

# The Power of a Brand: Paramount, Heartland Narrowcasting, and Taylor Sheridan's *Yellowstone*

**Joshua Sperling**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6140-7352>

Oberlin College, United States

[joshua.sperling@oberlin.edu](mailto:joshua.sperling@oberlin.edu)

## Abstract

Taylor Sheridan's *Yellowstone* is, above all, the story of a brand. By situating the popular series in relation to both the streaming and culture wars, as well as a related schism in academic media studies, this article proposes that the political economy of media corporations and the narrative aesthetics of media texts must be understood in tandem. As the Paramount Network's signature property, *Yellowstone* manifested the channel's demographic mission to include women and "narrowcast" to heartland viewers. By sophisticated generic and narratological innovations, *Yellowstone* went further to create an aesthetic protocol of brand loyalty where the process of branding, at once ancient and modern, physical and symbolic, was made self-consciously central to the show's redescription of rural cowboying as a cultural identity and marketable lifestyle. The show's intertwining of branding and belonging, as well as its vigorous use of product placement and merchandising, modifies prior assumptions in the field of franchise studies. In the gap between brand synergy and brand dilution, *Yellowstone* presents itself as a paradigmatic case study for the new imbrications of narrative entertainment, commodity fetishism, and identitarian politics.

**Keywords:** branding; streaming; industrial allegory; narrative complexity; polarisation

UNISA 

Journal of Literary Studies  
Volume 40 | 2024 | #16243 | 25 pages



<https://doi.org/10.25159/1753-5387/16243>

ISSN 1753-5387 (Online)

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## Streaming and Culture Wars

The first season of Taylor Sheridan’s *Yellowstone* was commissioned by the Paramount Network five months after Donald Trump took office and premiered with enough lead time for the Weinstein Company to be removed from its credits. The historical conjunction of these two events—the 2016 election and #MeToo—gives some sense of the fraught political and industrial background against which the show emerged and in whose vexed and unpredictable interrelations it must be understood. Initially overlooked by metropolitan audiences, *Yellowstone* gained popularity in rural markets (so-called C and D counties<sup>1</sup>), and by its third season had crossed over to mainstream success. It is now one of the most popular (and expensive) scripted dramas across all platforms: broadcast, cable, and streaming. As of 2023 the series has reached over 100 million global viewers (Jurgensen 2023), with production costs swelling to well over \$12 million per episode (Schwartzel and Flint 2023). Inside Paramount, it became a strategy-defining property that, as executive Chris McCarthy put it, “has the ability to go run the whole model” (Adalian 2023).

For such a significant cultural text, *Yellowstone* attracted relatively little critical attention until recently. Only once the series became too big to ignore did legacy outlets have reason to contend with what they had once disregarded, reading it diagnostically in relation to the so-called “culture wars.” It is telling that after a perfunctory first review in 2018, the *New York Times* did not publish anything further on *Yellowstone* until its fifth season, in 2022–23, when a flurry of articles sought to retroactively account for its popularity while offering a diagnosis of its politics (Cottom 2022; Douthat 2023; Poniewozik 2022; Tracy 2023). A commonplace of these and other recent reviews is to start with a string of categorical shorthands (“red-state drama,” “the conservative show,” “the Republican show,” etc.) only to complicate such labels with qualifications (“simplistic” [Cottom 2022], “oversimplified” [Poniewozik 2022], “may not do analytical justice” [Wanzo 2022]), before returning to a more archetypal or capacious analysis of its ideology, usually understood in tacit (and often unequivocal) relation to Trumpism. “It’s simplistic to label ‘Yellowstone’ a ‘red-state drama,’” runs a paradigmatic lede. “But the cowboy soap speaks the language of culture war with a perfect accent” (Poniewozik 2022).

A more or less separate discourse to the above has followed *Yellowstone* from its inception. This discourse, rooted in the trade and financial press, has understood the series primarily as a hot, if contested, property with the ability to move markets—not only in entertainment but also, as it gained a following, in retail, tourism, real estate, and even sport. *The Wall Street Journal*, for example, has run a spate of articles tallying

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<sup>1</sup> Nielsen Media Research, the analytics firm best known for its audience ratings, categorises counties in the United States based on their population. A counties denote those in the largest 25 US cities; B counties refer to any non-A counties with a population over 150,000; C counties refer to counties that are neither A nor B but with a population over 40,000; D counties refer to all remaining counties. See <https://microsites.nielseniq.com/cpg-dictionary/dictionary/county-sizes/>

the effect of the show on everything from the sales figures of cowboy hats and vests among suburbanites (Gallagher 2023) to the rise of ranch tourism (Carlton 2023) and the creation of an intercity bull riding league (Schwartzel 2022). Industry reporters have similarly chronicled the outsized role *Yellowstone* played in the wild west of subscription on-demand video—the so-called streaming wars—where Paramount’s strategic mishap of licensing the first two seasons to Peacock, a rival platform, led directly to its decision to franchise *Yellowstone* (along with its auteur-creator, Sheridan) into a full-fledged cinematic universe as it launched Paramount+ into an already crowded market. The all-in strategy, founded on a \$200-million overall deal for Sheridan, a self-fashioned industry outsider, has led many commentators to remark on the unprecedented leverage a single writer who splits his time between Texas and Wyoming now wields over one of the “Big Five” Hollywood studios from the classical era. Other articles have discussed Sheridan’s growing empire of ancillary businesses (Hibberd 2023; Schwartzel and Flint 2023) as well as Paramount’s precarious, increasingly distressed market position thanks to its costly streaming ambitions (Shaw 2024).

Thanks in large part to the institutional demarcations of professional journalism, these two discourses—the culture wars and the streaming wars—have proceeded largely independent of one another, each with its own analytical criteria and stakes, even as the historical conditions that gave rise to *Yellowstone* were significant precisely because such phenomena could no longer be so neatly or convincingly disentangled. The 2016–2018 period when *Yellowstone*’s first season was green-lit, shot, and premiered represented an unprecedented inflection point in politicised market behaviour. The communication firm Edelman noted that by 2018 nearly two thirds of global consumers were “belief-driven buyers,” e.g. consumers who “will buy or boycott a brand solely because of its position on a social or political issue,” a “staggering increase” of 13 points from the prior year (Edelman 2018). In such a media and market environment, the logics of cultural ideology, narrative aesthetics, and industrial strategy must be studied together. Indeed, it will be my argument in what follows that what makes *Yellowstone* such a quintessential text of the Trump era, far more than the content of any particular ideological vector, is the manner in which the series persistently blurs the logics of capitalist enterprise and cultural belonging. Like the bifurcated Y so central to the show’s imaginary, the two are in fact joined at the base by the root concept of a *brand* (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** The omnipresent Y logo so central to the aesthetic and economic function of *Yellowstone* (S1 E1, “Daybreak,” June 19, 2018)

