

The World Itself

Powerlessness, Fantasy, Transportation Systems & Lost Masculinity in True Detective Season 2

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It's been a while since I wrote a meta-analysis of popular media (since *The Counselor*), but *True Detective* season 2 is so good that I want to exercise that muscle a bit here. What follows was written at several different stages during the airing and consuming of the season, so it expresses the author's steadily transforming point of view.

The Psychology of Corruption (Early Impressions)

"In *True Detective*, the world itself is the crime."
—Nic Pizzolatto

The show is all about power. The lack of it, the abuse of it, the struggle to get it and then to maintain it; the inevitability of losing it and what happens then. Power and potency.

True Detective writer Nic Pizzolatto has expressed the idea that the show is about characters and not story, but hasn't epigenetics blown that arbitrary distinction out of the water forever? As above, so below. Any plot maps the internal struggle of the characters to make sense of their world and assuage the existential identity crisis of death-awareness; all forms of violence (all bids for power) are quests for

identity, and so on, and so forth.

The show lays this out by showing the symbiosis between the characters' emotional and sexual issues (dysfunctions) and their abuse of power at a social as well as personal level. The difference between social and personal power abuse is arbitrary and imaginary; politics is always personal, which is why everything is politics. Character is story and society shapes the individual, and vice versa. For example: Ray Velcoro (Colin Farrell) abuses his police power to track down and beat the father of the boy who bullied his son. By desperately trying to manage the train wreck of his life, he only gets more deeply tangled up with the wreckage.

For me, it was apparent from the first episode ("The Western Book of the Dead") that season two leveled up from season one. The richness of texture and hue (visually and sensorially it's the richest TV show I've ever seen) and the sheer care that has gone into it is obvious in just about every frame. Beyond that, it is going far deeper into the psychology of corruption. There is no longer the imaginary dividing line between "cops investigating mystery" and "crime being exposed." Season two is mapping out the landscape of criminality (politics and social engineering) by following the ones on the edges of power, the cops and the smalltime criminals, as they begin to cross over into the perennial twilight of Plutocracy and realize that there is no terrain that doesn't belong to it—not even the seemingly spiritual (and certainly not the personal or sexual).

Sexual dysfunction in the series is not just a metaphor (it's all metaphor once you learn—or at least learn about—twilight language), but also both a symptom and a cause of the larger social corruption. Maybe that should read "corruption," because in *True Detective*, society and culture are more the agents of rot than the results or victims of it.

In other words, the rot is systemic and endemic, as in a line from *Bram Stoker's Dracula*: "Civilization and syphilisation have advanced together."



Walking Corpses & Poison Containers

In what way does an artwork's exploration of vice intersect with and deepen one's own growing recognition of a lifelong complicity with the social horrors being depicted? And how much is enjoying these sorts of media a symptom of and indulgence in that same said complicity, and how much is it leading to an extrication from it? The degree of pain our "entertainment" causes us might be a good measure of that. As Pauline Kael once wrote, good art never made anyone feel virtuous.

We get the world and the TV shows we deserve because we aren't separate from the process by which both world and TV are being generated. To watch a TV show is to co-create it; ditto with social involvement at any level. We are all complicit in the rot because we are all carrying the microorganisms that implement it. It's not the rot that turns us into walking corpses, however. (By corpses I mean spiritually empty vessels for capitalist agendas to transport their goods through.) It's the resistance to it, i.e., to the base reality of the body and of death. Death is not the enemy; denial is.

The David Lynch influence on season two is almost embarrassingly obvious but I love it anyway; less obvious but worth mentioning is how the film may have been informed by *The Counsellor*, which both laid the template and raised the bar for exploring the overlap between human exploitation, political graft, metaphysical "evil," and spiritual or existential crisis and awakening.



True Detective is an existential detective show. The mystery is always a puzzle because existence is a metaphor for something else. Like Frank Semyon (Vince Vaughn) gazing at the water stains at the start of episode two, something in our environment is nagging at us that we have misinterpreted the data and ended up in a dissociated fantasy, a socially engineered Bardo realm. The world we see is made of papier-mâché, and the crazed need to prop it up and make it seem real is what drives the capitalist machinery. It is all the desperate mental activity (accumulation of wealth and power and sexual gratification) of a boy abandoned by his father in the dark of a basement, with only rats for company.

