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Real Fake Fighting: the Aesthetic of Qualified Realism in Japanese Professional Wrestling

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REAL FAKE FIGHTING:
THE AESTHETIC OF QUALIFIED REALISM IN JAPANESE PROFESSIONAL
WRESTLING

A Thesis Presented

By

CLARA EVELYN MARINO

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

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ABSTRACT
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WRESTLING

MAY 2021

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Professional wrestling is a performance art in which the line between fact and fiction is often obscured. Much of the existing scholarship on the medium that examines its dynamics regard reality and artifice focuses on the role of the artificial, analyzing pro-wrestling as primarily a form of heightened spectacle akin to passion plays or soap opera. However, professional wrestling in Japan, particularly that found in the country's largest promotion, New Japan Pro-Wrestling, features many elements that resemble real sports much more closely than many American promotions. These elements include fighting styles, wrestler injury, characters that do not fit easily into defined archetypes, stories focused on win-loss records, promos that resemble press releases, and audiences who react to the show not only like a performance, but also as if it were a real sport. At the same time, it does still feature many spectacular and heightened elements found throughout the pro-wrestling world, resulting in an overall aesthetic of qualified realism. This realism is a defining element of promotions like New Japan Pro-Wrestling, and it serves to make characters and their stories relatable to audiences in ways that are more difficult for other promotions. This reveals unique thematic qualities of Japanese pro-wrestling, in addition to demonstrating the aesthetic diversity of the genre as a whole.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Professional wrestling is a mode of artistic expression poses a number of difficult questions regarding medium, genre, and authorship. Chief among these is the ambiguity of which parts of any given professional wrestling performance are strictly ‘art’ — that is, intentionally created as creative, expressive spectacle — and which parts are simply events that occurred ‘in real life.’ As such, much of the discussion of professional wrestling centers around a tension between the real and the artificial.

Almost all adult spectators of professional wrestling understand that the results and general events of matches are predetermined by the performers, company executives, and writing teams, albeit with some rare divergences caused by sudden injuries, mistakes, or rebellion by performers. That said, a pro-wrestling performance consists of more elements than merely the fights. Wrestlers’ ‘gimmicks’ (dramatic personas); the relationships between wrestlers; the ‘angles’ (narrative threads) that are woven throughout multiple shows; ‘promos’ (monologues or interviews performed by a wrestler) given before, after, and between matches; the injuries that wrestlers incur; the interplay between performers and audience — all of these elements form integral parts of the profession wrestling experience, and they are the primary points of uncertainty over the degree to which pro-wrestling is intentionally or spontaneously constructed. Did he ‘really’ break his leg, or is that just part of the act? Are they ‘really’ friends? Does she act that way ‘in real life?’ These are all legitimate questions that can easily fuel speculation among pro-wrestling fans.

This ambiguity is reflected in the common ways that professional wrestling has been conceptualized by scholarship. In one of the earliest academic commentaries on the genre, “The World of Wrestling” in the book *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes describes pro-wrestling as a form of theater portraying mythic battles between good and evil, comparing it to a passion play.¹ More recent comparisons include reality television, soap opera, and the complicatedly constructed cinematic universes like those of the contemporary Marvel superhero films.² What is common to all of these analyses is that the emphasis lays largely on the artifice of professional wrestling, the ways in which it creates its own universe that may reference our own, but is fundamentally separate, and heightened spectacle is one of the key signifiers of this separateness. The prevalence of this kind of analysis makes sense, given how often professional wrestling is explained with the negative definition, “like normal wrestling, but not a real sport.”

However, critic Masataka Kashihara questions this axiomatic definition in his essay, “Why Isn’t Pro-Wrestling a Sport?” His primary contention is that the rules of a legitimate sport are, like the dramatic conventions and predetermined outcomes of pro-wrestling, are ultimately arbitrary, in that there is nothing inherent to play that determines them. Rather, like a promotion deciding which fighter will become the next champion,

¹ Roland Barthes, “The World of Wrestling,” in *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 23.

² Sam Ford, “The Marks Have Gone Off-Script: Rogue Actors in WWE’s Stands,” in *#WWE: Professional Wrestling in the Digital Age*, ed. by Dru Jeffries (Indiana University Press, 2019), 120; Anna F. Peppard, “‘We’re Not Just Cheerleaders’: Reading the Postfeminist Polysemy of *Total Divas*,” in *#WWE: Professional Wrestling in the Digital Age*, ed. Dru Jeffries (Indiana University Press, 2019), 178; Eero Laine, “World Building in the WWE Universe,” in *#WWE: Professional Wrestling in the Digital Age*, ed. Dru Jeffries (Indiana University Press: 2019), 31.

real sports rules are decided and enforced by rules committees and referees.³ Thus, while one may conventionally think of pro-wrestling as ‘fixed’ and sports as ‘legitimate,’ sports are also to a degree fixed by the external actors that define what the sport is. The primary difference, according to Kashihara, is merely that traditional sports attempt to mask this arbitrariness, whereas professional wrestling displays it openly.⁴ Professionally wrestling becomes, as a result, a “scapegoat” that other sports can dyadically oppose themselves to in order to add legitimacy to their own proceedings.⁵ While this is an interesting departure from the common way of considering pro-wrestling, it has some flaws. First, it ignores one of the key components that defines play and games (of which sports are one kind) as defined by theorist Johan Huizinga in his seminal work, *Homo Ludens*: uncertainty and ‘chanciness’ of the game’s outcome and the tension that this uncertainty creates.⁶ If the moves of a chess game were set before the game began, we would recognize that not as a game but rather as a demonstration. However, even if we choose to read Kashihara charitably and say that the uncertainty and tension still exist for the viewer, there is still another problem that this conceptualization shares with the conventional one.

Both Kashihara’s critique and the conceptual vein he challenges share a similar issue. Though they recognize in professional wrestling a tension between reality and

³ Kashihara Masataka 柏原全孝, “Puroresu wa naze supôtsu dewanai no ka” プロレスはなぜスポーツではないのか [Why is Professional Wrestling Not a Sport?], *Supôtsu Shakaigaku Kenkyû* スポーツ社会学研究 12 (1996): 55-57.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 59-60.

⁶ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), 10.

fiction, explaining the function of the fictive tends to take up a disproportionate amount of the argumentation. However, given that the tension between real and artificial is one of the defining features of professional wrestling, no analysis of it is complete without a thorough investigation of realism in the genre.

It is precisely this side of the dichotomy that this paper will investigate: in what ways does the 'real' inform the aesthetic identity of professional wrestling, and how does the real interact with the 'fake'? Are they purely in conflict with one another, or can they be synthesized?

Realism, though, is an already ambiguous term, and only becomes more so when discussing a medium where the lines between fact and fiction are so frequently blurred. Herein, we shall primarily focus on realism as an aesthetic quality: the extent to which a piece of art gives the impression of reality. In other words, to what extent can viewers consume the art and determine that it resembles something they have or could see or experience in their own lives. Certainly, this may include centering or alluding to real-life people or events, but it need not necessarily. If two wrestlers despise each other in real life but in the ring pretend to be close friends, as long as that performed friendship gives the impression of believability and relatability to the audience, it may still be considered realistic.

One particularly useful place to look to understand how realism functions in professional wrestling is Japan's premiere promotion, New Japan Professional Wrestling (NJPW). NJPW is the world's second largest professional wrestling company after the American WWE, which is something of an industry hegemon. NJPW is also frequently

depicted as a representative of Japanese pro-wrestling, which is known abroad for an athletically demanding style and a greater devotion to realism and ‘kayfabe.’

Kayfabe is a term of ambiguous origin, but refers to the constructed, semi-fictional universe of a wrestling promotion, including wrestler’s gimmicks, relationships, and the legitimacy of the sporting event. In this way, it can often be a synonym for ‘in-fiction’ or ‘in-character.’ However, ‘maintaining kayfabe’ has been at times a more meaningful term, which referred to the wrestlers’ and promotion’s commitment to not allowing audience members to realize that these fictional elements were not real. This would include such things as two performers of rival wrestlers behaving bitterly towards each other in public, even if in truth they were friends, or heels acting just as cruelly towards fans as they would towards their opponents.

It should be said that some viewers do still believe that professional wrestling is a legitimate sport. A 2012 study in Japan found that about 16% of self-described pro-wrestling fans surveyed said that they believed pro-wrestling was a serious sport.⁷ A similar ratio of respondents who did not describe themselves as fans said the same, though those who said they have “absolutely no interest in” or “actively dislike” the genre seemed to believe this at a slightly higher rate.⁸ A 1999 Gallup poll found similar results, with 17% of Americans claiming to believe that pro-wrestling was a legitimate

⁷ Saitou Fumihiko 齋藤文彦, “Puroresu no shakaigaku kôsetsu: *Supôtsu to bunmeika/kofun no tankyû yori*” プロレスの社会学考察—『スポーツと文明化/興奮の探求』より [A Sociological Investigation of Pro-Wrestling: On *Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilising Process*] (master’s thesis, Waseda University, 2012), 68.

⁸ Ibid., 77; 85.

sport (regardless of whether they watched it or not).⁹ Interestingly, a 1951 poll showed quite different results, with only 17% of respondents claiming they thought that all professional wrestling was fixed, 42% that only some of it was fixed, and 24% believing none of it was fixed.¹⁰ These numbers demonstrate that even though some believe professional wrestling is a real sporting competition, they are in the minority, and at least in the United States the proportion of people that believes this has declined.

In general, as the viewing public has grown more unanimously aware of the fictionality of professional wrestling, the interest in maintaining kayfabe has dwindled. Indeed, kayfabe has its limits in Japan, with NJPW producing books, interviews, and movies that explicitly discuss their product as a kind of performance, such as the 2018 film *My Dad is a Heel Wrestler*, in which a young boy discovers that his father (played by NJPW star Hiroshi Tanahashi) plays a villainous wrestler in the ring. The protagonist is at first horrified, but eventually learns to come to terms with the fact that villains like his father's character are an important part of the act of pro-wrestling. As such, there is no attempt by NJPW to deceive the public into believing its kayfabe; the truth is more than readily available, particularly in the internet age. However, to some extent the spirit of kayfabe culture still remains in New Japan, as it maintains an interest in an aesthetic of qualified realism that has existed in the promotion since its early days.

The history of Japanese pro-wrestling in general and NJPW in particular has been, until recently, haunted by the specter of what wrestling fans often call 'shoot fighting,' at

⁹ Mark Gillespie, "Two out of Ten Americans Are Wrestling Fans, 'Stone Cold' Steve Austin Picked as Fan Favorite," *Gallup News*, August 23, 1999, accessed April 13, 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/3637/two-ten-americans-wrestling-fans-stone-cold-steve-austin.aspx>.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

least somewhat legitimate matches with undetermined outcomes. This term exists in contrast to ‘works’ or ‘worked matches,’ the standard form of pro-wrestling where outcomes and major events are predetermined. The very first pro-wrestling match held in Japan with all Japanese participants occurred on December 22, 1954 between two famous fighters, Masahiko Kimura and Rikidôzan. As the story goes, it was originally intended to be a draw that would fuel a year-long feud, but Rikidôzan, incensed at what he assumed was an intentional low blow, veered off script and started genuinely attacking Kimura, knocking him out.¹¹ What was meant to be a work had transformed into a violent shoot.

A little over 15 years later, Antonio Inoki, a student of Rikidôzan, founded NJPW, and not long after became seemingly fixated on the idea of merging professional wrestling and genuine combat sports. In 1976, Inoki gave the promotion the title ‘King of Sports,’ in what pro-wrestling commentator Chris Charlton describes as a way to not only protect the NJPW brand amidst a competitive marketplace, but also to protect professional wrestling itself during a time of growing skepticism about its legitimacy.¹² In the same year, Inoki, perhaps protesting too much, created the Real World Martial Arts Championship,¹³ which would see him fight against legitimate martial artists, the first broadcasted title match being fought with Muhammad Ali.

The exact details of the match’s background are disputed. One claim is that Inoki originally planned for the fight to be worked, but Ali refused to go along with the plan,

¹¹ Chris Charlton, *Lion’s Pride: The Turbulent History of New Japan Pro Wrestling* (Self-Published, 2015), 3.

¹² *Ibid.*, 29.

¹³ The series’ Japanese title (*Kakutôgi sekai-ichi ketteisen*, World Martial Arts Championship) is more subtle, not explicitly containing the word ‘real,’ though in the present day the term *kakutôgi* is mainly used to describe legitimate combat sports and martial arts, and less so pro-wrestling.

though others allege that Ali originally assumed it would be worked, but then was intimidated by a serious Inoki and demanded that the rules of the match be changed in his favor.¹⁴ Either way, what resulted was a disastrously unpopular shoot match that ended in a draw.

There would only be a handful of other matches fought over the Real World Martial Arts championship, but Inoki would persist in his efforts to make his and his promotion's fighting appear authentic. In 1984, several New Japan wrestlers left the promotion to form the Universal Wrestling Federation (UWF), where they cultivated a style of wrestling more reminiscent of traditional martial arts. In 1985, many of the UWF wrestlers returned to NJPW in an angle known as the "UWF U-turn." According to Charlton, the addition of this more authentic fighting style was a major success:

The UWF U turn achieved what Inoki wanted to pull off with the Real Martial Arts title far more effectively. These were mainly people who had been trained and wrestling in NJPW's own system before leaving and returning with a harder shoot style edge; a far smoother proposition when it came to TV and live presentation than attempting to have legitimate sportsmen from other domains participate in worked matches.¹⁵

Ultimately, though, this style proved dangerous, resulting in UWF leader Akira Maeda breaking major star Riki Choshu's orbital bone.¹⁶ Maeda was suspended, and eventually left with other former UWF members to reform their rebel promotion.

¹⁴ Andy Bull, "The Forgotten Story of...: Muhammad Ali v Antonio Inoki," *Guardian*, November 11, 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/blog/2009/nov/11/the-forgotten-story-of-ali-inoki>.

¹⁵ Charlton, *Lion's Pride*, 64.

¹⁶ "Hiro saitô 40-shûnen historî: (20) ringu-jô de mokugekishita Maeda Akira no Chôshû Riki ganmen shûgeki jiken" 【ヒロ斎藤40周年ヒストリー】 (20) 「リング上で目撃した前田日明の長州力顔面蹴撃事件」 [Hiro Saito's 40th Anniversary History #20: The Maeda-Choshu Face-Kick Incident as Seen from Inside the Ring], *Sports Hochi*, October 20, 2019, <https://hochi.news/articles/20191011-OHT1T50090.html>.

