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The Wire Files

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Editorial: ‘All the pieces matter’ - introductory notes on The Wire

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
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 distain 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 televisual 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 televisual 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.

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. 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.

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.2

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.2

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.8

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.8

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.

*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. 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.
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.

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. *”The Wire,” “The Corner,” and “Homicide: Life on the Street” *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; Hilary 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.

URL to article: http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2009/05/29/editorial-all-the-pieces-matter-introductory-notes-on-the-wire/
Who Loves Ya, David Simon?

Notes towards placing The Wire’s depiction of African-Americans in the context of American TV crime drama

Critics have justifiably praised The Wire for its rounded African-American characters, and the risks it took in foregrounding ‘black Baltimore’ - risks that have harmed its ratings, according to its makers. They have concluded that the crime genre has been taken somewhere new.

But how new is ‘new’? What the critics couldn’t do - weren’t tasked to do - was to contextualise the show in terms of the history of crime drama on TV. This article will therefore seek to survey a number of key shows from the past that purported to convey a liberal viewpoint, and which have made race a focus. This is in order to suggest ways in which The Wire might be part of a genre tradition - and equally how it might be seen as expanding the parameters of that tradition and saying something genuinely original.

In terms of our overall framework, it is taken as axiomatic that changes in any genre - in this case, the quality of the depiction of African-Americans - are driven by changes in society, and by broadcasters’ attempts to gauge what viewers are willing to buy into. (It’s a curious irony that crime drama often exploits the irrational fears expressed by communities in the face of increasing crime, in a dual effort to provoke anxiety as well as to reassure.) Thus, within any given historical period there will be political agendas linked to crime which get picked up by television and re-interpreted through genre-based storytelling that relies on innovation as well as repetition in an effort to maintain audience interest.

The term ‘competing narratives’ helps explain this process, specifically how crime TV stories function within different historical and institutional contexts by capturing a broad and often contradictory dialogue about the origins of, and solutions to, the ‘crime problem’. David Simon has said that so far as Americans are concerned the ‘crime story [like the western] is elemental to our understanding of ourselves’. That being so, and because of the status the crime story maintains within the national culture, American crime TV is one of the most relevant contemporary forums through which competing narratives and ideas about race, class and gender are contested rather than guaranteed.

Underpinning this relationship is a host of factors that might include: The circumstances of TV production which influence programming strategies - for example, whether tied to advertising, the level of government regulation, etc. This depends on whether a show is produced in the ‘network era’, ‘neo-network era’ or ‘HBO-era’. Linked with this, there’s the question of how the media (TV included) is inclined to report crime: it is not irrelevant that crime drama tends to gets scheduled near the news and historically has used plots ‘ripped from the headlines’ in order to manufacture an illusion of unmediated authenticity.

Then there’s the notion of what audiences have come to expect in terms of representation from films, novels, comics, etc. (other aspects of culture), and more specifically what they might anticipate from TV and in particular TV drama (what is the status of portrayals of women, homosexuals, ethnic minorities, etc. in war series, period dramas, westerns, etc.?). The same applies to what they might have come to expect from TV crime drama specifically, including how one show argues with, responds to, is inspired by, another. Similarly, we shouldn’t forget factors that might prompt audiences into receiving the message in a particular way - via trailers, advance information in the press, the internet, and so on (sometimes termed ‘ancillary’ material’ in Reception Studies). And, of course, how any viewer’s reading of a particular show is always negotiated according to personal circumstances.
The list could continue. It amounts to a complex matrix, and one that is constantly changing. With regard to the depiction of African-Americans, it explains, for example, why they have been more ‘acceptable’ in some kinds of TV show than others (e.g. comedy - a phenomenon dating back to before vaudeville); how the criminalisation of ‘the black man’ on the TV news might have an effect; why cop shows have taken a certain viewpoint during the Civil Rights era or after Rodney King, etc.; and how such shows have fed off ‘Blaxploitation’ and ‘Hood’ movies (for example). Above all, it underscores the importance of reading TV as being orientated primarily towards the kind of white, middle class demographic that advertisers want to reach, and why, therefore, any claim to ‘realism’ in TV crime drama has to be problematised. In other words, there is a need constantly to ask what a ‘positive’ representation might be, and how far ‘blackness’ is the otherness against which white viewers define themselves.

We don’t have the space in this essay to explore these ideas in any detail, but we can hope to use some of them to offer an analysis of *The Wire* that situates it in the context of its TV genre - a genre that has been woefully under-explored at an academic level. To this end, we would now like to turn our attention to the past, in order to remind ourselves very briefly of five key crime shows from the post-Civil Rights era which purported to be liberal, and which made it their mission to make race a feature.

In surveying these shows, the ‘police procedural’ has been privileged over other kinds of crime show (prison, legal, private eye, etc.) because this is the tradition into which *The Wire* most comfortably fits - though this is not a categorisation without controversy, as we shall see. However, our main aim is to highlight the varying degrees of dramatic agency invested in African-American characters and to identify any potential transformative power these character representations might possess in terms of challenging racism and/or enhancing our understanding of the diversity of African-American experience. (We’re also interested in tracing the relative importance these programmes attribute to ‘race’ in relation to other factors such as class and gender orientations which also contribute to the construction of African-American identity/identities.)

**Kojak (1973-78, CBS)**

A phenomenally popular show, based around discrete storylines in a pulp tradition, and created by a writer who was a friend of Martin Luther King (Abby Mann), and who set out to use the crime genre to shine a light on injustices. As such, for Kojak ‘the police force is the community’, and his duty is to a New York that is shown in all its gritty multi-ethnic glory (and frequently from the perspective of very run-down districts). Kojak himself was of ethnic origin (Greek), a foreshadowing of his re-casting in 2005 as an African-American, and it was his smart-talking charisma that floated the show (‘Who loves ya, baby?’, etc). However, lest we forget how hard-hitting the series could be, and that it was not just about catchphrases and lollipops, the pilot episode (based on a real case) featured an unjustly imprisoned black youth, racist cops, and a lawyer who tells the court that ‘Law and Order is being used as a catchphrase for Stop the Nigger’.

Later episodes toned down the social rhetoric, much to the disappointment of Mann, though individual examples still made points (e.g. about ethnic gang warfare, the police shooting of a Puerto Rican and the reaction of the community, etc.). There were plenty of African-Americans in supporting parts, and not simply as criminals (jewellers, cabbies, students and cops) though beefier roles were rare (e.g. Salathiel Harms, the private eye who intrudes on Kojak’s patch). Similarly, the Kojak character continued to differ from other TV cops through the ways in which his ‘ethnicity’ facilitated his equivocatory positioning as both ‘white’ and ‘non white’. Like many hardboiled detectives he was defined by his intimate
knowledge of the 'streets' and through his own 'eccentric' urban city vernacular. However, both these traits were presented as intrinsically linked to Kojak's New York 'immigrant' status and not simply used to reproduce the sort of 'white' male-encoded cynical and superior detachment that would conventionally be associated with a Marlowe clone.

Thus, from a 2008 perspective, Kojak is self-contradictory for the way that it includes African-American characters who lack dramatic agency, in terms of both the contributions they can make to the episodic action of the show and as fully integrated members of an 'ideal community' in the form of the police force. It is really only in one-off episodes that focus directly on racism that African-American characters are foregrounded through scenarios which feature shootings of black characters by whites or other miscarriages of justice. Although these individual shows still retain their power as anti-racist indictments, the series taken in its entirety remains tied to more familiar Hollywood modes of representation through which African-American characters are either marginalised and shown in relation to whites, or depicted in terms of a 'black identity function' as the privileged indicators of an ongoing racial problematic.

**Hill Street Blues (1981-87, NBC)**

Debuting just after the election of Ronald Reagan, and the lurch to the right of US politics, this was a cop show that was also a soap opera - a genre hybrid - with an ensemble cast and returning characters. Co-created by Steven Bochco, race was always intended to be at its centre, and the intertwined storylines and psychological complexity were groundbreaking. This structure allowed space for character development - including a significant number of African-American characters - and for the generation of atmosphere, specifically the claustrophobic setting of a police precinct in a 'city under siege', where ethnic gang warfare is rife.

The moral tone was similar to Ed McBain's 87th Precinct novels, and indeed, McBain (real name Evan Hunter) was encouraged to sue for plagiarism. This tone was especially evident in the racial politics: both Hill Street and the McBain novels were procedurals that increasingly honed-in on white reactions to racism. As scholar Eric Macdonald has written: 'In the novels, “good” men are fair and objective in their quest for justice and in their dealings with diverse peoples, whereas “bad” men are either overtly racist or at least non-compassionate....' In *Hill Street* this was demonstrated particularly in one episode that featured a racist cop who shoots a black teenager, and in a later story arc about an African-American street gang (led by a young Danny Glover).

Although there were many more black characters than in any show of its kind previously, this didn't necessarily always mean 'progressive' depictions (especially with regard to women). However, the inter-racial cop pairing of characters Bobby Hill and Andy Renko was a hit with audiences, and underlined a take on masculinity that involved personal revelation and emotional problem-sharing. Again, this soap operatic angle was very unusual in the crime genre.

Thus the show was innovative for the way it utilised inter-racial partnerships and a racially integrated ensemble cast to address issues of policing in relation to expanded concepts of male heroism - a structure that made it possible for the writers to base individual episodes largely around African-American characters, though this only happened rarely. Along with *Miami Vice* (below), it was indicative of a 'new' trend within the genre which was concerned with subverting ideologies of race and ethnicity as the markers of identity. That being said, there is a possible counter-argument, namely that the characters are primarily male-identified rather than racially defined and that therefore masculinised forms of social bonding are being deployed in order to diffuse racial differences and the need to question...
white-centred power relations as a potential barrier against the social inclusiveness of African-Americans.

**Miami Vice (1984-89, NBC)**

Made at the high point of Reaganism, when the war against drugs was entering a new phase, and during the transition in the TV industry from the ‘network’ to neo-network era, this was a black/white buddy series based around the characters of Tubbs and Crockett. Thus, it was made with the existing audience for the police drama in mind, but also to target the 18-34 year-old male viewers who were switching to cable. The concept was described by one NBC executive as ‘MTV Cops’ and ‘Hill and Renko with a music video feel’.

As such, *Miami Vice* was never interested in investigating race relations in America and the impact of drugs on inner city communities, but instead offered a glossy package with an underlying political message about the drug trade as a confrontation between the law and drug-runners, ‘trans-border commodity flows’ and the US government’s vested interest in keeping the drug trade going.

Michael Mann’s presence as an auteur in the role of executive producer - a noted liberal – subverted to some extent the show’s critical reception as ‘hip fluff’. When he said that, ‘We loved the way a dark star and a blonde star played off each other - visually, it’s very exciting’ referencing one possible reading of the show in which the noir connotations of ‘dark’ and ‘blonde’, as opposed to ‘black’ and ‘white’, linked Tubbs and Crockett to the mulatto figures of hardboiled fiction, and the idea that both men were attempting to ‘pass’ as something they were not i.e. undercover cops posing as high level drug dealers. The fact that Tubbs was played by a light-skinned African-American caused some critics to question his authenticity as ‘black’, but within the context of a show predicated on masquerade and passing, it’s at least conceivable that Tubbs’ disturbance of racial signifiers actually worked in favour of the idea that ‘race’, like masculinity, is ‘performed’.

**NYPD Blue (1993-2005, ABC)**

A Clinton-era show, again co-created by Steven Bochco, again featuring an ensemble cast based in a police station, and again with the stated intention ‘…to address race’. In order to do this, the primary vehicle was the character of Andy Sipowicz, a white, alcoholic middle aged cop who happens to be racist (as well as homophobic). It is his redemptive journey that propels the show: he is the everyman figure a white audience is asked to identify with, and his common use of words like ‘nigger’ and ‘spade’ are there as a provocation. Such language is challenged by his fellow cops (especially his much-loved ‘ethnic’ partner Bobby Simone) until he reaches the point where he has modified - at least to some degree - his politics. In this regard, despite the many black characters in the show, *NYPD Blue* is part of a tradition centring on white attitudes to racism, with ‘blackness’ as the other against which a flawed white liberalism is defined (in terms of its intolerance of men like Sipowicz). The influence of Ed McBain is again clear.

More subtly, Sipowicz is a Vietnam veteran who often gets nostalgic about the past (though not the war), and so the show can be read as a dialogue with the 1960s and what happened to America post-Civil Rights. For example, it is about coming to grips with the Clintonian era of ‘political correctness’, and the relationship of language to everyday racism (Sipowicz often has a swipe at Clinton). Similarly, affirmative action is problematised: when the African-American Arthur Fancy rises quickly through the ranks, becoming a Lieutenant in charge of the Squad and finally Captain, it’s not clear whether this was because of or in spite of his ethnic background, and audiences could anticipate Sipowicz’s unease. Ironically, the actor who played Fancy once referred to himself as ‘the highest paid extra on television’.

Based on a David Simon book, with Simon as a scripter for some episodes, this was a precursor to *The Wire* in important respects. It focused on the work of an ethnically diverse police homicide unit, and like *Hill Street* and *NYPD Blue*, was an ensemble piece and decidedly glamour-free (like those shows, it combined the serial structure of its melodramatic plots with more contained, case-based narratives, typically closing down these procedural arcs within one or two episodes). It was also arguably the show that finally made the breakthrough into a ‘de-centred’ view of race within the crime genre: the reason given by the creators was that it was set in Baltimore, and therefore had to reflect the city’s ethnic population (i.e. black-majority). In short, it provided a platform for more complex discussions of race identity. Here we see a re-constituted squad room in which African-Americans are represented as one ethnic group among others (and so are ‘whites’). The programme’s strength lies not only in the way it articulates differences of race and ethnicity but also in how it invokes a dispersed notion of subjectivity by incorporating gender and generational differences as the basis of tension within and between ethnic characters.

As such, the show included the most rounded African-American characters yet seen, perhaps anywhere in TV drama. In particular, there was the troubled Detective Pembleton, a fiery individual with a Jesuit upbringing, and Lt Giardello (played by Yaphet Kotto, previously a heavy in Blaxploitation flicks), who has Sicilian ancestors and who reminisces about the difficulties of being a black cop during the 1960s. Occasionally the show would focus on issues directly concerned with racism (e.g. Pembleton confronting a white supremacist in the interrogation room; Giardello’s negotiations with a black separatist; the shooting of an unarmed African-American drug dealer, etc.) But more commonly the intersection of race politics with other factors that contribute to the construction of human identity would be on a more subtle level. One New York Times TV critic ‘couldn’t believe [her] ears’ and asked ‘Is this Friday night television or a Spike Lee movie?’ upon watching an episode in which Giardello gets turned down for a date with an African-American professional woman, blaming it on the fact that ‘women like that never find me attractive - I’m too black.’

Thus, we can see from this briefest of surveys that - on a surface level - a lot of what *The Wire* achieved in terms of black representation was not new (certainly not as new as much of the media response to the show has implied). Thus, for example, its portrayal of the city as a melting pot with un-meltable elements was pre-figured in *Kojak*, and became a trope in many shows since - indeed, Baltimore itself was the setting for *Homicide*. Its depiction of middle class black characters (Cedric Daniels, Bunny Colvin, etc.) was presaged by *Homicide* and, to a lesser extent, *Hill Street Blues*. Its inter-racial buddy characters (Herc and Ellis, McNulty and Bunk) were pre-figured most strikingly in *Miami Vice* and *Hill Street*. Its take on the everyday racism of white Irish cops was there in *NYPD Blue*. And its inter-racial romantic elements (Daniels and Rhonda Pearlman) were foreshadowed particularly in *Miami Vice* and *Homicide*. The list could continue.

This isn’t to say that these ideas were pioneered in TV crime drama. Sometimes, they were already a part of other kinds of TV fare (the first inter-racial kiss famously happened on *Star Trek* in 1968, and American audiences were already familiar with middle class black depictions from comedies like *The Jeffereasons* and *The Cosby Show*). Indeed, commonly, such tropes were pioneered in other mediums - in the case of crime fiction, for example, the novels of Chester Himes and later Donald Goines were considered particularly hard-hitting when it came to the depiction of urban black experience, and pre-dated the appearance of anything like it on TV by many years.

But on a more sophisticated level, we can see that *The Wire’s* claim to originality lies in its openly class-based politics. David Simon has said that it is ‘a political tract masquerading as a cop show’, and is ‘more interested in class than race’. In order to pursue this line, he
made sure to structure the show around two inconvenient truths. The first concerns the idea of the divided city (i.e. Baltimore) as a metaphor for an America that remains segregated along race and class lines. The second rests on the implication that the drug trade is itself a by-product of a larger capitalist economy; an economy via which the lives of those who are no longer useful to it are being devalued and destroyed.

These truths are only capable of being expressed due to the circumstances of TV production. Simon has stated that ‘The Wire could not exist but for HBO’, or the economic model upon which HBO is based. Network television executives, he argued, would have shuddered at the thought of the show’s premise for its first season: ‘an argument against American drug prohibition - a Thirty Years’ War that has mutated into a brutal war against the underclass’. Such bald politics, he went on, could never have been compatible with network advertising sponsorship commitments, and the need to ’sell sports utility vehicles and pre-washed jeans to all the best demographics’.

Thus, the fact that The Wire is an HBO show facilitates degrees of experimentation with the idea of ‘televisuality’ that would not be possible for more mainstream network fare. Although the show retains an implied and sometimes muted dialogic relationship with other police dramas (particularly those we have focussed on) it can do things that these programmes were never able to achieve, such as breaking with the idea of episodic action and semi-serial formats. By fully embracing long-form serialization The Wire can adopt a novelistic approach to storytelling which favours a more subtle development of characters over time.

This is why the makers of The Wire could so easily co-opt the hipper writers from the world of crime novels (Dennis Lehane, Richard Price, George Pelecanos) who in their work had shown how it might be possible to build on the foundations laid by Himes, Goines and others to present a grittier and more nuanced view of black urban experience. Because previously TV had been so beholden to advertisers and a middle class white demographic, it was bound to be the case that this kind of content would be elided - and, indeed, that a ’softer’ and more white-centric author such as Ed McBain should be relatively much more influential. It was only with the advent of HBO that anything like a level playing field with other mediums began to emerge.

So, how, exactly, does The Wire capitalise on these new circumstances to make its case? Most obviously, the storylines are famously political and complex. In each of the five seasons, a single criminal case-based narrative forms part of an expanded social critique which takes the form of a ‘systemic depiction of American institutions’ and their culpability in perpetuating the city’s flourishing drug trade and the high murder rate associated with it. (The city itself seems to be on trial when the opening titles for Season 1 visually reference an actual street wall in Baltimore with the graffiti ‘Bodymore Murdaland.’) The series targets the police force and the profound failure of its war on drugs, the public education system and the ‘fraud of equality of opportunity’, and mourns the decline of unionized labour and the death of the working class. It documents the failure of the city’s political structure to address any of these social problems and indicts the city’s media culture for its failure to provide mechanisms of accountability, particularly in the form of an ‘aggressive, surly press’.

The issue of ‘race’ is at the centre of most of these plot-lines, though the overall pessimistic nature of the show might suggest that any positive message would be hard to generate. Yet Simon has argued that The Wire remains ‘humanist’ in its approach, and that the stories are ‘told in caring terms with nuance and affection for all the characters’, including those who are ethically compromised or on the wrong side of the law. By ‘nuanced’ and ‘humanist’, Simon also means that audiences should not regard the identities of characters as necessarily fixed or defined by any one single factor - be it race, religion or anything else (just as, on a personal level, Simon dislikes being reduced to his happening to be a Jew).
This sense of fluidity also extends to the moral identities of many of the characters who although depicted as flawed also achieve momentary redemption.

With this in mind, the writers of The Wire pay meticulous attention to the social stratification of Baltimore and its higher ethnic demographic ratio of African-Americans to white Europeans. The former are visible at every level of Baltimore society and fully integrated within the institutions they are committed to. For example, the series retains the multi-ethnic dynamic of the squad room that featured so prominently in Hill Street, NYPD Blue and Homicide, but makes an additional intervention by extending the range of African-American characters on offer outside this milieu and by connecting each of them to communities of more than one or two (token) African-Americans.

However, although race is up-front, The Wire is interested in the divided city, and as such its focus is on ‘establishment Baltimore’ and the world of its underclass. These two entities mirror each other. For example, through the dual perspective established in Season 1 the seemingly separate world of the underclass emerges as having its own economy - a predominantly African-American organised drug trade, which is depicted as just another institution, with its own bureaucracy. The cleverness of The Wire lies in the ways which these two worlds are ultimately shown to be interconnected through the web-like symbolism of its interweaving stories and the often dysfunctional relationships it establishes between characters caught up in these narratives across the series.

In this way, The Wire implies an active engagement with race politics. In moving within and across the institutional frameworks of the city the drama of the series facilitates a panoramic series of black ‘looks’ - often fragmented and contradictory - in an effort to constitute an overall perspective which draws on a number of different aspects of African-American experience. Audiences familiar with Homicide will see that The Wire reproduces the same character inflections based on class, gender and generational differences, though this time for the purpose of complicating the view of race identity presented in that show. Where The Wire differs from Homicide is through the implied magnitude of its class-delineated vision of African-American Baltimore society and the degree to which it is able to de-centre whiteness as a result of this extended focus.

True, there are compromises. The Wire, like Homicide, features white characters, and one in particular is prominent: Jimmy McNulty. In an interview with The Guardian, the actor Dominic West said: ‘It was always accepted that there’d be a white lead. I was rather uncomfortable with that...’ If this is/was the case, then even an ostensibly ‘ensemble’ format had to be shaped with old-fashioned crime TV tropes in mind, and the fact that the show was an HBO production no more guarded it against this than had been the case with Homicide and NBC. (HBO, being a subscription channel, has always been patronised by an affluent white audience.)

Yet even with this in mind, the task of de-centring whiteness is undertaken in a variety of ways. For example, The Wire goes further in the way it takes delight in its momentary foregrounding of black/white social relations that imply a reverse power dynamic: the carpeting of William Rawls by Erwin Burrell for example; the mock shooting of Landsman in the back by a hung-over Bunk; the roadside philosophizing between Jimmy McNulty and the ('old soul') street kid; the way the kid then tutors McNulty in the finer points of Snotboogie’s life history and the crap game etiquette that leads to his murder. However, because these moments are shot-through with humour they work in a self-reflexive way against the idea that The Wire is in favour of valorising hierarchies whatever form they take.

In terms of visual style, this overall perspective is reinforced. To sustain its deeper commitment to characterisation, The Wire rejects the high-on-adrenalin visual style of Miami Vice, and also the wobbly camera effects of Hill Street Blues and Homicide (which
have since also become the primary stylistic signifier of ‘True Crime’ reconstructions). Instead *The Wire* opts for a vintage documentary fly-on-the-wall feel that studiously avoids flashbacks and reserves the use of visual montage and non diegetic sound effects for the final episodes in each season. The strategic deployment of wide angle camera shots is also significant for the overall look of *The Wire*. Characters appear within the context of their habitual environments (or are placed against the slightly removed backdrops of other visualised Baltimore based social settings and milieus). The camera’s positioning of characters is thus instrumental in establishing an important visual parallel to the narrative focus of the series on the idea that ‘there are two Americas separate and unequal’.20

This aesthetic also contributes to the formal rhetoric of *The Wire* which suggests that its writers are in the business of telling stories that are rooted in local reality (but nonetheless fiction). In this way, it self-consciously utilizes the idea of the TV police drama as a method of drawing-in the viewer, but disrupts any expectations that this will provide access to the familiar Manichean universe of TV law and order discourses based on good versus evil (discourses which arguably had their origin in Dragnet (1952)).

We would argue that the positioning of African-American characters at the centre of *The Wire* in the ways we have discussed is in keeping with the kind of transformative strategy Maureen T Reddy argues for in relation to crime fiction. In *Traces, Codes and Clues* she states:

> Writing about African Americans without assuming the normativity of whiteness - removing the white veil, so to speak would require placing white readers in the position of eavesdroppers, their consciousness not central but marginal. Conceiving of white readers as marginal would certainly push the boundaries of the genre in a way that white authored crime about people of colour currently avoids...21

Yet this potentially radical impulse, that stems from the formal construction of *The Wire*, sometimes sits uneasily with the writers’ deterministic commitment to portraying individuals as compromised by the institutions they are committed to. Running parallel with this theme is the diminishing depth of characterisation which occurs whenever the action shifts upwards to the higher echelons of power. Senator Clay Davies, Mayor Royce and Erwin Burrell are the most obvious examples in this respect. They lack that ‘extra layer of complexity’ that bell hooks has alluded to her in her discussions of ‘common representations of black people’.22 If these particular African-American characters still have the power to engage us it is because whether in the guise of politicians (Davies and Royce) or as the pragmatic tactician (Burrell) they know how to hold an audience. Their function in *The Wire* is purely as satire and there is an implied social critique in their ability to self consciously exploit what Charles Burnett has referred to as the perennial re-assuring stereotypical ‘image that suggests that black people are first and foremost entertainers’.23

The flattening-out of character does not continue further down the social scale. In keeping with *The Wire*’s class-based analysis, it is not surprising that it is more interested in characters from the underclass. This is exhibited in a number of ways, often having to do with characters’ stores of cultural capital. So, for example, much pleasure is to be had by the viewer in checking-out Stringer Bell’s suits, Omar’s long duster coat and Marlo’s T-shirts. These fashion choices have little to do with Hollywood notions of gangsta cool, and everything to do with letting the characters articulate themselves and their aspirations through their clothes.

Similarly, cultural capital exists in terms of speech patterns, which again subvert conventional stereotypes. Voicing the underclass through characters’ use of what Simon has described as an ‘esoteric’ form of urban slang is one of the great strengths of *The Wire*. What
this means is characters use an idiom in which profanity is counter-balanced by a figurative form of speech that is closer to poetry. Often they use esoteric slang to communicate their intelligence as well as their misdirected potential. The drug dealer D’Angelo’s explanation of the game of chess through the analogy of The Game which in turn is a metaphor for the drug trade is one memorable example. Another is how gangster kingpin Marlo sums up his philosophy about status with the line, ‘my name is my name’.

In developing this theme of subversion further in relation to images of the underclass, it is clear that Reddy’s ideas about eavesdropping are particularly germane: for in The Wire, surveillance is key. It not only inspires the title of the show (as in wire-tap), but provides a plot device where everybody is being watched/eavesdropped-upon, in one way or another - with the viewer implicitly included in the act. If The Wire is a picture of a city, built up episode-by-episode, and if the drugs trade is a metaphor for a bigger capitalism, then the individual with the best vantage point over how the pieces fit together is the viewer.

Uncomfortably, the idea of surveillance and the distance it requires is also used to imply the casual indifference of mainstream America to the problems of the underclass (the viewer might as well be being told, ‘If the cap fits…”).

