Reading Replay
in "Live" Television Text

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On Sundays I find myself settled into a comfortable chair and Kyle, my 21-year-old son, stretched out on the couch, both of us ready to enjoy a day of "live" sports on our color TV. He is likely to be in possession of two favorite items: a piece of double crust pizza with mushrooms and the remote control channel switcher. Simultaneously, and with an equal degree of ease, he can eat pizza with one hand and play the switcher keyboard with the other. On this particular Sunday, it is midway into an NCAA college basketball game, and while the CBS announcers are making their half-time predictions about game-winning strategies the two opposing coaches are likely to employ during the remaining period of play, Kyle decides he will switch to another sports event.

In milliseconds the switcher transports us to professional big-time wrestling where an interview is in progress. The interview is "live"; we know this because the word LIVE is superimposed in the upper-left corner of the screen. Kyle and I, big-time wrestling devotees, are thoroughly familiar with television's method of showcasing professional wrestlers scheduled for future matchups; in this particular "promo" for next week's wrestling attraction, a beefy figure called Jimmy Superfly Snuka, wearing a jungle outfit, shouts threats and insults to an absent adversary—Rowdy Roddy Piper. Snuka alternately rages either in the direction of the camera or at a poker-faced commentator, Lord Alfred, decked out in a tuxedo; in a world of television wrestling, Snuka's performance warrants tuxedo formality. Suddenly, via replay:

We are at ringside during a previous Snuka/Piper matchup. Superfly Snuka stands poised atop the ropes in the corner of the wrestling ring. Arms spread, Superfly launches himself from his perch, toward the center of the ring and the back of the aforementioned Rowdy Roddy Piper, who is inexplicably carelessly hunched over, and, for no apparent reason, looking in the wrong direction, oblivious to his fate. (Directly in front of Piper, his frantic fans scream warnings, but he is either deaf to their appeals, dazed, or suicidal.) The Superfly descends heavily on Piper and he is flattened. A count of three by the referee signals that the Superfly is victorious.

The replay is over and we are back in the studio where, once again, Snuka is "live," continuing his verbal assault, even more threateningly. Apparently, worse things are in store for Piper in a match scheduled for next week. Lord Alfred assures us we will witness the promised mayhem for ourselves if only we remember to tune in. For now, a computer commercial appears, so Kyle switches us back to join "live" coverage of the second half of the basketball game.

Kyle and I, for the purpose of this paper, represent ordinary sports televiewers who, because we have such experiences often, always take them for granted. We never ask ourselves or each other how we are able to comprehend the mixture of content "natural" to television. Actually, we have little time to be analytic about what we watch as we watch it, even if we are so inclined. The text appears and disappears rapidly; in turn, we must read it rapidly. In the process of rapidly reading television, distinct features of its content and structure blur together into what we take to be the essential message being broadcast. As a result, our pace of reading televised content inevitably leads us to disregard much of what is actually a very complex text. And we tend to recall only the most basic features of plot and the general purpose of whatever we have witnessed. No doubt, if someone would ask Kyle and me what the Snuka interview involved, our response would be as brief and limited as: "Superfly demolishing Roddy—there's a rematch next week."

Like most experienced viewers, Kyle and I automatically "watch television." We are, however, doing something far more demanding than merely watching the television screen. The idea of "watching" does not really encompass the notion of engaging in the multiple reading processes television text requires; "watching" suggests that something far more passive is sufficient. Actually, we are, at the very least, sorting, selecting, and responding to elements contained in the text. But how can we understand more specifically what responding to television text actually entails? We can attempt to capture, with as much accuracy as possible, a written description of a sample of the text, examine it in detail, and reconsider the activity of reading it.

Even a brief written version of approximately four minutes from a typical wrestling telecast reveals (1) how much content actually was there to be dealt with in a relatively short time and (2) the precise form of the text's structure.[1] For my purposes in this paper, the written description makes visible the centrality of replay to the telling of Snuka's story and clarifies the basic elements of the story's structure, the narrative frame,[2] into which the replay is placed. I am able to distinguish, in a preliminary way, content from form. When Kyle and I actually observed the interview unfolding on that Sunday, the replay, for instance, seemed just part of the story, hardly a ripple on the surface of the broadcast

text. I doubt if either of us would think to single out seeing that single replay or any other replay as worth special mention. Replays are a commonplace feature of "live" televised sports. But, replay, I am convinced, especially in "live" television, is a unique and deceptively powerful narrative device, which in some important regards, differs from similar narrative devices found in other media. To determine what is unique about television replays, one had to consider the contexts in which they appear and what narrative functions they serve.

