Detective (later Sergeant) Thomas “Herc” Hauk (portrayed by actor Dominick Lombardozzi) is, perversely, the greatest criminal investigator in David Simon’s Baltimore. Despite his ostensible function as comic relief in *The Wire*, Herc proves to be the catalyst for the surveillance plot in each of the series’ five seasons. This contention has implications for the series as a whole. First, Herc’s repeated accomplishments season by season serve to underscore the ineffective results achieved by more intelligent and more driven characters: in the police world of *The Wire*, success is independent of ability or intention. Second, any success Herc does have similarly indicts the institutions he serves. As part of the series’ ongoing examination of civic institutions and their failings, the systemic faults in the Baltimore police force come to be embodied in Herc and in his success in spite of himself. The series lets him see himself as an oppressed and overlooked white man in a predominantly black city; we see that he is lazy and sloppy (though not as sloppy as Mahon and Polk, two other white cops). And yet he succeeds. In this article, we trace Herc’s surprising narrative prominence as a lynchpin of both narrative and social commentary in *The Wire*.

Our introduction to Herc and his partner Ellis Carver is inauspicious: their fellow Narcotics detective Kima Greggs provides a more successful search than they do on a roadside bust (1.1). Assigned to Daniels’ detail investigating the Barksdale organization, Herc is among those providing surveillance from the Towers, but it is not long before he, Carver, and Roland Pryzbylewski (“Prez”) appear at the Towers in the middle of the night and start a fight in which a young bystander loses an eye (1.2). Herc walks along the edge of what is legal, in part through a lack of moral rigour, and in part through a lack of ability. When Herc and Carver seize some drug money for which they are unable to lay charges, they consider stealing it (1.9). While the idea is eventually rejected, they are later accused of theft in any case when the money goes missing; two episodes after that, they do take some money (1.11). Yet it is in this same episode that, while slacking off watching the East Side/West Side basketball game, Herc and Carver make the most important cognitive leap in the pursuit of the Barksdale organization. Realizing that Avon is likely in attendance at this conflict of two drug organizations (prompted by seeing two other drug dealers, Bodie and Poot, in the crowd), they mobilize the detail, which leads to the first visual confirmation of Barksdale’s identity and to his arrest the following episode (1.12).

Herc wants to help clear cases, but he is not concerned to do so legally. In the second season, frustrated with the limitations of visual rooftop surveillance, he and Carver shop for a wireless bug - “something that can stand up to the pressures of the modern urban crime environment” - at a spy store (2.6). Since it is expensive, they take it for a “test drive,” planning to return it for a refund after they have put it to use. Hidden inside an old tennis ball left lying
on the roadside, the device quickly proves effective at recording the street conversations: “Isn’t technology the fucking bomb?” Herc asks Carver, both satisfied and impressed. Just as quickly, however, Nicky Sobotka, mid-conversation with the drug dealer Frog, finds the tennis ball, bounces it, then throws it across the road, where it is destroyed by a truck. Though only a momentary success, their surveillance provides a link for the detail’s target, connecting Nicky’s drugs with stevedore union boss Frank Sobotka (“How many fucking Sobotkas can there be, even down here in Polack town?”). The link is established by Carver, who is amazed that Herc does not make it himself:

Carver: *Sobotka?*
Herc: *That’s what it says here.*
Carver: *That mean anything to you? Yo, Beavis. That’s the name of the guy we’re supposed to be working. Frank Sobotka.*

The explicit allusion to *Beavis and Butthead*, the MTV cartoon (1993-1997) that featured two lazy teenagers whose fantasies (sexual and otherwise) outstripped any real-world experience, condemns Herc as both inept and ineffectual. Nevertheless, the connection is made. Concern about the loss of the bug, however, leads Herc and Carver to invent an imaginary confidential informant (CI), whom they name Fuzzy Dunlop, punning on the name of the tennis ball (2.7). Their intention is to embezzle payments to Fuzzy to repay Carver for the lost microphone. Herc convinces Carver to lie to Daniels, and a fictional CI is registered (after they are out-negotiated by Herc’s cousin Bernard, who poses for the CI’s picture). With the help of Fuzzy Dunlop, Herc provides the single piece of surveillance that allows the case at the docks to close, but it is based on illegally obtained evidence and the result remains unsatisfactory: as Beadie Russell summarizes, “I mean we locked some people up, right? But Frank is still gonna be dead and the port is still screwed and the guy who killed the girls, he got killed anyway. And the girls - I mean the ones we locked up, they’re probably back in Europe right now getting into another shipping container” (2.12). As Vondas and the Greek leave the country, we have no doubt that their function as drug suppliers to Baltimore will continue.

