**S****creening Affect: Rape Culture and the Digital Interface in *The Fall* and *Top of the Lake***

**Abstract:**

Though it often goes unremarked, digital screens are a key point of commonality across the many different transnational renditions of the story of violence against girls and women found in contemporary TV crime drama. *The Fall* (UK, 2013-) and *Top of the Lake* (UK/Australia/New Zealand/US, 2013-)are two striking examples of TV crime dramas that frame their self-conscious interrogation of rape culture through digital media. Considering the mutual imbrication of feminist politics and the deployment of new media technologies on these shows, this essay considers how the digital interface functions as a way of mediating viewer response to violence against women. Resisting a reading of digital technologies as either inherently oppressive or inherently liberatory, the essay explores how these TV series navigate the tension between the simultaneous violence of new media and its investigative/feminist/affective potential.

**Keywords**

Digital interface, *The Fall*, *Top of the Lake*, rape culture, affect, screens, feminism

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In episode 4 of the third and final series of hit British TV crime drama *Broadchurch* (ITV 2013-2017), rape survivor, Trish Winterman (Julie Hesmondhalgh), returns to the scene of her rape and remembers a vital detail: when she came to after being knocked unconscious by her assailant, she saw a bright “light” in the distance. Standing near the river where her assault occurred, the traumatized Trish tells Detectives Hardy (David Tennant) and Miller (Olivia Coleman): ‘There was a light shining from over there…really bright.” For fans of the show on Twitter, the clue was obvious, and could only mean one thing: someone had filmed Trish’s rape. Among the many live tweets on the topic, organized through the hashtag #broadchurch, were the following: “Convinced the light Trish saw was a phone light and her attack was recorded;” “A light like a phone camera light?” Others had even more specific theories: “The light Trish saw while being attacked is a phone camera. Somebody filmed it and it’s the video Miller’s son has on his phone”; “I think there’s a sex ring involved. The rape (s) distributed between them all. You heard it here first” (cited in Westbrook, 2017).

That so many people should immediately assume (correctly) that the “light” was from the flash of a smartphone is a striking indicator of the extent to which image based violence has become normalized in 21st century networked culture. It is now taken-for-granted that new media devices are a central part of the commission of violent criminal acts, especially, perhaps, forms of sexualized violence. *Broadchurch* is just one of many recent TV crime dramas to feature new media technologies as a central part of its examination of rape. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that new media technologies, including surveillance cameras, smartphones, and computers, are ubiquitous in TV crime dramas featuring narratives of sexualized violence. Though it often goes unremarked, digital interfaces are a key point of commonality across the many different transnational renditions of the story of violence against girls and women found in contemporary TV crime drama.

While new communication technologies are now a major part of *all* network and post network TV – with voice mail, texting, skyping and the like regularly incorporated into popular television narratives – such modes of communication assume a particular urgency for the crime genre. As Anna Westerstaphl Stenport and Garret Traylor suggest, crime is a “technology dependent genre”, and “new variations of digitally networked communication devices – from fax machines and desk tops to cell phones, embedded chips, and wearable computers like Google Glass – are mobilized to help characters solve crimes and mobilize enemies” (2015, 81). But, beyond their obvious relevance as functional tools of detection, what is the affective resonance of digital interfaces for how crime, and in particular, crimes against women, are now imagined in contemporary TV crime drama? What do digital technologies mean, in other words, for how images of rape and rape culture are framed in 21st century media culture?

In this essay, I suggest that the digital interface is key to how TV crime dramas work through their increasingly self-conscious attempt to engage with a feminist critique of rape culture, popularized through the rise of social media networks. Digital screens and interfaces, as they appear within the narratives of a range of internationally successful TV crime dramas, including, for example, *Forbrydelsen* (DR 2007-2012), *The Killing* (AMC 2011-2014)*, The Bridge* (SVT1 DR, 2011-)*, Top of the Lake* (BBC Sundance Channel, 2013-)*, The Fall* (BBC 2013-)*, Happy Valley* (BBC 2014-)*, Case* (Channel 2 Iceland 2015-)*,* and *Broadchurch,* serve as mise-en-abymes for the shows themselves, offering pointed meta commentary about the politics of visually remediating images of violence.

In thinking about the affective power of digitally remediated images of sexual violence on TV crime dramas, I draw on recent affect scholarship, which emphasizes the “importance of exploring the affective underpinnings of human-machine relations and the complex forms of agency that arise from these” (Hillis, Paasonen and Petit, 2015, 2). As Susanna Paasonen, Ken Hillis and Michael Petit assert in the introduction to *Networked Affect*, affect is “produced and circulated” through the mutual entanglement of technology and human bodies (ibid., 2). Central to this understanding of affect is the notion that our sensory, emotional and political responses to events, including violent events, are formed through our relationship to digital screens and interfaces. As Adi Kuntsman asserts, there is a “need to think about feelings, technologies and politics *together,* through each other” as we continue to be inundated “by new and constantly changing digital communication technologies” (2012, 2). In order to consider the affective politics of current televisual depictions of rape, then, it is necessary to examine how they are bound up with, and remediated through, forms of digital technologies.

