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**Apple Pie with a Side of Lies:  
Consuming Gender in TNT's *Animal Kingdom***

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**Abstract**

Using the theoretical framework of popular criminology, this paper examines the performance of gender and crime in the TNT television series *Animal Kingdom*. The purpose of this analysis is to identify how this unique fictional crime series depicts gender and crime in ways that both conform to and depart from traditional gendered roles, and to evaluate how the portrayal of these gendered roles may subvert and reinforce longstanding stereotypes about female criminality and violence. We report the results of a qualitative thematic analysis of the visual and narrative components of the first season of the series, with specific attention given to the representation of gendered roles and stereotypes among the main characters. To evaluate the social effects of the performance of female criminality and violence on *Animal Kingdom*, anecdotal audience data was collected from the website *TV Fanatic*. Our analysis found that the program often reproduced gendered stereotypes that were largely shared by viewers. However, *Animal Kingdom* also contained significant departures from traditional gendered roles, criminological discourse, and popular ideology about female criminality. While exploratory, this study contributes to the growing literature on popular criminology, viewing culture as an important site where popular ideas about crime and gender are both reinforced and occasionally subverted.

**Keywords:** popular criminology, crime, gender, masculinity, femininity, feminist criminology, media

Media and popular culture reflect and shape our fundamental ideas about social, economic, and political issues (Rafter, 2006). As a result, the media has immense power to influence popular opinion about crime, deviance, and the criminal justice processes (Fineman & McCluskey, 1997). Prime-time television dramas are a key source of what Rafter (2007) calls popular criminology. Since the 1960s, one-fourth of all shows on

prime-time TV have contained crime-related storylines (Cecil, 2007). Filled with dramatic confrontations between officials and offenders, these programs offer the audience a distorted view of the workings of the criminal justice system and the people who are processed through it (Cecil, 2007). Crime TV also shapes how we understand issues like gendered identity and power dynamics (Zisman Newman, 2020). Mirroring official statistics about gender and crime, most offenders portrayed in crime TV are male (Cecil, 2007). Women serve in only a handful of capacities in crime media, including an actual or potential sex partner, a victim, or a mysterious “other” (Zisman Newman, 2020). We analyze the performance of gender in TNT’s popular crime television series *Animal Kingdom* to examine how female and male criminal characters conform to and depart from traditional gendered ideals in contemporary fictional crime television, and to better understand subsequent societal effects these representations may produce. We focus particular attention on the representation of female roles within *Animal Kingdom*, including roles as a victim, cop, and criminal, and analyze how these roles may conform to or depart from gendered stereotypes. Further, we undertake a comparative analysis of traditional masculine constructs of crime and criminality, and the representation of female criminality, violence, and the link to femininity as they are performed throughout the first season of the series. Drawing on the theoretical and conceptual framework of popular criminology (Rafter, 2007; Rafter & Brown, 2011; Kohm, 2017), we analyze the program alongside academic discourse and theory about gender and crime. To set the stage for our analysis, we begin by reviewing key literature on gender and crime and the representation of gender roles in contemporary fictional crime television. This literature informs our qualitative analysis of the first season of the program. We argue that *Animal Kingdom* depicts gender and crime in ways that both conform to and depart from traditional gendered roles, and in doing so may both subvert and reinforce longstanding stereotypes, criminological theory, and popular ideology about female criminality and violence.

### **Popular Criminology, Gender, and Crime**

Rafter (2007) called for the development of a popular criminology to analyze forms of culture that grapple with understanding crime and its causes. Rafter (2007) argued that crime films deal with matters that go beyond the remit of academic criminology. She argued that crime films

and other visual culture raise complex philosophical, psychological, and ethical issues about crime and justice that are often neglected in academic discourse. Crime films constitute a complementary discourse parallel to academic criminology. Popular criminology asks us to take crime films seriously as popular efforts to explain crime and its consequences and use them to conceptualize the causes and consequences of crime in society alongside and in tandem with academic discourses (Kohm, 2017; Kohm et al., 2017).

Scheuneman-Scott and Kilty (2016) argue that “media often (re)produce and widely circulate disparate images of crime that encourage fear of the criminal ‘others’. As a result, particular visuals have the power to reinforce gender, class, and ethnic stereotypes” (p.74). Rafter (2006) refers to this as ideology, defined as not “beliefs people consciously hold, but ... the myths that a society lives by” (p. 9). In the process of encountering the world, we absorb new narratives and mental pictures from popular culture that may encourage shifts in these myths and assumptions (Rafter, 2006). For example, before films began portraying women as police officers, and so long as women were portrayed in alternative roles such as the victim, it was difficult to picture them as something different (Rafter, 2007). Popular criminology interrogates ideology and myth about crime and criminal justice that circulate in culture and in the media, thus, making it a useful tool for examining popular depictions of gender (Kohm, 2017).

Academic criminologists have analyzed gendered patterns of crime, describing a universal gender gap in offending where women are less likely than men to be reflected in official crime statistics (Steffensmeier & Allan, 1996). This includes police statistics, National Crime Victimization Surveys, surveys on self-reported crime, studies of criminal careers and gangs, and case studies that provide qualitative data on differing contexts of male and female offending patterns (Steffensmeier & Allan, 1996). According to these statistics, men offend at much higher rates than women for all crime categories, except prostitution and minor property offences (Schwartz & Steffensmeier, 2008). Men have a higher rate involvement in crimes against persons, including homicides (Schwartz & Steffensmeier, 2008).

