Exploring American Cultural Myths and Social Inequality in The Wire

Jurković, Tin

Odsjek za anglistiku

Filozofski fakultet

Sveučilište u Zagrebu

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Kandidat: Tin Jurković

Mentor: dr.sc. Sven Cvek

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Introduction

This paper will focus on how HBO's *The Wire* subverts dominant cultural narratives through an exploration of social inequality and the decline of modern institutions. This primarily concerns ideas elementary to the discourse of Americanness such as equality of opportunity (in terms of moving up the social ladder) as well as the idea of a democracy that serves the people's best interest via functional institutions.

The series reflects on the historical failure of traditional social and political institutions and its aftermath. In this paper, characteristics of such a process will be approached through the notions of "postmodernization", globalization and neoliberalism. At the same time, particular developments in television production have given rise to what television studies define as "quality TV". These developments opened up new possibilities when it comes to building complex narratives, and *The Wire* successfully does so through its multilinear narrative. Other means of achieving this include the abandonment of generic conventions and the allegorical use of phrases such as "the game is the game" as a means of expressing a particular worldview. In this way, the series effectively subverts dominant cultural myths, i.e. the main ideological tenets of US capitalist democracy. The metaphor of the game is employed in particular to speak of the new conditions of life for those excluded from the official social institutions, hence faced with limited options when it comes to employment and a secure livelihood.

In this spirit, the paper will discuss the seemingly futile struggles of particular characters, which ultimately reflect a dysfunctional sociopolitical system. Careful observation should

challenge the viewers' notions of urban America as a place where success is guaranteed through hard work. Its persuasiveness in making such arguments is found through the use of verisimilitude, but also the skillful use of its format to offer social critique of various institutions as well as the state's inability to effectively tackle the flaws within the system. By including an analysis of different scenes and characters found throughout the seasons, the paper should offer a more coherent picture of how the show presents these greater systemic issues. It will also be argued that it does so through an unconventional portrayal of individuals who exceed the limited roles previously painted by more traditional crime shows. Furthermore, considering that its approach is strongly influenced by the author's observations of social issues in a local setting, the show will be presented as an ethnography of an American city. Finally, by discussing the emergence of neoliberalism and the resulting decline of modern institutions, it should become clear that *The Wire* manages to portray different sociopolitical issues steming from such developments.

1. The creation of the show and its influence

The Wire is a show that was very much a collaborative effort of a series of writers and directors. It was originally written and created by a crime reporter and an ex-policeman turned teacher, David Simon and Ed Burns, respectively. By spending 13 years working for the *Baltimore Sun*, Simon had gained considerable knowledge on Baltimore's criminal and justice system. He decided to take a leave of absence in 1988 in order to shadow the Baltimore police homicide department, which resulted in the publishing of his first work: *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets* in 1991. This critically acclaimed book was soon adapted into a television series, which was then followed by others and, eventually, the *Wire*. It could be said that *The Wire* was a culmination or at least a logical continuation when it comes to Simon's previous projects such as *Homicide* or *The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner-City Neighbourhood.* These are also focused on a realistic approach detailing life in poverty-stricken Baltimore, yet they do not tackle certain aspects of city life which are examined in *The Wire.* Even though *The Wire* was, just as the aforementioned shows, created by Simon and Burns (who were also its main coordinators throughout), it boasts a series of different writers and directors experienced in writing crime fiction. This includes accomplished crime fiction novelists such as George Pelecanos, Richard Price, Dennis Lehane, and so on. The show was broadcast on the HBO cable network between 2 June 2002 and 9 March 2008, developing a cult following in the process. The early critical reviews were largely positive, as demonstrated by Steve Johnson of the *Chicago Tribune,* who described the show as "spellbinding", calling the show "compelling in its complexity, heart-rending in its humanity, and surprising in the ways it finds to spin the conventions of cop drama". Despite struggling with mainstream success during that time, it has retained and arguably gained popularity

throughout the years. Emma Jones notes in a 2018 BBC article that the show is “still consistently cited by critics as one of the greatest TV series ever made”. Others praise the show's proficiency when it comes to exposing various social issues, comparing it to the likes of Dickens in the process: The series has the ability—like Dickens, Wright, Zola, and Dreiser—to give dramatic resonance to a wide range of interconnected social strata, their different behaviors, and their speech over long swathes of time (Williams, 209). Its realistic depiction of police work and the crime-ridden streets of Baltimore coincided with a period of US history when “War on Drugs” was already an everyday phrase. This idea then gave way to another as the public space became overwhelmed by the War on Terror. The show voices its commentary through the voice of detective Carver in the pilot episode. Namely, after attempting some witty banter about the War on Drugs with his colleague Thomas Hauk (known as Herc) and annoying the third detective in the office, Kima Greggs, he ends by saying “You can't call this a war... wars end”. After exclaiming this, Carver benevolently turns to Herc who is fumbling for a pencil and asks “Oh, you gonna write that down?” (1.01). Apart from the fact that these characters are making comments on a topic that is so current in the US (especially in the early 2000's), the humoristic and laid back dialogue allows the viewer to see the characters and their thoughts as more realistic and genuine. The authenticity of dialogue is seen in the accent as well, since part of the cast are native Baltimoreans: “In the Baltimore accent, noticeable in several of the show’s characters, ‘police’ is pronounced ‘POE-leese’—making the compliment ‘real POE-leese’ seem all the more authentic and distinctive” (Brooks, 76). It can be argued that the verisimilitude of such a world, paired with the focus on the realities of drug trade and its consequences, leads the viewer to engage in a deeper understanding of these issues. As Marshall and Potter note, the show is layered with authentic dialogue which “draws the viewer into a sympathetic consideration of characters who live the sort of lives many viewers will not ever

have examined with careful, concerned, critical awareness" (9). They also see a connection between the development of television culture and the introduction of such shows to a broader audience. Namely, the show was broadcast by HBO, a subscriber-based channel which was "composed of (comparatively) affluent, middle class, white Americans. Subscribers choose to invest in programming that is assumed to have a certain quality that distinguishes it from 'regular' TV" (9). Furthermore, a wide audience was "generated through DVD sales, another means for direct marketing of quality television to viewers" (Marshall and Potter, 9). Considering the aforementioned format as well as the thematics, the show reached a wide audience that had not previously experienced this type of television:

"Many would not have previously invested emotional energies in caring about the drug problem in urban America and its ramifications. Intellectual energies, sure, maybe. But the veneer of fiction offered by the series in fact stimulates a desire for identification with the characters, immersing the viewer into the heart of an American city" (Marshall and Potter, 9).

2. On modern television

The Wire is often touted as a television series that expands on the tradition of the realist novel. As Marshall and Potter note, "David Simon and others have drawn analogies between *The Wire* and the nineteenth-century novel, a genre whose sweeping narrative produces a coherent whole" (10). This is partly due to its format, but also because of the ability to make good use of the format and emphasize various details: "Beyond the novelistic, there is also an epic scope to the series, which—over the broad canvas of more than 60 hours of television—takes the time to focus on small details. Given the generic expectation of substantial length, epic can afford to linger over apparently insignificant objects and people, to find virtues in the ordinary (10). However, the novel comparisons have sometimes invoked an impression that the medium of television is not being evaluated on its own terms, which undermines its scholarly legitimacy: "…the act of routinely comparing television to its antecedents implies that television, rather than standing as an independent, sufficient, and autonomous medium, relies on other forms of expression to justify its aesthetic existence" (Vest, 8). In the following chapter, it should become clear how *The Wire* responds to a number of critiques and effectively challenges the genre's conventions. Before this is discussed, it is worth examining how the development of a style known as "quality television" is perceived within television studies. In this context, one should also review the role of categories such as "quality" and "genre".

It can be argued that modern television has, as a fairly recent form of mass media, gathered interest from many scholars in an attempt to discern its place and role in our everyday lives as well as in its artistic and/or academic value. As Jason P. Vest notes, scholars such as Todd Gitlin claim that "[television] does not value innovation, depth, or complexity as much as formula, shallowness

and simplicity" (1). Vest claims that Gitlin is only one of a number of scholars that viewed television as a shallow form that could not produce the complex moral or social intrigue offered by other media. Others have expressed a similar sentiment in different ways, e.g. Adorno and Horkheimer coined the term "culture industry"[1] which reflects the idea that television is a mass medium that follows the logic of capitalism. They believe that, as a result, this aspect of mass production lead to mediocrity and a loss of standard: "mass media are such important, profitable, and pernicious facets of corporate capitalism that they erase distinctions between high and low culture to become opiates for the masses" (qtd. in Vest, 3). This type of argument is something found in most later instances of criticism, which generally include ideas that television is a form of escapism, trivial, lacking in depth, fast paced and hence not allowing the viewer moments of reflection and understanding (Vest, 4). Another issue faced by researchers is what can be described as an instinctive tendency of comparing television to other media that pre-dated it such as novels and theatre. This can be understood if one experiences television as the contemporary successor totheatre and cinema. Vest finds that this is normal to the extent where it is understood that these earlier art forms "inspired television's narrative and visual development" (8). Since the time of the aforementioned criticism, a large scholarly field of television studies has developed and offered new insight. Namely, television programs such as *the Wire* effectively prompted scholars to examine and determine how "good television" can function as a means of social criticism.

[1] First appeared in their 1944 essay "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception", published in their book "Dialectic of Enlightenment".

