

# Here comes the new

## *Deadwood* and the historiography of capitalism

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We are swept up, are we not, by the large events and forces of our times?

A.W. Merrick, *Deadwood*, Season 3

Shown across three twelve-episode series that began in 2004, *Deadwood* is one of several recent television programmes to develop long, serially formatted narratives of a complexity and scale hitherto unusual in its medium. Produced by HBO, the American subscription cable network also responsible for *The Sopranos*, *Six Feet Under*, *The Wire*, *Treme* and *Boardwalk Empire*, *Deadwood* was devised and overseen, until its unexpected cancellation in 2006, by the writer David Milch – a one-time literature academic who is exemplary of the kind of auteur figure increasingly associated with such new television works.<sup>1</sup> Set between 1876 and 1877, during the last years of the ‘bonanza frontier’, just prior to the historical *Deadwood*’s annexation by the United States, and weaving together multiple storylines spread across a large ensemble cast, *Deadwood* is comparable, in particular, to the more celebrated *The Wire* (2002–08), in that a good part of its immediate novelty resides in the unusual and striking breadth of social vision it achieves through the televisual representation of a particular historical moment and place.

It is unsurprising, then, that in extending beyond the biographical or family-focused narratives still typical even of other ‘complex’ series of the last decade – including *The Sopranos* or AMC’s widely lauded *Breaking Bad* – the critical reception of both shows has invited comparisons less to cinema, the traditional artistic reference point of television ‘drama’, than to the ‘epic’ forms of the nineteenth-century realist novel.<sup>2</sup> In part this is a function of sheer length (around thirty-six hours’ viewing in the case of *Deadwood*), which makes possible an expansiveness of representation lacking in both film and more conventionally episodic television. This is one consequence of the break offered by new

broadcast technologies from the temporality of the traditionally assigned ‘time-slot’, which favours the self-contained episode as against the construction of longer narrative arcs.<sup>3</sup> But it might also be thought to identify both *Deadwood* and *The Wire* with one ‘popular’ dimension of what has been described as a larger re-emergence since the 1990s of ‘something akin to a realist impulse ... not only to describe, witness or give testimony to the new phase of capital accumulation, but also to account for, analyse, respond to and intervene in it’. It is such an impulse that has encouraged a re-mobilization under changed historical circumstances of the totalizing and ‘connecting values of realism’: knitting together the individual with the socially collective (in a form of which *The Wire* is exemplary), and conjoining and putting into interaction the otherwise fragmented worlds of different classes and milieux.<sup>4</sup>

If, however, *Deadwood* certainly shares something in this respect with *The Wire*’s patient, panoramic accumulation of social content (a kinship acknowledged in a scene from the latter’s final series in which a character is seen watching *Deadwood* from his hospital bed), unlike *The Wire*’s quasi-documentary focus upon the contemporary metropolis, *Deadwood* is a work of historical fiction, as well as a particular kind of genre piece – a fact that somewhat complicates this undoubted ‘realist’ dimension. Relocating the novelistic forms of recent serial television back into a fictionalized past, blending documented historical events and people from the historical *Deadwood* of the 1870s, including such semi-mythic figures as Wild Bill Hickok, Calamity Jane and Wyatt Earp, with reworkings of the Western’s existing generic framings of its historical and geographical locale, *Deadwood*’s manifestation of a ‘realist impulse’ assumes a significantly different form.

In these terms, if what *The Wire* narrates in its use of the crime genre is ‘the present life of a neoliberalized

postindustrial city',<sup>5</sup> what *Deadwood* narrates through its use of the rather less fashionable genre of the Western is, first and foremost, a specific past as 'pre-history' of this capitalist present. In this it conforms to the basic outline of Lukács's definition of the historical novel, for which, beginning with Sir Walter Scott, historical fiction represented the emergence of 'a clear understanding of history as a process, of history as the concrete precondition of the present'; an innovation that was pivotal to the development, in Balzac and others, of the classic forms of nineteenth-century realism itself.<sup>6</sup> It is thus, arguably, as a contemporary form of televisual *historiography*, and a historiography of capitalist modernity in particular (its most evident 'felt relationship to the present'<sup>7</sup>), that *Deadwood* can be most coherently viewed and understood.

As what is a form of televisual fiction, however, this also raises certain broader questions about the specifically *contemporary* representational and epistemological challenges posed by the fundamental economic and social relations of capitalism to which, as 'pre-history', *Deadwood* seeks to give a narrative form. For in trying, at some level, to rewrite the popular form of the Western's national 'progressive historical epic' (as Richard Slotkin calls it), to become what is in effect a kind of historical epic of *capital itself*, it necessarily confronts the formidable problems involved in any attempt to give both narrative and visual form to the essentially abstract dynamics of capital accumulation and circulation as such.<sup>8</sup> In this, its 'success' as a contemporary epic form lies, paradoxically, in its depiction of the historical emergence of a situation in which the very understanding of society promised by 'realism' is itself *narrated* in the form of its eventual crisis.

### **'Just months that this camp came together? Remarkable'**

Viewed as one three-series-long overarching plot, *Deadwood* is constructed through its activation of the potential for narrative temporality to be found in the raw materials provided by the growth of the historical Deadwood itself. Beginning soon after the initial formation of the 'illegal' mining camp in 1876 and ending, little more than a year later, just prior to the town's legal and political annexation within the Dakota Territory, what the show narrates is a historical dynamic of *transition*: that new 'alteration in the rhythm of temporal experience: acceleration', as Reinhart Koselleck describes it, 'by means of which one's own time is distinguished from what went before'.<sup>9</sup> 'Change calls the tune we dance to', as one of the show's central characters, Al Swearengen, puts it early

on in the third season. Here, in giving fictional form to its own (past) present as historical, *Deadwood* seeks to represent a dynamic of modernity as an everyday concern of social and subjective experience. While the series draws upon a number of 'stereotyped' tropes familiar from the cinematic Western, then, its 'epic' novelistic scope allows, across its thirty-six hours of viewing, for the reinscription of these generic conventions within what becomes a far broader and more complex narrative formed by the camp's changing legal and political status over the course of the year or so narrated.

Formally, this is partly a function of the way in which the segmentary character of each episode of *Deadwood* serves to unwork the temporality of conventional televisual modularity itself. Each episode is conceived as something like a 'chapter' in the gradually unfolding sequence making up the series as a whole, in which 'the whole is constantly present in the parts'.<sup>10</sup> Storylines are stretched over several episodes, with multiplying overlapping 'subplots'. They drop in and out of a vast range of characters' lives, often with considerable spans of time in between, in a manner that the cinematic Western is unable to achieve. As opposed to hour-long 'films' organized around discrete events or themes, what unfolds instead is a multi-dimensional and antagonistic depiction of competing residual, dominant and emergent forces, spread out across several episodes, through which the transitional moment that *Deadwood* represents is thereby 'framed' historiographically as a whole.<sup>11</sup> In this way it becomes possible not only to give a 'snapshot' of, but to *narrate*, as Lukács puts it, a time in which 'the new opposes itself hostilely to the old, and the change "goes hand in hand with a depreciation, demolition and destruction of the preceding mode of reality"'.<sup>12</sup>

If the characterization of Wild Bill Hickok in the early episodes signifies the 'residual', the obsolescence of the social forms and customs of heroic romance, it is the capitalist George Hearst, arriving in town in the final episode of the second series, who will embody, terrifyingly, the forces of the 'emergent'. Our first sight of the camp, in the opening episode, is of a single market street of mud largely cut off from the rest of the world, and literally overseen by Swearengen from the first-floor veranda of his saloon and brothel. (As in most revisionist Westerns, dirt is a persistent signifier of historical 'naturalism' throughout the series.) Our last view is of Hearst, in control of almost all its consolidated and industrialized mining interests, leaving a town that is now equipped with telegraph, bank and a growing number of 'bourgeois'

homes. Showing the newly arrived theatre impresario Jack Langrishe around the town in the final series, a somewhat bemused Swearingen wanders past several buildings: ‘This is new ... And I can’t remember who this fucking belongs to...’

Without ‘a certain kind of space, a certain kind of story is simply impossible’, Franco Moretti argues in his ‘atlas’ of the nineteenth-century novel. As such, ‘*what* happens depends a lot on *where* it happens’.<sup>13</sup> And it is certainly the case that the specific ‘where’ of *Deadwood*’s boomtown locale is central to the televisual ‘what’ that it is able to narrate as historical experience – mapping the ‘overnight expansion’ characteristic of a period in which, unlike the slower settlement pace of an earlier ‘agrarian frontier’, ‘the “bonanza” became’, as Slotkin puts it, ‘the characteristic theme of each new frontier enthusiasm’, based in the frenzied search for new mineral resources with ‘a high commercial value’ as commodities exchangeable elsewhere.<sup>14</sup> The historical ‘raw material’ of this dynamic lies, on the one hand, in the discovery of gold in the Black Hills surrounding what would become Deadwood in the mid-1870s, and, on the other, in the fact that this land was, at the time *Deadwood* depicts, still officially part of that earlier given to the Sioux under the terms of the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty, and thus ‘unincorporated’ within the United States. What is here a traditional Western trope of the ‘lawless’ (but ‘free’) frontier society, which must, according to the usual conventions of the genre, be brought progressively

(if violently and tragically) to ‘order’ and ‘civilization’, is hence also crucially identified as what is itself the result of a direct – and all-too-violent – act of ‘accumulation by dispossession’.<sup>15</sup> This is made explicit in the show’s very first scene, in which Seth Bullock is serving out his final day as a sheriff in the Montana Territory (one of only a handful of scenes set outside of the spatial limits of *Deadwood* itself). Sitting with his last prisoner, due to be executed the following day, the two converse about Bullock’s relocation to run a hardware store in Deadwood, where, the prisoner marvels, there’s ‘gold you could scoop from the stream with your bare hands’. ‘No law at all in Deadwood?’

