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Popular Entertainments and the Spectacle of Bleeding

This article considers the spectacle of bleeding in two popular entertainment forms: professional wrestling and the sport of rugby union. It explores the conventions and spectatorial expectations attached to blood and bleeding through an analysis of the concept of cheating. What happens when actual bloodshed forms part of an entertainment narrative? What are the particular contracts involved in deliberate bleeding or in seeing others deliberately bleed? Is it possible to bleed untruthfully or inauthentically, and what might the answers to this question tell us about the conventions of truth, authenticity and popular performance? Lucy Nevitt is a Senior Lecturer in Drama at the University of the West of England, UK. Her particular research interests are in violence in and as performance.

The discipline of performance studies has long been occupied with the relationships between actual and simulated acts in theatre and in wider performance frameworks such as sport, politics and aspects of everyday life. This article considers within this context two examples of popular entertainment: the sport of rugby union and the 'sports entertainment' performances of professional wrestling. Each example is understood according to its own clear conventions and, for knowledgeable spectators, to break these conventions is equated with cheating. Both can be read as performances by and about actual human bodies moving, interacting and colliding in a contained area, for the entertainment of large live crowds and extensive television audiences. In the discussion that follows I will look in detail at one particularly vivid aspect of this actual corporeality as it is framed within the paradigms of entertainment, convention and cheating.

In both pro-wrestling and rugby it is understood that sometimes bodies will be injured and sometimes blood will be shed: the sight of people actually bleeding is common to both these entertainment forms. Bleeding in rugby is conventionally accidental, while in wrestling it is deliberately induced, but in both cases it functions in part as a guarantee to spectators of the actuality and legitimacy of the action they are witnessing. The presence in both cases of actual blood, shed in the name of popular entertainment, offers an intriguing focus for an exploration of how the concepts of realness and authenticity function paradigmatically in and as performance.

Two instances of performed bleeding

Twenty minutes into a professional wrestling match, with six more minutes to go, one wrestler slides out of the ring and grabs a metal chair. His opponent, momentarily distracted, does not seem to see what is happening until the chair is slammed down on the back of his head, knocking him to the ground. Seizing the advantage, the first wrestler pulls him towards the solid metal stairs that lead up to a corner of the ring. He pauses briefly, allowing the spectators to see what he plans to do before he smashes his dazed opponent face first into the steps. The referee approaches and the crowd goes wild, booing and jeering as the temporarily victorious fighter parades around to the other side of the ring, drawing the spectatorial focus away from the man on the ground.

Crumpled by the steps, seeming to writhe in pain, the prone wrestler removes a razorblade from his boot. Shielded from view by the steps and the referee, and with his 'opponent' keeping the spectators occupied, he quickly uses the blade to make cuts in the skin of his forehead. As his attacker approaches again, he slips the blade to the referee and struggles to his feet. Blood, apparently caused by the impact of his collision with the steps, trickles down his face. Enraged, he launches himself back into the fight and the blood continues to spread downwards until he is, as the commentators and fans will express it, 'wearing the crimson mask'.

This is a generic example because 'blading' for blood in pro-wrestling is unexceptional: an aspect of the performance that is expected and understood by performers and knowledgeable spectators alike. *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Pro-Wrestling* even offers its readers a generic definition of blading: "Blading means using a piece of razor to open a cut and get the blood flowing. The usual place to cut [is] the forehead because the blood flows freely over the face, creating the 'crimson mask' effect."¹ My second example is specific and, while it was not a unique occurrence, its revelation led to scandal, investigation and punishment for those involved.

On April 12th 2009, in the final minutes of a tight quarter-final rugby union match between two major professional clubs (London-based Harlequins RFC and the Leinster Rugby team from Ireland), Harlequins player Tom Williams took a joke-shop blood capsule from its hiding place in his sock. He bit the capsule, lay down on the ground and signalled to the club physiotherapist. He was escorted, limping, from the pitch with a red liquid visibly trickling from his mouth. Williams was replaced in the game by Nick Evans, a specialist kicker whose skills could potentially win the match for Harlequins but who had been substituted at an earlier stage and was therefore ineligible to rejoin the game except in the event of a 'blood injury' to another player.

