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## ***The Fall* and Television Noir**

### **Lindsay Steenberg**

A woman is cleaning the bathroom. She is shot from behind leaning over the bathtub, with the door to the bathroom intruding in the frame, implying that she is being watched by an unidentified voyeur. As she turns around, we see that she is wearing a cosmetic face mask. We watch from behind half open doors, as the woman removes her mask, packs a suitcase with the accoutrements of professional femininity and sits down on the bed with her laptop to read a newspaper article about the murder of a professional woman. The shot then cuts to a resonant and uncanny parallel sequence of a masked man breaking into another woman's house. There can be no doubt that this will be a show about hunting women.

This is the stylishly shot opening sequence of the first season of *The Fall* (2013-), a Belfast-set series about a man who stalks, rapes and murders women. It is also a series about the female investigator who is tracking him – the well-groomed and disciplined DCI Stella Gibson (Gillian Anderson). It is not a murder mystery, as we already know the identity of the killer – Paul Spector (Jamie Dornan), the masked man in this first sequence.<sup>1</sup> Nor is it a slow mapping of the forensic procedures that will lead DCI Gibson through all of Spector's careful criminal footprints. *The Fall* belongs to a new sub-species of transnational crime-based programming, which is self-conscious, if not self-reflexive, in its mobilization of noir and Gothic tropes to aspire to the cinematic.

From its very first shots, *The Fall* insists on its visual and thematic pre-occupations: the porous border between female victim and hero; the fetishizing gaze of the pathological voyeur; a deliberate (perhaps overwrought) invocation of both noir and the Gothic; and the philosophical underpinnings of murderous masculinity. Poised to begin its third season, *The*

*Fall* is provoking in its gender politics, stylish in its aesthetics and deliberate in its intellectualism.

It is this self-awareness, both in terms of gender and genre, that makes the show such a rich object of study; and yet, as much as this article is an investigation into *The Fall* (which it uses as a key case study), it is also a study of the label ‘noir.’ It is my aim to use noir and its scholarship to shed light on *The Fall* and its complex gender politics and genre position. Even more significantly, my goal is to use *The Fall* to illuminate the complex ways in which noir currently operates across Anglo-American television and culture. Given the glut of noir-labelled texts and noir-related scholarship, I have questioned whether there is anything left to say about noir. The success and controversies surrounding *The Fall*’s broadcast strongly suggest that there is more to be said. I would argue that *The Fall* is proof that something new is happening around the label and practice of noir and this article is a step to uncover how noir has been revived on television and, in a small way, an intervention into the history of a complex critical and theoretical term.

There are two interwoven strands to this article; the first is concerned with an analysis of *The Fall* using a combination of textual analysis, critical reception study, as well as a wider consideration of its stars (Gillian Anderson and Jamie Dornan) and the paratexts circulating around the show and its production. The second looks to the label of noir itself. My interest here is in the televisual expression of noir; its exceptionally deliberate engagement with the discourses of noir and its interface with the Gothic. While my methods draw heavily from the scholarship around film noir, my questions are specific to the medium of television, where I argue noir now finds its most productive expression. British television, in particular, has been a fertile environment for noir – for the kinds of programs that are received by critics on both sides of the Atlantic as complex, realist and significant. In this sense, the reception of British television noir has much in common with that of American ‘quality’ television

aired on channels such as HBO.<sup>2</sup> Both British noir and American ‘quality’ television represent programming that critics credit as engaging in interesting ways with issues of gendered violence, criminal pathology and social climate. At stake and central to both of these avenues of inquiry, and to *The Fall*’s themes and narratives, are questions about how and why sexual violence has become not only entertaining but a guarantor of artistic legitimacy and authenticity.

### ***The Fall* and Feminism: A Troubled Relationship**

In 2013 when *The Fall* aired on BBC 2 philosophical framings of serial killers were well established, to the point of being both dated and generically exhausted.<sup>3</sup> *The Fall*, however, sought to differentiate itself from the sensationalism of the serial killer narrative (common to programs such as *Criminal Minds* [2005-]) with its aspirations towards feminist social commentary and by layering a political charge through its Belfast setting. Such claims to the series’ feminism as well as its post-Troubles Irishness are among the most mentioned aspects of the show’s critical reception, particularly within the UK. These two elements work in tandem to foreground the ways in which the show is different from other female-led Anglo-American crime series such as *Silent Witness* (1996--) or *Body of Proof* (2011-2013). The *Atlantic*’s Amy Sullivan calls *The Fall*, “the most feminist show on television” (2015) and the *Independent*’s Tom Stanley says it is both feminist and anti-men (2014). The show’s writer, Allan Cubitt, insists on the importance of a sense of place to the show’s success while simultaneously arguing that one of his aims was “to tackle head-on issues of male violence against women” by featuring a female detective (2013). On the whole, the show and its politics have been critically well received<sup>4</sup> – both as an example of feminist television drama and as a series that thoughtfully taps into Belfast’s history of sectarian violence. As with *Broadchurch* (2013-) and *Hinterland* (2013-), the foregrounding of place, which to some British or American audiences might be read as exotically other, connected these fictions to

the Nordic noir programs and their remakes also being screened on the BBC (e.g. *Wallander* [2005-2013; 2008-]).<sup>5</sup>

While *The Fall's* gender politics have been lauded by many media critics, feminist television scholars have been more conflicted in their reception of the show. In her discussion of *The Fall's* Gothic provenance Lisa Coulthard highlights its uneasy and unconvincing balance between critiquing the violent voyeurism of the crime genre and glamorizing Paul Spector as a sexual predator. She argues, “the series thwarts this self-reflexivity and diegetic critique of voyeurism through its representation of sexualized violence and its own fascination with the killer’s good looks and fit body, his psychology, and his family life.” (forthcoming).