In the 1990s, the world saw the birth and explosion of MMA, or mixed martial arts, and the sport boomed in Japan with popular promotions like Pancrase and Pride Fighting Championships, the former being founded in part by NJPW wrestler Minoru Suzuki. Amid this environment, Inoki created a new promotion, the Universal Fighting-Arts Organization (UFO) which featured pro-wrestlers such as Inoki himself in the same cards as noted MMA stars like Antônio Nogueira. Many, if not all, fights were shoot matches. The company lasted from 1998 to 2002, but never saw much success. According to cagematch.net, an online database of pro-wrestling and related fighting events, attendance peaked at UFO's final event, Legend, reaching just under 30,000 attendees.¹⁷ In comparison, PRIDE 17, held by Pride Fighting Championships the year prior, reportedly attracted over 53,000 attendees to the same Tokyo Dome where Legend would be held.¹⁸

Inoki had better financial luck with another series of events featuring MMA fighters, titled Inoki Bom-Ba-Ye. The first show, held in 2000, featured a main event match between Inoki and Renzo Gracie, a member of the legendary Gracie family that founded Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu. Though this first Bom-Ba-Ye event was entirely worked, it drew a respectable crowd,¹⁹ and NJPW proceeded to introduce more MMA fighters into their events, as well as send some of their performers off to fight in legitimate MMA matches at Pride.

¹⁷ "UFO Legend," Cagematch, accessed April 13, 2021, <https://www.cagematch.net/?id=1&nr=120391>.

¹⁸ "PRIDE 17: Championship Chaos," Tapology, accessed April 13, 2021, <https://www.tapology.com/fightcenter/events/pride-17-championship-chaos>.

¹⁹ Charlton, *Lion's Pride*, 152.

This appears to have been a disastrous combination for NJPW. Attendance at NJPW shows dropped dramatically as the trend continued, and the financial gains of having wrestlers participate in MMA fights was likely close to nil, NJPW taking no percentage of whatever profits were made from the Pride fights.²⁰ The company entered what is often referred to as its ‘dark age,’ and was ultimately driven into the ground, with many arguing that this focus on MMA and shoot matches was to blame. In 2005, Inoki sold his majority shares in the promotion to the video game company Yuke’s, and started again with the Inoki Genome Federation, another pro-wrestling/MMA hybrid promotion that lasted from 2007 until 2019.

Under the new management at Yuke’s and now at games and entertainment company Bushiroad, NJPW has seen an increase in financial success so dramatic that it is frequently characterized as a ‘V-shaped recovery.’ This resurgence is popularly attributed to several factors, primarily: moving away from shoot fighting and MMA-like matches in favor of the company’s signature ‘strong style,’ which finds a middle ground between realistic fighting techniques with classic pro-wrestling showmanship; effective writing of wrestlers that audiences respond well to; and long-term storylines that a sizable portion of wrestling fans find more grounded and engaging than the company’s largest competitor, WWE. These three qualities being commonly portrayed as important aspects of NJPW’s identity, the first three chapters of this thesis will expand on them and examine what kind of artistic product is created by contemporary NJPW’s fighting style, the fighters’ characters, and the narratives that surround the wrestling itself.

²⁰ Ibid., 153-4.

Chapter 2 focuses on the physical act of fighting in New Japan Pro-Wrestling. I will investigate exactly what constitutes strong style, as well as how this style maintains a delicate balance of resembling authentic combat while still offering the unrealistic spectacle that many fans desire. Additionally, the role of violence and injury in simultaneously developing that same authenticity and spectacle will be examined. Chapter 3 then moves out to the wrestlers in these fights, or more specifically, their characters. The various kinds of personas or ‘gimmicks’ wrestlers inhabit in New Japan will be explicated, with special attention paid to how they relate to paradigms of morality and nationality. In Chapter 4, focus will be drawn further out to the story angles commonly seen in New Japan, which are largely center around match and tournament results as well as interpersonal melodrama. Lastly, Chapter 5 will examine the ‘peripheral’ elements of the Japanese pro-wrestling experience that, while not directly bearing on the core fighting and stories, contribute to the social space within which the wrestling is situated. These elements include parts of shows created directly by or in collaboration with NJPW, such as promotional material and match commentary, as well as elements outside of New Japan’s immediate control, namely audience behavior. In each of these chapters, the primary focus will be on the extent to which each aspect helps constitute a kayfabe universe that is, in one way or another, ‘believable,’ often through hewing more closely to the athletics, aesthetics, and rules of real-world sporting events and institutions.

The scope of this thesis will primarily look at the contemporary period after NJPW’s ‘dark age,’ particularly after it gained its present head booker, the wrestler Gedo (real name Keiji Takayama). A ‘booker’ in professional wrestling is roughly equivalent

to a theatrical director or scriptwriter. A booker is responsible for creating characters, setting up matches, and writing storylines. As such, bookers can generally be said to possess significant authorial control. Additionally, though the focus of this thesis is on New Japan, when comparatively useful it will also analyze other wrestling promotions. The primary point of comparison will usually be WWE, as it is the largest professional wrestling company in the world and, therefore, NJPW's primary competitor, as well as a promotion that shapes much of the discourse and ideas about pro-wrestling worldwide. Some other promotions will be included as well, such as other Japanese promotions like the women's league World Wonder Ring Stardom.

CHAPTER II

THE BODY

A. Strong Style and Realistic Fake Fighting

What may immediately strike many accustomed to the style of fighting on display in WWE and other American professional wrestling promotions is the degree to which NJPW wrestlers employ techniques from competitive combat sports in addition to the standard pro-wrestling repertoire. Of course, absurd moves that any legitimate sporting event would ban — such as the tombstone piledriver, which involves slamming an opponent head-first onto the mat — are on full display in Japan as they are in the United States. But in addition to the over-the-top blows and high-flying acrobatics, one also finds slow grappling exchanges and martial art maneuvers. Let us compare, for example, two title fights from major summer events: one fight between Roman Reigns and Brock Lesnar during the WWE event SummerSlam 2018, and another between Kazuchika Okada and Minoru Suzuki at the NJPW event, New Beginning in Sapporo 2017.

The fight between Reigns and Lesnar opens with Lesnar walking into three superman punches (a technique where the user dramatically jumps in the air and punches the opponent in the face) and two spears (a headfirst dive at the opponent), punctuated by Reigns howling and hyperventilating (see fig. 1).²¹



Figure 1. Brock Lesnar reeling from one of Roman Reigns' superman punches that has not actually connected.

²¹ WWE, "FULL MATCH - Brock Lesnar vs. Roman Reigns - Universal Title Match: SummerSlam 2018," YouTube video, August 21, 2020, accessed April 13, 2021, 8:02, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nSNkwIvIWJU>.

Reigns then performs a third spear which lands squarely into a guillotine choke from Lesnar. The rest of the six-minute fight consists largely of these moves and a few body slams from both wrestlers. This is a fairly typical fight for Reigns, a major star of WWE. A similar series of superman punches is feature in another fight between Reigns and Lesnar at WrestleMania 31.²² This fight is no doubt full of spectacle, and the audience reacts spectacularly itself, raucously cheering at each jumping attack that Reigns lands. Thus, if this were one's only exposure to professional wrestling, it would be easy to assume that the appeal of the medium is to represent combat only in its most heightened, exaggerated form.



Figure 2. Minoru Suzuki (left) and Kazuchika Okada (right) vying for a grab.

However, Okada and Suzuki's fight progresses in a completely different way. When the bell rings, the two wrestlers slowly square off and cautiously extend grasping hands in a way that resembles the beginning of a Brazilian jiu-jitsu match (see fig. 2).²³

Okada eventually gets a slight grasp on Suzuki, who then edges back against the ropes, forcing Okada to, as per standard pro-wrestling rules, carefully release his grip. The match goes on for forty minutes, gradually ramping up the intensity of the grappling and submission exchanges until it eventually reaches heights of spectacle comparable to the

²² WWE, "Roman Reigns vs. Brock Lesnar - WWE World Heavyweight Championship Match: WrestleMania 31," YouTube video, May 25, 2016, accessed April 13, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S93aGSnDin4>.

²³ *THE NEW BEGINNING in SAPPORO ~ revival! Snow of Sapporo decisive battle - Feb 5, 2017 Hokkaido Prefectural Sports Center Hokkai Kitayell 9TH MATCH Kazuchika Okada vs. Minoru*, streaming video, NJPW World, accessed April 13, 2021, 0:12:21, https://njpwworld.com/p/s_series_00417_1_09.

above WWE fight, at one point Suzuki menacingly lolling his tongue and proudly declaring to the audience his intent to break Okada's leg.²⁴ Despite this heightened climax, though, the match still begins in a way that is recognizable as two people attempting to defeat each other in actual combat, in a way that the fight between Reigns and Lesnar almost never is. Indeed, critic Dave Meltzer writes about the match, "it comes across no longer as entertainment but as close to dramatic sport as could be possible in the genre without going full bore shoot style."²⁵ Ultimately, this fight caused the audience to cheer just as fervently as the former, and was well-received by critics. Besides Okada being stalwart and Suzuki cruel — typical behavior for both of them — there is little character work on display in this fight, so one may assume that this positive reception largely stems from the fighting itself. It is apparent, then, that pure, unadulterated spectacle is not the only way to sell a pro-wrestling fight to audiences.

This semi-realistic fighting style on display throughout many NJPW matches is often marketed as 'strong style,' and its origin is generally attributed to Antonio Inoki. A standard definition of strong style is that it is the hard-hitting and (relatively) realistic style of fighting on display in much of Japanese pro-wrestling.²⁶ Each part of this definition, though, deserves some clarification or qualification.

First, the term 'hard-hitting' is fairly ambiguous in a medium that frequently features performers attacking each other with metal chairs. In some cases, this is referring

²⁴ Ibid., 0:41:50-0:42:00.

²⁵ Dave Meltzer "NJPW New Beginning review, WWE Fast Lane/Elimination Chamber cards, more," *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* (Campbell, CA), February 13, 2017.

²⁶ Sean Desilets, "Daniel's Specter: Daniel Bryan, Chris Benoit, and the Work of Mourning," in *#WWE: Professional Wrestling in the Digital Age*, ed. Dru Jeffries (Indiana University Press: 2019), 202.

to ‘hardcore’ matches, gruesome and sometimes elaborate fights that took the violence intrinsic to professional wrestling to its bloody extreme. Hardcore fights were once a more common feature of pro-wrestling in Japan, though they have waned in recent years. Even so, it is still appropriate to use the term when speaking of promotions like New Japan, which do indeed revel in full-impact strikes and grueling grappling sessions. To take an example from women’s wrestling, the all-female promotion Stardom frequently features wrestlers moving their fights into the crowds, and then leaping from an entrance balcony onto the hard floor to slam or stomp on their opponent (see fig. 3).²⁷



Figure 3. Stardom wrestler Meiko Satomura jumping from a balcony and colliding with opponent Io Shirai.

The hard-hitting aspect of Japanese pro-wrestling is perhaps best typified, though, by the chopping exchange, found in nigh every NJPW event, if not in the vast majority of matches. The standard formula for the chopping exchange is that two wrestlers will face each other and, wishing to demonstrate their bravado, allow each other to chop their chests at full force, without defending themselves. Both wrestlers will let out loud grunts with each strike, each blow audibly resounding, causing sweat drops to fly from the receiver’s breast, and eliciting chants from the audience. Eventually, the fighters will begin to recoil, and normal fighting will resume. Variations also exist, such as using forearm strikes or having one performer ‘no-sell,’ that is, not react to the hit. Such sequences are not unheard of in WWE, but they are rarer as of late, with some viewers

²⁷ Digital image from “Stardom “The Highest” on 3/21/16 Review,” Joshi City, March 30, 2016, accessed April 13, 2021, <https://i1.wp.com/joshicity.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/stardom3.21-5.gif>.

criticizing the promotion's programming as being too "PG" in recent years.²⁸ Where they are present, though, the result of tropes like the chopping exchange would never be found in actual combat sports, they do create a sense of real, genuine aggression felt between the wrestlers.

As for realism, we have just described how the hard-hittingness of strong style wrestling can actually detract from its believability. Still, despite — or perhaps because of — this, Japanese pro-wrestling also frequently draws attention to the idea of genuine fighting technique. One such example is the cautious exchange in the Okada-Suzuki fight described above. It is also noteworthy that another prominent element of strong style is grappling and submissions takedowns, arguably the subset of pro-wrestling moves most usable in actual fights. Some promotions (albeit usually not NJPW) will even highlight their performer's previous sports and martial arts experience on their rosters.²⁹ These touches are subtle enough that strong style wrestling is still distinct from actual combat, but are evident enough to give the style some groundedness that other pro-wrestling may lack. It should be noted, though, that even Roman Reigns' superman punch is used in some real martial arts such as Muay Thai, if more sparingly than in WWE.

Thus, while strong style may be provisionally defined as hard-hitting, realistic, Japanese pro-wrestling, there are many caveats to the definition, making a precise

²⁸ For an example of a more hard-hitting recent WWE match, see the 'Boneyard Match' between the Undertaker and A.J. Styles from WrestleMania 36, which includes a body slam and piledriver performed from the roof of a large shed: WWE, "FULL MATCH - Undertaker vs. AJ Styles – Boneyard Match: WrestleMania 36 Part 1," YouTube video, November 22, 2020, accessed April 13, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=266C_taG-TU.

²⁹ See the profile of Stardom wrestler Hanan, which lists her previous experience in judo and handball: "Hanan," *World Wonder Ring STARDOM*, accessed April 13, 2021, <https://wwr-stardom.com/fighters/hanan/>.

understanding of the term difficult to pin down. Even some of strong style's most famous practitioners fail to elucidate its meaning. In a 2019 interview with Japanese culture magazine *Kettle*, Hiroshi Tanahashi, one of New Japan's most illustrious former champions, stated that he often struggled over what exactly following strong style meant, and when he asked Antonio Inoki for a clear definition of the term, the company's founder allegedly responded, "The term 'strong style' is just something someone came up with. I don't know what it is."³⁰

Despite this ambiguity, though, the term is an important part of New Japan's brand identity, appearing throughout blog posts and sizzle reel titles, as well as the 2018 overseas events, Strong Style Evolved (held in the US) and Strong Style Evolved UK. According to Charlton, strong style is better described as a hybrid of "the showmanship of American wrestling with the grappling of European Catch."³¹ Catch wrestling (alternatively catch-as-catch-can wrestling) is the origin of modern professional wrestling and freestyle wrestling. The original catch wrestling came from England and allowed holds and throws of almost any kind (unlike, for example, Greco-Roman wrestling, which forbids holds below the waist). Though catch wrestling matches began as legitimate events held at carnivals and funfairs, event organizers eventually began to set the outcomes of matches ahead of time, thus turning into professional wrestling as it is known today. Charlton's usage in the above quote refers to the style of professional wrestling that emulates these no holds barred fighting events.

