

Ironic Europe

Gender and National Stereotypes in *Killing Eve*

Lynge Stegger Gemzøe

is a postdoctoral researcher at Department of Culture and Learning, Aalborg University. He is a member of the DETECT project. His current research area focuses on European crime drama and cultural identity.

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Abstract

BBC America’s television series *Killing Eve* (2018 -) can be read as a classic clash between East and West, male and female, but with a twist: some of the (gender) roles have switched, and the show – while certainly also buying into classic stereotypes – seems interested in nuances and a humoristic play with the viewer’s expectations. This article explores the female protagonist and antagonist roles in seasons 1-3 of *Killing Eve* in light of contemporary gender stereotypes and representations. It links this analysis with a consideration of how national culture and locations are constructed in the show, exploring the notion of ‘secondary markers of location’ and illustrating a connection between challenging stereotypes and the corporate purpose to promote BBC America’s channel brand.

Keywords: Television series, Gender, National Stereotypes, Europe, Crime

BBC America’s television series *Killing Eve* is transnational in more ways than one. BBC America is public service broadcaster BBC’s commercially funded branch in the United States, which targets an

audience of “those fans that really respond to that witty, slightly subversive storytelling with a certain kind of smarts to it, underneath it all.” (Adalian 2017). As such, it builds on the historical creative trade between the United Kingdom and the United States, which has been described in detail by Weissman (2012). At the time of this writing, *Killing Eve* can be found on streaming services other than BBC, such as HBO Nordic. Based on a series of novellas by Luke Jennings and adapted for television by British screenwriter Phoebe Waller-Bridge, the show features Eve, an American special investigator of Korean descent, as the leading character. Although presented as based in the United Kingdom, Eve lives her adventures all over Europe, thus supporting the transnational character of the production. Repressing her bisexual side, at the beginning of the series she is shown married and living with a man of Polish descent. Eve hunts Villanelle: an international assassin of Russian descent. Villanelle insists on mostly speaking English, but is also fluent in Russian, French, German and Italian.

Despite – or rather because of – this border crossing and transnational setup, the series continually features stereotypical renditions of national culture and locations, sometimes to the brink of caricature. As such, for anyone with an interest in how national culture and identity are represented in transnational narratives, *Killing Eve* is a spectacularly good case in production, storytelling and aesthetics. The combination of a transnational spy setup based in the United Kingdom and the interplay between national stereotypes is clearly inspired by the James Bond-franchise. Both the original motion picture features and their various spin-offs have proven valuable cases for the analysis of gender and contemporary popular culture as well as geopolitical structures (Agger 2017; Funnell 2015; Bennett and Woollacott 1987). In consequence of the complex setup of *Killing Eve*, the theoretical framework of this article is based on both this literature and the scholarship on crime fiction detectives (Piper 2015; Brunsdon 2013), ‘bad girls’ and anti-heroines (Chappell and Young 2017; Buonanno 2017), geopolitics and national stereotypes (Dodds 2014; Saunders and Strukov 2017).

Powerful Women, Violence and ‘Bad Girls’ on Screen

Killing Eve is a crime television series featuring three prominent female leads. For a series that appears unquestionably inspired by

and commenting on the James Bond-franchise, female leads are an interesting choice. The James Bond films certainly feature their share of deadly women, but they are typically tamed or outperformed by Bond (Funnell 2015). The female leads also comment on the crime genre. Despite the fact that police work is still male dominated in real life (Mannion 2015), more and more female investigators have appeared on television in the last few decades.

Prime Suspect (ITV 1991-2006) is one of the first influential television serials with a female protagonist who has to balance her ambition, career and private life: the determined Jane Tennison, portrayed to critical acclaim by Helen Mirren. *Prime Suspect* was written by Lynda LaPlante, “with the assistance of DCI Jackie Malton, whose real-life experiences in the masculine stronghold of the Metropolitan Police Flying Squad have since been widely reported” (Piper 2015, 67). Jane Tennison is successful at work, but she sacrifices her personal life to succeed. The impact of this character is highlighted, among others, by Charlotte Brunson, who argues that *Prime Suspect* is “a canonical text for feminist television studies and that Helen Mirren’s performance of Lynda La Plante’s creation has provided an influential template for television, and the broader culture, to imagine what a senior female police officer is like” (2013, 1).

