

MEDIA EDUCATION
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TRANSCRIPT



Challenging media

WRESTLING WITH MANHOOD: FULL VERSION
BOYS, BULLYING & BATTERING

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FULL VERSION

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INTRODUCTION

FANS:

Welcome! Finally the Rock has come back to Springfield.
 You know, it's good clean fun.
 Honestly, I wouldn't let my son watch it.
 This is Austin's middle finger.
 Too much violence.
 That and a lot of kids want to be like Stone Cold so they'll drink beer.
 The female wrestlers, I think, are tremendous athletes.
 Big boobs and ripping each other's clothes off.
 She's a whore.
 Sometimes they get naked.
 The women are just their little playthings.
 The things they make them do, get on the ground and bark (barking sounds).
 That was pretty cool what they did to Trish.
 It's promoting men beating on women.
 They want to come into the man's world, they deserve to be treated just like a man.
 If a man is hitting a woman what is that showing the little kid?
 It's not the WWF's responsibility to raise them kids.
 It's no worse than watching a movie or watching a soap opera or watching television.
 It's entertainment.
 It's entertainment.
 It's just entertainment.
 I think it's only entertainment, yeah.

SUT JHALLY: You know it's really difficult to get people to take professional wrestling seriously. Whenever I say that I'm working on this project on wrestling, people start smiling and laughing, almost as if to say "how can you take this stuff so seriously. It's so obviously fake, and so juvenile that you can't spend any serious time analyzing it." Well, I think that attitude is a major mistake if we want to understand what's going on in contemporary American culture, and the reason it's a mistake is because of the tremendous and widespread popularity that professional wrestling enjoys today.

[WWE announcer] *Welcome to Smackdown! At the Arco Arena in Sacramento, California! Michael Cole and Tazz at ringside.*

JACKSON KATZ: There's no question that professional wrestling is phenomenally popular especially with young men. The World Wrestling Federation, which is now called World Wrestling Entertainment, or the WWE, has the highest rated cable programs every week. In it's advertising in the trade press the WWF even boasts about the fact that they have more teens watching

wrestling, 4.5 million, than popular shows like Buffy, Roswell, Charmed and Dawson's Creek combined.

[CNBC Interview: Linda McMahon] *The primary number one show on cable, Raw is War, will now go to TNN as well as a couple of other of our shows for TNN. We will have the opportunity for our Heat program, Sunday Night Heat, which will now move to MTV. So we have multiple media platforms under this new deal. We are very excited about it.*

JACKSON KATZ: In addition to popular TV shows like Raw and Smackdown, which bring in millions of dollars of ad revenue, there is a variety of live shows every week which bring in \$100 million a year, and every few weeks there is a Pay-Per-View event that rakes in another \$160 million annually. The WWE also makes millions of dollars in sales from merchandising products.

[TV ad] *With WWF backstage mayhem you can catapult WWF superstars through the walls, break through doors and concrete blocks, with over ten slamming action sound effects. Reek havoc with alarm, working soda machine, and a flushing toilet.*

JACKSON KATZ: WWE stars like Mick Foley publish best selling books, there is now a theme store and bar in Times Square devoted to the WWE. Wrestling stars appear regularly on talk shows like Regis and Conan and star in big budget Hollywood movies like the Scorpion King. The female stars of wrestling are regularly featured in their own magazine, not to mention appearing as centerfolds in *Playboy*.

People who aren't familiar with wrestling today sometimes confuse it with the wrestling they think they know from the 50's and 60's with wrestlers like Killer Kowalski, Gorgeous George, or the 70's and 80's with wrestlers like Macho Man Randy Savage or Hulk Hogan. Today's wrestling is a radically new form of entertainment in all its dimensions.

[WWE announcer] *The most hideous smell I have ever smelled.*

[WWE Mr. McMahon] *That's it, mop the ring up with her Steph. That's it, mop the ring up with her. Put her head in it, come on.*

[HBO Interview: Vince McMahon] *It's a combination of a good story, good execution, and good performances that makes people laugh or makes them cry. Where it evokes some sort of emotion from it. That's actually the business that we're in. We are an entertainment business, we try to evoke some sort of emotion from you.*

SUT JHALLY: So the old question about wrestling, "Is it real or fake?" just isn't relevant anymore. Everyone knows it's fake but it doesn't matter.

FAN: It's one of the best things out there right now on TV, I know it's fake, but it just, it draws you in.

SUT JHALLY: Everyone knows that it's like the rest of television. That it's constructed and that there's a creative team behind the scenes coming up with the stories and the characters.

[WWE announcer] *What's going on, what is this? Oh my god, it's Eric Bischoff! The Raw General Manager.*

FAN: I love the action, the storylines, the characters, the colors. It's like a soap opera for guys.

SUT JHALLY: Soap opera is really the thing to compare wrestling to. The writers have to come up with 6 hours of new programming every week that integrates the major stars like The Rock, The Undertaker, Triple H, Brock Lesnar, into story lines that also have to feature the growing number of female characters. To help us understand the intricacies of the characters and the story lines the writers also use announcers at the live events to give meaning to the action and to guide audience response.

[WWE announcer] *She's a virgin! She's a virgin, JR – she's saying Moses couldn't part those legs!*

SUT JHALLY: One of the interesting aspects of the storylines, the plays around the edges of reality and fiction is that the real life owner of the WWE, Vince McMahon, also plays an important character on the show, Mr. McMahon, who is also the fictional owner and boss.

[WWE Mr. McMahon] *I am the boss!*

SUT JHALLY: On top of all this there is also the incredible action that takes place inside the ring where these high-performance athletes are risking their bodies in just unbelievable ways.

FAN: It's an adrenaline rush.

FAN: Totally breathtaking and totally extreme.

FAN: It's like going to the circus for like older kids but you get to see guys beating each other up, man, it's awesome.

SUT JHALLY: So we don't have to wonder about whether or not wrestling is popular. The television ratings tell us that millions of people, the vast majority of them young men, are watching the telecasts. And the enthusiasm of the fans at

the live shows also tells us that wrestling is tapping into something deep in the audience and in the culture. Moreover, the producers of wrestling know that they have to connect with the audience.