³⁰ "“Sutorongu sutairu towa nani ka?” Tanahashi Hiroshi no shitsumon ni A. Inoki wa nan to kotaeta?” 「ストロングスタイルとは何か」 棚橋弘至の質問に A・猪木は何と答えた？ [‘What is Strong Style?’ How Did Antonio Inoki Hiroshi Tanahashi’s Question?], *Kettle News*, Ohta Publishing Co., February 11, 2019, <https://www.ohtabooks.com/qj kettle/news/2019/02/11091210.html>.

³¹ Charlton, *Lion's Pride*, 15.

Other evidence of strong style's hybridity can be found in the fact that even its 'Japaneseness' is sometimes in question. A number of wrestlers have moved from NJPW to WWE recently and in the past, including major stars like AJ Styles, Shinsuke Nakamura, and Brock Lesnar. Some WWE wrestlers, such as Chris Benoit, were also known in particular for importing the Japanese style in the techniques they used.³² There are also some American promotions more known for their affinity to Japanese wrestling, such as Ring of Honor (ROH), which has had a partnership with NJPW that has many wrestlers to have prominent careers in both, and All-Elite Wrestling (AEW), a more recent promotion made up of many former NJPW and ROH personnel. Furthermore, it is debatable to what extent strong style is Japanese in its origins as well. It is common practice for NJPW wrestlers to go on 'excursion,' where they train and perform at a partner promotion elsewhere in the world (namely Mexico, the US, or the UK), before coming back to show what they have picked up. In this way, the signature style of NJPW is a particular blend of global influences. Kazuchika Okada, a leading star of the promotion, describes his own style in a *Sports Illustrated* interview: "I started wrestling in Mexico, and then I came to New Japan. I tried to be different. I learned the Mexican style, the Japanese style and the American style. My dropkick is from Mexico, but my fighting spirit is from Japan. The TV and the entertainment is from the U.S., so everything combined."³³ Though Okada characterizes his international mix of styles as "different" and "new," given how common excursions, training abroad, and bringing in

³² Desilets, "Daniel's Specter," 202.

³³ Justin Barasso, "Week in Wrestling: Jimmy Hart on the art of theme songs; Trish Stratus," *Sports Illustrated*, May 11, 2016, <https://www.si.com/extra-mustard/2016/05/11/trish-stratus-jimmy-hart-wwf-new-japan-kazuchika-okada>.

wrestlers from other countries is, this approach may alternatively be thought of as the standard for strong style wrestling.

Charlton's definition, then, goes some way to explain Tanahashi and Inoki's uncertainty over strong style; if it is such a hybrid style, then it requires balancing the fantastic and the realistic, rather than simply pursuing one direction. This way of understanding the style is also supported by the fact that strong style is often described in negative terms, contrasting it with either the WWE style or shoot wrestling as the case may be. For example, in an interview with *Sports Illustrated*, NJPW head booker Gedo described his promotion thus:

We are not a soap opera [...] We are not sports entertainment, we are not acting and not dancing. We wrestle and we are wrestling. Watch a Shibata match and the way he kicks, that's New Japan Pro Wrestling. [Tetsuya] Naito, [Hiroshi] Tanahashi, and [Tomohiro] Ishii all wrestle and fight. That is entertaining, but it is not entertainment. It's wrestling. Characters are different in the United States than they are in Japan. Skill and fighting spirit are most important, much more than character, in Japan.³⁴

Here, where Gedo wishes to distinguish his company's product from its leading competitor's, Japanese wrestling is all about 'skill' and 'wrestling,' not 'entertainment' or 'acting.' However, at the same time, Gedo himself represents a step away from the company's earlier 'Inoki-ism,' when legitimate, competitive matches — indeed, real wrestling — were much more common. Even now that New Japan is no longer owned by Yuke's, the company that had mandated the end of shoot wrestling in New Japan, Gedo has made no moves to bring back anything even remotely resembling shoot matches. It is also worth noting that, even in the above quotation, Gedo subtly includes the abstract

³⁴ Justin Barasso, "Week in Wrestling: Interviewing New Japan's head booker; Goldberg's WCW origins," *Sports Illustrated*, October 19, 2016, <https://www.si.com/extra-mustard/2016/10/19/wwe-week-wrestling-new-japan-goldberg-colt-cabana>.

‘fighting spirit’ with the more grounded discussion of kicks and skill. Much like strong style, fighting spirit is a term that features prominently in NJPW’s branding (such as is in the recent series of events, Fighting Spirit Unleashed), but is quite nebulous in definition, referring generally to the ability of wrestlers to fight on despite enduring intense pain. Charlton explains the term, “the idea of a wrestler standing up to heavy damage, often seemingly receiving a shot of adrenaline to withstand a powerful move only to pop up and go on offense.”³⁵ In this sense, fighting spirit is a dramatic mechanism used to create the sort of thrilling reversal often seen in the likes of popular action anime.

Thus, even though strong style is frequently described as realistic, there is still clearly a limit to how far NJPW is willing to commit to that realism in the present age. Indeed, should a promotion lean too heavily on the real, they may face the same economic catastrophe that Inoki’s New Japan suffered. However, elements like powerful strikes, grappling, and nods to real combat sports moves allow for an attenuated realism that allows for easier suspension of disbelief than more heightened styles, while still maintaining the flare that fans expect from professional wrestling.

B. Pain and Injury

While we have thus far examined *puroresu* with regards to the way wrestlers perform their moves, in professional wrestling, the art of ‘selling,’ or receiving a move and seeming genuinely injured by it. Though one may debate whether a given promotion’s talent is better or worse at this skill, generally speaking, it is done the same way in most of the wrestling world: grunting, limping, doubling over, making pained

³⁵ Charlton, *Lion’s Pride*, 14.

expressions, etc. However, there is one tactic that Japanese promotions have been and still are (at least when comparing modern NJPW and WWE) more willing to employ: actually injuring wrestlers.

As previously mentioned, ‘hardcore’ matches (also called ‘deathmatches,’ particularly in Japanese) were once a fairly prominent part of the Japanese wrestling scene. Though the term ‘deathmatch’ in Japan originally referred to no-draws, no time-limit, best-of-one matches, eventually, the term was used to refer to matches with bizarre gimmicks designed to draw crowds during the economic crises of the late 80s and 90s.³⁶ While some of these were more benign, such as matches where wrestlers were tied together at the wrists, others chose to emphasize violence and bodily harm, and these are the fights that would generally be dubbed ‘hardcore’ in English. One of the pioneers of hardcore wrestling was Atsushi Onita, who performed a 1989 match where the ropes were replaced with barbed wire, and another in 1990 where this barbed wire was also electrified.³⁷ Another noteworthy figure is Abdullah Kobayashi, who has participated in multiple matches featuring him and his opponents breaking glass tubes over each other to the point where their bodies are covered in blood. Fights like these are particularly brutal examples of the ‘hard-hittingness’ of Japanese wrestling described above.

NJPW briefly tested the waters with hardcore matches, even featuring its own electrified barbed wire match with Onita in 1999. The match was a relative failure

³⁶ Kashihara Masataka 柏原全孝, “Desumacchi no shakaigaku ni mukete” デスマッチの社会学に向けて [Towards a Sociology of the Deathmatch], *Otemon Gakuin University Bulletin of the Faculty of Sociology* 11 (2017): 42;44.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 45

though, and hardcore matches never ended up being a mainstay of the promotion.³⁸ Even so, they do partake in some of the bloodier trends in wrestling from time to time. One such example is the practice of ‘blading.’ Blading refers to when one wrestler takes an attack and then one performer (usually the referee, but potentially the victim themselves or another wrestler) will try to surreptitiously take out a small razor blade and make a cut on their scalp. Cuts to the scalp heal fairly easily, but also bleed quite profusely, producing a gruesome image of the wrestler’s face covered in streaming blood and sweat, sometimes referred to as a ‘crimson mask.’

Blading used to be common practice throughout the wrestling world, and remains to some extent in much of it, but is no longer used in WWE. This appears to have started in 2008, when the American broadcast of the show received a TV-PG Rating from the Federal Communications Commission. In 2015, WWE reportedly went so far as to release a statement when rumors spread that one wrestler bladed during a match: “WWE programming is TV-PG and we don’t permit intentional bleeding. The communication or contact between our performers and referees is part of our safety protocol. That said, unintentional blood sometimes occurs, and we do our best to minimize.”³⁹ In another fight later that year between Brock Lesnar and the Undertaker, some spectators complained that WWE appeared to intentionally avoid showing Lesnar bleeding on one side of his head, only broadcasting shots of the other side of his head at a certain point. Additionally, when the match was uploaded to YouTube, the footage abruptly changes

³⁸ Charlton, *Lion’s Pride*, 125-6.

³⁹ Andrew Ravens, “WWE issues statement about Brock Lesnar blading in his match at WrestleMania 31,” *Wrestling News.Co*, March 31, 2015, <https://wrestlingnews.co/wwe-news/wwe-issues-statement-about-brock-lesnar-blading-in-his-match-at-WrestleMania-31/>.

from full color to black-and-white from the moment where Lesnar's cut first appears until the end of the video.⁴⁰

One may argue that WWE has reduced the overt violence of their wrestling out of concern for their wrestlers' safety. Chris Benoit was a WWE wrestler from 2000 to 2007 who, as described above, was known for showing off many common Japanese moves in his wrestling. However, in 2007, Benoit had a sudden mental break that led to him killing his wife and son, and then himself. He asphyxiated both his wife and his child, though bruises on his son's face suggested that he did so in the latter case using one of his signature chokeholds. An autopsy of Benoit revealed that the numerous head injuries he had suffered throughout his career resulted in severe brain damage known to cause such violent tendencies.⁴¹ As Sean Desilets notes, it is very likely that the hard-hittingness of the strong style Benoit brought to his performance contributed to the severity of his brain damage.⁴² WWE responded to the incident by all but completely purging Benoit from their history. Desilets describes:

His matches were removed from DVD releases, and his name was scrubbed from WWE.com. His actions motivated a whole series of new restrictions on WWE wrestlers, who were banned from using moves associated with Benoit or reminiscent of his actions. Performances of choking, for example, were banned. Nearly ten years later, his matches do appear on the WWE Network, but a search for his name yields no results, and the matches are not indexed in the way other matches are. The streaming service includes cue points that mark the beginnings and conclusions for most matches on its archived shows, Benoit's being a notable

⁴⁰ Richard Gray, "WWE's Anti-Blood Policy, Swagger To Be Suspended?", Android App, Piledriver Banned," *Wrestling News World*, published February 26, 2013, last modified July 31, 2018, <https://www.wrestlingnewsworld.com/ask-wnw/wwes-anti-blood-policy-swagger-to-be-suspended-android-app-piledriver-banned>; WWE, "FULL MATCH - Brock Lesnar vs. The Undertaker: SummerSlam 2015," YouTube video, March 26, 2020, accessed April 13, 2021, 9:10, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sBBFSuHATmw>.

⁴¹ Desilets, "Daniel's Specter," 201.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 202.

exception. Benoit is a metadata ghost, a hole in the net of information that facilitates fans' interaction with WWE history. In short, though the rigor of WWE's efforts to make Benoit disappear has relaxed over time, the company still tries to efface his memory.⁴³

Should the lengths WWE has gone to remove the memory of Benoit and his wrestling, then, be interpreted as an attempt to protect their workers' and their workers' families' lives?

Signs point to wrestlers' safety being a secondary concern in the matter. Between not providing its wrestlers health insurance⁴⁴ and having them perform during the peak of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in the US, it is evident that wrestlers' bodily health is something WWE is willing to risk. Furthermore, chokes and blading did not cause Benoit's death, concussions did. Rather, the removal of practices like blading seems to be primarily economically motivated. Since becoming a publicly shared company in 1999, WWE has made a strong push towards marketing its content as more family-friendly, with one executive, Paul "Triple H" Levesque comparing the fighting in WWE to the cartoon violence of Wile E. Coyote.⁴⁵ As time has gone on, WWE has also come to produce many of its own tertiary products aimed specifically at children, such as comics, cartoon series, and *Scooby-Doo* tie-ins.⁴⁶ Taken together with the above statement's emphasis on the TV-PG rating, it is clear that WWE, though creating a

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Felix Upton, "Stephanie McMahon Addresses Superstar Health Insurance & What WWE Pays For," *Ringside News*, July 24, 2020, <https://www.ringsideneews.com/2020/07/24/stephanie-mcmahon-addresses-superstar-health-insurance-what-wwe-pays-for/>.

⁴⁵ Eero Laine, "World Building in the WWE Universe," 31.

⁴⁶ Dru Jeffries and Andrew Kannegiesser, "Mapping the WWE Universe: Territory, Media, Capitalism," in *#WWE: Professional Wrestling in the Digital Age*, ed. Dru Jeffries (Indiana University Press: 2019), 74-5.

universe where violence is necessarily at the center of every story and every character's life, has removed the most obvious examples of injury from their repertoire of stage tricks. Levesque's comparison to the *Looney Tunes* is then quite appropriate. Like cartoon characters, WWE wrestlers are beaten, bludgeoned, and thrown on their faces, but the audience can rest easy knowing that they suffer no real harm and will be back to do it all again in a week's time. The performers, though, are just as likely to develop concussions as they would have been otherwise.

New Japan also features other ways of taxing its wrestlers' bodies that are not seen in WWE, some less obvious than blading but more pervasive, such as match length. As stated above, the Reigns and Lesnar SummerSlam 2018 match described at the beginning of this chapter lasted six minutes. When the two fought again at WrestleMania 31, WWE's largest yearly event, they went for sixteen minutes between both rings of the bell. In both cases, these fights were the main events of their respective shows. The Okada and Suzuki fight also described earlier was a main event too, but it was held at The New Beginning 2017, and while New Beginning is a fairly major event, it is by no means NJPW most thoroughly promoted or well-attended, coming roughly a month after its defining New Year event held every year at the Tokyo Dome. Even so, that match lasted forty minutes, almost twice the length of both of these Reigns vs Lesnar matches combined. This is no aberration; a best-of-three match between Kazuchika Okada and Kenny Omega at Dominion 6.9 (2018) lasted over an hour. WWE has held a handful of matches of comparable length, such as Bret Hart vs Shawn Michaels at WrestleMania XII (produced under the company's former name, WWF). Especially in recent years, though,

this is an exceptional case; it is rare for a WrestleMania main event to last for more than half an hour.

The most likely reason for this discrepancy in match length is that NJPW and WWE have different restrictions by virtue of the differences in their programming structure. While NJPW centers around monthly pay-per-view events with occasional smaller shows leading up to them, WWE broadcasts several weekly television shows, as well as larger pay-per-view events and house shows, non-televised performances held at smaller venues and generally lacking major story developments.⁴⁷ While not every member of the active roster appears at all of these shows, it is rare for anyone besides an established veteran or a poorly-performing newcomer to be repeatedly absent from the weekly programming without extenuating circumstances like pregnancy or hospitalization. As such, WWE wrestlers have less time to recover from matches than do those working for New Japan. While, as aforementioned, WWE may not always hold its employees' physical well-being in the highest regard, as a business, they are most likely to care for their most lucrative talent, i.e., the wrestlers that they would book main events with. There is also a significant difference between long-term injuries, such as brain damage, and immediate, show-stopping wounds, such as a broken bone, which can easily disrupt both the matches they happen in and following weeks' material. As such, each match must be less physically taxing to prevent these sudden disruptions.

