

Corpses and the Collapse of Meaning: Chaos, Death and the Abject in David Milch's *Deadwood*

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David Milch's critically acclaimed television series Deadwood depicts life in a frontier town in the Dakota Territories of America's West. Life in Deadwood is Hobbsian: nasty, brutish, and very usually short. Smallpox runs rampant, as does venereal disease, and walking down the perpetually muddy thoroughfare may get you shot. In a particularly eloquent moment, saloon keeper Al Swearengen sums his philosophy for surviving in the violent, lawless, filthy frontier town. "In life you have to do a lot of things you don't fucking want to do," he muses, "many times, that's what the fuck life is... one vile fucking task after another." And indeed life is vile in Deadwood, but as Kaarina Mikalson demonstrates, violence and vulgarity serve a crucial function for the viewer. The paper utilizes Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject as well as Jean Baudrillard's notion of simulacra and simulacrum to argue that the viewing audience is taught to encounter its own reality through an encounter of the vileness that is life in Deadwood. The abject, Mikalson explains, is that which has been rejected by the subject and is ever-after an inherently traumatizing encounter. Each encounter of violence "draws the viewer to the edge of meaning," but as Mikalson demonstrates, the society we watch is uncomfortably close to our own.

-Dr. Erin Wunker

In "Approaching Abjection," Julia Kristeva situates the abject on the periphery of our awareness, occupying a liminal space between what we accept and what we reject, what we know and what excludes meaning. Similarly, as argued by Terrie Waddell, David Milch's television series *Deadwood* is a liminal text. Its form pushes the borders of the formulaic Western genre it imitates and tries the viewer's and critic's tolerance for profanity and violence. Thematically, it is literally a Frontier text and commits itself to this liminal site, emphasizing the dangerous freedom of the lawless Frontier space. It also uses an elaborate mise-en scène of mud, filth, and decay as a foundation to constantly re-evaluate separations between civilization and wilderness, innocence and guilt, and, perhaps most resoundingly, life and death. This results in a tension that marks the omnipresence of the abject in the experiences of both characters and viewers.

As a text grounded in the abject, *Deadwood* draws its characters, viewers, and the civilized America from which it originates toward the frontier of what is understood. By tracing *Deadwood's* liminality and abject nature through the first season, with special focus on Reverend Smith's illness and death, *Deadwood* induces a prolonged encounter with the abject and exemplifies the "emptying of signs" theorized by Jean Baudrillard, a collapse of meaning that occurs just beyond our reality's unstable borders.

In the time the series is set, *Deadwood*—the camp, not the series—was rapidly developing as a result of the gold rush and attracting a wide range of fascinating historical figures. Even more interesting is the uneasy legal standing under which this development occurred. *Deadwood* is located in the Black Hills, an area set aside for the Sioux people by the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868 (Darus Clark). The occupation of this land by white settlers and miners was in direct violation of the government's promises. As a result, *Deadwood* was not

recognized by the United States government. This not only put the property rights of the settlers at risk, but also ensured that the rule of law did not interfere with their profit and vice driven lifestyles. Consequently, the context of *Deadwood*'s development and Milch's series is one of chaotic freedom. *Deadwood* was an unintentional experiment in anarchy, a situation that Robert Westerfelhaus and Celeste Lacroix liken to John Locke's "state of nature", "in which every person is a law unto himself or herself, with no real security against predation" (Westerfelhaus and Lacroix²⁸). This situates the camp on the limits of American-governed society, as well as civilization as we understand it—that is, as regulated by authority or authorities that operate with legitimacy.

When the boundaries of civilization are evoked, wilderness looms as a threat. The action of *Deadwood*, however, rarely leaves the confines of the camp. Instead, the wilderness is represented by the perceived threat of the Savages, a threat that is propagated but never realized. When a "savage" presence does enter the camp, it is already conquered, as in the case of the severed Indian head sold to Swearingen or the scar from Bullock's deadly fight with the native. Otherwise, it is white corruption masquerading as a savage threat, such as the case of the settler family killed by road agents. Savagery, that is, the mark of the wilderness, presents itself instead in the aggression, violence, and criminal activity of the settlers themselves. In a reversal of the typical man versus nature model, the major threat against which the camp must form a (tenuous) coalition is not the wilderness, but civilization, whose approach is marked by the encroachment of law and regulation on the freedom of the camp.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that the camp does not lack regulation altogether. Power structures inevitably arise, with strong figures such as Swearingen and Tolliver rising to positions of influence. These power structures are essentially illegitimate and irresponsible, as they are driven by profit and imposed through the threat of violence and death. Though they may reflect the power structures of more organized authorities, they still mark themselves as liminal and abject through their sustained rejection of rules. This rejection is one that that Kristeva identifies as a mark of the abject:

It is not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules...The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a savior. . . Any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject, but premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge are even more so because they heighten the display of such fragility. (Kristeva 247)

Deadwood's mis-structured society features such a perversion of order since it obeys an order founded on criminality and the acknowledgment of law's fragility. The government formed in the episode, "No Other Sons or Daughters," is nothing more than symbolic: its major task being to organize a bribing system and keep the "territorial cocksuckers" at bay. The roles this informal government assigns are equally questionable. E.B. Farnham's position as mayor is undermined by his own character: if the position were valued, it is certain it would not be bestowed on such an incompetent figure. After accepting the position of camp sheriff, Bullock must walk past the

fresh blood stain on Swearengen's office floor, both acknowledging the violence that will mar his pursuit of justice and accepting Swearengen's dual role as brutal criminal and camp leader.

The political games played by Swearengen, Tolliver, and the others are as cunning and variable as those played in governed societies, but they are escalated by the pervasion of violence. Murder is a performative act and communicates political messages effectively, if brutally. In "Suffer the Little Children," the sadistic murder of two teenagers, Flora and Miles, is meant to assert Tolliver's authority to his employees. However, the act is miscalculated, and the messy and heinous scene marks him as struggling to maintain power and perhaps even sanity. The scene also spurs his employees, Joannie and Eddie, to find ways out of his failing political structure. In contrast, the season finale, "Sold Under Sin," demonstrates how murder effectively conveys power. The magistrate, on the verge of giving up the warrant for Swearengen's arrest, states, "Make the appropriate gesture, and the constable hand of the past will no longer weigh upon you" ("Sold Under Sin"). Swearengen, proficient in the *Deadwood* model of action over symbolism, glances to Adams and responds, "What man couldn't that be said about?" ("Sold Under Sin"). Adams immediately slits the throat of the magistrate, marking his loyalty to Swearengen as well as Swearengen's attitude towards the law. This murder denies the Magistrate's earlier appeal to Swearengen of law's power: "You can't *murder* an order, or the telegraph that transmitted it, or those that have to put food on the table simply by being its instruments. It can't be done" ("Sold Under Sin"). But Swearengen does just this, dealing out death and identifying the law as not only fragile, but also meaningless when brought to an abject place.

Though the visceral reaction that Kristeva identifies as an encounter with the abject is repeatedly evoked while viewing *Deadwood*, it is not the visual violence that sustains this feeling of abjection. Rather, it is the vulgar physical details of everyday life: the blood stains that appear regularly on Swearengen's floors, the stained and disintegrating clothes of the settlers, the dirt-smearred, bruised and half-naked bodies of the Gem's whores, the oozing sores of those suffering from the plague, and the butchered animals strung up throughout the camp's Chinatown. All these details, lauded by critics as creating a realism never before achieved in screen depictions of Frontier life, contribute to the visceral atmosphere of the camp:

The total effect of this surface realism mirrors a deeper, more naturalistic vision of the human experience as seen on the frontier between wilderness and civilization. All aspects of the life process are presented in a sombre naturalistic vision: birth and death, youth and age, sex and violence, illness and decay, even nutrition and elimination. (Millichap 186-7)

But this "naturalistic vision," certainly emphasizes death, or at least its omnipresence as marked by the visible materiality of all things. Kristeva writes, "The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost abjection. It is death infecting life" (247). While *Deadwood* does not rely on the presence of the corpse to indicate this infection, it is confident that the abject details of everyday deteriorating life will make the point.

That being said, the most strikingly abject aspect of the series is the unusual disposal of corpses. Very few of those killed are given a traditional burial or any kind of ceremony that might mark their life or death as meaningful. Instead, their corpses are rejected and removed in a deeply disturbing manner: “Bodies are thrown in the mud, shot, and clandestinely carted through back streets and Chinese Alley on their way to Mr. Wu’s...flesh-eating pigs. These roadways signify the border between ‘am’ and ‘am not,’ places where the dead and living commingle, foundations for growth and tombs” (Waddell 26). This commingling is emphasized by the unspoken suggestion that these corpses will be cannibalistically consumed by the camp, perverting the natural order and re-affirming the cycle of violence. Furthermore, the pigpen remains a constant visual reminder of the mortal border blurred by the camp: Joannie Stubbs must recognize Flora’s bonnet in the corner of the pig pen, along with the guilt and vulgarity that she has rejected in order to move beyond the girl’s murder (“No Other Sons or Daughters”).