[HBO Interview: Vince McMahon] *Exactly what they want and we try to keep our fingers on the pulse of the marketplace, listen to our audience and really give them what we want, give them compelling story lines and great athleticism.*

SUT JHALLY: Anything this popular reveals something larger about our society, about its deep seeded values, the morality that underpins it.

[HBO Interview: Vince McMahon] *Again, we're not everybody's cup of tea, but we're a lot of people's cup of tea. They really enjoy what we do and if they didn't they wouldn't watch.*

SUT JHALLY: So we need to ask, why are people watching? And second if millions of people are being exposed to these stories every week, how is wrestling, in turn, affecting the society?

HAPPY AND ESCALATING VIOLENCE

FAN: There is no doubt it can have a negative effect, look what's going on.

FAN: I think that parents should talk to them.

FAN: You got brothers hitting their sisters, thinking it's, you know, WWF. And I always said, you know, you can't do that in real life because somebody would get hurt.

SUT JHALLY: To the extent the people have paid attention to professional wrestling so far, the issue that's dominated the debate has been the question of violence, and especially whether kids imitate in the real world what they see their heroes doing on TV every week. This has become very relevant recently in light of a number of high profile court cases where young boys have killed or maimed younger kids, allegedly imitating wrestling moves. Although drawing a direct connection between these deaths and wrestling is difficult to prove all you have to do is speak to parents and teachers and even fans to know how prevalent this imitation is even if it doesn't lead to death.

FAN: They wrestle, and they wrestle hard. They come up crying, so what are they gaining out of it. And these are actors, they act for this. These are kids that sometimes get hurt because of it.

FAN: Well, being that my little brother clothes lined a little kid the other day...yeah. And said, "Hey, I'm The Rock," so. My friend DDT'd another one of my friends in the hall the other day, so... Yeah, there is a big connection.

FAN: They put don't do this, don't try this at home on their shows

FAN: They say don't try this at home but they do it anyways.

FAN: That doesn't work at all. It doesn't. No because I still have fun fighting and playing on the concrete.

FAN: I got up in my tree, right, shit, jumped right down, nearly broke the kid's back, it was all worth it though. Got it on film and everything.

SUT JHALLY: The most extreme manifestation of this is the phenomena of backyard wrestling where boys and young men are doing and filming really dangerous wrestling moves. The question is, why are they acting and behaving in ways that seem to suggest that they have no idea about the real and tragic consequences of actual violence? To answer that question properly we have to look inside the stories of violence that have been told.

JACKSON KATZ: Wrestling is sometimes described as cartoons for adults. Which is at least partially true because no one really seems to get hurt. In cartoons violence explodes all over the place but in the next scene all is forgotten. The violence has little, if any, lasting effect. We see the same kind of structure in the violence of wrestling. What's routinely done to wrestlers in the ring would land real people in the hospital when it didn't kill them outright. But in the WWE you can be sure that within sixty seconds the victims of the most brutal violence imaginable will be up on their feet without a mark on their bodies. This kind of cartoon like violence is what media scholar George Gerbner has called "Happy Violence," a brutal but ultimately cleaned up world in which the real life consequences of violence are pushed out of view.

SUT JHALLY: Actually, the effect of happy violence on the audience may be even greater in wrestling than in cartoons precisely because the violence is being committed by real people not animated figures, who are incredibly skilled at persuading us that what appears to be happening is actually happening. Essentially modern wrestlers are involved in a very high level choreographed performance where they are in partnership together to pull off the illusion that what we are seeing is real violence. Wrestlers are sort of co-conspirators in a sort of conjuring trick which requires absolute trust between the wrestlers and skills which require years of training. There's a revealing moment during one of MTV's *Tough Enough* reality based wrestling programs where the instructor reminds the class that as soon as they enter the ring they are responsible not only for the safety of their own bodies but also the safety of the other wrestlers.

[MTV Tough Enough: Tori] I think this is first and foremost important, is that in here not only do you have your own body that you need to be listening to and respecting but other people will begin to give you their bodies and there must be 100% awareness of that at all times.

SUT JHALLY: And in a strange way the skill of the wrestlers in convincingly pulling off the illusion gives even greater creditability to the belief that there are no real consequences. Precisely because the violence seems so real.

JACKSON KATZ: There is a really interesting moment in a documentary film about wrestling called "Beyond the Mat." It shows the real Mick Foley, one of the most popular wrestlers in the WWF, bringing his kids along to a wrestling event. His kids are pretty young and haven't seen their father in action before. They get to hang out all day with their father before the evening show and all the wrestlers come up to them and kind of pal around. This is reassuring to them. They see that behind the scenes everyone's friends and it's explained to them explicitly that their father doesn't really get hurt in the ring, that it's all just fun and games and play-acting.

[Beyond the Mat]

Buddy, you know Rock is Daddy's friend, right? He's not going to do anything to really hurt Daddy, right? Peanut, you know that? You do, right? You're not going to be scared, right?

-- Daddy's going to be OK.

JACKSON KATZ: But that night a different reality intrudes. When the kids see their father getting beaten up they become hysterical. What this shows, and shows painfully, is that the sheer skill of the illusion has the power to overwhelm even those kids who have been told that it's not real. That even kids that have been backstage and reassured get taken in by the violence and believe its reality.

[Beyond the Mat]

I want Daddy!

JACKSON KATZ: Well, if Mick Foley's kids can't see behind the illusion, what chance do kids have that have never been led behind the curtain.

SUT JHALLY: Mick Foley, in fact, has been a kind of hero to the backyard wrestling kids because he once was a backyard wrestler himself, filming his matches. He is also known as the king of hardcore. The wrestler who has taken in incredible amount of punishment and who was in the van guard when in the search for more shock value, wrestling kept upping the ante, escalating the scale and intensity of the violence. From simply using fists and hands to using chairs, to belts, to tables, to ladders, to sledge hammers, to barb wire, to thumbtacks, to throwing people off the top of steel cages, to running them down with cars, to using bulldozers to crush people in cars, to dragging people behind motor bikes, to ramming trucks into the sides of ambulances. The stakes have been progressively raised.

