

***Killing Eve* (BBC 2018-2021): Television Violence as Liberation?**

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Abstract

Killing Eve (BBC 2018-2021) has been hailed as a feminist television show. Its cinematic production values call upon a history of espionage on screen, encompassing international intrigue and glamorized hyperviolent action sequences. Is this violent aesthetic a cathartic reference to newly-visible feminist discourse or are we just being sold a new version of old fantasies?

In this chapter *Killing Eve* is examined in relation to a history of violent women spies on screen, from Emma Peel (*The Avengers* 1961-69) to Sydney Bristow (*Alias* 2001-2006). While Villanelle (Jody Comer) appears to present an amoral account of postfeminist 'empowerment', Eve (Sandra Oh) carries echoes of second-wave feminist concerns with community, morality and ethics. With each season the differences between Villanelle and Eve unravel, raising questions about what constitutes 'quality' television and how that might intersect with old-fashioned ideas about women's liberation. While the show depicts each character as liberated in some respects, they are both entangled in corporate nets which repeatedly put them in danger and pull them back into violence as a form of labour.

Keywords: feminism, television, gender, power, liberation

Killing Eve (BBC 2018-2021) has been a huge international hit, winning awards and critical praise for its first season in particular. Created by Phoebe Waller-Bridge following her success with *Fleabag* (BBC 2016-2019), the show is based on a series of e-books by Luke Jennings and is a transatlantic production commissioned by BBC America. The first season was scripted by Waller-Bridge and each subsequent season has had a new female showrunner or head writer, with a largely female production team. *Killing Eve* differs from earlier spy dramas in its production team and its focus on women's relationships with each other; it has been hailed as a feminist show in popular blogs, newspaper reviews and academic articles (see, for example, Frazer-Carroll 2018). Earlier spy series, such as *The Avengers* (1961 – 69) in the UK or *Alias* (2001 – 2006) in the US, offered protagonists who were female spies but they tended to be surrounded and managed by men. *Killing Eve* thus seems to mark a shift in the representation of the female spy as well as how violent women are represented on screen.

Violent women in visual media

Since the 1970s, Laura Mulvey's feminist essay on the 'male gaze' has informed critical work about violent or active female protagonists on screen, proposing that women in classical Hollywood were framed 'to-be-looked-at' rather than to move the narrative forward (1975). In his book and television series about *Ways of Seeing* John Berger broke the gendering of visual media down to a binary argument that '*men act and women appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at' (1972: 47). These works continue to be widely cited as important interventions in debates about gender and representation but they are also critiqued for a tendency to generalize about women and visual media (see, for example, Boyle 2015). Those binary dynamics appear to be confounded in the late 20th and early 21st century, as popular media features a range of violent women. Unlike the classic femme fatale figures in American film noir of the 1940s and 1950s these more recent deadly women do not inevitably suffer for their transgressive behaviour (Kuhn 1998).

Killing Eve is one of the latest examples of a television narrative featuring an active, violent protagonist – contract killer Oksana Astankova, known as Villanelle.

Villanelle is unapologetic in her profession as an assassin, conducting her work with wit and evident pleasure. In the show's second and third season we find out more about Villanelle's backstory, while Eve develops a more complex relation to her work in espionage. In earlier work I proposed that such spy dramas 'explore the profound inextricability of the professional and the familial/romantic, positioning the workplace as a space in which and through which the personal is worked *upon*', examining how these shows function 'as etiquette guides for the (post)modern urban woman' (White 2011: 45). *Killing Eve* follows this trajectory, navigating work, family and romance across an international map. Its focus on the obsessive relationship between Villanelle and Eve signals shifts in popular discourse around sexual and gender politics in twenty-first century western media.

Killing Eve was first screened during the era of #MeToo and burgeoning public debate about women's rights and feminist politics; it also emerged at a key moment for television drama. In their 2019 article about how the representation of 'difficult women' has shifted since the millennium, Svenja Hohenstein and Katharina Thalmann argue that the 2010s are 'a pivotal moment with regard to changing representations of women on TV' (2019: 109); that during this period American television drama and comedy has increasingly 'played with viewers' gendered expectations, adopted an unapologetic (intersectional) feminist agenda, and handled female characters and themes in a nuanced, complex, and non-stereotypical manner' (2019: 111). That shift is widely acknowledged but it is unclear whether this is part of broader changes within television culture regarding production and consumption, as streaming becomes the norm and services such as Netflix and Hulu become producers as well as providers of content. Hohenstein and Thalmann offer a valuable overview of the numerous 'golden ages' of quality television; television which is noted for its complex plotlines, cinematic aesthetic and innovative characters.

