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Heroic Realism: Violence, Conservatism, and the Fate of Culture

In an epic trawl through the heroic narratives of Hollywood action movies, TV crime drama, and their maverick protagonists, from The Maltese Falcon to Dexter via 24, Amanda Beech explores the depiction of law, violence, and the politics of contingency, and asks what the resolute actions of these heroes have to tell us about conceptions of the political force of culture

A standard Hollywood version of the action hero that proliferated in the 1980's is now the subject of parody from those outside of this system and its original perpetrators alike.[1] This is the kind of hero that ignored the law, pushed his (it was usually a man) personal agenda and was free from doubt, contemplation or anxiety. Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone, and Bruce Willis set the precedent for these A-list machismo-steroid-pumped agents of destruction, and their presence honed this genre with sequels, franchises and effective and simple slapstick-comic scenarios.

These heroes were often persuaded to return to action—to the role of the hero—with some resistance. And traditionally, this return to action was followed through because the threat to the larger body politic, often understood as the nation state, coincided with a threat to their family. Indeed, through this reluctant but necessary return to action, our heroes succeed in reconfiguring the normative good of the West simultaneously with the preservation or even restitution of their family unit.[2] This local interest/national interest axis underscores the link these narratives make between public and private and subject and world, since for these characters, nation is world. Bringing the hero back into action thus promises to reinvigorate the state or governmental power—often in the form of a benevolent

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1. *The Expendables*, 2010, Sylvester Stallone, and *Last Action Hero*, 1993, John McTiernan.

2. *Die Hard*, 1988, John McTiernan, features a family who seek to be reunited for Christmas and are prevented from doing so by terrorists; *Commando*, 1985, Mark L. Lester, features a father who had retired from service must go back to fight terrorism in order to save his kidnapped daughter.

liberal President as a universal condition of life. For these characters there is never a wrong turn: Every decision *leads somewhere*. And death is impossible—only other people die.

This vector constitutes an ethical frame for all action, and the subject as plot device extends action towards this borderless and baseless field that apparently has neither ground nor guarantee. What is interesting about the series of action scenarios that make up these films is that this world of contingency does not focus on a tragic or self-conscious subjectivity. Constantly in action, these figures do not have time to dwell on thinking the human condition, nor do they have time to contemplate their own. They have no bearing upon or consciousness of the correlation between the personal and the ethical, since for them, this correlation is forged at the level of the pre-political and natural condition of life. In action, always in action...sleeping at the wheel can only promise death. There can be no room for doubt, no questioning of the gap between perception and reality. Events, occurrences, objects, sounds, and images are taken as facts to be dealt with, each according to the circumstances of action.

This contingent world in camera produces particular cultural scenarios that reveal a contemporary understanding of power, action, and death that is often reflected in popular narrative. It tells us that, *in action*, our community, relations, and affiliations are impossible; and that if we seek to act, then we must go to work without a central ethical consciousness. To be modern, to be decisive and to be mobile, in this sense, means leaving sociality behind. Moreover, it tells us that our morals are mere semantics, and that our desires are located only in the present. If any ties to law are possible at all, then they fall back on the reference to the family unit, as index of the basic principle of the preservation of human life. This principle is only captured as an invisible and immanent background or as an initial but quickly forgotten catalyst for the aesthetics of violence on screen. In action, this is a quasi-Rousseauean reality: a world without consciousness, without measure, but one that invariably turns us toward an unregulated and invisible norm—a norm where individual self-interest is eclipsed by the tradition of a neoliberal subjectivity. This is something from which these characters cannot move one inch away.

In the face of this capitalistic and conservative but nevertheless dynamic figure of modernity, the leftist complaint has often been that these figures are not free to identify the nature of the power that drives their action; and that therefore their actions, which appear to be forceful and effective, only serve to perpetuate the forces of existing ideological power. Since there is no distinction here between subject and law, so the argument goes, the individual and the family coalesce through the mobilization of an individualistic drive that knows nothing of the relations between the two, and is therefore unable to change or to nurture them. Action therefore privileges a naive foundationalism that emphasizes dynamic violence as the conservative axis of culture.

Although this figure of violence has become a standard archetype of contemporary power, as underscored by the many parodies of these action-based scenarios, the figure of a hero who lives a 'contingent life' exacerbated by an aesthetics of violent and often aggressive individualism has been and still remains a guiding tradition in literature, philosophy, and film. It can be seen in the Nietzsche-inspired literary philosophy of Ernst Jünger's epic leftist and quasi-fascistic modernism, the tradition of hardboiled noir in Dashiell Hammett, the exploits of technocratic law in the *CSI* franchise, and the consistent narratives of justice that produce HBO award-winning series. The figures in these scenarios play out decision in the context of a world without morality, ethics, or law. A place where there are no hard and fast rules, only the process of the moment in which we are all caught.

These transmutable, flexible, self-interested, charismatic, and driven subjects underline the problems of locating and understanding both contingency and the political. The fundamental instance of contingency here is a form or figure in action, and this contingency acts as the central and basic (non) foundation for the life of the characters. These characters are the vehicle or medium of contingency in so far as they manifest the conditions of a changing life that is shot through by the violence of the unknown. This characterization of power seeks to develop a subject of contingency rather than a subject that transcends contingency. However, as we shall see, this attempt at realism ends up producing or recalling certain standards. While on the

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one hand contingency is read as the destabilization of all standards, on the other hand it appears with a specific character of its own: that of a type of neo-conservative violence.

This type of violence connects agency to the realm of a sovereign meritocratic and aristocrat subject. A self-rule and rule of the best stands in opposition to a democratic materialism because the subject takes on the role of a divine type that is the result of the idealization of a (neo)liberal principle of freedom.

The conditions under which these characters act should lead us to question the politics of culture. This is not just the question of the depiction of specific neo-conservative agencies that feature predominantly in Western narratives, but that of the way in which we understand contemporary culture as figuring for itself the same kind of vision—the way in which culture adheres to this characterization as the space of freedom, competition, and force—wherein the thrust of the new is lived as part of a larger, invisible but known abstract power. This alerts us to the particular thrall of realism, and the questions that a realist culture draws us towards: If culture understands itself to participate in the world that it presents to us, and if this world is taken seriously, then we could say that culture writes itself, and its destiny, as a private and conservative fiction.

This is the ultimate horror story for culture, in which culture seals its own fate as non-political. In the face of this, we must now question the requirement that culture must produce contingency at all. What might it mean to displace the question of contingency away from its idealistic center? What kind of realism could culture produce without idealizing the connection between image and reality, and without deposing the capacity for the image to participate in the construction of reality?

In our examples up to this point, the character of contingency is easily tied to the force of modernity: in the action-hero narratives we recognize the vitality of the force of decision, innovation, and change. Contingency promises difference. However, this idealization of contingency and its character is a mistake since, as we have seen, it results in the naive affirmation of contingency as the definition or false mirror of the status quo.

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This text attempts to reflect on these problems, and asks first of all how any thought of contingency inflected with a transcendental realism is to be accounted for in the political as language. This question naturally leads to the alternative possibility—that, if the nature of contingency demands that there can be no politics of contingency because any attempt to construct such a politics on this groundlessness would be at best contradictory, at worst ironic, then we must rethink the conditions under which we understand the political in any sense, or at all.

