

BETWEEN PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING AND THE PUBLIC ARENA: CONSTRUCTION OF THE PUBLIC PERSONA

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Professional wrestling as a form of live performance has existed in a variety of different manifestations for hundreds of years and masks, both literal and figurative, have been documented as being utilised as a means of creating stage personas and archetypal figures in professional wrestling since the nineteenth century. Expanding upon Heather Levi's essay in Chow et al.'s recent collection Performance and Professional Wrestling (2017), regarding the utilisation of a popular persona in Mexican culture to promote a specific political narrative, this article utilises examples of both masked and non-masked performers from different professional wrestling cultures, in conjunction with Jungian and post-Jungian theories, to provide an alternative perspective on existing studies of persona and archetypes. It considers sociological notions of identity, social presentation and individual self-conception as well as theories such as separation and integration of the self from the persona, found in Quinn's "Celebrity and the Semiotics of Acting" (1990), the concept of "the theatre ghost" and how it permeates into the public consciousness highlighted in Carlson's The Haunted Stage (2001), and how the persona can engage with a broader public sphere as discussed in Balme's The Theatrical Public Sphere (2014). This article also considers not only how the professional wrestling mask functions as an autonomous entity but also its role in the creation of mythopoeia and how personas created within a professional wrestling context can, effectively or otherwise, transfer from the confines of the wrestling arena into the public arena.

Professional wrestling as a form of live performance has existed in a variety of different manifestations for thousands of years, from classical antiquity at least, and masks, both actual and figurative, have been documented as a means of creating stage personas and archetypal figures in professional wrestling since the nineteenth century.

Expanding upon Heather Levi's essay in Chow, Lane and Warden's recent collection *Performance and Professional Wrestling*¹ regarding the utilisation of a popular persona in Mexican culture to promote a specific political narrative, this article will draw on examples of masked performers from different professional wrestling cultures, in conjunction with Jungian and post-Jungian theories. Its objective is to provide an alternative perspective on existing studies of persona and archetypes within performance. It will consider sociological notions of identity, social presentation and individual self-conception as well as theories such as separation and integration of the self from the persona, found in Michael L. Quinn's "Celebrity and the Semiotics of Acting,"² the concept of "the theatre ghost" and how it permeates into the public consciousness highlighted in Marvin Carlson's *The Haunted Stage*,³ and how the persona can engage with a broader public sphere as discussed in Christopher B. Balme's *The Theatrical Public Sphere*.⁴

This article will also consider how personas created within a professional wrestling context can, effectively or otherwise, transfer from the confines of the wrestling arena into the public arena. It contemplates the question of where the person ends and the persona begins.

It is firstly important to establish a distinction between persona and character. In many definitions, including translations from Latin, the two terms are interchangeable, and both can precipitate different interpretations dependent upon the context within which they are used. Character in a moral sense, for instance, is a wholly different concept than the character one might adopt within a performance context. In this instance, and for the purposes of clarity, the term persona will be used in accordance with the definition given in Jungian psychology: the guise which one adopts in social situations and subsequently transmits to others. It will be utilised alongside performance-based examples from professional wrestling as a means of establishing a framework for studies into the integration and interaction of professional wrestling personas within the public realm.

In 2002, masked professional wrestler The Great Sasuke was elected into the Iwate Prefectural Assembly, a local branch of the Japanese parliament. His election

¹ Heather Levi, "Don't Leave Us in the Hands of Criminals: The Contested Cultural Politics of Lucha Libre," *Performance and Professional Wrestling*, ed. Broderick Chow, Eero Laine and Claire Warden (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2017) 59-69.

² Michael L. Quinn, "Celebrity and Semiotics of Acting," *New Theatre Quarterly*, 6.22 (1990): 154-61.

³ Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2001).

⁴ Christopher B. Balme, *The Theatrical Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

and appointment were not considered particularly unusual: he was certainly not the first professional wrestler to have been appointed to political office, nor was the fact that he continued to perform as a wrestler during his time in office. However, it was Sasuke's refusal to remove his ornate Ninja-inspired mask during parliamentary meetings, and when attending official public engagements, which proved to be particularly problematic for a number of his political contemporaries. It was felt that Sasuke, as a public figure, should be forced to remove his mask "so that the public can see his real face." In response to this request, Sasuke defiantly replied that "the mask is his real face" and remained masked throughout his entire political tenure.⁵

