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Excellence of Execution: Vince McMahon's Incorporation of Expose into Fiction

Bret Hart wanted to leave the World Wrestling Federation with his "head held high." If there were a thesis statement made during Jay's *Wrestling with Shadows* (1998), it would be Hart's martyrdom as the moral avenger in Vince McMahon's crooked world of exploitation. The documentary focuses on Hart's struggle in leaving the WWF for rival Ted Turner's World Championship Wrestling (WCW) and the controversy of Hart's exit from the company. While the documentary depicts the events from Hart's point of view, the narrative was incorporated into the WWF's own storyline, and the company used the documentary's biases to its own advantage by taking the villainous McMahon character from Jay's work and incorporating it in the script. Such an incorporation complicates the power of expose to present a singular truth, as McMahon appropriates these images for his own use in this case.

Hart had been an employee of the WWF for about 12 years and had signed a 20-year, multi-million dollar deal with the company in 1996 after negotiating between Turner and McMahon. McMahon, however, was struggling on the losing end of a war with Turner's WCW, and he decided during the next year that Hart's value was not consistent with the amount he was being paid compared to other wrestling talents. McMahon told Hart that, if he could get a better deal with Turner, he would be allowed out of his contract because the WWF would have a hard time holding up to the agreement Hart and McMahon had signed to. The complication, of course, is that Hart had won McMahon's WWF World Heavyweight Title in August 1997. Hart appeared in Jay's documentary to be quite ambivalent about leaving the company that helped

build his legacy, but he had become disillusioned with what he saw as a break in the moral fiber of wrestling through the antics of what was being labeled “WWF Attitude,” a mixture of sophomoric sexual references and various verbal and non-verbal obscenities. McMahon decided to pit Hart against backstage rival Shawn Michaels even though both were “heels” (villains).

Jay’s documentary depicts Hart as a proud warrior whose loyalty to the WWF made him the tragic hero in Vince McMahon’s manipulations. Hart tells McMahon that he had rather not drop his title to Shawn Michaels in Montreal, citing a creative control clause in his contract. The war between Michaels and Hart had involved Michaels’ disrespect for Hart’s home country, Canada, and Hart was not willing to drop his title to Michaels in Canada on PPV in his last match with the company. His alternate suggestion would be to have the match end in a no-contest and for him to hand the title over to Vince and leave “with his head held high.”

McMahon ostensibly agreed to such an arrangement, only to change the script during the match without ever informing Hart. When Michaels had Hart in Hart’s own submission hold, “The Sharpshooter,” referee Earl Hebner called for the bell as if Hart had submitted. When Hart realized what happened, he spat in McMahon’s face at ringside and blacked his eye backstage. McMahon insinuated that he was afraid Turner’s WCW would embarrass him by having Hart never defeated as WWF champion and coming into their company, as WCW was expected to announce Hart’s signing the night after Survivor Series. WWF Women’s Champion Alundra Blayze had embarrassed McMahon on the rival WCW show in 1995, throwing the WWF belt in trashcan. In the case of McMahon and Hart, the rhetoric for both sides had been set. McMahon disseminated his story through his WWF shows, and Hart used Jay to tell his story.

According to Jay’s expose and the implications he makes through the text appearing on the screen, Hart was loyal to the WWF when the company viewed him as nothing but an asset or

commodity. The film displays but downplays Hart's self-deification and his depiction of his role as a moral crusader in a devolving world of lewd and bawdy content. Certainly, Hart's own financial motivations in his maneuvering between McMahon and Turner and his negotiation of a 20-year deal with McMahon to stay on board questions loyalty suggested by Hart in the film. In his rhetoric justifying his actions, McMahon even claims he did Hart a favor by bidding up his services for an eventual \$3 million contract with WCW (McNeil 85). This is not to attack Jay's stance, as his story detailing Hart's feeling of betrayal is captivating. However, viewers must realize Hart and Jay's own stake in the documentary and that deifying Hart makes the film much more effective and clear cut, with Hart the clear protagonist. Jay had set out to examine a national hero and instead had an explosive situation thrown in his lap that garnered international attention for his documentary.