Before pursuing this line of thought further, however, it must first be acknowledged that the division between economic and cultural reasoning is not only a fillip of journalistic labels; it also supervenes on an equally persistent, if less codified, rift in academic media studies between the political-economic analysis of media corporations and the cultural-symbolic interpretation of media texts.<sup>2</sup> Though individual scholars have tried to bridge both traditions (e.g. Babe 2009; Johnson 2013), perhaps the most provocative synthesis of recent years has been the corporate allegory school of Jerome Christensen and J.D. Connor (Christensen 2011; Connor 2015), and it would be easy enough to read *Yellowstone*'s plot in relation to industry-wide anxieties regarding media transition and Paramount's predicament in particular. The Dutton family ranch, like an ageing legacy studio (Paramount), must defend its turf against new corporate juggernauts (Netflix, Apple, Amazon), who threaten their old way of doing business. Subscribers, in this framework, are like cattle to be amassed and reined in, shepherded within a dynastic pen. “Cattle don't know the difference between your land and ours,” John Dutton tells an Indian sheriff in the pilot after his herd has strayed onto the neighbouring reservation, just as “Where can I stream *Yellowstone*?” became one of the most googled searches during the whole Peacock debacle. There is even a persistent obsession in the pilot with streaming itself. “The gambler's money is like a river,” the tribal chief Thomas Rainwater (sic) says, “flowing one way, our way.” Or later, when a construction lackey tells John, “I can't stop the river from flowing,” he responds, “I don't want you to stop it ... I want you to move it.”

My argument builds on the method of corporate or industrial allegory while also hoping to move it past certain limitations into a more politicised present. Industrial allegory has produced many uncannily sophisticated readings, but the method also risks reifying insider/outsider divisions while foreclosing the scope of meaning of a given text around backroom struggles and (thus) its own methodological recursion. The allegories themselves usually tend in two directions. In one direction they move towards unconscious, often esoteric specificity—an esotericism suggested in the reading above by the fact that the pilot (about the mix-up of cattle) was filmed two years before the

<sup>2</sup> There of course have been individual exceptions to this rift. In the South African context, for instance, Keyan Tomaselli's significant *Cinema of Apartheid: Race and Class in South African Film* (1988) provided a critique of numerous films while commenting on their relationship to South African economic realities and the realities of the South African entertainment industry.

mix-up with Peacock! In the other direction they arrive at the over-obvious and baldly instrumental in-joke. In the fourth season of *Yellowstone*, for example, Taylor Sheridan appears in his own show as the horse trader Travis, offering to breed the Yellowstone's horses and "take them on the road," an appearance that coincides with his franchising negotiations at Paramount. When Travis tells John, "There's no money in the oak, all the money's in the acorn," adding that, "it's going to cost a few million to do that right," the meaning is tongue-in-cheek, the exertion of symbolic leverage over Paramount's executive suite. "Let me build you a team," Sheridan even goes on. "I'll get you the best of the best ... And I will stack checks on your desk thick as a fucking phone book." The apogee of this scripted bit of self-promotion comes when John asks Rip if he can trust Travis, to which Sheridan has Rip say, in relation to himself, "I mean that fucker doesn't do anything but win, sir."

Between the esoteric and the over-obvious is a more wholesale approach that sees the media text as both allegory and manifestation. Like other prestige television shows, *Yellowstone* can be read at two levels—a hidden (industrial) subtext and an overt (cultural) text—but more so than other shows it places its own *brand* (understood as precisely the juncture of business and culture) front and centre. The logo appears on the ranchers' chests as well as their clothing, vehicles, helicopters, and barns, just as it now circulates outside the diegesis through a growing inventory of licensed products and tie-ins. Not only is the logo omnipresent, the series is also narratively fascinated with branding as a *process*, something that occurs over time and cuts across a character's inner and outer life (hence the obsession with skin). And if branding marks the point where a product achieves superadded socialised value, it also names the site where pre-existing values (the spirit of the cowboy, the tradition of the west, a certain stripe of American masculinity, stand-your-ground defiance) grow attached to given products. Even more than other high-concept properties, *Yellowstone* understands this connection profoundly.

### Paramount's Rebrand: Heartland Narrowcasting

Before *Yellowstone* was a franchise and full-fledged cinematic universe it was simply one part of Paramount's corporate mission to gain a foothold in prestige cable, a market already exploited by rivals AMC and FX, at a time when linear programming was still thought to be sound business. It bears remembering that episodes from the first season aired at a precise day and time of the week: Wednesdays at 10pm. They were moved to Sundays at 10pm in the third season. And it is a telling piece of corporate archaeology that the show's proprietary Y logo, so crucial to its imaginary, is registered at the United States Patent and Trademark Office to Spike Cable Networks Inc., a Delaware corporation (Spike Cable Networks Inc. 2020, 2023).

Launched in 2003, Spike's slogan was "The First Network for Men," and its relaunching in early 2018 as the Paramount Network involved a demographic rebrand along two axes: gender and geography. On the one hand, the network wanted to expand its viewership to include women; on the other hand, it was willing to forsake coastal and

metropolitan markets for a heartland “narrowcasting” strategy. (In common North American parlance, “the heartland” refers to the inland region of the United States that is culturally set apart from the coasts and associated with more traditional, conservative values.) Though undoubtedly driven by perceived market opportunity the rebrand also allowed executives to neatly harness a corporate origin story: in a prior incarnation Spike TV was once The Nashville Network—later The National Network—which catered to what network president Kevin Kay would later call “the ‘villes,” e.g. Nashville, Louisville, Asheville, Fayetteville, and other cities in the American south and Midwest (Kay quoted in Schneider 2018).

