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CAPITALIST REALISM AND SERIAL FORM: THE FIFTH SEASON OF *THE WIRE*

Leigh Claire La Berge

*Work it like a real case and it will feel like a real case.
And, more importantly, it will read like a real case.*
—Detective Lester Freamon, *The Wire*¹

When speaking about *The Wire*, the HBO series he cocreated with Ed Burns, David Simon frequently compares the show to a nineteenth-century realist novel and suggests that any particular episode might be read as an individual chapter. Indeed, some critics, following Simon himself, have used the term *visual novel* to mark *The Wire*'s radical break with standard televisual aesthetics.² Simon, of course, is not the first to compare television to nineteenth-century realism. In his 1954 "How to Look at Television," Theodor Adorno unfavorably compared mystery shows to nineteenth-century French novels and concluded,

The meandering and endless plots and subplots [in the novels] hardly allowed the readers . . . to be continuously aware of the moral. Readers could expect anything to happen. This no longer holds true. Every spectator of a television mystery knows with absolute certainty how it is going to end. Tension is but superficially maintained and is unlikely to have a serious effect anymore . . . the spectator feels on safe ground all the time.³

Of course, nothing within the formal constraints of television necessitates its lack of realism any more than the printing press assures the production of dime novels.⁴ Nonetheless, there have only been a handful of television programs in some fifty years that have used the medium of television, with its combination of film's visuality and print culture's seriality, to raise the medium to, as Adorno famously defined art elsewhere, the level of "nega-

tive knowledge of the actual world.”⁵ That Simon explains its structure in terms of the nineteenth-century realist novel is unsurprising, then. Simon strives for the aesthetic and mimetic credibility of literary realism precisely because critics such as Adorno made it critical common sense to think that television could not accomplish more. And if, since Adorno, television has been derided as a conveyer of a commercialized, vernacular culture, then the realist novel has been hailed since Georg Lukács as the only generic medium that can glimpse the historical truth of social totality.⁶

This essay first explores *The Wire*'s televisual realism and then examines that realism through the show's fifth season, the one judged by critics to be *nonrealist*.⁷ I argue, through an examination of Baltimore's *Sun* and other news-media outlets, that the fifth season adds a new element to the realist series as the production of representation itself is brought into view. In season 5, realism is transformed from a mode into an object as Simon and Burns turn their attention to the production of realism itself in its serial form. Season 5 does for serial realism what the other seasons did for the unions, the schools, and the criminal justice system: it allows us to watch the production of an institution with all its internal compromises and failures. I foremost locate this self-reflexivity in the actions of Detectives Jimmy McNulty and Lester Freamon, who replace Marlo Stanfield, the series' most ruthless killer, with a fictitious serial killer in order to divert money from other city agencies to their now-underfunded police department. The Baltimore police “couldn't catch a real serial killer, well, maybe they need the make-believe” (5.3), McNulty explains, as the violence of a white media economy is narratively substituted for that of a black drug economy. This narrative substitution, and the bifurcation of the representation of real and fictitious racialized violence, become the season's central narrative tension and provide, among other things, a form of self-critique that had been absent. Thus, the fifth season departs from the previous four, whose defining aesthetic feature was their realism as measured against a black underclass and the violence of its illicit economies. By substituting the melodrama of newsroom-serial violence for the structural violence of urban poverty as the main narrative thread, season 5 invites us to critique the relationship among race, violence, economy, and seriality in the construction of realism.

The Wire in its entirety demonstrates how realism is always economic realism, what I will refer to as *capitalist realism*, a term from the visual arts that I think deserves broader translation into cultural studies.⁸ The entire series is an investigation into how the realistic representation of an urban nexus of race and economy reveals forms of social violence—structural

and interpersonal—as a kind of metonymic totality. Season 5 continues to engage this problematic, but at the metaformal level. It invites us to examine the racialized trope of seriality itself, particularly racialized serial violence as it undergirds the television series. The representation of black economic violence produces one form of seriality—that is, the series' realism. Conversely, white fictitious killing, the form of seriality that emerges in season 5, offers a critique of the series' previous realism and its reception. *Black serial killing* is read transparently as economic: it is treated as real within the narrative frame, and it is read as realist by the viewer; *white serial killing* is treated as psychological within the narrative frame and therefore read as not realist by the viewer.⁹

