

DRAMATURGICAL ASPECTS OF PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING MATCHES

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After watching a professional wrestling exhibition in an arena on a Saturday night, one of the strongest of many impressions the reflective observer comes away with is that of the overwhelming plottedness and redundancy of the matches he has seen. Yet it would be a most serious error to associate this reduction of all wrestling to some apparently basic plots with a paucity of creative ability on the part of the wrestlers, or to use it as the basis for some kind of categorical criticism of the devoted and appreciative audience. On the contrary, these patterns should be conceived of as a point of departure, both for the wrestlers themselves and for the fans, who can, respectively, manipulate and perceive them in so many different ways.

By focussing on the plottedness of professional wrestling, I do not mean to suggest that this is the most essential component of the whole phenomenon. This would be making an error comparable to mistaking a script for a play, an error perhaps justifiable from the perspective of literary history, but not from a point of view which sees dramatic art in its entirety. According to J. L. Styan,

The script on the page is not the drama any more than a clot of earth is a field of corn; it is essential constantly to return to this. The words of Hamlet are merely signals for communication, in which (heresy, still, to some) the unspoken can be as important as the spoken, in which the nighted colour of the Prince's costume can be as urgent as the stroke of a poetic image. Thus, the criticism of drama must imply a study of stimulus and reaction, but this is a social study concerned with all the vagaries of human social behavior.¹

My purpose in emphasizing structure is rather a different one, and it is necessitated by the inherent nature of professional wrestling itself. Professional wrestling is not unlike other forms of drama insofar as it is performed as a representation or interpretation of reality. What makes it unique, however, is that while it is performed as drama, it is in many instances perceived as a form of open-ended contest--that is, as legitimate sport.² Furthermore, in many cases where it is perceived as drama, wrestling has the capacity to invoke and sustain a "suspension of disbelief" on the part of its fans for much longer periods of time than do other forms of drama.

Given these facts, it becomes apparent that analysis of the structure of professional wrestling matches logically precedes any greater understanding of the event as a whole. For on the one hand, as alluded to above, it is the ability of the wrestler to deal with traditional expectations (i.e., the formulaic plot) in a creative way which makes his or her performance more or less engrossing and convincing. At the same time, it is the way in which the structure of this action is perceived that ultimately informs the meaning and significance of the event as a whole for the individual percipients.

While there is a broad range of involvement displayed in the arena, two poles of meaning between which this involvement varies suggest themselves from the testimony collected from wrestling fans. There are those individuals who perceive a wrestling match as an event with a predetermined outcome. It is my contention that, for these people, wrestling is seen primarily as artful entertainment, while the moral struggle which wrestling dramatizes is experienced intellectually and, whatever its importance, in some way secondarily to the purely entertaining nature of the event. On the other hand, there are those people who perceive

professional wrestling as open-ended sport. For them there is no separation between the action and the controversy which motivates it; that is, the wrestlers are not seen as actors who adopt roles, but as real manifestations of good and evil. For these individuals, wrestling is responded to passionately as the embodiment of a battle between virtue and vice, carried out by contestants possessing varying degrees of martial skill. Thus, as one wrestling fan said to me, the reason he went to see Bruno Sammartino wrestle Stan Hansen in a championship match at the Philadelphia Spectrum was because he "thought it would be one tremendous outgoing of brute force against brute force."³

It is to be expected that wrestlers, who are often quite sophisticated performers, have a highly detailed knowledge of the match structure. Thus, in terms of an analogy to linguistics, successful professional wrestlers not only begin with an understanding of semantic intent--the creation through drama of the illusion of an open-ended struggle between the forces of good and evil--but they know the syntactic and phonological rules necessary for generating and producing minutely stylized performances as well.⁴ That is, they have a knowledge of move sequences and of particular ways of physically realizing these sequences. Knowledge of these rules is manifested as the choices made by a wrestler throughout every part of his performance.

Audience awareness of the "grammar" of professional wrestling is more problematic than that of the wrestlers themselves. While there appears to be common knowledge concerning the ostensible semantic intent of wrestling--that is, everyone understands that it is a more or less real "battle" between good and bad (just how real, of course, is the question)--knowledge of the syntactic and phonological rules utilized by the wrestlers is invariably less inclusive than that of the performers themselves, and varies from one member of the audience to the next. With this information spelled out, it should become apparent how different fans interpret and evaluate the performances which are staged for them with their (tacit) cooperation.

