

James BUXTON

Should we Display our Dead?

Ethical Issues behind the Use of a Human Corpse

USED WITH THE PERMISSION OF BODY WORLDS



The Body Worlds exhibition of Prof. Von Hagens and the issues raised by the practice of plastination are emotive issues. These are two e-mails I received. From a consultant at Guy's: "I do find the display of plastinated corpses abhorrent and even immoral without being able to rationalise the emotion. I am used to the wax models in the Gordon Museum but to display a cadaver holding his skin like a cloak is obscene in the extreme."

From a first year physiotherapist: "I just want to say that I went with a non-

medic friend of mine to the Body Worlds exhibition, and how fascinating we both found it. Neither of us felt that it was in any way disrespectful to the dead. It felt almost liberating to be able to see at close quarters how wonderfully made the body is. The dissections are fantastic. Isn't it high time the body was revealed for all to see, just as more and more of the universe is increasingly visible to us, and now the deepest parts of the ocean? How can people be against this?"

SOME POSITIVE REFLECTIONS ON THE PRACTICE OF PLASTINATION, BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION

There were no big shocks for me in the exhibition. I have no expertise in anatomy – or in related disciplines, but I have spent time in the dissecting rooms, and I can well appreciate what others have told me, that these cadavers offer opportunities for study that may well go beyond what is possible in the dissecting room. Mainstream contemporary Christianity supports entirely the need for medical professionals to receive the best possible education for the tasks to which they are called, so we cannot say from a Christian point of view that plastinated should be ruled out as an aid in the education process. After all, skeletons, for example, continue to be essential aids to learning, as they have been for many years.

Beyond this, I personally found some of the 'plastinates' to be awe-inspiring and beautiful, such as the configurations of blood vessels. To behold the intricacy and artistry of these makes me reflect on the sublime energies of the God whom I believe to be the creator or sustainer of all things.

It is of course the case that this is nothing new. Anybody who has visited the Gordon museum will have received a similar experience through viewing the many extraordinary

models there. Nevertheless, Body Worlds has enabled the vision of the inner body to be communicated to a far wider public than has previously been possible. World-wide, something like 9 million people have seen the exhibition. The huge interest that the exhibition has engendered shows that people are fascinated to know more about what goes on inside. I cannot see that this 'democratization' of anatomy (as it has been called) is in itself wrong, though I know that professionals may argue that just peering does not help one to understand much.

To continue positively, ours is a society in which death and the fact of our natural impermanence has been pushed further and further out of our consciousness. As a society we are losing sense of what might be a natural life-span, or what might constitute a 'good' death, as new technologies make possible the staving off of death for longer and longer. In general we experience death far less often and far less intensely than our forebears did, and as do those in many other parts of the world today. It could be argued that the exhibition may contribute to helping us all to recover not only a more realistic sense both of the wonder of our inner workings, and the limitations of our mortal lives.

CONSENT: BODY WORLDS – THE TIP OF A PLASTINATION ICE-BERG

The first among the problems is the issue of *consent*. If we are going to discuss the display of the dead, I believe we do need to ask if those so displayed had the chance to offer themselves for this. I was present at the press launch of the exhibition, at which Prof. VON HAGENS, anatomist, and inventor of plastination, was present, along with his team of commentators and apologists.

What struck me very forcefully on that occasion, sitting, appropriately perhaps, next to a journalist from 'Bizarre Magazine', that though the panel at the press launch spoke a lot about the ethics of displaying the dead, and gave out about how shocked they were at the difficulties they had in obtaining permission to bring the exhibition of plastinated to this country, the issue of consent was not raised at all until I had a chance to get on the microphone. The question of whether permission has been obtained by the donors for their use in this way is a very important one, and one which we, as those who are involved in medical education and research, are very aware.

I am sure that the Central Office of Anatomy (UK body which regulates use of cadavers for medical and educational research), which was asked to give an opinion on whether this exhibition should go ahead, were punctilious in ensuring that informed consent was gained for the individual cadavers currently being displayed in London. But my concerns is that this exhibition is the tip of the ice-burg in terms of plastination. Prof. VON HAGENS has extensive operations in China and in Russia, both places which have very different standards with regard to consent than we have here.

Unclaimed bodies from the mortuaries and prisons of these countries are being used and I very much doubt whether consent as we understand it has been given for these donations. Certainly, VON HAGENS himself has been content in a non-consensual environment.

