

A Hall of Mirrors: The Sublime Object of Justice in *Dexter*

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Abstract

This essay investigates the cultural significance of the construction of justice in an internationally successful American TV series, *Dexter*. The double life led by the eponymous protagonist, a serial killer who is also part of the Miami police, is read as a literal staging of the mutually foundational relationship of legitimacy and violence, and of the paradoxes of what Giorgio Agamben, following Jacques Derrida and Walter Benjamin, terms “force-of-law,” with “law” under double erasure: a state in which on the one hand, the law is in force but lacks the power to be enforced, and on the other hand, the force of law is separated from the law and associated with acts that suspend the law. An embodiment of vigilante culture who is also part of the legal police enforcement, Dexter is a figure of sovereignty as the law: he reclaims and enacts a form of extralegal justice predicated on the disjunction between the legitimate and the legal. Reading this fantasy of justice as, in Slavoj Žižek’s terms, a “sublime object,” the essay argues that it operates along the same lines that were practiced and theorized by the Bush administration in the wake of September 11, 2001.

Keywords: detective fiction, popular culture, state of exception, justice and law, September 11

The broader intellectual context for this essay is a full-length project on crime and detection narratives, addressing their philosophical and political function from the inception of the genre to some of its more recent instantiations in post-9/11 American TV series. Detective fiction, I contend, is a crucial narrative technology of secular modernity, in that it creates a link between two fundamental notions of western thought, truth and justice, articulating both with modern state formations. More specifically, I argue that the genre operates in regard to the modern state as the theological and philosophical discourse of theodicy had operated in regard to God: it grounds the subject’s reliance on a transcendent entity in intellectual conviction, providing reassurance of its ultimate justice in spite of empirical evidence of evil and injustice in the everyday world. The genre thus forges a link between the state and the reader as subject-citizen, based on an infinitely reiterated (and infinitely deferred) promise of justice. And yet, while keeping justice constantly present as its ostensible object, the genre’s narrative machinery operates as a way of foreclosing *the question* of justice, by foreclosing any alternative way of *thinking* about justice—for instance,

in social rather than penal terms, and as redistribution rather than retribution.¹ Crime and detective fiction as a genre thus qualifies as a modern myth in Roland Barthes's sense: "*myth hides nothing*: its function is to distort, not to make disappear" (120). In this essay, I will investigate the cultural significance of the construction of justice in an internationally successful American TV series, *Dexter*.²

Delectable Monsters

Dexter is a unique character: a serial killer who is also a forensic expert working with the police. Orphaned at the age of three and permanently damaged by the trauma of witnessing his mother being killed with a motorsaw by a gang of drug dealers, he was adopted by a police officer, Harry Morgan, who early perceived his sociopathic tendencies and channelled his urge to kill in what he deemed a socially useful manner. This is what Dexter calls "the code of Harry": kill only people who are themselves murderers, take all the necessary precautions not to get caught, and lead an outer life of unimpeachable normalcy to conceal the inner monster. By day, Dexter Morgan is a blood spatter expert working for the Miami police,³ where his half-sister Debra also serves, and concealing his lack of human emotions through a carefully constructed façade of attentiveness to friends, to his lover and then wife Rita, and to her two children; by night, he is a prowler seeking out criminals who have escaped from the law. Untrammelled by police procedures and legal niceties, he seeks incriminating evidence, and once he has acquired the moral certainty of his victims' guilt he captures them, tortures them to extort their confession, and kills them, disposing of their bodies in carefully wrapped pieces that he throws into the ocean from his boat, the "Slice of Life."

The ironic layering of meanings in the suggestively named boat may provide a key to the otherwise surprising success of a show centering around such gruesome deeds. Both the show and the series of novels by Jeff Lindsay from which it was adapted present us with a witty, sparkingly ironic first-person narration by the

¹ Over the years, I have been developing some of these ideas at the "Futures of American Studies" Institute at Dartmouth College, where an early version of this essay was presented in 2009. I take this opportunity to (once again) thank the Futures director, Donald Pease and all of the Futures co-directors, faculty, and participants for the ongoing intellectual dialogue, which has immeasurably enriched my thinking on these issues.

² The show, produced by Showtime, first aired on October 1, 2006, and ran for eight seasons, until 2013. It had high audience ratings, mostly positive reviews, and got a number of awards and nominations. Michael C. Hall's interpretation as Dexter was unanimously praised, and so were the sophistication of the camera work and screenwriting. The show's concept comes from a series of novels by Jeff Lindsay, starting with *Darkly Dreaming Dexter*, of 2004; the first couple of seasons loosely follow the plot of *Darkly Dreaming Dexter*, while the subsequent ones have original plots. By way of methodological clarification, let me add that my observations in this essay will mainly concern the first two seasons: given the peculiar operation of TV series—where transformations in each subsequent season respond to such disparate factors as audience response, leading actors' personal and professional demands, sponsors' requests, need for diversification of plot and escalation of effects, etc.—I take the first two seasons of each series as the place where the series' concept and implications can be grasped at their purest and analyzed most effectively.

