

Audience Affirmation and the Labour of Professional Wrestling

Broderick Chow and Eero Laine

Professional wrestling presents a simulacrum of grappling and combat sport practices with ancient roots, framed by serial narratives of rivalry, jealousy and deceit that present a simplistic moral universe. [note]1 Situated between sport and theatre, the audience has a large and active role in the spectacle, participating as if the results of the matches were not determined before the performers enter the ring. Professional wrestling exaggerates the imperative to perform -- the sentiment that the 'show must go on.' After all, it is as if there were something at stake for the spectators, and their gestures of affirmation often encourage excessive work and labour on the parts of the wrestlers. Fans cheer when wrestlers bleed. Risky leaps are rewarded with admiring chants. Throughout, the wrestlers labour through a performance of pain, which is frequently made apparent in their bruised, bloody, and broken bodies. These displays of performance labour frequently move beyond the theatrical. If an actor playing Hamlet stabs an actor playing Laertes in such a way as to actually draw blood, there is significant cause for concern. In pro-wrestling, a similar situation is met with cheers as it attests to the authentic labour of the performance. The three examples discussed in this article -- an in-ring death, an extreme style of wrestling, and a stunt gone too far -- demonstrate theatrical affirmation while troubling the ways in which audiences directly consume and affirm or encourage the labour of the performer.

The cheers of the crowd, however, are only part of an economy of performance that includes affirmation in the form of remuneration. Most wrestlers work for a wrestling promoter or a corporation that produces wrestling events. Some wrestlers work on a per match basis, while others might be contracted to perform for longer periods of time. Marx reminds us of the relation between performer and entrepreneur:

A singer who sings like a bird is an unproductive worker. If she sells her singing for money, she is to that extent a wage labourer or a commodity dealer. But the same singer, when engaged by an entrepreneur who has her sing in order to make money, is a productive worker, for she directly produces capital. (Marx 1864, emphasis added)

Like Marx's singer, wrestlers labouring for a promoter are productive insofar as surplus value is created for the promoter through ticket sales. But unlike the singer, in the wrestling event, the physical exertion of the performer is the purpose of the performance not a byproduct. The physical labour of wrestling is immediately obvious as wrestlers sweat, bleed, and perform bodily exhaustion. This performance of the labouring body, which produces no physical commodity as such, is affirmed through payment by the promoter and by the cheers of the crowd. When a wrestler collapses, sweating profusely and bleeding in the ring, the wrestler is performing labour itself.

Wrestlers are freelance workers, hired by promotions as independent contractors, as opposed to salaried employees, which is to say, wrestlers sell their labour power to the promoter in exchange for a fixed wage per performance (see Mujanovic 2011). In return the wrestler generates value for the promoter through ticket sales and at the level of the WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment, the largest promoter of televised professional wrestling) and other corporate promotions, through merchandising and selling of the wrestler's image. The labour that the wrestler is paid for is representational labour, that is, the presentation of a storyline. Representational labour produces value for the promoter because it is a fulfilment of the basic contract made with the customer/audience member. These narratives, more often than not, are threaded through with cultural stereotypes, racism, misogyny and nationalism -- sensationalism of this sort helps to sell tickets and attract attention (positive or negative). At the same time, representing violence in the ring is mostly a matter of actually taking a punch. While moves are adapted to be performed (relatively) safely, many 'bumps' (falling) and 'strikes' (punches and kicks) involve a great deal of pain. While wrestler turned WWE executive, Triple H, states: 'At the end of the day, it's all about the story, and it's not about the bumps' (Shoemaker 2013); the physical narrative of the match relies on the wrestlers and their ability to endure painful stunts.

Endurance, though, has its limits. There are moments in the live event where the injury of the wrestler, because of its severity or suddenness or apparent non-theatricality, especially subverts the narrative frame and reveals the labour of the wrestling body. In these moments, the substance and meaning of affirmation quickly changes, from appreciation of narrative labour (that is, the ability to tell or represent a story) and the ability to simulate violence theatrically, to a celebration of labour as such. The labour of the wrestler is no longer captured by an economy of the theatre, but is excessive to it. Our discussion will focus on three such moments, and what they tell us about the politics of wrestling. Behind the frequently regressive storylines

professional wrestling offers a politics of work, sweat and blood that reveals the entwined nature of labour and violence, which, as Marx has demonstrated in the first volume of Capital, lies at the heart of the commodity form.

