Blood as Currency in Professional Wrestling

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Blood as Currency in Professional Wrestling

The analysis of professional wrestling as theatre and performance is well established, with the publication of *Performance and Professional Wrestling* (Chow, Laine, Warden, 2017) providing a seminal text for further re-readings of pro-wrestling through the field of performance studies. In the volume’s introduction, Chow et al argue that the performative act of blading in pro-wrestling’s production provides a link between professional wrestling and performance art via “Schechner’s notion of the “entertainment-efficacy braid,””, through which “[t]he continuum between entertainment and efficacy, especially among practitioners of theatre and performance, can often seem more like a chasm, especially in the context of bodily violence.” (Chow et al, 2017, p. 16)

The authors assert that the urgency of risk and deliberate acts of self-sacrifice by the wrestlers themselves can enable pro-wrestling’s theatrical performance to be situated in the field of performance art. Equating the performance of professional wrestlers to that of performance artist Marina Abramovic, the authors focus their rationale on the inclusion of blood in pro-wrestling, specifically the act of blading; where wrestlers will deliberately use a concealed razor blade to cut themselves during a fight to make the violence seem more spectacular. Blood, and the act of bleeding is perceived as ‘real’, and therefore more authentic than simply acting wounded. The authors cite a 2010 interview with The Guardian in which Abramovic is quoted as saying that in theatre: “The knife is not real, the blood is not real, and the emotions are not real. Performance is just the opposite: the knife is real, the blood is real, and the emotions are real.” (O’Hagan, 2010) By comparing Abramovic’s work to pro-wrestling’s performative act of blading, the authors imply that the practice of drawing one’s own blood brings an audience closer to the wrestler as a performer, and renders the spectacle of violence on display as more immediate and authentic when blood is present.

The response to the act of blading by audiences asks for an interrogation of the implied presence of authenticity in pro-wrestling, specifically in relation to pro-wrestling’s performance methodology of kayfabe. While initially, a fan might respond with shock and awe at the sudden presence of blood in a match, very quickly the conversation turns to the method by which the blood got there in the first place. Was it through blading? Or by ‘hard-way’, where pro-wrestlers are deliberately heavy handed in the delivery of moves in order to inflict injury? Or was it a genuine accident? Kayfabe, the practice by which audiences and performers invest in the action of pro-wrestling as if it were real, implies that nothing in the ring is real at all. Authenticity
then, becomes as performative as the titles, the moves and indeed, the blood itself.

In order to analyse kayfabe as a performance methodology, this article employs a Hobbesian analysis of professional wrestling that uses the characteristics of the lexicon as outlined in *Leviathan* (1651) to understand kayfabe as both a performance and community practice. As Hobbes describes in *Leviathan*, individual subjects within communities interact with each other based on a system of values that are entirely artificial. This external, everyday practice, analogous to pro-wrestling’s performance methodology, offers the opportunity for subjects to produce identities that enable them to conduct their lives in relative safety under protective confines. What a Hobbesian analysis of pro-wrestling as performance enables is the interrogation of authenticity as performative, while giving weight to the argument that kayfabe, like Hobbes’s lexicon, has potential to be transformative as well as communicative.

Primarily, this article focuses on explaining the communicative nature of kayfabe, and the methods by which communal investments in performative fictions; particularly masculinity and capitalism, are embraced and enacted by pro-wrestlers, audiences and pro-wrestling promotions alike. Focusing the analysis on the practice of blading and the presence of blood in pro-wrestling matches alerts the reader to certain significant demands of pro-wrestling’s lexicon. Namely, the fact that kayfabe as a performance practice is reliant on spectacular performative affirmation. When professional wrestlers move beyond the theatrical to give more of themselves through risk, blood and injury to the performance, kayfabe is directly preserved. By giving more than is required to the theatrics of pro-wrestling, pro-wrestlers that blade or take greater risks further blur the boundaries between the real and the performed, and with their blood purchase further opportunity for kayfabe as a performance practice to appear as liminal and transformative when perhaps the very opposite is the case. Blood therefore becomes the currency of this transaction, and has equal value whether shed deliberately or by accident.

First, this article will explain Hobbes’s theoretical approach to the performative lexicon and its significance to the formation of Commonwealths. By doing so, the article will establish that kayfabe is reliant on the same fundamental principles of performative investment in acknowledged fictions. Significantly, the article aims to demonstrate that collective investment in a performative myth is beneficial to both the preservation of the individual and the preservation of the system, identifying the performative element of Hobbes’s lexicon as essential to the lexicon’s own sustainability. This is particularly important when the system is both capitalist and masculine.
The article will then use this analysis to interrogate the WWF (now WWE) WrestleMania X-Seven (2001) match between The Rock and Stone Cold Steve Austin. This section will focus specifically on the performative act of bleeding as a vital communication tool during this match, and draw on autobiographical evidence from Steve Austin from his match commentary on *The Steve Austin Show* podcast. The section will explore the significance of the transactional quality of blood in this match, as a method to advance the performance narrative but also to authorise certain physical actions.