If this is a question of strategy in the context of contingency, or more precisely in the context that disallows a theory of context, then our project would be compelled to reimagine the modes of cultural practice that we currently operate within, because they too have made the great error of opposing stability to instability, change to the status quo, and the singular to the plural, as a means to bear out the thought of contingency in material form.

A question of culture arises specifically here, because designating contingency as a non-idealist absolute

risks undermining all facets of language and mediation as false and weak expressions. The focus here would privilege the authority of contingency as the supreme power that reduces all other forms to semantics. This approach would therefore risk forging incorrect and unrealistic distinctions between what is thought and what is pictured, and would fail to account for the place of our reason—that is, our ability to reason contingency, to understand it, and the way in which this understanding must manifest itself in the material world.

Faith in Contingency

The question of how our comprehension of contingency is expressed within the realm of the fictional and the political is central to a problem of representation, and our predilection for thinking in ontological terms. This is especially pertinent to the way in which contingency becomes a principle that gets mapped onto particular circumstances, behaviours, and things, and how in turn this is understood as a means to develop a real politics that can surpass and supplant the status quo of dominant power. Taking this into consideration, it is helpful to explore the ways in which philosophy and fiction have worked through a theory of contingency. By doing so, we can rehearse our concern that certain theories of contingency develop specific forms of conservative culture and politics that share and nurture the standard definitions of life and desire that correspond to a global neoliberal climate.

Firstly, let us acknowledge that a comprehension of the world as contingent easily conjures up a kind of dramatic paranoia, a world of 'Who can you trust?' action where there are only certain things that we can fall back on: family, home, the basic ethics of a rational community. But when these fail, we fall back on the last bastion of trust, by locating the lone individuated and alienated subject as the last survivor. One dimension of this world of paranoia is that within it, techno-capital is read as the primary condition of cultural abstraction, and is located as the means by which we experience contingency and the consciousness of an ungrounding and orient it towards some idea of redemption.

Ernst Jünger's heroic realist theory is particular pertinent here. In his 1927 essay 'Fortschritt, Freiheit und Notwendigkeit', Jünger writes: 'In our technical era the individual appears to be evermore dependent, "unfree" and endangered.'[3] He continues: 'but the nature of these bonds are less visible than those of the feudal era. Hence they are even more absolute than the absolute monarchies.'[4] Jünger's work springs from the recognition that, with the advent of technology and capitalism, there was a dissolution of any recognizable polemics that might allow one to perform a dialectics of political and revolutionary power. Consequently power, for Jünger, is the invisibility and alterity of capitalism, which manifests itself as a kind of metaphysical nature-force. Instead of criticizing this power as a figure, since such a figure is always unavailable, and by instead understanding it as a process, Jünger assimilates it into the rhetoric of heroic submission and sacrifice.[5] Here, submission to the thrall of capitalistic techno-power is related not to a defect but to an advantage, a theatre in which to play out one's own power struggle:

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> The machines are not only directed against nature, but against us as well. We depend on these steel translations of our blood and our brains, just as the actor depends on his act. No power is in a position to offer the stars to us other than we, ourselves. If it is not our intention, so it certainly is our innermost will to sacrifice our freedom, to give up our existence as individuals and to melt into a large life-circle, in which the individual has little self-sufficiency as a cell which must die when separated from the body.[6]

Jünger constructs a modernist vision of techno-capital quite distinct from the Volkish, pastoral aesthetics preferred by other philosophers and theorists, including Heidegger, where countrified lifestyles and rustic technologies were preferred over the threat of

3. J. Herf, *Reactionary Modernism, Technology, Culture and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 87. E. Jünger, 'Fortschritt, Freiheit und Notwendigkeit', *Arminius* 8 (1926), 8–10

4. Ibid., 88.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

these 'anonymous' technologies of cities and steel. Nor did his theory seek to overthrow the normative conditions of a life in techno-capital; rather, the redemption here was at the level of a spiritual-aesthetic experience of constraint. These more mystical powers are now the only reality worth considering, and surpass all other forms of political reality. Consequently, by undertaking and assimilating the aesthetics of the high speed modern life, associated with an avant-gardist or specifically 'modernist' vision,[7] Jünger creates a politics of 'total mobilization' through the manipulation of and surrender to 'futuristic' technological forces which he identifies as being present in the subject's 'innermost will'. Here an unrestricted drive to self-sacrifice embodies not only an anonymous slavery and the romanticism of the loss of reason and feeling, but also the possibility that one could be the avid spectator of one's own death, in a comprehension of one's own subjectivity through an intimate relation with an aesthetics of violence.

Whilst Jünger's work sought to overcome the tragic consciousness associated with Marxian inspired revolutionary theory, what we see captured in his work is the destiny of techno-capital written as a form of negative freedom. For Jünger, therefore, the artistry required for such a life can only be exercised privately, or manifest itself as a fictive narrative that finds it difficult to assert its claim as a politics that might transcend the conditions of this imagined natural context.

In contemporary society, the 'contingent space' of capitalist power standardizes a post-Thatcherite world where society as a concept has now reached its terminal point. It is here that the self-interest of particular parties resides. Goals change every day, affiliations are flirtations, and no one trusts anyone. The basis of power has to be mobile and dynamic. This space-in-flux serves to indicate a world of contingency to which we are all bound, and which is conducted by the avaricious needs of capitalistic power in action.

House of Cards (BBC Television, 1990) (riffing on *Macbeth*) features the Chief Whip of the Conservative Party Francis Urquhart (Ian Richardson) fighting from the inside to seize power with a relentless, ruthless, and tenacious conviction. Every event is an opportunity. The make-up of the corrupt environment mimics a world of Darwinian survival, where the lives of humans are thrown into a machine of their own making that now figures reality. Tellingly, after his underhand clawing to secure the position of Prime Minister, Urquhart meets his own violent death at the end of the series, when the Thatcher memorial is unveiled. He is assassinated at the behest of his wife. The unveiling of the monument at this crucial point articulates a specific identity; it acts as a kind of capitalistic contingency that haunted Urquhart throughout his leadership. He watched the installation from his window, where the monument remained under wraps, and he subconsciously anticipated the unveiling ceremony as the revelation of the utter contingency of his own power in the face of another ubiquitous judgment.

7. For more information regarding Jünger's conception of technology as being opposed to that of 'traditional' antimodern thinkers, see Herf's theory of 'reactionary modernism' as an alternative to the antimodern: Herf, *Reactionary Modernism*, 154.

This unveiling marked the abstract center of contingent power, the heart of its operations, and it was bound to necessitate his death.

In this way, the icon of Thatcher in *House of Cards*, as concept-ghost and finally as real symbolic presence, embodies the contingency and thrall of capitalistic power present throughout. Its unveiling is the commemorative guarantee that power is fickle and temporal, that power will always be that of a kind of unregulated private and conservative economics, which Thatcher, as figure of the political, holds over, even in death. This revelation of the figure of capital from the background of processional action, however, does not bracket the action: it stains action right the way through; it is the affect of all narrative processes. Contingency is read through these different forms of violence that coalesce in a politics of individuation, alienation and power.

