What Do Real Thugs Think of The Wire?

The Thugs were bored. Episode 7 [Season 5] failed to move them. “Too slow,” griped Shine “They’re making us wait,” said Orlando. “See, that’s when this stuff gets unreal. When they start making you feel like you could actually get somewhere in the ghetto.” “What do you mean, ‘get somewhere?’” I asked. “In the ‘hood, everything changes. Nothing happens the right way,” he replied. “Give me an example,” I said. “Well, like what’s happening with Marlo and Omar,” he replied right away. “In the ghetto, you never have this kind of thing last so long. People kill each other right away, or not at all.” “Ever heard the term, ‘3-day work week?’” Tony-T interrupted. I shook my head. “Well, it means that, in the hood, nothing lasts. I mean nothing! People are so poor that they can’t even afford a 7-day work week.” “So, one of the two - Omar or Orlando - would have killed the other?” I asked. “Yup,” said Shine. “And my bet is that Omar is getting a little stupid. Looks like he’s hurting. But my bet is that both will be done with by the time this is over.” Then he asked if we could go over some of the comments that Freakonomics readers had made a few weeks ago, after episode 4, when the Thugs asked readers to assess what would happen between Omar and Marlo. I printed out the 100+ responses, and here’s a quick-and-dirty evaluation by the Thugs:

1. No Future
   “These people are crazy!” Orlando began, referring to the commenters. “Bloggers, they think they can predict what’s happening in the ghetto. Rule number 1: there is no future.” When I asked Orlando what he meant, he said that most of the responses thought too far in advance. “The one thing I don’t like about this show is you never make plans when you’re hustling. Not for more than a few days, anyway.”

2. Insurance for Whom?
The Thugs liked the comment from “d” about insurance. Apparently, what separates the Greeks (and everyone else outside the ghetto) from people on the streets is that the former can obtain insurance policies. “Marlo tried to get his own supply line, you know, just in case. But that kind of thing never happens if you’re on the streets,” Shine said. “Of course, you always want a second option. You always want another source for product, somebody else who can get you a
gun, but you can’t get so easily.”
“That’s right,” said Kool J. “For those Greeks, they can move around because they’re not from anywhere. But around here, everyone is spoken for by somebody. If people see that you’re trying to get security by lining up with more than one group at a time, they see you as vulnerable.”

“Why vulnerable?” I asked.
“You always align yourself with somebody, rise and fall with them. If people see you trying to making friends all over, then they think you have something to hide. That’s when they come in and take over.”
“See, that’s what makes the game the game,” Shine jumped in.
“You live and die with those around you. You just have to be real careful when you’re juggling a lot of balls at once. People want to know where you stand. They could get nervous if they see you trying to get that kind of insurance policy.”

3. The Look
“I think Wiregirl is wrong about ‘the Look,’” Kool J blurted. “That only works when you [are] talking about killers. Where I hang out, everyone knows that there are only a few people who really can kill somebody. The rest of these fools don’t even put bullets in their guns. But any fool can stand on the corner and make a sale. That don’t take no brains. Just a little desperation.”

4. Will the Real Black Man Stand Up?
“Yo, Blue Moe!” Tony-T shouted, referring to comment 84. “Yeah, we believe you when you say you’re a Negro. Because no self-respecting black man would feel good about reading the New York Times. I got something for you: its called the Amsterdam News. Take a look at it, my brother. Its for the real Negroes.”

5. Need a Job, Alex?
“My brother, I like the way you think,” cried Orlando, referring to comment 96. “We’re rooting for Michael, too. And, by the way, do you need a job? If so, call me!”

6. Watching with the Police
“We asked Sudhir to watch it with the police, too, but he’s too scared,” said Shine, referring to comment 109. “We also told him to get a real job, but he wouldn’t do that, either.”
I didn’t disagree.
Overall, the Thugs were impressed. They had one question for the readers:
If the gangs were white, what would be different about the show?

