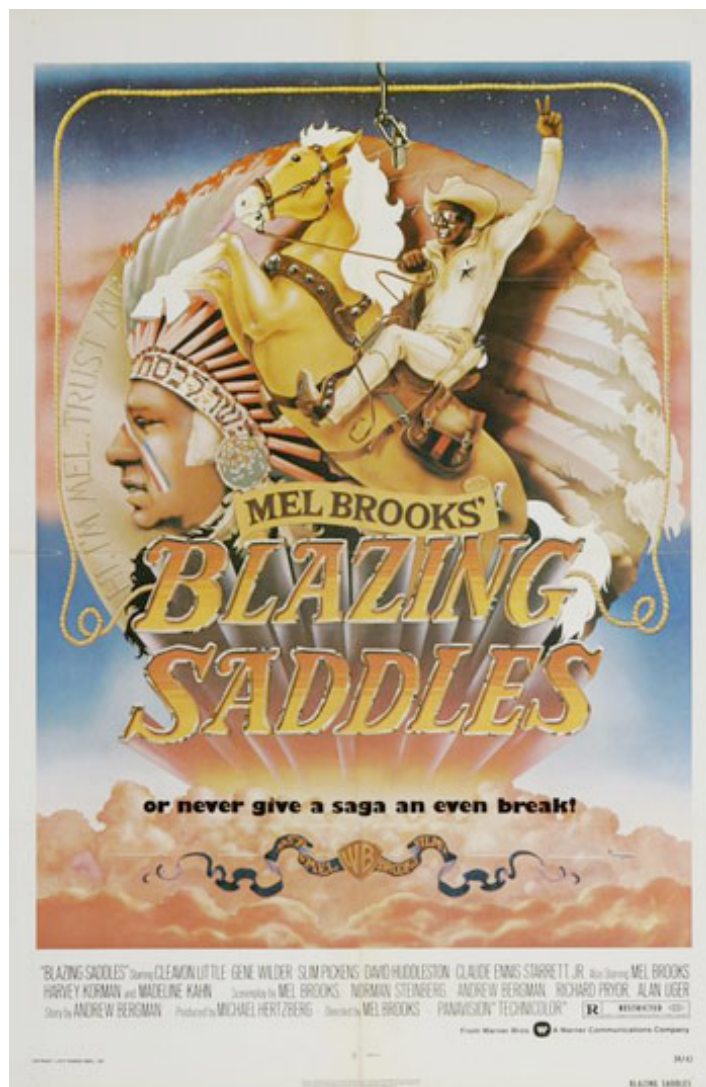


“A Hell of a Place”: The Everyday as Revisionist Content in Contemporary Westerns

By Erica Stein

In 1974, Mel Brooks' Blazing Saddles concluded with the citizens of Rock Ridge preserving their town by decoying the villains hired by corrupt politicians and industry into a cardboard replica of Rock Ridge.² The ruse discovered, the resulting fight spills into the Busby Berkeley musical set on the next soundstage:

The fight then proceeds through a studio cafeteria, out onto the street and back into an L.A. theater currently showing the end of Blazing Saddles. Led by Sheriff Bart, the residents are victorious and, per their contract with Bart, extend property rights to their previously excluded African-American, Chinese and Irish neighbors. Brooks' climactic sequence – and the basis for analysis of the film as a revisionist Western – depends on a strategy of exposure. In order for more equitable living situations to occur, the iconographic conventions of the genre must be revealed as flimsy alibis for conventional narrative structure and exceptionalist ideology, their representation structured not by reference to a material historical reality but by the demands of a capitalist production system. The acknowledgement of such truth is tantamount to demolishing the structures built to conceal it and, the mythic function of the Western now visible and intelligible, a corrected, corrective narrative can emerge.



Although Blazing Saddles is a parody or burlesque of the Western,³ its understanding of the politics of the classical Western and its articulation of a genre critique is both paradigmatic of the Hollywood Renaissance cycle of revisionist Westerns⁴ and consonant with the genre's theorization by the discipline of film studies during the same period. In his chapter on the Western in Hollywood Genres, Tom Schatz argued that the revisionist films of the 1970s, such as Don Siegel's The Shootist,⁵ could be read as the culmination of a general evolution in the genre toward more complex films that dwelled on their heritage and rendered complexities formerly implicit in the characterization of "the Westerner" explicit in "contradictory impulses and ambiguous resolution[s]."

Like many canonic studies of the genre, Schatz tied his argument to an auteurist reading of John Ford's long career, concluding that by Ford's late work the Western "had grown ... to a sophisticated formula in which American history and ideology – and the Western genre itself – could be reflected upon and examined in detail."⁶ That is, Brooks' film typified the form and function of the genre in the mid 1970s, and its literal flattening of setting can be read alongside Schatz's, Jim Kitses's⁷ and Will Wright's⁸ dismantling of the Western's depictions of dances, funerals, town halls and ranch houses as neutral settings and visual backdrops and reconstruction of them as aspects of structuring oppositions constitutive of the genre's narrative, thematic and political functions. The argument for spectacular, non-narrative content as that which enabled narrative signification was also articulated to the field's turn from a consideration of the Western as history to the Western as myth.

In her introduction to Westerns: Films Through History, Janet Walker traces this transformation. She recounts the insistence of André Bazin and other early Cahiers critics on the Western's inherent ability to explain and capture the past and to function best when it eschewed overt commentary and thematization of specific historical occurrences and instead simply rendered historical truths. Walker summarizes this analysis: "The Western does not 'spring from,' nor 'grow out of' history. No sense of boundaries or of separate entities is couched. The Western is history."⁹ Walker then details three related responses by later critics to the Bazinian position, all of which presuppose that the relationship of the Western to history is intensely problematic: first, there are accounts of the production of the first Westerns, which corresponded with the closing or end of the old west, that seek out the mechanisms by which facts are transformed into fictions and the ideological underpinnings of such transformations; second, bricolage-based critiques that understand

the Western as historical "by virtue of the period in which a given film was produced"; third, a comparative approach given to studying "veracity of representation of historical personages and events ... in comparative studies of films and their historical context."¹⁰ All three approaches – the latter two of which find their fullest expression between 1965 and 1980 – insist on narrative and structural analysis for at least part of their methodology and are dedicated to divesting the genre of its claim to being history, instead proving its mythic status and applications. Just as such theory works by demonstrating the narrative functions inherent in renderings of the historical everyday, Hollywood Renaissance Westerns such as Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid¹¹ and The Wild Bunch¹² evacuate representations of both "civilization and the wilderness"¹³ and, therefore, eject representations of the historical everyday from their diegeses.