There are a number of theories for these disparities between male and female offending patterns, and each of them rely on the social organiza-

tion of gender. Steffensmeier and Allan (1996) claim that the organization of gender together with sex differences contribute to male and female differences in several types of characteristics that increase the probability of prosocial responses on the part of females, but antisocial and predatory responses on the part of males. They describe five areas of life that inhibit female crime but encourage male crime: gender norms; moral development and affiliative concerns; social control; physical strength; and aggression and sexuality. “Gender differences in these areas condition gender differences in patterns of motivation and access to criminal opportunities, as well as gender differences in the type, frequency, and context of offending” (Steffensmeier & Allan, 1996, p. 475). One of the main reasons why women participate less in criminal behaviour is due to a lack of access: “Female misbehaviour is more stringently monitored and corrected through negative stereotypes and sanctions ... The greater supervision and control reduces female risk-taking and increases attachment to parents, teachers, and conventional friends” (Steffensmeier & Allan, 1996, p. 477). Another explanation for women’s lack of involvement in crime is the masculinity theory posed by Shover, Norland, James, and Thornton (1979), which identifies the contradicting nature between traditional feminine behaviour and criminality. Shover, Norland, James, and Thornton (1979) claim there is “an affinity between traditional masculine behaviour and criminal behaviour” (p. 163). In fact, criminality and masculinity have much in common; physical strength, aggressiveness, a lack of fear, and the need for visible and external “proof” of achievement (Shover et al., 1979). Each of these characteristics are facets of the ideal male personality, and also much of criminal behaviour. The criminal justice system’s greater “leniency” and “chivalry” toward women has also been used to theorize lower offending rates of women. Female offenders have a lower probability of being arrested or imprisoned (Daly 1994). This difference appears to be related to a variety of factors, including pregnancy, responsibilities for small children, greater display of remorse, as well as perceptions that women are less dangerous than men (Daly, 1994). Nevertheless, the chivalry hypothesis is grounded in cultural norms and expectations for female behavior.

Crime media works alongside academic discourse to shape perceptions of women’s involvement with the criminal justice system. Crime films, news, and television series play a powerful role in framing women’s ex-

periences with crime and victimization (Humphries, 2009). News reporters rely on stereotypes associated with men and women and work these gendered assumptions into news reports (Humphries, 2009). Similarly, crime films and other visual media produce images of women as “crazed, frenzied, and emotionally out of control,” ultimately creating the narrative of ‘mad’ versus ‘bad’ women (Scheuneman-Scott & Kilty, 2016, p. 72). Thus, women who behave violently are framed in media and popular culture as psychologically and culturally aberrant.

### **Consuming Gender in the Media: Femininity and Masculinity**

“The binary of masculinity and femininity is one, if not the primary cultural distinction foisted onto human beings from birth” (Naegler & Salman, 2016, p. 356). Masculinities and femininities are made up of behaviour expectations, stereotypes, and rules that keep individuals within their gendered construct (Gentry & Sjoberg, 2015). However, Judith Butler (2004) suggests that “terms such as masculine and feminine are notoriously changeable; there are social histories for each term; their meanings change radically depending upon geopolitical boundaries and cultural constraints on who is imagining whom, and for what purpose” (p. 10). In this sense, terms of gender designation never settle just once, but are constantly in the process of being remade (Butler, 2004). The media is an important arena where gender is made and remade.

#### *Femininity*

In media and popular culture, idealized women encompass traits such as kindness, innocence, naivety, nurturing, and sensitivity, and are relationship-oriented (Scheuneman-Scott & Kilty, 2016). As a result, the ‘ideal’ woman would be expected to avoid any type of trouble, including crime and delinquency. Women have traditionally been rewarded for their ability to establish and maintain relationships and to accept family obligations. As a result, opportunities for criminal involvement are restricted by aspects of family life, such as child-rearing and relationship building (Steffensmeier & Allan, 1996). Other stereotypical traits of femininity include weakness, submission, domestication, and ‘ladylike’ behaviour — qualities that are incompatible with criminal activity (Steffensmeier & Allan, 1996). Violent women who do not embody these idealized features of femininity are often viewed as not only being “bad,” but as “bad women” (Gentry & Sjoberg, 2015). Women and girls who commit vio-

lent crimes may be viewed as more deviant than males because not only did they break the law, but they also broke gender-role expectations (Scheuneman-Scott & Kilty, 2016). Women may also be labelled ‘bad’ for violating gendered expectations around sexuality. Crime films sometimes present sexuality itself as deviant, then use it to explain why a woman deserves to be harmed (Rafter, 2006). Thus, the media maintain the illusion that ‘good’ girls have social privileges and protections from crime that are otherwise denied for ‘bad’ girls (Humphries, 2009). In addition to possessing these idealized feminine traits, women are also expected to conform to a number of narrow gender roles such as being a good mother, a good wife, and a good woman (Gentry & Sjoberg, 2015).

### *Masculinity*

Crime and violence have historically been viewed as a male preserve because of masculine gendered expectations that are common to both men and criminals. These include physical strength, aggressiveness, competitiveness, and greed. (Shover et al., 1979). Competence, volatility, freedom, compassion, and caring for women are the hallmarks of effective masculinity (Humphries, 2009). Moreover, crime dramas offer audiences leading men whose masculinity is defined by their heterosexuality (Zisman Newman, 2020). Traditionally, a male anatomy is assumed to be coextensive with performance of masculine gender and with heterosexual desire for women (Pomerance & Gateward, 2005). This traditional gendered expectation is reproduced within media depictions, especially within crime films. Men who are portrayed as LGBTQ+ in media and popular culture are rarely depicted as prototypically masculine. This is because masculinity draws from stereotypes about good, strong men, who are unemotional, independent, and straight, whereas men who are LGBTQ+ fail to possess any type of effective masculinity, and thus, are labelled as bad or deviant (Rafter, 2006). As Pomerance and Gateward (2005) state, “culturally marginal forms of sexuality falling outside the heterosexualist continuum are effectively rendered unintelligible by mainstream narratives, including (and especially) those focused on boyhood and masculinity” (p. 42). Or worse, Rafter (2006) points out that the cop film *Magnum Force* depicted “good men as straight and bad ones as homosexual” (p. 121). However, in recent decades, LGBTQ+ characters have begun to appear more often in the media, including crime dramas, after much public criticism for the lack of

representations more generally in the media (Pomerance & Gateward, 2005). Although LGBTQ+ characters are more frequent in the media in today, “heterosexual masculinity remains as a structuring norm in relation both to images of women and gay men” (Pomerance & Gateward, 2005, p. 50). Idealized heterosexual masculinity encompasses traits such as aggression, power, and control, thus, leaving crime and delinquency as a dominant heteronormative masculine preserve.

