

Silk blouses and fedoras: The female detective, contemporary TV crime drama and the predicaments of postfeminism

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Abstract

This article examines the markedly contrasting fates of two recent female protagonist led police series, the dimly received *Prime Suspect USA* (NBC, 2011) and widely celebrated *The Fall* (BBC, 2013–), asking what the reception of each suggests about the state of play for women in TV crime drama in today's postfeminist culture. What do women cops need to do to make the cut in an era in which, on the one hand, it seems they are more prevalent and have more opportunities than ever before (Gerrard, 2014); but also, on the flip side of this, in which they must somehow offer something 'extra' to survive in an era where the presence of a female detective in itself is no longer an innovation or novelty? In an era in which, to adopt Angela McRobbie's much-cited phrase, 'feminism has been taken into account' (2007: 255), how can these series' invocation of feminism or 'feminist issues' be understood as fundamental to their respective demise and triumph? I argue that, crucially, *Prime Suspect USA's* account of sexist bullying in the NYPD was greeted as hackneyed and overblown, where *The Fall* spoke adroitly to a media culture in which ratings can be won via a superficial but glossily packaged nod to the female detective's postfeminist 'progress', while relishing misogynistic violence. Hence the article also asks, what implications does an inquiry of the kind undertaken here – where interrogation of the genre combines comparative text-based analysis with critical reflection on the author's own perturbed response to the eroticisation of violence against women in *The Fall* – have for future models of feminist criticism of TV crime drama?

Keywords

Eroticisation of violence, female detective, postfeminism, *Prime Suspect*, *The Fall*, TV crime drama

Maria Bello is hanging up her hats. NBC's low-rated new cop drama *Prime Suspect*, which was left off the network's midseason schedule, will wrap production this month. (Andreeva, 2011)

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The Fall has been recommissioned for a second series ... [it is] BBC Two's biggest drama series to launch in eight years with an average audience of 3.5 million and 15.4% share ...

Ben Stephenson, Controller, BBC Drama, says: "*The Fall* has proved both a critical and ratings hit for BBC Two ... [and with] more of Allan Cubitt's intricate and thrilling plot revelations yet to unfold through the captivating performances of [Gillian Anderson] and [Jamie Dornan], a second series is a must". (BBC, 2013)

In the statements above, these two announcements, made less than two years apart and drawn from either side of the Atlantic, confirmed the fate of two high-profile contemporary TV crime drama women detectives. In the first, the NBC US remake of celebrated British ITV drama *Prime Suspect* was cancelled, after just one season and years of anticipation. In the other instance 18 months later, *The Fall* was widely hailed as the 'must-see TV' series of its moment in the UK before being streamed by Netflix in the US and, having spawned endless column inches about its sexy stars and compellingly edgy drama, the second season was commissioned before the first had even finished airing.

This article explores what the fate of these two female protagonist-led series might tell us about the state of play for women in TV crime drama in today's postfeminist culture. What do women cops need to do to make the cut in an era in which it seems, on the one hand, they are more prevalent and have more opportunities open to them than ever before (see Gerrard, 2014); but also, on the flip side of this, in which it seems they must somehow offer something 'extra' to survive, to present an identifiable 'Unique Selling Point' (USP), in an era where the presence of a female detective in itself is no longer worthy of remark, nor an innovation or novelty in itself. In 2011, after years of on-off speculation following the worldwide critical and commercial success of the original *Prime Suspect* (ITV, 1991–2006), NBC finally launched the series' stateside 'reboot' (distinguished here as *Prime Suspect USA* (NBC, 2011)). Starring Maria Bello as 'Detective Jane Timoney', 20 years on from the first series' debut in 1991 this iconic figure was still a determined, sometimes bullish but gifted woman cop making her way like her British predecessor DCI Jane Tennison (Helen Mirren) through challenging cases, a tricky personal life and a hostile, sexist workplace. Despite the outstanding success of the original and the long anticipation that met the new one, however, the series proved a ratings flop and was not renewed. Fast forward to May 2013, and a very different fate unfolded for *The Fall* (BBC, 2013–). Having doubled BBC Two's average audience share (see Kanter, 2013), the former *Prime Suspect 2* (ITV, 1992) writer and BAFTA nominee Allan Cubitt was again nominated for a 'Best Mini-Series' BAFTA and, at the time of writing in 2015, season three is scheduled to reach British screens in 2016. As such, these two texts constitute rich case study material with which to examine the gender politics of the genre at this time, offering tremendously high profile instances of contemporary women detectives, drawn from either side of the Atlantic in internationally distributed series, which met with very different responses. In the context of two such contrasting destinies, then, what does the premature retirement of *Prime Suspect USA*'s Jane Timoney and the rolling contract awarded to *The Fall*'s Stella Gibson (Gillian Anderson) tell us about what a woman cop might do in today's postfeminist media landscape to maximise her chances of staying on-screen? Furthermore, what implications does an inquiry of the kind undertaken here, where interrogation of the genre combines comparative text-based analysis with

critical reflection on my own troubled response to the eroticisation of violence against women in *The Fall*, have for future models of feminist criticism of TV crime drama?