Since *Prime Suspect*, there have been a great many powerful female detectives on television with various degrees of trouble in their personal life, especially in the tradition of Nordic Noir: Ingrid Dahl in *Unit One* (DR 2000-2002), Sarah Lund in *Forbrydelsen* (DR 2007-2012), Saga Norén in *Bron/Broen* (DR/SVT 2011-2018), Dicte Svendsen in *Dicte* (TV2 2012-2016), Maria Wern in *Maria Wern* (TV4 2008-2018) etc. In fact, according to Karen Klitgaard Povlsen, “Since the 1990s, female police investigators have taken over Scandinavian screens” (2011, 91). Furthermore, Povlsen states that these investigators are often “young single women, living outside marriage, but with children” (2011, 92). Outside of the Nordic region, Temperance “Bones” Brennan, featured in *Bones* (Fox 2005-2017), is another take on the partly autistic crime investigator seen in various iterations since Sherlock Holmes, but Brennan is special in that she manages to combine work with children and a successful marriage, which only a few Scandinavian female detectives characters seem able to do (see for example Irene Huss in *Huss*, Illusion Films and *Yellow Bird* 2007-2011, or Liv Hermansson in *Thin Ice*, TV4 2020 -). Sum-

ming up, *Prime Suspect* marked the beginning of a portfolio of female investigators on television trying to juggle career and family at the same time, often unhappily so, with only a few occurrences of happily married female investigators. What unites all of these figures, however, is their unfettered dedication to their work, bordering on obsession. In this respect, they are not so different from their male counterparts (Agger 2016).

Mischievous, rebellious women have become increasingly visible in television, and this has attracted some scholarly attention. The idea of the rebellious and mischievous female is an integral part of Western civilization, in that the allegedly first female in Christian theology rebelled and defiantly ate the forbidden fruit in Eden. Eve and Pandora (Eve's ancient Greek counterpart), are also the starting point for Mallory Young's article in a recent anthology on 'bad girls' in popular fiction (Chappell and Young 2017). While defiant women such as Eve were once shamed, in the new millennium they appear as centrepieces in television series such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (The WB / UPN 1997-2003), *Game of Thrones* (HBO 2011-2019) and *Orange is the New Black* (Netflix 2013-2019). Powerful, transgressive women in television have become common, but researchers question the meaning of their standing up to patriarchal norms: "Is the bad girl's appearance no longer a matter of actual resistance but rather an entertaining performance of transgression?" (Young 2017, 3). Also, according to Kaley Kramer, an important distinction has to be made between female power and female violence. Building on Hannah Arendt's research, Kramer observes that violence is traditionally a masculine act, which is widely accepted if it is undertaken to preserve feminine virtue and innocence. When women are violent, they are culturally justified only if they are protecting their purity or their offspring. Otherwise, they are seen as deviants and therefore potentially subject to social exclusion. Thus, "Violent women upset not only the binary between 'masculine' and 'feminine' but threaten the foundation of patriarchal ideology, which requires ongoing violence in the service of an imagined (but never realized) future peace" (2017, 17). Kramer then goes on to illustrate how *Buffy*, protagonist in the pop-classic television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, stirs up these traditional accounts by presenting an embodiment of female justified violence. This is of particular interest in this context, for *Killing Eve* is, on the one hand, a

gruesome parade of unjustified female violence and, on the other, a story about two women breaking free of – or not caring about – prevailing societal norms and traditions.

