

# BELFAST IN *THE FALL*: POST-CONFLICT GEOGRAPHIES OF VIOLENCE AND GENDER

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the TV series *The Fall* in terms of the relationship to its location in the city of Belfast. Viewing the process of production and dramatization as intrinsically linked to aspects of the city from a post-conflict perspective, the paper examines how issues of onscreen violence and gender are worked out in this context of economic regeneration in operation since the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. The introduction of a fictional serial killer to the province after decades of violence and a fragile peace process can be seen as an attempt to normalize the region in the popular imagination. The paper firstly examines the various ways that the older geography and spatial markers of the city are incorporated into the series and characters. At times used by the director to add a sense of unresolved social tension and spectral presence

of simmering violence, the city and its history provide a repressed background to the foregrounded conflict. This is examined further by framing the series as an example of third-wave Troubles drama where cultural production plays an important role in the stabilizing of this post-conflict society. Within the drama itself images of birth and the tenuous beginnings for future generations are configured around issues of gender, masculinity and unpredictable reactions to the opening up of Northern Irish society to forces of globalization. The paper reflects on how the series effectively intertwines issues of loss, grieving and fragile recovery in a place still not clear on how to deal with its recent history and the anxieties over the return of violence.

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I think the best of these sorts of shows on TV often have a very strong sense of place. In a way, the whole trick with creating a compelling drama is to create a distinct world. Belfast as a location has a very particular quality – a product, perhaps, of its history. A history, in part, of violence. That history casts a long shadow.

Allan Cubitt (2013), Writer, *The Fall*

## 1. NORMALISING BELFAST

*The Fall* was one of the UK's and Ireland's most highly rated BBC drama series of 2013/14.<sup>1</sup> Set in contemporary Belfast, it follows the search for a killer of young, professional women, which plays out on the streets and locations of a city still carrying echoes of the Troubles in its attitudes and iconography. At the centre of the drama is a struggle between the killer, who is located in the context of the city and its history of violence, and the detective brought in from outside the province, whose job it is to identify and arrest him. This paper will argue that the television series manifests a sense of anxiety in response to the changing physical and personal landscape of the city of Belfast, as issues of violence and gender work themselves out, often contradictorily, on screen. Through a consideration of research on the city as a post-conflict territory subject to the forces of redevelopment as part of a peace dividend, it is possible to identify that the newly enabled professional class is, in many ways, aligned with these processes of globalization but that this process has, problematically, not succeeded in resolving suppressed issues of identity, class resentment and a culture of past abuse. Indeed, in what can be considered an almost forced articulation of this, the serial killer's name, Paul Spector, suggests a haunting that personifies the return of a repressed and unresolved violence that the force of law is no longer able to keep in place, and which, in this context, can be seen as pointing to the fear of a collapse of the consensus for peace in the province, highlighting the presence of destabilizing forces. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to make connections between the drama's use of location and key aspects of individual characterization to provide an insight into popular perceptions of the current status of Belfast and

Northern Ireland in a post-conflict context. It addresses issues of masculinity and gender in this specific context, as these relate to the themes of the series and its positioning within the crime drama genre, the history of the province, and the location of the city of Belfast itself, and seeks to provide an analysis that critically examines how these cultural formations are intrinsically woven into the texture of the drama.

In terms of the Northern Irish conflict, Belfast saw one and a half thousand people killed and tens of thousands traumatised by what took place over those thirty years (McKittrick et al. 2004). As a site of representation, during this period the city became associated in film and media with the imagery of militarised street warfare and bombings, usually framed in terms of a sectarian urban conflict that minimized the role of the British state in perpetuating the divisions within the society. Since the stabilisation of the region with the signing of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, the city has undergone a process of renovation and renewal driven by the forces of economic regeneration and, indeed, rebranding (Moore 2016; Northover 2010).<sup>2</sup> In the realm of the visual, policy makers have sought to construct non-controversial images that speak of the new economic prosperity as part of a wider promotion of the region as a safe and prosperous place. The film and television industries have played an important part in this process and, through the state-funded agency of Northern Ireland Screen, have sought to boost the region's economy and celebrate what they describe in inclusive language as 'our culture' (Northern Ireland Screen 2016). Such strategies are important, not least to move away from the reductive picture of a place that was once so firmly associated with a singularising notion of war. The diversity that was always present but was forced underground through a repressive discourse of rigid identity is now able to have a visibility in a way not seen before.<sup>3</sup>

