"As true as television gets": *The Wire* and perceptions of realism

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Introduction

It is not rare to see a film or television show praised by critics for its “realism” or “authenticity.” It is rare, though, to see these types of accolades explained, much less critically examined. One television show that was particularly lauded for its realism was *The Wire*, a drama that ran on the premium cable channel HBO for five seasons between 2002 to 2008. As in most cases, the praise for its realism tended to be rather unspecific. In attempting to determine why audiences were so quick to hail the show for its authenticity, this thesis will argue that the perceptions of realism surrounding *The Wire* might be connected to properties of the text. More specifically, it will apply differing critiques of televisual realism to *The Wire* so as to assert that the show’s form, its affect and its treatment of representation are all possible reasons for the perceptions of realism. Furthermore, the thesis will be united by the argument that the show may have felt particularly realistic to its viewers because of deviations from the generic norms of the police drama -- generic deviation being a 'benchmark' for defining realism.

Background

Over the course of its five seasons, *The Wire* developed a complex fictionalization of the city of Baltimore with a far-ranging scope practically unparalleled in the realm of television. In season one, the show portrayed the operations of both the city’s police force and its illegal drug traffickers, introducing viewers to two distinct bureaucracies and sets of characters. In season two, the show continued to follow the police and drug-dealers, but also delved closely into the world of the city’s blue-collar dockworkers. Season three introduced viewers to the city’s political system and season four brought the show into the hallways of the city’s school system.
In the fifth and final season, *The Wire* inserted the city’s leading paper, *The Baltimore Sun*, into its fictional universe. Although the ratings for the show were never very strong, each season was generally received with extremely positive reviews and pleas from television critics imploring audiences to give the show a try and see what they were missing. Almost universally-praised, it was often joked that the show’s only audience was the television critics themselves.

A close examination of the reviews reveals just how strong the acclaim could be. In fact, unequivocal statements of support leap from almost every page. Tim Goodman of *The San Francisco Chronicle* calls the show “the absolute best of what television has to offer” – “an astonishing display of writing, acting and storytelling that must be considered alongside the best literature and filmmaking in the modern era.” Maureen Ryan of *The Chicago Tribune* describes the show as a “masterpiece” that is “on a level with the best work in television history.” Brian Lowry of *Variety* argues that “when television history is written, little else will rival *The Wire*” and that the show “has secured its place as one of the most demanding and thought-provoking series ever to grace television.” Robert Bianco of *USA Today*, meanwhile, writes that it is “brilliant” and a “TV achievement of the highest order.”

As mentioned above, reviewers were quick to praise the show’s authenticity and frequently invoke words like “truth” and “realism.” For example, *The Washington Post*’s Tom Shales writes, “The sense of realism is uncompromised and rigorous.” “’The Wire,’” he adds, “might be the most authentic epic ever on television.” Goodman argues that it analyzes Baltimore “more truly than any history book could have.” Lowry writes that *The Wire* is “a totally organic world.” Bianco writes that the show “tries to tell a full-bodied version of the truth.” “Its verisimilitude – its feel for the details and nuances of urban life – is unparalleled,” he explains. Melanie McFarland of the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, meanwhile, calls it HBO’s “most
lifelike” series. Brian Holcomb of online publication *Slant Magazine* contends that “*The Wire* is as true as television gets.” James Poniewozik of *Time* writes that the show is “steeped in lived experience.” For Alessandra Stanley of *The New York Times*, each new season of the show is like a “new *Harry Potter* book for adults” but trafficking in realism “instead of magic.” The praise for the show from Amy Finnerty of *The Wall Street Journal*, meanwhile, is almost entirely based upon its authenticity. Under a headline of “Wired for Authenticity” Finnerty writes about the “faithful representation of the city” that honors “the spirit of the place,” avoiding “a bland facsimile of grittiness.” “The series,” she writes, “achieves immense success in one vital regard for drama – the feeling that we are in a real place.”

But it remains unclear what exactly these reviewers are trying to say when they use words like “realism,” “authentic,” and “true.” It seems that they are aiming for an idea more complicated than factual accuracy, but beyond that, the terms remain ambiguous. It is also apparent that most of the reviewers are probably not overly familiar with the worlds *The Wire* represents, whether it be the dealer-controlled street corners or the inner-city classrooms. Thus, the critics’ perceptions of realism must have come from somewhere other than their own experiences – somewhere within the text.

The aim of this project, then, is not to provide a sociological analysis of the show or to examine it from the lens of urban studies; the goal is not determine whether or not the show is realistic, but rather, to determine what attributes of the text make it appear to be “as true as television gets.” To that end, the thesis will look at multiple conceptions of televisual realism and apply them to different areas of the text, from its form, to the emotions it elicits, to its treatment of representation. Moreover, as mentioned above, all of the chapters will be connected
by the argument that the show may have felt particularly realistic to its audiences by offering them something a bit different than the other members of the crime genre.

Chapter three will examine the form of The Wire, arguing that the series makes use of a number of filmic techniques associated with non-fiction filmmaking that few other crime shows have adopted, including the frequent employment of long lenses and a total emphasis on diegetic sound. Additionally, chapter three will demonstrate that The Wire is built on a complex narrative structure rarely seen in mainstream crime television. Chapter four will focus on the emotions that The Wire elicits. More specifically, it will argue that the show's frequent subversion of melodramatic pleasures like catharsis and moral clarity creates a structure of feeling that stresses emotions like outrage, disappointment and dissatisfaction. These feelings are not only rarely seen within the typically melodramatic programs that comprise the bulk of the crime genre, but also may better reflect the nature of the show's content, which deals more with systemic issues than personal ones. Chapter five will explore The Wire’s treatment of representation. Here it will be argued that the show not only has more black characters in more major roles than the typical mainstream television show, but also represents a wider range of black experiences and black perspectives.
Literature Review

Foundational Theory

The notion of realism has been an important area of study within the discipline of film studies for decades, with some of the pioneers of the field, like Andre Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer, attempting to define cinematic realism in their seminal works of the mid 20th century. But the concept of realism would take on a political character and become a particularly heated battleground amongst theorists in the late 1960s and into the 1970s. In their introductory text *Film Theory*, Robert Lapsley and Michael Westlake attempt to trace the different schools of thought regarding cinematic realism that became prominent in this period and, in the process, distinguish three principal theoretical approaches in relation to realism: the mediation thesis, Marxism, and structuralism. The mediation thesis, perhaps the simplest of the three strains of thought, maintains that cinema is but the mediation between reality and spectator. “Although an impression of reality is engendered, the argument ran, it is not the transparent rendering it sets itself up to be, but it is rather a construction and a disavowed one at that” (Lapsley and Westlake 158). Marxism, meanwhile, holds that the “reality of social process is quite different from its appearance, and the only way to discern what it is is through the science of historical materialism, which reveals the underlying structures and forces determining the dynamics of society” (Lapsley and Westlake 162). Marxist film theorists, Lapsley and Westlake write, draw heavily on mid-20th century Marxist thinkers Georg Lukács and Bertolt Brecht, who both emphasized the need for art to “go beyond the misleading surface of things so as to show reality” (Lapsley and Westlake 162). The authors go on to explain that Marxism’s influence in film
theory peaked several decades ago, but that it has continued to influence thought on realism by “reinforcing suspicions that existing forms of realism disguised more than they revealed” (165).

Structuralism, the last theoretical mode that the authors discuss, holds that reality is constructed within language – a concept based on the idea that all thoughts about the real world occur through signifying systems (166). However, the authors explain, “Structuralist thinking came up against the problem in asking how, if signification produces rather than reflects, it creates an impression of reality. Alternatively, how was it that some texts or representations came to be judged as true and others false?” (169). The first way structuralists attempted to answer this question touched on the coherence thesis by saying a text was realistic if it conformed to spectators’ existing ideology. This answer, though, denies cinema the possibility of affecting spectators via new filmic forms because the existing belief system of spectators would constrain the reception of new modes of cinema. The alternative answer to the question was classic structuralism – the proposition being that the reader is “the effect of the text, the formal structures of which at once produce meanings and constitute the spectator as subject” (170). “Typically, the central mechanism for this is the effacement of all signs of the text’s production and the achievement of an invisibility of process … Through the denial of their textual status, the constructed meaning seems to occur naturally, to derive from elsewhere” (170). There is then a tension, though, between “the desire to attribute a specifiable effectivity to textual structure in isolation from a specific conjuncture and the necessity of recognizing that the subject was agent as well as effect, and was therefore sited within a particular historical situation” (170).

A central figure during this time period was the theorist Colin MacCabe. MacCabe’s first notable essay on realism was “Realism and the cinema: notes on some Brechtian theses,”
published in 1974 in *Screen*. “MacCabe’s distinctive position,” Lapsley and Westlake write, “was that realism should not be defined by its content or capacity to mirror reality but by a certain textual organization whose effect was to position the reader” (170). MacCabe explains this organization as he examines the “classic realist text,” pointing back as far as the 19th century novel. “A classic realist text,” he writes, “may be defined as one in which there is a hierarchy amongst the discourses which compose the text and this hierarchy is defined in terms of an empirical notion of the truth” (“Realism and the cinema” 8). Within fiction film, MacCabe argues, the image track is given precedence in the hierarchy and, thus, appears to deliver the truth. MacCabe would further refine his notion of realism a few years later in a new article, “Principles of Realism and Pleasure,” published in 1976 in *Screen*. In this new article, Lapsley and Westlake write, “MacCabe explicitly stressed that textual structure was not the unilateral determinant of reading, pointing also to the ideological and class configurations in which the spectator was situated. And implicitly, as in all accounts of the spectator’s response based on interpellation, the spectator was necessarily as much agent as effect, being called on to judge firstly the extent to which the narrating discourse was discrepant with the subordinate discourses within the text, and secondly the extent to which it conformed to the dominant social discourses and was thereby realistic” (173). “Realism,” MacCabe concludes, “is no longer a question of an exterior reality nor of the relation of reader to text, but one of the ways in which these two interact” (“Principles of Realism and Pleasure” 25).

However, Lapsley and Westlake point out that MacCabe had several critics. Colin McArthur, for example, took issue with MacCabe’s assertion that the classic realist text could not have significant political effectivity and was unable to handle contradictions. David Bordwell, meanwhile, accused MacCabe of leaning on the wrong novels as examples of classic
realism. Bordwell instead pointed to authors like Tolstoy, whose novels supposedly “are a site of struggle, of competing versions of the truth” (Lapsley and Westlake 176). In Realism and Popular Cinema, Julia Hallam and Margaret Marshment add that Bordwell also felt MacCabe focused too heavily on camerawork, overlooking “other filmic techniques” like music and lighting. Bordwell, too, argued that MacCabe’s hierarchy of discourses was too “loose” and could be applied to a great number of texts – “from newspaper reports to scientific documents” (Hallam and Marshment 12). Lapsley and Westlake build on this criticism. “The most fundamental objection to MacCabe’s position,” they write, “is that the hierarchy of discourse defining the classic realist texts can be applied to texts held to be unrealistic” (177), meaning that it cannot explain what distinguishes unrealistic and realistic texts nor how spectators uphold the claims of realism of some texts, but not others. Importantly, they note, “any theory of realism … must provide an account both of the hierarchisation of discourses within the [text] and how the spectator comes to privilege, at a particular historical moment, certain discourses over others” (177). This, of course, is tricky. “It is not simply a matter of pre-existing beliefs encountering the truth claims of the text, but rather the text’s own effectivity determines in part what the spectator believes to be true” (177). Structuralism tried to get around this dilemma by making the spectator an effect, but that line of reasoning was attacked by post-structuralists, who attributed agency to the subject. Lapsley and Westlake note, though, that post-structuralism was largely negative in its assertions and, accordingly, “post-structuralism did not bring a theory of realism any closer” (177).
Contemporary Discourse

Realism and Form

Hallam and Marshment claim that realism became less of a topic of interest in film theory following the theorizing described above. They write: “Since the debate in Screen in the mid-1970s … realism has been largely ignored in academic analysis of film” (xii). Hallam and Marshment, though, are fascinated with the subject and attempt to resuscitate realism as a mode of thought by examining contemporary popular films. First, though, they define realism for their purposes. Realism, they write, is a term that must be historically contextualized, as all definitions of realism hinge “on their fidelity to perceived notions of the familiar and the ‘other’ that constitutes audiences’ experiences of one mainstream movie as ‘more realistic’ than another” (xi). As this statement implies, the authors see realism not just as a way of assessing how a film relates to the world, but also as a way of comparing different texts – a sort of “yardstick,” in so many words. “A film or film style,” they write, “may be deemed realistic because it differs from current films or film styles, where the difference is construed as revealing a reality that was formerly hidden or absent” (xi). They move to further refine their definition of the word by writing that they see “realism as a mode of representation that, at the formal level, aims at verisimilitude (or mimesis)” (xii). Having acknowledged the importance of form, the authors set out to “investigate realism for its range of aesthetic strategies” (xv). The next parts of their text, then, involve close readings of several films that have been praised as “realistic,” with particular attention paid to formal properties.

It is significant that Hallam and Marshment’s definition of realism is a bit of a shift away from the earlier theoretical debates centered around figures like MacCabe -- debates that were often concerned with the political ramifications of realist cinema. It is a shift that Hallam and
Marshment are not shy to admit. They argue, “A conception of realism as a hybridized continuum of signifying practices operating across a wide range of production practices seems more appropriate to an analysis of contemporary films than the neoformalist and ideological models of realism currently on offer in film studies” (100). Continuing, they write that their “continuum is an interpretive framework that uses formalist analysis to indicate the shifting modes of mimesis and referentiality that are continually in play as filmmakers attempt to mediate a significant relationship between viewers and the antecedent facts and experiential realities which inform the fiction. Rather than suggest that any of these strategies are inherently more ‘realistic’ or ‘progressive’ than any other, this inclusive concept of realism allows us to examine the codes and conventions deemed ‘realist’ by popular criticism and consider … the contribution such films can make to contemporary debates on contentious social and political issues” (101).

The authors go on to describe these codes and conventions further, arguing that “to establish a recognizable relationship with these antecedents, many films use a range of codes and conventions associated with the reality claims of other contemporary media forms, particularly documentary and newsgathering techniques” (102). They then “break down the use of codes and conventions into four groups through which the relation to the real is activated” (102). The first group includes mise-en-scène, casting and sound. As part of this group, the authors point not only to location shooting, set design and the use of non-actors, but also the use of soundtracks where diagetic sound is favored and characters use forms of speech that correspond to their “social situation, location and circumstances” (102). The second group of codes and conventions they identify involves camera techniques that are drawn more from documentary, surveillance and newsgathering rather than classical filmmaking. The authors here point primarily to camera work that creates “the impression that the [camera] operator is a participant observer” (102). In
this group, they note, “the claim to veracity is deferred rather than direct, the referential link relying on the signifying veracity of modes of filmmaking associated with the use of the camera and microphone as recording instruments” (102). The third group the authors describe involves shot composition and editing techniques. Here they cite techniques like wide shots as well as two-shot compositions. And finally, the fourth group they identify involves the “use of technology to ‘reali-ize’ fantasy sequences.” This particular category is less relevant for this thesis, but one example might be of the use of special effects in *Jurassic Park* to create the “reality” of a world with dinosaurs. Hallam and Marshment summarize this section of text by arguing that “realist films” are those that include these formal properties, as well as certain themes that vary depending on the genre of the films. More specifically, the inclusion of these formal properties and themes causes films to be “labeled ‘realist’ by the discourses of criticism, critical reviewing, promotional literature and advertising” (123). Perceptions of realism, then, appear to be connected to a text’s form.

The authors later turn their attention to several categories of film that have made use of realist strategies, including films that have “revised” history, like *JFK*, social realist films, like *La Haine*, and violent “brutalist” films, like *Reservoir Dogs*. Significantly, in the last chapter – the section on violent films – the authors closely engage with popular criticism of realism. Writing about the popular reaction to the 1986 film *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*, the authors assert that the “reviewers find difference from generic detective thrillers such as *Silence of the Lambs* the principal ground on which to place *Henry* as a realist film” (237). They return to this thought as they close the book, writing that “stylistic difference from mainstream genre fictions continues to be a benchmark of defining realism” (253). The next chapter will return to Hallam and Marshment’s discussion of realist form and the importance of generic deviation.
Hallam and Marshment are not the only scholars attempting to identify the realist codes and conventions used in popular film and television. For example, in the book *The Philosophy of TV Noir*, R. Barton Palmer connects the crime series *Dragnet* with the legacy of postwar realist films and credits the show with bringing the imitative realism of cinema to American television. Palmer, attempting to define the “realist aesthetic” of *Dragnet*, emphasizes the show’s intention “to resurrect the complete illusion of real life, using the things characteristic of real life” (34).

