Dexter’s ‘Shrink Wrapped’: A Dispositional Reading of Gender and Body Violence on Television

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/jo_coghlan/120/
Abstract
The aim of this paper is to consider why audiences watch violence on television. A dispositional reading of Dexter (Showtime 2006-2013) on a macro and micro-level suggests that audiences will watch violence if it is conceptually scaffolded and framed in ways which posit acts of violence as being morally sanctioned.

Keywords: Dexter, symbolic and physical violence, body genre, disposition theory

Introduction

Breaking Bad (AMC 2008-2013), Game of Thrones (HBO 2011-), The Walking Dead (AMC 2010-), True Blood (HBO 2008-2014), Sons of Anarchy (FX 2008-2014), Boardwalk Empire (HBO 2010-2014), The Following (Fox 2013-2015), Banshee (Cinemax HBO 2013-) and Hannibal (NBC 2013-2015) all feature displays of spectacular body violence. Violent protagonists are often positioned as socially marginalised individuals (Breaking Bad, Banshee, Hannibal), as members of socially excluded groups (Game of Thrones, Sons of Anarchy, Boardwalk Empire) or as excluded ‘others’ (as in the case of vampire and zombie dramas like True Blood and The Walking Dead). Some protagonists are represented as ‘traditional’ family members, such as ‘Walter White’ in Breaking Bad, or as members of ‘symbolic’ families as in the cult-serial killer series The Following. Families have always been a generic feature of dramas however there appears to be a shift in how the modern family is represented, framed and narrated in terms of dysfunction and violence (Coghlan 2015).
There have also been changes in television production and distribution. Network television historically relied on small budgets, formulae writing, sound stage shooting, used limited camera positions, and was aired to suit advertiser demands. The aim of networks was to produce cheap, mass consumed, socially acceptable, and advertiser friendly television. As a result, television was a ‘vast wasteland’ doing little more than ‘pouring an unstoppable sludge of false reassurance and pernicious advertising into suburban homes’ (Martin 2013:22).

Advancements from analogue to digital production impacted on the industry. Analogue technology mechanically inscribes an image by recording light on an existing object. Digital technology can manipulate images by transforming a numerical matrix into pixels. Analogue filming combined with digital production, allows auteurs to create ‘elastic reality’ (Thanouli 2015:60). Images, once digitalised can be composited, morphed and animated to produce ‘what is not’ and ‘negate what is’ (Thanouli 2015:60). For auteurs operating outside of traditional television networks the endless possibilities of digital production were embraced. Digital production, coupled with technological advancements in satellite and cable distribution, especially when coupled with relaxed content laws, saw organisations such as HBO (a pay television service in operation since 1972) take advantage of the newly emerging technological possibilities of both digitalisation and streaming.

Commissioning original scripts, notably *Oz* (1997-2003), *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) and *The Wire* (2002-2008), cable providers such as HBO and Netflix integrated themselves into what is described as the ‘perfect technological time’ of television (Sepinwall 2013:5). Initially this was the DVR, then DVD and box set markets, and later Smart and Internet television. Developments in how audiences’ could access television coupled with the need for cable providers to produce ‘branded’ programs to generate premium subscribers saw a ‘new’ television landscape emerge (Coghlan 2015). But with network television recognising market loss to cable providers, not only did they embrace the lure of digital production but they also
began to relax their standards on violent content. Parr (2013) recognises that cable providers combatted this by making their programs even more violent resulting in ‘so many options for violence’ on television today.

In the United States, HBO has a 30 per cent market share of pay television households, representing 36 million unique subscribers. HBO is available in 151 countries and has 122 million global subscribers. Netflix (which began operations in 1997) similarly has 36 million American subscribers and is estimated to have a penetration rate of 30 percent in global markets by 2020 (Statista 2015). Netflix and HBO will undoubtedly lead to DVD’s and television box sets becoming redundant. What will remain is the ability of audiences to consume large swathes of television content, violent or otherwise, on demand. It should be remembered however that violence on television and in film has a long history (Kendrick 2009; Prince 2000; McCaughey & King 2001). It is its digital production and distribution that has a much shorter history.

A central question in considering representations of violence on television or in film is the elusive one of what is it? Violent content in film and television is arguably subjective. There are social definitions of violence, for example, the World Health Organisation considers it the

…intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, mal-development or deprivation (Kug et al 2002: 5).

In cultural products like film and television, as well as in the news, sport, religion, literature, music and art, this definition proves meaningless. ‘Media violence’, for Anderson and Bushman (2001) is considered to be any media-based content that depicts intentional attempts to harm in fictional and non-fictional content. However, this position doesn’t recognise the subjective nature of violence nor how representations of symbolic violence function
differently from representations of physical or emotional violence. Both definitions prove no more insightful than Signorielle etal’s (1995) claim that violence is like obscenity. We recognise it when we see it but it is difficult to define and elusive when applying, especially to film and television. While themselves unable to define what constitutes violence on television, in 1976 the American Medical Association resolved that television violence threatened the health and welfare of young Americans and encouraged opposition to violent television content. A similar stand was taken by the American Academy of Paediatrics and the American Psychological Association (Centrewall 1992:3059).

