

Analyzing Discourse in Sports Entertainment through Multiple Modalities

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Consuming professional wrestling provokes a multimodal experience whereby meaning is constructed through “a complex interplay of semiosis” (Bhatia, Flowerdew, and Jones 129). That is to say, the audiences of professional wrestling texts, such as those produced by World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), are invited to construct meaning in a variety of ways through a variety of means (Jewitt, Bezemer, and O’Halloran). These ways and means manifest in multisensory interactions (Collier 208) between the world of wrestling and the spectator. It is through these interactions that the aesthetics of wrestlers’ bodies combine with the aesthetics of the arena, the ring, the set, and the audience to create the wrestled space. It is by means of exchanges that the chants and roars of the crowd fuse with the amplified blare of entrance music to construct a multifaceted and transitory soundscape. It is on the surface of the televised text that graphical overlays converge with spoken commentary and the framed image to bring an augmented world of wrestling into the viewer’s home, and it is in combination that these interchanges create the rich, vibrant and multifaceted discourse of professional wrestling. This paper seeks to explore this multimodal process of meaning construction.

Within the field of discourse analysis (DA), the idea of considering such interactions as a meaning creating whole is a relatively recent development. That is not to say that the critical strand of DA has neglected significance of context (Van Dijk; Fairclough; Wodak), but rather that it is the more recent move towards multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) that has brought the confluence of multiple resources into scrutiny as a holistic form of meaning creation. As such, this paper has three main foci in exploring the multimodal process of meaning construction in the professional wrestling text. First, the paper provides a brief overview of MDA. The paper then returns to the existing literature of professional wrestling studies to demonstrate how the modes of multimodal meaning creation in professional wrestling have been conceptualized and defined by the professional

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wrestling studies community. Finally, the paper, through application, demonstrates how the mechanisms of MDA allow for the unpacking and analysis of complex modes of institutional meaning creation in increasingly multimodal media texts, such as those of professional wrestling.

A Brief Overview of MDA

MDA remains in the process of developing as a field. Consequently, definitions and concepts are used “somewhat loosely” (Hyland and Paltridge 120) and terminology is varied. Compounding these issues is the notion that discourse itself is, at times, perceived as a fashionable concept which escapes definition (Jørgensen and Phillips 1; Kress 115). Yet perhaps the more significant challenge in understanding this area is not due to the lack of definitions, but rather the multiple concrete definitions stemming from different theoretical positions. While strictly linguistic approaches to DA perceive discourse as spoken and written language (Brown and Yule), the critical discourse analysis (CDA) school draws on a more Foucauldian definition, where discourses are conceived as the organization of meaning about the world from an institutional position (Kress 110). It is this broader view of discourse that informs MDA and serves the analysis of convergent multimedia texts such as those of professional wrestling.

In the widest sense, therefore, the object of analysis in MDA can be described as “the ways in which we make meaning” (Callan, Street, and Underdown 68). It is not always easy, however, to grasp what these “ways of making meaning” are or, more specifically, what exactly constitutes a “mode” of multimodal meaning creation. Addressing this issue, Gunther Kress suggests that “what counts as mode is a matter for a community and its social-representational needs. What a community decides to regard and use as mode is mode” (87). For Kress, then, since the materiality of a mode depends on societal understandings of what is important for meaning-making, it is impossible to point to essentialist definitions of what modes are; rather, modes can only be categorized as such by virtue of what they do. As such, drawing on Halliday’s functional linguistics, Kress proposes a definition of modes based on three formal requirements: ideational function, interpersonal function, and textual function (87). In short, a mode must have meaning potential, its own “grammar” or set of rules, and the capacity to be organized in a coherent and cohesive way. In turn, a multimodal analysis seeks,

therefore, to understand how modes fulfill these functions and interact to form a cohesive communicative event.

The Modes of Professional Wrestling

At the heart of prior research in professional wrestling studies, both directly and indirectly, lie attempts to understand and define the nature of the modes of meaning creation in the wrestled text. What follows, therefore, is a short exploration of what the professional wrestling studies community has regarded as mode and how these modes have emerged from the phenomenon's social-representational requirements.

