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READING/WRITING AUTOPSY: A DIRTY THEORY OF THE SCIENCE OF DEATH

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READING/WRITING AUTOPSY: A DIRTY THEORY OF THE SCIENCE OF DEATH[1]

ABSTRACT

The recent emergence of a sub-genre of television crime drama which centres on the work of forensic pathologists, positions the unruly iconography of the televisual autopsy in the foreground of the cultural imagination. There has been some academic interest in the commercial and televisual success of *CSI* (*Crime Scene Investigation*), its sibling shows and their British and Australian counterparts. Conventional readings suggest that these shows bring the science of forensic pathology into popular discourse and through that process reinforce the veracity of science and its ability to narrate, with a degree of moral authority, the 'truth' of death. This paper challenges the kind of ideological critique implicit to these analyses, and it does so through the lens of Brian Ott's (2007) recent exposition of dirty theory. Dirty theory proposes an approach to cultural analysis rooted in erotics, a perspective which enriches and supplements, rather than replaces or supersedes the hermeneutic and interpretative approaches of art, literary and ideological criticism. From the perspective of dirty theory, the televisual autopsy and related techniques of anatomical inspection provide an occasion for transgressive pleasure which undermines, albeit momentarily, (hegemonic) ideologies of science. The rather banal and nonchalant ways in which television pathologists respond to everything from severed heads to charred bones, raise a number of complex issues concerning the cultural logic of late modernity – a logic which, on the one hand, represents (dead) bodies as indifferent objects available for dispassionate, scientific analysis; and on the other, celebrates the grotesque body and its functionality as Other to perfection, rationality, order and discipline. This tension is routinely played out in the drama of televisual autopsy and the forensic

investigations associated with it; a critical reading of the UK television drama series, *Waking the Dead,* provides, then, an important starting point for thinking about a dirty theory of the science of death.

INTRODUCTION: THE ART AND SCIENCE OF ANATOMICAL DISPLAY

In 1995, Gunther von Hagens presented the first *Body Worlds* exhibition in Tokyo, Japan.[2] Centred on a range of exhibits of preserved human bodies and body parts, prepared through a technique of plastination, *Body Worlds* has become a highly successful travelling exhibition visiting, amongst other places, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, South Korea, Singapore, Canada, the USA and England. Jim Connor has commented that *Body Worlds* 'is probably the first "blockbuster" exhibition that the non-art-museum world is likely to encounter' (2007: 850). Some commentators have denounced the exhibition as 'Anatomy's *Full Monty*' (Bohannon, 2003: 1172), as 'shock art' and `Dr Frankenstein's exhibition' (Harris and Connolly, 2002). Others have denounced von Hagens as 'Josef Mengele' (Connor, 2007: 850) and the 'Disney of Death' (Bohannon, 2003: 1172). Much of the debate, in fact, has been quite predictable and centres on a questioning of the ethical, anatomical (scientific) and educational value of *Body Worlds* – see, for example, Jones, 2002; Moore and Brown, 2007; Walter, 2004. Of interest here is not so much whether these issues have been resolved once and for all, but on what grounds they might be settled. Penny Herschovitch, for example, remains generally impressed by *Body Worlds*' educational aspects, but she is highly condemnatory of its aestheticism. In *Science*, she writes '(the exhibit) speaks to an unsatiated, voyeuristic public fascination with body, immortality, and death' (2003: 828). Similarly, in a journalistic exchange of views, Daniel Foster praised the exhibition for its educational qualities, while Thomas Hibbs

complained that *Body Worlds* had only 'shock value' and amounted to a 'pornography of the dead human body' (Foster and Hibbs, 2006 cited in Moore and Brown, 2007: 232). In short, a judgement is being made on the aesthetic value of *Body Worlds*; the presence of any sense of visceral gratification renders *Body Worlds* culturally and ethically unacceptable, as both art *and* science, and positions it outwith the contours of possibility for the 'proper' form and content of anatomical display.

The notoriety and controversy surrounding *Body Worlds* suggests the continuing presence in (post-)modernity of a normative framework of sensibilities which structures how representations of anatomical techniques should be culturally encoded and experienced, with ethical obligations placed on both the producer and consumer of such representations. As far as *Body Worlds* is concerned, its ethicality relies on its perceived educational value or its potential contribution to the furtherance of anatomical knowledge and/or its promotion of a 'sense of human community' (Moore and Brown, 2007: 253). However, as long as human corpses are being displayed in standing, sitting, jumping, flying, cycling and chess-playing postures in a public exhibition, it will be charged with purveying entertainment rather than, or as well as enlightenment. Indeed, D.G Jones poses the question of whether 'they (the exhibits) take us beyond education and into entertainment, and even into highly dubious entertainment?' (2002: 439). Jones' question may be rhetorical but it does hint at the presence of an (imagined) boundary between `truth-seeking rational enquiry' and `ethico-political discourse' on the one hand, and the `libidinal-aesthetic' on the other (Eagleton, 1990; Norris, 1992). Put another way, it hints at the socio-cultural unacceptability of certain kinds of aesthetic dispositions, in this instance, towards the grotesque body. That is, particular ways in which we *might* engage with anatomical

display are ruled out as inappropriate and unthinkable because they are regarded as prurient, eroticised, voyeuristic, ghoulish and as motivated by a morbid curiosity rather than a healthy interest in the subject matter. In other words, our normative consumption of science as art, or conversely art as science, anticipates the cultivation of a contemplative attitude and an alignment with objective, detached and dispassionate analysis. By extension, this requires a suspension of visceral enjoyment and a distancing from an affective world of desire, excess and corporeal pleasures. This begs the question, then, of what could be learned from an exploration of the 'dreadful delights' of reading/writing cultural representations of anatomical practices. Moreover, how would such an exploration proceed epistemologically and methodologically; and what would it contribute to our understanding of not only the politico-ethical value of transgressive pleasures, but also the cultural logic of late modernity?