One final example reinforces the point: Early on in the series the female cop Kima Greggs is shown on a roof behind wire fencing observing and photographing the activities of drug dealing teenagers and the customers they allude to as ‘dope fiends’. The action takes place in ‘The Pit’ (the courtyard in the low-rise projects of Baltimore). Viewed from Kima’s perspective the projects could be mistaken for an ‘open prison’ and this connotation gains greater credence as a metaphor throughout the series as it relates to members of an underclass who are denied any hope of their situations changing. In subsequent scenes we repeatedly see the teenage drug dealers, D’Angelo, Bodie and Wallace holding court in The Pit on a cast off dilapidated orange crushed velvet sofa. The dumped orange sofa has been termed ‘a life relic of the 1970s’ according to Vince Perranio, the Art Director of The Wire. The dating of the sofa is significant in that it refers to an era before drug dealing and addiction became rife in the Baltimore projects. The sofa therefore takes on a poignant metonymic visual symbolism in its questioning of the junkie stereotype and the idea that the people now involved in drugs don’t have a life outside of them, or didn’t exist as human beings before drugs, or indeed never had any self-worth. The sofa also has other functions in relation to the teenage drug dealers. It shows the audience that this is where the family is now located - on the street. As part of their youth culture they virtually live on the street as this is where their significant others are. The brightness of the sofa also makes it a focal point for the viewer - as it is for the young men.

In conclusion, by moving the voices and insights of members of an underclass from the margin to the centre The Wire aims to disrupt the complacency of viewers in terms of their attitudes to race and social inequality. Its starkest achievement lies in the way it catalogues the sheer waste of young lives across the five seasons as the casualties of the drug trade mount up. This is the root of the show’s power: when one fan wrote the following comment on a newspaper blog, he/she hit upon what makes The Wire so different from what has come before: ‘How often does a TV programme engage your emotions to such a level, or give you so much to think about?’.

Before we close, a post-script on genre. Our analysis thus far assumes that The Wire is a ‘crime’ show - but is this necessarily the case? Many critics have used other terms to describe it - an ‘urban drama’ (The Guardian), ‘tv as great modern literature’ (TV Guide), ‘novelistic urban saga’ (LA Weekly), ‘David Simon’s version of Dante’s Inferno’ (Entertainment Weekly), etc. Even The Wire’s creators have distanced themselves from the idea of a cop show - with Simon openly comparing it to Greek tragedy. Both Simon and Ed Burns have claimed they never wanted The Wire to be a cop show. You get the impression they want The Wire to be something else. They want it to be art.
The problem with this claim - good as The Wire may be - is that it takes a narrow view of what genre might be capable of. It may even imply a number of prejudices against TV (low culture, commercial, etc.) and crime drama more specifically (formalised, politically conservative, etc.), without taking into account how malleable and dynamic this forum can be. For, as we have seen, it was never one, fixed, entity: just as Hill Street was a long way from Kojak, so The Wire is a long way from Hill Street. And in ten, twenty years time, The Wire will look as creaky as those shows appear today.

True, by analysing The Wire in terms of one genre, there is a risk of closing down discussion of what other generic conventions might be in play (e.g. soap opera). But in the end, The Wire is filed under ‘crime drama’ in DVD stores for good reason, and David Simon himself reinforced that categorisation when he originally pitched the show to HBO with the words ‘...no one who sees [this] take on the culture of crime and crime fighting can watch anything like “C.S.I.” or “N.Y.P.D. Blue” or “Law & Order” again without knowing that every punch was pulled on those shows...’

It is perhaps worth noting that although Simon does not readily admit to being influenced by any previous TV cop show, when pushed he acknowledged that: ‘I saw some episodes of Hill Street Blues, and could see that it was well put together.’

He succeeded in that aim, we think, and The Wire remains the latest in a succession of crime shows that have had a dialogue with each other, as well as with their broader sociological context, and in so doing have allowed America to talk to itself about the most pressing political issues of the day - not the least of which is race.

Notes

1. David Simon, speaking at the National Film Theatre, London, 18/06/2008. Ed Burns echoed the sentiment in an interview with the authors, 26/06/2008.
4. While studies of crime TV are few and far between (there are a few outstanding books on individual shows, but much of the best work remains buried in unpublished PhDs), the crime genre per se has been the focus of a huge literature. For an overview of themes in the post-1970 period, we have found Paul Cobley’s The American Thriller (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2000) to be especially useful.
5. A filmed interview with Abby Mann can be seen on the ‘Archive of American Television’ at: http://www.emmytvlegends.blogspot.com and also on YouTube.
10. The occasional homo-erotic elements of such buddy partnerships should not be ignored - a long-standing theme in American fiction (as analysed by literary critic Leslie Fielder, for example).
12. James McDaniel quoted by actor S. Epatha Merkerson in Sandra P. Angulo, ‘Cop to it’,
18/10/1998.
15. David Simon speaking at The Times Center, New York, 30/07/08.
17. David Simon at the Times Center, op cit.
18. David Simon, interview with the authors, 30/07/08. See also the article by Sara Taylor in this Issue for a critique of humanism in The Wire.
20. David Simon, “There are two Americas, separate, unequal” Weekend Guardian, 06.09.08, 24-28.
23. Charles Burnett quoted in bell hooks, op cit., 168
24. Ed Burns dates the Baltimore ‘drugs deluge’ to the Reagan era (interview with the authors, op cit.). However, it seems clear that other urban centres (especially New York and San Francisco) felt the effects earlier.
27. Interviews with the authors, op cit.
29. Interview with the authors, op cit.
30. 

URL to article: http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2009/05/29/who-loves-yadavid-simon/
“Thin Line ‘tween heaven and here” (Bubbles): Real and Imagined Space in The Wire


In *America*, Baudrillard famously states:

> The American City seems to have stepped right out of the movies...To grasp its secret, you should not, then, begin with the city and move inwards towards the screen; you should begin with the screen and move outwards towards the city.\(^1\)

For Baudrillard, city space is always already sensed through the cinematic image and this image of the city exerts a powerful influence over how the ‘real’ city is grasped and understood. Indeed it is difficult to distinguish between the ‘real’ and the filmic city and in Baudrillard’s statement there is a sense that it is the image which is more ‘real’ than the city itself. If cinema has transformed the way in which urban space is understood, then television further collapses distinctions between real and imagined space. For David Morley, television is the site of ‘radical intrusion of distant events into the space of domesticity’;\(^2\) it is a point at which boundaries between domestic space and the outside world are both demarcated and destabilised. Television therefore not only blurs the distinction between the ‘real’ and imagined city but can also serve to collapse boundaries between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ space.

This essay will consider *The Wire* in terms of televisual representations and will suggest that whereas the city is frequently positioned as an environment ‘out there’, populated by ‘others’, *The Wire* offers a reading which moves beyond this. While it is not my intention here simply to set up a binary between *The Wire* and ‘other’ series, nor will I consider the production contexts which contribute to how series differ, it would seem reasonable to assume that many viewers will come to *The Wire* familiar with these televisual experiences of the city. And if, as Baudrillard suggests, the American city is to be understood through the screen image, then these representations themselves significantly inform how the urban environment is perceived. I will argue that *The Wire* both acknowledges these televisual representations and moves beyond them. I examine how, from the very first season, *The Wire* makes apparent the way in which space is constructed and space is elided. At the same time, *The Wire* itself engenders a sense of the city in its entirety, although not as a unified or homogeneous whole and the city takes on the spatial qualities of a social and lived environment. This moves beyond a reading of the city based on notions of essesionalised difference and ‘others’, while pointing to the power structures and social inequalities inherent in city spaces and playing on the unstable location of the television city itself.

Just as cinema and the city share a long history, so do the urban and the crime genre, and the city frequently serves as a backdrop to the crime drama series. Indeed the name of the city is often embedded in the title (*CSI: NY, CSI: Miami, NYPD Blue, Miami Vice*). Typically, in dramas such as *NYPD Blue* or *CSI* the cityscape appears as snapshots (and indeed this is also the case in other genres such as sitcoms or hospital dramas which are ostensibly set in a particular city). An episode will begin with a few establishing shots which serve to remind the viewer in which city the series is located. Frequently these shots will be aerial views or a few iconic buildings, reminiscent of postcards. This may be followed by an exterior shot of a building (such as the 15th Precinct building in *NYPD Blue*) or a crime scene, but there is little sense of a relationship between the opening shots and the next location. Views of the city also serve as links between scenes; a scene may begin with a car drawing up outside a building with a street view in the background, but in fact much of the key action and dialogue then takes place inside. Clearly, one reason for this is that dramas such as *NYPD Blue* and *CSI* are filmed primarily in LA, so recognisable landmarks are essential to locate the series in a particular city (and it is striking how many times events will occur in the proximity of these landmarks). But this engenders a sense of the city as an abstraction, not
as a lived environment. The city space is visited rather than inhabited and is frequently positioned as threatening and alien.

The Wire, however, puts the city centre stage; series creator David Simon has said that he set out to ‘build a city’ and described the series as a ‘travelogue’.\(^3\) Clearly the decision to film on location in Baltimore opens up the city in a manner which cannot be achieved on an LA studio lot. There is a sense in which Baltimore is not a ‘postcard city’ like LA, New York or Miami; it is a less obvious TV location and although it has a thriving tourist industry, is less well-known, particularly outside the US, as a tourist destination. Baltimore can be perceived more as an ‘every city’, although at the same time, its specific historical, geographic and economic situation is significant. It is an East Coast city which has suffered economically as a result of the collapse of heavy industry. Within each episode characters, and consequently the camera and the viewer, move through and across the city’s spaces, and each season extends further into the city’s institutions and geography. The Wire is not unique in being filmed on location and in a recent article in Flow TV, Alisa Perren points to the growing trend to use less obvious locations.\(^4\) Homicide: Life on the Street, which could be considered to be the network forerunner of The Wire, was likewise filmed on location in Baltimore and the link between location filming and authenticity extends back to series such as Dragnet and Hill Street Blues.\(^5\) However what distinguishes The Wire is the multitude of locations, the number of scenes filmed outside and the fact that it self-consciously plays on the way in which space is constructed and viewed.

There is an awareness of how space is frequently conceived as abstract, as image and that this invariably produces a partial view where space will be missed out. The abundance, particularly in Season 1, of images seen through camera lenses and on CCTV screens is central to a drama about surveillance. But the cameras also point to the way in which space is itself often experienced and understood through images; the photographic lenses used by the police bring distant objects or people into close proximity. The CCTV camera in the lift shows a whole space, but distorted, and the CCTV camera in the projects offers only a partial view. The cameras are an attempt to control space, but space is never fully contained. Space as an abstraction is also signified by the maps which adorn the offices of the Homicide Unit, the Western District, the Detail (and later Major Crimes Unit), the stevedores’ union building, the Mayor’s office, Carcetti’s campaign offices, the Maritime charts (and tide charts) and the newsroom. Even the code used by the ‘Greeks’ and Marlo in Season 5 refers to map grid references. While the maps suggest the ‘real’ city of Baltimore and its geography, they are also attempts to colonise space: the city is divided into voting districts, areas to be policed, zones to be redeveloped or spaces to be surveilled.

The Wire therefore knowingly points to the gap between the attempt to represent space and lived social space, but in doing so the series itself seeks to address this gap. This becomes apparent from the beginning of Season 1. Most obviously, there is no privileging of one view. Much television crime drama tends to follow in the tradition of the white male noir detective who, in spite of visiting many of the city’s spaces, is an individual alienated from the city.\(^6\) While dramas such as CSI and NYPD Blue include detectives who are black and female, the white male view frequently predominates (Sipowicz, Grissom, Horatio Caine, Mac Taylor). Even where this is not necessarily the case, as in Homicide: Life on the Street, the city is positioned as an environment ‘out there’ populated by people ‘other’ than the detective(s). The city’s spaces are primarily seen as crime scenes where there are either victims or criminals. That The Wire is not simply told from the point of view of the police detectives itself opens up the city to the viewer and the camera and allows it to be experienced as a lived social space rather than as an abstraction.

The significance of this multiple perspective can be seen from the very first episode. Many scenes are in long or medium shot, which, as David Simon suggests in the DVD commentary, allows the characters to be seen in their environment. ((The Wire, The Complete First
Season [DVD], Episode one commentary by David Simon (New York: HBO Home Video, 2003.) There is an abundance of detail and scenes begin with the camera showing a location before a known character appears. In 1:1 ‘The Detail’ D’Angelo arrives for his first day back at work after jail. The camera focuses first on a woman waiting at a bus stop. It is a bright sunny autumn day and in the distance, slightly hazy in the sunlight are the high rises of downtown Baltimore. The bus comes into view and as the woman gets onto the bus, D’Angelo steps off. The woman is wearing a pass around her neck, suggesting that she, like D’Angelo, is on her way to work, but in this case legitimate work. It is unclear who will descend from the bus or who is to be the focus of this scene, so the viewer has an opportunity to take in the location first. This place exists before D’Angelo arrives there, and the bus and the street are a shared public space where everyday life goes on. Unlike the ‘postcard’ establishing shot, the viewer here is positioned at ground level in the lived social space. The camera focuses on D’Angelo as he walks along the street and then cuts to show him approaching the towers and Stringer Bell.

The next scene begins with a view from above of Bodie on the orange sofa. The camera takes in a child looking out of a window and two women sitting on their steps talking, before D’Angelo meets Bodie, Poot and Wallace for the first time (he has been demoted from the towers following his jail term). In the next scene in the low rises, the camera once again lingers on Bodie on the bright orange sofa, a child watching from a window, a woman sitting outside her house, D’Angelo sitting on a plastic chair, eating, next to someone’s washing flapping in the wind. The wealth of detail suggests a ‘real’ space and a lived space. This is not merely an anonymous crime scene, but a place where ordinary life goes on. This may be an area where drugs are bought and sold, but it is not positioned as a murky underworld. In 1:4 ‘Old Cases’, while D’Angelo, Bodie, Poot and Wallace talk, in the background someone is hanging out the washing. The scene finishes with a view from above of one child pushing another in a shopping trolley. The camera then pans up to show the city, from the lower buildings in the foreground towards the gleaming high rises of downtown.

There is a sense of the city in its entirety, as well as the ‘real’ place of Baltimore, but also of the relationship between spaces. The juxtaposition of scenes is a technique used frequently in The Wire to underline the similarities of institutions, whether law enforcers or law breakers but here it also points to a geographical proximity and separation. The high-rises of downtown, which commonly feature in the television city in isolation, are here situated in relation to the projects. Neither space is merely an abstraction, as the following scene takes place downtown, in the opulent offices of the court, where Judge Phelan meets Burrell. Rather each space has a geographical, social and economic location within the city; they are at once a part of the same city and yet separate. Difference is both real and imagined; imagined because the activities within each space mirror each other, but very real in terms of economic and social conditions.

The relationships between spaces in the city are also apparent in the many scenes which take place in corridors, stairwells, lifts, outside on the street or inside cars travelling along streets. These interconnecting spaces are not simply areas which are passed through, or missed out altogether, but spaces where key conversations and action take place, and crucially these are also the spaces where people live. In 1:4 ‘Old Cases’, there are two scenes where Bubbles travels by car. In the first journey with Kima, the camera shows the view out of the car window of brightly coloured rowhouses against a clear blue sky. Some houses are boarded up, some are better maintained; there are people in the streets and cars parked outside buildings. The camera then cuts to an exterior shot of Bubbles through the car window, with the buildings reflected in the window. For Bubbles, this way of seeing the city is unusual, as he normally walks or takes the bus. Here, the view through the car window is seen from Bubbles’ perspective, but in fact this is how the city is frequently experienced and is a way in which the city’s spaces can be kept ‘out’, avoided or escaped altogether.
This is underlined further when McNulty takes him to watch his son’s soccer game. Here, the large houses and leafy front gardens contrast starkly both with the earlier scene in Kima’s car, and the next scene, the night time alleyway where McNulty drops Bubbles off. The organised soccer game also contrasts with the children playing in the street and chasing each other round a woman carrying her shopping. The affluent suburbs are unfamiliar territory to Bubbles and accessible only by car, but in fact they, like the projects, are a part of the city. This is the city as it is, in all its parts and in all its lived spaces. The contrast in spaces points to an economic and social gap, but the camera does not privilege any space and neither McNulty’s nor Bubbles’ view is privileged in these scenes. The McNulty family’s world seems far removed from Bubbles, but while McNulty and Elena argue publicly about McNulty’s lateness, the camera stays on Bubbles’ face. Later, when McNulty drops Bubbles off, the camera remains on McNulty’s face as he watches Bubbles walk down the alley. As Bubbles leaves the car he tells McNulty ‘thin line ‘tween heaven and here’. Each watches an existence which is at the same time distant and familiar. McNulty has been banished from the family home and his drinking is not dissimilar from Bubbles’ addiction. Bubbles himself has a sister, to whom he turns in both Season 1 and Season 5 for a place to stay. It is indeed a fine line between an existence which is socially acceptable and one that is marginalised.

There is a sense then, of a whole city and of social and lived spaces. The street, to which Bubbles returns, is not necessarily threatening or dangerous (although of course it can be) but it is also a place where children play. This is not just a city experienced by those who visit (and McNulty acknowledges to Bunk that this is the relationship the police have to the projects), but as a lived environment. However, there is no sense that this is an organic or homogenous whole, and in opening up the city, The Wire not only shows the spaces frequently elided but also the socially constructed divisions which are obscured as a consequence.

Movement across the city may be physically possible, but it is circumscribed. The city is connected but economic and social class, race, ethnicity and gender intersect to determine access to space, although not all of the time or in the same way. While Bubbles may visit the white suburbs and McNulty visits the black projects, The Wire moves beyond any such simplistic binary. There is an awareness of history; poverty has affected the black population most and The Wire also points to the complex ways in which race, class and gender interact. In the spaces of Kavanagh’s bar and the St Clement Street bar, black police socialise with white police (singing Irish songs) and black stevedores mix with white stevedores. In their professional space, Rhonda Pearlman, a white woman and Cedric Daniels, a black man appear equal and in their domestic space they are better matched personally, in terms of education and class (and reliability), than Rhonda and Jimmy McNulty. But in the projects, Bunk and McNulty, ‘white and black together, ties and jackets on’, can only be police.

One scene in which these complex interactions are particularly apparent occurs in 1:5 ‘The Pager’, when D’Angelo takes Donette to a fancy restaurant. It is clear from the moment they enter the restaurant that this is unfamiliar territory. D’Angelo is surprised that he should have made a reservation and has to make do with an inferior table. While he may be an authority in the low rises, here he is unsure of himself and Donette tells him he should have been more assertive with the waiter. Towards the end of the meal, D’Angelo asks her ‘Do they know what I’m about?’ The camera cuts to show their fellow diners, two elderly white ladies and a middle-aged black couple talking. Donette responds: ‘Your money good, right D.? We ain’t the only black people in here.’ D’Angelo replies that that is not what he means, rather ‘hard as you try, you still can’t go nowhere’ and Donette tells him ‘You got money, you get to be whatever you say.’ But this is not quite the case as D’Angelo then takes the wrong cake from the dessert cart. While there is nothing to prevent D’Angelo from going to the restaurant if he can afford it, money is not enough: social class and education are necessary to know restaurant etiquette. Even though he lives in the city, he will walk around harbour only ‘acting as if’ he belongs: these are spaces in which the middle classes, black and
white, feel at home. He is not out of place in the restaurant because he is black, but because he is the wrong class, but the fact that he is black means that he is less likely to have access to the education and money of the middle classes. And his feeling that it is in fact incredibly difficult to escape his background proves to be correct, as ultimately he is killed in jail, just at the point where he has decided to cut himself off from Avon.

*The Wire* engenders therefore a sense of both a connected and divided city. Lives may mirror each other, such as Bubbles and McNulty, but it is not the case that everyone’s experiences are the same and Bubbles’ experiences are much harsher than McNulty’s. The police tactics may echo those of the corner boys but the risks for each are not the same. However, there is never a sense in which the city is a space occupied by ‘others’. The spaces are all inhabited and lived spaces; the camera and the viewer are not positioned as visitors in these spaces, even though the detectives occasionally are. It is perhaps troubling that Season 1 appears to position McNulty, a white male detective, as the central character, but arguably he occupies this position only for it to be deconstructed and indeed in Seasons 2–4, he moves very much into the sidelines.

Homi K. Bhabha suggests that: ‘The Western metropole must confront its postcolonial history, told by its postwar migrants and refugees, as an indigenous or native narrative internal to its national identity’.\(^1\) I would suggest that *The Wire* re-presents the city as a space where all narratives are internal. These are not alternative stories of the city but are integral to any understanding of the city. In a recent article in *The Guardian Weekend* magazine, David Simon raises the concern that his reading of Baltimore ‘has more appeal the farther one travels from America’.\(^8\) But while particularity is important, *The Wire* also resists a reading which sees the narratives as internal only to Baltimore. The expressways and railways, not to mention the seaport, connect Baltimore not only to the rest of America, but also to the rest of the world. Baltimore does not exist in an economic, historical and social vacuum and its narratives are internal not only to this specific city but extend outwards nationally and globally.

It is this play on inside and outside space which inflects *The Wire* and its televsual representation of the city. *The Wire* endeavours to show Baltimore as it ‘really’ is and yet of course it is a fictional representation. In the same *Guardian* article, David Simon points out that even *The Wire* cannot say everything about Baltimore\(^2\) and indeed, in drawing attention to the constructed nature of space, the series acknowledges this at the outset. Yet there is a sense that the viewer of *The Wire* does, as Baudrillard suggests, begin with the screen and move out into the city. *The Wire* is not quite the ‘real’ Baltimore, but the city is experienced as a lived social space, not as a nightmarish alien urban wasteland. In opening up the city’s spaces, showing the viewer spaces which are often missed out, *The Wire* does not so much bring Morley’s ‘distant events’ and places into the home as move the viewer into the city’s streets. For Morley, the concern is that television should not be used to reinforce a sense of space which continues to rest on a binary of inside and outside, home and foreigners. But television is also a border site, and it is these border sites which Bhabha suggests are critical in order to move beyond identity based on binaries or notions of essential difference.\(^10\) If television is a point where distinctions between inside and outside, real and imagined space dissolve, then in taking on the spatial qualities of the lived environment, *The Wire* creates a television city which offers more than a view from a window on an ‘outside’ world, populated by ‘others’.

Notes


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 indict 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?” Here 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 comic 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 laughable. 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). Here 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 vacants 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.4

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).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. 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:

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 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.4

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](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”.

The Politics of Brisket: Jews and The Wire

The Wire generally avoids simple characterisations of heroes and villains in favour of ambiguous, finely drawn characters. Our expectations of characters’ behaviours are constantly challenged and played with. But in this world of complex motivations and contradictory actions, the lawyer Maurice Levy stands out for his near constant repulsiveness.

Levy appears throughout the five series of the show as the lawyer of choice for those in ‘The Game’. We first see him at the start of episode one, series one, defending D’Angelo Barksdale. His smugness and lack of surprise when Nakeesha Lyles, a key prosecution witness, backtracks on her story indicates his tacit complicity in what is clearly a case of witness tampering. From this beginning, Levy is shown to be not just a defence lawyer, but a part of The Game himself, although for the most part staying just about within the bounds of legality. As Omar Little responds to Levy when he attempts to discredit his character as a witness at Bird’s trial in season two: ‘I got the shotgun; you got the briefcase. It’s all in the game’. At times Levy acts as a kind of consigliere to his major clients, at the end of series one advising Stringer Bell and Avon Barksdale to - in not so many words - dispose of any possible witnesses to their criminality, leading to the murder of Nakeesha Lyles. He provides routes into the legitimate business world for Bell, Barksdale and later on for Marlo Stanfield, providing connections to property developers who have no qualms as to where they receive their money from.

During the fifth series, Levy is shown to be a criminal himself. He is discovered to have purchased court documents and to be involved in high level corruption of the justice system in Baltimore. Yet he is never actually charged with anything, as in the final episode he bargains his freedom with prosecutor Rhonda Pearlman in exchange for the conviction of Chris Partlow and others members of Marlo’s gang, together with the retirement of Marlo himself from drug dealing. In a series in which there are few outright winners, Levy manages to play The Game without losing.

In The Wire, family is often used as a way of ‘humanising’ even the most immoral characters. Avon Barksdale is seen visiting a sick relative in season one and extolling the virtues of family, even Chris Partlow is shown briefly with his ‘peoples’ in series five. So it is that two references are made to Levy’s family in the five series. Both of these references link Levy’s family life to his Jewishness. The first of these reference occurs when he is called out in episode two of series one to attend the interrogation of D’Angelo Barksdale. On his way to the interrogation room he complains to McNulty:

Levy: Shame on you McNulty, dragging me from the Levy family preserve on a Friday night
McNulty: My apologies
Levy: Yvette made brisket
McNulty: Good?
Levy: When served hot

This exchange and Levy’s annoyed demeanour suggest that while he will work on the Sabbath, he sees his time with his family at the Sabbath table as sacrosanct. The second reference to Levy’s Jewish family occurs in the final episode of series five. After informing Marlo of the deal he has struck with Pearlman, he goes to meet Herc, an ex-detective who is now Levy’s investigator. Here he had previously used his contacts with his ex-partner Carver to find out about the illegal wiretap responsible for Marlo’s prosecution and had then informed Levy of this. Levy elatedly tells Herc:

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Kiddo, you are a goldmine to me you know that? You've taken this law firm to a whole new level [...] Now if Marlo takes the deal he's going to take a walk after being charged in a multi-million drug seizure. That doesn't happen very often and when it does happen the name and number of the lawyer goes in the front pocket of every respectable drug trafficker. You're a genius for what you brought me on this [...] Here [handing Herc his address], you should come over for dinner tonight. Yvette's making brisket [...] You're mishpocha now.

For Levy, the comforts of the home, bound up in the comforting, calorie-rich taste of brisket, are a kind of sanctuary from the dirty business of The Game he plays in his working life. He may play The Game but his home and family are not in the West Baltimore neighbourhoods where his clients live. We can read Yvette (who never appears in the series) as Levy's ‘angel of the hearth’, someone who has not been dirtied by The Game and the street. For Herc to be invited into this sanctuary is a special honour and Herc’s pleased expression suggests he sees it as such. At the same time, it is also made clear that Levy’s brisket is paid for by his involvement in the drug trade. Levy may have his domestic sanctuary, but it is a sanctuary that is built on his corruption.

What is intriguing is how far our brief insights into Levy’s home life are tied in with references to his Jewishness. His family life is bound up in Jewish ritual (Sabbath dinner) Jewish food (brisket) and Jewish belonging (mishpocha). Levy’s invitation to Herc to become mishpocha has unmistakably clannish, even conspiratorial overtones. He extends the warmth of his Jewish family to someone who has loyalty to him - loyalty forged through Herc’s betrayal of Carver. In turning his back on his loyalties to the police and to his former partner, Herc is received into Levy’s Jewish family circle. Even if Herc has previously betrayed Levy himself through giving Marlo’s cell number to Carver (something of which Levy is not aware) Herc’s pleasure in Levy’s invitation indicates his willingness to forge a new set of loyalties that, whilst anchored in the Jewish home, are built on the values of The Game. In other words, Levy succeeds in seducing Herc - one of The Wire's dumbest and most suggestible characters - away from the rectitude represented by his former partner in the police (who over the five series has come to be redeemed from his earlier corruption). The embrace of Levy’s Jewish home is ultimately the reward for Herc’s betrayal. The home, a source of succour for other characters, is in the case of Levy a source of corruption.

