

a raw export

by r. tyson smith

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WWE pro wrestling

Pro wrestling is the most watched “sporting event” in the United States and increasingly the world. Even though the entertainment attains little mainstream credibility and airs on fringe networks like Sci-Fi and USA, wrestling programs combine to attract 15 million U.S. viewers every week of the year. In America’s never-ending chase for the young male television market, the sweaty spectacle of pro wrestling is the proverbial tortoise against the vaunted hare of professional sports like football, baseball, and basketball.

To outsiders, the loud, in-your-face World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) shows are patently absurd. Each program is littered with pyrotechnics, blaring music, smoke, nearly naked protagonists, 7-foot-tall goons, midgets, and outrageous color commentary delivered by endlessly amazed chatterboxes. Cartoonishly large men who had just been talking suddenly turn to bashing each other’s heads with steel chairs. Bikini-clad women escort a wrestler to the ring and then cry when he loses his match.

It’s these same qualities that demonize the hybrid entertainment—countless critics abhor its violence, skin, sexism, and fraudulence. It’s the “epitome of violence, sadomasochism, and sleaze ... [it’s] trash TV for ugly Americans,” one commentator inveighed.

Because there’s no pure competition, pro wrestling gets derided for its fakery, drama, and pageantry. Because it’s not conventional theater, it’s ridiculed for its violence, lack of subtlety, and over-the-top, macho characters.

Disdain often comes from men who have strong social investments in sport—associations between pro wrestling and sport unnerve many pundits who cherish what they believe are sport’s meritocratic, character-building virtues. A 2001 article in *Academic Psychiatry* calls pro wrestling “a virtual overflow of primary-process [primitive-level thinking] ... It teaches the exact opposite of the message of sports and is, in many respects, the antithesis of sports, or ‘The Anti-Sport.’” Moreover, men fake-fighting while wearing tights arouses suspicion in a culture obsessed with proving manhood.

Yet, these hyperbolic productions of bruising bravado remain a perennial favorite, even amidst the growing number of cultural offerings like mixed martial arts, video games, and the Internet. Pro wrestling—a unique pseudo-sport

derived from what is perhaps *the* oldest sport—continues its sleeper hold on our culture because of its compelling offering of masculinity, violence, and drama. Pro wrestling thrives as a haven for outrageous incivility—a thrill experience considered all the more threatened by modernity and a shifting gender order. Furthermore, male body performances such as pro wrestling seem to take on greater interest and intrigue in an information-based economy in which maleness has less and less inherent value.

Football, blood-thirsty video games, and the mixed martial arts production Ultimate Fighting Championship are also fast-paced violent shows targeting a similar demographic, but they don’t share pro wrestling’s same storytelling.

As social psychologist Jeffrey Goldstein argues in his book *Why We Watch: The Attractions of Violent Entertainment*, wrestling shows feature all the hallmarks of what makes violent entertainment appealing—it contains “clues to its unreality” (the staging and setting), it portrays



WWE action figures.

Photo by Gregg O’Connell via Creative Commons

an “engaging fantasy,” it is “exaggerated and distorted,” it has a “predictable outcome,” and it usually contains “a just resolution.” Not unlike nearly all other successful popular entertainment, it’s pro wrestling’s stories that keep us coming back.

Wrestling’s scripts are commonly based on timeless parables of love, betrayal, justice, and greed. It’s good versus evil personified in mammoth men. These scripts play on tropes of Western masculinity in which virtue is equated with honor, independence, patriotism, and chivalry and evil with weakness, vanity, defiance, and rudeness. Intricate plots are generated with aggressive monologues, tense interviews, locker room mishaps, hokey humiliations, replays of recent conflicts, and colorful commentary by two ringside announcers. In a two-hour program, little more than 20 minutes consists of actual in-ring combat. Often it’s referred to as a “male soap-opera” because of the flagrant masculinity and serial drama carried from show to show.

Wrestlers get an emotional response from fans by establishing what their character represents—good or evil, “babyface” or “heel”—and why there’s something at stake in a given match. Characters are almost always derivatives of well-worn, degenerate stereotypes of race, class, ethnicity, and gender.

Recent matches, for example, pitted “MVP,” a barrel-chested African-American with bling themes against “Vladimir Kozlov,” a tight-lipped brute with Slavic features and crew cut who’s also known as “The Moscow Mauler.” One tag-team, “The Odd Couple,” features an enormous, 7-foot-tall, dark-skinned behemoth with shoulder-length, jet-black hair named “Khali” and a Caucasian midget named “Little Horny,” who plays a crazed Irish leprechaun. Khali’s signature move, the “Punjabi Plunge,” consists of an opponent being dropped flat on his back. Some characters are mash-ups of other clichés, such as “Jimmy Wang Yang,”



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Edge makes his entrance.

who dresses country and is introduced by the commentators as “our favorite Asian redneck.”

