

“EVERYBODY’S JUST WORKING THE MARKS, BROTHER”: A KAYFABE READING OF SOCIAL IDENTITY, PERFORMATIVITY AND PERFORMATIVE IDENTITY

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Abstract: In 2011, mathematician and economist Eric R. Weinstein argued that kayfabe is “[a] sophisticated ‘scientific concept’ with the greatest potential to enhance human understanding.” Kayfabe, much like the professional wrestling industry, is an autonomous phenomenon. Defining it solely as a method of deception is denying its own autonomy as a social and cultural nonpareil. Kayfabe plays an integral role in the processes of societal interaction. Its identity, as well as its usefulness in academic discourse, relies upon the notion that all human interaction cannot exist without it. Kayfabe in many ways performatively embodies the questions of ontology, the nature of existence, the limits of reality and its perception and understanding. Humans create their own realities and truths based upon what they see, experience and believe. Nobody can declare with absolute certainty that the reality they experience is the same as the person next to them. It does not mean that either reality is not valid, nor that the truths which are born from those realities are without substance: it simply means that reality is kayfabe. Expanding upon concepts of human understanding and experience found in Lakoff and Johnson’s *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) and drawing upon notions of fictional worlds and representation elaborated in Walton’s *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (1993) this article will interrogate existing ontological concepts through the lens of kayfabe, utilising case studies from the world of professional wrestling, to recontextualise how fictions can create new realities and enable a greater understanding of social identity, performativity and performative realities. It will argue that by constantly engaging in kayfabe, humanity is able to imagine things into existence and, subsequently, collectively imagine new realities.

Keywords: kayfabe, professional wrestling, truth, reality, identity, existence, ontology, metaphor, mimesis, Kendall Walton, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson

Introduction

On and off stage, professional wrestling has created its own reality. More often than not, organisers of professional wrestling events promote the interactions they present to the audience as “real,” no matter how elaborate or exaggerated they may appear in their performance. Of course, what constitutes “real” and “reality” is the subject of much theoretical debate and it is important to emphasise that I do not intend to debate the etymology of the term “real” beyond the parameters of existing studies or outside of the contemporary context of social acceptance and common sense. It is also not the purpose of this article to prioritise one theory of reality. Instead, I intend to make a proposition regarding engagements with the concepts of truth and reality in performance and in their public presentation. I will assess these ideas through the lens of what professional wrestling calls kayfabe, a complex ideology of staged reality, and will draw upon existing theoretical positions and analysis of case studies from professional wrestling and the political sphere. Implicitly, kayfabe becomes a means of recontextualising how we engage with each other and the world. I will use terms such as “real” and “true” in a variety of contexts. Unless stated otherwise, I use them in their most widely accepted sense. These notions are in common use when it comes to kayfabe, and as such, the concepts of “real” and “true” are sociological phenomena. However, that would be for another article. I will be focusing on kayfabe.

Kayfabe

In 2011, mathematician and economist Eric R Weinstein wrote a brief article about kayfabe, a term popularised in the world of professional wrestling. He argued that kayfabe is “[a] sophisticated ‘scientific concept’ with the greatest potential to enhance human understanding.”¹ As a critical term, however, kayfabe is hard to accurately define. Freelance journalist John Lister suggests that it derives from the expression “keep cavey,” from the Latin verb “caveo,” which means “look out” or “beware.”² *Merriam-Webster* describes kayfabe as a “carny-derived term for the extreme strain of method acting peculiar to [professional wrestling],”³ whereas the

¹ Eric R. Weinstein, “Kayfabe,” *Edge.org*, 2011, <https://www.edge.org/response-detail/11783>.

² John Lister, “The Clandestine Jargon of Professional Wrestling,” *Johnlisterwriting.com*, 2008, <https://web.archive.org/web/20081015060222/http://www.johnlisterwriting.com/verbatim.html>.

³ Michael Brick, “Jingo Unchained,” *Harper’s Magazine*, 2013. Quoted in “Kayfabe: It’s Illusive and Elusive,” *Merriam-webster.com*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/word-origin-kayfabe>.

