

## ***Basic Instinct* with a Twist: How the Femmes Fatales of *Killing Eve***

### **Queer the Gendered Politics of Crime Television**

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#### **Abstract**

The femme fatale, one of the most common and renowned female, cinematic tropes across different crime genres, undergoes a queering in the 2018 UK series *Killing Eve*, in which the female investigator Eve Polastri and the female killer Villanelle engage in a dangerous cat-and-mouse game driven by mutual, queer desires. *Killing Eve* serves as a critical revisitation of the 1992 US-American classic *Basic Instinct*, in which one of the most notorious, flamboyant and influential femmes fatales to this day, Catherine Tramell, seduces and threatens a male investigator. By conducting a close, comparative reading of *Killing Eve*'s Villanelle and *Basic Instinct*'s Catherine, the relationship between investigator and female murderer in both media respectively, and by reading *Killing Eve*'s character Eve as an investigator who herself emerges as a femme fatale, this paper demonstrates how *Killing Eve* subverts the trope of the femme fatale, escalates its queer monstrosity and extends Catherine's ability to violently disrupt the heteronormative, gendered politics of pop-cultural imagination.

“The alternative is the thrill that comes from leaving the past behind without rejecting it, transcending outworn or oppressive forms, or daring to break with normal pleasurable expectations in order to conceive a new language of desire.”  
(Mulvey 835)

“... the power of fantasy is not to represent but to destabilize the real.”  
(Halberstam, “Imagined Violence” 190)

#### **Introduction: Revisiting *Basic Instinct* through *Killing Eve***

1 The femme fatale is a prominent figure and one of the most common female tropes in postmodern crime genres, (neo-) noir, the psychological thriller and the action thriller. Perhaps her unceasing popularity lies in the ambiguity of her character: The femme fatale is duplicitous, opaque and unsettling. As a profoundly liminal figure who disturbs categories and borders of femininity, womanhood or even humanity, she invites controversy and queer readings. Since the femme fatale poses a deadly threat to men, she can be a subversive character who undermines heteronormative narratives. Where she appears, gender trouble is inevitable.

2 One of the most controversial and influential femmes fatales in cinema is the character of Catherine Tramell, from Paul Verhoeven's 1992 blockbuster *Basic Instinct*. In the movie, the male, heterosexual, white investigator Nick Curran is trying to solve the case of a female murderer, who kills male targets with an icepick. Nick engages in an affair with Catherine, the rich, white, blonde prime suspect. *Basic Instinct* played with such gendered genre conventions of the neo-noir genre as the roles of the male investigator who deduces, and the morally ambiguous woman who seduces. To this day, Catherine represents the epitome of the femme

fatale as treacherous seductress. She left a polarizing legacy: On the one hand, gay rights activist protested Catherine's depiction as a queer, man-murdering predator, interpreting the movie as an example of homophobia and misogyny in Hollywood cinema (Tom). On the other hand, queer readings of Catherine's character continuously claim her as a powerful, queer icon. As one critic sums up the allure of the femme fatale in 2016:

Catherine is godlike. She knows all, sees all, and outwits everyone around her. ... It's astonishing to think that we haven't had a gay character before, or since, who possesses that kind of power. As a community, we are traditionally shown to be poor, powerless, or victimized. But not here. Not Catherine. In *Basic Instinct*, being 'other' is an asset. ... I applaud this film, not for its stereotypes, but for the ones it broke and the questions it asks, but also, for the legacy it leaves. (Morrison)

3 Since 2018, the British TV series *Killing Eve* by writer Phoebe-Waller Bridge has been re-negotiating the legacy of the femme fatale, so far dedicating three seasons to the trope and marking the femme fatale's entrance as protagonist into an internationally celebrated streaming title. In *Killing Eve*, MI6 agent Eve Polastri is investigating an internationally active, female contract killer named Villanelle. The two develop a queer desire for one another, as a suspense-packed cat-and-mouse game across Europe entails between them.

4 *Killing Eve* is a highly intertextual series with many cross-references to other popular narratives of the spy thriller and crime genre. Most saliently, it can be interpreted as a critical re-visitation of the femme fatale in *Basic Instinct*. For instance, Villanelle inherits many of the character traits of *Basic Instinct*'s prime antagonist. Both Catherine Tramell and Villanelle are blonde, white, iconic, murderous women, coded as behaviorally bisexual and characterized as psychopaths. At the same time, Villanelle strongly transgresses the trope of the femme fatale because, for instance, she is not a seductress and sex icon like Catherine. Also, both *Basic Instinct* and *Killing Eve* prominently explore the trope of the femme fatale through a relationship between femme fatale and investigator. Strikingly, in the case of *Killing Eve*, Villanelle's opponent is not a male, heterosexual investigator, but the female, queer agent of color, Eve Polastri. As such, *Killing Eve* offers itself as an interesting case study to analyze what it means to stereotype, subvert and re-negotiate the femme fatale in a contemporary, serialized format.

5 By conducting a close, comparative reading of *Killing Eve* and *Basic Instinct*, this paper argues that *Killing Eve* distinctly queers the trope of the femme fatale and thereby undermines the heteronormative, gendered politics of crime genres. The aim of this paper is not to construct a narrative of linear, queer evolution between the two, but to take *Basic Instinct* as a point of contact as well as departure. *Killing Eve* references the queer, disruptive potential of the femme fatale in *Basic Instinct*. Only, it exaggerates and expands the trope of the femme fatale, thinning

it to the point that it only just encompasses the characters Villanelle and Eve and allows their intelligibility as femmes fatales.<sup>1</sup> Reading *Killing Eve* through *Basic Instinct* and vice versa, I aim to make productive what Laura Mulvey has described as “leaving the past behind without rejecting it, transcending outworn or oppressive forms” (835) in search of a feminist counter cinema. This way, it becomes possible to read *Killing Eve* as a critical revisitation of *Basic Instinct*, that develops the trope of the femme fatale further.

6 First, this paper discusses Catherine and Villanelle, the respective blonde antagonists in *Basic Instinct* and *Killing Eve*. It takes as a starting point the similarity of Catherine and Villanelle, acknowledging that the imagined violence of both femmes fatales destabilizes the hegemonic nexus of masculinity and power within their respective narratives. It then proceeds to show how Villanelle subverts Catherine by aggravating the queer effect of female violence, deconstructing the trope of seduction, transgressing mature womanhood and detaching the trope of the femme fatale from male significance. Secondly, this paper discusses how *Killing Eve* queers the relationship of investigator and femme fatale by exploring how the relationship of Eve and Villanelle emerges as a form of mutually encouraged, combined, queer monstrosity. Lastly, the paper illustrates how *Killing Eve*'s investigator Eve herself transforms into a femme fatale, queering normative associations of the trope with whiteness and heteronormative femininity and dissolving the borders between culprit and investigator, law and criminality, morality and immorality, heteronormativity and queerness.