Deborah Jermyn’s personal ambivalence about the program’s gender politics becomes central to her analysis of *The Fall*. She uniquely couples a very personal reading of the show (in which she is disgusted by it and deeply unconvinced of its feminist claims) with more traditional television studies approaches such as textual analysis and reception study. She observes, “My ire was prompted by the particular nature of *The Fall's* salacious representation of the murder of women and its simultaneous disingenuous evocation of a feminist consciousness – a spuriously drawn ‘double entanglement’” (2016, 4).

There are many moments during which the program enacts this ‘double entanglement’ suggesting that the tension between challenging and naturalizing sensationalist violence against women is an inbuilt feature. One example is the opening sequence that fronts this article – a sequence which demonstrates how *The Fall* interconnects its fetishization of Stella Gibson (and her professional power) and Paul Spector, the only character whose viewpoint is shared by the camera in a hand held style that suggests the ‘killer cam’ of the horror genre. Another example of the show’s ambivalent navigation between sensationalism and feminism is Stella Gibson’s resistance to reading anything philosophical in Spector’s acts. She dismisses his violence as “misogyny; age old male violence against women.” Here Gibson

refuses to accept many of the ways that the show frames Spector's crimes: driven by a politicized and troubled childhood (his absent father is a British soldier); filtered through his knowledge of literature and art (T.S. Eliot's poetry; Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy; Henry Fuseli's Gothic painting) and juxtaposed against his role as father and grief counsellor. As a character, Gillian Anderson's Stella Gibson does not accept any excuses or the framing of Spector's crimes as anything other than repulsive and criminal assaults on women. The visual and narrative economy of the television series, however, is at odds with Gibson's politics.<sup>6</sup>

This ambivalence is down, at least in some measure, to Allan Cubitt who is himself aware of the almost impossible balance the show must strike between the exploitative and the confrontational. In a 2013 *Guardian* article he admits to a fascination with the serial killer mythology:

A key concern in creating dramas that tackle such issues is the degree to which they compound the problem by glamorising violence against women. Perhaps those people who have raised concerns about the issue of women in peril in [*The Fall*] are asking the wrong fundamental question. Surely the first question is: why write about a serial killer at all? (2013)

In its use of serial killer mythology *The Fall* inhabits a place of disconnect or hesitation between the critical reception that reads feminism into the show and feminist academics who argue that it is deeply troubling in its 'age old violence against women.' As I have argued elsewhere, the serial killer story is one in which violence is always confused with sex. It is also a story in which the relationship between the sexual predator and the female investigator

who stalks him is framed using romantic tropes (2011 and 2014). A production team must work overtime to present this mythology in any way other than prurient because it is a mythology of infamy, sexual violence, exploitation, and voyeurism.

The self-conscious, deliberate and frequently problematic use of the noir label (and associative elements) is the other key reason for the disconnect in the show's reception and explains the difference in the way scholars, critics and showrunners see the series. Along with its deliberate treatment of the gendered nature of violence and its investigation, *The Fall's* stylized cinematography and Belfast setting differentiate it from more traditional British crime shows, such as *Midsomer Murders* (1997-). These differences are part of the justification for the use of the term 'noir' by critics and showrunners - the show was dubbed "Ulster noir" by the *Guardian's* Gareth Rubin (2014), and considered as "Celtic noir" by television genre scholar Glen Creeber (2015). As a new kind of television noir *The Fall* earns its place alongside other highbrow crime programming aired on the BBC including Nordic noir imports such as *The Killing/Forbrydelsen*, co-productions such as *Top of the Lake* (2013-) and European offerings such as *Spiral/Engrenages* (2005--). I argue that British<sup>7</sup> crime programs such as *The Fall*, *Luther* (2010-2015), *Broadchurch*, and *Fortitude* (2015-) use the noir label as a filter to neutralize the prurient sensationalism of stories about serial rape and murder. The noir filter is a very successful legitimization strategy. It is a mobilization of the tropes, aesthetics and cultural myths circulating around film noir in order to call upon a history of critical acclaim and debate. The act of labelling something noir, particularly a visual fiction, is a way of insisting on its status as art. Indeed, given the rich ground film noir has provided for feminist film scholarship, through a judicious application of this filter/label, the word noir can imply or insist on readings that consider complex gender politics.

## What is Noir and Does it Still Matter?

Film noir is a worn and frayed category - much discussed by scholars, critics and filmmakers themselves. As many scholars have successfully argued, noir has travelled beyond its cinematic life-cycle to inhabit more diverse spaces –Scandinavian crime literature (the Nordic noir phenomenon); graphic novels (Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns* and the much more deliberate *X-Men Noir* series); videogames such as *L.A. Noire* and consumer products such as Tom Ford’s cologne, *Noir*.

