

Occupy Raw: Pro Wrestling Fans, Carnavalesque, and the Commercialization of Social Movements

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You see Stephanie and Hunter, this is the problem. You guys and people like you underestimate the power of these people. Stephanie, last week you told everybody here that you own this ring, that you own this arena, that you own me, that you own these people. Guess what? You don't own any of this. We... Own... This... Ring!

—Daniel Bryan, *Raw*, 10 Mar. 2014 (“Raw”)

ON MARCH 10, 2014, DANIEL BRYAN STAGED AN “OCCUPY Raw” protest in the center of the World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) ring. The event was broadcast live and seen by millions of viewers around the world on WWE’s weekly television series *Raw*. This scripted act of defiance saw fan favorite and underdog wrestler Bryan fill the ring with dozens of fans wearing his signature “Yes” T-shirt. The protest was the culmination of an ongoing feud between Bryan and The Authority, a team of corporate bosses and wrestlers consisting at the time of WWE Chief Brand Officer Stephanie McMahon, WWE Executive Vice President of Talent and Live Events Triple H, and a rotating crew of villainous wrestlers, including Kane, Seth Rollins, and Randy Orton.

This storyline of the Everyman versus his corporate bosses is nothing new for WWE. In the late 1990s, arguably one of the most popular professional wrestlers ever, “Stone Cold” Steve Austin, engaged in a feud with The Corporation and the evil Mister McMahon,

portrayed by real-life WWE Chairman and CEO Vince McMahon. WWE is a television drama, worldwide traveling spectacle, and multimedia corporation self-identifying as “sports entertainment.” For decades it has relied on global politics, current events, and popular culture to engage its fans with characters and storylines (Rahmani 95; Mondak 146). Blurring the lines between reality and wrestling has made WWE’s *Raw* one of the longest running serialized television programs ever. Marc Leverette argues that pro wrestling creates a “myth” that connects “tangible forms to abstract concepts such as class, power and economic and gender roles. The superstars embody the hopes, struggles, flaws and ideals of their fans” (106–07). WWE, for Leverette, performs a “*symbolic function* to reveal an audience conception of American society” (107, emphasis in original).

In creating “myth,” Leverette says every aspect of professional wrestling—from in-ring body slams and punches, to the costumes and storylines, and finally to the merchandise—must be sold (108). Because WWE is a multibillion dollar, publicly traded entertainment and media company listed on the New York Stock Exchange, the characters and their dramatic, athletic performances have real-world financial implications when they do or do not connect with the fan base. The Authority regularly stresses the importance of doing “what’s best for business” (“*Raw*”, 2014) and manipulates matches through referee corruption and outside interference to ensure that the World Heavyweight Champion is a handpicked wrestler consistent with WWE’s brand and corporate image. Daniel Bryan, a bearded wrestler who does not conform to the familiar aesthetics of the bronzed bodybuilder, is mocked and verbally belittled by The Authority for his height, called a “B-plus player” by Triple H and told he will never be the face of the WWE. While some argue that pro wrestling fans have a voice in the outcome of matches and the direction of storylines (Mazer “Doggie Doggie World” 114; Warden 8), WWE elevated fan agency during the Occupy *Raw* segment by inviting nearly thirty spectators into the ring and directly involving them in the show. This well-crafted interactivity by WWE writers keeps fans emotionally and financially engaged in the product.

The WWE and its fans create what Mikhail Bakhtin has explored as the carnivalesque. Once WWE writers crafted the underdog rebel wrestler character of Daniel Bryan, Bryan’s position as the leader of the Yes Movement had implications for the commercialization of

social movements. WWE relied on consumer culture and spectacle to craft a fictional social movement, the Yes Movement, that used the brand Occupy and its tactics of public disruption and demonstration. The Yes Movement and its attendant star Daniel Bryan were commercial properties that trivialized themes of income inequality and social justice. Because professional wrestling is both a narrative that promotes dialogue capable of spurring social change (Souther 274) and a form of popular entertainment that reinforces ideologies, WWE can be understood to engage its fans in participatory theater that simultaneously acknowledges the existence of contemporary social movements while reinforcing negative stereotypes about movement actors.

