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## Chapter 5

### Sports Entertainment: Toward a High Concept of Professional Wrestling

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In *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood*, Justin Wyatt (1994) described the arrival of motion pictures like *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975) and *E. T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (Steven Spielberg, 1982) as signaling the emergence of a new, high concept mode of commercial filmmaking. In this mode, which has become the hallmark of the Hollywood blockbuster, Wyatt suggests that economic considerations directly motivate cinematic aesthetics, resulting in movies where an emphasis on visually striking style, integrated marketing, and merchandising is combined with a simple and easily communicable premise to produce consumer products directly converged with their processes of promotion.

By analyzing the five key elements that Wyatt holds as central to the process of high concept filmmaking (i.e. the look, the star, the music, the character, and the genre), this chapter correlates Wyatt's notion of high concept cinema with World Wrestling Entertainment's (WWE) dominant form of professional wrestling, known as sports entertainment. The chapter thereby demonstrates how WWE pay-per-view (PPV) events have converged with the style and integrated marketing of the Hollywood blockbuster to become a high concept mode of professional wrestling, wherein the processes of aesthetic and stylistic convergence, organized around the marketing of consumer products, directly shape the function and form of WWE PPVs. Furthermore, by drawing on developments in media technology and digital convergence unavailable to Wyatt, this chapter expands on the notion of high concept storytelling. As such, the chapter demonstrates how contemporary WWE PPV events transcend conventional understandings of high concept to become a connected

mode of viewing that exploits live participatory consumption, transmedia storytelling, and paratextuality, establishing a concept even “higher” than that of the Hollywood blockbuster.

### **The Look**

Wyatt’s (1994) first convention of high concept cinema is that of the image, or “look.” Image is central to the processes of advertising (Messaris, 1997), and in the high concept movie, Wyatt suggests that the striking nature of the image, seeking to sell the lifestyle of the film through arresting visuals, can overwhelm the progression of the narrative.

This phenomenon has long been present in the professional wrestling text. For Roland Barthes (1972), wrestling is a spectacle told through images of “Suffering, Defeat, and Justice” (p. 18). A wrestler who is in a hold will use their facial and bodily gestures to offer “an excessive portrayal of suffering” (Barthes, 1972, p. 19). This is a performative suffering, an “external image of torture” (Barthes, 1972, p. 20), which delays the progression of the narrative so that the consumer can revel in the passions excited by the artistic representation of torment. In the feature matches of WWE PPVs, long submission holds, or lingering shots of prone competitors, frequently enact this function, “selling” (Kerrick, 1980) the image of suffering and the ability of the wrestler to withstand superhuman punishment.

These narrative units form modules that fetishize, rather than progress, the story, serving to both appropriate and contravene the norms of legitimate sport (Webley, 1989) and provide a space for the spectator to pause and explore the pleasures of distanced or socially prohibited activity (Atkinson, 2002). Perhaps the most striking example of the above occurred at *WrestleMania 13* in 1997. During a “no disqualification submission match,” Bret “The Hitman” Hart locked “Stone Cold” Steve Austin in the Sharpshooter submission maneuver and held him there for 103 seconds. Throughout this period, the broadcast used two intercut camera angles to explore the narrative. The first was a traditional medium-wide shot

of both competitors in the ring. The second was a close-up of Austin's head as he endured the "torture" of the hold.

It was in this second shot that the look overwhelmed the narrative. Here, Austin's face was drenched in blood as he writhed in the pain of the hold, his stretched features and agonized screams filling the frame. This image, so arresting, paused the narrative to manifest the image of Austin's resilience in the face of adversity, reducing the narrative of the match, and Austin's character, to a singular visual illustration (Wyatt, 1994) that thereafter defined the trajectory of Austin's career.

Such visuals are not, however, limited to the body of the performer. In a striking convergence with the style and aesthetic of the high concept movie, most WWE PPV broadcasts open with a package that appropriates images external to the wrestling world to create a series of juxtapositions. The purpose of these juxtapositions is for the look to exceed the narrative of the event and produce a network of images that "overwhelm[...] their narrative function" (Wyatt, 1994, p. 30) in favor of constructing signification from pre-existing phenomena.