A central issue in the debates about violence on television, apart from the subjective nature of violence, is to understand why audiences watch violent television. In order to provide some insight into this question, a macro-analysis of the series Dexter and a micro-analysis of one episode of Dexter, ‘Shrink Wrap’ (Episode 8, Season 1) is analysed using dispositional affect theory. This is overlayed with a re(working) of Linda Williams’ ‘body genre’ thesis. Firstly, is a brief discussion of Dexter and its critics.

**Viewing Dexter**

The narrative arc of Dexter is the identification, contact, and intimate killing of serial killers by ‘Dexter Morgan’ a forensically-trained blood spatter expert with the Miami Police Department. Nussbaum (2011) described Dexter in The New York Times as a show about ‘a serial killer who kills other serial killers’. The first series of Dexter averaged 6.4 million weekly viewers on cable (Kondolojy 2013). From 2007 an edited version was aired on CBS with an average audience of 8.1 million (Stelter 2008a). The edited version removed swearing and the ‘most visible moments of gore were truncated’ (Stelter 2008b). Nina Tassler, the President of CBS, said Dexter had been edited to ‘comply with the network’s standards’ (Stelter 2008b). All eight unedited seasons were streamed on Netflix from January
2014. Michael C. Hall won numerous awards for this portrayal of ‘Dexter’ (Ace Showbiz 2015). Of the 96 episodes produced, 123 characters were killed with 60 shown on camera. Showtime producer Robert Greenblatt considered *Dexter* as a ‘complex and fascinating look at serial killers’ that were often represented as ‘two dimensional’ (Greenblatt cited in Bozell 2006). A brief outline of the Pilot demonstrates the structure and central motifs of *Dexter*.

Family man and choir leader ‘Mike Donovan’ is a child killer. ‘Dexter’ uses intimate violence (a wire garrotte around his neck) to subdue him and take him to his pre-prepared ‘kill room’. ‘Dexter’ has arranged the bodies of ‘Donovan’s’ three child victims, which he has dug from their graves, demanding ‘Donovan’ look at his victims: ‘look at what you did…look or I will cut the eyelids right off your face’ (1:1). ‘Donovan’ begs, ‘I couldn’t help myself’. ‘Dexter’ replies: ‘trust me I definitely understand, see I can’t help myself either’…‘children I could never do that, not like you…I have standards’ (1:1). In this early *mise-en-scene* the reference to ‘standards’ posits a moral framing of ‘Dexter’.

With his naked victim strapped to a gurney secured with plastic, ‘Dexter’ slices ‘Donovan’s’ check with a scalpel. The blood he takes from the wound becomes a trophy. For ‘Dexter’ the world will become a ‘neater’ ‘happier’ and ‘better’ place without ‘Donovan’. Off screen ‘Dexter’ dismembers ‘Donovan’s’ body and places it into plastic garbage bags. On screen, in the Miami sunshine, ‘Dexter’ on his boat ‘Slice of Life’, dumps the plastic bags containing the body parts into the ocean. This, with some variation (notably the use of videos and photographs of the killers victims rather than the bodies), becomes the episodic arc for most of ‘Dexter’s’ kills over the next five seasons.

Each episode comes with a voiced-over internal narrative from ‘Dexter’, which reveals his inner serial-killer thoughts. Voice-overs are often associated with documentary television and film. Thanouli (2015:19) considers that used in fictional film and television, the device adds

We get to know ‘Dexter’ inside out, because we can hear his thoughts in a beautifully stylized, hard-boiled voice-over out of a 1940s movie: “Another beautiful day in Miami”, he says with typically dry humour; “mutilated corpses with a chance of afternoon showers”.

What is occurring here is focalization. Focalization considers how a text is a ‘hierarchical series of levels of narration’ (Branigan 1992:87). Narration is the ‘regulation and distribution of knowledge which determines when and how a reader acquires knowledge from a text’ (Branigan 1992:106). Focalization applied to the text of *Dexter* would see audiences ‘read’ ‘Dexter’ as the agent they see, act, do, move and speak. ‘Dexter’ is also the external focalizer giving audiences the information that only the character and audience share. This occurs in the sequences when ‘Dexter’ is stalking and verifying the ‘guilt’ of his next victim. Internal surface focalization also occurs when audiences ‘see’ through ‘Dexter’s’ eyes, for example when ‘Dexter’ engages in subterfuge to hide his killing. Internal depth focalization is when audiences ‘see/hear’ what is in ‘Dexter’s’ mind, for example, “mutilated corpses with a chance of afternoon showers”.

Tracing the narrative agency in *Dexter* is ‘understanding who tells us what and in what way’ which ‘determine[s] considerably the direction that our assumptions and inferences will take’ (Thanouli 2015:26). If we are to answer the question about why audiences watch *Dexter* understanding narrative agency is useful. Narrative agency plays a role in managing, or at least suggesting, a preferred reading and therefore is informative in uncovering how an audience can watch violence especially when it is framed dispositionally.
Brown and Stacey (2010:219) describe the ‘kill room’ as the ‘narrative space’ within which ‘the murder is the culmination of the performance’. The ‘performance’ is highly stylised and masculinised in terms of ‘Dexter’s’ costuming and body position, often straddling his victims while engaging in intimate conversation. As Johnson (2012:81) puts it ‘Dexter’ develops an ‘intimate relationships with his victims, stripping them, physically containing them, demanding that they look at him and at images of those they have murdered’. Focalization allows for audiences to understand why ‘Dexter’ is killing. Focalization acts in concert with motifs which are the visual signals which contain the violence. That is, the appearance of the plastic sheeted ‘kill room’ signals to audiences the start of violence and the garbage bags being thrown in the ocean signals the end of the violence. Plastic is used to tie down the victims, contain the blood within ‘kill room’, and used to dispose of the dismembered bodies. Plastic is one motif of *Dexter*, the other is blood.

