

The Executioner's Art

The Urth list — 3 messages, 3 voices, 15 Oct 2012

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/6300>

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Jeff Wilson — 15 Oct 2012, 05:42

Found at I, Cringely, a technology blog: <http://www.cringely.com/2012/10/09/off-with-their-heads-why-financial-regulation-stopped-working/>

"Thirty years ago, when I was working for a time in Saudi Arabia, I saw a public execution...."

"He was dragged up the steps to a platform and there fell to his knees. Another man whom I quickly came to understand was the executioner climbed to the platform with the prisoner and poked him in the side with a long curved sword. The prisoner involuntarily jerked up just as the sword slashed down and just like that there was a head rolling off the platform, the body falling dead like a sack of flour."

I'm having a bit of trouble envisioning how the sword can poke and then stroke again so quickly, but it seems that this eyewitness account bears out the subtle manipulation of the condemned and unhesitating resolve of the headman as depicted in the BOTNS.

Jeff Wilson - [jwilson at clueland.com](mailto:jwilson@clueland.com)
Computational Intelligence Laboratory - Texas A&M Texarkana
< <http://www.tamut.edu/CIL> >

DAVID STOCKHOFF — 15 Oct 2012, 15:12 · in reply to Jeff Wilson

From: Jeff Wilson <[jwilson at clueland.com](mailto:jwilson@clueland.com)>
To: The Urth Mailing List <[urth at lists.urth.net](mailto:urth@lists.urth.net)>
Sent: Monday, October 15, 2012 1:42 AM
Subject: (urth) The Executioner's Art

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---That's certainly true. In a word (or 2), skill and experience.

There must be a slightly longer delay between the jab and the response than you'd think, long enough for a skilled executioner to sweep the blade around. Perhaps sharp pain is not going to produce as rapid a response from the whole body as a tap on the knee will receive from the leg.

Not to extend the morbid topic, but on a related note I happened to see the recent video of the trapped car thief who fatally shot himself in the head. I couldn't help but notice that he stood there as though stunned for a long moment before collapsing. If these real-life incidents are taken as generally representative, we're left with an apparent contradiction . . . unless brain-centered autonomous-system muscle-controls account for those moments of suspension, in which case a beheaded body will collapse that much more quickly than a body that has been fatally head-shot.

But in Hollywood, beheaded bodies remain upright for a dramatic moment with such frequency that you can't blame yourself for wondering if this is more than just the cliché it appears to be. The above account seems to firmly indicate "cliché." And when Nucky shot Roland in the head in last week's *Boardwalk Empire*, he fell as though clubbed by a giant. This is typical and appears to be equally a cliché.

If the above theory is true, directors of HBO shows follow dramatic principles that consistently run counter to reality. It's as though well-performed formal beheadings are so fast that slowing them down makes them more dramatic, while fatal shootings are so slow that speeding them up makes them more dramatic. We need our narrated violence to match the situation, depending on whether it is anticipated or uncertain or completely unexpected, and naturally an execution is more anticipated than not.

Perhaps this is obvious. But I think these examples are interesting for what they say about human neurological biases in processing data---how narrative, by definition, manipulates our response to it by anticipating and shaping itself to those biases. And if narrative reflects our brains' deepest needs, then film reflects them even more closely.

Tony Ellis — 15 Oct 2012, 22:27 · follows DAVID STOCKHOFF

Jeff Wilson wrote:

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There's some historical evidence too. Poised to make the killing stroke, Anne Boleyn's executioner is supposed to have said "Boy, fetch my sword" to misdirect her at the crucial moment.

He was a skilled French headsman, brought in especially for the job. Judging by the accounts of the last moments of Thomas Cromwell and Mary Queen of Scots, our own British executioners of the time would have given Master Palaemon a coronary.