

# “Serial” Killer: *Dexter*’s Narrative Strategies

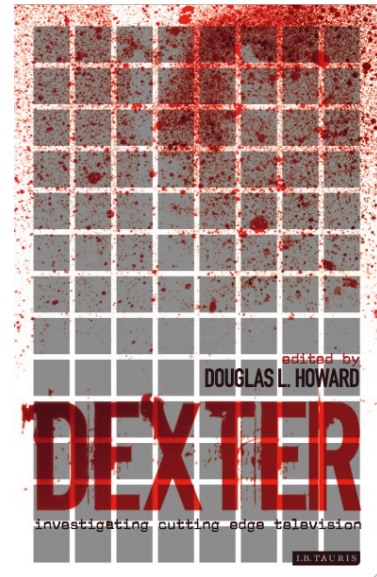
## I. “You think it ends here?”

Miguel Prado: You think I’m done with you? You think it ends here?  
Dexter (as he garrotes the ADA): It does for you.  
“I Had a Dream” (*Dexter*, 3.11)

Perhaps this exchange between our beloved anti-hero Dexter Morgan and his first-ever “friend” and apprentice vigilante Miami Assistant District Attorney seemed redolent with not only the series’ signature pungent wit but televisual significance only because of the assignment I chose for myself for this collection. I wanted to hear in its ironic humor the sort of self-reflexivity so many television shows now exhibit as they think aloud—within the diegesis—about themselves and their missions—and their ends—while still in medias res telling their tales. Those ingenious episodes of *Buffy*, for example, taking as their subject the show’s very narratology,<sup>1</sup> or that *Lost* hour in which the medium’s most labyrinthine narrative buries (literally) on screen its misguided plan to add two new characters for the indeterminate seriality of a multi-season marathon.<sup>2</sup>

The inextricable questions of *Dexter*’s end and Dexter’s fate have nevertheless been with us from the beginning. What would the series’ longevity be? Would it become a “long haul” show (the term is Sarah Vowell’s) or just have a short run? Could Dexter himself endure his impossibly dangerous existence without being done-in by the likes of his fellow serial killer brother, or a psychotic British woman, or the sadistic Skinner, or being caught by his law enforcement colleagues?

When this not-yet-viewer first learned about *Dexter*’s existence, before I had seen anything but its bloody opening credit sequence, I recall being struck at once by both the ingeniousness of the idea and its limits. As I became a serious, loyal viewer of its first season, I still remained skeptical of its potential for a long run. But my



<sup>1</sup> “Superstar” (4.17) or “Normal Again” (6.17) or “Storyteller” (7.16).

<sup>2</sup> I have in mind “Expose” (3.14), of course, which winks at the viewer throughout about its stand alone extermination of Paolo and Nikki, additions to the cast summarily rejected by its fan base and buried alive at the episode’s end.

track record as a prognosticator was not that strong. I had predicted *24* (FOX, 2001- ) would be a one day wonder and doubted *Prison Break* would make it beyond the Fox River Penitentiary (FOX, 2005- ), but both series have had long runs, with *24* remaining riveting for at least its first five seasons (out of seven to date) and *Prison Break* continuing to enthrall even on the lam.

Still, the challenges, the “peaks and valleys” as Marc Dolan calls them in a magisterial essay, facing a long-term serial narrative of any kind are massive and often fatal. For every success there are ten failures. One more inclined to cheap puns than myself might even suggest that television narrative is ever threatened by a “serial” killer, part industry force, part imaginative limitation, running loose in the medium, ready to cut down many a promising series in its prime. “Brilliant but cancelled” has almost become its own genre.