By 2017, thanks to Sheridan’s widely discussed feature scripts—*Sicario* (2015), *Hell or High Water* (2016), and *Wind River* (2017), which he also directed—he was likely seen as a natural fit for one of Paramount’s objectives (geography) if not the other (gender), and the narratological updates made to turn *Yellowstone* into a four-quadrant property are instructive, with considerable ideological side effects. First, the series moves well up the socioeconomic ladder. Alongside the films of Debra Granik, Kelly Reichardt, Jeff Nichols, and Andrea Arnold’s *American Honey* (2016), Sheridan’s screenplays were narratively fascinated with white rural poverty, the social ruin of economically depressed “flyover” states, and what has been termed Rough America (Kennedy 2021). “I been poor my whole life,” says an outlaw in *Hell or High Water*. “So were my parents, their parents before them. It’s like a disease, passing from generation to generation.” (“3 TOURS IN IRAQ BUT NO BAILOUT FOR PEOPLE LIKE US,” reads a graffitied wall at the film’s start.) *Yellowstone*, by contrast, features not only corporate executives (as villains) but wealthy (if besieged) landowners (as protagonists), shifting the sociological focus from class to cultural identity, while allowing for an aspirational “eye candy” aesthetic common to prestige TV, with expensive sets and costumes. Second, the use of family as a structuring device is new for Sheridan. The writer’s frontier trilogy tended to present a world of roaming monads or duos, and while likely motivated by story and market concerns (the so-called “industrious family” has been a privileged subject for prestige TV [Szalay 2023], well-suited to both in-home viewing and episodic A/B/C plots), the shift further reinforces the interest in clan over class, while understanding the Duttons as a token of a larger type (as when Jamie speaks of “my family and families like ours”). Third, and perhaps most strikingly, *Yellowstone* inverts the female typology of Sheridan’s earlier scripts. Whereas both *Sicario* and *Wind River* cast attractive white actresses as innocent rookies out of their depths in the field—a now clichéd trope that runs from *Blue Steel* (1990) all the way to *Zootopia* (2016)—*Yellowstone* casts Kelly Reilly as the fan-favourite Beth Dutton, a sharp-tongued financial attack dog, world-weary and jaded, the opposite of a neophyte.

Thanks in large part to these transpositions, *Yellowstone* became a flagship property of the Paramount Network in its first season, helping to steer and reorient the entire brand. “From a programming standpoint, a lot of other networks have that New York/L.A. thing covered,” Kay told a reporter in 2018. “When we look at something like ‘*Yellowstone*,’ which takes place in Montana and Utah, that feels like big blue sky, very

different, something you haven't seen on TV in a long time" (Kay as quoted in Schneider 2018). Speaking of the move away from Spike, Kay added: "what we're trying to do with Paramount Network is really broaden it to women, too ... The family drama here [in *Yellowstone*], I think—and it's proven to be true in the ratings—is really appealing to women without alienating men" (Kay as quoted in Lincoln 2018).

It does not require the sophisticated machinery of allegorical decryption to see how Kay's inoffensive corporate "script" finds its instrumentalised double in the show's coarser cultural screenplay. The first 20 minutes of the pilot set up a recurring opposition between California (land of capital) and Montana (land of land) that is operative throughout all five seasons and which *Yellowstone* draws on not only for new narrative situations but also whenever it needs rhetorical or satirical flourishes. References to condos, yoga, green smoothies, artisanal ice cream, keto diets, pour-over coffee, Obama, stock trading, and lean-in corporate feminism are all used to characterise the newly arrived "transplant" class. ("The best measure of progress in a town is decent coffee," says Jamie's wonkish girlfriend, just as coffee ranked #1 in *Stuff White People Like*, a popular blog and best-selling Obama-era satire on "left-leaning, city-dwelling, white people" [Lander 2008].) Perhaps the most memorable of these flourishes recurs in Beth Dutton's agonistic, castrating invectives, always aimed at professional-managerial white men, usually in bars though sometimes also in offices. There are two such soliloquies in the first 20 minutes of the pilot alone: one trained at a distressed CEO (who whispers "bitch" under his breath only to beg forgiveness) and another at an out-of-town pickup artist. "You look like a real soft fuck," Beth tells the tourist. "All you city boys do." Such verbal set pieces have become a signature part of the show's appeal ("Don't Make Me Go Beth Dutton On You" is now printed on aprons and T-shirts), and further reinforce the coastal/heartland split. However else one wants to read Beth—as a reactionary feminist, a sexualised revenge fantasy, the site of maternal trauma, the symbolic hysterectomy of the white race—she is also a stiletto-wearing embodiment of Paramount's double strategy: heartland narrowcasting and bringing in women.

## Sheridan's New Native Americans

In one important way, however, *Yellowstone* continues and intensifies the genre work performed by Sheridan's frontier trilogy. In many respects the "frontier" tag is a red herring: the films feature plenty of open space but are charged with a claustrophobic aura, an economic and cultural squeezing—the opposite of expansionism—set against a backdrop of post-Iraq, post-recession anomie. Sheridan's fast-earned reputation as a screenwriter rested in large part on his *feel* for this condition just as it was being politicised.

As early as the 1940s Leslie Fiedler spoke not only of a secondary frontier (the imaginative transformation of the American west into romantic myth) but a new "tertiary, pseudo-frontier" of postwar commercialisation, mass tourism, and Hollywood genre formulae (Fiedler [1949] 1999, 15). As a money-making phenomenon,

*Yellowstone* surely belongs to what Fiedler cynically dubbed “the hoax and . . . the take,” but as a cultural text it internalises and dispels such critiques through a number of means: not only its proximity to the political discourse outlined above but also the (self-)representation of phony carpetbaggers and cultural “compradors”; the conspicuous markers of globalisation and technological contemporaneity (smart phones, Chinese tourists, private jets, etc.); the inclusion of squalor and ugliness (notably drug dens) as a site of aesthetic fascination alongside the pristine landscape; and so on (Fiedler [1949] 1999, 16). More fundamentally, however, beneath Sheridan’s obvious talent for mood and atmosphere runs a complex ideological circuit that retains what Fiedler described as the white man’s “constantly nagging though unconfessed sense of guilt” (for complicity in the cultural genocide of the Indians) but attaches this to the imaginative redescription of white rural life as following a parallel, if historically belated, destiny of erasure (Fiedler [1949] 1999, 22). What cowboys share with native Americans—this thinking goes—is that they are both land-based traditions modernising progress will make extinct. And as cultures (not classes) the only way to prevent such extinction is through the defiant practice and expression of the culture: hence the significance in *Yellowstone* of the rain dances and Indian relay races on the one hand, and the rodeo and lassoing on the other.

