

# Contemporary Aesthetics (Journal Archive)

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Volume 0 Special Volume 7 (2019)  
*AESTHETICS AND TERRORISM*

Article 4

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10-31-2019

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### Recommended Citation

Davies, Christopher J. (2019) "Dismantling Bodies: The War on Terror, and the Wound Aesthetic of *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (2000-2015)," *Contemporary Aesthetics (Journal Archive)*: Vol. 0 , Article 4. Available at: [https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/liberalarts\\_contempaesthetics/vol0/iss7/4](https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/liberalarts_contempaesthetics/vol0/iss7/4)

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Volume: Special Volume 7 (2019)

## Dismantling Bodies: The War on Terror, and the Wound Aesthetic of *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (2000-2015)

Christopher J. Davies

### Abstract

This paper interrogates the aesthetic signature of *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (2000-2015). Utilizing a selection of representative episodes airing during George W. Bush's first term, I analyze how *CSI* mobilizes a particular aesthetic of wounding in which wound sites, bodily and geographic, may be understood to serve as vulnerable apertures through which underlying threads of critical engagement with the direction of the 9/11 discourse may be aspirated from within the body of the text. Specifically, I approach the wound sites of *CSI* as sources of war-on-terror critique that serve political double-duty. On the one hand, *CSI*'s injury-centric narratives and accompanying wound aesthetic provide a canvas against which the traumatizing realities of 9/11 could be mediated and moderated for a newly death-anxious audience. On the other hand, the wound aesthetic ironically provides a recuperative narrative about the state's ability to respond to political violence and prosecute its perpetrators.

### Key Words

9/11; censorship; crime narrative; forensic science; neoconservative narratives; recuperative narratives; post-9/11; war on terror; wounding

### 1. Post 9/11 and disappearing wounds

Between September 2001 and May 2002, while Hollywood's highest-grossing movies were the relatively tame *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (2001) and *Spider-Man* (2002), the top-

rated drama on American primetime TV (number two, overall) was *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (2000-2015) (hereafter, *CSI*). [1] Taking the viewer directly into the wound sites of crime, *CSI* presents its viewers with a hybrid crime-horror visual palette that, for a Bush-era audience, particularly in the early post-9/11 years, offered the bold premise of not only inviting one to vividly imagine every conceivable type of death and injury propagated on 9/11 and subsequently recreated in response under the auspices of a war on terror, but to enter into intimate acquaintance with the bodily and geographic wounds that would arise. Indeed, *CSI*'s rules of emplotment dictate that plot points always emerge appended to material, trace evidence recovered from wound sites, bodily and geographic. As such, crime is routinely solved and resolved quite literally *through* the wound, with sites of injury and their visual spectacle accordingly elevated to a position of absolute primacy within the narratives; an aesthetic of wounding provides the under girding framework for narrative progression and emplotment.

During the early post-9/11 years, this represented a position fundamentally at odds with what appeared to be a burgeoning consensus amongst cultural commentators that, having exposed Americans to a violent spectacle, the aesthetic of which had all the trappings of a Hollywood action-disaster feature, "the attacks were going to wean [them] (and quickly at that) from their taste for violence in the movies." [2] The consequence was presumed to be a demand for new forms of entertainment that would "account for the new media realities of the post-9/11 world." [3] Director Robert Altman even went so far as to intimate that continuing to feature spectacles of violence in mass-appeal popular culture outlets would be irresponsible as "[n]obody would have thought to commit an atrocity like that unless they'd seen it in a movie." [4]

Statements like those were part of a much broader movement within American politics and culture concerning the overall direction of the 9/11 discourse, one which sought to sanitize the visual field appended to the discussion of 9/11 and, subsequently, the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, so as to manage the terms upon which images of wounding arising from 9/11 were to be used. On the one hand, the wounding of the recent past provided the visual and referential backdrop against which support for the war on terror and its proposed legal powers under the Patriot Act was being argued. [5] Yet, at the same time, political and cultural forces were at work to actually remove imagery of bloodshed and death associated with 9/11 and the war on terror from the referential frame.