The opening video sequence for the *Roadblock: End of the Line* (December 2016) event demonstrates this process. Here the wrestling text converges with the skyline of Pittsburgh, while police siren sound effects translate to footage of a searching helicopter, accompanied by an "attention all units" soundbite, which in turn gives way to speeding police cars, unrolling "police line tape," and flashing light bars. These images then juxtapose with text and footage reiterating the backstory of the feature matches to situate the wrestling world alongside a bold cinematic aesthetic of place and culture.

There are, of course, no police car chases, helicopters, or criminal acts during the event. Instead, the PPV appropriates this look to synthesize notions of danger, crime, violence, excitement, and justice with an integrated marketing style. Here a police tape

aesthetic dominates the onscreen graphics, while police cars, flashing lights, and helicopter searchlights converge around the event logo in the title card. This same aesthetic then bleeds through from the video package to the actuality of the large screens in the arena set, bringing these pre-sold concepts directly into the wrestling space. Just like the high concept film, these images are moments of excess “to be extracted and used for advertising due to their striking aesthetic quality” (Wyatt, 1994, p. 24).

The physical space of the WWE PPV event also draws on the notion of the arresting look, where the spectacle of wrestling can emerge from even the “most squalid Parisian halls” (Barthes, 1972, p. 15). In the high concept film, the formal aspects transform locations from the banal to the aesthetically pleasing or visually striking, often amid a setting of high technology (Wyatt, 1994). It is here that convergence between the style of the high concept blockbuster and the contemporary WWE PPV is often most pronounced.

*WrestleMania 32* (April 2016) transformed the Dallas Cowboy’s AT&T Stadium from an NFL playing field to a spectacular high definition audio-visual (and pyrotechnic) environment, where, as in the high concept movie, the original location “is hardly recognizable” (Wyatt, 1994, p. 24). This disorients the consumer, forcing them to consume the spectacle of the look rather than understand how the image fits the developing narrative of the performance. Thus, the convergence of the event and the host space operates on a level of style, within and without the wrestling narrative, drawing on modern architecture, high technology, and design associated with upward mobility to create a spectacle of excess (Barthes, 1972).

Charlotte Flair’s victory in the WWE Woman’s Championship match and Roman Reigns’ victory in the WWE World Heavyweight Championship match at the *WrestleMania 32* event epitomized this consumption of excessive spectacle. Upon their victories, both wrestlers celebrated with the fans in the arena. Here, the broadcast privileged images of the

new champions amid the sweeping vista of the sold-out AT&T Stadium. Dwarfed by the scale of the technological infrastructure around them, the performers were furnished with a pyrotechnic display, which originated in the interior set, only to transcend the wrestled space into the world beyond, with a synchronous external display launched from the roof of the stadium. This formed a removable paratextual mode of signification, whereby “an exterior element [defined] the text through its very presence outside of the text” (Booth, 2016, p. 259), disrupting the universal consumption (Jenkins, 2009) of the live and television audiences.

This type of excess forms the backbone for the global WWE identity attached to all creative output. Here, the extracted spectacle of the converged space of past *WrestleMania* events underpins the aesthetic of the sequence. WWE thereby exploits the previous settings of *WrestleMania* as pre-sold content to reduce the overall WWE narrative to these single images of excess.

This same look is often pronounced in *WrestleMania* advertising. The stadium environment utilized for *WrestleMania XXV* in 2009 features prominently in the promotional materials for *WrestleMania XXVI* in 2010. In fact, it is difficult to discern the wrestling ring at all in the image, which instead features wrestlers mid-action amid the spectacular backdrop of the Reliant Stadium. The incorporation of the University of Phoenix stadium logo further reinforces the importance of the convergence of location and event and draws on the existing understandings of the stadium as a space for mega-events (Horne, 2007), where, come *WrestleMania XXVI* (March 2010), wrestling, space, and technology unite once more with spectacular results.

