" 9/11 memorial show and American culture at large's response to that event, a project Hebert began in a previous conference presentation, "Wrestling, With Politics: The WWF Performs 9/11."

to make of their deaths has resulted in far less serious injury and death than was once commonplace in professional wrestling.³

But this has not been the norm in post-Screwjob professional wrestling. Revelations about the material basis for WWE that contradict storyline and infuriate the fans typically do not result in a change in that material basis. Instead, WWE learns to monetize discontent, as they did with all of the storylines we considered above: Stone Cold Steve Austin as McMahon’s nemesis, Lita and Edge as heels, and Daniel Bryan and CM Punk as people’s champions whose positive pop was so great that management was finally forced to grudgingly put them over. In all these cases the visible contradiction between reality and storyline was addressed by inconsistently changing the storyline in just the right way. But in the cases of Hart, Guerrero, and Benoit the result was the opposite, changing reality to make the storyline true.

As with our discussion of gender, our discussion of Hart, Guerrero, and Benoit will leave us with as many questions as answers. Why do these intrusions of the real into the fictional world of wrestling in particular result in positive change? Why do some stories “stick” and others don’t? Are there any good political analogues, and if not, can there be? Somehow the death of these performers stuck a pin in the awful empire of kayfabe we have been assaying, and we would like to understand why.⁴

3 Note that this has not been a cure-all for the rate of injury in professional wrestling. Increasingly dangerous stylistic changes have made wrestling pose much more of a risk of injury than some of the styles of the past, and even in the most advanced and state-of-the-art training center, the WWE Performance Center, experiments with training have resulted in increased injuries, too. There are certainly fewer stunts in wrestling now, but weight training methodologies focusing on exceeding personal best records have resulted in an increase in muscle tears, ACL injuries, and assorted other injuries. For an in-depth treatment on injury and debility in WWE, see Brooks Oglesby, “The Veiled Production of Debility in Professional Wrestling,” *Professional Wrestling Studies Journal* 1, no. 1 (2020): 23–39.

4 We are not the only scholars drawn to answering this question. Aris Emmanouloudis discussed this in “Defining Kayfabe” with an assortment of interlocutors from within academe and from a number of individuals who have worked in the professional wrestling industry in a variety of

A theory of how this works is beyond the scope of this monograph, though we hope that our concluding description, of how the stories that were told about these wrestlers were part of reforming the industry, might provide data for such a theory.⁵

“Raw is Owen”

There were two rivals to the supremacy of the wwf during the 1990s: The first and most successful was Atlanta-based World Championship Wrestling (wcv), which lasted from 1988 to 2001.⁶ Though “Monday Night Wars,” the period when wwf’s *Monday Night Raw* aired simultaneously with wcv’s *Nitro*, was for most fans the most important story of the time, for our purposes the two promotions are similar enough that there is little to be gained in this context from studying the latter. However, the third most popular national promotion of the time, and the only other to have national television exposure, Philadelphia’s Extreme Championship Wrestling (ecw), presented a marked contrast to the other two in terms of the level of injury courted by its wrestlers. ecw matches often featured bloody stunts involving barbed wire, smashing fluorescent lights, hardware tools, tacks, an abundance of razor blades (performers secretly cutting their own foreheads so that they would bleed profusely when hit was a staple of wrestling, a gimmick constantly resorted

positions. Emmanouloudis notes that there are some performances that do not require kayfabe to be maintained, and numbers memorializations among them. Much of this chapter explores why this is the case. See CarrieLynn D. Reinhard et al., “Defining Kayfabe: A Dialogue Among Pro-Wrestling Professionals and Academics,” *Professional Wrestling Studies Journal* 3, no. 1 (2022): 145–66.

- 5 One such example is the concept of post-postmodern wrestling discussed in CarrieLynn Reinhard, “Being the Elite (Khan, 2019–Present),” in *Transmedia Cultures: A Companion*, ed. Simon Bacon (Peter Lang, 2021), which examines how social media further changes the conversation about kayfabe.
- 6 See Guy Evans, *NITRO: The Incredible Rise and Inevitable Collapse of Ted Turner’s WCW* (2018), and R.D. Reynolds and Bryan Alvarez, *The Death of WCW: 10th Anniversary Edition* (ecw Press, 2014).

to in ECW), and falls from greater and greater heights.⁷ While WWE contrasted itself with WCW mainly by pushing the Attitude Era — doubling down on sexism and on male performers who blurred the distinction between face and heel — it responded to ECW by hiring their talent and increasing the physical danger of WWE matches.

The apex of this was the infamous Mankind vs. Undertaker “Hell in a Cell” match from the June 28th, 1998 “King of the Ring” pay-per-view. During the match, The Undertaker (Mark Calloway) threw Mankind (Mick Foley) from the top of the “cell” to a ringside folding table, a fall of twenty-two feet that easily could have killed the performer. Then, the visibly concussed Foley climbed back up the chain-link enclosure, at which point Calloway choke-slammed him, causing the roof of the structure to break and Foley to again fall sixteen feet to the ring floor, where he bit through his lip and lost a tooth which somehow embedded in his own face. Calloway won the match, and Foley was taken on a stretcher to the emergency room. While the fans, as they always did, went wild to see stunt- and gimmick-heavy wrestling in WWE, commentators like professional wrestling insider Jim Cornette were disgusted:

What we’ve done is we’ve taken a business where grown men pretended to hurt each other but really didn’t and people believed that they did and paid to see it, and turned it into a business where grown men really do hurt each other and nobody believes they are and fewer of them pay to see it. Who’s the marks? Who’s the marks?⁸

How can upping the violence to the point of maiming your own talent be good for the industry in the long run? What would

7 See Thom Loverro, *The Rise & Fall of ECW: Extreme Championship Wrestling* (Simon & Schuster, 2007).

8 Quoted in Larry DeGaris, “The Money and the Miles,” in *Professional Wrestling: Politics and Populism*, ed. Sharon Mazer et al. (Seagull Books, 2020), 210.

wWE do when someone finally did die in the ring, as Foley easily could have? One year later, we would find out.

