

“The Bigger the Lie, the More They Believe”: Cinematic Realism and the Anxiety of Representation in David Simon’s *The Wire*

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WHILE HOLLYWOOD HAS A LONG HISTORY OF deploying film’s power of the spectacle in the service of escapism, from the earliest days cinema’s ability to accurately reproduce reality led radicals to experiment with realist modes as a means of exposing social injustice and fostering revolution. As André Bazin puts it, “Was it not from the outset their search for realism that characterized the Russian films of Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Dovjenko as revolutionary both in art and politics, in contrast to the expressionist aestheticism of the German films and Hollywood’s mawkish star worship.”¹ Indeed, the same era that saw Eisenstein representing the plight of the working class in a revolutionary call to action saw Americans D.W. Griffith and Cecil B. DeMille embracing spectacle and melodrama in order to construct a cinematic American mythology reinforcing the status quo. The tension between these two modes of filmmaking has led to an anxiety of representation; while revolutionary filmmakers may do their best to accurately represent social totality on screen there is no guarantee that the audience will read these representations in a revolutionary way. There is always the threat that the audience, trained in the escapist mode, will misread the revolutionary potential in these works.

Airing from 2002 to 2008, the HBO series *The Wire* is heavily influenced by this tension between realist and escapist cinema. While scholarship on the series has dealt with its realism, *The Wire* has mostly been studied in connection with the nineteenth-century novel rather than in its connection with cinematic realism.² It is within the cinematic tradition, however, that the series’ realist project is most fully understood. *The Wire* is more than a realist representation of Baltimore’s victims of American capitalism; it is a meditation on whether such realist representations can be a productive force for social change, a concern central to the history of cinematic modes of realism. The opening shots of *The Wire*’s first season opening credits montage consist of images of technological communication and surveillance: cell phones, pagers, and tracing software running on computer screens, which are quickly followed by an extreme close-up of an eye followed by images of Baltimore’s urban underclass

going about their daily lives. The sequence culminates in a high-angle shot in black and white from the perspective of a police camera, looking down on a group of young black men who in turn gaze back and throw a rock at the camera, breaking it. It is this final shot that illustrates the anxiety of representation inherent in *The Wire*. If the juxtaposition of shots of surveillance technology with the shot of the eye illustrates police procedure as an attempt to “see,” or witness and represent, a narrative, the final attack on the camera represents the symbolic violence present in such attempts at representation. At its worst such representation can become an attempt to define and, in the process, further oppress the black underclass. While the opening credits sequence is remade each season, the image of the youth attacking the surveillance camera remains, continually implying the antagonistic nature of surveillance and representation.

While the series attempts to honestly represent the lives of marginalized segments of Baltimore society, one cannot ignore the class dynamics of such representation. *The Wire* is, after all, a show created and written predominately by writers from a white middle-class background, and, distributed via HBO and DVD, is ultimately consumed by a similarly privileged audience. David Simon, the series’ creator and a veteran of the newspaper industry during an era in which print journalism as a vehicle for social justice withered away, exhibits a concern with how the in-depth representation of social injustice typically presented via journalism may be translated into new mediums such as television. While it is important to not lose sight of *The Wire*’s status as a television series, as Jason Mittell points out, “there are significant insights to be gained through the logic of cross-media frameworks, viewing a text through the expectations and assumptions of another form to understand its particular cultural logic.”³ By looking at the ways in which David Simon’s *The Wire* represents the blending of cinematic realism and journalistic methods we can better understand its own stance towards the possibility of representation.

Simon’s concern with accurately representing the systemic issues plaguing the underclass of Baltimore is largely informed by his years as a reporter for the *Baltimore Sun*. In his farewell letter to fans of the show Simon makes the link between writing *The Wire* and the research methods of investigative journalism explicit:

For those of us writing *The Wire*, a television drama, story research involved dragging the right police lieutenants or school teachers, prosecutors and political functionaries to neighborhood diners and bars and taking story notes down on cocktail napkins and paper placemats. To be more precise with their tales? To

record it and relay it in a manner that can stand as non-fiction truth-telling? Yes, that's harder to do. But there was a time when journalism regarded that kind of coverage as its highest mission. The true stories that *The Wire* traded in are out there, waiting for anyone willing to take the time. And it is, of course, vaguely disturbing to us that our unlikely little television drama is making arguments that were once the prerogative of more serious mediums.⁴

Simon is not alone in his concern that newspapers as a source of critical social analysis are disappearing. Some lay the blame at the feet of the new media, bloggers and news aggregators such as *Yahoo* that disperse news reports quickly and for free, cutting into newspaper sales and requiring many local papers to either shut down or be bought out by a handful of massive media corporations. Simon himself, however, attributes journalism's decline to a "Wall Street mentality" that began even before the rise of new media, and created a climate in which executives pursued the maximization of profits at all costs.⁵

In May 2009 fears concerning traditional investigative journalism's decline caused the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation to hold hearings regarding the medium's future. In addition to Simon himself, the committee heard testimony from representatives of print journalism and the new media in order to review how journalism was changing and whether or not something needed to be done to safeguard its future. The journalists of the traditional media were pessimistic about the medium's prospects; Steve Coll of *The Washington Post* argued that print journalism serves a vital function in ensuring that citizens remain informed as voters, and that the loss of local, more mundane day-in and day-out investigations was the most concerning trend. He told the committee:

We tend to memorialize the role of journalism through examples involving national episodes such as the civil rights movement, Vietnam, Watergate, and the Global War on Terror, but arguably, it was through the less visible role of independent reporting at the local and state levels—the constant and increasingly sophisticated watch-dogging of local school boards, zoning boards, mayors and legislatures—that the postwar era of professional journalism made its greatest contributions.⁶