Blood as a motif is a highly resonant visual element of the series that Karpovich (2010:31) observes with reference to the vivid red splash of its title as part of its ‘defining graphic identity’. As Green (2012:283) notes, ‘Blood is ‘Dexter’s’ reason for being, his professional medium, the fluid object of his desire, and the evidence of the unbounded body through which he constantly seeks restitution’. As ‘Dexter’ himself says, ‘Blood is my life’ (2:1). On their own neither blood or plastic posits graphic violence, digital or otherwise, but combined the two motifs ‘forces its audience to confront the experience of amusement and pleasure in watching orchestrated death and the unreal horror of bodies in disarray’ (Green 2012:586). It is the anticipation that these motifs signal that propel each episode. As motifs they are a ‘cultural dictionary’ that scaffolds an emotional response or affect for audiences (Thanouli 2015:9). Again, as Green notes,
Through a tidy display of body horror, lightly veiled by plastic-wrapped suburban romance, the series turns its audience on to the troubling stimulants of blood, death, and dismemberment while simultaneously alluding to its own narrative and ethical contradictions. Dexter’s reflexive performance of serial killer body technique thus encapsulates a tension between form and content as ambivalent and eroticized desire; both for heroic transgression and narrative resolution (Green 2012: 580).

Plastic and blood function as enticement for audiences to watch the numerous spectacles of violence evident in *Dexter*. But it is argued that it is how ‘Dexter’ is framed which provides insight into audience engagement with *Dexter*. By narrating ‘Dexter’ as bound by a complex moral code grounded in vigilante justice, audiences are given dispositional frames which allow them to legitimise his actions, and hence legitimise their engagement with the series. ‘Dexter’ is the product of his protective though disturbed Frankenstein-like adopted father ‘Harry’. Having rescued ‘Dexter’ from the scene of his mother’s brutal chainsaw murder (which we see in graphic flashbacks, another device used to ‘reveal’ and contribute to the audience scaffolding) as ‘Dexter’ grows ‘Harry’ recognises a ‘blood lust’ in ‘Dexter’. Reconciling that ‘Dexter’ will kill, ‘Harry’ (a police officer) develops a ‘Code’ that allows ‘Dexter’ to kill without being caught and instils in ‘Dexter’ a ethical view that his ‘victims’ are not innocent. It is in the ‘Code’ that a vigilante justice narrative is evident. The ‘Code’ is a core device that contributes significantly to audiences adopting an affective dispositional ‘reading’ of Dexter. It is in this narrative ‘space’ that one explanation for why audiences watch violent television can be found.

Arellano (2015:136) considers ‘Dexter’ as a vigilante hero because he ‘serially kills only other serial killers who have successfully evaded the law’ and have ‘done horrible things to innocent people’. Episodes reveal to audiences that the murderer of ‘Harry’s’ police partner evades punishment and the murderers of ‘Dexter’s’ mother are never arrested. The lack of justice contributes to ‘Harry’s’ empowerment of ‘Dexter’ to kill. As such, ‘Dexter’ is positioned as an ‘honourable murderer’ (Green 2012:279). Violence, particularly within
disposition theory, is accepted by audiences if it is done for ‘just’ reasons (Lachlan & Tamborini 2008; Jalava et al. 2015; Defife 2010). This frame is strengthened with the juxtapositioning of the Gothic ‘monster’. ‘Harry’s’ ‘Code’ embeds in ‘Dexter’ a view that his acts are monstrous and need to be hidden. As ‘Dexter’ says: ‘Everyone hides who they are some of the time’ (4:1). As his ‘father’s creature, a living being formed from the shards of the dead’ (Howard 2010:63) ‘Dexter’s’ agency is removed. Consolidated with the use of a reflexive inner narrative, multi-level focalization, and visual flashbacks, a dispositional reading of Dexter is possible. But it also perhaps the way Dexter appeared to justify violence that saw the series publically criticised.