Audience Affirmation

An affirmation is a performative declaration of the truth or reality of a thing. In his book on the politics of the (unsuccessful) theatrical encounter, Nicholas Ridout provides two examples of audience affirmation. The first is derived from the young Marcel's account of theatre-going in Proust's À la recherche du temps perdu, in which he recalls seeing the fêted actress Berma: 'the more I applauded, the better, it seemed to me, did Berma act' (quoted in Ridout 2006: 2). In this case, the affirmation of the crowd, the applause, is indexed to Berma's performance of characterization, her acting. Applause affirms the degree to which her labour of acting presents a fully-realized, natural character upon the stage, and thus the audience's affirmation is paradoxical. By affirming that Berma has convinced them, they demonstrate they have in fact not been convinced. In Ridout's second example, taken from Heinrich von Kleist's essay Über das Marionettentheater, Herr C. (a dancer) asks his interlocutor (Kleist, the narrator), if the story he is telling is believable, and Kleist enthusiastically responds by applauding. Ridout writes: 'If someone is trying to persuade you that something is true, and you applaud, you are admiring the performance of persuasion rather than conceding the truth of that of which you are being persuaded' (2006: 24). Taken together, Ridout's examples demonstrate a more complex relationship of the theatre to illusion than presented by anti-theatrical critiques of representation. Affirmative gestures such as applause show that theatre presents an illusion that is freely entered into by those whom it deceives. Applause is an affirmation of the labour of illusion, and not of the illusion itself. Therefore, audience affirmation is the acknowledgment of a job well done, the positive confirmation that the products of the worker's representational labour have been consumed and enjoyed. As such, audience affirmation forms part of the economy of theatrical representation alongside the worker's wage.

While Ridout's theoretical work is concerned with the 'theatre of modernity' and naturalistic realism, it rather closely describes the processes of affirmation in professional wrestling. However, we should make some distinctions. Consider the audience in which Marcel finds himself; not content to save their exuberance until the fall of the curtain, they applaud to cajole Berma's performance as it happens. Applause becomes crudely analogous to the economics of

the theatre, in which, to paraphrase Ridout, a group of people in their leisure time pays to watch actors in their working time. Applause stands in place for remuneration; a marker of the transaction between the two groups. While in the contemporary theatre this type of audience affirmation is less common, in professional wrestling, which wears its commercial nature proudly, the relation of spectator affirmation to the economic transaction of the performance event is standard. Sharon Mazer suggests: 'The basis for the contract between promoter and spectator is economic, a promise that fans will get their money's worth' (2005: 79). The applause, cheers and chants are not only affirmation of the wrestler's work, but also a demand. The chant of 'Boring!' that spontaneously rises from the stands as the action in the ring slows or becomes repetitive (see Mazer 2005: 72) is a demonstration of this demand at work. Indeed, it is not that the audience is actually bored as the chant demonstrates their investment in the performance, thus, affirmation is a kind of labour on the part of the spectators as well. In response to this participation, a 'babyface' hero might accelerate the pace of the match, while a villainous 'heel' might address the crowd with a vulgar quip or gesture. 'Everything about the event [...] Mazer writes, 'has explicitly catered directly to them [the fans]' (ibid.). The businesslike argot of wrestling best demonstrates how wrestling openly acknowledges its economics -- wrestlers are called 'workers', a 'work' (noun) is a con, to 'work' (verb) is to perform, and convincing the audience is called 'selling.' This is contrary to how derivations of words for labour and work are almost always used pejoratively as descriptions of theatre performances: a laboured performance, a workmanlike production, 'that was hard work!' and so on. In contrast, the economics of professional wrestling are made explicit through performance and perpetuated by its lingo, its relentless marketing and merchandising, and historical connections to the conventions of vaudeville, circus, and other popular and commercial performance forms. Affirmation in wrestling is not only a confirmation of a job well done; it is a demand for more.

