

The Unbeatable Monster and the Horror of Professional Wrestling

TIMOTHY BAVLNKA

“I’m going to rip John Cena apart at SummerSlam. I’m going to leave him in a pile of blood, and urine, and vomit.” – Brock Lesnar

On August 17, 2014, Brock Lesnar competed against John Cena for the WWE World Heavyweight Championship at WWE’s SummerSlam, their second biggest annual event after WrestleMania. This match would prove to be the beginning of Brock Lesnar’s current reign in the WWE, having left and returned several times during his career due to contract negotiations or to pursue other interests. Lesnar’s win against WWE’s biggest hero is unsurprising, but how the WWE presented this victory to the fans was, as this presentation was markedly different from traditional professional wrestling booking. While Lesnar and Cena wrestled each other previously, the promotional package before this match helped audiences feel the uniqueness of this bout. Cena presents himself as valorous, assuring his fans that he will not give up and will keep the WWE championship on his proud shoulders. Lesnar nonchalantly informs the audience of his assured victory. The video promotional package before the match sets the tone for what is ahead—a hero battling a returning foe.

However, the reality of the match provided a starkly one-sided physical performance by Brock Lesnar, dominating the then-current WWE champion. In the fictional world of the WWE, Lesnar is presented as something *different*—fiercely aggressive, physically superior, and possessing a life of experience outside of professional wrestling. This difference builds Lesnar as an outside force within the fictional reality of the WWE. As such, Lesnar becomes an abnormal entity within the performance of this SummerSlam match. He becomes a monstrous figure within the known-narrative space of the WWE’s canon. By embodying the monster archetype in with the WWE, Lesnar communicates how the horror genre can exist within a narrative television property, in which storytelling is propelled by fictional performance of physical combat. Through the

The Popular Culture Studies Journal, Vol. 6, No. 1
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manipulation of genre and the introduction of the monster character type to professional wrestling, a stark tension emerges between the traditional dualism of good versus bad moralities, allowing for a complexity that the traditional notions of storylines and expected diegetic realities do not. While some characters are often referred to as “monsters” by the commentary team, the goal of this essay is to examine an approach to studying monstrousness that can allow for horror to be present in professional wrestling.

As professional wrestling depends on its characters, establishing how a character embodies monstrousness is important. Wrestling fandom has established a character type known as a monster (as opposed to heels or faces). Popular website “TV Tropes” describes this character type as: “He’s as strong as he is fast, as tough as he is agile, he’s savage and is likely from Parts Unknown. He’s a monster!” which embellishes the notion of toughness to “convince the audience this guy is abnormal” (“Wrestling Monster”). This character type is important for the further understanding of wrestling and horror because of its positionality to previously established morality constructs. As Henry Jenkins III notes, “wrestling operates within a dualistic universe: each participant is either a good guy or a villain” (40). If monsters are to represent the abnormal, and the “disturbance of natural order,” then they must exist outside of this duality. Folklorist David Gilmore discusses monsters as “embody[ing] all that is dangerous and horrible in the human imagination” (1). As wrestling is a physical performance of fictional storytelling, the monster in wrestling maintains its status of an “imaginary being...that are usually represented in fiction, art, and folklore” (6). This essay’s main analysis considers this monstrousness by examining Brock Lesnar’s August 2014 *SummerSlam* match against John Cena, primarily to understand how the content of the match emphasizes Lesnar’s construction as a monster.

Genre and the WWE

The WWE exists as a multi-format entertainment company. The WWE’s primary television shows, *Raw* and *SmackDown Live*, air live on the USA cable network every Monday and Tuesday. Storylines within these programs culminate in larger television events, traditionally broadcast on pay-per-view, but now also streamed live on WWE’s Netflix-esque subscription network. The WWE as a television property exists in both these forms (weekly shows and special live events),

allowing also for the narratives between these events to interact. The WWE's genre (and wrestling in general) depends entirely on the context of the presentation. While it is always a physical performance, it can vary between underdog stories, slapstick comedy, or any variety of potential subgenres. As a television property, it shares the qualities of other fictional programming—a regular set of characters, a serialized storyline, and episodic format, among others (see Castleberry in this volume for more on television studies and professional wrestling).