### **White, Blonde and Deadly: How Villanelle References and Subverts Catherine Tramell**

“... First, I’m going to use you for sex.  
(laughs) Just a joke.”

(Villanelle to an MI5 agent, *Killing Eve*, Season 1, Episode 5, 00:33:14)

7 Initially, Villanelle and Catherine, the two blonde antagonists of *Basic Instinct* and *Killing Eve*, respectively, stand out as femmes fatales. One could say that Villanelle constitutes a re-interpretation of Catherine, one that ties in with Catherine’s disruptive power to queer the trope of the femme fatale. In this regard, one of the strongest reference points that connects Villanelle with Catherine, is that Catherine’s violence produces a queer effect: The violence of the femme fatale disturbs the hegemonic association of femininity with passivity and victimhood, of masculinity with power and violence. In other words, Catherine represents a femme fatale whose violence threatens and undermines the symbolic, heteropatriarchal order of crime genres, an idea on which Villanelle expands.

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<sup>1</sup> I thank my friend and colleague Dr. Lisa Spieker for supporting me to formulate this thought so succinctly.

8 In the case of *Basic Instinct*, Catherine represents a hypothetical, looming threat to the investigator that culminates in the ending of *Basic Instinct*. As she and Nick are lying in bed together in the final scene, Catherine raises the question what they are going to do now. To this, Nick monotonously responds that they will “Fuck like minks, raise rug rats and live happily ever after” (*Basic Instinct*, henceforth *B.I.*, 01:57:16). The cynicism of this response as well as the overall gloominess of the scene, set in dull colors and dim lighting, diverts from the promised happiness of a heteronormative ending. Eventually, the camera cranes downwards, and the movie ends with a shot that reveals an icepick under the bed. As spectators are aware of, being the weapon of the wanted murderer, the icepick implies that Catherine may – or may not – have been about to stab Nick. What should end in the restoration of heteronormative order through appropriation, domestication, devaluation or salvation of the femme fatale by the male investigator, instead is implied to be his downfall.

9 Accordingly, in “Imagined Violence/Queer Violence”, Halberstam notes that the open ending of *Basic Instinct* poses “a question about the possibility that female violence will disrupt once and for all the compulsory heterosexual resolution of narrative” (197). Furthermore, Halberstam emphasizes that when women, who are normatively represented as objects of violent crime, become imaginable as subjects who execute violence, this does not constitute a simple role reversal between men and women (191). Instead, “female violence transforms the symbolic function of the feminine within popular narratives and ... challenges the hegemonic insistence upon the linking of might and right under the sign of masculinity” (191). In other words, female, imagined violence, or rather, the fear of female violence that this fantasy produces, fundamentally disintegrates the hegemonic nexus of masculinity, violence and power (191-193).

10 In this line of thought, Catherine not only violently upsets the heteronormative ending, which already marks her as a decidedly queer femme fatale, but constitutes an embodiment of imagined, female violence that fundamentally disintegrates the normative, symbolic function of femininity and masculinity in representations of violence. Being a deadly and, most importantly, uncontainable threat to Nick, Catherine destabilizes the male authority and power that the male, white, heterosexual investigator is supposed to represent. Notably, she achieves this without reverting to displays of hegemonic, masculine aggression. Unlike Nick, she never hollers or even so much as raises her voice. In many instances, her behavior directly contrasts that of her male counterparts, as when she nonchalantly and disarmingly dismisses their verbal attempts at establishing authority over her (e.g. *B.I.*, 00:12:13). Apart from the graphic opening scene of the movie, Catherine is not seen to be physically violent, and even gets to express

weakness, as when she is crying in Nick's arms, mourning the loss of her girlfriend (*B.I.*, 01:28:50). Despite being a white, blonde woman who outwardly exhibits femininity and emotionality, which would normatively associate her with a need for protection, Catherine is assigned the indubitable power to destroy men. As a femme fatale, she disintegrates meanings like non-violence and victimhood assigned to femininity and delinks masculinity from power.

11 Likewise, *Killing Eve's* femme fatale Villanelle has come to join the "coalition of postmodern terror", as Halberstam calls the threat that imagined violences constitute to white, heterosexual masculinity (Halberstam, "Imagined Violence" 199). Having said that, Villanelle condenses and hyperbolizes the queer, destabilizing effect of imagined violence, taking the trope of the man-murdering woman to its utmost extreme. She preserves neither the subtle horror and mystery that *Basic Instinct* associates with the femme fatale, for instance through the floating, ominous soundtrack by Jerry Goldsmith, nor the suspense that *Basic Instinct* continuously builds through the question if, and when, Catherine's violence will erupt. Villanelle's kills are frequent, immediate, blunt and ultraviolent, producing an abundance of representations of female violence with an abundance of possible male victims. Catherine seduces and kills men, Villanelle reaps them.

12 Importantly, Villanelle's kills are often framed as acts of symbolic punishment of men who have threatened her, as when she murders archetypes of hegemonic masculinity, like the arrogant intellectual, misogynistic voyeur and women's killer Aaron Peel (*Killing Eve*, henceforth *K.E.*, S2 E8, 00:12:00), or the creepy predator disguised as Good Samaritan, Julian (*K.E.*, S2 E2, 00:35:37). Thereby, the violence of the femme fatale in *Killing Eve* is expanded by a dimension of comprehensibility, other than female violence in *Basic Instinct*, which is defined within the narrative as "unreadable, irrational, insane, motiveless" (Halberstam, "Imagined Violence" 198). Villanelle queers the femme fatale by demonstrating that women may have good reasons to respond violently to men. At the same time, her violence is never entirely rationalized, given that she also kills out of sheer impulse or annoyance. For example, Villanelle calmly and immediately shoots her new handler, Anton, for talking to her in a patronizing, infantilizing manner (*K.E.*, S1 E7, 00:18:34). Shooting Anton is not entirely out of line with Villanelle's reaction pattern of responding violently to hegemonic, male behavior, given that Anton's manner of talking down to Villanelle represents a sexist form of denigration. Still, Villanelle's reaction is impulsive, unreasonable and devoid of compromise. Thus, *Killing Eve* explores the queer threat of violent, female retaliation through the trope of the femme fatale on the one hand, without attempting to rationally explain or determine female violence, on the other hand.

13 At the same time, Villanelle queers the trope of the femme fatale because she resists a reading as an exclusively anti-male, or anti-patriarchal, revenge phantasy. Catherine exclusively murders men and *Basic Instinct* hints at a certain degree of solidarity between the female killers Catherine, Hazel Dobkins and Roxy that Halberstam characterizes as “a kind of sorority of empathy” (Halberstam, “Imagined Violence” 198). On the contrary, Villanelle kills regardless of gender or kin, least sorority. To name only one example, Villanelle brutally and malevolently attempts to murder her ex-girlfriend Nadia, who is another professional assassin (*K.E.*, S1 E4, 00:37:32). As a result, Villanelle is characterized by a general disregard of human life. She refuses to be read as partisan, exempting her from holding faith with any group of people or complying with the norms of a gendered solidarity. This only further complicates a reading of her motivation and increases the opacity of her character. Therefore, one could say that Villanelle constitutes the ultimate, queer femme fatale: a traitor of all norms, a character without essence, distinct allegiance and predictability.

