

# THE WIRE:

## BIG BROTHER Is Not Watching You in Body-more, Murdaland

Abstract: HBO's *The Wire* consistently showcases high-tech surveillance technology, but the show is really about the vulnerabilities of surveillance to particular forms of spectacle. This article focuses on *The Wire*'s fifth season, which critiques *The Baltimore Sun* for following a sensationalist story rather than serving as a responsible civic watchdog.

Keywords: narcissism, panopticon, reality TV, spectacle, surveillance, *The Wire*

**A**fter a five-season run that garnered a great deal of critical acclaim, but little in the way of ratings, HBO's *The Wire* aired its last episode in March 2008. Only 1.1 million viewers watched *The Wire*'s finale, despite its reputation as "the best TV show ever broadcast in America."<sup>1</sup> This inverse relationship between *The Wire*'s stellar reviews and marginal audience was just one of many contradictions that made the series unique. Others include its generic ties to the police procedural, while lacking the

episodic structure and clearly delineated protagonists (cops) and antagonists (criminals) that have largely defined that genre since *Dagnet*. *The Wire* was also frequently praised for its realism despite being a scripted drama in an era dominated by unscripted "reality" TV.

*The Wire*'s most striking contradiction, however, is evident in the show's title, which alludes to the court-approved wiretap procedure that each season's criminal investigation requires. This television show premised on high-tech surveillance technology reveals that, de-

By Joseph Christopher Schaub





Det. Lester Freamon (Clarke Peters, left) and Det. Jimmy McNulty (Dominick West, right). *The Wire*—HBO.

spite our apparent obsession with watching “the real,” no one is really watching.

*The Wire* implicitly critiques surveillance-based systems of institutional control in light of theories of surveillance advanced most famously by Michel Foucault. Whereas Foucault regarded

surveillance as the primary means by which modern democratic capitalist societies regulate their populations, *The Wire* suggests that surveillance technologies are vulnerable to a variety of threats, not least of which is the allure of spectacle. This is particularly evident

in *The Wire*’s fifth season, which highlights the failures of Baltimore’s mainstream media institutions. As the capstone of the previous four seasons, this

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final season of *The Wire* lays the blame for the unreported story of the decline of the American city squarely at the feet of the city's major news organs, which, like their counterparts in entertainment, have fallen prey to a narcissistic gaze. Ironically, *The Wire's* failure to attract a mainstream viewing audience was a result of its being far more "real" than most of the programs it was competing against in the era of reality TV.

Initially, *The Wire* seems to support Foucault's famous dictum from *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of The Prison* in which he states, "Our society is not one of spectacle, but of surveillance" (217). Surveillance society relies on a panoptic gaze through which the many are constantly monitored by the few. In declaring the dominance of surveillance over spectacle, Foucault dismisses Guy Debord's celebrated 1967 masterwork, *The Society of the Spectacle*, which states, "the spectacle epitomizes the prevailing model of social life" (13). French polemics notwithstanding, there are many ways in which these two systems of visibility coincide. Sociologist Thomas Mathiesen, for example, challenges the oppositional relationship that

Foucault establishes between spectacle and surveillance by pointing out that in the context of mass media, the panoptic gaze becomes "synoptic" by focusing the eyes of the many on the few. Mathiesen states, "[N]ot only panopticism, but also *synopticism* characterizes our society, and characterizes the transition to modernity" (219). For Mathiesen, nowhere is the reciprocal relationship between the panoptic and synoptic gaze more evident than in mass media's focus on crime news. By exposing the neglect of the mass media in Foucault's argument, Mathiesen reveals a far more nuanced dialectic between spectacle and surveillance. It is precisely this dialectic that *The Wire's* fifth season explores, although not with respect to the organization and control of society, but rather to its disorganization and chaotic decay.