The symmetries are deliberate and inform the deepest substratum of the show’s generic racial imaginary. Whereas traditional westerns work on a binary of civilisation and barbarism—or sheep and wolves in which cowboys are hybrid “sheep-dog” figures—*Yellowstone* innovates a tripartite story-world of Indians, cowboys, and newly arrived finance capitalists (coastal elites) that is far more pluralistic and speaks to the shifting, often contradictory sympathies and fantasies of its contemporary audience. As with other recent instances of so-called complex narration (Sperling 2022), the move to a tripartite schema complicates its politics, scrambling binaristic oppressor/oppressed cognitive models while implicitly casting the Duttons as “vanishing mediators,” squeezed between the racially marked (historically antecedent) poverty of reservation life on the ranch’s one side, and the multi-cultural (historically superseding) geography of golf courses and speculative real estate on the other. No longer westward pilgrims, the Duttons, now hemmed-in, in fact exemplify the *opposite* of Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis. According to Turner (and most traditional westerns), the Indians were the ones who “act like wolves and must be treated like wolves” (Turner as quoted in Cowie 2004, 14); in *Yellowstone* this derogation now applies to the over-refined venture capitalists. It is Jenkins, the greedy investor, who gives a paean to man’s “instinct” to roam freely in the pilot: *he* is the new frontiersman. And if we are to believe Fiedler when he wrote that “the heart of the Western is not the confrontation with the alien landscape . . . but the encounter with the Indian, that utter stranger for whom our New World is an Old Home” (Fiedler 1968, 21), then *Yellowstone* is in fact an inverted or inside-out western: the encounter is not primarily with the Indian but with the carpetbagging stranger for whom your old home is new. “Kayce used to tell me what a war it was for you keeping this place,” Monica, John Dutton’s native daughter-in-law, tells him at the start of the third season. “Nothing’s changed,” she adds, with reference



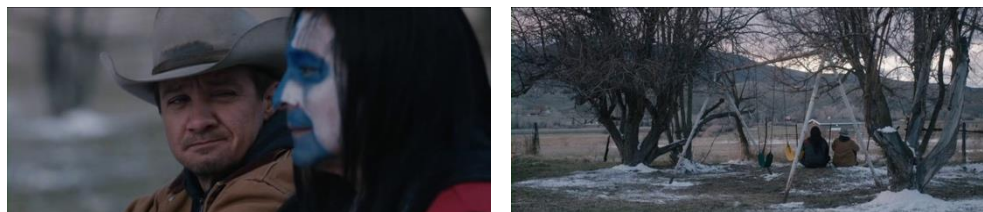
to her own ancestral struggle, “except you’re the Indian now” (the name of the episode is “You’re the Indian Now”).

First the loss of the buffalo, in other words, and now the loss of the ranch or farm (or American manufacturing). Such analogies are problematic, of course, and yet Trumpism (and the new nativism more generally) has been widely understood as precisely the right-wing appropriation of intellectual technologies originally developed by the academic left: cultural relativism, identity politics, standpoint theory, post-structural scepticism, indigenous resistance, and so on. In its political signalling, *Yellowstone* deserves to be read in relation to all of these transpositions, and yet it often cannily expresses the analogy in reverse, as it doubles back on itself, as in the MAGA-like red hat worn by an indigenous rapper that reads “Make America Native Again,” or the “Homeland Security” T-shirts Monica sees native students wearing with the slogan “Fighting Terrorists Since 1492.” Such mappings (re-appropriations) make their intersubjective commute in both directions, however, across culture and history, and while *Yellowstone* has been understood largely in relation to Trumpism (the most recent manifestation of American nativism), its transcultural imaginary draws on an American lineage at least a century old. As Walter Benn Michaels (1995) has argued, it was during the 1920s that the Indians became *the* privileged instance of what it meant to “have a culture” at all, precisely because theirs was at risk of vanishing. Michaels took as his primary reference Zane Grey’s *The Vanishing American* (1925)—a text that more or less underwrites the Thomas Rainwater character in *Yellowstone*—and Lothrop Stoddard’s racist polemic *The Rising Tide of Color* (1920), but his larger point applies to Sheridan as well, namely that to think of *any* racial or cultural group as endangered and vanishing “was inevitably to identify them with the Indians and, in minds more imaginative than Stoddard’s this identification could involve a deeper kinship” (Michaels 1995, 38).

Sheridan’s *Wind River*, the film that caught the eye of the Weinstein Company and paved the way for *Yellowstone*, fantasised a deeper affinity along precisely these lines. “I’d like to tell you it gets easier,” Cory, a cowboy, tells Martin, an Indian, both having lost daughters to kidnapping. “But it doesn’t. If there’s a comfort, you get used to the pain if you let yourself.” This scene—the first-act climax—finds its repetition at the film’s end when the two men sit together, framed in the teepee-like triangle of a swing set (see Figure 2). “No one left to teach here,” Martin says, joking about the warpaint on his face yet echoing the elegiac mood that so characterised the white working-class discourse of the time. “Got time to sit with me?” he asks Cory, who replies (it is the last line of the film), “I ain’t going nowhere,” a line that, inflected differently, expresses the same stand-your-ground defiance of the Duttons (along with most of Sheridan’s heroes).

Like *Dances with Wolves* (1990) (an obvious intertext for *Yellowstone* given the casting of Kevin Costner), *Wind River* can be read as a “white saviour” narrative. Unlike *Dances with Wolves*, it is not a “going native” narrative (though such a template does partly apply to Kayce in later seasons of *Yellowstone*). Rather, Sheridan’s directorial debut

fantasises a spiritual brotherhood between cowboy and Indian, the mutual recognition of a shared historical situation, each culture a reflection of the other. “That was pretty cowboy, huh?” Cory’s mixed-race son says as he learns to ride a horse. “No son,” Cory says. “That was all Arapahoe.” The scene in *Wind River* finds its multi-generational elaboration in *Yellowstone*’s pilot when Tate is brought to the ranch by his father. “Know how to ride a horse?” John asks his mixed-race grandson. “Of course I do, I’m Indian,” the boy says, to which John replies, taking the boy in his arms, “Yeah maybe so, but you’re a cowboy today.”



**Figure 2:** The final stills of *Wind River*, the film that attracted the attention from the Weinstein Company, portray the imagined kinship between the cowboy and Indian, framed within the teepee-like triangle of a swing set.

A full accounting of *Yellowstone*’s relation to the broad lineage of the western deserves a study of its own, so too its representation of indigenous peoples. At the very least this representation is problematic; at its most egregious it is fatuous. (In a personal conversation with me, Sterlin Harjo, the creator of *Reservation Dogs*, spoke of Sheridan’s depiction of native peoples as radically inauthentic.) In itself, however, the use of transcultural metaphor is nothing new: most politically interpretive frameworks (whether decolonial or neo-nativist) conjoin disparate struggles under a common umbrella: hence the common motif of *expressing solidarity*. Though less rhetorically pointed, so much of the narrative voltage powering *Yellowstone*’s long arc across its first two seasons derives from the (repressed) teleological desire to see John Dutton and Thomas Rainwater overcome their initial misalliance and recognise common cause. The same episode in which Monica tells John he is a latter-day Indian (“You’re the Indian Now”), Rainwater is told by his trusted advisor that Dutton “had honor while most wouldn’t” and “maybe he’s not the enemy we think he is.” The two men are watching news coverage of the event that formed the prior season’s finale: Dutton’s raid on a white supremacist cell to recover Tate, his mixed-race grandson. But the television set (as the show understands it) is also transcultural mirror.

