

# The Law of Diminishing Returns: Precarity and Nonreproduction in *The Fall*

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## Abstract

This essay examines the representation of precarity in the BBC Two series, *The Fall* (2013-), starring Gillian Anderson as Detective Superintendent Stella Gibson and Jamie Dornan as serial killer Paul Spector. In the series, institutions of social reproduction are revealed to be sclerotic, exemplified not only in the austerity policies of fiscally insolvent national governments but also in the family and the couple, social forms integral to a system of crisis management that depends upon feminized reproductive work. Here, precarity emerges as a double bind: a reproductive crisis that would seem to demand a doubling down, a renewed investment in the very systems of accumulation and control that underwrite its proliferation. This essay argues that the representation of such contradictory logic should not be mistaken for some failure of the imagination, but should instead be recognized as an expression of a crisis in the reproduction of the capitalist class relation as it is mediated across the social field.

**Keywords:** precarity, nonreproduction, austerity, gender, the child

This essay examines the representation of precarity in the BBC Two series, *The Fall* (2013-), starring Gillian Anderson as Detective Superintendent Stella Gibson and Jamie Dornan as serial killer Paul Spector.<sup>1</sup> From its opening scenes, the police procedural appears entirely preoccupied with reproductive crisis, situating the misogynistic violence of the Belfast Strangler at both intimate and world-historical scales. The setting spans several sites of nonreproduction, a concept which in this essay names both the contemporary crisis of futurity and the horizon of a politics of abolition, a contradiction I unpack in my analysis below. In the series, institutions of social reproduction are revealed to be sclerotic, exemplified not only in the austerity policies of fiscally insolvent national governments but also in the family and the couple, social forms integral to a system of crisis management that depends upon feminized reproductive work. Here, precarity emerges as a double bind: a reproductive crisis that would seem to demand a doubling down, a renewed investment in the very systems of accumulation and control that underwrite its proliferation. In other words, if gender names one of the many forms of separation specific to capitalist reproduction, *The Fall* suggests that the contemporary crisis of social reproduction constitutes a mode of continuity and stasis that relies precisely

<sup>1</sup> Special thanks to Megan Farnel and Natasha Hurley for their generous conversations about and keen insights into *The Fall* and questions of precarity, representation, gender, labor, affect, value, reproduction and the figure of the child in the series.



on the gendered maintenance of these very forms of separation. What I want to argue here is that the representation of such contradictory logic should not be mistaken for some failure of the imagination, but should instead be recognized as an expression of a crisis in the reproduction of the capitalist class relation as it is mediated across the social field.

My primary claim, then, is that *The Fall* represents rising precarity as reproductive crisis, indexed in the series primarily by the state's off-loading of the costs of social reproduction through austerity measures, but where austerity signals something more akin to a systemic crisis in the reproduction of the totality of capitalist social relations. Broadly conceived, this includes the state apparatus and its various institutions, as well as the multiple sites of feminized reproductive activity particular to the gender division of labor under capitalism. The series quickly establishes its concern with reproductive crises through the primary characters we meet in the pilot, all of whom work in some facet of social reproduction that is in one way or another dealing with financial strain: Paul is a bereavement counselor whose current clients are struggling with their son's death, which should have been prevented but was missed by tired and overworked medical staff; his wife Sally Ann (Bronagh Waugh) is a neonatal nurse working extended hours through the night; his third victim Sarah Kay (Laura Donnelly) is a divorce and custody lawyer whose caseload spills over into the weekend; and Stella is a law enforcement official brought in to assist a financially and politically beleaguered police department. My discussion of *The Fall* begins, then, with representations of gender and austerity in the pilot episode, which I tie to the function of policing and the figure of the child, interrelated lines of inquiry that provide key points of departure for examining precarity as nonreproduction in the series.

### **Policing the Reproductive Crisis**

The opening scene of the pilot, "Dark Descent," casts Stella and Paul as inverted images of each other. The first shot depicts Stella in an image of feminine domesticity, cleaning the bathroom in a red polka-dot hairband reminiscent of a 1950s-era housewife and wearing a facial mask, which she then washes off as she looks at herself in the mirror. In the following scene, Paul breaks into a house by climbing through a window – an image of violent penetration – and cases the joint in a disguise before he also un.masks before the mirror. But while the series examines the violence inherent in the gender-relation, it is quick to complicate conventional oppositions between male and female that might operate in terms of a distinction between, for example, the public and the private, which while not exactly irrelevant nevertheless fails to fully capture the division of gendered labor in the series. After the opening shots, we see Stella looking over case files, indicating she is a professional whose gendered relation to reproductive labor endures with her entry into the formal economy. Indeed, Stella is a successful woman, single and without kids, who takes no shit from men and sleeps with whomever she pleases – what critics might call a "strong female lead" – while Paul targets independent



