Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Continuum

Journal of Media & Cultural Studies

ISSN: 1030-4312 (Print) 1469-3666 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/ccon20

A libidinal economy of professional wrestling

David W. Hill

To cite this article: David W. Hill (28 Jul 2025): A libidinal economy of professional wrestling, Continuum, DOI: 10.1080/10304312.2025.2540841

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2025.2540841

Published online: 28 Jul 2025.

CONTINUUM: JOURNAL OF MEDIA & CULTURAL STUDIES
https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2025.2540841

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

A libidinal economy of professional wrestling

David W. Hill

Social Sciences, York St John University, York, UK

ABSTRACT

In the world of professional wrestling, the insistence that the action contributes towards a legitimate sporting contest – despite its being a pre-determined performance – is known as kayfabe. This article focuses on the intensities behind the media spectacle, the passion and excitement, to conceptualize how kayfabe is communicated between professional wrestlers, live audiences and television viewers. It is argued that professional wrestling is given its legitimacy by the co-production of passion in the form of communication; that this exchange of passion can be understood in terms of a libidinal economy; and that this libidinal economy is both sustained and disrupted by its mediation. As a media spectacle, professional wrestling is caught between its appeal to television viewers as a primary audience and its reliance on arena crowds to communicate its legitimacy and corroborate its storytelling. Without the presence of fans in attendance, kayfabe would be reduced to a kind of empty control – a top-down insistence that the television audience goes along with the pretence. It is concluded that professional wrestling is a communication of shared passions or else it loses its coherence as a spectacle.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 25 April 2025
Accepted 23 July 2025

KEYWORDS
Control; intensity; kayfabe; semiotics; spectacle

When the COVID-19 pandemic took hold, the world of professional wrestling was left with a difficult choice: stop the shows and wait or empty the arenas and carry on. New Japan Pro-Wrestling (NJPW) took the first option, cancelling shows until fans could return, albeit masked and prohibited from chanting. Consejo Mundial de Lucha Libre (CMLL) adopted a hybrid approach, pausing events and then returning to venues without fans, their 87th Anniversary Show performed in the 16,500-capacity Arena México but played only to a television audience. In the US, All Elite Wrestling (AEW) focused on its television product, broadcasting throughout the early days of the pandemic but without spectators in attendance. Fans were less than enthused with the experience of these empty or silent shows, which were seen to be lacking or surreal or else uncanny (see Ehantharajah 2020; Greenberg 2022; Truitt 2020).

The mediation of sporting entertainments in general has led to the uprooting of what was once local, now globally dispersed (Whannell 2014). In turn, being there has become less important as the medium augments the viewing experience (Galily 2014), offering

CONTACT David W. Hill d.hill@yorksj.ac.uk Social Sciences, York St John University, Lord Mayor's Walk, York YO31 7EX

better views and greater informational content during sporting events. As media have become more interactive, the dislocation of the event, with its tendency to individualize the viewer, has been met by a desire from fans to reach out through the screen to form collectives with other spectators (Gong 2020). The loneliness of the television spectator was felt across the sporting world during the pandemic. In European football, for example, stands were emptied, with chanting piped into the stadium to present a facsimile of fandom; eerie as this was, the absence of live spectators was seen to have a calming effect on the footballers themselves, unburdened of the energetic intensity of the crowd in these so-called 'ghost games' (Leitner and Richlan 2021).