In considering this scenario, several interesting theoretical arguments surrounding identity and persona are brought to the fore. Firstly, if we consider the sociological notion of identity, which focuses on the persona one presents when in public, alongside the etymology of the term persona itself, we see several references to the metaphorical mask. Danielle Jackson, for instance, states that "persona is the mask we put on in societal situations to both protect our ego and act in ways acceptable by our culture."⁶ Jackson, in this instance, is not referring to a solid form, at least in the conventional sense. Her inference is that the face one presents to others is fluid, it is not a constant – it is malleable, dependent upon situation and circumstance. It is most certainly not always their 'real' face. Considering this comment in view of The Great Sasuke's situation, it is evident that politicians wanted to see the face of Masanori Murakawa, the person behind the physical mask. In this instance they saw Sasuke as a persona, a 'non-person,' an inauthentic version of the self. However, even if Sasuke were to have acquiesced to their request, there is no guarantee that a 'real' or 'genuine' face would have appeared. Indeed, as an article in *The Japan Times* referenced shortly after his appointment to office: "the average politician presents a mask to the public in the hope that the public will accept it as the politician's real face, Sasuke presents a real mask knowing that the public will accept it as a mask."⁷ By doing so, Sasuke is providing us with an interesting dichotomy; as the wearer of an

⁵ Philip Brasor, "The Great Sasuke Faces up to Political Reality," *The Japan Times*, 4 May 2003, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2003/05/04/national/media-national/the-great-sasuke-faces-up-to-political-reality/> (accessed 10 July 2019).

⁶ Danielle Jackson, *Persona of Anime: A Depth Psychological Approach to the Persona and Individuation*, PhD Dissertation (Carpinteria, CA, and Santa Barbara, CA: Pacifica Graduate Institute, 2017) 14, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2017, <https://search.proquest.com/openview/7eb29f4d3bfa5a71ce5903619c74ed13/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y> (accessed 28 March 2019).

⁷ Brasor.

actual mask he is seemingly being more transparent than those decrying him of deception. He is permanently displaying his mask for all to see, unlike his colleagues and the invisible masks they adorn at different times.

Evidently, mere seeing of the 'real' face of an individual does not yet guarantee that this face is true. The assumption is that seeing the 'real' face provides access to a more 'genuine' version of the self, because we can read its emotions or expressions which would otherwise be hidden behind a mask. Similarly, it cannot be assumed that because the actual mask does not change it cannot be just as situationally malleable as a metaphorical mask, as oftentimes "we do not see the mask as completely expressionless" either.⁸ In her article "Speech Acts Politically," Judith Butler references culturally embodied norms in regards to verbal communication, highlighting that "the speech act is a bodily act"⁹ while also pondering the following question: "How do the norms that produce and regulate the subject of speech also seek to inhabit and craft the embodied life of the subject?"¹⁰ Sasuke's mask challenges the status-quo of his environment and his refusal to remove it is a threat to the accepted appearance of political figures within the public arena.

Considering the creation of a persona from a theatrical perspective, it is evident that "as the actor must create a character, so the person must create a persona, or personae."¹¹ Yet there is a risk that the person may become lost behind the persona that has been created. Sasuke and Murakawa, although intrinsically linked through their physical embodiment, are two distinct political entities. The Great Sasuke was voted into office. Sasuke exists within the public consciousness through his work in professional wrestling. Nothing is known of Murakawa, except that he is the 'real' person behind the mask of The Great Sasuke. Presenting himself by means of his mask, Sasuke can 'exist' without Murakawa through the myriad of video footage, photographs and articles that refer to him as such. Indeed, were Sasuke to remove his 'face' and reveal that of Murakawa, we would be looking at a different persona, one that has never 'existed' publicly and certainly not the one that was voted into parliament. Quinn references this merging of the self with the role in regard to the actor, yet it can also apply to the public persona. He states that "complete transformation can render the personal

⁸ Bruce Wilshire, *Role Playing and Identity: The Limits of Theatre as Metaphor* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982) 41.

⁹ Judith Butler, "Speech Acts Politically," *Deconstruction: A Reader*, ed. Martin McQuillan (New York: Routledge, 2001) 254.

¹⁰ Butler 255.

¹¹ Wilshire 204.

contribution unrecognisable.”¹² In the light of this statement it becomes apparent that prioritising the persona over the person has implications beyond not just the parameters of theatre and performance studies. It raises issues pertinent to studies of ontology for instance, in regard to the permanence of the public persona, its origins, malleability and authenticity. It also brings to the fore issues surrounding ownership and control of the persona and whether, once created, it can ever be erased.

In 2009, several years after he left political office, Sasuke was arrested for assaulting a man on a train who had tried to take his picture. Interestingly, Sasuke at that time stated “I did not want to be photographed when I was wearing the mask,”¹³ seemingly contradicting his previous assertions that the mask was his real face, unless he perhaps felt that his ‘real face’ was that of The Great Sasuke, professional wrestler and politician, not a man wearing a mask on public transport. Subsequent articles referencing his arrest stated it was indeed Sasuke, not Murakawa, who was arrested and the accompanying headshot showed, in keeping with his public persona, his masked face.