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The requirement for this central immanent ethic of the personal/global or, as we have seen, the figuration of contingency towards a social and heroic realism of techno-capital that might bind and support the 'freedoms' vouched for under neoliberal capitalism and which must be met in death, invite us to explore further the possibility for a culture that might offer a realism of contingency—that is, a contingency without ground. More specifically, this is the question of whether a culture can engage with the decision that is required by reason whilst continuing to participate in the scene of the social. I want to examine a few investigations in narrative form that attempt to resist the choreography of instability as a form of dramatic edge, a trick that is foregrounded in Hollywood story arcs, as a means to explore works that seek to move closer to a realist understanding of contingency.

Values: Capital and Contingency

The anxiety about the loss of stability, the groundlessness of our action, our inability to make moral judgments, and the impossibility of connecting our actions with any causal guarantees, dominates cultural history and its contemporary present. The question of where assurance lies, where conviction can be claimed, and how we might operate in this world that constantly reminds us of the contingent nature of life, continues as a form of folk narrative and a critical question. It has also been central to political theories that demand a re-thinking of democracy, as well as attempts to turn the political towards questions of commonality and equality.

Our 'media of contingency' invite specific figures of contingency that hinge upon various aesthetics of violence. Moreover, we can see that contingency has been essentially coupled with neoliberal capitalism, and serves to reinforce the state of the situation in which we find ourselves by portraying it as the space of nature. Already we can see that this conflation between power, violence, capital, and contingency underscores the difficulty of differentiating the deep and conservative individualism of such a culture.

Does the theorization of contingency only succeed in generating conservative and violent political action? Is culture capable of doing more than mirroring the conditions of capital as the symbolic form of contingency that they seek to grasp, so that contingency is destined to the genre of forms of melodrama? And if not, is culture destined to be conservative? The proliferation of these narratives can also be employed to question how we produce a theory of contingency. Can we understand contingent life as capable of generating a politics that moves beyond these figures of heroic realism? And if so, what might this look like?

In the film *The Maltese Falcon* (Warner Bros., 1941) Humphrey Bogart plays the noir hero Sam Spade. Spade is sleeping with his partner's wife, and she gets in the way. His partner is knocked off on a too simple surveillance gig that seemed suspicious from the start. Spade gets back to the dame that caused

all the hullabaloo (Brigid O'Shaughnessy, played by Mary Astor). She plays the victim at first, blubs a little, but then tries to play him against some other patsies. It looks like he might fall for her, but in the end he sells her out—not to the law, but to redeem the murder of his partner and friend.

This is only one part of the story, because working through this is the story of the Maltese Falcon itself. What the Maltese Falcon *is* is not important, and this is evidenced by it only being revealed two-thirds of the way into the film. Instead, the Falcon, much like the McGuffin in Hitchcock, is the object of exchange around which the action takes place. It is the object of desire, but also the object that has a shifting price on its head.[8] The movement of this object, its changing hands, its location, who has it, who had it, occupies the weight of the narrative, but this weight is mobile and also in motion. The film recuperates this mobility in a loading-up of action. Scenes are amassed almost on top of one another, heaped through hard edits and dark swipes like someone mixing cement; the weight of a building-up of tension through a gathering of information. The combined speed and hot clamour of the film in action reinforces the excess and efficiency of 'story', the desire to cut through the bullshit and get to real decision-time. Spade reflects this desire, in action, cutting through scenes, moving through characters, violent, interrogating, squinting, bored and jaded with the flim-flam. The intensity of the cinematic edit, the insistent dialogue and the claustrophobic lens of the camera, generate the pervasive airless affectual register of the film.

In the end *The Maltese Falcon* reinforces the link between law and justice, as Spade hands O'Shaughnessy over to the law—the kind of redemption shown here is not sweet. At the end of the film Spade gives up the girl, and this is a girl that he could have had some kind of future with. He destroys any potential for being together, of being more than one, in favour of the memory of a friend.

8. Hitchcock's 'McGuffin' can be seen in many of his films. In *Psycho* (1960) it is the money, the stolen cash that prefigures all the action and yet never appears, is never discussed or acknowledged as vital in the film. In *The Lady Vanishes* (1938) the McGuffin is the hummed tune that holds the secret message that must be relayed across the continent back to England for the sake of the war effort. The tune is the catalyst for the vanishing of our agent Miss Froy (Dame May Witty), but it is never thematised, and the message that it carries is never disclosed.

As such, to be the agent of action, Spade has to be alone. Spade's justice can only be achieved by the dissolution of his personal connections. He must give up the promise of a life with others. All that we are left with is law and individual justice as the necessary and real condition of life. People just seem to get in the way.

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The law of the police has very little to do with the sub-currents of exchange that monopolize the narrative here. The police as an enforcing regulatory power occupy a parallel position to the central narrative, and only step in at specific times to act as a more symbolic force. In this way, the police narrative figures the background threat to the success of the narrative itself, the story that we, as an audience, encounter.

Spade is accused by the police of being the murderer of his partner, and threatened. If the police were proved right, everything would simply stop.[9] However, in the main narrative, it is the collision between the uncertainty of relations and the value of the Falcon that figures our central drive—and pursuing this object, for Spade, is the only way he can get to his real purpose—justice. The lives of 'The Fat Man', billionaire Kasper Gutman (Sydney Greenstreet), the obsessive Falcon hunter, and Spade, the seeker of justice, are now set in tandem. The flow of value, verbal exchanges on the myth of

9. See below on *Dexter*, where this applies throughout—Season 1 and 2 see Sgt. Doakes obsess about the truth of Dexter's crimes: 'You give me the fuckin' creeps, you know that Dexter?'; and LaGuerta, in season 7, takes up the same case against Dexter. Both end up dead.

the Falcon in the intimidating dining rooms of the vulgar corrupt rich, the valuelessness of life, when the young hood who acts as The Fat Man's muscle is thrown over to death row as the patsy he was—all of these things are insignificant, since they are only means to win the Falcon and for Spade to achieve justice. Spade will do as much to get his justice as the evil capitalist will do to get the Falcon.

But as we, the audience, and Spade discover, the real Falcon was never part of this circle of deceit. The Falcon they are hunting is a cheap imitation. Spade's partner was killed because he got mixed up with the search for the Falcon, but the question of whether the Falcon was authentic or not has no bearing upon Spade's search for justice or his eventual arrest of the girl. Here we see two worlds collide into one: the Falcon is both the catalyst of and the object of the action. For Spade, getting mixed up in the chase for the Falcon is a means to justice, and for the gang The Falcon is a means to accumulation. The first has a crime to avenge, the latter inhabit a world of desire, but both are imbued with a corruption that is embedded within the system of everyday lives, a place where the standard law of the police does not matter. The flow of value-capital here has no grounds, the object they assumed they had in their grasp—the Falcon statuette—was never in their possession in the first place, and this fact, like police law, plays no causal role in the course of events.

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It is here, in this description of exchange, intrigue, and desire, that we can identify the correlation between the contingent and precarious site of the situation and the metaphor of capitalist exchange. This metaphor is literally deprived of its object when the gang of obsessive Falcon hunters find out that the Falcon they imagined to be authentic was in fact a copy. Here, in the chase, both money and the film's expressive delivery of this contingent life are deep abstractions that are unified in one totalizing poetic experience. Realizing that the Falcon was never in their possession does not mean that these players will turn to a life of obedience within the standard law of police jurisdiction. Consciousness here has no causal link to transcendence. Instead, the turbulent world of capitalistic forces remains, as the site of a life of desire, and the swell of corruption disposes of stability and community.

