

Mapping the Representations of Post-Conflict Belfast: *The Fall and Marcella*

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Abstract

*Recent examples of unique visualisation of place and landscape in British procedural drama echo the latest global trends in the Anglo-American televisual landscape which have been significantly influenced by Nordic Noir inspired crime dramas. Representations of Northern Ireland, which offers Nordic-style landscapes, in British procedural dramas have typically focused on the urban landscape of Belfast, with the city featuring as the location for numerous television series (or individual seasons) due to its specific spatial geography and troubled history. The frequency with which the city appears in television and cinema productions has inspired the main aim of this paper, which is to investigate the televisual representations of post-conflict geography of Belfast in two British crime dramas: *The Fall* (BBC, 2013 – 2016) and *Marcella* (ITV, 2016 – 2021).*

Keywords: *landscape, crime drama, Belfast, The Fall, Marcella*

Introduction

Despite the multitude of television and cinema genres available to viewers in the postmillennial era, the popularity of crime dramas endures on the media landscape, both on broadcast television and via newer streaming services such as Netflix, HBO or Amazon Prime. Nonetheless, the established elements of the crime drama in the Anglo-American television landscape have undergone significant modifications over time and the traditional narratives of the genre have been updated for modern audiences. A general shift towards a transnational context has been identified, not only in terms of transnational co-productions (the quintessential example being the Danish/Swedish TV series *Bron/Broen*)² but also in the predominance of regional productions which have gained international audiences such as Nordic Noir crime dramas from Scandinavia. Nordic Noir shows in particular have become globally influential, inspiring the emergence of noir-inflected television shows in other European countries. The United Kingdom is not exception to this trend, and the influence of international crime dramas is apparent in critically acclaimed shows such as *Broadchurch* (ITV, 2013 - 2017), *The Fall* (BBC, 2013 – 2016), *Y Gwyll/Hinterland* (S4C, 2013 - 2016) and *Marcella* (ITV, 2016 – 2021), to name but a few.

The television scholar Glenn Creeber acknowledges the global influence of Nordic Noir in Anglo-American television crime dramas and also argues that it has led to the emergence of a new sub-genre that he terms “Celtic Noir” (2015: 27). Creeber delves deeper into the conventions of the Nordic Noir genre, seeing it as “a broad umbrella term that describes a particular type of Scandinavian crime fiction, typified by its heavy mixture of bleak naturalism, disconsolate locations and morose detectives” (2015: 21). Similarly, Jensen and Waade note that “a specific use of Nordic imagery and a feeling of melancholy are created through landscapes, climate, architecture, colours and light” (2013: 262). What seems evident here is

that place, primarily location, landscape and setting, is an essential feature of Nordic Noir, but many other elements of audio-visual language also play a role, interacting with places to generate a distinctive tone and atmosphere. Creeber characterizes this tone as “a rather slow and understated pace, the dialogue often sparse, monosyllabic and the light frequently muted. While there is clearly action (it is, after all, part of the crime genre), its drama also allows for long moments of stillness and reflection (2015: 24-25). Additionally, Roberts proposes that the term Nordic could actually function as “a signifier of style”³ which allows us to “categorise or refine a ‘type’ of police procedural to a niche taxonomy” (2016: 372). He goes on to explain that “[b]eyond merely serving as a generic descriptor of a geographic region, of which ‘Scandinavia’ serves as a synonym, the term ‘Nordic’, when appended to ‘landscape’, is denotative of an idea or imagery of place” (2016: 371-372). This would suggest that even television crime dramas not locally produced in Scandinavia but which bear the archetypical ‘Nordic’ features and conform to the genre could themselves be labelled as the globally recognized genre of ‘Nordic Noir’. Vatsikopoulos (2015) also argues that Nordic Noir has developed into “a genre of its own” and that “[n]ow it’s the Scandinavians, with their melancholic characters and dark landscapes, who are setting the agenda”. It is therefore possible to suggest that there is a general consensus that the place in which the story takes place (i.e., its setting, landscape and location) and how that place interacts with the story and its characters are a key element of the Nordic Noir crime fiction genre.

In terms of British procedural drama influenced by the Nordic Noir global trend, Roberts identifies a tendency towards location and landscape serving as a significant element of the production process. He describes this tendency as the “locative turn” (2016: 365) and further explains this ‘turn’ as

one that points undoubtedly to a shift towards a broader cultural economy of landscape, space and place whereby television productions have engaged with and invested in location in ways that have outstripped those that programme makers had formerly availed themselves of.