Oxford English Dictionary describes its etymology as “of uncertain origin” and notes that

[kayfabe] is often said to have originated in the U.S. travelling carnivals and appears to have been coined with morphological and semantic opacity in mind. It has been interpreted as an alteration (following the conventions of back slang) of the command ‘Be Fake.’⁴

The use of carny or pig-latin argot by professional wrestlers was prolific in the North American wrestling industry for decades. Much like its British counterpart, Cockney rhyming slang or the Romani-derived polari, the purpose of carny was to facilitate clandestine communication. It enabled those in the same fraternity, in this instance professional wrestling, to engage openly in conversation while at the same time ensuring that no outsiders were able to understand. Kayfabe, and its covert method of communication, became professional wrestling’s omerta: a code of silence and honour that was to be maintained at all costs. Kayfabe has become symbolic of what is perceived as the lies, deception and fakery that are long associated with the professional wrestling industry. In doing so, it has achieved an almost negative connotation in its description.

Academic articles have described kayfabe as a “[a] noble lie”⁵ and “the illusion that everything is utterly sincere and authentic when it is all just an act.”⁶ Even academic specialists in professional wrestling such as Eero Laine and Broderick Chow define it as “the performance of staged and ‘faked’ events as actual and spontaneous.”⁷ Sebastian Herrmann, however, offers an alternative view: “By denying a world outside of its signification [...] kayfabe constitutes a particular way of thinking about what makes a performance real.” He then adds: “[u]ltimately, wrestling’s insistence on a performance that has no boundaries in turn also dramatizes the way in which other, presumably more unequivocally ‘real’ performances, assert their own realness.”⁸

Herein lies an interesting dilemma: the notion of a concept embedded in deception actually conveying an element of truth. It is not a new dilemma by any

⁴ *OED*, 3rd ed., “kayfabe, n.,” *Oed.com*, 2016, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/39393514>.

⁵ David S. Moon, “Kayfabe, Smartdom and Marking Out: Can Pro-Wrestling Help Us Understand Donald Trump?” *Political Studies Review* 20, no. 1 (2020): 47-61.

⁶ Moon, “Kayfabe, Smartdom and Marking Out” 51.

⁷ Broderick Chow and Eero Laine, “Audience Affirmation and the Labour of Professional Wrestling,” *Performance Research* 19, no. 2 (2014): 44-53.

⁸ Sebastian Herrmann, “Wrestling with the Real: Politics, Journalism, History in ‘Frost/ Nixon,’ and the Complex Realism of Kayfabe,” *American Studies* 61, no. 1 (2016): 18.

means. Pavel Drábek discusses the concept of performative models⁹ and how, whether in real life or in fiction, realities are created through broader social consensus of propositional performative acts. However, kayfabe as a concept comes into conflict with Drábek's notion of heterotelic models, as in the case of kayfabe the alternative purpose is often not given by free choice and consensus but rather by prohibition and compulsion. In this regard, kayfabe more closely resembles what Judith Butler refers to as "phantasmatic identification."¹⁰ Kayfabe, much like all human interaction, can be regarded as a performance that makes ambivalent or indeterminate propositions. However, whether it is something that is deliberately and intentionally performed, as Chow, Laine and Moon suggest, is another matter entirely.

In discussing reality, we are, in actuality, referring to a hegemonic reality. Reality is a constructed concept. Humanity creates reality, both individually and as a society. Truth is determined by our experience of reality and our environment. In that regard, one over-riding concept of unanimous truth cannot be determined. Aspects can be agreed upon – we all die, for instance – however how that manifests itself and what happens beyond that point is not, and cannot, be known with absolute certainty. Truth and reality always have exceptions.

Performative Reality

Richard Schechner, in relation to performative reality, observed that "a spectator need not intervene in the theatre to prevent murder as he might feel compelled to in ordinary life – this is because the violence on stage is a performance. That does not make it 'less real' but 'different' real."¹¹ It is in considering this notion of 'different real' that professional wrestling can provide unique case studies for analysis, particularly when it comes to matters such as empirical knowledge and the presentation of the self.

In my previous article,¹² I looked at how masked wrestler The Great Sasuke was appointed to local Government office in his native Japan whilst remaining in his performed persona, and I examined the subsequent consternation amongst his

⁹ Pavel Drábek, "Heterotelic Models as Performatives: From Speech Acts to Propositionality," *Litteraria Pragensia* 30, no. 60 (2020): 100-17.

¹⁰ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993) 93-119.

¹¹ Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception* (Routledge: London, 1997) 11.