That true?’, asks the prisoner. ‘Being on Indian Land’, replies Bullock. As the newspaperman A.W. Merrick puts it, in more directly epic terms, a little later in the same episode: ‘History has overtaken the treaty which gave them [the Sioux] this land. Well, the gold we found has overtaken it.’

Such contexts provide the effective background to a number of frontier narratives in classical and revisionist Westerns alike, but what is unusual – and one consequence of *Deadwood*’s ‘epic’ serialized form – is the degree to which the show seeks to progressively foreground these historical conditions, articulated in their fully prosaic and yet increasingly *ungraspable*



political, legal and economic complexity, as the structural basis of its plot development itself. As such, it is less individual characters than a specific historical environment and socio-economic context – above all, the dynamic organizing figure of gold, as natural substance, commodity and capital, identified by Merrick with the ‘overtaking’ force of ‘history’ itself – which takes on a motivating role in the series’ narrative. It is the ‘colour [gold] brought commerce here and such order as has been obtained’, states Hearst, the show’s literal embodiment of this ‘overtaking’ force in the final series. And as the town expands and changes as a consequence of ‘such order’, the sequential televisual

narrative thus unfolds according to a compositional logic determined by its boomtown rhythm of new arrivals, bringing into its field of vision an expanding cross-section of social character ‘types’. As each new arrival also marks the entry of new businesses, occupations and social functions (along with new technologies from the bicycle to the camera to the telegraph), it generates, in turn, the accumulation of an increasing range of social and cultural (including linguistic) ‘content’. What Milch describes as a plot based upon the real Deadwood’s ‘re-enact[ing of] the entire American experience in a kind of time lapse or accelerated form’ – ‘in April 1876 there was virtually no one there and by December of the following year they had telephones’<sup>16</sup> – is, therefore, by virtue of its lengthy serialized structure, combined with a richness of exposition that allows for a remarkably detailed tracing of such ‘accelerated’ historical transformation. In turn, the synecdochic structure through which the provincial or peripheral space is thus related to the ‘entire American experience’ – in what is itself a characteristic trope of the Western – underpins the claim to connect its local events ‘with the total world of a nation and epoch’ that constitutes its speculatively totalizing ‘epic’ form.<sup>17</sup>

### ‘Fuck the fucking new’

According to Lukács, the most effective historical novel is that in which its breadth of narration is nonetheless dramatized in the form of those everyday existential ‘effect[s] of material and psychological changes upon people who react immediately and violently to them, without understanding their causes’.<sup>18</sup> This is a good encapsulation of *Deadwood*’s narration of the changing social interactions that it depicts. ‘We’re in the presence of the new’, remarks Swearingen at one point to the tragicomic figure of Deadwood’s mayor E.B. Farnum, in what might be heard as *the* motif of any historiographical imagining of transition. ‘Fuck the fucking new’, Farnum succinctly replies.

A relatively early remark by one of Deadwood’s first settlers, Tom Nuttall – ‘I feel like the camp’s getting away from me’ – gradually becomes, in this way, a dominant motif of the series’ development. ‘Cocksuckers. Where were they when Dan and me were chopping trees in this gulch?’, Swearingen remarks at the appearance in episode three of a new business rival, Cy Tolliver. At the same time – in a somewhat obscene correlation that goes back to at least the figure of ‘Hawkeye’ in James Fenimore Cooper’s *Leatherstocking Tales* – such original ‘pioneering types’, as Tolliver calls them, come themselves to be

effectively equated (or equate themselves) with the very Native Americans that they have ‘illegally’ displaced. ‘You do not want to be a dirt-fucking heathen from this point forward’, Swearingen observes in the third episode. And, significantly, bar one very brief scene in the first series, on what is a rare excursion of *Deadwood*’s camera-eye outside the spatial confines of the camp, ‘Indians’ themselves are entirely invisible in the world that *Deadwood* depicts. History has, in Merrick’s words, already ‘overtaken’ them.<sup>19</sup>

From ‘this point forward’, the Indians’ only ‘presence’ in *Deadwood* is in the form of an unseen dead Sioux chief’s head that Swearingen keeps in a box in his office and periodically addresses. Musing, in the final episode, upon how to respond to Hearst’s aggressive move upon the camp, Swearingen remarks to the box: ‘I should have fucking learned to use a gun, but I’m too fucking entrenched in my ways. And you ain’t exactly the one to be levelling criticisms on the score of being slow to adapt. You people are the original slow fucking learners.’ While, then, both Swearingen and Farnum may wish to ‘fuck the fucking new’, the threat of being overtaken by ‘history’ (like both Hickok and the Sioux) entails that it has to be continually and painfully negotiated, even when not understood. As *Deadwood* evolves towards an incorporated, legal town, the problem of learning to adapt becomes a correspondingly intense one. ‘We study for our fucking lives’, remarks Swearingen, as he tries to make sense of Yankton’s written proposal for annexation.

Read against the history of what Moretti calls the ‘place-bound nature’ of the nineteenth-century novel, *Deadwood* is a definitively *provincial* space. In this sense, the density of *Deadwood*’s representation, as its TV-camera eye frames the expansion of the camp, is reliant on a relatively contained ‘world’ that is, novelistically, more akin to that of *Middlemarch*, or Zola’s *La Fortune des Rougon*, than, say, Balzac’s metropolitan Paris. Yet, if this containment classically functions as a means by which to *limit* the space and range of characters with which narration has to deal – in order, as Lukács puts it, to ‘narrow down and volatilize whatever has to be given form’ to the point where it can be ‘encompassed’<sup>20</sup> – here such ‘limitations’ become what is effectively an intrinsic concern of narrative development itself as *Deadwood* (and *Deadwood*) gradually expands its scale and scope.

What Fredric Jameson describes as modernity’s undermining of the *knowable* community, ‘whether this takes the form of the village or classical city, or of the vitality of national groups’, is directly thematized

in this way in what gradually becomes the central and defining element of the series' own overarching plot. To the degree that *Deadwood's* nineteenth-century location projects it back not only into the nineteenth-century West, but also, as it were, into the nineteenth-century 'age of realism', it simultaneously narrates the turn-of-the-century 'crisis' in such realism itself – the opening up, in Jameson's words, of 'a gap between individual and phenomenological experience and structural intelligibility' that an increasingly complex and objectively extended society entails. In this sense, *Deadwood renders in narrative form* what for both Hegel and Lukács was the essential 'form-problem' of the novel itself as a *modern 'epic'*, born of a world in which 'to individuals only a particle of the whole may accrue'.<sup>21</sup>

The most powerful image of this is *Deadwood's* repeated one of Swearingen taking a unique view over the camp from his saloon's veranda, from where, each morning and evening (and often at the beginning and end of episodes), he also asserts his mastery over Deadwood, surveying its other inhabitants moving to and fro beneath him and monitoring new arrivals. As a visual image, this gives a kind of concrete, televisual form to those bird's-eye views that characteristically open the nineteenth-century novel, whether strictly objective, as is typical in Balzac, or via a subjective perspective from height, as in many of Zola's works (Gervaise Macquart's view from a hotel window in *L'Assommoir*, for example). On arriving in the camp, one of Hearst's first challenges to Swearingen's authority lies in challenging this 'omniscience'. Taking a hammer to the wall of his hotel room he constructs his own balcony, thereby being able to face Swearingen at the same level directly opposite him across the street. The directly martial form of such a challenge is made clear when the two men's 'champions' fight a bloody battle in the mud below, the camera cutting between nauseating close-ups of the brutal fight and shots of Swearingen and Hearst spectating upon it overhead.

Yet, in fact, Swearingen's real problem is that this localized and violently *visible* confrontation is precisely *not* where the real struggle with Hearst must ultimately take place. Indeed, if it were, as Swearingen constantly observes, 'the days when a draw across the throat made fucking resolution' would evidently still be operative. ('If that cocksucker hadn't shareholders, you could murder him', Swearingen suggests to Langrishe. But as the latter replies: 'Serpents' teeth, shareholders. Ten thousand would rise up to replace him.') One of the first signs that the days of the immediate violence of throat-cutting might have been overtaken by history

comes in the final episode of the first series, when, threatening a corrupt Yankton magistrate who has unearthed an outstanding Chicago murder warrant, Swearingen is rebuffed with:

Those are the days behind us. ... I didn't generate the warrant. My disappearance won't quash it. You can't murder an order or the telegraph that transmitted it or those that are content to put food on the table simply being its instruments. It can't be done.

In this way, the personal violence that dominates the canonical 'poetic' world of the Western's struggle over law (think of the Gunfight at the O.K. Corral) is progressively displaced by the essentially *impersonal* violence that constitutes the intrinsic character of 'civilized' law itself. 'Had you vision as well as sight you would recognize within me not only a man but an institution and the future as well', the new county commissioner, Hugo Jarry, responds to an angry mob who threaten him after he has attempted to spread panic about the likely validity of existing gold claims after annexation. 'You cannot fuck the future, sir. The future fucks you.'

