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# “If you want to be the man, you’ve got to beat the man”: Masculinity and the Rise of Professional Wrestling in the 1990s

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## Abstract

This paper traces the relationship between the shifting representations of masculinity in professional wrestling programs of the 1990s and the contemporaneous shifts in conceptions of masculinity, examining the ways each of these shifts impacted the other. Most important among these was a growing sense that the biggest enemy in wrestling and in day-to-day life is one’s boss. Moreover, the corporate corruption theme continues to underscore the WWE’s on-screen and off-screen coverage, well into the second decade of the twenty-first century. Thus, the paper provides a template for considering a widely consumed popular cultural form in ways that challenge the determinism of sex, violence and fakery.

## Keywords:

Masculinities, Gender, Popular Culture, Television, 1990s, Cultural Studies

## Men in their Underwear

Especially in terms of its plots, professional wrestling was transformed radically in the mid-to-late 1990s. Not only did this coincide with a contemporaneous reconsideration of masculinities, the change in wrestling adopted, portrayed and ultimately reinforced the concurrent shift in masculinities. In the 1990s, the most easily and readily identifiable enemies were corporations such as Enron, Merck, WorldCom, Adelphia, Kmart, and Arthur Andersen, companies known for corruption and whose officers have been indicted for illegal activities. During this period, the “sports entertainment” industry achieved unprecedented box-office success along with unprecedented critical condemnation. During the height of their competition, World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) and

World Championship Wrestling (WCW) typically placed four of the top five programs in the Nielson ratings for basic cable networks (Cable).<sup>1</sup> Even a change in the network that hosts WWE's top-rated show, *Monday Night Raw*, had little effect.<sup>2</sup> Audiences responded to a greater emphasis on plot development than on muscle development. This fact in becomes even more significant given the staying power of wrestling since promotions stopped denying that the action is staged and given the rise of mixed martial arts fighting as a competing media draw. In a rare television interview during wrestling's rise, on TSN's *Off the Record*, WWE owner Vince McMahon explains that without its storylines, or "angles," professional wrestling would be "just two men, in their underwear, fighting." Many critics condemn wrestling for exploiting women, for obscuring reality and for portraying violence, yet this obscures the importance of the plots to the success of the formula.

So important are the stories that even WWE video games contain a storyline feature which allows players to create their own ongoing plot. Although wrestling depicts "men in their underwear," it also relies on plot structures borrowed from other genres, most notably westerns and action films. Beginning in the 1990s, wrestling writers began to adapt these themes to broader contemporary social themes in order to attract viewership among the male demographics.<sup>3</sup> Curiously, part of wrestling's past and current appeal derives from critical denunciations which reinforce — even duplicate — the underlying narrative, which depicts the powerful corporate leader as the principal enemy of the hero. The pleasures of wrestling, then, compensate for the perceived diminishment of and threats to traditional forms of masculinity in North American culture at the end of the twentieth century. Moreover, the corporate corruption theme continues to underscore the WWE's on-screen and off-screen coverage, well into the second decade of the twenty-first century.

## **Men in their Underwear: Wrestling Plots**

Like action and western films, wrestling reflects the culture that produces and consumes it. For example, the post-war era featured "German" wrestlers, most notably the "von Erich" family. Similarly, the 1970s and 1980s saw an increase in "Soviet" and "Iranian" wrestlers. However, the threats posed by the enemies of the Cold War and World War II are not part of the immediate experience of contemporary culture. Threats became more varied and not as easily defined; indeed, the largest organizations have largely avoided post-9/11 themes and characters. Therefore, a formula more complex than a simple good-vs.-evil dichotomy has developed. In his study of action movies, especially Sylvester Stallone's *Rambo* series, William Warner proposes that "in the seventies and early eighties the rise of the hero film offered audiences a pleasurable way to work

upon an insistent historical problem — the perceived decline of American power both in relation to other nations [following Vietnam and the oil crisis], as well as a recent, fondly remembered past” (672). Warner’s view is echoed by Susan Jeffords, both in *The Remasculinization of America* and in *Hard Bodies*, as well as Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner in *Camera Politica*. Wrestling, westerns, and action movies such as the *Rambo* and *Missing in Action* series are often dismissed because they lack “authenticity”: the movies for their lack of historicity and wrestling for its “fake” action. This type of dismissal obscures and ignores their intrinsic appeal, especially in the case of professional wrestling, and overlooks the fact that any theatric production has a predetermined outcome. The majority of fans know the action — billed as “sports entertainment” performed by “sports entertainers” — is staged. As well, the current variety of professional wrestling places as much emphasis on plot as it does on spectacular action. The key difference is that the decline is domestic — inside the borders of both the United States and the home — in terms of shifting employment and economic patterns, especially based on the pattern of corporate “downsizing” amid record profits and executive salaries, many of which came as a result of accounting and trading fraud.

In “Looking at the Male,” Paul Willemen suggests that male heroes in western movies perform in two distinct but inter-related ways: first as spectacle and second as a physically beaten body. Paul Smith, in “Eastwood Bound” adds a third and final stage occurs when the hero triumphs. Eventually, action films supplanted westerns, but as William Warner points out in “Spectacular Action: Rambo and the Popular Pleasures of Pain,” the genres’ appeal

depends upon subjecting hero and audience to a certain masochistic scenario — the pleasure of intensely felt pain, and crippling incapacity, as it is written into the action, and onto the body of the hero. Secondly, each [production] supports the natural virtue of the hero through a display of technology’s magic. Finally, each [production] wins the audience an anti-therapeutic relief from confining subjectivity by releasing it into a vertiginous cinematic experience of spectacular action. (673)

Professional wrestling depends on just such a structure and has since the 1990s. Indeed, such a reality is reflected in wrestler Ric Flair’s motto, which forms the first part of the title of this article. The highly structured and ritualized matches position the wrestlers as both spectacle and beaten body. Each wrestler’s entrance is announced and accompanied by music. Convention dictates that several momentum shifts occur during matches. The outcome necessitates spectacular action: slams, jumps, landings, and chairs over the head. These involve actual physical exertion and actual

physical contact even if the move is scripted. In a move known as “blading,” the wrestlers cut themselves on the forehead with a razor blade kept in the tape around their wrists. Thus, the blood, the sweat, and the tears are often real. Moreover, the action almost always produces a victor. While there are several possible results for a match — pinfall as in amateur wrestling, submission, disqualification, or time limit draw — there is always a winner in the minds of the fans.