¹² Russell Gilbert, "Between Professional Wrestling and the Public Arena: Construction of the Public Persona," *Litteraria Pragensia* 30, no. 60 (2020): 118-33.

political peers due to, amongst other things, their inability to see what they described as his “real” face because of his refusal to remove his mask for official Parliamentary engagements. Sasuke replied that the mask was his “real face.”¹³ In making this statement Sasuke was both engaging with, and destabilising, existing cultural norms. He was adhering to the established kayfabe of professional wrestling whilst simultaneously challenging the accepted social kayfabe. In doing so he was creating a new, albeit temporary, reality.

Perhaps no modern politician engaged with kayfabe as effectively as former United States President Donald Trump. Trump’s presidency was prolific in its use of kayfabe, although this is not in of itself unique to either Trump or politics, and the erosion of fact-based truth has been the subject of numerous books, such as Michiko Kakutani’s *The Death of Truth*¹⁴ and William Davies’ *Nervous States: How Feeling Took Over the World*.¹⁵ In the months prior to and ensuing his successful presidential campaign in 2016 a great number of articles, blogs and social media posts were published linking the new President Elect to the world of professional wrestling. Articles in *The Chicago Tribune* and *Huffington Post* respectively described Trump as a “wrestling villain”¹⁶ and “heel-in-chief,”¹⁷ “heel” being North American wrestling parlance for antagonist. Popular websites, such as psychologytoday.com and theconversation.com, published articles highlighting the correlation between the tactics Trump and his team used throughout his political tenure and classic professional wrestling tropes. Salon.com called him the “pro-wrestling inspired politician”¹⁸ and *The New York Times* even went so far as to ask: “Is Everything Wrestling?”¹⁹

¹³ Philip Brator, “The Great Sasuke Faces up to Political Reality,” *The Japan Times*, 4 May 2003, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2003/05/04/national/media-national/the-great-sasuke-faces-up-to-political-reality/>.

¹⁴ Michiko Kakutani, *The Death of Truth* (London: Harper Collins, 2018).

¹⁵ William Davies, *Nervous States: How Feeling Took Over the World* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2018).

¹⁶ David Von Drehle, “Donald Trump’s Pro Wrestling Presidency,” *Chicago Tribune*, 2017, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/opinion/commentary/ct-donald-trump-wrestling-presidency-20170828-story.htm>.

¹⁷ Marissa Alexa McCool, “Heel-In-Chief: Donald Trump and the Psychology of Pro Wrestling,” *Huffington Post*, 2017, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/heel-in-chief-donald-trump-and-the-psychology-of-pro_b_58df1a80e4b0d804fbbb7317.

¹⁸ Chauncey Devega, “Peter Thiel Pulls Back the Curtain: Donald Trump is a Pro-wrestling Villain Turned President,” *Salon.com*, 2017, <https://www.salon.com/2017/01/15/peter-thiel-pulls-back-the-curtain-donald-trump-is-a-pro-wrestling-villain-turned-president>.

¹⁹ Jeremy Gordon, “Is Everything Wrestling?” *New York Times*, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/27/magazine/is-everything-wrestling.html>.

These comparisons had good foundation. Donald Trump has links with the professional wrestling industry dating back more than three decades. In 1988 and 1989 the global leaders in professional wrestling, World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE, then known as the World Wrestling Federation), held their annual extravaganza “WrestleMania” at what they announced as the “Trump Plaza Hotel and Casino” in Atlantic City, New Jersey. Discarding kayfabe, both events were actually held at the adjacent Boardwalk Hall with Trump sponsoring the proceedings and occupying a ringside seat in the crowd at both shows.

In 2007, Trump would appear at “WrestleMania” once again, this time in a more active role opposing World Wrestling Entertainment owner and promoter, Vince McMahon (himself an established media persona at the time as the despised megalomaniac “Mr McMahon”). The event was billed as a “Battle of the Billionaires,”²⁰ and both men chose a wrestler to represent them in a match. The billionaire who loses would have their head shaved in the middle of the ring by the winner. Needless to say, McMahon lost. During the match, Trump attacked his fellow billionaire and pummeled him with punches, much to the delight of the live audience who hated McMahon. In 2009, Trump announced that he had bought “Monday Night Raw,” WWE’s flagship television show of more than twenty-five years, from his hated rival Mr McMahon although, as is the case with almost everything else in professional wrestling it was a pre-arranged storyline intended to generate television ratings, pay-per-view purchases and publicity. In 2017 Trump appointed Linda McMahon, Chief Executive Officer of WWE and real-life wife of Vince McMahon as “Administrator of Small Business Administration”²¹ in his cabinet, a position she held for two years.