POSTMODERNITY AND THE GOTHIC IMAGINATION

There is nothing new, of course, about a Western culture of fascination with excessive Otherness, manifest in a Gothic imagination and its celebration of the macabre, the monstrous and the grotesque. As Fred Botting notes, though there may have been transformations in both the form and content of the Gothic (as a literary genre) over time, it nonetheless provides an enduring frame of reference and projects an aesthetics of excess which is immediately recognisable in Western societies (1996, see especially Chapters 7 and 8). With its 'tortuous tales of vice, corruption and depravity' (*ibid*: 7), metaphorical use of gloomy landscapes, swirling mists and dimly-lit interiors, the Gothic trope creates an atmosphere of mystery and a backdrop of desolation and horror within which extremes of pleasure and cruelty, in equal

measure, are displayed. The Gothic deals with 'fears of the forbidden and (the) repression of unauthorized urges' (Helyer, 2000: 726), and incites a range of ambivalent, affective dispositions which not only trigger analytical displacements about what it means to be human, but which also amplify deep-seated concerns and anxieties associated with a specific socio-political and historical moment. Gothic narratives invite us into a regressive and destabilising fantasy by blurring the boundaries of the known/unknown, order/chaos, mind/body, morality/immorality, past/present/future, sanity/madness and life/death. In the Gothic world, what is familiar, transparent and certain turns out to be strange, hidden and fallible; in short, things are never quite what they seem. This is very neatly summarised by Botting:

> In the twentieth century, in diverse and ambiguous ways, Gothic figures have continued to shadow the progress of modernity with counter-narratives displaying the underside of enlightenment and humanist values …. Gothic writing remains fascinated by objects and practices that are constructed as negative, irrational, immoral and fantastic. Gothic excesses … the fascination with transgression and the anxiety over cultural limits and boundaries, continue to produce ambivalent emotions and meanings in their tales of darkness, desire and power (1996: 1-2)

As a contemporary genre, Gothic continues to proliferate and reinvent its aesthetic forms and modalities such that Gothicism may be better thought of as organic, 'highly contingent and dialogical' (O'Rawe, 2003: 191), and as 'a set of discursive resources, a trampoline for creativity' (Stam, 2000: 129), rather than a fixed and static cultural paradigm. Some commentators have questioned the identification of Gothic with transgressive excess, noting that it can (and has) functioned conservatively at particular historical junctures (Watt, 1999). However, and notwithstanding historicist

critiques, I would argue that the Gothic imagination remains central to our cultural experience in modernity and late- (or post-)modernity. Such an imagination is not a psychic disorder, neither does it give rise to a prurient voyeurism nor an erotic scopophilia. Rather, a Gothic sensibility is grounded in the dynamics of social change and transformation, and is prompted by a range of fears and anxieties about the human condition which such transformation engenders. It is a sensibility which questions not solely the way things are, but also how things could be. Fascination with the human body in death, in this formula, has nothing to do with an unreflexive viscerality but is propelled by the very human need and propensity to make sense of a runaway social world in which the sacred has become the profane, and there are no longer, to use Julian Pefanis' words, any 'existential guarantee(s)' (1991: 45) – and this would almost certainly include the absolute guarantee of death as the ultimate limit of human experience (Bataille, 1985). In his commentary on *Body Worlds*, Connor despairs of postmodern sensibilities and considers that:

….. our collective "moral autoimmune system" becomes compromised daily in the contrived world of "reality" television programs such as *Fear Factor*, *Gana la Verde*, and *Survivor*, as well as graphic forensic investigation shows ….. (T)he current popularity of the travelling cadaver spectacle is just another sign of our times' (2007: 861).

Furthermore, he cites Leon Kass' injunction to heed the 'wisdom of repugnance';[3] that is, to reject as harmful and morally reprehensible anything which we find disgusting or which has the 'yuck factor' (Cohen, 2008). This, it seems to me, completely misses the point that it is precisely those things which fascinate, revolt, shock and repel us, or which jolt us out of our everyday routines of thinking and

feeling, or which appear to be at the limits of our experience and understanding which are the stuff of postmodern experience. Chris Jenks reminds us that '(e)very rule, limit, boundary or edge carries with it its own fracture, penetration or impulse to disobey….. Seen in this way, excess is not an abhorration nor a luxury, it is rather, a dynamic force in cultural reproduction' (2003: 7). Conceptualised as the transcendence of the boundaries, constraints and limits of the social, a transgressive act – such as, the disturbing pleasures of the autopsic gaze – becomes one more means of confirming and resisting, making and unmaking the taxonomies, explanatory logics and normative frameworks which constitute our sense of social order. This positions what could otherwise be construed as a parochial concern with cultures of transgressive excess within a wider interdisciplinary debate on the nature of continuity and change as manifest in the (perceived) shift from modernity to postmodernity.

There is, of course, already a significant body of scholarly work which positions excess at the heart of an analytic concerned with the late modern (or postmodern) preoccupation with boundaries and their collapse.[4] A range of competing epistemological approaches are represented in this burgeoning literature – poststructuralism, feminism, existentialism and structurationism all make an appearance and have collectively contributed to the development of a vibrant conceptual vocabulary for debating the transgressive potential of the Gothic imagination. There is clearly considerable epistemological scope for understanding the nature and experience of transgressive excess, but of concern here is the less often asked methodological question of how we might investigate the pleasure of

transgression – such as the 'dreadful delight' of the autopsic gaze - in a way which retains a sense of its ambivalence and its potentially destabilising effects.