Wrestling programs function more like serials than complete cinematic productions, which interferes with the third stage mentioned above — hence the cliché of wrestling as “soap opera for men.” The recent change in the role of women in the industry further complicates (an examination of) the narrative framework. Currently, characters portrayed by female body builders and fitness models, often with “masculinized” physiques, can and do “compete” physically with the men. Regardless, since former WWE mainstays, “Diesel” and “Razor Ramon,” left to join WCW, plots have depicted masculine diminishment. The wrestlers, Kevin Nash and Scott Hall, respectively, appeared under their own names and called themselves “The Outsiders.” Wrestlers usually adopt a ring name and a persona to go with it. In the case of Nash and Hall, WWE actually owns the trademarks “Diesel” and “Razor Ramon.” The Outsiders were so-named because of a (real life) contract dispute with WWE’s owner, Vince McMahon. They then appeared, without invitation, at WCW events although the latter’s officials denied having signed them to contracts. Eventually, they were joined by several prominent “heels,” or bad-guys, to form “The New World Order,” or “NWO.” The format, and the NWO, were so successful that WWE reintroduced the unit and its storyline following the takeover of WCW. The purpose of NWO was to destroy the existing structure of WCW and to take over the corporation. They were among the most sadistic rule-breakers in the history of wrestling. They rarely, if ever, engaged in matches, but rather interrupted matches involving other wrestlers to “punk” everyone, regardless of affiliation.<sup>4</sup> Frequently, they would force one combatant (or set of combatants) to leave the ring while they singled-out a fan-favourite, or “babyface,” to assault.

When WCW’s then president, Eric Bischoff, revealed his membership in the group, the implications of the NWO’s on the narrative structure became clear: the “fix was in,” because the boss sold out his employees. Professional wrestling now follows the conventions of

a series of films which took up an old theme of American film and culture — the individual’s struggle against an unjust system — and gave that scenario a distinct new turn. The protagonist did not challenge the system by teaming up with an ambiguous woman to solve a crime (as in *film noir*), or

organizing the good ranchers against the Boss who owns the whole town (as in some Westerns). (Warner 675)

The contemporary character is almost always a loner. While he does take on the boss, who also owns the whole corporation, and the boss's henchmen, the hero does so with neither female companions nor male allies. A further shift away from westerns and *film noir* is the increased violence in action movies and professional wrestling. In addition, Warner perceives a more important alteration in action films as opposed to westerns, one that reflects changes in social and technological configurations. He observes:

Now the System — sometimes a state, sometimes a corporation — is given extraordinary new powers of surveillance and control of the individual. The protagonist, almost entirely cut off from others, endures the most insidious forms of manipulation and pain, reaches into the primordial levels of self, and emerges as a hero with powers sufficient to fight the System to the point of its catastrophe. (675)

According to Warner, the 1980s variation on this theme manifests itself in movies such as the *Rambo*, *Missing in Action* and *Iron Eagle* series. These films were intended to redress the powerlessness caused by the perceived national failure of the Vietnam War. Indeed, according to Warner, "this is the crux of the [films'] explicit discursive project: not only to reclaim the American vet [. . .] but further, to discover that what Rambo is and represents (pride, strength, will) is precisely that which is most indispensable for America today" (674). While the Vietnam veterans finally have been acknowledged, the current generation of men is faced with another perceived failure.

Susan Faludi's contemporaneous study, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man*, details the contemporary situation of (North) American men at the close of the last century. Stated briefly, her premise is that instead of a lost war, the powerlessness and failure North American men feel stems from losing "a useful role in public life, a way of earning a decent living, [and] respectful treatment in the culture" (40). In addition, Faludi finds that this situation causes many men turn to "the fantasy realm [of a] clear-cut controllable world of action movies and video combat, televised athletic tournaments and pay-per-view ultimate-fighting bouts" (32). The writers for the professional wrestling organizations are cognizant of this trend and incorporate it into the stories; the writing is so important that WWE has hired script writers away from Conan O'Brien, MTV and elsewhere (Leland 51). Further evidence of the emphasis on the stage-play can be gleaned from the box office success of

wrestling stars, including Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson, John Cena, and Stacy Keibler. When the WCW began to lose ground to WWE in the ratings, Eric Bischoff was reassigned. In his place, Turner Broadcasting poached Vince Russo and Ed Ferrara who had been the head writers for WWE. Following WWE’s takeover of WCW, Russo and Bischoff were both hired by Vince McMahon to reinvigorate the company. Whereas the old stories pitted a character like Sergeant Slaughter, a gruff-voiced United States Marine Corps drill sergeant (played by Robert Remus, an actual former Marine), in feuds with all of the stereotyped enemies of the United States — from Baron von Rashke, a Nazi, to Nikolai Volkoff, a Soviet, to The Iron Sheik, an Iranian who later became the Iraqi Colonel Mustafa during the Persian Gulf War — Remus himself now doubts “whether his All-American babyface character could have achieved stardom in this generation” (Marvez, 27 May 2000). Unlike the post-war or Cold War eras, but like the Vietnam War, there is no obvious enemy of the state.

Indeed, the American “war on terrorism” has had no influence on wrestling’s storylines. While Saddam Hussein fit the bill as a villain who (supposedly) sent Colonel Mustafa and General Adnan to defeat America (and its wrestlers) in 1991, he receives no mention today. There was a brief memorial which included the sounding of the ring bell following the attacks of 11 Sept. 2001 (as there was following the in-ring death of wrestler Owen Hart), but neither Osama Bin Laden nor his cohorts rates a wrestling persona. Furthermore, no one is winning the current “war” that Faludi documents. For wrestling, this means that today’s “All-American babyface,” played by a former Olympic Gold Medalist in freestyle wrestling and multiple WWE Champion, Kurt Angle, can be hated by the fans; he often plays a “heel.”<sup>5</sup> The irony is that Angle was a “real” wrestler who combined athleticism and hard work to achieve his Olympic dream — another popular plot — but upon his entry into WWE, Angle was given an immediate “push,” or promotional emphasis, before “proving” himself against the competition. Thus, he has not “earned” his position at the top. The fans most resent Angle’s sense of entitlement. Angle has parlayed his status into being the most-hated heel in WWE, “whose arrogance overshadows his patriotism” (Marvez, “Babyface”). The proverbial “boy next door” is an arrogant phony and braggart. Angle associates with a group known as “Right to Censor,” which “attempts” to rid WWE of its foul language and sexual content. Currently, Angle heads “Team Angle,” which features two more former amateur wrestlers. The members of Team Angle sport red, white and blue singlets, wave the American flag and wear their medals to the ring. Needless to say, Team Angle constantly tries to curry favour with the boss, Vince McMahon.

