

“Every New Land Demands Blood”: ‘Nature’ and the Justification of Frontier Violence in *Hell on Wheels*

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Abstract: This paper demonstrates how AMC’s TV show *Hell on Wheels* portrays the ideological force of nature to justify violence in frontier mythology. After a short look into the historical and ongoing relevance of frontier mythology in US culture, I will argue for its ideological reliance on nature. The following chapter will provide a theoretical background on social Darwinism, determinism, and scientism. I will then analyze how these relationships are examined in *Hell on Wheels*. First, as Thomas Durant’s social Darwinist monologue is paralleled with imagery that challenges the providential myth of Manifest Destiny, the show reveals that both ideologies equally replace human responsibility with a quasi-evolutionary rhetoric of inevitable progress. Second, the Swede’s deterministic notions of nature demonstrate the mythical power of the natural environment and evolutionary biology, which can easily assume Manifest Destiny’s divine authority as a justification for violence. Finally, the Swede’s and Reverend Cole’s discursive replacement of God with blood signifies a shift from religion to a redemptive scientism, in which science purports not only to explain but also to justify the violence of westward expansion. In these renditions, nature is variably utilized as the prime model for social behavior, as the ultimate victor over culture, and as the final authority whose imperatives are intelligible only through science.

The first two seasons of AMC’s popular TV show *Hell on Wheels* (2011, 2012) are certainly not without their problems. Almost too concerned with traditional generic conventions of the Western, the program’s predominantly male characters solve most of their disputes—over territory, justice, women, or money—by resorting to violence. The slaughter of Native Americans is often justified as self-defense against bands of attacking Sioux and Cheyenne. Most strikingly, protagonist

Cullen Bohannon (Anson Mount) is classically introduced as a hyperindividualistic gunslinger who has come to the frontier on a vigilante quest to avenge the murder of his wife and son. Around this theme of revenge, *Hell on Wheels* arranges the stories of various characters living in the eponymous camp that moves westward from Council Bluffs, Iowa, as its workers undertake the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad after the Civil War. An ambitious number of subplots might be the reason that some central figures lack psychological depth and appear as overtly symbolic stereotypes, which caused one commentator to complain about the show's "declamatory cartoons" (Wiegand). Its rendition of the historical Union Pacific executive Thomas Durant (Colm Meany), for example, is just as reminiscent of the robber baron archetype as Lily Bell (Dominique McElligott), "the fair-haired maiden of the West," personifies benign civilizational progress ("Immoral Mathematics" 0:24:55).¹

As persistent as these shortcomings are, *Hell on Wheels* nevertheless merits a closer look. What in weaker moments appears to be the show's naive take on frontier mythology is counterbalanced by stronger scenes revealing its ideological thrust: Manifest Destiny is exposed as an imperialist land grab in whose wake the true character of 'civilization' is disclosed as voracious and violent. Similarly, traditional Western fantasies of the individualizing, redemptive, and purifying force of the frontier are debunked as such. Matters of race and ethnicity are, furthermore, complicated beyond the familiar paradigm of the white settler vs. 'Indian' by depicting shifting alliances and conflicts between Anglo-Americans, Native Americans, African Americans, and Irish and German immigrants.² Finally, women are portrayed as actively struggling with the expectations imposed upon them by the show's patriarchal society. While *Hell on Wheels* is certainly not the first Western to challenge frontier mythology in these regards, it adds a layer that has figured less prominently in previous depictions of the frontier. In discussing notions of social Darwinism, biological and environmental determinism, and scientism, *Hell on Wheels* exposes the ideological power of 'nature' to justify violence in frontier mythology.

1 The destruction of the Hell on Wheels encampment during a Sioux raid, the arrest of Thomas Durant for misappropriation of railroad funds, and the murder of Lily Bell—all in the season two finale—mark the end of *Hell on Wheels's* first major story line. The decision to disregard seasons three through five in this analysis is, therefore, based on the different character constellations in these later seasons.