DIRTY THEORY: AN OUTLINE

Premised primarily on Roland Barthes' (1975[1973]) monograph, *The Pleasure of the Text*, Ott's (2007a, 2007b) exposition of dirty theory provides a critical framework for understanding the transgressive pleasures of reading/writing/viewing cultural media of all kinds. Dirty theory proposes an approach to cultural analysis rooted in erotics, a perspective which enriches and supplements, rather than replaces or supersedes the hermeneutic and interpretative approaches of art, literary and ideological criticism. As critique, dirty theory foregrounds pleasure - most especially disruptive pleasure – and regards this as the organising aesthetic of the production and consumption of cultural texts. Ott's principal concern is to propose a framework for understanding how pleasure, meaning and identity - which, he argues, are 'so deeply implicated in one another that it may be more appropriate to think in terms of one integrated concept, pleasure/meaning/identity (p/m/i)' (2007a: 31) – emerge from the intersections of textual structures and audience activity. Central to this task is Barthes' (1975[1973]) nuanced understanding of pleasure, in particular the distinction which he makes between *plaisir* and *jouissance*[5] to denote different modes of pleasure. Ott, however, goes a little further than Barthes and distinguishes between strong and weak versions of both *plaisir* and *jouissance*, and it is these categories of pleasure which constitute the 'four principal configurations of p/m/i' (*ibid*: 31) – *strong plaisir*; *weak plaisir*; *strong jouissance*; *weak jouissance*.

Citing Barthes, Ott considers *strong plaisir* as 'the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that ……. is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading' (1975[1973]: 14). Such a text is a closed text which Barthes refers to as a readerly or lisible text, one which 'shuts down signification … (and is) designed or "structured" to be read (passively consumed) but not to be written (actively produced)' (Ott, 2007a: 29). By contrast, *weak plaisir* emerges 'when a relatively active reader ……. engages a relatively closed text' (2007a: 33). However, this begs the question of how active readers engage with open texts - writerly, scriptible texts which are fragmentary, intertextual, eclectic, heteroglossic and polyphonic - and what kinds of subjectivities such a process might produce. These issues prompted Barthes to reflect on the usefulness of *plaisir* to adequately capture the spectrum of textual pleasures. He introduces the notion of *jouissance* which, in marked contrast to *plaisir,* incites a disruptive, erotic pleasure which destabilises subjectivities and unsettles any sense of coherence between self and society. Barthes writes:

> (The) text of bliss [*jouissance*] …. (is) the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his (*sic*) tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his (*sic*) relation with language (1975[1973]: 14).

It is this reference to boredom which, for Ott, marks a distinction between *strong* and *weak jouissance*, where the latter arises 'when a relatively passive reader engages a relatively open text' (2007a: 34). It is the kind of boredom which might be 'experienced by many in the face of the [post]modern (`unreadable') text, the avant-garde film or painting: to be bored means that one cannot produce the text, open it out, *set it going*' (Barthes, 1988: 163 cited in Ott, 2007a: 34 *Original emphasis*). Ott

also makes reference to Jean Baudrillard's notions of hyperreality and radical semiurgy, to denote a contemporary mediascape in which 'semiotic excess' can lead to a *weak jouissance* of 'boredom and resentfulness …. feelings of emptiness, placelessness, and loss' (2007a: 35). In contrast, *strong jouissance* is, according to Ott, positively orgasmic in as far as the text is experienced sensually and 'is made meaningful by the body' (2007a: 35). While this runs the risk of a 'sort of minideath … where social control terminates' it renders *jouissance* as a transgressive pleasure 'precisely because there is a momentary loss of self' (*ibid*: 36). This is supported by Fiske who comments that:

> *Jouissance* occurs in the body of the reader at the moment of reading when text and reader erotically lose their separate identities and become a new, momentarily produced body that is theirs and theirs alone, that defies meaning or discipline' (1989: 51 cited in Ott, 2007a: 35 *Original emphasis*)

While Ott's typology of pleasure is useful to understanding the variable ways in which text and audience intersect to produce pleasure/meaning/identity, he cautions against regarding such configurations as mutually exclusive, or as fixed and static categories. Indeed, it is Ott's application of dirty theory to television viewing which alerts us to the way in which *a priori* assumptions concerning the text (as open or closed), and the reader (as active or passive), are misplaced. Equally, the kinds of pleasure (strong/weak *plaisir*; strong/weak *jouissance*) which any particular relationship between text and reader engenders cannot be assumed in advance, or indeed, ruled out as unthinkable. In this sense, dirty theory permits a critical reading practice which acknowledges the *jouissance* of our engagements with these different kinds of transgressive media, and our experiences of momentary sensations of

disruptive pleasure. In other words, the conventional frameworks of artistic, literary and ideological criticism do not have the methodological wherewithal to investigate how active readers experience moments of instability and incoherence, nor how they negotiate the temporary loss of meaning when cultural boundaries collapse. It is this heuristic capability which not only makes dirty theory such an exciting and complementary addition to the methodological armoury of cultural studies in general, but which also provides us with the necessary analytical leverage to make sense of a postmodern world in which the Gothic imagination and its sensibilities of transgressive excess prevail. In the next section, as a prelude to exploring the *jouissance* of television viewing through the lens of dirty theory, I describe the recent emergence of a sub-genre of television crime drama which not only foregrounds the expertise of forensic pathology (and forensic science more generally), but which also popularises and circulates a cultural imagery of televisual autopsy and its associated techniques of anatomical and forensic inspection.

WAKING THE DEAD AND THE '*CSI* EFFECT'

Following a successful pilot episode, transmitted in September 2000, the BBC crime drama series, *Waking the Dead*, completed its seventh run in May 2008 with an eighth series currently being filmed (West, 2008). *Waking the Dead* features a specialist team of three CID police officers, a psychological profiler and a forensic pathologist who together staff a Cold Case Unit dedicated to investigating unsolved (usually) murders which have taken place a number of years previously. Nominated twice for an International Emmy Award, *Waking the Dead* won the award for Best Drama Series in 2004. It has consistently secured high ratings, with episodes across all seven series typically attracting over 8 million viewers, equivalent to more than a 30% share

of the combined terrestrial and digital television audience (Wilkes, 2003; Plunkett, 2008). The programme series is also broadcast internationally and is regularly shown on, *inter alia*, BBC America, Australia's Channel Nine, KRO TV (Netherlands) and HRT (Croatia). New crime drama series which foreground the investigative role of forensic pathology have proliferated since *Waking the Dead* was first aired in 2000, and have certainly reinvigorated, if not reinvented the traditional crime drama genre. Notably, in October 2000, CBS piloted *CSI* (*Crime Scene Investigation*) and since 2003, it has been the top-rated drama series in the US attracting an audience of between 30 and 40 million viewers weekly (Spadoni, 2007). With two spin-off series, *CSI:Miami* (since 2002) and *CSI:New York* (since 2004), *CSI* is now entering its ninth season during which it will have screened over 200 episodes. In addition to single dramas, such as *Kiss of Death* (BBC1, 26 May 2008), *Cold Case* (CBS since 2003) and *Silent Witness* (BBC since 1996) are amongst the more popular television series which similarly centre on the work of forensic pathologists in the context of the investigation of either contemporary or historical crimes, usually murder.