Given spatial constraints, this article cannot offer a full and comprehensive summary of noir scholarship.<sup>8</sup> The story of noir is well known to many. It begins with the retrospective labelling of dark American films screened in postwar France by French critics such as Nino Frank (1947), Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton (2002 [1947]). Contributing to many of these dark films were the ex-pat directors and technicians fleeing Europe. Moving on from the studio era, the label is cemented by New Hollywood’s cinephiles, exemplified by Paul Schrader – through his screenplay for *Taxi Driver* (Scorsese 1976) and his treatise, “Notes on Film Noir.” In the wake of New Hollywood’s production of nostalgic neo-noirs such as *Chinatown* (Polanski 1974), scholarship around the classical period of noir takes off with a newfound energy. This is particularly true of feminist scholarship focusing on the representation of the ambivalent figure of the *femme fatale* at the heart of so many film noirs. James Naremore argues that “...film noir has become one of the dominant intellectual categories of the late twentieth century, operating across the entire cultural arena of art, popular memory, and criticism” (2008, 2).

Since Naremore’s assertion, the process of the dispersal of noir has intensified. The word noir has become a distended, indistinct term that can describe almost any object, text or cultural phenomenon that projects a mood of unhappiness or moral confusion. Cynically, it



sometimes appears that noir is only of use as a branding or marketing ploy, having little to do with the content of the texts being described or even the contexts in which they are produced or received. This imprecision or fluidity is one of the reasons why scholars sometimes struggle to define recent noirs. In the case of Nordic noir texts, for example, they are using disparate terminology, such as calling the phenomenon: a transnational brand (Novrup Redvall 2013, 163), a set of production values (Marit Waade and Majbritt Jensen 2013) and an “umbrella term” for a Scandinavian type of crime story “typified by its heady mixture of bleak naturalism, disconsolate locations and morose detectives” (Creeber 2015, 21).

I would argue that the simulacrum is the only precise term that can describe how noir is being used.<sup>9</sup> It is a fusion of nostalgia and imitation that can never fully function as a generic category, but nonetheless becomes a widely circulating way of identifying certain types of television shows. These shows feel familiar or resonant because they remind us of memories of certain kinds of cinema or crime literature. Television noir renders this simulacrum particularly visible because the television noir text (whether it is Nordic or Celtic) always reaches out for other media. Creeber describes television noir (using in this case *True Detective* [2014-] as a prime example) as “harnessing the sheer breadth of the long-form narrative to embrace and nourish stories that are as visually stunning as film and as complex and multi-layered as the novel” (2015, 31). It is significant that many Celtic noirs and, indeed, Nordic noirs have been linked to the so-called ‘quality’ television serials of cable providers such as HBO. These cable serials pride (and market) themselves on their cinematic qualities and insist that they are *more* than television.

If, as Helen Wheatley has convincingly argued that “television is the ideal medium for the Gothic” (2006, 1) then television noir, which has an intimate relationship with the Gothic, sits in a less comfortably uncanny place. The very televisual qualities that serve to identify noir

programming are framed as being something *other* than television (cinematic, novelistic, artistic even).

This case study of *The Fall* reveals that the label noir can be used as a legitimization strategy and as a demand to be taken seriously, despite the presentation of subject matter that has been associated with sensationalism, exploitation and the tabloid. Noir is also used to ensure a kind of low budget, grassroots authenticity often tied to violence. The tug of war between sensationalist and elitist cultures of art is an established part of the history of noir as a theoretical concept, as Naremore explores in depth with regards to the Poverty Row films of the studio era and later cinephile exhumations and imitations of those films (2008, 136-166). He argues that using the noir label (and deploying its associations with modernism) to elevate sensationalist materials is ultimately unsuccessful. In the case of Poverty Row remakes, he claims that “When Hollywood converts its old thrillers into art, it gives them more significance than they can bear...” (2008, 160-161). I would argue that this unbearable burden of noir is manifest in *The Fall*, in which the system of noir (and its associations with art and authenticity) is unable to contain the excesses of the serial killer mythology and Gothic inflection of its postfeminist investigator.

### **The Gothic-Noir interface**

The next section of this article looks at this interface between television noir and the Gothic, as a kind of coping strategy for dealing with the overburdened system of noir. The interplay between noir and Gothic is an established association which TV noir shares with the media of popular literature and cinema. Tania Modleski calls our attention to the relative under-theorization of the Gothic when compared with noir.