## **The Star**

Related to the above is the influence of the star on the style of high concept. As with certain aspects of the look, the star often draws on the pre-sold image to market the product. Wyatt (1994) defines the star in high concept as “the human capital” (p. 31), whereby their prominence in the marketing suggests that they supersede the narrative. The initial marketing material for *WrestleMania XXVI*, released five months prior to the event to advertise the “ticket on sale date,” included four wrestling stars even though no matches had yet been announced. All four stars—The Undertaker, Shawn Michaels, John Cena, and Triple H—played prominent roles in previous *WrestleMania* events.

Once the matches were announced and the narratives of the event established, the promotional material changed very little (an additional star was introduced, Dave Batista). Instead, the material continued to focus on the spectacular environment, the stars involved, and the branding of the event. In fact, there was no clear indication of the featured narratives, or indeed which of the wrestlers would face each other at the event. The five stars were simply organized symmetrically, with John Cena taking the center spot as the principal human capital of WWE. In short, the pre-sold notions of star persona, the space, and the brand eclipsed any specific narrative information in the promotional material of the event.

Furthering his discussion of the star, Wyatt (1994) suggests that the style of the high concept movie is not driven by an author, but rather by the marketplace in which the film trades. The marketplace molds the movie in its image through a tension between economic and aesthetic concerns. Again, this idea is transferable to the stars of WWE. The most popular wrestlers feature heavily in the promotion and marketing of WWE PPV events, and the characters they portray often link directly to the vogue in popular culture.

The trajectory of John Cena’s character functions as a good illustration of this idea. Cena’s appearance and mannerisms serve as a paratext for wider cultural phenomena as the character moves through and amalgamates several distinct phases and places aligned with

contemporary vogues. Initially, Cena's evolution began as a pastiche of hip-hop and rap culture. As his character gained popularity, however, that pastiche translated to an appropriation of mainstream hip-hop culture, manifesting itself less in parody and more in commercial album releases, collaborations with established recording artists, and an immersion in the contemporary hip-hop fashion. Such changes enabled Cena to operate on a metatextual plane, whereby Cena's different texts address and expand on each other, within a variety of different spaces and contexts.

In 2006, Cena further modified his character, integrating a pseudo-military aspect into his existing hip-hop persona to align his identity with the release of his first Hollywood vehicle, *The Marine*. Here, Cena toned down the hip-hop aesthetic, especially the "bling," and instead appropriated khaki or camouflage ring attire and dog tags, while maintaining his hip-hop entrance music and mannerisms. Cena's subtle reinventing soon came again, once more through his apparel, which featured "eight-bit" computer game graphics and retro WWF logos from the 1980s, leaving his self-performed hip-hop entrance music as the only link to his original hip-hop character.

In this way, Cena's appropriation of contemporary fashions and style enabled his character to remain in vogue, regardless of the wrestling narrative or external productions in which he was involved. This evolution of appearance bled through to impact the promotion and marketing of WWE PPV events. Moving beyond the scope of the blockbuster, WWE stars embrace a convergent digital ecosystem by drawing on the conditions of connected viewing (Holt, Steirer, & Petruska, 2016) to extend their characters beyond WWE television output. Unlike most Hollywood actors, wrestlers embody their characters during nearly all modes of public communication, becoming agents of their characters' lifestyles. Again, Cena presents an apt illustration of this process, promoting WWE and his character in everyday life.



Through social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram, Cena extends his WWE persona to facilitate multi-screen/device engagement with his image. Here, Cena adopts a hybrid model that shifts the distribution of his image to circulation (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). This adds a voluntary and participatory aspect to the construction of his “human capital” (Wyatt, 1994, p. 31). The audience is given the opportunity to move beyond the passive consumption of pre-constructed texts and become active in the “shaping, sharing, reframing and remixing” (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013, p. 2) of Cena’s persona.