The way *Killing Eve* goes into dialogue with gendered norms is best captured through an analysis of the powerful female characters portrayed in the show. Eve is the main and title character. She is yet another example of the dedicated, analytical detective who sacrifices her private life on account of an obsession with her work, just as Sarah Lund in *Forbrydelsen* (DR 2007-2012, see also Dunleavy 2014 and Gemzøe 2020) or Saga Norén in *Bron/Broen* (DR/SVT 2010-2018, see Philipsen and Hochscherf 2017). While Eve does share these characteristics with Lund, Norén, and a portfolio of brilliant and dysfunctional male detectives that can be traced back to Sherlock Holmes, Eve breaks the stereotype by being in love with the criminal she is hunting. The obsessive crush between protagonist and antagonist in the crime genre has been explored in *Basic Instinct* (1992), in which the male detective becomes intimately familiar with the deadly female killer. However, the trope is neither typical of the genre, nor – to the best of this author's knowledge – has it ever been seen in the form of a lesbian relationship as one of the primary dramaturgical, story-creating engines of a long television series. At times, the *will they won't they* dramaturgy in *Killing Eve* seems more important than the uncovering of the various criminal plots. Also, it is not just a question of whether they will become romantically involved or not – throughout the series they seem just as likely to kill each other at some point, referencing the title of the show. On these premises, the season finale in the first and second season mainly revolves around Eve and Villanelle meeting up and partly making out, partly killing each other.

Eve is initially stuck in the shackles of heteronormative monogamy, the daily treadmill at work and, related to that, the rules and expectations of society at large. Her character development is drawn towards adventure, irrational behaviour and violence. Eve, despite her sometimes violent journey towards a darker side of herself, serves as the primary moral allegiance and identifiable normality in the series. Unlike *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Killing Eve* is not interested in its protagonist becoming an active, glorified and justified female avenger, upsetting the patriarchy (Kramer 2017). Neither does the show want to depict a development towards a salvag-

ing character – one may notice that, especially in cinema, breaking free of norms and expectations is usually a good thing. But where Rose in *Titanic* (James Cameron 1997) is clearly set free by her disregarding society's standards and expectations, Eve becomes increasingly confused the more unconventional she gets. *Killing Eve* is interested in depicting a complex woman torn between her need for comforting safety and her desire for thrilling adventure.

Villanelle, the antagonist, also interacts with gendered norms, balancing the stereotype of the theatrical diva with ruthless physical resourcefulness and violence, completely lacking in the virtues that are traditionally thought of as feminine, such as empathy and motherly compassion (Kramer 2017). Killing for money, with no remorse, she is indeed, in the words of Kramer, a deviant subject to social exclusion. The lack of empathy is often used as a comical element to play with genres, incorporating a bit of violence-based black humour, as already seen in other serial fictions such as *Rick and Morty* (Adult Swim, 2013 -) or *Norsemen* (NRK, 2016-2020). Though certainly not picky with her victims, Villanelle's murders do sometimes show a touch of female revenge on powerful, dominating men. As such, there is occasionally a hint of justification in her graphic murders, potentially challenging the viewers' morals: are viewers supposed to identify with, or understand, this character or not? Adding to this confusion is the fact that over the course of the series Villanelle seems to develop a displeasure with her line of work, challenging the stereotypical figure of the deviant and unredeemable psychopathic serial killer.

Adding further to the viewers' potential moral confusion and feelings of conflict is Carolyn's character. She is a middle-aged high-ranking officer within MI6 section of the Secret Intelligence Service and, as Eve's superior, yet another pivotal and powerful female character in the show. Dubiously scheming and flirting with state-planned executions in the second season, she leaves the viewers with a very small safe moral space to occupy. Carolyn's character clearly comments on Judy Dench's portrayal of the similarly nonsensical M in the 1995-2012 James Bond movies. However, unlike Dench's M – who has been described by reviewers and researchers as either 'masculine' or 'maternal', and unlike most middle-aged or older women in the Bond-franchise – Carolyn uses sex and intimacy as tools in her job (Kunze 2015). She rejects roman-

tic monogamy and handles the death of her son mostly with emotional seclusion, alcohol and a stout determination to find out the culprit. Interestingly, *Killing Eve* does not imply that Carolyn's refusal to talk about grief and loss is ill-advised, or that her lack of a romantic long-time relationship is bothering her in any way. Rather, the narrative allows Carolyn to handle the death of her son in her own way and sleep with whomever she likes, indicating that even a woman like her has a place in the world.