Contrasting the performers playing a role and the public persona, the following statement should be considered: “the actor is more or less freed from his characters after each performance of them, while the person must die with the personae on his head. He remains forever responsible for them in a way in which the stage actor is not.”¹⁴ However in this instance it is the persona, The Great Sasuke, who is deemed the more responsible for their actions. Indeed, in allowing greater acceptance of the persona over that of the individual, it is quite fair in this instance to state that Murakawa did not commit the assault, Sasuke did. This inversion allows to see Murakawa, the ‘real’ individual, absolved of his actions – if indeed they were his actions at all. It may seem ludicrous, yet Murakawa’s embracing the persona, that is, both normalising and authorising it as the public figure called Sasuke, makes it responsible for the attack on the man with the camera.

However, this event raises a more interesting dilemma. Sasuke’s persona is noticeably different from the norm. It is easier to accept that The Great Sasuke is a persona adopted for public consumption because of this difference. Due to this he is afforded both positive and negative exemptions from regular public discourse than those whose personae are more obvious. His indiscretions can be dismissed as those of someone who inherently refuses to adhere to cultural norms, or can be amplified as those of someone looking to deceive and manipulate due to their obvious, and chosen, external difference. Of course, conventional political figures

¹² Quinn 156.

¹³ Brator.

¹⁴ Wilshire 204.

are not immune to these criticisms either, however the lack of clarity and overt 'obviousness' between their public and private personas means that these indiscretions are often less difficult to fully interpret. In his book, *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle*, Chris Hedges comments: "As often happens in celebrity culture, the line between public and fictional personas blurs."¹⁵ It is in permitting this blurring of lines that one ascendant persona emerges and, in turn, authorises the normalisation of what may otherwise be considered atypical personas into a particular environment.

More recently, in 2013, another masked wrestler, Skull Reaper A-ji, was appointed to political office in Japan. Similarly to Sasuke, he too was asked to remove his mask on the grounds that it would "offend the decency of the Assembly"¹⁶ and, much like Sasuke, he refused, stating "if I take my mask off I'm an entirely different person."¹⁷ A precedent had been set. However, in this instance Skull Reaper A-ji's 'real' name was (and is) not on public record, a concept examined below in more detail. In agreeing to reveal his 'real' name to Government officials, Skull Reaper A-ji, much like his predecessor, was allowed to maintain both his mask and his public persona for the duration of his political tenure.

In maintaining what, at their original inception, were personae created for a professional wrestling performance, both Sasuke's and Skull Reaper A-ji's actions bring to the fore wider theoretical implications for the arts as a whole. Their actions question not only where performance begins and ends, through the transference of the performance setting within which the persona manifests itself – suddenly, what existed within the confines of a professional wrestling arena has permeated its way into the political, and public, arena – but also the limits to which the public sphere will accept the actions of the persona over those of the performer, and vice versa.

Balme states that "we have to accept that what goes on in the privacy of a Western theatre is an almost entirely private matter: it is an artistic act conducted between two consenting partners – the performers and the spectators – and is therefore seldom of interest to the wider public sphere."¹⁸ However through the emergence of multi-faceted performance forms such as professional wrestling,

¹⁵ Chris Hedges, *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle* (New York: Nation Books, 2009) 4.

¹⁶ "Oita City Votes to De-mask Skull Reaper A-ji," *Fukuoka-now*, 8 March 2013, <http://www.fukuoka-now.com> (accessed 20 May 2019).

¹⁷ Kirstene Quan, "Japan: Politician Banned for Wearing Wrestling Mask to Meetings," *Time*, 14 March 2013, <https://world.time.com/2013/03/14/japan-politician-banned-for-wearing-wrestling-mask-to-meetings> (accessed 21 June 2019).

¹⁸ Balme 17.

and its performer's infiltration into the public arena, this privacy has been challenged and the lack of interest Balme references has suddenly become of greater importance. Professional wrestling as an entity has forced itself into a position where it has to be considered part of political, and social, discourse.

A more recent, yet no less controversial, example of the collision of the professional wrestling arena with the public and political arena is that of Glenn Jacobs, who, in 2018, became the Mayor of Knox County, Tennessee. Blurring of the difference between his person and persona, the headlines since his appointment read "Mayor Kane"¹⁹ and "Mayor Glenn Jacobs, aka Kane,"²⁰ referring to the persona he had adopted for the previous 21 years within professional wrestling, that of the 'monster' known as Kane.

