



DEPARTEMENT OF SOCIOLOGY AND
WORK SCIENCE



”I AM THE OPPOSITE OF PROGRESS”

A discussion about Bauman’s *Liquid Modernity*
through the lens of *Yellowstone*

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MA thesis:	15 credits
Course:	SC2502 MA thesis Sociology
Level:	Advanced, second cycle
Semester/year:	Spring 2023
Supervisor:	Henrik Lundberg
Examiner:	Kerstin Jacobsson

Abstract

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MA-thesis: Sociology, 15 credits

Semester: Spring 2023

Word count: 69111

Key words: conservatism, liquid modernity, Bauman, Yellowstone, sociology through literature

Purpose: The purpose is to problematize how to use conservatism as counterforce to *Liquid Modernity* by answering two research questions.

- What critique against **liquid modernity** can be identified in *Yellowstone*?
- How does *Yellowstone* articulate conservatism as counterforce against monetary interests and profit.

Theory: The theoretical framework consists of **Liquid Modernity** (Bauman, 2000), and how this can be applied on a study using fiction as main material.

Method: The methodological framework is twofold, in which I combine **sociology through literature** and **socio-poetics**.

Result: The text has come up with two major conclusions:

The most common critique is to enhance aspects that function as opposites to central elements in liquid modernity. These oppositions are all parts of what I call conservatism as a way of thinking and to preserve the future. This perspective involves concepts of **moral, tradition, virtues, contemplation** and **cultural elements** from both the ranching culture and the indigenous one.

Using conservatism is *one* strategy of pointing to the necessity of moving beyond fixed, woke ideas of white, male, stereotyped right-wing-driven ideologies of stale and outdated ideals. By enhancing **duality, ambivalence** and **conflict**, *Yellowstone* contributes with a broad, pioneering narrative of the importance for taking one step back to move forward. **Time to enable contemplation** is another essential tool for fighting profit and the transition from human to profitable object.

Cover image: DVD cover season 5. Source: Private.

Preface

Don't be afraid...to look back
at the past...there is your
answer
We should all Cry For a Vision

Choose your path!

Thank you Henrik for your supervision and support. I have learned so many new ways to think and look at the world.

“Kayce: When does the ceremony end?

Chief Thomas Rainwater: When you die, and the next one begins” (*Yellowstone* [SE1E2a](#))

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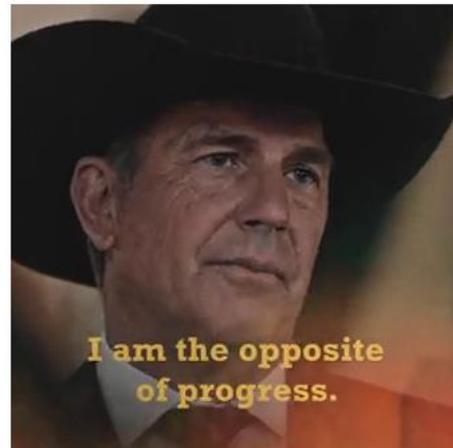
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1 Introduction

I am the opposite of progress. I am the wall it bashes against. And I will not be the one who breaks.

(John Dutton
Yellowstone SE4, 2022)

[SE4E7](#)



I am the opposite of progress... it was this very line that became the igniting flame for this study, as this expression so obviously can be interpreted as yet another American stereotyped macho-hardworking-conservative TV-show, and revival of the modern Western genre. However, when looking beyond that immediate horizon, a possibility emerged of how to use *Yellowstone* to discuss **conservatism** as counter force against what Polish-British sociologist Zygmunt Bauman calls **Liquid Modernity**. Today we live in a society increasingly characterised by speed and acceleration, similar to an uncontrollable, rushing train moving faster and faster – but without neither direction nor goal (Bauman, 2000). This critique against the evolution of our current society, is something I both share and support. Hence my curiosity of where this fusion of *Yellowstone* and Bauman will take me!

~

What scientific relevance does *Yellowstone* have compared to other material, you might ask? – to which my immediate answer is: because of its concrete reflections of Bauman's sometimes abstract and complicated reasoning about liquid modernity. Furthermore, they both share the common denominator of approaching liquid modernity from a **critical perspective**, in which *Yellowstone* focuses on the conflict between conservatism and modernity complementing Bauman's discussion about our increasing floating and liquidised society.

The origin to why Bauman uses the specific terminology **liquid**, instead of floating is based on its connection to monetary elements such as cash, stocks, bonds and other exchange-traded securities. To Bauman, our current society is a society characterised by

primarily economic aspects, as the “liquidizing powers have moved from the ‘system’ to ‘society’, from ‘politics’ to ‘life-policies’ – or have descended from the ‘macro’ to the ‘micro’ level of social cohabitation” (Bauman, 2000:7). Basically, this means how we have been imprinted with the fact that no one else can help us but ourselves! No one else but ourselves are now responsible for our own happiness and success. Our emancipation depends only upon ourselves. To Bauman, this perception is closely connected to **time**, as acceleration and speed are the primary and most important elements we must relate to. This gets us lesser opportunities of finding places for reflection, contemplation... or to stop and breathe for a while. To Bauman, this is the result of the rapid emergence of open areas characterised of inhospitality and emptiness, referred to as four types of city-space: **emic-, phagic- and non-places** leading to the society of **empty spaces**. In short, *emic* place is an open space characterized by its hostile sense of void with an endless flow of people passing through. Such place has no room for rest nor encounters, only a constant movement of strangers. *Phagic* places converts people into customers in a giant mall, in which strangers only meet other strangers in a never-ending flow of consumption. In *non-places*, people are only occupied with one activity: to wait – and while waiting, they conform themselves to obey a few, simple societal rules of behavior. *Empty spaces*, finally, have neither meaning nor content as they have yet to be colonized by strangers (p.98pp). The result of such society is a place lacking all sorts of meaning and purpose in which people are lured into believing that they **don’t need to be liberated**, as today’s society represents the ultimate freedom. This calls for great concerns as increasingly fewer individuals today *are willing to act*, nor have knowledge of *what liberation actually means* (p.16-17). This is also my concern. Due to the omnipresent, this rave for speed, acceleration and monetary, liquid assets really respond to the slogan **money talks! – at any cost**. Thus, my fundamental intention with this study is not to explore or compare different interpretations of modernity *per se*, but rather just discuss Bauman’s critique in the light of a single case: *Yellowstone*.

1.1 Purpose and relevance

As there are many ways to discuss liquid modernity, I will only focus on one aspect: **how to use conservatism as counterforce to the accelerated society imprinted with monetary interests only**. To me, this is also to illustrate the collision between monetary and non-monetary aspects – or in the prolonging, the collision between meaning and no meaning. *One* way to do this is to study the case of *Yellowstone* and its outspoken critique against imperialism,

colonialism, gentrification, profit and a society of non-humane values. This will be done by answering two questions:

1. What critique against **liquid modernity** can be identified in *Yellowstone*?
2. How does *Yellowstone* articulate conservatism as counterforce against monetary interests and profit?

Having *Yellowstone* as corpus is primarily based upon my approach to fiction as valuable source for sociological analyses. Secondly, I'm curious of the underlying intentions of *Yellowstone*'s creator Taylor Sheridan as he considers *Yellowstone* to exposing dilemmas related to modernity, progress, power and moral. (Which, to me, holds similarities with how I interpret Bauman).

This was one of the fundamental things I wanted to look at: When you have a kingdom, and you are the king, is there such a thing as morality? [...] Because anyone trying to take your kingdom and remove you as king is going to replace your morality for theirs. So does morality factor into the defense of the kingdom? And what does that make the king? And at the end of the day, that's really what the show is about. (Interview with Sheridan in *The Atlantic*, Pappu, 2022)

Although you might read this in terms of conservatism as stereotyped, populist, reactionary, outdated ideals and anti-woke,¹ to me, it's quite the opposite! Instead, my aim is to put this sometimes badly treated concept in another light, while transforming it from being used in a derogatory manner, to represent humane and non-monetary-driven aspects in life. Because that's what it represents to me; a means of preserving the future in a way without committing violence on humanity and nature, as well as re-connecting us with long forgotten fundamental values and the ability to step aside from the accelerated non-*telos*²-oriented existence. Although I can appreciate the complexity with conservatism often associated with right-wing ideologies – to which I can agree to a certain extent – traditional values needn't be negative *per se*, as I believe their interpretations must always be put in a context. That is why I choose to define conservatism in terms of more humanistic-driven aspects that we sometimes tend to forget in

¹ Woke meaning 'political correctness' as in being awakened for political injustices like racism, sexism, LGBTI-phobia etc. (My annotation).

² Telos, from Greek τέλος, meaning goal or end. (My annotation).

our never-ending rush for modernity. This is closely related to the concerns raised by Bauman (and Weber and Marx as well): “The melting of solids led to the progressive untying of economy from its traditional political, ethical and cultural entanglements. It sedimented a new order, defined primarily in economic terms” (Bauman, 2000:4). To Bauman, that new order has come to dominate the totality of human life into only involve the relentlessness and continuous reproduction of the new order (ibid.).

Another relevance in using *Yellowstone* as corpus is its generalizability which can be applied to other cultures as well beside the American cowboy and ranching culture. When John Dutton tries to protect his ranch it’s not just about protecting his business and family interests – but perhaps even more about protecting and preserving *the land, culture and traditions*. As such, it becomes a joint project between him and the Natives Americans to protect the land from exploitation, profit, gentrification and ‘land-grabbing’ monetary interests (Reul, 2022).

The specific situation of the Natives can easily be applied to other cultures, for example, the case of the *Sápmi*-people in Sweden, and how they became victims of the Swedish racial biology institute during the 1920s to 1950s, as well as more recent exploitation by the tourism sector and greedy mining companies (Broberg, 1995). A recent dilemma is how the Swedish government supports the British company Beowulf Mining’s exploitation of Gállok adjacent of the world heritage Lapland, which would properly be a threat to the *Sápmi*-culture and their reindeer husbandry (Jonsson, 2023).

” [...] there’s a war being waged against our way of life [...] They tell you all the reasons why our way of life is bad for this country [...] They will tell it so much you might even start to believe it yourself” (*Yellowstone* [SE4E7](#)).

What happened to all those humane values stemming from a sense of what is right and what is wrong? Where did we lose it? When did profit at *all cost* surplus humanity? Why is *nothing* sacred anymore? All these questions suddenly become so relevant when reading Bauman through the lens of *Yellowstone*. When this odd couple is brought together, I see conservatism as means for re-connecting with old, age-less, values – or said differently, the re-connection with barely survived old value judgements as in moral wisdom “that should have crumbled in this high-pressure zone” (Jameson, 1961:138). To me, such definition is *per se* free from ideology, instead appealing to our innermost human nature, or core, if you like.

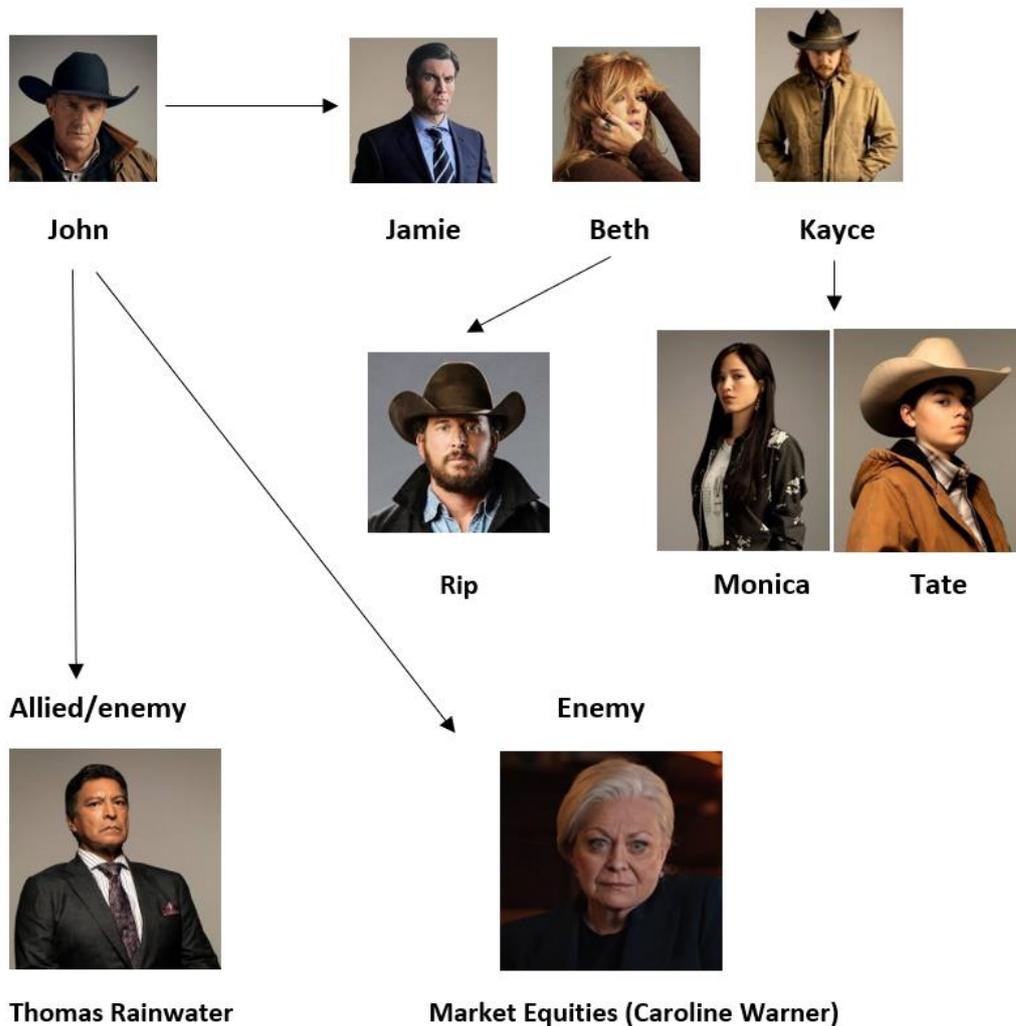
We can also approach liquid modernity by contextualising it within meaning versus non-meaning. Bauman's take on such approach is by using Polish sociologists Jerzy Kociatkiewicz and Monika Kostera's concept *empty spaces*. "Empty spaces are first and foremost empty of meaning. Not that they are meaningless because of being empty: it is because they carry no meaning [...] (Bauman, 2000:103). This image of our current society is so beautifully depicted in *Yellowstone* with its focus on time-less values like friendship, loyalty, simpleness, but also traditions, reverence for nature and non-monetary values. Although focus lies on Native American practices, we can easily find parallels to other indigenous cultures, as the core content in *Yellowstone* is all about the dichotomy of monetary and non-monetary values and responsibilities. Every action has its consequence. To make this sound a bit more sociological, we can talk of about it in terms of a dislocation of humane values (once singular and authentic) into only market structures and monopolising everything for profit (Proto, 2003:33). This is also my main argument throughout this study.