To represent “the things characteristic of real life,” Palmer argues that the show made use of conventions being popularized by Italian neo-realist films and American noir films, two genres that were, in turn, drawing upon documentary filmmaking techniques like location shooting and the use of natural lighting. But *Dragnet’s* realism went beyond style, Palmer writes. Like the neo-realist films, *Dragnet* found reality by making sure its content was far removed from spectacle and the extraordinary. *Dragnet* also mimicked its European forebears by foregrounding themes of postwar political and social difficulties, so as to “encourage identification not merely with characters but with the situations and events they experience” (47).

Palmer, too, writes of the importance of some of the show’s “reality effects” – small details that were emphasized but had little to do with moving the narrative forward, like the statement of time and place at the beginning of each episode (46).

In another study of television focusing on identifying realist codes and conventions, “Turner Network Television’s Made-for-TV Western Films and the Social Construction of Authenticity,” David Pierson looks at the concept of authenticity within Western films independently produced by cable network TNT. Citing media scholar Joli Jensen’s analysis of country music, Pierson writes “the concept of authenticity is vague and flexible,” but that “to call something authentic generally means to imply that it is good, true and genuine in nature (56)”.
Recalling Hallam and Marshment's notion of realism as a "yardstick," Pierson argues that part of the power of the word is that “to use the term authentic means that something else is by implication bad, fake and insincere” (56). Thus, “authenticity as a concept and discursive device offers a way of conferring legitimacy to certain forms while denying these features to others” (56).

Pierson contends that the “standards of authenticity” within the western genre “are part of a continuous process of negotiation between producers, writers, directors, actors, fans, and the public” (57). Concerned specifically with what makes an authentic western, Pierson breaks his analysis in half – first identifying six “authenticity markers” that help “certify their truthfulness and meaningfulness,” and then determining the presence of two thematic discourses embedded in the films that help the films “connect and communicate to contemporary viewers” (57, 59). In terms of the markers, Pierson explains “generic markers primarily function to define a particular cultural form and to establish boundaries by which to distinguish it from other similar forms” (57). The six authenticity markers Pierson identifies help determine what is and what is not a western. The two discourses he identifies, meanwhile, are thematic threads that have been prominent in fiction throughout American history.

The first authenticity marker of the TNT films, Pierson writes, involves the source material. TNT, he explains, likes to adapt the work of well-known western writers, including Louis L’Amour and Elmore Leonard. The second marker he identifies is “a familiar western cast” featuring actors that have been associated with the western genre in the past (58). TNT, he explains, “recognizes and taps into viewers’ fore-knowledge of actors and their associations with previous film and television roles” (58). The third marker is the “historical west” (58). TNT, he writes, places almost all of its westerns between 1865 and the 1890s – “the historical period most
closely associated with westerns” (58). “History,” he adds, “serves a central legitimator and attraction for viewers” (58). The fourth authenticity marker he lists is the western landscape. More specifically, this means a rough, inhospitable land marked by a lack of greenery and few signs of civilization. The fifth authenticity marker is “that TNT’s film narratives tend to center on the actions of a rugged, individualistic male protagonist who lives by and follows his own moral code” (59). Furthermore, this characterization often means a man with a “dark, troubled past” seeking redemption who “lives close to death” and best expresses their moral character through violence (59). The sixth and final authenticity marker is the “iconography most closely associated with the western film genre,” which includes everything from horses to cowboy boots. “These complex sets of iconic codes,” Pierson writes “structure and make [TNT’s] fictional and non-fictional western characters accessible, understandable, and authentic to its viewing audiences” (59).

Pierson’s identification of the six authenticity markers is not the end of his analysis. The markers, as stated previously, help determine what defines a western as such, but Pierson claims it is also necessary to locate certain thematic discourses within the films so as to understand how the “westerns engage their viewers” by picking up on themes that are represented throughout contemporary American popular culture (60). By constructing his argument in this way, Pierson implies that cues toward authenticity are only valuable if they are contained within a cultural product that connects to the world of the audience. Only through that combination does the cultural form gain meaning, which seems to be a final, necessary step towards a full sense of authenticity. The first discourse Pierson describes is nostalgia, which he writes is found throughout western novels, films, paintings, music and more. The nostalgia of TNT’s westerns takes several forms, in particular. There is, Pierson writes, nostalgia for “western myths and
heroes” as well as for “well-defined gender roles for men and women” (60). Not only that, but there is a nostalgia for a place “where possibilities were still open to people” (60). All of these forms of nostalgia, Pierson claims, tap into yearnings viewers may have in an age where gender roles are blurry and people are hemmed in by suburban life, traffic and stress. The second discourse, meanwhile, is “cynicism of social institutions” (62). Pierson argues that westerns, including TNT’s, put a strong emphasis on individualism and frequently are skeptical and cynical towards the role of social institutions. Claiming that national institutions and global corporations play a large role in modern life and citing the national sentiment surrounding the Vietnam War and Watergate, Pierson writes that “many viewers probably share these films’ cynical and skeptical viewpoint concerning the effectiveness of social institutions in contemporary society” (62). Pierson then describes in detail how the TNT westerns exhibit skepticism toward social institutions. The discourses, when combined with the markers, help make the films feel both credible and meaningful – assuring, then, that audiences see the films as authentic westerns. Although Pierson’s analysis is so specific to the sub-genre he examines that it is hard to apply to other texts, it is useful in so far as it is another rare example of a scholar connecting formal properties of a text to perceptions of realism.

Realism and Emotion

Not all scholars concerned with realism in the years following the Screen debates attempted to approach the issue from the perspective of form. For example, in Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination, Ien Ang investigates the “emotional realism” of the popular soap opera Dallas. Looking at viewer responses to the show, Ang discovers that many viewers found the show to be realistic, even though Dallas seemed to lack verisimilitude in
regards to its diegetic world. Reading further into the viewer responses, Ang determines that viewers were connecting to the show on an emotional level, finding the psychological situations on the show to be reminiscent of those in their own personal lives.

More specifically, Ang argues that *Dallas* is characterized by a “tragic structure of feeling.” Within the show, she writes, emotions are fragile, particularly happiness; characters in the show often find themselves swinging between contentment and depression. This fluctuation, Ang speculates, resonates with viewers because “in life emotions are always being stirred up” (46). Thus, the realism, or lack of realism, of the plot, the characters and the setting becomes irrelevant; what matters to viewers is the emotional realism. Ang’s conception of emotional realism will appear again in chapter three.

*Realism and Race*

There have also been recent texts specifically focused on the perceptions of authenticity surrounding racial representations in film and television, including Phillip Brian Harper’s essay, “Extra-Special Effects.” In his essay, Harper contends that representations of blacks on television in the 1960s and 1970s were gauged for their realism in two very different ways. The first kind of realism Harper identifies is that of “simulacral realism.” Proponents of this type of realism, Harper writes, advocated for “scenarios that might subsequently (and consequently) be realized throughout the larger social field, regardless of whether they actually pre-exist there” (70). According to Harper, this conception of realism was based upon the belief that televisual depictions of African Americans emphasizing concepts like racial integration could improve actual social conditions.
The other kind of realism Harper identifies is “mimetic realism,” which called for television to “reflect” the social reality on which it was implicitly modeled” (70). As Harper focuses on 1960s and 1970s television, he refers to criticism that met Room 222, an educational drama that aired on ABC. Writer John Killens, for example, called the show unrealistic because it portrayed “an middle-classish situation that hardly has anything to do with the Black experience” (71). As Harper writes, “the inauthenticity of televisual representation of black life is expressly identified with its presentation of a specifically ‘middle-class’ situation’ in which ‘the Black experience’ apparently cannot inhere.” There is an implicit demand, then, for blacks portrayed on television to display no socio-economic advantages.

Harper goes on to argue that Room 222 was not fundamentally flawed in the ways Killens described, but rather, misunderstood because when it premiered in 1969 it was at the “intersection of demands for televisual fidelity to a unitary ‘black experience’ and the increasingly evident illusoriness of such a social phenomenon” (78). The show is then relevant for today, Harper writes, because what is termed “the black experience” continues to become more conflicted and dis-integrated. Harper contends that it is difficult to assign authenticity to a show based upon its faithfulness to “the black experience” because there is no single “black experience.” Therefore, the nature of racial authenticity is bound to become contested ground. Harper’s essay will be discussed further in chapter four.

Television realism, then, is a notion that has been approached from a number of different angles over time. This thesis will seek to apply some of these varying conceptions of realism to The Wire. More specifically, these assorted understandings of realism will provide several dimensions by which to examine why the show felt realistic to its audiences.
The first textual feature of *The Wire* that will be explored is its form. This chapter will argue that the notions of realism that surround *The Wire* may be partially attributable to both its style and its structure. More precisely, this chapter will not only contend that the show employs a number of filmic techniques that are relatively rare within its genre, including many associated with non-fiction filmmaking, but also that the show uses a complex narrative structure that is rather unusual for the genre.

**Realist Codes and Conventions**

As previously mentioned, Hallam and Marshment argue that many films use several codes and conventions to activate a “relation to the real” (102). These codes and conventions are able to activate such a relationship by being "associated with the reality claims of other contemporary media forms, particularly documentary and newsgathering techniques, but including more personal forms, such as camcorder footage, home movies and video diaries” (102). As Hallam and Marshment write, these codes and conventions are not necessarily more realistic than others, but they are “deemed ‘realist’ by popular criticism,” providing an explanation for why certain films or televisions might be considered more realistic than others (101). Hallam and Marshment organize these codes and conventions into several categories, including mise-en-scène, casting, sound design and camerawork. Overall, the formal properties of *The Wire* closely align with Hallam and Marshment’s schema.

Starting with mise-en-scène, one notable characteristic of the *The Wire* is its heavy use of location shooting, which is the first realist convention identified by Hallam and Marshment. As
the authors write, the use of location shooting ensures that “the real, physical world is actually, iconically represented” (80). While *The Wire* did film on traditional soundstages for some scenes, including those set in the police headquarters as well as those within the fictional *Baltimore Sun* newsroom, a large portion of the show was shot in actual Baltimore locations (Chen). Much of season one, for instance, is set in a fictional housing project referred to as “the low rises.” For these scenes, the show used a real housing project located in west Baltimore. It should be noted, too, that intrepid fans have mapped out many of the show’s locations online, even those of relatively minor significance. One Google Maps collection, for instance, features locations like a restaurant where Cedric Daniels and his wife grabbed coffee and a park where the “Greek” drug distributors met with their Baltimore drug connections.

Within the category of mise-en-scène, Hallam and Marshment also mention set design that includes objects that are “narrationally obsolete,” writing that these objects create “a redundancy of detail that convinces us that these could be the real environments of real people” (80). Within *The Wire*, there are many examples of these types of objects. Just in terms of wall decorations, Wallace’s room in season one features a poster of the rapper Tupac Shakur, while Nick Sobotka’s room in season two is adorned with posters for metal bands like Disturbed and Trapt. These posters are never mentioned aloud, but succeed in making the spaces feel lived in. Finally, as far as the category of mise-en-scène extends, Hallam and Marshment note that films activating a relation to the real incorporate costuming and set design that “correspond to popular and officially perceived notions of authenticity” (80). Again, the purpose is to “persuade us that this is the kind of environment which these people would inhabit were they real people, that these kinds of people would inhabit this environment in real life” (81). While this particular notion is vague, it does seem to describe *The Wire*. An interview with the show’s costume
designer, for example, reveals that characters often wear clothing created by local T-shirt designers (MacIntyre).

Hallam and Marshment also turn their attention to casting, writing that one realist convention is “the use of actors (or non-actors) whose body type, facial characteristics and speech correspond with recognizable schemata drawn from everyday life” (102). This convention seems to perfectly describe the casting strategy of *The Wire*. Most obviously, *The Wire* has made use of a large number of relatively unknown actors for its major roles, many of whom have primarily worked outside Hollywood. For example, the show has called on several veterans of the theatre who have largely avoided television, like Clarke Peters (Lester Freamon). This casting strategy also means that the show has not only turned to British performers like Dominic West (Jimmy McNulty) and Idris Elba (Stringer Bell) to play its Baltimoreans, but also locals like James Ransome (“Ziggy” Sobotka) and Robert Chew (“Proposition” Joe Stewart). In an interview with Nick Hornby, Simon described this casting methodology as very deliberate. “We try,” he says, “to avoid those moments in which well-known actors appear onscreen and throw viewers right off their sense of *The Wire* as a documentarian exercise.” Clarifying, he adds, “Their faces are unfamiliar and therefore less likely to pull viewers out of the moment.”

As several of the lead actors from the show have commented in interviews, they are now closely equated with their *Wire* roles, both among the public and among figures within the industry (Burkeman; Hammer; Heisler).

*The Wire*, too, fills many of its smaller roles with non-actors. Simon explains in his interview with Hornsby how this contributes to the show’s look: “By having professional actors work off real people, it makes the world we are depicting much more improbable and idiosyncratic, and therefore, more credible.” There is a particular interest in casting locals. As
Simon explains, the show’s creators “have consciously utilized residents of [local] neighborhoods as speaking-role actors and background in various episodes” (Shoals). There is a particular interest, too, in casting non-actors who are closely connected to the show’s subject matter. Within the show’s law enforcement realm, for instance, the homicide detective Ed Norris is played by former Baltimore police commissioner Ed Norris (Deggans). The character of Major Mello, the commander of Baltimore’s Western District, is played by Jay Landsman, a former Baltimore homicide detective who is also the real-life inspiration for another one of the characters on the show (Kahn-Harris). The character of Grand Jury Prosecutor Gary DiPasquale, meanwhile, is played by Gary D’Addario, another former member of Baltimore’s homicide department (Sepinwall). This trend continues into the street-level roles. The character of the Deacon, an intermediary character on the show, is played by Melvin Williams, formerly a major Baltimore drug dealer (Talbot). The character of “Snoop,” an enforcer for one of the show’s drug kingpins, is played by Felicia Pearson, a once-incarcerated former Baltimore drug dealer (Hammer). Furthermore, there are many cameos within the show. Former Maryland Governor Robert Erlich, for instance, has a short appearance as a security guard for the show’s fictional governor – a character that seems to be loosely based on Erlich. Former Baltimore mayor Kurt Schmoke, meanwhile, briefly plays the city’s health commissioner on the show (Talbot).

*The Wire*’s use of sound also corresponds with Hallam and Marshment’s realist codes and conventions. One such convention is “a soundtrack design in which underscore is absent or minimized” and in which “diegetic sound is favored” (102). *The Wire* almost completely eschews the use of non-diegetic sound. Besides a few rare instances – including the montages that close each season – music comes from sources within specific scenes, whether it be from car speakers, boomboxes or other devices. But even diegetic music is rare; most of the show’s
soundtrack consists of ambient noises. In many exterior scenes, for instance, the sound of police sirens fills the soundscape. Hallam and Marshment also identify “forms of speech that correspond to [a character’s] social situation, location and circumstances” as a realist convention (102). On this note, *The Wire* makes heavy use of vernacular in dialogue. Staff writer Dennis Lehane explains in *The New Yorker* that Simon and show co-creator Ed Burns are experts in “authentic street poetry” and masters of “African-American ghetto dialogue” (Talbot). Although it may confuse some casual viewers, writers readily insert slang into the scripts; “burners,” “hoppers,” “re-ups” and “redballs” are all terms frequently used by the show’s characters with little explanation. Many characters on *The Wire* also seem to speak with the relatively subtle Baltimore accent. In Simon’s opinion, the characters of Snoop, Lamar, Prop Joe, Poot, Slim Charles, Lieutenant Mello, Marcia Donnelly and Ziggy Sobotka have the most accurate accents. As an example of the accent, Simon points to Donnelly’s utterance of the phrase “three in math, an’ four in syence” when describing test scores (Shoals).

After identifying realist codes and conventions in the category of sound, Hallam and Marshment discuss camerawork. According to the authors, the primary realist conventions for camerawork are “observational, static camerawork that creates the impression of raw, unmediated footage or ‘hand held’ camera work that creates the unsteady image and the impression that the operate is a participant observer” (103). Some valuable information regarding *The Wire*’s camerawork can be gleamed from a feature article by filmmaker Nick Griffin, “Inside HBO’s *The Wire*.” Focusing on the program’s cinematography, Griffin spent several days on the set of the show during the filming of the fifth season and also interviewed one of the show’s directors/producers, Joe Chappelle, as well as one of the show’s Directors of Photography, Dave Insley. Although Chappelle argues that the look of *The Wire* is flexible, he
and Insley explain that *The Wire* does have some conventions that carry over from episode to episode and from season to season. One such constant is the show’s use of long lenses. Chappelle says the use of long lenses provides a “voyeuristic view of the actions.” “One of the visual conventions of *The Wire*,” he explains is “that of someone observing but slightly removed from the action.” Continuing, he elaborates, “It’s that sense of life being under surveillance.” This technique, while not explicitly mentioned by Hallam and Marshment, would seem to fit into their schema. As they write, films that use realist codes and conventions tend to favor “techniques associated with television factuality genres such as documentary, surveillance and newsgathering forms” (103). One scene that might exemplify the show’s use of long lenses occurs when “Prop” Joe arranges a meeting between Stringer Bell and Omar in season one. There are a number of extreme long shots in the scene, such that the three figures barely fill the center of the frame. The end impression, as Chappelle might explain, is that the camera is far away and that the characters are being watched. Eventually, viewers find out that Omar and Stringer are indeed being observed by detectives McNulty and Greggs. However, it must be noted that not all scenes making use of long lenses lead to this sort of discovery.