Spade's search for justice must also follow the system of exchange, and participate in it. Contingency here, for Spade, is manifest in the chaos of relations generated through capital. The aesthetics of capitalist contingency is a kind of pragmatic realism that reinforces the strong division between self and society as abstract referents that are never to meet. As a detective, the work of solving the crime of the murder while at the same time securing justice for his partner has no bearing upon solving the mystery of the Falcon. The Falcon is still out there, it exists as a concept alone, maybe a real object...held someplace in the hands of private wealth. Only Spade can transgress this architecture of contingent capital. He escapes the attraction of love, and of the Falcon itself and with it the promise of big bucks.[10] Whilst a lot of money is promised and also changes hands during the film, Spade hardly breaks even for his time on the job. Spade takes $100 for the original job, and a little more later from O'Shaughnessy for another job. Joes Carro, another Falcon Hunter, offers Spade $5000 to locate the Falcon, but Spade only gets the down payment of $200. Spade takes $1000 from The Fat Man, Gutman, at the end of the film, but even this is handed over to the police in the final scene. Spade is not in it for love, money, or the Falcon.

Ordinarily, a subject is defined in relation to overlapping circles of values, such as police law, family, community, desire.... Spade, however, is different, since he holds these circles apart, not allowing them to overlap. The Falcon and Spade, in this instance, are two opposing forces, one that cuts, one that binds with the force of a telos. Spade and the Falcon can therefore never find redemption in each other. This radical antinomy places Spade outside of the spheres of regulation, where he is unbound from the relation to capital. In a world of the dispossessed,

10. The term 'nature' here specifically refers to the insinuation of contingency as a natural force in the world, the force that guarantees that there are no guarantees, and the rule that refuses to provide us with any restitution of ground or ontology by which action can be taken, understood, or planned.

choosing justice guarantees further alienation: a radical alienation from capital and from the rootless society that capital constructs. The rest of the shmucks out there are just chasing a dream and fooling themselves with concepts like happiness and the future, the big win, and soft dreams of love that are unfit for this lean world. Spade knows better, but significantly, his knowledge is not negatively orientated. He is not cynical; rather, his knowledge is defined by an affiliation to other beliefs, centrally the justice of his personal revenge. In this, his consciousness of the false dreams of others suspends him in the world, as an agent that must be alone and must be violent. He knows that subjects are not free, that they are the products of power relations, angles, scams, and desires.

Schemas of Contingency

The law of the police does not govern Spade; rather, he has embedded law in his own terms. *The Maltese Falcon* shows us the edges of capital and the thought of other schemas of power that seem to exist in parallel worlds. Here we see the legal criminal world of the police, whose power sets the standard framework for the story and constitutes the most passive and consistent element of its drama. The next schema is that of capital, where the key players aim to outdo each other to win the object of their desire. For some, the Falcon is the means to other accumulation, but for our billionaire, Gutman, it marks the pinnacle of accumulation itself. And thirdly, we have the world of Spade, the register of another law, but one that necessarily participates within the other two, first to seek justice and then finally to execute it in the form of arrest. Significantly, Spade is not a vigilante: he returns to the site of state law to get his revenge, as if the making public of his justice is central to his case. This desire for public testimony, accountability, punishment and confession is central to the crime genre, where some order is restored through a recognition of communal justice. Brad Pitt's character Mills in the film *Se7en* (David Fincher, 1995) faces the same drama: he can choose to mete out his own revenge by killing serial killer John Doe (Kevin Spacey), or can take the path of a central, public justice. He is tortured by this grotesque choice. In the end, Mills takes the other route: he gets involved in that other register of the law that is the law of the killer. John Doe sets Mills up to perform the kind of justice whereby Doe gets to decide his own end. Mills, therefore, provides the killer with the satisfaction of his desire. Mills shoots him, to the dismay of his paternalistic partner, Somerset (Morgan Freeman), who knows all too well that personal revenge cannot be accommodated by the law. Mills's action, effectively outside of the law, brings him swiftly back into its jurisdiction, where, at the closing of the film, he must now face the law as a criminal.

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For Spade, there is no choice or anxiety, since these categories are more stable, and his actions ultimately coincide with prevailing law because he does not mete out his revenge personally. Instead, he mediates this revenge through the prevailing law of justice. It is only this life, where action and mediation are set in tandem, that grants him his autonomy. Spade has the ability to skilfully move between these registers, and therefore to stand apart from the binary distinctions that might be made between law and capital, objective and subjective, ethics and politics, fixed and mobile, and good and evil. In fact, Spade's character collides desire and law in a schema of violence that exceeds both capital and the law. By way of Spade's actions, we are shown the edge of these realist landscapes, and offered another world that is his alone. This world is demanding. This is because we are asked to become the law and to exact law, rather than live out our desires as our essential drive.

Contingency, in *The Maltese Falcon*, lies where these worlds or regimes of law, police, and capital collide. Here, as contingent forces they imply no particular relation to each other but participate within the same sphere of life, gesturing towards their own intrinsic differences. In doing so they generate a transcendental politics that is figured through a mobile subject who can artfully navigate these realities and interact with them. As this individual, however, Spade has no interest in changing these systems. He must be alone and un-free: a figure without stable or long-term connections. But this freedom that we glimpse in Spade is not situated against a concept of constraint, for the freedom that is afforded to Spade is one where he must decide, and act. Law and justice are embodied as a form of nature.

This larger comprehension of contingency as the collision of existing schemae, and the fact that these vertical categories are never really destabilized or compromised through their interactions or by Spade's hand, demands that we consider how the politics of contingency that seems to be played out in this film relates to community, individuation, and certitude, as well as any understanding of change. The characters in the film do not undergo any process of emancipation, and all remain tied to the life of desire that the Falcon beguiles them with. The kind of transcendental figure of the political that is conjured here in the figure of Spade is particularly poignant in its preservation of the status quo. Spade is not motivated by his or others' redemption, and does not judge the conditions of his environment in any moral or political sense—he is without taste. As such, we could say that *The Maltese Falcon* serves to establish the charismatic and dark nerve centre of capitalistic processes as the real that is the background to action, as much as the fiction of an ethical subject who can choose not to locate himself within the drive of these desiring-forces. This Lacanian realism draws on the drama of the human. The drama of the piece consists in the temporal collision of two worlds that, as I have said, ultimately escape unscathed from this meeting. Ethical law and capitalist desire are drawn together through Spade's life of decision. The framework of *The Maltese Falcon* draws our attention to the normative condition of these categories as ideological forces that go uncontested; and we are also made aware of the idealist and naïve comprehension of contingency designated as the space of 'unfigured' or non-representational action that results, as the collision between two categories—naïve because Spade is the figure of this contingency as action. Extending within the narrative itself we identify the inflexibility of subjects; the fantasy of decontextualized action; the mythical sovereignty of individual will; and the enforced legitimacy of this will as the power that will always win out over concepts of community. This indicates further questions as to the conditions of fiction and its politics: we must ask how culture keeps in its sights the fiction of contingency as a condition of 'meaningfulness', and how this appeal to contingency satisfies the ideological norms of capital as a lived entity and the prevalence of fiction as an inconsequential fantasy.