³ Miami is Jeff Lindsay's home town, and Lindsay, interviewed by Lyz Lenz, has insisted on his sense of "something surreal about Florida—a beautiful sunset, a palm tree and a headless body at the bottom of the tree." However, it should be noted that Florida also has prominent associations with the history of serial killing: Ted Bundy, one of the most (in)famous serial killers in U.S. history, committed his final murders and was finally captured, convicted, and executed in Florida.

protagonist, who is humorous, funny, smart, capable, linguistically creative—in a word, thoroughly likable (an effect enhanced, in the TV show, by the physical attractiveness of the leading actor, Michael C. Hall). Even his name, Dexter, evokes dexterity and denies that there is anything sinister about him. He is the “good bad boy” of a whole literary and filmic tradition—except, of course, that he is a serial killer. Remarkably, this is a fact that he never tries to disguise or diminish: he always describes himself exactly for what he is, he never takes an apologetic attitude, he never seeks justification in his childhood trauma—although other characters do it for him all the time, creating the predictable tale of early victimization as motive for crime associated with the serial killer figure in popular culture.⁴ Dexter never claims to have noble or idealistic motives for killing, although he follows the code of Harry closely and loyally as a way of keeping his urge safe for himself and acceptable to his father figure or Superego. And yet, as one of the great literary criminals discussed by Sigmund Freud—“Indeed, even great criminals and humorists, as they are represented in literature, compel our interest by the narcissistic consistency with which they manage to keep away from their ego anything that would diminish it” (89)—he even takes a sort of narcissistic pride in his acts: “I’m a very neat monster,” he declares in the first episode, a line that is taken directly from Lindsay’s novel (12). “I’ve always enjoyed my work. It brings order to the chaos, fills me with civic pride,” he declares in Episode 1 of the second season.

This brazen and breezy exhibition of Dexter’s “civic” activities has a paradoxical effect: on the one hand, it reinforces Dexter’s difference from the rest of us—as he carefully underlines, he has no conscience, no feelings, no emotions, and he regards himself as not human—; on the other hand, it effects a direct interpellation of the reader/viewer as an accomplice and partner in crime. The moment you smile at one of his witty remarks you are compromised: you find him funny, you identify him as the hero, you find yourself condoning his acts, rooting for him, hoping he gets away with his murders.

A crucial moment in this interpellation and a key to the overall operation of the series is offered by the opening title sequence, which has deservedly become an instant classic.⁵ The bloody trace left by the casual slapping of a mosquito; the blade poised on a throat; the drop of blood falling in the sink from a shaving cut, trickling along a chin, and soaking a tissue; the knife slashing a piece of uncooked meat, the smattering of ketchup across a fried egg, the crushing power of a coffee grinder; the red mist of juice produced by another knife penetrating an orange, its interior squeezed into a blood-red pulp; the fingers testing the resistance of dental floss, followed by a bare neck suggestively evoking strangling, and the hands vigorously

⁴ On the popular representation of serial killers and for a critical investigation of the appeal of this figure in contemporary American culture, see Seltzer. For a more historical approach, tracing the cultural implications of this phenomenon from the nineteenth century to the post-9/11 era, see Schmid.

⁵ The opening credits sequence was created by Digital Kitchen. For another analysis of the sequence, partly divergent from the one I am offering here, see Karpovich.

pulling shoe-strings: in this sequence, a harmless morning routine is transformed into a deadly ritual.





The extreme close-up images in the opening credits have a twofold effect: on the one hand, they defamiliarize ordinary acts and objects, revealing their troubling inherent uncanniness. On the other hand, while denaturalizing daily objects and actions, they subtly *naturalize* killing, cutting, and bleeding *as part of daily life*. The perfect aestheticization of each shot, the wink at the viewer's visual encyclopaedia (from *Psycho* to *American Psycho*), the elegant balance between the tension created around ordinary objects and the ironic deflation of threatening signals into reassuringly recognizable ones, create a masterful effect of unsettling ambivalence. The threat erupts for a moment not as the repressed underside of everyday reality, as in typical horror movies, but as a result of a closer examination of its visible surface; the ordinary displays its continuity with the gory, and both reveal themselves as simply a question of scale and vantage point. A veritable object lesson in the "banality of evil," the title sequence pushes the notion of the serial killer as "abnormally normal" (Seltzer, *Serial Killers* 9-10) one step further, forcing us to consider the abnormality of normality itself. It is not so much a question of participating in a "wound culture," as Mark Seltzer has termed the "public fascination with torn and opened private bodies and torn and opened psyches," the "public gathering around the wound and the trauma," which he associates with the popularity of the serial killer (109). What is erased is not just the boundaries between the inside and the outside, between the scene of violence and the public convening around it, between "private desire and public scene" (140), as in Seltzer's argument, but the very *distinction* between the wound and the skin. What we have here is a disclosure of the troubling *familiarity* of the wound, positioning the public as *always already* a part of the wound itself.

