Bodies in Transformation:
An Interdisciplinary Symposium on
Fictional Representations of Bodies on Screen

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Ideal and Non-Ideal Victims:

Representations of Violence Against Women

in Television Drama and Video Gaming

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Today's Presentation

- Violence against women (VAW) in *The Fall*

- VAW in Grand Theft Auto

- Hierarchy of victims

- Implications

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The Fall (BBC 2, DVD age rating 15)

- Graphic depictions - true to life to reflect reality?
- 'art imitating life' (Jewkes, 2015, p. 216)

- Sparse script
- Visual
- Haunting music
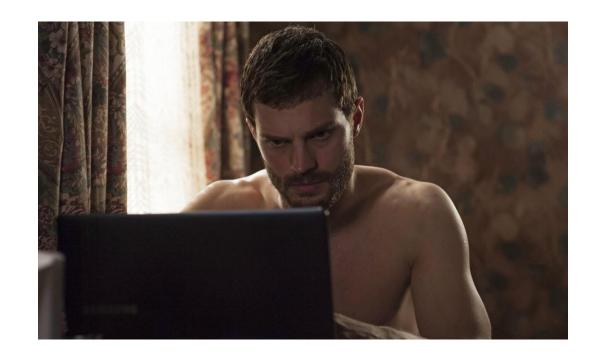
- **The beautiful perpetrator**
- **The beautiful corpse**

Perpetrator

Spector: often topless, sometimes naked from back

Muscular physique

Limbers up before each attack, semi-clad

Strength needed for the crime

Loving husband

Family man

Caring father
has special regard for children, sees them as innocent

Works in a caring profession as
Bereavement Counsellor

Reassures grieving mother, abused by husband, that she is not to blame for the domestic violence she is experiencing

Challenging preconceptions

- Unsettling common expectations of killers being unattractive, uncaring, social misfits, loners

In response to photo fit Gibson, female detective leading investigation, says:
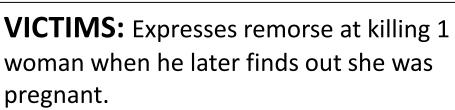

Gibson: 'Even a multiple murderer can have his share of good qualities or a pretty face.'

(Series 1, Episode 5)

VICTIMS: Expresses remorse at killing 1 woman when he later finds out she was pregnant.
Kills 1 man by mistake who disturbed crime (brother of female victim)

Victim Type

- Young professional women - Architect, Solicitor, Accountant

- **Ideal victims**: free from blame, their respectability and professional identity are foregrounded potentially increasing identification with them among viewers of similar social standing

- Identification can increase persuasive impact of narrative on viewers (Custers and Van den Bulck, 2013)

- But counter narrative disrupts dichotomy of ideal and non-ideal victims

Challenging hierarchy of innocence

Conversation between police detectives about women victims

Gibson: 'Let's not refer to them as innocent.'

Burns: 'They were innocent.'

Gibson: 'What if he kills a prostitute next or a woman walking home drunk late at night in a short skirt. Will they be in some way less innocent, therefore less deserving? Culpable? The media loves to divide women into virgins and vamps, angels or whores. Let's not encourage them.'

(Series 1, Episode 3)

- Gentle posing of corpses
- Bathed corpse, painted nails
- Artistic positioning like art installation
- Photographs and sketches for his 'murder' notebook

- Mannequin of woman, smashes it when he is topless
- Barbie doll, ties up with string - he strangles women
- Symbolism - dehumanising women

Perpetrator - afforded agency

Victims - silenced, malleable bodies, play objects

Violent embodiment

- Is graphic depiction of women's bodies necessary for character/plot development?

- Is VAW gratuitous? Glamourising violence?

- Does *The Fall* encourage voyeuristic participation among the audience?

- Ist series, Allan Cubitt (writer): 'It may be that the camera lingered too intimately on certain things…'

(Radio Times, 8-14 November 2014, p.15)

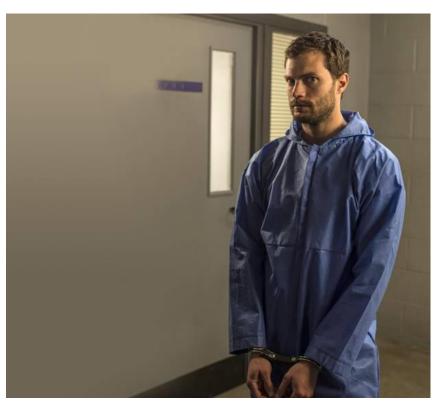# Spector manipulates babysitter - she is infatuated with him and provides him with alibi