My particular focus in this essay is on *The Fall* and *Top of the Lake,* two crime series that have received critical attention for their depictions of gendered violence and rape culture,1 even as their use of new media technologies remains under-examined. Exploring the ways in which the expression of feminist politics and the deployment of new media technologies on these shows are mutually imbricated, this essay argues for the importance of considering how the digital interface mediates affective responses to violence against women.

**Sexual Violence in the Digital Age**

Before turning to my analysis of the TV crime dramas themselves, it is important to contextualize the relationship between new media technologies and sexual violence in wider contemporary digital culture. TV crime dramas now circulate in a digital media environment where images of sexual violence against women proliferate and spread with unprecedented speed and abandon through social media networks. As feminist theorists such as Alexa Dodge have argued, rape culture, which is defined as “a complex set of beliefs that encourage male sexual aggression and supports violence against women” (Buchwald et. al cited in Dodge 2016, 57), is normalized and intensified in the digital age. In 21st century networked culture, there is a disturbing prevalence of what Nicola Henry and Anastasia Powell call “technologically-facilitated sexual violence,” (2017) a phrase which refers to the use of digital technologies to perpetrate sexually based offences. From rape jokes and memes, to slut-shaming websites and image-based harassment, wider rape culture makes itself manifest in technologically mediated spaces.2 In several publicized rape cases, including, for example, the Steubenville gang rape, the Vanderbilt rape case, and the Audrie Pott sexual assault, photos of the violated girls and women taken before, during and after the rapes have been shared online and gone viral, creating an instant “community of voyeurs…around the images” (Heyes 2016, 372). Recent stories of rape being live streamed on Facebook and Periscope (a video streaming app on Twitter) indicate further the disturbing extent to which contemporary communication technologies are used to perpetrate violence against women.3

However, at the same time as the internet has provided new opportunities for hurting women, it has also opened up new ways for feminists to publicly call out and resist rape culture (ibid., 76).4 Degrading images of women shared online by their male assailants in the form of a “joke” have been re-framed by feminist activists on social media as powerful criminal evidence of egregious male violence and abuse. It is within this wider context of digital framing and remediation that I want to situate my reading of rape culture in contemporary TV crime drama. Resisting a reading of digital technologies as either inherently oppressive or inherently liberatory, I am interested in how TV crime dramas navigate the tension between the simultaneous violence of new media and its investigative/feminist/affective potential. Moreover, I will argue, it is how such dramas present rape culture in terms of a wider network of communication technologies and digital interfaces, that marks them out as especially compelling sites for exploring both the limitations and the possibilities of digital media for a feminist re-framing of sexualized violence.

**Lost Girls**

One of the most insistent tropes in the current breed of TV crime dramas that have emerged post Nordic Noir and post Sarah Lund, is the relationship between a “strong, yet deeply flawed female character” (McCabe 2015, 29), and the figure of the “lost girl.”5 It is remarkable the extent to which the strength of the current breed of female detectives on TV crime dramas such as *The Killing*, *The Fall, Top of the Lake*, *Happy Valley* and *Marcella* (ITV 2016-)is derived through their identification or empathetic engagement with the lost girl (s)/daughters/sisters of violent crime.

For some critics, the close relationship between the female investigators and the female victims of crime, is a point of (feminist) strength: by having a flawed but ultimately honorable female lead negotiating the difficult terrain of violence against women, these post millennium TV crime shows are trying to “tackle head-on issues of male violence against women,” as writer and director of *The Fall,* Allan Cubitt, for example, asserts (2013). For others, such as critic Sarah Crompton, however, what is “problematic” is how shows such as *The Fall* make their “female enforcer (s) strong by reveling in the powerlessness and vulnerability of its women victims” (2013).

What I find crucial to explore in more detail, though, is the kind of feminist agency afforded (or not, as the case may be) by the media devices that repeatedly frame the images of violence viewed on these dramas. For better, and for worse, new media devices such as the smartphone and the laptop are central to how TV crime dramas attempt to mobilize affective response to the event of violence against women. What’s more, these new media images of traumatized women are constantly on the move: they circulatewithin the diegesis of these shows as they travel across scenes and are shared amongst the various characters who look at, and respond to them.

In the Icelandic drama, *Case* (2015-),6 for example, described by *The New York Times* as a “bleak Icelandic cross between *Broadchurch* and *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*” (“Watching”), smartphone videos of girls being raped and exploited are circulated amongst its various characters. These videos feature in a range of locations, from the crime scene to the police station and beyond, and move across a number of episodes in the course of a police investigation into the death of a young ballerina. The digital flow of images enables what Jennifer Holt and Kevin Sanson call “connected viewing”, in which photos and videos are circulated, shared, and discussed (2014).

However, connected viewing does not necessarily lead to critical viewing, and in the lack of a framework for contextualizing the images, or anchoring them in any kind of critical discourse, their constant circulation merely compounds and amplifies the violence done to the female bodies in the repellent videos themselves. According to Holt and Sanson, “Connected viewing is more than digital distribution; it is the broader eco-system in which digital distribution is rendered possible and new forms of user engagement take place” (1). In the context of the TV crime dramas I am exploring in this essay, the question becomes: does the remediation of images of violence through new media formats actually open up “new forms of user engagement?” Or: does it merely serve as a way of further reifying and amplifying trenchant gender scripts of male violence and female victimization?