1.2 Yellowstone – a brief presentation

Yellowstone is an American neo-Western drama written and created by Taylor Sheridan, which premiered 2018. *Yellowstone* portrays the Dutton family, owners of the Yellowstone Dutton Ranch, (the largest ranch in Montana), and their fight to protect the ranch and adjacent land of Yellowstone National Park (including the Broken Rock Indian Reservation) from being exploited. The Dutton's prime opponents is the multi-millionaire investment company Market Equities who plans to build a big resort and airport at the Yellowstone land. Another initial opponent is Chief Thomas Rainwater, who wants to expand his casino at Broken Rock to also involve the Dutton's land.

The Dutton's consist of father and widower John Dutton and his three children: Jamie, Beth and Kayce. Not relative by blood, head of the wranglers, Rip Wheeler is also considered family to John (and is later married to Beth). Other than protecting the ranch, the plot centers around John's attempts to rebuild his family who fell apart when their mother died. The plot also evolves the problematic situation between 1) Kayce and his wife Monica (member of the Broken Rock) who fears that both Kayce and their son Tate will end as the lonely patriarch John, 2) John and Jamie (who is secretly adopted), and 3) Beth's tragedy of being tricked to believe her teenage pregnancy was a miscarriage, when actually it was arranged by Jamie as an abortion.

The Dutton Family



The main protagonists in *Yellowstone*. Source: [Yellowstone](#) Retrieved 2023-03-24.



Figure 1 [Recap season 1-4](#). Retrieved 2023-03-24.

The origin of *Yellowstone* goes back to 1883³ when the Dutton family, moving from Texas to Montana, began to build the ranch. The story of the ranch is somewhat different from traditional western stories, as the land was *given* to them by Chief Spotted eagle as a gift to their dying

³ 1883 is the spin-off show focusing on the first Dutton generation at Yellowstone. (My annotation).

daughter Elsa. She had been fatally wounded by an arrow during a skirmish involving white settlers destroying an indigenous settlement. After asking her father to bring her to a peaceful place to die, an officer at the near-by fort contacted his friend Spotted Eagle about their situation. Spotted Eagle then offered them a spot on the native land called Paradise Valley, at the borders to Yellowstone National Park. However, there was a saving clause that within seven generations, the Crow Nation will take back this land from the Dutton's. What we have here is a narrative of friendship beyond borders, moral and doing what's right. However, this former agreement between the Dutton's and the Crows has now turned into a conflict as the present Chief Thomas Rainwater has built a casino (Grey Wolf Peak Casino) in Paradise Valley. The idea with the casino is to expand even further to gain money to Broken Rock Reservation. John Dutton is understandingly fighting this expansion as he fears for the survival of the ranch *and* its surroundings. To complicate things even further, Thomas Rainwater is partnering up with Marketing Equities, however they only want to gain as much land as possible to build their resort and airport. When Rainwater finds out his being betrayed, by ME, his only option is to join forces with John Dutton.

To summarize; *Yellowstone*⁴ is a homage to a hidden culture we don't see much in current Western films or TV-shows: the everyday-life of being a 'cowboy' – which is far from the idealised, sometimes stereotyped image seen on the film screen. As such, *Yellowstone* is a witness of a culture that, although being set within a US-context, could just as well be set in a Sápmi-context, farming context or any other culture or context that is dealing with and trying to live in harmony with nature. This makes *Yellowstone* an important witness of the on-going struggle between environment, society and monetary versus non-monetary interests – which has contributed to its rapidly huge success among viewers and critics both in US and internationally (Bergqvist, 2022).

2 Previous research

This review of previous research is divided in a general presentation of conservatism and modernity, followed by a specific review of recent studies about *Yellowstone*.

⁴The premiere episode of Season 5 had more than 12 million viewers, or more than 4,65 % of the adult population in the US, while also being the most watched TV-show in the US in 2022 (Highfill, 2022; Colangelo, 2022). Rating charts gives *Yellowstone* 8,7/10 by IMDb (<https://www.imdb.com> Retrieved 2023-02-25), while Swedish rating was 8,4/10 (<https://www.playpilot.com> Retrieved 2023-02-25), making it the #1 TV-show in Sweden both 2021 and 2022 (<https://www.allente.se> Retrieved 2023-02-25).

2.1 Conservatism as a way of thinking

Conservatism as a way of thinking is prominent in several studies. From a broad perspective, both Mannheim (1986) and Schoenwald (2001) discuss the close kinship between conservatism and traditionalism. To Mannheim, conservative traditionalism takes on *specific* conservative features *only when they become expressions of definite attitudes towards life*. As such, conservatism represents concrete ways of thinking and autonomous movements towards social change – opposed to liberal utopic and abstract ideas of changing the world. Mannheim puts specific emphasis on *immediate* actions to change the *immediate* surroundings – not the general *structure* of the world. To him, this is closely related to a **possible freedom**. Mannheim also emphasizes the idea of conservatism acknowledging humans being, *by nature*, being constituted of both possibilities *and* limitations – *making us by nature unequal* (Mannheim, 1986:90pp). To Schoenwald (2001) this conservative traditionalism grew stronger during the 1990s, especially concerning politics and morality, with the outcome of pushing even more powerful the canon of the **political moral, religious thought and action** closer to the paradigm of essence (p.264).

A cornerstone of conservatism is **moral**, discussed by e.g., Bourne (2006) and Stefaniak *et al.* (2021). In his novel *The righteous men*, Bourne portrays a group of righteous men trying to save the world by doing deeds out of virtue. Despite the fictional context, Bourne touches upon key elements of religious practices based on virtues and righteousness. This idea of moral being a compass for our longing to ‘the past’, is also discussed by Stefaniak *et al.* (2021:2pp), illustrating how conservatives perceive the modern world and its rapid social and political changes as threats to their national or religious groups. *One* way to escape these threats is to return to the past and find refuge in the *good old days*. Stefaniak *et al.* points out that this isn’t exclusive for conservative thinking as liberals also refers to dreams of the ‘past’, referring to old founding principles like trade unions, welfare state and governmental institutions.

The specific **American conservatism** is also closely connected to moral. Originating from 1818, coined by François-René de Chateaubriand, this conservatism enhances a strong belief in old customs, traditions, practices and institutions. This has often been associated with right-wing ideologies, and the reproduction and maintenance of traditional values involving religion, politics, gender and family virtues. Essential is the desire to keep things *as they are* or to return to how things *used to be*. The latter branch is often called reactionary conservatism. A sub-group, *National conservatism*, focuses particularly on culture

and race, involving values connected to nuclear family, organized religion, military institutions and property rights. Such ideology tends to favor institutions and practices that will guarantee stability and gradual evolution – or the return to traditional, historical virtues (McLean & McMillan, 2009). These virtues were seen as a counterforce against the ‘new generation’ of the 1960s and 1970s, and its advocacy of drugs, free sex and an overall sometimes violent revolt against the ‘old era’. To stop immoral behaviour and totalitarian ideologies, new conservative forces emerged during, e.g., the Reagan and Thatcher administrations during the 1980s. A critical voice to conservatism is raised by e.g., Grossberg (1992), who discusses the outcome of conservatism in terms of a weak Left ideology allowing the Right-wing to grow even stronger during the recent decades.

2.2 Modernity and progress

German philosopher Immanuel Kant once raised the question: What is enlightenment? to which he responded: “Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-imposed immaturity” (Kant, 1784:481). Contextualized within modernity, enlightenment represents a movement *away* from subordination to an omnipresent guidance, and instead *toward* a society built on *Sapere Aude!* or the courage to use your own understanding (ibid.). German sociologist Max Weber later claimed the importance of *disenchantment* (to de-mystify earlier more sacral-oriented beliefs and actions). This involved both science *and* religion (based on a normative rationality), resulting in a rational systematization of the notion of God *and* a significant diminishing of practical and calculating rationality. Instead, another ‘divine’ aspect gained ground: *asceticism* (the focus on hardworking sense of duty and calling – for the greater good). To Weber this evolution represented the dislocation from singularity to plurality; we can no longer talk of *one*, but rather *many* different universes of meaning (Engdahl & Larsson, 2011:73pp).

Swedish sociologist Roland Paulsen (2020:134pp) contextualizes disenchantment within indoctrination, how we are led to believe that *everything is possible* – especially in the work and production sector. We don’t ask *why* or *what* we produce, resulting in draining us from meaning and *lulling* us into false security, if we stick to the rules! A result of this indoctrination is our diminishing creativity and exploration – as pointed to by Weber (1904-05/1978) with his concept of *iron cage* and indoctrination. Hence the dislocation from religious moral-driven sense of hard work into a capitalistic idea of **hard work will set you free and make you wealthy!** To Weber, this indicated a society lacking all sense of meaning, only the constant and rational search for a meaning that doesn’t exist (Holton & Turner, 2010:27). The

disenchantment of the *old world* has incarcerated humans into a strict order of capitalism and rationality. We have now become enslaved into a “specialist without spirit, a hedonist without heart” – and a looser who think he’s achieved the highest state of human life (Weber, 1904-05/1978:86).

Another approach to modernity is discussed by von Wright (2000), who emphasizes **contemplation** as essential. Referring to Odysseus, von Wright describes our current society in terms of adventure and untested challenges – we can only seek what lies ahead. Such a disenchantment becomes equal to a future cosmopolitan world of freedom and equality. “The loathsome mask has fallen, the man remains sceptreless, free, uncircumscribed, but man equal, unclassed, tribeless and nationless” (von Wright, 2000:27). Von Wright also sees a close connection between contemplation and **progress**, or *the modern myth of progression*. Originating from the mid-1700s, French philosopher Nicolas de Condorcet, saw progression as the moral completion of mankind: the prosperous future freed from dogmatic religious priests, tyrants, slavery and oppression – only equality, prosperity, wealth, harmony and freedom (Liedman, 2014). This never-ending search for something we yet are left to imagine (Bauman, 2000), concerns von Wright as he sees a ‘new order’ lacking both direction and meaning, blinding us with its optimistic faith in the future: *the optimism of powerlessness*. “We are beginning to sense how our delusion is even deeper than we first thought” [my translation] (von Wright, 2000:134).

In relation to progress, **supermodernity** (*surmodernité*), coined by French anthropologist Marc Augé, describes the exaggeration and retention of modernity (González-Ruibal, 2014). This involves factual overabundance (acceleration of historical time), spatial overabundance (abolishing of distance by electronic media and transportation) and excess of the self-reflexive individuality, to which González-Ruibal, introduces a fourth excess: material overabundance. Regarding **acceleration**, Reckwitz and Rosa (2023), discuss the danger of acceleration threatening society, not only from the outside, but even more from *within*. This makes both the societal body as well as the human mind sick. Today society has become too fast for the soul (Reckwitz & Rosa, 2023).

2.3 Yellowstone

Hlásny (2020), Sourdot and Janak (2022), and Maldonado and Mattheis (2022) are all discussing modernity and conservatism by pointing at *Yellowstone*’s focus on reconnecting with old Western values *and* native American traditions. To Hlásny (2020), this opposes the myth of the

American Wild West's old values being reborn in recent 'civilized' communities with stereotyped characters. Instead, Hlásný *contrasts* the traditional Western genre, emphasizing native American traditions *and* the ranching culture as equally culturally important. This opens for an important discussion about ethics and race. Similar ideas are presented by Sourdout and Janak (2022) and Maldonado and Mattheis (2022) who talk about *Yellowstone* in terms of commemoration of the American monomyth⁵. Actor Kevin Costner becomes *the* essential typical hero with big H, depicted as *the rugged patriarch* John Dutton, only protecting his land and family.

Rabitsch and Pyrka (2022:96) discuss aspects like ownership, protectionism, greed, hostility, conflicts etc. by advocating an explicit narrative about native Americans. Hence *Yellowstone* is also a symbol for *resistance and survivance*. Martina (2020) expresses similar ideas by presenting three major conflicts emphasized in the show: **the external, the internal and the relational conflict**. These conflicts represent different situations and issues in relation to the Dutton family. To Martina, *Yellowstone* appears as an important role-model preparing a new scenario and ontology of the hybridization of the current world, old traditions and ways of thinking – a scenario in which **conflict** is the only constant. Maldonado and Mattheis (2022:88) mentions this tension in terms of the American monomythic narrative, focusing on the citationality⁶ of three themes: patriarch as conqueror, benevolent domination, and dominator as savior. In the aura of the Greater Good, *Yellowstone* embodies a mythological power struggle “where the ‘real’ American man as conqueror always achieve his conquest” (ibid.).

Conflict is also the issue to Wanzo (2022:80), referring to the history of forced sterilization of native American women living on reservations, being told using a reverse strategy. Instead of a poor Native woman, it's the white and privileged daughter Beth Dutton, who is brought to a clinic at the reservation, by her brother Jamie, secretly arranging for an abortion, unfortunately leaving Beth sterile. This strategy causes alert on how the natives are being violated by the 'white and privileged' race (represented by Jaime Dutton). Another reverse narrative focuses on how, the Dutton's are being attacked by fellow *white* villains, causing a sense of solidarity between the Duttons and Chief Rainwater: “What they did to John Dutton hasn't been done since they did it to us” (ibid.). This alerts the issue of *vanishing Americans* – a mythology in which Native Americans are given a prominent role.

⁵ Monomyth signifies *the hero's journey*, i.e., the narrative in which the hero goes on a victorious adventure, only to return home as a changed or transformed person [My annotation].

⁶ In literary theory, citationality means an author's citation of other author's works [My annotation].

2.3 My position

The review shows a variation in how to approach conservatism, modernity, progress and *Yellowstone*. What I find being a noticeable lack though, is how previous research fail in discussing the **why**, **how** and with **what** purpose this affect the individual, that is, I see a gap in the relation macro-micro level. Another gap is the weak discussion of conservatism from other perspectives than populistic, Right-wing politics. This deficiency demonstrates the valuable contribution my text offers as I instead focus on how value-, and goal rationality can be means for *moving away* from acceleration and liquidity. What previous research fail to discuss is simply how conservatism can be a tool for reuniting with *telos*. From that, I position myself closer to the discourse of **conflict** (Martina, 2020; Wanzo, 2022; Maldonado & Mattheis, 2022). Moral, ethics, profit, ownership, conflict of interests, progression, traditions, stereotyped monomyths and the Greater Good, can all be applied on **conflict**. As such, this essay aims at filling these gaps by presenting alternative ways to reveal hidden interests and agendas and take *concrete* actions, and by that moving closer to a *telos*-oriented society.