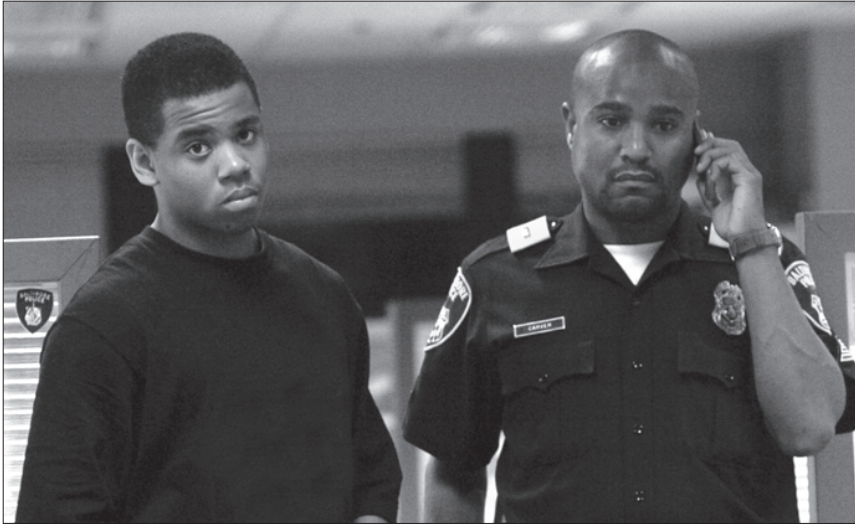
*The Wire*, seen in its entirety, can be read as a study in the vulnerabilities of surveillance to the seductions of spectacle. Each season highlights individuals in a particular civic institution who are unequal to the problem they are charged with monitoring. Season one shows the Baltimore City Police Department engaged in fighting "the war on drugs" but ultimately falling short, because at crucial points where they need federal assistance, they are told they are fighting the wrong war. In the new millennium, the war on terror trumps the war on drugs. Season two shows the collapse of Baltimore's port industry, where, to make ends meet, the longshoremen "look the other way" as organized criminals smuggle in cargo loads of illegal contraband. A container full of dead prostitutes helps to bring down the dockworkers' union, but the real criminals easily avoid detection. Season three shows a frustrated district commander creating "Hamsterdam," a legal drug zone where his officers can monitor drug dealers and addicts. Despite the drop in violent crime the experiment brings, politicians shut it down in a barrage of paddy wagons and helicopters to prove their antidrug stance. Season four follows four students in Baltimore's public school system and reveals the crushing irony of the "No Child Left Behind" Act. To prepare for standardized tests, teachers must ignore the real

problems their students face, and three of the four drop out of school to pursue a life of crime. Season five, the final season, indicts Baltimore's mainstream media for pursuing journalism that will lead to Pulitzer Prizes rather than investigating the real stories behind the forces that are destroying the city.

Although *The Wire* features a central cast of characters that includes detectives in the Major Crimes Unit and drug lords of Baltimore's heroin industry, the city of Baltimore is really the show's main character. *The Wire's* investigative methodology treats the entire city as a postindustrial crime victim with each season, responding to the question, "How could this happen?" Season five shows us *The Baltimore Sun* as the focus and stand-in for the failures of American journalism in general. The pressures of the marketplace have made it unprofitable for the newspaper to document the real story of Baltimore's devastation because of the war on drugs. Instead, *The Wire* suggests, journalism encourages and rewards false stories with spectacular appeal. An analysis of the fifth season, the capstone of the series, necessarily leads to comment on *The Wire* in its entirety. At ten episodes, the fifth season is also the most compact and easiest to embrace in a single article.

Season five opens with cutbacks to the Major Crimes Unit, which in season four had been investigating upstart heir-to-the-drug-kingpin-throne Marlo Stanfield (Jamie Hector) who is suspected of ordering the murders of over two-dozen people. Detective Jimmy McNulty (Dominic West), frustrated because of being removed from the Stanfield case and placed back in homicide, concocts a way to get back on "the wire" by inventing a serial killer. After reading a report stating that a red ribbon was found on a dead, homeless person, McNulty adds ribbons to several old case files to make it look like a serial killer is targeting the homeless. Working with Lester Freamon (Clarke Peters), one of two detectives remaining in the Major Crimes Unit, McNulty is able to arrive early at scenes where homeless men have died of natural causes, plant the ribbons, and manipulate the scene to make the deaths look like murders that were sexually motivated.





Michael Lee (Tristan Wilds, left) and Sgt. Ellis Carver (Seth Gilliam, right). *The Wire*—HBO.

After four seasons of watching the wiretap go up and then down, ultimately failing to convict a major drug kingpin, McNulty has learned that the only way to get the surveillance technology he needs from those empowered to provide it is by inventing a spectacle that captures their attention. By coincidence, he is helped in his effort by a dishonest reporter, Scott Templeton (Thomas McCarthy), who fabricates for his story, saying the serial killer contacted him by cell phone and provided salacious details to his crimes. Although the editor at the city desk suspects Templeton is lying, he is overruled by the managing editor, who sees possibilities for a Pulitzer in Templeton's work. After reading Templeton's story and knowing that he is lying about the phone call, McNulty calls Templeton himself, escalating the story by saying he is the serial killer and he has a hostage whom he will kill if the paper does not correct slanderous things written about him in the previous story. The public outcry over the ongoing story of the serial killer causes Mayor Tommy Carcetti (Aiden Gillen) to publicly promise to protect the city's "most vulnerable," realizing he can make the serial killer investigation the centerpiece of his administration, and a springboard for his gubernatorial run. Thanks to the contrived phone call, McNulty and Freamon get their wiretap and use it to monitor Marlo Stanfield rather than the imaginary serial killer. When they are found out in the final episode they lose

their jobs, but Templeton ultimately gets his Pulitzer.