FAN: I mean every day it's gonna get more and more extreme.

FAN: If they started shooting people that'd be kind of extreme, that's about it.

FAN: The more extreme it is the more people are gonna wanna go to it and that's what fills the seats and sells the tickets.

SUT JHALLY: Actually if you put this escalating violence together with happy violence, where no one seems to get hurt, that could provide an answer as to what is going on in backyard wrestling and why these boys and young men are acting in this way. The stories of wrestling tell them that no matter what they do they will somehow escape serious injury.

They also tell them stories about what it means to be a real man.

MAKING MEN: GLAMORIZING BULLYING

SUT JHALLY: One of the things we know is that we are not born with our ideas of how we should behave as men or women. They are not already in our heads. We know that those things are learned. That our family influences us, that our friends influence us, that the culture in general provides models, for example to young boys, of what a man should be. And perhaps the most important story that professional wrestling spins for its audience is that all the violence and confrontation that we see is connected to manhood.

[WWE wrestler: Shane McMahon] *And I lost to the better man.*

[WWE wrestler: Kurt Angle] *So why don't you come out here and face me like a man?*

[WWE wrestler: The Undertaker] *We're gonna see what kind of man you are.*

[WWE wrestler: Triple H] *I thought you were a man.*

JACKSON KATZ: So what does it take to be a man in professional wrestling? Well, we know there are a number of ways of defining manhood outside of professional wrestling. For example, the strength to support women and respect women and other men, the strength to confront bullying and defend those who are being bullied. But in the world of the WWE all of these things are the polar opposite of manhood. Instead we get a very traditional and very conservative version of masculinity represented as an ideal of physical strength, the ability to control and scare other people, to intimidate, and especially to not back away from confrontation. In fact real men of the WWE invite confrontation and conflict.

[WWE wrestler: Triple H] *Angle, get your Olympic ass in this ring and get it kicked right now!*

JACKSON KATZ: Now this may seem like innocent bravado, but what's being modeled here for young boys and men, is a way to be a man. In this world arguments aren't solved by talking, or by understanding and negotiation, but always by physical violence.

[WWE announcer] *Holly's been waiting for this. Hardcore Holly just...*

JACKSON KATZ: Now you might say, what else do you expect? Wrestling is about violence. And we know violence works at least to make Vince McMahon a wealthy man, right? But we need to ask a broader question, which is what effect does this modeling of behavior have on boys and young men in the real world. Boys and young men are learning that to strike out in anger is justified and even expected of a real man.

Obviously the WWE doesn't cause this type of behavior. It's much more complicated than that. But we would be naive in the extreme to think that something that's watched so much by so many young people, especially young

men, doesn't cultivate, legitimate, and glorify the attitudes that lead to so much damage in the real world.

[WWE wrestler] *C'mon C'mon C'mon, Taz.*

SUT JHALLY: Physical domination is one ideal that's stressed but just as important is a modeling of mental and psychic humiliation. Every wrestler knows that they have to have this trash talking as part of their act and the best wrestlers are the ones who can perform this in the most convincing way.

[WWE wrestler: Stone Cold] *Look at me. You know anytime I want you, BAM, you're mine.*

SUT JHALLY: In fact WWE telecasts are filled with actions who's major aim is to mentally subjugate your opponent, verbally taunting him after you have physically defeated them but it can take a lot of other forms as well. Whether it's shoving someone's head down the toilet, or having Stone Cold Steve Austin urinate over them, or watching The Undertaker forcing someone clearly weaker than him to first drink his tobacco spit, and then pouring vomit all over him. The aim of it is all the same, to mentally humiliate someone and reinforce their weakness. The same is true of Rikishi's stink face, or X-pac's Bronco Buster. Perhaps the clearest example of this was demonstrated by the character played by Vince McMahon himself.

[WWE Mr. McMahon] *Go ahead and kiss my ass.*

SUT JHALLY: This physical and mental humiliation can also be inflicted by a group on one person. This is the essence of course of bullying behavior. Where the weakest is picked out to be publicly humiliated.

[WWE wrestler: Stone Cold] *You gotta learn about respect from Stone Cold Steve Austin and the Alliance!*

SUT JHALLY: When we look at the real world we know that bullying in schools is at epidemic levels. That hundreds of thousands of kids are getting picked on and beaten up every single day and life is a living hell for them and some of them even commit suicide because they can't take it. If lots of boys are bullying others in this way then there must be something in the culture that is suggesting to them that a real man is also a bully. Someone who scares and intimidates other people.

[WWE wrestler: The Undertaker] *What's wrong, Cole, I sense fear, do you fear me? 'Cause I like that. You know fear and respect, they go hand in hand.*

SUT JHALLY: While a lot of wrestlers take on this role the most powerful bully in professional wrestling is also one of the most popular characters that wrestling has ever seen. Stone Cold Steve Austin.

[WWE wrestler: Stone Cold] He's gonna get your little boyfriend's ass whooped tonight, do I make myself clear?

[WWE wrestler: Lita] Look, look Steve I think it was just-

[WWE wrestler: Stone Cold] WHO?

[WWE wrestler: Lita] Stone Cold

[WWE wrestler: Stone Cold] That's right.

JACKSON KATZ: In one of the story lines he brutally assaults one of the ringside announcers, Michael Cole. Stone Cold is nothing if not the ultimate bully. He mixes psychological humiliation with physical domination.

[WWE wrestler: Stone Cold] Shut up! When I put this microphone in your mouth, you say "Yes sir Stone Cold."

JACKSON KATZ: So what's absolutely crucial to remember is that for many years Austin has been one of the most popular characters in the WWF. Maybe the most popular character. In essence what he's doing is glorifying a culture of bullying, literally defining a real man as a bully and being embraced like none other for doing it.