2.1. Quality Television and Good Television

In this light, responses to the aforementioned sceptical stance multiplied, in scholarly terms as well as in journalism. One example of this is found in a New York Times' article by Charles McGrath stating that television has indeed provided a quality of writing alike to that usually found in books: “The TV shows I have in mind are the weekly network dramatic series. These shows are flourishing in a way that they haven't since the very early days of the medium, and have grown in depth and sophistication into what might be thought of as a brand-new genre: call it the prime-time novel” (52).

Furthermore, another statement by McGrath reveals an issue that may be considered crucial in understanding television. This refers to the idea of reality, and the boundary between it and fiction. McGrath states that modern shows (of his time) take a specific approach to reality whereby the fictional world attempts to recreate it in detail, with the purpose of illuminating parts of it that are usually hard to perceive: “the painstaking, almost literal examination of middle- and working-class lives in the conviction that truth resides less in ideas than in details closely observed. More than many novels, TV tells us how we live today” (qtd. in Vest, 7). Considering this, it can be understood why McGrath used the term “prime-time novel”. Namely, when it comes to storytelling, such a detailed approach is one that can easily be traced back to literature, and it can be argued that well-written television drama manifests a similar quality and has the potential to expand the genre. As Vest puts it: “McGrath, by identifying television drama as a legitimate literary form, reverses the culture-industry argument to declare American prime-time drama relevant, serious, and valuable art” (7). Meanwhile, scholars such as Robert J. Thompson identified the formation of “quality television” as a phase that “stretched from the debut of Hill Street Blues

in 1981 to the cancellation of Twin Peaks in 1991. During this time, Thompson stresses out, quality TV was best defined by being compared to the "regular" series: "Series like Hill Street Blues, St. Elsewhere and Moonlighting really stood out next to their generic contemporaries like CHiPS, Trapper John, MD and Murder, She Wrote. In fact, quality TV back then was best defined by what it was not: Knight Rider, MacGyver and the rest of 'regular' TV." (17). What can be deduced is that such shows were different in their approach, while still remaining relatively outnumbered by the "regular" ones. Thompson claims that it was not until the 90's that quality TV entered the mainstream and "started spreading like a virus" (17)[2].

Another aspect that should be taken into consideration in the development of the genre is the emergence of cable television. This is significant in the sense that cable television allowed for more freedom and genre experimentation. Thompson claims that despite its beginnings which relied highly on the traditional TV shows found on network television, cable slowly introduced shows that were in a category of their own. One of the frontrunners in this case is Home Box Office (HBO), which became renowned for its quality shows and has, as Thompson explains, built on the idea that it is different than your everyday television: "The phrase 'an HBO-style series' has, in fact, now trumped 'quality TV' as a description of high artistic achievement in the medium. HBO's hubristic slogan picked up on the old idea of defining quality by what it isn't: 'It's not TV. It's HBO'"(18). This freedom of experimenting was certainly permeated by the specific conditions of success which was measured on the number of subscribers rather than the ratings. In such a situation, HBO could take more risks than regular broadcast networks (Thompson, 18). It could be

[2] Thompson wrote this in a preface to a book titled „Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond", edited by Janet McCabe and Kim Akass.

said that results came in the form of a number of shows that included complex narrative, characters, language and format. With the increasing number of such shows, Thompson's definition of quality television as something that is not "regular" television requires an update. As he himself noted: "I defined 'quality TV' with a list of a dozen characteristics. Now I can find a lot of shows on the air that exhibit all 12 characteristics but in the end, aren't really all that good. Also, I can find some spectacularly innovative programming – the first season of *Survivor*, for example – that aggressively resists the category of 'quality TV'" (20). While taking this into consideration, authors such as Feuer and Bignell discuss how quality television could be defined today. Jane Feuer sees it as a manifestation of older art forms within a new medium, while emphasizing its specific nature and the idea that it is indeed different than "regular TV" (8, McCabe). She goes on to make an important remark, noting that the idea of quality television is something "situated", and depends strictly on the "interpretive community", a concept originally introduced by Stanley Fish (Feuer, 145). Basically, this means that quality TV should be considered a descriptive category since all judgments of quality are relative to one's chosen perspective. In this sense, it is important to think of quality as a term that is not absolute, as it requires contextualization, or as Feuer would put it: "the term quality TV has to be used descriptively to understand how it operates discursively" (146).

In this sense, the judgment of quality is understood as an arbitrary selection process whereby criteria is made according to a set of ideals represented by an interpretive community. It could be said that Feuer stresses this partly in order to refute the idea of quality TV possessing an intrinsic higher value compared to shows emerging from a different type of genre: "And there's the rub. To the interpretive community that writes about TV, and who share a field of reference with those who create quality TV but not reality TV, only certain re-combinations matter" (157).

However, what can also be discerned is that she does so to emphasize the traditional aspect of quality drama, explaining that the shows that might be presented as bold and innovative should instead be examined in terms of the existing genre of quality television: “I believe I have demonstrated that there is nothing ‘new’ or ‘original’ generically between HBO drama and the television tradition of quality drama that cannot be ascribed to an equally generic tradition of art cinema. Thus we can locate a gap – I am even tempted to call it a contradiction – between the textual analysis of quality drama and its discursive context” (Feuer, 157).

The “gap” here refers to the location of HBO drama and quality TV within the greater discourse of television, whereby such forms belong to a tradition of art cinema, which then coincides with the tendency to present them as completely separate forms.

On the other hand, quality can also be seen as the result of a rise in production value and technological advancement. Bignell considers this an important factor as he claims that “industrial and institutional factors have contributed to the creation of a high-end television aesthetic” (9, McCabe). He elaborates on this by using a number of examples, including Simon's *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets.* Namely, the show expands on the realist aesthetic previously found in shows such as *Hill Street Blues* by using hand-held cameras to achieve “documentary-like authenticity” (167, Bignell). Instead of foregrounding the action and the crime itself, focus was shifted towards dialogue and police work as it is “with an emphasis on the process of detection rather than the witnessing of crimes themselves, and the arrival at a crime scene usually opened each narrative strand” (168, Bignell). He also claims that the focus on dialogue on television was seen as traditionally British and opposed to Hollywood's trend of emphasizing special effects and spectacle (158). It can be said that the employment of superior technology and different ways of

shooting merges the two traditions in certain shows, and this results in the aforementioned high-end television aesthetic.

Considering the idea that quality television is part of a genre and that it draws on an existing corpus, such shows also have the option of being linked to a fixed formula in the manner that is present in other genres. Moreover, such formulas are often accompanied by a recognizable style that can become defined as a brand. In light of this, it is easy to recall Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of television by using the term "culture industry", since the idea of a brand is very much in line with the "facets of capitalism" among which they also situate mass media (3, Vest). With a number of other examples of authors becoming "brands" by writing successful shows belonging to a certain genre, networks communicate ideas such as quality and originality. McCabe and Akass identify this as part of the process of "institutionalising the writer-producer as a strategy", with examples such as HBO's striving to send a message that it "financially supports and trusts – or so its aggressive marketing campaign tells us – its creative teams to come up with something special and to produce 'quality'" (McCabe, Akass, 10).

Another interesting point regarding the idea of quality television is brough up by Sarah Cardwell. She explains this on an example of a student who described a certain work viewed in class as "quality television", but didn't like it" (20). The work she refers to is the 1995 classic-novel adaptation of *Persuasion*. This suggests that we may recognize a certain work as quality despite it not being appealing to us. Furthermore, it means that there are certain generic aspects that may qualify a work as being of quality. Cardwell stresses out that the student was made aware of the supposed quality of the work, and that he "acknowledged that the programme was carefully constructed, well acted, well filmed and based on a good story adapted from a classic novel" (20). At this point, it appears that high quality is a category defined outside our own judgement, and is

instead dependent on a certain "critical community" (Cardwell, 22). What she goes on to suggest is a divide between shows that exhibit the properties of being high quality, and those which are "good". The latter refers to television that is "rich, riveting, moving, provocative and frequently contemporary (in some sense); it is relevant to and valued by us. It speaks to us, and it endures for us" (21). This does not mean good television is necessarily stylistically different or void of features found in quality television. On the contrary, it will most likely exhibit the signs of quality television. Still, it will do so with a level of delicacy and refinement. This can mean a number of things. For example, it can have a number of layers that are discovered through repeated viewing. In addition, its stylistic choices are made carefully and poignantly as opposed to, how Cardwell puts it, "making redundant stylistic choices" (31). Furthermore, it is important to note that this type of television is experienced positively as "we find it engaging, stimulating, exciting, original, and so on (Cardwell, 31). What this suggests is that good television is relying very much on the human experience, perhaps even more so than quality television, as defined above. This can be said mostly because quality, as opposed to being "good", has been more strictly defined in terms of genre and it is generally easier to pinpoints its characteristics. Cardwell explains this by saying that "'quality' is not synonymous with value or how good something is; it is closer to being a set of generic traits that distinguishes a group identity" (32). While the first case involves the identification of certain qualities and ascribing them to a genre (of quality television), the second relies on the ability to understand and allocate critical value in order to determine if the show is good or not. In this sense, it is important to have a way of evaluation that cannot be merely dismissed as an individual opinion. Cardwell believes that persuasiveness can best be achieved through a textual analysis which can be scrutinized and checked for merit: "no one need accept anyone else's evaluation, interpretation or indeed classification of a text unless there is coherent, persuasive evidence for it

in the text under scrutiny – thus the importance of close textual analysis as an indispensable aspect of evaluation" (33). Such criticism allows us to better understand what it is that we find compelling and important about different TV shows, or to put it in different words, why we find them to be good. While a lot of academic work is done towards analyzing quality television, Cardwell further argues that analysis should also focus on shows that are bad, yet of quality, as well as good non-quality television (33). In the case of the *Wire*, it can be argued that some of the show's features did not belong to the existing genre of quality television, yet its influence significantly affected the norms of the genre.