Summing up, *Killing Eve* playfully renegotiates (feminine) stereotypes. In *Killing Eve*, breaking free from standards and expectations is not necessarily a good thing. The serial killer is partly redeemable and partly an object of attraction for the detective. Furthermore, it appears perfectly fine for a middle-aged woman to be a sexually active, engage in cynical powerplays and to not talk about feelings. This renegotiation can be read as a feminist project - women cannot be put into boxes and do not fit stereotypes – but it is also very much in line with the witty, subversive storytelling which BBC America actively looks for (Adalian 2017).

Geopolitics, National Culture and Identity

Just like *Killing Eve* challenges traditional gender stereotypes, it also challenges national stereotypes. I have touched upon the transnationalism and border crossing inherent in the series, but this section shall illustrate how the show interacts with locations, national culture and nation-based stereotypes. First of all, it should be noted that the point of departure is clearly Anglo-Saxon. The English language dominates in the series and is spoken across all the different European locations. Villanelle, the primary antagonist assassin, is Russian, but she conveniently insists on speaking English, even to other Russians. The show attempts to justify this choice with some backstory and psychology. *Killing Eve* does feature a bit of non-English dialogue and goes to some length to avoid dialogue in English between, for example, two Frenchmen. With a clear national anchorage in the United Kingdom, keeping most of the dialogue in English becomes plausible, so *Killing Eve* manages to be border crossing and transnational while still having a main, almost believable use of English dialogue, clearly also catering to the American share of the intended audience. In line with the latter remark, Eve,

the protagonist, is an American, which provides BBC America's audience with an opportunity for national identification.

Killing Eve has an interesting, although not exclusive, use of European locations, which goes hand in hand with its overall playful and sometimes over-the-top tone. When the show cuts to a new location, viewers are told the location name with caps on screen: PARIS when in Paris, VIENNA when in Vienna, etc. This is accompanied by what I will label *secondary markers of location*. For example, differently from other transnational crime dramas, such as *Crossing Lines* (Bernero productions, 2013-2015), *Killing Eve* does not rely on such iconic, primary markers of location as the Eiffel Tower to communicate that the action takes place in Paris; rather, it focuses on the city's most quirky streets, with a musical score made by songs with lyrics in French, and has Villanelle speak French to her elderly landlady. Vienna is communicated via an *Eis Café* (Ice Café) situated on a town square and a cashier at said café wearing local, formal clothing. An example of this playfulness with national and regional stereotypes can be found in the occasion of Villanelle's visit to Tuscany. We see images of her riding a motorcycle through an idyllic Tuscan countryside. We then see her consume a perfect *bruschetta* and even squeeze the juice from a ripe Tuscan tomato over a local dish before consuming it. More than anything else, the initial scenes in Tuscany resemble a tourism ad, which is also a nod of the head to the picturesque tourist locations of James Bond (Chevriér and Huvet 2018). The ensuing scenes from a Tuscan family party resemble Italian parties as depicted in the iconic *Godfather* movies (1972-1990). It is almost *too* Italian – an ironic parody, which climaxes with the graphic murder of the *pater familias*. Villanelle's family town in Russia looks like a parody of rural Russia, where people believe the earth is flat and where Villanelle wins the local *dung-throwing contest*.