This point concerning tacit cooperation deserves some elaboration. Although the deliberate emphasis of my argument has been on the significant differences between ways of perceiving professional wrestling matches (especially their structure), in order for the event to produce more than just a random collection of unique, unrelated interpretations, the participants in the event must share certain conventions--that is, have some "mutual understanding about the meaning of action, which includes gestures and speech."⁵

According to Elizabeth Burns, there are two kinds of conventions operative in theatrical situations: rhetorical and authenticating. The former refers to the relationship between actors and audience, the latter to the relationship between actors within the fictive bounds of the play. Several very interesting things can be said about these conventions as they relate to professional wrestling. In a previous article it was shown how the wrestlers and their managers make constant use of a "communication currency" to intensify the interest of the fans, and to make legitimate the struggle in which they participate as the ideal representations of good and evil.⁶ Reference to this communication currency therefore serves both to define and authenticate the situation.

Definitions of the situation--or the establishment of a rhetorical relationship between performers and fans--is also accomplished through a very elaborate use and "misuse" of spatial, temporal, moral, and ethical frames. Frames are defined by Goffman as the "principles of organization which govern events--at least social ones--and our subjective involvement in them," in accordance with which definitions of situations are built up.⁷

In a wrestling match, frames are set up, like (for some) the theatrical and sporting atmosphere of the arena, the boundary of the elevated ring, the beginning and ending boundaries of the rounds or falls, the legal sanctity of the referee, and so on. These frames are then systematically and quite often chaotically transgressed. In other words, the initial definition of the situation as either a sporting or theatrical event is either reaffirmed or transformed in the eyes of the viewer. (Of course, the initial and in fact prevailing definition of the situation in the eyes of the promoters and performers is of a theatrical event--except, from their point of view, on those catastrophic occasions when the situation "deteriorates" into a real fight or riot.) Goffman describes this framing process in humorous detail:

Typically the contestants start out staying within the rules, except that often an elaborate point is made (especially by the villain-to-be) of doing so. Then character differentiation into heavy and hero begins. Foretold by the differential reputation and appearance of the two men, the differentiation begins to be established through the heavy-to-be's beginning to break the rules. He starts to make moves that are illegal, persists in these so that more than verbal admonishment is required by the referee, and when he finally desists he sneaks in a postterminal dollop. He threatens the audience, haggles with the referee, and shamelessly pleads for mercy when he is disadvantaged. He slaps the hero and steps on him in imperial acts of contempt that radically reframe fighting moves into purely ritual ones. The hero, weakened by punishing illegal attacks, inflamed by countless infractions of the rules, falters. Finally he is flagrantly sinned against once too often. His righteous indignation boils over, releasing new strength, and now, having earned the moral right to take the laws of wrestling into his own hands, he becomes downkeyed into a wild beast who roars for the kill, strikes back illegally, and wins the match. And what has been faked is not a demonstration of wrestling skill (there is very little attempt to do that) but, sometimes magnificently and sometimes cathartically, the violation of a traditional frame.⁸

To pursue the discussion of the definition of the situation, it is in the manner in which professional wrestling articulates with the life the audience lives outside the boundaries of the arena (an articulation exploited to the full by the promoters and performers of wrestling), that wrestling at least potentially assumes symbolic status. Once again, however, the realization of this potential and the actual form it takes is dependent upon the framework--theatrical or sporting--in which wrestling is perceived as taking place. This is because a certain amount of psychic distance must exist between an action and its doer or percipient in order for him to see that it has a potential reference beyond itself.

The notion of psychic distance brings us back to an issue mentioned above--the question of the esthetic quality (or, as some would have it, the lack of it) of professional wrestling. In his article on "The Complex Relation of Simple Forms," Roger Abrahams employs the parameter of the relative degree of psychic distance (used in a slightly different manner from the way I use the term above) as the basis for distinguishing between different genres of expressive behavior. In accordance with this criterion, Abrahams characterizes folk drama as consisting of "an almost complete severance of contact between performers and audience--this is what is meant by the term 'psychic distance.' Identification with the conflict occurs vicariously, rather than through participation, as in a game."⁹

As long as Abrahams' corollary claim holds up--that "there is a greater feeling of artificial dramatic involvement, emphasizing that the resolution of the conflict is predetermined"--it is possible for a member of the audience to evaluate the performance in terms of its artistic qualities.¹⁰ For professional wrestling, this esthetic is generally the style, creativity, and degree of convincingsness with which real strategic battle is simulated.¹¹ That is, as long as it is recognized as drama, it can be evaluated as such. (It is evident once again how important the notion of framing is to professional wrestling.)