Significantly, this second ‘Gothic revival’ [beginning in 1938 with Daphne Du Maurier’s *Rebecca*] took place at the same time that

'hard-boiled' detective novels were attracting unprecedented number of male readers. While Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler were persistently scapegoating women..., the paranoid fears of women were receiving new life. In the forties, a new movie genre derived from Gothic novels appeared around the time that hard-boiled detective fiction was being transformed by the medium into what movie critics currently call 'film noir.' Not surprisingly, film noir has received much critical scrutiny both here and abroad, while the so-called 'gaslight' genre has been virtually ignored. (1982, 21)

This gendered gap in scholarly attention is beginning to be addressed, inspired by feminist theorists such as Modleski. Germane to this piece are those scholars, such as Helen Hanson (2007) and Nina K. Martin (2007), who are looking at the overlaps (and sometimes confusion) between noir and the Gothic. Rather than seeing the cinematic Gothic as a feminine version of noir, they more usefully look at the exchanges of influences between the two types of films, in classical Hollywood and more recently. The Celtic noirs, of which *The Fall* is illustrative, are definitive examples of hybrids between the Gothic and noir. They rely on both traditions equally, although I would argue (following Modleski) it is the noir aspects that can be more effectively mobilized as quality assurance techniques. This may be one of the most significant reasons why such television programming is labelled Celtic (or Nordic) noir rather than Celtic Gothic, and it is why I will refer to programming like *The Fall* as TV noir throughout this article.

### **The Homme Fatal**

Most scholarship circulating around the Gothic-Noir interface, particularly feminist scholarship, tends to focus on the representation of female characters, in particular the

enduring trope of the *femme fatale*.<sup>10</sup> *The Fall* certainly relies on the conventions of the *femme fatale*: Gibson dominates the frame with her “strong, dangerous, and above all, exciting sexuality” (Place 1980, 36) and remains irresistible to the men around her. Her polished sartorial choices also recall the elegant tailoring of classical era *femme fatales* such as Vivian Rutledge (Lauren Bacall) in *The Big Sleep* (Hawks 1946). I would like to widen the scope, or perhaps shift it, to examine in greater detail the character of the *homme fatal* and, as a specific case, Jamie Dornan’s performance of that role. The *homme fatal* of television noir is a character who is a fascinating pastiche of several memorable male (Gothic-Noir) types: the treacherous husband of the paranoid women’s film, the Adonis of the erotic thriller, the charismatic murderer of the serial killer myth, the taciturn hero of the Gothic romance.

Andrew Spicer describes noir’s *homme fatal* as “enigmatic, duplicitous and destructive...an exciting mixture of cool calculation, manipulative charm and deep-rooted sexual sadism” (2002, 89). Like Spicer, Brigitte Frizzoni sees him as the male equivalent of the *femme fatale*:

The Adonis, the erotic male, proves to be highly productive of suspense in the female crime novel. One development of this new character type is the *homme fatal* – the dangerously attractive man as counter-image of the *femme fatale*, at whose first appearance the reader immediately asks herself: Is this object of desire to be trusted? (Frizzoni 2009, 34)

The dangerously attractive men of the female crime novel (Frizzoni uses the Stephanie Plum series as illustrative) have much in common with those of the Gothic and the romance, and with what scholars such as Benjamin A. Brabon and Stephanie Genz (2007) have labelled the

postfeminist Gothic. However, the mystery of the erotic male is absent from *The Fall's* construction of Paul Spector – from the first episode we know he is not to be trusted: he is a killer of women. The first indication is the overworked uncanniness of the character's name. Added to this is Jamie Dornan's celebrity persona, which originates in his work as a Calvin Klein underwear model and gained him the most visibility through his controversial casting as sexually dominant hyper-capitalist Christian Grey in the film adaptation of *Fifty Shades of Grey* (Taylor-Johnson 2015). Paul Spector is the apotheosis of a disturbing type of male character: the tortured torturer. Perhaps this character's self-hatred and disillusionment builds on that of the postwar hardboiled noir hero and certainly he resonates with the anti-hero of newer 'quality' crime dramas such as *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013). Despite his resonance with earlier hardboiled masculinities, Dornan's *homme fatal* persona is firmly rooted in postfeminist media culture.

The tortured torturer has much in common with the brooding heroes of Harlequin romances described by Modleski. Like the stories featuring the contemporary tortured torturer, these fictions openly acknowledge his violence, "he *is* more or less brutal, and it is the function of the novels to explain such brutality in a lover. The very titles often indicate the basic conflict: *Enemy Lover*, *Beloved Tyrant*, *Fond Deceiver*, etc." (1982, 40). The explanations almost always involve past abuse (physical or psychological). Layered onto this past of abuse, are the deep reservations held by the tortured torturer about his performance of violence. He does not want to be brutal, but he must because the stakes are high and his violence is motivated by the 'right' reasons – either to protect his family or his country. *24's* (2001-2010) Jack Bauer (Keifer Sutherland) is a perfect example here, embodying an intersection point between the discourses of postfeminist masculinity and those of the post 9/11 'war on terror'. Bauer must commit the violence that others are unwilling and unable to perform. However, the psychological toll of perpetrating such violence is untenable and the

masochistic suffering of the violent man is used both as a way to excuse his brutality and, significantly, as a way of making him more attractive to women. The tortured torturer can be both hypermasculine and emotive – and his suffering acknowledges and, in some ways celebrates, the fundamental instability of violent, heroic (noir) masculinity.