But professional wrestling is not quite like the other sports. Unlike amateur wrestling – a legitimate sport – professional wrestling has a fixed outcome and matches are, if not choreographed, then at least wrestled according to a rhythm agreed by the wrestlers in advance. The former AEW star Saraya explains that wrestling is not fake but instead 'predetermined': 'We're just trying to tell you a story', she says (in Moore 2025). Those stories are often simple morality plays involving faces (the heroes) and heels (the villains). The pretence that a wrestling match is a genuine sporting contest is known by performers and fans as kayfabe. Benjamin Litherland (2019, 12) defines kayfabe as 'wrestling's insistence on its own legitimacy'. In essence, kayfabe is the unwritten code that hides wrestling's non-competitive nature: to maintain kayfabe is to keep up the pretence; to break kayfabe is to reveal, by accident or by design, that wrestling has a predetermined outcome. But it would be a mistake to assume that the insistence is an imposition on the fan; both wrestlers and audiences are going along with the idea that the match is a hot sporting contest, even if the latter are aware that it is not. By reacting to the action, chanting, cheering and gasping at the audacity of it all, at once believing and knowing better, the fan insists too. It is this active co-production of the meaning of wrestling that seems to make it a coherent spectacle, and the absence of such that was felt so keenly during the pandemic.

The conceptual work developed here provides an account of how professional wrestling produces its spectacle of intensity by allowing live audiences to communicate its authenticity to television audiences. More broadly, it contributes to an understanding of the interconnection between the mediation of spectacle and the circulation of passion. The first section sets out the established literature on professional wrestling. This allows for the characterization of wrestling as a spectacle of emotional intensity (or passion) that is co-produced by wrestlers and spectators and given legitimacy by this co-production (in the form of communication). The second section substantiates the exchanges of emotional intensity between wrestlers and live audiences in the form of a libidinal economy. This offers a more detailed explanation of how passion is produced and circulated between the two parties. The third section demonstrates how this circulation of intensity is at once both sustained and disrupted by its mediation. This shows that the spectacle is subject to a constant tension between its reaching out to television audiences and its reliance on the live audience to complete the communication. The final section concludes that the passion work of wrestlers is miscommunicated to television audiences if there is no corroboration of their storytelling by live audiences, undermining the kayfabe that underwrites it. The experience of the pandemic ultimately reveals that empty arenas may give wrestling promotions more control over the product (in the form of a disinvestment from co-production) but that playing too much to the television cameras comes at the

cost of severing the communal tie between audiences – and thereby risks giving the lie to the spectacle.

Signifying intensity

Towards the end of *Poetics of Relation* Édouard Glissant (2024) touches on televised wrestling in the US. He argues that violence is sustained by its own dazzle, by its violent reproduction in the form of the spectacle, and that it demands to be staged. Reflecting on the predetermined nature of the wrestling match, Glissant (2024, 197) writes: 'Wrestling matches are not really meant to determine which competitor is the strongest. In the audience, however, they stir up waves of irrepressible violence, stripped of any skepticism'. This is characterized as a violence at its most extreme intensity. Turned to this volume, the audience can really believe in the spectacle of violence, and tune in precisely for the experience of this intensity. It does not then matter if the staging of the violence is meant to conceal that it is all predetermined: 'The desire for manifest violence is stronger than any suspicion of hidden nonviolence' (Glissant 2024, 198).

Glissant offers a useful framing of the spectacle of wrestling in terms of its intensity, and it is equally helpful to connect intensity to the overriding of doubt – not wholesale belief in the staging but the relative unseriousness of the staging for the experience of the spectacle. The attention to violence would situate professional wrestling within what Elias and Dunning (1986) identified as sport's civilizing process, offering spectators a release of intensity despite the social prohibition of violent action. But the characterization of this intensity as exclusively violent in nature limits an understanding of the range of experience of the spectacle and of its co-production between wrestlers and audiences. A corrective to this can be found in part in Roland Barthes' essay 'The World of Wrestling' in *Mythologies* (2009).

