

MEDIA EDUCATION
FOUNDATION
STUDY GUIDE



Challenging media

WRESTLING WITH MANHOOD

BOYS, BULLYING & BATTERING | FEATURING SUT JHALLY & JACKSON KATZ

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WRESTLING WITH MANHOOD

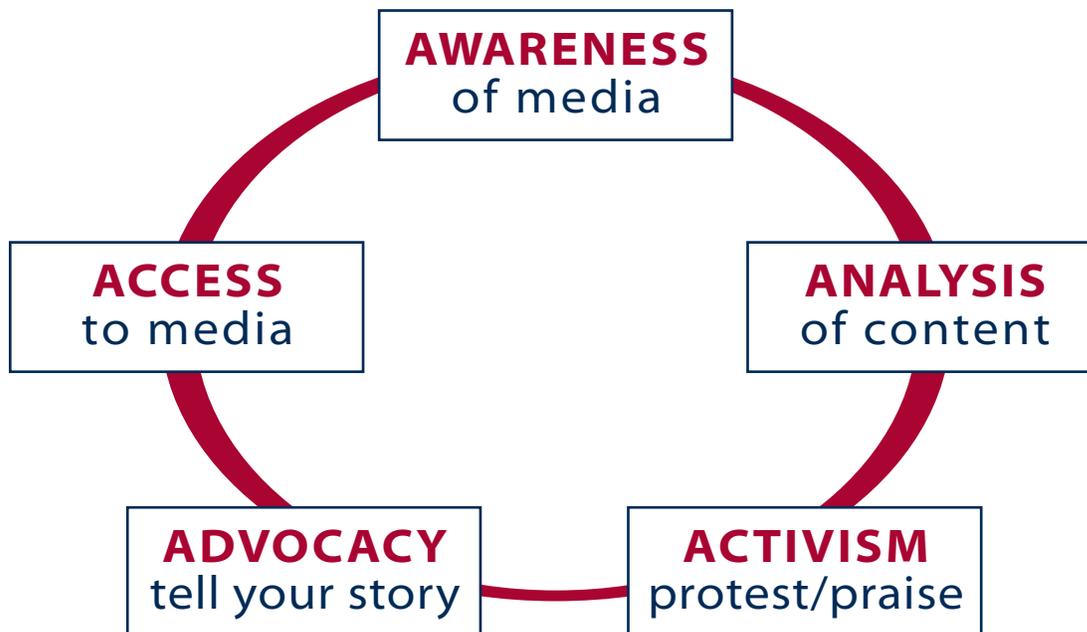
BOYS, BULLYING & BATTERING | FEATURING SUT JHALLY & JACKSON KATZ

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USING THIS VIDEO IN THE CLASSROOM

- » View the video prior to showing it to your students.
- » Review the study guide and choose which exercises you will use with your students.
- » Use the previewing activities to help your students prepare for the ideas presented by the video.
- » Encourage *active listening*. Because the content of this video is likely to elicit emotional responses from the students, it is important that the students engage with each other in ways that ensure everybody has the opportunity both to speak and to be listened to. It is advised that you set guidelines or norms to ways to “actively listen” in advance of classroom discussions. Check out MEF’s handout, *Techniques for Active Listening*. (<http://www.mediaed.org/handouts/pdf/ActiveListening.pdf>)
- » Have the students keep a journal. It will be an effective place for them to explore their own attitudes and opinions and to record their observations about the media.
- » Review and discuss the handout *How to be a Critical Media Viewer*. (<http://www.mediaed.org/handouts/pdf/CriticalViewing.pdf>)
- » Incorporate activism and advocacy into your media literacy study. They are an important part of empowering students.

THE MEDIA LITERACY CIRCLE OF EMPOWERMENT¹



THE MEDIA LITERACY CIRCLE OF EMPOWERMENT EXPLAINED

AWARENESS

Students learn about the pervasiveness of the media in their lives.

ANALYSIS

Students discuss the forms and contents of the media's various messages as well as the intent of most media to persuade an audience.

ACTIVISM

Students develop their own opinions about the negative and positive effects of the media and decide to do something about it – this can be in the form of praise for healthy media, protest of unhealthy media, or development of campaigns to educate others with regard to the media, to change media messages, etc.

ADVOCACY

Students learn how to work with media and use their own media to develop and publicize messages that are healthy, constructive, and all too often ignored by our society.

ACCESS

Students gain access to the media – radio, newspaper, internet, television, etc. – to spread their own message. This in turn leads to further awareness of the media and how it works, which leads to a deeper analysis and so forth.

