

(En)gendering the Boob Tube: Technology, Agency, and the Action TV Femme

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Images of the feminine cyborg—both threatening and desirable—have haunted popular culture for many years now. This posthuman character serves as a mediator in technologically ambiguous times, where humans both fear and fetishize their technological counterparts. The relationship between women and technology is a tenuous one, full of contradictions. While women and technology are often depicted as enemies and polar opposites, some popular cultural depictions combine woman and machine as a singular representation. In her essay, "Reading Cyborgs Writing Feminism," Anne Balsamo highlights the complexities of the relationships between gender and technology and suggests that, ironically, "woman's development is not separate from technological development, but has, in fact, displayed a similar trajectory. Her history illustrates several points of intersection with technology, points at which she has been forced to become like the cyborg, a hybrid creature of fiction and reality" (152). As would be expected, the multifarious relationship Balsamo alludes to is only further complicated by the mercurial nature of technology, cultural gender biases, and anti-technology sentiments.

Within recent years, action television programs have begun to feature more female protagonists, who appear to have more agency. Many of the recent action heroines have utilized technology in ways that have given them more empowerment than their predecessors. By comparing popular action television heroines from before the digital age (such as Charlie's Angels and The Bionic Woman), with similar shows from the mid-90s and after (such as Alias and Dark Angel), it becomes obvious how technology affected the representation of action heroines. The use of various technologies in the more recent

shows have allowed female protagonists to become multi-dimensional and less dependent on the male figures who have (to some extent in each show) created them. Ultimately, the technological power displayed in these shows is a representation of the changes that have occurred in the relationship between women and technology over the past 25 years.

Simultaneously, older paradigms remain consistent and the technological agency displayed by these heroines is balanced by an increased amount of melodrama. Thus, in this new form of programming the amount of power displayed by action heroines is consistent with earlier shows, but new technologies have provided a means for the focal point of this power to shift. Not unlike the relationship between women and technology itself, the representations of action heroines are riddled with contradictions.

It's a Cyborg After All: Gender and Technological Agency

In order to examine how technology has given agency to fictional television heroines, it is first necessary to understand the mercurial relationship between women and technology. The gender biases in the technological spectrum, while dubious in nature, are very much a reality. For many years—during and before the digital and industrial ages—Western society has held women to be non-technological creatures. In her book Cracking the Gender Code, Melanie Stewart Millar explains some of the sociological roots of this predicament:

In contemporary western culture, men are assumed to make the machines, and, if culturally appropriate, women may use them. There is an unavoidable common sense to this observation; after all, what could be more closely identified with traditional images of masculinity than the technological "Progress of Man" from so-called barbarism to civilization? Such an identification is reinforced by millions of historically constituted gender constructions that have come to define our very notions of what it is to be male and female. This relentlessly dualistic symbolic order has been repeatedly redeployed and vigorously

—at times violently—defended in the history of western culture and political thought; the masculine is associated with reason, science, and culture and production in the public sphere; the feminine with passion, nature, and reproduction in the private (domestic) sphere (15).

Millar's analysis of the cultural biases between femininity and technology are unfortunately not exaggerated. While many women may have taken part in a variety of technological developments, including "mythological evidence [that] connects women strongly with the taming of fire," and a variety of medical advancements, including developments of surgery, penicillin, sulfa-drugs, DPT vaccines, and breast cancer research, most are systematically excluded from the history of these developments (Stanley 5, 7, 11-16). Given the contradictions between myths and facts of women's relationship to technology, it is unsurprising that technology and masculinity are still falsely linked.

To further complicate the struggles between gender and technology there are debates regarding how technology affects feminism, and whether new technologies can legitimately offer a means for women to acquire more equality in Western society. While some feminist groups (primarily the cyberfeminists) feel that digital technologies offer a means for evening out the playing field, others (most notably the liberal feminists) suggest that it is only another way that women must work to keep up with men and maintain their constantly slipping foothold in society. Cyberfeminism is described as covering "feminist simulations of technology, most literally through debates about power, identity, and autonomy, and the role of new technologies in the transformation of these characteristics" (Kennedy 285). The liberal feminist approach to gender/technology issues is far more traditional. Primarily, the focus of the liberal feminist argument is that if women had more access to technology and training, they would automatically be

subsumed into a technological environment, and more likely to become programmers, engineers, and users of technology. Ultimately, the rationale is that if women pushed their way into a male-dominated technological environment, they would be best suited to leap across the gender gap (Millar 56).

It would seem that while, in many ways, relationships between women and technology on older shows are drawn from liberal feminism, the newer shows use cyberfeminist theory to support their technologically adept heroines. In order to relate the newer action heroines to cyberfeminism it is necessary to better understand its core figure: the cyborg. The image of the cyborg is central to many cyberfeminist writings. Arguably, Donna Haraway's (ironic) "Cyborg Manifesto" was one of the most important cyberfeminist writings, which sparked the cyberfeminist movement. Haraway attributes the emergence of the cyborg (or cybernetic organism) to three crucial boundary breakdowns in recent years: (1) the boundary between human and animal, (2) the boundary between organism and machine, and (3) the boundary between physical and non-physical (151-153). She explains that,

By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics. The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centers structuring any possibility of historical transformation (150).

