

Throwing Garbage The Glorious Abject Object in Terrence Malick's '*Badlands*'

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Death and garbage or litters: right from the very start these two themes set the stage in Terrence Malick's 1973 debut film *Badlands*. Based on true events, *Badlands* portrays Kit and Holly, two youngsters embarking on a seemingly pointless, murderous road trip.

We learn instantly that Holly's mother has died and that Kit is employed throwing garbage. Holly's father makes a living painting advertisement signs: the Imaginary paragon of consumerism that will merely bring forth more waste. When she meets Kit, Holly passively objects to their acquaintance by claiming that her father will disapprove her being seen with anyone who collects garbage. Kit's reply: "Well what does he know about garbage?"¹. Images of people throwing things away abound throughout the film. The abject object is omnipresent. Kit turns his back to the garbage truck, only to be immediately drawn to Holly. This movement will determine the rest of their metonymical journey. Kit is headed for a constantly fleeing horizon on which a paradise glimmers, "a magical place beyond the reach of the law"².

Throughout the film, we see Kit try to inscribe, to organize or settle his existence in the Symbolic process – which enables to deliver a cause, an acceptable purpose, to the community of human beings. Kit records a gramophone with a false story about the murder of Holly's father, and recites life lessons into a dictaphone. As though, for Kit in particular, something has not been anchored.

Finally, we see him try to inscribe himself in the barren fields of the Badlands, burying a few random objects in a bucket for anyone to find, and haphazardly piling rocks as a makeshift token of the location where the police finally catch him. Here, we also find an indication of the function Holly as a partner has for Kit: he wants to hear a girl scream his name at the moment he dies.

It is in death that he seeks to be symbolically validated. When Kit is eventually taken into police custody he shines gloriously, in chains, an airplane wing serving as a pedestal. In the moment his deadly fate is being sealed, he is a superstar. He throws his personal goods to his 'fans', the policemen gathered around him, shout questions like in a press conference – at this point, Malick's ingenious use of the audio stresses this resemblance. Kit experiences his moment of glory when he completely surrenders to the Other, dedicating his body, giving an address to the litter / letter of a miserable

1. Malick T., *Badlands*. (1973). Film script. *Dailyscript.com*.

2. *Ibid*



existence to science. The first smile we see on Kit's face is when the policemen recognize him as the spitting image of James Dean. Even in the Imaginary mirror image the stain of death lingers.

Kit and Holly's romance seems shaped on the mould of the American Dream. Yet something feels intriguingly 'out of joint' in *Badlands*. The couple seems oblivious to the horror they cause in their wake. The romantic, almost poetic reveries of Holly's voice-over form a stark discrepancy with the story's content, the murders seem in wry contrast to the beautiful scenery.

As Jacques-Alain Miller states in his *Seminar X* on anxiety, Lacan will distinguish the true object [*objet-cause* or *palea* – litter] from the false object [*objet-visée* or *agalma* – glamorous]³.

Set in the glorious landscapes in the light of the golden hour Malick shows us the cowboy, the Cadillac, James Dean – and at the same time: the outlaw, the weapon, the murder. Somewhere between *palea* and *agalma*, Malick seems to hint at the Imaginary of the American Dream enclosing the Real of the object, the horror hiding underneath beauty.

3. Cf. Miller J.- A., *Introduction à la lecture du Séminaire l'Angoisse de Jacques Lacan*. La Cause Freudienne, n° 59, Paris, Navarin, 2005, p. 67-103.