What begins to fuck the future sovereignty of Swearingen himself is anticipated in the opening shots of *Deadwood's* second series, where we see his response to men erecting telegraph poles just outside the camp: 'Messages from invisible sources or what some people think of as progress', as Swearingen describes them; 'Tries against our interests is our sole communications from strangers. So by all means let's plant poles all across the country, festoon the cocksucker with wires to hurry the sorry word and blinker our judgements of motives?' If this prophesies the problems posed by Hearst's later arrival in Deadwood, as a series of ever more unconquerable 'tries against' Swearingen's 'interests', it is because such *blinking* is then, finally, a necessary consequence of the entrance into the camp of the impersonal, 'invisible sources' of 'strangers' in general – not only via telegraph messages (that cannot be murdered), but, most importantly, in the form of the very invisibility of capital itself. For, in the words of Susan Buck-Morss, the 'question of seeing' is *always* 'problematic' in an 'envisioning' of capitalism, since there is apparently 'no perspective ... from which the whole productive social body [as mediated by the 'invisible' form of exchange value] can be seen'. This is an observation that has, among other things, an immense *televisual* significance.<sup>22</sup>

Swearingen's own panoramic 'realist' vision from the veranda – his 'perspective of totality', in Lukács's famous terms – becomes thus progressively *useless*,



as does our mediated vision through it as television viewers, for the simple reason that what needs to be ‘seen’ is no longer visible from any such perspective. Or, to put it another way, its concrete perspective is precisely revealed *as* provincial, and, from the viewpoint of ‘history’ (or ‘gold’, as Merrick says), fatally so. Discussing Jarry’s attempt to persuade prospectors of the legal dangers to their claims, Swearingen notes: ‘Politicians ain’t got the balls for this type of unsupported move. Someone’s backing their play.’ ‘Is it Tolliver?’, asks Seth Bullock. The reply is telling: ‘Tolliver is us.’ By contrast, as Hearst’s representative Francis Walcott puts it to Jarry, like capital, ‘Mr Hearst’s not a partisan in territorial rivalries.’

### ‘Before you know it we’ll have laws and every-fucking-thing’

Unlike the epic form of the classical Western, the historiographical perspective that *Deadwood* offers is less than a conventionally political one, which would situate it within the semi-mythological space of a primarily *national* epic – a narration that identifies, as Gilberto Perez puts it, ‘the move into new territory as *the* national story of the United States’ – than it is predominantly economic.<sup>23</sup> At least part of the significance of the Western as a generic ‘raw material’ for the series lies, in this respect, not only in its already given form as a species of historical fiction, but in the specific ‘mythopoetic’ shape that its typical construction of American history takes. For, as Robert Pippin notes, in *Hollywood Westerns and American Myth*, the classic Western is itself already readable as a kind of historiography of transition, in which its hero (like Hickok) is ‘in effect a figure (usually tragic) for the whole transition and modernity issue itself’. While, in this way, it may ‘aspire to *mythic universality*’, it is, Pippin observes, ‘also very much about ... the self-understanding of rapid American modernization’.<sup>24</sup>

As Perez notes, politically the image of the ‘frontier’ has been ‘made to stand for different things ... from a Jeffersonian natural democracy to a Darwinian struggle for survival and power’. Nonetheless, in the Western at least, such relatively variable political ‘contents’ have thus tended to be shaped by a fairly stable common narrative form: ‘the “transition” to civilised order and the rule of law’ as *the* national allegory of American modernity and progress per se.<sup>25</sup> (Its ‘model’, in this respect, manifested in such canonical films as Michael Curtiz’s *Dodge City* (1939) and John Ford’s *My Darling Clementine* (1946), is less the *Iliad* than that most epic of tragedies, the *Oresteia*: a narration of the transition from familial codes of honour and personal justice – the revenge feud – to an increasingly rational, public and impersonal law.) That this is apparently embedded in a narrative of *nation* – and particularly of the modern nation as an essentially *bourgeois* project – is, of course, central to the Western’s putatively epic form, given the familiar sense of epic as itself most characteristically devoted to stories of national origins.<sup>26</sup> But hence too the suspicion that the ‘myth-historiography’ of the Western can *only*, for this reason, assume an essentially conservative (or reductively populist) political character: an ideological justification of the present through a mythical allegorizing of the national past in the form of a heroizing of imperialism, manifest destiny and ‘just war’, as well as of traditional figures of race and masculinity.<sup>27</sup>

In a lengthy final footnote to his 1977 essay on the possibility of interpreting Sidney Lumet’s *Dog Day Afternoon* as a ‘political film’, Jameson identifies the limitations of popular cinema’s capacity to grasp its own time in what he calls a much broader and growing crisis of ‘figurability’. His argument is directly relevant to what as a television series *Deadwood* narrates. For it is in the emergence, Jameson argues, of ‘a radical incompatibility between the possibilities of an older



national language or culture ... and the transnational worldwide organization of the economic infrastructure of contemporary capitalism' that a situation develops in which 'the truth of our social life as a whole – in Lukács's terms, as a totality – is increasingly irreconcilable with the possibilities of aesthetic expression or articulation available to us'. We are progressively unable 'to insert ourselves, as individual subjects, into an ever more massive and impersonal or transpersonal reality outside ourselves'.<sup>28</sup>

This is a primarily historical proposition, central to Jameson's own periodizing hypothesis of post-modernism. But it is also, we might note, a description of what Buck-Morss describes as two different 'visions of the social collective' characteristic of the self-understanding of capitalist or bourgeois modernity more generally: 'the political notion of nationalism', on the one hand, and, on the other, 'the economic notion of a collective based on the depersonalised exchange of goods upon which, historically, the liberal-democratic tradition rests'.<sup>29</sup> (The 'capitalist or bourgeois' character of modernity registers the alternate character of these different conceptions as such.)

In *Deadwood's* second series, conversing over a possible newspaper story in the *Deadwood Pioneer*, Swearingen asks of Merrick 'You want the decent truth, huh?', before the discussion begins to broaden out onto the wider 'truth' of the colonization of the West:

Merrick: A more elevated perspective would construe our conduct as white men to be enacting a manifest destiny.

Al: Whereas the warp, woof and fucking weave of my story's tapestry would foster the illusions of further commerce.

Merrick, significantly, is the one person in the early episodes who clearly yearns for forms of civic community within the camp and he is largely a comic figure of 'bourgeois culture' (like the theatricals in Season Three) as a result. In one scene in the first series he proposes (unsuccessfully) to some of his fellow inhabitants the founding of a club called 'The Ambulators', in the guise of which they might walk around the camp conversing in 'civilized' fashion together, and it is Merrick who organizes and

chairs the hustings as the camp moves towards political elections. That he is a journalist is also of course significant in this respect, given the newspaper's historical importance, as Benedict Anderson argues, to the imagined community of nation.<sup>30</sup> In this sense, Merrick articulates one understanding of the narrative form of the frontier, as bourgeois national epic, internally to *Deadwood's* own dialogic structure. At the same time, however, Swearingen and Merrick's exchange also becomes profoundly metonymic: opening up onto, and reflecting upon, a broader representation of the 'truth' of struggles over sovereignty, the authority of law and the nature of social order ('manifest destiny' or 'further commerce') which are dramatized in a number of different ways across the various narrative threads making up the series as a whole.

In his review of Pippin's *Hollywood Westerns and American Myth*, Perez suggests that one key to understanding the Western is that its 'doesn't just tell violent stories, it tells stories about the meaning, the management of violence, the establishment of social order and political authority'. The major reference point here is John Ford's 1962 *The Man Who Shot*

*Liberty Valance*. At the heart of Ford's movie is its recounting of the story, as told by the film's lawyer-hero Ranse Stoddard (played by Jimmy Stewart), of how the savagely violent outlaw Liberty Valance was in fact overcome not by the 'civilizing' violence of Stewart's own character – as came to be believed – but by his gun-slinging friend, played by John Wayne. Its ambiguous motif is the famous line, spoken by the editor of the *Shinbone Star* (Merrick's equivalent in the film): 'When the legend becomes fact, print the legend.' As Pippin and Perez thus both agree – in a distant echo of Lukács's reading of Scott – the epic of civilization brings here, simultaneously, tragedy in its wake. 'It is the tragedy of the West that was won, the West that, after all the new beginnings on the frontier, ends up conquered by the East, defeated, dead', and in which, always lurking behind the civilizing forms of law and order, is its 'shadow of savagery'.<sup>31</sup> If the Western plays here the role of a great *origin* story, it does so precisely, as it does in Hegel's account of the 'modern bourgeois epic', by narrating some transition from a premodern condition – the savage, lawless, but also poetic wilderness – to the more prosaic reality of the modern itself. This is to say, it is an epic form that narrates the destruction of those very conditions that make the 'heroic' world of the epic possible.<sup>32</sup>