Therefore, the constant, participatory affirmation of the wrestling event signals the existence of a different interpretive frame than in the theatre. In wrestling's argot, this is 'kayfabe', defined as the performance of staged and 'faked' events as actual and spontaneous. Kayfabe extends beyond the physical space of the ring and the stadium to the discourse and media around the event -- wrestling, as we all know, is supposed to be 'real.' Drawn from the slang of carnival barkers, kayfabe was originally meant to exclude audiences from this industry secret (Marion Wrenn argues that it began as a shibboleth, meant to indicate to those in the inner circle that they were in the presence of someone who was not to know their secrets) (2007: 154). However, today fans and audiences take pleasure in active collaboration in not only creating the kayfabe

world but also in looking for ways of dissecting it (Mazer 2005, Wrenn 2007). Arguably throughout its history and certainly since the 1990s, when wrestlers and promoters began to actively acknowledge kayfabe, everyone in the wrestling event is 'keeping kayfabe,' cheering and booing as if the bouts were sportive rather than theatrical. Therefore, pro-wrestling's illusionism should be taken in the sense of what Pierre Bourdieu calls illusio: 'the investment in the game' (1992: 190; See also Wrenn 2007). After all, as the Canadian philosopher Mark Kingwell reminds us, the etymological root of 'illusion' means, simply, 'in play' (2012: 127).

But the nature of the 'fake' in wrestling is complex and counterintuitive. When wrestling fans participate in the illusion, keeping the game in play, their affirmation of the action of the match is an affirmation *as if* it were a real contest and simultaneously an affirmation of the reality of a violent move. The injuries wrestlers suffer are not separate from or incidental to the actions performed (as it would be with a dancer who slips and sprains an ankle during a tricky piece of choreography). And the blood that wrestlers euphemistically call 'getting colour' may be the result of a self-injury, but it is certainly a real wound. In the singular ontology of wrestling, where striking another body with a barbed-wire covered club and drawing blood can still be a simulation of the same, there remains the possibility of moments that trouble the frame of wrestling, and tip over the edge of what can be affirmed, kept in play, by an audience. These moments erase what in theatre is the 'vast difference between faking a punch or a gunshot or a strangulation and not faking one' (Enders 2009: xvii). In the audience, we cheer and boo as if we are affirming something real. Our affirmation declares it to be true, even though what we thought we were affirming was a mimetic performance of wrestlers executing moves and holds that appear painful, but are generally not. All along, however, we were really affirming the spectacle of the bodily enactment of labour -- the spectacle of suffering.

In the remainder of this article, we discuss three examples in which the limit of theatrical affirmation is exposed through the spectacle of violent labour. We begin briefly with Owen Hart, who fell to his death during a planned stunt in front of a live audience, which had to be assured that the fall was not part of the show. This attests to the power of the theatrical frame and the urge to keep in play that which was not part of the game. In the second example, the bloody hardcore wrestling style fetishizes excessive performances in ways that are quickly appropriated by management and sold to consuming fans. Finally, we take up an instance of 'getting color' gone wrong in a match between Eddie Guerrero and John Bradshaw Layfield. Through a close reading of Guerrero's blading (self-injury to draw blood in service of a performance), the event

presents a moment of excess that exceeds the scripted match and alters the affirmative act of the audience in ways that reveal the underlying politics of pro-wrestling.

Owen Hart (1965-1999)

Fans of pro-wrestling are not duped by the spectacle of apparent sport, but participate in the analysis of the theatrical event. They 'narrate the event, anticipate a turn or a finish, evaluate the performance as a performance' (Mazer 2005: 71).² This mode of viewing was encouraged under the chairmanship of Vince McMahon of the WWE, which began calling its product 'sports entertainment' in the 1980s and allowing fans into the 'secret' that the endings of matches were predetermined. The revelation only further extended the reach of the performance, however. When everything is understood as theatrical, even an irruption of the real, such as a fatal fall, becomes confused with a stunt or a special effect.

In 1999, wrestler Owen Hart fell to his death performing an unorthodox entrance, when the harness that was suspending him from the rafters of the Kemper Arena in Kansas City, Missouri malfunctioned. Despite the accident occurring early in the show, the performance continued as planned, sans Hart's match with Charles Wright, The Godfather. George Kimball of The Irish Times reported that promoter Vince McMahon met with the other employees and told them that 'after a moment of tribute, the show would go on. Anyone who felt as if he could not perform that night was welcome to step aside -- but, of course, anyone who didn't wrestle would not be paid' (Kimball 1999). Kimball was certainly not the only reporter to point to the economic impetus to perform for pay. T. Trent Gegax and Jerry Adler suggested that because of the potentially high payouts for wrestling performances, 'When the WWF says jump, wrestlers jump, even if it's 90 feet to the ground' (1999: 64).

