“CAN’T KNOCK THE HUSTLE:” THE MODERNIZATION OF THE GANGSTER IMAGE IN “THE WIRE”

A Thesis
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By

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A special thanks to my thesis mentor for the dedication and help.

For my Mom and Dad
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Introduction

Streaks of blood line the pavement. Blue lights from a police car reflect off the blood’s surface. The noise of sirens and barking dogs fill the night. The dead body of an unidentified man lies face down with a large gunshot wound in the back. A detective picks up a bullet casing in plastic gloved hands and deposits it in a tiny bag for evidence. Black girls in light jackets sit on a stoop watching the scene. A patrol officer writes out a report. Detective Jimmy McNulty and a man talk on a stoop close to the dead body.

MCNULTY. So, your boy’s name is what?

MAN. Snot

MCNULTY. You call the guy, Snot?

MAN. Snot Boogie, yeah.

MCNULTY. Snot Boogie? You like the name?

MAN. What?

MCNULTY. Snot Boogie.

MAN. (Shrugs)

MCNULTY. The kid whose mamma went to the trouble to christen him “Omar Isaiah Betts?” You know, he forgets his jacket, so his nose starts runnin,’ and some asshole, instead of giving him a Kleenex, he calls him “Snot.” So, he’s “Snot” forever. Doesn’t seem fair.

MAN. Life just be that way, I guess.

MCNULTY. So, who shot Snot?
MAN. I ain’t goin to no court. The motherfucker ain’t have to put no cap in him, though.

MCNULTY. Definitely not.

MAN. I mean, he coulda just whipped his ass like we always whip his ass.

MCNULTY. I agree with you.

MAN. He gonna kill Snot. Snot be doin’ the same shit since I don’t know how long. Kill a man over some bullshit. Look, I’m sayin.’ I mean, every Friday night, in the alley behind the cut rate, we rollin’ bones, you know. I mean all the boys from around the way. We roll till late.

MCNULTY. Like every crap game, right?

MAN. Like every time. He’s Snot. He’ll fade a few shooters. Play it out till the pots deep. Snatch and run.

MCNULTY. What, every time?

MAN. Couldn’t help hisself.

MCNULTY. Let me understand ya. Every Friday night, you and your boys would shoot crap, right? And every Friday night, your pal, Snot Boogie, he’d wait till there was cash on the ground, then he’d grab the money and run away? You’d let him do that?

MAN. I mean, we’d catch em’ and beat his ass, but ain’t nobody never go past that.
MCNULTY. I gotta ask ya. If every time Snot Boogie would grab the money and run away, why’d ya even let him in the game?

MAN. What?

MCNULTY. Snot Boogie always stole the money. Why’d ya let him play?

MAN. Got to. This America, man. (“The Target”)

The above scene takes place in the first episode of The Wire, a television series on the Home Box Office (HBO) channel that aired between 2002 and 2008. The scene is a microcosm of what the show attempts to accomplish on a larger scale: The Wire, in various ways, gives voice to the black working/lower class and the inner city black youth, presenting their perspectives on a range of issues, including their interpretations of what America represents to them. Similar to McNulty coming to a slow understanding of the man’s way of thinking, the viewer is gradually exposed to the mindset of a continuum of characters extending from the gangsters on the street to the politicians in office. The show, additionally, works to create for the viewer moments of understanding like McNulty’s, where different perspectives and interpretations can be fathomed.

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1 My use of the term “viewer” is based upon Wayne Booth’s Structuralist idea of the “implied reader.” The viewer, like the implied reader, “is not just a flesh-and-blood individual but also a cultural construct of the text, a complex, overdetermined function whose perceptions (and conceptions) are positioned and determined by the style and ideology of any given film or television show” (Pearson and Simpson 465). Furthermore: “[T]his notion implies that the viewer automatically identifies with the camera and/or a character […]” (465). In my argument, I will demonstrate how the gangster film(s) and The Wire repeatedly call the viewer’s attention to the implied reader or viewer in their gangster representations. This functions as a unique means of communication with the viewer that exposes the inherent ideologies and power structures associated with depictions of the gangster image.
An urban crime drama that focuses on the inner city drug trade in Baltimore, Maryland, *The Wire* details the rise and fall of two main gangster groups throughout its five seasons: the first led by Avon Barksdale (Wood Harris) and Stringer Bell (Idris Elba) in seasons one through three and the second led by Marlo Stanfield (Jamie Hector) in seasons three through five. The show, while gangster-centric, also portrays a number of different facets that comprise the city of Baltimore as a whole and that connect in their own particular ways with the gangsters and their drug trade. Such facets include: the police department, docks, city government, inner city schools, and major city newspaper, *The Baltimore Sun*.

The police department receives a significant amount of attention in *The Wire* primarily because of its direct involvement with and influence upon the gangsters. From the local beat cop all the way up to the commissioner, the police department impresses its authority upon the gangsters and their drug trade: the daily shakedowns of the kids dealing drugs on the street corners force them to improvise and adapt their “slingin’” and the brief institution of “Hamsterdam” – the legal sale and consumption of drugs in a quarantined space – instigates a change in how the gangsters market, supply, and sell their drugs. The other aspects of the show reveal distinct associations with the gangsters and the conditions of inner city life: the importation of the drug supply through the docks; a succession of failed inner city improvement plans coupled with corrupt leaders in city hall who doom the prospects of any change once genuine, well-meaning officials come to office; a small group of talented, dedicated teachers trying to make due with the imperfect system in which they work while also struggling to keep the students from
selling drugs on the street corners; accurate, reliable reporting on inner city life in the face of severe job cutbacks and un-credible writers and editors. Each aspect builds upon one another as the show progresses and further illuminates the structure and condition of Baltimore in its entirety. Jacob Weisberg, a writer for Slate, sums up the ambit of the show: “Its protagonist is the broken American city of Baltimore, depicted with obsessive verisimilitude and affectionate rage.” Besides providing a complete picture of all the different aspects that go into creating, perpetuating, and exacerbating the inner city drug problem, The Wire also endeavors to provide a complete picture of the gangsters themselves.

The gangsters, while committing or authorizing numerous murders, also display a keen business savvy and go as far as structuring their gangs on a corporate model. Indeed, a corporate/business mentality pervades the whole inner city drug culture: those in the drug business, including everyone from dealers to “fiends” (i.e. drug users), refer to it as “the game,” and acknowledge and abide by (most of the time) its strict set of codes and rules that determine everything from what gang gets to sell drugs on what corner and who does and does not advance up in rank in the gangs’ hierarchies. Despite the ensuing effects of the drug business (e.g. murders, addicted fiends, and general crime and unrest), the reasoning behind the game complicates simplistic explanations and value judgments. The viewer, for example, sees that the plights of the inner city black youth in the squalor of dilapidated housing projects and in the custody of drug-addicted parents practically force them to join the rank and file of the gangs – this offers the viewer one of many
insights into the intricate problems of the inner city and an opportunity to perhaps perceive those problems in a new light.

The Wire’s representation of the gangsters, however original, complex, and nuanced, actually derives from a larger, historical-cultural context of gangster representations that begins with cinema’s burgeoning development in the early twentieth century. In my study, I am going to specifically concentrate on how the show represents this gangster image, determining how it fits into the long line of past gangster representations. As there has been, relatively speaking, a paucity of academic scholarship on The Wire, this study will initiate critical discussion of the series. Before closely analyzing The Wire itself, I want to first outline the show’s historical-cultural context, which includes an examination of the classic gangster film of the 1920s and the Hood film of the 1990s. As I sketch out the critical dialogue concerning both types of films, I want to make some connections between each of them and demonstrate how those kinds of film relate to The Wire. I am expressly interested in how and why filmic representations of the gangster image exhibit a relationship to “reality” and the individual viewer. I argue that portraying the gangster image, whether in film or on television, becomes more about manipulating that image through form as different gangster representations emerge – The Wire works within this paradigm. A brief investigation of the classic gangster film and Hood film will help to discern how The Wire contributes in its own way to the larger cultural nexus of gangster representations.

The gangster image dates back to the advent of the gangster film cycle with the silent-era of the 1910s and the (talking) classic gangster films of the 1920s. The silent era
recognizes and establishes a relationship between film and reality/film and viewer that persists throughout the gangster film’s development in the twentieth century. Benshoff and Griffin delineate the rise of the first theaters and films, while also describing the socio-economic ties among filmic entertainment, actors, and viewers of the time. Film’s origins begin with the “nickelodeons” – small store-like theaters – and their primarily ethnic lower/working class locations, viewers, and films. The established American middle class – the purported guardians of America’s morals and values – assumed the role of cultural critics and censors who maligned the nickelodeons (including their viewers and films) for their “baseness” and who eventually employed the silent gangster film to perpetuate their ideology expressly concerning the status of ethnic lower/working class Americans. The filmic gangster was mostly an ethnic lower/working class character, either Irish or Italian American, and, during the silent era, his voice and actions were subjected to the control of critics and censors. The control exerted over the gangster image was a method for confronting society’s volatility, generated, in part, by the inundation of immigrants into America. The transition to the sound era, though, undermined any absolute control over the gangster image, and, hence, over viewer interpretation as well.