Next, the discussion will consider the current state of blood use in the WWE. As well as analysing moments from modern matches, such as Samoa Joe Vs Finn Balor at NXT Takeover Dallas (2016) and Brock Lesnar Vs Cody Rhodes from *Backlash* (2023), the article will consider how changes in WWE’s marketing strategy during the so called TV-PG era meant a significant reconsideration of the company’s internal rules on blading and blood use. With reference to the Hobbesian lexicon beyond the ring, the article will discuss whether kayfabe as a performative methodology has the potential to disrupt the usual modes of lexicon evolution, and consider examples of the performative disparity between individuals and institutions.

Finally, the article concludes by demonstrating how the perceived threat of significant injury reaffirms a capitalist kayfabe. While Hobbes implies that when a lexicon is fully exposed as fictional, it would be difficult to offer reasons for the reinvest in it, kayfabe offers the potential to analyse the performance of individuals within a community as re-affirmative and constantly guaranteeing the lexicon in which they communicate. Larry DeGaris’s semi-autobiographical chapter, *The Money and The Miles* (2020), provides a thoughtful insight into the historical performance of pro-wrestling and is useful commentary when considering the transactional nature of the industry and the lexicon through which it operates. Kayfabe’s liminality then is not based upon performative thresholds or transformation through performance, but on affirmations that reaffirm and guarantee performative actions and behaviours within and beyond the ring.

**Hobbes and the Capitalist Kayfabe**

Hobbes’s principles for constituting a Commonwealth are outlined in the introduction of Leviathan. His method for productivity and preservation is dependent on every subject subscribing to a specific lexicon; “an inferential framework for interpreting, understanding, and evaluating one another’s activity.” (Frost, 2001, p. 32). As with kayfabe, Hobbes advocates for a system of performed legibility; of the individual manufacturing oneself into a rational actor in order to be understood within a codified framework. Hobbes’s assertion that subjects “might
learn truly to read one another, if they would take the pains” (Hobbes, 1985, p. 82) demonstrates that, like professional wrestling, with proper investment, one can reap the rewards, that is the enjoyment of the entertainment and spectacle of a ‘fake’ system. For while one of the main criticisms of professional wrestling is that it is a ‘fake’ profession, for Hobbes, these fictions are no barrier to a Commonwealth being established at all, providing the subjects operating within and for the Commonwealth are all communicating within the same lexicon.

Samantha Frost’s interrogation of Leviathan in Faking It: Hobbes’s Thinking-Bodies and the Ethics of Dissimulation (2001) grasps firmly to Hobbes’s assurance that participation in the lexicon need not be authentic. Citizens of the Commonwealth need not genuinely prescribe to any of its ideals. Instead, they need only present themselves as though they do. “According to Hobbes’s argument, then, ethical subjectivity for thinking-bodies entails both conceiving of and making oneself a sign in a semiotic field in which peace provides the key to the meaning of our behaviour.” (Frost, 2001, p. 40) The key principle that equates Hobbes’s lexicon with kayfabe is that the Hobbesian subject would not only understand that he himself was ‘faking’ his participation in the lexicon, but he would also know that every other subject was doing the same. This important requirement is an essential element of the creation of Commonwealths, for with this acknowledgement that subjects are all simply ‘faking it’, a performative harmony is established.

Logically then, the pro-wrestling audience does not measure the success of pro-wrestling on its ability to deceive the individual into thinking the performance is genuine or authentic, but in how successfully we are able to invest in its fiction. Engaging in the performance of professional wrestling is not about suspension of disbelief, but about investment in performed belief, and the opportunity to compose oneself as a rational actor within the internal communicative structure. ‘[A]s Persona in latine signifies the disguise, or outward appearance of a man, counterfeited on the Stage: [...] And from the Stage, hath been translated to any Representer of speech and action, [...] . So that a Person is the same that an Actor is, both on Stage and in Conversation”. (Hobbes, 1985, p. 217). To phrase it in pro-wrestling parlance, the success of a pro-wrestling match is in its ability to enable the fan to ‘mark out’; to offer the opportunity to perform towards the match as if it were real.

