

# The Well-Wrought Broken Championship Belt: Thing Theory in Professional Wrestling Criticism

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On the June 10, 2013 episode of WWE's *Raw*, wrestler Triple H (Paul Levesque) insists on a rematch against Curtis Axel. His wife, Stephanie McMahon, and father-in-law, Vincent K. McMahon, object because they are worried about his health. Triple H begins the match, but Vince, owner of the WWE, orders the timekeeper to ring the bell, ending the match. Typically, the referee would make this call, but in this instance, the ringing of the bell, divorced from proper procedure, ends the match. Obstinate, Triple H restarts another match and again is foiled by Vince. His repeated insistence on a contest borders on obsessive, and to prevent the initiation of a third match—this time a 60-minute Iron Man match—Vince removes the bell from ringside and carries it into the back. The ceremony of professional wrestling (aka sports entertainment) starts and ends with the ringing of the bell—without this bell, a sanctioned match becomes definitionally impossible. The bell subordinates the desires of the wrestlers, the agency of the referee, and the action of the timekeeper to the physical object of the ring bell. Thus, instead of removing the wrestlers or referee, Vince removes the bell. The bell is a nonhuman actant equal to the human agents; it controls the match.

As announcers incessantly remind the audience, wrestling is a “very physical contest,” yet objects are intrinsic to the art and drama of professional wrestling. Examples range from the obvious (being hit with a chair hurts), to the practical (ring rope tautness affects how one performs moves), to the abstract (things can win open contests). As these examples show, the study of things in professional wrestling elucidates the multifaceted ways objects affect human experience. Just as Shakespeare once asserted, “the play's the thing” (II.ii.633), so too are the props, the audience, and the actors the things, in theatre as much as sports entertainment. A standard pro-wrestling contest consists of entrance music, an announcer, a ring, a bell, two competitors, a referee, and an audience. The music introduces the competitors, the announcer states their names and the terms of the

The Popular Culture Studies Journal, Vol. 6, No. 1  
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contest, and then the bell rings. The contest happens primarily inside a ring, where both wrestlers and the referee work together, as the audience interacts with them in the co-creation of public spectacle. Absence of any of these actors can negatively affect a performance. The network of things grows larger from there. For example, if the performance is a championship match, then the belt functions as actant. If a ladder match occurs, then the ladder bridges actors and action. Professional wrestling thus posits an apt form of popular culture to analyze through the critical lens of so-called thing theory. Things affect and prescribe the movements in the performance.

One purpose of this study is to elucidate how professional wrestling creates meaning. Pierre Bourdieu argues that “a work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded” (2). Professional wrestling, like all art forms, has a specific code for creating meaning, and things factor into this meaning creation. Bourdieu’s text argues that there is a difference between “high” and “low” culture, and professional wrestling is often considered low, like other areas of popular culture. Other popular culture narratives, such as comic books, have earned their place in the academy through the efforts of scholars, including Scott McCloud explaining comics’ code in *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. Similarly, this paper attempts to show that, like comics, professional wrestling is a mix of high and low culture, or, more radically, it might be art in the postmodern fashion. Uninitiated scholars may not possess mastery of this code and thus do not adequately address professional wrestling as an art form.

Pioneered by Bruno Latour and named by Bill Brown, thing theory is part of a current, ongoing series of debates in the social sciences. Scholars such as Graham Harman, Timothy Morton, and Jane Bennett have expanded on such theories to rewrite what it means to be human. The core basis of thing theory is that objects have agency, both in and of themselves *and* in how they affect human behavior. At present, scholars in the humanities and arts are still forming ideas on how to use thing theory in their fields. Rita Felski made great strides in this area by applying it to literature. Performance study of theatre made headway with Alban Déléris’s recent exploration of how props altered the choreography of Molière’s *Le Malade Imaginaire*. Like other forms of theatre, professional wrestling lends itself very well to such approaches, and thus acts as an in-road to applications of thing theory in other forms of popular culture.

This paper hopes to expand critical use of thing theory by applying it to professional wrestling. Case studies range from the most popular wrestling promotions, such as WWE and New Japan Pro Wrestling (NJPW), to local independent promotions, such as Southern Fried Championship Wrestling in Monroe, GA. Through these examples, the vibrant materiality of things and their effect on human behavior emerges.