women with promising careers, acting out his misogynistic fantasies on successful young professionals. Seeming to lead a double life, Paul is also a family man. A series of overhead shots depicting the domestic interior of the Spector home situates the visceral horrors of patriarchy squarely within the familiar space of domestic life, its traditional seat of power, and suggests an affective dimension of gendered violence, too, as his daughter's proximity to Paul's stash of "trophies" hidden above her bed trigger a series of night terrors like a spreading contagion. Housing itself has been emptied of the workers it was built to reproduce: Paul undertakes his ritual preparation before a murder in abandoned tenement housing. Hiding in plain sight, Paul is also part of the same vast state apparatus that is struggling through austerity-era Northern Ireland having seen none of the benefits of the Celtic Tiger, an Irish economic boom that had been established in part through growing geopolitical stability brought about by the Good Friday Agreement.

Set in Belfast, Northern Ireland, the series expectantly evokes "The Troubles" immediately upon Stella's arrival, as Assistant Chief Constable Jim Burns (Jon Lynch) announces that "policing is political here" ("Dark Descent" 00:17:15). Stella has been seconded from The Metropolitan Police Service in London by the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) to review the high profile murder of Alice Monroe (Gemma McCorry), the daughter of a Unionist Member of Parliament. Setting the scene with images of graffiti for peace and abandoned stately buildings, the PSNI appears as a struggling colonial apparatus, its walls decorated with a memorial plaque dedicated to "Our Murdered Colleagues" and pictures of Queen Elizabeth II. Political tensions are never far from the surface, occasionally bursting into view as when Paul's Protestant patient, in a fit of rage, decries the idea that his dead son's heart is now "beating in some Taig's chest" (00:23:49). Within this political climate, Stella would appear to represent the imperial order, a figure of central authority dispatched to the periphery to reestablish colonial rule in times of economic and political uncertainty. Evan Calder Williams has argued that the police procedural functions to legitimize policing by situating protagonist police officers at a degree of remove from the institution, so that, through those flawed – which is to say, non-normative, and thus *more human* – characters, we come to see cops as subjects, when in fact police are, socially speaking, objects to which we cannot relate and with which we cannot communicate, such that there is a certain incommensurability between the police and all other bodies in space. These are the rogues, traditionally, who flaunt the rules to get the job done, like Detective Jimmy McNulty (Dominic West) in David Simon's *The Wire* or any other of the countless rebel cops of popular representation. But they also, and increasingly, work representationally through the appropriation of feminism and queerness, in a version of "pink-washing" or what Jasbir Puar calls "homonationalism," by which she means to designate the tendency of states to incorporate queer subjects into their nation-building projects through "forms of regulatory queerness" (xxxii). In



this light, Stella's bisexuality functions as a veiled attempt to validate the ongoing colonial imposition of English rule in Northern Ireland.

The second episode of *The Fall*, "Darkness Visible," further explores this crisis of social reproduction – what in this essay I am calling nonreproduction – through the proximal relationship between the figure of the child and death. There's much to be said about nonreproduction in the series, to be sure, but *The Fall* appears immediately concerned with at least three not-easily-disarticulated valences of the concept: crisis, politics and labor. In working through the second episode with these ideas in mind, then, and in the course of making some remarks about the serial form, I want to consider what recent conversations in queer theory, communization theory and Marxist feminism might bring to bear on questions of futurity and negativity in the series. If the pilot episode of *The Fall* indexes a crisis in the reproduction of the capitalist class relation through austerity and social unrest in post-industrial Northern Ireland, the second episode only confirms what the first indicated: the cash-strapped PSNI are struggling to hit "performance targets" in light of "increased economic cutbacks and increased threats against officers" ("Darkness Visible" 00:15:26). A conversation between the emergency operator and Sarah Kay's sister, Marian (Lis Hogg), is telling in this regard: intensely personal for Marion, Sarah's death is, while taxing, a matter of routine for the operator, a government worker whose feminized affective labor is always just-in-time to take the next emergency call. Importantly, the emergency operator's initial concern is with the health of the baby she can hear crying over the phone, drawing a connection between gender, reproduction, and violence that hinges on the life of the child. The figure of the child, though, occupies a contradictory position in this context: on the one hand, as conventional agents of futurity, children in the series appear instead in close proximity to death, while on the other, although they work to facilitate a kind of historical erasure (their own and others), their unwitting concealment of violence infects them affectively, so that they are at once figures both of disappearance and residue.