Professional wrestling is not a televised sport, but rather a form of fictional entertainment. As such, its genre can be discussed similarly to other television programming. Jason Mittell builds a framework for discussing genre on television that is contextual, as he states, “an ongoing multifaceted practice” that relies on specific contexts of presentation and consumption (*Genre and Television*, xii). These contexts fashion an ongoing negotiation between the framing of the show in a scheduling block, intended markets, episode content, and audience engagement. Therefore, the context for television genre is “constantly in flux” (xiv). According to Mittell, genre cannot be considered in a pre-categorized way, but rather in how it is “formed through intertextual relationships between texts” (13). The programming of the WWE and its genre varies considerably, even within the same episode or event. Certain characters can provide comedic relief, while others allow for entertainment more geared toward children, or engage in grittier narratives for older audiences.

When discussing professional wrestling in a general sense, Heather Levi suggests that it “is a liminal genre, one that is closely connected with the category of ‘sport,’ but cannot be contained by it” (5). Rather than giving a definitive working of wrestling's genre (or potential genre), Levi insists that professional wrestling “occupies a space somewhere between sport, ritual, and theater and is thus capable of drawing its power from all of those sources” (6). Levi is describing wrestling's genre through its physical spectacle and traditional form of display to the public in a live setting. Rather than contextual, where genre works with established norms and traditions, Levi's discussion of genre in wrestling is essentially blank. Professional wrestling can take elements from a variety of genres or performance styles, allowing for a multifaceted presentation of narrative for the audience. This open discourse of the wrestling genre allows for Mittell's contextual understanding. By combining Levi's idea of genre blankness with Mittell's contextualized TV genre analysis, audiences can consider how wrestling

becomes any genre at any given time. Wrestling's traditional narrative space presents genre in the context of: the characters and their moralities; performers and their individual physical styles; the show or event; types of matches and work rate; (blurred and revised) histories of characters; career rivalries; companies and their specific narratives and markets; audiences (at live events, watching live on television, or through streaming services); and others. It has the "capacity to signify" any number of potential genres (Levi 6).

Understanding the generic application of horror to wrestling requires an understanding of how horror works as a structural system. Rather than assuming a genre through the shared set of aesthetics or themes, an analysis of horror's rules provides a way of looking at a media text. Noel Carroll differentiates horror from science fiction or "tales of terror" by noting that the genre centers on the confrontation between humanity's known reality and a different, abnormal reality. The horror exists in the narrative tensions between these confrontations. Further differentiating between these relatable genres, Carroll establishes horror as a genre in which "the humans regard the monsters they meet as abnormal, as disturbances in the natural order" (16). Monsters, in whatever form they appear, represent a tangible experience between knowable and unknowable, creating a tension between the paradoxical representation of the natural and the abnormal. While paradoxical narratives are not necessarily horrific in and of themselves, Tzvetan Todorov describes this experience of paradoxical realities in horror as "the fantastic" when he writes:

In a world which is indeed our world, the one we know...there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses...or else the even has indeed taken places, it is an integral part of reality—but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us. The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty...The fantastic is that hesitation experience by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event. (25)

Horror represents the ability for the impossible to paradoxically exist alongside reality in a horrific way. Further, these confrontations create an affective response of tension, a hesitation of consideration at the possibilities and potentialities exhibited by the presentation of paradoxes. This tension exists narratively through

the conflict within the text and among audience reception, where successful horror can conjure an (often negative) emotional response.

Horror and the WWE

With a horror genre framework in mind, combined with how Mittell and Levi talk about contextuality, the “blankness” of professional wrestling serves as a space where horror occurs. Before an in-depth analysis of who or what constitutes horror in wrestling, it is important to take some time to consider what does not fit within this system. In this discussion, monsters are not the performers’ real-life personae, but rather the fictional characters that they play within the diegetic space of professional wrestling, although sometimes these boundaries are porous, allowing for real-life events to cross into the fiction of the WWE. Professional wrestling is often character driven with its storytelling, allowing for a wide variety of characters to exist within its history. As faces (morally good) and heels (morally bad) are prominent, characters aesthetically linked to horror films have been around in wrestling for quite some time.

Often borrowing from horror films, wrestlers used these aesthetics to create more effective heel characters. For instance, wrestler Kevin Sullivan used the media panic of heavy metal music and its associated Satanic panic to create a “Prince of Darkness” persona (“Kevin Sullivan”). In Japan, American wrestlers on tour occasionally dressed deliberately as horror movie villains; Leatherface serves as a prominent example, blatantly copying the look from *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Kreikenbohm). In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the WWE (then the WWF) had three characters collectively known as The Brood, who were portrayed as actual vampires. Recently, the WWE has featured characters collectively known as The Wyatt Family, a swamp cult that follows and serves the charismatic leader Bray Wyatt. While these characters (and many others) share similar aesthetics with other horror texts, their use helps drive an opposing morality to the face/hero characters. For Jenkins, this is a way to help a male audience embrace the melodrama of wrestling, as it shares the “conventions within those forms of entertainment that ‘real men’ do embrace” (36). Instead of focusing on the shared aesthetics of horror, Levi maintains that a wrestler’s character means “cultivating and displaying a wrestler’s body, living as the embodiment of a particular kind of physical power” (14). Therefore, in terms of

monstrousness, horror and wrestling must be a display of physicality and the embodiment of “abnormal” power as well.

