Then, Now, Forever

Television Wrestling, Seriality, and the Rise of the Cinematic Match during COVID-19

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Abstract

In April 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the state of Florida classified professional wrestling (pro wrestling) alongside hospitals, law enforcement, and grocery stores as an essential service. The state's decision made global headlines and was generally met with a mix of confusion and surprise. This article investigates the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on contemporary television wrestling. After tracing the influence that the television medium and media convergence have had on pro wrestling, the article argues that the pandemic circumstances, coupled with the demands of television wrestling's serialized storytelling, led to an evolution of a specific wrestling-match type: the cinematic match. Through a close textual analysis of wrestling programs that were produced without a live crowd during the COVID-19 crisis (e.g., *WWE Friday Night Smackdown*, *Wrestlemania 36*), this article examines how television wrestling—in an effort to appeal to its audience—produced a number of cinematic matches that combine distinct elements (e.g., editing, cinematography, sound) of genre filmmaking (e.g., horror, action) with the spectacular athleticism of pro wrestling.

Keywords: professional wrestling, television, seriality, genre, narration, aesthetics, media convergence

In April 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the state of Florida classified professional wrestling (pro wrestling) alongside hospitals, law enforcement, and grocery stores as an essential service.[1] The state's decision made global headlines and was generally met with a mix of confusion and surprise. When Florida governor Ron DeSantis was asked during a press conference as to why pro wrestling should be considered an essential service, he referred to the fact that, due to the pandemic, "people are starved for content" and already have to revert to watching "reruns from the early 2000s"[2] to keep themselves entertained. According to DeSantis, pro wrestling programs could deliver to viewers new content while providing little health risks for the people involved in their production as long as they were recorded without a live audience. Unsurprisingly, DeSantis did not mention some of the more questionable motivations that might have influenced his decision to classify pro wrestling as an essential service: WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment) is a major American business, the McMahon family—who owns WWE—has long been associated with Donald Trump, and Florida is a Republican-run state. Of course, pro wrestling programs are not the only type of television production that continued to operate during the pandemic. Yet what sets pro wrestling apart from most other programs that continued production during the pandemic is that, true to its serial nature, television wrestling barely took a break. This article investigates the impact of the pandemic on current wrestling programs. It argues that the pandemic circumstances, coupled with the demands of television wrestling's serialized storytelling, led to an evolution of a specific

1. "WWE Deemed Essential Service in Florida—Alongside Hospitals and Fire Department," *Guardian*, April 12, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2020/apr/14/wwe-raw-florida-tv-shows-ron-desantis-wrestling-coronavirus.
2. Aaron Rupar, "Florida Gov. DeSantis declared WWE an 'Essential Service.' His Explanation Doesn't Make Much Sense," Vox, April 15, 2020, https://www.vox.com/2020/4/15/21221948/florida-wwe-essential-service-ron-desantis-vince-mcmahon-coronavirus.

wrestling-match type: the cinematic match. This article begins with a discussion of the core dynamics of pro wrestling and then looks at how the television medium and media convergence have influenced these dynamics. The essay then analyses how wrestling programs initially adapted to the COVID-19 outbreak before discussing the rise of the cinematic match during the pandemic.

Professional Wrestling, Television, and Seriality

In his seminal essay on pro wrestling, Roland Barthes defines wrestling as "a spectacle of excess."[3] Barthes notes that wrestling is "a sum of spectacles, of which no single one is a function: each moment imposes the total knowledge of passion which rises erect and alone, without ever extending to the crowning moment of a result."[4] Barthes here identifies two of the core elements of pro wrestling: spectacle and immediacy. Spectacle, as Barthes understands it, refers to the spectacular nature of watching two (or more) wrestlers participate in a complicated choreographed performance whereas immediacy describes how individual wrestling maneuvers or holds (e.g., the body slam, the sleeper hold) are able to capture the audience's attention. According to Barthes, in pro wrestling, every move, every gesture, and every interaction with the audience is characterized by a sense of immediacy and obviousness.[5] This includes wrestlers pretending not to be able to move after they have been attacked, wrestlers displaying pain through exaggerated facial expressions, and wrestlers taunting their opponents after having performed a successful attack.[6]

3. Roland Barthes, "The World of Wrestling," in *Steel Chair to the Head*, ed. Nicholas Sammond (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 23.
4. Barthes, "Wrestling," 24.
5. Barthes, 24.
6. Barthes, 26–27.

Based on this narrative clarity, pro wrestling has often been referred to as a modern morality play. John Campbell notes that morality plays commonly feature "mighty heroes" and "monstrous villains"[7] fighting each other in a battle between good and evil. Campbell points out that "the wrestler's character and actions must conform to the audience's clearly drawn expectations of what good and evil will do."[8] The evil portrayed by villainous wrestlers must be strong since this creates more dramatic tension and it is also crucial that the villain is eventually defeated in order for the in-ring drama to fit in with the tradition of the morality play.[9] This brief definition of pro wrestling does not cover every aspect of the appeal of wrestling, but it establishes spectacle, immediacy, and narrative clarity as core elements of wrestling performances. The significance of these principles is underlined by the fact that they have survived pro wrestling's transition from an athletic form of performance art into its own television subgenre.

