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Amanda D. Lotz: Redesigning Women: Television after the Network Era

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Hörfunk und Fernsehen

Amanda D. Lotz: Redesigning Women: Television after the Network Era

Chicago: University of Illinois Press 2006 (Feminist Studies and Media Culture), 224 S., ISBN 978-0-252-07310-6, \$ 25.-

It shouldn't have been any great surprise for me, but according to Amanda D. Lotz in *Redesigning Women: Television after the Network Era*, until the mid-1990s there were only a handful of female-centered dramatic television series. Depending on your age, I'm sure you could come up with *The Avengers* (1966-69), *The Bionic Woman* (1976-78) and *Cagney and Lacy* (1982-88), and comedies such as *I love Lucy* (1951-1960) or *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-77) are classics. However, shows with a central female protagonist or a female assemble cast were very rare indeed. Yet, if I were to ask you about recent programming, you could easily name *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), *Sex in the City* (1998-2004), *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995-2001) and *Desperate Housewives* (2004-). Lotz says "in terms of dramatic structure and setting, these shows are unprecedented in their plurality and diversity" (p.6). The book analyses this phenomenon, questions the significance of the change in programming for women and the way in which the television programmers think, and whether overall this is a progressive feminist gain for women. Lotz theorizes from a Cultural Studies perspective with its emphasis on how texts and audiences interact to create meaning(s) rather than from a mass communications tradition with its emphasis on the effect of the text on the audience.

According to Lotz, much of the increase in addressing female viewers has resulted from changes in the television industry in the United States and adjustments in the strategies the networks and advertisers use to pursue this audience. Since the 1970s and the emergence of the "working woman" or the "new women", female citizens have been known to have more disposable income and more control over the family budget than previously thought. Advertisers were led to target upscale viewers at first with the creation of hybrid prime-time series such as *Cagney and Lacy* and *St.Elsewhere* (1982-88) which were designed to attract upscale male and female audiences. As cable continued to expand, advertisers recognised that although it attracted smaller audiences, it often provided narrowly targeted audiences such as women and children. Phenomenally successful series such as *Sex and the City* (HBO) and *Ally McBeal* (Fox) were introduced on cable. With this revelation came the additional realization that women consist of distinct subgroups. Technological and institutional adjustments enabled a change in competitive strategy from broadcasting to narrowcasting.

For Lotz, a significant step was taken in the late 1990s when the Lifetime, Oxygen and The Women's Entertainment cable networks were created. Lifetime, which is about "inspiration, honesty and relevance" (p.53), produces its own series, movies, and non-narrative shows with the incorporation of political causes (breast cancer, domestic violence). Oxygen, which is "optimistic, funny, bold, irreverent, curious" (p.56), was created as a reaction to Lifetime, offered non-narrative programs to inform women about handling money and providing tools for balancing work and family. The Woman's Entertainment Network stayed relatively true to its previous incarnation, Romance Classics, by offering "traditional femininity for the younger a woman" (p.59), that is programming around dating, family, romance and fashion. Each of these networks airs series and films which address female audiences in distinctive ways. The range of programming offered creates an atmosphere in which women can seek fulfilment of discrepant entertainment needs. The success of original dramatic series influenced thinking about female character stories throughout the television industry. This new attitude recognized that "not only are women different from one another, but individual women have different needs and interests at different times" (p.62).

The bulk of *Redesigning Women* is concerned with analysing the various dramatic series shown between 1995-2005. Traditional situation comedies and made-for-television films are excluded on the grounds that they have different narrative features from the form that appears in this era in such an unprecedented multiplicity. Lotz divides these shows into three main categories: Action Drama (*Buffy*, *Xena*), Comedic Drama (*Ally McBeal*, *Sex in the City*) and Protagonist-Centered Family Drama (*Providence*, 1999-2002; *Any Day Now*, 1998-2002). The final chapter looks at the reformulation of workplace and/or mixed-sex ensemble drama (*Strong Medicine* 2000-6, *The Division* 2001-4). Generally, Lotz is very good at teasing out the different narrative strategies of these shows and explaining the differences between them and their predecessors. For example, the Bionic Man was turned into the Bionic Woman by changing the sex of the hero without any substantive adjustment to the character. A truly innovative series must surpass the gender-reversal device to draw complex female characters and tell stories about distinctly female experiences, which is exactly what occurred in the late 1990s.

The Action Drama balances character-driven stories and spectacular battle sequences. Many of these series increased their seriality from season to season which allows greater narrative depth. Ultimately, *Xena: Warrior Princess* explores the relationship between Xena and Gabriella in Xena's quest to atone for her crimes as a warlord. Many of these series have an ensemble cast (*Charmed*, 1998-) which allows different female viewpoints to be offered, and even in series with a single protagonist (*Buffy*) she is allowed the support of a 'community'. Lotz notes that these series often feature a male guide who counsels the heroine with regards to her powers and duties. Emotional bonds do form but they don't undermine the heroine's ability or independence. (Males who exhibit hegemonic masculinity are

most often villains.) Stories about loyalty become the primary narratives. Buffy and Xena are forced to prioritise between their desires and those of their friends. This resonates with many women who must balance the demands of their family and career.

Series in the 1990s eased the construction of the working woman as tough and assimilated into male corporate culture. In Comedic-Drama characters already have work but are not always shown at work although a community of workers or friends replace the family. The emphasis on characterization allows the telling of compelling stories. The blending of comedy and drama is crucial to these developing stories as traditional comedies and dramas commonly emphasize plot over characterization. This allows distinctly drawn characters to explore the dilemmas single women face, most noticeably in *Sex and the City*. Discourses of choosing between home and career seem to repeat 1980s containment strategies, yet the alteration of the contexts offer substantially different meanings making it difficult to assess whether these series are progressive.

Reconfigured family dramas, for example *Any Day Now*, *Judging Amy* (1999-2005) and *Providence* focused on a central female protagonist such as a female doctor or judge. In all three series the protagonist is forced to return to the family home. This allows the telling of certain stories: balancing career and family, the frustrations with inadequate social institutions like the legal system, but which could be interpreted as retrogressive for the modern woman. However, the family is not always seen as a safe haven. Lotz illustrates clearly the danger of comparing superficially similar series whose stories end with significantly different outcomes.

Since the *Hill Street Blues* (1981-87) women have had prominent roles in ensemble casts most noticeably in medical or police dramas. In the late 1990s this trend accelerated resulting in series like *The Division* which consisted of a regular cast of policewomen. Despite this, Lotz argues that in more regular series such as in the *Law and Order* franchise (1990-) or *Homicide* (1993-99) many characters appear as doctors and lawyers who are women rather than as *women* doctors and lawyers.

Lotz concludes that the range of female-centered dramas starting from the late 1990s began to address the needs and pleasures of female audiences. Many series went on to cater to particular subgroups within the female audience, although some groups were overserved because of their attractiveness to advertisers – working-class women, women with partners and African American women are under-represented. She warns that although women have more viewing options than ever before, this diversity must be approached with caution. The gains must be carefully sorted from the retractions.

Redesigning Women makes stimulating reading as it analyses an aspect of television which stays hidden through its sheer obviousness: that television has

traditionally portrayed women within limited roles or not portrayed them at all. Unfortunately, there are few examples of wit which makes the reading drier than necessary. She makes the salient point that the 'meaning' of a program cannot be determined by the examination of a single episode. As in the case of many books of this type, familiarity with the programs under discussion greatly enhances the pleasures and benefits which can be derived from it.

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