

Rest in Pieces

Death on an Undying Medium

**As Seen on TV's *Dexter*, *Nip/Tuck*,
Battlestar Galactica, & *Damages***

**A Television Studies Senior Thesis
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**For my two obsessions;
television and my twin.**

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Teaser: Next, on Rest in Pieces

***“Another day, another dollar.
Another irreplaceable chunk out of a finite and rapidly passing lifetime.”***
(Bill Watterson, Calvin & Hobbes)

I will admit it: death scares me. My body decaying, my self-sufficiency dwindling, my (hopefully) intact mind trapped in a body that I do not feel is my own. Even worse is the horror of knowing I may be forced to watch as this happens to those I love while I am the last one left, alone. Morbid, I know. Yet despite my fear of death, the literature and media I am most drawn to often deal heavily in this topic. Those close to me know of my fear, and perhaps think it bizarre that the quote above, from the infinite archive of *Calvin & Hobbes* comics by Bill Watterson, is my favorite. But I like to believe that it tells me, “Carpe diem!” I seize every day because it is one step closer to my last. However, as I have grown older and dwelled in more determinately “mature” literature, films, and television, I have realized that I have an innate drive to discover death itself. Certainly I am not alone in this macabre fascination. I do not think I overstep when I say the feeling of being disgusted and repulsed, yet not being able to look away, is a common human sensibility. In fact, the preponderance of death on television, a form loved, or at least consumed, by nearly every American, confirms this claim. Note the popularity and cult followings of series like HBO’s *Six Feet Under* (2001), *Band of Brothers* (2001), and *True Blood* (2008), ABC’s *Twin Peaks* (1990), *Lost* (2004), *Grey’s Anatomy* (2005), and *Pushing Daisies* (2007), CBS’s *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (2000), *Ghost Whisperer* (2005), and *Medium* (2005), NBC’s *Law & Order* (1990) and *ER* (1994), USA’s *Monk* (2002) and *The Dead Zone* (2002), FOX’s *Tru Calling* (2003) and *Bones* (2005), and the zombie apocalypse seen on AMC’s *The Walking*

Dead (2010), which has incited a nationwide craze. This list encompasses a wide range of networks, approaches, and audiences that deal with and are captivated by death, quite often in overt and corporeally abject ways. Why am I, along with many others, drawn to these series? What is the significance of death's presence on television?

These are extremely broad questions, and to say this thesis will address them fully *would* be overstepping. In order to focus my untamed curiosity, and in an attempt to at least begin to understand the trend of death on television, I have narrowed down this infinite archive of series into a more manageable one that includes Showtime's *Dexter* (2006), FX's *Nip/Tuck* (2003), SyFy's *Battlestar Galactica* (2004), and DirecTV's *Damages*¹ (2007). Why have I chosen this particular and diverse group of series? Indeed, over the course of this work I ask, both playfully and earnestly, what do a serial killer, a plastic surgeon, a cyborg, and a lawyer have in common? I like to think that by the end of this thesis I will have posited a suitable and perhaps thought-provoking answer to this strange query. However, in this introduction I have yet another admission to make: in initially gathering these series, I did not have a shred of an answer myself. In all honesty, they are four of my favorite series and that is what initially prompted my own desire to work with them more closely.² This is not to say that I thought of my preliminary decision to study them as definite or unyielding. I could very well have realized over the course of my analysis that to combine such seemingly disparate series was ridiculous. But, my experience with them was the opposite. The more time I spent with these shows that differ

¹ Originally aired on FX from 2007 to 2010 for the first through third seasons.

² Though perhaps now, after spending many a sleepless night together, I will say that they have become my four absolute favorite series.

so greatly in narrative content and style³ – differences that will become clear as I attend to each series individually – the more I began to see distinct patterns and consistencies that I had not first realized.

To begin, the initial connection I saw between these series was, not surprisingly, their mutual exploration of death as well as its causes and symptoms. Death is most predominant on *Dexter*; as a series about a serial killer we expect death. But, we also see on *Nip/Tuck* death brought on by abjection and horror, as well as a dysfunctional family constantly on the verge of life and death. On *Battlestar Galactica* we watch as the dying human populace fights for survival against the undying Cylons, a race of their own creation. And the depraved legal world of *Damages*, ruthless and corrupt, boasts numerous character deaths, as well as at least one character per season whose death we see repeated over and over in every episode. In fact, the moral compasses of the main characters of each of these series seem to be completely shattered when it comes to murder. Obviously, *Dexter's* Dexter is a serial killer. *Nip/Tuck's* star surgeons Christian Troy and Sean McNamara, among many other deviances, cover up the murders of several victims who are killed in their operating room.⁴ The humans and Cylons on *Battlestar Galactica* kill each other, at least initially, with no remorse. Moreover, the Cylons die and are resurrected repeatedly, and one particular Cylon does so purposefully. And to summon a list of victims, both direct and indirect, of *Damages's* Patty Hewes would be to engage in an interminable discourse. However, I do not mean to slight these characters. Indeed, we as viewers grow to love (or at least love to hate) and care about each of them. Death and violence certainly also seems to follow them, and the series more generally, despite any actions they may take to avoid it.

³ Not to mention in network.

⁴ Albeit, at the hands of others.

And likewise, we, the viewers, are plagued by death. Our lives are quite short, strikingly *unlike* the endless flow of television. So in watching these death-driven shows, we view that which torments us and compels our own finitude on a medium that is decidedly infinite.

Before delving too deeply into considerations to come, I want to first delineate some of the theoretical models that will inform my analysis across my chapters. One of the most oft referred to televisual concepts is that of Raymond Williams's "flow" outlined in *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*. He describes this "flow" of television as simultaneously continuous and discontinuous: fragmented yet whole. Television is endless, yes, but it is cut up into pieces by ads, series, programming blocks, and networks. Moreover, our own viewing of it is fragmented. Even that one guy who never gets up from the couch can't watch every channel at once. He watches, as the rest of us, in pieces. Furthermore, I note that on an intrinsically human level, our own bodies force us to live life the way we watch television: in a fragmented way (that guy on the couch has to sleep sometime, right?). And if we see this flow of television and our own viewing of it like that of our lives, perhaps television's drive towards death – something we are forcibly drawn to as humans – is not so surprising. These ideas, somewhat to my horror, creep towards a meta-existentialist philosophy that I am in no way ready to work through on my own. Which is why, over the course of my analysis, I will draw upon prominent theorists such as Sigmund Freud, as well as the likes of Julia Kristeva, Jacques Lacan, and Jacques Derrida, who each also draw from the former. Despite any misgivings readers may have over my collection of theorists, I urge an openness to their works not in their academic and logical

legitimacy,⁵ but as a means to understand the series I have gathered and the implications they have about television as a whole. I draw on Freudian psychoanalysis, in particular his theory of “repetition compulsion” and the death drive, and its presence in theories of the abject and the archive laid out by Kristeva and Derrida, respectively, as a means to configure a theory of television itself. In conjunction with and further understood by the series I have chosen, these theories will allow me to attempt to answer my questions about death and television. Specifically, the material body *on* television and *of* television is what will further focus my work. I see a precise rendering of these theories and of television itself in the way the body is figured on these series, a rendering I will further explicate in due course.

The convergence of my own thoughts on death and television, my viewing of the four aforementioned series, and my understanding of the theories I have chosen to work with have led me to the claims I will make here. Essentially, I have found relationships – both inverse and direct – among the way these series represent a drive towards death in a fragmented way, the fragmented mode of viewing with which we watch these series, and the fragmented structure of television itself. These series, each through their own visual and narrative strategies, enable a viewing of death in pieces. Whether we do not see death in its entirety (as in *Dexter*), or are subject to it in explosive, rapidly cut close-ups (as in *Nip/Tuck*), death and abjection is somehow restricted or archived. Similarly, we view these series episode by episode, season by season; in pieces as a result of television’s own structure. In “Viewing Television: The Metapsychology of Endless Consumption,” Beverle Houston maintains:

⁵ Though in no way am I implying this is something they lack.

Institutionally and formally, television insists upon the repetitive reformulation of desire. Rather than suturing the viewer further into a visually re-evoked dream of plentitude, it keeps the ego at a near-panic level of activity, trying, virtually from moment to moment, to control the situation, trying to take some satisfaction, to get some rest from the constant changes, which repeatedly give the lie to television's fervent, body-linked promise. In short...television offers rhythmic, obsessive, mitigated positions dependent in part on taking something like pleasure in the terror of desire itself (184-85).

We repeatedly come back to television, attempting to control our own viewing as well as what we view, and television takes advantage of our consumption. By fragmenting what and how we watch – a fragmentation I will argue is altogether visually, narratively, and structurally maintained – television stimulates endless consumption. Houston reinforces this argument for the most part through her analysis of Williams's flow and television's structure more broadly. Here, in my own work, I would like to expand upon Houston's claim through the structure as well as the narrative and visual content and style of *Dexter*, *Nip/Tuck*, *Battlestar Galactica*, and *Damages*. First, her notion of repetition as stimulating desire I see manifested in these series through an accumulation of repeated pieces, often of death and the body itself, that allow an evolution in viewing. Whether the repeated fragmentation restricts knowledge as it does on *Dexter*, explodes knowledge as it does on *Nip/Tuck*, archives knowledge as it does on *Battlestar Galactica*, or disorders knowledge as it does on *Damages*, with each piece we gain understanding of what we watch. But also, we gain an increased desire *to* watch. Secondly, I see her consideration of our own need to control as a need to master both what we watch and our own lives. Even the characters in these series demonstrate this desire to control. *Dexter's* Dexter controls the purity of the human race, killing those who "deserve" it. As plastic surgeons, *Nip/Tuck's* Sean and Christian control the body, beautifying it as they see fit. The Cylons and humans on *Battlestar Galactica* attempt to control each other. And *Damages's* Patty tries to control,

well, everyone. Watching and wishing to control the death and abjection on screen is a reflection of wanting to control our *own* limited time, or *own* bodies, and the characters subsequently portray this desire. This is all enabled by the perplexing way in which we take “pleasure in the terror of desire itself” (moreover, in the terror of death itself). We wouldn’t watch if it weren’t pleasurable. And altogether the fragmentation of death, viewing, and television are “body-linked” in the way these ideas are figured visually on the series. Bodies of victims – of murder, plastic surgery, suicide, war, and legal corruption – serve to visualize my claims and those made by the series themselves. I see a way in which these shows, in their various renderings of the body, can guide me to an illumination of my broad questions of television and death. Each of these series encourages repetition and consumption, both in viewing and of the body. All of these questions will become clearer as I attempt to answer them through my own analysis of particular narrative, visual, and structural devices in each series. Further, I will mimic the fragmentation of these series in my own fragmentation of what I choose to analyze. That is, not only have I chosen four discrete series from many, within each series I have chosen particular seasons, episodes, and/or arcs to engage with in order to make claims about the program as a whole. It is my hope that this analytical fragmentation will foster consumption, as does television’s fragmentation.

Perhaps my terrifying fear of death and desire, now, to study it are seemingly incompatible impulses. But then again, maybe *by* studying it, I am taking a cue from *Lost*’s Hugo “Hurley” Reyes who says, “Let’s look death in the face and say, ‘Whatever, man!’” (3.10, “Tricia Tanaka is Dead”). In fact, over the course of this work I will take cues from all the series I study. Each chapter, or “episode” as I have named them, is fragmented itself by

epigraphs – quotes that I have drawn from each of the series. These carefully chosen epigraphs serve a few functions. As fragments of the series themselves, they work as indications of what is to come. Similar to television teasers, each epigraph is a textual teaser of my own work. Moreover, these pieces are representative of my collaboration with the series. Not only have I made claims about these series, but also these series in turn have informed my own analysis. Yes, I will draw on theoretical works by Freud, Kristeva, and Derrida, to name a few, but more than anything my ideas have been fostered by the series themselves. This work serves as an illustration of my own experience in viewing and understanding *Dexter*, *Nip/Tuck*, *Battlestar Galactica*, and *Damages*.

Part 1: The Body In Pieces **Dexter's "Ice Truck Killer"**

"Tonight's the night. And it's going to happen again and again."
(*Dexter*, 1.1)

These are Dexter's first words – *or should I say thoughts?* – that the viewer is privy to. Whether this be the first or fifth viewing of this pilot episode, it is likely that "*Tonight's the night for what?*" is not a question running through any viewer's mind. In fact, "*Tonight's the night,*" may very well have been the feeling many viewers had upon the premiere of this series, having eagerly anticipated the show about a serial killer who kills serial killers. The series, broadcast on *Showtime*, has run for six seasons and is scheduled for two more. Based on *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* by Jeff Lindsay, the first of a number of Dexter novels, the series is adapted for television and centers on serial killer Dexter Morgan who "daylights" as a blood spatter analyst for Miami Metro Homicide. Each season runs for twelve episodes and contains a unique villain or foil for Dexter. Season one was the "Ice Truck Killer," season two was the "Bay Harbor Butcher" (Dexter, himself), season three was Assistant District Attorney Michael Prado and "The Skinner," season four was "Trinity" who killed Dexter's fiancée, and the list goes on. With each new obstacle, we watch as Dexter's understanding of his own drive to murder, what he calls his "Dark Passenger," transforms and troubles him.

Dexter, whose premise provides ample opportunity to dissuade the viewer, in fact retains its audience as we return to it "again and again." Its protagonist, a calculating serial killer, could very well revolt us. But he does not – at least not entirely. The audience continues to come back to him season after season. We develop what Sigmund Freud

would term a “repetition compulsion” for a man who has himself developed a much more macabre “repetition compulsion” (Freud, 15). Why are we so compelled by this man who should repulse us? I propose that through a fragmentation of the series’ – and most importantly Dexter’s – graphic moments of abject terror, the audience is able to maintain identification with the man who is now referred to as “America’s favorite serial killer.” Further, this fragmentation generates a reticulation of the physical and narrative body in *Dexter* that imitates the structural form of television itself.

I will more closely analyze this fragmentation through *Dexter*’s first season, in which we see the beginning of the series’ fragmentary vision of the image of the body and of narrative. In her book, *Bodies in Pieces: Fantastic Narrative and Poetics of the Fragment*, Deborah Harter brings to bear her concept of the “fantastic narrative” as one that “promotes the fragment rather than seeking the whole” and leaves “loose ends...purposefully uncontained.” She notes that in the fantastic narrative, consciousness “often drifts among several fragmented psyches. Endings seem inevitably to leave us hesitating. The dream of material completeness...is countered by a seeming delight in reproducing reality in its ‘pieces,’ where even the human body succumbs to morselization” (Harter, 2). In *Dexter*, I claim that there is a similar narrative and formal regulation in which abject moments are revealed, both for the audience and for Dexter himself. Dexter’s own crimes and his rapport with the series’ first recurring serial killer or “Monster of the Season” – the Ice Truck Killer (ITK) – produce a representation of the “body-in-pieces” three-fold.

Firstly, given Dexter’s dual role as a blood-spatter analyst by day and a vigilante serial killer by night, the amount of gore to which the audience is exposed is surprisingly

limited. Dexter's own murders of each "Monster of the Week" are often hidden from view, represented by a streak of blood across the mask he shields his face with, or a quick cut to Dexter disposing of the body in a few "neatly wrapped Heftys" (Dexter, 1.1). Furthermore, ITK's victims are literally given to us *in pieces*. They are for the most part dehumanized in that once we, and Dexter, see them they are drained of blood and tidily packaged, like pieces of deli meat. These pieces are meant to tantalize, succumbing to what Deborah Harter has termed a "morselization" of the body. Each piece offers a portion of "the dream of material completeness," but never provides the reality of that dream. And moreover, both the viewer's and Dexter's knowledge of his violent past is gradually acquired. In fact, it is Dexter's weekly rapport with ITK and the pieces of ITK's victims that primarily governs this controlled revelation. Dexter and the audience must keep returning to and analyzing that which tantalizes in order to gain a bigger picture.

The reticulated nature present in both Dexter's character and the series will elucidate Harter's "body-in-pieces." In conjunction with Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject, and its interplay with stages of psychological development presented by Jacques Lacan, I will analyze the way *Dexter's* narrative slowly unfolds. Further, this manifold fragmentation is what will allow for a discrete breaking down and understanding of the self-reflexivity *Dexter* exhibits as a serial television show about a serial killer who kills serial killers. Finally, the reticulation of *Dexter's* narrative *and* structural form is what drives the audience's own "repetition compulsion" by playing on our anxiety and desire for consumption. Beverle Houston claims that the function of television "is more directly linked to consumption, which it promotes by shattering the imaginary possibility over and over, repeatedly reopening the gap of desire" (184). Houston allows for a reading of the

television medium as one that stimulates endless consumption through fragmentary means, a reading that is further understood through *Dexter*.

“I’m a very neat monster.”
(*Dexter*, 1.1)

In Robyn Longhurst’s book, *Bodies: Exploring Fluid Boundaries*, she examines closely Kristeva’s theory of abjection elucidated in *Powers of Horror*. Longhurst claims that for Kristeva abjection is “the cost of the clean and proper body emerging”:

Abjection is the affect or feeling of anxiety, loathing and disgust that the subject has in encountering certain matter, images and fantasies—the horrible—to which it can respond only with aversion, nausea and distraction...the abject provokes fear and disgust because it exposes the border between self and other. This border is fragile. The abject threatens to dissolve the subject by dissolving the border. The abject is also fascinating, however; it is as though it draws in the subject in order to repel it. (28)

For Kristeva, bodily fluids and corpses in particular provoke feelings of abjection, for they characterize a physical collapse of our distinction between subject and object. This is a distinction that, according to Jacques Lacan, is crucial to the establishment of identity and procedure into the symbolic order and acceptance of societal dictates. However, before delving into an examination of abjection as an element of psychological development laid out by these two theorists, we must further pursue *Dexter’s* relationship with abjection, purely.

Dexter has an innate drive to kill. It is in his nature – a nature that will be explored later on in this chapter. This drive is given guidance by his foster-father, Harry, who taught him a proper “code,” one that Dexter now terms “The Code of Harry.” When he was alive, Harry shared an understanding with Dexter that “it’s not about vengeance, not about retaliation, or balancing the books. It’s about something deep inside” (*Dexter*, 1.2). It was

with this understanding that Harry was able to teach Dexter how to regulate his compulsions. In a flashback we see that he instructed Dexter to “use it for good”; to only kill those who truly “deserve it” (Dexter, 1.1). Though the rules were never written down, we come to know the code as follows:

1. Never get caught.
2. Never kill an innocent.
3. Always be sure.
4. Blend in.

Dexter follows these rules religiously, and they are primarily responsible for his honed sense of order and cleanliness. Now, recall Longhurst’s analysis that the abject “draws in the subject in order to repel it” (28). This stems from Kristeva’s notion that in abjection we are submitted to “a vortex of summons and repulsion” (1). For Dexter and his audience, abjection is regulated by this very neatness in murder – in both the act and the careful preparation – as determined by “The Code of Harry.” This regulation quells our “repulsion” and energizes what “summons” us, our “repetition compulsion.” It does so by shielding us from the proliferation of blood and gore that could very well dominate Dexter’s crime scenes. Further, it is not only Dexter’s orderliness, but also the camera’s deliberate concealment of Dexter’s abject crimes that allow them to happen again and again. *Dexter’s* very first murder scene illuminates these ideas.

Dexter murders the majority of his victims at night – a product of his rule to never get caught. He even goes so far as to comment that “there’s something strange and disarming about looking at a homicide scene in the daylight of Miami” (Dexter, 1.1). Appropriately, the first time we witness one of Dexter’s kills is also at night: “*Tonight’s the night,*” he thinks, as he drives through the streets of downtown Miami. In his car, his face is in shadow. The camera frames a close-up silhouette of our unlikely protagonist, and a red

line of light reflects off his profile. The most concrete image we are given of his face is fragmented: his eyes alone are reflected in his rearview mirror.