The premise of *The Maltese Falcon* is that the worlds we know are not enough, and that there are other possibilities for a life that exists beyond the given. However, as we can see, this life often relies upon the restitution of these norms in order to speak to a particular kind of alienation that risks replicating the conditions of the dominant ideology. What would it mean to break from these paradigmatic forms? Would this require the evacuation of a theory of contingency from our political horizon?

Destruction of Abstract Relations

The catalyst for most heroes in the genre of the Hollywood action movie is a moment where the hero reluctantly goes back to work in the defence of a concept of family. This is a defense of the private, manifested as a personal and selfless act, the value of which the characters can often only recognize fully by going through this process. Importantly, this restitution of family is often correlated with the restitution of order at the level of the good, in forms of military power, government, or state control. But the allegorical premise in *The Maltese Falcon* is that the stable configurations of both family and state are gone. Fixing one is not correlative to reconstituting the other. The state and family are past redemption, and we are left with the figures of contingency as our primary condition. In entering this landscape, we must now look more closely at the politics of these constellations.

What 24 offers is the impossibility of a return to the dynamic correlation between subject and state, family values and state interests

But first I will trace this transformation from stability to contingency in another narrative. Kiefer Sutherland as Jack Bauer in *24* (2001–10, Fox) begins Season 1 playing out the same family-orientated narrative that we have seen in the more traditional action hero movie: the kidnapping of his wife and daughter act as the catalyst for his taking action and getting out of the office in the subterranean Counter Terrorism Unit (CTU) in Los Angeles. However, significantly, by series 7 we see a shift: Jack Bauer is declared officially dead, and becomes a true rogue agent: we know that the President is an evil putz, ignorant, power hungry, and stupid, leading the country on whim, and has no understanding of ethical codes. Money and power dominate his decisions. When the country is led by the self-interest of one man, then law as we know it is suspended. We can no longer believe in government.

This lack of faith in government marks the point at which the drama gets ramped up, and is eclipsed by Bauer's suspicions about the ethical value of his family. The precious code of the familial bond that had, until Season 6, acted as the guiding principle of Bauer's interests, is smashed when Bauer tortures his brother and is sold out by his father. Whilst family and government are understood traditionally as correlative and stable entities that can be used to background a drama of uncertainty and then as a means to play out a final redemption and reconstitution of these relations, what is central to this scenario is that the hero is responsible for the destruction of these objects. What *24* offers in this instance is the impossibility of a return to these forms of stability, this dynamic correlation that we have seen as standard—that is, the correlation between subject and state, family values and state interests. Whereas in our standard action hero narratives contingency is a dramatic value that acts as the shaky ground upon which human drama is played out, here the axis of agency drives through these category forms with another set of principles that outweigh the political and moral themes of rights, individuation, and family.

The characters in *24* who make things happen are all radically disconnected from any ethics. This loss of family as a locus or motivation for action dislocates further any sense of ground, for there is no longer any origin for action nor any promise of any redemption. Their decisions are centred on short- or long-term goals, and abide by no central code. If there are beliefs being put into motion here, then they are often capable of changing.

Entering this world of contingency, an aesthetic of an inevitable time commands the action, quite literally, in the form of a digital ticking bomb or alarm-style clock that interrupts Bauer's exploits every twelve minutes or so (just in time for the commercials), forcing the screen to cut into sections, literally disfiguring the notion of a central narrative, as we see, as if in real time, action occurring in different locations.

Through this fragmentation of narrative, stability, and unilateralism, we can return to the question that *The Maltese Falcon* proposed around the politics of these narratives. We can ask whether this condition of contingency is merely the assertion that our lives are meaningful because they are dramatic, and that this drama is everywhere. Here we live by and against the clock, and time is never on our side.

If this is correct, then contingency may be understood as non-distinct from those conservative narratives where our action hero went to work with comic-book-style vigour—those that invite contingency into the drama at specific points as a plot device. This invitation to the world of contingency pushes the naturalization of contingency into the space of an infinite drama, or borderless theatre.

Time and Contingency

The figure of contingency that is presented as standard in *24* is the figure of time itself. We are always against the clock, time is without us, we are held in its thrall. The world that *24* presents is one that barely holds together. This is a tense world, made up of fickle agreements that are threaded together by a mixture of necessity, faith, desperation, and a strategizing towards avaricious and narcissistic power. It is a world that marches on, whether we like it or not, through time. It is only when all the empirical ties of family, belongings, and even his own identity are evacuated that we see Bauer thrive as the protagonist for a real justice within this world.

Bauer's actions have no absolute relation to the countdown of *24*, even if every episode is presented as if in 'real time', in the representation of one hour per show to make twenty-four hours in a season. The countdown is something that permeates his world—he feels the countdown to each hour, and each hour is a segment of urgency; but this collision between our time and Bauer's fictive time is experienced more at the intense points of the count, or what we could call high points of the drama. These high points occur when empirical demands such as a terrorist bomb threat, a deadline for a kidnapper to kill their victim, or a flight to rescue a nation that must not be missed, is synchronized to the countdown, and becomes part of time in a more self-conscious sense because Bauer or others around him are also counting, counting down to any number of crash-points, assassinations, explosions, murder, the making public of secrets—the interface between time and those other things that we cannot control. These are measures of time within the frame of time. Outside of this collision between our transcendental affiliation to time and these specific parcels of time, time as an abstract concept does not relinquish its count, as we know—but this is of no interest to the action. Instead, the count that mirrors this abstract time and that takes place across the seasons of *24* acts as a figure for this time, a processional contingency of time-presence that may or may not be connected to Bauer's or anyone else's consciousness. In this way, Bauer is always part of time, but the count itself, as a total framework and as the clock that we know is always there, adds a dimension of drama to every minute of the action, because we know that Bauer can never rest as long as he is in time. In fact, this presence of time raises every quotidian act to the level of dramatic action, a strong, mobile intensity where everything matters, everything is alive with potential, and we must be vigilant because we know that we are only capable of reacting in the moment. We cannot think the time ahead of us, and the time that is past is now too far away to contemplate.

