



## One to Another

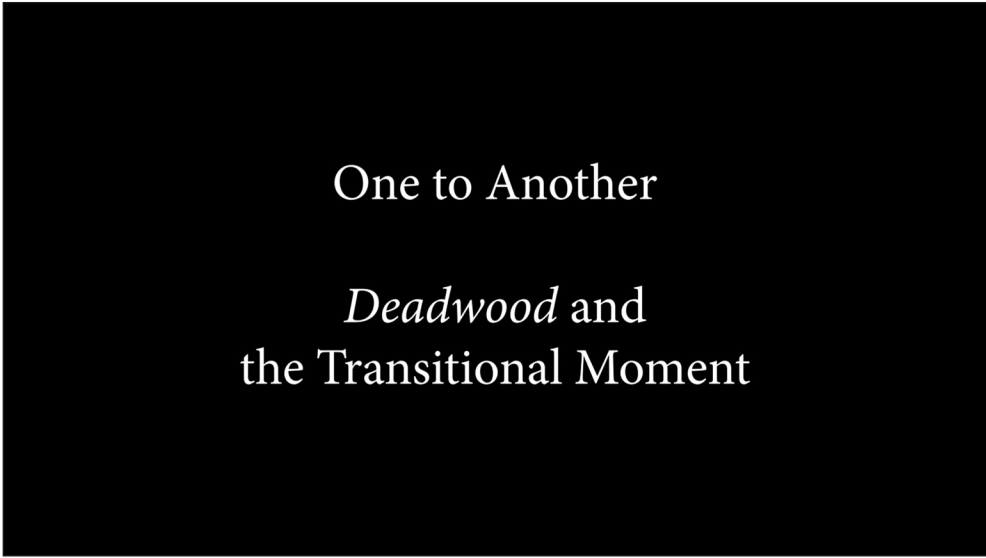
Sean O'Sullivan, English, The Ohio State University, US

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This video essay explores the use of rack focus as illuminating the stylistic and thematic core of the HBO series *Deadwood*.

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One to Another  
*Deadwood* and  
the Transitional Moment

### Curator's Statement

It is our great honor to publish “One to Another,” a videographic essay by Sean O’Sullivan about the use of rack focus in the HBO series *Deadwood*. Sean passed away in October 2023 after a 16-month battle with brain cancer, and thus we do not have a creator statement from him to publish alongside his video.

Some of you may recall seeing Sean present this video at the Theory and Practice of the Video Essay conference at UMass-Amherst in 2022. Sean never submitted this video to *[in]Transition*, even though we encouraged him to. That’s because, five years after finishing a draft at the 2018 Middlebury videographic workshop, he was still tweaking it. Unless he was facing a hard deadline, Sean tended to tinker, tweak, and generally make endless minor revisions to his work.

It’s not that he was a perfectionist exactly. But I think he had some anxiety about releasing things into the world if he thought it could be still better. Why this would be is anyone’s guess—he was the finest writer of any academic I knew, and he was filled with original ideas. In this video, the underlying idea is something that he and I playfully quarreled about over the years.

Sean and I met in 2000, when we were both hired as junior faculty in the English Department at Clemson University. I vividly recall the first time we met, at our new faculty orientation. It may have been the only time in my life when I met someone and knew within an hour that we were going to be friends. Not just friendly colleagues, but real friends. And we were.

Though he was hired as a Victorianist, I was delighted that day to discover that he had a master's degree in film and knew a lot about movies. Not long after this, we had the first of many spirited discussions about the question of whether all films had *mise-en-scène*. Sean believed that they did, and I did my absolute best to help him understand how misguided he was to think such a thing. Neither of us made any progress in convincing the other, but these arguments were fantastic fun.

When Sean shifted his scholarly focus to television, the argument returned with a vengeance. And here, I really dug in my heels. Television does not have *mise-en-scène*, I insisted; what it has are stylistic choices that are extensions of production design, part of the overall “look” of a series. Such choices do not fill the same expressive function that they do in cinema (or only in the most rudimentary way) largely because television directors do not enjoy the same latitude in stylistically shaping an episode the same way that film directors do.

Sean's strongest rebuttal was this video essay, which articulates how the rack focus was not simply a part of *Deadwood's* “look,” but served to express visually one of the key themes explored by the series over its three seasons. With this, it seems he has decisively won the argument.

But if, in my dreams, he was still here, I wouldn't concede a thing. That way, those wonderful arguments could go on and on.

—Christian Keathley, February 2024

## Biography

Sean O'Sullivan (1965–2023) was Associate Professor of English and member of the Film Studies Program at The Ohio State University. His scholarly work connected, in different ways, the fields of film, television, narrative theory, nineteenth-century British literature, and serial storytelling. He is the author of *Mike Leigh* (University of Illinois Press, 2011) and numerous influential articles and book chapters on a range of topics including: *The Sopranos* and episodic storytelling; modernist structure in *Mad Men*; poetic design and the serial season; the afterlives of Krzysztof Kieslowski's *The Decalogue*; *Deadwood* and third seasons; apocalyptic television in Margaret Thatcher's Britain; the limits of satisfaction in Dickens, Eliot, and contemporary serials; and the showrunner Ingmar Bergman's *Scenes from a Marriage* and *Fanny and Alexander*. At the time of his death, Sean was working on a book project entitled *The Sonnet-Season and the Transformation of American Television, 1999–2015*, examining the television season as a newly productive storytelling shape since the turn of the millennium.