To sum up, it can be said that quality, once defined as a genre, becomes primarily identifiable through a number of techniques borrowed from a corpus, along with modifications and innovations (technical or conceptual) that allow for a further development of the established form. In this sense, the genre of quality television is constantly evolving, and it can be argued that it can best be defined by the features of the shows that are deemed as "quality" at any given time. Finally, this is determined by a critical community which recognizes the various aspects that characterize a show as "high quality". On the other hand, "good" television is distinctive in its appeal and deeper understanding it offers to the viewer. While quality television is closer to an overt formulaic expression, good television does not significantly rely on formula. Instead, it tries to be contemporary, creative, layered, original, and so on. It is a matter of multiple elements coming together while relying on the viewer to recognize it as good television. In light of the aforementioned debate on television and its properties, it can be argued that *the Wire* displays many of the characteristics typified as quality or good television. Topically and stylistically complex, it uses a large narrative network to tell what could be seen as a single story of a city in decline. In the following paragraphs we will discuss a number of examples showcasing these

elements, including character complexity, use of verisimilitude, editing, language, social relevance, thematic depth, and so on. This will be covered through an exploration of the show's approach to the representation of a contemporary city in decay and its revision of the classical cop-show format.

3. Abandoning the "cop show" trope?

What is peculiar about *the Wire* is that it quickly becomes obvious that it is in many respects different from its genre predecessors. As Charlie Brooker states in *Tapping The Wire,* the television special, "simply calling it a cop show is a bit like calling *The Godfather* a film about a few dodgy Italians". This is reflected in the author's stance as well, considering the numerous interviews, documentaries and books which cite the authorial intent as one that transgresses entertainment as a purpose. Instead, the *Wire* renounces familiar topics such as "good versus evil", differentiating it from most other shows that concern crime fiction (Simon, 2)[3]. Namely, the episodes do not follow a "point A to point B" logic, whereby the crime is committed and the perpetrator neatly cuffed by the end of the episode. In an attempt to construct a narrative imbued with social critique, the particular criminal cases are not the main point, as it can be argued that all episodes coalesce into a connected whole. Such narrative logic is reflected by one of the show's characters when describing the act of building up a case, as Lester Freamon notes that "all the pieces matter" (1.06). David Simon's numerous interviews and lectures further corroborate this idea, as he states that the creative team is "not merely trying to tell a good story or two. We were

[3] This quote (as well as the following ones) belongs to Simon's prologue to Rafael Alvarez's „The Wire": Truth Be Told.

very much trying to pick a fight" (2). It can be said that this idea of a "fight" reflects what many have come to see as a need to criticize the state of urban decay in contemporary American cities as a result of global capitalism and an impaired system in its service. As a result, such a system effectively betrays a great part of society, or as Simon puts it: "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 pyramid that is capitalism" (4).

In an introduction to a book called "*The Wire": Truth Be Told*, Simon takes this idea further by explaining that its an "angry" show which is about "what we have left behind in our cities, and at what cost we have done so" (qtd. in Vest, 172). Once the viewer is aware of the author's intent on challenging socio-political issues through the shows narrative, it could be expected that the plot and its characters would come to be seen as subservient to a "greater message". However, the philosophy surrounding *The Wire* escapes this by its meticulous plot which relies heavily on delivering realistic scenarios. Simon explains this in terms of *The Wire's* "loyal, urbane, informed following, drawn by the show's great writing, gritty realism, and complex, morally ambiguous storylines (Simon, 39). As a result of this complexity and ambiguity, many have attempted to find proof of their theories in the story. Simon has illustrated this in his lecture at the *Observer Ideas* festival 2014 by stating that the show's audience included conservatives, liberals, libertarians, etc., who all identified certain elements that supported their worldview. As he puts it, "they all felt like they had a home for a while, but they also all found stuff to criticize". The fact that people of such different backgrounds ever came to find the *Wire* a platform for their views makes an example of the show's broadness and complexity in offering an overview of urban life. It can be argued that it is the abandonment of presenting a universal truth, and the subsequent variety of possible experiences, that comes forth as original and life-like. As Vest puts it: "That *The Wire* exposes the

challenging, upsetting, and negative aspects of 21st-century urban American life without degenerating into maudlin sloganeering testifies to the storytelling talents of Simon and his production staff" (172).

While this does help Simon's audacious claims, such as the show being inspired by Greek tragedy and the likes of "Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides" (Alvarez, 384), it is also important to note that the *Wire* should not be excluded from the tradition of the "cop show". Vest argues that Simon "seems so invested in pronouncing his series more sophisticated, capacious, and provocative than its generic forebears that he loses sight of the narrative conventions that define those earlier programs (conventions that *The Wire* reproduces even while revising them)" (174). While lavish comparisons to other forms of media such as the realist novel or Greek tragedy might serve to illustrate how the show attempts to revise the form, it is also vital to understand how it draws on an existing tradition of crime fiction. In this case, such a tradition is reflected in the show's main premise and its characters. In other words, like most other crime fiction shows, it revolves around detectives and criminals, while offering depictions of police work and criminal activities. On the other hand, the scenes are different in terms of execution and format. This refers primarily to the tendency to include long, dialogue-rich scenes that advance the storyline.

3.1. Defining "real" police work

By embracing elaborate dialogue and a realistic plot, the show engages in a different portrayal of what police work is supposed to be. Namely, the complexity here is derived by a divide within the police force that presents us with what Ryan Brooks terms "two competing modes of policing" (66). He believes that the point of this is to "produce what [its] characters call, alternatively, 'good' or 'real' or 'natural police.' My point is not simply that the show tells us what it means to be a good police officer, but rather that this definition privileges certain tactics of crime-prevention and order-maintenance over others" (65). The show achieves this by becoming the storytelling equivalent of a distant observer, i.e. it eludes the appearance of pointing its viewers towards a specific conclusion. It can be argued that such an unimposing approach benefits from a level of poignancy that would otherwise be hard to achieve. Brooks notes this by describing the show as a "catalogue of the mechanics by which these institutions maintain discipline" (64), referring primarily to the police department and the Barksdale criminal organization, even though this easily applies to other institutions in the show. However, Brooks also notes that these mechanics stand in stark opposition to the show's "authentic knowledge or truth" (64). It can be argued that this knowledge comes from the show's detached style of narration. Simon explains this in the following words: "We had it in mind that we would not explain everything to viewers. The show's point of view was that of the insider, the proverbial fly on the wall – and we had no intention of impairing that point of view by pausing to catch up the audience" (Alvarez, 2). This is well captured in the scene where McNulty and Bund Moreland investigate a crime scene for five minutes without uttering a single word except for "fuck" (1.04). Namely, this unconventional scene and its demand for intuitiveness reflect a number of ideas. Firstly, as Slavoj Žižek explains

in *The Wire and Philosophy*, the scene is not an attempt of "object-realism (realistic presentation of a social milieu)", but rather a "subject-realism", which refers to the idea of realism achieved through a sense of commonality, identification with the subject (218). Hence, the viewer is invited to recognize McNulty and Moreland as experienced detectives who know precisely how to "work" a crime scene. It can be said that it renders the dialogue in other crime shows as unnatural and superfluous, as it feels forced that seasoned detectives would have to state their every thought in a mannerly, elaborate fashion. Instead, they come to use an otherwise "prohibited word on non-satellite networks" which "comes to mean anything from annoyed boredom to elated triumph..." (Žižek, 218). In any case, it can be argued that such an approach adds a sense of reality, leaving the viewer with a sense of truth, of finding a show that "tells it like it is".

While *The Wire* allows verisimilitude to become one of its defining characteristics, Brooks recognizes this as a method of forming a certain perception of truth. In this case, by apparently disowning the narrative, the show is actually more convincing in its consideration of what makes "good police" (Brooks, 65). Even though the narrative doesn't include slogans or political messages, its discoursive network still presents us with its own vision of what is right and wrong, whether we are talking about policing, crime organizations, politics, the education system, etc. In this spirit, we are presented with the two different ways of policing mentioned earlier. The first is embodied in the character of Lester Freamon, a detective that is at first presented as a disinterested individual slacking off at his work desk. We soon find out that Freamon is actually policing in a different manner, since he considers the classic routine of chasing down criminals and making random street arrests pointless. He believes that these are only aesthetical solutions which do not tackle the deeper reasons behind Baltimore's war on crime. This is reflected in his following quote: "You follow drugs, you get drug addicts and drug dealers. But you start to follow the money, and

you don't know where the fuck it's gonna take you" (1.09). Therefore, Freamon bides his time in building a case against "bigger fish", such as Avon Barksdale. In doing this, he is at first perceived as a slacker by younger detectives such as McNulty. However, his profile as a very engaged and capable individual is slowly brought to light, in the same manner that the police work he does is not yielding immediately visible results. Older detectives, such as Moreland, inform McNulty that he shouldn't be fooled by Freamon, since Freamon is "natural police" (1.04). Furthermore, his career history in the force epitomizes the idea of there being a divide in the way police work is done. This is emphasized in a scene that situates McNulty and Freamon in a bar, with the latter explaining that he was demoted only for doing his job, i.e. for doing "real police work", which went against his orders (1.04). As Brooks notes, Freamon was punished for "arresting the son of a newspaper editor, a fence for stolen goods, despite his commissioner's orders. Like McNulty, Freamon is made delinquent, by departmental standards, after disrupting the quid pro quo that protects the department from outsider (media, legal, public) scrutiny" (68).

