Dead Women and White Men: Why Are Today’s Hit Noir Shows Still Stuck in the Gender/ Race Politics of the ‘40s and ‘50s?

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Critically acclaimed TV noir programs such as “True Detective,” “House of Cards” and “Hannibal” provide complex narratives with compelling characters, but fail to take full advantage of gender & race diversity.

By Zainab Akande

On October 6, Showtime announced the return of David Lynch and Mark Frost’s psycho-surreal crime drama, “Twin Peaks,” in the form of a nine episode miniseries to take place 25 years after the 1991 series finale. Unusual during its two-season run on ABC, “Twin Peaks” was dark, absurd and rife with the seedy horrors of suburbia brought to light by the police investigation into the death of the town’s beloved homecoming queen, Laura Palmer.

The timing for its revival couldn’t be more perfect—in an age where hit television dramas such as “True Detective” (creator Nic Pizzolatto is a fan of “Twin Peaks”), “Hannibal,” and “House of Cards” have dominated the must-watch conversation, it’s fair to say that TV noir is having a moment—both domestically and internationally.

Nordic noir has infiltrated the American noir TV zeitgeist with the Danish series “The Killing” and Danish-Swedish production, “The Bridge.”
“Sherlock” also cruises from the BBC in the UK to PBS every season.

The new golden age of television owes a debt to the classic film noir period of the ‘40s and ‘50s. The genre first influenced serial police procedural dramas that flourished in the ‘80s and ‘90s.

Since then, the TV noir genre has evolved creatively in terms of storytelling, but remains trapped in the gender and race dynamics of the era in which it was born—with white male antiheroes and the women who depend on them (or are sacrificed) for their development.

The French-born Italian critic Nino Frank devised the term film noir ("black film") to describe the burgeoning American crime films of the ‘40s post-WWII: bleak, cynical stories that matched the national tone driven by atomic era anxieties.

Noir drama usually contains a pessimistic/cynical antiheroes, a nonlinear storyline (frequently accompanied with voiceovers and flashbacks), crime/detective plots, violence, caustic conversations, melodrama, betrayals, low-key lighting techniques, ambiguous morality, haunting scores, brazen or perverse sexual material and clichéd femme fatales.
The “classic” film noir era began with director John Huston’s “The Maltese Falcon” (1941) and ended with Orson Welles’ “Touch of Evil” (1958). The films and televised works that followed are generally considered to be of the neo-noir (“new black”) canon.

The noir style then carried over to television. There was “Dragnet” in the late ’50s and “Naked City” in the ‘60s—but “Hill Street Blues” (a series Frost also wrote for) of the ‘80s revolutionized the genre, content-wise. Morally gray characters and more graphic depictions of violence and sex were all risqué at the time but nonetheless, well received.

Like classic film noir, TV noir continues to show little concern for diversity either in its casting or scripts. Though “Hill Street Blues,” touched upon race politics, the show was comprised of a predominantly white cast and covered race in the limited scope of poverty and crime; “The X Files,” featured a woman, but she and her leading male costar were white; “Twin Peaks,” “Dexter,” “Breaking Bad,” “Hannibal,” “Sherlock”—all have white male leads.
Meanwhile, female roles have undoubtedly become more multifaceted, but many are still stilted by gendered tropes. To exemplify, we’ll look into three contemporary, ongoing TV shows.

The critically acclaimed HBO series, “True Detective,” stars Detective Rust Cohle (Matthew McConaughey) and Marty Hart (Woody Harrelson)—two white men.

Inherently neo-noir, the gloomy swamps of Louisiana set the stage for the 17-year saga of the Cohle and Hart’s hunt for a serial killer. The story is told through flashbacks of the past intercut with present and interwoven with modern day narration from the older, jaded detectives themselves. The only people of color and consequence on the show are detectives Maynard Gilbough (Michael Potts) and Thomas Papania (Tory Kittles), who interrogate the Cohle and Hart in the modern day timeline. Both black men, their roles are secondary and are only relevant in relation to their white counterparts and their appearances on the show. They are also unremarkable. They have no real character development and merely serve utilitarian role in advancing the plot.

What makes this especially damning is the fact that with the show's established popularity, it had the opportunity to break the mold in terms of casting for the second season.

Before Colin Farrell, Rachel McAdams, Taylor Kitsch and Vince Vaughn were announced as leads for season two, fan casting and speculation mashed up dream
teams such as Idris Elba and Chiwetel Ejifor and Winona Ryder with Elizabeth Moss. Though many women were proposed, they were all white.

As Chris Rock noted in an essay for The Hollywood Reporter, “Literally everyone in town was up for that part, unless you were black...I never heard anyone go ‘Is it going to be Amy Adams or Gabrielle Union?’ for that show.”

The few women who do appear are marginalized and degraded. There are no female police officers but there are dead prostitutes. Hart has mistresses. The serial killer of the series has an affair with his half-sister. The female victim’s corpse of the first episode is nude, branded and left rotting in the sun.

Hart’s family life falls apart when his wife Maggie (Michelle Monaghan) sleeps with Cohle after discovering her husband’s return to infidelity. Until that moment, which takes place in the sixth episode of the eight episode series, Maggie’s role is minor and she’s presented as a nurturing motherly figure good: (the classic noir archetype of the ‘good’ woman), but she turns into a vengeful seductress in femme fatale fashion. Her latent sexuality and friendly banter with Cohle reaches a fever pitch in a clichéd and terribly petty manner. Furthermore, when Cohle blames Maggie for seducing him, she accepts the accusation rather than acknowledging that it takes two to tango in the sack. By the end of its debut season, while a crime is solved, no justice is served for the misogynist crimes that accompany the lack of agency for the women of “True Detective.”