*The Wire's* fifth season neatly summarizes the answer to the "How could this happen?" question that runs throughout the previous four seasons. Contrary to Foucault's conception of the disciplinary advantages of surveillance as an alternative to spectacle, *The Wire* shows us a world where spectacle becomes the seductive target of an undisciplined surveillance. Rather than serving as an instrument of control in the war on drugs, on the docks, in politics, in the classroom, and ultimately in the mass media, surveillance chases a diversionary spectacle. Indeed, throughout the series the technologies of surveillance themselves acquire their own spectacular appeal. Not only do the police listen in on the calls of the criminals they track with expensive computer equipment complete with colorful, wave-form monitors and impressive digital enhancement techniques; they are also constantly seen taking photographs from rooftops with sleek telephoto lenses or peering through binoculars from inside parked cars—planting video cameras no larger than a "nail hole," on the one hand, and

calling for "Foxtrot," their helicopter flyover support, on the other. The show is practically a master class in modern surveillance techniques, exploring a level of technical intricacy that far exceeds the standard police procedural, but in the process it reveals the seductive charms of the technology itself, while raising doubts about its actual effectiveness.

*The Wire* does not merely expose the limitations of surveillance technology by revealing the seductive nature of its spectacular appeal. It relies on three additional strategies that highlight the shortcomings of surveillance technologies. Initially, there are constant references to the physical vulnerabilities of high-tech surveillance equipment throughout *The Wire*. Perhaps nothing expresses the physical vulnerability of surveillance equipment more clearly than the brief image from the opening-credit montage that plays over the Tom Waits song, "Way Down in the Hole." Although the montage changed to reflect the specific concerns of each of the five seasons,<sup>2</sup> as did the vocal rendition of Waits's song, it never failed to include a sequence showing an automated, panning video camera. Then, a quick cut to a black-and-white point-of-view shot shows, from the high angle perspective of the camera, a young man throwing rocks at it from below. A rock strikes the glass, shatters the lens, and the camera drops, revealing only the cracked glass and, in soft focus, the receding bricks on the wall to which the camera is attached. The fact that this image remained in the opening-credit sequence when other images were changed from season to season emphasizes its thematic importance to the show as a whole.

Beyond the opening credit montage, *The Wire* frequently exposes the physical vulnerabilities of high-tech surveillance equipment in the show's narrative as well. In the seventh episode of season

[T]hroughout the series the technologies of surveillance themselves acquire their own spectacular appeal.

two (episode 20), Officer Ellis Carver (Seth Gilliam) and Officer Thomas “Herk” Hauk (Domenick Lombardozzi) buy a microphone on credit and plant it in a tennis ball to listen in on a target.<sup>3</sup> From a vacant building they watch in horror as the target casually tosses the tennis ball into the street where it quickly gets run over by a truck. Later, at the end of season four, Herk loses his job after members of Stanfield’s gang take an expensive video camera he was using to monitor them. In season two, longshoremen steal the eastern district’s surveillance van and ship it around the world after Major Valchek (Al Brown) authorizes an investigation of the Baltimore ports. As part of an ongoing joke, longshoremen from all over the country send photos of the van to Major Valchek’s office everytime the van arrives at a new port. The infuriated Valchek is not even able to report the \$120,000 van missing because of the embarrassment losing it would cause. The clear implication is that technology is at best a double-edged sword that can be a liability to those who use it as often as it is an asset.

The second method by which *The Wire* exposes the limitations of high-tech surveillance equipment is by privileging the low-tech gaze. Frequently, the most effective method used for gaining information in *The Wire* involves watching and waiting. Perhaps, not coincidentally, some of *The Wire*’s most interesting and memorable characters are also masters of low-tech surveillance. Foremost among them is the “rip and run” artist, Omar Little (Michael K. Williams), a gay, Robin Hood-like character who preys on drug dealers. Omar is repeatedly shown patiently staring, watching intended victims from shadowy outposts where he chainsmokes Newport. With no specialized equipment, Omar is able to ascertain where the dealers store their cash and when they will make transfers—something the police, with all of their high-tech monitoring equipment, are rarely able to do successfully. Other masters of low-tech surveillance include the heroin junky Bubbles (Andre Royo), who serves as a confidential informant for Detective Kima Greggs (Sonja Sohn). Bubbles’s apparent harmlessness allows him to get close enough

to dealers to overhear important information and identify them by name for the police. Another is Brother Mouzone (Michael Potts), a hired assassin from New York who belongs to the Nation of Islam. By merely relying on human agents to get information about his intended victims, Brother Mouzone, despite his soft-spoken demeanor, bowtie, horn-rimmed glasses, and penchant for reading *The Nation*, has “more bodies on him than a Chinese cemetery.”<sup>4</sup>

The benefits of low-tech surveillance are noted by “old school” police officers as well. In the tenth episode of season three (episode 35), Major Bunny Colvin (Robert Wisdom) explains to Officer Carver that he “ain’t shit when it comes to policin’,” because he has failed to cultivate the necessary relationships with people on the street that could keep him informed about any potential trouble. Thirty years into his career as a policeman, Major Colvin is the district commander who, unbeknownst to the commissioner, creates special zones where buying and selling narcotics is tolerated, so that the salvageable neighborhoods in his district can be rehabilitated in the absence of drug activity. The name that the “hoppers” give his open-air drug market, “Hamsterdam,” conjures both the canal-webbed Dutch city where drugs have been decriminalized and the enclosed carceral space of the hamster cage. Colvin manages to monitor drug traffic in Hamsterdam and lower crime in other neighborhoods, while avoiding detection by his superiors until one of his own men “drops the dime” on him and calls a reporter. The Hamsterdam experiment shows both the possibility of controlling drug activity through low-tech surveillance, since only a few officers were needed to patrol the open-air drug market, and the failures of high-tech surveillance, since Colvin operated under the radar of the commissioner’s staff, even as they monitored the statistical drop in crime.