The cyborg, therefore, represents "a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self," and according to Haraway this is, "the self that feminists must code" (163). Haraway contends that by embracing the cyborg as an ideal figure, and embracing technology, women are given new opportunities for empowerment. She explains,

There are several consequences to taking seriously the imagery of cyborgs as other than our enemy. [...] Intense pleasure in skill, machine skill, ceases to be a sin, but an aspect of embodiment. The machine is not an *it* to be animated, worshipped, and dominated. The machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment. We can be responsible for machines. They do not dominate or threaten us. We are responsible for boundaries; we are they. (180)

Haraway explains that the changing boundaries between man and machine also help to loosen gender boundaries. She asserts that the cyborg is post-gender, and its inherent bisexuality frees it from the stereotypes and politics involved in traditional forms of feminism (150-1).

Once Haraway's "cyborg feminist theory" was popularized, the image of the cyborg became central to the cyberfeminist philosophy. Other theorists began to dissect the image of the cyborg and use it as a cyberfeminist mascot. Most notably, Balsamo's Technologies of the Gendered Body examines how specific conditions of women's integration with technology (through medicine, bodybuilding, cosmetic surgery, and the internet) create a new landscape. She explains,

By reasserting a material body, the cyborg rebukes the disappearance of the body within postmodernism. Yet it never contradicts the variety of discursive constructions of the female body. The cyborg connects a discursive body with a historically material body by taking account of the ways in which the body is constructed within different social and cultural formations. Ultimately, the cyborg challenges feminism to search for ways to study the body as it is at once both a cultural construction and a material fact of human life. The impact of this is decisive: understanding that the body is culturally not "naturally" constructed means that the body is not solely a matter of materiality; nor can it be reductively a matter of discourse. (33-4)

Balsamo ultimately agrees with Haraway that the image of the cyborg can be seen as a "figuration of posthuman identity in postmodernity" (18). Balsamo's representation of the cyborg moves beyond Haraway's theoretical postulations, and shows some of the

more practical uses of appropriating the cyborg as a role model. By specifically focusing on ways that technology can be enmeshed with humanity to form empowerment (specifically in women), Balsamo manages to make the image of the cyborg more reality than fantasy. It is this realized image of the cyborg that, in many ways, will later become essential to describing television action heroines.

Another theorist, Rosi Braidotti, took the figure of the cyborg even further. According to Braidotti, Dolly Parton, Elizabeth Taylor, and Michael Jackson, with their multiple artificial reconstructions, are the spokespersons for the cyborg. Using these figures as examples, Braidotti speaks of "embodiment" as opposed to "bodies" when explaining the cyborg condition:

I would like to suggest as a consequence that it is more adequate to speak of our body in terms of embodiment, that is to say of multiple bodies or sets of embodied positions. Embodiment means that we are situated subjects, capable of performing sets of (inter)actions which are discontinuous in space and time. (3)

Braidotti's theories are indicative of a broader interpretation of the word "cyborg," showing that theorists are more open to new ways of understanding the body and its convergence with machines. Within the context of this convergence, machines can be considered prosthetic attachments to humans. This naturalization between man and machine has become known as "posthumanism." Posthumanism's more fluid definition of "body" is ultimately a reflection of how humans deal with and integrate themselves with technology.

Enter the Boob Tube

Returning to the premise of this essay, technology has played a significant role in the changing nature (and agency) of the action television heroine over the past 25 years.

In order to understand how technology has infiltrated the representations of newer heroines it is necessary to examine the more masculine technologies of the earlier characters. Women entered the action television show arena relatively late. Not until the early 1970s were women featured in leading roles in American action television programs. Policewoman (1974-8) was the first show to feature a woman as the primary protagonist in an action series. Due to the success of Policewoman, it was soon followed by the extremely popular shows Charlie's Angels and The Bionic Woman. In her book Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture, Sherrie Inness explores the complexity of these shows and their female protagonists. She explains,

The programs that featured these early heroines had a dual purpose: they offered women viewers potentially powerful role models, but the shows simultaneously helped to reaffirm that women, while more capable than generally given credit for, were still less competent than men. The representation of feminine toughness was in part a response to the very real feminist activism of the 1960s and 1970s and women's demands for personal and political power. During this time of profound social upheaval, television shows such as The Avengers, The Bionic Woman, and Charlie's Angels presented women as far more tough than did shows of the past. [sic] Yet, these new programs also emphasized the importance of femininity and sex appeal for women, thus diffusing the threat by second wave feminism. (32)

These shows, therefore, represented many conflicting ideas about femininity and early feminism simultaneously. While on one hand these female characters exerted more power than their televised predecessors did, they were still a product of Laura Mulvey's "male gaze": usually fetishized and often still rescued by male characters. Clearly, these early heroines showed a new kind of feminine representation, but were still trapped within the limitations of televised women.

Charlie's Angels was a good example of these mixed representations. Debuting in 1976, Charlie's Angels featured three female private detectives that had forsaken the

police force after their careers were limited by the sexism of superiors. The “Angels” chose, instead, to pursue a career with Charlie Townsend, a mysterious millionaire who sent them on a variety of more “dangerous” cases, communicating with them only through a speakerphone. By fetishizing its heroines in tight and revealing clothing, Charlie’s Angels was one of the first shows to display their protagonists in such a blatantly sexual manner. The show featured the Angels as sturdy career women who wanted to be taken seriously, but they were also often undercover and costumed, a practice which carried many complications. Inness explains:

Going undercover—masquerading as someone else—shows the constructed nature of identity. All is illusion. The constructed nature of the Angels’ identities is highlighted; they are not what they seem to be. Their toughness is brought into question because masquerade forces its audiences to question the nature of identity [...] Toughness, the show hints, is perhaps as artificial as the Angels’ roles as hookers, nurses, or roller derby queens. (43)

Thus, the Angel’s costuming and masquerading made them appear weaker. Furthermore, their masquerades were often highly sexualized, having them play the parts of centerfold models, hookers, dancers, and other career choices which allowed them to wear revealing and provocative outfits. Overall, many aspects of Charlie’s Angels left its audience with a variety of mixed messages suggesting empowerment, oppression, and consumption.