1. Diagram and explanation adopted from E.D.A.P.'s GO GIRLS! Curriculum, (c) 1999 (<http://www.edap.org/gogirls.html>)

INTRODUCTION

KEY POINTS

- » Professional wrestling has been immunized from serious and sustained cultural analysis largely because of its spectacular surface appeal and the common assertion that “it’s only entertainment.”
- » The immense popularity and cultural presence of professional wrestling, its consistently high ratings and its aggressive promotion across a range of media channels, raise two simple questions: Why is professional wrestling so popular? And what does its popularity tell us about American culture more generally?
- » The central argument of this video is that the popularity of professional wrestling reveals something larger about society, about the deep-seated norms, values and moral codes that shape our daily attitudes and behavior.
- » We need to ask not only why people are watching professional wrestling, but how wrestling in turn might affect society – how it might help shape and reinforce the very tastes that WWE creator Vince McMahon has claimed simply and innocently to be serving.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Have you watched professional wrestling in the past? What have you enjoyed about it?
2. Do you feel it’s important to examine the issues presented in the film?
3. Why might someone argue that it’s not worth examining professional wrestling seriously? Do you agree or disagree with such dismissals?
4. A number of education professionals have recently been making the case that kids shouldn’t be wasting their valuable school time studying and discussing pop culture. They argue that rather than talking about things like professional wrestling, or MTV, kids should be learning traditional subjects, and how to read and write. Do you agree with this argument? If yes, explain. If you disagree, make a case for why examining something like pro wrestling might be a valuable and important use of class time that meets traditional educational goals.
5. What do you make of the role of announcers in wrestling? Have you ever been to a wrestling event? Any sporting event? How is it different to watch without hearing the commentators? How do you think announcers might influence certain meanings and interpretations of the programming you watch?
6. Do you agree with the assertion made in the video that if something is popular, it reveals something important about the culture in which it becomes popular? Can you think of examples of a trend, or a popular phenomenon, that might not have any meaning beyond its just being popular?
7. What do you make of the argument in the video that wrestling, because of its popularity, can tell us something about the ethics and values and morals of our culture and society? What’s your understanding of the meaning of these three things? Are there differences between what’s meant by morals, ethics and values? Have you found that your definitions of these things sometimes differ from the definitions of others?
8. The introduction to the video makes a distinction between understanding the popularity of the WWE and understanding the effect the WWE might have on those who watch it. What do you make of this distinction? Do you see the two as separate issues? Would you agree, for example, with Vince McMahon’s argument that the WWE has no real affect on its audience, and that it is popular simply because it gives people what they want?

INTRODUCTION

ASSIGNMENTS

1. Watch the opening clips of the fans' statements outside the WWE event and write a reaction to them. What do you think of what they have to say? Do you notice any pattern to their views?
2. Write a defense or a critique of the position by some education professionals that studying popular culture in the high school or college classroom is a waste of valuable time and contrary to the "traditional" goals of education. Use this video to make your case for or against your argument.

HAPPY & ESCALATING VIOLENCE

KEY POINTS

- » The mainstream debate about wrestling to this point has involved the general issue of violence, and the specific issue of whether kids imitate this violence.
- » Even though a number of high-profile court cases, the phenomenon of “backyard wrestling,” and the comments of kids themselves may seem to support the contention that professional wrestling may have a direct effect on violent behavior, the focus on “imitation” may also deflect our attention from wrestling’s more subtle and cumulative effects.
- » Moving beyond simple questions of cause-and-effect, we need to ask why kids who imitate the violence they see in professional wrestling seem so willing to put themselves at risk – and more specifically, why these kids seem so oblivious to the actual consequences of actual violence.
- » These questions force us to look closely at the actual stories told in wrestling.
- » The stories of wrestling trade in the kind of cartoon violence that cultural analyst George Gerbner has called “happy violence,” or violence without injury or consequence.
- » In professional wrestling, the effect of such “happy violence” becomes even more powerful because of the sheer skill of the actors in creating the illusion that their violence is real.
- » The paradox of professional wrestling is this: The skill of wrestlers in pulling off the illusion of reality gives greater credibility to the belief that there are no real consequences to violence. In other words, the reality of violence disappears in wrestling precisely because it seems so real.
- » The fact that virtually everyone who watches wrestling knows that it is staged and “fake” therefore isn’t enough to discount its having real effects: The sheer skill of the illusion has the power to overwhelm even kids who know, and have been shown, that it’s not real.
- » The phenomenon of “happy violence” needs also to be considered alongside the drastic escalation of the level of violence presented in professional wrestling. Wrestling gets more and more violent and extreme even as the actual consequences continue to be pushed out of view.
- » This combination of “happy” and escalating violence may not only feed the kind of risk-taking behavior seen in the “backyard wrestling” phenomenon; it may also feed an exceedingly dangerous definition and ideal of manhood that equates being a real man with being invulnerable and violent.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Does the video argue that wrestling causes violence? Does it argue that kids who watch wrestling are likely to go out and commit acts of violence?
2. What reasons does the video give for moving beyond the issue of imitation and simple cause-and-effect?
3. How does the video define “happy violence”?
4. How does the video define “escalating violence”?
5. Do you see the increasing level of violence in wrestling as characteristic of an escalation in mainstream entertainment generally? Can you think of such extreme examples of violence in other TV shows and movies you’ve seen?
6. If there is such a pattern of escalating violence in media generally, do you feel this means that we, as viewers, are craving more and more extreme entertainment? Why might this be? Do media simply respond to our cravings, or do you see it as more complicated than that?
7. According to the video, how might an understanding of the combined effects of “happy” and escalating