Kane, upon his first appearance in October 1997, was a masked figure. His backstory was that as a child he had been horrifically burnt in a fire, an episode that left him not only physically but emotionally scarred. In presenting his 'real' face, wearing a suit and referring to himself by his 'real' name, Jacobs, unlike Sasuke, was emphasising that, most definitely, it is not Kane, the persona, who would be the Mayor of Knox County, but rather Jacobs, the man, husband and father. His insistence on distancing himself from the persona the public had known him by for so long, despite what it had helped him achieve, was an attempt at showing everyone 'his real face.' However, this did not prevent criticism, when it was announced that Kane would be wrestling on a show in Saudi Arabia which would be funded by the Saudi Government and, more specifically, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, mere weeks after the execution of American journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018.²¹ In promoting Kane, rather than Mayor Glenn Jacobs, as wrestling in Saudi Arabia, a clear distinction was being made. Kane wears red and black attire suitable for a wrestling contest, he sports a mask and has long black hair. Mayor Jacobs wears a suit and tie, his face is visible and he has short, receding hair. It was perhaps somewhat unfortunate then when, in an unplanned

¹⁹ Jake Grate, "Mayor 'Kane' Dons WWE Mask, Chokeslams Man through Table during Symposium," *Fox News*, 9 May 2019, <https://www.foxnews.com/us/mayor-glenn-jacobs-wwe-kane-dons-mask-chokeslams-man-table-tennessee-symposium> (accessed 15 May 2019).

²⁰ Tyler Whetstone, "Knox County Mayor Glenn Jacobs, aka Kane, Not Ruling out Return to WWE Ring," *knox news*, 29 April 2019, <https://eu.knoxnews.com/story/news/politics/2019/04/29/knox-county-mayor-glenn-jacobs-aka-kane-might-return-wwe-ring/3615405002/> (accessed 2 May 2019).

²¹ Tyler Whetstone, "Glenn Jacobs, aka 'Kane,' Still Planning on Saudi Arabia Trip amid Questions about Journalist Jamal Khashoggi's Fate," *knox news*, 10 December 2018, <https://eu.knoxnews.com/story/news/politics/2018/10/12/knox-mayor-kane-wwe-saudi-arabia-jamal-khashoggi-disappearance/1612304002/> (accessed 2 May 2019).

moment during the match, his opponent grabbed the mask of Kane, pulling it to such a degree that it came off and the face of Glenn Jacobs could be seen in a wrestling ring in the middle of a stadium in Saudi Arabia. Fortunately for him, this momentary revelation was given no social or political momentum and beyond the parameters of a few online wrestling forums was not seen as anything significant or worthy of comment. However, it is this accidental disruption of the performative element which further aligned, rather than distanced, Jacobs with his persona.

More recently, in an incident that was reported in both political and sporting outlets, Jacobs participated in a publicity stunt while delivering the opening speech at the National Association of Sports Commissions Symposium in Knoxville. He was “interrupted” by a man dressed as a member of the building staff overseeing the event,²² and, upon expressing his unhappiness at this unplanned moment, the lights in the building dimmed, a red hue appeared (as it often would during his wrestling appearances) and the music that would accompany Kane to the ring during his wrestling career blasted through the sound system in the hall. Jacobs then produced the demonic looking Kane mask from a bag, put it on, grabbed the man by the throat and slammed him through a nearby table. He then removed the mask, the music stopped, the lights returned to normal and Jacobs concluded his speech. Much like Sasuke, the obviousness of the difference between Kane and Jacobs in their physical manifestations meant that there was no confusion about what had occurred: it was clearly a stunt, referencing the Mayor’s previous career, which achieved its intended goal of garnering headlines and entertaining the people in attendance. It is perhaps not surprising that political outlets such as Fox News reported the incident as a bit of fun – Jacobs is a Republican – whereupon had it been a Democratic Mayor who did this, their reporting of it would most likely have been along the lines of mocking derision or outrage that a political figure would engage in such frivolous activities. Here lies a clear distinction between the actions of the two personas in this instance – by applying the mask, it was made apparent to those observing that it was not Mayor Glenn Jacobs who slammed the man through a table. It was Kane.

Even within the realms of the professional wrestling arena, Kane provides a fascinating case study into the influence of what Jung called the “collective unconscious” surrounding persona. Firstly, it is important to note that within the context of professional wrestling the mask was always emphasised as being just that, a mask. It was never, like Sasuke, presented as his ‘real’ face. In this instance, the mask was intended to hide burns that did not adorn the face of Jacobs the

²² Grate.

performer yet did supposedly cover the face of Kane. It was also done as a means of hiding from the audience that they were witnessing a performer they had previously seen under a different guise. Indeed, rather than acknowledging past accomplishments as a means of selling a performance, as highlighted in Carlson's *The Haunted Stage* when referencing theatre-based conventions, the professional wrestling industry utilises tactics that, unless it is convenient for them to do otherwise, attempts to conceal or alter a performer's previous personas.

