

Reviews

Barthes, Roland. *What Is Sport?* Translated by Richard Howard, Yale UP, 2007. 96 pp. \$16.50 pbk.

Before professional wrestling became a recognized area of academic study, it was common, in the humanities, to reference Roland Barthes as a legitimizing move. In “The World of Wrestling,” the opening essay in Barthes’ *Mythologies*, Barthes sets up the paradigmatic moves for the study of wrestling in the university:

- Barthes sets up the space of wrestling as a space of theater: “Here we find a grandiloquence which must have been that of ancient theatres.” (15)
- Barthes sets up the split between boxing and wrestling (significant at least in the American Midwest because some early wrestling promoters were also boxing promoters). In so doing, he sets up the difference between sport and wrestling: “This public knows very well the distinction between wrestling and boxing; it knows that boxing is a Jansenist sport, based on a demonstration of excellence. One can bet on the outcome of a boxing-match: with wrestling, it would make no sense.” (15-16)
- Barthes sets up the wrestler as a performer: “Thus the function of the wrestler is not to win: it is to go exactly through the motions which are expected of him.” (16)
- Barthes sets up the wrestling body as semiotic system: “As in the theatre, each physical type expresses to excess the part which has been assigned to the contestant.” (17)
- Barthes maps the narratives of wrestling: “What is thus displayed for the public is the great spectacle of Suffering, Defeat, and Justice.” (19)

The Barthes essay, then, is foundational to much of what became the first generation of professional wrestling studies, mapping the key areas for analysis and some of the key research questions. (Since then, of course, the field has widened to include areas of analysis he never imagined—the behaviors of fans, the media industry and media ecology of wrestling, and analyses in terms of gender and race that Barthes only began to see.)

Barthes did not return to wrestling—this gesture served (much like Umberto Eco’s analysis of *Superman* comics did for comics studies) as a plaintive assertion of validation. Barthes set the table for our work, but he didn’t stick around for dinner.

So, it is with curious eyes that I review *What is Sport?*, a text commissioned for a Canadian documentary film directed by Hubert Aquin. Written just three years after the publication of *Mythologies*, I read *What is Sport?* with an eye toward what it might do to extend the work of the “World of Wrestling” essay, and with an eye toward what it offers the teacher and scholar in contemporary professional wrestling studies.

The first chapter (on bullfighting) has much in common with Barthes’ discussion of wrestling. Bullfighting is sport, in that the bullfighter is in real danger from the bull, but it is also theater. “The bull entering here will die; and it is because this death is inevitable that the bullfight is a tragedy. This tragedy will be performed in four acts, of which the epilogue is death” (3-4). Bullfighting, like wrestling, is theater. But in bullfighting, “this theater is false theater: real death occurs in it” (3).

Where, in wrestling, Barthes saw the narratives of Suffering, Defeat, and Justice, in bullfighting, he sees a narrative to “tell men why man is best”—his courage, his knowledge (“the bull does not know man; man knows the bull”), and style” (8-9). In enacting this narrative, the bullfighter “has made his victory a spectacle, so that it might become the victory of all those watching him and recognizing themselves in him” (9).

Scholars of professional wrestling have, over the several decades since Barthes gave us the “World of Wrestling” essay, pluralized the narratives that Barthes initially mapped in Suffering, Defeat, and Justice—but *What is Sport?* reminds us that looking long and deep at the narratives in other sports-spectacles (like bullfighting) may push us further. We might explore the extent to which wrestling might encompass narratives like the tragedy of the bullfight, or perhaps the narratives in other sports spectacles, like racing—the subject of the next two chapters.

Barthes uses the chapter on bicycle racing to distinguish “competition” from “conflict.” The distinction, for Barthes, is that in racing, “man must conquer not man but the resistance of things” to arrive first at the finish line” (37). (At moments, the theater of wrestling tries to become both competition and conflict—the ladder match and the steel cage match incorporate the “resistance of things” within the conflict between men.)

Subsequent chapters, about car racing (a narrative of man and machine, conquering space and time) and about hockey, offer seeds of insight that could be drawn into scholarly reflection on wrestling. Barthes claims that hockey illustrates the way that “sport returns to the immediate world of passions and aggressions, dragging with it the crowd, which came precisely to seek purification from it. Sport is the entire trajectory separating a combat from a riot” (55). The shouting, the

homemade signs, the passion at a pro wrestling event: the social tensions about race, class, and gender that are worked through in the ring also “separat[e] a combat from a riot.” Barthes’ insights into hockey can illuminate wrestling studies.

In the final chapter, Barthes returns to the trope of theater: “At certain periods, in certain societies, the theater has had a major social function: it collected the entire city within a shared experience: the knowledge of its own passions. Today it is sport that in its way performs this function” for a city or even a nation. Professional wrestling may also have become the site for this kind of cultural work.

What is Sport is short—less than 100 pages, heavily illustrated, and (as text to accompany a documentary) it is not loaded with technical terminology nor with the literary allusions that make Barthes inaccessible to students. As a teacher, I value this book immensely for the ways it could open diverse conversations in my undergraduate classes. And as a scholar, I value the ways that it opens up new avenues in my thinking. Barthes set the table for professional wrestling studies in the “World of Wrestling,” and he left a spread of appetizers in *What is Sport?* Priced at less than \$20, it makes a useful addition to our syllabi as well as our libraries.

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Works Cited

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Eco, Umberto. “The Myth of Superman.” *Diacritics*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1972, pp. 14-22.

Aaron D. Horton editor. *Identity in Professional Wrestling: Essays on Nationality, Race and Gender*. McFarland, 2018. 309 pp. \$39.95.