If Abrahams' description is refined, however, to include the possibility that the resolution is not recognized as being predetermined--that is, that there are different degrees of involvement within the same genre--it would seem that the event could no longer be evaluated in terms of dramatic art, but only in terms of martial skill or intensity. It would be possible to say, for instance, that "Bruno Sammartino fought a strategically sophisticated, rugged battle," but not that "Bruno Sammartino did a brilliant job of acting as if he were fighting a strategically sophisticated, rugged battle." Thus, my contention is that there are two totally different levels of esthetic evaluation applicable to professional wrestling which are operative at the same time, one being in a sense a "meta-statement" about the other. Nelson Goodman makes a comparable point from a related angle when he says that no matter how identical an original and a forged work of art may appear to be, each supports its own esthetic. The difference between Goodman's case and the case at hand is that, while he is dealing with two distinct artifacts, one particular wrestling match is often perceived within itself as being both forged and genuine at the same time by different people, or by the same people at different times.¹²

This last observation raises an important point that so far I have been neglecting. I have tended to deal with the perception of professional wrestling almost exclusively in terms of an either/or distinction, and I may have created the inaccurate impression that all fans of wrestling fit neatly into one of two absolute categories: total sceptics or total believers. In actuality this is not the case. Total scepticism and total belief do form two poles of a spectrum of possible responses to professional wrestling, but the responses of an individual fan may be located at different points along this spectrum at different points in time, whether that time span be his or her entire life as a fan, the length of a Saturday night exhibition, or the duration of a single match.

An illustration of how different kinds of matches on a Saturday night card can elicit varying responses is provided by those matches in which the contestants are not male heavyweights. Although the majority of matches on any given night are between members of this group of wrestlers, it is common for the promoter to include a contest between "female grapplers" and/or a contest between midgets. This aspect of professional wrestling displays most explicitly its affinity to the circus in both content and form, and Bouissac's characterization of the rule-ordered nature of circus acts is as pertinent to the one as the other: "Any given circus act is not an open-ended series of happenings, but a patterned display of typical events, carefully planned, and repeated day after day in similar circumstances for a certain period of time without significant changes."¹³

The underlying reason why midget and female matches differ significantly from male heavyweight contests is that they are intrinsically more theatrical than the latter category; in America, at least, midgets and women do not usually participate as opponents in emotionally charged, physical contact sporting events (although this does not rule out the possibility that aspects of these events are not considered to be believable by some people). According

to Sherman Drexler, the husband of a former female wrestler, another inherent difference between women (and by inference, midget) wrestling events and male heavyweight events is in the manner in which they are performed:

They were always shorter (female matches), so they were basically quicker. And basically not as good in the sense of not being as accomplished actors. Part of what they had going against them was that they were lightweight. They had very few heavy women. They wanted women with some athletic ability to be able to fly through the air. And, so they weren't--they tried to do the same thing, but in my opinion they didn't succeed, because some of the men were formidable actors. And at a great weight, it just added to it, everytime they'd shake the ring with emotions, stamping. So it just made for a more impressive show. And then, when ponderous people finally erupt into action, that was always a kind of release. So it would be hard for the women. Sometimes they would do similar--sometimes they would even do more complicated things requiring more agility. But the men were much more willing to get into frozen tableaux of good and evil, slowly moving contests, that were easy to appreciate, more visual.¹⁴

One of the most interesting aspects of the fluctuation in attitude typical of wrestling fans is the phenomenon of the "suspension of disbelief," willing or otherwise, which occurs so frequently in so many viewers during a wrestling match. As noted before, this triggers a transfiguration in the perception of the arena from stage to battleground, and a similar change in the perception of the wrestlers from actors to combatants. It is precisely at this point that the metaphor of the stage assumes its full potential as a model for real life. At this moment one's knowledge of the always uncertain resolution of action in the "drama" of real life, and knowledge of the now apparently open-ended resolution of action in a totally absorbing play, are equally tenuous, founded on nothing more definite than hope, faith, and traditional expectations, which are themselves always subject to possible disconfirmation. As Louis Beck says,

If . . . I do not know the plot of Hamlet, my mode of interpreting the actions that Lord Olivier performs as Hamlet is very much the same as my mode of interpreting the actions I observe him to perform in real life as a member of the House of Lords. The reasons, situations, and specific public conditions of practice of the stage world of Elsinore Castle are different from but no more strange to me than those of Westminster Palace, and the manner in which I understand his actions in each is the same. My perception of the literal actor in an unreal world is synecdochic in the same experimental, tentative way as my perception of the metaphorical actor in the real world.¹⁵

Given this kind of "captivatingly tenuous" struggle between good and evil--which is the *raison d'etre* of professional wrestling--it is appropriate to consider wrestling's affinity to the literary type with which this characteristic tends to associate it: melodrama. "The classic melodramatic pattern," according to Russel Nye, consists of "a sensational plot, a dastardly villain, a brave hero, virtue rewarded and evil foiled, all set in a familiar, semirealistic framework."¹⁶ Based on this definition, some similarities between wrestling and melodrama are immediately apparent. Both rely upon clearly delineated character types who engage in often mortal, always moral combat; if successful, both manage to evoke tremendous emotional reactions from their audiences.

