

Wrestling with TV Rasslin

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TV wrestling stretches the envelope of what art educators might consider legitimate content under the emerging art educational paradigm of visual culture. (Duncum & Bracey, 2001) TV wrestling, or "rasslin" as its known to its audience, is a significant cultural site because it is very popular and, under analysis, has much to say about contemporary cultural experience, especially that of its audience. While it provides pleasures and reference points to its audience, these reference points are often sexist, xenophobic, homophobic, and in terms of familial relationships, dysfunctional. They are also violent and obscene.

This paper both acknowledges the lived experience of the audience for TV wrestling and calls into question the structures of feelings and ideas that are embodied in art. For the former it employs the theory of "needs and gratifications" that holds that cultural sites serve deep instinctive and/or social functions. By contrast, in critiquing TV wrestling, a cultural studies approach is employed that views underlying values of cultural sites in terms of the hierarchic power structures of society.

Definition

TV wrestling should not be confused with sport; it is entertainment, as the following legal definition makes clear:

Professional wrestling means an activity in which participants struggle hand-in-hand primarily for the purpose of providing entertainment to spectators rather than conducting a bona fide athletic contest. (*We're Shocked*, 1997, p. 30).

In a 1957 article that remains seminal, Barthes (1972) says, that professional wrestling is a "sum of spectacles." (p. 16). While the laws that regulate professional sports stipulate that action may be taken against those who permit a sham or fake a match, there are no comparable admonitions against faking a wrestling match. (Maguire & Wozniak, 1987). If sport is part play and part display, wrestling on television is all display and only a pretence of play. In the terminology of the TV wrestling world, those who do not understand that it is faked are called "marks"; they are easy prey because they are very stupid (McCoy, 2001).

Its Popularity

The popularity of TV wrestling is apparent on consideration of just a few statistics. In the US alone it is a multi-billion dollar business with a weekly viewing audience of 35 million people a week (Cantor, 1999). It has long been used to attract people to cable TV, and in 1999 the then two rival programs were the two highest rated programs on cable (Scott, 1999). It has also spread into other forms of cultural production. In 1999 the autobiographies of two top liners occupied the number one and three positions on the New York Times Bestseller list in 1999 (Devine, 2000), and merchandise - including plastic action figures, T shirts, videotapes, feature films, photographs, fan clubs, and magazines - grossed \$400 million in sales.

Its Audience

The precise demographics of the audience are contested. Apologists for TV wrestling now claim a far broader audience than its traditional working-class male fans. There is some independent evidence to support this view (Migliore, 1993; Ramsay, 1992) but recent machinations of TV station owners (Rutenburg, 2001) suggest that the great majority of viewers remain, as Scholosbers found them to be in 1987. His profile of a typical TV wrestling fan was male, among adults aged 18-24, poorly educated, and with a higher proportion of Blacks than in the whole population. Campbell (1996) accounts for this traditional demographic by arguing that the working-class finds an echo of its own experience in the determination of fate through physical rather than intellectual trials. The constant defeat of the good guys and ineffectiveness of the referee is also said to reflect working class experience.

Perhaps the broader audience is due to the opportunity TV wrestling offers to escape the more general constraints of an ever increasingly regulated social life, distant and indifferent governments, and repressive religions. A broader audience presumably mediates wrestling differently from a working class audience, perhaps relishing its self-mocking and parodical qualities, delighting in what is knowingly so artificial and exaggerated as to be funny. Perhaps better-educated and better-paid audiences also take pleasure in feeling superior to what is cheap and the product of the sensibilities of those who they perceive to be are beneath them. For this audience, TV wrestling would offer opportunities for slumming.

Meanwhile, recent attempts to appeal to children appears to be working, with TV wrestling Internet sites being accessed by 13 percent of all 12 to 34 year olds on the Internet, making it the number one entertainment site among 12 to 34 year olds, and the number one sport site among 12 to 17 year olds (WWFE, 2001). Its appeal to youngsters

then would not only be found in the cartoon-like simplifications espoused by TV wrestling, that are so appealing to children, but in the constraining regimes that govern children's experience. What is clear is that TV wrestling is highly popular and big business.

Its Pleasures

The pleasures of TV wrestling are many and diverse, and I deal here with only a few: visual spectacle, mythmaking, insider knowledge and artifice, and the carnivalesque joys of inverting social norms. Most of these pleasures have been described in terms of "needs and gratifications" theory whereby TV wrestling is said to gratify both social and instinctive needs.

