A Cultural Studies Approach to Excessive Forms of Entertainment: 
A Case Study of a Spectacle of Violent Death in Bedranowsky’s The Saw
Death Match (2007)¹

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Abstract

The death match in professional wrestling is stigmatized by institutions watching after the
public order and by participants of the pro wrestling community. There is no comprehensive
academic scholarship about this phenomenon. Despite the stigma, a unique perspective on
death match is offered in this article: it is approached as a cultural production that meets
specific standards of physical appearance and performance excellence. With all its
ambiguities, flaws, and abundance of aesthetic and ethical problems, the author comes to a
conclusion that the death match wrestler Alexander Bedranowsky uses this form of cultural
production as a tool for self-empowerment. The scholar compares the death match to splatter
films. With a focus on the first Saw film (2004), Saw II (2005) and The Saw Death Match
(2007), performed by characters Thumbtack Jack and Drake Younger, the author elaborates
on how death match wrestlers produce a “spectacle of violent death” (Schneider 2001). She
is particularly interested in the aspect of ‘creativity’ in death match. This original research
project is a step in the direction of raising awareness about death match in pro wrestling, and
initiating discourse around this excessive entertainment phenomenon among the cultural
studies scholars.

Keywords: cultural studies, horror film studies, death match pro wrestling, body genre,
gender

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Introduction

While researching scholarly literature about pro wrestling (PW), I found no texts that dealt specifically with the death match (DM). The ‘death match’ or ‘deathmatch’ were usually mentioned either in the context of scholarship on computer games or as a metaphor applied to describe competitive/antagonistic ideas. PW is commonly understood as a collaborative form of performance art. In this research, I approach DM as a “body genre” (Williams 1991). Unlike cinematic performance, DM is, first of all, a raw live performance. And unlike theatrical performance, DM implies actual excessive bleeding of pro wrestlers in the ring caused, for example, by using sharp foreign objects like light tubes, barbed wire, razorblades, etc., or the practice of self-inflicted cutting, which is called ‘blading’ or ‘getting color’ in the DM scene. In the long run, DM is very detrimental to physical health and psychological well-being.

DM is stigmatized by the institutions watching after the public order; it is also stigmatized by the participants of the PW community. Some pro wrestlers and fans do not recognize DM as a legitimate performance genre, arguing that DM has nothing to do with PW; hence, it should be done away with for good. Despite the stigma, this article offers a unique perspective on DM: DM is approached as a cultural production that meets specific standards of physical appearance and excellence in performance.

In this article, I compare DM to splatter films. With focus on the first Saw film (2004), Saw II (2005) and The Saw DM (2007), where DM is performed by the characters Thumbback Jack (TJ) and Drake Younger (in PW referred to as ‘gimmicks’), I elaborate on how DM wrestlers collaborate together (as film and theater actors do) in the production of a “spectacle of violent death” (Schneider 2001). Along with splatter film in horror of the twenty first century, DM as a cultural phenomenon offers social commentary on ‘whiteness,’ masculinity ideals, and voyeurism in entertainment, to name but a few.

Here, I mainly focus on ‘creativity’ in DM, meaning the ways by which a particular wrestler proficiently performs in his role as an opponent or, conversely, how a particular wrestler creatively inflicts damage to his own body. The article is a contribution to the body of work on horror in literature and film in which DM is a central topic for research. It is also a unique scholarly contribution to the German DM scene.

Cultural Studies Scholarship about Pro Wrestling

To a great extent, PW is a form of performance art. Like dance, theater, circus, ballet, etc., PW involves aspects of visual arts, literature and athleticism, and provides a “window on human thought and emotion” (Adams 2002). A number of studies of PW have gained important status within the field of cultural studies, Roland Barthes’ study being one of them. His approach to studying PW was very similar to Mikhail Bakhtin’s approach to studying carnival festivities and comic spectacles in his work Rabelais and His World (1984) during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Bakhtin pointed out that carnival festivities and comic
spectacles and the rituals connected to them had an important place in the life of an individual; they served the purpose of escaping from the official way of life. In Mythologies (1972), Barthes explored, as he put it, the myth of PW by contrasting it to boxing and judo, and drawing parallels between PW and the theatre of ancient Rome:

