

*The Wrestler*  
(2009)

“*Hart’s með höldum, hórdómr mikill,*” says the *Völuspá*, the Old Norse poem which describes the coming of Ragnarök. “It will be hard for heroes, great depravity.” Three winters will come back-to-back, and the gods will perish in battle with fire giants, a world-encircling serpent, and a wolf the size of Godzilla.

It sounds silly to us, but it should come as no surprise that the Vikings associated the end of the world with the death of its heroes. The worst thing a man could do was die old or diseased in his bed, a straw(mattress)-death which deprived him of the chance to punctuate his existence with an unforgettable last stand. In one saga, a man yanks a spear out of his stomach and remarks that it’s a make he’s never seen. Another sees a man use a rope to tie his spilt guts inside his shirt in order to keep on fighting.

Many of us would claim to find this behaviour more gruesome than inspiring, and yet its defiance of the flesh is a staple of athletic and spiritual thought alike. Even as we claim to admire physical achievement, mind-over-matter, and the ability to withstand suffering without complaint, cinematic representations of human endurance are often so far from good taste that their context is rarely dignified beyond box office receipts. Gore is most often considered gratuitous, as with *Rambo*, or even juvenile, as with *300*; it may be consigned to tragic realism, as in *Saving Private Ryan*. What the popularity of the *CSI* and *Law & Order* television franchises prove, however, is that bloodshed is not inherently offensive to modern audiences, and that a legalistic or scientific context goes far to justify sadism. Regarding physical suffering as glorious seems unpopular or outmoded, left to the fringe-elements of extreme body-modification, ultramarathon-runners, and the presumed ethos of medieval conquerors.

It is a rare thing, then, when a film about the present day explores aspects of heroic suffering, and does so in a way that is both sensitive and critically-acclaimed. The monumental achievement of Darren Aronofsky’s *The Wrestler* seems to have left more people talking about Mickey Rourke’s comeback than the professional wrestling industry, but with the actor and his part so harmonious, and the substance and presentation of the film’s story so utterly credible, it can become confusing to determine where fiction and reality meet. Having won big at the Venice Film Festival, *The Wrestler* was released in a limited capacity on December 17, and nationwide on January 23. Since the film’s opening, Rourke has taken home a Golden Globe for Best Actor, and was nominated for an Oscar in the same category.

At first glance, *The Wrestler* appears to be about a man whose life holds no meaning, at least any meaning beyond the ever-contracting world of his bush-league wrestling persona. It’s been around twenty years since he was part of the big scene, performing at a sold-out Madison Square Garden and other venues with what could only have been Vince McMahon’s World Wrestling Federation. Back then, the squared circle pitted real Americans against evil Soviets and Iron Shieks. Good and evil were clear-cut; today, it offers a motley roster of self-promoters whose allegiances change weekly.

Now, Robin Ramzinski (known in the ring as Randy “The Ram” Robinson) works an odd-hours joe-job on weekdays and wrestles at low-attendance matches on weekends. His only friends are the children in the trailer park where he lives, as well as a fortysomething year-old stripper, Cassidy—played by Marisa Tomei—whom he pays to be able to talk to. Like the wrestler, the stripper is a performer with a stage name, and uses an obsolescent body to eke out

an exhibitionist's living. The two characters and their choices are juxtaposed throughout the film, each a potential mirror for the other.

Despite its humbleness, the plot of *The Wrestler* proceeds under tension. After the film's opening match, The Ram is presented with the opportunity to fight his old nemesis, the Ayatollah, in what he believes will allow him a comeback. In the meantime, however, he suffers a heart attack and is given a bypass operation; he is told to go off steroids and to quit wrestling if he wants to live. What follows this ultimatum is the true struggle of *The Wrestler*, where with only his real-life persona remaining, Randy tries to find happiness in a world he has all but forsaken.

The film is of course full of bodyslams and leaps off the top rope, but its brutality is most apparent during the hardcore match that brings about the wrestler's heart attack. Here, The Ram and "Necro Butcher" shred each other's flesh with glass, barbwire, and staples; to the chanting of the crowd, Randy even uses an audience member's artificial leg to beat his opponent to the ground. Winning the match, he staggers backstage, his hunched, bruised, and perforated body presenting the film's iconic scene. Moments later, he throws up and collapses.

What makes *The Wrestler* a heroic film is not its gore and suffering but the frame in which these elements are presented. The fictional nature of the wrestling contest does not make injury vainglorious and effectively self-inflicted. Instead, the characters are subjecting their bodies to the fulfillment of living theatre—mythology—one which film can only counterfeit and which Roland Barthes himself wrote about in 1972. The forces which have been made to clash inside the ring have varied through the decades, but the ironic virtue of the Randy "The Ram" is that he's stuck in the eighties. He relishes flamboyant colours and laments what Kurt Cobain did to the feel-good music of his heyday. He is a Babyface—what the wrestling industry called a good guy before it abandoned the distinction between heroes and villains shortly after the Cold War ended. What Randy takes in the ring is testament to the endurance of what he represents as fictional character, not who he is as a taxpayer. That character is the vestige of a heroic age.

That he never gives up wrestling gives him pathos, surely, but his durability is admirable, especially because he blames no one but himself for the consequences his career has brought. He offers encouragement to other wrestlers, and is genuinely good-natured and proud; despite living in a run-down trailer, he is ashamed at being recognized while working at a grocery-store deli-counter. It is not until he tries to abandon his fictional persona that the Wrestler's life truly becomes trivial, and he is inseparable from those very masses who likely consider him their lesser.

The film's final moments are wrenching, but they do not entail the sort of emotional suckerpunch that leaves the audience grey. In the end, The Ram indeed chooses to live, and in a way that recalls moments from the best heroic literature. As for the pain he endures in order to keep his legend alive, it is best summed up in his own words, which he tells Cassidy before stepping back into the ring.

"I only get hurt out here."