The overwhelming success of these 'forensic-centred' programmes, all of which feature the practice of autopsy, has caught the attention of the academy, and the notion of the '*CSI* effect' has gained currency as a descriptor of the impact of the sub-genre on raising public expectations of the utility and contribution of forensic science to the investigative and prosecutorial work of criminal justice and law enforcement agencies. While there is considerable doubt concerning the validity and reliability of findings, there is nonetheless an accumulating corpus of work which seeks to demonstrate how far the '*CSI* effect' has, amongst other things, led to jurors demanding more scientific evidence before returning verdicts (Sheldon, Kim and

Barak, 2006); created an exaggerated faith in the capabilities and reliability of the forensic sciences (Mann, 2006; Schweitzer and Saks, 2007); exalted the infallibility of forensic evidence and predisposed jurors towards findings of guilt where it is presented in court (Podlas, 2006); increased the propensity for juries to acquit where no forensic evidence is available (Tyler, 2006); and has stimulated applications to a flourishing market of university programmes in forensic and related sciences - some of which are considered as highly inappropriate for the `real-world' of police forensic practice (BBC News, 2003; National Institute of Justice, 2004). Some media reports even suggest that the '*CSI* effect' has impacted on how crimes are committed, with offenders more likely than hitherto to attempt to 'clean' crime scenes of all potential forensic evidence (Milicia, 2006). Despite the atheoretical basis of this socio-legal 'effects' research,[6] its focus on the status and veracity of 'forensic science' has been carried forward into more sociologically-informed, and culturally engaged analytical work. Cavender and Deutsch, for example, conclude that:

> *CSI*, *CSI:NY* and *CSI:Miami* circulate cultural images which validate scientific evidence and science itself …. they have rehabilitated science by reducing any contradictions it might exhibit in the real world …. *CSI* has brought forensic science into the popular discourse (2007: 78-79)

It is not that this conclusion is 'wrong' but that it is partial and selective, and is the outcome of an epistemological framework which engages only with questions of strong *plaisir*. In their conceptual introduction, Cavender and Deutsch uncritically position *CSI* within existing accounts of the crime drama genre. Citing Jewkes (2004), Mawby (2004) and Rafter (2006), they state:

Crime dramas provide interpretative perspectives that shape our thought, in this case about crime. Crime dramas are morality plays which feature struggles between good and evil, between heroes who stand for moral authority and villains who challenge that authority. The crime genre exhibits stable elements, for example, a focus on crime, usually violent crime, and the quest for justice …. they reflect dominant, taken-for-granted assumptions, but they, in turn, perpetuate those assumptions and, in so doing, perpetuate cultural views about crime and criminals (*ibid*: 68-69).

From within such a schema, it is difficult to even contemplate that viewers may adopt an oppositional stance (a weak *plaisir*) which is critical of both the veracity and moral authority of forensic science, and its role and function within the criminal justice process. The authors read *CSI* not only as a singular text but also as a closed one which 'offers surety and certainty, and that this, *in part*, is why the program is so successful' (Cavender and Deutsch, 2007: 68 *Emphasis added*). It is this 'other part' which I want to explore in the remainder of the paper, that 'part' of viewing practice which unsettles our sense of ontological certainty and is existentially disruptive – in short, that part which incites *jouissance*.

THE APPLIANCE OF SCIENCE

Since 2000, including the Pilot episode, 31 two-part episodes of *Waking the Dead* have been broadcast, amounting to a total of 62 hours of viewing. To take account of any changes in the nature of the programmes over time, the analysis which follows is based primarily on a sample of filmic data which includes the Pilot programme, Series 1 and Series 6, amounting to 11 two-part dramas or 22 hours of viewing. This represents just over 30% of all the broadcast material. In addition, plot summaries for

all 31 episodes were examined, as well as a dataset of 155 viewers' comments for Series 5 and 6.[7]

The organising motif of *Waking the Dead* is the *scientific* process of discovery and revelation over and above the more prosaic policing tasks of bringing offenders to justice through tried and tested methods of detection and investigation. In the opening sequence of the Pilot episode, Detective Superintendent Boyd announces the *raison d'être* of the newly formed Cold Case Unit (CCU):

> We all know the stats, if a murder's not cracked in the first week then it's probably not going to happen. Unsolved crimes, cold cases, the Met's got more than its share, which is where we come in. We go right back through all the evidence, all the statements, every last detail from the first investigation …. *(flashed glimpses of newspaper headlines, `Police bungle hi-jack'; `Police call off murder manhunt')* …..But we've got new weapons this time, new forensic expertise, psychological profiling. We sift through every layer, we dig into the past, we excavate, reconstruct, find what's never been found. There's no such thing as an unsolved crime. Not any more (*Waking the Dead: Pilot*, 2000).