Entrepreneur and one time adviser to Donald Trump, Peter Thiel, gave an interview to the *New York Times* in 2017 where he stated: “[...] what I wonder is, whether maybe pro wrestling is one of the most real things we have in our society and what’s really disturbing is that the other stuff is much more fake.”²² He continued: “whatever the superficialities of Mr. Trump might be, he was more authentic than the other politicians [...] he was sort of real.”²³ “Sort of real,” much

²⁰ Brett Hoffman, “Billion Dollar Handshake”, *Wwe.com*, 2007, <https://www.wwe.com/shows/raw/archive/02152007/articles/billiondollarhandshake>.

²¹ Michael D. Shear and Maggie Haberman, “Linda McMahon, Small Business Administrator, Resigns from Cabinet,” *New York Times*, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/29/us/politics/linda-mcmahon-small-business-trump.html>.

²² Maureen Dowd, “Peter Thiel, Trump’s Tech Pal, Explains Himself,” *New York Times*, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/11/fashion/peter-thiel-donald-trump-silicon-valley-technology-gawker.html>.

²³ Dowd, “Peter Thiel, Trump’s Tech Pal, Explains Himself.”

like Schechner’s “different real,” is an interesting turn of phrase in this context due to its ambiguity. After all, “sort of real” denotes not *really* real. However, in a post-modern society the not-really-real oftentimes supplements the accepted reality which preceded it. Kayfabe has infiltrated itself into the fabric of society. Donald Trump employed it to great effect throughout his tenure as President both on social media platforms and in public. His reality, as contradictory or unreal as it may appear to a sober eye, became its own actuality. Many millions of people seemingly accepted the false reality as truth and perpetuated it as such. It is important to note that I am hesitant to use the term “believed” as it regards either side. It is open to debate whether Trump truly believes what he says when he cites things such as election fraud, or indeed whether those who parrot his claims believe them either, however identifying and defining genuine belief is not the most important element for consideration here. The statements are ambivalent and most likely intentionally so. Professional wrestling would call this ambivalence kayfabe, and kayfabe, the performance of a truth and its presentation, no matter how exaggerated or unbelievable it may appear on the surface, is the over-riding concept that I wish to interrogate.

“Sort of Real”

What is the “sort of real” in performance? Campbell Edinborough analyses the concept of reality from a performance perspective in his book *Theatrical Reality: Space, Embodiment and Empathy in Performance*.²⁴ He effectively critiques how reality is both promoted and received in contrasting theatrical settings, be it through shared experience, alienation or identification. “[T]he paradoxical reality of theatrical space,” Edinborough says, “challenges accepted structures of reality through its presentation.”²⁵ He goes on to note that “[t]heatrical reality becomes a tool that facilitates the mode of observation necessary for a critical engagement with the structures of social engagement.”²⁶ Edinborough’s theory applies beyond the performance space and captures the essence of kayfabe. Kayfabe is a paradoxical reality. It is a manifestation of Baudrillard’s hyperreality theory,²⁷ where fiction and reality consolidate to the point where there is no clear distinction

²⁴ Campbell Edinborough, *Theatrical Reality: Space, Embodiment and Empathy in Performance* (Chicago: Intellect, 2016).

²⁵ Edinborough, *Theatrical Reality* 90.

²⁶ Edinborough, *Theatrical Reality* 91.

²⁷ Jim Stark, “Cambridge Analytica, Wrestling Kayfabe and Baudrillard’s Hyperreality,” *Medium.com*, 2018, <https://medium.com/punditfight/cambridge-analytica-wrestling-kayfabe-and-baudrillards-hyperreality-1c0365d971f>.

between the two. If one maintains and promotes a façade, for instance, does this not therefore make the façade a form of reality? If so, does it then cease to be a façade? In actualising new realities, kayfabe requires an element of authenticity, no matter how small, in order to exist and flourish. It is in considering this statement that we come to our next brief case study.