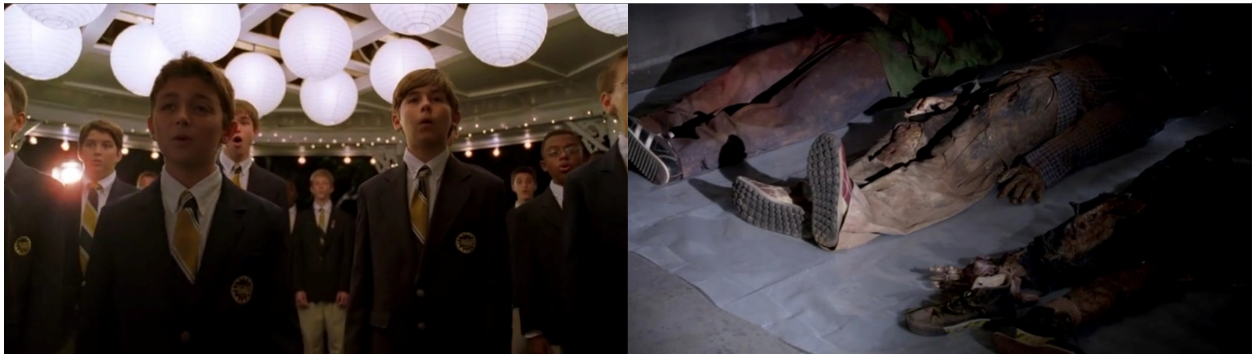


Dexter, 1.1, "Dexter"

"Nice night," his voiceover continues, *"Miami is a great town. I love the Cuban food. Pork sandwiches, my favorite. But I'm hungry for something different now."* This moment constitutes the very first scene in the series. Dexter, portrayed as a predator stalking his prey, tantalizes us. By keeping him hidden from view, his identity only alluded to by incomplete images and suggestive, cursory thoughts, we yearn for more. And soon it will be given.

Cut to a brightly lit gazebo filled with a boy's choir. Hmm, not exactly what we were anticipating, and just the beginning of the series' tendency towards subverting expectations. However, as the camera pans it reveals its true subject and Dexter's target: *"Mike Donovan. He's the one."* The camera cuts again to a shot of Donovan walking alone to his car. The car is in shadow, outlined by a glowing red light. The repetitive red lighting harkens back to Dexter in his own car, and alerts a vigilant audience to his presence in this one. Moreover, the colors of black and red that dominate these first shots indicate violence, blood, and secrecy. Once inside the car, the two are shot in darkness as Dexter orders Mike to drive by threat of strangulation to an abandoned garage: the first of Dexter's carefully chosen kill rooms. *"OPEN YOUR EYES AND LOOK AT WHAT YOU DID!"* Dexter yells

angrily. Then, more quietly and coldly, “Look or I’ll cut your eyelids right off your face.” He forcibly turns Mike’s head, and in effect, our own, to look, and the camera cuts to a shot that pans over three decomposing corpses. The corpses are in stark contrast to nearly all that has been previously shot. They lay on the floor of the garage, brightly lit as opposed to the formerly shadowed images. Further, this abrupt shift in lighting recalls the only other brightly lit scene thus far of the boy’s choir alive and well singing joyously in the gazebo.



Dexter, 1.1, “Dexter”

The severity of this shot and its difference from those preceding it emphasizes the deadness of Donovan’s victims, and by doing so we focus on *his* crimes, rather than Dexter’s. Further, this contrast brings about Kristeva’s notion of a cathartic, “poetic purification” in which we are shielded from the abject “by dint of being immersed in it” (Kristeva, 28). This is a moment in which the abject is repeated, for “one does not get rid of the impure; one can, however, bring it into being a *second time*, and *differently* from the original impurity” (28). By forcing Donovan, and us, to look at the dug-up, dead bodies of the young victims, Dexter recollects Donovan’s crimes for the purpose of purifying and legitimizing his own, which will soon follow. The ensuing dialogue emphasizes this concept of purification:

Donovan: Please, you can have anything!

Dexter: That’s good. Beg. Did these little boys beg?

Donovan: I couldn’t help myself, I couldn’t – please, you have to understand!

Dexter: Trust me I definitely understand. See I can't help myself either. But children, I could never do that. Not like you. Never, ever, kids.

Donovan: Why?

Dexter: I have standards.

This communication between two serial killers places Dexter on a moral high ground. And as unsteady as this ground may be, the sequence has enabled a bizarre purification that only Dexter can obtain in the eyes of the viewer, and himself.

The camera cuts to a shot of Dexter from below, and then to one of Donovan shot from the neck up, in profile, lying on a table and restrained by cellophane. Dexter's gloved hand enters the shot holding a small blade with which he makes a small cut across Donovan's cheek. This is the *only* blood we see in the entire scene. Still shot from below, Dexter places a drop of blood onto a piece of glass as if he is taking a sample – an action that is characteristic of his nature as both a serial killer collecting trophies and as a blood-spatter analyst collecting evidence. As he carries out this neat ritual he muses aloud – to himself, to Donovan, to the audience – that, “Soon you'll be packed into a few neatly wrapped Heftys, and my own small corner of the world will be a neater, happier place. A better place.” Then, he picks up a small power-saw and lowers it towards both his victim and the camera, blade whirring. The scene cuts to a shot of the two from above, and we hear Donovan scream. However, it is what accompanies the camera's composition of this first act of murder that is important: first and foremost, an utter lack of blood, and secondly, the entrance of non-diegetic sound in the form of upbeat Cuban jazz. Both these elements serve to mask the abject and begin suturing the viewer with our vigilante serial killer by subverting our expectations and limiting the graphic bodily horror that could very well have pervaded the scene. In this scene, along with countless murder scenes to come, *Dexter* plays with the “border” between repulsion and compulsion, and, by doing so,

“victims of the abject [become] its fascinated victims—if not its submissive and willing ones” (Kristeva, 9). We have become *Dexter’s* fascinated victims in that despite Dexter’s identification as a serial killer, we are willing and eager to continue on with the series, and in fact label Dexter himself as our “favorite.”⁶

“No blood. What a beautiful idea.”

(Dexter, 1.1)

The limited blood shown in Dexter’s murders is taken to an extreme in the crime scenes of season one’s Ice Truck Killer (ITK), who is revealed to be Dexter’s brother in the season finale. The very day after Dexter kills Mike Donovan he is called into a crime scene by his foster-sister and co-worker at Miami Metro Homicide, Deborah. However, upon arrival our blood spatter-analyst is informed that, “There’s no blood here” (Dexter, 1.1). Dexter revels in this notion, musing to himself *“No blood. No sticky, hot, messy, awful blood. No blood at all. Why hadn’t I thought of that? No blood. What a beautiful idea.”* His co-workers, forensic expert Vince Masuka and Lt. Angel Batista, unveil the body (which has been covered) *literally* piece by piece, and it is revealed to us and Dexter that the killer has drained the body of blood, cut it into manageable pieces, and neatly wrapped each piece in brown parchment paper. Besides the lack of blood, this technique is not so different from Dexter’s neatly wrapped Heftys. Laid out anatomically in the bed of a drained pool (what irony), this fragmented body is only the beginning of a killer and narrative that will similarly be revealed little by little. Perplexed and with no blood for our spatter analyst to evaluate, Dexter leaves with mixed feelings, *“I can’t think. I have to get out of here...That bloodless body. This guy may have exceeded my own abilities.”*

⁶ Dexter is promoted as “America’s Favorite Serial Killer.”

This crime scene evokes Harter's "body-in-pieces" and her description of a fantastic narrative that "delights in reproducing reality in its 'pieces,' where even the human body succumbs to morselization" (2). Put simply, we think of a morsel as a tidbit, just a bite. But there is more to it than that. This bite is meant to whet the audience's appetite, to leave us wanting more. And that's just what we will get as ITK strikes again and again, leaving a trail not of breadcrumbs, but of body parts. Moreover, that's just what we will get as *Dexter* strikes again and again, as a serial television show enticing us with a trail of narrative pieces.

After the second bloodless, and this time also headless, crime scene, Deborah tells Dexter that she noticed the pieces of the bodies were cold: "Meat packing cold," in fact (Dexter, 1.1). By keeping the body parts frozen, ITK wards off bodily decomposition, and for Dexter this is another tantalizing piece of information that the cut-up bodies have delivered. It leads him to deduce that the killer has been using a refrigerated truck to transport the bodies – the use of which gives him his nickname as the "Ice-Truck Killer." This leads to a sequence in which Dexter "stumbles upon" a refrigerated truck after a killing a victim of his own. Of course, we will soon realize that this happy accident was likely not an accident at all, but a deliberate move on ITK's part to continue baiting Dexter. And it works.

When Dexter sees that truck one night, he follows it and eventually it turns around to face a confused and captivated Dexter. As the vehicles pass, the lights of the truck blind him; and as he squints to try to make out the driver, his car windshield is hit by the head from the headless crime scene. For most this would be justified cause for alarm, but Dexter is intrigued. And when he returns home that night he is greeted by another disembodied

head, this time belonging to a Barbie doll. Appropriately, it is affixed to the door of his freezer, which he opens to reveal the rest of the Barbie doll, cut-up and neatly packaged in a fashion similar to that of ITK's victims. Again, Dexter is not frightened, but nevertheless recognizes the strangeness of his reaction, contemplating, *"I suppose I should be upset. Even feel violated. But I'm not. No. In fact I think this is a friendly message. Kind of like, 'Hey, wanna play?' And yes, I wanna play. I really really do"* (Dexter, 1.1).



Dexter, 1.1, "Dexter"

This "morselization" of the body to form an uncanny trail of its pieces is brought to a head in the episode titled, "Let's Give the Boy a Hand" (Dexter, 1.4). In this episode, posed body parts are discovered one by one like bait – calling cards of ITK whose impatience drives him to take more risks in his crime scenes. Why is this trail of body parts not more abject? For Kristeva, religion and art impart what should be abject with meaning and thus lessen their identification as such (Kristeva, 17). For Dexter and ITK, this art is the art of the crime scene. By this time it is clear to Dexter that ITK is playing an artful game of cat and mouse, baiting him with fragments of a picture not yet fully revealed. As each somatic calling card is dropped, it is made clear that this picture is of Dexter's mysterious history. Thus, the fragmented body artfully displayed for investigation gives the pieces meaning beyond that of abject waste. They are what allow Dexter to piece together his own

fragmentary memory. And we as viewers are allowed to gradually decipher this puzzle along with him, rather than be repulsed by overt abject imagery.

One piece prompts Dexter to look through his photo album. On the back of a photograph of himself and Harry at the Angel of Mercy hospital, Dexter finds a smiley face, apparently drawn by ITK. Taking this cue, Dexter goes to the now-abandoned hospital and finds the partially amputated victim whose body parts have been fueling ITK's trail. The victim is strapped to a table for Dexter to kill, blindfolded and bloodied. Dexter stands over the victim who tells him to, "Just do it. I'm ready. Just don't cut me anymore." Shot with his face cast in shadow, Dexter looks at the disfigured man recognizing that, *"He was left here so I would kill him. But my new friend doesn't see me as clearly as he thinks. I can't kill this man. Harry wouldn't want it. And neither would I."* His thoughts are accompanied by the classical guitar melody that typically signifies a profound moment of clarity on Dexter's part. He has resisted an abject body, once again shielding the viewer from graphic violence.

A clattering sound and the flash of a camera interrupts him, and Dexter turns to see the shadow of ITK fleeing the scene. Dexter finally is able to chase the killer, rather than his somatic calling cards, but fails to apprehend ITK and instead is left with the dropped photograph – yet another fragmented image of the picture of his history. Back in his apartment as he sets fire to the incriminating photo Dexter muses:

Everyone hides who they are at least some of the time. Sometimes you bury that part of yourself so deeply that you have to be reminded it's there at all. And sometimes you just want to forget who you are all together. And what about me? Maybe I'll never be the human Harry wanted me to be. But I couldn't kill Tony Tucci. That's not me either. My new friend thought I wouldn't be able to resist the kill he left for me. But I did. I'm not the monster he wants me to be. So I'm neither man nor beast. I'm something new entirely. With my own set of rules. I'm Dexter. BOO.

He then blows out the flaming photograph in a shot a la Kevin Spacey's Verbal Kint/Keyser Söze in *The Usual Suspects* who says in a similar voice over: "And like that, he's gone" (*The Usual Suspects*, 1995).



R: *Dexter*, 1.4, "Let's Give the Boy A Hand"; L: *The Usual Suspects* (Verbal Kint/Keyser Söze)

It's hard not to grin at this reference. Just like Keyser Söze, Dexter refuses to be caught in anyone's web. Like a puff of smoke, any hold on him is fleeting. And similarly, his own hold on himself is evasive, only now coming to light.

ITK's trail of a "body-in-pieces" goes beyond abjection through the parts of Dexter's fragmentary history it reveals. Further, the pieces literalize Harter's notion of the "fantastic narrative" (Harter, 2). This narrative "promotes the fragment rather than seeking the whole." It is one in which "loose ends...are left purposefully uncontained." These pieces constitute an incomplete body, an incomplete history. However, Harter finds that the fantastic narrative is "fraught with parts that eventually give the lie to its desperate efforts at achieving unity—constructs the human body itself in ways that ultimately reveal its careful patchwork—so the fragment...betrays a certain anguished gesture toward this literary form's own, different vision of wholeness" (Harter, 3). ITK's trail of body parts will tug at Dexter's memory more and more, constructing a history out of pieces, demonstrating Harter's narrative and television's own endless yet fragmentary structure.

This reticulated construction of the physical body and the narrative body in *Dexter* tantalizes Dexter and the audience, respectively. It does so by repeatedly reopening the “gap of desire,” thus fueling Dexter’s desire to know more, as well as encouraging the audience’s endless consumption (Houston, 184). With each body part Dexter draws nearer to a constructed whole, but never actually grasps its entirety. Similarly, the audience is fed pieces of the narrative with no clear path or means to an anticipated conclusion. So we keep consuming, falling into the patterns of our relationship with the medium itself. This relationship is described by Houston as one in which the audience develops a “panicky ego, fearing that desire cannot be endured, but must still be silenced, [we] repeatedly [seek] a oneness-through-incorporation by watching more television” (184). The seriality of Dexter, *Dexter*, and the audience’s viewing habits substantiate this claim.

“No bodies, just blood.”
(*Dexter*, 1.10)

For Dexter himself, abjection, “the cost of the clean and proper body emerging,” comes in the form of his drive to kill. This drive forces him to face abjection over and over. Longhurst describes Kristeva’s definition of abjection as that which signals “the tenuous grasp the subject has over its identity and bodily boundaries, the ever-present possibility of sliding back into the corporeal abyss out of which it was formed” (29). It is Dexter’s history and the formation of his identity that has directed him to repeatedly confront the abject. However, it is not until ITK that the abject forces him, and us, to confront this past. As the season progresses and Dexter comes closer to piecing together his fragmented memory, the abject as represented on screen proliferates. Kristeva addresses this repetitive abjection, describing a process of abjection of the self:

If it be true that the object simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject, one can understand that it is experienced at the peak of its strength when the subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very *being*, that it is none other than object. The abjection of self would be the culminating form of that experience of the subject to which it is revealed that all its objects are based merely on the inaugural *loss* that laid the foundations of its own being (5).

For *Dexter*, we witness an increasingly bloodied screen that ultimately culminates in the episode “Seeing Red” (1.10). It is in this episode that the object becomes such that it can no longer be masked. A sea of blood washes away Dexter’s neatness that formerly regulated our abjection, and exposes a piece of Dexter’s lost history – moreover, his history *of* loss – that he can no longer repress.

Dexter is called into a crime scene at the Marina View Hotel. As the primary blood-spatter analyst, he is instructed to go in on his own first. Dexter rides up the elevator and the doors open to reveal him standing in his crisp white haz-mat suit at the end of a very long hallway. This shot mirrors the infamous bloody elevator scene from Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining* (1980), foreshadowing the object horror Dexter will face at the hallway’s end.



L: *Dexter*, 1.10, “Seeing Red”; R: *The Shining* (1980)

In *The Shining*, the child Danny proceeds to have a vision of the elevator door opening to release a torrent of blood that washes down the hotel’s hallway, eventually covering even the lens of the camera. Similarly, at the end of *this* hotel hallway, Dexter will encounter a

room soaked in blood, and subsequent visions of his own bloodied childhood experience when his mother was killed. By evoking this parallel to *The Shining*, *Dexter* produces an anxiety in its audience for what is to come. In *Film Horror and the Body Fantastic*, Linda Badley recalls Freud's definition of horror "in terms of the irrational, 'gut level' fear, the uncanny (*unheimlich*), inspired by certain images and experiences in which the subject recognizes a repressed memory from childhood or an undiscovered aspect of the self" (11). Here, Dexter will soon experience this repressed memory, and by providing the audience with an allusion to the classic horror of *The Shining*, we are filled with fear, waiting for that torrent of blood.

Justifying this parallel and fulfilling our anxious expectations (an action pivotal in its own right in a series that usually defies them), Dexter walks down the hallway and opens the door to reveal a room soaked in what seems to be gallons of blood. Pure, unfragmented, total abjection. As he enters the room we hear the sounds of a child screaming, and shots of the blood-soaked hotel room are punctuated by fragmented images of baby Dexter sitting in a pool of his mother's blood.



Dexter, 1.10, "Seeing Red"

Suddenly Dexter faints, falling head first into the mess. The camera zooms out to reveal his body and stark white suit now covered in "sticky, hot, messy, awful blood" (*Dexter*, 1.1). This is the first time Dexter has had such a physical reaction to the abject. Further, this image of

graphic abject horror is held in opposition to previous crime scenes that are devoid of blood entirely. By abstaining until now, the series has enabled the possibility for the audience to have a similarly physical, gut-level reaction to this image that will facilitate further identification with a very unlikely hero through a shared experience of the abject.



Dexter, 1.10, "Seeing Red"

Not only does Dexter have an intense *physical* reaction to the blood, but also in this sequence we witness the abject forcing out a repressed image from Dexter's childhood, one in which he watches as his mother is cut up with a chainsaw and then sits, unable to escape, in a deep pool of her blood as he is locked with her corpse in a storage container for two days. Indeed, as Freud defines it, "horror" has provoked a "gut level fear" as well as "repressed memory from childhood [*and*] an undiscovered aspect of the self" (Badley, 11). Dexter picks himself up and runs out of the room gasping and breathing heavily. He exits the hotel visibly upset, his face pale and ironically drained of blood. His co-workers at Miami Metro voice their concern and ask him what he saw. Sergeant Doakes, who Dexter has noted is the only one suspicious of him, takes a jab at Dexter saying, "Something finally got to you. I guess you're human after all." And Dexter, rather than rejecting this statement, confirms it later when he puzzles over his reaction thinking, "*I've never met a problem I can't manage. Until the boy in the blood.*"

Dexter struggles with these pieces of his identity that have been provoked by the bloody hotel room. That which is abject has forced him to confront his own violent past. As we are faced with more bloodied images, Dexter is forced to delve deeper into his repressed memories. The scene recalls Kristeva's idea that, "The abjection of self would be the culminating form of that experience of the subject to which it is revealed that all its objects are based merely on the inaugural *loss* that laid the foundations of its own being" (5). Here, Dexter's violent loss of his mother during childhood is what has given him the drive to kill, the drive to experience the abject over and over again. Dexter "is none other than the abject" (Kristeva, 5). And with this scene a catharsis of the abject forces him to start to realize that.

Remember, now, the end of the pilot episode entitled "Dexter" and Dexter's discovery of the Barbie in his freezer, cut into pieces as were ITK's victims. Upon finding the doll, Dexter reaches inside the freezer to pick up its dismembered arm, to which a Barbie-sized mirror is affixed. Dexter looks at himself in the mirror, his eye reflected in the small glass, and then, breaking the fourth wall, he looks into the camera at us.



Dexter, 1.1, "Dexter"

Both literally and figuratively, this sequence recalls Lacan's idea of the "mirror stage" and Kristeva's application of the abject to this stage in development. Bernadette Wegenstein discusses the mirror stage in *Re:Skin*, explaining that for Lacan, "the only way we can

perceive our bodily selves is through a deceptive image that is framed by somebody *else's* gaze (in the beginning, the mother's or her substitute's), or through the frame of a screen or interface of some kind (mirror, computer interface, television monitor etc)" (84). Applying this to Dexter, we can claim that Dexter's lack of a mother as a result of her brutal murder before his very eyes robbed him of this perception of self and caused him to repress this key moment of identity formation. Wegenstein goes on to note that, "Lacan has specified that a child always comes to its self-identity via a fundamental misrecognition of its own body. This concept of a 'body in pieces' is, in other words, already distinctly phenomenological, meaning that the infant's own 'experience' of itself prior to the organization of the image in the mirror *is* a body-in-pieces" (88). For Dexter, his "organization of the image in the mirror" comes from the fragmented body-in-pieces we see formed in the series. His repressed history and identity is brought to a whole bit by bit by means of ITK, as Dexter works through a delayed mirror stage.

