

# TheWire

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RACE, CLASS,  
AND GENRE

Liam Kennedy and  
Stephen Shapiro

EDITORS

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## 8

### Elasticity of Demand: Reflections on *The Wire*

*John Kraniauskas*

Can't reason with the pusherman  
Finances is all that he understands.

—Curtis Mayfield, "Little Child Runnin' Wild"

David Simon and Edward Burns's TV series *The Wire* (HBO, 2002–8) opens with a killing and builds from there, over five seasons and sixty hours of television. What it narrates is the present life of a neoliberalized postindustrial city, from the critical perspective of its bloody "corners," the bloody corners of West Baltimore, USA.<sup>1</sup> *The Wire* is a continuation of Simon and Burns's earlier series *The Corner* (HBO, 2000), a docudrama, or quasi-anthropological reconstruction of real lives, directed by Charles S. Dutton. In fact, in many ways it is a combination and development of two previous TV series: *The Corner* (based on Simon and Burns's book *The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner-City Neighborhood*, 1997) and NBC's cop show *Homicide* (based on Simon's book *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets*, 1991).<sup>2</sup>

Corners are where everyday drug business is carried out. They are violently fought over and defended as what remains of the local economy is bled dry and addiction extends. They are the places, in other words, where the stories of the "invisible hand" of the market and/or "originary" capital accumulation are played out. This is the local, everyday street experience of (illegal) capitalist globalization. It provides the pathetic script for the character Bubbles (drug addict and police informant), which is literally written into his body, making him the figure of maximum affective intensity in the film text.<sup>3</sup> They are places

of labor, too, including child labor: the “corner boys.” Finally, they are places of intense state scrutiny and surveillance.

The “wire” that gives the program its name is a bugging or wiretapping device, fundamental to the narrative structure of each one of *The Wire*'s seasons. It is the main technological means of secret intelligence gathering, sought and deployed by the police to listen to, identify, and decode the telephone messages circulating between the drug dealers. In this respect, *The Wire* presents itself as a police procedural, centered on the detective work involved in juridically justifying and then deploying the bugging technology required. In a sense, looking for and acquiring such a device defines the operation as involving serious police work: patient investigation and interpretation and the like. Unlike the police-procedural pedagogic norm, however, *The Wire* critically foregrounds technological underdevelopment and uneven distribution, educating its viewers into a culture of everyday police bricolage and ingenuity, very different from the hyperbolic scientific know-how of *CSI* and its many imitators.

The activities of pushing and policing in *The Wire* mark out a territory that is racially and socially divided, crisscrossed and sutured (constituted in antagonism); in other words, wired. Crime at one end, joined to the law at the other; it constitutes “a whole way of life.”<sup>4</sup> In this respect a work of urban anthropology, *The Wire* nonetheless turns its corners so as to accumulate characters, stories, and “adventures.” It expands and opens out onto the world, charting encounters, much like the novel in its chivalric, educational, and realist historical modes. However, here it is a TV camera-eye that travels, explores, and frames the city, emplotting its sociocultural environments (in particular, their racialized, gendered, and class divisions), activating, in Franco Moretti's words, their “narrative potential,” which is to say, their relations of power, their “plots”<sup>5</sup>—but only so as to return, repeatedly, to illuminate its point of departure, the streets, and its principal object of attraction, the everyday experience and effects of the trade in drugs and its policing. Like other works of detective and/or crime fiction, *The Wire* relays and establishes the political and cultural contours of the contemporary, at speed. Indeed, in this sense, it fulfills one of the prime historical functions of the genre.<sup>6</sup>

As *The Wire* voyages out from the low- and high-rise housing projects whose corners it films, accumulating and weaving together its sto-

ries, it accretes social content as part of its overall moving picture. This is conceived primarily in terms of a set of overlapping institutions and their hierarchized personnel: the police (both local and federal), the port authority and trade union organization (in season 2), the city administration, its juridical apparatus, and its shifting political elites (especially from season 3 onward), the local educational state apparatus (season 4), and the local city newspaper (in season 5). It is important to note that these are all places of work. Work is a structuring ideogeme of the series, as it was previously of *The Corner*—with its dealers—and more recently of Simon and Burns's disappointing subsequent series about U.S. soldiers in Iraq, *Generation Kill* (2008), with its "grunts."<sup>7</sup> They are also sites of political power-play, concerned, like *The Wire's* "auteurs" themselves, with establishing their own standpoint with respect to the dramas played out and filmed in the streets. Thus *The Wire's* own TV camera consciousness produces itself, as it were, in counterpoint to the multiplicity of institutional perspectives it reconstructs, taking the side of the dominated, that is, of the "workers" portrayed in each case (this is what provides for the moments of identity between the frontline police and the corner boys—Bodie, Michael, Namond, Randy, Dukie, Poot—dramatized particularly in season 4). *The Wire's* populist images are, to use Sartre's words, "act(s) and not . . . thing(s)."<sup>8</sup>

Season after season, over years of programming, *The Wire's* looping narrative methodology transforms and enriches its own story and perspective. There is, however, a tension here that drives its realist compositional logic—and which its long-running television format invites—that is both formal and analytic. *The Wire* attempts to resolve the enigmatic character of the social that grounds the crime and/or detective fiction form through an accretive looping logic that incorporates *more and more* of the social (through its institutions), but that thereby simultaneously threatens to overload and diffuse its televisual *focus* on what is most compelling: the dramatization of the political economy of crime as the key to the understanding of contemporary neoliberal capitalist society (in Baltimore) and its policing. As the series develops and gathers in more institutions, increasingly the dramas occur as these overlap—police with city hall and school, newspaper with police, for example—rather than in and between drug dealers and police. Inverting the procedure of the classic police-procedural film *The Naked City*

(Jules Dassin, 1947), instead of zooming in on one of “8 million stories,” the series zooms out, arguably too far, attempting to show them all. The paradox of *The Wire*’s accumulative compositional strategy—and the epistemological and aesthetic problem it poses—is that the more of the social it reconstructs, shows, and incorporates into its narrative so as to explain the present, the less socially explanatory its dramatic vision threatens to become.<sup>9</sup> Although, alternatively, this compositional paradox might also be read as constitutive of all form-giving in an unreconciled (that is, class) society.