2 Since Chinese immigrants did not work for the Union Pacific Railroad, but for the California-based Central Pacific Railroad (CPRR), they are not portrayed in the first four seasons of *Hell on Wheels* (cf. Yang). Only season five, which includes the CPRR, features Chinese American characters.

After a short discussion of the historical and ongoing relevance of frontier mythology in US culture, I will argue for its ideological reliance on 'nature.' The next chapter will then provide theoretical background on social Darwinism, biological and environmental determinism, as well as scientism. Subsequently, I will analyze how this close relationship is examined in *Hell on Wheels*: first, by its comparison of Manifest Destiny with social Darwinism; second, by the Swede's biological and environmental-determinist justification of frontier violence; and finally, by his and Reverend Cole's scientific replacement of religion with the natural sciences.

1. FRONTIER, MYTH, AND NATURE

To a degree, the frontier has become difficult to talk about. At least since the new western historians³ of the 1980s have reinterpreted the history of the United States west of the Mississippi, the frontier has become "the 'F' word" of the discipline, despite occasional attempts at resurrecting it (Klein 181; cf. Paul 325). The concept has further been claimed to propagate nationalism, ethnocentrism, and racism in the spirit of Manifest Destiny (Limerick qtd. in Klein 181). Considering the well-known definition of the frontier by its single most influential theorist, Frederick Jackson Turner, as "the meeting point between savagery and civilization" (32), chauvinistic imperialism seems to be an inherent feature. I thus agree with the majority of scholars that Turner's 1893 frontier thesis, claiming that "[t]he existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, [would] explain American development" (31), holds only partial, and very limited, validity for the historical experiences of the westward expansion of Anglo-Americans. More importantly, the monolithic 'American character' this movement is supposed to have shaped (cf. 32) is an exclusionary and ideological construct that, among other shortcomings, overrides the fundamental importance in US history of everyone not considered 'white.'⁴ Therefore, it seems appropriate to point out the reasons for using this 'F' word in this article.

Engaging with the notion of the frontier does not necessitate an acceptance of the frontier thesis. Acknowledging the difference between these two conceptualizations is crucial as it relieves the frontier of some of its ideological baggage; it is not expected

3 New western historians such as Patricia Limerick, William Cronon, or Donald Worster expanded on previous historiography on the trans-Mississippi West by focusing on formerly ignored issues of class, race, gender, and the environment (cf. Klein 180).

4 For a succinct overview of the extensive criticism Turner's frontier thesis has received, cf. Paul 324-25.

to have “furnish[ed] the forces dominating American character” (Turner 32) anymore. Regardless of the accuracy one attributes to the historical frontier, it is hard to deny that, as a concept, “it has provided a host of resonant images for the American cultural imaginary” (Paul 311). Accordingly, what matters for the present study is not the empirical validity of the frontier thesis but the *myth* of the frontier.

As a national founding myth, the frontier has lost none of its relevance. Richard Slotkin maintains that, in the last decade of the nineteenth century, the frontier’s “significance as a *mythic space* began to outweigh its importance as a real place.” Writers like Turner, he continues, were transforming it from “a set of facts requiring a historical explanation” into “a set of symbols that *constituted* an explanation of history” (*Gunfighter* 61). Reading Slotkin’s claim in combination with Roland Barthes’s definition of myth makes clear the fundamental cultural significance of this shift in emphasis. To Barthes, myth is “a mode of signification” (109): *What* is said is less important than *how* it is said. This discursive approach enables him to argue that the central function of any myth is to “[give] an historical intention a natural justification” (142). Barthes’s use of the term ‘natural’ is expressed earlier as “*what-goes-without-saying*” and as “the falsely obvious” (11). It thus points toward a myth’s ability to present any kind of culturally specific institution as universal or self-evident; a myth hides the historical circumstances giving rise to these institutions. In doing so, it safeguards social constructions against interrogation and any form of debate: What is self-evident can hardly be contested. Myth is, therefore, “*depoliticized speech*” (142). It is exactly the mythic quality of the frontier that has provided the justification for the empirical events and has rendered them ‘self-evident.’ As the unabated popularity of the Western genre in the twenty-first century demonstrates, the myth of the frontier remains a vital part of the US cultural imagination.⁵