Simon's own testimony looks back with nostalgia at the days when journalism functioned as a powerful tool for social change: "For a rela-

tively brief period in American history—no more than the last fifty years or so—a lot of smart and talented people were paid a living wage and benefits to challenge the unrestrained authority of our institutions and to hold those institutions to task.”⁷ By defining journalists as critics of “unrestrained authority,” Simon and other traditional journalists position the profession as a bulwark of democratic ideals and a vehicle for social justice. Regarding Baltimore specifically, he goes on to tell the committee:

In a city in which half the adult black males are without consistent work, the poverty and social services beat was abandoned. In a town where the unions were imploding and the working class eviscerated, where the bankruptcy of a huge steel manufacturer meant thousands were losing medical benefits and pensions, there was no longer a labor reporter. And though it is one of the most violent cities in America, the Baltimore courthouse went uncovered for more than a year and the declining quality of criminal casework in the state’s attorney’s office went largely ignored.⁸

This raises the question: if investigative journalism was the primary way in which institutional systems were monitored and critiqued in their totality, how will such analysis be done in its absence? In what ways can the populace remain informed on important and complex social issues if print journalism is no longer a viable medium?

It is this necessity for journalism that was the inspiration for Simon’s *The Wire*, which, across five seasons, systematically investigates Baltimore’s drug culture. Simon’s concern for a replacement mode of examining society at the institutional level finds a precursor in Georg Lukács’ philosophy of literary realism; Lukács writes,

If literature is a particular form by means of which objective reality is reflected, then it becomes of crucial importance for it to grasp that reality as it truly is, and not merely to confine itself to reproducing whatever manifests itself immediately and on the surface. If a writer strives to represent reality as it truly is, i.e. if he is an authentic realist, then the question of totality plays a decisive role, no matter how the writer actually conceives the problem intellectually.⁹

This desire to represent reality in its totality, thus replacing the purview of investigative journalism, is the impulse behind *The Wire*’s structure. Each season of the show consists of an investigation of one of the components of Baltimore’s war on drugs: season one follows the impoverished Afri-

can-American community of the projects, season two the dockworkers union, season three moves to city hall and explores the city's politics and mayoral race, season four looks at the city's broken education system, and season five explores the role of the media in serving (or failing to serve) as the city's watchdog against corruption. This unique structure allows the show to serve as an alternative mode of exposing social totality for the audience; if the unemployment of African-Americans in Baltimore is not discussed in the press, then television offers a possible alternative space in which to represent this social issue to the citizens of Baltimore and the nation at large. If the media is ignoring the plight of the working class in America's Rust Belt cities, devoting a season to the exploration of dock working conditions can provide a possible alternative to traditional news coverage. As Simon comments, "If people are merely entertained, then we've failed what ambitions we had, I'm afraid."¹⁰

The desire to use cinematic realism for journalistic ends dates back to Italian Neorealism. Bazin writes, "Italian films are first and foremost reconstituted reportage. The action could not unfold in just any social context, historically neutral, partly abstract like the setting of a tragedy, as so frequently happens to varying degrees with the American, French, or English cinema."¹¹ Beginning with Luchino Visconti's *Ossessione* (1943) and Roberto Rossellini's *Rome, Open City* (1946), Italy's Neorealist movement signaled a shift towards a more realistic form of representation in cinema. This mode of film production relied on filmmakers shooting in real locations with non-professional actors in order to emphasize the authenticity of the films' social milieus. Whereas Hollywood cinema of the era was focusing on ever more elaborate productions with extravagant set designs and big name actors and actresses carefully groomed by the studio system, Italian films such as *The Bicycle Thieves* (1948) focused on providing simple stories that used a gritty realism to portray poverty and other social problems honestly.

Simon's Neorealist proclivities are apparent in the manner in which he assembled his cast and crew. His co-creator, Ed Burns, had been a homicide detective in Baltimore for twenty years before becoming an inner-city public school teacher.¹² Not only does this arc parallel the storyline of one of the series' protagonists, Roland "Prez" Pryzbylewski (Jim True-Frost), a policeman who, in the fourth season of the show, becomes a middle school teacher, but it also illustrates the importance to Simon that those who worked on the show were familiar with the social reality upon which the show was based. In addition to Burns, writer Bill Zorzi had spent twenty years as a journalist reporting on state and municipal politics for *The Baltimore Sun*, a knowledge vital to the series' third

season arc covering the politics of Baltimore's City Hall and the city's mayoral election;¹³ writer Rafael Alvarez worked as a journalist for *The Baltimore Sun* as well, but also had experiences as a merchant seaman and was the son and grandson of Baltimore dock workers, experience useful to the show's second season, which covered the decline of the dockworkers' union.¹⁴ In choosing his writing staff Simon sought reporters who not only knew the political and social issues that would be explored in the series, but also possessed the journalistic temperament to give *The Wire* an authentic investigative aura.

Beyond authenticity in the writing, the show also strives for authenticity in performance. As Bazin points out, the Neorealists relied upon "the rejection of the star concept and the casual mixing of professionals and of those who just act occasionally" in order to achieve its sense of realism.¹⁵ Simon admits that in choosing actors for *The Wire* he tried "to avoid those moments in which well-known actors appear onscreen and throw viewers right out of their sense of *The Wire* as a documentarian exercise."¹⁶ Without the distraction of big name actors, the viewer focuses upon the systemic issues presented onscreen rather than the individual characters. Furthermore, according to Kent Jones in his analysis of the series, this casting creates the sense that "we're watching actual characters, rather than agglomerations of behavioral and fashion cues, walking through real places as opposed to vague approximations and responding to believable situations instead of artfully contrived set-ups."¹⁷ Just as journalism "requires [a] daily, full-time commitment by trained men and women who return to the same beats day in and day out until the best of them know everything with which a given institution is contending,"¹⁸ *The Wire* depends upon specialized, focused expertise in order to delve into Baltimore's drug problem.