### Crime Scenes

It is as if *The Wire* had been produced in response to questions initially posed by Walter Benjamin in his “A Small History of Photography” (1931) regarding the photographic mediation of the experience of the modern city. Noting how the journalistic—and quasi-cinematic—work of photographers like Atget was increasingly able “to capture fleeting and secret moments” that thus demanded explanation (he refers specifically to the emergence of the use of captions in this regard), Benjamin asks, “is not every square inch of our cities the scene of a crime? Every passer-by a culprit?” And further, “Is it not the task of the photographer . . . to reveal guilt and to point out the guilty in his pictures?”<sup>10</sup> Three-quarters of a century (of technology) later, this is where the first episode of *The Wire* begins, with a crime scene in a Baltimore city street, one of many.

The opening scene of *The Wire* is both generically conventional and narratively surprising. It is also intensely televisual. A crime has taken place, and *The Wire* takes us to it immediately, opening directly onto a bloodstained street in close-up, bathed in the flashing red and blue lights of police vehicles, and to the sound of their sirens—images familiar to TV viewers from reality cop shows and local news programs. But if *The Wire* begins TV-like, it soon becomes cinematic: the camera scans and tracks, revealing the dead body of a young man. It then pulls back, encircling and framing the scene (thereby producing it) in which the key elements of its juridical and cultural coding—that is, the wired (bloody) territory of the series’ diegetic space—are crystallized: from a dead black African American young man, the victim of a ridiculous and

arbitrary crime, we pass on to an African American witness, who tells its story, and then to a white Irish American police officer, who listens and chuckles at its utter banality.<sup>11</sup>

The streets of *The Wire's* crime scenes thus constitute a central social space of encounter where, to put it in Althusserian terms, social power is transformed and normalized by the state apparatus qua machine, institutionalized as law, and actualized as force.<sup>12</sup> The police are the main agents of this process, of course, and homicide detective McNulty, the main star of the show, is at his post asking questions and making his presence felt. Most importantly, thanks to the invisible presence of the camera, audiences magically become privileged viewers of the crime scene too, positioned alongside the police at work for the state in the form of the local city, and given immediate access to look upon and accompany the process of crime interpretation. So far, so generically conventional: *The Wire* is a traditional work of detective fiction, adopting a critical (that is, a "workerist") police perspective that McNulty embodies.

What is narratively surprising about *The Wire's* first scene, however, is that the crime that opens the series has no particular significance for it, except in its generality, and will be neither reconstructed nor emplotted into its interlocking narratives. The death of the young man holds no mystery for the police and will not be interpreted and tracked. (This is to be expected in this part of town; it has been socially and culturally coded that way.) It does, however, register an important, although banal, truth that is significant for the relation the series establishes between narrative form and its own historical material: the excess of history over form. *The Wire* thus signals, on the one hand, its own partiality and, on the other, its consequent status as a work of narrative totalization that is always already incomplete. In this sense, the program emerges not only from a realist desire to accumulate social content, as noted above, but also from a modernist acknowledgment of its own narrative limits (imposed by narrative form) and thus not so much as a representation as an invention. The first killing functions as just one of a continuous, repetitive series that compositionally divides *The Wire's* overarching narratives off from the history that determines and contextualizes it. It stands in for all the victims associated with the commercialization of drugs that precede the stories told across the five seasons, for all those that will follow them, as well as for the collateral damage, those vic-

tims that accompany the telling of the stories dramatized in *The Wire*, episode after episode.

It is possible to identify other such series too, although these are built into the narratives that make up *The Wire* over time, season after season, imposing, for their appreciation, a discipline on its viewers that is specifically televisual: they have to stick with it, for years (or for countless hours of DVD watching). For example, there is a series of insider witnesses, many of them doomed by their contact with the police, especially with McNulty; and a series of wakes for members of the force who pass away, which ends with McNulty's own symbolic one, when he leaves the profession at the conclusion of the final, fifth season. He will be replaced. So if one series—of killings—opens *The Wire*, another—of deaths—brings it to conclusion. McNulty's institutional death, meanwhile, finally reveals *The Wire's* central articulating narrative: from the beginning, its first crime scene, it tells the story of McNulty's way out, the "death" of a policeman.

"Like detectives," writes John Ellis in *Seeing Things: Television in the Age of Uncertainty*, "we are rushed to the scene of the crime hoping to make sense of what happened from the physical traces that it has left." Ellis is not describing *The Wire* here, or a program like it, but deploying the conventional hermeneutic of detective fiction to account for a general effect of contemporary televisuality—which also, it so happens, describes the TV experience of tuning in to a program like *The Wire* and being "rushed to the scene of [a] crime."<sup>13</sup> Ellis's description of television form connects with Benjamin's account of photography. As is well known, the revelatory potential of photographic technology, in which once-hidden historical determinations are brought into the light of day by the camera demanding explanation, underpins Benjamin's notion of the "optical unconscious." In this way, the camera's ability to capture reality in photographs is associated with a modern hermeneutic—one that Carlo Ginzburg links to art criticism (the discovery of forgeries), psychoanalysis (listening out for signs of the unconscious), and detection (revealing criminal intent)—in which captured scenes may be read as "symptoms" of something else (a criminal capitalist economy, for example) and thus demand close scrutiny and interpretation.<sup>14</sup> Such technological developments are deployed and advanced by the state too, in surveillance operations, like those portrayed in *The Wire*.

