

**This is a self-archived version of an original article. This version may differ from the original in pagination and typographic details.**

**Author(s):** Koistinen, Aino-Kaisa

**Title:** Framing War and the Nonhuman in Science-Fiction Television : The Affective Politics of  
V

**Year:** 2020

**Version:** Published version

**Copyright:** © Author, 2020

**Rights:** CC BY-NC 3.0

**Rights url:** <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/>

**Please cite the original version:**

Koistinen, A.-K. (2020). Framing War and the Nonhuman in Science-Fiction Television : The Affective Politics of V. *Fafnir*, 7(2), 32-48. <http://journal.finfar.org/articles/framing-war-and-the-nonhuman-in-science-fiction-television/>



## Framing War and the Nonhuman in Science-Fiction Television: The Affective Politics of *V*

*Aino-Kaisa Koistinen*

*Abstract:* This article investigates how war between humans and aliens is framed in the original and reimagined versions of the SF television series *V* and the affective responses and ethical considerations that these frames evoke. Inspired by the work of Judith Butler and Sarah Ahmed and by posthumanist thinking, I analyse how SF television takes part in the cultural formation of “livable lives” for both human and nonhuman beings. It is argued that the kinds of violence that art or the media, including fiction, represent matter for the formation of ethical and political responses to violence.

*Keywords:* Livability, affect, aliens, frames of war, science-fiction television, posthumanism

Alien “others” are a common trope in science fiction. Encounters between humans and aliens may be friendly but often lead to conflict and war. The narratives of both the original and the new, or reimagined, version of the American SF television series *V* begin with the arrival of human-like aliens called “the Visitors” on Earth. The aliens pretend to be peaceful, but it is soon discovered that they harbor plans to exploit human beings and Earth’s natural resources. In both versions, this leads to the formation of a human resistance movement that wages war on the alien threat. It is also found out that beneath their artificial human-like skins, the Visitors have reptilian bodies, revealing their alien otherness. The original *V* started as a NBC miniseries in 1983. Its thrilling narrative, filled with political commentary, proved a success, and a sequel entitled *V: The Final Battle* (NBC) was released a year later. These two miniseries were followed by a continuous series *V* (NBC 1984–1985) that did not live up to the ratings or production values of the previous installments, and

only nineteen episodes were broadcast (Copp, 63; Geraghty, 81–84; Johnson-Smith, 120–21). A reimagined version of *V* then aired on ABC from 2009 to 2011 but was cancelled after the second season due to low ratings (Copp 115).

This article takes Judith Butler's notion of "frames of war" as a starting point for an analysis of how the original and reimagined *V* frame their narratives of war while negotiating the question of "livable lives" through the circulation of affective violent content.<sup>1</sup> In *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable*, Butler argues that the media contribute to understandings of war by framing it in a specific manner, such as by circulating discourses that dehumanise the enemy (ix–xix). The dehumanised lives are not considered lives worthy of mourning, protection, or preservation (xxvii). In other words, these kinds of lives are not considered as "livable" (22). "Grievability" becomes the precognition of a livable life that is allowed to continue and prosper, and the lives that are considered "ungrievable" fall in the category of unlivable lives – which, then, justifies war against them (xix). The way that war is framed thus has crucial consequences for the material conditions of human life, making the frames "operations of power" (3–4).

Butler also mentions that fiction has the power to question the acceptance of war and "call for justice and the end of violence" (11). I build on Butler's theory to analyse how fictional narratives participate in the cultural formation of livability. I posit that SF is uniquely suited for the discussion of the material conditions not only of human life but also of nonhuman life, connecting the original and reimagined *V* series to the line of posthumanism that is concerned with the role of the human in constructing livable lives for humans and nonhumans alike, expressed by feminist thinkers such as Cecilia Åsberg and Rosi Braidotti.

I also use Sarah Ahmed's work on the cultural circulation of affects or emotions. As Wetherell (2) notes, affects and emotions are sometimes considered separate, with "affect" referring to bodily sensations that precede interpretation and "emotion" to affects transferred into socio-cultural expression (see also Paasonen, "Resonance"). Ahmed, however, does not make a clear separation between these two concepts, but argues that past affective experiences have an effect on the emotions people experience today – not to mention that sensations are involved in the workings of emotions (*Cultural* 5–8). The aim of this article is thus to emphasise the affective politics of representations: in other words, how affective responses are mediated within specific contexts.

Scholars preoccupied with the notion of affect have tended to eschew representational analysis to focus on the so-called a-signifying bodily intensities (cf. Abel, x–xi; Koivunen; Wetherell). For both Butler and Ahmed, however, affective responses are regulated, circulated, and mediated through cultural practices. This cultural circulation is also political, as it has an effect on how people relate to those they consider other or nonhuman (Ahmed, *Cultural* 4; Butler 39–50, 74–75).<sup>2</sup> The questions asked are: How are livable lives framed

<sup>1</sup> A version of this article appears in my PhD dissertation (Koistinen, *Human Question*, article four), but the text has since been significantly altered.

<sup>2</sup> I have also discussed the circulation of affect in the context of other SF television series (Koistinen, "Konetta"; Hellstrand et al., "Real Humans?"; Koistinen & Mäntymäki). For emotional and embodied responses to SF literature, see Kortekallio, *Reading*.

through the circulation of affective representations of violence? What kinds of cultural connotations, affective responses, and ethical and political considerations does this evoke? For the original version of *V*, the focus is on the first two miniseries, due to their explicit political content and graphic representations of violence. When speaking of “the original *V*”, I thus refer to the first two instalments of the *V* saga and distinguish between them only when necessary.