Third, *The Wire* exposes the limitations of high-tech surveillance by continually showing its failure to protect informants or produce enough evidence to convict targets. Witnesses and informants are routinely assassinated in spaces within the city that are beyond



the scope of its meager protective surveillance. A typical example occurs at the end of season two after police arrest Frank Sobotka (Pablo Schrieber), the longshoremen’s union secretary who has been accepting money in exchange for allowing illegal smuggling to occur on the docks. Before Sobotka can testify against The Greek (Bill Raymond), the leader of an international crime syndicate, he winds up with his throat slit, floating in the harbor under Key Bridge. The fact that such assassinations tend to occur at the end of each season, after a case has been building, only heightens the sense of failure once the case collapses. A similar example occurs in sea-





Omar Little (Michael K. Williams). *The Wire*—HBO.

son three. After ten episodes of trying to capture cell phone conversations that will lead to the arrest of Stringer Bell (Idris Elba), chief financial officer in the Barksdale drug organization, Detective McNulty arrives at Bell's investment condo just after two assassins have shot Bell.<sup>5</sup> "I caught him, Bunk," McNulty tells his partner, Bunk Moreland (Wendell Pierce), over Stringer's corpse. "On the wire, I caught him. And he doesn't fuckin' know it."

Season five ends with similar frustrations but with a particularly ironic twist. The wiretap does lead to an initial arrest of drug kingpin Marlo Stanfield with the satisfying spectacle of \$16

million worth of confiscated heroin for the mayor and top police brass to display before the news media. But the case falls apart, and Stanfield is released when his lawyer finds out the wiretap that led officers to his stockpiles was not legally authorized. The resolution of the serial killer thread is even more ironic. Eventually, the media frenzy created by the fake serial killer causes a real "copy cat" serial killer to emerge, apparently drawn to the attention that the *Baltimore Sun* story generated. The surveillance McNulty acquired through his fake serial killer story not only failed to convict Stanfield but may have also contributed to the murder of a real homeless person

by inspiring a killer who hoped to share in the spectacle.

Although numerous images and anecdotes create a generalized impression of the limitations of surveillance and the appeal of spectacle throughout the five seasons of *The Wire*, the fifth season overtly implicates the mainstream media for its role in focusing the apparatus of surveillance exclusively on spectacle. Not coincidentally, season five was also the most heavily criticized season by the many pundits and bloggers who had embraced the show during its previous four seasons. Typical of the kinds of reviews leveled at this season were the ones coming from *The Baltimore Sun*, which suggested that season five had "nothing that matches the emotional power and sociological insight of the show at its best—namely the classroom scenes from Season 4. The complicating factor . . . is that creator David Simon turns his lens to the media this season—with a particular focus on a fictionalized version of the *Sun* newsroom" (Zurawick 2007). Likewise, an article in *The Atlantic* dubbed Simon, "The angriest man in television," stating, "The kind of reporting he felt could no longer be done at *The Sun* he has brought to the screen. But his fiction shouldn't be mistaken for fact. It reflects, as much as anything, Simon's own prejudices" (Bowden 57). Simon responded to many of these attacks by pointing out that nothing had changed in the critical approach taken in the fifth season. The only difference was that the object of the show's scorn was now the media itself. Simon attributes the reaction that season five inspired in print as well as in the blogosphere to the fact that "journalists like nothing better than to discuss themselves and assert themselves" (McCabe 16). As a former journalist, Simon makes a point that is worth considering, because it identifies a narcissistic tendency that is as relevant to the media coverage of season five as it is to the problematic portrayal of surveillance throughout *The Wire*. *The Wire* suggests that for the subject performing surveillance work, nothing holds more spectacular appeal than his/her own objectified image.

There are three main characters that benefit from the increasingly specu-

lar expansion of the serial killer plot line in season five, and each of the three occupies a position in a city bureaucracy charged with surveillance responsibilities.<sup>6</sup> Detective McNulty is a police officer; Scott Templeton writes for the city's "watchdog" news organ, *The Baltimore Sun*. And Mayor Carcetti, the city's chief bureaucrat, owes his election success to his campaign promise to monitor and reduce the city's escalating crime rate. As characters, Carcetti, McNulty, and Templeton fall prey to a narcissistic gaze that causes them to fail in their surveillance responsibilities. Rather than watching out for the welfare of the city, each of the three "watches in," searching for a reflected image of himself.