This paper will argue, however, that contemporary Westerns aspiring to a revisionist stance employ radically different techniques – in large part because the tactics of parody and self-reflexivity had saturated the genre and, exhausted in their turn, necessitated a new direction for the Western. Specifically, they eschew both classical narrative structure and the revelatory posture taken by Hollywood Renaissance revisionist Westerns with regard to the classic iterations of the genre. Instead, contemporary revisionist Westerns¹⁴ – here represented by cases studies of Dead Man,¹⁵ The Proposition¹⁶ and Deadwood¹⁷ – utilize a noticeably looser, more circular narrative structure in which the quotidian activities and realities of heterogeneous histories are foregrounded. Furthermore, I follow Melinda Szaloky,¹⁸ Felicity Collins¹⁹ and Jonathan Rosenbaum²⁰ in arguing that such a mode of storytelling – contingent, subjective, fragmentary, allegorical – has ethical implications for both the Western genre in particular and filmic representations of history in general.

While neither Szaloky, Collins and Rosenbaum, nor the earlier critics to whom they respond, clearly define and focus on "the everyday" as a category, their work implies the everyday as the content that conditions their argument. "Everyday" here, when evoked by discussions of the Western, does not quite occupy the traditional opposition to classical forms of narrative, or the abstracted relationship of the cinema as a medium to the reality of lived experience, that it does in film studies generally.²¹ Instead, the everyday in relationship to the Western is a highly codified representational matrix that evokes a specific historical period and setting (namely the American southwest from 1865 to 1890) and acts both as background visual content/context for an individual Western and intertextual iconography that assists in the constitution and recognition of the genre as such. To use Rick Altman's schema, in the Western "the everyday" is the semantic content that naturalizes and contextualizes the syntactic content to form generic conventions and expectations.²²

Such a definition and positioning of the everyday within the Western genre, however, produces an understanding of "the everyday" as that which is non-existent within the genre as actual historical trace or marker of routine experiences because it is always already the sign of something else and therefore inaccessible and unanalyzable as itself. In the case of the classical Western, what might usually be understood as details representative of the historical realities of frontier life in the late 1800s – dress, speech, riding equipment, building materials – is claimed as part of a signifying schema that is the mechanism by which historiography and nationalist ideology construct themselves. The white hat is never an article of clothing that keeps the sun off but always a synecdoche of the regeneratively violent hero and his black-hatted counter part; the apron and dress of the school marm imply all of feminizing civilization (and civilization as feminine). And yet, as Barthes notes in "The Reality Effect," it is not only thematic content but also the apparently extraneous detail that serve a narrative function.

In "The Reality Effect," Barthes recalls a description of a room by Flaubert and, after analyzing each object encoded with hermeneutic or other information, is left with the inert barometer that seems to say nothing about the characters or narrative.²³ Instead, appearing as a conspicuously ornamental, inconsequential, everyday object, "the barometer" as a sign sloughs its signified and the empty signifier comes to say, "I am real." That is, it speaks its genre of 19th century realist fiction.²⁴ The pen on Peabody's desk in The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence²⁵ performs a similar function, but instead of proclaiming itself real or the narrative in which it appears realist, the pen says – in the same voice as the fringes on a jacket – "I am history" and names the narrative in which it appears historical, thus reasserting the naturalness, rightness and invisibility of the repressive historiography in which that narrative is engaged.

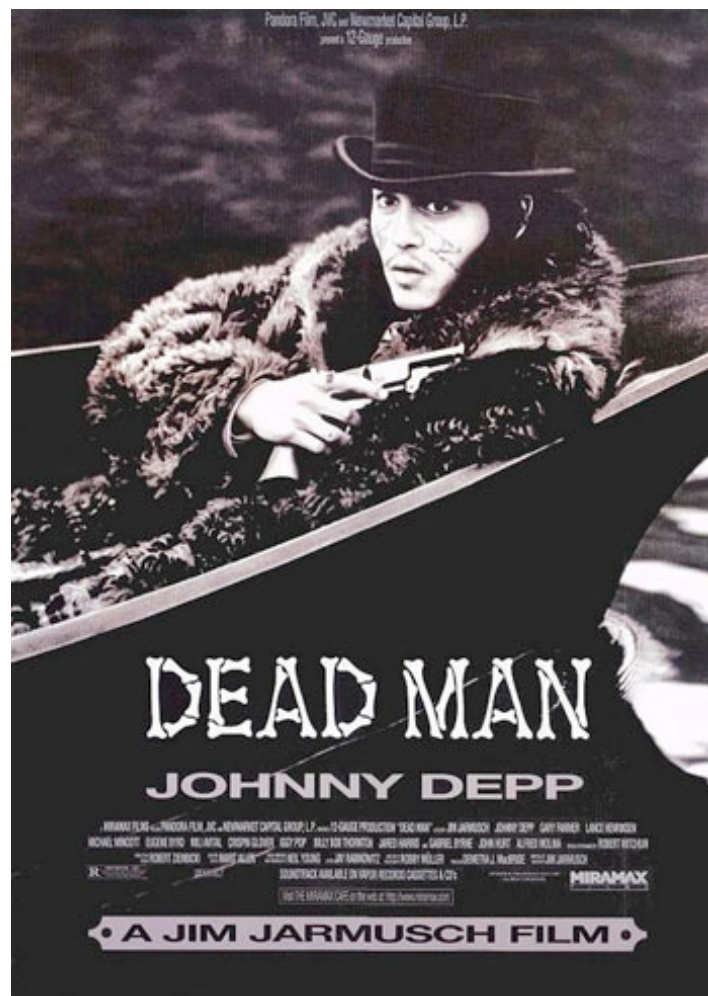
No wonder, then, that revisionist Westerns and film theorists of the 1960s and 1970s address the status of the everyday in the Western by attempting to expose its implication in the genre's ideological function and evacuate it from contemporary entries in the genre. To this end, the emphasis of Hollywood Renaissance revisionist Westerns is squarely on expressionistic violence, ambiguous protagonists or antiheroes and broad, schematic alternate histories – blood and its attendant ethics is the locus of revisionist intent and content. Self-reflexivity and interpolated media are also emphasized, not as contemporary emergent technologies, but as reminders that "the West," just as much as "the Western," is a carefully constructed, mediated ideological entity rather than a historical materialist epoch. This is particularly visible in Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid and The Wild Bunch. In the case of the first-wave revisionist Western, any non-narrative fragment that remains unaligned with the syntactic schema speaks with the same voice of the narrative itself to say: "I was not real." That is, Westerns are historiographic signs, not history, and both narrative

historiography and the material, historical everyday are unavailable to the genre except as myth. But if there is no such thing as the historical everyday in the Western because depictions of daily life are always already thematized and constitutive of ideology, then film studies repeats the disciplinary omission Michel De Certeau identifies when he describes "the everyday" as that which is left over from or unclaimed by disciplinary appropriations of other objects of study.²⁶