Levy’s crookedness, his cynical exploitation of the drug trade and his ‘seduction’ of Herc all recall common negative stereotypes of Jews as sinister, venal and secretive. I am not arguing here that The Wire is anti-Semitic in any crude sense, rather that this one character is constructed in ways that recall certain common anti-Semitic tropes. That said, the other two major Jewish characters on the series Sergeant Jay Landsman and Assistant State’s Attorney Rhonda Pearlman are much more sympathetic than Levy. We can assume with a reasonable degree of confidence that Pearlman is Jewish as she has a common Jewish surname, although her Jewishness is never referred to in the series. Landsman’s character is based on a ‘real life’ character who is Jewish and in his ‘eulogy’ for McNulty at the end of series five someone can be heard shouting out ‘play the fucking tape Jew’. Both of these characters are much more morally complex than Levy is. Pearlman is one of the few characters in the series who manages to retain her integrity while managing to balance idealism with career-advancement. Landsman, while a fat slob and a time server, retains his capacity for moments of compassion and loyalty, as with his sensitive treatment of Bubbles in series four and Ziggy in series two. Their Jewishness is not referred to as explicitly as Levy’s is and it is not treated as a significant source of either characters’ strengths and weaknesses.

What then is the significance of Jews in The Wire? How far is it significant that there are only three Jewish characters? What is the significance of the fact that the Jew whose
Jewishness is most explicitly referred to on The Wire is one of the show’s most unpleasant characters, whose depiction is consistent with some anti-Semitic tropes?

To approach these questions we have to look at how The Wire’s Baltimore relates to ‘real world’ Baltimore and in particular the real world of the Baltimore Jewish community. While the comparison of text with an external reality is often seen to be naïve in most contemporary critical theory, an assessment of how far The Wire’s Baltimore resembles the Baltimore that is lived in by its residents remains valid given that show creator David Simon has explicitly described The Wire as a portrait of the contemporary American city:

The Wire is about the American city: How it works, or doesn’t, and ultimately, what is at stake for all of us in these times. In that regard, it reflects, with precision, the Baltimore that the writers know and, yes, in a very real sense, love. It is not the work of Hollywood writers on studio lots. It is homegrown and organic and hence it is very much about place.\[5\]

There has been a significant Jewish presence in Baltimore since the late eighteenth century and the Lloyd Street synagogue is the third oldest in the US.\[6\] Today, there are around 100,000 Jews in the Baltimore Metropolitan Area, about 6% of the population.\[2\] Baltimore Jewry is a ‘strong, cohesive, active Jewish community’,\[8\] with a highest proportion of Orthodox Jews than any other American city. It is largely inmarried and has strong traditions of Jewish education, community involvement and philanthropy. Baltimore is also the home to Baltimore Hebrew University together with a number of yeshivot and seminars.

More than 71% of the Jewish population lives in Baltimore County rather than Baltimore City,\[3\] reflecting a suburban concentration shared by other ‘white’ groups in a two-thirds African-American city. Within the County, Jews are concentrated in a few suburbs such as Pikesville. County Jews tend to have been in Baltimore for a longer period than City Jews who are newer to the city and are dispersed across many neighbourhoods. Through the twentieth century there was a gradual process in which Jews moved in a northwesterly direction out from the city centre towards the suburbs. Jews were part of the ‘white flight’ that left many neighbourhoods in West Baltimore and elsewhere dominated by African-Americans.\[10\] It has been argued that over the twentieth century Jews in America gradually became classed as a ‘white’ minority and accrued the same privileges afforded to other white groups\[4\] and certainly nowadays Baltimore Jews are largely (but not exclusively) a well-off, well-integrated but still distinct part of Baltimore’s white minority.

The Wire does not portray ‘white Baltimore’ as homogeneous. The second series starts off with a dispute within the Polish community. McNulty is at one point referred to as a ‘Mick’ by Landsman in his eulogy and there are other Irish police characters as well. Carcetti is identifiably Italian-American. The ‘Greek’s gang is mostly Greek, with Russian and Israeli members. Yet the portrayal of white communities is much more uneven than that of African-American Baltimore. The Wire presents a cross-section of African-American Baltimore; from elites such as Clay Davis and Clarence Royce, through mid-level police officers and political aids, to upstanding residents of the ghettoes of West and East Baltimore, to players of The Game in those neighbourhoods. The series also shows some of the generational differences within African-American Baltimore; from elderly church-going residents through to the brutalised schoolchildren being drawn into The Game. With the partial exception of the Poles in series two none of this diachronic or synchronic complexity can be found in The Wire’s portrayal of white Baltimore. Nor indeed is there much of a presence of minorities that do not easily fall into the black-white dichotomy. The growing Hispanic minority is invisible save for journalist Alma Gutierrez in series five and some of the gardeners that Cutty works with in series three.\[12\] Asian-Americans are completely absent save for the
screaming Korean store keeper present at Omar’s shooting in season five and a brief appearance of a South Asian storekeeper in series three.

It would be absurd to demand of *The Wire* or any other programme that it exactly replicate the complex demography of a multicultural modern city. At the same time though, the explicit desire of David Simon to treat Baltimore as both the theme and location of the series suggest that we are entitled to question the different levels of attention paid to different communities. All representations are by definition partial, but some are perhaps more partial than others. My contention though is that whilst the absences in the representation of Jews and other minorities on *The Wire* might be seen as a ‘failure’ to fully attend to the diversity of non-African-American Baltimore, this failure can be read as dramatically and politically appropriate.

In an interview conducted just before the fifth series ended, David Simon discussed the significance of the newspaper as a focus for the final series (a focus that puzzled some viewers and critics):

> We know that the mayor is cooking the stats so he can become governor. We know that he’s taking apart the Marlo task force. We know that he’s backing No Child Left Behind, and hyping a dubious gain in the 3rd grade test scores though the schools remain an unmitigated disaster. We know that these politically charged prosecutions of Clay Davis are being undercut behind the scenes by a variety of conflicting interests, that there’s turf wars that result in complete lapses of any anti-corruption effort. We know that Prop Joe is the biggest drug dealer in the city with the main connect, and when he’s killed, it’s a brief. We know who Omar is — and, listen, you’d need a really good police reporter to write a story about Omar, but it could happen, but it certainly isn’t going to happen at that paper.

> The main theme is not the fabulist and what he is perpetrating. That’s the overt plot. The main theme is that, with the exception of the bookends - at the beginning, the excellent effort at adversarial journalism that begins the piece in episode one and the genuine piece of narrative journalism that concludes it, with Bubbles - it’s a newspaper that is so eviscerated, so worn, so devoid of veterans, so consumed by the wrong things, and so denied the ability to replenish itself that it singularly misses every single story in the season[...]

> That is the last piece in the Wire puzzle: If you think anyone will be paying attention to anything you encountered in the first four seasons of this show, think again.¹³

The *Baltimore Sun*’s ignorance of what is happening in Baltimore is shared by other institutions in the city. We can read the entire series as an interrogation of the disconnection and absences that are endemic within the post-industrial city. The police department, city hall and the newspaper are all ignorant - sometimes innocently, sometimes wilfully - of what is the true state of the city. They base policy on calculations that have little to do with what the city needs. The ‘wires’ that are the focus of investigations in all five series represent desperate attempts to make up for the ignorance that authority has of life in West Baltimore. The necessity for a ‘fake’ wire in season five to disguise the real/illegal one is a telling indictment of the refusal of those in authority to truly listen to what is happening in their city. Ironically, those who try to narrow the disconnect such as McNulty (through the fake wire) and Bunny Colvin (through the creation of ‘Hamsterdam’) have to resort to creating their own disconnection from their bosses.
Ignorance and disconnection is the function of a process in which whole neighbourhoods are not simply deprived, but systematically evacuated of a viable future. The post-industrial vacuum made worse by the evisceration of the education system and welfare state, is now filled with a drug trade that the police and city hall cannot and will not engage in through anything but ineffective short-term punitive measures. West Baltimore (and of course parts of East Baltimore too, although they are not portrayed with the same detail in The Wire) is a reality completely segregated from the rest of Baltimore. This is not the same though as the segregation of the pre-civil rights era. If pre-civil rights segregated communities were by no means ‘separate but equal’, there were at least similar values persisting across the communities. In series three, detective Bunk Moreland meets with Omar to ask for his help in the shooting of his associate Tosha. Omar tells him that no one will talk to him and that in any case the police feel that if no ‘tax payers’ are killed there is ‘no victim to speak of’. Bunk responds:

*I was a few years ahead of you at Edmonson, but I know you remember the neighbourhood, how it was. We had some bad boys for real. It wasn’t so much about guns, so much as knowing what to do with your hands. Those boys could really rag. My father had me on the straight, but like any young man I wanted to be hard too, so I would turn up at all the house parties where the tough boys hung. Shit they knew I wasn’t one of them. Those hard cases would come up to me and tell me ‘go home schoolboy you don’t belong here’. Didn’t realise at the time what they were doing for me. As rough as that neighbourhood could be, we had us a community. No body, no victim, it didn’t matter. And now all we got is bodies and predatory motherfuckers like you. And now where that girl fell I saw kids acting like Omar, calling you by name and glorifying your ass. Makes me sick motherfucker how far we done fell."

This portrayal of West Baltimore as a place that has come to be entirely removed from the rest of society is reinforced in the portrayal of the education system in series four. In episode seven Bunny Colin tries to explain to a sceptical teacher why the education system can no longer reach the children of West Baltimore:

*You put a textbook in front of these kids, put a problem on the blackboard or teach them every problem in some state wide test it won’t matter. None of it. ‘Cos they’re not learning for our world they’re learning for theirs. And they know exactly what it is they’re training for and what it is everyone expects them to be."*

The post civil rights era may have led to greater interaction between ‘races’ and the growth of an African-American political and business class, but The Wire suggests that a new kind of segregation has emerged that is worse than racial segregation. The degradation of West Baltimore represents a kind of nightmare in which an alternative universe has been created whose values are totally disconnected from the rest of Baltimore. That West Baltimore is African-American is not insignificant, but African-Americans in authority are no less disconnected from African-Americans from West Baltimore than anyone else is.

*The Wire* focuses relentlessly on West Baltimore in its portrayal of the city. It is the frame through which Baltimore is viewed and found wanting. The radical point being made is that no matter what good things happen in Baltimore - the regeneration of the harbour area for example - if West Baltimore is invisible and disconnected the city remains infected with a kind of pathological disconnection. This perspective, while it may recall politically radical discourses, lacks the kind of framework that would suggest any hope of change. The residents of West Baltimore have no more insight into the condition of the city than anyone else has - this is no idealised proletariat endowed with the ‘slave’s’ greater knowledge of the
‘master’ than the master has of himself. *The Wire* has a profoundly dystopian and postmodern view of the possibilities of knowledge within the post-industrial city, in which a cacophony of partial perspectives add up to something that is less than the sum of its parts.

The question of the significance of Jews on *The Wire* must be viewed through the shows ‘West Baltimore perspective’. For West Baltimore, the vibrancy of Baltimore Jewish life is a complete irrelevance. There is only the haziest idea of what Jews are and what they do. At one point in series four Namond’s mother asks his excuse is for ‘why you ain’t at school?’; she then asks if the reason is that it is ‘one of them Jew holidays’. David Simon has said of his time in West Baltimore while writing *The Corner*:

> I was the only Jew these guys have seen in the last 20 years, since the Koreans took over the corner groceries. There’s no connection. [Jews] don’t exist for them. 

In a 2005 interview with the *Baltimore Jewish Times*, Simon placed the principle responsibility for ending black-Jewish disconnection with the Jewish community, castigating most of organised Baltimore Jewry for its failure to engage in West Baltimore:

> I really resent it - why was David Simon with his little notepad the only representation of American Judaism down there? This is your city! This is Baltimore! Here are the worst problems in your city, and where the [expletive] are you?”

In *The Wire*, as in ‘real life’, Jews only enter West Baltimore life as authority figures (Landsman, Pearlman) or as those mediating that authority (Levy). In an interview with a Jewish newspaper, Simon explained why Levy was made into a Jewish character:

> Why did we make this guy Jewish? Because when I was covering the drug trade for 13 years for the [Baltimore] Sun, most of the major drug lawyers were Jewish. Some of them are now disbarred and others are not but came pretty close. Anyone who is anyone in law enforcement in Baltimore knows the three or four guys Maury [sic] Levy is patterned on.

Levy acts allegedly in the interest of West Baltimore residents but he does not relate to them as anything other than clients and his work helps to sustain the drug trade. Viewed from West Baltimore, Levy is a rapacious and sinister figure, to be used and respected but never to be treated as one of their own. The presence of anti-Semitic tropes in *The Wire* is a result of the lack of other Jewish figures for West Baltimore to base its view of Jews on. *The Wire* demonstrates how in a city in which meaningful connection between individuals and communities is destroyed by the open wound of West Baltimore, representation becomes mere stereotype. *The Wire*’s failure to adequately represent Baltimore’s Jews and other religious and ethnic groups is in fact a powerful statement that representations of urban multicultural diversity are an irrelevance if parts of the city have become so degraded. Through their disconnection from West Baltimore, Jews on *The Wire* become either sinister stereotypes or a barely differentiated part of an entirely ‘other’ world that is homogeneous in its ignorance of the wound lying in the heart of the city.

Notes

1. Thanks to Conrad Ege, Michael Wegier, Neil Rubin and Deb Weiner for their help in researching this article.
2. *Mishpocha* means family in Yiddish. However, it also implies a clannish sense of a wider Jewish family.
3. In addition, one of the Greek’s ‘employees’ in the second season is an Israeli called Eitan of whom we are told little. There may also be other minor characters that might have been portrayed as Jewish had the size of their roles been extended.

4. Landsman’s father was the first Jewish district commander in the Baltimore police department. Landsman himself plays Lieutenant Dennis Mello in the series.


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9. Unlike most other American cities, Baltimore County, which surrounds the city of Baltimore, does not include the city itself.

10. The history of Baltimore Jewry and its evolving relationships with both ‘white’ and ‘black’ Baltimore has been memorably drawn on in Barry Levinson’s films *Avalon*, *Tin Men*, *Liberty Heights* and *Diner*.


12. At one stage David Simon and the other writers discussed the possibility of a sixth season focusing on Hispanic East Baltimore. However, the idea was rejected as ‘none of us is fluent in Spanish; none of us is intimately connected to the lives of Hispanics in Baltimore. None of us could do it with the degree of verisimilitude we demand of ourselves. We don’t have that world in our pocket’ (Quoted in an interview with David Simon by Meghan O’Rourke, *Slate*, 1 December 2006 http://www.slate.com/id/2154694/pagenum/all/#).


14. One of the boys turns out to be Kenard, who shoots Omar in series five.


URL to article: http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2009/05/29/the-politics-of-brisket-jews-and-the-wire/
White Negroes and The Wire


A hipster moves like a cat, slow walk, quick reflexes; he dresses with a flick of chic; if his dungarees are old, he turns the cuffs at a good angle.
- Norman Mailer, *Hipster and Beatnik: a footnote to The White Negro.*

Just over fifty years ago, Norman Mailer prowled the psychic wilds of Greenwich Village in search of an apocalyptic orgasm. The result of Mailer’s cruising was *The White Negro,* an influential essay which encouraged more hipsters to rail against soul-destroying institutions with a little help from a bad ass Black culture. In the twenty-first century one rarely uncovers writers echoing Mailer’s description of white hipsters (with the notable exception of Armond White, a cultural critic for *The New York Press* and author of *The Resistance: Ten Years of Pop Culture that Shook the World,* who repeatedly employs the term to characterise artists such as Quentin Tarantino and Eminem). Rebounding from the term “wigger”, which haunted white fans of hip hop in the 1990s, Mailer’s legacy is transformed into the ironic pose of hot cultural commodities such as *Stuff White People Like.* Christian Lander’s popular blog lists an assortment of hobbies, interests and ornaments craved by white progressives used to footnotes and lists as thick as morons at a Ku Klux Klan meeting. Revealingly, number 85 on Lander’s table is *The Wire,* which purportedly fulfils a need for gritty realism and interracial brotherhood among folks who are also fans of gentrification (number 73). Various articles on the internet will undoubtedly repeat and castigate the ironies inevitable as the artists formerly known as White Negroes search for euphemisms for their status that do not note their economic position. However, we do not have to limit ourselves to the deconstruction of a creative class or a post-racial meritocracy when *The Wire’s* second season pays such an eloquent eulogy to the White Negro and the wigger in a working-class Polish American community.

Mailer’s depiction of *The White Negro* began by confronting the quick death offered by the military-industrial complex as well as the slow death of suburban conformity in the Cold War era.

If the fate of the twentieth-century is to live with death from adolescence to premature senescence, why then the only life-giving answer is to accept the terms of death, to live with death as an immediate danger, to divorce oneself from society, to exist without roots, to set out on that uncharted journey into the rebellious imperatives of the self.

In order to avoid the mortal coil of conformity, he believed that his masculine heroes needed to turn to African American guides. Why? Because Black bodies had been living on the margin between totalitarianism and democracy for two centuries ... The cameos of security for the average white: mother and the home, job and the family, are not even a mockery to millions of Negroes; they are impossible.

In passages that were regularly invoked as romantic racism 101 during the rise of whiteness studies in the 1990s, readers are told that “the Negro had stayed alive and begun to grow by relinquishing the pleasures of the mind for the more obligatory pleasures of the body.” This primitive authority meant the search for a “good orgasm” and an emotional feeling disseminated across borders by jazz and “the musical states of their artistic expression, without language, without conscious communication.”

Put bluntly, Mailer’s White Negroes accepted the Puritan charge that a Black world was infused with an alternative morality of go-getter pimps and prostitutes. The only difference
was that Puritan sociologists sought to sterilise Black bodies; hipsters wanted to inject their lives with a dose of the hyper-virile Blacks who haunted their dreams. Thus Mailer’s rebels can also be read as replicas, accepting the premise that Blacks were ostracized from American mainstream, but choosing to identify with the plight of urban African Americans rather than ascribe guilt and shame. According to Robert Park, an academic hailed as the father of urban sociology by people who ignore W.E.B. Du Bois’s earlier work on *The Philadelphia Negro*, the great migration of African Americans to Northern cities had produced (tragic, cultural) “mulattoes” who were not willing or able to limit himself to a national identity - much like “the Jew ... the first cosmopolite and citizen of the world.”6 Similarly, Mailer’s *The White Negro* was framed in response to attacks on Jewish masculinity and would not find a home in a predominantly Black community; he would only get some satisfaction denigrating the rules and regulations of his parents and teachers via the vicarious consumption of Black music. Unsurprisingly, this liminal figure ended up entering American mythology via the concerns of social workers and politicians, not just the creative productions of hipsters and beats.

Embarking on a crusade to expose the empty soundbites of modern alienation recycled by opinion leaders, with the story arcs of Greek plays and legendary characters borrowed from Westerns, the second season of *The Wire* sought to capture

> the last days of being able to follow in your old man’s footsteps to make a living if nothing better - and legitimate - came along. It was, said David Simon [the Jewish American creator of *The Wire*], a twelve-episode wake for the death of work [in Baltimore].

More to the point, this eulogy for working-class Baltimore was inspired by White Negroes and Black Power activists, a link made explicit by Simon’s attack on people and desiring-machines he calls “soulless white guys”, the champions of computers, condominiums and corporate takeovers.8 As is made clear by the H.L. Mencken epigram used to frame the shows final episode, it also evokes the sage of Baltimore who was suspicious of “marginal men”. In Mencken’s own words,

> I believe that this feeling for the hearth ... is infinitely stronger in Baltimore than in New York - that it has better survived there, indeed, than in any other large city of America - and that its persistence accounts for the superior charm of the town. ... Human relations [in Baltimore] ... tend to assume a solid permanence. A man’s circle of friends becomes a sort of extension of his family circle. His contacts are with men and women who are as rooted as he is. They are not moving all the time, and so they are not changing their friends all the time. Thus abiding relationships tend to be built up, and when fortune brings unexpected changes, they survive those changes.

In order to symbolise the challenges to Mencken’s solid Baltimore spirit, *The Wire*’s second season introduces us to Frank Sobotko, the longshorman’s union boss. Sobotko is compromised by his dealings with businessmen involved in the trafficking of drugs, weapons and women, but rationalises his participation as a means to support individual workers who suffer financial hardship or injury and obtain a canal vital to their trade. Without the canal, Sobotko is well aware that his livelihood will be threatened by property developers and a downsized port governed by technocrats.

> Down here it’s still ‘who’s your old man?’ till you got kids of your own and then it’s ‘Who’s your son?’ But after the horror movie I seen today - piers full of robots! - my kid will be lucky if he’s even punching numbers five years from now ....It breaks my fuckin’ heart that there’s no future for the Sobotkas on the waterfront.
A melodramatic piece of television may have exemplified Frank’s nightmare with a hard-working son determined to honour the family name on the docks; *The Wire* prefers to unveil the consequences of Frank’s dependence on drug importers through the creeds and deeds of his wayward son. We are regularly reminded that many longshoremen find it difficult to believe that Frank is father to Ziggy, an absent-minded worker mercilessly teased by members of Frank’s union. Failing to find comfort in the culture of longshoremen invested in tradition, Ziggy is left to adopt a hipster pose. He wins the attention of dockers by drawing attention to his source of virility, repeatedly flashing his penis at work and in bars. And, when he is not engaged in flashing his manhood, he flaunts money or expensive clothes.

Such self-fashioning evokes the caricature of superfly anti-heroes in Blaxploitation movies or hip hop videos rather than the values of the African American dockworkers in Ziggy’s community. Indeed, Ziggy is forced to adopt a White Negro pose to lampoon Nate as a buttoned down Black man chained by the union machine when he dares to question why a Sobotka would splurge $2,000 on an Italian leather jacket. However, after using an authoritative African American dockworker to remind us about the consequences of the greed Ziggy has consumed on his days off from work, *The Wire* has Ziggy’s pretty coat destroyed by a Black drugdealer called Cheese (played with aplomb by the hip hop artist Method Man). However many times he may have watched *Scarface* or *Shaft*, Ziggy is left speechless by the embodiment of Black machismo, especially when Cheese rips his leather jacket and laughs, “Not even a black man could style that shit.” Left with a tropical shirt and a colourful hat, Ziggy is doomed to live like a tourist in his place of birth, frustrated with the creased shirts of his father’s friends and the over-sized tops of the Blacks in outlaw spaces.

While Ziggy’s White Negro flagrantly uses the n-word (distancing himself from older workers who reluctantly hiss the derogatory term when reminded of exploitation, and announcing his frustration with Blacks who do not fulfil his fantasies), younger white males adopt the word to proclaim their commitment to a hip hop aesthetic. Frog, a pasty drug dealer decked out in a blue velour suit with matching trainers and hat, is sharply reminded of his racial and class location by Nick Sobotko, Ziggy’s cousin. Reminding Frog that the realities of Baltimore society mean that he is racialized as white, Nicky ridicules wiggers who imagine that they are living in a post-racial fantasy where black and white hustlers unite. Nicky, like *The Wire’s* writers, considers it a tragedy that the hard-drinking, hard-working, God-fearing thieves of Baltimore’s docks are destroyed. He is not enamoured with young whites forgetting the uniforms they used to wear to school and church. More pointedly, he is disgusted by the undisciplined behaviour among those that conform to the styles of hip hop videos and, as he spies an old lady ushering young drug dealers away from her stoop, left to reflect on his generation’s failure to uphold or protect the dreams of their elders.

In order to emphasise the tragedy of dockworkers who still want to use Timberland boots for practical purposes, the terminal conditions of White Negroes like Ziggy and wiggers like Frog are ultimately deemed a farce. Yet *The Wire’s* righteous anger does not simply target low-level drugdealers and invites larger questions about structural corruption, inertia and incompetence. Its refusal to forget the revolutionary ideals of Mailer’s White Negroes and the political goals of Black Power - even as it unveils the hypocrisy and compromises of public figures who would use the race card for personal profit - means that self-styled progressives can proudly display the DVD on antique coffee tables and rehearse attacks on multinational corporations blamed for the destruction of the American Dream. Yet as long as *The Wire* audience seize the homes and poses of the previous owners, buy condos on the docks and ripped stevedore T-shirts at vintage outlets, and cast a nostalgic glance at white fans of hip hop who sincerely believe it’s a question of where you’re at rather than where you’re from, Ziggy and Frog will not be the only short-lived characters engulfed by American myth and myopia.
Notes

3. Mailer, 273
4. Mailer, 273
5. Mailer, 279, 295
10. Backwash, 2. 7
11. Undertow, 2.5

URL to article: http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2009/05/29/white-negroes-and-the-wire/
The Subversion of Heteronormative Assumptions in HBO’s The Wire


Television today is inundated with reality programs, and formulaic sitcoms and dramas with very rare exception, and these shows are not only mechanical in their form and story development but in their depictions of social norms and cultural practices. This practice is particularly noticeable when applied to representations of homosexuality on screen, or more precisely the enforcement of heteronormative practices as a means of marginalizing homosexual relationships as somehow deviant or abnormal. This is not to say that the majority of television programs are overtly anti-homosexual, merely that heterosexual relationships are normalized and homosexual relationships are either absent or most often portrayed as sexually driven. Heteronormativity, obviously present in media depictions, is a reflection of a larger cultural mindset that places homosexuality as unnatural or undesirable.

Heteronormative cultures, like those of the Western world display and impose unseen social norms and customs upon institutions and individuals. These norms assume dimorphic sexual differences, biological essentialism which establishes clear and distinct sexual functions for both men and women, and mimetic gender and sex relationships that attach psychological traits to each gender. This structural framework is predominant in popular culture, which serve as visual support systems that reinforce heteronormative assumptions. Although there are programs on television that address homosexuality, very few subvert heteronormativity in the manner that one particular series, HBO’s The Wire, achieves.

In addition to challenging general assumptions about homosexuality, the series adds the element of racially specific stereotypes about homosexuality and traditional masculine and feminine roles. The Wire, in its portrayals of sexual diversity undercuts sexual expectations and shows what can be considered sexual normalcy within a relationship despite sexual orientation. The characters of Omar, Kima, and Lieutenant Rawls all fall under a category of sexually deviant as dictated by the heterosexually normalized spectator, and yet the series is able to present these characters as more than simply a stereotype.