An important scene in the third episode of season three (episode 28) shows Councilman Tommy Carcetti before he has announced his intention to run

for mayor. Carcetti heads up the major subcommittee on crime and uses his position to get attention for his mayoral run. At a late-night cocktail fundraiser, Carcetti's wife leaves early to take their kids home. After walking his family to the parking lot, Carcetti returns to the party, meets a woman, and has sex with her in a hotel room. The most interesting part of the sex scene is that it occurs in a bathroom, and Carcetti watches himself in the oversized mirror throughout. Staring into his own eyes while thrusting into a woman whose face remains unseen, Carcetti clearly fits the stereotype of a narcissistic politician obsessed with his own image. The more important issue, however, is that Carcetti's position as the head of the crime committee gives him the power of oversight with respect to the city's police force. In other words, he sits at the top of the city's surveillance

hierarchy, and this scene shows him as subject to an all-consuming narcissistic gaze. The scene foreshadows Carcetti's narcissism in season five, when the imaginary serial killer becomes a campaign issue by which he sees himself getting elected to governor.

A comparable scene in the eighth episode of season five (episode 58) reveals a similarly narcissistic gaze at work in Detective McNulty's invention of a serial killer as a ruse to get the surveillance to continue the Stanfield drug/murder case. In this scene, funds for the serial killer investigation are beginning to flow, and McNulty travels to Quantico with Detective Greggs to hear an FBI profile on the suspect. By analyzing the vocal recording, which, unbeknownst to the FBI agents, contains McNulty's disguised voice, they are able to ascertain that the suspect is "likely a white male in his late twenties to early thirties . . . likely employed in a bureaucratic entity, possibly civil service . . . has a problem with authority . . . resentment towards those who have impeded his progress professionally." During this description, McNulty is framed in close-up as the camera slowly zooms in, emphasizing his growing discomfort while hearing familiar details like, "the suspect is possibly a high-functioning alcoholic." The scene becomes a "mirror moment" for McNulty, who clearly recognizes himself in the FBI agent's description. Following the session, when Greggs asks McNulty what he thinks, he responds, "They're in the ballpark."

Likewise, Templeton's real motive for exaggerating the serial killer story is similarly narcissistic; he wants to build his portfolio so that he can move beyond *The Baltimore Sun* to a larger paper like *The Washington Post*. Because Templeton is the mediator between McNulty, who needs more money for surveillance, and Carcetti, who can approve the funding, it is particularly important that he serve as an honest broker. As a journalist for the city's watchdog institution, Templeton is in a position to discover



Det. Kima Greggs (Sonja Sohn, left) and Det. Jimmy McNulty (Dominic West, right). *The Wire*—HBO.

the truth about the phony serial killer, as well as the real motives of McNulty and Carcetti, but because of his fixation on his own career, he adds to the lie. Templeton begins by merely exaggerating details that McNulty gives him but then turns to outright fabrication when he invents the first phone call. At each stage in the process, Templeton's involvement in the story deepens. He not only writes the story but also gives press interviews, appearing on local, then national news shows. In episode 56, reporters in the *Sun's* newsroom gather round a TV monitor to watch Templeton on CNN's Headline News. In the interview Nancy Grace calls Templeton, "the Jimmy Breslin of Baltimore," comparing his story to the Son of Sam case.<sup>7</sup> Like Carcetti and McNulty, Templeton is a narcissist whose mirror is the media itself. Echoing the trajectory of reporters like Stephen Glass and Jayson Blair, Templeton's case exposes a flaw in the way the media performs its watchdog role. It appears far too easy for the reporter of the story to become the story itself.

We might ask what *The Wire* hopes to accomplish by highlighting the narcissism motivating these characters in season five. Certainly, the show is breaking no new ground by showcasing the possible narcissistic applications of surveillance technology. Susan Sontag identified this tendency when portable video cameras were first becoming available to consumers. In her treatise, *On Photography*, Sontag writes, "One of the effects of the newer camera technology (video, instant movies) has been to turn even more of what is done with cameras in private to narcissistic uses—that is, to self-surveillance" (177). In 1979, Christopher Lasch further explored this growing trend of self-surveillance as both a private and public obsession in his book *The Culture of Narcissism*. Lasch writes, "Cameras and recording machines not only transcribe experience but alter its quality, giving much of modern life the character of an enormous echo chamber, a hall of mirrors" (97). Sontag and Lasch were writing in an era when narcissism implied withdrawal from the public sphere to the selfish gratifications of private indulgence, and surveillance connoted inescapable oversight by an

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Orwellian Big Brother. Clearly, attitudes have changed.

The unqualified public acceptance of constant monitoring seems to have accelerated in the new millennium, most especially after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. In "The Culture of Surveillance," an essay that overtly alludes to Lasch's book, Vincent Pecora observes, "[In] the suburban high school, the airport, the stadium, the government building, the queue at the ATM machine, the local convenience store, and especially cases like that of Rodney King, video surveillance is now often embraced as an undeniable good" (347). Along with these highly visible forms of public surveillance, the new millennium has also ushered in a pervasive expansion in the types of surveillance technology that can be used specifically for narcissistic purposes. Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, and other Web 2.0 applications offer whole new virtual arenas for us to document, catalog, and observe our own lives. The ubiquity of surveillance in both the public and private spheres has affected a qualitative change in the way we regard surveillance generally. Surveillance now hardly seems like something to be feared; rather, it is something to be expected, cultivated, and relished. So what relevance do *The Wire's* warnings about surveillance have for a culture that regards the reality TV show *Big Brother* as the next step in a journey from Facebook to fame?