To this end Simon cast both little-known actors and non-professional Baltimore natives, such as Felicia "Snoop" Pearson, many of whom played roles based upon their actual personas:

[Felicia] Pearson grew up in Baltimore. She's the child of drug addicts and after she went through the foster-home system she did jail time for a second-degree murder rap. She brings values to her hired gun that a trained actor couldn't find with a map: it's not the semi-comprehensible drawl or the near-subliminal yelps that she occasionally uses to announce herself, but the lumbering ease with which she walks through the twilight world of "Bodymore, Murdaland," as if she'd already met her maker.¹⁹

The casting of Pearson gives a sense of realism to her character, and thus links the show more closely with a journalistic style than if a professional actress had been cast in the role.²⁰

The use of actual Baltimore locations further adds to the series' authenticity. In *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Reality*, Siegfried Kracauer writes that the Neorealists shot within "the orbit of the 'street,' that province of reality where transient life manifests itself most conspicuously [. . .] From *Open City* to *Cabiria*, *The Bicycle Thief* to *La Strada*, they are literally soaked in the street world; they not only begin and end in it but are transparent to it throughout."²¹ These filmmakers believed that by forsaking a controlled studio environment for the chaos of reality that their films would capture social totality as it was. Just as the Neorealist filmmakers took their cameras onto the bombed-out streets of post-war Italy in order to accurately capture the social conditions of their reality, Simon filmed in Baltimore's poorest neighborhoods, shooting the city's rowhouses and slums, neglected playgrounds and abandoned warehouses, in an attempt to honestly portray the city's poverty. The series "create[s] a portrait of a city in crisis block by block, brick by brick" by refusing to shoot in a safer, less authentic setting.²² As Sheryl Vint points out in her extended analysis of the series, "The series is filmed mostly on location rather than in dedicated sets and frequently in outdoor locations filmed in wide-angle and long shots. Such techniques relentlessly remind us that the drug trade happens in a real city."²³

The neorealist style is not completely unproblematic, however. As Bazin points out "the demon of melodrama that Italian [Neorealist] film makers seem incapable of exorcising takes over every so often, thus imposing a dramatic necessity on strict foreseeable events."²⁴ In other words, while the naturalistic casting and filming on location might grant the films an aura of realism, the drama of the individual protagonists threatens to obscure the social problems the filmmakers sought to depict. These films could be assimilated into the system as character studies deprived of their revolutionary content. It was the desire to create a mode of realist cinema incapable of reincorporation into the system that led to the rise of the Third Cinema movement in the 1960s. Much like the Neorealist filmmakers, the adherents of Third Cinema, focused largely on the *Cinema Novo* movement in Brazil, sought to present authentic representations of life to audiences by shooting in real locations and using real inhabitants as opposed to trained actors. However, such films went even further in their attempt to distance themselves from Hollywood filmmaking. Rather than simply creating an alternative production model, directors of this movement sought to disrupt the narrative pleasure so

carefully constructed through the editing and visual style of classical Hollywood cinema. In “Towards a Third Cinema,” the manifesto credited with defining the movement, Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanas argue that in traditional cinema:

man is accepted only as a passive and consuming object; rather than having his ability to make history recognised, he is only permitted to read history, contemplate it, listen to it, and undergo it. The cinema as a spectacle aimed at a digesting object is the highest point that can be reached by bourgeois film making. The world, existence, and the historic process are enclosed within the frame of a painting, the [safe] stage of a theatre, and the movie screen; man is viewed as a consumer of ideology, and not as the creator of ideology.²⁵

In contrast, the Third Cinema film was “important only as a detonator or pretext”;²⁶ this mode of filmmaking sought to destroy the passive spectator indulging in escapism and create in its place a critical social actor. By breaking away from the glamorized style and narrative structure of Western filmmaking, Third Cinema filmmakers hoped to create a new decolonized cinema that would not only explore social issues such as poverty realistically, but resist consumption by the Western spectator constructed by Hollywood cinema; they wished to create films that would remain, in Getino and Solanas’s terms, “indigestible” to passive audiences. To that end, it was the goal of these films to create alternative models of representation “by absorbing and at the same time breaking the codes of representation of both traditions [i.e. Hollywood and European filmmaking] [. . .] produc[ing] new meanings and generic innovations, thereby pushing at the boundaries of Brazil’s and the world’s filmmaking.”²⁷ In other words, the Third Cinema movement sought to create and challenge a critical spectator.

In his analysis of this mode of filmmaking, Mike Wayne argues that “Third Cinema is not to be restricted to the so-called Third World. First, Second and Third Cinemas do not designate geographical areas, but institutional structures/working practices, associated aesthetic strategies and their attendant cultural politics.”²⁸ Indeed, though created in an American city *The Wire* can be seen as following a Third Cinema model; it borrows from established forms, in its case from the genre of the police procedural, and alters them in order to resist easy consumption by the spectator. Whereas the vast majority of crime series, such as the prolific incarnations of the *C.S.I.* and *Law and Order* franchises, generally focus on one or two criminal investigations per episode, *The Wire* devotes an

entire season to a single investigation. The seasons generally follow the investigations through their initial setup, proceed to preliminary fact-finding missions, the obtaining of wiretap and other surveillance warrants, the act of surveillance itself, and finally arrests and prosecutions.

Additionally, as mentioned above, each season includes a subplot that parallels the police investigation and provides insight into one element of the city's war on drugs. In each of the seasons the cast of characters introduced in the subplot are new to the series and often do not return in later seasons. The dockworkers in season two, for example, do not appear in seasons three through five, and the journalists so important in the final season are not introduced before the first episode of season five. This process of shuffling characters each season denies viewer expectations by resisting standard television structure, where most if not all of a series' characters carry over from season to season and become important parts of the show. Marsha Kinder writes that *The Wire* shifts the "focus from a fascinating individual criminal [or, in fact, even heroes] to a broader analysis of the culture that creates and destroys him" (51).²⁹ By breaking the generic conventions of the police procedural by establishing long, complex arcs rather than self-contained episodic cases the series in some ways flirts with the indigestibility sought by the Third Cinema movement; a viewer cannot casually tune in and see a case resolved within an hour, but must instead devote hours to watching the entire season and series. Furthermore, Simon states that much of the impetus for creating these season-long institutional arcs was that in the procedural the underclass are portrayed as either "the salt of the earth looking for a break, and not at all responsible, or they're venal and evil and need to be punished."³⁰ *The Wire*, on the other hand, breaks free from these ahistorical tendencies of the police procedural, generally intent on upholding the law as righteous and the underclass as either docile or villainous, and seeks to create a thoughtful, critical viewership in the process. By focusing upon various institutions each season, the underclass is portrayed as a product of institutional systems.