*Yellowstone*’s narrative tripling thus works on two fronts. It not only produces the ever-shifting alliances prestige TV seems to require for its plots to thicken; it also keeps inherited political categories perpetually unstable even as it sets two land-based *traditions* against a deracinated, cosmopolitan *class*. As I have written elsewhere, rootedness is a vexed and ambivalent political concept: it can bend towards the left or the right depending on the uses to which it is put (Sperling 2018, 216–223). A decolonial framework would surely see Dutton and Rainwater as historical enemies (separated by the fact of white settler colonialism); in Sheridan’s imaginary, however, the two are

potential brothers (united by the common enemy of cosmopolitan finance). Just as the Indians serve to imaginatively mirror what the Duttons might become (or already are), the evil multinational corporation and white militia (both safe Hollywood villains) serve to further define what they are *not*: in place of the expansionist logic of capital (the corporation) or the zealous logic of ideology (the militia), the Duttons represent, as do the Indians, *not a logic but a way of life*. Hence the importance of locutions such as “my family and families like ours,” as well as the attendant cultural expressions that undergird the similarity: shared dress, cuisine, music, speech, and so on. Speaking of the secondary frontier, Fiedler wrote that “a demand begins to grow for some kind of art to nurture the myth, *to turn a way of life into a culture*” (Fiedler [1949] 1999, 15; italics mine). And as Sheridan and the Paramount executives surely understand, it is a short leap from culturalising (or protecting) a way of life to marketing a lifestyle.

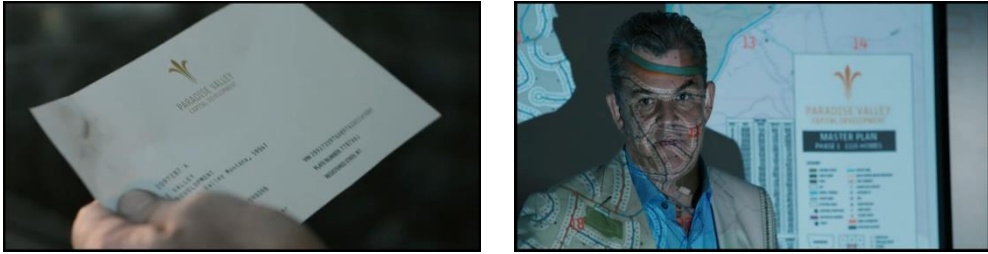
### Logomania and Brand Loyalty

The name of *Yellowstone*’s pilot is “Daybreak,” and the first shot is of sky—the “big blue sky” network president Kay spoke of. A hand soon enters the frame to touch a whinnying, injured horse and we see Kevin Costner’s bloodied temple in profile. “It’s not fair, this life,” John Dutton says as he places his head against the thoroughbred—in his most pensive moments the series often returns to a man-and-horse two-shot—before Dutton euthanises the animal with a revolver. If the sky, according to Kay, is what sets the series apart from the rest of cable, the overall mood of violence and post-moral nihilism aligns it with the broader thrust of prestige TV.

The opening also efficiently encapsulates *Yellowstone*’s narrative premise, understood as the confrontation of the old and the new: what we are witnessing, we learn, is a traffic wreck involving a horse trailer and a truck carrying a modern yellow excavator. More subtly but just as crucially, the opening visually imagines this confrontation as a clash between two logos: when John picks up his cowboy hat we see the cattle-brand Y logo on the inner brim, and when he examines the dead trucker’s papers, we see the fleur-de-lis pattern of Paradise Valley Capital Developments. The second logo in this instance functions analogously to the appearance of the Cross of Lorraine at the start of *Casablanca* (1942), also a detail shot of papers found on a dead man; only here, in *Yellowstone*, we are in a world of private equity rather than national liberation.

The Paradise Valley logo recurs throughout the pilot and is used to coherently brand one tranche of the film’s story-world: the milieu of finance capital associated with liquidity, glass, suits, and the superimposition of image on body as when the fleur-de-lis reappears 20 minutes into the pilot, projected over and beside the face of Dan Jenkins, the greedy developer, as he pitches to a panel of investors (see Figure 3). Another 20 minutes later the logo reappears on Jenkins’s windbreaker when John arrives on horseback to interrupt his game of golf. The visual composition of the encounter—occurring at the exact midpoint of the pilot—recapitulates the fundamental premise of the series: in a diptych likely recombined in post-production, an overwatered putting green meets the dry brush of the ranch (see Figure 4). The showdown between Dutton

and Jenkins not only presents us with a set of hyperlegible semiotic binaries (golf cart/horse, loafers/boots, etc.); it also places duelling business logos at the heart of the conflict, like warring heraldic symbols or modern-day coat-of-arms. “Every family you move in moves a family I know out,” John tells Jenkins, to which he replies, “For every winner there’s a loser,” a neat encapsulation of the zero-sum logic at the heart of the show (“the first thing you said I agree with,” John admits) that also, it must be noted, drives the increasingly tribalised psychology of affective polarisation in American politics (Mason 2015; Miller and Connover 2015).



**Figure 3:** The Paradise Valley logo, an effete visual double of Yellowstone’s more rugged Y (S1 E1, “Daybreak,” June 19, 2018)



**Figure 4:** Jenkins and Dutton meet at the dividing line of a fence (S1 E1, “Daybreak,” June 19, 2018)

Far less subtle than the Paradise Valley logo in *Yellowstone*’s pilot is the prevalence of the cattle-branded Y, also the logo for the show itself. The Y appears not only at the end of the title credits, set off above the name (see Figure 5); it gathers cumulative force during the pilot thanks to its appearance on the pickup truck, jackets and shirts, and

finally, as part of the crescendo before the first commercial break, on the helicopter John boards to survey his property. At this climactic moment, just as the full extent of the ranch's branded assets has dawned on the viewer, John tells Jamie, "Leverage is knowing if someone had all the money in the world, *this* is what they'd buy." The invaluable "*this*" of which John speaks is deliberately capacious and deictic. It refers not only to the material reality of the ranch (real estate) but the immaterial superstructure of the brand (intellectual property). As the music swells and the viewer takes full aerial stock of the land in the pilot's first act climax, it is the black Y on the gambrel-roofed barn that serves as our anchor point, a sort of vortex towards which the flying camera moves (see Figure 6).