During the sound era, the gangster, by talking, transformed into an image of sedition and rebellion. As Jonathan Munby relates, the talking gangster revealed his ethnicity, which facilitated the alignment of his viewpoint with that of a large segment of viewers. The talking gangster’s actions, furthermore, created uneasiness in critics and censors lest the gangster image start to appeal too greatly to the viewer: the sound era,
similar to the silent, reflected reality in so much as it portrayed current events, and the
talking gangster’s illegal or “illegitimate” response to the effects of such events fashioned
him into an image of rebellion. In direct contrast to the traditional Horatio Alger, “rags to
riches” narrative, the talking gangster represents a skewed version of the American
dream: his illegitimate actions, while the cause of his success, also ultimately undercut
his rise in status and wealth. Despite the gangster “demise” narrative and Hollywood’s
self-censorship with the Production Code, or “Hays Code,” of 1930 and the revised
Production Code of 1934 (the “Seal of Approval”), talking gangster films continued to
thrive. In addition, the classic gangster films, exemplified by The Public Enemy (1931),
solidified the characteristics associated with both the silent and sound eras – the close
relationship between the gangster image and its representation to reality and the viewer –
that provided a basis for later gangster film cycles, including the Hood film.

From its origins in the 1920s to its more modern articulation in the form of the
Hood film in 1990s, the gangster image, Jack Shadoian contends, underwent “changes of
degree rather than kind” and that certain tropes, as the years went by, were “inscribed in
the genre, never to disappear” (15). In the early 1990s, the Hood film developed into a
significant gangster film cycle that, in a complex way, reformulated the characteristics of
the classic gangster film. It seems, initially, that the Hood film just updates the
characteristics of the classic gangster film for a modern context: the gangster as a young
African American male, the crime as the drug trade, and the location as the inner city or
“hood.” After examining in detail this modernization, however, I want to show how the
Hood film actually retains a much more complicated relationship to its historical-cultural
context: it refashions the characteristics of the classic gangster film in reaction to and
against the gangster image’s growing awareness in mainstream society and its
exploitation by the corporate/media.

The Hood film’s gangster image begins with the historical-cultural context of the
postindustrial inner city’s impact on the black working/lower class and its effects on the
configuration of black youth culture. Due to significant de-industrialization in the latter
half of the twentieth century, as Mark Anthony Neal writes about, major American cities
lost crucial jobs and experienced general economic downturn, with some of the hardest
hit the black working/lower class located in the inner city areas. The introduction of crack
cocaine furthered the demise of the postindustrial inner city as both an illegal, though
efficacious, way to make money and as a way to manage life in such a destitute
environment. According to S. Craig Watkins, the media also exacerbated the problems of
the black working/lower class by representing them as an “underclass” and as the
“dangerous class,” which contributed to their general portrayal of the postindustrial inner
city as a “spectacle.” The black working/lower class, or, more exactly, the inner city
black youth, confronted the adversities of the postindustrial inner city and the media’s
biased coverage by creating the distinct art form of hip-hop culture.

Hip-hop culture, Tricia Rose elucidates, originally included a variety of artistic
forms like breakdancing and graffiti, but its most lasting manifestation came with the
development of rap music. From its infancy, rap music confronted a host of issues
affecting the black working/lower class and the inner city black youth that later arose in
the Hood film: the crack cocaine epidemic, police intervention, and corporate/media
exploitation. With its outgrowth into the gangsta subgenre, rap music embraced the gangster image as a method of subversion and rebellion; however, its practitioners also wanted to capitalize on its gradually building popularity, which, of course, unsettled its rebellious foundation (especially so when corporations and the media sought to exploit the rebelliousness of rap music and society’s fascination with the postindustrial inner city). While rap music’s history of managing its conflict of interests remains intriguing and important, I want to only focus on its beginning stages in order to outline the historical-cultural context of the Hood film and to note their similarity of issues. Because of its different medium than rap music, the Hood film confronts those issues through its own methods.

The Hood film, similar to the classic gangster film, struggled with external control and censorship in its depiction of the gangster image. As rap music evinces, the gangster image produced by black youth culture stemmed from a plethora of real issues affecting the black/working lower class like the crack cocaine epidemic, police intervention, and corporate/media exploitation. Kenneth Chan notes how black filmmakers, though ceding complete artistic and creative license to Hollywood, still found a way to render the gangster image that would also articulate their concerns about those real issues of life in the postindustrial inner city. Like the classic gangster film, the Hood film, I argue, communicates with the viewer on a level beyond its basic content. The Hood film, though, displays a much more heightened self-awareness than the classic gangster film; it recognizes the gangster image’s loaded connotations and its ability to function as a source of rebellion and exploitation. As I will make a case through *New Jack City* (1991),
the Hood film understands that the only way to be innovative with the gangster image (and to circumvent external control and censorship) is to manipulate form, which actually offers a critique of corporate/media’s exploitation of the gangster image.

In my analysis of The Wire, I argue that the show takes the characteristics of the classic gangster and Hood film – the correspondence to reality and the incorporation of the viewer – and expands upon them. In its adherence to reality, The Wire attempts to integrate “authentic” elements (e.g. street knowledgeable actors and actresses and Baltimore dialect), but it also simultaneously questions the notion of authenticity throughout its content and form. The show reveals in its depiction of the Barksdale gang and the police department that concerns over a “true” identity lead to conflict and a struggle for power. The main camera uses the surveillance apparatus (i.e. the surveillance camera and monitor) to lend an element of realism to its representations and to draw the viewer further into the show; however, the main camera too exposes how the surveillance apparatus, in its appearance of realism, actually functions within a power structure that positions the viewer in the role of authority. By focusing on its content and one of its formal components, I argue that The Wire provides the viewer with an opportunity to understand the underlying flaws of its display of authenticity and notice how the gangster image can be subsequently manipulated.
Chapter 1

The Classic Gangster Film

In the early twentieth century, before the introduction of plush “movie palaces,” Americans primarily patronized nickelodeons for filmic entertainment. The nickelodeons were located in ethnic lower/working class neighborhoods, likewise attracting the denizens of such areas. Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin state:

During the 1910s, cinema was commonly regarded in the United States as entertainment for immigrants and the working class. Some middle-to-upper-class white Americans felt that cinema was potentially a disturbing social institution that promoted “dangerous” ideas to the lower classes, and thus many local and state censorship boards began to monitor the content of films. (35)

The films shown in the nickelodeons catered to the alleged “tastes” of the ethnic lower/working class, depicting various “crude” images of “cockfights, boxing matches, female exotic dancers, muscle men, and city street scenes” (163). The nickelodeons, on account of their locations, viewers, and films, received scathing criticism from the media, which furnished the upper/middle class with a basis for condemnation. Benshoff and Griffin remark: “White middle-class Americans were told that villainy, alcoholism, and drug use occurred in nickelodeons, and that women could be accosted and even kidnapped in such places. Middle-class reformers began to target nickelodeons as dens of iniquity that needed to be shut down” (165). Despite the “condition” of the nickelodeons,
critics and censors managed to exercise some control over them, which partly stemmed from the influence of the silent gangster film.

The silent gangster film first introduced the gangster as an Irish or Italian lower/working class character, which offered critics and censors an occasion for taking advantage of the gangster image. The media in the early twentieth century greatly stigmatized both Irish and Italian Americans by signifying them as “other” in their “nativist” ideology. Benshoff and Griffin assert:

Conveniently forgetting their own recent resettlement from Europe, a number of American citizens rallied around the new cause of Nativism: that ‘America should be for Americans’ and not for foreigners. Laws were passed in various states restricting immigration, denying voting rights, and prohibiting Irish American citizens from holding elective office. (58)

The media also denigrated Irish and Italian Americans because of their physical appearance, even sometimes comparing them to African Americans. “Speeches, newspaper editorials, and political cartoons often described Irish Americans as barely human: they were represented as small, hairy, apelike creatures with a propensity for violence, drunkenness, and unchecked sexual impulses,” cite Benshoff and Griffin. “Similar descriptions were used for African Americans during these years, and comparisons were often made between the two groups” (58). Italian Americans suffered similar treatment from the media: they were depicted as “having darker skin tones, thick curly hair, and little to no education” (63). Despite Irish Americans’ attempts at
assimilation into American society by emphasizing their “whiteness” (sometimes through the entertainment of “blackface”), they, along with Italian Americans, were continually viewed as other, especially through the (silent) gangster image.

