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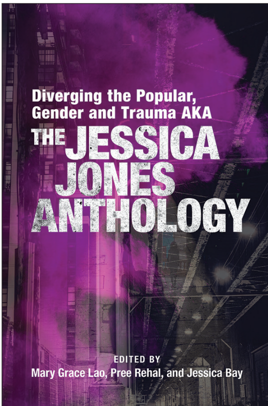

DIVERGING THE POPULAR, GENDER AND TRAUMA AKA THE JESSICA JONES ANTHOLOGY

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Watch Party: Watching Jessica Jones Watch Others

Eric Ross

The first season of *Jessica Jones* asks viewers to see it as a story about rape, patriarchal control, and female agency, but the formal elements of the show's construction reveal that tensions between public and private spaces, and the subsequent violation of those spaces, are integral to its representation of justice, vengeance, and agency in an increasingly murky universe. This tension calls into question how far one should be willing to go for justice. Violation of personal space is manifested most explicitly by the villainous Kilgrave and his ability to control people. However, Jessica herself routinely violates the personal space of others in her capacity as a private investigator, and as the series progresses, the line between hero and villain begin to blur. This is a particularly important point for twenty-first-century audiences as the power and ubiquity of digital surveillance technology grows and laws and law enforcement are slow to catch up. As such, ordinary citizens are more and more at the mercy of this technology as they cling to whatever shred of privacy there is left. As Michel Foucault wrote in 1975, "Our society is one . . . of surveillance" ([1975] 1995, 217).

Jessica Jones illustrates for its audience what Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* called "panopticism." A panopticon is a kind of building originally designed by Jeremy Bentham in the late eighteenth century. It consists of a central tower surrounded by a circular building. This outlying building would contain a number of cells with each one having a window facing toward the tower and an opposite window facing away. As Foucault describes it, "By the effect of backlighting, one can observe from the tower, standing out precisely against the light, the small captive shadows in the cells of the

periphery" ([1975] 1995, 200). The whole structure is designed to allow one guard to be able to observe all of the inmates simultaneously, consolidating power into the central structure. This state of "permanent visibility . . . assures the automatic functioning of power" (201).

The title credits of *Jessica Jones* immediately establish this theme by using a highly stylized animation that shows a montage of scenes around New York City, culminating in a close-up of an eye before the start of every episode. The first three shots in this sequence establish the voyeurism that will become a mainstay of the show's cinematography. At first the viewer sees mostly dark colours as the camera moves slowly to the right before emerging behind a building to peer into an alley as a dark figure walks away from the viewer. This is immediately followed by a shot of another shadowy-looking woman in profile walking down the street, but this time we as viewers are positioned as though we are riding in a car and slowly driving alongside the woman: watching out the window while she remains seemingly oblivious. Finally, we transition to a view of a window with the shadowy outline of a figure standing in it. Here, we are positioned outside the building and at least two storeys below the window, looking up.

The rest of the title sequence is accompanied by a montage of similar windows with similar figures and other people in alleyways as the music crescendos and a human face is finally revealed, presumably Jessica's, in profile with the focus on her eye. The image fills the left half of the screen before fading again to reveal the series title. And then the episode begins. The giant eye appearing at the end of this montage of urban scenes implies that each of the images was taken from the point of view of the eye, or in this case from Jessica. So right away, the show establishes Jessica's role as the voyeur surveilling the city, peering into the private lives of others through windows or stalking individuals outside without their noticing.

Surveillance has long been a trope of literature, especially in the superhero, detective, and noir genres, genres that *Jessica Jones* borrows heavily from. In detective fiction, in particular the works of Raymond Chandler or Agatha Christie, surveillance is often employed in a transgressive way by detectives and private investigators as a means to uncover the crimes and abuses of the rich and powerful. However, the role of surveillance in fiction has been complicated in the post-9/11 era. The war on terror has led to a number of different breakthroughs in visual surveillance technologies, and the resulting images have filtered into popular culture through mass and popular media,

whether it is drone footage of the Middle East (Parks 2013), home surveillance technologies like doorbell cameras, or, to use another superhero-related example, the climactic scene in 2008's *The Dark Knight* in which Batman uses surveillance data in cell phones to locate the Joker. In many of these instances, surveillance is seen, at worst, as a technology of the powerful rather than a tool to be used against them, and, at best, as an ambivalent put powerful tool available to anyone. This is the terrain that *Jessica Jones* is operating in, at once appealing to the traditional use of surveillance in detective fiction while also engaging with some of the wariness surrounding post-9/11 surveillance technology.