The Bionic Woman, which also first aired in 1976, similarly left its audience with mixed messages about female agency. A spin-off of The Six Million Dollar Man, The Bionic Woman centered around Jaime Summers, a former tennis pro, and the childhood sweetheart of Steve Austin (the six million dollar man, himself). When Jaime is injured in a parachuting accident, Steve Austin pleads with the creators of his bionically enhanced body to help the dying Jaime. Jaime is both saved and improved upon; she is given the

upgrade of two bionic legs, a bionic arm, and a bionic ear. Steve Austin is quickly ushered out of her storyline, using a memory loss that Jaime suffers as a hazy excuse. As the series progresses, Jaime spends her weekdays working as a schoolteacher, and weekends spying for the government. Inness posits that Jaime's dual role weakens her depiction, explaining that, "A woman might be a secret agent on the weekend, but during the week she still pursued a stereotypical woman's role of being a teacher. In this way, television supported and perpetuated gender norms by presenting them as perfectly 'natural'" (46). Jaime's job as a schoolteacher as well as her easygoing and peaceful nature helped to counterbalance the potential threat posed by her bionic body. In Reading Television, John Fiske and John Hartley discusses inherent contradictory nature of The Bionic Woman, explaining that,

The series shows a woman in social roles traditionally reserved for men. Jaime Sommers is strong, able to fight and beat men. She upholds those moral values which she asserts with her bionic right arm, and defends us from the plots she identifies with her bionic ear. In all this she represents a willingness on behalf of our society to see women as men's equals. But of course society itself has not yet translated the willingness into fact and neither has Jaime Sommers. Despite her manly role she is still a man's view of women: polite, willing to make her boss coffee, and attractively dressed according to male definitions of attractiveness. (192)

Thus, while Jaime Sommers is far less sexualized than the Angels, she still sends contradictory and confusing messages to the audience. On one hand she shows that women can be more powerful than men, but simultaneously she hints that women should still play along as powerless and domestic.

While there have been many analyses of the women in the aforementioned 1970s action shows, none have specifically examined the technological agency of the heroines. The weapons, devices, and, in the case of Jaime Sommers, a modified body all serve as

means for the extraordinary power of these seemingly ordinary woman. It is the use of technology that is crucial to understanding the agency displayed by action heroines. I posit that the older, more masculine technologies of the 1970s act as a foil to the heroines, while many more recent heroines are empowered by their more feminized technological weaponry.

In the case of Charlie's Angels, there were two primary technological developments that aided them in their crime fighting: guns and phones. The use of guns in many ways is a logical progression from the male-driven action programs that preceded Charlie's Angels. Certainly, both police shows and westerns (the two original forms of action shows) use guns as their primary weapon. Nonetheless, the Angels treated guns far differently than their male-action predecessors did. While, traditionally, the male heroes of action shows might shoot guns at enemies and occasionally hurt or kill them, the Angels very rarely shot their guns. Instead, they carried their guns in handbags, only occasionally taking them out and only very rarely shooting them. More often than not, if one of the Angels used her gun, the bullet was used as a warning shot, or to startle the enemy. At the end of the last episode of the first season, "The Blue Angels," an enemy is shot by one of the Angels. Due to camera angles, though, it is impossible to tell which Angel shot the man. This does not allow the audience to implicate any one of the Angels for his death. These tactics detracted from the potential power of the gun-wielding heroines. Ultimately, by subsuming the primary weapon of male heroes, the Angels had a very hollow sense of agency.

At first glance, the telephone may seem to be a dubious technology to highlight in this study. While the phone is not a weapon, it was one of the primary tools for crime-

fighting on many shows, particularly Charlie's Angels. Furthermore, newer telephone technologies were displayed prominently in the show. When compared to a show such as Alias, these technologies may seem archaic, and old-fashioned, but in 1976 speaker phones, cellular phones, and car phones were not used by the general public. Therefore, by showcasing the cutting-edge telephones as their tools, the Angels appeared technologically adept.

Furthermore the technology of the telephone, in effect, represented the Angels' patriarchal disembodied boss. Charlie, whom the Angels never saw in person, would give his orders through the square speakerphone that sat in the Townsend Detective Agency office. Despite any curiosity that the Angels may have had as to Charlie's identity, the speakerphone was the only representation of him that they would ever see. The power of the technology was reiterated to the audience in zoomed images of the stationary speakerphone while Charlie's orders were booming through it. In effect, it was this technology which controlled and gave orders to the show's heroines. Thus, rather than being a means of agency, the telephone technology represented the Angels' obedience and their willingness to accept their patriarchal employer.

In many ways, The Bionic Woman would appear to be more empowered by technology than the Angels. Jaime Sommers was the recipient of technological enhancements that could, conceivably, give her the power to be stronger than most men (with the obvious exception of The Six Million Dollar Man's Steve Austin). Her bionic body gave Jaime Sommers the ability to jump higher, hit harder, hear better, and run faster than the average human.

