

THE WIRE: POLITICS, POSTMODERISM AND
THE REBIRTH OF AMERICAN NATURALISM

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by
Ryan Aiello
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APPROVED BY THE DEAN OF GRADUATE STUDIES
AND VICE PROVOST FOR RESEARCH:

Katie Milo, Ed.D.

APPROVED BY THE GRADUATE ADVISORY COMMITTEE:

Geoffrey Baker, Ph.D., Chair

Matthew D. Brown, Ph.D.

Lynn Elliott, Ph.D.

Tom Fox, Ph.D.

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ABSTRACT

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My thesis analyzes the political themes and messages in David Simon's television show *The Wire*. Using the opposing theoretical frameworks for effective political art established by Jean-Paul Sartre and Theodor Adorno, I illustrate the ways in which *The Wire* melds a realistic portrait of an American city with obscure narrative techniques, resulting in a text that both educates and confounds its viewers. In the first chapter, I analyze the journalistic attributes of *The Wire*, placing it in the tradition of American naturalism. In the second chapter, I illustrate how the show's form, which forces viewers to grapple with multiple meanings, plays a vital role in allowing it to convey a political message. In the third chapter, I show how the endings of the individual episodes of *The Wire* provide the ideal site to analyze the ways in which the show's narrative form helps to formulate its social critiques. Ultimately, through my analysis, I show that *The Wire* achieves a remarkable balance between the obvious and the obscure,

allowing it to convey multiple political messages to the widest possible audience in the most effective form possible to induce individual growth or change.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

And we have much work to do, because the truth is, we still live in a country where there are two different Americas...one, for all of those people who have lived the American dream and don't have to worry, and another for most Americans, everybody else who struggle to make ends meet every single day. It doesn't have to be that way.

And we have so much work to do in America, because all across America, there are walls...The American people are, today, on the outside of that wall. And on the inside are the big corporations and the lobbyists who are working to protect a system that takes care of them. ... There is another wall that divides us. It's the moral shame of 37 million of our own people who wake up in poverty every single day. This is not OK. And for eight long, long years, this wall has gotten taller ... That wall has to come down for the sake of our ideals and our security. We can change this. We can change it. Yes we can. If we stand together, we can change it. ... This is not going to be easy. It's going to be the fight of our lives. But we're ready, because we know that this election is about something bigger than the tired old hateful politics of the past. This election is about taking down these walls that divide us, so that we can see what's possible—what's possible, that one America that we can build together.

-John Edwards

David Simon's HBO series, *The Wire*, more so than any text in recent memory, challenges and expands the traditional boundaries of political art. On its simplest level, *The Wire* can perhaps best be understood as a "political provocation," to borrow Simon's term—dissent against unjust practices in America designed to draw the ire of viewers. Over its sixty episodes, *The Wire* exposes its viewers to the harsh realities

of American society in the twenty-first century. But, whereas most conventional political works take up only one meaning or position, *The Wire* attempts to convey multiple political messages to the widest possible audience in the most effective form possible to induce individual growth or change. *The Wire* is not interested in offering solutions to the problems it analyzes—mainly because there are no easy solutions to them—or inciting a rebellion against the institutions or structures that have allowed the problems to occur. Instead, it seeks to cause a fundamental change in the opinions of its viewers. It seeks to make them more aware, more knowledgeable, more skeptical of the world around them. In this thesis, I will discuss how *The Wire*'s naturalistic model, rooted in the tradition of muckraking journalism, as well as its multilayered format, particularly the endings of its serial installments, offer viewers multiple ways of understanding and interpreting the show's political overtones and plot. By adopting these strategies, Simon's series solidifies itself as the preminent postmodern political text, able to meld the obvious and obscure in order to simultaneously educate, inform and challenge its viewers.

In their attempts to define what constitutes political art, theorists have traditionally offered radically different conjectures. This is perhaps seen most clearly in the opposing definitions of political art offered by Jean-Paul Sartre and Theodor Adorno. In *What Is Literature?*, Sartre argues that politically effective literature¹ must be direct in

¹ Throughout his essay, Sartre argues that literature is the only medium capable of political effectiveness since painting and/or music can be interpreted so many different ways—they are too open to ideas/various readings. He uses the example of Tintoretto's "yellow rift in the sky above Golgatha" in order to express that painting can be interpreted numerous different ways; the sky can be considered "to *signify* anguish or *provoke* it" Similarly, while he expresses great regard for Picasso's "masterpiece," "The Massacre at Guernica," he notes that "does anyone think that it won over a single heart to the Spanish cause" (4) Also, although he likes poetry, Sartre is critical of it because it doesn't get outside of its self and doesn't utilize language. Ultimately, a painter or a poet, unlike an author, cannot take the reader by the hand and show

its purpose. In other words, it must wear its agenda on its sleeve. Therefore, politically effective literature requires a need for certainty and a reduction of ambiguity. Sartre does not feel that politically effective literature can be “art for art’s sake.” Politically effective art must take a position and reflect a factual truth. Accordingly, politically effective literature must engage in dévoilement (unveiling). It must take the truth and “display it in full view,” it must “reveal the world and particularly reveal man to other men so that the latter may assume full responsibility before the object which has been thus laid bare” (8-9). In essence, due to its directness, politically effective literature makes a reader responsible. It takes away readers’ innocence and naiveté and forces them to come to a decision. Indeed, once readers are informed, they must choose to stop the wrong or they must choose not to care. For, as Sartre points out, “either he [the reader] will persist in his behavior out of obstinacy with full knowledge of what he is doing, or he will give it up” (8). Ultimately, according to Sartre, “politically effective literature is composed in such a way that “nobody can be ignorant of the world and nobody may say that he is innocent of what it is about” (9). It forces one to confront an issue and take a stand (either by ignoring it or attempting to change it).

In contrast to Sartre, Adorno argues in his essay, “Commitment,” which was written approximately 15 years after the publication of *What is Literature?*, that politically effective literature must challenge readers by presenting multiple meanings. Adorno does not think politically effective literature should be direct and/or realistic. In fact, he states that, “when a work is merely itself and no other thing, as in a pure

them the true meaning of their work. Politically effective literature requires a strong authorial figure who guides a reader through a piece to a particular goal.

pseudoscientific construction, it becomes bad art—literally pre-artistic” (195). He thinks that successful political art must be literature that one “can’t pin down” (i.e. literature that makes one uncomfortable). Indeed, Adorno feels that the “shock of the unintelligible” can communicate something that realism cannot (180). As a result, he frequently attacks the idea of solid reality that can be transferred from person to person. Also, unlike Sartre, Adorno doesn’t feel that politically effective literature should yield immediate results; instead, he feels that it should cause an internal change “at the level of fundamental attitudes” (180). Consequently, he criticizes the works of Brecht, which openly express their goal/meaning, and praises the modernist works of Beckett and Kafka because they “arouse fear which existentialism merely talks about” and “compel change in attitude which committed works merely demand” (191). In fact, he notes in regards to their works, “everyone shudders at them, and yet no one can persuade himself that that these eccentric novels and plays are not about what everyone knows but no one will admit” (190). Ultimately, Adorno believes that a politically effective work should, through its abstract nature and multiple meanings, force readers to think. It should not tell a reader what to do; rather, it should allow readers to ponder/ confront its meaning and come to their own conclusion—or to none at all.

Political art, it would seem, must be on one end of the spectrum or the other; it must either be unabashedly clear, or overly fragmented. *The Wire* is unique in this respect as it demands to be read according to a new framework, one which melds the two classical definitions of political art. At times, acting according to Adorno’s definition of effective political art, *The Wire* demands that viewers load meaning into the text. They are forced to interpret scenes without any instruction from music, flashback or

foreshadowing. In other instances, the show offers explicit or implicit political messages readily apparent to any regular viewer, thereby following Sartre's definition. In this sense, *The Wire* is part Beckett and part Brecht; part Picasso and part Plastov. It melds a realistic portrait of an American city with obscure narrative techniques, resulting in a text that both educates and confounds its viewers. This thesis discusses the manner in which this balance is achieved.

In the first chapter, I analyze the journalistic attributes of *The Wire*, placing it in the tradition of American naturalism. I demonstrate that, by reading the show as a naturalistic text instead of a Greek tragedy, viewers can better see the critiques of the conditions of inner-cities as well as the overarching power that institutions hold over individuals. Also, by showing the ways *The Wire* has redefined the naturalist movement and emerged as the prime representation of the new social novel through its increased scope and political viability, I show that *The Wire* is primarily concerned with effecting social change rather than simply telling a story. *The Wire*'s muckraking depictions of inner city life serve as a prime example of Sartre's philosophy of political art.

In the second chapter, I demonstrate how, as Brian Rose points out, "*The Wire* has helped reinvent the wheel, transforming the police drama from its emphasis on how to investigate heroics into one of the few places willing to argue passionately about the world outside the boundaries of the small screen" (90). By focusing on the show's differences—in terms of structure, content and intent—from traditional television offerings, I illustrate how the show's form, which, as Adorno suggests, forces viewers to grapple with multiple meanings, plays a vital role in allowing it to convey a political message.

In the third chapter, I show how the endings of the individual episodes of *The Wire* provide the ideal site to analyze the ways in which the show's narrative form helps to formulate its social critiques. By focusing on the show's four prominent ending strategies—which I refer to as character endings, symbolic endings, ironic endings and montage endings—I reveal the ways that endings play a significant role in shaping and redefining the show's critique of Baltimore. The endings provide little closure to the narrative; instead, they force viewers to focus attention on the overlying themes of the show—namely the power that institutions over individuals and the decline of the American empire.

CHAPTER II

“LAWYERS GUNS AND MONEY”: *THE WIRE*'S RESURRECTION,
REFORMATION AND REPRESENTATION OF AMERICAN
NATURALISM IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY,
INCLUDING THE REALIZATION OF THE
NEW “SOCIAL NOVEL”

Broken glass everywhere
People pissing on the stairs, you know they just don't care
I can't take the smell, I can't take the noise no more
Got no money to move out, I guess I got no choice
Rats in the front room, roaches in the back
Junkie's in the alley with a baseball bat
I tried to get away, but I couldn't get far
'Cause a man with a tow-truck repossessed my car
Don't push me cause I'm close to the edge
I'm trying not to lose my head

It's like a jungle sometimes it makes me wonder
How I keep from going under.
Grandmaster Flash, “The Message”

...A Man that could look no way but downwards, with a Muck-
rake in his hand. There stood also one over his head with a
Coelestial Crown in his hand, and proffered him that Crown for his
Muck-rake; but the man did neither look up, nor regard, but raked
to himself the straws, the small sticks and dust of the floor.”

John Bunyan, *A Pilgrim's Process*

A novel is a mirror carried along a high road. At one moment it
reflects to your vision the azure skies at another the mire of the
puddles at your feet. And the man who carries this mirror in his
pack will be accused by you of being immoral! His mirror shews
[sic] the mire, and you blame the mirror! Rather blame that high

road upon which the puddle lies, still more the inspector of roads
who allows the water to gather and the puddle to form.
Stendhal, *The Red and the Black*

The Wire is most aptly characterized as a modern iteration of American naturalism; the show's unremitting and uncompromising look into inner-city American life calls to mind the works of Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser and Frank Norris. A naturalist reading of *The Wire* yields a number of crucial insights into the show's intentions and motivations, offering a guide for interpreting the show's multi-layered narrative while clarifying its political stance. Indeed, a naturalist reading allows viewers to see characters as more than just tragic figures struck down by fate. The characters—including the city itself, which serves as the primary character as well as the overarching focus of the narrative—instead become representative of their respective positions in the social hierarchy, as I will discuss in more detail in the following chapters. Their existence, in essence, is dictated by their surroundings. They merely hold a position for a brief time until they are replaced; upward mobility is unachievable. Reading *The Wire* as a naturalist text also reveals the journalistic impulses that drive the show. Rooted primarily in Simon's years as a reporter at the Baltimore *Sun*, the show functions as an elongated op-ed piece, an argument against the myths and policies which have led to the increased separation between rich and poor in America. An understanding of the show's journalistic nature is central to uncovering *The Wire*'s political messages. *The Wire* is conceived as a muckraking text: its primary goals are to expose and comment upon the conditions on life in the inner-city. For this reason, the show can be seen as following in the tradition of Sartre's definition of political art as it removes viewers' naiveté and forces them to confront the living conditions in inner-city America. The show is

ultimately a political tract masquerading as a crime drama. Its primary goal is to make an argument rather than tell a story, to inform rather than to entertain.

