

# *Gurlz N Guns:* **Popular and Firearm Culture in Contemporary America**

**Peter Van Do**

*University of Massachusetts Boston*

---

vando37@yahoo.com

## **INTRODUCTION**

This study evolves from observations of the growing presence of women characters who “kick ass” in contemporary American popular culture. The research here compares and contrasts the realities of actual armed women and the stereotypes of girls with guns in American movies and television. The numbers of notable women characters with guns have increased in American popular culture since the 1970s. Roughly twenty years later, the rise in the statistics on actual armed women followed. With this in mind, this study will provide analysis of the difference between reality and fiction of armed women, how depictions of tough women in American popular culture are the manipulated embodiment of the feminist ideal or the subversive commodification of the feminist culture, and how the fiction of girls with guns in popular culture is affecting the minds of the next generation of young armed women today.

In the mid-1990s, the figures of armed American women attracted a lot of attention. According to Deborah Homsher, author of *Women & Guns: Politics and the Culture of Firearms in America*, in the 1990s, “Public interest in the subject [of armed women] sparked when a number of publications reported that American women were swarming to buy handguns.”<sup>1</sup> Many pro-gun associations supported this trend. In fact, the National Rifle Association (NRA) “elected to foreground two women, Marion Hammer and Tanya Metaksa, as representative spokespersons, and it actively promoted its own ‘Refuse To Be a Victim’ program,”<sup>2</sup> which recommended that women consider acquiring handguns for self defense. According to current estimates, “somewhere between eleven and seventeen million American women currently own guns.”<sup>3</sup> Approximately half of all American households have one or more firearms present,<sup>4</sup> and most of these firearms are legally owned and used by ordinary, law-abiding adults, a growing number of whom appear to be female.

Simultaneously in contemporary American popular culture, the audience has been growing accustomed to the image of tough women with guns on movie screens and television. Guns symbolize power and yet also become romanticized through such American rugged images of the loner cop, the independent cowboy, and even the dangerous secret agent/femme fatale. Any number of films and television programs will depict how guns have the ability to command

---

1. Deborah Homsher, *Women & Guns: Politics and the Culture of Firearms in America* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharp, 2001), 16.

2. Homsher, 16.

3. Mary Zeiss Stange and Carol K. Oyster, *Gun Women: Firearms and Feminism in Contemporary America* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 1.

4. Stange, 1.

respect and even fear. The female secret agent/femme fatale will be contributive to the focus of this study of actual women shooters and the depictions of women shooters in American contemporary popular culture. Some notable examples that will be mentioned in this study are the female leads in "Charlie's Angels," "Aliens," "Terminator 2," "Thelma & Louise," "Set it Off," "The X-Files," and "Kill Bill: Volumes I&II." Within these examples, the main female movie and television show characters are often portrayed as "girls who kick ass." Some of the common characteristics of the leads include being powerful, "bitchy," and sexy; all of which are linked with the notion that if these women leads associate with these characteristics, they gain a certain level of respect.

This study seeks to compare and contrast actual women with firearms and of armed women in American contemporary popular culture. The analysis presented here is drawn from a twenty-three questionnaires filled out by members of the American firearm community from various parts of the country like Maine, Massachusetts, Virginia, Texas, Tennessee, Alabama, Wisconsin, and California, and a combination of literary sources on American popular culture.<sup>1</sup> This study will compare the reality of actual armed women and contemporary American popular culture stereotypes of girls with guns. Further, the primary material collected through the conduct of the project questionnaire will be used to suggest the nature of the present culture of actual women with firearms in America. First, the subject of armed women and American popular culture will be visited. Second, the influence of the feminist movement will be summarized. Third, armed women in contemporary American film and TV will be analyzed.

## ARMED WOMEN IN AMERICAN FIREARM CULTURE

In the 1990s, the health and fitness movement that redefined women's bodies, the student anti-rape movement that sparked nationwide conversation about gender, violence, and power, and the movement of middle-class white women back into the paid labor force became major topics on the minds of mainstream America. In the same decade, the women's movement for the right to bear arms also sprouted. Therefore, many cultural changes created the hunger for tough women in film in the early 1990s. Caitlin Kelly's *Blown Away* reports, "The banner year for violent women in film was 1991; films that year included *Silence of the Lambs*, *Terminator 2* with Linda Hamilton, and *Le Femme Nikita*."<sup>2</sup> These movies earned many awards and box office hit status in ticket sales and sent a powerful message that having tough women lead characters was profitable.

Specifically from the 1970s to the 1990s, there is no evidence that show women (either having a background with firearms or not) contributing to the creation of the typical tough and/or armed women in American popular culture. Within the same period, there was no study that found that the growing armed women community was influenced by the growing number of armed women "role models" in film or television. Thus, additionally, this study finds that there are no direct relationships between tough women-with-guns in the movies and actual women who shoot guns. Of the women and men subjects who filled out the questionnaire for this study, all did not believe that any of the tough women-with-guns on film or television influenced their decisions to shoot. Rather, these women and men often state that movies with tough armed girls are unrealistic.