⁴⁷ N.b., WWE stopped hosting house shows around the beginning of the COVID-19 epidemic, and rumors have circulated that they will not be returning after the pandemic is over. See: Kevin Flavius, "Ex-WWE Referee Says Company Had Plans To Cancel House Shows Before The Pandemic," *The Sportster*, December 30, 2020, <https://www.thesportster.com/news/wwe-cancel-house-shows/>.

On the other hand, NJPW has the liberty to book extended matches precisely because they do not have a weekly show that their stars are expected to consistently appear in. These long matches are best understood as another kind of violent spectacle, one that is more like a slow torture testing the limits of the performers' endurance. In his New Beginning bout with Suzuki, Okada endures a veritable onslaught of chokes, holds, and hyper-extensions. By the end of it, he is flushed, covered in sweat, and panting through his victory speech. Unlike the acute, momentary pain of blading, this kind of violence can be drawn out to create an extended spectacle, one with its own dramatic arc of repeated capture and escape.

NJPW has, at times, made its own moves towards creating a wrestling environment that could appear safer than in previous years. In 2009, wrestler Mitsuhara Misawa died from a severe spinal injury resulting from a suplex he had received in-ring. This event drew serious attention from Japanese sports media, and in its wake, key figures from several Japanese wrestling promotions convened to discuss ways to make the profession safer. Coming two years after Benoit's infamous death, it is likely that that incident also informed the decision. The talks ultimately had limited effects, for instance effectively (but not formally) banning unprotected weapon strikes to the head, but not unprotected headbutts.⁴⁸ This is, then, a more subtle version of the same contradiction at work with WWE's ban on blading, one that still postures towards safety without truly doing much. In this case, though, the Japanese promotions still maintain the same general aesthetics of violence as before.

⁴⁸ Charlton, *Lion's Pride*, 183.

We might ask, then, what is the point of the aesthetic of violence and injury? Speaking on the hardcore matches detailed above, Kashihara lays out two benefits of their hyper-violence for the wrestling company besides just creating more highly concentrated spectacle: to allow for greater variety than just standard match formats, as well as to really hurt the wrestlers.⁴⁹ This last ‘benefit’ may be somewhat counterintuitive; while many employers (including, as established, wrestling promotions) may be indifferent to worker injury, few actively seek it out. This is, however, a unique quirk to the business of professional wrestling. Speaking of WWE, Eero Laine writes,

While camera tricks, special effects, and computer-generated graphics are employed to augment and insulate the filmed performer’s body, the bodies of wrestlers very clearly exist, and their performances occur without any mediated safety net [...] The performance of professional wrestling is literally imprinted on the wrestlers’ bodies insofar as the actions of their characters have material effects on the wrestlers themselves.⁵⁰

The point of this viscerality is to enhance the realism of the performance, to subconsciously give the impression of a real fight by virtue of the fact that the performers suffer the *effects* of a real fight. Without blood streaming or bones breaking, wrestlers seem less like real people fighting and more like, as described above, cartoon characters. The idea of fighting spirit is once again relevant here; because it is evident to audiences that the performer is suffering very real pain and injury, the wrestler’s ability to fight on regardless is impressive in that it demonstrates not only the character’s desire to win, but

⁴⁹ Kashihara, “Towards a Sociology of the Deathmatch,” 45.

⁵⁰ Laine, “World Building in the WWE Universe,” 28.

also the extent of the real person's physical training allowing him to continue the performance.

One might question, though, whether or not the gory displays found in hardcore matches or fights like the Wrestling Dontaku bout between Tetsuya Naito and Chris



Figure 4. Tetsuya Naito in a 'crimson mask,' bloodied after being hit in the head with an announcer's bell by Chris Jericho and presumable subsequent blading.

Jericho, which includes Jericho assaulting Naito before the match begins and cracking him in the head with the announcer's bell (see fig. 4.),⁵¹ have anything to do with realism. While Laine is correct that the real pain and injury create the impression of very 'real' violence, no major, legitimate sporting event in the modern era would risk their talent over such absurdly dangerous spectacle that goes far outside the bounds of the actual sport. As well, NJPW's hour-long matches are also quite

unrealistic. The longest a regulation boxing match can last is 36 minutes of fighting time (with additional resting time in between), assuming an extreme of 12 rounds with 3 minutes per round. Though earlier in MMA's history it would occasionally feature exceptional bouts like a 90-minute fight between Kazushi Sakuraba and Royce Gracie hosted by PRIDE Fighting, current UFC regulations are such that a title match can last a maximum of 25 minutes, with 5 minutes allotted for 5 rounds. This all being the case, such protracted violence only *could* happen in a 'sporting' event if the outcome were predetermined, if the fighters were really performers working together. Following this

⁵¹ New Japan Pro-Wrestling, "WRESTLING DONTAKU 2018 (May 4) - Post-match Interview [6th match]," YouTube video, May 5, 2018, accessed April 13, 2021, 2:56, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9521nKekVg>.

line of logic, Kashihara describes deathmatches like the electrified barbed-wire match as metatextual parodies of professional wrestling. By using real, visceral violence and injury, they highlight the necessary stagedness of the production, brazenly flouting once-precious kayfabe.⁵²

However, though Kashihara interprets this apparent contradiction between the physical reality and the staged dramatism of pro-wrestling violence as intentional parody, it is not clear that this is how the producers or consumers of the genre consider it. Rather, just as with the attenuated realism of legitimate fighting techniques mixed with piledrivers and DDTs, strong style's violence can serve as a compromise between the real and the spectacle. A viewer can be at once enthralled by the manifestly real pain that a fighter endures while also reveling in the absurdity that they are witness to the spectacle in the first place. Thus, at least as far as the violence of professional wrestling is concerned, reality and spectacle need not necessarily be in contradiction, but are able to simply co-exist as independent selling points that can appeal to the same fans at the same time.

⁵² Kashihara, "Towards a Sociology of the Deathmatch," 48.

CHAPTER III

THE COSTUME

Most professional wrestling matches are fairly sparse productions. Certainly, some may feature numerous performers, sometimes including managers and family members alongside wrestlers themselves; others may use unique staging like ladders, cages, or the aforementioned barbed-wire ropes; and others still may include lengthy promotional videos and bombastic entrance sequences. These matches, though, are exceptions to the rule, particularly in more aesthetically down-to-earth promotions like New Japan. At the end of the day, the vast majority of wrestling matches can be appropriately summarized as two people in a ring, fighting. We have thus far examined the fighting itself, but the people doing the fighting at least equally essential to any analysis of the medium. However, almost never is the person seen in a wrestling match exactly the same as the everyday person whose body is being used in the act. There is almost always some amount, large or small, of mediation between the performer and the wrestler.

The clearest way that this mediation takes place is in the construction of a ‘gimmick,’ or a wrestling persona. The gimmick is a slightly more fluid concept than that of a character. In some cases, when one speaks of a given wrestler’s gimmick, they may indeed be referring to an entire character with their own name, history, and style; they may be referring to particular variations within that character over time, such as changes in attitude or costume; or they may be simply referring to the affect and personality that the performer puts on while wrestling. One performer may take on many gimmicks throughout their career, and some gimmicks (particularly those of masked wrestlers seen

most often in Latin America and, to some extent, Japan) are shared between performers, sometimes covertly with no particular attention drawn to the fact by the promotion, and sometimes overtly through the process of one wrestler inheriting the gimmick from another (e.g. Tiger Mask in New Japan, Octagón in Mexico's AAA, etc.).

A. Good and Evil

Two broad divisions exist in wrestler's gimmicks: the babyface (often shortened to face) and the heel. These terms may be treated as synonymous with 'hero' and 'villain' respectively, but they also may be defined functionally: a face is a wrestler that the audience is meant to root for and a heel is a wrestler that the audience is meant to root against. In "The World of Wrestling," Roland Barthes lays out a number of ways in which this dynamic is central to the premise of professional wrestling, being imbued with the mythic sense of import of a struggle between good and evil, with good and evil being defined on political or ethical terms depending on the country.⁵³ A key part of Barthes' analysis is also that these roles are immediately clear to the observer. He writes, "Each sign in wrestling is [...] endowed with an absolute clarity, since [the audience] must always understand everything on the spot. As soon as the adversaries are in the ring, the public is overwhelmed by the obviousness of their roles."⁵⁴ This being the case, according to Barthes, "wrestling is therefore like an algebra which instantaneously reveals the relationship between the cause and its represented effect. Wrestling fans certainly experience a kind of intellectual pleasure in *seeing* the moral mechanism

⁵³ Barthes, "The World of Wrestling," 23.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 16-7.

function so perfectly.”⁵⁵ Barthes gives particular emphasis to the role of evil in the morality play:

Since Evil is the natural climate of wrestling, a fair fight has chiefly the value of being an exception. It surprises the aficionado, who greets it when he sees it as an anachronism and a rather sentimental throwback to the sporting tradition [...] he feels suddenly moved at the sight of the general kindness of the world, but would probably die of boredom and indifference if wrestlers did not quickly return to the orgy of evil which alone makes good wrestling.⁵⁶

In other words, according to Barthes, pro-wrestling simply cannot be pro-wrestling without the heel injecting evil into it.

However, one peculiarity of NJPW is the relative dearth of heels in its roster. That is not to say that heels do not exist in the promotion; in fact, there are entire factions made up of wrestlers somewhere on the heel spectrum, such as the Bullet Club and Suzuki-gun. Still, though, NJPW appears to feel less of a need to premise its matches on the kind of mythological battle between good and evil that Barthes describes than other promotions. This can be seen by looking at the main events of the promotion’s largest annual show, *Wrestle Kingdom*. From 2012 to 2020, only three out of nine of these matches featured a wrestler who was clearly meant to be a heel at the time.⁵⁷ In the same

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁵⁷ The heels were: Minoru Suzuki (fighting Hiroshi Tanahashi) at *Wrestle Kingdom VI* (2012), Kazuchika Okada (fighting Tanahashi) at *Wrestle Kingdom 7* (2013), and Kenny Omega (fighting Okada) at *Wrestle Kingdom 11* (2017).

timeframe, WrestleMania (WWE’s largest annual production) has had six such matches.⁵⁸

The wrestlers who have fit the mold of the American heel most closely have largely been members of the Bullet Club. Bullet Club wrestlers frequently violate rules in bombastic ways, often ganging up on opponents and attacking them with chairs and



Figure 5. Bullet Club members under leadership of Prince Devitt (center-left) performing a mock execution of eventual faction member Kenny Omega.

other weapons. At times, it has also been a ritual for the Bullet Club to devilishly pose over semi-conscious foes while making gestures of guns pointed at the victim’s head (see fig. 5).⁵⁹ They have even, at times, attacked journalists during post-match interviews. However, the Bullet Club is best described as the exception that proves the rule. One founding member, Karl Anderson, has reflected out-of-character on how much of a “shock” it was for fans in Japan to see the Bullet Club’s behavior, including their use of profanity and alcohol consumption during broadcasts.⁶⁰ In these cases, the Bullet Club broke decorum even for heels in a way that is hardly out of place in almost any American

⁵⁸ Randy Orton and Batista (fighting each other and Daniel Bryan) at WrestleMania XXX (2014), Seth Rollins (fighting Brock Lesnar and Roman Reigns) at WrestleMania 31 (2015) Triple H (fighting Reigns) at WrestleMania 32 (2016), Brock Lesnar (fighting Reigns) at WrestleMania 33 (2017), Ronda Rousey and Charlotte Flair (fighting each other and Becky Lynch) at WrestleMania 35 (2019), Lesnar (fighting Drew McIntyre) at WrestleMania 36 (2020).

⁵⁹ “Kenny Omega humiliated by the Original Bullet Club (2013),” Imgur, September 27, 2016, accessed April 13, 2021, <https://imgur.com/4HeZfxj>.

⁶⁰ Sam Roberts, “Karl Anderson on Sam Roberts Wrestling Podcast - Bullet Club, CM Punk, NJPW, WK9, etc.,” YouTube video, January 3, 2015, accessed April 13, 2021, 2:40, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ot6hAwnU52o>.

promotion, but which earned them legitimately-felt ire from fans. This serves to highlight the extent to which classical heelish behavior is outside of the norm in New Japan, and not its “natural climate.”

New Japan’s relative lack of reliance on the heel-face dynamic reflects a general trend in Japanese pro-wrestling of featuring subtler wrestler gimmicks on average compared to American wrestling. For example, WWE’s current roster includes the vaguely undead Undertaker, the demonic alter ego-possessing Finn Bálor (formerly Prince Devitt in NJPW), and the reality-altering cult leader Bray Wyatt. Not every WWE gimmick is this supernatural; indeed, most wrestlers are simply strong men or women with the will to dominate in their hearts, but the more outlandish gimmicks are undoubtedly there, Bray Wyatt and Undertaker both appearing in two important matches in 2020’s WrestleMania 36. The closest NJPW has generally come to this has been a case somewhat similar to Finn Bálor, where the masked hero Jushin Thunder Liger has, on four occasions (in 1996, 2006, 2012, and 2019), had his mask forcibly removed, revealing fearsome face-paint and transforming him into the vicious Kishin Liger. Otherwise, the most outlandish gimmick in New Japan in recent years have been Hiromu ‘Ticking Time Bomb’ Takahashi, an eccentric man who likes to show off cartoonish drawings and a stuffed cat doll; Taichi, who often wears a masquerade mask and sings before entering the ring; and a short stint for Kazuchika Okada where, after losing the IWGP Heavyweight Champion title, dyed his hair pink, acted excessively peppy, and was wont to carry in a handful of red balloons into the ring as he entered. While such gimmicks are certainly more colorful than what is usually seen at sporting events, they

still require significantly less suspension of disbelief than the supernatural fare found across the Pacific.