In the 1950s, when pro wrestling first began to be televised in the United States, many wrestling programs were essentially filmed versions of live events. It was not until the early 1980s when, largely through the influence of WWE chairman Vince McMahon, the television medium transformed pro wrestling. As an experienced wrestling promoter, McMahon thought of strategies to attract audiences. However, rather than trying to get wrestling fans interested in local live events, he was aiming to attract a national television audience. The key to attracting viewers was still to provide them with a "spectacle of excess";[10] however, the television medium offered McMahon more possibilities to deliver this spectacle. Over the years, McMahon incorporated narrative and aesthetic elements from other TV genres

7. John W. Campbell, "Professional Wrestling: Why the Bad Guy Wins," *Journal of American Culture* 19, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 128, http:doi.org.10.1111/j.1542-734X.1996.1902_127.x.
8. Campbell, "Bad Guy," 128.
9. Campbell, 128.
10. Barthes, "Wrestling," 23.

(e.g., sports, soap opera, reality TV) and popular culture (e.g., politics, film, comic books) into WWE's programming to appeal to a larger audience. Although WWE and its competitors (e.g., WCW, ECW) followed this strategy for years, it was not until the late 1990s that McMahon acknowledged the genre hybridity of pro wrestling or, as WWE referred to itself, "sports entertainment" by stating that "[*WWE* borrows] from such program niches like soap operas like the *Days of Our Lives* or music videos such as those on *MTV*, daytime talk shows like *Jerry Springer* and others, cartoons like the *King of the Hill* on FOX, sitcoms like *Seinfeld*, and other widely accepted forms of television entertainment."[11] Neal Gabler has previously pointed toward the ruthlessness with which WWE assimilated various aspects of popular culture into its own programming, arguing that, as a result of this strategy, WWE can be regarded as a "postmodernist mélange."[12]

In addition to amplifying pro wrestling's inherent intertextual tendencies, the television medium has revolutionized wrestling storytelling. Henry Jenkins has previously analyzed the effects of television on the narration of pro wrestling in detail. He regards television wrestling as "masculine melodrama,"[13] a form of the soap opera that is primarily aimed at a male audience and includes a cast of continuing characters and rivalries that unfold over an extended period of time across wrestling matches, interviews, and various out-of-the-ring segments. Jenkins defines television wrestling as follows:

> Television wrestling offers its viewers complexly plotted, ongoing narratives of professional ambition, personal suffering, friendship and alliance, betrayal and reversal of fortune. Matches still offer their share of acrobatic spectacle, snake handling, fire eating, and colorful costumes. They are,

11. Vince Russo, "The Attitude Era Begins," *WWE Monday Night Raw*, season 5, episode 48, aired December 15, 1997, USA Network.
12. Neal Gabler, "Professional Wrestling Is a Form of Political Protest," in *Professional Wrestling*, ed. Louise I. Gerdes (San Diego, CA: Greenhaven Press, 2002), 63.
13. Henry Jenkins, "Never Trust a Snake: WWF Wrestling as Masculine Melodrama," in *Steel Chair to the Head*, 34.

> as such, immediately accessible to the casual viewer, yet they reward the informed spectator for whom each body slam and double-arm suplex bears specific narrative consequences. A demand for closure is satisfied at the level of individual events, but those matches are always contained within a larger narrative trajectory which is itself fluid and open.[14]

Jenkins here makes clear that television wrestling is not only a spectacle of excess that is primarily characterized by its sense of immediacy but also engages its audience through serial storytelling. In fact, it is striking how much the narration of television wrestling resembles the serialized storytelling of soap operas or, more broadly speaking, television drama. Robert C. Allen has argued that instead of providing an ultimate narrative telos, soap operas usually feature a number of overlapping "mini-closures"[15] that resolve a particular narrative question but do not move the text closer toward an ultimate resolution. Similarly, Jason Mittell states that the plotlines of serialized television drama are rarely fully resolved and, if they are, they are typically immediately replaced by "more suspenseful or engrossing narrative enigmas to keep viewers watching."[16] As a result, the viewer's engagement with serialized television drama is characterized by a "wandering viewpoint,"[17] a mix between protension (expectation) and retention (retrospection). If we equate the rivalries between wrestlers with plotlines, then these observations on television serials accurately describe the narrative employed by pro wrestling programs. As Jenkins notes, television wrestling typically raises narrative enigmas during the free broadcasts but only resolve these enigmas during the monthly pay-per-view events.[18] Moreover, as I have discussed

14. Jenkins, "Never Trust a Snake," 34.
15. Robert C. Allen, *Speaking of Soap Operas* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 75.
16. Jason Mittell, "Film and Television Narrative," in *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, ed. David Herman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007),164.
17. Allen, "Soap Operas," 76.
18. Jenkins, "Never Trust a Snake," 35.

elsewhere at length, television wrestling frequently utilizes the audience's long-term engagement with its characters to increase the emotional impact of its storytelling.[19]