Lacan's fundamental conception of the mirror stage stems from the idea that, as infants, humans pass through a stage in which an external body image (as reflected in a mirror or the mother) is visualized and in turn gives rise to a psychological response and formation of the representation of the self as "I." However, in reality a unified body does not resemble the infant's own physical vulnerability, and thus it is an "*Ideal-I*" that is formed (Lacan, 44). The human will strive for the perfect and unattainable "*Ideal-I*" throughout its life. For Dexter this "*Ideal-I*" has come about through and is troubled by abjection, for at this stage his mother was dismembered by a chainsaw and murdered in front of him. So the person who should have been a "mirror" for Dexter, someone who he could emulate, became a fragmented, chaotic body before his very eyes. He tells us through

one of his didactic voiceovers, “*People fake a lot of human interactions, but I feel like I fake them all, and I fake them very well. That’s my burden, I guess.*” (*Dexter*, 1.1). Given his traumatic experience during a formative stage, Dexter has never quite experienced himself as whole, and instead fakes it: he has a dark passenger, not a soul. And thus his drive for the abject, to kill, is born.

However, ITK’s token Barbie mirror and trail of body parts will lead Dexter through a reassessment of this abject stage in which he has been stuck. The mirror holding his fragmented image is only the beginning of a quest for a new perfect “Ideal-I” that will continue throughout the series as Dexter grapples with his own issues of repression, memory, and morality. Not only does he see himself as more “ideal” than his even more broken brother in this particular season, he also slowly begins to see himself as part of a whole over the course of the entire series.

On a more televisual level, the fragmentation of the body and piecing together of Dexter’s past has mirrored our own experience with the series and the medium as a whole. When Dexter looks at us after looking in the mirror it is as if he is inviting us to play along with him and ITK – and we do. We come back every week. Harter claims that, “In a certain sense all narrative reality is a problem in emergence—a strategic uncovering, in a strategic order, of images that can only ever be partial. The writer must construct a world through the process of description in language, and to describe a thing is already to be obliged to break it into its parts before striving in the telling to reassemble its wholeness” (10). Similarly, we puzzle along with *Dexter*, working through the pieces in order to picture a unified whole – image by image, episode by episode, season by season.

***“My darkness revealed. My shadowed self embraced...
In their darkest dreams.”***

(Dexter, 1.12, “Born Free”)

In the final showdown with ITK, who has only in the final episode been revealed as Dexter’s long-lost brother, Dexter slits ITK’s throat and hangs him up to drain his blood, staging his death as a suicide of his own making. This is the very first time we see Dexter make a deadly cut on screen (thus far his on screen cuts being to the cheek to obtain a sample). Here, when we finally see a very graphic representation of Dexter taking a life, we also witness his cool exterior disrupted by feelings of horror and disgust – abjection. And thus a pattern has been developed in which moments of graphic abjection accompany those rare moments of emotion for Dexter, when things actually “get to him.” However, not to overwhelm Dexter or the viewer, these moments are fragmented, brought to us slowly, and again, rarely. It is through this regulation of bodily abjection that our compulsion for the series is maintained.



Dexter, 1.12, “Born Free”

Little by little, we have obtained pieces of Dexter’s history through regulation of the abject and the narrative. However, despite all that we think we may know about Dexter, when contemplating a world in which everyone knows who he is – in fact, imagining a parade held in his honor – Dexter scoffs saying, “In their darkest dreams.” He

acknowledges that this perfect world in which all can be revealed is a fairytale. And in doing so *Dexter* gives a little wink to the audience. We may never know all that is *darkly, dreaming*⁷, disturbing, Dexter.

⁷ In reference to *Darkly Dreaming Dexter*, the first novel in Jeff Lindsay's series upon which the television show was based.

Part 2: The Body Under the Knife **Nip/Tuck's "Perfect Lie"**

"When you stop striving for perfection you might as well be dead."
(*Nip/Tuck*, 1.01, "Pilot")

Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story *The Birthmark* tells the tale of Aylmer, a powerful scientist, and his new wife Georgiana. Georgiana is beautiful and perfect in every way, save a small, hand-shaped birthmark on her cheek. Though it did not at first bother him, Aylmer becomes obsessed with the birthmark, and soon so does Georgiana when she sees Aylmer's repulsion. One night, Aylmer has a dream of cutting the birthmark from Georgiana's face. However, in order to remove it he must cut so deep as to also cut out her heart. When he tells Georgiana his dream she is horrified, and agrees to let him attempt to remove the birthmark. He tries a number of remedies, but the one that finally works takes both the birthmark and Georgiana's life. A number of interpretations of Hawthorne's tragic tale have been devised, but a common belief is that the story represents human perfection as an unattainable goal (Lawson, 25). In the story, "perfection" – at least in the eyes of Aylmer – is only reached in Georgiana's death, and thus is essentially unreachable. This theme as mapped out by the body recurs contemporarily on television. Here, in my own accumulation of series, it is most notable in *Nip/Tuck* and *Dexter*, though one could argue for its prevalence in *Battlestar Galactica* and *Damages* as well.

Simply put, through the "Code of Harry" Dexter kills serial killers, in his mind removing the world of its imperfections. Like Dexter, *Nip/Tuck's* Sean McNamara and Christian Troy also perfect the world, but do so through cosmetic surgery. Now, in Hawthorne's story I would argue that what is most shocking is Aylmer's dream, not

Georgiana's actual death. Describing Aylmer's dream of operating on his wife, Hawthorne writes, "the deeper went the knife, the deeper sank the hand." He conjures up a grotesque image of a near-perfect face brutalized and disfigured for its flaws. Written in 1843, this short story describes a graphic procedure akin to the modern day plastic surgery that is recreated on *Nip/Tuck*. The gore presented in Aylmer's dream and on television's *Nip/Tuck* is repellent. In fact, the images produced by both works are, by Kristeva's definition, abject – that of "the clean and proper body emerging" (Longhurst, 28).

Televisually, I find the horror of *Dexter*, specifically in his kill rooms, to be much less physically affecting than that in the surgery scenes of *Nip/Tuck*. Yes, one could argue that the act of taking a life is much more horrific than plastic surgery, but it is in *Nip/Tuck's* visualization of the cut up body on screen that my claim finds its stake. In my last chapter I argued that *Dexter* regulates bodily abjection through various camera, narrative, and structural techniques. *Nip/Tuck*, on the other hand, assaults us with bodily horror. Even the simplest of surgeries become grisly spectacles. Whereas *Dexter* glues my eyes to the screen in morbid fascination, the explicit abjection in *Nip/Tuck* causes me to recoil and even cover my eyes in disgust. The brightly lit, music-filled OR's are exponentially more horrific than *Dexter's* kill rooms. And what of these ritualized spaces where the body finds itself in these series? *Dexter's* kill rooms are inherently violent and, apart from our involvement as witnesses, they exist for *Dexter* and his victims, alone. They are spaces for *Dexter's* ritualized murders and are rarely impinged upon by the outside world. *Nip/Tuck's* OR's, on the other hand, while designed to be sterile, are constantly invaded by outside forces, as are the bodies being operated on. And these bodies, made visually horrific, as is Aylmer's dream, suggest that corporeal perfection (at least one definition of it) and

corporeal abjection are oftentimes inextricably linked. In this chapter, I will advance my study of the abject body, specifically here as televisual spectacle. Further, I will establish this corporeal display as one layer of a multi-faceted invasion that occurs on *Nip/Tuck*, one that is simultaneously spatial, structural, and televisual.

“Tell me what you don’t like about yourself.”

(Nip/Tuck, 5.15, “Candy Richards”)

Nip/Tuck chronicles the lives of Sean McNamara and Christian Troy; partners of a cosmetic surgery practice located in Miami, Florida and later, Los Angeles, California. The series was created by Ryan Murphy and aired on FX for six seasons. It began in 2003 and ended in 2009, running for a total of 100 episodes. In an interview with *NPR*, Ryan Murphy explained that *Nip/Tuck* is essentially a show about “excess...so much crime, so much sex, so much surgery, so much money, so much glamour, so much skin” (Murphy). He claims that his inspiration came from Mary Shelley’s “Frankenstein”; that *Nip/Tuck* was a way of exposing “the creation of this monster in our culture” (Murphy). The excessive “monster” of which he speaks is revealed through the lives and practice of Sean and Christian, *Nip/Tuck*’s protagonists – flawed as they are. Each episode is titled for a client, though at times they are named for the series’ central characters. This nomenclature reflects the way in which the patient’s bodies stand in for central themes of the episodes or narrative plot points from Sean and Christian’s personal lives. Though in reality, due to *Nip/Tuck*’s “excess,” one body is never truly enough. The series’ relation of graphic surgery scenes to the dysfunctional McNamara/Troy family produces a complex web of abject corporeal and spatial invasion and horror. In order to dissect this idea I will turn to an episode from *Nip/Tuck*’s fifth season entitled “Candy Richards” (5.15). The episode contains four main

narrative arcs including the surgery of B-list actress Candy Richards, Julia McNamara's "attempted suicide," the incestuous affair between Christian's biological son Matt and illegitimate daughter Emme Lowell, and finally Sean being stalked and attacked by his talent agent Colleen Rose. Each of these plots deal with themes of horror, invasion, and concealed decay of the *Nip/Tuck* family. We will see that Candy's body, as the title of the episode, and even the body of the text itself, can barely contain these narratives.

The episode begins in typical *Nip/Tuck* fashion in a consult with Candy, who has had an unfortunate run-in with cheap plastic surgery obtained in Bangkok. Her whole body is one big botch-job, and, referring to her uneven breast size, she even calls herself "a leaning human tower of Pisa" (5.15). This simple statement objectifies Candy's body and alludes to *Nip/Tuck's* construction of the body as symbol, a concept that will be expounded upon as the episode continues. The disfigured actress goes on to explain that getting the surgery in Thailand was in an effort to stay out of the tabloids and protect her image as "a goddamn icon" with "a recurring role on every nighttime drama since Judging 'goddamn' Amy." She mentions her roles in *Law and Order: SVU*, *Trial by Jury*, *CSI*, *Cold Case*, and of course *Nip/Tuck's* own fictional series in which Sean has a leading role, *Hearts & Scalpels*. In this brief appointment taking place in the first two minutes of the episode *Nip/Tuck* has already undergone a layer of televisual invasion. By calling attention to competing nighttime dramas, *Nip/Tuck* allows itself to be invaded by other networks through self- and intertextual referentiality. Further, the surgery consult itself has been annexed by Sean's new claim to fame on *Hearts & Scalpels*. In this episode Sean later comments: "I play a doctor on TV. I pretend to do the thing I actually do, and suddenly I'm cool," which alludes to his narrative profession as an actor as well as to the fact that he is indeed an actor

playing a plastic surgeon on *Nip/Tuck*. In light of the way *Dexter* establishes a layered structure as a serial television show about a serial killer who kills serial killers, *Nip/Tuck* undergoes a similar effect in that it is a television drama about plastic surgeons that play plastic surgeons in their own television drama. However, *Nip/Tuck* goes a step beyond *Dexter* in its reference to other series on different networks. Jeffrey Sconce, in a discussion of the “new textual boundaries” of television – or lack thereof – notes, “such reflexivity is about breaking frame” (106). In acknowledging the overall diegesis of which it is a part, *Nip/Tuck* manifests a layered invasion that becomes increasingly prevalent throughout the series and particularly in this episode.

Candy goes into surgery immediately after her consult. However, to simply call it surgery would be a gross understatement. *Nip/Tuck*'s carefully crafted operating room scenes are visual symphonies. Each surgery comes with its own soundtrack, and as the body is cut open on the table, a number of choreographed close-ups are cut together in rhythm with the song as if part of a grotesque music video. Thus we become witness to the horror of cosmetic surgery – horror that typically remains hidden behind the doors of the operating room but that here is vividly and excessively revealed as almost operatic. The body is situated as spectacle and we its shocked spectators. Candy has gone from being a mutilated yet closed body in the consult, to a mutilated open body on the table as Sean and Christian excise the excess. Their hands move in and out of the frame as they remove Candy's seeming abjection: what has been added, that which is outside of the body.

According to Kristeva, the inside of the body

shows up in order to compensate for the collapse of the border between inside and outside. It is as if the skin, a fragile container, no longer guaranteed the integrity of one's own and clean self but, scraped or transparent, invisible or taut, gave way before the dejection of its contents (53).

Pre-surgery, Candy's skin looks as if it is literally going to be ripped open by that which has been shoved beneath it. Her engorged lips and breasts pull her skin "taut" and her eyes seem to be on the verge of popping right out of her head. The surgery is what lets this excess "give way": it is the "collapse" of which Kristeva speaks.



Nip/Tuck, 5.15, "Candy Richards"

In close-up, fragmented shots, Candy Richards becomes a series of similarly fragmented body parts. The colors of the operating room – crisp blue sheets, clean white gauze, and silver surgical instruments – and all that is outside the body, are in stark contrast to that which is removed from the body. With every cut comes an explosion of bright red blood that stains the sterile, clean world: clear visual abjection. Each shot is cut to the music and lasts only a few seconds, if that. Irene Cara's "Fame" accompanies the montage. She sings, "I feel it comin' together, people will see me and cry. Fame! I'm gonna make it to heaven, light up the sky like a flame. Fame! I'm gonna live forever, baby remember my name." These lyrics ring all too true for Candy, whose desire for fame has been made painfully obvious with this sequence. Ironically, the line "people will see me and cry" carries another meaning when coexisting with bloodied images of Candy's cut up body that make us cringe.



Nip/Tuck, 5.15, "Candy Richards"

Just as the body is invaded and made abject through the procedure, we as viewers are made to invade the operating room and become witness to the gruesome bodily spectacle. David Foster Wallace in "Television and U.S. Fiction" notes, "the television screen affords access only one way...we can see them; they can't see us" so in a sense "we're transcending privacy and feeding on unself-conscious human activity" (154). Perhaps calling the choice to undergo plastic surgery "unself-conscious" would be misguided in that it is indeed self-consciousness that encourages one to make that choice. However, the *activity* in the operating room could indeed be called "unself-conscious" for surgery itself is typically a private experience. Yet *Nip/Tuck* allows us to invade this experience and in doing so, exposes it as grotesque. We are made witness to the horror and fragmentation waged upon the body, and thus *Nip/Tuck* incites a sort of responsibility in the spectator. The body depicted in these scenes shocks and repulses us, and to what end? Could *Nip/Tuck* be provoking us to think about the impact of plastic surgery and our own participation in it? It is a conceivable possibility. In *The Picture of Abjection: Film, Fetish, and the Nature of Difference*, Tina Chanter argues, "by demanding that we attend to the abject" we, as a society, "confront the ways in which we systematically ask certain of our members to bear burdens that are unbearable" (94). I argue that the "certain members" bearing "unbearable burdens" in *Nip/Tuck* are primarily women, a claim that

will be sustained as I continue to dissect this single episode of *Nip/Tuck*. Whether or not this narrative tendency was intentional, it provokes us nonetheless. One thing I will say for certain is that these scenes, in their penchant for cutting – both literally and figuratively – acquire a discontinuous flow similar to that of television itself. The extremity of editing and horrific violation of the body composes a dual fragmentation that mimics both our own compulsion to repeatedly view as well as the interrupted flow of television.

“Julia’s been shot.”
(*Nip/Tuck*, 5.15, “Candy Richards”)

As Candy’s surgery continues, the music fades and the doctors talk among themselves, debating the allure of fame. Wide shots of the operating room and the continuous beeping of Candy’s heart monitor replace claustrophobic close-ups and upbeat music. Candy’s body remains out of sight, as our attention shifts to Sean, Christian, and their anesthesiologist, Liz. Here *Nip/Tuck* makes clear the power structure of the series that situates the clients as bodies through which the lives of Sean and Christian can be figured. *Nip/Tuck* is famous, or perhaps infamous, for its graphic surgery scenes, but the graphic images lasted a mere thirty seconds before giving way to the lives of the surgeons. This brevity of action mimics the rapidity in which *Nip/Tuck*’s narrative proceeds in any given episode – lulls in plot do not exist on the series. Rather than cut *away* to simultaneous action, plot cuts *in* to the operating room, literally. The doctors are repeatedly interrupted during surgery – further intimation of television’s own intermittent flow – as their personal lives refuse to respect the privacy of the operating room.

After a short dialogue during Candy’s surgery, the doctors and we become aware of two policemen talking to one of the operating room attendants beyond the glass. Christian

leaves to speak with them and reenters the operating room with the news that “Julia’s been shot.” It is important that rather than giving us this information as Christian received it *outside* the operating room; *Nip/Tuck* delivers the news *inside* the operating room. Though this is the first instance in this episode of Sean and Christian’s own lives invading the surgery rooms, it is a device used across the series. In this way, too, the operating room becomes a place of narrative significance. The constant breach of its walls transforms the space and the body on the table into a channel through which the horror of the family is projected onto the horror of the scene itself. Like the various bodies that repeatedly lie open, bloodied, and vulnerable on the table, Sean and Christian’s family is repeatedly ruptured. The family members are incestuous and abusive, they lie, cheat, and alienate one another to no end – they are an excessively dysfunctional American family. Comparable to the way in which the surgeries work to conceal the client’s flaws, Sean and Christian work throughout the series to conceal the flaws of their own family. And, through a trickle-down effect flowing from family to practice to patient, *Nip/Tuck* works through the theme of purification through abjection.

Sean and Christian discover that Julia has “attempted suicide.” However, we know differently. The series has gradually created a complex web of relationships between characters, which a first-time viewer would have extreme difficulty grasping in one episode. Julia and Sean, parents to seemingly well-adjusted children Matt and Annie, were happily married when the series began. Sean and Christian’s relationship, while somewhat dysfunctional, seemed relatively healthy. But this was soon revealed to be yet another instance in which the surface veiled something deeply troubled. In the second season, Matt was found to be *Christian’s* biological son – the product of an affair. After a trying divorce

from Sean in season three, Julia came out as bisexual in season five and began dating a woman whose daughter, Eden, tried to kill her, first by poison, and recently, in this case of “attempted suicide,” by gunshot. The divorce, Julia’s new lesbian relationship, and the attempts on her life are just a few concrete demonstrations of the splintering of the McNamara/Troy family. Notice how *Nip/Tuck*’s character relations are just as fragmented and flawed as the bodies on the operating table. But, just as Candy’s original surgery created more flaws than it hid, and just as the surgery scenes erupt with bodily horror, the more the McNamara/Troy family tries to hide their flaws, the more they are exposed, often in abject ways. However, this revelation is far from gradual (as it is in *Dexter*). Whereas most dramatic television series reveal a single narrative twist per episode, each episode of *Nip/Tuck* deals in multiple narrative (and visual) explosions, and cumulatively introduces a mass of actions we must sort through over time. And in doing so, the series demands that we read across episodes in order to piece together and pick apart the intricate narrative web. However, we are often not given the time to do so before we are confronted with another explosion of drama. For example, recurring villain Escobar Gallardo, a ruthless and violent drug lord from South America introduced in *Nip/Tuck*’s pilot episode, makes many unexpected appearances across the course of the series. The abruptness and volatility of his returns, in crimes involving the trafficking of women with heroine-filled breasts in season one as well as in Sean’s own disturbed hallucinations later in the series, forces us to suddenly incorporate a complex character into what is likely an already overloaded plot line. In such instances, total resolution of plot is lacking on *Nip/Tuck*.

In the episode of my focus, Sean, who is still in love with Julia, remains adamant that it wasn’t attempted suicide and rightly suspects Eden. However, this plot will not be

resolved until later in season five because Julia wakes up from surgery with amnesia. Sean then uses Julia's vulnerable state as a means, in his eyes, to make everything "perfect" again. He tells Julia that they are still happily married, and Julia of course believes him. Lacking memory, Julia is, in a sense, just a body – one that Sean takes hold of and uses for his own selfish purposes. This compulsive grasp illuminates an idea that Chanter discusses in her theory on abjection: the "use of the female body as a metaphor for the division between surface allure and concealed decay" (85). Eden's second attempted murder of Julia – whose body is already decaying from poison – and Julia's subsequent memory loss establishes Julia and her broken body as this metaphor. On the surface she has been sewn up, the accident only leaving a scar, but her mind is in a state of decay. Through both the practice and plastic surgery and the manipulation of the family, *Nip/Tuck* repeatedly works over the bodies of the female characters to perfect and purify corporeal and familial flaws.