***The Fall***

Few contemporary TV crime dramas have engendered more fierce debate regarding their feminist politics than that of the British-Irish crime drama, *The Fall.* In the UK context especially, the show was castigated as an “extended rape fantasy” (Wilson 2014), and derided for being anti-women. Just before the release of Series 3 in 2016, in an interview with *The Radio Times*, creator Allan Cubitt professed to being “hurt” over the “rape fantasy” allegations and suggested that he was, in fact, “restrained” when it came to the depiction of violence in the first two series (Jackson 2016). This followed Cubitt’s earlier defense of series 1 of *The Fall* in *The Guardian* in 2013, when he wrote that he “was at pains from the start to make sure that there was nothing gratuitous or exploitative in the drama” (Cubitt 2013). But despite – or perhaps because of – such earnest defenses of the series, issues of exploitation and misogyny are major features of *The Fall’s* reception as a controversial text. *The Fall* is either “the most feminist show on television” (Sullivan 2015) or “the most misogynistic” (Billen 2016). Perhaps there are elements of both. I assert that *The Fall*’*s* purported feminist messages are welded so tightly to its depiction of misogyny and violence that it becomes difficult to prise them apart from one another. In fact, it is the self-consciousness with which *The Fall* wears its feminist rhetoric – in as studied a way as its heroine, Stella Gibson, dons her silk blouses – that interests me most. One of the most immediately striking things about *The Fall* is how openly it engages with feminist discourse on sexualized violence and the objectification of women. It shows images of extreme violence against women – but it then tries to temper that portrayal of violence by having its female protagonist critically comment on issues regarding gender and the politics of representation. Thus, for example, Gibson schools her colleagues in the kind of language they should be using when writing press releases about sexualized murders and delivers serious speeches to them about the dark nature of men and their attitudes towards women.

In contrast to other recent serial TV crime dramas, *The Fall* is not a mystery or a whodunit. Rather, it centers on a handsome male serial killer, Paul Spector, and the beautiful, enigmatic female detective, Stella Gibson, who attempts to capture him. Lindsay Steenberg has noted that, as with other serial killer texts, it is a “relationship…(that) is framed both in terms of eroticism and romance” (2017, 12). What has largely gone unremarked, however, is the way in which this Mills and Boon style eroticized “chase” between Gibson and Spector is consistently and deliberately framed through the device of the digital screen. This is explicitly revealed in the Netflix trailer for the release of Series 2, which shows both characters with their digital devices. While Spector watches a press conference featuring Gibson on his laptop, Gibson looks at a digital e-fit of Spector on her smartphone; the male killer and the female police detective are enthralled by the digitized image of the other.

Not only do mobile technologies mediate the affective relationship between Spector and Gibson,7 they are also central to how *The Fall* stages its attempted indictment of rape culture. New media technologies are shown to be fundamental to Spector’s acts of violence towards women. In Series 1, after brutally murdering solicitor Sarah Kay, Spector takes pictures of her posed dead body and, in a later scene, masturbates to a slideshow of the images on his laptop. He is “creating his own pornography”, as Gibson observes to her colleagues. The internet is also the means through which Spector first finds, and then tracks and stalks his victims: he identifies his favored choice of woman – brunette, professional, mid 30s – through a fictionalized version of Linkedin. It is striking just how often Spector is pictured in front of a digital screen of some kind: we see him in internet cafes googling his female victims; in his home office watching YouTube videos of the family’s teenaged babysitter, Katie Benedetto (Aisling Franciosi); and in his living room watching televised press conferences led by Gibson.8 He is thus an avid consumer of digital images, but he is also a producer of them: in Series 2, he edits digital videos of his kidnapped victim Rose Stagg, which he transfers from his smartphone to his laptop. As I will discuss in more detail shortly, Spector is adept at the remediation of media formats.

If Spector uses new media technologies to assist him in carrying out his crimes (and in later reliving them), Gibson uses the same media technologies to try to capture him. Early on in Series 1, we see her scrutinizing images of dead female bodies on her work computer screen, looking for clues and trying to glean information about the psychological profile of the assailant. She continues this work in her hotel room where she is pictured in silk lingerie, eating a hamburger and drinking red wine while scrolling through crime scene photos (S1 Ep1 “Dark Descent”). In Series 2, there is an even more striking emphasis on Gibson as a spectator. “Ma’am there’s something you should see,” is a line uttered more than once in this series. And yet despite the increasingly “tangible scopic power” (Courcoux 228) granted to Gibson, she remains a curiously passive spectator. What Charles Courcoux notes of Carrie Mathison in *Homeland,* is also largely true of Stella Gibson in *The Fall:* “not only does (she) hardly ever discover anything throughout her surveillance operations”…but there is “much more emphasis on her passive role as a spectator than on her active role as an observer” (229). While Gibson does, at times, move from behind the screen and enter the scenes she is observing, it is in a curiously restrained way. I mean this quite literally, too: the hyper-feminized clothing Gibson wears – stiletto heels, tight pencil skirts, silk blouses (that have a tendency of popping open at the most inopportune of moments) – often make it difficult for her to move.

