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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Navigating nuclear narratives in contemporary television: The BBC's *Vigil*

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Abstract

This article explores the BBC television drama *Vigil* (2021) as a significant site for the construction of public knowledge about nuclear weapons. In doing so, it extends beyond discourse-oriented approaches to explore how nuclear discourses manifest in visual communication, everyday encounters, and popular imagination. In a close reading of *Vigil*, this article questions concepts of security, peace, and deterrence, revealing how the series (occasionally) challenges conventional discourses while reproducing gendered and racialised representations of nuclear weapons politics. The exploration asks questions of responsibility for nuclear decision-making, the portrayal of anti-nuclear activists, and the depiction of nuclear weapons as agents of both peace and destruction. While the BBC series reproduces existing (and problematic) discourses, it also provides a 'thinking space' for critical engagement. Amid the current geopolitical landscape, this article emphasises the urgency of studying contemporary representations of nuclear weapons and the need for scholarship that challenges traditional Cold War perspectives.

Keywords: nuclear weapons; popular culture; television; security studies; discourse; feminism

Introduction

BBC's Vigil as a site of public knowledge about nuclear weapons

BBC's television drama *Vigil* (2021) is set aboard a Trident Vanguard Class nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine, fictionally named *Vigil*. In the English language, 'vigil' has two important meanings. First, to keep vigil is to watch and remain alert – traits important in protecting against enemy attack. Second, to host a vigil is to host a still and peaceful demonstration, often acknowledging a loss. Taken seriously as a site of British nuclear weapons politics, this paper explores this paradox of watchfulness: at once, to watch is to be powerful and offer protection, and at the same time to watch is to be powerless and see loss. *Vigil* personifies and genders the boat: it is *her* name. The titular lexical choice exemplifies the dual nature of narrative about nuclear weapons: protecting human life, while able to destroy it.

As a police procedural drama, *Vigil* centres the police and their investigations, which come to intertwine with the Royal Navy, politicians, and anti-nuclear activists. *Vigil* represents an important site of public knowledge about nuclear weapons. Dramas reveal 'stories about ourselves, and others, that nurture the public imagination and offer significant resources for making sense of the world and for organising our feelings in relation to it'.[1] This paper demonstrates how *Vigil* reproduces (and occasionally problematises) status quo assumptions about deterrence, security, and peace.

[1]Kay Richardson and John Corner, 'Assessing television's political dramas', *Sociology Compass*, 6:12 (2012), pp. 923–936.

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Analysing popular cultural artefacts, such as *Vigil*, can reveal how assumptions about nuclear weapons and war are naturalised and depoliticised in everyday encounters. Deconstructing these encounters can expose tensions in the nuclear status quo, as well as the gendered and racialised processes of nuclear knowledge production. This paper is not claiming to present the best, only, or most 'true' analysis of *Vigil* – it cannot – rather, following the 'cultural turn' in International Relations, its value is in revealing and discussing discourses that are so widely reproduced that their political (and often problematic) nature is not easily recognisable.

Vigil attracted an audience of 13.4 million viewers,[2] making it the most-watched new drama since the BBC's *Bodyguard* in 2018. Like *Vigil, Bodyguard* (2018) also centred a fictional intersection between the police, the military, and international politics. Scholarly analysis of *Bodyguard* within the context of counterterrorism has revealed important insights into the role of popular television drama in the construction of British military identities[3] and British whiteness.[4] Since the war on terror, scholars of popular culture and world politics have turned significant attention towards representations of terrorist threat.[5] That this work has provided insightful contributions to Critical Security Studies demonstrates the importance of expanding the study of popular culture into wider security discourses, beyond that of terrorism. Indeed, in the current geopolitical landscape, renewing scholarly attention to nuclear weapons politics is urgent.

The lack of contemporary scholarly attention given to nuclear weapons risks presenting nuclear issues as issues of the past, confined to the Cold War. Even scholarly work produced after the 'end' of the Cold War looks back to popular culture produced during the Cold War.[6] This hindsight bias ignores the fact that every nuclear weapon state is modernising or expanding its nuclear arsenal and, as former US Secretary of Defense William Perry puts it, 'we are at greater danger of a nuclear catastrophe today than ever before'.[7] There is a significant gap in our knowledge about contemporary representations of nuclear weapons and war, as well as the significance of these representations for contemporary nuclear politics. BBC's *Vigil* provides an opportunity to return to the nuclear issue in a way that asks questions about the current cultural moment, rather than looking back to the Cold War. We are now entering a period in which deliberate nuclear war seems 'more plausible' than at any time in the past 30 years; yet most of the major works on the representation of nuclear weapons (and war) date from, or deal with, the Cold War period. As a result of this focus on Cold War popular culture, our understanding of representations of nuclear weapons and war is largely outdated – unresponsive to the current political moment, changing state relations, upgraded weapons technologies, and new artefacts of popular culture. In taking popular culture

[2]BBC Media Centre, 'BBC's Vigil is the UK's most watched new drama in three years', (5 October 2021), available at: {https://www.bbc.com/mediacentre/2021/vigil-ratings/}.

[3]Katy Parry, 'Representing public service and post-militariness in *Bodyguard* (BBC, 2018)', *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, 20:2 (2022), pp. 169–93.

[4]Louise Pears, 'Protecting whiteness: Counter-terrorism, and British identity in the BBC's *Bodyguard*', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* (2022), pp. 1–22.

[5]Jack Holland, '"When you think of the Taliban, think of the Nazis": Teaching Americans "9/11" in NBC's *The West Wing*', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 40:1 (2011), pp. 85–106; Nick Robinson, 'Have you won the war on terror? Military videogames and the state of American exceptionalism', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 43:2 (2015), pp. 450–70; Louise Pears, 'Military masculinities on television: *Who Dares Wins*', *NORMA* 17:1 (2021), pp. 1–16; Louise Pears, 'Protecting whiteness'; Katy Parry, 'Representing public service and post-militariness'.

[6]Alan Nadel, *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995); Adam Piette, *Literary Cold War, 1945 to Vietnam* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009); Mark Carroll, *Music and Ideology in Cold War Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Woody Haut, *Pulp Culture: Hardboiled Fiction and the Cold War* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1995); Thomas Schaub, *American Fiction in the Cold War* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991); Joyce Evans, *Celluloid Mushrooms: Hollywood and the Atomic Bomb* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998); Mick Broderick and Robert Jacobs, 'Nuke York, New York: Nuclear holocaust in the American imagination from Hiroshima to 9/11', *The Asia-Pacific Journal* (2012), pp. 1–14; Mick Broderick, 'Surviving Armageddon: Beyond the imagination of disaster', *Science Fiction Studies* (1993), pp. 362–382.

[7]William J. Perry Project, available at: {https://www.wjperryproject.org/}.

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seriously as a site of political meaning-making about nuclear weapons in the current moment, this paper makes a necessary intervention into Critical Security Studies.