Nonetheless, while her bionics gave Jaime the potential physically to surpass the men around her, it did not add to her sense of agency nearly as much as it could have. This is immediately obvious in the show's pilot episode: Jaime's bionic body is a less expensive duplicate of a body already created for a man. (Jaime's boss Oscar Goldman explains that she didn't cost quite six million dollars, because her parts are much "smaller.") Thus, the bionic woman is a spin-off, a circumstantial duplicate, both as a television show and a bionic being. Additionally, Jaime rarely shows off her skills in front of men (with the exception of those who already know of her abilities, or, occasionally children that appear in the series). Primarily, she uses her skills to obediently follow Oscar Goldman's orders and rarely uses them to challenge gender stereotypes.

While the Angels and Jaime Sommers were physically weaker than the heroines on recent shows, they were not weighed down by romantic or melodramatic plotlines. The more recent action heroines on shows such as Alias and Dark Angel are submerged in far more melodramatic plotlines than their predecessors. In the introduction to her book, Home is Where the Heart is: Studies in Melodrama and the Women's Film, Christine Gledhill discusses the paradoxes in feminist reactions to melodrama. According to Gledhill, melodramatic films and television shows often feature women in sadistic situations and are ultimately the result of the mainstream "patriarchal psyche."

Conversely, Gledhill also notes that:

Where film theory saw in melodrama's exposure of masculinity's contradictions a threat to the unity of the (patriarchal) realist/narrative text, feminists found a genre distinguished by the large space it opened to female protagonists, the domestic sphere and socially mandated "feminine" concerns. (10)

In general, these contradictory theoretical approaches make melodrama difficult to analyze. Nonetheless, melodrama's double-edged sword provides a means to make the potentially castrating heroines on Alias and Dark Angel more feminine and less threatening. It is ultimately this melodrama—various love interests and family problems—which provides a foil to the empowerment that technology has given the heroines of these shows. Previous heroines on shows such as The Bionic Woman and Charlie's Angels had far less agency, but at the same time they also had less melodrama and romantic plotlines. The series format of these shows forced romantic and personal plotlines to be limited to single episodes. While more recent shows, feature heroines with technological agency, they all have melodramatic plotlines that weaken them.

Ultimately, the heroines on shows such as Charlie's Angels and The Bionic Woman hinted at the future promise of more empowered women in television programming. Despite this, none of these heroines displayed any agency, and none utilized their weapons or technology as effectively as they might have. Instead of being powerful warriors, they paved the way for the crop of new female action heroines that began to arrive in the early 1990s. In their book, Athena's Daughters: Television's New Women Warriors, Frances Early and Kathleen Kennedy explore these new heroines. In comparison to the more recent characters they remark that the older action heroines,

... used and controlled violence to obtain the just ends of the democratic state. Each held her own in a fight and mastered the use of weapons. Yet acceptable boundaries for female violence constrained each. Moreover, this version of the woman warrior was seldom given an existence independent of a male boss or protector. (4)

Despite these shortcomings, the early action heroines helped to create a genre that would be rekindled in the 1990s.

The more recent crop of action heroines—from the 1990s through the present—are far more prevalent and have become far more complex than their predecessors. Early and Kennedy refer to the newer television “women warriors” as “glamorous, larger-than-life, yet disarmingly recognizable” (3). In many ways the televised woman warrior is now more powerful than her predecessors, and Early and Kennedy posit that this is, in part, due to many of the newer feminisms (as discussed in chapter one). They explain,

The woman warrior of the 1990s emerged as a reaction to the perceived limits of the 1970s feminism and 1980s conservatism. She rejected the previous decade’s gender conformity, especially the practice of heterosexuality, and acceptance of male political leadership. Rather than depend on men to protect her, the new woman warrior mastered violence. She was not restricted to how she used her body or her weapons. She could match any man’s physical prowess, command of technology, rationality, and leadership. Nor did she accept the 1980s sexual bargain. Instead, she often used her sexuality as an offensive weapon, oscillating between seducing possible foes, engaging in casual sexual encounters, and rejecting exclusive heterosexuality. (5)

Here, Early and Kennedy hint that “command of technology” may be one of many ways that the women warriors of television can “match” men, but they do not speculate that it is this technology that provides a focal point for their power.

Times have changed in the 25 years since Charlie’s Angels and The Bionic Woman aired. The action television heroines of today are stronger, more technologically adept, but also more melodramatic and vulnerable than their predecessors. Today, shows such as Alias and Dark Angel have given audiences far more complicated heroines which, in large part, is due to their relationships with technology.

Alias: Technology, Femininity and *Fabulous* Accessories

The show Alias provides representations of the contradictory gender-technology relationship, primarily through the use of technological weapons disguised as feminine

accessories. Additionally, while Alias's heroine, Sydney, is extremely technologically able she is constantly submerged in melodramatic plotlines that make her appear weaker. Alias is centered primarily around the subterfuge of its heroine, Sydney Bristow, and it is Sydney's weapons, most often technological, that provide her with a means of empowerment. Additionally, Sydney's body also functions as a weapon, and while she does not have cyborg modifications like Dark Angel's Max Guevera, to some extent the audience is made to believe that Sydney's body was created and bred to be a spy. In this way, Sydney's body carries a cyborg, technologized context.

Sydney's body—both powerful and sexualized—is her primary and unchanging weapon when fighting enemies both institutional and personal. Not unlike The Bionic Woman, her strength is both admired and fetishized by the men she is often defeating or saving. In the first season of Alias, Sydney is rarely seen carrying a gun, and only shown shooting a gun in the opening credits. But a gun seems unnecessary: Sydney's well-defined and curvy body provides a far more entertaining display of defensive fighting than a gun would, and creates a dual message of both empowerment and fetish. By using Sydney's body as a weapon, the producers are able to create an agile feminist heroine and at the same time display the attractiveness of her body.