In perhaps the most prominent early study of sports entertainment, "The World of Wrestling," Roland Barthes suggests that everything in professional wrestling operates on the level of a complex semiotic system (17) drawing on oppositions and external aesthetics to encode an immediately "intelligible" (16) account of the phenomenon directly into the design of the text. For Barthes, modes such as physical appearance communicate the role that the wrestler will play, where the ugly or obese signify the base human characteristics and combine with gestures and actions that correspond to the baseness signified (17). These semiotic choices allow the spectator to quickly grasp the nature of a character, where physique serves a preemptory function that suggests the future of the wrestling encounter and forms a "basic sign" (17) containing the entirety of the performance. Thomas Henricks defines this process as an amplification of the body, whereby interchangeable semiotic systems of dominance and submission construct a validity of competition that exploits the modes of sport in a representation of agonistic confrontation, which in turn exaggerates the existing moral prejudices of the audience (181). Here, the excessive gestures of the professional wrestler serve as an "exaggeratedly visible explanation of a necessity" (Barthes 16), attaining social cultural significance through the utilization of rhetorical resources (Webley 65).

For Gregory Stone and Ramon Oldenburg, this negotiation of professional wrestling through the modes of sport forms the principle ideational function of the phenomenon (Stone 307; Stone and Oldenburg 517). More specifically, Irene Webley suggests that while professional wrestling appropriates modes of boxing, it only does so in so far as providing a stage for the phenomenon to contravene the

norms of legitimate sport. Such contraventions, therefore, facilitate an interpersonal functioning of the text, constructing meaning derived from social relations. This reconfiguring of sporting modes completes the textual function of the phenomenon and is advantageous (Thompson 77) to the internal cohesion of the message-entity, enabling the phenomenon to exploit legitimate sport to sell a product (Atkinson 48) that can be readily refabricated according to audience needs.

Professional wrestling, therefore, operates on the level of mimetic metaphor (Forceville “Metaphor and Symbol”; Forceville “Multimodal Transcription”). For Michael Atkinson, legitimate sport is a mimesis of war-like behavior, exposing the participants to the pleasures of conflict without the risks (49). Professional wrestling is a mimesis of legitimate sport and expands on this mimetic exploration by utilizing exaggerated competition as a method of increasing and simplifying narrative comprehension (50). Professional wrestling, thus, represents sport, but not sport in the legitimate sense. Rather, it represents sport in the “mode of melodrama” (Levi 57). More specifically, it becomes a male mode of melodrama, constituting an exploration of the emotional lives of the wrestlers. This mode adopts the foregrounding of the working-class masculine myths of vulnerability, male trust, male intimacy, and national community (54).

This use of multimodal metaphor and metonym (Forceville “Metonymy”) in the professional wrestling text has formed something of a strand in the literature. In discussing the semiotic elements of professional wrestling (e.g. body, behavior, aesthetic, and voice), Webley demonstrates how these modes allow the characters of the wrestling world to appropriate commonly-held conceptions about particular ethnicities and explore them through the dynamics of plot (68). Such meaning-making capacities have historically occurred on the level of the stereotype and often feature a pejorative rhetoric (Maguire and Woznick 265-6), set against a wider political context of nationalism (Mondak 141-45). These modes are, therefore, not value free, but rather afford carefully planned discourses that respond to, simplify, and exaggerate a specific set of values, and become the means of disseminating the ritual metaphors of sports entertainment (Migliore 69-72) that dehumanize particular ethnicities to make and remake meaning for the specific cultural context of production and consumption (Thompson 57-69).

Such discussions of these phenomena prevail in the literature, resulting in ethnicity in sports entertainment being situated as a mode in and of itself. This representation “facilitates the coming to terms with the complicated political

occurrences in foreign lands” (Rahmani 87) and provides a guide to interpreting a contemporary political climate that does not require the consumer to engage in the argument’s subtleties (Mondak 147). Using these modes to ideologically activate the live audience (Freedman 12-22) offers a particularly prominent and “dynamic unfolding of specific social practices” (Van Leeuwen and Jewitt 3) that mobilize ethnic and racial stereotyping as a simple and effective way of eliciting a strong reactions from the consumers (Maguire and Wozniak 266).