By navigating the story in this way, the viewer comes to see the Baltimore police department as a very politicized place. Appearance comes before results and discipline is used to discourage those who do not adhere to the ideal. Freamon's experience is only one of a number of scenes where the viewer is presented with this same idea. On the other hand, it could be argued that Freamon's antithesis is found in detective Thomas Hauk, known as "Herc". If Freamon represents the intellectual, authority questioning, big picture detective, Herc stands for brute force, narrow mindedness and petty street arrests. However, this does not mean that Herc does not understand how the institution functions. Throughout the seasons, we see him develop a career by successfully exploiting the political corruption within the system. This is most notable once he finds himself fast-tracked for a promotion simply because he witnessed Mayor Clarence Royce

commit an act of adultery during the election period. Still, it is important to note that the show does not define its characters through singular qualities. For example, Herc shows his compassionate side when he sits down to talk to Boadie Broadus' grandma after a failed raid of their home (1.04). In any case, despite the characters themselves being in the gray area, it can be said that the show presents us with an idea of "good" police work as opposed to "bad", or at least ineffective police.

Brooks argues that the show is laying out a critique of these modes, what he calls "the statistical approach and the paramilitary, 'War on Drugs' approach" (66). As exemplified in the passage above, these approaches are defined by the way that they manifest themselves within the police department and in public. While the statistical approach relies on arrest numbers and the "juking of stats" ahead of political elections, the paramilitary approach sees police chasing down petty criminals and making minor arrests. While both are exertions of disciplinary power, it could be said they both hold the public image important. When it comes to what the show describes as "good police", the lack of arrests and bad statistics are not an issue as long as it is done for a higher cause. This cause presumes that there is a root factor behind the crimes that can be tackled. In such situations, traditional law is bent, criminals can be turned into spies, arrests can be postponed for the sake of secrecy of investigation, etc. The wire tap is an example of such an approach. The police observes and listens in to street dealers, yet they do not storm the grounds and give chase. Instead, they perceive the petty criminals as part of a bigger organization and try to learn more about it. This includes the wire tap, but extends to photographs of criminal activity and even cameras. Namely, one of the scenes that is also included in the show's intro illustrates this. We see Bodie, a young drug dealer, breaking a CCTV camera. Brooks recognizes that there are different levels of control at presence here:

> Just as Bodie hits the camera… D'Angelo's pager goes off. We watch as Freamon, sitting in his car, observes D'Angelo walk over to a pay phone and make a call; when the phone rings in Freamon's hand, he does not answer but merely chuckles in satisfaction. In the background, at the payphone, D'Angelo looks around in confusion. In this scene, the drug crew has successfully disrupted one form of control, the security cameras, only to be ensnared by a less visible but more effective form of control—the detective who has secretly tapped into their communication network. (68)

By assuming control through different types of surveillance methods, the police collects information on individuals in order to better understand their assumed role within a criminal organization. Furthermore, this is a constant source of potential power to exercise control over those individuals. Such mechanisms evoke the idea of Jeremy Bentham's *panopticon*, or as Foucault described it, the "architectural programme... at once surveillance and observation, security and knowledge, individualization and totalization..." (249). Of course, the streets of Baltimore are not a prison, yet the police method of attaining control follows the idea of constant observation. While Foucault notes that a "permanent gaze may control prisoners and staff" (250), a similar effect can be observed here as local gangs try to handle their business as subtly as possible because police may be present at any time, it is the proverbial game of cat and mouse. The word "game" is appropriate here as the constant interaction between crime and law is certainly a part of "the game", an arbitrary expression often heard in the show. In order to better understand the show's take on the relationship between cops and criminals and their position within Baltimore's institutions, an in-depth analysis of this concept is required. However, before discussing it in more detail, it would be useful to elaborate on the idea of postmodern institutions, i.e. the significant

organizations found in fictional Baltimore. This should enable a better understanding of how "the game" serves as a discoursive marker of the space reserved for the interaction between individuals and Simon's "indifferent institutions" that "have more rights than human beings (46). Furthermore, an argument will be made that the modern institutions are rendered largely dysfunctional as a result of the increasingly complex socioeconomic conditions. This should also help us understand how the show offers alternative narratives that undermine various social myths that have traditionally been associated with the USA.

4. Defining Baltimore's postmodern institutions

Another important part of the show is its approach to dominant cultural narratives. Whether it is the idea of exceptionalism, equal opportunity for all, equality before the law, the self-made man, or America as a melting pot, *The Wire's* bleak storylines make a point of exposing the inconsistencies and flaws of such narratives. These narratives (or myths) have long served as what Heike Paul refers to as "anchors and key references in discourses of 'Americanness', past and present" (11). Most of them imply a general idea of the USA as a country that offers the possibility of a good life, or at least a better life when it comes to its immigrants. As the historian Eric Foner notes, this idea is deeply rooted in the public consciousness:

> There is [in this country] a deeply ingrained notion of American exceptionalism. We are democratic. We believe in equality. We believe in opportunity. This is the land of all those things. So therefore, there is a tendency to forget about aspects of our history which don't fit that pattern. We forget about these things because they

> don't 'fit the image that we want to have of the greatness of our own country' (qtd. in Hughes, 2).

Naturally, if one was to explore concepts such as democracy and equality within a society, it would be crucial to understand its institutions and political particularities. *The Wire* deals with the institutions and their superiority over individuals, however, it can also be argued that it portrays the ineffectiveness of these institutions when it comes to serving the society. As a result, detailing these failures exposes the America that is significantly different than the one presented in the grand narratives.

Reasons behind such changes go beyond strictly economic or social factors, but imply a fundamental transformation whereby developments in the history of capitalism led to a paradigm now commonly known as neoliberalism. Wendy Brown comes to a similar conclusion when discussing the consequences of a neoliberal worldview: "This is the civilizational turning point that neoliberal rationality marks, its postpostmodernism and deep antihumanism, its surrender to a felt and lived condition of human impotence, unknowingness, failure, and irresponsibility" (222). In this case, it can be argued that such a major shift in social, economic, and cultural values effectively shaped modern institutions. In response to this, many scholars are discussing what became known as "postmodern institutions". Roger Burbach describes the idea of postmodernity in his book, *Globalization and Postmodern politics*:

> Postmodernity is commonly viewed as a condition, largely cultural, that penetrates many aspects of contemporary life. It is closely linked to mass consumerism, the rise of the information and the media ages, the constant sense of change and impermanence, and in its extreme form, the breakdown of the barriers between reality, fiction, appearance and imagination (69).

Furthermore, according to Burbach, this condition includes the decline of ideologies (such as liberalism and socialism) as they cannot offer adequate solutions to challenges brought about by "tremendous complexity and diverse realities of the contemporary world" (71). Other aspects of postmodernity and its effect on politics are found in the socio-economic shifts. For example, these are clearly seen in season two, which focuses on the demise of the Baltimore harbor. Specifically, we observe dockworkers who turn to smuggling as their original line of work has been systematically devalued over time: "…we witness an all-powerful, all-pervasive free market that enervates and corrupts governmental and media institutions…Crushed by Reaganite antilabor policies, the stevedores union is forced to support itself through smuggling" (Love, 488). Meanwhile, means of changing such conditions have been significantly reduced through an increasingly bureaucratized political system which favors a political elite over mass-participation: "Democracy is becoming highly formalized with politically alienated populaces and increasing voter apathy. Political parties are no longer organs of mass participation but instead media driven bureaucracies that function on behalf of the politicians and the vested interests who control them" (Burbach, 72). Simon uses a similar tone in his take on postmodern institutions at the *Observer Ideas* festival. He explains that they are shaped by the power of capital and corporate lobbying: "…if there is money to be made, then capital will buy enough government so that reform becomes impossible". He goes on to discuss the prospect of universal healthcare as an example, noting how much influence capital had on stopping such a reform: "…in a matter of minutes, 450 million dollars in lobbying money was directed at the national legislature at congress. That's not a democracy where the marketplace of ideas is determining what's the best course for most people – that's a purchased government".

When it comes to institutions found in *The Wire*, the changes brought about by neoliberal capitalism are not addressed directly, but rather implied through perceiving the social issues and institutional inability to tackle them. Instead of straightforward solutions, characters are often faced by hard choices which are then posited through a recurrent use of the phrase “the game”. This phrase represents a worldview which operates within the limits set by the institutions that govern it, whether it is the local government or the drug gangs fueled by international drug trade. In other words, it could be said that the expression comes to represent an understanding of the present-day American reality as opposed to the aforementioned myths of equality, opportunity, and so on. As Paul Thomas Anderson puts it:

> ...institutions and workplaces often function like games where implicit rules are as important as explicit ones. Learning, accepting, or rejecting the rules of a workplace's game is of major consequence on both sides of the law, in local politics, and beyond...phrases like Avon's 'the game is the game' function as conservative proverbs or short-hand renderings of an epic worldview defined by necessity and institutional consistency rather than turbulent change and randomness (375).