While this statement (and its supporting imagery) raises doubts about the effectiveness of law enforcement both past and present, it holds out the promise of exegesis through the appliance of science, a late modern version of the old adage of there being 'a new sheriff in town'. Any hint of the failure of investigative science in the past is overcome through multiple references to the advances made in forensic knowledge in the intervening period. For example, of DNA testing, Boyd remarks, 'five years ago it was like the dark ages, it's a wonder we ever managed to solve

anything' (*Waking the Dead: Pilot*, 2000). The importance and indispensability of scientific knowledge and expertise to the task of cold case investigation is further conveyed through the physical space of the CCU, which appears to be less a suite of offices than an open plan, and somewhat dingy laboratory with offset desk spaces. Indeed, the bulk of interaction within the unit tends to take place in and around the laboratory counter and/or the 'slab', reinforcing its importance to the unfolding drama. Moreover, the clothing, equipment and accoutrements of science - tweezers, sealed plastic bags, magnifying glasses, microscopes, masks, plastic suits, X-ray machines, slides, rubber gloves, teat pipettes, beakers – are on continual display and are often accompanied by detailed explanations of the use-value of different specialist apparatus, techniques and processes. Occasionally, the technical language of science is 'translated' for the team (and the viewer); in *Every Breath You Take* (Series 1, 2001), a visiting pathologist informed the team that:

'When a body's submerged instead of decomposing some of the tissues might be substituted by a waxy substance called adipocere. As you can see it preserves tissue, and allows you to find organs you might otherwise have thought were decomposed' .. [*to which Frankie interjected*] … 'What Robert is trying to say is that Debbie Britten was pregnant'.

On other occasions, however, it appears to be preferable to leave everyone baffled by science and its technologies. Asked whether it was possible to extract and test DNA from bones over 100 years old, Dr Eve Lockhart, without further elaboration, advised the team that, 'these days, there are much more sensitive new techniques - low copy number analysis and 34-cycle PCR' (*Deus Ex Machina* [Series 6, 2007]). From its initial entry into the narrative – invariably at the point when human remains are

discovered or exhumed – science pronounces its capability and responsibility to reconstruct from the grisly details of rotting corpses, the truth of their demise. Exhumation scenes, especially, tend to combine scientific endeavour with a duty of care to the deceased. Finding the burial plot waterlogged, and the coffin in danger of disintegrating, Dr Frankie Wharton very forcefully exclaims, 'I don't want her shuffled like a pack of cards. I'll go down there and take them (bones) out one by one if I have to' (*Waking the Dead: Pilot, 2000*). Similarly, in a scene where Boyd invites non-police others to attend the autopsy of an exhumed body, Frankie refuses admittance shouting, 'I'm not turning my path lab into a bloody theatre!' (*Burn Out*, Series 1, 2001).   Ideological criticism might well regard these representations of the paraphernalia, language and ethics of science, as supporting the programme's credentials and claims to scientific verisimilitude; however, dirty theory is much more circumspect.

GLIMPSES OF OBLIVION AND CHAOS

Despite the effectiveness of these key stylistic devices, the representation of scientism (and scientists) within *Waking the Dead* is invariably positioned alongside and within an equally diverse series of Gothic thematics which work to undermine any disciplinary purism. Even the title of *Waking the Dead* evokes an imagery of figures being roused from their graves and speaking to us of their experience of death. It does not immediately connote a crime drama series which is concerned with the pragmatic and routinised methodology of police procedural and investigative processes. In contrast, then, to the direct and relatively uncomplicated notion of 'crime scene investigation' – as in *CSI* - *Waking the Dead* explicitly stimulates our Gothic imagination and arouses our curiosity about an unfamiliar world in which the

dead (might) awaken. The refracted Gothicity of *Waking the Dead* is continually rendered through its *mise-en-scène* of foreboding, desolation and pending catastrophe; its background mood music, excesses of sound and colour effects, use of close-ups, slow motion, panning and reverse angles; its locational use of derelict buildings, industrial wasteland and claustrophobic interior spaces; and its contrasting montages of dark, secret recesses - tunnels, sewers, crypts, attics, cellars - concealed within a superficially vibrant urban landscape. The repetitious use and commonplace of these cinematic techniques create a consistent and coherent visual and narrative context for the dead to inhabit. In the *Waking the Dead: Pilot* episode (2000), for example, a land-fill site is the last resting place for a 16 year old girl, dumped naked and handcuffed, and wrapped in roofing felt. In *The Fall* (Series 6, 2007), the mummified, sexually-conjoined skeletal remains of an unknown couple fall from a concealed office during the renovation of a city bank. While in *Wounds* (Series 7, 2008), a man's sedentary remains are found gagged and bound, and ritually arranged in a disused tunnel. Close-ups of mutilated, dismembered and badly decomposed corpses as they appear *in situ* are flashed across the screen in a series of stills, permitting a glimpse, but rarely a prolonged gaze at their corporeal horrors. Ott (2007a) reminds us that the use of the 'glance' engages the viewer on an emotionally-embodied level rather than on a rational, cognitive basis. As Romanyshyn puts it, the televisual glance is 'an emotional vision, a vision that is moved at a bodily level' (1993: 341).

These filmic techniques – or as one viewer puts it, 'all these la-de-da camera angles' (Nick Bielby, Manchester; *Towers of Silence*, Series 5, 2005) - construct a melancholic cartography of the spaces of death, and are indexical of a wider range of

anxieties and fears which provoke a questioning of existing cultural beliefs and values – about, for example, the dignity of the dying experience and the ideology of the `good death' (McNamara, 2001), or the professionalised management of dying and death involving a plethora of experts such as priests, funeral directors, hospice nurses, doctors (Willmott, 2000). In short, it troubles what Giddens (1991: 156) has described as the 'sequestration of experience', the acquisition of a degree of ontological security through investment in an institutional infrastructure which protects us from direct experience of human conditions of madness, criminality, sexuality and death. Confronted regularly by the imagery of a painful, lonely, undignified death, the viewer of *Waking the Dead* is prompted to contemplate the possibility of their own oblivion and non-existence (Becker, 1973), and to acknowledge that they (we) may stand alone and afraid in the face of it all (Kierkegaard, 1974 cited in Craib, 2003: 288). In the moment of horror, lifestyle projects centred on healthy diets and regular exercise, or strategies to minimise risk of accident, disease, illness and disaster seem futile. In the fleeting instant of the televisual glance '(a)wareness ….. of mortality …. disrupts and problematizes …. the importance and seriousness of the projects of self-identity' (Willmott, 200: 661). The continual flow of these momentary images 'bring together bits and pieces from elsewhere, constructing … sequences of programmes on the basis of collage techniques and surface simulations' (Strinati, 1995: 231). As John Fiske suggests, specificity is lost, structure is absent and there is a 'refusal of order' (1992: 60) inviting viewers to actively create meaning from the rags and tatters of a hyperreal bricolage of intertextual and hybridised simulations.