The presence of time raises every quotidian act to the level of dramatic action, a strong, mobile intensity where everything matters, everything is alive with potential, and we must be vigilant because we know that we are only capable of reacting in the moment

This contingent world of being held or caught in time returns us to the drama of heroic realism, where an aesthetics of violence permeates our everyday life and is written through all our decisions. For Jünger, heroic realism meant that our hero would stay committed to action beyond the standards of normative time. His story 'The Lost Outpost' tells of a First-World-War soldier who stays at his post and guards it even when the war itself is over. His commitment to the post surpasses all empirical material. In many ways, Bauer replicates this commitment, since his actions affiliate with a version of justice that manifests as the real of democracy—a commitment to the outpost of the liberal sprit that must necessarily transcend the time of neoliberal capital. Here, as in Jünger's world, the fiction of contingency manifests a conservative identity because contingency is a metaphysical experience that can only be advanced at the level of private consumption. This brings home the problem of picturing contingency

Even if the ways and means that Bauer adopts in his life of intensity and violence are illegal, immoral, out of the box, off the radar, secret, anarchic, and dynamic, in the end these actions serve the purpose of a faith in the restitution of a kind of leadership that does not exist but is to come

as a condition of life within the domain of the sensible, and how this might underscore the limitations of a culture that identifies this task as its (political) charge. In this way, the destabilization of all relations in *24*, as in *The Maltese Falcon*, does not advance any other way of thinking life; rather it is a story of destruction that is made possible by the very codes that we seek to stabilize. What *24* struggles to account for are the types of lawmaking that take place through the process of Bauer's decisions, and the question of whether these laws are in fact any different to the ethical values of a normative understanding of a lost liberal democracy. Bauer's world of violence, therefore, in all its contingent character, might only be developed around an aesthetics of contingency. This means that, even if the ways and means that Bauer adopts in his life of intensity and violence are illegal, immoral, out of the box, off the radar, secret, anarchic, and dynamic, in the end these actions serve the purpose of a faith in the restitution of a kind of leadership that does not exist but is to come. This freedom to come, as a promise written through Bauer's actions, evades the state of the situation that Bauer-time involves us all in. As such, the problem here is not so much that Bauer cannot see the future, but rather that he believes in one, and imagines that his work is carried out in the name of that future he imagines should rightly exist. This commitment to a fiction (a democracy to come) means that Bauer has freedom from any responsibility for his actions. It is this cause, ultimately, that exonerates his brutal treatment of others. But in the end, the fiction of *24* clings to a future that has little to do with its conception and display of contingency 'by the clock', and even serves to undermine the very contingency that it proposes as a field of action.

Codes, Kills, and Community

In the media that we have just examined, we see the deployment of pivotal ethical motifs, aesthetic schemas, and discrete fictions. *The Maltese Falcon* proposes the collision of relations, and then in *24* we see the destruction of relations. In both, we are presented with a landscape of contingency, and within this, a figure of contingency that moves within it and through it. In these narratives the subject generates a central and organizing principle of the narrative, be it Spade's mixture of justice and revenge (law and desire) or Bauer's execution of justice and intensity (counterterrorist duty and time).

The question of codes, rule, and laws is central to these examinations of contingency—primarily because the work of contingency as a concept would serve to unbind and destroy existing standards, proving them to be temporal conditions of life and therefore subject to change. This promise of contingency is central because it does not show the weakness of certain rules and standards to be founded upon the idea that they might be illusory or fictive; instead, the question of instability is written through the dimension of time. For Dexter Morgan (*Dexter*, Showtime, 2006–2013), however, the classic values of family and the law take primary status.

Dexter Morgan (Michael C Hall) is a serial killer and a psychopath. At the age of 10, his adopted father Harry (James Remar) taught him the 'code'. Harry had consulted with Doctor Evelyn Vogel (Charlotte Rampling) a psychiatrist, after witnessing Dexter's childhood urges to kill and his general fascination with death, blood, and murder, expressed in his early drawings embellished with red crayon. Harry was at a loss, he didn't want to put Dexter in the system; after all, as a cop, Harry had seen the system and he didn't trust it. He also had a hypothesis that Dexter's

condition was a result of witnessing the brutal murder of this mother—a hypothesis that did not excuse Dexter's actions but certainly attempted to rationalize them and provide a way of living with them. Harry and Vogel thus made up the code, a way of making sure that Dexter could be trained enough to control his psychopathic urges to kill, by only killing in the name of justice. Only evil people would end up on Dexter's 'kill table'. Harry spent nine years training Dexter, inventing and implementing the code. The first rule—'Don't get caught'—was Vogel's idea, Harry's 'Kill only evil people' appears second on the list. The hierarchy of liberal individualism wins out over Christian ethics. As the seasons' narratives develop, it is clear that the code presents some internal contradictions, especially when Dexter begins to share the truth of his actions with his sister Deborah as well as his serial-killer girlfriend Hannah McKay (Yvonne Strahovski). During this process Dexter begins to shed specific beliefs that have been until now the basis for his constructed life as a 'normal' citizen and blood-spatter analyst for Miami Metro Dade's Police Department. The zones of killer and the daily life cover story of the regular nerd family guy begin to cross over in different ways, becoming more precarious: Dexter's kill slides, which symbolize and archive the ritual of his murders, are dropped and smashed, never to be replaced or reordered; His 'dark passenger', the identity he locates as the 'killer inside', is realized and accepted as part of his 'everyday' personality. In recognizing the plasticity or multiplicity of his identity, Dexter reaches another consciousness, and comes to understand that he finds pleasure in murder, a kind of pleasure that was not accounted for in the code. His consciousness now explores, and exceeds, the code. The code had hitherto enabled Dexter to exercise his 'natural' urges, and is considered palatable because it has a moral dimension—the killing of evil. But as the code disintegrates, Dexter is compelled to reconstitute his personality, one that he knows is free from feeling and from morality: The personality of a psychopath.

The narrative of *Dexter* is clear: Psychopaths require codes if they are to live in a society. This is emphasized further when Dexter takes on Zak Hamilton (Sam Underwood) as a killer trainee, as a means to attempt some form of control over Zak's desire. These codes ape the moral framework that other subjects go to work with everyday, but the disintegration of these codes as placeholders also acts as a real allegory of society at large.

Without the code, Dexter would never have learnt to kill. The code, understood as an ethical and moral system that contends with nature and also manages nature, rehearses a Hobbesian problem

Without the code, Dexter does not fall apart. Codes, in *Dexter*, are equivocal in the sense that, whilst they are seen to control and manage killer urges as well as to guarantee survival, they are also responsible for producing the killer in the first place. Without the code, Dexter would never have learnt to kill. The code, understood as an ethical and moral system that contends with nature and also manages nature, rehearses a Hobbesian problem. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes identifies the necessity for a contract between humanity and governance. Human nature is understood as being intrinsically violent and so must be managed as a problem. This Covenant to peace is invisible. There are no signatories and no paper. Power remains abstract. For Hobbes's theory, the question of the place and force of this contract is key, and the same goes for Dexter, where we face the core contradiction of this power that invents a concept of nature with which to diagnose the human subject. On the one hand, this concept of the human is understood as something that is pre-political and essentially groundless; but at the same time it requires invention within the political to ensure that it can be effectively constrained. As such, the contract between the human and systems of governance that takes place in both Hobbes's *Leviathan* and in *Dexter* struggles to account for its politics. For Hobbes, all men are dangerous, and the world is chaotic; and in *Dexter*, we are looking at the anomaly of the psychopath who needs to be given alternative codes in order to assimilate into reality. Both approaches demonstrate their own pathology in order to invent, diagnose, and solve the problem of a type of 'human nature'.

The narrative of *Dexter* reminds us that, when one code disintegrates, another takes its place. The themes of love, care, family, and responsibility arise as the narratives of justice are de-formulated, and

turn out to be equally oppressive and demanding. Dexter intends to kill Miles Castner (Julian Sands), Hannah's new and aggressive husband, but why? *Is it because he is an evil person, or because he beats Hannah*? The potential collision between these two scenarios is not generative. Unlike the narratives in our action hero genre, where saving family is made equivalent to putting order back in the world, in *Dexter* making these different scenarios compatible offers no redemption. The motivation for Dexter's kills are now no larger than his desire, whether this is the desire of the psychopath or of a lover.