As Williams left the pitch, he heard protestations of "that's not real blood" from the Leinster bench. According to his own account of the affair, he realised that his mouth was likely to be inspected by an official or doctor not connected with the Harlequins club, and so "it seemed to me that the only solution was to

cut my lip". He claims that in a state of panic he asked the Harlequins match-day doctor, Wendy Chapman, to do this for him and that she reluctantly did so:

I believe that Wendy pulled down my lip and attempted to cut it with a scalpel.[...]Wendy was initially too gentle, and needed to try again to open a cut. When she was successful, there was no need for stitches as it was a clean cut. She put gauze on it and told me to apply pressure to the cut. It took a long time for the bleeding to stop.²

Harlequins lost the match, but the controversy surrounding what was quickly dubbed 'Bloodgate' generated a great deal of discussion in rugby, sport and some wider media contexts.

At an initial disciplinary hearing Williams denied both the capsule and the scalpel, claiming that a collision on the pitch had resulted in injuries to his lower lip and teeth. Successive witnesses were asked to give their opinion on whether the substance they had seen in Williams's mouth had actually been blood. Before admitting these speculations, however, the hearing required each witness to prove that they knew what blood looked like: examples ranged from experiencing rugby injuries to witnessing car crashes, from serving in the army to being an experienced practising surgeon. Two different examples of "theatrical blood capsules which are used for amateur dramatics" were brought in and a legal assistant "gave a demonstration of biting into the capsule and the Committee were able to observe the product first of all appearing on his lips and then starting to trickle down the side of his mouth".³

If the report on the initial hearing reads like farce, it is surely because of the absurdly inept way that the scam itself was executed, and it seems that the use of a capsule – fake blood – is an integral part of that ineptitude. Nonetheless, the presence of an actual cut, bleeding actual blood, was a complicating factor. Ruling on whether Williams was guilty of misconduct by "fabricating a blood injury", the Disciplinary Committee was divided only on this issue:

Two members of the Committee concluded that what they saw on the face of the Player as he was leaving the pitch was not genuine blood, and irrespective as to whether or not there was (coincidentally) a genuine blood injury, the fabrication charge had been made out.[...]One of the members, however, concluded that as there was evidence of a laceration and blood[...]the case was not made out whatever other substance may or may not have been present at the relevant times.⁴

Bleeding is a purely somatic act and it seems odd to debate its authenticity. How can it be cheating to bleed? Who is being cheated? To witness bleeding is to be party to a semiotic communication – a signification of wounding and, by extension, of pain. But there are also visceral and emotional responses involved in such a witnessing and these, as well as the intellectual understanding, may seem to be betrayed if the blood that is seen is not

connected with the injury it purports to represent. How extraordinary, though, to consider the shedding of blood as a betrayal of the person who witnesses it. To read about 'Bloodgate' and then return to my long-term study of professional wrestling was, for me, to encounter a series of interconnected questions about the relationships between performance, spectatorship, artifice and the problematic concept of authenticity. What are the particular contracts involved in deliberate bleeding or in seeing others deliberately bleed? Is it possible to bleed untruthfully or inauthentically, and what might the answers to this question tell us about the conventions of truth, authenticity, spectatorship and performance?

The shedding of actual blood is an acknowledged and expected aspect of rugby union, as is demonstrated by the existence of regulations specifically relating to blood injuries. Rugby spectators are accustomed to seeing the players bleed, but also to seeing the convention that bleeding players are removed from the pitch so that the flow of blood can be stopped. Bleeding contributes to the narrative of many rugby matches as an effect of rugby. While it may have a subsidiary affective impact on some spectators, this is not the way that it is framed or responded to in the context of the match.

In theatrical performance, bleeding is most usually simulated. Actual bloodshed is relatively rare and tends to be contextualised by the expectations and conventions associated with performance art. Framed as 'art', actual bleeding may be presented as an affective or ethical provocation to the spectators and/or an exploratory somatic experience for the performer. While narrative causality is not necessarily absent from such events, the 'art' involved in the performance of deliberate bleeding is usually more focussed on affect. Often a deliberate attempt to challenge boundaries and provoke response, the spectacle of bleeding is likely in these contexts to be a focal point of the performance.

Unlike rugby players, pro-wrestlers plan and prepare opportunities to bleed, and often seek to increase rather than staunch the flow once it has begun. In just one example taken from an autobiography filled with descriptions and photographs of bleeding, pro-wrestler Mick Foley writes: "I landed with a thud and lay there[...]pushing with my diaphragm so as to squeeze out as much blood as possible from my busted-wide-open head".⁵ Unlike rugby or theatrical performance, the flow of blood in pro-wrestling functions as narrative effect, non-diegetic effect and spectatorial affect in equal measure.