Associated Press photographer Richard Drew's image of a man presumed to have jumped from the North Tower was printed on

September 12, on page seven of the *New York Times*, only to quickly be censored from reproduction on the grounds of being exploitative.[6] Later references in popular culture would reimagine such falling people as heroic figures or superheroes, shorn of the vulnerability to injury and death that the original images conveyed.[7] On the war on terror front, *Los Angeles Times* reporter James Rainey would write, in 2005, of a “relatively bloodless portrayal of the war” having emerged through U.S. newspaper coverage of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, images of American dead and wounded notable by their absence.[8] Even the repatriation of U.S. war dead was a no-go area for visual media, as the Bush administration upheld a 1991 ban on such photographs, and attempts to override the ban met with accusations of breaching the privacy and dignity of families.[9]

It seemed that turning the population’s attention to incidents of American wounding was drifting into a timetabled affair, with David Altheide noting that, in the wake of 9/11, “[d]omestic life became oriented to celebrating/commemorating past terrorist acts, waiting for and anticipating the next terrorist act.”[10] The image and occasion of America’s wounding had become a Pavlovian trigger, oriented around falling architecture, deployed to feed a sense of national vulnerability, and adrenalize emotional and philosophical resolve toward retaliatory violence whenever the moral, legal, or ethical legitimacy of the war on terror was called into question.[11]

Moreover, such returns were to generally delve no further than the meta-level imagery of the falling towers. Such imagery had dominated media coverage on the day of the attacks and would be recycled *ad nauseum* thereafter, the images functioning as repeated invocations to the imagining of injury over any actual confrontation with images themselves. Consequently, the experience of 9/11 and its aftermath became, as Thomas Stubblefield suggests, “one in which absence, erasure, and invisibility dominated the frame in equal measure.”[12] A particular *forgetting* of wounding had been pressed into service for the war effort, bolstering resolve for war where *remembering* wounding may potentially have meant remembering a little too much.[13] Post-9/11, under the Bush administration, was consequently a time in which America’s citizens were compelled to fear the incursion of terrorism into their lives and to fear death and injury to their bodies, yet portrayals of real death and injury associated with both 9/11 and the war on terror were relegated to the intangible realm of the imagination.

The removal of imagery of bloodshed and death from the referential frame was consistent with the physical withholding of

its horrors that the World Trade Center towers exercised in their collapse. The very manner in which the towers fell had contrived to censor the bloodshed that was occurring. As Stubblefield notes,

[f]ollowing the logic of implosion ... the World Trade Center withheld its contents from view as it fell; its stories “pancaked” on top of one another rather than turning themselves inside out. With the vast majority of the dead dying behind the curtain wall of the towers’ facades, “the most photographed disaster in history” failed to yield a single noteworthy image of carnage.[14]

What human remains were recovered from the rubble of the World Trade Center were likewise held from the visual arena of the public domain. While, in Douglas Kellner’s words, “[t]he strike on the World Trade Center and New York City evoked images of assault on the very body of the country,” *CSI* was effectively providing its audience with a translation of that metaphoric bodily assault into a series of *actual* bodily assaults that demonstrated, in hyper-real terms, the vulnerability of the human body.[15] Ironically, this ran counter to the neoconservative sanitization of the visual parameters of both 9/11 and the war on terror.

For a traumatized nation, resounding to critical voices either calling for less emphasis on violence in entertainment or postulating a wave of audience avoidance of such fare, it might seem counter-intuitive that a TV show like *CSI*, in which the spectacle of ruined bodies and gore-strewn geography held such narrative primacy, would dominate the primetime TV ratings. However, it may be understood that eager audience engagement with, and consequent proliferation of, the stylized and graphic renderings of wounding that *CSI* would trade in operated in a kind of cultural symbiosis with a combination of real large-scale violence in the immediate past and conjured, yet sanitized, violence in the neoconservative rhetoric of the war on terror.

It is a symbiosis not without precedent. Vicky Goldberg has identified an exponential increase in the appetite for, and subsequent production of, representations of death and wounding in popular culture as the probability of being confronted in reality by sudden end-of-life scenarios decreased through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[16] Goldberg finds that real-world acquaintance with death and gross bodily injury receded from general view under a combination of medical, social, and religious changes.[17] Nevertheless, as she describes, as much as the spectacle of actual death and wounding receded from everyday experience, anxieties about death (in concert with human curiosity) remained. As death, the dead, the dying all slipped from view, death’s presence persisted

in the spectral realm of the abstract, occupying the anxiety-inducing position of the lingering unknown.[18] The new terror-age of post-9/11 under Bush continued this paradoxical relationship between anxiety about death and the paucity of its actual presence in the visible, real-world register.

