Killing Women: The Visual Culture of Gender and Violence. 

Along with an introduction, Annette Burfoot and Susan Lord’s anthology consists of 15 chapters organized into three sections. Originating from discussions on an email listserv and two focus panels convened at the 2002 Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences, this wide and eclectic collection includes some fascinating, novel, and insightful chapters. The central connecting thread is the visual and culturally mediated relationship between women who kill and women who are killed. The first section, appropriately titled “History, Memory and Mediations of Murder,” features historical and contemporary crimes committed by women. Ranging from the representation of the 10th anniversary of the Montréal Massacre to women on death row in the United States to representations of Karla Homolka and the absence of feminist criticism in that case’s coverage, the section attempts to interrogate a number of critical issues.

The second section, “Techniques and Technologies of Representing Violence,” tackles issues of representation and form in different media formats, varying from televirtuality film to photographic exhibitions and the artworks of Abigail Lane and Jenny Holzer. The last section, “National Trouble: Gendered Violence,” again covers a vast terrain, including representations in different national cinemas such as popular Indian, Italian, and American cinemas; kung fu and wuxia pian films; and horror, documentary, and experimental genres. Here the focus is not primarily on the genres themselves and their representational economy of female subjects/objects, but rather the discourse of nationalism and how it intersects with and textures these representations.

In their pithy introduction, the editors confess that their approach to the existing collection does not include social scientific studies or the more well-known research on representations of violence and femininity in popular media. Nevertheless, the questions that frame their collection resonate with some of the recent work that has been advanced along social scientific lines, albeit using more qualitative, methodological orientations. Yet this does not detract from the collection; rather, we are presented with recent and contemporary innovative analyses of how representations engender violence. The collection inspires one to draw out the commonalities between representations in the various media discussed. Thus, the beginning chapters of the the antholog force us to confront the similarities and differences in the cases of the missing women in Ciudad Juarez and Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. Against the contextual backdrop of the first chapter, which focuses on an historiographical analysis of women accused of and incarcerated for killing their husbands and/or children, the “missing” women’s cases appear as one more turn—albeit differently mediated—of patriarchal power as it manifests itself in the discursive and material violence against women.

The uniqueness of Killing Women: The Visual Culture of Gender and Violence lies in the kinds of approaches deployed and the questions that the different chapters seek to answer. Not only is there a systematic attempt to deal
with discursive violence, but there is also a sustained effort to examine the different ways such violence is gendered, occluded, erased, or displaced from view. Thus, from a critical analysis of eighteenth-century anatomical models of women’s bodies to an examination of the “forensic aesthetic” in feminist artworks, the chapters underscore this tie between representational and corporeal dimensions, making explicit the relationship between discursive and structural forms of violence.

The focus on “abject victims” is similarly balanced by an examination of the women who kill; in other words, women as perpetrators of violence. Here, the arguments are nuanced in the sense of accounting for the heinous crimes that have been committed by women while simultaneously seeking to locate women perpetrators within a theoretical and material context. Hence, “feminist counter-violence” as a response to the persistent violence that textures daily life is one possible explanatory framework advanced. The other, as suggested in the analysis of Karla Homolka by legal theorist Belinda Morrissey, draws attention to female sadomasochism. “Agency” is complicated in these encounters, wrought as much by material culture as by individual actions.

Although all of the chapters in this anthology are highly relevant in the current context of violence against women and the media’s obsessive fascination with women and girls who kill, it is the wide and divergent array of media formats and representational economies explored that enhances the value of this collection. This is particularly true of the last section, where the contributions interweave discourses of nationhood with female representations in different cinematic genres. Virdi’s analysis of the emergence of avenging female bodies in popular Indian cinema is especially revealing, insofar as it connects these representations to the Indian women’s movement and its struggles at the time. Similarly, Naaman’s analysis of Palestinian “angels of death” and their representation in films dealing with national liberation struggles in the Middle East makes this connection between nation and gender even more tangible, highlighting the ways in which women’s bodies are discursive and material battlegrounds. On a lighter yet just as relevant note, Young’s analysis of “lighter than air” martial artists in films such as Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon emphasizes the ways in which female agency and defiance of tradition are both permitted and contained by neoconservative ideologies. As the editors summarize it, this collection demonstrates how “the globalization of media culture and the geo-politics of gendered violence find in the image of the female body a familiar and horrible home”—a home which, as they emphasize, we all share.

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