One statement that embodies the sentiment of all the subjects' perception of the portrayals of armed women in American popular culture is provided by one twenty-six year-old white female subject from Virginia. She states:

I was influenced by Mel Gibson's movie "The Patriot." It showed how someone could be forced to defend his or her family and country. Also, movies like "Patton" and "The Ghost and the Darkness" show how firearms and self-defense are noble traditions. I have not had much motivation from "girls that kick ass [in film or television]." In fact, most portrayals are very unrealistic and anti-gun.<sup>3</sup>

---

1. A total of twenty-three questionnaires (focused on the women's experience) were filled and collected within a two-week time period between the last week of April and the first week of May 2004. Announcement of this particular project was spread through email by contacting several women firearm organizations, posting the questionnaire, over special firearm internet interest groups, and the researcher's own personal email network. The research focused questions on women's experience of firearm culture and was unlimited by gender, race, class, or age. Eighteen were female and five were male, seven of the eighteen women and two of the five male respondents were under thirty-five. The youngest was at the age of seventeen and the oldest at fifty-nine. With the exception of one Latino and one Asian American male, the rest of the respondents were white Americans. The firearm community is defined to include all those individuals who enjoy shooting arms for leisure within this study. A copy of the actual questionnaire is provided in an Appendix at the end.

2. Caitlin Kelly, *Blown Away: American Women and Guns* (New York: Pocket Books, Inc., 2004), 88.

3. Gurlz n Guns Project Questionnaire. Questionnaire by author (2 May 2004, Boston) Form, University of Massachusetts, Boston, twenty-six year old white female from Virginia.

Quite often, male characters-with-guns are received as influential because they are more realistic than the tough women seen in contemporary American popular culture. Moreover, the statement above indicates that there is a divide between how armed men and women are characterized on film and television even though both women and men subjects who filled out the questionnaire agree that armed women characters in popular culture do not mimic actual armed women.

Interestingly, the television series *America's Most Wanted*, a real-life crime investigative show where the audience can participate to help find run-away criminals, has been noted as being important in making the decision of one informant to learn to shoot a gun. A thirty year-old white Virginia woman explains:

The wake-up call came after I saw an episode of "America's Most Wanted" that scared the daylights out of me. This woman was driving alone late at night and was forced off the road by another car. The two assailants, armed with a bat and knives, bludgeoned and stabbed her 50-something times. Miraculously, she survived. But it was a HORRIBLE ordeal to go through. When I saw this I kept thinking, "Had she been armed, she likely could've prevented the attack." I'm not saying that guns are practical for every situation, but in this one, a gun definitely would've helped her. All she had to do was merely brandish the gun and her assailants likely would have backed off.<sup>1</sup>

Shows like *America's Most Wanted* are one of the only forms of media that portray women in real-life situations. What makes this respondent's statement so significant is that she believes the reality of reality TV. The possible reason why the respondent would be influenced by seeing *America's Most Wanted* is because of its ability to portray a woman's perspective in a real three-dimensional story. Importantly, the story and female lead was influenced by the real-life narrative of a woman rather than a fictional character concocted from the creative imagination of a person. In general, the armed women shooters realize that the tough women-with-guns depicted in the thriller action/sci-fi movies are a fantasy and inaccurate cartoon-like characters. The respondents are able to see the difference. As a forty-nine year-old white Maine woman states:

No movie, book or magazine ever influenced me. My father and fellow sportsmen and women have influenced me, as good examples of our sport [firearm shooting]. My own opinion is that movies that promote this "kick ass" pop culture are detrimental to the great sport of shooting and hunting, as they probably portray women's involvement with guns as careless, hyped up females on a testosterone high....<sup>2</sup>

This woman alerts that a stereotype of characters are showcased in popular culture that does not justify or portray real firearm culture.

Furthermore, the same respondent continues to discuss the similar unrealistic portrayals of some racialized categories of men:

...much like the same type of film involving men. I doubt that the general public ever sees the dedication sportsmen have for their craft, the years of training, the long hours practicing at the range, the striving to make the groups on the targets more and more accurate and the pride in accomplishment that comes from good shooting. They see some black or Hispanic teen, with baggy pants, a du-rag on his head, and chains around his neck holding a pistol improperly and claiming he is "gonna put a cap in yo' ass." This is an example for both men and women in movie. That is defamation to all who take shooting seriously.<sup>3</sup>

The forty-nine year old white woman from Maine is indicating that all armed men in American popular culture are as similarly badly represented as women are. However, the significance is the examples of men that this Maine woman uses to state her case; her examples are men in popular culture belonging to racialized categories of color. Therefore, this statement complicates and introduces new ideas without the respondent knowing the importance of her comment. What originally appeared as a divide of realistic portrayals of men from women in popular culture becomes a divide of realistic portrayals of white men from white women, and men and women belonging to historically oppressed communities in the modern world. The respondent may not have meant to participate in implied racial stereo-

---

1. Gurlz n Guns Questionnaire, thirty year old white female from Virginia.

2. Gurlz n Guns Questionnaire, forty-nine year old white female from Maine.

3. Gurlz n Guns Questionnaire, forty-nine year old white female from Maine.

typing of armed men in popular culture, but the statement makes some indication that there are similar stereotypes shared between armed white women and armed men and women belonging to racialized categories in popular culture. The idea of common stereotypical overlap of armed white women and armed men and women of color will be revisited later within this study. However, this study will mainly focus on all armed women.

In short, the tough armed women scene in the movies and television do not influence the people who have filled out the research questionnaire at least according to their self reporting. In fact, there are no connections between the emergence of tough women-with-guns on film and television with the rise of women shooters in the United States. Real armed women tend to “look down” upon these popular cultural depictions as demeaning and “defamation to all who take shooting seriously.” Rather, tough women in films are seen as “detrimental.” If there were a movie that influenced these shooters, it would be the connections they felt with male lead characters with guns that are portrayed as realistic and human.