There is something quite uncanny about this scene. For followers of The Wire the intense and protracted debates about the veracity of the plot-lines and characters will be very familiar. The unfolding of a complex urban reality has been central to the series attracting such a passionate ‘underground’ audience and in producing interminable discussions. What seems slightly surreal is the image of a number of New York ‘gangsters’ sitting with a sociologist around a television watching and analysing a cop show. The scene takes a further unreal twist with the ‘gangsters’ responding to the blog comments made by readers of the New York Times. Clearly The Wire is no ordinary television.
An re-occurring thought I have had after imagining the above scenario was - do gangsters watch television, and if they do, what do they watch? If we take *The Wire* itself, as evidence for the reality of the ‘thug life’, then television is not an important medium in the gangsters’ everyday consumption habits. A cursory examination of the series suggests that the criminal fraternity, unlike the urban working class in general, is not shown to spend too much time in domestic family spaces, and only have fleeting exposure to television, usually in the background in public spaces such as bars and clubs. Conversely, the law enforcers do seem to watch some TV, but they largely see television as a cynical form of public information management - recall the numerous scenes that McNulty and colleagues are usually watching with disdain the news reports about crime in the city. For example, the presentation of recovered drugs by the police for the news media in Season 3 exemplifies the critical and cynical attitude of the series to contemporary media. Although there is little (positive) reference to television, *The Wire* does spend Season 5 examining the workings of the newspaper industry. Here we get a more detailed critique of the media, where again it is understood as a tool for public relations and information management, corrupt journalism and for exploitation by corporate organizations.

So while for *The Wire*, television and contemporary public media generally, are part of the problem of neoliberal culture, the TV series itself has been particularly valorized as an exception to the everyday banalities of televisial culture - one that even ‘real gangsters’ will watch and discuss in terms of ‘realism’ and ‘ghetto authenticity’. The discourses of ‘authenticity’ and ‘superiority’ are key to the increasing academic, as well as popular interest in the show. From even anecdotal evidence on the web, and personal conversations, a significant proportion of the show’s fan-base do not watch much television beyond *The Wire* - in fact they are critical of television as a populist cultural medium and see *The Wire*, with one or two other recent US series such as *The Sopranos* and *Battlestar Galatica*, as being far superior than the rest of television.

*The Wire*’s creator, David Simon, references to Balzac and 19th century realist novel fiction, as well as the show’s serial structure, length and narrative complexity confirm to the followers that the series is a challenging and serious piece of contemporary art. Part of the enjoyment of the series is the requirement to sustain an unfaltering drive to grasp the various interweaving plot-lines and social issues being presented. Against the supposed banality and triviality of ordinary TV, with its easily consumable diet of reality shows and insipid celebrity pop culture, the ‘difficulty’ of *The Wire* demands commitment - a heroic and masochistic duty. This is a position that Simon also cultivates. In an UK BBC2 *Culture Show* (2008) interview, he exclaimed “Fuck the average viewer.”

A key factor elevating the series to its critical cult status is the ability to view the show outside of its original real-time broadcasting schedule. The vast majority of viewers watch the show on either time-displaced recordings, downloads and/or commercial DVDs. It is this ‘post-television’ networked media environment that *The Wire* has been able to utilize and exploit to create an emergent form of televisial viewing experience. My own practice of watching the show on my laptop with headphones in bed, two to three episodes at time, is a common
example of a form of consumption that greatly differs from the presumed classical family TV audience watching the serial weekly.³

The series on DVD is viewed more akin to a fictional novel; something which suits very well the ambitious and complex structure of *The Wire*. These individuated temporal disjunctures in the consumption of the series have extended infinitely the ‘screening time’ of the series. There is no normative screening form or moment of transmission for the series. At best, the first screening of the series on HBO in the US (2002-8) is like a ‘pre-history’ to the post-television *Wire* and its multiple audiences and viewing experiences. This multimedia rhizomatic network of viewing has been producing variable and ever-expanding set of fetishised discourses about the mode and temporality of consumption. As much as the content of the series is the focus, there are some familiar questions one constantly hears: Have you seen *The Wire*? How far have you got in the series? How long has it been taking? How many episodes have you viewed in one go? The circulation of this discursive interrogation itself is an important aspect of the series and gives further credence to its special status as television not as we know it.