As Frost elaborates in her analysis of the Hobbesian subject qua rational actor, “what is important is not whether the inferential framework we use to interpret one another’s actions is correct but rather whether we all draw on the same one.” (Frost, 2001, p. 32) Hobbes’s lexicon, grounded in a fictional framework which all subjects
as Rational Actors subscribe to, provides the ideal inferential platform from which all participants in the lexicon can project their outward actions. Because of the strength of investment in this fiction, all subjects are able to infer from others their thoughts and activities, based on this communicative structure and together in codified performance are able to reaffirm the boundaries of this communicative fiction.

Going Over; The communal performative labour of kayfabe

One of the ethical dilemmas faced when operating within Hobbes’s lexicon, is acknowledging an unsettling truth; existing just beyond the confines of the fictional lexicon in which subjects live their lives is a reality based on exploitation for personal gain. As Degaris suggests in *The Money and The Miles*; “I think kayfabe is pretty straightforward. It’s the truth that’s slippery.” (2020, p. 212)

By subscribing to a performance rationality that places deliberate emphasis on enjoying the risks that other people take, there is an acknowledgment of the inequalities in performative labour between the pro-wrestlers and the audience. Litherland, Phillips and Warden subscribe to the notion that wrestling is ‘co-produced’ (2020, p. 121). The idea that, just as in Hobbes’s lexicon, kayfabe is manufactured by the performative effort of both audience and performer emphasises the amount of labour involved in pro-wrestling’s production. Referring to pro-wrestling as a ‘work’ then, has connotations based not just in historic pro-wrestling parlance; the art of fooling audiences into believing that a match is real, but as physical labour as well. But as Degaris acknowledges, within that cooperative labour there are major inequalities:

“While it’s true wrestling performers need audiences, the roles are not equivalent, nor are they equal. I once repeated the common refrain about fans, ‘We can’t do it without them’, to which Jimmy Snuka responded, ‘Yeah, but they can’t see it without us.’ (2020, p. 215)

Additionally, while acknowledging the disparities between the performative labour of the audience and that of the wrestlers themselves, there are amongst pro-wrestlers individuals who would go over and above the level of physical effort required to enact a fight. Degaris’s titular ‘Miles’ do not just reference the length of time on the road for those in the industry, but the amount of punishment the pro-wrestler’s body is put through. As he explains;

“I feel like I learnt life’s most important lessons in pro wrestling rings, locker rooms and car rides: that too often we make things hard on ourselves when we don’t have to; that you get over to the extent someone puts you over; that it’s better to work together towards a
common goal than to compete with one another; and that being talented doesn’t mean you’ll get a push.” (2020, p. 208)

Degaris’s reflection highlights that while the cooperative nature of kayfabe promotes an ideal of codified working together in the spirit of creativity and enjoyment, it also highlights that pro-wrestling is a business. ‘[B]eing talented doesn’t mean you’ll get a push’ is a reference to a promoter, the person in charge deciding who will be put in front of fans as a central competitor in their promotion. That person is often considered a ‘draw’; a person who people are willing to pay money to see in a headline match. The transactional nature of wrestling highlights that this is a capitalist system, where an individual at the top of the organisation is profiting from the labour of others.

What the pro-wrestling audience are perhaps unready to admit is that in paying to see their favourite wrestler perform, in making them a ‘draw’, they are asking them to increase the ‘mileage’, the strain that their bodies are subjected to. As a low expectation this might include hours spent in the gym, practicing manoeuvres and improving physiques, and time spent rehearsing promo’s or discussing spots. At the opposite end of the scale, this includes a degree of physical and emotional sacrifice, where wrestlers find themselves in constant battle with injury, fatigue and burn out.

This continuous investment is considered by many wrestlers as being a part of the job, and that the glory of working their way towards a main event position is worth the physical strain. Degaris recalls the absurdity of this stance, stating; “as one tag-team partner of mine came up to me excitedly, ‘We’re going over tonight.’ You know it’s fake, right?” (2020, p. 213) When fans, performers and even academics are reminded that there is no genuine championship in this production, no authentic competition; that the belts are props and the contest fixed, then the codified language used to imbue those props with value also imbues performed violence with the same weight as actual violence and the actor with the same characteristic of the athlete. At some point, the ‘rational actions’ of the Hobbesian subject in kayfabe start to become irrational; giving ever more in pursuit of receiving the codification of athletes while at the same time gradually finding it harder to deliver those highly skilled moves through injury and fatigue. However, that sacrifice is read as perfectly rational in the pro-wrestling lexicon, and giving more is glorified by the spectator as a sign of a great match or a great wrestler.