To elaborate on my methodological approach, as a feminist media scholar here writing for an interdisciplinary journal and adopting the critical traditions of TV and Cultural Studies, in this article I scrutinise the US/UK media reception of *Prime Suspect USA* and *The Fall*,¹ while drawing also on textual analysis. In this particular instance, this methodology is adopted in part to underline the delimiting ideological ramifications effected by the manner in which the media reception of television's construction of 'professional women' recurrently returns to the sartorial domain. Further, my analysis examines these series within changing inflections of TV crime drama, where the relationship between gender and genre – and more specifically, the construction of the female detective – operate as key sites on which to debate the continued marketability, popular appeal and cultural significance of TV crime drama. What trail of clues do these 'daughters of Jane' leave behind, to use Charlotte Brunsdon's description of the powerful legacy Tennison bequeathed to TV crime's subsequent female detectives (2012), to be grappled with in conceptualising women in the genre at this time; and what has been the import of their perceived relationship to contemporary postfeminist discourse? Brunsdon's memorable phrase points too to the pervasive generationalism of postfeminism which has popularised the sense that the second wave passed on an unsatisfactory inheritance to its successors, making the former appear antiquated and obsolete in the new order. This is a tension here embodied by Tennison's fraught career, as a woman coming of age under the second-wave and battling the glass ceiling in the 1980s, only to rise up the ranks and 'appear to move ... to a postfeminist stereotype of a lonely, aging career woman' by the series' end (Cavender and Jurik, 2012: cover description). Thus critics have debated the disparaging connotations of the prefix 'post' in postfeminism for this very reason, noting that its implication of 'pastness' suggests the redundancy of feminism itself; and it is precisely such rumination on the *datedness* of *Prime Suspect USA* that comes to the fore in my analysis of the media accounts of its failure.

Of course there are numerous different institutional, industrial and cultural specificities at stake in relating how the two series performed, and which contributed to their very different fates, from their marketing and scheduling to their stars' fan bases and more. Space constraints mean I can only acknowledge some of this broader contextual matter, which extends also to the landscape of the contemporary transnational television marketplace, very briefly in what follows. What I want to focus on instead is how the women protagonists and the series' invocation of feminism or 'feminist issues' can be thought of as fundamental to their demise and triumph. Timoney's battle with sexist bullying in the NYPD was greeted as hackneyed, dated and overblown. Serial killer crime-drama *The Fall*, in contrast, was described by *The Atlantic* as 'the most feminist show on television' (Sullivan, 2013) and was received by many as startlingly re-setting the coordinates for TV's women detectives. I want to explore, then, how the success and failure of these series was inextricably tied up in the perceived success and failure of their female leads at constituting convincing and diverting modern women detectives operating in the 21st century police service. After all, we have been for some time in an era in which, to adopt Angela McRobbie's much-cited phrase, 'feminism has been taken into account' by popular culture (2007: 255) – and in a sense, what is at stake in what follows is whether or how such a postfeminist perspective was felt by critics and audiences to be articulated in these series.

Alongside this inquiry, however, I want to reflect not only on the TV crime dramas of Timoney and Gibson, but on the 'crime drama' I experienced on watching series one of *The Fall*. This was a show which made me reassess my own engagement with TV crime over a period of more than 20 years, and to revisit my earlier work on the original *Prime Suspect*, in a way that *Prime Suspect USA* did not prompt at all. It led me to ask whether as a writer and academic who had helped promote what I and others saw as a difficult or flawed but potentially powerful feminist politics at the heart of *Prime Suspect*, I had somehow been complicit in the popularisation of a televisual movement which has normalised and propagated an everyday discourse of increasingly graphic violence against women in TV crime drama. For me, this movement reached a kind of apex in *The Fall*, a series I felt to be deeply misogynistic and which I struggled to watch at times through feelings of revulsion and anger. In bringing this experience to bear in what follows, I undertake something that is somewhat outside the usual constraints of academic studies of crime drama – not quite autoethnography as such, but not entirely 'detached' scholarly analysis either – and yet I want to argue that there is a legitimate space for such an approach within study of the genre. Rather than bury this response as subjective, personal, 'un-academic', I want to bring it to the fore alongside more conventional textual and discourse analysis. And in doing so I want to make a case for feminist television criticism of crime drama as being able to meaningfully *draw on* one's felt experience of representations of violence against women as part of one's textual interrogation; an approach which acknowledges the potential affective dimensions of this labour, giving the lie to the critical ideal of detachment and the possibility that scholars self-identifying as women might watch such texts entirely and utterly objectively 'outside' them.

My ire was prompted both 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', to return to McRobbie again (2007: 255), which I found unravelled under scrutiny. In this respect, I want to argue that *The Fall* exemplifies what Joanne Clarke Dillman has identified at the centre of the contemporary media's preoccupation with dead women; women whose bodies, 'echo and visually intensify a discourse that posits women as disposable and replaceable in the era of neoliberalism and globalization' (2014: 2). Her powerful and persuasive polemic argues that, 'The rancor and ambivalence surrounding the feminist project ... are manifest in the surfeit of women who need to be dead before an exploration of their lives, subjectivities and experiences is authorized in mainstream representations' (2014: 2). This analysis thus provides a compelling framework to inform feminist readings of *The Fall*; since to talk about Stella Gibson without simultaneously talking about the tortured and murdered women that serve as the prompt for her work and the premise whereby she may showcase her place as a 'powerful' woman in the 21st century police service, I argue, would be to persist with a major critical omission. Instead, as Lindsay Steenberg has called for, I wish here 'to put the victim ... back into the analysis of violent death' (2013: 18).

Recalling *Prime Suspect*

To set the context for this discussion, it is instructive to briefly turn first to the original *Prime Suspect*. Launched in a two-parter broadcast on consecutive evenings in 1991, it eventually ran intermittently for 15 years, broadcast irregularly but always also with huge anticipation and media attention in the UK over seven 'seasons'. Its importance in the history of the genre cannot be

over-stated. In the course of its run, as Gray Cavender and Nancy Jurik note in their nuanced study of the multi award-winning series, it 'aired in seventy-eight counties and worldwide audiences for some episodes [approached] two hundred million viewers' (2012: 3). It also became the subject of a good deal of feminist criticism, with scholars arguing, for example, that its textured female lead brought new dimensions to TV's configuration of the woman detective (see Hallam, 2005), while elsewhere I posited that the first season's disturbingly explicit (for the time) depictions of its murdered women victims pushed back the generic boundaries of realism and representation (Jermyn, 2003, 2010).