'The virtue of all-in wrestling', writes Barthes (2009, 3), having distinguished the form of sporting entertainment in question from the legitimate sport of amateur wrestling, 'is that it is the spectacle of excess'. This spectacularity renders all discussion of the supposed fakery in professional wrestling redundant:

> The public is completely uninterested in knowing whether the contest is rigged or not, and rightly so; it abandons itself to the primary virtue of spectacle, which is to abolish all motives and consequences: what matters is not what it thinks but what it sees. (Barthes 2009, 3)

Wrestling is not so much a sport as an arousal of passion in moments that may take the form of a sporting contest but need not adhere to the same logic. The purpose of the wrestler is not to win but to perform according to the role expected of them by the crowd. Wrestling then cannot be undone by its predetermined nature; it suffices that the match presents intelligible representations, images of moral experience that wear their meaning on the outside. The result of this, Barthes (2009, 7) claims, is the 'emptying out of interiority to the benefit of its exterior signs'. Contra Glissant, Barthes emphasizes the exhibition of suffering over violence, which taps into a shared moral universe occupied by the audience, who want to see heels get their comeuppance and wounded faces triumph. This is why wrestling is such a pantomime; everything must be maximally explicit to communicate unambiguously the rightness or wrongness of suffering. Grimaces, screams,

grotesquely distorted bodies – beyond all reasonable fidelity to the genuine impact of the move performed – are all signs that are all-out. This is why the emphasis is on suffering and not violence; the crowd does not want the wrestler to be legitimately injured, only to see suffering expressed as a vehicle for the staging of justice. 'It is not true that wrestling is a sadistic spectacle', writes Barthes (2009, 9); 'it is only an intelligible spectacle'.

Barthes' account of wrestling then acknowledges the importance of the presence of the audience in the creation of the spectacle. The only reason a heel cheats when the referee is not looking, for example, is not because they cannot be seen but precisely because they are seen by the fans. A spectacle of unambiguous signs gives the crowd something they cannot possess outside the arena: 'the perfect intelligibility of reality' (Barthes 2009, 14). The audience is not only part of the spectacle but made powerful beyond possibility by its participation in the spectacle – by its being freed from all ambiguity.

Litherland's *Wrestling in Britain* (2019) provides a comprehensive history and analysis of audiences, from the 1930s through to the 1980s; he concludes that 'audiences did not care that [wrestling] was performed because it was entertaining, and their participation was a vital part of the event' (104). Playing along with the performance makes the spectator part of the performance, to the extent that the response to kayfabe – booing villainy, wincing at strikes, gasping at moves, groaning at holds, chanting ('you sick fuck!' when a heel uses a weapon, say) – 'folded audiences into the text' (Litherland 2019, 105). This is not to say that the crowd is straightforwardly hoodwinked by what they are seeing; fans retain their agency, and the joy of being freed from ambiguity is balanced by another pleasure: scrutinizing the spectacle for breaches of kayfabe or breaks in its internal logic (sometimes expressed in the form of a chanted 'you fucked up!'), such as when a wrestler slips from character or when a supposedly offensive move is too obviously assisted in its completion by the opponent (see Litherland 2014).

Building on Tyson Smith's (2008) study of the co-production of passion work between wrestlers, Annette Hill (2015) demonstrates how passion is performed through forms of labour not limited to the in-ring talent. Fans' responses are manipulated by the actions of the wrestlers (denigrating the local sports team is guaranteed to elicit boos for the heel, whereas a face battling back strongly after a period of sustained skullduggery from the heel is bound to get the audience on their feet in hopeful anticipation of a just win). Sam West (2024, 82), reflecting on how wrestlers plan their matches, notes that 'storytelling is built around clear expressions of emotion. Matches are often planned by plotting desired emotional states – moments of anger, frustration, and fear'. But it is the performance of the fans that legitimates the spectacle. If the crowd withheld their responses, which is to say, if the crowd refused the intelligibility of wrestling's system of signs, then the spectacle short-circuits; you cannot have legitimacy in a staged sport if the fans do not go along with it (see Alcott 2024). It is the passion work of the audience that puts the emotional intensity into the spectacle sufficient to sustain the kayfabe.