Herc serves as a nexus for critical information in the series, though it is often through blind luck. No longer part of the detail in Season 3, Herc is patrolling Hamsterdam, the newly instituted “free zone” for drug deals, instituted by Commander Bunny Colvin, when he sees Avon Barksdale driving by (3.7). He relays this information to the detail, showing that Barksdale has avoided long term punishment for the events in season 1. Carver, meanwhile, is working for the success of Hamsterdam: he institutes an *ad hoc* welfare system among the drug dealers (“What are you, a fucking communist?” asks Herc; 3.7), and is willing to move a body outside the boundaries of the free zone to avoid legal repercussions and undue attention for Colvin (3.9). Forgetting his previous legal transgressions, Herc is offended that he could be asked such a thing, and responds with an anonymous call to the *Baltimore Sun*, which brings to an end Colvin’s (and the series’) unlawful social experiment in harm reduction.
Herc is a Zelig: like Woody Allen’s character in the 1983 film, he consistently turns up at the heart of the action, even though he has neither the authority nor the intelligence to deserve to be there. From a semi-omniscient position, the viewer can recognize Herc’s role in several critical plots, even though he himself does not. In *Zelig* (and *Forest Gump*), historical hindsight (achieved through presumed shared cultural memory within the audience) communicates the character’s accidental centrality. In *The Wire*, the writers make the audience work harder to recognize the nuanced creation of character and motive. A tension is created, in that even though the show foregrounds so many black characters in prominent roles, Herc’s whiteness renders him largely invisible within the institutions the show presents.

His function as a comic foil depends on his color. The show makes this explicit, when Freamon plays a tape of a drug dealer who identifies Carver and Herc (“the white boy with the ball cap”) and calls them “Batman and Robin, yo” (1.7). Status and color become variables in their competition, as the two debate who was identified as whom, with Herc claiming “I’m Batman” because “Batman’s white.” Carver’s laughing rejoinder, “…and Robin’s black?” points to the vacuity of the argument, which soon reverts to the laughing homophobic banter (“Boy Wonder, why don’t you suck my bat-dick?”). It is Herc’s comedic function that masks his centrality. Whether left out overnight on surveillance of a suspect who has already turned himself in, or installing air conditioners for a judge, Herc is perpetually presented as a low-status drone in the cogs of police work. From this perspective, he can complain about hypocrisies in the system, even as he helps to perpetuate them.

As Season 4 begins, Herc is working for the Mayor Royce’s security detail (4.1), a practical transfer that Herc believes will advance his career. When Herc accidentally walks in on the Mayor receiving oral sex from his secretary, he fears his career is over (4.2). Herc takes the advice of Major Stanislaus Valchek (known from Season 2 as a vindictive and spiteful opportunist), who instead sees this as advantageous: “Kid, careers have been launched on a helluva lot less. Just shut up and play dumb.” Herc does just that when the Mayor interviews him about his career ambitions (4.3), and he is promoted to sergeant and assigned to the Major Crimes Unit, now commanded by Lt. Marimow (4.4). As Herc benefits from the system, so he supports it. He endorses Marimow’s “rip and run” approach to dealing with drugs, and, prompted by Carver, begins working for Mayor Royce’s re-election.

When Marimow’s raids on Marlo Stanfield’s drug operation go disastrously wrong, Herc on his own initiative places a camera to record Marlo’s outdoor meets. Herc and other officers position a camera borrowed from the police—another surveillance object obtained without authorization—and they are encouraged by the initial results (4.5). A lip-reader provides additional clues, which leads to an attempted interception of drugs at an Amtrak station (4.6). The bust is a failure: Marlo knew he was being recorded, as becomes clear when Herc learns that the camera has been moved, and now shows only pigeons (4.7). In the ethos of *The Wire*, this is a joke that could only be directed at Herc, whose failures are neither traumatic nor tragic, but merely
laughsable. He lies to Marimow, again claiming Fuzzy Dunlop as a source. He then confronts Marlo directly, demanding the camera, and initiating daily bust-ups of Marlo’s outdoor hangout (4.8).

The return of Fuzzy Dunlop emphasizes the precarious nature of Herc’s policework. His desperation to recover the police camera leads him to pull over Chris and Snoop, two of Marlo’s soldiers. Herc’s intimidation tactics include firing a nail gun from their vehicle into the road. Again, chance conspires to give an unpredictable prominence to this moment. The nail gun, purchased by Snoop in the opening scene of the season (4.1), ties Chris and Snoop to the boarded-up vacants in which many bodies have been left in the case being pursued by the Major Crimes Unit. However, because of Herc’s aggressive interrogation, Chris and Snoop throw the nail gun into the harbor (4.8): the possibility of a firm case against Marlo Stanfield is tauntingly presented to the audience, only to be taken away because the point of intersection is localized on Herc, who has left his card with Marlo, who passes it to Proposition Joe, who with a series of phone calls traces Herc’s career path from Narcotics to the Mayor’s Office to Major Crimes. The criminals gain a disproportionate sense of the breadth of the investigation: they even start discarding their cell phones, given the history of Major Crimes’ prosecution against Stringer Bell (4.9).