3 Theory

Being located within a post-modernist and structuralist perspective, my theoretical framework consists of Zygmunt Bauman's concept of **liquid modernity**. In short, this concept centres around the problematics with the accelerating modernisation from the former *solid* society to our current *floating* society. In other words, our transition from *singularity* to *plurality*). This transition is described by Bauman as leaving the **solid totality** (non-freedom) while moving toward a society imprinted with **anomy** (freedom). What characterises this anomy-oriented modernity is primarily how we have become 'doomed' to create our own freedom, happiness and identity. However, to Bauman, this freedom is just a chimera as we only *think* we are free, while we in fact becomes increasingly limited. Thus, Bauman makes a distinction between the 'imagined' freedom (*de jure*) and the real freedom (*de facto*). From this, Bauman draws the conclusion that form is superior to content, creating duplications in which modernisation ends up being an endless process of empty modernisation only for the sake of modernisation. We have individualisation for the sake of individualisation, freedom for the sake of freedom, capitalism for the sake of capitalism etc. This is also the great paradox of capitalism: to be 'modern' is nothing else but only 'being' – we no longer have any direction or meaning other than being modern. As such, we live in an endless *telos* world (Bauman, 2000). A consequence of this is the continuous, ruthless *change* – hence the liquidity! As such, change also make the individual liquid, floating and porous that runs and runs...but never comes near the finish-line. This creates a desire of keep on 'running' toward the horizon, described by author Lewis Carroll: "Now, here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least as fast as that!" (p.53).

Because of this dissatisfaction, our desire transforms into a **liquid constraint** – which also becomes paradoxical: everything in our floating society builds on freedom of choice except for the compulsion of being in constant movement (Bauman, 2000:73) Another consequence is the deprivation of hope in terms of **de-politization**. We no longer believe we can make a difference. Without hope, we believe that changing the system is way beyond our reach and ability, as we are busier with the impossible task of creating our own lives. This is also the fundamental paradox: we increasingly become slaves under the pressure to be architects of our own happiness, in an accelerating tempo of achieving FREEDOM! The more freedom we get, the more slaves we become – and all this happens in the name of modernity. To Bauman, this illustrates the big lie as the totalitarianism we fear, in fact just lives on, if yet in different clothes, which Bauman considers a dystopic-oriented threat as in an abstract, invisible and

anonymous *non-freedom*. A modernity that profits from dissolving all enduring social ties reproduces its power by making individuals contextless, left to their own fate. This is the very core in Bauman's liquid modernity: the continuous growing 'gap' between society (the supreme order) and the single individual. Hence, the more modern you become, the less authentic and autonomous you'll get. This argument is pointing at the post-Fordist society: everything changes faster and more capricious, or in other words; everything becomes more radical and short-term (Bauman, 2000). *Everything* need to be liquid and porous to avoid the dangerous, solid security. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profane, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life and his relations with his kind (Marx & Engels, 1955:13). What is identified in Bauman's approach to liquid modernity is the explicit ideology critique in which modernity has the function of de-politicizing individuals, covering them in false freedom (*de jure*), while manifesting a social class system to define social borders.

4 Method

This study employs German American sociologist Lewis Coser's concept **sociology through literature** as methodological framework. All sorts of fiction (literature, film, music, theatre, art etc.) can work as complementing certified scientific knowledge, enabling scientists with a "wealth of sociologically relevant material" (Coser, 1963:3). Fiction is a source "from which knowledge about man can be derived" (p.4) – a statement supported by Japanese sociologist Shun Inoue. To Inoue, sociology has been tacitly premised on a sociological imperialism, assuming literature to be the *dependent* variable and society (sociology) the *independent* one. In fact, Inoue goes even further than Coser, stating the path in which sociology learns from literature has "generally been ignored" (Inoue, 1985:346). This illustrates the risk of scientists neglecting contributions provided by fiction, and by having such attitude, risk to neglect visions of reality (ibid.).

This methodology frames my text within what French philosopher Paul Ricoeur refers to as **critical hermeneutic**. His focus on a) communication and b) the subject, involves revealing conflicts to create a spiral of new understanding *through* these conflicts. By emphasizing the *conflict of interpretation*, Ricoeur illustrates how texts possess power to reveal 'other worlds or truths. Hence the significance of the text's *own* meaning. The interpreter should seek for the significance of a text *through* understanding the conflicts within the text (Ricoeur, 1991). As such, I'm interested in *understanding*, rather than comprehending, including context, intentions and implications of *Yellowstone* (Thurén, 2019:110). Alike Ricoeur, Swedish sociologists Christofer Edling and Jens Rydgren (2015) also discuss conflict in terms of *pluralistic ignorance*, meaning how individuals are led to believe that following a consensus-majority, in respect of values, truths and norms (that actually doesn't exist). A good example of such ignorance is the fairy tale *The Emperor's new clothes* by Danish author H.C. Andersen. You are led to believe that everyone else understand something you yourself don't understand – leading to the avoidance of questioning of fear of appearing ignorant (p32).

By turning to fiction, the material can speak *freely*, allowing us to gain knowledge and understanding through *the material itself* (Coser, 1963:4). Alike Coser, Edling and Rydgren (2015) strongly supports the use of sociology through literature, emphasizing the advantage of applying metaphors as inspirations for sociological analyses and interpretations. Sociologists should stimulate their sociological fantasy by turning to the sociology outside the academic, as in sociology as articulated in literature and other forms of fiction (p.16). Although never replacing sociology as academic discipline, 'fictional' sociology can still be a valuable source

for gaining understanding and knowledge of sociological phenomena and dilemmas. To Edling and Rydgren, one of literature's strength is its descriptions and interpretations of reality, which can be advantageously used to enhance fantasy and creativity within sociology (ibid.).

Another advantage in using sociology through literature, is its elements of what Swedish literary scholar Johan Svedjedal (2016) refers to as *socio-poetic*. To Svedjedal, this is a fundamental assumption, functioning as reflections of reality – which is also the very function of all fictional expressions (p.85-93). Such approach enhances a focus on both macro-, and micro-level because of its 'conversation' between fiction and its consumers – and their current reality. These conversations can be a useful tool for revealing underlying, structural conflicts between colliding interests; the current lack of *telos* and the individual's desire for *finding* this *telos*. In addition, I want to stress this study to be considered a sociological *essay* with certain 'normative approaches', to allow me to discuss conservative way of thinking in the light of *telos*. Said differently, I want to illustrate *Yellowstone* as representing a movement away from liquid modernity by enhancing *telos* – something that has been lost and forgotten in the monetary-driven consumer society.

4.1 Operationalization

The material consists of 47 episodes of *Yellowstone*, each approximately 50 minutes long. By watching *and* reading the script ([transcript](#) Retrieved 2023-04-15), I'll provide thick descriptions of both visual and textual sociological readings. As I'm already familiar with *Yellowstone*, I apply the principle of convenience (Marshall & Rossman, 2016:115; Creswell, 2013).

The selection followed three steps: 1) watching episodes again and reading the script to each episode, 2) focusing on a) expressions of critique against Bauman's definition of liquid modernity, b) articulations of progression, c) my definition of conservatism, and finally 3) after having collected scenes/dialogues I found fitting, I made a table to organize them into three categories corresponding to my research questions: critique, progression and conservatism. To present the scenes/dialogue in a more dynamic way, I downloaded each episode, cutting out the actual scenes using the app "Movie Maker". I then linked these clips adjacent to each quote in the result chapter.

Table 1 Example of organizing quotes from the episodes into three categories.

Critique	Progression	Conservatism
John: Living day to day isn't living, Monica, it's surviving, with no regard for tomorrow. (<i>Yellowstone</i> , SE1E5)	Thomas Rainwater: The ceremony doesn't end when the sweat ends. Study the things you see. They're a map of your future. The good thing about maps is if you don't like the path that you're on, you can always choose another. (<i>Yellowstone</i> , SE1E2a).	John: The ugly truth is that they want the land, and if they get it, it will never look like our land again. That's progress in today's terms, so if it's progress you seek, do not vote for me. I am the opposite of progress. I am the wall that it bashes against, and I will not be the one who breaks. (<i>Yellowstone</i> , SE4E7).

Although this whole selection process might be considered subjective as it's only my 'pick-and-choose' (to which I agree to a certain extent), the weakness regarding reliability and validity, needn't *per se* be negative or non-scientific. Alike *subjectivistic sociology*, I agree that social and societal circumstances *always* are subjective as they are constructed by individuals and groups from within historical processes and contexts (Månson, 2020:119). Being aware of risking to be niched in a fixed discipline, I still claim the value of subjectivity. If looking at fiction we can learn that subjectivity plays a vital role in terms of a) the director's intentions, and b) the audience's perception and interpretation. Thus, to me, subjectivity plays an essential part in the intent of "asking large questions, while at the same time it draws its most important insights from small places" (Hylland Eriksen, 2001:2). The relation small places-big questions can also be applied on the idea of *estranging the known*, which in my case means to watch *Yellowstone* from a new perspective and with new intentions and expectations (cf. Roberts, 2006).

The sociological 'reading' involves a humble attitude toward the material, i.e., I'm not forcing in into fixed frames. Rather I quite openly try to identify scenes/dialogues that seems fitting and relevant – **to me**. Lines like "Study the things you see. They're a map of your future" from season 1, episode 2 appears *to me* relevant for a discussion about progression, or *telos* – but it could also fit into the category Critique. Being aware of the risk of 'favorizing' as I might tend to unconsciously select scenes/dialogues only *supporting* my standpoint, I still claim that it's still *the material talking*. The explanation of that seemingly paradox is simply that although I might favorize scenes/dialogues, my 'reading' puts them in a new context. This is also an explanation to how they become *estranged* and new, despite my previous experience. Hence, we shouldn't confuse experience, knowledge and understanding to be equal. Instead I claim that this essay aims at formulate a critique against liquid modernity that I've never formulated before.

Subjectivity is also part of my strategy of a modified *narrative text-oriented* reading. Not only do I intent to blur the lines between the Western-genre and science/not

science, (cf. Lindgren, 2009, I also intent to distinct the story from the narrative. In short, a story tends to involve only the characters *within* the story, not the reader/audience, while a narrative is open-ended and involves to a greater extent the reader/audience (Corman, 2013). Put simply, a story is the concrete events of imaginary or real individuals, while a narrative is **how** we choose to tell a story (Rose, 2023). In *Yellowstone* we see how the characters tell a story, while director Sheridan rather expresses a narrative, as he decides *how* to tell the story of the Duttons. As such, he mediates *his view* on a burning question, leaving a door open for all us viewers to be involved in ongoing conflicts.

4.2 Ethics

Having the character of essay, this text doesn't involve the same ethical dilemmas as, for example, an interview study etc. Nevertheless, I still need to address a few ethical considerations, contextualized within **fiction**. Films and TV-shows are made to be consumed and interpreted by an audience, and in this actual case, it's **not the actors** that are being analyzed, **nor their characters** *per se* – rather it's **the script** I'm interested in. In connection to this, I am aware of legal issues concerning re-distributing scenes, episodes etc. However, the scenes, quotes and clips presented in this text are only used to clarify or enhance certain aspects of *Yellowstone*, which is allowed when consulting the Act on copyright to literary and artistic work (SFS 1960:729), 1 Ch. 22-23§, I'm allowed to quote from published works, in accordance with good practice and to the extent justified by the purpose (SFS 1993:1007), and reproduce published works in a scientific non-commercial presentation. In relation to the reproduction part, it's worth mentioning that *who we are* often defines *what we choose to study*. This is closely connected to the question of ontology (Eldén, 2020). This will undoubtedly affect how I formulate research questions, what I 'look for' in my material and what I see (or don't see).

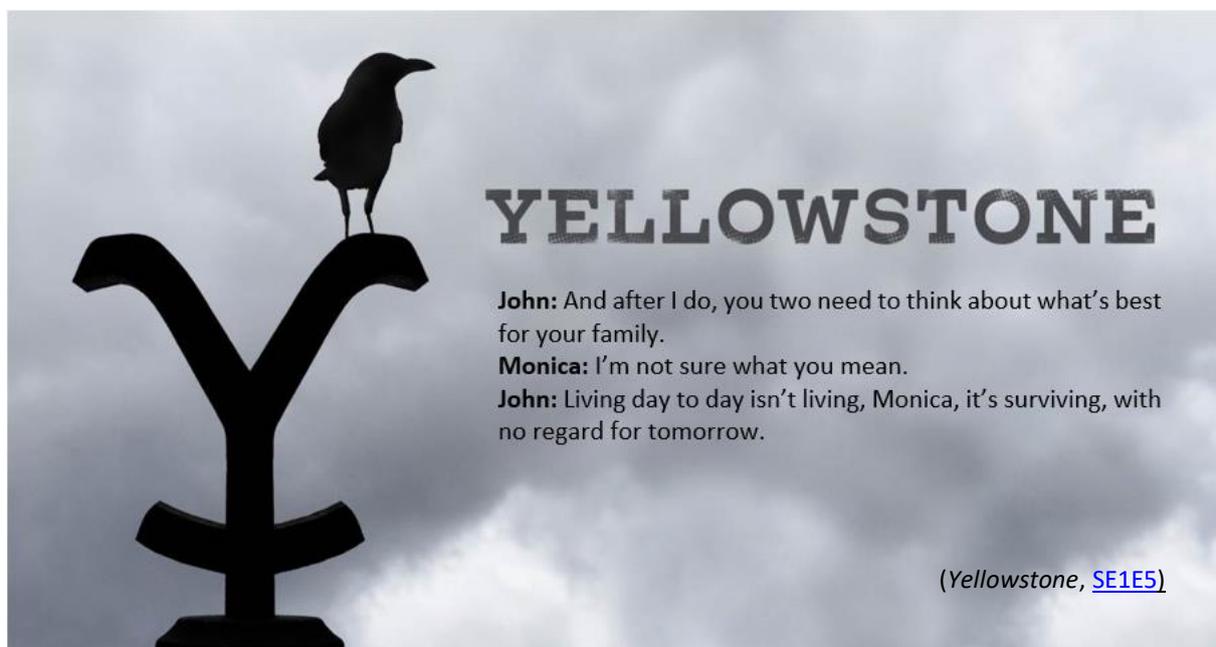
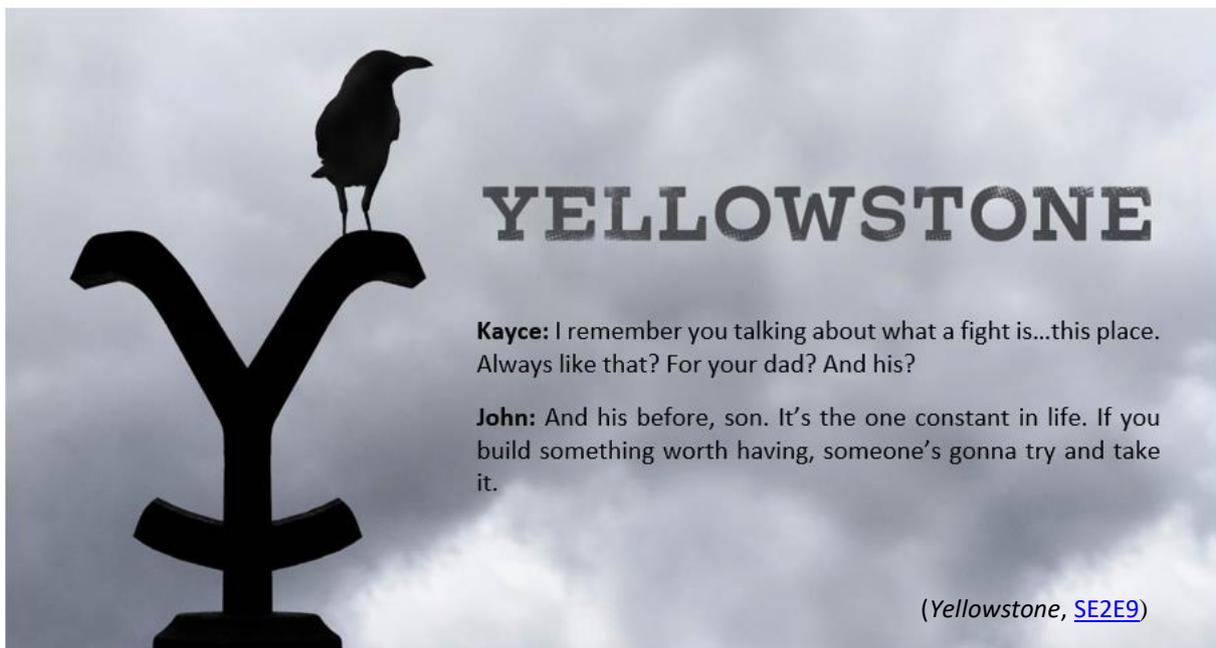
A consequence of these considerations is related to subjectivity, where I'm inclined to agree with Bauman's claim of the impossibility of being neutral: "A non-committal sociology is an impossibility" (Bauman, 2000:216). Seeking a morally neutral stance is a vain effort as we must accept that whatever the conclusions might be, they *will certainly* affect the reader. To Bauman, these effects should rather be seen as benefits, providing the reader with a multitude of choices, which at the end of the day is our job. "The job of sociology is to see to it that the choices are genuinely free, and that they remain so, increasingly so, for the duration of humanity (ibid.). When analyzing films, TV-shows, etc., I'd make a point of 'standing outside' the narrative (Naryan, 2012:96), involving precautions of my eventual desires to steer the