The already excessive nature of wrestling's representational labour led to widespread confusion in the live audience: many sources reported that members of the audience, thinking Hart's fall to be part of the show, cheered after Hart's body hit the ring (Lipsyt 1999; Avner 1999; Baker and Kennedy 1999). The Globe and Mail emphasized that 'commentator Jim Ross repeated over and over to the audience that Hart's fall was not scripted' (Canadian Press 1999). Commentator Jim Ross's announcement that 'This is not part of tonight's entertainment[....]This is as real as real can be' functioned as a performative statement altering the reality of the event for viewers watching at home on pay-per-view television. (The audience in the arena was not informed that

Hart had died, however, only that the injury was not part of the performance.) When Hart's body was wheeled off in a stretcher, 'everybody cheered for him like he was a football player being taken off the field.' (Baker and Kennedy 1999). This shift in emphasis from cheering an illusion to cheering the performer as an athlete brings the work of the wrestler to the fore. It is worth noting how stubbornly the illusion of the theatrical remained and the fact that it was only dissipated through the combination of direct assertion and extreme injury.

Bloody labour: hardcore style

Intentional self-injury in order to draw blood in professional wrestling is fairly common, and points to the unique nature of wrestling labour. The practice is known as 'blading', 'getting colour', 'juicing', or 'gigging.'^[note]³ A worker will make a small incision in his forehead using a razor hidden in the wrist cuff or taped to the fingers, out of view of the audience -- for example, when holding one's head after a blow from a steel chair that is meant to be the actual cause of injury. The presence of authentic blood in an openly theatrical spectacle points to the unusual nature of wrestling labour. While it serves the storyline, as Lucy Nevitt argues, it also 'simultaneously proves the actual pain involved in simulating that injury, and in this context only actual blood will do' (2010: 84). Therefore, there is a complex affirmation at play when fans cheer on the celebrated 'steel chair to the head.'

Consider this scenario (or 'spot'), which might play out in any number of matches, either grassroots or televised: the face -- handsome, well-built, likeable -- has pinned the sneaky and brutish heel. Walking away, he turns to receive the adoration of his fans. The heel rises, and rushing up from behind, tosses the face over the ropes, out of the ring and across the announcers' table. The heel jumps out, and as the face rises for a counter-attack, he slams the face over the forehead with a steel chair. The audience jeers, and seeing the face rise up, wearing a 'crimson mask' they begin to chant: 'Holy shit! Holy shit!' The simplistic morality play of which much wrestling scholarship is concerned is actually only one side of what is being cheered (see Barthes 1957; Campbell 1996; Jenkins 2005; Morton and O'Brien 1985). The audience is a) affirming the narrative, that is, participating within it by affirming its ability to move them emotionally; b) affirming the representational labour of the workers (in the same way as the crowd applauds the actress Berma); and c) affirming the excess of labour in the performer, their commitment doing their job well by feeling actual pain and bleeding.

Hardcore wrestling style distills the above example down to its bloody and painful essence. Matches are made up entirely of dangerous spots, often eschewing even the most basic face/heel narrative. Wrestling historian Scott Beekman notes that hardcore style originated in the late 1980s when some wrestling promotions in Japan developed 'a style of wrestling built entirely on bloodletting and props such as barbed wire, thumbtacks, and mild explosives' (Beekman 2006: 137). The style gained in popularity throughout the 1990s in the United States and was the primary style of wrestling promoted by ECW (Extreme Championship Wrestling) (Beekman 2006: 137). The brutality of ECW matches was even a surprise to some experienced wrestlers. Konnan, a wrestler who had never performed for an audience anticipating a hardcore match describes the demands from the ECW audience: 'In Mexico, hardcore meant all they wanted was to see some blood. This was a whole different species....I hit my opponent with a chairshot that wasn't too hard, and they turned on me. These guys were for real' (Williams 2006: 69)