Surprisingly, discussions about the show's literary models have largely ignored naturalism and its roots in progressive journalism. Most critics have frequently turned to older, distinctly more European sources in their attempts to most accurately describe *The Wire*'s complexity, scope and depiction of urban life. *The Wire* has often been compared to nineteenth-century European novels, particularly the works of Charles Dickens, arguably the most famous author of the period. In speaking of *The Wire*, Steve Erickson, a writer at *LA Magazine*, points out that "the show's vast population recalls Dickens ... with fascinating characters both good and bad, each morally nuanced and fully realized, tumbling out of every broken window or through every empty doorway before it gets boarded up by assassins hiding bodies there" (2). Taking the comparison a step further, Mark Bowden of *Atlantic Monthly* argues that *The Wire*, which "creates a vision of official Baltimore as a heavy, self-justified bureaucracy, gripped by its own byzantine logic and criminally unconcerned about the lives of ordinary people, who enter it at their own risk," does for "turn-of-the-millennium Baltimore what Dickens's *Bleak House* does for mid-19th-century London" (3). New York *Times* writer Nicholas Kulish has even gone so far as to state, "If Charles Dickens was alive today, he would watch *The Wire*, unless, that is, he was already writing for it" (1). This comparison, however, is forced at best. Nineteenth-century European novels mirror *The Wire* through their size, scope and serial form, but lack other key attributes—namely a staunch political conscious, which overrides the audience's preferences and expectations as well as commercial viability. Whereas Dickens famously changed the endings of *Great*

Expectations and *The Old Curiosity Shop* to appease fans and thereby increase sales, Simon refuses to cater to viewers' desires, as evidenced by his remark, "Holding on to a character and then twisting the story to serve that character? ... There's no gratification in that for anyone. We're not doing a soap opera here" (Ogunnaike 2). *The Wire* has no concern with boosting its profitability; its primary goal is to convey a political message as accurately as possible.

Interestingly, Simon has also attempted to place the show in a literary tradition. When discussing the models for the series, he constantly makes reference to Greek tragedies. In more than a dozen interviews, he cites the works of Euripides and Socrates and Aeschylus as his primary influence. For instance, in an interview with Nick Hornby, Simon states:

We're stealing instead from an earlier, less-traveled construct—the Greeks—to create doomed and fated protagonists who confront a rigged game and their own mortality. The modern mind—particularly those of us in the West—finds such fatalism ancient and discomfiting, I think. We are a pretty self-actualized, self-worshipping crowd of postmoderns and the idea that for all of our wherewithal and discretionary income and leisure, we're still fated by indifferent gods, feels to us antiquated and superstitious. We don't accept our gods on such terms anymore; by and large, with the exception of the fundamentalists among us, we don't even grant Yahweh himself that kind of unbridled, interventionist authority. But instead of the old gods, *The Wire* is a Greek tragedy in which the postmodern institutions are the Olympian forces. It's the police department, or the drug economy, or the political structures, or the school administration, or the macroeconomic forces that are throwing the lightning bolts and hitting people in the ass for no decent reason. 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 this drama, 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. Greek tragedy for the new millennium, so to speak. Because so much of television is about providing catharsis and redemption and the triumph of character, a drama in which postmodern institutions trump individuality and morality and justice seems different in some ways, I think. (1-2)

While certainly poetic—and useful, perhaps, in describing the epic nature of the show—Simon’s comparison is not entirely apt. His comparison, it seems, is rooted in his desire to separate *The Wire* from other “high end HBO fare”—such as *The Sopranos* or *Deadwood*—which, he asserts, follow a more Shakespearian model, like most American drama, and center around the “angst of the individual and his own conscience and his own struggle against himself” (Andelman 5). His comparison ultimately fails to capture the essence of *The Wire* as it neglects the show’s journalistic conception and in turn limits its political viability. Moreover, the understanding that, as in Greek tragedy, “lightening bolts” hit people for “no decent reason” on the show diminishes its argument about the conditions of inner city life. *The Wire* illustrates that certain people are purposefully separated and punished precisely because of who they are and where they come from.

One of the prime similarities between *The Wire* and its naturalist predecessors is its detailed depiction of and focus on inner-city life. The city itself was a prominent fixture in naturalist literature as authors attempted to grapple with the widespread changes occurring in cities—namely, as Donald Pizer points out, the “rapid shift from a predominately rural, agrarian civilization to an urban industrial society”—in the wake of the industrial boom following Reconstruction (17). In 1870, 26 percent of Americans lived in Urban areas and there were fourteen cities with populations greater than 100,000; by 1900, 40 percent lived in urban areas, and thirty-eight cities had populations greater than 100,000 (Howard 33). The city was of such great importance, in fact, that references to it were frequently included in the title of naturalist works. Crane’s *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893), an exposé of New York City tenement life that followed in the

footsteps of Jacob Riis's 1890 work *How the Other Half Lives*, was also titled "A Story of New York." Similarly, the full title of Norris's *McTeague* (1899) includes the caption "A Story of San Francisco." In these early naturalist works, the city dominates the narrative; it transcends the term "setting" and becomes a character in its own right. Though *The Wire* is not officially titled "a story of Baltimore," it places the city at the forefront of its narrative. The show is far more concerned with giving an accurate depiction of Baltimore than any specific character or plot line. As Simon states

The Wire was not about Jimmy McNulty. Or Avon Barksdale. Or Marlo Stanfield, or Tommy Carcetti or Gus Haynes. It was not about crime. Or punishment. Or the drug war. Or politics. Or race. Or education, labor relations or journalism. It was about The City. It is how we in the West live at the millennium, an urbanized species compacted together, sharing a common love, awe, and fear of what we have rendered. At best, our metropolises are the ultimate aspiration of community, the repository for every myth and hope of people clinging to the sides of the ever-more-fragile pyramid that is capitalism. At worst, our cities—or those places in our cities where most of us fear to tread—are vessels for the darkest contradicts and most brutal competitions that underlie the way we actually live together, or fail to live together. (Simon 3)

In *The Wire*, then, characters are of secondary importance. The show is primarily concerned with depicting the conditions within the city at the turn of the twenty-first century, in the wake of the Enron and WorldCom scandals, the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, and Hurricane Katrina. The show follows the affects of "deindustrialization, suburbanization, segregation and globalization" on the city, demonstrating how certain facets of the city that were once crucial have become useless (Simon 5). Like its naturalist predecessors, *The Wire* seeks to remind its audience that the nation's growing wealth does not mean uniform prosperity, and the show attempts to direct their attention to those people and places that are usually ignored and/or forgotten.

The Wire also mirrors naturalist literature through its adherence to determinism, a belief that one's fate is predetermined by one's heredity and environment. In his definition of naturalism, Lars Åhnebrink notes that this is the genre's definitive characteristic, stating that naturalistic literature can best be understood as "life as it is in accordance to the philosophical theory of determinism...a naturalist believes that man is fundamentally an animal without free will (vii). In this vein, *The Wire* shows people who can't develop precisely because of their surroundings. Their "potential for growth is evident" but they ultimately "fail to develop because of the circumstances of life" (Pizer 20). This is a marked difference from Greek tragedy where a character falls from a position of stature, and later learns the reason for his fall, as in *Oedipus Rex*. The vast majority of characters in *The Wire* never reach any position of substance; they are permanently relegated to an inferior and undesirable state. Nor do they achieve some kind of insight into the cause of their downfall (such as hubris). Due to the power structures within the city, those that do reach the highest levels of their social hierarchies rarely fall. Instead, they escape punishment while those under them suffer. Clay Davis, the corrupt state senator, for instance, is never brought to justice. Similarly, drug kingpins Avon Barksdale and Marlo Stanfield receive minimal punishment for their actions while their respective enforcers "Wee-Bay" and Chris are sentenced to life terms in prison. The show therefore, on account of its naturalist form, reminds viewers of the inequality present in every facet of American society.

The Wire's characters act as archetypes for their positions in society and reveal the inescapability of inner-city life. Wallace, a sixteen-year-old drug dealer, is perhaps the best example of this phenomenon. Despite his lack of formal education—he

dropped out of school in order to make money to support his siblings—Wallace is surprisingly smart. Unlike his friends, he knows that Alexander Hamilton never held the office of president even though his face appears on a bill. He also acts as a parent to his young siblings, forgoing meals so that they can eat his portion, helping them with their homework, and making sure they attend school. After witnessing the mutilated body of Brandon lying outside of his window, Wallace attempts to separate himself the Barksdale drug organization. He goes to the police and is put into the protective care of his grandmother in Cambridge, Maryland. However, after spending only a few weeks in country setting, Wallace, bored and lonely, returns to Baltimore. Despite the inherent danger that it poses, Wallace cannot break from his old life. His return backs Poot's deterministic assertion that "You can take the nigga out of the West-Side but you can't take the West-Side out of the nigga." As evidenced by his remark "This is me, you, right here," describing the area where he lives and works, Wallace recognizes that he is attached in a fundamental way to West-Baltimore; it defines who he is and what he can do. Upon his return, Wallace is killed for his perceived snitching, signifying that escape and upward mobility are utterly impossible for those born into inner-city poverty. While Wallace's death is undeniably tragic and meant to tug at viewers' heartstrings, it carries a larger meaning when read according to naturalism. Like Crane's Maggie, Wallace seems to be exceptional, a flower that "blossomed in a mud puddle" (Crane 38). Despite his talents, Wallace's surroundings make it impossible for him to escape. The show argues that knowledge, skill and potential are not enough to advance. One can still be corrupted by one's surroundings.

The Wire, however, doesn't only focus on the plight faced by those born into the bottom of the hierarchy; it also shows how one's existence is affected when they are born near the top. Take, for example, D'Angelo Barksdale. Though D'Angelo is born into the most powerful drug family in Baltimore, he enjoys little freedom. As he tells Detectives McNulty and Moreland in the final episode of season 1, "Sentencing," "Y'all don't understand, man. *Y'all don't* get it. You grow up in this shit. My grandfather was Butch Stamford. You know who Butch Stamford was in this town? All my people, man—my father, my uncles, my cousins—it's just what we do. You just live with this shit until you can't breathe no more." D'Angelo seemingly has no other choice but to engage in criminal activity. Though he yearns to have some say over his own life, his family and surroundings prevent this from ever happening. As he states, "I swear to God, I was courtside for 8 months, and I was freer in jail than I was at home." D'Angelo illustrates that even when one is born into a seemingly desirable situation, one must still act in accordance with the expectations that have been set for that position in life. The show reminds viewers that no matter where one is born, their freedom will be limited by forces outside of their control. This is a sharp contrast, of course, from the schema of Greek tragedies, where characters fall based on their deeds. *The Wire's* characters are controlled by their environment, especially the institutions they work within. Similarly, while Stringer Bell arguably reaches the top of the Baltimore drug game, he too is paralyzed by his roots. Despite his attempts to start a legitimate business, he is never allowed to operate in the real economy. Instead, Stringer is taken advantage of by corrupt developers and politicians, who exploit his inexperience in professional business matters as well as his vulnerability due to his connection to the drug trade. Stringer's inability to

become a true businessman speaks to the inability of an individual to overcome his environment. No matter what Stringer does in an attempt to make himself socially acceptable, he will always be viewed and treated as a “gangsta.” One’s position in society, then, is essentially fixed at birth. The idea that one can overcome one’s upbringing and, through increased prosperity, become a member of a higher class is only a myth.

Given *The Wire*’s adherence to determinism, it is appropriate that religion is left out of the series almost entirely. Characters are rarely shown praying or going to church, suggesting that no amount of faith can overcome the predicaments faced by the characters and dispelling any possibility of divine intervention that could save the characters from their inevitable fates. In an existential sense, characters are essentially born alone into a cold, uncaring world. They cannot seek guidance from any outside or divine source; they must simply try to make sense of the situation they’ve inherited. In fact, when religion does appear in the series, it usually results in confrontations and consequences for characters. For instance, in season two, Frank Sobotka is initially targeted by the police because he donates a larger stained-glass window to a local church than Lieutenant Stan Valchek.

A notable exception to *The Wire*’s decidedly secular nature, however, is its opening theme song, “Way Down in the Hole.” In the context of the show, the song’s refrain seems out of place: “If you walk with Jesus, God’ll save your soul, you gotta keep the devil way down in the hole.” The use of these lyrics in the opening theme, however, carries a decidedly more political slant. Read symbolically, the lyrics can be interpreted to mean that the “evil” in the city must be kept submerged, beneath the public eye, thus

creating the other America that the show focuses on. By couching this message in religious terms, *The Wire* challenges its audience to take notice of a discrepancy and uncover its purpose, a strategy I will discuss in later chapter when illustrating how the show utilizes its form to convey its message.