In an HBO special entitled The Wire: Odyssey Wendell Pierce, who plays Bunk Moreland on The Wire commented that all of his male friends, upon first seeing Omar Little exclaimed: I want to be just like Omar… until they found out he was a homosexual. Omar is presented as a gangster Robin Hood figure; he robs all of the major drug dealers on the show and distributes cocaine and heroin vials to the needy in exchange for amnesty and silence as to his whereabouts. He is fierce, ruthless, and incredibly masculine, and yet he maintains loving, monogamous relationships with three separate men throughout the series. Omar is interesting on a theoretical level because he challenges the traditional gender expectations for black men, expectations developed in images like the black oversexualized and sexually threatening ‘buck’ figure, through his stable relationships. On another level he complicates ideas of masculinity because he is ultimately pursuing relationships with men. Phillip Brian Harper discusses the place of the black male homosexual in saying that:

While the black gay man seems recently to have become a key figure of crisis that, at present, threaten the very foundations of institutionalized culture in the United States, this should not be taken to mean that his representations have not functioned to buttress (often specifically by challenging) normative conceptions of race, sexuality, and gender identity since at least the Black Power era of the late 1960s.

Omar is a rare example of a character that is able to reconcile these issues of masculinity and homosexuality on screen; he is groundbreaking in presenting the idea that black men can be gay, and masculine, and masculine without being purely sexually driven. That the two are not polar opposites is also manifested in the depiction of Reynaldo, Omar’s lover in Seasons 4 and 5, as he is depicted as equally masculine. One of the greatest strengths of Omar is the fact that he is universally feared by the neighborhoods of West Baltimore. Everyone knows
him by name, and even though he theoretically could have been killed much earlier in the series, he maintains this image of immortality because he is talented at what he does. One of the most interesting images of Omar is towards the beginning of Season 4, where the audience watches as Omar leaves his house in turquoise silk pajama pants with a matching robe to walk to the corner store without a gun, and all of the boys in the neighborhood yell ‘it’s Omar’ and ‘Omar comin’ as they run away in fear.

The idea that anyone would be afraid of a man in turquoise silk pyjamas is slightly comical, but is also telling in the sense that traditional expectations of masculinity are not necessarily dictated by sexual orientation. Patricia Hill Collins points to Omar as doubly significant because he is ‘dark-skinned, violent, and in no way appears to be the stereotypical ‘sissy.’ Moreover, the gay Black male relationship is between two working-class Black men, thus challenging the association of gay sexuality with Whiteness and/or with middle-class men.

In this excerpt, she is referring to the relationship between Omar and Brandon, his boyfriend from Season 1 who is brutally murdered because of his association with Omar and the robbery of one of Avon Barksdale’s stash houses. She also points to the ways in which Omar subverts assumptions about gay populations outside of the black community; Phillip Harper, in his discussion of sexual politics confirms that ‘the ‘gay’ community… has been popularly conceived as white, wealthy, and male’, and the character of Omar serves to debunk two of those conceptions.

The audience is also able to see Omar as loving, while still maintaining sexual machismo; he is one of the few male characters to be seen entirely naked, yet he is not simply a body. Omar also serves as a counterpoint to the character of Major Williams Rawls, a white police officer who is not openly gay within his community. The only clue as to his true sexual preference is made in passing when the audience witnesses him in a gay bar while another character looks for Omar in Season 3. Rawls’ homosexuality is not particularly important to the trajectory of the show, but it is another way The Wire opposes stereotypical assumptions for homosexuality in that Rawls is no more traditionally feminine than Omar.

The character of Shakima ‘Kima’ Greggs is yet another subversion of sexual expectations for women. It is not necessarily the fact that she is a lesbian that makes The Wire’s depiction of Kima unique, rather the depiction of her home life and relationships with women. Patricia Hill Collins asserts that: ‘On The Wire, the committed love relationship of the Black lesbian couple is treated as no different than any other relationship on the series. This ordinary treatment thus provides a mass media depiction of middle-class Black women that remains highly unusual.’ What Collins is referring to is the relationship between Kima and Cheryl; like other couples on the show they go through turmoil over the dangers of Kima’s job, Kima’s desire to quit law school, and the prospects of having a child together. They are pictured engaging in sexual activity as well as fighting; Kima seems no different that any of the male officers in her willingness to share problems about her ‘woman,’ and even goes so far as to take advice from McNulty on how to cheat on Cheryl when their problems become overwhelming. Like any other couple on the show, or any show for that matter, their relationship has ups and downs, yet audiences do not often see this type of relationship between two women, let alone two minority women.

This depiction of lesbianism is not presented as for the voyeur to watch the deviant, rather for the audience to watch a relationship unfold. Besides Cheryl, the only other significant lesbian character is Snoop, but her sexuality is only referenced once and she is mostly seen as entirely androgynous. Whereas Kima and Cheryl maintain certain traditional standards of femininity in dress and attitude, Snoop’s character does not dictate sexual expectations, instead she seems to represent a rare inclusion of the female into the world of the corner.

The characters on The Wire demonstrate a departure from heteronormative assumptions in television complicated by race. The prospect of seeing homosexual minority couples has remained largely untouched by major media outlets and it is therefore worth applauding. While the series may lack a strong female presence to challenge traditional heterosexual
gender roles, the work that it has done involving homosexual partnerships serves as one of
the sole examples of normalized homosexuality.

Notes

of Black Gay Men,’ in Callaloo 18.2 (Spring, 1995), 390-4.
5. Harper, 392
6. Collins, 146

Casting *The Wire: Complicating Notions of Performance, Authenticity, and ‘Otherness’*


In an effort to produce original programming that viewers are willing to pay for, the pay-cable channel HBO has successfully defined its output in opposition to network television. This approach is perhaps most apparent in *The Wire* (2002-2008), a drama that challenges many of the conventions of what is often regarded as the most standard of network genres, the police procedural, or rather ‘the cop show’. By adopting a structure that is more novelistic than episodic, and by questioning the moralistic framework that tends to inform such programming, *The Wire* seeks to create a complex, authentic, and credible depiction of the American city of Baltimore, through which to examine the themes of class, institutional corruption and corrosion, and the ongoing drug war.

What makes *The Wire* even more distinctive, however, is the fact that it features a cast that is around sixty-five percent black. Although there is a growing number of television platforms for so-called ‘black programming’ in the US, HBO’s most successful shows have traditionally been examples of white ‘quality’ programming. These include, amongst others, *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005), *Deadwood* (2004-2006), *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), *Entourage* (2004-), and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000-), with the latter explicitly dealing with issues surrounding race and the casting process in certain episodes. This overwhelmingly white roster of programming can be attributed to the fact that despite being broadcast on a pay-cable channel that relies more on enticing viewers to renew their monthly subscription than actual programme ratings, a predominantly black cast still limits the audience available to a show, something that David Simon, creator of *The Wire*, regretfully admits to.

This article will discuss the way in which the casting process in *The Wire* continues the complexity inherent within the narrative of the series. I suggest that by featuring a racially diverse ensemble cast that consists of acting professionals and non-actors, *The Wire* raises some issues surrounding the notions of performance, authenticity, and ‘otherness’. In an attempt to continue the anti-network approach to series production, the series draws on a diverse group of actors who are relatively unknown to American television viewers, resulting in a cast that is made up of British-born actors, those working predominantly on the East-coast stage, and Baltimore residents playing versions of themselves onscreen. In the case of the latter, at least, this links the programme to other (mainly comedy) productions within the HBO schedule. For example, *The Larry Sanders Show* (1992-1998), *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, and *The Comeback* (2005) all feature actors self-consciously playing versions of themselves in an attempt to lend authenticity to the conceit of each show. In each instance, this involves the pastiche and critique of the network television system and an attempt to create a type of ‘insider’ humour for the knowing viewer. With regards to *The Wire*, however, the intended outcome of the casting process is to lend authenticity to the onscreen construction of Baltimore. Nevertheless, I argue that this process results in other effects too, particularly regarding the use of non-American actors and non-professionals.

Overall, the casting process in *The Wire* affirms the sense of ‘otherness’ that informs the show; the ‘other’ America that tends to go unseen on television screens due to the focus on mainly white, middle-class, and ultimately ‘aspirational’ characters. This ‘otherness’ undoubtedly consists of race and class, but in relation to the cast it also incorporates issues of nationality. As such, this article will discuss a number of these issues through an examination of the characters/actors Detective Jimmy McNulty/Dominic West, Stringer Bell/Idris Elba, and Snoop/Felicia ‘Snoop’ Pearson.

**Television and Black Representation**
In relation to film and television fiction, the casting process is an area that has remained relatively undertheorised within the academy. However, it is something that studies of reality television have recently begun to engage with, due to the way in which real people with divergent personality traits are chosen by producers to play heightened versions of themselves onscreen, with the ultimate aim of creating entertainment based on conflict. Adopting many of the visual codes of reality television, the aforementioned HBO sitcom *Curb Your Enthusiasm* works to blur the boundaries between fiction and reality by allowing actors to self-consciously play with their public persona and regularly reference real-life events and cultural texts. In an episode of Season One entitled ‘Affirmative Action’, this conceit is used to comment on the largely white casting process of the previous productions that the show’s creator and star Larry David was involved with. Nominally playing himself in *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, David is confronted by an African American woman who accuses him of racism for the relative invisibility of non-white actors in his hugely-successful NBC sitcom *Seinfeld* (1990-1998) and for failing to hire her for his real-life movie *Sour Grapes* (1998). This is one of the few instances in which the seemingly overwhelming ‘whiteness’ of network television (and Hollywood) is explicitly referred, and which HBO seeks to distance itself from in episodes such as this, despite relying on white ‘quality’ programming for the majority of its output.

The relationship between race and network television is, however, more complex than this suggests. For example, in a report by the Bunche Center at UCLA entitled *Prime Time in Black and White*, Darnell Hunt suggests that compared to other ethnic minority groups, blacks are over-represented on television, as are whites. Moreover, by the 2002 fall season (the year in which *The Wire* premiered on HBO), black actors tended not to be stereotyped in lower-status or criminal roles, appearing instead, alongside white actors, in high-status occupations such as doctors, lawyers, and police officers. This is perhaps best exemplified by the NBC police drama *Homicide: Life on the Street* (1992-1999), which was originally based on David Simon’s book of the same name. Although careful not to situate itself as a ‘black show’ on its release, Thomas Mascaro nevertheless explains how a close examination of the scenes of this racially and ethnically integrated series reveals variations among African Americans that etch lines of distinction into the uniform blackness typical of television . . . *Homicide* presented black people not in positive or negative lights but as textured individuals.

Yet, Hunt’s study suggests that such an example of ‘racially and ethnically integrated’ programming remains ‘the exception rather than the rule’. One of the main reasons for this is the fact that with regards to the prime-time television landscape, white cast members continue to ‘dominate “screen time”, not only in terms of the number of characters, but also in terms of the prominence of the characters in their respective shows’ narratives’. In addition, the most prominent black characters have traditionally been concentrated in situation comedies that are broadcast on smaller niche networks on particular nights. This raises concerns about the portrayal of African Americans as ‘buffoonish characters ill-equipped for meaningful contribution to the larger society’, along with the continuing segregation of black and white TV viewership.

These are issues that have been raised by various television scholars over the years and it would seem that when it comes to examining black representation on screen, the casting process and the performance of the actors themselves are often taken into account. For example, in considering the type of stereotypical portrayals of African Americans perpetuated in US radio and television programming of the early 1950s, J. Fred MacDonald states that the naturally harsh voice of Eddie Anderson, the actor who portrayed Rochester in *The Jack Benny Program* (CBS, 1950-1964; NBC, 1965), gave him a ‘vocal quality akin to the throaty “coon” dialect developed by minstrel endmen’, a trait that did ‘little to advance
the cause of the realistic portrayal of African Americans in popular culture’. There is a suggestion, then, that if the casting director had chosen another actor then the character may have been portrayed in a more positive light. This is in spite of Rochester being in the service of domesticity within the series. This idea of ‘commutation’, or rather the substitution in our minds of one actor for another, was developed by John O. Thompson in the 1970s and is something to which I will return later in the article.

More recently, Robin Means Coleman has described the comedian Martin Lawrence as the ‘king’ of ‘neo-minstrelsy’ for his array of one-dimensional and limited character types; a programming trend in which she also situates the Wayans brothers for their swaggering and stumbling depictions of urban single clowns. Herman Gray and Darnell Hunt, on the other hand, have tended to consider the institutional context of black representation rather than critique the performances of the cast themselves. For Gray, three discursive strategies have structured black representation on US commercial television, namely ‘assimilation and the discourse of invisibility’, the ‘pluralist or separate-but-equal discourse’, and ‘multiculturalism and diversity’, with the latter being the preferred but relatively underemployed approach. For Hunt, the concentration of African Americans in comedic roles on niche networks can be described as ‘ghettoization’, a view that appears to be shared by David Simon. In a Q&A in which Simon was asked why he thought The Wire did not achieve higher ratings, he replied that it was because ‘sixty-five percent of our cast was black’ before going on to explain that the dramatic subject matter was also problematic for viewers: ‘This wasn’t The Cosby Show [NBC, 1984-1992]. You can laugh at black people but there’s never been a sustained drama [that has gained mainstream success].’ Bearing this in mind, therefore, I want to consider the context in which The Wire emerged in 2002 and the importance of casting to the production.

Casting with a Conscience: Minority Participation and the Supporting Cast

Having previously written and produced the mini-series The Corner (2000) for HBO, Simon was aware of some of the benefits of pay-cable television with regards to minority participation both onscreen and behind the cameras. As well as assembling a largely black cast and shooting the series in Baltimore, the director Charles S. Dutton was able to convince HBO to bring on board a number of black crew members from around the country. While this was feasible for a six-part production, Simon states that the demands of continuing television meant that this approach was too expensive for The Wire. Thus, despite having a writing and production team that he describes as being ‘whiter than we wished they were’, minority participation was achieved by drawing on Baltimore and Washington locals for the show’s supporting cast. Simon describes the benefits of this as being threefold:

Yes, it leavens the project to have local faces, accents and credibility. Yes, it is fun to run some inside jokes among the cameos (Kurt Schmoke as city health commissioner, Melvin Williams as The Deacon, the Rev. Frank Reid as the Rev. Reid Franklin). But also, we can’t afford to bring the entire cast from New York, L.A. and London.

While the latter is undoubtedly true (and the comment about ‘inside jokes’ links the programme with other comic productions in the HBO schedule), the flippancy with which this remark is made is a little disingenuous, as the use of locals within the supporting cast of The Wire lends an authenticity to the programme that marks it out as distinctive. The often impenetrable accents and highly specific colloquial vernacular make no concessions to the average viewer but instead demand their attention and commitment. While the dialogue is due to the extensive research carried out by the (mainly white) writers on the show, the way it is delivered is of equal importance. If the aim of Simon and his creative team is to create a portrait of the city of Baltimore focusing on those residents who usually remain invisible (both in public life and on television), then the appearance of real-life locals who have
experienced many of the problems and issues dealt with in the narrative only lends this credibility.

I would suggest that Simon’s approach could therefore be described as ‘casting with a conscience’ (at least with regards to supporting characters), as the production team make a concerted effort, where possible, to involve the local community and utilise residents of the neighbourhoods in which the series is filmed. Simon acknowledges that offering speaking parts to locals is particularly problematic because it is at odds with the acting union SAG, which aims to secure work for its membership. However, The Wire would be a very different programme if the supporting cast was filled with jobbing actors rather than Baltimore residents with first-hand experience of the drug crisis within the city. It is important to note that it is not only parts for black drug dealers and users that are offered to locals. For example, in addition to the aforementioned Melvin Williams, a notorious drug dealer who was arrested by Ed Burns (Simon’s writing partner and a former detective) as part of a wiretap case in 1984, The Wire’s supporting cast also features a number of ex-homicide detectives and a former Baltimore police commissioner, governor, and mayor, as well as journalists and columnists who once worked for the Baltimore Sun. That such a diverse range of people can successfully be incorporated into the world of The Wire is testament to the backgrounds of the creative team and the relationships established during the extensive research carried out for the programme.

Yet, the appearance of non-professionals is not without critique. Rather than add to the authenticity of the show, the use of non-professional actors has been questioned, most notably by current staff at the Baltimore Sun. Discussing Season Five of the series, which introduces viewers to the print media and the Sun in particular, David Zurawik bemoans the use of journalistic shoptalk, the confusing mix of fact and fiction, and the lack of acting skills displayed by some of the cast. Apart from the fact that the storyline may be a little close to home for this particular Sun reporter, it is interesting that he feels the need to criticise these elements of the show’s final season, as I would suggest that they have always been present in The Wire. What else, but ‘shoptalk’, is the vernacular used by the various drug crews throughout the series? By having non-actors playing characters based on real people and performing narratives drawn from actual events, hasn’t The Wire always mixed fact with fiction? But Zurawik does not criticise the language employed by the drug dealers or the shocking events dealt with by the police and their anger at the system. This is because, unlike the world of journalism, these are more alien, both in real life and in their onscreen representation. Rather than focus on white characters’ experiences of crime or depict the police force and criminals in terms of heroes and villains, The Wire presents another perspective, one that is harder to negotiate but which is rewarding in terms of its complexity and credibility. It presents the ‘other’ America that tends to remain invisible to the average (white and/or middle-class) citizen and television viewer. As such, it is less concerned with the acting abilities of the supporting cast than with conveying their everyday reality.

A Sense of ‘Otherness’: Race, Nationality, and the Main Cast

One of the contradictions within The Wire, however, is that while the supporting cast is made up of local residents, many of whom have first-hand knowledge of the difficulties presented within the narrative, the main characters are played by professional actors drawn from an extremely wide area. When asked whether the production team actively seek those with a Baltimore or Maryland connection when casting ‘traditional’ actors, Simon emphasises the near impossibility of this within the industry:

No, we don’t look for the Baltimore [connection] when hiring actors for major roles. It is hard enough finding the right people for certain parts when casting the widest possible net and too much is stake to worry about whether someone’s accent will sound Baltimore, or whether they know how to
pronounce Bentalou Street. The first job is to cast an actor who can convey the totality of the character with all possible range and credibility. Thus, there seems to be a disparity between the way in which the supporting cast convey credibility and the way in which it is achieved by the professional actors in the series. With regards to the former, hiring Baltimore residents with experience of the world depicted onscreen works to add to the authenticity of the series. With the latter, on the other hand, there is a reliance on their performance skills to convey a similar sense of authenticity and credibility. The former is concerned with contributing to the overall landscape of the series while the latter is about conveying a sense of each individual character and their relationships to the institutions of which they are part of.

It is for this reason that The Wire features a cast that places former drug dealers and police detectives alongside Dominic West, a white English actor schooled at Eton who went on to join the acrobatic Argentinian circus De La Guarda, and Idris Elba, a black Londoner whose most high profile role in Britain was as a policeman in the ill-fated Channel 5 soap Family Affairs (1997-2005). On discovering the backgrounds of the actors who play two of the show’s most prominent characters, Detective Jimmy McNulty and Russell ‘Stringer’ Bell, they may seem an unlikely fit within the series. Yet, although their presence is at times problematic (particularly with regards to West/McNulty), there is also a sense that their ‘otherness’ only enhances the strength of their onscreen performances.

As mentioned, the character of McNulty is especially difficult due to the fact that it is written for, and played by, a white actor. In a show that features a predominantly black cast and which deals with the various problems occurring in black neighbourhoods, the fact that the closest The Wire comes to a main character is white, seems unusual. With Simon himself being white, it could be suggested that McNulty was created as a sort of stand-in for the show’s creator. Likewise, by initially introducing the audience to a white character who features throughout the entire series, it could also be the case that McNulty is offered to white viewers as a ‘way in’ to this black world. Yet, as is perhaps to be expected, Simon explains it in more simple terms, which is that on shadowing the homicide department in the early 1990s for the book he was writing, two-thirds of the staff there were white; thus, McNulty was also written as white. Furthermore, for Simon, The Wire is an ensemble piece with McNulty as the character who most often stirs things up. While he may have initially been presented as the main protagonist, the typical Irish-American disgruntled cop, both his character and the conventions of the police procedural in general, were soon challenged, revealing McNulty to be more morally ambiguous than expected. In fact, as the series draws to a close, McNulty himself comments on this, stating that ‘you start to tell the story and you think you’re the hero, and then when you get done talking you . . .’, before trailing off.

It should be noted, then, that although he may have ostensibly been set up as the hero at the beginning of the series, the character of McNulty becomes less prominent in future seasons, only for him to return to the fore in Season Five. During this time, the audience is able to view the police force from a variety of perspectives, including that of Cedric Daniels, Lester Freamon, and McNulty’s one-time ally, William ‘Bunk’ Moreland. However, unlike McNulty (and the character of Daniels, to an extent), viewers are never provided with an insight into Freamon and Moreland’s private lives, as, for the most part, their storylines are restricted to their roles within the force. With McNulty, however, we are introduced to his complicated private life from the outset and, in the show’s final season, it is his actions that drive the narrative. Thus, viewers are indeed encouraged to identify with McNulty throughout the series. To return then to Thompson’s ‘commutation’ test for a moment, it is worthwhile thinking about what kind of character McNulty would have been if he had been played by a black actor? How would this have affected his status within the force, the depiction of his private life, and his actions in Season Five? How would it have affected The Wire’s (relatively small) ratings on HBO and its subsequent success on DVD and downloads? While there is no
space to begin to answer these questions in this article, I think it is an important question to pose.

To add to this, the fact that an English actor was chosen to play the character of McNulty, particularly one with the physical appearance of Dominic West, has not gone unnoticed by both critics and fans. While many journalists seem to enjoy the novelty of a tough, Baltimore cop being played by an old Etonian, a number of fans comment on West’s (un)suitability for the role, most notably in a *YouTube* post entitled ‘McNulty’s English Accent’. Featuring a clip in which his accent appears to slip, a user named Funkmike states that “a skinny, relatively good-looking guy would NEVER be a cop in the U.S., especially not in a rough shithole like Baltimore. *The Wire* is an awesome series, but sorry to say, ‘McNulty’ looks every bit the English actor that he is”.

Whether or not it is true that good-looking guys do not join the police force in the U.S., it is the case that West has the kind of features more commonly found in British costume dramas or Hollywood romantic comedies than a gritty cop show. This statement highlights the ease with which actors can be stereotyped according to their look, rather than their acting ability, and it is perhaps to the production team’s credit that they looked past this when casting *The Wire*. However, once viewers are aware of West’s Britishness (and not all of them are), there does seem to be a correlation with his character, in that as a white cop in a predominantly black neighbourhood, McNulty represents the ‘other’ and, as such, is always trying to prove himself, a situation that tends to result in him stirring up trouble. In the final episode of Season Five, Sergeant Jay Landsman actually refers to McNulty as ‘the black sheep’, albeit in an affectionate manner. There is therefore an edginess apparent in West’s performance that is in marked contrast to the ease with which the actors Wendell Pierce and Clarke Peters portray Bunk and Freamon respectively.

Something similar occurs with Idris Elba’s portrayal of Stringer Bell, second in command of Avon Barksdale’s drug crew and McNulty’s nemesis. With Barksdale essentially running a family business, Stringer is again the outsider, not just because of his lack of blood ties, but also because he sees himself as more of a businessman than a drug dealer, and thus has a different agenda from Avon. As an actor, Elba admits that he didn’t consult anyone in preparing for the role, as that is ‘more like mimicking and not as creative’. Unlike the authenticity that the non-actors bring to their parts due to their life experiences, Elba’s credibility again lies in his ability to inhabit the role using his *performance* skills rather than mimicry or drawing on his own background. The other interesting element of Elba’s performance (and indeed, a number of the other black actors within the show, including Jamie Hector who plays Marlo Stanfield), is his reluctance to adopt the swaggering and ostentatious style of many of the neo-minstrel characters discussed by Means Coleman, as well as stereotypical ‘ghetto’ gangsters depicted in more conventional television drama. Discussing in an interview for HBO’s website the features that he has in common with the character he plays, Elba refers to Bell’s understated style and his subtly authoritative stance:

Stringer is also serious in how he carries himself and so am I. Even the clothes he wears are selected not to be too bold or flashy. I won’t let you judge me on clothes I wear but it’s important that you carry yourself in a manner consistent with who you are. One of the first things I realized as an actor is when you walk into a room, how you carry yourself makes a difference before you even open your mouth. The more you can blend, the less attention people give you and Stringer achieves that.

It would seem to me that this is part of the reason that Simon avoids casting well-known television faces and instead recruits British-born actors and those with experience of the East-coast stage (such as Clarke Peters). With a writing team consisting of crime novelists and journalists (rather than seasoned TV writers) who constantly challenge and play with the conventions of the traditional cop show, *The Wire* is actively constructed in opposition to network television. As Means Coleman and others have argued, the most successful (or
prominent) black actors on television in recent years have been those that adopt a neo-minstrelsy approach, i.e., one that relies on comic physicality and an ostentatious style that feeds into stereotypical perceptions of ‘blackness’. Elba’s decision to make Stringer ‘blend in’ rather than ‘stand out’ is in contrast to this. Moreover, the presence of British and stage actors bestow the production with a sense of ‘quality’ that is rarely associated with network television but which HBO relies on for its position within the marketplace.

‘Real is Pretend, and Pretend is Real’: The Case of Felicia ‘Snoop’ Pearson

The one character that complicates these notions of performance and authenticity further, is that of Snoop, who is played by Felicia ‘Snoop’ Pearson. Unlike the other main cast members, Pearson is not a professional actor. Yet, on being introduced to the creative team by Michael K. Williams who plays Omar on the show, they were compelled to write her a part. Instead of restricting her, however, to the background like other local residents, they created ‘a character with the same name, the same defiantly ambling gait and the same distinctive, smoky voice with its undulating, often hard-to-follow Baltimore accent’. Moreover, Snoop was given an integral role in Season’s Four and Five, as part of Marlo Stanfield’s violent drug empire. Despite Simon’s acknowledgement of the difficulty in finding the right professional actor for a part, who can convey the character in all its totality, the Lee Strasberg-trained Jamie Hector, who plays the aforementioned Stanfield, claims that ‘Snoop is Baltimore’, and that ‘the reason Felicia is such a great actress . . . is because it’s coming from authenticity. And a lot of great actors . . . most of them had hard times. I mean, the good ones, you know? They’re pullin’ it from something, even if it’s subconsciously. I’m thinking of Brando’. It is in the character of Snoop, then, that The Wire’s complicated mix of fact and fiction comes together. Caught up in the drug trade from a young age, Pearson was convicted at the age of fourteen for the murder of a fifteen year-old-girl and spent five years in prison. On joining the cast of The Wire four years after her release, she was still dealing in hard drugs and therefore had a foot in both realities. Writing in her memoir, Grace After Midnight, she explains how ‘real is pretend, and pretend is real . . . I wake up in the morning, get dressed, leave my work on the block to walk into a world about make-believe work on the block’. Yet, Simon is quick to dismiss the idea that Snoop ‘just played herself’ in the series, as he believes that a certain amount of skill is required to convey a sense of authenticity onscreen:

It’s all scripted. One of the things I am a little bit resentful for is we have a remarkable cast of African-American actors who are utterly unacknowledged by the industry. They are never nominated for anything. They are never regarded as having created any characterizations or achieved any sense of craft for what they are doing. It’s almost as if they think we turn the camera on people, and they just were being; that’s the way they are. And in fact, these are incredibly professional actors who are reading from a script. The dialogue is from the world that Ed policed, that I covered as a crime reporter in Baltimore for twelve years, that is very common to us from having spent time in West Baltimore.