*The Fall*, like many other recent female-led TV crime dramas, can be said to offer a “meditation on sexual difference” (Dillman 2014, 89). The psychic burden of living in a rape culture is something the show tracks across the full age range of femininity: from Spector’s daughter Olivia, to the teenager Katie, to the middle-aged Stella Gibson. Attention is continually drawn to the nature of female/feminine performance in patriarchy: the female child Olivia, for example, performs the role of wannabe pop star in front of her family who cheer her on from the sofa, and Katie, the sexually precocious babysitter, performs her songs on YouTube. When Katie first meets Spector she flirts with him by telling him to check out her YouTube performances (S1 Ep1 “Dark Descent”). He does so, almost immediately, and beneath the screen of Katie playing her guitar and singing, viewers can discern the “comments” of YouTubers, which include remarks about 15-year-old Katie’s breasts: “nice rack you got there.”

The technological mediation of rape culture is subtly – and not so subtly – acknowledged in a range of ways on *The Fall.* In certain instances, the series takes pointed aim at the practice of “slut shaming,” and in particular the “public shaming of women perceived to be promiscuous on or through social media” (Chun and Friedland 2015, 1) In one notable example, a male police officer expresses critical judgment over a video clip that one of Spector’s victims posted on an adult website. Gibson sharply admonishes him: “… I’m not interested in judging, just in finding the killer” (S1 Ep5 “The Vast Abyss”). In such moments, *The Fall* emphasizes formations of rape discourse and misogyny in order that its female protagonist may counter them.

However, at the same time, *The Fall* also renders its own problematic judgments about women, sex, and new media. The teenaged babysitter Katie is a central foil for Gibson and is presented by *The Fall* as a kind of femme fatale for the digital era. While the role of Katie appears to perplex some reviewers, who find her character weak, contrived and unconvincing (Frost 2014), I argue that she is, in fact, a central character to consider when pulling apart the threads of *The Fall’s* fraught gender politics. The teenaged Katie is shown to be adept at using digital technologies in her personal and sexual interactions; she is rarely, if ever, depicted apart from her smartphone or laptop. It is she that initiates Skype sex with Spector and it is she who records the imagery of Spector masturbating for her on her smartphone. Katie is portrayed as Spector’s victim, but she is also, at the same time, portrayed as a “slut,” not only for her apparently voracious (hetero) sexuality but also in terms of her online, digital behavior.

As Wendy Chun and Sarah Friedland have argued, the figure of the young girl plays a special role in the gendered figuration of the internet and its dangers: she is “the ideal victim of Web 2.0 and its exposing leaks” (2015, 12). Whether it is as a victim or as a slut, and often it is both at the same time, the discourse of “predators, pornographers, and slut-shamers” (ibid.: 17) is central to the kind of “morally tinged debates about personal responsibility” (ibid.: 3) that dominate public discussions about the violence of the internet. Despite the care it takes elsewhere to challenge the media’s division of women into “virgins or vamps” (to quote from one of Gibson’s feminist speeches), *The Fall* problematically presents Katie as an example of what Chun describes as the “‘bad user’, ‘the girl’ who threatens her own (and other people’s) safety through her promiscuous behavior” (2016, 18). Gibson’s attempt to thwart the pornographic online circulation of images of female victims is countered by the presentation of the teenaged Katie, as someone who refuses to hold “privacy sacrosanct” (Chun 2016, 102) and whose dubious engagement with new media leads to her aiding and abetting a serial killer.

While Gibson is as sexually voracious as Katie, her erotic activities are performed “privately”, behind closed doors, away from the glare of the screen. Most commentators refer to the scene when Gibson meets the handsome young policeman Jimmy Olson as a key example of *The Fall’s* portrayal ofGibson as a sexually assertive, independent woman: Gibson sees the younger man, demands to meet him, and then instantly gives him her hotel room number to set up a sexual rendezvous (S1 Ep1 “Dark Descent”). However, an even more telling and interesting example of how *The Fall* sketches Gibson’s attitude towards men and sex involves digital media, and occurs *after* her sexual encounter with Olson. Following their liaison, Jimmy is shown to use his smartphone to “sext” Stella photographs of himself in various states of undress. Gibson pointedly ignores the messages, much to the dismay of Jimmy who looks forlornly at his smartphone. “I misread him,” she tells her boss and ex-lover Jim, “I thought he understood it was a sweet night, nothing more” (S1 Ep4 “My Adventurous Song”).

This is not the only time Gibson shows an antipathy towards new media and its “public” intimacies. Both she and Spector are shown to have strong attachments to so-called old forms of media: the show makes a point of how they both keep paper diaries. Gibson has a dream diary, and Spector keeps a scrapbook diary of his obsessions and killings. For Spector, old and new media are interconnected: new digital technologies allow him to extend, and further proliferate, his acts of violence. Spector is constantly remediating old media into new and vice versa: for example, when he breaks into Gibson’s hotel room, he takes pictures of her written diary and then digitizes them (S2 Ep3 “Beauty Hath Strange Power”). It is this public raiding and rendering of her “private” thoughts that rattles Gibson more than anything and that initiates a speech from her on how “modern life is such an unholy combination of voyeurism and exhibitionism – people perpetually broadcasting their internal and external selves.” By contrast, Gibson wants to keep her diary (and herself) “private.” She situates herself in opposition to digital media networks and their upending of distinctions between the public and the private.