On one hand, these action sequences featuring Sydney fighting are not dissimilar to the song and dance spectacles that Laura Mulvey speaks of in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." According to Mulvey:

The presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation. This alien presence then has to be integrated into cohesion with the narrative. (33)

Sydney's fight scenes function similarly on Alias. Using a variety of martial arts, boxing, and other fighting techniques, Sydney's body is displayed to the audience. Due to the often low-cut, high-cut, skin-tight, and sheer costumes she wears on her spy missions—where she does the majority of her fighting—the combat scenes help to showcase Sydney's body. As in a musical or dance number, these scenes stop the diegetic action, which cannot recover until the fighting is done. The primary distinction between the Mulvey model and the newer Alias model is that it is not necessarily the male who restarts the diegetic flow: fight scenes end when someone has won, and Sydney often (though not always) wins. An example of this kind of spectacle fighting is seen in the second episode of the first season, "So it Begins." In a scene in Moscow, late in the episode, Sydney poses as a maid (in, of course, a sexy French maid costume), in order to steal documents from an arms-dealer's hotel room. While rummaging through the documents, she is surprised by a bodyguard. At the point that the action starts, the diegetic flow pauses in order to watch Sydney fight. The camera angles focus on Sydney who manages to perform numerous jump-kicks in her very short maid's uniform and heels. It is not until the bodyguard is knocked out that Sydney can go back to looking for her documents. This formula is, of course, commonplace in the action genre—both television and film. But because it is a woman winning the fight, it is both similar to and different from the spectacle discussed by Mulvey. Sydney Bristow's fighting spectacles are usually controlled by her, contradicting the more traditional forms of spectacle.

Because Sydney has some control over her own spectacle she is a representation of female empowerment. More often than not Sydney is seen fighting men rather than other women, and more often than not she wins these fights. Her power and abilities are

therefore recognized by male characters on the show whom she often saves or helps. But unlike The Bionic Woman or Charlie's Angels, Sydney saving men is rarely recognized as strange or out of the ordinary. Immediately following the scene as a maid, Sydney realizes that her partner is in trouble and reassures him "not to panic"; she will be there to help in "two minutes." When she does rescue him from the situation, her actions are treated as commonplace. This attitude is very different from The Bionic Woman or Charlie's Angels where a woman rescuing a man is always shown as out of the ordinary. Sydney Bristow is not shown as an anomaly, and that unto itself is a potentially empowering image.

For the most part, Sydney shows her cyborg-self through body extensions disguised as tools or weapons. Her spy technology is more personal than most hand-held weapons, and in many ways seems integrated with her personality when she is working as a spy. For example, in order to communicate with her partner, the CIA, or SD-6, Sydney uses a headset/microphone device that, for the most part, is invisible to the audience (reminiscent of Jaime Sommers' bionic hearing). Because we are unable to see the technology, it almost appears that when she is talking to people through these devices she is communicating through superhuman abilities. While the audience knows that this is part of the show's technology, this kind of disembodied communication helps to present the show's star as a cyborg. Indeed, it almost seems as though this enhancement is physically part of her body. But like all of her other technological adaptations, the headset is removable; Sydney is not given these technological abilities when communicating in her personal life. This ability to remove her technological shell makes Sydney a unique character, in that it allows her to switch back and forth between newer

and older representations of femininity. The constant shifting between technology and femininity creates a contradictory aspect to Sydney's representation.

Each time Sydney is given a new accessory, its ability and mutability is broken down for her (and the audience) in a staff meeting. By presenting the usefulness of the tool or weapon and simultaneously stressing its invisibility as an accessory, the audience is made aware of her technological acumen as well as her femininity—most of the tools have some kind of feminine edge to them. For example, in "So It Begins," Sydney's tech-toy is in the form of a ring: the top stone (when properly manipulated) puts people to sleep when it touches the skin. As jewelry, the ring automatically reinforces Sydney's femininity. This is paralleled later in the episode when she is back home and laments over her lost love while holding the engagement ring given to her by her dead fiancée. Meanwhile, non-diegetic music plays Kate Bush's "This Woman's Work," subtly implying that Sydney is constantly at a crossroads of choosing between her personal life and her spy life. In her essay, "Women as Slaves in Gold Chains," Mary Jo Deegan remarks on the significance of jewelry in American culture. She explains that women combine numerous items of jewelry which work together to create a feminine identity:

They relate to a particularly female presentation of self. They are part of the "identity kit" of being a female person in this society. Whether they are emotionally meaningful or superficial, a deeper structural meaning is displayed of female/gendered behavior. Within the context of modern advertisements, the meaning assigned to these objects is associated with traditional heterosexuality and class structure. (73)

While it is easy to consider this analysis in terms of the engagement ring, Sydney's spy accessories are far more complex. Because Sydney's identity is constantly changing, her jewelry and accessories must always be a reflection of these changes. When Sydney wears her spy ring she is able to be an entirely different person than when she wears her

engagement ring. Additionally, due to the symbolic nature of the engagement ring, the parallel creates a heavy-handed suggestion that now that she has lost her fiancée she is more symbolically bound to her spy career. The underlying message here is somewhat unsettling, implying that a woman taking her work-life too seriously is at risk of losing her love life.