Whether Kyle or I read it as such at the time, the Snuka/Piper segment from their prior wrestling match was, in a structural sense, an intrusion into an already established "live" flow. My written version of the interview-replay-interview segment deliberately emphasizes that the replay is structurally apart from its "host" text; the written description demonstrates my view that the beginning and end of the replay actually constitute seams in the broadcast text. At the seams of a replay such as the one I have described, viewers are expected to supply certain information—that is, if the replay is to make sense. At the very least, the viewer of the Snuka/Piper drama, for example, must supply some transitional information which the producers obviously do not feel a need to include. Viewers, presumably, are to understand that the replay has been recovered from the last matchup, which was held in a different time and place. Therefore, when we viewed the replay, though it blended seamlessly into our comprehension of Snuka's tale because we are so familiar with "live" scenes of this sort, the replay is, nonetheless, actually an isolatable sort of parenthetical phrase; it says something like this for Superfly: "See for yourselves how I destroyed Roddy." Apparently, the replay (1) interrupts a "live" interview, (2) introduces a recognizably new spatial/temporal dimension, and (3) invites an empathetic, analytic response from viewers. In order, then, to read the replay into the "live" interview with a basic level of understanding, a viewer cooperates with the text by filling in content, thereby completing the story by supplying certain material to it. Furthermore, the reader of the replay's content must employ several other levels of independent interpretation: identification of characters (Piper, the referee, the audience) and their contributions to the event, selection of relevant data (do not be distracted by such details as the configuration of ropes surrounding the wrestling ring or what the precise demographics of this wrestling audience might be), and evaluation of the drama itself (determine how it was possible for Superfly to win and, perhaps, what might have altered the outcome). One begins to see how replays of this sort draw viewers into reading activities of completion , analysis, and interpretation.

Thus, my written account of the Snuka/Piper "promo" is useful, if only that it clarifies for me what was and was not specified in the text about the replay, though I certainly do not believe I captured on paper everything that was there to be seen, nor do I think mine is the only possible rendition of events that transpired on the screen that day. Nevertheless, I have in hand a careful description of the text. With it, I can attempt an analysis of this one rather commonplace television replay as a representative of an elementary textual phrase of its kind. "Snuka/Piper," written out, becomes a model text.[3] As an experienced viewer I can note at the outset that the Snuka/Piper model text is quite typical: though the replay interrupts "live" text, the replay is well-integrated into the storyline.

In its narrative function, the replay resembles flashback, a commonplace narrative device found often in the media of film and print. The sort of television replay we see here is not, however, exactly equivalent to the well-established narrative technique of flashing back to fill in information from the past: neither film nor print insert past information into "live" action, into an audience's awareness that events under consideration are actually in progress. In the Snuka/Lord Alfred sequence, for example, the viewer's time/ "real" time, and the time of the interview are identical. Furthermore, when we speak of television replay we mean that an event has been telecast before and is being telecast again. The same content appeared in prior televised programming; an event is being recovered and introduced anew into the continuous flow of television text. A flashback, however, may appear but once, though we understand it to be presenting information about something that transpired in the past. In "live" television, then, replay differs from what we customarily mean by the term flashback: replay actually interrupts the "real" time of the text, which is simultaneously the reader's time, and a replay consists of text produced earlier.

Radio, of course, permits an interweaving of replays and live events. Nevertheless, though television replay resembles radio replay—in that both electronic media can blend together prior broadcast text and immediate events—television also makes its audience into onlookers at the scene. As a "live" television audience, we are witnesses ourselves to what is transpiring now. When we listen to radio reportage, we are always engaged in imagining actual details of past and present events; the television audience witnesses events first hand. I believe recognizing content as "live" introduces a measure of urgency into the viewing experience. The awareness of spontaneous action serves to heighten viewer's attention to replays within "live" action. When a television replay appears in "live" text, we know our presence as engaged observers is being taken into account. During a "live" sports telecast, for instance,

replay is obviously meant to enlist viewers in more sustained contemplation of a particular action. And, regardless of the success of any individual replay, the idea that viewers are to take advantage of privileged insight during a "live" event is signalled each time a replay appears. Replay tells viewers to pay closer attention and thereby determine exactly what happened.