One of the many shocking things about Owen Hart's death is the extent to which he may have seen it coming.⁹ In response to his brother Bret's treatment in the Montreal Screwjob, he requested to be let out of his wWF contract but was denied. Like his brother, he hated the new creative direction of wWF which blurred the face/heel distinction while amping up the sexism. His extortionate contract would have forced him into four years of unemployment if he quit. Though he did not walk out of his contract, he refused to play a violent heel who degraded women. As a result, he was forced to wrestle as The Blue Blazer, a retread superhero gimmick that he used when he first broke into the wWF in early 1988. He hated having to descend in a harness from the catwalk while "flying," something he'd done a few times prior to May 23, 1999, and hated the newest twist on it, a quick release mechanism that would allow him to simulate it breaking five feet over the ring. wWF technical supervisor Joe Branon refused to rig up the quick release mechanism because he knew it was too dangerous. wWF bullied Bobby Talbert, who had no expertise in safety rigging but, like Owen, had to pick his battles in wWF, to rig the stunt.

The mechanism failed the first time it was used, causing Hart to fall seventy-eight feet onto the ring rope, fatally rupturing his aorta. wWF did not cancel the live pay-per-view during which this occurred, "Over the Edge," on May 23, 1999. As paramedics removed Hart's body on a gurney, the audience was told that it was not a story, that Hart was really injured. Minutes later, Jim Ross announced that Hart was dead while the wrestlers grimly and surreally marked their way through the pay-per-view's remaining matches.¹⁰

9 See Martha Hart and Eric Francis, *Broken Harts: The Life and Death of Owen Hart* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

10 Broderick Chow and Eero Laine analyze the death of Owen Hart and the ghoulish financial incentives and punishments handed out by McMahon to encourage performers to continue working the pay-per-view despite Hart's death. See Broderick Chow and Eero Laine, "Audience Affirmation

Hart’s death inaugurated the first postmodern tribute show, the macro for Eddy Guerrero’s half a decade later.¹¹ The May 24, 1999 episode of *Raw* opened with a ten-bell salute and consisted of matches shorn from storyline interspersed with wrestlers crying as they praised Hart as a person.

Even more so than with the Screwjob two years earlier, these tributes would make no sense to viewers whose only knowledge of wrestling came from the fictional storylines on TV. Although Owen reliably played a heel, the faces who played his enemies all talked about what a great person he was. The extent to which kayfabe was publicly broken by Hart’s tribute show was unparalleled in the history of wrestling up to that point. It was not the case that storylines were inconsistently rearranged as they had been after the Montreal Screwjob. Instead, the tribute show worked as a liminal space where wrestling storylines were temporarily abandoned.

Though the show was “real” and “honest” in this regard, many commentators were outraged by the way it whitewashed WWF’s complicity in Hart’s death. The breaking of kayfabe helped create and sustain another fiction, that behind the scenes WWF nurtured a workplace with a culture of caring deeply about its performers’ well-being. On the surface, this is not so different

and the Labour of Professional Wrestling,” *Performance Research* 19, no. 2 (2014): 44–53.

- 11 Because of space and dialectical constraints and the role of this chapter as a positive coda to a mostly pessimistic book, we have not attempted to craft this discussion into a contribution to the vital work in performance studies on memorialization, ritual, trauma, and redress, which would be a book length project on its own. We hope that we do manage to say enough to encourage such a project among professional wrestling scholars. In this respect, we should note that just as our work on conspiracy theories and professional wrestling above begins with Birchall, the substantive project suggested by this chapter begins with Jessica Nakamura’s *Transgenerational Remembrance: Performance and the Asia-Pacific War in Contemporary Japan* (Northwestern University Press, 2020). With respect to performative remembrance and political redress, we take as canonical the framework developed by Elizabeth W. Son in *Embodied Reckonings: “Comfort Women,” Performance, and Transpacific Redress* (University of Michigan Press, 2018).

from funerals where extended family members who have good reasons to hate one another find themselves able to temporarily set their animosities aside. But in the context of professional wrestling, it can only be seen as a more cynical version of old kayfabe (neo-neokayfabe?), only now it is not a code to protect the secret that match outcomes are predetermined, but rather a commitment to cover up just how exploitatively dangerous the work environment is to talent. This remnant of the old kayfabe became the norm in tribute shows.

This different approach would later extend beyond tribute shows to DVD collections of performer's matches, which always tell a story about the performer and storylines from the perspective of a smart mark who knows the stories are fictional and the match outcomes predetermined. But the smart mark is still a mark. The authorized "real" stories in tribute shows and DVDs are arguably no less fictional than the storylines they replace. The DVDs almost always tell the same kind of neatly packaged stories one often finds in VH1's *Behind the Music* documentaries. The performer works hard, achieves success, experiences setbacks, and then triumphs over the setbacks. Such collections do not end, as did the Barry Blaustein directed documentary *Beyond the Mat*—the inspiration for Darren Aronofsky's *The Wrestler*—with the washed out, physically broken performer sitting alone in a hotel room smoking cocaine.

We do not explore this new kind of kayfabe to condemn it. In fact, the narratives around some wrestlers' deaths actually do seem to place pressure on wrestling promotions to alter reality so as to make the positive narrative of redemption less false. WWE has also had the sense to move away from extreme wrestling in the aftermath of Hart's death and lawsuits from Martha Hart, which included an \$18 million settlement on November 2, 2000. All Elite Wrestling's recent inauguration of the Owen Hart Cup as well as their contributions to Martha's charity that helps children in need, the Owen Hart Foundation, have been a clear signal of the new company's intent to go beyond WWE in creating a safer working environment for their performers.