Both rugby union and mainstream pro-wrestling command extensive, demographically mixed audiences. Both can be viewed – in a way that body art cannot – as popular entertainment. This is an article about performance rather than rugby but the 'Bloodgate' scandal introduced some of the tropes of performance into a sport that rarely has cause to investigate the slippery paradigm of authenticity. This seems to me to be a rich starting-point for an exploration of how blood and bleeding function in performance-based entertainment.

Imagining bleeding, comprehending pain

Blood makes a strong image in the sense that it is striking, noticeable, intriguing, disconcerting. But an image of blood and bleeding has further power because it does not just signify meaning in an intellectual sense. It also generates physical, emotional and psychological responses. The following perspective on abjection, offered by Julia Kristeva at the beginning of *Powers of Horror*, can help us to understand the powerful effect and affect of witnessing bleeding:

A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not *signify* death. In the presence of signified death – a flat encephalograph, for instance – I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theatre, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border.⁶

It is not uncommon for people to faint or feel sick at the sight of blood. Actual blood, released from its containing skin, carries meanings and connections that range widely. To witness another person bleeding can often prompt an imaginative leap into one's own body, but *how* bleeding is imagined is not always an easy question to answer. Do I think about bleeding visually, in terms of the colour or the speed of flow, spurt or seepage? Do I imagine the feeling of the blood (warm, thick, sticky...) as it escapes the body? Perhaps I might remember the taste of blood licked from a cut on my finger or from an injury in my mouth. When I contemplate bleeding, do I remember or imagine pain? The imaginative connections and separations between bleeding and pain or injury are surely fundamental to the relationship between representations of, and responses to blood in performance.

In her 1985 book *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry discusses the difficulty of expressing and comprehending physical pain. Pain, she explains, brings about an "absolute split between one's sense of one's own reality and the reality of other persons":

Thus when one speaks about "one's own physical pain" and about "another person's physical pain," one might almost appear to be speaking about two wholly distinct orders of events. For the person whose pain it is, it is "effortlessly" grasped (that is, even with the most heroic effort it cannot *not* be grasped); while for the person outside the sufferer's body, what is "effortless" is *not* grasping it (it is easy to remain wholly unaware of its existence [...]). [...] Thus pain comes unsharably into our midst as at once that which cannot be denied and that which cannot be confirmed.⁷

Pain, Scarry argues, is resistant to language because it is not directed at an object: "it is not *of* or *for* anything".⁸ When we attempt to describe an experience

of pain it is therefore necessary to adopt what she calls the “language of agency”, often using the image of weapons or wounds to create a simile that allows sensation to be comprehended through its similarity to something visible and tactile. As Scarry explains: “physical pain is not identical with (and often exists without) either agency or damage, but these things are referential; consequently we often call upon them to convey the experience of the pain itself”.⁹ The weapon or wound exists or can be imagined to exist outside the body, and so its image externalises the internal experience, offering a strategy for expressing and comprehending the unsharable bodily sensation of pain. “The point here,” she writes, “is not just that pain can be apprehended in the image of the weapon (or wound) but that it almost cannot be apprehended without it”.¹⁰

Viewed from this perspective, a display of actual or genuinely convincing blood in performance is a powerful and problematic signifier. On one level, blood functions like Scarry’s linguistic image of the wound, making vivid and visual the idea of pain, aiding the outsider’s imaginative leap towards the bodily experience being had by another. But of course, it is only the *idea* of pain that is communicated in this way. The extent of blood flow does not necessarily correlate with the degree of pain felt, and pain is by no means always accompanied by bleeding. Nonetheless, the image of bleeding is an image of effect that assumes a violent, and therefore probably painful, cause. For the spectator or witness, the sight of blood proves the injury and therefore also proves the force of the violence that caused it. Spectatorially this is important because, as Scarry makes clear, pain – always, to the witness, in doubt – cannot prove itself.

Within the context of most theatrical plays, this series of connections is not especially complicated. Where the convention is to preserve a separation between the diegetic and non-diegetic worlds, the blood that is shown and seen needs to be fake: the bleeding needs to be simulated. It is the character that is wounded and in pain, and the character is necessarily distinct from the actor in theatrical representations of violence and bodily suffering. The contract between performance and audience is that it should not be distractingly unconvincing, but also that it must not be distractingly convincing. If spectators genuinely thought that they were witnessing actual violence and not simulation in a fictional, theatrical context, their ability to maintain the position of spectator would be badly undermined, if not destroyed. Indeed, this is one of the areas that body artists set out to provoke and explore. Professional wrestling, on the other hand, has a greater intermingling of the diegetic with the non-diegetic, and a very different kind of contract with its spectators.