14 Simultaneously, the versatility of Villanelle’s violence queers the femme fatale, because it deconstructs notions assigned to femininity by ironizing the objects associated with female murderers. In *Basic Instinct*, Catherine exclusively and unironically relies on an icepick, a phallic weapon. In *Killing Eve*, the femme fatale is not determined by her need to arm herself with a phallus symbol: Villanelle stabs, shoots, poisons, strangles, suffocates, cuts or bites throats, breaks necks, or throws victims off ladders or in front of cars and subways, to name a few. Not only does her versatility qualify Villanelle as a hyper-vigilant, hyper-competent female power fantasy, perhaps more so than Catherine. It also plays with and delinks the symbol of the phallus from its hegemonic, heteronormative meaning of masculine power and importance.

15 For instance, while the first scene in which spectators witness Villanelle murder a target, the mafia boss Cesare Greco (*K.E.*, S1 E1, 00:23:14-00:25:04), directly references the opening of *Basic Instinct*, it also includes an ironic twist. In both scenarios, the murder takes place in a bedroom and the target is a rich, white man. The weapon Villanelle uses to kill Greco can be read as a cross-reference to the icepick in *Basic Instinct*, given it is also a sharp, metallic object used to stab the victim. However, in Villanelle’s case, the corpus delicti is disguised as a hairpin, and, as if that were not enough, it is also a retractable syringe containing a lethal poison. By collapsing the phallic object and feminine signifiers like the hairpin or poison, the latter being traditionally stereotyped as a feminine weapon, into one weapon, *Killing Eve* subverts the icepick. The weapon emerges as a self-reflexive collage that hyperbolizes and mocks the

cultural symbols and meanings assigned to femininity and masculinity, laying bare their constructedness and variability.

16 Villanelle and Catherine also differ in another common aspect of the femme fatale trope: the idea that the femme fatale uses her sexuality as a weapon to seduce men, which is most vividly discernible in Catherine. She became a classic sex icon the moment that *Basic Instinct* was released. Even today, *Basic Instinct's* arguably most commonly remembered scene is Catherine's revelation of her vulva to a group of police officers during interrogation (*B.I.*, 00:26:30), a moment Catherine carefully stages to sexually provoke the men, and successfully, at that. The men break into sweat, Catherine commands the room. Questioned whether she likes to engage in kink activity, Catherine flips the question and slyly asks the officer: "Exactly what did you have in mind? ..." (*B.I.*, 00:25:10), revealing her awareness of the sexual fantasies and arousal that her presence provokes in her male counterparts and her ability to instrumentalize those. Catherine is the epitome of the femme fatale as evil seductress, who weaponizes her sexual appeal and kills men during sex. Of course, this ties in with misogynistic discourses that frame female sexuality as a danger to men, or as woman's only true power over men.

17 In this regard, it is important to note that *Basic Instinct* frames and sexualizes the trope of the femme fatale through a distinctly male, heterosexual gaze. Nick is established as the articulator of the gaze early in the movie, when he first encounters Catherine: Taking off his sunglasses to take an unobscured, desiring look at her, viewers not only get to see 'what' Nick sees, namely an iconic shot of Catherine against the backdrop of the blues sea, but also 'how' Nick takes pleasure in the act of intense gazing (*B.I.*, 00:10:44). Throughout the movie, this is repeated as a dominant pattern of shot reverse shots, cutting between close-ups of Nick's face, gazing with a facial expression of fascination or arousal, and shots of Catherine's body. Her spectacle is frequently sexualized, as when she strips naked in her bedroom, being watched by Nick (*B.I.*, 00:21:40). Thereby, the femme fatale essentially becomes the passive object of the investigator's gaze, a gaze that, as Mulvey has argued, is active, voyeuristic and caters to desires of male, heterosexual spectatorship (837).

18 Additionally, *Basic Instinct* constructs investigation of the femme fatale as a matter of gazing at her. As Shiri Eisner demonstrates, drawing on Israeli researcher Ronnie Halpern, Catherine is constructed as a dangerous, bisexual riddle that Nick must solve (153). Through Nick's point of view, spectators are interpellated into the masculine viewer position and invited to look at Catherine as erotic and enigmatic. Mulvey proposes that an identification with the male protagonist allows male spectators to project their look onto that of their screen surrogate, combining their own erotic look with the power of the male protagonist who controls the events,

which creates a sensation of omnipotence in the spectator (838). In line with this argument, *Basic Instinct* can produce an alignment of male spectators with Nick's quest to 'solve' the case of Catherine. By partaking in his gaze, they become investigators of the female body themselves. The femme fatale is, essentially, a sexual riddle to be deciphered by looking at her.

19 On the contrary, Villanelle queers the trope of the femme fatale as sex object and seductress, because she does not seduce men to kill and is not sexualized like Catherine. Take the assassination of Cesare Greco in Italy. In this situation, Villanelle's tactic relies on efficient manipulation, producing a trap situation, but not on seduction. She instrumentalizes Greco's unsuspecting grandchild to lure Greco into a secluded room in his house, under the pretense that he is about to receive a present (*K.E.*, 00:22:36). Once alone with Villanelle, Greco is all too willing to assume that Villanelle must be his 'present', remarking upon her beauty and attempting to touch her neck. Villanelle resists his advances and murders him on spot. There is no preparation to appeal to Greco. Villanelle's outfit is hardly even a disguise: She is wearing a dress of Greco's wife that she has found only after infiltrating the mansion. The dress is a long, modest specimen in light pastel blue and floral ornaments in white lace, connoting beauty, but not sex or seduction. Thus, Villanelle queers the trope of the femme fatale by detaching her from the misogynistic concept that sexuality is woman's weapon, and that seduction is a necessary means to deceive men. Particularly, she ironically subverts Greco by unveiling that man's downfall is not the femme fatale's seductive charm, but his inability to view her as anything 'other' than sexual, no matter how she looks. Additionally, Villanelle extends the anti-patriarchal threat of the femme fatale, because other than Catherine, Villanelle represents danger to men in general, not just a select few who are unfortunate enough to fall for her charm.

