

❁ SENIOR STUDENT ESSAY COMPETITION: 2023 AWARD WINNER ❁

DRESSED TO KILL:  
VIEWERS' RELATIONSHIPS WITH REPRESENTATIONS OF VIOLENT  
HYPER-FEMININITY IN CONTEMPORARY QUEER HORROR

Revena Correll Trnka<sup>1</sup>

ABSTRACT

*Recent trends in contemporary horror TV present queer women as Western media's latest anti-hero, foregrounding presentations of hyper-femininity as central to queer women's violence. I examine how representations of 'violent lesbians' are used by viewers to aid in shaping and understanding their own identities. Drawing on fashion theory as well as Barbara Creed's concept of the 'monstrous feminine' to examine the role depictions of hyper-femininity play in both highlighting and undermining women's power, I present a textual analysis of two queer horror shows – Ratched (2020–) and Killing Eve (2018–2022) – alongside discussions with fans via focus groups and interviews. I examine how these shows represent queerness and femininity in relation to violent women, and how women and non-binary individuals collectively create meaning out of these representations. I argue that while these shows present viewers with alternative images of femininity, they also reinforce certain gender norms, supporting dominant power structures that present a restrained image of queer women's deviancy, and one that is not available to all bodies. Viewers critically engage with this material, utilising these shows to expand their own understandings and expressions of identity, while also challenging the shows' limitations.*

*Keywords:* queer studies; media studies; femininity; violence; fashion theory

INTRODUCTION

In the last few years, murderous lesbians have become more visible than ever before in horror media, reflective of an overall increase in representations of deviant, violent women in TV today (Hagelin and Silverman 2022). As seen in popular lesbian TV horror shows, such as *Killing Eve* (2018–2022) and

*Ratched* (2020–), murderous lesbian characters stand out in part because of their hyper-femininity, which is heavily entwined with their propensities for violence. In these shows, hyper-feminine clothing and appearance and their assumed connection to heterosexuality are regularly used as a disguise, hiding women's potential violent power and thus enabling them to kill a plethora of (mostly male) victims. Crucially, the violent lesbian's hyper-femininity goes beyond functioning as a disguise, remaining significant to these characters' personalities even after their propensities for violence are revealed. Indeed, contemporary lesbian killers not only use femininity as a tool but also derive enjoyment from its articulation; being a highly feminine woman is as much a part of their essential character and a source of power as it is a device for luring victims.

In interviews and focus group discussions with New Zealand fans of these shows, I found that women and non-binary viewers were attracted to and enjoyed this representation of overtly feminine queer violence while also being highly critical of it. Viewers both drew on the shows to develop their own understandings and presentations of gender, while also critiquing the perceived limitations of the shows' representations of femininity. There are limits to how subversive femininity is enacted within each show; given these limitations, the shows function to reinforce particular gender norms and, in effect, to uphold elements of the dominant gender hierarchies they may initially appear to challenge.

The findings in this article are based on a textual analysis of the horror TV shows *Ratched* and *Killing Eve*, as well as research amongst their New Zealand fans. *Ratched* is a horror-thriller series, created by Evan Romansky and developed by Ryan Murphy, serving as a prequel to the 1975 film *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, directed by Miloš Forman. The series, set in 1947, follows Mildred Ratched (Sarah Paulson), detailing her growing cruelty and abuse of her position as a nurse at Lucia State Hospital in California. While working at Lucia, Ratched meets Gwendolyn Briggs (Cynthia Nixon), a lesbian who takes an instant interest in her. While Ratched initially rebuffs Gwendolyn, she gradually accepts and returns Gwendolyn's affections.

*Killing Eve* is a spy thriller series, based on Luke Jennings's *Villanelle* novels, produced by Sid Gentle Films for BBC America and BBC iPlayer. Three seasons of the show are examined here (a fourth aired after my research concluded). The series, set in contemporary Britain, focuses on the relationship between Eve Polastri (Sandra Oh), a British intelligence investigator, and Villanelle (Jodie Comer), a queer psychopathic Russian assassin. When Eve is tasked

with catching Villanelle, the two women develop a mutual obsession with one another, complicating the identities of pursuer and pursued, as well as what they want to do when they catch each other.

Both shows found global success. *Ratched* was viewed by 48 million people in its first 28 days and *Killing Eve's* first season increased BBC America's viewership by 41%, with later seasons airing simultaneously in a range of countries, including New Zealand (Netflix 2020; Press 2018). While actual information on audience demographics is difficult to come by, these shows are characterised as being centred on women, both as creators and viewers (Ellman 2018; Villarreal 2020).