Wrestling blood and the “phantom of the real”

The authenticity of bleeding in pro-wrestling rests on the shedding of actual blood. To use a capsule or a blood bag would be seen as cheating. While it is fundamentally important to much of theatre that the act of simulation remains uninterrupted, wrestling is built on a spectatorial understanding of the physical actuality of performed action. At the heart of this performance form is the undisputed and crucial fact that wrestling *hurts*. The tricks of performance and

the fictions of storyline, character and dialogue can never be allowed to obscure that fact, and fans are reminded of it repeatedly through media such as wrestlers' autobiographies and pro-wrestling magazines.¹¹ It therefore becomes important that the performance techniques which create images of physical violence and suffering are not treated as distractions to be hidden in the interest of verisimilitude but are recognised aspects of the performance.

In any wrestling manoeuvre, the bodies involved are rarely doing what they seem to be doing. Instead they are doing something that may be almost as painful but that hurts in a different place or way. For example, a 'piledriver' is a popular move in which the victim is picked up, fully upside-down, before the aggressor seems to drive the victim's head into the ground with enormous force. In performance, this move is executed collaboratively. The victim's head is firmly supported and protected between the aggressor's thighs and does not touch the ground at all. Instead it is the aggressor's knees that hit the ground, catching the full weight of two bodies and making the requisite loud thud before the victim performs collapse. To fully appreciate wrestling is not to 'believe in' the illusory suffering but to recognise the actual bodily stress involved in creating the illusion.¹² Pain is the authentic core of wrestling – it is what sets wrestling apart from stage and film fighting and is its central defence against accusations from outsiders that wrestling is 'fake'.

Wrestling fans know about the pain experienced by performers but in the interests of the fiction that actual pain must still be dissembled. Wrestlers perform diegetic pain according to precise semiotic codes. These codes are designed to communicate to spectators positioned on all sides of the ring, many of whom are too far away to make out subtle expressions or to hear anything that is spoken. Diegetic pain must be performed outwards, on a very large scale. Actual pain is an experience that tends to draw the sufferer inwards, as Scarry's work makes clear, and so it cannot be read clearly by a large live audience. As spectators consciously read the performed pain, actual pain can be forgotten and so blood is an important mechanism through which the diegetic is reconnected with the actual. Wrestling blood has two functions, serving the diegetic and the actual. Diegetically, the blood in wrestling functions to prove the injury/wound and its associated diegetic pain. In this context it is similar to theatrical practice and there is no obvious reason not to use theatrical blood substitutes. But it also simultaneously proves the actual pain involved in simulating that injury, and in this context only actual blood will do. While the knowledgeable spectators know that there is no causal correlation between diegetic injury and actual blood, the blood is still real. Wrestling's crimson mask functions as proof of a wrestler's toughness, of his or her ability to absorb pain and survive suffering.

The recognition and interpretation of the ways that fiction, performance-trickery and actuality are interconnected in wrestling is one of the spectatorial pleasures of the form, as Sharon Mazer explores:

The more insistent fans become in their exposés of wrestling's fakery, the more they look to experience the real. As they expose the con-artistry of the game, they revel in it and, on some level,

seek to be conned, at least momentarily. They 'see through' the fiction of the wrestling event to its facts[...]. Yet they also appear to yearn for the illusion to be real regardless. That is, they disbelieve what they see as they look to believe[...]. This phantom of the real is at the heart of professional wrestling's appeal. It keeps the fans coming back for another look, keeps them reading into and through performances and predicting future events for each other.¹³

Blood in wrestling reconnects the performer with the character and ensures that spectators are aware of both. This is important because it is in the *combination* of performer and character that wrestlers achieve authenticity. The skills and 'toughness' of the performer are always integral to the credibility and success of his or her character. Writing about photography in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag reminds us that images of pain are often credited with making suffering "real or more real" to those who are distanced from it.¹⁴ Of course, for this to happen the suffering must be rendered in some way visible and, importantly, credible. Sontag explores the significance of the relationship between the actual and the staged in photographs of violence and its effects:

What is odd is not that so many of the iconic news photos of the past, including some of the best-remembered pictures from the Second World War, appear to have been staged. It is that we are surprised to learn that they were staged, and always disappointed.[...]The photographs we are particularly dismayed to find out have been posed are those that appear to record intimate climaxes, above all, of love and death. The point of 'The Death of a Republican Soldier' is that it is a real moment, captured fortuitously; it loses all value should the falling soldier turn out to have been performing for Capa's camera.¹⁵

Blood in wrestling – *because* it is actual blood – also proves most vividly what the wrestlers are prepared to do for their spectators. The use of a blood capsule in wrestling would be read as cheating because it would be refusing the performance and its spectators the appropriate level of commitment. Wrestling's crimson mask claims authenticity both because it is actual and because it is self-inflicted. The performer's willing and actual suffering, as signified by blood and blading, is what constitutes the authentic in a performance that in so many other ways celebrates the unrealistic and the ludicrous.

