



# Evil Dead: Feminist bloggers bring the hammer down on *Top Model* necrophilia

## AIN'T NOTHIN' HOTTER THAN A DEAD GIRL.

That's the take-away message of a recent episode of *America's Next Top Model*, in which 10 wannabes were instructed to pose as crime-scene victims. The lithe lot were arrayed in awkward, broken poses, splayed out in cold concrete corridors, back alleys, and bathtubs, their faux-bloodied, lifeless limbs positioned provocatively. Stabbing, shooting, electrocution, drowning, poisoning, strangulation, decapitation, and organ theft were all essayed, to judges' raves of "Gorgeous!" "Fantastic!" "Amazing!" "Absolutely beautiful!" and—my favorite—"Death becomes you, young lady!" This was ugly even for *ANTM*, a series that for seven seasons has trafficked in bottom-feeder humiliation, objectification, and degradation of women in the name of fashion and for the deep profit of integrated marketers such as *Seventeen*, *Elle Girl*, and *Cover Girl*.

Creator/host Tyra Banks's disingenuous claim to care deeply about girls' empowerment has always been more than a little suspect, but this episode laid bare *ANTM*'s nexus of ad-industry misogyny and corporate media money-grubbing. And it wasn't even original: The industry's hostility toward women has been manifest for decades in fashion spreads and ad campaigns with a sickening equation of beauty and violent death. (In the past, *Bitch* has noted fashion spreads in *Details* and *Soma*, ads for Sisley, and art photos by Melanie Pullen, each of them showing women as beaten, raped, drugged, hanged, amputated, and murdered—but sexy!—victims.)

Here's where this story stops being about *ANTM* and becomes a case study about using feminist blogging to posi-

tively impact public debate. Tyra's underfed cash cows died for CW's ratings on March 21. The next morning, I ripped into *ANTM* on WIMN's Voices—the group blog of my organization, Women In Media & News—writing, "[This] episode of *Top Model*...serves as a sharp reminder that what millions of reality tv viewers believe to be harmless fluff...is...the cultural arm of current political backlash against women's rights."

I asked a targeted group of bloggers and journalists to link to my critique and write about the show themselves, and by Friday, blogs from *Feministe* to *Salon's* Broadsheet were waving the outrage flag high. Before long, the NYC chapter of the National Organization for Women distributed a press release with its stamp of institutional ire. The combined anger of independent bloggers and movement leadership provided the tipping point for the story to jump to the corporate and independent press. New York's *Daily News* ran the first piece, "Tyra's Rapped on Gory tv Pix"; from there, *TV Guide Online* took notice, as did the *Canadian Times & Transcript*. By the next week, *America's Top Dead Models* had spawned a full-scale media controversy. The pics were denounced everywhere from the *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, and London's *Guardian* to a YouTube slide show that superimposed stats about violence over the maimed-model pics. It became a subject of debate on Fox News shows *America's Newsroom* and *The Insider*.

Even CNN blowhard Glenn Beck—a Bill O'Reilly clone who has mocked Native American reproductive-rights activists and called Hurricane Katrina victims "scumbags"—denounced the "horrible, horrible pictures" two shows in a row. The first



night, when *In Touch* editor Kim Serafin insisted that *ANTM* is "empowering" and that critics hadn't seen the photos "in context," Beck bit back, saying, "Let's be honest...for a lot of sick people, this is masturbation to hot women who are dead. You tell me that is empowering for women? I'm sorry, I just don't accept it."

Beck went further the next day, calling defenses of murder chic a "pathetic rationalization and a load of bull crap.... As a father of three daughters, I am disgusted, and, America, you should be, too."

This may be the last time I'm in agreement with Glenn Beck on anything. And though I'm sorry this wake-up call was necessary, I'm glad it happened. Next time you find yourself outraged at media mistreatment of women, consider this instance of feminist bloggers reframing beautiful corpses for a previously unfazed media—it's not pretty, but it's worth speaking up.

—JENNIFER L. POZNER

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