Wrestling is not a sport, it is a spectacle. [...] Boxing is [...] based on a demonstration of excellence. One can bet on the outcome of a boxing-match: with wrestling, it would make no sense. [...] In other words, wrestling is a sum of spectacles, of which no single one is a function: each moment imposes the total knowledge of a passion which rises erect and alone, without ever extending to the crowning moment of a result. Thus the function of the wrestler is not to win; it is to go exactly through the motions which are expected of him. [...] In judo, a man who is down is hardly down at all, he rolls over, he draws back, he eludes defeat [...]; in wrestling, a man who is down is exaggeratedly so, and completely fills the eyes of the spectators with the intolerable spectacle of his powerlessness. [...] In wrestling, as on the stage in antiquity, one is not ashamed of one’s suffering, one knows how to cry, one has a liking for tears. (Roland Barthes. Mythologies. New York: Hill and Wang. 1972. pp.15-16.)

Thanks to this particular study, a cultural studies approach to studying PW as a spectacle gained popularity among scholars. However, Barthes’ assertion that “wrestling is not a sport, it is a spectacle” (Ibid.) should be taken with reservation. Narrowing PW down to a spectacle only is not helpful in understanding the multi-layered nature of PW. Besides being dramatic public display, PW match has much in common with sports competition. After all, PW is a live athletic performance. In addition to theatrical skills, like any team sport, PW demands physical athleticism and fine motor skills along with, ideally, physical and mental agility. Often, discussions concerning PW are narrowed down to the question whether PW is fake. In the documentary Fit Finlays (2010), David Finlay, Jr, an Irish pro wrestler, explained the interplay between ‘real’ and ‘fake’ in PW:

Give me a thumb. So they give me a thumb. [...] You prove your friend that I am hurting you. [...] I put a little bit of pressure on your thumb, you can’t explain pain, you can only feel it. So I put a little bit more pressure on your thumb… By the way, I can sing a song while I am hurting you, and your friends are going to be totally confused, what’s real here. Are you in pain? And I would snap their thumbs. Bam! Just like a chicken leg. [...] That’s what I believe I should do just to make you prove that wrestling is legitimate, and what we do is for real, what we do is who we are. (Ronan McCloskey. The Fit Finlays. Ireland: Setanta, 2010.)

Singing a song while putting pressure on a thumb and eventually snapping is a ‘real’ experience to the one who has his/her finger dislocated. Depending on the circumstances, and how this experience is presented or displayed (power play), ‘real’ experiences can be contested and even laughed out. To some, DM might appear more ‘realistic’ because DM pro wrestlers are actually bleeding their own blood. The viewer might be fascinated by what s/he sees or disgusted as a result of trying to figure out how painful it is for these bodies in front of his/her eyes. However, the repeated practice of self-induced pain and the release of adrenaline in the body during DM contribute to pro wrestlers’ heightened pain resistance and stamina. The aforementioned does not make DM wrestlers’ experience any less painful. These examples illustrate how setting and display of pain can move the viewer: s/he can laugh at
someone’s thumb being snapped by Finlay and/or feel nauseous when looking at Bedranowsky’s face covered with blood. In the end, the viewer’s responses matter the most: “This is sick. But I will come to the next show. Buy DVD. Consume it.” In Powers of Horror (1982), Kristeva elaborated on finding ‘jouissance’ in the abject. The question of reality here is irrelevant because this cultural phenomenon is ‘real’ and ‘legitimate’ in its own right, entertaining and pleasurable to some, superficial and degrading to others.

In Understanding Popular Culture (1989), John Fiske provides analysis of Rock ‘n’ Wrestling television series. His analysis complimented Bakhtin and Barthes’ studies of carnivalesque bodies: grotesque, burlesque, excessive, jolly, offensive, and profane and degrading from the point of view of “high” culture. Fiske approached American PW on television as a text. His study of PW as a popular text revealed many insights about the role of the male body in the American working class cultural forms of entertainment. Bakhtin, Barthes and Fiske agreed that the grotesque body was positioned in opposition to the beautiful and perfect.