The Road to WrestleMania

To understand the interactive nature of a professional wrestling event, the sociopolitical implications of the “Occupy Raw” storyline, and the language Daniel Bryan, The Authority, and the “Yes Movement” used during this television show, I rely on my experience attending the Royal Rumble in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania on January 26, 2014 as well as a textual analysis of WWE *Raw* broadcasts, specifically the episode that aired March 10, 2014 in which the “Occupy Raw” segment took place. Through a self-reflexive analysis of my position as a fan, I understand the interactive nature of WWE live events and fan culture. Attending the Royal Rumble event with friends and fellow professional wrestling fans allows me a nuanced understanding of the fan anticipation, expectation, and reactions at pay-per-view shows. Through this, I explore how WWE shapes fans’ viewing experiences and their place within the “WWE Universe.”¹ In the current media environment in which podcasts, reality shows, and social media messages are constantly being delivered, WWE has expanded its product offerings and fan engagement opportunities. This complicates our understanding of the carnival.

To establish his oppositional narrative and challenge the oppressive corporate Authority, the WWE announcers and Bryan refer to the audience and Bryan throughout the Occupy Raw segment as the collective Yes Movement. This fictional movement consists of the live

audience as well as the televised audience watching at home. They posted, commented, and tweeted their support for Bryan's quest to win the WWE World Heavyweight Championship using the hashtags #YesMovement and #OccupyRaw on social media. Because WWE travels around the country (and the world) producing and broadcasting from a new city each week, the Yes Movement gives the appearance of a networked movement in which participants work together to achieve justice for underdog wrestler Bryan. The corporatizing of the organizing structure and language of contemporary social movements in a popular television show like WWE's *Raw* is problematic for several reasons: it promotes the personalization of politics by highlighting individual goals and assumes movement work achieves a clear resolution and definitive ending. Networked and horizontally structured social movements like Occupy Wall Street have been critiqued for failing to propose or secure policy reform, while equally being celebrated for introducing concepts of economic inequality—"The 99%"—into the public consciousness. By co-opting the networked structure and message of "us versus them" that contemporary social movements use, WWE's "Occupy Raw" segment and the Yes Movement storyline (1) reinforce negative stereotypes of movement actors and activism, (2) trivialize the labor of movement organizing, and (3) show how WWE engages in a form of corporate social responsibility (CSR).

During the Occupy Raw segment, Bryan repeatedly encouraged the fans in Memphis, Tennessee to join the movement by interacting with his performance. Crowd chants of Bryan's signature "Yes! Yes! Yes!" and "No! No! No!" catchphrases reinforce the audience's participatory role and agency within the live show and promote Bryan's story of the underappreciated wrestler demanding a shot at the championship. To engage fan participation Bryan sends cues to the fans, such as asking closed-ended, yes or no questions and motioning with both hands repeatedly raised overhead in his signature "Yes!" gesture. The genesis and evolution of the "Yes!" and "No!" chant is somewhat complicated, but it should be noted that prior to Bryan's role as a fan favorite or, as professional wrestling fans refer to the good guys, a "face," he was a "heel" or villain wrestler. His evolution from a villain to fan favorite reinforces Bryan's anti-establishment ethos and allows him to connect with the audience and build his "movement."

Carnavalesque, Professional Wrestling, and Its Fans

The Royal Rumble is an important moment because it is what wrestling fans refer to as the beginning of WrestleMania season, and is the beginning of the so-called the Road to WrestleMania. The winner of the Royal Rumble battle royal becomes the number one contender for the World Heavyweight Championship at WWE's biggest annual spectacle, WrestleMania. The promoters, writers, announcers, wrestlers, and fans identify with this period between early January through late March as the time when the most drama, excitement, and surprises occur. Several incidents involving Daniel Bryan, his quest for the WWE championship, and the fans' reaction to the events in Pittsburgh led to the development of the Yes Movement and culminated in Bryan winning the World Heavyweight Championship at WrestleMania 30 on April 30, 2014.

