"When She Cracks": The Visual (Re)Construction of "*Deadly Women*" in Infotainment Media

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Abstract:

Mass media narratives about criminalized women, especially those who are convicted of committing acts of violence, have historically relied on gendered stereotypes to make sense of women's criminality. These stereotypes are particularly problematic when they are invoked within infotainment media – a genre that combines information and entertainment. Since infotainment (mis)represents itself as primarily factual, the ideological messages that are disseminated through such televised media are more likely to be taken at face value and to be perceived as truthful to an unquestioning audience. This research examines how visual aspects of infotainment media such as the camera angle, zoom, exceptional use of black and white imagery, and the subject's gaze, combine with audio narration and dialogue to create particularly powerful (audio)visual (re)presentations of violent women and girls. This article presents some of the findings from a larger qualitative content analysis of the televised infotainment series *Deadly Women* that were chosen as a case study. The ways in which visual film conventions are used to (re)produce images of female subjects as crazed, frenzied, emotionally out of control, and ultimately as simultaneously mad and bad are examined.

Introduction

Most Canadians have never experienced crime first hand, yet there is an increasing social fear of violence that can partially be attributed to the saturation of violent crime in media coverage (Greenhill and

Kohm 2010; Lee 2007; Linnemann, Hanson and Williams 2013). The media commonly use visual representations to depict violence because graphic imagery is one of the best ways to catch the audience's attention, but it can also distract us from critically examining the meanings that are visually (and auditorily) embedded within the content (Jewkes 2004; Kohm 2009; Peelo 2005). Public perceptions of crime are related both to the content as well as to the media genre itself, thus societal interpretations of crime are diverse yet they can generate a collective cultural experience that often relies on mythology as a result of media disseminating misinformation (Garland 2000; Greenhill and Kohm 2010; Kohm 2009). This article explores visual characterizations of violent women within infotainment[4] media and argues that visual (re)presentations combine with audio traditions to effectively (re)create stereotypical portrayals of women who commit violence. These portrayals often have neo-conservative and neo-liberal law and order undertones[5] that reinforce the social distance between "us" and "them" – in this case, between the audience and criminalized Others that are constituted as dangerous or threatening to the social body.

Media portrayals of women and girls who commit violent crimes often rely on aged myths to characterize their motives and identities. Women who commit violent crimes are perceived as "doubly deviant" (Lloyd 1995) since they break not only the law, but also gender role expectations (Comack 2006; Kilty 2010), many of which revolve around motherhood and what it means to be a "good

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[4] Infotainment is the hybridization of information and entertainment where factual information is presented in an entertaining and dramatized manner. At the same time that infotainment diminishes the intellectual level of the analysis of the issue, it also blurs the lines between reality and entertainment (Chandler and Munday 2011; Kohm 2009; Rowe 2012).

[5] Neo-conservative and neo-liberal law and order discourses downplay the social responsibility for crime in favour of explanations that emphasize personal responsibility, individual pathology, and the individual's failure to self-govern. These views contribute to the social marginalization of offenders, demands for increasingly punitive correctional policies, non-recognition of the structural factors that contribute to criminality, and the "psy treatment" of prisoners, especially women (Greenhill and Kohm 2010; Kilty 2012; Kohm 2009; Pollack 2006; Rowe 2012).

mother" (Berrington and Honkatukia 2010; Faith 1987; Kilty and Dej 2012), a "good wife" (Ajzenstadt and Steinberg 1997), and a "good woman" – all characterized as kind, innocent and even naive, nurturing, caring, and relationship-oriented (Chesney-Lind and Irwin 2008; Comack 2006). Women who break these gender ideals by committing violent offences are overrepresented in media coverage since their cases encompass many (and sometimes all) of the criteria for newsworthiness.[6] For instance, violent women evoke what Jewkes (2004) describes as the most salient criterion of newsworthiness, sex, as well as to the most common criterion, violence. Violent women are taken up as newsworthy stories in the media because their cases dramatize questions of gender and the nature of women's violence, which stand in stark contrast to women's historic role as established victims and often translates into the "monsterization" of women and girls that perpetrate acts of violence since these acts are not expected from "good women" (Jewkes 2004; Kilty and Frigon 2006).