The frantic fantasy enactment of culture is the only way for us to paper over the cracks of the dream and prevent it from dissolving.

Frank is small-time crook who finds himself on the threshold between dream and reality: i.e., in a liminal space. He is suspended between the basic social climbing that everyone is doing, and the inner circles of the Plutocracy where a different criteria applies, where the bid for power has taken over completely and become full-blown pathology, and where any childish doubts and fears about what is real (any possibility of a healing existential crisis) have been banished forever. In their place is the nihilistic conviction that nothing is real, so everything is up for grabs.

Frank doesn't know what to do with the money he makes because he hasn't yet reached the level where the real power operates. At that level, money is irrelevant except as a means to control others. Frank's attempt to level up, and how it is sabotaged by the murder of Caspere, seems to be the main plot engine of *True Detective*. It's as if Frank is being prevented from joining the Plutocracy because he's not one of the club, for whatever reason (probably generational, i.e., he's not part of the power bloodlines; but maybe also because he's too moral and isn't willing to cross the lines that have to be crossed; he seems to care about children, which may be the real "prize" at the secret Plutocrat parties). Because he's denied access, he is forced to level down, and re-forge ties with the petty crime world he left behind (the same world he was trying to level up from), in order not to lose his footing in "reality" entirely.

As far as Frank sees it, the only purpose to having money, beyond his capacity to spend it, is to leave it to his children. But his attempts to have children are thwarted by his own impotence in the face of a plastic cup. (Frank Semyon = Honest Semen?) As the recipients of money, status, and power, children are the Plutocracy's poison containers: the poison IS the power, so to speak. For Velcoro, his son is his only ostensible reason for living, i.e., for struggling to gain power in the world. Once that relationship is taken from him, he no longer has anything to live for, hence no reason to go along with the power drives which Frank represents.

If Velcoro is the show's hero, it is only insofar as he begins to act autonomously and not merely as a power-puppet (i.e., controlled by his own trauma-drives). Like Frank in the hospital scene, and Velcoro who is indifferent to women since his wife was raped, the motorcycle cop Paul Woodrugh (Taylor Kitsch) is also impotent because of his ambiguity about his sexuality, which relates to his past, his mercenary work for Black Mountain (i.e., corporate military power).

Most obscurely of all, the female cop Antigone (Rachel McAdams) has past ties to quasi-spiritual groups, and her childhood involvement with "social research" have manifested in her conflation of sexual freedom with the capacity for violence (she has a thing for knives, a kind of operational penis-envy). It's too soon to try and untangle these various snakes, but with any luck the show will do the job, or at least provide enough hints to intuit the shape of the festering ancestral/psychosocial wound that's being mapped here (and sold as corporate product).



As for “the secret occult history of transportation” (Pizzolatto’s early description of what the show was going to be about¹) and the recurring aerial shots of highways, it might be worth exploring the metaphoric angle: as above so below. We hear regarding the infrastructure of Vinci that it has become so utterly industrialized that a) it’s a major source of planetary pollution; and b) it has hardly any residents

¹ “This is really early, but I’ll tell you (it’s about) hard women, bad men and the secret occult history of the United States transportation system.” <http://www.hitfix.com/whats-alan-watching/true-detective-creator-nic-pizzolatto-looks-back-on-season-1/3> In May 2015, Pizzolatto admitted: “There’s definitely bad men and hard women, but no secret occult history of the U.S. transportation system. That was a comment from very early in the process, and something I ended up discarding in favor of closer character work and a more grounded crime story. The complexity of the historical conspiracy first conceived detracted from the characters and their reality, I felt, and those characters are ultimately what have to shape the world and story. So I moved away from that.”

and mostly just workers, and exploited ones at that. This may be hinting at how trauma, sexual and otherwise (abuse of power, social engineering), affects the human nervous system and turns the body into an empty receptacle, a poison container, for inhuman forces (psychic fragments) to possess and utilize. But these are all just guesses.