Contemporary revisionist Westerns attempt to correct this lack by turning to "acid," "allegorical" and "subjunctive" narratives²⁷ that produce and contemplate self-reflexively authentic and strange, estranging details as replacements for traditional syntactic content and form. Such films feature an authenticatory discourse in production materials and, on screen, an emphasis on visual detail, background action and a variety of implicit "how-to" and "how-did" lessons – which is to say, ethnographic and anthropologic content and non-narrative forms – within the diegesis. That is, it is no longer blood that shocks the audience, but dirt, no longer moral ambiguity and racism but frontier medicine and outdoor plumbing exposing "the Western" and, by extension, "the West" as ideologically determined narratives. Here, the authenticatory discourse surrounding given productions serves two purposes. First, it justifies the production's content and safeguards it from protests over "excessive" violence, sex and/or language. This is particularly evident in the case of David Milch's pre-production of Deadwood, which included a monograph addressed to HBO heads Chris Albrecht and Carolyn Strauss presenting his research of the town and its history as well as social, cultural and linguistic norms and usages of the late 1870s.²⁸ Second, this attention to the everyday – which might register as a series of (repulsive) attractions and spectacles – provides an alternate narrative structure for the contemporary Western. The first cycle of revisionist Westerns, for all their arguably progressive politics, have extremely conventional, classically structured narratives. To borrow John Cawelti's taxonomy of "demythologizing" genre films, the revisionist content and intent in fact directly arise from close mimicry of classical genre conventions.²⁹ The church raising and saving in McCabe & Mrs. Miller,³⁰ for example, are direct allusions to My Darling Clementine.³¹

The Hollywood Renaissance films' endings are downbeat, but not open. In the contemporary period, the narrative structures are notably looser, making room for documentary-like aspects of the ethnography and newsreel, eschewing or complicating narrative deadlines and insisting on anti-climax and ambiguity. The result is a de-emphasis of linear narrative and a single, regenerative hero and a congruent foregrounding of self-reflexively "historically accurate" semantic content so that the "story" of the film becomes "how did one live then" and "what does that imply about how must we live now." In Dead Man, The Proposition and Deadwood, the daily life of a given town is central to the action, not as a contrast to the wilderness, but as that which constitutes reality and produces ways of engaging with historical traumas.

In the above description of contemporary Westerns, De Certeau's expelled "everyday" – that which resists traditional narration – is serial, circular, boring and incomplete; taking on a suggestive relationship with Walter Benjamin's, Roland Barthes's and Hayden White's theories of myth, narrative and history. These theories stress just such strategies over and against that of traditional, narrative historiography: when the Hollywood Renaissance Western explodes the classic Westerns' everyday, it falls back on nearly identical narrative techniques and structures to produce an equally unified, narrated history in which meaning always replaces reality.³² Thus, Collins, Rosenbaum and Szaloky argue that such strategies are problematic and ineffectual, achieving only the status of anti-myth with reference to the mythic status and function of the classical Western, unable to articulate an allegorical sense of history or represent the everyday. More important, all three critics argue that Hollywood Renaissance Westerns are both unable to represent the varieties of everyday experience of the period as determined by racial and ethnic difference and to represent or even gesture toward lost, repressed or traumatic histories.



Jarmusch's Dead Man, released a decade before the other two films considered here, has generated a substantial body of critical literature that points to just such a strategy, although the issue of traumatic history has been more thoroughly discussed than that of the everyday, as typified by the work of Rosenbaum and Szaloky. Both authors identify the film's status as allegory, and its foregrounding of the everyday as authenticatory discourse and detail as effective anti-narrative strategies that escape the mythic program and allow the film efficacy as a vehicle for the emergence of repressed histories, including material-based, everyday experiences.

Proceeding from her reading of the quote with which the film opens – "it is preferable not to travel with a dead man" – Szaloky understands the film as a meditation on repressed history and the onus on both historians and artists to reckon with historical traumas, specifically the genocide of Native Americans, in their work and to fashion (anti-) narratives capable of performing the memory work of recovery, to recognize that there is no ethically acceptable way to travel but with the dead.³³ To this end, Jarmusch must represent the unrepresentable, both in the register of Western history and the history of the Western genre:

Can there be a true revival for a genre that has been forced [by 60s-70s revisionist films] to forget its past or, rather, to remember it anew? If Roland Barthes is right in claiming that myth entails a drainage of history, what is left, may we ask, after the explosion of a myth? Is it history or is it simply countermyth that is yielded up from the scattered remnants of the frontier myth?³⁴

Szaloky goes on to argue that Jarmusch is successful in both escaping the trap of the countermyth and the lure of merely "corrective" classical history through his deployment of the everyday. For Szaloky, like Rosenbaum, this is closely tied to both the narrative's casual, rather than causal structure and the offhand way in which violence is depicted and rhetorized – not as part of a myth, but as part of quotidian reality. Here, Jarmusch's "subjunctive mode [of] developing his plot in the grey zone of liminality ... a dreamlike, hallucinatory netherworld" allows Dead Man to overcome the impossibility of representing the authentic (and traumatic) historical everyday with an "indicative," normative/everyday mode of filmmaking.³⁵

Szaloky identifies the film's presentation of violence as a key strategy in its establishment of the "deadly everyday."³⁶ Rosenbaum's analysis of the film turns on the question of violence as well, specifically the vacillation between violence as authentication (buffalo slaughter, inefficiency of guns) and violence as outrageous hallucination (cannibalism, exploding heads). To this play of everyday

detail and resistance to realism and narrative, Rosenbaum adds the film's stubborn refusal to represent the fact/condition that gives context and meaning to all the other violent acts depicted in the film: the systematic destruction of Native Americans, available only as traces in dialogue and as fleeting images.³⁷ Out of this mixture of realism, fantasy and catastrophe comes a distinct style:

All [of Jarmusch's subversions] follow a consistent pattern of combining traditional elements with transgressive details ... Blake's delirious impressions of the Makah village perfectly illustrate the film's strategy: on the one hand, a simple itinerary of prosaic and everyday sights and events, rendered almost anthropologically; on the other hand, a series of slow lap dissolves that merge and confuse those simple perceptions.³⁸

The result, according to Rosenbaum, is a film that constantly gestures beyond itself, from its assumption of an audience that includes Native viewers, to its adoption of ethnographic research and New York minimalist hipster style to create "a new use value" for the past in the present.³⁹

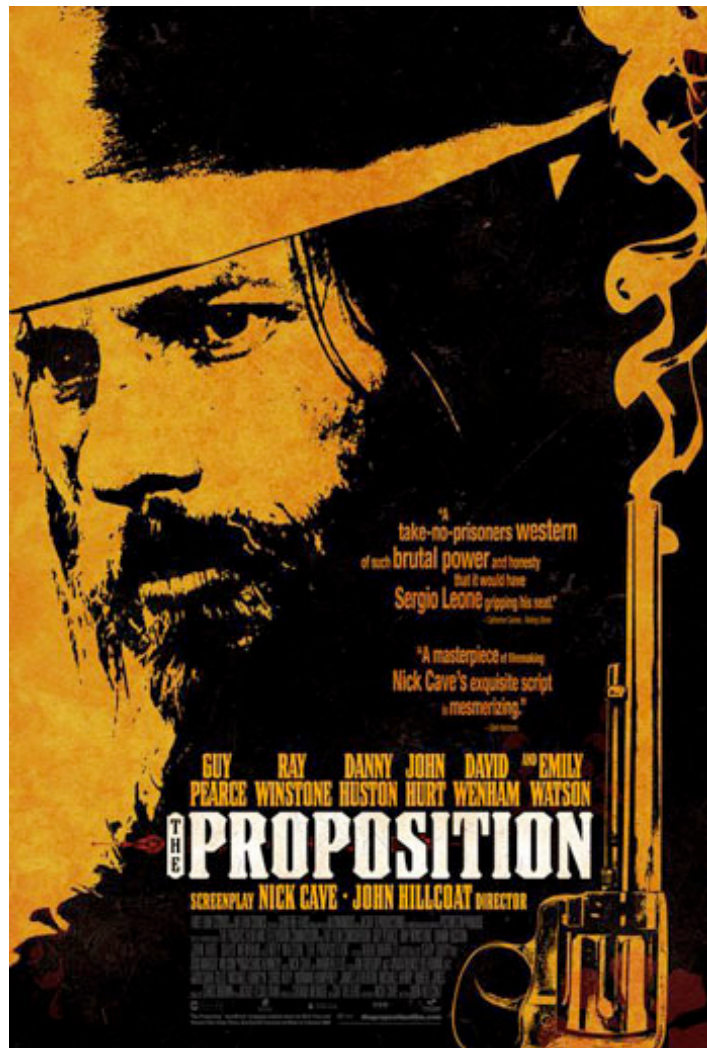
The Proposition

While Szaloky explicitly draws on Barthes's theories of myth, reality and history to position Jarmusch's film, Felicity Collins bases her analysis of John Hillcoat's 2005 film The Proposition, on a Benjaminian valorization of allegory as a form that resists White's twin traps – "the seductions of myth in popular genres or fantasies of intellectual mastery in modernist narratives."⁴⁰

Allegory 'attaches itself to the rubble' and 'offers the image of transfixed unrest' as an image of historical time. For Baudelaire, 'myth was the easy path' – Benjamin aimed to demonstrate 'the antidote to myth in allegory.' The modern myth that preoccupied Benjamin's allegorical thinking was that of history as progress. As an antidote, he offered the counter-image of history as catastrophe.⁴¹

Collins insists that a film seeking to signify in such an allegorical mode, performing the kind of memory work necessitated by post-colonial historical trauma, has recourse to Benjaminian allegory for its narrative structure and must consist of a series of ruins and fragments, moments and pauses instead of a linear, causal account.⁴² Collins identifies The Proposition as such a work; her analysis of the film is oriented around an appreciation of the diegetic eschewal of authenticatory discourse in favor of a logic of correspondence where "at no point does [the film] pretend to tell the story or reveal the history 'behind' the archival photographs. Rather, the film adds new, supplementary meanings to the cultural iconography of colonial violence to which the photographs belong."⁴³

Collins here refers to the credits sequence, which features a series of black-and-white photographs and wood cuts, which are divided into two sections, the first containing images produced during the period in which the film is set (1890s) and the second containing images produced during the period of the film's production (2000s). Collins's argument proceeds from the presence of the films' actors in the second set, which would seem to indicate their "good faith" status as artistic, rather than historical, objects that transparently announce their date and purpose of manufacture.⁴⁴ That being said, her argument ignores both the post-production discourse of the filmmakers and the nature of the photograph as a medium. First, the filmmakers clearly understand their film – both in terms of pre-production activities and in terms of diegetic representations – as having recourse to a truthful presentation of materialist details.⁴⁵ Second, a photograph is always self-authenticating, as Barthes places it among the late 19th-century technologies charged with evacuating the signified in favor of the "realness" of the signifier; photographs always convey the "reality of the having-been-there."⁴⁶ Placing a photograph within a film, then, and placing the diegesis within a photograph, has the effect of collapsing the distinction between the sets of photographs, between the 1890s and 2000s, producing the photographs as an authentication of the film. The congruent result is an articulation of the film as authentication of the photographs and, arguably, a return to the erasure of reality through narration. However, Collins's reading of the film as displaying a kind of allegorical logic responsive to historical trauma and its ethical incumbency on the present is largely borne out by two aspects of the film she does not consider: the editing structure and the *mise-en-scène*.



The Proposition erases distinct spaces within the diegesis and presents its deadline-bound quest narrative as an interruption of a larger, ongoing series of objectives and failures enacted in an unbounded, quotidian reality. The result is that semantic material that would otherwise be reclaimed as part of an oppositional syntactic schema or evacuated into signifiers of the (historical) real instead remain as descriptive, materialist detail that allow “the everyday” to be read as a repeated series of skillful acts and the scars those acts engender. Like Benjamin’s sense of history as allegory, the film produces a series of shots that record an un-assimilable fragment of reality that cannot be transposed into a given meaning – cannot be narrated – but simultaneously register as being a piece of a historical truth because they retain and reveal their status as ruin and trauma. This often occurs via an evocation of classic generic tropes, which are not so much exposed as myth as de-emphasized in favor of emphasis of material conditions in the image track and a loose narrative structure that rejects such tropes as the basis of linear narrative in favor of a meditation on the experiences of the everyday.