Foucault's panopticon is, again, instructive. He goes to great lengths to demonstrate how the functioning of power is so automatic that the panopticon no longer requires a guard at all, the goal being

> to arrange things [so] that the surveillance is permanent in its effects even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers. ([1975] 1995, 201)

Essentially, the functioning of the panopticon ensures that anyone can operate its mechanisms, even the prisoners themselves. Indeed, it even comes to rely on the assumption of the constraints of power: "He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power . . . ; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection" (202). Thus, in this state where the threat of surveillance is constant, people take it upon themselves to enforce discipline on themselves and on the others around them in order to avoid punishment. This resembles what Deleuze calls a society of continuous control. Under continuous control, the state cares only that the individuals under its control are in the correct zone or in the right place, that one fits the algorithm (1992, 7).

Jessica Jones demonstrates several things about surveillance in our twenty-first-century world. It demonstrates the power of surveillance to

objectify individuals as specimens to be observed, and questions how we, the viewers, should feel about it. It demonstrates how the mechanisms of surveillance can be used by just about anyone for a variety of purposes. Michalis Lianos points out that by the early twenty-first century, what had seemed like a coherent project of control, as described by Foucault, has been fractured by privatization, the easy access to technology, and the diffusion of control (2003, 426). This situation has created a reality in which the many are able to see and monitor the few, or even in which the many can monitor the many, using digital technology. This is what Thomas Mathiesen refers to as the "synopticon" (1997, 215), where individuals use peer-to-peer surveillance or "lateral surveillance" (Andrejevic 2005) for security purposes. Crucially for Mathiesen, we live in what he calls a "viewer society" (1997, 219), a society that normalizes the experience for everyone of being both constantly watched by others and constantly watching others. This is especially relevant for both Jessica Jones the character and *Jessica Jones* the show.

The first scene of the show continues with all of these themes. The camera follows a couple as they walk back to their car at night and proceed to have sex in the back seat. As the viewer follows them, they are always seen from a distance: from behind a fence, through a car window, or from odd angles—above them as they walk, or very low to the ground once they reach the car. As they move, the camera occasionally stops in a freeze-frame, accompanied by the sound of a shutter, to imply that Jessica is taking pictures of them. All this happens while we hear Jessica in a voice-over saying,

> New York may be the city that never sleeps, but it sure does sleep around. Not that I'm complaining, cheaters are good for business. A big part of the job is looking for the worst in people. Turns out, I excel at that. Clients hire me to find dirt, and I find it; which shouldn't surprise them, but it does. Knowing it's real means they've got to make a decision. One: do something about it, or two: keep denying it, shoot the messenger, tell me I'm getting off on ruining their already shitty lives. Option two rarely pans out. (ep. 1.01, "AKA Ladies' Night")

As her monologue continues the scene shifts to a view of the door to her apartment with a frosted glass window that reads "Alias Investigations." Behind the window we can see silhouettes and hear a muffled argument. As

the monologue ends, a man crashes through the glass window; Jessica then emerges to say, "and then there's the matter of your bill" as the scene ends. Besides establishing that Jessica spends her time watching others, especially "at their worst," with its implications of privacy violation, Jessica's introductory monologue sets up a shallow defence of her violations by first appealing to morals. Her first line seems to chastise New York City and its residents for their loose morals as "cheaters," before she ultimately pivots to appealing to business and talent.

Jessica seems to be trying to persuade the viewer that what she is doing is not wrong, because she is being paid. She is a small business owner who is hired to watch people. This is what her clients ask her to do, and she is very good at her job. For Jessica, her role is to find the truth and to report that truth to her clients in the form of photographic and eyewitness evidence. Here she has positioned herself pre-emptively opposite Kilgrave, whose violations of personal space and privacy aim simply to serve himself and his own agenda, while Jessica is serving others and "the truth." Despite Jessica's defence of her own actions, the work of the camera during this scene, as well as several others, seems to suggest that her actions are less than noble.

The most salient point of this conception of the surveillance state is that it completely democratizes power. Technology "subtly arranged so that an observer may observe, at a glance, so many different individuals, also enables everyone to come and observe any of the observers" (Foucault [1975] 1995, 207). For Foucault, the panopticon functions because the inmates allow it to function by doing most of the work themselves. Mark Andrejevic extrapolates from this idea in his analysis of the modern surveillance state, where the constant threat of surveillance encourages individuals to police themselves and others, or, as he writes, where everyone is "simultaneously urged to become spies" (2005, 479). Anyone can exercise such power as long as the threat exists, and while that power is primarily exercised by states and other kinds of institutional authority, "it would be wrong to believe that the disciplinary functions were confiscated and absorbed once and for all by a state apparatus" (49). Rather, some of the work of surveillance and discipline is left to ordinary individuals within a society (Foucault [1975] 1995, 215). Indeed, modern video and electronic surveillance functions in the same way by surrounding us with digital recording devices, such that we never know who or if anyone is watching (Koskela 2000, 243).