The concept of carnivalesque bodies borrowed from cultural studies scholarship is useful for my analysis of The Saw DM (2007). Bakhtin, Barthes and Fiske proposed that carnivals and PW spectacle served the purpose of vent/escape from social control and imposed norms. Their insightful reading of the carnivalesque and grotesque bodies are valuable for better understanding of PW as a cultural phenomenon. In many ways the bodies of DM wrestlers can be regarded as carnivalesque and grotesque. Typically, but not exclusively, these are masculine working class bodies. They undergo modifications: they are often tattooed, pierced and/or scarified, and, as a result of a DM career, heavily scarred. They are often fractured and damaged in the ring. Most importantly, these bodies are bleeding bodies, they are expected to bleed actual blood during every DM. When these bodies are approached as texts, they offer a variety of ideas about death and entertainment as a means for escaping social control. Underground 18+ events are not widely advertised. But escaping social control is not always possible; these bodies need to be medicated. In order to be medically attended in German hospitals, DM wrestlers—unlike “elite” sportsmen in football, tennis or golf—lie about the actual causes of injuries. In a locker room, other wrestlers can easily spot DM wrestlers. Their bodies are often described as incongruous, ugly, or even disgusting because they do not correspond to the widely shared ideal of a ‘beautiful masculine body’ in PW.

Understanding these grotesque bodies provided better understanding of DM wrestling, but they did not explain the how and why of explicit violence in DM. Some concepts and theories developed in the studies of contemporary horror in literature and film turned out to be useful in designing the research framework of the present study.

**Monster as an Artist in Horror Film Scholarship**

A variety of concepts and approaches can be borrowed from horror theory and criticism and applied to studying DM. In the context of this brief article, the DM genre is
approached as a “body genre” (Williams, 1991). The Saw DM (2007) was presented as a “spectacle of violent death” (Schneider, 2001). And DM gimmick Thumbtack Jack (TJ), performed by Bedranowsky, was introduced in the role of “monster as corrupt or degraded artist” (ibid).

While staying recognizable, TJ-gimmick was constantly evolving. Throughout his career as a DM wrestler, Bedranowsky’s TJ personified the traits of: 1) a classic monster of horror, monster as a flawed/corrupt/degraded work of art (Cohen 1996); and 2) a more recent version of monster brought about with the splatter film and the developments in the gaming industry, that is, a corrupt and degraded monster-artist (Schneider 2001). In The Saw DM, TJ personified the latter. Hence, this sub-chapter mainly puts forward the scholarship about monster as an artist.

In The Philosophy of Horror: Or, Paradoxes of the Heart (1990), a widely read work on horror, Noël Carroll elaborates on recent tendencies in depicting “extreme gross fury visited upon the human body as it is burst, blown up, broken, and ripped apart” (Carroll 1990) in the horror genre. Carroll refers to it as “person-as-meat” (ibid.). In this extensive work on horror, Carroll mentions the term ‘splatter’ twice (on pages 21 and 211); both of them in the connection to Clive Barker, as he calls him “the literary equivalent of the splatter film” (ibid.). Barker’s monsters in Weaveworld (1987) and The Son of Celluloid (1991) serve as examples of “unclean” and “disgusting” monsters; the thought of being touched by them was described as “sickening” (ibid.). Carroll contextualizes splatter within American history by suggesting that the Vietnam War and disillusionments as associated with that decade contribute to Americans’ sense of paralysis, engendered by massive historical shocks, and an unrelenting inability to come to terms practically with situations that persistently seemed inconceivable and unbelievable. The American Dream becomes wrapped up in an American Nightmare, in which victims are left dumbfound by horrific monsters (ibid.).

In “Murder as Art/The Art of Murder: Aestheticizing Violence in Modern Cinematic Horror” (2001), Steven Schneider shares his views on a “new era of cinematic horror” based on his reading of the contemporary horror films:

The monster is human, all too human, and besides that, all too real. Real in the sense that no obvious or Expressionistically – rendered signifiers of physical deformity-simplistically (and sometimes misleadingly) signifying moral corruption – are made available to the audience/protagonist/victim for the purpose of immediate identification. […] One distinguishing mark of the modern horror film is a shift in the genre’s dominant aesthetic metaphor: what used to be the monster as corrupt or degraded work of art has become […] the monster as corrupt and degraded artist. (Steven Jay Schneider. “Murder as Art/The Art of Murder: Aestheticizing Violence in Modern Cinematic Horror.” Intensitiescultmedia.files.wordpress.com. 2001. Jun. 1, 2014. p. 2.)