Contribution to the literature

Most Critical Security Studies engagement with nuclear weapons takes a 'discourse-oriented approach' inspired by thinkers such as Foucault and Derrida, whose work lay the foundations of post-structuralism. These scholars are inherently critical of the narratives, practices, and ideas that define conventionally accepted notions of security. The sub-field of this scholarship that is interested in nuclear weapons and war is nuanced in its complexity, innovative approaches, and questioning of the status quo. Carol Cohn's exposition of techno-strategic language is likely most well known.[8] Cohn demonstrated how techno-strategic language functions as a pre-emptive discourse defining what is deemed rational and what is deemed irrational. Cohn's main contribution was in revealing how this discourse is deeply gendered and, as such, reveals discourses as a function of power. Rather than simply describing nuclear weapons, dominant discourses inform and influence their existence, structuring what is legitimate, accepted, and normalised, who can be heard and what can be said. Understanding nuclear weapons as products of discourse does not deny their real danger. Instead, it illustrates how reality is ordered, expressed, and prioritised.

Critical nuclear scholarship demonstrates the role of discourse in producing, shaping, and maintaining shared understandings about the role of nuclear weapons in the world.[9] However, this scholarship has often focused attention on discourse in high politics: political speeches,[10] international treaties,[11] and policy legislation.[12] Such perspectives highlight how the power relations that maintain and legitimise nuclear weapons often rely on gendered and racist notions of rationality, security, and threat. However, this literature does not engage with popular culture as a site of political meaning-making. This absence ignores how nuclear weapons function in the everyday and are experienced by ordinary citizens. This paper seeks to understand this scholarship within

[8]Carol Cohn, 'Sex and death in the rational world of defense intellectuals', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 12:4 (1987), pp. 687–718.

[9]Paul Chilton, *Language and the Nuclear Arms Debate: Nukespeak Today* (London: Pinter, 1985); Christian Enemark, 'Farewell to WMD: The language and science of mass destruction', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 32:2 (2011), pp. 382–400; David Mutimer, 'Testing times: Of nuclear tests, test bans and the framing of proliferation', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 21:1 (2000), pp. 1–22; Martin Senn and Christoph Elhardt, 'Bourdieu and the bomb: Power, language and the doxic battle over the value of nuclear weapons', *European Journal of International Relations*, 20:2 (2014), pp. 316–40; Laura Considine, '"Cornerstones" and "fire from the gods": The role of language in nuclear disarmament', *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, 27 (2020), pp. 55–67; Laura Considine, 'The importance of narrative in nuclear policymaking: A study of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty', Report White Rose (2021); Laura Considine, 'Narrative and nuclear weapons politics: The entelechial force of the nuclear origin myth', *International Theory*, 14:3 (2021), pp. 1–20.

[10]For analysis of political speeches, see Chilton, *Language and the Nuclear Arms Debate*; Bryan Taylor, '"The means to match their hatred": Nuclear weapons, rhetorical democracy, and presidential discourse', *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 37:4 (2007), pp. 667–9; Massoud Sharififar and Elahe Rahimi, 'Critical discourse analysis of political speeches: A case study of Obama's and Rouhani's speeches at UN', *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 5:2 (2015), pp. 343–349; Ivana Indah and Suprayogi Suprayogi, 'The representation of Iran and United States in Donald Trump's speech: A critical discourse analysis', *Linguistics and Literature Journal*, 1:2 (2020), pp. 40–5.

[11]For analysis of international treaties, see Nick Ritchie, 'A hegemonic nuclear order: Understanding the Ban Treaty and the power politics of nuclear weapons', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 40:4 (2019), pp. 409–34; Laura Considine, 'The importance of narrative in nuclear policymaking'; Laura-Rose Brown and Laura Considine, 'Examining "gender-sensitive" approaches to nuclear weapons policy: A study of the Non-Proliferation Treaty', *International Affairs*, 98:4 (2022), pp. 1249–66; Carolina Panico, 'Making nuclear possession possible: The NPT disarmament principle and the production of less violent and more responsible nuclear states', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 43:4 (2022), pp. 651–80.

[12]For analysis of policy legislation, see Nick Ritchie, *US Nuclear Weapons Policy after the Cold War: Russians, 'Rogues' and Domestic Division* (London: Routledge, 2008); Nick Ritchie, 'Relinquishing nuclear weapons: Identities, networks and the British bomb', *International Affairs*, 86:2 (2010), pp. 465–87; Claire Duncanson and Catherine Eschle, 'Gender and the nuclear weapons state: A feminist critique of the UK government's white paper on Trident', *New Political Science*, 30:4 (2008), pp. 545–63.

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the context of the mundane – questioning if and how discourses in high politics are translated into popular imagination in the current moment.

To this end, there have been productive studies that navigate post-Cold War visual representation, for instance, Gamson and Stuart's (1992) work on political cartoons, Rosenthal's (1999) work on the mushroom cloud, Vuori's (2010) work on the Doomsday clock, and Särmä's (2018) work on nuclear parody and memes.[13] This paper adds to this canon of work, navigating nuclear discourses across both written and spoken language, as well as still and moving images. In doing so, it contributes to a growing sub-field of Critical Security Studies interested in the political impact of visual communication and narrative in processes of securitisation and militarisation, which has yet to turn its attention to nuclear weapons in enough detail.

Popular culture, world politics, and nuclear weapons

Though it remains at the margins, the study of popular culture is now well established in International Relations and Popular Geopolitics.[14] This establishment is often termed the 'aesthetic turn', of which Bleiker's (2001) work was the catalyst.[15] Informed by feminist, post-structuralist, and post-colonial insights, the 'turn' recognises the importance of taking seriously 'different forms of insight into world politics, including those that emerge from images, narratives and sound'.[16] This acknowledges how aesthetic sources can offer new ways to understand and address global political problems. Aesthetic approaches are interested in the role representation plays in producing a 'common sense' everyday. As feminist scholar Cynthia Enloe reminds us, 'the personal is international'.[17] In taking popular culture seriously, everyday acts such as watching television become critical incidents of world politics. An overt example of the entanglement between popular culture and nuclear weapons policy is former US president Ronald Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) – popularly named 'Star Wars'. For William Chaloupka, the nickname symbolised a struggle of light against darkness, connecting the mission of the SDI to the *Star Wars* franchise (1977–83), where technology situated in space would save the day.[18] This entanglement becomes even more complex when one considers Reagan's preference for proliferating missile defence technologies alongside his performance as an actor in the 1940 film *Murder in the Air*, in which his character used secret ray weapons to shoot down an attacking aeroplane.[19]

[13]Willaim Gamson and David Stuart, 'Media discourse as a symbolic contest: The bomb in political cartoons', *Sociological Forum*, 7 (1992), pp. 55–86; Peggy Rosenthal, 'The nuclear mushroom cloud as cultural image', *American Literary History*, 3:1 (1991), pp. 63–92; Juha Vuori, 'A timely prophet? The doomsday clock as a visualization of securitization moves with a global referent object', *Security Dialogue*, 41:3 (2010), pp. 255–77; Saara Särmä, 'Collaging Iranian missiles', in J. Vuori and R. Saugmann (eds), *Visual Security Studies: Sights and Spectacles of Insecurity and War* (Routledge, 2018), pp. 114–130.

