

WARRIOR WOMEN

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Why are tv shows like “Buffy the Vampire Slayer”, “La Femme Nikita” and “Xena: Warrior Princess” so popular, especially among teens?

You can gauge the public's true feeling by what its entertainment is trying to salve. Television's weekly one-hour shows, known in the trade as "episodics," constitute the bulk of America's exposure to serious drama. These series mostly depict cops, doctors and lawyers--professions on the gritty interface between working citizens and the ruling powers, professions that Americans are leery of in real life.

We watch to reassure ourselves that the representatives of Officialdom can be depended upon in a pinch. We need to be reassured; deep down, we harbor the nasty notion that nobody's really looking out for us. These shows soothe our fears.

Somebody cares. The heart of society is good, after all.

I've dubbed these dramas the Priest-and-Nun Shows: characters agonize earnestly and endlessly over moral choices and their own worthiness. ER, Chicago Hope: priests and nuns with stethoscopes. NYPD Blue, Homicide: Life on the Streets: priests and nuns with guns. Law and Order, The Practice: priests and nuns with briefcases. The X-Files: a priest and nun (who, unlike most of the other "clerics," seem to be celibate) fight the Dark Powers, for the truth must be out there somewhere--a moral conviction if ever there was one. Throw in Baywatch: naked priests and nuns. And Dawson's Creek: the teen novitiate hour.

Such fare speaks of a people unsure of what it means to be good or bad. In classic Hollywood films, moral choice wasn't an issue, wasn't the meat of the drama. The major characters had already drawn a hard line between right and wrong; the drama was in getting the job done against enormous odds. Now characters anguish over where the line is, or whether it even exists. They always come out on the side of traditional morality, of course. That's the point of the exercise, though it can take a while to get there, to reaffirm that the heart of society is, after all, good.

But there is another breed of show on TV, with a very large and mostly young following, that takes the opposite stance: the heart of society is demonic. Society is Hell. The vision is fatalistic, the moral choice made for us before we were born. There may or may not be a God, but the Devil is the buffy in your neighborhood. And to be human is to constantly fight demons.

The X-Files, at first glance, seems to fall in this category. But Fox Mulder and Dana Scully continue, despite all evidence to the contrary, to believe that there's a moral solution to their dilemma. If only the truth "out there" were known, they'd be victorious.

The real society-is-hell shows aren't so optimistic. For one thing, they don't believe there's an end to the struggle. For another, in these shows men aren't much good at demon-fighting. It's up to the women.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer follows a perky high-school girl (Sarah Michelle Gellar) whom fate has designated the Slayer. Every generation has one, and if you're it, you have no choice. Two students, a boy and a girl, are Buffy's allies, but she's the Slayer. She does all the fighting, mostly kickboxing. Convinced that she'll die young--you can only kickbox for so long--Buffy lives for the moment, though she's kept so busy with her duties, she doesn't get to date much.

According to Buffy, the American high school lies right around the corner from the Mouth of Hell, which constantly spews forth demons (mostly teens) intent on disrupting the course of education. With the exception of the school librarian, adults are oblivious to the evil reality. Bizarre events occur with unnerving regularity and Buffy is rarely home nights, but her single Mom remains certain that things will be normal in the morning and that Buffy could finish her homework if only she had the right counseling.

The symbolism is dizzying. Drugs, alcohol and gangs are conspicuously absent from Buffy's high school, but it's clear that these are Hell Mouth's vomitus. Demons are the gangs. The surreal transformations in gullible kids victimized by demons--that's your brain on drugs. And the helplessness of grown-ups in the face of this Hell--that's life. Even Buffy's love, Angel, is in the end just another vampire.

Done with sly yet generous humor, Buffy lets us forget the pain of its premise--which is precisely its appeal. Buffy, the pagan priestess, struggles to turn darkness into light, but the battle is unending. There's always another vampire to fight, every night, every generation. Humor makes it bearable but doesn't change it.

Only one show has a bleaker premise: La Femme Nikita. With Buffy, Hell's around the corner. But Nikita lives in Hell. It's called Section One, and it's even located underground. "I was falsely accused of a hideous crime," intones Nikita in the opening narration of each episode, "and condemned to death." Section One staged her funeral, recruited her, trained her, "and if I don't play by their rules, I die."

