

POPULAR CULTURE

from the author

Never have I sat down and written a paper on a topic I truly had a passion for. In WRT 109 Dawnelle Jager handed out a course guide that told of the many assignments we would have during the semester. There were three major writing assignments, and all of them were to deal with a media moment that personally affected me. As my fellow students started mentioning music, movies, and musicals, I immediately thought wrestling.

The first paper highlighted a specific media moment in my past that influenced me. I chose Wrestlemania VII, when the icon Hulk Hogan wrestled Sgt. Slaughter after Slaughter turned on the U.S. and became an Iraqi sympathizer. The following assignment - which is the paper that follows - was a broader topic where I was instructed to analyze a particular aspect of my choice of media. I looked no further than the program I was about to view later that night, WWE Raw. After reviewing the thesis with Professor Jager and making several key changes to early drafts, I began my in-depth journey into Raw.

In retrospect, I can honestly say this was an enjoyable experience to analyze something I love, and I don't use that word loosely. Whether it was easy or hard is irrelevant, as I attribute more importance to its effect on me. We seldom critically look at TV or a show we really enjoy, and through this paper I have gained a new perspective on professional wrestling.

from the professor

"It's Fake!" was in response to the second assignment in a sustained inquiry project in WRT 109. I wanted to push students to use analysis and writing to challenge perceptions and knowledge of a topic they were passionate about. Mark used description, comparison, juxtaposition and other writing strategies to analyze the appeal of WWE's weekly show, RAW. He explored gender, political, social and cultural contexts in his analysis, and his writing demonstrates deep thinking about a familiar topic. - Dawnelle Jager

It's Fake! Why Do You Watch It?

Taking on the phenomena of modern wrestling - which finds its background rooted deeply in ancient history - we can analyze the effects of "reality television" as a popular and legitimate form of entertainment

by Mark Melara

the it. factor

This essay deals with a particularly modern phenomenon: television programs. Here, this phenomenon is related to something of historical fact and significance. Does this serve to validate the essay topic?



the it. factor

The detailed descriptions of the very visual medium of television help to convey to the audience what is being analyzed. There is a fine line between "summarizing" for the reader's benefit, and excessive description.



If prompted to identify every professional sport in recent history, the typical response would consist of: baseball, basketball, football, soccer, hockey, and golf. However, one very significant and deeply rooted sport is absent from this list. This sport is interestingly labeled as "Professional Wrestling," the seemingly "advanced" level of amateur wrestling. Stemming from the gladiators of ancient Rome, this phenomenon has survived the greater part of 3000 years. Shunned and passed off as simply being fake, modern wrestling is commonly regarded as the least competitive of the professional sports. So why does fake, scripted competition have such a massive and deeply loyal fan base? The answer lies in one simple viewing of WWE Raw, a wrestling program that embodies all the unique elements that cultivate such a large following.

World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) is simply one cross-section of the modern form of wrestling. The flagship program produced by the WWE is Raw. Aired live every Monday night from arenas across the United States, this program attracts thousands of live audience members and millions at home. Yet the fact remains that everything from the punches to the storylines, unlike their gladiator predecessors, are fake, a fact acknowledged by WWE representatives as well as their fans. Thus, what would possess a person to spend two hours of their evening watching an utter facade? They watch for the same reason they spend two hours watching "Must See TV" For entertainment. However, wrestling takes this a step further becoming a multi-faceted entity blending music, athleticism, drama, comedy, violence, and sex.

This mix of mayhem is clearly seen in the episode of WWE Raw on October 13, 2003, emanating from Pittsburgh, PA. WWE Raw begins with separate images of the two general managers of the "Raw Roster." In a bold move to validate wrestling and possibly bring it closer to other pro-sports, the WWE split into two brands - the Raw Roster and the Smackdown roster - showcased on their respective programs. Thus, with two brands, general managers need to be appointed to facilitate pertinent issues on the programs. Raw is driven by the battle between co-general managers, Stonecold Steve Austin and Eric Bischoff. This is a case where drama unfolds in a very "real" way. What intensifies this interesting feud is the background of each individual in a non-scripted sense. Steve Austin was once fired by Eric Bischoff when he legitimately ran World Championship Wrestling (WCW), the bitter rival company of the WWE from 1993 to 2001. In true over-the-top WWE fashion Eric Bischoff was controversially hired as the general manager of Raw. Though he plays the character of general manager, there is

an authentic hostility between himself and his former employee. Hence, the bitter hatred and tension between these general managers is amplified for the cameras, ultimately benefiting the audience. Similarly, reality television in its purest form is extremely popular due to the genuine realness that it projects. The WWE fans are intrigued to see how the scripted program echoes this substantiated real-life drama.