These involve not only new visual technology, but devices geared

specifically for sound. For it turns out that there is also a “sonic” unconscious, made available for scrutiny today by mobile phones. This is what McNulty and his colleagues seek to access by “wiring” and grabbing the messages exchanged between corner boys and drug dealers. Ellis, meanwhile, is interested in camerawork, but more than just with its recording function: combining aspects of both the cinema and radio, with television the camera has become a broadcasting and transmitting device too. In the words of Rudolf Arnheim, “television turns out to be related to the motor car and the aeroplane as a means of transport of the mind.”<sup>15</sup> This is how “we are rushed” to other places, such as West Baltimore’s corners, or how other places are tele-transported to viewers, as scenes, as they relax in living rooms and bedrooms. Television, in other words, appears to overcome both the distance between its subjects and objects and their different times, making them co-present in viewing; and not just mentally, as Arnheim suggests, but sensually too—sounds and images touching and tugging at the body through eyes and ears. Ellis refers to the new social form of looking produced by contemporary television as “witnessing,” and to television form itself as a kind of dramatic “working through” of the materials thus broadcast in an era of information overload: they are managed and formatted into genres (from the news, to sports programs and soaps), dramatized and put into narrative, serialized and scheduled.<sup>16</sup> Again, Ellis might also have been describing *The Wire* and its first scene, whose last shot is a close-up of the dead victim, his blank wide-open eyes staring out from the TV screen at the tele-transported viewers; and in the background, the witness and the detective, working through.

There is another crime scene in the first season of *The Wire* that is destined no doubt to become a classic of its type. In contrast to the first scene, however, this one, although approaching abstraction in its sparseness, is full of significance for the articulation and unraveling of its narratives and dramas. It involves McNulty and his partner “Bunk,” and a disenchanted middle-level drugs dealer D’Angelo Barksdale (known as “D”), the nephew of West Baltimore kingpin Avon Barksdale. The latter is the prime target of McNulty and his associates’ police investigation, the object of the wire, and remains so across three of *The Wire*’s five seasons. Despite all the surveillance, however, information- and evidence-gathering is difficult, since Barksdale and his crew are deadly, ruthlessly shoring up any possible weakness or leakage in their organization. Like



so many subaltern outlaw groups, the Barksdale crew have internalized and replicated statelike repressive structures that are ferociously hierarchical, and, within their own terms, strategically meritocratic.

Even before McNulty and Bunk arrive at the murder scene, viewers know that Avon has had one of his girlfriends killed (she had threatened to give him away and talk). We know this not because it is a crime that is shown and witnessed, but because in a previous scene he tells the corner boys he organizes. As noted above, *The Wire* is made up of a number of proliferating narratives, and moves between and through them transversally. As it jumps from scene to scene, it travels between different characters, the social spheres they inhabit and work in (institutions), and their locations (streets, offices). Thus all narratives are interrupted and crossed by others, looping back and forth, such that at and through each level—episode, season, and series—*The Wire* resembles a collage or a montage of segments. This is the relation established between the scene of D's "narration" and the scene in which McNulty and Bunk reconstruct his crime. However, what happens before, at the level of narrative emplotment, happens *simultaneously* at the level of its story. These scenes, like others, are part of a constellation of mutually dependent segments with a shared temporality, but distributed across different spaces. This means that viewers know Avon is guilty before McNulty and Bunk do, but who then—in their decoding of the crime scene—work it out and catch up, such that by its conclusion characters and viewers become co-present again at the level of knowledge as well as that of action. But if *The Wire's* polydiegetic and segmentary character may be described as either novelistic or cinematic, its televisual character should not for that reason be ignored.

Indeed, it has been suggested that the segmentary quality of the television moving image is definitive of its form: originally anchored in domesticity, distraction, and the predominance of the glance over the cinematic gaze. Interrupted viewing (by adverts, for example) is constitutively inscribed into both the medium and into television form itself, most obviously in news programs and soaps. Being an HBO production, however, whose broadcasting is advert-free, *The Wire* is able both to put such segmentarity to use as a compositional strategy and simultaneously to subvert the temporality of its viewing. This is because, for the most part, its compositional segmentarity works to extend the action and narrative continuity *beyond* the fixed temporality of the episode,

undermining the latter's semiautonomy within the series (as maintained even by *The Sopranos*), slowing down and spreading the action and stories it portrays beyond episodic television time (and its scheduling), giving the impression, at times, that "nothing happens." At this level, *The Wire* dedramatizes the serial form from within. This experience of "slowness"—which contrasts markedly, for example, with the hectic deployment of segmented scenes in 24<sup>17</sup>—may be one of the reasons why *The Wire* has attracted so few viewers on television, although it is a success on DVD and "on demand" platforms.

This other crime scene may be only a short segment, but its significance flows through season 1 and into season 2.<sup>18</sup> It knots their narratives. This is underlined by the inclusion of another brief segment within this constellation of scenes in which Lester—McNulty's partner on the wire detail—identifies a phone number he has picked up off the wall at another crime scene (where the romantic character Omar Little, a kind of urban cowboy, has stolen one of Avon's stashes), which he identifies as linked to a corner phone used by "D" at work.<sup>19</sup> Through composition and editing, all of these discrete segments feed the central narrative: they become part of the story in which, first, the wiretap is justified and put to use and, second, "D" is persuaded to give up his uncle-boss Avon (and is then murdered in jail).