analysis in a certain direction (Kamler & Thomson, 2006; Somekh & Lewin, 2005). This calls for reflexivity of how I use my own personal choice in relation to present a result as neutral as possible – to open rather than close by establishing a preferred ‘truth’ (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Although subjectivity implies a personal interpretation of the material, it’s important to still maintain a scientific approach to avoid a bias ‘manifest’-like analysis (Thurén, 2019; Lindgren, 2009).

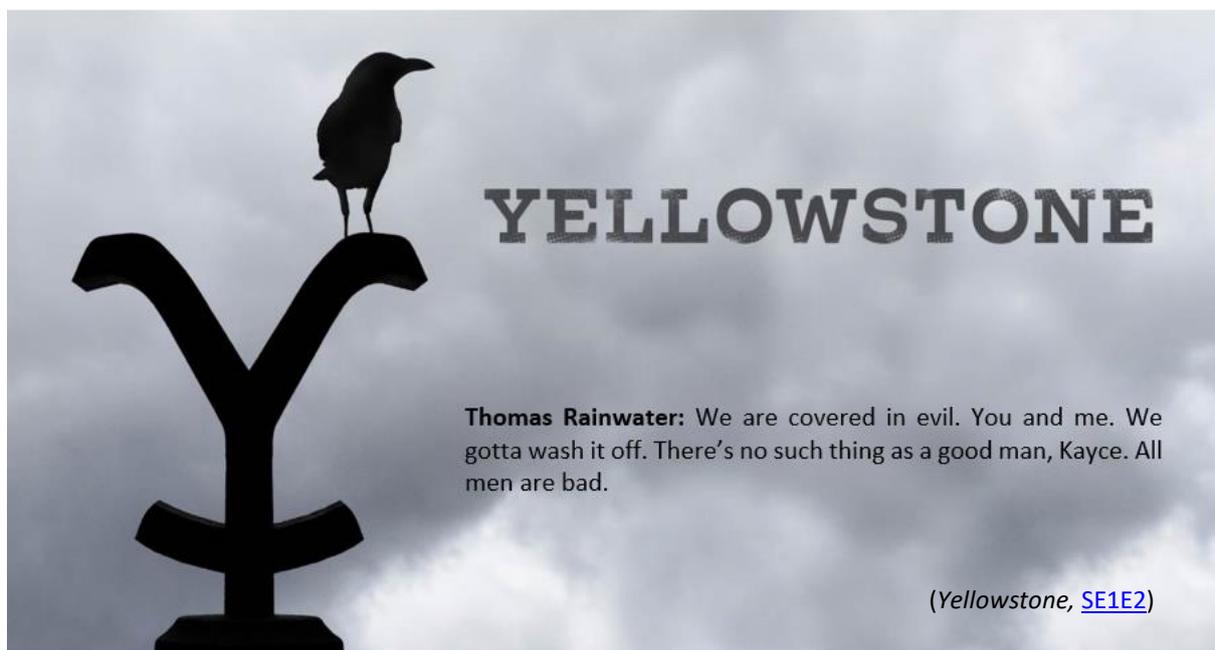
5 Result and Analysis

The result indicates an overall discourse of *Yellowstone* focusing on conservatism as a way of thinking contextualized within **conflict**, **moral**, **contemplation** and **freedom**. This will be discussed by presenting two discourses: one covering conflict, moral and agency, and the other focusing on conservatism beyond the stereotyped and populist American Dream.

5.1 Conflict, moral and agency

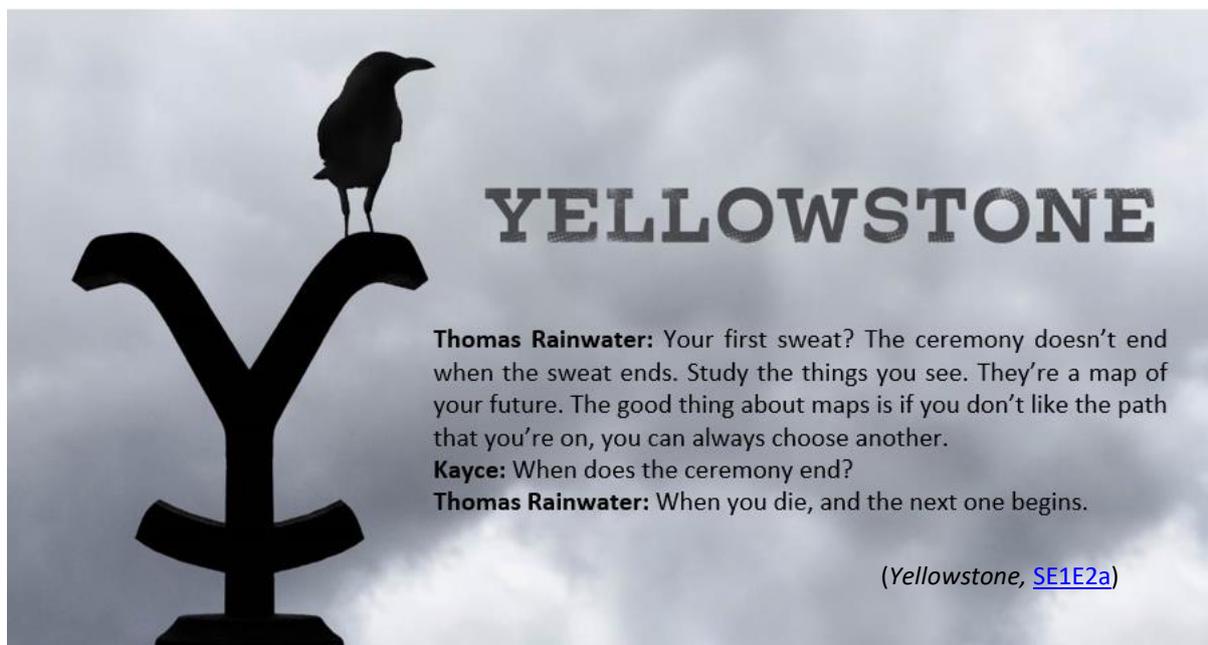


A cornerstone in *Yellowstone* is **conflict as constant**. This isn't a new phenomenon, but the nature of conflict has transformed into, today, center around **time** in terms of keeping us occupied with *only surviving*. To Bauman, the liquidized and porous time reduces everything into unauthenticity, floating and totally detached from *telos*. Today we live in a society with no goal nor meaning other than chasing the constantly updated version of Me. There's simply no time for anything else but to live day-by-day (Holton & Turner, 2010). *Yellowstone* responds to this by being a counterforce to this accelerating liquidity.



Chief Rainwater doesn't express any naïve, utopic dream of the 'perfect' man (Mannheim, 1986:90pp), but instead the acknowledgment of the opposite: we are bad, but we can be better. Performing the native American rite *sweat lodge*, *Yellowstone* presents similarities with Odysseus' adventure into returning as a better man (von Wright, 2000), from a journey *toward telos*. To enhance this aspect of journey and *telos*, *Yellowstone* portrays *Haṅbléčeyapi*, or **Crying for a Vision** in Lakota language ([Aktá Lakota](#) Retrieved 2023-05-30). These rituals are all about seeking meaning, strength and knowledge in the context of reconnecting with the spirits to get guidance of how to choose between different paths. Salient here is the significance of **contemplation**⁷, as a counterforce against liquidity, fragmentation and acceleration. This enhances the significance of fragmentation and disassemble of individuals, to rebuild them into desired humanoid-like objects (Paulsen, 2020).

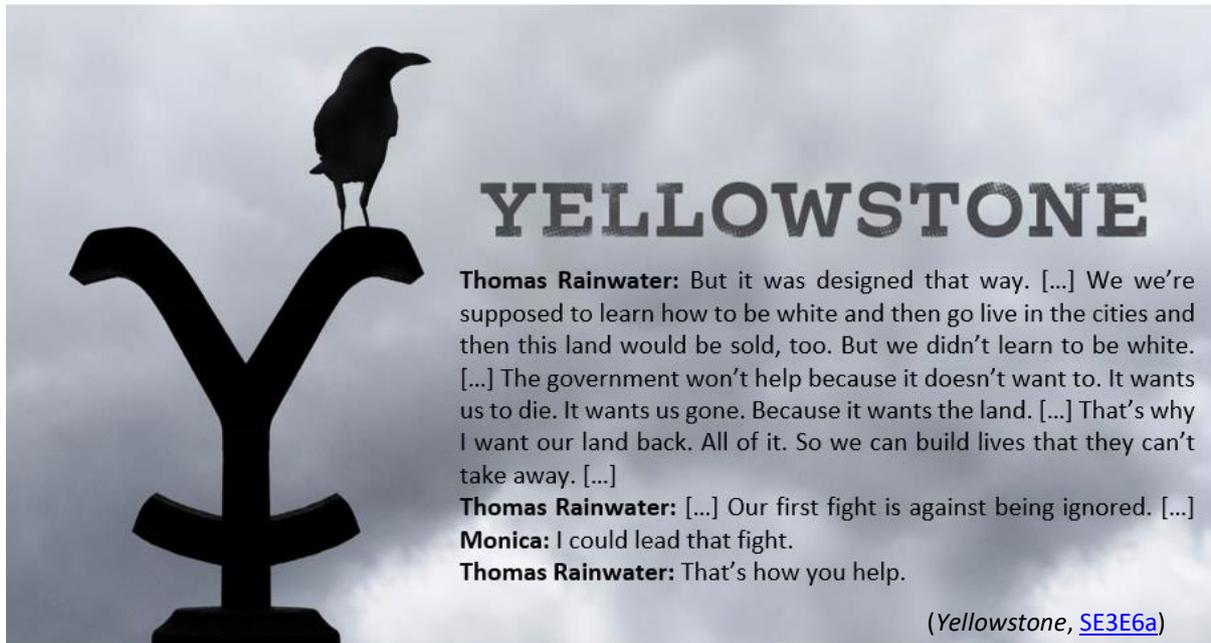
⁷ From Latin *contemplation*, meaning to observe, to ponder by allowing the mind to be absorbed by deep thoughts during a longer period of time (<https://www.ne.se> Retrieved 2023-05-27).



When you're occupied with only living for the next day, neither time nor contemplation exist. This is also an observation of how moral and virtues have become surplus as there are no subject to act morally *to*. The current objectified *stranger* is only occupied with the *Sisyphus*-project of defining a Self that was never meant to be found! That perspective describes liquid modernity in terms of a porous, nomadic object lacking foundation, goal and *telos*. There is only one activity: the accelerated never-ending search for stimuli and to be updated (Bauman, 2000:32). *Yellowstone*'s approach is to point at the **duality of time**: either we constantly search for non-*telos*, or the opposite, to use time wisely, making room for *contemplation and reflection* (von Wright, 2000; Svedjedal, 2012).