In this article, I draw on textual analysis of both shows alongside discussions with some of each show's New Zealand viewers. My research involved 11 participants, who variously took part in two focus groups as well as six individual interviews. The participants were young New Zealand women and non-binary adults, ranging between the ages of 22 to 26. Additionally, while sexual identity was not selected for, the majority (10 out of the 11) participants identified as LGBTQ+.

In these discussions, viewers evoked a shared understanding that the TV shows they watch help shape their perspectives of gender and sexual identity. This is in line with scholarly findings that TV not only reflects the norms of the cultures that create it, but also has a hand in shaping, and reinforcing social norms (Scharrer and Blackburn 2017, 169–170). TV can introduce viewers to new ideas, influencing cultural conversation, as well as understandings of acceptable ways of being in the world (Hagelin and Silverman 2022, 20; Peterson 2008, 119). Amongst my participants, TV was similarly seen as a powerful tool in shaping social attitudes, but the nature of that power was regarded as volatile. Specifically, TV can create a space for self-discovery; several of my participants recounted how queer horror media helped them discover their sexuality. But it can also be a space of restriction. TV representations, particularly of already marginalised groups, can function to create boundaries around acceptable forms and expressions of identity (Lovelock 2019, 3).

Drawing on fashion theory coupled with Barbara Creed's concept of the 'monstrous feminine' (1993; 2022), I examine how the shows' depictions of lesbian killers represent hyper-femininity as a form of power. Creed's original conceptualisation of the 'monstrous feminine' suggests that violent, 'monstrous' women are defined by their sexuality and, moreover, that their gender identity is central (rather than coincidental) to their role in the production of monstros-

ity and horror (1993, 3). In 2022, Creed expanded her original text to argue that the contemporary 'monstrous woman' revolts against gendered expectations, thus destabilising patriarchal power structures. Expanding on Creed's revised notion of the 'monstrous feminine', I propose that an analysis of viewers' responses to hyper-femininity as portrayed in *Ratched* and *Killing Eve* reveals that even though the shows *attempt* to challenge patriarchal structures by presenting the monstrous feminine as powerful, their reinforcement of other aspects of societal gender norms upholds the same power structures they purportedly challenge. It is instead left up to viewers to undertake the work of further subverting the presentation of hyper-femininity, beyond the very restricted representations of powerful women offered by these shows.

#### HYPER-FEMININITY AND VIOLENCE

Within both these shows and discussions about them, feminine fashion featured prominently as a marker of gender and sexual identity. Defining femininity is complex, understandings of femininity are culturally specific and can diverge both historically and within a culture. Sociologist Rosalind Gill (2017) argues that in popular media, femininity is represented as a bodily practice in that women's bodies are portrayed as the site of their identity and power while also being highly regulated. Importantly, femininity can also include facets beyond the materiality of the physical body. Gender theorist Hannah McCann (2017) argues that femininity can be viewed as a 'style of the body', which is a normative descriptor for, but also separable from, female-designated bodies, enabling us to conceptualise femininity as 'an aesthetic that also goes beyond the surface of the skin' (2017, 5). Fashion can play a central role in the production of a feminine aesthetic. Fashion and identity are closely linked; sociologist Patrizia Calefato (2021) describes fashion as a 'sense-making system', which allows for the production of individual and social representations of identity. We can build an image of the self through the clothes we choose to wear. However, fashion also presents us with a space for play. It allows one to shift between identities or project false identities (Geczy and Karaminas 2020, 10).

The love for the hyper-feminine fashion permeated most discussions about the shows, with the young people I spoke to regularly referencing characters' clothes, and often, their desire to replicate them. Characters' outfits were perceived as a representation of a form of power, and viewers interpreted from this that dressing in a similar way would allow them to share in some of this power. However, this perceived feminine power is complicated as within the shows, it acts as a disguise or subterfuge, relying on others failing to perceive the wearer's power.