Promoting the persona in its totality, with little or no acknowledgement to the contribution of the performer, the professional wrestling industry therefore creates an interesting case study encompassing a persona and its performance. This can help to re-evaluate notions of public engagement with persona and the construction of the public self.

Narrative advancements in professional wrestling, particularly within the globally broadcast WWE promotion where the Kane persona was created and developed, are written like an episodic television series. Groups of writers work alongside the promoter, and in some instances the wrestler, to decide the outcome of matches and the progression or cessation of any particular on-screen conflict or personality trait. Over the course of time, the aesthetic of the Kane persona changed, with the removal of his physical mask, revealing that the supposed scarring he had allegedly received as a child were actually psychological rather than physical scars, and a shaved head replacing the long dark hair of the original incarnation. However, despite these changes, the audience still accepted this as Kane. Indeed, it was still the same performer despite these changes, and the audience were aware of this.

It was only several years later, when a new wrestler, portraying the physical embodiment of the original incarnation of Kane, complete with mask and long, dark hair, was introduced and began 'haunting' the current manifestation during his matches, that a theoretical quandary surrounding the acceptance of one authentic persona emerged. Indeed, this new wrestler, due to his similar physical attributes and the attire that he wore, bore more of a semblance to the original incarnation than the current one, despite the audience being aware that another performer was wearing the costume. If a picture of the two standing opposite each other was presented to someone familiar with the original incarnation, they would, unfamiliar with the changing aesthetic of the 'genuine' persona, most likely state that the new 'inauthentic' version was indeed the 'real' Kane. Due to the subversion of the original signification and to the working of the collective unconscious, the 'real' Kane in this scenario has been perceived as the newer aesthetic manifestation which bears little or no resemblance to the original.

Despite this the audience has accepted his new look as the image of the original performer.

This example brings into consideration the notion of image and its power to supersede both the performer and the performance when it is accepted as a persona. It has been argued that “the actors are not up there on the screen, their images are; and this translation of person into image is crucially important psychologically, because it moves film past the personal and into the archetypal realm of psychological experience.”²³

Conventional theatrical tropes afford many performers the opportunity to play one role. “The historical function of the mask, in most cultures, has been to enable the masked person to assume another role or persona in order to achieve a different psychological state through the submersion of his or her own persona,”²⁴ and while this holds true of both Kane and The Great Sasuke, it is perhaps in Mexican professional wrestling, or *lucha libre* (translated as “free fight”), where anonymity and transference plays the most dominant role.

In Mexican culture the real name of the performer behind the mask of the *luchador* (Mexican professional wrestler) is not always made a matter of public record, meaning that while the crowd may be aware that the current incarnation of a particular persona is not necessarily the original performer, there is also a greater emphasis placed on the importance of the persona and the performance rather than the individual performing it. Indeed, the search for information on particular *luchadores* often yields extensive details about their career yet very little or nothing about the person behind the mask. Placing emphasis almost solely upon the persona, to the point where the performer is not acknowledged as existing independently from it, makes *lucha libre* a subject for a fascinating research into the theories of persona and the use of masks. Carlson comments that “within any theatrical culture audience members typically see many of the same actors in many different productions, and they will inevitably carry some memory of those actors from production to production,”²⁵ based on their appearances or sometimes mere names. However, in *lucha libre*, this is not always the case, allowing for an entirely different adaptation of the concept of theatrical ghosting and persona identification.

²³ John Beebe, “The Anima in Film,” *Jung & Film: Post-Jungian Takes on the Moving Image*, ed. Christopher Hauke and Ian Alister (Hove: Brunner-Routledge, 2001) 216.

²⁴ Terree Grabenhorst-Randall, “Jung and Abstract Expressionism,” *C.G. Jung & the Humanities: Toward a Hermeneutics of Culture*, ed. Karin Barnaby and Pellegrino D’Acierno (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990) 193.

²⁵ Carlson 53.

In 2011, Mexico's most popular *luchador*, Mistico, announced that he was leaving the country and moving to North America to compete for World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), the global leaders in professional wrestling.²⁶ In doing so he would forfeit the Mistico persona and, despite maintaining a similar mask and aesthetic, become Sin Cara, which translates from Spanish as "faceless" – an interesting choice of name considering the previous discussion of masks and faces. In his absence, a young *luchador* known only as Dragon Lee was gifted the Mistico persona during a ceremony in Mexico,²⁷ acknowledging to the audience that while the original performer may have left, the popular persona would continue. Subsequently a new performer, whose real name is not on public record, adopted the role of Dragon Lee at an event in November of 2013. In both instances, the masks and costumes of the roles remained the same despite the change in wrestler. However, several years later, Sin Cara returned to Mexico and unable to reassume the role of Mistico, which had now been successfully impersonated and accepted by the audience by the former Dragon Lee, became Myzteziz and then ultimately Caristico.²⁸ Caristico has competed both as a team mate and opponent of the new version Mistico while remaining fundamentally the same persona. Apart from the different names and subtle outfit changes, there are no discernible differences between how the original Mistico, Sin Cara, Myzteziz and Caristico have been presented. Indeed, when standing next to each other, or watching them perform, it is very difficult to tell the difference between Mistico and Caristico unless one changes the style or colour of their attire: such is the archetypal nature of their persona.