Discussing the appeal of the crimes of serial killers in popular culture, David Schmid contends that “exposing ourselves to representations of death, even violent death, helps alleviate our anxiety about being claimed by such violent death.”[19] In this vein, and to hijack Rebecca Scott Bray’s critique of Angela Strassheim’s 2009 photographic collection *Evidence*, the fictive images of wounding in *CSI* can be understood to bring the withheld imagery of 9/11 and war on terror injuries “to life by making images that look like the evidence we never see.”[20] The dominant visual presence of a simulated reality of wounding and death that *CSI* provides access to was therefore primed to attend to the “need to know . . . what it is, how it looks, what it does to us, what we can do about it” that post-9/11 censorship of death imagery left behind for an audience inured to the neocon narrative of post-9/11 world as a world of terror.[21]

However, as Susan Sontag suggests in her long essay, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), images of wounding and death and images of war are not fixable in their determination. Inherently, such images as *CSI* trades in bear the potential for opposing readings, such as “a cry for peace” or “a cry for revenge,” principally because each viewer will bring different social, cultural, and political contexts to that viewing.[22] The terms upon which meaning is determined are therefore, as David Holloway notes, “circumscribed by [the meaning makers’] positions in the networks of power and contingency that condition the circumstances in which they read,” and therefore “unavoidably enmeshed in, or in tension with, the lived ideologies and structures of feeling shaping their time.”[23]

Utilizing a selection of representative episodes aired during President George W. Bush’s first term in office, this paper approaches *CSI* as mobilizing a particular aesthetic of wounding in which wound sites, bodily and geographic, may accordingly be understood to serve a political double-duty. On the one hand, the aesthetic of wounding at play in the simulated reality of *CSI* can be seen as functioning as a mediator between a post-9/11 audience’s worst fears of bodily destruction and a moderated space in which those fears could be confronted in comforting and reassuring ways. Providing intimate access to the range of bodily destruction that was largely excised from coverage of 9/11 and the ensuing wars, *CSI*’s wound aesthetic potentially undermines the neoconservative terror-fear project mobilized



to solicit support for the war on terror. On the other hand, with consistent, late-narrative reorientations of the wound that draw audience attention *away* from the body and onto the accuracy and reliability of advanced scientific technology, the wound aesthetic in *CSI*, ironically, provides a recuperative narrative about the State's ability to respond to political violence and prosecute its perpetrators.

## 2. Reintroducing the wound and calming anxiety

Over the course of *CSI*'s second season (September 27, 2001–May 16, 2002), every scenario of bodily injury and death available either on 9/11 or in the line of duty fighting the war on terror was conferred upon victims of crime in Las Vegas. Such experiences ranged from gunshot and blunt force injuries causing organ failure and neurological shutdown to exsanguination from bodily tearing; incineration, pre- and post-mortem, and exposure to vehicle bombs to slow lingering deaths of individuals trapped in wreckage or experiencing death from secondary ailments such as septicemia. Under *CSI*'s aesthetic of up-close and personal wound exposure, what each death and injury provided for a newly death-anxious, post-9/11 audience was what Elisabeth Bronfen refers to as art's "death by proxy."<sup>[24]</sup> The experience of death by proxy is one that has the reassuring feature of affording an opportunity one can never realize in life,"namely that we die with another and return to the living."<sup>[25]</sup>

In the episode "Alter Boys," as the pathologist describes a victim's death by a combination of gunshot and asphyxiation, the camera takes the audience directly into the body through the point of injury.<sup>[26]</sup> First the camera passes into the entry wound, whereupon computer graphics recreate the passage of the bullet rattling around the chest cavity and damaging organs before the picture resets to place the audience back in the morgue. Secondly, the camera passes through the victim's mouth, taking the audience down into the lungs to show capillaries withering and dying as the pulmonary system shuts down. As the victim dies again in simulation, the camera withdraws once more, placing the audience back in the morgue with the living. Later, as *CSI* Gill Grissom recreates the gunshot, firing into a water tank, the camera-work places the audience into the tank and into the path of the bullet. Shown in slow motion, with the bullet ploughing through the water, distorting and growing larger in the shot as it gets closer, the viewer is momentarily shifted into an imagined space of the victim's point of view. For a few moments, the viewer is literally facing death as if it were to be his or her own, seemingly waiting for inevitable injury, only to emerge once again unscathed in the company of the *CSIs* in the lab.