Perhaps *The Wire's* detailed critique of surveillance is not designed to provide an anachronistic warning so much as a timely rationale for an alternative form of television. *The Wire* has been called, "a great Victorian novel," "a Homeric epic of modern society," and "a spectatorial game, being played on the screen for the benefit of an audience."<sup>8</sup>

No doubt HBO's familiar catchphrase, "It's not TV, It's HBO," invites these sorts of transmedia comparisons for its products. It is also probable that the narrative complexity of *The Wire*, and the fact that it subverts easy classification, baffles reviewers looking for linkages to traditional television formats and genres. There may be yet another way of seeing *The Wire*: as a dramatic alternative to reality TV.

During the five seasons that *The Wire* aired on HBO, from 2002 to 2008, reality TV programs dominated both the networks and cable stations in the United States and across the globe. Indeed, television scholar James Friedman has pointed out that in the new millennium, ". . . no genre, form, or type of programming has been as actively marketed by producers, or more enthusiastically embraced by viewers, than reality-based TV" (6). It seems significant that *The Wire's* five-season run occurred at the apex of this reality TV boom if for no other reason than because of the amount of praise *The Wire* received for its "realistic" portrait of an American city in decline. Writing for *The Atlantic*, Mark Bowden describes *The Wire's* ability to portray Baltimore "with a verisimilitude that's astonishing. Marylanders scrutinize the plot for its allusions to real people and real events. Parallels with recent local political history abound, and the details of life in housing projects and on street corners seem spookily authentic" (51). *The Wire's* depiction of Baltimore has been so close to reality that co-creators David Simon and Ed Burns had to explain and defend the show as fiction when Baltimore's political establishment attacked *The Wire* for the "negative image" it gives the city (Donovan E3). Baltimore City Councilman Kenneth N. Harris Sr. was quoted as saying,



“David Simon isn’t fooling anybody. . . . *The Wire* is more documentary than it is drama.” In spite of the many incursions of the real Baltimore into *The Wire*, David Simon has vehemently argued in frequent interviews and articles that *The Wire* is fiction, and is quoted in the Donovan article saying that, “*The Wire*’s exploration of the struggles associated with the war on drugs is applicable to any American city” (E3).

We might say that *The Wire* offers a simulacrum of Baltimore, a city that rests squarely within the borders of what Simon calls the “other America,” referencing Michael Harrington’s famous book of that title.<sup>10</sup> *The Wire* reveals the name of this simulacrum in its opening credit montage, when a cut to a cinder-

is “spookily authentic,” it casts doubts on our quest for a real or authentic experience when viewing shows like *Survivor*, *Big Brother*, and *American Idol*. *The Wire* suggests that our attraction to these and other reality programs is rather a quest for what media theorist John Corner calls, “documentary as diversion” (260). In an influential essay about the British reality series *Big Brother*, Corner argues that television has entered a “postdocumentary” phase (257), in which “the legacy of documentary is still at work” and visible in some techniques (lack of scripted dialogue, etc.), but the function has changed, serving mostly to provide “popular factual entertainment” (260). In the face of reality TV’s offerings of documentary as

frame” as the coherent thread linking all of its characters. In an essay entitled “All in the Game: *The Wire*, Serial Storytelling, and Procedural Logic,” Jason Mittell has explored the dense layering of ludic elements running throughout *The Wire*’s narrative. He observes that characters, “can regularly be seen playing craps or golf, watching basketball or dogfighting. More centrally, nearly every episode has at least one reference to ‘the game’ . . .” (431). Although “the game” refers to the drug trade in *The Wire* and clearly functions differently than it does in most reality TV programs, it is nevertheless omnipresent.

Like reality TV, *The Wire* also creates possibilities for ordinary people, or, at least, non-stars, to have leading roles.

## Just as *The Wire* uses real elements

taken from the city of Baltimore to critique the decline of the American city generally, it takes elements from reality TV to critique the diversionary track that contemporary American media has taken.

block wall spells out in colorful graffiti the words, “Body-more, Murdaland.” In this “other” American city, “A massive drug economy serves an estimated 50,000 addicts, and . . . the 2006 homicide rate of 43.3 per 100,000 residents was one of the highest in the country, behind only five cities, including New Orleans and Detroit” (Lanahan 25). *The Wire* was conceived as a way of telling the real stories behind the disembodied facts because, as season five attests, the mainstream, media watchdog institutions, for a variety of reasons, no longer are. The fact that *The Wire* uses the banner of “fiction” to tell stories premised on reality should hardly come as a surprise in an era when the banner of “reality” is so often used to market shows with an obviously fictitious premise.

