
The Warrior Women of Television: A Feminist Cultural Analysis of the New Female Body in Popular Media by Dawn Heinecken explores the recent trend in television that places female action heroes at the centre of popular television series. Heinecken takes the action hero archetype as a starting point and applies it to examinations of television heroines, using the title characters of La Femme Nikita, Aeon Flux, and Buffy the Vampire Slayer to demonstrate how television’s current female action heroes are constructed in relation to the tradition of the male action hero.

Heinecken, who has a background in American culture and popular media studies, argues that the recent increase in female action heroes on television reflects changes in society’s attitudes and beliefs. Specifically, Warrior Women of Television studies “the current representation of female action heroes on television to see what they have to say about female bodies, and by extension, female power” (p. 5). Throughout the text, Heinecken argues that the construction and representation of women’s bodies as evidenced in television’s female action heroes reveal a lot about what our society believes and thinks about women and women’s power. The purpose of the book, most generally, is to look at and begin to understand the female action hero as a cultural symbol that is gaining popularity and influence. Heinecken addresses this cultural symbol and sets out to examine how it reflects cultural attitudes and beliefs, including the incorporation (or co-optation) of feminist values.

Warrior Women of Television is part of the Intersections in Communications and Culture Series and, as this and the book’s title suggest, it is aimed at academics and others interested in cultural and media studies. Consequently, Heinecken dedicates a substantial portion of the book to contextualising her work within the traditions of feminist media and cultural studies. Although the book is often heavy on academic theory and references to scholarly work, the subject matter of television’s female heroes suggests the possibility of reaching popular audiences. This is facilitated by Heinecken’s references to popular reading material, such as Salon.com and Time Magazine, as well as her use of stills from the television series she discusses; however, the formal tone and format of the book, including its unremarkable cover, are unlikely to draw everyday television fans.

Heinecken begins the book by establishing a context for her argument and providing a detailed background about feminist media studies and studies of the body. She also establishes quite thoroughly the archetypes of both male and female action heroes. Following these initial chapters are three chapters of analysis, each presenting and discussing a different female action hero. These chapters are very focused and each one draws out different elements particular to the series and female hero in question in order to demonstrate the various ways in which cultural beliefs and attitudes are reflected in television’s female action heroes.

The book’s opening chapters succinctly and clearly set out the theories and traditions which form the basis for later discussion of the three case studies. Heinecken does an excellent job outlining feminist media theory, managing to capture the fundamental elements without boring the reader. She successfully presents the challenges in choosing television as a media of inquiry and discusses the “complementary approaches” of audience studies and textual studies as traditions in this field (p. 20). Textual analysis, however, becomes the focus and Heinecken argues that “since texts are not open to every interpretation, textual studies are necessary in order to shift between an understanding of the text and the audience in order to gain an understanding of what possible meanings the texts are capable of forming for different audiences” (p. 20). While this is undoubtedly true, the textually-
focused case studies presented later in the book leave the reader wondering where that complementary look at the audience is.

Heinecken uses a separate chapter to describe and examine each case study, building on the context she has set out. For the most part, she manages to communicate to the reader how the female heroes she is discussing have been constructed and contextualised within each television series by using very specific examples to demonstrate important points. Each case study is centred around a different theme which helps to focus the examination of each female action hero and demonstrate the complex ways in which female action heroes are constructed and how they reflect social values.

The case study of *Aeon Flux* is the weakest of the three analyses with Heinecken's arguments much more difficult to follow in this chapter. This has nothing at all to do with the author's arguments or reasoning, but everything to do with the nature of the series and hero she is discussing. The *La Femme Nikita* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* series are modeled after traditional television genres such as romance and horror and use conventions familiar to most television viewers. For this reason, Heinecken's descriptions of scenes from these series can be understood even by those who are unfamiliar with the television series she is discussing—television viewers will be able to extrapolate from their other experiences. With *Aeon Flux*, however, the conventions are not as traditional and Heinecken's attempts to describe the "weird, animated imagery" are not entirely clear for those unfamiliar with the series. Lengthy descriptions of disjointed imagery are sometimes challenging to read and, at times, the message is lost in the details.

Despite the difficulty of examining and describing the *Aeon Flux* case study, Heinecken's choice of female heroes to explore is effective. Each of the three television series she examines is fundamentally different and presents its hero in a specific way (not to mention that each series has been very popular with audiences). These differences allow Heinecken to not only demonstrate the variety of female action heroes on television, but to also discuss a different element of feminist cultural studies as a central point of each case study. So while the *La Femme Nikita* case study focuses on the action hero's relationships and emotions as presented in the series, the *Aeon Flux* case study brings the grotesque and chaotic presentation of the female hero's body to the forefront.

After discussing the three case studies and presenting a number of arguments regarding the means by which each female action hero's conceptualization within a television series reflects various perspectives on women's bodies and power, Heinecken concludes her book with a chapter combining the points made in the case studies. This chapter brings the book back to its beginnings and revisits the initial idea of the male hero archetype while focusing on postmodernism to "offer suggestions as to why the new model of hero is female" (p. 134). Heinecken sees the female action hero as a reflection of various aspects of postmodern society and argues that "women suggest a different response to the demands of society than previous father-figure heroes" (p. 136). She also points to the fact that these television series endorse traditionally feminine attributes such as emotions and relationships, but finds this "relatively revolutionary when viewed against the context of a culture, not to mention a genre, which has tended to repress the feminine" (p. 140). Heinecken makes the argument that these new female action heroes and series focus on elements of feminine culture often ignored or devalued in action-oriented television series provide new possibilities for conceptualising female identity and power.

*Warrior Women of Television* is one of a few books to offer an in-depth analysis of the recent trend in female action heroes on television. While a number of popular texts have been written about the female action heroes discussed by Heinecken (among many others), Heinecken's book is refreshing in that it provides a critical and feminist look at how the construction of these characters mediates changes in cultural beliefs and attitudes. Not only is Heinecken analysing what is on the screen and in the promotional material for these tele-
vision shows, she is also asking “What does the current proliferation of female action heroes in television really tell us about contemporary attitudes towards the female hero, the female body, and female power?” (p. 2).

Heinecken’s argument is relatively complete given the scope of her analysis, but it could have been strengthened by more attention to the extratextual materials associated with the series and further acknowledgment of the audience as an important factor in media analysis. Heinecken does occasionally address the extratextual elements of each television series (such as press articles and advertising materials); however, little time is spent discussing or analysing these materials or exploring audience reactions to both the series and the extratextual materials. Much of the cultural significance of television series can be seen in audience reaction and extratextual materials, and the mediation of cultural beliefs and attitudes that she is arguing exists would be evident in these places if the female action heroes of these series are becoming important cultural symbols of our time. So while Heinecken has presented a wonderfully thorough textual analysis of three important television series built around female action heroes, her examination seems very small in relation to the enormity of these series’ impacts on popular culture today.

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