Nonetheless, it is through her affective relationship to new media that *The Fall* frames its representation of viewer response to gendered violence. Viewers are repeatedly invited to watch Gibson’s pensive, at times anguished, face in close up as she sits before computer screens and monitors. In *The TV Detective: Voices of Dissent in Contemporary Television,* Helen Piper writes that:

Conventionally, camera direction in police-detective drama emphatically privileges the facial gesture of the detective, often allowing them ‘the last word’ by returning to a close-up on his or her face after an interrogation or exchange, so giving an indication of how preceding discourses should be interpreted. The indulged face of the detective is thus a visual, stylistic reinforcement of his or her expressed ‘voice.’

(2015, 37)

In *The Fall,* the privileging of Gibson’s face, and the affect it expresses, is therefore revealing of how the series wants its digital remediation of images of gendered violence to be understood and responded to.

In the shift from series 1 to 2 of *The Fall* there is a noticeable intensification of the role played by digital technologies, accompanied by a concomitant reduction in the images of eroticized brutality that caused such controversy in the first series. With Spector identified to police as the killer, he, along with his home and his family, are put under surveillance, a plot point which means that viewers are invited to watch the unfolding events through the mediation of surveillance technologies and screens. Writing on post 9/11 “terror TV,” Yvonne Tasker has noted that “Banks of monitors, computer screens running databases, and camera relays are central to the iconography” of many crime dramas (2012, 48). As with the crime dramas discussed by Tasker, the use of screens on *The Fall* produces “visual style” and “generate (s) excitement” (ibid.) but it does more than that, too: it allows the series to offer tableaus of affective reaction and response to images of gendered violence. The power of the omnipresent digital screens and technologies derives less from how they assist Gibson in solving crimes and more from the extent to which they are able to generate affect – both for Gibson and for *The Fall* itself.

The central female victim of the second series, Rose Stagg, is kidnapped in Episode 1 of Series 2; thereafter, our access to Rose is through the frame of the screen. Rose’s image is remediated across a range of devices, including television screens, computer monitors, smartphones and ipads. But the set piece is Rose’s appearance in a video from Spector’s smartphone, which is dramatically revealed to Gibson, at the end of the penultimate episode of Series 2 (Ep5 “The Perilous Edge of Battle). Watching the distressing video of Rose Stagg, who is alternately pleading and cajoling with Spector to set her free, the normally stoic Gibson becomes more and more emotional and tears begin to roll down her face. The significance of this scene is signposted by its duration: the video runs for 3 minutes, during which time the scene cuts between images of Rose on the video and images of Gibson’s face in extreme close-up as she watches. Our look at the video of Rose is thus mediated through the affective responses registered on Gibson’s face **{Insert Image 1}**. In the images of the silent, weeping Stella Gibson, *The Fall* presents an image of the female/feminist spectator as grief-stricken over the fate of the victimized woman. As the culmination of Gibson’s many acts of spectatorship throughout *The Fall*, this affective tableau of feminine grief and mourning suggests a certain disciplining of the female gaze that runs counter to the assertion of the female investigator’s agency.

Writing on the cumulative impact of ubiquitous images of women and death in contemporary media culture, Joanne Clarke Dillman asserts that “women viewers are disciplined to be fearful and are rendered vulnerable through these on-screen mediations” (2014, 31). Faced with the images of the suffering woman, framed through the device of the screen, the previously unflappable Gibson is thus rendered vulnerable. Read in the context of wider debates over violence against women in TV crime drama, in which *The Fall* is self-consciously participating (even if not always as critically as it thinks it is), this scene can be said to provide commentary on how a barrage of images of dead women, “serve to frighten and discipline the women who consume them” (ibid., 62).

In this regard, it is telling that Gibson’s reverie is abruptly – and violently – interrupted by the sudden appearance of Spector on the video. “Why the fuck are you watching this, you sick shit?” he demands. “What the fuck is wrong with you?” It is a moment of striking meta-commentary – one that appears to call not only Gibson to account, but audiences of *The Fall* as well.As Gibson herself later asks Spector in the face-to-face “showdown” interrogation scene that concludes Series 2: “Who are you talking to? Yourself, me, the people who like to read and watch programmes about people like you?” The question remains unanswered – both by Spector and by *The Fall.*

In the final episode of the series, Gibson brings the video of Rose Stagg – stored on an ipad – to the interrogation room, and plays a portion of it back to Spector (and to viewers) [S2 Ep6 “What is in Me Dark Illumine”]. She holds the ipad screen up in front of her face, as she demands that Spector watch it. The mobility of the digital screen enables the female detective to carry the image of female suffering with her, to circulate it as an image, and to demand accountability for it. Such a remediation of the violent video through the agency of the female investigator provides a powerful visual image, and one that, for me, strongly encapsulates something of the complex maneuvering performed by *The Fall* in its attempt to hold together its challenge to misogyny and its depiction of female abuse and suffering. If the rest of the series doesn’t quite match up to the force of this image – and instead tends to shore up a sense of the “inherently debilitating vulnerability of women” (Chun and Friedland 2015, 10) – it nonetheless gestures towards the possibility of a feminist remediation of image-based violence. In *Top of the Lake,* the co-produced New Zealand/Australia/UK/USA TV crime drama I turn my attention to next, the possibility of feminist digital witness is taken to further, and more compelling, levels. Whereas in *The Fall,* the emphasis on the female gaze at the sight of female suffering is tied to a certain inability to act – to remain frozen before the screen in grief – in *Top of the Lake*, the female gaze and the deployment of digital screens is much more actively linked to feminist agency.