These types of investments in the cultural economy of British regions are often encouraged by local development and funding agencies with the aim of stimulating the economic and commercial prospects of location sites. By appearing in popular television or film productions, towns and regions in Britain can increase their national and international recognition and develop their local tourist industries.

One region of the UK which boasts a wide range of attractive rural and urban locations for both British and international procedural drama⁴ is Northern Ireland. The success of the region in attracting film and television productions is due in no small part to the committed work of Northern Ireland Screen, a state-funded agency which has helped to boost the region’s economy by “maximising the economic, cultural and educational value of the screen industries for the benefit of Northern Ireland” (Northern Ireland Screen, 2022). The geography of the region offers Nordic-style landscapes, while its unique history contributes further to the elements of the Nordic Noir genre. Representations of Northern Ireland in British procedural dramas have typically focused on the urban landscape of Belfast, with the city featuring as the location for numerous television series (or individual seasons) due to its specific spatial geography and troubled history. The frequency with which the city appears in television and

cinema productions has inspired the main aim of this paper, which is to investigate the representation of post-Troubles Belfast in two British crime dramas: *The Fall* (BBC, 2013 – 2016) and *Marcella* (ITV, 2016 – 2021). While the former show is set in Belfast for the entirety of its three seasons, and the latter show relocates to the city for its third and final season.

The spatial anatomy of Belfast

The image of the city of Belfast promoted online is of a vibrant metropolitan city, a fascinating tourist destination where visitors can explore local attractions related to the city's prosperous shipbuilding past. The city is rebranding its image around its connection with the ill-fated Titanic⁵ through the redevelopment of the former Harland & Wolff shipyard into the Titanic Quarter and its centrepiece of Titanic Belfast, a museum that tells the story of the eponymous ship. This revamping of the city in the global online space is the result of ongoing initiatives by local policy makers to foster and promote non-controversial representations of the city. By choosing which layers of history to promote and which to repress, Belfast's policy makers and tourist officials are at pains to establish the city as a neutral space and emphasize that modern Belfast is an inclusive and a safe place to visit.

However, as Cubitt (2014) has remarked “[a] landscape is a history, just as much as it is a geography”, and the complex urban landscape of Belfast is still unable to hide its past and its intrinsic links to the sectarian conflict known as the Troubles⁶ that affected the entire region of Northern Ireland. Shirlow (2008: 73-74) explains:

Belfast's future remains tied to enduring ethno-sectarian separation. This is a city within which some 1,500 people were killed and tens of thousands victimised and traumatised in a conflict that rumbles on, although thankfully in a less dramatic fashion.

Despite the efforts of the tourist authorities, Belfast cannot simply erase its past, as the troubled history of the city is deeply engrained in the specific territoriality and the organization of the urban space itself. Space sharing and territorial belonging are key elements in the complex ethnic geography which is marked by the existence of two conflicting cultural identities which has resulted in the segregation of the city's communities. The territorial demarcations between the two communities are still visible and are an unconventional tourist attraction for visitors who are interested in experiencing the realities of post-Troubles Belfast.

One example of territorial demarcations in the urban landscape of Belfast are the large murals which use defined spaces (originally the sides of buildings but later also peace walls) to portray selective images of people or events which hold significance for the local community (often related to politics, religion or history).

A far more geographically evident physical legacy of the Troubles are locally called 'peace walls' that were erected as protective walls in order to protect republican (Catholic) and loyalist (Protestant) neighbourhoods by keeping the warring communities apart. The barriers (in the form of high usually concrete walls, metal fences or gates that are locked at night) were built from the 1970s onwards to mark the boundaries between areas occupied dominantly by

one of the two communities in a bid to reduce tensions, effectively creating the intricate territorial divisions of the urban landscape. Originally established as a temporary measure and a rather simple solution in periods of increased tension, the walls have become a permanent feature in Belfast and other Northern Irish cities due to their perceived effectiveness, but the long-term value of the structures is disputed. Although the original purpose of these physical interfaces⁷ was to ensure the safety of local communities, they have since become an integral part of Belfast's spatial anatomy, gaining considerable cultural relevance and attracting the curiosity of visitors. Many of the walls are adorned with murals and political messages and imagery and have become iconic locations which feature in the "black cab" tours of sites related to the events of the Troubles which are popular among the city's tourists⁸.