The silent gangster film demonstrates anxiousness on the part of critics and censors about the steady influx of immigrants into America, and the (silent) gangster image was something that could be utilized to circumscribe the “dangerous” effects of the growing immigrant population. Jonathan Munby notes: “In the context of Prohibition (1920-1933), pre-Crash (1929) silent-era gangster films (as well as popular press representations) were part of a general middle-class moral crusade to both redeem and stigmatize the ethnic ghetto” (5). Further on, Munby articulates more specifically the reasons behind the distorted representations of the “ethnic ghetto,” and, by extension, its immigrant inhabitants: “This translation of ghetto realities into a Victorian nativist middle-class fantasy of ‘how the other half lives’ was, equally, a way of defusing the unsettling forces of immigration, industrialization, urbanization, and consumerism” (5).

Beyond the broad, distorted representations of the ethnic ghetto, the (silent) gangster image localized efforts to control the “unsettling forces” of society in fluctuation.

As cinema developed in the 1910s and 1920s, it strove to become a more attractive form of entertainment to the wealthier middle-class: the old nickelodeons were supplanted by more elaborate, finely wrought movie palaces that had “marble foyers, crystal chandeliers, and curtained boxes” that “helped elevate the status of film to something closer to that of live theater” (Munby 35). Though cinema gradually transformed into a more “respectable” form of entertainment, the gangster image actually
evaded the growing interference and control exerted over it, turning into an image of sedition and rebellion. With cinema’s technological development in the realm of sound in the mid to late 1920s, the silent gangster film morphed into the talking gangster film and that change altered the gangster image.

The ability of the gangster to speak decidedly diminished the control critics and censors maintained over the gangster image. “The talking gangster, as it were, took advantage of one of the few places granted in the culture for the representation of lower-class ethnic American life,” details Munby. “A space of cultural containment and ideological manipulation turned into something more rebellious” (5). Most notably, the gangster, by talking, called attention to his particular ethnicity, which highlighted his marginalized status in society: “[W]henever the gangster speaks he reveals that this American’s story is delivered from a very specific cultural space. His accent frames his desire for success within a history of struggle over national identity” (Munby 44). This fostered a shift in the viewer’s perspective: the silent era gangster film was shot from an “outside looking in” perspective that promoted a critical stance toward the gangster; however, the new version of the gangster, by talking, repositioned the viewer in alignment with his perspective. About the impact of the talking gangster film, Munby affirms: “No longer was the underworld story to be told exclusively from the socially reforming nativist perspective” (47). After the shift in the viewer’s perspective, the gangster image became seditious and rebellious, and the gangster’s actions on film only intensified its defiance of outside interference and control.
The talking gangster film, from its origins, correlated with reality in so far as it reflected the current events of the time: Prohibition (1919-1933), the Wall Street Crash (1929), and the Great Depression (1929-1941). The talking gangster countered the effects of these social and economic disasters through lawless actions, which multiplied the fears of critics and censors lest the gangster image start to appeal too greatly to the viewer. In some ways, the talking gangster of film recasted in only a slightly different light the actual gangster of real life. Munby succinctly defines the impact of the real life gangster on his filmic counterpart:

This moratorium [Hays’ 1935 restriction on the gangster film] was motivated ostensibly by the concurrent media fascination surrounding the outlaw-gangster John Dillinger’s escapades and his death in 1934. Fear about the romanticization of Dillinger in particular proffered yet another opportunity to demand the suppression of the general representation of gangsters. (20)

Both the real life and filmic gangster’s actions interfaced with the ethnic lower/working class viewer: the gangster image embodied an “untraditional” or even illegitimate version of the Horatio Alger, rags to riches narrative. Horatio Alger, a one-time New England minister, wrote dime novels that propagated a narrative typically featuring poor, lower class characters who eventually rise in economic and social standing through hard work and diligence – the basic formula of the American Dream (Benshoff and Griffin 164-65). The talking gangster, however, questioned the basic formula of the American Dream. His desperate actions exhibited the impracticality of the American Dream for most ethnic
lower/working class Americans; the un-tenability of his rise to riches indicated the reluctance of some to legitimize those same ethnic lower/working class Americans. Jack Shadoian elucidates this ideological conflict of the talking gangster film:

Central to the substratum of the gangster/crime film is its exposition of two fundamental and opposing American ideologies. There is an inherent contradiction in American thought between America as a land of opportunity and the vision of a classless, democratic society. Both beliefs are deeply held, and the contradiction cannot be resolved […] The gangster is a vehicle to expose this central problem of the American people. (5)

By examining one of the (talking) classic gangster films – The Public Enemy (1931) – the ideological conflict inherent in the gangster image can be exposed, along with the common characteristics associated with the classic gangster film.

The Public Enemy recounts the story of Tom Powers (James Cagney) and Matt Doyle’s (Edward Woods) lives of crime during Prohibition, where, from an early age, they apprehend the benefits and allure that come from breaking the law. Tom and Matt start committing various petty crimes as young boys, like stealing from department stores, when their mischief eventually escalates to the point of murdering a policeman during a robbery attempt. After evading the ensuing manhunt for them, Tom and Matt unite with bootlegger Paddy Ryan (Robert Emmett O’Connor) and find economic success by engaging in the lucrative business of smuggling alcohol during Prohibition. Tom
avails himself of the opportunity of moving up in the gang’s hierarchy by “flexing his muscles” and taking by force everything he wants, though he eventually loses everything he gains when a rival gang kills him.

The Public Enemy transposes the “real world” concerns of the time onto the screen, aligning the plight of its ethnic lower/working class character struggling to survive with the situation of most of its viewers. Munby observes: “Public Enemy’s narrative is an attempt at documentary realism that follows a real chronological ‘historical’ time frame and tries to locate its protagonist in a real social space” (51). The film puts Tom in a real world time frame by juxtaposing the maturation of his criminal life with societal developments, almost suggesting that the former derives from the latter: 1909 (Tom’s petty crimes as a boy), 1915 (Tom’s maturation as a criminal marked by him killing a policeman), 1917 (newspapers pronounce the beginning of World War I), and 1920 (the beginning of Prohibition). Shadoian declares about society’s influence on Tom:

If social conditions do not force people into crime, the film implies that if you follow the natural drift of things you end up a crook. Conditions certainly do not favor virtue. The film is not a rabid tract; Tom’s environment, class, and upbringing do not compel, but they hinder rather than help a calm, law-abiding existence. (48)

The Public Enemy contrasts Tom’s successful, albeit short, illegitimate life with his brother’s legitimate one. Tom’s brother, Mike (Donald Cook), works a low paying job after he returns from serving in World War I, and also tries to provide and care for his
aging mother. Mike’s meager existence clashes with Tom’s opulent lifestyle, with the brothers frequently arguing about the legitimacy of one another’s choices. Though Tom dies as a result of the choices he makes, Mike’s choices remain invalidated because of the lack of opportunity afforded by his lifestyle. The film, in general, exposes the shortcomings of the legitimate version of the American Dream, exemplified by Mike’s moral and lawful life. He represents the stereotypical Horatio Alger character, but the film emphasizes his lack of access to success and wealth through the traditional methods of hard work and diligence. “The film also indicates how entrenched and deadening a lower-middle-class environment can be and that Tom’s move for easy money is inspired by a sense of the inhibiting structures he was born into,” explains Shadoian. “The unambitious stand still as they grow older and get nowhere” (48). In the end, The Public Enemy does not quite condone Tom’s illegitimate choices, but it at least gives a context for them and argues for a more substantial consideration of his character.

While the talking gangster turned into an image of sedition and rebellion, it contended to a greater degree with censorship. The potentially dangerous ideas advanced in the talking gangster film – the glorification of criminal life, the critique of legitimate society, and the illusory nature of the American Dream – disturbed critics and censors enough to force them into imposing various restrictions on the gangster film. The Production Code, or “Hays Code,” of 1930 and the revised Production Code of 1934 that mandated a “Seal of Approval” for officially sanctioned films all modified the way Hollywood conducted its business. In 1935, Will Hays, the father of the Production Code, further obstructed Hollywood by enforcing a moratorium on the production of gangster
film, which, according to Munby, was “to demonstrate that the Production Code Administration (PCA), formed a year earlier, actually had teeth, and to appease those accusing the industry of exploiting the contemporaneous public fascination with Dillinger” (84). The Public Enemy exemplifies a gangster film that was subjected to considerable control and censorship throughout Hollywood’s adoption of various “codes.”

Because of its scandalous and seditious material, The Public Enemy begins with a Foreword that constructs for the viewer a preferred reading of the film. The Foreword problematizes the gangster image by regarding Tom as an Everyman gangster-type, a negative byproduct of society that needs correction. The Foreword reads:

It is the ambition of the authors of “The Public Enemy” to honestly depict an environment that exists today in a certain strata of American life rather than glorify the hoodlum or the criminal. While the story of “The Public Enemy” is essentially a true story, all names and characters appearing herein, are purely fiction.