The following chapter will offer a more detailed approach to how the show uses the idea of “the game” to observe the impact of contemporary socio-economic conditions and the decline of modern institutions on a local level.

5. Analyzing the "game"

By refering to the show as a "Greek tragedy in which the postmodern institutions are the olympian forces", David Simon claims that the show presents a broad variety of institutions as the indifferent Gods who define all rules and outcomes: "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" (qtd. in Alvarez, 384). Meanwhile, the characters are the tragic heroes that are persistent in battling these inevitable scenarios, much to their own damage: "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" (384-385). This is a common theme throughout the show, as the storyline's advancement relies on characters striving to achieve their goals or elevate their social status, usually to no avail. Their scenarios strongly oppose traditional cultural narratives which depict America as a society founded on ideas of equality, inclusive democracy that serves the people, or the idea that anyone can succeed if they work hard enough (commonly defined as the myth of the American Dream). In this spirit, certain scholars may claim that the "city portrayed in *The Wire* is a dystopian nightmare, a web of oppression and social pathology that is impossible to escape" (Kim, 200). Whether it is McNulty's obsessive (and destructive) approach to solving cases, Frank Sobotka's desperate attempts to return prosperity to the port, or Stringer Bell's ambition to become a legitimate businessman, it turns out to be a Sisyphean task with traps and obstacles at every corner. This struggle becomes a representative element of each season, portraying individuals in the criminal justice system, but also in education, media and politics. Paul Allen Anderson notes this by stating that "The series' would-be heroes

repeatedly chafe at the frustrating institutional logics defining the works and days of Baltimore life, whether the underground drug economy, local law enforcement, organized labor, urban politics, public education, or the local media" (373-374). It appears that the show is determined to present the institutions as bigger than the individual, which is in a sense opposed to what the American mainstream is used to. This defies the ever-present heroic narrative found in many shows and movies whereby individuals regularly defy the conventions to achieve their goals, leaving the institutions in the background. Simon also emphasizes this: "...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" (qtd. in Alvarez, 384). It can be argued that the first season effectively establishes this correlation between the towering institutions and the individual's struggle. It focuses on the drug war and its tragic consequences on the local level, especially considering Baltimore's youth.

In the very beginning of season one, we see D'Angelo Barksdale, the leader in the low-rise projects known as "The Pit", observing the local corner boys play checkers on a chess set. He interrupts them in order to teach them chess since it is a "better game" (1.03) and proceeds to explain each piece with an example from real life. The king becomes the "kingpin", i.e. Avon Barksdale, and by describing the queen as a "go-get-shit-done piece", the boys recognize it as Stringer, Avon Barksdale's right hand man. The rook is compared to the stash house (where the drugs are kept), as it regularly moves in clear directions, etc. The crew takes particular interest once D'Angelo explains that pawns are like soldiers, i.e. the cornerboys and other low level gang members:

“D'Angelo Barksdale: These right here, these are the pawns. They like the soldiers. They move like this, one space forward only. Except when they fight, then it's like this. And they like the front lines, they be out in the field.

Wallace: So how do you get to be the king?

D'Angelo Barksdale: It ain't like that. See, the king stay the king, a'ight? Everything stay who he is. Except for the pawns. Now, if the pawn make it all the way down to the other dude's side, he get to be queen. And like I said, the queen ain't no bitch. She got all the moves.

Preston 'Bodie' Broadus: A'ight, so if I make it to the other end, I win.

D'Angelo Barksdale: If you catch the other dude's king and trap it, then you win.

Preston 'Bodie' Broadus: A'ight, but if I make it to the end, I'm top dog.

D'Angelo Barksdale: Nah, yo, it ain't like that. Look, the pawns, man, in the game, they get capped quick. They be out the game early.

Preston 'Bodie' Broadus: Unless they some smart-ass pawns.” (1.03)

There is a great moment of foreshadowing in this scene as D'Angelo says “they be out the game early” before taking a look at one of the boys, Wallace, who is killed by his crewmates by the end of the season. Of course, this speech is not intended to be a chess lesson as much as it is a lesson (if not a warning) on how to play the game. In other words, we are presented with a metaphorical explanation of the hierarchy and inner workings of the local drug trade. As Anderson notes, D'Angelo is effectively teaching the boys to “think of themselves as pawns... They are low-power figures who need to learn the explicit and implicit rules of the local game well if they are to survive, much less move on to positions of higher responsibility and power... D'Angelo wants his

crew to start thinking more abstractly about their lives in the game" (379). The chessboard and the pieces illustrate the relationship and interdependency between gang members of different roles and status, and what is deduced is that one's knowledge of how to manage these relationships, i.e. how to play the game, is crucial for survival. Still, when young members are recruited it is not via a promise of survival, but a promise of success, as it can be seen in season four. Namely, Marlo Stanfield, the new gang leader, has his henchman give out money to the local boys. This can be seen as his attempt to show them that they could earn money by drug-dealing and check their disposition towards him. However, one of them, Michael Lee, is determined to stay away from drug-dealing and decides to walk away. Before he can get too far, he is intercepted by Marlo himself. Reading the situation well once more, Michael keeps his head down, avoiding eye contact. However, once Marlo insults him, Michael unexpectedly gives him a piercing, hostile stare. Marlo, who at that point already established a very notorious reputation, smiles and appears to respect the confrontational stance (4.03). Another thing that becomes apparent here is how internalized the rules of the game have become, even for the boys who are still in their early teens. If the chess lesson in the first season can be understood as an introduction to how the allegorical game is played, then scenes such as this one expose how nuanced and important such knowledge can be in real situations.

While belonging to a gang can have familial connotations, such a viewpoint is problematic considering what Elizabeth Bonjean terms a "narrative myth of the dominant culture which excludes African American gang subculture from human conditions of family, love, and felt loss" (170). In Michael's case, by putting an emphasis on his family matters, this myth is effectively deconstructed. His little brother Bug is an important figure in his life and, when Michael is not out on the streets, he helps him with his homework and makes sure he goes to school regularly. Their

alienated mother is a drug addict, and Michael's relationship with her only deteriorates as she brings Bug's father back into the household. Especially considering that he sexually abused Michael in the past. As David Bzdak claims, “we expect parents to be partial towards their children, and to provide them with special care and attention. The absence of such care and attention often seems like a moral failure...The strong negative reactions this character inspires result not just from her bad behaviour, but more significantly from her failure to be partial towards her own children” (49-50). Apart from Michael's family, an example of this lack of partiality is clearly displayed by D'Angelo's mother, Brianna Barksdale. When D'Angelo is imprisoned, she reassures Stringer that she “raised that boy right”, implying that he will not snitch in order to avoid jail (1.12).

It can be argued that despite his efforts to stay away from the world of crime, Michael is faced with pressure at home due to his abusive stepfather, and eventually becomes a part of Marlo's crew. Bonjean believes the public has overlooked the “pressures of individual survival in African American subcultures where life in racialized and violent communities often means that very young children lose their parents, making “the support of a close family member . . . extraordinarily important”“ (170). Meanwhile, Michael becomes increasingly consumed by the drug-dealing world. It appears that despite recognizing the destructiveness of such a life style, he perceives it as the most logical choice for survival. As Anderson puts it: “leaving the game is less abstractly rational and individualistic because of family and peer pressure, employers' suspicion about snitches, and the simple difficulty of finding any other paying work. The pathos of the pawn's situation is that increased self-awareness and knowledge about the game and its terms only increase recognition of one's limited agency and constraint (380). In other words, when important elements of one's life such as family, friends and work are all connected to a particular lifestyle

and worldview, it is difficult to leave such a lifestyle, even if one is aware of its ruthlessness. By the end of the show Michael becomes a stickup man[4], hence portrayed as the new Omar Little, which could be interpreted as symbolizing the repeating patterns within the life of a neighbourhood (especially since Omar is killed beforehand). Considering the idea of the game as a lifestyle, it can be deduced that family (or the lack of a stable one) is an important factor that can both lead to successful recruitment of young gang members, as well as the subsequent limitations when it comes to leaving the game. By displaying Michael as a gangster, but also a son, stepson and a brother, the show effectively presents us with a complex character who refuses to be aligned with any single category. Furthermore, it elaborates on how these different elements of an individual's identity intertwine and influence one's ability to make choices.

Another youngster, Wallace, represents an individual who does not blend in, and therefore suffers once he tries to leave the gang. The show portrays Wallace as a 16-year-old who sees the game for its brutality, and wants to abandon that life (especially after discovering the violent murder of Omar's partner, Brandon). As Anderson notes: “The unusually empathic Wallace badly needs the income that dealing makes possible but is temperamentally unsuited to the brutal gang life. He contemplates a different life outside the game and confides to D'Angelo, “I just don't want to play no more. I was thinking of going to school” (1.9.)” (382). He appears to be without any parents, instead living in one of the project buildings where he cares for a group of younger orphans. After growing uneasy with the violence, he attempts to leave the projects to live with his grandmother, yet decides to return. When D'Angelo warns him that it is not safe for him to return

[4] A stickup, also defined by the Merriam-Webster online dictionary as a „holdup“, is the description used for Omar Little's activity of sticking up drug dealers, i.e. robbing them of their possessions.

as his absence arises suspicion, he responds “This is me, yo, right here” (1.12). The show calls attention to the importance of this quote by including it in the episode's epigraph (traditionally found at the beginning of each episode). This suggests that, similarly to Michael Lee, Wallace feels he has little choice; his lifestyle is inextricably connected to the neighbourhood of Franklin Terrace. However, his situation is perhaps more overtly tragic as his expression of belonging and sentimentality are contrasted by the nontolerant and cruel methods of the gang hierarchy.