Libidinal exchange

'Hot passions rule', writes Hill (2015, 183), of wrestling's spectacle of intensity. An intensity – passion, desire – is an excitation of energy. A sanitized account of emotional intensity would posit the body as a closed system, that it might be

possible to encounter expressions of feeling in the form of utterances or actions, but that passion or desire is held captive in the body. In *Libidinal Economy* (2004) Jean-François Lyotard offers instead an account of bodies as internal systems for the flow of these energies that are nonetheless open-ended; that is, the body opens on to other bodies and on to other systems or dispositifs (politics, economics, ethics), such that intensity circulates between them. There are only comfortable, stable relations – with others, with the world – once intensities cool. Those systems can appear wholly rational or unemotional only after the fact of affect. And when intensities run hot, the fear is that they will boil over into violence or fascism.

But this would be to confuse a force with a power. It is the kind of confusion that permits Glissant to claim that wrestling fans are overcome with a desire for violence. To experience an intensity is to be made vulnerable by it, to be compelled towards something that one cannot form a synthesis with. You cannot have what you desire; you can only have the desire. Passion is 'having to cry near to areas struck by lightning' (Lyotard 2004, 39). The wrestling fan is not puffed up with the power to incite violence; they are compelled towards the action playing out in the ring, their bodies opened on to the bodies of wrestlers, coursing with passion work, and on to the system or dispositif through which all that passion is directed for the sake of coherence: kayfabe. The passion of the fans, aroused by the passion work of the wrestlers, then circulates through a system that domesticates intensity as a desire for a pre-determined performance of wrestling. There are no good or bad intensities, as if there were an adequate measure for indeterminate energy; there are, of course, good or bad systems, and wrestling can be judged (by whatever metric) on the basis of channelling intensity towards a predetermined spectacle of suffering – and not towards violence itself.

Barthes is closer to this idea of wrestling with his account of the importance of signification. But if the system of kayfabe is to provide an adequate outlet for all that passion, then the nature of the sign requires some clarification. In the vanguard of Lyotard's challenge to traditional semiotics is the tensor. The tensor is not a stand-in, does not point back to something elsewhere or evoke an idea of it or situate anything amidst rules; the tensor is a tension that is felt. Whereas the tensor would be itself an expression of intensity, signs as they are imagined by conventional semiotics would be 'intensities in exodus' (Lyotard 2004, 49). If wrestling is straightforwardly indexical in its communication of passion, that is, if the fan is merely pointed towards the intense struggle underway in the ring, then that passion is elsewhere and is essentially deferred. If wrestling is iconic in the sense of resembling a real sporting contest, then not only is the thing itself elsewhere (amateur wrestling, say, or boxing) but also the excitation of the spectacle is not of the passions but instead reduced to an object of thought (in the act of comparison). Similarly, if the wrestling match is symbolic, which is to say, if it communicates the system of rules that governs it (i.e. kayfabe) then the enjoyment of wrestling is firmly rooted in the intellectual reading of its fidelity to the rules and its coherence according to those rules. The act of wrestling may well be communicated by these forms of signification – but it would not be sufficient to ground the passion of it all.

Lyotard is not offering a fourth sign to add to the index and the icon and the symbol; he is proposing a different way of understanding the same thing the semiotician renders as a sign. The shift from the semiotician's understanding to

Lyotard's is made clear: 'It speaks to you? It sets us in motion' (Lyotard 2004, 49). The tensor is a singularity that can be clothed in different structures of meaning but is at heart an 'instantaneous, ephemeral concentration of force' (66). The semiotician can make it stand to attention in an interpretative system, but this cannot completely mask that the tensor is an intensity trying to communicate itself.

