

Review

Barna William Donovan, *Blood, Guns and Testosterone: Action Films, Audiences, and a Thirst for Violence*, Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2010. 258pp. ISBN: 978-0-8108-7262-2 (pbk).

This fascinating book makes a substantial contribution to our knowledge and understanding of audiences for one area which has been substantially under-researched: the tradition of action films from the 1960s onwards. Across ten chapters, Donovan weaves an argument across the history of the genre and its major narrative characteristics; a whole series of debates about a 'crisis in masculinity'; and the responses of more than forty fans of action movies – their likes and dislikes, star and film preferences, and the ways they find pleasure and meaning in the films. At the heart of his argument is an encounter with that idea of a crisis in masculinity, and the unpacking of this into a set of issues about men's changing role in contemporary American society (all his interviewees are from there), taking into account ethnicity, class, and political orientation. And of course having to consider people's responses to women entering the public sphere generally and the workforce in particular at many levels, and the articulation of feminist critiques of various kinds.

Like any good piece of audience research, what this book first shows is complexity. Here are fans of Sly Stallone, of Arnie Schwarzenegger, of Clint Eastwood, of Mel Gibson, even (just) of Steven Segal – although he and others such as Dolf Lundgren are dismissed as 'inauthentic' by many fans of other stars (Eastwood and Schwarzenegger being valued by their fans for their emotional inexpressiveness, Stallone for the opposite). Here are young and older men, a significant few women, and a small number of black respondents. The book explores with great perceptiveness many of the differences between them. And there are politically charged differences between those who find in the films a validation of their anger at women, and those who find quite other stories in their preferred films – about honour, about the maintenance of courage in the face of impossible odds, and about being an 'outsider' marked by cynical distrust of all kinds of established political and industrial power. But with all the differences, there are common threads as well. The 'violence' for which the genre is so often condemned is reconceptualised by fans as something used cynically by those in power, but engaged in unwillingly, only as a final resort, when the hero has been pushed to recognise that not only to survive, but more importantly to retain his sense of rightness, he has to fight back.

In particular Donovan argues that his research reveals a differentiation along one dimension: 'emotional disclosure'. He writes: 'as my interviews progressed, I came to realise that the level to which self-disclosure and emotional access could be tied to their preferences for action personalities' (p. 123). This becomes a major theme, organising his accounts of fans' responses across age, class and gender.

All this is impressively presented, I really enjoyed reading it, and learnt a lot from it. But the book, at a number of levels, also left me with questions and uncertainties. First, I just wanted to be told more about the research methods. Donovan tells well how he recruited his participants, but says almost nothing about either the construction of the interview profiles, or about his methods of analysis of these. From the way he describes particular interview moments, it appears that he was using quite provocative and interventionist methods – for instance, presenting participants with academic and political debates on the 'crisis of masculinity' to draw out responses, and sometimes pushing them with opposite views of their favoured films, to see how they will respond. Donovan on several occasions suggests, from these, that people are 'unable' to articulate their views (see p.96 for instance). One fan is described as 'averse to appearing vulnerable', another as displaying 'contradictions'. Well, that might be right – and sometimes I was inclined to accept his judgement; or it might be that some people find that line of questioning either personally difficult or outside their zone of responses. And to be fair, at certain points, Donovan notes his own unease at the danger of 'putting words in people's mouths' (eg, p.164).

In the course of the book, I both really appreciated – yet at times felt uncomfortable with – the way he used his own deep textual knowledge of films within the genre as a basis for challenging the rightness of his participants' responses. For example, pp.112-3, he challenges one person's interpretation of Clint Eastwood's *The Unforgiven*. I became unsure about the extent this was a *tactic* to see what participants might say, when challenged, or whether this was actually a suggestion that they are *wrong* (his references to 'selective memory and perception' can be read to mean that *he* has been unselective). On one occasion he even accuses some respondents of 'dodging the issues' (p. 160), while with others, whose views clearly cohere most closely with his own, he rather *coopts* their answers as confirmatory.

This is in a number of ways a very 'American' book, and is marked by the state of debate in American communication studies. So, not only is the concept of 'identification' taken as a given obvious way of accounting for audience engagements with films, and their stars (although for instance the doubling he reports (eg, p.234) on how a number of people research the background to their favoured stars might suggest at least some complexity), but this is taken in the standard mass communications mode, with references to the work of people like Dolf Zillman, and no sign of awareness of critical debates about work of this kind. In other ways, too, one can sense a researcher working within a partly closed intellectual climate – even while he pays serious respect to the broad cultural studies tradition. But here you will find repeated references (see for instance p.180 and p.206) to the work of

people such as Lionel Tiger, and other ‘anthropological’ theorists who offer possible evolutionary/brain-differentiation explanations of male vs female behaviour – without apparent awareness of either the intellectual (how to account meaningfully for variation) or the political (from conservative-pessimistic deductions to medical-interventionist) problems in these positions.

In one other way, too, I sense an ‘American-ness’ in the research. Donovan participates in the common dividing of the world in ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ categories. This shows, for instance, when he writes that the Mexican peasant world of *The Magnificent Seven* is ‘clearly feminine’ (p.146) – because it operates differently than the closed, dying world of the gunfighters. That move only makes sense if you have already decided that everything has to be clearly and unambiguously marked with a gender. And that is a cultural-political position which I particularly recognise within much American academic feminism, it is not an obvious truth.

But for all my concerns and disagreements over particular points and procedures, I found this a really valuable contribution to the field of audience research, and highly recommend it. Donovan is right that there has been little attention to date to the lived responses of audiences to this tradition of films, and his work is a valuable source-book and challenging argument.

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