What I want to suggest, following these associations between austerity, affect, children, and death, is that the labor of the child paradoxically represents the labor of the negative in the series. The concept of nonreproduction is associated most immediately with queer theorist Lee Edelman, for whom the figure of the child represents the conservative tendencies of "reproductive futurism" (3), or the ongoing reproduction of the existing social order, such that the refusal to reproduce constitutes a potentially radical act. Despite Edelman's deep distrust of the political, which he sees as always-already based on a reproductive *telos* of the status quo, the refusal of reproduction here might align the negativity of the anti-social turn in queer theory with a politics of negation as it is outlined in the theory of communization, insofar as the latter defines revolution as "the direct non-reproduction of the class relation" ("Crisis in the Class Relation" 11). Edelman's contention is that "politics, however radical the means by which specific constituencies attempt to produce a



more desirable social order, remains, at its core, conservative insofar as it works to affirm a structure” (2-3). But the political, understood broadly, covers an array of possible positions between affirmation and abolition, including the radical negativity epitomized in what Marx and Engels call “the real movement which abolishes the present state of things” (Part 1A). If there is no necessary correlation between the political and affirmation, might a politics of nonreproduction counter-intuitively find its representative in the series in the figure of the child?

I want to pause here and consider the manner in which nonreproduction emerges in the series as a crisis of social reproduction, with the state off-loading reproductive work primarily onto women. Given Jack Halberstam’s concerns regarding a queer politics that “always lines up against women, domesticity and reproduction” (154), we might note that a politics of nonreproduction shares certain key contradictions with the more familiar notion of a politics of reproduction advanced by theorists of the reproductive commons such as Sylvia Federici and Peter Linebaugh. As Maya Gonzalez, Marina Vishmidt, and others have pointed out, in positing the self-organization of reproductive activities as a terrain on which to mount a feminist and anti-capitalist politics, a politics of reproduction risks naturalizing the externally imposed relationship between gender and reproductive activities, and therefore also gender itself. *The Fall* poses a similar problem for nonreproductive politics, only inverted: while the concept of nonreproduction might hold open political possibilities, it also names the condition of contemporary immiseration.

To further explore the place of contradiction in a politics of nonreproduction, I want to turn to the opening scene of the second episode, which like the pilot positions Stella and Paul as mirror images of each other, but with important distinctions. “Darkness Visible” opens by juxtaposing Stella and Paul in terms of intimacy, coupling and control: Stella takes the lead throughout the sex scene with Detective Sergeant James Olson (Ben Peel), while Paul enacts his misogynist fantasy in total control of Sarah’s lifeless body. And yet we quickly see that the scenes are not simple mirror images of each other. For one, Paul is meticulous in cleaning Sarah’s body and her apartment, while Stella asks DS Olson not to shower because she “likes it” (00:04:22), and by the end of the opening scene, Stella is juxtaposed not with Paul but with Sarah, as they both appear lying across the bed before the two men leave their respective settings. And while Paul is able to move relatively freely in the world, Stella faces constant resistance to her agency: sexually, socially, and professionally, men appear threatened by her, and repeatedly question her authority and motivations. We might think here about the implications of Paul’s cleanliness in terms of sterility, given the series’ concern with nonreproduction. Stella’s nonreproductive activities are positioned in terms of empowerment, while Paul’s are associated with violence and death. What might this mean for the figure of the child, given the fact that Stella is childless while Paul’s children are called into service to provide his cover story? And if nonreproduction paradoxically names both the condition of immiseration under



contemporary capitalism, and the horizon of a feminist, queer and anti-capitalist politics, how might we think about nonreproduction as itself a form of work or labor?

In “the time of the desert of unemployment” (73), Fredric Jameson argues, “the power of the negative turns out to be postmodernity after all: it is not,” he suggests,

the motor power of history Hegel celebrated. Rather, it is history’s breakdown, an ominous perpetual present in which no one knows what’s coming ... and indeed no one knows whether anything is coming at all. This is truly the realization of queer theory’s master slogan “no future.” (71)

I wonder, then, what it might mean to “fight the future,” as Gillian Anderson does in another series, *The X-Files*, as Dana Scully (where she also plays a law enforcement official) while trapped in a perpetual present. This brings me, finally, to the serial form, and the relationship between narrative and futurity. On the one hand, the serial form would seem to inaugurate a developmental narrative *telos*, reminiscent as it is of the assembly line, unfolding with the steady, durational rhythms of Fordist temporality, building toward its climax over a series of episodes that together comprise the finished product. On the other hand, however, in its very seriality, time in *The Fall* seems to stretch out indefinitely to the point of temporal saturation where nothing ever gets resolved, such that temporal progression itself seems to vanish. If a breakdown in the historical reproduction of the class relation prompts a crisis in narrative possibility, might the contradictory presence of the child – as a figure of nonreproduction and the labor of the negative – represent the absent future in the present, and the possibility of a radically different world over the horizon? Or might it simply be the possibility of a renewed cycle of accumulation that remains over the horizon in the current age of finance capital? In order to further explore these questions, I want to address a series of concerns threaded throughout the series, namely the relationship between the figure of the child and the question of labor, the matter of Stella’s subjectivity, and a series of the connections between value, crisis and the family form. Like the hitherto adjacent worlds of Stella and Paul – as well as storylines, acoustics, bodies, affects, and sensitive information – these topics bleed across their ostensible boundaries in the series as it continues its own bloody unfolding, but for the sake of clarity I will address them as interrelated but distinct points of inquiry.