Midway Slump & Colin Farrell's Moustache



The only smile Ray Velcoro's got in him

After writing all of the above, I was severely disappointed by episodes five and six, “Other Lives” and “Church in Ruins.” So much so that my disappointment after episode five seemed to coincide with a several-week descent into depression—just as if I was psychically hardwired to Pizzolatto’s narrative. I guessed there might have been a highly subjective element to my disappointment, however. Since I’d just written about the first four episodes, I was heavily invested in the idea of the show’s brilliance (I got enmeshed); it seemed unlikely to be a coincidence that, immediately after writing about it, my enjoyment of the show bottomed out.

On the other hand, the first four episodes were dense, complex, slow moving, highly atmospheric, difficult to follow or get a read as to where they were going. They were also unrelentingly bleak. People complained about it, as well as the unfathomable plotlines. The fifth and sixth show, in contrast, were simple, one-dimensional, with easy to follow storylines and familiar characterizations; even the dialogue seemed more obviously hardboiled and less esoteric. Where had all the nuance gone? They also became linear to the point of total implausibility, and full of tropes. The original team all being demoted or kicked off the squad and then miraculously reassembled into an undercover operation, for example, and how easily and quickly Velcoro finds out about Blake (Frank’s henchman) and his secret dealings. The kitchen showdown between Ray and Frank was nicely done, but it also felt a bit pat: “You may be the only friend I’ve got,” Frank tells Ray, who replies, “How fucked up would that be?” It’s a funny moment,

but do we really need it spelled out when the show has done such a great job of subtly indicating that progression already?

I started to wonder if the change in the show could be a corporate reaction to the poor reception it had been getting. Maybe Pizzolatto had a deal with HBO: final cut on the first four episodes, followed by a renegotiation. If the ratings and reviews were good, he could finish it how he wanted. If not, as happened, HBO would move in and re-edit the shows (maybe they even had their own edits ready). People complained about the overly complex plotline and the next thing the shows were simple enough for a twelve-year old to follow them. Viewers didn't like what a downer it was—all that brooding misery and dysfunctional sexuality—and suddenly we get wall to wall superficial action. Maybe the lesson was simply that a TV show is never going to be a substitute for imagination—much less approximate reality.

What I liked about the first four shows was how starkly they depicted the sheer powerlessness of the characters, even the seemingly powerful ones like Frank. Finding a way to bring this bunch of soul-burned losers into contact with the agents of Plutocracy would have been a real *coup*, because in reality (as far as I know or can imagine) the two worlds never meet. I wanted to see more about why Frank couldn't gain access to the upper ranks and what he would have to turn himself into to do so. To see how finding that out might have turned him against the power he was trying to gain, and aligned him with Velcoro (who was fully broken) in powerlessness.

I wanted to see the show move more towards the existential aspects and away from the detection. The fifth and sixth episodes no longer seemed to be going deeper into the characters, and the plot deteriorated accordingly. It started to seem contrived and all by rote, like all it had ever really been about was “doing an edgy TV show.” But then, what had I really expected?

Then with episode seven, “Black Maps and Motel Rooms,” when I'd about given up on it, the show seemed to receive a blood transfusion from somewhere. By the end of that show, *True Detective* seemed to have got most of its mojo back—the plot was even hard to follow again! I jokingly suggested at a forum that it related to Colin Farrell's facial hair. After he shaved his moustache and got all clean-cut, the show went to shit. It was as if Farrell's regained slickness was reflected in the show's new superficiality. Let's give them what they want, starting with a clean cut Farrell who doesn't look like you'd smell him before you'd see him. By episode seven, Farrell (sounds like feral) was unshaven, unwashed, and looking like something a sewer rat dragged back for lunch. The show was also back in the sewers where it belonged—as if Velcoro's scumminess and facial growth was the equivalent of Samson's golden locks.

The final scene of episode seven, the one between Velcoro and Bezzerides, put the show back at the top of existentially-angsty-pulp-crime-drama, where it belonged.

Velcoro: “Do you miss it?”

Bezzerrides: “What?”

Velcoro : “Anything.”

I got chills.

At the forum where I was discussing the series, someone commented about the drop-off in veracity in the mid-section of the series, suggesting that “episodes 5 and 6 were so cinematic because the characters were basically dissociating into a Heroic Journey narrative rather than facing how fucked they

were. [Episode seven] was the reality check.” He then quoted this exchange between Frank and the Russian gangster who double-crosses him:

Frank: “I had ideas of getting out of this, you know.”