Jamie Dornan's Paul Spector is the vicious apex of this masculine convention. His regret and outrage upon the discovery that one of his victims was an expectant mother is one example of how he inhabits this character type. Spector writes a letter to the victim's father apologizing for his crime and asking for forgiveness – he claims that he feels protective of children (he is a father of two and his wife is a neo-natal nurse). Like Hannibal Lector (another charming serial killer), Spector has a homicidal rule book that dictates a moral code determining who is eligible for murder and who is not. Spector's grief seems authentic in this moment as it does later when he apologizes to his daughter – a scene which is being watched by a troubled Stella Gibson. Gibson is moved to uncharacteristic tears by Oliva's (Sarah Beattie) loyalty to her father and Spector's fatherhood as a redeeming/redeemable masculine feature is used to encourage an empathetic reading of his character, providing further weight to the tortured torturer convention. The violent man's suffering is a powerful performance, which requires a mostly female audience (such as those associated with the female Gothic, the Harlequin, and the postfeminist Gothic crime novel). It is often presented using double framing devices. Spector's sad goodbye to his daughter is filmed, his homicidal philosophical rantings are recorded in a scrapbook, and when he films his torture of Rose Stagg (Valene Kane) he appears in the frame yelling at the camera: "Why the fuck are you watching this, you sick shit? What the fuck is wrong with you?" In the case of the last example, it is unclear to whom Spector's anger and disgust are addressed – at himself? at Gibson? or perhaps *The Fall's* audiences? Likely his angry masochism is deliberately choreographed for the benefit of all three.

Through these doubled framed devices, the tortured torturer must draw our attention to both his violent abilities *and* to the emotional price he must pay in using them. The spectator is asked to be impressed by both. In discussing Gothic masculinity, Benjamin A. Brabon argues that “[m]ale gender is now a ghostly performance of masculinity that is simultaneously hard and soft, macho and feminine” (2007, 58). Brabon argues that this performance of masculinity cannot be attributed to a straightforward backlash against second wave feminism or to the subsequent 1990s crisis in masculinity, because it is frequently self-destructive and aimed at other men. This is true of characters like Jack Bauer, but complicated by the star persona of a performer like Jamie Dornan, who received his Hollywood break playing the role of sexual dominator Christian Grey. The persona that Dornan brings to his roles suggests that his characters are always a risk to *women* rather than other men, despite his embodiment of many of the hard/soft features described by Brabon. Like the Adonis type described by Modleski and Frizzoni, Dornan’s characters present emotional risks to women – he might, like Christian Grey, be unable to love them because of an abusive past. However, like Paul Spector, he might be a physical risk to the women who find him attractive.

Dornan’s *Fifty Shades of Grey* casting was announced in October of 2013, in between the broadcast of the first two seasons of *The Fall*. He replaced Charlie Hunnam, who left the film after only a month, while reports circulated that his departure was due to his distaste for the sexual sadism and misogyny of the role (Kroll 2013). Thus, Dornan’s two best known roles are mutually reinforcing versions of the *homme fatal*. Furthermore, his role as the huntsman/Sheriff in *Once Upon a Time* (2011-), the role for which he was best known in America at the time of his *Fifty Shades* casting, also informs his embodiment of the *homme fatal*. The character he plays in *Once Upon a Time* is the sheriff of the small town of Storybrooke, in which (Disney affiliated) fairytale characters are living double lives. Dornan

played the huntsman from *Snow White* as a desirable and conflicted hunter of lost girls. Almost all the roles that Dornan has played have added layers to the *homme fatal* persona, while the vast majority of his media appearances have insisted on his humility (his Irishness is offered as an antidote to the threat of A-List American celebrity corruption) and his threatening masculinity has been carefully managed by focusing on his role as a father – particularly around the release of *Fifty Shades of Grey* in 2015. Dornan’s Irish identity and the ways in which that fits in *The Fall*’s version of a Belfast-specific articulation of violence add a resonant layer to his star persona.

There is not space in this article to give the Irish context of *The Fall* its due attention and I would argue that, particularly in its international reception, the show’s Belfast location is sometimes emptied out of its political specificity. References to the country’s history of violence are generally limited to more marginal characters (one of whom is the man who shoots Spector at the close of the second season) and to the urban identity of Belfast as a noir city. It is, however, worth noting that Dornan’s performance of the Irish *homme fatal* recalls the charming Irish characters of classical Hollywood, including Orson Welles’ somewhat unconvincing embodiment of Irishness in the noir *The Lady from Shanghai* (Welles 1947). More usefully, Dornan’s *homme fatal* puts him in the context of a larger tradition of the Irish Gothic.<sup>11</sup> The Irish *homme fatal* inhabits a liminal space between the politically specific and the transnationally generic. Characters like Paul Spector, and perhaps Michael O’Hara in *The Lady from Shanghai*, embody masculine violence and suffering in polysemic and uncomfortable ways. The most significant manner in which this uncertainty manifests in *The Fall* is through Dornan/Spector’s role as a father.