These power dynamics of production and consumption suggest that the theatrical modes of professional wrestling develop concepts of morality and ethnicity in the spectators, which enable them to negotiate their place in relation to the wider structures of capitalism (Levi 58-60), whereby meaning about the social world is organized in the text from an institutional position (Kress 110). Wrestling fans, therefore, like soap opera fans, use these modes to construct an alternative community that parallels the reality of the viewer, allowing them to vicariously extend their own lives or construct new communities of event attendance (Maguire 172). This community can be related to social disenchantment, where the constraints of contemporary capitalist society arouse the need for excitement in the social actor, leading to the emergence of increasingly spectacular “cathedrals of consumption” (Maguire 173), provide places for the masses to experience exhilaration (172), and experiment with the simulated impoverishment of social control (Campbell 127; Fiske 240-7).

Toward Multimodal Discourse Analysis of the Professional Wrestling Text

The foregoing section situates sports entertainment as a longstanding site of multimodal meaning creation and demonstrates how much of the existing literature in the field has addressed the functioning of these modes. However, the emerging discipline of MDA can offer more to the analysis of professional wrestling. Applying MDA is particularly appropriate given the increasingly complex and convergent methods of dissemination and consumer engagement afforded by developments such as the WWE Network. Here, the mechanisms of MDA can help understand how wrestling consumers interact with progressively multimodal processes of communication (White), not solely for the purposes of understanding professional wrestling, but also to understand the changing

contexts of the consumption of popular culture (Krzyżanowski; Macgilchrist and Van Hout).

On the level of the professional wrestling text, rich and divergent strands of textuality, and intertextuality, remain ripe for disentanglement and analysis. The plurality of analytical opportunity provided by MDA invites diverse scholarly communities to invest in the phenomenon through collaborative study, drawing on multiple fields of interest to understand the complex interplays of semiotic modes. Via the interaction of existing methodologies such as systemic functional linguistics (Halliday and Matthiessen), visual grammar (Kress and Van Leeuwen) conversation analysis (Austin), iconography (Barthes), the psycholinguistics of gesture (McNeill), kinesics (Birdwhistell), and musicology (Way and McKerrell) it is possible to further unpack and understand the polysemy of sports entertainment and lay bare the divergent meaning-making capacities and conditions that form the texts.

MDA also opens the door to a return to study the effects that professional wrestling texts have on consumers. Rather than position professional wrestling as engendering antisocial behavior (Bernthal; Bernthal and Medway; Lemish “Girls Can Wrestle Too”; Lemish “The School as a Wrestling Arena”; Soulliere and Blair; Woo and Kim) or as a site of overly gratuitous violence (DuRant, Champion, and Wolfson; Tamborini, Chory, et al.; Tamborini, Skalski, et al.), MDA can be used to privilege the perspective of the creator/consumer (Bucher) as an active participant in the creating and recreating of meaning in the wrestling world. What follows, therefore, is a short MDA of the 2017 WWE Network event *NXT TakeOver: WarGames*.

A Short Multimodal Discourse Analysis of *NXT TakeOver: WarGames* 2017

The nature and purpose of the NXT brand of WWE has been subject to definition and redefinition since its inception in 2010. During this time, the institutional meaning encoded into the product has experienced significant evolution. In the initial format, talent contracted to the WWE developmental territory, Florida Championship Wrestling (FCW), were mentored by talent from the Raw and SmackDown brands in a pseudo-reality competition to break into the main WWE roster. This format continued for five seasons between 2010 and 2012. In this

incarnation, NXT was presented as a hybrid product, aesthetically indistinct (except for branding) and subservient to the WWE premier content Raw and SmackDown.