The author sketches out that, on the one hand, murder in the modern-day horror film can be approached as an artistic product. Consider a murderer recycling victims into various pieces of bone furniture in The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974), organizing objects of murder and parts of victims into a pop-art installation in White of The Eye (1987), or skilfully
arranging the death scene in *Se7en* (1995). On the other hand, murder can be interpreted as artistic performance. Consider a violent performance of “Singin’ in the Rain” while stomping on the body of an old man in *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), performances in Shakespearean drama in which actors literally kill unsuspecting critics in *Theatre of Blood* (1973), or Lecter’s spectacle of escape whereas *The Goldberg Variations* plays as accompaniment in *The Silence Of The Lambs* (1991). These are but some examples of ‘artistic’ products by a corrupt and degraded monster.

Both aspects can be also regarded as complementary. Examples incorporating both could be, among many, *Peeping Tom* (1960) and *Manhunter* (1986). In *Peeping Tom*, Mark Lewis (Karlheinz Boem) murders his victims in a ‘creative’ way with a retractable spike attached to a movie camera. In addition, a small mirror is affixed to the camera which enables him to record the terrified expressions of his victims as they watch themselves getting killed. In *Manhunter*, narcissistic Francis Dollarhyde (Tom Noonan) murders a couple in their bedroom and splatters the walls with their blood; he places shards of mirror into their eyes so they can watch what he is doing. Schneider wrote, “What we have here is a paradigmatic case of the ‘murder as artistic product’ theme dovetailing with that of ‘murder as artistic performance.’” (Schneider 2001) Schneider’s reading of these monsters suggests that the murderer is primarily coded as monstrous not because of some physical or mental deformity, but because the murder put his artistic talent to malevolent use.

The spectacles of violent death in most of the previously mentioned films have an art critic personified as a detective who attempts to understand the creative acts of murder. Detectives, rarely killers’ victims, but often the viewers themselves, are forced into the role of art interpreters, struggling at first with disgust, but eventually distancing themselves from the moral repugnance of the crime in order to understand the artworks. According to Schneider, the radical shift he traces in the horror genre’s dominant aesthetic metaphor, besides socio-historical conditions, stem largely from the shift in the cultural discourses of ‘art’ (the popularization of modern and avant-garde artistic practice). In his opinion, art became “more open to and associated with notions of ‘shock,’ transgression and offensiveness” (Schneider 2001).

In a recent work on the splatter genre titled *To See the Saw Movies: Essays on Torture Porn and Post-9/11 Horror* (2003), the authors elaborate on the cultural and historical context of the *Saw* franchise (2004-2010), and connect the existence and fascination with *Saw* with the traumatic nature of a post-9/11 America. In this collection of articles, McCann (2003) proposes that these films symbolically chart a crisis of masculinity in horror; male characters are mostly depicted as powerless and impotent in the hands of Jigsaw. In many ways, Jigsaw (Tobin Bell) is a monster much the same way as John Doe in *Se7en*: they are ‘creative’ murderers in Schneider’s sense. After a failed suicide attempt, Jigsaw, dying from a frontal lobe tumor, realizes how grateful he is to be alive. He vows to select people to put into circumstances in which their wills are tested and they are forced to choose between life and death: ‘Live or die, make your choice’ becomes a kind of mantra. The bodies of those who fail to save themselves, miss parts of skin, cut out in the form of jigsaw pieces. In a conversation in *Saw II*, Jigsaw explains that he never murdered anyone in his life, implying
that the decisions are left to the people themselves. Ambiguous, intelligent and aesthetic in his own way, the Jigsaw-character is comprehensively analyzed in Jake Huntley’s article “I Want to Play a Game: How to See Saw” (2007).

In his study of murder as art and monster as artist in the contemporary horror film, Schneider points at the limitations of his research:

An obvious question to ask here, albeit one I am unable to pursue in the present essay, is why so often it is a young woman who is first confronted with these spectacles of death within the diegesis? Is it because femininity is traditionally assumed to respond ‘better,’ at least more viscerally, to works of art/murder? (Steven Jay Schneider. “Murder as Art/The Art of Murder: Aestheticizing Violence in Modern Cinematic Horror.” Intensitiescultmedia.files.wordpress.com. 2001. Jun. 1, 2014. p. 6.)