“Vive Guerrero: A Tribute to the Memory of Eddy Guerrero”

Eddy Guerrero was an improbable figure, the heir to a famed Mexican family of luchadors who managed to connect with fans enough while wrestling in ECW and then WCW to be hired by WWE, a promotion with no patience at that time for the high-flying luchador style nor the smaller wrestlers who could perform it. Guerrero somehow managed to become one of McMahon's most bankable stars, but it came with a price: Guerrero's physical trauma and constant pain brought about by the WCW and WWE work schedules led to his addiction to prescription drugs and alcohol. The WWE cult of the huge eventually led the former luchador to bulk up with anabolic steroids and human growth hormone. Though WWE never explicitly put this in storylines, fans knew that Guerrero's break from WWE in 2001 was in part caused by him going to rehab. When he returned a year later, fans were ecstatic. Guerrero personified grit and the ability to overcome adversity, to come out of hell not only stronger but wiser and kinder. But when Guerrero died three years later from congestive heart failure caused by years of steroid and human growth hormone abuse, the redemption narrative's arc was threatened. Guerrero died sober—for a pro-wrestler, at least, which almost certainly would not count as sobriety to members of AA/NA. To people in the industry, nearly all of whom had to confront the same painful destruction of their own bodies and difficult issues with prescription and nonprescription drugs, it counted for a lot. Fans and performers were depressed.

Guerrero's memorial show contained more exhibited pathos than Hart's. Matches were interspersed with recordings of wrestlers addressing the camera as if it were Guerrero. Masked luchador and fan favorite Rey Mysterio Junior (whose WWE career was arguably made possible by Guerrero getting over) finished his speech by removing his mask, an event normally suffered by defeated luchadors after a mask-against-mask *lucha de apuesta* (betting match), but a first time for Mysterio in the WWE. Chris Benoit's hysterical sobbing was so moving and overwhelming in its intensity that fans at home (including the

authors of this book) found themselves in tears. Just as with Hart's, the memorial was dissatisfying, this time not merely from the hypocrisy of the promotion that killed him exploiting his death, but also because the very thing that had been the fulcrum of Guerrero's redemption arc, his return to wrestling after defeating drug addiction, was the thing that killed him. To be clear, he didn't die because he started abusing steroids and prescription drugs again. He died from the damage already done in pursuit of the WWE's physical ideal while working WWE's grueling schedule of two matches a week, leaving his body no time to heal. In some ways, this made the situation seem more hopeless. If Guerrero, the hero we loved who got his act together, nonetheless died from the very things he'd heroically overcome, what hope is there for the rest of us?

Then when Benoit, the wrestler who shared hotel rooms with Guerrero on the road and the person who gave the most compelling performance of authenticity during Guerrero's memorial show, murdered his own wife and child before killing himself, something was broken. Not only were the fictional storylines threatened by real world events, but the "real storylines" that had become the staple of career retrospective DVDs were threatened too.

When the deaths of Chris Benoit, his wife, and his child were initially announced, the tragedy was believed to be the result of a home invasion. However, during the June 25, 2007 memorial show on *Monday Night Raw*, the news broke that Benoit himself had, over a three day period, murdered them and killed himself. WWE responded by not airing the show in countries where taped versions of *Raw* are played, instead showing a hastily constructed "John Cena recap show," and removing all evidence of the Benoit show from their web presence. Benoit merchandise and DVDs were taken from circulation, and when the online WWE Network started in 2014, making an enormous amount of wrestling history available to subscribers, Benoit matches remained in archived live events but were not searchable, even though he had been one of the company's top performers. Dedicated audience members could find these matches by knowing

which shows they originally took place in or by searching for the name of Benoit’s opponent, but the search algorithm was specifically tooled to prevent people from being able to look for Benoit as an individual performer.¹²

This ritualized forgetting of Benoit comes with a price, however. Benoit’s most noted “finishing move” (the move associated with each wrestler that if successfully executed will almost always lead to victory in the match in the WWE style of wrestling) was the swan dive headbutt. After he’d maneuvered his opponent flat on his back, Benoit would theatrically slash his finger across his throat, climb to the top of the turnbuckle, and spread his arms. He would then leap up into the air and fall forehead first onto his opponent, usually landing on the opponent’s back. Sometimes this would end the match, and sometimes it worked as a setup for Benoit’s submission finisher, the crippler crossface. For two decades, Benoit repeatedly concussed himself performing the swan dive headbutt as well as a number of the other maneuvers in his intense repertoire that exerted force on his head and neck.

12 An earlier draft of this material contained an extended discussion of the rich, magisterial, and justifiably canonical Odai Johnson, *Ruins: Classical Theatre and Broken Memory* (University of Michigan Press, 2018), in particular Johnson’s account of the Athenian banning of Phrynichus’s *Sack of Miletus* as the defining moment in the development of tragedy as a genre. Johnson’s notion of “remembering to forget” is tailor-made for a longer explanation of both Benoit’s erasure and the memorial show WWE put on after the events of September 11, 2001 (“Never Forget: WWE Returns After 9/11”), but our discussion turned into a lengthy, partially critical discussion ultimately out of place in this book. Briefly though, just as most philosophers cannot conceive of reasonable grounds for the execution of Socrates — including the murder spree his students orchestrated and participated in while instituting the Thirty Tyrants period — Johnson’s theoretical approach renders him less sensitive to the possibility that no longer playing the *Sack of Miletus* in publicly funded theatrical performances was on the whole a very wise choice, analogously to the wisdom of WWE remembering to forget Benoit. Can any rational person deny at least the possibility that the United States and world would be in a much, much better place if Americans hadn’t had to constantly remember to remember 9/11 in the early aughts?