While analysing the circulation of affect, I am aware that I only have access to my own affective responses, as also noted in previous studies on affect and the media (Koistinen, “Konetta”; Paasonen, “Resonance”; Rossi). Nevertheless, my claim is that the way that affective content is circulated draws attention to certain affective responses. I therefore offer a representational and contextual analysis of the circulation of violent, affective content in the *V* series and complement it with a close examination of the affective responses and ethical considerations evoked by this very circulation.<sup>3</sup>

## Encountering the Alien

Darko Suvin has famously defined SF as a genre that creates imaginative alternatives to empirical reality while retaining connections to it. Through this evocation of cognitive estrangement, SF is not bound to a mimetic representation of the world; this freedom allows the genre’s works to offer imaginative visions of worlds, cultures, and futures (viii, 7–8, 10). This makes SF also a potential platform for imaginative expressions of political views, which also applies to narratives on alien encounters. As Elana Gomel puts it, SF’s alien invasions are often “used as a political allegory to excoriate a *threat du jour*, be it Communism or terrorism” (28).

According to J. P. Telotte, articulating observations on cultural issues is particularly typical for SF television series, partly because of the continuous storylines that allow for ongoing discussions of cultural phenomena (“Introduction” 7). Often these discussions revolve around war and violence, which is framed as a conflict between humans and aliens. SF television is thus a suitable medium for discussing the politics of representation, but it is also a fitting medium for the examination of affect. Sherryl Vint connects the estrangement of audiovisual SF, particularly television, to the “sense of wonder” evoked by audiovisual spectacle. Audiovisual SF therefore engages viewers in cognitive as well as emotional (or affective) and political levels, and the “pleasure potential” of the genre relies on the interplay between these two (“Spectacles”).

One way that the original and reimaged series of *V* draw their viewers into an affective relationship with them is through spectacular visual representations of the alien. These include disturbing scenes in which the Visitors’ human-like skin is torn away, revealing their reptilian bodies. In the 1980s, when the original *V* was produced, experimentation in televisual techniques was increasing, which also meant more-sophisticated visual effects. Jan Johnson-Smith notes that both the original miniseries *V* and *V: The Final Battle* feature visual effects that were quite shocking for the audience of the

<sup>3</sup> On this kind of mediation, see also Cvetkovich; Rossi; and Staiger et al.

1980s, including scenes of the Visitors consuming live rodents. In fact, the *V* series paved the way for more visually spectacular SF television (120–21, 273n1). Through discussions with spectators in conferences and seminars, I have learned that people who watched the series in the 1980s tend to remember the scenes of the Visitors eating rodents and the affects they evoked – a testimony to their affective power. Since the 1980s, computer-generated special effects have evolved rapidly, enabling SF television to incorporate increasingly spectacular visual effects, including visually outstanding aliens (Johnson-Smith 3–8, 57–58; Telotte, *Science Fiction* 38–39). This is visible in the reimagined *V*; for example, in scenes where a Visitor whips out their tail underneath the human disguise. The affects evoked by the *V* narratives are thus not only reliant on cultural allegory or commentary, but also on the wonder evoked by the audiovisual imaginations of the genre.

It has been argued that in comparison to literature, for example, audiovisual productions have the power to affect their viewers more violently with their “visceral immediacy” (Abel 31; see also Clover 129). Writing on film, Stephen Prince argues that violent fiction, even though based on visceral intimacy, requires a sort of emotional and cognitive distance that allows viewers to enjoy violence that they would in reality detest (28–29). In this sense, violent fiction always relies on the interplay of immediacy and estrangement. Following Vint, I would argue that SF television brings another level to this interplay with its tendency toward affective spectacle and estranging world-building. In a sense, speculative narratives that differ from mundane reality are perfect settings for violent content that evokes estrangement. In the *V* series, the spectacle of violence and the spectacle of the alien intertwine, together creating the affective sense of wonder and the cultural commentary of the series. Thus, the series are not only cognitively but also affectively estranging.<sup>4</sup>

## Framing War and the Nonhuman in *V*

The original *V* and the reimagined version both feature violent encounters between humans and nonhumans, yet they stage their alien invasions in somewhat different ways. Ahmed calls emotional or affective connections “attachments” in the sense that human beings become connected to others “through being moved by” their proximity (“Feelings” 27). Emotions also work to align subjects with others while positing them against “other others” (18, 32). Affective responses are, of course, unpredictable, and it cannot be claimed that a specific object or image always engenders a specific affect (Tomkins 74), but for Ahmed they are also a product of cultural processes of circulation, where certain emotions are assigned to certain objects (*Cultural* 7–8). The social and cultural “repetition of signs is what allows others to be attributed with emotional value” (32). Thus, some affective attachments are more probable given their cultural context.

---

<sup>4</sup> Together with Helen Mäntymäki, I have coined the term “affective estrangement” to refer to the affective and cognitive sense of wonder evoked by SF (Koistinen & Mäntymäki). Kaisa Kortekallio also writes about “embodied estrangement” in *Reading Mutant Narratives*, and Essi Varis discusses both the affective and estranging aspects of speculative fiction (“Alien” 87).

Following this logic, the cultural circulation of affectively saturated images is used to evoke attachments with the humans and against the Visitors in *V*. In the original version, the Visitors are equated to tyrannical regimes, occupations, and warmongers, whereas the human resistance fighters are likened to guerrillas fighting against tyrannical regimes (for instance, in the civil wars of Mexico and El Salvador). The Visitors are also clearly aligned with the Second World War and the Nazi regime. They employ propaganda, and, in a direct visual reference to the Nazis, their symbols resemble swastikas. Nazism, in fact, is commonly used as a sign of nonhuman monstrosity in fiction (Gomel 83, 157; Paasonen, *Figures* 32).<sup>5</sup> The references to Nazism are therefore used to affectively align the Visitors to the violent acts committed by Nazis. In a direct comment on the genocide of the Jewish people, the 1983 miniseries even shows the Visitors persecuting and kidnapping scientists and their families to avoid having their reptilian origins revealed. From today's perspective, the persecution of scientists also resonates with the recent discrediting and persecution of scientists in countries such as Turkey.