Presumably, having given her an expanded role, Simon includes Pearson in this category of extremely professional actors. For him, the success of the series is based on the combination of extensive research and excellent writing and performances. Everyone has their part to play; it is not as simple as turning the camera on real life. It is for this reason that fans and critics are surprised to find out that Stringer, for example, is played by a softly-spoken Londoner, because the disparity between the actor and the character is so great.

Again, this brings us back to the way in which, by playing on the authenticity of its supporting cast (as well as its location shooting and well-scripted dialogue), The Wire
complicates the performative nature of the piece. Moreover, it reveals some of the problems facing African American actors in relation to securing suitable roles within the industry and proving their abilities. For example, Pearson is able to produce such a fascinating performance in The Wire because she is allowed to fully utilise her thick, Baltimore accent and her androgynous manner. For the most part, many viewers are unsure as to whether she is a young girl or boy, and the narrative never seeks to make this clear until the series nears its end. The ease with which she dispenses violence also adds to her seemingly masculine nature, while her delivery of dialogue requires a keen ear if viewers are to fully comprehend it. In mainstream roles, particularly within white programming, Pearson would be required to conform to more rigid characterisations, and perhaps lose some of the richness of her performance (or her ‘otherness’) in the process.

Elba’s convincing performance in The Wire has, on the other hand, opened up various opportunities for the actor. Having felt marginalised in Britain, his complicated portrayal of the business brains behind a Baltimore drug crew has allowed him to demonstrate his acting range to those within the industry, a situation that is also similar to that of Dominic West. Rather than being cast for his square-jawed looks, West’s against-type portrayal of the self-destructive McNulty may open-up opportunities previously inaccessible to him. This means that while The Wire as a series may benefit from the inclusion of non-actors replaying lived experiences, for the professional actor (and indeed for the creative team when choosing main cast members), the ability to perform the ‘other’ may be ultimately more authentic.

Notes

1. In addition to the cable channel Black Entertainment Television (BET), a number of niche-networks have also embarked on ‘black-block’ scheduling strategies in order to secure a foothold in the marketplace, i.e., Fox in the mid-1990s and the now defunct UPN.
2. David Simon, Q&A at the Glasgow Film Theatre, 18th September, 2008.
15. Simon, Q&A at the Glasgow Film Theatre, 2008; During the period in which The Cosby Show was broadcast, the critically acclaimed Frank’s Place (CBS, 1987-1988)
lasted a single season with *Roc* (Fox, 1991-1994), starring Charles S. Dutton, stretching to three.

16. *For the City: Q&A with David Simon,*

17. In the montage sequence which closes the final episode of Season Five, viewers are offered an insight into the future lives of some of the key characters, alongside footage of Baltimore itself and a number of local residents. Although essentially updating the narrative of the series, it is on Baltimore as a location and the people who live there that the camera affectionately lingers on.

18. David Zurawik, “*The Wire* loses spark in newsroom storyline,”

19. These details are garnered from Burns’s police case studies during his time as a detective and Simon’s year shadowing the homicide department.


22. *Scene from The Wire - McNulty’s English Accent,*
   [http://uk.youtube.com/watch?v=xg_3ZSeHL4g](http://uk.youtube.com/watch?v=xg_3ZSeHL4g) (February 14, 2007).

23. The series self-reflexively plays with West’s Britishness in Season Two when McNulty adopts an English accent to go undercover. The laughs on the part of his colleagues are perhaps genuine as he adopts a Dick Van Dyke type accent rather than his own, more refined voice.


25. Idris.

26. Oliver Burkemen, *When Pretend is Real,*
   [http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2008/may/24/the.wire.season.five](http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2008/may/24/the.wire.season.five) (May 24, 2008).

27. Cited in Burkemen.


29. Bob Andelman, *David Simon,* *The Wire* creator,

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The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same: Serial Narrative on *The Wire*


*The Wire* has been lauded for its uncompromising look at the failure of institutions in contemporary Baltimore. The city of Baltimore functions as a microcosm of the larger problems effecting contemporary U.S. urban life. Each season the writers tackle diverse topics from the ‘war on drugs,’ to under funded inner-city schools as the Baltimore police’s major crimes unit works a case. Unlike the ‘ripped from the headlines’ stories of more episodic television series like *Law and Order* and *CSI* franchises in which a case is opened and closed within the span of an hour, the narrative on *The Wire* slowly unfolds over an entire season. In this essay, I shall begin to examine how the broad narrative structure of the series aims to produce a sustained and powerful institutional critique. After this brief analysis, I shall turn to question whether the series is successful in its attempted critique and what the political implications of this might be.

The serialized narrative has emerged in prime time television, in part, as a reaction to the changed political economy of the U.S. television industry; ‘it is probably not surprising that the serial format appears as a significant trend in the late twentieth century at a time when competition for audiences has increased.’ HBO, *The Wire’s* home network, has cultivated a blue chip audience who are willing to pay a premium for the ability to see its ‘not TV’ brand of television. HBO’s place as a premium pay television channel has allowed it to push boundaries and cultivate a loyal brand and audience following. In so doing, network and basic cable outlets have had to alter their content to entice audiences back.

Formally, other television scholars have noted the serial’s appeal, its narrative openness and complexity and how it ‘better responds to and reveals the complexity, ambiguity and lack of closure that typifies the contemporary world.’ Jason Mittell argues that the ‘narrative complexity’ of contemporary television ‘moves serial form outside the generic assumptions tied to soap operas’ and that ‘narratively complex programs invite temporary disorientation and confusion, allowing viewers to build up their comprehension skills through long-term viewing and active engagement.’

*The Wire* is a narratively complex series that seizes on these aspects of the contemporary serial. In particular, David Simon has stated that ‘[the writers are] looking at this thing as a 66-hour movie.’ There is a small irony here, in that, only through exploiting the conventions of television is Simon able to achieve his goal. Depth and detail are hallmarks of the program and this is achieved through the following strategies: narrative framing, compelling characterization, and attention to the minutia of everyday life, criminal investigations, and the rules of each respective ‘game’ (the street, good ‘police,’ political maneuvering, etc.).

This essay is not making value claims about the use of seriality as somehow implicitly better than episodic television. Instead, I want to emphasize the way in which the aim of *The Wire* - to throw light on the entrenchment of the status quo in various U.S. institutions - relies on the formal conventions of serialized narrative. This is not to say that one needs the conventions of seriality to throw light on social, political, and cultural issues, but that the level of engagement that Simon desires would be impossible in any other screen based medium.

*The Wire* unlike most other television series was conceived with five seasons in mind. The overall thematic arc is the inability of institutions to serve the public; ‘it’s about the very simple idea that, in this Postmodern world of ours, human beings—all of us—are worth less.’ The different levels of the narrative frame and reinforce one another. Each season arc focuses on a case worked by the major crimes unit that, in turn, frames a narrative that follows a specific institution and its individual failings. These season long arcs then frame
the individual character’s arcs, some of whom are followed throughout the entirety of the series. These character arcs work back out again to the larger series wide narrative as they confront the institutional machine. This use of repetition and framing works to reinforce and strengthen the dehumanization of contemporary urban life. The repetition is continued in both the program’s characterization and attention to detail.

*The Wire* uses a number of different strategies to highlight its preoccupation with emphasizing inconsequential moments, thoughts, bits of information, backgrounds, rules, and events. I would like to highlight two integrated tactics, the opening sequence and the individual character quotes that appear at the beginning of each episode. The opening sequence of any television program generally draws attention to key aspects of the program. *The Wire* is no different in this regard. In the first season, the opening montage sequence is a series of mostly close-up, decontextualized images from events that will occur throughout the season. The song *Way Down in the Hole* written by Tom Waits and covered by The Blind Boys of Alabama plays over the sequence of images, which come together to give the viewer a sense of the overall crux of the series. As the viewer watches the story unfold from episode to episode the previously decontextualized images begin to make sense as their relationship to the overall narrative is revealed. The viewer begins to see how the various pieces fit together; this mirrors the narrative structure as the disparate bits of information come together to create a case.

In each subsequent season, images from the current season are incorporated in with previous season images. The instrumentation and style of the opening credits also changes from season to season. For the audience this serves as an indication that a change in the main interest of the investigation has occurred, while also emphasizing a fundamental similarity to seasons past. The initial change might be distracting, but the familiarity of the tune and lyrics keys the viewer into the narrative world of the series.

At the close of the opening sequence a quote taken from within the episode appears. The viewer learns that the opening thought encapsulates some larger thematic concern of the episode or series. It focuses the viewer’s attention by setting the tone and indicating what aspects to be on the lookout for. The remarks are often said in mundane situations drawing attention to the minutia of everyday life and lending it a sense of weight. On *The Wire* moments of revelation and clarity happen at a small scale, in daily interaction with the world. These moments are perhaps the closest the series ever gets to didacticism, in that, they do often work to focus attention on a specific lesson learned by a character and through that character the lesson is imparted to the audience. This technique is successful in how it guides the viewer and establishes the rich narrative world of the series. For example, in episode 1.03 ‘The Buys’ the opening quote is ‘The King Stays the King.’

In perhaps one of the most memorable scenes in the series, D’Angelo Barksdale teaches Bodie and Wallace how to play chess using language of ‘the game.’ This scene serves the practical purpose of introducing the viewer to the workings of the Barksdale clan, and it also works metaphorically to explain the logic of the world that the people in *The Wire* inhabit. In the game, as with chess, the king or kingpin, doesn’t have to do much, since there will always be readily available and expendable pawns who ‘be out in the field […] They get capped quick. They be out the game early.’ The queen, ‘the go get shit done piece’ reminds Wallace of Stringer. Stringer, until his death in season three, does indeed hold a lot of power, but doesn’t learn D’Angelo’s lesson, that ‘the king stays the king’ and this ultimately leads to his demise. D’Angelo explains to Wallace, Bodie, and the viewer that the world is one in which there’s always a king on top; through out the series the viewer meets the king in his many incarnations, Avon, The Greek, the Governor, and Marlo to name a few.

Character development (or in some cases devolution) through out the series works as another strategy of critique. Of course character growth adds a necessary interest for the
viewer, without compelling, interesting, and generally flawed characters the story would become a bland exercise in didacticism in which the writers instruct the viewers on the ills of society. *The Wire* rejects a conspiratorial model of critique in which a singular and often inherently evil individual is responsible for social decay and destruction, for example, the sadistic gangster or the megalomaniacal politician. The ‘villain’ on *The Wire* is the institutional machine, which transcends any of the individuals within it. To emphasize this point, the writers are very careful not to demonize one side of the law over the other, choosing instead to humanize most of the characters as much as possible. These multifaceted characters reiterate the institutional critique. A few manage to overcome personal tragedies or setbacks, but most of the characters are consumed by the cycle of violence and indifference.

For example, Stringer Bell’s story highlights his inability to reform the drug trade. He wants to stop the violence, not for altruistic or humanitarian reasons, but for economic reasons. His ultimate aim is to go legit, but his desire to do so is continually thwarted. Clay Davis and the real estate investors take advantage of him. He betrays his long time friend, Avon Barksdale, which ultimately leads to his downfall. In an act of poetic justice he’s gunned down in the building he was hoping would offer him freedom. He may be a kingpin (or the ‘queen’ as we learned in ‘The Buys’) on the street, but he’s still just a street thug in the eyes of those with the real power. Omar Little, who despite the fact that he’s a murderer and thief, attempts to live his life according to strict code, but he is ultimately taken down by a young child after being forced to return to the game to avenge his friend Butchie’s death. The impact of these events would be impossible in a more episodic series. The emotional and intellectual implications of these character’s sad outcomes would fail to effectively reinforce *The Wire*’s critique.

All of the discussed devices are employed by the writers to emphasize the larger thematic element, the dehumanization of the characters by various institutional machines, that ‘the game is the game.’ The critique builds through the slow time of the narrative arc through all five seasons. If the viewer wishes to have a thorough understanding of *The Wire*, it demands the viewer watch closely and carefully to catch the details, to sweat the small stuff, and to live and die with the characters. Otherwise the final upshot, that the more things change, the more they stay the same, will be lost. And this final upshot is ultimately what makes *The Wire*’s critique fall flat.

When I began thinking about *The Wire*, I wanted to explore how it exploited the conventions of seriality to articulate a powerful critique of modern institutions. However, the more I thought through this argument the more I found that *The Wire*, despite what David Simon asserted when he said, ‘in its treatment of the actual characters, be they longshoremen or mid-level drug dealers or police detectives, I don’t think [*The Wire* is] cynical at all. I think there’s a great deal of humanist affection’ is far too cynical to successfully engage the inadequacies of institutions and ‘their capacity for serving the needs of the individual.’ Though *The Wire*’s use of seriality makes for well crafted and high quality television, its critique ultimately fails; it wallows far too long in the decay and dejection of contemporary urban life revealing the general conclusion of the entire series: the more things change, the more they stay the same.

The imperative of most of the institutions (with the obvious exception of the drug trade) is to effect change, to make the city and its inhabitants better. The government and its various agencies (the police, politicians, social policies, etc.) are tasked with working in the public interest. However, more often than not, as is made explicit in season five’s examination of the news media, the public interest is then massaged in the interest of the status quo; for example the ‘dope on the table’ and the superficiality of the bust as a band aid to cover over larger problems that the ‘war on drugs’ has created . There’s no real incentive for long-term structural change. The ‘new day’ Carcetti promised crumbles under the weight of
bureaucracy. What the slow pace and build-up of the narrative exposes (or reinforces) is that to understand the complexities of how the system works and why it doesn’t change one needs to understand the entrenchment of the reasons to keep the status quo, power and profit. Instead there is so often an illusion of change - the ‘juked’ books, emphasizing that the 3rd grade test scores went up, the reduction of crime through the surreptitious legalization of drugs, and exposing a corrupt union because of a petty dispute over a church window. They all point out that real change would require a complete upheaval of the entire system, because the system is beyond hope.

This is particularly disheartening given its engagement with the deep entrenchment of racism with U.S. culture. Racism is so often addressed in superficial ways. *The Wire*’s series long story arcs do not erase the complexity of racism and its imbrication with classism. But what are the people of Baltimore to do? What is left? Is it enough to explode stereotypes? To reveal as D’Angelo does to a room full of lawyers and police who stare at photos of brutally murdered people that,

> You all don’t understand, man. You’ll don’t get it. [...] I grew up in this shit. All my people, my father, my uncles, my cousins. It’s just what we do. We just live with this shit ‘til you can’t breath no more. I swear to god [...] I was freer in jail then I was at home.11

What does he want,

> I want to start over [...] I just want to go somewhere where I can breathe like regular folk.12

Though the *The Wire* does explode the stereotypical representation of the street thug with characters like Stringer Bell, D’Angelo Barksdale, Avon Barksdale, Omar Little, Bubbles, Proposition Joe. Despite these compelling portrayals the possibility that those, often white characters who appear so little in the actual program, who wield most of the actual power, to whom all these players are simply ‘one of them little bald headed bitches,’13 will one day be called to task for their exploitation and insurance that the status quo continues to function. *The Wire* offers no possibility that D’Angelo, or anyone else like him, can be free and breath air like regular folk.

What *The Wire* can do by trading on its ‘not TV’ status is leave the viewer to feel secure in his or her moral superiority for watching the gritty realism of *The Wire* and not the obscene consumption of vapid teenagers on *My Super Sweet Sixteen*, while simultaneously excusing herself from any complicity with the system or responsibility to see it changed. It’s become irredeemable. It’s not a matter of calling people to action, to write their local congressmen or volunteer at the local soup kitchen, but *The Wire* absolves the viewer of needing to think about her or his own complicity within a larger social structure. The institutions become intangible inhuman entities, and the people who work within them become corrupted by the mere fact of their presence within them. It’s not simply a matter of arguing that *The Wire* doesn’t validate the power of the individual to overcome adversity.14 In completely dehumanizing institutions, it elides the importance of the interplay between structural issues and the individuals who make them up.

The repetition within the narrative underscores this issue. *The Wire* is deeply frustrating in this aspect. After investing so much time in following a case or individual only to see to them shot down repeatedly can leave the viewer feeling unsatisfied and hopeless. Bubbles’s final ascent to his sister’s dinner table in the final episode seems to be the exception that proves the rule. But even there, his triumph is bitter sweet as we see Duquan, ‘Dukie’ take his place. Micheal takes Omar’s place. Detective Syndor takes McNulty’s place in Judge Phelan’s office.
trying to drum up support for his case. ‘There ain’t no nostalgia to this shit here. There’s just the street and the game and what happen here today.’

The Wire is a deeply pessimistic and bleak series. Though the characters are (mostly) fully humanized there is very little of any kind triumph. In most cases the crippling inadequacy of the institution is far too large and all consuming to allow for any hopeful way out. The Wire could be seen as a failure; while it throws a necessary light on the failure of the modern institutions to create a ‘great society’ it offers little indication that the situation can be any different.

Notes

7. O’Rouke
8. ‘The Buys’ 1.03.
10. Walker.
13. ‘The Buys’ 1.03
14. Though it toys with a neoliberal solutions to social problems, it does not go so far as to suggest that privatization is the cure for every social ill
15. ‘–30–’ 5.10.

URL to article: http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2009/05/29/the-more-things-change-the-more-they-stay-the-same-serial-narrative-on-the-wire/
A man’s gotta have a code: Identity, Racial Codes and HBO’s The Wire


Race, as a key marker of difference, helps individuals navigate contemporary life, and static notions of identity are often grounded on racial bodies connected to fixed thoughts of Blackness and Whiteness. Popular media representations, serving as sites of contestation regarding the social construction of race, play a key role in shaping, communicating, and understanding racial identities. Often, these representations simultaneously support and disrupt a problematic racial ideology built upon a naturalized Black/White binary. Anyone who has watched an episode of The Wire knows that questions of identity are central to its narratives. Twenty five years after Newcomb and Hirsch described TV as a ‘central cultural medium’ filled with conflicting meanings, The Wire provides an excellent opportunity to reconsider the social and political relevance of TV.

Media tend to focus on individual problems that render complex social and political issues invisible, erase power inequalities, and deny survival strategies and distinctive lifeways resulting from experiences. Nonetheless, societies do examine themselves through art and TV presents a site for discussion as it raises questions regarding societies deepest dilemmas. In response, The Wire contests racial normatives and refuses to manufacture simple solutions to complicated policy issues within the time frame of a single episode or season. Instead, it presented complex individuals struggling with the inherent tensions of good and bad and rejecting simple racial categorizations. Rather than the ‘easy triumph of justice’, it offers a mix of urban sociology, [and] fiercely argued politics...through an examination of the pressures and policies that govern everyone’s lives...from dispossessed to those doing the dispossessing...outcasts to the corporations and institutions indifferent to those cast out by economic realities.

Even as The Wire made viewers work hard to follow its intricate plotlines, it was recognized as ‘one of the few places in TV willing to argue passionately about the world outside the boundaries of the small screen.’ Television Week named it one of the best shows on TV and it even earned a prestigious Peabody Award. In addition, with a ‘large and largely African American cast’, The Wire continued in the vein of previous programming that ‘broke a mold of racial uniformity.’ Color is no longer invisible but racial representations are presented in the context of class and culture to create parallels between worlds and identities commonly presented as dichotomous.

In the 1980s, Hill Street Blues acknowledged that ‘race and class tear this society apart, that behaving decently under these conditions is an everyday trial, and that there are no blindingly obvious solutions for the accumulated miseries.’ The Wire offers a similar analysis through tragic heroes and principled deviants who illustrate the tension between structure and agency. For five seasons The Wire used gripping portrayals of complex social issues to interrogate the daily interactions of disconnected communities in a society wrestling with racial identity. The focus of each season shifted from drugs to corruption in city government to a failing public education system, but an underlying theme concerned with notions of the racial self remained evident. Combining complex characters with a serial storyline, The Wire challenged assumptions about who and what we are while commenting on fundamental social and political issues. Too often complex aspects of individuality are discarded for judgments based on perceptions tied to race. Because nearly every character played with stereotypes, each episode of The Wire demanded reconsideration of assumptions about authentic racial identities. This underlying theme is signified by Omar’s belief, ‘a man’s gotta have a code’ and prompts a focus on individuality as opposed to socially imposed labels. Whether it is McNulty’s infidelity, Bunk’s alcohol abuse, Freamon’s misguided approach to securing murder convictions, Sgt. Carver cop putting a troubled kid
back on the street because social services will fail him, or Kima, an intelligent and dedicated homicide detective struggling to fulfill her duties as a parent *The Wire* explored the realities of postindustrial America. It also re-introduces the ‘old American hero…the self-remade man.’

Television has constantly struggled over meanings and representations of race as it presents and produces a racial order, but it can no longer be burdened by the eternal search for authentic representations or accurate reflections. In early television history, blacks played subservient roles and blacks and whites occupied separate and unequal worlds. In the world of TV, discrimination, domination and struggle have been continuously displaced by a menacing Black underclass disproportionately represented in news accounts where ‘blacks dominate the visual representations that evoke images of crime, drugs, and social problems.’ Minorities remain ‘severely underrepresented on TV programming and when they do appear, their level of power and social status is significantly lower that their white counterparts.’ (Voorhees, 418)). When TV does venture inside the separate and unfamiliar world of black America, viewers are provided the comforting reminders of whiteness and an ideology of white supremacy yet denied access to the social competence and civic responsibility of Black Americans.

In addition, media often ‘shift conversations of inequality away from structured social processes to matters of individual choice.’ For decades, TV consisted of ‘authentic’ representations of life in poor urban communities that reinforced a normative white middle class, or enlightened approaches to cultural difference privileging white middle class subject positions to create racial oneness. The end result was a media landscape constructing a self/other and black/white binary grounded in restrictive scripts marking ‘whiteness as civilized, rational, ordered, disciplined, and morally superior and leaves people of color undisciplined, unrefined, primitive, inappropriately sexual, emotional, and unstable.’ These discourses create a ‘carefully constructed chasm between [white and black].’ These racial codes also create a dichotomy of deficient/gifted individuals and create obstructions to understanding that those trapped in underclass have same qualities but lack options and opportunities to realize them due to unemployment, industrial relocation, ineffective social policies, power inequalities, and racism.

It took *The Cosby Show* for a ‘previously unexplored territory of diversity within blackness’ to emerge. But where *Cosby* failed to comment on economic and social disparities, *The Wire* considers these issues and offers a prime example of how TV can challenge a hegemonic social and racial order built upon separation by moving beyond constructed dichotomies and revealing the intersection and interdependence of class, race, and gender. Bodroghkozy explains how TV functions as a symptomatic text at times trying to avoid racist representations only to come up with more binary opposition. *The Wire* has overcome the limitation of questions concerning authentic, positive, and negative, with a commitment to social realism. When shows like *Julia, Good Times, The Jeffersons,* and even *The Cosby Show* are ‘critiqued for not telling it like it is’ they become a struggle over how to represent reality. Responding to these criticisms, *The Wire* offers a blend of the contested meanings of race, and recognizes that racial experience is not singular. Black is no longer code for a violence, poverty, crime, deviance, and drug abuse. While such representations are present in TV and reality, *The Wire’s* appreciation for the influence of social context on identity helps to ‘unhinge black and white from previous definitions that rely on racial codes.’

The characters and issues found in *The Wire* apply *Hill Street Blues’ use of ‘multilayered realms of law and lawlessness’...[that] demonstrate how we are all subject to similar kinds of
institutional pressures and tensions... Whether comparing Stringer Bell and Avon, McNulty and Daniels, Prez and Bunk, or Michael and Senator Davis, *The Wire* blurred lines attempting to connect one’s code to a racially marked character. Is a Senator more beneficial to his community than an 8th grade corner boy raising his brother? Is Avon Barksdale’s gangster lifestyle more authentic than Stringer Bell’s educational aspirations? What does the audience think as Cutty - a recent parolee - embraces his troubled past in an attempt to create a future for himself and his impoverished community, yet Major Colvin uses his stature in the police department to create an authorized drug sanctuary. TV can no longer rely on simple answers to these questions.

Elected officials and truants understand an economy based on points on the package just as those in Town Hall and those on the corner understand the benefits of cooperation and competition. In the end, these narratives of survival ensure ‘various combatants are not portrayed as selfless defenders of the good or brutal psychopaths or hopeless losers but rather complicated individuals ensnared in and driven by larger social forces...’ For example in season two, the ‘same conditions of despair and criminal activity that envelop the city’s most hopeless neighbor hoods and black drug organizations are mirrored by white counterparts...’ Frank Sobotka is the guy everyone turns to when they need work or help. As work on the once profitable docks disappears Sobotka finances his efforts and good intentions by letting shipping containers with illegal cargo slip into the port undetected by authorities. At the same time, unable to pay their bills and make ends meet, Sobotka discovers that his son and nephew have been doing some freelance work stealing shipments of cameras.

As race codes of identity become naturalized, necessary and universal, essentialist notions of accuracy focus on contesting negative stereotypes with positive ones. Refusing to participate in this futile search for positivity and distortion, *The Wire* emphasizes the impossibility of separate and distinct identities and replaces them with an understanding that identity is culturally constructed and relational. The Wire’s challenge to extant racialized codes is clearly articulated in Omar’s belief that every man’s gotta have a code which provides an entry point to understand how the characters in *The Wire* upend historical representations of black and white and a media history requiring individuals be situated into a black/white dichotomy. Instead of relying on essentialized identities and a single narrative, *The Wire* offers ‘depth to the categories of identities that become specific, fragmented, and contradictory and constructed through interactions.’ This supports Gray’s argument that TV ‘allows for leaks, fractures, tensions, and contradictions...’ It also redirects the question, what happens when a man breaks his code?