While Chappelle cites the show’s “surveillance” aesthetic in explaining the use of long lenses, he does not mention the incorporation of surveillance footage into the show. Many episodes feature black and white images taken from security monitors throughout the city, whether it be from cameras in the hallways of the city offices or from cameras overlooking the housing projects. Moreover, the show makes frequent use of the point-of-view of a still camera. In multiple seasons, the police characters embark upon surveillance operations, monitoring drug crews from afar and taking pictures in the process. More often than not, the show attempts to show what images the cameras are capturing, momentarily freezing the scene and changing the
colors to black and white. Again, Hallam and Marshment’s comment about “surveillance” form seems relevant.

However, not all of *The Wire*’s camerawork would be considered realist by Hallam and Marshment. As Chappelle explains, *The Wire*’s look is built upon moving shots – almost every scene is filmed with a dolly on tracks. The camera, then, often seems to be smoothly gliding around the show’s characters. This particular look it is neither observational and static nor raw and unmediated. Nonetheless, the show’s mise-en-scène, sound design and casting all correspond closely to Hallam and Marshment’s realist codes and conventions, as do the other previously mentioned camera techniques. As the authors argue, when critics suggest that a show is realistic, they may actually pointing to these codes and conventions that, through their connection to non-fiction filmmaking, have become synonymous with realism. The acclaim for *The Wire*’s realism, then, might be closely tied to some of the formal properties discussed above.

**Genre and Genre Deviation**

In the section above, it was noted that *The Wire* uses a number of formal techniques associated with non-fiction filmmaking, providing a possible reason why critics identified the show as realistic. However, this is not necessarily the only reason why *The Wire*’s form might have caused its audience to perceive it as realistic. As noted in the introduction, Hallam and Marshment write, “Stylistic difference from mainstream genre fictions continues to be a benchmark of defining realism” (253). Therefore, *The Wire* may have also seemed realistic because of ways in which it formally differentiated itself from other recent shows of its ilk.
Genre

Genre theory, as it pertains to television studies, involves categorizing television programs into certain types, the intention being, as Glen Creeber writes in *The Television Genre Book*, to “organize a good deal of material into smaller categories” (1). This categorization, Jane Feuer explains in *Channels of Discourse*, is meant to help scholars “arrive at a greater understanding of the structure and purpose of” the object of study (116). *The Wire*, though, is a relatively difficult show to categorize. As has already been noted, the narrative focus of *The Wire* changes from season to season as the show shifts its attention from one Baltimore institution to another. For this reason, *The Wire* does not necessarily fit cleanly into any one sub-genre beyond the umbrella grouping of “drama.” Season three, for instance, with its focus on the city’s politics, temporarily gives the show the feel of a political drama, exemplified by shows like *The West Wing* and *Commander in Chief*. Season four, meanwhile, foregrounds the city’s struggling school system and it would not be too difficult to compare the season to other recent programs within the educational drama genre, like *Boston Public* or *Friday Night Lights*. Mary M. Dalton and Laura R. Linder actually explore some of the differences between *The Wire* and other shows set within schools in their book *Teacher TV*, but those differences will be discussed more in the later chapters on affect and representation.

Aaron Bady, meanwhile, argues that *The Wire* can most easily be read as a Western, primarily for thematic reasons. Like a Western, Bady writes, *The Wire* deals heavily in nostalgia for an America lost at the hands of modernity. In the case of *The Wire*, the primary culprit becomes post-industrialization and the dooming effects are seen most easily in the flailing city institutions. Also exemplifying the show’s connection to the genre, Bady argues, is the character of Omar. “Omar,” he writes, “represents the concrete realization of a certain strain of Western
narrative, the idea that the individual can step out of society and make his own destiny, narrate his own story in opposition to the institutional forces of society." Omar lives, according to Bady, like a cowboy. That is to say, he “lives according to his own code.” Returning to a discussion of form, Bady also briefly contends that *The Wire* makes frequent use of Western iconography, citing comparisons of the police force to cowboys as well as “blocking, shooting and editing” reminiscent of Sergio Leone, especially in scenes involving Omar.

Nonetheless, *The Wire’s* continual inclusion of characters from the Baltimore police force as well as the city’s drug crews means that the program is usually grouped into the “crime television” category – a genre that a number have scholars have elaborated upon. Lez Cooke argues in *The Television Genre Book* that crime series are all based around “a basic formula in which society is protected and the status quo maintained by the forces of law and order” (29). Cooke explains that while the genre is occasionally gripped by certain thematic trends, it has largely remained true to this simple formula. Douglas Snauffer tracks some of these thematic trends in greater detail in his book *Crime Television*, which splits the crime genre into decades from the 1950s through the 2000s. During the 2000s, the time period in which *The Wire* debuted, he writes that the genre has become dominated by “police procedurals” in which forensic techniques are at the center and in which “science is the most powerful tool in solving crimes” (224). Stauffer points to the success of CBS’s *CSI* and its multiple spinoffs as the most prominent example of this trend.

*CSI* itself has been the subject of close examination. In his book *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, Steven Cohan proposes that there are four elements that distinguish *CSI* from other television shows. The importance of forensic science is one such element, as Stauffer alluded to above, but more specifically, the equation of forensic science with “truth and justice” is distinct
Another distinguishing element for Cohan is “the visual look of series,” which involves a color scheme heavily manipulated in post-production and an emphasis on special effects to simulate, for example, how a bullet might tear through certain organs (6). The third element Cohan identifies is “the narrative incorporation of Las Vegas’s contrasting histories of gambling on one hand and suburban expansion on the other” (6). Lastly, Cohan points out the “thematic emphasis on social and sexual nonconformity” (6). As CSI has become a popular model for other recent crime shows to follow, Cohan’s work is a useful exploration of some of the formal and thematic tendencies that have recently become prevalent within the genre.

Genre Deviation

Before exploring the ways in which The Wire departs from the formal expectations of the crime drama, it must first be noted that a few scholars have already latched onto some differences between The Wire and other shows within the genre, including in the area of form. Brian G. Rose, for example, argues in The Essential HBO Reader that The Wire “was a direct assault” on the crime genre, meant to “literally explode the creaky, hidebound world of prime-time crime and law enforcement from within” (82). Formally, he writes, the show is episodic like any other crime series, yet not as structurally dependent on the episode in the same way other crime shows are. “The basic structural unit,” he explains, is “the series as a whole, permitting vast twelve-or-thirteen-part story arcs” (83). Rose sees this as a dramatic departure from the typical crime show, which is based on “one-hour solutions” (83). Stylistically, Rose writes that The Wire is less flashy than some of the other members of the genre, like NYPD Blue or Homicide: Life on the Street, which he claims were influenced by “modern advertising techniques” (88). Presumably, Rose is referring to visual techniques like rapid editing and close
framing. Instead, Rose argues that *The Wire* uses a “more filmic strategy, emphasizing clarity, spatial depth, and the relationship of characters to their environments” (88). Moreover, Rose claims that *The Wire* is less susceptible to “film noir clichés” (88). This would seem to be an allusion to *The Wire*’s avoidance of certain cinematographic techniques, like highly contrasting lighting, as well as mise-en-scène like smoking manholes and heavy fog.

Rose, though, provides only a brief examination of *The Wire*’s formal deviations from the genre norms, leaving much more room to explore. Some deviations involve the formal properties associated with non-fiction filmmaking discussed earlier in the chapter. Location shooting, for instance, gives the show a unique appearance. “Working on location,” Chappelle explains, “gives us something very different from the usual Hollywood look” (Griffin). One example of this Hollywood look is *CSI*, which is mostly shot in studios in Los Angeles despite being set in Las Vegas. Simon also talks about this difference, comparing his experience working on *Homicide* with the shooting processes of *The Wire*. *Homicide*, like *The Wire*, was known for its location shooting, but Simon indicates that it was limited. According to Simon, *Homicide* “didn’t do a lot of shooting in the heart of the East or West Baltimore ghettos,” sticking instead to the city’s wealthier areas (Shoals). *The Wire*, though, is shot throughout the city, including the city’s poorer neighborhoods. Relatedly, Simon is quoted in an article by Steve Rose of *The Guardian* as saying *The Wire* is like a “travelogue.” Rose adds that the show takes viewers to “parts of the city you never usually see: the ports, prisons, courthouses, boxing gyms, discount stores and, most of all, the shabby inner-city streets.”

In terms of sound, *The Wire*’s emphasis on diegetic sound and its refusal to use an underscore also set it apart from other crime shows, most of which feature heavy doses of ominous music. As Simon would have it, the use of vernacular in the show’s dialogue is a key
deviation, too. Simon, in his interview with Hornsby, criticizes the typical mainstream TV shows, which he argues use “dialogue that simplifies and mitigates against the idiosyncratic ways in which people in different worlds actually communicate.”

*The Wire*’s casting also breaks from traditional procedures. Although there are other procedurals that make heavy use of relatively unknown character actors, many shows turn to Hollywood to fill their major roles and are quick to promote any stars that join the casts. When actor William Peterson left *CSI*, for example, he was replaced by Laurence Fishburne, one of the stars of the enormously successful *Matrix* movies. One of the selling points of the spinoff *CSI: NY*, meanwhile, was the involvement of well-known actor Gary Sinise, who has had key roles in Hollywood blockbusters like *Apollo 13*. Similarly, *The District*, which started the same year as *CSI*, revolved around actor Craig T. Nelson, famous for roles in *Coach* and, later, *The Incredibles*. As for the use of non-actors in smaller roles, *The New Yorker*’s profile on Simon states that “the show’s departure from Hollywood formulas may be nowhere more palpable than its routine use of nonactors to fill the minor roles” (Talbot). Simon argues in *The New Yorker* how important the inclusion of these people are – “these are the faces you don’t see on television, the faces and voices of the real city” (Talbot).

However, not all of the formal qualities that separate *The Wire* from the rest of the genre were covered in the previous section. For director/producer Chappelle, one of the things that sets *The Wire* apart from more mainstream shows like *CSI Miami*, which he has also directed, is the lack of hard and fast rules regarding the show’s look. *CSI Miami*, he says, covers its shots the same way in every episode and has very specific guidelines for its camerawork and editing. “*The Wire,*” he is quoted as saying, “is the opposite of this formulaic approach. It’s very loose and well, there really isn’t a formula” (Griffin). Directors and the crew, then, have more leeway
in constructing the look of each individual episode and the style of the show becomes less rigid. But, as already mentioned above, The Wire does have a number of stylistic conventions that carry over even as new directors come and go and these conventions, as much as the show’s flexibility, set it apart from the rest of the genre. Take, for instance, the show’s lack of special effects. As Cohan describes in his book on CSI, special effects are a key part of that show’s identity. The action-driven series 24, which Snauffer also places in the crime genre, has as many stunts and effects as most blockbuster films.

The Wire’s lighting, which Brian Rose alludes to above, also needs to be mentioned. As Rose writes, the show avoids clichéd “film noir” lighting that some other shows use, but the differences go beyond this (88). Chappelle says that the lighting setups The Wire uses are relatively basic – something that he claims sets the show apart from more mainstream crime shows (Griffin). CSI, as mentioned above, has a very stylized color scheme that involves a lot of careful lighting and post-production work. Its spinoffs, as Snauffer mentions, also have distinct, carefully engineered color schemes (203). Other shows, like Numb3rs and Cold Case, meanwhile, have typical, glossy Hollywood lighting. But, as Chappelle says about The Wire, “We’re not afraid to let people go into shadow … you know all the things you’re supposed to, well we usually don’t” (Griffin). It should be noted, too, that the decision to keep filming The Wire in 4x3 standard definition separated the show from almost every other show on television (Griffin). Most mainstream procedurals made the switch to 16x9 high definition filming as soon as possible.

A discussion of formal deviation must also include mention of The Wire’s unique structure. As Ted Nannicelli writes in his essay “It’s All Connected: Televisual Narrative Complexity,” many of the reviewers who praised The Wire tended to compare the show to
literature, often pointing to the show’s unique narrative structure in the process. Nannicelli seeks to parse out *The Wire*’s distinct structure even further. Nannicelli first draws out the difference between television series and television serials, explaining that series are shows whose stories conclude with each episode and that serials are programs whose stories stretch beyond single episodes. He argues that these two modes of storytelling are not binary opposites and, rather, are two ends of a continuous spectrum. Modern dramatic television, he writes, tends to be a hybridized mixture with most shows located somewhere in the middle between the two modes. Nannicelli goes further, though, and writes that the hybridization of contemporary television is a part of a trend towards “narrative complexity” (192). Following television scholar Jason Mittell, Nannicelli identifies some of the characteristics of narratively complex shows, including “a lack of explicit storytelling ‘signposts’” and the raising of questions that will not be answered until future episodes (192).

*The Wire*, Nannicelli argues, is very narratively complex. As an example of this complexity, Nannicelli refers to the first episode of season three, “Time After Time,” particularly the episode’s closing sequence. In the final few minutes of the episode, Nannicelli writes, the show jumps between a large number of characters and scenes – showing the program’s willingness to “multi-thread,” a term Nannicelli describes as “the multiple layering of narrative threads within and across episodes and series” (193). More than that, though, the show uses these scenes to raise a number of questions that will not be answered until future episodes – another trait of narrative complexity. Furthermore, Nannicelli writes that it is significant that in the first episode of the season, the show challenges its audience to remember a number of details from the previous season.
The narrative structure fleshed out by Nannicelli sets *The Wire* apart from other procedurals. As noted above by Brian Rose, the typical crime show tends towards the series mode and is heavily based on the episode. *CSI*, for example, typically introduces a new crime each episode that is wrapped up by the end of the episode. Cohan notes that some *CSI* storylines extend beyond single episodes, but for the most part, most storylines are confined to one or two episodes. Moreover, Cohan points out that *CSI*’s attempts to develop the personal lives of its characters over time are rather limited. Snauffer also comments on the rather rigidly simple structures of some of the most popular procedurals. *Cold Case*, for example, always begins its episodes “at some point in the past where viewers would be introduced to the unfortunate victim of the week’s tale” (221). Moreover, “each episode of *Cold Case* ends in a similar fashion,” with the investigative team arresting the week’s culprit (221). The narratives of *Without a Trace* and other shows, he writes, are similarly based on single episodes. Nannicelli, though, makes the argument that not only is *The Wire* highly “narratively complex” along the lines of other serialized shows like *The Sopranos*, but also in even more radical ways. *The Wire*, for example, is not afraid to close an episode without any sort of narrative resolution. Instead, he writes, episodes of the show often provide closure through “the unification of themes and motifs into an orderly, integrated whole” (193). *The Wire*, too, takes the idea of “multi-threading” – already discussed above – to new extremes. Not only does the show expect its viewer to track a large number of narrative threads, but also “threads that reemerge sporadically and circuitously over greater periods of time” than in other shows (193). And beyond that, he argues that the show follows threads that have little bearing on the prominent plotlines – frequently venturing into characters’ domestic lives, for example. Additionally, Nannicelli argues that the show does not make use of the traditional recapping devices employed by most other shows that veer towards
serialization. For one, he writes that while *The Wire* does have short segments preceding each episode supposedly meant to summarize what has come before, these “Previously on *The Wire*” segments actually “seem to attempt to distort past events rather than clarify them” (195). Secondly, he argues that the show rarely uses redundant expository dialogue to catch viewers up on narrative progress. Nannicelli points out that Simon suggests that viewers may need to watch episodes multiple times in order to fully comprehend all of the plots.

Therefore, stylistically and structurally, there are a number of ways in which *The Wire* deviates from generic norms. These differences may make it all the easier for reviewers to single out the show for its “realism.” That is to say, even if critics do not necessarily connect the program’s style to non-fiction filmmaking, they may still perceive that the show is operating quite differently than the traditional cop show and define that differentiation as “realism.”
Affect

Although many critics undoubtedly connected *The Wire*’s formal characteristics with a sense of realism, form is not the only reason that the show may have felt so real to so many people. Rather, it may have felt real precisely because of the feelings the show attempted to elicit. More specifically, by playing with the norms and expectations of the melodramatic mode, the show may have managed to feel real by way of subversion. That is to say, by depriving audiences of typical melodramatic pleasures, the show may have activated new feelings in viewers that were perceived as more emotionally realistic; in certain cases, anger and ambiguity may seem more real than catharsis and moral clarity.