20 On a different note, Catherine not only seduces men but also conveys that she uses them for her own sexual pleasure. For instance, when Catherine is suspected to have murdered her ex-lover and questioned whether she is sorry about his death, she dryly replies: "Yeah, I liked fucking him" (*B.I.*, 00:11:50). The macabre sense of humor implies that her ex-lover meant nothing to Catherine but the purely sexual benefit she got out of him. In a similar vein, Catherine announces clearly that she uses men like Nick as character templates for her fiction books, scripting their deaths and disposing of them the moment they have fulfilled their function, as when she tells Nick to leave because she has finished her new book (*B.I.*, 01:44:26). In and of themselves, men bear no significance to Catherine. Instead, she uses them as a means to an end. She keeps turning to men for what they have to offer her, that she seeks. Hence, Catherine is a femme fatale who is associated at least to a certain degree with a motif of need.



21 On the other hand, rather than following a need, Villanelle operates on the motifs of joy and fun. She orients towards what generates excitement and enjoyment. This is for instance illustrated when Villanelle is driving through Tuscany on a motorcycle, wearing hotpants, a leather jacket and sunglasses, accompanied by a non-diegetic rock soundtrack (*K.E.*, S1 E1, 00:19:11). The scene connotes a sense of teenage hipness, independence and girl power that give Villanelle the air of a young, female tourist on an exciting trip through Europe, rather than that of a sexual predator on the way to her next victim. Villanelle indulges, whether in shopping for fashionable clothes, living in a luxurious apartment or watching her victims die (e.g. *K.E.*, S1 E3, 00:05:31). This also becomes apparent in the playfulness of her character: Villanelle's attempts at spooking her handler Konstantin Vasiliev, pleased to see how he flinches every time, serve as a running gag throughout the series (e.g. *K.E.*, S1 E1, 00:10:21). Even Villanelle's kills frequently adapt game mechanics, as when she incorporates Cesare Greco's grandson into a deceptive 'prank' of hide-and-seek. Villanelle is, essentially, a sensation-seeking character.

22 One result of this is that Villanelle queers the femme fatale along the dimension of maturity and immaturity. Catherine is a problematic woman, because she does not like children (*B.I.*, 01:57:21), kills men and resists heteronormative domestication. Nevertheless, she is intelligible as a mature woman, because the motifs of seductiveness, sex and need associate her with mature womanhood. Villanelle, on the other hand, resists intelligibility as a mature woman because her childlike ability of turning everything into a game, her orientation towards joy and excitement are juvenile qualities that associate her with girlhood. At the same time, of course, she is not a teenager, but a hypercompetent, autonomous killer in her twenties. Villanelle constantly transgresses the categories of maturity and immaturity, girlhood and proper womanhood, marking her as an exceptionally liminal femme fatale. Villanelle is the deadly femme, the deadly girl, the deadly anti-woman, who irritates the normative association of girlhood with innocence and questions what is left that constitutes womanhood of the femme fatale.

23 Another consequence of Villanelle's orientation towards joy, rather than fulfilling a need, is that, unlike Catherine, she has no need whatsoever for men. In fact, the series directly and ironically references her difference to Catherine when Villanelle is asked by one of her victims, MI5 agent Frank Hallett, if she is going to kill him (*K.E.*, S1 E5, 00:33:14 – 00:33:32). Villanelle nods and adds: "But first I am going to use you for sex." At the sight of his confused reaction, she breaks into laughter, assuring him that is "just a joke" and proceeds to kill him. Thus playing with her victim, Villanelle ironically subverts the 'using men for sex' theme associated with Catherine. Her joke humorously sums up how men are not of use to Villanelle,

sexually or any other way, and dismisses any trace of male indispensability. Overall, the series leaves no doubt that Villanelle does not bother with men and their lives. As Natalie Adler points out, *Killing Eve* is “about femme power, femme cruelty, femme treachery – an explicitly queer power, one that doesn’t suffer cis men” (Adler). Whereas Catherine in *Basic Instinct* deliberately attracts the attention of men, forming a relationship with Nick on the premise of benefit, Villanelle in *Killing Eve* completely emancipates the trope of the femme fatale from its relation to, and the importance of, men. To borrow a phrase by Sara Ahmed, one could say that Villanelle queers the femme fatale by “wrestling her away from him” (Ahmed 224). A trope once bound up with heteronormativity and essentially defined through its relation to men, unfolds its queer potential because the threat to male exceptionalism comes into full effect.

### **Queer Monsters, Collapsing Borders: How *Killing Eve* Queers the Relationship between Femme Fatale and Investigator**

“I think we all have monsters inside of us.  
It’s just that most people manage to keep theirs hidden.”  
(Eve to Villanelle, *Killing Eve*, S3 E8)

24 Notably, both *Basic Instinct* and *Killing Eve* most prominently explore the relationship between femme fatale and investigator, respectively. It is within this relationship that the femme fatale unfolds her most unsettling quality in *Basic Instinct*, seducing and manipulating the male investigator, to whom she poses a dangerous riddle, as illustrated. Arguably, it is also in respect of the relationship between killer and agent that *Killing Eve* most strongly digresses from *Basic Instinct* and the queering of the femme fatale takes its full effect. *Basic Instinct* posits the femme fatale in an antagonistic relation to the heterosexual, male investigator, presenting her as a corrupting influence who facilitates his metamorphosis, while she remains largely uncontaminated by his character. Conversely, *Killing Eve* creates a female agent and assassin who transform alongside and with one another through their mutual desire and emerge as a unitary monster, a postmodern alliance eroding the categories of investigator and femme fatale, morality and immorality, right and wrong.

25 Initially, the potential of psychic parasitism to disturb the borders of subjectivity between femme fatale and investigator, likens Catherine to Villanelle. Both are characterized through their pronounced ability to infiltrate minds, especially the mind of the respective investigator. For instance, Nick’s boss warns him about Catherine, telling him: “She is screwing with your head, Nick! Stay away from her” (*B.I.*, 00:59:41). Likewise, *Killing Eve* frequently showcases Villanelle’s ability to infiltrate other character’s minds as a form of psychological threat. In a conversation with Eve, Villanelle’s handler Konstantin warns Eve not to get too close

to Villanelle, echoing the words of Nick's boss, because: "She's a parasite, Eve. She gets into your brain, she eats you up and makes space for herself ... Burrowing in and creeping around" (*K.E.*, S2 E3, 00:01:47). Notably, the warnings point to a central trope of Gothic horror, namely live burial, which Halberstam reads along parasitism: "Live burial is the entanglement of self and other within monstrosity and the parasitical relationship between the two. The one is always buried in the other" (Halberstam, *Skin Shows* 20). In other words, the self and its other are not distinct categories, instead their relationship and inter-dependence is what constitutes monstrosity (20). In this sense, becoming buried in another person's mind, feeding of it like a parasite, is an ability that vitally disturbs the border between the characters of investigator and killer and signifies the monstrosity of their relationship in both *Basic Instinct* and *Killing Eve*.