In his 2020 analysis of Kayfabe, Eero Laine acknowledges David Wills, ‘The Crying Wrestling Fan’, and quotes his viral video appearance; “Yea. Um. I just want to thank each and every one y’all for all you’ve done to your bodies. It’s still real to me, damn it!” (alaninucd, 2006 in
Laine, 2020, p. 192). While Wills’s sentimental outburst went viral for his ‘it’s still real to me’ refrain, his speech reminds us that pro-wrestling fans are in full awareness of the consequences of overexertion on a professional wrestler. Wills’s speech is in reference to painkiller misuse, one of the consequences of living with injuries made worse by in-ring action. The reality of professional wrestling is that an audience of pro-wrestling fans purchase tickets to see performers face risk of injury. When a wrestler is injured, while the hope is that they make a full recovery, the truth is that the audience are really hoping that there will be an opportunity to see the performer wrestle again. This ethical conundrum highlights one of the slippery truths in pro-wrestling’s kayfabe; that the capitalist myth subjects have subscribed to external to the ring influences what an audience are prepared to pay for. Additionally, this myth also influences what pro-wrestlers are prepared to pay with in order to attain the ‘push’ and reach the influential ‘main event’ position.

As Hobbes explains; “But as men, for the atteyning of peace and conservation of themselves thereby, have made [...] artificial chains [...] These Bonds in their own nature but weak, may nevertheless be made to hold, by the danger, though not by the difficulty of breaking them.” (Hobbes, 1985, p. 264) We cannot underestimate the power of the fiction that the Hobbesian subject so desperately subscribes to in fear of it breaking. The wrestler chooses freely to add labour to his performance in a bid to strengthen his chains. These might be considered, in pro-wrestling terms, the chains that hold kayfabe together; the pro-wrestler’s intention to enact fights to an accomplished level allows the audience to bypass the negotiation between investment and scepticism and perceive the codified performance as something real. In the world beyond the ring, these chains enable the pro-wrestler to attain a degree of safety in his performed identity, and particularly where masculinity is concerned, the subscription the these values firmly reperform a masculine myth that enables the pro-wrestler to attain a certain safety from anonymity in a lexicon that, at its core is completely nonsensical. Hobbes’s suggests that; “The final Cause, End, or Designe of men, (who naturally love Liberty, and Dominion over others,) in the introduction of that restraint upon themselves, [...] is the foresight of their own preservation, and of a more contented life thereby”. (Hobbes, 1985, p. 223) Hobbes’s artificial chains then, enable the preservation of the fiction through which the Hobbesian subject conducts his life; as he performs dutifully towards the lexicon for his own preservation, so too does he guarantee the preservation of the others who perform to the same ideals. This performance is self-serving then; the more rational it is the more likely it is that you will be met with similar rationality. To rephrase this Hobbesian approach through pro-wrestling parlance; the thing that subjects mark out for is the
‘work’; the fictional performance that connects all individuals together as a Commonwealth. We yearn for the safety in being a mark.

WrestleMania X-Seventy

The match narrative between Stone Cold Steve Austin and The Rock at WrestleMania X-Seventy was instigated when Austin’s wife Debra Marshall, in her role as The Rock's manager, was attacked by Kurt Angle during a match. Austin blamed The Rock for not protecting Debra, leading to the match for The Rock’s WWF Championship Title.

As the WrestleMania X-Seventy programme began the lead in to the match, it was announced to be a ‘no disqualification match’. The announcers appeared surprised at the sudden change in stipulation. All illegal moves, weapons and interference would now go unpunished. Austin quickly gained the upper hand against The Rock, with the fight quickly moving outside the ring. Austin struck The Rock with the ring bell, allowing Rock the opportunity to “take care of business” (Austin, 2016) by blading his forehead, resulting in the first blood of the match being shed. Rock then sent Austin into an uncovered turnbuckle for the second blade of the match, hitting Austin with the ring bell to further reinforce the injury.

Cameras followed Rock and Austin to the ring apron to get better images of the blood now pouring from their faces. To add to the violence, Austin struck The Rock with the monitor from the announcers table. Returning to the ring, the performers traded sharpshooters, stealing each other’s finishing moves as the match progressed to its final act. Blood still flowed from the performers foreheads, the camera angles used to capture the suffering of the competitors emphasising the injury more prominently.

Finally, WWF CEO Vince McMahon approached the ring, interrupting a cover by The Rock. The Rock then pursued McMahon around the ring, only for McMahon to lead him towards Austin who delivered the ‘Rock Bottom’ on Rock. After McMahon handed him a chair, Austin attacked Rock with the weapon, and though The Rock managed two kick outs as he endured the attack, eventually Austin took the win. Finally Austin shook hands with Vince McMahon and willingly accepted his allegiance to the authority.