Unsurprisingly given all this, speculation had circulated for years that the show could be picked up for a remake. But it wasn't until 2009 that the old rumours became reality. The American network NBC at last greenlit *Prime Suspect USA*, starring Maria Bello, now as brusque NYPD Irish-American Detective 'Jane Timoney'. Like Tennison, Timoney is trying to make her relationship work while struggling to get on in an antagonistic male-dominated workplace, where in the reboot her colleagues speculate that she gained her transfer to the unit because she '[banged] the bureau chief' (1.1). The slow-burn two-part serial killer narrative and format of the original was dropped, replaced instead by 43(ish) minute episodes with self-contained stories week-on-week in a traditional series format. Despite a surge of advance publicity, ratings got off to a lukewarm start and it was soon evident that NBC's tactic of trying to build audience momentum by scheduling additional repeats had failed to produce the desired results (Paskin, 2011b). The mid-season decision to dramatically revamp the title credit sequence spoke volumes in this respect – out went the sombre white-on-black title card that mimicked the original UK series, dropped for what one might call, very advisedly, a more recognisably generic 'Americanized' crime-drama rapid montage credit sequence, featuring frantic chases and gun showdowns against a stirring soundtrack. All of this clearly situated the series as being a far more 'action'-led cop show, contrasting with the largely sombre, slow-moving style of much of the original series. In any case, by the end of 2011, following a 13-episode run, it was all over. Not all the reviews and commentary had been negative; Melissa Silverstein, for example, noted 'this was one of the strongest shows about women this season and it died a sad death for no good reason', conjecturing that TV still can't handle 'a female character that is not 100% likeable' (2011). Nevertheless, *Prime Suspect USA* was cancelled, having garnered an average audience of not quite 5 million viewers an episode by that November.

Yet the US's NPR had observed in its coverage of the impending new series shortly before it aired that, '[f]rom a network perspective, it makes perfect sense. *Prime Suspect* ushered in a wave of successful TV shows starring tough, mature women: *The Closer*. *Damages*. *The Killing*. So why not reboot a known franchise with Maria Bello occupying Helen Mirren's redoubtable shoes?' (Ulaby, 2011). Having taken their time over the crucial decision of who would play the new Jane, something which might have proven a sticking-point for the series given Mirren's extraordinary reputation, NBC had eventually succeeded in casting a highly regarded, Golden Globe-nominated actor, who was well-received even among often lacklustre reviews. As noted, there are a range of larger contextual factors that would merit consideration in a broader comparative consideration of *Prime Suspect USA* and *The Fall*, which might include, for example, the specificities of the two broadcast channels (NBC and BBC Two), their national contexts and audience demographics; or the star meanings of Gillian Anderson versus Maria Bello. Linked to this, one should acknowledge here the particular history and practices of the transnational exchange of television between the

US and UK, and indeed the long-standing tendency evident in UK v US television criticism which (though perhaps eroding) has traditionally championed the supremacy of British TV, themes which I examine elsewhere in detail in relation to *Prime Suspect/Prime Suspect USA* (Jermyn, forthcoming). Indeed, beyond the US/UK nexus, it is intriguing to note that Michelle Hilmes has pointed to *The Fall* as a recent example of a production made by 'a national broadcaster [with] transnational distribution a clear goal', in a television marketplace where increasingly 'domestic drama production around the world is being conceptualized, funded, scripted, and cast with a diverse global market—and, often, global partnerships—foremost in mind' (2014).

But alongside these factors one must examine the *socio-historical differences* at stake between the original *Prime Suspect* and *Prime Suspect USA*; most crucially here, that in the 20 years that had passed between the original and the remake, the work of feminism and the rhetoric of equal opportunities in the workplace – and media representations of these – had undergone something of a transformation. In describing the series' depiction of sexism as 'ham-fisted' (McNamara, 2011) the *LA Times* effectively pointed to this changed social context, one in which McRobbie's sketch of a popular culture that presumes 'feminism has been taken into account' (2007: 255) also means a commonplace (and misguided) faith in legislature and workplace regulation as having resolved the 'old' problems feminism once tackled. Hence Mary McNamara's review observed incredulously that, 'writers Peter Berg and Alexandra Cunningham behave as if human resources, and lawyers, did not exist' (2011). Her critique thus exemplifies how in postfeminist culture 'a certain kind of liberal feminist perspective is treated as commonsense' (Gill, 2007), presumed here to be written into and upheld now by institutionalised structures of power.

In 2011 in the US alone, just some of the recent and current high-profile crime series with female leads or major female protagonists included not only *The Closer* (TNT, 2005–2012), *Damages* (FX Network, 2007–2010; Audience Network, 2011–2012) and the remake of *The Killing* (AMC, 2011–2014), but also *Crossing Jordan* (NBC, 2001–2007), *In Plain Sight* (USA Network, 2008–2012), *Rizzoli & Isles* (TNT, 2010–) and *Homeland* (Showtime, 2011–). In this televisual and cultural landscape, critics of *Prime Suspect USA* thus repeatedly pointed to how the relevance and timeliness of the issues explored in the original series were now past. As such, the remake's depiction of chauvinistic bullying in the NYPD in which Timoney is dubbed 'Serpi-ho' (1.4) was deemed by reviewers to be 'retrograde' (Atkinson, 2011) and 'brutally overt', to the extent that it 'bugs us. ... Surely it's now out-of-date and overdone?' (Doyle, 2011). In sum, in 1991 the original's narrative innovation was to have a woman lead a murder investigation while simultaneously dismantling the institutionalised misogyny of the police, a reconfiguration of TV crime drama that felt bold, fresh and provocative. Twenty years on, however, and particularly in a postfeminist culture which has undermined recognition of gendered workplace inequities, and misleadingly rendered talk of the 'glass-ceiling' as quaintly and preposterously outmoded, as the *LA Times* again put it, 'no-one makes the argument that the public just won't accept a female homicide detective. Good news for society, bad news for *Prime Suspect US* which [has] lost the novelty and underlying tension of the [original]' (McNamara, 2011). In such a changed context, Jane Timoney in and of herself simply did not stand out and, in essence, *Prime Suspect USA* never really proposed a USP. Hughes' negative review again underlines this issue by pointing to how two of the most enthusiastically critically debated and dissected female detectives of recent times, from 'Scandi-noir' hits *The Killing/Forbrydelsen* (DR, 2007–2012) and *The Bridge/Bron/Broen* (DR/SVT, 2011–), have proved to be absorbing precisely because they brought with them the novel

premise of women protagonists who appear somewhere-on-the-spectrum; or as she put it, 'We've moved on from Jane Tennison to the near autistic dysfunction of Sarah Lund and Saga Noren. By comparison, Jane Timoney doesn't feel up-to-date so much as behind the times' (Hughes, 2012, my emphasis).