On several levels *The Wire* challenges the hegemony of reality TV’s hold on the popular imagination. By presenting a simulacrum of the real Baltimore that

diversion, *The Wire* gives us *drama as documentary*.<sup>11</sup> Corner goes on to point out that “the early reality TV shows, focusing on the work of police and emergency services, learned a lot from the style of dramatic action narratives” (260). One might make the reverse point with regard to *The Wire*. It is a dramatic police action narrative that has learned a lot from reality TV. Just as *The Wire* uses real elements taken from the city of Baltimore to critique the decline of the American city generally, it takes elements from reality TV to critique the diversionary track that contemporary American media has taken.

Corner defines *Big Brother* and other reality programs as instances of “pre-planned group surveillance within a ‘game frame’” (261). Similar comments could be made about *The Wire*. Clearly, exposing the “realities” behind surveillance is one of its main concerns, but *The Wire* also has something of a “game

There is a core of police officers that are trained actors, but *The Wire*’s cast has also included well-known Baltimoreans, ranging from former drug kingpin Melvin Williams to former mayor Kurt L. Schmoke. Cameos, such as former governor Robert Ehrlich playing a security guard in the state capital, are common. Local luminaries do not merely make cameo appearances, however. Former Baltimore city police commissioner Ed Norris played Detective Ed Norris for all five seasons. The most alluring example of an ordinary person getting an opportunity to become a star is that of Felicia, “Snoop” Pearson. Discovered in a Baltimore club by Michael K. Williams, who plays Omar Little in the show, Pearson was brought in to audition for Simon and other producers. Pearson had been a gang member in Baltimore and had served prison time for second-degree juvenile murder. She was immediately cast in the role of the

eponymous thug Felicia “Snoop” Pearson and became an overnight celebrity, not just in Baltimore, but nationally, just by playing herself and using her trademark east Baltimore accent.

With its realism, “game frame,” and use of non-actors in leading roles, *The Wire* transgresses the boundary that separates traditional dramas from reality-based programming, but *The Wire*’s biggest challenge to the hegemony of reality TV is the opposing view of surveillance it projects. In highlighting the narcissism behind surveillance’s quest for spectacle, *The Wire* sheds light on the narcissistic appeal of surveillance-based reality shows like *Survivor* and *Big Brother*. Others have certainly noted this in discussing the motivations of both viewers and participants. Pecora, for instance, has stated that “Narcissism is intrinsic to the culture of surveillance shaping reality TV” (355), but he sees it as satisfying a fundamental social need to understand the complex ways that individuals function in group dynamics. Needless to say, *The Wire*’s portrayal of the narcissism at the heart of the culture of surveillance does not support this somewhat utopian view.

Instead, *The Wire*’s depiction of surveillance seems closer to that expressed by Mark Andrejevic in *Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched*. By situating reality TV in the context of the cultural shift from old “passive spectator” media to new “interactive” forms that require us to disclose personal information even as they seem to grant us participation in the production process, Andrejevic makes the case that reality TV helps to sell the idea of comprehensive submission to surveillance as a means of power sharing in the new interactive economy. He writes, “The more details we divulge about our shopping and viewing habits, our lifestyle and even our movements during the day, the more we can have goods and services crafted to meet our individual needs” (6).

Andrejevic points out that the online supplements to reality TV shows serve the double purpose of providing viewers with opportunities to participate in their favorite TV shows while providing broadcasters with a way of moni-

toring viewer habits. The opportunities that the online accompaniments provide for expressing opinions, shopping, and even eliminating contestants, in the case of shows like *Big Brother*, have been celebrated as part of the democratic potential of new media. For his part, Andrejevic cautions that in spite of the revolutionary appeal of greater participation and customization, “. . . we find ourselves caught between the promise of an empowering form of interactivity and the potential of an increasingly exploitative one” (7).

*The Wire*’s related point is that the whole process of participation and monitoring taking place in front of television and computer screens occurs in what may be an essentially narcissistic loop. The enthusiasm behind our limited ability to participate in the production process—what Andrejevic identifies as “the fantasy that ‘it really could be you up there on that screen’” (9) is seen in the fate of Snoop Pearson, playing herself on *The Wire* and becoming a celebrity. But *The Wire* does not fail to show us a more realistic portrayal of the fantasy of seeing ourselves on the screen. Like Templeton, the reporter in the fifth season, as he moves from watcher of the serial killer story to becoming the story himself, we may eventually be able to see nothing but ourselves onscreen, or a carefully customized media experience designed exclusively for our individual tastes. In this narcissistic loop, the limited agency of the interactive spectator does not seem like much of a revolutionary advance over that of the passive spectator. And, perhaps more importantly, while we engage in varying degrees of participation and disclosure in front of our private surveillance monitors, the traditional “fourth estate” job of old media institutions—serving as the watchdog for democracy—goes largely undone. *The Wire* has taken it upon itself to do this job. It does so by appropriating and subverting some of the tactics of reality TV.