The notion of spectacle and the use of graphic imagery is another key criterion of newsworthiness that is important to consider when examining (re)presentations of violence. Problematically, media often (re)produce and widely circulate disparate images of crime that encourage fear of criminal Others and realistically communicate messages through graphic visuals that employ fear-driven logics and warnings of "what not to do" that ultimately reinforce gender, class, and ethnic stereotypes (Linnemann *et al*. 2013). For example, when women are victimized, media accounts commonly question why they were walking alone at night or whether their attire somehow invited unwanted sexual advances. Stories with the greatest number of newsworthy criteria are the most likely to be broadcast and are often those that are the least representative of official crime rates, which contributes to the mythology about particular offenders and crimes (Greenhill and Kohm 2010; Jewkes 2004; Kohm 2009; Wilson *et al*. 2010).

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[6] Newsworthiness refers to what television, film, and news producers believe will attract an audience (Jewkes 2004). The 12 criteria for newsworthiness discussed by Jewkes (2004) are threshold, predictability, simplification, individualism, risk, sex, celebrity or high-status persons, proximity, violence or conflict, visual spectacle or graphic imagery, children, and conservative ideology and political diversion.

Greenhill and Kohm (2010) claim that media can be "understood as a sort of popular criminological discourse that reveals much about the place of crime in contemporary culture as well as its moral, ethical, and philosophical dimensions" (81). This perspective is reflected in the sub-discipline of visual criminology where researchers examine both the explicit and implicit meanings behind crime-related images (Brown 2014; Hayward 2010; Rafter 2014; Young 2010). One method of undertaking visual criminological research is through "scenographic" analysis, which involves examining components of a filmed scene (e.g., camera angles, colour, and script) and can be used to understand the social construction of particular groups of offenders, such as women who commit violence, into rudimentary explanatory typologies (Young 2010). Visual research is important to conduct as many contemporary images of crime shore up structural divisions according to the gender, race, and class of the victims and perpetrators (Brown 2014; Carrabine 2012; Linnemann *et al*. 2013).

In the first section of this article, we shed light on some of the problems inherent in the (re)presentations of criminalized women in infotainment media. Next, we describe the study's research design and *Deadly Women*, the infotainment series adopted for this case study. Following this, we identify some of the visual conventions that are employed in the show and provide specific examples of how the visual and audio aspects of *Deadly Women* work together in order to produce particularly salacious storylines about women who kill. Video image stills are used to illustrate these examples for each of the two cases discussed herein. The final section examines the similarities between the two cases and offers a discussion of how media content continues to rely on the mad/bad dichotomy to explain women's acts of violence.

(Re)Presentations of Criminalized Women in Infotainment Media

Since infotainment is presented as primarily factional, meaning that its content is depicted as truthful rather than fictional, its ideological messages may be more likely to be taken up by an unquestioning or

uncritical audience (Kohm 2009; Peelo 2005). Moreover, any gaps in the storyline are often filled with the audience's own meanings that typically stem from previously attained knowledge that easily comes to mind such as heuristics that reflect deeply embedded cultural and gendered stereotypes[7] (Agger 1991). There are many gendered stereotypes about criminalized women; for example, that they are manipulative monsters who are "out of control" (Berrington and Honkatukia 2010; Comack 2006), exceptionally dangerous (Comack and Balfour 2004; Kilty and Frigon 2006), masculine – lacking "maternal instincts" and "ladylike qualities" (Chesney-Lind and Irwin 2008; Faith 1987; Kilty 2010), hypersexual and sexually aggressive (Faith 1987; Skilbrei 2012), "evil" (Berrington and Honkatukia 2010; Comack 2006; Faith 1987), emotionless (Berrington and Honkatukia 2010; Comack and Balfour 2004) yet also overly emotional (Comack 2006; Jewkes 2004), and likely mentally ill (Berrington and Honkatukia 2010; Lloyd 1995; Skilbrei 2012). Although not an exhaustive list, the majority of these kinds of stereotypes are encompassed within the broader belief that violent women are either "bad" or "mad."

"Bad women" are characterized as failing to conform to traditional gender role expectations and are typically perceived as emotionally cold, ruthless, selfish, evil, and solely responsible for their crimes; on the other hand, "mad women" are typecast as previously conforming to traditional gender roles and their crimes are believed to result from untreated mental illness (Meyer and Weisbart 2012; Wilczynski 1991). These characterizations of criminalized women justify a variety of sentences that are dependent on how she is perceived. For instance, Donohue and Moore's (2009) work on distinguishing between "offenders" (those perceived as hopeless are dealt with retributively) and "clients" (those perceived as able to actively participate in their own punishment and "correction")

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[7] Heuristics are imperfect mental shortcuts that facilitate decision-making; examples include using a rule of thumb, an educated guess, stereotyping, profiling, or common sense. Stereotypes are preconceived, oversimplified, and often prejudicial beliefs about the characteristics that typify a person, gender, race, sexuality, or community. Furthermore, stereotypes are resistant to change and may lead to treating the stereotyped groups or individuals in particular, often derogatory, ways (Last 2007; McArthur 2013; Scott and Marshall 2012).

demonstrates how criminalized women that are narrated as "bad" are more likely to experience harsh penal treatment since they are not perceived as amendable to correctional rehabilitation.