**Figure 5:** The show's title sequence exhibits a profound preoccupation with material and immaterial resource economies. We see images of strip mining, mineral extraction, cattle, and wild horses, but we are also watching the audiovisual logo of purely intellectual real estate. (S1 E1, "Daybreak," June 19, 2018)



**Figure 6:** The aerial “money shot” just before the first commercial break discloses the totality of the ranch as well as the cattle-branded Y on its barn. (S1 E1, “Daybreak,” June 19, 2018)

J.D. Connor has described a process of “logorrhea” endemic to studio filmmaking such that “as the property becomes more integral to the corporate imaginary, the logo reaches deeper into the film until the relationship between studio and story switches. Now, instead of slipping the logo into the film, the film takes place ‘inside’ the logo ... The logo, in other words, turns into the utopia” (Connor 2015, 26). Connor’s reading largely applies to *Yellowstone*, though it is important to note that what is fetishised here is not the logo of a studio (and Paramount significantly dropped its mountain from the first logos of the rebranded Paramount Network) nor of pre-existing intellectual property (IP) (as in the X of *X-Men* that furnishes Connor with his primary example). Rather, what we are witnessing in the pilot of *Yellowstone* is the *birth* of a brand (“Daybreak”), something the episode both allegorises and makes literal when Jimmy, a petty criminal, is inducted into the Yellowstone through the ranch’s (and show’s) Y being physically branded onto his chest (see Figure 7).



**Figure 7:** In the pilot, Rip inducts Jimmy into the Yellowstone by branding him with the Y. Jimmy’s long character arc can be read as both becoming-man and becoming-brand. (S1 E1, “Daybreak,” June 19, 2018)



Originating in the ancient practice of marking livestock (dating back to ancient Egypt), the branding of bodies has been a secret practice of some American fraternities as well as the impetus for gang tattoos and other quasi-tribal affiliations (Marriott 1991). The Y on the ranchers' chests similarly works as a mark not only of ownership and loyalty—a site of bondage and belonging—but also of protection and pride. It is talismanic, akin to the “red-hot brand” of Hester Prynne’s scarlet letter that “imparted to the wearer a kind of sacredness, which enabled her to walk securely amid all peril” (Hawthorne 1850, 163). The high-concept frisson of *Yellowstone* is thus to reinvigorate a modern corporate practice with premodern talismanic superstition. The Y in *Yellowstone* collapses character, scar, and logo into one, moving from type to body to social identity.

The long arc of Jimmy is representative of this process. In a pilot that introduces each character in a characterising environment (Jamie in court, Beth in a glassy office, Kayce cowboying, Rainwater at a casino, Monica on the reservation, etc.), it is significant that we first meet Jimmy in a trailer, blasting heavy metal, stammering and drugged. In an efficient bit of casting and art direction, Jimmy appears as a stereotypical meth-head, wire-thin and heavy-lidded, surrounded by an undisciplined libidinal economy of Playboy posters, caged spiders, and empty beer bottles—a “two-time loser,” as Rip, the ranch enforcer, calls him. And when Rip uses a hot branding iron to mark him with the Y, he both inducts Jimmy into the Yellowstone ranch/brand and begins his multi-season arc—a form of hazing—of what Lloyd, an old-timer, later calls the “rough business of becoming a man.” The two trajectories, in fact, are the same—becoming-brand and becoming-man—such that it is only when Jimmy is sent to the Four Sixes in Texas (an actual ranch Sheridan bought with the proceeds from his overall deal, exchanging intellectual property for real property which can then be re-franchised) that his maturation is complete. From undisciplined trailer trash (“You’re either a king or a servant in this place,” he tells Rip before he is branded, “and I ain’t no fuckin’ servant”), Jimmy emerges from the chrysalis of narrative—a spiritual bootcamp of pain, submission, and rebirth—to become a disciple of the brand and its chosen emissary. (It is significant that Taylor Sheridan plays the horse trainer who drives Jimmy to West Texas inducting him into the new “real” cowboying of the historic ranch—e.g. not the fantasised *Godfather*-like cowboying of the original show, as Sheridan began to speak

of *Yellowstone* once the series ran into production delays and contract negotiations with its lead actors, notably Costner, broke down—see Figure 8.)



**Figure 8:** Jimmy (left), once a “two-time loser,” and showrunner Taylor Sheridan (right) as Travis, a trainer “who does nothing but win,” in Texas as part of *Yellowstone*’s fourth season (S4 E9, “No Such Thing as Fair,” December 25, 2021)

Manhood must be achieved and defended just as a brand must be built and stewarded. Both confer social power yet are perpetually vulnerable to reputational risk. “A brand isn’t something you earn,” John tells Rip. “It’s something you live up to.” The aphorism has stood out to numerous fans (who have blogged at length about its meaning) as it has been duly repurposed by the marketing departments at both Peacock and Paramount. As with Sheridan’s best one-liners it holds a coiled force. A warning against complacency (e.g. dues don’t *get* paid but rather *are* paid everyday), it also marks a rhetorical transition from the material base of goods (which you *earn*) to a more heavenly superstructure of ideals (which you *live up to*). Most meaningfully it inverts the expected dependency relation between brand and wearer akin to Kennedy’s patriotic injunction: *ask now what the brand can do for you but what you can do for the brand*. It thus crucially replaces considerations of brand *equity* (what you receive from the brand) with those of brand *loyalty* (how you adhere to it), a replacement that tellingly mirrors the newly described psychology of the American body politic in which “interests” have reverted to “passions” (Bull 2018), “belief-driven buyers are now the majority across markets” (Edelman 2018), and voters behave “more like a sports fan[s] than ... banker[s] choosing an investment” (Mason 2015, 129) or “sports team members acting to preserve the status of their teams rather than thoughtful citizens participating in the political process for the broader good” (Miller and Conover 2015, 225).

### Retailtainment and Franchising

Visual symbols, of course, can be trademarked with the United States Patent and Trademark Office and the show’s logomania works not only to the interested benefit of



its own franchising, merchandising, and licensing contracts; it also builds an aesthetic *protocol*—a kind of cinematographic operating system—within which other brands can be neatly integrated or “folded.” As *Yellowstone* gained steam, producing a kind of cultural mania, viewers were increasingly accessing the show not only via advertising-driven cable (with its commercial breaks) but also subscription on-demand streaming. New revenue streams were poised to saturate the diegesis. By *Yellowstone*’s fourth season, the series was increasingly trading narrative tension (hard to maintain for any series) for the rhetorical logic of product placement and cultural allusion. One episode included pointed references to both Cocoa Chips (the cereal) and Nietzsche (the philosopher), indicating the extent to which the series was turning into an associative vessel for marketing campaigns seeking to partner with the branded lifestyle *Yellowstone* represented (e.g. where brands are the key signifiers of self-expression and belonging). Early placements included Dodge trucks, Coors beer, and Wrangler apparel. Subsequent placements became more blatant and featured Carhartt, Filson, Kimes, Yeti, Schaefer, and others. Beth drove a Mercedes for several seasons before trading it in for a Bentley in season five. As with sports leagues there are tie-ins: Coors is now the “exclusive beer of *Yellowstone*” and the slogan for its new Banquet line is “Grab a Banquet for the Bunkhouse.” The premiere of the fifth season was the platform for Buffalo Trace whiskey to produce its first-ever television ad, complementing its appearance in the diegesis, when Beth conspicuously mixes a drink for her father. “We realized ‘Yellowstone’ as a property shares similar values,” explained the global brand director for Sazerac, the parent company of Buffalo Trace, “and we knew this was a can’t-miss opportunity to introduce our brand to a new and like-minded audience” (Duncan as quoted in Kilgore-Marchetti 2022). (Buffalo Trace now sells sweatshirts, T-shirts, trucker hats, and whiskey glasses, all branded with the trademarked Y.) As one Reddit commentator put it: “I was almost surprised when Rip did not say: ‘Beth, would you like to enjoy an ice-cold beer from this Yeti™ Tundra 35 quart, rotomolded cooler? This cooler, by Yeti TM will keep beverages very cold, and preserve ice for days on end. I could not be happier with my Yeti Tundra™ cooler.’”