However, despite the effort to conceal transgressions, they never remain hidden for long. We are introduced to another character that embodies this idea in season two when Emme Lowell comes to McNamara/Troy to request the removal of a birthmark covering half her face. To others, it is seen as detraction from her otherwise perfect beauty, similar to the way Georgiana's birthmark is seen by Aylmer as a grotesque flaw in Hawthorne's tale. After having the surgery, Emme meets Matt, and the two begin sleeping together. It is not until the "Candy Richards" episode in season five (the focus of this chapter) that Emme is revealed to be Christian's illegitimate daughter – a past transgression from which Christian hid unawares until now – making her relationship with Matt incest. Not only did Christian's past force its way into the present, but incest is also a repeated subject on *Nip/Tuck*, specifically for Matt's character. In fact, in season two Matt also dates Ava

Moore, a transsexual woman who had an incestuous relationship with her own son. By repeating such plot devices *Nip/Tuck* plagues its characters with perpetual limitations and thus suggests inescapability from transgressions. Furthermore, these transgressions are, appropriately, *embodied*. Julia's affair is realized in her son. Christian's womanizing ways manifests itself in multiple children – he has three out of wedlock in the course of the series, including Emme. Sean's obsession with fame comes back to haunt him in the form of his crazed agent Colleen, a plot point that will be further discussed later in this chapter.

Unlike Hawthorne's Georgiana, however, the removal of Emme's birthmark does not take her life. But, like Aylmer, once Matt becomes aware of a flaw (i.e. that their intimacy is incest), he concludes that he and Emme need to cut ties entirely, excising Emme as Aylmer excised Georgiana's birthmark. So, despite the fact that she is Christian's daughter, after a mere two-episode stint on *Nip/Tuck* Emme leaves Los Angeles, never to return. And thus, like Georgiana, Emme *is* expelled with the loss of her birthmark, in a greater sense, from the family. Chanter reviews Kristeva's theory of abjection by describing it as coming about through "rituals" that "map the world into territories" and "divide excrement from the body...and ultimately, society from its outcasts" (161). Though Emme's expulsion was not abject in a bodily sense, if we look at the McNamara/Troy family as the "society," Emme *is* abject in the sense that she is made an "outcast" of the family. Furthermore, Emme's short run on *Nip/Tuck* is yet another case of the series' propagation of a pattern in which "a woman's body becomes the site of abjection" due to the desires or actions of a man (Chanter, 141).

Both *The Birthmark* and *Nip/Tuck* strive for perfection through surgery, literally and figuratively. However, this dream, purely, is dashed. Rather, in our invasion of the

operating rooms and of Julia and Emme's characters, I argue that this theme is molded to propose perfection as attainable *only* through abjection. Plastic surgery is about hiding flaws. In revealing to us the gruesome means through which these flaws are hidden by making us witness to the spectacle of the body on the table, this direct relationship between abjection and perfection is established. Perfection is, in fact, requires impurity to attain. Julia and Emme, whose narrative roles reveal the flaws of the family, further establish this relationship. They become abject – Julia is shot and gets amnesia and Emme is essentially exiled – in order for the family to be “perfect” again, at least on the surface. And so *Nip/Tuck* deems abjection as necessary for “perfection,” or what the men deem as such: Sean in creating his “happy” family and Matt in repression of his primal desires. However, despite Julia and Emme's mutual subjection, the outcomes of their respective narratives are vastly different. Emme is never seen again while Julia, a core character of the series, will remain. Despite its constant invasion, *Nip/Tuck* is simultaneously tightly enclosed against characters outside the family. The territory of the series is familial, but more precisely it is determined by Sean and Christian. Julia remains because Sean wants her to, and Emme is expelled because Matt tells her to go, but ultimately because *Christian* ordered him to. The space of the narrative essentially belongs to Sean and Christian and is only selectively seceded to others.

“Fame, makes a man take things over.”
(David Bowie in *Nip/Tuck*, 5.15, “Candy Richards”)

While Julia and Emme function metaphorically as abject, other women appear more explicitly monstrous. In *Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection*, Barbara Creed examines the concept of the monstrous-feminine, or “what it is about

women that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject” through the horror film (63). She illuminates the presence of abjection in the horror film as coming about in three ways: through the graphic image, through the border, and through the break from the maternal figure (63-66). This illustration of abjection in horror changes across cinematic works, but familiar tropes and cinematic devices can be drawn across all modifications. Notably, Creed endorses Kristeva’s theory that abjection can occur “where the individual fails to respect the law and where the individual is a hypocrite, a liar, a traitor” (66). The individual who escapes, or attempts to escape, the confines of the law – like that which escapes the confines of the body – becomes abject. In *Nip/Tuck* these individuals are manifested in “monstrous” females, females who are developed as villains, though at first may seem relatively harmless. They are, always, outside of the law. Kristeva notes that abjection is “immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady”; it is “a friend who stabs you” (4). For Sean, the “friend” who stabs him is Colleen Rose, his crazed talent agent in season five.

Due to McNamara/Troy’s move to L.A. in the beginning of season five, Christian, and especially Sean, are consumed by the desire for fame. They become consultants for a medical television drama called *Heart & Scalpels*, and Sean, with the help of his new agent Colleen, acquires a recurring role on the series. However, he soon realizes that Colleen is more than he bargained for when she begins to stalk him on set, in his practice, and even in his home. The stalker is a common trope of the horror film, most notably developed in John Carpenter’s famous slasher flick *Halloween* (1978). The film was one of many from the 1970’s to demonstrate the themes of paranoia and lack of control felt by the general population due to increased governmental surveillance. The notion of home invasion and entrapment often enacted this paranoia. Throughout *Halloween*, Michael Myers, a

seemingly unmotivated psychotic killer, stalks the women in the film and is able to slip in and out of spaces unnoticed. The technique of the “hand-held subjective camera” in *Halloween* promotes our own “identification with the killer” and situates Myers’ invasive character as eluding the women he stalks as well as controlling us as an audience (Cook, 235). Just as the film’s *masked* villain stalks the film’s protagonist Laurie, Colleen stalks Sean, her future malevolence *masked* by a seemingly harmless façade. Further, like Myers, Colleen will invade the space of the home as well as the operating room, and using camera techniques similar to that of *Halloween*, we will see how *Nip/Tuck* forces a certain identification with her. Despite Colleen’s initial innocuousness, the series gives the viewers a key allusion to Colleen’s madness through its use, once again, of music to create an atmosphere. Colleen’s musical theme is in stark contrast to the upbeat soundtracks that accompany surgery scenes, and it consists of a strain that sounds like a reworked version of Michael Myers’ theme from *Halloween*. In the film, the repetition of Myers’ eerie melody strikes fear in the viewers’ hearts and creates a tone of suspense. By evoking this soundtrack in Colleen’s sequences, a similar mood is created, foreshadowing a violent ending to her narrative arc by enhancing its likeness to *Halloween*.

Her storyline comes to its climax in the episode I have been working through, “Candy Richards.” In the preceding episode she slit her wrists in Sean’s own home and waited for him bloodied and half-dead on his couch (*Nip/Tuck*, 5.14, “August Walden”). In this episode, despite a subsequent restraining order, Colleen stalks Sean at the office and on set, and she even leaves a rival agent dead in Sean’s closet. The horror film’s stalker trope has been firmly established, as has the “Terrible Place” trope Carol Clover, in her work *Men Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, defines as the safe

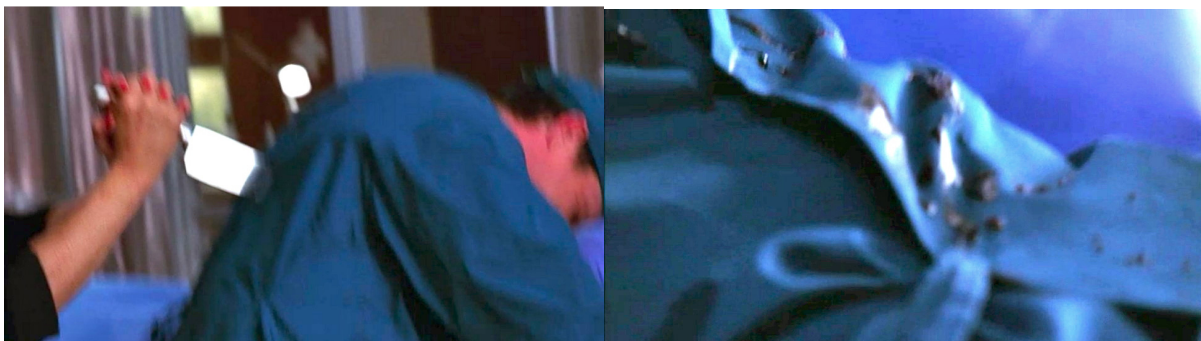
space made dangerous (31). However, *Nip/Tuck* is always about the climax – an idea I will elaborate on later – and that happens in the last two minutes of the episode when Sean performs surgery on his daughter, Annie, who has suffered an injury from a car accident caused by aggressive paparazzi looking for Sean.

The scene begins in a familiar manner with fast cuts rhythmically editing shots of the surgery to the tune of David Bowie’s “Fame.” This montage is significantly less graphic than the one of Candy at the start of the episode. There is no removal of fat and excess as there was previously; Sean merely stitches together a gash across Annie’s forehead. However, this relatively clean surgery becomes horrifying when Colleen invades the operating room. Sean has asked Liz to get gauze, and upon “her” return he asks what she thinks about his future plans to settle down, ironically commenting, “It’s gonna be good from now on, I promise.” However, Sean is completely unaware, as are we, that Colleen has taken Liz’s place. Such naiveté alludes to the scene in *Halloween* when Myers disguises himself in a sheet and tricks one of his victims into thinking he is her boyfriend simply playing a prank. Like Myers’ stealth intrusion of the home in *Halloween*, Colleen’s quiet entry into the operating room, not captured by the camera, catches Sean and the viewer unawares. Sean leans down quickly and Colleen is suddenly revealed behind his shoulder wielding a large knife over her head.



Nip/Tuck, 5.15, “Candy Richards”

The simple surgery is, in a matter of seconds, turned into another abject, bloodied montage as Colleen stabs Sean in the back repeatedly. Blatantly horrific, Colleen's choice of weapon likens her further with *Halloween's* Myers, amplifying the narrative's parallels with *Halloween* and the horror film more generally. Clover notes of the genre, "Knives and needles...are personal extensions of the body that bring attacker and attacked into primitive, animalistic embrace" (32). Notably, "knives and needles" are not only weapons but also oft-used surgical instruments on *Nip/Tuck*. Clover's comment is made interesting in this way, when we think of Sean and Christian's surgical instruments as extensions of their bodies. We have seen how these instruments, in their cutting of the body on the table, bring surgeon and patient into a horrific "embrace," and further how the surgeries themselves become extensions of Sean and Christian's personal lives. Here, Sean's private life has invaded the operating room once again, harmlessly by Annie's presence and abjectly by Colleen's. With each stab of Colleen's knife, Sean's clean blue medical robe is soaked and splattered with blood, mirroring the bloodying of gauze and sheets during the surgery scenes.

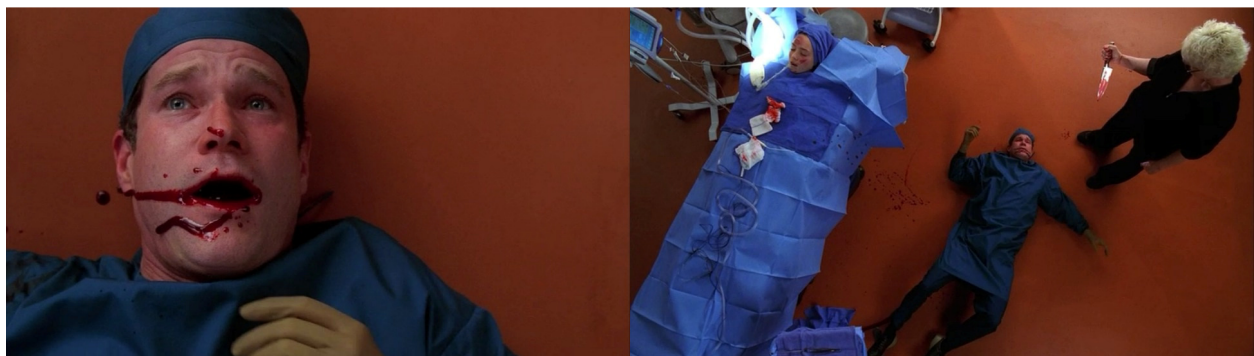


Nip/Tuck, 5.15, "Candy Richards"

In addition to the disembodiment of Colleen's hands as they stab Sean, as well as the accompaniment of Bowie's "Fame," the stabbing sequence, like the surgery sequences, is transformed into a lurid music video. This symmetry, along with parallels to the horror

film, elucidates the idea of the desire for fame and perfection as incumbent to excess and abjection. Clover recognizes that the horror film intends to cultivate “outrageous excess,” and further that “audiences express uproarious disgust (“Gross!”) as often as they express fear, and it is clear that the makers of slasher films pursue the combination” (41). *Nip/Tuck* likewise activates both fear and disgust with narrative arcs like that of Colleen.

After the stabbing, Sean, framed in close-up, lies on the bright red floor, blood gurgling in his throat and dripping down his face. Again, alluding to *Halloween’s* Myers, Colleen stands over him calmly watching him die, still wielding the bloodied knife. The scene moves to a bird’s-eye shot of Annie unconscious on the table, Sean dying on the floor, and Colleen standing above him, a grim tableaux of the price of fame.



Nip/Tuck, 5.15, “Candy Richards”

The blood-red floor and Sean’s prostrate body harks back to the bloody hotel room in *Dexter* that causes Dexter himself to collapse. However, unlike *Dexter*, this image is not the result of abstaining from abjection, but rather another instance of abject invasion. The difference in this scene is how that horror comes about. Thus far, Sean and Christian have remained physically unscathed – besides a few run-ins with the series’ infamous villain Escobar Gallardo as well as with The Carver (a violent, serial rapist introduced in season two and to be discussed later in this chapter). Here, by Colleen’s aggression, the confines of the male body have been broken. But more significantly, a woman has broken them. And

thus, despite the fact that the bodily abjection is that of a man, the cause of abjection remains female in nature. According to Creed, "One of the key figures of abjection is the mother who becomes abject at that moment when the child regrets her...by refusing to relinquish her hold on her child, she prevents it from taking up its proper place" (68). This woman she defines, this monstrous-female, "threatens stability" and does not adhere to the law or to her proper role in society – Colleen pretended to be a talent agent in an attempt to move from the outside in, and this crossing of the border is what, according to Kristevan theory, becomes abject.

After we are subjected to Colleen's brutal attempt at murder, we must see it two more times in the next episode, first in the "Previously On" sequence, and later when it is revealed how Colleen made her way into McNamara/Troy despite Sean's restraining order. By giving us the murder three times, the series succumbs to Beverle Houston's idea of a repetition compulsion – one that is also established by the reiterated surgery scenes. Similarly, we watch slasher flicks over and over: we watch stalkers kill victims over and over, despite the fact that we can likely predict the outcome. With three instances of Colleen's attempted murder, the sequence takes on the air of a horror film, but with the same victim over and over, instead of many. It wouldn't be *Nip/Tuck* if it weren't excessive.

The third time we see the murder is at the end of a sequence that bears extreme likeness to *Halloween*. It begins with Colleen entering the building; first we see just her dark shoes, then her body is revealed, and finally her face masked with gauze. She has disguised herself as a woman recovering from cosmetic surgery. Like the mask Myers wears, the gauze hides Colleen's identity and allows her to bypass security.



R: *Halloween*, 1978; L: *Nip/Tuck*, 5.15, "Candy Richards"

When Colleen arrives at the offices she is framed, like Myers, from behind. In *Halloween*, the subjective camera situates Myers' invasive character as eluding the women he stalks and works to control us as an audience. Similarly, situated behind Colleen as she stalks Sean, we feel little control in this scene. We know what is about to occur and can do nothing about it besides patiently watch in horror as the scene progresses. We cringe as Colleen has near encounters with Liz and Christian, who unknowingly avoid her knife, replicating instances in *Halloween* when Myers' teenage victims unknowingly evade their stalker. This works to create a heightened level of suspense for a narrative whose outcome has already been realized.



L: *Nip/Tuck*, 5.15, "Candy Richards"; R: *Halloween*, 1978

After we see Sean get stabbed for the third time, we finally get to see the events that followed. In the ensuing action, Sean takes the role of the slasher genre's "Final Girl," what Clover defines as "the images of the distressed female...who did not die," who is "object

terror personified,” is “chased, cornered, wounded” but who in the end will, in most cases, kill her assailant (35). Colleen leaves Sean dying on the floor of the operating room. He drags himself up but Colleen comes back and takes him from the room, dragging him out of the operating room, down the hall, and into a small examination room, leaving behind a trail of blood⁸. Here the abject is literally expelled from the operating room. Logistically, this is Colleen’s attempt to hide her violent act and keep Sean to herself. On a graphic level, this shift of the space of action takes *Nip/Tuck* from the televisual into the cinematic. By moving Sean to a more confined space, *Nip/Tuck* refers to the final sequence of *Halloween* in which Myers traps Laurie in a closet. In the film, Laurie survives by stabbing Myers with a knitting needle. Similarly, Sean will survive by stabbing Colleen with her own knife.



Nip/Tuck, 5.15, “Candy Richards”

Sean’s murder of Colleen brings *Nip/Tuck’s Halloween* narrative full circle. Like Laurie with Myers, Sean has been stalked, trapped, and wounded, but ultimately victorious over Colleen. Unlike Colleen, however, Myers always narrowly avoids death, a common feature to horror films. I would argue that Colleen’s inability to conform to this role of the elusive killer resides in her status as a woman. The monstrous-females in *Nip/Tuck* are usually killed off (see: “Black Widow” serial killer Teddy Rowe killed by another serial

⁸ A trail not unlike the trail of body parts left for Dexter by the Ice Truck Killer, this trail will lead Christian and Liz to find Sean.

killer in season six – *Dexter*, perhaps? – or illegal organ harvester Jacqueline Bisset from season four and emotional, recurring victim Kimber Henry, both driven to suicide, among others). The male villains, however, typically evade death – or at least death in the literal sense. Escobar Gallardo plagues Sean and Christian over the course of four seasons before being killed by his own wife. However, this does not stop him from continuing to haunt Sean in hallucinations as a bad conscience incarnate. Most significant, however, is the narrative of The Carver, a serial rapist attempting to purify the world of the “tyranny of beauty,” who terrorizes the series for two seasons and is never apprehended (*Nip/Tuck*, 2.15, “Sean McNamara”). In an episode of season two entitled “Sean McNamara,” *Nip/Tuck* draws connections between the Carver narrative and Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960), most notably in the series’s replication of the shower scene in which the film’s antagonist Norman Bates attacks and kills Mary Crane. With this second allusion to the horror film, *Nip/Tuck* is once again invaded; this time by classic slasher flicks *Halloween* and *Psycho*.

The Carver’s modus operandi is to carve gashes from the mouths and across the cheeks of the faces of his victims, giving them Joker-like scars. He typically rapes his victims, though Sean’s attack differed in this way. The clearest allusion to *Psycho* comes when Sean takes a shower after returning from a day of repairing faces that The Carver had disfigured. Angered at Sean’s disregard for his “art,” The Carver attacks him. In a near-perfect replica of the famous shower scene in *Psycho*, Sean, figured as Mary Crane, bathes unaware of the fact that The Carver, figured as Bates, stands watching him.



R: *Nip/Tuck*, 2.15, "Sean McNamara"; L: *Psycho*, 1960

In this scene Sean, as he was in the Colleen/*Halloween* narrative, is figured as feminine. However, up to this point he has taken a very paternal role in that he takes care of the victims pro-bono, despite the danger to his own well being. This elevation and denigration of character is a common narrative tack in *Nip/Tuck*. As a series that revels in excess and exposing the flawed and the ugly, no character can maintain an idealized role for very long. Every character is, at some point in time, a victim. Here, Sean's descent into victimization is swift and is carried out through his functioning not as the Final Girl, but as a true victim of a horror film in the sense that he is unable to defend himself against his attacker. The scene diverges from *Psycho* in that The Carver does not attack Sean while he is in the shower, but waits until he finishes bathing and injects him with a paralyzing tranquilizer. Sean is helpless and immobilized, and this methodology in fact recalls a familiar serial killer, Dexter. Like The Carver, Dexter uses a tranquilizer to subdue and trap his victims, and takes advantage of their paralyzed state to explain to them why he is killing them. Here, like Dexter, The Carver does just that. He explains that he is "rescuing people" from being "slaves to the tyranny of beauty," that "beauty is a curse on the world [that] keeps us from seeing who the real monsters are" (2.15). Similarly, in a voice-over Dexter explains, "Monsters come in all shapes and sizes. Sometimes it's the very people who are supposed

to protect us. A cop, a parent, the spatter guy” (*Dexter*, 4.04, “Dex Takes a Holiday”). Both Dexter and The Carver are getting at a way in which monsters, through status and beauty, respectively, maintain what Chanter deems a “surface allure.” The Carver goes on, like Dexter, to break through this surface allure and expose the “concealed decay” by cutting open the faces of his victims (though in Dexter’s case this cutting is much more clean than The Carver’s, in line with *Dexter’s* comparatively cleaner aesthetic). Moreover, through these similar narrative arcs and themes, we see a way in which these series, and television itself, exposes the sickness of us as viewers. Through the clean surfaces of our television screens we watch violent, bloody scenes unfold. Yes, we are safe from these fictitious killers, but television seems to have as much of a hold on us as the killers have on their paralyzed victims. Glued to our seats, immobile, we watch in morbid fascination.