Although Jenkins's work on television wrestling dates back to the 1990s, most modern wrestling programs can still be described as serialized masculine melodrama. Yet, as with most other forms of contemporary storytelling, media convergence has influenced the narration of television wrestling. Of course, pro wrestling has always relied on audience participation. As Annette Hill states, audiences are responsible for creating much of the "controlled chaos" that is integral for sports entertainment, for example by playing certain roles such as "chanting or booing for heroes and heels; using props, like offering a wrestler a beer; and interaction with the wrestlers during a match through noise amplification, attention to the action and participation as fans and anti-fans."[20] This kind of audience participation is essential since it provides the basis for the in-ring performances of the wrestlers. For example, wrestlers might address the audience in the middle of a match, perform wrestling moves that are a direct response to the audience, or adjust the pacing of their movements based on the crowd reaction. Ford describes pro wrestling as a "a massively popular fictional performance that invites the audience to participate directly with the text," adding that "without audience participation, the text of a pro wrestling [match] cannot be completed."[21] These studies underline that audiences are an integral part of pro wrestling since they influence the flow of wrestling matches on a moment-to-moment basis. Most contemporary wrestling programs are still produced in front of a live audience, but media convergence has somewhat redefined the role of

19. Oliver Kroener, "Wrestling with Characters," in *Convergent Wrestling: Participatory Culture, Transmedia Storytelling, and Intertextuality in the Squared Circle*, ed. CarrieLynn D. Reinhard and Christopher J. Olson (London: Routledge, 2019).
20. Annette Hill, *Reality TV* (London: Routledge, 2014), 112.
21. Sam Ford, "Pinning Down Fan Involvement: An Examination of Multiple Modes of Engagement for Professional Wrestling Fans," *Material of the MIT Programme in Comparative Media Studies* (2007), 30.

live crowds at televised wrestling events. As Jon Ezell notes, the live audience of a televised wrestling event may "cheer and boo different performers, but in the repertoire of responses there is a continuity informed by prior televisual experience and dictated by the current ecology of performance, where live audiences' immediate responses have less influence on the performance than responses from mediated audiences (e.g. ratings, stock price, social media)."[22] Contemporary wrestling programs produced by WWE have particularly embraced the influence of mediated audiences on the performances and storytelling of television wrestling that Ezell refers to here.

Convergent Wrestling

Jenkins has famously defined media convergence as "the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want."[23] Based on its inherent intertextuality and its embrace of transmedia storytelling, contemporary television wrestling represents a prime example for media convergence.[24]

WWE does not only exclusively develop its stories through its weekly television programs or monthly PPV events but also through social media platforms. For example, wrestlers might continue a rivalry that began on television on Twitter. Similarly, WWE has previously advanced plotlines on their weekly programs that originated from reality TV shows, web series, and podcasts

22. Jon Ezell, "The Dissipation of 'Heat': Changing Roles of Audience in Professional Wrestling in the United States," in *Performance and Professional Wrestling*, ed. Broderick Chow, Eero Laine, and Claire Warden (London: Routledge, 2016), 14.
23. Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 2.
24. CarrieLynn D. Reinhard and Christopher J. Olson, "Introduction—Defining Convergent Wrestling," in *Convergent Wrestling*11.

featuring WWE talent. In addition to developing its stories across different media platforms, WWE encourages their fans—the WWE Universe—to engage with their content on social media. For example, the company frequently creates event and match-specific Twitter hashtags to increase fan engagement and prominently features the Twitter handles of their performers on-screen as they enter the ring. As Joyce Goggin and Argyrios Emmanouloudis have discussed, WWE also offers viewers a smartphone application that allows them to access news, highlights, and videos while also giving them the opportunity to vote for matches they would like to see.[25] Despite the fact that WWE seems to do everything they can to increase online audience participation, the question remains as to how much fans are actually able to impact the storytelling. Of course, the discussion as to who really is in control of an unfolding transmedia narrative is not new. Suzanne Scott already noted almost a decade ago that one of the dangers of transmedia stories is that despite their "collaborative narrative design, the media industry frequently equates fans' 'participation' with their continuous consumption of texts that narratively and financially supplement a franchise."[26] Based on how WWE have in the past edited unwanted participation from the live crowd, a practice that wrestling fans and insiders commonly refer to as "sweetening," it is safe to assume that WWE only welcomes certain types of fan interaction and is concerned with remaining in power of the stories it tells. Frank Kelleter has argued that in popular serialized narratives, production and reception are closely related since "a series is being watched or read while it is developing, that is, while certain narrative options are still open or have not yet materialized as options."[27] Following Kelleter's logic, popular serial storytelling functions as a feedback loop in which production and reception

25. Joyce Goggin and Argyrios Emmanouloudis, "The Pro wrestling Audience as Imagined Community: Reflecting on the WWE Universe as a 'Fan-Generated Narrative' Body," in *Convergent Wrestling*, 143.
26. Suzanne Scott, "Who's Steering the Mothership? The Role of the Fanboy Auteur in Transmedia Storytelling," in *The Participatory Cultures Handbook*, ed. Aaron Delwiche and Jennifer Jacobs Henderson (London: Routledge, 2012), 43.
27. Frank Kelleter, "Five Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality," in *Media of Serial Narrative*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2017), 13.