Archetypal images are embodied with the energy of the original archetype and depend upon collective unconscious for their relevance and influence. In the examples provided by *lucha libre*, the persona is so respected by the culture it finds itself in that the performer becomes almost insignificant, with their 'real' name not even being disclosed to the public: such is their apparent insignificance. However, there remains a constant parallel beyond the collective unconscious the persona is reliant upon, and the performer, even if the persona can exist in myriad forms. *Lucha libre* complicates this further by promoting events where, should the wrestler lose, they will forever remove their mask and reveal their name, age and level of experience. Although this is intended as a moment of shame and dishonour,

²⁶ Matt Fowler, "Mistico Signs with WWE," *IGN*, 25 February 2011, <https://uk.ign.com/articles/2011/02/24/mistico-signs-with-wwe> (accessed 20 April 2019).

²⁷ "Dragon Lee is CMLL's New Mistico," *luchablog*, 20 June 2012, <http://www.thecubsfan.com/cmll/2012/06/20/dragon-lee-is-cmls-new-mistico/> (accessed 5 May 2019).

²⁸ Vania Ravelo, "Caristico: the Return of a Mexican Legend," *ESPN*, 16 May 2017, http://www.espn.co.uk/wwe/story/_/id/18917550/caristico-formerly-known-mistico-sin-cara-reflects-experiences-cml-wwe (accessed 2 May 2019).

performers regain their significance and receive their acknowledgement from the audience for their contribution to the persona.

In its utilisation of archetypes and “stock characters,” alongside masks, costumes and largely improvised routines, *lucha libre* draws parallels with another culturally distinct form of performance, commedia dell’arte. It is understood by the audience who attend a *lucha libre* event that much like the classic commedia characters the *luchadores* will act in a certain way dependent upon the role they are allocated; for instance, a *rudo*, literally translated from Spanish as “rude,” will break the rules and taunt the crowd. Alternatively a *tecnico* will fight with heart and honour and only break the rules in retaliation or if there has previously been significant justification to do so. *Luchadores*, much like the commedia troupes, also travel from town to town, sometimes performing their routines in temporary venues and small outdoor gatherings in rural towns and villages.

It is in this understanding of the form that *lucha libre* stylistically differentiates itself from Japanese, European and North American professional wrestling. Its uniqueness consists in the ways it is performed and presented. In 2018, *lucha libre* was named “an intangible cultural heritage” in Mexico City²⁹ and is considered the second most popular sport in the country after football. In describing the role of *lucha* in Mexican culture, *luchador* El Sublime states that “the rudos flout the rules like politicians do. The people do their best to remain honest [...] Mexico City invented *lucha libre* so that it could laugh at its own tragedy.”³⁰ Its performers and their personas therefore have often surpassed the realms of the fighting arena and found themselves very much embedded into Latin American popular cultural scene.

It is without exaggeration to state that *luchador* El Santo is a pop culture icon in Mexico. He has been described as “more than just a wrestler; he was a Mexican hero [...] immortalized as a Latin symbol of power and heroism.”³¹ He has appeared in over 50 films and featured in over 300 published comic books across a period of 35 years. At a time when *lucha libre* was banned from television for fear it would be a bad influence on children, Santo transcended the arenas and bullrings he would regularly perform in and become the embodiment of hope and

²⁹ “Mexico City Declares Lucha Libre ‘Intangible Cultural Heritage,’” *teleSUR^{HD}*, 21 July 2018, <https://www.telesurtv.net/english/news/Mexico-City-Declares-Lucha-Libre-Intangible-Cultural-Heritage-20180721-0020.html> (accessed 1 July 2019).

³⁰ Benjamin Fernandez, “Coping with the Blows: Mexican Wrestling Goes Global,” *The Nation*, 9 November 2016, <https://www.thenation.com/article/coping-with-the-blows-mexican-wrestling-goes-global/> (accessed 25 June 2019).

³¹ Luis Miguel Echegaray, “El Santo, Legendary Mexican Wrestler, Commemorated in Google Doodle,” *The Guardian*, 23 September 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/sep/23/el-santo-google-doodle-mexico-wrestler-lucha-libre/> (accessed 10 July 2019).

social justice for working-class Mexican people, a stark contrast to the politicians referenced earlier and the masks they use.