**Conclusion**

TV should not bee seen as a ‘progression from stereotypes to truth but a struggle to constantly articulate the meanings of people’s identities and the way they live those cultural categories.’ Constructed racial identities are central to social organization. Race provides meaning, assigns positions and operates as an explanatory concept defining and maintaining difference. Popular media representations, as symptomatic texts, require further analysis regarding their response to a social reality containing fluid and unstable identities posing challenges to traditional boundaries creating social cleavages. But pinpointing media’s role in this process remains elusive as texts maintain stable identities, challenge claims of authentic racial identities, and even forge new identities. Nonetheless, these conflicting and often competing representations are grounded on racial bodies understood as ‘a primary readable text’ connected to fixed notions of Blackness and Whiteness. As a result, invented - yet entrenched - racial identities make it nearly impossible to look past perceptions of difference an attempts to see ‘each other as one in the same.’ This process of sacrificing individual identity for the collective reinforces constructed racial boundaries. Questions concerning popular media representations of racial identities cannot overlook the potential
to reinscribe the logic of the system they hope to dismantle,^41 but they must also, embrace
the 'evolution of ideas about race in America... marked by nuance, complexity...a fluidity
between cultures.'^42

The Wire's narrative pays close attention to the details of daily life, but it does not make it
easy to navigate this landscape. The Baltimore vernacular of characters like Spider and
Snoop reminds viewers of social partitions, but the intriguing respect between Bunk and
Omar or McNulty and Bodie demonstrates the flaws in our understanding of difference.
Ultimately, the intersection of two supposedly distinct communities often defined by race is
exposed and investigated. Mayor Carcetti wins the election using similar tactics as hustlers
on the corner. A convicted criminal and his law enforcing nemesis find common ground as
they work to save youth from following the same dead end. On the other hand, Omar -
staying true to his code - returns from a life of luxury to avenge the death of a friend, and
Kima rocks her child to sleep using the tried and true technique of numerous parents across
the country - even if the words change drastically. Goodnight Moon, Goodnight Stars,
Goodnight, po-pos, Goodnight fiends, Goodnight hoppers, Goodnight hustlers, Goodnight
Scammers, Goodnight to everybody, Goodnight to one and all.

Over the course of five seasons, The Wire highlighted the complexities of identity and race,
and placed 'other' America at center stage to compel privileged/default America to examine
the consequences of misguided and shortsighted 'codes.' Throughout, struggles to articulate
racial identities marked by nuance and similarity as opposed to difference were presented,
and TV once again contained assumptions about who and what we are, commented on
ideological issues, and offered insight to social dilemmas.^43 As the media landscape rapidly
evolves and TV tries to situate itself, The Wire demonstrates this mediums relevance to
important conversations concerning the social and political consequences of entrenched
racial borders.

Notes

   (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995
2. Horace Newcomb and Paul Hirsch, 'Television as cultural forum,' In Television: the
critical view, 6th ed., ed. Horace Newcomb (New York: Oxford University Press,
2000),561-573.
   Jones, (Lexington, KY: The University of Kentucky Press, 2008), 82-91.
4. Rose, 90
5. Rose, 97
7. Gitlin, 275
8. One of Baltimore’s most notorious stick-up artists, yet uncomfortable with profanity,
   Omar is careful to distinguish between players and citizens. He holds Sundays
   sacred, choosing not to work and even escorting the woman who raised him to
   church once a month. My character sketches were modified from those found at
   http://www.hbo.com/thewire/cast/
9. A good hard case, women, a failed marriage, two young boys, drunkenness,
   philandering, and insubordination. This is the life of Jimmy McNulty. But he is good
   police - driven by a propensity for solving cases, even as his personal life crumbled
   around him.
10. Gitlin, 311
11. A career-conscious police officer, Lt. Daniels holds a law degree and was once rapidly
   climbing the ranks of the Baltimore Police Department. His marriage to a politically
   ambitious and well-connected wife was strained due to a corruption scandal that
   occurred during his early days on the police force. Daniels found a new romance with
A.S.A. Rhonda Pearlman, and with Mayor Carcetti now backing Daniels’ ascent through the department, the pair appear on the verge of becoming a power couple.

12. Gitlin, 313
17. Gray, 1989, 377) This occurs by displacing the social with the personal and the complex with dramatic. ((Gray, 1989, 382
18. Gray, 1995
20. Shugart, 118
24. Bodroghkozy, 145
25. Bodroghkozy, 150
26. Bodroghkozy, 153
27. Rose, 85
28. Ranking number two in one of Baltimore’s most successful drug operations, Bell is a product of the projects he now operates in. A master of organization with a penchant for economic theory, Bell came close to turning the corner and establishing himself as a legitimate real estate developer. His efforts to reform the violence and gangsterism of the drug trade backfired, resulting in his death.
29. Gitlin, 85
30. Rose, 86
32. Grossberg, 220
33. Grossberg, 230
34. Gray, 2000, 300
35. Grossberg, 233
41. Wiegman
43. Newcomb and Hirsch
URL to article: http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2009/05/29/a-mans-gotta-have-a-code-identity-racial-codes-and-hbos-the-wire/
“These Are Not Your Children”: *The Wire’s* eighth graders and their fate at Edward Tillman Middle School


*The Wire* holds fans in its weary grip, surveying the broken streets and systems of modern day East Baltimore. Its naturalistic tradition is full of heart — Theodore Driese’s lost Sister Carrie of 100 years ago comes to mind, or Nelson Algren’s lovable unloved children of Depression-era Chicago. It couldn’t be any other way for the show’s creators, David Simon and Ed Burns, an ex-reporter and an ex-cop, respectively. The American city be damned, they seem to be saying, but not before we listen in on the disenfranchised, regardless of what they’ve done or what’s been done to them.

Like the elite surveillance technique of its title, *The Wire* is about overheard conversations. It’s a teacup-to-the-wall sort of show: you might want to put on the subtitles, to make sure you get every word. The everyday talk is as banal as it is essential. Like when accomplice Renaldo, cooped up in a van for hours with Omar, a modern-day Robin Hood who steals from the dealers and kills more than his share, complains that he ‘needs to go.’ Thinking he’s chickening out — they’re about to score big at a dealers’ poker game — Omar fumes quietly, muttering about cowards, but this changes nothing for Renaldo, who insists, ‘No, man, I got to go.’ Now Omar gets it, and hands over the toilet paper.

In their newspaper accounts and case files of their previous jobs, Simon and Burns wrote drafts of what would become *The Wire*’s stories of the downtrodden and the fallen, those rising up and the ones just making do. It’s a small world but the cast is large, for television, even for HBO: more than 50 characters, predominantly African American, over the show’s five-year run. They are drug dealers, lieutenants, and soldiers; three generations of dock workers in a falling-down union; a white incumbent mayor who thinks his election may have been a fluke, and a seasoned black mayor whose his corrupt cronies refuse to capitulate; school children, teachers, administrators; cynical cops, drunk cops, and the few who still believe they can protect and serve.

Each year focuses on a different bureaucracy complicit in the lie that results when we try to make a bad situation look good: ‘Jukin’ the stats.’ Everyone does it — the mayor, the police chief, the union hall, and the school principal - though they try not to. Season Four, set at Edward Tillman Middle School, was Assistant Principal Marcia Donnelly’s year. She’s as guilty of capitulating to the numbers game as the next bureaucrat, but Donnelly plays along because to keep her school functioning, she has no other choice. Both sympathetic and no-nonsense, she’s determined to do the impossible: provide a semblance of order amidst chaos. But she’s only nominally in charge of the season’s four young protagonists, none of them much older than 14.

September brings a new year like any other, even for these boys, starting eighth grade. Each one brings his own mismatched blend of enthusiasm and dysfunction to the task. Operating out of his hallway locker, Randy’s experiment in free enterprise — a mobile candy store for younger students that he operates out of his backpack - finds him too often in the lunch room, cutting class. Michael sees that his younger brother gets to and from school, fixes his supper, and helps him with his homework, but where his own education is concerned, he can only shrug and stare at the floor. Duquan learns the limitations of trust in a relationship with his math teacher. As the son of a convicted dealer, Naquan’s suspension in seventh grade earns him placement in an experimental class with a curriculum designed to make school relevant to kids ‘who won’t be around much longer.’ Sherrod, although grateful for a place to stay at Bubbles’, can’t live up to his terms: that he attend school for a whole day. No one expresses disbelief in the benefit of a diploma’s long term investment of years better than dropout Bodie, a corner kid who’s maybe 18 and who supervises Namond in his new job on the corner. This puts him in contact with Randy, Duqan and Michael, wistful for his
youth. He’s already paid his dues on the corner. He’s been loyal, punctual, obedient, and he never steals. And he’s got nothing to show for it. Maybe he should reconsider education - whatever that means. Impressed by Michael’s intensity, he mistakes it for an interest in academic achievement, asking him seriously, ‘What you wanna go to school for? To be an astronaut?’ The man on the moon is the closest school comes to offering a role model in this town.

Although school responds to each boy in crisis, their fates are more tied to the neighborhood’s continuing decline. Randy Wagstaff seems almost happy, at first. Smaller and cuter than the others, his biggest fear initially is crossing his foster mother, which is a good thing: for all her strictness, she provides safety and privacy, which Randy experiences in her home for the first time. When Donnelly brings him to her office for cutting, Randy begs her not to call his foster mother. Ms. D. asks for a good reason. He offers to rat out the school’s graffiti artists, but she already knows who they are. Then he remembers a night recently when someone who didn’t give him a choice told him to pass along information about a murder. Donnelly withdraws the call home when she hears that word, and contacts the police instead. Randy knows nothing, but on the basis of his non-story, a not-too-bright cop makes an arrest that doesn’t stick. It’s enough to earn Randy the name ‘snitch,’ however, and turn him into someone it’s dangerous to be friends with. His foster mother’s house is torched. Feeling responsible for his partner’s mistake, Sergeant Ellis Carver tries unsuccessfully to intervene on Randy’s behalf with social services, which returns him to a penitentiary-like group home. After their goodbyes, Carver sits alone in his squad car, beating his fists against its steering wheel. So much for father figures, but even Randy gives him a positive sendoff: ‘You tried.’ What’s ahead for Randy is nothing less than shame and torture among his peers in the foster care system for what they think he’s done.

But what was Randy’s error, exactly? That when candy sales were good, he cut a few classes? That one night he stood outside when he should have been inside? That he feared being honest with his foster mother? Perhaps we could blame the legal system, which obligated Marcia Donnelly to call the police. Even in a world where options are slim to none, most African American want to survive anyway. This is the lesson of Randy struggling to remain optimistic. It’s repeated in the show’s overall theme of surveillance as the saintly black detective Lester Farley parses scratchy sentences coming on wiretaps connected to drug dealers’ cell phones to understand the code of East Baltimore’s survivors, of whom Randy, Michael, Duquan and Namond are emblematic. When rising drug lord Marlo Stanfield tells his number one lieutenant, ‘I heard your pups did tall with snitchin’ boy,’ we learn more than just a few words of street dialect; we understand that news travels fast; that justice is swift; and that the lives of both Randy and Michael, the initiate referred to as ‘pups’ are already on the line.

Besides Carver, two characters who formerly were police step up for these boys. (As Carver’s frustration makes clear, anyone with feelings for these kids needs a more believable MO than being a cop.) Season four finds Presbylewski, or Presbo, filling a math teacher vacancy at Edward Tillman. It’s a stretch to take Presbylewski’s transformation seriously - last year he blew his own calm cover in a shootout, his fear taking over and causing an unnecessary death - but advertising aside (‘It’s not television. It’s HBO.’) this is still TV land. More genuine is the mentoring role assigned to formerly Lieutenant Colvin, suffering from a wounded ego after a bungled attempt to control the drug business forced him into early retirement. The university piloting the experimental class at Tillman hires Colvin as part security guard, part teacher. Despite his ambivalence about both tough kids and liberal good will, he’s glad to have the work. Another adult character, Dennis Wise, or Cutty, an ex-con, opens a boxing gym in the neighborhood for kids that he hopes will keep them and him out of trouble. And Bubbles reaches out to Sherrod. Each of these men provide some grounding for the boys because they give them respect. Support and even love follow - not that it always matters.
Take Michael, for instance. He’s no killer, but he figures his best route is to become one. His returning stepfather maintains a relatively low profile, but Michael hates him anyway. He stays around to protect his much younger brother, to whom he has become mother and father both. Although they argue over who cashes the welfare check, his stepdad isn’t violent or insistent. He’s just another junkie like his mother, it seems. As the situation stagnates, Michael becomes more and more withdrawn. Typically for the series, his preoccupation takes a while to resolve itself as options, considered and discarded, shape the boy into the person he becomes. Cutty can’t melt his stony silence, although Michael loves the gym, and although he relishes the opportunity to prove his potential, he can’t stand it when Cutty tries to get close to him. Mr. Presbylewski’s contact as his math teacher is peripheral, but even he notices Michael’s smoldering and urges him to speak with a school social worker, advice he also refuses. Finally we see but cannot hear Michael telling all to drug dealer Marlo Stanfield, the show’s villain. He’s taking over every one else’s territories in East Baltimore and is certain to become its next drug boss. His solution is ruthless, brutal, and fatal: his hit man Chris kills the stepfather.

Why did Michael turn away from Cutty and Mr. P.? Because his problem is private. In one of the more brutal scenes of this violent show, as Chris beats the stepfather to death, he asks repeatedly whether the stepdad ‘got any’ in prison. And did he ‘like little boys.’ Chris, another ex-con, was such a victim; as such, he’s a stand-in for Mike, who trades his life for the survival of his little brother. We might even say that belonging to Marlo Stanfield gives purpose to a boy who feels so alone. Michael trades eighth grade for hit man school with Chris and his associate, a teenage girl not much older than Michael named Snoop. He’s a good student. No one, Namond, Randy, or Duqan, know his reasons, only the outcome: when Michael goes ballistic on a kid not much older who’s stolen from Marlo, Namond, who witnesses this left-for-dead beating, sums up his horrified reaction later with: ‘He ain’t Mike no more.’

Duquan’s friendship with the other boys shows their capacity for love and acceptance. Always broke and hungry, and unable to conceal his parents’ neglect, he shows up at school in yesterday’s clothes; his body odor provokes teasing and worse. They look out for Duquan, after a fashion. When they find him being beaten up in an alley, they chase the other boys away. Then it’s their turn. ‘They can’t whup on Dukie like that. Only we can whup on Dukie like that,’ they tease, punching him once again to the ground. The beatdown is a term of their endearment, and anyway, Duquan finds a way out of his extreme neediness by giving back something doesn’t cost money: knowledge. He can explain why pigeons wear bands on their legs because he cleans coops for a person ‘who schooled me.’ He also has a key piece of information about the mysterious disappearance of dead bodies in the neighborhood. Dukie, an unseen eyewitness to murder, knows where they are, but he only tells Randy, Michael, and Namond, and only to set them straight. In their fear, they’ve begun repeating a theory invented by younger kids that a ghost disappears people in the dark of night. Now Dukie stands tall, but remains their equal. One night he sneaks them inside a boarded up building to show them Lex, a homicide victim they knew. Watching their horrified reaction, he instructs flatly, ‘no special dead, just dead.’

Duquan shares a generous trait with Mr. P., but their friendship challenges a cardinal rule of survival for young men in East Baltimore: never admit you need each other. Duquan teaches himself how to use a computer he and Mr. P. have found unopened in a school storeroom; it’s not long before he’s passing along what he’s learned to Randy and others. When Presbo’s first act of kindness fails - the new school uniform he provides Duquan disappears before his family’s ruthless thieving - his second act is more foolproof: he gets Duquan early access to one of the school’s showers in the gym. If, by his third act - laundering Duquan’s clothes, you find this portrait of a teacher’s selflessness stretches credibility, note that Assistant Principal Donnelly provides the reality check. Always the bearer of bad news, she’s become quite thoughtful in her delivery of it. When she tells Mr. P. that Duquan, aged out of eighth grade,
must be socially promoted to high school, he can barely conceal his tears. ‘Do you have any children of your own?’ she asks. ‘No, not yet,’ he returns softly. ‘Well, have some,’ she advises. ‘They’ll be yours forever. These are not your children.’ He’s already crossed the threshold when he realizes he cares about his students, exposing a vulnerable side. In an English test prep class he’s forced to teach along with every other faculty member in the school, a text calls for a definition of ‘intimacy.’ Most kids think it means sex, but Presbo explains that it’s more subtle than that, ‘like when you tickle your partner,’ he says. His honesty has cut off the stream of crude jokes that had already started in the back row, not to mention commanded the attention of his students. Blushing, he quickly recovers with ‘That’s enough for now,’ but when pressured about returning to the subject of intimacy, replies, ‘If you want to, yes, and if I don’t get too embarrassed.’

The attitude of The Wire towards its children acknowledges that they’re vulnerable by design, even though some come up harder, and quicker, than others. Namond sits in Presbylewski’s class too, unimpressed. He’s preoccupied with his treatment by this man, who’s just another authority figure to him, calculating his first attack of the new year. It’s spot-on: ‘Why you got to dog me before I know the rules?’ he challenges, when Presbo interrupts his answer by telling him he’s already made a mistake. Reassignment to the experimental class engineers his introduction to Bunny Colvin. Their first meeting is a fluke — literally, they almost knock each other down in one of the school’s corridors as Colvin and Professor David Parenti are walking to their classroom. In Colvin’s view, Parenti’s abstractions about the predictability of school dropout rates repeat the familiar ‘jukin’ the stats’ talk that soured his retirement from the police force a season or two ago. Colvin, not knowing or caring how to make intellectual small talk with Parenti that reduces the kids he knows to mere numbers, is so busy not paying attention to him that he almost collides with Namond in the hallway. Colvin, looking for an apt response to all the brainy small talk, welcomes Namond’s sudden proximity. ‘They do step up when you need them to,’ he observes drily to the professor.

Namond Brice’s sharpness and maturity puts him on a par with his equally calculating mother Yolanda, nicknamed ‘the dragon lady’ by the corner boys, who expects him to become a street soldier like his father Weebay, who wouldn’t sell anyone out and who, in prison, stands tall as a hero to Namond’s young superiors. Namond, 14, wants a different life — if only he could figure out what it is. He’s smart enough for the corner, all right — before he changed programs, he cleverly got himself kicked out of class just in time to get there for his new part-time job. His new teachers don’t ask him to leave when he acts out. ‘They do everything ass-backwards,’ he complains. He starts paying attention to other things they do differently. Maybe he realizes that his own view of the corner is ass-backwards, too. Despite having been told to cut his hair by Yolanda and by Bodie too, he ties it into a bushy ponytail at the nape of his neck that identifies him too easily to the police. He’s also too nice to his customers. He lets an addict pay for a hit with just $6, short of the required amount, rationalizing his generosity to his annoyed coworker with, ‘That’s Michael’s mother.’

Colvin’s acute perceptions about borderline kids precipitate a breakthrough in cooperative learning, a trope of the young, university-trained teachers whose teenage charges have been less than cooperative. The incident itself is small: Namond’s reprimanded for reading a magazine and as he throws it aside he remarks tartly, ‘It wasn’t mine anyway.’ Colvin observes that Namond has just successfully ‘gotten over,’ i.e., reduced the teacher’s scolding to an indifferent, ‘who cares?’ in front of his peers. An animated discussion of ‘getting over’ on the corner and elsewhere follows. This wasn’t the planned lesson, but it’s a breakthrough. As teachers establish ground rules for talking and listening, some progress is made; Namond does well enough to sit for standardized tests. But it doesn’t keep him out of trouble. Picked up by Carver on a routine bust, Namond lets on that he is terrified of juvie — or ‘baby booking,’ as his mother calls it; Carver calls Colvin, who agrees to take him home overnight. That’s when Namond learns that Colvin’s wife calls him Bunny. Violence is never far from
the baseline of even the most benign subplots on *The Wire*. In a hilariously unexpected exchange, while his wife gets peach cobbler in the kitchen, Colvin threatens to ‘cut [Namond’s] nuts off’ if he ever tells anyone his nickname.

Soon after Colvin visits Weebay Brice in prison to ask him to allow Namond to live with Colvin and his wife in their safer neighborhood while he attends high school. ‘You and I, we couldn’t change our paths,’ he starts, reflecting on Weebay’s long prison term and his own straight path in law enforcement. Weebay’s first reaction to his proposition is, ‘You’re asking too much.’ Colvin redirects his question with characteristic dignity: ‘You know your son.’ Both men love the boy, but Weebay knows it’s Colvin’s turn to love him more. Together they overrule Yolanda, and Namond moves out. In the season’s final scene, it’s morning and Namond is scribbling his homework while hurriedly finishing his orange juice and running for the school bus on a new corner - the one where Mr. and Mrs. Colvin live. In other words, he’s a normal kid — for now.

Is Edward Tillman Middle School a real place? Of course not. But at least *The Wire* integrates its role in the education of the young men of East Baltimore, in two ways. The first is by recognizing that the street is where most learning occurs. It happens when Dukie schools the other boys trying to catch a homing pigeon by identifying the rings they wear, or Snoop explains to Chris everything she has just absorbed about the new technology of the nail gun she’s just purchased in a hardware store. Snoop’s a girl, not a boy, and as such doesn’t have a father figure. She’s lucky enough just to be a character on the snow - the only female under the age of 21, and just as mean and soft as the rest of the adolescents.) Adults are not immune to instruction, either, as when Presbo, who’s left his keys in his car, asks one of his students to do what he doesn’t know how to do: break the lock with slim jim. And it happens in Bodie’s pivotal scene about the purpose of school and the man in the moon.

The reverse is also true: violence is not just what happens on the street. This is a commonplace on TV shows about public schools. As a public high school teacher myself, I was disappointed that *The Wire* stooped to the same cliché as other TV shows depicting adolescents in classrooms: they fight a lot, tragically sometimes. In the fourth episode two girls eye each other menacingly in math class as Mr. Presbylewski, clueless, proceeds with an algebra problem. Before the period is over, one has cut the other across the face with a boxcutter. Now if this ever happens, it’s a rare occurance. Not because kids don’t take boxcutters to school: they do. But TV knows how violence such as this plays into the living rooms of smug middle class (and predominantly white) viewers who accept black-on-black violence on the screen, no questions asked. We want to see poor kids destroy each other; it validates a do-nothing attitude that the system is broken and that there’s nothing we can do to fix it.

*The Wire* gets points, most of the time, for choosing objectivity over judgement; connection over isolation; humanity over indifference. Duquan provides that last detail even in this scene; operating a cheap hand-held fan, he blows fresh air across the assailant’s face. His goofy gesture of kindness turns a monster into a child, sweaty, tear-stained, and scared, soon to be handcuffed, expelled, incarcerated, and disappeared from society.

My only other caveat is an objection to the excessive amount of abusive language spoken by actors posing as students to teachers and administrators. One reason real teenagers use less profanity than the actors on *The Wire* is that they’re not stupid enough to get into trouble over the ‘f’ word when there are so many other provocative options. Like kids through the ages, they find ways of challenging authority figures that are much more clever than simply breaking the rules, especially in a school setting. The other reason is that they’re raised better. A public high school teacher for 15 years, I’ve been called names and teased, written up kids on discipline charges, and thrown a few temper tantrums of my own. But even the foulest mouthed children who talk trash to each other defer to most adults. I’m frequently
referred to as ‘Miss,’ despite the fact that at our school it’s policy for students to call teachers by their first names, and despite the fact that I’ve been a happily married lady for almost 30 years, a fact I occasionally share with them. That’s the sort of statistic that inspires at least a second or two of awed silence: like the rest of us, they want to fall in love, and they want it to last.

The peripheral story of Sherrod serves as antidote to the outcomes of Michael, Randy, Duquan, and Namond, all of whom come from families with drug addicted and/or incarcerated parents. The homeless Sherrod’s sole custodian adult is the squatter and dope fiend Bubbles; yet even Sherrod’s tragic end isn’t the bottom for his half-alive guardian. It takes another year and a half of The Wire for Bubbles’ story to reach its happy ending. And at that, he’s one of the few characters among the entire cast whose future might even be called optimistic. Therefore, if you are inclined to feel sorry for any of these young protagonists, straighten up: on The Wire, pity is in short supply. Because life is hard. And life goes on.

Common Ground: The Political Economy of The Wire

*There’s not a liberal America and a conservative America. There’s the United States of America.*
*There’s not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America; there’s the United States of America.*
- Barack Obama

If Snot Boogie always stole the money, why’d you let him play?
Got to. *This America, man.*
– Dialogue from episode one, The Wire

When, after much hectoring, my friend Winston finally watched *The Wire*, he asked my wife and I why ‘two nice, well-to-do white people, who live in the suburbs, like the show so much.’ My awkward answer was as ‘white’ as it could possibly be: that watching *The Wire* alleviated a sense of neglect, guilt and fear that had built up within me over the years. My wife’s answer was subtler: she grew up in Oakland. Her response and mine both reflected a sense of cross-cultural sympathy, but where mine depicted a world of differences that need to be overcome, hers depicted a shared world that is somehow not shared enough.

Now that he’s watched *The Wire* and is attached to the show as we are, Winston uses its stories as a sort of political shorthand. For instance, when he talks to people about the intelligence required in the drug world, Winston points to Stringer Bell, who he describes as ‘a two-bit drug dealer and a two-bit businessman and not really that good at either.’ *The Wire* offers a great many such transitional figures: people whose principles are at odds with the organizational systems in which they find themselves. Bell’s ambitions for legitimacy leave him alienated both inside and out of the drug world; detective Jimmy McNulty’s restless desire to combat intelligent criminals eventually costs him his job and his family; police captain Bunny Colvin’s disgust at the decay of his neighborhood drives him to try legalizing drugs, bringing the wrath of the police establishment and unprecedented depths of despair; Frank Sobotka’s desire to bring work to his union brings corruption to the piers and ultimately costs his life. These characters emphatically reinforce the point that anybody trying to change business as usual in an American city grapples with corrupt and ruthless systems. As *The Wire*’s blind bartender Butchie says, ‘conscience do cost.’

The show’s approach, rooted in Greek tragedy, allows the viewer to see such outsider individuals not as representatives of races or classes, but as cogs in complex institutional machines. David Simon, creator of *The Wire*, described these tragic characters as ‘doomed and fated protagonists who confront a rigged game and their own mortality.’ Simon does not shy away from discussing the political implications of this tragic narrative structure. He notes that he writes for the people living the event, people to whom he and the show’s other writers can relate: ‘we are of the other America or the America that has been left behind in the postindustrial age.’ Here, Simon is evoking the language of Democratic senator John Edwards in his description of ‘two Americas’. The key difference between Simon’s use of the ‘two Americas’ concept differs from Edwards’ in the same way my wife’s response to Winston differs from my own: Simon draws himself into the ‘other America.’

My brother, a man preternaturally careful about the opinions he draws pointed out that the show was written by, and most likely for wealthy, well-educated, mostly white Americans who have had precisely the sort of opportunities not available to the ‘other America.’ My brother extrapolated from this point that one should not take too much to heart the supposed political implications of the story, but this point reflects precisely Simon’s political objective: to devalue the division between the ‘two Americas’ by bringing the America that he was born into to the same community meeting as the one he now lives amidst.
This effort on the part of Simon and the rest of The Wire team requires an effort to reduce the primacy of racial divisions. The people within each institution depicted in The Wire are shown perpetually subsuming racial difference beneath the effort to survive against the system. Some of these points are made in joking asides, such as when detective Bunk Moreland is mocked for wearing a lacrosse sweatshirt to work, to which he responds, ‘what, a brother can’t run around with a stick?’ or when one drug dealer tells another that business is ‘slow as a white man in slippers.’ At other times, these lines are politically charged, but undercut, as in a union meeting in which a black union leader draws resentment when he calls a crooked business man ‘that Polock motherfucker.’ Amidst jeers, he audits the comment, out of deference for the union. Race is always a presence and an issue, but it is subsumed in the bigger problems of the social environment.