Later in this paper I isolate some of the text-specific analyses that television replay encourages from viewers, but, for now, I want to say a bit more about the notion that replay in "live" television, though similar to, in one sense, is quite different from, in another, the narrative device we ordinarily think of as flashback. On the one hand, in what way is the television replay found in the wrestling interview similar to a flashback? It serves a similar story-telling function: a relevant event, recovered from the past, presumably illustrates or illuminates a main idea in the story. I assume that most viewers of Snuka's saga saw the content of that replay as somehow verifying or negating information given in the "live" interview. Thus, the replay helps viewers determine immediately whether Snuka's claims are "true" or not. Viewers can draw a conclusion of some sort for themselves. In this manner, the replay is a unique opportunity provided in the text for viewers to gather more detailed evidence for themselves and arrive at independent judgments. And, in this regard, the Snuka/Piper wrestling replay reminds us of conventional flashbacks: a bit of the past is recovered and added to a tale, As we watch the replay, we consider what constitutes "truth" in the situation, much as we might pause to evaluate in novels or films an event supplied to us from the past.

On the other hand, via my written rendition, we can observe that the Snuka/Lord Alfred interview is designated by a caption as "LIVE." In marking the interview as taking place immediately, the producers of the program intentionally highlight the spontaneity of the interview; thus, at first, viewers are informed that events are now in progress, and, subsequently, a replay invites viewers to acquire insight from the past. This deliberately promotes a shift in viewers' awareness of time. What is gained by identifying the interview as "live?" What possible difference can it make? Awareness of "live broadcasting, I believe, adds dimensions of unpredictability and urgency to the proceedings, and, I submit, works toward intensifying viewers' analytic engagement with replay. The knowledge that the interview is "live" appears to put some pressure upon viewers to observe the text now. Then, when a replay of past action is recovered and inserted into the "live" text, another sort of engagement with content is introduced; viewers are to weigh variables and make judgments for themselves. The popularity with viewers of this combination of "live"/replay texts suggests a sort of complementarity

in the conjunction. Presumbably, viewers are responsive to the pairing of textual experiences: engage and evaluate. To discriminate further among "live"/replay combinations in television text, I need to distinguish between two types of replay commonly found in "live" sports broadcasting.

"Snuka/Piper" is representative of one common sort of replay experience viewers have. As far as I can determine, however, replay within "live" text may be experienced by viewers in more than one way—as recovery or as re-entry. And, I believe the nature of the replay experience depends upon the context in which the replay appears, most importantly, its spatial/temporal relation to the "host" content. In the case of "Snuka/Piper," the replay amounts to a recovery of an exemplary instance from the distant past though the audience is not directly informed about the exact time or place of the original match. In reading the text, most viewers simply supply for themselves a general awareness of the origin of the replay; Lord Alfred provides no such information and, I'm sure, the station was not besieged later by questions about these sorts of details. Presumably, most fans are satisfied that the interview/replay together constitute a sufficiently complete and informative message. In fact, experienced viewers such as Kyle and I probably take a degree of pleasure in using our expertise to fill in the absent temporal/spatial contextualizing information.

Viewers do not, however, need to supply the same type of contextualizing information in every instance of "live" text containing replay. There is another kind of television replay which also involves recovering past information for inclusion in immediate action: but in this sort of replay, the host text is "live" while the replay is retrieved from recent action, not from the distant past. In the basketball game Kyle and I saw before and after the wrestling program, instant replays automatically and frequently were inserted into the "live" text.

The instant replay is not, I think, read solely as recovery of text, though a vestige of this realization is probably present. Instant replay, by and large, produces something more akin to an experience of re-entry; as viewers, we are returned to an environment and an action recently left behind. The instant replay experience—which often consists of back-to-back or multiple instant replays—juxtaposes past text against its own "live" action; viewers do no need to supply spatial/temporal information. Viewers understand instant replay is recent "live" action, most likely being seen from another perspective. Thus, instant replay invites appreciation and analysis of current text.

There are two sorts of instant replay. Occasionally, an instant replay simply repeats identical prior broadcast text (producers do tape a transmitted program as it is fed out to the audience, rather than depending

solely on using isolated cameras to capture all incidents viewers might hope to see more than once), but, ordinarily, an instant replay consists of a totally new perspective upon a recent action from a new camera angle and, thus, does not merely re-show the same text that viewers have already seen. The most typical sort of instant replay, invariably presented in slow motion and often concluded by a freeze frame, provides a fresh version of recent action. Thus, each new instant replay is another opportunity for analysis of the same situation, another opportunity to draw a perhaps better conclusion about factors influencing the ongoing event.