The use of femininity as a disguise for hidden violence constitutes what Creed (1993) calls the ‘monstrous feminine’. In arguing that the feminine monster is defined by her sexuality, Creed claims the abject, ‘horrifying aspects’ of the feminine monster are ‘offset through the display of woman as a reassuring and pleasurable sign’ (Creed 1993, 24). Creed shows how femininity can be conceptualised as a disguise; signifiers of ‘acceptable’ femininity are used to complicate and hide a monstrous women’s monstrosity, making them unidentifiable (Creed 1993, 136). These kinds of women are sometimes identified through the image of the ‘femme fatale’, a murderer whose sexuality is central to her identity, as she uses it to seduce her victims, a famous example being Sharon Stone’s Catherine Tramell in *Basic Instinct*. Here, as elsewhere, the femme fatale is depicted as a delinquent form of femininity, whose sexuality is turned against men and used for harm, and who therefore must be reformed or destroyed (Miller, Atherton and Hetherington 2021, 1–2). The bisexual femme fatale is particularly destabilising of sexual identity given her dual attraction and danger to both men and women (Farrimond 2012, 148). In the TV shows, at various times, both characters adopt the role of the femme fatal, but in particular Villanelle, as demonstrated in season one of *Killing Eve*:

Having broken into the house of her latest mark Caesar Greco, Villanelle is sitting at the end of the bed, stroking a hand over silk sheets when Greco enters. Villanelle wears a light, summery blue dress, which is sheer in parts and has a slit in the front. Combined with the fact she appears to be braless, the dress draws attention to Villanelle’s chest. Her blond hair is pinned up with an ornate hairpin.

Villanelle employs her hyper-feminine appearance to mask her violent intentions and deflect from her ability to carry them out. Her disguise proves successful when Greco, a mob boss with a range of bodyguards patrolling his house, shows no concern at finding an unknown woman in his bedroom. Assuming that Villanelle is a sex worker sent to him as an anniversary gift, Greco then draws on another assumption of femininity, namely that a feminine woman’s role is to serve men. Villanelle goes along with this idea, confirming that she was, in a way, sent to him. In this moment, Villanelle uses Greco’s assumptions about feminine presentation against him. She draws both on the connection between femininity and assumed heterosexuality, and femininity and weakness, to allow her to get close to and put Greco at ease. However, once Greco is successfully deceived, allowing Villanelle to move physically close to him, she shows no interest in actually engaging in sex with him. When Greco attempts to touch her, she brushes him away, chiding that ‘[he] should always ask before touching’. Her disguise successful, Villanelle now reveals her hidden power:

Villanelle pulls the hairpin free from her hair and thrusts it into one of Greco's eyeballs. She presses a valve that releases the poison in the hairpin, slowly killing Greco as Villanelle cradles his face in her hands, watching him die.

Ratched similarly uses hyper-feminine presentation to disarm and control men. The ways in which this presentation is a purposefully crafted disguise are highlighted in the first episode:

Before embarking on a job interview with Dr Hannover, the male hospital director, Mildred Ratched perfects her presentation of 1940s femininity. Mildred selects a dress specifically for the occasion. It is a vibrant yellow, hanging just below knee level, and well-tailored to her body. Ratched's hair is done up neatly, and pearl earrings dangle from her ears.

Mildred's outfit is planned down to the precise tilt of her hat, copied from a fashion magazine, highlighting the extent to which these characters are consciously crafting their performances of femininity. The dress, with a cinched waist and the padded shoulders works, to quote Sarah Paulson, to 'make a woman look like a real woman' (SAG-AFTRA Foundation 2021).

The way this feminine aesthetic is copied and crafted through the replication of other women's representations of femininity is foregrounded in the next moment, when, positioned over Mildred's shoulder, viewers watch her apply bright red lipstick in the bathroom mirror. The action is a moment of mimicry – minutes earlier we watched as Dolly, a young, notably attractive nurse trainee, applied her own lipstick, the makeup slowly gliding across her lips. Mildred copies the action, as well as the accompanying compliment Dolly had just received from the night guard, telling herself in the mirror that she is 'looking good today, Mildred'.

My participants noted this conscious use of femininity by the TV shows' characters, commenting on the perceived link being drawn between presentations of femininity and assumed behaviour.

Two of my participants, Rose (she/her) and Hana (she/her), both queer cis women, discussed this theme together, commenting on how the shows portray the way men perceive feminine women as unintelligent and thus unthreatening:

*Rose:* (discussing Ratched and Villanelle's use of femininity to get

close to men): ‘I think it is that sort (of) the thing of like, oh when one cares that much about (their) appearance, you can’t have other shit going on in a brain – that’s not how it works’.

*Hana*: ‘There’s only so much room in there! Can’t be, you know, thinking of other things’.

*Rose*: ‘Just thoughts about lipstick colours ...’