The connections to Nazism were noticed at the time by contemporary television critics like Kenneth Clark and Jack Thomas, and later research has linked the themes of propaganda and totalitarianism to the anxieties of the Cold War period in the United States (Johnson-Smith 121; Koistinen, "Passing" 252). In fact, it has been argued that the atmosphere of the Cold War has influenced the way aliens have been portrayed in SF in general as an invading, monstrous threat (Geraghty 69; Hill 117). The fact that the Visitors are aliens also evokes associations with discussions of (illegal) immigration in the United States, as the word "alien" commonly refers to an "individual who is not a U.S. citizen or U.S. national" ("Immigration Terms and Definitions Regarding Aliens"). When the original *V* aired in the 1980s, questions of immigration were a highly topical issue in the United States, finally leading to the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) in 1986, which made it illegal to hire illegal immigrants yet granted amnesty to many ("Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA)"). These questions are articulated in the original *V* when an African-American construction worker, Ben (Richard Lawson), wonders whether after having to compete for work with white people and Mexicans he now has to compete with the Visitors as well (*V*, "Part I"). For a viewer watching the series today, these references to immigration easily evoke associations to contemporary affective discussions on immigration circulating in the media, where immigrants are often framed as an invading, alien threat.<sup>6</sup>

Whereas in the original *V* the alien invasion was an external threat drawing on Nazism or fears of Communist invasion, the reimaged version features Visitors that have already infiltrated human societies – resonating with contemporary fears of terrorist infiltration (Koistinen, "Passing" 252; Urbanski 190, 193). In the first episode a link between the Visitors and terrorism is established by the caption "Where were you on 9/11?" displayed in the beginning of the episode, after which the link is made visually when the aliens

<sup>5</sup> Monsters commonly signify the other as a threat in popular culture – and I refer here to this tradition. As a thinking tool and method, the monster can also function as a liminal figure that destabilises boundaries between "us" and "the other" (Hellstrand et al., "Promises").

<sup>6</sup> For more on the framing of immigrants as a threat, see Ahmed, "Feelings"; Ahmed, *Cultural* 46–47.

arrive in spaceships that loom ominously above the skyscrapers of Manhattan. This associates the Visitors with the affective images of 9/11, aligning the aliens expressly to the threat of terrorism, as Copp (118) also notes. The analogy between the Visitors and terrorists is also articulated by one of the characters in the episode. Terrorism, like Nazism in the original series, is thus used as a sign of the monstrous nonhuman, evoking the viewers' affective responses to these real-life phenomena.<sup>7</sup>

The above examples highlight that the way that war is framed as a struggle between human beings and a malevolent nonhuman enemy in both the original and reimagined *V* resonates with Butler's claim that war is justified by a process of presenting entire populations as not quite human; rather, they are a threat to human life (42). The war narratives of *V* thus serve as allegories for times of war in human societies. Film scholar Murray Smith also claims that viewers create allegiances with characters (i.e., orient sympathetically towards them) that they perceive as (more or less) moral (74–75). Therefore, as the humans are represented as morally superior to the Visitors, the viewers are positioned to create allegiances with the human characters. Or, in Ahmed's terms, viewers are aligned with the humans and against the Visitors.<sup>8</sup>

However, both the original and the reimagined *V* also include breaks in these frames. Butler posits that the frames of war must constantly be iterated and reiterated, and that they incorporate "a constant breaking from context, a constant delimitation of new context" (10). These contexts influence the interpretation of the frame: "What is taken for granted in one instance becomes thematized critically or even incredulously in another" (10). In both the original and reimagined *V*, viewers gradually learn that the ranks of the Visitors include dissident proponents of non-violence who disapprove of the war and offer a helping hand to the humans, while humans are shown as engaging in "nonhuman" acts of violence associated with Nazism or terrorism. Thus, references to Nazism and terrorism become thematised differently through their repetition, at some points highlighting the nonhuman nature of the Visitors, yet at others emphasising the lack of morality in the human characters. Following both Smith and Ahmed, this shift in the representation of morality means that the viewers are positioned to become affectively attached to – and aligned with – not only the human characters, but also the nonhuman ones. Hence, both series invite interpretations that question the framing of war based on the simplistic dehumanisation of the enemy (see also Koistinen, "Passing" 259–60). In fact, in 1980s SF films as well as television started to offer aliens that could be either evil or benevolent, which differentiated them from many earlier alien-invasion narratives going back to the 1950s, which mostly portrayed aliens as a malevolent threat (e.g. Geraghty 69). Both the original and the reimagined *V* take part in this

<sup>7</sup> In "Passing for Human in Science Fiction", I have discussed how the original and reimagined series resonate with questions of racial othering, which contributes to their affective power. The aliens that infiltrate human societies invite the question: what kind of bodies can pass for human – and why? On passing for human in SF, see also Hellstrand.

<sup>8</sup> Smith also uses the terms "alignment" and "attachment" in reference to emotional responses to fictional characters (74–75). By "alignment", he refers to the way viewers are positioned to characters in terms of access to their thoughts and inner states. This is established by "attachment" – the way the narrative revolves around a specific character. In this article I follow Ahmed's definitions of these terms.

trend. While doing so, they also make the so-called *threat du jour*, be it terrorism or Communism, seem a more complex issue.

What differentiates the original and reimagined *V* from “non-speculative” war narratives is that they do not only frame the enemy as allegorically or metaphorically alien, but imagine a war between humans and alien beings. Thus, it is relevant to analyse the series also in the context of broader discussions on human-nonhuman relations, such as posthumanism. SF’s potential to discuss questions relevant to posthumanism has been previously discussed at length (e.g. Badmington; Graham; Gomel; Hellstrand; Koistinen, *Human Question*; Kortekallio, *Reading*; Vint, *Bodies*). What makes SF a suitable genre for discussing multiple others is specifically its speculative nature, which allows for the creation of multiple worlds and futures inhabited by various kinds of creatures.