This is why the opening scene self-consciously gestures toward the classical American Western’s construction of binary syntactic chains in service of the manifest destiny/regenerative violence myth, the classical Hollywood narrative used to convey them, and Australian myths of the “empty land.” After the shootout between Charlie’s faction of the Burns gang and Stanley’s men, Stanley presents the eponymous proposition, which requires Charlie to capture and kill his brother Arthur by Christmas or be responsible for his younger brother’s death. The scene occurs in a tin shack riddled with bullet holes: the typical wilderness/civilization and inside/outside binaries fully present and embodied. Stanley rationalizes his bargain while looking out the window: “Australia. What fresh hell is this? I will civilize this land.” Stanley’s words are accompanied by a reverse shot onto the desert in front of him, filled with soldiers digging graves, which erases the window as a framing device and uses a long shot to convey a panoramic sense of paranoid vision.



The Proposition

Thus far, Hillcoat and Nick Cave seem to be utilizing a conventional deadline structure and protagonist, situating them within the opposition between civilization and wilderness, here with the additional justification of the classical history of colonization as progress. Then Charlie replies: "What the hell are you talking about, Stanley?" The dialogue is accompanied by a cut to Burns in medium shot, which is held long enough for the viewer to catalogue his dirty hair, the dried blood covering his face and shirt, the sweat soaking his clothes, and the sawdust kicked up by the shoot-out coating his shoulders. The words Burns speaks and the condition from which he utters them are not one of opposition but of incomprehension. The civilizing master narrative of progress is revealed as Stanley's obsession-compulsion, an outgrowth of a particular subjectivity and not an objective manifestation of history. Stanley's vision is totally at odds with and incapable of speaking to a lived experience of "this land,"⁴⁷ which, contrary to colonial myth, is neither fresh nor empty. The wilderness/civilization distinction collapses as the viewer is cued to recognize – based on Burns's/the shack's ruined condition, the sound bridge connecting the spaces and the resolutely occupied and "worked" status of the allegedly hellish/empty land by Stanley's (Aboriginal) soldiers on burial duty – that both spaces are the product of colonialism's corrupting influence, the reach of which extends into Stanley's attempted creation of narrative. More than an attempt at characterizing either character, Stanley's line must be read as an attempt at plot – at setting up the kind of structuring oppositions the Western needs to function. Every character attempts, at some point, a kind of narrative creation, but is consistently thwarted by incomprehension registered by a reverse shot – no one's vision, no one's story, can be entertained or taken as the bedrock of a stable narrative, and the result is that the quizzical, contradictory reverse shots render each articulation of narrative fragmentary, questionable, and incomplete. Burn's incomprehension is not a rejection of Stanley-as-the-embodiment-of-colonialism but a rejection of narrative itself as incompatible with the material situation in 19th century Australia – and with 21st century attempts at representing that historical reality.

The rest of the film continually enacts such resistance through repeated incidental dialogue and an editing structure that prevents any one character from establishing himself as the bearer of a dominant point of view. This continually reminds the viewer that the biblical conflict experienced by Charlie is simply an unremarkable "everyday" outgrowth of the larger, generally unseen colonial policy that compels Stanley as much as he espouses it. Charlie's quest is in fact positioned as an interruption of several competing experiences of the everyday: Arthur's retreat into a created family and its unstructured time of artistic/violent pastimes; Banyon's desperate pursuit of governmentally structured/sanctioned labor; Stanley's never-ending task of training and genocide. Most strikingly, there is Martha's attempt to import the Victorian domestic sphere and its trappings – which in the classic Western constitute the feminized everyday against which and for the "protection" of which the masculinized narrative grounds itself – into a house that can only sustain habitation when it ceases to be separate from the outside world. The ranch house has multiple doors along each wall that must be opened every morning, giving the impression that the house has no walls at all.



Ray Winstone and Emily Watson, The Proposition

The Stanley home, with its gap-toothed fence and endless series of open doors, echoes the shotgun ravaged shack from the first

scene and is indicative of the breakdown of narrative and symbolically differentiated spaces within the film. What should be the easy hierarchical distinction between private and public, town and outback, is resolutely denied by the persistence of visual and aural detail and an editing strategy that insists on connecting spaces. This strategy can be easily perceived in what is the most noted feature of the film's image track and its most famous scene: flies and flogging.



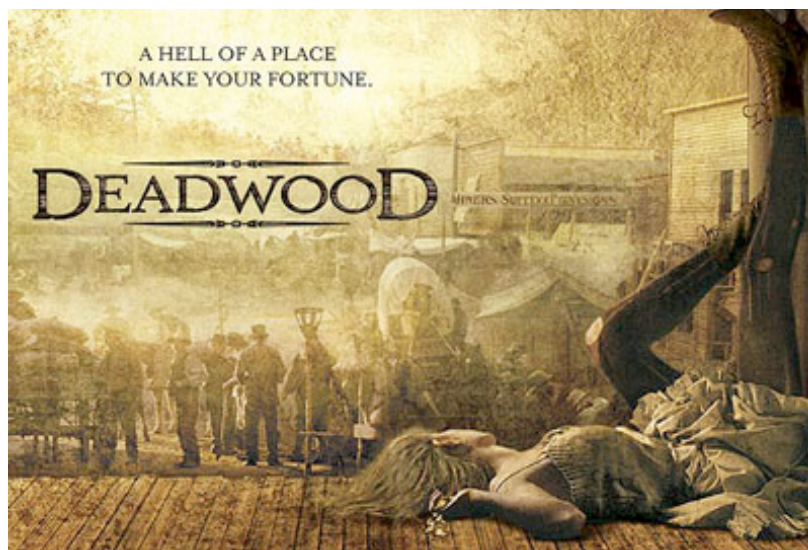
Richard Burns, The Proposition

This sequence, which depicts the flogging suffered by Mikey as witnessed by the town of Banyon, intercut with a vocal performance of "Peggy Jordan" at Arthur's hideout, is bordered by a series of tracking shots that detail Charlie's journey from one place to the other and long shots of the sun setting and rising over both locations. The connection of the settings – emphasized by the overlay of "Peggy Jordan" on both – limits the ability of the viewer to read one place and its signification as opposed to the other. In the course of the flogging scene, Hillcoat pans from shots of the flogging to shots of the crowd, not as event and reaction but as process and temporal register. After the first shot of Mikey's agonized face and the flinches/grins of the crowd, the camera wanders away to examine the growing pool of blood on the ground, the flesh clinging to the whip, the physical exhaustion of the flogger and the flies collecting on the shirts and hats of the onlookers. The effect is a de-emphasis of the flogging as an ideological, narrated event that happens to Mikey and characterizes him/the outlaws in opposition to the abstracted town. Simultaneously, the fluid long takes emphasize flogging as a particular judicial practice executed as a familiar (re)occurrence with predictable, physically tangible results unfolding over a distinct period of time measurable in both a numeric and natural sense: the flogging lasts as long as 39 strokes and as long as it takes for so many flies to land.

