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# Review: 'Action Chicks: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture'

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## ***Review of Action Chicks: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture* ed. Sherrie A. Inness**

By Ione Damasco

Inness, Sherrie A. Ed. *Action Chicks: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

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The recent emergence of the tough female heroine as a popular media icon is simultaneously celebrated and deconstructed in *Action Chicks: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture*, a thought-provoking collection of essays edited by Sherrie Inness of Miami University. Although the title implies an analysis of heroines depicted in traditional action/adventure genre outlets, such as Lara Croft in the *Tomb Raider* series of videogames and films, or Xena, the blade-wielding Amazonian warrior of television fame, the book explores the portrayals of "tough" women in other venues as well, such as the character Chynna, a female wrestler who was popular in the World Wrestling Federation for several years, and the character Carmela Soprano, a mafia wife prominently featured on the HBO series *The Sopranos*. Drawing upon feminist and queer theories of criticism, each author examines the ways in which the construction of particular heroines precariously walks the line between the subversion of dominant notions of gender, and the reinforcement of those very same heterosexual and patriarchal norms. As Inness asks in the introduction, "Do these characters afford a more powerful vision of womanhood than that afforded to women by media in the past? Or are they merely the newest trend in beautiful women fighting crime ... doing little to challenge or question gender stereotypes?" (14). Not surprising is the authors' assertion that stereotypes of gender and sexuality can ultimately undermine the potential of the action heroine to portray new models of autonomy for women. However, each chapter moves beyond this widely-held assertion to delve more deeply not only into the construction of these characters, but into the contexts in which they are placed, ultimately demonstrating the abilities of these characters to destabilize accepted notions of womanhood.

- 2 The first part of the book is devoted to analysing the changing images of action heroines in various media, such as television, video games, film, comics, even the toy market. The section opens with a chapter by Claudia Herbst that is devoted to the character Lara Croft, which crossed over from the world of video games to the world of film. Lara Croft, often held up as one of the first action heroines to promote a new image of woman as "kickass," is depicted by Herbst as a far more troubling product of the imaging technologies that have developed due to "war, the industries delivering the simulation of violence for the sake of entertainment, and reproductive technologies [that] are male-dominated" (23). Herbst clearly argues from the essentialist viewpoint, positing that Lara Croft, far from being an icon to be celebrated, represents the ultimate subjugation and transformation of the natural female body and its reproductive potential into the simulated, virtual female form as harbinger of destruction and violence. In sharp contrast is the subsequent chapter by Jeffrey Brown that examines the "Bad Girls" of action films and comic books, most notably the character Barb Wire, portrayed by the notoriously surgically-enhanced actress Pamela Anderson. Brown sees the over-the-top construction of the Bad Girl "(huge, gravity-defying breasts, mile-long legs, perpetually pouty lips, and perfectly coifed big hair)" as "an almost hysterical mask of femininity" (63). Ultimately Brown argues that the "overfetishization" (58) of Bad Girls, combined with their hypermasculine violent abilities, results in the almost playful destabilization of supposedly natural gender roles, since these icons simultaneously enact both idealized femininity and masculinity.