The satirical bent of this fan’s commentary indicates the strategic danger of over-mining, what is known as brand dilution, though this is something *Yellowstone* and Sheridan have been largely heedless of. When an episode shows off Beth’s new Bentley a valet remarks on the “beautiful car” (“doesn’t suck,” Beth says) and asks if the “payments are steep.” Beth quips that the “lease payments have an inverse relationship to the length of [her] skirt,” a witticism that finds its double in the next scene when Beth excoriates a Northwestern professor for being a “fucking hypocrite” by “lecturing on inequity and the concentration of wealth” while drawing a “six-figure salary” and saving up for his “dream house.” The culture war script, once a mirror of a network’s corporate strategy, now serves a new purpose, namely, to rhetorically offset the mercantile shilling of product placement. Both the Bentley quip and the liberal-hypocrisy quip belong to the realm of purely rhetorical excess the show’s later seasons increasingly inhabit, a realm of acute (almost high-concept) paradox where commodity fetishism is wedded to an ethos of rugged self-reliance. Seen in this light, so much of *Yellowstone*’s fourth and

fifth season moves in a register not only of industrial self-allegory but mannered, nearly farcical self-allegory, and it begins to dawn on us that what we are watching when we see Kevin Costner playing John Dutton telling a fake cowboy to go back to California is a Californian pretending to be a Montanan telling other Californians to stop pretending to be Montanans. Or when Taylor Sheridan performs horse tricks before an impressed bunkhouse cast, what we are literally watching are employees paid to be filmed oohing and aahing at their boss.

Authorial self-aggrandisement is not, of course, unique to Taylor Sheridan. Nor is the logic of product placement particular to *Yellowstone*. In many ways both are as old as the medium itself. The Walt Disney Company (named after a single individual) granted its first license in 1929, the same year it reorganised its corporate structure into four divisions—production, film recording, real estate, and licensing/merchandising—to reflect the importance of ancillary revenue sources (Wasko 2020, 13). The logic of product placement intensified particularly in the 1980s and after as part of Hollywood’s overall emphasis on high-concept marketing. E.T. also drank Coors, for example, just as Corona has become nearly synonymous with *The Fast and the Furious* franchise. In a paradigmatic case study of this broad phenomenon, Eileen Meehan suggested that Warner Brothers’s *Batman* (1989) was “best understood as a multimedia, multimarket sales campaign,” and that capitalist media is “always and simultaneously text and commodity, inter-text and product line” (Meehan as quoted by Christensen 2011, 281).

*Yellowstone* certainly ratifies Meehan’s broad thesis, but it also moves historically and conceptually beyond the post-ideological window in which it was formulated, whose suppositions continue to underwrite scholarly work on franchising and merchandising. In a recent chapter on Paramount+, for example, media scholar Derek Johnson does not mention *Yellowstone* or Sheridan, preferring instead to focus on the role *Star Trek* played in Paramount’s marketing campaign, in effect bracketing the whole culture wars question (Johnson 2023). The thesis regarding “once familiar” content transposed to a new media framework thus applies reflexively to the method as well: the properties that populated Johnson’s seminal work on media franchises included *The Avengers*, *Battlestar Galactica*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Spider Man*, *Transformers*, *X-Men*, and, of course, *Star Trek* (Johnson 2013).

*Yellowstone* diverges from the received templates of franchise studies in a number of ways. First, it is not a special effects blockbuster aimed at teenagers, nor is it an animated film for children; if anything, its demographic skews older (indicated by its continued dominance on cable and, during the writer’s strike, broadcast). Second, it does not work on pre-existing IP, whether from comics or toys, as do most heavily merchandised franchises (*Barbie* being the most recent case in point). Third, unlike other adult prestige TV properties with tie-in retail potential, such as *Sex and the City* or *Mad Men* (the latter of which had a special product line at Banana Republic), *Yellowstone* does not depict fashion-conscious city dwellers but rather rough, supposedly self-reliant cowboys. Perhaps most significantly, however, the series modifies the “access for all” thesis

regarding the deliberate structural ambivalences in neoclassical Hollywood whose general policy was the opposite of narrowcasting. Hollywood studios, the theory went, wanted instead to appeal to as many viewers as possible through political indecipherability, neutrality, versatility, and/or malleability. When asked if *Forrest Gump* had a liberal or conservative message, Robert Zemeckis replied, “My film is a party to which everyone can bring a bottle” (Zemeckis as quoted in Elsaesser 2011). The line furnished Thomas Elsaesser with a useful shorthand for his reading of *Avatar* (another effects-driven blockbuster) even as *Avatar* seemed to be gesturing towards political allegory.

*Yellowstone*, again, ratifies much of Elsaesser’s “access for all” thesis while also moving beyond its most basic historical premises. The “messy” and “muddled” ideology of the series—as well as Sheridan’s own guardedness in interviews—reflects the strategies Elsaesser delineates, as do the calibrated political wrinkles, such as the recent semi-sympathetic appearance of a vegan activist. Furthermore, as already explored, Sheridan’s updates to the tendencies of his prior feature screenplays reflect the received wisdom of “something for everyone” (e.g. four-quadrant appeal) most scholars see as a defining trait of Hollywood narrative: the patriarch plot appeals to fantasies of white-collar managers; the Kayce-Monica and Beth-Rip romances target the female audience; the bunkhouse plot invites blue-collar male engagement, and so on. And yet, for all these concessions to Hollywood orthodoxy, *Yellowstone* seems to contradict the “access for all” thesis in its very premise, namely, “stay off my land.” That is to say, the “brand identity” of *Yellowstone* is not only horses and cowboying and the heartland but a flinty attitude of stand-your-ground defiance in the face of foreign cultural pressure. If powerful brands are verbs, as advertising wisdom proclaims (e.g. “Nike exhorts. IBM solves. Sony dreams” [Aarons 2011]), then *Yellowstone* defies.