**Dexter’s Critics**

Common Sense Media, an American-based parental advocacy organisation, considered the series as ‘extremely dark and violent’ with ‘graphic close-ups of severed arms, legs, and heads’ and ‘bloody visuals’ coupled with ‘psychological mayhem that comes with taking a peek inside the twisted mind of a killer’ (Croop 2015). Dexter’s most prominent critic however was the American Parents’ Television Council (PTC) which issued a warning against the show considering it ‘graphically violent, sexually explicit and profanity-laden’. The PTC was also critical of CBS and their decision to air the ‘graphic drama’ and claimed that CBS ‘ignored its responsibility as a broadcaster to use the publicly-owned airwaves in the public interest’ (Winton 2008a). The PTC publically called on CBS to cancel the program saying the series ‘compels viewers to empathize with a serial killer, to root for him to prevail, to hope he doesn’t get discovered’. PTC President Tim Winton argued Dexter ‘introduces audiences to the depths of depravity and indifference’ while ‘celebrating graphic, premeditated murder’ (Winton 2008b).
Variety’s Brian Lowry (2006) said of Dexter, ‘Showtime has reminded us how antics of the deranged, even when constructively channelled into vigilante justice, aren’t really all that pleasant to watch’. The Wall Street Journal described the ‘grotesqueries of Dexter’ as ‘not something that can easily be dismissed (Dewolf Smith 2006). The LA Weekly pronounced Dexter as ‘fashionable gore’ (Abele 2006). Kelly (2008) put it that ‘some critics are offended’ by a program in which the ‘lead character and hero is a remorseless and amoral killer’. But Kelly defended the series’ cable airing as ‘adult-orientated programming’ on a platform that is not ‘hamstrung by strict rules’ regarding ‘language, violence, sex, drug use’ (Kelly 2008). To date, this macro-discussion has considered the broad themes embedded in Dexter and suggested that ‘Dexter’ is framed in ways which provide audiences with scaffolding that posits a dispositional reading of the text as justifiable violence. The following explores this position further in a micro-analysis of one episode ‘Shrink Wrap’ (1:8). The aim is to more fully conceptualise how an affective dispositional ‘reading’ of Dexter is made possible for audiences allowing them to watch, and even enjoy, violent television.

**Dexter’s Shrink Wrap**

‘Shrink Wrap’ (1:8) was the most watched episode of season one (Nicholson 2007). This micro-analysis has several aims. Apart from demonstrating how the ‘conceptual scaffolding’ (Thanouli 2015:6) of Dexter functions in terms of its episodic layering of violence, it seeks to distinguish representations of physical and symbolic violence. Physical violence is examined in terms of the violence ‘Dexter’ does to the bodies of his victims. This is juxtaposed with the violence done to the bodies of victims that ‘Dexter’ investigates as a forensic scientist. In this particular episode, the killer of three women ‘Dexter’ investigates becomes the victim of ‘Dexter’ the serial killer. Aspects of symbolic violence are also considered. Symbolic violence is represented by the violence done to ‘Dexter’ as a result of him witnessing his mother’s murder and the attributes of the ‘Code’ ascribed onto ‘Dexter’ by his father.
Symbolic and physical violence is also considered in relation to gender and power. In this, and subsequent episodes, women are framed as the recipients of both types of violence. The three central female characters: ‘Deb’ (‘Dexter’s adoptive sister and a junior police detective); ‘Rita’ (‘Dexter’s girlfriend and domestic violence survivor); and ‘LaGuerta’ (‘Dexter’s Cuban-American police boss) are positioned as all being subjected to symbolic and physical violence.

Torches shine light on the blood covered bathroom walls of a female victim. Jokes are exchanged between police officer ‘Angel Batista’ and ‘Dexter’ about what the blood splatter represents: ‘clowns dancing’ or ‘lobster claws’. This camera pans down to a naked women in a bath of bloodied water, mouth agape, and the camera settles on a gun on the bath ledge. An exposed breast forms the background of the shot. ‘Angel’ determines it a suicide. ‘Dexter’ suggests women don’t tend to commit suicide with guns. Discussion moves to the luxurious nature of the bathroom fittings positing that the woman is wealthy. We discover she is a lawyer and her husband is an artist that she financially supports. One of his pieces of art takes up the next shot: a large abstract piece of red gelatinous sculpture. The husband is interviewed in a blood-soaked shirt. Within this mise-en-scene ‘Dexter’ is happily taking crime scene photographs. The music is light and the scenes are bathed in whiteness, which accentuates the previous scenes of darkness and bloodied walls and water and the visceral sculpture. These are the opening scenes of ‘Shrink Wrap’. This episode contains representations of physical violence, as noted in the opening scenes. Light and humour are used to downplay the graphic nature of the scene. But the blood soaked walls, the nakedness and expression of the female victim in the blood soaked bath and the camera resting on the gun, denote an act of violence has occurred. Gendered aspects are immediately at play. The violence is done to a woman. There is discussion about women’s preferred methods of
suicide (pills rather than a gun) and the husband is questioned as a possible suspect. The women in nude but at least there is a context for her nudity (she is in the bath).

At play in this episode is the convention used in other episodes of *Dexter*. Generally there are three ‘crimes’ operating concurrently in any one episode: the ‘crime of the week’ being investigated by the police; the crimes perpetuated by ‘Dexter’ the serial killer which are episodically resolved; and the police investigation of the crimes conducted by other serial killers, who become ‘Dexter’s’ victims. The latter tends to run over a whole series. ‘Dexter’ is narratively and physically linked to each of the three parallel crimes that occur in the episodic arc of the series as: the forensic scientist attending the police scene; as a serial killer himself; and hunting the other ‘serial killer’ in order to understand their motivations and to kill them.