- 3 The next chapter, written by Inness, focuses on the fluctuating role of the female action figure in a largely male market. Inness does an excellent job of placing her analysis within appropriate historical and social contexts. The rise of second-wave feminism, the growth of women in the workplace, and the practice of basing toy development on popular television shows inform her discussion of the rise and fall (and potential rise again) of female action figures' availability. Not surprisingly, Inness points to the problems that toys can pose for the socialization of children and their introduction into the world of gendered expectations. As Inness states, "from early play, children learn that men and women have different duties in life. Barbie and her girlfriends are concerned about the next trip to the mall; G.I. Joe and his male teammates are concerned about how to prevent the next terrorist strike" (79). However, there is hope for children yet, as Inness explores the possibilities for play offered by ambiguously-gendered, racially diverse figures, such as the Power Rangers line of toys. Furthermore, Inness refuses to underestimate the power of children's imaginations to subvert expected gender roles and "play with toys in ways that manufacturers could never have imagined" (91). Despite these moments of optimism, the final conclusions of the chapter basically state that the limited presence of female action figures, which are usually constructed as white, heterosexually attractive, and feminine, demonstrates the toy industry's inability to evolve quickly enough to reflect the genuine and rapid changes of real women's roles in our society.
- 4 The last three chapters of the book's first section focus on the failure of the action heroine to transcend not just gender norms, but racial, sexual, and class norms as well. Charlene Tung's chapter on *La Femme Nikita* looks at the construction of "the acceptable fighting female" that "reinscribes notions of Western and white heteronormative superiority" (106). Drawing upon the historical constructions of black female bodies as aggressive and hypersexual and Asian female bodies as either lotus blossom or dragon lady (both overtly eroticized), Tung examines the marginalization of nonwhite female characters on *Nikita*, and its troubling reinforcements of these long-standing stereotypes. Unfortunately, Tung's contextualization of Asian female bodies within the martial arts film genre, although an interesting analysis, does not seem to apply to the depiction of Asian female characters on *La Femme Nikita*, which she acknowledges does not tend to rely on ethnic stereotypes. However, her analysis of the black female characters on the show corroborates her discussion of racialized stereotypes throughout history, since the few black women on the show are depicted explicitly as aggressive or violent, and implicitly as sexually deviant or queer. Furthermore, Tung convincingly posits that the show enforces a compulsory heterosexuality, by maintaining a traditional narrative that focuses upon a dominant male (the character Michael) and a subordinate female (Nikita), and their on-again, off-again romantic relationship which culminates in a symbolic wedding in the show's finale.
- 5 David Greven's chapter, which focuses upon the television adaptation of the comic book *Witchblade*, also covers a great deal of critical ground, juxtaposing the queer sensibilities of the first season with the compulsory heterosexuality of the second season. Greven addresses the problematic construction of the show's main character, police officer Sarah Pezzini, "a woman who defies masculinist power while wielding it" (123). Greven uses socio-historical representations of witches as the backdrop for his analysis of Pezzini's character, who wields a weapon known as the Witchblade, a mythic gauntlet that has been worn by a line of warrior women both historical and fictional. Greven poses some interesting questions regarding Pezzini's character, whom he initially posits is a "queer heroine" (126). Is the role of the tough woman ultimately to reinforce essentialist notions of male and female by shaming male characters who do not adequately demonstrate manhood? How can Pezzini function as a