Additionally, the series' tendency to avoid dramatic catharsis in what most series would turn into riveting action sequences conforms to Wayne's conception of drama in Third Cinema. He writes, "The viewer is not drawn into the action to experience it cathartically, but instead views events from a distance; angrily but with a measure of dispassion so that the historical conclusions can be drawn."³¹ In *The Wire*, action scenes frequently occur off-screen. In the season one episode, "The Cost," a drug dealer shoots Detective Kima Greggs (Sonja Sohn). The sequence begins with Greggs, in the backseat of a car, spotting a shadow of someone

approaching from the alley; the camera cuts from a close-up of Greggs' face to a long shot of the passing shadow to establish the shot as from her point of view. After cutting back and forth between Greggs and the attackers, the camera shows two hooded figures through the windshield of the car Greggs is in. The view is obscured, denying the spectator a clear view of the attackers by keeping the camera within the confines of the car's back seat. As soon as the attackers begin to shoot the camera cuts back to the other police officers monitoring her undercover operation; the rest of the attack is represented over the radio. The audience is denied the visual pleasure of the spectacle of the action typically associated with the police procedural; instead they are shown a montage of the other police officers converging on the scene and ultimately arriving too late.

Similarly, in the season five episode, "Clarifications," Omar Little (Michael K. Williams), a legendary bandit who robs the drug dealers of West Baltimore and a fan favorite,³² is unceremoniously shot and killed. In the scene Omar approaches a convenience store window to order a pack of cigarettes; the camera cuts to a medium shot of Omar's face that lasts for twelve seconds before he is shot. In that time the camera never cuts from Omar, only signaling the approach of his murderer aurally through the ringing of the store's doorbell. After Omar falls out of the frame the camera cuts to the young shooter, holding the gun and looking frightened before backing silently out of the store. Instead of dying in a blaze of glory Omar is shot without ceremony, caught off guard by a juvenile drug dealer, robbing the sequence of much of its potential sensationalist weight. This is not to say that these scenes that restrain the standard dramatic action expected of the police procedural are devoid of tragedy, but the tragedy takes a decidedly different, less personal, form. Wayne argues that tragedy in Third Cinema results from the impossibility of revolts against the system succeeding; these films, and, I would add, *The Wire*:

Are tragedies because the revolts are historically premature; they are premature anticipations of the later struggles that will succeed but which can only come at the expense of preceding generations sacrificing their lives [. . .] But these first, tentative, embryonic struggles, so small, so isolated, will fail. The tragedy lies in the discrepancy between the necessity to revolt, to reaffirm their identity and dignity, and the historical conditions which give the dominant classes an overwhelming advantage.³³

The Wire is, in other words, a tragedy of systems and institutions rather than of individuals; the spectator is meant to mourn the oppressiveness of Baltimore's social totality when Omar is shot, specifically the impossibil-

ity of individuals to resist the system, rather than feel a personal sadness at the loss of Omar as an individual character. By denying the viewer the typical tragic catharsis via the death of one of the protagonists (or near death in the case of Greggs) the series attempts to train a critical, rather than emotional, viewership.

The Wire's season-ending montage sequences further illustrate the show's emphasis upon systems rather than individuals, as well as the ways in which the series attempts to resist easy consumption. While the typical police procedural ends with the legal system triumphant at the end of every (or nearly every) episode, here season-long investigations end ambivalently at best. At the end of the first season, for example, the police investigation of the Barksdale drug ring ends with only two minor players behind bars; Avon Barksdale (Wood Harris), the leader of the organization, and his lieutenant, Stringer Bell (Idris Elba), remain free and in command of their criminal enterprise. The special investigation unit investigating Barksdale, on the other hand, disbands, with Detective Jimmy McNulty (Dominic West), nominally the series' protagonist in season one, demoted to duty in the Marine Unit for his refusal to obey the chain of command. Rather than in most television and film procedurals where brash individualism generally results in the successful prosecution of the case at hand, McNulty's disregard of authority results only in his punishment.

Instead of the narrative reward of watching a successful prosecution during the concluding montage, the viewer witnesses scenes of Prez dismantling the board that had displayed the Major Crimes Unit's case against Barksdale (an image that recurs at the end of all five seasons); shots of the room left vacant and abandoned, trash littering the floor, are juxtaposed with images of Stringer continuing to profit off of his criminal activities, emphasizing the futility of the individuals' actions. The tragedy of each season of *The Wire* does not lie in personal events such as the death of Omar; the tragedy rather is in the inability of revolutionary attempts to change the system, whether they be Major Howard Colvin's (Robert Wisdom) development of the decriminalized Hamsterdam District in season three or McNulty's misappropriation of police funds in season five (both described later in more detail later), to succeed.

Apart from avoiding the typical narrative resolution that reinforces the legitimacy of the forces of law and order in capitalist society, the style of these montage sequences also diminishes the significance of the individual in comparison to the institutions that dominate his or her life. The first season montage ends with a series of shots illustrating low-level drug deals on the streets. The camera begins by showing a long shot of

the Baltimore streets at night and slowly zooms in to the dealers conducting business on the corner. The next shot in the sequence begins with a close-up of the dealer and then pulls back to reveal more of the street; the next is a brief tracking shot moving parallel to the street as dealers conduct business with drivers as they stop in the streets. By zooming in and out and tracking along the city's streets, the cinematography of the montage sequence relates the individual to the environment of the city, and because the dealers are typically shot in long shot or with their backs to the camera, their faces obscured, they are not represented as discernable individuals; their distinctness is denied while the city itself takes prominence.