In a concise manner, the Foreword rehashes the debate surrounding the gangster film, and actually acknowledges its intrinsic ability to attract the viewer while stating the purpose of the film. At the end of The Public Enemy, a postscript appears that repeats the Foreword’s general idea, but includes the viewer in its ideological standpoint much more explicitly: “The end of Tom Powers is the end of every hoodlum. ‘The Public Enemy’ is not a man, nor is it a character – it is a problem that sooner or later We, the Public, must
solve.” The film’s re-release in 1954 brought with it a revised Foreword, which only made clearer the gangster image’s seditiousness and rebelliousness.

The revised Foreword still maintains the original version’s stance that argues the gangster as a social problem, but, unlike the unoriginal version, it outright recognizes the gangster image’s dangerous appeal to the viewer. The revised Foreword warns:

Perhaps the toughest of the gangster films, “Public Enemy” and “Little Caesar” had a great effect on public opinion. They brought home violently the evils associated with prohibition and suggested the necessity of a nation-wide house cleaning. Tom Powers in “Public Enemy” and Rico in “Little Caesar” are not two men, nor are they merely characters – they are a problem that sooner or later we, the public, must solve.

The intended seriousness of the revised Foreword fails to conceal its comedic undertones: it seems to engage in a revisionist history that explains the gangster films’ “great effect on public opinion” in terms of “the evils associated with prohibition” and “the necessity of a nation-wide house cleaning” rather than in (more likely) terms of the gangster films’ elicitation of viewer empathy for the gangsters. The Foreword(s) and postscript of The Public Enemy renew critics and censors’ efforts to align the perspective of the viewer with their own, to see the gangster as a “social problem” rather than as an image of sedition and rebellion.
Chapter 2

The Hood Film

The antecedents of the Hood film – hip-hop culture and rap music – grew out of the deteriorating environment of the postindustrial inner city in the 1970s. The black working/lower class located in the inner city areas experienced various government and corporate impositions that, whether intentionally or not, contributed to their disenfranchisement by eroding job opportunities and adding to the general entropy of the urban environment. Mark Anthony Neal exposit:

The black urban populations were affected by economic and social transformations both internal and external to the traditional Black Public Sphere. In the quest to create a functional postindustrial environment, the masses of multiracial working-class and working poor people were some of the most expendable urban resources that, a half-century earlier were enticed to migrate to urban spaces in support of industrial development.

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The introduction of crack cocaine, furthermore, accentuated the economic and social problems of the already decaying postindustrial inner city: it developed as another (illegal) method for countering the withdrawal of more legitimate means of economic gain. “In response to poverty and unemployment, an illicit economy emerged as a primary conduit for economic survival among some segments of the postindustrial city,” regards Neal (367). Within the postindustrial inner city, the demand for crack cocaine soared, because it offered a way of neutralizing the degrading effects of economic and...
social disenfranchisement. The demand for crack cocaine followed the larger social trend of excessive spending and consumption. Neal posits: “[T]he intensity of crack cocaine mirrored the intensity of consumptionist desire in America” (368). The rabid consumption of crack cocaine, however, affected more than the users: the black working/lower class as a whole, due to the rise of the drug trade and the overall envelopment of the postindustrial inner city, became the center of a media fascination that relied on generalizations and stereotypes.

At the outset of the postindustrial inner city, the media identified the black working/lower class in collective terms by representing them as a type of underclass and implied a connection between lower socio-economic status and inherent baseness and criminality. Neal mentions that, while they varied their representations of “white” images, the media constructed a selective image of the black working/lower class – the underclass – that represented as a whole the postindustrial inner city: “[T]he mass-mediated images of the black underclass often served as the only images available to mainstream consumers, whereas a diversity of images for the white ethnic experience was often presented for consumption” (367). The media intensified its image of the underclass by creating a spectacle of the criminality that did pervade the postindustrial inner city – an important issue that rap music, and, later, the Hood film encountered.

The spectacle of the underclass, more often than not, fixated on those ostensibly responsible for the violence and crime – the inner city black youth. S. Craig Watkins
charts the media’s formation of the image of the underclass, noticing how the media increasingly situated the inner city black youth at the center of the spectacle:

A main set of organizing themes in the “underclass” is the alleged social pathologies of ghetto youth. To be sure, the connection of black youth with illegal drugs, gangs, and violence performs a distinct role in shaping how many of the crisis scenarios of the period were understood. (60)

Watkins shows how the spectacle of the underclass also led to the corresponding image of the black working/lower class as the dangerous class in need of police and government intervention: “The perceived dangerousness of the urban poor legitimates the deployment of the coercive technologies of the state and the adoption of elaborate crime management operations” (61). The black working/lower class, however disenfranchised and subjugated, responded to these external influences and even assaults; the inner city black youth, specifically, responded in one way by expressing themselves through hip-hop culture.

Hip-Hop culture and, later, its outgrowth into rap music, reacted to and against the eminent issues facing the black working/lower class, but its origins in the postindustrial inner city also greatly contributed to its formation. Tricia Rose explains how the postindustrial inner city experience shaped hip-hop culture:

Life on the margins of postindustrial urban America is inscribed in hip hop style, sound, lyrics, and thematics. Situated at the ‘crossroads of lack and
desire,’ hip hop emerges from the deindustrialization meltdown where social alienation, prophetic imagination, and yearning intersect. (21)

The first expressions of hip-hop culture included other forms than rap music like breakdancing and graffiti that helped black youth construct a sense of identity in and a mode of resistance to the experiences of the postindustrial inner city; however, rap music constituted a much more lasting and forceful mode of resistance when it finally materialized as one of the last expressions of hip-hop culture.

As with any other artistic and entertainment genre, rap music consists of different sub-genres, and, of those, the sub-genre of gangsta rap incited the biggest following and the most prolific controversy. Similar to the other forms of hip-hop culture, rap music was highly contextualized: it sprung out of and spoke about specific neighborhoods, detailing the struggles of day to day life in particular sections of the postindustrial inner city. Although originating in the Bronx area of New York City, rap music permeated different cities throughout America afflicted by the scourge of postindustrialism. Rose attests:

[R]appers began exploring more themes with greater intertextual references and complexity, and hip hop crews from urban ghettos in several major cities began telling stories that spoke not only of life in Houston’s fifth ward for example but also of the general bridges between the fifth ward and Miami’s Overtown or Boston’s Roxbury. (58)

The sub-genre of gangsta rap flourished in a similar fashion: it evolved in the rough neighborhoods of Los Angeles, California like Compton, Watts, and South Central in the
late 1980s; its graphic language fixated on violence and sexuality, which brought with it unprecedented ire from critics and censors. Shortly after gangsta rap’s introduction, though, it actually began to garner a considerable following that identified with its rebellious subject matter.

While a number of factors contributed to its infiltration into mainstream society, gangsta rap’s appeal to the audience of young white males facilitated a greater awareness of it in culture and of its promise in the marketplace. Watkins acknowledges:

Although the expansion of rap’s appeal did not signal the erasure of the racial, class, and gender boundaries that structure the youth marketplace, it did, nevertheless, reveal significant shifts: specifically, young white males were emerging as major consumers of black popular cultural products.

(187)

The new demand for gangsta rap by the larger, wealthier audience of young white males attracted the attention of corporations looking to profit from a growing market for black youth culture. Davarian L. Baldwin writes about the link between gangsta rap’s audience and its marketability: “The gangsta subject would not continue to exist in commodified form if there were not buyers waiting for the product. Gangsta rap deals in fantasy and evil, constructing marketable stories that tell as much about its white teen listeners’ desires as about its practitioners” (166). The profitability of the gangsta style proved quite lucrative with even its practitioners recognizing its potential for wealth. As Watkins relates, the gangsta style, however real or authentic at its inception, became a legitimate commodity, something that even the practitioners of gangsta rap understood and utilized
to their advantage: “The gangsta style can be partially viewed as a marketing pose […] In many ways, the creators of hardcore were carrying out a strategy that is now common in the age of music video culture – image management” (186). Although gangsta rap’s conflict between its original statement of rebelliousness and its drive for wealth remains a separate issue from the rise of the Hood film, it nonetheless shows the impact of commodifying the gangsta image and underscores corporate eagerness to cash in on the gangsta rap phenomenon.

