

## **Reality TV: Deja Vu All Over Again?**

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“That’s Not Real, Is It...?”: Reality Television, Professional Wrestling, and Authenticity

A common theme when going around the room on the first day of my media classes is for students to deride the overwhelming presence of reality television, or to sheepishly admit to their own guilty pleasures consuming these texts. There is a certain romanticism of days gone by, when reality television didn’t dominate the media landscape. However, reality television’s textual, industrial, and thematic processes have much in common with other media properties throughout history. In particular, the genre of professional wrestling offers a very useful framework for understanding reality television.

Industrially, professional wrestling and reality television occupy similar terrain within the media landscape. They are both cheap to produce and garner relatively high Nielsen ratings. In local markets like Memphis and Dallas, professional wrestling historically was provided for networks free of charge – allowing for content to fill broadcast time while delivering ratings that stations could use to attract advertisers. This was a symbiotic relationship as wrestling promotions could use these local television programs to promote upcoming matches, attracting live audiences to an event. In the 1980s, Vince McMahon’s WWF (now WWE) went a step further by actually paying television stations to air his programs, facilitating a national promotion that replaced regional wrestling companies. This focus on cheap content is mirrored by reality television, as numerous networks have moved to reality television as a cheap alternative to other television forms.

The derision of both reality television and wrestling marks another similarity between these texts. Both typically garner less money from advertisers due to the perception of their audiences – that they are somehow less sophisticated or are of a lower socioeconomic class making them less desirable to advertisers. Further, wrestling and reality television are often derided for being “excessive,” textually depicting spectacles that are melodramatic in nature. The genre of melodrama is marked by excess, emotions that are unable to be contained and burst from the body. Reality television prominently features these moments of excess, as cast members speak frankly into the camera about how they really feel, often coupled with tears and trembling voices. And as many of the reality television countdown shows suggest, the most famous/infamous moments of these shows are marked by fights between characters, where they literally cannot contain their emotion any longer and explode in violence.

Wrestling also focuses on excess, as Roland Barthes famously expressed. Wrestlers have to communicate concepts such as “suffering” to the audience, often exaggerating the impact of “fake” maneuvers within the confines of a wrestling match. These performers have to sell the audience on the authenticity of the spectacle before them, making sure every action is pronounced. In this way, every move is exaggerated, pushed to excess so that the narrative is comprehended. However, wrestling fans often point to aspects of the matches and narratives that have origins in reality, that stand out as distinct from the rest of the spectacle. Some fans point to maneuvers that are particularly dangerous or athletically impressive, focusing on the real threat they pose. Others focus

on how well a performer plays his or her role, applauding the performance itself rather than the narrative. Still others focus on “shoots,” or elements of the narrative that have a basis outside of wrestling’s diegesis. In all of these examples, wrestling audiences are focusing on elements that are distinct from the exaggerated aspects of wrestling texts.

The excessive nature of professional wrestling and reality television facilitates these authentic moments being made legible. Because everything is presented in an exaggerated fashion, aspects of authenticity may be glimpsed because they are so distinct. Media audiences use these generic texts as playful sites where glimpses of something real may be witnessed amidst these excesses. Within these spaces, audiences question whether what they just saw was authentic or real, momentarily suspending their disbelief and playfully engaging these media genres. Critics may decry both genres because of their excessiveness, but each depends on these excesses in order to communicate authentic elements.

Although both genres are scripted, they are marked by the potential of something authentic standing out – real emotions, real violence, and even real love. Examples include cast members not getting along backstage, a “shoot” fight breaking out between performers, and actual relationships developing behind the scenes. These examples dominate fan discourses, and along with their textual and industrial similarities, demonstrate that reality television is not nearly as new as many believe. Instead of understanding reality television in its generic specificity, scholars should focus on what it shares with other historical genres in order to see what media audiences are taking from these modes of address, to understand why genres such as wrestling and reality television historically reach media audiences and what they communicate to them.