As the boundary between humans and Visitors are blurred, the humanist frames of how we distinguish “the Other” also become problematic (Koistinen, “Passing”). Given a posthumanist analysis, the Visitors’ treatment of humans as a resource to be exploited also evokes allusions to the ways humans treat other species. In a clear analogy to the commodification of nonhuman animals, justified through their difference from humans, in the original series the Visitors even harvest humans for food. According to Sherryl Vint, SF’s human-eating aliens reflect the anxieties in humans’ relationship with other animals (*Animal Alterity* 21, 24). These anxieties resonate with Donna J. Haraway’s concerns in *When Species Meet* (69; see also Vint, *Animal* 28) regarding how boundaries between livable and killable species are drawn. Pets, laboratory animals, and farm animals are treated differently from one another. In this sense, the Visitors, here framed as the unethical or immoral nonhumans, only highlight the unethical actions of human beings towards other animals.

## Affective Responses and the Limits of Response-ability

In what follows, I will delve deeper into the analysis of the circulation of affect by focusing on scenes describing the graphic torture or misconduct of prisoners, and my affective responses to them. Following Katariina Kyrölä (1–6), I consider affective engagement with the original and reimagined *V* as a complex relationship comprising the viewer/researcher, the audiovisual content, and the cultural and theoretical context that frames the viewing experience (see also Koistinen and Mäntymäki). When referring to “the viewer”, I am thus referring to my own affective responses and how they become constructed in this relationship. Both the original and the reimagined *V* feature scenes of the Visitors torturing human prisoners. In the original, torture is shown explicitly in “Part Two” of *V: The Final Battle*, where the Visitors subject a human, Julie Parrish (Faye Grant), to the so-called *conversion process*, a form of extreme psychological torture. Following Ahmed, the episode is constructed in a manner that evokes affective responses to the pain of the tortured Julie, affectively aligning the viewer with the human character and against the alien Visitors. The viewers see Julie standing in the middle of a room, while her tormentors, including the chief antagonist of the series, the Visitor Diana (Jane Badler), watch her behind a one-way window. Close-ups of Julie’s distorted face are used to focus the viewers’ attention on her agony. She is also shown sweating,

shaking, and screaming in pain. The camera divides viewers' attention between the agonised Julie and Diana, who remains unmoved by Julie's pain. Indeed, lack of emotion is often used as a feature that differentiates humans from nonhuman monsters in fiction (Paasonen, *Figures* 32). To highlight this, the Visitors are visually aligned with nonhuman beasts; in this case, Julie hallucinates that she is being attacked by a giant lizard.

These images and sounds thus position the viewer in close proximity to Julie's affective experiences, making it hard not to respond to her pain – to become attached to her and to feel uncomfortable in the face of her treatment. According to Murray Smith, in addition to getting to know a character's moral compass, having access to a character's emotional states and thoughts are key elements of engaging with them (74–75, 84–85). Literary scholar Suzanne Keen maintains that knowing the inner thoughts and emotions of characters invite empathy towards them, possibly “changing attitudes, and even predisposing readers to altruism” (212).<sup>9</sup> Instead of empathy, I nevertheless prefer to discuss affective responses in Ahmed's terms as attachments. Returning to the posthumanist framework, empathy raises questions of human supremacy and the problematics of universal recognition of sameness. According to Gomel, human rights are based on the assumption that humans possess some unifying essence that forms the grounds for universal human rights, and empathy has been considered as one of these unifying factors. Gomel calls this the “Golden Rule” that relies on “human nature” as the basis of empathy (24–25) and argues that alien encounters in SF often reinforce this rule (28). I claim that the *V* narratives also offer breaks in the Golden Rule – or, at the very least, my reading of them offers a potentially estranging viewpoint to it.

This discussion now returns to the frames of war. In the violent scenes analysed above, Julie is construed as a grievable life, someone whose pain is worthy of mourning. The Visitors are framed as the nonhuman threat, and the viewer is positioned to root for the human resistance. The fact that Julie has been introduced to the viewers as a moral protagonist early on in the series may have considerable effect on the intensity of their responses to her torture. Jason Mittell calls the way viewers build knowledge of characters and events over the course of a television series “serial memory”. Drawing on Smith, Mittell argues that these memories have an effect on viewers' emotional engagement with characters throughout a continuous television narrative (156). To put it simply, continuous television series enable viewers to form emotional bonds and affective attachments with characters as, over time, they come to know and feel for the characters (50–51, 127–32; see also Geraghty 125–26; Keen 217). This resonates with Ahmed's claim that affective responses are guided by earlier experiences (*Cultural* 5–8). Following Ahmed's argument, then, if viewers already have a strong affective attachment to the character, they are likely to respond more strongly to violence affecting that particular character. As Susanna Paasonen writes, “The human body is shaped by historically layered skills, experiences, and sensations that bring forth particular ways of relating to other bodies and reverberating with them” (“Grains” 360). I suggest that this affective engagement with serial television could be called affective or bodily serial memory.

<sup>9</sup> For criticism of literature as evoking empathy, see Merja Polvinen and Howard Sklar in “Mimetic and Synthetic Views Of Characters.”