Hardcore wrestling goes beyond the sportive theatrical frame of professional wrestling in that every match is a bloody match. The hardcore style aestheticizes (however brutally) spectacular displays of pain, suffering, and humiliation. Rather than being a symptom of competition or the narrative, real pain and blood become fetishized commodities. Wrestlers are compensated for their willingness and ability to perform bodily destruction -- they are paid to bleed (and jump through tables and get hit with chairs and fall off of ladders and land on thumbtacks and cut each other with kitchen utensils and puncture themselves with staple guns and dive onto fluorescent tubes, cacti, and barbed wire and light each other on fire). Unlike Owen Hart's fall, which was a dangerous maneuver that was meant to be performed safely, the hardcore wrestling style begins with the promise of excess. The wrestlers are productive when they are (self) destructive. Excess value is correlated with excess pain and its gory outward symptoms. With hardcore wrestling, one is tempted to read literally Marx's metaphor of vampiric capital sucking the blood of workers.

In online, fan-posted videos from independent promotions -- rings set up in church parking lots, community centres, gymnasiums -- we see the wrestlers exposed, mostly naked, covered in wounds, dripping blood, and cheered by fans. It is brutal and, more often than not, difficult to watch not unlike some horror films or videos of surgical procedures. Hardcore wrestling is as chaotic and gruesomely creative as the former, yet it is as real as the latter. The theatrical frame is not immediately clear, as the unruly audience affirms the performance of blood and pain in a

way so as to make it 'less' than art. These affirmations mark the event as ambiguously theatrical, questionably sportive, and perhaps merely brutality. What is interesting and disturbing about the style is the way in which the demand of the fan becomes synonymous with the demand of the promoter. In the representational economy of wrestling, fans demand both the performance of narrative as well as some 'surplus.' There is something pornographic about this surplus: the understanding (and desire) that the 'real act' is being performed. Just as the promoter seeks to extract surplus value from the excessive labour of the wrestler, affirmative gestures by the audience in hardcore style become a means by which the fan, as consumer, extracts their purchase of the wrestler's labour.

Eddie Guerrero v. John Bradshaw Layfield, Judgment Day 2004

If hardcore style demonstrates the way that excessive labour as pain can be demanded, consumed, and affirmed by audiences, our final example demonstrates that perhaps there are also moments of political potentiality that lie in wrestling's oscillation between the theatrical, representational frame and the real of the wrestler's body. This was the case during a match between John 'Bradshaw' Layfield (JBL) and Eddie Guerrero, the main event on the card at WWE Judgment Day, which took place at the Staples Center in Los Angeles, California, on 16 May 2004.

Six foot six inches tall and dressed impractically only in boots and blue trunks topped with a white Stetson hat, John 'Bradshaw' Layfield's gimmick played on the stereotype of a wealthy Texas oil baron. This persona was compounded by a pre-recorded character promo that featured Layfield 'hunting' illegal immigrants at the US/Mexican border. Appropriately, Layfield's opponent Eddie Guerrero presented himself as a Mexican-American wrestler from El Paso, Texas. In his career at the WWE, Guerrero took on the gimmick of 'Latino Heat', which Phillip Serrato calls 'a sleazy Latin lover who embodied the worst of the greaser Mexican stereotype' (2005: 251). Despite this villainous heel gimmick, Guerrero was an extremely popular wrestler, which perhaps contributed to his 'face turn' to immigrant, working-class hero in this match.

Within the kayfabe narrative, at stake in the match is Guerrero's championship title and belt. Layfield takes the microphone to taunt his opponent, suggesting that once he's taken the title, Guerrero's mother will be welcome to work at the Layfield estate as a maid, playing further on discourses of undocumented workers, border patrols and American anti-immigration rhetoric.

Layfield is booed and jeered as loudly as Guerrero is applauded and cheered. The codified participation here affirms the 'reality' of the situation for those inside the event -- it sets up the rules of the game in which, regardless of the outcome being fixed (and thus neither opponent winning or losing in the traditional sense), the libidinal investment is with Guerrero. We are supposed to want him to 'win.' These gestures of affirmation are only part of the story, however. As fans of Guerrero and the less popular Layfield as wrestlers, the audience applauds these wrestlers in a manner akin to applauding a famous actress for the promise of her representative labour. We know these guys, working together, will give us a great show.

[[figure1]] Figure 1. Eddie Guerrero at WWE Judgement Day, 2004, screen capture, via YouTube.com; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=luuHR6l-x1o>, accessed 3 September 2013.