### **The Law of Diminishing Returns**

In capitalist societies, children conventionally feature as the labor force of the future (if they are not already conscripted into the work force), but what happens to labor power after labor? What happens to bodies destined for a future of wage-labor when there is no future, or at least no future for labor, which under current conditions amounts to the same thing? Dispossessed of the means of their own reproduction save selling their labor, proletarians – as “a class in transition,” in Aaron Benanav and John Clegg’s words, “a working class tending to become a class excluded from



work” (593) – tangentially come to face dispossession of even the commodity labor power, as increases in productivity push labor out of production. This process leaves only empty vessels, deprived of their social contents. As such, the children in the series might also index – along with the other logics and concepts they represent – the emergence of a global condition of superfluity: the consolidation of a surplus population exemplary of a form of disposable life particular to capital’s current expulsion of living labor on a global scale. Their labor, then, figures at least in part in the negative, as the labor of erasure. Although it might seem a stretch, we might think of the Tyler family’s recently deceased son’s organs being harvested for transplant as suggestive, at least, of what Melinda Cooper calls “life as surplus,” that is, the folding of organic materials of biological reproduction into capital accumulation across geopolitical boundaries, which Kevin Floyd has also identified as part of the vast industry of organ trafficking facilitating the biotechnological transfer of reproductive tissues from the global south to the global north. The Tyler son, terminally ill and thus unsuited for waged work, that is, bereft of the commodity labor power in life, finds his use – assumes social utility, or acquires use-value – only in death. And if the children refuse to disappear entirely, appearing at once as disposable and necessary, they nevertheless often appear through their absence, especially for Liz Tyler who has lost her child but who also used to be a child minder, her backyard – once full of children – now yet another empty container. Indeed, in the final episode of the series, Sally Ann miscarries when she finally learns the truth of Paul’s crimes. The signs of nonreproduction loom large here.

This also helps clarify the stakes of form in the series more generally. There is no developmental narrative to be found here, which would suggest that, if post-Fordism retains any use for an analysis of precarity in the post-1973 period, it is only through an emphasis on its status as *post*, that is, as a period of capitalist history that unfolds *after growth* (or *post-bildung*), a condition of generalized stagnation tied to what Brenner calls the long downturn rather than a positive concept naming a new regime of capital accumulation. Post-Fordism is itself a negative term, acquiring meaning in relation to that which it is not – namely Fordism, shorthand for an era of unprecedented capitalist expansion that has long been exhausted – and as a strategy of capitalist innovation, it is perhaps best understood as a part of the scramble for profitability symptomatic of our current era of financialization. Here, I am using financialization in the Arrighian sense as the coming to a close of a cycle of accumulation that has been systemic and global in scope, a leap into liquidity that Stella enacts each morning with her daily dive into the pool, but in the context of a moment in which a renewed cycle of accumulation remains elusive. This is ultimately a question of value, then, insofar as it is also a question about a crisis in the reproduction of the capital-labor relation, and so in order to consider the relationship between futurity and narrative possibility – or better, the possibility of narrative – I want to move from this scale of the world-system to the level of reproduction and the body, or what we might call, following Stella, the level of



intimate detail. As Stella says when briefing her new task force, “the devil – quite literally, ladies and gentlemen – is in the detail. Detail, detail, and detail again” (“Insolence & Wine” 00:18:00). Stella reminds us that it is in the concrete that we can discern the violence of abstraction, for, as she says later, “What could be more intimate than squeezing the life from another human being, having their dead body at your disposal?” (00:55:40).

This brings me to the matter of Stella’s subjectivity, since it is in the context of her expanding authority that DCI Eastwood makes a series of comments regarding her sexual activity which occasions her wry remarks on gender and the subject-object relation: “Man fucks woman. Subject man, verb fucks, object woman. That’s OK. Woman fucks man. Woman subject, man object. That’s not so comfortable for you, is it?” (00:51:27). There is a line of continuity that runs through the series regarding the objectification of women, connecting this exchange between Stella and Eastwood with the male violence against sex workers that occurs under the watch of corrupt police officers running a prostitution ring on the side – one of whom dismisses this violence with the sentiment, typical of men in these situations, that “she must’ve said something, done something” (00:10:41) – but also with domestic abuse in the Tyler household, and ultimately with Paul’s misogynist murder of women – women Stella refuses to qualify using the term “professional,” insisting on “something that’s less of a value judgment” like “highly qualified” (00:28:35) though the press use the term “professional” anyway – in a logic made explicit by Paul’s use of the feminized mannequin in planning his next attack. Indeed, as Stella says, “after they’re dead, they’re playthings to him, he treats them like objects, paints their nails, uses them like dolls” (00:57:04). This logic remains apparent throughout the mundane operations of the police force, as when a female police officer speculates over dinner break that the killer “hates women who occupy powerful positions,” and a male police officer quips, “don’t we all” (00:53:18).