In the reimagined *V*, there are even more scenes of the Visitors torturing or medically examining humans using methods such as the insertion of long needles into their bodies while the humans scream in pain. The most graphic scenes of the Visitors torturing humans appear in the episodes “Pound of Flesh” (season 1, episode 6) and “John May” (season 1, episode 7), in which the Visitors torture Georgie (David Richmond-Peck). Like Julie, Georgie is a character already familiar to the viewers – although he has not been part of the series from the very start – and his torture is likely to evoke strong affects. Similarly to Julie’s torture, close-ups of Georgie’s distorted face are used to focus the viewers’ attention on his pain. Like Julie, he is also heard screaming in pain. These elements draw viewers close to Georgie, affectively attaching them to him and his pain. The viewers are, again, aligned with the human being and against the violent Visitors. Georgie’s friends are also shown mourning for him as he eventually dies. As Mittell notes, “on-screen relationships guide the viewer how to feel toward a character” (144). Like Julie, Georgie is represented as a grievable life – a life worthy of mourning – and the viewers are positioned to feel for his suffering.

Looking again at the circulation of affective responses, in the scenes showing Julie and Georgie being tortured, the viewers are only shown violence being performed by nonhumans and suffered by humans, making it possible for the viewers to respond only to human suffering, not to nonhuman suffering. However, Georgie is finally killed by a Visitor who wants to save him from further suffering, suggesting that the Visitors are capable of ethical actions. Indeed, some Visitors consider the treatment of humans wrong, but it is explained away by the fact that they have only learned to disapprove of torture through contamination by human emotion; again, this establishes humans as morally superior to the nonhumans. True to the SF tradition of portraying aliens as unemotional monsters, most of the Visitors are also shown to be unaffected by the pain of tortured human beings. The expression of emotion by some of the Visitors nevertheless creates a break in the frames that posit the Visitors as malevolent monsters. This seemingly also creates a break in the Golden Rule: if nonhumans can become capable of expressing “human emotion”, perhaps empathy is not exclusively a human trait. Braidotti nevertheless notes that extending the capacity of empathy or morality to nonhumans only admits to “benevolently extending the hegemonic category, the human, towards the others” (79). Thus, the break in the frames of war is problematic in a posthumanist sense, since the Visitors are only established as sympathetic due to their “human-like” actions.

The frames of war and the boundary between humans and nonhumans start to break even more, as both the original and reimagined versions include scenes of human violence and experimentation on Visitor bodies. In *V: The Final Battle* (Part One), for instance, humans conduct experiments on their Visitor prisoner Willie (Robert Englund); this establishes a powerful analogy to the treatment of laboratory animals. Although Willie’s treatment is not as grueling as Julie’s (and he even volunteers for the experiments), the overt references to Nazism in the series liken Willie’s treatment to the Nazis’ violent experiments on prisoners. Human violence is nevertheless downplayed: Willie is not hurt by the experiments because the Visitors have been inoculated against all Earth diseases. The humans, however, are unsure whether the inoculation is truly effective before conducting the tests. Thus, even though the experiments

do not appear harmful, they leave the viewer feeling uneasy. Willie has been a regular and sympathetic character from the beginning, and viewers have had time to bond with him during the course of the series. On the level of the narrative, Willie has also formed bonds with the human characters, and some of them protest against the experiments. Here, Willie's morality or likeness to humans does not seem to matter, but he is considered to be a test object because of his nonhuman nature, evoking the treatment of nonhuman animals. The viewer is nevertheless supported by the narrative to become affectively attached to Willie, the other, and to view him as a life worth grieving.

Another powerful scene in *V: The Final Battle* (Part Three) involves a human woman, Robin (Blair Tefkin), killing a male Visitor named Brian (Peter Nelson) by inserting lethal gas into a chamber in which he is held – yet another blatant reference to Nazism. This instance of violence is “justified” by the fact that Brian has seduced and impregnated Robin, which evokes rape as a tactic in war. Robin's actions therefore also enact a typical rape-revenge narrative. Robin has also been one of the protagonists throughout the series, and the viewer has been given the chance to witness her horror at the discovery of being pregnant with an alien fetus. That said, even though the narrative supports affective attachment to Robin by highlighting Brian's immoral actions, the violence of the scene complicates this: the viewer cannot help but feel uncomfortable watching the alien suffer and die in the chamber.

In the reimaged series, scenes of torture are constructed in a manner that evokes increasingly complex affective responses to characters. This links the series to the trend of complex, often antiheroic and ambiguous characters that Mittell (142–63) identifies in contemporary television series – such as the hardboiled agents and darker heroes discussed by Copp (109–10). In comparison to the original *V*, the reimaged version also features more graphic violence performed by human protagonists. The most powerful scene appears in the episode “Laid Bare” (season 2, episode 3) as a Visitor named Malik (Rekha Sharma) is tortured by the human resistance. The narrative initially positions the viewer to become aligned with the human characters. Malik's torture is ordered by Erica (one of the protagonists introduced already in the first episode), with whom the viewer has had ample time to bond with. Malik, in contrast, has appeared in relatively few episodes. The viewers who have followed the series also know that Malik has previously tried to kill Erica, evoking affective serial memories of Malik as violent and immoral. Moreover, it is explained that Erica's motive behind the torture is to protect her son, who is in danger because of the Visitors; thus explaining the (relative) morality behind her actions while also giving the viewers access to her emotions towards her son.

In this sense, the series does not seem to construct Malik's life as a grievable, but rather as collateral damage in the human efforts against the overpowering enemy. As I've noted previously (Koistinen, “Passing” 256–58), the form of Malik's torture, skinning, also emphasises her otherness, reminding us that the enemies simply are not human – and, perhaps, do not need to be treated the same as human beings.<sup>10</sup> The viewer is also presented with cues of Malik's nonhumanness as she hisses and growls like a nonhuman animal. Finally, Malik dies as result of the torture as, unlike in the original, skinning

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion on Malik's torture in relation to grievability, race and the treatment of prisoners in Abu Ghraib, see Koistinen, “Passing”.

causes death in the reimagined version. Grievable or not, Malik's life in ends up not being livable.