L: *Nip/Tuck*, 2.15, “Sean McNamara”; R: *Dexter*, 1.1, “Dexter”

The symmetry of character, narrative, and image among horror films like *Halloween* and *Psycho* and series like *Dexter* and *Nip/Tuck* further establishes *Nip/Tuck’s* sense of boundary crossing. By referencing other television dramas as well as iconic slasher films, *Nip/Tuck* cuts across media forms. Film and various television series collide and repeat one another to create an abject visual collage of images and intertextual referentiality. In

doing so, television succeeds in both increasing our anxiety by recalling these established texts and expanding its own ever-growing archive⁹.

The relationship between Colleen's narrative arc and horror films like *Halloween* is more complicated than a simple parallel, however. By positioning Colleen, a woman, as the stalker and Sean as the perpetual victim, *Nip/Tuck* transcends typical horror tropes. In *The Horror Film: An Introduction*, Rick Worland examines the gendered roles of the horror film and what significance "mutations and slidings" might have (16). He claims, "When we observe a change in the surface male-female configurations of a traditional story-complex, we are probably looking, however obliquely, at a deeper change in culture," and that these "slidings" present "masculinity and femininity" as "more states of mind than body" (22). Sean, at this point in the narrative, is figured as having a "feminine" state of being. This is interesting because according to Clover, the Final Girl "is not fully feminine" but rather quite "boyish" (40). And thus Sean, as male, is the full realization of the Final Girl as boyish. However, in Worland's terms, Sean's somewhat feminine "state of mind" makes this "mutation" of the Final Girl appropriate – or at least more believable than a rendering of Christian as the Final Girl would have been. Like Candy and Colleen, Sean has recently been sucked into the fame-game, even indirectly allowing his daughter to be hurt by this desire that *Nip/Tuck* figures as unclean. And what of Colleen as figured as a female villain? The female villain is a commonly used device on *Nip/Tuck*, and to what end? Clover contends, "To the extent that the monster is constructed as feminine, the horror film thus expresses female desire only to show how monstrous it is" (47). Through the female body on the table and the female body outside the law, that which is feminine is made monstrous on

⁹ This concept of a televisual archive will be examined in my next chapter as I analyze *Battlestar Galactica*.

Nip/Tuck. The desires and actions of women are abject. They willfully allow their bodies to be opened up and unlawfully open up the bodies of others. In this way, females are essentially linked with the abject; made so grotesque on screen that we can only look at them with disgust, or extremely perverse pleasure. The monstrous-female of *Nip/Tuck* is excessive and undisciplined, in stark contrast to the sunny beautiful world where the series is set. She hysterically, uncontrollably, and repeatedly breaks through the streamlined surface that the show attempts to maintain, dashing the sleek, fetishistic beauty on, and of, television.

Though these two types of women are obviously quite disparate, I argue that the most important difference is their outcome. The woman on the table, prostrate and submissive, is objectified and abject but nevertheless allowed to remain. The unlawful woman, like the horror villain, is “eventually killed or otherwise evacuated from the narrative” (Clover, 44). Unlike the woman on the table, the Colleens of *Nip/Tuck* are a danger to the patriarchy that is firmly established by Sean and Christian. Not only is Colleen outside of societal law, she is outside televisual law in that she threatens our protagonists. And thus she is expelled. The women of *Nip/Tuck* are managed by being cut in various ways – literally and narratively.

“I’ve had enough of your lack of boundaries.”

(Nip/Tuck, 5.14, “Candy Richards”)

Rick Worland indicates the sharply politicized controversy surrounding the horror genre, and more specifically the slasher film:

The slasher cycle elicited sustained condemnation in the mainstream press, outcries against the foreboding social implications of unfettered media violence that

dovetailed with feminist protests against demeaning images or violence against women in commercial media, activism that flowed from the social movements of the 1960's (227).

As I have argued, in its style and narrative *Nip/Tuck* is not unlike the horror film, and this penchant to produce protest is another point of intersection. Most prominent in criticism of the series was the Parents Television Council (PTC). Though the show does display a "Viewer Discretion Advised" warning before every episode, the PTC did not think this was enough and campaigned to take the show off the air, in 2005 going so far as to write to the Sony Corporation, requesting that they rescind their sponsorship or else risk boycott of their products (Bozell, "Letter"). Scenes that sparked much debate included Christian and recurrent character Kimber attending an "upscale" swinger's party in season one and Sean having sex with a RealDoll made to look like Kimber in season two (1.07, 2.10). In addition to explicit sex, the PTC opposed virtually all of the surgery scenes, and claimed that the show went "preposterously over the top in an attempt not to push the envelope, but to shred it" (Bozell, "*Nip/Tuck*"). In 2009, the new PTC President Tim Winter expressed extreme outrage with an episode of season five in which a woman, after being rejected as a client, performed a mastectomy on herself using an electric turkey carving knife in the middle of the McNamara/Troy lobby (Winter) (5.17). Winter called the scene "sickening" and "bloody" – few would disagree – and went on to argue that cable consumers "should be able to reject paying for such wanton, callous and malicious programming that is bundled into their monthly cable bill" (Winter). The claims made against *Nip/Tuck* are many, and few would dispute their description of the program as extremely graphic, not even the show's creator, Ryan Murphy. However, Murphy does defend the series in his interview with *NPR*:

It's always been a show that's completely against plastic surgery. It is a show that basically says to the culture you're working on the wrong things. And I'm always amazed that somehow people think that the show is pro plastic surgery. And indeed, I've gotten letters and calls from people who had procedures that they've seen on the show because they think that it would make them look better (Murphy).

While Murphy goes about it in a different way, he is in agreement with the PTC in that what the series represents is “preposterously over the top.” However for Murphy, what is over the top is contemporary culture. Unlike PTC, to get this point across Murphy breaks boundaries rather than adheres to them – a proclivity reflected in *Nip/Tuck*'s narrative. Perhaps for Murphy, by forcing the audience to work through the horror of the show, the horror of the reality of plastic surgery will be revealed.

“Do what you do best...and screw the rest.”
(*Nip/Tuck*, 5.15, “Candy Richards”)

As Sean and Christian discuss the downfalls of fame over Candy's open body, Liz tells them to stop worrying, to, “Do what you do best...and screw the rest.” Though this statement was directed at the doctors, *Nip/Tuck*'s refusal to sway to public opinion, specifically to the PTC, demonstrates a way in which the series takes this advice as well. Excess is what *Nip/Tuck* does best; it defines the series. The episode I dissected, occurring *mid*-season five, arguably contained four narrative arcs worthy of a season finale. Any other series would have gradually revealed each of the plot points over the course of several episodes. However, scenes of process that slowly move us through action are literally nipped and tucked from *Nip/Tuck*. It is as if the series itself has undergone narrative liposuction to remove all the fat in order to give us climax after climax after climax – ironically appropriate given that the chief rival to *Nip/Tuck*'s surgery scenes in

terms of explicit graphic content are *Nip/Tuck's* sex scenes. The series seems to be always on the edge of implosion. Rather than undergoing a slow build up, *Nip/Tuck* is in a permanent cathartic state in that the potential for catharsis is always there and nearly always seized upon. Like the bodies on the table cut into time and time again, *Nip/Tuck's* metaphorical surface is repeatedly ripped open, both from within and without.

For a reader new to *Nip/Tuck*, it is presumably hard to imagine being able to truly grasp a series that I describe as so explosive. How can we work through a series that allows no time for processing? John Ellis describes “working through” as “the process whereby material is continually worried over until it is exhausted” (79). I argue that it is in *Nip/Tuck's* incessant *repetition* – of explosions, cinematic devices, filmic tropes, bodies, plot devices – that allows for a kind of processing. All the aforementioned are “continually worried over” and it is through a viewer’s on-going experience of the series as excessive that it can be understood. This concept of learning through repetition will be resurrected and expanded upon in my following chapter on the Cylon in *Battlestar Galactica*.

Part 3: The Body Resurrected **Battlestar Galactica's Cylon**

The Cylons were created by man.
They rebelled.
They evolved.
There are many copies.
And they have a plan.
Battlestar Galactica (2004)

Evolution. I boldly claim that this word, with a range of meanings, encompasses nearly every narrative and thematic thread in *Battlestar Galactica*. Take the above phrase, for instance. Almost every episode of the Sci-Fi channel's *Battlestar Galactica* is prefaced by some derivative of these words. I repeat: some *derivative*, for it is the transformation of these words that is important. Commensurate with the evolution of the Cylons themselves, all together the series, its characters, and the audience undergo an evolution of understanding over the course of the narrative. And this shared transformation is reflected in the modification of each episode's introduction. The choice to repeat, change, or remove the phrase completely from one episode to the next is significant, and something a knowledgeable viewer will learn, one could even say *evolve*, to pay attention to. Each repetition adds to our archive of knowledge as we learn more about the "plan" (or plans) of the Cylon race.

Battlestar Galactica encompasses much more than the Sci-Fi (now SyFy) channel television drama developed by Ronald D. Moore and David Eick. The 2004 series, which began as a three-hour mini-series and aired 73 episodes, is merely one part of a military science fiction franchise created by Glen A. Larson. The original series began in 1978 and spawned a sequel shortly after in 1980 as well as book adaptations, comic book series,

board games, novels, and video games. Sci-Fi also developed a prequel television series *Caprica* (2010) that encompasses the events preceding those shown in the 2004 remake. Not only is the reimagined series part of a continually expanding franchise, but in its reimagining it evolved in a number of ways. For example, the characters of Starbuck and Boomer are now female. As well, the phrase quoted above is a succinct account of the premise of *Battlestar Galactica*. Man, the opening of each episode tell us, split into the Twelve Colonies on twelve planets, created the Cylons, a cybernetic race who evolved and eventually rebelled. After warring for decades, the humans and the Cylons declare a truce. However, after 40 years of no contact, the Cylons abrogate this truce and launch an attack on the Colonies that nearly wipes out the entire human race. This attack is what kicks off the series and each subsequent episode chronicles the survivors from the Colonies as they attempt to avoid complete extermination at the hands of the Cylons and search the vast universe to find a new home on Earth – the fabled “thirteenth colony.” This general premise is shared by the entire franchise.

Not surprisingly, given the obvious theme of human versus machine, *Battlestar Galactica* grapples with many notions of duality: reason versus religion, human polytheism versus Cylon monotheism, military versus government control, democracy versus dictatorship, good versus evil, Cylon versus human, the list goes on and on. However, similar to the way the worlds of *Dexter* and *Nip/Tuck* are much more than what meets the eye, the boundaries between these simplified polarities are malleable and often broken. So in fact, the evolutionary claim I make about *Battlestar Galactica* applies to all of its themes, which undergo many changes over the series’ run. Not excluded from this list is the tension between life and death, specifically, the immortality of the Cylons. The violent

return of the Cylons hinged on a key factor: in their 40-year absence they evolved to look and feel like humans. There are a total of thirteen humanoid Cylon models separated into two groups: the Final Five and the Significant Seven (in fact eight in number before the seventh model was sabotaged). The Final Five remain shrouded in mystery for the majority of the season – their identities eventually revealed to be persons previously thought to be humans even by them. As the series progresses the Seven are gradually revealed to the Colonies as well. Unique, they are referred to by a number and sometimes a name and include Number One (the Cavils), Number Two (the Leobens), Number Three (the D’Annas), Number Four (the Simons), Number Five (the Aarons), in addition to Number Six and Number Eight who both go by a number of aliases. There are many copies of each of the Seven but each live copy has its own memories. Their immortality stems not from resilience of the body – since now in human form they are physically vulnerable – but from the ability to resurrect. If a physical body is killed, the memories from that body are downloaded into a new body, of which there exist millions readily available to become active on the Cylon Resurrection Hub.

The President of the Colonies, Laura Roslin, speaks to this immortality saying, “It is not enough simply to kill Cylons because they resurrect themselves. It is horrifying” (3.01, “Occupation/Precipice”). For the humans it is clearly horrifying – they must fight against an undying race as their own race dwindles to near extinction. But what about the Cylons? With each new body they get a clean slate in a physical sense, but keep all the memories, as traumatizing as they may be. So their replicated bodies are sites of more than just repetition, but of accumulation. Similar to the way in which our understanding of *Dexter* evolves with a fragmented and gradual exposure to abjection, and to the incessant

repetition of excess that allows us to work through *Nip/Tuck*, it is through aggregate repetition of bodies and of life and death on *Battlestar Galactica* that we, along with a given Cylon model, may undergo an evolution of sorts. This could be an evolution of our understanding of the Cylon narrative or of our own human desires in comparison to Cylon realities; the possibilities, like the Cylon, are endless. To further understand this concept I will focus on the transformation of three Cylon models – Three, Six, and Eight. I will also draw upon Sigmund Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, which itself undergoes an evolution of theory as it examines the relationship between the pleasure principle and the death drive as worked through by a developed repetition compulsion. I will also analyze Jacques Derrida’s integration of this theory into his own premises developed in *Archive Fever*. I see the Cylon narrative as an explication, reworking, and expansion of Freud and Derrida’s complex and at times divisive theories.

“You kill me, I download, I come back, we start over. Five times now.”
(*Battlestar Galactica*, 3.1, “Occupation/Precipice”)

In the mini-series that preceded season one, the Cylon model that goes by the name Leoben is the one that reveals to Admiral Adama the Cylon capacity to appear in human form. His model returns later as an agent discovered hiding in the fleet in an episode entitled “Flesh and Bone” (1.10). This is Leoben’s first contact with Kara “Starbuck” Thrace, the woman with whom his model becomes obsessed over the course of the series. He learns of her success in piloting a Cylon raider by manipulating its innards and is from then on convinced of a “greater destiny” in her future. This conviction is enhanced further when, during Starbuck’s interrogation of him, he has a vision of a life together with her on

New Caprica – a vision he will repeatedly strive for in the future. After eight hours of emotionally charged interrogation that proves ineffectual in determining the location of a nuclear bomb Leoben claimed to have planted in the fleet, Starbuck develops unlikely empathy for Leoben, but nevertheless watches passively as he is executed by being released out of an airlock. The trauma of this experience is repeated tenfold in their next encounter, when Leoben imprisons Starbuck after the Cylons discover and take over the human colony that has settled on New Caprica.

The season three premiere, titled “Occupation/Precipice,” includes the evolution of this Cylon/human relationship that takes place in a jail cell Leoben has constructed as Starbuck’s home. The episode is appropriately titled, as we see the two races at a precarious peak in their relationship. They have played a cat and mouse game across the universe and now, in the Cylon occupation of New Caprica, this incessant repetition has finally come to a crux. This broad plot point is more narrowly figured in the Leoben/Starbuck relationship. In the short statement quoted above and restated here, Leoben sums up the narrative that takes place: “You kill me, I download, I come back, we start over. Five times now.” Starbuck brutally murders Leoben over and over again – despite the knowledge that he will resurrect – and Leoben comes back over and over again – despite the knowledge that Starbuck will try, and often succeed, to kill him. In this violent tête-à-tête, Starbuck and Leoben enact a perverse rendering of Freud’s game of “fort and da” laid out in his theory of the pleasure principle. Freud’s game, which translates to “disappearance and return,” is one in which a child plays with a ball on a string, throwing it over a ledge so it disappears, and bringing it back with the string. In this game the throwing of the ball, like the departure of the child’s mother, is a “necessary preliminary to

her [its] joyful return” (15). The child alleviates the distress of his mother leaving by becoming active in repeating that trauma. This becomes an effort of mastery: “to work over in the mind some overpowering experience so as to make oneself master of it” (16). And to achieve this mastery, the child must undergo unpleasure. In performing this ritual time after time, the child develops a repetition compulsion that can be in itself pleasurable.

Freud’s repetition compulsion is mimicked and made murderous in Starbuck and Leoben’s narrative, with Leoben taking on a role similar to that of the child. The episode introduces the kill, come back, repeat cycle with Leoben bringing Starbuck dinner. The two engage in pithy dialogue as Leoben cuts Starbuck’s steak for her – reluctant to give her a knife, and for good reason. We know Starbuck has been appraising other weapons, and this plan is realized when she stabs Leoben in the neck with a pair of metal chopsticks just after he has told her how beautiful she is. As he dies he tells her, “I’ll see you soon, Kara,” to which she responds, “Take your time.” After brutally stabbing him many times for good measure, Starbuck wipes her hands on the carpet and sits down at the table to eat the dinner Leoben prepared for her.



Battlestar Galactica, 3.1, “Occupation/Precipice”

Here, Leoben closely acts out the role of the child in that he repeatedly suffers the unpleasure of being killed as a “necessary preliminary” to come back to Starbuck, and

eventually to claim some mastery over her. Thus, after his death, Leoben comes back, resurrected, to Starbuck's cell. His dead body still lies on the floor with the chopsticks plunged into its chest. He steps over his own previous body, giving it only cursory acknowledgement as he approaches Starbuck who sits on the couch.



Battlestar Galactica, 3.1, "Occupation/Precipice"

Leoben rebukes Starbuck for her actions, and then tells her, "I'm going to bed. It'd be nice if you joined me. Either way, you're spending the night with me," gesturing to his lifeless body. The unpleasure Leoben undergoes in his departure from Starbuck is physically present here in the corpse lying next to them, as with each death comes a discarded body. Like the bodies in *Nip/Tuck* that come to represent the flaws of the family, the body that is discarded with each death is a physical manifestation of a past unpleasure. And in an act befitting the nature of Cylon rebirth, Leoben simply walks over his old body, *discarding* that past mistake. Furthermore, he *learns* through cumulative repetition: this time Leoben anticipates Starbuck's move, and tells her to "drop the knife" that he knows she must be hiding. In this way Leoben demonstrates Freud's developed "mastery" through repetition that he will use to exploit Starbuck in their next encounter. He states, cryptically, "Life means something to us so I've decided to show you just how precious life can be. How even in the worst of times it can restore your faith." And with this he brings in Kasey, a young girl whom he claims to be bred from Starbuck's own egg previously obtained when she was

held by the Cylons at their ovary-harvesting facility. In this action we see further evolution through cumulative repetition. Leoben has gained an understanding of his prisoner, manipulating her – mastering her – through what he has perceived as an emotional weakness, one we will later find out to be true based on her own troubled past.

But, Freud wondered, why would repetition compel more suffering than it seemingly dispels? Leoben, after repeatedly dying at Starbuck's hand, never does acquire the life in New Caprica that he envisioned (in fact, she escapes and takes Kasey with her). In terms of *Battlestar Galactica*, Freud might ask, why would the Cylons even construct a body vulnerable to death? Why would they endure the unpleasure of dying if they have found a key to eternal life? In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud posited the existence of a drive on par with the pleasure principle, which he termed the death instinct – though he struggled with accepting this theory himself (26). This human instinct, explicated below, is one that I argue the Cylons have, though perhaps unknowingly, evolved for their own purposes.