SUT JHALLY: Stone Cold is in many ways the key figure of modern professional wrestling. Its' contemporary popularity stems from his emergence in the early to mid 1990's as a major star. Now in his early career Austin was a baby face and a glamour boy. He became the biggest star of professional wrestling by transforming himself into a "heel"-a bad guy, and anti-authority rebel who drank, didn't care about anyone else, beat up anyone who disagreed with him. Now before this "heels" were not supposed to be popular. The audience was supposed to root against them. What's unusual about Austin the "heel" is that the crowd cheered him and turned him into one of the most popular wrestlers in history. Whether he is controlling his wife or humiliating the boss's daughter, or especially humiliating the boss himself, Austin the bully came to be seen as a sort of everyman.

FAN: Cause Austin is like the most, he is like normal, you know. He's like every, like your everyday man, you know. He goes to work, you know, kicks some ass, you know, that's what he does. He ain't trying to be flamboyant or nothing. He comes, he says what he's gonna do. He does it. Boom.

FAN: He was the first one to defy authority, you know. He was the first one to tell people that it's ok to not go with what's normal.

FAN: Everybody likes him. It's like it's what they want to do in real life but they really can't.

FAN: Cause he's like what every American male wants to be, you know, he doesn't take crap from anybody, he drinks the beer, he's loving it. Livin the life, everybody would love to be like him. That's the way I wish I could be

FAN: He doesn't care about nothing, he does what he wants to do and he's proud of it and he doesn't have any regrets. That's the thing to do.

SUT JHALLY: While individual audience members would say that they were obviously against bullying what happens with Austin is that because it's part of his overall character, who is very popular, people end up identifying with the bully not the bullying victim. The obvious question that we need to ask is what's the effect on the culture when bullying is glamorized in this way.

FAN: I love Stone Cold. Stone Cold is the man. He's the man. He kicks people's asses, you know, so he's my favorite guy.

HOMOPHOBIA AND CONSTRUCTING HETEROSEXUALITY

[WWE announcer: Jerry Lawler] *The reason I'm so excited about this catfight, whenever you see two girls in a catfight you think...they might kiss.*

SUT JHALLY: One of the staples in the WWE is the spectacle of nearly naked women fighting each other and as Jerry Lawler says, part of the attraction for some young straight men is the possibility that the women might kiss and therefore fulfill one of their fantasies, lesbian sex, which is a standard genre of male heterosexual pornography. Sometimes this is presented pretty explicitly.

[WWE wrestler: Eric Bischoff] *Welcome the Lesbians!*
[WWE announcer] *Whoo hoo, HLA. HLA.*

SUT JHALLY: Now if this is true, women who are wrestling each other might potentially kiss, then it must also be potentially true for the male wrestlers as well. Especially as they are in such close physical and intimate contact with each other so much of the time. So the potential for homoeroticism, sexual desire between men, is always there, just under the surface. In fact if you look at professional wrestling in this way a whole new way of watching the WWE emerges.

SUT JHALLY: When violent, threatening and above all straight masculinity is set as the ideal in professional wrestling this homoerotic undercurrent is very threatening so the writers have to compensate for it by clearly proving that the masculinity on display is not homosexual, not gay. One of the standard ways they achieve this is by using insults to distance the wrestlers from gayness as it were. When men and boys are insulting each other the derogatory terms are meant to demonstrate what real masculinity is not. Insults are used to police the boundaries of what is considered to be normal.

JACKSON KATZ: In the real world some of these insults are things like fag, or homo, but because the WWE is on mainstream television they choose not to use those words. Instead they use another word, which has the effect of feminizing a man.

[WWE wrestler: Triple H] *After tonight Kurt Angle's gonna be my bitch!*

[WWE wrestler: The Undertaker] *I'll slap you around like the little bitch you are...*

[WWE wrestler: The Rock] *So shut up bitch!*

[WWE wrestler: Hulk Hogan] *Are you actually gonna do something or are you just gonna stand up there like the bitch that you are?*

SUT JHALLY: Another technique used to defuse the homoerotic tension is to transfer all of that tension onto clearly defined gay wrestlers. This has a long

history although in the recent past the wrestler most defined by his homosexuality is Goldust.

In 2002 the WWE introduced another couple of gay characters. The tag team of Chuck and Billy, that makes all of this even clearer. While for a long time it was never stated that they were gay it was done with a nudge and a wink. There was no doubt what the other wrestlers thought.

***[WWE wrestler Bradshaw]** Hug each other, tell you how purdy each other is, but whatever you do, get used to being close cause come Wrestlemania you two can kiss each other's ass and those belts goodbye. See you in Toronto, ladies.*

***[WWE wrestler: Triple H]** I'm really glad that you and your partner have found a whole new meaning to the phrase suck it.*

SUT JHALLY: There is also no doubt that the fans reacted in a negative way based on their sexuality.

FAN: Chuck and Billy? I think they are both fags.

FAN: I don't like them either.

FAN: Chuck and Billy? Flaming gay!

FAN: Chuck and Billy, you know, are kind of gay in my opinion. They wear this weird shit and headbands. I don't like em at all.

FAN: They act like fags.

FAN: They f---ing suck!

SUT JHALLY: The function of Chuck and Billy is pretty clear, just as with the homophobic insults. They are there not to demonstrate not their sexuality but the straight sexuality of everyone else. So that when the straight wrestlers stereotypically make fun of them it is clear that what they are doing in that moment is not really about Chuck and Billy but about attempting to define themselves as straight.

SUT JHALLY: Because gay wrestlers are not so called real men, when straight wrestlers are fighting them the humiliation takes an explicitly sexual direction with aggressive kissing, physical degradation, and stripping of clothes.

Following this equation even when two straight wrestlers are in conflict the ultimate insult and the way to prove their own manhood is to treat the other as if he were gay.

[announcer] *It's a three-way wiggle.*

SUT JHALLY: While the audience may be laughing at this, the function of asserting heterosexuality in this way is always at the expense of gay people. By making homosexuality something that you laugh at you make it abnormal, something perverted. This laughter is as the root of devaluing gay sexuality, of gay bashing, of homophobia in the real world.

JACKSON KATZ: There is another story line that played on these homophobic themes, which featured the hyper-heterosexual Triple H ridiculing the former US Olympic champion wrestler Kurt Angle for being a sissy because he cried when he accepted his gold medal in the Olympics.