***Top of the Lake***

When we first meet Detective Robin Griffin (Elisabeth Moss), the female protagonist of *Top of the Lake,* she is in bed with her smartphone (S1 Ep1 “Paradise Sold”). She stares at it ambivalently. Then follows a phone call with someone we later surmise to be her fiancée. Griffin is visiting her ailing mother in New Zealand and, as we learn in subsequent episodes, is reluctant to return to her fiancée in Sydney. In Series 1 of *Top of the Lake,* the smartphone is thus a nagging reminder of Griffin’s unwelcome romantic ties/obligations, but it is also what connects her to the possibility of newfound intimacy with her childhood sweetheart, Johnno (Thomas M. Wright).9 Griffin uses the smartphone, for example, to contact Johnno when she finds herself in physical danger (S1 Ep2 “Searchers Search”).

Above all, though, the smartphone is a central tool in Griffin’s investigation of the disappearance of 12-year-old pregnant Tui Mitcham. As a detective specially trained in sexual assault, Griffin is called in to help the local police when Tui enters a freezing lake in an attempt to kill herself and is subsequently discovered to be pregnant. Arriving at the police station to meet with Tui, Griffin enters a masculine enclave where women are viewed with mocking derision; as an eye-rolling Detective Sergeant Al Parker (David Wenham) declares upon hearing that the visiting sexual assault detective is a woman: “oh fuck, this will be fun” (S1 Ep1 “Paradise Sold”). When Tui goes missing, Griffin fronts the investigation to find her – much to the disdain of the male police officers.

As with *The Fall,* the empathetic female detective forges a strong affective connection with the “lost girl” via new media devices. Numerous scenes depict Griffin looking at photos and video footage of Tui on computer screens and smartphones. But whereas in *The Fall,* Stella watches passively, grief etched on her face, Griffin’s affective responses to the figure of the lost girl are inflected differently, and are tied more concretely to forms of feminist agency enabled by digital technologies. In *Top of the Lake*, the feminist critique of rape culture is performed not only at the level of narrative content (think Gibson’s feminist speeches), but also at the level of form and affect. Digital technologies play a crucial role in what *Ms*. Magazine’s Natalie Wilson describes as *Top of the Lake*’s devastating “feminist take-down of patriarchal rape culture” (2013). In a much more unequivocal way than *The Fall,* *Top of the Lake* reveals the feminist potential of new media devices to function as technologies of affect.

Griffin’s traumatic past, in which her gang rape as a teenager resulted in pregnancy and childbirth, connects to Tui’s story in ways designed to demonstrate the strength and resilience – and *not* the vulnerability – of both females. Whereas Gibson is often objectified under the terms of the masculine scopic regime *The Fall* professes to be critiquing, *Top of the Lake* foregrounds the embodied experience of its female protagonists*.* Both Griffin and Tui are depicted as active, fighting bodies, constantly on the move and physically retaliating against abusers, as when Griffin breaks a bottle and stabs one of her rapists in the leg (S1 Ep3 “The Edge of the Universe”) or when Tui trains a gun on her father (S1 Ep1 “The Edge of the Universe; S1 Ep6 “No Goodbyes Thanks”).

The complex rendering of the links between agency and victimhood – and between the female investigator and the missing girl – can be traced through the mediated device of the smartphone as it circulates across all seven episodes of *Top of the Lake.* The smartphone operates as what Misha Kavka calls a “micro-technology of affective transmission” (2008, 36), intimately binding the female detective to the missing girl.It is surely not coincidental, given the emphasis that *Top of the Lake* places upon the relationship between digitality, violence, and feminist agency, that the first piece of evidence Griffin discovers is Tui’s pink smartphone (S1 Ep3 “The Edge of the Universe”). Scrolling through its photos, she sees a screen saver shot of Tui’s dog, followed by pictures of her friends, followed by a shot of an artfully decorated barista style cup of coffee. Though Griffin (and the viewer of *TOTL*) does not realize it yet, within this set of smartphone photos are key clues to the hidden male violence that lurks in the town of Laketop. Tui and her friends, both girls and boys, are being drugged and raped as part of a paedophile ring, with the victims all working at the local coffee shop/café, which operates a “youth community scheme” to rehabilitate troubled young people.

Immediately after this scene with the smartphone, Griffin is called in to look at found video footage of Tui. She banishes the male police officers from the room (not for the first time), so that she can be alone while she watches. Similar to *The Fall, Top of the Lake* includes close ups of the female detective’s face as she views digital imagery of the girl whose disappearance she is investigating. But where Gibson views dead female bodies and traumatized, presumed-to-be-dead-ones, Griffin watches moving images of Tui in which she is very much alive and thriving. Griffin smiles and laughs at the images of Tui smiling and laughing, which the camera captures in a two-shot image that includes them both. This is in stark contrast to the shot-reverse-shot structure of *The Fall,* in which there is a shot of a victimized female body, followed by a reaction shot of Gibson’s pensive and/or anguished face.