*The Wire, Emotionally*

The Wire as Melodrama

In *Realism and Popular Cinema*, Hallam and Marshment briefly discuss melodrama, quoting Peter Brooks’s *The Melodramatic Imagination* to describe it “as a certain fictional system for making sense of experience” (18). Consideration of the melodrama when discussing realism is important, they write, because “realism and melodrama are often posted as antithetical aesthetic terms, with realism connoting authenticity and truth and melodrama exaggeration, sensationalism and sentimentality” (18). Although this debate was perhaps more significant in the early days of cinema, when the new artform was still developing in the shadow of theatre, the term melodrama still has certain negative connotations that implicitly denigrate it in favor of realism. Writing in *Playing the Race Card*, Linda Williams explains that “the word melodrama seems to name an archaic form – what vulgar, naïve audiences of yesteryear thrilled to, not what
we sophisticated realists and moderns (and postmoderns) enjoy today” (11). However, Hallam and Marshment argue that “the two terms are not antithetical – they present different approaches to shared ideological and cultural conditions” (20). Brooks and Williams also attempt to give the melodrama “its due,” citing its prevalence and its widespread influence (Williams 18).

When talking about The Wire, David Simon is quick to compare the show to Greek tragedies and regularly cites plays like Antigone and Madea as influences. In his interview with Hornby, Simon even bills the show as “Greek tragedy for the new millennium,” explaining that in his version, vengeful Olympian gods have been replaced with destructive postmodern institutions like the drug economy. But as eager as Simon is to place himself alongside Aeschylus, it might be just as fruitful to examine the show within the context of the melodrama. In “‘The Dickensian Aspect’: Melodrama, Viewer Engagement and the Socially Conscious Text,” Amanda Ann Klein argues that The Wire makes use of a number of conventions typically associated with the melodrama. Like Hallam and Marshment, Klein notes the significance of the relationship between realism and melodrama. Pointing to the acclaim for the show’s realism, Klein writes that “this focus on the so-called realism of The Wire … marginalizes the series’ reliance on codes of melodrama – a mode that is frequently read in opposition to realism – in order to enlist viewer identification” (177). Klein, too, cites Brooks in reclaiming space for melodrama and points to works like Oliver Twist and Uncle Tom’s Cabin as examples of great works “grappling with moral questions during times of moral uncertainty” (177). “Despite their reputation for being emotionally manipulative, escapist and/or improbable,” Klein writes, “most melodramas seek to uncover some ostensible truth about a social ill and to explain its existence and consequences to the audience” (177).
In listing the standard conventions of the melodrama, Klein draws heavily on Williams’s book and includes “a focus on powerless victims, an emphasis on corruption and injustice as the primary source of conflict, and the characters frustrating inability to effect change around them” (178). The revelation of truth about the social ill the work is trying to illuminate, meanwhile, is normally achieved via “a moment in which it is either ‘in the nick of time’ or ‘too late’ for a character with whom the audience has been encouraged to identify” (178). As an example of *The Wire*’s use of all these conventions, Klein cites the life and death of the young dealer Wallace in season one. Klein writes that Wallace, who briefly attempts to escape the Baltimore drug life only to return and be murdered shortly after, exemplifies the powerless victim who must vividly suffer in order to condemn an unjust system “in which the innocent are passively slaughtered” (179). As for other examples, within season one, the upstanding detective Kima Greggs also must suffer in order to demonstrate the unjust system as she is nearly murdered while going undercover. Although the end result is not as serious as death, one might argue that season five of the show uses the character of Alma Gutierrez in much the same way that it uses Wallace. Gutierrez, a tireless and ethical reporter at *The Sun*, is transferred to a less glamorous division of the paper as the season ends, implicitly punished for not bending the rules like her less scrupulous colleagues.

Although Williams asserts that “melodrama focuses on victim-heroes and on recognizing their virtue,” virtuous characters like the ones mentioned above are only one half of the melodramatic formula. Brooks writes that “melodramas tend … to move toward a clear nomination of the moral universe,” and sometimes *The Wire* will produce patently villainous characters to exist alongside the aforementioned virtuous characters (17). While unethical reporter Scott Templeton serves as Gutierrez’s foil, the paper’s arrogant editor may have even
fewer redeeming qualities. More than Templeton, he is able to embody all that is wrong with the newspaper industry. Brooks also argues that “the ritual of melodrama involves the confrontation of clearly identified antagonists and the expulsion of one of them” (17). Brooks builds on that notion by writing, “Melodrama starts from and expresses the anxiety brought by a frightening new world in which the traditional patterns of moral order no longer provide the necessary social glue” (20). He continues, adding that melodrama “plays out the force of that anxiety with the apparent triumph of villainy, and it dissipates it with the eventual victory of virtue” (20). That The Wire is willing to indulge in this melodramatic tendency is evidenced by the plight of the conniving drug dealer “Cheese” Wagstaff. In season five, Cheese coldheartedly kills his uncle, the likeable drug kingpin “Prop” Joe, in order to climb the Stanfeld organization’s ladder. However, just as Cheese appears to have gained even more in the series finale, he himself is murdered by Slim Charles, thus confirming the sub-plot’s melodramatic trajectory.

Subversion of Melodrama in The Wire

Despite the show’s frequent use of melodramatic conventions, Klein argues that The Wire “diverges from other socially engaged, melodramatic texts by constantly undercutting its ability to generate viewer affect” (179). Continuing, Klein explains that “affect – that deeply felt, visceral emotional response on the part of the viewer – is a key feature of melodrama” (179). More specifically, Klein writes that “the series engages and then denies or subverts several key melodramatic pleasures,” including “the catharsis of tears, narrative closure, moral legibility, individualistic solutions to social problems, and nostalgia” (179). Klein then begins to detail how exactly the show disrupts each one of these pleasures, beginning with the lack of narrative closure. In the previous chapter, it was noted that the show’s refusal to provide narrative closure
at the end of each episode is a key part of the show’s unique narrative complexity. Klein, though, takes the argument a step further and asserts that the show wraps up each of its seasons with unsatisfying narrative resolutions. In season one, for example, Klein writes that the show had slowly developed the character of D’Angelo as the dealer who was most conflicted and perhaps the easiest to identify with, especially as he questions the violence of the drug trade. The season eventually builds up to his cooperation with the police, showing him ready to become a witness and achieve some sort of retribution for Wallace’s death by implicating his killers. With little warning, though, D’Angelo changes his mind and refuses to cooperate. The season’s narrative then moves on so quickly from this decision, Klein writes, that the viewer does not even have a chance to weep with frustration or anger. “The end result,” she explains, “is that the viewer remains dissatisfied” (181).

Another melodramatic pleasure subverted by the show, Klein writes, is moral clarity. According to Klein, melodramas are conventionally marked by unambiguous “black-and-white” morality (183). However, *The Wire* continually blurs the line between right and wrong. Sometimes this ambiguity arises in characterization. Although the show does have several relatively innocent or virtuous characters, like Wallace and Gutierrez, it has many more characters that straddle the line between honorable and despicable. In “Heroism, Institutions and the Police Procedural,” Alasdair McMillan provides a brief character study of Jimmy McNulty, the Baltimore policeman who is one of *The Wire*’s main characters. McMillan argues that McNulty represents a “divergence from the Platonic heroic archetype” (57). Although McNulty is initially developed as a heroic character with unambiguously virtuous goals, it is soon discovered that McNulty is quite the flawed character. He is not only revealed to be an adulterer and an alcoholic, but also to be operating with motives and principles that, in McMillan’s words,
become altogether suspect” (57). His dogged pursuit of the Barksdale organization in season one, for example, seems to be more of a matter of him asserting his dominance than helping the city’s residents. Similarly, his fabrication of a serial killer in season five in order to get funding to pursue the Stanfield organization, McMillan writes, “becomes more of a vendetta than a quest for justice” (57). Ultimately, then, his “principles are deeply problematic” and the audience must judge for themselves whether his actions are right or wrong (57). Klein’s example of the show’s moral complexity, meanwhile, is the resolution of the Hamsterdam narrative in season three. As Klein writes, the audience has been encouraged for the entirety of the season to empathize with Major Colvin’s experiment in setting up an area where drug crimes will not be prosecuted, but as the season concludes and the experiment comes to a disastrous end, the show refuses “to tell the audience whether the loss of Hamsterdam is something to be mourned or celebrated” (183). In the final episode, as Major Colvin returns to look upon the emptied area and reflect, Bubbles walks by and remarks how extraordinary it was that the police let drug dealers sell their product and drug users use them without any hassle. However, when Colvin replies by asking Bubbles, “It was a good thing, huh?” Bubbles merely answers with “I’m just saying” and walks away. “This finale,” Klein writes, “lacks an explicit articulation of moral compass, leaving the viewer lost in a thicket of values that they must parse on their own” (183).

Klein also writes that The Wire subverts the common melodramatic device of the successful benefactor. In a typical melodrama, Klein writes, “The introduction of a benefactor (an individual who intervenes in the affairs of destitute youth) places the burden of the victim’s survival on the shoulders of a kindhearted stranger willing to do good” (183). As prime examples of The Wire’s willingness to play with this standard plot, Klein points to the children introduced in season four of the show. While one of the children, Namond Brice, is pulled from
a life in the drug trade by an empathetic Major Colvin, all of the other children either find themselves without a benefactor or with an unsuccessful one. Sergeant Ellis Carver, for example, attempts to assist Randy Wagstaff, an orphan who has become a pariah after cooperating with police. Carver’s sincere efforts to keep Wagstaff out of a group home, though, are fruitless and Wagstaff is quickly a subject of harsh ridicule and violence in the group home. Thus, despite the positive trajectory of Namond Brice, the audience is not left with the typical melodramatic pleasures because “we cannot pin our hopes on the success of the individual when so many others are failing” (185).

“The denial of catharsis” is the last melodramatic subversion Klein identifies. Usually a melodramatic plot, as mentioned above, concludes with a moment in which it is either “too late” or just “in the nick of time” for a character that the audience has come to identify with (178). Each of these endings – too late and just in time – involves a sort of catharsis, whether it is channeled through tears of sadness or tears of joy. However, The Wire denies this catharsis by balancing the two possibilities. One of Klein’s examples of this phenomenon is the ending montage from season five. In this montage the viewer gets to see the resolution to many of the characters’ storylines. Several of these conclusions are tragic examples of it being “too late” for characters. The teenager Dukie, for instance, is seen fully sliding into the realm of drug addiction as he shoots up heroin. But not all characters meet such a bleak ending. Bubbles, a drug addict who has been battling a heroin addiction since season one, is finally able to get clean and join his sister and nephew for a family dinner. This conclusion, Klein writes, should induce “viewers to cry because despite overwhelming odds, Bubbles has achieved sobriety and become a functioning member of society … the improbable has become probable and hope has become reality” (187). Despite Bubbles’s success, though, “we cannot locate victory in Bubbles’s
sobriety … because these instances of individuals overcoming the system are placed on the same plane as all of the failures we have just witnessed” – failures like Dukie’s slide into the same despair Bubbles has just escaped (187).

Klein concludes by arguing that *The Wire* employs melodramatic conventions “in order to enlist viewer empathy and to engage us in its otherwise daunting, sprawling narrative” and then twists them so as “to subvert the passive, satisfied viewing position typically established by the primetime social melodrama” (188). Continuing, Klein writes that the show instead “constructs an active, socially engaged viewer” (189). The viewer is socially engaged, she explains, because the viewing position “demands engagement with the social conflicts described in the series, not merely the fictional characters that are animated by them” (189). Viewers may feel sad or cry at the end of each season, she speculates, but urgency and outrage will linger longer than any sadness. What Klein does not do in her conclusion, though, is connect the subversion of melodrama back to the acclaim for the show’s sense of realism. For Klein, praise for the show’s realism obscures just how much the show relies on melodrama. However, this praise for the show’s realism may very well be pointing back to Klein’s main argument: that the show subverts melodramatic pleasure. In other words, the show may feel real precisely because it is denying that pleasure and leaving its viewers outraged rather than fulfilled.

**Emotional Realism**

*Baltimore and Dallas*

It is not a novel argument to suggest that feelings influence perceptions of realism. In *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination*, Ien Ang explores why some viewers found the television show *Dallas* to be incredibly unrealistic while others heaped great
praise on the show’s realism. Ang argues that one important reason for these conflicting viewpoints is that realism can be conceived of on multiple planes -- a result of the fact that “a text can be read at various levels” (42). The first level Ang identifies is the literal, which concerns the content of the narrative. In regards to Dallas, Ang finds that many of the viewers who claim that the show is unrealistic are judging the show on this level and, in the process, finding that there are few resemblances between the show’s fictional world and reality.

However, Ang contends that a text can also be read at the level of the connotative. “This level,” Ang writes, “relates to the associative meanings which can be attributed to elements of the text” (42). It is on this level, she argues, that Dallas is often considered realistic. Pointing to letters that she has solicited from the show’s viewers, Ang further asserts that “the realism of Dallas can be called an ‘emotional realism’” (45). “What is recognized as real is not knowledge of the world,” she writes, “but a subjective experience of the world: a ‘structure of feeling’” (45).

Ang elaborates on why Dallas is considered emotionally realistic by viewers. Dallas, she writes, contains what she refers to as “the tragic structure of feeling” because happiness, in the show’s world, is precarious; as one viewer explains, the show fluctuates between “happiness” and “sadness” (46). Ang suggests that this structure of feeling resonates with viewers because “in life emotions are always being stirred up … life is characterized by an endless fluctuation between happiness and unhappiness” (46). It seems, though, that the perceived realism of this particular structure of feeling must be considered alongside the show’s genre, the soap opera. According to Ang, one important characteristic of shows within the soap opera genre is that they focus almost entirely on characters’ personal lives. “Social problems and conflicts,” Ang writes, “get short shrift or are not dealt with” (59).
Above, it was argued that *The Wire* subverts melodramatic pleasures, preferring to leave its viewers disaffected and outraged rather than happy or sad. This “structure of feeling” – something resembling anger combined with ambiguity and dissatisfaction – might be considered emotionally realistic by the show’s viewers. Here is where genre becomes important. *The Wire*, despite being a serial-oriented program that is occasionally interested in its characters’ personal lives, is not easily comparable to soap operas, lacking several of the other qualities that Ang uses to describe the genre. Therefore, *The Wire* needs to be examined a bit differently than *Dallas*. Perhaps the most important distinction to mention here is that social problems do not get “short shrift” in *The Wire*. Instead, social problems structure the entire show; each season, after all, is based around a new social problem, whether it be fading labor unions or ineffective public schooling. This is especially important to keep in mind given the structure of feeling that was considered so realistic for *Dallas*. The structure of feeling in *Dallas* – a fluctuation between happiness and sadness – is considered realistic, in Ang’s view, because “life” is characterized by swings between those two emotions. More specifically, though, it might be said that personal lives are characterized by this structure of feeling, especially in regards to the types of events *Dallas* concerns itself with, things like “romances, families, and the attendant rituals” (59). As Ang mentions, even when public issues – like politics and businesses – are brought into the *Dallas*’s landscape, they are important only insofar that they affect personal lives and, therefore, these topics are represented “from the point of view of the personal” (60). *The Wire*, though, might be said to invert this relationship. That is to say, if personal lives are represented, it is from the point of view of the social. For example, in season four the audience gets a few additional glimpses of Roland “Prez” Pryzbylewski’s personal life and his personal relationships as he becomes a Baltimore schoolteacher, but the forays into Prez’s life outside of his job are
limited. Instead, character of Prez is almost always represented from the point of view of the social – in this case, the context of urban public education. His storyline is primarily important to the extent that it illuminates what is happening within Baltimore’s inner-city schools.

For The Wire to be perceived as emotionally realistic, then, it would seem to need a structure of feeling more apt to fit with life as it experienced via social institutions than life as it experienced through personal relationships. To this end, emotions like anger and dissatisfaction make sense. The Wire purposefully picks subject matters that are thorny – issues that are not black and white and that lack easy solutions. The goal of improved urban public education, for instance, is an extremely complicated one that has, historically, seen more failures than successes. We might suppose, then, if The Wire had evoked simple, cathartic feelings of happiness or sadness in dealing with this issue, then it would have been met with some skepticism. Quite simply, a viewer should not walk away from season four of The Wire thinking that fixing urban public education is just a small step away, or even that it is a matter of personal triumphs and defeats. The Wire appears to capture some of the ambiguity and dissatisfaction that characterize these social aspects of “life.”

Generic Deviation

Having now compared The Wire with a popular 1980s prime time soap opera, it might again be worth contrasting the show with other members of its own genre(s). In the previous chapter, it was suggested, along the lines of Hallam and Marshment’s work, that “stylistic difference from mainstream genre fictions continues to be a benchmark of defining realism,” including in the case of The Wire (253). However, it seems plausible to extend that assertion from style to affect and argue that The Wire’s emotional realism was amplified by the fact that it
evoked feelings so different than those of the traditional procedural. In simple terms, *The Wire* might have felt real because it provided a breath of fresh air – a crime show that fully acknowledged the complexity of the systemic issues surrounding urban criminality rather than indulge in melodramatic pleasures. From Ang’s analysis *Watching Dallas*, it is possible to begin constructing the typical structure of feeling for a crime show. In drawing out the defining characteristics of the soap opera, Ang makes a comparison with other genres, including police and adventure series. “These genres,” Ang writes, “are preoccupied with overcoming a danger or an enemy, and there is usually little room for emotional uncertainties” (69). Continuing, Ang adds, “The (almost always male) hero is … completely sure of himself. Even more, precisely this certainty forms an important ingredient of his invincibility: he never doubts, knows precisely what he has to do and never dwells on his own insignificance” (69).