In a *Newsweek* article about wrestling’s surge in popularity in the 1990s, Jean Paul Levesque, better known to wrestling fans as WWE wrestler Hunter Hearst Helmsley, or The Game, explains that the

reason for this dramatic change in focus is that “in the post-cold-war era, ‘there is no horror now. To the average person, the real-life enemy now is their boss’” (qtd. in Leland 54). Susan Faludi finds the same perspective among the men she interviews. According to Faludi

The handful of men plucked arbitrarily from the anonymous crowd and elevated onto the new pedestal of mass media and entertainment glamour [are] unreachable [not] because they [are] necessarily arrogant or narcissistic, though some would surely become so; they simply [exist] in a realm from which all lines to [other men] have been cut. [The others become] unseen backing for the corporation’s real star: its brand name. (33)

The Kurt Angle storyline, like many others, exemplifies the situation. He does not deserve his status. It has been given to him as the corporation’s chosen star. Merit never enters the equation in such storylines. The corporation’s only allegiance is to its brand name, not physical prowess. Thus, the ability to enact masculinity is not necessarily the measure of the man.

Rather than taking care of its employees, the corporation only takes care of itself. McMahon has famously double-crossed several wrestlers, most notably Bret Hart, in real life. This often makes its way into the plot. R.W. Connell finds the corporate setting to be an important site of masculine formations:

The corporate activity behind media celebrities and the commercialization of sex brings us to [another] arena of hegemonic masculinity politics, the management of patriarchal organizations. Institutions do not maintain themselves; someone has to practise power for power effects to occur. [But] the fact that power relations must be practised allows for divergence in *how* they are practised. (215).

Instead of a “patriarchy,” Connell suggests that different modes of “hegemonic masculinity,” each with different methods of deployment, vie for power. Despite criticism to the contrary, this occurs because “There is no Patriarch Headquarters, with flags and limousines, where all the strategies are worked out. It is common for different groups of men, each pursuing a project of hegemonic masculinity, to come into conflict with each other” (Connell 215). Relationships and personal ties are no longer important in an era in which there is no greater common purpose, or more likely, a greater common enemy. Competing forms of hegemonic masculinity — here, economic and physical — come in contact with each other. In professional wrestling plots, this competition results in arbitrary deployments of power and enacted rage.

At any given time, several angles involve a wrestler (or group of wrestlers) as the victim(s) of the evil corporation and its “boss.” The basic plot remains consistent to the present day and indeed has been refined since the WWE split its “brands” into the *Smackdown* and *Raw* offerings. Whereas Eric Bischoff and Vince McMahon previously appeared on camera only as announcers — for many years McMahon’s ownership of WWE was hidden — they are now central characters in the plots. In a plot mimicking a current corporate trend, the NWO replaces the older, hardworking, loyal, traditionalist wrestlers, those who rely on their performance in the ring and the classic good vs. evil construction, following a hostile takeover. The message is clear: get with the New World Order or be beaten up and “downsized.” As if the hundreds of methods of beating on a human anatomy are not enough, the NWO spray-paints their logo — graffiti *qua* branding in the corporate as well as physical sense, because this is how the logo appears on the T-shirts they sell — on the defeated body of the victim. Finally, since the entire proceedings are always videotaped and photographed, “the System” has extraordinary powers of surveillance built into it. One of the most familiar scenes is a supposedly candid scene featuring a wrestler “back-stage,” watching the in-ring proceedings on a monitor. He never likes what he sees, so he smashes the monitor, but not the camera that is filming him. This act seemingly symbolizes resistance: he uses the features of the system against itself by watching without being seen and then smashes the equipment that makes this possible. Such an act is typical of the action movie genre. For example, in *Running Man*, Arnold Schwarzenegger’s character destroys the “Cadre” satellite TV network. Similarly, Rambo machine-guns the computerized reconnaissance systems that guides, or controls, him on his mission. Warner concludes that “by destroying, or interrupting, the operation of the system, the audience is left [ . . . ] with a freeze frame image of Rambo as a nuclear subject, a self etched against a landscape where no supporting social network seems necessary” (676). He is alone against the system and self-sufficiency is his best method of resistance. No supporting social network exists in wrestling; all that exists is subjection. Smashing the surveillance equipment is a futile act since a camera is still present, watching the wrestler as he watches. Moreover, destroying the monitor does little to stop the action that so upset him. He only thinks he has control, when the corporation has complete control.

While the NWO’s treatment of the older wrestlers is exaggerated and (physically) violent, it echoes the treatment the same generation of workers — the spectators — are receiving from the large corporations that employ them. Downsizing, outsourcing and forced early retirement do not cause bodily harm, but they do create violent disruptions in people’s lives on a large scale. Faludi lists some of the larger examples:

The deindustrialization and “restructuring” of the last couple of decades [has] scythed through vast swaths of industrial America, shuttering steel and auto plants across the Midwest, decimating the defense industry, and eliminating large number of workers in corporate behemoths: 60,000 at Chrysler, 74,000 at General Motors, 175,000 at IBM, 125,000 at AT&T. Though going “postal” [is] an extreme reaction, downsizing [is] a violent dislocation, often violently received. Yet those prototypical workingmen [are] taking their bitter disappointment with remarkable gentility. (60-1)

Daimler-Chrysler later cut 28,000 more jobs world-wide. Nortel Networks eliminated 50,000 of its 90,000 positions in a two-year period. These cuts affect workers at all levels of seniority. The remaining workers must be available to work all of the time. Legislators are moving to enforce what had been mere business practices.<sup>6</sup> Monitoring and surveillance of employees actually are increasing through the use of passive means. According to an American Management Association study, “About 74% of companies do some form of electronic monitoring of employees.” Companies monitor employees’ computer use through “firewalls” on the servers which prohibit the reception or transmission of “inappropriate” materials and catalogue attempts to do so. John Cloud wonders, “Which is more stifling, the paternalistic company with its gold watch as a reward for lifetime service, or the new paradigm: all work, all the time, all your life?” (54). Given this type of unsettled environment, it is not surprising that many employees act out their frustrations. Professional wrestling capitalizes on this situation by virtue of its inherent structure: the co-workers are necessarily rude and belligerent; the boss is completely unreasonable and occasionally gives his workers ultimatums of “win your next match or lose your job;” each wrestler is hated by a significant proportion of clients, or fans, who chant epithets, spit, and throw objects at the wrestlers. Where the average worker might be reduced to tears, wrestlers are supposed to seek revenge by damaging either the competition, the equipment or the boss.