Clarifying the context of the term “popular culture” in the foreword to Lourdes Grobet’s book *Lucha Libre*, writer Carlos Monsivais notes that, “the popular [in this instance] should be understood ‘not [as] the opposite of that which is aristocratic or bourgeois’ but rather as a response to the ‘institutionalized invisibility’ of the anonymous masses.”³² Presenting this “invisibility” and “anonymity” so successfully, the Santo persona transcended conventional notions regarding the use and interpretation of social masks. In this instance, the ‘faceless’ masses have been given the most distinctive yet unremarkable ‘face’ imaginable: a plain silver mask. It is neutral. It is not extravagant or expensive looking. It is, in contradiction to Wilshire’s claims, expressionless and representative of a human face only through the utilisation of holes for the eyes, nose and mouth. However, it is in its simplicity that Santo’s mask has been able to become a symbolic portrayal of the Mexican working classes. In an interview with the son of Santo’s most famous rival, Blue Demon (himself a cultural icon in Mexico) *luchador* Blue Demon Jr commented that “people see a mask, and it’s simply a mask. The person under it, whoever it is, doesn’t matter. The mask and the character – not the person – are the motor that drives the people’s passion.”³³

However, despite Demon Jr’s comments that the persona supersedes the person, it is the curiosity of seeing the person under the mask that remains popular in *lucha* to this day. Indeed many times a *luchador*, at the culmination of a series of matches between two heated rivals, will wager their mask against that of their opponents. As noted above, the forced removal of one’s mask due to the loss of a match, the actual shedding of one’s persona, is seen as a great dishonour. Indeed, the term “losing face” has never been more apt in this instance. After losing the mask, the *luchador* is required to publicly reveal their real name, their age and how long they have been a wrestler – they have, in one simple act, become a “person” again. Inevitably, these matches draw big crowds with the audience desperate to see their favourite *luchador* retain their mask and strip their despised rival of their treasured public persona.

El Santo remained masked at all times when in public. Stories surrounding him travelling alone and having an agreement with authorities, such was his iconic stature, that when requiring to travel by airplane he would only show his

³² Quoted in Fernandez.

³³ Blue Demon Jr., “In Character and Continuing, with Dignity,” *ESPN*, 14 October 2009, <https://www.espn.co.uk/espn/hispanicheritage2009/columns/story?id=4557953> (accessed 10 July 2019).

face in private to one or two airline security personnel so that they could verify his face matched that on his passport, remain embedded in Latin American folklore. He reportedly had a custom-made mask which allowed him to eat while remaining masked.

In his study of Santo's films, Doyle Greene juxtaposes what he refers to as "public Santo" and "private Santo"; the "public" persona being that of the superhero who defeats the villains, whether that be in the wrestling ring or on the screen, and the "private" persona emerging in his films showing the masked Santo performing every-day activities like driving or answering his front door while wearing a bathrobe.³⁴ In *Santo contra Hombres Infernales* (*Santo vs Hell Men*) for instance, Santo "played an ordinary police sergeant who inexplicably wore a luchador mask in every single scene."³⁵ In showcasing the "private" side of his persona, even though it was in the context of a film intended for public consumption, Santo still ensured that he remained masked. In referencing an example from the film, *Santo contra la hija de Frankenstein* (*Santo against the Daughter of Frankenstein*), Greene notes that it is only in moments of intimacy with his lover, Norma, where Santo is shown removing his mask (and even then it was not Santo who removed his mask, rather a stand-in actor, ensuring that Santo's face would not be shown to even the cast and crew of the film). In being shown removing his mask at this point, Greene notes how "the fact that Santo can unmask when they are alone suggests a high degree of intimacy and a component of eroticism in their relationship: Santo can 'expose himself' to Norma, who can view his most private, personal body part – his face."³⁶

In discussions of masks and persona, references are made to the wearing of different masks, their application and removal depending upon circumstance, etc. Santo, and much of *lucha* as a whole, provides a unique case study as it regards the 'constant' mask, one that does not change its form and remains present at all times.

In 1984, two years after his retirement from wrestling, Santo appeared on Mexican talk show *Contrapunto*, where he removed his mask and showed everybody the face of Rodolfo Guzman, the man behind the Santo persona. A mere ten days later, Guzman died of a heart attack.³⁷ He was buried wearing his mask, and his

³⁴ Doyle Greene, *Mexploitation Cinema: A Critical History of Mexican Vampire, Wrestler, Ape-Man and Similar Films, 1957-1977* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2005) 56.