Most women who possess firearms cite self-protection, and practical use as an additional advantage of being armed. A fifty-eight year-old white woman from Massachusetts offers her views of the benefits of shooting for women:

Shooting is an excellent sport for young women, and can also be a lifesaving skill. Training in the proper use of firearms is essential to make women safe around guns, even if they never intend to own them, and it is also the best way to dispel the myths about guns that often cause ineffective laws to be passed. Women who get involved in shooting for protection tend to view guns as tools, like a fire extinguisher, useful for what they can do but not particularly interesting in themselves.<sup>1</sup>

This woman explains that shooting a gun is not a romantic skill where the people are role-playing into movie roles. Many of the women who shoot understand the practical use of guns as a tool/instrument.

There are also differences between the men and women that are shooting. The same Massachusetts woman also adds the differences between genders in firearm training:

As an instructor who has taught many men and women to shoot, men tend to be more ego involved and less willing to accept instructions; women tend to be less ego involved and more willing to follow directions (and thus often turn out to be better shooters than the men). Men are more likely to come to a gun class having often imagined themselves shooting or in possession of a gun. They may have already made up their minds that they would be willing to use a gun to protect themselves and their family. They tend to look forward to getting a firearms license as a way to join a group of men they have long admired and want to be a part of. Women are more likely to come to class reluctantly, and are unlikely to have had a lengthy period of imagining themselves with a gun. Women usually learn to use guns safely, then perhaps buy one, and only then consciously make the decision that they could use a gun for protection. Women seldom know other women who own and use guns, so getting one does not have the same social/emotional aspects that it does for men.<sup>2</sup>

The passage above indicates a sense of precaution and responsibility by women. In contrast to the often victimized and reckless killing machines used as the typical model of tough armed women in American popular film and television, real women shooters are not victims. As the two passages above state, these women are taking the responsibility by ensuring that they do not become a victim. Interestingly, this form of empowerment is something that movie directors, producers, and mainstream audiences are not prepared to see. Kelly notes, “women who possess lethal power, women wreaking violence [in movies]... make many viewers, and would-be directors and producers, deeply uncomfortable.”<sup>3</sup> These women are breaking stereotypes. In many ways, actual armed women are taking responsibility **of their own bodies, which can be interpreted as an act coinciding with the goals of the feminist movement.**

Many of the women think of themselves as feminist, or their shooting as feminist in nature. A seventeen year-old white woman from Wisconsin states:

I think just as long as a woman is doing anything she wants to despite the beliefs that she shouldn't because of her sex, that the act is one of a feminist nature. So, in essence, I suppose shooting is feminist. Hopefully soon it will be just as much a woman's game as a man's game, and then it won't be considered a feminist act,

---

1. Gurlz n Guns Questionnaire, fifty-eight year old white female from Massachusetts.

2. Gurlz n Guns Questionnaire, fifty-eight year old white female from Massachusetts.

3. Kelly, 66.

just an act.<sup>1</sup>

Another woman who has been a long time feminist activist had this to say:

I have long considered myself a feminist, as I have pursued many non-traditional-for-women activities in my life, and have felt supported by most of the feminist movement. However, I cancelled my subscription to Ms. [a feminist magazine] after they came out strongly and unfairly against guns.

Women now take responsibility for their own bodies, for their own health, for their own finances, and for their own careers, but they are still being told that they are incapable for taking responsibility for their own safety. They are told to depend on a husband or boyfriend or the police to protect them, instead of facing the reality that they should be trained to protect themselves, because the others might not be around when needed (or the others might BE the problem). A woman should have as much freedom of choice about how to protect herself from rape or murder as she has about how to protect herself from pregnancy. Feminists should celebrate and support that choice, even if it includes firearms, but they do not.<sup>2</sup>

The passage above addresses the divide and debate within feminist circles on whether firearms, in relation to women, have certain subversive evils. Stange expresses her thoughts; “Feminist scholars, journalists, jurists, and activists have devoted thousands of pages to arguing the evils of firearms, especially in relation to women. It is time we look at the ways in which guns can be good for women.”<sup>3</sup> Clearly, the feminist community divide regarding the issue of armed women is complex.<sup>4</sup> However, the important matter is that these women do derive immense satisfaction and empowerment from owning and using guns. They are determining their lives from their own free will as women. In the 1970s, the feminist movement raised significant awareness for the action and recognition of the inequalities between women and men. Feminist thought was energized by the insight that the “template of gender could disclose aspects of culture and history previously concealed.”<sup>5</sup> In a historically male dominated arena of guns, these women embody the ideals in raising the awareness for the action and recognition of the inequalities between women and men. These ideals are in motion through their presence on the shooting ranges and in shooting competitions.

The connections between tough armed women in American popular culture and tough armed women in real-life appear to be nonexistent. However, the “male gaze” and pornographic fantasies depicted in American popular culture are seeping into the lives of those who filled out this study’s questionnaire—especially those under thirty-five years old. One young woman from Virginia states:

I think that women consider the shock, smoke/smell, and demolition unfeminine, but it seems to have the opposite effect on men. They genuinely find appeal in a woman that can appreciate and participate in her defense. Something attracts them to that assertiveness. As we can see from x-games etc., men are prone to flirt with the dangerous.<sup>6</sup>

Another young woman offers her opinions of whether women shooting is sexy. She states:

My husband always told me that there’s nothing sexier than a woman in high-heels with a gun...I tend to agree. If you’re already feminine, you can do just about anything feminine. Although I did get slack from my husband the first time I shot a AK-47 assault rifle. I sat down to shoot (since the gun was too heavy for me to hold it) and naturally crossed my legs. My husband was like, “What are you doing? You don’t shoot a gun like that?!!” He’s never let me live it down. I tend to hit the gun range after work, when I’m often dressed in a nice suit, stockings and heels. I figure the chances of being dressed comfortably when and if I ever need to use my gun is pretty slim, so I better learn to shoot in heels.<sup>7</sup>

---

1. Gurlz n Guns Questionnaire, seventeen year old white female from Wisconsin.

2. Gurlz n Guns Questionnaire, fifty-six year old white female from Massachusetts.

3. Stange, 2.

4. The feminist/pro-gun community also have other characteristics including having mostly white middle-to-lower-class socioeconomic backgrounds.

5. Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 216.

6. Gurlz n Guns Questionnaire, twenty-six year old white female from Virginia.

7. Gurlz n Guns Questionnaire, thirty year old white female from Virginia.

The first informant illustrates the environment that is attached to shooting is unfeminine in her opinion. However, she states that men are attracted to women who shoot guns because men can “appreciate and participate in her [women’s] defense....” Both passages above give some insight and gives a reminder that there are realities of the subversive depictions of American popular culture are being absorbed and recycled by those invested in them. Caitlen Kelly’s *Blown Away, American Women and Guns* claims:

Putting a gun near a woman...sends a powerful, coded message, at least to male viewers [of American popular culture]. She’s hot, dangerous, probably out of your league. Don’t mess with this one. Because skill and comfort with guns remains, at least in mass-media images, so male a prerogative, a gal-with-a-gun has already crossed the line. What else is she willing to try?<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, the fact that these women, who consider shooting as sexy, are under the age of thirty-five is a contributive factor. Men see these young women shooting and this triggers a reminder in the male minds of the pornographic depictions of young armed women in American popular culture. It is rare that the tough armed women in American popular culture appear aged, hideous, and unyouthful. These real youthful armed women sense the attention by these men. They feel the power of this attention because these men are projecting their armed women fantasies. Thus, the real youthful armed women feel sexy and possibly empowered through the entire experience of being able to balance perceived notions of a sexy women while being able to shoot (ex. thinking it is sexy women wearing high-heels and shooting), not realizing that both are enjoying a subversive act and disrespect of women.

The influence of American popular fashion has also reached the armed women audience. One young woman informant started her own business of stylish concealment purses. Her products can be bought and found at [www.heat-bag.com](http://www.heat-bag.com). These purses are custom-made and are described to *feature a secure, removable inner liner for concealing and protecting your personal firearm* on the website.<sup>2</sup> The catchphrase of these line of concealment purses is, “Be secure in style.” The young business entrepreneur offers her explanation for her purses:

I think being independent and empowered to protect yourself is sexy. There are certain ways to carry a concealed weapon that I think look unfeminine, but that’s why I created stylish concealment purses. I think women are turned off by shooting if they think they have to change their lifestyle in order to do it. By integrating it into their life, they are more comfortable with the idea and the firearm.<sup>3</sup>

To critique a young woman who has started her own business and shoots guns as a hobby is difficult. However, this young woman’s investment into the American popular culture ideals of femininity is subversive by creating fashionable concealment purses so that women can carry guns and look feminine too. Like a lot of movies and television shows with tough women with guns, the subject is constructing male fantasy values in American popular culture and implanting these values into the reality.

Those who filled out this study’s questionnaire above the age of thirty-five often had a different viewpoint of whether shooting a gun, for women, is feminine/sexy. One woman states:

Shooting is not glamorous. The eye protection, ear protection, and hats that must be worn are not fashion items, and being outside for hours at a match leaves one quite bedraggled, anything but sexy. The pictures one sees of women in gun magazines for men are definitely fantasy, not reality. (The magazine *Women&Guns* is the only magazine that has consistently presented real pictures of real women using real guns Feminine, sometimes; sexy, never).<sup>4</sup>

The passages above offer the realities of how women are objectified because of their youth. The reasons why the women over thirty-five do not believe that shooting is sexy is because they are not subjected to the illusion of power through the attentions and gawks of men who value a women’s worth by her youth and attractiveness.

---

1. Kelly, 88.

2. See Appendix D

3. Gurlz n Guns Questionnaire, twenty-six year old white female from Virginia.

4. Gurlz n Guns Questionnaire, fifty-eight year old white female from Massachusetts.

## POPULAR CULTURE

In the 1970s, the feminist movement raised significant awareness regarding the inequalities between women and men. According to Susan Bordo's *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, she emphasizes the feminist thought was energized by the insight that the "template of gender could disclose aspects of culture and history previously concealed,"<sup>1</sup> and thus, Bordo further discusses that women began to practice and critically assess the culture and history of gender dynamics to determine the roots of gender oppression since the 1970s. She claims, "The male-normative view of the world, feminists argued, had obscured its own biases through its fictions of unity (History, Reason, Culture, Tradition...)." <sup>2</sup> Bordo further relates, "Each of those unities was shown to have a repressed shadow, on "other" whose material history, values, and perspectives had yet to be written."<sup>3</sup> Thus, feminist thought sought to bring to the mainstream the misrepresentation of women in the past and to educate the realities of the female struggle, strength and inequality.

Since the 1970s, the growing number of tough women main characters has been noticeable in American film and television. The emergence of these characters were influenced and a response to the feminist movement. Yet, the question arises whether the depictions of these tough women in American popular culture are the embodiment of the feminist ideal or the subversive commodification of the feminist culture. Some academic scholars would argue the latter. As Carla Freccero claims in her book, *Popular Culture: An Introduction*, "Under the guise of feminism... the [contemporary] film enacts intense backlash and antifeminism."<sup>4</sup> Therefore, further analysis of tough women in contemporary American popular culture will be explored to determine whether these portrayals are a form of "antifeminism."