The ‘crime of the week’ in ‘Shrink Wrap’ is that of the successful lawyer found in her bath. Audiences recognise this case will be episodically resolved. At this level *Dexter* operates within the conventions of the police-crime genre. A difference in this episode is that ‘Dexter’ will be responsible for the death of the murderer. This creates resolution of the episode but also provides another ‘kill’ in which ‘Dexter’s’ justification for violence can be explained. The ‘crime of the week’ usually involves ‘Deb’, ‘LaGuerta’ and ‘Dexter’ as the blood splatter analyst. The other forensic-police characters are men represented as Asian, African-American, Latino, and White. The police and legal hierarchy are White men. The ‘crime of the week’ involves ‘Dexter’ examining a bloodied body or body parts paying little or no attention to the corpse. Rather his focus is on the blood splatter of the crime. ‘Dexter’ offers insight into the likely cause of the death and provides a profile of the killer and his/her methods.
The overarching storyline of Season One is that of the serial killer named the ‘Ice Truck Killer’ (ITK). He murders prostitutes, drains their blood, dissect them, and leave their bodies in public places; a motel swimming pool and an ice hockey rink. His other victim is ‘Tony Tucci’ a security guard at the ice hockey rink who disturbs the ITK while disposing of the body parts of the prostitute ‘Cherry’. While audiences don’t seen the murders committed by the ITK, the bloodless body parts are shown extensively. They are presented to ‘Dexter’ in the form of presents left in his apartment by the ITK. To symbolise the crimes a ‘Barbie doll’ is left in pieces in ‘Dexter’s’ freezer with ribbons tied on the various dismembered toy parts. ‘Dexter’ sees it as an opportunity to ‘play’ with the serial killer. He resorts to Craigslist and posts messages to ‘Ken’ from ‘Barbie’ with references to coldness (an ice truck is thought to be the place the bodies are frozen to help in draining blood).

The audience is not shown what happens to victim ‘Tony Tucci’, originally suspected of being the killer. Latter thought to have been murdered by the ITK because ‘Tony’ witnessed his placement of the body parts on the ice, ‘Dexter’ investigates a series of body parts that turn up in locations associated with his childhood. An arm and a foot are located and believed to be those of ‘Tony’. The arc is resolved when ‘Dexter’ finds ‘Tony’ strapped to a gurney in a rat-filled room, with his hand and foot severed. This image is shown to audiences. The ITK takes a Polaroid photo of ‘Dexter’ standing over ‘Tony’ and leaves it for ‘Dexter’ to find. ‘Dexter’ assumes that the killer wants ‘Dexter’ to kill ‘Tony’. Here is the realisation that ‘Dexter’ is known to be a killer to someone else. This unnerves ‘Dexter’ though he assumes it is because the killer has been stalking him and has spent time in his apartment looking at his childhood photos and his trophies of blood slides. Childhood memories shown in flashbacks and photographs are used extensively in this episode.
The third parallel crime that episodically occurs in *Dexter* is that of ‘Dexter’s’ own killing. In the case of ‘Shrink Wrap’, ‘Dexter’ identifies the murderer of the victim in the bath and two other women as their psychiatrist, ‘Emmett’, and sets about to fulfil his burden of proof that he is the killer. Here as with other episodes, audiences (via ‘Dexter’s’ voiced-over narrative) are given insight into the functioning and operation of the ‘Code’. It acts in each episode as the ‘standard of proof for himself, and by extension, for viewers’ to justify ‘Dexter’s’ killing (Arellano 2015:136). As ‘Dexter’ says in order to kill: ‘he must be sure’ (3:1); and he likes to be ‘right’ (5:1). As in other episodes, ‘Dexter’ uses police databases to ‘investigate’ possible killers that have evaded capture. In ‘Shrink Wrap’ ‘Dexter’ accesses digital police photographs of two other powerful women suspected of committing suicide with a gun. The photographs show the two women’s bloodied and naked bodies. Each of the three women sought help from ‘Emmett’ for depression. ‘Dexter’ makes an appointment to see ‘Emmett’ under a false name ‘Sean’ on the pretext that a female friend committed suicide. ‘Emmet’ tells ‘Dexter’: ‘To some people death makes perfect sense. Life that's the puzzle’. Asked who ‘Dexter’ is closest to, he says his ‘father’ who he did ‘normal father and son stuff’ with.

Here is the first of the flashbacks (a device to show the backstory of ‘Dexter’s’ childhood and how the ‘Code’ developed). In this flashback we see ‘Harry’ attacked in his kitchen by a masked man who restrains him from behind with a rope around his neck, choking him into submission. ‘Harry’ is released from the grip and the attacker takes off his mask revealing it to be a teenage ‘Dexter’. He asks if his father is all right. Harry coughing replies he is fine and that it was a ‘Nice ambush. The perfect point of attack’. ‘Young Dexter’ is elated as his efforts saying ‘I won’. ‘Harry’ admonishes him, ‘This isn’t a game Dexter’. Harry tells the young ‘Dexter’: do you really think I want to ‘teach you these things. This is the only way I know how to keep you out of an electric chair. This is about survival Dex’. Flashbacks, as with the internal narrative, are only shared with the audience.
Convinced ‘Emmett’ is the killer, ‘Dexter’ turns the conversation to one about ‘fakes’. The point of this dialogue is twofold. Firstly, we know that ‘Dexter’ as the blood spatter analyst sees himself ‘faking’ his way through life, the only time he feels ‘real’ is when he is killing. Secondly, ‘Dexter’ is driven to understand his ‘dark side’. This is why he intimately engages in dialogue with his victims. ‘Dexter’ the serial killer is self-reflexive. ‘Dexter’ increasingly believes that ‘Emmett’ is the killer and that he should be killed by ‘Dexter’ having satisfied his ‘Code’ of ‘Emmett’s’ guilt and evasion of police detection. The use of the internal narrative layered within the normative dialogue structure is demonstrated in the following:

Emmett: …you accept the fact that we all have a big bad wolf hiding inside of us. The darkness we don’t want anyone else to see…

Dexter: Well, how do you deal with your own wolf?

Emmett: Well, first of all, I accept that it was there. I made friends with it. And I just let it out for a big meal, once in a while.

Dexter: [Voiceover] At least three times, that we know about.

The second flashback occurs while ‘Dexter’ is at another session with ‘Emmett’. This time it is to provide audiences with ‘Dexter’s’ memory of his mother. Until this point there has been no dispositional narrative that explains the reasons for his adoption.

Emmett: Well, there must have been a time in your life when you felt powerless, right? Foster child, no control over your destiny. If we can bring some of those memories to the surface, we might find the root of your ‘control issues’. First I want you to close your eyes and focus on your breathing…

Dexter: [voiceover] This is ridiculous. I could be killing him right now.

Introduced in previous episodes was ‘Rudy Cooper’ a prosthetic doctor that assisted ‘Tony Tucci’ when his foot and hand amputated by the ITK. ‘Rudy’ and ‘Deb’ start an intimate relationship. Also occurring in this episode is ‘La Guerta’ revealing her doubts about the earlier arrest of ‘Neil Perry’ as the ITK. ‘Dexter’ has determined ‘Neil’ wasn’t the ITK in the
previous episode. ‘Dexter’ considers ‘Neil’ as a ‘pretender’. Fear emerges in ‘Dexter’ at the thought that ‘Neil’ will become the ‘fall guy’ for the real killer who will ‘disappear’. This would deprive ‘Dexter’ of an opportunity to learn about himself from another serial killer and kill another serial killer. ‘LaGuerta’, in accepting that ‘Neil’ is not the killer but needing him to recant his confession, produces a severed head in a plastic bag and dramatically waves it in ‘Neil’s’ face. He recoils from it and off-screen recants his confession. ‘LaGuerta’ reports this to the Police Captain and the District Attorney. They override her opinion that he is not the killer and decide to go to trial instead. ‘Deb’ is marginalised from the investigation of the bathtub victim and struggles with her fears of intimacy. ‘Deb’ and ‘LaGuerta’ are both framed as lacking agency and power, forms of symbolic violence. The bathtub victim and the two other victims of ‘Emmett’ (who ‘Dexter’ refers to as the ‘Suicide Sisters’) are victims of both physical and symbolic violence. Physical violence refers to their brutal murders and symbolic violence can be ‘read’ as the deceit inflicted on them by their doctor.

**Body Genre Violence**

Violence, as noted, can be symbolic as well as physical. Linda Williams’ (1991) work on the ‘body genre’ seeks to unmask female victimisation in violent cultural representations. Williams’ posits that there exists in screen horror a ‘body genre’. Spectacles of violence generate bodily reactions within audiences. The more spectacular the violence, the more audiences experience bodily responses. The ‘body genre’ as: pornography (an erection); horror (palatable fear); or melodrama (tears, grief, melancholy) are all measureable biological functions. Williams argues that because there is a bodily reaction it affects audiences’ disposition to violent entertainment. Williams (1991: 6) offers fetishism, voyeurism, sadism, and masochism as spectacles of pleasure, fear and emotional pain that denote the ‘body genre’. A central aim of Williams work is to examine the male gaze on the female body in ways which posit female disempowerment and male agency. Similar arguments can be found
in the works of Judith Butler (1993) and Elizabeth Grosz (1994) and their feminist deconstructions of body and gender discourses.

In this re(working) of Williams’ ‘body genre’, female victimisation exists in *Dexter*. This discussion seeks to consider how the ‘body genre’ thesis can demonstrate that when violence is framed dispositionally it can generate an emotional affect on audiences. Dispositional violence can be framed as symbolic violence done against a person in gesture, speech, or an act such as discrimination or marginalisation, as well as physical violence. The argument is that if violent spectacle can create a *bodily* reaction in audiences when violence is framed dispositionally it can also create an *emotional* reaction in audiences. Generating an emotional affect will impact on how an audience ‘reads’ a text. Hence, both symbolic and physical violence done to the television ‘body’, when framed dispositionally, can generate an emotional affect in the television audience.

Dispositional frames are those which include reflexive narratives and situational context which act as ‘conceptual scaffolding’ (Thanouli 2015:6) to consign meaning. The consigned meaning in this re(worked) ‘body genre’ thesis is the violence done to a body (male or female) can be accepted if a framework is provided that justifies the acts of violence. Vigilante justice, as represented in the ‘Code’ acts to consign a ‘conceptual scaffold’ for audience to understand and justify ‘Dexter’s’ acts of violence. More so, there exists a second layer of ‘conceptual scaffolding’ that occurs in *Dexter* which dispositionally frames the violence done to ‘Dexter’.

