

# "Catching the Bad Guy is Only Part of it': The Human Body and the Foucauldian Medical Gaze in *Bones*" by Lilla Farmasi

## Introduction

"Dr. Brennan always says catching the bad guy is only part of it. The rest is all about knowing absolutely everything about the evidence" (Hanson and Toynton 2007)—remembers Zack Addy, summarizing neatly the job of the team of scientists helping the FBI solve homicide cases, led by Dr. Temperance Brennan, an accomplished forensic anthropologist in the American television series entitled *Bones*. The evidence Addy refers to is (remains of) the human body, which is one of the most popular themes in contemporary culture, and a main theme of this essay.

Works of forensic detective fiction, an immensely popular sub-genre of crime fiction, have been published in the last two decades, and forensic noir movies and television series appeared as their visual media counterpart. In the focus of these novels and films we find the phenomenon with which critical theory has been deeply preoccupied in the last few decades: the human body with a special respect to its interiority. No wonder that simultaneously with the development of the above mentioned theorizations genres which have the act of investigation as one of their main features developed sub-genres focusing on the human body. The appearance and the popularity of forensic crime fiction and forensic noir are closely tied to the contemporary scientific, artistic, and most of all popular trend centered on our corporeality.

In forensic noir, unlike in classic film noir works, the corpses of the crime victims remain in the foreground all through the stories and they become the main source of information for the detective figure(s) of the genre, who is most often some kind of medical specialist. At the end of these stories, just like in crime stories in general, no mysteries remain unsolved: the detective unveils the secrets and restores order. Here he or she

does this by applying the complete knowledge of the medicalized human body and using the victims' corpses as tools for solving mysteries.

I will consider the popular television series *Bones* (FOX 2005-), the adaptation of the forensic crime novels written by Kathy Reichs. Both the novels' and the series' most important figures are scientific experts of the human body: Dr. Temperance Brennan is a forensic anthropologist and her team consists of scientists. Coping with death and handling corpses is Brennan's area of expertise, due to the forensic gaze she possesses and her superior understanding of the human body, the phenomenon that represents highly problematical and incomprehensible questions for the rest of us. I wish to trace the ways forensic noir employs the phenomenon of the body as well as the figure of the medical professional, and the way it exploits the general audience's view on corporeality in a culture where masses of people are curious to learn about the (injured) body.

## Poststructuralism and Corporeality

The last few decades of the twentieth century have witnessed an intense inquiry concerning human embodiment—in poststructuralist thinking the physical body is an extremely popular object of scrutiny in a number of fields. Arts and humanities started to take their share in experimenting with the somatic, which had mainly been the subject of strictly scientific investigations before. It was Michel Foucault who called attention to the “non-purely biological view of the body” (Cooter 2010, 743), introducing it as an object of the humanities. In *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archeology of Medical Perception* (translated in 1973) he examines the evolution of what he calls the “medical gaze,” and the role of the human body in power relations which he further develops in his subsequent study, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977).

Corporeality has become one of the most popular topoi of contemporary criticism and philosophy; investigating the body as the material component of the subject attracts

an immense scientific as well as popular interest. This tendency indicates an epistemological crisis of the poststructuralist era where the technologies and hermeneutics of the self, “the possibility for the individual of being both subject and object of his own knowledge” (Foucault 1975, 197) was brought (back) in theoretical discourses.

Different art forms have been testing the qualities and limits of the human body, for example the non-classical experimental theatre, or the exhibitions and the public autopsy performed by the (in)famous German anatomist, Gunter von Hagens (Kiss 2010, 57), not to mention the popular *CSI* (Crime Scene Investigation) franchise on prime time television, or forensic detective fiction, a bestselling genre.

What is truly outstanding about this tendency of the investigation of corporeal matters is that it attracts a huge audience. Von Hagens’ public autopsy was performed in 2002. “The autopsy was shown on giant screens inside the east London art gallery. The waiting list for tickets was more than 1,000 long and around 200 hopefuls were left disappointed outside the gallery in the rain” (“Controversial autopsy”). *CSI* series and forensic crime fiction are also remarkably successful genres in terms of popularity, while the website [autopsyfiles.org](http://autopsyfiles.org) displays authentic celebrity autopsy reports, death certificates, and the like in a shockingly sensational manner. Even our television commercials have incorporated the phenomenon; in different medicine commercials we are presented with animated skeletons, skinless human bodies, or single organs (apparently not in hope of gaining a deeper understanding of the body, though).

The experience might be appealing or disturbing, and most of these experiments with approaching and understanding the body result in producing new questions instead of answers, still it seems people could not be more fascinated when it comes to seeing what could be under their skin. This is closely connected to the social trend which Mark Seltzer calls “wound culture,” the “public fascination with torn and open bodies and torn and opened persons, a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound”

(Seltzer 1997, 3). In his study entitled “Wound Culture: Trauma in the Pathological Public Sphere,” he understands the trauma and the wound as switch points, or a collapse between public and private, between the self and the other, which definitely opens the topic up for further investigation. The question of the links between the psyche and the body is re-emerging, body modifications and physical violence become objects of serious inquiries. Wound culture is extremely rich in pop culture phenomena focused on the opened up body, and one of these would be forensic noir. In the following section I will consider the way the sub-genre seems to exploit the popularity of the image of the injured body.