The scene is a kitchen in a house that has been stripped bare and wiped clean. It has become a white box. And in such a space, the detectives' reconstruction of the crime is almost a work of performance art. Bereft of forensic technology, they use their bodies, their pens, and a tape measure like *bricoleurs* to reimagine the crime, the trajectory of the bullet, the position of the shooter as he taps the window ("tap, tap, tap," as "D" has already described it) and shoots the young naked woman as she turns to see who is there. This is the work of the imagination, and in its eccentric performance both Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes and Poe's Dupin are parodically evoked. Most important for this reconstruction, however, are the photographs of the barely clothed dead victim that McNulty and Bunk scrutinize for clues and place about the room so as to visualize the event—for this work of detection is also the work of fantasy. McNulty and Bunk perform the scopic drive. Whilst scrutinizing they only enunciate one word and its derivatives—"fuck!"—over and over again as they realize how the murder was committed, reaching a climax of discovery—"fucking A!"—as they find the



“Fucking A!”

spent bullet in the fridge door and its casing in the garden outside. It is as if the discovery were a restaging of the primal (crime) scene.

“Fucking” and detection intertwine. In a sense this is just an extension of the sexualized homosociality that characterizes the office of the homicide division of the Baltimore Police Department run by Sergeant Landsman, its principal promoter. But it also says something about McNulty and Bunk’s own addictive relationship to their work: they do not spend time together drinking so as to forget and obliterate their experiences as police; on the contrary, they do so to maintain and extend it, and in fact to obliterate everything else, the rest of their private, non-police lives.<sup>20</sup>

### Adam Smith in Baltimore

The main conflict within the police institution in *The Wire* is that between its upper bureaucratic echelons with more or less direct access

to the political elites (associated with city hall) and the working detectives in the homicide (McNulty) and narcotics (“Kima” Greggs, “Herc” Hauk, and Ellis Carter) divisions joined to form a special detail in the pursuit, first, of Avon Barksdale (seasons 1–3) and, then, of his “successor,” Marlo Stanfield (seasons 3–5).<sup>21</sup> Under the command of Cedric Daniels, they are joined by a variety of marginalized officers such as Lester and Prez. The “brass” imposes targets and, therefore, arrests. In Lester’s version, they “follow the drugs” and arrest low-level drug dealers and addicts. But keeping minor criminals off the streets helps the mayor. For their part, the detectives “who care” (such as McNulty, Lester, Kima, and Daniels) want to build cases against the kingpins inside and outside the state, and “follow the money,” exposing economic and political corruption. In this context, the struggle to legally justify the wiretap becomes a political one, requiring legal justification and the allocation of resources (and finally the goodwill of the mayor). It is hindered at every turn.

However, *The Wire’s* principal interest lies in the way in which the conflicts inside the state apparatus are mirrored—across the wire—within the criminal, drug-dealing community and its political economy. This includes not only the influence of the police on the illegal, subalternized capitalist economy, but also the ways in which the latter, through bribery, loans, and money laundering (I am thinking particularly of the character Senator Clay Davis in this regard) underwrites upper echelons of the local state and economy through the circulation of its accumulated wealth—at which point it becomes finance capital.<sup>22</sup> The intracrime conflict presents itself on the ground as a struggle between fractions for territory and corners (between the East Side and West Side of Baltimore) and takes three main forms, each of which is associated with a particular economic logic and specific characters: “Proposition” Joe, Avon Barksdale and Marlo Stanfield, and Omar Little.

The first form involves an attempt to overcome the struggle between competitors. In this context, the character of Proposition Joe (who comes to the fore in seasons 4 and 5) is important since he represents a tendency toward the formation of a kind of Baltimore cartel, a cooperative of dealers, which can manage quality, prices, and security. For some, however, this delegation of business administration sounds suspiciously like monopoly, and undermines the pursuit of self-interest, self-reliance, and, thereby, control. Avon and Marlo, who represent

a second street-level, “competitive” form of doing drug business, are suspicious of Proposition Joe’s corporate, conference-room style (he is finally assassinated by Marlo’s henchmen toward the end of the series), preferring instead to impose their own more neoliberal economy. The third form is a romantic version of the second, and is represented by Omar, the transgressive outlaw’s outlaw (and thus McNulty’s criminal mirror-image and sometime ally). Taking advantage of the mistrust generated between the corporate and competitive styles, Omar uses guerilla tactics to trick and rob all the local kingpins. On the one hand, Omar becomes a local myth in his own (albeit brief) lifetime; on the other, he violently debunks the myth of original accumulation.<sup>23</sup>

The tension between these regimes of accumulation is what drives the segmented narratives of *The Wire* as they loop across and through each other. The narrative loops connecting the different dramatic scenes may thus also be thought of as narrative cycles: from the cycle of capital accumulation as it passes through commodity exchange, which takes place on the streets (or in prison), to the cycles of finance and capital investment, which take place mainly in offices (or restaurants and luxury yachts). This is why the policing that McNulty and Lester struggle against constitutes a racist disavowal on the part of the state. The imposition of a policy based on targets and the pursuit of street crime (that is, of corner boys and drug addicts), which ignores the circulation of money capital, involves, in the first place, the fabrication of the otherness of the criminal “other” (a racist production of difference) and, second, the deployment of the resources to insist on it. The flow of money, however, tells us that the supposed “other” is in fact constitutive of the state in the first place. This is why drugs money is “laundered.”<sup>24</sup> Lester and McNulty pursue the money—so much so that, in the end, they almost break the law<sup>25</sup>—to reveal its origins and, particularly, its ends. In other words, they are involved in a radical act. Taking the side of the “working” detective within the police institution, from scene to scene and location to location, *The Wire* follows the money too.