Namely, following his return from absence, Stringer Bell deems Wallace a liability and orders Bodie and Poot to murder him. While they reluctantly obey, the viewer is presented with an emotional scene where the contrast between the identity of a young gangster and a young teenager is painfully clear. What ensues is an example of how unsparingly rigid the game can be when it comes to interpersonal relationships, or as Stephen Lucasi puts it, “a telling example of the ways that capital corrupts the most fraternal connections” (138). This is also corroborated by the fact that Stringer phrased his order as an opportunity for Boadie to prove himself and move up in the gang, the equivalent of a promotion in the business world. Stringer's language when subtly giving out the order reflects this: “Are you built for this shit?...You ready to put the work in?...Alright soldier” (1.12).

When faced with Boadie and Poot, Wallace cries out “We boys” and “You my niggas”, while Boadie is struggling to proceed with the shooting. Visibly shook by what is happening, Boadie calls him a “weak ass nigga” and urges him to stand up and “be a man” (1.12). It can be argued that by calling him weak, Boadie is trying to perceive Wallace as a gangster who did not obey the implicit code of the game. Moreover, it appears that for him, as for many other characters in the show, the idea of following a code is inextricably linked with one's capacity to “be a man”. This is revealed after he is provoked by Poot's questioning of Stringer's order: “Cause the man said

so, that's why. The man gave the word. We either step up or we have to step off. That's the game yo, that's the fucking game" (1.12). As Flore Coulouma explains, "Bodie knows not to look for an explanation: asking why already amounts to dissention and thus, to disloyalty" (152). On the other hand, Boadie's reactions reveal that this is contested by his idea of Wallace as a teenage boy and a friend. The fact that he still goes through with the murder because "the man said so" testifies to the power of the hierarchy within the gang. Coulouma believes that "in the Barksdale system, words retain their full pragmatic import, and more: in a context where words directly trigger violent action, any injunction functions as a direct speech act, literally making things happen in reality" (152). Consequently, such a straightforward way of decision-making does not leave space for any thought or debate after Boadie's proverbial "the man" has had his say. Hence, it can be argued that the structure of the gang possesses a totalitarian dimension whereby orders and their execution are based on a type of detached business-like rationality that excludes any moral values. While Stringer and Boadie might discuss Wallace as being "weak", what is actually meant is that he is a weak link in the collective, and thus a danger that must be removed. Potter and Marshall explain that such "killings are presented as purely rational, governed by a strict logic of cost and benefit. By Stringer's estimation...Wallace has proven himself too weak, a likely candidate to become an informant" (128). Furthermore, the structure is based on the hierarchy and the implied punishment of disregarding orders. As Bodie described it, "we either step up or we have to step off" (1.12). Coulouma believes that this way of making decisions is particular in terms of language as well:

> ...obligations are expressed in the usual compounded form "gotta": "you gotta stand your ground", "you gotta get the count right", "you gotta take the weight", and so on. This points to the business-like dimension of people's obligation as opposed to the moral imperative conveyed by "must", a form rarely used by the gangsters

except Omar... In the Barksdale organisation, there is no inner, moral imperatives but only orders from the outside (the rules, the bosses) (151-152).

Considering all of the above, it can be concluded that the particular discursive elements of what is commonly known as the game are set at the crossroads of different factors that come to shape one's life decisions. In this case, it can be said that a lack of perspective and normal familial conditions are met by a strong hierarchy and a sense of belonging found in a criminal gang. Therefore, it appears that there is an inextricable connection between the elements of one's personal identity and the ability to play the game. In more mundane terms, rather than concerning strictly drug trafficking, the game becomes a synonym for the particular way of life in fictional Baltimore. Ultimately, as it is displayed by the unfortunate fate of the characters that defied its rules, learning how to play the game becomes a matter of survival. As Brianna Barksdale explains it to her son while visiting him in jail: “Now if you wanna get even with him, you can. But if you hurt him, you hurt this whole family...This right here is part of the game, D. And without the game, this whole family would be down in the fuckin’ Terrace living off scraps. Shit, we prob’ly wouldn’t even be a family” (1.12).

6. *The Wire* as an ethnography of a city

It is difficult to classify *The Wire* within a particular TV genre for a number of reasons. This is not because there is a lack of genre to which it could be accredited, but rather because the series takes its inspiration and advances across many genres throughout its five seasons. As a result, it would be unfair to the whole project to call it simply a "cop show", or an "organized crime story". One of the reasons behind this is the attention to detail and the series' innovative slow pace (at least it was at the time of its shooting) storyline. The dialogue-heavy series could perhaps be best described as relying on an idea of an "ethnographic imaginary", a term borrowed from Linda Williams (215). This would mean that it combines factual data and incorporates it within a broader fictional world, which results in something George Marcus terms a "fiction of the whole" (qtd. in Williams, 212). By this, Marcus refers to the situation in which ethnographers find themselves in upon studying a specific social phenomenon. Namely, if one focuses on a specific location of study, how can one indicate the existence of a larger system? Marcus argues that in such situations the researcher necessarily refers to an idea of a macro system: "ethnographers of a "single site" inevitably have recourse to a larger whole that has not yet been studied so systematically (qtd. in Williams, 212). Williams claims that these macro systems then amount to an abstraction such as "the state", "the economy", "capitalism", and so on (212). This allows the ethnographer to "build a world", i.e. present a more complete picture of the world surrounding the phenomenon, despite the local aspect of his research. She explains the importance of this in allowing the "telling of an ethnographic tale as a tale; it enables some kind of closure" (212). This is an inevitable aspect of even the most thorough research, an outside world is always implied and present as an abstract concept. It can be said that Simon made a lot of progress towards bringing together the localized and the abstract, and what makes this possible is the medium of television.

Namely, television programs have the ability to invoke chosen content that is deemed important by its creators. This allows the build-up of a fictional story that has all of the potential of being or becoming true. Firstly, this is made possible by the fact that Simon spent considerable time on understanding Baltimore's sociocultural background. Apart from a history in journalism where he reported on local crime, he sought to actively spend time following police on the streets in what he himself termed "stand-around-and-watch-journalism" (qtd. in Williams, 211). Williams stresses that these are "the basic methodologies of ethnography: a long-term— one-year—stay in a field where a particular set of social relations can be observed by an outsider who follows selected individuals in their work and daily lives (211). Another aspect that helps present the show as a realistic account of urban Baltimore is the fact that *The Wire* does employ many truthful elements in its episodes. This extends from the language that reflects the one used in real-life Baltimore to the ex-cops/criminals turned actors, a realistic portrayal of drug-dealing, policing, etc. In this sense, the plot may seem secondary to our suspension of disbelief, however, it can be argued that it also adds to the verisimilitude of the series. This may in particular be true for those who know of Baltimore's history. For example, the cast included Little Melvin Williams, who inspired the character of Avon Barksdale, yet played the Deacon on the show (Williams, 210). Furthermore, a number of police staff on the show had in certain ways been connected to the actual Baltimore police. In a chapter entitled *Casting Baltimore?*, Penfold-Mounce et al. list a number of examples including even marginal characters: "Governer Robert L. Ehrlick Jr. who played a Maryland State trooper; Leonard Hamm, a former Baltimore police department commissioner who appears as a midnight shift homicide detective in season five; Jimmy Rood, a Baltimore police department CID Major who appears as a patrolman in season five..." (160). Perhaps a more layered example is found in the character of Jay Landsman: "...Landsman takes the complexity even further, for he is

a long-time police officer who inspired a Wire character of the same name. He was not cast to play himself but was cast as another character called Lieutenant Dennis Mello who was named after Captain Dennis Mello, the Western District Commander when writer Ed Burns was a police officer in the 1980s (160). Therefore, there are numerous instances through which the series wishes to confound the line between truth and fiction. It can be argued that such a unique approach also serves to disrupt previously established norms by most TV shows of a similar genre.

Another way in which verisimilitude is achieved is through the way politics is presented in the series. This is perhaps best expressed in the latter seasons (third season and onwards), where the city council, mayor and state senator are introduced. For example, the opening of the third season is marked by a scene where the Franklin Terrace Towers (introduced as Barksdale's turf in season one) are scheduled for demolition. The scene focuses on three different characters. Firstly, we see incumbent mayor Clarence Royce, leading the ceremony with a speech. He wants to emphasize that tearing down the towers is emblematic of his tackling of the poverty and crime present in the city: "A few moments from now, the Franklin Terrace Towers, behind me, which sadly came to represent some of this city's most entrenched problems will be gone." (3.01) Meanwhile, we are shown that Preston "Bodie" Broadus and Malik "Poot" Carr are in attendance, passing by the crowd and lamenting over the situation. Poot is saddened by the demolition of the place he calls home, while Bodie is critical both towards Poot and the government:

Poot: I dunno man, I mean I'm kinda sad. Them towers were home to me.