From Ang’s statements, it might be concluded that one thing crime shows are marked by is moral certainty. And although Ang was writing in the 1980s, this property seems to have remained constant. *24*, for example, frequently builds a strong distinction between the heroic counterterrorist agent Jack Bauer and his irrevocably evil enemies; within the show’s universe, what is right and what is wrong is normally very simple and Bauer’s decisions almost always turn out to be the best ones. *CSI* draws a similarly clear line between its heroic lead investigators and its monstrous criminals. Snauffer, for example, describes *CSI*’s Gil Grissom as “totally dedicated” to his profession (200). Brooks speculates that police dramas dominate television programming because of how effortlessly they produce moral certainty, writing that they “provide an easy identification of villains and heroes (who can often be recognized simply by uniform), of menace and salvation” (204). As already detailed above, *The Wire* constantly eludes moral clarity, preferring instead to remain morally ambiguous whenever possible. It is a
difference that Simon is eager to claim. He explains to Hornsby, “Instead of the usual good guys chasing bad guys framework, questions [are] raised about the very labels of good and bad, and, indeed, whether such distinctly moral notions [are] really the point.” From the flawed character of McNulty to the equivocal conclusions at the end of every season, it is hard to ever know which way the show’s moral compass is pointing. Sometimes, the show’s characters reflect this uncertainty in ways most crime shows do not allow for. In season two, union leader Frank Sobotka is never able to determine whether it is morally justifiable to be working in conjunction with a group of European gangsters to help them smuggle illegal goods into the country. While Sobotka needs the additional money to fund efforts to strengthen the union and its long-term prospects, it deeply disturbs him to enable and profit from the sex trade.

Ang’s comments also tie into the role of the individual within the genre. As Ang’s argument implies, the crime show is often driven by a single protagonist, generally a policeman or some other law enforcement officer. This convention ultimately ties into the melodramatic pleasures associated with “the successful benefactor.” As Klein details, melodramas tend to seek individually-produced successes, and most crime shows fit into that model. Crimes in CSI, for example, are often solved through the unique ingenuity of Gus Grissom. However, The Wire is different in that it deals more with systemic problems than problems that can be solved by any one individual. As mentioned in the previous chapter, The Wire, especially in regards to the fourth season, can also be compared with educational dramas. In terms of the role of the successful benefactor, this is especially relevant. In Teacher TV, Dalton and Linder discuss how The Wire deviates from mainstream television in this area, writing that the show is less about specific, personal instances of issues like poverty and instances than “about the systems that produce (or reproduce) these social problems” (168). Above, the various plights of the children
followed in season four were cited as an example of the failure of the individual benefactor within the show. Dalton specifically references these storylines in praising the uniqueness of *The Wire*’s systemic focus. Writing about Namond Brice, the child who is brought into a loving home by the now-retired Colvin, the authors state: “Although Colvin has made a significant, and probably a life-saving change in one student’s life by fostering Namond, he is not in a position to create larger, systemic change” (177). In other words, not only are “successful benefactors” like Colvin few and far between in *The Wire*, but the impact they can make is limited given the scale of the city’s problems.

The show’s purposeful subversion of the benefactor trope, though, might be even better embodied by another relationship Dalton and Linder refer to, one between Prez and a student of his, Dukie. Over the course of the season, Prez develops a particularly close tie to Dukie, whose parents are both addicts and who is often ridiculed by other students for his poor hygiene. Prez launders Dukie’s clothing, allows him to shower in the school and even provides him extra food. However, the show forcefully denies the possibility of Prez becoming a successful benefactor as the season comes to a close. Having been promoted to high school at the end of the year, Dukie leaves Prez’s watchful eyes and drops out of school, eventually becoming an addict just like his parents. The assistant principal at Prez’s school counsels Prez not to become too attached to his students. “The kids in the school aren’t yours,” she tells him. “You do your piece with them, and you let them go.” In their conclusion, Dalton and Linder praise the show for being an exception to the generic norm of teachers as saviors. “Good teachers can make a difference,” they write, “but not the difference” (179). As Klein writes of the show’s melodramatic subversion, “we cannot pin our hopes on the success of the individual when so many others are
failing.” Fittingly, Dalton and Linder wrap up their discussion of Prez by noting, “this character … feels more ‘real’ than those who have come before him” (180).

Finally, *The Wire*’s frequent denial of catharsis seems to be a feature that sets it apart from its peers. Brooks finds the nature of the police drama to lend itself to the melodramatic catharsis. Crime shows, he writes, “give a set of situations in which virtue can be held prisoner, made supine and helpless, while evil goes on the rampage, and they offer highly exteriorized versions of its vindication and triumph” (204). *The Wire*, though, does not provide such vindication and triumph. Again, it is a point of departure that Simon is proud of. In his interview with Hornby, Simon says, “In much of television, and in a good deal of our stage drama, individuals are often portrayed as rising above institutions to achieve catharsis.” In contrast, he claims that within *The Wire* “the institutions always prove larger, and those characters with hubris enough to challenge the postmodern construct of American empire are invariably mocked, marginalized, or crushed.” Overall, then, *The Wire* is again significantly departing from the mainstream shows that dominate its genre(s), eliciting feelings often untapped by its brethren. In accompaniment with the potential emotional realism of its affect as described above, this generic deviation provides another possible reason that audiences perceived the show as realistic.
Representation

When *The Wire* debuted in the early 2000s, black characters on the major networks were struggling to see screen time. As Darnell Hunt reveals in a content analysis of network programming, the mean screen time for black characters on Fox in 2001 was just 2.54 minutes. On NBC, meanwhile, the average was only 2.76. He writes: “Integrated programming featuring characters of different races that interact with one another – and that share equitable degrees of prominence – was the exception rather than the rule” (293). Meanwhile, *The Wire*’s cast was not only largely black, but blacks also filled many of the major roles. It is a distinction David Simon is cognizant of. Talking to the website campusprogress.org, Simon says, “I think there are probably more continuing roles for African American actors on *The Wire* than all the rest of television combined. We have 50-60 continuing roles for African Americans—can you name 50 or 60 from the rest of the network lineups? You can’t.”

But statistics cannot fully describe the nature of representation on *The Wire*. Nor can they completely explain how race and representation within the show connect to perceptions of realism. *The Wire* was not just willing to depict more black characters than the rest of television and for longer periods of time, but it was also willing to break new ground in representing a diverse black experience told through diverse black perspectives. For these reasons, we can begin to discern another explanation for why *The Wire* might be perceived as realistic.
Race and Realism

Mimetic and Simulacral Realism

Phillip Brian Harper posits some of the ways in which representations of race might be linked to perceptions of realism. Writing on the representation of “the Black experience” on television in the 1960s and 1970s in the essay “Extra-Special Effects,” Harper sees “two kinds of realism” being promoted by black performers and writers during this period. For those who desired “simulacral realism,” television was seen as an ideal place to represent “scenarios that might subsequently (and consequently) be realized throughout the larger social field, regardless of whether they actually preexist there” (70). This line of thinking was largely based on the idea that televisual representation could effect change in social relations, more specifically that black people could see their social statuses improve as a result of their depiction on mainstream television. Therefore, it was argued that representations of successful blacks who are well-integrated into American society could set the stage for the “realization in the ‘real’ world” of such scenarios (70). The other category of realism Harper saw people advocating for was “mimetic realism,” which demanded television “‘reflect’ the social reality” on which it was based (70). Harper largely identifies this concept of realism with writer John Oliver Killens, who argued that television failed to “mirror faithfully the conditions in which black people live their daily lives” (71). Killens, for example, cited the “middle-classish” situation of the black characters in ABC’s Room 222 as having hardly “anything to do with the Black experience” (71).

Other scholars have also noticed this dual conception of authenticity. In an essay on the sitcom Good Times, Aniko Bodroghkozy uses letters written to one of the show’s producers, Allan Manings, to analyze the audience reaction to the sitcom. In the letters, realism and the
politics of racial representation become contested sites. According to Bodroghkozy, the show’s depiction of a “poor ghetto family was at the heart of the show’s presumptions to black ‘authenticity.’” (418). That is to say, both the show’s creators and many of its viewers thought it was realistic “to show how institutional racism and the vicissitudes of poverty trap families in a prison of disadvantage” (418). However, not all viewers were comfortable with the show’s representation of black life. A number of letter writers, she explains, wanted the show to depict a professional black family, one constantly attempting to improve their situation – something The Cosby Show would give these viewers a decade later. While some viewers might have found the show’s depictions of inner-city life realistic, “such representations might not appear particularly empowering – at least not to black viewers with more middle-class sensibilities” (418). Thus, the same two categories identified by Harper – simulacral realism and mimetic realism – emerge again. In attempting to satisfy those seeking mimetic realism, the show’s creators were unable to satisfy viewers looking for simulacral realism.

As both Harper and Bodroghkozy focus on shows that aired in the 1960s and 1970s, the question remains whether realism, as it pertains to race and representation, is still measured using these two competing notions. Darnell Hunt, writing in the 2005 essay “Making Sense of Blackness on Television,” suggests that it is. Typically, he writes, black images are denounced either for being distorted or for being damaging. In the case of distortion, criticism tends to arise from the acceptance of mimetic realism, “the assumption that images should reflect some underlying reality” (15). Criticism related to damaging images, meanwhile, comes more from an acceptance of simulacral realism, “the assumption that media, for better or for worse, have the power to engineer social outcomes” (15). There seems to be a long history, then, of
representations of race being gauged for their realism using the dual concepts of simulacral and mimetic realism.

*The Multiculturalist Discourse*

For a show to be widely received as realistic in regard to race and representation, it seems to have to please two distinct audiences – one looking for mimetic realism and one looking for simulacral realism. Harper suggests, though, that all criticisms of black representation on television centered around realism tend to relate to the same desire for television to represent “the Black experience.” That desire is problematic, though, given the diversity of the black experience (78). As he explains, it is difficult to assign authenticity to a show based upon its faithfulness to “the black experience,” as there is no single “black experience” (78). *The Cosby Show*, then, was criticized for not representing social issues and the underclass in much the same way that *Good Times*, as noted earlier, was criticized for not depicting a middle-class family of black professionals. Herman Gray’s criticism of *The Cosby Show* seems emblematic. Although he notes that the show depicted some aspects of black life that had rarely been seen before on television, he argues that the show “often failed … to comment on the economic and social disparities and constraints facing millions of African Americans outside the middle class” (*Watching Race* 81). In other words, “while effectively representing middle-class blackness as one expression of black diversity, the show in turn submerged other sites, tensions, and points of difference” (*Watching Race* 82).

Thus whether a show is attacked for not being mimetically realistic or attacked for not being simulacraly realistic, the criticism seems to derive from the fact that the show in question only attempts to show one slice of black life, rather than try to incorporate a more complete
range of black experiences and perspectives. Perhaps, then, the easiest way to avoid such
criticism would be to depict a wider scope of black life. But the question then becomes: what
does it mean to depict a wider scope of black life? It is significant that Gray’s criticism of The
Cosby Show is mentioned above because the idea of providing more diverse accounts of black
life is the very same concept encapsulated in Gray’s notion of the multiculturalist discourse,
which includes representations that “fully engage all aspects of African American life” (“The
Politics of Representation” 171). Writing in the 1990s, Herman Gray argues, “Contemporary
images of African Americans are anchored by three kinds of discursive practices” (“The Politics
of Representation” 165). The first discourse Gray identifies is assimilationist television, which is
predicated on racial invisibility. To the extent that racial issues are addressed on shows
subscribing to this discourse, Gray writes, they are always located on the individual level – never
the systemic. Furthermore, these shows privilege visions of color blindness and universal
harmony. “Assimilationist programs,” he argues, “construct a United States where the historic
and contemporary consequences of a structured social inequality and a culture deeply inflected
and defined by racism are invisible and inconsequential to the lives of its citizens” (“The Politics
of Representation” 166). The next discourse Gray describes is “separate-but-equal,” in which
black characters are placed in situations that parallel those of whites, facing the same sorts of
experiences and conflicts. While these shows, like The Fresh Prince of Bel Air and Family
Matters, occasionally acknowledge race as the basis of cultural difference, Gray argues that
social and historical contexts are missing, as are any suggestions of race as the source of
inequality or struggle. Moreover, Gray argues that these shows are linked to a “white middle-
class universe” and gloss over diversity among African Americans (“The Politics of
Representation” 168).
Finally, Gray identifies a discourse of multiculturalism. Shows within this discourse, Gray writes, depict “complex, even contradictory, perspectives and representations of black life in America” (“The Politics of Representation” 169). Although these programs sometimes continue to be shaped by a middle-class perspective, Gray argues that “they are driven less by the hegemonic gaze of whiteness” (“The Politics of Representation” 170). Importantly, they are willing to explicitly examine complex issues like racism and discrimination from multiple perspectives within blackness. “The richness of African American cultural and social life as well as the experience of otherness that derives from subordinate status and social inequality are recognized, critiqued and commented on,” he writes (“The Politics of Representation” 170). Concluding, Gray indicates a preference for such a discourse. “Within commercial television representations of African American culture, the most compelling and powerful representations mark, displace, and disarticulate hegemonic and normative cultural assumptions and representations about America’s racial order” (“The Politics of Representation” 171). Continuing, he writes, “At their best, such representations fully engage all aspects of African American life and, in their process, move cultural struggles within television and media beyond limited and narrow questions of positive/negative images, role models, and simple reversals of the politics of representation” (“The Politics of Representation” 171). Given that perceptions of realism as they pertain to race and representation seem to be predicated upon wide-ranging depictions of black experiences, the multiculturalist discourse appears to provide a model for analyzing The Wire. That is to say, a show that fits Gray’s model of a multiculturalist show would seem to placate both sets of critics described by Harper. If The Wire can be considered a multiculturalist show, it might also be considered a realistic one.
Race and The Wire

A Range of Experiences

To reiterate, shows like Good Times and The Cosby Show seem to have been in situations that would necessarily lead to some sort of disapproval. In attempting to show one aspect of black experience, it was probably inevitable that they would be met with criticism from those who wanted to see other parts of black life. Shows, though, in the multiculturalist discourse, offer the possibility of fully engaging, in Gray’s words, “all aspects of African American life” and operate at multiple levels of “class, gender, region, color, and culture” (“The Politics of Representation” 171). The Wire seems to do just that, working with a larger scope and presenting a more diverse depiction of black life than other aforementioned shows. In doing so, The Wire might have avoided some of the concerns of inauthenticity that met these earlier shows. HBO itself provides a basic example of what this phenomenon looks like. On the channel's website, The Wire characters are divided into several areas depending on where they fit in the show’s universe, including “the law,” “the street,” “the paper,” “the port” and “the school.” Each one of these areas is racially heterogenous. The police force, for example, includes major black characters, like Cedric Daniels and Kima Greggs, as well as major white characters, including Jimmy McNulty and Herc Hauk. The “street” characters are largely black, but this working community still includes white drug dealers, like “White” Mike Mc Ardle and Frog, white drug addicts, like Johnny Weeks and Waylon, as well as the lawyer Maurice Levy. Other writers have also picked up on the diversified representation of black life in The Wire. As Jane Gibb and Roger Sabine argue, “the writers of The Wire pay meticulous attention to the social stratification of Baltimore and its higher demographic ration of African-Americans to white Europeans” (15). Continuing, they write that “the former are visible at every level of Baltimore
society.” In each community, moreover, there are “more than one or two (token) African-Americans” (15).

But, as Gray indicates, multiculturalist shows work across multiple levels, including class, gender, region, color and culture. *The Wire* does more than just make sure each of its working communities is racially heterogeneous. When stepping back, one sees that its black characters are diverse in a number of ways. Some characters are rich, some are poor; some characters are drug dealers, some are drug addicts; some characters are in positions of political power, some are powerless; some characters are faithful to their partners, some are prone to cheating; some characters are committed to their jobs, some are lazy; some characters are heterosexual, some are homosexual. The list goes on. In Gray’s words, viewers “encounter complex, even contradictory, perspectives and representations of black life in America” (“The Politics of Representation” 169).

Before moving on, though, something might be said regarding the fact that the show depicts few characters beyond the scope of black and white. There are, for example, almost no Asian-American characters, and there is barely any Hispanic representation, either. Keith Kahn-Harris, in the essay “The Politics of Brisket: Jews and *The Wire*,” suggests that Jewish characters are also under-represented. Moreover, he argues that they are pigeonholed into stereotypes, especially as represented by the seedy lawyer Maurice Levy, and are often met with anti-Semitic sentiments. Kahn-Harris, though, contends 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” (35). More specifically, Kahn-Harris argues that *The Wire* is largely interested in presenting a universe centered around West Baltimore. Fittingly, then, “in *The Wire*, as in ‘real
life,’ Jews only enter West Baltimore life as authority figures … or as those mediating that authority” (37). This not only explains why there are few Jewish characters, but also explains the use of anti-Semitic tropes and stereotyping, as there is a “lack of other Jewish figures for West Baltimore to base its views of Jews on” (37). Therefore, the lack of representation of races other than black or white might be read as realistic because it matches the reality of West Baltimore demographics.