Thoroughly old hat – Timoney's 'doomed' fedora

If one had to settle on a motif that neatly crystallised all of this, it would be Timoney's/Bello's signature fedora. My focus in what follows on the realm of clothing and costume, and how this featured in the media reception of the series, engages feminist media studies methodologies which have staunchly championed the necessity of scrutinising such semiotic detail. Via this analysis, I wish to demonstrate how in both *Prime Suspect USA* and *The Fall*, the media's constant return to the women protagonists' 'appropriate' or 'inappropriate' sartorial choices crystallises the inescapably gendered nature of the reception of these female detectives, one which situates them within generic traditions but also operates to contain them within a 'feminine' realm. Timoney's hat was, it would seem, adopted in order to bring some kind of modish 'look' to the series and its protagonist. In doing so it arguably sought to evoke the genre's distinctive sartorial iconography – an aesthetic history of plain-clothed cops and private detectives in sharp trilbies and belted raincoats – and thus to shoe-horn Timoney into this memorable, and masculine, visual tradition. Interviews with Bello note that she herself brought the hat to the set and insisted her character adopt it (for example, Paskin, 2011b). One can conjecture that Bello imagined the fedora would align her with such visually recognisable and *fêted* (male) predecessors as *Kojak* (CBS, 1973–1978) and *Columbo* (NBC, 1971–2003), cop series which she professed in interview were 'some of her favourite shows' growing up:

They were all detectives who had a little weird thing, their own quirk. And we haven't seen a woman like that on television, a woman detective. So we were all in agreement about that, that that's what we wanted to do. (Bello cited in Lowman, 2011)

Instead, the hat was received with ridicule as an irritating gimmick, a derivative distraction and proof of the series somehow trying too hard to gain traction while lacking any real substance or originality of its own. It was, quite literally, old hat. As Hughes put it: 'Ah, the hat. There are whole pockets of the internet dedicated to the hat and why it is central to the new show's demise' (2012).

Indeed, TV.com ran an article accompanied by a gallery of images of Timoney with her hat, posing the headline question, 'Is This the Fedora That Will Doom NBC's *Prime Suspect*?' (Abramovitch, 2011), while *Entertainment Weekly* described it as a 'curious wardrobe choice that has a modern female detective looking like a 1940s mobster' (Hibberd, 2011). Perhaps most memorably, vulture.com devised a 'Prime Suspect Hat-o-Matic', in which readers could play 'a mix and match game that lets you toggle through various hat and scarf combinations, different to Jane's usual accessories' (Paskin, 2011a). Though this is presented as harmless sport within the ironic structures of humour popularised by postfeminism, it nevertheless neatly erases any attention to the female detective's actual work to suggest that her outfits constitute her most noteworthy quality. The 'quirky' fedora, appeared only discreetly in the series' key publicity image, which pictured Bello, hat in hand, in a black waistcoat and leather jeans, unbuttoned shirt with

scarf-cum-neckerchief, while wearing her revolver slung over her hip next to her police-badge on a leather belt. But this 'gunslinger' image too was received as tired, and drew derivatively also on the (again, masculine) iconography of the Western and its frontier sheriffs.² In interview, Bello indicated this styling was a deliberate refusal to comply with an unrealistic image of glamour among other women in the genre, remarking "'That was something I was adamant about ... [I] don't understand why women detectives on TV shows wear high heels, because how can you wear high heels when you're running after a bad guy?'" (cited in Lowman, 2011). Bello, like Mirren, came to the show with a certain 'sexy' star persona garnered from previous film roles. But she described how as Timoney she had aimed to channel a classical Hollywood star famed for her strong-willed roles and androgynous style:

I had a really particular way of wanting to dress, which was Katharine Hepburn, but a modernized version of her. And I didn't want to do anything with my hair, with my make-up, you know? I just wanted it to be really, really simple. And it takes me fifteen minutes in hair and makeup, and that's a relief. (cited in Paskin, 2011b)

What Bello had perhaps not anticipated was the sheer resistance she and the series would be met with in a postfeminist climate, as one that still overwhelmingly expects women's adherence to normative standards of femininity and ideally their willing subjectification of the self (Gill, 2007). Bello's experience differs very interestingly in this respect from Sofie Gråbøl and her reception as Detective Inspector Sarah Lund in the much celebrated and deliberated Danish crime drama *The Killing/Forbrydelsen*, a series in which there was also much media fascination with the woman detective's eschewing of feminine attire, in this instance for the comforts of a distinctive but 'unflattering' Faroe Islands woolly jumper. Here, however, this sartorial motif became a cult object in a lauded show; a material object that could be emulated as a sign of one's knowing investment in a 'quality' series, twinned as it was (as noted above) with a woman character at the forefront of the recent international success of 'Scandi-noir' who was widely and enthusiastically debated for her intriguing emotional distance and unknowability. Crucially, then, Timoney's perceived sartorial solecisms came to function as problematically loaded signifiers in the series' reception. They were taken to point emblematically to the perceived shortcomings of the show, as one which lacked innovation or originality, or an up-to-date grasp of how women are no longer contained by the pre-feminist/feminist problems of old; thus its costuming was greeted as being as antiquated and tired as its representation of workplace sexism.