Mark Calaway began his professional wrestling career in 1987 and spent the next three years learning and perfecting his craft by wrestling in different territories across the United States as well as touring South Africa and Japan. In late 1990, he landed a job with the World Wrestling Federation and was re-branded as the intimidating “Undertaker,” a persona he steadfastly maintained in a variety of manifestations for the next thirty years. After spending over half of his life ardently perpetuating kayfabe in his work and in public, Calaway admits that The Undertaker persona consumed his identity. In an interview with the *Hindustan Times* in 2020 he declared: “I’m only now starting to look under the hood and see who Mark Calaway is.”²⁸ He went on to acknowledge that, during his career, “[w]hen I ordered a drink at a bar or a delivery boy came to the motel room with pizza, he wouldn’t get this person (Mark Calaway). He’d get somebody staring at him with cold, dead eyes. [...] That’s one of the reasons why (The Undertaker) was so successful, because I never turned it off.”²⁹ Asked whether appearing in public as himself was difficult, Calaway’s answer was simple: “It’s definitely been difficult. Very difficult. You have no idea.”³⁰ Kayfabe had become his reality. In transgressing one kayfabe, Mark Calaway is building, and engaging with another.

Herein lies the beauty of kayfabe. It is a constant. It is forever changing and adapting to the societies it inhabits. Kayfabe can mutate and change shape (in a metaphorical sense) but can never truly die (or cease to exist). It is so embedded into cultural engagement that it would be impossible. There is no avoiding kayfabe. It is inherent. We are all metaphorical performers in a social and cultural kayfabe, and it is out of our control. If we are aware of our engagement with it, we can mediate how it is enacted, or how it is received, but we cannot escape it. It is always all around us. Eric Weinstein perhaps puts it best when he states that “[k]ayfabe [...] seems to have discovered the limits of how much disbelief the

²⁸ Aditya Iyer, “For 30 Yrs, He’s Lived Life as the WWE Star The Undertaker. Meet Mark Calaway,” *Hindustan Times*, 2020, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/other-sports/for-30-yrs-he-s-lived-life-as-the-wwe-star-the-undertaker-meet-mark-calaway/story-NN30juoY32TChODtd6tEnM.html>.

²⁹ Iyer, “For 30 Yrs, He’s Lived Life as the WWE Star The Undertaker.”

³⁰ Iyer, “For 30 Yrs, He’s Lived Life as the WWE Star The Undertaker.”

human mind is capable of successfully suspending before fantasy and reality become fully conflated.”³¹

Aesthetic philosophy, and Kendall Walton, reject the notion of “suspension of disbelief,” however, arguing instead that “[s]ome kinds of realism consist in correspondence between work [or kayfabe] worlds and the actual world. The more ‘similar’ the world of a work is to the real world, the more realistic it may be said to be [...]. We might ask either how much of what is fictional in the work is also true, or how much of what is true is fictional.”³² Sociologist Robert Pfaller argues that truth “is first and foremost something practical, a position; it is that which one believes.”³³ If one adopts an empirical perspective regarding truth, this statement has rigour. However, discussing the psychology of sport, Jim Taylor is quite definite in his assertion that “[p]erception is not reality. Just because you think something is reality doesn’t make it reality.”³⁴ Yet, if something is experienced as real by the individual, such as Mark Calaway living the persona of The Undertaker or The Great Sasuke insisting that his mask is his real face, then does that not make it a social reality the likes of which Pavel Drábek was referencing? If it does, then should that reality not be accepted as such? Humans form their own realities and truths based upon what they see, experience and believe. Nobody can state with absolute certainty that the reality they experience is the same as the person next to them. It does not mean that either reality is not valid, nor that the truths, which are born from those realities, are without substance, although it does mean that humanity is able to imagine things into existence and, subsequently, collectively imagine new realities.

Similarly, reality television, despite its name, is kayfabe. Are the individuals who participate in it real? Yes, in so much as they exist and are therefore real people. However, the persona presented by the individual is both real and unreal. Humans act differently in different situations.³⁵ How one behaves when interacting with their partner, for instance, likely differs greatly to how they behave when interacting with a stranger. It is not to say that certain fundamental attributes do not remain, they do, rather that the interaction is shaped by the

³¹ Weinstein, “Kayfabe.”