All this is not to say that race disappears as an issue in The Wire, just that it is a particular difference that does not matter to the system. Sobotka has to hold together the racially divisive politics of the stevedores union in order to continue running illegal drugs through the piers to raise money for the union. At one point, he uses harsh rhetoric to convince a black stevedore to support him as union president for one more year: ‘Black, white. What’s the difference, Nat? Until we get that fuckin’ canal dredged, we’re all niggers, pardon my French.’ In this vision of the world, racial tensions do not disappear, but they are only a peripheral pressure on Sobotka, who finds himself a hinge in the drug trade that is devastating inner city Baltimore - which in turn threatens the futures of his son and nephew. Sobotka sees his crisis as a matter of class rather than race. He berates the lobbyist he has hired with the drug money: ‘...down here it’s still who’s you’re old man ’til you got kids your own, and then it’s whose your son. But after the horror movie I seen today: robots. Piers full of robots. My kid’ll be lucky if he’s even punching numbers five years from now.... It breaks my heart that there’s no future for the Sobotkas on the waterfront.’ Sobotka’s efforts are made in the name of family and class, but they are all subsumed in institutional change. As his situation completely unravels, Sobotka complains that ‘we used to make shit in this country. Build shit. Now we just put our hand in the next guy’s pocket.’ Simon, in a conversation with conservative thinkers, makes this point explicitly.

For 35 years, you’ve systematically deindustrialized these cities. You’ve rendered them inhospitable to the working class, economically. You have marginalized a certain percentage of your population, most of them minority, and placed them in a situation where the only viable economic engine in their hypersegregated neighborhoods is the drug trade. Then you’ve alienated them further by fighting this draconian war in their neighborhoods, and not being able to distinguish between friend or foe and between that which is truly dangerous or that which is just illegal. And you want to sit across the table from me and say ‘What’s the solution?’ and get it in a paragraph? The solution is to undo the last 35 years, brick by brick. How long is that going to take? I don’t know, but until you start it’s only going to get worse.

The philosophy that Simon is expressing here is summed up in a hip-hop aphorism: ‘don’t hate the player, hate the game.’ This universalizing - albeit harsh - message is central to the great political value of The Wire: no matter your race, creed or profession, the system will have its way with you.

Recently, Barack Obama cited The Wire as his favorite television show. Obama called the show fascinating, likely recognizing elements of its depiction of the American city from his time as a community organizer in south Chicago. But in its unflinching perspective connecting politicians, drug dealers, businessmen and all sorts of institutional corruption, the show could never overtly inform national policy in America. Still, Obama noted that he was particularly fascinated by Omar Little, the gay drug thief. Obama cited Omar’s capacity
to embody seemingly contradictory qualities: ‘He’s a gay gangster who only robs drug dealers and then gives back. He’s sort of a Robin Hood. And he’s the toughest, baddest guy on the show, but he’s gay.’ Obama seems taken by the idea that a person can maintain an ethical standard outside of the system, alienating both people in his own community - through his homosexuality and willingness to cooperate with the law\(^{13}\) - and in society at large - through his illegal activities. The Wire posits, through Omar, that there is a way of functioning in American politics that transcends the relative pettiness of race-bating and class warfare. The show kills Omar in the final season, a casualty of changing times. For his own part, Obama is careful to hedge the implications of his ‘fascination’ with Omar: ‘That’s not an endorsement...he’s not my favorite person.’\(^{12}\)

Notes

4. Hornby, Nick. ‘Interview with David Simon.’ The Believer, August 2007, 72. ‘The Wire is a Greek tragedy in which the postmodern institutions are the Olympian forces’.
5. Hornby 72
6. Hornby 72
8. ‘Backwash.’ The Wire. HBO, July 13, 2003. The black leader does not disagree, but also does not back down on the racial language, respond ‘Or Polocks, pardon mine’.
12. views such as these are prominent throughout Internet chat on The Wire: ‘hey dat nigga omar was a faggot and a snitch but he was so gangsta he didnt even giva a fuk..... any nigga had a problem wit dat shit he put gun 2 they head and itll b over...he was loyal 2 his niggas, wasnt afraid wut ppl had 2 say bout him and wasnt afraid 2 b him self and dats wut makes him a real nigga’ hayward101. YouTube - The Wire - Omar: Let’s Bang Out. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8gLvic55FXs, September, 2008.

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URL to article: http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2009/05/29/common-ground-the-political-economy-of-the-wire/
Before, and at a notably accelerated pace since the unfortunate events of 2001, the notion of “life” in the United States has been reduced to an abstract reference to health and safety. Security has taken precedence over quality of life, used as an excuse for the growing poverty and inequality facing people in the US today. This obsession with security, coupled by an increasingly superficial news media has resulted in an essentialist approach to political questions, while complex portrayals of life inside the United States are few and far between. HBOs television series *The Wire*, as an intricate, multi-layered portrayal of life in post-industrial America, works as an exception to this rule. In the following contribution I will attempt to describe the ideological construct of the biopolitical nation-state and its role in the creation of racialized risk-objects, and how *The Wire* serves as an antidote this essentialist, depoliticized, and absolutely repressive political formation. For the scope of this particular article I’ve chosen to forgo an in-depth analysis of the series in order to focus on the meta-functioning of the program in the current political and media landscape in the US.

**Biopolitics**

In Foucault’s lecture “Society Must be Defended” he discusses what he perceives to be a historical development of political right as practiced by the state. In essence, this change is characterized by the transition from the right of the sovereign state to what he vaguely refers to as the biopolitical state. He explains that “The right of sovereignty was the right to take life or let live. And then this new right is established: the right to make live and to let die.”\(^1\) With regards to policies of the state towards its population, he describes the biopolitical as dealing “with the population as a political problem, as a problem that is at once scientific and political, as a biological problem and as power’s problem”\(^2\). Society was no longer something to be only disciplined, but to be regulated as well.

Governmentality can be thought of as the modus operandi of the biopolitical state. Judith Butler, discussing the ways in which sovereign power emerges within the context of governmentality, writes:

> Governmentality is broadly understood as a mode of power concerned with the maintenance and control of bodies and persons, the production and regulation of persons and populations, and the circulation of goods insofar as they maintain and restrict the life of the population. Governmentality operates through policies and departments, through managerial and bureaucratic institutions, through the law, when the law is understood as “a set of tactics”, and through forms of state power, although not exclusively.\(^3\)

The biopolitical realm that is administered through the system of governmentality is that of the mass - not society in the sense that it is comprised of individual social beings, but rather a mass of biological beings, even though the effects of policies or institutions that come into being on the level of the biopolitical have effects on the individual and the social relationships between individuals. Foucault maintains:

> …the mechanisms introduced by biopolitics include forecasts, statistical estimates, and overall measures. And their purpose is not to modify any given phenomenon as such, or to modify a given individual insofar as he is an individual, but essentially, to intervene at the level of their generality. …There is absolutely no question relating to an individual body, in the way that discipline does. It is therefore not a matter of taking the individual at the level of individuality but, on the contrary, of using overall mechanisms and
acting in such a way as to achieve overall states of equilibration or regularity...  

The biopolitical consideration of a population in turn serves to legitimize the abstract concept of nation-state. Notions of health, safety, and prosperity (for example) are abstracted from the individual and re-introduced on the level of national superstructure. Biopolitical speech appropriates the word “we” and empties it of all specificity and personality, conjuring up a mass that is essentially “... a new body, a multiple body, a body with so many heads that while they might not be infinite in number, cannot necessarily be counted.” It is important to note that the biopolitical state is legitimized by diverse societal actors who are not necessarily direct representatives of the elected government. Butler writes:

Governmentality thus operates through state and non-state institutions and discourses that are legitimized neither by direct elections nor through established authority. Marked by a diffuse set of strategies and tactics, governmentality gains its meaning and purpose from no single source, no unified sovereign subject. Rather, the tactics characteristic of governmentality operate diffusely, to dispose and order populations, and to produce and reproduce subjects, their practices and beliefs, in relation to specific policy aims.

In this sense, the notion of the nation-state as biopolitical abstraction is the ideological end product of governmentality.

Foucault argues that biopolitical governmentality does not exclude the disciplinary however, but rather incorporates it. As Foucault asserts: “What is more, the two sets of mechanisms - one disciplinary and the other regulatory - do not exist at the same level. Which means of course that they are not mutually exclusive and can be articulated with each other.” Butler identifies the emergence of sovereign power within a system of governmentality as heterogeneous and unpredictable, like the rogue police officer enacting sovereign power in a temporary suspension of the law:

...because our historical situation is marked by governmentality, and this implies, to a certain degree, a loss of sovereignty, that loss is compensated through the resurgence of sovereignty within the field of governmentality. Petty sovereigns abound, reigning in the midst of bureaucratic army institutions mobilized by aims and tactics of power they do not inaugurate or fully control. ... Governmentality is the condition of this new exercise of sovereignty in the sense that it first establishes law as a “tactic”, something of instrumental value, and not “binding” by virtue of its status as law.

The contemporary strategies of the “war on drugs” and the subsequent “war on terror”, both waged by US government simultaneously on and with its citizens, represent biopolitical campaigns that rely on and employ the tactics of governmentality to simultaneously fulfill particular policy aims while reinforcing and legitimizing the existence of the nation-state.

In an attempt to reconcile the use of disciplinary techniques within the logic of biopolitical governmentality, which is concerned with life and the maintenance of an abstract, superstructural equilibrium or homeostasis, Foucault introduces the notion of threat as rationale for the killing of individuals - killing not referring exclusively to actual death, but “every form of indirect murder: the fact of exposing someone to death, increasing the risk of death for some people, or, quite simply, political death, expulsion, rejection and so on.” The biopolitical threat exists on the abstract level of the superstructure, which then in turn justifies individual disciplinary use of power. “This is not, then, a military, warlike, or
political relationship, but a biological relationship. And the reason this mechanism can come into play is that the enemies who have to be done away with are not adversaries in the political sense of the term; they are threats, either external or internal, to the population and for the population.”

This depoliticization of threat is achieved through the biopolitical ideological rhetoric of public health, safety, and security that serves to refuse, suppress, and neutralize questions of inequality and political injustice of any nature. The notion of the existence of a biopolitical threat characterizes both the war on drugs and the war on terror in that while in both cases, race (more specifically the visual markings through which race is supposedly identified) and cultural identity play explicit roles in the identification of the risk-object, a biopolitical rationalization for the existence of the threat to national health and security for example - serves to shroud otherwise blatantly racist, xenophobic policies, articulating, with the help of the media, the legitimization of these policies.

In his article “From Biopower to Biopolitics”, which is a further exploration of Foucault’s notion of biopolitical governmentality, Mauricio Lazzarato suggests that the development of biopolitics can be seen as “the necessity to assure an immanent and strategic coordination of forces.”

The stage for the immanent and strategic coordination of forces that became known as “the war on drugs” in the US was set by the administrations of the late sixties and early seventies, partially as an excuse to integrate federal power with local policing. From the beginning, the war on drugs took on a biopolitical form in that illicit drugs were construed as a threat to the general health and safety of the national population as biopolitical mass. In a 1969 Presidential address regarding the threat of drugs to the nation, Richard Nixon clearly outlined the biopolitical nature of the future war on drugs:

Within the last decade, the abuse of drugs has grown from essentially a local police problem into a serious national threat to the personal health and safety of millions of Americans. ... A national awareness of the gravity of the situation is needed: a new urgency and concerted national policy are needed at the federal level to begin to cope with this growing menace to the general welfare of the United States.

The creation of this national myth about the dangers and effects of drugs was accompanied and legitimized by the creation of government bodies and agencies such as the then Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs (what is now the Drug Enforcement Administration - DEA) and the modification and introduction of laws such as the Hobbs Interstate Commerce Act and the RICO Act that facilitated the functioning of the justice system and law enforcement agencies in relation to drugs and drug crimes. During the early eighties, the Reagan administration put the war on drugs into full swing with the creation of the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force Program and the infamous Comprehensive Crime Control Act of 1984, which included the first mandatory minimum sentences, increased maximum fine levels for drug cases, and included new assets forfeiture statutes. The asset forfeiture statutes “expanded the governments ability to seize property and cash from convicted - or even accused - drug dealers, in civil or criminal court” and proved to be a great motivation (as a source of income) for police forces around the country to “fight” drugs.

The criminal justice aspect of the drug war was accompanied by fervent anti-drug social campaigns like Nancy Reagan’s famous “Just Say No” campaign, the DARE program (Project Drug Abuse Resistance Education), project STAR and project ALERT. These programs educated children and adults alike on the supposed biological and social effects of drug use, along with its criminal consequences, laying the responsibility on the individual/would-be potential user to ensure the health and safety of the population/nation. More importantly, these social crusades ensured that drugs became a codified societal threat.
Drugs do not act on their own, however, and the success of the war on drugs relied heavily on the creation of an object of risk, someone or group of people who could bear the signification of threat. Allen Feldman, in his essay “On the Actuarial Gaze: From 9/11 to Abu Graib”, refers to Ulrich Beck and the creation of symbols of risk:

Ulrich Beck’s cultural symbols through which society ‘sees’ risk, are not solely cognitive ideations, but have to be fabricated from concrete circumstances and bodies, and then forcefully retro-branded onto social subjects and spaces that are seen as originating and circulating risk. 

The object of the war on drugs was what criminologist Steven Spitzer referred to as “social dynamite”. Social dynamite, as Christian Parenti goes on to describe it in his book “Lockdown America: Police and Prisons in the Age of Crisis”, refers to:

...those who pose an actual or potential political challenge. They are that population which threatens to explode: the impoverished low-wage working class and unemployed youth who have fallen below the statistical radar, but whose spirits are not yet broken and whose expectations for a decent life and social inclusion are dangerously alive and well. ... This is the class from which the Black Panthers and the Young Lords arose in the sixties and from which sprang the gangs of the 1980's. ... Thus social dynamite is a threat to the class and racial hierarchies upon which the private enterprise system depends. ....controlling them requires both a defensive policy of containment and an aggressive policy of direct attack and active destabilization. ... This is the class, or more accurately the caste, because they are increasingly people of color - which must be constantly undermined, divided, intimidated, attacked, discredited and ultimately kept in check with what Fanon called the 'language of naked force.'

In the case of the war on drugs, the bearers of threat, the cultural symbols of risk that fueled the biopolitical discourses of public health and safety with regards to drugs were for the most part (although not exclusively - Asian and Latino youth are also included) young, poor, urban, male and black.

The creation of a risk object - the bearer of biopolitical threat - implicitly involves the de-acknowledgement of the right to have rights. Rights, or human rights, are the set of codified principles through which an individual is assured full and equal participation in the social and political life, and the denial of these rights is a form of killing according to Foucault. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt clarifies the consequences of the denial of the right to have rights:

The fundamental deprivation of human rights is manifested first and above all in the deprivation of a place in the world which makes opinions significant and actions effective. Something much more fundamental than freedom and justice, which are rights of citizens, is at stake when belonging to the community into which one is born is no longer a matter of course and not belonging no longer a matter of choice...This extremity, and nothing else, is the situation of people deprived of human rights. They are deprived not of the right to freedom but of the right to action.

While referring to the condition of statelessness - of legally not belonging, or being legally dispossessed of the right to belong to and participate in the nation-state one finds themselves in - this condition essentially describes the growing prison population (including ex-prisoners) in the US. The war on drugs has played a significant role in the creation of a
body of rights depraved people - people who no longer fully belong, but who are ‘amongst’ us.

Most recently, the Pew Center on the States released a report stating that one out of every one hundred American adults is currently behind bars in the US. Breaking these statistics down categorically, they reveal that one out of every nine black males between the ages of twenty and thirty-four are imprisoned. Additionally, according to the Department of Justice, at the end of 2006, over five million adults were under some form of parole or probation. Of these five million, more than a quarter were under supervision for a drug law violation. Of those released who had been convicted of a drug violation, over 60% are likely to be re-incarcerated. The productivity of the war on drugs is manifested in this growing body of rights-deprived people, the rest-product of this biopolitical campaign, who on a whole represent the racism institutionalized in the war on drugs.

Feldman goes on to write that “Bio-political policing does not eradicate its object, but requires its managed reproduction within discrete security and publicity apparatuses; the ongoing retrieval and presentation of threat-profiles legitimates the security archive.” This ongoing presentation and retrieval has as its aim and result the training of the visual evidence of suspicion. Skin color undoubtedly plays a significant role as a visual signifier of potential risk in the war on drugs.

The proliferation of all forms of media over the past decades has aided in codifying the existence of a national biopolitical entity, as well as the supposed threats to it. Television in particular has played a significant role in the formation of the risk object, and more particularly, the racialized risk object. Examples include weekly television doku-dramas like Cops, LAPD, and True Stories of the Highway Patrol that consistently present the police officer - often white, but not always - as the representative of order and public good, the guardian of national health and safety, venturing into the “bad” neighborhood or stopping the suspicious car. The persons they’re pursuing - the young, poor, non-white - are supposedly, in the eyes of the law, “innocent until proven guilty”. On the contrary, these depoliticized individuals are already guilty of being the object of risk, the biopolitical threats to health and safety, long before they enter the courtroom.

The war on drugs is a biopolitical construction of the state as a response to a constructed, and depoliticized biopolitical threat, a construction that produces a reality that people are subject to and exist inside, where those considered to be the objects of risk are usually deprived the chance to represent themselves as something other than that. It is within the political and social reality created by the war on drugs that the HBO television series The Wire takes place - both on screen and as part of the political and social reality of viewers in the US.

The Wire, unlike the aforementioned programs that rely on and reinforce the normalization of the war on drugs and the overall dehumanization of the object of risk, is a dramatization of life inside this constructed biopolitical conundrum. The Wire is set in the city of Baltimore, Maryland. According to the Baltimore Sun, of the 23,342 people incarcerated in the state of Maryland, seventy percent are in on drug and drug-related offences, and of these seventy percent, ninety-two percent are African American. Over the past 30 years, the city of Baltimore has:

...lost 28 percent of its population, and manufacturing jobs declined from 20 percent of available work to 8 percent. In 2006, 19.5 percent of Baltimoreans lived in poverty, and, as of 2000, 43.4 of blacks were absent from the labor force (the city is 64.4 percent black). Poverty is a fact of life for 22.9 percent of
blacks, 30.6 percent of black children, and almost half of all female-headed black households with children five years old and younger. Only 35 percent of Baltimore students graduate high school within four years. It has the nation’s second highest increase in new aids cases. A massive drug economy serves an estimated 50,000 addicts, and there are roughly that number of vacant housing units. And Baltimore’s 2006 homicide rate of 43.3 per 100,000 residents was one of the highest in the country, behind only five cities, including New Orleans and Detroit.

The Wire embraces these facts and makes the complexity and inter-relatedness of them its focus. It functions as critique of the nation-state administered through the logic biopolitical governmentality in-so-far as it deconstructs the notions of national health and safety, revealing the social effects of policies that are designed to ensure the survival of the nation-state at the expense of the population.

In The Wire, objects of risk - for the most part young, inner city black men - are transformed into living, breathing people who actively struggle with questions of ethics as well as survival. In fact, the majority of the characters and situations reflect the contradictory (yet prevalent) condition of simultaneous subject/object positioning - both agent and victim. Which is not to pass judgment upon or to say that the existence of these simultaneous positionings denotes equality of individuals, on the contrary, but rather, to quote Patricia Williams in The Alchemy of Race and Rights, to imply the fact “That life is complicated is a fact of great analytic importance.”

In The Wire, it is nearly impossible to form absolute alliances with characters based upon their status as threat or non-threat, precisely because those categories are rendered unintelligible. Instead, the viewer is asked to take a closer look at the subtleties and interplay of race, class, gender, sexuality, education, ability, and status as user/non-user, while at the same time understanding the larger framework of institutionalized inequality based on these same categories.

In The Wire there is no such thing as good and evil as clear-cut moral categories. There is no heroine or hero, but a cast of at least thirty significant central characters. The police, a far cry from the guardians of national health and safety, are a non-unified mass of non-uniquely dysfunctional individuals plagued by racism and sexism, not to mention alcoholism, prone to deploying sovereign power. The drug dealers are well-organized and ruthless business people with highly developed codes and refined business practices. Government officials are mostly corrupt and drug addicts mostly kind-hearted. Some of the most principled characters are queer, and most of the characters struggle with relationship issues or love drama of some kind. It is through this ambiguity and contradiction that the characters are humanized, allowing the viewer to empathize with each of them on some level despite, and most likely because of their flaws.

The structure of the programme itself is that of an epic novel. It is a text that can be read from beginning to end, interwoven with sub-plots and sub-text. Each 60 minute episode is a chapter in the novel, each one leading from and into the next from beginning to end. Through its sixty chapters spread over five seasons, the Wire constructs a city in the midst of the crisis of the war on drugs as it is related to poverty, failing industry, unemployment, drug addiction, failing schools, corrupt politicians, and insincere media institutions. Fiction allows for the combination of the real and the fantastical, in this case resulting in the strikingly metaphoric, prophetic creation that is often compared to social realist texts like Sinclair’s The Jungle and Steinbeck’s Grapes of Wrath. The world of The Wire closely resembles the outside world, from the locations to the local dialect to the music flowing out of the open window of a passing car. The issues the characters grapple with - relationship issues, addiction, unemployment - are real issues. The program as a location in televiusal
space functions as a sort of Foucaultian heterotopia, where “all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.”

According to media theorist Alexandra Juhasz, realism as a strategy in filmic narration:

...can function in any of a number of ways, including, but not limited to, the confirmation, perpetuation, and reflection of bourgeois, patriarchal reality. It can testify to alternative, marginal, subversive, or illegal realities; it can critique the notion of reality. To portray the world with a realistic film style is not necessarily to imply that one believes that the “reality” portrayed is fixed, stable, complete, or unbiased, although it probably means that one has an opinion about what this reality means, what it feels like, how it functions, or how it might change.

What fiction allows for is the structuring of these reals into a story that will draw the reader/viewer in and keep their attention. Paolo Carpignano writes that “the space of television can only be analyzed as a cultural construct, as a space that can only be understood in terms of social relations of communication, and defined by the sense of place of its inhabitants.” Indeed the act of watching and listening to television involves an active process of mediation by the viewer. In the case of The Wire, this mediation involves the intimate confrontation with the lives and situations of characters who reflect the complexities and contradictions of contemporary US society, serving as an antidote to the depoliticized, depersonalized rhetoric of good and evil characteristic of the biopolitical nation-state. Overall, The Wire is not about resolution. It is not a prescription for how to fix a broken society. The resolution is elsewhere, in the residue of affect that lingers long after the television is turned off, and in the viewers’ relationship to the characters, which is an empathetic relationship exactly because the characters are flawed, ambiguous and contradictory figures.

Empathy with others, as Homi Bhabha has noted, is what creates the condition for the possession of rights (what we would call human rights). Empathy is essential for the acknowledgement by others of one’s right to have rights. The creation of the risk object involves the de-acknowledgement of the right to have rights, doing so at the level of the multiplicity. The Wire gives faces and lives to this multiplicity, inviting the viewer to engage with characters who never fully satisfy and more often than not disappoint, leaving the viewer to empathetically contemplate situations and decisions which resemble the real world. With this in mind, The Wire as a televisual text is a small step in the reversal of the ideological construction of the biopolitical nation-state, filling the currently too empty void between good and evil, and undoing some of the stereotypes and myths constructed by the institutionalized racism of the war on drugs in the process.

Notes

2. Foucault: 245.
5. In the sense that biopolitical concepts such as birthrate, deathrate, average age, etc. assume and therefore legitimize the nation-state as a “natural” biological entity.
10. Foucault: 256.
11. Foucault: 256.
14. Roland Barthes, “Myth Today” in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1984) In this usage of the term myth I refer to Roland Barthes’ explanation in Myth Today, specifically the passage where he refers to myth as depoliticized speech: “(myth) abolishes the complexity of human acts ... it does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them ... It gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but a statement of fact. ... it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves.”
21. In this instance, the deprivation of rights refers to, for example, the fact that in 47 states in the US, prisoners are denied the right to vote, 32 states disenfranchise felons on parole, in 29 states those on probation as well, and 10 states felony offenders are stripped of their voting rights for life. For more information, see for example the report “Losing the Vote: The Impact of Felony Disenfranchisement Laws in the United States” published by The Sentencing Project and Human Rights Watch. Available at http://www.hrw.org/reports98/vote/. And that fact that per the “Aid Elimination Provision” of the Higher Education Act enacted in 1998, people convicted of drug crimes are not eligible for federal student aid. See the ACLU article Injustice 101: Higher Education Act Denies Financial Aid to Students with Drug Convictions, available at http://www.aclu.org/drugpolicy/youth/10753res20020614.html.
24. According to the US Bureau of Justice Statistics, the recidivism rate in 1994 for drug offenders was 66.7%, the most recent statistic to be produced by the government. The report is available at http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/reentry/recidivism.htm.
26. In the sense that the issue of drug addiction could be addressed in a way that does not include criminalization and incarceration.
27. By that I mean as a risk object, although the other extreme is also true - that they are portrayed only as victims, which also serves to deny agency and responsibility, and is just as unjustified.

29. I owe the inspiration for this quote to Avery Gordon, who introduces her book *Ghostly Matters* with it.

30. There is a large body of scholarly work on empathy, much of it related to psychology. For my purposes here I associate my use of the term empathy with the four characteristics that Amy Coplan describes in her article “Empathetic Engagement with Narrative Fictions” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 62, No. 2, Special Issue: Art, Mind, and Cognitive Science (Spring, 2004): 141-152.


34. This is not to exclude other forms of media, in fact the computer screen may be more significant than the television screen given the proliferation of peer-to-peer exchange of media files.


As Terry Flew has pointed out there is currently an increase in the use of ‘new humanist’ discourses in the cultural industries. Consequently it is not surprising to find a relationship between informed engagement with the values of neoliberalism and appeals to universalistic humanist values in *The Wire*. In the following investigation of *The Wire* I analyse episode one of season three (3.1): “Time after Time” in the context of the political-economic culture of HBO. This is done in three stages: first, I consider the role HBO executive management plays in the distribution of original drama series such as *The Wire*, secondly I consider the role of ‘parafimic’ material in translating the screen text in the context of HBO’s affiliation to the values and principles of neoliberalism, and lastly I investigate the philosophical application of ‘new humanism’ in the screen text. In doing this I am interested in the presence of both reflexivity and compliance to the principles of neoliberalism in *The Wire*.

**Keeping The Wire in context: An HBO original drama series**

*The Wire* is unmistakably an HBO original drama series, and HBO is a company that according to McChesney is unparalleled in its dual role of content production and international distribution and is described as a global power-house for Time Warner that ‘gobbles up’ new countries. Currently HBO’s main role is as a transnational distribution company; this has far exceeded its original role as a cable television company. It is in this role that HBO’s compliance to the values and activities of neoliberalism can be most clearly seen.