Somewhat surprisingly, the peace walls have increased in both length and number since the signing of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement which heralded the start of the peace process in Northern Ireland. Shirlow (2008: 79) notes that

there were sixteen interface walls in 1994, the year in which almost all the principal paramilitaries in the region announced a cease-fire. Since then most of these constructions have been either extended or heightened. Nine additional walls have been constructed owing to interface-related violence since 1998. The first meeting of the Northern Ireland Assembly in 1998 was held on the same day as an interface wall was built through Alexander Park, a public park located in north Belfast.

Shirlow (2008) also links the spatial segregation of the city via interface walls to social inequality, as the majority of peace walls lie in the north and west districts of Belfast⁹, areas which are generally considered to be the most deprived parts of the city.

Although the peace walls remain standing, the conflict-ridden communities have slowly begun to reintegrate and reconcile as the city itself continues on slow but ongoing transition from a 'troubled' city to a vibrant and rebranded modern city. Public bodies are actively involved in encouraging this process, as is described by O'Neill (2022):

In 2013, the Northern Ireland Executive launched a strategy called Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC) which aimed to improve community relations, particularly at interface areas between Catholic and Protestant communities. One of the key aims of the project was the removal of all the so-called peace walls at these interfaces by 2023.

This strategy also applies to the whole region, not just Belfast, and as a result, "[s]ixteen sectarian interface barriers — among them nine in Belfast and four in Londonderry — have now been dismantled" (McAdams, 2021). However, as of 2022, it seems more than obvious that the goal of removing all Northern Ireland's interface walls by 2023 is unlikely to be achieved.

Even though their future remains uncertain, peace walls still attract numerous tourists and represent an explicit manifestation of Troubles-related imagery which Belfast cannot conceal. However, other parts of the city, specifically the riverfront and the former shipyards, which have undergone huge regeneration and redevelopment, thereby transforming the city skyline. Neill and Ellis explain that "[g]lass is now the representational form of choice for

development in the post-conflict city, offering as it does an obvious contrast to the brutalist terror-proofed buildings of the ‘troubles’” (2008: 99). Belfast has undergone a radical process of rebranding, with the city authorities positioning the Northern Irish capital as a ‘city in transition’.

The ongoing development of the post-conflict city has been assisted to a significant extent, by Northern Ireland Screen which has made considerable efforts to promote the city and Northern Ireland as a whole as suitable locations for television and film productions due to its specific geography and history. Richard Williams, the chief executive of Northern Ireland Screen, sees the undisputable success of the Northern Ireland television and film industry as a “shining example of what was meant to happen post the Good Friday agreement” (cited in Elliott, 2021). Cities or locations which feature in television series or films can become popular tourist attractions for fans and this can elevate the status of a city or region on both a national and international level. Belfast currently houses three film studios and several British television series such as *The Fall*, *Line of Duty*, *Bloodlands* and *Marcella* have been filmed in the city, resulting in a corresponding increase in Belfast’s status as a tourist destination. In the next section, we will examine the televisual representation of the post-conflict geography of Belfast in two of these series, the procedural dramas *The Fall* and *Marcella*, both of which also fall within the genre of crime noir.

The representation of Belfast in *The Fall*

The Fall (BBC, 2013 – 2016) is a three-season British procedural drama which is set in Belfast. In terms of storyline, it is less a ‘whodunit’ than a ‘whydunit’ as the identity of the serial killer is introduced in the first episode and the viewers get to know his backstory. In contrast, Stella Gibson, the detective, who is on his trail, is something of an enigma,¹⁰ a conscious decision on the part of the showrunner Allan Cubitt who wanted to “tell the audience next to nothing about her private life, but let them learn about her little by little via the choices she makes” (Cubitt, 2013).

Despite the central role of the city in the series, the opening scene is not set in Belfast but London, where the viewer is introduced to Gibson in the private spaces of her bathroom and bedroom. In a later scene, the serial killer breaks into the bathroom and bedroom of a house in Belfast, private spaces of the home of his next victim. The parallels in the views and experiences of the two protagonists are used to introduce Belfast as the location for the drama.