Typically, the movies and television programs that include tough girls with guns belong to the action/thriller and science fiction genres. When the project study of this research on armed women shooters asked to name a movie or television show where they found tough women, or "girls that kicked ass," *Charlie's Angels*, *La Femme Fatale*, *Thelma & Louise*, *The X-Files*, *Aliens*, and *Terminator 2* were a few that were mentioned. Interestingly, the major audiences of these forms of entertainment are adolescent to young adult men. Furthermore, men directed all of these films.

There are striking similarities between Carol J. Clover's study, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* and the study of armed women who "kick ass" in film. The audience of horror movies is usually adolescent to young adult men also. In addition, men often direct horror movies. Further analysing horror movies, Clover states that "the 'art' of the horror film, like the 'art' of pornography, is to a very large extent the art of rendition or performance, and it is understood as such by the competent audience."<sup>5</sup> Action/thriller and sci-fi movies share a similar male audience with horror movies. At the same time, action/thriller and sci-fi films have a pornographic bent to their storytelling. To add further to the argument of these movies as pornographic material, Caitlen Kelly's *Blown Away, American Women and Guns* needs to be restated to explain the male fantasy of armed women in action/thriller and sci-fi movies:

Putting a gun near a woman...sends a powerful, coded message, at least to male viewers. She's hot, dangerous, probably out of your league. Don't mess with this one.... What else is she willing to try?<sup>6</sup>

In addition, the *Charlie's Angels* movies, past and present, can be regarded as examples of how tough women are depicted as fantasy figures to the male gaze. Much of the *Charlie's Angels* includes scenes where many of its three main lead female characters are secret agents who must act as strippers or masseuses to get the job done.

The body of tough armed women in contemporary American popular culture is further an indicator of the male dominance and power in film. Susan Bordo's *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* makes an observation of the heroine's body and points out:

In the enormously popular *Aliens*, the heroine's personality has been deliberately constructed, with near-comic book explicitness, to embody traditional nurturant femininity alongside breathtaking macho prowess and

---

1. Bordo, 216.

2. Bordo, 216.

3. Bordo, 216.

4. Carla Freccero, *Popular Culture: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 120.

5. Carol J Clover *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), 11.

6. Kelly, 88.

control; Sigourney Weaver, the actress who portrays her, has called the character ‘Rambolina.’<sup>1</sup>

Like Sigourney Weaver’s character in *Aliens*, tough armed women in films are abnormally slender and are an example of where “traditional constructions of femininity intersect with the new requirement for women to embody the ‘masculine’ values of the public arena.”<sup>2</sup> Bordo further states, “One cannot simply add the historically feminine virtues to the historically masculine ones to yield a New Woman, a New Man, a new ethics, or a new culture. Even on the screen or on television, embodied in created characters like the *Aliens* heroine, the result is a parody.”<sup>3</sup> Consequently, there are additional and more extreme examples that support Bordo’s observations since the *Aliens* movie release in 1986. The main female lead in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (2003) fights off demons and vampires that are more than twice her size, however, she manages to keep her arms and body to appear smooth and delicate with no indication of any muscle mass. *Terminator 2* (1991) and *Xena: Warrior Princess* (2001) are exceptions where women with large muscles were seen on mainstream popular film and television. Yet, these characters have been extinct or retired. Currently, there are no examples of their muscular “kind” to date. The growing trend, like the recent trend for waif models in fashion magazines, is to have a skinny delicate heroine who can also carry fifty-pound machine gun without any problem and in an unrealistic cartoon-like stereotype.<sup>4</sup>

Significant portions of tough women in contemporary American popular culture are victims of some extreme experience presented in tough armed women films. Whether it is rape like in *Thelma & Louise* (1991)<sup>5</sup> or racial, gender, and class combinations of injustice like in *Set It Off* (1996), women are found empowering themselves with a gun after being severely abused. Josephine Gattuso Hendin offers insight of the victimization of women in contemporary American popular culture. She states that the narrative of violence confronts the “agony of depersonalization and identity crises revealed in the more individualized expressions in fiction.”<sup>6</sup> Hendin indicates that these stories recognize the “absence of self, the purely symbolic nature of the individual, or the meaninglessness of life and death are disproved by the effort to enact power and define it as a living individual process.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, these films are offering a more two-dimensional explanation of the women’s experience with guns in film or television.

The victim story of women with guns in film and television may be overrepresented since the story of women who shoot out of their own free will is hardly told. Kelly finds that “women who possess lethal power, women wreaking violence... make many viewers, and would-be directors and producers, deeply uncomfortable.”<sup>8</sup> It is rare to see a woman who actually enjoys shooting. A woman able to kill out of her own free will challenges preconceptions of female vulnerability and attractiveness. Kelly plays with the notion of the armed independent women in films by stating, “With the power to blow you away whenever and where she feels like it, she’s scary as hell.”<sup>9</sup> In the case for male dominated audiences, directors, and producers, women are to reduce to two-to-one-dimensional characters that fit into the masculine ideal.

Women’s victimization stories, in armed women films, is often overdone and another indicator of the male patriarchy view where women can only find their source of power when they are emotional and in rage for revenge. Furthermore, images of women who simply enjoy shooting for their own pleasure, not those in pursuit of criminals, aliens, or abusive men, are rare. Some films have made the attempt to unfulfill this stereotype such as the 1999 film *American Beauty*. In this film, “a suburban mother and wife smothering in a stalled career and dead marriage, Benning’s character picks up a gun at her local range and fires with fierce pleasure, exulting, ‘I love this!’”<sup>10</sup>

Some other recent films have been released to offset the imbalance of these over-told victim stories. Films that have been directed and produced by women, who successfully tell the stories of strong tough women, do not include the common vengeful victim story. As Kelly states, “Most often, when *women* tell the stories, they offer *not* a passive victim awaiting rescue, but a female willing and able to do it herself.”<sup>11</sup> For example, the 2002 film *Frida* starring

---

1. Bordo, 173

2. Bordo, 173.

3. Bordo, 174.

4. See Appendix B.

5. *Thelma & Louise* follows the victimization story, however, this movie may not follow some of the more extreme depictions and characteristics of “kick ass” women in American popular culture mentioned earlier within this study.