The continuity between the monstrous and the ordinary, the murderous deed and the thoughtless everyday gesture is re-enacted throughout the story, where violence is pervasive, corruption is rampant, threats lie everywhere—including the family, as shown by Rita's abusive former husband—, and department politics relies on

dishonesty and betrayal as a matter of course. The double move of the opening title sequence, thus, can be found everywhere: if on one side, Dexter claims for himself a monstrous exceptionality, on the other side he acts as a lens capable of revealing the more or less criminal continuum that is ordinary reality. The script, of course, ironically underscores this universality of violence through a hundred touches, as witness, for instance, the catchphrase inscribed everywhere when Dexter plays bowling with his colleagues in the second season: “Bowl till you bleed.” Specularly, Dexter the monster becomes “normalized”: over the course of the first four seasons, we see him gradually transformed from an asexual and emotionless fake human into an appropriately heterosexual lover, husband, father of a son, and devoted stepfather of his wife Rita’s two children. An apparently normalizing move that is in fact double-edged, since while on the one hand it makes it easier to like the character and forget his “peculiarities,” on the other hand it installs him even more firmly as the heart of darkness at the center of ordinary everyday life.

What this amounts to is a multiple mirroring effect between Dexter’s “abnormal normality” and the normal abnormality of the surrounding world. Again and again, Dexter finds a specular character mirroring his own experience and inner urges—his long lost brother and fellow psychopathic killer in the first season, the arsonist Lila and the former covert operations specialist Doakes in the second, the Assistant District Attorney Miguel Prado in the third, Arthur Mitchell, the “Trinity killer” and socially respected family man, in the fourth season, Lumen in the fifth. Mirrors are self-awarably used as metaphors: for instance, when Dexter’s victims start surfacing accidentally in episode 3 of the second season, he thinks to himself that “they were meant to remain in the silent shadows keeping their secrets. Now they’re exposed to the glare, reflecting my darkness like some grotesque carnival mirror.” And finally, literal mirrors are planted everywhere in the series, as in the novels before them: rear view mirrors reflect Dexter’s masked face to his victims when he ambushes them in their cars, or reflect his face back to us when he is driving, virtually placing us in the position of back seat passengers. Incidentally, that is the position occupied by the inner alien urging him to kill, which is occasionally called “The Dark Passenger,” its constant sobriquet in the novel. The mirroring effect is thus extended to the viewer, installed as a secret sharer. And in a spectacular *mise en abyme*, the Barbie doll whose sawed-off body pieces tied in nice colored ribbons Dexter finds in his fridge in the first season—a present and a clue from his brother, the Ice Truck Killer—holds a mirror in her hand, in an obvious invitation to self-recognition that extends to the viewer thanks to the strategic placement of the camera, framing the diminutive mirror from Dexter’s point of view, which thus becomes identified with our own.



This multiple mirroring draws us into the serial killer's world both as members of the "normal abnormal" everyday life and by assigning us to the uneasy position of partners rather than the safe one of spectators. In the mirror, interpellated as witnesses, participants, and not-so-reluctant accomplices, we are confronted with our own enjoyment of the crime scene. But what crime scene are we dealing with exactly, and why is it enjoyable?

Short-circuiting the Symbolic Order

From Edgar Allan Poe to Thomas Harris, the move of creating some degree of identification with or admiration for the criminal has been performed again and again, but never, I suspect, to the extent of so thoroughly enlisting the reader's or viewer's sympathies.

As a literary, rather than literal serial killer, Dexter is a composite character combining theoretically incompatible figures and positions. He is a classic Jekyll/Hyde figure (a motif explicitly mentioned in episode 1 of the second season), who further reactivates a universal motif in classic detective fiction, the detective as the criminal's double—Dupin and the Minister D. in "The Purloined Letter," both specularly outside the normalcy of ordinary everyday society. In his daylight life as a crime scene specialist, he embodies the rational, scientific, technological aspect of investigation, as well as its state-mandated institutional aspect; in his hidden life, seeking clues to convict his victims, and then ambushing and capturing them, he is a private investigator in the hard-boiled tradition. He operates according to the inductive-deductive logic of the classic detective story, but he also has extra-rational intuitive clairvoyance based on his own inner darkness and his capacity to recognize it in others. He is both the producer of "false solutions"—the convincing naturalized scenes that divert the attention of the police—and the reader of the false solutions

disseminated by other criminals.⁶ He is the serial murderer, the object of investigation. But he is also the avenger, the omnipotent extra-legal defender fighting evil by way of evil and thus turning his own evil into good. What does this conflation mean in terms of his cultural function? *Dexter* faces us with something that is more sophisticated and infinitely more troubling than the mechanism of scapegoating operating in classic detective fiction. In an attempt to assess its peculiarity, I will now turn to the work of Slavoj Žižek, not only to profit from the theorist's brilliance as an analyst of popular culture, but also because, like many recent TV series, *Dexter* seems to have been written expressly to be interpreted by Žižek.⁷ I will adopt a Lacanian/Žižekian approach tactically, as a way of elucidating some dynamics which I will then try to push in a different direction.⁸