Watching *The Fall*: Stella goes stellar

But what, then, of *The Fall*? How did this series succeed in finding the 'modern vision' that NBC Primetime Entertainment President Angela Bromstad (cited in Schneider, 2009) had promised but failed to deliver with *Prime Suspect USA*? If the feminist themes of *Prime Suspect USA* were, like Bello's fedora, found unsobly rendered and hopelessly passé, *The Fall*, I argue, by contrast spoke to a media culture where ratings can be won via a superficial but glossily packaged nod to post-feminist 'gains', despite the fact that these dress up a deeply regressive impulse. In this section, then, I want to explore how this resonance with the zeitgeist of 'double entanglement' generated such an animated welcome from much of the media; while at the same time, on a macro level

(and unlike *Prime Suspect USA*) it prompted such a powerfully felt resistance from me, a response that I want to try to take apart in what follows.

Anyone reading a British newspaper in the early summer of 2013 could hardly have helped but be aware of the new BBC Two series. It had produced the highest drama ratings on the channel for nearly a decade and, like *Prime Suspect* 20 years earlier, for a spell it was arguably the most talked about British show on UK television, chatter fueled this time round not just by the water-cooler but by social media, Twitter, Tumblr and Instagram. Like *Prime Suspect*, it starred an established and highly esteemed woman actor, here Gillian Anderson of *The X-Files* fame (Fox, 1993–2002), as a senior police officer whose skillful detection links the separate investigations into the brutal murders of young women as being the work of a single serial killer. Like Tennison, Detective Superintendent Stella Gibson is an experienced Metropolitan Police detective and a driven, committed professional with a steely air about her that means she will never win a popularity contest. Like George Marlow before him, the serial killer Paul Spector (played by former Calvin Klein underwear model, Jamie Dornan) is not a freakish loner but an attractive, everyday-kind-of-guy in a relationship with a loving partner. In fact, here he is even a doting father to two young children, recurrently pictured at home, leading Lisa Coulthard to situate the series within the generic history of the gothic, which has long explored uncanny domestic spaces (2015). And like *Prime Suspect*, *The Fall's* graphic attention to violent detail caused some commentators to revisit anew what it is or is not permissible for television to show. Given all this, it might seem surprising or contradictory to note that *The Fall* was described by *The Atlantic* as 'defying the genre's conventions' (Sullivan, 2015); or that it prompted *The Guardian* to pledge, 'If there's a more original anything this year, I'll eat my squeaky rubber truncheon' (Dempster, 2013). Elsewhere, *The Telegraph* declared it 'a brilliant drama' (Deacon, 2014) and *Bitch Flicks* applauded its 'manifest feminism' (Johnson, 2013). Yet as the brief comparison to *Prime Suspect* made here underlines, in many ways it was undeniably treading a lot of very familiar ground. What, then, made it a hit?

I suggested above that if there was a single motif that might be taken to sum up the failure of *Prime Suspect USA*, it was Bello's fedora. Alternatively, if there was a motif that might be taken to sum up the success of *The Fall*, it would be Gillian Anderson's blouses. Having been flown in from London's Met Police to Belfast to head a 28-day review of the Alice Munroe murder investigation, Gibson's skill and authority, unlike Timoney's, is never in doubt. Furthermore, she is not incongruous, not a woman in isolation as both Tennison and Timoney largely were. Instead she works alongside a cast featuring a number of smart, successful women professionals, and gets what she asks for from all her staff. Very quickly, then, the assertive Gibson was being held up as an icon for working women. This was partly because of her commanding presence in the workplace, where nothing, not even the office suicide of a colleague, ruffles her feathers. Hence leading British women's magazine *Red* ran an online article titled 'How to channel The Fall's Stella Gibson at work', declaring that she had 'taught us we're handling work all wrong' and listing five key lessons that Gibson had imparted, such as 'Know you are good at your job' and, in a post-feminist imperative if ever there was one, 'Exercise, no matter what' (Gilbert, 2014). But this admiration was most especially won by Gibson not for her deft handling of office politics but for her having nailed the convoluted intricacies of the postfeminist workplace wardrobe and, in particular, for her seemingly unparalleled collection of pastel-toned silky blouses.

Such was the preoccupation that Gibson's blouses gave rise to that in summer 2013 the major online clothes retailer ASOS and mid-range high-street fashion store French Connection both

noted a spike in silk shirt sales following the show's broadcast (see McVeigh, 2013). Succeeding where Bello's fedora failed by capturing an elusive 'cult'-type appeal, in which an accessory or style is taken to define a character in a distinctive, venerated and ideally replicable manner, Tracey McVeigh's (2013) *Guardian* article (entitled 'Now everyone wants a silk shirt to look as cool as TV's sexy sleuth') is representative of the effusive reception meeting Gibson's trademark look. In it she conjures up Gibson as the perfect vision of the postfeminist career woman – who is empowered ('positively [bristling]' with sexuality) but still feminine – describing her blouses as 'an iconic part of the character ... silk, cleavage-enhancing, under a well-cut suit, and defining her as a professional woman not afraid of looking attractive' (McVeigh, 2013). Chiming with Gill's (2007) account of 'the pervasive sexualisation' of culture under postfeminism and the shift in representation of women 'from sex object to desiring sexual subject', the article ends by relishing how Gibson remains sexy despite being 'terrifyingly capable', noting 'Anderson has said it's the most sexy character she has ever played: "If she finds someone attractive, she has the balls to say, "Hey, you know ... come on," which I like in a woman"' (McVeigh, 2013). The imperative here, then, is that women should constantly aspire to be sexy, should remain 'forever "up for it"' (Gill, 2007) not just on their own time but in the workplace too.