If Buffy is uncorrupted by her struggle, Nikita has fallen victim to it, accepting corruption and far worse. Nikita herself is a demon, one of the living dead, but darkly on the side of light. Section One fights terrorists. And in fighting terrorists, the ends justify the means. Nikita kills and tortures on order. She resisted the practice at first, but now she breaks fingers with the best of them. The show's horrors are something Buffy would not dare contemplate.

But make no mistake: La Femme Nikita's weekly torture session, indulged in by characters with whom viewers are encouraged to identify and empathize, is unconscionable. Torture is disturbing, but the real ugliness here is the stylistic flourish with which it is presented. In Nikita, torture is not a horror but a titillation.

Nikita pushes our preconceptions in other ways as well. While Buffy is a squeaky-clean hetero teen, Nikita (Peta Wilson) is a seductive 20-ish blonde, a fashion plate with a runway walk who sexually swings both ways. In one episode Nikita falls in love with a stunning African-American woman, and their close-up tongue-twining kiss makes the cancelled Ellen's lesbian lip-locks look as tame as a Brady Bunch buss. In most episodes, though, Nikita's love is a cold control-freak named Michael. A Section One comrade, he's passive-aggressive, effeminate and masculine.

Hell, in other words, knows no boundaries. Butch/femme, straight/gay, good/evil, sweet/bitter, control/chaos--everything's blurred. Hell is just like the Nineties. The ambivalences that frighten Americans so much are taken for granted on La Femme Nikita.

You want Officialdom to be on your side? OK, it's on your side--sort of. But it's evil. If it has to threaten you and your children to stop a terrorist, it will. Being on society's side doesn't necessarily mean being on your side. La Femme Nikita provides no comfort. It assumes we're living in the worst of worlds. As with Buffy, there is no future. For every terrorist you kill, you'll have to face another.

What Buffy and Nikita have most in common is that they are warriors. Western storytelling hasn't seen their ilk since the legendary female fighters of the Celts. So it's fitting that the most brazen of TV's new warrior women is the Celtic battler Xena (played by the grand Lucy Lawless).

Buffy and Nikita inhabit the Devil's kingdom, but Xena frolics in a sorcerer's realm where Playboy-foldout witches come and go in puffs of smoke. Xena is never

threatening like Nikita or focused like Buffy. She cavorts safely in the legendary past. It's all comic book--except for the look in Xena's eyes.

A scantily-clad butch who's still femme enough to please the boys, Xena has a sentimental streak and a fundamental sweetness. But her eyes blaze with rages and fears, bright with paradoxes that belie the silly scripts. The strain of her fierceness wears on her. Where we see a fairy realm, she seems to see a bad dream. A very human face stares from that comic book, and you can't get more Nineties than that surreal mix.

Not so long ago, viewers wouldn't follow a woman into such hellish worlds. Now they wouldn't follow a man. (Hercules, for all its popularity, is basically a cartoon for little kids; it's Xena: Warrior Princess that grabs both teens and adults.) Far from softening the shows, these warrior women make the nightmarish visions all the more stark. Male heroes just aren't flexible enough to handle the conditions that Buffy, Nikita and Xena deal with. To handle, that is, the Nineties.

John Wayne would sooner nuke Nikita's world than tolerate it, even if it means blowing up the planet; Humphrey Bogart, trapped in Buffy's high school, would get drunk and stay drunk; Errol Flynn, faced with Xena, would drop his sword and abandon the field. The old dramatic conception of the male hero depends upon strong boundaries and clear choices. In a world increasingly without boundaries, those guys would just look lost--as their descendants usually do on the male-dominated Priest-and-Nun shows.

America isn't ready to accept sexual ambivalence in its male action heroes. America still wants them to make clear moral choices, even if they have to struggle to get there. None of this half-angel, half-devil stuff. In a man, that's still seen as somewhat sinister; in a woman, it's seductive.

Young America, the big audience for these shows, seems willing to let warrior women lead in the realm of the betwixt-and-between, morally, sexually, every which way. If the women prove survival is possible in such a world, the men may eventually tag along. But they won't be ready until they, like Buffy and Xena, can not only tolerate but learn to relish ambivalence--and, unlike poor fallen Nikita, refuse to let a lack of boundaries demolish their morality.

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