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Authors	Fradley, Martin
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Gender in Post-9/11 American Apocalyptic TV: Representations of Masculinity and Femininity at the End of the World, by Eve Bennett. Bloomsbury Academic, 2019, 224 pp.

Martin Fradley

Eve Bennett begins her new book, *Gender in Post-9/11 American Apocalyptic TV: Representations of Masculinity and Femininity at the End of the World*, by describing the apocalyptic aftermath of a suicide bombing in *Heroes Reborn* (2015). Telecast almost fifteen years after the traumatic incidents it evokes, Bennett notes that *Heroes Reborn* is entirely symptomatic of a televisual culture that "has not yet entirely got over its preoccupation with the horrific events of September 11th, 2001" (1). To this end, *Gender in Post-9/11 American Apocalyptic TV* joins a weighty corpus of scholarly work similarly preoccupied with screen representations of 9/11 and its geopolitical repercussions. These include monographs such as Douglas Kellner's *Cinema Wars*, Stephen Prince's *Firestorm*, Kevin J. Wetmore's *Post-9/11 Horror in American Cinema*, Stacy Takacs's *Terrorism TV*, Fran Pheasant-Kelly's *Fantasy Film Post-9/11*, Guy Westwell's *Parallel Lines: Post-9/11 American Cinema* and Terence McSweeney's *The War on Terror and American Film*, as well as numerous edited collections on the same subject (Dixon; Schopp and Hill; Birkenstein et al.; Bragard et al.; Briefel and Miller; Lacey and Paget).

In *Gender in Post 9/11 American Apocalyptic TV*, Bennett argues that the enduring resonance of 9/11 has conjoined with contemporary telefantasy to produce a series of popular screen fictions which ideologically map national and geopolitical anxieties across gendered bodies, identities and social relations. Although fantasy texts have unquestionably been *the* popular locus of 9/11's innumerable post-traumatic reimaginings, Peter Biskind's recent *The Sky Is Falling* argues that the fashionable apocalypticism of twenty-first-century American film and television should be understood as an uncanny portent of a culture of "extremes" exemplified by the pre-eminence of Donald Trump. "[E]xtreme culture is apocalypse culture," suggests Biskind, "for the simple reason that the apocalypse provides a laboratory in which we can experiment with extreme attitudes, behaviours, and measures" (14). Similarly engaged with illustrative telefantasies like *The Walking Dead* (2010–) and *Falling Skies* (2011–2015), Bennett also uses this apocalyptic imaginary as a febrile testing ground for contemporary cultural politics. However, whereas Biskind is largely disinterested in gender politics, Bennett situates the representation of masculinity and femininity as her methodological Ground Zero. Building her thesis upon the combative work of Susan Faludi, Bennett strategically remobilises the core argument from Faludi's influential *The Terror Dream*. To wit: in the wake of 9/11, a broad sense of national vulnerability triggered a counter-progressive retrenchment into a

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traditional-conservative model of hetero-patriarchal gender relations. Exemplified by George W. Bush's transformation into a swaggeringly performative Texan-cowboy-cum-protective-father, Faludi argues that post-9/11 American culture reflexively turned towards mythic archetypes of "heroic male protectionism" and "vulnerable womenfolk" as a broadly reactionary psycho-social coping mechanism.

Restricting her study to serials produced between 2002–2012 and organising her thesis across four chapters, Bennett poses a series of questions which structure the critical trajectory of her book:

> How are gender roles and the power-inflected relationships between men and women portrayed in post-9/11 American apocalyptic television series? What recurring character types and narrative configurations related to gender can be found in them? Is it possible to draw any links between the representation of gender in these texts […] and the wider socio-political context at the beginning of the 21st century? (6)