Capitalist reproduction, with its regime of differential inclusion, selectively bestows subjectivity through the wage, as it is the social validation of labor that provides the basis for citizenship and participation in the public sphere, those realms of activity vital to liberal subjecthood. This has traditionally, of course, been the purview of masculinity. Stella’s position in the PSNI troubles this logic and the male police officers, who are embarrassed talking about sex with Stella and become defensive, smug and condescending (DCI Eastwood sneaks a quick peek at Stella’s backside when she’s leaning over her desk before chastising her for having a one night stand). Against the repeated attempts to objectify her, Stella asserts herself as a subject with agency: an *agent*, as it were, of the police force. Here I am struck by the resonance of this logical movement with Williams’ arguments regarding the police procedural and the subject-object relation. Stella certainly encounters resistance from all angles, which we can think of in relation to the reification of her nonreproductive labor, but how do we reconcile this with a series that distinguishes between corrupt cops and the honorable police agent?



In considering this question, it is important to note that Stella herself demonstrates an explicit concern with the politics of representation, dismissing a series of possible names for the police operation – “Eden,” for example – based on how they signify, before deciding on Operation Musicman. She also asks the media liaison officer, and ACC Jim Burns, “not refer to them as innocent”:

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 love to divide women into virgins and vamps, angels or whores. Let’s not encourage them.” (00:29:28)

Stella is acutely aware of the relationship between representation and vulnerability, but her investment in representational politics is a response less to the idea that the police face a legitimacy crisis (although this question will remain an open one for the time being) than to the persistence of patriarchal defamation, both inside the police and without. If the police are ironically recast here as the victims of surveillance, operating “under the glare of media lights” (00:17:45), then Stella lives under a different gaze, a “brighter spotlight,” evidenced by the import attached to her “wardrobe malfunction” when she comes under scrutiny after a button of her blouse comes unfastened during a press conference (00:33:31).

This trope of feminine objectification in the show also points to the relationship between value, crisis, and the family form. The place where Paul aims to reconstitute the conditions of his labor, which is to say the foundation on which to continue his misogynist killing spree, is an abandoned home, a former site of domesticity and family life, now empty, forgotten and forlorn, a site of labor and affect after the family form. The building sits in close proximity to Sally’s parents’ house – a site of lineage, genealogy and reproduction – drawing their affective circuitries together in a further bleeding of bounded worlds. If, following Angela Mitropoulos, the Fordist family wage operated as the contractual organization of gendered reproductive labor – that is, the performative gesture underlying the oikonomic order of reproduction in that period – might Paul’s fantasy be the restoration of the patriarchal order of Fordism? I noted above that Paul targets women who upset that order in both their professional ambitions and their nonreproductive status, and how Stella embodies this logic by which Paul chooses his victims. I want to suggest, in relation to crisis, value and the family, that Paul’s place in this opposition can be understood as a kind of will to accumulation on the part of capital. As Stella describes Paul’s killing spree, “There’s a law of diminishing returns” that underwrites any attempt to return to a moment of former glory, an attempt that is inevitably “doomed to fail” (00:15:58). This sounds an awful lot like the current crisis of value playing out on the world stage.

Paul thus figures as a character mask, scrambling to reconstitute the conditions of reproduction – which is to say the conditions of capitalist profitability – in an era of financial crisis. Finance exemplifies the logic of affective circulation, and,