Importantly, Dexter does not need to kill Miles, and so escapes this moral dilemma. Hannah does it before he gets to the scene; but he knows how to manage the situation, how to clean up, how to cut up and dump the body. *How to get away with it*. Dexter's actions do not restore order, but develop the constant reappraisal of the systems within which he operates. As the framework for his actions is unavailable, the processes of the kill are part of the action, and there is nothing outside of the crime. Dexter is a detective with nothing to prove, and his actions must never become visible to the conditions of a normative police justice. His murders are catalyzed, constructed, and enabled by a law that resembles the police, a twisted law that enables his pathology to flourish.

Dexter's life as a psychopath performs an allegory of the fact that our relations are contingent, and that to some degree we are all attempting to live a 'normal' life

Dexter's life as a psychopath performs an allegory of the fact that our relations are contingent, and that to some degree we are all attempting to live a 'normal' life. To do this, we use codes to make other people believe that we are part of society, that we are alike, when actually we feel dispossessed, alienated and liable to be 'found out' for the real, unstable personalities that we are. The constructed nature of these codes and their falling away in the series challenges this division between what is natural and what is constructed, as well as the Platonic idealism of a subjectivity that holds onto a concept of a real, because the narrative turns to question the monolithic nature of ethics as well as the way in which there is no outside of these systems and laws in the first place.

This reinforcement of heterogeneous codes is established further in Season 8, where we see Vogel's serial killer dinner party, an 'Adams Family' scenario where figures that transpose that of the traditional nuclear family eat together with all the etiquette of its homogeneous counterpart.[11] Here the subversive world requires the law, and appeals to the same regulatory conditions. In this way, as a symbolic fixture, the family life that Vogel tries desperately to reconstruct is conservative and without imagination. Emerging from this is a different story, when this tableau is smashed by the pathology of another killer, 'the brain surgeon', who turns out to be Vogel's alienated and crazy son (Darri Ingolfsson) who, unlike Dexter, occupies two visible identities, as Daniel Vogel and Oliver Saxon. Again, destruction emerges from the semblance of stability.

Dexter's world of law encapsulates his identity; from the experience of knowing someone else's love and the need to protect his son Harrison, to the way in which his work as a blood-spatter analyst only serves to support his ongoing training to kill and remain unprosecuted. To that extent, Dexter's world is not so much a world without values as a world of contesting values; and it is not a world without community, but a world in which community is produced through these different forms of law; a community made up of desire and necessity. This world without rules that Dexter faces, furthermore, is not a world that is compelled to relinquish all human and social connections. All of the characters in *Dexter* privilege family over the law, but the very

11. Tobe Hooper's *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, 1974, offers this image most spectacularly, in the 'family dining' scene.

nature of family is unhinged from the start. Dexter and Deborah are not related by blood, and Deborah (Jennifer Carpenter) confesses her love for Dexter in series 7. The potential of their sexual relationship hovers around themes of incest and the taboo. So this world might be post-ethical but it is not without community—it's just that this community is also ungrounded.

The individualism of the psychopath is constructed by community and is, as Dr. Vogel states, community's ideal fantasy figure. This is not so much the Machiavellian and Aristotelean argument that self-interest is the make-up of community as we know it, where acting on our self-interest serves to produce community because we need other people to *like us*, to survive, to work with us, and we need things from them—it is more that the psychopath figures the power of the human to act without standards and without the traditional forms of consciousness that make up the good society. As the figure of the outside, the psychopath stands as the locus of what a community cannot ever become, and follows on from the Hobbesian politics of fear that we encountered earlier. However, Dexter does not live up to this ideal; instead, he has another type of family life that is born of neccessity. It is this distinction between his non-human psychology and human life that grounds an American family life in Dexter. According to the ideological norm, it is this that acts as the constituent site to be undone, purged, and reformed. For Dexter, it is the only way of life.

The territory we enter here is one of violence and the operations of a conditional and contingent life, a drama that spells disaster for any hope for a democracy to come

In this way, for the most part, the duality of community and individuation, peace and war, are no longer possible as we read *Dexter*. Instead, the territory we enter here is one of violence and of the operations of a conditional and contingent life, a drama that spells disaster for any hope for a democracy to come. But it does not leave us reeling with the horrors of anarchy, because Dexter begins to develop his own method when the code seem unworkable or its jurisdiction simply runs out. We might compare this ad hoc method in *Dexter*'s final season to the organization of life in *The Maltese Falcon*, where, as we have seen, relatively stable categories interact through the intervention of Spade's ethical will. The difference here is that *Dexter* locates this will in particular circumstances. For the most part, Dexter gives up nothing that would figure his life as the neoliberal consumer of prevailing ideologies—the girlfriend, the job, the boat, the kids...he 'has it all', especially in serial-killer terms. In fact, the series is dominated by this question of how one might live a life of decision in the context of a life of moral values. How might one become law in a real sense, without living Spade's alienated life, and without turning the world upside-down and ending up facing a new anarchy?

The series responds to these questions in various ways, but in the final season there is something of a retraction of this possibility in favour of another understanding of life. Dexter's sense of alienation, which is palpable for most of the series, is called into question in his interactions with Vogel. As I have mentioned, it is here that we are drawn to the implication that Dexter may not be a psychopath after all. It turns out that his conception of himself as alienated was an invention of psychology, and that therefore his life as a killer was the consequence of some particular and careful training. The revelation of another possible power that constructed not only Dexter's world, but Dexter himself, pushes home the anti-realism at the heart of the piece. Here the world, to all extents, is delivered as unreal to Dexter. Harry and Vogel trained Dexter to kill efficiently and with ethical direction, whatever Dexter was meant to be—a form of necessary evil or a dark special ops police department force—and the relations he develops in the series make us question whether Dexter is psychotic or not. Now we see the split between abstract law and particular life recaptured in a split that must deliver Dexter to the normative narrative of the serial killer; and we return to the scenario of life and nature that the action so far had undermined. This traditional Oedipal scenario foregrounds Dexter's blindness in action to another law—that of the parent as power, and the concept that there is no such thing as nature. In the face of this unreality, Dexter disengages himself from the law and community and renounces all decision.

The final episode of *Dexter* sees him alone. He fakes his own death—he is dead to the world, and constrained to an isolated existence in an unknown location, cut off from all social networks. His final voiceover: 'For so long, all I wanted was to be like other people, to feel what they felt, but now that I do, I just want it to stop.' Dexter spends his life trying to become human, and it is this register that organizes his life: The fact that he identifies himself as sub or non-human, as we know, is a product of the code as much as its consequence. His ultimate isolation is a sacrifice that a human monster makes, a decision that seems to commit to the preservation of his family without him. Without him things can be 'normal'. But we know that Dexter's son is as likely to need a code of his own, and that his new step-mother is the serial killer poisoner Hannah McKay, who is now his guardian and protector. Who better to help Dexter's boy, Harrison, into the world? Dexter's final isolation therefore forgets the allegory that we inherited from the rest of the series, which is that the registers of normal and taboo are not distinct in any categorical sense; that we are all as much non-human as human and that there is no fixed location to be found that would allow us to escape this fact. Ultimately, rather than fake his own death, Dexter might as well have gone to Argentina with Hannah, for we know that his action will not restore the family. But could America cope with the knowledge that such a life could be led without any form of punishment? Consequently, the faith in the fiction of isolation from society is the big script error for *Dexter*, because it serves to contradict the conviction of the series up until this moment.