The latent second meaning of Zemeckis’s politically neutral “party” (e.g. not only a festivity but an affiliative group) indicates how much of Hollywood’s neoclassical marketing orthodoxy belonged to a unipolar, end-of-history mood thought to be defined by “the expiration of ideological contestation” where Hollywood product operated in a “postideological matrix of corporatized citizenship” (Christensen 2011, 282). Decades later, *Yellowstone* belongs to a far more segmented, pressurised market environment where partisan affiliations increasingly supervene, at least partly, on corporate identities and the very *possibility* of neutrality may have been seen passing over the horizon. In an industrial ecosystem wracked by the culture and streaming wars, perceived non-neutrality may be an asset, a form of market distinction, especially for smaller firms seeking to compete by serving overlooked demographics. In this sense it is a telling historical conjunction that Paramount went all-in on Sheridan (with spin-offs and tie-ins) right when corporate activism, or so-called “woke-washing,” was reaching its peak in the wake of the police murder of George Floyd; Paramount’s strategy can be seen as a kind of tacking against the wind (a tactic taken by other legacy brands at risk of falling to the second-tier such as *Harper’s Magazine* or the Venice Film Festival). It is likewise telling that the paradigmatic case studies for both franchising and all-access storytelling

(such as *Batman* and *Avatar*) belong to a pre-streaming media landscape defined by the special effects blockbuster and event film. In the streaming age the all-access thesis might still apply, simply no longer to media *texts* but rather the biggest platforms and content providers. Given its algorithmic and capitalised head start, Netflix has tried (and can afford) to generally stay above the partisan fray by effectively branding itself along the twin axes of infinitude and personalisation: “Our brand is personalization ... We didn’t want any show to define Netflix” (quoted in Havens and Stoldt 2023, 202). A much smaller latecomer, Paramount+ may have seen little choice but to pursue a contrary strategy.

## Conclusion: The Spectre of Dilution

Writing in the 1990s, Thomas Elsaesser remarked on the ironic fate of the *politique des auteurs*, where erstwhile (self-styled) romantic outsiders from the 1970s could be reborn in the 1980s as industrial insiders and capitalist entrepreneurs. “The artist is no longer opposed to the business man,” as Elsaesser bluntly put it, “but *is* a businessman” (Elsaesser 1995; italics added). In this new cultural and market reality, auteurism is a marketing strategy and the film director operates “like a brand name of a product, a sort of one man, one name logo: seal of quality, definer of expectations, locus of imaginary/fantasy identification” (Elsaesser 1995). In his tract, Elsaesser had in mind directors such as George Lucas, Steven Spielberg, and, perhaps most of all, Francis Ford Coppola, the director who (curiously enough) was seen to have revitalised Paramount’s sluggish performance in the 1970s thanks to a renewed auteurist aesthetic and artistic leeway. In a sense, then, the corporate strategy of banking on an outsider to revamp company operations was as much in Paramount’s history as the heartland connection was in Spike TV’s—and so too, via Coppola, the authorial strategy of merging the identities of artist, merchant, and visionary.

Here the final, glancing ironies proliferate. Sheridan was said to have pitched *Yellowstone* as “*The Godfather* in Montana” (Hibberd 2023), just as he has since, like Coppola himself, branched into real estate, tourism, and alcoholic beverages. During the 1980s, Coppola acquired a large ranch in Belize thanks to his proceeds from Paramount, just as Sheridan used his overall deal to acquire the historic Four Sixes ranch in Texas, launching Four Sixes beer and cocktails. In late 2023, meanwhile, Sheridan’s other property, Bosque Ranch (whose logo he sports on *Yellowstone* as Travis), recently sued actor Cole Hauser’s company Free Rein for trademark infringement. Both sell craft coffee and, as the suit alleges, the logos for each brand (themselves modelled on cattle brands) are “confusingly similar ... for virtually identical goods” (quoted in Hibberd 2023). Sheridan’s coffee is said to “embody the spirit of the Cowboy” while Hauser’s was “born from the Cowboy tradition.” At the same time, Costner has similarly partnered with Green Mountain Coffee for his own product line, while eatyellowstone.com encourages consumers to “start your day the Dutton way” with the Bunkhouse medium roast. The Yellowstone food brand, featured prominently at WalMart, now also sells spices, chili, smoked meats, bacon, and breakfast links. (Its ad-

copy replicates the template of the other brands, asking shoppers to “celebrate the rustic charm of cowboy cuisine and American traditions with ... an immersive culinary experience that invites you to savor the essence of the series and taste its flavors firsthand.”)

For all its internalised synergy, then, *Yellowstone* risks externalised dissipation. Ultimately the property must be understood as much in relation to Taylor Sheridan as vice versa, just as both brands (one fictive, one authorial) were always married to a third (corporate) brand—Paramount—and possibly a fourth, that of the star, Kevin Costner. All of these stakeholders are fragile allies. As in *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948), the game-theoretic misalignment of their interests threatens to undermine the goldmine they found together. In time, Paramount’s all-in wager on Sheridan may one day be seen as a warning shot. Costner has reportedly left *Yellowstone* (and will be written out) to direct his own cowboy-and-Indians epic, *Horizon: An American Saga*, a Warner Brothers release, whose trailer begins, uncannily, with the voice of Danny Huston, the actor who played John Dutton’s fleur-de-lis-wearing enemy. Meanwhile, Costner’s own voice (and face) has been lent to documentary miniseries *Yellowstone: One Fifty*, now a signature property meant to drive subscriptions for the rival streaming platform, Fox Nation. For his part, Sheridan has begun to distance himself from *Yellowstone* and even the profession of screenwriting, styling himself in interviews and public appearances as more of a cowboy who happens to write scripts than a screenwriter who happens to ride horses.

In the gap between brand synergy and dilution, or (cultural) text and (economic) context, the full meaning of *Yellowstone*, as a property, will play out. The historical conjunction of the culture and streaming wars created new opportunities for brand loyalty and its self-representation, but stalking in the shadows were the perennial threats of reputational fragility, misalignment, distraction, and contingency. Fifty years after *The Godfather* (1972), Coppola is perhaps better known as a maker of wines than films. Whether a similar fate awaits Sheridan remains to be seen.

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Spike Cable Networks Inc. 2020. Service Mark. The mark consists of a stylised “Y” design and the term “YELLOWSTONE” appearing in a stylised font immediately below. United States Patent and Trademark Office, Reg. No. 6,042,705, filed November 18, 2019, registered April 28, 2020.

Spike Cable Networks Inc. 2023. Trademark. The mark consists of the word “YELLOWSTONE” in stylised lettering. United States Patent and Trademark Office, Reg. No. 7,199,132, first use August 21, 2020, registered October 24, 2023.

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