In its striking opening scene, *Deadwood* would appear to establish a parallel dialectic of civilized and savage violence. Here, following his jailhouse conversation, facing down a mob which demands that he hand over his prisoner, Bullock responds by hanging the prisoner himself on the steps of the jailhouse – 'under colour of law' as he puts it, and as such, according to an apparently impersonal and abstract 'order' posed against the mob's own personal desire for revenge. This is certainly readable, as Daniel Loick suggests, as a kind of parable of the ways in which – in the customary manner of a dialectic of enlightenment – our seemingly most civilized 'achievements turn out to prolong the violence they set out to abolish': every document of civilization is a document of barbarism also.<sup>33</sup> But, precisely *as* a story about the meaning of violence, there is a significant difference. For, while Bullock's act may appear to anticipate an epic narrative of civilization to be pursued across *Deadwood* as a whole, once we move from Montana to Deadwood, 'social order and political authority' are themselves explicitly subordinated to, or serve the interests of, capital accumulation, and its own increasingly abstract forms of violence. The slow establishment of political institutions in the camp, which will culminate in the final episodes

in official elections, is thus driven, as *Deadwood's* narrative develops, not by 'civic virtue', so as 'to compensate for the moral inadequacies of the laws of political economy', but by a dynamic determined by those 'laws' themselves.<sup>34</sup>

In her account of the problem of 'envisioning' capitalism, Buck-Morss cites Robert Reich on the disconnection of the 'American economy' from the 'American polity', whereby 'those citizens best positioned to thrive in the world market are tempted to slip the bonds of national allegiance, and by so doing disengage themselves from their less favoured fellows'. Reich's point concerns contemporary globalization (the capitalist present of which, of course, *Deadwood* constructs the prehistory). But the problem is a more general one to the extent that, as Buck-Morss notes, 'the cosmopolitan promiscuity of commodities' must, at some level, *always* come 'into conflict with the political limits of the nation, the wealth of which it is called upon to secure'. Indeed, as she points out, this was already implicit in Hegel's own understanding of modernity's prosaic world, to the extent that his conception of civil society, drawn from Adam Smith, was as a fundamentally *economic* form generative of a quite different collectivity than that of an older (epic or poetic) 'people'.<sup>35</sup> It is tempting to see this reflected in the show's much-remarked use of language, and in its unique blend of the prosaically everyday and its mythopoetic displacements. While in his monologues the character E.B. Farnum often sounds like he's speaking in something akin to an archaic Shakespearean iambic pentameter – a sign, perhaps, of the degree to which he is increasingly being left behind by the camp – this is counterposed with the most repetitious, creative and brutal uses of the term 'cocksucker' imaginable (a 'necessary' linguistic anachronism in Lukács's terms). As Milch remarks in one of the DVD box-set interviews: 'The relentless obscenity of the mine was a way of announcing the compatibility of his [the miner's] spirit with the world in which he found himself.' By contrast, the desire for a more 'elevated' communal existence, in a character like Merrick, is implicitly indicated in his 'ornate presentation', as Milch describes it, derived from the 'purple prose' of contemporary Victorian novels.

In fact, the 'corruption' of the political by what Commissioner Jarry calls the 'exigencies of commerce' is less a matter of *individual* criminality in *Deadwood* (as it might be personified in, say, Jarry himself) than it is a consequence of the primary economic violence of an illegal accumulation by dispossession that drives

the formation and expansion of the ‘civil society’ of the camp itself. In so far as the camp’s ‘illegality’, in ‘being on Indian land’, is the condition of unrestricted accumulation, its very lawlessness and lack of political institutions maintains the sovereignty of the economic over any social order in the camp. It is hence also the underlying logic of different characters’ central narrative interactions in *Deadwood* itself. ‘Did you come to the camp for justice’, says Swearingen to Wu, the head of the town’s small Chinese community, ‘or to make your fucking way?’ Yet, at the same time, it is precisely the resultant legal uncertainty of the claims, once any annexation takes place, that forces the creation of some ‘ad hoc municipal organization’ as a political body necessary for defending the illegal settlers’ property rights: ‘Be in my joint in two hours. We’re forming a fucking government ... prove ourselves civilized sorts.’

‘The Lie Agreed Upon’ is the title of the opening episode of Season Two in which Merrick and Swearingen’s conversation about the ‘truth’ of the West takes place – a phrase derived from Napoleon’s Machiavelian definition of history, but also, we might note, a neat summary of *Liberty Valance*’s plot. Yet the nature of the ‘lie’ is, finally, a rather different one here than that identified by Pippin. (The following episode is entitled ‘New Money’, and marks the arrival of Hearst’s mining company’s representative, the psychopathic Francis Walcott.) ‘*Liberty Valance* is not the story of a love triangle: it is a national allegory’, Perez argues. And it is so because, in Pippin’s words, being ‘an American is essentially a *political* identification’. Yet, if *Liberty Valance* can, in this sense, certainly be read as a narration of the capacity for the political to ‘civilize’ the violence of the economic (Liberty Valance has himself been hired by powerful cattle ranchers to terrorize smaller farmers, so as to resist annexation and the forms of state regulation that might come with it), its ambiguity lies in whether this is itself part of the ‘lie told’. As Pippin himself observes, in the scene in the film where Ranse’s wife Hallie, returning to Shinbone, marvels at the town’s latter-day modernity, the marshal Link Appleyard’s response is: ‘the railroad done that’ – ‘as if to say *not* Ranse’, or, in other words, not law or politics (Ranse is now a US senator) so much as the technologies of capital accumulation themselves.<sup>36</sup>

Against Pippin’s reading of the Western as that which attempts, first and foremost, ‘to capture the fundamental problem in a founding, the institution of law, or in some other way to capture the core drama in a particular form of political life’, *Deadwood* re-narrates this ‘bourgeois’ epic form precisely as a story of ‘the *depersonalization* of economic exchange

within capitalist society’ itself, which, Buck-Morss continues, ‘depoliticizes economic power, no matter how close capitalists and politicians may become’. That the Hearst empire, unseeable and unknowable from Swearingen’s veranda, is implicitly *global* – connecting together the import of Chinese prostitutes with Cornish and German mineworkers and African gold mines – is of evident narrative importance in this respect.<sup>37</sup>

In his commentary on *Liberty Valance* in *Cinema 1*, Deleuze argues that if in Ford’s film ‘order [is] re-established’, it is on the basis of an acceptance of ‘the transformation of the law which ceases to be the tacit epic law of the West in order to become the written or novelistic law of industrial civilization’. Implicitly, this is contrasted to what is the properly epic form of the Western’s ‘milieu’ in what Deleuze calls ‘the Encompasser’, which ‘brings things together in a whole of organic representation’, and which is classically exemplified in the traditional signifier of epic scale, *landscape*, in many of Ford’s earlier films: ‘Encompassed by the sky’, Deleuze writes, ‘the milieu in turn encompasses the collectivity’. It is noticeable that, although Deleuze doesn’t mention this, *Liberty Valance*, shot in black and white, emphatically turns its back on any such grand vistas, retreating for much of its action indoors. The same, too, is largely true of *Deadwood*, which self-consciously reverses Bazin’s judgement that the Western’s ‘transformation into an epic’ entailed having ‘virtually no use for the closeup, even for the medium shot, preferring by contrast the travelling shot and the pan which refuse to be limited by the frameline and which restore to space its fullness’. By contrast, it is very much the closeup and ‘medium shot’ – usually focused through a blurred foreground movement of bodies interrupting the frame – that predominates almost exclusively in *Deadwood*’s representation of space.<sup>38</sup>

Yet if this is indeed ‘novelistic’ in some form (as well as, of course, televisual as *opposed* to ‘cinematic’), its epic dimension is not so much lost as it is progressively situated elsewhere; no longer ‘visible’ in landscape and sky, but rather in those messages ‘from invisible sources or what some people think of as progress’ which constitute the ever-expanding *abstract* social relations constitutive of capitalism itself, and which hence ‘encompass’ a rather different ‘collectivity’ – what, writing of another film by Ford (*Two Rode Together*), Deleuze describes as ‘the spiral of money which, from the start, undermines the community and goes on to enlarge its empire’.<sup>39</sup> In other words, it becomes an epic not just of capitalism but of capital.

## 'It's out of proportion'

Historically, then, as a narration of the historical genesis of our present, what *Deadwood* plots is less the triumph of the bourgeois 'order' of law and political sovereignty than the epic progress of capitalism itself at one of its crucial moments of historical transition – an anarchic market society and mercantilism slowly giving way over the three series to corporate and monopoly capital, bringing with it both financialization (the establishment of the town's first bank and monetary circulation) and industrialization (the mine as opposed to the individual claim, with its 'efficiencies and economies of consolidation' and proletarianized workforce). In the first scene set inside a building in Deadwood, we see unfold what is a kind of 'originary' act of exchange, in which Swearingen tots up from behind his bar the price of the gold that the prospector Ellsworth (who will ultimately be murdered by Hearst's agents) has brought back from his claim:

Swearingen: 8 dollars of gold at 20 dollars an ounce is 160 plus 10 dollars for a half an ounce makes 170 in total.

Ellsworth: Inform your dealers and whores of my credit and pour me a goddamn drink.

The personal and *localized* form of this basic exchange in which a commodity is exchanged for money in order to buy other commodities – gold for credit, which is exchanged for whiskey, prostitutes or poker chips – is emphasized later in the opening episode when, despite its ultimate guarantee by a 'letter of credit from the Bank of New York', Swearingen's crooked brokering of a deal to sell a gold claim to the New Yorker Brom Garrett (the series' self-consciously stereotyped effeminate, bourgeois Easterner) is finalised by the face-to-face ritual of spitting on hands and shaking. Tellingly, in a much later scene in the final series, when one of Swearingen's men, Silas Adams, is selling his house to Bullock's business partner, Sol Star, he goes to spit and shake only to have Star raise his hand and, signing a sheet of paper, say 'Oh no, that's what these are for'. If, in the exchange with Ellsworth, Swearingen is then accumulating capital – along with violence, one source of his power in the early camp – it is in a significantly restricted (in a sense, 'provincial') form.