The term 'quality television' emerged in the 1980s with work by academics such as Jane Feuer, who observed how such narratives made space for women's stories (Feuer, Kerr and Vahimagi: 1984). It was taken up by scholars in the early 2000s, who defined a new era of 'must-see TV' (see Jancovich and Lyons: 2003; McCabe and Akass: 2007). By the turn of the twenty-first century 'quality was busting out all over', as Robert J Thompson asserted with regard to American network television (2007, xvii). His 1996 volume on *Television's Second Golden Age: From Hill Street Blues to ER* had already begun to chronicle that wider shift, which was 'busting out' beyond American networks to inflect international television production. At the same time, scholars such as Amanda Lotz (2006) were examining how women's roles were changing during this era. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) and *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995-2001) marked a shift in how women were represented in action-adventure dramas, while *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002) and *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) represented "'New" New Women' (Lotz: 2006, 88). Hohenstein and Thalmann build upon that body of work, as well as more recent scholarship such as Jason Mittell's account of 'complex television', to argue

... it is only in the 2010s that we got to see more innovative, honest, and truly complex representations of women on TV, that only in the 2010s, showrunners, television executives, and audiences alike allowed stories about complex, difficult women to be made, stories that were also innately and unapologetically feminist. (2019,119)

This proposal shapes their account of Netflix prison drama *Orange Is The New Black* (2013-2019) as 'a feminist discourse' (2019, 119). Yet what 'feminism' is this? As we have learnt from many years of debating, arguing, examining and organizing, feminism is not a singular or coherent set of politics but rather a complex, untidy and controversial set of positions and practices.

The emergence of 'feminist' television in the second decade of the twenty-first century resonates with a similar shift in cinematic representations of female action heroes at the end of the twentieth century. Yvonne Tasker and others have examined such violent 'new women' in Hollywood action

adventure films of the 1990s, such as *Thelma and Louise* (Ridley Scott 1991) and *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (James Cameron 1991) (Tasker 2004). Dismissed as excessive – privileging special effects and spectacle over character development and plot – these films appeared to harbour a new ‘feminist’ version of the action hero; women who could fight and survive as well as their male counterparts. The complexity of figures such as Ellen Ripley and Sarah Connor was made apparent in critical work (see, for example, Creed 1993, Tasker 1998, Hills 1999, Munford and Waters 2014). Villanelle, the superhuman assassin in *Killing Eve* is one inheritor of those 1990s tropes, as well as a substantial history of women spies on British and American television. Kathleen J Waites notes the proximity of Villanelle to the titular character of Luc Besson’s *Nikita* (1990), but the show trails a far longer heritage of active and violent female spies, including *The Avengers* (1961-69) and *The New Avengers* (1976-77) in the UK and *The Girl From Uncle* (1966-67) and *Alias* (2001-2006) in the US (Waites 2021, 119). *Killing Eve* inherits the quirky humour of the British shows as well as the glossy production values of American action series. As with all these precursors, however, the ‘feminist’ aspect of *Killing Eve* raises more questions than it answers.

***Killing Eve* and neoliberal feminism**

Several critics have noted that Phoebe Waller-Bridge’s first season adaptation is vastly different to its source text. Audrey Jane Black describes Waller-Bridge’s adaptation as a ‘*feminist appropriation*’ [italics in original] as defined by Anne Cranny-Francis (1990), because it eschews the sadomasochistic training scenarios, queer stereotyping and hypersexualization of Luke Jennings’ novellas (Black 2020, 9-10; see also Miller, Atherton and Hetherington 2021, 3). The series focusses on three remarkable female characters; Villanelle, Eve Polastri and Carolyn Martens (Fiona Shaw). The pleasures which *Killing Eve* offers do, however, tread notably close to the tropes which constitute postfeminist popular culture. The production and distribution of the show took place at a time when feminism had become a marketable term in popular media.