Gender has always been one of the central topics in horror theory and criticism. In “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess” (1991), American film scholar Linda Williams provides perspectives on gender construction and how it is addressed in relation to basic sexual fantasies in the horror genre, particularly slasher films. Williams coined the term ‘body genre’ to describe a cluster of genres characteristic of a gross display of the human body. The author proposes that pornography, horror and melodrama share common pertinent features. First, the bodies portrayed in these three types of excess systems “are caught in the grip of intense sensation or emotion” (Williams 1991), that is, the bodies are depicted as sensationaly orgasmic in porn, shaken by violence and terrified in horror, and weeping in melodrama. Second, these bodies are often depicted as aurally ecstatic with sexual pleasure, fear and terror, or overpowering sadness; the body screams with pleasure in porn, from fear in horror, and in anguish in melodrama. The third major feature these genres share is the body of a woman offering the most sensational sight: the female body in pleasure, fear, and pain. Williams explains that ‘pornography’s appeal to its presumed male viewers would be characterized as sadistic, horror films’ appeal to the emerging sexual identities of its (frequently adolescent) spectators would be sadomasochistic and women’s films appeal to presumed female viewers would be masochistic” (ibid.).

Regarding horror, Williams writes that it serves a function of problem solving; each instance endlessly repeats the trauma of castration as if attempting to explain the original problem of sexual difference in the world where the notions of gender are rapidly changing. She argues that the problem of sexual difference in horror is solved by more violence. In accordance with Williams’ reading of horror and the body genre, the answer to Schneider’s questions can be formulated this way: the body of a young woman offers the most sensational sight in horror; hence, young women (but not exclusively) are usually displayed as the first to confront the spectacle of death within the horror diesis. Besides the function of punishment of the ill-times exhibition of sexual desire in a ‘bad girl,’ explicit violence against a ‘good girl’ in splatter films can function as an empowerment trigger when the young woman makes a choice to overtake control and appropriate phallic power. (Ibid.)

During my research phase of DM scene in Germany, I gathered texts, photographs and 18+ videos for analysis, the graphic content of which had many similarities with that of
splatter films (a horror genre notable for its bloody gore) and porn films (particularly, S/M scenes depicting sadomasochistic relations). The explicit content of DM is exemplary of Williams’ body genre in the sense that it operates within the representations deemed excessive, gross and sick. Williams’ concept of ‘body genre,’ Schneider’s approach to reading particular horror films as ‘spectacle of violent death,’ and his typology of ‘murder as an artist,’ and Carroll’s ‘person-as-meat’ metaphor significantly contribute to the theoretical framework of this article. My reading of The Saw DM is a vivid example and, to a certain extent, voyeuristic account of how DM operates in the realm of gross.

The Saw Death Match

Bedranowsky writes in his autobiography Meine Kaempfe (2011): “On May 11, 2007, Drake and I massacred ourselves. The match was simply announced online as ‘Death Match.’ We wanted to surprise our fans with the gimmicks [in this context, weapons] we wanted to use – most importantly, we wanted to shock them!” The match took place in Westside Dojo’s training facility in Krefeld, Germany. To Bedranowsky, the shabbiness of the room created the suitable atmosphere. As in Saw, most of the action took place in this one room. With thirty-five fans and the crew, the room was overcrowded. Further, some highlights of the match are presented.

ENTRANCES. TJ and Drake Younger, personified by Alexander Bedranowsky and Drake Wuertz, ‘work gimmicks’ (play their characters) from the very beginning of the match. TJ presents himself as a psychopath, whereas Drake appears calmer, more focused, and, most importantly, performs friendliness to the fans as the ‘good guy’/’babyface’ gimmick should be. After a round of circling in the ring, TJ, ‘bad guy’/’heel’ announces, “Drake Younger, I wanna play a game. And I’m gonna call it ‘The SAW Death Match.’ I got a couple of gimmicks prepared… just like this one” (ibid.). Whereupon TJ briefly leaves the ring to retrieve his weapon: a collapsible chair with thirty five razorblades sticking out of its seating surface. “Do you remember SAW II, when that girl cut her wrists… with razor blades?” (Ibid.) The ring becomes a porous space, through which bodies and objects can be tricked through.

