

One man's meat, another man's poison



By [Janine Lazarus](#)

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I am hopelessly infatuated with news. It's been a 28-year tempestuous love affair and one that I don't think I will ever get over. Captivating headlines, startling images and spicy stories leave me all at once breathless and adrenalised, infuriated and heartbroken. And I wouldn't swap these highs and lows for the world. I'd feel so much poorer without the rush.

So in spite of the flurry of far more important news headlines like the re-election of the American President after a closely contested battle, the horrifically inexplicable visuals of the victims of the Marikana violence, a shock rock concert disaster, and the rather frivolous war of words lending a questionable amount of colour to President Jacob Zuma's private residence in Nkandla, it was a rather off-beat headline last week that got my vote.

But the story under the headline "Seeing dead people" wasn't quite as *Daily Sun* as I expected. The deceased referred to have been viewed - or rather gawked at - by more than 35 million curious people in 70 cities around the world.

More interesting perhaps than the brain trailing its major nerves like thin grey tentacles, a skinned man playing a saxophone, a copulating couple, a smoker's blackened lungs, and a woman 'molting' out of her discarded skin and hair, was the questionable educational value of the controversial exhibition of human remains.

Questioning, analysis and interpretation

Billed the biggest exhibition to hit Africa, Body Worlds and The Cycle of Life is also one of the most controversial. All 200 anonymous corpses neatly sliced and diced in every which way and then preserved through plastination have, according to its creators, been "donated."

Since news is such a living, breathing entity that by its very definition, begs questioning, analysis and interpretation, a flurry of delicious debate inevitably followed the exhibition across various newspapers and on the television news.

Gazing at clean, odourless cadavers with a slightly lacquered sheen is one thing, but is it ok to enjoy looking at them? A kind of compelling edutainment of sorts? More especially if you are assured by the exhibitors that there is, and I quote, "plenty more material available for future exhibits."

That, in and of itself, begs the next question: How freely were the bodies donated? In fact, it is precisely their origin that had journalist Grace Yu from the Macau Trailhiker, frothing in outrage. Yu leaned heavily on activist group Macau Conscience who petitioned the authorities to provide a detailed explanation on the identities of the clinical specimens.

Darkly hinting at the possibility that condemned prisoners executed on the mainland may unwittingly have become part of the post-plastinates display, Yu's piece pretty much echoed a news report in the Irish Times. Reporter Kitty Holland didn't mince her words either when weighing up the educational value of the exhibition with concerns about the derivation of the bodies.

Criticisms

The Slovak Spectator also pitched in on the debate, feverishly quoting a shocked Roman Catholic Church. Going even further, journalist Michaela Terenzani-Stankova, quoted a lawyer acting for the Conference of the Bishops of Slovakia to strengthen her argument that the exhibition violated the law on burial which requires human remains to be handled with respect.

As far as other criticisms go, there were plenty more that reared their head, all rather tame by comparison. Disturbing, tasteless, grotesque "kitsch," an excuse for sensationalism, disrespectful to the dead, and "total madness" were some.

An attack on human dignity, and making use of South Africa as a dumping ground for "abnormal things in the name of democracy" were some of the others.

But this is precisely what news is. It engenders robust, tempestuous debate. The stuff of love affairs. And isn't that just delicious?

ABOUT JANINE LAZARUS

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