

Delivered at ICAS, 2015.
This concerns a work re-written, unfinished,
with the dynamics of power in this medium.

Thank you to my fellow panelists and the attendees here today.

Although scholarship on World Wrestling Entertainment may seem somewhat niche, a goal of mine is to call attention to the complexity and utility of this type of scholarship for the whole of sports culture. In particular, what I attempt to do with this essay, “The Guerrero Tribute RAW: The Cultural Power of Epideictic Rhetoric,” is to use a classic type of oratory, to help convey the potential for critical studies on WWE.

WWE has a long and complicated history. In scholarship, professional wrestling is defined, in various combinations, as a morality play, soap-opera, a spectacle, a pseudo-sport, and a masculine melodrama. Though all of those elements, representing different times in history, and in varying doses, would appear in my definition of WWE—to definitively define WWE is an uphill battle. Instead a focus on rhetorical function rather than definition, allows for a more inclusive critique. Where meaning is made from examining the intrinsic nuances of this brand of American Professional Wrestling, rather than making assumptions about simply, what it is and what it is not. Because this media machine is the farthest thing from simple.

For this essay, the nuances of WWE at the forefront are the relationships between reality and fiction, also known as shoots and works, or scripted and unscripted content. The emotional relationships between the audience and the company, or between fans and wrestlers. The economic relationships between the customers and corporate. The experiential and performative relationships between attending a show live, watching it live on television, and watching it retrospectively. And the prolific relationships between the content, or matches,

promos, weeklies, pay-per-views, the network, wwe.com, message boards, magazines etc., and history, heritage, culture, memory, and place.

What is even more daunting, is that all of these dynamics are ongoing, simultaneous, and reciprocal. These elements appear in every piece of content, but what is so rare about the case under study, is how clear the connections are when viewed through the frame of epideictic rhetoric.

The case in this essay is the November 14th, 2005 Monday Night Raw from Minneapolis Minnesota. Eddie Guerrero, a beloved top-card superstar, was found dead, from heart failure, the day prior in his hotel room. Despite him being four years sober, a culmination of past drug abuse, steroid use, an underlying heart condition, and an immensely intense workout schedule, contributed to Guerrero's death. When he passed away, Eddie "Latino Heat" Guerrero was in contention, some say slated to once again become the WWE Champion, at the same RAW that would instead serve as a televised, public memorial service. He was only thirty-eight years old.

This "tribute" was turned from just being a normal RAW that progresses storylines and characters, and spectacularly entertains with amazing feats of athleticism, physical and spoken talent, into a cohesive series of eulogic addresses. These eulogies took the form of normative speeches, video packages, family images, strategic shots for the live audience on the jumbotron and the audience watching at home, and, of course, wrestling. This service was helmed by Vince McMahon, the superstars, Eddie's family members, and the audience, who all served to collectively honor the man who loved to "perform more than anything else," with the nightly goal to steal the show.

Eulogy is a sub-set of the larger genre of epideictic or ceremonial rhetoric, that in the words of Gray Matthews, is at "the heart of...sports culture...A claim could be easily be put forward that sport...as a cultural phenomenon-represents

one of our society's most vibrant expressions of epideictic rhetoric." Through eloquent, timely communication, speakers and audiences can reinforce or undermine a sense of purpose, community, and ideology. The epideictic function of the Tribute RAW of Eddie Guerrero not only has the potential to reiterate and challenge current beliefs, attitudes, and values within WWE culture, but in the larger sports and popular culture it operates within.