Part of *CSI*'s aesthetic signature, such sequences provided access to the dead and injured body in a way contrary to the general dampening of such visuals under the editorial parameters the White House was imposing on war on terror reportage.[27] However, it is interesting that the technique of immersion into, followed by withdrawal from, the bodily wound sites also served to moderate the death experience available. Snap-cut resets back to the morgue and reversed camera shots tracking back out of the wound again ensure that the audience can always re-establish a separation from death and injury experienced in and with the bodily other. The sense of ultimate distance from death and wounding is often bolstered in *CSI* by set choices and camera angles. For example, in "Alter Boys," the opening and closing shots of the body in the morgue are conducted from the doorway so that the wounded body is at a clear physical remove from the viewer. Meanwhile, in another episode, "Butterflied," the glass partition of a murder victim's shower cubicle physically separates the audience from the dead woman.[28]

Such distancing not only reinforces one's sense of separation but reminds one of the unreality of the death experienced. Indeed, *CSI* consistently issues reminders, through formal and narrative choices, of the unreality of the depicted deaths. In the episode, "Burden of Proof," the opening sequence presents a varied tableau of grisly deaths, with bodies in various states of decomposition, only for the narrative to subvert audience expectations by revealing that the location is the *CSI* body farm, a very *unreal*, simulated collection of crime scenes in which to monitor the *real* of post-death decomposition under controlled conditions.[29] *CSI* also consistently deploys computer animated recreations of various aspects of deaths, in such a way that bodily wounding eventually is de-realized.

In this respect, representations of death and wounding of the sort *CSI* majors in may function therapeutically, because, as Bronfen suggests,

[e]ven as we are forced to acknowledge the ubiquitous presence of death in life, our belief in our own immortality is confirmed. There is death, but it is not my own. The aesthetic representation of death lets us repress our knowledge of the reality of death precisely because here death occurs *at* someone else's body and *as* an image.[30]

The body of the other, in concert with the fiction of the medium, erects, then, a distance between the possibility of and vulnerability to death and the self, as death is projected onto the body of another.



The wound sites of *CSI*, particularly in the early post-9/11 years, simultaneously conferred opportunities to remember and forget the traumas of recent history and its attendant anxieties about bodily vulnerability. With each new episode, *CSI*'s audience were permitted to re-experience the reality of sudden and violent death on 9/11 and reminded of the vulnerabilities their own bodies bore to violent intrusion, only for the unreality of the medium to simulate a kind of post-traumatic repression of such knowledge. *CSI* then offered a microcosm of the remembering and forgetting tensions of the prevailing modes of wound exposure in neocon narrativization of 9/11 and the war on terror; clarion calls to "not forget this wound to our country" couched in articles of memory premised on surface level vagaries of "image[s] of a fire, or a story of rescue" that tacitly suppressed the bodily realities.[31]

*CSI*'s immersions in the wound bear an inherent vulnerability to reversal that renders its treatment of wounding politically ambiguous. While providing a safe arena in which the post-9/11 death anxieties of terror-stricken citizens could be projected onto surrogate bodies, *CSI*'s deployment of intensely vivid wound imagery to tell stories about crime and its apprehension by state agencies after 9/11 may equally be read as actively contributing to the neocon terror-world narrative, the state's "pervasive communication [dictating] that danger and risk [we]re a central feature of everyday life" after 9/11.[32]

### 3. Reorienting the wound and stoking our fears

The season two *CSI* episode, "Chasing the Bus," opens with shots of a bus, heavy with passengers, snaking through Nevada mountain roads.[33] The narrative feeds the audience a dummy, tracking a suspect-looking individual moving down the bus to sit near the driver, who responds with unease, suggesting violence will enter the narrative at this man's hands. Instead the bus unexpectedly accelerates, the steering shakes, and the bus careens across the highway, colliding with the central guardrail in a shower of sparks, before veering violently back across the road and over the hillside, face-on to the camera.

Lit by portable spotlights, the resulting crashsite evokes ground zero: strewn crash debris, high-visibility jacketed emergency workers, human remains in body bags, and bloodied survivors on stretchers hooked up to drips. This is a wound site in both geographical and bodily terms. In line with *CSI*'s adherence to narrative centrality for the wound, the crashsite assumes primacy as the narrative locus for "Chasing the Bus." Over the course of the episode, the *CSIs* revisit this site of wounding multiple times, in person and in simulation, to gather and analyze trace material evidence of and draw conclusions about the bus's loss of control.