Of course, the intercutting is also ironic, juxtaposing the beautiful song with its ugly source (the toothless, dirty singer) and uglier intertext (a mob) and opposing the peaceful pursuits of the outlaws with the violent pursuits of the law. However, the performance is also presented as a command from Arthur to Samuel, evidence of the gang's hierarchical structure and pointing to Arthur's love of poetry and art as accompaniments of violence. The song itself resists a syntactic reading because of its repetition in the final sequence, as Arthur again commands its performance, while Samuel is in the act of raping Martha. "Peggy Jordan" cannot signify as syntactic content as it would in either a classical or first wave revisionist Western and neither is it reducible to a signifier of an historic real. The song remains undecidable but not illegible, much as the structure of the film itself. The Proposition is organized into episodic sequences articulated around a series of sunsets, the effect of which is the reduction of all events to the status of everyday occurrences. Like Dead Man and like Deadwood, Hillcoat's film takes trauma and genocide as its basic fact but refuses to represent them directly as unified, narrated events, instead turning to the quotidian activities constituted with and against such history, as Collins argues: "As allegorical re-interpretation, The Proposition supplements historical 'traces' rather than represents 'holocaustal' events."⁴⁸

Deadwood

As an HBO series, Deadwood has a double stake in such tactics. First, television in general has a special affinity with the rhythms of everyday life.⁴⁹ Second, as Christopher Anderson argues, HBO's branding and boutique-style production ensure that its series are equipped with a multitude of textual and paratextual content and contexts that articulate the series as art, many of which trade on authenticatory discourse.⁵⁰ This is especially true in the case of Deadwood, with DVD commentaries dutifully noting the vintage costumes worn by actors, the custom-made weapons handled by them, and the presence of "real cowboys" on the set. These claims are repeated by Milch in a lengthy New Yorker interview⁵¹ and in the forward to the series tie-in book, Tales from the Black Hills.⁵²



More over, on a thematic and structural level, the series is about and depicts the creation/invention of the everyday. If Blazing Saddles implicitly critiques and explicitly exposes the contingent, ideology-riddled nature of the “Western town’s everyday” by demolishing the town and revealing it as a set, then Deadwood performs an inverse operation by carefully detailing the on-going creation of the town. Each season began with an extended arrival sequence that allowed viewers to attain spatial mastery of the diegesis from a variety of socially implicated points of view, while depicting the various activities of Deadwood’s inhabitants, changes in buildings, expansion of businesses and solidification of power structures. The first season largely details the origin of the camp as a physical structure, the second as a political entity and the third as a socius. Each episode observes the classical unities, especially of time – the final line of HBO’s second-season trailer is “just another twelve days in Deadwood.”

Each episode covers a day in the life of the camp and details both ongoing character-based plots and the mundane activities engaged in by those characters, with meals, the work of small business employees and the consequences – venereal diseases, slow-healing wounds – usually ejected from other Westerns on full view. In Deadwood the narrative depicts the way in which the everyday as structuring institution, daily routine, social interaction, entertainment and boredom all have to be invented by communities and the various economic, political and social imperatives conditioning, constraining and demanding such creation:

Deadwood is a show about how order arises ... [it] is provisional ... It requires a temporary suspension of immediate concerns in the interest of an agreed-upon fiction about a better tomorrow. Because order is provisional, it also requires that we don’t fuck with the peaches, which remind us of how things came to be the way they are.⁵³

The peaches referenced by Milch in the above quote can be understood as a metonymy for the series’ overall project and structure.⁵⁵ What begins as an object of pure use-value comes to have a heavily inscribed function in the symbolic order, acting almost as a fetish for the community: fruit becomes a signifier of authorized space for decision making and marks the participants as “civilized.” Moreover, the peaches stubbornly remain peaches and have efficacy in the diegesis on that level: several characters experience intestinal distress after eating them in episode nine and the innovation of serving cinnamon with the peaches puts another character into anaphylactic shock in episode 34. The uptake of material reality as narrated material is never quite complete in Deadwood. Objects in the *mise-en-scène*, elements of the narrative and the formal structure of the series constantly assert themselves as both narrated events and as fragments of everyday experience.

To this end, the series might be read as a number of short “process” ethnographic films or docu-drama style “historical re-enactments” that include such topics as “how to select a reading for a child’s funeral,” “how to clean a blood stain,” “how to negotiate rental properties,” “how to remove kidney stones,” and “how to suffocate someone.” In each case, the lesson is both a fully narrated, thematized element of a generic text and something like an historical re-enactment that privileges the historical trace of the everyday over the representation of what that everyday signifies as narrated history.



How to clean a blood stain, Deadwood

Some of these bifurcated lessons serve as episode A plots, consuming most of the run time, allowing the lesson in question to be explicitly articulated in both dialogue and imagery, and continue in later episodes as minor C plots or incidental detail; this ensures that such detail is never quite evacuated into evidence of an abstract real or consumed by the narrative into historical event. Instead, healing wounds serve as series continuity and markers of the flow of quotidian time. This continuity also exists as pure anti-narrative in Deadwood's image track. Characters, although conspicuously lacking black or white hats, own only a few articles of clothing that, in some cases, are altered or upgraded in response to moves up or down the social ladder. In addition, clothes generally appear clean at the start of a season and gradually collect more dirt as the episodes and days accrue.



Deadwood

This background could certainly be understood as pure authenticatory discourse with regard to history or even to the series' pedigree as "not TV but HBO." However, it is positioned within a fragmentary, loose narrative structure that insists upon the representation of aspects of 19th century everyday life in the West as traces of a synchronous social reality instead of externalizations of character psychology or the ideologically implicated iconography of generic syntax.