Rings are not the only example of feminine accessories that are facades for weapons or tools. Throughout the series, Sydney is given other pieces of jewelry (earrings and necklaces), as well as other accessories that might camouflage well into a young woman's lifestyle, such as makeup, cell phones, purses, and glasses. Glasses are used very often as disguises and spy tools. Obviously, Sydney Bristow is not the first spy to use accessories as technological weapons. James Bond's spy tools have had movie fame for over forty years. Bond, like Sydney, uses a variety of accessories (watches, pens, and cuff links) to camouflage his technological spy-toys. But the primary difference between the accessories of James Bond and those of Sydney Bristow lies in men's and women's different relationship to accessories. Unlike women, men are not defined by the jewelry they wear (or "identity kits" as Deegan refers to them), nor by other wearable accessories. Jewelry does not bear the same social significance for men; therefore, a weapon disguised as an accessory has less personal meaning for a male character than a female character. More importantly, James Bond carries a weapon that in most cases proves more useful than his spy toys: his gun. Because Sydney does not always carry a gun, it is these weapon-tool accessories that are most likely to save her life, and they are therefore a more integral part of her identity. By receiving enhanced accessories that will undoubtedly help or save her in each episode, she is maintaining a constant link to her

cyborg extensions. Sydney Bristow's power is fortified by being able to change or remove her cyborg attachments after each adventure. The show's title, Alias, stresses this dual representation, and Sydney's ability to change.

This ability to switch back and forth—aided by all of her various body extensions—gives Sydney far more power than many of her female action predecessors. Similar to the permanent body alterations Rosi Braidotti speaks of, when Sydney wears her technological extensions she becomes a new version of the cyborg. But the difference between Braidotti's model and Sydney's model is the impermanence of the alterations: as soon as the cyborg parts are removed, Sydney is revealed as soft, frightened, sad, or angry. Her spy, cyborg self rarely allows any emotions, giving her the appearance of being more machine-like. As a cyborg, she does not blurt out cute puns or commentary while she is fighting (like many other actions stars, both male and female) and only speaks as part of her official communication.

Sydney's other self—her non-cyborg personality—reveals her to be highly melodramatic. Rarely an episode goes by that Sydney does not cry, at least once, and the softness in her makeup and clothing reflects this difference. The scene following Sydney's spy-work in "So It Begins" illustrates this: holding her engagement ring and lamenting, Sydney is next seen naked in a bathtub, still holding her ring. Her semi-nudity is in no way sexualized: Sydney's nakedness is far more of a showcase of her vulnerability than her body. In essence, while Sydney's cyborg self is the protagonist in the action parts of Alias, her sensitive, feminine side stars in the melodramatic scenes. Alias is a serial show, and like other serials, plotlines continue from week to week, similar to a soap opera. The melodrama in Sydney's relationships with her family,

friends, and lovers is therefore not dissimilar from other nighttime dramas. While, on one hand the melodrama in Alias makes Sydney appear weaker and less threatening to male audiences, it also balances her character and gives her the ability of transformation. By switching between roles, she can portray both a fantasy action star and a more tangible woman dealing with melodramatic issues, such as difficulties between work and personal life and estranged relationships with parents. These melodramatic elements contradict Sydney's technological empowerment and ultimately show her as a more conventional representation of femininity. While her technological tools may make her appear more powerful than the Angels or Jaime Sommers, Sydney Bristow's melodrama portrays her as weak similar to her action television predecessors. Ultimately, the representation of Alias's Sydney Bristow creates a binary and contradictory theme of femininity versus technology—a theme which resonates with the gender-technology debates previously discussed.

Dark Angel: Tales of a Transgenic Drama Queen

Dark Angel's heroine, Max Guevera, is also wrought with contradictory elements: vacillating between technological agency and melodramatic powerlessness. Max's technology is far more personal and far more complicated than that used by Sydney Bristow on Alias. Max is, by any definition, a cyborg. Created out of a secret government project called Manticore, Max was born in a lab where the scientists used recombinant DNA to turn her into a superhuman soldier. Her DNA gives her the ability to jump higher, run faster, fight harder, and see and hear better than the average human. At the age of nine, Max and twelve other children in the "X5" project escaped Manticore, and she now lives on the run in fear of being discovered by government operatives. Max is

presented to the audience as an anomaly: she is both military and girlish, she is both feminist and feminine, and she is both technologically superior and humanized. Her humanization is partially provided for by her friend and love interest, the liberal-minded philanthropist Logan Cale. Throughout the series, Max protects Logan, and runs missions for him that are far more humanistic than militaristic.

The audience is constantly reminded of the horrors of Max's early childhood, both to reinforce melodrama and to show the highly masculine military she is fighting. This information is provided to the audience in the form of flashbacks (some repetitive) in every episode. The militarized Max is androgynous (partly due to her pre-pubescence, partly due to her fatigues and crew cut). She is shown to the audience as sometimes threatening, but simultaneously as a scared, and overwhelmingly brainwashed child. These flashbacks provide frequent reminders to the audience of Max's constant struggle between the military technology with which she was raised and her own, modified more feminine version of this technology that she has developed over time.

In many ways, Max's cyborgness is reminiscent of Frankenstein: she is a conglomeration of many organic life forms. In an essay on the gothic nature of Dark Angel, Kathleen McConnell explains that the show is a modern rewriting of Mary Shelley's novel, and, for that matter, the Pygmalion myth. She explains,

Just as Mary Shelly's Frankenstein presented a nihilistic revision of the Prometheus myth at a time of social upheaval due to technological change, so Dark Angel's revised Pygmalion myth embraces a darkness unanticipated in Ovid's tale, at a time when cloning technology is in the process of changing human society. (186)

While Frankenstein constructed his monster out of the physical parts of many humans, in Dark Angel DNA splicing has similar implications. The Frankenstein message is

reinforced at the end of the first season when one of Max's X5 "brothers" literally gives his heart so she can live.