Although determinism pervades *The Wire*'s narrative, the show is not nihilistic. Like naturalistic novels, which “concede that there are fundamental limitations to man’s freedom” but are “unwilling to concede that man is thereby stripped of all value,” *The Wire* celebrates the Sisyphean struggle of its characters (Pizer 24). As Simon states in reference to the show,

. . . there exists an abiding faith in the capacity of individuals, a careful acknowledgment of our possibilities, our humor and wit, our ability to somehow endure. They are, in small but credible ways, a humanist celebration at points, in which hope, though unspoken, is clearly implied. If the stories are hard ones, they are at least told in caring terms, with nuance and affection for all the characters, so that whatever else a viewer might come to believe about cops and dealers, addicts and lawyers, longshoreman and politicians, teachers and reporters and every other soul that wanders through *The Wire* universe, he knows them to be part and parcel of the same tribe, sharing the same streets, engaged in the same, timeless struggle. (Simon 31)

At its heart, *The Wire* is not as simple or reductive as its deterministic viewpoint would make it seem. It simultaneously displays and condemns societal strictures while celebrating the fight of the individual against the forces that enslave him or her. It is unsound, then, to criticize *The Wire*, as many critics have, for being “overly pessimistic.” The show is undeniably dark, but its portrayal is not devoid of any hope or redemption.

The foremost similarity between *The Wire* and its naturalistic predecessors is its reliance—both in its creation and depiction—on journalism. Many naturalist authors began their careers as journalists. Crane, for instance, “spent a number of years living

with and chronicling the activity of transients, petty criminals, and other starving artists in the Bowery section of New York City” in order to gain the experience and perspective necessary to write *Maggie* (Underwood 111). Some have even speculated that this led him to contract tuberculosis, which led to his untimely death at twenty-nine. Norris wrote for the San Francisco *Wave* and covered the Spanish American War in Cuba. Dreiser, who wrote for the Chicago *Globe*, stated that his time at the paper “broadened” him “considerably” and “finally liberated” him “from moralistic and religious qualms,” causing him to look upon life as a fierce grim struggle in which no quarter was either given or taken, and in which men laid traps, lied, squandered, and erred through illusion” (qtd in Underwood 113). And, during his time at the *Globe*, Dreiser came across the series of articles that he would ultimately turn into *An American Tragedy*. Early naturalists’ time as journalists gave them material to write about as well as a distinctive viewpoint on the state of America. In this sense, David Simon can be viewed as the most recent figure in the tradition of literary-journalists. While working as a crime reporter for the Baltimore *Sun* in the 1990’s, Simon tried to engage with his subjects as much as he could. As he states, “I made a point of getting out of the newsroom. And I tried to spend more time with the people who were getting policed” (Rothkerch 4). *The Wire* is undeniably a product of his time as a journalist. In speaking about the show, he states,

It’s fiction, I’m clear about that. But at its heart it’s journalistic...I’m not mistaking *The Wire* for journalism. I have too much respect for journalism to make such a statement. But the impulse, the initial impulse behind doing the show? It was the same reason somebody sits down to write an editorial or an op-ed. (Pearson 2)

In essence, the show was conceived as a muckraking venture, designed to announce, “Shit’s going wrong. Here’s where I think it’s going wrong. Here’s what I think might

make it right.” By focusing on “the equivocations” and “the stuff that doesn’t make it into the civics books,” *The Wire* could depict the America that got left behind. This understanding is key to uncovering *The Wire*’s political messages. The show is not really meant to entertain; it is meant to expose, reveal and inform.

There are, however, some key differences—or, perhaps more accurately, additions—that distinguish *The Wire* from the American naturalists and place the show squarely in the tradition of political art as envisioned by Sartre. The primary distinction is the show’s scope, which is far more expansive than any of its predecessors. As Donald Pizer explains, “The naturalist populates his novel primarily from the lower middle class or the lower class. His characters are the poor, the uneducated, the unsophisticated” (20). Given *The Wire*’s form, which I will discuss in more detail in the next chapter, and its running time of over sixty hours, the equivalent of a lengthy novel, the show can focus on the rich as well as the poor through its depictions of the inner workings of Baltimore, Maryland and Bodymore, Murdaland, the slang name given to Baltimore on the show by members of the inner city. Indeed, *The Wire* focuses not only “ex steelworkers and ex longshoreman; street dealers and street addicts, and an army of young men hired to chase the dealers and addicts; whores and johns and men to run the whores and coerce the johns—and all of them unnecessary and apart from a new millennium economy that long ago declared them irrelevant,” but on teachers, administrators, campaign managers, politicians, and police officers (Simon 9). So while the show certainly exemplifies that “the poor—in education, intellect, and worldly goods—are indeed pushed and forced, that the powerful do control the weak, that few men can overcome the handicaps imposed on them by inadequacies of body and mind, and that many men have instinctive needs

that are not amenable to moral suasion or rational argument,” it also illustrates the ways in which institutions dictate the lives of those people holding the most prestigious positions (Pizer 20). Those people occupying the positions at or near the top of the hierarchy are also becoming worthless; they too are easily replaceable. *The Wire* argues that it is erroneous to believe that the poor are the only group affected by the changes afflicting America in the twenty-first century. *The Wire*'s broad depiction of both urban and suburban life is a prime example of Sartre's definition of political art. In essence, the show makes a claim about twenty-first century American cities by showing the conditions of Baltimore as they truly are. Viewers are forced to recognize and respond to the bureaucracy, poverty and violence that they are exposed to in each episode. They do not necessarily have to “read between the lines” in order to grasp the show's intention.

Through its clear depiction of the inner workings of Baltimore, *The Wire* offers a careful analysis of the power structures which govern the two Americas. As the title of this chapter suggests, the legal economy is controlled by lawyers while the illegal economy is managed with guns. The show makes the point, however, that these two fixtures are not that different. In the sixth episode of the second season, “All Prologue,” Barksdale's attorney, Maurice Levy, scolds Omar, a “stick up boy” who robs drug dealers, stating “you are amoral, are you not? You are feeding off the violence and the despair of the drug trade. You are stealing from those who themselves are stealing the lifeblood from our city. You are a parasite...” Omar interrupts Levy's criticism and interjects, “Just like you, man...*I got the shotgun. You got the briefcase.* It's all in the game though, right?” Through this parallel, *The Wire* draws attention to the similarities in method that the two sides utilize and shows how money, the prized commodity, is

disseminated through both arenas: the two sides are not only interrelated, they actually help to support each other. Those in the real economy profit from both attacking and protecting members of the illegal economy while members of the illegal economy benefit from financing received from members of the real economy and selling their product. It is this connection that explains why both sides fight vehemently against change; as long as the status quo is kept, both sides continue to profit. Both economies ultimately adhere to the same maxim: “*It ain’t about right. It’s about money.*” This belief makes reform impossible.

On account of the show’s broad scope, *The Wire* touches on many universal issues that are not unique to a certain city. While *The Wire* offers an unflinching portrait of Baltimore, practically any major city could be substituted as the setting. The show is, according to Simon, equally viable in “London, or Mexico City or Beijing” (Simon 4). Consequently, the show’s scope allows it to resonate more personally with more viewers as the issues it touches upon—education, jobs, crime, addiction, and government policy—are applicable everywhere. In effect, one needn’t live in Baltimore to understand the show or themes. In fact, by watching *The Wire*, one is challenged to look at the situations and problems in one’s own city.

To be sure, *The Wire* is more overtly political than earlier iterations of naturalist fiction. The show isn’t satisfied with merely exposing the inner workings of the alienated and often ignored segments of America, it seeks to offer some explanation of how such divisions have occurred and why they persist. Just as the show seeks to establish that everyday human beings are worth less, it also argues in nearly every episode that the American dream is dead. Characters in both Americas are crushed time

and time again as they attempt to navigate the social structures they operate within. The show's stance is perhaps best characterized by Simon, who states,

The Wire began as a story wedged between two American myths. The first tells us that in this country, if you are smarter than the next man, if you are shrewd or frugal or visionary, if you build a better mousetrap, if you get there first with the best idea, you will succeed beyond your wildest imaginations. And by virtue of free-market processes, it is entirely fair to say that this myth, more than ever, happens to be true. Not only is this accurate in America, but throughout the West and in many emerging nations as well. Every day, a new millionaire or three is surely christened. Or ten. Or twenty. But a supporting myth has also presided, and it serves as ballast against the unencumbered capitalism that has emerged triumphant, asserting as it does for individual achievement to the exclusion of all societal responsibility, and declaring for the amassed fortune of the wise and fortunate among us. In America, we once liked to tell ourselves, those who are not clever or visionary, who do not build better mousetraps, have a place held for them nonetheless. The myth holds that those who are neither slick nor cunning, yet willing to get up every day and work their asses off and be citizens and come home and stay committed to their families, their communities and every other institution they are asked to serve—these people have a portion for them as well. They might not drive a Lexus, or eat out every weekend; their children might not be candidates for early admission at Harvard or Brown; and come Sunday, they might not see the game on a wide-screen. But they will have a place, and they will not be betrayed. In Baltimore, as in so many cities, it is no longer possible to describe this as myth. It is no longer possible even to remain polite on the subject. It is, in a word, a lie. (Simon 5-6)

The Wire attacks the fundamental principles on which the country supposedly operates. It reveals that Americans are exploited by the institutions that control them. America is not a land of opportunity; rather it has become a country of exclusion, where all men are not created equal and equal opportunities are not available to all citizens.

Ultimately, *The Wire* is able to convey its political messages in a way that straight journalism cannot. As Simon states in an interview with Bill Moyers,

. . . here's the problem for journalism. When we write about inequality, we use numbers that are profound, but are numbing. I mean, here's an excerpt I read just this morning: 'Over the past 20 years, the elite one percent of Americans saw their share of the nation's income double, from 11.3 percent to 22.1 percent. But their tax burden shrank by about one-third.' Now those facts tell us something very

important. That the rich got richer as their tax rates shrunk. But it doesn't seem to start people's blood rushing, you know. (8)

Since *The Wire* is not mandated by facts, it can present the most compelling message possible; it can use its plot—both its entertainment value and its fictitious presentation—for its political purposes. Interestingly, the show even rallies against facts in general. It establishes that facts and statistics don't always tell the whole story because they can be “juke,” or manipulated to fit a certain purpose. As Simon points out,

You show me anything that depicts institutional progress in America, school test scores, crime stats, arrest reports, arrest stats, anything that a politician can run on, anything that somebody can get a promotion on. And as soon as you invent that statistical category, 50 people in that institution will be at work trying to figure out a way to make it look as if progress is actually occurring when actually no progress is. And this comes down to Wall Street. I mean, our entire economic structure fell behind the idea that these mortgage-based securities were actually valuable. And they had absolutely no value. They were toxic. And yet, they were being traded and being hurled about, because somebody could make some short-term profit. In the same way that a police commissioner or a deputy commissioner can get promoted, and a major can become a colonel, and an assistant school superintendent can become a school superintendent, if they make it look like the kids are learning, and that they're solving crime. And that was a front row seat for me as a reporter. Getting to figure out how the crime stats actually didn't represent anything, once they got done with them. (Moyers 5)

Since statistics alone can be misconstrued, the filter through which one receives one's information becomes especially important. Though *The Wire* is journalistic in its conception, its literary structure, an amalgam of television, film and the novel, which I will discuss more in the following chapters, allows it to make a more adept critique of American society.

Given its improvements over early manifestations of American Naturalism, *The Wire* can most accurately be described as the exemplar of the new “social novel.” In his 1989 essay, “Stalking the Billion Footed Beast,” Tom Wolfe challenged authors to

pen a novel that was defined by “a highly detailed realism based on reporting, a realism more thorough than any currently being attempted, a realism that would portray the individual in intimate and inexorable relation to the society around him” (Wolfe 50). *The Wire*, though written and filmed more than 20 years after Wolfe’s call to action, serves as a prime example of the realization of his model. Interestingly, *The Wire*’s realization of Wolfe’s principles suggests that the traditional novel might not be the most appropriate venue for such a study. In the following chapters, I will analyze how *The Wire*’s form, which amalgamates best aspects of multiple genres—the populist medium of a television series, the breadth of a novel, and the imagery of film, and amalgamated them in order to create the ideal postmodern political text.

The Wire marks reemergence of American naturalism in the 21st century, illustrating Pizer’s point that

The reappearance of naturalism at several points in our literary history suggests that it has survived as a significant yet popular literary movement in America because it has responded to the preoccupations of particular moments of Modern American life and has discovered appropriate forms for doing so. (16)

The Wire responds to the postmodern condition through an entirely new form, a visual novel, which allows it to “depict American life with a grandiosity of sweep and a largeness of meaning that has made the American naturalistic novel our epic literature” (Pizer 22). But, perhaps more importantly, *The Wire* signals the maturation of naturalism from strictly determinist study to a full scale socio-political study of a city, worthy of an anthropologist or sociologist. Taking a cue from Sartre, *The Wire* doesn’t offer an escape from reality; instead, like its muckraking processors, it highlights the incongruities in modern life, forcing viewers to come to terms with the bitter realities of life in the “other

America.” The show is extremely valuable not for its solutions to social problems (as it offers none) but for its ability, like earlier works by Benjamin Franklin and Fredrick Douglass, to show its viewers how to operate within their respective societies. *The Wire*’s overarching message is that one cannot necessarily change the system in place; consequently, one must be able to recognize the shortcomings of society and the strictures that are placed on one in order to successfully navigate one’s surroundings.