Eventually, professional wrestling’s most recognizable and most marketable performer, perennial fan-favourite, Hulk Hogan, became Hollywood Hogan when he joined the NWO. This was a major coup for the NWO and a major departure for Hogan since he had preached a gospel of “say your prayers and take your vitamins” to all the “little Hulkamaniacs” for well over ten years. Hogan’s entrance music, “Real American,” with lyrics proclaiming that he “fights for the rights of everyone” was replaced by Jimi Hendrix’s “Voodoo Chile (slight reprise).” This indicates that the “American” way of life no longer matters in the new world order. Hollywood and Bischoff became the leaders of the NWO. Hogan’s new moniker and transformed behavior symbolize his allegiance with the corporatized world, or what Faludi calls “a culture of ornament” (40). In such a culture, “manhood is

defined by appearance, by youth and attractiveness, by money and aggression, by posture and swagger and 'props,' by the curled lip and flexed biceps, by the glamour of the cover boy and by the market-bartered 'individuality' that sets one astronaut or athlete or gangster above another" (Faludi 40). The colourful ring attire many of the NWO members traditionally wore was replaced by a uniform of black pants and a black shirt with the NWO logo on it. Thus, in the New World Order, individuality ceases to exist, and their motto, "NWO for life," is a constant reminder.<sup>7</sup> This is a simplified — black and white, if you will — version of the current world order, but the basis of the storyline clearly resonates with audiences and accounts for a great deal of wrestling's popularity.

### **“Stylin’ and Profilin’”: Ric Flair**

The foremost example of the cruel corporation vs. the solitary male involves Ric Flair and Eric Bischoff as the principle players in a strange mixture of art and life. Flair is one of the greatest performers in the history of wrestling. However, even Ric Flair can fall victim to the New World Order and the new corporate reality. This should not have come as a surprise given that the convention involves what Warner describes as:

a version of the fable of self and system which dichotomizes fictional space into two positions. The self, often associated with nature and the erotic, becomes the locus for the expression of every positive human value, most especially “freedom.” Opposite the self is the System, which in its colorless, mechanical operations, is anathematized as a faceless monster using its insidious powers to bend all human effort to its own service. (676)

In stark contrast to the NWO's austere uniform and amateurish logo, the flamboyant Flair is known for his outlandish robes, one of which “has 7,200 rhinestones and weighs 45 pounds,” countless colourful sayings, and his entrance music: *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (AP). He could not be more closely associated with nature since his nickname throughout his entire career has been “The Nature Boy.” Flair is so-named because he seems natural in the ring; that is he “sells,” or makes the actions seem real, better than anyone. Flair's association with the erotic is ensured by more than his platinum blonde hair, perennial tan, and brief wrestling attire. He has always portrayed, even at fifty, a playboy. In his words, Flair is a “stylin’ and profilin,’ limousine-riding, Learjet-flying, wheeling-dealing, kiss-stealing, love-making, heart-breaking son-of-a-gun.” Of course, sexual freedom is one of the ultimate freedoms.

The plot began with a “real-life” dispute between the wrestler and WCW. Flair’s contract allowed him flexibility in terms of his performance schedule. Thus, Flair decided to forego a WCW event in order to go the AAU national amateur wrestling — that is, real wrestling — championships so that he could watch his nine-year-old son, Reid, compete in the tournament. Nothing could be more natural than wanting to watch one’s son. Apparently, Eric Bischoff did not agree because in a “suit filed by World Championship Wrestling [the company] claims Flair’s failure to show up at a series of bouts this year played havoc with ‘story lines’ planned out for the performances” (AP). The lawsuit was settled eventually, but not before Flair’s entire family was drawn into the action when the script was changed to include elements that occurred outside the ring. When Ric Flair had a heart attack — a “work,” or well-guarded part of the script — Eric Bischoff appeared to have a change of heart and called Ric’s wife Beth, along with sons Reid and nineteen-year-old David, to the ring so that he could say he was sorry. In a classic heel move, Bischoff said that he was sorry that Ric Flair is an old, broken-down man who cannot provide for his family and rudely kissed Beth Flair. An NWO thug then held Reid while Bischoff beat David. A few weeks later, on the night of Flair’s triumphant return to WCW following his (actual) reinstatement, Bischoff crashed the proceedings fire Flair. Flair responded, “You can’t fire me, I’m already fired” and condemned Bischoff’s “abuse of power” (Gardner). When Bischoff entered the ring, Reid Flair, with his AAU medal hanging around his neck, tackled the president. In other words, the boss is not man enough to defeat a child. Nevertheless, Bischoff’s hubris led him to challenge Flair to a winner-takes-all match for the presidency of WCW. Naturally, Flair won, but triumph is not complete until the wrestler is champion of the world. In the weeks leading up to the title match between Hollywood Hogan and Ric Flair, Bischoff and the NWO made Flair’s life miserable. Of course, Flair won the title. However, at the moment when Flair was both president and champion, he turned heel by abusing his power and refusing title matches. Thus, the continuity of the narrative is never in danger.

## **Beating the Boss: Stone Cold Steve Austin**

While WCW’s plots involving Ric Flair and the NWO present the new approach to sports entertainment, Vince McMahon has seemingly perfected the ruthless boss vs. employee format. The longest running such feud involves McMahon and Stone Cold Steve Austin and is detailed in the video, *Austin vs. McMahon: The Whole True Story (AvM)*. It is interesting to note that the video has the feel both of a work and of an actual documentary, including narrator Jim Forbes of VH1’s *Behind the Music* documentaries. Fans consider the Austin-McMahon feud, now more than five years old, “The greatest feud in sports entertainment history” (*AvM*).<sup>8</sup> Forbes summarizes the phenomenon that

is the angle: "WWE fans have embraced a new attitude in the past two years, leading to explosive growth in our industry. And, the happiness these fans feel is in large part due to hatred; hatred between two men: Vince McMahon, the owner of WWE, and Stone Cold Steve Austin, his most popular and rebellious employee. [. . .] Their conflict changed the face of sports entertainment" (AvM). Former wrestler turned WWE booker Terry Taylor explains the heart of the angle: "You've got a guy like Stone Cold, who says, 'To hell with the boss,' and makes the boss the target — which has never been done" (AvM). WWE announcer and Vice-President in charge of talent, Jim Ross, puts it, "Stone Cold will never be employee of the month" (AvM). In the characterizations of Vince McMahon and Steve Austin, WWE writers encapsulate current corporate trends and their impact on employer-employee relations and the resultant impact on masculinities.