Elsewhere, *Stylist* magazine recommended that women adopting Gibson's blouses should 'choose the softest silk in a close-cut fit with the top few buttons undone' (*Stylist*, 2014); *The Mirror* instructed readers on how to 'Get Gillian Anderson's *The Fall* look with the 10 best sexy blouses' (Danso, 2014); and *The Guardian* signed off on season two with 'An anatomy of DSI Stella Gibson's best blouses' (Marriott, 2014). This fanatical coverage of Gibson's blouses embraces them for the manner in which they symbolise the possibility of women attaining power in the workplace without abandoning their femininity. Yet the text itself seems to suggest her blouses function as a reminder that she is still, ultimately and above all, a woman, when in a lengthy and oddly anti-climactic sequence, her authority seems vaguely but suggestively undermined as she attends a crucial and very public crime appeal on the Sarah Kay case without realising her blouse has come undone and that her breasts risk being exposed on stage.

Dead sexy: Eroticising murdered women in *The Fall*

But while these stories were extolling the (post)feminist-inflected power-dressing credentials of the series and the cool confidence of its heroine, other 'women's issues' raised by it were often left largely unspoken. It is important to note the insidious work of such attention to women's dress in TV drama as a way of bolstering a notion that there is no more important decision a working woman makes on a daily basis than what to wear. But equally such coverage provided a smoke-screen too for *not* talking about other women in the series. It operates here as a façade erected around the show to make it seem somehow impressively 'woman-centred', as if a woman protagonist is all a text needs to claim that worthy moniker. One could make this same critique too, in fact, with regard to the reception of *The Killing*, where endless attention to Sarah Lund's knitwear dominated discussion. Meanwhile, textured examination of how at the heart of the series lay the body of the murdered teenager Nanna Birk Larsen and the abject violence enacted on her – a violence relished on a loop, over and over again at the start of every opening credit sequence, when she is pictured stripped, crying, running in terror from her killer in the woods – was barely effected.

In the endless attention dedicated to Gibson's blouses, then, there exists a glaring absence. Such coverage looks at the series as if through a lens with a mask drawn over it, like a still from a silent movie, encouraging the viewer to focus their gaze only on a fragment of the frame. Where was attention to the other highly-stylised women of *The Fall*? The ones bound, gagged, strangled, undressed, bathed, dressed, posed and photographed? The ones seen begging for their lives, flailing, fighting, with skirts pulled up round their waists, hands tied behind their backs, thrown on beds, with bruised flesh and opaque pupils, laid out on gurneys? Cubitt claimed it was important to him to give his victims 'a powerful, human presence', to show them with real lives pre-existing their victimhood (Cubitt, 2013). But this seems evident only really in regard to the third victim, Sarah, who Spector identifies as his next target at the opening of the first episode. As we see her enjoying drinks and flirtatious banter with a colleague (while Spector breaks into her home and rifles through her underwear), then later talking to police and family about the break-in, the effect is not so much that we are getting to know the victim so that we will feel the pain of her loss more keenly later. Rather, it could be said that the tension and suspense around her imminent murder is being drawn out to extend the anticipation surrounding the killer's sport for as long as possible.

The sense of *The Fall* prolonging a sadistic pleasure in the violence enacted on these women is true too of the expansive scenes of Spector carrying out the actual attacks, and in Sarah's case of his necrophilic manipulation of her corpse as he washes, poses and photographs her after murdering her. In a leisurely sequence which spectacularises the dead woman as the killer's erotic plaything, *The Fall* relishes the 'convergence of sex and death to recruit a necrophilic gaze', as Sue Tait has observed of *CSI*, albeit within a different visual economy (2006: 52–53). As the first season unfolded, I watched *The Fall* not only as a feminist TV scholar curious about its evolving entry into the canon of television's women detectives, but with a sense of disbelief and rage at the nature of, and sheer amount of screen-time devoted to, scenes of extreme violence against women; at its eroticisation of sexual violence against women; at its delight in building anticipation that ends with the climax of assault. When I look back at my notes on the brutal attack on Annie and her brother, I find they describe the series of shots in the sequence and their composition, and then read: 'I feel shaky'. Titillating and sensationalistic, its 'feminist heroine' (Johnson, 2013) is repeatedly intercut with shots of the hyper-athletic killer whose muscularity and agility is lovingly and admirably filmed as he prepares for his crimes.³ In these sequences the editing continually reminds us that Stella too is an erotic object, moving back and forth between Spector and her. Nowhere is this erotic 'frisson' between Spector/Gibson, or conflation between the victims/Gibson, made more disconcertingly evident than in the opening to episode two, where a lengthy sequence cuts back and forth between Gibson having sex with James Olson, the policeman she just picked up, while Spector lovingly toys with the naked corpse of his latest victim. Stella is not just an erotic object, but a potentially vulnerable one, a status she can never escape regardless of how many degrees she holds or how big the workforce she commands. If it came to it, the editing seems to imply, not only could she too not help but be impressed by his virile masculinity, she too could be overpowered, made a victim of this man, and for this reason these spectacular and desiring images of Spector/Dornan never just objectify him.⁴ Repeatedly too, Gibson is made to 'mirror' the victim visually, another trait common to representations of the 'postfeminist female investigator', borrowing from the traditions of the gothic, as Steenberg has observed (2013: 67–73). Hence she is pictured gripping her own wrist as hard as she can, as she imagines Paul must have

gripped his victims; painting her nails the same vivid red as Paul painted Sarah's; lying on Sarah's bed, visualising and reenacting how she was tied up by him at the crime-scene; looking into the bathroom mirror at her reflection where Annie, the fourth victim, saw hers. The notion of there being some 'electricity' between the hunter and hunted in the thriller and crime genres is not unfamiliar territory. Again as Steenberg notes, for example, 'a sexualized and romanticized attraction' is commonplace in narratives that play a female profiler off a male serial killer (2011: 227). Here, it inarguably operates as part of the series' erotic appeal, to the extent that in season two Stella's new lover, Tom (Colin Morgan), senses the attraction and actually asks if she was drawn to him because of his resemblance to Spector, so that increasingly in the series the lines between 'sex', 'sexiness' and 'sex-crime' blur.