Bauman illustrates this in terms of *fluid and light*. Time exceeds place, as only the flow of time matters. However, despite this fluid time, conflict as constant is still present when it comes to greed and hegemonic powers (Martina, 2020). Bauman enhances this as the inevitable outcome of liquid modernity. The stronger the greed, the stronger the liquidity, or the "principal tool of power and domination" (Bauman, 2000:9). In such a society, time only functions to maintain conflict as constant, while the rest becomes floating and porous without any clear direction other than movement – for the movement's *own sake*. "We can no longer bear anything that lasts. We no longer know how to make boredom bear fruit. Hence the question: can the human mind master what the human mind has made?" (Bauman, 2000:1). Interruption, incoherence and surprise are now the ordinary conditions of life. "They have even become real needs for many people, whose minds are no longer fed by anything but sudden changes and constantly renewed stimuli" (ibid.). *Yellowstone* responds to this by pointing at the

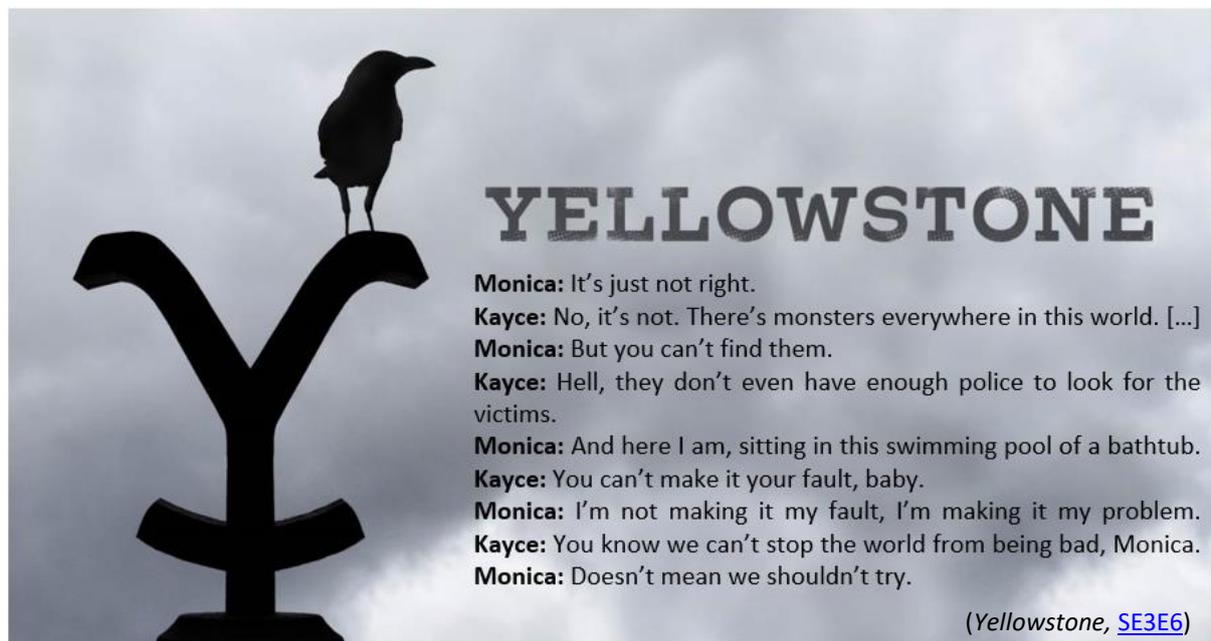
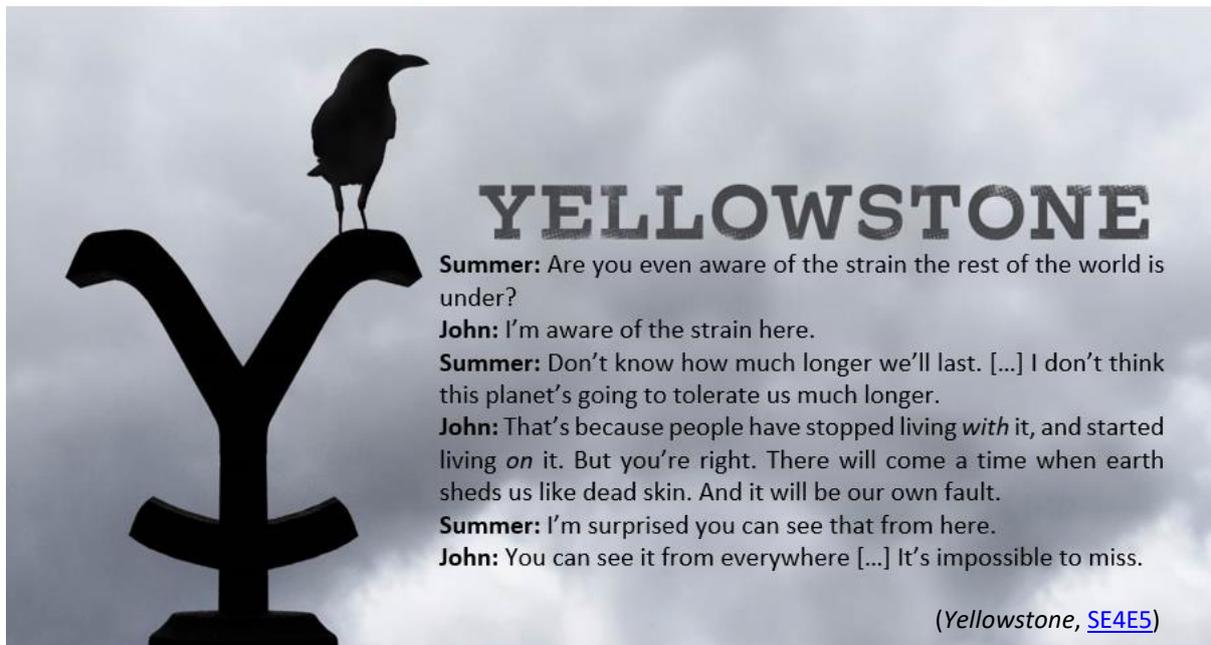
significance of **contemplation**, alike Bauman when referring to the *Sisyphus* activity of chasing a horizon that isn't there (Bauman (2000:53). Another response is *Yellowstone*'s attempt to introduce **agency** (the individual's capacity of having power and resources to act [my annotation]), as important counterforce.



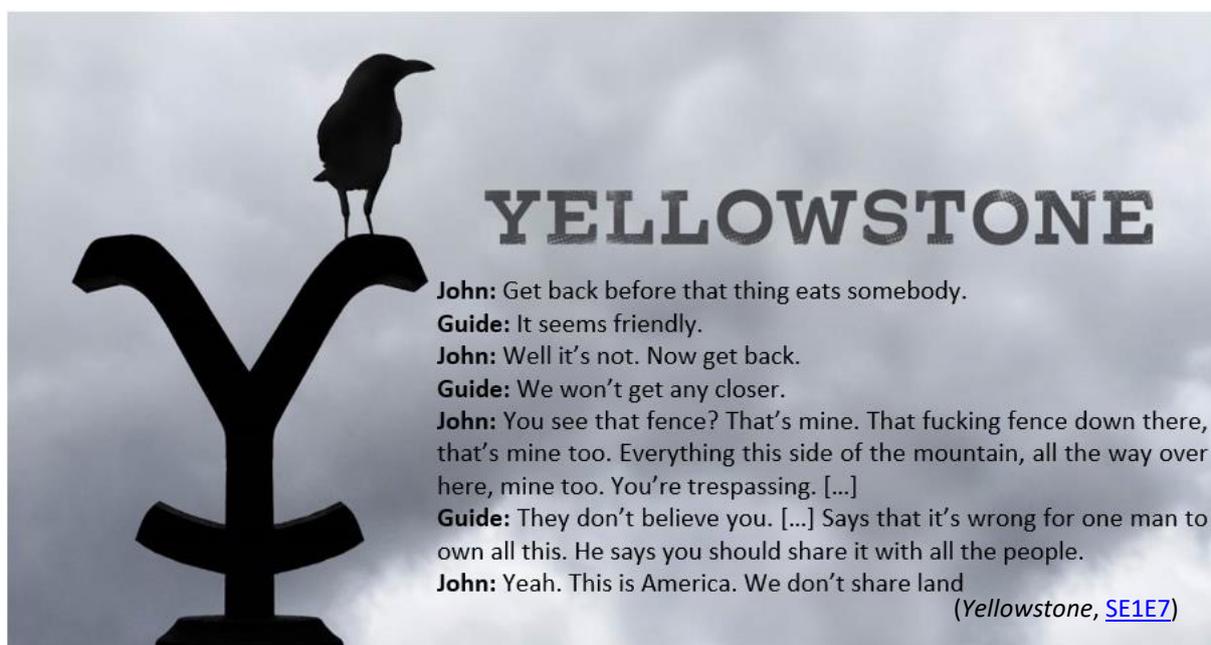
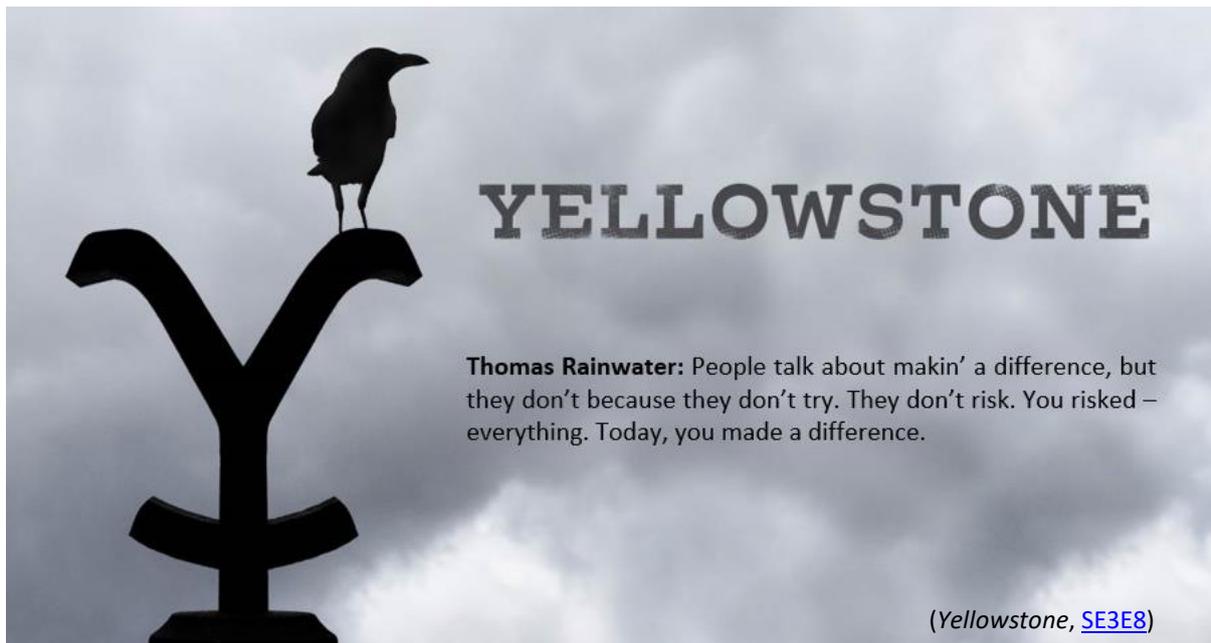
Having no *telos* nor agency, we have been **de-politized**. The nomadic object is normalized into believing that any actions toward societal change is nothing but surreal, absurd and ludicrous. To Bauman, this illustrates the transition from *de facto* (real freedom) to *de jure* (illusive freedom), meaning to be encouraged (or indoctrinated?) to remain in the loop of an imagined freedom. This implies hegemonic oppression to which we voluntarily give up our agency to powers we have no control of (Bauman, 2000:39pp). *Yellowstone* supports this critique in terms of the *active agent* and *agency* by detaching ourselves from hegemonic indoctrinations.

Above, **Thomas Rainwater** refers to the significance of *telos* – and the necessity of active agency. That is how we reach *de facto* freedom. Another approach to active agency is articulated by John Dutton during a conversation with environmental activist Summer Higgins. To me, we can interpret this dialogue in three ways: 1) a white, conservative, hard-working male humiliating a white, academic (but naïve) middle-class woman, 2) an implicit ridicule of activists as being detached from reality by converting protests into a ‘desk-product’(as in the academic ‘playing’ the concerned activist), or 3) the enhancement accelerating issue of liquidity transforming us into predators and exploiters of nature. Thus, we have lost our ability to

appreciate the value in treating other individuals and the environment respectfully and with reverence – and that’s important!



Yellowstone tries to broaden the discussion about agency by illustrating both side: we have John Dutton, desk-activist Summer, Kayce Chief Rainwater and we have Monica – all fighting against a systemic structure stemming from the conflict between **culture** (socially created individuals and behavior) and **nature** (the autonomous agent) (cf. Rosaldo (1993)).



Another depiction of **agency**, and the conflict between *nature* and *culture*, is the scene above. Greedy tourists invading and reveling a wild bear, portrays the belief that the modern man has a right to exploit who/whatever he wants - at *any cost*. By shouting saying *this is my land, this is America*, John initially appears as the patriotic white male reactionist only protecting *his* land. But a second glance reveals someone only trying to *preserve* our land (nature) against greedy tourists (culture). Such alternative interpretation dislocates the discourse to another direction, in which John and Chief Rainwater try conservative articulations as means for **preserving the future**. By emphasizing conservatism in terms of reconnecting with old values, moral, common

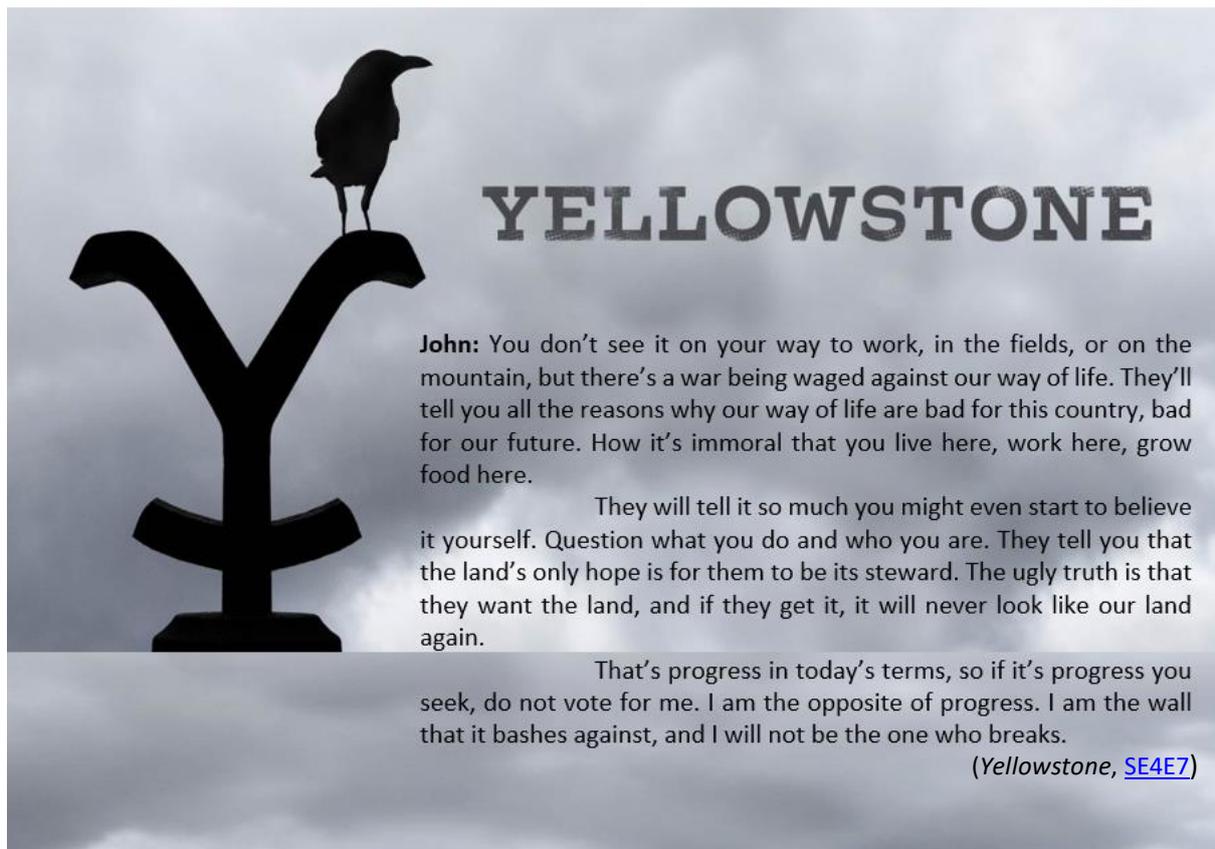
sense and ancient traditions, *Yellowstone* brings forth the need for preserving both our *current* society, as well as the *future* one from perish in the jaws of liquid modernity.