By contrast, women that are discursively constructed as "mad" are perceived as having somewhat diminished responsibility for their crimes and as more amendable to treatment, which then justifies the invasive use of psychiatric and psychological interventions such as "medication orders"[8] (Kilty 2012; Pollack 2006). Ironically, there is a common misperception that mad women are treated more leniently by the criminal justice system than are bad women (Chesney-Lind and Irwin 2008; Comack and Balfour 2004; Kilty and Frigon 2006; Lloyd 1995), regardless of the fact that many are coerced into treatment (Kilty 2012). This is especially pertinent in cases involving mothers who kill their children, who are commonly described as suffering from extreme post-partum depression and other mental illnesses (Berrington and Honkatukia 2010; Rapaport 2006; Wilczynski 1991). Explaining these women's acts of violence as the result of mental illness without considering the structural origins of criminality tends to soothe social anxieties surrounding the expectations of "good mothers" as it provides an explanatory narrative that does not disrupt the gendered expectations that women be nurturing (Rapaport 2006). While we cannot suggest a causal link between media content and the ways in which women are punished and psychiatrized in carceral institutions, there is discursive continuity in how infotainment media (evidenced by *Deadly Women*) (re)presents women's badness and/or madness as valid but simplistic explanations of women's violence and the extent to which criminalized women are subject to a host of punitive and psy interventions[9] (Kilty 2012; Pollack 2006). Due to the deeply entrenched nature and permeability of gendered cultural stereotypes

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[8] Kilty (2012) explains that "medication orders" remove women's agency and autonomy in treatment decision-making. Criminalized women are often required to take psychotropic medications and participate in cognitive behavioural programming under the threat that they will not be released if they refuse treatment.

[9] The term "psy" refers to "psy sciences" such as psychology and psychiatry (Kilty 2012). As such, "psy interventions" include the previously mentioned "medication orders."

into different discursive formats, such as correctional rehabilitation and parole release plans, both the explicit and implicit messages that are advanced in infotainment media are important to study.

Research Design and the "*Deadly Women*" Case Study

We chose a case study approach to explore how (audio)visual traditions impact the (re)construction of criminalized women in infotainment media. The purpose of the research[10] was to examine how violent women are portrayed in infotainment media and to look at the ways in which (audio)visual conventions contribute to these (re)presentations. *Investigation Discovery*'s *Deadly Women* was selected for analysis as it is the only televised infotainment series that is solely concerned with presenting "true crime" stories of women who kill. *Deadly Women* was first broadcast in 2005 and is currently in its ninth season. Since the series' inception, no noticeable changes have been made with regards to its format. Each episode is divided into three segments that recount and re-enact one case of female perpetrated homicide. According to *Deadly Women*'s website, the series aims to investigate the motives and methods of women who kill, which it claims are significantly different than men's (Investigation Discovery 2013). Episodes begin with an off-screen female narrator that introduces the cases and their similarities such as the motive for the crime. These descriptive categorizations are used to create arbitrary typologies (e.g., "mothers who kill") that structure the episodes. While the episodes examine the (disparate) similarities between the three cases, they tend to ignore the similarities between criminalized and non-criminalized women, instead focusing on the differences between "us" and "them."

Throughout the episode, the narrator describes key moments in each offender's life, which are generally used to construct simplistic narratives about their motives for the crimes and which aid in the series' ability to develop the women as characters. The narrator also introduces the "expert" sources that were filmed for the production. One such expert is Candice Delong, a former FBI profiler, who appears in each segment of every episode across all of the seasons.

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[10] This article is based on the first author's Master's thesis research, which was supervised by the second author.

Other expert sources include: forensic pathologists, police officers, lawyers, "true crime" writers, and friends of the victims. The expert sources typically provide similar statements that corroborate each other's views of the women as mentally ill or "born bad." It is important to note that the actual women who are the subjects of the show are completely absent in the series – at no point in the nine seasons of *Deadly Women* did they provide interviews with the women whose behaviour the show aims to explain. In addition to expert testimony, the series also uses actors to create dramatic re-enactments of the crimes as well as fictionalized incidents to supplement the storylines. Each episode ends with the narrator retracing the connections that were drawn between the three cases and offering a concluding explicit or implicit lesson (e.g., when mothers who suffer from mental illness do not seek psychiatric help, they can become "out of control" – thus posing a fatal threat to their children).

