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Viewing Body Violence on New Television: A Sociological Analysis of Dexter

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Abstract:
Industrial changes in how television is produced and distributed have had an impact on television content in recent years. A raft of television programs referred to as ‘new’ television is increasingly violent in content and popular in consumption, Game of Thrones being a point. While violence is not new on television, it does appear to be increasingly graphic and frequent. This paper seeks to understand how violence in ‘new’ television is represented and framed in ways that enable and encourage audience engagement with violent content. A quantitative analyse of Dexter (Showtime 2006-2013) on a macro and micro level suggests that dispositional devices, including focalisation and the use of justice narratives act to represent and frame physical and symbolic violence in ways which are allow audiences to justify acts of violence if they are done for moral
This paper argues that audiences will watch television violence if it is conceptually scaffolded in ways which posit acts of body violence as being morally sanctioned. This is evident if the violence enacted against bodies is physical or symbolic violence. Beginning with body genre violence, dispositional and affect theory as well as moral-sanction and moral-judgement narratives and frames, this article seeks to understand why we watch and appear to enjoy representations of physical and symbolic body violence on television. Arguably how we rationalize acts of fictional violence has consequences for how audiences judge acts of real violence occurring in society.
Main Body Article

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-), *Vikings* (History Channel 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, Vikings*) 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*.

Driving the spectacular and visceral body violence evident in ‘new’ television (Coghlan 2016) are changes in both production and distribution. A brief overview of these institutional changes begins to unearth reasons for increasing representations of bodily violence. This review establishes some of the reasons for increased amounts of bodily violence however on their own they don’t explain why audiences not only watch, but appear to enjoy, watching increasingly violent television.

Historically network television production relied on small budgets, formulae writing, and sound stage shooting and was aired to suit advertiser demands. The aim 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 in digital production mean images are now compositied, morphed and animated to produce ‘what is not’ and ‘negate what is’ (Thanouli 2015: 60). For auteurs of in the post-broadcast era of ‘new’ television the endless possibilities of digital production mean filmatic scenes of mass violence are now possible (Lotz 2007; Coghlan 2015). Evident of this are the mass killing scenes depicted in *Vikings* and *Game of Thrones*.

Advancements in digital production, coupled with technological advancements in how television is distributed has seen media organizations such as HBO, Netflix and others take advantage of the technological possibilities of both digitalization and Internet streaming. With less restrictions on content, ‘new’ television was well-positioned to produce television content that would brand their networks in an increasingly crowded cable landscape. Recognizing this, and marketing their channels to advertisers with demographically-unique audiences, the non-network channels began commissioning original scripts. The success of HBO’s *Oz* (1997-2003), *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) and *The Wire* (2002-2008) and Netflix’s (*House of Cards* 2013-) posited a period of ‘new’ television.

Traditional networks recognised the shift though, in the case of *Dexter*, they still had to operate within the traditional confines of what could be shown on free-to-air television. For Sepinwall (2013: 5) the cable providers took advantage of the ‘perfect technological time’. With advances in both DVD technology, the marketing of box sets and now Internet streaming services (which are not subjected to copyright download restrictions), cable providers seeking to attract premium subscriptions produced more cutting-edge content, mostly violent content, to mark them as different to free-to-air television. Recognizing this, broadcast networks increasing free from government regulation and changing social and cultural tastes, began producing more original, and violent content. With network television recognizing 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) recognizes that cable providers combatted this by making their programs even more violent.

Changes in production values and the means of distribution means that audiences have the ability to consume large swathes of television content, violent or otherwise, on demand. There is a long history of representations of violence on both television and in film (Kendrick 2009; Prince 2000; McCaughey & King 2001). This quantitative analysis of *Dexter*, the aim is not to debate the issues of violent content on television, rather the aim is to understand how ‘new’ television programs, such as *Dexter*, are representing and framing body violence in ways rationalise and institutionalize acts of body violence.

A central question in considering representations and frames of violence on television is the elusive one of what it is? Violent content is arguably subjective. There are social definitions of violence, for example, the World Health Organization 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 result in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, mal-development or deprivation (World Health Organization 2002: 5).

In cultural products like 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. This position doesn’t recognize the subjective nature of violence nor how representations and frames of symbolic violence function differently from representations of physical violence. Both definitions prove no more insightful than Signorielle et al.’s (1995) claim that violence is like obscenity: We recognize 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 sociological debates about violence on television, apart from the subjective nature of violence, is to understand why audiences watch violent television. To provide some insight into these question, a macro-analysis of the series *Dexter* and a micro-analysis of one episode of *Dexter*, ‘Shrink Wrap’ (Episode 8, Season 1) is analyzed using dispositional affect theory. This is overlayed with a Linda Williams’ ‘body genre’ thesis. Firstly, is a brief discussion of *Dexter*.

**Viewing Dexter**

The narrative arc of *Dexter* is the identification, contact, and intimate killing of serial killers by Dexter Morgan (Michael C. Hall) 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. 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, 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. 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’ (Greenblatt cited in Bozell 2006). Donnelly (2012), Byers (2012) and Coghlan (2016) argue that *Dexter*...
can be read through a sociological lens. Dexter is a middle class white educated man, not unlike Vic in *The Shield* or Walter in *Breaking Bad* that is increasing alienated in a fearful post 9/11 era and is further fracture by the ongoing demands of neoliberalism. As a result, these fractured men who are no longer the hegemonic dominant force, act violently against the ‘Other’. Acts of physical body violence in *Dexter* are perpetuated against deviant white men, Latino’s, African American’s and women. Before examining how *Dexter* uses representations and frames to engage audiences in Dexter’s murderous behaviour, a brief outline of the pilot episode demonstrates the structure and central motifs of *Dexter*. This is followed by a discussion that inform understandings about audience engagements with the visual body violence that is the hallmark of the series; beginning with the role of focalization.

