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English Leather

No villain was a match for the sexy, cat-suited Emma Peel.

By LIESL SCHILLINGER

When the television heroines of the 1960's needed to dodge an assailant, the American ones called in supernatural forces. Jeannie crossed her arms and bobbed her head, Samantha Stephens wiggled her nose, and afterward they returned to their primary occupation: vacuuming. But Emma Peel, a very British "it" girl with a very whisky voice, relied on her own natural thigh muscle, jujitsuing a thug with a disabling kick to the abdomen or imprisoning an attacker between her slim leather-clad legs and flinging him backward into a pond. She kicked, she fought, she flipped, she looked better in a cat suit than any cat ever has and she could bring a building to its knees with a single flex of her booted calf. After felling the villains, she and her aristo partner, Steed, would celebrate coolly with a glass of Champagne, then part, she in her Lotus, he in his Bentley or Rolls, as a jazz riff trickled off behind them. Now there was a role model a liberated girl could go for, and, not surprisingly, a lot of liberated boys too.

THE

AVENGERS

By Toby Miller.

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The character of Emma Peel, played by the pantherine actress

Diana Rigg, appeared midway during the cycle of the ironic and iconic British television series "The Avengers," a pseudo-espionage program that had its premiere in 1961 and ran for a decade, by the end of which it had attained cult status. In his book "The Avengers," an overview and cultural analysis of the series, Toby Miller, an associate professor of cinema studies at New York University, charts the origins and evolution of the show and exposes with a decidedly hermeneutic lust the impact "The Avengers" had on the world of fashion, art and sexual politics in its time. While there are few moments when one actually envies an academic, this is one of them.

"The Avengers" exhibited more style and daring than is to be had on all of Milan's runways, and more wit and winks (well, winks, anyway) than the oeuvres of Oscar Wilde and Monty Python combined. In episode after episode, natty, chivalrous Steed and his slinky, forbidding female partners showed that the perils of the cold war and the chilly technocratic future could be staved off by coquettish, aggressive women, so long as amusing men could be found to keep up with them and pour them Champagne. Miller originally wrote his slim, photo-crammed book for the British Film Institute as a resource for die-hard connoisseurs with a taste for pop semiology. For this select band, he provides a kind of interpretive scrapbook, furnishing biographical, often titillating details about the actors (Patrick Macnee, who played Steed, was raised by his mother and her lesbian lover) and assessments, both his own and those of others -- including his "informants" from the World Wide Web -- of why the show's punch packed so much force.

"The Avengers" emerged at a time when television was dominated by placid family dramas and by earnest crime series enacted almost entirely by humorless men in unrevealing dress. Wide-eyed audiences adored the show's kinky irreverence and political sarcasm, and if its plots were absurd and often repetitive, no one seemed to care. Viewers evidently conspired in pretending that the stagy, campy crises the investigative duo untangled were good enough to watch, although, Miller concedes, many watched simply for the chemistry and the clothes -- Courreges miniskirts, boots, hot pants and fur for the

ladies, high-toned suits and embroidered waistcoats for Steed. In James Bond films, which made their debut one year after the first "Avengers" season, villains tended to look like traditional villains, with metal teeth, sinister facial hair and armored fortresses. The villains in "The Avengers" looked as if they could have cycled off the set of a Miss Marple mystery. There were vicars, Boy Scouts, nuns and window cleaners, oenophiles, cat fanciers and aunties with knitting needles -- stolid members of the British middle classes who looked banal until they sprang from the shrubbery with a hypodermic.

These were the sort of bad guys calculated to terrify schoolboys around a campfire, not grown-ups with loaded revolvers. Nonetheless, kidnappings were effected, bullets flew and hypnotic gases seeped, leading critics to condemn the show for its violence and deplore it for its louche S & M subtext. Still, the series remained more comic-book than thriller, more naughty than nasty. Bodies toppled like bowling pins but left no gory Tarantino carnage when they hit the ground, only a kiss or two ended up being exchanged by even the raciest of the cast members and the most twisted plots resolved themselves with Tintin neatness.

Almost 40 years on, "The Avengers" remains Britain's most popular exported serial ever, with sales to 120 countries, Miller writes. Its fan sites choke the Internet, Mrs. Peel cat suits (called Emmapeelers) and Steed T-shirts turn up in specialty shops and an "Avengers" movie will soon saunter to the big screen, with Uma Thurman in the zippered leotard, Ralph Fiennes in the bowler hat.

What can explain the lasting popularity of plots that even a kindergartner can see the holes in? Miller credits the program's flirty dialogue, which he calls "sex through discourse," its innovative cinematic techniques, its coy manipulation of British postwar class confusions and its post-modern blend of old and new fashion, conventions and art. No scholarly book is complete without academic exegesis. Thus, when a bad guy's bullet hits a Champagne bottle, Miller claims, "the conceit is to take an aspect of hierarchical social structure or culture, or a

serious generic convention of screen drama, and deflate it by forming a syntagmatic relationship to the series." Nor can he restrain himself from sprinkling "diegeses," "diegetics" and "diegetically" throughout, or using "trope" as a verb and as a gerund just for kicks. As he writes, with sheepish self-deprecation, "I suppose I represent pseudo-scholars looking for post-modern intertextuality."

But he has enough humor to see the absurdity of submitting such a fanciful subject to turgid critique. Mostly, he lets the Avengers sell themselves, as they have done before and continue to do, renarrating choice episodes like a tireless but confident joke reteller. He knows his readers will exult no matter what he writes, because they're as smitten with the series as he is -- and have their own private fantasies about it that no theory can touch.

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