At its center, the Hood film embodies ideological conflict: Hollywood’s desire to exploit the gangsta image often clashed with black filmmakers’ desire to create an artistic and socially relevant film that addressed the issues confronting the black working/lower class, and, especially, the inner city black youth. Kenneth Chan asserts that black filmmakers, in order to achieve a semblance of artistic license, had to negotiate Hollywood’s agenda of “crossover audience appeal” – reaching out to the larger, wealthier audience of young white males. Chan remarks:

These [black] filmmakers, who are dependent on major studios for production assistance, have to navigate a complex and obviously vicious political terrain through a balancing act of surrendering sufficient political ground to the powers-that-be in Hollywood so as to sustain financial input and yet maintain enough leverage to upkeep an often diminishing artistic integrity. (36)
And, as Chan also iterates, black filmmakers comprehended the necessity of giving in somewhat to Hollywood’s agenda, though they still crafted a way to express their ideas: “Many of the black directors of the nineties […] have succeeded, in varying degrees, in presenting the experience of African American males within the framework of the black action genre” (36). New Jack City makes an ideal example in exploring the “experience of African American males” on film, because of its status as the first major Hood film and its subsequent influence on all succeeding films of that cycle. With New Jack City, I want, more specifically, to determine how it circumvents external control in addressing the critical issues facing the black working/lower class and the inner city black youth.

Released in March of 1991, New Jack City quickly jumped to the top of the box office with multimillion dollar earnings, making it the one of the most successful Hood films of all time and a template for future films in the cycle. Watkins notes:

Variety reported that the most cost-effective film released during the 1991 spring season was “Warner Brothers’ hit New Jack City with its $43.6 million gross in eleven weeks” […] The enormous commercial success of New Jack City and Boyz N the Hood fueled an imitative cycle that eventually produced over twenty similarly packaged feature-length films between 1991 and 1995. (172)

New Jack City attracted moviegoers with an outlandish plot and gratuitous violence: the film chronicles the rise and fall of the drug dealer, Nino Brown (Wesley Snipes), and the elaborate business he establishes to sell a new, cheap, and highly addictive drug – crack cocaine – in the centralized location of the Carter apartment complex. It seems, at first,
that *New Jack City* only perpetuates the spectacle of the postindustrial inner city rather than critiquing it, given the ample scenes of young black men shooting one another, selling drugs, and wreaking general havoc in the inner city areas. The film even goes as far as correlating its spectacle with one from real life: Nino’s gang – the CMB or Cash Money Brothers – is molded after the actual Chambers Brothers gang of Detroit, Michigan, who first advanced the idea of consolidating all aspects of drug business (i.e. its production, sale, and consumption) into one primary location. Despite this and other evidence to the contrary, I argue that *New Jack City*, with both its content and form, does indeed critique the notion of the spectacle, specifically in how it portrays the crack cocaine epidemic and how it incorporates police intervention and corporate/media exploitation.

From the standpoint of its content and form, *New Jack City* seems to display a marked self-awareness; it knows how the gangster image can be manipulated and employed to perpetuate the spectacle of the postindustrial inner city. Through its content, the film critiques the spectacle of the cocaine epidemic by playing upon its nature to exaggerate and hyperbolize, turning everything into over exaggeration and perpetual hyperbole. Nino’s drug business provides the best example: in his hostile takeover of the Carter apartment complex, Nino and his crew commit murder and crime in broad daylight on busy city streets with impunity; once they takeover the apartment complex, Nino’s crew flaunt their positions by wearing shirts and hats with the initials “CMB” on them; and a person who desires to purchase drugs from the CMB must present a flashy, holographic card to gain admittance to the apartment complex, where, once inside, they
proceed through an assembly line-type process that includes the exchange of money and the procurement and even consumption of drugs. *New Jack City*’s over exaggerated representation of the spectacle of the crack cocaine epidemic demonstrates how images can be appropriated and distorted to fit the corporate/media agenda.

The film offers a similar critique through its form. Its opening subtly engages the issues of police intervention and corporate/media exploitation with the notion of the spectacle: the film begins with rap music by Queen Latifah and then moves to an extended overhead shot of Manhattan; the rap music eventually fades to just the chorus (which repeats the word “money,” but is, for the most part, unintelligible) and becomes part of the background music that also contains a variety of police, ambulance, and fire engine sirens; with the camera looking down on the city in continual movement across the skyline and the near unintelligible rap chorus and sirens for the background music, different news broadcaster voices fade into and out of one another, featuring reports about economic decline, criminality, and violence in the inner city areas. For instance, one voice says, “Unemployment is up according to figures released by the department of labor, with nearly 200,000 more claims for unemployment over the last year.” The next voice states, “News releases from the government today indicate that the Americans whose income has fallen below the poverty line has risen to 2 million compared to 1.6 million in 1979.” The same voice adds: “The economists say that the economic inequality is at its worst level.” While these statistics do criticize, to some extent, government polices and corporate programs, the full force of the opening’s critique derives from the
combination of these statistics with the news reports about the violence and crime in the inner city areas and the strategically selected and placed background music.

After the news about the economic statistics, more voices cut in detailing the crime and violence in the inner city areas. A voice intones: “Three young black men were discovered this morning by joggers in [inaudible] memorial park. Police believe the three were victims of a drug deal gone bad. Identity of the victims has been withheld.” The last voice gives the most outrageous news report:

[Inaudible] [...] henchmen were gunned down this afternoon in front of the Spartan Club. Witnesses said the gunmen road past Mr. Amateo as he sat in front of the restaurant and sprayed the group with automatic weapons. Police speculate the shooting was the result of an ongoing turf war over the control of the cocaine business in the city.

As with (and because of) the background music, all of the news reports – those about the economic situation and the inner city crime – have parts that are either difficult to hear or completely inaudible. The beats from the rap music, the ceaseless wail of sirens, and the repeated news reports distort one another, making it close to impossible to understand one of them let alone all of them together at the same time. The confluence of sounds suggests the inextricability of inner city poverty, crime, and police intervention; it highlights the intention of the spectacle to incite panic and create confusion through distortion. It also implies that not one but all of those factors together generate the spectacle of the postindustrial inner city.
In its content and form, *New Jack City* deals with the multiplicity of issues affecting the black working/lower class and the inner city black youth; it furnished a new way for black youth culture to represent and respond to the crack cocaine epidemic, police intervention, and corporate/media exploitation in the form of the spectacle. From its beginning, the Hood film, exemplified by *New Jack City*, consistently manifested a distinct awareness of its nature as a product of black youth culture: it understood that it could not fully express the relevant issues through its content and that playing with its form was the only viable option. The Hood film recognized the gangster image’s loaded meanings, its potential for rebellion and exploitation, which is why it was forced, in a sense, to use its form to help convey its own meanings. The opening of *New Jack City* shows the importance the Hood film places on form: it manipulates the form of (gangsta) rap music and the news media by blending together their sounds, which distorts their individual voices. In all, its effect subtly rehashes, and, by extension, reciprocates the corporate/media’s exploitation.
Chapter 3

The Wire

In 2002, when HBO aired the first season of The Wire, the gangster image and its numerous variations were already well established both in film and on television. During the measurable amount of years between the different gangster film cycles and the debut of The Wire, the gangster image, in a sense, underwent a process of modernization, though without losing any of its significance. This modernization actually brought with it a larger site of meaning: the Hood film cycle demonstrates how the gangster image can either signify sedition and rebellion for one group (the inner city black youth) or an opportunity for exploitation and commercial success for another group (corporate/media). The role of the viewer also gained significance with the modernization of the gangster image: the classic gangster film cycle first engaged the viewer in an attempt to communicate meaning beyond a surface-level context; the Hood film cycle, through its content and form, engaged the viewer to the extent that it demanded a more active participation in the signification of the film. The Wire further modernizes the gangster image, and, in addition to developing other, related aspects, it also demands more by putting the viewer in the position of ultimately determining how the gangster image is projected.

The Wire, on a fundamental level, strives for a relatively accurate representation of reality: many of the actors and actresses, before their emergence on the show, had little to no acting experience, but, nevertheless, were very acquainted with inner city life and well versed in its arcane street dialect. In its content and form, The Wire still strives for
as close a representation of reality as it can manufacture. The content mirrors the classic
gangster and Hood film cycles by focusing its gangster image on marginalized, minority
characters and their elemental lack of opportunity that forces them into a criminal life.

The Wire, more specifically, represents the inner city black youth who, more often than
not, succumb to the gangsta lifestyle, settling for quick money and the prospect for a
future. In its objective for reality, the form follows the general theme of the show by
assuming the function of surveillance. The main camera frequently adopts the
technological operations of the surveillance apparatus (i.e. the surveillance camera and
monitor) in its representation of certain scenes. The main camera, in these scenes,
“switches” to the view that would come from looking out of the surveillance camera and
at the surveillance monitor; the switch, in extension, effectively transforms the television
screen of the viewer into the surveillance camera and monitor. This resulting effect
amplifies the sense of reality and draws the viewer further into the show.

Here, I want to examine in depth this emphasis on reality in its depiction of the
gangster image. I argue that its various ways in creating an appearance of reality through
its content and form actually incites conflict on various levels. As I briefly allude to
above, The Wire tries to create reality through authenticity (i.e. accurate correspondence
to “real” life: the “street” knowledgeable actors and actresses and the adherence to
traditional Baltimore dialect), though, as I will expand upon, the notion of authenticity
itself is the center of conflict among its characters and between the show itself and the
viewer. The conflict over authenticity that occurs among the characters leads to a struggle
for power. The Barksdale gang and the police department each play out this conflict over authenticity and the ensuing struggle for power.