A serial narrative about a serial killer—that would seem to be courting undue risk, and yet *Dexter* has survived now for three, twelve episode premium channel seasons.<sup>3</sup> Season One, drawing substantially on the origin story laid down by Jeff Lindsay in *Darkly Dreaming Dexter*, was strong from start to finish as our hero did battle with his brother-in-crime The Ice Truck Killer. It seemed difficult to imagine *Dexter* ever achieving a more brilliant moment than the blood-spatter-specialist’s triumphant, imaginary walk through the throng of adoring, “Way to take out the trash”-ing fans—a plane overhead trailing a “We ❤️ Dexter” banner. If *Dexter* had been a miniseries, this would have been a sensational, unforgettable ending to a limited narrative. But *Dexter* would go on, preparing for the long haul. For example, the decision was made to leave dead-at-the-end-of-the-first-novel Lt. Maria LaGuerta (Lauren Velez), a central character in all three seasons, still alive.

Season Two, in which Dexter, aka The Bay Harbor Butcher, becomes the hunted, began somewhat slowly (or was that perception really projection, the side-effect of my initial skepticism) but gained momentum with the introduction of Lila (Jaimie Murray) and the spiraling antagonism between Dexter and in-house nemesis Sergeant Doakes. Some of the B and C stories of the season would earn the snark of bloggers at sites like Television Without Pity and The Onion TV Club (it seems not everyone cares for Dexter’s sister Debra [Jennifer Carpenter]), but for the most part

---

<sup>3</sup> In an interview with James Longworth (67), *Touched By an Angel* showrunner Martha Williamson insists the single greatest detriment to the production of quality television is the sheer number of episodes required—ordinarily twenty two—by a network television series. She speaks with envy of the premium channel agenda—ordinarily twelve or thirteen—of her friend David Chase (*The Sopranos*).

*Dexter's* sophomore outing was critically well received and ended well. The future of the series seemed promising indeed. When Dexter insisted with a pride touching on hubris that he had now outgrown his father—"I'm no longer his disciple. I'm a master now. An idea transcended into life" ("The British Invasion," 2.12)—my meta-commentary Geiger Counter sounded again. James Manos' adaptation of Jeff Lindsay's fiction had, in the hands of Clyde Phillips and company, found its stride, achieved mastery. Would it last? Would it transcend?



Season Three on the other hand, characterized by Heather Havrilesky as "dark but capricious," really did seem different—and not nearly as adroit. S3's dual story—Dexter's growing friendship and then war with the manipulative and more evil Prado/his expectant father domestication and eventual season-ending marriage to Rita—nevertheless prompted *Salon's* television critic, fonder of the season than I, to wonder:

does Dexter really have anything but ice water flowing through his veins? Is he capable of being a remotely decent husband and father, given his utter lack of feeling for everyone and everything in his life, not to mention his tendency to disappear on nefarious errands with clock-like regularity?

Asked by *TV Guide* to speculate on the future for her character and Dexter, Julie Benz (Rita) suggested that “The success of their relationship will depend on how good Dexter is at multitasking and juggling. ‘Most men aren’t very good at that,’” says Benz. Neither, my metacommentary Geiger counter prompts me to add, are television shows.

## II. *Dexter* as a Narrative

What kind of narrative is *Dexter*? Television scholars like Marc Dolan, John Tulloch and Manuel Alvarado, Horace Newcomb, and Robin Nelson have helped us sort out the multiple narrative modes television series come in, from the Traditional/Episodic, in which each episode stands alone, adding little or nothing to the cumulative memory of the show over seasons/years. In sharp contrast, serial narratives, relegated for most of television’s first three decades to the mediacosmos of daytime—“another world”—told open-ended, linear stories “designed to be infinitely continued and extended” (Dolan 33).<sup>4</sup>

The advent of night-time soaps like *Dallas* (CBS, 1978-1991) broke the mold and introduced new hybrids. The sequential series, for example, shows “that, had they been made a decade earlier, would almost certainly have been constructed in almost purely episodic terms,” made broadcast order of prime importance, “since events in one episode clearly led to events in another” (Dolan 34).<sup>5</sup>

The last two decades of television, however, have seen the initially experimental but now common adoption of what Robin Nelson terms the “flexi-narrative,” a “hybrid mix of serial and series forms . . . involving the closure of one story arc within an episode (like a series) but with other, ongoing story arcs involving the regular characters (like a serial)” (82). Appealing both to those wanting long-term relationships with television and the less faithful, no-appointment necessary,

---

<sup>4</sup> For a more historical account of the classification of types of television series, see my own “Lost and Long-Term Television Narrative.”

