

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

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1 This collection of essays is a testimony of a relevantly recent efflorescence of tough women in mass media. As Sherrie A. Inness, its editor, states in the introductory chapter, the book is a natural continuation of numerous studies about the impact of tough women on popular culture, such as her own publication *Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture* (1999), her edited anthology *Delinquents and Debutantes: Twentieth-Century American Girls' Cultures* (1998), or Martha McCaughey and Neal King's compilation, *Reel Knockouts: Violent Women in the Movies* (2001). Whereas these collections focus on the earlier hard-boiled protagonists from the 1980s and 1990s—including Sarah Connor of "Terminator", Ripley of "Alien" or Thelma and Louise—Inness's most recent book analyzes images of tough heroines from the last decade, exploring the cultural role these strong women really play in contemporary society. As the essays delineated in continuation corroborate, tough women are still designed to appeal to a primarily male audience, since they are expected to be womanly, physically attractive and heterosexually appealing. On the other hand, their sex appeal is not reminiscent of traditional passivity, as these heroines challenge the patriarchal social structure by defending other women and fighting the men who threaten them. These female protagonists exhibit aggressive behavior, quick wit, and intellectual skills, an array of attributes allotted traditionally to men. They become popular heroines and as such, they shake up women's role in American pop culture.

2 Following Inness's introduction, the anthology is divided into two sections. One, entitled "Changing Images of the Female Action Hero" demonstrates how women have come to the forefront as new role models who often substitute traditional male heroes. Its first essay, written by Claudia Herbst focuses on Lara Croft, the lead character of a 1996 computer game "Tomb Raider," who combines erotic allure with unprecedented violence. The author warns that although Lara Croft grew to represent a virtual sex symbol of the digital age, she is far from providing a positive gender model for girls. A desperate gladiator whose sole function in the game is to kill and avoid being exterminated herself, the heroine embodies fascist ideas of obedience and hardness, triggered by computer science and military practices. As such, Herbst argues convincingly, she cannot and does not provide a powerful gender role where women could see their own interests reflected in her adventures.

3 The second essay by Jeffrey A. Brown deftly builds a conciliatory interpretation of

sexy female fighters who combine what has been traditionally viewed as masculine and feminine characteristics and, by doing so, destabilize the concept of gender traits. For Brown, recent heroines such as Pamela Anderson's curvy Barb Wire straddle both sides of the gender divide, being simultaneously a sex symbol and an aggressor, an object to be looked at and a gazing subject. Their playful manipulation of virile brutality and feminine sultriness corroborates that both genders are conventional and that these very conventions do not have to symbolize sexual difference. The third essay written by Inness is based on a survey of American toy stores in search of female action figures who serve as gender role models for little girls. Based on her findings, Inness confirms that female action figures remain only helpmates to more important toy action heroes. Thus, regardless of changing attitudes towards both genders, the lingua franca of mass media and mass production perpetuates traditional stereotypes of child-bearing females and combative males. Even in those rare positive cases where gender and race are equally distributed (such as, for instance, Mighty Morphin Power Rangers), female dolls are stereotyped into pastel-colored uniforms, which allude to girls' softer nature. The most problematic finding is perhaps the fact that female action figures hardly ever make it to the actual stores because, fearing small demand and subsequent loss of profit, stores order almost exclusively male action figures.

4 The section's fourth essay by Charlene Tung takes a closer look at the television series "La Femme Nikita", arguing that its heroine endorses neocolonial empowerment. The show demonstrates that an acceptable fighting female must fit into pre-existing tropes, reinscribing notions of Western and white heteronormative superiority, and relegating African American and Asian women to stereotypically oversexualized, criminal and/or exotic roles. Tung seems to be torn between condoning and condemning the series as she concludes that despite its reinforcement of Western imperialist discourses, its focus on female courage is largely redeeming. David Greven, the author of the following article on another popular television series "Witchblade" is reminiscent in his message of Herbst's attitude towards Lara Croft in that he cautions about the show's impasse between radical and reactionary forces. Witchblade's lead character, Sarah Pezzini, a 'metahuman' witch with extraordinary powers, seeks to defy patriarchy yet, in the end, destroys its enemies: queer men and power-seeking women. Analyzing closely two seasons of the series, Greven discovers that the second part distances itself from the first season's homoerotic tableaux, removing previous queer themes and eventually locking the heroine into a conventional gendered and sexual place.

