NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Showtime leaves little to the imagination

Jamie Manson | Aug. 27, 2009

I had my first real insight into pornography when it was taken out of the context of sex. tt

My understanding came from a somewhat unlikely source: a Jesuit priest. Nearly forty years ago, in a vitally important, seldom heard-of text titled *Images of Hope: Imagination as Healer of the Hopeless*, Jesuit Fr. William Lynch describes a cultural phenomenon he terms ?the pornography of violence.? For Lynch, one of the highest purposes of the imagination and its creative power is to help human beings cope with the fragmentations of relationships and the absurdities of life -- most especially death.

If our imaginations are too afraid to deal with life?s heaviest realities directly, we will deal with them indirectly, in bizarre, compulsive ways. So, when our imaginations seek to engage in a difficult situation, but cannot face its most emotionally challenging or fearful, we detach or fragment the physical reality from the emotional reality. So, we create a pornography of violence to escape our deepest anxieties of loss and death, and a pornography of sex to avoid the challenges of loneliness and intimacy.

This Showtime?s fall television lineup lends a lot of credence to Lynch?s words. If you want to know what is putting fear in American minds and hearts, your deepest insights are only as far away as your remote.

On the same evening in late September, Showtime will premiere its new seasons of the popular Sunday night series Dexter and Californication. The latter title leaves little to the imagination. Californication?s anti-hero, Hank Moody, is a highly successful ?bad boy writer.? In the trailer for the series, a chorus of ?Girls, girls, girls? blares in the background as Hank upholds his reputation as a ?lady whisperer.? This season, his finances hit the skids, so he is forced to teach at a local college?and conquer every woman on campus. Regardless of how crudely Hank treats these women, each female that crosses his path, it seems, is powerless against the erotic appeal of his edgy, nihilistic melancholy.

These libidinous encounters are often graphic, and seem to compete for greater heights of coarseness and lewd humor. Reinforced throughout each episode is Hank?s longing for his one true love, who left him because of his immaturity and self-destructiveness. But there is something disingenuous at work here, since the camera seems to find much deeper gratification from Hank?s frequent, empty sexual exchanges than his chaste chats with his soul mate.

Though Californication is perhaps the most explicit show to appear on a non-pornographic channel, it finds a comfortable bedfellow in HBO?s also immodestly titled Hung, which boasts an ad with a headshot of a woman that reads ?pimp? and a another headshot of a man that reads ?ho.? The advertising execs at HBO are unapologetically proud of their playful paradox.

Though I have no qualms about watching sex scenes that take place between intriguing, well-drawn characters, I do wonder what?s behind this rapidly increasing explicitness. In a country where only a few decades ago, Lucille Ball was banned from saying she was ?pregnant,? it seems that we might have simply gone from one extreme to the other -- repression to obsession. Have Americans gotten more sophisticated, more integrated

about sex and sexuality, or are they more fragmented about it than ever? Is the compulsiveness with which TV involves and invokes sex just further evidence of our aching fear of intimacy?

Body parts are of equal interest to Showtime?s Dexter, though in this case, they are more likely viciously amputated than aroused. Dexter is a serial killer with a conscience. He uses a moral code to choose his victims, only killing, in an elaborate ritual, heinous criminals who have managed to otherwise elude justice. When not in search of a kill, Dexter works for the Miami Police Department analyzing the blood spatter patterns left at crime scenes. This season, Dexter?s son is born. The ads show a toddler, splattered with what appears to be ketch-up, and a bib that reads, ?My dad is killer.? Though it is one of the most well-written and produced shows currently on TV, Dexter?s fetishistic shots of rooms full of blood and dismembered bodies quenches those left thirsty by slightly more discreet scenes of ravaged, decomposing, sexually violated human remains that litter the likes of the CSI series and a seemingly endless collective of murder, cop, and lawyer shows that are broadcast nightly.

Tales of sex and crime are as old as writing itself. What is problematic is in the intensification of the graphic nature with which these themes are being portrayed. The bigger the risks a show seems to be take, the less insight we gain and the greater avoidance seems to happen. The few heated moments of a sex scene, a quick glimpse of grisly evidence at a crime scene simply aren?t enough to satisfy the escape viewers increasingly crave. Have we become like addicts who, rather than face loneliness and loss, seek out a fix of sex and violence that detaches us from the emotional power of the situation?

I?m not as conflicted about the schlock shows on network television. But the cable networks have left me heavy of heart, especially in the wake of The Sopranos and Six Feet Under, two dramas that thoughtfully and often times brilliantly integrated shocking images of sex and violence into deeper reflections on isolation, fragmentation, and the inevitability and absurdity of death.

Today?s writers and directors, those whose imaginations create the images, characters, and stories that work over American minds each evening, continue to do us a disservice by evoking the deepest sufferings?struggles to survive, broken relationships, brutality, the loss of life?that shake us at our foundations, and then, in a cowardly move, graphically and compulsively avoiding the depth and anxiety of the situation by inserting titillating, gratuitous images of carnal satisfaction and floors awash with blood and body parts.

But in the interest of full disclosure, I should confess what worries me the most: I can?t wait to tune in and see what happens next.

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Source URL (retrieved on *09/02/2015 - 09:16*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/showtime-leaves-little-imagination