## Forensic Noir

Forensic noir, a sub-genre of television crime drama, roots considerably in film noir, a genre which is truly characteristic, although we have probably yet to encounter a brief and clear definition of what it is. Mark Conrad defines classic film noir

by the constant opposition of light and shadow, its oblique camera angles, and its disruptive compositional balance of frames and scenes, the way characters are placed in awkward and unconventional positions within a particular shot, for example. But, besides these technical cinematic characteristics, there are a number of themes that characterize film noir, such as the inversion of traditional values and the corresponding moral ambivalence [...] the feeling of alienation, paranoia, and cynicism; the presence of crime and violence; and the disorientation of the viewer [...]. (Conrad 2006, 1)

The period of classic film noir was not long but many of its characteristics have survived in different neo-noir sub-genres, one of which is forensic noir. Lindsay Steenberg in her monograph, *Forensic Science in Contemporary American Popular Culture* points out the fact that the “forensic aesthetic” leans heavily on the genre of film noir from more than one aspect, for instance its “atmosphere – an urban backdrop of literal and moral

darkness” (Steenberg 2012, 3). The term “forensic noir” could be “characterized by two distinct features: an almost fanatical belief in forensic science to solve crimes and a morbid interest in human dissection” (Farré-Vidal 2013, 118). While the description refers to works of literary fiction in Farré-Vidal’s essay, the phenomenon it summarizes may be easily traced in other elements of popular culture, especially in the United States. Forensic noir also draws on the same idea. The popularity of forensic science quickly becomes obvious when it is proposed that we can, in fact, observe a “forensic turn” that our contemporary popular culture has experienced (Steenberg 2012, 1).

What makes the sub-genre of forensic noir distinct is probably the way it makes a spectacle out of medical science, with a special attention to autopsies, and the way it regularly features “the mind of the expert in action [and] the spectacle of data” (3, 5). One of the central elements of forensic noir is obviously the forensic gaze, the gaze of the (here often medical) expert, which no evidence, no detail, and eventually no criminal escapes.

The powerful position of the person representing the institution of medicine, in a broader aspect the state, was elaborated on by Michel Foucault in his significant work, *The Birth of the Clinic*. Here Foucault traces the development of the powerful gaze of doctors, to which the forensic gaze of forensic noir becomes unmistakably similar when doctor figures become chief characters of the sub-genre.

Forensic noir shifts focus from action to less visible processes such as thinking, analyzing, looking, for which it developed a distinct way of portrayal to make it appear more spectacular (5). Featuring processes of thinking and examining leads to making the viewer feel that he or she is able to see with the eyes of a whole group of scientists, which is apparently one of the qualities that make these series immensely popular, and which is widely known to be an illusion (6).

It seems that the “morbid interest in human dissection” is what drives the wound culture viewer to watching forensic noir where he or she meets and acquires the “almost

fanatical belief in forensic science to solve crimes.” Since in this sub-genre the key to solving crimes is the knowledge of the medicalized human body, the curious viewer is being contrasted with the all-knowing, all-deducing scientists and is rendered powerless and unqualified despite his or her wish to learn about the body.

## Bones

*Bones* is a successful forensic noir series on FOX channel that has started in 2005, as an adaptation of the works of Kathy Reichs, a forensic crime novel author, who is incidentally a practicing forensic anthropologist herself. The comedy-drama is about a team of forensic scientists, led by Dr. Temperance Brennan, working in the laboratories of the fictional Jeffersonian Institute helping the FBI solve homicide cases. The series habitually features a number of corpses, which are dissected, processed, and last but not least understood by the detective figures, while they feed the morbid appetite of the audience for the injured and lifeless bodies. Brennan and her team have their share of mass disasters, serial killers, and numerous forms of violence – typical scenes with which the wound culture is obsessed.

In *Bones*, at the core of the series besides the solution of the mystery of the cases and the punishment of criminals is a crucial feature, the forensic and medical knowledge of scientists. In fact, the series shows that homicide cases are solved primarily by a group of scientists instead of police detectives or FBI agents. As it is problematized in the very first episode of the series, “squinting” scientists take over the role of collectors of the majority of the evidence and become the detective figures themselves, and by doing so they bring the forensic gaze very close to the Foucauldian medical gaze.

We are clearly presented the spectacle of hard science in each episode, usually accompanied by the abject elements of human remains. Actually Brennan’s “simple” act of determining numerous facts about the victims by taking a quick look at their skeletons—

from their sex and age to their childhood traumas or hobbies—is repeatedly presented as a spectacle of medical science. The whole building of the Jeffersonian Institute, where the majority of the episodes take place, is a scenic space of science and technology, with human remains all over the place. For instance we can often see shelves from floor to ceiling, full of plastic boxes, lighted from behind, containing sorted human bones—always delivering a dramatic look, but rarely being actually used. The scenes depicting the power of medical knowledge usually also feature people who are, similarly to the audience, not trained scientists, therefore naturally marvel at the process or the scenes, emphasizing the authority of knowledge.