³² Kendall L. Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990) 328.

³³ Robert Pfaller, *On the Pleasure Principle in Culture: Illusions without Owners* (London: Verso, 2014) 9.

³⁴ Jim Taylor, “Perception Is Not Reality,” *Psychology Today*, 2019, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-power-prime/201908/perception-is-not-reality>.

³⁵ Lee Ross and Richard E. Nisbett, *The Person and the Situation: Perspectives of Social Psychology* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1991).

difference in circumstances and relationship. In that regard, all social interaction itself is kayfabe.

Identity and Parasocial Relationships

In commenting on the role of celebrity P. David Marshall states that “performance is a critical component in any public figure’s identity.”³⁶ How their identity is presented publicly is dependent upon their actions, the environment they find themselves in (both literal and social) and the reception of others (known and unknown). This is true of non-celebrity participants within society also, particularly heightened within the climate of social media, and, as Marshall also notes, “celebrity has been and is increasingly a pedagogical tool and specifically a pedagogical aid in the discourse of the self.”³⁷ Modern celebrity and the proliferation of alternative forms of media challenges the boundaries of what is considered the public sphere as defined by Erving Goffman in the 1950s.

Different forms of communication and social engagement now exist, including alternative methods with which individuals and groups are presented to, and accepted by, the society. They need to be considered, as well as what exactly constitutes the contemporary public sphere. For instance, how one chooses to present themselves on a social media platform such as Snapchat, is not the same as they would present themselves in person. The image that is presented on the platform can be manipulated and altered prior to posting. Rather than a myriad of potential elucidations experienced within face-to-face interaction, this still image captures a single moment in time and is open to interpretation, the narrative of which, in its decision to be shown to others, is initially controlled by the originator, further removing itself from an authentic or ‘real’ image. Marshall describes this as the “parasocial self,” defining the term as “a pragmatic understanding that it is impossible to communicate individually with thousands and millions; and yet in this shifted on-line culture some effort has to be made.”³⁸

Indeed, this is not to say that one’s persona cannot, and does not, change beyond the parameters of a single image. It does. It is also not to say that, because the originator of the image, or the persona, has control of its presentation regarding its initial creation, they then maintain that control once it has been conceived. Parasocial relationships have been described as one-sided, where one person extends emotional energy, interest and time, and the other party, the

³⁶ P. David Marshall, “The Promotion and Presentation of the Self: Celebrity as a Marker of Presentational Media,” *Celebrity Studies* 1, no. 1 (2010): 39.

³⁷ Marshall, “The Promotion and Presentation of the Self” 36.

³⁸ Marshall, “The Promotion and Presentation of the Self,” 43.

persona, is completely unaware of the other’s existence. In some respects, this is true, however kayfabe allows us to look at both the parasocial self, and parasocial relationships, through a different lens.

In 1985 professional wrestler Kevin Sullivan and his wife, Nancy, began working for Florida Championship Wrestling, a promotion that, as the name would suggest, broadcast weekly televised wrestling events and live wrestling shows in venues throughout the state of Florida. Successfully exploiting the cultural kayfabe of the time, Kevin and Nancy developed personas that embraced the “Satanic Panic” which was prevalent throughout North America in the mid-1980s. In what has been described as “the perfect mix of kayfabe and fundamentalism”³⁹ Sullivan became a Charles Manson-esque cult leader who would draw satanic symbols on his face and forehead and recruit wrestlers into a faction he called his “Army of Darkness.”⁴⁰ Nancy became “The Fallen Angel,” a leather-clad slave who Sullivan would drag around the ring by chains. Performing ritualistic acts such as bloodletting as well as referencing demonic possession, hallucinogenic drug taking and sado-masochism when interviewed, Kevin and Nancy were deliberately wanting to evoke fear and outrage in their predominantly religious audience. Nancy would oftentimes come to the ring with large snakes wrapped around her body in a blatant nod to religious iconography. Both were so successful in their use of kayfabe and developing a negative parasocial relationship with the crowd that they were regularly attacked by fans at events. In an interview decades later, Kevin acknowledged that both himself and Nancy would lead even kayfabe fellow wrestlers into believing that they were Satanists, his logic being that if those he spent the most time with believed it, then the audience certainly would.⁴¹