It is important to note here too that amidst the critical acclaim there was also dissent, where a number of commentators expressed distaste, concern and sometimes anger at what they also perceived as *The Fall's* titillating glamorisation of violence against women (see, for example, Gerrard, 2014; Webb, 2013). In perhaps the most unequivocal damning of the series, *The Daily Mail* denounced it as 'The most repulsive drama ever broadcast on British TV' (Stevens, 2013). This later prompted a riposte from Michael Deacon at *The Telegraph* arguing, in an article entitled '*The Fall* may be "repulsive" – but it's right to show the graphic murder of women', that, 'TV dramas are full of raped and murdered women because our society is full of raped and murdered women ... it's true to life. And if it's graphically disturbing – well, so it should be' (Deacon, 2014).

Deacon's simplistic defence here completely sidesteps the issue of mediation. Indeed, outwardly the show seems to champion a postfeminist picture of progress. Between them, the various women of *The Fall* get to make their own money and be the boss; to 'have it all' by being successful working professionals who *also* have families and husbands; to be taken seriously even though they still favour 'girly' high heels and tight pencil skirts; who get to call the shots on when they have sex, and with whom, regardless of whether or not they are in a relationship. However, these postfeminist women are precisely the ones too that the series punishes virulently. The white, educated, economically independent, sex-positive, young woman is the poster-girl for postfeminism as McRobbie (2007) and Gill (2007) show. While through Gibson the series may seem to celebrate this modern woman,⁵ through the protracted scenes of violence against the killer's victims it also annihilates her. The script continually reminds viewers that the killer has a type, that these are 'not victims of chance but victims of choice' in Gibson's words, that only *certain* women need be fearful. He has a physical type but also a social-demographic one – slim, 30-somethings with long dark hair, who live alone and independently, who are educated professionals, women active in the public world, working as lecturers, architects and solicitors, and who adhere nevertheless to highly normative standards of femininity. And while *The Fall's* women assert their right to be sexually active and/or proactive, the fact is this never ends well for them; Gibson's lover is dead within 24 hours and her professionalism publically tarnished;⁶ Sarah, it transpires, was pregnant from a fling without seemingly even knowing it; Rose narrowly misses being strangled to death when she cheats on her boyfriend for sex with a stranger; the police believe that Annie's video on an 'adult website' is what led Spector to her. In the end, *The Fall* reminds women to navigate the world in fear, even as they reap the rewards of the second wave. 'What will you tell your daughters, in the future? About how to stay safe', Gibson asks the female pathologist Reed Smith; 'Pretty much what I tell them now. Don't talk to strange men' she replies. 'Strange men?'. 'Any man'.

Nevertheless, at the same time *The Fall* is engagingly and adeptly put together, with 'quality TV' pretensions though this remains a contested arena (McCabe and Akass, 2007). At the very least it is 'smart' TV, or gives the illusion that it is, with its frequently ponderous delivery, its beautiful lighting, its striking and unusual location-shooting in Belfast, its glittering nighttime photography, its literary and philosophical references to Nietzsche and Milton and the like, its discordant music and inventive set design where the camera roams and floats seamlessly above and across partitions in the rooms of Spector's home. In this vein, Benjamin Secher (2014) in *The Telegraph* referred to it as 'the most sophisticated drama on British television', admiringly noting it 'has an elegance that is as transfixing as it is troubling: gliding across surfaces, it finds a beauty in some of the ugliest acts of all'.

Furthermore, in publicity for the season two launch, Cubitt said that 'he hoped it would be seen as a feminist piece' (Plunkett, 2014). Thus within its 'smart' appeal it knows how to capitalise on feminist discourse and the fashionable turn to postfeminism in popular culture. Hence there are a series of flat exchanges of dialogue where it seems as if the programme is woodenly and self-consciously declaring, 'Look! I know the problem with the media and women! Can't you see I'm critiquing it, not reproducing it?' So, Stella insists a police press statement doesn't refer to the dead women as 'innocent victims', refusing to endorse this implicit value-judgement; and she forthrightly calls out the men around her who seem aghast at the fact she had a one-night stand, pointing without shame to their gendered double-standards ('Woman fucks man. Woman, subject. Man, object. That's not so comfortable for you is it?'). Gibson even invokes Margaret Atwood's famous aphorism that 'men are afraid women will laugh at them', while 'women are afraid that men will kill them'. *The Fall* does a wonderful job in such moments of consciously adopting a feminist discourse and seemingly dismantling the media's odious propagating of gendered inequities and sensationalising of violence against women. Then, with this 'get-out-of-jail' card in place, it delights in showing women being picked off by a sociopath with a penchant for clever young brunettes, while he himself is pursued by a woman in improbably high heels. Is this, then, one way to secure a woman detective a series renewal? – one that *Prime Suspect USA* got all too wrong with its antiquated preoccupation with workplace sexism and thus its 'fuddy-duddy feminism'? (Brunsdon, 2012) – namely to deliver postfeminist lip-service to feminist issues, as a disguise for pre-feminist scorn. When all is said, the generic tradition Stella most overtly draws on is that of the femme fatale, highly fetishised through her constricting pencil skirts and stilettos, through the textures of her long loose hair and her tactile silky blouses, and her mastery of the gun/phallus on the shooting range (see Kaplan, 1998). Little wonder sex with Stella, like Paul indeed, proves deadly. She is a spider-woman, a Hitchcock blonde, an ice-maiden – and for all her seeming postfeminist progress, and indeed the history of feminist readings of the femme fatale, an archaic archetype.