Yet as the town develops and expands, this begins inexorably to shift. Gold becomes not just a commodity but capital, ultimately underwriting the paper money of the bank (established by Alma Garrett, the widow of Brom, and backed up by her own rich claim), just as ownership of the illegally acquired land itself

becomes governed less by the informal and personalized principle that 'a citizen can have title to any land unclaimed or unincorporated by simple usage', and more by the rules of real estate: abstract partitions to be legally bought, sold and speculated upon. Indeed, the inhabitants' anxiety about Deadwood's incorporation into the United States, which Hearst and his agents exploit to acquire and consolidate their holdings, rest primarily upon the implications of this, provoking the inhabitants' fear that being annexed into this far *larger* and more abstract economy they may lose their rights altogether. As the obsequious county commissioner remarks to Hearst's representative Walcott: 'Anticipation of the forthcoming judicial holding may itself largely cleanse the market'; that is, remove the original 'owners' of the claims.

In the episode 'Full Faith and Credit', in which the Bank of Deadwood opens, this shift is subject to an amusing attempt by Ellsworth (who has since married Alma Garrett) to explain 'what's behind [the] scrip' to one aggressive customer demanding that his deposits be available 'day and night'. The deposits have to become financialized, Ellsworth retorts, for the simple reason that, 'Short of following you around with her fucking mine on her back, how else is she supposed to do it?' In this respect, and as part of a shift from gold as physical commodity to abstracted capital, the bank itself acquires an effectively 'two-faced' status with regard to the camp. In an argument between Swearingen and Bullock in the first episode of the second series, the former suggests that Alma shouldn't 'ship her fucking loot to Denver' because she owes a 'civic duty' to the camp, 'see as here's where she lives and struck lucky'. In this guise, the bank does indeed appear as a local civic body: the bank is of 'service to the camp', as Ellsworth puts it, 'turning her mine into houses and the like getting built, businesses begun', as well as, secured by its provinciality, freed from 'echoes of Eastern financial panics'. Yet, at the same time, in opening up, of necessity, onto an abstract and impersonal system of finance – providing capital, 'some for people that'll never know her [Alma's] name' – it must simultaneously overwhelm this very localization.

From the standpoint of the camp's inhabitants (including Swearingen, Bullock and Ellsworth) – a standpoint that the series largely adopts as its own – the *social* consequences of this are what *Deadwood's* second and third series will predominantly unfold. What was the original violence of the accumulation by dispossession from the Sioux will be itself overtaken, from around the beginning of the second series, by a second appropriation (and hence second story) in the

form of a seizure by monopoly capital of much of what was appropriated in a more anarchic form in the initial process of accumulation itself. While the first historical defeat in the series is suffered by the largely absent Indians, the second defeat unfolds in the form of that suffered by the individualist entrepreneur him- or herself, who becomes, in turn, overtaken by 'history' (or by 'the gold'), as Hearst moves in.<sup>40</sup>

It is at this point, arguably, that what *Deadwood* seeks to 'narrate' becomes both most interesting and most difficult – a point that returns us to that problem of 'figurability' or 'seeing' that both Jameson and Buck-Morss identify with the more general representational and epistemological dilemma posed by capitalism. For, in a sense, what *Deadwood* wants to 'show' us as viewers, as its historical narrative unfolds, is what precisely *cannot* be shown, any more than it can be seen from Swearingen's balcony. As the local connections that constitute what 'social order' the early camp possesses are displaced by a growing proliferation of imperceptible and abstract connections, extending far beyond the camp itself (and thus what *Deadwood's* own camera-eye can show), so the incapacity to *grasp* such causal agencies of transformation itself becomes an explicit theme of what the series narrates.<sup>41</sup> It is this that is existentially dramatized in the growing inability of *Deadwood's* inhabitants to make sense of (and thus effect) the transformations of social life in which they are caught up. A 'lived' experience of incomprehension effectively mediates, for us as viewers, a kind of historiography of the growing difficulty posed by capitalist modernity as a whole – the difficulty, in Jameson's words, of 'insert[ing] ourselves, as individual subjects, into an ever more massive and impersonal or transpersonal reality outside ourselves'.<sup>42</sup> The 'invisible' is rendered visible (and narratable) *in* its invisible 'power' via the individual articulation of the growing powerlessness and loss of understanding experienced by the characters themselves in the face of capital's impersonal, 'collective' economic forces.

Hearst is the focus of this, with Swearingen's increasing sense of the impossibility of understanding Hearst's 'purpose' from a perspective internal to *Deadwood* itself. 'The *why's* what fucking confounds me', as he puts it at one point. 'What's in his head I cannot fucking find in mine.' 'It's past me. I cannot figure the fucking angle.' (The equivalency to the Native Americans having been overtaken by 'history' returns here too: 'Watching us advance on your stupid tepee, chief, knowing you had to make your move', Swearingen plaintively asks the Indian head in one of the final episodes, 'did you not just want first to understand?') Yet the impossibility of Swearingen's desire to strike back at Hearst by finding a way 'to confound the fucking cunt' in turn (if he cannot just cut his throat) indicates that the problem here is not, strictly speaking, Hearst himself at all.

Spatially, often as not, the dilemma posed by Hearst's motives is conceived of as a problem of *scale*. As Swearingen puts it in one monologue:

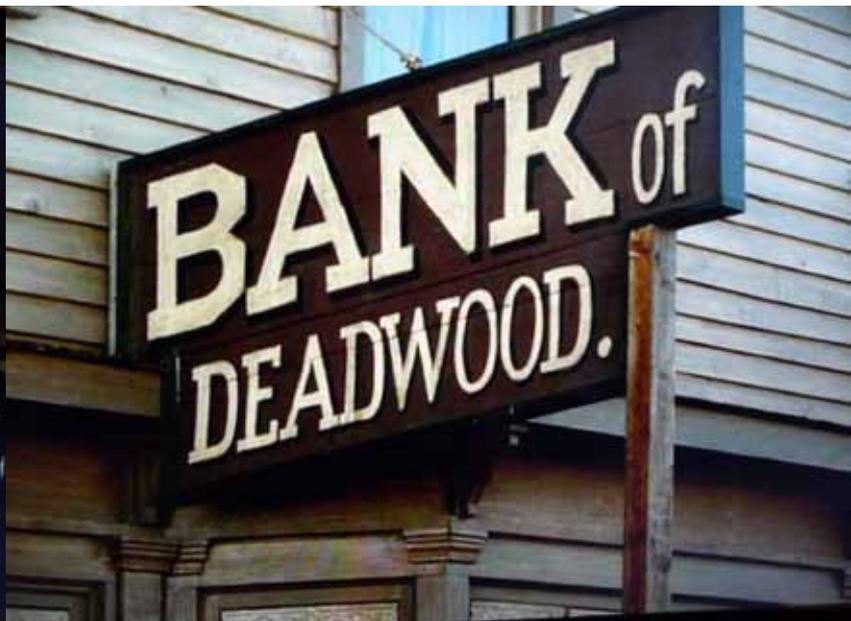
Pain-in-the-balls Hearst. Running his holdings like a despot, I grant has a fucking logic. It's the way I'd run my home if I fucking had one. But there's no practical need for him to run the fucking camp. That's out of scale. It's out of proportion, and it's a warped, unnatural impulse.

This 'out of proportion' to the space and sociality of the camp, and to what is therefore seeable within it, is picked up again in one of the final conversations of the series, in which Langrishe seeks to persuade Hearst of the wisdom of leaving *Deadwood*:

Langrishe: I ask you to believe that fate has not chosen for your encounter with your deepest destiny the place where you now find yourself, while decreeing for some, my friend Swearingen included, quite otherwise.

Hearst: Your proposition is that this place at this hour will show all of Mr Swearingen?

Langrishe: ... imagining for you, Mr. Hearst, the earth entertaining some larger purpose.