Significantly, the two-shot image in *Top of the Lake* has the effect of emphasizing the mutuality of Griffin and Tui’s relationship, and the intimacy of their shared affectivity. The technological apparatus materially enables what Teresa Brennan calls the “transmission of affect” (cited in Kavka 2008, 33). As Kavka writes, quoting psychologist Silvan Tomkins, “Recognising the affect of the other…is inherently an exercise in crossing, and even translating, the gap between one’s own face and others; this crossing for Tomkins is facilitated and amplified by media technology” (ibid., 37). The moment of communion between Griffin and Tui, mediated through the screen, is a moment of intermediation and relationality, not power or domination; it binds the pair into what Kavka describes as a “shared reality cohered by an affective glue” (ibid., 37).

In contrast to the legions of “dead-but-not-gone” girls and women who populate TV crime dramas, and whose stories are told “from beyond the grave,” (Dillman 2014, 11) Tui is alive – and remains alive throughout the narrative. Tui’s ethnicity as a non-white Eurasian girl with a Thai mother and a white father is also a significant challenge to the widespread tendency – in non-fiction news reports as well as in fictionalized TV crime dramas – to focus exclusively on white girls and women as the idolatrous victims of sexualized violence.

If the male abusers in *Top of the Lake* use digital technologies in the commission of their crimes, then the role of the feminist investigator is to actively use those same technologies to fight back against them. For example, in Episode 4 (“A Rainbow Above Us”), a pair of local men harass Griffin and her lover Johnno and take smartphone photos of the two having sex; a violent scuffle ensues in which Johnno gets stabbed in the leg in the process of getting the smartphone from the men. Back at “Paradise,” the all women sanctuary led by CJ (Holly Hunter), Robin instructs Johnno to delete the compromising photos but before he does, he finds a video of Tui on the men’s phone. The video is of Tui on her own, moving through the woods. “Good girl Tui,” says an emotional Griffin as she and Johnno watch the video together. ‘She’s alive!’ cry the women of Paradise as they pass the smartphone amongst each other and open bottles of champagne to celebrate visible evidence of Tui’s survival. Here the criminal use of the smartphone for generating and circulating non-consensual sexual images is eclipsed by its ability to serve as digital witness for a feminist community.

Where the audience of *The Fall* always knows more than Gibson does because of our access to Spector, in *Top of the Lake* it is Griffin’s viewpoint that is privileged. As Patricia Pisters has written of the “affection-image” in relation to Andrea Arnold’s “neuro-thriller” *Red Road*, viewers are invited to “co-feel” with the female protagonist (2014, 90). The primacy given to Griffin’s affective responses is evident in the depiction of her relationship with her superior Al, whose attempts to court her initially appear benign, if socially awkward. Al’s attempts to romance Griffin are voiced through the language of patriarchal cliché: “I’m old enough to know my angel when I see her” and “Have you ever tried an older man? Experience counts you know” are amongst his chat up lines. In fact, Al’s mildly humorous romantic ineptitude belies a deep-rooted misogynist violence. He is one of many men in *Top of the Lake* who give voice to the language of rape culture, in which women are viewed as either “fuckable” or “unfuckable,” “angels” or “sluts.” While Griffin is always carefully neutral in her verbal interactions with Al, her body has strong negative reactions to him. Driving in the car with Al, Griffin asks him to pull over and she vomits at the side of the road. This echoes an earlier scene from the first episode in which Tui’s mother vomits upon being told her 12-year-old daughter is pregnant. As she tells Griffin: “Men are sick, they have sex with children.”

*Top of the Lake* frames its portrayal of sexual violence through Griffin’s acts of digital witness. In the dramatic denouement, Griffin discovers that Al is leading a paedophile ring and inviting men to drug and rape the children in his employ at the local café (S1 Ep6 “No Goodbyes Thanks”). There is a scuffle outside his home and she shoots him dead. Her face and clothes spattered in blood, Griffin enters Al’s house and discovers Tui, alive. She then descends into his basement, looking for other children and expecting to find the worst. There is a shot of Griffin’s horrified face as she raises her gun and her smart phone simultaneously (one in either hand). A reverse shot provides us with the terrible image she sees: a semi naked man, dragging a young, unconscious, half naked girl by the legs across the floor of the basement. The smartphone in her hand, Griffin films what she sees; the red recording button flashes. The shot moves from the image of the smart phone filming to a shot of *what* it is filming: two unconscious young teenagers, a boy and a girl, half naked, lying face down on the floor. Unaware of the female detective’s presence, the paedophiles are also filming; a camera stands mounted on a tripod in the room. As one man pulls off the trousers of the unconscious girl he is about to rape, a second man readies the camera. It is at this moment Griffin shouts out: “Turn around, put your hands up! Do it now!” The men instantly and silently obey.

As Griffin pans the nightmarish scene of sexual abuse with her smart phone, there is a shot of a large TV screen, which is hooked up to the men’s camera and which is screening the scene of abuse for them as it happens. Griffin, rage and determination flashing from her eyes, holds her smart phone up high, recording the TV screen and continuing her panning movement of the room, gun still firmly in the other hand **{Insert Image 2}**. The sounds of police sirens now join the diegetic strains of the classical music that has been playing in the background.

It is an extraordinary sequence, remarkable for its highly self-conscious use of the smartphone as a means of presenting and remediating the event of sexual violence. In the resolute hands of Campion’s female protagonist, the smart phone functions as a recording device, but also as a weapon: more potent than her gun, it captures the violent actions of the men as evidence. Not only does the smartphone initially lead Griffin to the crime scene (it is the ringing of Tui’s smartphone that alerts her to the fact that the children are inside the house), it is the means by which she *apprehends* the crime, both in the sense of capturing the criminals, but also, in the sense of affectively registering it and taking in what she is witnessing. Previous crime dramas might have shown the detective hand cuffing the criminals; *Top of the Lake* leaves us with an image of her filming them instead.