This match is significant because even before it began, the suggestion is present that blood will feature. In a pre-match video package, The Rock stated; “I will give you every drop of sweat, every drop of blood, every ounce of energy I have. You are gonna get the absolute best of The Rock at WrestleMania” (2001) Blood and the willingness to bleed are framed instantly as performative masculine ideals. The labour The Rock appears willing to add to the performance for the benefit of the
audience’s enjoyment of the spectacle is referenced, which is then confirmed by the change in match stipulation to ‘No Disqualification’; essentially confirming that the violent spectacle performed is likely to draw blood.

Already, that promise of additional violence influences kayfabe’s narrative progression. McMahon’s unpunished influence in the match and Austin’s dirty win are authorised by the change in match stipulation. While the ‘No Disqualification’ enables the story to develop it also authorises the use of blood, which helps to tell that story. Blood here becomes an item of costume, worn in order to act out the narrative and symbolising the sacrifice made in pursuit the Championship Title. Just as Austin’s leg braces are worn in support of an actual injury, those same braces serve as an item of costume representing the bodily sacrifice of the wrestler and the actual labour required by Austin to physically compete. Austin’s history of injury is further referenced by the commentary team, alongside continual reference to the amount of blood in the match. Consistently the acts of physical sacrifice, risky manoeuvres and even the act of bleeding itself are championed as evidence that the performers personify the role of masculine ideals, over any reference to their strength and athleticism.

Though, as previously discussed, while there are inequalities between pro-wrestler and audience labour in kayfabe production, in this match there is an equality between the two wrestlers, and the performative labour of bleeding is evenly distributed. For the narrative to make sense and Austin’s heel turn to be accomplished, Austin must first be seen in his role of ‘character face’. This masculine, ‘hard man’ persona needs to inflict as much damage as possible first, especially when performed in Steve Austin’s home state of Texas. Then, to demonstrate that the character of Austin is under increasing pressure, The Rock must inflict equal amounts of violence in return.

Counterintuitively, the more The Rock and Austin bleed, the more masculine they become. In the hyper-masculine lexicon of pro-wrestling, even the most irrational of acts are framed as rational if performed in pursuit of the codified communicative order. Austin and The Rock’s blood is portrayed consistently as a marker for masculine strength; as Paul Heyman enthusiastically cries from the commentary table. “Austin bloody, the rock bloody, the battle is for the title and all is on the line!” (2001) The overemphasis of sacrifice in pursuit of glory marries Barthes’s assertion of masculine suffering with Degaris’s ‘miles’, the lengths the wrestler will go to do the work (2020). As Barthes observes; ‘Wrestling presents man’s suffering with all the amplification of tragic masks. The wrestler who suffers in a hold which is reputedly cruel (an arm-lock, a twisted leg) offers an excessive portrayal of Suffering” (2000, p. 17) Degaris, criticising some
independent wrestlers determination to actually injure themselves in pursuit of performance remarks; “It’s smarter to make money and not get hurt than to get hurt and not get paid.” (2020, p. 210) Blood then becomes a theatrical device, essentially a prop. Easily acquired through blading, it is removed from authenticity and worn by a rational actor who is very much playing a part. In response, the energy and excitement from the commentary team is nearly always for the display of risk and injury in order to sell the blood as hard gotten and occurring through genuine violence. Blading then, becomes the most efficient, cost-effective way to reaffirm the masculine pursuit of glory, and purchases the audience’s investment in the match.

Alongside narrative progression, blood in professional wrestling matches enables the WWE fan base to straddle the lexicon beyond and within the ring in order to negotiate the match itself and the methods by which it was performed. Investment in kayfabe as a narrative fiction does not mean that the method by which the theatrics of pro-wrestling are enacted are entirely denied. In the moment of performance, bloodshed in ring has an immediate exchange rate. But as fans discuss the match post-event, the presence of blood and more importantly, how it got there, is often debated. An element of enjoyment in the spectacle of pro-wrestling can sometimes be found in the desire to be right, or rather, smart enough to have figured out a code believed to belong to the performers; the insiders and not the fans. Modern kayfabe is structured in part to provide the illusion that pro-wrestling is still a work, and that fans remain on the outside of the production, unaware that it is a predetermined contest. Blading then, provides an opportunity to continue to conceal something from the fans, and give them a chance to speculate.