## Literature Review

Kit MacFarlane's thoughts on professional wrestling criticism help to justify this study, and thus it is valuable to quote them at some length:

Though professional wrestling is a highly stylised drama, the actual process of its dramatic construction is frequently overlooked and undervalued in Western academic and cultural analysis, with the art-form itself relegated to being a signifier of anti-drama or broad (and often base) cultural norms rather than a complex and unique constructed dramatic form in its own right. (137)

Through application of thing theory, scholars can analyze professional wrestling's dramatic construction with more depth and accuracy, thus elevating the art-form's esteem in academic circles. Furthermore, MacFarlane emphasizes that without "examining specific, individual dramatic texts" professional wrestling scholarship becomes uniform and alienated (138). This study's goal is not to reproduce uniform pro-wrestling scholarship, but instead to move towards a more dynamic and engaged analysis of professional wrestling by narrowing the scope to examine things' agency in professional wrestling.

Early on, academic study of professional wrestling addressed spectacle, but even now rarely addresses things' role in that spectacle. Many consider Roland Barthes' article "The World of Wrestling" as the initiation of professional wrestling scholarship. In it he argues that "wrestling is not a sport, it is a spectacle" (3). Sharon Mazer's monograph asserts that wrestling is sport and spectacle, when she asserts how "wrestling, then, is a hybrid performance practice: a professional sport in which players can earn their livings at the same time that it offers its audiences a spectacle that goes beyond contest into theatrical spectacle" (6). Bodies are crucial to the corporeal storytelling of professional

wrestling, yet so are things. Broderick D. V. Chow contends that the “bodies of wrestlers are reproduced and endlessly circulated as commodities, their stripped, exposed, shaved, tanned, and hypermuscular images sold as posters, as action figures, in video games, and on other branded merchandise” (81). The corporeal body is important because, as Chow suggests, aspects like “scars, bruises, broken bones, dislocations, and excessive muscle gain” are markers of the physical work of the wrestler (81). These scars, bruises, broken bones, and dislocations can be the result of things, which may or may not be functioning correctly. Leon Hunt's “Hell in a Cell and Other Stories” discusses physical objects in professional wrestling's spectacle, but he focuses on “[b]lood [...], barbed wire, cages, assorted weaponry (‘foreign objects’), [and] fire [...] these are the stock-in-trade of the so-called ‘hard-core’ wrestling match” (118). These “stock-in-trade” objects are not of interest here, as they do what they are intended to do: make wrestlers bleed. Rather, this paper discusses “stock-in-trade” objects when they do not follow their intended use, and therefore become things, such as when a ladder wins a championship match.

Though film and professional wrestling are different types of genres, each employ similar narrative devices. For instance, Paula Cohen contends that as a visual medium “movies show us bodies in motion, engaging with material things” (79). Wrestling is also a visual medium, and shows us bodies in motion engaging with other bodies and material things as spectacle (Chow). One of Cohen's other revelations has to do with male material glamour, which is a combination of male bodies and material objects. Cohen defines “male material glamour” as “male characters' relationship to *things* [...] that has nothing to do with plot” (80, italics mine). “Things” here signifies material objects, but the same applies to things as defined by thing theory.

Wrestling also engages material things in specific ways. From the ubiquitous use of foreign objects to the WWE's pay-per-view event Tables, Ladders, and Chairs, material objects in wrestling serve unique narrative functions. According to MacFarlane, “It is not the overall spectacle of the entire wrestling show” that scholars should study, but rather “the unique, carefully-negotiated, and often semi-improvised mini-dramas that take place from ‘bell to bell’” (138). As demonstrated, the bell affords a rich generic case study, while additional broken and unruly physical objects like championship belts present alternative narrative props. Additionally, by thinking in terms of the immediacy of live improv and theatre, the ways things immediately affect a performance become clear.

Spectators can see the action while it happens, especially if viewing it live. If the ring breaks, it affects everyone involved.