[14]See Michael Shapiro, 'Textualizing global politics', in W.H. Leidhold (ed), *International/Intertextual Relations: Postmodern Readings of World Politics* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1989), pp. 11–22; Roland Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Roland Bleiker, *Visual Global Politics* (London: Routledge: 2018); Roland Bleiker, 'Seeing beyond disciplines: Aesthetic creativity in international theory', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 75:6 (2021), pp. 573–90; Kyle Grayson, Matt Davies, and Simon Philpott, 'Pop goes IR? Researching the popular culture world politics continuum', *Politics*, 29 (2009), pp. 155–63; Laura Shepherd, *Gender, Violence and Popular Culture: Telling Stories* (Oxford: Routledge: 2018); Penny Griffin, 'Symposium "exploring the (multiple) futures of world politics through popular culture"', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 54 (2019), pp. 508–14; Jutta Weldes and Christina Rowley, 'So, how does popular culture relate to world politics?', in F. Caso and C. Hamilton (eds), *Popular Culture and World Politics: Theories, Methods, Pedagogies* (Bristol: E-International Relations, 2015), pp. 1–16.

[15]Roland Bleiker, 'The aesthetic turn in international political theory', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 30:3 (2001), pp. 509–33.

[16]Bleiker, 'The aesthetic turn', p. 510.

[17]Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), p. 351.

[18]William Chaloupka, *Knowing Nukes: The Politics and Culture of the Atom* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992).

[19]*Murder in the Air* was released by Warner Bros on 1 June 1940.

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The political importance of television drama has been demonstrated across shows likely to be considered apolitical (*Big Brother; Buffy the Vampire Slayer; Game of Thrones*),[20] as well as dramas, such as *Vigil*, that depict overtly political and militaristic events (*The West Wing; Call of Duty; SAS: Who Dares Wins; Bodyguard*).[21] Concluding his study of *The West Wing*, Jack Holland argues that television drama can promote or derail official policies and reflect or drive political consciousness.[22] Television dramas, in and of themselves, can thus be a resource to help organise and understand political opinion.[23] Fictional representations of politics can influence citizens' political feelings and beliefs, echoing or challenging real-world political narratives. Fictional drama has been shown to influence soldiers', politicians', and lawmakers' views of military and foreign policy.[24] They represent logics of war to the general public, acting as sites of meaning-making for elites and ordinary citizens. Returning to Reagan for an apt demonstration, there is a popular anecdote in nuclear history that cites the president's diary entry: 'I ran the tape of the movie *ABC* is running … It's called "*The Day After*"… My own reaction was one of our having to do all we can to have a deterrent and to see there is never a nuclear war.'[25]

Popular culture is especially important to understand nuclear weapons for three key reasons. First, many features of the weapons themselves (subatomic processes, nuclear fission, radioactivity) make them impossible to directly observe or describe without the use of abstraction and metaphor.[26] Radioactivity and subatomic processes are beyond human senses: we can speak of them, and think of them, only through metaphor. Their literally inconceivable nature primes nuclear weapons for exploration through myths, symbols, and metaphors which make thinkable what is otherwise 'other-worldly'. Second, the levels of secrecy and lack of democratic deliberation that are inherent in nuclear weapons policy mean that the public largely come to know about nuclear weapons through popular culture.[27] Often, nuclear weapons politics is deliberately kept out of democratic debate. Popular culture becomes a site where norms of nuclear politics become meaningful, and the possibility of nuclear war comes to be normalised in everyday spaces. Finally, the effects of nuclear weapons mining, production, testing, and use have been directly experienced by very few globally, and yet everyone lives with the risk of nuclear annihilation. Through popular culture, we can understand what nuclear weapons mean to all of us in the everyday.

Discussion: Navigating *Vigil*

How does Vigil present responsibility for the use of nuclear weapons?

In *Vigil*, the idea that men are responsible for the use of nuclear weapons is presented not only in principle but in practice: if necessary, it would be men operating the UK's nuclear arsenal.

[20] John Corner, 'Performing the real: Documentary diversions', *Television & New Media*, 3.3 (2002), pp. 255–69; Shepherd, *Gender, Violence and Popular Culture*; William Clapton and Laura Shepherd, 'Lessons from Westeros: Gender and power in *Game of Thrones*', *Politics*, 37:1 (2017), pp. 5–18.

[21] Holland, 'When you think of the Taliban'; Shepherd, *Gender, Violence and Popular Culture*; Robinson, 'Have you won the war on terror?'; Pears, 'Military masculinities on television'; Pears, 'Protecting whiteness'; Parry, 'Representing public service and post-militariness'.

[22] Holland, 'When you think of the Taliban'.

[23] Richardson and Corner, 'Assessing television's political dramas'; Parry, 'Representing public service and post-militariness'.

[24] Georg Löfflmann, 'Hollywood, the Pentagon, and the cinematic production of national security', *Critical Studies on Security*, 1:3 (2013), pp. 280–94.

[25] Reagan Foundation, White House Diaries, Diary Entry 10/10/1983, available at: {https://www.reaganfoundation.org/ronald-reagan/white-house-diaries/diary-entry-10101983/}.

[26] Jacques Derrida, 'No apocalypse, not now (full speed ahead, seven missiles, seven missives)' *Diacritics*, 14 (1984) pp. 20–31; Robert Jacobs, *Filling the Hole in the Nuclear Future: Art and Popular Culture Respond to the Bomb* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010).

[27] Steve Cooke and Andrew Futter, 'Democracy versus deterrence: Nuclear weapons and political integrity', *Politics,* 38:4 (2018), pp. 500–13; Robert Dahl, *Controlling Nuclear Weapons: Democracy versus Guardianship* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1985); Kjolv Egeland, 'Peace, democracy and nuclear weapons', *Site du CERI* (2019).

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In Episode One,[28] the gender imbalance onboard *Vigil* is explicitly communicated to viewers when Chief Petty Officer Elliot Glover (Shaun Evans) states 'We're eight women, 140 men'. While the demographics of military personnel stationed on the real Trident submarines is a state secret, in an interview with the *Metro* former lieutenant commander David Lovell described this as 'a pretty realistic number'.[29] Indeed, women make up just 10.9% of the British Forces, and 9.8% of the Royal Navy and Marines, with such disparities even more pronounced in leadership positions.[30] The fictional crew onboard *Vigil* is therefore structured in a way that brings attention to the hegemonic forces of masculinity that continue to shape the nuclear realm in 'reality'. Drawing the audience's attention to this stark gender imbalance could encourage welcomed consideration of injustice and gender discrimination. Alternatively, it may simply bring military masculinity from 'real-world' politics into our living rooms. As Carol Cohn put it, 'white men in ties discussing missile size'.[31]