6. Josephine Gattuso Hendin, *HeartBreakers: Women and Violence in Contemporary Culture and Literature* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 163.

7. Hendin, 165.

8. Kelly, 66.

9. Kelly, 65.

10. Kelly, 69.

11. Kelly, 66.



Selma Hayek and directed by Julie Taymore, tells the story of a woman who was naturally confident and tough. One scene includes Frida shooting a gun to ward off local trespassers at her front door. She was not portrayed as a victim, but a person who was defending her property out of her own free-will. This scene in *Frida* was revolutionary because a female character, in a well-respected film, was portrayed in a three-dimensional manner with a gun like other men in popular culture.<sup>1</sup> Just the same, although the image of the character Frida shooting a gun out of free-will was revolutionary, the image did not resonate enough to the popular culture audience to insist more accurate tough female roles in film and television.

In short, realistic or positive images of women and guns, whether of women who enjoy shooting sports, competing athletically, or using a gun professionally, remain extremely rare in the mass American popular culture. The theme of conformity, dominance, and power to and of a male higher being is commonly indicated through many films where armed tough women are portrayed. As in the highly popular French film, *La Femme Nikita* (1990), the main female lead begins as an uncontrollable animalistic impulsive person—in many ways like a rebellious boy teenager. Yet, she is admitted in a special agent training “factory” where Nikita is slowly learns to become the patriarchal ideal of a woman. She also must report and follow the instructions of her male supervisor/parent figure. For all the images of women subjected to cinematic gun related violence, very few show a woman ready and able to fight with an instilled sense of power. Rather, a girl-with-a-gun, like the sexy, skimpily clad seductresses of B movies and Agent 007’s, “‘Bond girls,’ has instead become a fashion-layout cliché, her slim hand with long red nails languorously caressing the cool, polished steel of a firearm and its phallic shape.”<sup>2</sup> These tough armed women are to be objectified for the fantasies of men.

The depictions of hyper feminine characters of armed women in action/thriller and sci-fi movies can be viewed as a manifestation of orientalism. According to Carla Freccero’s *Popular Culture*, orientalism is defined as:

a term made famous in modern times by Edward Said, used to refer to the particular construction of the East by the West, a construction that is a result of Western historical attempts to dominate the East and Western fantasies about the East as complement and opposite of the West, most prominent in Europe in the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup>

The connection of orientalism to modern forms of stereotyping women is not far-fetched. According to Bordo, “‘femininity,’ (at least since the nineteenth century), has been constructed through a process of mutual exclusion.”<sup>4</sup> Notions of the Western ideal of femininity for women and the exoticizations of the East emerged during the same period. Furthermore, orientalism and practices of gendering and gender stereotyping both imply and feed off a process of constructing mutual exclusions. As the East is exoticized by the West to enable colonial rule, so are images of women by men to perpetuate gender domination. Besides, additional studies can be done to compare and contrast the processes of gender stereotyping/dehumanizing/orientalizing in the West and those experienced in historically oppressed communities in the world.

The incorporation of tough women-with-guns in film and television may be a reaction to the influence of the feminist movement in the 1970s. However, the depictions of these women are not totally ideal to the feminist notion. In fact, these tough women are a perverse fantasy, reconstruction, and commodification misrepresentation of the true feminist message. The tough armed women in films and television strive not to disturb or disrupt the American mainstream’s patriarchal romantic love affair for the “orientalized” woman on film and television.

Additionally, in his study, *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop*, W.T. Lhamon Jr. describes the transmission between two cultures, one the dominant and the other the oppressed. The notion of transmission of the culture of mainstream and culture of men and woman fits well within Lhamon’s theory. He explains the transmission process as a *lore cycle*. Lhamon states:

How does a lore cycle turn? The answers ultimately meet in the middle and become one, but they start separately. A lore cycle turns from the inside, by inversion of its very popular, very compacted meanings. And a lore cycle turns from the outside, when it is pummeled by new forces making demands on it or policing it.

They meet in the middle as the lore cycle mediates people’s adjustment to the stimuli and pressures of their

---

1. See Appendix C.

2. Kelly, 89.

3. Freccero, 163.

4. Bordo, 174.

time. A lore cycle transmits the terms by which groups understand themselves in relation to others. Its turning tends less to volte-face inversions, however dramatic they are as illustrations, than to *adjustments*. The main reason cultural inversions do not effect social revolutions is that they are knotted up with so many other ameliorating factors.<sup>1</sup>

Lhamon describes the lore cycle for the black American experience with minstrelsy. However, this cycle applies to feminist culture in the same manner. The outside (American patriarchal mainstream) assimilates the opposing culture. The outside remains in control by redefining and policing the opposing culture in the process of making the opposing culture appear to influence mainstream popular culture.