## Ring Theory

When critically studying professional wrestling through the lens of thing theory, one is overwhelmed by the multiplicity of objects confronting the viewer. Some things simply do what they are intended to; as such, they are regarded as objects but not “things” (Brown 3). For instance, a chair in which one sits is an object. An object that does not fulfill its intended purpose, such as a chair used to hit an opponent, is a “thing.” For the sake of brevity, this essay focuses on “things” when their “thingness” becomes apparent. According to Brown, “We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us” (4), meaning when an object ceases to fulfill its intended function, it becomes a thing. Similarly, Graham Harman discusses the ways broken objects force themselves onto human consciousness and assert their identity independent of human existence:

When using a hammer, for instance, I am focusing on the building project currently underway, and I am probably taking the hammer for granted. Unless the hammer is too heavy or too slippery, or unless it breaks, I tend not to notice it at all. The fact that the hammer can break proves it is deeper than my understanding of it (186).

His analysis shows that objects have agency outside of human experience and use; if objects only existed to fulfill human use, they could not break. Because they only define objects in relationship to human experience, object-oriented ontology and thing theory often run into trouble. How does a human speak about objects’ agency outside of human existence if one cannot escape their own human perception? This paper offers no answers to larger existential questions involving thing theory. Rather, by studying a controlled narrative like professional wrestling, where humans interact with nonhuman objects in real time, the things’ agency emerges.

Latour, publishing as Jim Johnson, provided a salient example of how things shape human behavior. He described the ways an automatic door “disciplines” humans by closing the door behind them, so they do not have to (300).

Additionally, if the automatic door closes too quickly, people learn to move before it hits them (301). Latour refers to things' imposition of behavior on humans as "prescription." He further describes the ways prescriptions are only relevant to local contexts and are thus examples of "local cultural condition" (301)—not all automatic doors close too quickly.

The same can easily be applied to wrestling. The local cultural conditions of a particular ring set up—the ring height, rope tension, smoothness of the canvas, type of turnbuckle covers, height between the ring and the ceiling, and ceiling fans—all alter the way wrestlers move in a match. Once accustomed to a particular ring set-up, the wrestlers engage in prescribed behaviors shaped by the physical ring. A wrestler's physical body and the physical ring interact in some unexpected ways. When "running the ropes," a wrestler should be able to cross the ring in three steps. If a wrestler is closer to five feet than six, they must take longer strides, and if they are around seven feet, they need shorter strides. Additionally, if the shorter person wants to enter the ring over the second rope, they may not be able to depending on the height of the ropes, whereas a taller wrestler (see Cody Hall in Fig. 1) can go over the top rope. Other factors also affect one's in-ring experience: in Figure 1, the placement of the ceiling fan and the height of the ceiling constricted the types of moves available to Cody Hall. He is actually an inch away from the ceiling fan—this picture was not taken at an angle to create the illusion of his height. The ring dictates entrances, moves, and mobility, even when the ring is in good working order.

The ring, however, is not always in good working order. Latour describes the effects of things on humans when they fail in their prescribed function; in his example, the door does not close itself, and thus is left open all day during the winter because they fail to realize the door is broken (300). The door's brokenness breaks the script of human behavior, and humans must adapt. Similarly, at a 2015 Southern Fried Championship Wrestling show in Monroe, Georgia, the ring temporarily broke. One of the boards under the canvas bowed up, causing an uneven surface. An uneven surface or a ripped canvas can be very dangerous, as such imperfections can impede movement. If this board had an edge facing up, it could seriously injure a wrestler. The two competitors spent the rest of the match avoiding hitting the board directly while doing moves next to it in an attempt to make the board fall back into place. This broken ring, by not fulfilling its intended function, altered the course of the match and forced the human competitors to work around the broken board. Things matter in wrestling.



**Figure 1. Cody Hall at SFCW. Photo credit Robert Newsome.**

### Championship Belts as Things

In the world of professional wrestling, one object soars high above the others, epitomizing ring prowess and main-eventing pay-per-views: championship title belts. A wrestler who metaphorically holds the title of champion literally holds the championship belt; thus, a belt is more than a symbol, it is a thing. By possessing this physical object, a wrestler shows his or her superiority over others. Their dominant ring prowess may be honest, by being a better wrestler than one's opponent, or dishonest, by pulling the tights or using the ropes for extra leverage, but the result is the same. If the two wrestlers compete in a championship contest, the symbolic win results in a physical trophy. If ring prowess asserts superiority, then championship belts epitomize in-ring mastery. That the belt is important, as both a thing and a narrative trope, is axiomatic in the context of professional

wrestling. Belts are not symbols but subjects in earnest, especially when their symbolic function fails.