### **Media Portrayals: A Women’s Role in the Crime Drama**

In crime media, women are often represented in only a handful of capacities and take up very distinct roles, including victim, detective, or offender. Victims are often represented as ‘worthy’ or ‘unworthy’ (Humphries, 2009). Worthy victims possess the traits of Nils Christie’s (1986) “ideal” victim. The ideal *female* victim is inherently blameless for the acts committed against her. She is involved in domestic life, possibly a stay-at-home wife and homemaker, she is feminine, she is attractive, she is innocent, she is often a mother, a devoted wife, a perfect daughter, or a pregnant woman. Additionally, race is key to understanding the ideal female victim, where white victims “are seen to matter the most” (Horeck, 2020, p. 37). In popular culture, ‘unworthy’ female victims are frequently blamed or made responsible for their own victimization when they fall outside the hegemonic, patriarchal, classed, white representation of the ideal victim (Zisman Newman, 2020). Rader and Rhineberger-Dunn (2010) argue that the blame of female victims in American crime TV is often subtle and inferred through relationships with the accused. ‘Unworthy’ victims become nearly unknowable as women, because they do not conform to common popular culture stereotypes of appropriate femininity, and thus, their personal characteristics are unworthy of knowing (Zisman Newman, 2020).

While Hollywood began to portray women as cops and detectives beginning in the 1970s, these characters were often sexualized and frequently subordinate to leading male characters (Rafter, 2006). Worse yet, female cops were punished with violence for entering the masculine realm (Rafter, 2006). The portrayal of women’s toughness or strength in crime media is routinely mitigated by a narrative that instead places focus on their relationships with men and family life and emphasizes their sexuality and femininity (Rabe-Hemp, 2011; King, 2008; Zisman Newman, 2020). However, more recent crime films and television series, like

*Fargo* (1996), *The Fall* (2013–2016), and *Prime Suspect USA* (2011–2012) have demonstrated that the ideal cop can sometimes be a woman who departs from traditional gender stereotypes (Brunsdon, 2013; Jermyn, 2017; Rafter, 2006). Nevertheless, female crime fighters continue to occupy an ambiguous place in male-dominated television crime dramas (Jermyn, 2017).

Finally, crime dramas have typically depicted female offenders as beautiful, resourceful, and sometimes violent, but also as young, white, and feminine (Cecil, 2007). This suggests that female offenders in crime media tend to reflect dominant ideologies about femininity and womanhood. Consequently, Cecil (2007) contends that when females are depicted in crime dramas, they are likely to be shown in positive and sympathetic roles, such as victim or detective, rather than as offender. However, the female offenders who do make it on screen tend to be framed as ‘mad’ women, ‘bad’ women, or as protective mothers (Cecil, 2007). However, recent TV series like *Orange Is the New Black* have paved the way for more diverse depictions of female criminality (Cecil, 2015; Schwan, 2016).

Female offenders who are considered ‘mad’ are often portrayed as having diminished responsibility for their crimes. This is because these women previously conformed to gender-role expectations and displayed attributes of femininity and womanhood (Scheuneman-Scott & Kilty, 2016). The crimes of mad women often stem from untreated mental illness (Scheuneman-Scott & Kilty, 2016). Some crime media depict mad women sympathetically and with reduced criminal culpability. However, this excludes women who kill their children, even those found not criminally responsible by the law (Cecil, 2007). Mothers who kill their children are deemed to have departed significantly from gender-role expectations, and thus, despite mental illness, are still viewed as culpable (Cecil, 2007).

Film noir (c. 1940–1955) portrayed powerful women disparagingly, as sexualized vamps and psychotics (Rafter, 2006). These ‘femme fatale’ characters in crime films of the *noir* period were conniving, double-crossing, and smooth-talking. This reflected contemporaneous criminological theory, which explained most male crime in terms of greed, and most female crime in terms of abnormal psychology. Today, the ‘bad’ woman is still portrayed with femme-fatale traits, such as being emo-

tionally cold, ruthless, selfish, sexually aggressive, out of control, manipulative, dangerous, masculine, and unable to conform to traditional gender-role expectations (Scheuneman-Scott & Kilty, 2016).

Crime dramas can also link criminal behaviour to one of the ultimate traits of femininity: motherhood. "Women are supposed to be nurturing, to desire motherhood, and to do anything to protect their children; however, the good mother can go too far with her actions, resulting in criminal behaviour" (Cecil, 2007, p. 251). Incorporating motherhood within the crime drama allows the audience to sympathize with the female offender (Cecil, 2007). Women who are shown to be violent or commit a criminal act in order to protect their children are not viewed as dangerous, because they are still conforming to gender-role expectations and exhibiting maternal instincts (Cecil, 2007). Mothers who offend in order to protect their children can foster audience sympathy, even though they are breaking one gendered expectation to uphold another.