In a certain paradoxical way then, this strategy of 'normalisation' sees the city, for the first time, assigned its own fictional serial killer in *The Fall*.<sup>4</sup> This can be interpreted as an

1 "Currently airing on Monday nights, *The Fall* became BBC Two's biggest drama series to launch in eight years with an average audience of 3.5 million and 15.4% share." <http://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/latestnews/2013/the-fall-series2.html>

2 As recently as 2004 Martin McLoone would write: "It has to be said that even after nearly a decade of the peace process in Northern Ireland Belfast still suffers from a profound image problem. Its reputation as a centre of religious bigotry and inter-communal violence has made it, in Neill *et al*'s graphic phrase, 'a pariah city'".

3 For a good example of a film essay that effectively communicates something of this, see Mark Cousins, *I am Belfast*, 2015.

4 The term normalisation has a long history in Northern Ireland and it has been consistently employed as a part of political and military efforts to discursively position the conflict within terms that isolated it from wider questions of the role and responsibilities of the British State.

example of what Mark Seltzer refers to as the “abnormally normal” representation of this type of person, functioning as a key element of what he describes as “wound culture” with its fascination for trauma and death that bridges private desire and the public sphere (Seltzer 1998). Quite whether a population still profoundly affected by the consequences of actual levels of personal and community violence is similarly ‘fascinated’ by such spectacles is a moot point perhaps, but of course the drama is circulated far beyond the province as a transnational product. What can be seen in this series are some of the familiar tropes of the fictional serial killer mapped on to the locations and contours of Belfast in a popular television drama that effectively uses the location to attempt to advance the genre and articulate something of this culture in which it is placed. This can be seen as part of what Les Roberts describes as the “locative turn” a tendency towards investment by programme makers in the potentials of location in a way that has not been so evident in the past (Roberts 2016). Such a potential is encouraged by development and funding agencies that seek investments in the regions as part of an expansion of the cultural economy. Hence *The Fall* was developed by BBC2 and co-produced with BBC Northern Ireland, who provided 75% of the initial funding, with further finance from Northern Ireland Screen and the European Regional Development Fund. The first season was written by the British writer Allan Cubitt and directed by the Belgian Jakob Verbruggen, and was filmed primarily in Belfast between March and June 2012 before being screened in the UK and Ireland over May and June 2013. The second season was written and directed by Cubitt alone and went out in November 2014. As this paper is submitted, a third season is about to air and therefore it is not discussed in any great detail due to publication deadlines. Cubitt and Verbruggen are both from outside Northern Ireland and so this is not a drama series written or directed by those who directly lived through the conflict. However, as a BBC production, it was able to draw upon crew and talent that did have extensive local knowledge.<sup>5</sup> In certain ways, therefore, the drama is involved in the very processes of internationalization it makes manifest on screen even if the locative details can function as a backdrop and may go unrecognised by many viewers where, as Lindsay Steenberg argues, the political specificity of the city of Belfast is sometimes evacuated and it becomes, rather,

5 This can be seen to follow in the footsteps of films such as *Sunday* (2002), *Bloody Sunday* (2002) and *Hunger* (2008) all of which were written and directed by British directors from the mainland.

a “noir city” (Steenberg 2017). Productions such as *The Fall* are constructed so as to be available to a global market place and so that no necessary knowledge of history or place is required that might reduce the potential audience.<sup>6</sup> The complexity of the transnational television market is replicated in the complexity of the drama itself. I do not seek to reduce it in this regard, but rather attempt to map out certain contours of place and meaning that provide a perceptual register against and within which the dramatic process is enacted, as evidenced by the opening statement from Allan Cubitt.

## 2. CODING THE CITY

The central argument offered in this paper is that the TV series *The Fall* can be seen to resonate with tensions between the actions of this archetypal serial killer and the location of Belfast as a post-conflict society, one still struggling with the difficulties of unresolved loss, displaced violence and post-traumatic stress. This issue is creatively positioned at the centre of the drama since the killer is working as a bereavement counsellor, something that, at times, plays a significant role within the narrative. As one commentator observed, the series “...goes beyond the ‘Troubles tourism’ of the entertainment industries”<sup>7</sup> to give a compelling sense of the unevenness of the process of post-conflict social experience where there is an active effort to repress troublesome elements of the population within a broader process of globalized development. There is a policing component to this and a fear that these threatening individuals will return to kill the process before it has had a chance to establish itself.

