

Book review: Action chicks: new images of tough women in popular culture

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Book reviews

Sherrie A. Inness (ed.), *Action Chicks: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. 293 pp. ISBN 1-4039-6396-7 (pbk) £12.99

Buffy cares about shoes as much as stakes; Nikita's ski-wear merits more attention than her hardware, but you can only tell if a Power Ranger doll is a girl by the colour of her helmet. This collection is timely in its focus on a new breed of 'action chick', a breed which can both compound and confound traditional gender binaries and stereotypes.

These popular culture heroines fight their corners on the small screen, toyshop shelf and computer monitor rather than on the big screens and comic book pages of their predecessors. The chapters embrace an interesting selection of the media in which such heroines are made manifest, from computer games and action toys to TV drama and wrestling. In terms of content, it extends the scope of Inness' (1998) previous publication, *Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture*. Inness' introduction sets out the central questions raised by the study of the new generation of 'action chicks', asking: 'Do they represent greater freedom from gender stereotypes? What do these figures suggest about changing societal roles for men and women?' (p. 2).

After giving a brief historical overview suggesting how such heroines have developed from antecedents in film, TV and comic books, Inness positions the collection within feminist and cultural scholarship, indicating that the chapters will explore the two sides of the empowerment/containment debate which characterizes much critique of the subjects explored here, and mirrors wider debate within third-wave feminism.

Thus far the book does pretty much what it says on the tin. The chapters offer some careful scrutiny of a range of issues raised, from female sacrifice and friendship to gendered behaviours, with arguments supported by a detailed knowledge of the individual subjects. These include Lara Croft, Buffy, Xena, La Femme Nikita, the WWF's Chyna and 'mob wives'. There is a balance within the collection itself of argument, and exploration of the limits of the challenge to gender roles offered by the chicks in question. For example, both Charlene Tung in Chapter 4 and Sharon Ross in Chapter 9 show how the fighting female is contained



within existing tropes of white, western heterosexuality, while in her discussion of molls and mob wives in Chapter 8, Marilyn Yaquinto sets the development of the representation of gangsters' women within both traditional binary definitions of gender and broader cultural shifts. In Chapter 2, Jeffrey A. Brown explores the limited usefulness of such binary approaches within themselves for understanding the nature of contemporary representations of women. Tellingly, Tung describes her own admiration for action heroine Nikita as existing, 'in lieu of other representations' (p. 117). This phrase nicely encapsulates the tensions identifiable in a range of chapters between an appreciation of the new breed of action heroines, and the need to acknowledge and explore the forces and effects of containment.

At their best, the writers here unite a careful consideration of such issues and tensions with an appreciation of the particular conditions and possibilities existing within their chosen medium. For example, Brown considers the serial nature of the televisual drama, and Ross the narrative structures of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Xena: Warrior Princess*, as important in allowing for depth and development in female friendships. Sara Crosby in Chapter 6 draws attention to the parallels between the more problematic containment of feminism in *Dark Angel* compared with *Xena* and *Buffy*, and the sexualization of Max through costuming and camera work. In Chapter 1, Claudia Herbst rightly considers the military antecedents of computer games and women's relationship with new technologies in constructing her reading of gender, reproductive technology and violence in *Tomb Raider*.

However, in the collection as a whole there could be more consideration of the relationship between the representations themselves and the medium of presentation under discussion. For example, given developments in television as a medium worthy of study in its own right (see, for example, Turnbull, 2004) surprisingly few of the chapters focusing on TV have given time to the consideration of the particular conditions existing within the development of television as a medium, of resulting audience issues and how these may resonate with the emergence of the 'action chick'. In some chapters there is a tendency to treat the subjects under study as generic texts; character and appearance of the heroine, storyline and dialogue are used again and again to buffer argument, but with little to indicate the nature of the text or medium. At times it is easy to forget whether a TV, film, literary or computer-game heroine is under discussion, and too little acknowledgement that we need to understand these representations within a context of prime-time constraints and marketing appeal, as well as representing broader sociocultural developments.

Moving from textual to audience research models, there is some interesting original research, for example, where Tung explores responses to Nikita in a self-defence class, but in other chapters, frustratingly, such research is merely referred to in passing. Some of the essays in *Action*



Chicks fall somewhere between the two stools of medium and audience, to produce a focus on content or message which can appear dislocated.

Action Chicks is accessible in style and offers in its entirety an overview of some key issues raised by the emergence of the 'action chicks' phenomenon. Some contributors make challenging and useful contributions to the body of scholarship in the field, and I would certainly use selected extracts and chapters in my teaching. However, others have tended to neglect the embedding of their argument and/or approaches taken within critical or theoretical frameworks, in favour of detailed but impressionistic discussion of the heroines themselves.

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Sara Gwenllian-Jones and Roberta E. Pearson (eds), *Cult Television*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004. xx + 242 pp. ISBN 0-8166-3830-6 (hbk) \$68.95; ISBN 0-8166-3831-4 (pbk) \$22.95

The academic study of 'cult media' seems to be gaining momentum, and rightfully so. Given the widespread use of the term in contemporary culture, it is high time that the topic received attention, both in the form of critical debates and proper research into the nature, uses and implications of 'cult' in media studies. *Cult Television* adds to the depth and scope of the debate, but although it never claims to be the definitive say on the topic, it occasionally lacks the theoretical stamina that one hoped it would have.

Exempting a few studies of 'camp' (Susan Sontag) and 'subculture' (Dick Hebdige) cult film and television have only been part of academic and critical debates since the 1980s (Hebdige, 1979; Sontag, 1964). Bruce Austin's empirical 'Portrait of a Cult Film Audience' (1981), J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum's *Midnight Movies* (1985), Umberto Eco's essay on *Casablanca* (1986), Gina Marchetti's (1986) framing of cult as a set of subcultural practices and J.P. Telotte's *The Cult Film Experience* (1990) stand as academic studies among several more popular and encyclopaedic attempts (like Danny Peary's series on *Cult Movies*; 1981, 1983, 1998)