Bodie: You gonna cry over a housing project now. Man they shoulda blown those motherfuckers up a long time ago if you ask me. You're talkin' about steel and concrete man, steel and fuckin' concrete.

Poot: No I'm talkin' about people, memories and shit.

Bodie: They're gonna tear this building down and build some new shit, but people, they don't give a fuck about people.

The camera shifts to the mayor, then returns to Boadie and Poot, and so forth. Despite Boadie and Poot standing away from the crowd and keeping their comments to themselves, this scene can be interpreted as a dialogue between the mayor and the two of them. It could be said that while the mayor presents a certain public discourse which is common among politicians, Boadie and Poot represent the voices that are left out of this discourse, the voice of the local community. Poot's sentimentality points towards the idea that however bad the condition in a certain neighbourhood is, it is still considered home for those who live there and holds value as such. On the other hand, Boadie dismisses such sentiment and calls out the mayor for missing the real point in his speech, and this is the condition of the people, rather than "steel and concrete". As David M. Alff notes, Royce promises low and moderately priced housing and eloquently predicts a new era of prosperity, but is oblivious both "literally and ideologically" (Alff, 24) to Boadie's critique. The scene ends with Royce's countdown to demolition, and we see the debris and smoke spreading out a lot more than predicted, enveloping those gathered in a cloud of black dust. Alff sees this as a convenient metaphore: "Royce coughs into his sleeve as black dust swallows the podium. Like Bodie's dismissal of the mayor's reform vision for privileging "steel and concrete" over people, the backfired publicity stunt casts a dark cloud over Royce's vision of a new Baltimore" (25). In this example, the line between truth and fiction is made thin considering that there was a very similar event in 1996 Baltimore, when Mayor Kurt L. Schmoke held a ceremony of dynamiting a low-income residential complex. Schmoke stated the following: "What we have done is torn down what essentially have become warehouses of poverty, and what we're creating is town houses of

choice" (23). This is very reminiscent of Royce's speech in its phrasing and the invocation of change as an idea which is, as Alff claims, "anything but new in Baltimore, a city perennially dramatized, historicized, and poeticized as the subject of formation and reformation narratives" (25). This element of constant change that is characteristic of Baltimore is reflected in a number of different factors such as demography and architecture: "Baltimore has, in the words of geographer Sherry Olson, grown and contracted in a "boom-and bust-sequence" of "building up and tearing down, swarming an dispersing…" (qtd. in Alff, 25). Alff goes on to explain the level on which the series recognizes and reproduces this aspect of Baltimore life, as he considers the very rhythm of the plot and the behavior of characters can be connected to the dynamics of the city itself: "By attending so closely to the realities of twenty-first century Baltimore, *The Wire* has internalized the metabolism of a city historically characterized by boom-and-bust sequences, a pattern traceable through the actions and words of characters on the show" (25). The goal of this scene is to emphasize the political attempt of creating a connection between the rhetorics surrounding the event and the actual change that is taking place. Once Boadie's and Poot's input is taken into consideration, this perceived connection is rendered as false and instead serving a specific agenda. Hence, we can conclude that the presence of such characters serves to cause a ripple that ultimately becomes a powerful critique of such identity-building rhetorics: "*The Wire* embarrasses Baltimore's project of rhetorical self-fashioning to suggest the inadequacy of such language to aptly describe the city" (Alff, 25). The series achieves this subversive effect even in the case of politicians who are presented as well-intentioned, such as Thomas Carcetti. His vague political slogan "It's a new day in Baltimore!" is a classic example of a reformist rhetoric that is a well known part of city history. Carcetti suggests that his involvement is enough to end the cycle of political corruption and violent crime, however, this is revealed as very disproportionate to the

reality awaiting him once he is elected mayor. Therefore, Carcetti embodies the idea of populist rhetoric seen many times before on the political scene:

> Locating Carcetti within a nearly 300-year tradition of Baltimore orators, it is possible to read him as a pastiche of promises, talking points, motivations, and gestures. By rehashing the reformist language of tomorrow so often deployed by real-life Baltimore civic leaders, industrialists, journalists, and historians, Carcetti personifies the historic incompatibility between municipal rhetoric and material reality. (Alff 26-27)

7. The sociopolitical background of local politics' inefficiency

It can be argued that *The Wire*'s depiction of turn-of-the-century Baltimore fits in perfectly with its past. It is described as a city that developed in a state of political hostility, as the state of Maryland historically "favored rural interests over the port town" (Alff 28). We should consider this on the example of the aforementioned councilman (who becomes city mayor and ultimately state senator) Thomas Carcetti. Namely, he is a smart and savvy politician who is fueled by his anger and desire for change, i.e. he truly believes he can "fix" the systems shortcomings. Carcetti reveals he is running for mayor at the end of season three, just as Major Colvin's Hamsterdam project is revealed and negatively scrutinized before the public eye. As Alff notes, Carcetti takes this opportunity to "score" some political points through rhetoric which employs a touch of nostalgia: "We turned away from those streets in West Baltimore the poor, the sick, the swollen underclass of our city trapped in the wreckage of neighborhoods which were once so prized,

communities which we've failed to defend, which we have surrendered to the horrors of the drug trade. (3.12)" (32). In this instance, Carcetti is effectively summoning a vaguely defined Other that the city is fighting against, i.e. rather than delving into the issues with precision and detail, he chooses the simpler yet politically more effective rhetoric of positioning the blame outside of the city and its institutions. Alff claims that this is an attempt of presenting deeper systemic issues as something that is only a question of willful intention, rather than careful examination: "Carcetti uses the figure of invasion to elide the complexities of municipal management and to explain the city's shortcomings as a simple failure of will" (32). In this sense, he belongs to a series of political figures surrounding Baltimore's history that follow the pattern of disconnection between rhetoric and material reality, and the build-up of own electability by criticizing the others' reformative failure: "Carcetti merely echoes Royce's commonplace call for a "new Baltimore." Carcetti's assertion that "It could be a great city again" also recalls Mayor McLane's 1904 boast that Baltimoreans would look back on the fire as a milestone of progress"[5] (Alff, 33).

It can be argued that the disconnection between rhetoric and reality stems from his lack of information as well, and it is this lack of knowledge that is then supplemented by populist rhetoric: "Unaware of funding shortages, the strained relations between the city and Maryland, and the need to broker compromises across multiple constituencies, mayor Carcetti at this stage calls only for "the courage and the conviction to fight this war the way it should be fought (3.12)" (32). Namely, the aforementioned lack of funds quickly becomes presented as a major issue in policy-making. These limited resources are emphasized as the show makes a point of the politicized process of their allocation. This is exemplified in season four, once the mayor realizes he does not have the

[5] This is a reference to the Great Baltimore Fire of 1904.

funds necessary for both education and the police department. By observing Carcetti and his advisors as they contemplate his next move, it becomes obvious that the decision has other factors besides the limited funds. As Boumgarden and Johnson note: “The problem for Simon goes beyond the limited resources to the way in which people make decisions given such constraints” (258). They go on to explain that in such cases decisions are seldom based exclusively on the most sensible approach, but rather on the particular political benefits available for the policy-makers: “Specifically, decisions in Simon's version of Baltimore are not made pragmatically...working to serve the needs of the greatest number of people – but rather are the outworking of those striving to maintain or build their own position of power (258). In this instance, we are presented with an another version of the *game*, as Carcetti has to turn to the governor to secure the necessary funds. However, the implication of publicly accepting a state sponsored bail out is the loss of voters in case he should run against the current governor in the upcoming elections. Hence, the mayor is considering “what set of agendas to support based on both what looks best as the representative of the people of the city (justice concerns) and what it might mean for his anticipated candidacy for the governor of Maryland (power concerns)” (Boumgarden and Johnson, 258). His advisers explain that he will face public backlash either way. In case he does not secure the money, the schools will be broke. Otherwise, it will be detrimental to his campaign among non-Baltimore tax payers. After the current governor tries to make him publicly beg for the bail out, Carcetti declines the money in order to save face and stand better chances of becoming governor: “He was gonna make me beg; call up a press conference so the world can see me on my knees” (4.13). His adviser explains that it was the right thing to do, as it is for a higher cause: “Don't worry. Two years, and we'll make him pay” (4.13). On the other hand, another adviser previously told Carcetti “you are the mayor *now*” (4.12; emphasis added), meaning that he could have helped the school system

instantly in his current position. Boumgarden and Johnson note that such a depiction of Carcetti clearly indicates that "self-deception is a significant factor in this justification, and that this type of self-deception is unlikely to disappear upon moving up to the next rung of the ladder" (259).