When I watch the episode, however, I find it hard not to respond to Malik's pain, and not to feel uncomfortable in the face of her torture. As the final scene of Malik's torture progresses, viewers are shown close-ups of her bloodied face and forced to listen to her scream in agony. This draws them into visceral proximity with the on-screen violence. Melancholy music plays in the background, contributing to the affective mood. In my reading, this circulation of affective sounds and images thus posits Malik as grievable. The acts of violence themselves are conducted by a Visitor called Ryan (Morris Chestnut), who collaborates with the human resistance, and a human called Hobbes (Charles Mesure). Neither one seems moved by Malik's pain; this portrays both humans and nonhumans as equally capable of violence against the SF stereotype of nonhumans as unemotional and violent monsters. Erica and another human member of the resistance, in contrast, appear to feel uneasy with the torture. For Heather Urbanski, Erica's approval of Malik's skinning denotes the justification of the violent acts conducted by "good" people" (192). Despite this, I claim that the uneasy feelings expressed by these human characters may also complicate the viewers' alignment with humans and against aliens, as they invite the viewers to feel for the torture of the nonhuman other.

For Butler, apprehension of the equal vulnerability of "us" and "the enemy" may lead to the questioning of the norms and conditions that determine what kinds of lives are considered grievable and, thus, meet the conditions of a livable life (4–5). By circulating only certain kinds of images and discourses, the media thus limit not only viewers' options for affective responses but also the kinds of social critique to which these responses might give rise (29, 47). Building on Butler, Sasha Torres posits that representations of war in television fiction "seek to mass-produce" affects in the viewers (50). Series that do not represent torture as justified violence call for complex, even counter-violent responses in viewers (61–62). I would not go as far as to say that the *V* narratives simply "mass-produce affect", yet I would claim that although in both the original and reimagined versions human violence is usually given more justification than the violence perpetrated by the Visitors, their violent scenes also make the construction of a moral humanity and an immoral alien threat a complex and often conflicting process. The frames of war where "others" are established as the ungrievable and unlivable enemy therefore become open to question, and thus invite attitudes that oppose violence towards "the nonhuman". What is different in the reimagined version is that humans are shown using even more extreme forms of violence than in the original version, making alignment with human characters even more complicated.

## Suffering Matters

Within the context of posthumanism, there are limitations to the ethical responses evoked by violence in the original and reimagined *V*, as both series leave out encounters with beings whose suffering humans cannot recognise. Gomel argues that SF can offer representations of transformative ethics if humans accept the otherness of the aliens and choose to act compassionately towards them, even when it seems inconceivable to judge them by humanist

ethics (213). Thus, the original and reimagined *V* are limited due to their emphasis on sameness: the viewers are mostly invited to feel for the nonhuman due to their similarity to human beings. Perhaps the closest viewers may come to feeling the kind of compassion that Gomel describes is at the death of the Visitor Brian, who has been represented as morally questionable, yet whose pain is difficult to escape. Yet, it can be claimed that even Brian's suffering relies on the recognition of sameness as basis of empathy (in line with the mirror-neurons theory discussed by, e.g., Braidotti 77). Moreover, Braidotti notes that the idea of mutual vulnerability creates a negative connection between humans and nonhumans, "which is itself a consequence of human actions upon the environment" (79).

Indeed, if humans are attuned to interpret the actions of fictional characters by the same schemata used to interpret those of humans (i.e. morality), are there any possibilities to capture nonhuman experiences in fiction? As Essi Varis writes, even though there are "vast nonhuman domains" that always escape representation, speculative fiction can be a reminder that these limitations exist and invite readers and viewers to wonder about them ("Alien" 105). Following Varis, the aforementioned limitations do not wholly diminish the potential of violent fiction to challenge readers and viewers to think and feel with others, as it can affectively highlight the very limits of human "response-ability" (Haraway, *Species* 88) to others – or, in Butler's terms, invite viewers to apprehend them.<sup>11</sup> Apprehension, indeed, serves as a critique for recognition, as it refers to "marking, registering, acknowledging without full cognition" (Butler 5). In my posthumanist reading, the *V* narratives thus evoke the following question: What should ethical encounters between humans and "their others" be based on, if the recognition of the sameness or difference between humans and nonhumans turns out to be false? Placing emphasis on the constructed and unstable nature of humanity remains important in posthumanist thought, and SF imaginaries often highlight this very aspect of humanity (see also Badmington 150–51; Koistinen, "Passing"; Koistinen, "Konetta"). The sameness between the Visitors and the humans also serves as a reminder of the fact that humans do not always extend ethical treatment even to those nonhumans whose pain and suffering they are able to recognise.

Marietta Radomska writes, "Ethics are not sets of given principles, but instead, emerge from within and are shaped through particular ... encounters and situations"; the potential of art, then, lies in its capacity to affect "us in the ways that interfere in and change our perceptions" (228). Readers' and viewers' affective attachments to fictional beings thus not only resemble the way they encounter beings outside of fiction but open up their imagination for the ethical treatment of others also outside of fiction. This makes fictional narratives important objects of research when studying the formulation of livability in contemporary contexts.

In this article, I have argued that by their circulation of affective content, the original and reimagined *V* relate to pressing questions on how lives are framed as livable or unlivable. When I respond to the violence depicted in the *V* narratives, what is at play is a sort of apprehension of the equal vulnerability of my body and the fictional bodies on screen. This is not to say that I, or other

<sup>11</sup> In *Reading Mutant Narratives*, Kortekallio discusses at length how the narrative means of SF literature can have an effect on the thinking and feeling with others.

viewers for that matter, confuse the characters with actual living beings, but that viewer/reader/researcher can have powerful emotional engagements with characters.<sup>12</sup> In their circulation of affect, the original and reimagined *V* also use the cognitive estrangement and affective sense of wonder typical of the SF genre, as well as its tendency toward political commentary, and the continuity of serial narratives to engage audiences and to affectively attach them to characters.