How I begin to get at those overt and covert ideologies, and critically examine what functions they may serve for the WWE speakers and audiences, is by utilizing Condit's epideictic functional pairs as the framework for analysis: definition/understanding, display/entertainment, and shaping/sharing of community. The function for the speaker is reflected in the first term, the function for the audience in the second. For this case, definition/understanding, display/entertainment, and shaping/sharing of community can be linked to both Vince McMahon, the Superstars, and the fans, since control over the message in WWE can fluctuate, to an extent, between the two. The fans can be the speakers, and the company, the audience, since WWE is a type of content that relies so heavily on interactivity and feedback, sometimes resulting in the blurring of the possession of power. Who holds the power in the WWE Universe is simple: everyone, no one, just the company, just the stockholders, just the public, just the fans, and just the McMahons. Though WWE ultimately has control to the content broadcasted, messages are moderated on their sponsored boards, the fans, as citizens of the democracy of sport, make their voices known, during shows through signs, chants, and boos and cheers. They discuss topics on online forums, reply and read content on sites like EWrestlingNews and BleacherReport, and fans have and will continue, to take the end all be all temperature of sports entertainment, by staying quiet when a star comes down the ramp, staying home instead of buying tickets, not wearing WWE merchandise, and most simply, by changing the channel.

With Condit's vocabulary to navigate this complex notion of the speaker/audience relationship in WWE, the first pair, definition/understanding, aims to illuminate the happening the rhetor is speaking about, the sudden and tragic death of Eddie. So the audience can comprehend it, and make sense of it in relation to their social world.

For this critique, this pair refers to the tension between reality versus fiction. Specifically, how the superstars break 'kayfabe' or let, in this case purposefully, unscripted, real content, to become a part of the show. Necessarily and strategically breaking kayfabe facilitates an honest, emotional, tribute to their colleague and friend. Simultaneously, staying true to some aspects of the fiction of WWE, upholds a sense of authentic grief for themselves and the audience that comforts them in the wake of such a tragedy.

Display/entertainment is the second functional pair. Display pulls on what is thought to be the traditional function of epideictic rhetoric which is predicated on "eloquence" or the beauty of the words spoken, that then "entertains" the audience with the aesthetic appeals of language. Display/entertainment manifests as the types of tributes (or nuances of the eulogies themselves) that harness the necessary elements of beauty in language, but also pull on expectations of the audience. These displays, in order to entertain in the context of professional wrestling, as rely on physicality, and mediated film, as well as language, to entertain a grieving fan who expects a level of entertainment inherent to WWE and sport in general. It is an expectation that of course would be abandoned in such a shocking time, where a tragedy of this magnitude happens without much notice, but must be noted that Vince McMahon began the show by assuring the audience that the best way to honor Eddie is to do what he would have wanted: to entertain them.

The final pair, shaping/sharing of community, emphasizes the continued need for a unified company and fan-base, who, in their collective mourning for Guerrero, confirm ideological and cultural norms WWE and sport rely upon in a way that can both subvert and reaffirm normative cultural identities and practices.

“By venerating a figure,” Richards (2009) claims, “that integrates known history, established beliefs, and imagined possibilities, epideictic can subvert some elements of the existing social order while affirming others” (p. 3). In the case of WWE, the orator is continually reminding the audience of a certain history and beliefs that can converge or diverge with dominant narratives and ideologies that constitute the community surrounding WWE. Hegemonic masculinity is reinforced by the bouts throughout the tribute, with the commentators reminding the audience that this is a display Eddie would have wanted. Conversely, hegemonic masculinity is also subverted, emotion is made permissible, in a sanctioned circumstance: in the aftermath of the death of a friend.

Due to the rare presence of all pairs in one address, Condit’s epideictic functions not only provide a context to examine the ceremonial address that is Eddie Guerrero’s tribute RAW, but create a space and vocabulary to better understand the function of the whole of World Wrestling Entertainment. For the whole of sports culture, a reversion to classical rhetorical approaches may illuminate concepts, that today, are more complex, naturalized, and fluid, than ever before. Though I know this fit between Condit’s theory and this case, is just as rare as the case itself, the utility of epideictic for the whole of sports culture, can not be ignored when commodification and ideology are so intrinsically linked.

As a fan, who loved Eddie, and still considers him to be one of the greatest to live this craft, I can’t believe that the Tribute RAW was a ploy to sell more “Who’s Your Papi” t-shirts, to cash in on grief, and commodify pain. Yet as a critic, I also know, in my heart, that if I am to call for continued attention to the

positive and innovative aspects of this content, it must be balanced with a sensitivity to the aspects, like violence, gender bias, and commodification, that WWE does dangerously reify. Long live the critics who are up to this challenge. And long live Eddie.

Viva La Raza.