This mode of communication allows for a subtlety and hybridity in the marketing of multiple products via Cena’s star persona. On January 6, 2017, Cena tweeted “440lb ‘pause bench’ @AJStylesOrg will understand why at #RoyalRumble I can kick out at 2! @WWE @TapouT #EarnTheDay.” A short, embedded video of the bench-press in question accompanied the tweet, in which multiple products and narratives converge through the image of Cena’s lifestyle. His characteristics of determination, power, and strength are foregrounded in the video clip and clarification of the weight lifted. These properties then align to the narrative of the coming Royal Rumble event and the discourse of professional wrestling, before being conflated with the wider WWE brand, the associated Tapout product range, and his personal mantra “earn the day.”

The tweet constructs a multi-faceted semiotic system that promotes multiple products via a spreadable form of media content that is far less intrusive than traditional advertising (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). This “reducible, concise and transferable” (Wyatt, 1994, p. 122) image, organized around an aesthetic sensitive to economic considerations, creates a simplistic narrative, anchored in Cena’s stardom, which is easy to communicate, comprehend, and market beyond the space of the wrestling text.

## **The Music**

Wyatt (1994) suggests that perhaps the most significant stylistic element in relation to merchandising in the high concept movie is music. Here, the commercial application of the element, most often as an independently purchasable soundtrack, aids its separation from the movie. In high concept, therefore, music is rarely integral to the development of the narrative. Instead, music is matched with marketable concepts, converging with other elements of style, such as the star and the image, to reinforce inherent marketability as the motive for inclusion.

This matching of music to marketable concepts is noticeable in the WWE PPV on two levels. In the first, music is matched to individual wrestlers via their entrance themes. In the second, music is attached to specific PPV events as the official theme song. In relation to the former, these themes interrupt the main narrative of the PPV event, stalling progression to allow for the consumption of arresting images; here the star converges with the set and the music to construct a self-contained, pre-sold, and repeatable narrative that is detached from the larger storyline it serves.

The main event of the 2016 *Survivor Series* PPV illustrates the above. From the outset, the match was delineated from the preceding content by a video package summarizing the development of the Goldberg/Brock Lesnar storyline. This prepared the audience for the consumption of a new narrative strand. The wrestlers' ring entrances followed this package, pausing the narrative to allow the spectators to revel in the excess of the main event superstars. During the entrances, the broadcast ceased commentary and privileged the sound of the wrestlers' signature music along with the ambient sound of the live audiences' reaction to their presence. The accompanying visuals focused on intercutting the live audience, the wrestler's bodies, the physical space of the arena, and the accompanying pyrotechnic displays to create an audio-visual convergence united and demarcated by the flow of the wrestler's entrance themes. The broadcast commentary only resumed once the audience had received sufficient space to marvel at the superfluity of performance. Like musical sequences in the

high concept movie, these entrances were marked “by a modularity in design created through an excess in the production, stars, and especially soundtrack” (Wyatt, 1994, p. 44) where that conjunction worked against the “sequential structuring” (p. 40) of the narrative to become removable from the rest of the storyline.

In the above example, both wrestlers’ themes were produced “in house.” Yet WWE has often utilized commercially-available entrance music produced by third party organizations. For instance, Triple H’s entrance theme, “The Game,” was a custom track written and performed for him by British rock band Motörhead, appearing on their album *Hammered* (2002). John Cena similarly utilized a track from his own album “You Can’t See Me” (2005), and CM punk entered to “This Fire Burns” by Killswitch Engage, from their album *As Daylight Dies* (2006). Here the modular excess of the wrestler entrances directly integrates with the cross-promotion of partner products, converging the music, entrance aesthetic, wrestling star, and recording artist into a singular stylistic unit.