**Structure and Motifs in 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’ (Season 1: Episode 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 killer’s 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 authenticity when presented as a ‘reflexive narrative’. The use of a reflexive narrative in *Dexter* contributes to the viewing schemata for audiences. Gilbert (2006, online) demonstrates its stylistic value.

> 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 humor; “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* 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 and hear what is in Dexter’s mind, for example, ‘mutilated corpses with a chance of afternoon showers’ (1:1).
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 and framing is useful. Regarding framing 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’. Donnelly (2012) and Vaage (2016) argues that by framing Dexter as a vigilante ‘new American hero’ accounts for audience engagement with the series and their tolerance of graphic body violence. 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 Abbott (2010: 219) describe the ‘kill room’ as the ‘narrative space’ within which ‘the murder is the culmination of the performance’. The ‘performance’ is highly stylized 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, and 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 body 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 an enticement for audiences to watch the numerous spectacles of body 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 legitimize his actions, and hence legitimize 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 audience scaffolding) as Dexter grows Harry recognizes 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 an 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.

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). Bodily 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’, Dexter is a ‘living being formed from the shards of the dead’ (Howard 2010: 63). Framed this way 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.
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 body 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 episode, the killer of three women that Dexter investigates becomes the victim of Dexter the serial killer. 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 are gendered and reflect aspects of institutional power. In this and subsequent episodes, women are framed as the recipients of both physical body violence and symbolic 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 all positioned as being subjected to symbolic and physical body violence.

‘Shrink Wrap’ begins with torches shining light on the blood covered bathroom walls of a female victim. Jokes are exchanged between police officer Angel and Dexter about what the blood splatter represents: ‘clowns dancing’ or ‘lobster claws’ (1:8). The camera pans down to a naked woman in a bath of bloodied water, mouth agape, and the camera settles on a gun resting 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. The 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’.

The episode contains representations of physical body violence, as noted in the opening scenes. Light and humor 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. The discussion is 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*. 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 recognize 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 the 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 and LaGuerta as the attending police officers 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 all 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 see the murders committed by the ITK, the bloodless female body parts are shown extensively. They are presented to Dexter in the form of presents left in his apartment by the ITK. To symbolize the crimes, a Barbie doll is left in pieces in Dexter’s freezer with ribbons tied on the various dismembered toy body 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. Later 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 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 realization 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 killings. 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 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 the 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 were amputated by the ITK. Rudy and Deb start an intimate relationship. Also occurring in this episode is the marginalization of LaGuerta when she reveals her doubts about the earlier arrest of Neil Perry as the ITK to the white, male police captain and district attorney. They override her opinion that he is not the killer and decide to go to trial instead. Deb is marginalized from the investigation of the bathtub victim. 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 and on Deb and LaGuerta as their marginalization.

**Body Genre Violence**

Violence is symbolic as well as physical. Linda Williams’ (1991) work on the body genre seeks to unmask victimization 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 measurable 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’ central aim of
Williams work. The aim of William’s thesis 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.

Williams’ body genre thesis is informative in understanding why audiences watch *Dexter*. It is informative in demonstrating how 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 marginalization, 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 engages with 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 body genre thesis is the violence done to a body 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 the audience to understand and justify Dexter’s acts of violence. Layered in the framing of Dexter’s vigilante justice is a trend in post 9/11 television of the need to draw distinctions between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ violence. Hence vigilante justice is embedded in series like *Dexter* and *The Shield* (Donnelly 2012). However, in *Dexter* there exists a further layer of conceptual scaffolding that occurs in *Dexter* which dispositionally frames the violence done to Dexter.
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 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 behavior 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 judgments. 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, a 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, empathize 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
behaviors’ in context with the ‘justice sequence’ to come to a set of evaluations about the ‘dimensions of morality’ at play. Disposition theory offers insights into understanding why audiences cheer for the villain.

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 judgment plays a role in the enjoyment of observed violence and in attitudes toward perpetrators’ (Lachlan & Tamborini 2008: 139-40).

Further examining the dispositional relationship between narratives, text, and violence, is Raney and Bryant’s (2002: 404) ‘justice sequence’ model. Multiple narratives need to be presented for violence as a ‘justice sequence’ to emerge and to 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 bodily violence acceptable when there is a moral reason for it (Weaver & Wilson 2009: 444-45; Raney 2004; Raney & Bryant 2002; Zillmann & Bryant 1975). Characters that engage in representations of violence, when attributed with ‘moral purpose’, allows audiences to rationalize 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 and Gerbner (1994, online) 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 understood 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.

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 body 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’ (Green 2012: 583).

**Conclusion**

In this micro-analysis of ‘Shrink Wrap’ and macro-analysis of *Dexter*, body and symbolic 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 innocent’ and the violence done to the young Dexter. In *doing violence* to bodies in the ‘kill room’ scenes the 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. 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 female 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. This analysis 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 insightful 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 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.
References


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