The sample for this research consisted of 16 purposively selected segments that reflect the four most common typologies of women who kill that were identified from both the series *Deadly Women* as well as the extant literature: mothers who kill their children, women who kill their partners for money, girls who kill, and vigilantes. The first author selectively transcribed the audio data over two separate periods of time in order to ensure that any data that was initially excluded from transcription was reconsidered for transcription. The visual data (e.g., camera angles) was also translated into a written description during this process and visual stills were created to increase the opportunity for readers to be able to see and interpret the visual data for themselves. Using techniques outlined by Creswell (2013), Leavy (2007), Reinharz (1992), and Shkedi (2005), the first author coded the audio and visual data separately and then together in order to consider what was being *shown* at the same time as what was being *said.* Then, the two authors coded a sample of segments together in order to member check the initial content themes and to revise them to better identify the ways in which they were similar to and different from the typologies that were uncovered in the literature. We identified the main (audio)visual mechanisms used to relay content and how these mechanisms

worked to convey information to the audience in particular ways. This article presents some of the findings related to the key visual conventions employed in *Deadly Women*, which we conceptualize in the next section.

(A)Typical Photographic and Film Conventions in *Deadly Women*

Deadly Women uses many photographic and film conventions[11] to suggest particular things to the audience – as such, film conventions do not offer neutral (re)presentations of the subject or the content at hand (Lister and Wells 2001). One such film convention is the camera angle, which situates the audience's position relative to the subject (above, below, or at eye level) (Berger 1998; Lister and Wells 2001). Camera angles represent relative socio-spatial positions and intimate power relations between the filmmaker and the subject, between multiple subjects onscreen, as well as between the subject and the audience that are often taken for granted and mistaken as natural (Berger 1998; Kress and Leeuwen 2006). For instance, the expected position of a child in relation to their parent is that the child is below their parent – so from the perspective of a child, s/he would look up at their parent, and from the perspective of a parent, s/he would look down upon their child. Another typical convention is the use of distance via zoom, which functions to draw the audience's attention. Zooming-in suggests that the audience should look more closely at an important detail and is associated with intimacy, whereas zooming-out suggests that the audience should look at the bigger picture and is associated with feelings of greater social and intimate distance (Berger 1998).

Deadly Women also uses a variety of atypical photographic and film conventions. When photographic and film conventions are not typically used, they become even more visually apparent and draw the audience's attention to what is happening onscreen (Berger 1998). These unique visuals can distract the audience from critically assessing implicit ideological messages behind images and audio accompaniments, which increases the likelihood that the audience

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[11] Conventions are a "socially agreed way of doing something" (Lister and Wells 2001: 75).

will accept the messages as valid. *Deadly Women* employs two atypical conventions. The first is the reoccurring use of black and white image stills which are socially and culturally associated with documentary and historical genres – thus contributing to the illusion that the black and white image is real and truthful (Berger 1998). The absence of colour is also associated with emotions and feelings of coldness, darkness, repression, brooding, and moodiness (Kress and Leeuwen 2006). *Deadly Women* often uses black and white image stills during re-enactment scenes in order to highlight the issues underlying the offenders' motives in an obvious albeit rudimentary way; they are also used to showcase the methods and acts of violence as a way to generate emotion in the audience. For instance, stabbing intimates a closeness between perpetrator and victim such that the offender is thought to be either emotionally disengaged or emotionally enraged and out of control in order to be able to inflict this type of violence; when such a scene is devoid of colour it elicits feelings of horror and disgust. By combining several atypical conventions, such as a moving scene turning into an image still and a colour scene changing into black and white, *Deadly Women* draws the audience's attention in order to facilitate the dissemination of stereotypical and ideological messages through visual and auditory means.