continuously influence each other. For example, in the case of a television series, producers might alter the unfolding story based on how viewers reacted to previous instalments. However, even if viewers do not actively engage with a series (e.g., on social media), they still have to be considered "agents of narrative continuation" since producers might still make changes to the story based on the audience's viewing activity (e.g., drop in viewership).[28] Television wrestling represents a unique example of popular seriality since, unlike most other transmedia stories, its fictional world is "built fundamentally around serialized live events."[29] This somewhat complicates the feedback loop between production and reception. More specifically, the audience participation of television wrestling operates on different levels—the live audience participates in the pro wrestling performances on a moment-to-moment basis while simultaneously shaping the long-term storytelling through their participation. On a broader level, the television audience influences the progression of the story through their viewing of or interaction with these serialized live events. Some studies have already traced how the interaction between these different types of audience participation have influenced the serialized storytelling of WWE programs—for example, scholars have referred to the fact that the enthusiastic manner in which live crowds and wrestling fans on social media responded to Daniel Bryan in 2013 forced WWE to make rapid changes to their storytelling and create a plotline that culminated in Bryan becoming WWE World Heavyweight Champion at *Wrestlemania XXX*.[30] The pandemic provided a different kind of challenge for television wrestling. The absence of a live audience, coupled with the demands of serial storytelling and the expectations of the viewers at home led to a rise of cinematic wrestling matches, a match type that was designed to provide viewers with the spectacle they associate with pro wrestling, albeit in a pandemic environment.

28. Kelleter, "Popular Seriality," 13.
29. Sam Ford, "WWE's Storyworld and the Immersive Potentials of Transmedia Storytelling," in *The Rise of Transtexts*, ed. Benjamin W. L. Derhy Kurtz and Mélanie Bourdaa (New York: Routledge, 2016), 170.
30. Goggin and Emmanouloudis, "Imagined Community," 144.

The Weirdest Show on Earth: Television Wrestling during COVID-19

Alongside most other aspects of modern life, the COVID-19 crisis has affected media production and reception. The impact of the pandemic on contemporary media has also led to an emergence of scholarship on "pandemic media," which refers to everything from media that reports on the crisis (e.g., news programs, special reports) to media produced during the pandemic (e.g., films, television programs, video games) as well as media consumption during COVID-19.[31] At the time of this writing, the scholarship on pandemic media is still evolving, but there have already been a number of studies that have focused specifically on how the COVID-19 crisis has impacted film and television production, exhibition, and distribution. For example, Kate Fortmueller argues that cinema closures and, more generally, the cancellation of most live events have accelerated the move toward streaming that had already been in motion prior to the pandemic.[32] Meanwhile, Darshana Sreedhar Mini argues that the pandemic circumstances have led to film and television productions with a decidedly "pandemic aesthetic" while outlining the strict health and safety protocols that American labor unions helped to put into place to guarantee a safe return to work for employees involved in film and television production:

> The staged reopening process requires producers to ensure the availability of protective safety equipment, thermal screening and physical distancing protocols, including minimising instances of scenes involving fights, intimacy and crowds by amending scripts or using digital effects. The agreement emphasises the maintenance of a safe workspace, pitched as a

31. Philipp Dominik Keidl, Laliv Melamed, Vinzenz Hediger, and Antonio Somaini, eds., *Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory* (Lüneburg: Meson Press, 2020).
32. Kate Fortmueller, *Hollywood Shutdown: Production, Distribution, and Exhibition in the Time of COVID* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2021).

> 'shared' goal and responsibility. Apart from the lab-based PCR diagnostic kit for testing, the employees are also divided into separate zones, depending on the number of people with whom they are in contact. Employees will be eligible for paid sick leave and quarantine pay. The COVID–19 compliance supervisor is another addition to safety protocols, and this official will be physically present during shoots to enforce regulations.[33]

As previously noted, based on its classification as an essential service in Florida, professional wrestling was somewhat of an outlier in the early stages of the pandemic since—in contrast to most other forms of live entertainment—wrestling never went on hiatus. In terms of distribution, WWE benefitted from the fact that they already had television deals in place and were ready to distribute their content (e.g., weekly shows, PPV events, documentaries) to a global audience via their own streaming platform (the WWE Network). At the same time, like any other form of live entertainment, WWE lost all income that was generated through live ticket sales. In order to counter pandemic-related financial losses, the company furloughed or laid off a large number of employees in the early phase of the COVID-19 crisis and continued to do so throughout the pandemic. WWE's actions were widely criticized given the company's current net worth of over $5 billion. On the production side, the classification of pro wrestling as an essential service in the state of Florida meant that WWE quickly had to put health and safety protocols in place to be able to produce their weekly shows and monthly PPV events. Yet the company's health and safety protocols did not have to comply with the strict protocols that had been negotiated by film and television labor unions since professional wrestlers in America are still not allowed to unionize, meaning the majority of them are employed as independent contractors. This, along with the company's mass firings, created tensions between WWE and many of its employees. Specifically,

33. Darshana Sreedhar Mini, "Where Is Cinema? COVID-19 and Shifts in India's Cinemascape," *IIC Quarterly* 47, nos. 3 and 4 (Winter 2020–Spring 2021): 118.

wrestlers and members of WWE's production crew anonymously reported to the media that they felt the health protocols the company put in place were inadequate and voiced concerns over being pressured to work in close proximity to other people if they wanted to keep their jobs.[34] This article primarily focuses on how the COVID-19 crisis affected the aesthetics and the narration of television wrestling, yet this overview of how the pandemic disrupted wrestling productions is still relevant since the changes to the production of wrestling programs paved the way to how they how they evolved on a textual level during the pandemic.