CHAPTER III

“I ALWAYS FEEL LIKE SOMEBODY’S WATCHING (AND LISTENING) TO ME!” *THE WIRE*’S TRANSFORMATION OF TRADITIONAL TELEVISION GENRES AND TECHNIQUES

What the fuck? You’re supposed to be good cop!
Detective Thomas “Herc” Hauk

The Wire is conceived, as I discussed in the previous chapter, as an analysis of a modern city, not a cop show. Creator David Simon is adamant about his intention, stating in an interview with Bob Andelman:

We are not trying to do a cop show, we are trying to depict an American city. That’s a big thing, and we are trying to show how power and money route themselves through the modern city-state and why that city-state can’t solve its problems and maintain itself against its problems. (6)

As a result, *The Wire* functions as an extremely subversive show, “a rebellion of sorts,” according to Simon, “against all the horseshit police procedurals afflicting American television,” which are “rooted in good and evil in the Sipowiczes and Joe Fridays and Pembletons of the world” (Andelman 5). As the show is not designed for commercial viability, it disregards the familiar components that could increase its ratings—“more white faces, more women with big tits, and more stuff that blows up or squirts blood real good” (Hornby 2). Indeed, rather than attempt to follow a time-honored formula, *The Wire* seeks to be an entirely new type of show, one that includes and utilizes staples of

multiple mediums. On the one hand, through its defiance of accepted genres and techniques, *The Wire* attacks the misinformed principles on which they are based, leveling a staunch critique on American television in the process. However, by requiring viewers to actively engage with the show through visual and audio stimuli, *The Wire* is able to convey its political messages in an abstract manner, one that forces viewers to grapple with what Theodor Adorno calls “the shock of the unintelligible” (180). The show could not have the same resounding effect if its viewers were always told how to feel or provided with easy solutions. As Adorno notes, speaking of viewers’ reaction to the political art that *The Wire* emulates, “the moment of true volition ... is mediated through nothing other than the form of the work itself, whose crystallization becomes an analogy of that other condition which should be” (195). Through the show’s various narrative techniques, which rely on both visual and audio stimuli to prevent a typical linear structure, viewers are constantly destabilized and challenged to reconsider their oldest and most cherished beliefs about American society and the institutions governing it. Viewers are constantly forced to sift through multiple images, clips and conversations in their attempts to make sense of the plot, as well as the show’s broader political themes. As a result, the show can exert even more political force. “By dismantling appearance,” it can “explode from within the art which committed proclamation subjugates from without, and hence only in appearance” (191). Though diligent viewers will likely be able to unlock most of the meaning hidden within the show’s structural components, the show’s density assures that some information will always be out of reach. Viewers, who are thus in a constant struggle to keep up with the information presented in each episode, must constantly grapple with the images they see and as well as their interpretations of what

they see. While the first episode of *The Wire* begins as if it were just another iteration of the television police procedural or cop drama, it quickly declares itself to be a different breed of show by disregarding the standard episodic model of cop shows. The episode opens at a crime scene in West-Baltimore where a murder has just taken place. In the “cold open” viewers are teased into thinking that the episode will focus on, as McNulty muses, “Who shot Snot.” Instead, after returning from opening credits, viewers discover that this minor case has already been closed. McNulty jokes about the events to his friend Detective “Bunk” Moreland while entering the courthouse, and moves on to a new case, the Barksdale investigation that will be covered throughout the first three seasons. This maneuver immediately separates *The Wire* from its episodic processors as viewers are never granted any closure to the Snotboogie case, nor is the murder directly alluded to again in the series. They simply learn through offhand conversation between two of the show’s primary characters that the case is “down,” or removed from the giant board that lists open cases in the homicide division’s office. Though I will deal more specifically with the show’s use of closure in the next chapter, this initial example of the show rejecting closure is nevertheless noteworthy. Though no resolution is ever offered, the opening shot of the series, Snotboogie’s blood spilling in the streets, is shown during the opening credits of every episode of *The Wire*, suggesting that this murder, though not important in the series, has broader implications. It is symbolic of the more than 250 murders that occur annually in Baltimore—the city with the fifth-highest murder rate in the nation in 2009, over seven times the national average (even after a precipitous 17.4 percent drop from the pervious year), trailing only New Orleans, Richmond (CA), St

Louis and Detroit (Fenton 1). The scene serves as a grim reminder that *The Wire*, despite its expansive scope, can only represent a fraction of the violence that occurs in city.

Though only five minutes in length, the opening scene of *The Wire* serves as a frame for series, echoing the show's political mantras by suggesting that the core ideals America has been built on—equality, opportunity, and freedom—are no longer viable. Snotboogie and his friend are representative, as Blake Ethridge points out, of “the urban underclass shunned by and segregated from the rest of the country,” one of the primary focuses of the show (153). According to the audio commentary in *The Complete Series of The Wire*, they serve as a “wonderful metaphor for what’s going on in the American city, that those who are excluded from the legitimate economy make their own world.” Since they have no other means for advancement, the illegal dice game essentially serves as their livelihood. Even more tragic, however, is their belief in and adherence to what Simon calls the “American myth”; they erroneously believe that America is a place of inclusion, as evidenced by the man’s remark, when asked by McNulty why Snotboogie was allowed to continue to play in the dice game even though he would always try to steal the money, “Got to, this is America, man!” In their mind, you cannot leave anyone out, even if you know that person might cause problems or even steal from you. They don’t realize that they are being excluded. The parable of Snotboogie, therefore, calls attention to two of the primary political themes of the show: the division between what Simon calls the “two Americas,” and the impossibility of achieving the American Dream.

The Wire’s first episode also differentiates it from the new crop of cop shows, such as CSI, which rely on scientific advancements to help solve cases, by depicting a work environment where technology is very limited. This is somewhat ironic, given that

the show centers on using a specific piece of technology—a wire tap—to help solve difficult cases. In the episode, detectives are shown using type-writers to write their reports and joking about their need—or lack thereof—for more sophisticated technology. On one level, these scenes are meant to serve as a scathing critique of the lack of resources afforded to most inner-city police departments: in 2002, what businesses' don't have functioning computers for their employees? However, the absence of a forensics division also announces, albeit subtly, that the show will not indulge viewers with sudden breakthrough discoveries or with criminals who are careless enough to be caught that easily. *The Wire*, in essence, is not concerned with a case being solved (again, I will discuss closure in more detail in the next chapter), or even the cases themselves; the show's primary focus is to analyze the social conditions that breed the environment it depicts.

The first episode further challenges and defies the accepted police procedural format by altering the inciting moment that begins the action in the series. As Nick Lacey discusses in his work *Narrative and Genre: Key Concepts in Media Studies*, “disruptions are always caused by criminals” in a typical cop show (Lacey 164). Stasis is broken when the greater peace is disturbed, for instance, by a thief robbing a bank or two rival gangs clashing. In *The Wire*, however, this formula is inverted. Detective McNulty sets the events of the series into motion when he talks to Judge Phelan in the first episode after D'Angelo Barksdale is acquitted on murder charges. As the series begins, no one in the police department, aside from McNulty, has any idea who Avon Barksdale or Stringer Bell, the two men who will become the primary targets of the investigations, are. It is his refusal to follow the chain of command structure that sets the events of the series in

motion. After the Judge gets word from McNulty that the Barksdale organization is responsible for several additional murders, he orders the lieutenants to begin looking into their empire. Interestingly, the fact that the show's plot is initiated when a detective acts out of turn and oversteps his bounds suggests that the series itself is sort of accident, something that isn't supposed to happen. This highlights the notion that *The Wire* is at once a different type of cop show—in terms of its presentation and goals—and, as I discussed in the previous chapter, muckraking in its intent.

The Wire also differs from traditional cop shows in its humanistic depiction of criminal characters which puts them on par with the presupposed protagonists of the series. As Simon asserts in an interview with *Salon*,

the bad guys in most cop shows are basically fodder for the cops: They're to be chewed on and spit out and rendered as archetypes. And I got no interest in that. Even the guys who have the capacity for being sociopaths have to be considered in human terms. It doesn't mean you give 'em a puppy, but it's about making everybody whole. (Rothkerch 4)

The Wire systematically humanizes perceived gangsters by showing them in their natural environments—interacting with their families and pets—outside of their normal work environment. This portrayal distinguishes the show because viewers are invited, even forced, to identify with the proposed antagonists of the story. They cannot simply judge the characters according to their rank or position in society and are thus forced to consider the societal and institutional pressures that often dictate a character's decisions and actions.

Similarly, while on most cop series, as Lacey observes, “The law is seen as an overriding moral embodiment of natural justice (the bad guys must pay; evil must be punished)” the criminal characters in *The Wire*, especially those at the very top of the

drug game, often go unpunished (164). On account of the sympathy viewers come to feel for some of these characters, they may actually celebrate the criminal characters' ability to beat the legal system. At the same time, however, viewers are forced to question viability of the legal system as well as the unbalanced strictures in some areas—particularly relating to drug policy.

The Wire's unrelenting depiction of widespread institutional bureaucracy also sets it apart from cop shows. On the latter, according to Lacey, "The hero is invariably characterized as a professional whose job is made harder by an organization man less interested in solving crimes than maintaining his position in the hierarchy" (164). In *The Wire*, greed and bureaucracy are the standards, not the exceptions. As Simon points out, "Every singular act of heroism or of rebellion within these institutions (the police department, City Hall, Public School System) is undercut, because someone somewhere sees a chance to make a buck. Or to advance themselves to a point where they will have more power, power ultimately translating to more money" (Ryan 9). Every character in the show is invested in maintaining their position. That's not to say some characters don't act heroically from time to time, or do something for unselfish reasons, but they are primarily concerned with their own self-interest, not honor and valor. By depicting its characters in this way—as subjects of the institutions they work within—*The Wire* suggests that it is money and a desire for self-preservation—not altruism—that dictates and motivates individuals' actions.

Through its rejection of standard practices, *The Wire* doesn't just challenge the cop show genre; it damns the beliefs and underlying assumptions behind such shows (and which such shows often espouse): most prominently that police are unquestionably

good and completely invested in upholding the law. Indeed, it is what Simon calls “intellectual vanity” and/or a desire to move up in the hierarchy that drives police to solve crimes, not their desire to do good (Rothkerch 6). This is most apparent in Detective Jimmy McNulty. He only takes an interest in the Barksdale case because he is bitter that they “beat him,” or escaped sentencing, in an earlier murder case; he seeks retribution for his own ego, not because he has a desire to see them brought to justice for the murders that they’ve committed. His hubris is on display in the final episode of season three, “Mission Accomplished.” After finding Stringer Bell’s dead body, McNulty is not upset that Bell was not brought to justice, or even seemingly aware that the case against the Barksdale organization has taken a substantial hit: he is instead most concerned that Bell didn’t know that he was about to be caught: “I caught him, Bunk. On the wire. I caught him. He doesn’t fuckin’ know it.” McNulty’s desire, as evidenced by his quote, is to prove to Bell that he (McNulty) was smarter and better at his job. McNulty wants to see Stringer’s face when he is caught more than he wants to see him brought to justice for the crimes he has committed.

While the ways that *The Wire* breaks from the cop show format are certainly important, if not essential to understanding the show’s political themes, it is also interesting to note the ways that the show functions in relation to television in general. Indeed, the show doesn’t just break from expectations; it challenges the possibilities of television as a medium for politically effective art. As the show doesn’t have to appeal to a broad audience or follow any set model (given that it airs on HBO, a premium cable network that consistently backs the show despite lackluster ratings) it can experiment using bold structural and narrative techniques not before used in television in an attempt

to create a show that cannot be watched passively—a show that requires the same attention that one would devote to reading a novel. Accordingly, the show follows the model set forth by Adorno in “Commitment.” It is the “uncompromising radicalism” of *The Wire* that gives it a “terrifying power” (189). The result is a fundamentally different show that questions what television is, what it can do, and what it looks like.

One of the most striking features of *The Wire*’s structure is its use of an epigram to begin every episode. These quotes, taken from each individual episode, take on meaning both inside and outside of the episode. Their prominent placement announces that the quote will have a profound impact within a given episode. Yet their placement also suggests that the quote can exist outside of the world and context of the show. The epigrams are often prophetic, revealing truisms about the condition of modern society and its inhabitants. In this sense, they become political messages disguised as character quotes. For instance, the epigram of the fourth episode of season one, “Old Cases,” “Thin line between heaven and here” refers literally to “Bubble’s” remark leveled at this homeless camp. On a broader level, though, the remark refers to the thin line that separates the two Americas that the show analyzes. Similarly, the epigram for episode three of season one, “The Buys,” “The king stay the king,” refers to D’Angelo’s explanation of the rules of chess to Bodie and Wallace. But the remark also suggests that in any social institution, the power remains at the top of the hierarchy; one cannot rise up from humble origins and attain such a position. The duality of the epigrams allows the show to speak to viewers on multiple levels. They can signal an important scene in a given episode while simultaneously making a broader statement that has nothing to do with the characters or events in the show.