Nevertheless, the narrative pursuit of money through the cycle (or loop) of accumulation from the streets into finance only goes so far, and this narrative limit constitutes the generic limit of *The Wire* as a work of crime fiction. Crucial, here, is another important character in the series, “Stringer” Bell, the key to McNulty and his colleagues’ surveillance operation, via “D.” He is murdered at the end of season 3 by

Omar and Brother Mouzone (a hit man from New York) with the tacit agreement of Avon Barksdale.

Stringer Bell is Avon's second in command, the manager of the business (he counts the money), a close associate and friend (he advises him to have "D" killed)—indeed, he is the "brains" of the outfit (much as Lester is for the wiretap detail). Avon is a more charismatic leader with a keen sense for the uses of violence as a strategy of power and drugs commerce. Inside the partnership of Barksdale and Bell (Stringer eventually dies under a sign for "B & B Enterprises") there coexist in increasing conflict two of the above logics of accumulation associated with commodity exchange, on the one hand, and corporate finance and investment, on the other. *The Wire* traces this conflict in Stringer's attempts to consolidate the "cooperative," with a reluctant Avon following him right into the offices of Baltimore's luxury apartment redevelopment projects in which he invests (with the help of Senator "Clay" Davis, among others)—until he is shot, when Avon decides against the world of finance capital. *The Wire* follows suit, abandoning the compositional strategy of looping in and between accumulation cycles linking the office scenes of finance with commodity exchange on the streets. Instead, it returns to foreground the battle for corners and corner boy allegiances in the streets, where accumulation begins, and where *The Wire's* story over seasons 1 to 3 is replayed across seasons 4 and 5—this time between different crews and different kingpins: Proposition Joe and his nemesis Marlo Stanfield.

The significance of Stringer Bell's story as a limit both for the narrative of *The Wire* as a whole and for its narration is given in a very brief scene—starring McNulty and Bunk again—at the beginning of the last episode of season 3. It repeats the conflict of accumulation regimes as a problem of police interpretation. Stringer has just been killed and the detectives find an address they did not know about in his wallet. They go and are uncharacteristically stunned into silence by what they (do not) find. They wander in to Stringer's open-plan designer apartment, and just stare, as if it had become stuck in their eyes (it refuses to open up and become an object for them). "This is Stringer?" asks (states) McNulty; "Yeah!" replies Bunk. Their scopic prowess has clearly reached its limits: the more they scan the apartment, the more unreadable it becomes. Bunk stands in the middle of the living room as if there were nothing to be decoded, no clues, none of those traces on which his and McNulty's subjectivization as detectives depends. McNulty and Bunk



“This is Stringer?”

have reached the limits of their considerable interpretative powers and find no pleasure—no crime—in the scene. This is because Stringer has “laundered” his lifestyle and wiped his apartment clean, so that it would seem to have nothing whatsoever to do with crime—that is, the drugs business, the murder that he administers, the violence of the exchange of commodities he coordinates—nor with the “culture” associated with it. McNulty goes over to a bookshelf and looks at the books. He takes one down and glances at it and asks: “Who the fuck was I chasing?” (as if to the viewers, since they know more than he) and puts the book down again. At which point the frustrated detectives turn and leave. The scene is never mentioned again, never returned to and “looped” into the narrative. However, just as they turn away, the camera detaches itself from their perspective and becomes momentarily autonomous—this is *The Wire’s* TV camera consciousness at work again—to concentrate the viewer’s gaze momentarily on the title of the book McNulty has discarded. It is Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations*.

The detectives do not pick up on Stringer’s particular knowledge,

even though McNulty had previously followed him to a college where he studies business administration, specifically the idea of “elasticity of demand.” It is clear in class that Stringer’s practical knowledge of the market in heroin has given him a head start on his peers since he already appreciates, as he tells the teacher, the importance of the creation of consumer demand, of feeding desire, so as to sell more and more commodities of a particular type. This feeding of consumer desire has its correlate in Stringer, an addict too, since the elasticity of demand also feeds his own desire: to accumulate.

The late Giovanni Arrighi taught at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, although it is by no means certain that Stringer Bell attended his lectures. We might speculate, however, at what might have been the result if, like *The Wire*, rather than looking to China in his study of the contemporary world economy, Arrighi had turned instead to the local “wired” territory of the drugs trade, at Adam Smith in Baltimore, rather than *Adam Smith in China* (2007)—a book probably composed over the same period as *The Wire*.

In his discussion of Smith’s account of the role of commodity exchange and competition in capitalist development, given in the formula C-M-C’—in which commodities are exchanged for money in order to purchase commodities of greater utility (hardly what is going on in the territories *The Wire* maps)—he counterposes to it Marx’s general formula of capital, M-C-M’, in which “for capitalist investors the purchase of commodities is strictly instrumental to an increase in the monetary value of their assets from M to M’.” The formula M-C-M’ describes Avon Barksdale’s mercantilist street economy of commodity exchange, its accumulative logic (backed up by extreme violence). But if Avon’s activities are M-C-M’, Stringer’s are M-M’. As Arrighi notes, in certain circumstances “the transformation of money into commodities may be skipped altogether (as in Marx’s abridged formula of capital, M-M’).” In his previous work, *The Long Twentieth Century* (1994), Arrighi fleshes out this point further:

In phases of material expansion money capital “sets in motion” an increasing mass of commodities [for example, drugs] . . . [I]n phases of financial expansion an increasing mass of money capital “sets itself free” from its commodity form, and accumulation proceeds through financial



deals (as in Marx's abridged formula  $MM'$ ). Together, the two epochs or phases constitute a full systemic cycle of accumulation ( $M-C-M'$ ).<sup>26</sup>

Stringer's "financial deals" and "abridgement" of the  $M-C-M'$  formula to  $M-M'$  threatens either to break away from the cycle of the commodity exchange of drugs—and set him free—leaving his friend and partner Avon behind, or to subordinate them both to its logic.

