

Why do we love Dexter Morgan in the Morning?

by Catalin Brylla



“Before familiarity can turn into awareness, the familiar must be stripped of its inconspicuousness. [...] However frequently recurrent, modest, vulgar it may be, it will now be labeled as something unusual.”

The above quote by Bertold Brecht is an excellent starting point to analyze the title sequence of *Dexter*. This short sequence takes the mundane morning routine of the main character and turns it into something highly unusual by adding new layers of meaning and expanding its significance beyond the literal into ideological, aesthetic, hermeneutic and even ontological realms. We will dissect this short sequence into a variety of semantic layers, but we will relate all our findings to the common audience, and how the spectator is affected when watching it. The aim is to search for the answer to one simple question: “Why is this opening sequence so appealing to the viewer?”

The Morning Routine

Before delving into the form and style of this sequence, it is worth exploring the choice of the “morning routine”. It appears that the morning routine has been a favorite trope for characterization in Western culture. Usually at the film’s start, these sequences show an American montage (a temporally compressed version) of the entire morning ritual (*American Beauty*, *Dangerous Liaison*, *All That Jazz*, *The Truman Show*). In most cases the purpose of this sequence is purely expositional: to describe the main character(s)’s external persona, his/her life style, domestic environment, and most importantly, the psychological state, which is significant for the main storyline.



Why is the morning routine in general so popular as a narrative device? The first answer is evident: the space and environment, as well as the action themselves, are extremely intimate and kept out of the public sphere, thus it brings the audience as close as possible to the character. In addition, the character becomes an object of empathy. We, the audience, start feeling for him/her without knowing anything about the actual story. This sudden proximity is reinforced by a not insignificant guilt complex on our part: We as the spectator gain exclusive access to a space and at a time that would not be acceptable to ourselves, if we were in that situation. We feel like an intruder. We want to be voyeurs, but, at the same time, we know we would not want to be the object of anyone's gaze. In addition to that, we are observers placed in a very privileged and secure vantage point in this intimate environment. We cannot be exposed, but the character is exposed to us, which gives us a great amount of control. The enclosed space (shower, bathroom), from which there is no immediate escape away from our merciless gaze, and the (semi)nudity of the character place him/her into an extremely vulnerable position. Our sudden power over him/her makes us sympathize with him/her.



Naturally, there are variations of this concept, and *Dexter* (like Stephen Frears' *Dangerous Liaisons*) is such an example: the face, the body and the location of the character are obscured. Thus, a considerable amount of our power is shifted back to the protagonist. From this perspective, *Dexter's* title sequence builds a complex power-control relationship between Dexter

himself and the viewer. We get exclusive but not unlimited access to him. He (or rather the director) decides how much and when we receive fragments of his complex psyche. The vehicle for this gradual and deliberate exposition is the camera (as we will see below). In the actual diegesis it is his calm, almost controlling voice-over, and the deliberate revelation of plot twists. At times it even seems that we are subjected to his will, rather than the other way round.

The second answer to the question “why morning routine” is that it feeds us with an enormous amount of intellectual information about the protagonist: age (notice his skin texture), gender, ethnicity, culture (notice the choice of food), geography (notice the mosquito – mosquitoes are typical of warm environments near water; notice the brightness outdoors and the clothes he is wearing), historical period, physical constitution, behavioral tendencies, character traits and even narrative motifs (notice the blood splatter).

The third reason for using the morning ritual is slightly more complex. It is the first stage of the day. It is the first stage in our diurnal consciousness, and is usually perceived as a transition from sleeping to waking. Thus, in *Dexter*, that morning routine does not only constitute the start of his story, but the start of a new consciousness for the audience: An entrance into a new reality.