Visual Spectacle

Barthes (1978) predates the post-modern emphasis on spectacle by noting, "For adults the issue is clear – wrestling is faked: the public is uninterested in whether or not it is rigged because it abandons itself to the primary virtue of the spectacle – what matters is not what one thinks, but what one sees" (p. 15). TV wrestling has been likened to MTV in that it

uses a visual style characterised by an insistence on the importance of the signifier, physical sensations, the surface of the body.... Wrestling fans need not spend any intellectual energy making sense of wrestling. It is a spectacle that exaggerates the visible, works on the physical senses, and refuses meaning or depth (Campbell, 1996, pp. 127, 128).

It is theatre; specifically, it is an "elaborately staged and imaginatively costumed" combination of melodrama, soap opera and

slapstick comedy (Devine, 2000, p. 11). Professional wrestling requires of its actors the communication to a large audience of emotional states such as the effects of torture, abasement, outraged fury, abjection, cowardice, triumph and contempt. Because it is offered up as theatrical spectacle, Levi (1998) rightly says that it is misread if it is seen as fraudulent.

Visually, it is a celebration of what is artificial, exaggerated or wildly, and explosively ridiculous; it is everything that refined good taste is not. It suppresses narrative drive in favour of the dazzling, the spellbinding; as theatre it celebrates corporeal sensations, albeit virtual, and downplays characterisation and plot.

Mythic Dimensions

This is not to say that TV wrestling is without a narrative interest. From various perspectives observers have commented on the mythic, metaphoric and ritualistic dimensions of TV wrestling, including history (Devine, 2000), Jungian psychology (Zengota, 1994), and anthropology (Migliore, 1993). Ramsay (1992), a sociologist, sees TV wrestling as a moral drama or morality play, a latter-day passion play. In this sense too it is not fake; as a myth it is real. This can be seen by discerning the recurrent patterns involved. According to Ramsay's research, most fans report that the prime attraction is wrestling's clear-cut incarnation of good and evil. Yet while there are no shades of grey, there is much more. Heroes suffer at the hands of unscrupulous opponents and ineffective referees as well as the general arbitrariness of fate. Often they suffer repeated failures, but their manliness is demonstrated by accepting their outrageous fortune because there is no salvation without pain, even humiliation. Yet justice demands retribution where ultimately evil is destroyed by its own weapons of force.

While acknowledging that the wrestling is choreographed and the plot lines are scripted, fans are willing to suspend disbelief even where the acting is poor because it appears to offer a deeper truth. As Ramsay (1992) says, "images strike some responsive cord of affirming recognition about life generally" (p. 5). This is why it appeals to those who frame their experience as one of oppression; they see themselves as beaten by circumstances beyond their control, which according to Campbell (1996) is why heroes are more often defeated than triumphant. TV wrestling confirms the audiences experience of what is real, but also it provides participants a community of spectators with whom social bonds are formed, however fleetingly and however virtual.

Insider knowledge and the Skills of Artifice

Until the past few years TV wrestling has existed in a tension between two related but quite different pursuits, theatre and sport. While it purported to be sport, all but the utterly naive knew it was theatre. Thus, even the most casual viewer could indulge in the pleasures of being-in-the-know, in the secret, however open the secret, that the narratives were fiction and the bouts were faked. Pleasure came from seeing what could not possibly be believed, as ring commentators frequently proclaimed, yet, nevertheless, was constantly asserted to be true. In this way the pleasure of watching lay in a tension between an official discourse of what one was witnessing and knowing more.

However, the pretence to be sport has recently given way to an open acknowledgement that wrestling is all theatre. As one of the top liners explains: "No longer is anyone trying to pull the wool over anybody's eyes. It's live-action soap opera. It's entertainment" (cited in Scott, 1999). Cantor (1999) says that in this respect TV wrestling is now a quintessentially post-modern cultural phenomenon, openly

parading itself and engaging the audience in the joke. For the audience, the success of a wrestling match is not in who wins or loses, but how effectively the wrestlers play their roles. While a kind of morality play, it is all designed to be fun and one of its pleasures lies in admiration for the skill of artifice.

Carnival

TV wrestling offers all the pleasures of the carnival. Like medieval carnivals, it criticises social norms and turns their power on their head through derisive laughter (Fiske, 1987; Campbell, 1996; Langman, 1997). The TV wrestling ring is a carefully circumscribed ludic space where the vulgar, obscene and erotic are celebrated. Like the festivals of feudal times, where for a day all that was normally repressed was inverted, TV wrestling provides frenzied expression to what is elsewhere constrained or forbidden. For example, breaking unwritten rules saw one wrestler base his character on the alleged size of his penis and another, described by Leland (1998) as "a walking cry for help," strutting about brandishing a woman's severed head.