“Death becomes a learning experience.”
(*Battlestar Galactica*, 2.15, “Scar”)
(Repeated in “Previously On” in 2.18, “Downloaded”)

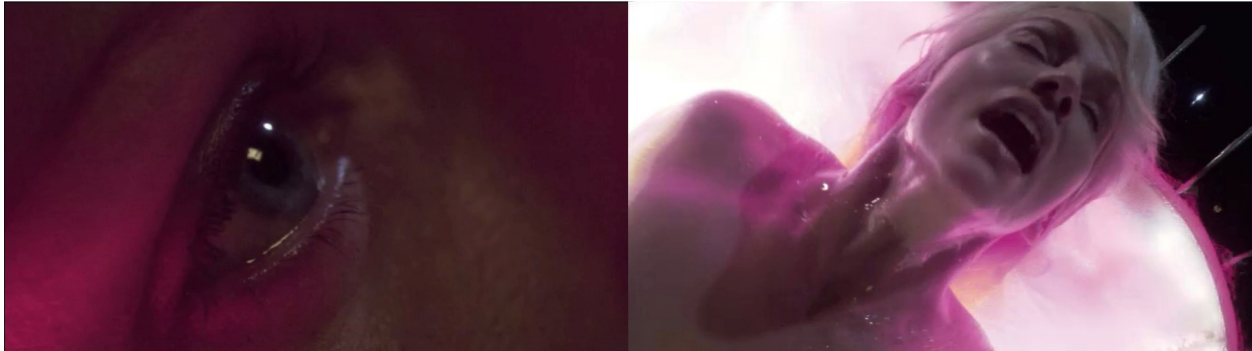
In opposition to the pleasure principle, Freud finds an instinct, the death drive, which instead moves towards unpleasure. This finding stems from his analysis of the child who repeatedly submits to unpleasure as a means towards pleasure, and it is the perplexing preponderance of unpleasure over pleasure that leads to Freud's notion of the death drive. To examine this more organically, in a figurative and literal sense, Freud articulates resemblances of this instinct in the field of biology. He uses the analogy of a

“living vesicle with a receptive cortical layer” (Freud, 30). He describes it as a “little fragment of living substance suspended in the middle of an external world charged with the most powerful energies” that “would be killed by the stimulation emanating from these if it were not provided with a protective shield” (Freud, 30). This protective shield is one that shields against stimuli, it is a layer that protects against the external world and that can, by its death, “save all the deeper ones from a similar fate” (Freud, 30). And if this layer is significantly breached, “cathetic energy is summoned from all sides to provide sufficiently high cathexes of energy in the environs of the breach” (Freud, 34). He goes on to say, “a system which is itself highly cathected is capable of taking up an additional stream of fresh inflowing energy and of converting it into quiescent cathexis, that is of binding it physically” (Freud, 34). Freud then furthers his examination of organic analogies to find in the facts of embryology a “hypothesis that *all* instincts tend towards the restoration of an earlier state of things,” and further that “*every* modification” which is “stored up for further repetition,” while perhaps “tending towards change and progress,” is in fact “striving to return by the *circuitous* paths” towards “an *old* state of things” (Freud, 44-46). This “old state of things” is death, which leads Freud to his bold conclusion that “the aim of all life is death” (Freud, 46). However, it is not death by any means. In emphasizing the “circuitous” path by which the organism will come to this origin (death), Freud implies that this death drive is towards a natural death, one appropriated by the being itself. For humans, this would be dying of old age. Can we see a similar circuitous path in Cylon resurrection? Not only the ability to be reborn, but the knowledge that dying is not the end makes this path, for Cylons, cyclical rather than circuitous. And endless cycle of death and rebirth is possible.

In the Leoben narrative we see the repetition of death itself, but by the hands of another. Cylon death, in opposition to an idea Freud laid out in the (human) death drive, only occurs by *non*-circuitous paths in that the Cylon, unlike the human, will never die of old age. But then why die at all? As I questioned earlier, what is the point of having such a vulnerable body? The Cylons, in a sense, have developed their own version of the death drive by allowing that possibility in the first place. I believe that Cylon resurrection, as a modified death drive, can clarify and expound upon what Freud has posited as the death drive for humans. I will substantiate this claim by examining the experience of resurrection by two particular Cylons: Caprica Six and Lieutenant Sharon “Boomer” Valerii (an eight).

The season two episode entitled “Downloaded” begins with the usual “Previously On *Battlestar Galactica*.” After reminding the viewer of a number of narrative arcs that will be continued in the current episode, the montage ends with an eight (Sharon “Athena” Agathon) saying what is cited above, that in Cylon resurrection, “Death becomes a learning experience.” The screen then goes black with the words “9 Months Ago,” and we are back on Caprica at the time of the first Cylon attack in the home of Gaius Baltar. Gaius – a (in)famous intellectual who unwittingly supplied the Cylons, and specifically Six, with information that made the attack possible – demands to know the Cylon escape plan. Six informs him that she does not need one, for when she dies her memories will merely be transmitted to a new, identical body millions of miles away. Then we see the explosion repeated from the first episode, but this time, rather than ourselves being transported to another area of attack on Caprica, we are taken with Six to her new body on the Cylon

resurrection hub. We as viewers have been transported from the trauma and reborn to experience resurrection along with Six.¹⁰



Battlestar Galactica, 2.18, "Downloaded"

The subsequent series of images edited to resemble the Cylon experience of resurrection begins with a close-up of Six's eye that glows with a pink light. This moves to a montage of rapidly cut shots that chronicle Six's life with Gaius and end with the explosion and her new body being born and gasping for air in a tub filled with light and some kind of viscous substance. I would first like to note the similarity between this sequence and the "Previously On" montages composed for the weekly viewers. Just as the Cylons remember the lives of their past bodies as they gain a new body, we as viewers remember what has happened in the series thus far with each new episode. In this connection, we see the beginnings of the similarities between Cylon resurrection and our own mode of viewing television.

The phrase, "My entire life flashed before my eyes," is one often used by subjects of near-death experiences. In Cylon resurrection, this phenomenon is realized when the entire life from a destroyed body is remembered as its memories are transmitted to a new one. Six's transportation from trauma – in this case, bodily trauma – and repetition of it in

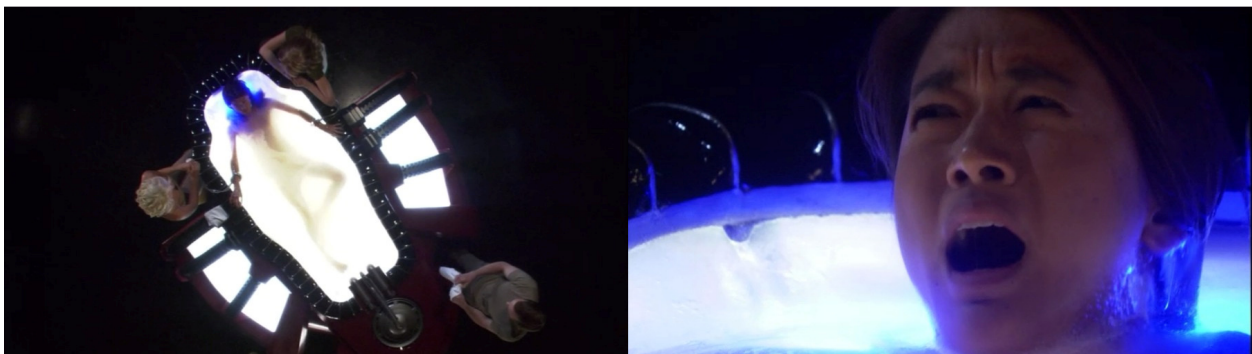
¹⁰ Notably this is the opposite of *Nip/Tuck*, which brings everything *to* the trauma in the operating room.

the mind is reminiscent of Freud's organic "little fragment" that is guarded from external stimuli by "a protective shield" (Freud, 30). Six's old body, like the organism's shield, will save all her subsequent bodies from "a similar fate" in that remembering her past gives her vital information that will help her live in the present ("Death becomes a learning experience"). In a statement encompassing this concept, Freud notes that, "One cell helps to preserve the life of another and the community of cells can survive even if individual cells have to die" (Freud, 60). In our case as viewers, recalling past episodes gives us information that help us understand present ones.

Six's voice is shaky as she tries to grasp this experience; Boomer previously stated that dying and being reborn, despite being a "learning experience," can be "painful and traumatic" (*Battlestar*, 2.15). Other Cylon models (sixes, eights, and threes) stand around the tub with worried expressions as Six speaks of Gaius, seemingly worried for his well-being. Investment in a human is, by Cylon belief, problematic. However, before she gives away her feelings for him, a hallucination of Gaius, like the hallucination of Six that we know to haunt Gaius's character throughout the series, comes to her and warns her that it will be a problem if anyone knows what he means to her. Six thus alters her reaction, quelling the worries of the on-looking Cylons. In Six's altered consciousness, we see how Cylon resurrection and replication is more than just repetition, it is an accumulation of memories and experiences that can in turn *preserve* and *evolve* the individual Cylon, their particular model, and even the entire Cylon race. With this death, Six has evolved by gaining a new, distanced understanding of her relationship with Gaius and its implications to her positioning as a Cylon. In living that body's life and then dying and coming to her origins – rebirth in the tub – she and we see in Six characteristics of *all* sixes: sexuality, the

ability to love, self-protection. Our understanding as viewers of her model evolves, as does she. The Cylon death drive, like our own experience of the series, is an evolutionary process. Rather than just returning to their original state, as Freud claims humans do in their drive towards death, Cylons return to their origins and *learn* from this return, invoking a circular process of live, die, learn, repeat.

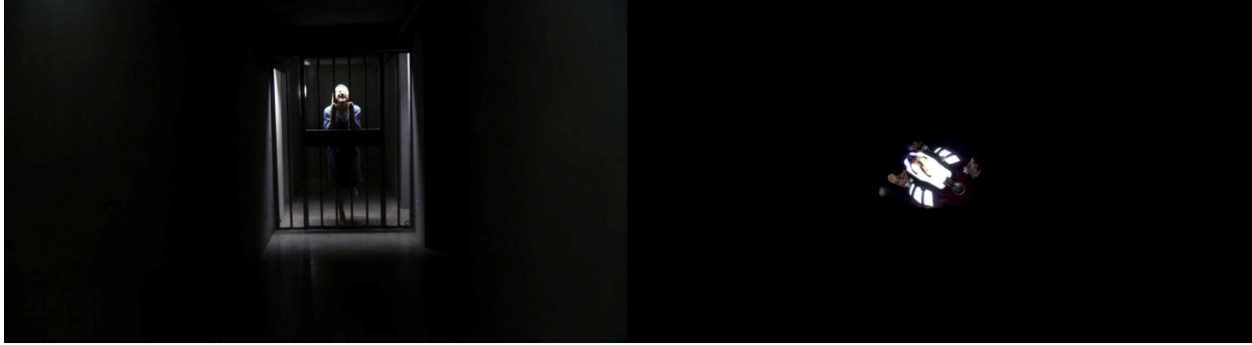
Following our experience with Six, the screen goes black with the words “Ten Weeks Later, Battlestar Galactica.” We are then confronted with images from Boomer’s past (the Eight who was a sleeper agent and did not know she was a Cylon until recently) as a Lieutenant on Galactica: her love affair with the Chief, her blackouts and subsequent realization that she is a Cylon, her own attempted suicide and her attempted murder of Commander Adama, and finally her own death at the hands of a fellow officer. Boomer wakes up seizing in a resurrection tub, physically affected by the repetition of this trauma. Her experience is further complicated by the fact that she believed, until only a short period before her death, that she was human. She was not even aware of her ability to resurrect until her identity was revealed. The Cylons that surround her tub now trying to comfort her thus have the opposite effect, and she begins to scream.



Battlestar Galactica, 2.18, “Downloaded”

Boomer’s death was more jolting than that of Six. Six knew she was going to die. Her mission was to gain information to aid in the attack on the Colonies and to return to the

Cylons when her body on Caprica died along with most of the human race. So in a way she was aware of her drive towards death – the way she would return to her “original state” was laid out and thus one could argue that she did indeed travel by circuitous paths to death since the means were her own, or at least those of the Cylon race. Boomer, on the other hand, dies without warning at the hands of another, that is, by non-circuitous paths. Her death is further complicated by her continued struggle to ascertain to what race her loyalties lie. Due to her previous belief that she was human, she must also have had some stake in human death, and for that belief, among many others, to be suddenly upturned is a trauma in itself, a *death* in itself. And for Boomer, it is not a death she takes lying down. She becomes a troubled Cylon. Her experiences in her past life, most of which were human, do not help her to live conservatively in her new body as do Six's, but in fact are incompatible with Cylon life. Later in the series, due to her apathy and inability to live under Cylon terms, Boomer is put under threat of being boxed, her memories put into cold storage: a true Cylon death. Rather than heeding her own model's words and taking death as a learning experience, she has become trapped in a repetitive cycle that she does not want to be in: trapped by a race she does not wish to be a part of. The change from a circuitous to a cyclical death drive is detrimental to her character. The camera acknowledges Boomer's future dissonance and zooms out at the end of her resurrection sequence, mirroring a shot that will come later of Starbuck in similar circumstances, who as we recall will also be trapped by the Cylons (Leobean in particular). For Boomer, like Starbuck, this repetition is a prison. This leads me to believe that perhaps this modified death drive *is* predominantly unpleasurable despite the addition of a learning curve, which would adhere to Freud's conviction of the predominance of unpleasure over pleasure.



Battlestar Galactica, L: Starbuck, 3.1, "Occupation/Precipice"; R: Boomer, 2.18, "Downloaded"

In all cases, despite any modification, we see an instinct towards origins: the human towards death itself, Six, in her hallucinations, towards her life with Gaius, and Boomer towards her life as a human. However, in each case we also see an opposition to this instinct: for the human there is the pleasure principle, for Six there is her nature as a Cylon to oppose humans, and for Boomer there is her basic identity as a Cylon. All these conflicting instincts, memories, lives, and theories *accumulate*. And this accumulation brought me to the theory of the archive, and more specifically, to Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever*, which itself partially stems from Freud's own theory that we have been examining from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. As we will see, Derrida's theory is also a complicated and schismatic one, but one that, like Freud's death drive, can be illuminated through the Cylon experience of resurrection and can also aid in a working through of the body of television itself.

"Death's just a revolving door isn't it?"
(*Battlestar Galactica*, 3.9, "The Passage")

To preface his theory, Derrida begins with the physical entity from which it came: "the meaning of 'archive'" he says, "comes from the Greek *arkeion*: initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the *archons*, those who

commanded" (3). These *archons* were the guardians of the archive, and its documents would articulate the law only with the *archon's* accord. And thus this edifice, the archive, becomes a place of "passage" (Derrida, 3). Initially the word "passage" refers to a transition from the private to the public, though, Derrida makes sure to note, not necessarily from the secret to the non-secret. However, as his theory evolves, we see this "passage" as encompassing many other dualities: repetition vs. accumulation, fragmentation vs. holism, conservatism vs. revolution, past vs. future. I claim that each of these dualities of archive theory laid out by Derrida, which I have generalized in this summative list, can be understood through Cylon resurrection, but further, through the structure of television itself.

Derrida argues that the archive has the "power of consignation," which he defines as the unification of the archive into "a single corpus"; indeed, "there should not be any absolute dissociation, any heterogeneity or secret which could separate," but rather, the archive fosters a "gathering together" (3). And further, that not only is there "no archive without a place of consignation," but also not without "a technique of repetition" (11). What does Derrida mean by this exactly? Understood through Cylon resurrection, I see their ability to repeat and accumulate memory in death as a means of forming their own archive of knowledge. And further, I see their inability to die *without* resurrecting as a means by which the Cylons maintain the homogeneity of their archive. The experiences of Six and Boomer illustrated how the repetition of accumulated memory in death fosters a "learning experience," though the nature of said experience may differ between individuals. Six's accumulated memory allowed her, as an individual, to recompose herself in the Cylon narrative. She was able to reintegrate into the "single corpus" of the archive. However, in

Boomer's case, we saw an instance that was viewed as a danger to the other Cylons, an example, perhaps, of "absolute dissociation" that could jeopardize the consignment of the archive. And thus she was threatened with being boxed to maintain the homogeneity of the Cylon race. This idea of fragmentation versus holism can be seen, too, in television itself, both contextually and structurally. The four series that make up this very body of work – *Dexter*, *Nip/Tuck*, *Battlestar Galactica*, and *Damages* – are narratively quite disparate. I asked in my introduction, what do a serial killer, a plastic surgeon, a cyborg, and a lawyer have in common? This is a question that deserves much more than a passing comment, but for now I will only say that their surface level disparity makes clear the idea of television as a whole made up of many articulating units. Here we see Raymond Williams's idea of the fragmented flow of television – cut up, but repetitive and never-ending, like the Cylon body itself. Television, as an archive, *gathers together* narrative and structural forms, as well as the viewers themselves.

Returning to *Battlestar*, Boomer's character was the first whose heterogeneity became "non-secret" rather than "secret"; however, it was not the last. The tendency towards disunity in the Cylon archive intensifies over the course of the series, and becomes most evident in the evolution of D'Anna Biers' character – though her resurrection cycle could also be viewed as a singular ploy for unity of a *different* archive, one of knowledge. D'Anna Biers seemed to have a different conception of the origins to which her death drive would take her.

Derrida contends that "archive desire" is impossible "without the threat of this death drive" for it is in fact a "painful desire for a return to the authentic and singular origin" (19, 85). This is what links Derrida to Freud's death drive (which itself represents a

desire for return to an original state) and what brings *us* to D'Anna as a means of interpreting this connection. In season three, D'Anna becomes obsessed with origins. The Cylon race is so evolved, but how? And from where? The Final Five are said to have created the Significant Seven, yet the Seven know little to nothing about the Five. In fact, they are forbidden to even speak of them. The identities and whereabouts of the Five are unknown, and the majority of the Seven believe that this should be the extent of their knowledge. Knowing anymore would be detrimental and against their innate beliefs – Cylons always look to the future, never back on the past. The classified nature of the Five bring about Derrida's idea of the archive as not necessitating a passage from the secret to the non-secret. Though many Cylons would call for a preservation of secrecy, both the viewers and D'Anna hope and drive, respectively, for a reveal.

In "Hero," D'Anna, in a desire to discover her own origins by identifying the Final Five, acts upon the idea I have laid out of resurrection as more than just repetition. She orders a centurion, one of the less evolved, militaristic Cylon models, to kill her, for she *wants* to resurrect in order to repeatedly experience the moment between death and rebirth. She sees this moment as a means of interpreting her origins. By committing suicide, D'Anna has not only enacted the Cylon death drive, but has transformed it.



Battlestar Galactica, 3.7, "Hero"

In her first purposeful death, D'Anna has a vision of the Final Five in some sort of sacred chamber. The light burns so brightly that she cannot make out their identities, but she wakes up energized, with the desire to further decipher what she has seen. She whispers to the Cylons that surround her tub, "There is something beautiful, miraculous, between life and death" (*BSG*, 3.7). After this experience, she becomes addicted to the resurrection process and develops what Derrida might term an *archival* "desire for a return to the authentic and singular origin": in her case, for the place where she could learn of the Final Five. In an episode incidentally entitled, "The Passage," Gaius becomes aware of D'Anna's deliberate death drive and says with sardonic jealousy, "Death's just a revolving door, isn't it?" (*BSG*, 3.9). For D'Anna, death is a door she passes through in an attempt to "discover who we are"; something Gaius notes is a desire shared by humans and Cylons alike (*BSG*, 3.9). In D'Anna's death drive, or perhaps, I argue, it would be better called an origins drive, we see Freud's theory of the unpleasure principle. D'Anna willingly submits herself to the traumatic experience of dying in order to eventually attain the knowledge of her origins that will bring her pleasure. This developed repetition compulsion as a means of accumulating knowledge is present in our own repetition compulsion as television viewers. We watch episode after episode of shows like *Dexter*, *Nip/Tuck*, *Battlestar Galactica*, and *Damages* because, despite the pleasure we feel at the end of each installment, this feeling is quickly replaced by unpleasure in that we want more, but must wait. This near-simultaneous cyclical experience of pleasure/unpleasure constitutes desire itself.

The connection between the death drive and the archive is something Derrida strives to illuminate. He argues that, "There would be no future without repetition. And thus, as Freud might say (this would be his thesis), there is no future without the specter of

the Oedipal violence that inscribes the superrepression into the *archontic* institution of the archive” (Derrida, 81). Put more simply, without the death drive, there *is* no archive. In televisual terms, without repeated viewing, there is no series – would we ever just watch one episode of our favorite show and then stop for good? Our televisual archive is an ever-expanding accumulation of episodes and programs. Similar to the way we come back to *Battlestar Galactica* every episode, D’Anna, after having a taste of the Final Five, comes back to resurrection over and over to try to learn more. The Cylon archive is like our own televisual one, in that it is made up of physical bodies (like individual episodes), and accumulated knowledge. Their memories, like our understanding of the series, get re-downloaded with each resurrection.

D’Anna sees her origins drive as one that will lead to discovery, something that will benefit the entire Cylon race and perhaps even beyond that. However, most of the other models, spearheaded by the more conservative Cavils (the Ones), see her drive as antithetical to their survival. Cavil says, “She defied us, defied the group” (*BSG*, 3.11). In this opposition, we see Derrida’s theory that “every archive...is at once institutive and conservative. Revolutionary and traditional” (7). But further that “the death drive is above all *anarchivic*...archive-destroying” (11). D’Anna believes her death drive to be an exception to this rule, which Derrida allows for. However, the Cavils see it as anarchivic, and take action against it in “Rapture,” an episode appropriately titled since the word rapture, in religious studies, is often used as a signifier for the final resurrection (Coleman, 84). It is in this episode that D’Anna sees the Final Five for the first time and in doing so, fulfills what she believes to be her destiny.