In keeping with the archetype of the hero, Stone Cold Steve Austin is a white heterosexual male. As mentioned earlier the protagonist in this form is a loner. Austin is no different and this is reflected in his nicknames and character. Like Ric Flair, Austin's *nom de guerre*, "Stone Cold" more than implies his association with nature, in this case at its harshest and most heartless. He is not like "stone cold;" he is stone cold. In addition, Jim Ross gave Austin the nickname, "The West-Texas Rattlesnake," or simply, "The Rattlesnake." Such a nickname enhances Austin's connection to nature and signifies several aspects of both the man and the form of masculinity he represents, all of which are connected to popular American myths. The rattlesnake is a species peculiar to North America but is especially associated with the southwest, which is in turn associated with the rugged masculinity of the frontiersman and the cowboy. The rattle indicates that the snakes wish to be left alone; they are not aggressive but will defend themselves with deadly force, if necessary. As well, Texas is the "Lone Star State" which gained independence in a purportedly rebellious war with Mexico which featured the legendary battle of the Alamo. As the story goes, Texas stood alone against tyranny then and Austin does so now. Austin further removes himself through his philosophy of interpersonal relations: "D.T.A.: Don't trust anybody." He frequently repeats this line and it has appeared on T-shirts. On the rare occasions when Austin has accepted the help of a partner, it has been forced upon him by circumstances beyond his control and then accepted only begrudgingly. Finally, he has no romantic life. While certainly indicative of Austin's independence, his approach also reveals his self-destructive streak.

For Austin, relenting to McMahon's demands or accepting help from a partner means giving up freedom. In dichotomizing the self and the system, the producers of action movies create what Ryan and Kellner find to be the genre's "essential ideological gesture, [by which] no middle ground is

allowed [. . .] anything that departs from the ideal of pure individual freedom (corporations, but also socialism) is by implication lumped under domination” (256). Warner surmises that “Such a fiction no doubt has deep roots in American populist paranoia about global conspiracy” (676). In Austin’s case, a partner precludes his total independence. Austin will ultimately have to suffer alone.

Austin’s solitary style has a doubly detrimental effect: it incites the wrath of his vindictive boss and eliminates any possibility for help. In hero films, “the exchanges of self and system are given the insistently Oedipal configuration of a struggle between overbearing fathers and a defiant son” (Warner 676). In the action genre, however, the father possesses added authority because his “authority is linked to the state” (Warner 676). It is worth recalling that Warner posits that corporations can take the place of the state. Plot suspense, then, “pivots upon a personal drama, meant to allegorize the struggle of every modern person who would remember their freedom: a contest between the system’s agenda for the self and the self’s attempt to manipulate the system to his own ends” (Warner 676). On several occasions both Flair and Austin attempted such a manipulation. During a broadcast from Minneapolis, his hometown, Ric Flair enlisted the aid of the city’s mayor and local sports heroes John Randle, of the Vikings, and Kirby Puckett, of the Twins, to remove Eric Bischoff from the arena. Similarly, in Chattanooga, TN, Steve Austin turned the tables on Vince McMahon and had the boss “arrested” by local police after McMahon admitted to having assaulted Austin the previous week. In both cases, the victory was only temporary. Although these manipulations temporarily even the score, Warner finds that victory does not suffice: “two ideas are developed about loss [. . .] Both emphasize the cruel sadistic sources of this pain and loss: ‘we were unfairly beaten [. . .] and experienced loss’; ‘others were responsible for that loss, and they should now be punished’” (Warner 677). Wrestling operates around these two ideas. Rather than the state, the source of the pain is now the corporation and its chief executive. Instead of Vietnam, the loss is at home, in the battlefield of the workplace. This is not an entirely new viewpoint, especially when one considers that many magnates of the early twentieth century — Henry Ford, William Randolph Hearst, John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie — were reviled for their (violent) treatment of workers. To an extent, World War II and the Cold War overshadowed worker-boss enmity. Labour unions have lost much of the power, where they exist at all. The fact that the site of the dispute is now on North American soil means that the enemy is within — a traitor, as it were — rather than from without makes the scenario more sinister. This framework contains a third idea “which is never allowed to reach consciousness [. . .] but nonetheless motivates and informs the narrative diegesis: ‘I am responsible for the losses, and I should be beaten’” (Warner 677). The result is that

“unconscious guilt for failing [. . .] is deflected away from consciousness, but it motivates that defiant and risky behavior which repeatedly throws [the hero] into the position to receive punishment for failing” (Warner 677). As mentioned above, both Flair and Austin attempt to use the system to their advantage. However, their efforts invariably fail. Since the boss — either Bischoff or McMahon — is allied with the system (and is the system), he will always have greater access to power. Each small victory for Flair and Austin results in massive retribution by the corporation. Thus, in a palpable way, Flair and Austin are the sources of their own pain through their defiant behaviour toward their bosses. By continuing to be involved in the feud, they ultimately are submitting to pain and defeat.

One of the most dramatic and revealing series of episodes in the Austin-McMahon feud occurred during the fall of 1998. At the September pay-per-view, McMahon conspired with “Undertaker” and “Kane” to beat Austin and retrieve the WWE Championship Belt. Following the match, in typical McMahon style, he reminded Undertaker and Kane that they might both be over seven feet tall and weigh over 300lbs but he is the boss and they owe their success to him. With his power, McMahon can reverse the fortunes at any time. This is an expected feature of many storylines. Once Undertaker and Kane turned away from McMahon following Austin’s removal from the ring, he mouthed the words, “Fuck you!” and flipped his middle fingers at the pair. Unfortunately for McMahon, Undertaker saw the gesture and with Kane retaliated by “breaking” McMahon’s leg by “crushing” it between the metal ring steps. The pummelling forced McMahon into hospital where he was assaulted by Austin, who was disguised as a doctor. The routine began as slapstick comedy, with Austin hitting McMahon over the head with a bedpan and zapping him with a pair of defibrillator paddles. However, the scene ended in a more disturbing fashion. Austin grabbed McMahon, the latter clad only in his underwear and a hospital gown, and bent him over the bed. Austin positioned himself behind McMahon and lifted WWE owner’s gown, saying “I’ve always known you were full of shit, Vince, so let’s find out how full of shit you really are” (*Raw*). Austin then appeared to slam an enema tube violently into McMahon, while shouting, “This is going to hurt you a lot more than it’s going to hurt me, I can tell you that” (*Raw*). The scene fades to black as the tube disappears, McMahon screams, and Austin ends up belly-to-back with McMahon.