## Methods

We analyze the performance of gender and crime in the first season of TNT's *Animal Kingdom*, a US crime television series adapted from a 2010 Australian film of the same name. Both were inspired by the real-life, Melbourne-based Pettingill crime family, which was headed by matriarch Kath Pettingill. The Pettingill family was involved with drug trafficking, arms dealing, and armed robberies in Australia. Set in Southern California, *Animal Kingdom* follows 17-year-old Joshua "J" Cody, who moves in with his estranged relatives after his mother dies of a drug overdose. The Cody family is a criminal organization led by J's grandmother, Janine "Smurf" Cody. *Animal Kingdom* is atypical of most TV crime dramas in the way it represents gender and gender roles. The Cody family is headed by a female matriarch, who is not only a criminal, but also, seemingly, a devoted mother and grandmother. Additionally, the series includes a prominent male criminal character who confounds traditional gender roles by combining masculine toughness and violence with an LGBTQ+ identity. *Animal Kingdom* was a popular and culturally significant program, reaching 1.268 million viewers during its first season (Nielson Company, 2017). The series continues to be available on streaming platforms such as Netflix and, as a result, has current potential to impact viewers' perceptions of gender and crime.

We analyzed this unique fictional crime TV series, examining how its representation of gender and crime both conform to and depart from traditional gendered roles. We argue that the performance of gender within the program may simultaneously subvert and reinforce longstanding stereotypes about female criminality and violence. Drawing on the conceptual framework of popular criminology, we undertook a qualitative thematic analysis of the visual and narrative components of the first season of the series, comprising 10 one-hour episodes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Visual and narrative elements of the program were analyzed with attention to the representation of gendered roles and stereotypes among the main characters. We focused analysis on the performance of masculinity and femininity, and the way characters on the program conformed to and departed from traditional gendered roles and expectations. Audience reaction to the representation of gender was collected from the website *TV Fanatic*, which aggregates reviews of each episode from fans of the series. This allowed for some analysis, albeit exploratory and anecdotal, of the social effects of the show's representation gender and crime.

### **Character and Plot Summary**

Before proceeding to the findings, we provide a brief description of the main plot lines and key characters of the show. The first season positions 17-year-old Joshua “J” Cody as the focal point of the narrative. After the death of his mother, J moves in with his grandmother, Janine “Smurf” Cody, and his four uncles, Baz, Pope, Craig, and Deran. Viewers learn about the Cody family as J does, and in many ways the program is framed through his perspective. The family plans and executes high-risk, high-reward heists under the direction of matriarch Smurf. Much of the season's plot follows J's gradual acculturation to and involvement in the criminal lifestyle of his new-found family. Initially, Smurf appears to be a nurturing, kind-hearted mother and grandmother, but as the plot progresses, she is revealed as a tough matriarch who is extremely protective of her family, and at times exhibits incestuous desires towards her “boys.” Baz, Pope, Craig, and Deran all embody stereotypical masculine characteristics. They participate in high-risk activities, extreme sports, and, of course, criminal behaviour. However, Deran departs from the masculine identities of his brothers as he struggles with his sexual identity throughout the first season and goes to extreme lengths to conceal his sexuality and maintain his masculine status. Nicky, J's teenage girl-

friend, is sexualized by J's family, and eventually takes on the identity of a deserving victim. Catherine, Baz's girlfriend and the mother of his daughter, Lena, strongly opposes the criminal activities of the Codys, and takes on the characteristics of the ideal woman and as a devoted partner to Baz and mother to Lena. Finally, Sandra Yates is a detective who investigates the Cody family and will stop at nothing to break the case. Several secondary supporting characters include: Adrian, who is Deran's secret romantic partner; Patrick Fischer, who is a detective working with Sandra Yates and a friend of Catherine; Renn, a female drug dealer and Craig's romantic partner; and Lucy, who appears as 'the other woman' in her relationship with Baz. Much of the plot of the first season focuses on the relationships and power struggles between each of the main characters.

### **Constructing Traditional Masculinity on Crime TV**

The first season of *Animal Kingdom* stages numerous performances of stereotypically 'masculine' activities such as when the Cody boys engage in extreme sports like skydiving, surfing, dirt biking, and paintballing (Figure 1). Crime itself is like an extreme sport to the Cody men. Crime and violence have long been a male preserve due to the shared masculine gendered expectations common to both men and criminals. Criminal behavior is often characterized by physical strength, aggressiveness, competitiveness, and greed (Shover et al., 1979), traits that are evident in the Cody men. In Episode 1, Craig and Deran initiate conflict with another group of surfers at the beach for no apparent reason, except to assert their dominance. As if to initiate their young nephew into the family, Craig hands J a gun and says, "Show him who's king, man" (Figure 2). Later in the same episode, J is goaded by his uncles to jump off the roof into a swimming pool during a party. Failure to participate in the rough play with his uncles would be viewed as weak. However, before J can make up his mind to jump, he is grabbed by Craig and dragged down into the water. Everyone at the party cheers, including Smurf, as the boys are praised for their daring act.

The Cody men are extremely competitive with one another, and frequently engage in roughhousing and friendly brawling. In Episode 8, Pope chokes Deran during a fight until the other brothers step in to break it up. Another example takes place during the opening of Episode 2, where the Cody men are playing basketball in the pool. During the

game, Pope holds J's head underwater until he struggles for air. Pope says to J: "Little prick. You do that, you're gonna get hit." Shortly afterwards, Baz and Pope get into a fight, and Baz elbows Pope in the mouth. This is framed as friendly competition between brothers when Deran asks Smurf, "Hey, who you rooting for Ma'?" to which Smurf responds, "Both of them, baby. That's the beauty of being a mother. You never have to pick sides."



**Figure 1:** Craig on a motorcycle engaging in a stereotypical 'masculine' activity. Image source: Animal Kingdom, 2016.

