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Review of Redesigning Women: Television after the network era

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Redesigning Women: Television after the Network Era
AMADA D. LOTZ, 2006
Urbana, IL, University of Illinois Press
pp. 224, tables, \$25.00 (cloth)

Author Amanda Lotz cites the television landscape of the post-network era as one of diversified female characters, female-centered shows and cable channels specifically targeting women. Lotz carefully reviews the emergence, evolution, and targeting strategies of three cable channels, Lifetime Television, The Women's Entertainment Network (WE) and Oxygen as they work to attract and retain adult female viewers. With Lifetime debuting first in 1984, it has since held the lead in ratings, women-centered content, and brand recognition with a strategy of broadly appealing to women. Oxygen and WE soon followed about a decade later with each developing their own particular niche: Oxygen with more of an edge and a challenge to traditional female portrayals and a clear contrast to Lifetime; and WE as more of a "middle-of-the road" network lacking the issue-oriented programming of Lifetime and the edgier, female empowerment programming of Oxygen. As Lotz argued, despite each network's particular angle, the advent of these networks allowed for more complex representation of women in series such as *The Division* (2001-4) and *Strong Medicine* (2000-6) on Lifetime, as well as reality based shows such as *I've Got a Secret* (2000-1) and *Women & the Badge* (2001) on Oxygen, and *Style World* (2000-3) and *Winning Women* (2003) on WE. Furthermore, with traditional broadcast networks (i.e., CBS, NBC & ABC) recognizing the inevitable segmenting of the audience due to an expanded cable line-up, a changing audience, and women in search of strong female characters, broadcast network television also responded with a succession of series. Lotz points particularly to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995-2001), *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002), *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), *Judging Amy* (1999-2005), and *Providence* (1999-2002) among others. Lotz works to persuade her readers to understand these texts as progressive and as an effort to challenge dominant ideological gender roles. Lotz challenges feminist media critics to recognize, in a world of pleasure and politics, that it is not appropriate to regularly claim 'containment' of media content via hegemonic and political economy forces, but that these shows and programming changes are worthy of note in the diversification of the representation of women and women's diverse lives. Lotz concedes these are not ideal feminist icons while simultaneously questioning whether this is even something attainable in a market, profit driven industry.

Lotz is right to recognize the significant, progressive changes with regard to the representation of women in television. Clearly, changes in American women's lives as well as the fragmentation of television audiences have contributed to the changes in programming. Women more frequently appear as complex characters than as one-dimensional eye-candy. However, as a feminist media critic myself, I find Lotz applauds this progress too generously. Although Lotz acknowledges a continued need for improvement, she sacrifices a handful of progressive characters in place of real progress in the representation of women from diverse backgrounds. For example, there is no female character on television today that even comes close to the strength of Maude from the self-titled television show in the 1970s, where abortion and women's rights were dealt with in very real ways. Certainly, a variety of the shows and programming

strategies Lotz discusses are improvements from 1970s *Charlie's Angels* (1976-81) or *Wonder Woman* (1976-79), but the improvements have not been satisfying or significant enough to warrant applauding these changes to the degree Lotz argues. After all, since the publication date of the book, the television landscape has been witness to *Grey's Anatomy* (2005-present) and *Private Practice* (2007-present), both of which perpetuate the white, thin, heteronormative trope of men rescuing women, even if the women is a strong, independent career woman. Both then and now, there are strong, independent, complex female characters, such as in *The Closer* (2005-present) with Kyra Sedgewick and *Damages* (2007-present) with Glenn Close, and *Maude* (1972-78) and *Rhoda* (1974-78) of the 1970s. However, these shows air alongside and are often overshadowed by programming that still continues to represent women as one-dimensional and stereotypical. It seems as though, the more things change, the more they stay the same – unfortunately.

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