One of the most important contributions *The Wire* makes to crime fiction is the detail with which it dramatizes, on the one hand, the procedures and limits of detection and, on the other, crime as a complex practice that it conceives formally and compositionally, through its narrative loops and cycles of accumulation (which constitutes in turn the TV series' polydiegetic, segmented architecture), not as crime against capitalism, but as crime that is thoroughly capitalized (a neoliberal utopia, in fact). *The Wire* uses the crime and detective fiction genre classically, but creatively, to unpack and unravel Marx's formulas for capital accumulation. The abridged formula  $M-M'$  provides the clue to Stringer Bell's tendency toward "freeing" capital from its commodity basis in drugs (and thus to his conflict with Avon), as well as to reading the unreadability of his abstract, apparently contentless existence in his designer apartment—it is, or pretends to be, pure money (the content of the form). Such unreadability constitutes a limit not only for detectives McNulty and Bunk but for *The Wire* too, a limit beyond which it cannot go. So it also returns to the streets, to Avon and Marlo, the corner boys, to  $M-C-M'$ .

## Repetition and Reproduction

The context of the return to the mercantile accumulation of the corners, as well as to Stringer's story, is told in season 2, which focuses on the plight of the harbor workers' union whose members struggle to survive in a deindustrialized port in the process of being redeveloped for tourism and luxury homes (part of Stringer's investment portfolio). They still refer to themselves as "stevedores." The union turns a blind eye (for money) to the illegal importation of goods, including sex workers, by a "Greek" ("I'm not Greek," says "the Greek"! Mafia-like outfit). In *The Wire* deindustrialization feeds and drives the criminalization of

the economic system. Indeed, it is the dominant form taken by the informal economy.<sup>27</sup> McNulty and the police become involved because a container load of sex workers is murdered.

The main story centers on the trade union leader, Frank Sobotka, his reaction to the murder as he turns against “the Greek,” and on his unhinged son Ziggy and his nephew Nick, who, increasingly desperate for work and money, also get involved with “the Greek” and his gang<sup>28</sup>—stealing container trucks of goods to sell on. Its principal object is to reflect on the idea of *workers who have lost their work*, as industry disappears. It also constitutes the dramatic background for the articulation of *The Wire’s* own workerist sentiments (which pervade each of its seasons and each of the social institutions it represents) providing it with its critical standpoint throughout. In this respect, the harbor—like the corners, the police, the schools, and the local newspaper—is also subject to the “abridging” effects of the M-M’ formula of capital. More specifically, abridgement here means the loss of industry, for the formula M-C-M’ refers not only to the buying and selling of retail goods, but to another cycle of accumulation, that of industrial capital—in which money is invested in special kinds of commodities (forces of production, including labor power) that make other commodities, which can be sold for a profit. This is what has been lost, including in the form of its negation: the organizations of the working class. As Sobotka, “Gus” Haynes (the city editor of the *Baltimore Sun*), and McNulty complain, “proper” work—in which, as Sobotka says, “you make something”—has disappeared. This *loss of good work* is melancholically performed, daily, in the local bar at the port, where generations of workers meet to regenerate, and attempt to make good, an increasingly sentimental and nostalgic sense of community. (One question is the degree to which such a “workerism” feeds *The Wire’s* own sense of radicalism.) Meanwhile, however, all of their activities are financed by crime. Needless to say, finally, the mysterious “Greek” connection has Sobotka killed.

In “Prologue to Television” Adorno characteristically sets out the authoritarian and regressive character of television as it plugs “[t]he gap between private existence and the culture industry, which had remained as long as the latter did not dominate all dimensions of the visible.” With its new, digitalized, and mobilized delivery platforms, televisuality in a posttelevision age keeps on plugging. *The Wire*, for example, although televisual at the level of production, is almost re-novel-

ized in its consumption in DVD format: episode after episode it may be viewed outside the TV schedules, and almost on demand. Indeed, there is a sense in which it has reflexively incorporated this aspect into its composition. Despite his well-known cultural pessimism, Adorno did evoke future emancipatory possibilities, even for television (without them, critique would be pointless). He concludes his essay as follows:

In order for television to keep the promise still resonating within the word [i.e., *television*], it must emancipate itself from everything with which it—reckless wish-fulfillment—refutes its own principle and betrays the idea of Good Fortune for the smaller fortunes of the department store.<sup>29</sup>

The “dependent” or “autonomous” character of each artwork cannot be thought of as mutually exclusive, nor be simply read off from their social inscription, but rather need to be established through critical interpretation. *The Wire's* dependency on HBO's fortune can be conceived as providing one of the material conditions for its freedom—which takes the form of time, the time for Simon and Burns to pursue its realist compositional logic.<sup>30</sup> *The Wire's* stubborn insistence in this regard eventually leads its narrative loops to *cycles* of accumulation—and their local history.