The drama itself revolves around the binary of the male serial killer and the female police detective brought in to find him. Initially, the detective is brought in to carry out a 28-day case review of the unsolved murder of a young female architect. The Police Service Northern Ireland (PSNI) have been unable to make any headway and cannot see the pattern at work that points to a single perpetrator of a series of murders of professional women in the city. The starting point, therefore, is that of a prejudicial blind spot, an inabil-

6 For a discussion of these issues and the call for further research see Hilmes, M. ‘Transnational TV: What Do We Mean by “Coproduction” Anymore?’ at <http://www.mediaindustriesjournal.org/index.php/mij/article/view/44/84>.

7 ‘The Fall: extreme violence as a distorted mirror of post-conflict Belfast’ Niki Seth-Smith, 27 October 2014, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/niki-sethsmith/fall%E2%80%99s-extreme-violence-is-distorted-mirror-of-postconflict-northern-ireland>



FIGURE 1. STELLA IN HER HOTEL ROOM OVERLOOKING THE SHIPBUILDING YARD (1.01).

ity to see the reality suggested by the evidence. It takes an outsider, a woman from London's Metropolitan Police, to solve this case. Stella Gibson is a career officer, well versed in the audit culture and quality control of modern policing that speaks of the new order of organisational governance. In this sense, she signals a shift in the coding of the location of Belfast that has traditionally been defined as a masculine space of heavy industry and paramilitary violence. We can see this in relation to the Harland and Wolff cranes, Samson and Goliath – iconic symbols of Belfast and the shipbuilding industry that dominated the city through the twentieth century and which reappear throughout the show as part of its cinematic landscape (Lukinbeal 2005). In one scene from early on in series one, there is a shot of Stella standing in front of the window of her hotel room (the hotel is located in a prime area of regeneration in the docklands) which overlooks the shipyard and frames the cranes in the background before the rack focus pulls back to reveal her profile. Figuratively, she

now overlays the past just as the new present in the form of Belfast's regeneration process, overcodes the old (Figure 1).

What the character of Stella can be seen to articulate is a force for consolidating the newly imposed reality of the post-conflict city. As a member of a privileged de-territorialized elite that arrives in different locations but never connects to its lived space (Bauman 2000), Stella moves across and through post-conflict Belfast without connecting to its past. This lack of engagement is rudely brought into focus after the gunning down of a police officer with whom she has recently initiated a casual sexual encounter, and prompts her superior to comment:

“We should get you issued with a firearm, book yourself in at the range”

“I don't have time”

“This is Belfast, make time!” (1.03)



FIGURE 2. STELLA'S VIEW FROM HER CAR AS SHE ENTERS THE CITY (1.01).



FIGURE 3. "OUR MURDERED COLLEAGUES" RUC OFFICERS KILLED IN NI (1.01).



FIGURE 4. THE ARREST OF 'JIMMY' BY THE PSNI FOR BREAKING THE TERMS OF HIS EARLY-RELEASE LICENSE (1.01).

However, the abnormality of the location has already been established from the moment of her arrival, as she is surprised to be collected at the airport in an armoured vehicle that prompts the response: "Welcome to Belfast" (1.01). As she moves through the city-space safely ensconced within the protective vehicle, she views two iconic structures that make reference to the past as travelling shots: first, the peace wall at Cupar Way between the Catholic and Protestant communities of the Shankhill and the Falls, and second, the now derelict Crumlin Road Courthouse, a place that was central to the conflict as the point of entry into the prison system for convicted terrorists (Figure 2). These are also now established as tourist destination points in the city, where a 'Black Cab' tour will provide an introduction for visitors.<sup>8</sup>

The point is forcefully made that this is a very different place from the mainland as Stella enters the militarised and fortified police headquarters<sup>9</sup> and passes a memorial to officers killed in the conflict (Figure 3).

Brought in from outside the province, she is a necessary presence whose function is to resolve the threatening and destabilizing danger that the serial killer presents. As Steenberg explains, Stella "functions as a kind of aspirational inoculation against the abject horror of Spector" (2017: 69). The murderer Paul Spector is precisely a figure who operates outside the boundaries of the containable – a return of the repressed past of the city and its history of terror and death. He can be

seen in this way as the kind of unsettling figure described by Gordon Avery as:

Haunting and the appearance of specters or ghosts is one way ... we are notified that what's been concealed is very much alive and present, interfering precisely with those always incomplete forms of containment and repression ceaselessly directed toward us (2007: xvi).