Beyond gender imbalances, more covert gendered norms are communicated in *Vigil*'s script and storyline. Investigating Hollywood's depiction of female soldiers, Yvonne Tasker argues that women are presented as a disruptive presence that must be incorporated into the masculine hegemony, managed, or contained.[32] These ideas translate into the BBC's depiction of women onboard *Vigil*. In Episode Two,[33] DCI Silva is challenged by Commanding Officer Neil Newsome (Paterson Joseph) who asks her, 'Can you even begin to imagine the tactical challenge?', before immediately answering his own question: 'No, no, didn't think so'. The female lead (bestowed with high rank and authority within the police force) is denied words by the male commander. Military and strategic tactics are deemed beyond her imagination as she is belittled by the commander's derogatory and mocking answer. This communicates a very particular meaning: nuclear decision-making is a man's work. In line with Tasker's observations,[34] DCI Silva is first managed (silenced and denied legitimacy of opinion) then contained. The commander orders his officers to 'confine her to quarters'. DCI Silva is excluded from the space, rendering her literally and metaphorically unfit for the room. The paternalistic overtones (parallel to sending a misbehaving child to their room) communicate the notion that this could be for her own good – that perhaps she needs disciplining in order to learn how to behave in this space. Importantly, the use of military jargon (calling the room where she sleeps her 'quarters') further reinforces the commander's ease in navigating the military realm while creating a powerful interpersonal meaning with viewers at home. Alongside DCI Silva, the audience is left with a sense of exclusion by the use of jargon that is abnormal in their everyday life. In a few short sentences, DCI Silva (and vicariously, the audience) has been rendered childlike and out of her depth within the military setting.

The treatment of DCI Silva in *Vigil* is illustrative of the gendered logics that are deeply embedded in nuclear discourse. If men are responsible for nuclear weapons, then women are *not* responsible for them. According to feminist scholar Cynthia Enloe, one of the core militaristic beliefs is the belief that 'in times of crisis those who are feminine need armed protection'.[35] Thinking specifically about nuclear militarism, feminist scholar Catherine Eschle highlights the continuation of this belief, showing how nuclear security discourse highlights the heroic male and imagines women as in need of protection.[36] Even in the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), women are constructed as a

[28] *Vigil* Episode 1, 21:00 29 August 2021, BBC One London, 60 mins.

[29] Tori Brazier, 'Everything kind of right – and very wrong – with BBC One's *Vigil*, according to an ex-submariner', *Metro*, available at: {https://metro.co.uk/2021/08/30/vigil-everything-right-and-wrong-according-to-an-ex-submariner-15178081/}.

[30] UK Government, 'UK armed forces biannual diversity statistics: 1 April 2020', Ministry of Defence, available at: {https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/uk}.

[31] Cohn, 'Sex and death in the rational world of defense intellectuals', p. 692.

[32] Yvonne Tasker, *Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2002).

[33] *Vigil* Episode 2, 21:00 30 August 2021, BBC One London, 60 mins.

[34] Tasker, *Working Girls*.

[35] Cynthia Enloe, paraphrased in Nick Robinson, 'Militarism and opposition in the living room: The case of military videogames', *Critical Studies on Security*, 4:3 (2016), pp. 255–275.

[36] Catherine Eschle, 'Gender and the subject of (anti)nuclear politics: revisiting women's campaigning against the bomb', *International Studies Quarterly*, 57:4 (2013), pp. 713–24.

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Figure 1. DCI Silva enters *Vigil*. Copyright © 2023 BBC, reproduced in accordance with fair use.

homogeneous category of 'outsiders'.[37] *Vigil* demonstrates the continuation of this narrative beyond high politics and into popular culture and the everyday. The exclusion of DCI Silva reinforces feminine incompatibility with rational decision-making and military spaces. The paternalistic treatment of DCI Silva reproduces the narrative of male military protection.

These ideas can also be seen in *Vigil's* visual communication. A scene of great importance to the series occurs when DCI Silva first enters the nuclear submarine in Episode One.[38] In literally depicting DCI Silva entering the space, the scene is an important semiotic resource for the analysis of her relationship with that space. DCI Silva is lowered from a helicopter into the submarine (see Figure 1). Descent is a powerful visual tool. Shared cultural conventions connect the act of going down with decline, danger, and failure. Linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson describe this metaphorical convention as 'up-down spatialization',[39] whereby virtue is signified as up and depravity signified as down. A clear example of this convention is the physical locations of Heaven and Hell. By showing DCI Silva in descent, her journey onboard *Vigil* is metaphorically foreshadowed. The nuclear submarine below her can be understood as a place of moral disturbance, scrutiny, and danger. This accurately foreshadows the unfolding of the series while presenting the physical manifestation of nuclear weapons as a site of great risk. Ideas of danger are also communicated through the *mise en scène* (the staging of the scene and everything that appears before the camera). Here, semiotic resources have been selected for their connotations of danger; the red boilersuit, the choppy grey waves, the cold and dark metallic body of the submarine. Using setting, *Vigil* constructs an aura of fear around nuclear weapons without showing a weapon itself, instead, rendering their physical location unpredictable and precarious. In the script, it is communicated that the presence of a civilian, as well as the surfacing of the submarine to board her, is strictly against military protocol. This forbidden context makes it clear that, after her descent into this space, DCI Silva must learn to adapt to life onboard or become a dangerous disturbance herself.

[37] Brown and Considine, '"Examining gender-sensitive" approaches'.
[38] *Vigil* Episode 1.
[39] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

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Just as Tasker observed,[40] the presence of female characters is shown to disrupt military spaces. The gendered discourses observed in high politics penetrate spaces of popular culture and the everyday. At best, women may be able to be incorporated into the masculine hegemony, at worst, they must be contained.

This hierarchy, wherein militaristic masculinity is presented in opposition to a passive femininity, is also observable in *Vigil*'s representation of an anti-nuclear peace camp. Dunloch Peace Camp (est. 1982) is based upon the real Faslane peace camp (est. 1982) which claims to be the 'longest running permanent peace camp in the world'.[41] Researching activist identity at Faslane, Catherine Eschle identified gendered articulations of the male and female activist.[42] Male activists were constructed as 'Peace Warriors' whose identity 'resonated with the hierarchical military masculinity from which the campers had previously asserted their difference'.[43] Female activists were imagined as 'Earth Goddesses', an identity shift 'caused by the declining influence of feminism and the rise of radical environmentalism'.[44] This gendered articulation of activism is reproduced in *Vigil*, wherein the leader of the peace camp, Ben Oakley (Cal MacAninch), is depicted in military khaki while his female counterpart, Jade Antoniak (Lauren Lyle), is more frequently seen in earthy tones (see Figure 2). While the 'warrior' fights for change, the 'goddess' inspires others' agency through her *being* rather than *doing*.[45] Where the character of Ben Oakley shares intelligence with Russia that will discredit Britain's nuclear programme, the character of Jade Antoniak is the girlfriend of a threatening whistle-blower and is later drowned.

However, despite these internal hierarchies, all characters associated with the peace camp are ultimately presented as outsiders. Shots of Dunloch are filtered with a rustic, sepia-toned hue that dampens the colourfully painted set (see Figure 2). This aesthetic decision connects the activist characters to their peace-camp setting, where bright paints would otherwise have created contrast. Whether a Peace Warrior or an Earth Goddess, the campers are perfectly in tune with their world. However, the world of peace and activism exists in stark contrast to the technocratic settings of policing, government, and militarism in the rest of the BBC series. In the real Faslane camp, male and female identities converge though visual representations which differentiate them as subcultural: 'anarchist, feminist, punk, hippy'.[46] Reproducing this in the fictional realm, *Vigil* presents the anti-nuclear fight as a subcultural commitment, out of touch with the realism afforded to the sets of the police, politicians, and navy. Peace is constructed as outside of normalcy, relatability, and even reality, incompatible with social and political authority.