Hana and Rose’s comments both jokingly portray how men within these shows perceive feminine women and reflect the key overarching message given by both shows and expressed in focus groups, namely that the overt performance of femininity is interpreted by society as a symbol of weakness. This idea of feminine weakness can be connected back to biologically essentialist Western ideas of sex and gender, according to which women are perceived as the weaker sex, less capable than men in terms of both physical strength and mental rationality (Grosz 1994, 14). In their discussion Hana and Rose made it clear this is how they believe the men perceived the women, not how the women are, with Rose commenting that *Ratched*’s feminine appearance ‘came across’ as a way to make men feel ‘comfortable’ and ‘lull (them) into a sense of security’. This reflects how both shows’ central message is not that to be a woman is to be weak, but that to be a woman, and, perhaps more significantly, to be *seen* as a woman, particularly a hyper-feminine one, is to be underestimated.

This image of hyper-feminine-presenting women being underestimated was one that participants linked to their own lived experiences of presenting as feminine. In interviews, one participant, Rose (she/her), a queer, feminine-presenting cis woman discussed how her femininity affects peoples’ view of her intelligence:

going into makeup [school] [...] I’ve had people say I’m ‘too smart for that’ or have a very obvious shift in their view of my intelligence based on it. Also, I notice the more femme I’m presenting, the less seriously people take me, like there’s a peak amount of femininity you can present before you’re vapid. So, you can wear makeup and a skirt, but God-forbid it’s pink or you take any joy in it.

This connection between femininity and intelligence is in part due to how Western ideals of femininity are often connected to youth. Young women are seen as being the most capable of replicating feminine norms. In turn, successful productions of femininity carry along with them assumptions of naivety

and innocence (McCann 2017, 47). The shows play off the idea that to be seen as successfully feminine simultaneously suggests one is less powerful, and by extension, non-threatening. This association of femininity with lack of violence occurs not only within the world of film; it reflects perspectives more broadly held in Western societies. For example, according to a study of women's criminal sentencing by sociologist Belinda Morrissey (2003, 170), in the United States and the United Kingdom, women who are perceived as 'feminine' are more likely to avoid sentencing or receive a lighter sentence when charged with murder relative to women who are seen as failing to perform femininity. In other words, feminine women are viewed as 'safe', due to their apparent adherence to feminine norms.

In her exploration of the 'monstrous feminine', Creed suggests that female monsters utilise acceptable images of femininity to cover up their monstrosity. This disguise, moreover, functions to destabilise their gender identities (Creed 1993, 23–4, 135). The use of signifiers of 'acceptable femininity' is thus interpreted as either the monstrous woman's capitulation to patriarchal pressures in order to survive, or as a disguise that hides their true, dangerous self (Chare *et al.* 2020, 26). The revealing of this disguise involves the removal of 'proper' femininity, exposing a woman 'in revolt', which Creed argues functions to destabilise patriarchal gender roles (Creed 2022, 5, 71). Through her murderous actions, a woman is marked as deviant not only because she kills, but because in doing so, she goes against what it is to be a woman, revealing herself to be 'bad' at being a woman (Miller, Atherton and Hetherington 2021, 2). Creed's examination of masquerade notably suggests a separation between feminine monsters' presentations of femininity and their 'true' self. Within these shows, however, while the moment of violence is portrayed as a subversion of societal stereotypes of what it is to be feminine, it crucially does not constitute a *removal* of the feminine from the characters' identity or presentation. Instead, the 'masquerade' of femininity remains enacted after the act of murder, revealing itself to be not only a masquerade, but one of her character traits. This pattern is reflected in the scene of Villanelle's killing of Greco, which exemplifies how Villanelle regularly draws on symbols of traditional femininity, turning them into weapons, including the hairpin, poisonous perfume, a knife buried within a tube of lipstick, and deadly knitting needles. These items are subverted from their original purposes, in which they can be read as tools of oppression and symbols of women's naivety and weakness, to become the tools with which Villanelle kills.