Multiple Perspectives

But to argue that The Wire might be perceived of as realistic because it depicts a wide range of black characters seems a bit too simple. More specifically, a show could include a variety of black characters yet manage to only operate from one or two perspectives, perhaps white perspectives. Many shows with large casts that include several black characters operate this way; 24, for instance, almost always privileges Jack Bauer’s perspective. And, on this note, The Wire would probably be a very different show if all of the proceedings were from Rhonda Perlman’s point-of-view, or even Prez’s. It is a distinction that Gray notes. According to Gray, television shows operating with the multiculturalist discourse “position viewers, regardless of race, class, or gender locations, to participate in black experiences from multiple subject positions” (“The Politics of Representation” 170). As an example, Gray mentions Frank’s Place, which aired on CBS in 1987-1988. According to Gray, the show used “multiple and complex perspectives within blackness” and “seldom, if ever, adjusted its perspective and its representation of African American cultural experiences to the gaze of an idealized white middle-class audience” (“The Politics of Representation” 170).
\textit{The Wire}, like \textit{Frank’s Place}, seems to be working with “multiple and complex perspectives within blackness” (“The Politics of Representation” 170). Gibb and Sabin, for example, write that “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” (15). It is worth contrasting, for instance, the different points of view offered by the characters of Dennis “Cutty” Wise and State Senator Clay Davis. In season three, viewers are encouraged to closely identify with Wise. The show follows him closely as he is released from prison after a long sentence. We see him finding shelter in his grandmother’s basement, struggling with a day laborer job, returning to Avon Barksdale’s drug trading organization, then leaving once he realizes he can no longer stomach a criminal life. We then track him as he struggles again with the day laborer position, takes counsel with a church deacon and then decides to better the community by opening a boxing gym targeted at the youngest members of the drug trade. Wise faces a number of obstacles in his path to redemption, not the least of which is an indifferent bureaucracy. Talking to the deacon after leaving the Barksdale organization, he confides that no one in the city’s social service system is interested in helping him. Later, when Wise decides to open the boxing gym, the bureaucracy becomes nothing less than an adversary. As he goes downtown in an attempt to get the proper permits, he is met by a long series of uncaring city workers who present him with a number of impossible hurdles, leaving him confused and defeated. Significantly, the city workers are shot from Wise’s point-of-view, so the audience leaves just as confused and defeated as Wise does. Only when Wise talks to the deacon and gets a member of the city council involved can he successfully navigate the bureaucracy.
However, in season three the audience also gets a closer look at another black man, State Senator Clay Davis, and his perspective on bureaucracy. Although Davis is not as well developed as Wise, the audience quickly learns that, for Davis, bureaucracy is far from an obstacle – rather, it is a tool of power. As the season progresses, he siphons an increasing amount of money from drug dealer-cum-property developer Stringer Bell, another man looking to navigate the city’s bureaucracy. Offering to be Bell’s guide through the bureaucratic jungle, Davis strings Bell along, promising help and success in exchange for money. In comparing Wise and Davis, then, the audience begins to see class as a larger dividing line than race. For Wise, a member of the underclass, every bureaucratic institution represents a barrier; it is the rare city employee who can offer assistance or sympathy. For the politically powerful Senator Davis, though, institutions are instrumental. Gray writes that within multiculturalist shows, “differences that originate from within African American social and cultural experiences have not just been acknowledged, but interrogated.” (“The Politics of Representation” 170). The starkly divergent, yet parallel, experiences of Wise and Davis seems to demonstrate that the show is interested in critically examining such differences. By portraying bureaucratic institutions through multiple black perspectives, the show has complicated the ways class and race intersect.

It must be said, too, that the aforementioned example is just one of many instances of the show’s use of multiple black perspectives to complicate the intersection of race and class. In the essay “‘Thin line ‘tween heaven and here’: Real and Imagined Space in The Wire,” Linda Speidel examines a scene from season one in which dealer D’Angelo Barksdale and his girlfriend Donette visit a fancy restaurant. While D’Angelo has the money to afford the restaurant, he feels uncomfortable during the meal and makes several etiquette miscues. When D’Angelo expresses his discomfort to Donette, she tells him, “We ain’t the only black people in
here.” He then responds by informing her that race is not the problem. As Speidel writes, “He is not out of place in the restaurant because he is black, but because he is the wrong class,” though she argues that it needs to be remembered that “the fact he is black means that he is less likely to have access to the education and money of the middle classes” (24). Later, in season four, a viewer cannot help but recall this earlier scene when Colvin takes a group of his “corner kid” students to a fancy restaurant as a reward for the successful completion of a classroom activity. The students are unfamiliar with etiquette, but again, class instead of race is foregrounded. The middle-class Colvin fits in; it is only his lower-class students who have never been in such an environment that seem out of place. But it would also be impossible to only read the show through class identities – factors like gender and sexuality often enter the picture and this aspect of the show will be explored more below. As Todd Fraley writes in the essay “A man’s gotta have a code: Identity, Racial Codes and HBO’s The Wire,” “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” (62). It is a remark that seems to echo Gray’s assertion that multiculturalist shows “create a discursive space in which subject positions are transgressive and contradictory, troubling, and pleasurable, as are the representations used to construct identity” (“The Politics of Representation” 170).

However, one cannot discuss The Wire’s integration of a range of black perspectives without mentioning the character of Jimmy McNulty. Although The Wire, as mentioned, has a large number of black characters and introduces many varying black perspectives, the show tends to position white detective McNulty as the lead character. Not only does McNulty receive the most screen time, especially in the first season, but it is also his actions that most often drive the plot forward and it is his personal life that the viewer gets to examine most closely. It is an
indicator, then, that the show might still be working under a “gaze of whiteness,” in Gray’s terms. It might be speculated, for instance, that McNulty is serving as someone for the largely white audience to identify with so that they can more easily enter into a largely black universe. A number of writers have elaborated on the apparent contradictoriness of McNulty’s prominence, including Marshall and Potter, Gibb and Sabin, as well as Spiedel. Marshall and Potter, for example, write that the show’s “predominantly black cast of characters often [play] a supporting role to the white McNulty in screen time and plot centrality” (30). Lisa W. Kelly, meanwhile, notes that “in a show that features a predominantly black cast and which deals with various problems occurring in black neighborhoods, the fact that closest *The Wire* comes to a main character is white, seems unusual” (50). But many of these writers also downplay the problem. Kelly, for instance, seems to support Simon’s contention that the show is an ensemble piece and McNulty just happens to be the character “who most often stirs things up” (50). Kelly, too, notes that McNulty’s moral ambiguity undermines his central position and that he “becomes less prominent” after the first season (50). While he is gone, then, Kelly writes that “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” (50). However, Kelly does suggest it is significant that the audience never gets insight into Freamon and Moreland’s personal lives to the extent that they do with McNulty – a key identification device. The character of McNulty, then, remains contested ground.

For Gibb and Sabin, a significant result of the incorporation of multiple black perspectives is that it serves to de-center race. The scenes mentioned above, for example, accentuate the importance of class divisions, allowing race to become a secondary factor of identity. Gibb and Sabin argue that another way that the show de-centers race is through the
“momentary foregrounding of black/white social relations that imply a reverse power dynamic” (15). They point, for instance, to the opening sequence from the first episode of the show, in which McNulty is tutored by a black kid on the life of the recently murdered “Snotboogie” and some of the principles of street life. To use Gray’s terminology here, this might be an example of a “gaze” of blackness supplanting a gaze of whiteness. Another example of note here might be the way in which the show closely follows councilman Tommy Carcetti’s efforts in launching a run for mayor. As he initially ponders the move, his chances are quickly dismissed by many, mainly for the reason that it would seem impossible for a white man to be elected in a city that is majority-black. In the season premiere, the incumbent mayor, a black man, is rather blunt. Talking about Carcetti’s mayoral odds with an aide, he says: “Not in this town … if he was whiter he’d be see-through.” Later, when Carcetti attempts to convince an old friend to run his campaign, she can only say that Carcetti is “the wrong color.” Gibb and Sabin point out that “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 valorizing hierarchies whatever form they take” (15).

To that end, it also seems worth mentioning some of the throwaway jokes the show makes about racial stereotypes – all of which serve to further complicate the show’s perspective. In season three, Bubbles, who is black, brainstorms a scheme with his white friend Johnny to steal a ladder from a white man working on the windows of a house. Johnny initially suggests that he should try to threaten the man, with Bubbles then coming in to save the day so that the man on the ladder will monetarily reward Bubbles for his help. However, Bubbles insists that they reverse the roles. Because the man on the ladder is white, Bubbles argues, “I should be the bad guy so he don’t get confused.” In a later season three episode, McNulty and Greggs travel south to the town of Dumfries, Virginia. Stopping by the local police office in order to seek
assistance, McNulty tells Greggs to stay in the car, assuming that everyone in the southern town will be racist. Then, once inside and talking to the police chief, McNulty tries to build a rapport with the man by acting incredibly racist, making a series of demeaning comments and cracking crude jokes. Much to McNulty’s chagrin, though, a black police officer approaches the chief from behind and kisses him. “My wife,” the chief tells McNulty. An embarrassed McNulty can only respond with, “You’d like my partner.”

The character of Herc, meanwhile, might be the embodiment of this tendency to take delight in the reversed black/white power dynamic. As C.W. Marshall and Tiffany Potter write in the essay “The Life and Times of Fuzzy Dunlop: Herc and the Modern Urban Crime Environment,” “the series lets [Herc] see himself as an oppressed and overlooked white man in a predominantly black city” (26). But Herc’s sense of oppression is rarely treated seriously. Rather, it is a source of comedy and Marshall and Potter argue that “his function as comic foil depends on his color” (26). For instance, when helping to campaign for the incumbent Mayor Royce as Royce goes up against Carcetti, Herc cold calls a voter and says: “Lady, between you mean, 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?” Herc’s delight in being able to use his minority status as a political selling point is both humorous and emblematic of the show’s willingness to have fun with the city’s racial dynamics.

“Social Issues and Cultural Practices”

In discussing the multiculturalist discourse, Gray singles out a few shows as exemplars, including A Different World and Frank’s Place. One thing that makes these shows exceptional,
according to Gray, is the “explicit attention to African American themes” (*Watching Race* 90). These shows, he argues, interrogate and engage “African American cultural traditions” and examine relevant social issues like “racism, apartheid, discrimination, nationalism, masculinity, color coding, desegregation, and poverty” (*Watching Race* 91). Gray later discusses the two shows in more detail. *A Different World*, he explains, explored “social issues and cultural practices central to African American life,” referencing sports figures, musicians and events as well as highlighting controversies and events “within African American social and cultural discourses” (*Watching Race* 101). *Frank’s Place*, meanwhile, “was distinguished by its explicit recognition of the habits, practices, manners, nuances, and outlooks of black Americans located in New Orleans” (*Watching Race* 119). More specifically, Gray points to details like food, music and dance as locating the show within African American culture. In terms of music, for example, *Frank’s Place*, “was one of the few series on commercial network television … that actively used blues and jazz performed by original artists in setting like those found in black communities … and represents a rare moment when commercial network television treated African American music as a cultural resource and the African American musician as a cultural hero” (*Watching Race* 122). Moreover, by addressing social issues like “drug abuse, sports, voodoo, middle-class status and homelessness, *Frank’s Place* tilted toward a more noble and serious representation of black working-class experience” (*Watching Race* 121).

Like these two shows, it seems *The Wire* was seriously engaged in exploring “social issues and cultural practices central to African American life” (*Watching Race* 101). In terms of cultural practices, *The Wire*’s use of music is important. According to Simon, the show’s creators wanted to avoid using music that lacked cultural specificity (Caramanica). Much as the music in *Frank’s Place* serves to locate the show in black New Orleans, *The Wire*’s music serves
to locate the show in what one might call “black Baltimore.” As a *New York Times* article on the show’s music notes, there exists “a distinctive local black sound — Baltimore club” (Caramanica). Accordingly, the show has used several Baltimore club songs, in addition to music from local rappers.

In regard to the treatment of social issues, it has already been noted in the previous chapter that *The Wire* was more than willing to tackle complicated systemic issues. Many of these issues might be, in Gray’s words, “‘relevant’ to significant segments within black communities” (*Watching Race* 123). Take, for instance, an issue mentioned above by Gray: drug abuse. Here it is worth mentioning how the show deals with this particular issue through multiple black perspectives. Not only does the audience see the consequences of drug abuse through an addict’s eyes – via Bubbles – but viewers also learn about the larger context of the drug trade, as the show depicts both drug suppliers and drug distributors. Moreover, *The Wire* attempts to locate the issue of drug abuse within contexts of policing and neighborhood safety. The fourth episode of season three, for example, opens with a neighborhood meeting. During the meeting, community residents complain to a young police officer about the deterioration of their neighborhood and the proliferation of drug dealers. Furthermore, the show is willing to explicitly address how several social issues are specifically related to race. In season three, for instance, Councilman Carcetti comes to talk to Bunny Colvin about his Hamsterdam experiment. At one point, Colvin begins discussing how the neighborhoods in his district were transformed by the end of Jim Crow and the ensuing white flight. Also in season three, Prez and McNulty respond to a call they hear on their police car’s radio. Prez, rushing into action, mistakenly shoots a black police officer. The show not only questions whether Prez’s mistake might have
been motivated by some sort of underlying racism, but also explicitly discusses the consequences of such perceptions.

Black Masculinity

As mentioned above, Gray argues that television shows falling within the multiculturalist discourse operate at multiple levels of representation, including “class, gender, region, color, and culture” (“The Politics of Representation” 171). Sexuality, too, might be added to that list. Although the topic of sexuality could alone be a topic for additional chapters, it is worth briefly addressing the representation of black masculinity within The Wire, particularly due to the popularity of the character of Omar. A quote from President Barack Obama points to both Omar’s popularity and his singularity. While campaigning in 2008, Obama was interviewed by the Las Vegas Sun. Asked who his favorite character on the show is, Obama cited Omar. Omar, Obama noted, is “the toughest, baddest guy on the show, but he’s gay” (Coolican). In Obama’s words we can see that the character of Omar seems to embody a contradiction – incredibly masculine, yet somehow simultaneously gay.

It seems this line of thought was common amongst viewers, even if not all fans could be quite as poised as Obama. In her essay, “‘Gots to Get Got’: Social Justice and Audience Response to Omar Little,” Kathleen LeBosco closely examines fan postings on the HBO website. In particular, she pays attention to postings focused on Omar and observes that most posters praise the character, admiring his strict moral code and many quirks. At one point, though, LeBosco specifically turns her attention to posts concerning Omar’s sexuality and finds that there is a considerable amount of “anti-queer hostility” as well as the occasionally inflammatory post (221). However, in the case of provocative posts, she finds that fans come to
Omar’s defense, even if there are few “defenses of queerness … or even distancing ‘tolerance’ moves” (221). Many fans, she writes, “respond by reinforcing Omar’s credibility as ‘true G’ despite his homosexuality” (221). Later, she adds, “Omar’s performance of gangsta masculinity mitigates against his sexuality … ‘hard’ masculinity salvages his citizenship” (223). She points to one indicative poster, Prophetessroxy, who writes, “I loved Omar because even though he was homosexual, he wasn’t a stereotypical ‘flamer’ … he liked his boys, but he was gangsta to the bone” (223). Again, Omar seems to embody a contradiction; the latter half of Prophetessroxy’s comment is almost identical to Obama’s statement.

The fan feedback, then, seems to indicate that the character of Omar was challenging viewers’ standard conceptions of black masculinity by subverting the norms of representation of black gay men. Omar is something relatively new – a black man who is able to be masculine “despite his homosexuality” (LeBosco 221). As Gray writes in his 1995 essay “Black Masculinity and Visual Culture,” “contemporary expressions of black masculinity … rewrite and reinscribe the patriarchal and heterosexual basis of masculine privilege (and domination) based on gender and sexuality” (402). In other words, black masculinity is closely connected to heterosexuality in American culture. Omar is perhaps even more distinct, though, because of his “gangsta masculinity” (“Black Masculinity and Visual Culture” 403). Gray specifically references representation in relation to rappers like Dr. Dre, Too Short, Ice-T, Ice Cube and more to surmise, “Representations of the OG … are also underwritten by definitions of manhood deeply dependent on traditional notions of heterosexuality, authenticity, and sexism” (“Black Masculinity and Visual Culture” 403). Notions of “gangsta” masculinity are, again, closely linked to the norm of heterosexuality. Furthermore, in Watching Race, Gray also makes the claim that few television shows are willing to undertake critical examinations of black
masculinity. Discussing the television show *Roc*, he writes, “The relationships among sexuality, race, and gender are complex and are rarely, if ever, acknowledged and addressed in television constructions and representations of African Americans” (129). *Roc*, which depicted an interracial homosexual marriage, must be singled out, then, “because it is one of the few television shows about blacks, if any, that has dealt seriously with issues of sexuality, race, and masculinity from the perspective of working-class African-Americans” (*Watching Race* 129). Phillip Brian Harper makes a somewhat similar argument with his essay “Walk-on Parts and Speaking Subjects: Screen Representations of Black Gay Men.” Representations of black gay men, he writes, have been few and far between. Quite problematically, he argues, “The ‘gay community’ … has been popularly conceived of as white, wealthy, and male since the beginning of the current wave of gay activism after the Stonewall riots of 1969” (392). Gray, though, might not be totally surprised by the appearance of Omar. In “Black Masculinity,” he writes, “Contemporary conceptions of heterosexual black masculinity are … open to challenge” (404). He argues that films like Marlon Riggs’ *Tongues Untied* and the aforementioned episode of *Roc* challenge and destabilize “the monolithic and hegemonic character of images rooted in stable heterosexual black masculinity” (“Black Masculinity and Visual Culture” 404). In the years since Gray’s essay, conceptions of black masculinity have perhaps become even more open to contestation. *The Wire*, then, seems to be following a path opened up by earlier representations. But, again, fan feedback indicates that black masculinity is still most commonly associated with heterosexuality.