Plastic and light don't bleed

Proportionate in scale to their own collectible action figures, the wrestlers pose, dwarfed by their video representations, at the top of a ramp[...]. In a short circuit of signification that moves from the hard plastic body of the toy, through the hard flesh of the performer, to the massive, processed image above them, the presence of the wrestler is consumed, fragmented, and multiplied in the flow of its commodity status.¹⁶

In the most mainstream manifestations of pro-wrestling, the live spectatorial experience is always already mediated by television and merchandising. Fans who attend live events prepare by following the weekly action on television. Spectators wear t-shirts, hats or other accessories connected with particular wrestlers. The merchandise stands that trade throughout performances offer giant posters, plastic championship belts, and a range of character-connected clothing. Action figures – plastic dolls in various sizes – are marketed both as toys for young fans and as ‘collectables’ for those who are older. As Nicholas Sammond points out, the wrestler’s body is both integral to the performance and subsumed by its wider corporate contexts:

Wrestling is brutal and it is carnal. It is awash in blood, sweat, and spit, and for all of its emphasis these days on soap-operatic storylines and backstage intrigue, it still depends on the match – the violent and sensual meeting of human flesh in the ring. Yet that flesh – far from being the seed of meaning from which springs the signifying force of the wrestler, or the match, or wrestling itself – is but a node in a circuit of signification. The most popular wrestlers today aren’t simply individuals; they are part of larger commodity packages.¹⁷

The wrestler’s image is ubiquitously available, although subject to copyright. During many live events it is the projected image, made of light rather than flesh, which the majority of spectators can see most clearly. The corporeal aspects of the performance could easily become secondary and so the bleeding body operates as proof of that body’s actuality, its aliveness and, in performance terms, liveness. In this context a bleeding body is an authentic body. Because it bleeds and therefore is assumed to feel. It is distinguished from the plastic toy that it sometimes resembles, and from the giant projection that dominates it even in the moment of performance. Blood also circumvents more complex and pervasive questions about the authenticity of the wrestler’s body, such as how the musculature was achieved: whether it was developed ‘honestly’, through hard work and training, or by ‘cheating’ with steroids and other enhancements. Bleeding proves that the flesh contains blood. The blood flows, therefore the body is real, and in that moment of performance all further questions about honesty and authenticity can be put aside.

Bleeding is a thing that the spectators have in common with the wrestlers. Seeing a wrestler bleed reminds us of the limits of our own bodies much more vividly than the sight of the performed fighting alone can do. This could be assumed to generate empathetic spectatorial responses, both emotional and physical, but bleeding wrestlers complicate empathy because they bleed and respond to bleeding according to a distinct and different set of conventions. The unchecked flow of wrestlers’ blood signifies the corporeal vulnerability that they share with their spectators, but only in order to emphasise the way that they transcend it. Like *Die Hard*’s John McClane (Bruce Willis) crossing broken glass in his bare feet, the bleeding wrestler achieves the status of hero according to the convention that heroes exceed corporeal limits through force of will. Bleeding thus ensures that wrestlers are perceived simultaneously as like their spectators

and beyond them, human and super-human. Indeed, the super-humanness of wrestling characters and their performers only really succeeds when read alongside indications of humanness and vulnerability. Without noticing and knowing the latter, the former is merely fiction, and not always particularly engaging or interesting fiction at that.