In *Complex TV*, Mittell discusses Bryan Cranston and the role of Walter White on *Breaking Bad*. In part, Bryan Cranston’s previous work—namely as a comedic actor and sitcom father—influenced how the audience originally interpreted the character of Walter White. Cranston’s previous roles and outside persona added to the character of an “everyday schlub” (Mittell, *Complex TV*, 152). This positioned the audience to have certain expectations that could be toyed with by *Breaking Bad* showrunner Vince Gilligan, allowing for complex character development throughout the course of the series. This intertextuality of character serves an important basis for understanding how the monster works in professional wrestling. It is common for a wrestler to change morality or even personas over the course of a career.

Because there is an importance of an outside intertextuality, a monster represents something different within the specific context of wrestling. The monster embodies horror’s “particular kind of physical power” in how they represent an abnormal entity within the normative narrative of professional wrestling (Levi 14). Often, these wrestlers are coming in with an outside cultural cachet—mostly from another professional sport like football, or from more “real” fighting (UFC or other MMA promotions). If the monster is a physical embodiment of the narrative tension between expected reality and the representation of horror, then in wrestling the monster is a performer who must be the abnormal performative entity: someone working within the industry of professional wrestling, but with an established outside intertextuality.

Because of this intertextual sense of performativity, one that shifts away from the history and narrative expectation of professional wrestling and muddies it with sport and fighting, there now exists a tension between the established reality of wrestling and an abnormal, outside construct. This narrative tension of the monster can be explained further through Steven Shaviro’s notion of sincerity, which “implies a sense of consistency in the way that a being acts and presents itself” (91). Shaviro writes about how Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson’s breakthrough in the film industry comes with the trappings of his background in pro wrestling. His film performance (in the case of the drama *Southland Tales*) is jarring because of his paratextual persona and career. This concept of sincerity adds to narrative tension because of “the diffuseness and discomfort of this character, together with its difference from the usual screen persona...they are

just *presented*, and transformed into spectacle, in their full messiness and intractability” (Shaviro 91). Applying this logic of horror narratives and character personae, the monster becomes a figure in pro wrestling with an inescapable background outside of the industry.

More so, because of this persona, the monster figure’s sincerity (consistency as a monster and authoritative, intertextual athlete) contrasts established performativity (the constantly developing narrative of professional wrestling) and emphasizes the tension between opposing narrative realities. While Mittell discusses how the background of an actor can be the cause for narrative development, Shaviro emphasizes this idea with the notion of sincerity, alluding to an inescapability of one’s intertextuality, regardless of complexity of the text’s narrative. Continuing with Carroll’s definition of horror in relation to wrestling’s monster, they become abnormal performative entities within wrestling’s expected narrative structure. They are often unbeatable, presented as “stronger,” or somehow more legitimate than others. The pro-wrestling monster provides the tension between performativity and sincerity because of their abnormality. They maintain a continued monstrousness, clashing with those who do (or can) change within wrestling’s narrative form, implying a rift in the very structure of wrestling’s storytelling and diegesis.

The Beast: Brock Lesnar

Within the fiction of a wrestling text, the monster allows for a character to have aspects that would not be normally present, such as the easy defeat of the hero, their unexpected athleticism, size and strength, and their seeming undefeatability. For Gilmore, this is because “terrible monsters are impressive exactly because they break the rules and do what humans can only imagine and dream of. Since they observe no limits, respect no boundaries, and attack and kill without compunction, monsters are also the spirit that says ‘yes’—to all that is forbidden” (12). By existing outside of the traditional duality of wrestling’s storytelling, and occupying a body capable of seemingly impossible physical feats, the pro-wrestling monster can escape the expected narrative structures of professional wrestling. Former champion collegiate wrestler, NFL player, UFC fighter, and current (at the time of this writing) WWE Universal Champion Brock Lesnar almost singularly embodies these characteristics.