It also is significant that Gray constantly links the black masculine norm, which includes heterosexuality, to the concept of authenticity. This seems to imply that the distinctive character of Omar might be received as something unreal, even if the norms of black masculinity are open
to challenge. However, the larger framework of this chapter’s argument must be remembered – that perceptions of realism might very well be linked to depictions of diversity within the black community as well as the willingness to display multiple black perspectives. Thus, Omar, by allowing the show to explore sexual diversity within “African American life,” might actually add to the show’s perceived authenticity (“The Politics of Representation” 171). LeBosco seems to agree with this argument. She writes: “The widespread adoration of Omar might indicate that his audience … are well trained to see ‘authenticity’ in intersecting identities” (223).

Therefore, Omar appears to be another example of The Wire’s willingness to operate across many levels of representation, including not just “class, gender, region, color, and culture,” as cited by Gray, but also sexuality (“The Politics of Representation” 171). In several ways, then, The Wire closely corresponds to Gray’s description of a multiculturalist show. By working within this framework, the show may have steered clear of potential critics ready to denounce the show for either being mimaetically unrealistic or simulacraally unrealistic. In other words, by being multiculturalist, The Wire may have appeared realistic.

**Generic Deviation**

As argued above, The Wire was pursuing representation in a way different than much of what is on television – crime television included. As already stated, it had more roles for black characters and more screen time for them than almost anything else on major network television. But, again, a discussion of The Wire and representation goes beyond numbers and it must be considered why shows like CSI and Cold Case can include multiple black characters, but rarely allude to diversity within the African American community or incorporate a range of black perspectives. Here it is worth returning to Bodroghkozy’s essay on Good Times. Bodroghkozy
writes that the show’s attempts to pursue progressive racial politics were necessarily limited. While the creators set out to “circulate empowering messages about African-Americans,” they also had to avoid unnerving white viewers. Thus, they had to “soften the representation” and make the show’s representation of black inner-city poverty as palatable as possible. The show, for example, “recirculated the notion of the traditional sitcom family” (413). The show also increasingly focused on the popular JJ character, a buffoonish clown cited by J. Fred MacDonald as a key element of “the age of new minstrelsy” (Bodroghkozy 419). But, as Bodroghkozy speculates, the show’s creators may have had little choice when it came to JJ. “Good Times without JJ might have been too radical, too different to achieve the popular relevancy and polysemy necessary to allow 1970s heterogeneous audiences to find narrative purchase in this text,” she writes (420). Summarizing, she asserts that the show “took a progressive step forward in circulating representations of an inner-city, intact black family, but negotiated that progressiveness in racial imagery with … a familiar sitcom family of warmth and good humour, but also a more reactionary ‘coonish’ image traditionally associated in the white American imagination with ‘black humour’” (420).

Although Good Times premiered over 35 years ago, some of this need to compromise undoubtedly remains. As previously mentioned, Gray notes that much of television is dominated by the assimilationist and separate-but-equal discourses. Furthermore, he explains that even the shows that he places in the multiculturalist discourse, like A Different World and Frank’s Place, faced certain constraints. In A Different World, for example, “economic and political inequalities were framed as various kinds of misunderstanding, ignorance, and lack of experience with different groups and communities” (Watching Race 111). He points to one instance, regarding an episode about South Africa, where the network made the writers make their argument less
one-sided. *Frank’s Place*, meanwhile, tended to personalize systemic problems. Moreover, Gray writes that *Frank’s Place*’s innovative treatments of representation contributed to its lack of popularity and its quick demise. Sasha Torres seems to complement Gray’s argument with her 2005 essay “Television and Race.” Torres suggests that television’s uses of race have undergone recent changes. For almost the entire history of the medium, Torres writes, television produced “race as a spectacle” (395). For the most part, televisual representations associated race with persons of color “either mired in or courageously transcending such social contexts as poverty, drug addiction, criminality, or racial oppression” (395). As a result, race was constantly used to signify social problems. Torres argues, though, that race has become increasingly decoupled from its social contexts, the intention being to “garner as many fragments of the post-cable audience as possible in order to sell them to advertisers” (405). This, Torres suggests, is a new form of televisual racism. “Representations,” she argues, now “tend to wrench persons of color out of the still pervasive political context of white dominance and out of the still-relevant social context of the communities of color” (407). Continuing, she writes, “in the process, real political, social and economic inequalities disappear” (407). It seems then that Torres’s account of contemporary television reads much like Gray’s conception of the three discourses. In both accounts, television is dominated by depictions that privilege ideas like colorblindness and gloss over social and historical contexts.

Darnell Hunt might be even more blunt in describing contemporary television. According to Hunt, television remains a “white-controlled cultural forum” and “most of the programs in prime-time – particularly top-rated shows that appear on the larger networks – remain a white place in which white can affirm the universality of whiteness in raceless times” (299). Hunt elaborates, writing, “White characters lead and nonwhite characters follow.”
Accordingly, “black characters are typically the coworkers of more prominent white characters” (299). A show like CSI, in which the crime-solving teams almost always include at least one or two black characters situated firmly in the background, comes to mind. Moreover, Hunt argues that “these television blacks seem content to blend into the (white) mainstream” and “the specter of race rarely emerges as an explicit concern” (299). He even points to a crime show, The District, to observe, “When hints of the ‘ghetto’ style surface … they do so as implicit threats to (white) order that invoke the binary and its related chains of equivalence. These threats, of course, are contained by the show’s end at the hands of the (white) lead, likely feeding an enduring white ambivalence towards blackness and generating considerable audience pleasure” (299).

However, The Wire was free of some of constraints placed upon prime-time programming – some of the constraints that must affect the composition of shows like CSI and Cold Case. Although HBO features a largely white subscriber audience, it develops programming in an idiosyncratic way. Thus, The Wire did not necessarily have to make as many comprises as a show like Good Times had to in the 1970s or CSI does today. What kind of compromises would The Wire have had to make if it were on a major network? Lisa W. Kelly speculates on a few of them in her essay on The Wire’s casting, “Casting The Wire: Complicating Notions of Performance, Authenticity, and ‘Otherness.’” For one, Kelly specifically mentions how actors on The Wire are free to work against some of the performances that other black actors have ridden to success. Citing Robin Means Coleman’s work on the black situation comedy, she writes, “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’”

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According to Kelly, though, the actors on *The Wire*, including Idris Elba (Stringer Bell) and Jamie Hector (Marlo Stanfield), have shown a “reluctance to adopt the swaggering and ostentatious style of many of the neo-minstrel characters … as well as the stereotypical ‘ghetto’ gangsters depicted in more conventional television drama” (51). She argues that Elba, for example, is intentionally “understated” and “blends in” rather than standing out (51). Kelly also discusses Felicia “Snoop” Pearson, who plays the character of Snoop. Pearson plays a rather unique character – an androgynous member of the Stanfield drug crew with a “defiantly ambling gait” and a “distinctive, smoky voice with [an] undulating, often hard-to-follow Baltimore accent” (52). Kelly argues that “in mainstream roles, particularly within white programming, Pearson would be required to conform to more rigid characterizations, and perhaps lose some of the richness of her performance (or her ‘otherness’) in the process” (53).

The case can be made, though, that *The Wire* is not doing anything new within the crime genre when it comes to race and representation. Gibb and Sabin, for instance, examine the treatment of race in several popular crime shows that came before *The Wire*, including *Kojak, Hill Street Blues, Miami Vice* and *Homicide: Life on the Street*, and find that there was some precedence for the way representation is handled in *The Wire*. They argue that *Hill Street Blues*, for example, “was innovative for the way it utilized inter-racial partnerships and a racially integrated ensemble cast to address issues of policing in relation to male heroism – a structure that made it possible for the writers to base individual episodes largely around African-American characters” (11). *Homicide*, meanwhile, broke ground in depicting middle class black characters and incorporating inter-racial romantic elements. But absent from their discussion are many of the contemporary shows that *The Wire* is measured against – shows like *CSI* and *Cold Case*. While *The Wire* may have been drawing on elements from several shows that preceded it, it is
hard to identify a contemporary network show that deals with race in ways similar to *The Wire*. Gibb and Sabin also cannot help but point out that *The Wire*, being on HBO, was free of many of the constraints placed upon network television. “The fact that *The Wire* is an HBO show,” they write, “facilitates degrees of experimentation with the idea of ‘televisuality’ that would not be possible for more mainstream network fare” (14). Because of this freedom, the show could present a “more nuanced view of black urban experience” (14). Therefore, it appears that *The Wire*’s treatment of race differed from many other members of its genre. Thus, as far as representation is concerned, *The Wire* may have appeared realistic to its viewers not just because of its ability to appear neither mimaetically unrealistic nor simulacrally unrealistic, but also because it, again, deviated from generic norms.
Conclusion: The Text and the Extratextual

The Text

As season five of The Wire began and the show started to shift its attention to the city’s newspaper, The Baltimore Sun, the program was once again met with laudatory reviews. However, for the first time, a few critics began to question the show’s realism, particularly the authenticity of the depiction of The Sun. Melanie McFarland, of the Seattle Post-Intelligencer, called the show “one of the medium’s greatest” and mentioned its “uncompromising verisimilitude,” but wrote, “the newsroom scenes are the least successful of this season.” Aaron Barnhart of the Kansas City Star also had mixed words, arguing that like novelists striving for realism, show creator David Simon had created a world “often more authentic” than the real one, but called the journalism component of the season “more truthy than truthful.” The harshest words, though, came from Baltimore Sun television critic David Zurawik. Although Zurawik wrote that the show was “still one of the most daring dramas in the history of the medium,” he called the newsroom scenes “the Achilles’ heel of Season 5” and questioned the authenticity of the fictional Sun. More complaints appeared once the show premiered and other journalists began watching the show. New York magazine’s entertainment blog, for instance, discussed the show several times – arguing in one post that what was coming out of the show’s “mouth” sounded “like bullshit.”

There is more than one possible explanation for the slight change in reception. Perhaps, as these critics would argue, The Wire was doing something different when it came to its depiction of The Sun. Another possible explanation for the criticism is that the show’s treatment of the Sun is generally negative and, as one of the characters in the show says, paraphrasing
Mark Twain, “You don’t want to pick a fight with anyone who buys ink by the barrel.” But perhaps the most compelling explanation for some of the criticism is that season five marked the first time the show had dealt with a sector of society that television critics could fully weigh and measure. Most reviewers are unlikely to be familiar with the bureaucracy of a modern police force or the life of a young drug-dealer, but they are almost all inhabitants of a newsroom and employed by major media companies. At last, they could compare their own lives to what they were seeing on-screen and offer their perspective.

This explanation also would seem to strengthen the underlying argument of this thesis: that *The Wire* felt real to so many audiences not because of how accurately it depicted the life of a blue-collar port worker or whether or not it captured every last nuance of the gangbanger lifestyle, but rather because of several qualities inherent to the text as a whole, including its form, the emotions it elicited, as well as its treatment of representation. Important, too, is the fact that along all of these dimensions, the show differed from mainstream crime drama. Although it must be acknowledged that even the modern procedural behemoths like *CSI* and *Cold Case* are not entirely monolithic and offer their own moments of innovation and difference, *The Wire* has consistently set itself apart in several important areas detailed in the previous chapters. As HBO executives might argue, *The Wire* has offered something a bit different from the rest of its ilk. It may be because of these deviations that the show is often perceived as realistic.

However, as has been mentioned at several points in this thesis, there are additional features of the text that can also be explored. For example, while this thesis has been able to offer brief comparisons between *The Wire* and other crime shows, the door is open to more detailed side-by-side comparisons between *The Wire* and other crime shows. Another area that could be mined much further is that of representation. As Herman Gray argues, television shows
work across multiple levels of representation, including class, gender, race and sexuality, amongst others. In this thesis we have examined race and how other levels of representation, like class and sexuality, are depicted through the angle of race, but much more can be said about the show’s treatment of class, gender and sexuality and whether they might invoke a sense of realism in much the same way as race. Perhaps, though, the most compelling area of interest not fully examined in this thesis involves what happens in the world outside of the text.

**The Extratextual**

This thesis has argued that *The Wire* may have felt particularly realistic to much of its audience because of its textual properties. But this is not to say that the text is the only contributing factor to the show’s realism. If there is to be a more complete account of this phenomenon, interested scholars might also want to consider the extratextual and attempt to discern what forces might have been helping to drive the discourse surrounding the text. To that end, future work might examine some of the more prominent voices that are part of the discourse and that could potentially be shaping the way the show has been received. These forces, by advocating for the show’s realism and continually invoking notions of authenticity and verisimilitude, may further reinforce and legitimize the perceptions of realism that surround the show. Below, some potential candidates for further study are suggested.
The Auteur

Creating a Creator

On March 15, 2010, the *New York Times* published a feature by Wyatt Mason spotlighting David Simon’s new HBO show, *Treme*. Notably, the article was headlined “The HBO Auteur.” Although much of the article is concerned with the particular details of the new show, a recurring theme in the article is how Simon’s shows are definitively products of his creative vision. Mason notes that Simon “works on every script by every writer of every show he produces.” Richard Price, who worked as a writer on *The Wire*, is quoted by Mason as saying that Simon is the “single sensibility” behind each of his series. HBO executives refer to Simon, as the headline indicates, as an “auteur.” Although Mason mentions that a number of individuals contribute to each of the episodes, Simon’s point-of-view is prioritized and he is clearly given ownership of the show. *Treme*, like *The Wire*, is not considered HBO’s show, or even a collaborative effort, but entirely Simon’s show. *The New York Times* piece, too, is not the first article to treat Simon in this manner. Every chapter thus far has included at least one quote from Simon. Finding such quotes is not difficult; Simon has been interviewed by countless publications. Significantly, most interviews proceed with the assumption that Simon’s vision influenced every facet of the show – from the casting, to the filming, to the philosophy.

This sense of ownership is relatively unique in television – producers like Jerry Bruckheimer or Mark Burnett are often closely associated with their shows, but their creative visions are not necessarily emphasized. In other words, it is not assumed that their fingerprints are all over every plotline and every piece of dialogue. Occasionally, figures like Aaron Sorkin or Richard E. Kelley will be elevated to near-auteur status, but even then it is assumed that they are being somewhat constrained by the influences of other writers, producers and their networks.
At this point, the location of the show becomes relevant; Sorkin and Bruckheimer primarily operate within network television while Simon has worked with the premium cable channel HBO not only on *The Wire*, but also *Treme* and the miniseries *The Corner* and *Generation Kill*. HBO has long branded itself as something different than typical television – “not TV,” to be precise. Writing in *It’s Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era*, Marc Leverette argues that since its creation in 1972, “Home Box Office has continually attempted to redefine television as we know it, gaining a reputation for offering high quality original programming” and positioning itself as “an alternative to network offerings” (1). Meanwhile, in an analysis of HBO’s original dramas in *The Essential HBO Reader*, Christopher Anderson writes that HBO has encouraged its audiences to approach its shows with a unique sensibility and to arrive with “the cultivated expectation that watching certain television series requires and rewards the temperament, knowledge and protocols normally considered appropriate for encounters with museum-worthy works of art” (24). Anderson continues by writing that “the viewers of HBO dramas are permitted to detach themselves from typical modes of television viewing, to approach the state of disinterested contemplation idealized in Kantian aesthetics” (25).