Does Vigil *present humans and/or nuclear weapons as agents for peace and/or destruction?*

Throughout Vigil, the nuclear submarine is referred to as 'the UK's deterrent', 'the nuclear deterrent', or 'the deterrent'. Nuclear deterrence theory argues that the possession of nuclear weapons would deter an adversary from making a conventional or nuclear attack because of fear of retaliation. Under this theory, the bomb is a protective agent acting as a source of safety and security. Coining the term 'nukespeak' (a play on 'newspeak' to emphasise the Orwellian ability of those in power to limit the realm of nuclear debate), Paul Chilton demonstrated that deterrence is presented as a factual description rather than a theory.[47] In fact, he argues that deterrence should not even be viewed as possessing the same authority as a theory since it does not meet the scientific rigour required of theories. Deterrence is neither verifiable (since we cannot know that an absence of

[40]Tasker, *Working Girls*.

[41]Faslane Peace Camp, available at: {https://www.banthebomb.org/campaigns/faslane-peace-camp/}.

[42]Catherine Eschle, 'Beyond Greenham Woman? Gender identities and anti-nuclear activism in peace camps', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 19:4 (2017), pp. 471–90.

[43]Eschle, 'Beyond Greenham Woman?', p. 478.

[44]Ibid., p. 486.

[45]Ibid.

[46]Ibid., p. 476.

[47]Paul Chilton, *Language and the Nuclear Arms Debate*.

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Figure 2. Dunloch peace cam. Copyright © 2023 BBC, reproduced in accordance with fair use.

aggression is caused by the possession of nuclear weapons) nor falsifiable (since we also cannot know that it is not). Rather, Chilton understands deterrence as a 'socio-cultural product' capable of performing powerful political work.[48] For instance, to 'deter' an enemy does not bestow that enemy with any rationality or agency: one cannot 'dissuade' a shark, but one may 'deter' it. Adversaries are thus not endowed any traits that would merit diplomacy or cooperation. Following, describing nuclear weapons as 'the deterrent' is often reserved for 'our' weaponry. In Western discourses, the United States 'deter' while Russia 'threatens'.

The 'deterrent' is an example of nominalisation; a process has been transformed into a noun. 'Deterrent' becomes a synonym for nuclear weapons, claiming fact of their ability to deter conflict and limiting alternative thought.[49] Naming the bomb itself 'the deterrent' makes opposing voices that speak to the danger of the bomb seem irrational. Presenting deterrence as common sense delegitimises alternative narratives and sets the boundaries of possible thought. If deterrence is presented as fact in popular culture, it is likely that public consciousness will also be uncritical of the notion. Rather than possessing the potential ability 'to deter', the submarine is a 'deterrent'. The nominalised language used in *Vigil* (re)produces certainty around the idea of deterrence, pre-defining rather than describing. The normalisation and depoliticisation of this language minimises,

[48]Ibid.
[49]Paul Chilton, *Language and the Nuclear Arms Debate*.

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rather than encouraging, the audience's interrogation of nuclear weapons as a form of deterrence. This simple choice of language ideationally communicates that the UK's nuclear submarine is both safe and necessary. In doing so, *Vigil* reproduces official narratives about Britain's nuclear arsenal – that it exists as a protective measure, which deters aggression and ensures national safety and security; the weapons become agents of peace. *Vigil* presupposes that the UK deterrent is 'good'.

In Episode One,[50] we are given an outline of the logic of deterrence from Commanding Officer Newsome:

> The entire nuclear deterrent rests on just three things. The first, you must have viable weapons. And second, your enemy can't ever know if you'll use them. Which is why we keep the letter of last resort in a safe, inside another safe, on board this boat. The final thing is, your enemy mustn't be able to stop you. So you stay hidden.

This description relies upon the existence of a discursively constructed enemy as well as the centrality of secrecy to nuclear weapon policy. The commander repeatedly refers to 'your enemy' without ever clarifying who that may be. Such ambiguity serves nuclear deterrence ideology, since the enemy can be a defined aggressor or simply the presence of an Other.[51] This description also relies on a common visual metaphor: that invisibility is security. Ideas of invisibility are intertwined with cultures of secrecy and security.[52] Something that cannot be seen is either articulated as safer, meaning it needs to be kept secret and concealed, or more threatening, meaning it must be revealed. This outline reveals a paradox at the heart of nuclear politics: one must understand 'our' nuclear weapons as safe and needing to be 'hidden', while nuclear weapons are inherently threatening and need to be revealed in the hands of the Other.[53] *Vigil*'s script plays on and reinforces these ideas, creating tension through the idea of a high-stakes game of hide-and-seek. Nuclear weapons are presented as agents of peace in our hands, and agents of destruction in the enemy's. Understandings of enemies and secrecy are thus interrelated with the ability to justify and legitimise 'our' weapons through deterrence theory, while discrediting the weapons of the Other.

Ultimately, in *Vigil*, deterrence is not challenged by activism but by weaknesses within the military itself. Throughout the series, the audience is repeatedly reminded that the nuclear arsenal is vulnerable to human interference and error. The centring of human agency exists in direct juxtaposition to the narrative of safety and security promoted by ideas of deterrence. Indeed, human action is central to *Vigil*'s plot and climax, which follows various threats caused by people onboard the boat. In Episode Four,[54] two Navy Officers question the investigating police:

Lieutenant Commander Branning: So, you're saying there could be a Russian asset onboard *Vigil*?
Rear Admiral Shaw: 'No, this is … I – I don't believe that that's … They're all vetted.
DC Kohli: Yes, but you have hundreds of sailors. People can slip through.

The UK's nuclear deterrent becomes a site of danger and insecurity when foreign presence becomes a possibility. The script transforms 'asset' into 'people', removing the obscurity of techno-strategic language and humanising the threat. The notion of slippage suggests a clumsiness within the military that would not have been implicit had the decision been made to suggest that people can 'infiltrate' or 'invade'. This simple linguistic choice has social and political implications, presenting the possibility of a vulnerable, exposed, and even clumsy, military – very different to the usual connotations of military power. The presence of a single person is presented as a security threat to millions.

[50] *Vigil* Episode 1.
[51] Paul Chilton, *Language and the Nuclear Arms Debate*.
[52] Elspeth Van Veeren, 'Invisibility', in R. Bleiker (ed), *Visual Global Politics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), pp. 196–200.
[53] Gamson and Stuart, 'Media discourse as a symbolic contest'.
[54] *Vigil* Episode 4, 21:00 12 September 2021, BBC One London, 60 mins.