Belts show their “thingness” when operating outside of the standard use. As professional wrestling fans know, a belt is typically worn around the waist or over the shoulder of the champion. The belt physically adorns the champion while also symbolizing victory. The physical detail, the weight, and the size of the belt impress the viewers. Mildred Burke’s championship belt is described as follows: “It weighed fifteen pounds and was said to be twenty-four carat gold with four sapphires, six amethysts, and a seven-carat diamond” (Leen 7-8). They have only become more extravagant since the first half of the twentieth century.

Still, the belts sometimes appear stripped of meaning. For instance, CM Punk tweeted a picture of his WWE World Championship belt not in its normal place, but instead stored in a refrigerator. The story goes that after he got home from *Money in the Bank 2011*, he went straight to the fridge for some water and absentmindedly shoved the belt inside. The belt occupies a private, domestic space, and is no longer a public symbol of victory, but just a guy forgetting something he works with in his fridge. Here, the belt loses all its pretensions and simply becomes the material object, a thing out of place, stripped of symbolic meaning. Its placement in the refrigerator suggests it is as consumable as the Jiffy Peanut Butter and the Pepsi; it is simply an article made for capitalist consumption. The placement of the championship belt breaks it from its narrative function and makes apparent its thingness. This is one of many examples in which a championship’s status as an auxiliary object becomes hazy and unnerving.

Much like a misplaced belt, a broken belt presents the audience with unique challenges. On May 18th, 2017 at *Best of the Super Juniors 2017 Night 2*, Tetsuya Naito, then-holder of the IWGP Intercontinental Championship, cracked the belt’s faceplate by repeatedly throwing and swinging the title into nearby steps and ring posts. Certainly, this brazen act of defiance helps to build his character as an anti-establishment outsider of sorts. Much like the previous example with CM Punk’s WWE title, Naito’s belt exceeds the status of a mere prop. Though it seems like a burden or a curse to Naito, there is an undeniable compulsion toward obtaining and keeping the belt nonetheless. In his continued attempts to devalue and destroy the belt, Naito, however paradoxically merely augments the object’s power. As Harman states in his description of the hammer, when it serves its function, the user does not take notice of it as a thing (186). The same applies to a pro-wrestling audience’s appreciation of championship belts: they are physically



present but so commonplace as to be unremarkable. It follows, then, that no matter how many times Naito tosses it away, the audience's focus (and the camera's focus) returns the belt. Its agency radiates outward at all times; the belt is a subject unto itself, and proves itself deeper than its symbolic meaning.

Another belt exceeds its intended purpose by losing its normal positioning and narrative function. In the December 18th, 1995 episode of *WCW Nitro*, the newly-signed Madusa, formerly known as Alundra Blayze in WWF, announces her entrance at the new company. There is one particularly stunning aspect of her arrival—she carries with her the WWF Women's Title, only to pitch it into the trash. Here, on this rival program, the title should be stripped of meaning, since it comes from a different narrative universe, but it is not. Outside of the larger corporate rivalry between WWF and WCW, this event smudges the belt's status as a stable symbol. Similarly, when Robocop appeared at WCW's Capital Combat 1990, the cohesive narrative cracks and the invading person or object attains preeminence; the story became not about Sting or the Four Horsemen, but about Robocop. Even the poster featured Robocop larger than the other characters. The same can be said of the belt: the belt becomes more a subject in earnest than Madusa. It acts both as a signifier, in this case of corporate triumph, and another actor in the strange network of competing wrestling promotions. As Bennett argues "a vital materiality can never really be thrown 'away,' for it continues its activities even as a discarded or unwanted commodity" (6). Such is the case with the belt. Once in the trashcan, this vital materiality overwhelms the rest of the segment. The symbolic as well as physical weight of the belt hitting the bottom of the can resonates larger than any of the humans in the scene.