It is worth thinking about in what ways is this viewing experience different from other cult US TV series, which have increasingly being made available as DVD box sets - *The Sopranos, ER, CSI, 24, Sex and the City, Star Trek, Battlestar Galatica, X-Files, Six Feet Under* etc. A key claim is that *The Wire* demands one to view the total 66 hours of TV to fully appreciate the expansive reality presented. Its serial form marks it out as special and different to other recent TV series.⁴ The other element is the intellectual demands of the series, especially its sociologically driven analysis of contemporary urban society. In this respect, the show has been of interest not just to television studies scholars, but to academics from very diverse fields of study.⁵

One could argue that *The Wire* is an ‘open textual machine’ - it allows for a range and variable levels of analysis and interactions that enable different approaches and issues to be addressed. *The Wire* presents an environment that one at once inhabits and critiques. It is more ‘real than reality’, partly because the show presents an analysis itself of the social milieu. Further, the series has an explicit political agenda and offers a set of critiques of neoliberal institutions and capitalism that resonates with much analysis in left-liberal academic circles.⁶

In the life of the field of ‘*The Wire* studies’ these are early times in terms of mapping out the different conceptual approaches being mobilised in analyzing the series; but we can still identify some distinctive tendencies in the emergent critical writing:

A significant type of analysis, in one form or another is of *The Wire* as representing, mapping and critiquing neoliberal capitalism and its social effects.⁷

A second and related critical approach focuses more centrally on the failures of the institutions and organisations, such as the police, legal, unions, city hall, education and media. This is linked with examining the representations of the city and social landscape. As many have commented Baltimore itself is the main star
of the show. The series develops an incredibly detailed topology of the city in terms of space and power.²

The focus on the economic and neoliberalism, usually mobilises some form of (neo)Marxist or structuralist theoretical perspectives, other discourse or semiotic orientated television analysis deconstruct specific characters and their social identities and representations.³

An interesting dimension is the strange ‘absence presence’ of race in the critical dialogues. What seems predominant, especially with (white) writers on the web for example, is how race is either assumed as given and not commented upon, or that it is not race but class that is the important dynamic in the series.¹⁰ The unusual, numerically significant presence of African-American characters through the series, across institutional and class lines, arguably makes blackness the norm. This is borne out with the way Series 2, with its focus on the docks and de-industrialization, is marked out as being particularly about whiteness, as well as class. The normalization of blackness and ‘making whiteness strange’ is progressive in terms of the politics of representation, but the theoretical effect of these deconstructions makes race either marginal or invisible to the politics of the show, if we remain at the textual level. While the series presents a nuanced and complex discourse of multi-racial urban life, the prevalent commentary on the racial logics of the series is tending to underplay the changing modalities of contemporary race discourse. It is vital to examine how in The Wire race does not disappear in some form of post-racist conjuncture, but remains politically significant, not necessarily just at the level of signification, but inscribed centrally into the workings of social power and control. To grasp the immanence of race in the social order requires one to historically situate the shifts in (techno)racial and multicultural politics.

Although racism is endemic to neoliberal governmentality, The Wire recognises that anti-racism is hegemonic now. This is no mere superstructural or ideological rhetoric, but present, if unevenly, in the discourses and practices of institutions and society more generally. If in the analysis of race we examine the representations of the black characters in the series we get very quickly get caught in an undecidable bind: arguably the series shows a diverse and complex range of African-American characters, yet the depictions are reducible racial stereotypes (positive or negative). The limitations with an analysis of the politics of representation is that it remains confined to a struggle over media representation. In this approach, television series are analysed as texts that are politically interpreted in isolation of the matrix of social affect, information and desire. ‘Realism’ and ‘authenticity’ become the only sites for debates over racial meaning and power. The affective dimension of race in the circuits of knowledge and information across the series and audiences; for instance, in the grain of the voices of the Baltimore accents or in the coded communication of the street corners, need analysis.