The wrestler's body is a commodity. It exists in order to sell its image and images of the physical sensations it experiences, over and over again to an audience of eager, paying consumers. Maurya Wickstrom, exploring Walter Benjamin's concept of "empathy with the commodity", suggests that:

The allures of the commodity are recognizable and pleasurable. We are tempted and do turn to the face of the Blackberry, or the Game Boy, away from the risk of encounter, of the almost certainly disorienting experience of recognizing, face to face, the astounding vulnerability of the human person. Our affinities, more and more, are for the thing, and for humans appearing in thing like forms.¹⁸

The bleeding wrestler is surely a perfect example of a "human in a thing like form". The flow of human blood in wrestling performance simultaneously proves the "astounding vulnerability of the human person" and protects spectators from genuinely recognizing it, in an actual experience or encounter. The affinity felt by those witnessing a wrestler bleed is not empathy after all, but an imaginative substitution in which someone else has a reliably actual somatic experience that remains perpetually and pleasurably beyond the reach of the spectator.

"That's not real blood!"

At the 'Bloodgate' disciplinary hearing, several witnesses described what they saw in Tom Williams's mouth, explaining why it did not 'look like' blood. "Too bright", "too copious" and "not sticky enough" were phrases offered by Kevin Stewart as non-specialist opinions,¹⁹ while Professor Arthur Tanner's extensive surgical experience led him to conclude that "[t]he viscosity was not consistent with blood, it was not behaving normally, it was running down his mouth in a fashion that blood would not have done. It was very runny".²⁰ In performance, too, the impact and effect of blood and bleeding is to a great extent based on what it looks like to the spectator: the colour, quantity, speed and direction of flow, and the way that blood spreads around from its source to other parts of the body, other bodies and the surrounding environment. In performance as with the 'Bloodgate' example, it is often important to the achievement of its effect that the image of blood is not distractingly 'unrealistic'.

An interesting thing about blood on stage is how easily it can fail to achieve its intended effect through a failure of credibility. At least in part, this is because spectators know it is not real and so always judge it against that knowledge: stage blood effects need to overcome the fact of their unreality, not by genuinely seeming to be real but by meeting an expected standard of generic credibility – by seeming to *try* to 'look like' blood. J. Allen Suddeth, an

experienced practitioner of stage and screen violence, understands well how to persuade spectators to accept a fake blood effect:

The rule about blood in the mouth, as elsewhere, is that less is usually more. Rarely is a great gusher of blood very effective, and can even have the opposite effect on the audience. I have found that a small trickle of blood from one corner of the mouth is very effective. Another trick is that of a sudden ‘cough’ that sprays blood out of the mouth, even sometimes onto another performer.²¹

This spectatorial acceptance of an effect is not about being convinced of the blood’s actuality so much as being offered an image that is appropriate to the context of its presentation. Ideas about what is ‘realistic’ often get mixed up with an understanding of what is conventionally or generically appropriate.²² Stage blood in a production of a play generally follows particular codes that both conform to and confirm spectatorial expectations. For example:

[O]nce one has shown blood early in a play, one has to keep it up throughout the production, and even escalate its use. If one uses blood in the act 1 brawl scene of *Romeo and Juliet* and continues to use it in the act 3 scenes for Mercutio and Tybalt, then by the time of Paris’s death and Juliet’s suicide, the use of blood may have lost its impact.²³

Blood effects in theatre tend to be reserved for moments of high narrative impact, a principle that professional wrestlers understand and manipulate as well. If every wrestler in every match shed blood, it would soon cease to work as a guarantee of corporeal authenticity and become just another element of performance. Wrestlers do not bleed every time it is ‘realistic’ to do so, any more than characters in plays do. The image of blood is, nonetheless, an image of effect. Without a convincing image of cause (an act of violence) it is harder to believe in the bleeding, as pro-wrestler and scholar Laurence de Garis explains:

Other logical transgressions are outright comical. On one overseas tour, a wrestler decided to “get color” in his match (by nicking his forehead with the tip of a razor). The blood was meant to be set up by him being hit with a championship belt, a rather common technique. And that was how it went. Except, he “bladed” in the front of his head but was hit from behind. So, there was no blood on the back of his head where he was hit. [...]The problem is not that the business is given away but that it is a poor performance.²⁴

Tom Williams’s blood capsule was very quickly deemed ‘unrealistic’ and therefore unsuccessful. He was exposed as a cheat in a very straightforward way but the case documentation and wider media coverage suggest a degree of complex ambiguity about precisely whom he cheated and how. In the context of rugby union law, the cheating occurred when the Harlequins team used the blood injury substitution rules to get a specialist kicker back onto the field after he had been substituted and was thus not eligible to return to play.²⁵ From this

perspective, the bleeding seems to be a secondary concern and the actuality or otherwise of the blood is only relevant in that it was used as an alibi for the illegal playing of Evans. Yet it was Williams who dominated the responses to the event; the blood, and not the substitution, became the focus for the wider accusations of cheating. It was 'Bloodgate' – not 'kickgate' or 'subgate' – that threatened to bring the game of rugby union into disrepute.