“I’m not happy with the colour [amount of blood] he’s got there. [...] Rock’s about to go do a movie, so we’ve got to be careful with his appearance.” (Austin, 2016)

Not only do Austin’s revelations expose elements of the performance practice and reasoning in the ring, they also demonstrate how the performers negotiate risk. The risk in this match is not only that performers might be injured, but that The Rock in particular should not be disfigured. Blading becomes the quickest and safest way to draw blood without risking The Rock arriving onto The Scorpion King set with major bruising and scarring. Revealing this information in post-match commentary demonstrates how blood provides investment in a match long after the bout itself, and the ability to allow fans to become
insiders preserves their investment in kayfabe long after the match first aired.

A Kayfabled Currency

Acknowledging the process by which blood is drawn post-match guarantees a significant fact: the blood drawn in professional wrestling is always actual. While there may be fake hitting there is never fake blood. The use of blood in the WWE became problematic when the company announced that their programming was to become TV-PG on July 22nd 2008. As a result of this, blading as a performance practice was forbidden, and repercussions in the form of fines were issued for those performers that did blade during a match. Matches during this period, which arguably is still ongoing due to the current TV-PG rating of WWE programming, focused more on the athleticism and physiques of performers, and blood spilled accidentally rarely featured in matches.

However, kayfabe as a performance methodology retains the historical narratives of past matches, and as a consequence it remembers blood as part of its practice. This is apparent in the desire of fans to debate matches that feature blood in their performance, and the desire of wrestlers to reveal all about these matches in podcasts and autobiographies. While WWE has officially deterred the use of blood in its productions, its main competitor, AEW, frequently features matches with blood involved, as do a great many independent pro-wrestling promotions. So the question of a return to blading remains, and was proposed to the then WWE Chief Content Officer Triple H in a 2022 interview with The Ringer, to which he responded;

“I’m just of the opinion right now, given the state of the world and the pandemic, and at the end of the day, what we do is dangerous enough without intentionally making it more dangerous. Yes, we did [feature bleeding] for a long period of time, but we’ve changed that practice. And it’s irresponsible to go back.” (Triple H, 2022)

While Triple H was of the opinion that it is irresponsible to return to the practice of blading, blood inevitably still appears in WWE matches by accident. For example, in a 2016 match between Samoa Joe and Finn Balor at NXT Takeover: Dallas, Joe received a blow to the right side of his face in the opening seconds of the match that seemingly accidentally cut open his brow. The wound began pouring with blood instantly, and the referee immediately put on gloves. Many medical personnel attempted to interrupt the match to stop the bleeding; NXT is also TV-PG rated. But the constant interference irritated the audience as the flow of the match was stalled by the medic’s vain attempts.
The television audience’s response to Joe’s blood is indicative of the significance of historical kayfabe and the communicative value of pro-wrestling’s lexicon more broadly. The immediate enthusiasm by the crowd to Joe suddenly bleeding demonstrates how blood invokes an energy and anticipation of physical spectacle such as that shown by the WrestleMania X-Seven match between The Rock and Austin. However, in the TV-PG era, this blood must be hidden as soon as possible, rather than exploited for narrative value. The consequence is that, rather than the crowd playing their part fully; cheering and booing in the right moments in response to the action and subjugating themselves to the practice of kayfabe, the audience reacted with a collective performed anarchy towards the WWE. Cheers of “Let Joe bleed” can be heard over the commentary team, which eventually, after the constant medical interference descended into “PG Sucks” and finally, “Fuck PG”.

The audience response is then perhaps unfairly read as a moment of baying for blood. In their enthusiasm for Joe to continue bleeding, the pro-wrestling lexicon that authorised that blood use previously, according to the crowd present, now unfairly attempts to stop that blood flowing and thus stalls the action. The integration of blood into pro-wrestling’s communicative lexicon results in an inability to erase it from the performative memory of fans and performers. While WWE chose to punish performers who did blade in matches during the PG era, most notably the $100,000 fine handed to Dave Bautista after blading during the 800th episode of RAW in a steel cage match against Chris Jericho, what the WWE are unable to – or perhaps choose not to - punish is the accidental flowing of blood. As a result of the corporate punishments for blading, but in response to a historical kayfabe interest in seeing blood from the older fan community, WWE wrestlers who do want to include blood in their match narratives can only do this the ‘hard way’; by deliberately injuring themselves or mistiming a hit or fall so that blood can be produced in a way that appears accidental.

The sentiment in Triple H’s 2022 announcement has been proven short lived by the use of blood at WWE Backlash on May 6th 2023. In the main event match between Brock Lesnar and Cody Rhodes, Lesnar caught his forehead on an exposed turnbuckle, causing it to bleed profusely for the rest of the match. Unlike the Joe V Balor match in 2016, there was no attempt to interfere with the match and stop the bleeding. The blood was left to flow, echoing a similar injury caused at WrestleMania 2021 between Lesnar and Roman Reigns. In that match, Lesnar bled again, this time after striking his head on the ring post. Narratively then; the blood from Lesnar, portrayed as a beast who cannot be easily defeated, shows that not only can he be beaten – he can be harmed. And if both Reigns and Rhodes are able to draw blood
from Lesnar, will they be able to draw blood should a rematch for Reign’s Universal Championship Title go ahead?