By the mid-2010s feminism was being visibly identified in popular discourse as ‘cool’: it was ‘a moment in which feminism has seemingly moved from being a derided and repudiated identity among young women [...] to becoming a desirable, stylish, and decidedly fashionable one’ (Gill 2016, 611). Rosalind Gill describes this moment as one in which anyone and anything could be a feminist issue, but where a rebranded ‘hot feminism’ was ‘notable for both its affect policing (resolutely *not angry*) [...] and its *contentlessness*’ (Gill 2016, 618). While there is evidence of anger in *Killing Eve*, it is hard to see where the feminist *content* or *politics* of the show lie. Having female leads alone does not make a show inherently feminist, particularly when two of those leads (Villanelle and Eve) are spectacularly violent towards each other. *Killing Eve* is also visibly cognisant of and comfortable with consumer culture, evincing the kind of neoliberal politics which is ‘complicit with rather than critical of capitalism’ (Gill 2016, 617). Villanelle’s fashion-forward couture has garnered articles and blog posts, while Maria Sulimma demonstrates how the show’s international settings align with consumer fantasies regarding global travel (Gilligan and Collins 2021; Sulimma 2021). Despite these signifiers of postfeminist aesthetics and neoliberal politics, *Killing Eve* offers some interesting reflections upon both postfeminism and neoliberalism.

When she first appears in Season One Villanelle may be understood as a model of neoliberal feminism in action (Rottenberg 2018). This kind of ‘feminist’ politics eschews radical social change, evincing a corporate version of ‘feminist’ discourse in texts such as Sheryl Sandberg’s *Lean In* (2013). Such discourse allocates responsibility for ‘success’ or ‘liberation’ to the individual, refusing to acknowledge structural inequities or propose any political praxis which might challenge consumer culture: ‘such key contemporary feminist texts have little in common with other feminisms, being exponents of an individualistic, entrepreneurial ideology’ (Gill 2016: 617). That neoliberal or right-wing feminism contradicts the tenets of left-leaning second wave feminisms that emerged in the 1960s, despite employing similar language. Second wave feminisms were critical of Western capitalism and identified structural inequalities that constrained women and men regarding work, family, sexual rights and economics. Whereas second wave politics advocated women working

together to effect change, the women in *Killing Eve* are constantly betrayed by each other, locked within the patriarchal structures of their secret organizations, whether they be state intelligence services or criminal conspiracies. Villanelle is the perfect employee in this respect; she is amoral, dedicated to her profession and relentless in her pursuit of targets.

Her work as a contract assassin also references the precarity of contemporary employment practices. Villanelle is part of a gig economy, albeit a very high-end version, and liable to be (literally) terminated if she does not meet her employer's demands. When Villanelle is stabbed by Eve at the end of Season One, she is cast adrift, unable to function as an assassin and regarded as a liability by her employers. Season Two takes up the story '30 seconds later', with the arrival of three agents at Villanelle's Paris apartment disguised as paramedics and carrying guns, sent to kill Villanelle. As *Killing Eve* progresses through its second and third seasons we learn more about Villanelle's background; where she came from and how she was trained for the work she does. This offers some substance to the character we meet in Season One, mitigating her apparently superhuman abilities to execute targets and escape unscathed. In Season Two Villanelle becomes more visibly damaged, both physically and emotionally, by the work she does. At the beginning of Season One, however, she demonstrates her remarkable facility with identities and equipment, assuming numerous disguises, various accents and a range of weapons.

That first-season version of Villanelle as consummate contract killer positions her as an ideal young woman for the twenty-first century. She is 'flexible, individualised, resilient, self driven and self made [,] who easily follows nonlinear trajectories to fulfilment and success' (Harris 2004: 16).

Villanelle's pleasure in killing and quirky humour makes her skill with weapons and disguise appear innate or natural, rather than learned. What we see in Season One is the finished product of a long training process which subsequent seasons recount. The third season of *Killing Eve* takes us back to the history of how Villanelle was discovered and trained, opening with the history of her predecessor, Dasha (Harriet Walter), who manages Villanelle in the hope of being allowed to return

to Russia. It is this gradual disintegration of Villanelle's superhuman façade which offers one way of understanding her violent actions as both symptom and critique of the economy she serves.