While fatherhood is marginal in *Fifty Shades of Grey*, it is central in *The Fall*. In Spector’s role as father, and through the deeply disturbing use of children as witnesses, *The Fall* offers its unique take on the serial killer myth. Serial killers are rarely fathers in popular fiction,



although children have become integral to Celtic and Nordic noir television texts, which feature lost girls like 12-year-old Tui (Jacqueline Joe) in *Top of the Lake* and 19-year-old Nanna Birk Larsen (Julie R. Olgaard) in *Forbrydelsen/The Killing*; conflicted witnesses like Olivia in *The Fall* and ambivalent perpetrators such as Liam (Darwin Brokenbro) in *Fortitude*. Spector's performance as a dedicated father is one of the most discussed aspects of his character, and Dornan's fatherhood is often called upon in interviews to offer an insight into his role on *The Fall*. Fatherhood is a flashpoint where the tortured torturer can perform the kind of unstable spectral masculinity described by Brabon. As Margaret Cohen insists, "While the femme fatale is rarely a mother, the homme fatal is an undeniable father" (1992, 117-118).

As a signifier combining sensitivity, maturity and power, fatherhood is a fixture in television crime dramas, and there has been particular attention in more recent years to the single fathers of precocious daughters – for example Richard Castle (on *Castle* [2009-]), Jack Bauer on *24* and Cal Lightman on *Lie to Me* (2009-2011). Significantly, fatherhood on crime television fixates on the father/daughter relationship. Spector has two children and almost no screen time is given to his son. It is in Olivia's room (in the attic above her mobile) that Spector hides his murder scrapbook. It is Olivia alone that suspects her father is a killer, even if this is only expressed indirectly through her pictures and nightmares. It is Olivia who witnesses her father's assault on the 15-year-old babysitter, Katie (Aisling Franciosi). It is only to Olivia that Spector offers an apology for his crimes. It is Olivia's stalwart loyalty to her father that makes the indefatigable Stella Gibson cry. It is Olivia who throws into terrifying contrast Spector's violent misogyny. How can he love a little girl, but hate adult women? This very question is posed in a sequence in the second season of the program in which Spector sneaks into a former girlfriend's house and encounters her young daughter and

reassuringly puts her back to bed. How can he be kind to this little girl while in the very act of kidnapping her mother in order to rape, torture and murder her?

To a certain extent, fatherhood functions as an answer to this question as it is associated up with ideals of masculine power and property as well as paternal love. Spector is able to weaponize fatherhood and use it to his pathological advantage. When he breaks into Gibson's hotel room and reads her dream diary (in which she writes at length about her father) he devises a strategy for disconcerting her – by forcefully putting her in the role of needy daughter to an intimidating father. This angle of attack is successful and shows Gibson at her most vulnerable. Spector also measures his fatherhood against the paternal abilities of others. For example, he expresses his most vehement disgust and hatred not for the women he kills, but for soft men who fail as paternal protectors. When Spector describes killing Annie Brawley's brother to Gibson, he is filled with revulsion, calling him bourgeois and weak. This certainly provides evidence for Brabon's assertion that postfeminist masculinity does not exclusively focus its violence against women, but often (as in *Fight Club* [Fincher 1999]) directs it at feminized men. It is fitting that Spector is shot at the end of the series' second season not by Gibson but by the gangster whose wife Spector aided in escaping his abuse. Spector is severely wounded not by the cops who are hunting him, or by one of his victims or their families but by the thug whose family Spector helped to dismantle. Spector's double life reveals the dark underside of the postfeminist loving father; a devouring primal father who is particularly destructive to his own family. Television noir is uniquely drawn to stories revealing the horror and menace of the primal father – from Leland Palmer (Ray Wise) in *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991), to Joe Miller (Matthew Gravelle) in *Broadchurch*. While Paul Spector is perhaps singular in his combination of physical beauty with monstrous fatherhood, he draws on, and adds to, an established tradition in television noir.

Like the *femme fatale* before him, the *homme fatal* reveals anxieties and ambivalences around desire, voyeurism and the shifting public roles of men and women. Margaret Cohen argues that the “homme fatal crystallizes contemporary social anxieties around material and ideological threats to a traditional gendered division of labor, and particularly around the figure of the new man” (1993, 114). Building on Cohen’s argument, Spector’s *homme fatal* as primal father represents an evolutionary shift in the mythology of the serial killer revealing a pathological and violent element of the New Man. I would argue that *The Fall* frames this anxiety as belonging to the female members of its audience –specifically professional women. The show does not suggest that this might be paranoia, a term used to describe the fears of the threatened women of the female Gothic. Professional women *are* Spector’s victims. He presents himself as desirable to them (as the show presents him as desirable to his audience) and then he hunts them, rapes them and kills them in their own homes. This is a justifiably frightening scenario and the element of paranoia/suspicion suggested by the show is that all men (sensitive or not) have the capacity and perhaps desire to hurt women.

Unlike the wives of the paranoid women’s film, Spector’s wife Sally Ann (Bronagh Waugh) does not exist in a state of chronic anxiety about her husband’s propensity for violence. She does not suspect that her husband is a murderer and Gibson condemns her lack of insight, describing Sally Ann as “stupid and incurious, but innocent.” This is because Spector has cannily used the excuse of sexual infidelity to cover his psycho-pathology. When his wife catches him in a lie about his whereabouts on the night of Sarah Kay’s (Laura Donnelly) murder, Spector falsely confesses to sleeping with the babysitter. This lie is so in keeping with postfeminist narratives of masculine identity and ageing that Sally Ann does not question it. Therefore, her paranoia is exclusively retrospective (she looks back at all the times Spector might have been unfaithful) and divorced entirely from violence. In his complex and conflicted relationship with his wife, the mother of his children, Spector’s

performance of the *homme fatal* inhabits several levels of danger to women: firstly (and most significantly) his danger to the professional women he hunts and murders and secondly, to the woman who now questions the life and family she has built with him. Finally, although he repeatedly denies it, he represents a constant threat (experienced most poignantly by the audience) to daughters (his own and others’).

