

Always Different, Always the Same: Critical Essays on The Fall

Edited by Eoin Deveraux and Martin J. Power

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Reviewing this collection feels like a deeply satisfying consolation prize, given that I was prevented by circumstances from attending and presenting at the symposium upon which it based. Organised by the Popular Music and Popular Culture research cluster at the University of Limerick, the event was held in November 2019. It's one of my great regrets that I couldn't be there, surrounded by fellow Fall-heads, in Ireland, for a symposium that took place—appropriately enough for an event focused on Mark E. Smith—in a pub.

That the event was a worthwhile intellectual endeavour as well as a lot of fun is evidenced by the selection of contributions collected here. Deveraux and Power's introduction explains that the symposium was attended by 'fans, academics, students, and academics who were Fall fans' (p3). In addition to academic papers, there was an interview with one-time Fall drummer and indie music mainstay Simon Wolstonecroft, as well as a gig by a former line-up of The Fall operating as 'Imperial Wax'.

Something of that diversity is captured in this collection, which features a foreword by Smith's old friend Gavin Friday of Irish post-punk band the Virgin Prunes; an interview with Smith's sister Suzanne, who contributed numerous cover artworks for The Fall over the years; and pieces whose style departs from the familiar conventions of academic writing. This includes John Fleming's speculative comparison of the autobiographies of Smith and Robert Forster of Australian post-punk band the Go-Betweens. Michael Mary Murphy, meanwhile, fuses personal recollection with sociology to consider the influence of Ireland on The Fall and in turn, the influence of The Fall on the Irish alternative music scene. In this respect, *Always Different, Always the Same* resembles recent edited collections by The

Subcultures Network, which also avoid taking a polarised approach to subcultures and fan communities on the one hand and academic enquiry on the other. Such collections do so by emphasising shared passions and crossover of personnel whilst recognising and validating the range of insights that arise from different subject positions. This attitude is epitomised by the way many contributors here acknowledge their reliance on the labours of love undertaken by the fans who contribute to The Fall's unofficial website, documenting lyrics, anecdotes, gigographies and more.

The editors also note that the collection 'casts a very broad net in terms of subject matter and focus.' (p5) This is broadly true, although there are some consistent threads—most notably a concern with the intersection of The Fall's working-class background and the kinds of experimental modernist technique once largely confined to the early and mid-twentieth century middle and leisure classes. Previously explored in Mark Fisher's riveting *K-Punk* blog (2006, 2007) and in my own work on The Fall (2016, 2019), it's a topic that benefits greatly from further unpacking here.

In this vein, K.A. Laity's chapter insists upon The Fall as 'art' by emphasising their crossover with the worlds of literature, theatre, cinema and fine art. Elsewhere, Samuel Flanagan emphasises the continuity between the anti-nostalgic tendencies of certain strands of modernism and comparable tendencies at work in the later, neglected output of The Fall. Kieran Cashell does justice to the specifically working-class nature of the band's aesthetic disposition in his discussion of Smith alongside Ezra Pound, writing of the way that 'Smith deploys...pulp...to displace the extra-linguistic excess buried beneath the consecrated soil of the modernist text', (p205) thus rescuing its disruptive thrill from dusty establishment canonisation. Mike Glennon, likewise, explores the social and political dimensions of aesthetics in his Marxist formalist comparison of The Fall with the subversive techniques of three of Smith's key influences: the German avant-rock band Can, dub reggae and, later, dance music. Similarly, Paul Wilson grounds the captivatingly odd typography featured throughout the band's output in Viktor Shklovsky's theory of defamiliarisation. This emphasis on 'strangeness' is developed in Martin Myers' poignant reflection upon Smith's relatively early death at the age of 60 and the way it robs us of a figure who remained able to 'generate discomfort' to the last, thanks to his uncanny fusion of a working-class habitus with modernist shock tactics.

Another shared theme of *Always Different, Always the Same* is the original application of linguistic methodologies to Smith's output. This includes the use of software by Matt Davies to identify patterns and preoccupations across a Fall 'corpus'. Davies is self-aware enough to stress that it ought to be left to others—specifically humans rather than computers—to interpret his findings. He also notes the irony of his method, given Smith's notorious technophobia. Meanwhile, Elaine Vaughn, Brian Clancy and Eoin Devereaux are a little more willing to draw analytical conclusions from their comparative discourse analysis of early and late Fall lyrics. What emerges from these two chapters is an ambitious willingness to try and get to grips with the entire public *oeuvre* of the compulsively prolific Smith over the course of four decades.

Other contributions are more disparate but no less interesting. If anything unites them, it is the way they dwell upon important aspects of The Fall's work that have

been acknowledged previously but which reward further investigation. One of these is the band's frequently captivating record covers, including perhaps my personal favourite, *Grotesque (After the Gramme)*. Here, Devereaux's interview with Suzanne Smith is a valuable piece of 'history from below'. It displays implicit solidarity with feminism and everyday working-class creativity in its foregrounding of one of the many women who played pivotal roles in The Fall, plus its discussion of her largely self-taught methods and influences. Fittingly, one of Suzanne Smith's works adorns the cover of *Always Different, Always the Same*. Ben Lawley ventures bravely into the territory of the occult, investigating the significance of Smith's repeated claims that he was psychic - at least until he 'drank (his) way out of it'. Sprawling in its scope, the chapter opens doors for further enquiry. I was left pondering what motivated Smith to make such claims; what motivated some of his audience to believe them; and perhaps most significantly, what Smith's place is in a much larger history of esoteric/working-class crossover. Finally, David Meagher and John McFarland conclude the volume with a speculative comparison that mirrors that of John Fleming earlier in the collection. Rather than autobiography, the focus here is psychiatry and The Fall's inheritance of the 60s and 70s counterculture's revolt against its dominant approaches. Like other writers before them, Meagher and McFarland invoke the spectre of Prestwich Hospital as an early and vital influence on the North Manchester-based band. What they add to this discourse is a comparison between Smith's treatment of mental health and that of Dr Montagu Lomax (1860-1933), whose 1921 expose of the cruelties of the British asylum system helped catalyse widespread reform. Meagher and McFarland rightfully acknowledge that 'it would be fantastical to draw any direct lineage between the two individuals' (p254) but their chapter is insightful nonetheless.

Overall, *Always Different, Always the Same* is an important contribution to critical analysis of The Fall. It builds upon existing work while throwing new approaches into the mix, highlighting the inexhaustible richness of the band's working-class weird achievements.

References

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