In the Barksdale gang, the conflict arises when Avon Barksdale, the top gangster, clashes with Stringer Bell, his second in command, over two different approaches to controlling the gang and their relative authenticity: the gangsta style and business method. Avon embodies the gangsta style, because of his strict loyalty to “the game” – the street rules and codes of drug dealing and its general way of life. The gangsta style, like the business method, aims at acquiring wealth, although not at the cost of compromising its identity, or authenticity. Stringer exemplifies the business method: he regularly attends community college economics classes to inform his work, and organizes the gang into a more official, business like hierarchy. The issue of authenticity eventually leads to a power struggle between Avon and Stringer over the right way to structure the gang. Avon embraces all components of the game, which includes the use of force and violence against rival gangs, though that brings monetary consequences, personnel casualties, and police intervention – none of that matters, though, because “It’s all in the game,” or, in other words, it’s authentic. Stringer, however, views the opportunity cost of the gangsta style and the mentality of the game as too high; even though Stringer demonstrates to Avon the lucrative benefits of the business method, conflict erupts when Avon calls into question Stringer’s loyalty to the game, and, hence, his authenticity.

The police department exhibits a similar conflict over authenticity and internal struggle for power. Much like the Barksdale gang and the notion of the game, the police department follows a rigid hierarchy that comes with its own set of rules and codes based
upon rank, authority, authenticity, and power. For those police officers desirous of climbing in rank and pay grade, they must abide by “the chain of command,” that is, they must respect authority by following orders and not deviating from protocol. Issues of authenticity, however, spring from the code of the chain of command: the police officers who aspire to do good police work, whether that means obeying authority or not, and avow an ambivalent attitude toward career advancement are termed “good police,” while the sycophant, career minded are “bad police.” The dichotomy between good police and bad police – separated by who is authentic and not – often gives way to an internal fight for control and power. Detective Jimmy McNulty (Dominic West), for instance, quarrels with and ignores the commands of his lieutenant, Cedric Daniels (Lance Reddick), because of his alleged reputation as bad police; however, once McNulty learns of Daniels’ “real” status as good police, he begins to respect him more and respond to his commands. The issues of authenticity and power start to directly correlate with the viewer when the police employ their surveillance tactics to incriminate the drug gangs.

The conflict over authenticity in The Wire’s content (i.e. the Barksdale gang and the police department) permeates its form, and, furthermore, it raises questions about the role that form plays in connection with the viewer. Formally, the show attempts to give the appearance of authenticity; however, the main camera belies that authenticity through its functioning as the surveillance apparatus. In The Wire, surveillance actually has its own power structure founded upon a distinct ideology. Those in the position of authority (i.e. the police) use surveillance techniques to build cases against alleged criminals (i.e. the gangs). It is assumed that those conducting surveillance do so from a position of
authority and power, while those under surveillance are seen as deviant. The main camera, therefore, embeds the viewer in this power structure through its functioning as the surveillance apparatus; the viewer, perforce, moves into the position of the police (i.e. of authority and power), and becomes inclined to regard the gangs from that narrow perspective.

A scene transpires in the first season of The Wire, though, that momentarily disrupts the viewer’s alignment with authority. The scene takes place when Bodie (JD Williams), a low-level drug dealer, throws rocks at a surveillance camera in the courtyard of the housing projects, which he eventually hits and disables. Moments before the rock strikes the surveillance camera, the main camera switches to the view of the surveillance apparatus (the view suggests both the surveillance camera and monitor), also turning the television of the viewer into the surveillance apparatus. The view of the rock smashing the surveillance camera comes from the surveillance apparatus and the television itself, so, when the rock makes impact, it effectively breaks the surveillance camera and obscures the projected images on the monitor and television. I argue that this scene causes the viewer to perceive difference from authority, and provides an opportunity for a critical examination of the work that the main camera engages in with the surveillance apparatus. In this scene, the viewer is forced to step back and recognize how the surveillance apparatus contains a power structure and to determine how that affects their viewing and interpretation of the show. The other scenes where the main camera switches to the surveillance apparatus for short, random shots, I argue, operate as meta-moments that call attention to the show’s form and subtly reproduce the effects of the rock-
throwing scene on the viewer. While using the surveillance apparatus to represent reality, The Wire also demands that the viewer look closely at how it portrays the gangs and how it functions in cohesion with the main camera. The surveillance apparatus and the main camera suggest a larger critique of mainstream representations of the gangster image, and highlight the possibility of how those representations can work within a power structure and advance a particular ideology.

At the end of the first season of The Wire, Avon gets arrested and sent to jail, while Stringer is left to manage the gang according to his own prerogative. Avon, however, schemes with Maurice Levy, his attorney, to fabricate his early release from jail in the beginning of the third season, which initiates the conflict between him and Stringer. During Avon’s incarceration, Stringer makes subtle changes in the organization and structure of the gang that become noticeable in the third season, right before Avon’s release. One of the opening scenes of the third season illustrates the gang’s new model: Stringer calls a meeting with all of the gang’s low-level drug dealers, managers, and “muscle” (i.e. security), where they strictly follow Robert’s Rules of Order in their discussion about official gang business. The manner in which Stringer discusses the business clearly distinguishes him from Avon. The scene begins with a member of the gang reading Robert’s Rules of Order, assuring the attendees follow the written guidelines. Stringer stands behind a podium rigged with a microphone and only calls upon members who raise their hands. At the meeting, Stringer also sets himself apart from Avon by his approach to selling drugs: product over territory, compromise over
violence, business over gangsta. The discussion starts when Stringer recognizes Bodie, the first to speak.

    BODIE. With these towers down, we need to take the rest of them low rises and all them Fayette Street corners.

    STRINGER. “Takem’? Takem’ how, Mr. Bodie?”

    BODIE. (Shrugs)

    POOT. Say fuck it, and takem.’

    STRINGER. Nigger, you ain’t got the floor. Chair ain’t recognize your ass. Takem’ how?

    BODIE. I don’t know. Just let them Fayette niggers know, you know, we serious, right? You know, get or get got.

    STRINGER. Yeah, yeah like you did on McCullough Street last year. Snatch the real estate, load up, and just wait for some shit to happen, right? Nah, man. We done worrying about territory, man, what corner we got, what project. Game ain’t about that no more. It’s about product. Yeah. We got the best goddamn product, so we gonna sell no matter where we are, right? Product, mothafuckers. Product. (“Time After Time”)

Stringer’s business lesson in the meeting highlights the source of contention between him and Avon: the nature of the game. Stringer asserts that the game has changed, meaning the macho gangsta style has been supplanted by a more level headed, business-like
methodology – product over territory. Avon, though, disputes Stringer’s assessment of the game, because of its lack of adherence to the gangsta style.

In the sixth episode of the third season, Avon and Stringer feud with one another over their ideas about the game, with the former arguing his point about the gangsta style in terms of its authenticity. While drinking cocktails together in their office, Avon listens to Stringer’s argument, but disregards it as un-authentic.

STRINGER. Take a deep breath, man. I mean, take a long, deep breath, knowin’ if you call the shot, we at war, and I’m there like I always been. The thing about turf, man, it ain’t like it was. I mean, you ain’t got to pay no price to buy no corners.

AVON. Since when do we buy corners?

STRINGER. Man, you goin’ to buy one way or another, whether it’s with the bodies we done lost, or you’re gonna lose. Time in the joint is behind us or ahead of us. I mean, you gonna get some shit in this game, but ain’t shit for free. I mean, how many corners do we need? How much money can a nigga make?

AVON. More than a nigga can spend.

STRINGER. We ain’t gonna be around to spend what we done made already.

AVON. Shit, I didn’t think I was gonna be around this long.

STRINGER. Let the youngins’ worry about how to retail, where to wholesale. I mean, who give a fuck whose standin’ on what
corner if we takin’ that shit off the top, puttin’ that shit to good use, makin’ that shit work for us. We can run more than them corners, B. We could do like Little Willy, back in the day, with all that number money, and run this goddamn city.

AVON. Like businessmen?

STRINGER. Man, just let me talk to the boy, Marlo. See if I can’t smooth this shit out. I mean, it ain’t gonna be overnight, cause the nigga only knows what he knows. But I think I could talk some sense into his head.

AVON. Yeah, I ain’t no suit wearin’ businessman like you, you know. I’m just a gangsta, I suppose. And I want my corners.