Benoit's eventual autopsy revealed severe chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) involving massive damage to all four lobes of his brain and brainstem. Yet by the time the autopsy results were announced, McMahon had already framed the tragedy as an inconceivable event that must have been caused by Benoit being a "monster." Press coverage and even one posthumous book speculated that the meticulous and brutal murders could have been the result of "roid rage" where steroid abuse causes people to lose their temper.¹³ Because of Benoit's death and the activism of Chris Nowinsky and his Concussion Legacy Foundation, wrestling companies have made a number of adjustments to protect their performers' necks. WWE and its competitor AEW both have banned chair shots to the head and face, and also adopted concussion protocols to protect their athletes the way other sports do. But while some moves have been banned, nothing has been done to arrest the prevalence of increasingly dangerous high spots, including, incredibly, moves like the diving headbutt with which Benoit brained himself twice weekly.¹⁴

It is no accident that WWE instated its Talent Wellness Program on February 27, 2005, a month after Benoit's murder-suicide. The regime tracks aspects of each wrestler's health relevant to heart and brain health as well as drug abuse. While its provisions dealing with concussions are widely considered to be too lax (occasioning multiple lawsuits in the succeeding years by injured talent) and performers are still non-unionized and required to manage their own health insurance, the testing regime around steroids and human growth hormone has for the first time in history been rigorous and successful. This is all the more surprising given that the policy was instated during the height of the steroids era in Major League Baseball.

13 Irvin Muchnik, *Chris & Nancy: The True Story of the Benoit Murder-Suicide and Pro Wrestling's Cocktail of Death* (ECW Press, 2021).

14 See Hamza Ali, "Why the Diving Headbutt Is One of the Most Dangerous Moves in Wrestling History," *The Sportster*, May 24, 2023, <https://www.thesportster.com/why-diving-headbutt-one-of-most-dangerous-moves-in-wrestling/>.

Within two months of the policy’s institution, WWE wrestlers started looking markedly different. They no longer personified the monstrous chiseled classic (to borrow a Molly Ivinsism) Schwarzeneggeresque walnuts-stuffed-into-a-condom look. Even from distant camera shots, everyone could tell wrestlers now had much smoother skin. Camera closeups no longer unintentionally revealed outbreaks of “backne” (acne on the back caused by overproduction of TLR2 immune system receptors) related to steroid and human growth hormone use.

After Owen Hart’s death, promotions began to manage not only the fictional narrative written by the creative department, but also, as with companies in the heyday of the Hollywood studio system, the narratives that smart marks told about performers and about the promotion itself, including the institution of this wellness policy which will, going forward, prevent wrestlers from dying as Guerrero did. It simultaneously transformed Guerrero into a martyr, and in so doing made the redemption arc of his shoot narrative real: He died so that future wrestlers, who no longer have to take dangerous amounts of steroids and human growth hormone to be booked in matches, will not. Guerrero first redeemed himself when he got clean and then redeemed the industry in death.

WWE doing the right thing after the double whammy of Guerrero and Benoit showed the kind of choice elite institutions can make when our shared fictions are revealed to be false. On the one hand, elites can retcon the narrative, introducing new fictional information that causes a reinterpretation of the previous narrative in a way that to some extent, as long as the audience willfully forgets information no longer foregrounded, restores consistency. Remember, this was WWF’s direction after the Montreal Screwjob. Somehow McMahon “playing himself” in the fictional narrative and allowing himself to be defeated in fiction was enough for fans who knew full well that in real life he was approving the scripts that led to the ritualized humiliations of his fictional persona. With respect to the Screwjob, WWF was able to shift the narrative while shifting none of the material conditions that make the WWF narrative possible. With respect

to the “You screwed Matt!” storyline, WWE just shifted the narrative to torment the female wrestler even more than she had previously been tormented.

But with respect to Guerrero’s death, instead of trying to shift the narrative, WWE shifted the reality so that the fictional narrative — the one involving the performer, not the characters played by that performer — could be made true. Once the wellness policy was in place and enforced, Guerrero’s redemption arc was secure forever. If we view narrative management as one of the paradigm political functions of elites, we can see these two kinds of responses to narrative disenchantment instantiated everywhere through history, though the former is the norm. Indeed, as we have argued, the contemporary paradigm of “politics as spectatorship” seems to reduce most of national politics to that of a reality show, where the politicians perform their own authenticity and the only real joy is seeing your enemies defeated in the real life “storylines” revolving around elections. WWE’s change-the-narrative response to the Screwjob is in this sense paradigmatic of the contemporary political impasse. But the WWE’s response to Guerrero’s death does suggest different possibilities.

Guerrero remains a powerful totemic figure among professional wrestling fans. For example, in the opening match of the February 8th, 2023 episode of *AEW Dynamite*, Konosuke Takeshita combined a performance of the “Guerrero shimmy” before successfully executing Eddy’s signature frog splash on MJF (Michael Tyler Friedman, who wrestles under the name Michael Jacob Friedman) in the El Paso arena. The crowd, almost eighteen years removed from the death of Guerrero, erupted in a chant of “Eddy! Eddy! Eddy!” It is now routine in AEW, WWE, and in promotions around the world to pay homage to him through the Guerrero shimmy, to the ecstatic approval of the wrestling fans.

We cannot end this section in pure optimism though. Sadly, with respect to memorial, professional wrestling seems to be considerably more progressive than the political elite in this country. How many memorial services to victims of mass shoot-

ings did President Barack Obama attend? Nothing changed. Yet? The entire nation wept for John F. Kennedy, but Camelot died with him. Or did it? We are not so pessimistic. The murder of the Kennedys is a weird echo of the murder of the Gracchi brothers in the dying days of the Roman Republic. But it was only with Marcus Antonius’s funeral oration for Julius Caesar, seventy-seven years later, that the *populare* faction gained enough power to overthrow the Roman *optimates* who had killed the Gracchi brothers and Caesar. In high school history classes that teach this material in the United States, we unsurprisingly almost never learn that the *optimates* were aristocrats whose colonial tax seizures had led to constant unsustainable war as they routinely blocked debt forgiveness, land for military veterans, and public grain. Or that Caesar’s nephew, Octavian, finally instituted all of these reforms as part of a new social contract when he became Emperor Augustus. Let us all hope that in the year 2040, seventy-seven years after the murder of Bobby Kennedy, the transition out of neoliberalism is more peaceful than that which birthed the Roman Principate.