However, if this 'larger purpose' is Hearst's, it is also, crucially, *capital's*, in relation to which Hearst then appears as a 'personification' in the sense in which Marx famously describes the capitalist as *Träger*: 'the conscious bearer' of the 'limitless' 'movement of capital'.<sup>43</sup>

This is not without its problems. For if *Deadwood's* historiography, in its latter parts at least, is centred on a narration of the processes by which social relations *become abstract* – a historiography of abstraction, so to speak – the very concreteness of Hearst's malevolence *as an individual* may seem to indicate the reaching of a certain generic limit here. The risk, in other words, is that in personifying and thus individualizing (in pathological form) what are, at their most 'epic' level, fundamentally impersonal and systemic forces, the very televisual form of *Deadwood* (and its need for visual depiction) threatens to re-concretize the forms of violence at stake in this into the comforting form of one identifiable villain. As such, it would fail to escape what Philip French calls the 'populist tradition' to which the standard politics of the West belongs, in which 'evil' is fundamentally a matter of a personal corruption or savagery (and thus might be otherwise), generally embodied in the figures of the politician, or their representatives, and the 'robber baron' tycoon.<sup>44</sup> Certainly, all the politicians in *Deadwood* are uniformly corrupt.<sup>45</sup>

Yet if Hearst – a truly *monstrous* figure in the show – partly fits this pattern, as do Bullock and Star as Hearst's 'good', individualist entrepreneurial reverse, it is also the case that the very excessiveness of Hearst's monstrosity and seemingly 'inhuman' nature becomes gradually less, I think, a villainous example of the individual capitalist in *Deadwood*, than something akin to a kind of terrifying embodiment of *capital*: 'capital personified and endowed with consciousness and a will'. 'My *only* passion is the colour', states Hearst, imagining himself less as an individual speculator or industrialist than as a kind of privileged 'spiritual' conduit for the gold itself – able to hear from the earth where, as he puts it, 'the colour is'. 'Boy-the-Earth-Talks-To' is, as Hearst likes to remind his listeners, his 'Indian name'. Gold itself thus becomes, in this figuration, both organic agent and the material form of capital as living subject or 'animated monster'; Hearst merely its 'means'. It was *gold* 'brought commerce here and such order as has been attained'. The mechanical metaphor of Langrishe's description of Hearst – 'a murderous engine' – is apposite.<sup>46</sup>

In her discussion of Adam Smith's 'invisible hand', derived, as it was, 'from natural theology, which saw

effects of the hand of God everywhere in the natural world', Buck-Morss considers the question of to what kind of body such an 'unseen hand' belongs in *The Wealth of Nations*. If the hand is self-evidently benign in Smith, a sign of nature's capacity to 'harmonize the whole', there is, Buck-Morss notes,

a dark side, however, underneath the naturally harmonious whole, something monstrous in the system that, sublimely out of control, threatens to escape every kind of constraining boundary ... invisible except in its commodity effects, insensate to human passions, impervious to human will, the thing-body of 'civilized' society grows, theoretically, without limits. It is vastly grander than the moral society that it encompasses and overruns. The social body of civilization is impersonal, indifferent to that fellow-feeling that within a face-to-face society causes its members to act with moral concern,

or with what Smith calls (as might Merrick) the 'pleasure of mutual sympathy'.<sup>47</sup> 'Vastly grander than the moral society that it encompasses and overruns' – 'out of proportion ... a warped, unnatural impulse', as Swearingen puts it – Hearst is imaged as that 'impersonal' body of the invisible hand, indifferent to 'fellow-feeling', that constitutes the 'monstrous in the system' of America and beyond.<sup>48</sup>

Out of all scale and proportion, Hearst is, in this way, *Deadwood's* configuration of the Western not only as a kind of capitalist epic – the bourgeois epic narration of modernity as it might be heroized in the figure, not so much of the lawmaker, as of the entrepreneur – but as an epic of that 'spiral of money which, from the start, undermines the community and goes on to enlarge its empire', as Deleuze described it: an epic of the 'monstrous' and 'limitless' movement of capital itself.

### **'The noise is terrible isn't it, Mr Ellsworth? Like fate'**

Notoriously, in his 1984 essay on postmodernism, Jameson makes the argument that our relation to the historical 'past' in an advanced capitalist culture has become 'modified', so that

what was once, in the historical novel as Lukács defines it, the organic genealogy of the bourgeois collective project – what is still for the redemptive historiography of an E.P. Thompson or of American 'oral history' ... the retrospective dimension indispensable to any vital reorientation of our collective future – has become a vast collection of images, a multitudinous photographic simulacrum ... [T]he past as 'referent' finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts.

It is this that, Jameson proposes, ‘inscribes itself symptomatically’ in the distinctive ‘formal features’ of both the glossy pastiche of ‘nostalgia film’ and the so-called ‘postmodern’ novel. If for Lukács, the importance of the realist historical novel lay in its ability to depict ‘a set of representative human types whose lives are reshaped by sweeping social forces’, fiction today, writes Jameson, can ‘no longer set out to represent the historical past ... [but] only “represent” our ideas and stereotypes about that past (which thereby at once becomes “pop history”)’.<sup>49</sup>

While much of recent serial television could certainly be said to conform, in at least some terms, to this analysis (most obviously, perhaps, in the ‘sixties’ depicted in Matthew Weiner’s intensely stylized *Mad Men*), as a generalized account of ‘our’ current eclipse of historicity, it is precisely this that the distinctive historiographical forms of *Deadwood* serve to complicate. As Kristin Ross has argued, in her discussion of the historiographical uses of the detective genre in ‘Parisian Noir’, *Deadwood* may also be read in this way as taking its own ‘gamble with a readership [or viewer] adrift in the contemporary eradication of historical depth’; part of the more general demands of attention that it makes upon its audience as a kind of serially extended novelistic form.<sup>50</sup> But perhaps most significant is that it does so *via* existing forms of popular genre. As such, it involves what might be best described as a strategic *use* of genre that draws upon the social and historical energy carried by mass popular forms, which are consequently the object of a critically reflective construction, deploying the structures of inherited genres as its formal raw materials (as much as any real ‘history’ of the 1870s). Its historiography, in other words, is also an immanent political rewriting of the specific history of its form.

If this connects it to the desire to re-historicize and, consequently, ‘demythologize’ the West, characteristic of many ‘revisionist’ cinematic Westerns of the 1960s and 1970s – typified by the films of Samuel Peckinpah, and of which Robert Altman’s *McCabe & Mrs Miller* (1971) seems a particularly apposite example – *Deadwood*’s sheer ‘novelistic’ scope marks out what is an important difference in its ‘de-reifying’ ambitions. The existing ‘classical’ formulas and stereotypes of the genre itself, and its ‘vast collection of images’, are neither simply negated nor merely presented as an object of pastiche, but, rather, *put to work*, compositionally and politically: re-presenting the social and cultural antagonisms that are reified as quasi-mythical ‘pop’ images of the West. In this respect, while *Deadwood* might indeed be said to seek to recover

something of the ‘reality’ of that ‘past as “referent”’ in which Jameson locates a (now impossible) historiography – the brutal reality of the late-nineteenth-century West, and the violence and suffering inherent to it – it can, nonetheless, only start from that referent’s already existing overdetermination *by* the forms of popular genre to which it must simultaneously ‘refer’. In other words, it cannot but *work through* – in both the straightforward and the psychoanalytical sense – such given materials, which, as a result, become a part of its own compositional form. This is signalled in the opening episodes in the plots revolving around the figures of Hickok and Calamity Jane, already intensely ‘overdetermined’ by popular representation. But it is played out, too, for example, in a whole range of Western stereotypes that provide the basic raw material from which are constructed the show’s exemplary ‘cross-section’ of social types: from the central female characters of ‘pioneer heroine’ (Alma Garrett; later, Mrs Ellsworth) and ‘saloon girl’ (Trixie) to its ‘big-hearted alcoholic doctor’ (Doc Cochran) to its ‘gruff, sterling sheriff’ (Bullock).<sup>51</sup> (The character descriptions are taken from Philip French’s account of John Ford’s 1939 *Stagecoach*.) At the same time, such immanence of generic tropes also necessarily operates at the level of the show’s overall narrative framing in broader terms. The novelistic character of *Deadwood* (which is also its contemporary televisual rather than cinematic character) might be said to function, in this way, as a specific ‘literary’ strategy of reinscribing Western as a genre in ways most pertinent to ‘our’ historical present.

It is in this that *Deadwood*’s contemporary success as a rewriting of the Western as a form of capitalist epic resides. Yet one critical consequence of such rewriting is that it raises a question of the internal limits that might be set by its generic raw materials themselves, particularly at the level of politics, and the kinds of social ‘content’ that they are ultimately able to incorporate. This is certainly an issue as regards *Deadwood*’s depiction of Hearst as its final ‘villain’. It might also be observed, more problematically, in its representation of what Hearst’s transformation of the camp brings with it: a potentially collective *proletariat* – the Cornish miners imported by Hearst, in particular – and, hence, the struggle *between* labour and capital that has (as opposed to that between individual freeholder and tycoon or rancher) been almost entirely absent from the Western.<sup>52</sup> The Cornish miners ‘do tend to aggregate and organize in order to further their financial interests’, as Hearst puts it. And much of the more dramatic violence of the third series turns on

the consequences of Hearst's order of the murder of a number of union organizers. Yet it is also here that the inherited limitations of the Western as a generic and mythic-historiographical form perhaps most evidently impose themselves, in a way that *Deadwood* cannot, ultimately, quite transcend.

It is certainly the case that the violence intrinsic to the industrialization of the mines is brutally depicted in the series. So, for example, Episode 8 of the second series opens with the voice of Walcott as he writes to Hearst. As he advises delaying the introduction of Chinese labour 'until workers at wage outnumber individual prospectors in the camp', and comments on the Cornish workers, 'ever ready to combine and

linguistically (and culturally) incomprehensible, and thus unheard, both by other characters and, effectively, by us as viewers. What the Native Americans were to the past – present only in their absence – the proletariat are to the emerging future in *Deadwood*. The miners are *only* ever figured collectively (like the Indians), but as a collective *subject* they remain essentially spectral. In fact, if there is a proletariat in *Deadwood* it is perhaps fully figured only in the prostitutes. In one typically brutal sequence, a shot of Hearst's Chinese representative, Mr Lee, burning the dead bodies of imported prostitutes is cut against preparations for the 'bourgeois' funeral of Bullock's adopted son. Set against this, the detailed characterization manifest in the show's narration of Trixie's troubled upwardly mobile journey from whore to bookkeeper is significant, as too, for example, is the brothel madame Hannah's sermon to the increasingly traumatised Joanie Stubbs on the prostitute's ultimate fate: 'Nobody gets even. We get dead.'