SCIENCE AND ITS OTHER

The Gothic imagination neither stops nor starts with these kinds of production techniques and editing processes, but is further aroused through the invocation of a range of staple Gothic tropes which unsettle scientific 'truths' and confuse the distinction between science and its Other. This includes the use of a range of narrative devices which are overtly and unmistakably Gothic. In *Wren Boys* (Series 6, 2007), for example, 'ancestral curse' is used to create a relationship between the killer and the victim's father – 'I curse your killer with my blood. By my blood, I swear, it'll be avenged' (Series 6, 2007). In *Burn Out* (Series 1, 2001), the failure of identity, and the weakness of administrative-legal (eg: recovered wallet) and scientific (eg: dental records) processes of identification, are introduced *via* the creation of a '`counterfeit' corpse. On other occasions, the collapse of the boundaries between light and dark, rationality and irrationality, the natural and the supernatural is achieved more subtley. For example, in *The Blind Beggar* (Series 1, 2001) the priest descends to the crypt to witness Frankie's preliminary examination of a skeleton excavated during building works. Advised to wear a hard hat, Father Ryan responds calmly, 'I have my own protection'. Throughout this particular episode, religious iconography is superimposed – through flashing imagery and careful use of background music - onto the pathologist's scientific work. In particular, during the sequences when Frankie 'discovers' some important detail from the skeletal remains, a chorale arrangement of *Panis Angelicus* is playing continually, leaving the viewer questioning whether science or religious belief has, in fact, facilitated the discovery of a key piece of evidence. The dramatic use of churches, cemeteries, temples, religious artefacts, rituals and symbolisms of the supernatural appear regularly throughout all series of *Waking the Dead* and is as commonplace as the trappings of science

discussed above. This ensures that in a process of semiotic exchange, for every scientific signifier there is a corresponding other-worldly signified. Even in those few episodes where religiosity is not featured, appeal to the fantastical world of dreams, nightmares, visions and spectres is made. In *Burn Out* (Series 1, 2001), for example, the murder victim's daughter reveals that:

'I keep seeing him, he's haunting me. I keep dreaming about him. I don't believe in ghosts, or souls, or the afterlife, or anything like that. All of these things are just hallucinations but I keep getting them, all the time. It means that there's something wrong with his death … it means he's not at peace'.

Where one might have thought that this was the cue for the CCU to decline her request to investigate her father's apparent suicide, it becomes the trigger for the Unit's involvement.

THE PLEASURES OF EVIDENTIAL EXCESS

The shadow of the Gothic is never far away, and is present even within the crucial sequences which foreground the power of scientific evidence. Each episode provides for a detailed summary of the findings of the autopsy, and this is generally (but not invariably) presented *via* an interactive discussion around the 'mortuary slab'. However, there are (at least) three distinct discursive modes involved in evidential summation. The first is what could be described as a *professional* discursive mode. In *A Simple Sacrifice* (Series 1, 2001), Frankie explains the evidence in the context of a crime scene reconstruction: 'Giles died when his throat was cut. His arterial spray is evidence of that. As you can see it travelled the length of the room and decreased in distance as it ran out of blood'. However, this matter-of-fact reportage is rarely

sufficient and is generally bolstered by what could be termed, a *sensual* discursive mode. For example, in *The Blind Beggar* (Series 1, 2001), having confirmed in scientific terminology that the skeletal remains were not ancient, Frankie goes onto elaborate this finding in terms of olfactory and culinary knowledge:

'There's liquefaction and a sickly sweet smell. No, that body was flesh and blood when it was put there, and concrete poured on top. You will see that the flesh has turned into a sort of syrup. I mean one sniff and you'll never want to eat another mince pie'.

This kind of analogy is repeated in *Every Breath You Take* (Series 1, 2001). In her efforts to explain to the team how she has recovered evidence from a wrist watch, Frankie points out: 'you know when you put a fork in a sausage, and it bursts. Well, it's the same with brain matter. Brain just kind of sticks to everything'. Notwithstanding the explicit gratuitousness of this language, the *interrogative* mode of evidential summary is, perhaps, the most existentially disruptive in its effects. In the following sequence, the 'horror' of the death is conveyed through a process of questioning:

Boyd: Could the injuries have been sustained sometime before. You know, like old injuries?

Eve: No evidence of new bone formation, no callouses, no sign of healing ….

Boyd: (*interrupting*) So these injuries took place before death?

Eve: It would seem so.

Boyd: So, he was tortured before he was killed?

Eve; Yes, and a form of suspension torture …..

Boyd: (*interrupting*) Hanging upside down, or hanging up, or what?

Eve: Yes, there are five basic techniques. There's the cross. Butchery, where you hang by one or both hands. Hanging by the leg. Parrot perch where you're hung by a bar, and finally, this one, the Palestinian suspension ….. There's an older name for it, *strapaddo*, dating back to the Inquisition (*Deus Ex Machina* [Series 6, 2007]).

These exchanges are crucial to elaborating the various configurations of violent death and in this sense they stimulate the imagination beyond the brutality and cruelty featured within a single episode - how many blows; did they put up a fight; were restraints used; was the victim tortured; how long did it take them to die; were the wounds made before death; where is the head; how bad is the decomposition; was this a frenzied attack, all feature in the episodes viewed.

LOSING THE PLOT

One of the more interesting aspects of the comments from viewers of Series 5 and 6 was that none reported an experience of strong or weak *plaisir* which is so often assumed on their behalf by ideological criticism. While many viewers of *Waking the Dead* commented on the standard of the acting, the background music, the special effects and the introduction of new characters, the bulk of commentary expressed both strong and weak *jouissance* with the programme. Weak *jouissance* is perfectly captured by the following reviews:

Boyd looking morose. Flashback. DNA match. Decayed body. Forensic breakthrough. Repeat flashback. Boyd snaps at staff. Flashback. Intuitive leap. More forensic evidence. Totally unconnected character. Nap. More flashbacks. Loss of plot. Zzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz. End credits (John, UK; *Yarzheit*, Series 6, 2007)

There were too many loose ends and the first part gave the viewer no ideas at all. I

expect to be confused but this was beyond confusion, almost bordering on boredom

(Ian Gould, Derbyshire; *Deus Ex Machina*, Series 6, 2007).