Battlestar Galactica, 3.11, "Rapture"

D'Anna wakes up in a resurrection tub with Cavil leaning over her, presumably to ease her resurrection. The following dialogue ensues:

Cavil: You know the drill. Long, deep, controlled breathing. At least you'll never have to go through this again. The decision wasn't easy, but the conclusion was inevitable. Your model is fundamentally flawed.

D'Anna: No. It's not a flawed question, our purpose, is it? To wonder who programmed us the way we think and why?

Cavil: Well that's the problem right there: the messianic conviction that you're on a special mission to enlighten us. Look at the damage it's caused.

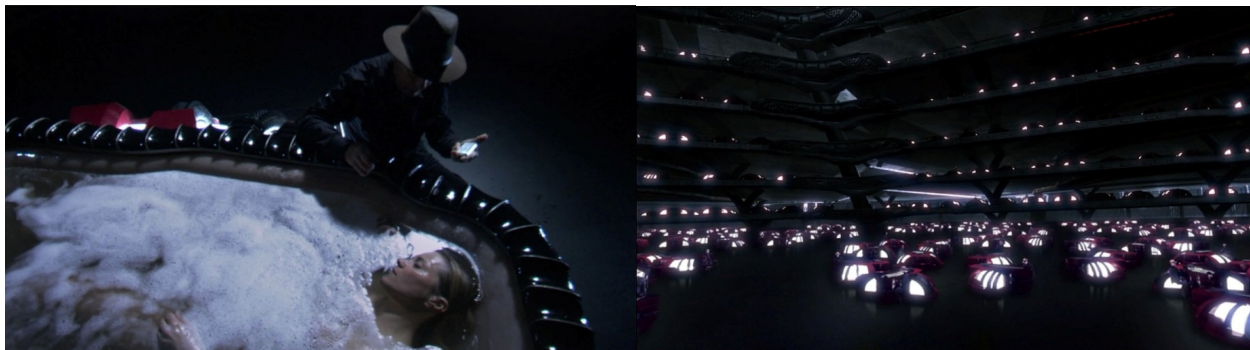
D'Anna: I would do it all again.

Cavil: Yes, we know. That's why we've decided to box your entire line. Your consciousness, memory, every thought your model ever had, going into cold storage. Indefinitely.

D'Anna: One must die to know the truth. There are five other Cylons, brother. I saw them. One day you're going to see them too.

Cavil: Goodbye.

And with that dismissal, Cavil terminates D'Anna's life, for good. It was, as the title "Rapture" alluded to, her final resurrection. The lights in her tub go out, and D'Anna's body floats, lifeless, in the darkened tub.



Battlestar Galactica, 3.11, "Rapture"

As Cavil gets up to walk away from her tub, the camera pans out to reveal a room filled with rows upon rows, and levels upon levels of tubs just like it, each holding another D'Anna and guarded by another Cavil. This layered resurrection space is a visualization of the archival technique of repetition. Layers upon layers of bodies fragmented by these contained tubs (or television tubes?) of light, comprise the entirety of her model, her archive. However, this is the end of D'Anna's archive. For all these pieces, the death drive has been *anarchivic*, archive-destroying. Like a television series that has neatly tied together all its narrative threads and come to its finale, D'Anna's discovery and found closure is the end of her repetition compulsion.

Derrida stresses that the archive is not simply a means of documenting the past, but as a "question of the *future*...and of a responsibility for tomorrow" (36). D'Anna's death drive was projected towards a future of discovering her origins, seeing the Final Five, and accumulating repeated resurrections in order to do so. The other Cylons did not share this vision of the future. They saw this origins drive as disastrous and D'Anna's quest as incompatible with their future as a race. And perhaps they were right, in a certain sense. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud argues through biological analogies that, for an organism that undergoes a full life cycle, "unlimited duration of individual life would become quite a pointless luxury" (55). For Cylons like Leoben, Six, and Boomer, who never fully attained their innate desires (Starbuck, Gaius, and a human life, respectively), the resurrection cycle was not pointless. With death they gained knowledge, but not fulfillment, so they maintain that circular path. D'Anna, on the other hand, found her origins and thus was boxed: her life, in Freud's terms, was "a pointless luxury" – something the entirety of the Cylons race did not want. And as expected, the identification of the Final

Five led to the eventual demise of the Cylon race as a contained archive for they became part of a larger one – one composed of humans and Cylons alike. Derrida indeed claimed: “There would be no future without repetition,” and for the Cylon race, whole and unfragmented, there wasn’t (81).

D’Anna, before her final resurrection and before seeing the Final Five, expresses worry that knowing “the space between life and death” would be like knowing “the face of God [which] is to know madness” (*BSG*, 3.11). Televisually, compare the space of which D’Anna speaks to the space between each episode of *Battlestar Galactica*. Perhaps it is a grand comparison, but as viewers there is a way in which we, too, go mad in this space. We are driven crazy by this wait, but we endure this madness and keep watching, episode after episode. Moreover, when we do rarely come to moments of narrative closure, we may be even more horrified by this knowledge than by the wait that preceded it.

“All this has happened before, and all this will happen again.”
(*Battlestar Galactica*, Pythia)

The quote cited above is from Pythia, an ancient oracle believed to have been one of the writers of the Sacred Scrolls. Written about 3,600 years before the events chronicled in *Battlestar Galactica*, the Scrolls are a set of writings that form the basis of Colonial religion, indeed an archive in their own right. Those of staunch faith believe the contents of the Scrolls to be an accurate record of the history of humanity, including life on their ancestral homeworld of Kobol before the great exodus. The Scrolls also lay out what is to come (the archive is indeed a “question of the future”), including the legend of Earth – a planet sought

after throughout the series. Pythia's writings are not explicated for the viewer, but are understood to be studied by many, and are often quoted as is the above line.

The origin of this quote as well as its implication brings me to my coda. However, to conclude we first must return, and appropriately so, to the *origin* of this chapter itself. Recall my bold claim that nearly every narrative and thematic thread in *Battlestar Galactica* can be summed up with one word: evolution. Well, I was wrong, but not entirely. Through this chapter, my claim has undergone an evolution of its own. I now contend that not one, but three words are necessary to cover *Battlestar Galactica's* range: evolution through repetition.

We saw how Cylon resurrection produced a version of Freud's death drive – what I also called an origins drive. And further, how that death drive, according to Derrida, was both necessary for and antithetical to the archive, as something that produces archival desire but also has the capacity to destroy. We made sense of this claim by understanding the archive as a place of origin yet of perpetuity, a place of stasis and order, yet also of discovery, through the experience of several individual Cylons. Essentially, we have seen that the archive, simultaneously fragmented and whole, is a place of diverse and infinite meanings, but one that cannot survive “without a technique of repetition” (Derrida, 11). The series finale of *Battlestar Galactica* brings this concept to bear, as well as the relevance of this theory to the series, and to television more broadly. By the end of the series, the human and Cylon fleets have come together and found Earth. After some deliberation, and a realization of the damages their differences have done thus far, the humans and Cylons decide to abandon all material possessions and start a life on Earth, unburdened with things of the past. They have come to a new place of origins, and thus, in a theoretical

sense, a new domicile for an archive. However, as viewers, keeping in mind the claim above, we see that this new life, this new place, is in fact just another replication of what “has happened before” – another piece of a larger archive. In the final minutes of the finale, we come to modern day Manhattan, 150,000 years later. ‘Lo and behold, the hallucinations of Six and Gaius that have run throughout the series stand on the city streets discussing a National Geographic article detailing the discovery of what could be the very first human-Cylon ancestor – an ancestor we know to have been part of the Colonial fleet as the child of Sharon “Athena” and Helo Agathon. As they walk down a crowded sidewalk, the following dialogue ensues:

Six: Commercialism, decadence, technology run amuck. Remind you of anything?

Gaius: Take your pick: Kobol, Earth, the real Earth, before this one, Caprica before the fall...

Six: All of this has happened before...

Gaius: But the question remains, does all of this have to happen again?

Six: This time, I bet no.

Gaius: You know, I’ve never known you to play the optimist, why the change of heart?

Six: Mathematics, law of averages. Let a complex system repeat itself long enough, eventually something surprising might occur. That, too, is in God’s plan.

If Six is right by her “law of averages,” this trend of a self-repeating archive of archives (of archives...) will eventually stop, or at least is somehow “due” for a change. But any self-respecting mathematician¹¹ would reject her theory with the knowledge that the law of averages is false, simply wishful thinking. What *can* be argued with mathematical success is the law of large numbers. This theorem, one of the most widely used results in all of probability theory, states that the results obtained from a large number of trials that converge towards a particular constant demonstrate a trend, one that will only become stronger as more trials are performed (Scheaffer, 420). Assuming that Gaius’s implication

¹¹ Or an undergraduate majoring in mathematics like myself.

is correct, regarding the many, perhaps infinite number of times this result has played out, this law of large numbers may very well apply. Given the care with which this series was composed, I'm sure the fallacy of Six's argument was no accident. The implication that this human-Cylon race is, in fact, repeating history once again is clear. And if you cannot take my word for it, consider the images that follow Six and Gaius's conversation and that ultimately close the series. As the two glide down the streets of New York, the camera pans to an image of a television in a store window depicting a robot dancing the wave over an MSNBC headline that reads: "Advances in Robotics" (*BSG*, 4.22). This is followed by a number of similar images of technological progress: yes, the law of large numbers tell us, it is all happening again.

Recall the layered spatial, structural, and television invasion on *Nip/Tuck*. That which invaded the operating room, and the self- and intertextual referentiality, constantly impinged upon the already complex and horrific narrative. With the repetitive archivization on *Battlestar Galactica*, a similar layering of space and knowledge takes place, starting with the body. Each individual Cylon can die and be reborn in a new body potentially infinitely many times. With each resurrection, their own archive expands. However, each of these archived bodies is part of a larger body of Cylons making up their particular model. And all the bodies of all the models, together, comprise the whole of the Cylon race. Yet, as we have seen, the Cylon race is just another repetition of a history that has already happened again and again. So the events we see on *Battlestar Galactica* are only a part of an even larger archive of history. Not only that, but the series in question is part of the *Battlestar Galactica* franchise, which we can argue comprises an archive in itself. And further, that franchise is just another piece of the even larger body of television itself.

It seems as if this iterated logic is infinite, and could perhaps bring us to some frightening existential questions.

I would like to end on a self-reflective note by observing how *Battlestar Galactica* has made its own contribution to even another archive by being the subject of this chapter. As I've moved through this work I have accumulated pieces of information that have been part of a broader domicile. *Dexter*, *Nip/Tuck*, and *Battlestar Galactica* (and soon *Damages*) are now each a fragment of my own archive, and to what end? There are clear threads that run throughout – violated bodies, seriality, repetition, accumulation – but what I see as most prevalent, and perhaps as most alarming, is the death drive I've found in myself in creating an archive of series that all revolve around that which is extremely flawed, sometimes violent; essentially, I am seeing my own proclivity for thanatology. In their ability to resurrect, the Cylons hover between life and death. *Dexter* and *Nip/Tuck*, too, maintain a similar state in their respective modes of abjection and the demonstration of surface allure but concealed decay. What is the significance of this suspension between life and death? And how might it relate to our own viewing of television? *Damages*, as the final contribution to this academic archive, will help to illuminate these questions.

Part 4: The Reticulated Body **Damages and the Allure of the Abject Archive of Television**

“You know, working for you this past year, I... think I understand you.”
(*Damages*, 2.13, “Trust Me”)

A man dead and bloodied in a bathtub, a woman running bloody through the streets, a series protagonist shooting an unidentified victim, a series regular being zipped into a body bag, a young Afghan boy witness to torture and murder. Each of these images of violence and death is introduced with almost no context in its respective season of *Damages*. Known for its nonlinear narrative and tantalizing plot twists, *Damages* is part legal drama and part psychological thriller. Premiering in January 2007 and originally run on FX for its first three seasons, the series is now broadcast on DirecTV and has run for a total of four seasons, with each containing thirteen episodes. Every season has its own storyline that revolves around a major case taken on by a high-stakes law firm headed by the notoriously ruthless and brilliant Patty Hewes (Glenn Close). Also developed each season is the relationship between Hewes and Ellen Parsons (Rose Byrne), a woman ruthless in her own right who has played the roles of Hewes’ protégée, rival, and seemingly loyal confidant.

To say the narratives on *Damages* are complex would be an understatement. Simply plotting out the events of a *singular* episode is a daunting and arduous task. Perhaps this was part of the reason *Damages* did not survive on FX, despite its critical acclaim. Accordingly, I do not mean to use this chapter to recount intricate storylines or to make a claim solely on *Damages* itself. Rather, I will venture to make use of *Damages*’s innovative structure and techniques as a means of articulating the relationships among the four series

I set out to explore, regarding fragmentation, death, and consumption. And further, *Damages* will allow me to fully understand what my analysis and archivization of these series has enabled me to say about my own viewing of television as well as the medium in its entirety. However, I will not give too much away here, in my opening statements. I will allow my analysis in this chapter to unfold slowly, as does *Damages* in time.

“Don’t be stupid, Ellen. Everybody’s hiding something.”
(*Damages*, 1.02, “Jesus, Mary and Joe Cocker”)

The temporal structure of *Damages* is constructed through a multi-directional temporality, driven by flashbacks and flash-forwards whose prolific and varied nature eradicate the notion of one present and one past, and instead endorse multiple presents, all competing for importance. Kinesthetic sequencing of the narrative enables a sort of time-travel in viewing. Multiple presents develop serially both individually and across presents. For example, the pilot episode begins with Ellen emerging from an elevator, bloodied and terrified, running through the streets of Manhattan, eventually apprehended and held in an interview room. Her face is hardened and desolate, the image is dark and grainy. This scene abruptly moves to one six months earlier. The image, transformed as well, is bright and clear, as is Ellen’s demeanor. Juxtapositions like this one are common on the series. A chronological sequence could potentially be adhered to, but instead *Damages* mimics the structure of television itself, which similarly develops as a form of simultaneous presents that interrupt each other and compete for attention, but also work off and compliment each other. For instance, a well planned programming block on a particular network will

include series that appeal to similar target audiences, thus providing potential for continuous viewing.

In *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, Raymond Williams defines a fragmented “flow” of television, which includes more than just the heterogeneous programming, but interstitials as well (Williams, 91). The sequence of an individual program is “transformed by the inclusion of another sequence” of ads and promos, such that their combination constitutes the true flow of television (Williams, 91). Due to the disparate nature of these two sequences, in experiencing this flow we encounter seams, or edges, when two discrete units are placed side by side. The combination of these units creates a montage of images in which two disparate worlds come together and are revealed: the outside world, articulated by ads, and the spectatorial world, articulated by the program. *Damages*’ nonsequential narrative mimics this fragmented flow. By contrasting image and time in consecutive scenes, the series produces edges similar to that of television’s structure as a whole. As I noted before, the edges connect that which is dark and light in *Damages*. These edges not only make us aware of narrative flow (we deduce that all which may at first seem good will eventually lead to a dark future), they reiterate our desire for it by performing a kind of narrative strip tease – yet another enactment of Freud’s repetition compulsion. This is most clearly seen in the fixation upon and continual reenactment of specific moments of trauma, including, for example, the death of Ellen’s fiancée, David, in season one. Abject repetitions of the scene of the crime, a bloody bathtub, are enabled by the multi-directional temporal structure of the series. As well, every reenactment gives us just a little more information. However, the narrative pleasure we derive from our further understanding of that moment is dashed by it being cut short. For

instance, the first time we see the image of David, lying dead and bloodied in the bathtub, is at the *end* of the pilot of *Damages*, and we are left for a week to try to fit this horrific, gory piece into the puzzle.



(*Damages*, 1.01, "Get Me A Lawyer")

In this pilot episode, a bloody hand, foot, and chest are framed in consecutive close-ups, and finally we see David's face, his lifeless eyes still open. This gradual accumulation demonstrates both the narrative build-up of the series and the process this very image will undergo as the season progresses. Shown in the final minutes of the episode, these fragments are all we get: we are left hanging with David's death. Cliffhangers like this are seen across television; however, what is different here is that after the first materialization the image of David is then consistently repeated throughout the season up until his killer is revealed. We are subject to the same cliffhanger over and over again. This image invokes a number of narrative questions, but most importantly, why is it so relentlessly *repeated*?

In its repetition, David's death acts as an anchoring device in that we constantly return to it, developing a familiarity that in itself is disturbing. It is an enacting of Freud's death drive, an instinct that Freud himself had difficulty accepting, despite his conviction of its verity. Yet the image changes slightly with each repetition, and thus simultaneously adheres to the *Damages* mode of never being what it seems, consistently challenging any

familiarity we might have. Freud notes, “unconscious mental processes are in themselves ‘timeless’...they are not ordered temporally...time does not change them in any way and the idea of time cannot be applied to them” (Freud, 31). In the multi-directional temporality of *Damages*, events are indeed not ordered chronologically, and this shuffling does not change them *content-wise*, but it *does* change our *perception* of what is presented. Each repetition of David, dead in the bathtub, is surrounded by different images. The nature of these circumstances varies: at times they depict events just before his death, and at times they depict events that could explain the motives behind it. Whatever the narrative, our understanding of the means to David’s grisly end is transformed by an accumulated archive of images. Similar to the way the death of a Cylon became a learning experience in *Battlestar Galactica*, here, with each repetition of David’s death, our perception of the image changes and transports us to another world in which someone else is our suspected killer (Ellen, Lila, the doorman, Patty, etc.). So we see a way in which *Damages* both stabilizes and destabilizes us in David’s death. We are anchored in the repetition of one image, but the kinesthetic movement inherent to the temporal structure of *Damages* is paralleled in our own understanding, which constantly moves along with the serial nature of the series. This evolutionary way of knowing can also be seen in my own passage among these four ostensibly disparate series, the archivization of which has allowed me to further understand and modify the claims I have made thus far.

Freud notes that the “‘perpetual recurrence of the same thing’ causes us no astonishment when it relates to *active* behavior on the part of the person concerned and when we can discern in him an essential character-trait which always remains the same”; rather, “We are much more impressed by cases where the subject appears to have a *passive*

experience, over which he has no influence, than by those in which he meets with a repetition of the same fatality” (23-24). Could the repeated image of David’s death fit into this description? Perhaps, but not without challenges. In a sense, David was passive in his death because he was indirectly related to its cause – had Ellen not gone to work for Patty, David would be alive and well. So when we see the image of his death constantly repeated it is “impressed” into our minds not only because of the repetition, but also because of David’s disassociation with his own murder. We wonder what combination of narrative elements would cause the death of this innocent man? But why do we never question his innocence? Next to all the other characters, he is a downright angel; nobody else on the series comes near this status, yet we never find this strange. Maybe any suspicions are quelled by the fact that it is his *death* we are seeing. Through his death he has, in effect, been split from the other characters that we consistently see, for the most part, alive and “well” in the multiple presents of *Damages*. And thus, David is split from the wholly un-angelic remainder of the cast. Recall the way unlawful women in *Nip/Tuck* are abjected and expelled from the series due to the danger they pose to the patriarchal family dynamic. In a similar manner, due to the preponderance of ruthless, immoral characters on *Damages*, I argue that David’s purity made him an outlaw, out of place in a lawless world. And thus he was expelled, ironically made abject as a means of maintaining the *Damaged* dynamic of the series.¹²

Or, perhaps we do not question David’s purity because we just don’t care about him that much. Ironically, the reveal of his murderer, after all the build-up, turns out to be a very anti-climatic moment of the narrative. Why is it that once we know who killed David,

¹² Similar circumstances are seen with Katie’s dog that is killed and Patty’s stillborn daughter, to name a few.

we are almost apathetic to the discovery? On a narrative level, the answer is simple: the actual killer is not someone we know, so the reveal is not a shock and does not answer any questions. However, our apathy could also be attributed to the fact that *Damages* always seems to go a beat past where we expect the end to be. The pilot of *Damages* could very well have ended on the image of David dead in the bathtub – leaving his death as the event lingering in our minds. Instead, it cuts to an image of Patty holding the dog collar of Katie’s dog who had been killed—yet another event that could have ended the episode—and then moves once more to a shot of Ellen who, in response to the demand that she “start talking,” says, “Get me a lawyer.” This demand is ironic in its own way; Ellen *is* a lawyer. But why choose to end the pilot with that scene? Simply for the irony? Or is it another anchoring device, one that situates us in the interview room? We could also read it as an effort to *not* end with death, but instead with the drive to understand it, and come to it in a natural way—as Freud contends that organisms strive to come to death itself in a natural way by circuitous paths (Freud, 47). Here, by ending in the interview room, David’s death is not the *end*, but a *means* by which other narrative elements are revealed and brought into question (and appropriately so, as his death is not what drives the narrative). Why did Patty have the dog killed? It clearly was not an easy decision given her attempt to give the animal some sort of funeral rites by tossing the collar into the ocean. Or was this act simply one of covering tracks? And why did Ellen not ask for Patty, her employer and very successful lawyer? Similarly, in the reveal of David’s killer later in the season, many more questions are opened up and almost none are answered. Who is this man? Who hired him? And why? Death opens up the narrative, and even the eventual “resolution” of death – if you read resolution as the *who* in David’s murder – does not close the narrative, as it does

for many, especially episodic, crime series, but opens up the narrative even more. Consequently, discovering David's killer gives the viewer almost no satisfaction. John Ellis in his article, "Television as Working-Through," notes that television refuses "'the advantages of certainty' in favor of the pleasure and pain of living in the uncertain present" (Ellis, 69). True to this claim, *Damages* never gives us certainty. We repeatedly re-experience traumatic events in an attempt to gain certainty, but each repetition lends no familiarity and instead further mystifies our own understanding.