It became kayfabe born of more kayfabe. Hyperreality created from hyperreality. An extreme parasocial relationship between performer and audience. In an era where the verisimilitude of the performance was key when it came to profitable business, Sullivan and Nancy’s commitment to kayfabe would prove so successful that it prompted writer J.D. Oliva to state that “[f]ans across the country truly believed Kevin Sullivan worshipped the Devil.”⁴²

³⁹ J.D. Oliva, “Devil in the Sunshine – How Kevin Sullivan Tapped in the Satanic Panic,” *Wrestlejoy.com*, 2021, <https://wrestlejoy.com/2021/03/devil-in-the-sunshine-how-kevin-sullivan-tapped-in-the-satanic-panic>.

⁴⁰ Oliva, “Devil in the Sunshine.”

⁴¹ Martin James Dickinson, “Kevin Sullivan Had One of the Weirdest Careers in Wrestling History,” *TheSportster.com*, 2021, <https://www.thesportster.com/kevin-sullivan-weirdest-career-wrestling-history/>.

⁴² Oliva, “Devil in the Sunshine.”

Of course, whether anybody *actually* believed it is open for debate. In his book, *Fearing Fictions*, Kendall Walton noted that “[i]t is not always easy to say whether or not someone does accept, implicitly, a given principle of make-believe.”⁴³ He proffered that emotional, or “gut” reactions, contrast rational or logical ones in instances such as these. However, he was keen to point out that when it comes to accepted reality or truth both are valid. One can be both scared by the horror film yet know that the monster is not truly going to get us. He commented that “[w]e postulate beliefs or desires to make sense of them,”⁴⁴ going on to note that humans have a “habit of playing along with fictions.”⁴⁵ As noted previously, when it comes to kayfabe, genuine belief becomes secondary to the actions of the moment. In this instance, kayfabe has once again supplemented conventional reality and, in doing so, has shown itself to be multifaceted. In true pro-wrestling style, there is a conflict of ideology happening – kayfabe as a deliberate, conscious act vs. kayfabe as a spontaneous, impulsive act.

Many years after leaving Florida, Kevin and Nancy started working in mainstream wrestling company, World Championship Wrestling. Kevin was at this point both an active wrestler and a booker – a booker being someone who is employed by the company to work behind the scenes to devise and develop the antagonistic interplay between two or more opposing wrestlers for the purposes of drawing money. In this instance, Sullivan devised a storyline that would play out over the course of a year. It would describe how his wife Nancy began an affair with wrestler Chris Benoit culminating in a series of matches Sullivan and Benoit took part provoked by Nancy’s supposed infidelity. Insisting that kayfabe be steadfastly maintained it was agreed by all parties that Nancy and Chris would travel together between shows and be seen out in public together when not wrestling. It was vital for the storyline and the potential revenue it might elicit that fans believed they were a couple. In much the same way Sullivan maintained kayfabe around his fellow wrestlers a decade earlier. Nancy and Chris were often seen kissing and cuddling backstage at wrestling shows. In this instance, however, kayfabe became reality when Chris and Nancy genuinely fell in love.⁴⁶ Nancy subsequently filed for divorce from Kevin and moved in with Benoit. However, all three managed to successfully push the boundaries of kayfabe and conventional reality by continuing with the proposed on-screen rivalry as planned. On one occasion, Benoit returned from the ring after a match with Sullivan sporting a

⁴³ Kendall L. Walton, “Fearing Fictions,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 75, no. 1 (1978): 11.

⁴⁴ Walton, “Fearing Fictions” 8.

⁴⁵ Walton, “Fearing Fictions” 20.

⁴⁶ Dickinson, “Kevin Sullivan Had One of the Weirdest Careers in Wrestling History.”

black eye, split lip and a swollen nose. Nancy, seemingly breaking kayfabe, stated publicly that Kevin had violated the bond that wrestlers have not to deliberately injure each other during a match, by intentionally inflicting those injuries on Benoit as revenge for her leaving him. In truth, Benoit and Sullivan had agreed prior to the match to be rougher than usual with each other, although to what extent that roughness was intended to manifest itself is not known.⁴⁷ Nancy was aware of this agreement and her apparent breaking of kayfabe was kayfabe. It had become public knowledge that Nancy and Chris were now a couple and all three wanted to ensure that the audience questioned what was legitimate. Sullivan, for his part, stated several weeks later that Benoit had popped his eardrum in retaliation by punching him in the side of the head during a subsequent match. All available reports indicate that Sullivan did sustain the injury due to a punch from Benoit, yet none note whether it was agreed ahead of time or not. Had Sullivan used kayfabe to exact a small portion of retribution against Benoit in the first instance? Knowing this, had Nancy used kayfabe to genuinely break kayfabe by telling people the truth about a situation that got out of hand? Had Benoit used kayfabe to really retaliate against someone who had gone too far in being rough during a match? Perhaps the truth is that all of it, to some degree, was kayfabe.