Dark Angel is constantly contrasting Max and her mannerisms with traditional military attitudes which are far more representative of conventional, masculine, technologies. Various characters on the show help to provide this contrast, as does Manticore, the military-industrial complex that created the X5s. In certain scenarios even Max uses traditional military methods, reminding the audience of her origins. Despite this, it is Max's feminized technologies that give her both technological agency and melodrama.

The images shown of Manticore evoke notions of traditional military technology. Scenes from Manticore (primarily depicted in flashbacks, but also shown in the final episode of first season) are photographed in dark, muted colors, giving it a gothic and foreboding feel. Even the name "manticore" conjures the image of a mythological monster. Thus, the very place where Max is created lies in direct contrast to what she has become—a feminized anti-militaristic depiction of technology.

Numerous characters also help to reinforce the contrast between Max and the military. Donald Lydecker, the director of Manticore who "raised" the X5s, is Max's masculine, military antithesis. Despite referring to Max and the other X5s as his "kids," Lydecker is primarily looking out for the good of the "team", the good of the Manticore program, and the good of the country. In the final episode of season one, "...and Jesus Brought the Casserole," Lydecker tries to explain the nature of his original vision and justify the breeding and torturing of his "kids." He explains that, "instead of sending 1000 troops into battle and losing 100, sending in ten perfect soldiers and losing none," is a

more efficient means of fighting a war. In Lydecker's world, the ends justify the means, and "there is no 'I' in team."

Max's X5 "brother," Zack also contrasts Max with a more traditionally military depiction. Despite his rejection of Manticore, Zack still uses much of his military training. Unlike Lydecker, Zack does not care about the good of the country or the Manticore program, but he is obsessively concerned with the well being of the group of escaped X5s. In his first season appearances, Zack makes it clear to Max that she and the other escaped X5s should not succumb to the risks involved in family, friends, and loved ones. In the episode "Hit a Sista Back," his X5 sister, Tinga, attempts to evade Lydecker with her husband and son. Zack expresses annoyance to Max over the inefficiency of Tinga's decision to involve her family:

Zack: Those two aren't gonna do anything but slow her down. Mess with her judgement. If she's smart she'll tell him to take the kid and go. Otherwise they'll end up sharing a suite back at Manticore.

Max: You're a real family values guy, aren't you?

Zack: Family isn't an option. Not for us.

Later in the episode, Zack warns Max specifically about the risks of her own romantic entanglements remarking that, "[Tinga] made herself vulnerable, and now she's paying the price. Don't make the same mistake." Throughout the first season Zack, gets angry at Max and the other X5s for risking exposure. In many cases, Zack refuses to tell Max the group's plans because she refuses to "behave like a good little soldier." Zack's hardcore militaristic attitude is a contrast to Max, who constantly expresses the importance of family—whether blood relationships or close friendships—throughout the series. While Max cares deeply about the well being of the other X5s, she cares equally about other loved ones in her life.

These very masculine depictions of Lydecker and Zack help to make Max's technology appear more feminine to the audience, and make her melodrama and maternal instincts more obvious. Despite her military upbringing, Max's agency lies in her feminine technologies. There are numerous aspects to Max's personality and to her DNA makeup that are very unequivocally female.

One of Max's most obvious rejections of male-dominated military technologies lies in her refusal to use guns. This rejection of guns is vaguely explained to the audience in the fourth episode of the first season, "C.R.E.A.M." In this episode, Logan tries to give Max a gun as a gift, but Max immediately declines:

Max: Not to sound ungrateful but I don't do guns.

Logan: That would make you the only person walking around this city not packing.

Max: And that's how it's gonna stay.

Logan: A genetically engineered killing machine squeamish about guns.

Max: Just a rule.

As Max says this last line, we are shown a flashback from Manticore. In this flashback, an X5 is shot after trying to steal a gun from one of the guards. While Max never explains that this is her exact reason for rejecting guns, the incident appears to be the basis for her "squeamish" behavior. Throughout the season, Max constantly reinforces this anti-gun policy, repeating over and over lines like, "I don't do guns" or "guns make me nervous." The gun is the central piece of technology to any modern military, and to use a gun would ultimately make Max appear more militaristic. Furthermore, by rejecting the gun she is more likely to use her own technology (her DNA-enhanced body) to fight enemies.

The feminized side of Max's technology is also reinforced by the fact that some of her DNA is feline. Max explains the purpose and repercussions of this feline DNA in her inner-monologue in the episode "Heat:"

I am in heat or something like that...all because they spiced up that genetic cocktail called "me" with a dash of feline DNA...so I can jump 15 feet of razor wire and take out a 250-pound linebacker with my thumb and index finger...which makes me an awesome killing machine and a hoot at parties. But it also means that three times a year I'm climbing the walls...looking for some action.