The second atypical convention that *Deadly Women* employs is the subject's gaze. While Mulvey (2009) describes the gaze as belonging to the image-maker – generally an active male gaze cast upon a passive female body – our analytic focus is on the gaze of the subject herself. Our conceptualization of the gaze is mirrored in the work of Lister and Wells (2001) who define it as the direction or location to which the subject looks within the camera frame. Most media genres, except for news and documentary, avoid having the subject look directly at the camera, (and by extension the audience) since it breaks the fourth wall and sacrifices the illusion that viewers are unseen voyeurs looking into another world (Lister and Wells 2001). Kress and Leeuwen (2006) argue that interpretations of social meaning in images are derived from face-to-face interactions; thus when a subject gazes directly at the audience, the audience understands that it is being directly addressed. Therefore, the

subject's gaze towards the audience is of primary analytic importance since it acts as a cue for what to expect from the imaginary relationship between the audience and the subject. Of course the audience does not actually believe that they have a relationship with the subject, rather the subject's direct gaze creates the impression that if a relationship were to exist between them that it would reveal the emotional expectations of this relationship – for instance, that the audience should feel afraid of the subject and horror at their actions. In this sense, the gaze directly relates to how the television show's subjects are visually (re)constructed and how the audience is intended to perceive them.

In the next two sections we present the cases of Kelly Silk and Alyssa Bustamante and explore how *Deadly Women* uses the aforementioned audiovisual conventions to construct these women as both mad and bad. These cases are but two examples from the larger sample that we selected in order to exemplify the main findings discussed in this paper. Unfortunately, while it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss all of the cases in the sample, let alone the series, the conclusions described herein were reflected across the sample.

The Visual (Re)Construction of Kelly Silk as a "Mad Mother"

Deadly Women (re)presented Kelly Silk as a "good mother" – at least on the surface: she was middle class, went to church, was married and had four children whom she homeschooled. However, the show also suggests that deep down, Kelly Silk was a "mad mother" who "lost her mind" due to "postpartum depression" which ultimately resulted in the murder of her husband and two of their four children. Silk's acts of violence are said to have commenced when she stabbed her husband to death in their bed. Their eldest daughter heard her father's screams and when she went to investigate Silk stabbed her repeatedly and lit her and the family home on fire. Miraculously, both the eldest and youngest children survived while Silk, her husband, and their two other children died in the fire.

In many of the cases involving mothers that kill their children, like Kelly Silk, *Deadly Women* referenced psychiatric diagnostic labels

such as "depression" and "postpartum depression" to explicitly assert that the female subject was mentally ill despite the fact that the expert sources do not identify whether the subject received a mental health evaluation or diagnosis. This is consistent with the current correctional practice of (over)medicating criminalized women, even prior to having been psychiatrically assessed and observed for any length of time, and the zeal with which correctional discourse locates women's criminality in their flawed cognitive processing (Kilty 2012; Pollack 2006). For example, with respect to Kelly Silk, the narrator states: "Kelly is suffering [from] severe postpartum depression and is on the brink of insanity." At the same time, the scene visually depicts Silk sobbing as she sits on her bed and yells at her children to be quiet. Silk's children are heard laughing in the background and the scene intermittently shows the children playing while Silk lays down in the fetal position on her bed and cries uncontrollably. As Silk brings her hands towards her face and closes her eyes, the scene slowly zooms in and becomes a black and white image still (Figure 1).

This shift from moving colour to still black and white image serves to further dramatize the scene and depicts Silk losing emotional control. The black and white also serves to elicit an emotional

Figure 1. Kelly Silk (Mavety 2012a: *Bury Their Babies*). Reproduced with permission.

response from the audience (Berger 1998; Kress and Leeuwen 2006; Rose 2012) – in this case, a depressed mood – while the zoom-in on the image brings the audience literally and figuratively closer to the subject's distraught emotions. This framing contributes to the creation of a narrative that positions Silk as losing touch with reality and situates her violence within a mad mother framework.

Similar to *Deadly Women*'s portrayal of other cases involving mothers who kill, former FBI criminal profiler Candice Delong explicitly establishes an undeveloped explanation of "mental illness" as the root cause of Silk 's crimes: "Kelly was able to stab her daughter and pour gasoline on her because Kelly was out of her mind." Accompanying this narration are two black and white still images. The first image is of Silk holding a bloody knife with her mouth opened wide and teeth bared as if screaming while spattered with blood that appears black against her white shirt (Figure 2). The second image is shot looking upwards as Silk pours gasoline onto her daughter (unseen; Figure 3).

The second image is shot in such a way that it appears as if the gasoline is about to land on the camera lens, and by extension the audience, to demonstrate that if Silk is a danger to her own daughter she is certainly a threat to the public. It is not only the gaze of the

Figure 2. Kelly Silk (Mavety 2012a: *Bury Their Babies*). Reproduced with permission.

