

Shifting Kayfabe in Hardcore Wrestling and Beyond

Brooks Oglesby

University of South Florida

oglesby@usf.edu

“How Do You Learn to Fall Off a 20-Foot Ladder? Exploring Hardcore Professional Wrestling as One of the Last Keepers of Kayfabe” offers an important opening to further analysis of an underappreciated genre of professional wrestling. As a young fan, I implicitly took up this argument while defending professional wrestling to skeptical friends, citing moments like Mankind’s fall at *WWF King of the Ring 1998* or the practice of blading as elements that cannot be “faked,” situating the genre as exceptional within professional wrestling. And certainly, hardcore wrestling troubles the rigidity of kayfabe as it pushes the boundaries of fakery and legitimacy but also challenges binarized ideas of safety and danger, as the slicing of flesh and spectacular impacts to the body invite audiences to consider the production of bodily harm—and perhaps their own complicity as viewers—in this unique form of choreographed collaborative violence.

Hardcore wrestling mirrors other boundary-pushing forms of performance art like surgical performances, which “create uncontestable images of the opened body that force the attention of spectators” (Faber 89). A viewer notes the absence of a bruise after repeated worked punches to the face, but hardcore wrestling upsets that aesthetic distance by drawing attention back to the body as it produces visceral evidence of injury. Hardcore wrestling capitalizes on the tension of watching a performer face what seems to be a more genuine bodily risk, transforming kayfabe through a “deep interplay between knowing, and not knowing, for sure” (Conquergood 273).

What strikes me about this argument, though, is that these spectacular sights in hardcore wrestling—crimson masks, thumbtacks, barbed wire—are, with some exceptions, not typically the bodily impacts that leave lasting impacts on performers. Whereas a bladed forehead can heal in days, the more mundane impacts: the long drives from town to town, hundreds of repeated flatback bumps, and pressures to accrue and maintain sufficient bodily capital (Chow 82) all contribute to the long-term wearing down that makes early death so common in the industry (Morris). Yet, the splitting of skin in a hardcore match troubles the viewer’s aesthetic distance much more immediately and effectively, drawing forth an empathy from audiences that might otherwise be suppressed through conventional notions of fakery.

Does this redemption of kayfabe through hardcore wrestling, then, preclude the possibility of shifting contexts of kayfabe within conventional genres of professional

wrestling? If spectacular falls, cuts, and explosions lend a feeling of legitimacy to kayfabe, non-hardcore wrestling would face greater pressure to keep up so as to not lose buy-in from audiences. As non-hardcore wrestling remains popular among fans despite a perceived lesser sense of legitimacy, I posit that kayfabe is not quite bygone but rather shifting and reforming across genres, certainly including but not limited to hardcore wrestling. As a fan, watching stiff strikes in conventional wrestling matches draws a comparable empathetic response from me, for example, as do some legitimate-looking submission maneuvers applied by wrestlers with mixed martial arts backgrounds. With the advent of high-definition broadcasts, wrestlers working televised matches have had to work more snugly, again shifting styles to meet changing performative contexts. And while heels and babyface traveling together as co-workers is no longer a scandalous affront to kayfabe as it once was, contemporary wrestlers frequently blend onscreen personas with personal lives on social media, extending an updated form of kayfabe well beyond the confines of the wrestling arena (Litherland 532). In this way, hardcore wrestling is a testament to the malleability of kayfabe over time, a form that provides particularly promising avenues to bring attention back to the wrestler's body as it faces down precarity and peril both imagined and painfully felt.

Works Cited

- Chow, Broderick. "Work and Shoot." *TDR: The Drama Review*, vol. 58, no. 2, 2014, pp. 72–86.
- Conquergood, Dwight. *Cultural Struggles Performance, Ethnography, Praxis*. U of Michigan P, 2013.
- Faber, Alyda. "Saint Orlan: Ritual As Violent Spectacle and Cultural Criticism." *TDR: The Drama Review*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2002, pp. 85–92.
- Litherland, Benjamin. "Breaking Kayfabe Is Easy, Cheap and Never Entertaining: Twitter Rivalries in Professional Wrestling." *Celebrity Studies*, vol. 5, no. 4, 2014, pp. 531–33.
- Morris, Benjamin. "Comparing the WWF's Death Rate to the NFL's and Other Pro Leagues'." *FiveThirtyEight*, 24 Apr. 2014, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/comparing-the-wwfs-death-rate-to-the-nfls-and-other-pro-leagues/>.