With the development of a strong Internet community on professional wrestling interested in the backstage happenings of both the WWF and WCW, fans were hungry to know the truth behind the Montreal incident. Henry Jenkins IV claims that, at this stage, most fans were as interested in guessing the "true" rivalries and backstage events as they were watching the actual on-stage performances. The WWF appeared to have a public relations nightmare on their hands, with fans and wrestlers alike condemning the company for its treatment of Hart. With Jay's documentary in production, Hart's story was sure to find distribution. Instead of fighting this negative image, however, WWF incorporated the content of *Wrestling with Shadows* and turned it into a selling tool that was perhaps most responsible for turning McMahon into a billionaire and allowing McMahon to win the wrestling war with Turner.

Performance studies scholar Sharon Mazer claims that wrestling bolsters its script by giving its fans instances in which to discern "moments when the display of violence becomes, or

at least appears to have become, actual” (163). That process of separating “real” events from “scripted” events is often controlled by the promoters. Thus, in the weeks after the Hart/Michaels match in Montreal, the WWF continually brought up Hart’s departure on their program. Shawn Michaels brought out a midget version of Hart and mocked his leaving for WCW. Footage of Hart destroying WWF property and spitting on McMahon were replayed on WWF television. McMahon appeared in an interview, displaying his black eye and explaining his side, claiming Bret had not “respected the time-honored tradition” of the wrestling business by dropping the title on his way out. His defense was both a real claim and simultaneously a way to turn himself into a villain through his detractors. Despite being criticized as a simple dichotomy, wrestling often presents these ambiguous distinctions due to what scholar Ben Wright identifies as its “hyperreal nature” that makes it impossible to “construct messages that have singular meanings” (50). McMahon claimed that Hart’s consideration of his own legacy over the business as a whole led to the Montreal controversy, drawing a line between Hart supporters and McMahon supporters. McMahon ended with his memorable line, “Vince McMahon didn’t screw Bret Hart. Bret Hart screwed Bret Hart.”

The event signaled McMahon’s role change from longtime announcer to acknowledged owner of the company, a change that had gradually been happening since 1996. Meanwhile, Hart’s character had been built as a wrestler turned heel in America because of his constant complaining about declining American values and his always being screwed over by matchmakers. Earlier in the summer, McMahon and Hart had even had an on-air altercation about Shawn Michaels’ being the referee for one of Hart’s matches, an altercation that was so intense many fans believed it to be “real.” After Montreal, McMahon allowed Hart to be deified by the Canadian fans and, in turn, made himself the villain, thus using a real situation to further

propel personas for both Hart and McMahon. Following the *Survivor Series*, USA Network officials told McMahon that he was his “own best act” (Assael and Mooneyham 195), and McMahon reacted by giving fans a drama that played on some of the backstage tensions in the company. In the next few months, McMahon’s character would openly display his disdain for wrestler Steve Austin and would attempt to take the title from him. McMahon would regularly find ways to “screw” the wrestlers out of matches by manipulating the officials and, on the one-year anniversary of the Hart/Michaels match, again called for the bell and took the title from a wrestler by submission when the wrestler did not submit. Of course, this time, the event was written into the script. Instead of becoming an expose, then, the images of Jay’s documentary became visual icons that McMahon repeatedly referenced to evoke hatred for his character.

Eventually, fans began to suspect whether *Wrestling with Shadows* was really a documentary at all or whether it was an elaborate scheme by the WWF. After all, fans posited, what is the possibility that a documentary crew happened to be backstage during this event and captured the happenings so perfectly, if Hart was not aware of what was going to transpire? Even film reviewers began to consider the film a ruse, an elaborate scheme by the wrestling world to create a multi-layered fiction (Plagens). Such conspiracy theories demonstrate McMahon’s power of appropriating images meant to attack him and instead using it to bolster his product. McMahon is notorious for incorporating the arguments of his detractors into his show, such as his creation of an ultraconservative censorship faction of villains on his wrestling program to mirror the very real attack of L. Brent Bozell’s Parents Television Council (Lowney). This appropriation concept is built into wrestling, where real events are often incorporated into the script, especially in explaining wrestlers’ injuries (see Morton and O’Brien 142-143). The

WWF's incorporation of *Wrestling with Shadows* into its fictional text only further complicates the line between fiction and reality and the meanings that are attached to documentary images meant to depict "truth." McMahon's use of *Wrestling with Shadows* proves that truth is not inherent in an image but rather manipulated by those using the image for their persuasive goals.

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