What could be explored productively is how the The Wire presents a complex network of ‘micropower’ relations that transverse the institutions, subjects and technologies of the urban racial milieu. Such an approach does not negate racial
signification; rather, as Arun Sadana argues, race can be understood as a ‘machinic assemblage’:

Race is a shifting amalgamation of human bodies and their appearance, genetic material, artefacts, landscapes, music, money, language, and states of mind. Racial difference emerges when bodies with certain characteristics become viscous through the ways they connect to their physical and social environment. Race is a machinic assemblage, to use a concept of Deleuze and Guattari. Machinic assemblage is an ontological concept and therefore apt for tackling the question ‘What is race?’ Basically, the concept presents constellations, especially biological and sociological constellations, as fully material, machinelike interlockings of multiple varied components, which do not cease to be different from each other while assembled.  

The formulation of race as ‘machinic assemblage’ would enable one to consider the significance, for instance, of communication technologies to the series, and their articulation with social and political critique. Surprisingly, there has been little theoretical focus, so far, on technology - given the significant role it plays in the series. The wiretaps and surveillance technologies connect together the multitude of different social actors. The communication technologies act as objects that draws in the viewer to the narrative drive of the show. It is the trials and tribulations of the detectives, especially Freeman and ‘Prez’ that is the core subterranean narrative thread though the series. Race instead of being limited to the symbolic order, needs to be situated in the distributed networked assemblages across the post-television media in the form of racially coded information, affect and materiality.

This focus on the representational modalities of *The Wire* could be connected to what can be called its molecular race politics. The networks of power, communication and control present the fundamental elements in the working logics of a cybernetic racial formation. These micro-structures of affect, bodies and information potentially enable a focus on race that does not delimit the analysis to moralistic discourses of anti-racist textuality or the dominant tendency of a certain theoretical disavowal of race that is prevalent in much critical discourse: “I know that race is important but lets carry on as if it’s not.” This fetishistic disavowal is arguably the form in which much of the (racial) engagement with *The Wire* is taking place. It allows one to fetishise the symbolic presence of poor black Americans and empathize with their predicament, but at the same time one continues to ‘enjoy’ the show as if race is materially insignificant.

At the beginning of this introduction, I suggested that the discourse of the ‘gangsters’ was uncanny in that while it presents an extraordinary rich and complex picture of power, it does so within the ubiquitous and familiar genre of the cop show. Remarkably, *The Wire*’s aestheticized politics deconstruct and rework the conventions of the televisual genre in a post-television context; a key popular TV genre and context to track the changing contours of race, class,
masculinity and technocultural transformations in Obama’s ‘post-racial’ postmodern racist America.14

‘The Wire Files’ *darkmatter* Journal special issue aims to examine the place of race in the complex formation of the series. The various pieces collected highlight, through a productive range of methods, approaches and modes of writing, how race is located within the structures of the series.15 The articles address the implications raised by the New York ‘gangsters’ with their parting question *‘If the gangs were white, what would be different about the show?’*. By marking race within the series one begins to understand the racial logics of neoliberalism and contemporary institutions of power and control. A form of racialization that is immanent to the hegemonic discourses of anti-racism and multiculturalism in post-television media.