In her first chapter Bennett engages with the representation of male heroism in *Heroes* (2006–2010) and *The Walking Dead*, focussing upon their respective adoption of two popular archetypes of American masculinity: the superhero and the cowboy. Interpreting both serials as examples of male melodrama, Bennett argues that *Heroes* and *The Walking Dead* reject the Manichean with-us-or-against-us rhetoric of the Bush administration, instead offering a more ambivalent view of masculine heroism. Although *The Walking Dead*'s early season pivots around a crudely conservative binary of active male leadership and passive female domesticity, Bennett nevertheless detects ideological fissures in its representation of masculinity. Mapping Deputy Sheriff Rick Grimes' (Andrew Lincoln) deteriorating mental state, Carl Grimes' (Chandler Riggs) introjection of his father's would-be regenerative violence and the Governor's (David Morrissey) warped sense of patriarchal protectionism, Bennett argues that postapocalyptic masculinities in *The Walking Dead* are often fractured and forever on the verge of violent pathology. Similarly, despite *Heroes*' relative tonal optimism and definitive Bush-era redemptive tagline ("save the cheerleader, save the world!"), Bennett locates uncertainty in the series' depiction of recuperative male heroism. "[I]n *Heroes* there seems to be a deliberate project underway to undermine the specific labels and dichotomies employed by the Bush administration", she writes (47). Whereas Faludi sees popular discourses as endorsing the "remasculinization" of the nation after the horrifying "feminisation" of 9/11, Bennett suggests that the melodramatic terrain of *Heroes* and *The Walking Dead* offer an affective form of ideological pushback in which "apparently heroic men [are] in fact the source of serious problems or threats" rather than agents of protective resolution (48).

In her second chapter, Bennett develops the theme of patriarchal succession in apocalyptic dramas by pointing to the thematically nihilistic impasse at the heart of *The Walking Dead*.

> The series is deeply pessimistic in outlook, providing little, if any, hope that its characters will escape from either their bleak situation or from the repressive social hierarchies that, just like the Walkers, refuse to die. One reason for this is that the show implies, mainly through the character of Carl, that the younger generation, due to a combination of volition and parental pressure, will imitate their parents' behaviour. (52)

Via close examination of *Battlestar Galactica* (2004–2009) and long-running cult series *Supernatural* (2004–), Bennett subsequently identifies the "Prince Hal narrative" as a key trope

in contemporary apocalyptic television (56). Derived from William Shakespeare's *Henry* tetralogy (1595–1599), Bennett's detailed reading understands the fractious relationship between fathers and sons in *Battlestar Galactica* and *Supernatural* as gendered melodramas of post-9/11 cultural dialectics. As such, the angst at the heart of esteemed military Commander Bill Adama's (Edward James Olmos) strained bond with his unhappy son in *Battlestar Galactica* serves as Oedipal register for American culture's fraught and divisive relationship with the ongoing "war on terror". Elsewhere, the dense neo-Christian mythology of *Supernatural* also employs patriarchal lineage and the suffering of handsome sons as core thematic tropes. Echoing the suicidal distress of Lee Adama (Jamie Bamber), Sam and Dean Winchester (Jared Padalecki and Jensen Ackles) are tormented by the weighty burden of paternal inheritance. At the same time, however, *Supernatural* ratifies the Winchester's filial introjection of their father's combative persona, a masculine skillset which allows the brothers to fend off the looming apocalypse. This persistent ambivalence regarding the authoritarian violence embodied by warrior-patriarchs like Bill Adama and John Winchester (Jeffrey Dean Morgan) is crucial to elucidating the post-9/11 gender politics of American telefantasy. For Bennett, the psychologically debilitating burden shouldered by beleaguered sons prevents these serials from being simply "progressive" or "reactionary", but more usefully understood as gendered sites of struggle and negotiation over American identity in the wake of profound national trauma.