There exists another affinity between wrestling and melodrama as well, particularly in the latter's appearance as what John Cawelti calls "social melodrama." This type "synthesizes the archetype of melodrama with a carefully and elaborately developed social setting in such a way as to combine the emotional satisfactions of melodrama with the interest inherent in a detailed, intimate, and realistic analysis of major social or historical phenomena."¹⁷ As I suggested above, it is in the articulation between "real life" and professional wrestling that wrestling manages to sustain its relevance in the eyes of its audience. While this manipulation of the social background is clearly not as extensive as in social melodrama, without some degree of it professional wrestling would be as bland as amateur or collegiate wrestling. According to Gorilla Monsoon, this would be a totally unacceptable state of affairs:

You take wrestling per se, collegiate-type wrestling. It's like watching grass grow. Because there's no excitement. You see, we deal in excitement. Sure, a promoter could say, "O.K., I want you guys to go out there tonight, and I want everybody to wrestle collegiate-style wrestling." You'd be out of business in a month, we'd be out of business in a month. No question about it. Because people want to be entertained.¹⁸

But there are differences between wrestling and melodrama as well. Where the melodrama ends predictably in the victory of virtue and the reaffirmation of conventional wisdom and morality, on a long-term basis the same cannot be said about wrestling. Heroes certainly win their share of victories, to the truly immense satisfaction of the audience, but they just as certainly succumb as often to ignominious defeat at the hands (and feet) of some of the most wicked villains imaginable. Since wrestling has followed the same basic formula for such a long period of time, and since many individuals wrestle successfully (that is, lucratively) for years, it is often difficult to point to any absolute termination of a particular sequence of matches.¹⁹

Professional wrestling, therefore, has an added dimension of complexity not found in melodrama. In fact, whatever genre we choose to compare it with--be it 15th century morality plays, contemporary soap operas, or others--we will find that wrestling ultimately is not entirely commensurate with any one of them. Like all expressive phenomena, professional wrestling answers the needs and expectations of those who participate in it; the important thing to realize is that it does so in its own, unique way, and should be valued accordingly.

My comments in this paper have been confined to some interesting dramaturgical aspects of professional wrestling matches, and given the length of the article, they have by design been more schematic than substantive. It is my hope that the analytical necessity of considering the differential perception of the structure of these matches and the implications of this approach for the interpretation of the meaning(s) and esthetic(s) of complex expressive phenomena will be seen as relevant to all kinds of traditional and contemporary dramatic events.

Notes

1. J. L. Styan, Drama, Stage, and Audience (London: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. vii.
2. For a partial qualification of this point, see pages 8-9 below, on the subject of female and midge wrestling.

3. Personal interview, 27 September 1976.
4. The concept of generating performances based on a system of underlying rules is derived from Noam Chomsky; see J. P. B. Allen and Paul van Buren, eds., Chomsky: Selected Readings (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 7-18. The notion that these performances are designed according to standards of appropriateness dictated by the social context is derived from work in the ethnography of speaking.
5. Elizabeth Burns, Theatricality: A Study of Convention in the Theatre and in Social Life (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), p. 28.
6. Mark E. Workman, "Structural and Symbolic Aspects of a Contemporary Ritual Event," Keystone Folklore XX, No. 3 (1975), pp. 19-31. For reference to "communication currency" see Nancy Munn, "Symbolism in a Ritual Context: Aspects of Symbolic Action," in John J. Honigmann, ed., Handbook of Social and Cultural Anthropology (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1973), p. 580.
7. Erving Goffman, Frame Analysis (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), pp. 10-11. For additional discussions of the effects of frames on the perception of activity occurring within them, see Richard Bauman, "Verbal Art as Performance," American Anthropologist 77 (1975), pp. 290-311; and Gregory Bateson, "A Theory of Play and Fantasy," Steps to an Ecology of Mind (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), pp. 177-193.
8. Goffman, Frame Analysis, p. 418.
9. Roger D. Abrahams, "The Complex Relations of Simple Forms," Genre 2:2 (1969): 117.
10. Abrahams, p. 117.
11. It also includes such things as the humor which is a part of some performances.
12. Goodman's thoughts on this matter are discussed in chapter III, "Art and Authenticity," and elsewhere in his book, Languages of Art (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968).
13. Paul Bouissac, Circus and Culture: A Semiotic Approach (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), p. 123.
14. Personal interview, September 10, 1976.
15. Louis White Beck, The Actor and the Spectator (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), p. 68; emphases in original.
16. Russel Nye, The Unembarrassed Muse (New York: Dial Press, 1970), p. 156.
17. John G. Cawelti, Adventure, Mystery, and Romance (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 261.
18. Personal interview, August 28, 1976.
19. By long period of time, I mean at least 20 years. This is the length of time I have been a fan, and it is also about as long as wrestlers like Bruno Sammartino and Killer Kowalski--both of whom are still active--have been in the business.