Chris Charlton speculates that another reason for the paucity of heels in Japan may be due to Japanese wrestling's nationalistic past. He writes:

Decades of main events saw Japanese babyfaces and foreign heels, and the huge matchups between top Japanese stars played like 'what if' scenarios that didn't require the added set dressing of a devious opponent. The roots of the medium in Japan lead most domestic promotions to be 'babyface territories' so to speak, companies built around an 'ace' that was established through months and years of consistent victories. In the nationalistic era of pro wrestling they were all conquering Japanese athletes, and when all Japanese main events became more common, it was less a matter of the crowd having no horse in the race, but rather being invested in their favourites regardless of out of the ring conduct.⁶¹

Charlton's final point here on viewers' 'investment' seems particularly apt, as the heel-face dynamic is often less thoroughly reflected in Japanese audience behavior, as well. For example, in the aforementioned New Beginning fight between Kazuchika Okada and Minoru Suzuki, even though Suzuki is as undeniably heelish as a wrestler can be in New Japan, sadistically reveling in inflicting pain on his opponent, one can still hear voices throughout the match sincerely calling out his name and cheering for him to win. Thus, though there is a clear hero and villain in the fight, a heel in the other sense — someone the audience roots against — is nowhere to be found. This is, of course, even more true in those fights where there is not even any particularly villainous character.

The effect of this is that, just like in any real sport, fans are free to choose which wrestler they will root for based on their own personal preferences. This allows for dynamics like those seen in the IWGP Heavyweight Championship bout between Okada and Kenny Omega at Dominion 6.9 (2018). In this fight, both competitors are effectively

⁶¹ Charlton, *Lion's Pride*, 12-3.

babyfaces, a facet explain succinctly through wrestling shorthand. Namely, at one point early in the match, Okada throws Omega into the corner of the ring, grappling with him slightly, and is then instructed to let him go by the referee once Omega grabs the ropes. Okada lets go, but then quickly appears to go for a strike against Omega before pulling the hit and gently patting Omega's chest in a friendly/teasing manner. Omega then escapes from the corner, and does the same to Okada, and then backs off allowing the match to resume on neutral footing.⁶² This is a somewhat formalized trope seen particularly often in Japanese wrestling, where the wrestlers perform respect for each other and the rules to demonstrate that they are both upstanding, honest fighters. Both wrestlers being ones viewers are meant to root for, at points in the match members of the audience engage in cheering competitions, one segment chanting "O-ka-da! O-ka-da!" and another "Ken-ny! Ken-ny!" both attempting to drown the other out, though the group favoring the challenger Omega generally won in this regard.⁶³ In this way, fans can easily form a kind of symbolic identification with their favorite wrestlers, deepening their emotional investment in the outcomes of matches. There is also the incidental benefit that, when two faces are put against each other, a show can always end on a fulfilling, triumphant note, no matter which wrestler wins. Similar scenarios can also be found in other promotions, such as in the Attitude Era WWE feud between the Rock and "Stone Cold" Steve Austin, two wrestlers who bordered between heel and anti-hero. Other complications may arise when, seemingly despite a company's intentions, a face is

⁶² *DOMINION 6.9 in OSAKA-JO HALL June 9, 2018 Osaka • Osaka-Jo Hall (English Commentary) 9TH MATCH DOUBLE MAIN EVENT II IWGP HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPIONSHIP Kazuchika Okada vs. Kenny Omega*, streaming video, NJPW World, accessed April 13, 2021, 0:16:18-0:16:45, https://njpwworld.com/p/s_series_00485_2_09.

⁶³ See *ibid.*, 13:10-13:20.

particularly disliked, or a heel particularly loved. Common narratives surrounding WWE leading men John Cena and Roman Reigns are such examples, where both wrestlers have been pushed by the company to an extent that some fans feel annoyed by them and start to heckle them.⁶⁴

This arrangement mirrors real combat sports (as well as other sports), where there are rarely heroes and villains, though one fighter may be more upstanding than another, but rather just two strong, highly trained people willing to brutalize each other to win, with one or the other being preferred or disliked by certain sections of the viewing audience.

B. Nationality

One other form of gimmick less commonly seen in present-day New Japan is the national or ethnic gimmick. Since its early days across the world, professional wrestling has made extensive use of ethnic and national tensions when developing characters and storylines. American wrestling has often created gimmicks based on stereotypes of Native Americans, such as WWE Hall-of-Famer Chief Jay Strongbow (played by a non-Native Italian-American man). The national or ethnic other is also a readily available heel, one that can instill jingoistic pride as audiences see their own ethnic surrogate vanquish him. In the 1980s, the WWF paired together the Iron Sheik and Nikolai Volkoff, two heels who represented fears of Iranian and Soviet threats, respectively. Early Japanese professional wrestling saw Japanese fighters like the famous Rikidōzan

⁶⁴ For an example of such sentiment expressed see: Cageside Seats, “WWE fans discuss why Roman Reigns is so divisive with the fanbase,” YouTube video, April 8, 2018, accessed April 13, 2021, 3:03-3:42, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RkoPOOaQ-B4>.

(who was actually played by a *zainichi* Korean) face off against American strongmen in what Shun'ya Yoshimi describes as a "national symbolic drama" that "gave shape to Japanese people's complicated feelings toward America, an enemy country that had become both Japan's occupier and protector."⁶⁵ As such, ethnicity and nationality make for easily conceived and immediately understood gimmicks, and the national rivalry story angle nearly writes itself, appearing often in real sports as well.

This classical depiction of nationality has continued into contemporary professional wrestling to varying degrees across promotions. In WWE, there are still some gimmicks centered around nationality, and the archetypal evil foreigner does still occasionally appear; for instance, some have expressed concern over Jinder Mahal, a fearsome heel who wears a black turban and will occasionally shout menacingly in Punjabi. As for New Japan, there are not too many wrestlers whose gimmicks are focused on their nationality, with the exception of a family of Tongan-American/New Zealander wrestlers including Tama Tonga, Tanga Loa, Bad Luck Fale, and Hikuleo, who will sometimes use language and imagery evoking their heritage, such as Tanga Loa's ring name being a reference to the Tongan god Tangaloa.⁶⁶ There is also Los Ingobernables de Japon (LIJ), a faction headed by Tetsuya Naito after his excursion with the Mexican promotion AAA and their heel faction Los Ingobernables. The faction's aesthetic includes frequent uses of the Spanish language, such as Naito's signature finishing move 'Destino' or the faction's practice of calling tag-team partners *parejas*. Despite this, none

⁶⁵ Shun'ya Yoshimi, trans. Jodie Beck, "From Street Corner to Living Room: Domestication of TV Culture and National Time/Narrative," *Mechademia* 9 (2014): 129.

⁶⁶ Tama Tonga's name is not in fact (exclusively) a reference to his heritage, but more directly to the real name of his father, Tonga 'Uli'uli Fifita, who also wrestled with NJPW under the name Haku.

of the members of LIJ are actually Spanish or Latin American, though Rush, a member of the Mexican Los Ingobernables, has at times appeared alongside LIJ.

However, as rare as gimmicks directly invoking nationality may be rare in New Japan, the image of the adversarial *gaijin* has remained a mainstay of the promotion. Non-Japanese wrestlers make up a large part of the heel faction Bullet Club (see fig. 5), which was originally founded by Westerners and only gained its first Japanese member into its second year of existence. While there are also a fair number of Japanese heels, besides Minoru Suzuki, most of the other truly vicious villains of recent years have been from abroad, such as Jay White, Tama Tonga, and Chris Jericho.

This, as well as the fact that Japanese wrestlers have tended to dominate major title reigns, even at times with plentiful foreign talent in the roster, could be said to create an environment where non-Japanese wrestlers are marginalized. However, there seems to be at least some self-awareness of this fact. In fact, the very premise of the Bullet Club stemmed partially from the idea of foreign talent banding together to assert themselves. In an out-of-character promotional video published to New Japan's YouTube page, Alipate Fifita (Tama Tonga) recounts, "The way I see it, it was four *gaijin*, in the land of the rising sun, that were brothers, that are brothers. It was only us *gaijin*, and the rest were *Nihongo*. And we bonded. Really, we became brothers, friends, best friends, because all we had was each other, to speak to each other in English."⁶⁷ While Fifita does not reference any direct discrimination here, he does allude to particular difficulties faced by non-Japanese wrestlers in Japan. This creates an interesting reversal of roles, where

⁶⁷ New Japan Pro-Wrestling, "NJPW OnTheRoad: Tama Tonga #1," YouTube video, November 28, 2017, accessed April 13, 2021, 7:36-8:06, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7bzioTJuO_s.

the foreign talent can become underdogs when pitted against Japanese champions, faintly echoing Japanese underdogs facing Americans in the 1950s. One example is Prince Devitt, an Irish wrestler and the first leader of the Bullet Club, who in 2013 challenged the then-champion Hiroshi Tanahashi, with the implicit narrative placing him as an underdog outsider, needing the Bullet Club to get him where he was as both a foreigner and a fighter in a lower weight class than Tanahashi. In a video detailing the history of Prince Devitt and the formation of the Bullet Club, NJPW describes the lengths that Devitt and his allies took to challenge Tanahashi and other leading figures as “[breaking] the glass ceiling they perceived to exist above them in New Japan Pro-Wrestling, whether or not it existed in the first place.”⁶⁸ The last few words there seem to wish to downplay the extent to which non-Japanese wrestlers are actually marginalized within New Japan, while still acknowledging that many wrestlers and fans certainly feel that they are. The initial fervent backlash against the Bullet Club seems to validate this, as the heat the heel group generated did apparently take on a national character. Charlton describes, “In the hotter markets of Osaka and Tokyo, crowd tensions were so high as to feel almost dangerous; fans would chant ‘*kaere*’ (‘go home!’) with such venom as to evoke the nationalistic fervour of NJPW 40 years earlier.”⁶⁹

It should be noted, though, that many fans of NJPW abroad have flocked to the Bullet Club. As Charlton puts it, there were those among New Japan’s viewership, even eight years ago when the promotion was less successful abroad, who were monolingual

⁶⁸ New Japan Pro-Wrestling, “History of BULLET CLUB - Part 1: Shoot Style,” YouTube video, November 22, 2018, accessed April 13, 2021, 7:15-7:28, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UFb8Dxypi00>.

⁶⁹ Charlton, *Lion’s Pride*, 204.

Anglophones. For these fans, the Bullet Club was immediately appealing by sheer virtue of speaking in English.⁷⁰ Furthermore, they were also eminently understandable to American fans in that they evoked so clearly the iconic heels in their own country, which was, as established, a rarity in the promotion. This, as well as an eventual warming-up-to by domestic viewers, allowed the Bullet Club to slowly shift from nefarious outsiders to cool anti-heroes. A large part of this shift likely had to do with the introduction of the Elite, a sub-faction consisting mainly of members who also worked with the American promotion, Ring of Honor. Notable members were Cody Rhodes, the Young Bucks, and faction leader Kenny Omega. The Elite is notable, in part, for their frequent use of comedy, exemplified in their metatextual humor-laden YouTube series, *Being the Elite*. This levity they brought to the Bullet Club often softened the faction's edges. The aforementioned title fight between Omega and Kazuchika Okada occurred in 2018 when Omega was leader of the Bullet Club, but he was in no way depicted as a villain. When Omega won, the tone of the event was unequivocally triumphant, golden streamers pouring down from the rafters as he celebrated with his friends and the audience passionately applauded. That said, since Omega and the Elite's departure for their own promotion, All-Elite Wrestling, the Bullet Club has returned to its more traditionally heelish routes, particularly under the leadership of Tama Tonga and Jay White.

New Japan also seems to be interested in addressing fans' perceptions of *gaijin* as secondary members of the promotion. In one promotional video targeted towards Western viewers, NJPW boasts their recent economic upturn, adding, "The secret behind the success? The unbeatable match of skill and charisma that makes up the New Japan

⁷⁰ Ibid., 207.

roster. Cultural diversity and compelling characters makes our talent unbeatable to fans worldwide.”⁷¹ What exactly is meant by “compelling characters” is unclear and somewhat curious, given the previous quote from Gedo on characters being less important in Japan than in America, but more relevant here is the emphasis on relatability to “worldwide” viewers (though it should be said, the video gives no specific examples of global diversity besides white wrestlers and website accessibility for English and French speakers). Clearly, New Japan is interested in appealing to audiences abroad, and greater international influence would synergize well with much of their branding, such as their most important title being the International Wrestling Grand Prix Heavyweight Championship. To this end, New Japan has also made a point in recent years of holding more events abroad and opening wrestler training facilities in New Zealand and the US.

This push towards international appeal is not entirely new, however. Antonio Inoki made several pushes to bring in non-Japanese talent throughout his career, such as partnering with the WWF in the 1970s and 80s to have wrestlers from both promotions appear in the other, as well as an attempt to bring in Russian athletes during the decline of the Soviet Union.⁷² None of these moves to diversify the promotion have changed much about traditional national dynamics, as a good number of these Western wrestlers were brought in to act as menacing rivals to heroes like Inoki, such as the American heel Big Van Vader. As such, only time will tell if the present championing of diversity will also mean the phasing out or adjustment of common tropes regarding non-Japanese wrestlers.

⁷¹ New Japan Pro-Wrestling, “This is New Japan Pro-Wrestling,” YouTube video, March 24, 2020, accessed April 13, 2021, 1:58-2:12, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=89PWsWnk14>.

⁷² Charlton, *Lion's Pride*, 32; 73.

It is also unclear if NJPW would even have any interest in such a change, as the Bullet Club's popularity demonstrates that *gaijin* heels can be perfectly lucrative hits with foreign audiences. Furthermore, national tensions in and of themselves do little to harm NJPW's realistic aesthetic. After all, real life combat sports are rife with examples of jingoism and national heroes. As long as these national and ethnic dynamics do not become cartoonishly totalizing elements of wrestlers' gimmicks, New Japan is able to maintain decent believability when playing up national divides.

Thus, by creating gimmicks that are relatively grounded with regards to morality and nationality, New Japan is able to further maintain its realistic aesthetic. While there may be cases that push the boundaries on how evil a character or overt in playing up national tensions the promotion can be, the company still centers its character design on a core template of earnest, affable athletes seeking to prove themselves to an extent that challenges previous analyses of professional wrestling as primarily a form of morality play. Furthermore, the national dynamics and tensions sometimes on display in the promotion also contribute a certain air of reality themselves, whether intentionally or not, by referencing the seemingly genuinely felt marginalization by non-Japanese wrestlers.

CHAPTER IV

THE RING

While it is all well and good to have colorful characters thrust into a ring and be made to fight each other, there is also generally a demand for a narrative to frame those fights. In professional wrestling, the stories and scenarios crafted for this purpose are referred to as ‘angles.’ While all sorts of angles may exist, most are quite simple, and usually boil down to either two people being angry at each other for some ultimately inconsequential reason, one person having a championship title that the other person wants, or a combination of the two. All roads must lead to the ring, so it should be no surprise that animosity and envy fuel most wrestling stories.