The Wire's use of its primary camera is also noteworthy as it forces viewers to parse through a barrage of information in order to make sense of the show's plot. The show, as Margaret Talbot points out, does not rely on the "jumpy handheld-camera shots and the blurry 'swish pans' that a lot of network shows have adopted" (6). Instead, the camera adopts a more filmic strategy, achieved by "more languid camera movements" that emphasize "clarity, special depth and the relationship of characters to their environment" (Rose 88). The camera is meant to mirror the show's methodical narrative pace, allowing for the scenes to elaborate on the characters and their surroundings. As Simon asserts,

We didn't want the camera to have any advance knowledge of the story, since we're asking the viewers to follow the story very carefully and pick up facts as they go along and never pick up more facts than we're allowing ... If a camera move 'fishes' for a punchline or a telltale moment, we're probably ruining the reveal through an inelegant move. (Rose 88)

As a result, the camera often "remains locked, for minutes at a time, on people talking," forcing viewers to pay attention to everything taking place in the scene, including allusions to early episodes and hints of possible future events (Talbot 6). Thanks in large part to its camera work, *The Wire* presents a character-driven narrative in lieu of the more accepted plot-driven narrative. The plot is, in essence, derived from the interaction between characters. It emerges from the character's personalities, wants, and needs.

The Wire's narrative also differs dramatically from standard television fare due to its serialized format, a device that allows the show to accumulate meaning as it progresses. Its serial structure is often cited by critics as being the defining characteristic that separates the show from its peers, past and present. In essence, each episode of the

show functions like a chapter in a novel—they are merely installments in a larger, collective whole and cannot be viewed as stand-alone entities. For this reason, the episodes in each season must be viewed in order if one hopes to attain even a basic level of understanding. Indeed, as Jason Mittell points out,

The Wire offers very little episodic unity—while each episode is certainly structured to deliver narrative engagement and payoffs in specific beats and threads, it is hard to isolate any identifying characteristics of a single episode in the way that a show like *The Sopranos* has particular markers, such as “The College Trip” or “The Russian in the Woods. (8)

Moreover, as each season focuses on one aspect of the city, the series accumulates meaning as it progresses. For instance, the arrest of an aide to Senator Clay Davis in the first season “adds little to that season’s arc, but it sets up a major plotline of seasons three and four.” Likewise, the knowledge that Lieutenant Cedric Daniels has, according to Agent Terrence Fitzhugh, McNulty’s friend and FBI contact, “a couple hundred thousand dollars more in liquid assets than any police Lieutenant should ever have” has little impact on season one, but it ultimately comes back to burden him in season five, when he is forced to prematurely resign his post and retire as Commissioner of Operations, setting a number of other events—including the unexpected promotion of Valchek, Commissioner of Administration, and Daniels’s return to his roots as an attorney, into motion. As *The Wire*’s narrative doesn’t progress in a classical fashion, where there is a concrete and discernable rising action that leads to a climax and then to falling action, viewers are challenged to retain and consider the implications levied in each individual episode. They are then forced to piece the information together to create a viable, albeit sometimes incomplete storyline. The endings of *The Wire*’s individual episodes are particularly notable, as I will discuss in detail in the following chapter, for

their ability to convey the show's overarching political themes through an Adornian approach. Like the show's fragmented narrative, the endings often result in viewers not receiving the answers or information they desire. They are forced to wrestle with the unintelligible or work through/ consider multiple meanings for a given scene.

The Wire also makes frequent use of parallelism, often devoting successive scenes—resulting in what amounts to roughly equal time over the course of the series—to the corresponding levels of command that comprise the social hierarchies on both sides of law. By presenting these scenes side by side, viewers are invited to see the similarities between seemingly dissimilar characters. For instance, in *The Wire*'s first episode, “The Target,” the constant alternation back and forth between scenes involving McNulty and D’Angelo illustrate that the two figures are at the mercy of the institutional structures that they operate within. Whereas McNulty must answer to Lieutenant Rawls for his indiscretions, D’Angelo must also answer to his superior, his uncle’s associate Stringer Bell. Similarly, as is made clear throughout the episode, their acts of defiance have ramifications that affect all levels of their respective organizations, costing time and money—the two most valuable commodities in each economy. Those beneath McNulty and D’Angelo are also forced to suffer through an increased workload and/or demotion. This parallel presentation helps to convey the show’s political sentiments as it effectively explains why both sides in a given conflict rally to keep status quo: they both have vested interest in it. Change—or any disturbance, for that matter—is not favorable for either side as it results in a loss of resources.

On a more general level, *The Wire*'s use of parallelism is notable to two levels: first, it is unprecedented in television, and a direct result of its serial structure,

which allots approximately sixty hours for the story to be told. Perhaps more importantly, however, it also forces viewers to juggle various perspectives. The show's multivocal narrative is effectively designed democratically—with many viewpoints represented—and is thus able to give a forum to the America that lacks a voice. Also, by showcasing the characters in their own eyes, as well as through the eyes of their peers and their opposition, *The Wire* prevents viewers from analyzing characters in overly simplistic or reductive terms—such as “good” or “bad.” Viewers must concede that all cops are not good, law abiding citizens; all criminals are not violent, money-hungry thugs. In this absence of easily discernible categories, viewers are forced to put themselves in both positions and consider the options that are available to each side. It is only through this empathetic process that one can gain an appreciation for the plight faced by the members of the other America.

The Wire's narrative is unique as it destabilizes viewers by often omitting key scenes from its episodes. As a result, viewers are forced to piece together the missing details based on the results, or consequences of the perceived but unseen actions, which may or may not occur in the same episode. For instance, in the opening scene of “Middle Ground,” the penultimate episode of season three, a standoff between Omar and Brother Mouzone is cut short before the two men put down their weapons. The two men agree to talk—at gunpoint—but viewers are not privy to their conversation. Instead, viewers only see the outcome of their meeting—the murder of Stringer Bell—and are then forced to wonder what occurred in the unviewed scene. How did these two men, who had attempted to murder each other on more than one occasion—with Brother Mouzone even going so far as to torture one of Omar's associates in order to learn of his whereabouts—

get to this point? When and where did it take place? What was said, agreed to, or promised? In many ways, the removal of scenes makes the show more novelistic as viewers are forced to actively engage with the visual work. Viewers can't rely on the show to provide them with every detail so they are forced to use their imagination—as if they were reading—in order to comprehend the content. This practice, no doubt, adheres to David Simon's philosophy that "less is more." Simon believes that

Explaining everything to the slowest or laziest member of the audience destroys verisimilitude and reveals the movie itself, rather than the reality that the movie is trying to convey. The audience need not understand everything at the moment they see or hear it, and some details need never be explained—if they get it, great, if not, that's a lot like life. (qtd. in Mittell 7)

By allowing for multiple interpretations of a crucial but absent scene—without ever revealing the true happenings—*The Wire* actively engages viewers and allows them to add their own slant to the plot.

Unlike most television shows—which rely solely on elaborate action sequences to titillate the audience and evoke emotion—*The Wire* relies on auditory stimuli as much as visual stimuli in order to tell its story, reflect its setting, and convey its themes. In fact, the HBO advertising campaign for the first season—printed prominently on its DVD case—is "Listen up." From its inception, the series declares that it will require viewers to engage actively and with multiple senses.

The language used in *The Wire*, one of its most distinctive and often most frustrating facets, thrusts viewers into a foreign world where they must follow along closely and make constant deductions in order to maintain their grasp of the plot. The show demands that viewers "master a whole argot" of Baltimore slang; however, the characters never overtly define any of the words they use (Talbot 3). Viewers must

therefore pay close attention to the language itself and the context in which it is used in order to learn the meanings of certain Baltimore-specific word and phrases. For instance, through the scenes at the West-Baltimore police station in season one, the viewer learns that “to have ‘suction’ is to have pull with your higher-ups on the police force or in City Hall; a ‘redball’ is a high-profile case with political consequences; to ‘re-up’ is to get more drugs to sell” (Talbot 5). This knowledge must then be remembered and applied through the ensuing seasons in order to remain cognisant of the show’s narrative. Language is one of the primary factors that prevent the show from being watched passively. Failure to decipher the show’s vernacular will lead viewers to become totally detached from the world of the show.

One’s first viewing of *The Wire* is comparable to reading Joyce’s *Ulysses* or *Finnegan’s Wake* for the first time; trying to understand the dialogue makes the already fragmented action increasingly difficult—if not impossible—to follow. The jargon is so impenetrable, in fact, that some viewers have had to turn to the show’s subtitles—making it even more novelistic—in an effort to increase their comprehension. As *Sunday Times* columnist India Knight writes:

I have friends who have been addicted to *The Wire* for ages but I didn’t see the point, despite having watched the pilot twice, because I could never understand what anyone was saying ... Then someone lent me a box set and suggested I turn on the subtitles. (1)

However, columnist Oliver Burkeman warns that “Turning on the subtitles will help you only marginally with the Baltimore-speak of *The Wire*” (3). Even knowing precisely what was said does not guarantee that viewers can make sense of the statements uttered.

Understanding the language used in *The Wire* and the way people from different social

backgrounds communicate with each other are focal elements in the show. It requires viewers' full attention. Language, at times, especially early in a season when viewers are exposed to a new institution in Baltimore, will actually take precedent over the characters' actions on screen, a new phenomenon in any visually-based genre.

Language is also used in *The Wire* as a vehicle to make an overt political statement about the growing disconnects in American society. The show often attaches common language—that is, words and terms familiar to most viewers—to drug paraphernalia in order to unite the drug war and war on terror and emphasize the dissimilarity between the two Americas. For example, drugs are referred to at different points in the series as “pandemic,” “WMD,” “greenhouse gas,” and even “Bin Laden.” These names and terms, ripped out of current headlines, link the drug sales to other international concerns like global warming and terrorism. By assigning these terms to the drugs being sold, *The Wire* seems to be questioning which “war” is more pressing, more deserving of our country's attention and resources. At the same time, however, the show seems to be making a statement that there are few similarities between the two factions in America and they are moving further apart. What is front page news in one America is just another name for a drug in the other.

Like its use of language, *The Wire* uses music to separate itself from other television shows and to announce its themes. *The Wire* uses primarily diegetic music—“music that emanates from an element within the scene”; in other words, the show doesn't add any unnatural sounds—something “not a part of the real-time narrative”—to give clues as to what will happen next, convey emotion, or influence one's reading of a certain scene in any way (Frere-Jones 1). Viewers, then, cannot rely on a musical clue to

inform them about the importance of a scene or to give them any direction on how to read the scene. They are left to their wits to determine which scenes are essential to the plot and which are merely filler. The use of diegetic music is also meant to heighten realism and authenticity of the show. When detectives McNulty and Moreland go to country-themed bar, Gram Parsons's "Streets of Baltimore" plays on the jukebox; when D'Angelo and "Wee-Bey" ride to Orlando's club, they listen to Jay-Z's "H to the Izzo." The narratives of each song add significantly to the meaning of the scenes but viewers who don't know the songs will miss this. The only outside music that appears in the series, aside from the music that plays during the opening and closing credits, occurs during the season ending montages, which I will discuss in more detail in the next chapter, and is used precisely to differentiate it as something separate and different from the rest of the scenes in the series.

Still, the most prominent auditory cue in the series that helps to destabilize viewers and require their full attention when interacting with the text is "the wire" itself. As the show's title would suggest, the wire tap is the vessel through which show is structured, even if the device itself only appears in approximately half of the episodes due to the amount of time it takes each season for the characters to uncover enough information to merit a wire tap in their investigation. In keeping with the show's unconventional, non-linear narrative, the information that viewers receive through the wire tap varies. Sometimes, it reveals new information that is essential to understanding the plot; on other occasions, it divulges information viewers are already aware of but is new to the characters. And, from time to time, the wire supplies only information that is known by both viewers and the characters, offering no new insights into the case. In any

event, the wire forces viewers to occupy two places simultaneously: viewer and participant. When the characters' receive information from a wiretap, viewers essentially, get the information at the same time as the character. Viewers are then expected to sift through, comprehend, and internalize the information, as the characters do not provide any sort of summation of what they've just heard. By receiving information first hand, viewers are put on the level of the characters—they are effectively made an active participant in the world of the show.