Markers of femininity within the shows function both as disguises that mask or deflect away potential danger and come to evince a form of violent power



themselves. In Villanelle's hands, lipstick not only offers a false sense of security, hiding the face of an assassin under its pretty hue, but the lipstick itself is now a weapon as well. This point is summarised by Charlie (they/she), a queer non-binary person, who said in regard to *Killing Eve*: '[Villanelle's] joy in clothes and makeup and stuff I don't think [is] patronised. I think it turned into [...] a literal weapon, like when she has a little blade inside a lipstick'. Crucially, as suggested by Charlie's comment, these are also items Villanelle delights in, in their original forms. Villanelle adores clothing, makeup and perfume. She regularly spends money on luxury clothes, and her apartment is cluttered with perfume bottles. Beyond the disguise and out of costume, Villanelle remains a hyper-feminine woman, a fact which contributes to connecting power to her feminine fashion, as Villanelle displays her agency by enacting a chosen, interrogated femininity (McCann 2017, 103; Miller, Atherton and Hetherington 2021, 11).

*Ratched* similarly blurs the line between weapons and tools of femininity, most starkly in its marketing via Netflix posters juxtaposing symbols of femininity with horror. In one poster, Ratched holds an ice pick, an iconic tool alluding to the medical tool used for lobotomies in *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* and one Ratched herself uses as a weapon in the show, paying homage also to *Basic Instinct*. However, the poster's positioning of the pick, hovering above Ratched's eye, does not fit with the image we usually associate with lobotomies. Instead, Ratched imitates the pose held when applying mascara. Here again, we see the mixing of markers of femininity and violence, as well as the depiction of these markers as more than a disguise. The ice pick/mascara is symbolic of Ratched's identity, a meeting point between violence and hyper-femininity in which neither masks the other, but both work in conjunction to enable her violence. The fact that the murderous lesbians' hyper-femininity does not evaporate along with their 'cover story', but rather continues to be portrayed as a genuine facet of their identities, prompts viewers to interpret the representation of these characters' femininity as not just a disguise that conceals a separate form of power, as claimed by Creed, but as itself a source of power.

Viewers' desires to replicate the TV shows' feminine signifiers reflect their endorsement and enthusiasm for the connections made between feminine presentation and power. When one of my participants, Naavya (she/her), a straight cis woman and fan of *Killing Eve*, conducted a Zoom interview, she discussed how much she loved one of Villanelle's outfits, a summery blue floral dress. Whilst lamenting her inability to purchase that particular outfit, Naavya revealed she once recreated a different dress from the show for a birthday party. During our interview, Naavya, who was seated in her bedroom, held up a dress that was easily recognisable as a recreation of one of Villanelle's dresses. She

discussed why she made it, expanding on the influence the show has had on her personal style:

During university I was kind of trying to maybe figure out more about my style and sense of self. I feel like *Killing Eve* was kind of a catalyst to me experimenting with my own style [...] I wore [the dress] to a party, and I styled it in a very specific way. Pretty much, like, I copied the exact kind of style [...] of what Villanelle [was] wearing [...] I knew that my outfit look[ed] so good, so I wasn't really super concerned with how people saw me [...] I felt very, very confident. I think more than I usually would. And I think that's what fashion really does for me [...] I kind of embody the show [by] literally wearing this dress [...] Coming in in such a grand outfit it was like I don't really care what anyone thinks, I'm just gonna wear my dress and do my own thing.

The outfit replicated by Naavya – a bright, bubble-gum pink statement piece made from layers of tulle – caught other viewers' attention as well. Designed by Molly Goddard, the dress sold out after the episode aired and subsequently topped several 'Villanelle's top outfits' compilations (*You Magazine* 2020).

Naavya's comment reflects the potential power of television images of hyper-femininity. The copying of TV characters' outfits, clothing and accessories is a way for fans to draw a perceived connection between themselves and the character whose outfit they replicate (Mascio 2021, 443). Sociologist Antonella Mascio suggests that this action speaks to a desire to replicate the characters' qualities and often their sense of strength (2021, 443). Naavya depicts this very clearly in her reflection on how replicating Villanelle's dress was in fact a way of replicating her confidence and power. Importantly, this is a strength that Naavya sees as closely connected to Villanelle's gender identity. The confidence Naavya drew from Villanelle's dress cannot be separated from the hyper-femininity of the outfit. However, this sense of confidence is different both from Villanelle's violent power and her frequent use of femininity to draw herself closer to others. Naavya specifically commented that the dress helped her feel secure being on her own, saying, 'I didn't feel bad if I wasn't talking to people as much anymore'. In this way, Naavya's recreation of the dress was not a recreation of feminine performances that utilise women's power through being underestimated, but an embracing of a perceived power in hyper-feminine presentations that deliberately stand out.