HAPPY & ESCALATING VIOLENCE

violence help us understand that “backyard wrestling” is more complicated than a simple case of imitation?

8. What argument does the video make against the common assertion that “everyone knows wrestling is fake,” and that it therefore doesn’t have any serious impact on people?

ASSIGNMENTS

1. Write a paper comparing and contrasting the kind of “happy violence” on display in professional wrestling with depictions of violence in a specific Hollywood film. If you feel the film you choose shares the characteristics of Gerbner’s definition of “happy violence,” cite specific examples and explain why. If you feel the film depicts violence more realistically, with more realistic consequences, cite specific examples and explain how you feel the WWE and the film might differ in their overall meaning and effect.

2. Write a paper explaining what is meant by the paradox of wrestling: The seemingly contradictory idea that the skill of wrestlers in pulling off the illusion of reality gives greater credibility to the belief that there are no real consequences to violence – in other words, that the reality of violence disappears in wrestling precisely because it seems so real. What does this mean, and why is it important to the overall argument of the video?

MAKING MEN

KEY POINTS

- » Culture both shapes and reflects our ideas about gender, our sense of what it means to be a man or woman.
- » Given that professional wrestling is a prominent part of the American pop-cultural landscape, we need to examine the stories it tells about gender, and we need to ask whether and how these stories might feed into and off of very specific ways of thinking about masculinity and femininity.
- » Examined through the lens of gender, the obvious surface violence of professional wrestling comes into focus as highly gendered, with stories about violence always linked to stories about manhood.
- » What professional wrestling offers its overwhelmingly young, male audience is a traditional, conservative definition of masculinity, a masculine ideal that equates physical strength, intimidation, violence and control of others with manhood.
- » Professional wrestling, in other words, models a way to be a man, demanding that we ask what effect this modeling of behavior might have on boys and young men in the real world.
- » Beyond simplistic notions of cause-and-effect, we need to examine how something watched so frequently by so many boys and young men might cultivate, legitimate and glamorize certain ideas about what it means to be a man, and therefore certain behaviors that conform to these ideas.
- » Bullying is one of the most commonly glamorized behaviors in professional wrestling, even as it remains a severe and persistent problem in the real lives of young people.
- » Whereas in the past bullies were seen as the bad guys, or “heels,” of wrestling, today’s wrestling glorifies bullying, with the biggest bullies achieving the greatest popularity and allegiance from fans.
- » With this shift, and this new equation of manhood with bullying behavior, we now have a phenomenon in which kids identify with the bully, not the victim.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do you agree that culture shapes and reinforces our ideas about what it means to be a man or a woman? In American culture, what do you see as the “ideal” of masculinity and femininity?
2. According to the video, what kind of manhood is constructed in professional wrestling? What kinds of values and behaviors get linked up with what it means to be a man in the WWE?
3. Do you feel that the models of manhood constructed in professional wrestling differ in significant ways from the kinds of ideals of manhood on display in other popular mainstream media forms (Hollywood films, professional sports, etc)? In other words, do you see the masculine ideals depicted in the WWE as within the American mainstream, or as severely different from it?
4. According to the video, what effects might this construction of masculinity have on the boys and young men who are repeatedly exposed to it? How is this different from the notion of simple cause-and-effect: from the idea that boys see men like this and literally go out and act like them?
5. What is the connection between masculinity and bullying, according to the video? Do you feel that this connection holds outside of the fictional realm of professional wrestling? Do you see an equation between bullying and certain definitions of masculinity in general?
6. Stone Cold, while whipping Tazz, says, “You gotta learn about respect from Stone Cold Steve Austin,” while the Undertaker tells Michael Cole that “fear and respect go hand-in-hand.” Meanwhile, in the real world, the WWE sponsors a program that sends wrestlers to libraries and schools to teach young people about respect