What makes the character of Spector problematic is that he doesn't fit into the post-conflict narrative that has assimilated the category of Belfast terrorist, even if inflicting terror is a way in which he derives his sexually sadistic pleasure.<sup>10</sup> At the start of the series, as he invades the house of another victim, he removes his balaclava to reveal himself, symbolically stripping away the masking that became central to the iconography of the paramilitary. The State, as represented by the PSNI, has evolved in order to manage problems posed by rogue individuals with paramilitary pasts, as we can see in the suppression of the grieving father and Loyalist Jimmy who, although a disruptive presence to the killer, is a limited and two-dimensional portrayal of an ex-paramilitary driven by rage and sectarian hatred (Figure 4).

At this more repressive level, Stella Gibson's function is to maintain the progress of the peace process by smoothing out the troublesome elements that threaten it. In this way,

8 <https://www.getyourguide.com/belfast-l442/private-driving-tour-belfast-black-taxi-t10929/>

9 This is a constructed entrance for the purpose of the series and the actual location is College Square North in central Belfast. Later in the series The Maze prison was used to stand in for the police station.

10 The 1998 film *Resurrection Man* presents an abject portrayal of a sadistic killer (based on the Loyalist Shankhill Butchers who were members of the UVF) who is also sexually excited by the torture he inflicts on his victims. For a useful discussion on the representation of both Loyalist and Republican paramilitaries see McLaughlin and Baker (2010) pp. 49-68.

she represents not only the police force, but also the force of globalization. As Baker and McLaughlin argue, what they have called the ‘propaganda of peace’ was:

only partly about encouraging accord between unionism and nationalism. It had another purpose: to prepare Northern Ireland for integration into global capitalism, something barely acknowledged in public debate where the Good Friday Agreement was rarely considered as anything other than a self-evident good (McLaughlin and Baker 2010: 12).

In other words, the aim of the strategy of post-conflict regeneration has been to argue that Belfast has emerged from the period of conflict with sustained economic growth, rising house prices and a buoyant economy. This has been driven by policies of urban renewal that have actively sought to mobilise a generic style of development described as ‘urban cloning’, whereby a standardized retail aesthetic is filtered through a branded localism that makes explicit reference to indigenous histories (such as the Cultural Quarters). As Brendan Murtagh observes, “In Belfast, these processes have distinctive appeal in the attempt to reposition the city as a neutral, modernising place that has left its parochial sectarianism behind” (Murtagh 2008: 3) However, as Peter Shirlow pointedly observes in an article on Belfast as a post-conflict city: “The fundamental problem that affects Belfast is that geography matters in a way that is overt and obvious. The cantonisation of life is a forceful impediment to the delivery of a new city.” (Shirlow 2006: 107). Within *The Fall* this key aspect of the city becomes a moment of drama as the killer, out on reconnaissance for a future victim, finds he has crossed into territory that is still firmly within the

control of the Loyalist paramilitaries off the Shankill Road. On returning to his car he is challenged (Figure 5).

“You talking to me?”

“Yes, I’m talking to you. What are you doing here?”

“Is that any business of yours?”

“I’m making it my business. You’re not from around here.”

“So?”

“So what are you doing?” (1.03)

The series, then, locates the path of the serial killer as he stalks his next victim, a female accountant at the forefront of the gentrification process, as problematically overlaying the older sectarian geography of the city to which he himself becomes victim. This ongoing struggle to reterritorialize the city is by no means complete and is subject to being violently opposed. We get a sense of the fluid nature of the smooth space of capital – here represented by a female accountant, and so figured as part of the gendered process already described in relation to Stella – coming up against the striated space of the city’s sectarian geography, even if it seemingly passes by the territorial mindset of the Loyalists, who are represented as still locked into old issues of masculine (sectarian) identities. However, both serial killer and terrorist confront each other as lawless war machines driven by sadistic violence, leading to the denouement of series two where one seeks to destroy the other.<sup>11</sup>