Spectacular pleasures

In their article about queer style in *Killing Eve* Sarah Gilligan and Jacky Collins note how Villanelle is costumed to demonstrate 'a play with sexuality and gender that speaks to the fluidity of contemporary queer identities and style'; how 'she exists as surface appearances, highlighting her fluidity' (2021: 354,356). This stylish self-consciousness is a principal pleasure for viewers of *Killing Eve* but it is only one part of the show. After Season One, when Eve stabs Villanelle in the finale, the contract killer is suddenly vulnerable, less able to take care of herself. 'Nice and Neat' (2:1) where she is trapped by another psychopath, Julian (Julian Barrett), and barely escapes, demonstrates that Villanelle is more human and less unusual than we might have thought. What follows as Season Two progresses into Season Three, reveals that this assassin is a product rather than an individual. She has been (re)constructed by an organization, in much the same way any corporation trains and manages its employees. Her relationship with Eve seems to be her only weakness, exposing Villanelle to danger as an inefficient and unpredictable cog in the murky organisation run by The Twelve. Eve is a distraction – as she repeatedly says 'I can't stop thinking about you' – and their obsessive romance puts them both in life-threatening situations and exposes their messy humanity.

Eve and Villanelle are never identified (nor identify themselves) as any category in sexual terms; they do not say 'lesbian', 'bisexual' or 'queer'. The show situates them within a diverse range of sexual behaviours. Carolyn Martens is avidly heterosexual, Bill Pargrave (David Haig) is polysexual and Paul (Steve Pemberton) is gay. This is entirely fitting in contemporary quality television where a liberal attitude to sexual identities is taken as standard, but it also removes them from wider social contexts. This is a trope common to popular television, which enabled shows such as *Friends* (NBC 1994-2004) or *Sex and the City* (HBO 1998-2004) to construct an improbably white middle class New York. In *Killing Eve* we are offered a fantasy workplace where neoliberal attitudes accommodate any

sexual preference as long as employees remain efficient. Villanelle's performance is monitored by her handler, Konstantin (Kim Bodnia), as we see in an early psychiatric evaluation (to ensure she is still an efficient psychopath), and later by Dasha.

In all these ways *Killing Eve*, and Villanelle in particular, offer a range of spectacular pleasures for the audience which conform to neoliberal discourses of individualism, personal 'liberation' and the fluid adaptability of identity. The show demonstrates Angela McRobbie's account of how feminism is co-opted within contemporary consumer culture. She identifies three prime strategies regarding how feminist politics are translated into a consumable, mainstream product:

These are the 'perfect', which appertains to lifestyle and the terrain of the feminine 'good life'; the 'imperfect', which offers some scope (but within carefully demarcated boundaries) for criticism of and divergence from these ideals; and finally 'resilience', which becomes the favoured tool and therapeutic instrument for recovery and repair. (2020: 42)

Villanelle is 'perfect', as evidenced by her effective performance as an assassin and as an avid consumer of designer goods. She is 'imperfect' in her sexual identity which is initially depicted as driven by obsession on the one hand (first Anna, then Eve) and impulse on the other, picking up a variety of lovers on the street and consuming then discarding them. Villanelle's professional and sexual behaviours have a similar dynamic. Throughout all three seasons Villanelle is exceptionally 'resilient'; she recovers remarkably quickly from physical and psychological wounds. She is not troubled by trauma, despite the extremely violent situations she encounters or creates. This is understood within the narrative as part of her psychopathy; Villanelle's illness makes her a good employee.

Violence as critique?

Villanelle is employed largely by the mysterious organization known as The Twelve, usually under the management of Konstantin. While the identity of The Twelve is not revealed, it does have an

organisational structure. By Season Three, Villanelle is hoping to move beyond her position as a contracted killer to that of a 'keeper' or middle manager, similar to Konstantin. In 'Management Sucks' (Season 3, Episode 2) she is given a test via her current keeper, Dasha, who says: 'Money, rewards, lifestyle; it all gets better the more you succeed', adding: 'Management is not easy. It's watching someone do job worse than you' [sic]. Dasha could almost be citing a neoliberal feminist text such as Sandberg's *Lean In*. This is a concept of success which eschews personal fidelity or human connection; business is all and reward is solely financial. This is what makes Villanelle the model employee – except that she is not suited to managing others. Villanelle is required to mentor a new assassin, Felix (Stefan Iancu) for his first kill. When they first meet Villanelle is not interested in Felix's account of his family and personal life. They arrive at a children's party on the Cote D'Azur dressed as clowns and when Felix bungles the assignment Villanelle casually shoots him in the head. All this takes place following the death of Carolyn's son, Kenny (Sean Delaney), thrown from the roof of his new employers' offices because he was finding out too much about The Twelve. Eve and Carolyn are visibly traumatized by Kenny's death, whereas Villanelle is not troubled by killing Felix. Villanelle's lack of response identifies her with the popular 'hot feminism' Rosalind Gill described; 'notable for both its affect policing (resolutely *not angry*) [...] and its *contentlessness*' (Gill 2016, 618). Villanelle feels little about anything, it seems, apart from Eve.

