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Postfeminist Villainess: Patriarchal Fantasy or a Symbol of Resistance?

Maury, Cristelle, and David Roche. *Women Who Kill: Gender and Sexuality in Film and Series of the Post-Feminist Era*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. pp.368.

In recent years, popular culture has witnessed the proliferation of violent female characters, while female criminality has also received increasing attention from many critics and academics. These women remain a fascination for both mainstream culture and researchers as their acts go against cultural conceptions and are even viewed as antithetical to femininity. And while the increasing presence of female violence in media and popular culture may be symptomatic of present-day society's concerns about gender behavior, the portrayal of violent women still seems to be following genre conventions and familiar stereotypes that inevitably frame, and thus normalize, their acts within boundaries of traditional discourses on femininity. In that regard, *Women Who Kill: Gender and Sexuality in Film and Series of the Post-Feminist Era* presents itself as a particularly timely book that investigates the representation of women who kill in a so-called postfeminist context recognized principally by a tension between various feminist discourses. However, there is yet little agreement on what would be the central agenda and meaning of postfeminism. As a term that originates from within the popular culture and thus carries a certain market value, postfeminism is by some critics viewed as a backlash against second-wave feminism, while others see it as an evolution of feminist thought. Most of the controversy and difficulty in defining postfeminism can be linked to its entanglement with the contradictions of postmodernity and to what is perceived as its simultaneous articulation and repudiation of feminist ideas.

However, the aim of this book, as stated by editors, was not simply to identify certain elements of postfeminist thought in a cultural product but rather to examine to what extent are contemporary villainesses engaged with ever-present postfeminist discourse and are they simply to be perceived as patriarchal victims or have they evolved to represent figures of empowerment. Structured around generic archetypes present in contemporary fiction, film, and television, the book is divided into three sections: Neo-Femmes Fatales, Action Babes, and Monstrous Women. And though each chapter takes one generic figure of a violent woman as a point of reference, analyses presented in this collection cross genre boundaries and even media, allowing for readers to consult published essays separately and/or as a part of the unity in an attempt to get a more holistic view on the politics of representation in a postfeminist context.

In the first section of the book, the authors attempt to situate the stock figure of femme fatale within a postfeminist discourse, and, though differing in their interpretations, they all recognize the inextricable link between characters' female agency and what Rosalind Gill called sexual "subjectification" – "an allegedly freely chosen decision to represent themselves as objects of the male gaze" (19). In her chapter on the femmes fatales of 1990s neo-noir, Delphine Letort reads well-known erotic thrillers such as *Basic Instinct* (Verhoeven, 1992), *The Last Seduction* (Dahl, 1994), *Bound* (The Wachowskis, 1996), and *Body of Evidence* (Edel, 1993) as texts that promote neoliberal values specifically by emphasizing the female characters' sexual commodification. While the subversive potential of the classic noir femme fatale was evident in her refusal of patriarchal constraints of motherhood and domesticity, the neo-noir femme fatale uses her body as a sole weapon to achieve her liberation and empowerment while the act of murder in the narrative appears as a mere consequence. In a somewhat similar manner, Cristelle Maury emphasizes the evolution and transformation of the femme fatale and contends that the female protagonist of Fincher's *Gone Girl* (2014) embodies a whole set of incompatible feminist and anti-feminist ideas, which she reads as indicative of contradictions inherent in postfeminism. A central plank of Maury's argument is that Amy's paradoxical characterization is above all a political comment on the present feminist debates, while her de-eroticization serves to distance her from feminist theories altogether. Shifting smoothly from a seductive femme fatale to a housewife turned sexy feminist, to eventually a psychotic murderer, the character of Amy Dunne moves beyond those contradictions and

becomes what Maury defines as an “ironic product of postfeminism” (110). In the same section of the book, Emilie Herbert and Isabelle Schmitt-Pitiot take on a different approach with the attempt to re-vision the figure of femme fatale through an intersectional lens. Herbert investigates the new African femme fatale in the short film *White Men Are Cracking Up* (Onwurah, 1994) and opts for the term of “post-womanism” to captivate the racial dimension of the female subject and to acknowledge the invisibility of black women in contemporary postfeminist white discourse. On the other hand, Schmitt-Pitiot offers another point of view by contextualizing a transwoman contract killer within the narrative of “postfeminist sensibility,” characterized predominantly by the sexualization of the woman’s body, individualism, and consumerism. Both of the authors recognize and underline the necessity of thinking intersectionally and taking multiple social exclusions into account when approaching a postfeminist subject.