Let us start from the obvious. What the series stages is, like all detective stories, the emergence of the Lacanian Real—"the nonsymbolized kernel that makes a sudden appearance in the symbolic order, in the form of traumatic 'returns' and 'answers'" (Žižek 39). *Dexter*, as a killer, is the producer of such traumatic moments, but simultaneously he is also the figure containing them and integrating them back into "normal" symbolic reality, that is, the investigator whose presence "guarantees in advance the transformation of the lawless sequence into a lawful sequence; in other words, the reestablishment of 'normality'" (Žižek 58). This twofold position as a figure of control, in the tradition of classic detective fiction, and as a figure of painful involvement and ignorance of his own truth, as is the case with the personally threatened PI of the hard-boiled lineage, is formally captured by the anomalous status of the voice over, which is both the involved voice of the hard-boiled filmic tradition and the ironically detached voice of an external narrator operating in the role of "the subject supposed to know"—the detective or the analyst in psychoanalysis. This role, which for Žižek is theoretically impossible in the first person (62), since "the subject supposed to know" is always such for another subject (like Holmes to Watson), offers a further key to the character's peculiarity: the voice's mediation realizes a double transference: his own and ours. The voice over is thus the vehicle of a twofold role: on the one hand, it promotes our identification; on the other hand, it externalizes *Dexter* with regard to himself, enabling him to see himself from the outside, and putting him simultaneously in the position of the analyzed and of the analyzer. The peculiarity of *Dexter* is that he creates a constant circularity—or more precisely, a short-circuit—between the lawless and the lawful. What he does is reveal "the 'inner' truth ... that we *are* murderers in the unconscious of our desire" (Žižek 59): but

⁶ On the structurally necessary role of the "false solutions" see Žižek (54 ff.).

⁷ This is not meant as a joke but quite literally: screenplay writers frequently share the same academic background as cultural critics or TV studies scholars. This increasing permeability between their respective worlds may well be one aspect of TV narratives' increasing claim to an aesthetic status: mutual validation between producers and critics of art has been long recognized as a crucial move in the creation of a "field" in the Bourdieusian sense.

⁸ Surprisingly enough, no Lacanian reading is offered in the essays collected in the volume *Dexter and Philosophy* (Greene, Reisch, and Robison-Greene). The volume, though, does provide a number of interesting takes on the first three seasons of the series, including a Burkean reading of the sublime (see Brace). For a psychoanalytic approach to *Dexter* as a character, including a reading of his sublimation processes, see Johnson.

whereas the traditional detective operates a scapegoating mechanism by “play[ing] upon the difference between the factual truth (the accuracy of facts) and the ‘inner’ truth concerning our desire” (59), Dexter forces us to acknowledge our involvement in his acts by holding to us the mirror of our own unconscious desire.⁹

Dexter’s short-circuiting between the lawless and the lawful offers all sorts of different interesting connections. The first one I want to pursue, again by way of the insights offered by Slavoj Žižek, is the question of the relationship between the normal and the abnormal. In Žižek’s terms, we could describe *Dexter* as a staging of the dynamic between the big Other—that is, the rules of the social game, the intersubjective community, the ignorant bystander who must not know how things really are, the illusion structuring social reality—and what Žižek terms the “secret wars” going on behind its surface, under the protection of the social mask. In the first seasons of the series, the big Other comprises almost the totality of the characters (apart from Dexter) and is eminently embodied by Rita, his fiancée, whose ignorance of his activities constantly produces ironic effects.¹⁰ But as Žižek reminds us, the “‘outside’ is never simply a ‘mask’ we wear in public but is rather the symbolic order itself” (73-4): “By ‘pretending to be something,’ by ‘acting as if we were something,’ we assume a certain place in the intersubjective symbolic network, and it is this external place that defines our position” (74). In other words, at the level of the symbolic order, Dexter *really is* the responsible husband, father and pillar of the community that he pretends to be. What we have here is a “special kind of double deception” since, as Žižek puts it, “Only man can *deceive by feigning to deceive*” (73). It is on this logic of double deception, in fact, that the whole mechanism of the “abnormal normality” both of Dexter and of daily reality itself is hinged. This logic, in yet another metalinguistic twist, is repeatedly laid bare in the series, for instance in the course of the second season, when Dexter pretends to be concealing the secret of his drug addiction in order to conceal the secret of his addiction to killing, and during the meetings of the Narcotics Anonymous, performs as the addict that he is by making up a false story that is in fact his own. What is placed *en abyme* here is, simultaneously, the mutually constitutive relation of inner self and social mask, on the one hand, and the actual relation that the storyline entertains with its audience, on the other. Dexter deceives his world by feigning to be normal in order to disguise the monster within him, and in so doing he deceives *us* disguising his actual normality.¹¹

⁹ Following this line of reading, Žižek’s work also offers a possible key to the character’s appeal, which would reside exactly in Dexter’s repeatedly denounced inner void: like the *femme fatale* in the hard-boiled tradition, discussed by Žižek, his “power of fascination masks the void of [his] nonexistence” (65) but “precisely as nonexisting, i.e., at the moment at which ... [he] *assumes* [his] nonexistence, [he] constitutes himself as ‘subject’” (65)—“the dimension of the pure subject fully assuming the death drive” (66).

¹⁰ The dynamic changes after Debra is exposed to her brother’s secret at the end of season 6. By the end of the 8th season, the character will be completely overwhelmed by the emergence of the Real and the consequent shattering of her known world, but Dexter’s position will prove to be equally threatened by the new porousness between his social and his sociopathic selves.

¹¹ Interestingly enough, James Manos, Jr., the character’s developer and the writer of the series pilot, in an interview with Douglas Howard claims that compared with the rest of the characters, “in fact, Dexter is the most sane of them all” and “he’s the most honest, even though he’s living a secret life” (21).