MAKING MEN

(see: <http://parents.wwe.com/real/index.html>). What do you think of this? Does it seem inconsistent to you?

7. Think of a male role model you have: what qualities does he have that are important to you? How does this version of manhood and masculinity that you respect compare with the versions portrayed in the WWE? And why do you think so many young men, like the fans in the film, might see wrestlers as role models?

ASSIGNMENTS

1. Look up “hegemony” in the dictionary. Pay particular attention to how “hegemony” gets made and how it stays in place. Then construct, in your own words, a definition of what you see as “hegemonic masculinity” in American culture. Write a paper explaining the features of what you see as “hegemonic masculinity,” where it comes from and how it is maintained, using specific examples to support and illustrate your claims. Then talk about the relationship between your definition and explanation and the kind of masculinity on display in the WWE.

2. Watch the MEF video *Tough Guise*. Write a paper examining the connections between the arguments made in the two films. Specifically, use *Tough Guise* to fit *Wrestling with Manhood*'s central argument about masculinity into a larger cultural context.

HOMOPHOBIA

KEY POINTS

- » The stories professional wrestling tells about manhood are deeply and consistently homophobic.
- » This anxiety about homosexuality makes perfect sense when we see it as a way for wrestling to announce and maintain its heterosexual credentials – something that takes on special importance given that professional wrestling essentially consists of scantily-clad and sweaty men groping each other for the enjoyment of other men.
- » When the nearly naked women of professional wrestling grope each other, the homoerotic undercurrent gets featured as part of a storyline lifted from heterosexual pornographic fantasy.
- » When the nearly naked men of professional wrestling grope each other, the homoerotic undercurrent is transformed into homophobia.
- » When violent straight masculinity is set as the standard, it becomes necessary to establish the straightness of these men through violence: through insults that feminize and question the sexuality of other men, and through ridicule of stereotypically gay characters.
- » The function of stereotypically gay characters such as Chuck and Billy, then, is not to demonstrate their sexuality, but the straight sexuality of everyone else.
- » Wrestling's obsession with homosexuality, whether in the form of denigrating stereotypically gay characters or denigrating allegedly straight characters with homophobic slurs, reveals the extent to which traditionally macho ideals of masculinity may be founded on deep anxieties about what it means to be a man.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do recent plot lines that include lesbian characters and gay characters like Chuck and Billy indicate that the WWE is turning “gay-friendly”, as some have argued? Explain your point of view on this.
2. According to the video, in what ways is wrestling “homophobic”? What examples are given? What differences are there between these kinds of homophobia?
3. What is “the function of homophobia,” according to the video? Do you agree or disagree with this argument?
4. What argument might be made against the claim that if wrestling commentators and fans think female wrestlers might kiss, then they must also think the same thing about the male wrestlers – and that they therefore need to block it out? Is there a way to argue against this? And if there is, how might you come back and defend the video's point of view on this?
5. Is saying that there is a “homoerotic” subtext in professional wrestling the same thing as saying that the WWE is “gay”? Why or why not? What does the video mean by homoerotic?
6. According to the video, what is the “function” of Chuck and Billy? How does this relate to this section's overall argument about the connection between the kind of manhood depicted in the WWE and anxiety about homosexuality?
7. A recent *Miller Lite* commercial portrayed two women mud wrestling with each other in a sexually provocative way, as part of the male fantasy of a number of guys in the commercial. What do you think it means that heterosexual male pornographic fantasies like this are creeping into mainstream culture? What does it say about how the sexuality of women gets represented in media? And what does it say about how men are represented – via these alleged fantasies?

HOMOPHOBIA

ASSIGNMENTS

1. Write a paper summarizing the central argument of this section of the video concerning the relationship between the construction of manhood in the WWE and homophobia. Then use this argument to analyze what you see as a similar phenomenon in a Hollywood film or music video of your choice.
2. Compare and contrast the argument made in this section to the argument made in the MEF video *Playing Unfair*, which examines the way homophobia is related to media representations of women athletes. (Or see the online study guide with summaries and key ideas.)