SHINE. ‘Shine’ is a term used to describe the beginning of the match when the wrestler’s face demonstrates his/her (technical, physical, and/or ethical) excellence, thus entertaining the crowd while giving them reasons to admire and support him/her. TJ positions the infamous chair in his corner of the ring and launches attacks against Drake. However, Drake is most of the time a step ahead of TJ, reversing most attacks, and taking control of the chair with razorblades. Drake slams the chair against TJ’s back, and then applies it again; this

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3 According to Bedranowsky, thirty-five fans came to see the event. However, in our personal exchange of messages with Tassilo Jung – Westside Xtreme Wrestling’s managing director, promoter and referee – he informed me that, in fact, seventy fans attended The Saw DM. According to him, the event was sold out, this particular match “caused a final boom for DM and then consequently led to DM’s demise, this being (...) the most important death match”.

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way, TJ’s ‘sick’ creativity is used against him. Blood is streaming down his face (‘crimson mask’). TJ turns his back on the camera and crowd. Blood pumps from the wounds on his back every time he contracts his muscles. In real time, this scene drew strong reactions. In reference to this, Bedranowsky writes, “Money shots in the porn industry are cumshots, in the DM scene [money shots] are such recordings.” (Ibid.)

CUTOFF. ‘Cutoff’ is a term for a short action sequence that reverses the flow of events, thus shifting power within the ring. The one who dominates is humbled, and the one who is subdued becomes empowered. For example, Drake seats TJ on a chair, climbs to the top rope, flips down to TJ, but TJ is no longer there. He managed to escape from the chair at the very last moment. Drake took the full impact from his own move, screaming in pain in the center of ring. TJ takes control. Fans chant for Drake.

HEAT. ‘Heat’ describes a phase in the course of a match when the heel dominates the face. Despite being beaten and degraded, the face does not die, speaking figuratively. The face fights back despite the persistent brutality against it. Though down, yet always in action, the face demonstrates that s/he has a fighting spirit, thus winning the hearts of fans who sympathize with his/her situation. The heel enjoys and might abuse its power. TJ smuggles in handcuffs and barbwire, the latter being a traditional heel weapon, but also a reference to the *Saw* franchise. He handcuffs Drake and whips him with barbed wire. Meanwhile Drake mimics the screaming typically heard in splatter film victims. TJ, his back still bleeding, smuggles another weapon to terrorize Drake – a saw. (In his first *Saw*, Dr. Lawrence Gordon (Cary Elwes) is placed in the dirty room with Adam Stanheight (Leigh Whannell). He goes against Jigsaw’s rules: instead of killing Adam, he uses the saw to cut off is leg in order to free himself.) The saw in the ring portends more damage to come. TJ addresses Drake, “I’m gonna mess you up for good! But there’s a solution to your problem! Because there is a key to those handcuffs inside of the referee’s stomach!” Westside Xtreme Wrestling (wXw) referee Tassilo Jung escapes the ring immediately. Crowd laughter ensues, thus temporarily reducing the atmosphere of tension. The key in the stomach is another reference to *Saw*, where Amanda Young (Shawnee Smith) slices the stomach of her cellmate in order to get the key to free herself from an apparatus fixed on her head that was capable of ripping off her jaw. The whole setup during the heat phase plays with numerous notions of facial injuries. Drake is bodyslammed against the concrete floor, TJ drills Drake’s forehead with an electric drill, bumping against the chair with razors, thrown onto a pile of syringes, etc. All of these ‘spots’ are accompanied by Drake’s screaming.

HOPE SPOT. ‘Hope spot’ is a sequence of moves to which the face can regain control over the match. One of Drake’s hope spots is taking control over TJ’s saw; Drake saws the handcuffs and frees himself, thus avoiding another of TJ’s ‘sick’ fantasy for the time being.