### 3. THIRD-WAVE TROUBLES DRAMA

In a wider sense, *The Fall* is part of what can be described as third-wave Troubles drama. This periodizes the series as coming after the first and second wave of dramas that were produced, respectively, during the conflict and in the immediate aftermath of the 1998 peace agreement. Positioning the series as a third-wave Troubles drama usefully highlights aspects of the active part that such cultural productions play in the post-conflict regeneration process, in which a concerted effort is made to present a new phase of locative identity, more fluid than the rigidity of the previous religious forma-



FIGURE 5. PAUL SPECTOR CONFRONTED BY LOYALISTS OFF THE SHANKILL ROAD (1.03)

11 Gregg Lambert writes of this Deleuzian formulation of the war machine and how it operates as fundamentally exterior to the operations of the law of the State: ‘...the people are always failing the ideals of the State, always found to be lacking, or exhibit a tendency to go a little insane, to return to religion and to the family, and if pushed to the extreme limit, to become terrorists or serial-killers.’ (2010: 3)

tion. It is a shift away from the essentialist and identity-driven structures of the only recently ceased conflict. This shifts the range of characterizations into more ambiguous terrain where the point is very much that these old indicators of identity are not simply reversed, but can begin to be transcended, so that the on-screen markers become, therefore, far less obvious if still consistently focussed on masculinity and atavistic violence – a key characteristic of Troubles drama. These markers still hover in the background, providing a secondary reference for the foregrounded Manichean conflict of killer and detective. This can be seen in the many glimpses of the mural-lined streets that mark out the city, for example in the shot seen below (Figure 6).



FIGURE 6. LOYALIST UVF MURAL IN THE BACKGROUND OFF DONEGAL PASS (2.02).

As previously stated, the introduction of a fictional serial killer into the province can be seen as part of the push towards presenting a certain kind of normality encouraged by regional development agencies and part of a wider marketing of Celtic noir. What becomes apparent in deciding on the location of Belfast as a dramatic setting is the need to stabilize a volatile people for whom state institutions have only very recently asserted any kind of credibility, none more so than the police, now called the Police Service Northern Ireland and no longer known as the less than neutral “Royal Ulster Constabulary”.<sup>12</sup> Of course, all crime dramas present the police in an imaginary way and don’t necessarily relate the location to any history or

12 The PSNI came into existence in 2001, as part of a review of policing contained in the Good Friday Agreement and sought to address the problem of the relationship between the state and the Catholic minority and what was seen by them as the oppressive role played by the Royal Ulster Constabulary within the province. The main Republican party, Sinn Fein, fully endorsed the PSNI in 2007.

regional identity. For instance, the second and third series of the police procedural *The Line of Duty* were filmed in Belfast yet avoided any identificatory markers of the city, presenting it more generically as a typical British city. What *The Fall* articulates through its Belfast location, therefore – amongst all its other elements of genre and cliché – is the difficulty of establishing a new people, a people not defined by the old hatreds, which can help enable a stable future of economic prosperity. The function of the police, as an armed wing of the state, is to try to enfold all dangerous individuals within a legitimizing form of power so as to maintain law and order.<sup>13</sup> In Northern Ireland, the paramilitaries as collective organizations of disruption have now been largely assimilated and what is left are those deemed to be rogue individuals outside this process, who pose a far less existential threat to the state. In this way, we can see the serial killer as the most extreme form of individualized threat, for as Gregg Lambert writes in regard to formulation of the war machine and those who revolt against the state, such people are different from criminals:

To be exceptional or solitary means in some way to be found outside the circle of society, and often against it, but not in any way that could be compared to the criminal who merely represents the law’s own inherent contradiction, which can be peacefully resolved. (Lambert 2010: 1)

The serial killer and the paramilitary are not simply criminals because criminality can be addressed through the self-regulating law and order machine, as we see with the suicide of a corrupt officer, who faces questioning about the murder of his fellow officer by gangsters with whom they have been involved in drug dealing and prostitution. For the paramilitary characters in the series, their fate echoes their origins, as they use the gun and in return are shot themselves, in a kind of equivalence that restores the principle of identity. Similarly, the serial killer is apprehended and then subject to an interrogation. In another place he would be subject to the death sentence but here he is subject to the interrogation of the police officer whose function is to extort a confession in all its detail that, in a suggestive way, mirrors the sadistic actions of the killer, who torments his bound victims before killing them.<sup>14</sup>

13 Readers should be aware that all members of the PSNI carry firearms as routine, whereas on the British mainland police officers do not carry guns other than as part of specialist units.