The official theme songs of WWE PPV events function in a similar manner. Drawing on the 2016 *SummerSlam* event as an illustration, WWE attached three official theme songs to the event: “Who’s with Me” by Flo Rida (2016); “My PYT” by Wale (2016); and “Welcome” by Fort Minor (2015). The event’s opening sequence summarized the featured narratives through a succession of intercut video clips, stills, soundbites, and narration. The overlay of the track “Who’s With Me” unified this discourse, operating, along with the conflation of the other elements, as a central signifier for the event.

At the sequence’s conclusion, the video faded to a sequential splash of brand logos (including event sponsors Cricket Wireless, Kentucky Fried Chicken or KFC, and WWE SummerSlam) while resetting the Flo Rida track to the beginning. This reinforced the correlation between the track and the event, reducing the narrative of *SummerSlam* to an audio-visual unit, whereby the track, pre-sold concept of the SummerSlam brand, and

featured narratives converged in a “strong singular image[...] which makes an immediate impression” (Wyatt, 1994, p. 122).

As with the earlier illustration from *Roadblock: End of the Line*, this aesthetic bled into the arena, converging the pre-sold concepts with the event space through an intersection of the fans, the music, the event logo, the pyrotechnic set, and narration. This process parallels the tendency of the high concept movie to spread music across the opening of the film, the credits, and the first scenes to “privilege self-conscious and concentrated narrative information” (Wyatt, 1994, pp. 41-2). Beyond the opening sequence, the official theme songs of *SummerSlam* reappeared in localized situations, creating distinct structures (Wyatt, 1994) that once more fused the music, stars, narratives, and SummerSlam logo, thereby reinforcing the symbiosis throughout the event.

As in the high concept movie, this convergence of commercially available music with the WWE PPV text performs a double function (Wyatt, 1994) whereby the integrated tracks promote the artist and external consumption of the track promote the event. In the high concept movie, this “cross-referencing sometimes develops beyond merely integrating film clips and singer” (p. 45) to manifest the actors in the cross-promoted music video or the artist in the film. A WWE PPV event often utilizes this same process. At the *WrestleMania 32* event, recording artist Snoop Dogg performed a live version of Sasha Banks’ entrance theme. Accompanying Banks to the ring while wearing a wrestling inspired robe, Snoop Dogg’s external identity melded with the style of the wrestling world, and Banks’ character specifically, to produce a semiotic synthesis invoking a new level of cross-media signification.<sup>1</sup>

## **The Characters and Genre**

In the high concept movie, characters exist as types, “defined through a small number of characteristics, with physical appearance most significant to the definition” (Wyatt, 1994, p. 53). The correlation to WWE becomes clear in relation to the traditional character polarities of the wrestling world. The first match of *Hell in a Cell* (October 2016) illustrates this mode of character creation. The match involved Lana, Rusev, and Roman Reigns. Lana, a Russian character portrayed by Floridian Joy “C.J.” Perry, entered the arena first. Her character exemplifies Jeffery Mondak’s (1989) notion of utilizing mannerisms, behaviors, and ethnicity to provide the signs that construct the performer’s morality. Billed as the “Ravishing Russian,” Lana appropriates a gait and posture associated with the fashion catwalk, pausing in her entrance to strike many poses that emphasize her physicality, while her intense stare and the stern set of her facial features project out toward the live audience in an almost predatory fashion.

When Lana addresses the crowd in her faux “Russian” accent, she situates herself in opposition to the predominantly American audience, asking the attendees to stand for the entrance of Rusev, her Bulgarian-born onscreen (and real-life) husband, defining him as a “true American hero” who will crush his American opponent Reigns. Lana amplifies this rhetoric on the level of her body. Beginning the exchange with one hand clasped to her hip, Lana raises her chin to the audience, before commanding them to stand with the raising of her outstretched palm and finally punctuating the words “true” and “crush” with a stab of her pointed finger. Such rhetoric presents a carefully constructed response to a specific set of values. These values draw on and exaggerate the wider fears and key political issues of American society, becoming the ritual metaphor of wrestling (Migliore, 1993). Lana “facilitates the coming to terms with the complicated political occurrences in foreign lands” (Rahmani, 2007, p. 87) through her construction of a Russian identity.