I was appalled at this week's episode.   The plot was confusing and the violent

flashbacks gratuitous and far too frequent. The constant shots of decomposed corpses

and the characters' jokes about the condition of the body were disgusting (Michael

Stocks, UK; *Towers of Silence*, Series 5, 2005).

These three reviews suggest not only variation in the experience of weak *jouissance*,

but also alert us to its difference from *plaisir* (weak and strong) and strong *jouissance*.

For example, John's account of his viewing practice mirrors Ott's account of nodding

off and channel surfing so as to experience what he describes as 'textasy'. In Ott's

words:

The pleasure of the "sweet spot"… does not come from "following" the story, of

passively submitting to its form. I return again and again not because I desire to know

what happens, for I already know….. The narrative arc holds no suspense, no

surprises. I know each scene, each glance, each line before it comes …. It is a

pleasure of both rhythm and familiarity …. This is the moment of release, of

jouissance (2007b: 298*)*.

There is no hint within John's commentary of being so bored that he may stop

viewing altogether. This contrasts with Ian Gould's experience of the programme as

'unreadable'.   This is indicative of a weak *jouissance* which acknowledges the

openness of the text when, perhaps, narrative closure was preferred. It is a *jouissance*

of frustration and confusion which, ultimately, came close to inducing boredom. Michael Stock's complaint concerning the level of gratuitous violence depicted in *Towers of Silence* is a common one. It could be argued that this represents an oppositional perspective and his experience (as with other viewers) is one of weak *plaisir*. However, this viewer is not 'opposed' to the violent imagery *per se*. It is the coupling of his rejection of the violence with his failure to make sense of the plot which suggests the presence of weak *jouissance* rather than weak *plaisir*.

Jouissance, then, may involve an experience or sense of disruptive *dis*pleasure as well as pleasure – both affective states being transgressive and subjectively troubling, and both emerging from an engagement with an open text. Indeed, it is the openness of *Waking the Dead* as a series of cultural texts which appears to induce amongst the majority of its viewers a strong *jouissance*. Notwithstanding the limitations of the available data, the following review comments are commonplace.

> I honestly think this is the most obscure plot creation I have come across to date, an enjoyable challenge if it all hangs together at the end. The two episodes have ended and no-one can explain the relationship between Sheryl and Vine, let alone the motivation for framing Boyd with the hit and run (Anthony, UK; *Black Run*, Series 5, 2005)

> Is this deliberate, leaving so many unanswered questions so that you keep thinking about the programme? Who shot Palliser? (Mike Coombes, Solihull; *Black Run*, Series 5, 2005)

I still have no idea who sent the wallets in the first place, or why…. We need to see the team actually solving a crime, or at least working through to some sort of resolution of the story, rather than chasing after it (Sarah, Cambridge; *Mask of Sanity*, Series 6, 2007)

It was brilliant, but I didn't understand how the widow and Vine ended up in a room together. He acted as if they had had an affair, which they obviously hadn't. I was left a bit confused (Ben, Manchester; *Black Run*, Series 5, 2005)

For each of these viewers, the programmes have remained as open texts, and despite their best efforts to make sense of the plot, there is no narrative closure and there remain many unanswered questions. This is a characteristic feature of 'continuing drama' (or soap opera) television series and their 'continuous serial of overlapping and fragmented narratives …. (which) carefully corresponds to the haphazard flow of events and messy irresolution in lived reality' (McGuigan, 2005: 433). That this constitutes a pleasurable outcome and an experience of strong *jouissance* is integral to a Gothic sensibility which continually postpones the moment of narrative resolution. Putting this another way, there is more to be resolved in these programmes than the matter of the crime. Stripped of its scientific and Gothic gloss, *Waking the Dead* boils down to a series of dramas about human relationships of love and hate, of forgiveness and revenge, of trust and betrayal. The decomposing remains of an unidentified, unmourned and/or unclaimed individual which take centre-stage on the autopsy table, are merely a working surface for reconstructing a narrative of the human condition. The crucial role played by forensic pathology (and forensic science) in this scenario is that it represents modernity's claims to progress, order and rationality; and it works to fashion from the bits and pieces of broken bodies, a vision of the world as its own

perfect simulacra. The affective simulations of the Gothic imaginary provide, then, a parallel but important subversive and critical commentary on modernist ideologies and the politics of truth which they inspire. As Ott suggests, this 'does not signal the end of ideology, but it does fragment it, break it up, weaken its hold' (2007a: 40). Re-read in this light, consider the episodes in Series 1. Here we encounter everyday stories about living with guilt and paternal desertion (*Burn Out*); adultery and the myth of celibacy (*The Blind Beggar*); maternal sacrifice and abuse of trust (*A Simple Sacrifice*); and obsessive love (*Every Breath You Take*). While Series 6 could be summarised as stories about family honour and family feuds (*Wren Boys*); national resurgence and imperial downfall (*Deus Ex Machina*); organised crime, financial capitalism and Catholicism (*The Fall*); institutionalised child abuse (*Mask of Sanity*); alternative medicine and therapeutic techniques (*Double Bind*); and genocide, neo-Nazism and international human rights (*Yahrzeit*). There is certainly a marked shift in focus from the earlier to the more recent series. Notably, stories shift from those concerned with personal relationships, intimacy and family life, to those which grapple with the complexities and uncertainties of a globalised, internationalised postmodern world where traditional boundaries have collapsed. In either case, the refracted Gothicity of *Waking the Dead* opens up a critical space for questioning all those imponderables which science and its equivalents cannot actually resolve.