The second part of the book assesses the influence of postfeminist thought on the representation of some of the mainstream action heroines. While murderous women have so far been studied specifically in film noir, melodrama, and horror genre, the action heroines seem to have received less critical attention from feminist and gender scholars. The perspective offered by the authors in this section emphasizes the generational gap between feminist ideas evident in the representation of contemporary action heroines. Contrasting representations and readings of action heroines in the *Terminator* franchise, Marianne Kac-Vergne contends that the latest productions of the franchise attempt to demonstrate a break from the earlier feminist generation by sidelining older female characters and celebrating girl power principally shown in the young heroine’s rebelliousness. Kac-Vergne goes on and argues that despite the impression that *Terminator* women are strong and in control, the portrayal of Sarah Connor and *Terminatrix* in the latest productions adheres to the patriarchal structures by disregarding female solidarity and thus representing women who kill as a “lone phenomena lacking greater political agency and wider support” (130). The generational gap between feminist strands is also a central topic of Adrienne Boutang’s essay “Girls against Women: Contrasting Female Violence in Contemporary Young Adult Dystopias.” Boutang reads some of the most popular young adult dystopias often praised as feminist such as *The Hunger Games* (Ross, 2012; Lawrence, 2013; Lawrence, 2014 – 2015), *Divergent* (Burger, 2014), *The 5th Wave* (Blakeson, 2016) by focusing her analysis not only on

teenage heroines and their empowerment but also on the portrayal of older female characters and the intergenerational relationship. In that competitive intergenerational relationship, the caricature of a wicked, old, and masculinized woman seems to be representative of “outdated” second-wave feminism while the innocent, quite feminine, and emotional girl illustrates ambivalences inherent in the contemporary postfeminist culture. While it may seem, in some segments, as though the ideas presented in this section of the book are repetitive and somewhat redundant, the last two chapters provide a particularly fresh insight into the subject by adopting a reception studies approach. Acknowledging the importance of the dialogue between audience and film, Connor Winterton analyzes how viewers react to controversial female killers in Tarantino’s *Kill Bill* (2003-2004) and *Death Proof* (2007) and to what extent does their opinion agree with the critical academic discourse that examines the mentioned texts. Surveying online forums and fan sites dedicated to Tarantino’s films, Winterton finds that most spectators do not recognize the metadiscourses of the texts; however, most of their readings can be viewed as inherently postfeminist since they do not view sexual objectification as limiting to their empowerment. The ambivalent representation, as well as reception of Tarantino’s violent women, can be read, according to Winterton, as illustrative of the contemporary political context and multiple tensions between feminism and postfeminism. Finally, the last section of the book attempts to investigate and re-position the abject figure of monstrous-feminine, taking into account present-day feminist preoccupations. All chapters in this section draw attention to postfeminist implications behind representations of the contemporary monstrous-women while also investigating the nature of the threat that they continue to pose to patriarchal structures. Drawing heavily on the work of Carol Clover, Barbara Creed, and Linda Williams, most of the presented chapters demonstrate the transformation of key mythical figures by exposing the current debates and ideological implications of the analyzed films and series. For instance, Julia Echeverría adopts Creed’s term of *femme castratrice* and goes on to read so far the underexplored character of the female Patient Zero in a specific genre, often called virus narratives. Focusing particularly on a critically acclaimed film *Contagion* (Soderbergh, 2011), Echeverría shows how the representation of the female Patient Zero is “in tune with neo-liberal discourses of individualism, empowerment and an ethos of success” while ultimately she, as a female Other, is punished for her transgressions (219). Another critique of neoliberal discourses

present in popular postfeminist narratives is put forward by Rosie White in her analysis of the British documentary *Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer* (2003). Following Berlant's theory on "cruel optimism," White analyzes the case of a serial killer, Aileen Wuornos, as a part of postfeminist media representations promoting narratives of the pursuit of perfection. Such analysis frames Wuornos' story as an "example of the toxicity of such neoliberal optimism" where, ultimately, the non-conforming subject suffers (fatal) consequences (313). White's somewhat provocative reading is grounded in the comparison between different documentary and fictional narratives of Wuornos's life, which all, to a certain extent, attempt to find a rationale for her murderous acts. In a rather convincing manner, the author concludes that Wuornos, as a working-class woman, a lesbian, and a former sex worker, disturbs the postfeminist fantasies and, at the same time, highlights the power that cruel optimism of the American Dream holds over society's Others.

In reading and evaluating contributions to this collection, one becomes sadly aware of the link between neoliberal accounts and current feminist assumptions that shape our contemporary climate and also how false it would be to believe that we live in a postfeminist and post-racial society. As a part of Bloomsbury's Gender and Popular Culture Library Series, this book reflects on the representation and consumption of mainstream cultural products interrogating the political potential of women who kill and their relationship with different strands of feminism. Regardless of whether we interpret violent women as victims of patriarchy or symbols of resistance, all authors point out that the potential and signification of the figure of a violent woman lies in her reveling the nexus of conflicting ideas about femininity, power, and sexuality. Although at times it seems that ideas and approaches favored by some authors are overlapping, particularly in the section on action heroines, the overall analysis is rather complementary and well-structured. The collected volume presents a refreshing perspective and a necessary intervention in studying postfeminist representations and will most likely generate further discussions on the topic. That being said, the analysis would benefit from a more in-depth analysis of the political, social, and economic conditions influencing the current feminist debates. Nevertheless, the book will considerably enrich the learning of students, scholars, and all those interested in issues surrounding feminist perspectives, as well as the development of gender identities and popular culture.



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