5 The section's final essay by Sara Crosby is perhaps the most pessimistic one, as it points to a startling phenomenon in the present-day television series where in the mere summer of 2001, three highly popular female lead characters perished, in "Dark Angel," "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" and "Xena: Warrior Princess." Reading these deaths as patriarchy's solution to eliminate any threat to gendered hierarchy, Crosby examines recurring dilemmas which the female fighters must confront before their deaths. Unlike their male counterparts, these women regard their toughness a sin, ultimately rejecting their heroism as transgressive and detrimental to their (patriarchal) community. Plagued by guilt, denial, and final community choice, they become sacrificial heroines, transforming the feminist shows into patriarchal affirmations. Of course, such fictional characters can be resurrected on demand, and Crosby sees this possibility as the choice between perpetuation of female monstrosity (encoded in woman's physical aggression) and a productive critique of an idolized national identity, provided the tough female's death is recognized as unnecessary and morally bankrupt.

6 The collection's shorter second part consisting of four essays examines the media's traditional constructions of female heroism, simultaneously offering different forms that such toughness could adopt. These standard characteristics include muscularity and aggression (which, nevertheless, cannot be as prominent as they are in male fighters), childlessness and the absolute autonomy of a loner. Dawn Heineken's essay about World Wrestling Federation superstar Chyna examines the hidden high costs of the fighter's move from the fringes to mainstream culture. The author convincingly argues that the wrestler's popularity is owed more to her steady process of physical normalization than to her transgressive qualities of an outrageous and unruly rebel she exemplified initially. Extensive plastic surgery, including breast implants and facial reconstruction, as well as glamorous makeup and sexy animal-patterned clothes, converted the shocking 'other' who did not fit into any culturally recognized mold to an objectified tough female. Arguably though, despite all these normative practices, Chyna still retains unaccustomed female musculature and the visceral power to disturb hegemonic gender norms.

7 Marilyn Yaquinto's exquisitely written article goes into the murky waters of the gangster world -both in the movies and in the recent television hit *Sopranos*-, in order to track the rise and fall of mobsters' molls and their surprising legacy for the present-day gangsters' wives and sisters. While the early days of the cinema portrayed molls as tough chicks who moved with confidence in a flagrantly misogynistic universe of crime, the conservative mood of the 1980s and 1990s has devaluated their cockiness, converting them to hysterical and

often disloyal sexual partners. In the process, however, their toughness and aggression have moved on to the gangsters' households, giving previously silenced female family members an opportunity to demonstrate their feminist assertiveness, their intelligence and guts. Presently, mob women still nurture their family members but they also protect their turf and contribute to the game, rewriting the rules behind power plays in the gangster underworld. Unlike old-fashioned molls, they come in a wholesome suburban package, yet their strong character and ruthlessness make them equal partners in crime with their husbands.

8 Sharon Ross's article returns to Xena and Buffy, in order to demonstrate that new visions of heroism inflect the concept of toughness with the notion of flexibility, also leaving behind the less practical individualism in favor of women's reliance on their female friends. Rejecting isolationism and emotional withdrawal characteristic of heroic loners, Xena and Buffy are able to resist patriarchal intentions to divide and conquer them. Instead, these hard-boiled fighters build their real strength by consciously seeking harmony through communication and interdependency. Renny Christopher's essay, which closes the second section of the book, takes the issue of female toughness to outer space, where women's empowerment and the shift in gender roles can be reimaged with a greater ease. Aeryn Sun, the female protagonist of the science fiction show "Farscape" comes from a planet where men and women are equally aggressive interplanetary space police. She establishes a romantic relationship with a human astronaut who exhibits many traditionally female qualities yet does not lose any allure this way. Since the show treats the reversion of the couple's gender roles with utter naturalness, it allows for the evaluation of generations-old stereotypes. It paves the way for the imagery of autonomous and fearless female heroes and more intuitive men who do not need to flaunt aggressiveness to assert their position.

9 Overall, the collection most certainly does what it sets out to accomplish. It focuses on a broad array of recent action heroines from computer games, science fiction series and films to real life female fighters of the World Wrestling Federation. It probes how contemporary popular culture presents powerful females and how this imagery has changed in the last decade, if at all. The essays-albeit of somewhat uneven quality where some are far more engaging than others-highlight the contradictions and impasses of a female-identified notion of heroism where women have indeed advanced in their autonomy, but only as far as men (or mass media) have let them go. They evince that the new female heroes are tougher and more muscular, yet they are still attuned to their "feminine" side. They fight and risk life and limb, yet also protect the weaker and maintain their friendships with other women. Athletic and physically attractive, they become nearly equal partners to their male counterparts. Sadly

though, they still have to ascribe to conventional feminine tropes of being sexy and somewhat weaker than men if they want to enjoy the limelight a while longer. This pessimistic underlying message aside, the anthology is insightful, provocative and certainly fun to read. It is an important contribution to the field of cultural studies and would make an excellent teaching tool in courses on Popular Culture or Women and Gender Studies.