In March 2020, WWE began to produce their weekly programs and monthly PPV events at the Performance Center in Orlando, Florida. The Performance Center, which is WWE's training facility, gave WWE the possibility to shoot their weekly programs with minimal staff and without a live crowd. The first empty arena show that was produced at the Performance Center was the *Friday Night Smackdown* episode that aired on March 13. The episode begins with a statement by wrestling legend and current WWE chief operating officer Triple H. He introduces viewers to the Performance Center, vaguely alludes to the pandemic circumstances, and assures viewers that despite what is going on in the world, WWE is still determined to "put a smile on peoples' faces."[35] Later on in the episode, Triple H proclaims that by continuing to produce content during the pandemic, WWE are truly fulfilling the promise of their current tagline: "Then. Now. Forever." The episode that follows this opening statement is mostly structured like a regular episode of *Smackdown*: it features wrestling matches, interviews, and various out-of-the ring segments—all of which further WWE's serialized storylines. The episode begins with a female tag-team match that sees the heel team of

34. Kim Kelly, "WWE Is Considered 'Essential' Furing COVID-19. Why Aren't Its Wrestlers?," *Esquire*, April 28, 2020, https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/tv/a32236195/wwe-wrestlers-coronavirus-essential-business/.

35. Andrea Listenberger, "WWE Elimination Chamber Fallout," *WWE Friday Night Smackdown*, season 22, episode 24, aired March 13, 2020, Fox.

Bayley and Sasha Banks take on babyfaces Alexa Bliss and Nikki Cross. The match features some instances in which the wrestlers cleverly acknowledge the circumstances under which they are performing, such as, for example, the heel team interacting with an invisible crowd during their entrance. However, overall the match highlights that due to the sudden impact of the pandemic, the in-ring performers did not have time to adjust to wrestling in front of an empty arena. Aside from a few small adjustments such as, for example, talking more to each other to make for the lack of crowd noise, the wrestlers perform as if they were wrestling in front of a live crowd: they pace their moves in a way that leaves room for audience reactions and, at one point, Nikki Cross even stomps her foot on the ring apron, which is the wrestling equivalent of asking a live crowd for their support. Cross even goes so far as to pretend that she has been energized by the nonexistent live crowd when she gets tagged into the match by her partner. Of course, some of these actions are meant to be read as comedic, but they also underline the absurdity of the performance. The match ends with an outside interference by the villainous Asuka who sneaks into the arena and costs the babyface team the win. Even with a live crowd, this classic pro wrestling scenario relies on the audience's willingness to suspend their disbelief. In an empty arena, it is rendered completely implausible. Picking up on the absurdity of the situation, the commentators react to the ending of the match by exclaiming: "She came right through the crowd. I never saw it coming!"[36]

As a result of COVID-19, televised wrestling events without live crowds became common in 2020; however, there have been instances of televised empty arena matches prior to the pandemic. Perhaps most notably, the Rock fought Mankind in a pretaped empty arena match that aired during the halftime break of the 1999 Super Bowl—a strategic move by Vince McMahon to get viewers, who normally would not watch television wrestling, interested in WWE's programming. Another famous empty arena match was the confrontation between Terry Funk and Jerry Lawler at the Mid-South

36. Listenberger, "Elimination Chamber Fallout."

Coliseum in Memphis in 1981, which Ezell discusses at length in his work on the changing roles of pro wrestling audiences. He states that pro wrestling, as "a genre of performance," obviously requires a live audience while pointing toward the eerie quality of empty arena wrestling: "There is a sense of anxiety and absurdity in the absence of a live audience; the sounds of the men shrieking and screaming reverberate like attempts at echolocation."[37] Much of the online discourse surrounding the empty arena shows that aired during the COVID-19 mirrors Ezell's analysis. As Ron DeSantis predicted when he declared pro wrestling an essential service in Florida, some viewers were grateful that WWE and AEW, the two major wrestling promotions currently operating in the United States, continued to produce new content during the pandemic. In April 2020, a viewer in the pro wrestling subreddit SquaredCircle noted that they "got used to it by now"[38] whereas another viewer rhetorically asks, "What the fuck else is there to watch?"[39] These somewhat positive viewer reactions are offset by a wealth of negative viewer responses toward wrestling programs that have been produced without a live audience. Reddit user Arch_Angel666 states that they cannot get invested in empty arena matches and, consequently, feel no desire to watch WWE's weekly programs anymore.[40] Meanwhile, another fan describes getting through a few empty arena programs per week as "a chore"[41] whereas the user BlackfishShane proclaims that "wrestling without a crowd is just a

37. Ezell, "The Dissipation of 'Heat,'" 10.
38. ANismanloMataron2, "Are You Watching the Empty Arena Shows?" Reddit, April 27, 2020, https://www.reddit.com/r/SquaredCircle/comments/g900f8/are_you_watching_the_empty_arena_shows/?utm_source=amp&utm_medium=&utm_content=comments_view_all.
39. Nitraw, "Empty Arena Shows?" comment, Reddit, April 27, 2020, https://www.reddit.com/r/SquaredCircle/comments/g900f8/are_you_watching_the_empty_arena_shows/?utm_source=amp&utm_medium=&utm_content=comments_view_all.
40. Arch_Angel666, "Empty Arena Shows?" comment, Reddit, April 27, 2020, https://www.reddit.com/r/SquaredCircle/comments/g900f8/are_you_watching_the_empty_arena_shows/?utm_source=amp&utm_medium=&utm_content=comments_view_all.
41. GhostandTheWitness, "Empty Arena Shows?" comment, Reddit, April 27, 2020, https://www.reddit.com/r/SquaredCircle/comments/g900f8/are_you_watching_the_empty_arena_shows/?utm_source=amp&utm_medium=&utm_content=comments_view_all.