It is interesting and important to note that, beyond its significance in terms of the narrative, the wire can act as a metaphor for the show's overarching goals and political intentions. As David Simon points out:

The Wire is a double entendre of sorts. It specifically refers to the electronic surveillance methods used by the police to try to undermine and take apart a criminal organization. In the first season, it would have been a drug organization, the second season, it was a smuggling organization, and so forth, but that's more the literal reason for the title. The title really refers to almost an imaginary but inviolate boundary between the two Americas, between the functional, post-industrial economy that is minting new millionaires every day and creating a viable environment for a portion of the country, and the other America that is being consigned to a permanent underclass, and this show is really about the vagaries and excesses of unencumbered capitalism and what that has wrought at the millennium and where the country is and where it is going, and it is suggestive that we are going to a much more divided and brutish place, and I think we are, and that really reflects the politics of the people making the show. It really is a show about the other America in a lot of ways, and so *The Wire* really does refer to almost a boundary or a fence or the idea of people walking on a high wire and falling to either side. It really is sort of a symbolic argument or symbolic of the argument we are trying to make. (Andelman 4)

In essence, the show itself functions like a wire, offering glimpses into life in urban institutions and revealing information about their failures. It is precisely this connection, this understanding of something foreign, that allows one to understand that there is a division between the two Americas. Like the show's narrative strategy which melds clear

messages with convoluted presentations, the wire simultaneously connects and divides. Consequently, it acts as a perfect vehicle for realizing Adorno's definition of political art. Viewers must simultaneously recognize and consider the similarities and differences between their world and the world depicted in the show while acting as active participants in the show! No matter what they do, viewers cannot escape the show's reach. Though they might try to retreat to the comfortable confines of their world outside of the show, they are forced to still confront the show's presentation of postmodern American life.

Visual surveillance techniques also play a prominent role in the series and help to expand upon its themes. *The Wire*'s narrative is often interrupted when its primary camera gives way to other media. At times, for instance, photographs replace action and dialogue for 5-10 second intervals. During these sequences, one's viewpoint shifts from the camera's vantage point to that of the officer taking the pictures. The insertion of these photographs creates a more fragmented narrative since viewers, for a period of time, are only privy to the information apparent in the photographs; the story is told largely without words. One of the most prominent examples of this technique takes place in the second episode of season one, "The Detail," when "Bubbles," a recovering drug addict and criminal informant, agrees to help identify some members of the Barksdale organization by placing specific hats on them which Greggs takes pictures from a nearby building. The scene shifts between "Bubbles" placing the hats on the men and the ensuing snapshots, forcing viewers to temporarily watch from both angles and hold both subject positions. Appropriately, since the pictures are taken from an adjoining rooftop—a customary maneuver in a stakeout—some of pictures turn out grainy and

viewers are unable to identify anyone in them. Aside from the obvious fact that such pictures couldn't be used as evidence in a trial or benefit the case in any discernable way, they also help to remind viewers that in an investigation there will be no silver bullet, no perfect evidence that will assure that a criminal will be put behind bars. Rather, it will be like viewers' relationship to the show, some reconstructed narrative that has everything to do with the subjectivity of the persons telling the story.

Video surveillance is also constantly used in the show as a replacement to the main camera. Without announcement, viewers can find themselves temporarily watching a scene from a surveillance camera located in an elevator, office, or street lamp before returning to the standard camera. This sudden shift in perspective, in its simplest sense, serves as yet another method to force viewers into watching the show from multiple perspectives—figuratively and literally. However, they also remind viewers that modern cities are manifestations of a panopticon: one is always being watched, but can never sure when, where, why or by whom.

The Wire's use of audio and visual cues, in addition to its multilayered structure and narrative, situate the show as distinctly new type of media that deserves the title of "visual novel." The show also dares viewers to uncover multiple meanings and messages pertaining to the role of institutions in American society through its use of parallelism and epigrams. Similarly, the show's use of audio stimuli—such as Baltimore slang, diegetic music and the wire itself—and its frequent interruptions to the main camera with photographs and visual surveillance footage, keeps viewers in an uncomfortable state, unable to put a finger on where they are or where they are going, and challenges them to constantly reassess the world around them. All of these features

help to make viewers active and engaged participants in the work. They cannot find meaning simply through watching, especially if they don't devote all of their attention to their narrative. In this sense, as I will discuss in more detail in the next chapter, *The Wire*'s form mirrors its function. It sets the precedent not only for future television shows, but also any medium that wants to convey a political message. Indeed, though Henry Jenkins talks at length about television's opportunities for producing political art in his seminal book *Convergence Culture*, *The Wire* illustrates that such possibilities can already be achieved.

CHAPTER IV

“EVERY NEW BEGINNING COMES FROM SOME OTHER BEGINNING’S END?” THE POLITICS OF *THE WIRE*’S SERIAL ENDINGS

Shit’s never finished; it’s just abandoned.
David Simon

What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.
T. S. Eliot

In the overall structure of *The Wire*, the endings of episodes take on extra significance; they are sites where its political themes are explicitly brought to bear. In keeping with *The Wire*’s untraditional narrative techniques, the episodes lack uniformity: they don’t end at same time; some episodes run for fifty-three minutes while others run as long as an hour and sixteen minutes. Moreover, there is not a definite number of episodes in each season. Some seasons contain thirteen episodes, others ten or eleven. Since the endings are not dictated by the show’s form, episodes end when they need to end—where the ending can have the greatest power—rather than when they are forced to end due to time or page constraints; as a result, the endings are able to convey Simon’s sentiments exactly, albeit sometimes cryptically. As they are the last image seen each week, they have the capability to highlight key information from the episode to help viewers better

understand the episode upon review, or further destabilize viewers by defying their expectations.

The endings of the show also take on added significance as, unlike many contemporary television shows—such as *Lost* and *True Blood*—which use a “puzzle structure”—highlighted by a cliffhanger ending that incites viewers to tune into the following episode to receive answers, to motivate interest—*The Wire* offers almost no mysteries. As television studies scholar Jason Mittell points out, viewers “typically know who the criminals are and what they did” (7). For instance, as Mittell posits, even though the second season begins with an unsolved murder of a shipping container full of Eastern European prostitutes,

. . . the whodunit is downplayed in the narrative drive, with the final revelation becoming almost an afterthought with the focus shifted to the larger systems of corruption, smuggling, and the disintegration of labor—the only closure offered by discovering the name of the already-dead murderer is the ability to remove the ‘red names’ from the board in the homicide squad. (8)

Instead of mysteries, the show’s narrative focuses primarily on the game between competing systems, with suspense and tension generated through anticipation of what procedures will pay off for each side, and how the various sides will end up before the next round is played.” Endings, therefore, which are meant to further complicate the narrative rather than tie it up, follow an Adornian model. Since they don’t have to clean up any storylines, they can instead function as a mechanism to challenge viewers and reinforce the show’s political views. The endings accomplish this feat through their various strategies and techniques—namely characterization, symbolism, and irony—to present a clear critical message that condemns the practices of modern institutions and the increasingly oligarchical structure of American government.

Despite the differences in medium and technique, the key disparity between *The Wire* and its serial predecessors, as I have mentioned earlier, is its refusal to cater to its audience's expectations. As its primary goal is not profit, the show refuses to sacrifice its postmodern-political vision—even in the face of cancellation—and does not attempt to seduce or trick readers into tuning in to the next week's episode. By doing this, *The Wire* adheres to Adorno's assertion that, "The uncalculating autonomy of works which avoid popularization and adaptation to the market involuntarily becomes an attack on them" (190). Fittingly, *The Wire* only uses one cliffhanger ending in its sixty episodes. The tenth episode of season one, "The Cost," concludes showing a close-up of Detective Greggs's lifeless body in a hospital bed after she has been shot in a staged drug deal that goes awry. Although the actual event occurs at the end of the ninth episode, the audience is left unsure whether Greggs will survive the incident, and must tune in the following two episodes in order to learn whether she will survive.

Every episode of *The Wire* does not end in the same manner, and the different endings play a significant role in shaping and redefining the show's critique of Baltimore, the representative postmodern American city. A clear understanding of the show's four prominent ending strategies—which I will refer to as character endings, symbolic endings, ironic endings and montage endings—are required in order to grasp the extent to which the endings complicate and enrich the show's themes.

The most frequently occurring types of endings in *The Wire* are character endings, which occur in approximately two-thirds (42) of the episodes. Character endings are distinctive in that they end with a final shot of a character's reactions, usually in response to their acquisition of a piece of knowledge pertaining to a particular plotline

that they're a part of; information that viewers usually know from having watched the episode, or those preceding it. It is important to note that the character in question never speaks during the ending sequence; there is no soliloquy that is offered to help crystallize the characters' thoughts. Rather, viewers are only privy to the characters' emotions—their glances, reactions or expressions—which reveal their inner turmoil, angst, or jubilation with a distinction and clarity that language cannot provide. Character endings rarely provide new information—at least in terms of plot. Instead, they help to provide a framework from which viewers can gain a greater understanding of a character—their motivations, motives, and morals—which, in turn, will help them read the text in a certain manner. Since *The Wire*'s narrative is almost entirely free of expository devices like flashbacks that could help educate viewers about a character's background, character endings can, as Margaret Talbot states of the show's structure in general, “elaborate on the characters and the power structures they move within,” providing the blueprint for viewers to follow as the series progresses (3).

It is interesting and important to note that, as the series progresses, character endings are used more frequently. In seasons four and five, character endings account for over ninety percent of the episode endings, suggesting that, in the waning episodes of the series, viewers, already aware of the show's major themes, must pay particular attention to the characters themselves, as they will yield more insight into *The Wire*'s social commentary than any other facet of the show. This technique is also appropriate given that new characters are constantly introduced, even in the series' final episodes. The four prominent characters in season four—Michael, Namond, Randy and “Dukie,” incoming eighth graders at Edward Tilghman middle school, a West-Baltimore Junior High

School—do not appear earlier in the series; their respective stories are picked up at the start of season four and carried through season five. Similarly, the staff of the Baltimore *Sun*—namely city editor Gus Haynes and aspiring journalist Scott Templeton—appear only in season five. While the character endings in the final two seasons often focus on new characters, older characters continue to appear in the endings, sometimes unexpectedly, giving viewers the chance to see what, if any, changes that character has made. The brief appearances made by past characters also suggest that their plot threads, which have continued to remain open, will stay that way forever. For instance, the reemergence of “The Greek,” the true power source behind the Baltimore drug enterprise, in season five suggests that the problems he poses will never be eradicated. Though rarely seen, a major drug supplier will always be present in Baltimore. Through such depictions, *The Wire* makes a powerful, albeit somewhat negative statement about the ability to mend and/or improve the dominant societal structure

Due to the immense number of characters that appear on the show—there are approximately sixty-five “regular” characters, according to John Atlas and Peter Drier—not all of the characters can be featured in this way (1). Accordingly, character endings are reserved for those characters that are the most intricate and hardest to understand; those that are defined by their mixed loyalties and motives and their often tragic circumstances. Character endings place these characters at the forefront of the series, thereby adding to its narrative complexity as viewers must constantly readjust their expectations of characters based on the characters’ actions and reactions. But the endings also compel viewers to reconsider their definitions of “good” and “evil.” Character endings highlight the forces and pressures that institutions enact on individuals. They

demonstrate how, regardless of what side of the law one is on, one is at the mercy of the structure of the institution that one works within. In this sense, character endings have a humanizing effect on viewers. They show that Baltimore's heroes are not that different from its villains; in fact, both are caught in same predicament. For this reason, character endings also force viewers to question to whom they owe sympathy. Should Jimmy McNulty, a cop, be forgiven for his multiple indiscretions while Stringer Bell, a drug kingpin, is forsaken simply because of their respective places or roles in society? The character endings, therefore, which highlight basic human emotions and frailties, expand beyond the show itself. Viewers must adjust and assess their stereotypes of certain individuals, roles, and institutions.