Two years after winning the 2000 NCAA Division I Heavyweight Championship in collegiate wrestling for the University of Minnesota, Brock Lesnar signed a development contract with the WWE. After accomplishing an impressive number of victories, and with only a few years in the company, Lesnar left the WWE behind for the first time (Sullivan, Pantaleo, and Greenberg 51). Lesnar served a brief stint in the NFL with the Minnesota Vikings, as well as wrestling overseas for the New Japan Pro Wrestling organization (see Belfeuil in this volume for more on the history this organization). Lesnar then turned to mixed martial arts, becoming a champion in UFC. In 2009, discovering that he had diverticulitis, Lesnar retired from the UFC to undergo treatment (Babcock). Following a successful recovery, with competitive fighting out of the picture, Lesnar returned to the WWE as a “part-time performer” to lower physical risk. Lesnar became the highest-paid performer in the WWE, earning \$12 million in 2016 and working fewer days than most other wrestlers (Smith).

The PPV series SummerSlam offers WWE’s second biggest live event of the year. The 2014 main event between Lesnar and Cena served as a highly marketed way to bring attention to this event. It was the beginning of Lesnar’s most recent employment by the WWE, and it set up a high-profile standard for his future performances. The promotional package before the match highlights both performers. Lesnar is famous for previously defeating legendary wrestlers such as Triple H and The Undertaker in other notable matches, as well as those noted for their strength or size, such as “The World’s Strongest Man” Mark Henry and “The World’s Largest Athlete” The Big Show. As the company’s most popular hero, Cena was, at the time, the holder of the WWE’s most desired title: the WWE World Heavyweight Championship. As Lesnar declares in the promo, “Everything that has been put in front of Brock Lesnar, I have conquered, I have defeated.” Cena retorts with “There is one thing Brock Lesnar will not do: win. Because he does not deserve the title.”

To begin the match, Brock Lesnar’s entrance music plays and he enters the stage for his walk towards the ring, accompanied by his manager and primary mouthpiece, Paul Heyman. Audible boos can be heard from the audience. Once Lesnar is in the ring, John Cena’s music plays. He enters the arena wearing the championship belt. He receives a mixed reaction from the crowd, as he is beloved by younger fans but bemoaned by older ones. After their introductions, the bell rings and the match officially begins. After a brief physical exchange between the two performers, Lesnar hoists Cena onto his shoulders, swings him through the

air, and slams Cena onto his face; this maneuver is known as the “F5” and is considered Lesnar’s finishing move. It is highly unusual to see a finishing move within the first 30 seconds of the match, let alone the first actual move done between performers. The commentators are shocked, noting how they are only “about 30 seconds into this match and it’s almost over!”

The crowd’s excitement builds as fans chant “Let’s go Brock!” paired with the familiar dual-cheer of “Let’s go Cena!”/“Cena sucks!” Lesnar grabs Cena with the latter’s back firmly against the former’s chest. Lesnar throws Cena backwards over his head—the first of many German suplexes in the match, followed immediately by another. Cena tries to swing a flurry of punches and misses, dazed from being thrown. A lone child’s voice in the crowd can be heard clearly on the ringside camera’s microphones cheering “Let’s go Cena!” Lesnar suplexes Cena again, and follows with knees to the ribs. Commentator John “Bradshaw” Layfield exclaims, “Who can come back from this? You’ve got a freaking monster standing over ya!” Lesnar follows this with four more German suplexes, each dumping Cena on the back of his shoulders, neck, and head. Lesnar attempts a nonchalant pin, which Cena kicks out of. Lesnar performs two more German suplexes. Cena, in a flurry of adrenaline, grabs Lesnar and hits him with his own finishing move, “The Attitude Adjustment.” However, Lesnar bolts up immediately and laughs at Cena’s attempt. Lesnar toys with Cena, yelling at the referee to check if Cena wants to quit the match. Lesnar then grabs Cena and hits him with a series of four German suplexes, without letting go. After the release, Lesnar immediately grabs Cena for three more. With a final F5, Lesnar successfully pins Cena. Main commentator Michael Cole solemnly declares, “It wasn’t even close.” Brock walks up the ramp to the stage exit holding his newly won title, and the event ends with John Cena lying in the middle of the ring with members of the medical staff attending to him.

