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Signs Made Flesh: *Crime Scene Investigation* and the Realm of Necrosemiosis

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It would seem at first glance, that we are living in the age of the semiotic; a world super-saturated with meaning, a world in which everything is a sign, demanding to be read. The problem with that analysis, of course, is that all the signs seem to be pointing in the same direction, towards the same terrifying and transcendent truth. All the signs, that is to say, have already been read in advance. Thus, the more one observes the current state of contemporary American culture, the more it begins to look like the apocalypse *has already happened;* or if it hasn't yet, the wait is a mere formality. Which means that all these hermeneutic exercises are, quite simply, a farce. Meaning is no longer something to pursue, or something we are willing to wait for; for the answer has arrived, the mystery has unveiled itself. Signs, in effect, have become obsolete, for they have become the very things they pointed to. This is the fantasy of a post-semiotic world, a world without ambiguity, composed entirely of self-evident truths (and which therefore do not need to be read). This is the realm of *necrosemiosis.*

Among the highest-rated television series in America, aired in countless countries across the globe, is the police drama *Crime Scene Investigation. CSI* seems to represent the very apotheosis of hermeneutics itself: the heroes of the series are forensic scientists who spend most of their time examining fabric under microscopes, trying to identify the origin of mysterious stains. Everything here would appear to be tied to the reading of signs. But here, too, hermeneutics is a cynical farce. The scientific objectivity of the technician makes him the perfect, effortless reader, for whom there are no mysteries. Hermeneutics is now a formality, a mechanical process carried out by technologies beyond human understanding. No crime goes unsolved, no murderer goes unpunished, and no sign survives, at least not for long, in this realm of the techno-reader (a realm in which science and ethics coincide; when Good triumphs over Evil, Certainty triumphs over Ambiguity).

In fact, signs in *CSI* are mostly human corpses, or pieces thereof. And all of this elaborate show of interpretation is a pretence for the display of naked,

eviscerated, tormented bodies. Death here is not the real catastrophe (on *CSI* death is an event that has already occurred). The true catastrophe here would seem to be the violation of the body that occurs after death. The sign has indeed become naked, become flesh. In *CSI* we can see America's new pornography, a kind of obscene semiotics: the naked truth itself, on display. (Compare this to the gruesome tableaux of martyred bodies that traditionally brought the classical tragedy to a close; here the display of death is something ritual, formalized, and sacred.)

We are not so far, in fact, from the traditional genre of sexual pornography. In both genres, the mysteries of the body are unveiled to reveal the purely finite and completely readable contours and kinetics of flesh; in both, there is absolutely no ambiguity about the end of the exercise. But violence is more economical, and more efficient, than sex; in today's America, there is no time for seduction, or foreplay. Death is the new sex in today's America. (Here I would pair with *CSI* the astonishingly pornographic parade of violence in another film of Mel Gibson's, *The Passion of Christ;* here, too, the naked body is the sign, whose violation and death is displayed for our delectation.)

Information on *CSI*

By *CSI* in this article I am, in fact, referring to a CBS franchise of three distinct television series:

1. *CSI* (Syndication title: *CSI: Las Vegas).* The original series, of which the following two are "spin-offs." Starring William Petersen as CSI Head Investigator Gilbert 'Gil' Grissom. Airing 2000-2007. Creator: Anthony E. Zuiker. From Jerry Bruckheimer Television and CBS Productions.

2. *CSI: Miami.* Starring David Caruso as Lieutenant Horatio Caine. Airing 2002-2007. Creators: Ann Donahue, Carol Mendelsohn, Anthony E. Zuiker. From CBS Productions.

3. *CSI: New York.* Starring Gary Sinise as Detective Mac Taylor. Airing 2004-2007. Creators: Ann Donahue, Carol Mendelsohn, Anthony E. Zuiker. From Alliance Atlantis Communications.