Pro wrestling fans can find varieties of this programming most nights of the week, nearly all of which is produced by WWE. On Monday it’s *RAW* on USA, Tuesday features the recently revived *ECW* (*Extreme Championship Wrestling*) on Sci-Fi, Friday it’s *Smackdown* on MyNetworkTV, Sunday at 2 a.m. it’s *A.M.* *RAW* on USA, and on Sunday nights *RAW* airs on Telemundo (in Spanish). The Monday night production of *RAW* is rou-

everyone can access. *ECW* runs on paid cable and has been with WWE for only two years.

A friend at WWE explained that *RAW* has “more mature content,” is “more aggressive,” and targets the 18-and-older audience. *Smackdown*, on the other hand, is a feeder program that’s “cleaner and a bit softer ... more suitable for the 12-year-old fans.” *Smackdown* is like a “shop window”—being tamer and always free, the show helps lead newcomers into the WWE megastore.

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tinely the top-rated regularly scheduled program on cable.

“Smarks” (“smart marks,” or knowledgeable fans) appreciate the program distinctions and how they offer separate rosters, different storylines, and variation in their lasciviousness. *RAW*, the flagship program, runs on pay cable stations and is now in its 15th year. *Smackdown*, which is six years old, always runs on free television channels

tus as a hybrid of sports and theater fosters derision, it also allows wrestling’s corporate interests to exploit the marketing techniques of both entertainment and sport.

The major marketing distinction from professional sports is WWE’s year-round schedule. Instead of a four-to-five month season like the NFL (or *American Idol* for that matter), WWE fills arenas three times a week, 52 weeks a year.

Moreover, fans can consume more than a dozen pay-per-view programs that each net WWE several hundred thousand buys. *Wrestlemania*, the annual marquee pay-per-view event, had more than 1 million buys in 2008. And despite being known as a “male soap opera,” one-quarter to one-third of its viewers are female.

In addition to their nearly 300 live productions a year, WWE merchandises dozens of products. Fans swallow up WWE-produced and licensed apparel, video games, magazines, movies, action figures, books, DVDs, music, video-on-demand subscriptions to wrestling “classics,” and downloadable ring-tones, updates, and videos for mobile phones.

On top of that, the WWE website, which was one of the first outlets to turn streaming video profitable, attracts nearly 20 million individual visitors each month. Within the United States, the WWE has a near monopoly on the industry aside from one outsized competitor—Total Nonstop Action (TNA). (Seldom profitable are the dozens of smaller, regional promotions that are independent of WWE.)

Given that many sports-entertainment products portend great success but never quite make it (think XFL or professional indoor soccer leagues), WWE deserves credit for its ongoing ability to capture the always-shifting market. The company manages several contradictions: it’s a sporting event without any true competition; it’s a series of fights between “mean” opponents who actually cooperate, trust, and coordinate with one another; and it’s a family-owned and operated freak show, but also a publicly-traded corporation.

Embodying the contradictions and the outrageousness is Vince McMahon, the long-time CEO and occasional wrestler. Last year, upon receiving a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame for the television category, he proclaimed, “I already know I’m a star ... I’m the biggest star of all time.”

These days his product is a growing export as the company increasingly invests abroad. WWE currently airs programs in 23 languages in more than 130 countries and is now concentrating on expansion in Latin America, China, India, Australia, and Japan. In South Africa, for example, 5 million people watch RAW. While Americans like to admire the export of their technology, medicine, and democracy, they should also recognize the increasing flow of these man-made,

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ahem, RAW materials.

Despite 2007 being a tough year for WWE—a murder and suicide by mega-star Chris Benoit instigated a public relations debacle—the company’s revenues increased by nearly 21 percent, to \$485.7 million in the fiscal year. WWE is on the *Forbes* list of “top 200 best small companies,” and because of the stock’s 12.8 percent annual yield in 2008 (the highest level since the company began to pay dividends in 2003), *Forbes.com* endorsed the company as a sound investment choice in early 2009.

Among other things, understanding the attraction to pro wrestling helps demonstrate the appeal of simplistic yet powerful narratives of triumph and dominance, which succeed in other realms. It illuminates why so many Americans swoon at “manly” public figures whose well-crafted life stories become compelling, regardless of artifice.

Undoubtedly, pro wrestling productions tap into America’s appreciation of violence as a method of solving problems. With so many of our sports coaches, movie directors, and elected leaders opting for combat over dialog, it’s clear we live in a culture that easily endorses violence as a means of conflict

resolution. Pro wrestling represents this lust for violence in its crudest, most simplistic form.

At the same time, the performance remains interactive and the show is dependent upon spectators’ response. In the act of shaping the show, fans experience an emotional connection. This connection is all the more valuable in a fragmented social world in which heroes are rarely so palpably available, aside from the contrived events tightly

managed by agents and handlers.

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