Many interesting things occur within this 15-minute match. For instance, Lesnar’s one-sided dominance of the main WWE hero is highly unlikely. Cena has more title reigns than all the current working wrestlers and is regarded as one of the company’s top performers. His moral alignment as a “face” (and perhaps the most moral wrestler within the WWE) would typically position him as capable of standing up against the attempts of a heel and winning a match no matter the odds. However, as established, Lesnar is neither a “heel” nor a “face.” He escapes this duality and breaks the rules of WWE’s narrative. For WWE fans, this is a shocking match, as it is unexpected within a narrative tradition. As previously

noted, Lesnar using his finishing move immediately in the match is highly uncommon, thus adding to his ability to break the standards otherwise held by a traditional wrestling performer. Cena's finishing move, meanwhile, had no effect on Lesnar, establishing this monster's imperviousness to Cena's physicality (and by extension his morality). Monsters hold this ability, as they challenge "the very foundation of our known world" (Gilmore 189). The "known world," in this case, is that of the WWE's narrative diegesis. Of note is the remark from commentator Layfield, declaring Lesnar's monstrousness. This establishes Lesnar's position for the WWE fanbase. His physical performance may have been jarringly dominating for the audience, but being called a monster adds to his character development and explains this dominance.

This character framing of Brock Lesnar continues throughout WWE's subsequent programming and adds to his monstrous persona. At WWE's *SummerSlam 2016*, Lesnar faced the returning Randy Orton, another major figure in the WWE Universe. The ending was the result of a referee stoppage rather than a traditional pin. This happened because Lesnar repeatedly elbowed Randy Orton in the head, gashing his scalp open and causing him to bleed profusely. As a monster, Lesnar defies the traditional expectations of a wrestling match, incapacitating his opponent rather than beating him by pin fall. This type of ending and the presence of blood are both rather uncommon in a contemporary WWE match.

Perhaps the most notable aspect of this match is what happened backstage after its conclusion and was reported on by the press. Fellow performer Chris Jericho, after witnessing the result of the match, confronted Lesnar backstage, and a heated argument occurred between the two performers, which was broken up by WWE owner/showrunner, Vince McMahon (Meltzer). This blending between narrative fiction and professional reality occurs because of Lesnar's believability as a monster. The horrific tension between the knowable diegetic narrative and the monstrous-unknown of Lesnar's persona is strong enough that even fellow performers are shocked by events in the ring. This is due to the monster's ability to transition between these narrative spaces, as "the monster demarcates not only between the real and the unreal, but between the permitted and the forbidden" (Gilmore 192). In this context, the real and the unreal are the narrative of the WWE and Lesnar's textuality. The permitted is represented by the consensual and previously established choreographed physical performance, and the forbidden by the "actual fight" ending, resulting in blood. Though WWE has openly claimed

that this was the mutually agreed upon ending for the match, it does little to discredit Lesnar's character.

Conclusion

The monster in professional wrestling serves a multifaceted function. The monster adds complexity to an otherwise traditional narrative style. By having a character work outside of a dualistic system of morality, they are not limited with what characters they can interact with. Standard pairing would limit heroes to wrestle villains (and vice versa), but a monster can work outside of that limitation. Their presence manipulates the genre of the event, allowing an audience to experience uncertain tensions between expectation and uncertainty. While working in a structural system of horror, this provides an anxiety that elevates the consumption of the spectacle. While wrestling storytelling often includes surprises, this narrative format provides a space for the unknown to interact with reality of the fiction. As a form of entertainment whose fiction/reality is often called into question, the monster character adds a sense of authenticity. The performer's intertextuality allows for an outside history to be added to the character, providing an element of legitimacy to the presentation of the physical spectacle, and even allowing for a form of hybridity to the program's style.

Other monsters exist in different wrestling promotions and companies. For example, *Lucha Underground*, a more gritty and cinematic wrestling show that airs on the El Rey cable network, features a cross between the Mexican "lucha libre" style of professional wrestling with American independent wrestling. Though introduced beyond the camera's frame in the first episode of the series, "The Monster" Matanza Cueto is not seen by the audience until the ninth episode of the second season in a battle royal episode featuring the bulk of the performers all in one match. The final performer to come to the ring is Matanza, who proceeds to handily beat every luchador present and win the show's main championship title. Matanza is framed as actually murderous. He represents the monster archetype, unfazed by the style of lucha libre and the show's narrative; instead of a successful physical attack, other wrestlers often literally bounce off his body.

While Brock Lesnar is not the only monster in professional wrestling, his prominence within the most wildly viewed wrestling programming allows for a

highly visible and culturally engaging text. His actions provide the audience with a paradoxical reality within their fictional spectacle—an intertextual and “authentic” athlete wrestling against physically skilled, but ultimately choreographed, performers. As a construct of horror, the monster allows for a narrative engagement between an expected fictional reality and an unknowable possibility. By existing outside of a traditionally morally dualistic style of storytelling, Brock Lesnar and other monsters develop a complexity for professional wrestling audiences where the realities of physical combat bleed seamlessly into the presentation of physical spectacle.

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