Initially, attention to long stretches of rubber seared into the road, contrasted against a shorter stretch of abrasions from a trailing suspension arm, allows the CSIs to both map the passage of the bus prior to it leaving the road and prove that the skid began *before* the suspension collapsed. Later, the CSIs delve deeper into the skid marks, finding an indentation in the tarmac, previously obscured by the burnt rubber, indicative of a tire blow-out, thereby identifying the starting point of the accident. Meanwhile, shredded tire remains placed under chemical analysis at the CSI lab reveal traces of chloroform, which indicates sabotage. It is a cycle of exposure and re-exposure to the wound site, whereby through attention to trace material dispersed in wounding and retrieved at the wound site, the hidden narrative of events preceding the CSI's arrival at the wound site is rendered a *found* narrative, in which past and present come together to reveal concealed criminality.

The criminal element in the deaths of the passengers turns out to be relatively innocuous. An embittered bus company mechanic, fired for having marijuana in his locker, filled the tires with chloroform in order to weaken the tire structure and ensure a blow-out, thereby causing delays and costing the company money. The tire deflation is made devastating by the bus company's use of cheaper suspension components sourced from a supplier that falsified the stress loads of its products. Violence then has not emerged at the hands of any obvious criminal type figure. The collection of geographic and physical injury and death instead emerges out of the blue, from a combination of overzealous enforcement of bus company drugs policies and a collision between corporate frugality on one side and greed on the other.

"Chasing the Bus" extends the avenues of death's intrusion beyond the obvious criminal bogeymen of the crime procedural: thieves, rapists and murderers personally connected to their victims. Instead, criminality inflects the inanimate materials of rubber and steel, turning objects of the everyday into tools of potential mass destruction, thus reminding one of the 2002 anti-terror campaign of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA): "*If you see something, say something.*" MTA's public service ads used the image of empty subway cars with unattended luggage, often tucked under seats, to transpose the terror threat from the animate of human perpetrators to the inanimate of everyday items, projecting a sense of all-encompassing threat. As Stephanie Younane notes in her comparative analysis of U.S., UK, and Australian anti-terror advertising, such campaign messages were contradictory, "[b]oth detailed and vague . . . allow[ing] audience members to create their own image of how 'terrorists' look and talk, or where they might live." [34] One was to feel assured that the

government was aware of the terror threat and was being proactive in combating it; still, one had to remain anxious because the direct source of threat was nebulous.

“Chasing the Bus” embodies the same contradiction. Government agents, here CSIs, reassuringly bear the knowledge and tools to uncover the source of death and injury, but apprehending such elements prior to injury is not so assured, because the criminals in “Chasing the Bus,” enmeshed within the social and corporate scenery, bear no obvious outward signifiers of criminality by which “alterity” may be discerned. Taken in conjunction with *CSI*’s adherence to wound sites as the locus of each episode’s narrative, “Chasing the Bus” is a representative example of the manner in which *CSI* tacitly reconfirmed to a post-9/11 audience that, as John Ashcroft would say, in his push to pass the PATRIOT Act through Congress, “[t]he danger that has darkened the United States of America and the civilized world on September 11 did not pass with the atrocities committed that day.”[35]

#### 4. Recuperating the wound and building resolve

Quite apart from contributing to what Altheide calls a “campaign to integrate fear into everyday life routines,” a campaign emerging at the crossroads of popular culture, mass-media, and politics after 9/11, such patterns of exposure to graphic renderings of end-of-life scenarios, as *CSI* trades in, only become more politically unstable with repetition.[36] Zillman notes that such overexposure, such an insistent familiarization with the graphic outcomes of violence upon the body, can temper any fear, revulsion, and shock that such images might be deployed to induce.[37] Viewed ideologically, the loss of the shock factor associated with graphic portrayals of wounding affirms the strategic value of embedding wounding into the everyday, as war and its anticipated re-runs of wounding are validated as routine, un-extraordinary.