[WWE announcer] *Look at the tears! They're streaming down his face!*

[WWE wrestler: Triple H] *There is nothing wrong with a man crying, there is nothing wrong with that, it doesn't make you a sissy.*

JACKSON KATZ: At one point the entire crowd joins in and chants sissy at Angle.

[WWE crowd] *Sissy! Sissy! Sissy! Sissy!*

[WWE announcer] *Sissy Sissy, do you think it's true? It's true!*

[WWE wrestler: Triple H] *I mean all the looks you've been giving me, and the little smirks, I mean who are you trying to get close to here? Maybe it's time to open the closet door Kurt.*

JACKSON KATZ: The result is that Angle must now prove that he is not gay. So how does he do it? First by brutally beating the man who questions his manhood. Domination, intimidation, taunting are almost by definition here equated with being heterosexual.

[WWE announcer] *Kurt Angle is proving to HHH he's not just a man, he's all man.*

[WWE announcer] *I'd hate for someone whose manhood I'd questioned to do that to me.*

JACKSON KATZ: And second, by proving his heterosexuality, his straight manhood in relation to a woman. A woman belonging to Triple H, his wife, Stephanie McMahon.

[WWE wrestler: Kurt Angle] *Hey Hunter, when you catch your wind ask your wife if I kiss like a pansy.*

DIVAS: SEX AND MALE FANTASY

FAN: Look at your average wrestling fan, it's a young man between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five years old. What do they want to see? They want to see t and a.

SUT JHALLY: One of the major functions of the growing number of female stars in professional wrestling is to help demonstrate the straight sexuality of the male wrestlers. So it's not surprising that they looked like they stepped out of the world of heterosexual pornography.

*[TV ad] I guess basically I'm a living Barbie. I'm an athletic Barbie.
-- The WWF Divas taking their beauty out of the ring and onto the beach.*

[WWE wrestler: Torrie] To put it bluntly, she's gotten a little, uh, sleazier. The clothes have gotten a little skimpier. I learned through trial and error that I got more popular as the hemlines got shorter.

FAN: Heh heh heh DIVAS.

FAN: Oh I like women.

FAN: Every girl in there is hot.

FAN: They are hot.

FAN: Lita? She's wicked hot.

FAN: They're hot, all of em.

FAN: I like Stephanie, she's hot.

FAN: Oh my god, Lita, oh my god, Trish.

FAN: I love Trish Stratus.

FAN: Trish Stratus, she's hot.

FAN: Let me tell you about Trish Stratus, I really like her because she, uh...

FAN: You need that, that's the juice, that's what keeps it flowing, without them, I mean there would be no WWF, you know what I'm saying.

JACKSON KATZ: In the old days before the 1990's there were very few female characters except for the occasional character like Miss Elizabeth who is associated with the Macho Man Randy Savage. But now there are a lot more

female characters with women like Trish Stratus, Torrie Wilson, Stacy Kiebler, and Lita now central to the narrative.

[WWE announcer] *Oh man I'd like to stuff her stocking.*

JACKSON KATZ: One of the reasons why the WWE is so popular among young boys is that it's essentially a strip show.

[WWE announcer] *You know what we're gonna get to see? Naked women!*

JACKSON KATZ: Parents wouldn't let their kids, their twelve year old, their thirteen year old, their fourteen year old, to go to real strip joints but they allow them to go to the WWE where women are stripping almost as much as they would at a regular strip joint and also the strip aspect is reflective of a larger trend in the culture where the conventions of pornography have made their way more and more into the main stream.

The most extreme example of this attempt to use highly sexualized female characters is the case of the *Ho Train* where in each city visited by the WWF local women were selected to be part of the group of women that surrounded the pimp character of the Godfather.

[WWE wrestler: The Godfather]

That's right, two for the price of one. What's your name baby?

-- I'm Erin and I'm working so hard.

Whoa,woah the best part, you don't pay to hear em talk.

JACKSON KATZ: As the women get integrated into the narratives a similar structure of dominance operates there as well. And a similar structure of taunting and violence. And the more competition there is between them the more they are actually involved in wrestling matches. But unlike regular matches the basic function of these is to provide a spectacle for men.

[WWE announcer] *It's the bra and panties match for the WWE women's championship. All Stacy has to do is take off Trish's clothes and she'll be the next champion. And we'll all be rewarded.*

JACKSON KATZ: Likewise we get the whipped cream match, the gravy bowl match, or the paddle match. In the evening gown match there is this certainty that women will lose their clothes, the winner being the one who strips the other of her dress.

[WWE announcer] *Bra and panties! Bra and panties!*

SUT JHALLY: As the women are there to reinforce the heterosexuality of the men, so there are lots of storylines about them teasing men, entrancing men so

they can't do their job, distracting men by provocative displays. And as this is really about male adolescent pornographic comic book fantasy, the women who inhabit this world come to reflect those desires.

[WWE wrestler: Trish] *I have been so bad that I deserve a spanking.*

SUT JHALLY: Given that these women come from a sexual fantasy world that doesn't actually exist they meet the expectations of the men who control the WWE by recourse to surgery. So that breast implants are almost standard operating procedure in the WWE.

[WWE wrestler: Ivory] *That's kind of were I sit with implants. I know I have enjoyed having a larger bust line so I can fill out clothes and feel feminine and still have rock hard biceps. It's real personal...*

SUT JHALLY: On the one hand some of the female wrestlers in the WWE are examples of strong independent, assertive women who could compete equally with women in this tough world. And Chyna is a prime example of this with a phenomenal physique and great athletic ability she worked her way up from being a bit player, Triple H's body guard, to a major character in her own right. But being a strong independent woman is not enough. She had to be the right *kind* of woman and overcome the idea that a strong woman was not even a woman. To survive she had to become a different kind of woman. Softer, more vulnerable, less assertive and through a series of plastic surgeries including jaw reconstruction and breast implants she has transformed herself into the ultimate male fantasy appearing as a centerfold in *Playboy*. In fact by the time she left the WWE and started a new career as Joanie, she was almost unrecognizable from a few years ago and much less threatening to men.