Žižek connects the question of the big Other to the process of “transference of guilt” that he analyzes with reference to Alfred Hitchcock’s films. Murder, he argues, is never simply between the murderer and the victim; it is always *for* a third party who does not know and refuses to know the way in which s/he is implicated in the affair (74). In other words, the ultimate instigator and recipient of the murderer’s act is always the big Other itself—the delusional fullness of the social order. In the series, the big Other is represented (especially in the first seasons) by virtually all characters apart from Dexter himself, but none of the characters embodies it more fully than Dexter’s fiancée and then wife, the knowing-unknowing Rita. Her lack of understanding of Dexter’s secret life and her naiveté in taking everything at face value create countless occasions for irony. But when, in season 2, she decides to throw away her husband’s shoe—the evidence of Dexter’s role in his imprisonment and eventual death, which she refuses to acknowledge—we are suddenly faced with an effective epitome of the wilful ignorance that grounds the very existence of the social world. As inhabitants of the symbolic order, we are placed, like Rita, in the position of third parties, the unknowing instigators or beneficiaries of Dexter’s murders. And yet, by staging both sides of this process, the show offers us an experience that is the reverse of catharsis: as viewers, we are made to move from blissful ignorance to the realization that, *as* third parties, we are always already guilty. If Dexter is, with respect to the symbolic order, a psychotic—in Žižek’s words, “a subject who is not duped by the symbolic order” (79)—with respect to Dexter we are the hysterics, identifying with him to accede to our own desire.

But what is, then, the nature of this desire? This is the moment of finally tackling what I have called “the sublime object of justice.”

Justice and the Sublime

Slavoj Žižek defines the Sublime as the paradox of that which, in the field of representation, provides a view of what is unrepresentable. If, in Lacan’s description, the drive circulates around a lack whose only positive existence is in the form of the unattainable *das Ding*, the Thing, the sublime object is precisely the materialization of the Thing: “‘an object elevated to the dignity of the Thing,’ an ordinary, everyday object that undergoes a kind of transubstantiation and starts to function, in the symbolic economy of the subject, as an embodiment of the impossible Thing, i.e., as materialized Nothingness” (83). Žižek goes on to explain: “This is why the sublime object presents the paradox of an object that is able to subsist only in shadow...as soon as we try to cast away the shadow to reveal the substance, the object itself dissolves; all that remains is the dross of the common object” (83-4), since “the sublime quality of an object is not intrinsic, but rather an effect on its position in the fantasy space” (84).

For Dexter, the function of the sublime object is performed by the code of Harry, the set of instructions that holds an absolute hold over him and to which he returns obsessively, the hidden core that endows his inner void with positive existence and

that makes his enjoyment possible through a positive injunction to “enjoy his symptom,” that is, to kill. Harry is a fantasy figure, literally appearing on stage when Dexter needs to make a choice, as a ghostly personification of the superego: a literal embodiment of the psychoanalytic lesson according to which, in order to exert symbolic authority, the living father must be dead. Like the sublime object, which changes back to ordinary when taken away from the fantasy space, the code of Harry runs the risk of dissolving and temporarily loses its function when Dexter, trying to learn about his past, finds out about Harry’s lies. Significantly, this is also the moment in the plot when Dexter becomes impotent to kill: by reducing Harry to an ordinary, self-serving person, Dexter has inadvertently undermined the sublime object’s authority as a transcendental ethical code, and the whole fantasy structure that gave him consistency and authorization falls apart, revealing the hole in the symbolic order, the emptiness where formerly was the Law, the superego command sustaining reality.

What I wish to suggest is that the fantasy authorized by the code of Harry, and lacking which Dexter finds himself unable to satisfy his urge to kill, is exactly a fantasy of justice—“justice” being, not accidentally, a word that recurs everywhere both in the novels and in the show. Clearly reinscribing, with an ironical wink at the audience, Clint Eastwood’s “Dirty Harry” in Don Siegel’s eponymous film of 1971, Dexter’s father (played by James Remar) looks even physically like an older version of Inspector Callaghan, and his code is inspired by a similar notion of violence and extra-legal action as the best way of protecting society and enforcing justice, despite and beyond the limitations of the legal system. To Dexter, therefore, the code of Harry is not just a way of staying safe from capture and prosecution: it is what keeps him—in spite of, and in fact exactly by virtue of, being a serial killer—ethical, the thin line that separates murder from justice, lawless killing from righteous extrajudicial punishment.