All three of these belts show their thingness in different ways, and show they have agency outside of human use. CM Punk's title appears without a human and in an alien context, creating affinity with the objects around it. Naito's belt, in its brokenness, forces the gaze to return to it again and again. Madusa's title overshadows the commentary team and the title holder herself. The preceding instances are all relevant in their thingness, but the most apt example matters not only in itself, but based on its champions: Dramatic Dream Team's (DDT's) Ironman Heavyweight Championship. As an object, much like the belts mentioned previously, it exerts absolute dominion over human actors. The title's stipulations are also noteworthy: it has a 24/7 defense clause, meaning the contest has no definite start or finish. Conscious or unconscious, the title holder must be ready to defend at all times. The title defense clause disciplines the competitors

and the viewers (Johnson 300), in that they all must be alert for a title change, on DDT programming and off. On July 31, 2016, Joey Ryan dropped the title to the audience at *Beyond Wrestling* in Providence, RI, and then won it back. As an open challenge, the belt can be won and lost anytime, and literally anywhere, even in dreams.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, a belt or match that is an open challenge, like the Heavymetalweight, means anyone can compete for it, as the previous example of the audience shows. As one might suspect based on the other title stipulations, the title holder in this instance does not need to be human.

DDT takes the logic of professional wrestling to its furthest conclusions, and thus is the case of the Ironman Heavymetalweight Championship belt. The logic of this title seems to be if anyone can compete, cannot *anything*? If an acting referee is present, the title can change physical or metaphorical hands. As such, logically, if a painting covers a wrestler whose shoulders are down to the count of three, it can win the title. On June 23, 2013 at *What are You Doing 2013*, a calligraphy painting “Kōmyō” did win the title. At WCPW’s *State of Emergency* on April 1st, 2017, Joe Hendry won the title only to throw it into the trash shortly thereafter. Subsequently, the trash bin briefly became the champion. Unlike when Madusa discarded her title, it is not the belt’s vital materiality that asserts itself, but that of the trash bin. As of this writing, twenty-five inanimate objects have held the Ironman Heavymetalweight title (if one considers Yoshihiko an inanimate object; the authors do not agree on this point<sup>2</sup>), including three ladders, a chair, a table, a ringside mat, a Hello Kitty doll, and a pint of beer. On April 29, 2014 at *Max Bump 2014*, the belt itself became champion by falling onto the chest of Sanshiro Takagi, becoming the thousandth title holder. Here, the belt’s symbolic and material statuses combine into one. The logic of professional wrestling does allow for this occurrence, because wrestling has always valued the vital materiality of objects.

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<sup>1</sup> Joey Ryan lost the title on July 28 to Candice LeRae in a dream. In a video posted to Joey Ryan’s Youtube channel, Candice tells him over the phone that she is coming for his title. She meets his reaction (“That’s not even possible. You’re in Cleveland and I’m in California”) by wishing him sweet dreams. As he sleeps that night with the Heavymetalweight title on his chest, they compete and she pins him. Upon waking, the title is gone.

<sup>2</sup> Yoshihiko is one of two so-called love dolls who compete in DDT. They are treated as human competitors, not as objects.

## Conclusion

A championship belt is much more than a symbol of victory; if these belts were simple props, the emblematic weight of reinforcing a competitor's triumph could easily be borne by announcers and commentators. There is little need to go through the time and expense of fabricating a belt if its fate is that of an inert signifier. Returning to MacFarlane, and to push professional wrestling scholarship forward, criticism must now actively concern itself with the minute complexities of the artform. By applying elements of thing theory to the study of professional wrestling, this study attempts to elucidate but one of these complexities. Though an extended focus on championship belts expounds the degree to which things matter in professional wrestling, there are still countless avenues of approach to consider.

Most importantly, at least in the context of professional wrestling, scholarship has much to gain by considering things as active, vibrant agents in their own right. In other words, this examination is merely a starting point. Professional wrestling, as a form of live theater, is uniquely well-suited to matters of non-human agency and object-oriented ontology. Week after week, there are near-countless opportunities to engage with professional wrestling in real time. As such, and in a broader sense, it provides a valuable, constantly active inroad for thing theory's inclusion in the realm of pop culture studies at large.

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