In contrast, “House of Cards” presents a more complex view of women in the world of Washington D.C. politics—a world where backstabbing and crime are essential to running the country.

The most nuanced and contrasted performances from the show come from Claire Underwood (Robin Wright), the wife of the white antihero male lead, Frank Underwood (Kevin Spacey) and budding journalist Zoe Barnes (Kate Mara) with whom Frank has a calculated affair. Claire is a 21st century power woman—successful, without children and CEO of a nonprofit charity. Her physical appearance does well in conveying as much.

She is middle aged with short blonde hair, a trendy yet conservative sense of fashion with wisdom and grace under fire that comes with age. With such traits, it would be easy to write her off as untouchable ice-queen, but there’s an edge of softness to her character provided through her domestic interactions with Frank in the confines of their home. Her humanity and complexity as a flawed character spring forth from her extramarital affair, struggles against menopause and her history as a harrowing rape victim. She is a well-written female character, not defined by a singular trope.

In contrast, Zoe is young and presents as more traditionally feminine—with long brown hair. She has aspirations of getting ahead in her profession at any price, no matter how ethically dubious, going as far as using her sexuality to her advantage by
sleeping with Frank in order gain exclusives and become a prominent journalist. From this standpoint, she and Claire are alike but their divergence comes from their differences in strength. Despite her vulnerabilities, Claire is a steady pillar—while Zoe wavers.

Claire Underwood (top image) and Zoe Barnes (bottom image) from Netflix’s “House of Cards.” Courtesy of Feminspire.com and Videogum.com.

The narrative of the naïve, young woman being in awe of and exploited by the older, more powerful man is an old trope. Further insulting Zoe’s character, is that her death used to fuel the anguish of her male lover, Lucas Goodwin (Sebastian Arcelus) and continue his storyline.
Even with a great female lead such as Claire, “House of Cards” fall short, such as with the case concerning Zoe—a weak femme fatale who ultimately falls victim to the power of the D.C. boy’s club.

“House of Cards” also falls short on race. Remy Danton (Mahershala Ali), a former press secretary and protégé of Frank’s, is a venal black man who manages to rock the boat with switching allegiances on both Claire and Frank on certain occasions, but not much else. He is also a flirt who threatens to overstep the line in becoming the overtly sexual black male. Claire has a black female secretary and Frank finds friendship in Freddy Hayes (Reg E. Cathey), a lower class black man who owns the hole-in-the-wall BBQ joint Frank frequents and interacts with Frank as the comforting, soulful magical negro.

Frank discards him in season two, in order to preserve his image when word of their friendship becomes public.

NBC’s televised adaptation of “Hannibal,” when stacked against the aforementioned noir dramas is perhaps the most progressive of all. The series, based on the novel “Red Dragon” by Thomas Harris, examines the infamous cannibal Hannibal Lecter (Mads Mikkelsen) in an elaborate game of cat versus cat against empathetic criminal profiler Will Graham (Hugh Dancy).

Both white men, they are once again the focus of the show, but an arguable third main character comes in the form of head of the Behavioral Science Unit of the FBI in Virginia Jack Crawford (Laurence Fishburne). He is a black man in a position of power who is a mentor to Will, and appears as frequently as Will. He has been a major player in the storylines of the past two seasons—including a personal plot where his wife is diagnosed with cancer.
Beverly Katz (Hettienne Park), an Asian crime scene investigator, is the only female member of a three-person team regularly featured in the show. But still, in a main cast of eight, Jack and Beverly are the only people of color.

The show does better with gender—with several leading, strong female characters. Creator Bryan Fuller took characters that were originally male in the novels—specifically FBI psych consultant Dr. Alana (originally, Alan) Bloom, and tabloid journalist Fredricka “Freddie” (originally Freddy) Lounds.
But what starts out an independent group of women in the first season collapses the second.

Alana’s moral judgment concerning Will becomes impeded by her sexual attraction to and affair with Hannibal—and she becomes an object of lust for Will and Hannibal to compete over versus an object of rationale as previously presented. In the fourth episode of the second season, “Takiawase,” Beverly meets a gruesome end by Hannibal’s hands after she acts impulsively after breaking into his home on a stealth mission to find criminal evidence.

Fans were outraged by the implications of offering a woman of color in a sloppy, uncharacteristic manner. The outcry was so intense that the actress who played Beverly, Hettienne Park, wrote a blog post addressing it:

*Fuller cast me in a role that I didn’t think I had a chance in hell of getting. I rarely if ever see minorities, women, minority women, let alone Asian women, get to play characters like Beverly Katz. I rarely if ever see characters like Beverly Katz period. And her last name is Katz for Christ’s sake. Pretty open-minded, non-racist, pro-feminine writing and casting in my opinion.*

*As far as “fridging” (killing her off for the sake of advancing the plot or creating “manpain”)… HANNIBAL is based on the Thomas Harris novels and it centers on the relationship between Hannibal Lecter and Will Graham – two dudes, so that’s where the focus will be and will likely remain. (My guess is that now that*
their relationship has been well established, there will be opportunity to further develop female characters. One can hope.)

In the end, one can only hope.

Today’s TV noir is providing content that is not only darker, but also richer cinematically than its predecessors; the depictions of minorities and women are starting to evolve. Women are more than just vixens—they're CEOs, politicians and police investigators with agency. Today's television landscape also isn’t as constrained by the attitudes toward race that were present during the ‘40s—’80s, leaving more room for opportunity to make the visual world of fiction look more like reality.

Even so—when “Twin Peaks” returns in 2016, Laura Palmer will still be a dead, white girl in a body bag.