Although the material might illustrate imperialistic expressions of the American Dream, another approach can be discussed. What if John's reaction toward the tourists in fact is a *sane one*? Not only in respect of the bear, but also the exploitation of nature in general, transforming it into a giant *phagic* place? Maybe it's a sane reaction toward the motto *nothing is sacred anymore!* – and the humanoid creature has lost all ability (and desire?) of doing something *good* for someone else – as there *is no-one else* (Bauman, 2000). *We don't share land here* could indeed be a reference to the American Dream's ultra liberalistic ideology of privacy and ownership. But it could also be a critique against the rewriting of culture (Stoller, 2009), in terms of old, imperialistic values still being present. The question of freedom *at any cost* might have different implications whether its freedom for *nature* or freedom for *culture*. Contextualized within liquid modernity, is there a human right to *trespass* because I can!/? Does modernity *per se* mean that we have the right to act to *every shred of desire* – or should we also take into consideration questions of moral, respect and what it means to be a living human or non-human individual (Studley, 2018)? Bauman's response would probably be the increasingly fading of humanity into a vague memory, in which monetary interests dictate the fate of humanity *and* nature. A tightly controlled society will ensure individuals to remain ignorant and indolent. When gluttony trumps moral, we risk losing our ability to act morally and respectfully toward humans and non-humans. We have then become the perfect humanoid, the liquidised, porous and nomadic object. To Bauman, such individual can only live and move within the realms of emic-, phagic-, -non-places and empty places (Bauman, 2000:98pp).

5.2 Conservatism beyond the stereotype and populist

When watching *Yellowstone*, John Dutton might be interpreted as a stubborn, reactionary, white American male – and again, I claim alternative interpretations. John Dutton might instead be representing the voice the accelerating modernity try to silence, because it's threatening the *status quo*. We have no room for reclaiming humanity or virtues like respect, reverence, loyalty, moral and putting *nature before culture*. John is indeed a product of his time, being this wealthy rancher and landowner – but he's also something else. His explicit search for the Greater Good, distinguishes him from greedy companies like ME, or similar profit-driven actors. And note my spelling: Good – not God. This is a deliberate spelling to mark the difference between traditional populist conservatism, embracing the American double standard emphasizing a dogmatic

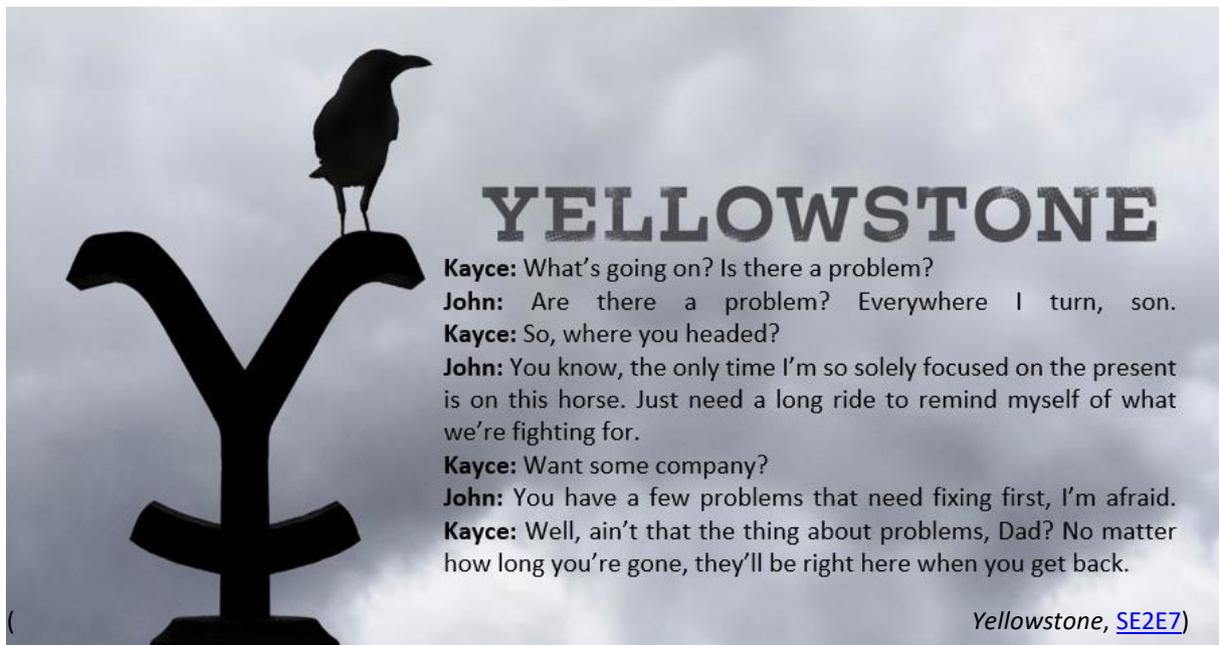
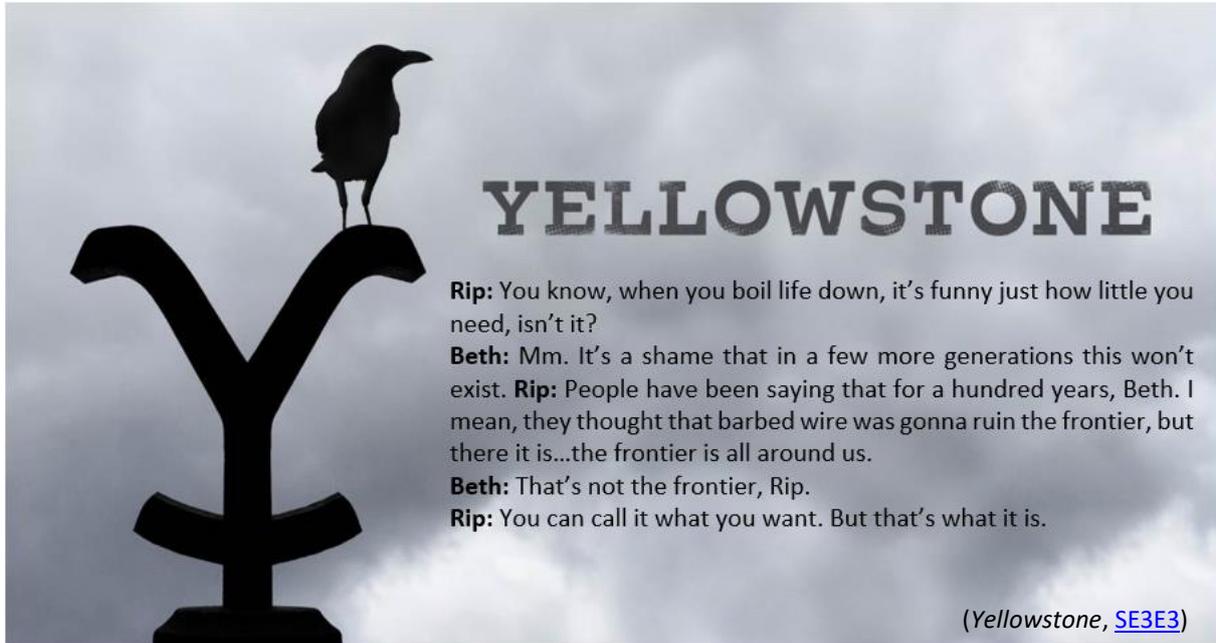
Christianity as superior to other beliefs (Santin, 2021:8-9). *Yellowstone* opposes that by advocating a conservatism stretching beyond the American conservatism (McLean & McMillan, 2009).



John Dutton is primarily seeking to reconnect with values based on *telos* and **freedom of choice** as in being a living human (or non-human). It's an attempt to strike back hegemonic normalization, indoctrination of *de jure* superseding *de facto*, or the compulsion of having us constantly locked up in a Weberian *iron cage* (Weber, 1904-05/1978), with false promises of happiness (cf. Adorno, 1997).

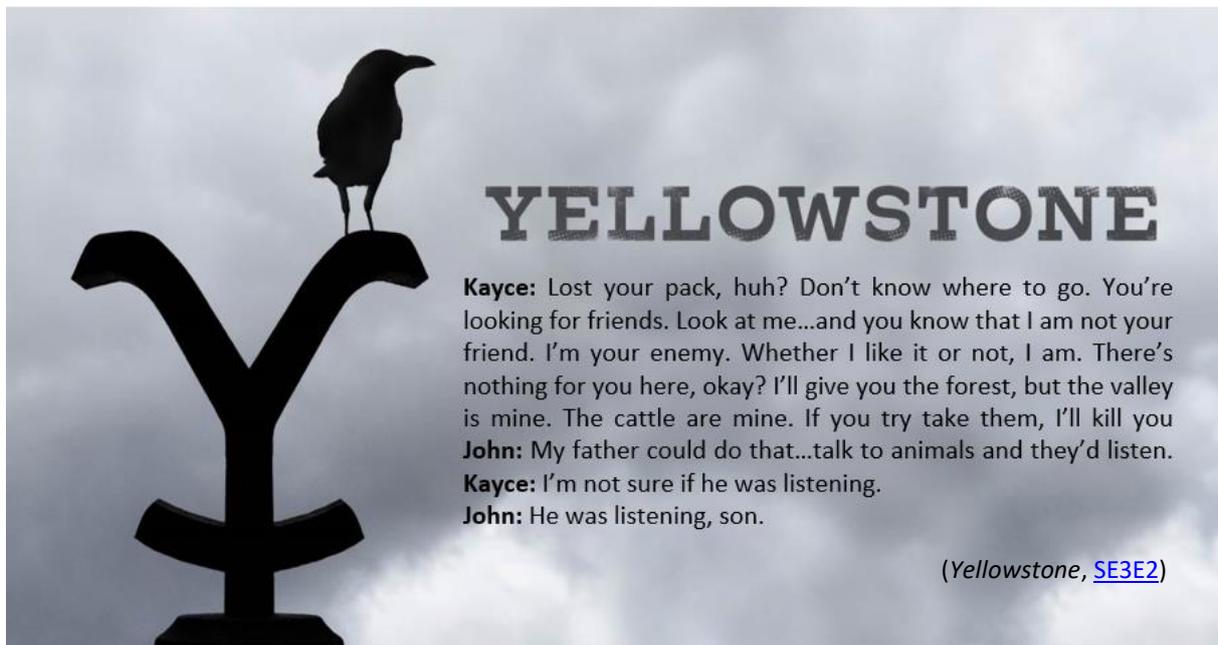
Freedom to connect with *nature* as source for contemplation and agency is another central element in *Yellowstone*. Stretching beyond the image of American ranching culture and romanticized homage to cowboys and the Wild West, the narrative articulates the need for contemplation as counterforce against liquidity, fragmentation and objectification. Other than being subject of violation, exploitation and greed, nature is also peace, tranquility and reflection. This approach has similarities with *Green conservatism*, founded by British-Irish thinker Edmund Burke. "The earth, the kind and equal mother of all ought not to be monopolized to foster the pride and luxury of men" (Burke, 1906-07: 247). *Yellowstone's* response to Burke is to advocate how the only way to reconnect with nature *is through nature*

itself. In *Yellowstone*, this is done through native traditions, rituals or just riding on a horse or breath the surrounding, majestic nature. *This* is how we can return to nature – not by building a giant resort with hotels, golf course, airports etc.



The above quotes imply nature to always be the *bigger* force and something we need to treat with respect, while being *in* and *with* nature. This also implies a close relation between nature and *telos* – and a discourse of embracement rather than exclusion. Nature has no limits

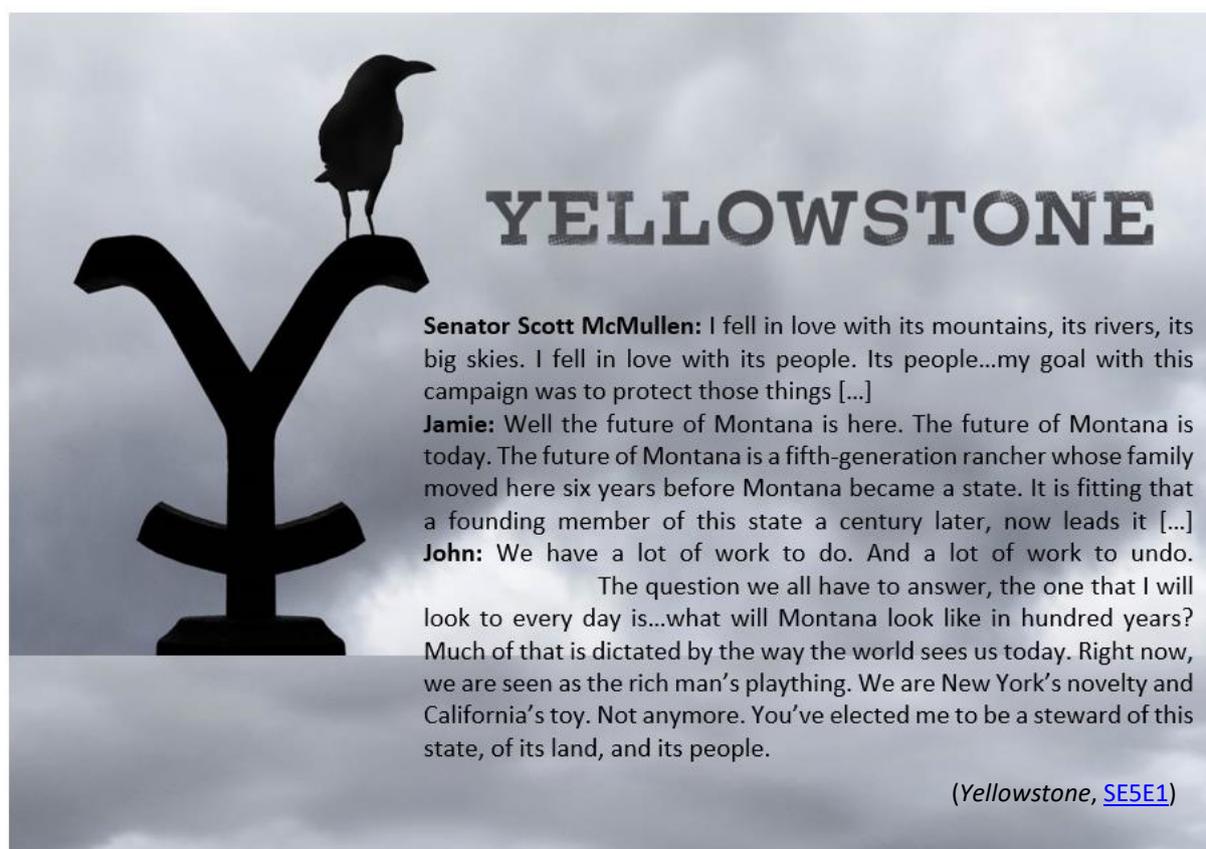
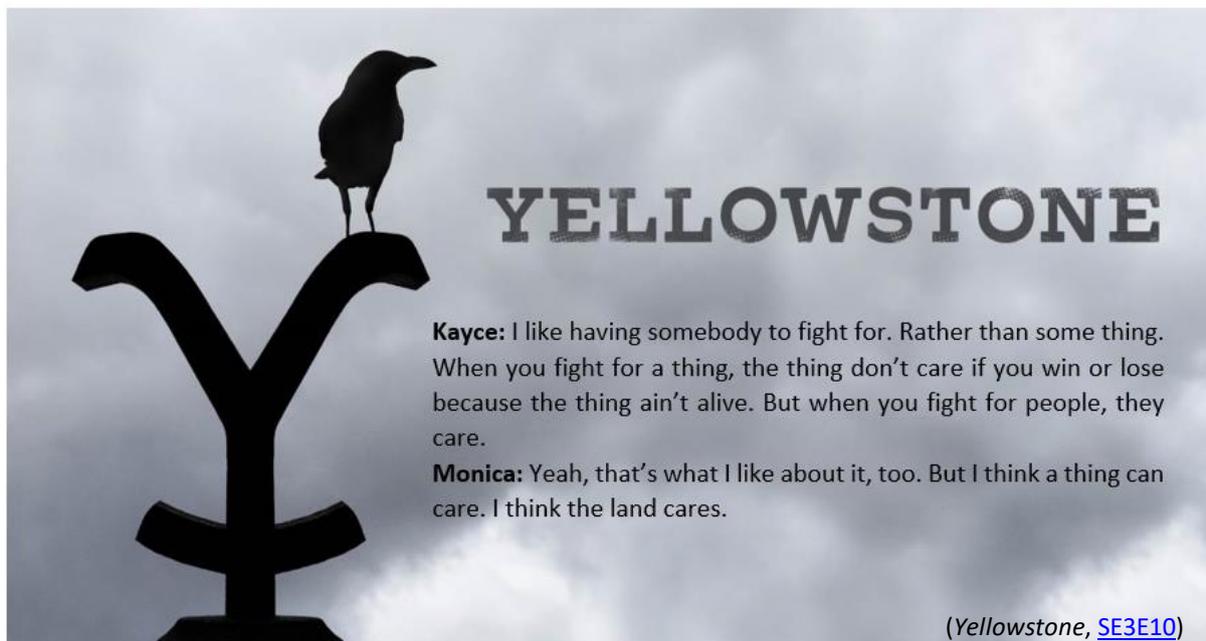
regarding nationality, age, gender, confessions etc., nature is everyone's *friend or foe*. This **duality** is depicted in *Yellowstone* by using the metaphor of wolf as *trickster*⁸.