By not limiting their representations of violence and suffering to either side of the conflict, the *V* series invoke complex affective responses to violence conducted during war, as well as broader contemplations on human relations to various nonhumans. Thus, these series resonate with posthumanist concerns and encourage reflection on the ethics of human-nonhuman relations. Although the *V* narratives might not be able to completely break from their humanist frames, the negotiations of “similarity” and “difference” for the Visitors not only reaffirms humanist ideals but also highlights the inconsistencies and ethical problems behind humanist frames.

Keen notes that when “texts invite readers to feel, they also stimulate readers’ thinking” (212) – and this could, of course, also be true for audiovisual fiction. Perhaps, then, fiction that can mobilise people to feel for/with others also mobilises them to consider their ethical responsibility towards these others. The affective politics of fiction are therefore worthy of attention. While affective responses are unpredictable and elusive, what kinds of representations or imaginations of violence the media offers for audiences to respond to in the first place does matter.

## Acknowledgements

I am thankful to Kaisa Kortekallio, Line Henriksen, and my colleagues at the research seminar for Contemporary Culture (University of Jyväskylä) for their comments on this article.

*Biography:* Aino-Kaisa Koistinen (PhD in Contemporary Culture, Title of Docent in Media Culture) works as a postdoctoral researcher in Contemporary Culture at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. She has studied a variety of media texts ranging from European policy documents to science fiction television and transmedia storyworlds. Koistinen is the chair of the Finnish Society for Science Fiction and Fantasy Research, a member of The Monster Network, an affiliate member of the Posthumanities Hub at Linköping University, and the School of Resource Wisdom (University of Jyväskylä).

## Works cited

Abel, Marco. *Violent Affect: Literature, Cinema, and Critique after Representation*. U of Nebraska P, 2007.

---

<sup>12</sup> For a thorough discussion on engaging with human and nonhuman characters, see Varis, *Graphic*.

- 
- Ahmed, Sara. "Collective Feelings: Or the Impressions Left by Others." *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 21, no. 2, 2004, pp. 25–42.
- . *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh UP, 2004.
- Åsberg, Cecilia. "The Timely Ethics of Posthumanist Gender Studies." *Feministische Studien*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2013, pp. 7–12.
- Badmington, Neil. *Alien Chic: Posthumanism and the Other Within*. Routledge, 2004.
- Braidotti, Rosi. *The Posthuman*. Polity, 2013.
- Butler, Judith. *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* Verso, 2010.
- Clark, Kenneth. "'V': NBC Brings Sci-Fi to the Small Screen." *Philadelphia Daily News*, 29 Apr. 1983. ProQuest.
- Clover, Carol J. "Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film." *Screening Violence*, edited by Stephen Prince, Rutgers UP, 2000, pp. 125–174.
- Copp, Dan. *Fascist Lizards from Outer Space: The Politics, Literary Influences and Cultural History of Kenneth Johnson's V*. McFarland, 2017.
- Cvetkovich, Anne. *Mixed Feelings: Feminism, Mass Culture, and Victorian Sensationalism*. Rutgers UP, 1992.
- Geraghty, Lincoln. *American Science Fiction Film and Television*. Berg, 2009.
- Graham, Elaine L. *Representations of the Post/human: Monsters, Aliens and Others in Popular Culture*. Rutgers UP, 2002.
- Gomel, Elana. *Science Fiction, Alien Encounters, and the Ethics of Posthumanism: Beyond the Golden Rule*. Palgrave, 2014.
- Haraway, Donna J. *When Species Meet*. U of Minnesota P, 2008.
- Hellstrand, Ingvil. *Passing as Human: Posthuman Worldings at Stake in Contemporary Science Fiction*. PhD thesis, U of Stavanger, 2015.
- Hellstrand, Ingvil, et al. "Promises, Monsters and Methodologies: The Ethics, Politics and Poetics of the Monstrous." *Promises of Monsters*, special issue of *Somatechnics*, vol. 8 no. 2, 2018, pp. 143–162, doi: 10.3366/soma.2018.0247.
- . "Real Humans? Affective Imaginaries of the Human and Its Others in the Swedish TV-series *Äkta människor*." *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, vol. 9, no. 4, 2019, pp. 515–32.

- “Immigration Terms and Definitions Regarding Aliens.” *IRS*, [www.irs.gov/Individuals/International-Taxpayers/Immigration-Terms-and-Definitions-Involving-Aliens](http://www.irs.gov/Individuals/International-Taxpayers/Immigration-Terms-and-Definitions-Involving-Aliens). Accessed 6 August 2014.
- “Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA).” *Boston University Human Resources*, [www.bu.edu/hr/policies/federal-and-state-laws/immigration-reform-and-control-act-irca/](http://www.bu.edu/hr/policies/federal-and-state-laws/immigration-reform-and-control-act-irca/). Accessed 6 August 2014.
- “John May.” *V*, directed by Jonathan Frakes, season 1, episode 7, ABC, 13 Apr. 2010.
- Johnson-Smith, Jan. *American Science Fiction TV: Star Trek, Stargate and Beyond*. I. B. Tauris, 2005.
- Keen, Suzanne. “A Theory of Narrative Empathy.” *Narrative*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2006, pp. 207–36.
- Koistinen, Aino-Kaisa. *The Human Question in Science Fiction Television: (Re)Imagining Humanity in Battlestar Galactica, Bionic Woman and V*. 2015. University of Jyväskylä, PhD dissertation.
- . “Konetta ei voi raiskata? Seksuaalinen ja sukupuolittunut (väki)valta ja ihmisen kaltaiset koneet tieteistelevisiosarjoissa.” *Sukupuoli ja väkivalta – lukemisen etiikkaa ja politiikkaa*, edited by Sanna Karkulehto and Leena-Maija Rossi, SKS, 2017, pp. 75–94.
- . “Passing for Human in Science Fiction: Comparing the TV Series *Battlestar Galactica* and *V*.” *NORA – Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, vol. 19, no. 4, 2011, pp. 249–63.
- Koistinen, Aino-Kaisa, and Helen Mäntymäki. “Affective Estrangement and Ecological Destruction in TV Crime Series *Fortitude*.” *Mobility and Transgression in Contemporary Crime Narratives*, edited by Helen Mäntymäki, Maarit Piipponen, and Marinella Rodi-Risberg, Palgrave MacMillan, 2020, pp. 261–277.
- Koivunen, Anu. “An Affective Turn? Reimagining the Subject of Feminist Theory.” *Working with Affect in Feminist Readings: Disturbing Differences*, edited by Marianne Liljeström and Susanna Paasonen, Routledge, 2010, pp. 8–28.
- Kortekallio, Kaisa. “Becoming-instrument: Thinking with Jeff VanderMeer’s *Annihilation* and Timothy Morton’s *Hyperobjects*.” *Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman and Posthuman in Literature and Culture*, edited by Sanna Karkulehto, Aino-Kaisa Koistinen, and Essi Varis, Routledge, 2020, pp. 57–75.
- Kortekallio, Kaisa. *Reading Mutant Narratives: The Bodily Experientiality of Contemporary Ecological Science Fiction*. 2020. University of Helsinki, PhD dissertation.