“The Brodie Lee Celebration of Life”

Jon Huber began his in-ring career as a standout in small independent promotions in the northeastern United States. Once he gained the notice of the WWE, he was tapped to play the role of Luke Harper as part of Bray Wyatt’s supernatural backwoods faction The Wyatt Family and became the in-ring workhorse of that team. He wrestled for WWE for nearly seven years, and online became increasingly vocal about his desire to be recognized as a top singles wrestler rather than being part of a tag team or faction flunky. Once All Elite Wrestling was announced to be an actual promotion, Huber took to Twitter to advocate for his release from his WWE contract because he believed the WWE did not see in him what fans did. Eventually, Huber debuted in AEW as a heel, Brodie Lee, after securing his WWE release. Fans were willing to go along with the storylines of booing Huber. The current postmodern moment of professional wrestling was

clear. Throughout his AEW run, fans could boo Brodie Lee the character while they rooted for Jon Huber the performer, a phenomenon which became perfectly clear the night AEW memorialized Huber after his death.

In storyline, Brodie Lee was a monster heel who ran the company's evil cult, the Dark Order. Under his leadership, the group's focus shifted from being a serious part of storylines to being the comic relief surrounding Mr. Brodie Lee. In part, the story was a parody of the alleged way WWE Chairman Vince McMahon required his inner circle to be bumbling sycophants. Dark Order storylines focused Brodie Lee's ability to demolish his opponents while continuously having to deal with the ineptness of the men and women he led. "Serious" scenes would play out on AEW's weekly television show, while on the web series *Being the Elite*, the bumbblings of the flunkies of his cult always ended with Mr. Lee screaming at them for their mistakes and smacking them in the face with a handful of papers.

As is often the case, though, fans of AEW began to fall in love with the humorous depictions of Mr. Lee and his Dark Order—in part because Huber and the wrestlers he worked with were clearly having the time of their lives being comic relief online, and in part because of fans' love of Jon Huber and their happiness at seeing a beloved performer being so happy.

When AEW was launched in January of 2019, it seemed destined to join the dozens of failed wrestling promotions begun since WWE purchased or drove out of business all the local wrestling promotions in the 1980s. Three years later, its flagship show *AEW Rampage* and various pay-per-views had established the company as the clear number two wrestling company in the world behind WWE. These companies were viewed as legitimate competition for each other, even while AEW's capitalization remains a tiny fraction of WWE's.

Tony Khan's AEW might be seen to be a paradigm case of doing well by doing good. While Khan is the undisputed head of creative, his wrestlers can give input on their characters and are not forced to deliver scripted interviews, a stark contrast to the Byzantine soap operas designed by WWE Creative under the

direction of Vince McMahon. The work schedule is so much less brutal that one of AEW’s most popular performers, Dr. Britt Baker, can continue working as a dentist in her hometown over 500 miles away from Jacksonville, Florida while leading the women’s roster. Every aspect of the promotion’s infrastructure is designed to free the wrestlers from WWE’s pre-pandemic grind, where they performed untelevised practice matches and at least one televised match in different cities every week. The independent contractor status of the talent at AEW is not just a ruse to get out of giving wrestlers work benefits such as retirement and health insurance. All AEW wrestlers are allowed independent promotional revenue streams and can wrestle with other promotions provided those bookings do not interfere with the performers’ AEW commitments. Performers are not humiliated in storyline at the whim of the boss, and female talent are not forced to take part in degrading storylines. Matches showcase a variety of wrestling styles. Wrestlers who specialize in high flying or British submission holds or who trained in Japan are not relegated to the undercard. Finally, while AEW is not unionized, management has not responded punitively to wrestlers discussing the pros and cons of forming a union.¹⁵

AEW’s first memorial show aired live on December 30, 2020, four days after Huber’s death at the age of forty-one from idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis, a condition of irregular scarring in the lung tissues that usually kills people in their late seventies. Though Lee did not die of COVID-19, his death from lung failure during COVID-19 resonated with the national trauma many AEW fans were experiencing at the time.

In the days between the announcement of Brodie Lee’s passing and the next episode of *AEW Dynamite*, AEW owner and booker Tony Khan struggled with how to make an appropriate memorialization of Huber while remaining true to the spirit of a professional wrestling show. Dave Meltzer wrote that Khan

¹⁵ While as of October 2023 there has been no serious push for unionization for Khan and AEW management to contend with, the Khan family cooperates with players’ unions in their football properties.

spent an entire night writing and rewriting the show, in the end designing it so that,

all [non-tribute] plans were pushed back one week, even the Kenny Omega vs. Fenix match. The show would be all matches involving members of the Dark Order, and of course, they would all win. The main event would have a one-time only trio of [The Dark Order's Number] 10 (Preston Vance) & Cody Rhodes & Orange Cassidy, because they were Brodie Huber's [one of Jon Huber's sons] three favorite wrestlers.¹⁶

One thousand fans packed the Jacksonville, Florida arena Daily's Place for the "Brodie Lee Celebration of Life" and another million watched on television live around the globe. It was a landmark event. Like previous wrestling proceedings produced in the wake of tragedy, it marked a suspension of in-ring storylines, and promised to be a very real tribute to a performer and his family.

"The Brodie Lee Celebration of Life" is part of a fiction just like all the wrestling shows. Strangely, there was less breaking of traditional kayfabe in it than in the WWE's memorial shows done decades prior. But "The Brodie Lee Celebration of Life" seemed also truer, more authentic, than the WWE memorial shows. The Southern Fan wholly imaginatively complicit in the WWE shows would come away with a misleading picture of the working environment at WWE. Not so with the Brodie Lee memorial reflecting the reality of wrestling for AEW.