Returning to the corners and their economy, in season 4 a school is added to *The Wire's* expanding world, as are the life and times of a number of potential “corner boys.” The business in drugs has been taken over by Marlo with extreme violence—and the dead bodies of countless “competitors” hidden in the abandoned houses of the area (now, in the children's minds, an eerie cemetery haunted by ghosts and zombies: typical of zones of continuous “primitive” accumulation in the Americas) by the scary killers Chris and Snoop. At the level of crime, season 4 repeats the conflict between accumulation logics, but refuses to return to the unreadable sphere of finance capital. At one level, seasons 4 and 5 can be experienced as mere repetition. At another, however, the moving story of the corner boys suggests that the addition of another institution has another strategic intention: systematicity. It shows the social *reproduction* of the logic of criminal accumulation and its constitutive violence. Bodie, the head corner boy, is shot as he comes into close contact with McNulty—just as he shot the timid Wallace (another

potential informant) in season 1 so as to “step up” (and gain promotion), in Stringer’s words. The long but faint thread of his story is one of the main narrative achievements of Simon and Barnes’s segmentary composition. Of the schoolboys Michael, Dukie, Randy, and Namond, only the latter escapes the corner—the son of Wee-Bay, one of Avon’s imprisoned henchmen, he is taken in by ex-cop “Bunny” Colvin. Randy is lost to the city care system by Sgt. Ellis Carver—a member of the “wire” detail. Despite Prez’s efforts, Dukie becomes a street vendor and junkie, exactly like Bubbles. Finally, Michael is groomed by Chris and Snoop and becomes a killer too.<sup>31</sup> In its portrayal of the education system *The Wire* demonstrates the complete failure of hegemony, conceived as the consensual reproductive power of the state. In contrast, however (the dangers of naturalist containment notwithstanding),<sup>32</sup> *The Wire* does show the constitutive, systematic, and reproductive power of M-C-M’, in both its abridged and unabridged accumulative forms.

### Notes

1. There are few temporal markers of exactly when the action depicted in *The Wire* takes place, but judging from the story of Lester Freamon’s marginalization as a detective, which he tells McNulty in a bar, the series begins sometime in 2000 or 2001. This suggests that Simon and Burns are intent on filming and understanding the present, over several years, more or less as it happens.

2. David Simon, *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets* (New York: Holt, 2006); David Simon and Edward Burns, *The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner-City Neighborhood* (New York: Broadway Books, 1998).

3. In this sense, Bubbles functions like a classical film close-up, that is, as a place of identification.

4. As described by the luckless Gary McCullough in *The Corner*: “There’s a corner everywhere . . . The corner dominates . . . I was loyal to the corner . . . it don’t care where you come from . . . it’s big enough to take us all.” Addictions of all kinds are, of course, fundamental to such a culture.

5. Franco Moretti, “The Novel: History and Theory,” *New Left Review* 52 (July–August 2008): 115. For Bakhtin, the novel was a city-text of voices, a hierarchical orchestration of ideo- and sociolects. See Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogical Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

6. Michael Connolly’s recent series of thrillers starring his LAPD detective

Hieronymous Bosch is another good example of this relaying: from post-Rodney King cultural sensitivity to homeland security.

7. Responding to the question, "Is this how true warriors feel?" the resentful Sergeant Brad "Iceman" Colbert of *Generation Kill* is very specific: "Don't fool yourself. We aren't being warriors down here. They're just using us as machine operators. Semiskilled labor." Both the soldiers in *Generation Kill* and the cops in *The Wire* make do—that is, proceed—with out-of-date technology.

8. Jean Paul Sartre, *L'Imagination* (1936; Paris: PUF, 1981), 162.

9. In contrast, *Generation Kill* has the inverse problem: refusing to "loop" its narrative through other spheres, it remains fixated on the field of military operations.

10. Walter Benjamin, "A Small History of Photography," in *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: New Left Books, 1979), 256. Benjamin also notes that with such developments "photography turns all life's relationships into literature." He might well have referred to film too. Before working on TV programs, David Simon was a journalist for the *Baltimore Sun*, while Edward Burns was a police officer and subsequently a schoolteacher (like the character Prez in the series).

11. The dead kid had been given the unfortunate nickname of "Snot Boogie." Every Friday he attempts to "snatch and run" with the proceeds from a local craps game. He was regularly caught and beaten up, almost as if in a ritual. This time, however, he was shot dead. Puzzled, McNulty asks the young witness: "Why did you let him play?" "Got to," he answers, "it's America, man!" *The Wire* criticizes and mocks the U.S. state's ideology of "freedom." For another reading of this scene, see Blake D. Ethridge, "Baltimore on *The Wire*: The Tragic Moralism of David Simon," in *Its Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-television Era*, ed. Marc Leverette, Brian L. Ott, and Cara Louise Buckley (New York: Routledge, 2008), 152–64.

12. Louis Althusser, "Marx in His Limits," in *Philosophy of the Encounter: Late Writings, 1978–1987*, ed. François Matheron and Oliver Corpet, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (London: Verso, 2006), 95–126.

13. John Ellis, *Seeing Things: Television in the Age of Uncertainty* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 10.

14. See Carlo Ginzburg, "Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method," *History Workshop Journal* 9 (1980): 5–36. Ginzburg refers to the emergence of a "medical semiotics."

15. Quoted in Margaret Morse, "An Ontology of Everyday Distraction: The Freeway, the Mall and Television," in *Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, ed. Patricia Mellencamp (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, London: BFI, 1990), 193.