The distribution of surveillance technology was supposed to occasion a sense of security and safety, but instead it mostly just makes a society where people are always afraid. In *Jessica Jones*, nearly all of the main characters—Jessica, Kilgrave, Trish, Simpson, Luke Cage, and Malcolm—engage in some form of surveillance of others, whether by stalking them, or breaking into their homes, or watching them on camera. As the show progresses toward its final confrontation with Kilgrave, it takes on a more traditional superhero-action format with a series of smaller confrontations leading to the final battle, but for the first half of the show's first season Jessica engages in a significant amount of stalking, snooping, and sleuthing around the city as she attempts to find Kilgrave and solve a number of mysteries around his return and their mutual past together.

During these scenes, as Jessica sneaks around looking in windows and breaking into buildings in search of clues, the camera's positioning reflects the scenes of stalking that we see in the show's opening title credits. These sequences serve to heighten the self-awareness on our part as viewers that implicates us in Jessica's actions. We are stalking her as she stalks other characters in the show. Christian Metz (1982) calls this phenomenon primary cinematic identification. Scott Richmond applies this idea specifically to superhero films, writing that the viewer is encouraged to think of themselves as an observer within the world of the film, unraveling the boundary between diegetic and non-diegetic space: "such unraveling follows directly from the perceptual arrangement of the cinema, which gives us a world from which we are constitutively absent and therefore in which I am 'all-perceiving' " (2012, 131). So we are encouraged not only to identify and sympathize with Jessica, but our identification with the camera itself encourages us to be critical of her as well.

Kilgrave is first seen in the season's second episode. Without ever directly showing his face, the camera follows him as he enters an apartment and informs the residents that he will be their guest, and he uses his powers to command the family several more times in the scene. All of this is in full view of the viewer. We see Kilgrave's actions fully and we understand him to be the villain of the show because of it. Over the season's first two hours we learn more and more about Kilgrave's terrible powers and his obsession with Jessica, but in his first appearance we see the true nature of his powers. Not only is Kilgrave violating the physical space of this family by forcibly entering their home and taking up residence, but he continues to rob them of their free

will and agency by forcing the children to stay in the closet while forcing the adults to serve him dinner with a smile on their faces.

Whenever Kilgrave is violating the space of others the camera makes no attempt to hide or distort him. He is rarely shown through another object or in reflection. Knowing they are witnessing the show's villain, the viewer has no illusions about his wrongdoing. Whether it his casually telling someone to stab themselves, or to cut their own heart out, or to jump off a ledge, the show wants the viewers to see Kilgrave's evil head-on: to hear him issue the commands, and for the victims to follow orders while Kilgrave goes about his business. It is important for the series to establish Kilgrave as the villain, and to do so it is important that he be observed fully.

Setting herself apart from the sociopathic Kilgrave, Jessica declares that "My greatest weakness is that occasionally I give a damn" (ep. 1.02, "AKA Crush Syndrome"). It's this distinction that grows more important as the series progresses and the line between the two characters blurs even more. At the end of the third episode, it is revealed that someone has been taking photographs of Jessica all over the city for Kilgrave. This unsettling revelation is made more interesting because of the similarities between these pictures of Jessica and the pictures that she herself has taken of others, including her now lover, Luke Cage.

Jessica has invested a great deal of effort into creating a distinction between herself and Kilgrave, frequently justifying her actions in her voice-over monologues or in conversation with other characters. Despite often operating outside of the law, she frequently refers to herself as a small business owner, and later, as the series sees her pivot to hunting down Kilgrave full-time, she speaks of her sense that her mission is for the "good" of everyone. In an early scene, after it has been revealed that Jessica has been stalking Luke and taking pictures of him and his lover, Jessica lies to protect herself by claiming that the woman's husband had hired her to see if she was cheating. It is, however, later revealed that this is not the case, and that the woman's husband had no idea. When the woman comes to Jessica's office to confront her, Jessica dodges the accusation that she is a stalker by telling the woman that she "ruined her own marriage" (ep. 1.02, "AKA Crush Syndrome"). Later still, when Jessica is attempting to steal an anesthetic called Sufentanil to use on Kilgrave, she says in her monologue, "Knocking out one clerk to catch Kilgrave? Worth it. Knocking out two people? Still the right call" (ep. 1.03, "AKA It's Called

Whiskey"). Jessica ultimately reconsiders, but only after the arrival of a pregnant doctor and a security guard.