Mikhail Bakhtin describes carnival as the place where nearly everything is allowed and where the participants exhibit a "second life, organized on the basis of laughter" (*Rabelais* 8). This laughter in celebratory performance can encourage "the return of repressed creative energies" and a venue to counter "the sterility of dominant norms" (Robinson 2). Carnavalesque is a type of folk-humor that encourages communal participation "with no boundary between performers and audience. . . . It creates the chance for a new perspective and a new order of things, by showing the relative nature of all that exists" (Robinson 2).

Professional wrestling, viewed through Bakhtin's carnivalesque, is a way for wrestlers to present "private craftsmanship" to the "social life of discourse outside the artist's study, [into] the open spaces of public squares, streets, cities and villages of social groups" ("Discourse" 269). For the pro wrestler, presenting his or her craft to a live WWE audience is where careers are made or broken. The wrestler must not only have incredible athletic talents to perform high-risk maneuvers in the ring, but also a charisma on the microphone that shows he can respond to the crowd. As Sharon Mazer points out, "The audience is. . . treated as valued customers, active participants whose approval is essential to the action onstage" ("Doggie Doggie World" 114). Mazer also explains how fans can impact the pacing of a match with chants of "Bo-ring! Bo-ring!" or "This is Awesome!"

and the various ways, depending on the in-ring experience of the wrestlers, the performers react to or ignore these cries (*Professional Wrestling* 160). Regardless of how excited or disinterested the fans are in the action and, however, the wrestlers choose to feed off or ignore this energy, the outcomes and ensuing storylines are fixed. For Roland Barthes:

Wrestlers, who are very experienced, know perfectly how to direct the spontaneous episodes of the fight so as to make them conform to the image which the public has of the great legendary themes of its mythology. A wrestler can irritate or disgust, he never disappoints, for he always accomplishes completely, by a progressive solidification of signs, what the public expects of him. In wrestling, nothing exists except in the absolute, there is no symbol, no allusion; everything is presented exhaustively. (25)

Watching a WWE event on television and attending a live event in person are very different experiences, and Laurence de Garis believes the growing “emphasis on televised performance has led to an overall decline in wrestlers’ ability to react to a crowd and construct an *ad hoc* story” (205). With the absence of a live crowd (or studio audience), it would be difficult to imagine what kind of atmosphere *Raw* would have. Fans of professional wrestling are typically thought of as falling in one of two categories: Marks, on the one hand, are fans who do not understand the story is scripted and have limited knowledge of the wrestlers and their personal and professional histories. (“Marking out” describes the moment when fans overreact or become overly emotional about a scene or outcome of a match.) Smarts, also referred to as Smart Marks or Smarks, on the other hand, have a deep understanding of professional wrestling, its operational structures as a business and form of athletic entertainment, and, due to their level of involvement in online message boards and fan communities, typically predict surprise storylines or match results. Smarks are not immune to “marking out.”

Major events like WrestleMania and other high profile pay-per-view promotions tend to attract the smartest of Smarks. Following The Authority’s “cheating” Daniel Bryan out of his WWE World Heavyweight Championship the previous August at the pay-per-view event SummerSlam, many expected Bryan to redeem himself and win the Royal Rumble. He was scheduled to perform in a singles

match prior to the Royal Rumble main event, and many expected that if he won the singles match he would be a surprise entrant into the Royal Rumble main event, win the contest, and compete for the WWE Championship at *WrestleMania 30*. During Bryan's singles match, fans eagerly chanted, "Yes! Yes! Yes!" and shouted their approval with chants of "This is awesome!" Much to the crowd's disapproval, however, Bryan lost the singles match.