16. In *Seeing Things*, Ellis gives a periodization of televisual eras: a first

“era of scarcity” that lasts until the late 1970s (characterized by few channels broadcasting for part of the day only); a second “era of availability” that lasted approximately until the end of the 1990s (characterized by “managed choice” across a variety of channels—including satellite—twenty-four hours a day); and a contemporary third “era of plenty” (characterized by “television on demand” and interactive platforms). Some also refer to the latter, underlining tendencies toward digital convergence and branding, as “TVIII,” in which HBO would be a central player. See Catherine Johnson, “Tele-branding in TVIII: The Network as Brand and the Programme as Brand,” *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 5.1 (2007): 5–24.

17. 24’s impression of speed is further enhanced by the use of the split screen. See Michael Allen, “Divided Interests: Split-Screen Aesthetics in 24,” in *Reading 24: TV against the Clock*, ed. Steven Peacock (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007). Of course, the split screen in film crime was pioneered in Norman Jewison’s *The Thomas Crown Affair* (1968) and Richard Fleischer’s *The Boston Strangler* (1968).

18. For a discussion of the relation between “segment” and “flow” in television, a staple of television studies, see in particular Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (London: Fontana/Collins, 1974); John Ellis, *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video*, rev. ed. (New York: Routledge, 1992); Richard Dienst, *Still Life in Real Time: Theory after Television* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1994). For an approach that links the discussion to recent technological developments, see William Uricchio, “Television’s Next Generation: Technology/Interface Culture/Flow,” in *Television after Television: Essays on a Medium in Transition*, ed. Lynn Spiegel and Jan Olsson (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004), 163–82. In “Is Television Studies History?” *Cinema Journal* 47.3 (2008): 127–37, Charlotte Brunsdon notes a masculinizing shift in television discourse, away from feminized melodrama and its inscription into the living room, to masculinized quality cop shows, like *The Wire* and, especially, *The Sopranos*, and their inscription into redesigned living spaces (and TVs) organized around a variety of new delivery systems.

19. McNulty and Lester’s partnership is Kantian: without Lester, McNulty’s intuition is “blind”; without McNulty, Lester’s reason is “empty.”

20. This is what makes McNulty a delusional hero who, intent on befriending and helping the corner boys, in fact destroys them: he drags them in rather than helps them out.

21. For example, in season 2 Major Valchek pressurizes Commissioner Burrell to reform the detail that pursued Barksdale in order to investigate Frank Sobotka, the leader of the stevedores union—out of religious jealousy—and thus pave the way for the eventual institutional rise of Daniels. In this context Daniels’s own shady past dealings are hinted at. Similarly, McNulty uses (and is used

by) contacts in the local branch of the FBI and the Baltimore judiciary (under his influence, Judge Phelan pushes Burrell into the formation of the special detail in the first place).

22. Such entry into the sphere of the local ruling class is also mediated by lawyers, particularly Maurice “Maury” Levy, who acts for and counsels the crime bosses (Avon and then Marlo), and who remains an important screen presence throughout the series.

23. Omar’s death is, however, banal: he is shot dead by a small child robbing a shop, almost by accident—the myth of his invulnerability shattered (at least for the viewers). Omar is a transgressive character in a variety of ways—most annoyingly for the gangsters he robs, in terms of his sexuality (a key theme for many of the back stories in *The Wire*).

24. In this sense, the territory of *The Wire* may be read from the perspective provided by Homi Bhabha’s account of racism in his *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

25. Much to the annoyance of Bunk and Kima, McNulty and Lester transform dead bodies they find into the victims of a serial killer so as to sideline funds happily given them to investigate the “murders” (they generates newspaper sales as well as city office popularity) to pursue their, by now, “private” investigation of Stansfield.

26. See Giovanni Arrighi, *Adam Smith in Beijing: Lineages of the Twenty-first Century* (London: Verso, 2007), 75, and *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power and the Origins of Our Times* (London: Verso, 1994), 6.

27. Mike Davis locates this process of informalization in a globalized context in his recent *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2006). For Baltimore, see David Harvey (a critic who has “lived in Baltimore City for most of [his] adult life” and also taught at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore), “The Spaces of Utopia,” in *Spaces of Hope* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 133–81: “Manufacturing jobs accelerated their movement out (mainly southwards and overseas) during the first severe post-war recession in 1973–5 and have not stopped since. . . . Shipbuilding, for example, has all-but disappeared and the industries that stayed have ‘downsized’” (148). If season 2 stands out in the series, even geographically, this is because the phases of accumulation foregrounded by Arrighi also have territorial significance. As Harvey makes abundantly clear, the predominance of the abridged formula of finance capital represented by Stringer changes the urban and social geography of Baltimore.

28. In season 2 *The Wire* increasingly presents itself as a drama that is concerned with forms of “white” ethnicity—Irish and Polish, especially—as well as racism. Indeed, as the above discussion of accumulation logics suggests, the series works through and becomes entangled in the social semiotics of “race,” including its connotative domains (for example, the economic coding of “race”

and the racist coding of economic logics). This is part of *The Wire's* realist compositional logic.

29. Theodor W. Adorno, "Prologue to Television," in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 49–50, 57.

30. Of course, in its autonomy *The Wire* also contributes to "brand" HBO, a subsidiary of Time Warner.

31. Predictably, Michael eventually turns against his teachers. Having killed Snoop, he returns home where his brother invites him to watch a program on TV: its about "a serial killer that kills serial killers," he says. He is probably watching *Dexter*, but he is unknowingly describing his brother.

32. See my brief reflection on *The Wire* in "Noir into History: James Ellroy's *Blood's A Rover*," *Radical Philosophy* 163 (September–October 2010): 25–33.