Perhaps Kilgrave would have gone ahead with the heist and knocked everyone out, but this scene illustrates what Jessica meant by "occasionally giv[ing] a damn." Jessica's initial desire to commit assault in order to commit theft in order to track down and apprehend Kilgrave represents an appeal to a broader sense of social good. In her mind, the elimination of Kilgrave is worth breaking the law. This sense of vigilante justice is common in superhero stories. In these incidents, superheroes often justify their unlawful actions as eventually benefitting the community that they hope to protect and serve.

Setting aside the legality of Jessica's actions, this devotion to the community and to her ideas about justice embodies the disciplinary ideals of Foucault. Despite the fact that Jessica breaks the law a number of times during the show's first season, her desire to protect her community shows her allegiance to the institutional authorities already in place. The main driver of the show is Jessica's desire to capture Kilgrave and prove the innocence of Hope Shlottman, the young NYU student whom Kilgrave compelled to murder her own parents. Rather than simply break Hope out of prison using her own superpowers, Jessica seeks, at first, to preserve the integrity of the justice system by working within its limits to put Kilgrave behind bars. Jessica is constantly reminded by Hogarth of the need to complete her investigation by the book, or rather to give Hogarth a real story that will be usable in a court of law. Thus, much of the first part of the season focuses on Jessica's attempts to either elicit a confession out of Kilgrave or collect usable evidence of him wielding his powers—evidence that she attempts to collect through digital video surveillance.

During the season's fourth episode, Jessica begins the hunt for the person who has been taking photographs of her around the city. As she combs through hours of police footage, she says in voice-over, "Now I know how it feels. Someone watching your every move, seeing you in private moments" (ep. 1.04, "AKA 99 Friends"). The pain she feels at having been watched grants her a degree of empathy for the people that she watches. However, just as this feeling begins to set in, Jessica goes out to complete another job, and what follows is the season's most extensive use of the stalking camera effect.

Earlier, Jessica had been hired by a woman named Audrey Eastman to find out whether or not her husband had been cheating on her. Jessica initially suspects that Audrey is being used by Kilgrave to set a trap for her, but

after observing her for thirteen hours, she is convinced that she is not under his influence. For a full two minutes the camera alternates between shots of Audrey's husband and Jessica as she follows him around a dark and mostly abandoned neighbourhood. During this time, the two figures are partially obscured behind fence posts, walls, and glass windows as Jessica watches the husband enter a building and then a room to meet with his "mistress." When Jessica enters the room, it is revealed that the "mistress" in question is actually Audrey. Only then do we learn that the whole situation was contrived so that Audrey could try to kill Jessica as revenge for her mother's death during the events depicted in the first *Avengers* film.

This scene does little to alter the arc of the story, but it does present the stalking camera effect in a way that had not been seen before in season 1. The extended use of the stalking camera in this scene serves two purposes. First, it serves to heighten the sense of pain that Jessica felt at being watched earlier in the episode and to transfer some of that unease to the viewer. By partially obscuring the figures around corners or behind objects, the viewer's position in relation to Jessica and the husband is foregrounded, as are the camera's attempts at observing without being seen. This is especially apparent when we consider the previous scene, in which Jessica feels the pain of having her space violated by her as yet unknown stalker.

Second, the technique itself illustrates the democratization of power through surveillance. It forces viewers to be aware of the fact that they are watching Jessica just as she watches the husband. As we have seen, the whole situation is merely a trap set for Jessica, and so the use of the lurking camera serves as a warning for Jessica that she is in fact being watched, and not just by her stalker or by the viewers, but by the Eastmans, who are trying to kill her.

Jessica is the titular character of the series, the hero and the protector of the streets of Hell's Kitchen; it is her duty to observe and to watch. She is the guard in the guard tower. But, as in any fully realized surveillance state described by Foucault or Lianos, power functions here so as to "enable everyone to come and observe any of the observers" (Foucault [1975] 1995, 207). And indeed, anyone with access to a Netflix account can observe Jessica Jones as she observes others, and the camera's positioning and movement draws attention to that. But Netflix viewers must also be aware of the ways in which they are themselves watched, not by Jessica or Kilgrave, but by Netflix itself. Users are constantly reminded of this when the streaming service asks if they would like to continue watching their chosen show or movie, or whether they

would like to watch something else. Netflix's algorithms watch us so well, and are so sophisticated, that they recommend additional content based on the aggregate viewing data of users ("Privacy Statement" 2022).