*Animal Kingdom* also depicts 'effective' masculinity through secondary male characters like Patrick Fischer, a police officer with a soft spot for Baz's girlfriend, Catherine. Patrick is compassionate, caring, and protective of Catherine. These traits conform to traditional portrayals of male detectives and police officers, who possess traits such as competence, compassion, and caring for women, which are also hallmarks of effective masculinity (Humphries, 2009). In Episode 3, Pope surprises Catherine by waiting for her outside by her car at night. Catherine is clearly displeased, and Patrick comes to her aid. Patrick gives Catherine his card and tells her to call him if she needs anything. In this regard, Patrick embodies traits of effective masculinity that contrast with the violent masculine performances of the Cody men.



**Figure 2:** J pointing a gun at a group of surfers. Image source: Bobic, 2022.

*Animal Kingdom* demonstrates that ‘effective’ masculinity can be performed in negative as well as positive or prosocial ways. Men who commit criminal or violent acts conform to traditional masculine behaviour through characteristics such as physical strength, aggressiveness, and violence, and by portraying visible and external “proof” of achievement (Shover et al., 1979). Whereas men who are portrayed as heroes or cops conform to traditional masculine behaviour through characteristics such as competence, volatility, compassion, bravery, and caring for women (Humphries, 2009). ‘Ineffective’ masculinity, then, is marked by characteristics that fail to conform to either of these sets of stereotypically masculine traits and challenge was it means to be a ‘man’ — which we explore in more detail in the next section.

### **Contesting Traditional Masculinity on Crime TV**

Although the Cody men exhibited many masculine traits, the program offered critical departures from these gendered expectations. Our analysis revealed two key ways the program subverted traditional expectations of masculinity and what it means to be a ‘man.’ This included frequent infantilization of the adult men in the program, as well as a subplot that focused on Deran’s covert sexual identity.

### *Infantilization*

Infantilization was identified by David Levy as a form of maternal over-protection (Levy, 1943). In *Animal Kingdom*, Smurf's close relationship with her male children has the effect of infantilizing them, which, in turn, goes against society's gendered expectations of what it means to be masculine. Throughout the first season it becomes clear that Smurf pulls all the strings; she controls the money and picks the jobs. Smurf even places tracking devices in her boys' phones, similar to parents who are concerned about the whereabouts of their children and teenagers, only the Cody boys are in their late 20s and 30s. Similar to rebellious teenagers, the Cody men complain about their controlling mother, but seem unable to escape her control. In Episode 2, Craig and Deran complain about Smurf having them do all the "dirty work," like scrapping a stolen car with a blowtorch. Deran grumbles: "I'm pulling my own jobs if this keeps up." Infantilization also included Smurf consoling her adult sons as if they were small children. In Episode 1, Deran weeps in his mother's lap as Smurf rubs his head and sings him a lullaby. She whispers, "Shh. Everybody makes mistakes. Poor little Deran." Treating her grown sons as little boys subverts and counters other masculine performances by the Cody men as they commit crime and engage in other extreme pursuits (Figure 3). The boys also compete for Smurf's affection. In Episode 1, when J first meets his estranged relatives, his uncles are not pleased with J becoming a part of the family. Smurf hits back at them and says, "Shut up! All of you! What's the matter, my baby boy? Are you afraid he's [J] gonna get more attention than you?" In Episode 2, J wakes to find Smurf cleaning his room for him. She then insists on undressing her 17-year-old grandson to do his laundry. In Episode 6, Craig awaits his death after ripping off Renn (Craig's drug-dealing girlfriend), who overdosed in front of him. Renn's cousins seek revenge with a plan to inject him with enough heroin for an overdose. However, they allow him one phone call — to his mother — who comes to his rescue. As a punishment, Smurf takes Craig's Ducati motorcycle away, saying: "Misbehave, you lose your toys." These examples of infantilization work to subvert other performances of masculinity by the Cody men.



**Figure 3:** Smurf comforting J. Image source: Charles, 2019.

### *Masculinity and Sexuality*

Another significant departure from traditional masculine expectations in *Animal Kingdom* relates to sexuality and sexual identity. Throughout the first season, Deran constantly struggles with his masculinity and his LGBTQ+ identity, which he hides from his family, and understandably so. Deran's brothers and criminal counterparts exhibit and prize stereotypically masculine characteristics such as physical strength, aggressiveness, and visible and external "proof" of achievement, whether legal or illegal (Shover et al., 1979). LGBTQ+ men are not typically portrayed as masculine and therefore depart from traditional gendered expectations of what it means to be a 'man.' Effective masculinity draws from stereotypes such that hard, strong men who are unemotional and independent are viewed as straight, and thus good, whereas men who are LGBTQ+ are perceived as failing to possess this same type of 'effective' masculinity, and are thus labelled bad or deviant (Rafter, 2006). In Episode 2, J finds Deran's car parked outside the beach restrooms and goes inside to find Deran receiving oral sex from another man (Adrian, his romantic partner). Deran reacts by violently assaulting Adrian to cover for his secret sexual relationship. He yells to J, "Get in here, man! C'mon, this guy tried to take my wallet!" Deran's violent display of masculinity

seeks to restore his position as an effective man. Later, Deran engages in heterosexual activities with women to prove his masculinity. In Episode 4, the Cody men go to the strip club where they are offered lap dances. Deran responds with: “Yeah! Hey, J, what do you like — brunette or redhead?” But before J can answer, Deran interrupts, “Doesn’t matter, they’re both for me anyway.” In Episode 7, Deran hugs Adrian, who is nervous and uneasy after being assaulted by him in the public wash-room. Adrian signals his submissive role in the relationship: “Whatever you want man, you’re in charge. You made that clear.” This dialogue affirms Deran’s dominant masculine identity, achieved through fear and power over Adrian. Deran’s character breaks the traditional association between masculinity and heterosexuality and confirms that one can still be prototypically masculine without conforming to a heteronormative sexual identity (Figure 4).