The montage concluding season two, which focuses upon the demise of the waterfront's working class, goes even further by granting the empty docks prominence over the individuals. While the opening of the sequence follows the pattern of the previous season, the end of the montage consists of a rapid series of images showing the abandoned waterfront; these images, displaying shipping crates, non-working cranes, and other derelict stevedore equipment, last for a fraction of a second each, again emphasizing the importance of the institutions over the individuals. Seasons three through five adopt similar stylistic strategies to grant the institutions examined during each of their seasons the same sort of importance. While it would go too far to say that the conclusion of each season of *The Wire* gives no closure to individual characters' arcs, the emphasis is placed much more prominently on the institutions governing their lives, in particular the fact that these institutions remain intact and continue to exert their power over the individuals in the city long after the story is concluded. The series refuses to grant the emotional narrative closure that makes non-realist modes of cinema, such as the classic Hollywood style, safe and digestible for the viewer; instead the series becomes provocative, encouraging a critical, active viewership, much like journalism.

While *The Wire*'s emphasis on social realism may place it firmly within the traditions of Neorealism and Third Cinema, it is the series' concern with its own mode of representation where it is most innovative; there is, to put it another way, an anxiety of representation evident within the series, and this anxiety is responded to by the show's creators via a strategy of self-reflexivity. Whereas Third Cinema avoids being appropriated by the dominant culture via its method of guerilla distribution, *The Wire*'s distribution via a premium cable service precludes this possibility. As Tiffany Potter and C.W. Marshall point out in their analysis, "For these viewers (who through investment in a specialty channel, or through the

purchase of DVDs have committed to HBO and *The Wire*), the initial episodes of the series may possess an almost anthropological fascination";³⁴ at its worst, the series threatens to devolve from an attempt to represent the social realities of the disenfranchised to a type of "poverty porn" for consumption of the middle and upper classes.³⁵

Indeed, the visual style of the series suggests an attempt at conforming to an anthropological, realist style of fiction filmmaking. Most significantly, throughout the series images are presented in such a way as to make them appear to be found footage. Many shots in the series, such as the beginning of the sequence where Greggs is shot, are presented through a tiny opening in a window or stakeout van, much of the frame obscured, giving the scene an imperfect framing and suggesting both a sense of surveillance and of naturally capturing events as they unfold. Other shots emphasizing clandestine observation throughout the series include shots from security cameras, hovering helicopters, and the city's numerous police surveillance cameras. Placed at high angles, shooting their subjects in long shot, these perspectives give the impression of representing the event unfolding without dramatizing it. Just as a newspaper photographer should ideally take photographs that encompass an entire situation rather than individual drama, these shots take in the "big picture," both literally and symbolically.

During the third season of the show Major Colvin establishes a decriminalized drug zone in order to lower the violent crime rate in his district. Eventually the police commissioner and mayor discover this zone and promptly order its dissolution. As the police descend upon the neighborhood, arresting drug dealers and users who had enjoyed immunity up until this point, shots of police busting criminals are intercut with long shots from the perspective of a hovering police helicopter's camera. These long shots, while granting the scene a sense of verisimilitude, suggest the power of those who are capturing the scene on film as opposed to those being represented; with modes of cinematic realism comes the threat that the subjects of representation become objects for the consumption of the observers. Realism, if uncritical, can become poverty porn at best, another means of controlling the underclass at worst; in both cases realism's revolutionary potential will be safely contained by the system.

But the techniques mentioned above, while indicative of the realist mode, illustrate the tension between a drive for greater realism and the type of cultural appropriation indicative of poverty porn; the shots from the various cameras around Baltimore imply a found-footage, realist aspect, but their presence within police boxes, helicopters, and business headquarters emphasizes their link to institutions. Yes, these cameras

can capture and represent underclass life, but only from a distance and only from above looking down; there is, in other words, a classed power dynamic implied by such forms of representation that suggests it is ultimately impossible for the privileged members of the institutions to truly grasp the experience of underclass life. Most of the criticism of *The Wire*'s aesthetic focuses on the ways in which it strives for realism. Vint is typical in her argument that "*The Wire* never breaks its fictional frame and indeed is predominantly filmed in a style that belies the existence of the camera and strives for the high-quality visual *mise-en-scène* of Hollywood cinema."³⁶ Yet, while I obviously do not disagree that *The Wire* is drawing upon various methods of social realism, Hollywood, with its tendency towards spectacle, is hardly the best analog. What makes the series stand out is an awareness of and anxiety towards the difficulty of representing underclass life for a predominately privileged audience that is nonexistent in most Hollywood fare.³⁷

Simon proves aware of both the difficulty of accurately representing these systems and experiences on screen as well as the danger that audiences, trained in the pro-capitalist Hollywood mode of viewership, will misinterpret these representations. It is the show's portrayal of its outlaw hero, Omar, where it most exhibits its conflicted nature towards representation. While the series strives to take a de-romanticized view towards its characters by preventing any of them from becoming too heroic or too villainous, Omar, as an archetypical Robin Hood-style bandit, naturally attracts the audience's admiration; other cultural products have taught viewers to idolize such figures, from Robin Hood to Zorro to Han Solo, so it is natural that Omar became a fan favorite. Simon and the creators of *The Wire*, for their part, attempt to de-romanticize him as much as possible throughout the series. At the end of season one, the final sequence has Omar holding up a drug dealer on a corner; he walks up to the man, whistling, and pulls his gun on the dealer. Up until this point the sequence is shot primarily in typical Hollywood style; the camera follows the action and gives the viewer a close-up of the outlaw hero's face. However, then the camera cuts to a long wide-angle shot exaggerating the size of the buildings and the depth of the street leading down to the city skyline rather than focusing on the individuals involved in the action sequence. The drug dealer and Omar are dwarfed by their environment as the camera holds for an additional seven seconds before fading to black. The shot distance and exceptional duration of the shot denies the viewer the normal narrative pleasure of witnessing an exciting action sequence with the outlaw hero, and further expresses a degree of

self-reflexivity; by denying the viewer what is expected the sequence calls attention to the artifice of the series and of representation in general.