A Threshold to a different Reality

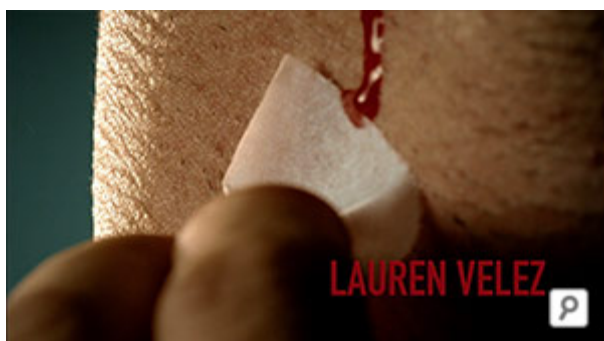
In a text entitled “On some functions of Literature” Umberto Eco wittily observes that fictional stories constitute an unquestionable truth. Statements, such as “Superman is Clark Kent”, “Sherlock Holmes plays the violin”, “Dexter loves blood”, do not need any proof for their veracity. Thus, unlike real historical characters and scientific laws, which are constantly subject to interpretation and revision, fictional characters and worlds are what they are written as. No doubt about it. Furthermore, directors and screenwriters constantly externalize our innermost desires, dreams, night-mares and fears onto the screen, and create a “fictional reality” that is and feels much more real than our external reality, as Slavoj Zizek, (in)famous film philosopher and psychoanalyst, has argued. Usually attributed to cinema, this much darker alternate reality that exposes the abnormal, the immoral and the taboo, has slowly caught up with television series in the past decades. Examples include *Twin Peaks*, *Lost* and *Dexter*.

How does the audience cope with this unquestionable fictional reality that has the potential to overpower our ontological sense, making us question who we are and what is real. How do we handle an immoral issue? How can we justify not only watching, but actually feeling attracted to a man who is a serial killer? Why don't we want him to be caught when he embarks on his killing spree? Are the producers irresponsible to show this gore and violence? And the viewers in turn irresponsible for feeling attracted to a killer? This is where Dexter's title sequence succeeds in creating a very smooth transition for the viewer from one reality to another. Technically, this title sequence is a paratext, i.e. it is neither part of our non-fictional world, nor part of Dexter's fictional world (compared to the book covers and foreword/afterword in a novel). The use of these bracketing devices has generally facilitated the complex mediation between author, text and reader (especially when such complex themes as in Dexter are depicted), and Dexter's paratextual title sequence has achieved this by smoothly introducing the viewer into a world with different morals, different aesthetics and different emotions.

Not being part of the actual narrative, this short sequence does not include any plot points, but is mere exposition, preparing the viewer to enter a different reality. Content-wise it establishes the character and his space. Stylistically, it introduces the tone of the entire show. Affectively, it sets up a certain mood and state of mind that makes us accept and enjoy the morally ambiguous elements of the story. Structurally, it is a micro-narrative in its own right, which reveals even more about Dexter's persona.

A short Film in its own Right

One reason why this short title sequence is so appealing and we cannot help watching it with every episode is its ritualistic significance, which parallels Dexter's killing rituals. This repetitive seriality brings us one step closer to the serial killer Dexter himself, turning us gradually into serial consumers of that sequence.



Furthermore, looking at this series of shots as an enclosed narrative reveals some interesting patterns of progression and development, other than the literal morning routine. On a subtextual level this little narrative shows Dexter's gradual affinity for blood and killing. It serves almost as a prelude to his ultimate affects, which are manifested by the killing scenes in the actual story. The sequence starts with Dexter innocently killing a mosquito and smiling at the bloody bite mark. It continues with him shaving and cutting himself (we do not see the actual cut, only the blood), him cutting up his breakfast egg and ham, pressing down the coffee machine plunger and squeezing a blood orange. In the end he ties his shoes and puts on his shirt. The mise-en-scène and editing reveal the agglomeration of his drive to kill: affinity for blood (mosquito, shaving, blood drops) > violent demeanor (eating his breakfast) > actual killing (tying his shoes – strangling his victim) > wrapping up the corpse (putting on the shirt). The violence and Dexter's true nature are gradually exposed. This subtle progression is underlined by an additional pattern: the initial omission of his hands performing the cuts and the slow revelation of his hands as the actual agent of the action culminating in the overemphasized tying of his laces.



Another developmental pattern is the gradual revelation of Dexter's face and body. Dexter's face is constantly obscured by shadows, tight shot sizes or shallow depth of field until finally revealed in the third last close-up, and then, his body further revealed in a medium shot as he leaves his apartment. This puzzle-like revelation is actually a smart analogue to the main storyline, which unfolds like a puzzle in every season.

Another aspect highlighting the independence of this sequence from the main narrative is the music. Dexter's title music is almost exclusively used for this sequence, only rarely in the actual plot. One such rare example is when Dexter is cleared of the murders in season 2, allowing him to go back to his killing routine, thus re-establishing his initial equilibrium. Not only the same music, but also similar shots are used for that scene. It is a clever example of the title sequence becoming a referential device for the main narrative.