Absolute emotional detachment is proffered in *CSI* as a prerequisite for attending to the prosecution of criminality. In “Chasing the Bus,” after a lab technician proves unable to function after witnessing the bus driver die from internal bleeding, CSI Nick Stokes coolly recalls his first time at a crime scene: “[I]nitial call was a robbery. I get there: triple homicide, blood all over the place, mother and two kids.”[38] Grissom, meanwhile, nonchalantly recounts the varied places he’s retrieved body parts during his career, including “a box spring mattress . . . found a head in a bucket of paint once.”[39] The crucial difference between Nick, Grissom, and the lab tech is that neither Nick nor Grissom suggest being thrown by these scenes. The injuries, and the ability of other humans to inflict such damage, are neither surprising nor catalysts to emotional

attachment. They just *are*. CSIs are representative post-9/11 counter-terrorism warriors, “calm and resolute, even in the face of a continuing threat,” sacrificing their emotions to meet the realities of a post-9/11 world in which the President warned that exposure to extremes of violence and wounding were now the anticipated backdrop to everyday working life.[40]

CSI then exercises what Holloway calls the “crude but redemptive logic” of neocon “war on terror” rhetoric, a necessary descent into the arena of violence in pursuit of ultimately protecting the citizenry.[41] The characterization of CSIs as not only desensitized to violence and emotionally aloof in relation to the wounded individual, but actually requiring such attributes to be able to function in a post-9/11 world, evokes 9/11 culture’s other prominent crime fighter, the torturer. As Holloway details, in his analysis of the war-on-terror espionage thriller, be it in the novel form from writers like Vince Flynn or in TV shows like *24* (2001-2014), the torturer, like the CSI, is a figure of martyrdom whose descent into wounding is presented in terms of a necessary evil and in the name of protecting national interests.[42]

While this promotion of emotional detachment might seem at odds with the highly emotive rhetoric with which Bush was narrativizing 9/11, where “freedom itself” was suggested to be “under attack,” the sensitivities Bush’s narrative lent upon were of the cynical and manipulative kind.[43] Entreaties to maintain one’s memory of the lives lost on 9/11 were predicated on preserving such memories, in service to anger and bolstering resolve to war. As Judith Butler has noted, straying into the more therapeutic engagements of grief, such as mourning, had the inconvenient disadvantage of accidentally opening lines of commonality with the victims of America’s own aggression.[44]

There was, in Butler’s estimation, a “discourse of dehumanization” emerging in war on terror politics, amplified by compliant mainstream media outlets.[45] In this context, Butler has pointed out that withholding, in American media, of obituaries for non-American war casualties actually helps rendering the lives of those victims into non-lives—“If a life is not grievable it is not quite a life”—thus implicitly justifying their death.[46] Under such narrative parameters, the wounded bodies resulting from American military aggression are recuperated to reorient the war on terror narrative away from the victim, as well as dismiss any consideration of universal human vulnerability that might destabilize the national resolve to war.

Consequently, counter-terrorist action is legitimized as a paradoxically humane response by the removal of its human casualties from the discourse.[47] The only wounds

acknowledgeable as wounds were those of America and its allies, whose graphic detail was censored from display anyway and therefore made available only as an abstract emotive presence most commonly deployed in calls *not* to forget the wounding.[48] Generally, each *CSI* episode plots a similarly recuperative reorientation of the wounded bodies in its narratives, as “we are infrequently shown more than fleeting scenes of the human cost of death to family and friends.”[49] While the aforementioned death by proxy attributes of *CSI*’s wound aesthetic offers the viewer that therapeutic possibility of salving one’s insecurities about being claimed by violence, in an ironic turn, the vulnerable human body is mobilized to serve a narrative of both the state’s superior ability to respond to crime and the legitimacy of their crime fighting techniques. It is an expression of what Susan Faludi calls the “bur[ial of] our awareness of our vulnerability under belligerent posturing and comforting fantasy . . . to prop up our sense of virile indomitability,” that, as Faludi suggests, had become ubiquitous in American political, social and cultural responses to 9/11.[50]

In the episode “Anatomy of a Lye,” the principal victim is replaced in the narrative by material stand-ins: flecks of silver paint and car headlight plastic tweezed from the victim’s wounds and gathered from the road outside his apartment where he was run over.[51] These victim proxies experience a descending sequence of miniaturization as they are exposed to what Tatum calls *CSI*’s “prosthetic supplements of . . . digital imaging technology and computer hardware and software” in the LVPD crime labs.[52] A paint fleck analyzed under Gas chromatography–mass spectrometry (GCMS) is reduced down to a wavering graph-line on a computer printout detailing its chemical composition. This graph is further reduced to a sequence of letters and numbers, corresponding to a color code in an automotive database. Headlight plastic viewed under a microscope is narrowed down to a symbol too small for the naked eye and likewise relatable to a car model designation. Stripped down to chemical formulas and integers in numerical sequences, the wound has spoken through the mediating platform of forensic science and its prosthetic voice-boxes of the GCMS, microscopes, and databases. Through this process, the human victims and their bodily wounds have ceded prominence in the narrative equation, usurped by the field of forensic science and the computational and imaging technologies of the Vegas crime lab.