**Figure 4:** Deran and his romantic partner Adrian. Image source: Bernardini, 2021.

### **Constructing Traditional Femininity on Crime TV**

Possessing prototypical feminine traits such as kindness, innocence, naivety, nurturing, and sensitivity (Scheuneman-Scott & Kilty, 2016), the ‘ideal’ woman is expected to avoid any type of trouble, including crime and delinquency. Two powerful focal concerns ascribed to women include nurturant role obligations, and female beauty and sexual virtue.

Other stereotypical traits of femininity include weakness, submission, domestication, and 'ladylike' behaviour (Scheuneman-Scott & Kilty, 2016). Catherine, who is the mother of Lena and girlfriend of Baz, most closely conforms to this type of feminine narrative. Viewers observe Catherine's nurturing demeanor in Episode 1 during the pool party when J is being pressured to jump off the roof. While everyone taunts J to jump, Catherine is the only one who expresses concern the boy's safety. In Episode 2, Catherine expresses sympathy for the police officer who was killed during the most recent heist: "That security guard died, and he wasn't just a security guard, he was a real cop in Long Beach, moonlighting to support his family." Her maternal instincts are strong, and she implores Baz to protect Lena: "Promise me. I don't want Lena to get shot because her parents are just stupid. We're not those people Baz, we're not." According to Cecil (2007), "women are supposed to be nurturing, to desire motherhood, and to do anything to protect their children" (p. 251). Catherine's concern for her daughter and motherly instincts are portrayed throughout the season, such as when we see Catherine doing Lena's hair, helping her get dressed, and taking care of her when she's sick. Catherine also performs the role of a 'good' woman because she is loyal to her boyfriend Baz. She spurns the romantic advances of other men and refuses to talk to police: "I won't do it. I've loved Baz since I was 16, I can't turn on him. What would that make me?" Catherine's portrayal of traditional femininity sets her up to be a 'worthy' victim when she finally decides to escape the Cody family to protect her daughter. In Episode 9, Catherine is murdered by Pope after he discovers her packed bags and plan to leave Baz. The characteristics of a 'worthy' female victim includes being inherently blameless for the acts committed against her, being involved in domestic life, possibly a stay-at-home wife and homemaker, being feminine, attractive, and innocent. In summary, the ideal female victim encompasses the traits of traditional womanhood and femininity (Humphries, 2009). In this case, Catherine portrays nearly all of these characteristics, which ultimately set her up as the 'ideal' or 'worthy' victim.

Family matriarch Smurf conforms to some stereotypical expectations of femininity and motherhood, while departing significantly from others. Smurf appears to be a devoted mother to her boys who participates in traditional expectations of motherhood, such as cooking. For example, in Episode 1, the audience gets a glimpse at Smurf's dedication to baking

cupcakes for her family. In Episode 2, Nicky asks, “God, do you always cook like this?” Smurf responds with “My boys have big appetites.” Instances like these make it difficult to remember that this woman is running a criminal enterprise. Smurf will do anything for her boys — she will cook for them, clean for them, cradle them, and even dress them. Her innocence and motherly demeanor provide cover for her delinquent activities. Cecil (2007) argues that the ways in which concepts of motherhood are incorporated into the crime drama allows the audience to sympathize with the female offender. In this sense, she is not seen as a threat. Only when she is non-maternal is she perceived as a true threat to beliefs and customs surrounding femininity (Cecil, 2007).

### **Contesting Traditional Femininity on Crime TV**

The qualities and characteristics ascribed to femininity are incompatible with qualities valued in the criminal underworld and are characterized as inferior to masculine traits (Steffensmeier & Allan, 1996; Gentry & Sjoberg, 2015). However, there are instances when female character types subvert stereotypical feminine roles, which, in turn, may pose a threat to society’s traditional views of femininity and what it means to be a ‘woman’. We identified four ways that female characters departed from traditional gendered expectations. This includes through motherhood and infantilization, through criminality and violence, by being a ‘bad’ woman, and through sexual promiscuity. Female characters who are portrayed as breaking stereotypical feminine roles are often perceived as not only being ‘bad’, but also as ‘bad women’.

#### *Motherhood and Infantilization*

While Smurf performs the role of a nurturing and caring mother figure to her adult children, this is merely a means to control her children in the service of her criminal enterprise. In this way, traditional values of motherhood are subverted by greed and selfishness. For example, in the scene described earlier in which Deran lays in Smurf’s lap, crying, as she rubs his head and sings him a lullaby, Deran is upset because the previous criminal heist went wrong. While a ‘good’ mother would prevent her children from engaging in dangerous and otherwise criminal behaviour, Smurf’s nurturing demeanor stems from the need to control her boys, for them to depend on her for their survival, and for them to continue committing crimes on her behalf. In this sense, her actions are nurturing, but

her intent is not, thus leading her character to depart from the traditional role as a nurturing mother (Figure 5). Another example is Smurf's famous apple pie, which she makes as a reward for her boys after a heist is completed. Something as innocent as a mother making apple pie contains evil and criminal underpinnings, which acts to further subvert traditional gendered role expectations.



**Figure 5:** Smurf teaching her grandson, J, to shoot a gun. Image source: Fanfest, 2017.

### *Criminality and Violence*

Although Smurf tends to refrain from being directly involved in criminal acts, there are a few instances when Smurf engages in violent and otherwise 'masculine' behaviour. In episode 10, Smurf ruthlessly murders a man from her past by shooting him four times. Violence of this order is associated with forms of masculinity, and as a result, violent women are not only viewed as being 'bad' in the same manner as violent men, but also as 'bad' at being a women (Gentry & Sjoberg, 2015). This is because women and girls who commit violent crimes can be viewed as more deviant than men, because not only did they break the law, they also failed to adhere to gender-role expectations, and as a result, are labeled as failed members of society (Scheuneman-Scott & Kilty, 2016).