In his theory of repetition, Freud contends that the patient is "obliged to repeat repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of, as the physician would prefer to see, remembering it as something belonging to the past" (19). Similarly, in *Damages*, we as viewers, along with the characters, are forced to repeat traumatic events, such as David's death, as "contemporary experiences" instead of remembering them as something belonging to the past. But we have to remember that these images, repetitions, flashbacks, and flash-forwards, despite their temporal kinesthetic, are carefully *chosen*. Each temporal jump is deliberate. What may seem like random time-travel is deftly constructed in a way that endorses and/or eradicates our knowledge of the narrative. Like television, *Damages* is "defined by the process of scheduling" (Ellis, 69). It seems that what the deliberate "scheduling," or ordering, of time does is invoke a *desire to know*. But a desire to know what? I argue that the *what* is an "old state of things" (like the innate desire of Freud's organism) (Freud, 45). We become less invested in the fact that David is dead, and more invested in the events surrounding his death – what *used* to be, rather than what *is*. Our drive to investigate *Damages* is more driven by the attempt to understand death, than by death itself.

Recall, Freud contends that the organism, or the “*living* entity”—this could be compared to the David that is alive in *Damages*—strives to return to an “*old* state of things” by “circuitous paths” to death (Freud, 45). Due to the multi-directional structure of *Damages*, we continually see David alive. So the repeated image of his death is not only a change in perception, but also a reminder that he is, in fact, dead. Moreover, his path to “life” and to “death” is most definitely circuitous. We know he is dead from the pilot, and the persistent return to the image verifies our knowledge – against all other formal elements of *Damages* that in their nonlinear complexity almost never allow verification. *Damages* reassures us that despite flashbacks and flash-forwards, David remains dead. Furthermore, our knowledge of his death enables a viewing of his life, in flashbacks and flash-forwards, to become a manufactured rendering of Freud’s death drive. We view David’s “circuitous path” to death through the images and events that lead up to it. At the same time, *Damages* constantly upends everything we think we know. Though it trains us to retain narrative links over time (as is customary of serial television shows), what we retain is never stable. Things perceived as fact in one episode are often proved fallacious in those proceeding. But David’s death is one thing that will always be certain. What will not be certain is the who and the why. Here, and across all four series, death and/or abjection are certainties. They are, in a way, the only things we can count on.

This is not to say there is comfort in this certainty: the horrific nature of death and abjection make me question their preponderance on television, as Freud questioned his theory of the death drive. Why is it that we develop a repetition compulsion for trauma and unpleasure? Moreover, why do we in actuality derive *pleasure* from this abject compulsion? Dexter’s “dark passenger,” *Nip/Tuck*’s surgery scenes, the resurrected Cylons,

David dead in the bathtub – all of this keeps us hungrily coming back for more, when it could very well repel. Shouldn't abjection and death cause loss of appetite, rather than cravings? As I move on in my analysis of *Damages* in relation to the other series and television itself, I argue that it is the *fragmentation* of the abject archive that maintains and even feeds this allure, for it stays our complete repulsion by keeping some things hidden from view. As I quote Patty at the title of this section: "Everybody's hiding something," and they're hiding it for a reason.

***"Maintaining the illusion...
is far more effective than admitting the breach."***
(*Damages*, 1.07, "We Are Not Animals")

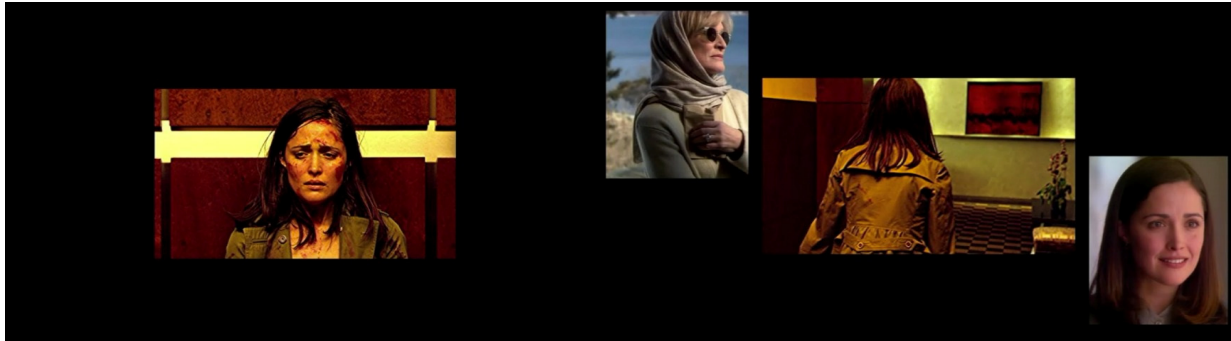
In Deborah Harter's *Bodies in Pieces: Fantastic Narrative and the Poetics of the Fragment*, she notes how, in the fantastic narrative of the nineteenth century, we see a promotion of the "body in pieces," where "body" refers to both the human body and the narrative body (28). She goes on to examine the paradox that arises, in that the "promotion of the *part* in fantastic narrative would seem also to reflect a quest for *unity* in a world whose wholeness has been lost to view" (28). Reading texts, such as Edgar Allan Poe's *Berenice* (1835), which are made up of beating hearts, severed hands, and misplaced feet and teeth, Harter explores a definition of the fantastic narrative through the *fragment*. However, she also sees, in the combination of fragments, a subsequent link with a desire for *holism*. She argues that the fragmentary nature of the fantastic narrative in fact betrays a tormented endeavor towards its own version of wholeness.

Fragmentation, and specifically fragmentation of the body, occurs across my four series of focus. Recall the trail of body parts left for Dexter by the "Ice Truck Killer," the

rapidly edited close-up shots of the body on the table in *Nip/Tuck*, the archived body of the Cylon in *Battlestar Galactica*, and finally what we have recently seen in *Damages*'s multi-linear temporality and repetitious, discontinuous construction of David's death. I argue that not only do these televisual narratives present a drive towards death, but further, that this drive is fragmented as a means of staying our own viewing. Portrayed through an archivization of parts, each of these series can be defined through Harter's fantastic narrative. But for what purpose? I believe that by giving us abject, death-driven worlds in pieces, *Dexter*, *Nip/Tuck*, *Battlestar Galactica*, and *Damages* maintain an allure (despite concealed decay), and thus suspend us, between life and death, in an endless viewing of television. Further, we see an obsession with death and time that is reflected in the structure of television itself. However, before delving too deeply into this claim, I would like to further examine a technique seen on *Damages* that will be useful in doing so.

By season three, we have been immersed in the immoral world of *Damages*'s characters. Like the cold, granite buildings and statues shown in the opening credits, previously naïve or wholesome characters have been hardened: made unyielding and corrupt by *Damages*'s depraved dynamic. The premiere of its third season demonstrates an innovative "Previously On" technique, to remind us what has happened thus far, that mimics the layered temporality of the series, as well as the fragmentary nature of the other shows I have analyzed. The premiere episode, entitled "Your Secrets Are Safe," begins with an image familiar to *Damages* devotees: the elevator doors, out of which Ellen burst, bloodied, in the series's pilot. In a voice-over we hear a man who warned Ellen in season one about Patty's implacability saying, "You're special Ellen, but that'll only make the fall harder. Once Patty meets you, there's no turning back. And she'll own you." With those

words, the elevator doors open, but to a shrunken image of Ellen that only fills the center of the screen. As this montage continues, more images are added alongside this image of Ellen, both fragmented in their own right and *fragmenting* the screen itself.



(*Damages*, 3.01, "Your Secrets Are Safe")

The shots that follow are gathered from seasons one and two of *Damages*. They serve as a verification of the man's warning as they remind the viewer of Ellen's violent descent into Patty's dark world. These images, upon our first conventional viewing of them, came about gradually. As voices and scenes overlap and accumulate in this televisual collage, the pieces evoke our own reticulated memory of television and the complex narrative web of *Damages*. Now, by gathering these images of many narrative places and times into one present *screen* space and *viewing* time, *Damages* visualizes the archivization of narrative pieces that we acquire in our episodic viewing of the series. This innovative televisual technique imitates visually and compactly what is constructed gradually over the course of the fantastic narrative and series like *Damages*: that is, "a strategic uncovering, in strategic order, of images that can only ever be partial" (Harter, 10).

What is it about the way series like *Damages* construct their narrative that is "strategic"? To use Harter's term, it is in the way they "tantalize" their viewer. I see this tantalization coming about in a few ways in these four series. By fragmenting our view – of the body, of abjection, of memory, of time – and thus refusing to fully reveal the image, we

continually come back in order to discover the narrative in its entirety. However, the endless nature of television almost never allows this, and thus we are trapped in a continual repetition compulsion of viewing. Even more discretely, the camera's frame forces fragmentation of what we see, for it can never reveal the full picture. We can, and often do, imagine what was left out of each image. And *Damages*, in its careful selection of images and ordering, takes advantage of this fact.

There is also a tantalization in the way in which the images are juxtaposed. The Kuleshov effect is a well-known film concept that came about through experiments of a Russian filmmaker of the aforementioned name (Bordwell, 228). He cut the same shot of a man with a blank expression against varying images and noted the disparity in the audience's perception of the man's performance in each combination. In this analysis of montage, Kuleshov found that it is not individual shots themselves that are important, but the way in which fragments are *assembled*. On their own, shots can be meaningless, but in carefully chosen synthesis, the juxtaposition of distinct fragments can take on a range of specific meanings for the viewer. Though he was not the first to play with this idea, his explicit experimentation led film scholars to refer to this editing phenomenon as the "Kuleshov effect." This effect is inherently apparent in the *Damages* "Previously On" montage. On the surface, this collage of images is a quite perfect way of reminding the viewer what has happened thus far and enabling us, as David Bordwell notes of the Kuleshov effect, to "infer a spatial whole on the basis of seeing only portions of space" (Bordwell, 228). But further, as we scrutinize the choices *Damages* makes in its specific combinations of images, we see deeper implications being drawn out.

For instance, the image pictured below depicts Patty in various states of emotional unrest. She destroys her perfectly put-together kitchen in one shot and in another sits, disheveled, in the middle of her room that she previously tore apart. In conjunction with these images, we hear Ellen say, in voice-over, that it was an inspiration to see “how [Patty] balances work and her personal life.”



(*Damages*, 3.01, “Your Secrets Are Safe”)

Ironic, yes, but more importantly, by combining these elements, *Damages* expands upon the original meaning of the image by drawing attention to the way in which its characters create *illusions*. Recall the world of *Nip/Tuck*, physically manifested through the body. Put metaphorically, the “perfect face”¹³ on *Nip/Tuck* concealed a decaying body, creating a schism between interiority and exteriority that defined the series. Similarly, in *Damages*, both Ellen and Patty portray a public image of themselves that differs greatly from their private selves. Before, these images of Patty falling apart may not have been so obviously contrasted with the way she composes herself for the public. But here, this difference between interior and exterior personas is clear. So this character trait of Patty, and moreover of the series in its entirety, while likely seen by the viewer over the course of viewing *Damages*, is made obvious in this succinct combination of images.

¹³ Referring to the lyrics of the song in the opening credits of *Nip/Tuck*: “A perfect soul, a perfect mind, a perfect face, a perfect lie.”

Naturally, *Damages* is not the only series in which we see this theory demonstrated. The Kuleshov effect, is in fact present across television. By its very nature, the effect is simply a product of editing, and thus ever-present across visual forms. However, what is most striking is not the enactment of the Kuleshov effect in individual series, but more broadly, its enactment in television's structural flow. As we watch various programs back to back on live television, we unconsciously see connections between that which may have previously seemed disparate (a phenomena that has recently been made more obvious by television's increasingly purposeful self-referentiality). Comparably, in my own combination of series here, I have drawn conclusions and seen patterns and trends across television that the distinct series alone might not have made so evident.



(*Damages*, 3.01, "Your Secrets Are Safe")

However, not to get ahead of myself, I return to the *Damages* montage one more time. Beyond the individual effect each shot chosen to make up this collage may have, what is most striking is the effect of the montage in its entirety. As the sequence progresses, the images grow more and more abject (as seen above). They recall the violence and death seen thus far, but rather than come to them gradually as we did in our original viewing, they are seen here all at once at the *end* of the sequence. In this ordering, the montage enacts a rendering of Freud's death drive, as the progression is *driven* towards images of death. In fact, all the series I have examined are driven towards these types of abject

images. But why? I see a way in which abject fragments and our viewing of them engage in a power dynamic. It is clear that these types of images (seen in all four series) have a hold on viewers. They “take on distinctly material weight” and “anchor” the viewers in various forms of the death drive. However, our own “act of looking” also holds power over that which is fragmented, in that the fragmentation exists *because* we look. These series, and television, are constructed for the viewer. And thus, I see what Harter would term in the fantastic narrative an “entangled network of gazes” (Harter, 55). To play off of Freud’s use of the organism, our obsessive viewing of these fragments and their being constructed *for* that viewing are all part of a televisual ecosystem of sorts – we feed off television, and television survives due to our consumption of it.

So, television’s fragmentation as mirrored by *Damages* is both inherent in its structure *and* carefully crafted as a means to stimulate consumption. In the way *Damages* carefully chooses and orders images, we see a way in which we need all the pieces in order to fully understand what we watch. And not only that, we want them. Similarly, in my own analysis, by incorporating pieces of four different television series – *Dexter*, *Nip/Tuck*, *Battlestar Galactica*, and *Damages* – I have constructed a work in pieces. Like the pieces of *Damages*, the collaboration of my carefully chosen pieces was both necessary to make full and substantiated claims and a means to stimulate consumption. Surely a lengthy work making bold claims about television as a whole would not be compelling or as well founded without drawing upon multiple sources. Recall my claim from my teaser that, “This work serves as an illustration of my own experience in viewing and understanding *Dexter*, *Nip/Tuck*, *Battlestar Galactica*, and *Damages*.” Well, as I have come to realize, it also reflects

and has been influenced by television's own fragmented structure. I have been informed both by the medium and its reticulated pieces.

To end this chapter, I would like to further examine the fantastic narrative, which I have found to be in rapt similarity to my four television series. In her work, Harter draws upon a particular story: Maupassant's "La Chevelure" (57). It is the tale of a madman who collects objects and finds pleasure in imagining those who previously gazed upon and adored them as he does now. The madman is seduced by partiality, both of the materiality of the objects themselves and of his knowledge of them. He writes in his journal that the past attracts him, but the present horrifies him because he knows the future is death. From this, Harter argues that "there may be a way in which it is his *own* body that is most keenly at stake," his own death, and thus "his artifacts offer symbolic relief from an anguished desire to halt all movement of time" (57). Their fragmentation is a means by which the madman can "escape both his mortality and his own fragmented nature" (57). She goes on to say that the madman, after much obsession over these fragmented objects, will eventually "rediscover the whole." Similarly, as viewers, we obsessively watch fragments of television until we discover "wholes": whole episodes, whole seasons, whole series. There is a precarious balance between television and us, as viewers. By watching that which is fragmented, we attempt to gain control over something, master something. But these "fantastic" TV shows are increasingly fragmented and thus increasingly usurp that control we may feel. They tantalize us, and force us to watch, until it no longer becomes a choice. We see a push and pull on television – a "Fort" and "Da" – in that we continually attempt to decipher that which does not allow itself to be deciphered.

Finale: “Fort” And “Da”

“She’ll be back. Trust me.”

(Damages, 2.13, “Trust Me”)

Recall the fragmented screen seen in the season three premiere episode of *Damages*. After seeing all the pieces of the series in such rapid succession – and in such stark contrast to the way they originally appeared – it is agonizing to go into the rest of the episode and have to watch the narrative slowly unfold in the usual non-linear, confusing pattern customary of *Damages*. This sharp break in viewing mode imitates the way in which television, like the fantastic narrative, “tantalizes its often anguished audience with its refusal to allow its images to ‘appear’ more quickly, [and] delights in offering an occasional, uncanny, disembodied grin” (Harter, 15). The sequence ends with Ellen screaming and Patty, as pictured below, smiling smugly as she says, referring to Ellen, “She’ll be back” (for Ellen quit her job with Patty at the end of season two).



(Damages, 3.01, “Your Secrets Are Safe”)

In this choice, we see a way in which *Damages* “smirks” at us, as viewers. The series gives us a “disembodied grin” in this premiere of season three and says, “Yeah, you’re back again, and there’s nothing you can do about it.”

To conclude, I want to further think about what *Damages* says to these other series and to television as a whole. For we have seen a way in which each of these series gives us

that “disembodied grin” and keep us coming back for more. To work through the way they induce this game akin to Freud’s “fort” and “da,” recall my inquiry: what do a serial killer, a plastic surgeon, a cyborg, and a lawyer have in common? Well, despite the apparent lightheartedness of this question – one that could be the start of a very bad joke – my choice to analyze *Dexter*, *Nip/Tuck*, *Battlestar Galactica*, and *Damages* (let alone my choice to watch them in the first place) presents some disturbing trends. I noted in my last chapter how my accumulation of these series imitates the way television itself engages in a fragmented archivization of narrative and structural forms. Further, I now claim that the death drive exhibited by Derrida’s archive and these series – their repeated bodily abjection and violence – is one that is present in television itself, and both pushes and pulls us from television. There is both pleasure and unpleasure, life and death, on television and in our viewing of it. What is the significance of this suspension?

Damages, in its fragmentation of both the body *and time*, clarified this for me. In *High Anxiety*, Patricia Mellencamp claims that, “Television is a machine capitalizing on the fear of the passage of time—as aging and death” (77). Television, like *Damages*, is disciplined in time, constantly moving forward but controlling time in its own chosen structure. Unlike the short lives of its viewers, the “life” of television is, perceptively, endless. So we see a way in which television “obsesses with time while eradicating it” (150). Like the Cylon body, whatever death we see on television (of a character, an episode, a season, a series), is replaced by the life of something else. But our own lives, in comparison to that of television, are short, and this is both horrifying and fascinating. Just as the abject worlds of *Dexter*, *McNamara/Troy*, the Cylons, and *Patty* both repel and compel their viewers, so does television itself. These series, sites of death, violence, and

excess, are simultaneously contained by television – episodically, serially – by the physical box itself. Our viewing of television (and specifically of series with such a stake in death) represents our own desire to conquer time, and in doing so, to conquer death. But this is impossible. And all these series remind us of our passage towards death, and of the impossibility of this desire to gain control over it. *Dexter* tried to control abjection, but only held out for so long, for Dexter cannot control his “Dark Passenger” even after six seasons. *Nip/Tuck* was so excessive, not even Sean and Christian’s sutures could hold together its decaying body. On *Battlestar Galactica*, Cavil tried to box D’Anna and stave off the impending death of the Cylon race (in its pure form), but the archive prevailed, and history repeated itself. And finally, on *Damages*, no matter how time is manipulated, David is always dead, and the future is always bleak (emphasized by the darkness of its image). But still, we incessantly “box” television: we box time to try to control it. We fragment it to try to gain a position of mastery. But television, and time on television, slips through our fingers. And even when we are able to grab a piece of it, perhaps at the end of an episode or the finale of a series, a new piece of it is born that we cannot decipher or hold on to. In this way, television stimulates endless consumption through fragmentary means. Its reticulation of body and time tantalizes the viewer, who wants to control these things – both on television and for our selves. In viewing, repeating, accumulating, archiving, we seek some kind of unity that will never truly be fulfilled. There is always more.¹⁴

Television, like the steady (perhaps bloody) river of time, is endless.

¹⁴ And perhaps the same could be said about this thesis, with an infinite archive of shows about death to draw upon.

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