When Rusev's entrance begins, his character utilizes the same oppositional context, with his entrance theme containing Bulgarian utterances and the screens on the set changing to display the colors of the Bulgarian flag. Indeed, Rusev directly appropriates his character from the foundation constructed for him by Lana. Like Lana, when Rusev, known as the "Bulgarian Brute," makes his way onto the stage, he appropriates another mode of signification on the level of the body, which pre-emptly the nature of his character (Barthes, 1972). Here, size, strength, and an abundance of body hair construct Rusev's masculinity in opposition to Lana (Soulliere, 2005) as he stalks to the ring with long and purposeful strides, his chest puffed proud and his arms projecting far from his sides. Where Lana used a spoken discourse to establish her character, Rusev, who adopts the same stern gaze, instead vocalizes via a bestial roar that descends to a scowl as he first rattles and then scrutinizes the fencing of the chain-link cell in which he is about to fight.

This mode of character building works against meaningful character development by drawing heavily from a body of shared cultural knowledge, whereby, like the high concept movie, WWE directly appropriates this knowledge in the construction of narrative and character (Wyatt, 1994). Moreover, the high concept movie, with its simplistic narrative and easily definable characters, weakens the link between character and narrative that separates such films from other Hollywood films (Wyatt, 1994). Drawing from the above illustration, the same separation becomes apparent in the WWE PPV text, which departs from other forms of narrative-driven television through its impoverished storylines and intentionally shallow characters.

As in the high concept movie, this lack of deep character development forces a greater investment with the characters' physical aspects, encouraging a reading of the text's surface, where the look, stars, music, and characterization present style over substance (Wyatt, 1994). Yet this simplification of the wrestler's character has the potential to further Wyatt's notion

of integrated marketing and merchandising considerations motivating aesthetic, which can increase the breakdown of specific genres.

During the 2016 *SummerSlam* event, after the inaugural WWE Universal Championship match, a segment aired featuring a direct integration of the intellectual property and associated imagery of both WWE and event sponsor KFC. What appeared to be a conventional commercial for KFC differentiated itself from other commercials through an excess of convergence and style. The segment opened with a “typical” family debating the evening meal, utilizing the established visual aesthetic of the television commercial. This image was then interrupted by WWE star The Miz dressed in a chicken suit, who proceeded to promote the fictional brand of “Pupper Clucker’s Chicken,” which, Miz claimed, was the world’s best chicken sandwich. A discordant voiceover then interrupted the segment, causing the actors in the commercial to stop performing and directly address the camera. At this point, the segment cut to an establishing shot of a WWE *SmackDown* arena,<sup>2</sup> where the advert was playing on the Titantron. At this point, the actors now looked directly into the arena, where WWE star Dolph Ziggler, dressed as KFC’s Colonel Sanders, stood in the ring with a microphone. The Colonel, unhappy about Miz claiming that his chicken sandwich was the world’s greatest sandwich, argued with the cast of the commercial on the arena screen, converging the space of the commercial with the space of the *SmackDown* wrestling arena.

The situation soon escalated with the Colonel storming up the wrestling entrance ramp and into the backstage area. A moment later, the Colonel appeared on the big screen alongside the commercial’s cast (specifically Miz). Initially, this was presented via the WWE television aesthetic, where the audience watched Miz and the Colonel interact via the *SmackDown* set. Thereafter, the segment transitioned back to the television commercial aesthetic, whereby the direct address was abandoned, and the segment left the arena environment.

Inevitably, a confrontation ensued, with the Colonel ripping off his trademark white jacket to reveal a KFC-inspired wrestling attire and attacking the chicken-guised Miz. As the fight intensified, Miz and the Colonel broke through the fourth wall of the commercial back into the space and aesthetic of the arena, emerging from the *SmackDown* set to chants of “Colonel Sanders” as they made their way toward the ring. A highlight package then summarized the resultant match, with the Colonel taking the win against the backdrop of the *SmackDown* set restyled in the corporate colors of KFC. The segment then ended with a splash of the KFC Chicken Little product and bled back into the *SummerSlam* PPV event without further comment.