Hence, dispositional framing creates audience affect that provides a framework to accept, watch, engage with, and even enjoy, ‘Dexter’s’ acts of violence because his ‘victims’ are not innocent *and* because he was himself exposed to physical and symbolic violence. As a child ‘Dexter’ is exposed to the physicality of his mother’s murder and as a young adult is exposed
to the symbolic violence perpetuated by ‘Harry’ and his ‘Code’. Because the ‘Code’ removes ‘Dexter’s’ agency, he himself is a victim. Disposition theory arguably provides one framework to understand how and why audiences watch violent television.

**Affective Disposition theory**

Affective disposition theory examines how ‘viewer-character’ relationships affect enjoyment of a viewing experience’ (Sanders 2010:150). How the enjoyment of television is a function of a ‘viewers emotional connection with characters and with the narrative outcomes associated with those characters’ is a core aim of disposition theory (Raney 2011:18). As with Raney (2011, 2004), Lachlan and Tamborini (2008:150) found that ‘once a dispositional frame is established, audiences will evaluate the morality of a character’s behaviour in line with these existing beliefs and not based purely on conditions leading to the act’.

The central claim of disposition theory is that audiences make moral judgements. The more the viewer determines the motivations of a character to be morally correct the more positive the disposition they have for that character. If the viewer determines the actions to be morally incorrect, negative disposition is formed. Without moral and emotional ‘empathy’ (Tangney, Stuewig & Mashek, 2007:362) audiences will resist, and likely disengage. When audiences do activate a moral emotional empathy for characters, they will ‘identify with their struggles, empathise with their pain, and hope for their ultimate success’ (Raney 2011:19). Sanders’ (2010:151) puts it that ‘viewers’ actively ‘evaluate the characters’ and ‘their behaviours’ in context with the ‘justice sequence’ to come to a set of evaluations about the ‘dimensions of morality’ at play. Disposition theory can offer some insights into understanding why audiences ‘cheer’ for the ‘bad guy’.
Lachlan and Tamborini (2008:139) drawing on Zillmann’s (2000) ‘moral-sanction’ theory and Raney and Bryant’s (2002) ‘moral judgement’ model argue that audiences accept representations of violence if the ‘extent of the violence meets some level considered appropriate given the events that surround the act’ (Lachlan & Tamborini 2008:13). The ‘moral-sanction’ and ‘moral-judgement’ arguments embedded in disposition theory suggest audiences will accept visual representations of violence as long as they are perceived as being ‘just’. As such ‘moral judgement plays a role in the enjoyment of observed violence and in attitudes toward perpetrators’ (Lachlan & Tamborini 2008:139-140).

Narratives to elicit positive disposition towards the perpetuators of violence are central in this ‘reading’ of Dexter. Appelbaum (2013: 128) argues that ‘the rhythm of the narrative is tied to a rhythm of the text [and] the moral meaning of violence is tied to the emotional orchestration of the violence’. One way of examining the dispositional relationship between narratives, text and violence, is Raney and Bryant’s (2002:404) ‘justice sequence’. Multiple narratives need to be presented violence is framed as retribution in order for a ‘justice sequence’ to emerge and be understood by audiences. An act of violence, framed as retribution in multiple ‘justice sequences’, is considered morally acceptable because it is dispositionally sanctioned (Lachlan & Tamborini 2008:136). Disposition theory therefore suggests that audiences consider television or film violence acceptable when there is a moral reason for it (Weaver & Wilson 2009:444-445; Raney 2004; Raney & Bryant 2002; Zillmann & Bryant 1975). Characters that engage in representations of violence, when attributed with ‘moral purpose’, allows audiences to rationalise violence as acting to ‘overcome an obstacle’ meaning the violence, and the watching of it, is justified (Sanders 2010:159).

The limitation of dispositional theory is in its understanding of how audiences arrive at decisions about what is a ‘just’ or ‘unjust’ or a ‘moral’ or ‘immoral’ act of violence. However, Raney (2011:19) suggests gender of the character, their attractiveness, the plot,
dialogue, genre and viewer mood influence the emotional connections people have with characters and narratives. While that may be the case, disposition theory posits ‘moral considerations are central to the process of character liking’ (Raney 2011:19). As Goldstein argues ‘violent entertainment seems to be most attractive when it contains an engaging fantasy theme in which disliked characters are defeated by liked characters in the cause of justice’ (1998:4).

Kilbourne (1994) argues that ‘depictions of violence in any culture are never simply depictions of a physical act’. The ‘stories we tell about violence are always moral tales and lessons. Stories of violence tell us about who can get away with committing violence, who deserves it, and who must suffer’. This could have been written about Dexter. The emotional connection with characters in film and television arguably comes from the situational context they are placed in. At its simplest framing ‘good’ versus ‘evil’ acts to ‘scaffold’ how a text can be ‘read’ by the audience. In the case of Dexter, while engaging in ‘evil’ there is a moral justification for ‘Dexter’s’ acts of violence: namely his childhood and the ‘Code’. ‘Dexter’s’ morality is affectively evaluated by his character rather than actions. Further scaffolding this ‘reading’ a doppelganger device arguably allows audiences to separate the violent actions of serial killer ‘Dexter’ and forensic scientist ‘Dexter’.