While legitimate sports value fairness and equality for all the players as well as respect for the loser, wrestling inverts the dominant ideology. Campbell (1996) says that for the losers of society it represents their ideology; they know that they have little chance of being respected by the winners, and they don't necessarily admire the winners. It is a chance for them to demonstrate their difference through a celebration of a resistant culture, and it shows the strength and endurance of such oppositional and disruptive popular forces. This is another reason Campbell (1996) claims that the bad guys of wrestling so often win; the audience identifies with the "baddies."

TV wrestling transgresses the moral boundaries; it mocks, and, often literally as well as metaphorically, sticks out its tongue or gives

the finger to authority. This gives it, however momentarily, authority over authority as well as the pleasure of bonding with a community of like minds.

Its Reference Points

TV wrestling has undoubted appeal, but what is it about? If its pleasures are many and diverse, what values and beliefs does it seek to both challenge and side step? "Needs and gratifications" theory seeks to explain and, by implication, justify TV wrestling. By contrast, what follows is a cultural studies attempt to challenge TV wrestling in terms of its underlying values.

TV wrestling is decidedly "non-PC." In particular, it is racist, xenophobic, sexist, homophobic, violent, anarchic and obscene. Also, more recently, it engages in the same seriously dysfunctional relationships celebrated by programs like the Jerry Springer Show. While cloaked in outlandish humour, it deals with "the other" - whether of another race, country, gender, or sexual orientation - in terms of degrading stereotypes.

Racism

While most "baddies" are presented as unethical, black wrestlers are often seen as uncivilised. One prominent black wrestler, Junkyard Dog, wore a collar and chain as a vestige of slavery, and he frequently wrestled on all-fours. While his manager claimed that he worked with Junkyard Dog to "draw out his charisma from within," this effectively meant wearing a spiked collar and a leash, and eating dog biscuits that fans threw into the ring (cited by Maguire & Wozniak, 1987, p. 262). Another black wrestler was taunted by opponents as "a monkey" and compared to a gorilla in the Atlanta Zoo.

Kamala, purportedly from Uganda, was variously described in fan magazines as having an "animalistic look in his eyes", "the look of a wild animal," and having "animalistic tendencies" (p. 265). In one interview he brought along his lunch, a live chicken in a cage and on returning from a commercial break the chicken had gone but feathers covered Kamala's face. In another interview Kamala was said to be "eyeing up the cameraman" while his stomach rumbled, so that viewers were invited to believe that Kamala was a cannibal (p. 265). In a further example, the New Zealander Maoris, oddly called the Bushwackers, are said to "slaver, bulge their eyes, and strut grotesquely around the ring ... in a caricature of drooling idiot" (Zengota, 1994, p. 168).

Xenophobia

Until the last decade it was possible to view the periodic booms of professional wrestling in the United States in terms of its simplistic and xenophobic interpretation of international political events with America's enemies personifying evil (Monkak, 1989 in Richard, 1999, p.137). In the 1930s it was the Nazis and Japanese; in the 1950s it was the Hungarians and the Russians; in the early 1980s it was the Iranians and the Russians (Campbell, 1996). The Iron Sheik, purportedly from Iran, and Nikolai Volkoff from Russia, were matched against an iconographic patriot of the US, Sargent Slaughter. The Iron Sheik would denounce everything American while Volkoff would grab the arena microphone and demand silence so he could sing the Russian national anthem. Meanwhile, Slaughter kissed babies, draped himself in the US flag, and extolled the virtues of everything just and American. Despite the despicable tactics of the foreign duo, Slaughter usually prevailed.

Arab wrestlers have always been presented as treacherous (Ramsay, 1992), so a stereotype was ready at hand when directly following the September 2001 terrorist attacks on the US, the entire company of wrestlers, good and bad, lined up to outdo each other in their verbal vitriol against the as-then unclear perpetrators of terror. Through this unprecedented show of solidarity, which transgressed the usual intrawrestling conflicts, TV wrestling continued to serve as a marker of America's enemies.

Sexism

Women appear most often "as clinging love slaves of the muscled villains, pouting seductively at the camera, stripping the man of his outer garments before the match and interfering during it to save 'their men'" (Zengota, 1994, p. 173). Their secondary role is underlined by having such cute and submissive names as Precious, Baby Doll, and Miss Blossom (p. 173). Women wrestlers, or divas as they are called, used to appear as oddities like wrestling midgets, but nowadays they are more commonplace. With the same instantly recognised stereotypes as their male counterparts, "pretty cheerleaders and down-to-earth cowgirls face off against slinky leopard women and ratty-haired biker molls" (p. 173). Dressed to expose their bodies, even what little they wear is often ripped off during a match. They exist in a tension between a prurient wish to avoid reference to pornography and exploiting just that interest. Internet sites of women wrestlers include those where the wrestlers appear in the nude whereas there are no such similar sites for male wrestlers.