In a tragic turn of events, approximately ten years later, on Friday, 22 June 2007, Benoit murdered Nancy in the couple’s home in Fayetteville, Georgia. Less than twenty-four hours later Benoit killed their seven-year-old son Daniel. He placed Bibles beside both bodies. Benoit then took his own life on the evening of Sunday, 24 June 2007. Decades of concussions and head trauma from wrestling over 300 matches a year had resulted in severe brain damage, with post-mortem tests from the Sports Legacy Institute concluding that the forty-year-old Benoit had a brain that “resembled the brain of an 85-year-old Alzheimer’s patient.”⁴⁸ His diary entries from the year prior to the murders show a man that was becoming increasingly paranoid and detached from any semblance of normal, cognitive reality.⁴⁹ His motives for the crime remain unknown and this has led many conspiracy theorists to speculate that it was in fact Kevin Sullivan, long since divorced from Nancy, who had murdered the family in revenge for the affair and

⁴⁷ Jamie Kennedy, “10 Things We Learned About Chris Benoit Tragedy from Kevin Sullivan On Jim Cornette’s Podcast,” *Whatculture.com*, 2020, <https://whatculture.com/wwe/10-things-we-learned-about-chris-benoit-tragedy-from-kevin-sullivan-on-jim-cornettes-podcast?page=5>.

⁴⁸ ABC News, “Benoit’s Brain Showed Severe Damage from Multiple Concussions, Doctor and Dad Say,” *Abcnews.go.com*, 2009, <https://abcnews.go.com/GMA/story?id=3560015>.

⁴⁹ Associated Press, “Lawyer: Benoit Depressed over Death of Guerrero,” *Espn.co.uk*, 2007, <https://www.espn.co.uk/espn/news/story?id=3019688>.

the placing of Bibles beside the bodies of Nancy and the son she bore with another man perfectly fit the Satanic kayfabe she and Sullivan had immersed themselves in decades earlier. I have to point out that I am in no way intending to give these conspiracy theories any credence whatsoever. I am referencing them in this context only to emphasise the role kayfabe plays in regard to turning an objective reality into a subjective one. It is not kayfabe that Nancy and her son were murdered by Benoit or that he subsequently took his own life. However, the merging of the manufactured realities created within the parameters of the professional wrestling arena and the realities of those created outside of it means that kayfabe has become the overriding reality when discussing all of the participants lives. Again, it is irrelevant whether the people who perpetuate the conspiracy theories truly believe they are real – they have become a part of the reality schemata, nonetheless.

Conclusion

Kayfabe has shown that conventional notions of truth and reality are malleable. As an autonomous phenomenon, kayfabe plays an integral role in the processes of societal interaction. Human interface as we know it cannot exist without it. It reinforces existing theories of reality, such as Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality, and it shows that humanity is collectively able to imagine new realities into existence. Kayfabe also provides an alternative lens through which discussions of truth and reality can be placed in future research. Blending both fiction and reality, kayfabe works not only as a means of communication and communal imagining but also as a disruptive force destroying individual psyche and antagonising the society within which it exists. This rather unmanageable oscillation is a typical feature of what some have called a "post-truth age."

A leading scholar of professional wrestling, Sharon Mazer, has observed that one of the defining characteristics of die-hard wrestling fans is their acknowledgement that "everything – wrestling, life, the whole shooting match – might really be a work."⁵⁰ As a die-hard wrestling fan my instinct is to agree, and while it is certainly true that, as Kendall Walton says, "not all realism is a matter of correspondence,"⁵¹ the argument can also be made that not all realism is actually real either.

⁵⁰ Sharon Mazer, *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1998) 153.

⁵¹ Walton, *Mimesis as Make Believe* 329.

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