Whereas Barthes speaks of a “natural justification” primarily to say that myth makes things appear self-evident (142, cf. 11), certain aspects of frontier mythology suggest an expanded meaning in which ‘nature’ becomes a myth itself. If the frontier is understood as a space that exists in between the binary opposition of ‘civilization’ and ‘wilderness,’ notions of the nonhuman environment become especially pertinent to the surrounding mythology.⁶ Consider, for example, the explanation Slotkin gives for the

5 Quentin Tarantino’s *Django Unchained* (2012) and *The Hateful Eight* (2015), and Alejandro González Iñárritu’s *The Revenant* (2015), are some prominent recent examples.

6 Terms like ‘wilderness’ and ‘nature’ have often been used to include Native Americans (or ‘savages,’ cf. Turner 32) in opposition to ‘society’ and ‘culture.’ Speaking of the ‘nonhuman environment’ makes it possible to avoid this racist equation. In discussing the ideological work of ‘nature’ in *Hell on Wheels*, I am therefore only considering ideas about the nonhuman environment.

title of his second book about the frontier, *The Fatal Environment*. After citing Walt Whitman's "A Death-Sonnet for Custer,"⁷ from which the phrase originates, Slotkin elaborates:

Whitman means [‘the fatal environment’] to suggest something more [than the general’s death]: the idea that Custer’s death completes a meaningful myth-historical design, a grand fable of national redemption and Christian self-sacrifice, acted out in the most traditional of American settings. [...] And it is essential to the illusion of this myth that Custer’s fate seem somehow implicit in the environment, a moral and ideological lesson which seems to emerge from the very nature of things—as if Nature or God composed the story and assigned its meanings, rather than men. (11)

Slotkin exposes at least three meanings of ‘nature’ here. First, “the very nature of things” may speak for the *laws* of nature—fervently challenged in science and technology (the ambition to harness electricity, to defy gravity, etc.) but just as eagerly accepted as ideological tools to justify social injustice (through biological determinism, social Darwinism, etc.). Second, Slotkin evokes ‘Nature’ in its capitalized form, synonymous with God—a supreme being beyond human control whose laws have to be obeyed rather than understood. The final meaning of ‘nature’ emerges out of these two, and it corresponds to Barthes’s ideas on myth: Nature, both as scientific and as divine law, is “*depoliticized speech*” (142). Presenting something as ‘natural’ turns it into *fact*; it is neither an opinion nor a moral or legal doctrine that can be overruled. If nature is thus used as an effective discursive tool to prevent debate, it has become a myth.

2. NATURE, BIOLOGY, AND SCIENCE

While Whitman’s poetic rendition of frontier violence relies on the implication that certain developments are ‘natural,’ other approaches disguise political decisions explicitly as inevitable facts or scientific findings, and therefore as immune to debate. Beyond their original purpose to demystify nature, the sciences have, at times, been abused to justify social inequality and ruthless exploitation. In this section, I will introduce the theoretical concepts of social Darwinism, biological and environmental determinism, and scientism, which will all be relevant to my reading of *Hell on Wheels*.

7 Whitman wrote the poem as a response to cavalry commander George Armstrong Custer’s defeat and death at the Battle of the Little Bighorn during the Great Sioux War of 1876.