The blood in the Rhodes V Lesnar Backlash match purchases a number of significant responses to the match. Initially, it invites fans to continue the speculation of how the blood appeared and, given Triple H’s comments, who authorised that blood to appear. In narrative terms, it reminds audiences of a previous time that Lesnar bled, and weaves narratives between the three wrestlers; Lesnar, Reigns and Rhodes together so that storylines become unpredictable and narrative opportunities becomes possible. Additionally, the presence of blood at a time when blood is rare offers the suggestion that there may be a return to more blood use in future matches. As a currency then, Lesnar’s blood has purchased a significant investment in the future of the Rhodes/Lesnar/Reigns narrative, and at a time when WWE’s strongest competitor; AEW, frequently uses blood in its matches, a rare use of blood by the WWE reminds us of the value of blood when used both scarcely and effectively.

While Triple H’s 2022 statement suggested that the practice of blading in the WWE might be over, blood can still be a valuable element in matches, provided its presence can be explained as accidental. Austin’s earlier remarks demonstrate that blading is the preferred means to allow blood into a match as the risk of greater injury in the pursuit of it is minimised. However, as Lesnar’s blood demonstrates, with the ‘easy way’ removed from WWE’s internal performative lexicon, then those wrestlers determined to bleed for the purposes of a match have only the more dangerous ‘hard way’ available to them for this theatrical element to work. This arguably puts greater pressure and strain on the wrestler’s and their bodies, in an organisation that, having denied the use of the blade, can still find methods to be satisfied with the use of blood in their matches. In more direct terms; while the Capitalist, corporate lexicon of the WWE is interested in appearing TV-PG, blood is still a draw. Fans still wish to see matches that include bleeding and wrestlers are still willing to put on a show that includes blood.

WWE as a corporate entity, while using key figures to put out statements to suggest that all content in its matches will be TV-PG, is willing to allow wrestlers to bleed on television, provided that blades are no longer used. Acknowledging this sentiment asks further questions about the amount of performative labour pro-wrestlers are willing to commit to for the benefit of WWE. Lesnar himself is deemed by many to be in a privileged position in the company, able to make decisions about blood use that are in contrast to the traditional standpoint of WWE’s producers and executives. However, having discussed the labour inequalities between pro-wrestlers and the audience previously, it is important to recognise that by removing
blading from the performance lexicon of the WWE, that same corporation has in effect sanctioned a more dangerous method for allowing blood to enter matches. ‘Hard way’ is named so because of the physical effort taken to draw that blood. In Lesnar’s case, being hurled into the turnbuckle with enough force so as to actually break the skin. As Dave Meltzer, quoted by Wrestletalk.com, points out;

“It’s crazy because if Brock Lesnar insists on getting color [bleeding], they might as well let him blade, rather than risk a concussion or something dangerous by running his head into the metal buckle as hard as he can to split his head open.” (2023)

Meltzer’s remarks demonstrate the severity of the risks involved in drawing blood via ‘hard way’ over blading. To allow pro-wrestlers to draw blood using this method when a safer alternative exists appears counter-intuitive to the health of professional wrestlers. That said, to enable them to bleed at all is contrary to the TV-PG WWE corporate narrative. Therefore, for WWE to retain that rating, blood has to be explainable as accidentally occurring, even when a variety of dirt sheets had already uncovered the performance methodology of the ‘hard way’ blood some 24 hours after the show aired. The actuality of the act of bleeding in ring in the WWE today is that once sanctioned, the corporation is allowing the wrestler to take very real risks to his physical health that, in practice, could be made easier. But to be able to market its product towards families with a TV-PG rating, the WWE is effectively writing high-risk manoeuvres into its performative lexicon, and by doing so helps to define masculinity both in and beyond the ring as attainable through over-exertion.

Frugal Spending: making the miles go further

As the discussion above already recognises, the threat of serious injury when drawing blood via ‘hard way’ should be given more industry interrogation, particularly when in the sporting world standards of practice are being employed to ensure that steps are in place to reduce the risk of concussions in matches and training. For example, in UK football, where the FA’s guidance on heading the ball in youth training sessions has seen a ban on heading a ball for all under 12’s in practice sessions.