like contagion, liquidates the contractual foundations of cohesive narrative order – which is also to say the *polis* – as Mitropoulos argues, and which I want to read alongside Arrighi's model of periodicity outlined above.<sup>2</sup> Paul has his own take on rupture, narrative and futurity: "I don't subscribe to that model of grief. I don't see bereavement as ever being absolved or accepted. There's no closure, no recovery, but you can learn to live a life without the physical presence of your son" (00:23:10). Paul reproduces the fantasy of finance capital: that its futurity is possible without the reproduction and valorization of labor. And the delay, "the sexual release [that] comes afterwards when he's on his own" and is "all part of the fantasy, the fantasy that sustains him between killings" (00:54:44) is indicative of a temporal drag – formalized in shots throughout this episode – that registers an interruption in the circuit of valorization. When Paul finds out that Sarah Kay was pregnant when he killed her, the fact that he is distraught at the realization he has committed "child destruction" would suggest that his investments, so to speak, are indeed a warped reflection of capital's own. Unable to jumpstart its next period of expansion, to reestablish the organizational forms and foundations upon which to launch a renewed cycle of accumulation, the logic splits in two: children are at once disposable and necessary. The family, then, can never be a refuge, since it names the gendered formation through which capital exerts its force over labor, only to dissolve that relationship according to its own internal laws of motion. Another way to consider the fate of labor power after labor would be to ask what happens to what Sianne Ngai, following Marx, calls the "residue" (42) of abstract labor that is never realized as money capital, but where what remains as residue is the objectivity of the body deprived of the commodity labor power, and what is realized as money capital is always the contractual promise of *future labor*. This is a repeatedly projected image of futurity that stubbornly resists realization, and, with each crash and subsequent "jobless recovery," recedes ever further into the distance.

I want to pause once again here and consider the relationship between gender and maintenance work in the context of nonreproduction. The opening scene of the fourth episode, "My Adventurous Song," continues to play with character doubling, revisiting the crosscutting device used in previous episodes to establish parallel action between Stella and Paul. If episode three saw Stella and Paul reconstituting the conditions of their work – its own peculiar form of reproductive labor – then episode four begins with the two protagonists performing another kind of reproductive labor: maintenance work, made explicit through the daily labor of "keeping fit." "Fitness" seems an apt term for both Stella and Paul: as in "physically fit" – here understood to mean also mentally and emotionally "fit" – and thus able to continue their work, but also "fit for duty" in Stella's case – as one of the few "un-corrupted" police officers in the series – or "fit to kill" in Paul's – literally,

2 Suggestively, as Mitropoulos notes in "Archipelago of Risk," Spinoza develops his theory of affect during the period of financialization that brought the Dutch regime of accumulation to a close and had familial connections to finance capital through a family owned joint-stock company.



as Paul's modus operandi involves an elaborate series of ritualistic violences that require a great deal of brute strength, and in the more figurative sense of an extreme or elaborate example of a more pervasive logic of misogyny in the show.

What I find compelling here is the way in which the reproductive logic of maintenance seems to expand through labor ties and affective attachments throughout the social field, revealing an otherwise hidden series of relations threading the lives of seemingly disparate characters: lineaments of a total system of social reproduction. The connection made in the opening scene between Stella and Paul's respective fitness regimes surfaces a concern with maintenance work that links Stella to Sally in terms of the gendered labor of care. Both women are tasked with managing a crisis involving a death at work: when Rob Breedlove's suicide in DCI Eastwood's office causes panic, Stella takes swift command of the situation, while Sally remains at work after her shift to look after the young mother as the hospital withdraws Baby Girl Mitchell's intensive care. Although Stella's crisis management episode is certainly less routine than Sally's, as Sally does this kind of work for a living in a more explicit sense as a neonatal nurse, the way Stella excels at "handling things so calmly [and] efficiently" – that is, keeps things operating smoothly during times of crisis – codes her as a maternal figure, as her male colleagues continuously remind her afterwards in an attempt to reconstitute their own senses of gendered and professional identities ("My Adventurous Song" 00:23:19). The logic of mothering is here abstracted into a broad institutional structure of gendered social reproduction through the logic of feminized care work as maintenance.

The tragic story arc of Baby Girl Mitchell – a newborn being cared for by Sally Ann who lives only a short while – shares a startling fate with Paul's victims: after death, they are washed, dressed and photographed in life-like poses as part of the reproduction of a fantasy. In his letter to Sarah Kay's father, Ian, Paul says babies are innocent, implying that his victims are guilty of something. Paul, of course, considers himself to be above the law, at least in terms of the "petty rules and regulations" he flouts at work (00:26:23). But in his letter to Ian Kay, Paul makes an appeal to natural law via philosophy, as we learn that he thinks of himself as Nietzsche's "last man," the brute force of history figured as the heroic triumphalism of unfettered masculinity (00:40:20). If the postmortem photography of the deceased registers as a stopgap, on the one hand, it is also – at least for Paul – a return to innocence, on the other. Like gendering, this innocence figures for patriarchy as both natural and something that must be taught, and by force if necessary, in order to restore a "natural balance." Consider the bathroom scene in which ACC Jim Burns assumes the news that Breedlove had been having an affair with DS James Olson's wife would assuage any guilt Stella might be feeling regarding her one-night stand with Jimmy – what she calls a "sweet night" (00:11:03) – only to discover she feels none. Burns loses his composure, blurting out: "Do you realize the effect you have on men?" (00:22:36). Under the pretext of thanking Stella for handling things calmly, Burns instead presents another moment of crisis in which he appeals to Stella for



consolation, and Stella, at once withholding and performing affective labor, tells him coolly, “that would have been a mistake” (00:22:51). Paul also has to manage a crisis while “on the job,” so to speak, as his latest victim is not alone when she returns home and Paul is forced to improvise. Tellingly, her home is rendered particularly vulnerable to forced entry because it is undergoing maintenance, and Paul uses the scaffolding surrounding her front terrace to enter her house.

