

Reviews



Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling. Edited by Nicholas Sammond. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005. 365 pp. ISBN 0822334380

Last year I taught a first-year undergraduate seminar course on professional wrestling, a topic that led almost half of my students to withdraw on the first day. I would like to think that this disastrous attrition rate had nothing to do with my choice of textbooks, and, indeed, those that stuck with the course found much to recommend in *Steel Chair to the Head*.

Edited by Nicholas Sammond, *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling* certainly deserves an award for “Best Title for a Scholarly Book.” The jolt promised by the title is delivered through a series of well-written and engaging essays that address big questions about the intersection of popular entertainment with issues of race, class, and gender. At the same time, my students raised a number of issues with some of the essays, issues that reflect larger concerns about cultural studies generally.

After the introduction, the book opens with Roland Barthes’ well-known essay “The World of Wrestling.” This piece is the linchpin of the entire book, and it is cited in no less than seven of the other essays. If Barthes established the field of professional wrestling studies (such as it is), his approach leaves much unsaid. Indeed, many of the essays that follow in the book are attempts to clarify the shortcomings of Barthes’ mythological views on the subject. The most successful of these, and, according to the reading journal of one of my students, “the best essay EVER,” is Henry Jenkins’ “Never Trust a Snake.” Jenkins re-conceptualizes wrestling as a form of masculine melodrama, where violence serves the important function of allowing emotionally restricted working-class men to express raging emotions. Jenkins’ ability to cut to the heart of the sports-obsessed male psyche was compelling to the women in my class, many of whom found in his revelations the second coming of Dr. Phil.

Three essays broadly addressing the issue of race and the Hispanic contribution to professional wrestling were greeted more sceptically. Carlos Monsiváis and Heather Levi each wrote about the Mexican phenomenon that is *lucha libre*, the former through the beloved figure of El Santo and the latter through the gen-

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eral importance of the mask. Neither of these essays ignited a strong interest from my students, who, despite a number of matches viewed on videotape, were unable to grasp the fundamental cultural difference between events at the Calgary Saddledome and Arena Mexico. Phillip Serrato's essay on the role of Hispanic wrestlers in the World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), on the other hand, was remarkably well received. On the one hand, this may be simply a function of the students' greater familiarity with the stars of the WWE, but it also seems to be related to the fact that Serrato's take on the subject is much more critical. As the course unfolded, my students became appreciative of the performative aspect of the wrestling spectacle, but hypercritical of its economic and cultural practices, at the same time. Serrato's condemnation of the WWE for racist policies that have minimized opportunities for Hispanic wrestlers certainly hit a nerve.

At the same time, the essays by Jenkins and Serrato highlighted a weakness that is endemic not only to this volume, but to a great deal of scholarship on contemporary popular culture. Most of my students observed in their journals the irony of reading about anti-Hispanic racism in the WWE at a time when the three most popular stars for that company (Dave Batista, Eddie Guerrero, and Rey Mysterio) were Hispanic. Serrato can hardly be blamed for his inability to predict the future, but the discrepancy between the written word and the television product emphasized for my students the difficulty of maintaining currency in a process where peer review and the vagaries of academic publishing schedules can incur a several-year delay between the writing of an argument and its reception by the reader. Further, this discrepancy seems only likely to grow in the future. Just as the smoky Parisian gymnasiums described by Barthes seemed like an historical fantasy in the context of the brightly lit stadium wrestling shows that are now the norm, it seems likely that many of the essays about "current" trends in wrestling will date remarkably quickly. I am reminded of the many scholarly books about *The Simpsons*, *The Sopranos*, and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* published while the shows were on the air, which were quickly overtaken by changes in creative direction, rendering them historical markers rather than active analytical tools.

Jenkins' essay, originally published in 1997 but dealing with the wrestling culture of the early 1990s, at least has the virtue of proclaiming its own historical status. Yet here a different set of limitations revealed themselves. Wrestling, like so many aspects of "trash culture," is perpetually in the process of reinventing itself and of masking its own past. The events and situations described by Jenkins were vivid, but also largely inaccessible. Several of the wrestlers described by Jenkins are now dead; most, at the very least, are no longer active performers. But more importantly, most of their performances are lost in the WWE archives, totally unavailable to the researcher. Authors like Jenkins, discussing wrestling from the past, run the risk of writing about works that are now all but forgotten or performances that are completely unknown to today's audiences and totally unknowable to them. Jenkins and Barthes were too much in the past for my students; Serrato was too much in the present.

One result of this was that the essays that worked best were the ones that examined wrestling from a perspective outside of the traditions of media studies. Two popular essays examined what a professional wrestler does. Sharon Mazer,

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drawing work from her book *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle* (1998), offered an ethnographic analysis of the “reality” of wrestling, while Laurence De Garis provided an auto-ethnography drawn from his own career as a professional wrestler. My students found these essays endlessly fascinating for what they had to say about things like “match quality” and the distinction between reality and make-believe. At around this time in the course we had a guest lecture from retired WWE star Lance Storm, who bolstered the conclusions of Mazer and De Garis with his own tales of the road, stories about backstage politics between performers, match analyses, and workout tips. The essays from an “insider’s perspective” seemed much more revealing because they benefited from first-hand knowledge and were not simply “the opinion of someone watching it on television.”

The remaining essays in the book tend to focus nearly exclusively on the WWE as a corporation, as a television producer, as source material for slash fiction, and as a venue for popularizing sadism/masochism narratives and aesthetics. Each of these essays had a number of supporters and detractors, but in the context of the overall book, one result was an unnecessary narrowing of focus. Perhaps the tendency to write about the most visible aspects of popular culture is endemic to certain strains of cultural studies, but even to my students it was clear that this anthology had left important elements of professional wrestling out in the cold. Among the noteworthy absences were works dealing with the rise and fall of the regional/touring promotion, the culture of Japanese wrestling, international comparisons, independent wrestling shows, backyard wrestling, the relationship of professional and amateur wrestling (particularly in light of the success of Kurt Angle in each), wrestling films, wrestling music, wrestling toys (which, to be fair, is touched on in passing in the book), and, most importantly, the overlap between professional wrestling and mixed martial arts, by far the most talked-about issue in the class.

As for myself, I too was disappointed at times by the narrow focus of *Steel Chair to the Head*, but I was more realistic about what work was probably available to Sammond. Professional wrestling may be the least appreciated cultural form in our society. Even comic book fans look down their noses at wrestling fans. Of course, this is what makes it such a ripe subject for analysis, and *Steel Chair* can hardly be faulted for failing to be exhaustive on the subject. Working within tremendous limitations, the book manages to incorporate a number of interesting perspectives on a complex topic and provides a number of essays that are genuinely illuminating. It did not help me win many converts to professional wrestling, but I would like to think that it won some converts to critical thinking.

References

Mazer, Sharon. (1998). *Professional wrestling: Sport and spectacle*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi.

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