The great danger is how the next generation has learned to understand and absorb the images of tough women-with-guns on the silver and small screen. Have these people fallen into the trap of believing that these depictions of women are realistic and truly feminist? Bordo explains that the answer is “maybe.” In her analysis of some current scholarships that support the position that destructive stereotypes exist of tough women on film, she states:

Deconstructionist readings that enact this protean fantasy are continually “slip-slidin’ way;” through paradox, inversion, self-subversion, facile, and intricate textual dance, they often present themselves (maddeningly, to one who wants to enter into critical dialogue with them) as having it any way they want. They refuse to assume a shape for which they must take responsibility.<sup>2</sup>

Bordo believes that the emerging generation has invested in the idea that true equality of women and men have been gained and that the inclusion of tough women on film and television is indicative of this gain. Her major critique is that the next generation needs to fully understand the responsibilities of their inaction to see the bigger picture that these women are not real, but a pornographic creation of the male fantasy.

Lately, Bordo’s analysis of the emerging generation’s acceptance of stereotypical tough women on film is exemplified through some of the acts of powerful young women. For example, the 2000 film *Charlie’s Angels*, was produced by veteran actress Drew Barrymore and distributed by Columbia Pictures, one of the few studios with a woman president, Amy Pascal. The film grossed \$122.8 million, the twelfth most successful film of the year, just behind *Erin Brockovich* (\$125.5 million) and ahead of the *The Patriot* (\$113.3 million)...<sup>3</sup> As a producer of *Charlie’s Angels*, she insisted that the three Angels, Barrymore, Lucy Liu, and Cameron Diaz, use no guns in their many death-defying adventures. Barrymore is quoted in offering her personal vision of her movie, along with the director:

“We wanted to try and create something different, set a new tone, create a new genre,” said Barrymore. The challenge was to make them strong *and* likable. Said the director, McG, “They have to make the men say, “I want to be with her,” and the women say, “I want to *be* her.”<sup>4</sup>

The two most recent *Charlie’s Angels* movies, which Barrymore starred in and produced, have catered more to the fantasies of men. The three women lead characters often use sex and fantasy role-playing (i.e. dominatrix, submissive ditzzy girlfriend) to accomplish their roles as secret agents and as women. Ultimately, these films are not creating something different. The only difference is that these movies are building a female audience-base to accept pornographic depictions of women just because the film has “strong independent women.”

## CONCLUSION

To reassess, there are distinct differences between reality and fiction of armed women. Commonly, the women firearm community must constantly confront the stereotypical notions that are depicted of tough armed women in popular culture. In fact, the depictions of tough women in American popular culture are the manipulated embodiment of

---

1.W.T. Lhamon Jr., *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 90.

2.Bordo, 288.

3.Kelly, 69.

4.Kelly, 69.

the feminist ideal or the subversive commodification of the feminist culture. Furthermore, the general unrealistic and often pornographic portrayals of tough girls in popular culture is affecting the minds of the next generation of young women and men today.

There is no question in the minds of all respondents who filled out this study's questionnaire that shooting a gun has a practical and leisurely use for both women and men. The underlining rule to effectively and safely use a gun is to practice responsibility. As previously stated earlier in this study, fifty-eight year-old white woman from Massachusetts offers her views of the benefits of shooting for women:

Shooting is a lifesaving skill. Training in the proper use of firearms is essential to make women safe around guns, even if they never intend to own them.... Women who get involved in shooting for protection tend to view guns as tools, like a fire extinguisher, useful for what they can do....<sup>1</sup>

To this end, the above statement often resonates throughout the firearm community of men and women across the United States.

In the 1970s, the feminist movement raised significant awareness for the action and recognition of the inequalities between women and men. Thus, feminist thought sought to bring to the mainstream the misrepresentation of women in the past and to educate the realities of the female struggle, strength and inequality. However, opposition developed, and is continuing to recycle feminist opposition, through many aspects of current daily lives of Americans through *lore cycles*. As earlier mentioned in this research, Carla Freccero claims in her book, *Popular Culture: An Introduction*, "Under the guise of feminism... the film enacts intense backlash and antifeminism."<sup>2</sup> Therefore, further analysis of tough women in contemporary American popular culture identifies the portrayals of "antifeminism" in society. As analyzed earlier in this study, the body of tough armed women in contemporary American popular culture indicates the male dominance and power in film. As stated previously Susan Bordo's *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* evaluates the tough female lead in *Aliens*:

The heroine's personality has been deliberately constructed, with near-comic book explicitness, to embody traditional nurturant femininity alongside breathtaking macho prowess and control; Sigourney Weaver called the character 'Rambolina.'<sup>3</sup>

Quite often, the tough women leads are generally a reconceptualized "feminist" that fits the patriarchal ideals and pornographic fantasies of the largely male writers, directors, and audiences that support and spend money to see these characters on film and television. Consequently, the depictions of these tough women in American popular culture are the subversive commodification of the feminist culture.

The "male gaze" and pornographic fantasies depicted in American popular culture are seeping into the lives of those under thirty-five-years-old who filled out this study's questionnaire. The connections between tough armed women in American popular culture and tough armed women in real-life may appear to be nonexistent, however, statements provided have insightfully reminded us that realities of the subversive depictions of American popular culture are being absorbed and recycled by those involved, whether consciously or unconsciously.

It is rare that the tough armed women in American popular culture appear aged, hideous, and unyouthful. Actual youthful armed women sense the attention by these men. They feel the power of this attention because these men are projecting their armed women fantasies. Thus, the real youthful armed women feel sexy and possibly empowered through the entire experience of being able to balance perceived notions of a sexy women while being able to shoot (i.e., sexy women wearing high-heels and shooting), not realizing that both are enjoying a subversive act and disrespect of women overall.