Babysitter

Alibi

Gibson, female lead, is portrayed in sexualised manner too
Is VAW more acceptable / less offensive with strong female lead?
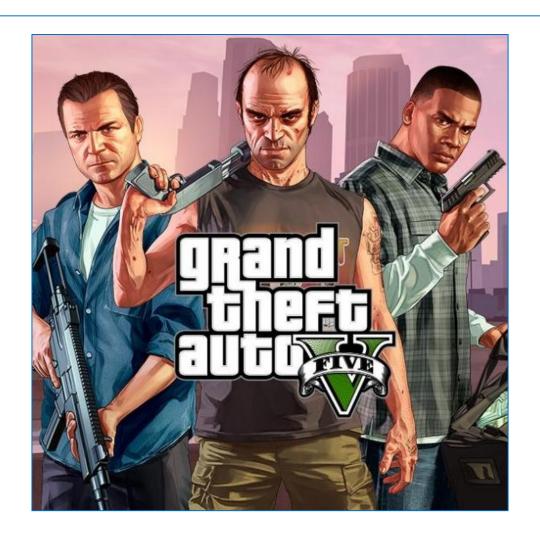
Challenging narrative conventions

- Difference between misogyny and the portrayal of misogyny to be critically analysed

- Multiple readings: *The Fall* could represent female empowerment avenging male violence thereby breaking with narrative conventions

- End of Series 1:

  Gibson to Spector: 'You try to dignify what you do but it's just misogyny, age old male violence against women.'

  (Series 1, Episode 5)

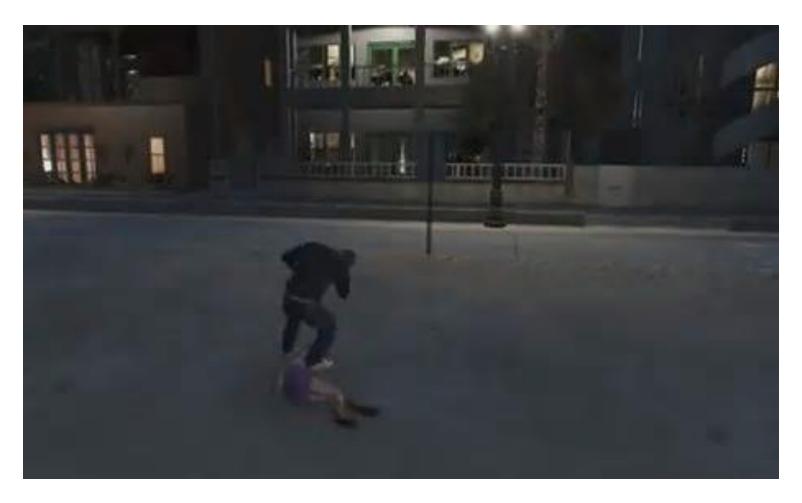- But interspersing feminist statements does not necessarily qualify *The Fall* as a feminist narrative or counter narrative

Grand Theft Auto (GTA) 5 (18+)

Women as Fair Game

- Gamer can pay for a woman and select from a menu of sexual acts
- Gamer gains points for having sexual relations
- Gamer can mug or kill sex worker to get money back
- Shock value sells – fastest selling entertainment product of all time, multiple awards
- Men subject to violence too, man in water-boarding torture
- Not just sex workers abused but also other women

Single player (offline) or multi-player (online)
Play in 1ˢᵗ or 3ʳᵈ person, VAW can be experienced in 1ˢᵗ person
Research shows playing violent video games alone can increase subsequent aggressive behaviour (Velez et al., 2016)

**Strong women
but recurring theme of VAW**

Different weapons... ...same theme

Different bodies...   **...same theme**

Different ethnicities...   **...same theme**

Different modes...   ...same theme

Different clothing...   ...same theme

Same bodies...   **...same theme**

Degenerate bodies

- **Non-ideal victims**: blameworthy, their lack of respectability is foregrounded potentially decreasing our identification with them

- **LINKS WITH REAL-LIFE VAW:**

- 'Discourse of disposability' (Lowman, 2000) - unwanted, unmissed, disposable

- Worthless victims (Kinnell, 2008)

- Construction of street sex worker as a social problem, positioning women as vermin victims (Strega, et al., 2014)

- Elimination of vermin to ensure clean streets

- Contrast with worthy victims: wanted, missed

Transferability

- Caution needed: contexts may not be transferable, e.g. fictional representations to real-life crime

- But fictional representations could be encouraging tolerance and/or trivialisation - VAW as entertainment

- Gamers may feel sense of entitlement

- Potentially reinforcing spectrum of VAW from casual through to extreme violence

- Women survivors of abuse campaigned successfully against sale of GTA 5 from certain stores in Australia

- Aforementioned research shows playing violent video games alone can increase aggressive behaviour (Velez et al., 2016)

Counter narrative

- Gamers may feel uncomfortable by actions
- Are gamers invited to question their/society's moral judgements?
- Can actions be more effectively questioned through the visceral experience of violating bodies?
- If GTA is critical of VAW, is the message too nuanced, subtle?

- Culture as a protective factor, GTA developed by UK-based company *Rockstar* – perhaps greater criticism if non-westernised country

Conclusions

- Complex, multilayered readings
- Are fictional representations of VAW:
  - critiquing state of society?
  - questioning preconceptions?
  - reinforcing gender stereotypes and male dominance?

- Could indicate weakening thresholds of VAW (cf. Ray, 2011)

➢ While fictional representations may challenge popular assumptions about victims and perpetrators, it is possible their cumulative effect is also contributing to the continuing cultural desensitisation and normalisation of VAW.

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