queer heroine when the show's second season casts her as the scourge of queer, non-normative men and women? In the end, Greven argues that Pezzini does not represent a new liberatory image of a tough woman, one that "opposes ... the homophobic and misogynistic codes of patriarchy," but is rather "a female Terminator, designed to look and act like a patriarchy-defying heroine but programmed to destroy patriarchy's enemies, queer men and power-seeking women" (149).

- 6 The final chapter of this section, by Sara Crosby, underscores the capitulation of female action heroines to the patriarchal structures that surround them by pointing to the suicides of three major heroines of American television: Xena, the titular lead of *Xena: Warrior Princess*, Buffy, the main character of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and Max Guevara, the female lead of the short-lived show *Dark Angel*. Crosby takes a somewhat different approach from her colleagues in this chapter; rather than framing her analysis within typical cultural and literary critical techniques, Crosby takes a more political approach by looking at the concept of republicanism, which she states "links muscular self-assertion and individualism to heroism and political power" (154), and how heroic women fit into that framework. Crosby begins with a keen dissection of the character Max, who "scrapes by at the bottom of the social scale as a minimum-wage bike messenger" (157) situated in a community of racially and sexually diverse characters who are aligned in horizontal rather than vertical relationships, "poised to challenge class, racial, sexual, and gender hierarchies" (157). Unfortunately, Max quickly rejects this feminist-democratic model and becomes part of an elitist, patriarchal pseudo-community where her abilities as a genetically-engineered super-soldier are used as a means to renew and enforce patriarchal privilege. Although the shows *Xena* and *Buffy* in particular feature formations of feminist communities as seemingly viable democratic sociopolitical structures, Crosby deftly argues that the sacrificial demises of the lead heroines in each of these shows (as well as the dissolution of the communities that surround them) reinforce the privileged stance of republican individualism within a patriarchal society.
- 7 The second section of the book, entitled "New Images of Toughness," is decidedly more optimistic in tone. The section opens with Dawn Heinecken's take on the evolving role of the character Chynna, a female wrestler who rose to mainstream popularity in the World Wrestling Federation throughout the late 1990s, culminating in a feature pictorial in a 2000 issue of *Playboy* magazine. Chynna's cultural transformation from "monster" (186) to "sexual spectacle" (203) is facilitated by her physical transformation. As Heinecken states, Chynna's introduction into the WWF as an extremely muscular woman who is capable of violent and physical (albeit staged) interactions with male wrestlers initially earned her scorn and derision from both the fans and the ring announcers. Just as many feminist theorists have discussed the body as politicized space, Chynna's body becomes a contested space of transgression within the largely heteronormative, masculinist world of professional wrestling. However, her physical prowess has quickly helped her earn a certain level of respect within the wrestling world. Her frequent matches with other male wrestlers rather than with other female wrestlers has been proof of this respect, since the other females in the WWF, who generally sport smaller frames and breast implants, seem to function mainly as eye candy for the mostly male audience. Heinecken does temper her optimism with an acknowledgment of Chynna's own acquiescence to heteronormative standards of beauty; the woman behind the character, Joanie Laurer, has had plastic surgery to minimize her jaw line and to increase her breast size. Despite these seeming setbacks, Heinecken refuses to completely place Chynna in the expected role of passive object. According to Heinecken, Chynna "has authored a body that is to be *used*, a ... body designed for motion and function, not for static display" (203).
- 8 The progression from passive object to active subject is also addressed in Marilyn Yaquinto's analysis of film and television representations of women in gangster stories/narratives. The chapter opens with a look at images of the gangster's moll, a tough, violent woman who frequently uses her body as a means of getting what she wants through the avenue of sex. Although this early misogynistic depiction paints the moll as regressively opportunistic, Yaquinto argues that early gangster films "provide glimpses into transgressive fantasies and illuminate portraits of women who often appear daring and rebellious" (208). Yaquinto tracks the influence of the moll on more recent depictions of gangster women, namely Mob wives, mothers, and sisters. Traditionally depicted as the emotional, virtuous, and physically weak foils for the brash, promiscuous, and violent molls of gangster stories, female Mob family members, particularly Connie Corleone (*The Godfather, Part III*), Karen Hill (*GoodFellas*), and Carmela Soprano (*The Sopranos*), represent the conflation of the Madonna-whore binary, "helping to destabilize fixed notions of identity" (209). Yaquinto particularly focuses upon the dynamic female characters in the television show *The Sopranos*. These women do not just use sex to get their way; they are active participants (and often partners) in the criminal activities of the Mob. Furthermore, the women of *The Sopranos* serve as a deconstruction of the Mob mother, a stereotype that previously depicted female toughness as an acceptable trait only when the mother's child was threatened. The different female characters on the show exhibit toughness beyond the sphere of maternal self-sacrifice; acceptable toughness serves as a means of survival within the dangerous world of the Mob, as well

as a means of personal gain within their own family spaces. In a surprising switch of gender roles, Tony Soprano, the male lead of the show, is the character who frequently demonstrates emotional vulnerability, seeking out the counseling of a therapist who ultimately exerts power over him because of "her ability to control her emotions, to check her anger and fear—a quality Tony and his fellow male gangsters cannot grasp" (222). Yaquinto convincingly concludes the chapter with the assertion that the women of gangster film and television, despite the historically violent and misogynistic environment that surrounds them, represent a new, complex construction of a woman who is capable of destabilizing previously established gender binaries of femininity and masculinity in order to hold her own.