As in Ralph Rugoff’s 1997 curated exhibition, *The Scene of the Crime*, the *CSI* audience are invited “to function like detectives or forensic technicians,” experiencing the communication of forensic knowledge as if they, too, were *CSIs*: they see what Grissom sees as he looks down the microscope.[53] This

privileged viewing position encourages a sympathetic alignment with the CSIs' point of view, because, as Corinna Kruse notes, the "viewer is . . . turned into the kind of person to whom the evidence speaks," anointed as fellow CSIs or investigative confidants.[54] Moreover, by experiencing the CSIs' forensic theorizing tested in lab conditions, generally producing results that confirm the CSIs' reasoning, viewers "can see for themselves that the investigators, by 'following the evidence,' finally know for certain how and by whom the crime has been committed." [55]

By the time the perpetrator confesses, the victim, as human individual, has become memorable only by the often grizzly manner of his or her death and autopsy. Reduced to computer printouts and chemical formulas, the narrative preoccupation with wounds and the material traces they contain has mutated into a promotional exercise on behalf of law enforcement and its specialist branch of scientist crime-fighters. This is perhaps best illustrated by the closing seconds of "Anatomy of a Lye," when the CSIs, having proven the killer's guilt, are handed a suicide note penned by the victim which proves he intentionally stepped into traffic.

For a brief moment, the humanity of the victim has been drawn back to the position of primacy, as a broader contextualizing set of circumstances surrounding his death are allowed into the narrative. A flashback shows the victim, figuratively remade from the broken carcass and material trace scrapings to which he had been reduced, stepping into the road, face-on to the camera, screaming as he deliberately faces death. In his anguished scream, we are given an insight into the emotional state of the victim, and in the revelation that the note was for his wife, we are given a hint of the family he leaves behind and are therefore afforded a moment to ponder the impact his death will have upon friends and family. But the moment is fleeting, the camera cutting abruptly back to the face of the driver, literally returned to the center of the narrative as his face fills the episode's closing shot.

This displacement of the victim's primacy in the narrative, shifted from a dominant bodily presence in the episode's opening autopsy scenes to a brief point-of-death flashback, conjured to validate the conclusions of these scientist-detectives and their advanced investigative technology, offers a neat analogy of the rapidity of George W. Bush's recuperation of the wounds of 9/11 for revanchist war on terror purposes. Bush's address to the nation on the evening of 9/11 began with the victims of 9/11, describing "secretaries, business men and women, military and federal workers, moms and dads, friends and neighbours." [56] Almost immediately, the wounds of 9/11



were repurposed from signifiers of a national tragedy, in which the nation had been exposed as vulnerable and ill-prepared, to a validation of America's righteous position on the world stage, America having supposedly been "targeted for attack because we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world."<sup>[57]</sup> By the third paragraph of the address, however, Bush was reminding the nation that "[o]ur military is powerful, and it's prepared," before declaring that already the "search is underway for those who were behind these evil acts" and assuring the nation that with the "full resources of our intelligence and law enforcement communities" a country that had "stood down enemies before . . . will do so this time" as it faced what was already a "war against terrorism."<sup>[58]</sup>

From attention to the nation's wound sites that had prompted awareness of its vulnerability to attack, Bush's narrative of America after 9/11 had quickly shifted to recuperate the incident of wounding as a call to marshal the strength and military resources the nation already possessed, in order to meet an assumed obligation to respond in kind. Bush's speech operated in much the same way that each episode of *CSI* generally does at its closure: it countered the anxiety-inducing notion that criminals, such as the 9/11 terrorists, might elude prosecution and continue to disrupt society. For a post-9/11 audience, *CSI*'s weekly cycle through the exposure of bodily vulnerability to the triumphalist celebration of the state's law enforcement resources was arguably "provid[ing] the repertoire for imagining as happy an ending as can be achieved in the presence of crime," when crime has been experienced on such a grand and seismic scale as on 9/11.<sup>[59]</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

