

**TERESA HIERGEIST; STEFANIE SCHÄFER.
*LADIES IN ARMS: WOMEN, GUNS, AND
FEMINISMS IN CONTEMPORARY POPULAR
CULTURE. TRANSCRIPT, 2024.***

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Ladies in Arms is a timely and thought-provoking collection edited by German scholars Teresa Hiergeist and Stefanie Schäfer. The volume brings together a collection of scholarly articles that explore the complex representations of armed women in popular culture - through media, visual arts and literature - from a feminist perspective. This anthology addresses the iconography of armed women, examining how these figures challenge and complicate traditional gender roles, offering a kaleidoscopic view of femininity, violence and empowerment

Teresa Hiergeist, Professor of French and Spanish Literature and Cultural Studies at the University of Vienna, and **Stefanie Schäfer**, Visiting Professor of North American Studies at Friedrich Alexander University Erlangen-Nürnberg, guide the reader through an exploration of the multifaceted roles women play in armed contexts. Their diverse academic backgrounds — spanning cultural studies, feminist theory, and mobility studies — allow for a nuanced interrogation of how weapons and gender intersect in both historical and contemporary settingsⁱ

The book grapples with how feminist discourse can unpack the symbolism of the armed woman in popular culture. Hiergeist and Schäfer argue that while the representation of armed women often oscillates between sexual objectification and empowerment, it also disrupts traditional gender binaries (Butler, 1990). In their words (Hiergeist and Schäfer, 2014, p. 11) *Ladies in Arms* challenges readers to reconsider the complex identities of women who wield firearms, identities that are often erratic,

ambiguous, and fluid. The figure of the woman with a weapon, they suggest, presents a paradox that is simultaneously empowering and subversive, transforming the gun from a symbol of violence into an emblem of female agency.

The anthology is divided into four sections, each dealing with a different dimension of armed women in popular culture:

- Section I: History Reloaded? Reinventing Military and Paramilitary Shooters
- Section II: Violent Societies: Civic Gun Cultures, Gender, and Politics
- Section III: Firearm Fictions: Media, Gender, and the Making of the Armed Heroine
- Section IV: Shooting to Kill (Patriarchy): Feminist Gunwomen

Each section delves into a different cultural, historical and social context, offering a diverse range of perspectives on the gendered dynamics of guns, violence and power. The articles critically examine how women use guns as tools of empowerment, whether in political struggles against or in support of fascist regimes, in fictional scenarios of post-apocalyptic survival or dictatorial regimes, in armed institutionality, or in subversions of traditional masculinity, as seen in genres such as hip-hop.

What makes *Ladies in Arms* particularly compelling is its attempt to understand the firearm as both a prosthesis and an accessory (Christensen-Strynø; Bruun Eriksen, 2021) facilitating female empowerment while also enabling her “autofiguración”ⁱⁱ. The gun, in this context, acts as a material-semiotic object — combining meaning, power, and pleasure — linking the woman and the weapon in a new network of social and cultural relations. Hiergieist and Schäfer propose the use of actor-network theory (Farías, Blok and Roberts, 2019) to explore how this relationship between woman and weapon constructs a shifting, fluid set of meanings. The firearm, as both a prosthesis and a symbol, functions as a device that grants power but also challenges normative notions of femininity.

The anthology successfully deconstructs the dominant Western narrative that associates violence and weaponry with patriarchal masculinity, critiquing how such narratives have historically excluded or marginalised women. The book draws attention to how armed women - whether real or fictional - are often situated in paradoxical spaces, where they are simultaneously sexualised, devalued and empowered. For example,

representations of female assassins or rebels challenge traditional misogynist tropes and offer new, transgressive visions of femininity.

While the feminist perspective introduced in *Ladies in Arms* offers valuable insights into the culture-violence-gender triad, the book would have benefited from a broader discussion of the diverse feminist positions on popular culture. It could have provided more clarity on the situational perspectives from which the contributing authors interpret the intersections between the female body, weaponry, and artistic production. However, the collection's strength lies in its critical response to the often-one-dimensional portrayals of women in the media and its effort to bring to the forefront the multiplicity of ways in which women interact with violence and power.

In sum, *Ladies in Arms* delivers a compelling and multifaceted analysis of the armed woman in popular culture, presenting a range of feminist interpretations that span the spectrum from empowerment to subversion. Hiergieist and Schäfer have compiled a thoughtful and provocative collection that challenges conventional narratives around gender, violence, and agency, and opens up new avenues for dialogue on the politics of weaponry and the role of women in shaping those politics.

Recommendation: This book is highly recommended for scholars and readers with an interest in cultural studies, feminist theory, gender studies, and media studies. Its interdisciplinary approach offers valuable perspectives for anyone seeking to understand the complex relationship between gender, violence, and cultural representation

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ⁱ Description from *Ladies in Arms*, pages 318 and 319.

ⁱⁱ Different studies on autobiographical literature in Latin America have coined the term ‘autofiguration’, to speak of becoming aware of the subject in a context of crisis. I recommend the work of José Amícola, *Autobiografía como autofiguración: Estrategias discursivas del yo y cuestiones de género* (2007).