Still, promotions are able to differentiate themselves by the sorts of trappings they employ to add variety to these narrative archetypes. For example, WWE includes many stories with cinematic and sometimes even supernatural elements, such as the “Firefly Fun House Match” between John Cena and Bray Wyatt in WrestleMania 36, in which Wyatt, whose gimmick is that of a demonic cult leader, subjected Cena to a series of reality-warping dream sequences including references to Cena’s past, homages to other famous wrestlers such as Hulk Hogan, and a puppet show. Other examples of promotions that feature cinematic angles such as this include All-Elite Wrestling, in which one of the major factions is a cultish organization equipped with masked henchman known as the Dark Order, and the former US-Mexican co-production Lucha Underground, which was (fictionally) run by a suspicious businessman who fueled crime story angles throughout the show’s lifespan.

New Japan's angles, like its gimmicks, tend towards being more grounded and subdued than many other promotions. Rather than crimes, supernatural happenings, or metatextual commentary, storylines are more likely to attempt to generate interest through the rules of and outcomes surrounding match results, as well as more direct interpersonal melodrama.

A. Rules and Results

One common element used to add spice to NJPW storylines is the procedural consequences of match results. This is most acutely on display during tournament stories, such as the G1 Climax tournament. The G1 Climax is a round-robin tournament, held in late-summer each year, where wrestlers from across the company's weight divisions are split into two blocks and gain two points on a win, one on a draw, and zero on a loss.⁷³ The wrestlers with the highest point totals from each block then fight in one final event, and the winner of this event, if not the current IWGP Heavyweight champion, is awarded the chance to challenge the champion at Wrestle Kingdom at the start of the next year. Tracking the point totals of wrestlers is a major focus in commentary and promos during the G1, such as in a Juice Robinson promo during the 2018 G1 where he laments not gaining any points two weeks in, as well as the difficulty of the block he was placed into, commenting, "I surely don't belong in the G1 next year if I can't get at least 8, 10 points. [...] This is the toughest block, in the toughest G1 against three of the toughest opponents back-to-back-to-back. I should have beat Tama Tonga, but big whoopity-doo, that would

⁷³ N.b., some years' G1 Climax tournaments have had different rules formats, such as different systems for point allocation or being single-elimination rather than round-robin.

have been two points. Two points ain't gonna win this thing.”⁷⁴ The progressions of point totals can also fuel fan speculation, as seen in a 2020 Reddit post analyzing point totals by the eighth night of that year's G1 to predict the potential routes to victory for different competitors and the percentage odds of each if the results were decided randomly.⁷⁵ The NJPW website also has a page dedicated to posting these results, including details like match length, finishing moves used, and the type of pinfall or submission by which the victor defeated his opponent.⁷⁶

Narratives emerge from these tournament mechanics, such as an underdog achieving a string of wins to turn them into a genuine contender for the finals, or wrestlers attempting to gain record amounts of points, such as in 2018, when Hiroshi Tanahashi became the first to gain 15 points out of a possible 18 in a 20-man tournament. There are also several other tournaments held specially and annually, such as tag-team tournaments, tournaments for particularly weight classes, and tournaments held to grant an annual or vacated title. Some, such as Best of the Super Juniors, are round-robin events similar to the G1, though others like the New Japan Cup are single-elimination. Single-elimination tournaments also generate fodder for promos and story angles, such as in the 2020 New Japan Cup when Taichi complained that his particular position in the

⁷⁴ New Japan Pro-Wrestling, “G1 CLIMAX 28 Night8 (July 26) - Post-match Interview [9th match],” YouTube video, July 27, 2018, accessed April 13, 2021, 0:50-1:17, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vb7D5QMC_WE&.

⁷⁵ MarcoTalin, “G1 Climax 30 (2020) A Block Night 7 Standings and Analysis,” *Reddit*, October 10, 2020, accessed April 13, 2021, <https://www.reddit.com/r/njpw/comments/j8mhk7/>.

⁷⁶ “Shiai kekka” 試合結果 [Match Results], NEW JAPAN PRO-WRESTLING, accessed April 13, 2021, <https://www.njpw.co.jp/result>.

bracket had him face a higher proportion of skilled heavyweights than others who were placed against newcomers and junior heavyweights.⁷⁷

In comparison to this structure, WWE matches appear to be organized almost totally arbitrarily. A fight will either happen for no particular reason, or possibly because one wrestler challenged at some earlier date. Full-on tournaments like the G1 are a rarity, except for some secondary events like the all-female single elimination Mae Young Classic tournament. There are some occasions on which angles are produced through rules and match results, of course including title matches, but also some more involved examples like the Money in the Bank event. Money in the Bank is an annual pay-per-view show, the main event of which is a ladder match in which competitors vie to climb a ladder leading to a briefcase holding a contract. This contract can be cashed in at any time of the wrestler's choosing to challenge for a title belt. This can add some procedural drama to WWE proceedings, but the specifics of its implementation are less clearly defined than something like the G1-to-Wrestle Kingdom progression. As such, it can be more difficult to suspend one's disbelief that there really is a game with particular rules being played in WWE than it is in New Japan.

It may be surprising that a medium that is so marked by its willingness to have characters 'break the rules' could care as much about rules and game mechanics as New Japan seems to. Yet, in many ways, they are committed to having the presentation of a legitimate sporting event, and that means having well-defined rules. On the official

⁷⁷ New Japan Pro-Wrestling, "SANADA vs EVIL is set for the semifinals! (New Japan Cup)," YouTube video, July 2, 2020, accessed April 13, 2021, 1:05-1:50, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VQUXvpPSLQU>; N.b., in New Japan, a heavyweight is defined as a wrestler who weighs equal to or above 100kg, and a junior heavyweight as one below 100kg.

Japanese NJPW website, there is a page detailing the in-fiction rules of the sport, much as one could find for any other major sporting organization such as the NFL.⁷⁸ It lists rules regarding weight-class divisions, match lengths, victory conditions, prohibited actions, and grounds for disqualification. While few fans likely bother to read this document, the fact that it exists at all is striking, especially when one compares to the official WWE website, which has no such page and rarely even uses the words ‘wrestling’ or ‘wrestlers.’ Even the presence of weight-class divisions is mostly absent from American wrestling, though it still persists throughout much of Japan.

Japanese wrestling is also noteworthy for its retention of gender divisions. Many American promotions will have both male and female performers who are mostly segregated into same-gender matches and titles, though sometimes intergender fights are also present (particularly in tag-team matches that feature teams of one man and one woman each). In most cases, the men’s matches are given priority in terms of screen time and marketing, though in recent years WWE has made some attempts to give its female wrestlers more attention, such as having a three-way women’s match for the main event at WrestleMania 35, as well as the all-female Evolution, held in 2018. Outside of comedy-oriented promotions like DDT, though, even seeing male and female wrestlers in the same room as each other is rare, with occasional exceptions like NJPW’s Taichi occasionally being accompanied by his wife Ofune, a retired pro-wrestler herself. Rather than having male and female divisions within a single company, promotions in Japan usually only hire one or the other. Much could be said about the gender politics of this

⁷⁸ “Shiai no rûru” 試合のルール [Match Rules], NEW JAPAN PRO-WRESTLING, accessed April 13, 2021, <https://www.njpw.co.jp/rule>.

separation, but as far as the question of realism is concerned, it does further highlight Japanese wrestling's willingness to maintain certain restrictions on itself for the sake of maintaining the image of being a real sporting event. After all, almost no major combat sports feature mixed gender events, and indeed in many cases women's leagues are operated quite separately from men's, if not being completely separate companies, such as in the case of Nippon Professional Baseball and the Japan Women's Baseball League.⁷⁹

The emphasis on tournament results and the rules that govern them may also seem odd on first blush in that, as is well-known by most viewers, all of the results are predetermined; unlike a real sporting tournament, there can be no real upsets or records that demonstrate a real person's unique prowess, as they only win or lose at the whims of the story writers. Rules are meant to govern play, to stop participants in a game from acting in ways unauthorized by a governing body. But, because of the nature of professional wrestling, the only way that wrestlers can act in an unauthorized way is in the same way that an actor could hypothetically defy their director; not by breaking the kinds of rules listed on the New Japan website, but by going off script. One may ask, then, why should anyone care about how play is governed when we already know how it is governed — by a group of men in a writers' room? However, this line of questioning contradicts itself. Certainly, were these competitive athletes in a combat sport that viewers assumed to be legitimate, the discovery that matches were fixed to artificially create narratives around false records and essentially meaningless rules would be

⁷⁹ One noteworthy exception is the UFC, which operates similarly to WWE in that it features both male and female fighters under the same banner with separate titles for each.

delegitimize the whole endeavor. In the case of pro-wrestling, though, most viewers go in knowing that the show is not a legitimate sporting event, but rather one that is more or less pre-scripted. As such, fans are able to engage with the material not as a rigged sporting event, but as a piece of sports fiction, a prevalent genre of media across the world, including in Japan. This realistic approach to rules, results, and regulations is essential to establishing verisimilitude in the pro-wrestling promotion's world, a world which, like most sports fiction, does happen to share a large number of similarities with our own. Indeed, almost all pro-wrestling uses this ambiguously shared reality to some effect, such as using performers' personal lives as fuel for story angles. However, an important part of the aesthetic of Japanese wrestling is that some of the main elements of the real world that it pulls from to construct its own are the institutions and procedures surrounding real sporting events, things many promotions in other countries are more willing to ignore.

This interest in appearing to have the rules of a real sporting institution is one in the same with the pursuit of the qualified realism that has been examined throughout this paper. More specifically, this is a question of how verisimilitudinous of a kayfabe (the semi-fictional wrestling universe) is created by different storylines. In a survey of WWE fans, Shane Toepfer found that many were impressed by Japanese wrestling (presumably mainly referring to New Japan) specifically for its "adherence to a more traditional 'wrestling is real' narrative," as opposed to WWE, which one fan stated they wish they could change to be "more real and not phony."⁸⁰ These viewers clearly understand that

⁸⁰ Shane Toepfer, "Sport vs. Spectacle: Fan Discontent and the Rise of Sports Entertainment," in *#WWE: Professional Wrestling in the Digital Age*, ed. Dru Jeffries (Indiana University Press: 2019), 112-114.

the wrestling in front of them is staged and “phony,” but to them, that does not preclude the possibility or even the expectation that the promotion itself should play along with game and present a kayfabe that is (albeit by a vague metric) ‘believable.’ The existence within the kayfabe of a governing rules body that cares about things like tournament design and win-loss records is one element that can increase the believability of the fiction, and thereby satisfy the demands of such viewers.

B. When Not to Fight: An Aside On the COVID-19 Pandemic

NJPW and WWE’s differing attitudes to reality were clearly on display during the spring of 2020, the time of the first peak of the COVID-19 pandemic in the US and Japan. New Japan cancelled all events starting from March 1st (at which time Japan had six observed COVID-related deaths according to the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME)), and resumed them one June 15th of the same year, after the first peak in COVID-related deaths in the country had passed. In contrast, WWE cancelled no events except for non-televised house shows. It did, however, postpone some, and has not had live audiences for any shows since March 13th of 2020, continuing through time of writing. New Japan brought back live audiences in July of 2020 during the New Japan Cup, albeit at roughly a quarter of the venue’s capacity.⁸¹ One notable change that WWE made was the inclusion of certain pre-taped events, such as the two main events of WrestleMania 36 between John Cena and Bray Wyatt and A.J. Styles and the Undertaker. The latter is especially noteworthy for not taking place in any ring, but instead in and

⁸¹ Randolph Leongson, “Thousands of fans at stands as Japan wrestling welcomes back live audience,” *Spin.ph*, July 15, 2020, <https://www.spin.ph/wrestling/thousands-attend-as-japan-wrestling-welcomes-back-live-audience-a2437-20200715>.

around a shed. Rather than attempting to win via pinfall, the match instead involved the two wrestlers attempting to bury each other in a shallow grave.

The main reason WWE continued holding shows during this time is quite likely the simple fact that they were allowed to do so. WWE is headquartered and has one of their main training centers (where much of the pandemic-era wrestling has been filmed) in Florida, a state which at the time deemed safe any athletic events, so long as they were closed to public audiences. This loophole was also utilized by the MMA promotion UFC to hold several matches in the state in April of the same year. No such exemption was made in Japan, so it is quite possible that even if New Japan had attempted to hold events during the spring of 2020, they would have had their sanctioning revoked, as the UFC fights were when they originally tried to conduct them in New York.⁸² As such, one should not interpret WWE and NJPW's different responses to COVID as necessarily reflecting a greater concern for safety or the companies' aesthetic philosophies.

That said, these two different COVID-responses do create drastically different aesthetic impressions with regards to how much the two promotions exist in the real world. New Japan followed largely the same recommendations given to real-world sporting events during the early days of the pandemic, whereas WWE cloistered itself in its own universe that doubled down on the cinematic approach to its storytelling. Reportedly, WWE even banned mentioning the word "coronavirus" during its broadcasts in March of 2020, though there have been some acknowledgements of its existence since then, such as when Drew McIntyre cut a promo about testing positive for the disease in

⁸² Kevin Draper, "U.F.C. 249, Skirting Coronavirus Limits, Is Set for Tribal Land in California," *New York Times*, April 7, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/07/sports/ufc-249-coronavirus-location.html>.

January 2021.⁸³ Despite this inevitable acknowledgement of the epidemic, the differing initial responses from the two promotions underlines the extent to which wrestling promotions can approach and feel the need to relate themselves to the real world, even amidst a global crisis.

C. Personal Drama

Personal melodrama is by no means a unique hallmark of Japanese pro-wrestling. Many have compared the medium to soap opera, including the CEO of WWE himself, Vince McMahon.⁸⁴ In fact, in addition to their standard wrestling fare, WWE also produces three different reality shows focused on interpersonal and domestic drama: *Total Bellas*, *Total Divas*, and *Miz & Mrs.* However, because promotions like NJPW do not have any other forms of heightened storytelling as described above, the interpersonal could be said to have a greater proportional amount of time in the spotlight in Japan than in other countries.

There are many forms of interpersonal grievance that wrestlers could have with one another and that can justify two people coming to blows. Wrestlers often speak of wishing to represent, dominate, or change the image of their company in ways that may clash with other wrestlers, usually on an aesthetic level, such as in the case of the Bullet Club's Americanized heelishness flouting the image cultivated by many other New Japan

⁸³ Alfred Konuwa, "WWE Reportedly Bans The Term 'Coronavirus,'" *Forbes*, March 18, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/alfredkonuwa/2020/03/18/wwe-reportedly-bans-the-term-coronavirus/>; WWE, "Drew McIntyre addresses testing positive for COVID-19: Raw, Jan. 11, 2021," YouTube video, January 11, 2021, accessed April 13, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TsyOmjCj2aM>.

⁸⁴ Jackson Katz and Sut Jhally, "Manhood on the Mat: The Problem Is Not That Pro Wrestling Makes Boys Violent. The Real Lesson of the Wildly Popular Pseudo Sport Is More Insidious," *Boston Globe*, February 13, 2000.

wrestlers. In other words, at times, having differing sensibilities is often enough to spark tensions. However, one of the most prominent types of angles in Japanese pro-wrestling is a less abstracted one: friendship and betrayal.