Stepping back from the show's narrative this sequence appears to parody and even critique the structures and management practices of corporate culture. 'Promotion' in this context is a dangerous process – leading to instant death for Felix – and its financial rewards are predicated on the excision of emotion or human connection. When Villanelle's 'success' is confirmed in 'End of Game' (Season 3, Episode 6), she recognises that it is 'bullshit'; she has been given a raise but no promotion. Helene, who may be a member of The Twelve, offers her champagne and congratulations; 'Your request has been successful. It's official. To Villanelle – the Keeper.' Instead of a managerial role Helene immediately gives her a new assignment; to kill a politician, just like all her previous jobs. Villanelle is not managing anyone. Corporate management is depicted as brutal

and not in any way transparent; 'promotion' is not feasible for Villanelle. Helene calls her a 'beautiful monster', 'an agent of chaos' and reminds her that she is 'only as good as [her] last kill' ('Beautiful Monster', Season 3, Episode 7). Villanelle is not management material because of her monstrous abilities as an 'agent of chaos' and because of her obsession with Eve, which Helene tasks Dasha with destroying, telling Dasha to 'drive a wedge between them' ('Still Got it', Season 3, Episode 4). Helene's management strategy ensures that her prized employee is not distracted by personal relationships.

These dynamics recall Catherine Rottenberg's description of neoliberalism, as: 'not just as a set of economic policies but as a dominant political rationality that moves to and from the management of the state to the inner workings of the subject, recasting individuals as human capital and thus capital-enhancing agents' (Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rottenberg 2020: 8). *Killing Eve* satirizes the dominant concerns of contemporary western capitalism as it seeks to cast its employees as 'capital-enhancing agents' rather than people with bodies, emotions and needs. The romance between Eve and Villanelle is a spanner in the works of such neoliberal management, whether MI5, MI6 or The Twelve. Affect kicks back against the demands of corporate culture, interrupting the performance target imperatives of neoliberalism. It is notable that Villanelle's assassinations are conducted like music videos - carefully scored and choreographed – but the sequences where Eve and Villanelle are together are slower and less frenetic. These are representations of two women pausing to take stock, to think, to feel. Such sequences are a break in the action; time slows down here because time is not, for that moment, about money. Time for Villanelle and Eve when they are alone together is not productive, does not register a target; it is time *out*.

That is not to say that their ongoing relationship is *nice*. They often fight; Eve stabs Villanelle at the end of Season One; Villanelle shoots Eve at the end of Season Two. The final shot which closes Season Three shows them walking away from each other. The strength of their feelings for each other – whether love or obsession – exceed the conventions of popular romance. In this respect Villanelle and Eve do not represent a simple account of neoliberal feminism. Some of their

behaviour – together or alone – embodies the anger that ‘hot feminism’ is *not* supposed to include (Gill 2016, 618). Before Villanelle arrives to find Eve in her Paris apartment at the end of Season One, Eve goes berserk, taking bottles of champagne from the fridge and smashing them on the floor, pulling designer clothes out of wardrobes and ripping them in a bacchanalian frenzy. It is exhilarating to see a woman on screen, particularly a character like Eve who has been so carefully *nice* to the people around her, suddenly let rip with frustration and rage. The most radical aspect of this moment may be its destruction of expensive consumer goods, but it is also a spectacular sequence in which Eve spectacularly loses it.