14 It is interesting to note that Cubitt makes reference to a real killer, Colonel

#### 4. REBIRTH

Fundamental to the concept of regeneration in the region is the projection of the idea of a rebirth, the emergence of a new generation that is not defined by the traumas and attitudes of the past. What can be seen throughout the series in this context are allusions to birth and the anxieties surrounding it. These anxieties, it can be argued, manifest a fear within the province, concerning the fragility of the peace process and the future for its children. In the series' opening sequence, Sarah Kay – a solicitor being stalked as the next victim of the killer – is asked by a male colleague whether she wants to have children, and replies, “Of course I do!” (1.01) but within days, the killer has murdered her in her bed, unaware that she was, in fact, pregnant. Paul Spector's wife is a neonatal nurse, and we see her caring for a baby born to a single, 18-year old mother, who cradles her infant as life-support is switched off. Anxiety surrounds all the children, even as the killer, in his communiqué with the police, justifies his actions by quoting Nietzsche “giving birth to a dancing star”. This hand-written document is subject to an electrostatic detection apparatus (ESDA) test (a reference to key miscarriages of justice during the conflict such as the Birmingham Six), which reveals the palimpsest of a child's drawing of a mother and baby in the womb (Figure 7).

The first victim identified, Alice Monroe, whose Unionist family connections initiate a high-level inquiry, is described as a “promising young architect” and can therefore be seen as a representative of the aspirations to build a new future for Belfast, one led by a professional class not yet securely established and subject to the predatory violence of the serial killer.

The question of gender in a post-conflict society previously defined by violence and the culture of “gunmen” is one that poses challenges for negotiating this transition to peace. Indeed, Naomi Cahn and Fionnuala Ní Aoláin argue that failure to address these issues could significantly affect the success of the conflict transition process (Ní Aoláin 2009). The emergence of a society from a sustained period of conflict and violence sees it move into a terrain of shifting attitudes and can pose difficulties for families with members who played active roles in the violence and now face the challenges of a far less secure image of masculinity. In terms of mas-

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Russell Williams, whose police interview and confession was released to the public and can be viewed on YouTube: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HPupWi28\\_qs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HPupWi28_qs). It is possible to identify phrases in this interview that are scripted into the Spector interrogation.



FIGURE 7. THE SHOT CONNECTS THE FEMALE DETECTIVE, MOTHER AND BABY, IN A LINE OF FORENSIC INVESTIGATION. (1.05).



FIGURE 8. THE KILLER EXERCISES (1.03).



FIGURE 9: JIMMY WORKING OUT IN THE CELL-LIKE ROOM OF HIS HOUSE (2.04).

culinity, *The Fall* offers a contrast between the body of the paramilitary, who is suggested to act out through domestic violence his frustration at his loss of status (represented by the death of his son whom he says was a victim of his crimes: “my son paid the price” [1.01]), and the serial killer, who at times we see in moments of narcissistic display (Figure 8).

Such images reinforce the sense of a shift in the place where previous images of traditional masculine bodies are supplanted by the new, aesthetic bodies of men concerned with achieving this ideal through exercise and diet rather than the “prison gym” workouts of the tattooed ex-prisoner (Figure 9).

The need to consider the changing terrain of masculinity in this context is important, otherwise, as Cahn and Ní Aoláin state, “this lack of attention to masculinities means a failure to account for the myriad of ways in which masculinities transform, adapt and reformulate in the post-conflict environment.” (Ní Aoláin 2009: 6) By making direct reference on-screen to domestic violence perpetrated by ex-paramilitaries, and the fetishistic targeting of single, professional women, the series makes connections and associations with a range of reactions generated by the changing landscape of Belfast and the province. Police statistics show that Northern Ireland has seen a significant increase in domestic violence since the 1998 Good Friday Peace Agreement (Women’s Aid 2016). As Melanie Hoewer observes in her research on the tension inherent in the transition from traditional roles to new, uncertain ones:

The competition between the traditional image of hegemonic masculinity and new gender images is central to the contention in intimate partnerships between men and women at the private level of society; this becomes visible in challenges in the re-integration of male prisoners into their families and leads to an increase in contention and violence in intimate relationships post 1998. This leaves female activists halfway between aspirations for changed gender relationships and remaining unresolved gender inequalities. (Hoewer 2013: 227)