### **Showdown**

*The Fall* presents Stella Gibson, with her taciturn professionalism, as a mechanism to combat the risk and terror the *homme fatal* inspires. She functions as a kind of aspirational inoculation against the abject horror of Spector. Like so many other serial killer stories, *The Fall* presents Spector and Gibson in an elaborately performed cat-and-mouse chase between serial killer and profiler. This relationship is framed both in terms of eroticism and romance – a point frequently raised in interviews with Gillian Anderson and Jamie Dornan. As I have argued previously (2011), serial killer stories have an established tradition of framing the relationship between female profiler and serial killer as romantic. In *The Fall*’s second season in particular, Gibson and Spector exchange ever more verbose philosophical banter. Spector rifles through Gibson’s hotel room – reading her diary, riffling through her underwear and changing her computer desktop to the gothic painting *The Nightmare* by Fuseli. *The Fall* insists that they are well matched adversaries and, as the program is not a whodunit, one of its centrally unravelling mysteries is the nature of the relationship between Spector and Gibson. This relationship is the cornerstone of the show’s second season marketing – most notably in an article and photoshoot for the UK’s *Red* magazine (2013) which featured Anderson and Dornan smiling and cavorting in formal wear. This type of campaign is typical for Anderson – who famously appeared on the cover of *Rolling Stone* (1995) in bed with David Duchovny during the height of her *X-Files* (1993-) success and more recently features in publicity images coupled with *Hannibal*’s (2013-2015) Mads

Mikkelson. These marketing texts consistently frame Anderson as part of a celebrity couple, reinforcing the tense eroticism of her fictional relationships with men.

To the troubling convention of the pathological romance, I would like to add a further dimension to the Gibson/Spector couple – the showdown scenario: one that almost seems to recall the final gunfights common in the Western genre. To elaborate, Gibson and Spector are presented as postmodern apex predators called together to battle for the spectators' pleasure using the well-worn template of noir. This becomes *femme vs homme fatal(e)*; hardboiled nihilist vs. sensualist manipulator. As Gillian Anderson describes her character to Maureen Coleman of the *Belfast Telegraph* (2014), "It seems she is a hunter as well."

The serial killer is the top predator of postmodern urban life as depicted in contemporary media culture – a monster born in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that largely preys on women by realizing sadistic fantasies which confuse sex and violence. In *The Fall's* scenario, as Anderson's statement above testifies, Gibson is also a hunter. She is the best at her job, frightening in her professionalism and able to calmly tell journalists to "fuck off." Furthermore, she has the confidence to physically intimidate a group of much larger street thugs who have surrounded her on a darkened street corner in a Loyalist neighborhood in Belfast. Both characters are indeed hunters, but to frame them as equal foes and to associate Gibson's professional authority with monstrosity is as troubling as the pathological romance device.

Interestingly, even as the show and its marketing insist we read Gibson vs. Spector as battling monsters with a frisson of sexual tension, Gibson shuts those readings down. For example, when Gibson's lover, Tom Anderson (Colin Morgan), asks if she is attracted to him because he looks like the killer, Gibson is swift and forceful with her put down, "he might fascinate you. I despise him with every fibre of my being." Although I would argue that Gibson's

feminist assertions are undermined by the show itself (in particular its visual economy and marketing texts), it is gratifying that Gibson is afforded the opportunity to refute the investigator/killer romantic couple. Such a refusal is virtually absent from other serial killer stories, although such nuanced performances of feminist and/or professional women are appearing more frequently on television noir (e.g. Saga [Sofia Helin] on *The Bridge/Bron* [2011-]). Gibson embodies the show's complex position on gendered violence and voices its feminist aspirations most forcefully. Furthermore, it is around her characterization that most of the show's debates crystallize. It is the characterization of Gibson as professional, fearless and driven that critics have praised. Furthermore, it is in the ways that Gibson's feminist assertions are, to a certain extent, negated by the program as a whole that prompts many feminist critics to read the programme as regressive.

### **Some Conclusions on the Unbearable Burden of Noir**

In an article investigating the mythology surrounding the naming of film noir, Garry Leonard suggests that at the moment of its inception (in Nino Frank's seminal 1946 article) film noir was as much about the death of an old crime formula as it was about the innovations of a new kind of dark film.

At every point, [Nino Frank] connects his observations with what must have been the conscious intention of the film-makers. Their primary intention is to rejuvenate the police drama: '[W]e are witnessing the death of this formula.' So, it is not the 'birth' of film noir that is being noticed, but the 'death' of the police drama. (2014, 8)

Leonard's emphasis on noir as an invention of generic exhaustion is important to remember, as it puts noir in the context of the crime genre, which it is sometimes mistakenly seen to

transcend. A similar moment of invention is happening on contemporary television where we see television noirs (whether Celtic or Nordic) as active and deliberate responses to/innovations of the forensic procedural formula which had been dominating broadcast television in the wake of *CSI's* 2000 debut.