The segment thereby functioned as a complex transmedia collaboration (Perryman, 2008) between the two organizations and the three spaces. By design, the segment was removable from the entire event, able to exist as a distinct, self-contained narrative unit (Jenkins, 2006). This relationship between narrative and media extended the “themes, characters and story worlds” (Kerrigan & Velikovsky, 2016, p. 250) of both KFC and WWE across the multiple platforms of the *SmackDown* audience, the *SummerSlam* televisual audience, and the subsequent broadcasts of the standalone crossover commercial (with the match itself becoming canonical to the WWE universe).

Much like the movie trailer, this severability created a paratextual product that is both part of and apart from (Booth, 2016) the *SummerSlam* PPV and the *SmackDown Live* event. The segment, however, moved beyond the properties of the trailer to exploit the interactivity of the transmedia creation (Booth, 2016), and the *SmackDown* audience could directly interact with the converged WWE and KFC story world. Therefore, the transmedia elements of the storytelling process disrupted the notion of a unified consumption whereby the totality of the narrative spread across multiple texts (Jenkins, 2009) and audiences, leading to a convergence of genres, the commercial and professional wrestling.



## **Conclusion**

Through an analysis of historic and contemporary professional wrestling texts, this chapter demonstrates how WWE PPV content converges with the five key stylistic and aesthetic apparatus of the high concept movie. In translating this process to live television, WWE has developed a high concept mode of professional wrestling—sports entertainment. In this high concept mode of sports entertainment, the processes of aesthetic and stylistic convergence, organized around the marketing of consumer products, directly shapes the function and form of WWE PPVs. Like the high concept movie, WWE PPV events are marked by an emphasis on a visually striking style, integrated marketing, and merchandising, which, in combination with a simple and easily communicable premise, produce consumer products directly converged with their processes of promotion.

Moreover, through the appropriation of connected modes of viewing that draw on participatory paratextual, intertextual, and metatextual conditions and technologies, this chapter reveals how the WWE PPV text transcends the conventional understanding of high concept to become a concept even “higher” than that of the Hollywood blockbuster. In this “higher” concept, multiple modes of simultaneous live audience, physical and televised, invite participation directly into the construction of the text, while the proclivity of the wrestlers to inhabit the look and lifestyle of their characters outside the traditional spaces of wrestling, often in the realm of social media, extends that construction beyond the central text. This conflation of the wrestling world with the everyday, through the bodies of the wrestlers and spaces of the events, allows WWE to transcend and blur the boundaries between reality and fiction, physically manifesting its discourses, derived from contemporaneous social-cultural contexts, in a more tangible form than even the most immersive texts of Hollywood cinema.

This expansion of Wyatt's high concept suggests a direction for future research. The live nature of WWE PPV events, and the accompanying processes of participatory consumption, appear to allow WWE to constantly and rapidly reconstruct its PPV events in response to, and in anticipation of, wider trends of popular culture. This in turn represents a significant evolution from the high concept of Hollywood cinema. The blockbuster movie, limited by onerous, expensive, and pre-defined mechanisms of production and distribution, can be slow to react to movements in popular culture. Further research could explore how WWE PPV events facilitate a mode of production and consumption whereby the narrative, aesthetic, and style remain unfixed and can react almost instantaneously to market and audience fluctuations. Such future research could add to the work done to understand the relationship between professional wrestling and its audiences (such as Goggin & Emmondoulodis, Wysocki & Call, and Reinhard in this collection).

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<sup>1</sup> Sasha Banks (Mercedes Kaestner-Varnado) is, in actuality, first cousin to Snoop Dog (Calvin Cordozar Broadus, Jr.).

<sup>2</sup> This segment was taped after the August 16 episode of *SmackDown* (Pritchard, 2016).