We are all as much non-human as human, and there is no fixed location to be found that would allow us to escape this fact

Contingency Without Alienation

What we are left with is a question of the nature of these forces and the kinds of beliefs that are situated *through action*. Discussing the characters Spade, Dexter, and Bauer, we must ask if and how these figures produce another form of life that enables us to think contingency without idealizing it as the space of drama whose maintenance is the defining role of contemporary culture— the culture that privileges the desires of capital accumulation and subjective freedom by fostering the principle of difference and enlightenment that is a crucial auxiliary mechanism for an avant-gardist Modernity. In other words, despite attempts to imagine a life within a realism of non-causation, narratives often reinforce particular conservative manifestations of power and human agency that serve to correlate the subject to existing power. Therefore in many ways the examples that we have examined in this text struggle to overcome the conservatisms of culture itself, and in turn they produce a conservative culture, often because they abstract ideological power into a natural condition.

The predilection to dramatize contingency as the figure of instability pays the price of the conclusive and final (non-productive) alienation of action from its location in time and space

The predilection to dramatize contingency as the figure of instability pays the price of the conclusive and final (non-productive) alienation of action from its location in time and space. This alienation is not just a theme of the characters we have explored, but is something that culture does to itself; effectively, culture makes an example of itself and, in doing so, withdraws from the political. This is the regime that requires a relation between the real of contingency and the figure of the human, producing what we have articulated as a developed category of heroic realism. In short, the idea that culture presents us with an experience of contingency only delivers an always-already alienated theory of culture itself. A theory that serves to dismiss culture as the weak space that is only good for standard fiction or, perhaps even worse, sentimentalist pedagogy. These worlds recall a form of heroic realism; a form

of action that bears out particular relations between the human subject and a metaphysics of contingency that gets reconstituted in a mix of action and cultic faith.

The prevailing problems that we encounter when we attempt to read a politics of this culture are haunted by, and often solicited by, the standard dualisms that occupy the themes of identity, space, and time. These are the distinctions between thought (of contingency) and representation (of contingency); between the subject (our autonomous hero) and community (our understanding of consensus); and so also between difference (a principle of freedom) and a communism (a principle of equality); and finally between law (as dominant ideological system) and freedom (social emancipation). All of these dualisms are set to work in the antagonisms of the narratives explored here, and are also often evidenced in their construction. Here the common assumption is that each category pair is held in contradiction, and that we cannot reconcile these terms internally or across these schemas.

These grounds for critique and creation, however, are not to be trusted, or put to work in the service of producing better forms of culture or in critiquing existing forms of culture as problematic, since, as we will see, they are blind to the systemic problem at the centre of their own philosophical beliefs. This problem at the heart of production critique, or the prevalent comprehension of critical practice, gets to the heart of our problem, for it is here that we can tackle the question of culture's conservative destiny. Is culture capable of being Modern beyond the conditions of capital? And if so, how can this be thought in terms of a different culture that exceeds the dominant ideology of a politics of difference that serves to abolish community? Can we move beyond heroic realism?

A first observation, drawing upon our examples once more, is that we can say that contingency is not a place that is free from law, but a time where *law happens and is always happening*, even if we are incapable of knowing this universalism as an empirical truth. As we have seen, the thinking of contingency portrayed in these examples attempts to explore the 'thrownness' of man in various contexts. These are potential worlds that are governed by other forces, forces of law, time, larger wills, etc., but through which our subject endures and decisions are made; things happen and plans are executed. Agency, as a condition of freedom, is secured because subjects align themselves with a law opposed to a principle of freedom. We have also seen worlds that look beyond the conditions of standard power, worlds beyond capital, beyond family and beyond governance—but here, also, law exists.

Agency, as a condition of freedom, is secured because subjects align themselves with a law opposed to a principle of freedom

If we understand that representations of contingency manifest as the condition of law-making, which effectively means decision-making processes, then contingency is the space within which we make our demands, not our promises. It is here where we must re-think law as such, since, even if our characters' cohesion with law might be stable, law itself is not. Narratives that seek to imagine the possibility of other modes of expression and life always institutionalize their own ideological code. We must appreciate the way in which action mediates law, and how this mediation of law presents us with possibilities for rethinking a life that is beyond the ideological principles of capital, but which can also accommodate the conditions of an existing community. Institutions do not exclude collectivity; in fact, they demand it, because law needs to be recognized. It is here that we can make a first distinction between existing power and law.

Secondly, if we are to understand the way in which a theory of contingency might be thought by culture, then we must realise that understanding contingency as a non-presentational entity that we will never grasp is as much the same as idealizing the concept that we can access and present it. A culture that makes contingency an object to be found, portrayed, and represented, and a culture that claims that there are objects never to be known, and which therefore are not to be presented, both miss the point about

contingency: that it is impossible to connect contingency to a liberal understanding of freedom.[12]

We must now make a third, methodological distinction, following that of our respective cut of the relations between the categories of subjectivity, law, contingency and liberal freedom. This would be the difference between the authoring of contingency or the choreography of contingency as a mirror of how our lives might be otherwise, and the idea that cultural form participates in the enforcing of ways and attitudes of life as much as any other object.

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An art of contingency is not an art of a humanist freedom, where one can re-tract oneself from power by choice, but is rather a force of law. And culture must understand the condition of a life that cannot become visible to us without condemning itself as a tool of dominance or as a weak expression of ulterior fantasies. The question of how law operates and what it produces is central to how we might understand a culture that is capable of thinking a non-representational and realist approach. In this, the decisive characters that we have explored have something to offer and say, because they allow us to re-think the subject as being as unstable as any other component of action; they ask us to imagine law in other forms, and invite us to re-think community within the logic of violence. Here we can differentiate more fully between the violence of reason-decision and the violence of mythologies. These two abstractions of decision are now foregrounded as meaningfully different, presenting us with our final cut through our exploration of these characterizations of action and image.

However, crucially, these two forms of violence are not made distinct by understanding one as fiction and the other as real. We cannot place our trust in the aesthetics of a dissonant modernity, or in a passive and self-conscious subjectivity over the aesthetics of a standard traditionalism or strong and active subjectivity either. (These are just more debates over the same intact subjectivity.) Instead, for us to think contingency in culture and the political via decision, we need to understand that this is a matter of understanding the difference between decision as the product of reason, and decision as the experience of choice, which is the last redoubt of a pervasive fatalistic mythology. This latter place which must now be renounced, is the site where a principle of subjectivity, *despite everything*, is never seen to lose its footing.

12. This limit point of fiction reminds us of the difficulty to think contingency and to imagine the relation between this thinking and its manifestation as image form. We have seen common calls for contingency in and by artistic practice (*Relationalism* and the *Inaesthetic* for example) that do not see the difference, and as a result naively and formally collapse the censoring the idealization of contingency as figure or representation, and the censoring of figuration altogether.