26 What sets *Killing Eve* and *Basic Instinct* apart, however, is the meaning assigned to psychic parasitism between investigator and femme fatale. In *Basic Instinct*, the way in which Catherine becomes buried inside Nick's character is framed as a process of dangerous contagion. Nick undergoes a metamorphosis that makes him increasingly resemble the femme fatale. For example, Nick rapes his lover Beth, whereupon Beth remarks that he has not exhibited this type of sexually aggressive behavior before (*B.I.*, 00:37:00). Of course, sexually predatory behavior is a trait associated with the femme fatale Catherine. Given that Nick has engaged Catherine prior to meeting Beth, the succession of events suggests that Nick has taken on sexual aggression from Catherine.

27 Furthermore, the psychic parasitism in *Basic Instinct* is constructed as a unidirectional influence. Catherine remains seemingly unaltered by her interaction with Nick, plotting and controlling him, without undergoing a metamorphosis that can be ascribed Nick's influence. As Halberstam resumes, Nick "is played as a distorted mirror image of Catherine: he slides ever more clearly into a criminal relation to the law and she masters and manipulates his movements as if he were simply a character in a scene she has scripted" (Halberstam, "Imagined Violence" 198). While *Basic Instinct* constructs a monstrous relationship between Nick and Catherine that transgresses the lines of subjectivity and morality, it does so under the sign of the female threat to male supremacy, hence the central conflict whether the male investigator will be able to withstand the femme fatale's corrupting influence.

28 Dissimilarly, *Killing Eve* takes the monstrosity of the relationship between investigator and femme fatale to an extreme, completely blurring the line between self and other. This makes it a lot harder to read *Killing Eve* as a story of the corrupting femme fatale. Surely, the series revisits and plays with the concept of corruption, as the investigator Eve undergoes a considerable metamorphosis into monstrosity herself through her engagement with the femme

fatale. Consequently, Eve's actions, like Nick's, become increasingly morally questionable and she departs further from the law. For example, this is illustrated when Eve, realizing that Villanelle's skills are of use to her, has Villanelle interrogate another suspect: a female assassin called The Ghost (*K.E.*, S2E5, 00:33:15). Eve is not present at the interrogation, which is hinted to involve an element of torture on the part of Villanelle. When Eve attempts to speak to the suspect afterwards, the woman angrily snarls "Monster!" (*K.E.*, S2E5, 00:37:24). As the utterance not clearly refers to either Villanelle or Eve, its ambiguity conveys that monstrosity has become as much an attribute of Eve's as of Villanelle's.<sup>2</sup>

29 Given Villanelle's infatuation with Eve, though, the trope of the corrupting femme fatale does not stand up to closer scrutiny. For instance, Konstantin's warning about Villanelle's psychological parasitism seems obsolete if one considers that Eve is as much buried in Villanelle's mind as Eve is buried in Villanelle's: Both confess to each other that they are constantly thinking about one another (*K.E.*, S1 E8, 00:35:47). Eve is shown to cause a certain vulnerability in Villanelle. Eventually, Villanelle even allows Eve to get close enough to her to inflict a potentially fatal stab wound (*K.E.*, S1 E8, 00:39:14). Thereby, Villanelle strongly digresses from the usual, hyper-competent and hyper-vigilant personality she exhibits towards other characters, signifying a change of character. Instead of either character corrupting the other, Villanelle, too, is contaminated and transformed by Eve.

30 Most importantly, monstrosity in *Killing Eve* is not something transferred from the femme fatale to the investigator; it is not constructed as contagion. Rather than presenting monstrosity as something that is transferred to the investigator, like character traits of Catherine's in *Basic Instinct*, *Killing Eve* presents monstrosity as something that is already inherent in the character of the investigator, that only beckons to be encouraged. After all, Eve's inappropriate and morally questionable fascination with the female assassin, surfaces well before she meets Villanelle, as early as in episode two, when she tells her employer Carolyn: "She is outsmarting the smartest of us and for that she deserves to do or kill whoever the hell

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<sup>2</sup> Visibly, Eve's metamorphosis is conveyed when she changes into the carefully selected clothing that Villanelle gifts her (e.g. *K.E.*, S1 E5, 00:18:01). Villanelle's habit of constantly changing her appearance, cross-dressing and slipping in and out of camouflage, serves as an example of the "immediate visibility" (Halberstam, *Skin Shows* 1) - a term Halberstam borrows from Baudrillard - of postmodern monstrosity. Halberstam uses the concept to describe a process by which identity, humanity and essence are dissolved to the thinness of the immediately visible surface, of skin (1). As Eve visibly changes into Villanelle's 'skin', so, too, her monstrosity becomes visible. The act of dressing points to a similar open-endedness and elusiveness of Eve's character. Reduced to the thinness of skin, personality and identity not just of Villanelle, but also of Eve, become fluctuant, inconsistent, unstable. It would make for an interesting reading to compare Villanelle's and Eve's changing appearances with a character like Buffalo Bill in Jonathan Demme's *Silence of the Lambs*, whose habit of dressing up in layers of women's skin is read as an example of the monstrosity of surfaces by Halberstam (1).

she wants” (*K. E.*, Eve, S1 E2, 00:05:43). The inherent monstrosity of Eve is made explicit in a dialogue between Eve and Villanelle on Tower Bridge:

V: Do you think I’m a monster?  
E: You’re so many things.  
V: Doesn’t answer my question.  
E: I think we all have monsters inside of us. It’s just that most people manage to keep theirs hidden.  
V: Well, I haven’t.  
E: (*laughs*) Neither have I.  
V: I think my monster encourages your monster. Right?  
E: I think I wanted it to.” (*K. E.*, S3 E8, 00:38:40)

31 Discussing their relationship, Eve introduces the thought that monstrosity is something inherent to the human condition, including herself and Villanelle, and that the only question is, whether it surfaces or not. The dialogue is an almost verbatim citation of Halberstam’s proposition that the distinctly queer potential of the postmodern Gothic is that it defines subjects as always partially monstrous (*Skin Shows* 27). Likewise, just as postmodern Gothic “warns us to be suspicious of monster hunters, monsters makers, and above all, discourses invested in purity and innocence” (27), so does *Killing Eve*. There is no original monster in *Killing Eve*, no original innocence. Instead, just as postmodern monstrosity marks a “conspiracy of bodies rather than a singular form” (27), Eve and Villanelle conspire together, constantly encouraging each other’s monstrosity and forming a unitary monster that contests any border between investigator and culprit, investigator and femme fatale, good and evil, morality and immorality, legality and criminality.