Homophobia

The appeal of near naked men displaying their muscles and in constant physical contact with one another is proportionate to the denial

of any homoerotic interest. Homoerotic desire is carefully policed and this is best illustrated in the invariable fate of wrestlers in drag. Gold Dust pranced into the ring performing an effeminate parody of a gay man and was beaten to a pulp by the other wrestlers in what one commentator called "ritualised fag bashing" (in Vadim, 2000, p. 196).

In another incident, The Beverly Brothers, in lavender tights, pouting and hugging each other, entered the ring against the Bushwackers, who by contrast wore big boots and work clothes. As the Bushwackers pounded their effeminate opponents baiting them as queer and gay, the crowd of thousands shouted "faggot, faggot, faggot," and at the conclusion of the match they cheered and stomped approval for 10 minutes. Jenkins (1997) says that what necessitated this homophobic spectacle was the need to define the Beverly "sisters" as outside accepted masculinity, a space where homoerotic desire could be freely expressed without danger of its calling into question the gender identity or sexual preference of the audience. While wrestling is an excuse for homoerotic contact, nothing is allowed to threaten the heterosexuality of the audience.

Familial dysfunction

With the breakdown of the Soviet Union, foreigners have been, to some extent, displaced as enemies in favour of psychopaths within US borders. Wrestlers now scream at each other their dark domestic secrets, sordid tales of adultery, sexual intrigue and child abuse. Consider this scenario: Kane, a good wrestler, hides his disfigured face with a mask. He is pitted against the Undertaker, who frequently punishes his victims by stuffing them into coffins, which as Cantor (1999) wryly notes, is "a nasty case of adding interment to injury" (p. 20). It turns out that they are half-brothers, and it was the Undertaker who as a child lit the fire that not only disfigured Kane but also killed

their parents. The Undertaker then turns out to be the son of his manager who neglected him for years and is only belatedly acknowledging paternity. Cantor (1999) says, "All the elements are there: sibling rivalry, disputed parentage, child neglect and abuse, domestic violence, family revenge" (pp. 20-21), and the scene is set for endless confrontation.

Anarchic and obscene

The show of solidarity over the terrorist attacks was an aberrant return to an earlier period of TV wrestling when the enemies of the US were clear and values well understood. Over the past decade TV wrestling has tended to reflect the demise of clear enemies abroad and the general breakdown of traditional sources of authority and authenticity. During the 1990s, TV wrestling increasingly became anarchic. Instead of good guys and bad guys only occasionally converting to their opposite side, wrestlers swapped back and forth at regular intervals. While attempting to maintain the opposition of good versus bad with all its associated qualities, TV wrestling has come to blur these distinctions by constantly alternating its representatives and by allowing heroes more and more to indulge in such massive retribution that there is effectively nothing to distinguish between the perpetrators of violence. Whereas wrestlers used to retain their identity as good guys or bad guys, they now switch back and forth with such rapidity that as one promoter says, these days "everyone is a psychopath" (Leland, 1998, p. 60). And bad guys are now heroes. Stone Cold Steve Austin, "a foulmouthed, scowling thug," (p. 60), one of the most popular heroes of the late 1990s—a good guy—based his character on an HBO program on serial killers. Whereas the universe of TV wrestling was once grounded in a view of established values, now these values are fluid, relative to the moment; instead of being governed by set rules, it is now chaotic.

Until recently, when parents and other moral campaigners ensured a diminution of sleaze, TV wrestling had increasingly become obscene. Leland (1998) writes,

To have a character simulate masturbation with a squirt gun or urinate in someone's boots in front of an audience of 7-, 8-, 9 year olds – well there's something demented about that (p. 60).

And Art Education?

Under the emerging paradigm of visual culture, art education has an important role to play in addressing the issues raised by cultural sites like TV wrestling. While inverting social norms of official, politically correct discourse, TV wrestling undergrids the status quo by extolling the virtues of blind patriotism, patriarchy, and heterosexuality. Moreover, it does so in such a cartoon cutout way that alternatives cannot even be considered. While, offering indulgences in the pleasures of excess, especially the carnival as spectacle, it acts to reinforce dominant values. It offers an opportunity for resistance and fun, but simultaneously it is socially and politically conservative. Furthermore, to the extent to which it refuses to consider alternatives, it is reactionary. While offering indulgence in the pleasures of childhood anarchy where big men get to behave like two year olds, it is underpinned by severe parental prescriptions.