By the season's second half, however, Jessica has devoted her energy full-time to tracking down Kilgrave, her PTSD driving her more and more to focus solely on her mission of justice. But the closer she gets to Kilgrave, the more her quest for justice seems like a quest for revenge. By this point in the series, having seen the full and gruesome extent of his powers with each new and shockingly evil punishment that he inflicts on people across the city, the audience has no illusions about Kilgrave. The show has now completely abandoned the lurking camera aesthetic, and there is no longer any question that what Jessica's doing is the "right" thing to do. Kilgrave is evil and must be stopped by any means necessary. By abandoning the lurking camera effect, the series is no longer questioning the potentially sinister nature of modern surveillance, and is instead falling back on the typical vigilante notion that to act in the face of evil is not only morally justified, but necessary.

As the hunt for Kilgrave grows more desperate, Jessica's and Kilgrave's methods begin to take on ever closer resemblances. The audience witnesses the decentralization of power and surveillance as Jessica and Kilgrave simultaneously stalk each other using video and digital technologies, tracking each other's movements throughout the city. About halfway through the first season, Kilgrave kidnaps Jessica and holds her prisoner in her childhood home, threatening the lives of a chef and maid that he has hired to make their lives more comfortable together should she attempt to escape. Jessica manages to escape after knocking Kilgrave unconscious with drugs. She then kidnaps him and holds him prisoner in a sealed, soundproof room that has been flooded with water and contains an exposed wire.

Jessica's kidnapping of Kilgrave is constantly normalized by her motivation to prove Hope Shlottman's innocence by catching Kilgrave's powers on camera, as well as by Kilgrave's manipulations of Jessica's friends to later secure his own escape. However, in addition to Kilgrave's illegal abduction, both he and Jessica put innocent lives at risk: Kilgrave with the chef and maid at Jessica's home, Jessica when she sends Kilgrave's biological parents into the sealed room to goad him into using his powers. Up until the point where Kilgrave escapes, one could even reasonably claim that Jessica's actions are worse. Kilgrave did not coerce Jessica to return to her childhood home, and while there he did not force her to do anything; he threatened the lives of

the staff, to be sure, but that claim would be difficult to defend in a court of law. Jessica, by contrast, abducted Kilgrave and held him in a sealed room, and videotaped the entire incident. These scenes also feature a kind of literal acting out of the panopticon as Jessica, Trish, and Hogarth each take turns monitoring the video equipment while Kilgrave remains locked in his cell.

Despite her determination to see justice done within the confines of the American criminal justice system, Jessica is reminded by her adopted sister, Trish Walker, and her employer, the lawyer Jeri Hogarth, that any evidence she might collect while holding Kilgrave prisoner would be obtained under duress and therefore deemed inadmissible. In response, Jessica lures a police detective to the room, holds him prisoner by handcuffing him to a pipe, and forces him to witness Kilgrave using his powers on his biological parents. The police detective, forced as he is to observe the proceedings, serves as a stand-in for the institutional authority to which Hogarth and Jessica need to appeal. All of this is done so that Jessica can "bring down" Kilgrave and prove Hope's innocence. During the demonstration, Kilgrave eventually drops the innocent exterior and reveals himself to be as evil as he is accused of being. In the room with his parents, Kilgrave forces his mother to kill herself; when Jessica's electrical trap then fails to go off, she must enter the room to save Kilgrave's father, allowing Kilgrave to escape with the help of the detective and Hogarth.

Kilgrave's actions further solidify his status as an evil character and emphasize the need for Jessica to stop him by any means necessary. His actions cannot and should not be tolerated, but by failing to call into question Jessica's actions in pursuit of him, the series chooses not to challenge Jessica's own illegal and often dangerous methods. Her past experiences with Kilgrave—the rape, assault, and other violations—have caused her significant trauma that she has not truly begun to adequately deal with beyond her own self-medicating. This PTSD resulting from her being forced to confront her rapist have turned this mission of justice into a dangerous quest for revenge. The moment before the lurking camera effect is abandoned, Jessica realizes how damaging it is to be the object of surveillance and illegal stalking, and she seemingly has a realization that she must begin to question her own methods. In the end, however, she does not change her methods even as the series loses the self-reflexivity of the lurking camera. This seems to suggest that, no matter Jessica's own actions, because her hunt for Kilgrave is based in a desire to see justice done, for the good of all, she must be free to defeat Kilgrave even if this means

compromising her own desire for justice. Her clarity of purpose demands it. But what does it demand of us, and are we willing to accept those terms?

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