But while the TV shows' representations of hyper-femininity are celebrated

by many viewers, they are also highly critiqued and often by the same people. Creed, in her revised discussion of the monstrous feminine, argues that the contemporary feminine monster challenges and destabilises patriarchy (Creed 2022, 5). In line with Creed's theory, these shows present violent women who fight against and challenge patriarchal systems. Similarly, contemporary literature on *Killing Eve*, such as the work of Sarah Gilligan and Jacky Collins (2021) and Alyson Miller, Cassandra Atherton and Paul Hetherington (2021), argue the show presents women who challenge the gendered norms of the dominant culture. However, both studies also indicate that *Killing Eve* can simultaneously be seen to maintain certain gender norms, as explored below. Viewers of both shows also drew attention to the ways in which the shows themselves continued to uphold many elements of the patriarchal power structure, despite their representations of resistant, disruptive women.

The shows' plotlines pivot on the idea that hyper-femininity is a potential source of power. The lesbian killer characters' abilities to understand and successfully perform hyper-femininity must be matched by those around them viewing them as successfully performing normative womanhood. But the relationship between hyper-femininity and power is also reliant on the connection drawn between femininity and heterosexuality, requiring presentations of femininity to remain appealing to the male gaze. The 'deviant' violent queer characters within these shows present in a similar physical mould: they are all (with the exception of *Killing Eve's* Eve, who is of Korean descent) cis, primarily white, able-bodied, conventionally attractive women. Because of this, many viewers perceived the potential power of femininity depicted in these shows as limited in its availability.

For many, these limitations created a barrier between them and the characters, as there are so many visible physical differences between them. For example, Rose (she/her), who self describes as fat or plus sized, began watching *Ratched* initially in part due to the main character's hyper-feminine presentation. However, she also noted that the very mainstream representations of women's weight in this and other similar queer horror shows limited the extent to which she felt she related to their queer characters:

there's not a lot of fat women [...] presented as full characters, [...] particularly as far as like how I present that is like a conscious thing [...]. That's not super shown in media as like, here's a fully fleshed out character.

This sense of separation is also influenced by the financial barriers involved

in replicating the clothing and items these characters use to transform their physical bodies. While at the beginning of the season *Ratched* is portrayed as financially struggling, throughout the shows both *Ratched* and *Villanelle* dress to project an image of themselves as wealthy. *Villanelle* wears a multitude of designer brands, and *Ratched*'s tailored looks are completed with signature pearls and lipstick costing \$50 NZD (Lalancette 2020). Crucially, these are the same items these women imbue with power, creating a form of feminine power that is closely bound to class, thus upholding social divisions generated by capitalism (McRobbie 2020). Some fans, such as Naavya, went to great lengths to overcome this financial hurdle. The pink dress Naavya recreated originally retailed for £408 (\$876 NZD), whereas Naavya made her version from several tutus from Look Sharp (Sansome 2020).

Viewers regarded the barriers these visual differences created in relating to characters as an example of the potentially volatile power of TV. While television is a space for testing and challenging cultural boundaries, it is also a space in which these boundaries are reinforced (Peterson 2008, 119). In showing only certain facets of an identity (*i.e.* the thin, white, well-dressed lesbian), TV may communicate to viewers that there are particular ways of being or appearing that are required to make that identity acceptable (Lovelock 2019, 3). Viewers expressed this view in their discussions of the relationship between TV and their understandings of their own sexuality. Drawing on their own life experiences, several viewers commented on how the invisibility of particular kinds of queer bodies in media – such as bodies of people of colour, or disabled bodies – has affected their own understanding of their sexuality. For example, Sophie (she/her), a queer cis woman who has cerebral palsy and uses a wheelchair, discussed in a focus group how the lack of representation of disabled, and specifically, queer disabled characters on TV influenced her own feelings and experiences of disability:

I think as we've all identified today, queer relationships are often side-lined or whatever, but I think more for the disabled community, [it's] even more so because when it comes to us, we get the stereotype of like, disabled people don't have a sexuality or we aren't interested in sex or relationships, and as a person who's in that community, it's really hard for me to identify and to see [that]. Because – spoiler alert – we are sexual. We like having relationships. And so to (be able to) see that on the screen and to have that for [...] people who are disabled and queer [...] to be able to identify with that would be great.

Sophie later expanded on this topic in a follow up interview, discussing in

greater detail how TV and film media have helped her figure out her sexuality, but her experience has been negatively affected by the lack of representation of disabilities.