Huber's wife, Amanda (who had previously wrestled under the name Synndy Synn) and their sons Brodie and Nolan attended the memorial show and sat ringside. Various performers and people involved with the promotion talked to the crowd about Huber, or directly to Huber's sons or Huber him-

16 Dave Meltzer and Bryan Alvarez, "January 4, 2021 Observer Newsletter: Rest in Peace Brodie Lee & Danny Hodge," *Wrestling Observer/Figure Four Online*, January 1, 2021, <https://www.f4wonline.com/newsletters/wrestling-observer-newsletter/january-4-2021-observer-newsletter-rest-peace-brodie-lee-danny-hodge-329046/>.

self through video packages inserted into the show. Audiences were told on television that in honor of Huber’s death, his faction, the Dark Order, was welcomed into the ranks of the fan favorites. Every match featured members of the Dark Order and friends of Huber against an assortment of other heels. The main event, labeled “Negative One’s Dream Match” (“Negative One,” along with “Brodie Lee Jr.,” were the faction’s names for one of Huber’s sons), featured three babyfaces chosen by Brodie Huber to wrestle three heels. Though the archived show on Hulu made no mention of it, the original telecast ended with Lee Jr., whose ambition had been to be a professional wrestler like his father, being guaranteed an AEW performer’s contract when he turned eighteen.

One representative monologue came from Eddie Kingston, a wrestling heel at the time who was still relatively new to AEW. Kingston was brought in for one match earlier in the year — weeks after throwing away his wrestling gear and deciding to retire — and subsequently offered a contract to be one of the promotion’s midcard heels. Breaking character, Kingston wept while he spoke of his friend. According to Meltzer’s recap:

Kingston, in one of the best interviews of the year, said he was going to miss Lee busting his balls, talked about yelling at him when he had a jacket that looked like something out of Harry Potter, and then cried when saying that he thanked Lee for believing in him when he didn’t believe in himself. He told Brody Jr. and Little Rhino (Nolan), “Your father is not gone as long as you remember him.”

At the end of the show, Brodie Huber placed his father’s boots in the middle of the ring to signify the end of Jon Huber’s wrestling career.

The news story of the death of Brodie Lee and the subsequent memorial held in his honor was surprisingly big. Meltzer noted that was unusual for a respected but not superstar wrestler, no matter how personally beloved he was:

Usually when something unexpected snowballs, it is because of the wrestling fans. This was because of the wrestlers, one after another, shock, grief, all telling similar stories. You expect that from people in your company, but in this case, not to discount anything AEW did because they could not have handled this better, but in my opinion, the story of the death of Jon Huber was so big because of the WWE wrestlers, breaking that wall of not supposed to acknowledge stuff in wrestling that isn't in your own company.

Given the buzz and the size of the news story, the tribute show was expected to set a viewership record for TNT. What the show actually did was even more remarkable. It was not only cathartic for fans, but a critical success according to those who watched wrestling. "It set a standard that's going to be hard to live up to. [AEW] had a lot of pressure that they put on themselves — nobody put pressure on them, but they put this pressure on themselves to do it. And they did it," Meltzer said while reviewing the show the evening of December 31, 2020.¹⁷

Like the Screwjob, the "You Screwed Matt" storyline, and the WWE memorials, none of this would even make sense to a fan who watched wrestling and believed that the matches and storylines on television were real. To fans who watched wrestling and limited what they knew to the content of the television shows that they watched, either years of storyline continuity were revealed to be false, or else in the wake of a hated heel's death everyone decided to lie about what a good guy he was. Nobody responded negatively to this inconsistency, where facts about material conditions of the storylines were with no friction whatsoever in one show incorporated into those very storylines. In this respect AEW does feel like a return to older, pre-Screwjob norms of wrestling viewing. The memorial show allowed for a

17 Dave Meltzer and Bryan Alvarez, "WOR: AEW Brodie Lee Tribute Show, NXT, RAW Ratings, UFC Price Hike, More!," *Wrestling Observer/Figure Four Online*, December 31, 2020, <https://www.f4wonline.com/podcasts/wrestling-observer-radio/wor-aew-brodie-lee-tribute-show-nxt-raw-ratings-ufc-price-hike-more-328976/>.

suspension of suspension of disbelief separated from the aspect of cynicism where purveyors of the fiction are hated as heels.

Unlike with Guerrero and Benoit, we see no clear political analogue to the success of the Brodie Lee memorial. But that does not obviate its worth. The closest kind of liminal space where political face/heel battles are set to rest is the open mic night at the local bar, where conservative and MAGA hat and liberal and left and apolitical music fans get together and share their love of beauty. In such settings politics just isn't an issue, and the reprieve is wonderful. While it would be impossible to determine this empirically, it's not improbable the necessary dearth of such public liminal spaces during the COVID-19 pandemic contributed further to contemporary polarization, and thus perhaps their reemergence will help strengthen the fragile civic peace in which we find ourselves.

Concluding Unsemantic Postscript

As we crafted the penultimate draft of this conclusion, Donald Trump and a rogues' gallery of conspirator flunkies — including “America's Mayor” Rudolph Giuliani — had been charged with ninety-one felony counts in federal and state courts relating to Trump's business practices and attempts to overturn the 2020 presidential election. Trump was found guilty in court of libeling one of his sexual assault victims. And yet his substantive lead in the contest to become the 2024 Republican candidate for President was unparalleled in history and his polling then, prior to Biden's disastrous debate performance, was roughly even with President Joe Biden's. And that very month, the latter's policy of rescinding Trump's March 2020 freeze on student loan repayments went into effect. Several of our friends, acquaintances, and family members whose material circumstances were being non-trivially and harshly degraded by this either did not vote in the 2024 election or voted for Cornell West or Marianne Williamson. Likewise for those Americans who remember Secretary of State James Baker during a period of less national

humiliation ordering then Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir to cease settlements in Gaza and the West Bank.