*The ‘Bad’ Woman*

Historically, the ‘bad’ woman subverts traditional gender-role expectations, and is emotionally cold, ruthless, selfish, emotionless, sexually aggressive, out of control, manipulative, dangerous, and masculine (Scheuneman-Scott & Kilty, 2016). Smurf performs many of these characteristics. For example, she is exceedingly selfish. In Episode 2, a heist goes wrong, and Smurf orders all the stolen watches to be discarded. Later, Smurf is seen stashing the stolen watches in a secret storage unit for herself. Smurf is also extremely manipulative. In Episode 2, Smurf cons her way into a young man’s home to steal psychiatric medicine to secretly give to Pope after going through his doctor’s confidential files. In this regard, Smurf could be viewed as a mother protecting her son, but her deceit and the lengths she took to do so depart from conventional gendered role expectations. Smurf also uses her manipulation skills out of her own self-interest to convince Pope to kill Catherine in Episode 9. Smurf rarely gets her hands dirty. Rather, she uses manipulation and deceit to trick others, particularly her sons, into committing criminal acts for her.

A character type that crosses the line between feminine and masculine behaviour is the female detective or cop. Detective Sandra Yates is introduced in Episode 5. She has been following the Cody family for years and, unlike her partner Patrick, Sandra is cold and manipulative; she will do and say whatever is needed to get the job done. For example, Sandra lies and manipulates J’s teacher, Alexa, into working as an informant. In Episode 9, Sandra pressures Alexa into starting a sexual relationship with the teenage boy to persuade him to wear a wire. Sandra explains the plan to her partner: “She is facing a class-one felony drug-trafficking charge. She will open her legs for a good-looking teenager if it means not doing 15 to 20 years.” In Episode 10, these manipulative traits are exposed when J confronts Sandra: “I remember you. Me sitting in the corner playing with some shitty little toy, watching you come over and work my mom. She’d beg you to leave. She cried, and, oh man, you’d just do anything, even offer to score for her just so you could get what you wanted. But you never got it, did you?” Sandra’s questionable morals and emotional outbursts are contrasted with Patrick, who conforms with gendered expectations of an ideal male police officer (cool under pressure, emotionless, in control). Historically, the portrayal of women’s

toughness or strength in crime films has been routinely mitigated by a narrative that instead places the focus on the relationships these women have with men and family life and places an emphasis on their sexuality and femininity (Zisman Newman, 2020). However, Sandra Yates does not conform to this narrative. Instead, she and Smurf depart from traditional gendered expectations of femininity, thus giving the audience the perception that both of these women are not only bad but are bad at being women.

### *Sexual Promiscuity*

Some crime films present sexual promiscuity itself as deviant, then use it to explain why a woman deserves to be harmed (Rafter, 2006). Women who have a certain kind of sexual history are portrayed as less worthy of fair treatment than those who do not. Throughout the first season of *Animal Kingdom*, J's teenaged girlfriend Nicky was routinely sexualized. Nicky was portrayed as a young, naïve girl who was of little importance to her boyfriend or the Cody family except as a potential sexual partner. For example, in Episode 3, when J returns home after spending the night with Nicky, Smurf asks if they are having sex: "You don't have to be embarrassed, she's a beautiful girl. Does she know what you like? Does she satisfy you? Just make sure she knows what you need. You know there are some girls who like to be told what to do." Nicky is eventually portrayed as a bad influence for J, particularly after she begins using drugs with some of the older Cody men. In Episode 4, Nicky is caught smoking a joint outside of class and J ends up taking the blame. In Episode 8, after breaking up, Nicky tells J she did coke and had sex with Craig. In Episode 10, Nicky's father sees her doing cocaine with Craig. This marks the ultimate loss of innocence. Nicky's sexualization, naivety, and the loss of innocence ultimately contributed to her portrayal as sexually promiscuous and a potentially deserving victim at the hands of the Cody family.

### **The Social Effects of *Animal Kingdom***

Using the framework of popular criminology, this paper has analyzed the ways visual media represents, reinforces, and at times contests cultural meanings around crime and gender (Humphries, 2009). Media works to foster attitudes, expectations, and practices that reflect basic social arrangements of gender (Humphries, 2009). These particular sets of atti-

tudes, expectations, and practices help to establish gender norms, which in turn fuel gender stereotypes. However, these attitudes, expectations, and practices are not uniformly accepted by all members of society (Rafter, 2007). Rather, individuals will perceive, interpret, and remember cultural depictions in the media differently, and interpretations will vary over time and space (Rafter, 2007). Popular criminology is concerned with understanding the ways in which media depictions of crime form cultural understandings that become popularized amongst those who consume them. The portrayal of traditional gender roles and stereotypes have historically been anchored in crime films, which can ultimately either subvert or reinforce gender roles in the process (Scheuneman-Scott & Kilty, 2016). In this sense, crime becomes a gendered construct, and such constructs are displayed visually in the media, and then popularized by society.