The detective, an outsider to the city who is unburdened by the specific history of the place, is placed into direct confrontation with the embedded ethnic and spatial geographies of post-conflict Belfast immediately upon her arrival in the city in the first episode. She voices her surprise as she is picked up at the airport in an armoured car and gets the deadpan response “Welcome to Belfast” (S1EP1). While being transported through the urban landscape to the fortified police station from where she will work, she sees two iconic landmarks of the Troubles through her car window: the famous stretch of peace walls at Cupar Way and the derelict Crumlin Road Courthouse. The specificity of location is cemented further in the police station itself as Gibson walks past a memorial to “Our Murdered Colleagues” commemorating the members of the Ulster Constabulary who were killed while on duty on the streets of Belfast. From her hotel room she can also see the iconic symbols of Belfast’s shipbuilding past – Samson and Goliath, the two giant cranes of the former Harland and Wolff shipyard. As the

series progresses, especially in the first two seasons as she hunts down the killer, the detective repeatedly encounters specific geographic and political arrangements of the space of post-conflict Belfast: she is driven around the city by other police officers even though she can drive herself and she is prompted by her superior to get a firearm even though she does not consider it necessary. As an outsider, however, the detective makes little effort to engage with the history embedded in the urban geography of Belfast even though it is an authentic a part of the cinematic landscape of the series.

The killer, on the other hand, experiences the urban landscape of Belfast in a totally different way. As a local resident, he is fully aware of the conflict-related spatial territoriality of the city, and it is through him that the viewers experience the local knowledge of space and post-conflict memory as he moves around the city by both day and night before he is ultimately captured by the police. In the above-mentioned scene where he breaks into the house and enters the bathroom of his next victim, he pauses in front of the mirror and removes his balaclava, a symbol associated with the paramilitary groups, thereby revealing his own identity but also distancing himself from the narrative of Troubles-era terrorism. This scene, combined with the detective's attitude towards the city and her active refusal to engage with its history, could be seen as an attempt to alter the televisual representation of Belfast.

The series' focus on the male serial killer who preys on young professional women highlights the issue of violence in the context of the specific urban landscape of Belfast, a city that has its own history of violence, sectarian or otherwise, and which carries its own share of traumas related to the conflict. Lynch suggests that the "introduction of a fictional serial killer to the province after decades of violence and a fragile peace process can be seen as an attempt to normalize the region in the popular imagination" (2017: 61). It can also be argued, as Les Roberts notes, that the story "can be said to have grown out of the landscape" (2016: 374). Conflict-related imagery lends an authenticity establishing the cinematic landscape of Belfast and its post-conflict representation. Allan Cubitt, the series creator and director of the last two seasons echoes Robert's "locative turn" (2016: 365), clearly understanding that procedural dramas "have a very strong sense of place" (2013) and further explains that "the whole trick with creating a compelling drama is to create a distinct world. Belfast as a location has a very particular quality – a product, perhaps, of its history. A history, in part, of violence. That history casts a long shadow." (ibid.).

The representation of Belfast in *Marcella*

Like *The Fall*, *Marcella* (ITV, 2016 – 2021) is also a British procedural drama, but this series differs in that only its third and final season is set in Belfast. The location of the series relocates to Belfast after the main protagonist, the eponymous detective, experiences a personal catharsis after an interrupted suicide attempt, mutilating her face with scissors and cutting her hair off. She then fakes her own death and disappears in the streets of London after accessing the repressed memory that she caused the death of her infant daughter during a mental blackout.

As season three opens, we find Marcella working deep undercover in Belfast under an assumed name as she attempts to expose the Maguires, a seemingly respectable, successful family with its dark secrets who are in fact running the local crime scene. By adopting a whole new identity, changing her name, appearance and backstory, and accepting a new undercover job, Marcella has in some respect re-programmed herself, making a fresh start and leaving her

past behind (although not always successfully). The plot mirrors the recent efforts to normalize Belfast by re-branding it as a modern city and emphasising the newly built or renovated parts of the city which are not associated with the conflict and violence. This is particularly apparent in the opening credits of the third season, where the urban landscape of Belfast is introduced with images of the Titanic Museum and more affluent parts of the city. An early scene in the first episode also introduces Belfast by presenting a view of former shipyards and iconic Samson and Goliath cranes which also appeared in *The Fall*, again serving as a reference to the city's prosperous past. The regenerate docklands appear frequently throughout the season,¹¹ as the criminal activities of the Maguire family also include shipping and trafficking, but the locations are so easily recognisable in the show (McGoran, 2021). Other parts of the urban landscape are also used to code the televisual representation of Belfast as a modern post-conflict city as there is very little imagery related to Belfast's history of sectarian conflict; remarkably, there is only a single brief glimpse of a peace wall over the course of the entire season. Other locations used in the show include the modern glass buildings of a courthouse, an art gallery, a hotel, a hospital and the renovated Titanic Quarter. *Marcella* represents a significant shift in the televisual imagery of post-conflict Belfast in comparison to the city's appearance in *The Fall* where Belfast is coded through conflict-related imagery. The Belfast of *Marcella* retains the rebranded imagery of a vibrant modern city which takes pride in its prosperous shipbuilding past.