But it is not just for physical health that a pro-wrestler should engage in safer tactics for performance. As quoted previously, Degaris’s assertion that; “It’s smarter to make money and not get hurt than to get hurt and not get paid.”, serves as a reminder that the profession of pro-wrestling is based on the same labour practices as any capitalist system: with performed labour comes payment for the job. Degaris, like Meltzer, argues that the job itself should be made as easy as possible. Arguably,
this is either through a committed ban on bloodshed that would eliminate ‘hard way’ from pro-wrestling’s performance methodology, or Meltzer’s favoured approach, by WWE letting wrestler’s blade again.

Yet blood is still spilled in ring, and audiences recognise its presence as an opportunity for heightened drama regardless of a TV-PG status that begs bloodshed to be challenged. Barthes offers that the audience’s recognition and response to blood may lie in the immediacy of the moment of storytelling. “Each sign in wrestling is therefore endowed with an absolute clarity, since one must always understand everything on the spot. As soon as the adversaries are in the ring, the public is overwhelmed with the obviousness of the roles.” (Barthes, 2000, p. 15) Blood becomes the prop that reinforces this absolute clarity, and purchasing Austin’s heel turn at WrestleMania X-Seven and narrating the possibility that Rhodes has the strength and cunning to defeat not only Lesnar, but anyone else who may stand in the way of his long awaited WWE Universal Championship Title win.

In a performative kayfabe existing in a capitalist lexicon, the blood shed by performers purchases investment from the audience into the narrative they are perceiving. In an external lexicon where sacrifice for the common good is glorified and masculine sacrifice in particular reaffirms the notion that men are tough, physical and unafraid, the very act of bleeding for performance becomes a further affirmation of the system of kayfabe, both in the ring and beyond it. Two men working through injury, battling through pain and suffering serve as a reminder that in the capitalist lexicon this is the everyday experience of most subjects. Working through injury without complaint. And as an audience we appreciate that sacrifice. As David Wills’s “It’s still real to me” refrain affirms, pro-wrestlers lay it all on the line for the audience just for that same audience to beg to see it again. The wrestling fan will purchase that blood from the wrestler in ticket price, and the wrestler will pay the same blood to push the narratives along. It is a vicious and toxic cycle, but it is one that once revealed, is very easy to commit to yet further. For the truth of the Hobbesian lexicon is that without these spectacular performative acts that make the individuals legible in the ring, there would be no purpose, no identity, simply anonymity. The capitalist lexicon that has been manufactured, that is reaffirmed in pro-wrestling’s Kayfabe, constantly reminds us that without its confines what we are really watching is two individuals in tights pretending to punch one another.

The theatrical spectacle of injury

In order to reflect on the discussions in this article, it is beneficial to return to Abramovic’s quote from the very beginning. The assertion that, through analysis of bloodshed in pro-wrestling, we might be
assured of something authentic within its performance is thrown into question when taking a Hobbesian approach to the blood itself. In calling for safer ways of bloodshed in pro-wrestling to resume, Meltzer contradicts Abramovic’s argument that performance that uses real blood somehow elevates the action beyond theatrical and into “real” experience. His focus on safety, and of avoiding injury and sustained physical toil in calling for a return to blading indicates that the theatricality of that very blade is what is required to ensure pro-wrestlers wellbeing in matches where blood is featured. The blade and the blood then, deny their authenticity and embrace a theatricality, all the while sustaining a deeply embedded performance lexicon that is both a methodology for theatrical practice and a system of codified communication.

However, in a corporation that assures its audiences, and crucially television networks, that it has turned away from such practices in a bid to retain a ‘family-friendly’ façade, the denial of this theatricality reveals the absurdity in the investment in kayfabe and investment in Hobbesian lexicons more broadly. In a performative system that aims, in simple terms, to entertain through the re-enactment of fights, to enable an approach that allows performers to actually injure themselves, sometimes with great severity, in the pursuit of this re-enactment, is entirely irrational. Yet, without the all too rational response to these acts by Hobbesian actors – both wrestler and performer, the entire system is exposed as completely artificial. Kayfabe exists as a codified communicative practice that harnesses artificiality to create guidelines for identity performance. In performing and presenting oneself rationally within this system, the subject is afforded a performance liminality that reaffirms to other subjects a secure and safe identity in that same artificial system. Performance then becomes protective, affirmative and employs mythological ideals of masculinity and capitalism not just as foundations on which identities are founded but principle via which people are read. Blood within this system becomes a currency which can be traded in reaffirmation of the system in its entirety, codified to the point of theatricality yet shed at great physical cost. In kayfabe, only direct acknowledgment of the fiction; the pursuit of truth over peace in Hobbes’s terms, can truly reveal the absurdities but also the exploitation of those who operate within its confines.

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