Though the corpse-eating pigs trope is not unprecedented in film and television. It appears as a humorous plot detail in the Guy Ritchie film *Snatch*, what may be the most effective angle of this abject image—and perhaps the least intentional. This reoccurrence suggests that the abject has force that far exceeds what its authors can imagine—the associations it has for many viewers. The disturbing method of disposal resonates with anyone familiar with the Robert Pickton murders, a series of killings that shook Canadian society and thrust many of our values into question. It is an image that reasserts itself constantly throughout the series, emphasizing that, though we may reject the abject materiality, this rejection is never fully successful. Like the murdered women of Vancouver, our shunning of that which we “permanently thrust aside in order to live” (Kristeva 247) will only delay the painful recognition of infection, of death’s steady encroachment on our values and ourselves.

The most thorough example of death’s infection of life is the slow death of Reverend Smith by his brain tumour. Over the course of the first season, Reverend Smith makes the difficult transition from symbol of divine truth to abject being. The Reverend is first introduced to viewers when he makes the acquaintance of Bullock and Star. Here, he is shown to be a hardworking and well-intentioned man who prides himself on his ability to bring people closer to God (“Deadwood”). He is out of place in the rough atmosphere of the camp, where his spirituality brings little comfort and is often met with indifference and even hostility. However, he still plays a small role in the camp proceedings, laying the murdered men to rest and attempting to bring the “Word” to the struggling folk around him.

But just as the plague makes its way into camp in a firm enactment of death infecting life, the Reverend’s health begins to fail. His seizures, jerky movements, weakened vision, and failing memory—signs of his slow and painful death—make his presence undesirable. He is mocked, ignored, and rejected. To further indicate the extent of his abjectness, he is kicked out of the Gem, a site of utmost abjection. The Reverend’s awareness of his deteriorating life is made painfully clear when the doctor comes to examine him:

REVEREND. I smell my flesh rotting.

DOCTOR. It isn’t rotting, Reverend. Your flesh does not smell. You’ve not died. You’re having organic changes in your mind that’s making you believe these things.

Do you understand me? REVEREND. Formerly, Doctor, when the Word took me as I read scripture, people felt God's presence through me and that was a great gift that I could give to them. Now the Word does not take me when I read. Nor do I feel Christ's love. Nor do those who listen hear It through me. ("No Other Sons or Daughters")

Here, *Deadwood*'s abject power infects yet another life. A holy man, who once brought meaning to those in need as a vessel of faith, now rots away to the that the truth he once symbolized is denied by the physical reality of his tumour. If any truth can be found in his illness, it is a deeply unsettling one, revealing a God whose cruelty matches and perhaps even exceeds the savage environment of the camp, suggested when the Doctor begs God to kill the Reverend: "What conceivable Godly use is his protracted suffering to You, what conceivable Godly use?" ("Sold Under Sin"). This ruthless God, if He exists at all, does not answer. But Swearengen does, and bending the physical violence that rules the camp now to an act of mercy, he efficiently releases the Reverend from his suffering through asphyxiation.

The Reverend's illness exemplifies the emptying of meaning presented by Jean Baudrillard in his theory of simulacrum:

The transition from signs which dissimulate something to signs which dissimulate that there is nothing, marks the decisive turning point. The first implies a theology of truth and secrecy (to which the notion of ideology still belongs). The second inaugurates an age of simulacra and simulation, in which there is no longer any God to recognize his own, nor any last judgement to separate truth from false, the real from the artificial resurrection, since everything is already dead and risen in advance. ("Simulacra and Simulations" 174)

The death of the Reverend exemplifies this transition from meaningful to meaningless. The Reverend is emptied of truth and left with no God to rescue him and no great judgement to look forward to. The camp is so pervaded by death already that the dying man no longer holds ceremony. As Swearengen harshly tells the Doctor, "A human being in his last extremity is a bag of shit" ("Sold Under Sin"), and consequently can neither give nor receive anything absolute or meaningful.

Baudrillard writes about the effects of geographic exploration and colonization on reality: "When a system reaches its own limits and becomes saturated, a reversal is produced...when the map covers the whole territory, something like the principle of reality disappears" ("Simulacra and Science Fiction" 269). *Deadwood* is situated on the frontier of governed America, civilization, and life. In accordance with this liminal site, it abandons the principles that govern known reality: law, separations between civilization and wilderness, cleanliness and dirtiness, life and death. It blurs these borders. In doing so, it brings itself precariously to the unstable abject border between self and other, being and not being, knowing and the collapse of meaning. As a result, watching *Deadwood* is not typical entertainment: it is a prolonged encounter with the

abject, one that shakes the structures of meaning in our society and our culture. The “televsual viscera” (Waddell 21) of *Deadwood* contains images, actions and characters that remain in the viewer’s thoughts long after the process of viewing has ended, gnawing away at the imagined borders that regulate our daily realities.

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