The problem, of course, is that *The Wire* was just a little too real, or certainly more so than the average reality TV program. Shows like *Survivor* and *Big Brother*—which are set in highly

contrived locations, relying on preconceived and often hackneyed formulas for generating conflict among a pool of carefully chosen contestants, many of whom are vying to launch television careers—hardly seem to be exploring the complex ways that individuals function in groups. Instead, they appear to be the latest incarnation of prefabricated entertainment devised by an increasingly sophisticated culture industry. The promise of participation that reality TV offers turns out to be no more legitimate than that of older, pre-convergence media.

*The Wire*, on the other hand, may not offer the promise of participation to the highly coveted demographic that mainstream media needs for ratings, but it achieved something that may be unique in television. As much as it appealed to critics at the high end of the cultural ladder, it earned the loyalty of those at the low end of the economic ladder, as typified by Baltimore’s underclass. Margaret Talbot, writing for *The New Yorker* points out, “the fan base of *The Wire* seems like the demographics of many American cities—mainly the urban poor and the affluent elite, with the middle class hollowed out” (155). Likewise, a recent *Newsweek* article describes a T-shirt that a man is selling in west Baltimore with a photo of Snoop Pearson on it. The article states, “The show is legendary here—many of the characters are based on people plucked from the city’s recent past—and the cast and crew are often treated like folk heroes” (Gordon 54). Certainly that was part of Simon’s intention. Interviewed in Gordon’s article, he says, “Mainstream America has 100 shows to love. The other America has this one” (54).

By portraying the reality of the other America, *The Wire* directly challenges the notion of surveillance sold to us by new media forms like reality TV. In doing so it does not counter, “the spectacle of how fun surveillance can be” (Andrejevic 8) with the threatening panopticon of Foucault. Instead, it shows us the narcissistic preoccupation of surveillance, its inevitable attraction and vulnerability to spectacle, and ultimately the growing ranks of those excluded from the interactive revolution.

*The Wire* may have been too real for mainstream audiences during its five-season run on HBO, but its popularity in syndication and DVD sales suggests a far more successful afterlife.<sup>12</sup>

#### NOTES

1. This often-cited quote originally appeared in Jacob Weisberg, "The Wire on Fire: Analyzing the Best Show on Television," *Slate* 13 Sept. 2006. <<http://www.slate.com/id/2149566/>>. Following Weisberg's article, numerous other journalists began referring to *The Wire* with similarly hyperbolic sentiments. Gordon's *Newsweek* article, for example, states in the lead, "Now's your last chance to catch what may be TV's best drama ever" (57).

2. For example, season two shows shots of the harbor, ships, and loading docks. Season three shows shots of City Hall and so forth.

3. HBO Web site <<http://www.hbo.com/thewire/episode/>> gives sequential episode numbers from 1–60, rather than dividing the shows by season and episode. For clarity's sake I am providing both.

4. Proposition Joe (Robert F. Chew), a character whose eloquence precedes him, gives Brother Mouzone this epithet in the ninth episode of season two.

5. Not coincidentally, Stringer Bell is shot by Omar Little and Brother Mouzone, two masters of the low-tech gaze. In a rare team-up, these former rivals take revenge on Bell for playing them against each other in the previous season.

6. Detective Lester Freamon plays a role in the serial killer plot as well. He encourages McNulty to get more sensationalistic (e.g., the bite marks) and also helps him find bodies, but it is McNulty who invents the serial killer and is the primary on the investigation. To avoid the confusion of an additional name, I left Freamon out.

7. Breslin is the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist whom David Berkowitz (Son of Sam) contacted at the height of his killing spree in 1977.

8. The quotes come from, respectively, Talbot 155; Aoun 152; and Mittell, 431.

9. Sadly, Harris's insight regarding the levels of violence that *The Wire* depicted was poignantly on target. He became a victim himself when he was shot to death in a northeast Baltimore parking lot on 19 September 2008.

10. Simon was clearly influenced by Harrington's book. In numerous interviews he refers to the "other America," and in one lengthy piece Simon wrote for *Baltimore Magazine* ("Down to the Wire," *Baltimore Magazine*, Feb. 2008: 112–52), he uses the phrase three different times. For the original usage, see Harrington .

By portraying the reality of the other America, *The Wire* directly challenges the notion of surveillance sold to us by new media forms like reality TV.

11. One of the traditional functions Corner ascribes to the documentary, journalistic inquiry and exposition, seems to apply to *The Wire*. As a former reporter for *The Baltimore Sun*, who accepted a buy-out rather than continue to work under the paper's new corporate management, *The Wire*'s creator Simon would certainly know how to do this sort of journalistic inquiry. His other television credits include the Emmy Award-winning HBO series *The Corner* and the book on which the NBC series *Homicide: Life on the Street* was based.

12. Following its final broadcast on HBO, *The Wire* was picked up by many channels around the world, perhaps most notably by the BBC, which aired all sixty shows in the spring of 2009. An article in *The Telegraph* noted that all five seasons continue to maintain top-forty DVD sales chart positions, despite the first season being available for seven years ("The Wire: Arguably the Greatest Television Programme Ever Made," 2 Apr. 2009 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/5095500/The-Wire-arguably-the-greatest-television-programme-ever-made.html>).

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