As evidenced in the first episode of *The Wire*, character endings heighten the show's political message through their depiction of the power institutions' hold over individuals. Early in the episode, D'Angelo Barksdale, a young drug dealer, is acquitted on murder charges after a witness changes her testimony, presumably after being threatened by associates of D'Angelo's uncle, Baltimore drug kingpin Avon Barksdale, who appear at the trial, clad in black, sitting prominently in the back row. In spite of the angelic symbolism within his name and the professional clothing that he wears, viewers assume, given his unsavory affiliations, that D'Angelo is a cold-blooded murderer, a view that is certainly heightened when an eye-witness identifies D'Angelo as the murderer in court, disregarding the menacing glances he receives from members of the Barksdale organization. However, throughout the episode, viewers are given clues to suggest that D'Angelo is somehow different from the men he associates with. When a junkie attempts to pass off fake bills to purchase his drugs, D'Angelo, who manages "the

Pit”—a prominent Barksdale-run drug distribution area in the courtyard beneath the poverty-stricken low-rise apartments—where the man attempts to cop, refuses to condemn him. When his associates seek guidance on how to handle the situation, D’Angelo says nothing; he simply turns and walks away. D’Angelo’s decision illustrates that he is not a brutal man, nor is he comfortable with brutality; but it also illustrates that he is not entirely pure either. He does not force his comrades to leave the man alone and as a result the man is brutally beaten after D’Angelo turns and leaves. At the end of the episode, the questions surrounding D’Angelo’s character are brought to a head: viewers see D’Angelo as he discovers that the aforementioned State’s witness that identified him, William Gant, has been murdered. D’Angelo is visibly appalled upon seeing Gant’s body in the street, realizing that the man was murdered simply because he testified. He realizes that he is, in some way, responsible for the man’s death. D’Angelo’s reactions illustrate that, though he is slightly older than some of his accomplices in “the Pit,” who range in age from sixteen to eighteen, he is just a kid, not a hardened player in the drug game. Fittingly, in the final scene, the camera alternates between images of D’Angelo walking away from the crime scene, his head fixed downward, and a shot of the area where the murder took place, framed by a statue of a cherub on one side and an ambulance on the other. D’Angelo is tragically caught between violence and innocence: he is half in the drug game and half out. Though viewers are left unsure as to whether D’Angelo committed the murder that he was accused of, or whether he was merely an accomplice who had no choice but to attend, they realize that D’Angelo is not innately evil, nor is he a stereotypical “thug,” who murders indiscriminately and without remorse; he is capable of sympathy, remorse, and guilt. Consequently, viewers realize that D’Angelo is

obligated to act in a certain manner by the organization that he works with. Failure to comply with the institution's expectations would almost certainly result in his demise. The ending, by highlighting D'Angelo's precarious position—middle management in the drug game—demonstrates the power that institutions hold over individuals; they deprive their subjects of free will and choice.

Another poignant example of a character ending that comments on the plight of an individual who is torn between his own beliefs and the strictures and expectations of the institution he works within in the first season involves Cedric Daniels, the Lieutenant assigned to the special narcotics taskforce that is created in the wake of Gant's killing. At this early moment in the series, viewers do not know if Daniels is—in the streetwise vernacular of the show—"good police," or if he is just another corrupted "company man"; viewers only know that Daniels has more money in "liquid assets" than he should, leading them to speculate that he has taken bribes, or at the very least engaged in some unjust activity in the past. In the series' second episode, "The Detail," Daniels faces a dilemma: three of his men go to an inner-city apartment complex late at night in a brash and foolhardy attempt to provoke an altercation with some drug dealers. When a skirmish ensues, one of the officers, Roland Pryzbylweski, strikes a boy with his gun, severely damaging one of the boy's eyes. As a result, Daniels is caught in a catch-22: should he protect his men, who were not acting on his orders, at the expense of the boy, or should he "do right" by the boy and sanction his men. Initially, Daniels protects his men, telling them to allege that they were provoked when asked by investigators. At the end of the episode, however, Daniels is shown lying awake in bed at 3AM. When his phone rings, he promptly answers and learns that the boy has lost the eye. The episode

concludes with a wide shot of Daniel sitting on his bed, sickened by the gross incompetence of his men. Daniels, who is physically one of the largest characters in the series, is made to look small and insignificant in the shot, as though he is without control. Daniels's reaction lets viewers know that while he is loyal, he is not uncaring. Unlike others in the department, he does not view the boy as just another "project nigger." This incident, in turn, helps to solidify Daniels as a flawed but decent character, constantly placing the interests of others above his own.

In each season of *The Wire*, multiple character endings are devoted to a single character. This practice has two primary implications: first, it establishes a character as the prominent figure in a given season; at the same time, however, this extra attention forces viewers to acknowledge the characters' flaws as well as their qualities, and consider if the character progresses or regresses over the course of the narrative. For instance, in the first season, three character episode endings are devoted to Detective Jimmy McNulty. McNulty, who is arguably the show's overarching protagonist and focalizer—the Virgil who leads us through the hell that is the "other America," inner city Baltimore—given that he is the first character viewers are exposed to in season one and the last character seen in season five; his goals organize, motivate and instigate most of the show's events. He is responsible for inciting the department's investigation of the Barksdale drug cartel in season one and the murder of the Russian prostitutes in season two; likewise, in an attempt to save the department's case on Marlo Stanfield in season five, he creates a fictitious killer for the department to investigate in order to procure enough funding to continue the Stanfield case. Given his prominence, it is easy to ignore McNulty's many faults and misdeeds. His character endings, therefore, function as a

vehicle to remind viewers of human frailty and potential by forcing him under a microscope, leading viewers to question, as David Simon states, “How many times is McNulty going to fuck an alligator in the sewer and then do an honest thing and then do a fucked-up thing the next minute” (Pearson 4).

Multiple character endings in the first season are devoted to an analysis of McNulty, highlighting, among other qualities, his idealism, vanity and self-destructive nature. On the one hand, the endings establish that he is intelligent, a good friend, and, perhaps most importantly, “good police.” In episode three, “The Buys,” McNulty reacts hostilely upon hearing the news that Daniels, his supervisor, may be corrupt. While neither viewers nor McNulty knows for certain whether Daniels is “dirty,” his reaction shows that he is devoted to his work. He is disgusted by the mere thought that a police officer would act in such an irresponsible manner. Viewers’ response to McNulty’s reaction, however, are tempered by the fact that he is shown drinking in his police car in the scene, demonstrating that he is flawed, unable to look at his own behavior objectively. Appropriately, McNulty’s character endings also demonstrate how reckless, selfish, insecure, and destructive he can be. In episode seven, “One Arrest,” he arrives unannounced and in a drunken stupor at the home of Rhonda Pearlman, the attorney with whom McNulty carried on an affair, leading to the collapse of his marriage; in episode eight, “Lessons,” he barely acknowledges Detective “Bunk” Moreland’s comment that “You’re not good for people, Jimmy,” seemingly unaware that his penchant for “giving a shit” when it’s not his “turn” has serious ramifications in his associate’s lives, something that he doesn’t grasp even superficially until later in the season when Detective Gregg is

shot and nearly killed due to McNulty's unrelenting insistence that the team keep pursuing the Barksdale case.

As evidenced by its constant focus on conflicted characters, *The Wire* is fascinated with exploring the idea of the past—particularly whether an individual can overcome her upbringing and/or past transgressions to change and become someone new. Character endings play a pivotal role in analyzing and framing this phenomenon, especially when they are focused on “criminal” characters, such as Frank Sobotka, the corrupt I.B.S union's secretary treasurer, or Stringer Bell, Avon Barksdale's right hand man. In keeping with *The Wire*'s naturalistic roots, the endings help humanize the characters and clarify their motivations, solidifying them as merely individuals attempting to attain a piece of the American dream, unaware that their aspirations cannot come to fruition. For example, the first episode of season two, “Ebb Tide,” ends with a shot of Sobotka's reaction after learning of the dead prostitutes in the shipping container. Reminiscent of the ending involving D'Angelo in season one, Sobotka's reaction, which could most aptly be described as an amalgam of shock, sorrow, and anger, demonstrates that he did not expect that his foray into larceny, which he began with noble intentions—to help support the members of his dwindling union—would result in any pain or suffering, especially to people who are not even immediately associated with his cause. More importantly, the ending sets the stage for Sobotka's ongoing internal struggle. He must decide whether to stop his business relationship with “The Greek,” thereby risking the complete ruination of the union, which only survives due to the generous contributions it receives from some unnamed sources, or continue his criminal partnership with the knowledge of what dastardly deeds such a relationship might entail.

This predicament, which dominates season two, showcases the plight faced by individuals when confronting the institutions that control their lives. Regardless of his decision, Sobotka cannot act justly. Even if he breaks his association with organized crime, which he does in the penultimate episode of season two, he cannot escape his past. He is ultimately killed by “The Greek” for backing out of his agreement, signifying the impossibility of change in a corrupt society. Even when one attempts to act rightly, the broader social institutions that control society—on both sides of the law—prevent it from happening. The individual is always at the mercy of “the game.” He is forced to play, and then suffer the consequences of his actions, whatever they might be.

When not highlighting the ongoing struggle—on both sides of the law—between individuals and the institutions that control them, character endings can also, at times, assist in the destruction of standard notions of genre, identity and masculinity that *The Wire* revels in, often through the introduction of new characters who do not fit with societal norms. For instance, at the conclusion of episode nine of season two, “Stray Rounds,” Brother Mouzone (a feared hit-man who has “more bodies on him than a Chinese cemetery,” according to Proposition Joe, an Eastside drug dealer) arrives to help Barksdale retain his stronghold over the West-side, which was weakened in the wake of his brief prison term. One would expect Mouzone, given his reputation, to be a fearsome looking man, well muscled and clad in dark, oversized, nondescript clothing, much like Barksdale’s enforcers “Wee-Bey” and “Bird.” Yet, when he emerges from his car, a nondescript Chevrolet Impala with New York plates, in the final scene, he is small in stature, wears glasses, and dons a suit and bow tie. Quite simply, Mouzone, who is likely a member of the Nation of Islam, looks more like a minister than a murderer. Mouzone’s

appearance should not shock viewers considering the number of other characters in the series who challenge conventions, such as Omar Little, the most feared man on the streets, a “stick-up boy” who robs drug dealers, yet adheres to a code—he refuses to use invectives or to turn his gun on anyone not associated in the drug trade—and is homosexual. But, by introducing Mouzone at the end of an episode—a technique the show also uses earlier in season two when introducing “The Greek,” who appears at first glance to be a harmless old man, not a ruthless killer and drug trafficker—*The Wire* plays upon viewers’ expectations in order to elicit a more profound reaction. Viewers essentially have no idea what to expect, having not seen the character previously, and must therefore create their own image of the character before he or she is seen. Viewers cannot help but imagine that the character will adhere to some stereotype. By first seeing the character at the end of the episode, viewers are initially startled, as they are given little time to actually process the information they have been given, and then forced to wait until the following week to see the character again, giving them ample time to consider the significance of the character’s appearance. In essence, this strategy provokes viewers to consider the range and legitimacy of their stereotypes. They are also forced to wonder if there are other ways, besides appearance alone, in which the character may surprise them.

Symbolic endings differ from character endings in that they help to contextualize a specific episode or storyline—not a character—by highlighting the importance of a certain event through the presentation of a final climactic image that carries several underlying connotations in relation to the episode or season. Though symbolic endings don’t necessarily add new information to the plotline, they help to

focus it, often revealing the ways that an individual episode or plotline relates to the broader social cultural and political implications of the show. In keeping with the complex narrative pattern utilized by *The Wire*, symbolic endings are also not easily understood, at least on the first viewing. In fact, symbolic endings often require viewers to re-watch an episode in order to grasp the significance of the final image, which may or may not be readily apparent. Likely on account of their inaccessibility, symbolic endings occur somewhat infrequently—there are eight in all—approximately two per season.

Through their multilayered presentation, symbolic endings require that viewers actively engage with the show and consider its political themes on a local (show-specific) and universal level. Take, for instance, the ninth episode of season one, “Game Day.” In the closing scene of the episode, Omar attempts to kill Avon Barksdale in retribution for the recent murder of Brandon, Omar’s boyfriend. Omar’s plan is foiled, however, by the unexpected arrival of “Wee-Bey,” an accomplice of Barksdale. Omar shoots at Barksdale while he uses a payphone outside of a nightclub and misses. Omar is subsequently shot at and hit, sustaining a serious injury to his shoulder. The episode ends with a shot of the telephone, which is beeping to announce a “disconnected” call. The disconnected phone call is meant to mirror Omar’s failed attempt on Avon’s life: just as the call could not be completed, neither could Omar’s plan. The image also forces viewers to refer back to a quote Omar had made in an earlier episode—“if you come at the king, you best not miss.” Since Omar has failed in his attempt to kill Barksdale, he knows that he must watch his back as he will be hunted by Barksdale’s associates. By forcing viewers to remember implicit implications made early in the episode or season, symbolic endings test their understanding of the narrative and its themes. Omar’s

situation is no different from that of anyone who challenges the authority of an institution. Failure to remove the leader—whether by election or murder—will inevitably result in the demise of the individual who instigated the movement.

Another prime example of symbolic endings' ability to force viewers to grapple with a season's narrative arc as a whole in order to fully comprehend the political implications raised in an episode occurs in episode five of season two, "Undertow." The episode focuses primarily on the plight of the stevedores, particularly their lack of work in the current Baltimore economy. At the end of the episode, Frank Sobotka, after being questioned by police about the murder of the Russian prostitutes, goes to the bathroom. His actions in the bathroom—splashing water on his face, his nervous looks—suggest that he is afraid that the murders of the girls may ultimately expose his relationship with "The Greek" and close down the port for good. As he leaves the bathroom, the camera focuses in on a black and white picture on the wall of the bathroom. The picture shows a Baltimore port, presumably in the 1950s, when the ports were at their peak. The image is one of prosperity: stevedores unloading a large ship while other ships wait to be attended to. The image reiterates Sobotka's proclamations to the younger workers—particularly his nephew and son—earlier in the episode regarding the "good ol' days," when ships would be "backed up for hours" at the port. The photo serves as a reminder, both to Sobotka and viewers, of how downtrodden the workers currently are. The lack of ships into the port means that they may only work five days a month, or less. The picture reflects a time that has passed, an impossibility that Sobotka will ultimately die trying to recapture. In the post-industrial age, the port will never be what it once was. Though the shipping of goods will continue, machines will ultimately displace humans, leaving

stevedores without work. Symbolic endings can thus help place *The Wire* in the tradition of political art envisioned by Adorno as they force viewers to come to grips with themes not readily apparent or available in a given scene. They force viewers to think back on previous episodes and scenes while looking ahead to the broader social critiques that the show is leveling as well as the conditions it is exposing.