Media very much played a role in helping me find my sexuality. This is a topic that isn't freely talked about within my family, and disability and sexuality are also not freely talked about within society. It's very much the narrative with disability [...] that we are not sexual in any form, or if we are, it's only a select few or it's [for] fetish material [...] I am yet to see a disabled character on-screen that I connect with in terms of this, [but] other able-bodied characters helped me to explore the idea that I might be something other than straight.

Sophie's comments highlight how, while TV horror shows claim to offer images of complex, queer women, portraying examples of powerful deviant resistance to societal gender norms, many viewers nonetheless perceive these representations as highly limited. Because of this, the shows are perceived as continuing to maintain many of the same gender hierarchies that they initially appear to challenge. Their over-arching message is that only certain forms of queer deviance, namely those that otherwise conform to the expected norms of 'attractive' bodies, are acceptable. In doing so, the shows maintain ablest, racial, and sexual hierarchies. Whilst celebrating queer womanhood, they promote and reinforce new kinds of homosexual normativities.

Many of my participants believe that this influences how queer identities are not only seen by others but also presented by those who embody them. Indeed, several of them recounted how not being seen on TV or in film media limited their own forms of self-expression. To be able to see queer women on screen, but not queer and fat women, or queer and disabled women, conveyed to them the message that you can be queer *or* fat, but not both. And in actually being both, their own identities still lie beyond the bounds of acceptability and attractiveness, even as enactments of (acceptable) deviance. This shows the complexity both in how these shows represent gender and femininity, as well as in how viewers understand and respond to these representations.

## CONCLUSION

A new genre of queer TV horror shows, of which *Ratched* and *Killing Eve* are a part, attempt to present subversive images of femininity, challenging assumptions of femininity as weakness, and suggesting that it may be both a disguise of strength and a vital element of how powerful, agentic women identify.

However, while these shows present subversive representations of femininity, the power they portray remains linked to one's ability to successfully perform traditional expectations of femininity, an ability reliant on very narrow, delimited acceptable forms of appearance. This created a barrier between the diverse viewership that found these shows appealing and the forms of gender presentation represented in them, leading to viewers' concerns that the shows continue to uphold dominant gender hierarchies rather than fully challenging them. But despite this limitation, viewers were highly receptive to these images of subversive hyper-femininity. Gender markers were copied and recreated by viewers such as Naavya to create their own expressions of self-identity. Crucially, this process did not involve replicating these markers exactly as presented within the shows but often involved changing and transforming them to suit the wearers' own needs, such as Naavya utilising *Killing Eve* to help develop her daily wardrobe, and her use of the pink party dress to bring her confidence in a new environment.

Based on textual analysis, we can see how the shows portray violent women who represent Creed's concept of the contemporary monstrous feminine, acting to revolt against and destabilise gendered norms and thus patriarchy. However, my discussion also indicates that despite the shows' representations of deviant, destabilising women, viewers perceive the shows as falling short of this goal. The restricted forms of powerful deviant femininity that are allowable within these representations function to reinstate and maintain oppressive gendered expectations for women. Instead, it is the viewers themselves who take these representations and further transform them to create subversive presentations of hyper-femininity.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to all of my participants for making this work possible, and my supervisors, Grant Otsuki and Catherine Trundle. Research for this article was approved by the Victoria University of Wellington Te Herenga Waka Human Ethics Committee: 0000029819.

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST AND FUNDING

The paper was not funded, and there are no conflicts of interest to note.

## NOTE

- 1 Revena Correll Trnka recently completed a Masters in Anthropology at Victoria University of Wellington. In addition, they co-run the Wellington theatre company, *Ducttapedon*. Their interests include performance, gender and sexual identity, and fashion.