Surfacing in the late nineteenth century, the term social Darwinism has a complicated history in Great Britain and the US, and definitions have varied accordingly (cf. Bannister 3-5; Williams 186). It is commonly understood, however, to denote the application of the evolutionary principles of “struggle for existence, natural selection, and survival of the fittest” to the realm of human society (Bannister 7). The first two natural laws, struggle for existence and natural selection, were widely popularized in Charles Darwin’s 1859 *On the Origin of Species*. The ‘survival of the fittest’ is also often regarded as a Darwinian term, but it was first introduced in 1864 by the social philosopher Herbert Spencer, who saw his thoughts on society supported by Darwin’s findings on natural evolution (Williams 187).⁸ Spencer believed in “a principle of social selection operat[ing] in human history” that gave him reason enough to reject government interference with society. As a result, “[h]e opposed state aid to the poor on the grounds that this would preserve the weaker and less successful members of the race” (187). If natural selection is responsible for a species’ success or failure in nature and if humans are, after all, animals, then why should this principle not be applicable to society as well? Accordingly, for Robert Bannister, “social Darwinism [...] derived its sting from the implication that the struggle and selection of the animal realm were also agents of change (and progress) in human society—the governing assumption being that men shared *natural laws* with the rest of Creation” (8). It becomes clear that such a doctrine can acquire the power to strip any given human society of its checks and balances, and that it can antagonize the causes of cooperation, support, and charity.

Determinism, at its broadest, is the assumption that every condition is “completely determined by previously existing causes” (“Determinism”). From the microscopic to the cosmic scale, everything is believed to be rationally comprehensible, calculable, and thus, predictable at least in theory. In regards to humanity, “[d]eterminism is usually understood to preclude free will because it entails that humans cannot act otherwise than they do” (“Determinism”). Two supposed explanations for such a completely determined nature have been found in biology and geography. Biological determinism, on the one hand, attempts to locate all causes for human behavior and characteristics in heredity. In consequence, it naturalizes people’s position in society:

Biological determinism has made claims about groups of people, especially the socially subordinated (including racial/ethnic minorities, women, and gays), suggesting that their disadvantages do not result from social practices but from the inherited biologic/genetic attributes of the

8 Darwin himself was no social Darwinist. As Bannister points out, “Darwin [and other leading proponents of the theory of evolution believed] that nature provided no guide to ethics or social policy” (9).

socially advantaged as opposed to the inherited attributes of the subordinated. (Graves 25)

Environmental determinism, on the other hand, assumes that the single most significant factor in determining human character is people's natural environment. As Judkins et al. point out, such ideas can be traced far back to ancient Greek philosophy, and these ideas "found renewed scientific merit following Darwin (1859) and Wallace's (1855) theory of evolution—albeit that neither were environmental determinists" (19). Similar to social Darwinism, therefore, environmental determinism (and biological determinism, for that matter) extends biological theories and natural laws into the realm of society. Human-made social hierarchies as well as discrimination based on gender, economic class, and race, which are culturally specific and historically contingent, are justified as inevitable facts, determined by nature.

Having received considerable support during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, neither social Darwinism nor determinism are regarded as scientifically tenable theories today (cf. Graves 25-26).⁹ Even when they were seen as scientifically accurate, the conclusions drawn from these theories were readily incorporated by many proponents into agendas that transcended the realm of science (Graves 25). When science is used as the major foundation for a particular ideology, this worldview can be seen as scientistic. The term scientism has been applied to the belief that the natural sciences are sufficient to negotiate matters usually understood as philosophical, ethical, or religious. Mikael Stenmark argues that "[a]t least some forms of scientism seem to offer a substitute for traditional religions and thus present science itself as a religion or world view" (16). The rise and success of the sciences throughout Western countries in the nineteenth century has often been seen as a fatal blow against the unscientific beliefs of religion. Instead of democratizing society and liberating the individual, however, the sciences have often been employed merely to replace God's supreme authority. If social conditions once were God's will, proponents now justified them as the laws of nature—of natural selection and the survival of the fittest, of physiology, or of adaptation to a given environment. "If science can provide both knowledge and values," Stenmark warns, "perhaps we do not have to consider any other realms of life significant" (27). Like myth according to Barthes, scientism shrouds historically contingent social conditions in the guise of self-evident and universal fact, thus invalidating any form of debate.

9 This does not mean that these ideas have completely disappeared. Judkins et al., for example, argue for the recent "rebirth of determinism" in publications like Jared Diamond's 1997 best seller *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (18).