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Military vulnerability is thus represented in individual, humanised, and personal ways, as well as in national, existential, and unprecedented ways. In Episode Five,[55] nuclear peace camp leader Ben Oakley confirms that 'We have no viable deterrent if it can be infiltrated by a foreign power' (restating his militaristic knowledge as 'Peace Warrior'). This becomes the high point of tension in the series. Finding the person who has infiltrated *Vigil* becomes the central focus of plot. In constructing this tension, a more traditionally militaristic lexical field has been chosen: 'viable', 'deterrent', 'infiltrated', 'power'. Such choices communicate threat on a national security level. What was a single person, able to 'slip through', is now infiltration by 'a foreign power'. Too often, nuclear weapons are presented as an infallible gift of technology, rendered safe and secure. However, throughout all the weapons' existence, human miscalculation has accounted for more error than mechanical or technical failure.[56] Alarmingly, their use is most likely to be in miscalculation or accident, past incidences of which are vastly documented but little known.[57] *Vigil* presents this vulnerability in a refreshing questioning of the idea that nuclear weapons inherently ensure security and deter threat. This dismantles the myth of infallible power that is too often bestowed upon nuclear weapons, instead presenting the deterrent as vulnerable to the actions of a single person as well as entire states. In doing so, *Vigil* provides audiences with a narrative that is little heard: nuclear weapons are not innately safe, they do not inherently provide security, and they are not integral to peace.

Navigating whether nuclear weapons are presented as agents for peace or destruction has revealed paradoxical ideas. On the one hand, 'the deterrent' suggests a matter-of-fact nature to the security provided by nuclear weapons. This grants the weapons an agency that is unconditional to human action and affords them guarantee in their ability to grant security and ensure peace. On the other hand, human agency is centred as the driving force of *Vigil*'s plot, with foreign infiltration forming the series climax. In presenting both narratives concurrently, *Vigil* communicates the complex reality of nuclear weapons and provides the audience with arguments both for and against their continued existence. This constructs a middle ground, or 'thinking space', for the audience – encouraging critical engagement with issues of nuclear policy, which all too often are kept out of public consciousness. However, threat remains conditional: whether nuclear weapons are agents of peace or destruction depends upon an Orientalist narrative about their owners.

Though it is refreshing to see this narrative counter mainstream assurances of nuclear security and highlight their risks, in *Vigil* it functions as part of a larger problematic discourse: Nuclear Orientalism. Post-colonial scholar Edward Said demonstrated how Orientalist discourses construct the Orient in opposition to the West (the Occident).[58] These discourses function along binaries, wherein the West is constructed as fundamentally different and superior to its Other. Hugh Gusterson (1999) noted a specific operation of this discourse within the nuclear realm, which he termed 'Nuclear Orientalism'. Nuclear Orientalism divides the world into 'good' and 'bad' based on whether or not that state is to be trusted with nuclear weapons. 'Good' nuclear states can be trusted to be rational decision-makers and use nuclear weapons to deter aggression and ensure international security. However, if nuclear weapons get into the wrong hands, these 'rogue' states cannot be trusted to be rational, and their weapons represent global threat and instability. Nuclear Orientalism functions as an ideology so often and subtly invoked that it seems natural and reasonable.[59] Post-colonial feminist Shampa Biswas notes how this ideology presents certain states as

[55] *Vigil* Episode 5, 21:00 19 September 2021, BBC One London, 60 mins.

[56] Benoît Pelopidas, 'The unbearable lightness of luck: Three sources of overconfidence in the manageability of nuclear crises', *European Journal of International Security*, 2:2 (2017), pp. 240–62.

[57] James Doyle, 'Why eliminate nuclear weapons?', *Survival*, 55:1 (2013), pp. 7–34; Pelopidas, 'The unbearable lightness of luck'.

[58] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge, 1978).

[59] Hugh Gusterson, 'Nuclear weapons and the other in the Western imagination', *Cultural Anthropology*, 14:1 (1999), pp. 111–43.

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Figure 3. The spy is unmasked. Copyright © 2023 BBC, reproduced in accordance with fair use.

responsible stewards of international security, while other states are cast as fundamentally irresponsible and denied the same autonomy.[60] Decisions made by the United States and its allies are assumed rational by default, while decisions made by non-Western states are continuously labelled as ideological rather than strategic – delegitimised through reference to religion or culture.[61] Nuclear weapons possess the material capabilities no matter their state ownership, yet time and time again nuclear discourse constructs Western weapons as rational, modern, and safe while non-Western weapons are constructed as impulsive, backwards, and dangerous. Nuclear weapons can be understood as safe and secure in 'our' hands, while being dangerous threats in the hands of another. Continuing this narrative into spaces of the everyday, in the BBC's *Vigil*, whether nuclear weapons are presented as agents of peace or destruction is conditional to their ownership – to whether they are controlled by 'us' or 'Other'.

In *Vigil*, this Other is defined as Russian. *Vigil* presupposes that Russia would have an incentive to compromise Britain's deterrent; perhaps reflecting an inflated or disproportionate sense of self-importance in British national identity. Historian Margaret Gowing argued that the Attlee government's pursuit of an independent nuclear arms programme was irrational and emotionally motivated to make up for Britain's loss of empire and world power status.[62] *Vigil* continues the binding of Britain's nuclear weapons with a belief in global power status, cementing the relationship between Britain's independent arsenal and Britain's yearning for a sense of global independence and power.

In the penultimate episode,[63] *Vigil*'s plot reaches climax when DCI Silva is knocked to the floor moments before Chief Petty Officer Matthew Doward (Lorne MacFadyen) reveals his face from behind a visor. The audience realises alongside DCI Silva that Doward, an ordinary navy officer, is actually the Russian asset (Figure 3). This scene is the *big reveal* that the whodunnit mystery builds up to. In a literal unmasking of the villain, viewers are given a resolution comparable to that of an episode of *Scooby-Doo*. In *Vigil*, the Russian spy operates as a specific version of a common trope in popular culture: the Russian enemy. Here, interpersonal meaning is 'dynamicized', and the relation between participants and audience is enhanced by the shared experience of time.[64] In this important scene, Doward is bestowed with power, seen towering over DCI Silva, who looks up to him from the floor in fear and shock. The camera angle places the audience, alongside Silva, in a position of vulnerability at the mercy of the Russian spy. Since the Cold War, there has been a common trope in fiction (across all genres and subject matters) wherein Russia and Russians are depicted as a principal threat to world peace. Characters of spies and/or traitors are classic archetypes of the

[60] Shampa Biswas, *Nuclear Desire: Power and the Postcolonial Nuclear Order* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

[61] Biswas, *Nuclear Desire*.

[62] Margaret Gowing, *Independence and Deterrence: Britain and Atomic Energy, 1945–1952 Volume 1: Policy Making* (London: Palgrave Macmillan: 1974), pp. 160–206.

[63] *Vigil* Episode 5.

[64] Theo Van Leeuwen, 'Moving English: The visual language of film', in S. Goodman and D. Graddol (eds), *Redesigning English: New Texts, New Identities* (New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 81–105.