It is these aspects of the series that see it usefully connected to the actual experience for women in the province and the cultural location Cubbitt draws upon to construct the drama. Spector’s professional role as a kind of mediator means that his temperament is initially one of passive de-escalation, as when faced with the threat of violence

from paramilitaries such as Jimmy and his accomplice. Yet he exploits his professional access to vulnerable women to the extent that he has himself appointed as the therapist to a woman he attempted to murder. The primal motivations of sectarian hatred that have long been held to underpin and drive the conflict in Northern Ireland are thus displaced onto young, professional women who encapsulate the shifts in power emerging under the nation’s new regime. Stella’s speech in one of the final scenes of series one – “You are a slave to your desires, you have no control at all, you are weak, impotent, you think you are some kind of artist, but you are not... you try to dignify what you do, but it’s just misogyny, age-old male violence against women” (1.05) – echoes in some ways Margaret Thatcher’s assertion that, in relation to the campaign for political status for paramilitary prisoners in the 1980s, “There is no such thing as political murder, political bombing or political violence. There is only criminal murder, criminal bombing and criminal violence.”<sup>15</sup> Such a connection does not raise the misogynistic violence of the serial killer to the level of paramilitary violence but rather collapses both into an established idea of atavism and sadism as key characteristics of Belfast, returning to the paradox of normalizing the place through the serial killer construction.

This attempt to resolve Belfast’s actual history of violence through an overlay of generic television crime drama imagery, informed by certain ideas of contemporary gender attitudes, founders on the extreme nature of what is needed to achieve this. The beginning of the series is structured around a number of shots that relate to both of these elements of place and genre and introduce the terms of this process. The opening shot of the very first episode is of Stella bending over, cleaning the bath, whilst dressed in pyjamas, and signals the series’ attitude to the female characters, whose most intimate spaces are to be invaded and objectified as sources of pleasure for the fetishistic male view. This can be seen in the way the drama mobilizes this voyeuristic gaze as it follows the actions of the killer, as – in prolonged scenes that I found quite difficult to watch – he stalks his victims before binding them and finally strangling them in an act of sexual gratification. This raises issues concerning the regressive tradition of crime drama, which uses the peril and terror of female victims to reinforce the message of male violence and domination. Deborah Jermyn, in an analysis of *The Fall* in relation to issues posed by postfeminism, articulates her discomfort at the “double entanglement” that

15 A speech from March 5 1981 by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, [www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104589](http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104589)

the screen representation of murdered women entails, whilst simultaneously giving us the character of Stella as powerful career police officer (Jermyn 2016). The series justifies itself by countering the graphic violence against the women victims with the characterization of Stella Gibson who, it is argued, challenges many of the clichés of the genre as a woman who is simply unconcerned at any attempt to “slut shame” her because of the sexual encounters she initiates with certain male officers. When she is challenged at one point with regard to the morality of her actions she retorts:

That’s what really bothers you isn’t it? The one-night stand? Man fucks woman. Subject man, verb fucks, object woman. That’s okay. Woman fucks man. Woman subject, man object. That’s not so comfortable for you is it? (1.03)

Other scenes throughout the series are constructed to reinforce this representation, one that clearly tends towards defining Gibson as a femme fatale, and extends to a suggestion of bisexuality in her encounter with the pathologist Professor Reed Smith, played by Archie Panjabi. This is not the place to examine in detail the wider reading of the sexual politics evident in the series, but to instead point out how the contradictions of the post-conflict process can be seen in the way that Stella – a woman from outside the province, and so someone who the existing order has no power to discipline through any localized regime of repressive morality – has the status and authority to challenge the patriarchal contours of the city. Even so, the killer is able to invade her bedroom, read her personal journal and, at the end of the final series, violently and graphically assault her in the interrogation room (3.06). The women located within the province do not even have this level of security and can therefore easily be targeted by the killer in a way that is designed to generate a fear of all spaces, public and private. What *The Fall* points to, therefore, is a clear sense of the layers of power and violence operating within and across the city of Belfast as the location of the serial drama, while still carrying a sense of unease as, in this uncertain period, the fragility of the social order becomes, at times, apparent.