If, then, the 'populism' of a series such as *The Wire* assumes, as John Kraniuskas has argued, a predominantly 'workerist' form in its narration of the contemporary city, the political standpoint of *Deadwood* as historical fiction is considerably more uncertain and ambiguous.<sup>53</sup> From 'the side of the dominated', the show's 'sympathy' evidently lies, in large part, with the desire for civic virtue and community that characters such as Merrick represent. Yet, particularly as its standpoint becomes increasingly identified with Swearingen's struggle (for comprehension as well as power) with regard to Hearst, it is less Merrick's vision of the bourgeois body politic than the standpoint of the individual *entrepreneur*, of a non-subsumed individual



complain', what we see is a series of images of labourers being forcibly showered, submitted to anal searches, beaten and shot. However, if the risk run in *Deadwood*'s depiction of Hearst as a personification of capital is one of his becoming, as it were, *too* personalized, in the case of the workers something like the reverse is the case. In their few appearances in anything approaching an individually characterized form, like the Chinese, the Cornish miners are

economic freedom, that emerges as *Deadwood*'s privileged optic of critique. 'I may have fucked my life up flatter than hammered shit', as Ellsworth has it, in his opening conversation with Swearingen, 'but I stand here before you today beholden to no human cocksucker.' If *Deadwood*'s form of historical epic is also tragedy, the 'tragedy of the West that was won', its hero is then perhaps Ellsworth, increasingly 'beholden' to 'the large events and forces' of the times, overtaken

by history, shot by Hearst's assassins, his corpse finally carried on a cart through Deadwood's streets. 'The noise is terrible isn't it, Mr Ellsworth?', says Walcott as he looks over Alma Garrett's mine in an earlier episode. 'Like fate.'

In the epic forms of both the historical novel and classic realism, Lukács writes, each 'narrative detail' is 'significant' precisely 'to the extent that it expresses the dialectic between man-as-individual and man-as-social-being'.<sup>54</sup> For the Western, in both its classic and revisionist forms, it is, above all, the political identity constituted by nation that has been the medium of such a dialectic, and, hence, for its prehistory of the present as a narrative of progress or defeat. Yet in *Deadwood* – and this is central to its *contemporary* character as a historical fiction – it is less nationhood than it is what Marx calls the real abstraction of that 'self-moving substance which is Subject', in the 'shape of money' – of gold in the process of becoming monetary abstraction – that constitutes the most 'epic' social being of the transition to modernity.<sup>55</sup> It is the *gold* that has 'brought commerce here, and such order as has been obtained', and it is to such 'order' that *Deadwood* seeks to give a narrative form. In doing so, it asks a question of fictional representation's very capacity to render visible a historical society in the process of *becoming abstract*, where such abstraction must become itself a part of the historical genesis of the contemporary that it narrates. In this way the historiographical difficulties posed by capitalism, and the 'crisis of realism', come themselves to be foregrounded as issues of narrative form. *Deadwood* may indeed be said to assume the historical novel's 'traditional' epic task of endowing time with meaning by 'connecting individual experience ... with the history of a collective'.<sup>56</sup> Yet in the 'concrete historical genesis' of our own time, the possibility of any such epic history is perhaps, *Deadwood* suggests, constituted, above all, by the abstract and monstrous social collectivity of capital itself.

## Notes

Some of the material for this article was first provoked by an invitation from Ben Noys to talk about the Western at a *Historical Materialism* conference in London in 2012. Thanks to him and to Alberto Toscano for discussions at that event, as well as to Alex Warwick for many hours of DVD watching.

1. Other obvious (and exclusively male) examples would include David Simon (*The Wire*, *Treme*), David Chase (*The Sopranos*), Alan Ball (*Six Feet Under*, *True Blood*), Aaron Sorkin (*The West Wing*, *Newsroom*), Matthew Weiner (*Mad Men*) and Vince Gilligan (*Breaking Bad*). Milch himself has subsequently gone on to make two further series for HBO, *John from Cincinnati* (2007)

and *Luck* (2012), both of which were cancelled after one season.

2. Such comparisons are evidently alluded to in one episode title from *The Wire*'s final series: 'The Dickensian Aspect'.
3. Most importantly, the capability provided by the DVD box set and on-demand online streaming for viewers to 'time-shift' programmes, making it possible to watch several hours of a series in one go, has begun to dismantle what Raymond Williams famously described as 'the fact of flow' as *the* 'central television experience'. Consumed as tangible commodity objects 'published' in the shape of conveniently paperback-sized DVDs, serialized programmes such as *Deadwood* assume the character of newly discrete, individual 'texts' to be taken as a self-contained 'aesthetic' whole (Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, Fontana, London, 1974, p. 95). As a result, a programme like *The Wire*, 'though televisual at the level of production, is almost re-novelized by its consumption in DVD format', as John Kraniuskas has noted (John Kraniuskas, 'Elasticity of Demand: Reflections on *The Wire*', *Radical Philosophy* 154, March/April 2009, p. 33). Anecdotally, it is worth noting that, outside of the USA, I have yet to come across anyone who has *not* watched *Deadwood* in this way.
4. Gail Day, 'Realism, Totality and the Militant Citizen: Or, What Does Lukács Have to do with Contemporary Art?', in Timothy Bewes and Timothy Hall, eds, *Georg Lukács: The Fundamental Dissonance of Existence*, Continuum, London and New York, 2011, p. 205; Christopher Prendergast, *The Triangle of Representation*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2000, p. 132. See also, on the 'return to realism', Matthew Beaumont, ed., *Adventures in Realism*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2007.
5. Kraniuskas, 'Elasticity of Demand', p. 25.
6. Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell, Merlin, London, 1962, p. 21. This must be read against a dominant temptation, in what academic reception *Deadwood* has received to date, to understand the relation of past to present at work here primarily in the form of *allegory*, or what Lukács describes as a 'tendency to turn the past into a *parable of the present*' (p. 238): a depiction of the past of America's West as standing in for, say, contemporary neoliberal regimes of capital accumulation or 'post-9/11' culture. This can only, in the end, indicate the all-too-obvious inadequacy of any such allegorical equivalence itself. See, for example, Daniel Worden, 'Neo-liberalism and the Western: HBO's *Deadwood* as National Allegory', *Canadian Review of American Studies*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2009, pp. 221–46; and Robert Westerfelhaus and Celeste Lacroix, 'Waiting for the Barbarians: HBO's *Deadwood* as a Post-9/11 Ritual of Disquiet', *Southern Communication Journal*, vol. 74, no. 1, 2009, pp. 18–39. The social and economic world of a small provincial nineteenth-century mining camp is, it should be fairly evident, a less than satisfactory analogy for the globalized complexities of a contemporary capitalist world. In recent serialized 'epic' television, it is not in the representation of past history, but in the science fiction of *Battlestar Galactica* that by far the most satisfying 'allegory' of a post-9/11 contemporary is to be found. See, specifically, the defamiliarizing depiction of the 'war on terror' developed in the programme's third series, in which the apparent 'good guys' turn to suicide bombing as resistance against the Cylon occupation.

7. Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, p. 53.
8. Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 1992, p. 288. For a broader account of the idea of the novel as an epic of capital, which informs this article, see David Cunningham, 'Capitalist Epics: Abstraction, Totality and the Theory of the Novel', *Radical Philosophy* 163, September/October 2010, pp. 11–23.
9. Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe, Columbia University Press, New York, 2004, p. 241.
10. This is Lukács's famous description of Balzac's social panorama of Restoration-era France in his *La Comédie humaine* cycle of novels, to be found in *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, trans. John and Necke Mander, Merlin, London, 1970, p. 99.
11. It is noticeable that *Deadwood* has an unusual number of episodes that simply start up again directly where a previous one ended, reinforcing a sense of any one episode's lack of independent narrative meaning 'in itself'. The demands that are thereby made upon the viewer in keeping track of such lengthy and often complex narratives encourage a form of more 'serious', concentrated viewing that – along with freedom from the interruptive and distracting rhythm imposed by advertising – constitutes what is justifiably presented by their makers as such programmes' relative *autonomy* in an artistic sense: a certain distance from the commercially defined 'popular' forms of the mass media of which they nonetheless remain, crucially, a part. It is also a condition, it should be said, of *Deadwood*'s most frequently remarked feature: its extensive use of linguistic obscenity. These are, to put it crudely, works that ask not merely that they be distractingly 'watched', but also that they be in some way attentively *read*.
12. Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, p. 39; the citation is from Hegel.
13. Franco Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel 1800–1900*, Verso, London and New York, 1998, p. 70.
14. Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, pp. 17–18.
15. See David Harvey, *The New Imperialism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2003.
16. 'The Language of the Old West', David Milch interview with Keith Carradine, *Deadwood: The Complete First Season*, DVD extra, HBO, 2005.
17. G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. 2, trans. T.M. Knox, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1975, p. 1044.
18. Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, p. 49.
19. It is in something like this sense that the narrative 'function' of the series' initial focus on the figure of Hickok – and, to a lesser extent, Calamity Jane – must be understood, as depicting one who has 'outlived his time and role in history', as Pippin puts it (Robert B. Pippin, *Hollywood Westerns and American Myth: The Importance of Howard Hawks and John Ford for Political Philosophy*, Yale University Press, New Haven CT and London, 2010, p. 142). A stock figure of the revisionist Western, from Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* and *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* to Don Siegel's 1976 *The Shootist* (John Wayne's last film), the aging gunfighter is, in *Deadwood*'s West, a 'mythical' residual poetic image of the 'pre-modern': a chivalric knight adrift in a world of railways, telecommunications and industry. A figure akin to those of 'medieval courtly romances' is how Bazin describes him, although we might note that he is *also* a kind of early proletarian rootless wage labourer. Supposedly in the camp to take up the prosaic role of a gold prospector, a newly married Hickok instead loses himself in drink and gambling. See André Bazin, 'The Western; or The American Film Par Excellence', *What is Cinema?*, vol. 2, trans. Hugh Gray, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1971, p. 144.
20. Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock, Merlin, London, 1971, pp. 38–9.
21. Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible*, Routledge, London and New York, 2007, p. 125; F.W.J. Hemmings, *The Age of Realism*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1974, p. 9; Fredric Jameson, *The Modernist Papers*, Verso, London and New York, 2007, p. 240; Hegel, *Aesthetics*, vol. 1, p. 149.
22. Susan Buck-Morss, 'Envisioning Capital: Political Economy on Display', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 21, no. 2, 1995, pp. 446–7.
23. Gilberto Perez, 'The House of Miscegenation', *London Review of Books*, vol. 32, no. 22, 2010, p. 23; emphasis added.
24. Pippin, *Hollywood Westerns and American Myth*, pp. 21–2.
25. Perez, 'The House of Miscegenation', p. 23; Pippin, *Hollywood Westerns and American Myth*, p. 59.
26. In the canonical account: 'The bourgeoisie keeps more and more doing away with the scattered state of the population, of the means of production, and of property. It has agglomerated population, centralized means of production, and has concentrated property in a few hands. The necessary consequence of this was political centralization. Independent, or but loosely connected, provinces with separate interests, laws, government and systems of taxation, became lumped together into one nation, with one government, one code of laws, one national class-interest, one frontier and one customs-tariff.' The historical task of nation building, assigned to the bourgeoisie, is in this sense, for Marx, part of capitalism's more general compulsion 'to introduce what it calls civilization'. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, trans. Samuel Moore, Penguin, London, 2002, p. 224.
27. See Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, p. 10.
28. Fredric Jameson, 'Class and Allegory in Contemporary Mass Culture: *Dog Day Afternoon* as a Political Film', *College English*, vol. 38, no. 8, April 1977, p. 858.
29. Buck-Morss, 'Envisioning Capital', pp. 456, 439.
30. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London and New York, 1983, pp. 39–40.
31. Perez, 'The House of Miscegenation', pp. 23, 25.
32. There is something of a minor academic tradition of 'Hegelian' readings of the Western, in which the latter appears as, in the words of the *Aesthetics*, 'the Saga, the Book, the Bible of a people' (Hegel, *Aesthetics*, p. 1045). Thus, as Pippin puts it, 'the Greeks had their *Iliad*; the Jews the Hebrew Bible; the Romans the *Aeneid*; ... The Americans have John Ford' (Pippin, *Hollywood Westerns*, p. 19). See Kurt Bayertz, 'Hegel und der wilde Westen', in *Dialektik 2: Hegel – Perspektiven seiner Philosophie heute*, 1981, pp. 138–41; 'Zur Ästhetik des Westerns', *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und Allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2003, pp. 69–82. Yet, at the same time, as Pippin also rightly notes, this has to be qualified by the fact that 'in the terms used by

- Hegel ... a mythic perspective and an epic narrative presuppose for the credibility of the narrative a specific (and old) form of historical life and a specific set of ethical presuppositions ... [which] is not ours; ours is an unheroic and prosaic world' (*Hollywood Westerns*, p. 163). It is not insignificant, then, that in *The Historical Novel* Lukács himself rereads Hegel's definition of the novel as the 'modern bourgeois epic' in something like this way, as naming a kind of 'secularized' epic of the emergence of the bourgeois nation, and through this of the bourgeoisie as a 'subject of history' more generally – but in a specifically modern 'progressive' form (Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, p. 35). For Lukács, if the classical historical novel characteristically 'defended' progress (as the *necessary* prehistory of the present), its 'historical perspective' could nonetheless – shifting from the tone of epic to that of tragedy – 'only be that of the *necessary decline of the heroic period*, the necessary march of development into *capitalist prose*' (ibid., p. 244).
33. Daniel Loick, *Kritik der Souveränität*, Campus Verlag, Frankfurt, 2012. Reviewed by Eva von Redecker in *Radical Philosophy* 175, September/October 2012, pp. 59–61.
  34. Buck-Morss, 'Envisioning Capital', p. 456.
  35. Ibid., pp. 438, 454.
  36. Perez, 'The House of Miscegenation', p. 25; Pippin, *Hollywood Westerns*, pp. 63 (emphasis added), 87.
  37. Pippin, *Hollywood Westerns*, p. 20; Buck-Morss, 'Envisioning Capital', p. 437.
  38. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam, Continuum, London and New York, 2005, pp. 150–51; Bazin, 'The Western', p. 147.
  39. Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, p. 152.
  40. The gendering of entrepreneurship – in the figure of Alma Garrett, who takes over her murdered husband's unexpectedly lucrative gold mine, on the one hand, and the Madame, Joanie Stubbs, and prostitute-turned-bookkeeper, Trixie, on the other – is an important strand within the series. 'I guess if you've got a pussy', one of the prostitutes remarks of Alma, 'even owning a bank don't get you a seat at that table'. Significantly, Hearst's later violent gendering of the earth – 'Her telling me where to dig into her' (to find the gold) – comes soon after a scene in which he comes close to sexually assaulting Alma Garrett when she refuses to sell him more than 49 per cent of her claim.
  41. This is perhaps most directly illustrated in an exchange between Charlie Utter and Bullock following the former's use of the phrase 'amalgamation and capital' (which gives the episode its title). 'What's the import of that expression?', asks Bullock, which receives the reply: 'Do I look like I fucking know? Some big shot Eastern magazine reporter interviewing Bill said that was what's changing things around.'
  42. Jameson, 'Class and Allegory in Contemporary Mass Culture', p. 858.
  43. Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume I, trans. Ben Fowkes, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1976, pp. 253–4.
  44. Philip French, *Westerns*, Secker & Warburg, London, 1977, p. 43.
  45. Hearst's own sense of his dominance over politics is exemplary in this respect: 'Elections cannot inconvenience me. They ratify my will or I neuter them.' In turn, the 'corrupting' effects of Hearst's takeover of the camp in this respect are dramatized in two contrasting depictions of the military in its first and final series. In the first, the Indian fighter General Crook adheres to a vanishing moral code that causes him to reject, contemptuously, Tolliver's attempt to bribe him to station a garrison in the camp, and he encourages Bullock to take the job of sheriff. In the final series, however, the election for sheriff is bought for Bullock's opponent precisely by bivouacking soldiers nearby who are instructed to vote as Hearst requires. 'Men of a certain calibre cannot allow fastidious morality to distract them from the exigencies of commerce', as Commissioner Jarry puts it to Hearst.
  46. Marx, *Capital*, Volume I, pp. 254, 302.
  47. Buck-Morss, 'Envisioning Capital', pp. 450–52.
  48. One might make an interesting comparison here to the portrayal of the oil tycoon Daniel Plainview in Paul Thomas Anderson's 2007 film *There Will Be Blood*; not strictly a Western, but a film that borrows heavily from its characteristic tropes and imagery. As the taciturn and 'inhuman' Plainview, played by Daniel Day-Lewis, describes himself, as if to indicate his full embodiment of capital's dynamic: 'I am full of competition.'
  49. Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', *New Left Review* 1/146, July–August 1984, pp. 66, 69; Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, p. 222; Jameson, 'Postmodernism', p. 71.
  50. Kristin Ross, 'Parisian Noir', *New Literary History* 41, 2010, p. 108. Such 'use' of popular genre, with varying degrees of criticality, is a marked feature of new serialized American television more generally, embracing, for example, the gangster film (*Boardwalk Empire*, *The Sopranos*), gothic (*True Blood*), fantasy (*Game of Thrones*), as well as science fiction (*Battlestar Galatica*).
  51. French, *Westerns*, p. 63.
  52. The Western's characteristic populism in this regard reflects, as Slotkin notes, the real political struggle in the late nineteenth century between what he calls Progressives, who (exemplified by the real-life Seth Bullock's friend Theodore Roosevelt) argued for the inevitable 'transformation of small individual concerns into large economic and political institutions', as a condition of America's progression as a 'Great Power', and Populists, whose 'ideological premises combined the agrarian imagery of Jeffersonianism with the belief in economic individualism and mobility characteristic of pre-Civil War "free labour" ideology' (*Gunfighter Nation*, p. 22).
  53. Kraniuskas, 'Elasticity of Demand', pp. 26, 32–3.
  54. Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, p. 75.
  55. Marx, *Capital*, Volume I, pp. 255–6. See also Cunningham, 'Capitalist Epics'.
  56. Ricardo Roque-Baldouinos, 'The "Epic Novel": Charismatic Nationalism and the Avant-garde', *Cultural Critique* 49, 2001, p. 69.

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