- 9 The next chapter in this section, by Sharon Ross, is a celebration of the female friendships and communities found in *Xena* and *Buffy*, a sharp counterpoint to Crosby's earlier assessment of these shows as a condemnation of feminist interdependence. Ross grounds her analysis in the feminist theory of epistemic negotiation, "a process of building knowledge in which individuals come together as a community to discuss what they each know and then debate how best to address the situation at hand" (232). Drawing heavily upon feminist scholar Lorraine Code's previous work on feminism and the production of knowledge, Ross attempts to demonstrate that productive knowledge is created only when women work interdependently within communal situations while recognizing each woman's individual experiences. Ross argues the evolving relationships between Xena and Gabrielle and between Buffy and Willow are testaments to the power and value of female bonding as a means to resist patriarchal pressures. By focusing on those episodes that feature some kind of emotional crisis for the main characters, Ross tries to assert that such shared experiences not only strengthen the friendships between these characters, but these experiences also make them better heroes. Furthermore, Ross states, the concept of toughness itself is transformed "from a state of loneliness and separatism to a mode of heroism that embraces empathy and community" (250). Although these are certainly positive notions put forth by Ross, her discussions of female bonding and women's ways of knowing come across as firmly essentialist, and warrant further questioning. Ross's arguments rest upon a shaky foundation of oppositional gender binaries, and when juxtaposed against Crosby's earlier assertions, ultimately fail to be convincing.
- 10 The final chapter by Renny Christopher examines what may be the most progressive television show featured in the entire book, a science fiction show produced by the SciFi Channel entitled *Farscape*. Set against the backdrop of outer space, *Farscape* pushes the viewer to question essentialist ideas about gender and sexuality by portraying a "queer" relationship between two major characters of the show: John Crichton, a male astronaut who accidentally ends up in a distant part of the galaxy, and Aeryn Sun, an alien female who has spent her life serving as a Peacekeeper, a soldier within a culture that does not practice gender differentiation. The subversiveness of the show is played out as the relationship between Crichton and Sun evolves from a purely sexual relationship to a serious emotional relationship. The alien culture that Sun comes from is described by Christopher as "a masculinist culture" in which women participate in "not only equal but undifferentiated terms ... not only is there gender equality between male and female Peacekeepers but there is no gender difference between them, although there is sexual difference and it is a heterosexual culture" (262). Christopher points to the gender performances of Sun and Crichton as further evidence of the show's queer subtext. Sun is clearly meant to portray a type of masculinity, one that is rooted in physical strength, stoicism, and sexual aggression, while Crichton is meant to portray a type of femininity, one tied to physical weakness, vulnerability, and emotionality. Conflict occurs when either character tries to impose their notions of acceptable behavior (Crichton's based in patriarchy; Sun's based in masculinism) upon one another. The show becomes truly and progressively queer when both characters learn to shed their gendered behaviors and create a new space for themselves that allows them to develop a deeply loving relationship. Christopher points out many more situations in the show that demonstrate complex gender dynamics between Sun and Crichton that force the viewer to question the heteronormative perspective. Ultimately, Christopher successfully argues that *Farscape*, and the larger world of science fiction, are valuable spaces of cultural examination not to be overlooked.
- 11 Although *Action Chicks* is not a perfect critique of media images, it is definitely a compelling and thought-provoking book. Like any collection of essays, the book is written unevenly and some essays are argued more convincingly than others. Some of the arguments put forth actually reinforce essentialist and heteronormative concepts of gender rather than deconstruct them. However, as a whole, the book succeeds in troubling the notions of gender performance, sexuality, and heroism. Written with the right mix of entertainment and scholarly analysis, this book is a must-read for anyone interested in pop culture, feminism, and media studies. A follow-up book is certainly warranted, especially since so many of the shows discussed in the book are now defunct and action heroines sadly seem to be (once again) in short supply. Are we currently experiencing a cultural backlash against the weekly presence of tough heroines on our televisions? What might be some of the causes behind the decline of

shows such as *Xena* and *Buffy* (and with them, declining visibility for the actresses who worked on those shows)? What new constructions of the action heroine have emerged from films such as *Ultraviolet*, *Aeon Flux*, and the *Underworld* film series? How does the new Sci-Fi Channel series *Battlestar Galactica* subconsciously reinforce, reinscribe, and redefine masculinity, femininity, and heteronormativity as it consciously explores what it means to be human? These are just some of the questions that could be explored in a much-needed sequel to this worthwhile text.

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