[TV interview: Joanie Laurer] *Men who were scared of me a few years ago, are now really wanting to court me and wine and dine me and are very chivalrous.*

JACKSON KATZ: For women in the WWE, power is ultimately connected to being looked at by men, to sexuality, and above everything else, to breasts.

[WWE announcer] *Whoooo! JR! Puppies!*

JACKSON KATZ: What's the effect on boys and young men who are being conditioned to seeing women as one-dimensional objects, as bit players in a male narrative, as sexual playthings?

[TV interview: Stacy] *There is a statue here of my legs and my butt, and it's really interesting to see the way that people are, uh, touching it and taking pictures of it knowing that that's an exact replica of my legs and my butt (laughs).*

NORMALIZING GENDER VIOLENCE

[WWE wrestler: Bubba Ray Dudley] *I've got you! I've got you, you little bitch! I've got you, you little bitch!*

SUT JHALLY: As a result of the female characters being included in the narrative, they've increasingly been drawn into the conflicts and the violence of the male wrestlers, so that there are many, many examples of men hitting women. Since this violence and humiliation is presented over and over again as entertainment, after a while, the images don't seem strange; they start to become normal.

[WWE announcer] *Austin hit Lita with a steel chair! I can't believe this. This is sick (crowd cheers).*

In the real world, men's violence against women is a major public health concern. The rate of domestic battery, the incidences of sexual assault and rape, of men killing their domestic partners, are at epidemic levels. While wrestling doesn't directly *cause* boys and men to become abusive, it contributes to an atmosphere where violence against women is not taken seriously. In fact, millions of boys and men are entertained weekly by images of men beating on women, by degrading images of men stripping women of their clothes.

[WWE announcer] *Who, oh my God! (crowd cheering in background) Who! Oh my God! Oh!*

JACKSON KATZ: You have to remember that all this stuff is scripted, it doesn't just fall from trees. The idea is that women are just like little girls. In this way they stripped, not only of their clothes, but of any sense of agency or power on their own.

(Wrestler yelling and crowd cheering in background.)

JACKSON KATZ: Women are there, plain and simple, for the pleasure of men. And not surprisingly, this stripping of women's power, maturity, and basic humanity sets up a favorite plotline: men forcing themselves onto women.

[announcer] *Yeah, yeah, Franchise her ass.*

[announcer] *No! No!*

JACKSON KATZ: You have to remember that's being depicted here is not just men's violence against women, but a story about what this violence means.

[announcer] *He's got his fist up, and he's gonna hit her. Oh my... (crowd cheering)*

JACKSON KATZ: In the context of wrestling, the sickening level of men's violence against women, in the real world, is almost always treated as a joke. In this adolescent male fantasy, women actually enjoy what's being done to them.

(crowd cheering) [announcer] She liked it. She liked it!

JACKSON KATZ: This stuff is so normal in the world of wrestling that in one case, involving Dean Molenko and Lita, the announcer Jerry Lawler observes that an unconscious woman actually enjoys what's happening to her, even welcomes it.

[WWE announcer] She loved it, look at her.

[WWE announcer] Oh, I don't even know if she's aware of that.

[WWE announcer] Oh look at her hand, look at her rubbing Dean's shoulder.

[WWE announcer] What?

[WWE announcer] She's liking it.

SUT JHALLY: The violence also become sexualized, so that the young men who are watching are being aroused by how the women are acting. As of the same time the women are being beaten up and assaulted. This is a recipe for disaster in the real world as violence against women is being presented in a way that actually turns men on.

[WWE wrestler: DDP] The pain in her eyes. To see the anguish in her eyes, I mean, it really turned me on. I mean it tweaked something deep inside. I mean, GOD!

JACKSON KATZ: This is part of a larger pattern, when violence is directed against women, it is almost always presented as deserved.

[WWE announcer] The jezebel got what was coming to her!

JACKSON KATZ: Another storyline that made it clear that women deserve the violence done to them occurred to Triple H and his wife on the show, Stephanie McMahon. She's depicted as scheming and controlling and lying to her husband, so that when he engages in what we can only call domestic battering, it is presented by the commentators as inevitable, as though she deserves everything she gets.

[WWE announcer] This woman has pushed her soon-to-be-ex-husband way too far.

[WWE announcer] JR, this is about to be ex-spousal abuse.

[WWE announcer] I don't know what's gonna happen, but whatever it is, this woman deserves it.

[WWE announcer] And Stephanie got what she deserves. Look at this, I gotta agree with you. (beating noises and crowd cheering) Unlike Stacy, she had it coming!

JACKSON KATZ: Of course, during the next week, this is all presented as a big joke, with Triple H even taunting her about what else he's going to her.

[WWE wrestler: Triple H] Steph, I hope you have a matching neck brace for every outfit you have because after Monday night, you're gonna need one!

JACKSON KATZ: Incidentally, at the time of his storyline, Triple H was actually dating Stephanie McMahon in real life.

[TV: Conan O'Brien Show]

(Conan) In real life you date Vince McMahon's daughter?

-- (Triple H) Yes, Stephanie McMahon.

(Conan) Stephanie McMahon.

JACKSON KATZ: What's important to remember here is that this sort of thing mirrors the structure of abuse in battering relationships in the real world, where men who are abusive to their wives or girlfriends, claim to have been driven to it by the women.

[WWE wrestler: Stephanie] You have to do it.

[WWE wrestler: Triple H] Why do I have to do it for you? Why? Because you're the billion dollar princess? Why? Because you're Stephanie McMahon? Why? Why do I have to do it? Because you always get your way? Why? Because everything we do, everything in our life, is about you? Is that why? That's why I have to do it? Is that why?

JACKSON KATZ: And you don't need a PhD in Cultural Studies to understand that when you make this sort of abuse fun and entertaining it has the effect of normalizing, justifying, and rationalizing men's violence against women.

FAN: I pointed and laughed at her some more, because she deserved it.

FAN: Yeah, she deserved it.

FAN: She had it coming for a while.

FAN: She got what came coming to her.

FAN: She finally got what she deserved.

FAN: I think that was cool. I was like “yeah, yeah, finally, finally (laughing). He did it, he did it.”

