

Review of *Foreign Objects in the Ring: Professional Wrestling and the Politics of Engagement* by Lugnut Jones

Reviewed by Charles A. Goldthwaite, Jr., University of Virginia

(Note: Portions of this review were originally presented as a plenary address in honor of Professor Jones delivered by the author at the Professional Wrestling Commentators Association Millennial Conclave in Dothan, AL, 2000).

Are you man enough to wear these \$500 alligator shoes or this Rolex watch? I spent more money last year on bellhops and spilled liquor than you punks will earn in your entire life [sic]. So if you think you can be the man, you got to beat the man. There's only room at the top for one, and you're lookin' at him, baby. So get out your pens and pencils and notebooks, 'cause now we go to school. Whoo!

-“Nature Boy” Ric Flair, television interview, 1987

The virtue in professional wrestling is that it is the spectacle of excess.

-Roland Barthes, “The World of Wrestling” (1952)

“Can we please restore some order here?” Thus begins the introduction to Lugnut Jones’ *Foreign Objects in the Ring*, a groundbreaking discursive study of professional wrestling and its discontents. This paradigm-setting masterpiece picks up where Jones’ recent analysis of the popularity of televised in-church confessionals, *Fifty Bucks; Same as in Town* (1997), leaves off. In his introduction, Lugnut reprises *Fifty Bucks*’ controversial conclusion, that “everyone is, at heart, a guilty bastard” when addressing the appeal of televised wrestling. If this is true, then the world brims with an abundance of guilty bastards.

Stemming from the age-old traditions of Japanese Noh drama and drunken brawling, professional wrestling has emerged as a definitive statement of American culture in the late twentieth century. From its humble beginnings as a regionally-based entertainment spectacle, professional wrestling has, through the medium of television, exploded onto the national consciousness. No fewer than five prime-time wrestling shows air each week, and wrestling spectacles such as *Wrestlemania* and *Starrcade* remain among the most popular offerings in the pay-per-view format. On-camera appeal and acting ability have thus superseded the traditional path of traversing local and regional circuits as the keys for aspiring wrestlers wishing to break into the business. Wrestlers in the television age have therefore extended the basic principles of showmanship and athleticism that originated with such icons as Gorgeous George Wagner and Lou Thesz into a virtual prime-time soap opera that has developed wrestlers, promoters, and even announcers into on-screen personalities. Consequently, when not tuned in to *Baywatch*, the world’s cultural intelligentsia are likely to be tuned in to the free-for-all occurring within the Squared Circle. Although a few scholars have analyzed the forms and fictions of professional wrestling in order to determine its appeal, Professor Jones examines the impact of television on this most visual form of entertainment.

Jones’ discourse situates itself to the right of that displayed in works such as Todorov’s *Beavis, Butthead, and Bakhtin* (reviewed elsewhere by Michael Dunne) by implying that wrestling lures its viewers through its veracity rather than its carnivalesque atmosphere. Although Barthes argues that “what matters most to the audience is not what it thinks but what it sees,” many modern critics have focused on wrestling’s elements of melodrama and its penchant for blurring spectacle with reality. The Lugnut gets into the ring and takes these critics to task in *Foreign Objects* by proposing a series of arguments designed to dispel long-standing myths about the myriad roles of this spectacle in shaping the lives of television viewers. Perhaps most intriguing of his assertions is his chilling theory that televised professional wrestling is actually real. His postulation that televised wrestling represents a reversed *Blair Witch Project* in which the all-too-real action is staged to look fake has caused near-rioting in traditional wrestling strongholds such as Memphis, Charlotte, and Saginaw, MI, where the fans know damn well when they are being

fooled. For Jones, however, televised wrestling thus becomes an integral component of what Fox Mulder has termed America's "military-industrial-entertainment complex." Fooling the viewers into thinking that they know they are being fooled is no foolish task, and Lugnut Jones draws provocative similarities between Outhouse Brown's trademark double guzel with a trash can lid and decidedly real socio-historic precedents such as Joseph McCarthy's threats to rout the Communists in order to restore the order of democracy.