The blading accident takes place around 14 minutes into the match.{{note}}4 What the audience sees first is Layfield striking Guerrero over the head with a steel chair. Next, Guerrero collapses under the blow. When he rises again, blood is spurting from his forehead -- he has severed an artery. (fig. 1) As Layfield notes, Guerrero overcompensated with an extra-deep cut due to scar tissue on his hairline from previously 'getting colour':

Eddie went deep. Very deep. I had no idea until I watched that tape back how much blood there was, I have seen some bloodbaths and in Japan, Europe, Mexico and Texas I had been in several -- I have never seen anything like that (Layfield 2011).

The act of self-injury is intentional, but the outcome is unexpected. The audience evidence the collapse of the diegetic frame, or rather, any pretence of maintaining the diegetic frame (in other words, keeping kayfabe), by letting out a collective gasp, before cheering.{{note}}5 We also notice hesitation and uncertainty on the part of Layfield, who seems unsure how to proceed, whether to stop or 'take it home' (end the match) early, or to follow the planned structure of the match. The relation between the two men and their communication during the match might be an example of what sociologist and wrestling scholar, R. Tyson Smith refers to as 'passion work': 'jointly performed emotional labour intended to elicit a passionate response from subjects through an impression of extreme states such as joy, agony, or suffering' (Smith 2008: 159). Professional wrestling is fertile ground for passion work as it thrives on 'situations in which two (or more) performers jointly perform emotional labour in a high-stakes context where there is great risk for pain, injury or death' (Smith 2008: 159). We might infer, then, from their close

personal and professional relationship that a tacit, almost unconscious signal took place between the two men, leading them to continue the match for a further 15 minutes.

The blood continues to pour from Guerrero's head, covering his face and chest, and soon both men are covered in one man's blood. The ring itself is stained and streaked with red. (fig 2) After the moment of uncertainty, the site of the audience's affirmation has shifted, from the fulfillment of the theatrical promise to surprise to the celebration of Guerrero's labour as worker. As a celebration of Guerrero's commitment to work, the cheers of the audience are troubling and revelatory. In the final moments of the match Guerrero climbs up the turnbuckles above the bloody canvas, ready to deliver a final frog-splash to a prone Layfield. (fig 3) The crowd screams, seemingly for vengeance, an affirmation that collapses the representational into the actual -- 'after all this, he's got to win.' Yet, who wins (it's JBL in the end, after some sneaky business of stealing the belt) is less important than Guerrero's commitment as a worker. As one online commentator writes: 'if anything stands out as a testimonial to his dedication to the business and his commitment to wrestling fans, it should be this match. It's clear that Eddie was dedicated to the idea that "the show must go on" even in the face of personal risk, pain and suffering' (Mike B. 2011).

[[figure2]] Figure 2. Eddie Guerrero vs. JBL, at WWE Judgment Day 2004. L--R: John Bradshaw Layfield, Eddie Guerrero, screen capture, via YouTube.com; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=luuHR6I-x1o>, accessed 3 September 2013.

[[figure3]] Figure 3. Eddie Guerrero at Judgment Day 2004. The 'finish' of the match. Screen capture, via YouTube.com; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=luuHR6I-x1o>, accessed 3 September 2013.

When analysing this accidental event, we must consider the severity of the injury. Layfield, looking back at the match, notes:

Eddie was out of it, he didn't remember the last 15 minutes of match. They took him to hospital to get blood right after [the] match was over. I can't believe he made it through. He wasn't right for a couple of weeks (2011).

The moment is in every way excessive to the representational labour of wrestling, which already contains self-injury as an acceptable representational practice. In the moment of performance, this excess escapes from its capture by the corporate promotion (WWE) and is consumed/affirmed directly by the audience -- and in doing so draws attention to the way value is produced and captured by the promoter. Guerrero's excessive labour goes beyond the economy of representation -- in excess to the labour conscripted by the promoter, it is directly consumed, celebrated and affirmed by the fan. Owing to their knowledge of the conventions of wrestling, fans know that matches are loosely structured but mainly improvised, and therefore, after the accident, JBL and Eddie Guerrero could have run straight to the finish. As the fifteen interminable minutes tick by after the accident, the audience begins to cheer endurance, commitment and labour as such. Guerrero is no longer working for his cheque, but for us. This recalls Ridout's discussion of the applause of the curtain call which cannot be returned by the applause of the performers: 'The audience is trying to figure itself as the recipient of a gift. [...] It wants to feel something extra, garner some "affecting surplus" from the encounter that has nothing to do with either the literal or the figurative economies of representation that obtain in modern theatre' (2006: 165). In this case this is precisely what the audience has received: the excess of blood figures as an affective surplus in the purest sense.