Most real combat sports are isolated endeavors. Fights that involve teams in almost any form are incredibly rare. Rather, professional fights are commonly discussed as being the culmination of two skilled and dedicated individuals who compare each other's training and physical condition to determine who can be considered stronger and more skilled, at least until they fight again. This highly individualistic narrative leaves little room for discussion of friendship. In pro-wrestling, though, there are ample opportunities to inject such stories. One of the most obvious ways is through tag team matches, which NJPW features quite prominently.

There are two major tag team tournaments held annually, one for each weight class: World Tag League and Super Jr. Tag League. Additionally, there have been many important tag teams that have driven storylines, such as the brothers Matt and Nick Jackson (known as the Young Bucks). Many tag teams, though, are most famous for their dissolution. For example, before Prince Devitt formed the Bullet Club, he was largely known for Apollo 55, his tag team with fellow rising star Ryusuke Taguchi. Devitt eventually turned on Taguchi, attacking him and proclaiming that Apollo 55 was no more, replacing Taguchi with soon-to-be Bullet Club member, Bad Luck Fale.⁸⁵ In fact, the Bullet Club has been a frequent place for those looking to betray their partners to turn, such as when Gedo, Kazuchika Okada's manager, left Okada after his 2018 loss of the IWGP Heavyweight title to Kenny Omega, and now manages current Bullet Club

⁸⁵ New Japan Pro-Wrestling, "History of the BULLET CLUB – Part 1: Shoot Style," 2:39-3:39.

leader Jay White. In the 2020 New Japan Cup, LIJ member Evil took up a brutal approach towards his tag partner, Sanada, and similarly defected to the Bullet Club. One particularly famous example, though, is that of the Golden Lovers, Kenny Omega and Kota Ibushi.

Omega and Ibushi first met in 2008 in the Japanese promotion DDT, and in 2009 formed their tag team, the Golden Lovers, whose loose gimmick was the vague implication of being in a romantic relationship. The team quickly grew in popularity, in 2010 debuting in New Japan, where they went on to take the IWGP Junior Heavyweight Tag Team Championship from Apollo 55, a match that earned the magazine *Tokyo Sports*' Best Bout Award for 2010.⁸⁶ Eventually, both Omega and Ibushi would become regular members of NJPW, but their relationship soon appeared to sour, particularly as Omega joined the Bullet Club in 2014 under the leadership of A.J. Styles. Omega eventually became leader of the Bullet Club by attacking Styles and became one of NJPW's most prominent heels. In time, though, tensions mounted between him and stablemate Cody. These tensions eventually came to a head when, at New Year Dash 2018, Omega interrupted a ritual Bullet Club attack on Ibushi led by Cody.⁸⁷ Then, at New Beginning in Sapporo 2018, Cody attempted to usurp Omega and attack him with the rest of the Club, in a similar move to how Omega himself had taken over the faction from A.J. Styles. Ibushi, though, interrupted the attack, fended off the Bullet Club

⁸⁶ "Tōkyō supōtsu puroresu taishō" 東京スポーツ プロレス大賞 [Tokyo Sports Pro-Wrestling Awards (2010-Present)], Tokyo Sports, accessed April 13, 2021, https://www.tokyo-sports.co.jp/wrestling/wrestling_past5/.

⁸⁷ New Japan Pro-Wrestling, "History of BULLET CLUB Part 3: The Golden Elite," YouTube video, December 23, 2018, accessed April 13, 2021, 8:55-9:25, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MmOH2Asi8QE>.

members, and warmly embraced Omega (see fig. 6).⁸⁸ With this, the Golden Lovers were reformed, and Ibushi would accompany Omega for many of his most important matches with the promotion, such as his title victory against Kazuchika



Figure 6. Kenny Omega (left) and Kota Ibushi hugging as streamers fall after their reconciliation at New Beginning in Sapporo 2018.

Okada, as well as in a fight with Cody at the 2018 G1 Special in San Francisco that instigated Omega's reconciliation with him as well.⁸⁹ Being an IWGP Heavyweight Champion and an otherwise high profile member of NJPW's roster, the fact that so many of Omega's storylines during his time at the company revolved around friendship, betrayal, and reunion highlights these themes' prevalence in Japanese wrestling.

Friendship and camaraderie also make themselves apparent in the prevalence of factions in Japanese wrestling. As has been discussed, the Bullet Club was formed with the premise that its members were a group of outsiders who could rely on each other to stand up against the hegemonic champions of New Japan. Los Ingobernables de Japon was founded on largely the same premise, though it is less heelish and does not feature non-Japanese wrestlers the way that the Bullet Club does. Factions are also an important part of Japan's largest female promotion, World Wonder Ring Stardom. In particular, the domineering face faction Queen's Quest and the rough-and-tumble heel faction Oedo Tai are major forces in the company, and their rivalry has frequently taken a front stage. By

⁸⁸ Ibid., 13:00.

⁸⁹ New Japan Pro-Wrestling, "History of BULLET CLUB Part 4: Civil War," YouTube video, January 11, 2019, accessed April 13, 2021, 4:00-4:40, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gvn7s3mliKQ>.

placing wrestlers in the context of these stables, even when they are fighting by themselves, they can be representing a larger team, thereby potentially tying even one-on-one matches between simple rivals to this ubiquitous theme of friendship.

As stated, though, friendship is not a commonly found narrative element in the discourse surrounding combat sports. One may then wish to ascribe its inclusion in professional wrestling as one of the areas where it strays from realism and enters the realm of heightened drama. In the Japanese case, there is certainly no paucity of sports manga and anime that center a team dynamic, so one may hypothesize that these themes in professional wrestling are emerging from the same cultural background. To an extent, this is a fair analysis. However, it is worth noting that these storylines may also be speaking to a very real phenomenon felt in combat sports. MMA is a sport where fighters can behave quite bitterly to one another, with many competitors (such as the infamous Connor McGregor) being known for their pro-wrestling-like propensity to antagonize



Figure 7. MMA fighters Rose Namajunas and Michelle Waterson hugging after fighting each other in a match.

their opponents at press conferences and interviews.

MMA can also be one of the most violent sports played on a large scale, with fighters appearing at times to truly want to murder their opponent, often brutalizing each other into bloody messes. And yet, many of these same MMA fights end with the fighters respectfully shaking hands, or perhaps even tenderly hugging each other (see fig. 7).⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Esther Lin, “Rose Namajunas (left) and Michelle Waterson hug after Namajunas beat Waterson by TKO at UFC on FOX 24,” *MMA Fighting*, accessed April 13, 2021, https://cdn.vox-cdn.com/uploads/chorus_image/image/54658937/138_Rose_Namajunas_vs_Michelle_Watson.0.0.jpg.

We might consider, for one, that the literal closeness between fighters in wrestling, MMA, and other combat sports that feature grappling may have some effect. Analyzing classical Greco-Roman attitudes towards wrestling, John Zilcosky writes, “runners aim ‘to put the maximum amount of space between each other’ and boxers ‘are not allowed by referees to clinch,’ whereas wrestlers are always ‘laying hold of each other and embracing each other, — most parts of the contest ... bring them together and mix them up with each other’ [...] wrestling is a technology that merges two bodies into one.”⁹¹ The physical act of bringing two bodies together may naturally encourage some form of mutual identification between the two fighters, even as they conduct violence against one another. MMA Fighter Julie Kedzie takes a less abstract approach, describing the phenomenon in a 2017 interview with *MMA Fighting*, “I feel like fighters shake hands and show respect after a fight sometimes out of relief because the fight is over [...] But also because you share something in the cage with another person. Fighting is exhausting and emotional and the only person who *really* understands that is your opponent.”⁹² The brutality of fighting, then, encourages this expression of respect and affection, as it engenders a feeling of shared experience of hardship. Scholar Hagiwara Takuya argues that a similar phenomenon can be found in professional wrestling, in his examinations of women’s pro-wrestling promotions where he found that the shared risks and pains that comes with the profession brings on a sense of camaraderie among

⁹¹ John Zilcosky, “Wrestling, or the Art of Disentangling Bodies,” in *The Allure of Sports in Western Culture* (University of Toronto Press, 2019): 80.

⁹² Marc Raimondi, “Click Debate: Why do fighters frequently show respect to each other after MMA bouts?” *MMA Fighting*, May 7, 2017, <https://www.mmfighting.com/2017/5/7/15570902/>.

performers.⁹³ Many wrestlers have similarly commented on the kind of working relationship that is necessary to safely perform a professional wrestling match. To receive blows that, if performed incorrectly, could result in serious injury or death requires a great deal of practice and trust between performers, regardless of whether or not they personally like each other. This likely holds even more true in the kind of hard-hitting wrestling that we see in Japanese wrestling, where the risk of injury, and therefore the necessary communication and cooperation, increases drastically.

The reality of this connection between pain and friendship is succinctly exemplified by a ritual found in Japanese women's promotions' farewell shows for stars leaving the company. During the wrestler's last match, at some point, members from throughout the roster appear and one by one, run up to their departing coworker and hit them. This is not framed as a punishment for the wrestler leaving, but rather, a show of loving respect where one last time, each performer shares a moment of pain with the departee, the very same that has connected them throughout their careers. During such a moment, the fictionality of the show is allowed to be revealed just a bit, but in service of expressing the real, felt connections that develop between wrestlers. It demonstrates that, even if the personal drama in pro-wrestling mostly falls on the spectacle end of the spectacle-reality dyad, it is often undergirded by real emotion and the unique psychological effects of being paid to fight one's coworkers in front of a live audience, regardless of whether the fighting is legitimate sport or scripted.

⁹³ Hagiwara Takuya 萩原卓也, "Itami no keiken kara umareru shintaiteki kyôdôsei" 痛みの経験から生まれる身体的共同性 [Bodily Cooperativeness Resulting from Experiences of Pain], conference paper abstract, in *Nihon bunka gakkai kenkyû taikai happyô yôshi-shû* 日本文化人類学会研究大会発表要旨集 [Japanese Society of Cultural Anthropology Abstract Collections] 46 (2012): 93.

CHAPTER V

THE STADIUM

Professional wrestling is a relatively old form of multimedia art, with its narratives being created not only in writers' rooms or on the ring, but also in the commentary performed during broadcasts, the social media profiles of wrestlers, the journalism and marketing surrounding events, and in the behavior of the audiences themselves. In the case of New Japan, just as the aesthetic of attenuated realism pervades all other elements of its production, so too does it pervade these more peripheral components of the pro-wrestling experience. Particularly when compared to WWE, NJPW's commentary, promos, and audience demeanor are much more akin to those of competitive sporting events, though they still retain much of the bombast expected of pro-wrestling.

A. Commentary

The accoutrement to the pro-wrestling experience most obviously related to the product, at least for those watching official broadcasts of an event, is for many promotions the commentary. As in real sports, most major pro-wrestling events have commentators who describe and give context to the matches for viewers at home. It is worth noting that, like those viewing a baseball game in the stadium, this commentary can generally not be heard by spectators in attendance, except possibly for those seated particularly close to the commentary table. Besides merely describing events as they unfold, though, pro-wrestling commentators are also expected to provide context for the character backgrounds and story angles that inform a match. Additionally, it is not

uncommon for pro-wrestling commentators to become embroiled in the actual action of a match, such as the frequently seen NJPW trope of a wrestler being slammed into the ringside commentary table by their opponent. Furthermore, because many commentators are themselves wrestlers from the promotion, it is rarer, but not unheard of, for them to fully enter and participate in a fight should they or their sensibilities be sufficiently attacked.

Frequent watchers of WWE's televised matches can quickly catch onto a pattern in their commentary, particularly in any match between a heel and a face: one commentator will fervently support the designated babyface of the match and be outraged by the heel's behavior, another will revel in the heel's cutthroat attitude and balk at the first commentator's squeamishness, and (if present) a third commentator will act somewhat neutral or as a wild card. This heel-face commentator designation often overshadows calling the actual moves in question. This has drawn the ire of a number of fans, particularly those on blogs and internet forums. When prompted, "What is the worst part of WWE commentary," one Reddit commentor answered, "Arguing amongst themselves over dumb shit that doesn't matter and ignoring what is going on in the ring."⁹⁴ Other criticisms from the same thread also point to the commentary's perceived over-explanation of elements they consider to be obvious and time spent discussing storylines unrelated to the match at hand.

Most commentators in New Japan however, both in Japanese and in English, spend much more of their time calling moves, sometimes even just listing out maneuvers

⁹⁴ alough000601, "What is the worst part of WWE commentary?" *Reddit*, November 24, 2016, accessed April 13, 2021, <https://www.reddit.com/r/SquaredCircle/comments/5epmns/>.

during the relatively quiet and involved sequences that appear in some matches, though NJPW commentary is perhaps better known for its more bombastic moments, with announcers shouting the names of finishing moves at the top of their lungs, as can be heard in one NJPW-produced video compilation of Kazuchika Okada performing his signature ‘Rainmaker.’⁹⁵ Additionally, heel commentators are rarer in NJPW, where most commentators will either neutrally evaluate the athletics on display or denounce particularly villainous impropriety.

These differences largely reflect many of the other differences already laid out between WWE and NJPW. For example, WWE’s greater reliance on a heel-face dynamic in their commentary mirrors the same reliance in their matches, and the fact that New Japan matches more closely resemble combat sports in their technique lends these fights to more sports-like maneuver-calling. The commentary, therefore, may be said to exist as an extension of the aesthetics already established by other parts of a promotion’s product, one that is very audible and apparent to home audiences.

B. Promos

Promos are another place where the relative realism of New Japan stands out. In professional wrestling, ‘cutting a promo’ refers to when a wrestler makes some statements, either in monologue or dialogue, separate from the active fighting of the match. In much of wrestling throughout the world, promos appear at many points

⁹⁵ New Japan Pro-Wrestling, “(Shin Nihon Puroresu) Okada Kazuchika Reinmêkâ in Tôkyô Dôme” 【新日本プロレス】オカダ・カズチカ レインメーカー in 東京ドーム [(NJPW) Okada Kazuchika Rainmakers at the Tokyo Dome], YouTube video, December 23, 2019, accessed April 13, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WYj0_gCBiPk.

throughout an event, such as in the ring before, after, or in the middle of a match, or during staged interviews in some separate area. This latter kind of promo may be shown on a screen during a live event, or it may only be viewable outside of the event as part of a televised broadcast or web video. NJPW is noteworthy in that the plurality of its promos are cut outside of the ring. The primary exception is when the victor of a major fight (usually a title bout) gives a speech and is sometimes confronted by a rival who wishes to publicly challenge him. Promos at other points of the match, though, are quite rare, though they appear more frequently in other promotions.