Here, ideational constructs, such as the hybridity of product, as well as the freedom of youth, opportunity, and aspiration, were immediately introduced into the meaning creating processes of NXT through a conflation of modes familiar to the WWE audience. Most notably, these modes manifest in the short graphical stings that open the broadcasts, where stylized text, along with voice over, rousing string-based rock music and branding combine to disseminate the WWE conceptualization of NXT through three simplistic audio-visual narrative units: “8 NXT Rookies”, where the NXT logo is sandwiched between the numeral eight and the word rookies; “8 WWE Pros”, where the numeral eight, the word pros and the WWE logo are sandwiched between the Raw and SmackDown logos; “1 Dream”, where the numeral one and word dream are superimposed over an image of a full arena of WWE fans (the WWE Universe).

This process of ideation is built upon in the subsequent opening title sequence, in which footage of the eight aforementioned rookies, situated collectively and individually in a WWE ring, along with images of existing WWE pros, converge with the theme “Wild and Young” by American Bang. In this instance, modality encompasses materials such as the bodies of the rookies and pros, the NXT logo, yellow graphics in keeping with the NXT logo, the wrestling ring, text delineating and aligning the pros from/with the rookies, as well as song lyrics promoting NXT imperatives such as “we are wild and young” and “we have just begun” to inject the WWE institutional conceptualization of NXT directly into the viewer from the outset of the broadcast.

As such, within the opening fifty seconds of the text, these modes fulfill the ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions desired by WWE, interacting to form a cohesive communicative event that situates NXT as an aspirational process, in which fresh young talent strive for the privilege to join the elite of WWE, thereby elevating the status of the premier products Raw and SmackDown. So successful was this incarnation of NXT that by the latter half of 2012, the institutional conceptualization of the product evolved from a developmental process subservient to Raw and *SmackDown*, to a WWE premier brand in its own right. This shift required a new internal conceptualization of NXT within WWE, transitioning away from the simplistic and tangible notions of youth, opportunity, and aspiration to something more complex.

WWE Executive Vice President, Talent, Live Events & Creative Paul Levesque (aka Hunter Hearst Helmsley, aka HHH, aka Triple H) attempted to articulate this new, more complex conceptualization of NXT in 2016:

“NXT has kind of become the fastest growing brand in the entire industry, and, from a WWE standpoint, it [has] gone from what was being kept at one point in time, considered our developmental brand, where we were just grooming stars for the future, to really becoming a third brand that tours globally alongside of [WWE Monday Night] *RAW* and [WWE] *SmackDown*. NXT is no different. It’s a slightly different style, and I don’t mean by in-ring style, but [rather] the presentation is slightly different and it really tends to super-serve our passionate fanbase, the fanbase that kind of lives and breathes WWE and that lifestyle. And NXT on the WWE Network really captures the imagination of that group. The talent are maybe a little bit younger, a little bit more diverse, and they’re really hungry and they’re trying to sort of either make their name, or prove their point, or remake their name in some cases, and earn their spot as being at the top of the sports entertainment industry.” (Csonka)

Levesque’s challenge in succinctly articulating the institutional conceptualization of NXT presents an opportunity to use MDA to unpack that evolution of institutional meaning construction retrospectively. By exploring the established modes of professional wrestling at play in the *NXT TakeOver: WarGames* broadcast, it is possible to demonstrate how the NXT brand has redefined itself through the very modes of meaning creation it utilizes.

The title of the event is a logical starting point for this exploration and clear mode of meaning creation in the wrestling world. The wording *NXT TakeOver: WarGames* provides a discourse laden with hostility. Perhaps the consumers’ first access point to the event, the title, suggests that NXT is no longer content to be subservient to the other brands of WWE. The implication of the *TakeOver* component of the title, and indeed the wider *TakeOver* series, simultaneously implies, however, that NXT is not truly of equal status with the other brands of WWE and must struggle to attain equal status by taking over broadcast or events, almost in a revolutionary fashion. This locates NXT as a dangerous other, almost on the outs with WWE, or threatening to it. This notion is compounded by the *WarGames* component of the text. Harking back to the historical *WarGames*

matches of the National Wrestling Alliance (NWA) and World Championship Wrestling (WCW), both prior competitors of WWE, the WarGames element fosters notions of an alternative product little known or alien to the wider audience of WWE. In combination, these discourse elements suggest that NXT, once the subservient lap dog of WWE striving for the opportunity to be a part of *Raw* or *SmackDown Live*, could soon go to war with its parent organization, becoming an impassioned movement, intent on making its mark on the industry by force.