32 Of course, it is important to note that the mutual transformation and encouragement of monstrosity between femme fatale and investigator in *Killing Eve*, is facilitated by a female, queer gaze<sup>3</sup>. Particularly, *Killing Eve* constructs a mutual, reciprocal gaze between both women, as Megan Wilson points out: the series “primarily uses Eve’s gaze through which to observe Villanelle, and vice versa” (7). As a result, Villanelle returns the gaze of the investigator in a way Catherine does not. The bilateral gaze of both Eve and Villanelle is strikingly visualized in one of their season finale stand-offs, on Tower Bridge. Standing close, they are exchanging desiring looks while facing each other in a symmetrical shot, with Eve on the left and Villanelle on the right side of the frame (*K.E.*, S3 E8, 00:40:01), a pattern repeated throughout the scene. Both women are presented as equals engaging on eye level; neither character is the singular

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<sup>3</sup> Not least, the series was written by a diverse team of 16 authors and 8 directors (“*Killing Eve* – Full Cast & Crew”) of different genders, whereas *Basic Instinct* was written and directed by two men. Contemporary serial productions commonly have different episodes written and directed by different people, allowing for more perspectives and looks behind the camera, raising the question whether serialized genres particularly lend themselves to layered explorations of gendered narratives.

object of the gaze. Therefore, *Killing Eve* subverts the hegemonic dichotomy between a passive, looked-at, femme fatale and the active, looking investigator, emancipating the femme fatale from the voyeuristic, male point of view that is characteristic of *Basic Instinct*.

33 The encounter on Tower Bridge demonstrates how the queer, mutual gaze enables a bilateral connection between femme fatale and investigator. The scene is coded as a break-up, accentuated by a somber, non-diegetic soundtrack by Johnny Jewel, and the tender, romantic conversation between Eve and Villanelle (*K. E.*, S3 E8, 00:38:40). When Eve asks Villanelle to help her end their relationship, Villanelle advises Eve to turn around, walk, and not look back. An end of connection is thereby marked as an end of gaze. As both characters walk away, they eventually stop and turn around (*K.E.*, S3 E8, 00:41:55). Consequently, as they are looking at each other from a distance, their connection is extended and unbroken. The connection is constituted by the gaze; the gaze 'is' the connection of the two women.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the season ends with the question, whether Eve and Villanelle will stay together. This is supported by the setting: The meeting of both characters in the middle of a bridge connotes both connectivity and division.

34 Whereas the gaze in *Basic Instinct* focuses on women as erotic objects, the gaze in *Killing Eve* focuses on connecting women with each other<sup>5</sup>. The mutual gaze between Eve and Villanelle both connects them and enables them to articulate desire for the other female object. A male, unilateral gaze like Nick's in *Basic Instinct* others the femme fatale, creating a more

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<sup>4</sup> *Killing Eve* thereby extends a tradition of looking aesthetics in lesbian romantic drama, in which longing, mutual looks become the vehicle for the connection of two - often closeted - queer women. The bridge scene parallels a key theme in Céline Sciamma's *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (France, 2019): the classic Greek myth of Orpheus' attempt to rescue Eurydice from the underworld. To save her, he must not look back as he guides her out of Hades; when he looks back at her, he loses her forever. In *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, the myth is subverted by a dialogue in which a maid suggests that perhaps Eurydice encouraged Orpheus to look back. This reading challenges female passivity and places importance not on salvation of Eurydice, but a symbolic preservation of connection. This idea is later paralleled by the protagonist Héloïse when she beckons her lover Marianne to turn around and look back at her one last time before they part forever. Like Orpheus, who cannot save Eurydice from hell, Marianne cannot save Héloïse from her confinement to a heterosexual, bourgeois life, but the two keep their connection intact through a mutual gaze. Héloïse later keeps conveying this gaze to Marianne secretly through a queer-coded painting, after they have parted. In an interesting twist, in *Killing Eve*, to save the other, or help the other end their relationship, would have meant for Eve and Villanelle to leave and not look back on Tower Bridge. Instead, neither Eve nor Villanelle save themselves or the other, foregrounding instead the question of connectedness through keeping sight of one another.

<sup>5</sup> This also queers the relationship between femmes fatales and spectators: As Lucie Arbuthnot and Gail Seneca have criticized, feminist film projects in the past have sometimes focused more on denying men the ability to see women as erotic objects than to focus on connecting women with one another, in this way disabling both male viewers' pleasure and pleasurable female identification at the same time (qtd. in Kaplan 123). Interestingly, in *Killing Eve*, the mutual gaze between femme fatale and investigator enables both to articulate desire for one another. Wilson demonstrates how the constellation of Eve and Villanelle in *Killing Eve* does not produce a heterosexual spectator subject "and is therefore difficult to view in terms of masculine pleasure" (7). At the same time, it enables a distinct viewing pleasure for female, queer spectators, allowing them to desire both feminine objects, Eve 'and' Villanelle, without having to take on a masculine, heterosexual spectator position (7) like they would have to in *Basic Instinct*. Thus, the femme fatale in *Killing Eve* is not only awarded the agency to look, but also caters to the desires of a different target audience who is better enabled to identify with the femme fatale.

rigid distinction between femme fatale and investigator, between the object and the subject of looking. Dissimilarly, connection through the gaze is what facilitates mutual contamination and transformation of femme fatale and investigator in *Killing Eve*, as well as their formation as a unitary monster, at the same time not conflating both characters into a heteronormative, stable, domestic union. As demonstrated, Villanelle's and Eve's connection remains unstable, uncertain and shifting, which creates a radically open, queer dynamic between femme fatale and investigator.

### **The Deadly Woman of Color: How Eve Polastri Queers the Femme Fatale**

“I'd paralyze you with saxitoxin and suffocate you in your sleep.  
Chop you into the smallest bits I could manage, boil you down,  
put you in a blender, then take you to work in a flask  
and flush you down a restaurant toilet.”  
(Eve to Niko Polastri, *Killing Eve*, S1 E1, 00:26:40)

35 Along with this, one could go so far as to say that Eve herself becomes a femme fatale throughout the movie. At first glance, Eve clearly does not fit the trope. A married woman with “a husband, and a house, and a chicken” (*K.E.*, S3 E8, 00:38:04), as Eve herself sums up her initial heteronormative lifestyle, Eve lacks the exciting sex life, the extravagance and radiance of a femme fatale. When Catherine or Villanelle enter a room, their presence fills the room; they command the room, if they want to. When Eve, on the other hand, enters the MI5 conference room in the pilot, late and hungover, she gets interrupted by her boss, earns awkward glances for noisily unpacking a croissant and gets belittled for her theory that the assassin is female (*K.E.*, S1 E1, 00:04:24 – 00:06:49). None of this is particularly femme, nor fatal, instead Eve appears like the antithesis of a character like Villanelle.

36 However, as the series unfolds, Eve reveals a cunning logic and manipulative tactics that are in no way inferior to Villanelle's. One example is the way in which Eve anticipates Villanelle's motives and reactions like no other investigator in the series can, mirroring Villanelle's ability to burrow into other people's minds. When advised by her colleague to execute an encounter with Villanelle in a team, for safety reasons, Eve repudiates: “We need her calm and thinking she's in control. She can't know I'm expecting her. ... I'll only be safe as long as she trusts me. We need to be alone. It needs to feel intimate” (*K.E.*, S2 E5, 00:19:29). This demonstrates that both Villanelle and Eve have in common the calculating, cunning quality typical of a femme fatale. Eve seems to possess a knowledge of Villanelle that other characters do not, implying that, perhaps, it takes a femme fatale to understand one.