Reflections on a genre, then, now

To conclude, I want to return to my opening call for a mode of feminist criticism of TV crime drama that might enable the entry of an element of self-conscious 'anecdotal' reflection. Increasingly, it seems to me that throughout an academic history of looking at TV crime, I have always been watching both as 'a woman' and 'a feminist scholar', which are clearly two interrelated but not interchangeable things. Intellectually, as a feminist scholar, I can identify the elements of *The Fall*

that enable a feminist reading of it, and my intention here is not at all to reproach viewers who have enjoyed the series partly for having interpreted it this way as being 'bad feminists' (Gay, 2014), or to suggest they have 'misunderstood' it. It is the disingenuous nature of the 'double-entanglement' (McRobbie, 2007: 255) of postfeminism, after all, that facilitates such simultaneous and conflictual responses to the feminist claims of popular culture, and numerous previous theorists have adroitly traced the complex push-pull appeal of the female investigator to/within feminism (see Mizejewski, 2004; Steenberg, 2011, 2013). Nevertheless, as a woman tired of negotiating endless media violence against women, I do not *feel* at all convinced by claims to the series' feminism. Instead, I share Clarke Dillman's sense that here 'graphic deaths by sexual violence and the aftereffects of this violence on the woman's body visually nullify the agency gained by other powerful women figured within the story space' (2014: 7). And instead, I felt watching *The Fall* that I had never seen something so violently misogynistic on television. I recognised that over a period of some years I had been withdrawing from the genre, and *The Fall* reminded me vividly why. Images and themes that had seemed to me to constitute startling, painful, but thought-provoking television in 1991, when *Prime Suspect* introduced new levels of forensic realism around its murdered women, had become par for the course. *Prime Suspect* now looked veritably restrained in fact, as TV crime drama increasingly took the exploration of the brutalised female corpse to be its default narrative prompt, its habitual content, a quotidian mainstay, and I had become weary of it. I worried that I was a hypocrite for despising *The Fall* when I had felt moved by *Prime Suspect*. I worried that by constructing a critique that argued for the original *Prime Suspect* as having sometimes incorporated these images and issues critically and intelligently, though not unproblematically, as part of a larger generic and cultural intervention, I had helped unwittingly, in a modest fashion, to provide a defence for future misogyny in the genre.

In her book, Clarke Dillman cautiously and thoughtfully points to how she wants to pursue a different approach to those previously constructed by Elke Weissmann and myself, in which we formulated ways of thinking about the female murder victim in certain instances as a troubling figure with the potential to be a disruptive presence in the text. She comments of her study, that 'While these readings have validity, I differ from these authors ... rather than enabling a female viewer to work through fears or generating empathetic responses, the images work to *contain women and undermine the discourse of feminism*' (Clarke Dillman, 2014: 13, my emphasis). Some years on from that work and watching *The Fall*, this is also entirely what I felt, and Clarke Dillman's words triggered a jolt of recognition in me. Alongside reflection on a *felt* or embodied response, the critical intervention undertaken here demonstrates via reception and textual analysis the manner in which these texts exemplify how the process of containment she speaks of is actually undertaken. In pursuing this work, I emphatically do not mean to propagate essentialist readings that would situate emotional responses to the kinds of sequences described here as a 'feminine' mode of engagement, since this is a perspective that has been adopted to shore up a conception of women as less able to manage the pursuit of 'proper' analysis. Neither is it the case that all women will respond to these themes and images on the same spectrum described here. Further, the response I have described is arguably one in which the cerebral *and* the 'physical' are not at odds but come together, being prompted by a political sensibility (an investment in feminism) while it is felt and expressed in an immediate sense at least in an embodied way (from 'feeling shaky' to shouting at the TV).

Rather I wish to ask, what might be the affective dimensions at stake in the kind of labour undertaken when working on TV series like *The Fall*?; and to consider how greater exploration of

responses like those outlined here occurring among scholars might begin to feature productively in analysis. What all this points to is how it is judicious for scholars, feminist and otherwise, to observe critically how and why their connections with a genre may change over time just as genres inevitably shift; how the individual television text may come to signal different things for one's own 'TV history' over time; and how one should be willing to revise the positions one once held. Did I change, then? Did television change? Unquestionably we both did, and postfeminist culture was doubtless significant in both instances. I cannot watch *The Fall* in the way I watched *Prime Suspect* more than 20 years ago, because now I have seen too many dead and brutalised women discarded, detected and laid out on mortuary slabs. And if I feel saturated in these images, then is this because I watched too much TV, or because the genre became saturated? I sense it is the latter, and the fact that a term like 'crime porn' even exists substantiates that I am far from alone in feeling this exhaustion (see, for example, Mackichan, 2014). Yet all of this would go unsaid, unarticulated, in a purely 'traditionally' constructed academic analysis; such that feminist criticism of TV crime drama as it evolves perhaps has more to lose from burying that awkward space that lies somewhere between autoethnography and 'objectivity', than from exploring it.

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Notes

1. I focus in this article largely on the narrative and reception of season one of *The Fall*, though some commentators have noted that season two tones down the degree of salaciousness found in the first. Significantly, Cubitt took over as director in season two and, despite vehemently defending the series against accusations of misogyny, he has admitted of the first season, 'There are many, many things I would have done differently. ... It may be that the camera lingered too intimately on certain things' (cited in Dougary, 2014). It is the nature of TV drama scholarship that later episodes of a series can require us to revisit and reposition our understanding of earlier ones. But at the same time, I would maintain that opening seasons must withstand analysis in their own right, not least because it is on this basis that they secure or fail to secure a re-commission.
2. This poster image can be found online in Thomas (2011).
3. Jamie Dornan, of course, would a short time later would be starring in the film adaptation of *50 Shades of Grey* (Taylor Johnson, 2015), and this casting move across the two texts, with their shared concerns about masculinity, violence, consent and domination, was assuredly not coincidental.
4. In season two the thrilling pleasure of this vulnerability is taken to the nth degree when Paul breaks into Stella's hotel room and hides in her wardrobe watching her while she remains oblivious to the peril she is in.

5. Though now in her 40s and so in some respects not entirely 'the ideal subject' of postfeminism, Gibson would have reached adulthood in the era of postfeminism.
6. Again, this reading is reinforced by events in season two when Stella recruits a new detective, Tom Anderson, to her team and spends the night with him before he too is shot in the season finale.

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