The bedpan is reminiscent of a beer shower Austin gave McMahon in Chattanooga and serves to level the playing field. The effect is to say “You might be the most powerful man in sports-entertainment, but you still have to piss and shit like the rest of us.” McMahon is so enfeebled — that is, less than a complete man — that he is confined to a bed and needs a bedpan to relieve himself. McMahon also looks silly and clumsy in his underwear and hospital gown because his frailty is

exposed. He may as well be naked, because he has been stripped of his power, or at the very least, it is useless to him in the hospital; you cannot buy unbreakable bones. Moreover, in this context, McMahon's power does not stem from any intrinsic ability. He has not earned it and he is not "man enough" in a tangible, physical way, to hold power, but Stone Cold Steve Austin is. The defibrillator paddles also symbolize McMahon's reduced power. An actual jolt to a functioning heart could seriously harm a person. The effect is to say that McMahon, and by extension, all corporate leaders, do not have a heart in both the literal and the metaphorical sense. He is only interested in the "bottom line."

Finally, the insertion of the enema tube into McMahon serves a greater function than to ensure that the boss is no longer "full of shit." Given that the tube is forced into McMahon, the scene evokes anal rape. This point is reinforced by the positioning of the pair when the scene ends. Both men are at an angle to the camera, facing the bottom-right of the screen. The probe disappears into McMahon as Austin's belly slams into WWE owner's backside. Whether or not Austin's body or a phallic object is penetrating McMahon's is of no significance since the effect is the same. It is still Stone Cold who controls the "phallus" and who uses it. Again, McMahon appears as something less than a man. As Connell writes, "Anal sexuality is a focus of disgust, and receptive anal sex is mark of feminization" (219). Austin is physically doing to McMahon what the boss figuratively does in business: "fucking him up the ass." It is worth recalling that neither the boss nor the wrestler is fixed in the position of spectacle or beaten body. Instead, the genre depends on an oscillation not just between good and bad, but between beating and being beaten. Whenever one of the players triumphs, the third and final part of the formula, it is temporary and fleeting. However, the difference is that Austin is able physically to assume the role of the sadistic abuser while McMahon must use manipulation and deception, practices typically projected onto femininity, to achieve a similar result. Corporate power, then, is illegitimate power since it is obtained through means that are not essentially masculine.

As male heads of patriarchal organizations, Eric Bischoff and Vince McMahon can be considered the figurative fathers of their respective federations. When Austin attacks McMahon with the enema tube, for instance, he is figuratively raping his "father" in a violent revision of the Oedipal configuration. Such a formation is typical of action films. As Warner observes, "pain becomes the occasion for pleasure through an encounter with figures of 'the father' — but not the mother. In each film that father is bifurcated into 'good' and 'bad' fathers, so each becomes emblematic of public aspects of America" (677). The major difference in the contemporary is that the absence of the "good" father. As held by McMahon, Bischoff, and CEOs of aforementioned companies, the position

traditionally occupied by the good father, the provider and head of the household, becomes the domain of the bad father, the “entirely cynical bureaucrat [and] duplicitous organization man” (Warner 678). Rather than a complete break with the formula, McMahon and Bischoff represent a progression of the type. In the films on which wrestling is based, “there is enough evidence of the complicity between [the] rival fathers to suggest that they are in fact two sides of one father” (678). McMahon and Bischoff represent two important progressions: first, bad fathers currently control the order of things; second, good fathers can become bad fathers at any given moment. This attitude reflects a lack of trust in institutions and leaders. This is hardly an original observation, given the critical view that postmodernity is marked by a lack of faith in institutions and “grand narratives” and a resultant tribalization of society. However, one must also consider that patriarchies have reproduced themselves seemingly without interruption during this same period and that the current lack occurs on a microcosmic scale.

## **Standards and Practices: The (Actual) Effects of Criticism**

According to William Warner, *Rambo*, and other action films construct “a subject position — one which is Western, white, and male — which hails spectators to an ethos for being in the world [that] values isolated self-assertion, competitive zeal, chauvinist Americanism, and the use of force” (675). Although the hero in professional wrestling is a Western male, he is not necessarily white in the currently popular formula. What is telling in Warner’s analysis is the popular reaction to the criticisms of the *Rambo* films, which decried the films’ overt “Reaganism;” that is, their endorsement of Ronald Reagan’s policies. He explains:

by reading *Rambo* as a filmic expression of Reaganism, an approach used repeatedly by film critics and cultural and political commentators [. . .] the film hero and the president become each other’s latent cultural truth. This reading uses the popularity of Reaganism to gloss, explain, and (for many commentators) discredit the popularity of *Rambo*. In a complementary fashion, *Rambo* becomes the dream-fantasy in film, the “truth” of Reaganism, now blatantly exposed as in various ways mendacious. (675)

Critiques of *Rambo* and of professional wrestling very successfully point out the social ills the forms glorify, especially violence and sexism. However, as Warner recognizes critiques of *Rambo* and Reagan had a

paradoxical effect within the political culture of the 1980s: [they] helped Rambo become a generally recognized cultural icon. [C]ritical condemnation of Rambo, almost as much as the film itself [. . .] allows Rambo to emerge as a cultural icon in the mid-1980s. Thus, Rambo as a cultural icon includes the idealized filmic projection, and its scathing critique, condensed in one image. (675)

The people who watched *Rambo* then and the people who watched wrestling in the 1990s — and continue to do so now — consume the productions in spite of *and* because of the critical reaction to them. In fact, the turn of critics to the extreme, sanctioned, and real violence of mixed martial arts events has allowed wrestling to mimic its competitor while receiving reduced attention. Criticism, especially from sources perceived as elitist or self-righteous, makes wrestling more attractive. Fans take dismissals of wrestling as dismissals of themselves, which adds to the list of oppositions (in fans' minds) which led to the popularity of wrestling. Even for those who refuse to become consumers of the shows professional wrestling, with its “icon[s] of the masculine, the primitive, and the heroic, becomes the site of a (bad) truth about American culture” (Warner 675). Rather than enlightening viewers, critics become class enemies.