This is useful for understanding the co-production of the spectacle of wrestling via passion work precisely because it retains the intensity of passion without betraying its singularity to make it intelligible and because it allows for an understanding of how passion flows between fans and wrestlers rather than by deferral creating a chasm to leap over. If bodies are open-ended, such that desire does not end at the skin but flows in and out, then the tensor is not only a communication of intensity but also a meeting of intensities, a tension, since what flows from one body meets what flows from another. The face feigns agony in a sharpshooter (a submission move) and communicates this in the form of passion work; the fan feels this pain and is overcome by the jeopardy – that the wrestler will tap out (hit the mat three times with their hand to signal that they give up) – and communicates this by their own passion work. This is perfectly intelligible as conventional signs. But what makes it primarily passionate, that is, an exchange of passion and not a 'fraudulent exchange' where passion is translated into intelligible signs and thereby diminished (Lyotard 2004, 75), is that underneath all this is an exchange of intensity between wrestler and fan, energies from under one skin and another meeting in the middle and occupying the chasm between one and other in genuine encounter where what is felt – unique to the fan and to the wrestler – is shared.

Libidinal mediation

If kayfabe ensures that hot passion does not manifest as genuine violence, then it is not the only system through which intensities circulate. The disagreement between Barthes and Glissant on the nature of fans' desire – for justice or for violence – may come down to the former considering wrestling as a live event experienced in church halls and the back rooms of pubs and the latter reflecting on wrestling as a televised spectacle. What impact then do systems of mediation have on the energies of fans?

In 'The Mirror of Terrorism', his essay on fan violence at a televised football match included in *The Transparency of Evil* (2009), Jean Baudrillard argues that what unfolded was 'less from passion than from the screen: a violence in the nature of the image' (85). There are two key parts to this. The first is that the dislocation of the image on the screen from the live event creates a sort of abyssal space – analogous to the semiotic gap created by the deferral of signs – that tortures the imagination with fears of monsters and barbary. 'Violence exists potentially in the emptiness of the screen', writes Baudrillard (2009, 85), 'in the hole the screen opens in the mental universe'. It is easy enough then to imagine seeing the wrestling spectacle on television and then being led to believe, stripped of all context, of passion work being met by passion work, stripped of the embodied experience of intensities held in tension, that an eruption of very real and ugly violence was imminent. A fan watching on television might encounter all those swirling intensities, since they extend their own passion into the mix, but the casual observer might see only violence in the emptiness of the screen. The second part is that the fact of being televised,

such that spectators are conscious of their part in a televised spectacle, might cause the live crowd to alter their understanding of their role. This is the argument Baudrillard makes about the football violence, that a reversal of roles had taken place, such that spectators, knowing that they too were images being circulated globally, turned themselves into actors, such that 'under the gaze of the media, they invent their own spectacle' (2009, 87). Baudrillard (2009, 87) asks:

> Now is this not precisely what is expected of the modern spectator? Is he not supposed to abandon his spectatorish inertia and intervene in the spectacle himself? Surely this is the leitmotif of the entire culture of participation?

With wrestling, the spectator absolutely is supposed to intervene in the spectacle. A wrestling match is co-produced to the extent that it lacks semiotic coherence if that second-order intelligibility is not undergirded by a first-order flow of meeting intensities (understood from the perspective of practice as passion work). At the level of signs: if the audience does not gasp at the pain experienced by the face held in some brutal manoeuvre or boo the heel when they connive behind the back of the referee then the meaning of the whole thing collapses. But that gasp and that boo have to come from an experience of intensity triggered by the intensity emanating from the wrestlers – or else wrestling fandom would simply be a dispassionate response to explicit calls originating in the ring. This does not bear scrutiny; wrestling does not so much speak as it moves. It occupies energetic systems. That all this energy runs through a system of kayfabe means that the intensity is not in the service of hot violence but the professional wrestling spectacle. And the circulation of this spectacle means that the passion work of the crowd is also captured in the circuits of mediation.

That this energy also runs through a global media system effects opposing forces held in tension. Professional wrestling exists today in a context of commercial transnationalism (see Koh 2022). It is possible to watch NJPW from Japan, CMLL from Mexico, AEW from the US, all around the world. The impact of this routing through the global media system can be described, after Bernard Stiegler, as pharmacological: on the one hand, the communication of the live audience's passion effectively extends the system of kayfabe to include the televised audience; and, on the other, routed through commercial channels, the communication of passion is always running against the diminution of intensity in the form of the commodity.