The two most recent *Charlie's Angles* movies is an example of having invested and profited from the fantasies of men for tough women on the silver screen. The three women lead characters often use sex and fantasy role-playing to accomplish their roles as secret agents and as women. Drew Barrymore, a young female actor and producer, insists that the "updated" versions of the *Charlie's Angles* female leads to refuse to use guns to creating "something different" so that both men and women audiences can appreciate the new *Charlie's Angles* franchise. And yet, the only difference

---

1. Gurlz n Guns Questionnaire, fifty-eight year old white female from Massachusetts

2. Freccero, 120.

3. Bordo, 173

is that these movies build a female audience-base to accept pornographic depictions of *non-shooting* women just because the film has “strong independent women.”

Additional studies need to be done to draw the experiences of women, and others in society, to identify the oppressive implications of stereotyping/dehumanizing process of all people, which creates a *lore cycle* of sorts within popular culture. This study only scratches the surface of the how popular culture has practiced a form of *lore cycle* through the Western orientalized hyper-feminine ideal of women. Similar forms of analysis should be implied throughout all means of communication such as literature, television, film, advertisement, art, radio, and speech so that the process of liberation from the psychological oppressions that consciously/unconsciously portray the Western patriarchal social hierarchy of gender, race, and class can be pictured accurately so that later it can be learned-from effectively.

Equally important is the common responsibility of all others to seek out to understand the common and different experiences of those outside one’s own categorized gender, race, and class. The issues raised from the analysis of tough women in popular culture concerns all women as much as all men. Young women are not the only members of the community who are being “trained” in investing into the ideals of the subversive recycled version of the Western orientalized hyper-feminine ideal, but young men are equally subjected to the same “training.” The gender example used in the previous statement can also be applied in understanding race and class by all participants of social “categories.”

Lastly, in the days of the dominance of the personal television, computer, and CD player/MP3 player “lifestyle,” the American community is becoming alarmingly a passive and non-interactive audience. The American mentality is increasingly submitting to a “couch potato” frame-of-mind where physical, mental, and human interactive behaviors are likely to demand too much effort and energy. Proof of this phenomenon is indicated by asking the question as to why issues of gender and tough women portrayals in popular culture have not been raised significantly within the American community by now. Further analysis of current American popular culture can only shed some light on recent, past, and future trends of American society and culture. A growing U.S. audience that is too comfortably passive and submissive to a small, powerful, and influential elite is simply dangerous because this elite may or may not have the best interest in mind for their yielding audience.

## APPENDIX

### GURLZ N GUNS Project: UMass-Boston © 2004 Questionnaire

Male or Female \_\_\_\_  
Age \_\_\_\_  
Race/Ethnicity \_\_\_\_  
Residence (U.S. State) \_\_\_\_

1. What is the most exciting part of shooting a gun?
2. Where did you get the idea of shooting?
3. If you had a daughter, would you want her to learn how to shoot a gun? Why?
4. Do you remember reading anything, or seeing a movie, that influenced you in shooting guns? Can you name some characters in books or movies where you found “girls that kick ass?”
5. Do you support the NRA (National Rifle Association)? Do you think this organization responds to women’s needs?
6. What is the most frustrating part in working with a shooting range? Most satisfying?
7. If you were sixteen years old again, how would you relive your life? Would you still be involved with shooting guns?
8. How does your husband/wife, boyfriend/girlfriend, partner, family members feel about your gun hobby?
9. How do you think your gun hobby experience would have been different if you were a man or woman?
10. What are the differences between the motivations and shooting styles between men and women?
11. What are your thoughts of shooting as being unfeminine, sexy, or both for women?
12. Would you think women shooting as being feminist in nature? Why or Why Not?

Please send questionnaires to: peter.vando@umb.edu or Gurlz n Guns Project, American Studies, UMass-Boston, 100 Morrissey Boulevard, Boston, MA 02125-3393,

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bellesiles, Michael A. "The Origins of Gun Culture in the United States, 1760-1865" in *The Journal of American History*, 83:2 (September 1996), 425-455.
- Blau, Francine D. "Trends in the Well-Being of American Women, 1970-1995," in *Journal of Economic Literature* 36:1 (March 1998), 112-165.
- Bordo, Susan. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003.
- Clover, Carol J. *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992.
- Freccero, Carla. *Popular Culture: An Introduction*. New York: New York University Press, 1999.
- Green, Karen and Tristan Taormino. ed. *A Girl's Guide to Taking Over the World: Writings from the Girl Zine Revolution*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997.
- Gurlz n Guns Project Questionnaire. Questionnaire by author, 2 May 2004, Boston. Form. University of Massachusetts, Boston.
- Hendin, Josephine Gattuso. *HeartBreakers: Women and Violence in Contemporary Culture and Literature*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004.
- Homsher, Deborah. *Women & Guns: Politics and the Culture of Firearms in America*. Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharp, 2001.
- Hurwitz, Jon and Shannon Smitley. "Gender Difference on Crime and Punishment," in *Political Research Quarterly* 51:1 (March 1998), 89-115.
- Kelly, Caitlin. *Blown Away: American Women and Guns*. New York: Pocket Books, Inc., 2004.
- Lhamon Jr., W.T. *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998.
- Lizotte, Alan J. and David J. Bordua. "Firearms Ownership for Sport and Protection: Two Divergent Models," in *American Sociological Review* 45:2 (April 1980): 229-244.
- McCaughy, Martha. "The Fighting Spirit: Women's Self-Defense Training and the Discourse of Sexed Embodiment," in *Gender and Society* 12:3 (June 1998), 277-300.
- Stange, Mary Zeiss and Carol K. Oyster. *Gun Women: Firearms and Feminism in Contemporary America*. New York: New York University Press, 2000.
- Stoeltje, Beverly J. "'A Helpmate for Man Indeed': The Image of the Frontier Woman," in *The Journal of American Folklore* 88:347 (January-March 1975), 25-41.