This questioning of post-9/11 male authority becomes more explicit in the third chapter, which focuses upon the contrasting cultural politics of *Jericho* (2006–2008) and *Dollhouse* (2009–2010). Arguing that both serials offer critiques of apocalyptic patriarchal conspiracies, Bennett cautions against interpreting the Bush-esque figureheads behind these catastrophic plots as a politically oppositional move. "It may indicate an inability on the part of the programme makers to imagine true global power in the hands of anyone apart from a white male elite", she notes shrewdly (107). Like *The Walking Dead* and *Falling Skies*, then, *Jericho* mobilises postapocalyptic crisis in order to ideologically fetishize a return to a conservative system of self-governance underpinned by traditionally gendered imbalances of power. By contrast, *Dollhouse* powerfully employs Female Gothic tropes in order to critique the neoliberal machinations of the global sex industry. In Bennett's view, *Dollhouse* rejects the Tea Party–style libertarianism of a serial like *Jericho*, offering instead "matriarchal and socialist" political alternatives to the monstrous patriarchal corporations which ceaselessly exploit and reify women's bodies (137).

The final chapter examines a group of cult SF series featuring prominent "weaponized women", including *Firefly* (2002–2003), *Bionic Woman* (2007), *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles* (2008–2009), *Fringe* (2008–2013) and *Caprica* (2009–2010). Bennett frames her analysis with a discussion of the market logics underpinning postfeminist culture, mapping broader discourses of neoliberal biopolitics across the respective serials. Pointing to the fragile mental health of characters like Dr. Claire Saunders (Amy Acker) in *Dollhouse* and *Fringe*'s Olivia Dunham (Anna Torv), Bennett interprets their depressive and sometimes dysfunctional personality traits as symptoms of patriarchal techno-capitalism and the systemic exploitation of women's affective labour. However, Bennett is typically cautious in her political appraisal of these serials. While the posthuman agency of *Caprica*'s Zoe Graystone (Alessandra Torresani) allows her to resist patriarchal oppression, otherwise fascinating characters such as *Bionic Woman*'s Jaime Sommers (Michelle Ryan) and Cameron Phillips (Summer Glau) in *The Sarah Connor Chronicles* remain under the regulatory control of male authority figures and/or coercive corporate structures.

After carefully examining gender representation in numerous post-9/11 television serials, Bennett offers a somewhat downbeat conclusion:

> [O]verall, we are left with a sense that the programmes are willing to acknowledge that traditional gender roles and hierarchies are problematic but are largely unable or unwilling to imagine alternatives, despite the freedom theoretically offered by the non-realist genres (science fiction, fantasy and/or horror) to which the shows belong. (187)

While I have no argument with Bennett's measured conclusion, there is a nagging sense throughout that the book's great strengths—namely, its breadth of textual reference and unwavering critical emphasis on intersections of gender and genre—are also in many ways its core weaknesses. Perhaps the key issue here is Bennett's overreliance on Faludi's *The Terror Dream*, a tome which is rhetorically compelling but fatally compromised by its polemically overdetermined premise. By providing a scant introductory summary of *The Terror Dream*, which subsequently serves as a contextual framework for the following two hundred pages, Bennett's book somewhat disingenuously uses Faludi's work as both a methodological prop *and* a convenient punching bag. Reducing such a voluminous body of televisual work to such a narrow critical schema is something of a gamble, and it is difficult to shake off the feeling that Bennett too often loses sight of the complexity and thematic nuance of many of these serials. Not only do the contextual realities of 9/11 and its aftermath go missing with alarming regularity, but there is also a dubious elision of the pivotal shifts within American culture that occurred during Bennett's self-imposed timeframe.

The problems with this are manifold. For example, Bennett positions the metonymic surety of George W. Bush's "heroic cowboy" persona as an ideological mainstay throughout her book. In reality, of course, the president's approval ratings sunk steadily towards ignominy following his fleeting deification in the immediate post-9/11 moment. This national loss of faith in the Commander-in-Chief is registered in the depictions of male authority under Bennett's critical scrutiny, but the lack of reference to Bush's catastrophic fall from grace—a decline which provides the contextual backdrop for all these telefantasy serials—only underscores the slender methodological premise of the book. Elsewhere, the explicit post-9/11 allegorising of *Battlestar Galactica*—a series which intelligently refracted conflicting discourses about the "war on terror" throughout its five-year cycle—becomes reduced to little more than a portentous Oedipal tussle. This problem becomes even more apparent when Bennett casually elides both the election of Barack Obama and the global economic implosion in 2008. This is frustrating, not only because the epochal financial crisis should provide a resonant context for Bennett's discussion of neoliberal dystopia in the second half of the book, but also because a post-2008 serial like *The Walking Dead* has been persuasively interpreted by critics such as Katherine Sugg in terms of its specific reconfigurations of gender identity following the *economic* apocalypse.