We argue that the TV crime drama *Animal Kingdom* is an important cultural site where gendered roles and stereotypes are performed. Societal expectations of femininity and masculinity are both reinforced and subverted by the writers, producers, actors, and cultural creators of crime media. Ellen Barkin, who played the character of Smurf, reflected on her portrayal of a female character who departed from cultural expectations around gender:

Every time you have a bad woman in a movie or a show, there's always something in her that has you forgive all the badness, and you feel sorry for her ... I don't want her to be sympathetic. Smurf might've had a very tough life, but I just think she's bad. (Toby, 2018)

Additionally, in an interview with Jonathon Lisco, *Animal Kingdom's* creator, he explained that the unusual gender dynamics are what intrigued him about the original Australian film that made him want to adapt it into a TV series:

When I realized the DNA of the show was really about a provocative, perverse matriarch and the emotionally incestuous hold that she had over her four boys, who drop with a kind of hypersexualized danger, I was in. What's interesting to me is it's this dysfunctional family drama, and the — Smurf — has warped them through love and through some disturbingly leaping boundaries simultaneously in

the way that she's raised them ... So, what I found really riveting was the way in which these boys were both repelled by her attention, but also very much crave it. In the midst of all that psychological and emotional baggage, I thought, "Well, this is a family crime show that's really not about the crimes." (Leeds, 2016)

This statement by the content creator suggests that the goal of *Animal Kingdom* was to subvert traditional gendered constructs. However, how audience members perceive, interpret, and remember cultural depictions in the media will vary (Rafter, 2007). Nevertheless, anecdotal audience data suggest that the subversive performance of gender is not lost on viewers. Viewer reviews and comments from the fan website *TV Fanatic* provide some information about how the general public is consuming and interpreting various gendered themes in *Animal Kingdom*.

Viewer comments reflected a notable gap between creator's intentions and audience reception. A reviewer of Episode 4 stated: "While I appreciated what this show is trying to do in some ways, it's getting old fast. The shock value and the intrigue are wearing off, and most of these characters are totally unlikable" (Sumerel, 2016). Another reviewer of Episode 5 commented: "Generally, I think *Animal Kingdom* is overdoing it when it comes to shock value, going for the raunchy and uncomfortable when it could be focusing more on character development and storytelling" (Sumerel, 2016). Both comments suggest that the motivations of directors, writers, producers, and other content creators are not always taken up or reflected by audiences in the intended ways. Consequently, assessing the social effects of representations is complex, and must attend to the interrelated contexts of production and reception, along with content itself (Valverde, 2006).

Another notable aspect from the fan reviews related to perceptions of the characters and which actions viewers found to be good or bad. For example, a reviewer of Episode 1 stated: "Pope is the batshit crazy one. He's just returned from prison, doesn't seem to trust anyone, and is clearly trying to move in on his nephew's girlfriend. It's not okay" (Sumerel, 2016). Additionally, a review of Episode 3 stated: "And mom? She's basically the worst. Smurf does seem to care for her 'boys' as she so fondly likes to call them, and she believes in loyalty and family. Those are her priorities, but it's also pretty clear that money and power aren't too far behind" (Sumerel, 2016). Reflecting dominant societal

constructions of gender, the reviewer disapproved of Smurf's departure from traditional expectations of motherhood. A review of Episode 8 stated: "I could smack her [Nicky] right in the head for being so stupid. I'm not sure if I believe she slept with Craig, but the idea of it certainly was enough to completely mess with J's mind. Had she not been such a bitch, then maybe they could have run off together" (Babick, 2016). In this example, the reviewer likewise condemns Nicky's apparent sexual promiscuity — behavior counter to ideal womanhood — which in turn sets her up to be a deserving victim. Conversely, Catherine's performance of many traits of the ideal woman did not shield her from criticism by audience members who felt her victimization was also deserved. A reviewer of Episode 9, stated: "I really want to believe Pope was going to give Cath a chance. If she didn't lie to him, maybe she'd still be alive ... I can't say she got what she deserved, but all of her actions were just stupid. She never should have gone to Smurf's to steal money. She should have just left with Lena. It was also pretty dumb for her to seduce Pope to get out of her situation" (Babick, 2016). The reviewer pointed out that Catherine departed from ideal traits of femininity and womanhood when she stole money from Smurf and when she attempted to seduce Pope to save her own life. As a result, despite possessing many qualities that conform to gendered expectations, Catherine was deemed responsible for her own fate, and thus labelled as an unworthy victim. This further suggests that women are held to nearly impossible standards of conduct in order to be deemed worthy victims of violent crime.

This anecdotal look at fan reviews offers insight into how audiences may interpret mediated information in a variety of ways shaped by societal myths or ideology. Although traditional understandings of gender and crime have been established and reproduced through powerful cultural norms and other areas of social life, it remains clear that interpretations still vary by individual, although many seem to conform to cultural gendered stereotypes. Thus, it becomes important to analyze the ways in which certain concepts surrounding crime and gender become popularized through the media as a barometer of shifting societal attitudes and ideology.

## **Conclusion**

Media have historically reflected societal ideas about fundamental social, economic, and political issues, while simultaneously shaping the ways

we think about these issues (Rafter, 2006). As a result, media possesses the power to alter popular opinion on matters concerning crime, deviance, and criminal justice processes as a whole (Fineman & McCluskey, 1997). There is growing awareness that film, TV, and other forms of popular culture contribute to understandings of crime and criminal justice processes (Rafter, 2007). However, our analysis demonstrated that crime media can also shape how we understand issues like identity and gendered power dynamics (see also Zisman Newman, 2020). Using the conceptual lens of popular criminology, this paper analyzed the performance of gender in TNT's crime television series *Animal Kingdom*. We comparatively analyzed the representation of traditional masculine constructs of crime and the performance of gender within this fictional crime drama. The findings suggest that the television series *Animal Kingdom* depicts gender and crime in ways that both conform to and depart from traditional gendered roles, and in doing so may subvert and reinforce longstanding stereotypes about female criminality and violence. Anecdotal data from the fan website *TV Fanatic* suggest that the intentions of directors, writers, producers, and other cultural creators may be taken up by audiences in a variety of ways. Although the media embodies the power to influence popular understandings of crime and criminal justice processes, it is important to note that influence has the potential to flow in both directions, in which "the street scripts the screen, and the screen scripts the street" (Hayward and Young, 2004, p. 259). It is clear that a popular criminological analysis of a TV program like *Animal Kingdom* adds to our understanding of the dynamic interplay between crime and culture.

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