The long shadow of the Troubles is not as openly visible in *Marcella* as it is in *The Fall*, although the conflict does form an important background to the plot of the series; it transpires that the deceased patriarch of the Maguire family had a paramilitary past and members of the family often resort to violence in their line of business. Nonetheless, this only emphasises the impression that the Troubles are connected with the city's past rather than its future, and the series predominantly presents Belfast as a city that promotes its non-controversial shipbuilding history and which is slowly but surely attempting to wipe the slate clean on its former reputation as a locus of violence and sectarian hatred.

Concluding remarks

Recent examples of unique visualisation of place and landscape in British procedural drama echo the latest global trends in the Anglo-American televisual landscape which have been greatly influenced by Nordic Noir inspired crime dramas, including those produced outside of Scandinavia itself. Crime noirs of this type are set in carefully and consciously chosen locations which become a significant element of the production process. The geographical imagery of Belfast has frequently featured as a location for several British crime noirs as the city offers a highly distinctive space for the narrative of human conflicts that are so typical of crime dramas. The city of Belfast, with its specific spatial territoriality and violent past, serves as the location of both *The Fall* and *Marcella*, two recent examples of British crime noirs. Each of these procedural dramas represents a different engagement with the location and its specific landscape, and these two approaches to Belfast result in two very different representations of the city. In *The Fall*, Belfast is represented through the use of Troubles-related imagery that is more authentically pronounced. However, as Lynch (2017) argues, the very fact of placing a violent serial killer in a city with its own history of sectarian violence could, ironically, be considered as a sign of normalisation. *Marcella*, uses different yet no less authentic televisual

imagery of Belfast, representing the city as a post-conflict space and simultaneously emphasising its non-controversial, rebranded modern imagery. This approach is indicative of a shift in televisual representations of Belfast and the move away from more archetypal imagery associated with the Troubles and the city's violent past.

Notes

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² The Danish-Swedish co-production *Bron/Broen* (2011 - 2018) was not only successful among international audiences but also spawned adaptations in several countries. There is the American adaptation *The Bridge* (2013 – 2014) and also the Anglo-French adaptation *The Tunnel* (Sky, Canal+, 2013 – 2017).

³ Les Roberts understands this 'style' as that characterised by Jensen and Waade who describe it as using the specific colours, atmospheric elements and "bleak urban cityscapes, reminiscent of the film noir" (2013: 262).

⁴ Many films and television series have been filmed in Northern Ireland but *Game of Thrones* is generally seen as the trailblazer which kicked off the boom in the film and television industry in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland Screen publishes a catalogue of past and upcoming film and television productions which can be found at <https://northernirelandscreen.co.uk/made-in-northern-ireland-production-catalogue/>

⁵ RMS Titanic was built in Belfast by the shipbuilding company Harland & Wolf.

⁶ The Troubles is the name for sectarian conflict (also known as the Northern Irish conflict) in Northern Ireland between Catholics and Protestants. The conflict, however, was not based on religious beliefs. Therefore, these two groups are also termed republicans and loyalists respectively. Belfast was a focal point of the conflict, suffering regular street violence and terror bombing in the 1970s in particular.

⁷ As Peter Shirlow (2008: 87) explains an interface is "a boundary between Catholic and Protestant communities. Many of these interfaces are marked by walls, some by roads and others by derelict housing".

⁸ Black cab tours are famous tours of Belfast conducted in a London type taxi that cover the city's troubled past, focusing on political history and related places such as murals and peace walls. The guides are taxi drivers who often have personal experience of the Troubles. <https://www.getyourguide.com/-1442/-tc259>

⁹ The Belfast Interface Project has produced an interactive online Interfaces Map available at <https://www.belfastinterfaceproject.org/interfaces-map>

¹⁰ Gillian Anderson, the actress playing the detective Stella Gibson, used the word "enigma" when referring to her character in an interview promoting the series. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/tv/entries/7a388fd4-fba2-33a6-98bf-75c5680e0e22>

¹¹ Anna Friel, the actress playing the detective Marcella Backland (or Keira Devlin once relocated to Belfast) explained in an interview for Belfast Live (as quoted in McGoran, 2021): "We shot down by the docks. But the thing is, there's so many shows shooting in Belfast at the moment - thank goodness! - that because of that, we had to find locations which weren't too recognisable from other shows." <https://www.belfastlive.co.uk/whats-on/be/marcella-itv-belfast-locations-friel-19697297>

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