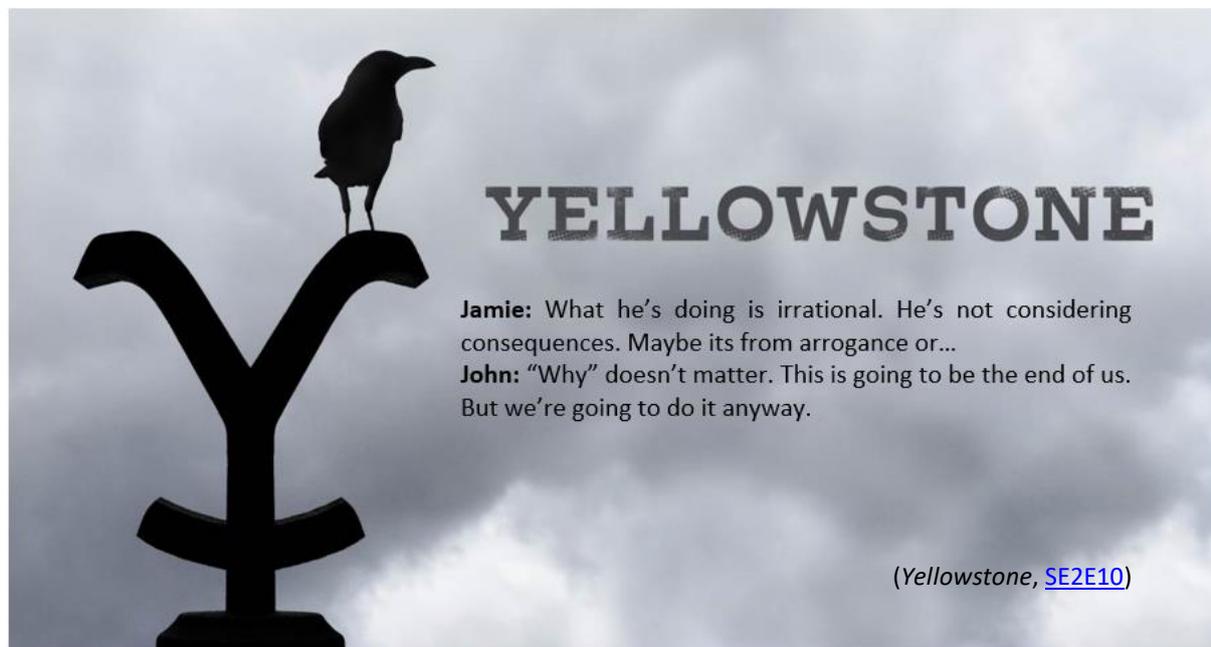
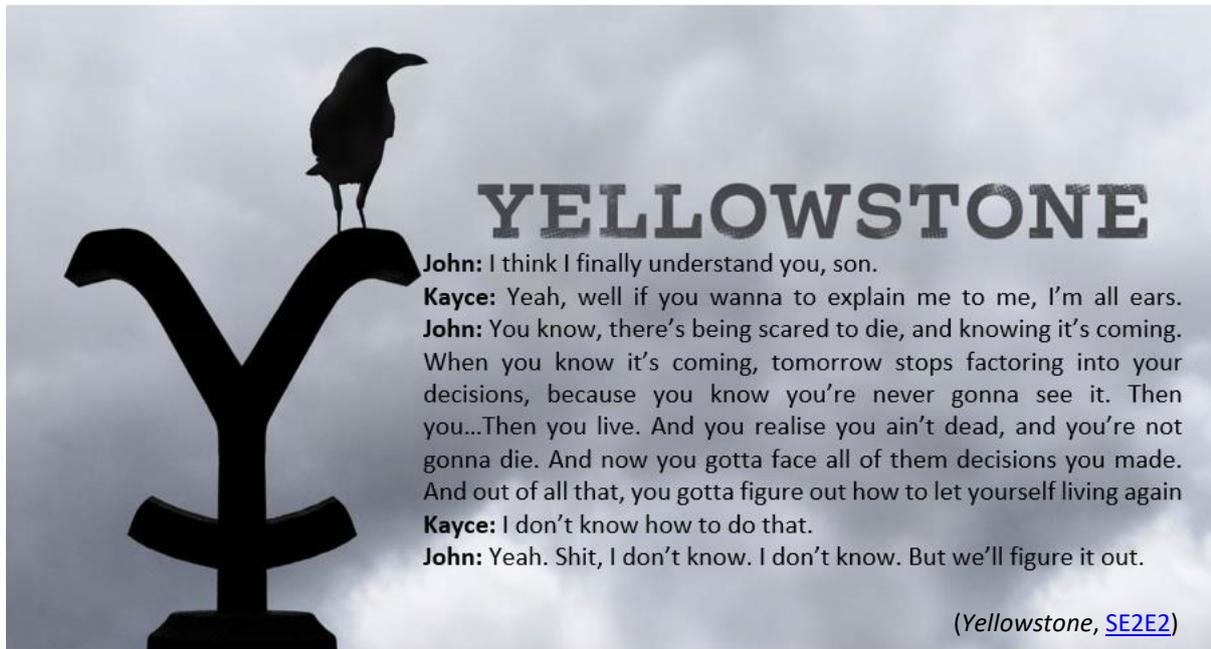
As *trickster*, the wolf challenges us, plays with us or trying to deceive us. Translated into Bauman, liquid modernity has become the 'urban' *trickster*. Animals, old rites and traditions are part of *Yellowstone*'s portrayal of conservatism having little to do with American conservatism, dogmatic ideologies or white/male domination. Rather it represents a respectful voice for **nature** being a living entity to interact and have a respectful dialogue with.

This has implications for how **agency** involves *both* humans and non-humans by **active participation**. Both John, Kayce and Monica articulate the need for involving and view non-humans being equally important as humans. Although John having a ranch doesn't *per se* mean he don't understand the necessity of involving non-humans in the search for *telos*. Being a rancher is not entirely about profit, but rather a way to pay respect to history and maintaining traditions and a life-style dependent on nature. As such, John Dutton doesn't violate and exploit nature. Instead, he becomes a representative for an alternative voice: that of *not* running an ideologically oriented enterprise doing whatever needed to gain profit and wealth. The Dutton empire is in fact *the one who's dependent*, paying its respect and reverence for nature and 'old ways' to preserve a cultural heritage and a sustainable future.

⁸ An agent affecting the narrative by making it porous and mouldable. It is neither nature nor culture but should rather be considered as another 'world' beyond the human or non-humane (Haraway, 1988:592).

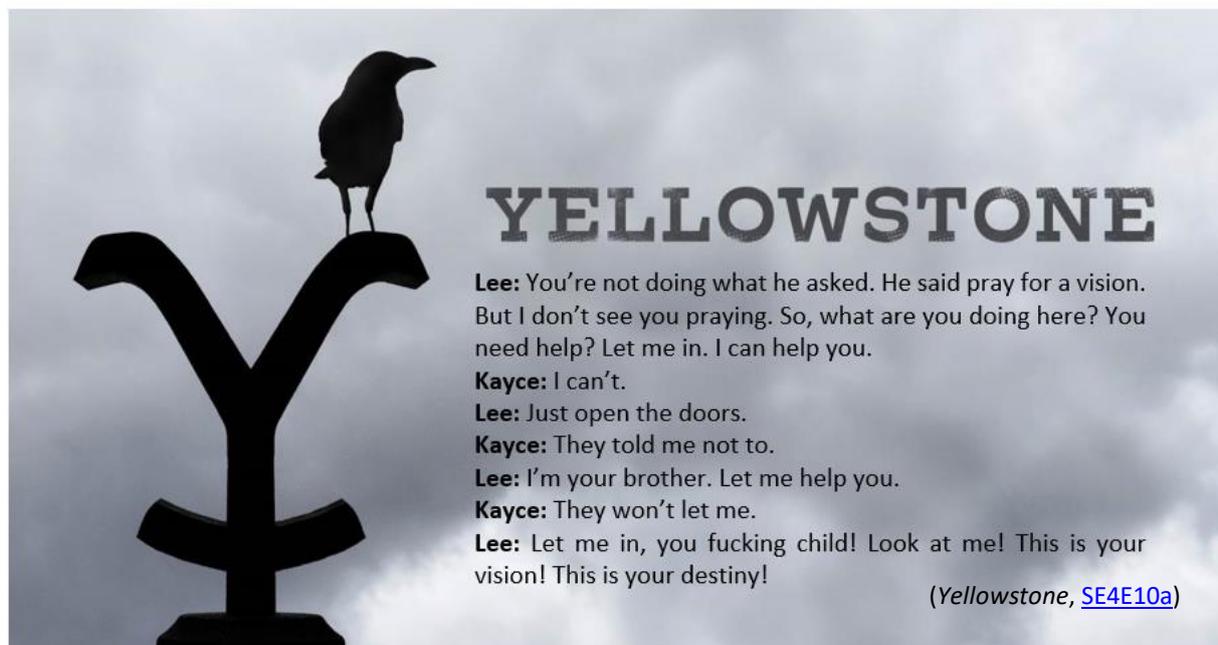


Essential in the foundational *Yellowstone* discourse is *calling*, meaning running for Governor is also something beyond status and wealth, it's to preserve something that needs to be saved. In this case the state of Montana and Yellowstone National Park. Essential in this strategy is the cooperation with Chief Rainwater to prevent ME from building their resort and airport.



The scenes above again depict the necessity of **agency**. Alike the *calling* of being a Governor, the narrative tells us a story about being brave and whatever we do, we do it for the Greater Good. To reclaim *de facto* freedom, doesn't come cheap. In all its idyllic naiveness, the story of a ranch suddenly becomes a philosophical narrative of reconnecting with the Greater Good. Agency means choosing path. Whether its monetary or non-monetary interests, we must always choose path – or as John Dutton says to Kayce: “Well, all the world's a test son. Don't ever let it trick you into thinking different” (*Yellowstone*, [SE2E3](#)). This test can illustrate liquid modernity's great paradox: it rejects reactionary conservatism, while simultaneously *being*

reactionary in its efforts to reject! And this is also an image of liquid modernity as urban *trickster*.

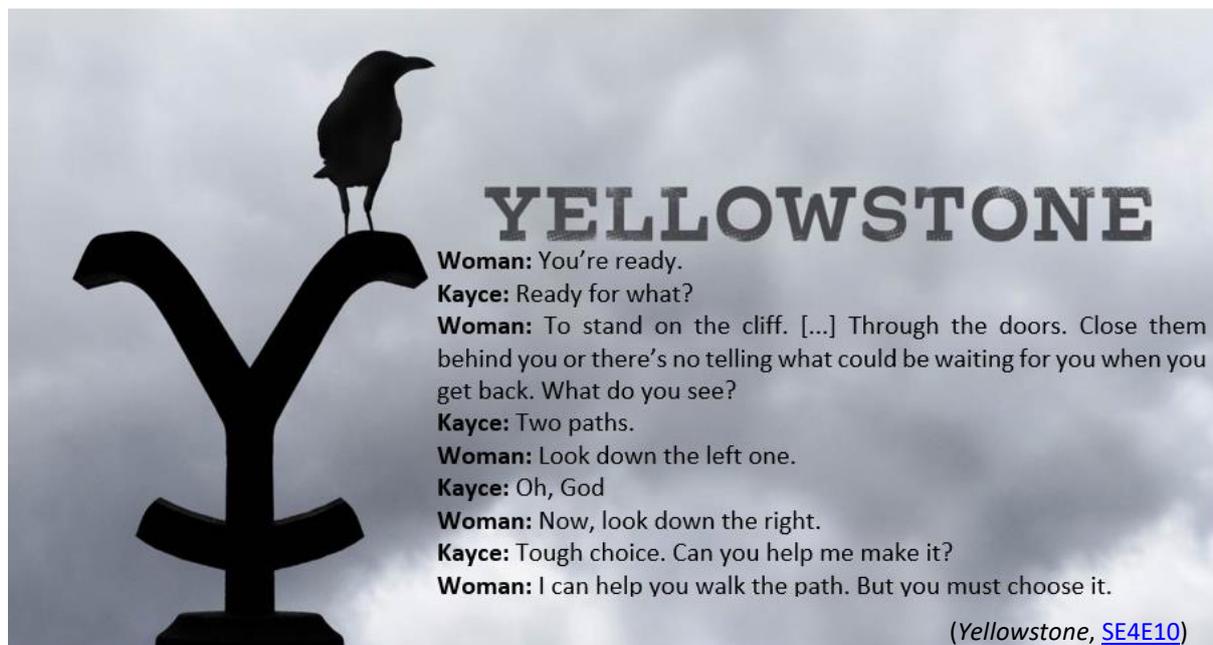


This intense scene portrays effectively the **duality** and **ambivalence** of liquid modernity as urban *trickster*. John Dutton sometimes shows likeness to the fisherman in Hemingway's *The Old man and the Sea* (1922/1952). They both embody the same struggle: the single individual versus the great systemic structure. And here's the conflict, the collision and the duality. Greater Good indeed implies different significance depending on interests. While John aims at restoring harmony, ME interprets harmony in a completely different way. To ME, Greater Good is equal to violation and exploitation through rewriting culture (in which indigenous people still are being violated), if yet within different *modus operandi*. The difference between John's violence and ME's, is that John's trying to protect and preserve based on **moral** and **freedom**, while ME has an agenda of greed and imperialism.