The Royal Rumble's main event is an every-man-for-himself battle royal where up to thirty wrestlers compete in the ring at one time. The object is to eliminate all other competitors by throwing them over the top rope and on to the mat below. The last man standing is victorious and secures his position in the main event at *WrestleMania*. When it was revealed that Daniel Bryan would not participate in the Royal Rumble event and newly resigned, part-time wrestler Dave Batista would be the winner, the crowd booed relentlessly. After four years away from wrestling, the WWE perhaps assumed Batista would be a fan favorite upon his return. As he stood on the ropes after his victory, looking to the crowd for approval, fans continued jeering Batista. After the overwhelmingly negative reaction from the crowd and social media commenters, WWE re-evaluated its plans for *WrestleMania* and scripted *Occupy Raw*.²

Although the events that evening in Pittsburgh likely influenced the *Occupy Raw* segment and Daniel Bryan's victory at *WrestleMania 30*, fan participation and their influence on the show is ultimately limited and shaped by the writers and bookers. The relationship between the WWE's writers and their fans is in some ways reactionary. The writers develop storylines and test them weekly before a live audience. The stories that elicit the biggest possible reaction, positive or negative, from the live crowd and those commenting online are acknowledged and pursued by WWE. As long as the fans are engaged with the product, the show is successful. Within the Bakhtinian carnival of the wrestling match, fans are led to believe "a utopian promise [exists] for human emancipation through the free expression of thought and creativity" (Robinson 3). Wrestlers and their promoters often pause during in-ring monologues, leaving space for the live audience to shout their approval or disapproval with the scene, encouraging free expression. However, because WWE is the only major professional wrestling promotion available for fans and wrestlers and is broadcast as a weekly television series, it is "blinkered

by a fantasy that oppression can be willed away through the regulation of speech and representation” (Sammond 19). All successful television shows build drama through anticipation. If the writers and promoters gave the fans exactly what they want, when they want it, what would be left for next week’s show? The WWE is often referred to as a man’s soap opera with storylines that never end and cliffhangers that are never resolved.

Through social media and other forms of crossover entertainment properties, WWE has complicated fan engagement with these storylines. Fans have been using message boards to discuss the characters of pro wrestling and behind-the-scenes aspects of the wrestling business for years, but with the popularity of fan-produced podcasts and social media it is becoming increasingly difficult for the WWE to ignore these conversations. Since launching its 24-hour streaming television service WWE Network in February 2014, WWE has produced and aired several podcasts with executives breaking kayfabe to acknowledge negative fan reaction and describe any story adjustments as one way the company listens to its fans. Kayfabe is a term professional wrestling fans understand as the suspension of disbelief and the creation of realistic drama. In a 2013 interview, Triple H said, “we have a focus group every single night, 10,000 people somewhere” (Shoemaker), describing how WWE’s live shows present an opportunity to gauge fans’ reactions to current rivalries and storylines and make changes as needed. Market researchers utilize focus groups to increase an organization’s brand community and create what Sarah Banet-Weiser calls “engagement” between the producers and consumers that only *feels* “authentic” (43). Independent podcasts and fan websites that critically discuss the writing as well as the business of WWE has forced WWE to respond at the risk of losing control of its message. WWE and its wrestlers craft storylines that often merge with the performers’ off-screen and out-of-the-ring life, making aspects of sports entertainment difficult to separate from the fairness of competitive sport. WWE regularly offers its wrestlers for live interview segments on *ESPN SportsCenter*, and the E! Network’s *Total Divas* show provides a behind-the-scenes look at the wrestlers’ personal and romantic lives. Even the characters’ names are part of the illusion. Bryan’s real name is Bryan Danielson, a simple reversal of his ring name, while Stephanie McMahon and Triple H are real-life corporate bosses and principal owners within WWE management.

Inside the ring Bryant is demoralized by The Authority to create dramatic tension for the sake of television entertainment, but outside the ring Bryan's "Yes!" chant has transcended professional wrestling and is mimicked in popular culture and college athletics. His marketing appeal for both casual and passionate fans made him the obvious choice to lead the Yes Movement.