Anderson goes further into detail regarding this “disinterested contemplation.” Under this mode of viewing, he argues that audiences are able to “to reflect on the meaning of form even as one feels drawn into the pleasure of a gradually unfolding narrative; to recognize the threads of cultural and historical references woven into the fabric of a story; to appreciate the subtle subversion of genre conventions and audience expectations; and, most importantly, to celebrate the transcendence of the artwork over everyday experience and more mundane forms of popular culture” (25). At this point, though, what is significant is that this mode of viewing also encourages audiences to “perceive the artistic vision of an individual creator where once one
may have seen stories with no discernible author” (25). Anderson goes on to explain that this new way of watching television was by no means unintentional, and instead, part of a costly and intensive marketing effort by the channel. In the case of the “auteurs,” “HBO promotes the creators of the drama series and encourages reporters to flesh out their biographies so that the public learns to identify the artistic vision of a single creator behind each series, no matter the scale and complexity of the production or the number of people involved in bringing it to the screen” (36). It is not hard to find examples. For example, HBO is currently running ads promoting *Treme* as the new show from David Simon. Similarly, the upcoming show *Boardwalk Empire* is being marketed as the product of Terrence Winter and Martin Scorsese. But the advertising of auteurs is not always so overt. As Anderson explains, the network encourages journalists to spotlight the creators. Articles like the one from *The New York Times* discussed above, as well as the many interviews with Simon, might be referred to as “earned media” within the public relations world. The network and its publicists, one might assume, are working to arrange the interviews and grant access to Simon. In the process, they not only build buzz for their shows, but also increasingly privilege his personality and his voice. This, then, serves to further his status as an auteur and also bolsters the network’s reputation as the home for television auteurs.

That HBO deliberately elevates the status of its shows’ creators might best be evidenced by comparing David Simon to David Chase, creator and producer of *The Sopranos*. Chase is usually given full ownership of *The Sopranos*, both by the popular press and by academics. In interviews, in feature articles and in scholarship, his voice is taken as the voice of the show. However, Chase was not considered an auteur for most of his television career. David Lavery and Robert J. Thompson, writing in the essay “David Chase, *The Sopranos*, and Television
Creativity,” note that throughout the many years Chase spent writing and producing for network television shows, “he remained largely anonymous” (19). However, once Chase moved to HBO he, like Simon, became an auteur. Anderson describes this transition: “David Chase has been a writer and producer in the television business for decades, but it is only with the Sopranos that we have grown accustomed to reading statements such as this from a writer on the series who is quoted in a cover article in Vanity Fair: ‘Every shot, every word, of The Sopranos is David in some way or another’” (37). Continuing, Anderson writes, “Although his name has appeared in television credits countless times since the 1970s,” it is only now that “he is acclaimed as an artist capable of placing his signature on every shot of a television series” (37). It is significant that in Lavery and Thompson’s essay, which is just one among many that use Chase’s words as source material, they are able to cite several different interviews with Chase. As with Simon, it can be assumed HBO was working to promote Chase as a creative voice bringing his visions to life on the network.

Framing The Wire

HBO, then, has managed to promote David Simon as an auteur, creating the sense that his vision completely shapes the world of The Wire. This has certain consequences. For one thing, his interviews take on an elevated importance. If he is considered the driving force behind everything that happens in the show, his thoughts on the show become harder to dismiss. At the very least, it can be assumed that they add to the discourse around the show and undoubtedly shape the way many viewers engage with the show. To that end, it is worth considering what themes Simon returns to again and again when being interviewed or profiled. First and foremost, it seems that Simon is interested in emphasizing what he considers to be the underlying message
of the show: that modern urban institutions are broken and wreak havoc on the lives of many individuals. He is rather explicit about this point and seems intent on ensuring that viewers do not miss what he sees as the thesis of the show. Simon also frequently talks about class and the media. In his interviews, he often is more interested in talking about societal concerns than television.

For the purposes of this project, though, it is particularly important that Simon frequently alludes to the realism of *The Wire*. Take, for instance, a quote from *The New Yorker* used in the first chapter. “These are the faces you don’t see on television,” he says regarding the show’s use of non-actors, “the faces and voices of the real city” (Talbot). Similarly, regarding the use of relatively unknown professional performers, Simon says that it helps avoid throwing “viewers right off their sense of *The Wire* as a documentarian exercise” (Talbot). Often, Simon emphasizes the accuracy of *The Wire*. “The music they’re listening to,” Simon says in a *New York Times* article about the show’s music, “is the hip-hop they’re listening to in Baltimore” (Caramanica). In his interview with Nick Hornby, he criticizes the bulk of mainstream television for using “dialogue that simplifies and mitigates against the idiosyncratic ways in which people in different worlds actually communicate.” Therefore, Simon is framing his show in a particular way – not just as a societal critique, but also a “real” depiction of Baltimore life.

**The Scholars**

“*The Academic Love Affair*”

For the past several years, *The Wire* has received an impressive amount of attention from those within academia. As Drake Bennett notes in the *Slate* article “This Will Be on the Midterm. You Feel Me?” “Academics … can't seem to get enough of *The Wire.*” The evidence
of this fixation is widespread. For one, the show has been the subject of a number of conferences and conference panels. As an example, Bennett points to a 2009 symposium at the University of Michigan entitled “Heart of the City: Black Urban Life on The Wire.” But it is also worth noting that the interest in conferences has even spread across the Atlantic. The ESRC Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change at the University of Manchester in England hosted a two-day conference entitled “The Wire as Social Science Fiction?” That particular conference featured almost 50 papers about the show, most of them authored by British scholars. Secondly, the show has also yielded anthologies as well as special editions of academic journals. Previous chapters of this thesis, for instance, have cited several essays from Tiffany Potter and C.W. Marshall’s The Wire: Urban Decay and American Television. Finally, a number of colleges – including Harvard, UC Berkeley, Duke, and Middlebury – have started offering courses devoted to the show. The Berkeley course, for example, was taught by Linda Williams under the title “What’s So Great About The Wire?” According to the course description, students, amongst other things, read pieces of David Simon’s print journalism and compare the show to Greek Tragedy, Charles Dickens’s Bleak House and the work of Balzac. Students, the course description explains, “try to discover what was and is so great about The Wire.”

The Wire as a Case Study

Scholars tend to bring their own interests to bear on The Wire, so the critical work surrounding the show has been varied. However, there are some recurring elements within much of the scholarship. For instance, there has been a particular fascination with the character of Omar. The show’s structure, examined in chapter one, has also been referred to frequently. And, again, the show’s supposed realism is often mentioned. Many of the comments regarding
the show’s realism are uncritical asides that hardly differ from the writings of the television critics. For example, in the introduction to their book, C.W. Marshall and Tiffany Potter write that one of the things that distinguishes *The Wire* “is an authenticity that bleeds through the screen” (10). Similarly, Ash Sharma opens up a special issue of the journal *darkmatter* focusing on *The Wire* by writing, “The unfolding of a complex urban reality has been central to the series attracting such a passionate ‘underground’ audience and in producing interminable discussions” (2).

But more powerful than these brief statements singling out the show for its realism has been the willingness by scholars to approach the show not as a work of fiction, but rather as a snapshot of reality. In the *Slate* article, Bennett points out that classes on *The Wire* “aren't just in film studies or media studies departments; they're turning up in social science disciplines as well, places where the preferred method of inquiry is the field study or the survey.” In these new social science classes, professors are treating the show as a case study of issues like institutional racism and poverty. Furthermore, the professors are not necessarily bashful about using the show as a case study. *The Harvard Crimson* quoted Sociology Professor William J. Wilson, who is teaching a seminar on *The Wire*, as saying, “*The Wire* has done more to enhance our understanding of the systemic urban inequality that constrains the lives of the poor than any published study” (Garlock). Bennett also talks to Wilson. “You want to talk about it being fiction, call it fiction,” Wilson tells Bennett, “but it shows incredible imagination and understanding about the way the world works, and for me that's enough.”

It must be mentioned, though, that not all scholars approach the show like Wilson does. As Bennett writes, several media scholars have pointed out that “treating the show simply as a look into the intricacies of the American inner city is incomplete.” To that end, Bennett
interviews Jason Mittell, a media scholar who teaches a class on *The Wire* at Middlebury. Bennett writes: “Mittell argues that for all its vaunted realism *The Wire* still has a particular audience in mind, and that audience shapes the sort of stories the show tells and the way it tells them.” To that end, Mittell examines what gets included in the show and what does not. For example, Mittell thinks it is notable that rape is largely absent from the show. Nevertheless, that there are so many scholars ready to either praise the show for its realism or treat the show much like a documentary is significant. More specifically, the enthusiasm of intellectuals seems to add a degree of legitimacy to any claims regarding the show’s realism.

**The Critics**

Academics may have a key role in legitimizing the perceptions of realism surrounding *The Wire*, but, thus far, the writings of television critics have been used as the main evidence that *The Wire* has been received as a particularly realistic piece of television. After all, their writing is much easier to track than that of the average viewer. However, something might be said regarding the particular incentive critics have to praise the show’s realism and to repeatedly circulate this reading of the show. Much of this motive has to do with the unique position of the television critic. As Amanda Lotz argues in the essay, “On ‘Television Criticism’: The Pursuit of the Critical Examination of a Popular Art,” “The job and mission of those called television critics differs substantially from other forms of artistic criticism” (20). Lotz explains that much of this difference is due to the unique responsibilities with which the typical television critic is tasked. Most television critics, for example, have to cover industry maneuverings in addition to reviewing new shows. However, the singular nature of the television critic is also related to the way television is perceived. Quite simply, television has less cultural capital than media like
literature, theatre and art. Both among general audiences and academics, it is hard to even argue that film and television are placed on the same plane. Anderson argues that television has long been considered an inferior medium amongst cultural critics, both those employed as journalists and those working within academia. While he acknowledges that critics have long tried to claim artistic merit for individual series “that appeared to transcend the constraints of the medium or to make a dramatic leap forward in the development of a particular genre … there hasn’t been a consensus that television series ought to be treated as legitimate works of art” (25). Until recently, he writes, “commercial television, when not an object of derision, was at best a guilty pleasure for intellectuals” (26). It would not be surprising, then, if television critics were suffering from a bit of an inferiority complex.

However, as Anderson’s statements imply, television has been able to gain more respect in recent years. According to Anderson, HBO has been a large part of this change. Again, marketing is key, and it entails more than just the slogan “It’s Not TV, It’s HBO.” HBO, Anderson argues, “distinguishes its brand by cultivating an aura of artistic achievement” (37). One prime example is the aforementioned marketing of its show creators. Anderson writes, “In its avid promotion of those who have created its drama series, HBO has enhanced the value of its brand while also contributing to a more widespread discourse of authorship in television.” Citing Pierre Bourdieu’s assertion that the “the belief in the artistic vision of a sole creator – ‘is the ultimate basis for belief in the value of the work of art,’” Anderson argues that HBO’s emphasis on its shows’ creators has made it increasingly possible to consider television as art” (37). And there are more examples, too, of HBO indirectly promoting itself as art. Recently, HBO premiered the World War II miniseries *The Pacific*. In addition to standard print and video advertising featuring scenes from the show, there was also a wave of press in the form of feature
articles and interviews, much of it mentioning the show’s high production values and emphasizing the show’s historical accuracy.

The efforts of HBO, then, have worked to add prestige to the medium – and, indirectly, to the role of the television critic. This is not to say, though, that the critics do not have their own role to play in the aggrandizement of HBO, specifically, and television, more generally. Anderson cites Bourdieu’s concept of “social alchemy” in order to make the argument that the elevation of HBO into art involves both HBO’s marketing and the reception of its marketing by a fervent press. That is to say, television critics have been eager to pass along HBO’s assertions that it is creating art because critics have their own interest in “contributing to the belief that certain television series are candidates for aesthetic appreciation” (38). Not only does the press’s endorsement of HBO programming as art potentially attract younger audiences eager to read about True Blood, for example, but it also reaffirms cultural critics as a sort of gatekeeper able to differentiate among different types of television. That is to say, the television critic becomes more essential if they are able to differentiate between “legitimate candidates for aesthetic appreciation” and illegitimate ones (Anderson 38). By being able to praise HBO for its more “artistic” qualities, this task becomes easier.

Realism might be another dimension by which critics attempt to differentiate between “legitimate works of art” and illegitimate ones. Recalling Hallam and Marshment’s assertion that “realism” has long been code for “good,” especially when contrasted against the melodrama, this hypothesis does not seem far-fetched (22). This hypothesis might also be supported by the fact that The Wire is not the first HBO show that the “realistic” label has been attached to. While not all HBO shows strive for verisimilitude, The Sopranos, Band of Brothers, The Corner, Generation Kill and The Pacific have all been highly praised for their realism. Here it is possible
to re-use a *New York Times* review of *The Sopranos* that Anderson singles out as evidence of the recently elevated status of television. The reviewer, Stephen Holden, writes, “*The Sopranos* sustains a hyper-realism with an eye and ear so perfectly attuned to geographic details and cultural and social nuances that it just may be the greatest work of American popular culture of the last quarter century” (23). Here, too, it is worth keeping in mind Anderson’s contention that critics are not hesitant to repeat HBO’s publicity. Given David Simon’s proclivity for mentioning the authenticity of his show, it might follow that critics are inclined both to believe him and to further circulate his assertions that the show is realistic.

**Closing Thoughts**

On April 11, HBO will premiere the aforementioned *Treme*. While it is too early to know how most television critics will receive the show, Joshua Alston’s early review in *Newsweek* might end up being indicative. Alston’s review revolves around the concept of realism and its importance within David Simon’s oeuvre. “Authenticity,” he writes, “has become the linchpin of Simon’s work.” Simon, he argues, is defined by “his affinity for obsessively researched detail and his authenticity-über-alles ethos.” Writing on *The Wire*, more specifically, Alston declares, “With *The Wire*, [Simon] created a dystopian simulacrum of Baltimore so sprawling and ambitious that it’s often (and justifiably) called the best television ever.” While Alston finds that *Treme* “fits neatly into the Simonian tradition,” he finds himself disappointed with the show. Alston, it seems, does not think *Treme* lives up to its “chief ambition” of capturing the “authentic essence” of New Orleans. Most problematically, Alston notes that the characters feel less like people than “walking ambassadors for the most esoteric details of NOLA culture.” *Treme*, then, cannot match the total realism of *The Wire*. 
Alston’s assessment – that *Treme* is less realistic than *The Wire* – is particularly intriguing given that many of the features that defined *The Wire* – and have formed the basis for this thesis – seem likely to appear again in *Treme*. The most notable similarity involves personnel. Like *The Wire*, *Treme* will have the “single sensibility” of David Simon. It, too, will feature some of the same producers and writers, such as George Pelecanos and the late David Mills. But the similarities appear to go deeper. As in *The Wire*, many minor roles will be filled by non-actors. As in *The Wire*, most of the shooting is on location. Because many of *Treme*’s directors also shot episodes of *The Wire*, it might be speculated that the camerawork will be similar, too. If one is to judge by the trailers, there is every indication that the show will be structured similarly and strike the same tone. It is too early to know what emotions the show will elicit or how it will treat representation, but there are indications *Treme* will follow in *The Wire*’s footsteps. *Treme*’s cast, like *The Wire*’s, contains a large number of African Americans. And if *The New York Times* article mentioned above is a reliable source, then it looks as though viewers will again see black perspectives emphasized.

Because of the many similarities, Alston’s review feels strange; one would not assume *Treme*’s most notable weakness would be its authenticity. Of course, there are some differences between the show that should be noted that might play into its perceived lack of realism. Perhaps most significantly, *Treme* is not a crime drama. Separating itself, then, from mainstream genre fare will be more difficult. In *Treme* audiences will again see the faces of actors Clarke Peters and Wendell Pierce in major roles. As was mentioned in chapter one, the theater background of Clarke Peters was significant; *The Wire* intentionally cast actors and actresses rarely seen on American television. It appears *Treme*, for the most part, will not continue this trend. Melissa Leo, an Oscar nominee, is in a key role. Also in major roles are John Goodman
and Steve Zahn, both of whom have appeared in a number of Hollywood blockbusters. In another continuing role is Rob Brown, star of *The Express* and *Finding Forrester*. And this is not to mention that Peters and Pierce have now become closely connected to their roles in *The Wire*. Another notable difference is the setting. *The Wire* took place in Baltimore, which Simon himself has called a relatively anonymous setting and one that few others have been interested in. *Treme*, though, will be set in post-Katrina New Orleans, which was arguably the center of the nation’s attention for some time. Moreover, as Alston writes, post-Katrina New Orleans “has become the civics nerd’s favorite fishbowl.” While there has not been another television drama set there yet, a few popular documentaries arose have attempted to capture New Orleans as it coped with Katrina, including *Trouble the Water* and Spike Lee’s *When the Levees Broke*, another HBO product. Most audiences, then, might have a familiarity with the setting of *Treme* that they did not have with *The Wire*.

But Alston’s review might be indicative of a phenomenon that goes beyond these differences; it seems that *The Wire* might have established the bar by which televisual realism is measured. It is significant that a show that resembles *The Wire* in so many ways cannot match it – this might just indicate that *The Wire* will forever be unmatchable. If this one of the legacies of the show, then this thesis will have been all the more important. This thesis has attempted to address the lack of critical examination of praise like “realistic” and “authentic.” More specifically, it has attempted to tackle the why *The Wire* felt so real to so many people. If *The Wire* does becomes the standard of realism, then discerning the source of these feelings is a necessity.
Bibliography