Figure 3. Kelly Silk (Mavety 2012a: *Bury Their Babies*).
Reproduced with permission

audience; the image also uses the gasoline falling onto the lens to direct attention. Together, the gaze of the subject, the stream of the cascading gasoline, and the upward angle of the shot serve to depict Silk as a powerful, threatening, and somewhat larger than life figure.

When examined as a whole, these images are used to create emotional responses in the audience (Berger 1998; Rose 2012); first, sympathy and compassion when Silk is shown crying and distraught (Figure 1) and then horror and disgust when she is depicted as acting out in a violent rage (Figures 2 and 3). They also highlight the particular mood of the scenes (Kress and Leeuwen 2006), at first sombre and saddened, then becoming angry and frenzied. Here, the frenzied and graphic nature of the images supports the accompanying audio that describes Silk as "out of her mind" by providing a dramatized visual re-enactment of the facts of the case that appear more legitimate because "seeing is believing" (Doyle 2004: 36). The audio and visuals presented in this segment contribute to the (re)construction of "mad mothers" as hysterical, frantic, dangerous and even possessed; because they endanger their own children and deviate from what are believed to be their innate

maternal instincts[12] to protect their children from harm, these women are monsterized as potentially harmful to others.

The Visual (Re)Construction of Alyssa Bustamante as a "Troubled Teen"

Similar to Kelly Silk's portrayal, 15 year old Alyssa Bustamante was also portrayed as "normal" on the surface: she was described as bright, a good student, polite, and as happy to spend time with her younger sister; however, *Deadly Women* also described Bustamante as "not a normal teenager." Indeed, Bustamante was portrayed as an emotionally disturbed young girl who had "a troubled background, [and] a troubled life." Bustamante was diagnosed with depression, engaged in self-harm, and attempted suicide by the time she was 13 years old. Although she was prescribed psychotropic medication and was seeing several therapists, Bustamante's emotional state did not seem to improve as was evinced by her continued self-harming behaviour and her expression of a "desire" to kill that she wrote about in her diary. *Deadly Women* frames this diary entry as evidence that Bustamante was unemotional, despite the fact that she displayed negative emotions such as sadness. Alyssa Bustamante's violence erupted when she killed her nine year old neighbour by slitting her throat, strangling her until she was unconscious, and stabbing her repeatedly.

Bustamante is said to be mentally ill, as the narrator states: "Although just 15 years old, and diagnosed with antisocial personality disorder, Alyssa is tried [in court] as a lucid adult." This quote is especially troublesome for several reasons. First, Alyssa Bustamante is a young offender and is thus more likely to be negatively affected by diagnostic labels as the accompanying stigma and associated stereotypes make it more difficult to find meaningful work, attend post-secondary education, and develop professional networks (Ascani 2012). Second, Bustamante could not have been officially diagnosed with antisocial personality disorder (APD) because one of the criteria for diagnosis is that the person is at least

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[12] It is of note that *Deadly Women* portrayed some of the women who killed their children as having no or expressly limited maternal instincts; in those cases, the women were characterized as unnatural, unfeminine, and emotionless.

18 years old and was diagnosed with conduct disorder prior to age 15 (Andrews and Bonta 2010). Bustamante meets neither of these criteria. This is but one of many examples of *Deadly Women* using "psy terminology"[13] (Kilty 2012) to offer a simple psychological explanation of a subject's violence that in turn casts her as emotionless; in this case, Bustamante was characterized as emotionless regardless of the highly visual display of emotions she expressed via self-harming behaviour.

Accompanying the above auditory quote is a disturbing visual – the camera frame initially shows the word "hate" and crossed out hearts that Bustamante carved into her abdomen. The shot slowly moves up Bustamante's body, following her hand that she shapes into a gun and presses to the side of her head. While Bustamante does this, she stares directly into the camera lens – her dark "gothic" eye makeup with dramatic black tears, smeared lipstick, and black nail polish all become visual props that contrast against her pale white skin. As she holds this pose staring at the audience, the camera lens zooms into intimate distance of Alyssa Bustamante's face (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Alyssa Bustamante (Mavety 2012b: *No Good Reason*). Reproduced with permission.

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[13] "Psy terminology" refers to the language, diagnostic classifications, and discourses of the psy sciences (i.e., psychology and psychiatry, Kilty 2012).

Drawing from Lister and Wells' (2001) and Kress and Leeuwen's (2006) work on the subject's gaze, social interactions are apparent in film and being addressed with a blank stare creates unease in the imaginary connection between the subject and the audience. Thus, even though Bustamante has harmed herself and is in emotional distress, it is difficult for the audience to empathize due to the way she is looking "at" them; instead, the visual is used to elicit the audience's fear of this dark and troubled teen girl.