Even when there is a moment in televisual narratives which breaks with the script of neoliberal feminisms and femininities – in this case an example of women’s rage – it is absorbed into the pleasures of viewing through the spectacular framing of such a sequence. How that moment is understood depends largely on viewers’ responses, which can be radically diverse (Wheatley 2016). I read Eve’s rage as a response to extreme circumstances (within the narrative) and to the wider demands on women to be ‘nice’ or positive even in the most demanding situations (in western society). It is both narratively appropriate and allegorically powerful. But it is also embedded within a format which endorses neoliberal capital by the very fact that it is a highly successful transatlantic product. In this regard, women’s rage can be repackaged and sold back to us as pleasurable spectacle.

The same can be said of Villanelle’s efficient assassinations. Violence here is a symptom of neoliberal western capital *and* a spectacle/product for consumption within it. The prizes that *Killing Eve* has received are for outstanding performance and production values. The show which appears ‘new’ and ‘feminist’ in its narrative trajectory offers a violence which is contained and pleasurable to watch. We, the audience, are offered a safe, choreographed and well-designed vision of women killing, being angry, losing control. Such violent sequences are entertaining and spectacular. They are eminently consumable. George Gerbner writes about ‘happy violence’ in popular television drama:

This happy violence is cool, swift, painless, and often spectacular, even thrilling, but usually sanitized. It always leads to a happy ending. After all, it is designed to entertain and not to upset; it must deliver the audience to the next commercial in a receptive mood. (2006: 46)

Although the BBC does not have commercial breaks, *Killing Eve* is a commercial product. Action dramas are eminently exportable across a range of international platforms. Violence 'travels well' – unlike sex on screen, it does not often face censorship (Gerbner 2006: 50-51).

Conclusion

Killing Eve is a dramatic narrative which offers a hyperbolic account of neoliberal feminism. The competitive relationship between Villanelle and other assassins mirrors corporate management strategies, except here being terminated is not a euphemism. Depictions of MI5, MI6 and The Twelve in *Killing Eve* parody corporate culture in a neoliberal economy where you are 'only as good as your last kill'. Employees are disposable; management roles are not clearly defined and promotion from the lower ranks is unlikely. *Killing Eve* represents women's anger on screen; anger with each other (within the narrative) but also an anger with the wider constraints which still shape how women live their lives. It is undoubtedly refreshing to see women as violent protagonists in a genre which continues to be dominated by male protagonists who are usually killing women or seeking other men who kill women. Nevertheless, simply placing active and violent women in the 'masculine' role of killer or protagonist does not effectively denote 'feminist' television nor signal a society in which feminism is achieved. Rather shows like *Killing Eve* demonstrate the continuing attempt to contain feminist ideas within marketable media products, taking 'elements of feminism [...] into account' (McRobbie 2009, 1).

This is a drama which offers a feminist *flavour* but not any visible political praxis. Admittedly, a viable political vision is a lot to ask from popular drama, but some sense of women's community rather than the off-kilter relationship between Eve and Villanelle would go some way towards this. Beyond the central cast there are few women who appear regularly throughout the show. Eve has no female friends beyond her job. Villanelle's casual betrayal of her former lover, Nadia (Olivia Ross)

– reversing a car over her body and then getting into a Russian prison to assassinate her in Season One – sets the tone for much of the show. Structural inequities are not dissected because, like most television dramas, the narrative focus is on the individual. Class and race are visible onscreen but they are not evidently relevant to the roles of the protagonists; Eve’s Asian identity is barely touched upon and Carolyn’s white privilege is neither interrogated nor fleshed out with some sense of her background. The show is spectacular in its account of neoliberal economies which continue to inflict women’s lives, demonstrating the violence enacted by corporate organizations regarding emotional and physical labour – the dynamics of gender and power – but *Killing Eve* is not feminist television.

Violent women have a long history on screen. From the femme fatales of early twentieth-century cinema to the women warriors of twenty-first-century epic television series, they are visible and eminently consumable. Academic writing has examined how such women are represented and how they reflect upon debates about femininity and power (see, for example, Boyle, 2005; Inness, 2004; Kuhn, 1998; Maury & Roche, 2020; McCaughey & King, 2001; Neroni, 2005; Tasker, 1998). The continued fascination of western audiences with violent women, and western academics writing about them, indicates their role in ongoing cultural debates about how men and women could or should behave. Women’s violence is not explicitly or intentionally political but it is nevertheless about politics. Spectacular images of violence on large and small screens refract real-world political relations between people, organisations and states. These images worry at specific political problems but rarely offer workable solutions. What they can do is make us think differently about our own contexts.

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