In Yellowstone, this duality and ambivalence following in the wake of liquid modernity is described as more of an internal than external dilemma, which the scene above is an example of. However, although the dialogue between Kayce and his dead brother Lee is taken place *inside Kayce's vision* – it's still equally important as if it had occurred *outside*, in the 'real' world. The whole idea with introducing the *Hanbléčeyapi* ritual, could be an attempt to problematize the importance of memory and vision. Bauman touches upon this by referring to French author Guy Debord: "Men resemble their times more than their fathers" (1990:20), meaning today's men want to forget the past while simultaneously having lost their belief in

the future. And here lies *one* central conflict as memories of the past *and* trust in the future used to be the fundamentals our society used to rest upon (Bauman, 2000:129). What is left now is what Bauman refers to as temporary consensus-constructed ‘moral’ as liquid and floating as everything else (p.201). Hence conservatism isn’t *per se* a path to freedom, rather it functions as a compass for us to discover different paths toward a *de facto* freedom, and to guide us in choosing wisely. To put it drastically, conservatism might be a *trickster* challenging us to be courageous enough to face our inner demons. Because that’s what society is – a set of good and less good characteristics that together constitutes society.

Wolf being a *trickster* is another representation of duality and ambivalence. It symbolizes our immanent ambivalence of being both our worst enemy *and* best friend. Depending on which ‘wolf’ we feed, that wolf will define our future path. This is why time and contemplation are vital if we want to change the course of the accelerating modernity. Listening to the ‘wolf’ is to listen to wisdom; encouraging us to act good and intelligent toward ourselves, and others (including non-human entities). But it’s also a narrative of being cautious toward the ambivalence we carry inside: the wolf can indeed be protective and good, as well as a dangerous predator – and it’s up to us which wolf we want to be (Lake-Thom, 1997). It’s time to face the cliff with eyes closed, stretched arms while leaning forward to embrace the possibility of choosing path!



5.3 Analysis – conservatism vs hegemony

The narrative in *Yellowstone* emphasizes the conflict between **conservatism** and **hegemony**, in which conservatism is the key to preserve the future. This isn't controversial one *per se*— rather it's the idea of combining *conservatism* with indigenous traditions and culture that is controversial. This conflict is depicted in terms of **duality** and **ambivalence**. You need to choose side...path: either you continue the 'modern' way of de-humanization and profit, or the old ways of reconnecting with moral, virtues and foundational reverence for all that is living (human and non-human). This goes for everything, business, politics, work or family. As dystopic as it might sound, *Yellowstone* is in fact the opposite. It's a narrative of hope, of still having a chance to change course and choose another path. We still have time to saddle up a horse and ride toward the sunset.

Time. Contemplation. Values. Reverence. To Bauman these are the words of a fool. They are ridiculed and humiliated (Bauman, 2000:39pp) – and who wants to be ridiculed? To make a point here, I want to stress the element of **hegemony**⁹ in the narrative by listening to what Kayce tells John: “Killers don't seek their victims' approval” ([SE4E2](#)) Here you have it! Liquid modernity never asks, it only takes – with our good memory. And although Bauman problematizes and criticizes the accelerating modernity, he still lacks the provision of concrete alternatives. Yes, he makes a diagnosis, but, to my opinion, never comes up with any clear solution – and this is why *Yellowstone* is such a valuable narrative in the discourse about modernity and progress: it gives us *both paths*.

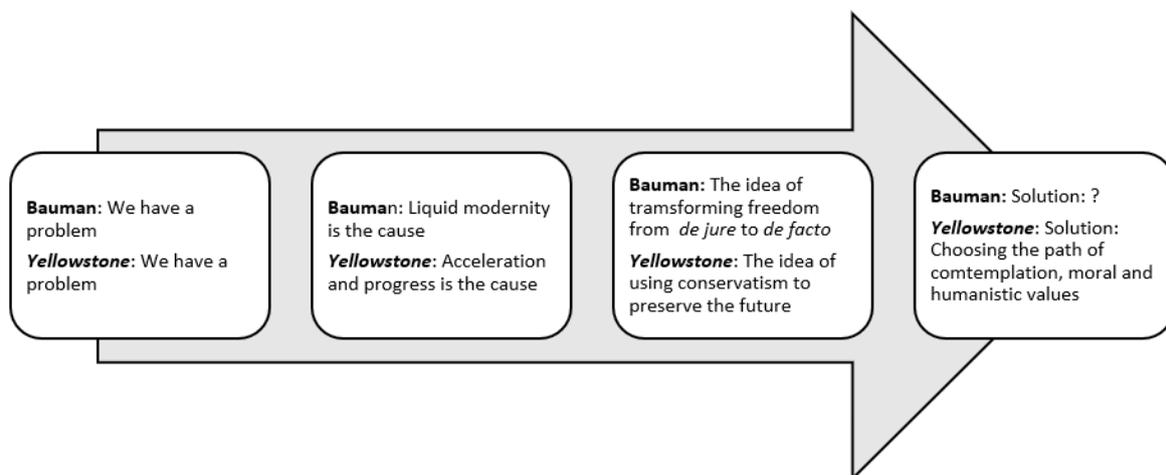


Figure 2 The difference between Bauman and Yellowstone. (My model).

⁹ Italian intellectual Antonio Gramsci explains hegemony as the dominance by the ruling class who manipulate beliefs, explanations, perceptions, values, norms etc., so that the worldview of the ruling class becomes *the only* worldview and accepted cultural norm (Bullock & Trombley, 1999).

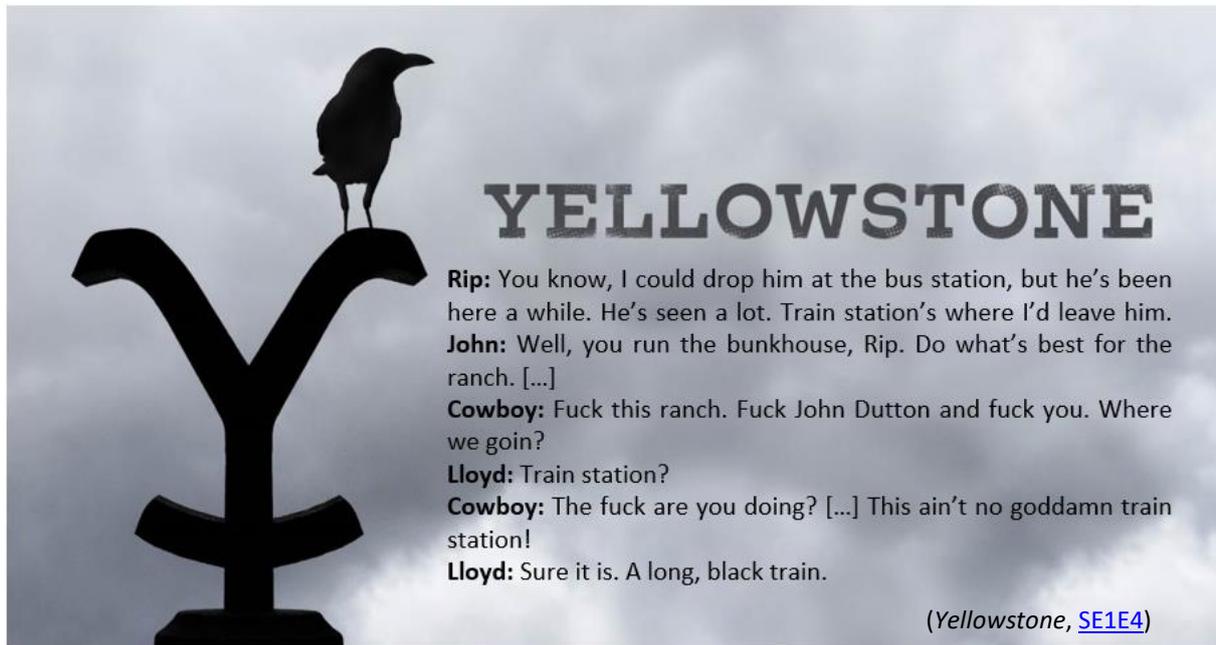
The model above (fig.1) shows the important results of having different narratives. In Bauman's case we are left with a highly relevant critique...full stop! while *Yellowstone* leaves us with a feeling a hope! And this is an essential remark. To me, the main sociological contribution shouldn't be to only expose us to societal problems or conflicts – it should have the primary aim to combine discussion with tools for change. The story about Kayce performing the *Haṅbléčeyapi* ritual is such tool. This is where Bauman fails – to challenge us to face our demons and the remnants of what used to be us – not the humanoids we have become. The wolf being a *trickster* might also be the one guiding us to choose wisely. Obviously, for purely scientific reasons, such discussion cannot be found in Bauman's narrative – which proves my point in advocating fiction as valuable source for broadening and enriching sociological analyses.

All this talk of *trickster*, rituals, traditions and duality is also a narrative of **agency**. One element of this agency is to create room for reflection and contemplation – which requires **time**. But time is also about remembering. We need to remember what the world looked like, before liquidity turned us into humanoids stranger at the *phagic* mall. However, remembrance requires responsibility: the Duttons who need to fulfill the old 'contract' from 1883 and Chief Rainwater needs to remember *why* he built the casino. Is it for saving his tribe or has he too been a disciple to the greedy, hegemonic systemic structure he's simultaneously criticizing? All this points to a narrative containing the necessary process of **conservatism, moral, contemplation** leading to *de facto* **freedom**. This is the solution Bauman fails to articulate – and *Yellowstone* is a good representation of how this solution can be articulated beyond populist, ideological statements or buzz words. *Yellowstone* equals Greater Good to *telos*. Stretching beyond ideology by enhancing timeless universal values like friendship, loyalty and kinship is a direct response to Bauman's discussion about the *phagic* stranger. But it's also a contribution to the general discussion about moral and what it means to be human (Pappu, 2022), by challenging the liquidized sense of everyone creating their own moral (Bauman, 2000).

Yellowstone's narrative is also introduces **progress** as vital. Responding to the accelerating train called liquid modernity, *Yellowstone* instead portray progress as embracing traditions and practices that favors humanity and collaboration between humans (and non-humans). And here is where the narrative challenges those who calls *Yellowstone* anti-woke, cementing stereotyped obsolete ideals. How can reconnection with loyalty, ethics, moral, virtues and Greater Good be a bad thing? Such objections make *Yellowstone* an important contribution, as fiction has the **agency** to freely express societal dilemmas and conflicts,

compared to science. Fiction can use any expressions, metaphors or symbols for narratives of small places answering big questions.

Talking about acceleration and trains, what would be more fitting than to go to the train station, which in *Yellowstone* is as a place for getting rid of unwanted elements and behaviors like distrust, disloyalty and other aspects that will keep you away from *de facto* freedom and *telos*.



5.4 Conclusive discussion

With the intention to answer the questions of 1) identifying elements in *Yellowstone* that supports Bauman's critique of liquid modernity, and 2) how *Yellowstone* articulates conservatism as counterforce against monetary interests, I claim I have presented a thorough and pioneering analysis (without losing the essential scholarly approach).

What critique against liquid modernity can be identified in *Yellowstone*?

The most common critique is to enhance aspects that function as opposites to central elements in liquid modernity. These oppositions are all parts of what I call conservatism as a way of thinking and to preserve the future. This perspective involves concepts of moral, tradition, virtues, contemplation and cultural elements from both the ranching culture and the indigenous one. This critique illustrates a modernity lacking *telos* and purpose. This conflict between *telos* and *non-telos* is fueled by duality, ambivalence, hegemony and progress. Having a more holistic

view on these conflicting elements, *Yellowstone* provides both diagnosis *and* solution, compared to Bauman's discussion. By using a reverse strategy, the critique constitutes of exposing acceleration by contextualize it within time and contemplation, or liquidity within tradition etc. This narrative of reflecting social dilemmas against an ontology based on the Greater Good reveals hidden agendas and ideologies hidden our liquidized, modern society.

How does Yellowstone articulate conservatism as counterforce against monetary interests and profit?

Using conservatism is *one* strategy of pointing to the necessity of going beyond fixed and woke ideas of white, male, stereotyped right-wing-driven ideologies of stale and outdated ideals. By enhancing elements of **duality**, **ambivalence** and **conflict**, *Yellowstone* contributes with a broad and pioneering narrative of the importance for taking one step back to move forward. Viewing society from a distance enables the necessary *time for contemplation and reflection*, which are the essential tools for fighting profit and the transition from human to humanoid.

~

In hindsight, I claim I have successfully contributed to approach liquid modernity from a pioneering spirit, while providing a thick and multifaceted discussion. Using fiction as material body, gave the essay a highly subjective aura, however to me, this is in fact a strength. Inspired by Giddens' (2014) idea of sociology focusing on individuals' perceptions of their surrounding existence and milieu, I claim the value of subjectivity, if it's done from a scientific point of view (Månson, 2020). At the cost of a weak reliability and validity, my methodological framework yet turned out to be successful as it depicted dilemmas with modernity, progress, moral etc. Everything is allowed in fiction, which is why it holds such strength to *pretend and play* to illustrate social issues *and* to put forth any solution you want – conservatism, liberalism, communism...whatever that suits you. And this is why we need to complement science with fiction, as science often stops at: “[t]o diagnose a disease does not mean the same as curing it” (Bauman, 2000:214).

Still Bauman touches upon the necessity of sociology questioning *itself* as society is human-made and only humans can unmake it. “To restart questioning means to take a long step toward the cure” (p.215). *One* part of this cure is *Yellowstone*'s contribution to the sociology of modernity, progress and conservatism, by introducing the idea of combining conservatism with indigenous traditions, regardless of culture. These conclusions open for

future research, in which I'd like to explore further said connection between conservatism and indigenous culture. Other interesting themes are discourses of moral and ethics connected to dehumanization, as well as the modern (Western?) idea of progress.

*You're ready?
Ready for what?
To stand on the cliff.
Tough choice. Can you help me
make it?
I can help you walk the path. But
you must choose it.*



[SE4E10](#)

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