SUT JHALLY: In the summer of 2002, there was a really clear demonstration of this link between real life and wrestling, featuring Stone Cold Steve Austin and his on-screen and real-life wife, Deborah.

Apart from violence inflicted on women directly, so-called ‘real men’, like Austin, also demonstrate their heterosexual masculinity by controlling women.

[WWE wrestler: Stone Cold] *Do not leave this spot until I come get you. Understood?*

[WWE wrestler: Debra] *Yeah.*

[WWE wrestler: Stone Cold] *Thank you.*

[WWE announcer] *Well the Rattlesnake ain’t gonna be husband of the year, I can tell you that.*

SUT JHALLY: Well a few days after he left the WWE in a well-publicized dispute, his wife called the police to report an assault on her by Steve Williams, the actor who plays Stone Cold, who it seems, couldn’t separate fiction from reality either. The police report states that her husband hit her several times after an argument, resulting in a large, noticeable welt in the right side of her face, just below her eye, as well as injuries on her back.

JACKSON KATZ: The idea of men controlling women also extends into other areas, like the workplace. Sure enough, we see on the WWE, all sorts of situations, which, in other parts of the real world, would be considered sexual harassment. The scriptwriters seem to have a special obsession with demeaning working women.

[WWE Mr. McMahon] *How badly do you want to be on the WWF?*

[WWE wrestler: Torrie] *Oh, bad, bad.*

[WWE Mr. McMahon] *How badly do you want to be a WWF superstar?*

[WWE wrestler: Torrie] *Oh, ohhhh, bad, bad.*

[WWE Mr. McMahon] *Really?*

[WWE wrestler: Torrie] Oh yes.

JACKSON KATZ: The effect is that one of the great problems for working women is turned into a joke, into something we actually enjoy.

[WWE Mr. McMahon] Stacy will do everything that I tell or ask her to do.

JACKSON KATZ: Take special pride in glamorizing sexual harassment, the kind of behavior that in the real world, has cost corporations millions of dollars in legal damages, not to mention the pain and suffering that women have endured.

[WWE Mr. McMahon] That's a model employee for you. (crowd applauding)

JACKSON KATZ: And in keeping with other aspects of pro-wrestling, humiliation is a key aspect of how scriptwriters present relationships.

[WWE Mr. McMahon] Just get on your knees.

[WWE announcer] She's doing it! (crowd cheering)

[WWE Mr. McMahon] Now I'm going to unzip my pants.

[WWE announcer] (Laughing) oh no (laughing).

JACKSON KATZ: Women are often given the choice of either submitting to some sexual request or losing their jobs.

[WWE announcer] Oh, you're not enjoying this?

[WWE wrestler: Triple H] Your jobs are on the line.

[WWE announcer] Do it or you're fired, that's what he's trying to say, ladies.

SUT JHALLY: In the most extreme, and most infamous example of sexual harassment, we see the ritual sexual degradation of a woman, Trish Stratus, by a powerful man, Vince McMahon.

The storyline unfolds over several weeks. In the first episode, Trish is humiliated by Vince and his daughter Stephanie.

The next week Trish apologizes to Vince, and asks for his forgiveness.

[WWE wrestler: Trish] I'm so sorry, I deserved everything. I didn't mean to make you mad. I really didn't. I, I...

SUT JHALLY: What follows is some of the most disturbing television that is ever been produced.

[WWE Mr. McMahon] *You're sorry, get on your hands and knees like a dog.*

[WWE announcer] *Oh for God's sake, you've gotta be kidding me.*

[WWE Mr. McMahon] *Get on your hands and knees like a dog! Okay?*

[WWE Mr. McMahon] *That's it! Crawl around like a dog, you're sorry! Speak Trish, speak! Damn it, bark like a dog!*

(Crying and dog barking noises.)

[WWE Mr. McMahon] *Ah, that's not what you said. Bark like a dog, c'mon, tell me you're sorry.*

More crying and dog barking.

[WWE Mr. McMahon] *Get up, you disgust me! Take y our clothes off!*

(crowd loudly cheering)

[WWE Mr. McMahon] *Take your coat off, take it off! Now take your blouse off, Trish, c'mon.*

[WWE announcer] *He's my hero, look at what he's getting her to do.*

[WWE Mr. McMahon] *You really really are sorry. Take your skirt off, and take it off NOW!*

[WWE announcer] *This is going too far.*

[WWE Mr. McMahon] *I said take it off if you're sorry.*

[WWE announcer] *How humiliating.*

[WWE Mr. McMahon] *Are you sorry now? Are you sorry enough for Mr. McMahon? I don't think so. No you're not sorry enough, not for Mr. McMahon. Take your bra off and take it off now! C'mon.*

(crowd cheering very enthusiastically)

SUT JHALLY: Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of this is not only what's going on in the ring, but the reaction of the crowd, which is wildly cheering what can only be described as a psychic and physical violation. A stadium full of seemingly normal boys and men cheering and getting off on the control, the humiliation, the degradation.

FAN: I let my four year-old daughter watch it. I have no problem with it.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think its bad to let your daughter see women getting stripped off?

FAN: No, it's just... welcome to the real world.

FAN: It's okay with me, I don't see a problem with it.

FAN: If we watch it he can watch it.

SUT JHALLY: The next week, when Vince McMahon is confronted about what he did, he justifies it by saying that Trish deserved it, because she is trash.

[WWE Mr. McMahon] Trish, Deborah, Trish is trash. I mean, she's not like you, alright? She's not like any other woman that's here. She's trash.

SUT JHALLY: Well this is a standard defense that many men accused of rape resort to. "The woman deserved it, because she is a slut."

It's an accusation that many rape victims have to confront, that their previous sexual behavior means they were asking for it, legitimating it.

[WWE crowd] Slut! Slut! Slut! Slut!

[WWE wrestler: Stone Cold] I don't know if you hear it or not, but they're calling you a slut.

SUT JHALLY: While there are many different factors that lead to violent behavior, some of the early research that has now been conducted, does suggest a connection between exposure to things like professional wrestling and rising levels of dating violence and domestic abuse.

But we really shouldn't need to studies to prove the obvious point that if you present abuse, violence, and control in a glamorized way, the lives of real men and women, real boys and girls, who live in that environment, will reflect those same things.