It is deeply significant that the scene of sexual violence is mediated for viewers through the device of the smart phone, which is in constant contact with the female detective’s body. Heidi Rae Cooley has argued that there is a special “‘fit” between the hand and the mobile screen device (MSD),” which “enables a more direct and vital mode of experiencing one’s surroundings” (137). Because the smartphone is “handheld and mobile,” it “gains access to places beyond the reach of other screens” and “opens onto a different manner of seeing” (143). This tactile mode of viewing is to be differentiated from television and cinema screens that operate as “windows.” This shift from the window to the mobile screen “reconfigures one’s relationship to that which is seen” such “that which is being viewed (and perhaps recorded) no longer exists separate from that which is framing it” (143).

Beyond its use as a convenient narrative device, then, I suggest that the smartphone on display in the denouement to *Top of the Lake*, and its “fit” in the female protagonist’s hand, is an important enactment of what Cooley calls the “seeing of interface”: the “material experience of vision that results as hands, eyes, screen and surroundings interact” (145). The miniaturized images captured by the smartphone are not easy for viewers to discern, but this only enhances their affective non-representational force. Whereas the diegetic television at the crime scene is static and hooked up to the camera trained on the unconscious children, thereby reflecting and acting as a “window” onto the scene, the smart phone is mobile and attached to an embodied feminist gaze, enabling a form of tactile critical vision. Our gaze moves with the body of Robin Griffin, and is inseparable from the technical apparatus that moves with her. *Top of the Lake* thus offers a powerful feminist re-framing of sexual violence through digital media. While it never downplays the violent potential of new media technologies, it reveals how devices such as the smartphone can simultaneously enable forms of feminist affective solidarity and communication, which exert a direct challenge to normative rape culture.

**Conclusion**

This essay has explored the role played by new communications technologies in transnational TV crime dramas, which routinely remediate images of sexual violence through digital interfaces. While I have raised questions about the varying degrees to which digital media allow for the possibility of feminist agency on these shows, it is important to acknowledge that there is no one “right” way for a TV crime drama to “do sexual assault.”10 To make that suggestion would be to risk generating new omissions and blind spots. What is imperative, however, is to continue to explore the kinds of affective responses and relations that are enabled and made visible through digitally networked remediations of sexual violence. With their circulation of sexually violent images through a “networked aesthetic” (Jagoda 2016), contemporary transnational TV crime dramas provide an important opportunity for a feminist consideration of the complex intertwining of digital media technologies, affect and agency.

**Notes**

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1 On *The Fall* see Coulthard (forthcoming 2018); Jermyn (2016); Steenberg (2017). On *Top of the Lake* see Mayer (2017) and Moylan (2015)

2 Special thanks to Feona Attwood, Thea Cronin, Nicola Henry, Kaity Mendes, Jessica Ringrose, and all the participants at the #notaskingforit: Rape, Discourse and Media symposium at Middlesex University on February 23rd, 2017, for informing my thinking on this.

3 See “Facebook live ‘broadcasts gang rape’ of woman in Sweden” (“Facebook Live,” 2017) and “Teenager is Accused of Live Streaming a Friend’s Rape on Periscope” (McPhate, 2016)

4 See Keller, Mendes, and Ringrose (2016).

5 On the special role of “lost girls” in TV crime drama, please see Horeck, “‘It’s not just any girls, it’s the lost ones’: Framing Gendered Violence in *The Killing*” in *Damaged Goods: Gender in the Antihero Television Era* (forthcoming Wayne State University Press, editors Ina Rae Hark and Brian Faucette).

6 *Case* aired in the UK on Channel 4 in January 2017 as part of its “Walter Presents” series, which aims to provide “quality foreign drama” to British audiences. The series was available online, all at once, and promoted as a “binge-worthy” text.

7 See Hunter Hargraves (2016) for a fascinating discussion of the role of the smartphone as a communicative device on *The Good Wife* (CBS 2009-2016).

8 I should add here, too, that Spector is often pictured topless in front of a computer screen, allowing *The Fall* to show off his physique. Steenberg (2017) and Jermyn (2016) have discussed the uncomfortable relationship between Jamie Dornan’s former career as a Calvin Klein underwear model, his role in the much-hyped Hollywood adaptation of erotic romance *Fifty Shades of Grey* (US, 2015), and his role as serial killer Paul Spector. *The Fall’s* exploitation of Dornan’s sexy star image sits uneasily alongside its professed attempt to indict rape culture. Though I don’t have the space to fully explore this here, Dornan/Spector’s sexual charge is mediated through his engagement with digital screens and new media technologies. Most obviously, there are the scenes where he engages in Skype sex with teenaged babysitter, Katie, but I would suggest that it is notable, as well, that when Gibson dreams of Spector it is of him in his digital e-fit form.

9 My analysis focuses on the first series of *Top of the Lake.*

10 This phrase comes from a review of *Broadchurch*, which suggests that, “its dignified, myth-busting and feminist portrayal of rape was an outright lesson in How TV Should Do Sexual Assault” (Ryan 2017).

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