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Cold War popular culture, reflecting a paranoia in the United States about Communist infiltration known as 'McCarthyism'.[65]

However, not all spies are presented equally. There is a clear trend in Western popular culture whereby Western agents are presented as the 'good guy' who will prevail while Eastern spies are presented as the 'bad guy' who will ultimately be defeated.[66] *Vigil* marks a continuation of this trend, reinforcing a Nuclear Orientalist logic whereby Russia is defined as threatening while the UK is cast as an innocent victim. This frame preserves British (and, vicariously, Western) nuclear weapons as necessary for protection ('deterrence') while suggesting Russian nuclear weapons are solely objects of aggression. Britain is thereby imagined only as a nuclear victim, not a nuclear perpetrator. This simplistic binary is in many ways a Cold War narrative for modern times. *Vigil*'s viewers are given a simplistic narration of nuclear security and threat reliant on the redeployment of the archetypal Cold War enemy. It should come as no surprise that a drama portraying nuclear security relies on Cold War narratives of the Russian threat to the West. Threats (real and imagined) to the United States have long been vicariously experienced as threats to 'the world', 'the West', or the 'anglosphere'. This is most pronounced in the USA–UK 'special relationship', whose shared identity exists across personal, ideational, and material levels.[67] Navigating nuclear threat to the UK, it is unsurprising that writers defined threat as Russian. In choosing to continue the Russian enemy trope, *Vigil* does not surprise or confuse its audience but rather naturalises and normalises perceptions of Russia(ns) as Other. *Vigil* was written and broadcast six months before Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The casting of Russian villains is thus unlikely to leave our screens anytime soon.

Ultimately, does Vigil present the bomb as a power for good?

Interestingly, viewers are never actually shown a nuclear weapon in *Vigil*. In Episode One,[68] Officer Glover is giving DCI Silva (and the audience) a tour of the boat. Here he says, 'welcome to the bomb shop', which is the name given to the space where armaments, torpedoes, and missiles are stored (see Figure 4). The set is visually complex, the frame filled at the back and sides with technical machinery. The technical scene performs visually what technical jargon does linguistically: bureaucratisation.[69] Bureaucratisation is a rhetorical strategy common in 'nukespeak', wherein the deployment of technical jargon and acronyms constructs insiders and outsiders, defining who can be heard and what can be.[70] The space is defined by highly visual cues of technicality and specialist knowledge, suggesting that 'the realm of nuclear weapons [is] one reserved for experts'.[71] In this set, the presence of the missiles is visually represented elongated cyclical shapes. The shape of nuclear weapons has been noted by feminists as part of their appeal to hyper masculinities. The phallic properties of nuclear weapons has 'proved seductive to many governments across time and space'.[72] Carol Cohn documented the phallic images and sexualised metaphors in the language used by American Cold War defence policymakers.[73] Cynthia Cockburn described how during the Cold War, both superpowers 'wheeled out [their missiles] like monumental phalluses'.[74] More recently, former US president Donald Trump tweeted, 'I too have a Nuclear Button, but it is

[65]Joseph Oldham, '"Don't let the side down, old boy": Interrogating the traitor in the "radical" television dramas of John Le Carré and Dennis Potter', *Cold War History*, 20:3 (2020), pp. 311–27.

[66]Desislava Cheshmedzhieva-Stoycheva, 'Aspects of media presentations on Russians: Yet another spy story in the media', *Studies in Linguistics, Culture, and FLT*, 8:2 (2020), pp. 19–51.

[67]See Jack Holland, *Selling War and Peace: Syria and the Anglosphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

[68]Vigil Episode 1.

[69]Edward Schiappa, 'The rhetoric of nukespeak', *Communications Monographs*, 56:3 (1989), pp. 253–72.

[70]Ibid.

[71]Considine, '"Cornerstones"', p. 57.

[72]Duncanson and Eschle, 'Gender and the nuclear weapons state', p. 548.

[73]Cohn, 'Sex and death', p. 694.

[74]Cited in Duncanson and Eschle, 'Gender and the nuclear weapons state'.

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Figure 4. 'Welcome to the bomb shop'. Copyright © 2023 BBC, reproduced in accordance with fair use.

a much bigger & more powerful one than [Kim Jong Un's], and my Button works!'[75] Carol Cohn frankly described the exchange as 'penis-measuring'[76] and Anoosh Chakelian situated the tweet amid a 'long history of nuclear dick-waving'.[77] This language does not highlight destructive power: men, women, and children are substituted with 'collateral damage', the weapons are imagined as newborns 'fathered' by man, and phallic imagery and sexual metaphors make nuclear weapons referents of masculinity.[78] Such gendered sexual metaphors create excitement and support for nuclear weapons.[79]

Rather than overtly sexualised imagery and metaphors, the connection between masculine sexuality and nuclear weapons in *Vigil* is subtle but important. The nuclear weapons onboard Vigil are only an suggest presence: the torpedo tubes are empty, and the missiles are encased. The audience (much like the officers onboard a real nuclear submarine) are made aware of the weapons' presence without ever actually seeing one. Their hidden nature plays into powerful narratives connecting invisibility and secrecy with safety and security.[80] In this subtlest of images, we see the convergence of masculinity and otherworldliness that comes to mystify and celebrate nuclear weapons.

In the final episode,[81] the audience is given an explanation for the continued possession of nuclear weapons, despite arguments against their utility.

Rear Admiral Shaw: It's not just about protecting the Navy, is it? It's about protecting Britain.
MP Patrick Cruden: And how exactly does the deterrent achieve that? The Cold War is over. Admiral, there are better ways to exert our influence in the world than the threat of mutual distrust.
Rear Admiral Shaw: Yes, so says China, so says Russia, so says France. We all agree. Everyone agrees. But no one moves till we all move.

[75] @realDonaldTrump [Twitter post], 3 January 2018, available at: {https://x.com/realDonaldTrump/status/948355557022420992?s=20}.

[76] Carol Cohn, 'The perils of mixing masculinity and missiles', *New York Times* (5 January 2018), p. 5.

[77] Anoosh Chakelian, 'The long history of nuclear dick-waving', *The New Statesman* (3 January 2018), available at: {https://www.newstatesman.com/world/2018/01/long-history-nuclear-dick-waving}.

[78] Cohn, 'Sex and death'.

[79] Duncanson and Eschle, 'Gender and the nuclear weapons state'.

[80] See Van Veeren, 'Invisibility'.

[81] *Vigil* Episode 6, 21:00 26 September 2021, BBC One London, 60 mins.

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Here, the Admiral admits that nuclear weapons are not a safe way to conduct international relations. This point is expressed as an international agreement, citing consensus among three other nuclear weapon states. Notably, the script chooses to include both non-Western nuclear-armed states (China and Russia), suggesting agreement even among those typically labelled 'enemy', regardless of political regime. However, despite such agreement, there remains a stalemate. In a global security environment that relies on mutual distrust, it is impossible to be sure of another's intensions – it is impossible to 'move'.[82] The chess metaphor of the stalemate, as used here in *Vigil*, has been used across political discourse to denote a problem with no solution – expressing 'political immobility'.[83] Deploying the stalemate metaphor, *Vigil* communicates the fundamental security challenge: although nuclear weapons are not desirable, we cannot get rid of them. The audience is afforded a sense of hopelessness, discouraging political engagement or action by suggesting that disarmament is a hopeless cause. In this scenario, continuation of the status quo is the best possible outcome.