Stanley Corkin explains that while "self-serving politicians are not unique to the present age", there is a particular type of cognitive logic that is invoked when making political decisions (177). He refers to Wendy Brown's book *Undoing the Demos*, which thematizes what Brown calls *neoliberal political rationality*. Roughly speaking, this represents an idea that politics has underwent a process of "economization," which in turn endangers the prospect of democracy. As Brown puts it:

> This containment of antidemocratic forces and this promise of the fuller realization of democratic principles are what neoliberal political rationality jeopardizes with its elimination of the very idea of the demos, with its vanquishing of homo politicus by homo oeconomicus, with its hostility toward politics, with its economization of the terms of liberal democracy, and with its displacement of liberal democratic legal values and public deliberation with governance and new management. (207)

The definition of demos is found in the Merriam-Webster online dictionary as "populace" or "common people". In this sense, Brown believes that no matter the "routine claims by proponents that governance techniques are more democratic than those associated with hierarchical or state-centered forms", the common people have no voice within a neoliberal system of governance (207). Hence, the abandonment of *demos* coupled with the economization of the political process give way to calculations motivated by individual interest. Operating within this worldview, individuals such as Carcetti can come to see their calculations as justified. Corkin explains that "precepts of economic rationality become a means of constructing the individual

subject and thus permeate all aspects of behaviour, paradoxically circumscribing the actions of individuals by asserting and reasserting their atomized role in a "free" society" (177). By attributing a "means-end logic – analogous to cost-benefit analysis - to all matters of public life", the neoliberal rationality creates a market-oriented worldview which seeks to scale and divide individuals and institutions. As Corkin notes, the system "eliminates the notion of mutuality" and "Thomas Carcetti thus serves his own political interests while rhetorically remaining a "caring" leader (178).

It can be said that the show effectively points this out by following Carcetti through different phases of his political career. His rhetoric is decisive when it comes to battling social issues, yet, once he is in power, there is not that much difference between him and more overtly opportunistic figures such as Clay Davis. Corkin claims that "despite their obvious differences, these two men share too many characteristics to ignore" (176). During his time as mayor, Carcetti ends up doing only the "cosmetical" reforms. Such as the effort to have a 10% decrease in crime which, with a police force that can easily "juke the stats", does not mean much: "Carcetti's proposal to reduce crime by 10 percent is meaningless in a city patrolled by a police force willing to massage, miscontextualize, and falsify crime statistics" (Alff, 34). Meanwhile, the education reform, much more nuanced and costly, is not something that stems instantly visible results for the public. Just as with the falsification of police statistics, appearance and electability are chosen over actual results. This is particularly hypocritical since Carcetti previously called out Royce's manipulation of crime statistics in a live television debate (4.02). Still, as Stanley Corkin writes, "the absence of probing political reportage allows Carcetti to go unpunished for his cynical choice" (177). Even though his particular choice of policies is not the best for the city, it does help him become the governor (5.10).

What should also be noted is that, while Carcetti's rhetoric may echo the voices of bygone politicians, the sociopolitical issues he is facing surpass those of the past: “When the fictional politician slides into the rhetorical grooves of his historical predecessors, optimistically reiterating yesterday’s vision of Baltimore’s tomorrow, it remains only for the show’s writers to document the ways in which Carcetti fails to answer the challenges of twenty-first century urban management” (Alff, 33). Alff goes on to note the transformation that led to a significant change in the city’s economy and infrastructure:

Between 1970 and 1995, Baltimore lost over 95,000 manufacturing jobs. It was in these years that the city began to see the superblock housing projects and blighted corners that *The Wire* transforms into contested turf between the Barksdale and Stanfield organizations, the vacant rowhomes where Chris Partlow and Snoop stash corpses, and the shuttered commercial store fronts instrumental to State Senator Clay Davis’s corrupt urban renewal efforts.

While urban renewal efforts are exposed as corrupt through Davis’ activities, or satirized in scenes such as the one discussed earlier (where Royce’s rhetoric is juxtaposed with the corner boys’ experience of life in the neighbourhood), the show further points out that efforts to fix society’s issues by throwing money at infrastructure are often misplaced or symbolic. As Alff explains, this comes at the expense of the blue-collar jobs, with interest that is in line with a new form of economy that does not focus on the local population:

When the administration considers building a harbor promenade walk along the Patapsco River, it does so by prioritizing the interests of a potential Washington D.C. commuter population over the waterfront’s traditional blue-collar residents…city government’s disregard for the ports resurfaces in the words of a Carcetti advisor who laments that the promenade could not extend

further east because it would run into "the Locust Point Marine Terminal, which unfortunately is still a working enterprise (4.09) (34).

The continual failure to properly address these issues reflects the bureaucratic tendency to maintain current conditions for the sake of self-preservation: "It is true that a basic (and often described) function of the state bureaucracy is to reproduce itself, not to solve society's problems – even to create problems in order to justify its existence" (Žižek, 220). Furthermore, the apparent lack of funds in city and state budgets is only underscored by a neoliberal rationality that divides the political body and promotes individual self-interest. For these reasons, space is created for profit and/or consolidation of political power to come before the common good. Simon himself is evidently motivated to make a point of this, as he comments on the financial lobby and its detrimental impact on the democratic process and the possibility of reform. He discusses this during his speech at the *Observer Ideas* festival: "…that's not a democracy where the marketplace of ideas is determining what's the best course for most people - that's a purchase government". He then comments on the impossibility of the universal healthcare reform: "If there is money to be made in the maintenance of a problem…in the status quo, then capital will array against it". The result of such a market-driven political system is a political inability to tackle contemporary issues in a world characterized by what Chaddha and Wilson term "the decline or urban labor markets, crime and incarceration, the failure of the education system in low-income communities, and the inability of political institutions to serve the interests of the urban poor (164). Hence, even the career of a benevolent politician such as Carcetti serves to demonstrate the seemingly impossible task of achieving significant social change amid the conditions of twenty-first century capitalism. As a result, institutions are too often reduced to serving as pipelines of capital, while the inefficacy

of contemporary local and state politics comes to represent one of the major dystopian elements found in the series:

> Through Tommy Carcetti's political career, the show clarifies the point that policy changes or civil activism would not change the socioeconomic structures that have plummeted Baltimore into poverty and crime. In addition, the absence of an alternative or a vision for change is not where this show fails at all. Rather, it is the very reason why *The Wire* is so successful in exposing the bleak reality of contemporary America… (Kim, 200).

Conclusion

Considering all of the above, it appears that *The Wire* is a show that strongly focuses on exposing a number of sociopolitical issues. While being entertaining in the sense that it does belong to a tradition of television crime drama, it also possesses characteristics that allow it to introduce a level of originality and innovativeness which expands the genre. In this sense, partly due to the many years of dedicated research within the actual Baltimore community, it has been called an urban ethnography. This claim is valid both in terms of the show's realism and the focus on the microcosm in order to provide a better understanding of society as a whole. Its particular format enables it to focus on details, yet present them in a way that invites critical thought and generates a sense of commonality. These genre and format specifics have helped the show maintain a high level of detail and map out a network of connections between otherwise different aspects of society, whether it comes to low-level drug dealers or elite politicians.

While such traits may define *The Wire* as quality television, it is the level at which one can identify with the show that makes it good television. As Cardwell explained it, good television is "rich, riveting…it speaks to us" (21), and Žižek defined the show's subject-realism in similar terms by claiming it escapes crude realism and seduces the viewer (218). Instances of such an approach are utilized in the representation of different postmodern institutions in order to illustrate similarities between them. This may range from the hierarchical constrains, i.e. the inability to effectively challenge them, to the ways in which characters attempt to navigate the imposed norms. Tautological expressions such as "the game is the game" are used in situations when the characters realise they do not have a choice, and serve as a constant reminder of the existence of a larger system that breeds inequality. As Boadie would explain it to McNulty in their final dialogue: "The game is rigged" (4.11).

The show makes a point of slowly building upwards from the level of crime-ridden streets to the political offices that fail to respond with effective policy-making. Yet, it never focuses solely on one of these spheres, instead bringing them closer together and emphasizing their shared features. This is especially true in terms of disregarding moral values for the sake of profit. Hence, its characters are largely ambiguous, ultimately adapting to a business-like rationality to succeed or risk becoming seen as weak or incapable (as exemplified by Carcetti's political career). Moreover, if one is to look at the unlawful institution such as the local drug gangs, failure to adapt may lead to violence, deaths, torn families, etc.

Finally, it enables the likes of Malik "Poot" Carr to express his disagreement with Mayor Royce through storytelling that follows in the line of multi-sited ethnography, an ideal hardly achievable outside the medium of television (3.01). Meanwhile, it exposes the narratives put forth by the likes of Carcetti and Royce as a recycled rhetoric that is inadequate in the face of modern

socioeconomic challenges. While issues such as the drug trade, political corruption or the urban poor have been repeatedly explored in isolation, the show manages to display their interconnectedness as well as the deep social and economic inequality at the root of these issues. In other words, through intricate and realistic storytelling, *The Wire* becomes an example of how popular television can become an effective way of subverting culturally dominant narratives and give voice to a part of America that is seldom heard.

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Abstract

This paper explores how HBO's *The Wire* functions as an example of quality television that successfully portrays a variety of social issues and challenges dominant cultural narratives. The first part of the paper will focus on the particularities that enabled the development of the so-called "quality TV". This segment also serves to introduce the background of the series as a collective effort of a great ensemble of actors and writers, which partly owes its success to a narrative style that has been described as a "visual novel". Due to the show's broad thematic approach, focus has been put on analyzing how it builds a complex narrative which serves to identify the connection between the struggles faced by the many characters found in fictional Baltimore and the demise of modern institutions. Instead of presenting a society based on ideas of equality and social mobility, the characters' efforts are repeatedly halted by what can be described as institutional failure characterized by a neoliberal rationality. The concept of "the game" will further illustrate this claim, as it presents a particular worldview which serves as a response to oppressive living conditions. Finally, the paper argues that the dysfunctional institutions mirror the more fundamental socioeconomic changes in the US, which can be described as the emergence of neoliberal capitalism.

Key words: *The Wire*, television, cultural narratives, inequality, institutions