In conclusion, scientism—which, in this reading, includes determinism and social Darwinism—fulfills the same function as Barthes’s myth and Slotkin’s account of nature in “A Death-Sonnet for Custer”: It is a mode of signification devised to justify politically and historically motivated human action as merely ‘natural,’ thereby erasing human responsibility and thwarting any form of discussion (cf. Barthes 109, 142). The following chapters will discuss how *Hell on Wheels* illustrates these dynamics.

3. “ALL OF HISTORY IS DRIVEN BY THE LION”: SOCIAL DARWINISM

Hell on Wheels readily employs references to ‘nature’ in order to provide ideological justifications of westward expansion. The show announces this core theme in a monologue delivered by railroad tycoon Thomas Durant at the end of the first episode. He describes the construction of the First Transcontinental Railroad as

a thorny, brutal affair that rewards the lion for his ferocity. [...] What of the poor zebra? Well, the zebra’s eaten as the zebra should be. [...] But the lion shall prevail. You see, the secret I know is this: All of history is driven by the lion. We drag the poor zebra, kicking and braying. Stain the earth with his cheap blood. [...] But remember this: Without me and men like me, your glorious railroad would never have been built. (“Pilot” 0:41:51)

Durant’s conceptualization of progress does not allow for anything more complex than a dualistic view of society in which the strong are justified in preying upon the weak in order to prevail, thus supposedly driving history forward. Durant’s monologue merits attention because it recasts Manifest Destiny, one of the central ideological foundations of US expansionism during the nineteenth century, in the vocabulary of social Darwinism.

Durant’s speech constitutes the center of a sequence in which *Hell on Wheels* reimagines John Gast’s *American Progress* (Fig. 1). The famous 1872 painting allegorizes the westward movement of Anglo-American settlers across the continent. As they advance on foot, on horseback, in covered wagons, and on stagecoaches, they are followed by the telegraph cable, the railroad, and, on the painting’s far right, a rising sun that can be expected to soon illuminate the Great Plains and the Rocky Mountains in the same golden light that it already sheds on the metropolises east of the Mississippi. On the painting’s darker left side, Native Americans and wildlife have no choice but to retreat from the advancing colonists. The entire process is guided by the mythical figure of Columbia, dressed in angelic white garb. She is floating westward while carrying the telegraph cable and a volume titled “School Book.” *Hell on Wheels*’s

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corresponding scenes (Fig. 2) modify the painting's central imagery: Durant, the guiding force behind the westward movement, is sitting in his luxurious railroad car (holding a whiskey glass instead of a 'school book') while the Columbia-like 'fair-haired maiden of the West,' Lily Bell, tries to escape the frontier after having nearly been killed in a Cheyenne assault. Simultaneously, the railroad's working crew moves westward in a wagon trail to continue construction at the current end of the tracks.



Figure 1: John Gast's *American Progress* (1872) is one of the best-known visual representations of Manifest Destiny.

The show strikingly exposes the ideological tenets of *American Progress* by stripping the painting of its jubilant progressivism and Enlightenment imagery: The advancing frontier is not followed by golden light and 'civilization' but by wolves scavenging the camp's former site—a site that is now marked by burnt soil, scattered animal bones, empty whiskey bottles, and discarded wood and canvas. The dull mise-en-scène is completed by dark gray clouds hanging ominously over the land, permitting

no sunlight to shine through. The soundtrack complements the gloomy ambience with a grave string quartet. All of this creates a striking rejection of *American Progress*: Whereas the painting's Columbia figure has been read to "[provide] nurturing, protective guidance and fortitude for the extension of civilization over wilderness and the 'uncivilized,' the enigmatic, and the primal" (Hassen), the driving force in *Hell on Wheels*, Durant, offers no such qualities. On the contrary, his fable of the lion and the zebra's brutal struggle for existence is based on references to the wilderness, the primal, and the 'uncivilized.' Instead of "distracting [from] and softening the reality and the violence of this [westward] movement" (Hassen), Durant is trying to justify it. In sum, these features demonstrate that *Hell on Wheels* constructs a pessimistic rejection of the vision of *American Progress*.