KEY POINTS

- » Similar to the growing prominence of stereotypically gay characters, one of the functions of the increasing number of female stars in professional wrestling is to demonstrate the straightness of the male wrestlers.
- » Women increasingly have been integrated into the narratives of professional wrestling, but always within a basic structure of masculine violence and humiliation.
- » One way to understand the growing popularity of the WWE is to see it as coinciding with the growing presence of women wrestlers who are there primarily to provide an erotic spectacle for boys and men.
- » Because women are there mainly to reinforce the heterosexuality of males – both the male wrestlers and the males in the audience – storylines reflect male desires and fantasy.
- » Breast implants are standard procedure, and the strength and athleticism of women wrestlers is allowed only within the confines of male pornographic fantasy ideals of femininity.
- » Wrestling’s popularity with young men can not be separated from its emergence as, in essence, a strip show; we need to think seriously about the cumulative effects this might have on the boys and young men who come to see this as normal.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. According to the video, what is one of the primary functions of female wrestlers in the WWE? What examples are given in support? Do you agree or disagree with the video’s analysis of this function?
2. How do female wrestlers fit into the overall “structure” of WWE storytelling? What is this structure, and how does it relate to women?
3. According to the video, how does the WWE represent an example of the overall “mainstreaming” of the conventions of heterosexual pornography targeted at men? What are these conventions? Where are they in wrestling? Where else do you see them in mainstream culture?
4. How is the athletic prowess of female wrestlers contained by WWE narratives, according to the video? Do you agree with this analysis? Or do you see the emergence of women in the WWE as a sign of women’s increasing power?
5. Can you think of other examples in which women’s increasing power has led to their sexualization and objectification, demanding that they prove they are “real women” (*i.e. feminine, heterosexual, etc.*)?
6. People often say that women choose to do this work – that if they felt the WWE was degrading or offensive they wouldn’t do it. Do you agree with this point of view? Is it possible to believe individuals may exercise free choice, even as we acknowledge that the range of choices might be limited in other ways?
7. The video asks about the cumulative effects this portrayal of women might have on the boys and young men who watch wrestling. What’s your take on this?
8. What cumulative effects might such portrayals have on girls and women?

ASSIGNMENTS

1. Do a comparative analysis of how women are represented in a mainstream cultural text (*a magazine spread, an ad campaign, etc.*) and the representation of women in the WWE. Compare and contrast these representations with special attention to power.
2. Compare and contrast the central argument made in the MEF video *Playing Unfair*, about media representations of female athletes, and the analysis in this section of how women wrestlers are represented in the WWE. (*Or see the online study guide, with summaries and key points, for Playing Unfair.*)

NORMALIZING GENDER VIOLENCE

KEY POINTS

- » Female characters have become increasingly drawn into the violence of professional wrestling's narratives.
- » Through sheer repetition in these stories, the sight of women being hit by men has become normalized.
- » The normalization, not to mention glamorization, of men hitting women is especially troubling given that men's violence against women in the real world remains at epidemic levels.
- » The issue here is this: While wrestling doesn't simply cause men to be abusive to women, there can be little question that it contributes to an atmosphere in which men's violence against women is not taken seriously.
- » The fact that millions of boys and men are entertained weekly by men's violence against women is further complicated by the deliberate sexualization of this violence – creating a situation in which boys and young men are aroused as they watch women being beaten.
- » Violence against women is also commonly presented within a larger pattern and storyline that presents the violence as deserved – a pattern that mirrors similar justifications of men's abuse of women in the real world.
- » Similarly, wrestling plotlines regularly involve the humiliation of women in the workplace.
- » All of this has the effect of normalizing, justifying and rationalizing larger social patterns of men's violence against women.
- » Rather than focusing on whether wrestling causes violence in a simple way, we need to ask instead what it means that stadiums around the country are full of young men cheering, applauding and laughing at the staged humiliation and abuse of women.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. According to the video, how does wrestling normalize men's violence against women? Do you agree with this argument?
2. The video argues that the WWE's depiction of men's violence against women doesn't necessarily cause men to abuse women. But it does make the case that it has an effect, a potentially very dangerous effect. What is this potential effect, according to the video?
3. What are the different forms of men's violence against women that are repeatedly depicted in the WWE, and how do these forms of violence reflect patterns of actual men's violence against women in the real world?
4. The film asks not whether this violence has a direct causal effect on boys' and men's behavior toward girls and women – but, specifically, what it means when young boys and young men stand, cheer, laugh and applaud at the spectacle of men beating on, degrading and humiliating women. What do you think it means?
5. Do you see a connection between being entertained by something and finding it acceptable?
6. Following the reported assault on his wife Debra, Steve Williams, the man who plays Stone Cold, turned himself in to police and was later sentenced in County Court to one year of probation, fined \$1000, ordered to attend a domestic violence counseling course, and directed to perform 80 hours of community service. After 8 months, Austin returned to the ring while Debra has not returned to WWE programming. Discuss the implications of this minimal penalty for a man who assaulted his wife, especially what it might mean in the context of his on-screen persona as a glorified bully.
7. WWE ratings dropped significantly in the six months during Stone Cold's absence, and have soared since his return. Do you see a pattern in the real professional sports world, or in the entertainment world more