## REFERENCES

- Calefato, Patrizia. 2021. *Fashion as Cultural Translation: Signs, Images, Narratives*. London: Anthem Press.
- Chare, Nicholas, Jeanette Hoorn, and Audrey Yue. 2020. *Re-Reading the Monstrous-Feminine: Art, Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis*. Routledge.
- Creed, Barbara. 1993. *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge.
- . 2022. *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine: Feminist New Wave Cinema*. Routledge.
- Ellman, Lucy. June 23, 2018. “Killing Eve” and Women Who Love Murder.’ *Paley Matters*. <https://paleymatters.org/killing-eve-and-women-who-love-murder-fc03dd8db394>
- Farrimond, Katherine. 2012. “Stay Still So We Can See Who You Are”: Anxiety and Bisexual Activity in the Contemporary Femme Fatale Film.’ *Journal of Bisexuality* 12: 138–154. doi:10.1080/15299716.2012.645725
- Gill, Rosalind. 2017. ‘The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Postfeminism: A Postfeminist Sensibility 10 Years on.’ *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 20(6): 606–626. doi:10.1177/1367549417733003
- Gilligan, Sarah, and Jacky Collins. 2021. ‘Fashion-forward Killer: Villanelle, Costuming and Queer Style in *Killing Eve*.’ *Film, Fashion & Consumption* 10(2): 353–376. doi:10.1386/ffc\_00030\_1
- Geczy, Adam, and Vicki Karaminas. 2020. *Libertine Fashion: Sexual Freedom, Rebellion and Style*. London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts.
- Grosz, Elizabeth. 1994. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. New York: Routledge.

- Hagelin, Sarah, and Gillian Silverman. 2022. *The New Female Antihero: The Disruptive Women of Twenty-First-Century US Television*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Killing Eve*. 2018–2022. Produced by Sid Gentle Films. Aired on BBC America and BBC Three.
- Lalancette, Katherine. October 8, 2020. 'Netflix's *Ratched* Makes a Solid Case for Red Lipstick.' *The Kit*. <https://thekit.ca/beauty/makeup/ratched-netflix-red-lipstick/>
- Lovelock, Michael. 2019. *Reality TV and Queer Identities*. Camden: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mascio, Antonella. 2021. 'Media Convergence, Fashion, and TV Series.' In *The Routledge Companion to Fashion Studies*, edited by Eugenia Paulicelli, Veronica Manlow and Elizabeth Wissinger, 437–445. Routledge.
- McCann, Hannah. 2017. *Queering Femininity: Sexuality, Feminism and the Politics of Presentation*. Routledge.
- McRobbie, Angela. 2020. *Feminism and the Politics of Resilience: Essays on Gender, Media and the End of Welfare*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Miller, Alyson, Cassandra Atherton, and Paul Hetherington. 2021. 'Agents of Chaos: The Monstrous Feminine in *Killing Eve*.' *Feminist Media Studies* 23(4): 1802–1818. doi: 10.1080/14680777.2021.1996423
- Morrissey, Belinda. 2003. *When Women Kill: Questions of Agency and Subjectivity*. Routledge.
- Netflix. 2020. Twitter post. October 17, 2020 4:30 AM.
- Peterson, Mark. 2008. *Anthropology and Mass Communication: Media and Myth in the New Millennium*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Press, Joy. May 25, 2018. '*Killing Eve*'s Runaway Success Proves There's an Audience for Off-Kilter Drama.' *Vanity Fair*. <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2018/05/killing-eve-season-one-success-for-bbc-america-sandra-oh-phoebe-waller-bridge-and-jodie-comer#:~:text=Thanks%20to%20word%20of%20mouth,rare%20of%20ad%2Dsupported%20dramas>



*Ratched*. 2020-. Created by Evan Romansky, developed by Ryan Murphy. Distributed on Netflix.

SAG-AFTRA Foundation. January 12, 2021. 'Conversations at Home with Sarah Paulson of *Ratched*.' [https://youtu.be/n8F2x\\_SHk5c?si=fdp86mIVFfEoiTle](https://youtu.be/n8F2x_SHk5c?si=fdp86mIVFfEoiTle)

Sansome, Jessica. September 17, 2020. 'Primark Fans Go Wild for Dress which Looks just like *Killing Eve* star Villanelle's iconic outfit.' *Manchester Evening News*. <https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/whats-on/shopping/primark-fans-go-wild-dress-18948889>

Scharrer, Erica, and Greg Blackburn. 2017. 'Cultivating Conceptions of Masculinity: Television and Perceptions of Masculine Gender Role Norms.' *Mass Communication and Society* 21(2): 149-177. doi:10.1080/15205436.2017.1406118

Villarreal, Yvonne. September 18, 2020. "I worked with men all my life": *Ratched's* Women Open up about their Time in Hollywood.' *Los Angeles Times*. <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/tv/story/2020-09-18/netflix-ratched-sarah-paulson-cynthia-nixon-sharon-stone-sophie-okonedo>

You Magazine. September 17, 2020. 'Primark are selling a £15 pink dress which looks just like Villanelle's from *Killing Eve*.' *You Magazine*. <https://www.you.co.uk/primark-villanelle-dress-killing-eve/>