Through all of this, Herc is presented as representative of the problems with Baltimore policing. Herc floats through the system, rising and falling according to the larger series narrative, but never achieving any meaningful alliances beyond the at times problematic relationship he has with Carver. As the comic quest for the missing police camera continues, Herc seeks Little Kevin for his role in a murder and recruits drug addict and sometime informant Bubbles to show him who Little Kevin is. While later interviewing Little Kevin, Herc not only ignores a phone message from Bubbles pleading for help (which leads to a severe beating for Bubbles), but he also lets Little Kevin know that Randy Wagstaff, an entrepreneurial student, has tipped the police about Little Kevin’s involvement in the murder; this leads to a beating for Randy two episodes later (4.11). Herc enlists Bubbles’s help in search for the camera, but because of Herc’s earlier indifference, Bubbles deliberately provides him with false information, leading to an aggressive stop-and-search of an innocent black minister. A lack of compassion is presented as instrumental to Herc’s downfall. His inability to perceive the needs of Bubbles, Randy, and in a larger scale of Carver and the Major Crimes Unit, means that he remains vulnerable to the repercussions of Bubbles’ revenge plot.

Things begin to unravel for Herc. Mayor Carcetti is pressured by the ministers because of the stop-and-search, and Detectives Bunk and Freamon interrogate Herc about his failure to care for Randy (4.11). When Marimow is transferred from Major Crimes, leaving Herc the highest-ranking officer there, Freamon makes it clear that he defers to ability and not to rank. Nevertheless, it seems Herc is reprieved, as his self-approving misunderstanding of his circumstances makes clear: “I’m dipped in shit here. I’m the luckiest motherfucker you know” (4.12). This proves short sighted: when detectives from the Internal Investigation Division (I.I.D.) appear, Herc takes the rap for
inventing evidence (through the persona of Fuzzy Dunlop) and is charged. Before he leaves the police force, however, despite his stupidity, lack of compassion, and consistently sloppy police work, Herc does help provide a connection between Chris and Snoop’s nail gun, which provides the essential clue for identifying which of the boarded-up vacant s contain bodies left by the Stanfield drug organization (4.13).

At the start of Season 5, Herc is working as a private investigator for Maurice Levy, a drug lawyer who numbers among his clients both Prop Joe and (as of 5.4) Marlo Stanfield. Herc dresses well, and, using his police contacts, he proves remarkably successful (5.1). Even relegated to the role of private investigator, Herc sees himself as a lawman. Marlo taunts him in Levy’s office ("You ever find that camera?” in 5.4, as the legacy of Fuzzy Dunlop continues), leading a spiteful Herc to provide Carver with Marlo’s private telephone number, stolen from Levy’s rolodex. This enables police wiretap surveillance of the top level of the drug distribution network (5.5). Herc never is told the importance of the phone number for the investigation. Though it is illegally obtained (since it has been stolen from the office of Marlo’s lawyer), it provides information leading to the (mostly) satisfactory conclusion of the series.

In each season of The Wire, Herc proves crucial for the investigation, even though at times he is unaware of the effects or impact of his actions. The fictional creation of Fuzzy Dunlop to improve surveillance against a street-level dealer provides crucial evidence for the case at the docks, and three years later it brings down the Stanfield drug organization. Herc’s policework identifies Avon Barksdale, and his sense of justice destroys the momentary success of Hamsterdam. Herc lacks insight, and he seems to care about little beyond escaping punishment for his own misdeeds. Despite this, it is his investigations which prove central to every significant case in The Wire.

In this way, Herc functions as the human embodiment of the failure of institutional systems of policing. Structural insufficiencies, such as bad pay, dilapidated and inaccessible equipment, the racial/cultural demands of the community, and competition among different units (notably the police-versus-FBI tensions and the state-versus-federal prosecutions), force police officers to act outside of regulations, and serve to justify illicit behavior in the viewer’s mind. This often results in charges that cannot stick, leaving even good police frustrated and seeking new ways around institutional authority, an escalating process that reaches its pinnacle in McNulty’s invented red-ribbon crime spree in Season 5. Herc’s characterization is particularly important in that he self-constructs as a good cop, trying not to get abused by a bad system, and it is this that makes him a bad cop who has to be fired. When he comes dangerously close to stealing drug money, he argues that such actions are necessary: cops are so badly paid, it’s tacitly assumed that they are getting money from other places to survive (1.9). He is uncritical of himself and hypercritical of the system he serves, and he justifies everything he does as a response to the very problems created by actions like his own. The circularity of Herc’s vision is completely clear to us, and completely invisible to him. In his every act and breath Herc echoes creator David Simon’s sense of
systems of policing and governance in Baltimore: not inherently corrupt, but wrongly acted, inept, and self-rationalized.\textsuperscript{3}