NORMALIZING GENDER VIOLENCE

generally, in which transgressions like these get overlooked in the interest of ratings and sales?

8. The video points out that the WWE seems to have a special obsession with making entertainment out of sexual harassment. Vince McMahon, the real-life owner of the WWE, is also one of its central fictional characters: he portrays himself in exaggerated form as the owner of the WWE – as a boss who expects and demands titillation and submission from the women wrestlers who work for him. What do you think of these on-screen plot lines given that Vince McMahon is the actual boss of these women in the real world and that these women actually work for him? In light of the very real and persistent problem of sexual harassment in the workplace, does it seem to you that the line between fiction and reality might get blurred here in troubling ways? If not, why not? If so, troubling for whom?

ASSIGNMENTS

1. Do some research on men's violence against women. Gather information about the nature and scope of the problem, paying particular attention to patterns of abuse, the dangers women face when in abusive situations, and the ways abusive men sometimes justify their actions. Present your findings, then use them to see if they fit with the video's argument about how the WWE depicts men's violence against women.

2. Write an essay comparing and contrasting the video's analysis of homophobia in the WWE and its analysis of men's violence against women. What connections do you see between these two phenomena?

“IT’S ONLY ENTERTAINMENT”

KEY POINTS

- » A common defense of WWE loyalists when faced with any sort of criticism is that “people should lighten up” because “it’s only entertainment.”
- » If we agree with the common defense of wrestling as “simply entertainment”, we then need to ask: What does it mean that we’re entertained by men beating up women, by the humiliation and stereotyping of women and gay men?
- » We need also to ask whether one effect of all this might be that when we see these things in the real world, we don’t take them seriously.
- » The defense of wrestling as simply fun and funny, and the related accusation that those who see deeper meaning in it have no sense of humor, similarly deflects attention away from how humor can serve both to normalize brutal behavior and shut down those who are concerned about it.
- » Finally, the related embrace of wrestling as simply entertainment for those with a self-proclaimed rebellious sense of humor masks this fact: That true rebellion and independence would mean standing up to Vince McMahon’s attempt to sell the deeply conservative WWE as somehow counter to traditional values.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. According to the video, how does the world of the WWE differ from real social changes that have occurred in the world over the past few decades?
2. Do you think the difference between these two worlds might in some way account for the appeal of professional wrestling for some men?
3. What argument does the video make about the historic function of humor?
4. What do you think of Vince McMahon’s statement at the end that people who have concerns about professional wrestling need to have a sense of humor?
5. According to the video, the WWE is conservative, rather than rebellious. This implies that rebels define themselves against conservative values. What are conservative values? And what is it about the self-proclaimed “rebellion” of the WWE and many of its fans that might in actuality be deeply conservative?

ASSIGNMENTS

1. Write an essay about the differences between rebellion and conservatism. Look both terms up in a good dictionary, then draw on these definitions to formulate your own. Then evaluate the claim made by the video that the WWE and those who follow it share deeply conservative values, despite the repeated claims by the WWE’s most loyal defenders that it’s all about rebellion and being your own man.
2. Write a letter to Vince McMahon telling him what you think about his WWE.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- » If you’re interested in extensive behind-the-scenes information about the world of professional wrestling, watch two great documentaries: *Beyond the Mat* directed by Barry W. Blaustein and *Wrestling with Shadows*, a film by Paul Jay.
- » www.wwe.corpbiz.com/ is the official corporate website of the WWE. It includes facts, stats, biographies, and gives a fairly clear indication of what Vince McMahon and the WWE are all about.