Conclusion

These three examples demonstrate labour in excess to the theatrical contract. Audience affirmation in these cases is always surplus to the economics of the theatre. Yet while the audience affirms the generosity of the performer, at the same time the gift that cannot be repaid makes visible or performs the underlying relations of production. The excess of blood flowing from what is meant to be a superficial wound renders the theatrical contract insufficient to contain it.

The regressive politics of wrestling's narratives, with their jingoistic assumptions, racist stereotypes, misogyny and homophobia, have been thoroughly critiqued, both in scholarly work and popular culture. But as we have argued in this article, the narrative, that is, the diegetic, representational world, is only one aspect of professional wrestling's economy. Wrestling's codified affirmative gestures indicate a demand for labour in excess of the representational. Therefore in moments of uncertainty such as accidental injury, affirmation signals a kind of discomfort with one's place in the economy of the performance. These moments cannot initially

be captured by the transaction of the theatrical frame and as such reveal the latent politics of wrestling as a performance of the entwined nature of labour and violence. When the representational and theatrical fall to the side, audience members are confronted with the labouring, performing body. The potential of professional wrestling as an affirmation of labour is actualized, demonstrating not only the specific risks of wrestling, but performing the underlying exploitation and violence of wage labour in general.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Elizabeth Adams, Christine Marks, and Rayya El Zein for their careful reading and feedback on various drafts of this article.

Notes

1 There are, of course, historical and regional differences among the ways professional wrestling is and has been practiced; however, this definition is broad enough to include forms that can be found in the United States, Mexico, the United Kingdom and Japan.

2 In this way professional wrestling achieves a kind of *verfremdungseffekt* championed by Bertolt Brecht. Brecht, aimed for theatre audiences to possess the kind of analytic spectatorship found in fans of sport, even using a pseudo boxing ring in his 1930 production of The Measures Taken (Brecht 1926: 6-8; Mumford 2008: 16).

3 Note that 'gigging' is also yet another synonym for work in wrestling's argot.

4 The blade-job gone wrong can be seen in the three-disc DVD set Viva la Raza: The Legacy of Eddie Guerrero, but the specific moment itself is available online in numerous clips on video sharing sites. The channel 'WWElibraryHD2' posts the moment with the caption: 'Eddie Guerrero takes a big chair shot from JBL and does a bad blade job at Judgement Day 2004.' This is a smark (a term that combines the word 'smart' -- those 'in' on the illusion -- and 'mark' -- the supposed dupe; 'smarks' know that wrestling is fake but act as if they do not) narration of the event: the user clearly separates the representational/diegetic (the chair shot) from the actual (the blade job), there is no suggestion of cause-and-effect (the chair did not cause the bleeding, as the storyline suggests), and the use of the work-related argot in 'job' demonstrates the insider's view.

5 This type of spontaneous reaction is known as a 'pop.'

References

Avner, Benjamin S. (1999). 'Misplaced Blame in Ring Accident', New York Times, <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/06/13/sports/l-misplaced-blame-in-ring-accident-148440.html>, accessed 2 Sep 2013.

Baker, K.C. and Helen Kennedy (1999). 'WWF Wrestler Dies in Stunt 85 foot Fall During Live Event', New York Daily News, <http://www.nydailynews.com/archives/news/wwf-wrestler-dies-stunt-85-foot-fall-live-tv-event-article-1.824765#axzz2ePf6zdGd>, accessed 2 Sep 2013.

Barthes, Roland (1957) [1972]. Mythologies. Trans. Annette Lavers. New York: Hill and Wang.

Beekman, Scott M. (2006). Ringside: A History of Professional Wrestling in America. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.

Bourdieu, Pierre (1992). The Rules of Art. Trans. Susan Emanuel. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Brecht, Bertolt (1926)[1964]. 'Emphasis on Sport', in Brecht on Theatre, Ed. and trans. John Willett. New York: Hill and Wang, pp. 6-8.

