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violent femmes: women as spies in popular culture

Rosie White, Routledge, London and New York, 2007, 166pp., ISBN 978-0-415-37078-3, £26.99, \$53.95

'The spy is a suggestive figure', so begins Rosie White's study of female spies in *Violent Femmes: Women as Spies in Popular Culture* (2007). White's book adeptly cuts across a century of spies – from Mata Hari to Sydney Bristow in a way that allows her to put forward the notion that 'popular accounts of the secret agents are wired to a distinctly twentieth-century anxiety regarding personal and national identity' (p. 1). Focusing specifically on female spies also allows White to map the 'construction and reconstruction of femininity as a shifting, multiple discourse' (p. 1). White uses the notion of spying as a covert activity to suggest that the female spy is engaged in subverting and violently disrupting the contradictions inherent in gender and identity; she argues that the spy is 'a hermaphrodite figure within popular culture, destabilising unitary formations of gender identity in favour of a more mobile subjectivity' (p. 2). White's spies both conform to existing stereotypes while, at the same time, opening up questions regarding women's role in contemporary British and American popular culture.

The first half of the book essentially acts as a cultural history of the female spy in the twentieth century. Chapter one begins with an explanation of the male spy, focusing on four male spies including James Bond. Although White's analysis of 'Bond's girls' is well considered, I think she misses an opportunity here to discuss the development (or lack of one) of the 'Bond girl' from 'Honey Ryder' to Halle Berry's 'Jinx'. It is also notable that the first chapter of a book on female spies begins with male spies; however, as White explains, this is not to suggest the male spy as origin and the female spy as pale imitation, rather White uses the chapter to explore her broader concerns around gender in considering the 'contradictions and absences within literary representations of masculinity' (p. 11). The next two chapters move from the mythologies behind Mata Hari to the female spies of the 1960s. White notes the way in which the 'dolly-bird spies of the 1960s' masked professional talent with a veneer of acceptable femininity' (p. 63) which continues her exploration of the contradiction inherent in the violent *femme*. The real strength of this book, however, lies in White's analysis of contemporary televisual texts, particularly her reading of *The Bionic Woman* (1976–1978), *The New Avengers* (1976–1977) and *Alias* (2001–2006). These chapters (which make up the second half of the book) offer readers a persuasive way to frame and consider the female figure of the spy in contemporary popular culture.

White makes reference to Mary Ann Doane's influential figuration of the 'femme fatale' as developed in *Femme Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory and Psychoanalysis* (1991) in her chapter on 'femme fatales to British grit'. Given White's interest in femme fatales and Hollywood, I think it would have been useful to consider Žižek's discussion in *Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (2001). Here Žižek argues that the femme fatale is a 'helpless victim of fate' (2001: 67, note 39); elsewhere he has defined her as 'an "inhuman partner", a traumatic Object with whom no relationship is possible, an apathetic void imposing senseless, arbitrary ideals' (1994: 102). How close is Žižek's figuration to the violent femme?

Unlike the femme fatale of film noir, the violent femmes in White's book, particularly in the latter half, are 'good' in that they pursue justice and truth, work with their male colleagues and embody national identity. For instance, in her description of Jamie (from *The Bionic Woman*) White explains that 'She is a violent *femme*: a *femme* who does not prove fatal for her male colleagues and whose actions are driven by truth, justice and the American way, rather than selfish avarice' (p. 94, author's italics). And yet, Jamie is in many ways a 'traumatic Object' – her body, life and desires are controlled by the government. Similarly, Nikita and Sydney, the focus of the final chapters, are causalities that have been appropriated by the government to 'make good' of a life otherwise inconsequential. These women are not offered conventional 'happy' endings, or if they are, as in Sydney's case, we are left wondering whether her new life as mother and wife is just another alias. Indeed, as White concludes her chapter on *La Femme Nikita*: 'There is no feminist future here' (p. 125).

Although White persuasively illustrates that the violent femme reflects contradictions and ambivalence around gender and identity in contemporary culture, I do not think this is specific to the female spy. Feminist television critics such as Brunsdon (2000), Lotz (2001) and Arthurs (2004) argue that contradiction and confusion are an inherent part of the success of popular television programmes such as *Ally Mc Beal* and *Sex and the City*. However, White's specific attention to one figure, the *violent femme*, enables readers to trace the developments around femininity and identity from the modern to the postmodern: essential to those interested in feminist cultural theory.

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visceral cosmopolitanism: gender, culture and the normalisation of difference

Mica Nava; Berg, Oxford, 2007, 224pp., ISBN 978 1 84520 243 9, £18.95 (paperback), ISBN 978 1 84520 242 2, £55.00 (hardback)

Although located within the recent trend for new research on cosmopolitanism, this book does not dwell on its commonly known links with globalisation processes, human rights, inter- and trans-national relations, and tourism and elites, among others. Instead, its contribution is incisive insights into the intimate, unconscious, domestic, vernacular and emotional experience of cosmopolitanism. Focusing on cosmopolitanism as a 'structure of feeling' that swings between sites of deviance and sites of urban normality, Mica Nava explores the threads of various narratives following a time line from the early twentieth century to the 1990s. Through these stories she unpacks snapshots of the processes that built up a cosmopolitan predisposition for a city such as London: one that crosses class, gender and racial positions, and where a multiplicity of cultural and political alliances are being constantly orchestrated. The scope of Nava's analysis includes the romance between Diana, Princess of Wales, and Dodi Al Fayed, as well as the links between Argentinean tango, Russian ballet and London's consumer culture as epitomised by the iconic department store Selfridges pre-World War I. She also looks into the everyday experiences of wartime, racial imagery and the fascination with modernity – as represented by the United States' 'black' soldiers and popular culture (dance, jazz and film), as well as British fiction with its take on the experience of migration and how it has blended 'sexual thinking' with notions of 'race'. The fascinating autobiographical last chapter demonstrates this thinking in practice. Here we explore a detailed intermingled history of cosmopolitanism and Mica Nava's own life story, providing an insight into how it does indeed translate into specific everyday practices feeding into both familial lives and lines.

A recurring theme is Nava's concern with a lack of investigation into the question of gender by cosmopolitanist theorists. Nava is interested, more specifically, in