In an actual viewing situation , the range of differences between instant replays from different camera angels, even when they are back-to-back, largely goes unnoticed and uncounted. Some specific matter in replay content, of course, is usually brought to viewers' attention by the commentary. But, the commentary also serves to establish a sense of unity in the flow of the "live" action/replay; the maintenance of a relatively unvarying level of aural text mitigates against our noticing all the unique features in any particular replay. In fact, should too many differences between an instant replay and its host text actually capture our attention, we would lose track of our purpose: comprehending the play of the "live" game. By and large, then, with instant replay we experience something resembling temporarily stepping back into the same scene to analyze a known action; nevertheless, this is ordinarily an illusion. An instant replay probably presents us with a different text than we saw earlier.

Here is a description of two instant replays presented back-to-back which followed directly after a James Worthy live "slam dunk" during the 1982 North Caroline-Georgetown NCAA championship basketball game. Instead of the relatively high midcourt angle from which viewers originally saw the basketball "slammed" live, the pair of instant replays each originates from a new camera angle and, therefore, provides additional, unique content and a new sense of significant relationships; written versions of the two successive slow motion instant replays following Worthy's live basket make clearer the kind and amount of new information:

First instant replay:

One hand-held camera, located at the end of the court just beneath and to the side of the basket has recorded the steal, the pass, and the stuff. Now, from a low angle seemingly on the court racing next to Worthy himself, we observe a team-mate launch a pass which arches more or less toward us; Worthy emerges into the frame from the left, catches the perfect pass, and approaches Georgetown's "Sleepy" Floyd defending under the basket. The action is dream-like: Worthy glides through the air and slam-dunks over Floyd—

then, the camera freezes the action with Worthy and Floyd suspended in the air, the ball frozen in the cords of the net—a tableau of figures that focuses our attention on the two All-Americans whose personal duel has been established as a sub-plot within the larger conflict between the two teams.

Second instant replay:

Another camera also has captured the same play from a vantage point in the stands. Once again, we see the play, but this time it is Worthy alone we see slowly dribbling down court; as he approaches the basket, Floyd inevitably comes into view and inevitably, Worthy slam-dunks the ball—but in this version, the camera establishes yet a third player present for the confrontation; this action ends with a freeze frame of North Carolina's Michael Jordan, the leading offensive rebounder of the game, poised under the basket, ready to tip in the shot should it fail to drop.[4]

Written out, the back-to-back replays not only emphasize Worthy's feat, but also each one presents us with, potentially, another issue to think about. In the first replay, the established offensive duel of two graduating seniors, Worthy and Floyd, is dominant. In the second replay, Jordan, earlier established as a promising college star of the future, demonstrates his individual concentration, his determination to dominate the offensive boards. It is not simply, then, that the same action recurs in the two replays; we return to the action again and again, but in the process, we comprehend more about multiple factors influencing play of the game. The shifts in point-of-view provided by instant replay amount to fresh opportunities to interpret data, comprehend relationships, and speculate about how specific factors influence outcome.

The chart below contrasts several features of the replays I have described in this paper; the chart suggests, as well, something of what a viewer does when reading the two sorts of replay information;

Snuka Instant Replay	Worthy Instant Replays
Text	Text
1. "host" text different	1. "host" text similar
2. characters added	2. characters re-aligned
3. action new	3. action repeated
4. predominantly new visual data	4. partially new visual data
5. exemplary instance	5. descriptive repetition
Reader	Reader
1. add spatial/ temporal transition	1. evaluate and relate perspectives
2. select and evaluate new visual data	2. compare visual data plus add data in context
3. verify claims	3. comprehend simultaneous influences

In summary, the reading a television replay asks of viewers will vary: variations appear to depend upon at least three relationships a replay has to its "host" text: contextual (spatial/temporal), functional (exemplification, emphasis), and narrative (dramatic value). I found that certain questions helped me isolate differences among the replays here under consideration: What relation does the replay have to "live" text? What function does the replay serve in its host text? What sorts of analyses are required from the reader of the replay? Though I can now recognize more about the differing functions replays serve in differing host texts, in the actual viewing situation, I concentrated upon the central plot of the "live" action and this concentration prevented me from paying attention to the replays as separate and isolatable texts.