*The Fall* tracks a persistent sense of ongoingness that never amounts to any sort of actual optimism or renewal: nonreproduction as a structuring contradiction. This “holding pattern” involves the reproduction of a particularly violent patriarchal fantasy alongside the gendered labor of maintenance work.<sup>3</sup> As Jocelyn Cohn and Eve Mitchell argue,

Patriarchy is a total social relation, meaning it is an amalgamation of many varying social relationships that humans create and recreate on a daily basis. It transcends our current moment, our ways of doing things, to before and beyond where we are now, and what we do as individuals. But patriarchy can only be understood through the form of organization of our labor; it is historically and logically developed, rooted in the capitalist division of labor. As a total social relation, it is a process that contains many elements, moments, and forms, many of which appear to contradict one another. Patriarchy is part of the production and reproduction of current society, and cannot be abolished separate from the abolition of capitalism itself.

If Paul functions as a character mask for Fordist capital scrambling to reconstitute the conditions of its profitability after a fall, he is also therefore a symbol for patriarchy and an *oikos* contractually organized around the Fordist family wage. *The Fall*, with its characters whose lives are thoroughly mediated by violent abstractions, also proposes that these two systems – capital and patriarchy – cannot be approached separately but must be confronted as a unity. What this means for a discussion of precarity in the series thus becomes a question of reproductive futurity, as the emergence of nonreproduction in the class relation confronts a revanchist patriarchy desperate to ensure its own future. The frame of “doubling” in the season finale, “The Vast Abyss,” offers one convincing answer to this question, given its centrality to the thematic and formal stakes of *The Fall*, and, as I want to suggest here, to the representational logic of nonreproduction with which the series grapples so explicitly from its pilot episode.

### The Double Bind

Doubling is the necessary fiction (which is to say the ideology) of the series. If Dr. Reed Smith’s account of self-partitioning casts the base violence of what Gilles

3 “Holding pattern” is a term Endnotes uses to describe the calcification of both class struggle and economic crisis, a form of stasis maintained in the present moment primarily through austerity and quantitative easing on the one hand, and a series of anti-austerity protest movements on the other that in recent years have moved from the squares to the spaces of electoralism.



Deleuze, following James Joyce, calls the “chaosmos” (208) as separate from the affective labor of reproductive care work with all its tenderness and love – which is to say, wants to uphold a distinction between the profane and the sacred – Stella’s explanation of “doubling” is a highly dubious one, since what could be more quotidian than the daily work of social reproduction in the household economy. Certainly, Paul wants to believe that existence is fundamentally chaotic – fancying himself the Nietzschean Last Man who forces a society of deluded children to face the “vast abyss” of the Real – as opposed to an ordered world of social reproduction that care work makes possible. But this “half-baked philosophy” simply provides a rationale for his “age old male violence against women,” as Stella points out (“The Vast Abyss” 00:53:16). Noting what the truth will do to his family, Stella repositions herself as the agent of the Real, figured here as feminist vengeance in the name of Paul’s victims. More to the point, Paul’s entire *modus operandi* admittedly involves the imposition of aesthetic order upon the matter of the world: “a desire to control everything and everyone,” whether he is “driven by a will to power,” as he would have it, or “a slave to [his] desires” with “no control at all,” as Stella says (00:52:58). So if, as he puts it, “art is a lie” that “gives the chaos of the world an order that doesn’t exist” (00:53:11), then Paul is by his own account one of those “evil people” that Ian Kay calls “people of the lie” (00:17:51). His appeal to chaos theory is nothing more than a front to conceal his violent desire for order.

But doubling has functioned throughout this series to both connect and separate, drawing relations between characters even as it abstracts and isolates them. I have tracked the way the show works to sketch an image of totality, to insist upon the inseparability of various social phenomena across a field of relations. The logic of doubling constitutes an attempt to maintain a fiction of separation, say between daily life and extreme violence, or between patriarchy and capital, even as the show insists on interconnectivity, placing horror and violence squarely in the realm of the quotidian. The series thus documents a form of what the Endnotes collective call “the unity-in-separation of market society” (“A History of Separation” 85), as characters exist in isolation and depend entirely on market-mediated social institutions for their reproduction and futurity. Take Sally Ann, who is pregnant and feels she has no choice but to participate in the reproduction of the couple form and the nuclear family despite her obvious reticence, as these social forms appear to offer some financial shelter from precarity. Sally Ann makes her “choice” to give Paul another chance *under coercion*, and not only in a direct and personal form from Paul: she is effectively forced to go along with things in order to secure her children’s longevity for material reasons – her financial stability depends upon it – and so we are reminded that these characters are “ruled by *abstractions*” (164), as Marx put it in the *Grundrisse*. She knows that Paul is untrustworthy, but this knowledge cannot help her; knowing the difference does not seem to make any. As Stella says to Ian Kay when he does not want to lie to Paul, “That’s the way it has to be” (00:19:16). Choice here has little to do with freedom.