Much of the criticism of wrestling looks at what is “wrong”: authenticity, violence, and subject matter. Conversely, wrestling as a text — how it functions, how it is consumed, and why it remains popular despite condemnation — remains ignored. Michael Jenkinson, of the *Edmonton Sun* recognizes, “the debate isn’t really about the validity of wrestling [. . .] but a broader one about who defines acceptable forms of culture. [. . .] It’s really a debate over who sets the canon — the elites or the populists. And pro wrestling is one of the quintessential expressions of mass populism” (“Wrestling Studies”). Several recent events highlight the paradoxical effect of criticisms. One centers around the doll of “WWE character Al Snow, complete with a tiny severed female head in one hand. He’s holding it by the hair. Lovely” (Haskins). Following several protests, the doll was pulled from stores, including Walmart and Toys-R-Us, across North America. Eventually, WWE recalled all of the dolls and absorbed a considerable loss to appease critics like Sabrena Parton, of Kennesaw State University, who claims that the doll, and the character, “promote the brutalization of women” (qtd. in Jenkinson, “Feminists”). An *Edmonton Journal* editorial suggests that when WWE “produced and sold a doll whose gimmick was to carry around the severed head of a woman, they showed their true colours. [The doll] is a horrifying toy with a violent message” (qtd. in Jenkinson, “Feminists”). Psychologist Lori Egger claims that Al Snow depicts a “television image [that] draws a link between sexuality and violence and implies it’s normal male behaviour” (qtd. in Jenkinson, “Feminists”). In a line of defense frequently adopted by wrestling fans, both then and now, the critics are accused of

never actually having watched the WWE, otherwise they would notice that the character is a “lunatic” who has escaped from an asylum. He carries the detached head of a mannequin named “Head.” Snow only calls it Head, which furthers the notion that he is crazy. Within the story, he, and everyone who watches, knows it is a mannequin, yet he still believes the mannequin talks to him. Truth be told, the Al Snow doll, along with Head, is among the least violent of the toys WWE sells.<sup>9</sup> Al Snow belongs to the “J.O.B. Squad,” which refers to the wrestling slang, “to job,” which means that one is paid to lose. Snow then becomes a lovable loser.

This is not to suggest that the character is flawless but to point out that superficial analyses and knee-jerk reactions produce an opposite reaction among the wrestling fan souls that are supposedly in need of saving. In the words of Michael Jenkinson, fans see the critics as “humourless, politically correct busybod[ies]” (“Feminists”). The critics of the entertainment become the enemies of the fans; upsetting the critics is definitely part of the enjoyment for the fans. Vince McMahon has exploited this phenomenon in two recent storylines: a gay wedding and a “hot lesbian action” match. In both cases, protesters were active at wrestling matches. In fact, McMahon’s daughter, Stephanie, disguised as a prototypical “feminazi,” led the protests. Stephanie, according to the plot, wants to wrest control of the company from her father and used the protests to help. Actual protesters were completely duped by the plots and their own involvement in them. Once again, academics and cultural police appear to be talking only to themselves. They merely cause fans to resent the critics and the “establishment,” the perceived powers that would be.

Beyond the social and cultural factors which attended the rise of professional wrestling in the 1990s, an increase in men’s involvement in bodybuilding corresponds to the rise in wrestling’s popularity. Not surprisingly, this contemporaneous trend also reflects the then prevalent sense of masculine diminishment. Sport sociologist Philip White suggests that this “preoccupation with muscularity is [ . . . ] best explained as a response to contemporary male feelings of uncertainty and powerlessness. Men individually and men in general are experiencing a crisis of masculinity and are drawn to areas of social life where they feel comfortable and safe” (116).<sup>10</sup> While it may be argued that men remain(ed) the privileged gender, White notes that

with the growth of large and impersonal bureaucracies, whether public or private, there has been a transfer of power away from individual males [ . . . ] Power has shifted into the public domain, leaving many men feeling privately powerless — small cogs in large machines. Consequently, because men feel increasingly confused and insecure about what “real men” are like in a time of shifting

expectations, they are also impelled to seek out ways of bolstering and validating their masculine identities. (116)

White also contends that due to advances in technology and a shift away from a production-based economy in the last quarter of the twentieth century, “[North American] men are increasingly doing work where physical strength is not needed and where women are steadily breaking barriers to occupational mobility and success” (117). White suggests that in conjunction, “these factors represent threats to traditional masculinity and have made symbolic representations of the male body as strong, virile and powerful more prevalent in popular culture. A man may have to increasingly compete with a female colleague on an equal basis in the competitive world of work, but he can still display his muscles in a compensatory display of masculine power” (117). Connell notes that the military-industrial trends of the twentieth century have led to a “split in hegemonic masculinity. Practice organized around dominance [is] increasingly incompatible with practice organized around expertise or technical knowledge” (193). This split often results in competition between and/or among different versions of hegemonic masculinity.

Connell describes the schism between management and labor, economically, socially, professionally, as a chronic problem for corporations and for the state. Connell concludes that eventually a polarity “developed within hegemonic masculinity between dominance and technical expertise. However, neither version has succeeded in displacing the other” (194). This plays out in the wrestling ring and in the workplace as the opposition between those who “know,” the bosses, and those who “do,” the workers. Exacerbating this situation is the widely held sense among workers that those in positions of power have not earned their place through hard work—that is, physical work, which remains the essence of the “honest” day’s work. Sadly, the statistics seem to support the suspicion. In a contemporary survey of American corporate executives, *USA Today* found that 63% of male executives landed their job through networking. This compares with only 13% who turned to classified ads or search agents.<sup>11</sup> In other words, privilege begets privilege. The myth of America as a meritocracy is just that. Like wrestling, the match is fixed, the outcome is predetermined. The workers have no chance. Wrestling, then, exposes the boss as undeserving through his weakness in the ring.

Another trend arising in the 1990s and continuing in professional wrestling makes it another site of the growing power and presence of females in areas that traditionally have been the strongholds of men. Moreover, the presence of women as wrestlers furthers the sense of powerlessness that men

feel, especially when the women win. Former WWE star Chyna, a.k.a. Joanie Laurer, best exemplifies this situation. She is physically as large as, and as strong as, most of the men in WWE. She has held the Intercontinental Championship belt, which signifies the top-ranked contender for the federation's World Championship. While Laurer has undergone several surgeries to enhance her feminine attributes (several were necessary to correct a serious underbite with which she was born), she has maintained all of the muscle and all of the wrestling ability. It is arguable that Chyna's enhanced beauty might be for "eye candy," but her mat skills are not. Thus, she and the women who have followed in ever-growing numbers pose a significant threat to masculinity because she can be a sexually desirable woman and at the same time, can assert her power over *anyone*. More importantly, there is also the possibility for a male-to-female cross-gender identification among the identification processes involved in the consumption of a visual medium like a televised wrestling match. Chyna has been placed in the same type of situation as Austin and Flair, and it results in a similar viewing process.