“You can’t be a killer and a hero, it doesn’t work like that!” cries Dexter’s brother in the last episode of the first season, facing him with the choice of becoming a lawless, and therefore a mere pleasure killer by sacrificing his sister, Debra. What Dexter’s brother—himself a serial killer—voices here is, paradoxically, a conventional, legalistic understanding of killing as outside of the precincts of the law, and therefore incompatible with the social mandate and recognition associated with heroism. But by virtue of the code of Harry, Dexter manages exactly to represent himself as *both* a killer *and* a hero. It is the fantasy of justice sustained by the code that makes him possible as a hero. This becomes utterly explicit in his final apotheosis, at the end of season 1, when in a metafictional fantasy, Dexter imagines himself as a popular hero greeted by an enthusiastic crowd of fans. The fantasy is reinforced in the second season, after his victims have begun to resurface and the fact that they all had a criminal record has been circulated in the news. This creates increasing popular support for the as yet unknown killer called The Bay Harbor Butcher, which proves deeply rewarding to Dexter. In episode 5, while investigating a murder in a comic bookstore, he mirrors himself in the classic superhero: “I never

really got the whole superhero thing, but lately it does seem we have a lot in common: tragic beginnings, secret identities, part human, part mutant, archenemies.”¹² Immediately after that, he sees an image of the Dark Defender, the protagonist of a graphic novel project inspired by the Bay Harbor Butcher, that is, himself: “stalker of the night, his blade of vengeance turns wrong into right.” Dexter loses himself in contemplation of the Dark Defender, and then dismisses the image with an ironic twist: “No, Miami’s too hot for all that leather.” But later in the same episode, we see him fantasizing about himself as the Dark Defender, rescuing his mother and himself as a child from her murderers. In the usual metafictional vertigo, we witness, in fiction, a hero modeling himself in fantasy on a fictional hero modeled after a real-life killer coinciding with himself. Could the intricate interconnections between fact and fiction be any more explicit? The episode ironically signals that in the contemporary world, as Mark Seltzer puts it in *True Crime*, “the self-modeling of society is premised on the media doubling of the world” (8). And what social approval for the Butcher’s deeds indicates is that, indeed, Dexter is operating on a social mandate, with the big Other standing as both instigator and beneficiary. So that the question on which the episode ends—“Am I the twisted Bay Harbor Butcher or the valiant Dark Defender?”—is really a question that we as viewers are also called upon to answer, as it concerns more than just the status of Dexter. Does the “blade of vengeance” really “turn wrong into right”?

On a fantasy level, the answer is yes. The slippage between “defender” and “vengeance” is significant in this sense. In fact, Dexter does not defend anybody: what he does is exact retribution as a justification for satisfying his own urges.¹³ And yet, in the episode to which I just referred—the fantasy of himself dressed as the Dark Defender rescuing his mother—killing is represented as a way of retrospectively regaining a lost plenitude, in a complication of temporal dimensions whereby retribution actually becomes a fantasy of defense. In a sort of preemptive strike after the fact, the fantasy of redressal literally “turns wrong into right” by enacting a sort of counterfactual history.

Another way of turning wrong into right, of course, is by legitimizing and justifying extrajudicial violence as righteous. If the fantasy that Dexter is acting out for us is a fantasy of omnipotent and untrammelled justice, as the parallel with the comic book superhero explicitly suggests, then the actual site where private and public desire intersect in *Dexter* is a vigilante notion of justice. The desire to which he

¹² Dexter’s fantasy of himself as a comic-book hero is far from arbitrary; indeed, it is culturally revealing. Comic book superheroes are an important vehicle for representing and circulating notions of crime and justice within popular culture, and they display numerous and evident connections with the romanticized, individualistic vigilante figures of films and TV shows. Both present a rhetoric of retribution and an emphasis on (more or less graphically) violent enforcement of retributive justice. For an analysis of comic books’ portrayals of crime and justice and of readers’ responses to them, and of the ways in which the post-9/11 context affected comic-book notions of heroism, see Phillips and Strobl.

¹³ It is worth noting, however, that by prevalently choosing his victims among serial killers exhibiting a compulsive and repeated criminal behavior, rather than one-time murderers, Dexter blurs the boundary between retribution and defense, creating one more element of social “justification” for his killing.

gives expression is a desire for taking justice in one's own hands, sustained by a fantasy that pretends to endow the vigilante's acts with an inherent lawfulness, albeit an extra-legal one. By making available to us *both* our guilty murderous desire *and* its inherent lawfulness, Dexter makes sure that "we will be able to desire without paying the price for it" (Žižek 59), not by scapegoating, as in classic detective fiction, but by reinstating the legitimacy of the desire itself. The code of Harry—that is, very literally, the Name of the Father, the symbolic, the Law (and it is worth recalling that Harry Morgan was himself a police officer)—is there to guarantee its fundamental righteousness.

The Force of Law

What we witness, experience, and enjoy in *Dexter* is a split between the Law with a capital letter—the symbolic order—and the law with a small one, the legal apparatuses and guarantees, the habeas corpus, the right to be judged by a jury. While Dexter himself, at least at the beginning, explicitly denounces himself as a monster and repeatedly questions the legitimacy of his own compulsive (albeit carefully disciplined) actions, other characters—representatives of the law, such as Harry Morgan and, in the third season, Assistant District Attorney Miguel Prado—recurrently guarantee that Dexter is respecting the spirit of the law and merely contradicting its letter. What we are faced with is a troubling conceptual disjunction, whereby on the one hand force is disassociated from the law, reducing the latter to an impotent husk that is then denounced in its impotence; and on the other hand, force is associated with justice, in ways that evacuate justice of any significance other than the power of exacting retribution. What is the significance of this divorce of the legal from the ethical?