For every popular television show, a catchy theme accompanies it. This is no different for WWE Raw as a rap/rock band, The Union Underground, was enlisted to write a theme for the program's opening montage indicating that WWE mogul Vince McMahon was clever enough to fuse the widely popular rap/rock sound of the new millennium with his medium. Many current artists such as Sevendust, Limp Bizkit, and even Kid Rock have contributed to the WWE with their music and live concerts. Most appropriately, this music tends to have an intensity that parallels wrestling. Smooth jazz is not synonymous with aggressive behavior or violence, yet hard rock and often gangster rap is, enhancing the rage and deeply intense actions of pro-wrestlers and their fans by this genre of music.

The Raw program's opening video montage is equally essential in engaging the audience. Images of blood, high-flying wrestling, sexuality, and fireworks capture the audience's attention drawing them into the program, shedding some light on what they can expect to observe. For example, a curvaceous woman is seen dancing, blood streams down a man's face, beer is consumed, and various integral wrestling figures are intermittently placed throughout the video. Each image has a special significance, as the woman suggests sex appeal, the blood represents the violence, and alcohol representing the intended viewing demographic. Additionally, key wrestlers seen in the video convey a generation in wrestling. Older more legendary performers appear alongside fresh young stars appear, bridging the generation gap among the fans.

With the introduction of music to wrestling, this medium took a turn towards the greater concept of sports entertainment; beyond simply wrestling in a ring. Topical social issues are often poked fun at as the new governor of California, Arnold Schwarzenegger, was compared to Steve Austin on this particular episode of Raw. The commentator makes reference to how many in the WWE, primarily the "bad" guys, are unhappy with Austin as general manager, as many are unhappy with Arnold as their new governor. The bit of social satire raises the event above just a sport.

Furthermore, patriotism was also blended into this program. A strong scene transpires as the program begins with its first bout. The anti-American French team, La Resistance, waved their French flags proudly while the boisterous Dudley Boyz chant "USA" in unison with the 20,000 fans in attendance. This incident is significant for the live spectators, as they are drawn towards pro-wrestling events to become part of something; a mob mentality, perhaps. There are very few events where an audience can chant something in accordance with thousands of others. Particularly in a time of social unrest, united patriotism and the union of people in general can become a powerful force, attracting fans and non-fans alike.

Scripted drama unfolds as Scott Steiner, known as "Freakzilla," womanizes Stacy Keibler to the point where someone is forced to step in. Arriving for the first time of the night, as the signature sound of glass shattering is heard throughout the arena, Steve Austin, as "Stonecold," hurriedly walks to the ring posing the question, "Is that supposed to make you some kind of tough guy? If you want to hit somebody...Hit me!" Legally, Austin is not allowed to assault talent on his roster, unless he is physically provoked. In this scripted scenario, Austin was

the it. factor

"Stone Cold" Steve Austin. Throughout this essay the author argues that television audiences are smart enough to separate spectacle from reality. Does the evidence presented back up this claim?



the it. factor

"Freakzilla" played by Scott Steiner.



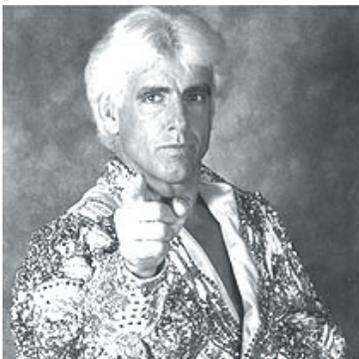
the it. factor

It is important to cover all sides of an argument. How would various readers react if this section on female wrestlers were omitted?



the it. factor

Again, the past is being related to the present (Ric Flair is pictures below). Here, however, it has a very different effect than references to ancient gladiators. How are the two comparisons different?



provoked, and proceeded to even up the odds, rescuing Keibler in perfect “good guy” fashion. Thus, through Stonecold, fans are vicariously living the age-old fantasy of helping a damsel in distress. Men feel an urge to be a knight in shining armor, and through this program they experience this desire.

This the classic story of good versus evil deviates from the traditional sense in the following scene. Instead of walking the distressed woman off into the sunset, Austin calls for some beer. Austin is the trademark beer-swelling redneck from Texas, and after a job-well done he longs for some refreshment. The perception that the blue-collar working man escapes his worries through alcohol is epitomized here as Austin vigorously drinks on the job. Additionally, this evolution of the traditional “good guy versus bad guy” storyline is what has kept fans engaged over the past decade. The anti-hero is quite prominent in today’s society. For example, Eminem is the antithesis of the squeaky clean image, yet is adored by millions. In modern society, especially in the media, remaining on the cutting edge is vital. One has to grow with their audience, and the WWE is no exception, as in the past fans were encouraged to say their prayers and eat their vitamins. They now have real jobs and seek to liberate themselves in a medium that provides a form of “real” fantasy, perhaps situations they can relate to.