(“Homecoming”)

As the dialogue relates, during the third season, a young, upstart drug dealer, Marlo Stanfield, encroaches upon Avon’s territory (i.e. corners) in his quest to expand his drug business. The threat posed by Marlo accelerates the burgeoning conflict between Avon and Stringer over the way to structure their gang. Their argument stems from a notion of authenticity: Avon wants his corners, which signifies to him a connection with reality or authenticity – the identity of the game and the gangsta style. Though money drives most of his decisions, Avon, when forced to choose, goes with what seems authentic. Stringer tries to make the case that the game subtly changed on them, but the argument fails to persuade Avon, because it values “honest” money (i.e. money made through legitimate business) over their identity as gangstas. Their resulting disagreement spurs a power
struggle over the control of the gang, where both Stringer and Avon try to get rid of one another.

In the police department, a contest based upon authenticity arises as well, and its intricate relationship to authority and power correlates it with the other relevant content (i.e. the problems in the Barksdale gang), and, perhaps most importantly, with the formal features and the viewer. Maybe more than the drug gangs, the police department functions within a highly rigid and stratified power structure that follows the chain of command. Officers of lower rank, ideally, “fall in line” by obeying their commanding officers and adhering to standard operating procedure. Despite the firmly established power structure, officers desirous of doing good police work often circumvent the chain of command to carry out their casework.

The first season of The Wire constructs in detail the police department’s power structure, but it also frequently exhibits instances where officers ignore the chain of command. Lieutenant Cedric Daniels provides an example of an officer who aspires to rise in rank and do good police work, although that repeatedly comprises both of his intentions. Daniels must simultaneously appease his commanding officer by following the orders given him, while also trying to do good police work which calls for, most of the time, ignoring those orders and going around the chain of command. During the first season, Daniels constantly fights against McNulty’s insubordination, because the latter never completely trusts the authenticity of the former: an argument erupts when McNulty
goes behind Daniels’s back to work a case that ends up backfiring and angering the top commanding officers.

DANIELS. I just came from the Office of the Deputy Ops, where your own major is tellin’ Burrell to do you. You hear me? Rawls is givin’ you up.

MCNULTY. What the fuck did I do?

DANIELS. You can’t shut your mouth. You think that downtown judge is gonna bail your ass out on this? You really think that? You should’ve come to me. We bring this business to the deputy first, we got a shot, but, no, you out there all alone jumpin’ bag

MCNULTY. Alright, you got the deputy’s ear on this?

DANIELS. On this case I do.

MCNULTY. Yeah? Then how come they send you every worthless hump in plain clothes? You ask for men, they send you drunks and fuckups. Look, I wanna do this case.

DANIELS. So do I.

MCNULTY. Well, then you gotta get all the way in it, lieutenant. I see you get all the way in, I know who you are. I know what you’re about. ("The Detail")

As McNulty alludes to, the dictates of the commanding officers constrain Daniels from performing his job and doing good police work. Since Daniels wants to rise in rank and appear authentic, he must find ways to go around the chain of command without
offending the commanding officers; he, therefore, solicits the help of Rhonda Pearlman, a state’s attorney, and the influence of the State’s Attorney’s Office.

DANIELS. Rhonda, my point is, I can’t build much with the garbage they sent me.

RHONDA. So, go to the deputy, right? You got his ear on this. Why not?

DANIELS. I asked the deputy for more manpower. He then tells Property to send me two more. And those shift lieutenants, they know it’s their chance to dump their dead wood. The deputy, he knows this too. He could’ve offered to pick who I wanted, but he didn’t. He sent me a message on this.

RHONDA. And the message is?

DANIELS. Don’t dig in. Don’t get fancy. You put a quick charge on this Barksdale and then get out. He sends me good police, I might get it in my head to do good police work. But if the State’s Attorney’s Office would?

RHONDA. Nah. No.

DANIELS. Rhonda, darling. It’s bad protocol for me to ask for help and then trash the help I’m given. You, on the other hand.

RHONDA. No way. My office doesn’t play that way. You people staff your cases, you bring us casework. I cross that line and I piss everyone off. The best I can do is tell my unit chief that you drew
shit. He wants to take it upstairs and have somebody call the Deputy of Operations, that’s his choice.

DANIELS. That won’t happen.

RHONDA. Probably not. Make Lemonade. (“The Detail”) 

After many efforts to adequately staff his case, Daniel’s finally gets the police officers capable of performing good police work after he manipulates the situation and persuades Ervin Burrell, the Deputy of Operations, of the case’s advantageousness for the both of them. McNulty, additionally, pushes for surveillance tactics to catch the Barksdale gang that Burrell also eventually authorizes.

The conflict over authenticity in the content (i.e. the Barksdale gang and the police department) belies the appearance of authenticity that the form tries to portray in its cohesion with the surveillance apparatus. The authenticity of the form, similar to the content, functions within a power structure, which, in this instance, emanates from the surveillance apparatus. Before delineating the power structure inherent in the surveillance apparatus, I first want to note how exactly the form functions with the surveillance apparatus, and, then, determine how that puts the viewer in a position of authority and power.

The surveillance apparatus in The Wire includes some of its content (e.g. police officers going undercover or on stakeouts), though its central importance lies in how the show’s form (i.e. the main camera) adopts its technological operations. In terms of equipment, the surveillance apparatus utilizes a camera and monitor, which parallels the
show’s main camera and the viewer’s television. The main camera directly engages with the surveillance apparatus in two different ways: it either incorporates the surveillance camera or monitor into its shot of a larger scene, or, as stated above, it switches to the view from the actual surveillance camera or monitor. The main camera also engages with the surveillance apparatus outside of its primary task of observing the gangs. The surveillance apparatus often operates within the courthouse, police department, and other state and federal buildings. In the opening scene of the first episode, for example, the main camera displays the surveillance monitor on the desk of the courthouse security officer. The surveillance monitor depicts Detectives Jimmy McNulty and Bunk Moreland walk up the steps of the courthouse, then, as they approach the security screening area, the main camera pans out and reveals the actual characters. During the first episode too, the main camera initially switches to the view of the surveillance apparatus in the police department: as Majors Bill Rawls and Raymond Forester enter an elevator, the main camera switches to the elevator’s surveillance camera and monitor. The main camera stays in the switch as Rawls and Forester ride the elevator up to a higher floor, then, as they step out, it switches back to its regular shot. The critical scene where the camera switches and really first assimilates the viewer into a position of authority and power comes in a similar location: the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s Baltimore Field Office.

The scene begins when McNulty visits his friend, Special Agent Fitzhugh, for some advice and aid in combating the Barksdale gang. Fitzhugh escorts McNulty into a room where a small team of FBI agents conducts remote surveillance of a group of men processing drugs. Fitzhugh explains their operation to McNulty, including the function of
their latest and most advanced surveillance equipment. In this scene, McNulty’s interplay with the FBI’s surveillance equipment becomes the defining moment of the main camera’s switch to and alignment with the surveillance apparatus. The dialogue, in this case, works with the main camera switch and reinforces what the form tries to establish with the viewer.

    McNulty: Jesus Christ.
    Fitzhugh: Pretty fuckin’ great, huh?
    McNulty: How’d you get this on tape?
    Fitzhugh: It’s not tape. That’s live, brotha.

At this point, the main camera positions directly in front of McNulty’s face, while he holds a pair of headphones up to one ear and stares straight back into it. The shot indicates that McNulty looks into the surveillance monitor, but it simultaneously implies that he looks into the television of the viewer as well. The scene continues.

    McNulty: That’s live?

The main camera, now, switches to the surveillance monitor (showing the men processing the drugs), which once more aligns the television of the viewer with the surveillance apparatus. McNulty’s comment about the surveillance occurring in real time contributes to the main camera’s attempt to create a sense of authenticity through its application of the surveillance apparatus. This shot lasts for a few seconds and then the main camera pans back out.

    Fitzhugh: Live. From a three story walk-up on Homer Avenue. To the bottom of Pimlico.
MCNULTY: This is goin’ on right now?

FITZHUGH: As we speak.

MCNULTY: How?

The main camera switches again to the surveillance monitor, briefly re-establishing the connection with the surveillance apparatus and the television of the viewer before it pans out.

FITZHUGH: Fiber optic lensing. The camera’s behind a hole in the dry wall. So small looks like a nail could have made it.

MCNULTY: Where’s the mike? These mothafuckers sound great?

The main camera, this time, switches to a different form of the surveillance apparatus – a computer monitor that displays the voice data picked up from the secreted microphones. It next moves over to a miniature video feed of the drug processing that appears on the same screen, which, like the previous shots, occupies the television of the viewer. Both of these shots and the dialogue about the technology of the surveillance apparatus further imply its association with the viewer’s television and heightens the sense of authenticity: the viewer’s television, because of its association with the surveillance apparatus, seems to take on the sophisticated technological capabilities that McNulty and Fitzhugh discuss.

FITZHUGH: Two remotes behind the baseboard heating ducts. That’s about 3k rollin’ on the table today. We followed it all the way from New York.