In *What Makes Life Worth Living?* Stiegler explains that something can be identified as pharmacological when 'its power is *curative to the immeasurable extent* that it is also *destructive*' (2013, 4; emphasis in original). A pharmacological system is something that allows for the transmission of care (another synonym now for desire) but that must be approached with care – that is, with sensitivity to its destructive potential. The transnational mediation of professional wrestling is curative to the extent that it facilitates desire to reach out to and encounter the passion of others. Since the object of desire is always outside the subject, the movement of desire is always a movement towards the other. This movement facilitates what Stiegler (2013, 18) calls 'co-individuation', where individuals are made whole by becoming parts of communities of others and communities of others are made whole by being made up of individuals. An individual is strong and confident to the extent that they are part of a community; a community is healthy and open to the extent that it is made up of empowered

individuals. Desire can never reach out to the other and have it wholesale; no synthesis is formed. Instead, a delicate arrangement of the individual within the collective.

The mediation of professional wrestling facilitates this co-individuation. Television audiences can form a collective with arena audiences – now part of the image circulated globally – that allows them to participate in the co-production of the spectacle as an arrangement of intensities and that legitimates the system of kayfabe that makes sense of it. If the co-production of the spectacle as passion work creates a tensor – that is, the intensity of the wrestler and the intensity of the live crowd held in tension, which is to say, as an encounter that escapes synthesis – then this tensor would be transmitted along the same circuits that broadcast the spectacle as image. The spectacle would then be more than a deferral; the image of the event would communicate more than that the event is happening where the television viewer is not – it would communicate passion as far as the viewer is located. The spectator of televised wrestling would then be able to meet this passion with their own, joining the encounter of intensities already formed by the wrestler and by the crowd. Not only seeing but feeling the passionate response of the crowd to the passion work of the wrestler in turn channels the energies of the television viewer into the system of kayfabe. In simple terms: If the live audience can gasp and boo and go along with what is pre-determined and performed, and if the television audience can form a connection with that live crowd, feel themselves together with it as a collective, then the television audience can go along with it all too. Above all else, kayfabe demands a communication of passion or else it collapses into naked artifice. And that passion must be co-individual: shared with others but individually felt rather than mere mimicry of an image of a crowd.

The circulation of professional wrestling via a global media system is also at once destructive to the extent that it commodifies the connection it facilitates, commodification running contrary to otherness and in the direction of the same. Wilson Koh (2022) has observed that commercial transnationalism works against local distinctiveness in wrestling storytelling as promoters attempt to convince global audiences that they are included in both its fandom and its narratives. Stiegler (2013) argues that co-individuation is short-circuited by consumerism, which forces the individual to adapt to the doxic (the common sense), destroying the circulation of desire by replacing what is desired with what is produced to be consumed. This is dis-individuating, and if strong and confident individuals – those who can both desire and reach the other – form collectives, then those dis-individuated by consumerism can only form masses. This creates what Stiegler (2013, 63) calls 'systemic infidelity'; the individual wants to reach out to the other but is re-routed to the same in the form of the commodity. As such, consumerism in fact works against desire. The more sanitized and homogenous professional wrestling becomes, such that it might circulate smoothly through the global media system in commodity form, the more it works against the generation of passion that routes through the system of kayfabe to co-produce the spectacle of intensity.

It is important to reiterate that the global mediation of professional wrestling is both these things at once, poison and cure. It sustains a libidinal economy that allows for the formation of collectives and the transmission of passion; and it threatens this libidinal economy by undermining the collective and so endangering the transmission of passion that the spectacle of intensity requires. The whole edifice of professional wrestling as a mediated spectacle is held in a precarious balance by this tension.

Empty control

Barthes (2009, 7) contends of wrestling that 'it no longer matters whether the passion is genuine or not. What the public wants is the image of passion, not passion itself'. The conclusion to be drawn here is that the image of passion is not in fact sufficient to sustain the spectacle of wrestling.