The ring is a further mode of meaning creation in the world of professional wrestling, which, in the case of *NXT TakeOver: WarGames*, interacts directly and indirectly with the event title to construct meaning and support institutional ideation. Within WWE, the space of the ring is multimodal in and of itself. Communicative processes such as the color of the ring ropes, the color of the canvas, the branding and imagery of the ring apron, all construct meaning. The aesthetics of the ring utilized during the *NXT TakeOver: WarGames* broadcast draw upon a dark, high contrast tone, with black ring posts and turnbuckles, mostly back aprons, and a charcoal canvas, contrasting with white ring ropes and white NXT and WWE logos. This suggests a polarized phenomenon, constructed in opposition to the aesthetics of the rings of *Raw* and *SmackDown Live*, which draw upon strong colors; red for *Raw* and blue for *SmackDown Live*. This absence of color again positions NXT as distinct from other WWE output. It presents a grittier, alternative, perhaps less flamboyant tone, whereby impoverished aesthetics defy the extravagance of *Raw* and *SmackDown Live* and reflect the hunger of the performers, for some of whom NXT represents their last chance to prove themselves. The very presence of the second ring also disrupts the norms and traditions of WWE, directly connecting NXT with the reinvention of events from the past rather than compliance with the currency of WWE.

While the above modes go far in differentiating NXT from the other texts of WWE, the set utilized during *NXT TakeOver: WarGames*, is very much a mode of WWE. The staging is near identical to that of *Raw* or *SmackDown Live*, or indeed, many other WWE pay-per-view events, as is the construction, temporal positioning and aesthetic of the wrestler entrances and entrance music. These modes construct a tension within the NXT text, pulling the aesthetic back toward the aesthetics of its parent organization and restricting the agency of NXT to forge an identity entirely distinct from the other outputs of WWE. This reflects the cognitive dissonance of Levesque's assertion that NXT is simultaneously the

same as and different from *Raw* or *SmackDown Live*, whereby opposing modes of meaning creation combine to disrupt each other.

The then-NXT champion, Drew Galloway, further represents this tension. Featured and once heavily pushed on the main rosters of WWE, Galloway was released by WWE in 2014, before re-forging his career on the independent circuit and Total Nonstop Action Wrestling/Impact Wrestling. It was during his absence from WWE that Galloway found success as a main event performer and in 2017 he was re-signed to WWE and assigned to the NXT brand. Galloway's character confronts his rejection by WWE through his participation in NXT. He remains rejected by the mainstream WWE products but has been elevated to the highest status in NXT. His success in NXT, therefore, exists as a challenge to the superiority of the *Raw* and *SmackDown* brands that rejected him. He personifies the redemption of the disempowered.

Even via such a limited MDA as presented, it is possible to unpack how the ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions of the modes at play in the *NXT TakeOver: WarGames* interact to form a cohesive communicative event that reveals the organization of meaning from an institutional position. The WWE is unsure as to what NXT is. NXT exists as an unfinished liminal state between *not* WWE and *of* WWE. Even a cursory analysis of its modes reveals a deep cognitive dissonance within the text that perhaps reflects a deeper tension within the institution and signals uncertainty as to the future of the organization.

Conclusion

This paper draws upon the mechanisms of MDA to situate sports entertainment as a site of multimodal discourse construction and offer MDA as a means of understanding the complex and institutional modes of meaning creation in the texts of professional wrestling. In doing so, the paper demonstrates the appropriateness of MDA to the study of sports entertainment by defining the nature of MDA and therein distinguishing it from other forms of DA, establishing that professional wrestling has long been considered a multimodal phenomenon, and suggesting through application that the emerging discipline of MDA will allow future studies of sports entertainment to unpack the complex interplay of semiosis (Bhatia, Flowerdew, and Jones 129) that is the wrestled text (Barthes 17) to better understand the nature of the phenomenon from the inside out.

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