Figure 2: As Durant delivers his social Darwinist monologue, the imagery of *American Progress* is reversed ("Pilot" 0:41:25).

All of the imagery outlined above have rendered *American Progress* one of the most influential visual expressions of Manifest Destiny (cf. Hebel 118, 313-14; Hassen). Therefore, the show's comment on the painting is simultaneously a comment on the doctrine. The sequence just discussed echoes Durant's opinion voiced earlier: After promoting Manifest Destiny to a group of potential financiers, he afterward immediately dismisses it as "horse crap," as "twaddle and shite," in a private

conversation ("Pilot" 0:04:13). Hence, the show highlights Manifest Destiny as a tool devised in order to promote westward expansion and capitalist interests. Durant willfully employs it as such, fully aware of its ideological power. As he thus sees through the ruse of the doctrine, he needs a different rationale to personally justify the excessive violence and exploitation accompanying the westward expansion that he propagates. His speech about the lion and the zebra reveals this new rationale. Durant has simply substituted Manifest Destiny's divine providence with the pseudoscientific explanation of social Darwinism: As a white entrepreneur, it is not his *choice* that effects the violence, the displacement, and the exploitation caused by westward expansion. Just as it is the lion's nature to kill the zebra in the struggle for survival, it is Durant's destiny to build this railroad at whatever cost necessary—and who would blame the lion for the zebra's suffering? Whether this destiny is ordained by God or determined by Nature matters little in the end. Durant's social Darwinist rationale for westward expansion, consequently, allows for the same ruthless exploitation and violence as Manifest Destiny.

4. "EVERY NEW LAND DEMANDS BLOOD": DETERMINISTIC NATURE

Arguably the show's most pertinent character in terms of a manipulative discursive use of 'nature' is Thor Gundersen (Christopher Heyerdahl), a Norwegian immigrant whom everyone calls the Swede. Despite his initial effort to maintain law and order in the frontier settlement as Durant's "head of security" ("Immoral Mathematics" 0:07:17), he is *Hell on Wheels*'s central antagonist throughout the first two seasons. Having been tarred, feathered, and driven out of town by a raging mob for corruption and brutality, the Swede has lost his former position as de facto sheriff and judge at the end of season one. In season two, he returns cleaning chamber pots, fetching corpses, and digging graves. Disillusioned and with nothing left to lose, he becomes a sinister seducer, devising schemes that lead to ethnic unrest and to the town's eventual destruction in a Sioux raid. His deeply enigmatic, manipulative, and disruptive role calls for an investigation of his character as a personification of evil or chaos in a separate article. The Swede, however, is equally important to an analysis of 'nature' in *Hell on Wheels*. This becomes evident in a short but ominous monologue in which he proposes a grim outlook on human nature: "In the beginning, there was blood. The land demands it. Every new land demands blood. And we relent. It is our nature. We are, after all, animals. In our arrogance, we forget this. But in the end, we rise from the land only to return" ("Slaughterhouse" 0:00:25). As I will argue in this chapter, the

Swede reveals the ideological power of environmental and biological determinism to justify westward expansion.

By stating that “every new land demands blood,” the Swede rhetorically justifies the violence of imperial conquest as a fact that lies beyond human control. He constructs a quasi-scientific causal link between the natural environment and human bloodshed. Hence, he makes it appear as if any time someone sets foot onto ‘new’ territory, a contract is being signed that places the newcomer under the obligation to provide this land with blood. What the land offers in return—probably the willingness to be settled and exploited by the colonist—and why it is blood that the land demands, however, are questions tacitly unanswered. Herein exactly lies the strength of this rhetoric: In its straightforward simplicity, the Swede’s claim corresponds to the “seeming intuitiveness” that Judkins et al. ascribe to “environmentally deterministic logic” (18). They further maintain that “[g]enerally, *society* has been viewed as determining human-environment relationships,” but “[d]uring different times, the *environment* has been attributed varying degrees of determinism” (19; my emphasis). As the mythical frontier is a societal enclave in the wilderness, the Swede attributes the same enormous influence to the nonhuman environment as Whitman does in “A Death-Sonnet for Custer” (cf. Slotkin, *Environment* 11). The bloodshed accompanying westward expansion is thus rendered as determined by the natural environment and as lying beyond human control.