Professional wrestling is not a fantasy-world in the same manner as professional sports, or even as the Ultimate Fighting Championships. These most often are purely masculine domains that depend on actual fighting. Professional wrestling is fiction, the audience knows it and, since the 1990s, the corporations have admitted it. Wrestling is not fantasy, but meta-fantasy. Herein lies one of the greatest ironies of this form of entertainment. Despite the notions of class revolt it might appear to exhibit, in terms of content and consumers, the multiple layers of containment ensure this possibility never occurs. First, the action occurs between character types rather than actual class constituents. The ring literally boxes in the action and television, the usual method of transmission, further mediates the content and adds another layer of containment. Finally, the outcome is predetermined, but more importantly, it changes nothing. When the bell rings, Vince McMahon still owns the company. The fact that criticism has no effect indicates that McMahon continues to win the fall, as it were. Professional wrestling is not necessarily the nostalgic look back to a lost era that some (or most) westerners are, nor is it altogether the reclamation project William Warner outlines in his analysis of eighties action films. Nor is it necessarily of the type Connell describes: "The imagery of masculine heroism is not *culturally* irrelevant. [. . .] Part of the struggle for hegemony in the gender order is the use of culture for such disciplinary purposes: setting standards, claiming popular assent and discrediting those who fall short. The production of exemplary masculinities is thus integral to the politics of hegemonic masculinity" (214). Instead of a project of maintaining hegemonic masculinity, professional wrestling should be seen as exemplifying the reifying reach of commodity

capitalism. Masculinity and class revolt, both inside *and* outside the ring, come pre-packaged and staged. Every pay-per-view purchase confirms the consumers' consent and containment. Given the poignancy of the plots and the increasingly threatening female presence — not as a companion, but as competitor — professional wrestling might yet be a small acknowledgment of a possible new order and the increasing impossibility of an old one. Masculine privilege is no longer a certainty because masculinity is tenuous rather than dominant. One of the ultimate lessons of the cultural shifts of the 1990s, shifts exemplified by the rise of professional wrestling, is that men can be replaced.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> During the period of growth, there were two wrestling corporations, the World Wrestling Federation (WWF) and World Championship Wrestling (WCW). WWF has purchased its competitor. As well, it was forced to change its name to "World Wrestling Entertainment" (WWE) by the World Wildlife Foundation. WWE operates as if the latter change never occurred. Fans do not seem to have noticed either. Neither major corporate change affected the stories. Therefore, I use "WWE" throughout for the sake of consistency.

<sup>2</sup> In Sept. 2000, *Raw* moved from USA Network to The National Network (TNN) in a deal worth a reported \$28 million per year, over four years. The latter broadcaster had only recently changed its name from The Nashville Network, and modified its format — originally, a schedule based on outdoors and country and western shows and aimed at a specific, regional audience — to a content mix aimed at a more diverse audience. The plan, according to Brian Hughes, Senior Vice-President of TNN Sports and Outdoors, is to “position some programming that fits within the 18-to-49-(year-old) demographic” (qtd. in Marvez, “TV’s Raw”). WWE fans followed *Raw* to TNN. In its first week it drew a “5.5 rating, which translates into an average of 7.14 million people in 4.28 million households” in North America (qtd. in Marvez, “TV’s Raw”). When Hughes mentions the target demographic the unstated focus is on males, who comprise the vast majority of professional wrestling’s viewership.

<sup>3</sup> Former wrestler turned advertising consultant, Arn Anderson, reports that approximately 63% of professional wrestling’s adult viewers are male and 70% are between the ages of eighteen and forty-four. Half of the 69% of the viewers who are employed work in “blue collar” jobs (Anderson). This statistic also indicates the youth of the viewership since 22% of them are between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five, ages at which many still live with parents or custodial guardians.

<sup>4</sup> This practice, known as the “run-in” ending, usually takes the form of a “save,” in which a wrestler is rescued from a defeat or a beating. For the NWO a run-in serves neither purpose. They “punk” or beat on everyone with an array of chair-shots, slams through tables, and other moves. They then leave their victims in the centre of the ring in a display of might-makes-right.

<sup>5</sup> In fact, the WWE attempted to give a serious “push” to a babyface character known as “The Patriot” shortly before the terrorists attacks occurred. The character wore an outfit of stars and stripes, waved the American flag and defended the helpless. Despite the push, the character never “got over” with wrestling fans and disappeared from storylines mid-way through a feud.

<sup>6</sup> The Canadian province of Ontario is among the most aggressive in this regard. The province’s Bill 147 increases the work week from forty to sixty hours and removes employees’ rights to choose overtime and be paid for it. Bill 74 expands the definition of “essential services” beyond police, fire, and medical workers, and forces Ontario’s teachers to be available *at all times* to supervise children.

<sup>7</sup> Shortly after Turner Broadcasting (now part of Time-Warner/AOL) purchased WCW, Vince McMahon briefly attempted to play the family-owned WWE as the little guy fighting the massive multi-national conglomerate. These included parodic skits with bumbling characters based on

wrestlers who left for WCW. Ironically, McMahon lured most of his talent, including those he parodied, away from other promoters at the expense of many small, often family-run, independent and local organizations. In any case, McMahon first employed the “us vs. the corporation” narrative to attack Turner. Eric Bischoff subsequently elevated the structure, but McMahon may have perfected it with the Stone Cold Steve Austin plot as will be shown later.

<sup>8</sup> Angles involving Austin were suspended after the arrest of Steve Williams, who plays Austin, in the summer of 2002, on charges of domestic assault. Williams then entered a rehabilitation program to treat addictions to alcohol and to pain-killers which allegedly stem from his several knee, back, and neck injuries. In a case of reality mimicking a fiction that mimics reality, WWE has no employee benefits program and has a history of quickly dropping performers who have medical and/or legal problems. Some are welcomed back once they have completed treatment. Thus, all that matters is the ability to make money for Vince McMahon. For example, Austin returned for the next “Wrestlemania,” in mid-2003 and remains a regular.

<sup>9</sup> I acquired the dolls at a factory outlet for less than one-third of the original price. Even in the doll version, the mannequin’s status as just that — a mannequin — is emphasized.

<sup>10</sup> This article was originally published in the *Globe and Mail*, 25 Nov. 1992.

<sup>11</sup> Equally telling are the statistics for female executives. While 41% of them found their jobs through networking – indicating that the “old boys’ club” might function for females – more than two-and-a-half times as many, 31%, found their jobs through the classifieds or search agents – which suggests that the club is not actively pursuing new members.

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