In its most typical "live" broadcast context, then, one might readily dismiss the importance of replay as a narrative device. Not only does most televised content and form appear to flow together, but the replay content, in particular, may seem altogether bizarre, as with "Snuka/Piper," or relatively trivial, as with the Worthy dunk. While viewing, one might not be much aware that combinations of "live" text/replay are promoting engagement in analysis. Most viewers probably associate replay with "non-serious" content on television. Nonetheless, it is the proven effectiveness of replay in enhancing analysis of "live" texts that we might turn our attention to. There is no reason to think that the same range, or a greater range, of analytic discriminations would not be equally intriguing to viewers, if replays were incorporated appropriately into other genres of "live" content.

Perhaps then, with replay, one intriguing question is whether television audiences would be willing to engage in more thoughtful analysis of other sorts of "live"/replay texts. Maybe so, if there were good reason to do so. The popularity of reading television replays within sports texts suggests that there is a potential here for educating the public in a similar fashion about other sorts of subjects (and "live" events related to them): perhaps the environment, government, arts. One might say that thus far only with sports programming has television fully extended itself to make the public knowledgeable about a particular range of content. Obviously, replay has been a major factor in the transformation of a sizeable percentage of the viewing public into enlightened sports fans. The popularity of replay in "live" sports, at the very least, illustrates that lively transmission of action paired with a method for analyzing the content is attractive to television audiences.

Aside from the potential of replay for education, it seems to me that replay alters the consciousness of a vast number of people who watch sports as avidly as Kyle and I do; an appetite, for instance, for seeing portions of "live" events from different perspectives has developed in us, but so gradually that we were largely unaware of it. The fact that "live" events on television occur in a time span identical with our own probably accounts to some degree for the carry-over of the same expectation when we are on-site at live sports events: we miss seeing replays when we attend games if the experience is not available. In fact, many sports fans claim to prefer seeing contests on television to seeing them live because replays add special pleasure and insight to the spectator experience.

I do not claim, of course, to know how all viewers read "live"/ replay segments in telecasts. Nor have I spoken about different pleasures viewers take in different replay content. I assume, however, that some such analysis would shed more light on the motivation to read certain texts closely. Perhaps one way to learn more about viewers' engagement with specific replay information would be to study the conversational patterns of experienced viewers to determine what aspects of particular replays are most compelling. I know, for instance, that Kyle and I enjoy arguing with each other and with the television screen when controversial replays arise. In other cases, we simply enjoy replayed demonstrations of players' grace in action.

Finally, I believe that the predominance of replays in "live" television texts may influence the perception of time viewers hold. In his book *The Image*, Kenneth Boulding observes that: "All human beings, except perhaps the extremely mentally deranged, regard themselves as oriented in some way in a stream of time." Boulding points out that the Western idea that we live in "a one-dimensional time stream flowing at a constant rate with a point, the Present, dividing the past from the future, is by no means universal."[5] Perhaps replay is subtly altering the emphasis of our orientation toward the Present. Instant reply posits a somewhat new relationship of individuals to events in the present by expanding our sense of what can be known about them. Replay reminds us that events, though they are inevitably sequential, also are invariably multi-dimensional.

If we suppose that repeated juxtapositions of "live" time with past time have some impact upon the millions reported to watch televised sports, what might the impact be? Perhaps, to draw upon Boulding's imagery, television viewers are learning that, while time is a stream of events, events in time can be prismatic, reflecting back upon themselves. If this is so, the many people who enjoy seeing and analyzing "live" events on television, and have developed a preference for the experience

of acquiring several viewpoints, have learned to prefer an analytic method that draws upon multiple perspectives. Thus, those of us habituated to replay in "live" text may have been taught a mode of acquiring understanding that will influence us in a far more fundamental way than we might imagine while we are just "watching" television.

Notes

[1]Barbra S. Morris and Joel Nydahl,"Toward Analyses of Live Television Broadcasts," *Central States Speech Journal 34* 3, 1983, pp. 195-202.

[2]Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), p. 10.

[3]Roland Barthes, "On the Fashion System and the Structural Analysis of Narratives," *The Grain of the Voice*, Trans. Linda Coverdale (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), p. 44.

[4]Barbra S. Morris and Joel Nydahl, "Sports Spectacle as Drama: Image, Language and Technology," *The Journal of Popular Culture* Vol. 18:4, Spring 1985, pp. 101-110.

[5]Kenneth Boulding, *The Image* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1961), pp. 48-49.

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