Notes

2. See *The Guardian* interview article by Oliver Burkeman ‘Arrogant Moi?’ 28 March 2009 with Simon where the ‘average viewer’ and *Culture Show* interview is discussed. [↩]
3. See Sara Taylor’s piece in this issue. Also Marc Leverette, Brian L. Ott and Cara Louise Buckley (2008) *It’s not TV: watching HBO in the post-television era*, Taylor & Francis offers a useful examination of the how HBO has been central to the emergence of post-television series. [↩]
4. Erika Johnson-Lewis in this issue offers a thoughtful account of the politics of the seriality of *The Wire*. [↩]
5. See for example the call for papers for a conference in Leeds, England, *The Wire as Social Science Fiction?* The conference is located within the ESRC Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change. [↩]
6. See for example the call for papers for an edited book study of *The Wire*: Call For Papers - Edited Collection: Down to "*The Wire*": Urban Decay and American Television, edited by Tiffany Potter and C.W. Marshall (University of British Columbia) Proposals are invited for an edited collection of original essays that examine "*The Wire*," HBO’s award-winning television series, which has just concluded its fifth and final season. The volume will be published by Continuum... The editors seek contributors who will examine *The Wire* from a variety of critical, theoretical, and cultural perspectives. This collection will be aimed at both academic readers and an educated general audience. We seek essays that are both scholarly and engaging. The complexity of *The Wire* as unforgiving political and social commentary demands academic investigation. Because the show addresses so many different social contexts, it is expected that this volume will include chapters from several disciplines and methodologies, including literary and cultural studies, political science, sociology, film...
and media studies, law, psychology, criminology, and philosophy. In addition to what we expect might include season-based examinations of drug crime, blue-collar crime, social policy and practice, education, and the media, as well as discussions of the nature of fictional representations of aspects of American life, the following is a list of topics that contributors might explore, though we invite proposals from any disciplinary perspective on any aspect of the series and its reception.

*intersections between representations of race, economy, and criminality
*issues of masculinity
*gender and sexuality in police and criminal cultures
*the family, childhood, parenting, and criminality
*re-imagining of the heroic beyond traditional narratives of America
*roles for women in urban America
*the technology of crime
*street speech and class-based communication
*cultures of addiction and treatment
*constructions of violence
*stress and trauma narratives
*education and class
*interest groups and issues of governance
*cable television and representing America
*issues of genre and narrative
*"The Wire" as television: direction, cinematography, music, casting, etc.
*representations of Baltimore.


8. See the Linda Speidel and Georgia Christgau pieces in this darkmatter issue.

9. See the thoughtful contributions by C.W. Marshall and Tiffany Potter; Keith Kahn-Harris; Daniel McNeil; Hillary Robbie; Lisa Kelly and Todd Frayley in this issue.

10. Judd Franklin provides an excellent discussion of the relationship of race and class.


12. Interestingly, the fetishisation of the technology could be productively conceptualised as the (Lacanian) object a - an object of desire that is the cause and solution to the lack in the symbolic order. (Thanks to my friend and colleague Jessica Edwards for this insightful analysis.) I am developing a theoretical framework that develops connections between psychoanalytical and affective materialist approaches to media culture. Lacan and Delueze and Guattari are conceptually closer than present academic work suggests. See for example Jerry Aline Flieger (2005) Is Oedipus online?: siting Freud after Freud, MIT Press.

13. Angela Anderson’s piece in the issue situates The Wire usefully in the workings of biopower. This could be productively developed in relation to the notion of race as ‘machinic assemblage’.

15. The original *darkmatter* call for papers navigated between making race the focus of the issue given the concerns of the journal, but at the same time recognized that race was simultaneously everywhere in *The Wire*, and only one dimension of the series: *darkmatter* - special issue ‘Way down in the hole’- *The Wire* files call for contributions.

The critically acclaimed US television drama *The Wire* has recently ended its fifth and final series. The Baltimore set HBO show has been celebrated for its gritty realism and complex representation of urban crime, policing and American city politics. Through the TV cop genre *The Wire* has weaved together issues of drugs, poverty, policing, inner-city murder, surveillance, political corruption, institutions, labour, schooling, print media, youth, sexuality and gender, with an ensemble cast of African-American and white characters and intricate plot-lines, providing one of the most compelling accounts of race, class and the city in contemporary media.

To mark this event the online journal *darkmatter* is putting together a special 'dialogue' issue exploring the aesthetics and politics of *The Wire*...We welcome contributions in the form of essays, reviews, interviews or creative media pieces on any aspect of the show - from detailed analysis of specific characters and episodes to the examination of *The Wire* in relation to the history of television, film and literary genre fiction, or as a mapping of the crisis of race, politics and the neoliberal capitalist economy in Baltimore, America and globally. [↩]