Using references, patterns and motifs is a permanent strategy in TV series to turn the audience from passive observers into active participants, and thus ensuring loyal viewers. These tactics stimulate our senses and trigger a range of cognitive processes. This not only works with the content, but also with the aesthetic treatment of that content.

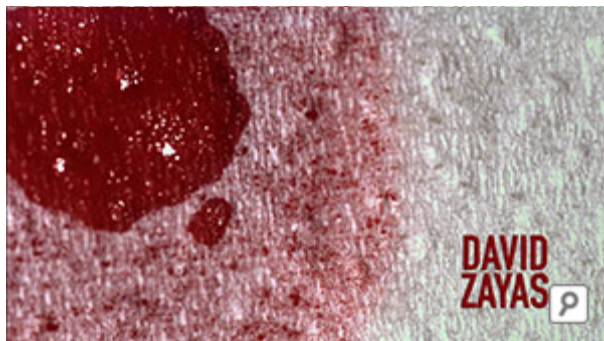
A Plethora of aesthetic Stimuli

Dexter's title sequence prepares us for a world with different aesthetics, a reality whose formal and stylistic treatment makes us understand morality differently than in every-day life. Paradoxically, the title sequence is the climax of audio-visual stimulation and engagement. However, this seems necessary, as thus, we abandon any sensual and cognitive residue from the outside world. This short but efficient process takes place on a range of different epistemological levels: conscious, subconscious, intellectual and emotional.



On the other hand, the visual language constitutes a permanent juxtaposition of opposite graphic elements, which we actively re-cognize. A variety of visual motifs are introduced and re-used in different contexts with different objects. This constant process of referencing and redefining the main motifs of the show places us into a different aesthetic and ideological mind-set. Firstly, there is a constant switch from horizontal to vertical compositions, either indicated by the arrangement of the props or the axis of the action. Then, there is the alternation of shot sizes: ECU (extreme close-up) – CU (close-up) – ECU – CU etc. Screen texture oscillates between straight and circular shapes (blood stain in sink – texture of ham – frying pan – knife - coffee beans – blood orange – dental floss etc.). The elements of “cutting”, “stabbing” and “strangling” (three recurring actions in *Dexter's* modus operandi) are metaphorized through straight lines crossing circular shapes (knife – ham/egg/blood orange, dental floss – finger/sink/ mouth, shoe lace – lace hole). Furthermore, there is a playful interaction between the colors red and white (sink – blood, ketchup – fried egg, blood orange – dental floss etc.). Then we have the contrast of space and how Dexter interacts differently with his two main environments:

indoors and outdoors. Indoors he is subjected to his affects; outdoors he is calm and controlled. In psychoanalytic terms, one could say as long as he is inside his apartment the “Id” dominates him, once he is outside the “superego” controls him. The change in shot size from inside to outside (closer > wider) and editing rhythm (erratic > long take) supports this argument.



More stimulation is achieved through the use of close-ups: Firstly, it creates constant visual jumps that symbolize the inner conflict of the main character (foreshadowing the story). Secondly, the close-ups create an abstract, claustrophobic and almost sinister mood by obscuring the character and space, reflecting one of the main motivations in Dexter’s diegesis: keep your affects and your true self hidden from the public. For the sake of interpreting this point further, the claustrophobic tone of the visuals could be seen as a foreshadowing narrative reference to season 2 when the investigation seems to draw closer and closer towards Dexter as the main suspect up to a point where Dexter has nowhere to run and hide. He appears to be literally “framed”.