Whether fans are unwilling or unable to distinguish between the off-screen personalities and the in-ring performers, WWE reinforces Bakhtin's suggestion that, "Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all people" (*Rabelais* 7). These dynamics surrounding Bryan and the Yes Movement helped create what Henry Jenkins calls "pseudorealism," a process in which WWE's storytelling and production choices "preserv[e] the narrative at all costs" (51).

WWE promoters occasionally misjudge fan reaction with their scripts. By creating the Yes Movement, however, WWE and its writers adapted to the fans' negative reaction to the Royal Rumble and provided them with small breadcrumbs throughout the WrestleMania season, maintaining interest and ratings for its product. The rivalry between Daniel Bryan and The Authority produced over six months of televised content and ratings success, merchandise buys, and increased attention paid to the buildup to WrestleMania 30. More importantly, it led to the fans occupying *Raw*.

Daniel Bryan Leads the Carnival

As the pro wrestling outsider and leader of the Yes Movement, Daniel Bryan reinforced the individualist ideal of one man representing the people and serving as the central force behind a social movement. Dieter Rucht and Friedhelm Neidhardt refer to "movement entrepreneurs" or "agitators" (11) as a key element in how social movements move from the individual to a collective frame. Bryan represented the agitator and invited fans into the ring. Bryan's decision to grow his beard and wear long, unkempt hair presents a stark contrast to the corporate, clean-cut look of his adversaries in The Authority. Bryan's signature beard also represents what Bakhtin calls the masking or unmasking of actors within the carnival (*Speech Genres*). Bryan's physical transformation in the years leading up to his

featured role in WWE displays carnival's "grotesque" element and "performs a kind of symbolic degradation aimed at bringing elevated phenomena 'down to earth'—to the material, bodily or sensuous level" (Robinson 3–4). The rebellious appearance of an undersized bearded wrestler along with his willingness to sacrifice his body and give it his all in the ring makes Bryan relatable to the fans. Critics of carnival, however, claim it "is a kind of safety-valve through which people let off steam. It ultimately sustains and is functional for the dominant system. It might even reinforce values by contrasting them with their opposites" (Robinson 6).

With Bryan as its leader, the Yes Movement attempted to represent what Hunt and Benford call a "new social movement" (437). Unlike social movements that focus on revolutionary themes that root their actions in class struggles, movements of the New Left have been criticized for engaging in what "has come to be known as 'identity politics,' which according to the view of many is no politics at all" (Calabrese 19). Social movements that fight for equality on issues such as gender, sexual identity, or race, for example, must connect messaging that resonates on an individual level to a shared struggle of communitarian change. Bryan, as the agitator and movement leader, established a collective frame for the Yes Movement through crowd interaction and collective action. Despite him being the sole benefactor of the movement's demand, a title shot at *WrestleMania*, Bryan showed *The Authority* that the fans have coalesced under his leadership. "What do you think if everyone here in this coliseum just walks out to this parking lot right now?" Bryan asked. "We can setup our own ring and you can have your own Raw in front of an arena full of empty chairs," he finished, and was met with the audience's resounding chant of "Yes! Yes! Yes!" ("Raw," 2014).

As Bryan leads the collective Yes Movement in his quest for respect and affirmation that the Everyman can beat the corporate power structure, he "enacts and undermines our fantasy that identity is the same as action, that representing the social order is the same as producing it—the ultimate perversion of the personal as political" (Sammond 20). While several dozen fans stand in and outside of the ring wearing Daniel Bryan T-shirts with logos depicting Bryan as a caricatured Che Guevara, Bryan sits on the top rope in a corner of the ring, elevated from the fans participating in the segment. This physical positioning in the ring during the *Occupy Raw* segment

reinforces the notion that an individual can spur social change and lead a movement. When The Authority sends a two-man security team to clear the ring, Bryan is protected from physical harm by a wall of his supporters and offers this message of solidarity:

But tonight, I am not alone. I am going to fill this ring, I am going to fill this arena, I'm going to fill this whole place with the 'Yes Movement', right here... Because you see, we are not going to take it any more. We are one. We stand together. We are united! And we are not going to leave this ring until The Authority gives us what we want. Isn't that right? Isn't that right? Isn't that right? We are not leaving. We are going to be here all night. [Crowd chants:] Yes! Yes! Yes! Yes! (Raw)

The chanting of “yes” is also reminiscent of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) strategy—“One NO to neoliberal capitalism, many YESES” (Wolfson 25). The Zapatistas was a leftist revolutionary group from Chiapas, Mexico and its “many YESES” refrain encouraged all people to join the fight for social change against systemic inequalities. The in-ring actions of Bryan encourage participation from the live audience, thus presenting Daniel Bryan as the antagonistic force against a powerful corporate organization and further supporting the notion that the Yes Movement’s goals broadly encompass a diverse set of individuals. “For (male) wrestling fans, [pro wrestling] provide[s] an avenue for a strong emotional response to social inequalities and injustices—particularly class oppression—that polite society usually [does] not permit. However, at the same time it reduce[s] those injustices and their resolution to a struggle between individuals” (Sammond 15-16). Bryan’s position as the leader of the Yes Movement also supports the idea that leaders of contemporary, horizontal social movements gain positions of authority because they hold the most social and cultural capital in the group for whom the social movement resonates.

Presenting a unified voice through “Occupy Raw” that stands opposed to The Authority and the real-life WWE bosses encourage fans and the audience to believe that a scripted rebellion during a television show, complete with a staged sit-in protest in the middle of a WWE ring, gives fans control over what happens next. Like protest participants who return home after a demonstration, there is satisfaction for being directly involved in the spectacle.

This collective, somewhat diverse group of fans that formed the Yes Movement represent what W. Lance Bennett calls the “personalization of politics” (26). Large, heterogeneous groups of individuals, according to Bennett, create movements that can rapidly expand membership due to low barriers to entry and challenge national and transnational business interests, while also being prone to reinforcing globalization and free market systems’ role in creating “political consumerism” (25). It is not the fans that stand to benefit from this scripted “protest”—it is Daniel Bryan and the WWE. Bryan demands and receives his title shot at WrestleMania 30 and his notoriety and popularity within and beyond professional wrestling increased. The WWE benefits financially from increased ratings, merchandise sales, and attention paid to its biggest event of the season, WrestleMania. WWE continues this illusion of fan agency online through social media and its mobile smartphone application during broadcasts of its Monday night series *Raw*. The announcers suggest potential opponents or storylines at the beginning of the broadcast and the option receiving the most fan votes will be carried out at the end of the show. All pay-per-views, it was announced during the launch of WWE Network in 2014, would be available to subscribers for \$9.99 per month, just in time for WrestleMania 30. The lure of fan favorite Daniel Bryan securing the WWE championship and completing his seemingly unlikely, against-all-odds comeback against The Authority served as incentive to sign up. Crafting the storyline of a movement of engaged audience members and at-home fans was not complete, however, without a villain. The Authority filled this role and exhibited corporate social responsibility when it gave in to the Yes Movement’s scripted demands.

The Commercialization of Social Movements

Contrary to Bryan’s voice of unification, The Authority’s Triple H performs the stereotypical role of hated corporate boss by vilifying and demeaning Bryan and his in-ring supporters. “Okay, Daniel congratulations, you got your own little Occupy Raw Movement, I’m sure all the other dirty little hippies and trolls that live under the bridge with you are very happy with you. And while I’m happy all of you could have a moment, this is the part where reality comes

crashing down on you" (*Raw*). He continues berating the fans, even hurling physical insults at one fan: "That's it, get it out of your system. Come on. That's all ya got? I know the fat guy right up front doesn't have much more in him, I can see him sweating. Come on, give it to me chubby, come on. Aw, you petered out didn't you? That's too bad because your 30 seconds of glory are over you losers." Calling the fans losers, insulting their physical characteristics, and threatening them with arrest and prosecution reinforces the idea that protests and public demonstrations are dangerous, their members are at the fringe of normal social order, and corporations will protect their capitalist interests by fighting back (Shamir 670).