FAN: Shut up! Smack her!

IT'S ONLY ENTERTAINMENT

JACKSON KATZ: In the real world, girls and boys, men and women are working together as peers and partners in unprecedented ways, in school, in the workplace, in other areas of social life. As a matter of fact, that's one of the best things that's happened in the culture in the past generation to girls *and* boys. But in the cartoon world that Vince McMahon has created, it's as if the women's movement never even happened.

SUT JHALLY: A typical response from someone who may be a fan of wrestling to the type of analysis we've been talking about there, is to say "just lighten up, stop taking everything so seriously. This is just fun, this is just entertainment."

FAN: All in all, its just for fun, its just for fun. That's all its for.

FAN: It's all part of the show, it's all entertainment.

FAN: There's ain't nothing wrong with it's all entertainment. Ain't nothing wrong with it.

[CNN Interview: The Rock] C'mon, grow up, what we do is entertainment. We are tame compared to what you see on network television.

JACKSON KATZ: Let's grant that this is just entertainment, that's fine. But if we do that, we have to ask some other questions. What does it mean, then, that we're entertained by men beating up women? By scenes showing men being bullied and humiliated? By stereotypical depictions of gays? What does it mean when we find that funny?

Well, one effect may be that when we come across those things in the real world we don't take them seriously, we don't see the tragedy involved, the pain and suffering that real human beings are facing.

SUT JHALLY: Many wrestling fans may say: "Look, I enjoy watching this as entertainment, but I don't go home and beat up my wife or girlfriend. I don't go around beating up gay people." But that's not the only issue. The real question that we need to ask ourselves seriously is: "What does it mean that millions of boys and men choose to watch entertainment that is abusive, degrading, and disrespectful to women?"

[WWE announcer] Oh no! Bischoff set these two women up! He's laying these women on top of each other.

SUT JHALLY: When violence against women in the real world is out of control, what does it mean to laugh at images of women being abused?

[WWE announcer] *These women have been annihilated.*

SUT JHALLY: Actually, the use of humor gets men off the hook from having to take responsibility for the violence that is so prevalent in the real world.

[HBO Interviewer] *Any of those things in retrospect grate against the sensibilities of a fair-minded person, do you think?*

[HBO Interview: Vince McMahon] *I would hope that they do. Uh, uh, I would suggest that, uh, you know, they were intended to do some of that. Uh, a, uh, fair-minded individual, but hopefully it's a fair-minded individual with a sense of humor.*

SUT JHALLY: It's a standard technique for keeping people passive. For instance, the Berlin nightclub in the 1930's were full of comedians making anti-Semitic jokes, and the people laughing at them were not loading Jews onto death trains, but they were the German citizens who stood by and did nothing, that took no action as their neighbors were being herded away. Although we're not talking about a holocaust here, there is a similar pattern that we can identify.

You can't be standing up against homophobia, against sexism if, at the same time, you're laughing at them. Likewise, to have any impact on changing the culture, first we need to confront the jokes that are at the basis of abuse and violence.

FAN: There's a right and a wrong, you know, you shouldn't be beating up women but then again, it was TV, she's the boss's daughter, she obviously wanted it done to her, so, I mean, it is his girlfriend. How many people wouldn't want to do that to their girlfriend? (laughs) But, I'm only kidding by the way.

SUT JHALLY: That's why this idea that the WWE is rebellious is so ridiculous. In fact, the opposite is true, they're the most conservative and traditional game in town. If Stone Cold was a real rebel he'd be organizing the union against the boss, not beating him up. If Triple H were a real rebel he'd be partnering with women to fight domestic abuse, instead of glorifying it. If the Rock was a real rebel, do you think he'd be at the Republican Party Convention at a time when the Republican Party is the most conservative it's ever been, dominated by the Christian right?

But that's the trick that Vince McMahon has pulled off – he's taken a conservative 1950s version of the world and sold it to American men as rebellious, as cutting-edge, as different, as individualistic. So millions of boys and men (and some women) are being dragged back into the values of the past under the guise of modern rebellion. You really have to hand it to Vince. He's pulled off a great

trick, and made the people he's manipulated into paying him millions of dollars for the privilege.

[WWE Mr. McMahon] *I know it's important for you to get your mind off of the daily grind you endure, and I accept that responsibility and the way that we get your mind off of those things is by entertaining you. Entertaining you (cheering crowd). Entertaining you (cheering crowd). Entertaining you. Entertaining you. Entertaining you...*

(Trish Stratus making dog barking/weeping sounds)

[TV interview: Vince McMahon] *As long as the audience likes what we do then we're going to be in business forever.*

DURING CREDITS

FAN: All my kids watch it, I've got a two year old at home. I mean, he imitates the Dudleys all the time. They're harmless, I mean, they know the difference between reality and showmanship.

FAN (describing tattoos): That's Trish Stratus.
That's, uh, Chyna, Joanie Laurer.
Yep, She signed it.

FAN: Ladies sit down there and watch soap operas all day and I know my wife yells at me every Monday night, every Thursday night I come home and watch wrestling and this is my soap opera. So, wrestling's a soap opera for us men.

FAN: You look at the kids out there and they're pretty much young. My daughter's nine. I just tell her that it's all make believe in the ring and you really shouldn't be hittin' on each other. You know what I mean, you shouldn't hit a woman at all. It's not right.

FAN: Do Road Dog. Do D-Lo Brown. He knows them all.

FAN: Monday, Thursday, Sunday. All the pay-per-views.

INTERVIEWER: If it was on every night, would you watch it?

FAN: Yup.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think it's degrading to women at all?

FAN: No. No. Not at all. People make it seem like it is, but it's not.

FAN: When's the last time you've seen a soap opera mid-afternoon? It's [wrestling] no worse. These guys ain't laying in bed together rolling around. You turn on Channel 6 at two o'clock that's what it is. He knows enough not to say the bad words, huh?

FAN: Vince McMahan would never let anybody down, he will always rise to the top, so I mean, he'll take care of, and that's it. As long as he's running the show, you have nothing to worry about, that's it.