The veil was formally lifted from professional wrestling in 1992, when, in order to obtain permission for his troupe to perform at the Meadowlands Arena, World Wrestling Federation president and founder Vince McMahon testified before the New Jersey state legislature that professional wrestling was scripted entertainment rather than sport. From this point onward, professional wrestling has expanded from contests between individual athletes into a virtual soap opera; an ongoing "meta-spectacle" of intrigue, plot twists, and surprises. Of the numerous facets incorporated so seamlessly into *Foreign Objects*, perhaps the most useful to the scholar is Jones' discussion of the intertextuality of the wrestling spectacle. Professor Jones deftly proves his familiarity with much of current criticism by expanding on James Baker's recent article, "Baywatch and Professional Wrestling: A Narratological Comparison," by noting that the good and bad guys that populate each type of entertainment represent tropes seen also in *Scooby-Doo* cartoons, beer commercials, and televised political debates. The Big Lug then really flexes his muscles of scholarly synthesis by addressing Taryn P. Cursive-Waters' recent theoretical framework of nasal elevation. As an example, he refers the reader to a televised interview between announcer Tony Schiavone and "Luscious" Jimmy Valiant (the Disco King). The nose says it all when Schiavone, after introducing Valiant by simply noting that "Uh-oh—It looks like he's headed this way" retracts his head as far as possible from his outstretched microphone. As Valiant hops in place, claps his hands, and muses "Donny Chavanto, sometimes I do, and then again, sometimes I don't-all right, all right," Jones brilliantly applies Cursive-Waters' principles of nasal analysis to suggest that, for Schiavone and the audience in general, the Disco King generates his own brand of nasal elevation. It is during such moments of free-form scholastic association that Lugnut transcends the narrow confines that bind so many of his academic cohorts, and it seems that no amount of Brawny paper towels can clean up the spill when his cup runneth over. In a word, this is a most compelling analysis, and, at moments like this, one cannot help but reprise the classic announcer's refrain that although he's number 28 in the program, he's number one in our hearts.

In the book's final section, Jones examines the career of "Nature Boy" Ric Flair as a case study to evaluate the impact of the television camera on the rhetorical strategies of the individual wrestler. His close reading of a Flair television interview is a near-brilliant analysis that subtly dramatizes the underlying socio-economic tensions that drive much of the sport's discourse. He begins by analyzing the components of Flair's wardrobe—alligator shoes, Armani suit, Rolex watch—as visual codifications of what Marxist critic Fredric Jameson has termed "the long class struggle of human history." Jones then draws parallels between the structure of the Flair interview, which is composed mostly of improvised self-hype, and traditional forms of expression such as the dramatic monologue, the Shakespearian soliloquy (where Ric substitutes his left shoe for Yorick's skull), and the more conventional embittered rant.

Although Jones demonstrates moments of astounding clarity and flashes of brilliant insight, he occasionally oversteps his boundaries, and, to use wrestling parlance, goes over the ring-ropes. For instance, his attempt to reconstruct Flair's interview as a mock-epic Biblical parable results in a veritable Pier Sixer in which the reader has his head dashed against the turnbuckle one time too many. Critics of professional wrestling agree that the spectacle represents a visual enactment of a moral fable of the battle between good and evil, yet The Lugnut's confident assertion that Ric Flair represents a "platinum blonde Moses in a feather boa" is likely to draw fire from theologians and fashion designers alike. His additional implication that Moses began his sermon from the mount by addressing the Egyptians as a "bunch of nothing-happening rednecks from the mountains of Nile country" is blasphemous, astonishing, and simply not backed by adequate scholarship. While Lugnut Jones should be praised for attempting to stretch the boundaries of scholarly inquiry, this reviewer can only echo the plaintive cry of legendary wrestling commentator Gordon Solie (a man whose nasal delivery deserves further treatment in its own right) when he says "Ah ah. Now wait a minute."

Professor Jones' also includes a handy abridged wrestling glossary designed for the neophyte that succinctly defines phrases often employed by ringside commentators in terms useful to the scholar, critic, or lay reader. The impact that terms such as "solar plexus" (groin) and "Pier Sixer" (melee) have had on wrestling discourse is immeasurable, and their appropriation by the critical community should truly put the "hetero" back into *heteroglossia*. In homage to the spirit of professional wrestling and in deference to the television viewer, Jones combines his social commentary and professional scholarship with many "hot pix" (big color photos) to make *Foreign Objects in the Ring* an ideal book for the coffee table, podium, or dashboard. Frankly, I think that I speak for the academy as a whole when I say that we have always admired The Lugnut for his unique ability to bridge the gap between these most disparate ends of the cultural spectrum.

In conclusion, Lugnut Jones' fascinating montage of critical discourse regarding the dialogics of televised wrestling is a work that is broad both in its scope and its appeal. Once again, Jones applies his special gift for synthesis to various elements of popular culture, and he sheds light on the delicate web of interlocking themes that unifies much of modern consumer culture. Although he occasionally pushes too far in his mental sojourns, Jones has created a career based on unifying the impossible and, in the process, teaching us much about our selves and our world. For the most part, Jones succeeds here with this tour-de-force, which whisks the reader over the rapids and down the waterfall only to bring him safely to the quiet pool at its base. I recommend this book for both the undergraduate and graduate reader, as well as for those old ladies seated on front rows of wrestling matches worldwide who so gladly hand their canes to the good guy in his effort to win the battle against evil.

Works Cited

- Barthes, Roland. "The World of Wrestling." *A Barthes Reader*. Ed. Susan Sontag. New York: Hill and Wang, 1983.
- Flair, Ric. WTBS World Championship Wrestling. Telecast, 1987.
- Jameson, Fredric. "Criticism in History" (1976). *Criticism: Major Statements*. 3rd ed. Eds. Charles Kaplan and William Anderson. New York: St. Martin's, 1991.