

Dead Body Porn

The Grotesqueries of the “Body World” Exhibit

Clearly I saw, and the sight still
comes back, / a trunk without a
head come walking on / just like
the others of that sullen pack, /
That held the chopped-off head
by the long hanks, / hanging like
a lantern from his hand.

—Dante, *Inferno*

The famous medieval Italian poet Dante creates a macabre vision of twisted bodies, divided and rent asunder, as a manifestation in the flesh of the deforming consequences of sin. In Body Worlds, a new exhibit touring the nation and now on display at the Dallas Museum of Natural Science, the German scientist Gunther von Hagens has discovered a new means of providing anatomy lessons to the masses—cuts, slices, and

dissections of “real” human bodies, preserved through a process called “plastination.” The impression left on viewers of Body World’s theatrical displaying of vivisected dead bodies will likely be as memorable as Dante’s imaginative journey among the dead. The question is whether it has substantive educational value, or is merely feeding our inordinate taste for the macabre while masquerading as science education.

The exhibit includes an array of complete corpses, hundreds of organs and partial specimens, and a series of preserved embryos, kept intact through the plastination process von Hagens invented—a plasticization that replaces water and fats with liquid silicone rubber. The process not only allows for preservation, but it also enables

bodies to be kept intact and upright and thus serves the end of displaying a wide variety of cuts, slices, angles of perception, and artful juxtapositions of parts of bodies. There are bodies slit into two or three parts, bodies with one eye and half a skull, bodies with inner organs removed, kept intact and now dangling next to the frame of the original body. The process lends itself to theatricality. The body of a goalie, in a diving position, stretching out with one hand to block a soccer ball, is split right down the middle and separated by a gap, while his other hand reaches backward to grasp his internal organs, which have been neatly removed from his torso.

Whereas Dante bluntly describes an individual with “his bowels and guts dangling between the legs,” Gunther von Hagens gives us the “Jumping Dancer.” His body is presented so as to stress the flexing of his muscles, but we get so much more than that little anatomy lesson. Von Hagens has lifted the “back of the trunk” and let it dangle behind the body, so that the back “opens downward” and the brain nearly straddles the floor.

Of course, there are lots of little educational tidbits provided via anatomical commentaries on each of the specimens. Indeed, the promoters of the exhibit speak of “raising awareness” about health problems such as obesity and smoking. “The Smoker” stands erect with blackened lung and cancer stick in hand, all supposedly revealing the evils of smoking. This is education through shock treatment

of course, but the utility of the “scared straight” strategy is questionable.

This points to the deeper problem of scientific illiteracy among the young in our country. The debate about evolution and religion, a debate that properly belongs in a philosophy class, merely distracts from the far more pressing curricular problem of reforming science education in the United States. The impulse of some scientists to praise the Body World exhibit for its pedagogical value indicates how desperate scientists are to interest an ignorant and indifferent citizenry in the necessity and significance of scientific knowledge. Science currently shows up in the media mostly when we fear some imminent disaster, such as *E. coli* outbreaks or global warming. And when Hollywood tries to dramatize scientific intelligence, it almost always ends up stressing the deranged lives attending the work of genius.

But Gunther von Hagens’s touring show of human bodies is likely to exacerbate the public image problem for scientists. Indeed, Body Worlds is in certain unhappy respects quite well suited to our culture, a culture currently awash in morbid fascination with vivisectioned bodies: from the explicit medical and forensic gore of *ER* and *CSI* through graphic depictions of radical reconstructive surgeries on *Nip/Tuck* to the box office popularity of barbaric horror films like *Saw* and *Hostel*. The problem is one of desensitization to violence in general and to the violation of the human body in particular. It is awfully easy in our culture

to forget that the bodies depicted are *human* bodies. To get the expected thrill of shocking novelty, jaded viewers need to be presented with ever more ghastly and excessive acts of brutality perpetrated on the flesh. In such a culture, it is not surprising that the Body Worlds exhibit now meets with shrugs of indifference.

The draw of Body Worlds is not that we can learn how bodies look and function. We could do that with very sophisticated artificial models; indeed, those models might in some ways even come closer to mimicking living bodies, with still active respiratory, digestive, and cardiac systems. And isn't the understanding of processes and activities, rather than mere gawking at the endless ways in which parts can be sliced and diced, what scientific knowledge of the human body is really about?

In fact, the entire exhibit plays off an equivocation about "real bodies." The advertising campaign calls the exhibit "authentic." But these are dead bodies artificially preserved. Indeed, in the texts that accompany the specimens, what stands out is not anything that we learn about human anatomy, but rather a celebration of the process of plastination and of experimental methods of dissection. One such text brags that for the first time we can see into the pelvis to the gluteal muscles from the front of the body. Sometimes the texts engage in the trivialization of human mortality. One corpse wears a white hat, the explanation for which is that it "adds to his eccentric posture

and further narrows the gap between life and death." Huh?

The very title of the exhibit—"Gunther von Hagens's Body World"—highlights the celebrity status of the scientist, who is as much director and artist as scientist. Judging by the ample poster-size quotes from philosophers, poets, and theologians, it would seem that von Hagens also fancies himself something of a high-culture intellectual. In fact, the quotations occasionally, if unintentionally, point out problems with the exhibit. A quotation from the philosopher Immanuel Kant is laughably out of place: "That man can be conscious of himself in his contemplation raises him infinitely above all other living creatures." But this exhibit is not about *who* we are as personal, self-conscious beings, it is about *what* we are as biological beings, and in that sense just like all other living creatures.

Indeed, the exhibit is explicitly against the raising of the "who" question about the dead. An explanatory note states that the "persons, identities, ages, and causes of death" are not supplied because the focus of the exhibit is on "physical being" and not on personal information. That saddles us with a severely truncated account of death that brackets the properly human element entirely. But for reflective viewers that question cannot be fully suppressed. It arises in the shock of recognition that the corpse we are currently examining with such detached curiosity is/was a human body.

The promoters of the exhibit want to see it as a sort of avant-garde move-

ment overcoming antiquated taboos. They are right to think that revulsion is not, by itself, a sufficient guide in matters of ethics. Revulsions about the human body, dead or living, vary widely from disgust at blood, feces, and corpses to repulsion at what might be done to dead human bodies, as in our taboos against cannibalism and necrophilia. The question is what sort of revulsion in these matters is rational and what is not. Merely experiencing revulsion cannot in the end decide the matter one way or the other. Conversely, merely asserting that one is engaging in the laudatory practice of overcoming taboos about dead bodies does not make it so. One might equally claim that pornography can provide sex education, when what porn in fact does is to reduce sex to the manipulation of body parts stripped of any larger human significance.

The problem with death in our culture is not that we have taboos surrounding it, but that we lack a rich language for articulating its meaning.

It is hard to see how *Body Worlds* will help at all in that regard. Great literature—from Dante’s depiction of the moral and spiritual significance of the bodies of the dead, to Homer’s meticulous detailing of the rituals of burial, to even Harry Potter’s brave quest to rescue the body of his friend Cedric—is of more assistance here than is *Body Worlds*. The exhibit’s little anatomical lessons, even were they not overwhelmed by the indelible images of vivisectioned bodies, will not take us far toward a rich vocabulary for death. Indeed, what is on display is not the mystery of death, but the reduction of bodies to inert plasticized parts displayed for viewers—in short, a pornography of the dead human body. *Body Worlds* brings us face to face with something profound, but it will leave us mute and inarticulate, the very image of what we behold.

—*Thomas S. Hibbs is dean of the Honors College and Distinguished Professor of Ethics and Culture at Baylor University.*