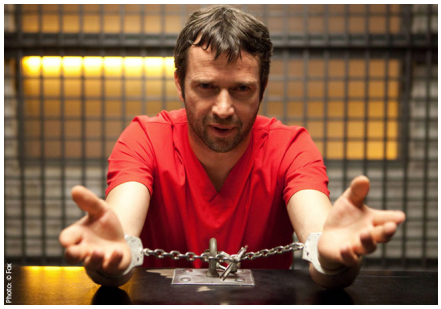
THE FOLLOWING (premiering tonight at 9/8 Central on Fox) represents the latest attempt by a broadcast network to compete with the extremities and explicitness of cable TV. Or to put it another way, how ya gonna keep ’em watching your procedurals after they’ve been down on the farm with THE WALKING DEAD?

The series also reps the latest iteration of that time-honored tradition, The Disillusioned Ex-Agent/Cop Called Out of Retirement For a Big Case. (Just once, I’d like to see a show or movie where that former lawman is implored to return and tells the bureau/force where to stick it, and they have to resort to their second choice.) SCREAM veteran Kevin Williamson, who created THE FOLLOWING and scripted the pilot, and Marcos Siega, who directed it, make the smart choice to get that setup out of the way quickly, as weary former FBI man Ryan Hardy (Kevin Bacon) is contacted, convinced and heads back into action with a head full of demons and a water bottle full of vodka, within just a few minutes.



He’s been summoned because he was responsible for capturing Joe Carroll, who had butchered 14 young women before Ryan got him a decade ago and has now staged a bloody escape from a not-maximum-enough-security-prison. Like almost all serial killers in movies and TV and almost none in real life, Carroll is a diabolical (and accented, as he’s played by Brit

James Purefoy) genius who aims to ensnare Ryan in a twisted, elaborate plot tied to his own love of literature; Carroll’s day job was as a college classics professor before his extracurricular activities got him put away. Once confronted with Carroll’s new crimes, Ryan becomes driven, obsessive and, in subsequent episodes (four were provided for early review), not averse to breaking a few fingers to stop this reign of terror.

Clearly, the high concept here is MANHUNTER/SILENCE OF THE LAMBS meets 24, though as opposed to the relentless real-time forward motion of that previous Fox hit, THE FOLLOWING frequently jumps back in time to reveal how Ryan was even more involved in Carroll’s case than it first appears, and the villain’s jailhouse interactions with his cult of acolytes who commit atrocities on his behalf, and give the show its title. No fair detailing who some of them are just now, and while this conspiracy isn’t as dramatically far-reaching as one might hope or expect—at least, in the quartet of shows offered in advance—the interactions among its members are more intriguing than the investigative stuff, which is pretty much procedural business as usual, as Ryan doggedly pursues leads, Carroll intellectually taunts him and the scenario takes us from FBI rooms with evidentiary photos all over the walls to grotty killers’ lairs similarly decorated with newspaper clippings and much more grisly pics. Given how neatly Williamson homaged and bent the rules of slasher cinema in SCREAM, it’s disappointing how straight-facedly he embraces its conventions here.

But the big news about THE FOLLOWING, clearly, is the graphic violence that got some of the journalists at the recent Television Critics Association press event into such a snit. Certainly, the pilot pushes boundaries in terms of the blood, gore and bad behavior on display, with the most startling scene involving a display of self-decoration immediately followed by an act of self-mutilation. Some of this is as shocking as intended, though perhaps not as much as it might be without all the gruesome competition over in cable-land. (What television’s recent permissiveness says about society, and whether it should be allowed, is a much bigger, separate issue.) The mayhem is toned down somewhat in the three subsequent episodes, though the creators were apparently so proud of one murder setpiece that it both closes one of them and is reprised at the beginning of the next.

The motivation behind this particular killing, and Carroll’s general fixation on Edgar Allan Poe, can’t help but recall last year’s feature THE RAVEN, adding to the cornucopia of influences on view throughout the first four hours of THE FOLLOWING. On every level, the show is professionally done, with atmospheric direction, strong production values and solid acting, led by Bacon and Purefoy’s committed turns as the key antagonists. Yet after its gruesomely attention-grabbing start, it remains to be seen whether it can carve out a more original, distinctive niche in the crowded thriller-TV field in the long run. Despite the claim in some of the promos that the series is “unlike anything you’ve seen before,” one can’t help but feel during these initial installments that THE FOLLOWING is aptly titled.