Thus, one way of looking at television noir is as an assertion about what it is *not*. It is absolutely not forensic procedural programming. It lacks the format's comforting repetitions and absolute faith in the unbiased truths of science. This, however, is not to predict the fall of the procedural form, rather its renewal and reinvention. What we are watching with *The Fall* is not the novelistic or the cinematic, but a new kind of televisual presentation tied inextricably to the crime genre and, with an insistent self-awareness, to discourses of noir. Despite its hyperreal status and diffusion in popular culture, I would argue that it is the medium of television which offers the best possibility for the re-constitution of noir as a useful theoretical concept. This is because, on television, noir has become simultaneously a brand, a set of production practices, a critical and production category and, as this article has argued, a problematic legitimation strategy designed to ensure a text's artistic significance. Like any generic label, television noir matters because a culture believes that it does – critics offer up 'noir' as a compliment and showrunners use it as a talisman to ward off the predictability of the forensic. As a theoretical category, television noir can function to map the shift in the way crime television texts are shot, told, marketed and received. It can also be used, as I hope it has been here, as a critical resource in questioning the gendered ways in which violence is narrativized and mythologized.

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<sup>1</sup> In his examination of the influence of Nordic noir on British television, Glen Creeber similarly draws attention to this opening sequence and the way it encapsulates the central themes of the series. "The opening of the first episode informs us a great deal about the overall mood and the theme of the drama as a whole...it appears to carefully craft a meditation on the nature of identity, examining the many 'masks' we all wear and exploring the hidden and sometimes dangerous spaces that exist between our public and private selves" (2015, 28-19).

<sup>2</sup> For further research on 'quality' television, please see Janet McCabe and Kim Akass' (2007) edited collection on the subject and Jason Mittell's *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Storytelling* (2015).

<sup>3</sup> It is deeply troubling that stories of men who murder women to feed ever more desperate misogynist fantasies have become so commonplace as to be predictable on popular television. Scholars such as Sarah Projansky (2000) and Tanya Horeck (2011) have made just such an observation on the proliferation of images of sexual violence; and in the case of Horeck with reference to shifts in the crime genre towards the Nordic noir brand of narrative, including *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, whose original title *Män som hatar kvinnor* translates literally as 'men who hate women' and features several acts of brutal sexualized violence.

<sup>4</sup> Deborah Jermyn claims that "[i]t had produced the highest drama ratings on the channel [BBC 2] for nearly a decade, and like *Prime Suspect* 20 years earlier, for a spell it was arguably the most talked about show on British television, chatter fuelled this time round not just by the water-cooler but by social media, Twitter, Tumblr and Instagram" (2016, 11).

<sup>5</sup> The term Nordic noir is generally applied to Scandinavian crime fiction featuring cynical investigators struggling to find some measure of justice in a broken society. The label originates in crime literature,

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associated with authors such as Stieg Larsson and Jo Nesbo. Currently, it has arguably become most associated with serial television crime dramas such as *The Killing/Forbrydelsen* (2007-2012).

<sup>6</sup> In the spirit of Jermyn's insistence on the personal nature of her response to *The Fall*, I feel I should add that my personal concerns with *The Fall* were never with its aspirations to feminism or with its feminist questions. What Anglo-American crime television needs is more feminism and more willingness to explicitly address violence against women not as a 'women's issue' but as an endemic social problem. I take some issue with the show's overwrought insistence on its artiness – through the use of noir and excessive philosophical dialogue and its use of well-worn serial killer conventions – in particular the killer's meticulously collaged scrapbook of his homicides. This noir artiness is a smokescreen for re-presenting an irredeemably misogynist mythology.

<sup>7</sup> In this I also include many British co-productions (e.g. *Fortitude*) and remakes such as *The Tunnel* (2013) and *Wallander* (2007).

<sup>8</sup> There are many excellent surveys of noir scholarship, including collections such as Alain Silver and James Ursini's series of readers on film noir. Also of interest is Frank Krutnik's work on masculinity (1991) and Andrew Spicer's *Film Noir* (2002).

<sup>9</sup> My interpretation of the term simulacrum is drawn from the works of scholars such as Jean Baudrillard (2007) and Umberto Eco (1987) and sees the simulacrum as a type of feedback loop in which there are endless copies with no definitive original. Such a simulation process makes the boundary between the real and the copy unclear and questions the validity of drawing such distinctions.

<sup>10</sup> See E. Ann Kaplan's edited volume *Women in Film Noir* (1980), in which Janey Place's "Women in Film Noir" provides an excellent survey of female character types.

<sup>11</sup> For further sources exploring Irish identity, culture and media history see Geraldine Meaney's *Gender, Ireland and Cultural Change: Race, Sex and Nation* (2011) and for a survey of the history of the Irish Gothic in particular see Jarlath Killeen's *The Emergence of Irish Gothic: History, Origins, Theories* (2014).