Yet despite these unconventional filming techniques Omar still became the subject of hero worship by the fans, leading Simon and his writing staff to create a storyline implicitly chastising fans for their romanticization of the violent outlaw.³⁸ In the audio commentary track for "Dead Soldiers" on the season three DVD set Simon elaborates on the problematic way in which Omar was received by the fans:

We created a character who was, he was probably the only character in *The Wire* that has mythic elements which is Omar [*sic*]. And as a result he had become this sort of iconoclastic hero figure, or anti-hero figure [. . .] in the sort of culture by which Omar is lionized, we thought something ugly was happening which was Omar was becoming utterly heroic.³⁹

Jason Vest explains how the show's writers sought to correct this situation:

Simon and the writing staff, therefore, incorporate this development [the growing popularity of Omar] into the show's third season in "Dead Soldiers," by having Omar's squad raid a Barksdale stash house, which provokes a streetfight that kills Tosha Mitchell (Edwina Findley), one of Omar's squad members. Omar and his two surviving partners leave Mitchell's corpse lying in the street while escaping the scene. Bunk Moreland arrives to investigate Mitchell's death but appears sickened when he sees five neighborhood children vying to play the role of Omar while enthusiastically reenacting the shootout.⁴⁰

The scene's construction emphasizes the disconnect between the romanticization of Omar and the brutal reality of his violence; as Bunk approaches the murder scene, examining the murdered girl's body, a close-up of her face filling the frame, the children's voices can be heard on the audio track as they play out the shooting off screen; the sound of their role-playing juxtaposed with the visual of the girl's bullet-riddled corpse is an indirect criticism of fans who had been admiring Omar's swagger while ignoring the brutality of his violence.⁴¹ In a later episode, Bunk confronts Omar for his role in destroying their old neighborhood: "As rough as that neighborhood could be, we had us a community, nobody, no victim, who didn't matter. And now all we got is bodies. And predatory motherfuckers like you. And out where that girl fell, I saw kids acting like Omar, calling you by name, glorifying your ass. Makes

me sick, motherfucker, how far we done fell.”⁴² In this exchange Bunk is scolding the viewer as much as Omar; just as the children who worship Omar ignore the violence he creates in order to fetishize him as an individualist outlaw hero, the viewer who romanticizes Omar ignores the institutional analysis Simon is attempting. Far from the show staying within the frame of realism, this is a moment of rupture wherein the viewer is indirectly critiqued for the way he or she watches the show itself; it is a moment of self-reflexivity.

The Wire's fifth and final season creates the most direct self-analysis of *The Wire* as a meditation on the possibilities of realist representation, symbolically calling the show's entire methodology into question. The plot of the season revolves around two interrelated fictions generated to promote public interest in Baltimore's crime problem. The first involves newspaper reporter Scott Templeton (Thomas McCarthy) who embellishes quotes and fabricates entire interviews in order to make his stories more sensational. While his fictions are based upon Baltimore's very real social issues, such as drug violence and a broken education system, the substance of them is artificial. The harm that such fictional representations can cause comes into focus when Templeton embellishes the interview of a homeless Iraq War veteran, Terry Hanning (Aubrey Deeker). The veteran tells his story to Templeton, explaining that his post-traumatic stress disorder is the result of seeing one of his fellow soldier's hands destroyed by an I.E.D. Templeton instead writes the story as a dramatic shoot-out sequence reminiscent of a war film. By rewriting Hanning's history Templeton can be seen as perpetrating an act of symbolic violence against the veteran who is concerned that one of his fellow marines will read the story; in this way Hanning becomes a victim of Templeton's sensationalistic representation.⁴³

The second fiction generated in the final season is McNulty's fabrication of a serial killer menace to the city of Baltimore. Frustrated by the mayor's refusal to allocate funds to the police department so that they can continue to fight the city's drug lords, the detective tampers with the evidence of several homeless men's deaths in order to make it appear as though a serial killer murdered them. He alters the crime scenes to make it appear as though the men have been strangled, even tying ribbons on the men's wrists to give the killer a signature. Once the city's newspapers begin to write story after story on the killer, the mayor's office grants more funding to the police department to catch the killer, funding that McNulty redirects into fighting the city's drug war. Both McNulty and Templeton sensationalized the news in order to promote public interest in Baltimore's crime problem; McNulty's motive was to get more

funds for the drug war, Templeton's was to get more publicity and win a Pulitzer. In both cases, however, sensationalizing the news destroys its possibilities for social justice. When Detective Lester Freeman (Clarke Peters) tells McNulty that when concocting the serial killer story he has to "sensationalize it. Give the killer some fucked up fantasy. Something bad, real bad. It's gotta grip the hearts and minds. Give the people what they want from a serial killer,"⁴⁴ he is essentially thinking like Templeton, and, in a broader sense, like sensationalist journalism and escapist modes of cinematic representation. The advice to "give the people what they want" can easily be paralleled with the typical First Cinema, Hollywood strategy of creating easily consumable cinema; it is a tendency to embrace an artificiality that obscures social totality.

Many critics of the show argue that this plotline destroys the narrative realism so carefully developed by Simon over the show's previous four seasons. Jones writes, "McNulty plays out a scenario that's breathtakingly preposterous—where the creators of *The Wire* had laboured for so many years to illuminate the ordinary, they suddenly lay down a whopper that's about as implausible as an old *Starsky and Hutch* plotline."⁴⁵ However, this assessment misses the core of what Simon is attempting to accomplish here, a critique of the possibilities and ethics of fictional representation. In her analysis of the series Leigh Claire La Berge argues for a reading of the fifth season as a commentary on the series' realism, but she confines her analysis to motives of violence; she writes, "violence committed in the commission of accumulation produces realism, whereas violence committed in the commission of gratification produces melodrama."⁴⁶ This is an interesting reading of the portrayal of violence in the series, but it ignores the ways in which *The Wire* exhibits an anxiety towards representation in general.