<sup>5</sup> Tulloch and Alvarez identify a closely related narrative form which they deem the episodic serial, series which exhibit continuity between episodes but only for a limited and specified number (ix). The subject of their study, *Doctor Who*, serves as an example, as does another famous British series, *The Prisoner*. And Newcomb uses a different designation for essentially the same narrative manifestation: “cumulative narrative.” Like the traditional series and unlike the traditional “open-ended” serial, each installment of a cumulative narrative has a distinct beginning, middle, and end. However, unlike the traditional series and like the traditional serial, one episode’s events can greatly affect later episodes. As Newcomb puts it, “Each week’s program is distinct, yet each is grafted onto the body of the series, its characters’ pasts” (quoted in Reeves 30).

occasional viewer, the growing popularity of flexi-narratives for audience and producer is not hard to understand.

*Dexter* is a flexi-narrative. Like *The X-Files*, it has blended discrete “monster of the week” (MOW) episodes with an ongoing story arc. In MOW mode, “the dark avenger” investigates, tracks, and murders this or that enemy of society, be they gigantic Cuban thug, murderous used car salesman, or psycho-stalker psychiatrist. Like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, however, the series has opted for constructing each season primarily around Dexter’s clash with a particular “Big Bad” (as *Buffy* deemed the Slayer’s foes): The Ice Truck Killer in One, Lila/Doakes in Two, Miguel Prado in Three, with none of these conflicts spilling over into subsequent seasons. At the end of *Darkly Dreaming Dexter*, the Ice Truck Killer goes free; the series, true to its medium, kills him off.

On the other hand, *Dexter*’s master narrative—*The X-Files* deemed it “mythology”—has essentially been the incremental, over an individual season and the course of the entire series, humanization of Dexter Morgan. Its twin multi-season line tracks his continuing dialogue with his dead father and his education as the right kind of serial killer and his developing relationship with Rita.

The legacy of his dead-by-his-own-hand before the series begins father (James Remar) has been of great importance to the ongoing narrative. Harry Morgan has appeared in every episode to-date, either in flashbacks or as a spectral presence serving as his monster stepson’s very special conscience, which gives Dexter someone to talk to in addition to us. Clyde Phillips admitted in a Season One interview that the voice-over evolved in order to solve the problem of Dexter’s extreme loner status.<sup>6</sup> Not until his friendship with Miguel Prado in Season Three can Dexter find another human being to confide in, but from the first he unburdens to us, and his often black-humored commentary, brilliantly done by Michael C. Hall, is the best, the wittiest on television, never becoming as cloying or pedantic as that of, say, Meredith Grey on *Grey’s Anatomy* or *Desperate Housewives*’ Mary Alice Young.

But to what end? The recent mega-controversial example of the culmination of *The Sopranos* reminded us that the narrative eschatology (as I have deemed it elsewhere) of a television series is a matter of great complexity.

### III. Happily Ever After?

---

<sup>6</sup> Except for the third (*Dexter in the Dark*), Jeff Lindsay’s novels are of course first person narratives and an obvious inspiration for the television series’ use of voice-over.

But have a real relationship with a person that goes on for years—well, that's completely unpredictable. Then, you've cut off all your ties to the land, and you're sailing into the unknown, into uncharted seas, and I mean, people hang onto these images of father, mother, husband, wife, again, for the same reason, because they seem to provide some firm ground. But there's no wife there. What does that mean. A wife. A husband. A son. A baby holds your hands, and then suddenly there's this huge man lifting you off the ground, and then he's gone? Where's that son?

Andre Gregory in *My Dinner with Andre* (Louis Malle, 1981)

Julie Benz has strong feelings about how she sees *Dexter* turns out. The Dark Defender and Rita, she hopes “will find happiness.” “In Season 1,” Benz recalls, “they talk about being normal. That's all they want, and I think that's what really holds them together. I'd love to see them get married, and then have babies, and live happily ever after. I'm a bit of a romantic.” Could this be the end of *Dexter/Dexter*?