The show also makes clear that Herc identifies his whiteness as one of the sources of his perceived victimization. When he and Carver write the sergeant’s exam at the end of the first season, the underprepared Herc actually scores better, but it is Carver who is promoted. It eventually emerges that Carver is simply rewarded for acting as a mole for Deputy Commissioner Burrell, but Herc understands the promotion as a response to community demands for black officers of rank as a representation of equal opportunity and respect.

Herc’s promotion narrative is merely a lower-stakes anticipation of Mayor Carcetti’s political ambitions, as both “still wake up white in a city that ain’t” (4.2).\textsuperscript{4} But in the larger frame of the series, Herc’s whiteness is important in more significant ways. As he comes to stand in for the institutions of policing and power, Herc’s colour reminds us that ultimately American institutionality is presented in the series as defaulting to white. \textit{The Wire} makes this clear not least in its predominantly black cast of characters often playing a supporting role to the white McNulty in both screen time and plot centrality. Herc is concurrently conscious and aggressively unconscious of his affiliation with authority by virtue of his race. Even as he bemoans his lack of promotion as an issue of race rather than competence, he enforces the presumptive authority of whiteness as he makes cold calls to voters in incumbent Mayor Royce’s campaign against Carcetti:

\textit{But lady, between you and me, I can tell from your voice you’re black and you can tell from my voice I’m white. So I gotta ask you: when do you think [was] the last time a white man voted for a black man when there was another white man in the race?} \\
(4.5)

Because it comes from a white man, Herc expects that his support of a black candidate will mean something in and of itself, irrespective of any personal qualities either candidate might possess. The viewer, however, recognizes that Herc’s support is self-serving, since Herc believes Royce will protect Herc’s personal interests.

Not least by virtue of his whiteness, Herc embodies Baltimore’s civic institutions and their failings. He enjoys a sense of entitlement because of his race, and this specifically (and ironically) creates a form of difference that can be used as a commodity to exchange for career advancement. In the election, Herc aligns himself with Royce, who has been depicted (with Senator Clay Davis) as one of the two most powerful men in Baltimore politics. He uses the presumptive authority of his whiteness to market the black mayor to black voters. Because it’s Herc, though, the scheme fails when Carcetti defeats Royce. Power–always implicitly white–is written at the end of \textit{The Wire} to be explicitly white. And yet Herc is still on the wrong side, the comic foil central to everything, conscious of nothing.
In the end, then, Baltimore’s institutional systems shrink into Herc, and Herc shrinks into Fuzzy Dunlop. Herc’s fictional white informant—created to deceive Herc’s superiors and to pay off a private debt created by the underfunding of the public police system—is a discarded tennis ball. Fuzzy may be given a human face in Herc’s cousin, but Fuzzy’s successful observation mirrors much more closely Herc himself: both are without consciousness and lack the ability to interpret the events they perceive. Because they are ultimately emblematic of the system that Simon’s series so consistently indicts, neither is really in a position to stand up to the modern urban crime environment.5

Notes

1. The reference 1.1 designates Season One, Episode One of The Wire series. [↩]
2. This is typical of the affirmations of heteronormativity within The Wire; also seen frequently in the black/white partnership of Bunk and McNulty, such adolescent invitations are always read ironically to assert a hierarchical masculinity. [↩]
3. Indeed, several aspects of Herc’s career are anticipated in the earlier David Simon series, Homicide: Life on the Street (1993-2000): like Herc, Detective Tim Bayliss has used the mayoral detail to secure a place in the Homicide division (Homicide 1.1); like Herc, Detective Mike Kellerman becomes a private investigator in the series’ final season, having been driven from the police force (Homicide 5.8-9). [↩]
4. In Homicide: Life on the Street, Det. Stuart Gharty utters almost the same beleaguered plea, as he positions himself as a victim: “I’m white and the city ain’t” (7.10). [↩]
5. Beginning February 2009, Steve Busfield has begun a weekly Blog on The Guardian website called “The Wire re-up” http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/wire, which is proceeding episode-by-episode through the series. Among the highlighted features is a running total of “Herc fuck-ups”, which stands alongside other recurrent tropes such as “Omar stick-ups”, “Murders” and “McNulty giving a fuck when it wasn’t his turn”. [↩]