CONCLUSION

The Gothic imaginary amounts to much more than a background aesthetic or a special effect. In the context of *Waking the Dead*, it establishes a relationship between public sentiments and scientific discourses through the lens of the grotesque body. In Philip Smith's genealogical account of the mythology and symbolism of the guillotine, he

argues that '(t)he Gothic trumps the language of science, framing as spooky and disturbing that which is presented as matter of fact' (2003: 45). Put another way, the Gothic scrutinises (even mocks) Enlightenment notions of progress, rationality, discipline and order with its coded celebration and affirmation of excess, pain, profanity and decay. As Fiona Price suggests, the Gothic poses questions of our spectatorship; '(it) queries how the disinterested yet ethical spectator might be distinguished from the inhumane, voyeuristic consumer' (2006: 1). The unruly iconography of the televisual autopsy provides an occasion to experience this kind of existential tension and transgressive displacement, and in many ways it serves as an ironic commentary on the fallibility and certainty of scientific truth and the authority of its expertise. The more crucial question, however, is whether Ott's dirty theory provides an appropriate (or only) framework for understanding this displacement as an embodied, emotionally-charged and culturally-dynamic experience.

Ott certainly moves us away from the one-dimensional analyses of ideological criticism, and he encourages us to explore the pleasures, not merely the power of texts. Moreover, his configuration of pleasure/meaning/identity emphasises how reading/writing practices are culturally, interpersonally and personally productive relationships. In setting out his typology, Ott does warn against the schematic use of dirty theory. Nonetheless, the theory relies upon and uncritically reproduces Barthes' original distinction between strong/weak *plaisir* and *jouissance*, which has long since been considered problematic. Jonathan Culler, for example, suggests that the difference between the former and the latter 'is only a matter of degree: the latter is only a later and freer state of the former' (1975: 191) – see also Culler (1983: 95-97), and on the related distinction between *punctum* and *studium*, see Michael Fried

(2005). Equally, it is not at all clear why 'boredom' should be aligned with weak *jouissance* and used by Ott as grounds to distinguish between its weak and strong forms. Put another way, Ott tends to make evaluative assumptions about activity and passivity, with active readership and scriptible texts being coded as 'good', or at least preferred to passive readership and lisible texts. Such a view does not sit well with contemporary philosophical work on radical passivity and its contribution to ethical agency. Indeed, for Emmanuel Levinas, radical passivity is the *necessary* condition for ethical action understood as taking responsibility for others (Wall, 1999; Hofmeyr 2009). At the same time, through the lens of dirty theory, the idea of the transgressive as a force of cultural dynamism tends to be asserted rather than demonstrated. For example, it is noteworthy that none of the viewers of *Waking the Dead* reflect on ontological questions about socio-cultural change. They comment primarily on the televisual aesthetics and filmic techniques of the series, as though its success or failure depended on the use of recurrent (and shifting) generic, Gothic tropes derived from contemporary horror films and thrillers such as *Silence of the Lambs* (1991) and *Se7en* (1995). In other words, dirty theory does not encourage a more historicist account which positions the transgressive within the political economic landscape of contemporary capitalism. Scholars such as Slavoj Žižek (2004), for example, might regard the televisual invocation of transgressive displacement as something of a 'false novelty', as the recuperation of avant-garde strategies into the dynamics and logic of capital accumulation. Moreover, dirty theory does not allow for what Fredric Jameson (1991) has described as the 'waning of affect' in postmodern culture – that is, far from there being a sensibility toward or a seeking out of transgressive pleasure, contemporary cultural experiences are characterised by an indifference to emotion and feeling resulting in a loss of critical

awareness, especially of the self. This has some resonance with Stjepan Meštrovic's (1997) notion of postemotional society in which contemporary emotional life lacks spontaneity and is, instead, manufactured and disjointed. In such a world, feelings are synthetic, simulated and manipulated, and more likely to induce compassion fatigue than transgressive pleasures. However, and despite Ott's uncritical reading and adaptation of Barthes, as well as his failure to take account of how pleasure/meaning/identity is accomplished within a socio-political context and is expressive of cultural change, dirty theory nonetheless provides an important starting point for understanding the cultural logic of late modernity. This is a logic which, on the one hand, represents (dead) bodies as indifferent objects available for dispassionate, scientific analysis, and on the other, celebrates the grotesque body and its functionality as Other to perfection, rationality, order and discipline.

NOTES

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2. See www.bodyworlds.com (accessed 5 July 2008)

3. In 1997, in response to the cloning of Dolly the Sheep, the bioethicist, Leon Kass published an article – `The wisdom of repugnance: why we should ban the cloning

of humans', *New Republic*, 2 June 1997, pp. 17-26 - which suggested that a negative emotional response of repugnance or disgust toward some thing, idea or practice, was a strong indicator of its potential harmfulness and justified a rejection of that thing.

4. Importantly, this would include Mikhail Bakhtin's (1984[1965]) poststructuralist elucidations of Rabelasian ribaldry and bodily excess; Julia Kristeva's (1982) psychoanalytical notion of abjection and its evocation disgusted fascination; Stephen Lyng's (1990, 2005) sociological concept of edgework and its denotation of the transgressive pleasures of voluntary risk-taking; Jack Katz' (1988) existential criminological work and its emphasis on the sensual, pleasurable and existentially invigorating thrills of illicit behaviour; and Judith Butler's (1990, 1993) delineation of the transgressive potential of sex/gender performance, epitomised by the figure of the drag queen.

5. At its most basic, *jouissance* is the French word for extreme pleasure, with an overtone of sexual bliss. However, *jouissance* as a concept has a complex genealogy which this footnote cannot even begin to elaborate. Georges Bataille, Jacques Lacan, Sigmund Freud, Frederic Jameson, Julia Kristeva, as well as Roland Barthes have, at different times and in the context of diverse theoretical and disciplinary frameworks, advanced particular formulations of the concept. For a good overview see Flowers MacCannell (2003).

6. For a critical debate on the limitations of `media effects research' see Barker and Petley, 2001.

7. These are downloadable from the *Waking the Dead* website at http://www.bbc.co.uk/drama/wakingthedead/ Material used in this analysis was

accessed on 25 June 2008. Viewers' comments were only available for Series 5 and 6.

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