Taken by itself, the Swede’s statement could be dismissed as mere figurative language, a way of referring to the violence that accompanies any imperial conquest. However, the message is more complex. In combination with the camera’s graphic depiction of blood gushing and entrails oozing as a butcher thoroughly slaughters a pig, the metaphorical quality of the blood evoked by the Swede pales in contrast to its literal, biological presence. After all, blood can be seen not only as a symbol for violence but also as a central material factor anchoring humans in the realm of nature. This meaning is effectively conveyed by the Swede’s claim that “we are, after all, animals” and by his explicit reference to “our nature” (“Slaughterhouse” 0:00:25). That way, the Swede cunningly supports his logic with environmental determinism’s belief that the “theory of evolution was the bridge linking all organisms (including humans) to the natural laws governing the environment” (Judkins et al. 19). As skillful with words as the butcher is with the knife, the Swede communicates his figurative message as fact. “Every new land demands blood” suddenly appears in the guise of science; it is rhetorically elevated to the same level as the biological fact that humans are animals—a fact that lies beyond our control.

The fact that humans are animals is therefore foundational to the Swede’s deterministic reasoning. Challenging the creationist doctrine of humanity being

separate from animals, he demonstrates a scientifically informed evolutionist outlook on life: He, thereby, invalidates any justification for human actions based on God alone. Like Durant, the Swede rejects the idea of a divinely ordained Manifest Destiny without, however, holding humans responsible for their actions. Both characters' rhetoric displaces responsibility to 'nature' instead of God. The difference to Durant's social Darwinism is that the Swede's biological determinism is based on a literal rather than a figurative understanding of humanity's evolutionary connection to the animal kingdom. He is biologically correct in stating that humans are animals. However, the Swede utilizes science in a fatally selective way: He omits that evolution has equipped the human brain with the capacity for rational thought and abstraction and that our species has consequently developed the potential to check our instincts with self-imposed moral principles. Thus rejecting what can broadly be termed 'culture,' the Swede exclusively localizes humanity in the apparent opposite: nature. This binary opposition, however, is false. Culture does not *separate* us from nature; it could rather be seen as the niche whose occupation distinguishes humans from (most) nonhuman species.¹⁰ Thus, human actions have to be measured primarily by ethical values; we are responsible for what we do. To the Swede, however, our animal nature determines our behavior, rendering us immune to claims of responsibility. Ruthless exploitation and violence are cast as inevitable and natural symptoms of 'progress.' Therefore, the Swede's rhetoric reveals the ideological power of environmental and biological determinism to justify westward expansion.

5. "BLOOD IS GOD HERE": SCIENTISM AS MYTH

The representations of determinism and social Darwinism in *Hell on Wheels* reveal that justifications of violence in frontier mythology are not necessarily dependent on a providential doctrine like Manifest Destiny. The apparent imperatives of nature, as comprehensible through science, can easily replace God's supreme authority. As the show's initially devout Christian preacher Nathaniel Cole (Tim Noonan) concludes after a band of warring Cheyenne has caused a violent train wreck: "Blood is God here" ("Derailed" 0:08:03). He realizes that a peaceful consolidation of Manifest Destiny with Native American land rights is impossible. Losing his faith and relapsing into alcoholism, he is evicted from the church and soon finds himself living on the

¹⁰ The *Dictionary of Environment and Ecology* defines niche as "a place in an ecosystem which a species has adapted to occupy" ("niche"). Culture is a human creation and it occurs throughout many ecosystems on the planet. I therefore refer to culture as a niche only metaphorically. For more on the idea of culture as a niche, cf. Hardesty.