37 The critical turning point that marks Eve's metamorphosis into a femme fatale, occurs when she manages to inflict a potentially deadly wound on Villanelle in a stand-off (*K.E.*, S1 E8, 00:39:38). Luring Villanelle into a false sense of secure intimacy, while both are lying closely in bed, Eve stabs Villanelle in the stomach with a knife she has kept hidden. Wilson argues that this constitutes one of the series' most homophobic instances, given that Villanelle is symbolically punished, and with a phallic weapon no less, having her immoral queer desire used against her in her most vulnerable state (8). Although this is an important, accurate reading, what constitutes a form of homophobic abjection<sup>6</sup> can also be interpreted as a queering of the femme fatale trope. Firstly, that is because Eve's ability to exploit Villanelle's queer desire for her reverts the roles of the two characters. Suddenly, Villanelle is on the receiving end of seduction and violence, whilst Eve becomes the deadly woman. Secondly, the ruse reveals that Eve is aware of a certain degree of power she holds over Villanelle and can use to her advantage. Therefore, the scene conveys not only how Eve transitions into a femme fatale, but also that she already has the confidence and self-awareness of one.

38 Reading Eve as a femme fatale fundamentally subverts key aspects of the trope. Characteristics that first marked Eve as an improbable femme fatale, at second glance question the very construct of the femme fatale. For instance, Eve transgresses normative, white standards of femininity stereotypically associated with the trope. There is no trace of Catherine, the blonde, sexual icon commonly remembered for wearing a revealing, ivory-colored dress to a police interrogation. Catherine serves style, sex and decadence, Eve, on the other hand, prefers pragmatism. She usually wears trench coats, slightly oversized parkas and pants that are anything but form-fitting. Whereas Catherine - and Villanelle, for that matter - often has a tight, blonde hairstyle, referencing the aesthetics of white femmes fatales of the 1950s like Madeleine in Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, Eve seems exasperated by the task of pinning her dark, curly hair up

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<sup>6</sup> I draw on Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject as that which "disturbs identity, system, order" (qtd. in Creed 8: 4). Threatened by the abject, the subject is compelled to exclude the abject and redraw the line of an imagined border (qtd. in Creed 9: 2). Consequently, subject and abject are always defined and constituted by the other (qtd. in Creed 9: 2). Importantly, the abject can never properly be expelled, it is continuously "beckoning the self to take up the place of abjection, the place where meaning collapses" (Creed 10). This idea is visible in Eve's violent attack against Villanelle: By stabbing Villanelle, Eve herself crosses the border between morality and immorality, between law and criminality, pointing to the fragility of these distinctions. The scene highlights the proximity of Eve's violence and simultaneous queer desire for Villanelle, which is conveyed through the intimate atmosphere of the encounter, the setting in bed. Any attempt to erect an imaginary border between herself and Villanelle, is bound to fail - there is no stable, heteronormative, lawful subject Eve. Villanelle's queerness and criminality, like Kristeva's abject, is something Eve rejects but cannot part from (Kristeva 4). Villanelle continues to beckon, and - unsurprisingly - Eve frantically attempts to administer first aid to Villanelle immediately after having stabbed her (*K.E.*, S1 E8, 00:39:58).



and mostly wears it down (*K.E.*, S1 E1, 00:33:39). In this way, Eve challenges a tradition of normatively feminine, white, blonde femmes fatales who are easily recognizable as the trope.

39 Additionally, like Villanelle, Eve is characterized by a disregard for men. Most notably, her husband Niko Polastri, a bridge-playing teacher whose character constitutes Villanelle's unexciting, inverted mirror image, is constantly over-shadowed by Eve's increasing obsession with Villanelle. In fact, Eve's indifference to Niko results in him getting harmed by the investigation, losing his friend Gemma, and his referral to a psychiatric clinic (*K.E.*, S3 E1, 00:35:00). Drawing on Adrienne Rich's concept of compulsory heterosexuality, Shiri Eisner suggests that the potential indifference of bisexual women to men constitutes a threat to men and heteropatriarchy (151). She argues that the power of female bisexuality lies in its embodiment of choice: a choice whether or not to have relationships with men, and on women's terms (150). This is what has already constituted the threat of the bisexually coded Catherine to men like Nick Curran in *Basic Instinct* (153). Similarly, Eve's queer desire for Villanelle plays with the fears surrounding female, queer choice and indifference to men<sup>7</sup>. While queer desire and activity between the femme fatale and other women in *Basic Instinct* is only ever relevant in relation to the heterosexual protagonist and objectified through his male gaze<sup>8</sup>, in *Killing Eve*, it is the male characters who are continuously sidelined by Eve and only relevant in relation to her convergence with Villanelle. An impudent exaggeration of male insignificance and of pervasive queer desire, a woman who could not be less domesticated despite her apparent domestic life, Eve represents the remarkably queer danger of the femme fatale to patriarchy.

40 Eve's character also queers the femme fatale trope along the dimension of racialization. She is a woman of color, unlike Villanelle, Catherine and most other femmes fatales in Hollywood or British cinema. Eve is performed by actress Sandra Oh, and coded as a Korean-American agent living in Britain. In season three, for instance, she is working at a restaurant in the Korean enclave New Malden in London, where her colleagues speak to her in Korean. Interestingly, race gives Eve an advantage, both as an investigator and as a femme fatale:

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<sup>7</sup> That is not to say, of course, that *Killing Eve* is an unproblematic, harmless depiction of bisexually coded women. Eisner has already pointed out that "bisexuality is often used to represent anything but itself (often to underline characteristics such as murderousness, duplicitousness, hedonism etc.), while erasing bisexuality as a topic in its own right" (76) and San Filippo has ascertained that "bisexuality and other forms of 'deviant' female sexuality are likened to mental and criminal deviance (variously diagnosed as abnormal, antisocial and insane)" (130). Femmes fatales like Catherine, Villanelle and Eve, who can be read as bisexually coded, or queer, are notably characterized along concepts like psychopathology, social deviance and criminal energy. For a discussion of how bisexually identified individuals assess media representation enforcing biphobic stereotypes and its possibly detrimental relationship to mental health issues in bisexual communities, please refer to Johnson 2016.

<sup>8</sup> This is epitomized in the dance club scene, when Catherine dances lasciviously with her female lover Roxy, creating a spectacle for Nick (*B.I.*, 01:07:27). The scene is dominated by the male, voyeuristic position, which is established through over-the-shoulder-shots, directly placing Nick as the spectator of the dancing women. This constellation brings to mind the visual language of mainstream, straight-coded, lesbian porn, in which erotic activity between women is reduced to a catering to the desires of heterosexual, male spectatorship.