## 6. IDENTITY AND LOCATION

In this context then, questions of national and religious identity continue to play a significant role in the social realm of the province (Morrow 2013). Cubitt addresses the identity of

the killer in this matrix by having him reply to the aggressive question from the Loyalist James Tyler “Spector? What kind of name is that anyway?” “It’s Russian. Jewish,” Spector replies. “That explains a lot”, says Jimmy (1.01), who later threateningly describes him as that “Jew-boy piece of shit” (2.04). Being Jewish in Northern Ireland locates Spector within a tiny minority often viewed as outsiders.<sup>16</sup> We later learn, after he has been identified as the prime suspect, that his father was a British soldier and that he was born in 1979 which, as the Assistant Chief Constable Jim Burns reminds us, was: “The year the Shankill Butchers were sentenced to life imprisonment for 19 murders, the year of Warrenpoint. A bad year” (2.03).

Creatively, the writer positions the killer most engagingly by having him work as a bereavement counsellor. Here, his role is to counsel those who are struggling to cope with loss after a loved one has been “seized by violence”. For the province, therefore, coming out of the period of conflict and its traumas, such a role is a significant one for any process of peaceful stabilisation. Breaking the cycle of violence and terror necessarily means working to look forward rather than back, and to avoid blame and rage for past events. In his role as counsellor to Jimmy and his wife, Spector acts to insert himself between them and ultimately acts to facilitate her finding a place at a women’s refuge while Jimmy is removed from the family home by the police (Figure 4). In a key exchange between the wife and counsellor in the bedroom of the child who died, he recounts his bereavement philosophy:

“I don’t think I’ll ever be able to accept what’s happened”  
“You don’t have to. I don’t subscribe to that model of grief. I don’t see bereavement as ever being resolved or accepted. There’s no closure, no recovery. But you can learn to live without the physical presence of your son.” (1.03)

And later in series two, as he counsels a victim of his own attack recovering in hospital:

16 See the BBC documentary *The Last Minyan: The Decline of Belfast’s Jewish Community* that looks at the fall in the number of Jewish people in Northern Ireland from a high point of 1500 in the mid 20th Century to 300 today. <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-26504260>. Sadly, it is still an identity subject to hatred and violence, ‘Seventeen Jewish graves desecrated in Belfast cemetery’ *The Guardian*, Sunday 28 August 2016. The graves location in West Belfast, traditionally a Republican area, suggests that it is an expression of anti-semitism driven by the crude aligning of Jewishness with Israel where Republicans have identified with Palestine in the conflict, see ‘Jewish cemetery attack shames city’ editorial in *Belfast Telegraph*, 29/08/2016.

"We all know people who live too much in the past. Too much history, too much remembering can ultimately destroy the present and the future." (2.02)

Such formulations describe well the realities of Northern Ireland, as it seeks to maintain a somewhat fragile peace, and where hopes for "truth and reconciliation" are continuously deferred and "dealing with the past" means moving on and simply living with the trauma. As Kevin Meagher observes:

The legacy of "the Troubles" remains, unsurprisingly, a sore point. Nearly 3,600 people were killed during the period and countless more were maimed, but there is little common ground about how and what is commemorated, remembered or conveniently forgotten. And, crucially, who is brought to book, either legally, or just in moral terms for the deaths and atrocities that occurred. (Meagher 2016)

## CONCLUSION

What can be seen in *The Fall* is an incorporation of the location to add an engaging element of place and identity to the narrative itself that is more generally defined by the generic conventions of the crime drama series. This shifting of the representation of the city of Belfast away from conflict-era imagery is indicative of an opening up of the province to a range of economic and cultural forces in a fragmented and uneven process of development evident in a post-conflict situation. The economic regeneration sees the attempt to more effectively integrate the city into transnational networks of capital, which is itself manifest in the production process of the series. *The Fall* can be seen to communicate something of Belfast's awkward relationship the past and to its people, and the sense of anxiety that still lingers over a city living with "peace walls" to separate communities even while they have become key tourist attractions. The attempt to normalize the city though the encouragement of investment both economically and imaginatively falters on the unresolved tensions still operating in the place even if the force of the narrative is one of moving forward into a globalized future. The response is still to see conflicts resolved through the forceful suppression of socially threatening agents, violently misogynist or otherwise. The different elements of the series itself, functioning

as entertainment, articulating shifting identities, and visualizing an unsettled location, resonate with the aggravating condition of the post-conflict situation that is morally ambiguous and politically unstable but dramatically mobilized in an attempt to resolve profound contradictions.

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