edge of town with the Swede, under whose manipulative sway he quickly falls. Cole's apostasy is reinforced by the Swede's quasi-religious assumptions about nature as expressed in his claim that "[i]n the beginning, there was blood" ("Slaughterhouse" 0:00:25). Both men no longer see God as the origin of the world. This vacant primary position within the cosmos brings with it a loss of authority, so that God is no longer the ultimate justification that people could refer to. However, instead of filling this vacancy with human responsibility, the Swede and Cole replace God with blood—a prime signifier of humanity's *natural* existence. Accordingly, the role of religion is assumed by a crude rendition of the natural sciences, which are thereby expected to provide not only knowledge but also the ethical values concerning human actions in the world.

Inferring his worldview exclusively from the sciences, the Swede betrays a scientific, rather than a scientific, understanding of nature. He ultimately convinces Cole that "[t]here are more things in Heaven and Earth than are dreamt of in [Christianity]" by showing him the skull of what appears to be a saber-toothed cat ("Durant, Nebraska" 0:28:30). A symbol for extinction, the skull conveys the Swede's message that Christianity needs to be replaced by a scientific view on nature: Only the latter can account for the existence of this skull as well as the incessant bloodshed on the frontier. The Swede thus offers Cole what Mikael Stenmark counts among the "forms of scientism [that] seem to offer a substitute for traditional religions" (16). As religions do not only explain the world but also tell their believers how to live, these philosophical questions need to be addressed by scientism as well. In Stenmark's vocabulary, the Swede proposes a "*redemptive scientism*, [...] [t]he view that science alone is sufficient [...] for creating a worldview by which we could live" (27). By equating the natural necessity of bloodshed with its ethical legitimacy, scientism has thus replaced religion as an ideological justification for frontier violence.

In the Swede's alliance with Reverend Cole, *Hell on Wheels* demonstrates that, if endowed with the same functions as religion and ethics, the sciences acquire the ideological power of myth. Incorporating and transforming Cole's shattered Christian faith, the Swede's scientism permanently silences what is left of Cole's beliefs in political and ethical debate. If "every new land demands blood," then violence can, 'naturally,' only be answered with violence, and God is replaced by blood. By employing the sciences for his scientific worldview, the Swede has given them the ideological power of myth.

6. CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to argue that AMC's TV show *Hell on Wheels* portrays the ideological significance of 'nature' to justify violence in frontier mythology. To summarize, it does so in a threefold manner: First, as Durant's social Darwinist monologue is paralleled with gloomy imagery that challenges the providential myth of Manifest Destiny, the show reveals that both ideologies equally replace human responsibility with a quasi-evolutionary rhetoric of inevitable progress. Second, the Swede's deterministic notions of nonhuman and human nature demonstrate the mythical power of the natural environment and evolutionary biology, which can easily assume Manifest Destiny's divine authority as a justification for violence. Finally, the Swede's and Reverend Cole's discursive replacement of God with blood signifies a shift from religion to a redemptive scientism, in which the sciences not only purport to explain but also to justify the violence of westward expansion.

In these renditions, 'nature' is variably utilized as the prime model for social behavior, as the opposite of and ultimate victor over culture, and as the final authority whose imperatives are intelligible only through science. 'Nature' is thus revealed to be as all-encompassing and flexible a term as its ideologically motivated user constructs it to be. In each instance, 'nature' is utilized as a myth that depoliticizes speech; it portrays historical developments as inevitable and human actions as 'natural.' Philosophical, ethical, political, cultural, and social questions are thereby stripped of their unscientific and decidedly nonnatural qualities such as being subjective, negotiable, and nonuniversal. In depicting frontier violence and nineteenth-century expansionism through this lens, *Hell on Wheels* does not only reimagine a central episode of US history but also reminds its viewers that nature and science are anything but neutral or unpolitical realms. Scientific progress in areas such as bioengineering and neuroscience regularly provokes questions that need to be answered in ways that are politically and philosophically controversial. How people discuss and decide upon these questions—in a democratic or authoritarian way—will, in turn, reveal much about a given society.

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