The feline DNA clearly sexualizes Max both literally and figuratively. By putting her in heat, Max's feline-ness is bringing her sexuality to the forefront. While this sexual nature is aggressive, it is overwhelmingly heterosexual—no matter how bad her "itch" is, she never propositions her lesbian roommate. The nature of her going into heat brings on a variety of repercussions, some comical and some melodramatic. In the episode "Meow," Max is once again afflicted with her feline heat. In more comedic moments the audience sees her hitting on inappropriate men (such as her nerdy and vile boss) in slow motion and with non-diegetic, sexually suggestive music playing. Conversely, later in the episode, she tearfully cries to Logan about her condition, explaining that it, "makes me feel like... no matter what I do... or how far I run... I can never really get away from [Manticore]." This melodramatic moment highlights the range of problems that occur with both Max's femaleness as well as her technology. On a more figurative level, Max's feline DNA is what allows her to be more nimble, quick, and limber. While fighting in her skintight "catsuit," Max is more sexualized to the audience. Ultimately, the duality between the technology given to her and the ways she has feminized it are part of Max's overall agency and her melodrama.

Much like Sydney Bristow, Max's technologically empowered representation is contradicted by melodramatic components, but in the case of Dark Angel motherhood is the primary means for this melodrama. Issues of motherhood and genetic engineering also facilitate an ongoing theme about technological agency and femaleness in Dark Angel. Max's lab conception is the starting point for this dialogue. While she did have a surrogate mother carrying her, her recombinant DNA implies many parents. This immediately hints to the audience that motherhood versus genetics will be a theme in the show. The theme is then reinforced by the opening credits, which, among various clips taken from episodes, ends with an image of a fetus'. Max is thus immediately presented as a constructed, composite creature rather than a naturally born human. Ultimately, these themes of motherhood show up repeatedly throughout the series. Despite these themes, Dark Angel never takes a strong stance for or against genetic engineering. While the ploys used by Manticore are depicted as generically evil, Max never shows anger or resentment towards her genetic enhancements. By not rejecting technology and the genetic engineering associated with it and simultaneously showing an interest in maternal issues, Max manages to be both technologically empowered and conventionally feminine.

Discussions of genetic engineering do not stop with Max's (and the other X5's) creation. Various single-episode plots dealing with mother-child relationships occur over and over in the first season. While some of these stories are more general—often dealing with kidnappings and abuse—other plots are part of a seasonal binary theme about genetics versus motherhood. These plots include two episodes where other X5 women deal with their offspring. The first of the X5 motherhood stories occurs in the first season episode, "Female Trouble." In this episode, Max finds herself confronting Jace, an X5

who never escaped Manticore, which she still fights for faithfully. During the course of their encounters, Jace discovers that she is pregnant, launching a debate about what the mother and unborn child should do. Max pleads to Jace, “You know what they’ll do to you back [at Manticore] for this. Never mind what they’ll do to your baby. They’ll take that child away and you’ll never see it again. Just like with our mothers. Is that what you want for your kid?” Eventually, Max convinces Jace to abandon Manticore for the sake of her child. This story helps to illustrate the potential powerlessness of women when genetics and technology are combined with childbearing. Ultimately, Max rejects the abuse of technology in childbearing, but not the technology in itself. This is reinforced later in the season with a multi-episode plotline dealing with Tinga, another one of Max’s escaped X5 sisters. Despite her genetic engineering, Tinga has attempted to start a family, but kept her origins secret from her husband and son. When her young son begins to show signs of advanced motor and thinking skills, Lydecker first attempts to abduct the child, but later decides that it would be better to recapture Tinga, referring to her as a “golden goose” who can lay more “eggs.” Both Tinga and Jace’s children have been indirectly genetically engineered (through their mothers) but simultaneously, naturally conceived. Dark Angel is full of these contradictory representations of feminine identity: Max is empowered by her technological agency, but weakened by her melodramatic interests in children and motherhood.

The contradictions between Max’s technology and maternally themed melodrama are further suggested in the final episode of the first season, “... and Jesus Brought the Casserole.” In this episode, Max and Zack attempt to annihilate Manticore by blowing up its genetics laboratory. Before setting off the explosives, the two walk through the labs,

noting that each of their bar codes matches a test tube. As he walks through the lab, Zack remarks, “Max, it’s you... me... Tinga.” Still angry that Tinga had been killed earlier in the episode, Max replies, “No, Tinga’s dead.” This short dialogue encapsulates one of the primary themes of the season and particularly that episode: a person is more than their technology, or in this case their genetic code. Since new children are created using the X5’s genes, the show essentially puts itself in a nature versus nurture debate, showing that while genetics may play a large role in who a person is, it does not define them entirely. This, once again, reinforces Max’s contradictory representation: while she accepts that her biology (and the technology creating it) has defined many of her attributes, she still believes it is her environment that finalizes her self-definition. The recurring binary themes of technology versus motherhood ultimately create a contradictory representation of Max, who is empowered by her technology and simultaneously weakened by her traditionally feminine representation.

Conclusion

In this study, I have examined the changing roles of action television heroines over the past 25 years. One of the primary factors that has caused a shift in these representations is the changing relationships between women and technology. Earlier action television shows such as The Bionic Woman and Charlie’s Angels featured allegedly “strong” heroines, but they utilized primarily masculine technologies and ultimately lacked technological agency. Meanwhile, heroines on more recent action shows such as Alias and Dark Angel use far more feminized technologies which is reflected in their empowered representations. For Sydney Bristow on Alias, technology is primarily worn as a prosthetic device that can be used and removed to connote

empowerment or femininity. Similarly, technology on Dark Angel is shown as part of Max's DNA, making her a cyborg, but also excessively feminine. While both of these shows represents different ways that nascent technologies can afford new forms of agency to women, they also send confusing and contradictory messages to the audiences about the female empowerment they supposedly encourage. Ultimately, like Charlie's Angels and The Bionic Woman, the agency of the heroines on Alias and Dark Angel are slowly paving the way for the technologically adept and empowered television heroines of the future.

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