Osip: “There’s no such thing for you, Frank. That world isn’t yours. You manage clubs.”

The Core Conspiracy at the Shredded Heart of *True Detective*



Ray Velcoro goes down

The core conspiracy at the shredded heart of *True Detective 2* is that of absented dads and failed fathers.

Both Ray and Woodrugh (though Ray doesn’t know it when he dies) leave unborn children in their bloody wake—sons (at least if Woodrugh’s child is a boy child) who will grow up fatherless. The show ends with the only two surviving leads, both females (Antigone and Frank’s moll, Jordan), carrying Ray’s baby into a Virgin Mary celebration in the Venezuelan night. The two power-women are escorted by a male servant—Frank’s only surviving henchman, Nails—a man only in the most primitive sense of warrior-protector, certainly no father or husband.

Velcoro dies because he chooses to risk everything to say goodbye to his teenage son. He needs to be the father he couldn’t be at least once before he goes. The decision seems insane at first, and willfully self-destructive. But it’s also logical. The moment in which Velcoro chooses to be a good father is the moment when the forces of destruction set in motion long ago finally catch up to him. He really has no choice.

Frank Semyon has tried but been unable to father a child. When he dies, it is haunted by his own father’s rage and verbal abuse. He is surrounded and hounded by black men, and then takes his last steps

towards a fantasy projection of Jordan, his wife—an internalized image of the lost object of the mother’s body, a momentary distraction in the desert of the real, where his body lays down to die. These final sequences tore me up internally. By the end of the last episode I felt gutted, unwilling to move. Was this what maleness had come to? Was the only form of heroism a senseless death by violence? Like God, the father, the male is defined by his lack of meaningful definition. He is found only through his absence. Hell.

Velcoro’s wife finds out that her son was also *his* son, and not the child of the rapist, as she, and we, had suspected, and as Ray had so deeply feared. It’s not so much that she misjudged Ray or the situation as that she couldn’t see beyond it. Velcoro’s corruption became inseparable to her from the soul that had been corrupted. She was blinded by disappointment—where *was* the man she married? It became as if there was no difference between him as the father and the violent thug who raped her. Ray’s death clears out that misperception as only death can do it. Bezzerides, on the other hand, sees Velcoro for what he is; she sees past the layers of scum he has picked up along the way. Being able to see that is what allows Velcoro —what compels him—to let go. The sum total of his actions until then (as with Frank) makes the violent ignominy of his death, not just inevitable but right.

There is no sunset to ride into. There is no princess waiting on the pier. One kiss can’t transform the toad. That only works in fairy tales. Or only when it’s the kiss of death.



Frank's death ride

Pain is a Concept by Which We Measure Our Soul (The Bringers of Bacon)



Corporatized man

I doubt if many people will see what I saw in *True Detective 2*. Maybe it isn't *there* to see for most people, who see instead just another violent pulp fantasy that ends badly. Some people will be disappointed that it doesn't explore or expose the conspiracy behind American society more thoroughly or persuasively. But by expecting the impossible from a TV show, they may have missed the real miracle. The plot, so tantalizingly labyrinthine, promising so much by way of grand revelations in the first four episodes, has by the end become (for me at least) almost superfluous. Pizzolatto moves deftly past his desire to create a scorching, scathing sociopolitical examination of capitalist society, into something simpler, cleaner, rawer, and immeasurably more heart and gut-wrenching. He creates a human tragedy while no one is looking. It will probably be Greek to most people.

The personal *is* political and vice versa. The incapacity of Woodrugh, Velcoro, and Semyon to be fathers, or even lovers, is inextricably bound up with the socially engineered environment (the conspiracy) that has turned all men into host bodies—transporters of capitalist goods, factory slaves, civil servants, cops and/or gangsters. They have been made useless to women and children in anything but the most basic survival sense, as the bringers of bacon. Strip a man of everything that makes him a man—of his independence, his autonomy, and his sense of being a dynamic sexual force for the good, a *procreative* force—and reduce him to a “productive” member of society, what you end up with is a force of destruction, of self or other. What drives the plot of *True Detective 2*? The actions of a criminally orphaned son who wears a mask of death which is also a bird (a crow): the masculine death force dressed up in the symbolic imagery of the soul, signifying also the feminine. (There may be another major clue in the mysterious female found floating in milk at Caspere's house, actually a projected image artwork by Peter Sarkisian, called “White Water, 1999.” And a clue also in the lyrics to the Raveonettes song, “Kill,” featured in episode 2.²)