Writing about the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), Laura Considine identifies three nuclear narratives and their political implications.[84] In *Vigil*'s presentation of disarmament as a hopeless cause, we see these same narratives reproduced in popular culture. First, the stalemate metaphor suggests a permanent nature that performs unseen political work that reinforces the status quo. Second, the stalemate permits an ongoing public acceptance of the injustice and unsuitability of nuclear weapons. Finally, the stalemate situates nuclear politics in a place of continuous crisis, constructing it as disturbingly fragile and certainly not fit for change. In the same way as the political narratives that are deeply embedded into the language of the NPT shape the boundaries of possible political debate, *Vigil* too constructs a narrative 'that justifies continually lowered expectations, that is status quo-oriented and that is unfavourable to initiatives based on a vision of the future'.[85] Ultimately, although *Vigil* does not nuclear weapons as inherently good, they are presented as unchangeable – discouraging a politicised public.

While disarmament is presented as a military impossibility, public opinion becomes a site of possible change. In the last 15 minutes of the series,[86] the audience is given closure through the police's explanation of the Russian spy's motive:

DS Kirsten Longacre: We think Russia's aim was to make the deterrent look bad. There's a vote coming up on its funding, and if questions were raised about it …

DSI Amy Silva: People were killed for that?!

DS Kirsten Longacre: No. But a lot of MPs want Trident gone but don't want to look soft on defence. And this … This would have given them an excuse to vote against it. Russia dupes Britain into scrapping its deterrent – that's modern warfare.

This short extract presents nuclear weapons as political objects, more so than military ones. As the defining motive behind the actions that centre *Vigil*'s plot, this representation is very significant. Rather than focusing on the instability of the weapons in and of themselves – susceptible to human error, attack, and computer failure – *Vigil* focuses on the weapons as a source of political tensions. Russia's aim was not to destroy a military target, but to tarnish the reputation of British nuclear weapons: 'to make the deterrent look bad'. Britain's nuclear 'deterrent' is presented as extremely

[82] Nicholas Wheeler, 'Nuclear abolition: Trust-building's greatest challenge?' Professorial Inaugural Lecture (Aberystwyth University, 30 September 2009).

[83] Bart Cammaerts, 'The strategic use of metaphors by political and media elites: The 2007–11 Belgian constitutional crisis', *International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics*, 8:3 (2012), pp. 229–49; Cathie Martin, 'Negotiating political agreements', in J. Mansbridge and C. Martin (eds), *Political Negotiation: A Handbook* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press 2015), pp. 7–33.

[84] Considine, 'The importance of narrative in nuclear policymaking.

[85] Considine, 'The importance of narrative in nuclear policymaking', p. 2.

[86] *Vigil* Episode 6.

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fragile and susceptible to public scrutiny: if Russia can make the British public think their nuclear weapons are unsafe, then Britain's own democracy will lead to their disarmament.

There is critical nuance in this representation: nuclear weapons are moved out of the military strategic realm and into the political one. This move contradicts the stalemate communicated by Rear Admiral Shaw and MP Patrick Cruden, instead suggesting that public opinion is a powerful tool for change. Interestingly, while the military problem (conceptualised as a metaphorical stalemate) is debated between men, two women are left to discuss the political implications of the deterrent looking 'bad' and MPs looking 'soft', presenting the political realm as more palatably feminine than the military realm. As nuclear weapons continue to be deliberately kept out of conscious politics and public debate,[87] this is emphasis on the power of public opinion is incredibly important. Through *Vigil*, the British public can gain consciousness about nuclear weapons – surely the first step towards a more democratic nuclear policy.

Conclusion

This paper has made the case for using popular culture as a site to understand the present narratives, and likely futures, of British nuclear weapons. It has argued that fiction and popular culture cannot be seen as separate from the production of truth and meaning-making processes about nuclear weapons. Navigating the BBC's popular television drama *Vigil*, concepts of security, peace, and deterrence have been called into question. Questions of vulnerability and error trouble the waters around the conventional discourses of nuclear deterrence and the alleged stability and security that this brings. Asking 'big' questions about global security, in reference to *Vigil* as an instance of popular culture, provides insight into the political reproduction and representation of ideas, identities, and subjectivities in everyday spaces. This exploration has demonstrated that many of the gendered and racialised discourses associated with nuclear weapons are reproduced in popular culture. However, this research has also demonstrated how popular culture is able to grapple with these discourses in complex ways. Rather than presenting a straightforward narrative about nuclear weapons, *Vigil* provides its audience with multiple perspectives, both legitimising and challenging mainstream nuclear discourse.

First, ideas of responsibility for nuclear decision-making continue a gendered imagining of the military and nuclear realm as DCI Silva is presented as a disruptive presence onboard *Vigil*. Peace activists were also presented as 'outsiders', while the only real challenge to nuclear deterrence comes from within the military itself. Second, contradicting representations of nuclear weapons as agents of peace (deterrence theory) existed alongside representations of nuclear weapons as agents of destruction (vulnerability to human error). This provided the audience with a critical 'thinking space' to consider two sides of an often-linear argument. However, this paradox was only made sense of through Nuclear Orientalism, a discourse which reproduces problematic dichotomies of 'us' versus 'them'. Finally, it was found that *Vigil* does not present nuclear weapons as inherently good and safe, somewhat challenging the status quo. However, relying on military reasoning, the series presented a stalemate that ultimately works to maintain the status quo by framing disarmament as a hopeless cause. The assumed importance of British nuclear weapons is insight into the continued ideological and cultural role of British nuclear weapons as a symbol of (lost) global status. However, *Vigil* also moves nuclear weapons out of the military realm and into the political one. In doing so, the series suggests the possibility of public opinion influencing nuclear policy, inviting a more conscious and politically engaged audience.

Ultimately, this paper has demonstrated how television can reproduce (and occasionally challenge) how we think about nuclear weapons and world politics more generally. The ideas and images presented in *Vigil* are not themselves representative of the nuclear realm, they simply illuminate and add to pre-existing discourses that (re)construct and limit the future of nuclear

[87] See Cooke and Futter, 'Democracy versus deterrence'; Dahl, 'Democracy versus guardianship'; Egeland, 'Peace, democracy and nuclear weapons'.

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weapons. It has made a necessary intervention into academic analyses of popular representations of nuclear weapons which remain stuck in a preoccupation with the Cold War and ignorance towards the contemporary moment. At a time when every nuclear weapon state is modernising and/or expanding its nuclear arsenal and Russia is threatening nuclear escalation, enquiry into the popular representation of nuclear weapons and war has never been more urgent. If anywhere there is a need for the kind of boundary challenging scholarship that taking popular culture seriously yields, it is in questioning the logic of nuclear deterrence. Sites of popular culture, such as *Vigil*, have real consequences for the imagining of world politics. This imagining can shape the boundaries of how nuclear weapons can, and likely will, exist in the future.

Video Abstract. To view the online video abstract, please visit: https://doi.org/10.1017/S026021052300075X

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