Jeff Lindsay, the author of the *Dexter* book series, who approved and initially co-authored the TV adaptation, discusses moral and ethical questions extensively in his published interviews. "Anybody who's been a cop for longer than a week eventually realizes that there's a huge gap between law and justice," says Lindsay in a 2009 interview with Douglas Howard (8).¹⁴ While insisting that he has no political agenda but rather "a philosophical one" (11), and that "the ethical and moral dilemmas" (12) are his main concern in the stories, Lindsay declares himself a fan of capital punishment for particularly heinous crimes: "Okay, that's what Dexter's doing. Now, he's doing it without benefit of the courts or anything else, but that's pretty much his agenda. So, whether it's right or wrong is not something I want to come out and say. I would just love it if people would think about it a little" (11). Then, asked to account for *Dexter's* success, he goes on to say: "it's hit some primal nerve somewhere, and I think it's partly because people love to see justice done. ... Everybody feels that. A

¹⁴ Similar feelings are expressed in an interview with Luan Gaines: "Q.: Do you think part of Dexter's appeal is the secret vigilantism in people's hearts, the thirst for justice without legal trappings? A.: That's definitely part of it. We're all frustrated with our legal system, and we've all butted heads with the huge difference between real justice and legal justice. But there's also a sense that Dexter is catching the people that slip through the cracks, and protecting us in ways that the cops and courts can't." www.curledup.com/intlinds.htm.

lot of us go, ‘Oh, that’s wrong. Let’s move on and not try to get blood for this.’ But down deep, we all want to see it done” (12).¹⁵ Clearly, the definition of “justice” presupposed here is of the eye-for-an-eye school. In a previous interview, Lindsay had gone as far as to define Dexter, thanks to the code of Harry, “an extremely moral individual”:

Whatever it is that made Dexter a killer is not something you can argue with, and he would be, like a lot of sociopaths, a killer in any case. But because he has had this code engrained into him by his foster father, he’s an extremely moral individual, as long as you take situational ethics seriously, which is to say that he has earned the right to kill because he follows the rules that he has learned to live by. They’re very definite rules, and he follows them very definitely. (Quoted in Goodykoontz)

An interesting element in this statement is the way in which the narrative of victimization and trauma—the serial killer’s typical origin story—is used unilaterally to represent Dexter’s compulsive murderous behavior as “not something you can argue with.”¹⁶ And yet, unlike Dexter, who is entitled to “enjoy his symptom,” the other serial killers who become his victims are never allowed to speak for themselves: in fact they are usually gagged and are only allowed to speak to confess. The implication is clear: unlike “moral” Dexter, they are rapers and paedophiles, the bearers of perverse desires; we are all better off without them, and we don’t care about their history or how they may have become what they are. Dexter, instead, “has earned the right to kill” because he has acquired an implicit social mandate by virtue of the disciplining and channeling of his impulses, whose socially useful function overrules the need for painstaking, time-consuming, and ultimately self-defeating legal procedures. This is connected to the other, really problematic point about situational ethics. First formulated by Episcopal minister Joseph Fletcher in the 1960s, situational ethics insists that moral judgments are decisions to be made contextually, rather than according to absolute prescriptive rules, and that the only standard of moral evaluation is love, that is, concern for the well-being of others. Love and justice coincide, and justice requires an attempt to achieve the greatest good for the greatest number. Popularized as a Christian version of the “end justifies the means” logic, the discourse of situational ethics was revived during the Bush presidency by Dick Cheney’s advocacy of the so called “enhanced interrogation techniques”—torture—in the superior interest of “saving American lives,” and endlessly rehearsed in the media, for instance in the TV shows’ recurrent “ticking bomb” scenario. This argument is explicitly echoed in season 2, episode 3 of *Dexter*, albeit without any

¹⁵ The moral implications of Dexter’s actions are also discussed extensively in several of the essays collected in Greene, Reisch, and Robison-Greene.

¹⁶ It is interesting to note that the victim culture—once mainly connected to social marginality and victimization, and mocked and denounced as such by conservative books like Robert Hughes’s *The Culture of Complaint* (1993) and Alan Dershowitz’s *The Abuse Excuse* (1995)—now surfaces everywhere as sanction or justification of extralegal retribution.

direct reference to the Iraq war or terrorism, by FBI agent Frank Lundy (Keith Carradine), who defends the legitimacy of killing when innocent lives are at stake. Special agent Lundy is presented throughout as an authoritative, expert, and reliable character. Are we really meant, as spectators, to take this version of situational ethics seriously, and to endorse the inherent morality of killing as the lesser evil, provided one “follows the rules”? Whose rules, and based on whose authority?