Identity in Professional Wrestling, edited by Aaron D. Horton, is a book that is well overdue. Professional wrestling as a topic of scholarly enquiry is crying out for credible research which finally seeks to answer long-held questions. The book itself comprises eighteen individual essays, excluding introduction, each grouped into four themes. The themes, in order, are: Race (I), Gender (II), Culture and Modernity (III) and Wrestling and Media (IV). The individual chapters are related to the themes rather than chronological, although it is safe to say that most decades of the twentieth century are covered in the analysis up to the present day. It should be stressed that this is not just a study of American wrestling. Naturally, Japan and

Mexico are studied both singularly and comparatively, while the historical contexts of South African, Brazilian and French wrestling are each afforded their own individual chapters. The editor is evidently sending a message that wrestling is a global sport, despite the obvious domination of WWF/E since the 1980s.

Horton is a historian based at Alabama State University whose work has focused predominantly on soccer. Like many entering this empirical field, he is a fan of wrestling who is seeking to establish it as a serious topic of scholarly study. In his own words, “the biggest hurdle may be achieving greater respectability for pro-wrestling within my own discipline (history), as most scholars who currently write about it come from disciplines such as media studies, communication, or anthropology” (“Author Interview”). However, herein lies an opportunity; wrestling offers openings for genuine interdisciplinary scholarship. This book shows that in spades. Its contributors are drawn from anthropology, international studies, English, physical education, and psychology. If anything, Horton should be commended for the ambitiousness of this project. Most of the chapter authors are academics from the United States; however, there is a good pool of international authors from countries like Canada, UK, Japan, South Africa, and Brazil.

In terms of content, the chapters on the then-WWF and the so-called “Rock ‘n’ Wrestling Connection” period from 1984 to 1993 are when the book really comes alive. Specifically, Zara Miramek’s chapter on the national identity markers demonstrated by the Iron Sheik, Kevin Hogg’s analysis of cultural appropriation, Tyson L. Platt’s study of the transmission of cultural values, and Damion Sturm’s examination of key wrestlers during what he calls the “halcyon days” of 1984 to 1993 particularly stand out. The heightened visibility of wrestling because of its link up with popular music and MTV, the utilisation of cable television and the increased use of gimmicks provide fertile ground to examine questions of identity, nationality and stereotypes, whether that is national, sexual and/or gender. Miramek achieves this successfully with a focus on the Iron Sheik and his overtly stereotypical dress; for instance, keffiyeh, iqal, and curly, genie-like, boots. Strum, while predominantly analysing fan memories of wrestlers like the Ultimate Warrior and “Macho Man” Randy Savage, offers a similar lens on Hulk Hogan and Hacksaw Jim Duggan. More than anything, these chapters offer a glimpse into what can be achieved through a study of wrestling. Yet, they also reveal the flaw of this book; some chapters are too brief to offer any substantive contribution.

Miramaek’s analysis, while frequently mentioning the Iron Sheik’s curly boots, does not go into sufficient analytical detail about either the man, Ali Vaziri, or character. For example, if Vaziri’s Iranian character was legitimate because he was actually Iranian what explains his depiction of Colonel Mustafa, a supposed

Iraqi general and ally of Sgt. Slaughter, one year after the end of the first Gulf War and only four years after the end of the Iraq-Iran war, in 1992? This level of analysis is missing from the chapter. Its inclusion would add an extra layer which would show that the Iranian gimmick was more disposable than implied and Vaziri was willing to do what is “best for business.” For Vaziri, it is likely that wrestling and the WWF came first rather than the nation. Greater use of primary research could help to get to the bottom of this.

It would be fair to say that many of the contributors in this book use online research as their core method of data collection. This is because of the lack of scholarly material on professional wrestling and the scope of the focus; for example, wrestler profiles, interviews given online through mediums like podcasts and fan reactions to characters. As mentioned, Damion Sturm utilises Facebook forums as a way of gauging “mediated memories” of the “halcyon days” of WWE. While this is not an illegitimate methodological approach, and Sturm justifies in detail his choice of method, the way that this was used throughout the chapter felt problematic. His citing of verbatim fan comments, which often involved swearing, vulgar language and/or spelling and grammatical errors, while raw and authentic, must be challenged for their empirical value. Facebook forums can be unwieldy and largely unmoderated. Therefore, memories of real value can be overshadowed by ranting and exaggeration. Such methodologies will undoubtedly become more frequent in the years to come but a strict set of criteria should be observed; for example, Eun-Ok Im and Wonshik Chee offer credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability as such criteria for the use of forums as a research method.

What was most lacking in this book was a common thread to knit the chapters together. Each chapter sits apart from one another linked only by a broad theme. This gives the collection a lack of coherence. For example, the reader’s progress through the book is slowed as a chapter repeats information already stated earlier. Definitions, explanations of so-called “wrestling parlance,” and the difference between a heel and face are outlined by numerous authors. Also, the example of Sputnik Monroe was used in both chapters on “Rock ‘n’ Wrestling.” This is not a problem per se, but the references essentially told the same story. A personal preference would be for fewer chapters with greater depth of analysis within a single conceptual framework. This would enhance the empirical impact of the book.

Overall, this book has achieved what it set out to do; the themes highlighted demonstrate the immense value of wrestling for broader questions which cross academic disciplines. While it is questionable whether this book has made a meaningful contribution, owing to the lack of a common thread and the brevity of

some chapters, it has certainly issued a call to action for further research on wrestling related themes. Here's hoping that scholars heed this call.

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