### Review by Elizabeth Alsop, CUNY

In his video essay “One to Another,” Sean O’Sullivan offers an incisive analysis of *Deadwood*, positioning the show’s subtle but pervasive use of rack focus as a visual enactment of its ethos. In Sean’s reading, this formal technique reflects the series’ commitment to dramatizing transitional moments and movements—the “becoming” of towns, relationships, and even, a multi-season television series. Its lovingly obsessive treatment of this single stylistic feature—all 1015 instances of it!—qualifies Sean’s work as a preeminent example of **videographic telephilia**, and one of a growing number of video essays committed to the exploration and elucidation of television.

Through its precise, persuasive, and witty elaboration of its argument, however, the video also represents what is most distinctive about Sean’s scholarship—and reminds us why his body of work has been, and will remain, instrumental to the intersecting fields of television, narrative, and seriality studies. Considered cumulatively, Sean’s essays and book chapters constitute a remarkably rich repository of thinking and theorizing about serial television narrative. Among his signal contributions is the idea that, as he put it in a **2010 article**, serial television is a “poetic enterprise,” in as much it is an art form “broken on purpose”—characterized by “segmentivity,” and the almost infinitely variable dynamics at work within and among those segments. His **2019 essay**, “Six Elements of Serial Narrative,” at once departs from and expands on this insight. In it, Sean borrows one of narratology’s signature moves—the elaboration of a taxonomic schema!—to powerfully explanatory effect, bequeathing to generations of future scholars a wonderfully flexible set of tools and terms with which to describe (not proscribe) serial narrative’s possibilities.

Whereas other theorists of television narrative, like Jason Mittell, have elaborated medium-specific methodologies, Sean’s rigorous use of cross-media comparisons and inclination and capacity to think across narrative forms mark him as both something of an outlier in media studies—a field historically (and often, justifiably) suspicious of interloping literary scholars—and a bracingly original thinker and writer. I was lucky enough to have had Sean as a collaborator and interlocutor. But I know all of us who study television storytelling will continue to benefit from Sean’s field-enlivening scholarship in sound, image, *and* text for years to come.

### Review by Jason Mittell, Middlebury College

When Sean O’Sullivan arrived at Middlebury College in June 2018 to learn videographic criticism, he carried a large binder with him into the computer lab. Prior to his arrival, we had discussed his project idea and I had warned him that one of the challenges of making video essays about television series was managing the massive amount of

footage and keeping track of where everything was. He assured me he had a plan: his binder full of notes, detailing every instance of a rack focus in *Deadwood*—more than a thousand spanning thirty-six episodes—copiously annotated and catalogued in a way that exemplified Sean’s way of making sense of television storytelling and style.

The result we see here—probably not yet fully baked to Sean’s sense of satisfaction (another concept we have debated repeatedly over the years)—typifies a crucial facet of what made Sean such a special scholar. He embodies the exacting attention to detail and careful precise language that any great formal analysis requires, but he is not satisfied with just convincingly revealing how the series works (although he certainly does that here). Sean subtly and seemingly effortlessly connects those specific formal insights into larger arguments about *Deadwood*’s narrative meanings and affective experiences. He pivots between analyzing specific structural patterns and broader thematic significances with the fluid grace of, yes, a rack focus.

Sean was, admittedly, a videographic novice, never having the chance to develop his skills beyond the workshop, first due to the pandemic and then his tragic illness. But this video stands as a lovely testament to the great work he did accomplish. It is particularly adept in its rhythmic sense, efficiently taking us through the enormous corpus of *Deadwood* with patience and a sense of calm control. The captions guide our understanding of his carefully constructed argument, allowing us to notice that which he has subtly revealed for us. It is an elegant simplicity of videographic design that uses the elements of multiscreen and negative space to great effect, keeping our attention focused on what he wants us to see and how he wants us to understand it.

My one regret with this video essay is that it doesn’t feature Sean’s voice—not because I think it would make the video better, as it wouldn’t. Rather, because I miss hearing Sean’s voice and I know that there is not another video essay forthcoming that might capture and preserve it for future generations. When Sean spoke about narrative theory, as he did in the many brilliant conference presentations I had the pleasure of hearing him give, he had a buoyant energy, humorous verve, and raw speed that still echoes in my head. I will always wonder how he might have adapted those talents to the videographic format.

Anyways. I have read nearly everything Sean has published about television storytelling and narrative theory, and I have learned so much from his writing and thinking. But this video is the first time I feel like I am watching television with him, seeing him notice patterns, draw connections, and link one thing to another. I just wish I could still have the opportunity to discuss every single one of these shots with my brilliant friend.

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