For example, the use of opiates in the town is widespread, especially among women. Matt Seitz points to this, and to the addiction of a main character, Alma Garrett, as one of the series' connections to McCabe & Mrs. Miller.⁵⁶ In the Altman film, however, Mrs. Miller's descent into the opium den in the final scene and drug use throughout the film is individualizing characterization that finally acts as evidence for her love of McCabe and despair over his death, moreover allowing for the film's high degree of closure; his numb death in the snow is mirrored by her overdose. In Deadwood, "opiates" exist as a multi-valent sign, acting as currency exchange between gangster/town father Al Swearengen and Chinese leader Mr. Wu; medicine administered by Dr. Cochran to a range of characters; forced addiction experienced by prostitutes; and finally, a conscious response to the demands of the patriarchy by Alma. The meaning of "opiates" as a sign is irreducible to a signifier in a larger series of structural oppositions resulting in meaningful classical or post-classical narrative – it is instead a fragment of the historical everyday and points to the fragmentary nature of perception in a series that takes its form from historical traces within an allegorical structure that privileges non-narrative material.



Opium, Deadwood

The series' overarching narrative – the town's invasion by rapacious corporations and its failure to expel them – is also compared by Seitz to McCabe, but here what is notable is the way in which Deadwood again refuses to act in the mythic mode of the Western, evacuating plot points into bricolages of contemporary concerns.⁵⁷ Instead, the series is at pains to remind the viewer of the reality of the historical context as it extends beyond generic barriers. In the second season, an emissary for George Hearst, Mr. Wolcott, arrives in camp to begin "consolidation of interests" by buying up locally held gold claims. He also slaughters several prostitutes. One of the survivors reports what has happened to the town deputy, Charlie Utter, but swears him to secrecy. Utter and the sheriff then have the opportunity to question Wolcott about an unrelated murder. They have the following exchange:

Utter: "It's nothing but amalgamation and capital to you, is it? Nothing but amalgamation and goddamn capital!"

Wolcott: "Are you a student of Hume, Mr. Utter, Smith? Or are you a disciple of Karl Marx?"

Outside, the sheriff asks Utter to explain what he meant, to which Utter replies: "Do I look like I'd fuckin' know? Some big shot Eastern magazine reporter interviewing [Wild] Bill [Hickok] said that's what's changing everything around." The exchange is certainly motivated by characterization and diegetic continuity, but, more important, it prevents the viewer from making the simple mythic step of analogy, concluding that Hearst/Wolcott stands for Enron/Wall Street in the way Miller's opponents in Altman's film correspond to and indicate corruptions in Watergate-era government and business. The scene also forces a reconsideration of "Western as history" in its widening of scope: suddenly the real history of economics intrudes on the "timeless" Wild West and carefully situates the diegesis within a particular context, acknowledging a variety of effects beyond the usual thematic schema that govern the genre. Wolcott's mocking response and Charlie's explanation also act as pertinent detailing of social class, education and regionalism. (The citation of a theory of class here acts as the occasion for authentication of the theory.) Finally, no one within the diegesis moves to correct Charlie's citation of "amalgamation and capital" to "amalgamation of capital," and that lack of perfect congruence with the historical record or facticity preserves the "everyday" aspect of the moment while engendering active viewership in the audience, much in the mode of Jarmusch's refusal to translate the various Native American languages spoken in Dead Man and Blake's inability to understand most of what is being said to him in English. Deadwood is here dedicated to the fragmentary allegorical narration of historical trauma that, in order to signify, must preserve the possibility of being misunderstood.

However, the most arresting irruption of the everyday in Deadwood is actually the product of an economic accident. The show was unexpectedly canceled when ten of the third season's twelve episodes had already been filmed. Milch had planned the third season as the first part of an intricately worked two-season master narrative.⁵⁸ The result is that the season resembles a series of vignettes or pseudo-documentary observations instead of a continuity-based fiction series. This is particularly evident in the non-resolution of the season's A plot, which concerns the conglomeration practices of mining baron George Hearst and the camp's attempts to resist. The series concludes with the slaughter of an innocent and protagonist Al Swaerengen's attempt to clean her blood off his floor. Swaerengen rejects an underling's request ("did she suffer?") to narrate and mitigate the murder. Continuing to scrub the floor, he speaks the series' last line: "Wants me to tell him something pretty." The show's final scene emphasizes labor and the physical trace left by political events. It also displays a self-conscious relationship with narration and a palpable sense of anticlimax and mundanity, which form a clear break from both the show's ending pattern in the previous two seasons and generic conventions in general.⁵⁹ The invocation of "pretty" resonates in myriad ways. First, it evokes the "unpretty-ness" and untidiness of the show's cancellation and open ending. Second, it gestures toward the "un-pretty" truth of the West as a historic, material everyday reality distinct from the classical cinema's attractive morals. Finally, it serves as a reminder of the unwieldy and anti-narrative structure of the everyday itself, which resists the "beautification" offered by classical narrative form.

What Al mutters to himself wonderingly, even as he refuses to do it, is in fact a definition of narrative as injunction: tell him something pretty. "Him" might be a viewer or the subject as part of an imagined (national) community, but telling and something

pretty always indicate each other in that to tell or narrate is always to modify and conceal the thing – the historical trace, the everyday, being told. What makes something “pretty” is not what kind of story is told but that information is narrated. This is why a Hollywood Renaissance Western like McCabe & Mrs. Miller is not truly a revision of My Darling Clementine: it repeats the act of narration and so still has the form of a myth. The famous example from Barthes’ Mythologies is that of the school lesson where the significance of the statement as an instructional tool is obscured by a signifier that actually signifies by being a demonstration of something else:

I open my Latin grammar, and I read a sentence ... : quia ego nominor leo. I stop and think ... the sentence is evidently there in order to signify something else to me ... it tells me clearly: I am a grammatical example meant to illustrate the rule about the agreement of the predicate.⁶⁰