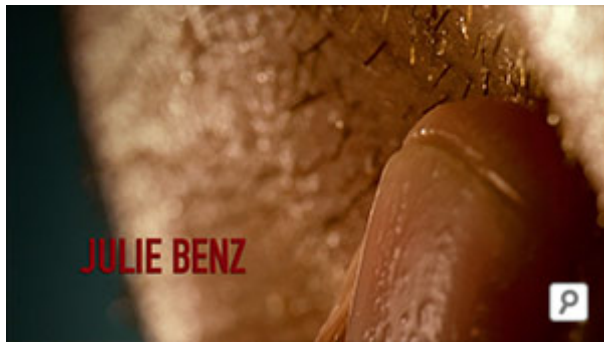


Thirdly, utilizing extreme close-ups fetishizes the content of the shots, making the audience perversely attracted to splattering blood, cutting flesh and ultimately strangling to death. The concept of fetish through strong colors and tight shots is reminiscent to adverts, which also have a highly limited time frame to attract and persuade. Another trope in advertising is 'sex': arguably, the previously mentioned interplay between straight lines and circles bears an implicit reminiscence to the sexual act, turning Dexter's obsession into a justifiable basic human instinct. When relating to the main storyline, it also explains how Dexter's blood thirst substitutes his male sexual drive. Our fetish for the graphic elements in this sequence brings us one step closer to Dexter and his fetish for blood and killing. The fourth benefit of close-ups lies in a cognitive engagement through visually omitting parts of the object framed by the camera. Thus, according to the Gestalt Theory's law of closure, the viewer is forced to imagine the context and complete the bigger picture. This is yet another clever parallel to Dexter's forensic profession.

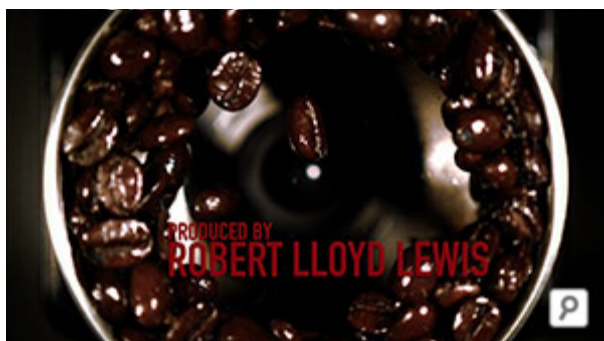
Irony through Stylization

Another stratagem the producers use is "irony". It enables us to justify what we are watching, and the fact that we are watching and enjoying it. The form and style of the entire show, but particularly the title sequence, are far from realism. The narrative form (plot), the high-key music, the almost surreal camerawork and the use of strong contrasting colors create an artifice that is clearly self-referential and ironic. Nevertheless, this does not contradict Dexter's narrative logic, nor our engagement with it. Consider, for example, the chrono-logical order of the morning routine, which is justifiably sacrificed for aesthetic and narrative logic: the shaving does not make sense as Dexter is never clean-shaven; eating the ham and egg separately, and then preparing coffee and juice is not the norm; tying one's shoes before putting on a shirt is not usual. Yet, we do not notice these things, but rather accept them as normal. Coming back to Eco's and Zizek's theory, a totally different, but plausible and unquestionable fictional world that we accept and enjoy is created. Arguably, it even feels more real due to the constant sensory and cognitive stimulation.





This hyper-real aesthetic is absolutely necessary to expose Dexter's character traits and motivation to us in a way that makes us accept and empathize with him. As Brecht says in the above quote, "the familiar must be stripped of its inconspicuousness in order to raise our awareness of it." In the case of Dexter we have an unusual example of anamorphosis: only by being placed into a more conceptual and oblique vantage point (through form and style) can we see through Dexter's façade, accept his inner motivations and ultimately condone his killings.





The fact that Dexter's aesthetic is so self-referential also means that the authorial intervention becomes more palpable. Camera and editing, for instance, become a conscious apparatus and thus a clear index for the filmmaker. The realistic style of the classic TV soap opera where the camera's eye is the audience's eye does not exist any longer. We, the audience, no longer have an omniscient point-of-view, jumping from one place to another secretly observing parallel storylines and knowing more than individual characters. Taking up the previous point about power, our power is partly handed over to the author and the character, who decide what insight we get and when. This ironic diminishment of the spectator's power is even emphasized when Dexter looks straight into the camera towards the end of the title sequence. Breaking the fourth wall through addressing us directly, which continues during the entire show with Dexter's narrating voice-over, places us in a more uncomfortable position, creating a more unpredictable and dynamic viewing experience. It also brings us one step closer to a truly cinematic experience where we are subject to the full control of the auteur. *Dexter* uses many cinematic codes in story, form and style, converting the limited scope of television into the emotional grandeur of a movie theatre.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Catalin Brylla is a UK-based filmmaker, film editor and lecturer. His practical expertise is in documentaries and short fiction. He teaches film production and film theory at the University of Newport and various other colleges in London. You can find more about him on his website: www.catalinbrylla.com or contact him at atcbrylla@yahoo.com.