In protecting their corporate interests, WWE and other multinational corporations promote corporate social responsibility (CSR). Ronen Shamir describes how "capitalist philanthropy" shapes an organization's public image as a socially responsible business (676). He writes, "[W]hile counter-hegemonic pressures often seek the backing of law and regulation, the CSR field evolves through corporate investment in self-regulatory schemes that have the capacity to preempt viable threats to corporate interests" (680). When Daniel Bryan represents the subaltern force against WWE's corporate interests, Stephanie McMahon, principal owner of WWE, violently lashes out at him: "I've had enough of this. Don't you disrespect my husband. Don't you disrespect my family's name. My great grandfather, my grandfather. When I was born, this place became mine. It is all mine. And I do own you. I do own you. *Get out. I said get out! Get out!*" (*Raw*). McMahon's husband Triple H intervenes, physically restrains his wife and grants Bryan a match at WrestleMania. While McMahon plays the role of corporate villain, Triple H conforms to corporate social responsibility by conceding and essentially giving the fans and the Yes Movement what they demand: a match with Triple H at WrestleMania 30 with the winner wrestling for the WWE World Heavyweight Championship. While Triple H's motto, "It's what's best for business," was previously used to disparage Bryan and discredit his ability to serve as the face of the WWE, this concession to the demands of Occupy Raw is savvy public relations. As Shamir writes, "corporations transform the idea of social responsibility into a marketing device and into a commodity that conceals the power relations that underlie the relationships between global capitalism and social inequality, social harm, and social wrongs" (684). WWE and other commercial brands

take financial advantage, and co-opt the language and visual symbolism, of social movements. Whether it is the sale of Guy Fawkes masks that benefit Warner Brothers (Bilton) or Occupy Wall Street posters being sold at Wal-Mart (Roy), corporations, rather than combating social movements as the opposition, protect their capitalist interests by recognizing trends and creatively monetizing them.

While Bakhtin contends the carnival is a “second life” in which participants are fully engaged (*Rabelais* 8), Guy Debord similarly refers to his conception of the spectacle as a phenomenon that is all encompassing: “The spectacle cannot be understood as a mere visual deception produced by mass-media technologies. It is a worldview that has actually been materialized” (7). Professional wrestling upholds this material worldview by popularizing geopolitical conflicts, social movements, and counterhegemonic practices within storylines and with the branding of its merchandise. Debord argues that this commodity fetishism produces a passive public alienated from its social conditions. Debord’s critique of the “star” can be analyzed using Daniel Bryan’s “Yes!” gesture. Following Bryan’s lead, the crowd thrusts their hands overhead in repeated succession, chanting “Yes!” as their hands reach full extension, reinforcing the idea that “the individual’s gestures are no longer his own; they are the gestures of someone else who represents them to him. The spectator does not feel at home anywhere, because the spectacle is everywhere” (11). By selling fake beards, T-shirts, and stuffed dolls featuring or resembling Bryan, WWE capitalizes on the wrestler’s populist underdog status, but also on his increasing role in the wake of the Yes Movement as the face of the company. Debord argued that the collection of “trinkets” satisfies the indulgence of the faithful, and WWE’s merchandizing of Bryan and his fictional movement invoke Debord’s comment that “the fetishism of commodities generates its own moments of fervent exaltation. All this is useful for only one purpose: producing habitual submission” (19).