On the other hand, almost every match at an NJPW event of any significance is followed up by a post-match interview getting comments from one or both competing parties. These interviews mimic the aesthetics of real sports interviews fairly closely, with a team of journalists surrounding the competitors, clicking away on their cameras, and receiving general, open-ended comments on the day's proceedings from the wrestlers. While the content of these promos varies greatly depending on the wrestler in question, there is one aspect common to many of the promos cut by NJPW's largest stars: sportsmanship. While pro-wrestling may be known by some for the hostile promos given by those like the Rock and Randy Savage in which they extol their own excellence above their opponents who they mercilessly denigrate, New Japan's stars frequently praise their rivals' skill and training.⁹⁶

⁹⁶ See for example Juice Robinson effusively praising Kenny Omega after being defeated by him in a G1 match: New Japan Pro-Wrestling, "G1 CLIMAX 28 Night8 (July 26) - Post-match Interview [9th match]," YouTube video, July 27, 2018, accessed April 13, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vb7D5QMC_WE.

There are two benefits to including promos like this. First, professional wrestling must constantly work to convince the audience of the real fighting ability of the wrestlers, and this can be more easily accomplished if all voices — the wrestlers themselves, their opponents, and a whole team of commentators — agree that they are talented athletes. Furthermore, if a wrestler spends a significant amount of time acknowledging their opponent's strength and then defeats them, it gives a greater impression of their own strength than if they had painted their enemy as a weakling. Second, these foe-aggrandizing promos further heighten the degree to which the interview resembles a real sports interview. While in recent years MMA has gained a reputation for having trash-talk on par (or sometimes more extreme) than in professional wrestling, in most sporting events it is considered a breach of etiquette to speak too ill of your competition; instead, players in most sports will acknowledge the hard work of their opponent, and then give the caveat that they themselves or their own team are still better prepared. Just like with the style of commentary on display in New Japan, we may see this trend as an outgrowth of the lack of a clear hero and villain in many NJPW matches. If the audience is expected to be able to cheer on either of the competitors, then it is only natural for them both to be depicted as skilled and sportsman-like, two generally popular qualities for any athlete, especially when they are combined.

C. Audiences

Though all aspects of the wrestling experience discussed thus far have been, at the end of the day, in the hands of the companies that run the shows — a wrestler or commentator may do something that is unacceptable to the promotion's managers, but generally speaking the offender will either have to adjust their behavior or have their

contract terminated — fan behavior is (relatively) outside of corporate control. Still, we find here a similar trend to all the other parts of pro-wrestling already addressed, with Japanese fans seemingly more committed to maintaining kayfabe than those in the West.

This difference manifests itself clearly in the variation between how audiences cheer or boo during matches. Especially in recent years, WWE audiences may be said to use chanting largely to comment on the quality of the match as a show. Two common chants include “This-is-boring!” and “This-is-awesome!” each followed by a series of five claps. Certain wrestlers may be cheered on or booed more than others, particularly at the beginning of a match, but not necessarily because the audience actually wants them to win or lose; rather, they can often be simply expressing their opinion on the character’s writing or the performer’s ability to portray them appealingly. Of course, these aspects do inform any wrestling fan’s cheering for a wrestler, but this difference between who the audience likes and who they root for is exemplified well in the figure of Roman Reigns. Roman Reigns is a wrestler who has been pushed as the face of WWE at various times, despite a controversial history among fans. Various publications have termed him one of the least liked wrestlers in the company, and his 2018 SummerSlam match with Brock Lesnar began with boos and thumbs downs from a noticeable portion of the crowd, who later shifted to chanting “You both suck!”.⁹⁷ However, when Reigns ultimately pinned Lesnar, the stadium was filled with nigh unequivocal cheers.⁹⁸ Nothing about Reigns’ performance that night varied too much from his usual fare that had earned viewers’ ire,

⁹⁷ WWE, “FULL MATCH - Brock Lesnar vs. Roman Reigns - Universal Title Match: SummerSlam 2018,” 0:50-1:00; 11:30-11:45.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 13:55-14:10.

so this seems to be a case where, though some viewers adamantly disliked Reigns, they cheered his victory simply because they found the turn of the events in the show to be a compelling story.

In contrast, audience chants in New Japan tend to come in two types: chanting along to a strike exchange (see Chapter 2) or cheering on a specific wrestler, either with their name or a particular catchphrase (such as “Go Ace!” for Hiroshi Tanahashi). Though audiences may shout or ooh and ah at moves or plot developments, for the most part, they do not use their chants to explicitly comment on how they perceive the quality of the show to be. The contrast is such that one Reddit user posted a clip from a Stardom match where two men were chanting in English “Let’s-go-Ko-na-mi!” and then “This-is-awe-some!,” followed by five claps, the poster titling the thread “Spot the gaijin at the Japanese wrestling show.”⁹⁹

It should be added, though, that almost all of the comments were highly critical of these two men’s behavior, not just because it did not follow the standard way of cheering in Japan, but also because it was perceived as rude and obnoxious. Stardom’s official English-language twitter account alluded to this incident shortly after the show, writing, “Thank you to all of the fans that attend our live shows. If you do attend, please be courteous and aware of the fans around you, and respect that we (myself included) are in a foreign country. Please do not make a spectacle during the show. Thank you.”¹⁰⁰ This speaks to a relative mild-manneredness of Japanese wrestling show attendees. In general,

⁹⁹ nathanrabin, “Spot the gaijin at the Japanese wrestling show,” *Reddit*, April 30, 2019, accessed April 13, 2019, <https://www.reddit.com/r/SquaredCircle/comments/bjaphy/>.

¹⁰⁰ We Are Stardom (@we_are_stardom), “Thank you to all the fans that attend our live shows,” Twitter post, April 29, 2019, accessed April 13, 2021, https://twitter.com/we_are_stardom/status/1122739223813996544.

audience members are instructed to stay seated and in control of themselves, such as in a Japanese-language instructional video on show etiquette produced by NJPW.¹⁰¹ This video's existence does highlight that this is not a completely natural phenomenon, but rather somewhat cultivated by wrestling promotions' policies. After all, sports fans across the world are known for loud, disruptive, and sometimes even violent behavior, so it could not be said to be more realistic that Japanese pro-wrestling fans observe matches quietly from their chairs.

Indeed, there have been times when these rules of audience behavior have been spectacularly violated, such as in the case of NJPW's December 27, 1987 show at the Ryôgoku Kokugikan. The audience started off the show with a hostile attitude, as many had been upset with the recent appearance of actor Takeshi Kitano in the promotion, who played a disagreeable heel. Charlton comments, "The angle was more akin to the obsession with mainstream celebrity involvement commonplace in America, not in Japan, and fans of the idea were few."¹⁰² As the show went on, this already sour attitude escalated, with fans throwing trash and toilet paper into the ring after they were informed that the main event fight between Antonio Inoki and Big Van Vader, two major stars, would be replaced with a tag match. This turned out to be a bait-and-switch, though, as Inoki suddenly appeared to defeat one of the winners of the tag match and challenge Vader, who then quickly disposed of Inoki. The audience was so angered by this turn of

¹⁰¹ New Japan Pro-Wrestling, "Shin Nihon Puroresu kansen manâ VTR Tenzan Hiroyoshi & Kojima Satoshi & Nagata Yûji & Taguchi Ryûsuke hen" 新日本プロレス観戦マナーVTR 天山広吉 & 小島聡 & 永田裕志 & 田口隆祐 篇 [NJPW Spectator Etiquette feat. Hiroyoshi Tenzan, Satoshi Kojima, Yuji Nagata, and Ryusuke Taguchi], YouTube video, July 23, 2015, accessed April 13, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C6oBhDQL13Q>.

¹⁰² Charlton, *Lion's Pride*, 69.

events that their trash-flinging transformed into a riot, with some audience members setting fire to their seat cushions. In Charlton's estimation, the crowd was "more enraged at the angle heavy five minute main event than by Inoki's upset loss,"¹⁰³ making this a prime example of audience behavior commenting on the show itself, rather on who they wanted to win.

This extreme case, though, is ultimately a notorious exception to the general standards of behavior for wrestling audiences in Japan. The general picture of Japanese audiences is one that is more willing to act like a simulation of a real sports audience, albeit usually a less rowdy one. This could be argued to be viewers responding to the greater commitment to some semblance of kayfabe on promotions' parts, where a WWE audience's behavior reflects that promotion's willingness to portray itself not as a sport but as a soapy drama.

This performance of kayfabe even around the peripheries of Japanese wrestling can perhaps be best explained by comparing professional wrestling not to theater, as it is often compared, but to a roleplaying game, where storytelling is improvised according to certain lain-out scenarios and guidelines. The players of this game are obviously the wrestlers, but also the managers of wrestling companies and, to varying extents, commentators. We may say that, compared to WWE shows, audiences at Japanese wrestling performances are more likely to also participate in that game, at least while they are in the stadium. Furthermore, in WWE and NJPW, the types of rules provided to the players are different; whereas in WWE, the rules exist to facilitate a particular branded spectacle of sports entertainment, in NJPW rules are used to simulate the

¹⁰³ Ibid., 72.

experience of participating in a legitimate sporting event at all levels. It is unclear how this difference developed. It may speak to a difference in the way that viewing audiences in the US and Japan approach media, or it may ultimately be the product of the vagaries of two influential men, the melodramatic Vince McMahon and the MMA-obsessed Antonio Inoki, who have or have left such an impact on the field in their respective countries that performers and audiences alike have conformed to their tastes. Regardless, these differences demonstrate the pervasiveness of differing approaches to reality and realism within pro-wrestling.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Whatever way one wishes to describe contemporary Japanese professional wrestling, it seems to always require a qualifier. The fighting styles are realistic, but they still include backflips and piledrivers. It is hard-hitting, but there are some particularly dangerous hits promotions would rather avoid. There are no real heels, except for a few. The storylines are grounded, except the melodramatic ones. The audiences act like real sports viewers, except when they are almost too polite. To some extent, this emerges from the fact that, in the current era, it is nigh impossible to understand promotions like New Japan Pro-Wrestling outside of their international context. Due to its tremendous economic and marketing dominance, the shadow of WWE looms over the entire world of wrestling, meaning that almost all other company's exist in implicit comparison to it, even if they emerged wholly separately. Should one append the term "relative to WWE" to many of these statements, many of those exceptions would appear less necessary.

However, many of these tensions still exist even when we normalize for a WWE baseline. One cannot just say that New Japan has realistic fighting, because its present era is defined in part by not being Inoki-ism, by not having shoot matches, by not simply trying to emulate real combat sports. The realism of strong style is inherently a qualified one. The same is true for character gimmicks and stories. New Japan's default for a high-profile match may be two faces or a face and an anti-hero simply trying to determine who is the best athlete, but audiences also crave the occasional heel's antics in their wrestling diet. Just as one might be able to say that another given form of professional wrestling is mostly unadulterated spectacle peppered with bits of real world drama to add interest,

New Japan-style wrestling is the inverse, a pervasive aesthetic of qualified realism textured with flashes of spectacle.

What NJPW's existence demonstrates is that such an approach to professional wrestling is not an aberration. Even while WWE maintains its hegemonic position in the industry, New Japan is currently thriving economically, and there are a number of former WWE fans who are now converts to Japanese wrestling, because to them that is what pro-wrestling should be. In no way can they be said to be 'correct,' of course. There is nothing intrinsically more enjoyable about either style, and while some may describe NJPW's as more 'skillfully crafted,' one should also understand that the schedule and training standards that WWE and its wrestlers maintain are monumental physical and technical feats.

However, through their realism, NJPW and other Japanese wrestling promotions can effectively communicate ideas that are more difficult to express in other pro-wrestling, particularly about one all-pervading aspect of the real world: labor. Japan was once known as a country where companies promised life-time employment to almost all college-educated men, but Japan's working world is growingly becoming just as precarious as any other in the modern global economy. And as we see even the professional class more and more forced to work for deadly lengths of time or get laid off and forced to scrounge for work elsewhere, so too do we see New Japan's wrestlers subjecting themselves to torment match after match, desperately trying to accrue enough wins to gain status in the company.

In fact, NJPW quite frequently reminds its audience of its status as a corporation, as the various champions are frequently discussed as 'representing the company,' with

the IWGP Heavyweight champion as its defining image. Furthermore, just as hierarchies emerge in real corporations determining who is more likely to be allowed to represent the company, so too do they emerge in NJPW in the form of weight class and nationality. New Japan being an all-male promotion, there is an additional undertone insisting that this brutal struggle for corporate status is equivalent to manhood, though promotions like Stardom show that women endure much the same, but earn less glory in return.

While some or all of these ideas may occasionally come across to more or less of an extent in promotions like WWE (which has a history of twisting its real-world labor struggles into cartoonish storylines), the verisimilitude of NJPW's world and the visceral quality of its fighting encourage personal identification from the viewer in a way that is unique. By encouraging its audience to view the wrestlers on stage not as cinematic superstars or mythic archetypes, but instead as real people, separated from the audience by only a thin line. When the audience engages in the performance by cheering for their favorites, or when the fighting extends out into the stands, that line grows even fainter. We can more readily, then, read the events in the ring as analogous to those in our own life. Furthermore, the heightened spectacle also takes on a slightly different function, as instead of being the defining baseline of the performance, they serve to underline and communicate the emotional overwhelmingness of the wrestlers' experiences, and by extension, the audience's own analogous experience.

Besides the artistic merit in the expression of these themes, there also lays value in contemporary Japanese wrestling for the simple fact that it is different from what many audiences and scholars of professional wrestling may be accustomed to and have based their conceptions of the genre upon. Because promotions like NJPW have a different

relationship to the real than (and consequently communicate themes differently from) ones like WWE, they encourage one to reconsider prior analyses and assumptions about how professional wrestling must handle the tension between fact and fiction.

Furthermore, it is also possible to take this modified understanding of the genre back to re-analyze other promotions. One might ask where within American wrestling are the qualities of Japanese wrestling discussed in this paper most prevalent? To what extent are they found across promotions, across divisions in the same promotion, or across wrestlers in general? How does a WWE match with multiple heels compare to an NJPW match with multiple faces? Such lines of inquiry open themselves up for future studies once one incorporates a more global understanding of pro-wrestling into one's analysis, and they do not even take into account other major styles, such as *lucha libre* in Latin America.

Professional wrestling is one of the world's most popular forms of entertainment. Each week, televised wrestling shows attract millions of viewers, and live events by promotions like WWE and NJPW regularly reach audiences in the tens of thousands. Despite this, there is still only a limited number of scholars engaging thoroughly with professional wrestling as a major artistic medium, and what work is available in English is largely focused on the particular formulation of pro-wrestling in one company in one country. By embracing the diversity of professional wrestling's forms, themes, and aesthetic styles, the potential quantity and quality of future research on this substantial topic can only increase.

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