Women in wrestling has also evolved over the past decade. In the past, women wrestlers typically had little sexual appeal and were not performing to show off their physiques but simply to show how tough they could be in the ring. Presently, women play a drastically different role. While still wrestling in the ring, they are more regarded for their sexual appeal. In this episode The Babe of the Year competition was promoted, as fans were urged to vote online for their favorite “diva.” Two interesting monikers are used in this context: “babe” and “diva.” One perspective is male, viewing these performers as merely “babes,” while females profoundly see something more. The female viewers tend to see strong-willed women with great figures fighting on their own a unique form of supremacy. Therefore, the term “diva” is implemented. Wrestler Trish Stratus is a Canadian fitness model and former graduate medical student who just recently published her autobiography, providing a performer a young girl may adopt as a role model. Consequently, WWE Raw on this night has provided sexual appeal for men, as well as a role model for young women.

This specific episode of Raw showcased a combination of classic athleticism with modern wrestling violence. Ric Flair, a 53-year-old wrestling veteran and 19-time World Champion, along with his protégé Randy Orton, wrestled Bill Goldberg and Shawn Michaels. Midway through the match commentator Jim Ross stresses that Ric Flair is “offensively dominating,” then proceeds to discuss the martial arts and training backgrounds of several of the competitors reinforcing the presence of some form of competitiveness, whether scripted or not. The acrobatic prowess and sheer athleticism of the performers captivates many fans, leaving them in awe of their sometimes limitless abilities. A great deal of respect is garnered for most wrestlers, as their fans are appreciative of how physically demanding wrestling 250 days out of the year can be.

Society is often driven by violence, and in wrestling the appeal of violence is ever-present. Classic mat-wrestling takes place, yet the violence is never far behind. During this episode of Raw, a “table match” was signed for the main event, wherein one of the performers must be slammed through a table in order for the opposing team to win. Simply the idea of a human body going through a table is violent enough, but the sound of the wood physically cracking as someone is sent through it can send the crowd into an absolute frenzy. The desire for tables

and violence in this match was evident as the fans chanted, “We Want Tables!” Earlier in the night, a steel chair was implemented as well. Scott Steiner was struck in the face by the flat end of a steel chair, much to the delight of the fans, as the “bad guy” received what he justly deserved.

Rarely do scenes of violence and drama blend with instances of comedy. Yet, in wrestling this occurs most frequently. For example, popular superhero character “The Hurricane“ is in the midst of training an overweight wrestler, Rosie, who lacks fan support. The Hurricane hopes to instruct Rosie on how to become a better superhero (read: a more entertaining performer). The Hurricane gives Rosie a lesson in the proper method of dressing, as all superheroes must change into their costume in a phone booth. Comedy ensues when large Rosie becomes stuck in the tiny phone booth. Throughout the night, the fans are reminded of this comical occurrence, as the mood is lightened when the image appears of this 300 pound man struggles to free himself. Even general manager Austin strolls past the phone booth stunned at what he sees, as Rosie pleads, “Help me, I need to use the bathroom.” Undoubtedly this comedy strikes a chord with the younger audience, yet is comical enough for older fans as well.

This juxtaposition of violence, drama, comedy, and sex is what truly captivates wrestling fans. These fans, though deemed lower than real sports fans, recognize the fallacy of wrestling, and that is their motivation for watching, as virtually every program from soap operas to reality shows are scripted. Many would argue that most forms of entertainment are heading towards the reality-based concept. I would disagree, as entertainment exists to satisfy its consumers, and consumers have varying desires. Some would rather see reality in its rawest form or maybe pure fantasy, or possibly both. Nevertheless, wrestling provides me, the consumer, with a never-ending roller coaster ride of entertainment, regardless if it is fake or not.

McMahon, Vince. WWE Raw. Spike TV, Mon. Oct. 13, 2003, World Wrestling Entertainment Inc.

works cited

Mark Melara, hailing from Carthage, NY, is a freshman Political Science major in the College of Arts & Sciences. Though others may scoff at the notion of professional wrestling, he firmly believes it has encouraged him to be unique and stand by his convictions. Humor, non-conformity, and individuality are qualities that have shaped his personality, and he feels a day without laughter is a day wasted. A prospective law student, he looks to a career in some aspect of the entertainment industry...perhaps with WWE Inc.

the it. factor

Doing an in-depth critical analysis of a single primary source can be just as effective as combining information from dozens of sources. It also allows for something new to be created.