Discussion and Conclusion

Professional wrestling has used geopolitical conflict and current events as inspiration for its storylines for generations. These storylines help perpetuate the notion that fans “perceive that their established values are incongruent with rapidly changing social conditions, [and]

respect and honor for their style of life is perceived to be diminishing” (May 81). While comparisons can be drawn between “Stone Cold” Steve Austin’s feud with Vince McMahon during the so-called Attitude Era of the late 1990s and Daniel Bryan’s feud with The Authority in 2014, the themes of participatory social justice and collective action against the wealthy corporate elite, as well as new forms of fan engagement through media, make Bryan’s episode different. In media interviews, public appearances, and televised events, executives and wrestlers stress the narrative that fans possess enormous power in dictating which wrestler will be “put over.” It is true to some extent that the writers and promoters listen to what the fans want, but the fact remains that WWE is the only major professional wrestling league in the United States for fans and wrestlers alike. WWE purchased nearly every other professional wrestling league—the most notable circuit being World Championship Wrestling (WCW) in 2001—leaving the wrestlers pursuing a professional career, and the fans wanting to cheer them on, practically no alternatives. The wrestlers perform for WWE as independent contractors and have very little, if any, room to negotiate merchandise royalties and compensation. Fans have indeed cheered relentlessly for wrestlers they loved to return to WWE, but because of contract disputes or creative disagreements between wrestlers and executives, the performers were released and no amount of cheering could bring them back.

Through the Occupy Raw segment and the creation of the Yes Movement, WWE shaped and reacted to fan behavior to create the illusion of fan agency within wrestlers’ storylines. In exploring how Daniel Bryan, the Yes Movement, and the Occupy Raw protest co-opted the language of a contemporary social movement and the horizontal, networked structure to focus on “identity politics,” WWE commercialized and trivialized social movements and the labor of activist organizing. By breaking kay-fabe and acknowledging the negative fan reaction to its failed booking at the Royal Rumble, WWE also promoted the idea that it listens to its fans and understands what they want. WWE and its fans have also evolved with the current media environment to perpetuate the never-ending carnival through social media, podcasts, and reality television. More importantly, in appearing to grant the fans script-writing privileges, WWE exhibited corporate social responsibility and produced a segment that exemplified “commodity activism” (Banet-Weiser 16). Connecting social or political engagement with participation in a scripted and

televised movement or purchasing a “Yes!” T-shirt to show solidarity with the leader of that corporate-constructed movement distracts from the on-the-ground organizing and political education that is necessary to sustain long-term social change. John Fiske argued that popular culture offers examples of resistance. “Popular culture is made by subordinated peoples in their own interests out of resources that also, contradictorily, serve the economic interests of the dominant. . . . There is always an element of popular culture that lies outside social control, that escapes or opposes hegemonic forces” (2). While texts like documentary films may connect their audiences to activism and campaigns for social justice, WWE’s Occupy Raw segment, as a commercial media product, points to the limitations of entertainment in pursuing social change. Examining popular culture requires a dialectical understanding of the political, economic, and social contexts in which these texts circulate, and there is no such element of the Yes Movement that serves to promote revolutionary or radical change. Critically examining popular culture for the ways in which it normalizes the messaging and protest tactics of social movements is helpful for recognizing what resistance actually looks like.

Notes

1. Authors have discussed professional wrestling fans and the ways they engage with the wrestlers and their storylines on television, at live events and on Internet message boards (Beard and Heppen). While information regarding WWE audience demographics is available, I am intentionally excluding it from this research to avoid a reductionist media effects analysis that links uniform fan behavior with lower socioeconomic status, race or gender (Butsch 113).
2. The 2015 Royal Rumble in Philadelphia, PA, was met with similar derision by fans in attendance and those watching at home. Bryan was an early exit in the Rumble match and a small group of fans reportedly gathered near the loading dock of the Wells Fargo Arena where the event was held to confront WWE’s management, staff, and performers. Taking their ire a step further, fans also created the hashtag #CancelWWENetwork shortly after the event, which became a trending topic on Twitter as fans canceled their subscription and posted images of their cancellation notices online.

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