Further complicating the auditory narratives are the flashback sequences to this particular scene. One flashback shows Bustamante taking pictures of herself in the bathroom (Figure 5).

Strangely, this scene serves to sexualize the teenager by directing the viewers' gaze towards specific body parts, including her exposed midriff, and the fact that she is wearing a crop top and panties. This image also juxtaposes Bustamante's expressed low self-confidence (demonstrated by her self-harm and the word "hate" carved into her skin) with what appears to be her high self-confidence (demonstrated by taking pictures of herself), which offers a very confused and even paradoxical portrayal of her character. The final section of this paper engages in a discussion of the mad/bad dualism

Figure 5. Alyssa Bustamante (Mavety 2012b: *No Good Reason*). Reproduced with permission.

and the dangers of relying on simple heuristics, such as gendered stereotypes, to explain the complex phenomenon of women's violence.

From Mad to Bad (and Back Again)

The mad/bad dichotomy is one of several dualisms that were depicted throughout the *Deadly Women* series. Although these characterizations are seemingly oppositional, they are similar to Kilty and Frigon's (2006) findings that some violent women, such as Karla Homolka[14], are (re)presented as simultaneously dangerous and in danger. *Deadly Women* commonly cast "mad women" as overly emotional (e.g., stressed and overwhelmed), out of control, and having past or current experiences of trauma, whereas "bad women" were characterized as emotionless, calculating, and selfish. Ironically, both mad and bad women were frequently said to suffer from some form of mental illness – mad women typically with depression and post-partum depression, and bad women with APD and psychopathy. However, *Deadly Women's* narratives about Kelly Silk and Alyssa Bustamante moved back and forth between depictions of the women's madness and badness. For example, while Kelly Silk was (re)presented as emotionally out of control and depressed, she was portrayed as emotionless towards her children. Silk was depicted as possessing traditional maternal instincts that were overwhelmed by the severity of her mental illness. Similarly, Alyssa Bustamante was (re)presented as emotional as she was said to suffer from depression resulting from past experiences of trauma, yet she was primarily typecast as an emotionless and calculating girl with APD.

These dual constructions that shifted from mad to bad and back again left little room to consider the contexts surrounding Silk's and

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[14] Karla Homolka, along with her husband Paul Bernardo, sexually assaulted and killed three young girls (including Homolka's younger sister Tammy). There are two seemingly opposed narratives in regards to Homolka's role in the sexual assaults and murders; the first being that she was a willing participant and the second being that she participated because she was abused by Bernardo to the extent that she believed that if she did not fully participate in the violence (and appear content while doing so) that she would become his next victim.

Bustamante's crimes. While Kelly Silk's eldest daughter mentioned her mother's emotional struggles with postpartum depression and claimed that she became more and more distressed every time she had another child, the segment offered no further discussion of these points. Moreover, the role the children's father had in childcare, childrearing, and in supporting his wife went completely unmentioned. Other than describing Silk and her husband as married and religious, the story was completely devoid of any discussion of the children's father, despite the fact that he might have been able to help ease Silk's depression by supporting her emotionally and helping more with the children, their homeschooling, or with household chores, which together likely contributed to Kelly's overwhelming feelings of stress.

Deadly Women claims that Alyssa Bustamante's parents suffered from alcohol and drug addiction and later abandoned her after the authorities removed her and her siblings from the family home. This aspect of Bustamante's narrative was mentioned in passing at the very beginning of the segment but was never examined further, shifting instead to emphasize her badness by focusing on her expression of homicidal thoughts in her diary. Neither anger nor the desire to secure control in her life were cited as parts of Bustamante's motive despite the vast body of research that links childhood neglect and trauma with violence in adolescence (Chapple, Tyler and Bersani 2005).

These dual mad/bad constructions obscure rather than clarify our understandings of women's violence thus encouraging simple explanations and stereotypical beliefs about women who commit serious violent crime. These confused portrayals were accomplished by using a series of visual cues, including camera angles (to demonstrate power imbalances either between the subjects on screen or the subject and the audience), zoom (to draw the audience's attention), black and white (to imply realism and specific moods), and the subject's direct gaze at the camera/audience (to create feelings of unease and fear). At the same time that the visuals constructed particular impressions of the women, the audio provided an explicit narrative about how the audience should understand each subject. Although there are debates within the field on whether

visual or audio is more influential in terms of audience perception (Ericson, Baranek and Chan 1991; Tuchman 1978), Doyle (2004) argues that visual evidence plays a primary role in genres that stress "realism" such as infotainment. Thus it is clear that visual imagery within infotainment has a significant impact on its audience particularly in regards to creating fixed typologies or categories (Linnemann *et al*. 2013; Young 2010), such as "mad" and "bad" criminalized women.