hollow experience."[42] Tanya Horeck has highlighted that—particularly in the early stages of the pandemic—television provided many people with a sense of comfort in a time of uncertainty.[43] However, Horeck's analysis of the shifting meanings of binge-watching during COVID-19 focuses mainly on the reception of television programs that were produced before the pandemic. The negative responses toward pandemic empty arena wrestling programs indicate that—just like viewers of other types of television—wrestling fans wanted to be comforted, yet many of them found themselves disappointed since the empty arena shows that were produced during the initial phase of the COVID crisis did not resemble the wrestling programs they were used to. Thus, rather than providing them with a sense of comfort, for many viewers empty arena wrestling programs just became another reminder of the pandemic.

While the actual wrestling matches were most impacted by the lack of a live crowd on the first empty arena episode of *Smackdown*, the absence of the audience can also be felt during the interview segments. This is particularly true for the last segment of the show, in which the all-American hip-hop Superman John Cena, one of WWE's top babyfaces, discusses his upcoming *Wrestlemania* match with Bray Wyatt, an evil children's show host who possesses mystical powers. Cena adjusts his performance in subtle ways to the empty arena setting—for example, by directly addressing the camera. Yet his cadence and his booming voice are clearly meant to appeal to a live crowd. Toward the end of the segment, Wyatt interrupts Cena, and the two wrestlers have a verbal confrontation in the middle of the ring. Wyatt voices a mix of envy and disgust at Cena's Hollywood career, big muscles, and beautiful girlfriends. However, more notable than the content of their confrontation is how

42. BlackfishShane, "Empty Arena Shows?" comment, Reddit, April 27, 2020, https://www.reddit.com/r/SquaredCircle/comments/g900f8/are_you_watching_the_empty_arena_shows/?utm_source=amp&utm_medium=&utm_content=comments_view_all.

43. Tanya Horeck, "'Netflix and Heal': The Shifting Meanings of Binge-Watching during the COVID-19 Crisis," *Film Quarterly* 75, no. 1 (Summer 2021): 35–40, https://doi.org/10.1525/fq.2021.75.1.35.

Wyatt's eccentric and spectacular performance clashes with the empty arena setting. Similar to Cena's performance, Wyatt's speech pattern and gestures seem to have been designed to appeal to a live audience, but, in accordance with the horror-inspired character he is portraying, his performance is even more exaggerated than Cena's. For example, Wyatt frequently pretends to be guided by the voices in his head and randomly breaks out in maniacal laughter while addressing Cena. As with most other segments in this episode of *Smackdown*, the confrontation between Cena and Wyatt is impacted by the lack of a live audience; however, in contrast to most of the other segments of the episode, it also offered a glimpse as to how television wrestling could successfully adapt to the pandemic circumstances. The segment sparked the interest of television critics and wrestling fans particularly for how the hyperbolic performances mismatched the empty arena environment. One critic referred to the segment as "Beckett-esque absurdist theatre"[44] and described it as "uncomfortably intimate, which to be honest is exactly how it should feel."[45] Fans also responded positively to the confrontation between Cena and Wyatt, with one viewer stating that "the lack of crowd actually made this more effective"[46] and another one remarking that the "silence of the room made Bray Wyatt's promo absolutely eerie."[47] It is safe to assume that the positive feedback to this segment, coupled with the less enthusiastic audience responses toward empty arena wrestling matches, led WWE to adjust their weekly programs and monthly PPVs in order to meet expectations of their mediated audience.

44. Thom Dunn, "WWE Smackdown without an Audience Is a like Beckett-esque Absurdist Theatre," BoingBoing, March 16, 2020, https://boingboing.net/2020/03/16/wwe-smackdown-without-an-audie.html.
45. Sean T. Collins, "Pro Wrestling in Empty Arenas Is the Weirdest Show on Earth," *Vulture*, March 17, 2020, https://www.vulture.com/2020/03/pro wrestling-no-audience-coronavirus.html.
46. Thatdeal79, "Bray Wyatt Crashes John Cena's Interview En Route to WrestleMania: SmackDown, March 13, 2020," YouTube, March 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ruCcewe7IM&t=3s.
47. Alejandro Rodriguez, "Bray Wyatt Crashes John Cena's Interview En Route to WrestleMania: SmackDown, March 13, 2020," *YouTube*, March 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ruCcewe7IM&t=3s.

The Rise of the Cinematic Match

In addition to fans who find it difficult to engage with wrestling programs that are produced without a live audience, there have also been viewers who have been critical of pandemic wrestling programs because they regard their existence as solely economically motivated. Kelleter has previously discussed the capitalist nature of popular serial media in detail, stating that

> whatever else popular seriality tells us, whichever plot it offers us, whichever character it lets us love or hate, it always also assures us that there will be not end to the return of our stories, no end to the multiplication of our story engagements—and thus no end to the world we know and imagine and controversially practice as our own.[48]