The final scene of Deadwood – which, crucially, proceeds from a narrative situation characterized by anticlimax and disintegration of plot – enacts the opposite operation. The sentence “wants me to tell him something pretty” performs a Barthesian analysis of itself by foregrounding and implicating the act and art of narrative as the agent capable of transforming everyday reality into meaningful story. The tendency to read the line as meta-commentary on both the series’ mode of production and its history of reception also contributes to this self-exposed structure. In so doing, the scene, which resonates with the series as a whole, is not subject to mythic exposure/evacuation and instead offers the alternative narrative form of the allegorical fragment. The lack of closure reinforces this sense of the ruin and fragment, disassociating the series from narrated history but highlighting its description of and attention to the fictional/historical town of Deadwood through the show’s adherence to the techniques commonly associated with a cinema of the everyday. What is finally produced is not a history of how the West was won but an annals or chronicle of a specific locale, where the series’ tagline – “a hell of a place” – is the guiding, organizing principle of the narrative. The series is dedicated to chronicling the creation of the place in multivalent physical, political and social forms even as it explores that which makes it specifically livable or unlivable for its inhabitants and authors. This is in fact arguably the same tactic utilized by Dead Man and The Proposition via the towns of Machine and Banyon, respectively. Perhaps the project of the contemporary revisionist Western is finally the realization of a place as a thing in and of itself with its own daily rhythms as opposed to a cinematic rendering of a space that can only speak the language of narrative, history and myth.



Deadwood

NOTES

1. Blazing Saddles. Dir. Mel Brooks. Warner Bros. Pictures, 1974.
2. John Cawelti. “Chinatown and Generic Transformation in Recent American Films,” Mystery, Violence and Popular Culture Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004. 193-209.
3. Which, with regard to the Western, I date from 1967’s Bonnie and Clyde to 1974’s Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia.
4. The Shootist. Dir. Don Siegel. Paramount, 1976.
5. Thomas Schatz. Hollywood Genres. New York: Random House, 1981. 64
6. Jim Kitses. Horizons West. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969.
7. Will Wright. Six-Guns and Society. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975.
8. Janet Walker. Introduction. Westerns: Films Through History. New York: Routledge, 2001. 1-26.
9. Ibid. 2-3.
10. Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. Dir. George Roy Hill. 20th Century Fox, 1969.
11. The Wild Bunch. Dir. Sam Peckinpah. Warner Bros., 1969.
12. Wright. 114.
13. Here I define “revisionist” not as dependent on historical relationship to the original or classical iteration of the genre but as having a certain political relationship – of one ideological rejection – to the original material and an explicit intent to challenge the structure, themes and

politics of the classic Western.

14. Dead Man. Dir. Jim Jarmusch. Miramax, 1995.
15. The Proposition. Dir. John Hillcoat. Columbia TriStar, 2005.
16. Deadwood. Creator David Milch. HBO. 2004-2006.
17. Melinda Szaloky. "A Tale N/nobody Can Tell: the return of a repressed Western history in Jim Jarmusch's Dead Man." Westerns: Films Through History. Ed. Janet Walker. New York: Routledge, 2001. 47-70.
18. Felicity Collins. "History, Myth and Allegory in Australian Cinema." Trames 12.3 (2008): 276-286.
19. Jonathan Rosenbaum. Dead Man. London: BFI, 2000.
20. Here I mean to evoke specifically the tradition of realist and indexical film theory deriving from Kracauer and Bazin.
21. Rick Altman. Film/Genre. London: BFI, 1999.
22. Barthes. 141-43.
23. Ibid. 146-48.
24. The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence. Dir. John Ford. Paramount Pictures, 1962.
25. Michel de Certeau. The Practice of Everyday Life. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984. xi-xxiv.
26. Rosenbaum, Collins and Szaloky, respectively.
27. Mark Singer. "The Misfit." The New Yorker 14 Feb. 2005: 192-205.
28. Cawelti. 198.
29. McCabe & Mrs. Miller. Dir. Robert Altman. Warner Bros., 1971.
30. My Darling Clementine. Dir. John Ford. 20th Century Fox, 1946.
31. Walker alludes to White for this reason.
32. Szaloky. 47-50.
33. Ibid. 49.
34. Ibid. 59.
35. Ibid. 58.
36. Rosenbaum. 55.
37. Ibid. 61.
38. Ibid. 87.
39. Collins, referencing Hayden White in Vivian Sobchack's Persistence of History, 277.
40. Ibid. 280.
41. Ibid. 281-83.
42. Ibid. 283.
43. Ibid. 285-87.
44. "There are certain aspects to our history we wanted to include ...," says Hillcoat, who spent years researching the complex relationship between the aboriginal populations and the two groups of settlers." ... "Basically, it's a panorama of life from that time." Roddick, 29.
45. Barthes. 44-45
46. Language, specifically moments of miscommunication, plays a crucial role in Dead Man, The Proposition and Deadwood. For Rosenbaum, in Jarmusch's film it serves as a reminder of Blake's status as a "stupid fucking white man," unable to understand what is said to him, preserving the possibility of subjectivities other than that of the Enlightenment subject. It serves a similar function for Collins in The Proposition. In Milch's Deadwood, language is variously a matter of contested historical authenticity by Milch; a mechanism that registers differences of gender, race and class; and an estranging method that works through copious profanity and ornate Shakespearian diction.
47. Collins. 284
48. See Mary Ann Doane. "Information, Crisis, Catastrophe." Logics of Television. Ed. Patricia Mellencamp. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1990. 222-239.; and Jane Feuer. "The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology." Regarding Television. Ed. E. Ann Kaplan. Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1983.
49. Christopher Anderson. "Producing an Aristocracy of Culture in American Television." The Essential HBO Reader. Eds. Gary Edgerton and Jeffrey Jones. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2008. 23-41.
50. Singer. 197.
51. David Milch. Deadwood: Stories of the Black Hills. New York: Bloomsbury, 2006.
52. Ibid. 134.
53. Peaches first appear as an offhand instruction from Al to his barman in episode six, remain a fixture for the rest of the first and second season and have become both an sacrilized institution ("No unauthorized cinnamon on the goddamned meeting table!") and identifying mark ("My meetings? I serve fucking refreshment.") by the end of the third.
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55. Matt Zoller Seitz. "McCabe and Mr. Milch." <http://www.thehousenextdooronline.com/2006/03/mccabe-and-mr-milch.html>.
56. Walker. 5.
57. Milch. 217.
58. The first season ends with Al on his interior balcony, watching over the dancing in his saloon. The second ends with Al on his external balcony, witnessing the annexation of Deadwood to Dakota and the celebration of Alma's wedding on the town's main street. These two ending

moments could be read as a kind of narrative of history as progress were it not for the wreckage, catastrophe and pattern breaking of the third season's final scene.

59. Roland Barthes. Mythologies. New York: Hill and Wang, 1972. 109.



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