The anger of spectators and commentators seems at least in part to be directed at Williams because he executed the trick badly. He did not perform bleeding convincingly, he did not hide the taking of the capsule with sufficient skill, he did not establish a credible cause for the faked injury and he winked at his teammates as he left the pitch. As any actor or wrestler could tell him, he was cheating the spectators of the illusion. He insulted their intelligence by offering a weak and unconvincing performance, a performance that did not adhere to the accepted and expected conventions of bleeding, either in sport or in performance. In his own words, Williams's poor performance was "embarrassing". But it also functioned as part of his defence when he admitted to the scam at his appeal hearing:

On the first attempt, the blood capsule fell from my mouth. I picked it up and bit it once again. Not only is this aspect of the episode shameful, it is also very embarrassing. However, it is a good indication that I was not thinking about what I was doing. I could not have picked a more exposed position on the pitch to take the capsule. The way I removed it from my sock and dropped it from my mouth was ridiculous. I was not thinking straight, and my execution of the fake injury was completely unplanned.²⁶

Had he performed well, the implication goes, he would have been more of a cheat – if he had succeeded in convincing the spectators of his non-existent injury then that would be evidence of planning and therefore cheating of a more disreputable kind. By this logic, because his spectators did not believe him, they were not so badly cheated.

However, this misses the point of the contract created by the commodified performance experience of professional sport. Williams's poor performance of the initial, fake blood injury consistently seems to have drawn attention away from the second blood injury – the actual cut to his lip with a scalpel, causing actual bleeding that he says "took a long time to stop". This focus is telling. The blading, because it was undertaken out of sight and with the purpose of satisfying the regulatory authorities rather than the spectators, compounds the nature of Williams's cheating. In the locker room the blood was actual, as was the unacknowledged wound that caused the blood. But it was on the pitch that Williams was under the scrutiny of his paying audience, and to them he offered the unconvincing illusion produced by a joke-shop capsule. Williams cheated in a fundamental way because he cheated both the illusion and its commodification. His audience had bought the spectacle of his corporeal transcendence, from ordinary human to super-sportsman. This transaction did

not require him to bleed but it did assume that any bleeding he did would be done *for them* – and therefore done live in their presence, for them to witness.

Conclusion: when is it cheating to bleed?

The bleeding performer embodies and enacts a collision between simulation and actuality that upsets one of the most fundamental boundaries connected with human life: that blood is contained and controlled by the body's encasing layer of skin. The image of escaping blood is easily interpreted as an image of diminishing life and when we contemplate bleeding we are engaging with thoughts of mortality and vulnerability. To witness someone bleed is to confront the boundaries of bodies and aliveness, to see most vividly one possible route to death.

Stage blood reconfigures this confrontation, providing the detachment of semiotic representation and enabling contemplation of possible pain, suffering and death to be undertaken relatively unthreateningly, in the abstract. Stage blood rehabilitates the phenomenology of bleeding into narrative context and into the context and conventions of *theatre*. Because we understand the convention that none of this is actual, there is no disturbance of order. The characters bleed, whereas the actors portray that bleeding. In the conventions of wrestling, however, the character bleeds because the performer bleeds. There is no distinction at that moment between the two. To return to Sontag:

A painting or drawing is judged a fake when it turns out not to be by the artist to whom it had been attributed. A photograph – or a filmed document available on television or the internet – is judged a fake when it turns out to be deceiving the viewer about the scene it purports to depict.²⁷

Both pro-wrestling and rugby offer their spectators a manufactured and commodified version of actual physical experience. In both, bleeding is an accepted and even expected component of the package being sold. Blood equates to proof: of impact and injury, of pain, suffering, effort and commitment, of the strength of a weapon or the reality of a risk, of the body's vulnerability, of heroism, humanness, and aliveness. Blood is a problematic signifier, therefore. Because it can prove all of these things, it can also be misaligned to them in order to generate false proof of their authenticity. Furthermore, because the spectatorial responses to actual bleeding are corporeal and emotional as well as intellectual, the sense of betrayal generated by such cheating of convention is particularly strong and personal. The varying sensations of unease that commonly occur in witnesses of bleeding tend to be obliterated by the conventions of popular performance but they remain as part of the landscape of how bleeding is understood. From these perspectives, to pretend to bleed outside the conventional context of the theatre is to tell a lie of a profound kind.