West (2024) argues that professional wrestling increasingly favours the television audience. This matters because the viewing angle on a particular move can determine whether it looks legitimate (real) or not; playing to the television cameras might mean that the arena audience can see the strings being pulled – a blow that misses its target or one wrestler jumping to give the impression of being deadlifted by another. West argues that this can sever the intimacy between performer and live crowd, impacting negatively on the experience of authenticity. Playing to the television audience is part of the tension that the spectacle's mediation necessitates, allowing the distant spectator to feel the passion at the risk of neglecting the feeling of the immediate attendees – and collapsing the spectacle altogether. COVID-19 measures – emptying arenas or prohibiting chants – provide an example of that tension no longer being held.

Baudrillard's essay on football violence concludes with a consideration of how events that have shaken off their spectatorish inertia are taken back under control. Teams whose fans have engaged in pitch invasions or racist chanting or hooliganism are often punished by having to play subsequent matches behind closed doors. The match might still be played in a colossal stadium and might still be selected for screening, but no fans would be permitted to attend. In these ghost matches Baudrillard (2009, 90) saw 'the terroristic hyperrealism of our world, a world where a "real" event occurs in a vacuum, stripped of its context and visible only from afar, televisually'. He continues:

> Here we have a sort of surgically accurate prefigurement of the events of our future: events so minimal that they might well not need take place at all – along with their maximal enlargement on screens. No one will have directly experienced the actual course of such happenings, but everyone will have received an image of them. A pure event, in other words, devoid of any reference in nature, and readily susceptible to replacement by synthetic images.2009 (Baudrillard 2009, 90-91)

Baudrillard claims that if spectators might turn themselves into actors, then the only policing of this adequate to the maintenance of power is to eliminate the public. In the case of wrestling, there is no suggestion that the promotions want to do away with live fans; but playing to the cameras would disinvest fans from their share of the passion work that co-produces the event, giving greater narrative control back to the producers.

When the arena audience is removed to prevent the spread of a deadly virus, the desire for control returns on itself and crashes the spectacle. Wrestling simply cannot bear too much control before it crowds out the passion that sustains it. Stiegler (2013) argues that control exists where attentions are captured and channelled away from an engagement with singularity, with the other, destroying the process of co-individuation such that atomized individuals become easy consumers of products or content. The COVID-19 measures show what happens if any promotion is ever tempted to take that too far.

The communication of signs in professional wrestling was only ever of a secondary importance when compared to the circulation of passions now removed. Signs as stand-ins are a deferral that ultimately reveals only absence. Without the passion of

the crowd, the passion work of the wrestler is too obviously put on. Without the chants and the boos and the gasps, the simulation of a sporting contest is laid bare. Without the spontaneity of live fans – unruly, on the cases of the heels, on the hands of the promoters – the performance is overwhelmed by rationalization in the form of numbers being punched, formulaic provocations or sequences of moves that are designed to get certain responses from spectators. Without any responses from the crowd providing a visible and audible expression of passion, the ambiguity returns to professional wrestling and the audience is disempowered. Without a strong and confident audience there is only a flat media control, which, by being essentially dominant – there is no one else there to corroborate or challenge what the cameras show – does not require collective buy-in so does not necessarily receive it. This is a lot to go without. It only goes to show, as Lyotard (2004, 48) would say, that 'semiotics is nihilism' – at least, if it cannot be imbued with the exchange of passion borne of direct experience. The tensor guarantees the connection of bodies against the dominance of dazzling images. The empty arena is the extreme expression of the control that ensues when bodies are disconnected by the removal of passion.

In short: If the communication of an audience that endorses the wrestling performance as a sporting contest – despite the fact that it is pre-determined and staged – is absent, then the identification of the television viewer with a community that is invested in the spectacle is no longer guaranteed. All that is left is the insistence that the television audience go along with it. Wrestling is a communication of passion or else it is reduced to a form of empty control that cannot sustain itself as a spectacle.