The final season arc is more than Simon critiquing the ways in which violence is represented by traditional police procedurals; it is a critique of whether or not the representation of social totality that the series has been engaged in since season one is ultimately productive. Put another way, by directly linking a fictionalized news story to a fictionalized crime wave, the series forces the viewer to confront whether or not such realism can ever be authentic in the first place. By evoking a storyline commonly seen in the conventional police procedural series, *The Wire* calls attention to the ways in which such modes of representation are artificial, obscuring the impact of social institutions upon criminality by relying upon sensationalist escapism. Simon challenges the viewer to think critically about such institutions rather than merely experience a cathartic emotional release for a handful of sympathetic characters.

Ultimately McNulty's efforts prove futile; while he gets the needed funding for his investigation and succeeds in arresting drug kingpin Marlo Stanfield (Jamie Hector), in the end only one member of the gang is imprisoned for life with two others facing possible time for possession with intent to sell. Marlo himself and his suppliers are let free because of McNulty's illegal methods. When Freeman confronts prosecutor Rhonda Pearlman (Deirdre Lovejoy) about Marlo escaping justice, she tells him "You lost the money trail, Lester, when you started coloring outside the lines. This isn't on me."⁴⁷ McNulty and Freeman's sensationalization of West Baltimore's social problems has resulted in the negation of the possibility for positive social action; by misrepresenting the facts the possibility for social progress is curtailed. Much like the bulk of police procedurals, the two obscure the institutional complexity of homelessness and the war on drugs, instead using the homeless as pawns to serve their sensational narrative; the institutional systems that cause drug violence and poverty in the first place are left intact and unchanged after their narrative has concluded.

Despite the futility evidenced in the series' conclusion, in her analysis of the series Leigh argues that *The Wire* promises a new hope for representation; "there is no going back. There is only going forward into new forms, new genres, and new epistemologies; *The Wire* as a whole exemplifies precisely such a movement."⁴⁸ But the failure of the protagonists to break up Marlo's drug empire along with *The Baltimore Sun* editor Augustus Haynes's failure to control Templeton's sensationalism suggests the limits of realist representation. All of the stories witnessed in *The Wire* become distorted; Proposition Joe, the king pin of East Baltimore, receives only a blurb in the newspaper following his death; Omar, a legendary figure among the underclass, has his body misidentified and his death entirely unreported by the press; Templeton receives a Pulitzer for his fabricated reporting on Baltimore's homeless while his honest editor is demoted. Far from Leigh's optimistic reading, the final season of *The Wire* suggests that representations of underclass life by the middle-class white media are doomed to failure.

The final season-ending montage of *The Wire* concludes with a rapid sequence of images showing anonymous Baltimore citizens walking the streets of their city, sitting in their yards, going about their daily business. These images last for less than a fraction of a second, giving the viewer only the briefest of glimpses before moving on to the next image. After the montage McNulty gets in his car, the camera shooting him from the passenger side doorway; he drives out of the frame, leaving only the highway and the skyline of Baltimore in the background, a shot that lingers

on screen for an additional fifteen seconds. The rapid shots of nameless individuals juxtaposed with the final long take of the city skyline perfectly conclude the representational project of *The Wire*. The difference in shot lengths between the citizens and the cityscape emphasizes the importance the series has placed on representing institutions and environments more fully than individuals, but it also serves as a final unspoken question as to how successful the show's realist project has been. After representing its fictionalized reporting on the plight of Baltimore's underclass, how much does the viewer know about the lived experience of the average Baltimorean? As Bazin points out, "the most realistic of the arts shares the common lot. It cannot make reality entirely its own because reality must inevitably elude it at some point."⁴⁹ Despite Simon's care in research and diligence in authentic representation, viewers remain free to distort and misinterpret these representations, such as when they view Omar as a hero rather than a symptom of Baltimore's brutal drug violence. If *The Wire* builds upon the tradition of cinematic realism in order to examine the ways in which a population can be exposed to social issues in their totality, it also stands as an expansion of that model. Apart from representing the lives of the disenfranchised for a privileged viewership, the series problematizes such representations and forces us to consider new ways in which marginalized groups may be represented in a world in which reporters are increasingly no longer working a regular beat. If such representation ultimately proves impossible, *The Wire* suggests that at the very least a self-critical stance can help prevent the media from converting the suffering lived experience of others into a commodity for safe middle-class consumption.

NOTES

1. André Bazin. "An Aesthetic of Reality: Neorealism," in *What is Cinema?: Volume 2*, by André Bazin, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), 16.

2. Two typical examples of works that examine *The Wire* as novelistic in structure include: Fredric Jameson, "Realism and Utopia in *The Wire*," *Criticism* 52. 3–4 (2010): 359–72; and Helena Sheehan and Sheamus Sweeney, "*The Wire* and the World: Narrative and Metanarrative," *Jump Cut* 51 (2009): n.p.

3. Jason Mittell, "All in the Game: *The Wire*, Serial Storytelling and Procedural Logic," *Just TV*, last modified May 22, 2007, <http://justtv.wordpress.com/2007/05/22/the-wire-and-the-serial-procedural-an-essay-in-progress>.

4. David Simon, "A Final Thank You to *The Wire* fans, From David Simon," *HBO.com*, last modified March 10, 2008, <http://www.hbo.com/the-wire/inside/interviews/article/finale-letter-from-david-simon.html>.

5. *The Future of Journalism: Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Communications, Technology, and the Internet of the Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation*, 111th Cong. (2009) (statement of David Simon, Former Reporter, *The Baltimore*

Sun [1982–95] and Blown Deadline Productions, [1995–2009]), 33. Simon points out that “when newspaper chains began cutting personnel and content, their industry was one of the most profitable yet discovered by Wall Street money,” suggesting that the rise of New Media played a much smaller role in the demise of print journalism than is generally believed.