MCNULTY: You’re up in New York on this?
FITZHUGH: We could be. We’re breakin’ in to some Dominicans up there. We could have a Title 3 on them right now if we wanted. Wrong war, brotha.’ Most of the squad has been transferred to counterterrorism. This thing’s the last drug case we got pending. I gotta shut it down by the end of the month.

MCNULTY: You guys getting out of drugs?

FITZHUGH: Yeah, for a while, yeah. We just don’t have the manpower to stay in anything big. Not since those towers fell.

The main camera repeats its earlier shot of McNulty looking directly into the camera with the headphones up to one ear; it, then, switches to the surveillance monitor, staying with this shot momentarily.

MCNULTY: What, we don’t have enough love in our hearts for two wars?

Joke’s on us, huh?

FITZHUGH: I guess so. Still, in all, you give great case, brotha.’ I wish you coulda’ worked it with us. (“The Target”)

As the scene concludes, the main camera switches to the computer screen with the voice data and software. The main camera performs a different formal maneuver here: in its switch to the computer screen, the sounds of the men talking while they process the drugs materialize. The sounds, as the scene implies, can only be heard through the pair of headphones that McNulty uses. The shot, in essence, expands the technological capabilities of the viewer’s television; not only does the main camera provide a seemingly unrestricted, unfiltered, and secretive look into the gangs through its switch, it
also adds the element of sound and dialogue, suggesting that the viewer covertly listens to privileged information.

The McNulty-Fitzhugh scene constitutes the first incident where the main camera firmly aligns the surveillance apparatus with the viewer’s television through its multiple switches and augmentation by the dialogue. That television transforms into the surveillance apparatus (i.e. the camera and monitor) that contains the technological capabilities of secretively penetrating the operations of the Barksdale gang. Similar to McNulty in the above scene, the viewer watches and listens in on the illicit activity through their surveillance apparatus (i.e. their television). The main camera switch, additionally, puts the viewer in a position of authority and power, like McNulty’s. The viewer’s position, however, functions within a power structure that has ideological implications. Because of the surveillance apparatus, the viewer interprets what takes place through a filtered lens that pre-establishes the notions of legitimacy and deviancy. The main camera’s switch to the surveillance apparatus is particularly detrimental to the viewer, because it presents a semblance of authenticity to its shots; this also works to authenticate and legitimate the viewer’s position of authority and power. The viewer remains unconscious of its position and the intricate methods of the main camera until the scene with Bodie and the rock throwing later in the first season.

The scene starts with Bodie tossing some rocks at a surveillance camera perched high on the corner wall of the housing projects, while D’Angelo, another drug dealer, stands by and offers encouragement. Detective Lester Freamon sits in a parked car watching both of them; he dials on his cell phone the suspected number of D’Angelo’s
pager, testing a crucial component of the police’s ability to wiretap the Barksdale gang. Before D’Angelo walks over to the nearby payphone to call Lester’s number, Bodie strikes the surveillance camera with a rock. The main camera switches to the view that comes from the surveillance camera (and monitor) moments before the rock smashes it. When the rock strikes the surveillance camera, it obscures the view of the entire surveillance apparatus (i.e. the camera and monitor) and the television of the viewer. The obscured view indicates to the viewer that the main camera is, in fact, restricted in its abilities to show everything and that some of what it does show can be considered intrusive to some. Once the viewer recognizes the main camera’s finite capabilities, they too recognize the limited nature of what they can and cannot view in the show. The appearance of authenticity and the position of ultimate authority that the main camera produces through the surveillance apparatus ruptures when the rock breaks the surveillance camera; the viewer understands, furthermore, its previous alignment with authority and its ability to now read the show not through the surveillance apparatus but in terms of how it can distort the images it presents. Throughout the rest of the first season and in different moments in the succeeding seasons, the main camera resorts to the switch or depicting the surveillance apparatus in its shots of larger scenes. Theses shots indicate different interpretations based upon how the viewer understands the scene with Bodie and the rock throwing.

If the viewer fails to perceive its difference from authority and continues in the ostensibly privileged, though partial, position that the main camera creates, then the following switches and larger shots of the surveillance apparatus reinforce that position.
Those switches and larger shots stress the notion of authenticity: they normally include a three-part process that begins with a shot of the character(s) then a transition to the surveillance apparatus then another shot of the character(s). This also works vice versa – surveillance apparatus to character(s) to surveillance apparatus. The Rawls-Forester elevator scene exemplifies the first type, while the McNulty-Bunk courthouse scene exemplifies the second type. The location of most of these shots contributes to the reinforcement of authority: a majority of the time they occur in spaces of authority like the courthouse and police department and the main camera’s attempt at authenticity through the surveillance apparatus in these spaces only reinforces their authority.

If the viewer interprets the scene with Bodie and the rock throwing as a realization of its difference from authority, then the subsequent main camera shots of and through the surveillance apparatus reinforce that difference. Those shots act as meta-moments that call attention to how the main camera functions with the surveillance apparatus and how that confluence might shape or distort what it represents. They continually highlight the formal features of the show and demand a closer look at how not only the main camera can influence its images and representations, but how that can also happen in other television and filmic portrayals of the gangster image. The Wire, I argue, wants to both use the surveillance apparatus to show and suggest things that could not have otherwise been depicted through the traditional form of the main camera, but it is not oblivious to the implications such a use of the surveillance apparatus brings.
Conclusion

My analysis of The Wire has been an attempt to initiate critical discussion about the show that, I argue, should begin with an examination of the issue of surveillance and how that affects its representation of the gangster image and its incorporation of the viewer. I first wanted to place The Wire in the larger context of gangster representations, because within that frame of reference originated a number of crucial aspects concerning the gangster image that the show interacted with and further developed. The classic gangster and Hood film illustrated the characteristics of the gangster image to relate to reality and speak to the viewer. The classic gangster film initially demonstrated how the gangster image not only could attract the viewers of that era, but how it could also uniquely align with their perspectives: the gangster, akin to most of the viewers, was a marginalized figure and contended with the effects of similar social situations like Prohibition. The classic gangster film, moreover, exposed how the gangster image could become a source of sedition and rebellion, something that critics and censors desperately desired to circumscribe. The gangster image, at this time, also started to function as a method for actuating the viewer’s perspective: critics and censors recognized the gangster image’s potential for rebellion and tried to restrict it by manipulating its meaning, therefore shaping the perspective of the viewer.

The Hood film followed the central characteristics of the classic gangster film, while building upon and adding to them. The gangster image of the Hood film was generated, once again, by societal influences: the postindustrial inner city greatly impacted the black working/lower class and the inner city black youth who countered the
elements of their harsh life through art and culture. The major results included rap music, its subgenre of gangsta rap, and the Hood film. Within the development of gangsta rap, the gangster image transformed into an excessively rebellious figure, but it also became a way for gangsta rap’s practitioners to climb in social and material standing, bringing gangsta rap into the mainstream. The Hood film reacted against the gangster image’s proliferation in the mainstream and its exploitation by the corporate/media; it understood that merely depicting the gangster image was not enough to say something original, and that playing with the form of its medium would provide the most potential for creativity, critique, and reaching the individual viewer.

In its own way, The Wire takes up the characteristics of the gangster image that the classic gangster and Hood film first elucidated and shapes them to fit its particular context. The Wire, foremost, is concerned with presenting a likeness to reality, the day-to-day life on the inner city streets of Baltimore; however, it is also aware of how that can be problematic, especially through its formal use of the surveillance apparatus. While utilizing the surveillance apparatus to help create that sense of reality, the show simultaneously apprehends its flaws and points them out to the viewer. The Wire especially engages the viewer through the surveillance apparatus because the semblance of reality and authenticity it attempts to create draws the viewer unawares into a power structure that puts them into a certain ideological position. For all of its originality and commentary on a variety of issues, The Wire emphasizes the formal features of the representation of the gangster image, critiquing through the work of the main camera the
way the gangster image, or any image, can be fundamentally altered, and how that can subsequently distort the perception of the viewer.

As the gangster image continues to be portrayed on television and in film, the importance of form, the main camera switch, and the incorporation of the viewer, I argue, will only be accentuated. In July of 2009, for instance, Universal Pictures released Public Enemies, a gangster film that, by title, alludes to the classic gangster film already mentioned – The Public Enemy – but in fact dramatizes the life of John Dillinger (Johnny Depp). One of the most striking features of this new gangster film is its concern over depicting reality – not in terms of a strict adherence to historical facts, per se, but in how it involves the viewer. For example, towards the end of the film, John Dillinger goes to see a crime/gangster film, Manhattan Melodrama, and, while he is in the theater, the main camera executes a number of shots including the switch. The main camera switches multiple times to the film screen Dillinger looks at, creating the sense that the viewer of Public Enemies is in the other theater with Dillinger watching Manhattan Melodrama. It is an interesting scene, because the main camera switch, used more frequently in modern gangster representations, becomes a means to recreate and re-examine past gangster representations, providing new possibilities for creativity and adding new layers of meaning.
Works Cited