The *political* story of the Trump (and Modi, Orbán, etc.) era problem of feckless center-left parties complicit in the neoliberal destruction of politics proper will not end even if Trump himself is somehow someday defeated. Nor will the toxic mix of cynicism, buffoonery, (hetero-)sexism, and conspiratorial thinking that characterizes what we might paradoxically now call global MAGA.

The *philosophical* problem that is the throughline of this monograph has been the problem of truth. This stems directly from the way that universal kayfabe, addressed in Chapters 1 and 2 with our meditation on the Montreal Screwjob, shows that freedom from all epistemic authorities is not the freedom to thrive in any meaningful material way but rather the quasi-spiritual freedom to believe whatever you want. It is not the case that, as the saying goes, nothing is true, therefore everything is permitted, but rather that if nothing is true everything may be believed.

The *political* problem of universal kayfabe stems from this very absolutism, whereby now political elites are freed from any prima facie obligation to even attempt to speak the truth. Politics then is in danger of itself becoming a kind of performance where, as discussed in Chapter 3, the joy of engaging in politics as a contribution to human progress becomes in part reduced to the simple joy of seeing people you hate humiliated. This is not a recipe for human flourishing, and it does not stop there. In Chapter 4, we showed that none of this can be separated from the way these epistemic failures breed moral ones as well. A world of universal skepticism is not, *pace* the hopes of several schools of Greek philosophy, a world of empathy or moral nuance. Finally, in Chapter 5, we explored how this sleep of reason breeds monsters. When enough people collectively abandon the connection between evidence and belief, the results are apocalyptic fantasias like QAnon and the by far largest mass suicide in human history, with millions of willfully unvaccinated people exposing their bodies to a lethal virus.

And while current political reality stems from material changes involved in transforming New Deal and socialist social contracts into the global neoliberal one, the ideological superstructure of this transformation has involved the destruction of our self-image as communal creatures. The view of human beings as dependent rational animals¹⁸ striving to collectively realize the true, good, and beautiful becomes the view of each of us as a homo-economicus lizard creature, radically alienated from every other lizard and only motivated by the machine version of reason that equates rationality with the narrow maximization of egoic pleasure. Our access to reality is likewise radically individualized. Do your own research. *Live your truth*. But what could it even mean to say that one person’s truth is different from another person’s truth? How did we even get to the point where people even think that that could possibly make sense?

One of our major philosophical interventions above is our discussion of the Quine-Duhem problem in Chapter 5, where we were able to show in a precise way that there is no simple solution to the philosophical problem underlying this empire of cynicism. Evidence that falsifies a hypothesis can always be explained away without sacrificing logical consistency. The manner in which theories and descriptions of experimental setups entail evidence is just too complex. And the price of denying this complexity is to replace cynicism with fanaticism, which is precisely what already happened to the January 6 rioters. *Cynics to the left of me, dogmatists to the right....*

These are not easy issues, philosophically or practically. What is truth? Given the Quine-Duhem thesis, how can I ever have any confidence that the stories I tell about the world are not merely rationalizations that help me deal with the psychic and physical trauma that comes with being a fragile biological creature? How can a story be true? And what does “truth” have to do with political liberation? Let us assume that, for example, successive theories in physics are more closely approximating the

18 On this, see especially Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Open Court, 1999).

truth about how material objects respond when interfered with. What does that “truth” have to do with how I should organize my life or how we might attempt to collectively organize society? Many of the most beautiful stories are false, though our meditations on the martyrdom of Eddy Guerrero in this chapter have revealed that sometimes a beautiful false story about the good is so compelling that its beauty can be a causal force in us reorganizing reality so that the story becomes true.

But now, to understand “truth” we must also have some idea of what people are talking about when they invoke notions of “the good.” For what it’s worth, these are the *philosophical* stakes of our discussion. Special relativity did not replace Newtonian dynamics merely because the Newtonian theory got, for example, the orbit of Mercury wrong. It replaced it in part because it was a better explanation of all the things Newton’s theory got right and it moreover got the orbit of Mercury right, among other things Newton’s theory miscalculates. This suggests that the problem with trying to convince adherents to, for example, QAnon that their theory has been disconfirmed is that interlocutors are not presenting them with better theories. But what makes a theory better? Common sense says that it must at least be truer.

This diagnosis makes sense of the fact that in countries undergoing societal decline occasioned by the ascendancy of neoliberalism, neither center-left nor center-right parties tend to have remotely convincing stories about either this decline or what might be done to arrest it. As life expectancy continues to decline in the United States, Donald J. Trump and Bernie Sanders remain the only national political figures who present themselves as possessing the outrage and passion commensurate to the challenge that this problem poses for the nation. If opponents of the contemporary conspiracy theories of Trump’s followers continue to merely offer them opposing dominant false narratives such as the Clintonian “rise of the creative class,” of course those opponents will not be able to rationally convince conspiracy theorists to abandon the story they tell to make sense of the world. And as we showed at the end of Chapter 5,

one does not counteract a false theory or narrative with discrete pieces of evidence, but rather with a truer theory or narrative. In the context of politics, this probably requires actual convictions, ideology, and a plan to creatively use the levers of power to bring about needed change.

Though we are centrally concerned with the meaning of meaning, these issues are not merely semantic. They have a strong practical consequence. Democrats who genuinely want to be part of a politics that serves the common good, for example, should stop obsessing over academics like George Lakoff who give them rhetorical advice about how to “frame the debate” to make the insulting story they are telling more attractive to voters.¹⁹ If there is one conclusion to this book, it is that one can only extricate oneself from kayfabe nation via truth. This being said, we have not attempted in this monograph to construct a philosophical account of narrative truth.²⁰ We do hope to have increased such an accounts’ salience, though. There decidedly are better stories out there, ones that might be made true through the struggles to come.