For all the therapeutic access to death imagery that *CSI* provides, its late narrative re-orientations to preference the state's ability to respond to criminal, or terrorist, violence, bringing to bear the full weight and resources of the state to eradicate threat, ensure that the wounded bodies in *CSI* ultimately function in a much more conservative fashion. Where wounds, in the TV show, initially serve as apertures through which subversive political content may emerge, such as a subtle critique of the war on terror, the disappearance of the wounded human serves to show that any (latent) progressiveness and subversiveness will be eventually locked out of sight in morgue drawers, alongside the human bodies themselves.

*CSI* offers a microcosm of the strategic "forgetting" of the grimmer realities accompanying political violence on 9/11 and beyond. Rather than reaffirming the scale and detail of the appalling violence that human bodies endure, the technological fetishizing of wounds in *CSI* ultimately serves to obscure the

presence of that very violence that the narrative had painstakingly sought to preserve, thus, in effect, denying that wounding ever took place and undermining the subversive potential of death by proxy. *CSI*'s bodily testimonies to the consequences of unrestrained violence reach a point of textual self-censorship in the show, cut from the narrative like the "jumpers" and the coffins of repatriated dead bodies.

While we cannot assume that the "real" imagery of bodily destruction resulting from 9/11 and the war on terror, were it uncensored, would provide an identikit proposition of political subversion, as *CSI*'s particular wound aesthetic seems to afford, *CSI* does ultimately advance a proposition for remembering violence that references that subversive potential, detrimental though it might be to neocon mentalities and the war effort.[60] On the other hand, *CSI* asks us to ultimately remember violence in broadly neocon terms: forget the fissures and holes in the body, withdraw to the surface, and avoid engaging with the subversive political material underneath.

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Published October 31, 2019.

Cite this article: Christopher J. Davies, "Dismantling Bodies: The War on Terror, and the Wound Aesthetic of *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (2000-2015)," *Contemporary Aesthetics*, Special Volume 7 (2019) *Aesthetics and Terrorism*, accessed date.

## Endnotes

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My thanks go out to the peer reviewers and editors for the insightful comments provided throughout the submission and review process, and the time and care taken in reviewing, providing feedback, and answering queries.

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[12] Thomas Stubblefield, *9/11 and the Visual Culture of Disaster* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), p. 4.

[13] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence* (London and New York: Verso Books, 2004), p. 146.

[14] Stubblefield, *9/11 and the Visual Culture of Disaster*, p. 4.

[15] Kellner, *From 911*, p. 50.

[16] Vicki Goldberg, "Death Takes a Holiday, Sort of," in *Why We Watch: The Attractions of Violent Entertainment*, ed. Jeffery Goldstein (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 27-52.

[17] Goldberg describes how advances in public health and sanitation combined with an evolving medical field to decrease

exposure to disease and advance life expectancy as new treatments emerged. Furthermore, opportunities for interaction with the dead and dying decreased as individuals increasingly died at great remove from families and friends, in hospitals and nursing homes, and undertakers assumed control of preparing bodies for funerals. Meanwhile, the public spectacle of violent execution retreated as Enlightenment voices condemned public torture and execution as atrocities, driving the eradication of the more spectacular means of execution such as drawing and quartering, while the actual forms of execution that remained were moved behind closed doors. See Goldberg, "Death Takes," p. 33.

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[43] Bush, "Address."

[44] Butler, *Precarious*, pp. 19-49.

[45] *Ibid.*, 35.

[46] *Ibid.*, 35.

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[54] Corinna Kruse, "Producing Absolute Truth: CSI Science as Wishful Thinking," *American Anthropologist*, 112, 1 (2010), pp. 79-91, 84.

[55] *Ibid.*, 85.

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[59] Kruse, "Producing Absolute Truth," pp. 87-88.

[60] Judith Butler identifies uncensored images of dead bodies as posing a threat to neocon narrative hegemony, discussing how the "coffins of the American war dead shrouded in flags . . . were not to be seen in case they aroused certain kinds of negative sentiment" that might be detrimental to the war effort. See Butler, *Frames*, p. 65.

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ISSN 1932-8478