6. *The Future of Journalism: Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Communications, Technology, and the Internet of the Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation*, 111th Cong. (2009) (statement of Steve Coll, President and CEO, New America Foundation and Former Managing Editor, *The Washington Post*), 25.

7. *Future of Journalism*, (statement of David Simon), 32.

8. *Ibid.*, 30.

9. Georg Lukács, “Realism in the Balance,” in *Norton Anthology of Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch et al, trans. Rodney Livingstone. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2001), 1037.

10. David Simon, interview by Roger Anker, *Mystery Science* 84 (2004): 56.

11. Bazin, “Aesthetic of Reality,” 20.

12. David Simon, interview by Nick Hornby, *The Believer* 5.6 (2007): 71.

13. *Ibid.*, 71.

14. *Ibid.*, 71.

15. Bazin, “Aesthetic of Reality,” 23.

16. Simon, interview by Nick Hornby, 75.

17. Kent Jones, “Down in the Hole,” *Journal of Sight and Sound* 18.5 (2005): n.p., accessed October 28, 2013, <http://fiaf.chadwyck.com.lib-ezproxy.tamu.edu:2048/fulltext/indexFullText.do?id=004/0351548&area=index&fromToC=yes&jid=006/0000306>.

18. *Future of Journalism*, (statement of David Simon), 32.

19. Jones, “Down in the Hole.”

20. Tiffany Potter and C.W. Marshall, “‘I am the American Dream’: Modern Urban Tragedy and the Borders of Fiction,” in *The Wire: Urban Decay and American Television*, ed. Tiffany Potter and C.W. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2009), 11. Potter and Marshall list several other cases of actors playing fictionalized versions of themselves:

Jay Landsman, a retired Baltimore homicide detective [. . .] plays police officer Dennis Mello in 18 episodes [. . .] Baltimore’s first elected black mayor Kurt L. Schmoke appears as the Baltimore Health Commissioner, who advises the series’s Mayor on his drug policy (3.11 and 3.12). Grand Jury Prosecutor Gary DiPasquale is played by Garry D’Addario, a former Baltimore Homicide Shift Lieutenant. Recovering heroin addict and musician Steve Earle (who sings the series’s title song in Season Five) plays Whalon, a recovering heroin addict who is Bubbles’s sponsor [. . .] And Ed Norris, Baltimore police commissioner from 2000–2002, plays a homicide detective in the show, who is also called Ed Norris.

21. Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), 255.

22. Jones, “Down in the Hole.”

23. Sheryl Vint, *The Wire (TV Milestones Series)* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2013), 21.

24. Bazin, “Aesthetic of Reality,” 23.

25. Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanas, “Towards a Third Cinema,” *Afterimage* 3 (1971): 21.

26. Ibid., 33.
27. Else R.P. Vieira, "Cidade de Deus: Challenges to Hollywood, Steps to *The Constant Gardener*," in *Contemporary Latin American Cinema: Breaking into the Global Market*, ed. Deborah Shaw (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), 59.
28. Mike Wayne, *Political Film: The Dialectics of Third Cinema* (London: Pluto Press, 2001), 6.
29. Marsha Kinder, "Rewiring Baltimore: The Emotive Power of Systemics, Seriality, and the City," *Film Quarterly* 62.2 (2008): 51.
30. David Simon, "Behind *The Wire*: David Simon on Where the Show Goes Next," interview by Meghan O'Rourke, *Slate*, Dec. 1, 2006. www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/interrogation/2006/12/behind_the_wire.html
31. Wayne, *Political Film*, 68.
32. Kathleen LeBesco, "'Gots to Get Got': Social Justice and Audience Response to Omar Little," in Potter and Marshall, *The Wire: Urban Decay and American Television*, 217–32. In this article LeBesco offers an in-depth analysis of fan response to Omar.
33. Wayne, *Political Film*, 68.
34. Potter and Marshall, "I am the American Dream," 9.
35. Alice Miles, "Shocked by Slumdog's Poverty Porn," *London Times*, January 14, 2009, <http://kings-winchester.hants.sch.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/Language.pdf>. Miles initially coined the term "poverty porn" in her review of *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008). She argues, "As the film revels in the violence, degradation and horror, it invites you, the Westerner, to enjoy it, too." This is the danger of representation that becomes easily consumable for the privileged viewer.
36. Vint, *The Wire*, 20.
37. Simon, "Behind *The Wire*." Simon, while defensive when questioned about the lack of African-American writers on the show, admits, "The people in that room on *The Wire* miss certain things because we're white. I'm sure we do. We miss certain things about black life—or not entirely; we miss the subtlety that a black writer of a commensurate skill could achieve." This suggests that Simon and the show's creators are aware of, and concerned with, the racial and class dynamics of the show's representation of black underclass life.
38. Vint, *The Wire*, 91.
39. David Simon commentary, "Dead Soldiers," *The Wire: The Complete Third Season*, created by David Simon (2004; New York: HBO Studios, 2006), DVD.
40. Jason P. Vest, *The Wire, Deadwood, Homicide, and NYPD Blue: Violence is Power* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011), 200.
41. Significantly, one of the boys reenacting the shootout is Kenard, the boy who will go on to kill Omar in the final season.
42. "Homecoming," *The Wire: The Complete Third Season*, created by David Simon (2004; New York: HBO Studios, 2006), DVD.
43. "Clarifications," *The Wire: The Complete Fifth Season*, created by David Simon (2008; New York: HBO Studios, 2008), DVD.
44. "Not For Attribution," *The Wire: The Complete Fifth Season*.
45. Jones, "Down in the Hole."
46. Leigh Claire La Berge, "Capitalist Realism and the Serial Form: The Fifth Season of *The Wire*," *Criticism* 52.3–4 (2010): 560.
47. "–30–," *The Wire: The Complete Fifth Season*.
48. Leigh, "Capitalist Realism and Serial Form," 563.
49. Bazin, "Aesthetic of Reality," 29.