- 
- Kyrölä, Katariina. *The Weight of Images: Affect, Body Image and Fat in the Media*. Ashgate, 2014.
- “Laid Bare.” *V*, directed by David Barrett, season 2, episode 3, ABC, 28 Feb. 2011.
- Mittell, Jason. *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*. New York UP, 2015.
- Paasonen, Susanna. *Figures of Fantasy: Internet, Women, and Cyberdiscourse*. Peter Lang, 2005.
- . “Grains of Resonance: Affect, Pornography and Visual Sensation.” *Somatechnics*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2013, pp. 351–68.
- “Part I.” *V*, directed by Kenneth Johnson, NBC, 1 May 1983.
- “Part One.” *V: The Final Battle*, directed by Richard T. Heffron, NBC, 6 May 1984.
- “Part Two.” *V: The Final Battle*, directed by Richard T. Heffron, NBC, 7 May 1984.
- “Part Three.” *V: The Final Battle*, directed by Richard T. Heffron, NBC, 8 May 1984.
- Polvinen, Merja, and Howard Sklar. “Mimetic and Synthetic Views Of Characters: How Readers Process ‘People’ in Fiction.” *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2019, pp. 1–15.
- “Pound of Flesh.” *V*, directed by Dean White, season 1, episode 6, ABC, 6 Apr. 2010.
- Prince, Stephen. “Graphic Violence in the Cinema: Origins, Aesthetics, and Social Effects.” *Screening Violence*, edited by Prince, Rutgers UP, 2000, pp. 1–44.
- Radomska, Marietta. “Promises of Non/Living Monsters and Uncontainable Life.” *Somatechnics*, vol. 8, no.2, 2018, pp. 215–31.
- Rossi, Leena-Maija. “Daughters of Privilege: Class, Sexuality, Affect and *The Gilmore Girls*.” *Working with Affect in Feminist Readings: Disturbing Differences*, edited by Marianne Liljeström and Susanna Paasonen, Routledge, 2010, pp. 85–98.
- Smith, Murray. *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema*. Clarendon Press, 1995.
- Staiger, Janet, Ann Cvetkovich, and Ann Reynolds, eds. *Political Emotions*. Routledge, 2010.

- Suvin, Darko. *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and Discourse of a Literary Genre*. Yale UP, 1979.
- Telotte, J.P. "Introduction: The Trajectory of Science Fiction Television." *The Essential Science Fiction Television Reader*, edited by Telotte, UP of Kentucky, 2008, pp. 1–34.
- . *Science Fiction TV*. Routledge, 2014.
- Thomas, Jack. "An NBC Treat for Sci-Fi Lovers." *Boston Globe*, 30 Apr. 1983. ProQuest.
- Tomkins, Silvan. *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness: The Complete Edition*. With the editorial assistance of Carol P. Bertram. Singer, 2008.
- Torres, Sasha. "Televising Guantánamo: Transmissions of Feeling during the Bush Years." *Political Emotions*, edited by Janet Staiger, Ann Cvetkovich, and Ann Reynolds, Routledge, 2010, pp. 45–65.
- Urbanski, Heather. *The Science Fiction Reboot: Canon, Innovation and Fandom in Refashioned Franchises*. McFarland, 2013.
- Varis, Essi. "Alien Overtures: Speculating about Nonhuman Experiences with Comic Book Characters." *Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman and Posthuman in Literature and Culture*, edited by Sanna Karkulehto, Aino-Kaisa Koistinen, and Essi Varis, Routledge, 2020, pp. 79–107.
- Varis, Essi. *Graphic Human Experiments: Frankensteinian Cognitive Logics of Characters in Vertigo Comics and Beyond*. Jyväskylä UP, 2019.
- Vint, Sherryl. *Animal Alterity: Science Fiction and the Question of the Animal*. Liverpool UP, 2014.
- . *Bodies of Tomorrow: Technology, Subjectivity, Science Fiction*. U of Toronto P, 2007.
- . "Spectacles and Seriality: The Entwined Pleasure Potential of Science Fiction Television." *Deletion*, 30 Aug. 2013, [www.deletionscifi.org/episodes/episode-1/spectacles-and-seriality-the-entwined-pleasure-potential-of-science-fiction-television/](http://www.deletionscifi.org/episodes/episode-1/spectacles-and-seriality-the-entwined-pleasure-potential-of-science-fiction-television/). Accessed 10 July 2019.
- Wetherell, Margaret. *Affect and Emotion: A New Social Science Understanding*. Sage, 2012.