As it has been mentioned, the portrayal of the forensic gaze creates the illusion that we can see with the eyes (and therefore are also equipped with the authority) of the professional medical examiner and this seems to be rather attractive to the audience. The way scientists are presented in *Bones* strengthens this image: they are not only willing to “share” their knowledge with the audience, but are also depicted as quirky, clumsy, uncomfortable in social situations, and noticeably unsuccessful in different aspects of their lives. The only area where their qualities are never questioned is that of their profession. As scientists they are (somewhat romantically) pictured as nearly flawless or at least able to solve the mysteries of the given FBI case at the end of each episode, which implies that their positions as doctors and scientists (granted to them by the state), immediately overwrite all of their other human traits.

Professionals’ speeches about the bodies they examine are infested with the language and logic of doctors, which are alien, hence in a way exotic, for the majority of the audience, but which do not offer the knowledge for those who are not already skilled for it (Foucault 1975, 115). Brennan and her colleagues regularly use medical terminology, their logic is difficult to follow, at several points the audience has to wait until the significance of their findings are explained again, “translated” as it is often pointed out.

The depictions of the examinations in and of themselves do not reveal much for the viewer without commentaries, we only know that the investigation is in process. The case is even more uncomfortable for the medically inexperienced viewer when scientists talk among themselves—as if their conversations were carried out in a secret language inaccessible for the general audience.

The viewer of forensic noir therefore meets the body, yet he or she is detached from it due to the scientific language and also because these series constantly stress that only medical experts are able to decipher the secrets of corporeality. *Bones* often contrasts the experience and theories of medical professionals and “ordinary” people, that is, anyone else. Despite Brennan’s usually being approachable to the people around her, one feels her exclusive authority when it comes to dealing with the body. Policemen, lawyers and different conventionally powerful persons lose their authority when a dead body has to be examined: when it comes to dealing with the body, the doctor is the only one holding a powerful position: that of the observer, the gazer. To be able to see the body that way is only possible through the medical gaze, which is organized in a special way, involving all senses and further tools such as X-ray, microscopes, etc. (164) and which represents an institution of serious authority (89). Our mere sight without lexical knowledge is useless—imply forensic noir series. While the viewer is invited into the discourse of the body by the graphic, morbidly attractive images, he or she is eventually alienated, excluded by the language and the knowledge, to put it simply, by the authority of medical experts.

As it has been mentioned, the medicalized human body only opens up for the professionals, hence to the question of how forensic noir utilizes the body we find that the gist of the sub-genre is that it needs to keep corporeality a mysterious phenomenon, since this is what lends the detective figure his or her exceptional role, therefore presenting the body as an inaccessible object of scrutiny for masses is one of the most important components of forensic noir series.



The viewer who is obsessed with the body actually does not get closer to it when watching forensic noir. By continually following the body with the “medicalized forensic gaze” these series stress that understanding the body takes special knowledge, experience, and equipment: the body belongs to the field of hard science where the masses of people necessarily remain outsiders. While these series might appear to confront the audience with bodies, bring it closer to them, in fact they detach people from them by emphasizing the ideological notion that interpretation and understanding of corporeality has to be the privilege of medical professionals. People of the wound culture gather around the wound waiting to learn something, but what happens in forensic noir is that they are excluded from this learning process.

## Conclusion

In this essay I attempted to place the sub-genre of forensic noir in the contemporary social and cultural trend of developing interest in the physicality of the human being with a special respect to the role of the “medicalized forensic gaze” pictured in forensic noir, which is a mixture of forensic and medical gaze and which lends a special authority to the detective figures.

The poststructuralist critical period witnesses a massive inquiry into corporeality: injured, opened up bodies attract unparalleled attention, not only in scientific and philosophical terms, but publicly, too. Forensic noir is apparently a reaction of crime series writers to this popular trend. In the focus of these series we find human physicality, we literally peer into bodies, catch glimpses of what is under the skin, and seemingly we get closer to them.

By considering one of the most popular forensic noir series, *Bones*, I have found that what actually happens to the viewer of forensic noir is the opposite of what could be expected: while witnessing numerous corpses, body parts, autopsies, stripping the body

to the bones, we are constantly reminded that this is the field of experts, and the public is not supposed to understand it.

Despite of seemingly inviting the audience to join and experiment with the body, forensic noir refuses to attempt to ease the epistemological crisis centered around the body and only reinforces that knowledge about corporeality is the privilege of an exceptional few by continually accompanying the body with what is very similar to the Foucauldian medical gaze. The mystery of the human body has to be maintained because it provides the tension of forensic noir, therefore series of this sub-genre emphasize that answers about the body can only be found by medical experts, and everyone else is detached from the physicality of the human being. The viewer waits to see torn and open bodies to learn about his or her (subjectivity in the course of learning about) corporeality, yet while offering the body as a sight for the public, and while possibly making the viewer feel that he or she gains the knowledge of insiders to the field, in fact, the viewer is fixed in the position of an outsider. As *Bones* needs to imply: the exclusive authority over the body is the restricted right of (medical) science.

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