Conclusion

This article explores how the visual aspects of infotainment media contribute to stereotypical gendered interpretations of criminalized women and girls. *Deadly Women* uses both taken for granted audiovisual conventions, such as zooming in and out, while also selectively using more unusual conventions, such as the use of black and white still images and the subject's gaze, to construct gendered narratives about women who commit violence. Interestingly, black and white still images were commonly used and were often accompanied by zooming in or out in order to draw attention to particular moments in the narrative – thus both atypical and typical conventions were used not only in the same segment but also at the same time within the segment. Another example is the use of dramatic camera angles and directing the subject's gaze towards the audience in order to create a sense of unease, threat, and fear amongst viewers.

Through the use of both audio and visual traditions, *Deadly Women* constructs convincing albeit simplistic narratives about women who kill as either mad or bad. These narratives evoke common gendered cultural tropes that are familiar in mass mediated content, yet they fail to adequately consider the mitigating life circumstances and the cultural, social, and structural constraints that influence women and girls' use of violence. The result is that *Deadly Women*'s narratives individualize and pathologize violence committed by women and girls. These stereotypes, especially as they are reified as "truthful" in the infotainment genre, have implications for criminalized women

and girls such that they encourage punishing offenders to the full extent of the law.

Although we tried to avoid making the data fit into previously identified themes, such as the mad/bad dichotomy, in the end our research findings reflected characterizations of violent women similarly to how they are broadly presented in the extant literature. This discovery suggests that new media is not inventing novel or more thoughtful ways of (re)presenting women's violence, rather they are relying on simple cultural tropes and stereotypes – namely that women who commit acts of violence are either inherently mentally unstable (i.e., the hapless offender who can be subject to successful correctional and psychiatric rehabilitation) or innately bad (i.e., the hopeless offender for whom "nothing works"[15]) – to explain this complex phenomena. These understandings of violent women are not only dated but they are also fundamentally sexist as they reflect how patriarchal discourses come to police women and girls' gender performatives.

The mad/bad dichotomy pathologizes womanhood and girlhood – not solely criminalized women – since it endorses the belief that something is intrinsically "wrong" with women and girls who commit crime and thus, by extension, something is "right" with women and girls who do not commit crime. Greer and Jewkes (2005) contend that media coverage of crime committed by women reproduces the individual pathology narrative that fuels social, cultural, and political distinctions between law-abiding citizens ("us") and criminalized women as Others ("them"). As a result, women are socially and discursively encouraged to behave according to normative gender role expectations – to be nice, nurturing, and passive, rather than aloof, callous, or assertive (Chesney-Lind and Irwin 2008; Comack 2006), and when women and girls break the law their actions are examined in relation to their gender performatives (Kilty 2010; Lloyd 1995).

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[15] Lipton, Martinson, and Wilks' (1975) report famously suggested, "nothing works" with respect to rehabilitating recalcitrant offenders. This argument was largely taken out of context, as many criminal justice actors began to advocate that correctional rehabilitative programming was a waste of time and money and that offenders should be incarcerated for lengthier periods of time.

Problematically, the media's reliance on gendered stereotypes, which are visually relayed through graphic imagery, hinders the audience's ability to critically question ineffective and sometimes-harmful carceral practices (Linnemann *et al*. 2013), including the disproportionate prescription of psychotropic medications for criminalized women (Kilty 2012). Subsequently, media imagery should be recognized for what it is – a discursive power that agitates many long-standing social insecurities, such as those surrounding female perpetrated violence, while simultaneously subjugating alternative readings of this "crime problem" (Brown 2014; Linnemann *et al*. 2013; Young 2010). Ultimately, this research provides case study evidence of the ways in which one infotainment television series, *Deadly Women*, invokes audio and visual conventions in ways that reify dominant mad/bad narratives about women who have committed serious acts of violence. While women commit only a small proportion of all violent crimes (Comack and Balfour 2004), *Deadly Women* employs different audio and visual conventions in order to create dramatized and shocking visual spectacles of women's violence that effectively render it hyper-visible and exceptionally scandalous to a captivated audience.

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