Firstly, her understanding of the cultural invisibility of immigrant workers allows Eve to convict the assassin The Ghost, an Asian-British woman of color. Eve is the first in her team to conclude, in conversation with her Black co-worker Jess, that a non-white woman can easily disguise as a cleaner, thereby gain entrance to an office building and assassinate a white-collar worker, because nobody will suspect her (*K.E.*, S2 E2, 00:28:17, 00:32:18). Eve is awarded an embodied understanding of racism that her white team members do not possess or doubt; she is able to recognize whom and what white people have learned to overlook. Secondly, Eve can successfully pass as an invisible worker of color herself, when she disguises as laundry staff to gain access to Aaron Peel's mansion in Rome. A stolen hotel staff outfit as a makeshift disguise and a few words in Korean are enough to convince the security that she is an immigrant worker and she is waved through to the staff entrance (*K.E.*, S2 E8, 00:08:38). In both scenarios, white naiveté and arrogance are mocked. The ability of the femme fatale of color to exploit the racism of white people to her advantage, weaponizing it against them, distinguishes her as a powerful trickster and danger to white supremacy. Also, Eve subverts the normative association of the femme fatale, and of the criminal investigator, with whiteness.

41 Owing to the abovementioned, Eve widens the scope of who can embody the trope of the femme fatale. She essentially calls into question what constitutes the very recognizability, or intelligibility, of the femme fatale. Significantly, she only adds to the disruptive, queer power and threat that the trope represents to heteronormativity and white supremacy, because she implies that any femme – married or unmarried, stereotypically feminine or gender-nonconforming, of color or white, employed in national security or a restaurant kitchen, has the potential to become fatal at any given time. The rich, dazzling Catherine heralds her danger so flamboyantly it becomes dubious how a male investigator could ever be foolish enough to get involved with her; the inconspicuous Eve, if anything, is tremendously more dangerous.

## Conclusion

42 While *Killing Eve* extends the legacy of a femme fatale like Catherine Tramell in *Basic Instinct*, the series also strongly subverts the trope, with a heightened sense of self-reflexivity and irony. One of the most common female tropes within crime genres thus becomes permeable and unstable, being re-arranged and stretched to the point that it is barely still recognizable as such. Like in an experimental setting, the femme fatale in *Killing Eve* is adjusted, exaggerated and distorted to an extreme, producing unusual, queer outcomes. A result of the series' extensive, postmodern critique is that it aggravates the queer potential of the femme fatale to

disrupt the symbolic, heteropatriarchal order imagined in pop-cultural representations within and across a variety of crime and detective genres.

43 As demonstrated, *Killing Eve*'s Villanelle directly references Catherine and re-interprets the figure of the blonde, attractive, dangerous woman. While Villanelle preserves the threat that imagined, female violence constitutes to the nexus of masculinity and power, a disruptive quality that already distinguishes *Basic Instinct*'s Catherine as a decidedly queer femme fatale, Villanelle takes the effect of this violence to its extreme. Catherine's violence constitutes a threat to male authority and power, especially against the profoundly heteronormative backdrop of the movie, such as the hegemonic masculinity of the heterosexual investigator, through whose gaze *Basic Instinct* is framed and narrated. In *Killing Eve*, though, there is no noteworthy male authority; Villanelle does not even suffer men. She subverts Catherine, discharging her, layer by layer, from such defining characteristics of the femme fatale trope as a reliance on seduction, an effort to appeal to men, or a motif of need. Villanelle is not dangerous because of her sexuality, she just 'is', because she is capable and willful. She presents the femme fatale as a conglomerate of juvenile joy, raw adrenaline and brutality, an endless blurring of lines between play, reality, reason and impulse. In Villanelle's opaque, liminal character, the categories of girlhood and womanhood, reason and emotion, maturity and immaturity lose all essence.

44 Entirely dismissing a male, heterosexual investigator, who so prominently features in *Basic Instinct*, and instead focusing on the relationship of a female investigator and assassin, allows *Killing Eve* to explore what happens when two femmes fatales collide. The result is a monstrous alliance of dangerous women: As Villanelle and Eve become buried within one another and the line between both is contested, it becomes impossible to identify an original monster, a corrupting influence like that of Catherine in *Basic Instinct*. The relationship of Villanelle and Eve emerges as a queer monstrosity that escalates when two femmes fatales conspire together; a monstrosity not bound to a singular body, but inherent to the characters' subjectivity itself. The femme fatale in *Killing Eve* is thus a unitary monster that highlights the fragility of the distinction between criminal investigator and femme fatale, morality and immorality, inside and outside of the law. *Basic Instinct* is a story about an exceptional and flamboyantly dangerous femme fatale who will not be contained by law and heteropatriarchy. However, the notion of a dormant, universal queer monstrosity that can be awakened in anyone, given the right circumstance and queer pairing, assigns the figure of the femme fatale in *Killing Eve* an even more subversive significance.

45 The character of Eve deviates even further from the trope of the femme fatale in *Basic Instinct*, queering virtually any aspect of it. Compared to Villanelle and Catherine, Eve is least recognizable as the trope initially, yet she undergoes a distinct metamorphosis that brings forth the qualities of an exceptionally opaque, layered and liminal femme fatale. Smart and cunning, but not necessarily seductive; apparently living a middle-class, domestic life, but deadly; a femme fatale, yet remote from flamboyance and heteronormative notions of femininity; a woman existing in relation to men, but indifferent to them; a woman of color who stands both inside and outside of the law and poses a threat to white heteropatriarchy, Eve dissolves any border between law and criminality, between investigator and femme fatale.

46 Catherine, albeit a powerfully disruptive and queer character, still fits well within the trope of the femme fatale and has certainly become one of its most memorable representatives in US-American cinema, but in the case of *Killing Eve*, it seems inappropriate to even speak of a trope, given that Eve and Villanelle resist a clear definition. One might ask, then, what is left that distinguishes the femme fatale, that constitutes her intelligibility when her stereotypical markers are subverted almost beyond recognition. She is a femme, but not necessarily feminine in her expression, at least in any heteronormative sense of the word. If she need not be a mature woman, if she may be a girl, if she so thoroughly and violently disrupts the very category of womanhood, then the femme fatale does not have to be female at all. Perhaps the femme fatale of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has become her own gender: a pop-cultural excess of queerness, a postmodern monstrosity that “represents the disruption of categories, the destruction of boundaries, and the presence of impurities...” (Halberstam, *Skin Shows* 27) and that takes seriously the assertion that “we need to recognize and celebrate our own monstrosities” (27). She is more of an effect than a trope, because where she appears, she plots the destruction of viewing habits and gendered certainties. She is a betrayer of the heteropatriarchal order, a rejoicing, queer danger that does not suffer men and rejects any definitive loyalty.

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