

Call for papers: interdisciplinary conference

Ladies in Arms: Representations of Shooting Women in Contemporary Popular Culture

19-21 Oct 2022, Vienna

Organizers: Prof. Dr. Teresa Hiergeist (Romanistik); PD Dr. Stefanie Schäfer (Amerikanistik)

In contemporary popular culture, representations of shooting women abound: Super heroines, warrior goddesses, and female avengers brandish their weapons in movies, cartoons, comics and novels, advertisements, and on the shelves of toy stores (Inness 2018, 4); stories of cowgirls, huntresses, and female police officers and soldiers have received increased media attention in the past 30 years (Browder 2008; Browder and Pflaeging 2010; Patton and Schedlock 2012). This new omnipresence of the gun-toting woman in the cultural imaginary indicates her great potential to concentrate different discourses about gender, the legitimacy of violence, and social cohesion. She exposes the values, norms and attitudes of contemporary individuals, groups and societies. In this respect it comes as no surprise that narratives of shooting women negotiate a variety of positions and identities.

On the one hand, representations of gunwomanship are often linked to feminist ideals of empowerment and agency. The gun, as paragon of modernity and modern warfare, serves as “great equalizer” that puts women on a par with ‘male oppressors’ and with patriarchy, enabling them to launch revolutions, effect anti-imperialist resistance, or ascertain self-defense in the domestic and public sphere (cf. Deckman 2016, Johnson 2014). Leftwing-radicals like the anarchists at the turn of the 20th century or the activists of the Cuban Revolution in the 1950s have profited from this symbolism to mobilize the population for the social changeover, equating revolutionary struggle and emancipation (Ledesma Prieto 2017, 113; Ramírez Chicharro 2010, 8). In US culture, shooting women produce discomfort and negotiate (white) feminisms (cf. Browder 2006,1; Stange and Oyster 2000). In the struggle against systemic racisms in the transatlantic world, the heroines of 1970s Blaxploitation cinema like Foxy Brown or Cleopatra Jones interrupt the spy movie genre or resonate with Wakanda’s Africana womanism in Marvel’s *Black Panther* (cf. Schäfer 2018 or Thames 2021). At the very latest, since the era of post-victim feminism in the 1990s, which refuses the idea of the female need of protection, armed women have become predestined identification figures (Minowa, Maclaran and Stevens 2014, 217). They jar with gender scripts of female softness, care and motherhood (Ellerbrock 2013) and challenge or subvert patriarchal hierarchies, specifically with the marketing of gun culture to girl consumers (Latzel, Maubach and Satjukow 2011, 12-16; Calibi and Sanger 2013, 8). Furthermore, representing shooting women or referring to them, especially when their violence is joint and organized, is particularly suitable to evoke the utopia of a matriarchally structured society (Cardi, Pruvost 2011, 34).

On the other hand, narratives about women with guns frequently perpetuate misogynic attitudes. Their stigmatization as criminal, deviant, or diabolic has a long tradition that reaches from the biblical figure of Salome, to the child- or husband-murdering mother or wife of the 19th century (Chauvaud and Maladain 2009, 11), the *femme fatale* in mid 20th-century detective fiction (Beardsley 2010, 60), the racialization of Angela Davis as “black militant” (Roman 2020; see also Gerund 2013) and into the present moment, with films like *Red Sparrow* (2018), *Esther* (2009) or *Wer ist Hanna?* (2011). Mainly depicted or imagined by male artists and authors, the shooting woman, in these contexts functions as a threat to masculine physical and moral integrity (Watanabe-O’Kelly 2010, 15), and/or as a *fascinosa tremendum* that sacralizes female beauty and permits her transgressive erotization and sexualization (Simpson 2010, 25).

Even in cases where the devaluation of the armed women is not as apparent, significant structural inequalities can be found in the discourse about the use of arms: Recent research has shown that violence committed by women is at times labelled as affective and justified as reaction to male aggression (Cardi and Pruvost, 2011, 25, 30). War operations executed by women are neutralized in reporting (Latzel, Maubach and Satjukow 2011, 47; Boutron 2016, 133) or integrated in stereotypical roles, that is the part of the assistant in combat or of the family defender (Agra Romero 2012, 52). Highlighting female agency in the coverage of terrorist acts often amplifies the scandalous effect of the acts and occasionally implies a parallelization of militant and sexual activity (Bielby 2012, 179, 185). In literature and fiction, the many new heroines do not necessarily change established patriarchal gender roles: A shooting woman can be shown as exception that both proves the rule (cf. Minowa, Maclaren and Stevens 2014, 217 or Browder 2008, 10) and attracts audiences by creating a special shock effect (Birch 1994, 2), or as carnivalesque, temporary inversion of the binary gender code, which does not affect the real allocation of roles (Inness 2018, 9-10). Only if there is an effort palpable to transcend the gender hierarchies, to create a heroism not limited to imitating male models, and to reflect the marginalizing or empowering effect of further social categorizations as race, class, (dis)ability or sexual orientation, a gender-performative character of the work can be stated (Cocca 2016, 218).

Our conference interrogates constructions of ladies in arms and gunwomanship in contemporary popular culture, to detect the contextually varying valorizations and strategies of representation. We seek to locate the gunwoman in her historical genesis and to reveal her political, economical, social, and cultural functions. We intend to reassess imaginations of armed women as modern site of gendered knowledge production and ask what kinds of discourses, contemporary and historical, are negotiated through the performance and reception of shooting women.

For our gathering in Vienna, we are looking for contributions from the humanities and the social sciences on shooting women that discuss historical or fictional figures and groups and their changing (feminist) conceptualizations across the boundaries of race, class, and citizenship, with a special interest in Feminist and Gender Studies.

Possible topics may include – but are not limited to – the following:

- gender stereotypes and shooting women
- motherhood, domesticity, and gun ownership
- revolution, anarchy and gunwomanship
- memory production, monuments, and gunwomanship
- gunwoman feminisms
- intersectionality, critical whiteness studies, and the meanings of women shooters
- queer and non-binary performances and readings of gunwomanship
- the conformity of shooting women with demands of the market
- guns as commodities, tools, and beauty accessories
- factual and fictional genres, reception attitudes and affective strategies in relation to which armed women appear

Please send abstracts and a short speaker bio **by May 6, 2022** to

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