Art education has a role in drawing out the underlying values embodied in TV wrestling and exposing them to their adolescent audience for critique. Perhaps no other site more clearly poses the question: when is a cultural site significant because it gratifies deep needs and when does it fail to serve its audiences' best interests?

At a theoretical level, this question is inherent in the clash between the two broad types of theory employed to examine TV wrestling and which have been used in this paper. On the one hand, the theory of

"needs and gratifications" focuses attention on positive benefits of TV wrestling by assuming that it serves deep instinctive and/or social functions. Like a pressure cooker suddenly released, TV wrestling is said to maintain personal sanity and social stability. On the other hand, cultural studies locates social values within their role of exploitive socio-economic structures. It notes how damaging many values are to segments of society.

Perhaps like with no other cultural site wrestling is the difference between these theories thrown into sharper relief and the relationship between them made problematic. This is because, unlike most other popular cultural sites, TV wrestling deliberately sets out to turn social values on their head. With cartoon-like clarity, it rejects social norms, so that it is always possible to say of TV wrestling that while it is racist, xenophobic, sexist, homophobic and so on, it is also really just great fun.

This is not a reason for avoiding TV wrestling in the classroom however; rather, it is precisely the problematic nature of TV wrestling that makes it an especially good cultural site for study and response in the classroom. Because the clash between gratifying needs and exploiting socio-economic locations for profit and social control is so strong, TV wrestling lends itself more than most sites to heated debate. TV wrestling raises questions like: what does it mean to be a man? How is the stereotype of the testosterone-powered male detrimental to the development of a balanced, healthy male identity? Does masculinity have to involve bravado and violence? How do stereotypes of race and foreign nationals help diminish an understanding of others? Does the development of a heterosexual identity demand homophobia? How do the females in a class respond to the erotic male gaze? How do they respond to the schematisation of females into virgins and whores? There are many other questions it raises, but the most central

is: when are the characteristics of TV wrestling to be taken seriously as contributing to people's actual beliefs and when are they just laughable?

Other forms of popular culture can be used to develop these questions by seeing how other images reinforce, question or counter the stereotypes offered by TV wrestling. For example, contemporary images of positive male identity and behaviour can be found in advertisements, TV drama programs, and computer games. They offer visual models with which students can develop their own images.

It is also interesting to note that the history of art can be read in terms of the stereotypes and behaviours offered by TV wrestling. Indeed, TV wrestling owes more to the history of picture making than it does to contemporary reality. In looking through a standard history of art, such as the recent *Oxford History of Western Art* (2000), there are many examples of homoerotic statues and paintings from Ancient times to the 19th century and an equal number of erotised women. There are some images of suffering male heroes such as Mantenga's 1459 painting *Sebastian*. There are pictures that celebrate violence, such as ancient friezes depicting scenes of war. There are images of naked men fighting such as Pollaiuolo's 1489 *Battle of the Nudes*. There are even images of sexual violence like Poussin 1636 painting the *Abduction of the Sabine Women* which is actually a rape scene. Finally, if further proof was needed that the history of art supplies TV wrestling with some of its icons, there are pictures of men carrying about severed heads as trophies.

If we want students to go beyond the stereotypes and limiting behaviour of TV wrestling, we need to deal with it directly. While acknowledging its many pleasures, we should ask students to stand back from it and examine it honestly to see to what extent it is merely funny, and to what extent it helps to shape their values and beliefs.

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Heads Above Grass

Edgar Heap of Birds

Many Tsistsistas (Cheyenne) were killed during the fight. The air was full of smoke from gunfire, and it was almost impossible to flee, because bullets were flying everywhere. However, somehow we ran and kept running to find a hiding place. As we ran, we could see the red fire of shots. We got near a hill, and there we saw a steep path where an old road used to be. There was red grass along the path, and although the ponies had eaten some of it, it was still high enough for us to hide. In this grass we lay flat, our hearts beating fast; and we were afraid to move. It was now broad daylight. It frightened us to listen to the noise and cries of the wounded. When the noise seemed to quiet down and we believed the battle was about to end, we raised our heads high enough to see what was going on. We saw a dark figure lying near a hill, and later we learned it was the body of a Tsistsistas woman and child. The woman's body had been cut open by the soldiers (Hoig, 1979).

Quote from *Moving Behind*, a fourteen year old Tsistsistas woman, survivor of Colonel George Custer's massacre of the Tsistsistas people at the Washita River November 27, 1868, near what is now called Cheyenne, Oklahoma.