¹ Captain Lou Albano and Bert Randolph Sugar with Michael Benson. *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Pro-Wrestling*. 2nd Edition. (Indianapolis: Alpha Books, 2000), 44. Blading and other strategies for "getting juice" are openly discussed in pro-wrestling magazines and by wrestlers themselves in their autobiographies – see, in particular, Mick Foley's book *Mankind, Have a Nice Day: a Tale of Blood and Sweatsocks* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999). For the sake of the performance, blading is concealed from cameras and spectators in an actual wrestling match. However, for those who are interested in seeing how it is done, the film *The Wrestler* (directed by Darren Aronofsky, DVD, 2008; Optimum Home Entertainment, 2009) contains a sequence in which blading is directly depicted.

² Quoted in European Rugby Cup, "Decision of Appeal Committee in Appeal by Tom Williams Held at the Radisson SAS Hotel, 301 Argyle Street, Glasgow, 17 August 2009" (*ERC Rugby*, http://www.ercrugby.com/images/content/cupstandard/Tom_Williams_Independent_Appeal_Committee_Decision.pdf, 19. Accessed January 26, 2010.)

³ European Rugby Cup, "The Decision of the Disciplinary Committee held at the Offices of Messrs Bird & Bird London, 2, 3 & 20 July 2009" (*ERC Rugby*, http://www.ercrugby.com/images/content/cupstandard/Tom_Williams_and_Harlequins_Independent_Disciplinary_Committee_Decision.PDF, 24. Accessed January 26, 2010.)

⁴ European Rugby Cup, "Decision of Appeal Committee...", 59.

⁵ Mick Foley, *Mankind, Have a Nice Day*, 164.

⁶ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: an essay on abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 3.

⁷ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: the Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 5.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹¹ Articles such as "A Pact with Pain" (Steve Anderson, *World of Wrestling* 3, 9 (September 2001) 73-76) and "Blading for Real" (interview with Dr James Andrews, *World of Wrestling* 3, 10 (October 2001) 46-52) are very much part of the wider context within which wrestling fans receive and understand the performances.

¹² There is also significant risk involved in manoeuvres such as this. Pro-wrestler Stone Cold Steve Austin suffered long-term injuries to his neck and spinal cord as a result of a piledriver gone wrong. In a further illustration of the reflexive relationship between performed illusion and actual technique, he directly referred to this accident in later performances when addressing his opponent: "Owen Hart! I'm not going to listen to the doctors. I'm not going to wear this piece of crap [neck brace] they gave me. The fact that you dropped me on my head don't mean a damn thing to me. The fact of the matter was, you were too stupid to cover me when you had the chance!" (quoted in Stone Cold Steve Austin, *The Stone Cold Truth* (New York: Pocket Books, 2003), 187.)

¹³ Sharon Mazer, *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 167.

¹⁴ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin, 2003), 6.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁶ Nicholas Sammond, Introduction to *Steel Chair to the Head: the Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling*, ed. Nicholas Sammond (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 7-8.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁸ Maurya Wickstrom, *Performing Consumers: Global Capital and its Theatrical Seductions* (London: Routledge, 2006), 61.

¹⁹ European Rugby Cup, "The Decision of the Disciplinary Committee...", 13.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

²¹ J. Allen Suddeth, *Fight Directing for the Theatre* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1996), 256.

²² Theatre audiences are quick to laugh at blood effects that do not meet the expectations established by theatrical convention, of which 'less is more' is one of the most well established examples in current practice. This laugh response, deadly to a performance that aims for pathos or horror, can be intentionally harnessed to great effect as with the grotesque gore of *Titus*

Andronicus or the extraordinary bloodbath in the final act of Martin McDonagh's *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*.

²³ *Ibid.*, 244.

²⁴ Laurence de Garis, 'The "Logic" of Professional Wrestling' in Nicholas Sammond (ed.), *Steel Chair to the Head*, 205.

²⁵ The relevant International Rugby Board (IRB) law – 3.12 – reads as follows: "SUBSTITUTED PLAYERS REJOINING THE MATCH: (a) If a player is substituted, that player must not return and play in that match, even to replace an injured player. Exception 1: a substituted player may replace a player with an open or bleeding wound." (International Rugby Board. *Laws of the Game: Rugby Union, 2010*. Dublin: IRB, 2010. <http://www.irblaws.com/EN/>, 33. Accessed January 16, 2010.)

²⁶ European Rugby Cup, "Decision of Appeal Committee...", 17.

²⁷ Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 41-2.