Part impassive technician amid his shining equipment in a carefully sanitized lab,¹⁷ part high priest in ceremonial garb performing a human sacrifice, Dexter carries out his tortures and killings according to a scrupulous ritual. The killing is preceded by a formal accusation of the captured perpetrator, followed by a moment of confession in perfect Foucauldian style—the prisoner confesses what the confessor already knows, thus subjecting him/herself to the confessor’s authority. The captives are surrounded by the photos of their victims, functioning in their mute presence simultaneously as prosecutor’s exhibits, witnesses, and audience, and signalling that the ritual is being enacted on their behalf. The killing thus takes on some of the quality of a formal trial, with the torture room transformed into a one-on-one courtroom. Similarly to Harry Callaghan and countless other avengers, Dexter acts as “a combination judge, jury, and executioner” (Maynard, Kearney, and Guimond 175).¹⁸ The symbolic trial he stages positions him as an institutional agent—the “third party...between the offender and his victim” that, by taking over the task of retribution, creates the “clear break” severing “the initial tie between vengeance and justice” needed to overcome the individual impulse towards revenge and to “satisfy the moral demand of a veritable sense of justice” (Ricoeur 223). This “third party” position is usually occupied by the state, as the political entity which by expropriating individual citizens of their right to do justice by themselves, claims for itself the exclusive right to arbitrate among competing claims, to ascertain the truth, and to exact punishment for the crime.

An implacably effective, because single-minded, version of the state, Dexter does not mediate between opposite interests and constitutional guarantees, but embraces exclusively the rights of the innocent victims, defined as exclusively in terms of prompt and deadly retribution. This makes him an ideal embodiment of that “fictive, compensatory American sense of justice,” expressed in the widespread conviction that “the charade of justice is in the courtroom, and the real justice is on TV,” that has accompanied the ongoing “shift from a justice of equity to a justice of retribution” (Aladjem xii, 63, 66), especially in the wake of 9/11. Dexter’s appeal as a vigilante superhero conveys the idea that *this* should be the ethical stance and the actual practice of the state, as well. But what if, reversing the terms of the equivalence, we read Dexter not as a killer taking on the prerogatives of the state, but rather as the

¹⁷ In the accurate arrangement of his killing space, *Dexter* inscribes and parodically subverts the countless scenes of autopsy, leading to decisive evidence about crimes, found in such popular shows as *CSI*, *NCIS*, etc.

¹⁸ On the crucial importance of the courtroom ritual as a way of delimiting the exercise of justice from the space of ordinary life, see Garapon and Gewirtz.

state taking on the prerogatives of a killer? In other words, as a fantasy figure, Dexter may be less a figure of the lawless vigilante *as opposed* to the law-governed state, in the Dirty Harry tradition, than a figure of the state *as* a lawless vigilante—a version of that “governmental lawlessness” (Maynard, Kearney, and Guimond xii) to which the U.S. administration resorted, both domestically and internationally, in the wake of the events of September 11, 2001. Perhaps, then, what we have here may be another case of duplicitous deception, whereby the repeated designation of Dexter as exceptional functions exactly as a way of disguising his actual exceptionality, or rather, to disguise the “state of exception” as the ordinary state of the new order.¹⁹

Treading the thin line between enactment and ~~exposure~~, *Dexter* provides us with yet another version of that state of exception that has become endemic to the West in the age of the “Global War on Terror,” and whose ideology has kept surfacing in so many recent TV productions. More specifically, it provides an accurate staging of what Giorgio Agamben, looking back to Jacques ~~Derrida~~ and through him to Walter Benjamin, defines as “the specific contribution of the state of exception”: “the separation of ‘force of law’ from the law”: “a ‘state of the law’ in which, on the one hand, the norm is in force [*vige*] but is not applied (it has no “force” [*forza*]) and, on the other, acts that do not have the value [*valore*] of law acquire its force” (38). What Agamben terms “the force of law,” putting the word “law” under double erasure to indicate its simultaneous inscription and suspension, is a state of anomie where the force of law is separated from law itself, “a force of law without law (which should therefore be written: force-of-law)” (39).

If the state defines itself, in Max Weber’s well-known phrase, through the monopoly on the use of legitimate violence, and if justice, as Ricoeur suggests, “cannot be entirely identified with the suppression of violence” but rather with its displacement “from the private sphere to the advantage of the political entity” (Ricoeur 225), therefore making the act of state-mandated punishment one of the defining prerogatives of the state’s domination, what Dexter reenacts and reclaims, and thus lays bare, is the original foundational violence of the state and of the state’s right to exact punishment, grounded in the state’s power of coercion. By claiming for himself the power to decide over life or death, Dexter installs himself as a sovereign figure, whose blade transforms “wrong into right” in the literal sense of establishing sovereign force as the “mystical” (Agamben 39) foundation of the law, and therefore, as the standard of legitimacy *per se* transforming violence into a legitimate act of justice. This conceptual conflation, ingrained in post-9/11 culture and ceaselessly feeding a culture of vengeance, subsumes justice into violence, thus rendering it as a literal “sublime object”: that which exceeds representation.²⁰ “The

¹⁹ My reading of Dexter as a post-9/11 fantasy of the state as vigilante diverges sharply from Schmid’s take on the connection between 9/11 and the renewed centrality of the serial killer figure in U.S. popular culture. Schmid reads the serial killer as overlapping with the figure of the terrorist, providing both a safely “domestic” and reassuringly nostalgic image of evil, and an economical way of demonizing the terrorist as the troubling Other.

²⁰ It is worth recalling that the sublime as an aesthetic and philosophical category has been associated with physical pain, death, and murder since the eighteenth century. Elana Gomel explores this connection

sublime object of justice,” thus, designates a void. A void where justice should be, or could take place as an event, if only we were able to reclaim different trajectories for our fantasies of justice.

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