This is the terrible truth of doubling: that people must work to maintain these fictions – even as they know them to be false – or risk it all, and who can afford such a risk? As Lauren Berlant writes, “When politics is serious, it risks a loss of the ground of living in which people have come to know their competencies and their desires: fantasy, in contrast, is a zone of stop-loss, a demand for the ongoing present to be the scene of lived fulfillment” (12). The series suggests that, however damaging social systems may be, society depends upon them for its survival, even as these systems appear increasingly hollow, unreliable and ineffectual. This is indeed a matter of maintenance under austerity, which the episode foregrounds from its opening scene: both Paul and Stella are again unable to secure the conditions of their labor, as external forces disrupt their attempts to work. And so the series encourages a critique of reproductive futurity, but it also returns again and again to the contradictions inherent in a politics of nonreproduction as they might unfold within the context of reproductive crises. People may not like the nuclear family, the police, or the colonial state, but, as far as *The Fall* is concerned, if society is to reproduce itself it needs those institutions since they reproduce society. It is tautological. *The Fall* equates capitalist nonreproduction with nonreproduction *tout court* – a notion that the dissolution of these social forms entails social dissolution as such – and suggests that, in order to survive, society must secure its institutional foundations in bourgeois civil society. Reproductive futurism therefore appears as a form of “policing the crisis,” to use a phrase from Stuart Hall, which the episode presents in its opening scene as a geopolitical tension between the PSNI and Catholic working class kids that threatens to erupt into chaos.

The series is right to suggest this ultimately shared fate. If it seems that the characters in the series cannot afford to let these forms dissolve – that their reproductive futurity depends upon it – then it truly is all or nothing. And when the direct nonreproduction of the whole is on the line, then Williams’ arguments about the rogue officer take on additional significance, as the police procedural in this case inspires sympathy with state violence not simply to legitimize policing but to encourage identification with the given world in all its misery. And so Stella’s sex positivism, while biologically nonreproductive, arguably affirms what the anonymous C.E. in “Undoing Sex: Against Sexual Optimism” describes as “the broader production of sex and gender.” C.E.’s position, it is worth noting, “is not that optimism is simply ineffective, that it has been appropriated and de-fanged by a system of repression and may thus be saved, but rather that it exists alongside shame and silence, each playing their part.” Again, Sally Ann’s example is instructive, as she and Paul come to some sort of reconciliation over and through sex. As C.E. says, “it is the optimism that insistently, cruelly returns us to the work of fucking” (16).

The take away for an analysis of precarity is that reproductive futurity and reproductive labor, including the work of sex – especially if, as Federici argues, “for women, *sex is work*” (25) – are entangled not only at the structural level of social institutions but also at the molecular level of the subject. To quote C.E. a final



time, “Non-procreative sex is allowed and fostered not because of society having moved any closer towards freedom, but because the reproductive labor demanded by modern capital is not merely that of population growth, but of the creation of the self, the individual, and consequently the identity” (33). Any attempt to disrupt this process of social reproduction is figured in the series as a sure path to duplicity and death, epitomized in Paul and his apparent lack of social situatedness. As Sally Ann says,

I look at you and I don't know who you are. When you first meet someone – when you first *get to know them* – there comes a time when you get to know their friends and family, and you get to learn all about them through those others, through their closest relationships: their mother, father, brothers, sisters. With you, there's nothing.

(“The Vast Abyss” 00:37:35)

Paul appears outside social relations here, while we know his misogynistic violence is entirely circumscribed within them. But what this scene also suggests is that Paul in all his horror is a direct product of the failure to maintain the very social structures that the show insists on reproducing. Lacking the conventional frameworks of knowability, Paul-the-monster-child is the result of an absence not simply of care work or networks of support, but of the traditional institutions of the nuclear family and the couple form. In *The Fall*, it seems, to enjoy the former one must secure the latter. Nothing less than the reproduction of the self is at stake. This is why precarity poses a problem for representation: any positive instantiation of a precarious subject appears inexorably as a contradiction, threatened by the very foundations of its social constitution. The precarious subject resists representation because it occupies a position of antagonism with respect to the categories of its own identity.

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