Gender in Post-9/11 American Apocalyptic Cinema is at its most compelling when Bennett draws upon the vast body of critical scholarship devoted to twenty-first-century telefantasy. Tellingly, however, the most conceptually interesting examples of this material—Gerry Canavan on biopolitics in *Dollhouse*, say, or Linnie Blake on *Supernatural* and neoliberal selfhood—only serve to expose Bennett's oversimplified thesis. Conversely, the evasion of pivotal scholarly work on US conspiracy culture—by Timothy Melley, Patrick O'Donnell and Peter Knight respectively—undermines what should have been a boldly illuminating third chapter. Elsewhere, the book finds itself on shaky ground when Bennett contends that the fractious portrayal of father–son relationships in apocalyptic television serials is somehow

indicative of "a new crisis in masculine identity" (62). While it would be foolish to argue with Bennett's point about the centrality of Oedipal melodrama in postapocalyptic television, it is equally naïve to ignore the ideologically recuperative currency of beleaguered US menfolk. Sally Robinson's influential argument that recurrent cycles of male "crisis" are pro-hegemonic is pertinent here, as is Stella Bruzzi's contention that Stateside screen entertainment has ritually used (real or symbolic) fatherhood as a default template upon which to map broader cultural anxieties. Ultimately, however, this occasional lack of conceptual precision is less frustrating than the paucity of political expectation. This entirely symptomatic deficiency is exemplified when Bennett employs rudimentary critical tools—neo-Bechdel Testing and painfully reductive binaries of individual agency/victimhood—in order to valorise the insipid gender politics of *iZombie* (2015–2019). Of course, one could counter that Bennett's straightforward argument and lucid, jargon-free prose makes her book accessible to the wider genre fandom—an argument that might hold water if only the ludicrous price tag didn't ensure its unaffordability to all but the most economically privileged of aficionados.

Gender in Post-9/11 American Apocalyptic Cinema is, in effect, a barely disguised PhD thesis. As a prototypical slice of doctoral research, destined to be read by no more than four people, it works just fine. As an original intervention in a particularly overcrowded field, however, it often feels more than a little undercooked. As such, Bennett's volume is perhaps best reimagined within the terms of the serials she dissects; that is, as a snapshot of a postapocalyptic culture where nurturing programmes of doctoral study have transmogrified into *Falling Skies*–style academic boot camps. In an uncanny echo of *The Walking Dead*, the modern academy is a zombified world driven by a publish-or-die survivalist mentality. Mirroring the posthuman dystopia of *Dollhouse*, emergent scholars become reified human capital on a dehumanising production line of quantifiable "outputs" and "impacts". This abyssian sense of professional idealism relentlessly hollowed out by campus realpolitik is only underscored by the overripe endorsements which decorate the book's reverse cover—examples of a "blurb economy" in which genuine intellectual reciprocity has been synergistically replaced by a cyborg facsimile. Just as so many of the shows Bennett analyses find it all but impossible to imagine a future that transcends the nightmares of the recent past, the production context of *Gender in Post-9/11 American Apocalyptic Cinema* demonstrates all too clearly that, for the twenty-first-century neoliberal academy, the apocalypse is already here.

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Martin Fradley has taught Film and Media Studies widely across the UK university sector. His recent work appears in the anthologies *Tainted Love: Screening Sexual Perversion* (2017), *The Politics of* Twin Peaks (2019), *Make America Hate Again: Trump-Era Horror and the Politics of Fear* (2019), and *Media, Technology and New Generations: Representing Millennial Generation and Generation Z* (2019). He is coeditor of *Shane Meadows: Critical Essays* (Edinburgh UP, 2013) and author of *Straight Outta Uttoxeter! The Films of Shane Meadows* (Auteur, forthcoming 2020).