Killing Eve increasingly engages with the geopolitical opposition between East and West in the third season, particularly by introducing Dasha, an over-the-top parody of a Russian patriotic former KGB-agent, who has lines such as "I killed so many Americans in Cold War, you can make giant, greasy tapestry out of them." Niko's family town in Poland seems almost *too* Polish, and so on. The series' use of the locations is a peculiar mix of caricature, Bond-aesthetics and a tourist gaze (Hansen and Waade 2017). While, on the

one hand, the show depicts locations and persons that are as much formulaic as to border on caricature, on the other, it goes to some length to at least nuance certain national stereotypes. A good example is Carolyn's character. With her power, flawless 'received pronunciation' accent and sometimes cynical use of human resources in an international context, she is certainly an echo of, and interaction with, the British legacy of an arrogant imperialist past. At the same time the series breaks down and plays with this stereotype by showing Carolyn both literally and figuratively in bed with the Russian intelligence, using the discrepancy between keeping up appearances and having a vigorous sex life with the enemy for comic effect. Similarly, the stereotype of a ruthless Russian intelligence officer is nuanced by the seemingly laid-back cooperation with British MI-6. According to Saunders and Strukov, a cultural stereotype is a "popular geopolitics feedback loop", in that it "affects and influence[s] our perception of the world as an imaginary geopolitical space" and may colour our view of a particular nation even if we have increased access to more nuanced information (2017, 5).

On the one hand, then, *Killing Eve* actively promotes cultural stereotypes by replicating them, sometimes negatively so. On the other hand, the either nuanced or over-the-top caricatures may invite a more subtle reading. Read with kind eyes, the show could be playfully inviting viewers to consider: are contemporary Italian family parties really reminiscent of those seen in the *Godfather* movies? Is Russia really just either dung-throwing contests or emotionally secluded mass-murderers?

As already touched upon, the choice to portray the United Kingdom as a base for the fight against transnational crime and the clear opposition that is built between the West – represented by the UK/US/Western Europe – and the East – especially represented by Russia – are both obvious references to James Bond and the geopolitical power structures explored in that franchise (Bennett and Woolacott 1987). At the same time, the East-West opposition is a fundamental trope in geopolitics in general (Dodds 2014). However, while the Bond-movies take viewers through highly profiled upper-class sights and traditions worldwide, often in the frame of the ideological tale of the West resisting or conquering the East, *Killing Eve* appears to move in a different direction. On the one hand, the opposition and conflict between West and East is presented along

the same old lines, on the other hand, the West is not seen to finally conquer the East. Rather, East and West fascinate, frustrate and emulate each other, as exemplified in Eve and Villanelle's cat and mouse play throughout seasons 1-3 of the series.

Conclusion

Mixing elements from James Bond-movies and the crime genre, *Killing Eve* is a fresh take and a revitalisation of both. It is clearly inspired by Bond in the use of tourist locations and the aesthetics of the innovative murder, and it owes a lot to the crime genre in its depiction and update of the obsessive female investigator. With its playful use of especially European locations, national stereotypes and the geopolitical relationship between East and West, *Killing Eve* establishes a distance to the iconic Europe found in a great many fictions. In contrast, the series goes for an *Ironic Europe* – a place in which traditional world views are either maintained to the brink of caricature, or unpredictably challenged, playing with the viewer's expectations. Since the playfulness in the portrayal of the different locations can be read as both upholding and nuancing nation-based stereotypes, the geopolitical message of *Killing Eve* is not crystal clear. Rather, viewers are supposedly invited to be entertained by the unpredictable nature of the show, and perhaps think for themselves, in line with the 'smart' kind of drama which BBC America is looking for. With regards to gendered norms, the series offers a playful reimagination of gender roles, which can be read as feminist or, again, in line with the 'witty' channel brand of BBC America, or both. One could also argue that *Killing Eve* provides its viewers with an opportunity for envisioning what would happen if their comfortable, heteronormative and a little bit boring relationships went rogue, without actually having to go through the trouble and mess of outlive the perils involved in a similar experience themselves. Despite these alignments with BBC America's channel brand, *Killing Eve* has fared very well in the United Kingdom and has been bought and promoted by HBO Nordic, indicating that the show offers fascinating renegotiations of gender and locations that are interesting for various European audiences as well (BARB 2000).

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