COMEBACK. ‘Comeback’ is a phase when the face pulls itself together to strike back with a strong and vigorous course of action. By the time of Drake’s comeback, the wrestlers’ heads, torsos, hands and gear are covered in blood. Bloodstains are found on the weapons, ring apron, floor outside the ring, and even outside the room where the event officially took
place. One of the “grossest” spots is Drake’s ‘Apron Death Valley Bomb,’ a signature move, performed from the ring apron onto TJ’s syringes scattered on the hard floor. According to TJ, four hundred fifty of them were used in this match). TJ confesses, “It was, indeed, very difficult not to be scared and worried when Drake put me over his shoulders, this meant that in a moment I was inevitably going to land on the syringes.” (Ibid.) In his autobiography, he reveals that the idea to use syringes came to him in December 2006 in Berlin during the Freak-Show performed by Scandinavian Circus Mundus Absurdus. He writes, “And then I was struck by an idea. […] I had images from Saw II in front of my eyes. Pictures of the leading actress Amanda […] , when he was looking for a key in a pit full of syringes.” (Ibid.) TJ reports that three syringes pierced him. When the referee helped remove the last one, people in the crowd strongly reacted.

FINISH. Traditionally, ‘finish’ is the final phase after comeback. The wrestler in control executes his/her ‘finisher’ or ‘finishing move,’ and pins the opponent. Ideally, the finisher should reflect the culmination of the match that leads to the crowd’s jubilation (if the face wins) or disappointment, or even anger (if the heel wins). Finishers can be spectacular or very simple. In The Saw DM, the finisher is ‘Drake’s Landing,’ also known as ‘Vertebreaker’. With the match complete, the fans applaud.

Discussion

There are many exceptions to the seven-step match structure in PW. With modifications, this was, however, at the core of the structure of The Saw DM. TJ-gimmick, as a monster artist in Schneider’s sense, chose the setting and weapons of torture for the spectacle of Drake’s death. In the DM scene, The Saw DM is atypical; it is an extraordinary example of a ‘creative’ match where the setting, story, gimmicks, performance, etc. are more or less congruous. It is a direct reference to the Saw franchise, Bedranowski’s PW-interpretation of the Saw-movies.

Unlike in historical gladiator competitions or computer games, DM wrestlers are not supposed to die literally. They are expected, as the wrestlers and show promoters say, to ‘work the crowd’ and ‘sell pain’ persuasively, and, depending on the gimmick, suffer accordingly. Unlike in theatrical performance where a character dies, a DM wrestler is not supposed to perform a dead body. Nevertheless, a DM is never under full control; it involves high risk of serious physical injury. The success of a DM is achieved when, among other things, the pro wrestlers manage to deliver a persuasive interpretation of intense pain and near death experiences to their audience. Young Bedranowski and Wuertz wanted to shock and make their names known in the DM scene (Bedranowski 2011, wXw Conversations: Drake Younger 2014).

The next day after The Saw DM, Bedranowski and Wuertz were criticized by some fans for transgressing the boundaries of good taste, arguing that what happened in that match had nothing to do with wrestling. In Film Bodies, Williams explains that the term ‘gross’ is typically used to designate excesses we want to exclude. The Saw DM contained all the major
features of the body genre as identified by Williams. The DM belongs to this cluster of genres. But unlike Williams’ film bodies and genres, DM is, first of all, a live performance of bodily excess. Once it is recorded, it loses a significant part of its value as a spectacle of violent death (where nobody is supposed to die, but everybody knows that there is a chance that things can go wrong). The viewer of a DM-DVD misses the live nature of the spectacle. Because this viewer does not smell the blood of the wrestlers, one does not have to cover one’s eyes to protect them from shatter flying in his/her direction from the ring when the light tubes are used, one does not see hairs of the wrestlers hanging from the barbed wire ropes, etc. The experience of watching DM on DVD can be very intense, yet limited to visual stimuli, and the perspectives of the cameramen. Hence, the lived ‘realities’ for a wrestling fan who was actually there, and the one who watched the edited DVD, are completely different. The Saw DM, however, was labeled as “gross” and/or “sick” by those who saw it, did not see it, and those who only read about it on the internet and by those who saw the video when it became available on a DVD and re-circulated on the web.