Author contributions

CRediT: **David W. Hill:** Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

Alcott, T. 2024. "Being 'Real' in a Staged Sport: The Process and Regulation of Authenticity in Wrestling Star Images." *Celebrity Studies* 15 (1): 7–22. https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2023.2295763.

Barthes, R. 2009. *Mythologies*. London: Vintage Books.
Baudrillard, J. 2009. *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena*. London: Verso.
Ehantharajah, V. 2020. "Coronavirus: WWE Wrestling Without Fans Isn't Wrestling at All." *Independent*. Accessed April 22, 2025. https://www.independent.co.uk/sport/general/wwe-mma-wrestling/wwe-coronavirus-wrestlemania-behind-closed-doors-raw-smackdown-steve-austin-a9407041.html.
Elias, N., and E. Dunning. 1986. *Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process*. Oxford: Blackwell.
Galily, Y. 2014. "When the Medium Becomes 'Well Done': Sport, Television, and Technology in the Twenty-First Century." *Television & New Media* 15 (8): 717–724. https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476414532141.
Glissant, É. 2024. *Poetics of Relation*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
Gong, Y. 2020. "Virtual Collectivity Through Second Screen: Chinese Fans' WeChat Use in Televised Spectatorship of European Football." *Television & New Media* 21 (8): 807–824. https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476419857199.
Greenberg, K. E. 2022. *Follow the Buzzards: Pro Wrestling in the Age of COVID-19*. Toronto: ECW Press.
Hill, A. 2015. "Spectacle of Excess: The Passion Work of Professional Wrestlers, Fans and Anti-Fans." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 18 (2): 174–189. https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549414563300.
Koh, W. 2022. "A Real American Hero: WWE Wrestling from American Exceptionalism to Commercial Transnationalism." *Television & New Media* 23 (1): 61–80. https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476420964722.
Leitner, M. C., and F. Richlan. 2021. "Analysis System for Emotional Behavior in Football (ASEB-F): Matches of FC Red Bull Salzburg Without Supporters During the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 8 (14). https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-020-00699-1.
Litherland, B. 2014. "Breaking Kayfabe is Easy, Cheap and Never Entertaining: Twitter Rivalries in Professional Wrestling." *Celebrity Studies* 5 (4): 531–533. https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2014.981047.
Litherland, B. 2019. *Wrestling in Britain: Sporting Entertainments, Celebrity and Audiences*. London: Routledge.
Lyotard, J. F. 2004. *Libidinal Economy*. London: Continuum.
Moore, A. 2025. "The Wrestler with Nine Lives: How Saraya Survived Alcohol, Abuse, Injury and a Leaked Sex Tape." *The Guardian*. Accessed April 22, 2025. https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2025/apr/01/the-wrestler-with-nine-lives-how-saraya-survived-alcohol-abuse-injury-and-a-leaked-sex-tape.
Smith, R. T. 2008. "Passion Work: The Joint Production of Emotional Labour in Professional Wrestling." *Social Psychology Quarterly* 71 (2): 157–176. https://doi.org/10.1177/019027250807100205.
Stiegler, B. 2013. *What Makes Life Worth Living? On Pharmacology*. Cambridge: Polity.
Truitt, B. 2020. "Coronavirus: Watching WWE Pro Wrestling Without Fans Is a Surreal World." USA Today. Accessed April 22, 2025. https://eu.usatoday.com/story/entertainment/tv/2020/03/17/coronavirus-wwe-pro-wrestling-without-crowd-truly-strange/5071084002/.
West, S. 2024. "Cults of Personality: The Micro-Celebrity Work of Independent Professional Wrestlers." *Celebrity Studies* 15 (1): 73–87. https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2023.2295767.
Whannell, G. 2014. "The Paradoxical Character of Live Television Sport in the Twenty-first Century." *Television & New Media* 15 (8): 769–776. https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476414551180.