Symbolic endings can also help to highlight ongoing storylines that have been played out over a number of episodes or seasons. For example, in the seventh episode of season two, “Backwash,” the relationship troubles between Daniels and his wife, Marla, who has urged him to leave his job since the second episode of season one, are brought to a head. Despite agreeing earlier in the season to resign from the police force and take the bar exam, Daniels tries to explain to Marla why he can’t leave his job. Obviously very unhappy at the news that he has once again refused to quit, Marla abruptly goes to bed. In the final image of the episode, the bedroom light, as seen from the outside of the house, is turned off, symbolizing the impending end of their marriage. The dissolution of the Daniels’ marriage that is suggested in this episode reflects the marital woes of McNulty and Gregg and suggests that it is impossible for someone, regardless of sexual orientation, to be fully committed to the institution they work for and sustain relationships with others outside of the institution that they’re tied to. The institution further dehumanizes individuals, therefore, since it mandates them to serve it fully.

Though the term ironic ending is not particularly original, I use it here to refer to endings that specifically underline the institutional and societal shortcomings that *The Wire* rails against. Occurring once per season, on average, ironic endings differ from character and symbolic endings in that they often defy—rather than clarify—expectations

and are integral to understanding the plot of the series. Ironic endings come close to realizing what scholar Frank Kermode calls in his seminal work *Sense of an Ending*, “peripeteia”—a sudden change in the movement of the plot. Peripeteia, a term that was originated by Aristotle, depends on our confidence in the end, according to Kermode. He states that “the interest of having our expectations falsified is obviously related to our wish to reach the discovery or recognition by an unexpected and instructive route” (18). As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, some character endings achieve a similar feat; but ironic endings force viewers to readjust their expectations through a reshaping of the narrative arc. Much of *The Wire* is predicated on viewers knowing precisely what is going to happen. Yet, even when viewers expect an ironic ending to occur, the sheer magnitude of the action it presents—the resounding effect on the narrative that accompanies the transfiguring of events—forces viewers to readjust their expectations of the story’s past and future. Still, ironic endings cannot be considered entirely peripatetic since “peripeteia” is, by definition, “something we do not expect” (18). Attentive viewers of *The Wire* may be aware that an ironic ending is about to occur; they will have learned about the imminent event from listening to the characters. Ironic endings, therefore, achieve a similar destabilizing effect, but viewers actually know—or suspect—that they’re coming. The overarching purpose of the ironic ending is not to destabilize viewers; it is to point out the flaws in the institutions that govern our society.

Ironic endings often draw attention to the inadequacies of modern institutions, especially those, such as the police department and FBI, which are meant to help prevent crime. For instance, episode five of season one, “The Pager,” concludes with a shot of the computer that traces the activity of the wiretap that the unit has placed on two terrace

phones. The computer is active, showing numerous calls being placed back and forth between phones. Unfortunately, due to the Baltimore police department's low budget, no detective is monitoring the computer after normal business hours. Consequently, the investigators are unable to prevent the murder of Brandon, Omar's boyfriend, who is the subject of the calls, or catch the murderers in the act. The ending overtly suggests that if more resources were afforded to the police districts, more crimes could be prevented and solved.

Another ironic ending that critiques the inner workings of police departments occurs in the tenth episode of season two, "Storm Warnings." Just as the unit is about to infiltrate "The Greek's" drug warehouse and bring a climactic and heroic victory against organized crime, word is sent to the traffickers from a spy in the FBI and they are able to destroy their heroine stash before the police can confiscate it. In the final scene of the episode, the camera pans in on a drain in the warehouse where the dope is being washed away, suggesting that the prioritization of counter-terrorism above drugs, as well as "bad police" and the chain of command structure that inevitably and arbitrarily forces numerous stalls prevent real police work from being accomplished.

Ironic endings can also call into question the viability of the American dream in the twenty-first century. In the final scene of the penultimate episode of season three, "Middle Ground," Stringer Bell is murdered by Omar and Mouzone. The final image of Bell's lifeless body on the top floor of a vacant commercial building is ironic on two levels. First, as the body is juxtaposed against a bright yellow sign in the background that reads "Coming Soon: Residential Opportunities from B&B Enterprises," an advertisement for one of Bell's planned legitimate business venture, viewers realize that,

despite his best attempts, Bell, like Frank Sobotka, was ultimately incapable of liberating himself from his past and his surroundings; he could not escape the game and start a legitimate business venture, proving F. Scott Fitzgerald's declaration, mentioned in the sixth episode of the second season, "All Prologue," in a scene involving D'Angelo while in prison, that "there are no second acts in American lives." Also, the scene is ironic in that, earlier in the episode, Bell had finally been caught incriminating himself on the unit's wiretap. Had he lived, he would have been arrested the following day. Three seasons (or approximately 36 episodes) of work plotting a case against Bell are essentially destroyed. He is brought to justice, but not under the strictures of the law, thus leveling another critique against the ability of police departments to conduct meaningful work when its leaders are concerned primarily with statistics.

True peripatetic moments do exist in *The Wire*, but they never occur at the end of an episode. For example, in the middle of episode eight of season one, "Lessons," Omar goes rogue and kills "Stinkum," a member of Barksdale's organization, after promising McNulty and Greggs that he would stay out of the police's affairs. While not entirely out of character for Omar, the event reminds viewers that, despite Omar's genuine and often admirable convictions, he is a killer. These events don't mark a fundamental shift in the narrative, as are the case in ironic endings; they merely add another layer to the narrative. They don't significantly alter the direction of the season or its themes. Thus, the purpose of such events is to remind viewers that, although they hold a unique position in the narrative, able to see the actions of both the police and the criminals that they're chasing, they never know everything that is going on. In essence, even the most attentive viewers cannot be sure what is going to occur.

The final type of ending—montage endings—appear at the end of the final episode of each season of *The Wire*. Montage endings are unique because they are, for the most part, less open-ended than the other ending types; they often provide some semblance of closure or resolution, at least to a few of the series' ongoing storylines. They are also far more expansive than other endings, which primarily focus on one character, plotline or theme. A montage ending can offer a dozen or more separate endings in a three-to five-minute clip. It can simultaneously address the specific themes of a season and the overarching political themes of the show. So, while montage endings may initially seem to be an entirely different breed of ending, given that some storylines are invariably brought to an end, they serve to further complicate, expand and enrich the narrative, especially the show's political views.

Montage endings are an amalgam of the other types of endings. They have a distinct "character" aspect as each montage ending contains a character who serves as its focalizer. The montage begins after a scene involving the focalizing character, who is typically the character that has been featured in the most character endings that season, if he has not already been killed. The montage is intended to resemble a character's daydream. After the montage has ended, the camera returns to the character before the screen fades to black. The images seen in the montage endings also adhere to the principles of symbolic and ironic endings. For instance, in the season one finale, the orange couch in the courtyard of "the Pit," which was the site of many influential discussions between D'Angelo, "Bodie," "Poot" and Wallace, is shown vacant, symbolizing Wallace's untimely death at the hands of his friends. Ironic endings are also used within the montage. In the season two finale, for instance, "The Greek," narrowly

escaping the authorities thanks to a tip from an FBI employee on his payroll, is shown getting on a plane to an unknown destination, suggesting that he will always remain just out of the reach of the law. As some details are always left unresolved, the show's montage endings help to maintain its broader narrative structure, as viewers are unaware whether or when the characters or themes will be alluded to again.

The montage endings create a type of circular continuity within the show. The scenes show that little has changed over the course of a season. Just as one criminal is arrested, or corrupt politician is voted out of office, another is there to take his place. In this way, *The Wire* actually lives up to the adage which lends its name to the title of this chapter. Every ending invariably leads to another beginning. But, thanks in large part to the institutions that govern modern societies, this new beginning is hardly original; it is merely a repackaged version of the old. Ironically, then, the story essentially becomes more open-ended through closure. The greater social ills that the show attempts to combat—the drug war, addiction, flawed police departments, corrupt politicians—are shown to be still present in Baltimore and, for that matter, all across the country.

In some respect, the montage endings also function as a call to action. In the interspersed scenes, viewers see footage of real people who have played no role in the season selling drugs or being arrested, drawing attention to the fact that outside of the show, the same game is being played. Through the blending of fiction and reality, these endings challenges viewers to first recognize and then attempt to stop the social ills that are present not only in Baltimore, but in cities all over the country.

More so than in previous finales, the season five finale provides clarity as it addresses the futures of many of the characters. Scott Templeton, the plagiarizing

journalist, is shown winning a Pulitzer in a classic ironic ending; Gus Haynes, the righteous news-editor who had attempted to expose Templeton, is shown at his “new” desk in a run-down news room; Baltimore Mayor Tommy Carcetti is shown becoming Governor of Maryland. These images provide a definite conclusion to the plotlines of the characters. Though their ultimate destination in the show’s world is uncertain, they are moving in a distinct direction within their respective institutions and it is unlikely that their fortunes will shift.

Yet, in spite of the detailed portrayals of some characters’ fates, *The Wire*’s finale leaves numerous plotlines open. Not all loose ends are neatly tied up, and viewers are left with lingering questions. For instance, although viewers are aware that McNulty has been forced to “retire” from the police force for his role in the “serial murderer” scandal that dominates season five, viewers are given no indication as to what McNulty will do. Similarly, one is left to wonder what will become of the emerging drug kingpin Marlo Stanfield now that he has had to forfeit his position at the top of the Baltimore drug scene in order to avoid a lengthy prison sentence. As evidenced by his misadventures at a business dinner in the penultimate episode of the series, he cannot function in the real economy. Unlike Stringer Bell, he has no desire to become a legitimate businessman. Viewers are also never exposed to the secret incriminating evidence in Lieutenant Daniels’s file that was used to blackmail him in seasons four and five. Some characters, in fact, such as Pryzbylweski and Cutty, are left out of the finale entirely; viewers are given no clue as to what their fate may be. By not revealing everything, and leaving viewers with some unanswered questions, *The Wire*’s finale stays

true to its core goals. It reaffirms that there are no easy answers or solutions and illustrates viewers can never be privy to the “whole story.”

In an attempt to demonstrate the circularity present in the show, the season five finale also links new and old characters. Paradoxically, the closing begets the opening. “Dukie,” a down on his luck high school student, is shown becoming/replacing “Bubbles,” shooting up in an abandoned horse stable turned homeless camp. Michael, who breaks away from Marlo’s crew, is portrayed as the new Omar, robbing a drug dealer while toting a sawed off shotgun. In a scene that echoes the first episode of season one, Detective Sydnor is shown becoming McNulty, carrying on a near identical conversation with Judge Phelan—in the same office, no less—that McNulty did in season one. Just as one character leaves their position—whether through recovery, death, or promotion—another will inevitably fill their role. In this sense, all of the characters on the show are made to seem interchangeable. They occupy a role in society that will eventually be filled by someone else. Characters come and go, but the overarching strictures of “the game” remain. This helps to demonstrate that Baltimore is the show’s “main character.” The characters are not unique; they merely play a role in maintaining the city. They are, to borrow D’Angelo’s famous metaphor from the third episode of season one, merely chess pieces, and even those who occupy position at the top of the hierarchy will eventually be replaced with someone else and the system that exploits them will carry on. One can never ever step outside the game or change its rules. A careful analysis of the endings of *The Wire*’s episodes reveals that their form is inseparable from their function. Their open-ended and interpretive structure alters longstanding, formulaic notions of closure. As a result, they are able to overcome the

critiques of Adorno and Horkheimer, who claim that a visual medium “leaves no room for imagination or reflection on the part of the audience, who is unable to respond within the structure of the film, yet deviate from its precise detail without losing the thread of the story,” by forcing its viewers to fill in the blanks and become active participants in the text (126). Furthermore, they disprove Neil Postman, who claims that “it is impossible to use television as a carrier of coherent language or thought” (91). Since they offer multiple interpretations and messages to viewers depending on how they are read, the endings help *The Wire* abide by Adorno’s definition of political art. The endings, perhaps more so than any other aspect of the narrative, espouse the political messages and themes of the show. Indeed, the same postmodern elements that make the show more novelistic and complicated actually make it more political by helping to reinforce its major themes.

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