To follow William’s logic about horror, DM serves the function of problem solving. In the case of The Saw DM, the problem of sexual difference is absent; however, the solution remains the same, e.g. escalating violence, which (typically, but not necessarily) ends with a finisher. Hence, the question: what kind of problem is being solved here by DM wrestlers/monster artists? A variety of answers can be offered. However, as a cultural studies scholar who is often preoccupied with the examination of power relations in cultural practices, I argue that DM is particular individuals’ answer to the problem of otherness in the PW-culture. DM wrestlers communicate what they consider as alternative ideals of male masculinity, e.g. bodies that are incongruous and excessive, yet strong and recklessly willful. As contradictory as it may seem, I would like to suggest that the major function of DM is self-empowerment. My perspective was particularly influenced by Bedranowsky’s description of his wounded back in the autobiography Meine Kaempfe. When he started contracting back muscles for the wrestling fans and the cameraman (who, by the way, zoomed in on the cuts), blood started pumping from the wounds. As already mentioned, Bedranowsky described this shot as a money shot, and drew a parallel to cum shots in the porn industry (Bedranowsky 2011). In pornography produced for male gaze, male ejaculation is often a display of domination and power. Bearing this aspect in mind, the aesthetics of DM and the fact that the consumers of this body genre are predominantly young males, the bleeding body can be interpreted as an empowered body. Self-expression and self-empowerment often go hand in hand. As in splatter film, excess in DM has a “creative” potential. In The Saw DM, monster artist TJ, who attempts ‘disgusting’ (yet creative) things against the babyface Drake, can be approached as Bedranowsky’s creative expression. From the perspective of an ‘outsider,’ this logic does not make sense. But in an attempt to understand this controversial phenomenon, my approach to DM as a tool of self-empowerment (with all its ambiguities, flaws, and abundance of aesthetic and ethical problems) makes sense. Although, I do not advertise or support DM personally, in my attempt to explain this body genre and understand its creative aspect, I attempted to put myself into the role of an avid masculine DM consumer.
Conclusion

Bakhtin’s study of Rabelais, Barthes’ study of French PW, and Fiske’s study of Rock ‘n’ Wrestling television series produced in the U.S. provide an insight into PW as a form of entertainment that offers escape from social control. However, in order to better comprehend DM as a phenomenon of cultural production with unique aesthetics, we need to reflect on the explicit violence of DM. The depiction of competitions — resulting in excessive bleeding of pro wrestlers — performed live in the wrestling ring is part of DM aesthetics. In order to explain this cultural phenomenon comprehensively, Williams offers an insightful conceptual framework. Like S/M pornography, splatter horror, and melodrama, DM is notable for its display of the human body. DM fulfills many characteristics of Williams’ body genre because it mainly operates within a system of excess. In the case of The Saw DM, for example, the abundance of unusual sharp foreign objects, dangerous moves, and excessive bleeding created a grotesque and gross spectacle. That said, DM as a body genre offers representations of excessive violence that resonate with images of deadly competitions (for example, wars for territory, battles for status, respect, and power, and, finally, struggle for life). In this article, The Saw DM performed by Bedranowsky and Wuertz, was presented as an example of DM as spectacle of violent death where TJ personified a monster as a corrupt and degraded artist in Schneider’s sense, typical of the splatter film in contemporary horror. I came to a conclusion that in the context of DM, Bedranowsky used this excessive form of cultural production as a tool of self-empowerment. I suggested that in this case study the bleeding body could be interpreted as an empowered body.

Today, academic interest in PW is rising, particularly in the field of cultural studies. Most of the English-speaking academic scholarship about PW is predominantly, but not exclusively, about American, British and Canadian PW; this particular study is a small but unique contribution to a body of scholarship about German PW. More studies in this field are necessary in order to record its history, and discuss its value within the context of PW as an international and local cultural phenomenon. Despite stigma, DM deserves its place within PW’s cultural history. Unfortunately, it is hardly possible to say exactly who started using the term DM first in the context of PW. Due to many problems, including language barriers, this factual question is unanswered here. More ethnographic research is needed in this field with English speaking and non-English speaking PW veterans.

Alexander Bedranowsky’s contribution as a DM wrestler (retired) and writer is particularly valued by the German and American DM fans. The transatlantic connection between the American and German DM scenes enabled an exchange of “talent,” even despite the contested value of this ultra-violent form of entertainment. Due to its transgressiveness and controversy, more scholarship about German DM is needed, particularly, in relation to the issues of class and social status, ethnic identity and race, etc. Women studies scholars could look at the significance of women in German PW, and women in DM scene in the U.S., Japan and Germany, taking into account the feminine body. By examining DM, the scholars of gender studies will be able to find an abundance of narratives where the discourse around masculinity, femininity, and sexuality are embedded.
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