Initially HBO’s activities as an international distribution company may seem incongruent with the narratives in HBO original drama series, such as *The Wire*. I contend that this incongruence is not as clear-cut as it initially seems and draw from Lisa Duggan’s work on how, despite what is commonly projected from the point of view of neoliberal elites, the global economy is actually dependent on cultural affiliations and artefacts to demonstrate how *The Wire* is integrally connected to HBO. Lisa Duggan has pointed out that neoliberalism is not promoted as a set of interests and political interventions, “but as a kind of nonpolitics—a way of being reasonable, and of promoting universally desirable forms of economic expansion and democratic government around the globe”.

Duggan also claims that the broadest cultural project of neoliberalism is the conversion of global cultures into market cultures. I argue firstly, that HBO is highly active in transforming global cultures into market cultures, and secondly, that these activities are consistently described by HBO executives as reasonable and universally desirable.

These two factors can be seen in a recent interview with Simon Sutton, HBO international president. In this interview Sutton describes HBO international distribution activities: “We often go to channels that maybe wouldn’t have an appetite for a broad, commercial product. We actually do better with more niche channels. Let’s take public broadcasters in Scandinavia; they really like our product. By focusing on a slightly different customer base, it’s really been to our benefit.” Sutton goes on to describe HBO free market policies, arguing that HBO channels tend to be the channels that buy HBO programs because they are the most suitable customers: “If our channels are buying the programming, it’s because they’re the most appropriate customers for it and they’re willing to pay the appropriate amount. We don’t favor them per se. It’s a free market for the shows. HBO Latin America, for example, does buy our programming in Latin America, and that’s because they value it.” In this interview one can see how the logic of the free market is presented as neutral and apolitical: HBO is presented as a company that simply provides a specific type of entertainment in locations around the globe because specific demographics of consumers in different global locations have the desire to be entertained by these type of televisual programmes. There is no acknowledgement of the economic dependency on global cultures and no acknowledgement that these global cultures have been turned into market cultures.
Duggan notes how economic policy is presented by neoliberal elites as a technical apparatus that is separate from politics and culture, and unaccountable to either political enquiry or cultural critique.

This rhetorical separation of the economic from the political and cultural arenas disguises the upwardly redistributing goals of neoliberalism - its concerted efforts to concentrate power and resources in the hands of tiny elites. Once economics is understood as primarily a technical realm, the trickle-upward effects of neoliberal policies can be framed as due to performance rather than design, reflecting the greater merit of those reaping larger rewards.\textsuperscript{8}

This rhetorical divide between culture and economics acts in part so that neoliberal executives such as Sutton do not feel the need to address the hegemonic nature of neoliberalism.

The fact that HBO does not address the hegemonic nature of neoliberalism at the level of executive management is not surprising. What is surprising though is that the more controversial aspects of neoliberalism are often addressed in the content of HBO original drama series. The lack of reflexivity seen in the emphasis HBO executives such as Sutton place on the fallacy that neoliberalism is apolitical is not replicated in the narratives of the series such as The Wire. I argue that there are traces of both reflexivity and complicity in the episode of The Wire that I analyse below and I am interested in what institutional and philosophical apparatuses are used to maintain this complex position towards neoliberalism. I suggest that academic debates on the increased popularity of ‘new humanism’ in the creative industries of the new economy provides philosophical insight into the engagement (critical and non-critical) with neoliberalism in The Wire, and that the arena of fandom provides insight at an institutional level.

\textbf{The institutional apparatus: The use of parafilmic material to interpellate fans of The Wire}

Fandom is used by HBO as a site of translation between what at first glance may seem like two incompatible languages: namely neoliberal HBO executives desire for the upwards distribution of capital and the gritty, politically engaged content of HBO original drama series such as The Wire.

Fandom is a site negotiated by HBO through peripheral content. I refer to this peripheral content as ‘parafilmic’ material.\textsuperscript{2} The term parafilmic is used because The Wire, although televisual in format, can be described as filmic because of the aesthetics, character development, and complexity of narrative in this screen text. Furthermore, episodes of The Wire are often watched back-to-back in a practise of spectatorship that closely resembles the consumption of film.

Parafilmic material can be divided into two groups: DVD supplementary materials and internet based material. In this paper I concentrate on DVD based parafilmic material. DVD based parafilmic material refers to supplementary material such as director commentaries and interviews with cast members, set designers, or script writers. Parafilmic material, which is primarily a marketing exercise for HBO, impacts on understandings of and engagement with the drama series. This material is particularly relevant in the Australian context from which I write. Although the drama series The Wire has been shown on Australian network television it did not achieve the ratings necessary for prime time television and was quickly relegated to a 12.30am time slot on channel nine. Despite the lack of popularity amongst mainstream audience in Australia it has been continuously brought to my attention that The Wire is popular amongst a select demographic of individuals, namely: postgraduate students, young academics, and those who can be identified as members of the creative classes. This demographic tend to watch the series on DVD format.
HBO DVD supplementary features interpellate ‘fans’ of HBO drama series. I am interested in the impact of this type of supplementary material on the meanings made by well-informed and heavily invested audiences. It has been suggested by Jenkins that “Fan culture muddies boundaries, treating popular texts as if they merited the same degree of attention and appropriation as canonical texts. Reading practices (close scrutiny, elaborate exegesis, repeated and prolonged rereading, etc.) acceptable in confronting a work of “serious merit” seem perversely misapplied to the more “disposable” texts of mass culture”.10

The encouragement of heavy spending on HBO products is threaded through the parafilmic material that accompanies The Wire. This can be seen in the voice-over for episode 3.1 (included as an extra in the DVD box set). The voice-over consists of a conversation between David Simon and Nina K. Noble, who are introduced by Simon, the creator of the series, as the executive producers. In this voice over Simon divides his attention between discussing the ways that the humanity of the characters in The Wire are maintained and promoting The Wire DVDs and other HBO products. Noble provides acknowledgment of David Simon’s ideas and briefly discusses the cinematography in the episode.

The subtlety with which ‘fans’ are encouraged to spend heavily varies from the not particularly subtle way in which the marketing for DVD box set of the HBO Mini-series The Corner is linked to a discussion of the casting of Robert Wisdom for the role of Howard “Bunny” Colvin:

Simon: We knew we wanted Robert Wisdom for this role we first encountered him reading for a part - the part of blue in the, the, ah The Corner, as it turned out that did not come off. He was not part of that production but I did remember what a strong read he gave, not only on tape but on call-back and Bob and I kept him in mind ... We knew where we were going in this season. We knew we wanted him to play this signature role. A wonderful actor and The Corner for those of you keeping score was a six-part, six-hour mini-series.
Simon: Um. Won a bunch of Emmys. I believe it’s available on DVD.
Noble: I think it is.
Simon: I think it is too.

To the complete absence of subtlety at the end of the voice over, fans are simply told to purchase as many copies of the DVDs as possible:

Simon: That’s right if you’re watching The Wire you have to go back and watch every episode five or six or seven times. There is nothing else to be done but to buy all the DVDs. Buy one for each and every member of your family and just continue to review.
Noble: That’s right because any character could come back any number of times.
Simon: You couldn’t possible watch our show...
Noble: Even the one’s that are dead.
Simon: That’s right they could come back in photographic form and you won’t know who you’re looking at. Everything connects. It all matters.
Noble: That’s right.
Simon: We try to teach them and yet they don’t understand.

It is difficult to read comments such as “We try to teach them and yet they don’t understand” as anything short of condescending. This attitude towards fans of The Wire is in contrast to the attributed superiority of The Wire in comparison to other television drama. The show is promoted as brilliant, and hence worthy of consumption, because of its humanism:

Simon: This was the season where we tried to create the political world and add that to The Wire universe and it was necessary because only the political world could render a verdict, maybe an inevitable verdict on Holden’s - on the experiment that the Western district commander, on Holden, was going to take to legalise drugs. Um one thing I don’t like about ah traditional television dramas when there’s somebody who, there motives are
unexamined and they’re really not there in story except to render a verdict. They’re just the big bad evil Mayor, or the big bad evil police commissioner and they’re not really examining the forces at work on them. The Wire goes to great pains, great pains to try to make everybody motives for humanity intact.

I am in agreement with Simon that the pains with which the characters humanity are kept intact in *The Wire* is one of the reasons the series is so engaging and worthy of devoting one’s time and attention to. None the less, the complexity of the series does unfortunately also provide justification for the promotion of a ‘correct’ reading of *The Wire*:

Simon: *Every season the first scene is in fact the metaphor for the entire season, as was this. We were using the idea of a housing project being demolished presumably for a new and more vibrant Baltimore as being a metaphor for reform and we were taking a glancing blow as well at the idea of the um, postmodern world. There is also in this season a drug war that occurs between the established Barksdale family - the Barksdale gang and the new insurgency run by Marlo Stanfield. That was a metaphor again for Iraq. So, there was a lot going on and you basically need to take very careful notes and voluminous notes and maybe a couple of postgraduate courses or you just got to watch carefully. One of the two.*

Simon’s promotion of the idea that one would benefit from postgraduate studies in order to understand this drama series alludes to the idea that there are ‘correct’ and ‘incorrect’ readings of *The Wire*. Fandom is shaped through parafilmic material that encourages ‘correct’ engagement with the screen text and consumption of products for increasing ones knowledge of this material. Furthermore, the complexity and status of HBO drama series as ‘quality television’ does not offer the same opportunity as popular culture to ‘muddy the waters’ of class distinction. The narratives in *The Wire* are deliberately dense. It is debatable whether these narratives can be penetrated or fully understood without formal or informal close scene analysis. HBO parafilmic material supports and maintains distinction. Consumption of and participation with HBO parafilmic material is an exercise in the acquisition of ‘cultural capital’ and that this practice is manipulated by HBOs neoliberal aspirations and practices in the global economy. Parafilmic material such as Simon’s and Noble’s voice-over translates the screen text into a commodity that must be purchased in order to truly understand the complexities of the story being told. Despite the potential benefits of participation in cultural politics gained through intensive engagement with screen texts such as *The Wire* “the contest has an unusual payoff: Fans help the culture industries recoup their marketing costs for stars and texts in return for its limited access. Real control of the industry remains in the hands of the few”.

*The philosophical apparatus: The use of ‘new humanism’*

The screen text, sans parafilmic interpretation, is more removed from the commercialism of neoliberalism than either parafilmic material or the mechanisms of distribution of HBO original drama series. Saying this does not however imply that the screen text is not engaged with the values of neoliberalism. The screen text is very much enmeshed in the ‘new economy’, and I argue that this relationship is maintained through the use of ‘new humanist’ narratives.

Thirty years ago humanism was in retreat. According to Mark Gibson Cultural Studies played an important role in this decreased popularity through the use of theory such as Louis Althusser’s understanding of Marxism as ‘theoretical antihumanism’, Roland Barthes’ declaration of the ‘death of the author’, and the anti-humanism of Foucauldian genealogy. Gibson suggests however that there is a reversal of this trend; agreeing with Flew that the ‘new economy’s’ interest in creativity and intellectual property has provided the impetus to reengage with humanism.
Flew considers this humanism to be sufficiently different from humanism of the past to be considered a 'new humanism'. He defines it as new because it “does not possess the baggage of earlier forms of liberal humanism, as it is more enmeshed within the realms of commercial popular culture” (2004,167). Flew argues that 'new humanism' differs from older humanism because it is not interested in either saving the culture of elite literary criticism (Bourgeois Liberal Humanism) or cultivating an anti-capitalist consciousness (Marxist Humanism) and furthermore:

Importantly, the new humanism is designed to impact upon the conduct of commercial enterprises, and the corporatizing public sector, and to align social consciousness and cultural awareness with enhanced economic productivity in the context of globalisation and multicultural societies.

In other words this ‘new humanism’ actively positions itself as a valuable tool for use in the new economy: as a tool for shaping social consciousness in alignment with global neoliberal capitalism. As opposed diving into overt celebration of this, the appearance of ‘new humanism’ however requires careful and considered critique. The problematic traits of humanism have been extensively critiqued: during the 1980s and 1990s liberal humanism was criticised by Foucauldian anti-humanists, such as Celia Kitzinger, for ignoring difference, for universalising human experience and hence maintaining the status quo. It is crucial that in contemplating the use of ‘new humanism’ in the ‘new economy’ that one learns from the historical use of liberal appeals to humanity and humanist ethics to justify imperialism and is cautious of the repetition of racialized economic policy and practices being justified through humanist philosophy.

Despite this cautionary note and despite holding the belief that much insight has been gained from Foucauldian anti-humanism - including the value of difference, and the need to be self-reflexive and alert to structural inequalities, I do however recommend openness to the potential values of a 'new humanism'. As Nicolas Rose has pointed out anti-humanism urged us to abandon belief in not only human essence, but “of the human being as the centre, originator and principle of history, epistemology, language or politics” Rose asks whether there may be “more appropriate ways to investigate these questions of our materiality as human beings”.

In the first scene of the episode 3.1 of The Wire the audience is introduced to values that arguably are 'new humanist'. In the first scene a medium shot is used to film three members of the Barksdale Crew walking towards the basket ball court where a speech is being made by the Mayor of Baltimore, Clarence V. Royce in celebration of the demolition of the Franklin Terrace Towers. As they walk a mother and her children cross their path. There are sounds of children playing. A debate is witnessed between old humanist values and values that are deemed more fitting to a contemporary 'new humanist' political and economic climate:

Poot: I don’t know. I’m kinda sad. Those towers be home to me.
Bodie: You going to cry about housing project now. Man they should have blown the mother fuckers up a long time ago if you ask me.
Poot: Man it aren’t all been bad. I be seeing some shit up in dem towers that still make me smile, yo.

As the boys pass a wrecked car the scene cuts to the speech:

Mayor Royce: A few moments from now the Franklin Terrace Towers behind me, which sadly came to represent some of this cities entrenched problems, will be gone.

The camera cuts to a still of these towers, which are kept in focus while the towers in the background are out of focus. This shot is reminiscent of a photo and a sense of nostalgia is created. The camera then cuts back to back to the three Barksdale boys who are now walking faster towards the courts. The camera shifts between the two speakers and as their speech
and walking pace increases the speed with which the camera moves increases which gives a sense of urgency, not only because the Franklin Terrace Towers are to be demolished in a matter of minutes, but because society is changing form and just as Poot is informed that he must catch up to this ‘new humanism’ so must the audience:

Mayor Royce: *Now what do you say, are you ready for a new Baltimore?*

The camera cuts to a close up of a young, pretty, African-American woman in the crowd who is clapping at the same time as looking dreamy and sad.

Crowd (in Unison): *Yeah!*

For the following conversation the Barksdale boys are filmed through the crowd and captured in a medium shot through the wire fence of the basket-ball court, thus allowing us to identify with the feeling of isolation and harsh material conditions that may be experienced if one does not conform to the new rules for humanity:

Poot: *Man. My whole life been around the towers. Man I feel. Shit, I feel like I don’t got no home man.*

Bodie: *Council just moved ya mama to pocket grove didn’t ya. You aren’t homeless nigger. You just damn near out of work that’s all.*

Poot: *What do you mean?*

Bodie: *Look all over this city you have people, even out of the city you have people. Coke and dope twenty-four seven. Where was it they go? You live in the projects you aren’t shit, but you selling product here you got the game by the arse man. Shit. Now these downtown suit wearing bitches have snatched up the best territory in the city from yol. If you’re going to have some problem with something have a problem with that.*

Bodie lays on the line precisely what Poot’s concern should be: Poot is told that his nostalgia for home and for community are not worthy of consideration and that the thing that he should be concerned about is how he is going to continue to make his living now that the location of his employment (selling drugs in the Franklin Terrace Towers) is being demolished. The values that Poot upholds are reminiscent of the values in the humanism of Kurtz and Wilson where the goal was “to pursue life’s enrichment despite debasing forces of vulgarisation, commercialisation, and dehumanisation”. These values are in contrast to commercialisation, which is the central value of ‘new humanism’. The scene cuts to a long shot of the Mayor who reinforces the collective embracement of a new Baltimore as he readies himself to push down on the detonator:

Mayor Royce: *Alright everyone, count with me!*

As the crowd counts backwards from ten we see the first use of a slow panning camera, which moves around the crowd in a circular motion pausing on various members of the crowd, hence enforcing the notion of a collective humanity that embraces this change. The camera lingers slightly longer in a long shot of the Barksdale boys with Poot looking away and Bodie leaning on a fence looking nonchalant.

It is a new era, and it calls for a new version of humanism. Society is encouraged to embrace this change, to shout “yeah” in unison just like the crowd does as it gathers to witness the demolition of the Franklin Terrace Towers. The new philosophy of humanity: ‘new humanism’, is inextricably linked to the acquisition of capital. In the opening sequence the scene is set for a further differentiation between Poot’s outdated values and the values of ‘new humanism’.

*A Compulsory ‘New Humanism’*?
In the parafilmic material accompanying this season of The Wire one witnesses the interpellation of fans to purchase a product that is deemed worthy of repeated viewing and detailed attention precisely because it is a drama series that maintains the humanity of all the characters, or in other words because it is a humanist product. Through both philosophical and institutional apparatus the audience may feel as if they are being seduced into accepting the idea that humanism and capital belong hand in hand. In the third sequence of this episode this message is elaborated on.

The Barksdale crew conduct their business meetings in a funeral parlour. The members of the crew sit like schoolboys in the funeral parlour pews and professional etiquette, requiring hands to be raised and the members to stand before they speak, is imposed. In response to Bodie’s concern that they need to take over new territory now that the Franklin Terrace towers have been demolished Stringer responds:

Stringer: *Nah man, we done worrying about territory man, what corner we got, what project. The game aren’t about that no more, it’s about product. Yeah. We got the best product so we’re going to sell wherever we are. Right? Product motherfuckers. Product. Chair recognises Slim Charles.

Slim Charles: Our people got to stand somewhere don’t it. I mean all the product don’t mean nothing if you’re constantly getting your arse whipped for standing on another fool’s corner man.

Stringer: Alright. We had six of the towers on the terrace right. All well and twenty-four seven, but three of those we had to give up to Prop Joe’s people to up grade the package we was putting out there right. Now how much you think we lost in the deal.

Stringer: Alright the answer is we made more. Half the real estate twice the product and our profit went up like eighty nine percent. Yol, get it straight. The territory isn’t going to mean shit if your product is weak. Go ahead and ask them motherfuckers trying to sell them four ten poles when you’ve got niggers running around in Japanese and German cars in America all day. Territory aren’t shit especially when you consider that it’s the territory that be bringing the bodies and it’s the bodies that be bringing the police.

Bodie: How are we going to stand on some corner that aren’t ours?

Stringer: Well we’ve got the best product right. Well chances are we’re going to be able to bring in the competition by offering them to re-up with us from our package. Feel me. Everybody making money sharing in the real estate.

In imparting this lesson Stringer touches on humanist values, i.e. the value of human life (not committing murder) and the value of freedom - retained in a very literal sense by not being incarcerated. These humanist concepts are however couched in economic terms: the economic power of having a superior product is said to establish a hierarchy that means that other gangsters will purchase from the Barksdale crew, hence they will be dependent on them and will not go to war with them. These humanist values are secondary gains that are governed and protected by a primary interest in the increase of capital. Slim Charles is concerned about the viability of this proposition:

Slim Charles: What if they don’t cop our re-up bill?

Stringer: Well I’m going to worry about that when it happens. Until then Mr Charles we going to handle this shit like business men. Sell the shit, make the profit and latter with that gangster bullshit.

In response to the questions posed by Bodie and Slim Charles Stringer speaks softly with the paternal air of a patient teacher. His argument is promoted as rational and he is protective towards the members of his gang. He does not manage to retain this composure after Poot’s question, in response to which he hits the microphone and moves towards Poot in a highly aggressive fashion:

Poot: *does the chair know we’re going to look like some punk arse bitches out there?

Stringer: Motherfucker. Yol, I will punk arse your shit ...
Stringer’s Right Hand Man: Yol Frank, Poot had the floor man.
Stringer: Shut the fuck up. This nigger too ignorant to have the fucken floor.

In response to this Poot looks ashamed and then sits down. The next shot is a close up of a very dejected Poot and Stringer’s twitching hand.

Stringer: You niggers need to look at the world in some new fucken light. You need to think about this shit like some grown fucken men not some niggers off the fucken corner. You heard me.

Poot nods obediently. A clear message is portrayed - to be part of society one must conform to a ‘new humanist’ philosophy where capital reigns supreme. Poot is chastised for believing that to conform to this version of humanism he will look like a “punk arse bitch”. Is ‘New Humanism’ compulsory? This is certainly the message that is given to Poot, but as readers of this screen text we are given the option in The Wire of sympathising and hence identifying with Poot. The Wire does not keep it secret that if one holds this subject position one is likely to be chastised, but none the less the option is made possible.

The critical question is whether HBO’s The Wire is simply an example of how, as argued by Flew, social consciousness is aligned with economic productivity in the global market or whether or this series encourages reflexivity and critical engagement towards the principles of neoliberalism. I hold the contention that although there is a “correct” reading of The Wire; namely conforming to the principles of neoliberalism through adopting a ‘new humanist’ position there is an undercurrent in the narrative of this series that allows one to reflect on the values of neoliberalism - to wonder whether or not one will look like, or worse yet become a “punk arse bitch” if one conforms to the fusion of humanity and neoliberalism.

In order to adopt this reflective standpoint towards the principles of neoliberalism, which are embodied in Stringer’s persona and speech, one may need to move away from the “correct” reading, to avoid the seduction of expertise, including the expertise of the creator of the show David Simon. In David Simon’s explanation of Stringer he is portrayed as attempting to bring rationality to the anti rational world of dealing drugs. In this explanation the economics of Adam Smith is promoted as a vehicle of rationality:

Simon: Stringer Bell was somebody arriving or working his way up in an industry that was in some ways very violent and anti rational and he was trying to rationalise it and make it coherent and conforming to nothing more rational than Adam Smith’s or, or ah Rollin Keynesian economics.

In Simon and Noble’s explanation of the narrative and promotion of HBO products there is conformity to the principles of neoliberalism. As Duggan points out neoliberalism has created a world where: “Capital reigns supreme, supply and demand serves as the mechanism for who gets what, and success is measured in productivity levels and net incomes. ...The prevailing mindset is: If something is not measurable, then it lacks value.” In the institutional apparatus of parafilmic material we do not however see the artificial divide between culture and economics that we seen at the executive level of HBO management. In the parafilmic material the economic motives are not disguised and this makes it considerably easier for the consumer to choose whether or not “to buy all the DVDs” than when economic motives are promoted as rational and universally beneficial. Furthermore, although there is no explicit reflection towards the principles of neoliberalism, other than the comment that in this season of The Wire they “were taking a glancing blow as well at the idea of the um, postmodern world” one can sense a certain trace of discomfort towards the commodification of this product in Simon’s increase of the use of ‘um’ and ‘ah’ when he explicitly tries to sell the DVDs. David Simon’s conformity to the principles of neoliberalism is certainly not as seamless as is Simon Sutton’s.
In the screen text of *The Wire* we see the use of a “new humanist” philosophy where economics are seen to promote and protect values for humanity including rationality, work, freedom, peace, and the preservation of human life. In this ‘new humanist’ narrative we do not see these cultural values being used to disguise the values of neoliberal economics. I do not see the same degree of projection of the rhetorical divide between economic policy and political and cultural life in the narratives in *The Wire* as are seen in the rhetoric of HBO transnational distribution policies, and argue therefore that the separation of these two arenas, which have been identified by Duggan as necessary to maintain power and capital in the hands of neoliberal elites (read HBO executives), is not as clear cut when one looks at the creative product of neoliberal elites. If the divide was clear cut one would expect screen texts that were either entirely complicit with the apolitical projection of neoliberalism or lacked any trace of reference to the political-economic arena.

Although we don't witness the artificial divide between culture and economics to be the biggest threat to the left, we do however have a new threat in that capital is seen in ‘new humanism’ to govern humanist values. In holding capital as a central value ‘new humanism’ excludes certain subject positions. It is consequently at risk of replicating one of the major flaws of liberal humanism. As Stuart Hall points out in a recent interview:

Liberal Humanism failed because it applied to only a third, an eighth, a tenth, of the world. It had no conception of difference, no conception that when the rest of the world came into history it could do anything else but think itself through the same things and in the same way. It failed to understand other cultures.27

In engaging with the values of a ‘new humanism’ we are subject to the same problems that Foucauldian anti-humanists have criticised older humanism of, namely ignoring difference. I do however, agree with Edward Said that “attacking the abuses of something is not the same thing as dismissing or entirely destroying that thing”.28 ‘New humanism’ in *The Wire* is in dialogue with less contemporary humanism. Humanist values, such as those endorsed by Poot, are still present. The audience is reminded that ‘new humanism’ is the most recent form of humanism in a long line of humanisms and opportunities are given for contemplating this history. There are opportunities in *The Wire* to be touched by a narrative that runs underneath the overt ‘new humanist’ narrative. This may not have the subversive potential that Jenkins has attributed to fans, but it does allow the audience to reflect on the contemporary status of humanity.

Notes

6. Daswani 2008
7. Duggan, 2003, p. xiv
8. The decision to use the term ‘parafilmic’ to describe this material was the result of a conversation with Nikos Papastergiadis who has previously used the prefix ‘para’ to describe institutional practices surrounding artistic endeavors.
9. Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*, *Studies in culture and communication*. (New York: Routledge, 1992), 17. Arguments such as this position the practise of fandom as an empowered practise of resistance. Although there is a certain appeal in this argument the political economy of producers and distributors of the texts of ‘mass culture’ has not been taken into account. As Fiske points out “it is impossible to ignore the extent to which media industries may be said to engage in an attempt to economically disempower fans by encouraging heavy spending on artefacts and merchandise, which to fans represent a kind of “capital accumulation”. ((Fiske, cited in Cheryl Harris “A Sociology of Television Fandom” in *Theorizing Fandom: Fans, Subculture, and Identity*, ed. Alison Alexander & Cheryl Harris (N.J: Hampton Press, 1988), 43.


13. Harris 1998, 51


16. This is clearly a contentious comment that leaves me rather sceptical as to what commercial popular culture has to offer in the eradication of the social discrimination that has been recognised as the baggage of liberal humanism.

17. 2004,167-168

18. An example of how this has worked in the film industry, can be seen in the popularity of the queer film *Boys Don’t Cry*, directed by Kimberley Pierce (1999) which despite highly controversial subject matter received wide spread acclaim amongst a mainstream audience and was very successful at the box office. The reason for the success of this film has been accredited to the use of a humanist narrative in the portrayal of a transgender character.


20. ibid.


22. Russell “Stringer” Bell is second in charge in the Barksdale crew

23. Who is of course largely recognised as the forefather of neoliberalism.

24. Referring to the economics of John Maynard Keynes.

25. Duggan 2003, 34