² “I never saw my dad on a midnight wave/Ripping in the darkness wild/I never saw my dad on a girlless beach/I never ever thought I would/I never met my dad in a loving dream/Smiling in the moonless night/One time I saw my dad fuck a redhead whore/I never ever thought I would/Are you gonna leave me/Are you now/Do you feel that it's ok/To leave a boy to drown/In this violent swell/Never gonna see you again”

If people didn't "get" *True Detective 2*—if all of this subtlety, nuance, pathos, and personal pain is lost on them, to be honest I'm sort of glad about it. Works of art aren't meant for mass consumption—at least they aren't meant for mass understanding. What's required is participation and complicity: a willingness to revisit and reawaken our own deeply buried pain and loss, to *relive* it *through* the work, and so enliven not just the work but ourselves. That process *hurts*. A TV show that has the *cojones* to go there, not only isn't it likely to get rewarded for it, it *shouldn't* be rewarded for it. Art ain't a social service, and it's not (really) entertainment either. It's a dark kind of science; the Greeks even had laws to regulate it.

I wonder what Pizzolatto would say if he read that *True Detective 2* exposes the hold which the image of the lost object of the mother's body (the world, mass media, government, crime, even "spirituality") *has* on the male psyche—and how that "Freudian" fixation prevents men everywhere from stepping into their own embodiment in anything besides some media-fueled fantasy of maleness, in a hail of bullets beneath the redwoods or a long walk to nowhere in the desert. Or if someone told him that it shows, in devastating and stark detail, how the corporate conspiracy of the world is run by unfathered sons, and by the hand that rocks the cradle. (Bezzeries carries the newborn on her chest, Venezuelan-style: at least she's done with cradles.) Honestly, I would be pleasantly surprised if he was consciously trying to convey any of these meanings; but I'd be even more surprised (and not so pleasantly) if he didn't feel an electric jolt of recognition to hear them laid out like this.



Whatever Pizzolatto was working through in his own interior space, the season finale of *True Detective 2* ("Omega Station") packs a wallop unlike anything I've ever seen on "prime time TV." It left me with the sort of internal bleeding that signals that something tremendous has just happened. This piece is the proof of it (I'm shitting blood). As it progressed, the series moved further and further from existential-intellectual probing or sociopolitical "exposé," into an almost unbearable dramatic tension and an unprecedentedly raw emotional space. For the three male leads to die—Woodrugh at the end of episode seven and Semyon and Velcoro simultaneously at the end of the last episode—was a lot more than just a bold creative move on Pizzolatto's part. By the end, it became largely what the show was *about*—the inevitability of that tragic ending gave meaning to everything that came before.

Pizzolatto's "trick," his art, was in making us care so much about these characters that we were willing to *hope* that he might go against the integrity of his vision and give us the ending that a TV show is *supposed* to give us, "reality" be damned. He made us *want* that and believe it was *possible*. Yet in the midst of the hope is the dim sense of futility: we know it's neither possible nor really desirable, that it's not desirable *because* it's not possible. "Truth," integrity of narrative, trumps fantasy every time, regardless of the cost. Because when illusions die, nothing is lost and everything is regained.

I suspect Pizzolatto *wanted* to rescue his characters from the inexorable fate he had condemned them to; maybe he even wanted it as badly as he needed us to want it from him. But having created something that lived independently of his own desires—like everything that truly lives, that can no longer be a carrier for someone else's desires—he was powerless to do anything about it. *True Detective* shows powerlessness at every level, from the social and political to the spiritual. It shows the impotence of male-female fantasy to create its own reality no matter how hard it tries, or to escape the consequences of the real, and why that's a reason to be grateful .

The soul-deep burning of *True Detective* is a kind of celebration, because the pain, in its very indescribability, lets us know there *is* a soul to burn.



Frank Semyon's long walk to nowhere