The most moving part of Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* is the ending, where Bradbury describes people on the periphery of a society which has banned reading. Each person memorizes pages of books. It is impossible to read that today and not think of everybody who steps away from the outrage of the hour, away from their phones and screens, and goes outside not merely to “touch grass” but to sit in it with a good book. Humans will con-

19 For example, George Lakoff, *The All New Don’t Think of an Elephant!: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate* (Chelsea Green Publishing, 2014).

20 One could do worse than start with Wolfgang Künne, *Conceptions of Truth* (Oxford University Press, 2005), and Richard Kirkham, *Theories of Truth: A Critical Introduction* (MIT Press, 1995), followed by the discussion of narrative in Mark Silcox and Jon Cogburn, “Computability Theory and Literary Competence,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 46, no. 4 (2006): 369–86; Jon Cogburn and Mark Ohm, “Actual Qualities of Imaginative Things: Notes Towards an Object-Oriented Literary Theory,” *Speculations* 5 (2014): 180–224; and Jon Cogburn and Mark Silcox, “Against Brain-in-a-Vatism: On the Value of Virtual Reality,” *Philosophy & Technology* 27 (2014): 561–79.

tinue to do this and continue in every other way to step back from the baleful dictates of their society to, if we can be permitted to put it this way, realize the good, the true, and the beautiful.²¹ One need only look at the displays in public libraries of local hobbyist artists, or go to an open mic night in the local bar — in our case, the Wednesday night jam at Brickyard South hosted by Dakota Civello, the legendary Thursday night Blues Jam at Phil Brady's hosted by SunDanze Dunston, and the Sunday night Build a Band Workshop at the Fat Cat Saloon over in Prairieville hosted by Derrick Bordelon and Joey Breland. We humans just do have a knack for continuing to define ourselves as people who love one another and together create things of

21 We realize that among all contemporary humanists, only philosophers are allowed to uncritically avail themselves of the neo-Platonist/Maritainian transcendentals. We hope that our colleagues in other disciplines will permit us this extravagance at least once. The transcendentals did not disappear when neo-Thomism did as a broader cultural force — as it had to in a society with usury as part of its economic base — but survived in Immanuel Kant's threefold divisions of his critiques, the first concerned with truth, the second with goodness, and the third with beauty; further into Alain Badiou's four different truth procedures: art, politics, love, and science, the first centrally concerning beauty, the second two the good, and the fourth truth; and finally into Tristan Garcia's contemporary rethinking of this transition. An earlier draft of this book contained a chapter tracing this genealogy, but it became unmanageable, a book project on its own. On the three transcendentals in Thomas Aquinas, see especially Eleonore Stump, "Dante's Hell, Aquinas's Moral Theory and the Love of God," in *Arguing About Religion*, ed. Kevin Timpe (Routledge, 2009); in Kant, see Gilles Deleuze, *Kant's Critical Philosophy: The Doctrine of the Faculties*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (University of Minnesota Press, 1985); in Badiou, Quentin Meillassoux, "History and Event in Badiou," trans. Thomas Nail, *Parrhesia* 12 (2011): 1–11; and in Garcia, Jon Cogburn, *Garcian Meditations: The Dialectics of the Persistence in Form and Object* (Edinburgh University Press, 2017). This being said, just as our appeal to "the good" is not inconsistent with pluralism, note that Mike Ardoline and Jon Cogburn, *Weird Atheism: H.P. Lovecraft and the Meaning of Life* (under review), centrally involves the thesis that, pace both Thomism and Noël Carroll's influential definition, horror proper is concerned with the kind of alienation that follows upon the sundering of Jacques Maritain's transcendentals from one another.

beauty apart from the dictates of the market or this week’s cable news indignancy.

In this book we have focused on one era of professional wrestling that coincided with Donald Trump’s performances in WWE. We have said next to nothing about Mexican lucha libre or British anarcho-feminist promotions where wrestlers enact openly political allegories which directly contradict the implicit politics of so much of WWE’s craft.²² We have only touched on AEW’s recent and at least for now moderately successful challenge to WWE’s hegemony, which we characterized above as in some ways a return to a pre-McMahon era of professional wrestling.²³ And if there is any cause for optimism, it is this: Human beings will keep trying to figure out the world, ourselves, and our place in it by telling stories, and by telling them through the medium of simulated athletic contests. In this way, perhaps Trump and his followers, as well as the corrupted liberals who have made all of the Trumps on this planet possible, can be beaten by a version of their own game.

Someday someone will tell a true story about the collapse of neoliberalism under the weight of its own contradictions. Perhaps the teller will find themselves in something like the kind of space communism we find in *Star Trek*. Perhaps in something like the (sorry, spoiler) anarcho-syndicalism in the happy ending to Kim Stanley Robinson’s *Mars* trilogy. Perhaps in a society with the quasi-religious non-hierarchical environmental consciousness described at the end of Dan Simmons’s *Hype-*

22 For the former, see Heather Levi, “Don’t Leave Us in the Hands of Criminals: The Contested Cultural Politics of Lucha Libre,” and Nina Hoecht, “Wrestling with Burlesque, Burlesquing Lucha Libre,” both in *Performance and Professional Wrestling*, ed. Broderick Chow, Eero Laine, and Claire Warden (Routledge, 2016). For the latter, see Heather Bandenburg, “Support Your Local Girl Gang: Feminist Resistance in the UK’s Independent Wrestling Scene,” and Amy Siegel, “Wradical Wrestling: What Happens When Womxn Run the Ring,” both in *Professional Wrestling: Politics and Populism*, ed. Sharon Mazer et al. (Seagull Books, 2020).

23 For more on the early conflict between WWE and AEW, see Vincent Smith, “AEW and WWE’s Wednesday Night Wars: An Early Analysis,” *Professional Wrestling Studies Journal* 2, no. 1 (2021): 47–60.

rion Cantos. Certainly, if that story could be delivered to us by time-travel we would be surprised, both at how things are going to turn out, and at the conceptual revisions necessary for our descendants to retroactively make sense of us and our future.

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