Disposition theory asserts that audiences make ‘moral judgements’ about characters. If the motivations of the character are ‘read’ as ‘morally correct’ then a positive disposition is evident, resulting in continued engagement. When audiences ‘read’ actions as ‘morally incorrect’, negative disposition can result. This leads to audience disengagement. As Tangney et al (2007:362) argue ‘without moral and emotional empathy’ for characters audiences will not accept violence, either in its symbolic or physical form. It is this that ‘vigilantly justice’ frameworks are engaging with in Dexter. Violence is ‘morally acceptable’ for audiences if the ‘conceptual scaffolding’ has revealed reasons for the acts (Weaver & Wilson 2009:444-20
Dispositional theory while embedded in the narrative form also considers stylisation and its impact on audiences. Stylistically *Dexter* has been described as

> It's not a stretch to imagine the crime scenes in *Dexter* as a Vanity Fair photo spread. This fiendishly excellent...series turns blood spatter into a pop art form, like Jackson Pollock meets Annie Leibovitz. Always framed by pristine white walls, the carefully displayed gore has the cool, sterile feel of an AIDS-era still life (Gilbert 2006).

Goldstein (1998:4) agrees that violent entertainment can be attractive. Stylisation and visual motifs coupled with the narrative devices and contextual framing posit the success of *Dexter* in dispositionally framing violence. In its arc of the ‘spectacle kill’, the catching of a murderer, and a mystery solved, audiences can be relieved, claims Green (2012:583). There is a ‘momentarily restor[ation] of the social order, albeit a trifle bloodstained, providing viewers with that tidy feeling of having wiped down the benches and taken out the trash’.

**Conclusion**

In this micro-analysis of ‘Shrink Wrap’ and macro-analysis of *Dexter*, violence is evident on a number of levels and is worthy of ongoing discussion. The violence of *Dexter* can be examined in terms of the violence ‘Dexter’ does *to* his ‘victims’. This is counter-posed with the violence done *by* his ‘victims’ to ‘innocents’ and the violence done *to* the young ‘Dexter’. In *doing* violence *to* bodies in the ‘kill room’ scenes the ‘other’ gothic-inspired ‘Dexter’ comes to the fore. The ‘monster’ is placed in the situational and narrative contexts of the ‘kill room’ and sits in opposition to the ‘Dexter’ the forensic scientist. The binary device of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ dispositionally shapes a context for not only ‘Dexter’s’ acts of violence but the violence done *to* ‘Dexter’. With the doppelganger ‘Dexter’ appearing in each episode, and given the more than 5000 minutes of production, the moral justification for ‘Dexter’s’ violence is added to over time in a continuous process (Sanders 2010:162).
This is particularly salient in the second juxtapositioning of violence, that is, the violence done to ‘Dexter’ and the denial of his agency because of the ‘Code’. Violence is also done to other ‘bodies’ in Dexter. Women are mostly the victims of violent crimes committed by ‘Dexter’s’ prey. Women victims feature in ‘Shrink Wrap’. However there are other forms of symbolic violence that occur. In both ‘Shrink Wrap’ and numerous other episodes each of the three other lead characters, ‘Deb’, ‘LaGuerta’, and ‘Rita’ are all disempowered and also denied agency. By the end of the series all three characters are murdered.

As a broad canvas to consider how violence is represented on television, the aim has been to consider more deeply the subjective nature of, and varying schemata, of violence. This was done to provide a backdrop to the central question of why audiences watch violence on television. The discussion has taken the view that dispositional framing, internal narratives, focalization, flashback, fantasy, situational context and stylisation can act in concert to provide ‘meaningful’ representations of violence. They are ‘meaningful’ in the sense that audiences engage with the moral narratives embedded within them. While public concern was evident in relation to the frequency and portrayal of intimate graphic violence in Dexter, notably by the American Parent Television Council, this paper concludes that the series framed the violence in such ways that debates about violence on television could be more meaningfully considered.

Violence, as already noted, is subjective. Violence can’t be determined by the frequency of bodies, the amount of blood or gore, or even the graphic nature of isolated violent acts. Quantitative studies of television violence in terms of frequency of violence or measurements of codified evidence of violence (the amount of blood or body parts, for example) lack or ignore the context for violence. Qualitative analysis, as this paper has adopted, suggests a more productive approach to understanding not only why violence remains a feature of popular culture, but provides a context to examine violence in a broader socio-political and
gendered context. This approach also allows for a clearer understanding of why violent content is consumed.

Demonstrating the value of qualitative analysis in understanding representations of violence in popular culture is that violence can be examined as symbolic as well as physical. Symbolic violence is that which denies agency in acts of speech and gesture and is generally gendered and racial. The latter was particularly evident in Dexter and arguably deserves further analyses. Further, reminders of violence as more than acts of physicality offer the opportunity for more nuanced debates about violence in the media.

WORKS CITED