Campbell (1996). 'Professional Wrestling: Why The Bad Guy Wins', The Journal of American Culture 19(2): 127--132.

Canadian Press (1999). 'Wrestler Owen Hart dies in stunt fall', The Globe and Mail, 24 May.

Enders, Jody (2009). Murder by Accident: Medieval Theater, Modern Media, Critical Intentions. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Gegax, T. Trent and Jerry Adler with Steve Rhodes and Thomas Hayden (1999). 'Death in the Ring', Newsweek. 7 June.

Jenkins, Henry III (2005) "'Never Trust a Snake": WWF Wrestling as Masculine Melodrama', in Nicholas Sammond (ed.) Steel Chair to the Head. Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 33--66.

Kimball, George (1999). 'Wrestling Routs Last Vestiges of Decency', The Irish Times, City Edition, p. 21, May 27.

Kingwell, Mark (2012). Unruly Voices: Essays on Democracy, Civility and the Human Imagination, Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Layfield, John (2011). 'My -Feud- With My Friend Eddie.' The Layfield Report, <http://www.layfieldreport.com/my-feud-with-my-friend-eddie.blog>, accessed 4 September 2013.

Lipsyt, Robert (1999). 'Backtalk: Going Over the Edge to Death and Applause', New York Times, 30 May 1999, <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/05/30/sports/backtalk-going-over-the-edge-to-death-and-applause.html>, accessed 1 September 2013.

Marx, Karl (1864). Economic Works of Karl Marx 1861-1864. Vol. 34 of The Marx and Engels Complete Works, Translated by Ben Fowkes. [marxist.org](http://www.marxists.org), <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1864/economic/ch02b.htm>, accessed 30 August 2013.

Mazer, Sharon (2005). "'Real" Wrestling / "Real" Life', in Nicholas Sammond (ed.) Steel Chair to the Head, Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 67--87.

Mike B. 'Matches To See Before You Die: Eddie Guerrero vs. JBL (Judgment Day 2004)' Gammacloud.org. 31 August 2011, <http://gammacloud.org/2011/08/31/matches-to-see-before-you-die-eddie-guerrero-vs-jbl-judgment-day-2004/>, accessed 4 September 2013.

Morton, Gerald W. and George M. O'Brien (1985). From Wrestling to Rasslin': Ancient Sport to American Spectacle. Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press.

Mujanovic, Jasmin (2011). 'The Political Economy of Professional Wrestling: Capital, Unions and Spandex' Politics Respun. 2 May 2011, <http://politicsrespun.org/2011/05/the-political-economy-of-professional-wrestling-capital-unions-and-spandex/>, accessed 16 December 2013.

Mumford, Meg (2008). Bertolt Brecht. London: Routledge.

Nevitt, Lucy (2010). 'Popular Entertainments and the Spectacle of Bleeding', Popular Entertainment Studies, 1(2): 78--92.

Ridout, Nicholas (2006). Stage Fright, Animals, and Other Theatrical Problems, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Serrato, Phillip (2005). 'Not Quite Heroes: Race Masculinity, and Latino Professional Wrestlers', in Nicholas Sammond (ed.) Steel Chair to the Head, Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 232--259.

Shoemaker, David, writing as The Masked Man (2013). "'Getting Ready for a Car Crash": An Interview With Triple H', Grantland.com, 22 August 2013, http://www.grantland.com/story/_/id/9588366/view/full/an-interview-wwe-superstar-corporate-officer-triple-h, accessed 3 September 2013.

Smith, R. Tyson (2008). 'Passion Work: The Joint Production of Emotional Labor in Professional Wrestling', Social Psychology Quarterly, 71(2): 157--176.

Viva La Raza: The Legacy of Eddie Guerrero. 2008. [DVD] Directed by Kevin Dunn. USA: World Wrestling Entertainment.

Williams, Scott E. (2006). Hardcore History: The Extremely Unauthorized Story of ECW. Champaign, IL: Sports Publishing LLC.

Wrenn, Marion (2007). 'Managing Doubt: Pro-Wrestling Jargon and the Making of "Smart Fans"', in Richard Sennett and Craig Calhoun (eds) Practicing Culture, New York: Routledge, pp. 149--170.