³⁵ Karl Smallwood, "Dedication to the Mask – The Story of El Santo," *Today I Found Out*, 7 July 2015, <http://www.todayifoundout.com/index.php/2015/07/dedication-mask-inspiring-story-el-santo/> (accessed 10 July 2019).

³⁶ Greene 90-91.

³⁷ Katie Vernon, "Mexican Wrestler El Santo Never Took His Silver Mask off until 1984, Ten Days Later He Passed Away," *The Vintage News*, 5 July 2018, <https://www.thevintagenews.com/2018/07/05/el-santo-mask/> (accessed 10 July 2019).

funeral remains one of the largest ever attended in Mexican history. Posthumously, several statues have been erected in his honour across the country.

In *lucha* culture, the masks that performers use serve not only to enhance and project – to create a character that resonates with an audience – but also as a means of hiding or deception: in some instances a *luchador* may not want their ‘real’ identity known, whether it be because they are too young to technically be allowed to wrestle (popular *luchador* Rey Misterio Jr began wrestling at fourteen) or because they do not want their family or friends to know that they are a wrestler. Masks lend an element of anonymity to the performer, yet at the same time, the mask risks becoming so recognisable that the persona itself is anything but anonymous.

Sergio Gutierrez Benitez has led an interesting and troubled life. He was born in 1945 and as a child his uncles were murdered. He was involved with gangs and drugs from an early age and has been in more fights than he cares to remember. In his early twenties, having been both stabbed and shot at different times due to his gang affiliation, he was an alcoholic and drug addict. His friend, and fellow gang member, had not long been murdered when he attended a church confessional, desperate and begging for help to turn his life around. It was not an easy task by any means; however, after getting clean Benitez ultimately became a fully ordained priest who founded an orphanage in Mexico. Struggling to raise funds to care for the occupants, Benitez, having been enthralled by several movies featuring *luchadores*, was inspired to become a *luchador* himself as a means of raising money for the children in his care and thus, Fray Tormenta (Friar Storm) was born.³⁸

In keeping with *lucha* tradition, Fray Tormenta adopted a mask, although in this instance it was as much out of necessity as anything else. Delivering sermons during the day and wrestling at night, Tormenta never let anybody know his true identity. He is noted as saying: “No one would have taken me seriously as a wrestler had they known I was a priest,”³⁹ an interesting comment given that the general consensus is that more likely no-one would have taken him seriously as a priest had they known he was a wrestler, due to the general perception of wrestling as a form of entertainment. In this instance the mask, while representative in colour of both the bright over-the-top persona Tormenta exhibited in the ring and the blood that he spilled in pursuit of victory (yellow and red), was also intended to hide and to deceive.

³⁸ Eric Nusbaum, “Addict, Priest, Luchador: The Unbelievable Life of Fray Tormenta,” *Vice* (Canada Edition), 11 November 2015, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/mgyn5q/fray-tormenta-nacho-libre-true-story (accessed 10 July 2019).

³⁹ “The Superman Priest,” *Tradition in Action*, 5 November 2006, https://www.traditioninaction.org/RevolutionPhotos/A180rc_FrayTormenta.htm (accessed 10 July 2019).

In view of certain metaphorical interpretations of actual masks, “the mask as a means for deception in face-to-face interaction,”⁴⁰ and the trepidation with which The Great Sasuke’s and Skull Reaper A-ji’s contemporaries greeted their wearing a mask makes the ideological contrast between two different approaches to masks – as a means of communicating a clear persona and as a tool of deception – all the more compelling.

It is not known whether Fray Tormenta’s real identity was ever truly a well-guarded secret like others within *lucha libre*. He successfully funded his orphanage for over twenty years because of his wrestling career and several movies have been made based on his life. He still delivers sermons to this day, appearing at first in the yellow and red Fray Tormenta mask before removing it to reveal Padre (Father) Sergio Gutierrez Benitez and placing it by his side as he carries out his duties. The statement that “Fray Tormenta is a character Padre Sergio plays, but he is also exactly who Padre Sergio is,”⁴¹ implies that while the mask can easily be discarded, its meaning and performative power cannot.

It would seem then that it is only through the distancing of the self from the persona that, in these instances at least, the performer can attempt to ‘exist’ as a separate entity. However, as has also been shown, the extent to which one can ever truly ‘exist’ beyond the realm of the persona remains problematic. In considering how the use of masks in professional wrestling can contribute to the studies of persona, this article reveals that the subject matter can not only be effectively critiqued within the parameters of existing research, but can also be used as a means of developing new research. It also highlights that professional wrestling as a source material has significant theoretical implications, as it is able to provide unique examples that are worthy of further critical analysis across several diverse academic areas.

⁴⁰ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (London: Penguin, 1990) 57.

⁴¹ Nusbaum.