Of course, the capitalist underpinnings of serial media that Kelleter describes here have been criticized before, but for many viewers the production of empty arena wrestling programs during a global pandemic brought this aspect of television seriality into sharp focus. Viewers particularly criticized Vince McMahon for his decision to hold *Wrestlemania*, typically the most spectacular televised wrestling event of the year, as a two-day event at the empty WWE Performance Center. One viewer argued that with this decision, McMahon showed "his greed as usual"[49] while, in the eyes of another fan, holding *Wrestlemania* at an empty arena highlighted that "nothing comes between Vince and money."[50] Overall, the two-day event received mixed reviews. As with the weekly empty arena programs, some viewers were happy that WWE provided them with some form of entertainment

48. Kelleter, "Popular Seriality," 30.
49. Koopatheelephant, "This WWE Event Held in an Arena with No Fans Is So Insanely Surreal," comment, Buzzfeed, March 17, 2020, https://www.buzzfeed.com/christopherhudspeth/wwe-coronavirus-caused-smackdown-event-in-an-empty-arena.
50. Sineadc4928ce1c5, "This WWE Event," Buzzfeed, March 17, 2020, https://www.buzzfeed.com/christopherhudspeth/wwe-coronavirus-caused-smackdown-event-in-an-empty-arena.

during the pandemic whereas others criticized the event since it did not provide the spectacle they associate with *Wrestlemania*, which usually takes place in front a live audience of over seventy thousand people and features not only the biggest wrestling matches of the year but also celebrity appearances and musical guests. Although the overall response to the event was mixed, viewers and critics praised the two cinematic matches that were part of the event, with *USA Today* going so far as to refer to the Boneyard Match[51] between the Undertaker and AJ Styles as "a masterpiece."[52]

The pretaped match, which was shot at an undisclosed graveyard in Florida, is remarkable in the context of this chapter since it highlights how the serial storytelling of television wrestling has evolved during COVID-19. Televised wrestling frequently features out-of-the-ring segments that progress the story and, over the years, WWE has developed a range of match types ("Hardcore," "Falls Count Anywhere," "I Quit") that allow the performers to fight all over the arena. Yet, what distinguishes such out-of-the-ring segments from the Boneyard Match is that they are typically concerned with preserving a certain sense of verisimilitude, which is often achieved through the use of handheld cameras that follow the performers as they fight their way through the building. In contrast, the Boneyard Match is essentially a short film set in the fictional world of WWE. The match was one of the last matches of the Undertaker—one of the most iconic wrestling characters of all time. Within kaybabe (wrestling vernacular for the fictional universe that pro wrestling creates), the Undertaker is a Western mortician who wears a black cowboy hat and possesses supernatural powers. Over the years, the Undertaker's persona has been slightly altered to include more aspects of Mark Calaway, who has been portraying the character since the 1980s. Perhaps most notably, in the early 2000s, WWE somewhat dropped the mystical aspects of the Undertaker

51. Andrea Listenberger, "Night One," *Wrestlemania 36*, TV special, aired March 25, 2020, WWE Network.

52. Nick Schwartz, "WWE Fans React to the Epic Undertaker-AJ Styles Boneyard Match," *USA Today*, April 4, 2020, https://ftw.usatoday.com/2020/04/wwe-fans-react-to-the-epic-undertaker-aj-styles-boneyard-match.

persona and transformed him into an outlaw biker. Since then, this biker persona has slowly merged with early incarnations of the Undertaker as a mystical heel. I discuss the character's gimmick in detail here because it is crucial for how the Boneyard Match unfolded. The match was mainly built around the notion that the Undertaker might be too old to defeat AJ Styles, whose wrestling persona is primarily based on the fact that he is widely regarded as one of the most athletic pro wrestlers in the world.

Right from the beginning, WWE establishes that the Boneyard Match will be different from a regular pro wrestling match. The match begins with the Undertaker's eerie entrance music while the camera pans around the graveyard to give the audience a sense of the location that the match will take place in. The production design of the graveyard immediately recalls old horror films: the audience is introduced to stone busts and gravestones that are covered in moss, and the entire graveyard is enclosed in thick fog. After the audience has been introduced to the locale, we learn that AJ Styles is already at the graveyard, awaiting his opponent's arrival. The match then cuts to images of an empty highway. Rock music starts playing as the Undertaker suddenly appears on his motorcycle. He races through the night toward the graveyard. Once he arrives, the two wrestlers begin to brawl all over the graveyard as AJ Styles mocks the Undertaker by insulting his wife and reminding the audience that the wrestling legend might be too old to keep up with Styles's athletic wrestling performance. From a wrestling standpoint, the match is somewhat unremarkable, but the way in which it is shot sets it apart from other backstage wrestling matches and the empty arena matches that have otherwise characterized television wrestling during the pandemic. Rather than primarily relying on one handheld camera and limited editing, the match continuously cuts back and forth between wide shots, handheld medium close-ups, and extreme close-ups of the competitors' facial expressions. This is common for cinematic fight scenes but unusual for television wrestling. Throughout the match, WWE uses nondiegetic music to heighten the emotional impact of the fight. For example, the beginning of the match is scored with what might be described as an eerie, low-key horror film