THE ETHICS OF CONSENT – A DEVELOPING AREA

It seems to me that consent is an area of ethics that has developed considerably in recent years, spurred on by cases such as the saga at Alder Hay Hospital, and the widespread use of organs which were taken, apparently without informed consent. If I am right that bodies are being used without permission within VON HAGENS' global operation, then I am afraid that involvement with the Body Worlds exhibition is a form of collusion with the exploitation of people who have died, and their families and friends.

EDUCATION OR ENTERTAINMENT?

Secondly, there are issues on the boundary between education and entertainment. You may feel that the intention of Professor VON HAGEN is a side issue in this discussion, but I must say that I believe it to be significant. After I had seen the exhibition, I saw as many others may have done, the Channel 4 programme. During this VON HAGENS is shown darting around the exhibition in the dark, illuminating the flayed and dissected faces of some of the more dramatic cadavers with a torch, while something like a horror-movie sound track thumped in the background. I have recently been to the London Dungeon, around the corner, with three of my nephews, and the professor's antics evoked more the atmosphere of that kind of horror-fantasy land than that of an educational exhibition. Was this for his gratification or for ours?

It is a direct encouragement of voyeuristic and ghoulish interest in the whole project. Actually it shocked me that he was prepared to flaunt these dead persons in this way. I did not feel at all that those I witnessed looking at the exhibition were doing so out of morbid curiosity or any kind of freak show mentality. So there is a big question mark for me over the subject of whether it is education or entertainment. It puts into question, to say the least, the issues I mentioned earlier about acquainting ourselves more realistically with the consideration of our own mortality.

OBJECTIFICATION – PORNOGRAPHY AND THE DEAD

Thirdly, I want to talk about the issue of 'objectification'. Somebody said in a Terry PRATCHETT novel that 'sin is treating people like objects'. Not a bad definition. Christianity is frequently thought of, wrongly in my view, as making a stark distinction between the soul and the body. In this way of thinking, the body is simply the earthly vessel of the eternal soul. There may well be plenty of Christians who take this dualistic view. But I believe that Christianity, undergirded by the highly body affirming doctrines of incarnation and resurrection, understands very well that individuals are psychosomatic; that it is not so easy to tease out what makes a person a person; therefore it is very important that we do not treat the body as an object in isolation from the person, even in death.

We may introduce a slightly risky analogy here. A central problem with *pornography* is the way that the bodies of those who participate, even when they are consenting, are

treated simply as objects, and viewed as such. There is a separation of the body from the person. Once you remove the notion of personhood from the bodies of people, you can then do what you like with them – and *there* lies much of the tragedy of human history. A dead person is still a person, bearing the signature of human life. So, I believe that the display of the dead currently going on in Brick Lane invites *just such* an objectification of persons, even though they are dead.

CONTEXT IS ALL

The context of 'display' really is crucial. Take the kind of carefully regulated 'display' that we encounter in the dissecting room. Of course a degree of objectification takes place here. It must do. But it takes place in a communal and carefully guarded context. Donated bodies are treated with dignity (charged and difficult word, but I think it is right); and the integrity of each dead person is as far as possible preserved. I have been impressed by the care that is taken in preparing students for the task of dissection. The teachers of anatomy encourage students to value the gift of these bodies so that they may learn the ways and the wonders of the body in the best possible way.

Thus the whole process is framed legally, ethically and spiritually, with all those involved in the process taken into account: Students, teachers, support staff, relatives and friends of the deceased. Even the opportunity of thanksgiving is given, in the annual service at Southwark Cathedral, where everyone is able to gather in a spiritual setting to give thanks for the privilege of working with donated bodies. In my view this is all absolutely as it should be: the use of the dead in this case being carefully framed so that nobody, living or dead, is exploited.

TO SUM UP

I can see various reasons why the display of the dead which we are encountering afresh in our society, holds a number of advantages. You only have to listen to some of those who have been to the exhibition to know that there is an opportunity for learning and for wonder in the contemplation of these bodies.

However, I do remain deeply concerned about the issue of consent. Body Worlds is part of a huge world-wide operation, much of which takes place with no regard to the wishes of those whose bodies are used, and without reference to people who were close to them. And then there are questions on the border-line between education or entertainment, and finally the risk of exploitation that takes place when we objectify the dead.

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The original of this essay was a talk given in June 2002 at a joint meeting between the GKT Gazette, Medical Ethics Group and Chaplaincy by GKT Chaplain The Revd James BUXTON. To find out more about The GKT Medical Ethics Group, the site is WWW.MEDETHICS.CO.UK The Body Worlds website is

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