The typical American narrative Leslie Fiedler famously argued in *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960) involves the male hero's flight from civilization and from the force of women. From the henpecked Rip Van Winkle of Washington



Irving, to James Fenimore Cooper's averse-to-the-feminine Natty Bumppo, to Mark Twain's Aunt Polly-defying Huckleberry Finn, the American hero prefers the company of a primitive, homoerotic “other” (Rip's little people, Hawkeye's Native Americans, Huck's escaped slave Jim) usually finds himself “lighting out for the territory” (like Huck, who wants no part of Aunt Polly's “sivilizing”).

Set in America's southernmost major city, *Dexter* remains distinctly American in Fiedler's sense. His other, of course, is found within, not without, in the form of his “Dark Passenger.” His marriage to Rita, his settling down, complete with step children and a baby on the way, is precisely the opposite direction for an American hero as charted by Fiedler.

Now supremely good at his life's work, Dexter dispatches his enemies, from Prado to the Skinner, with relative ease. Whether he can master the ordinary, the pursuit of happiness, remains to be seen. The futures of both the character and the ongoing narrative are riding on the unprecedented nature of that project. Clyde Phillips and company may have painted themselves into a corner, and nobody, nobody puts Dexter (*Dexter?*) in a corner.

But perhaps it won't be a corner. A "real relationship with a person that goes on for years," after all, as *My Dinner with Andre's* brilliant conversation reminds us, "well, that's completely unpredictable. Then, you've cut off all your ties to the land, and you're sailing into the unknown." On Dexter's boat, *The Slice of Life*, no doubt. "An idea transcended into life" indeed.

### Works Cited

- Dolan, Marc. "The Peaks and Valleys of Serial Creativity: What Happened to/on *Twin Peaks*." *Full of Secrets: Critical Approaches to Twin Peaks*. Ed. David Lavery. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1994. 30-50.
- Fiedler, Leslie. *Love & Death in the American Novel*. New York: Anchor, 1960.
- Gregory, Andre and Wallace Shawn. *My Dinner with Andre*. New York: Grove Press, 1981.
- Havrilesky, Heather. "Finale Wrap-Up: *Dexter*." *Salon.com* 15 Dec. 2008.  
<<http://www.salon.com/ent/tv/review/2008/12/15/dexter/index.htm>>.
- Lavery, David. "Apocalyptic Apocalypses: The Narrative Eschatology of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*." *Slayage: The Online International Journal of Buffy Studies*, Number 9 (2003).  
<<http://www.slayageonline.com/essays/slayage9/Lavery.htm>>.
- . "Lost and Long Term Television Narrative." *Third Person: Authoring and Exploring Vast Narratives*. Ed. Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009.
- Longworth, James L., Jr. "Martha Williamson: Visionary." *TV Creators: Conversations with America's Top Producers of Television Drama*. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 2002: 55-82.
- Nelson, Robin. "Analysing TV Fiction: How to Study Television Drama." *Tele-Visions: An Introduction to Studying Television*. Ed. Glen Creeber. London: BFI, 2006. 74-86.
- Newcomb, Horace. "*Magnum*: The Champagne of TV." *Channels of Communication* (May/June 1985): 23-26.
- Reeves, Jimmie L., Mark C. Rodgers, and Michael Epstein. "Re-Writing Popularity: The Cult Files." *Deny All Knowledge: Investigating The X-Files*. Ed. David Lavery, Angela Hague, and Marla Cartwright. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1996:
- Rizzo, Carita. "Till Death Do They Part?" *TV Guide* 3 November 2008: 38-39.

Tulloch, John and Manuel Alvarado. *Doctor Who: The Unfolding Text*. London:  
Macmillan, 1983.

Vowell, Sarah. "Please Sir May I Have a Mother?" *Salon.com* 2 February 2000  
<[http://www.salon.com/ent/col/vowe/2000/02/02/vowell\\_wb/index.html](http://www.salon.com/ent/col/vowe/2000/02/02/vowell_wb/index.html)>.