soundtrack and, toward the end of the match, melancholy string music begins to play as AJ Styles relentlessly beats up the Undertaker. In the context of this cinematic match, the performers' continuous talking and frequent use of nondiegetic music does not seem as if the wrestlers are compensating for the lack of a live crowd. Instead, the way in which the two performers brawl all over the graveyard while insulting each other is reminiscent of different types of genre filmmaking. This impression is heightened by the fact that the match features a number of "spots" (wrestling vernacular for a complicated wrestling move that has been designed to capture the viewer's attention) that specifically recall action and horror films. For example, the match features the Undertaker being attacked by a group of druids and, toward the end of the match, just when it seems as if AJ Styles is going to win by burying his opponent in an empty grave, the wrestling legend teleports out of the grave. The Undertaker's iconic silhouette mysteriously appears behind Styles, who has to come to terms with the fact that his opponent possesses supernatural powers. From this point forward, the Undertaker dominates the younger wrestler, and it becomes clear that the story WWE is telling is that Styles underestimated the Undertaker and his mystical powers and now has to pay the price. After the Undertaker teleports out of the grave, the match crescendos with a series of spectacular moves that clearly have been designed to provide viewers with the emotional catharsis they expect from pro wrestling. The Undertaker performs the tombstone—one of his signature moves—on AJ Styles before using his supernatural powers to set off an explosion at a nearby barn. The two wrestlers fight on top of the barn and, in the most spectacular move of the night, the Undertaker grabs Styles by the throat and throws him off the barn. He then carries the motionless body of Styles to the empty grave and wins the match by using a tractor to cover his opponent with dirt—all the while mocking Styles for underestimating him. The match comes full circle as the Undertaker rides off into the night on his motorcycle while Metallica begins to play on the soundtrack before the camera zooms onto the gravestone that the Undertaker seems to have custom built for AJ Styles.

The online audience response to the Boneyard Match underlines that it provided many viewers with the type of spectacle they expect from televised wrestling but found missing from pandemic empty arena matches. For example, in the post-*Wrestlemania* Reddit discussion, user smokedspirit describes the match "movie epic"[53] while another user refers to it as "one of the coolest things I've seen in wrestling in a long time."[54] Meanwhile, the user Rikkimaaruu admits that "it wasn't a great wrestling match" but still praises it for being "a great action segment with nice cinematic feeling to it."[55] In many ways, the Boneyard Match encapsulates the evolution of television wrestling during the pandemic. It is the result of the pressures of serial production and the constant feedback loop between serial production and reception. The mediated audiences of television wrestling largely reacted negatively to the empty arena wrestling programs that began airing early on in the pandemic. As a result, in order to entice viewers, wrestling promotions had to think of new ways to tell their stories without being able to rely on the interplay between live crowds and wrestling performers that has been an integral aspect of pro wrestling since its inception. The solution that wrestling companies came up with, the cinematic match, is a result of modern television wrestling's status as serialized transmedia storytelling. Television wrestling has assimilated elements of popular culture for decades—cinematic matches are only the next logical step in this evolution, which has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. To put it differently, in keeping with serial storytelling's desire to "practice reproduction as innovation,"[56] cinematic

53. Smokedspirit, "Post WWE WrestleMania 36 (Day 1) Discussion Thread!" Reddit, April 5, 2020, https://www.reddit.com/r/SquaredCircle/comments/fv5vjm/post_wwe_wrestlemania_36_day_1_discussion_thread/.
54. TheBrumAbisde, "Post WrestleMania 36," comment, Reddit, April 5, 2020, https://www.reddit.com/r/SquaredCircle/comments/fv5vjm/post_wwe_wrestlemania_36_day_1_discussion_thread/.
55. Rikkimaaruu, "Post WrestleMania 36," comment, Reddit, April 5, 2020, https://www.reddit.com/r/SquaredCircle/comments/fv5vjm/post_wwe_wrestlemania_36_day_1_discussion_thread/.
56. Kelleter, "Popular Seriality," 30.

wrestling matches such as the Boneyard Match adopt elements (e.g., editing, lighting, iconography) from film genres such as horror and action and incorporate them into the serial storytelling fabric of television wrestling. On a moment-to-moment basis, the Boneyard Match provides wrestling fans with spectacular fight scenes that evoke genre cinema, but it is also furthers AJ Styles and the Undertaker's respective plotlines while particularly acknowledging the history of the Undertaker within WWE's ever-evolving story world.

Conclusion

The Boneyard Match paved the way for a number of experimental cinematic matches that WWE and AEW produced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Among others, WWE produced the Firefly Inferno Match, which saw John Cena fight his way through a nightmarish recreation of his career that seemed to be inspired by the films of David Lynch, and a swamp fight that was based on slasher films such as the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974) and the *Friday the 13th* series. Meanwhile, over the course of the last year, AEW staged a number of extended cinematic matches at an empty football stadium in Florida. The Boneyard Match and, more generally, the evolution of cinematic wrestling during COVID-19 are notable examples of how contemporary popular seriality operates in practice. One of the underlying principles of popular seriality is that it perpetuates itself while adapting to the desire of its consumers, which is exactly what happened when wrestling fans reacted negatively to the empty arena wrestling programs that premiered during the initial phase of the pandemic, thus forcing television wrestling to innovate. In May 2021, AEW produced one of the first matches (Stadium Stampede) that combined a pretaped cinematic segment with a live wrestling performance. The cinematic segment of the match paid homage to a wide range of action films and featured various stunts that could not be carried

out in a live environment whereas the wrestling performances in the live segment were primarily dictated by the enthusiastic audience response of the live crowd. The match signals that although cinematic wrestling might have begun as a pandemic phenomenon, the serial storytelling of television wrestling has already entered its next phase of reproduction through innovation.