It is the representation of money itself through which these tensions among race, realism, and serial form are mediated, distributed, and narrated. The representation of black economic violence produces the series' realism by fetishizing illicit economic activity and giving us a model with which to proceed: follow the money. But, in season 5, this proposition is reversed: following the money trail no longer produces the series' realism; rather, the series' realism begins to be sold for money as McNulty and the fraudulent *Sun* reporter, Scott Templeton, inadvertently collude to fabricate a serial killer, and this transposition is structured through the representation of a kind of white, psychological violence that seems, at the level of content, to disavow the economic. This essay develops along similar lines: I follow the representation of money until it cannot be followed any further, and I argue that, at the end of the money trail in season 5, we find a transformed representation of realism itself. Capitalist realism, then, addresses itself to the realistic representation of the commodification of realism; it renders dynamic the tension so ably located in a text such as Walter Benn Michaels's *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* (1987) but nonetheless presented there as static—namely, the tension between the representation of capitalist circuitry and a vantage point from which to evaluate it.

Predictably, then, *The Wire's* fifth season must endure the charge that it has abandoned the very realism that so many critics and viewers cherished. In the popular press—really, the only one that has yet engaged the fifth season—the level of critical anticipation that greeted that season was matched only by the immediate disappointment that followed it.¹⁰ The fifth season *is* the series' most didactic. From the season's first episode, whose epigraph is a quote by laconic Detective Bunk Moreland—"The bigger the lie, the more they believe"—to Detective Norris's response that "Americans are a stupid people by in large. We pretty much believe whatever we're told," the editorializing is heavy-handed, if not condescending

(5.1). Those who actually are in the business of editorializing, the staff at the newspaper, are presented as remarkably uncomplicated and divided between the neat ethical and characterological dichotomies of good and bad, ambitious and restrained, and narcissistic and intersubjective—all mutually exclusive divisions that intimate a kind of melodramatic tone throughout the season.¹¹ Meanwhile, the viewer is aware that all discussions within the narrative frame about the production of news are simultaneously discussions of *The Wire*'s own narrative choices: "We don't want some amorphous series detailing society's ills," one of the managing editors quips during an editorial board meeting (5.1). But we would be wrong to agree with the *Sun*'s own review of the show, which claims that "the most disappointing aspect of [season 5] is that Simon offers such a simplistic critique of media and their effects on mass consciousness" or to agree with Simon's own claim that season 5 is about "perception versus reality."¹² When a series noted for its realism changes its narrative frame from realist, economically driven violence to sensationalist serial killing, the first response of the critic needs to be regarding the problem of seriality itself. Most literally, an examination of the fictitious serial killer is an examination of the narrative device that kills the series (if nothing else), and in representing what kills the series this device provides a site to understand what had enlivened it, structured it, and, in a word, made it real.

CAPITALIST REALISM

The Wire has correctly been labeled unique to the televisual medium for its use of a realist mode. It tends to eschew melodrama, sentimentality, romance, and excessive individualism, and it minimizes their associated techniques of nondiegetic sound, flashback, voice-over, dream sequence, and dialogue-dependent jump cuts. In their place, the show uses long tracking shots, wide-framed environmental shots, and many exterior settings, as well as incorporating forms of surveillance into the viewer's perspective through photograph-like freeze-frame shots. The viewer is repeatedly reminded of the techniques of viewing and spectatorship through this last device, a reminder that serves to highlight that the show's realism is produced through the voyeuristic viewing of black, informal, and illicit economic formations. Conversely, the revelatory pleasure of viewing illicit economic activity stands in for the desired moment of viewing the economic per se. If something as derided, secretive, and illicit as the drug trade may be represented, then what economic activity may not be represented? All of these might be considered *The Wire*'s techniques of

the real, under which we could also group the old Soviet theater technique of having real-life individuals play themselves. Here, Baltimore police, news reporters, politicians, and dealers (including former Baltimore mayor Kurt Schmoke) appear as themselves on the show; former *Sun* reporter David Simon himself makes an appearance in season 5. And certainly *The Wire*'s expansive, plotting, methodological realism is made possible by its serial, as opposed to episodic, form. There is little sense of narrative progress; instead, progress and narrative are disentangled as each season follows a novel-like spatialization of Baltimore. Simon suggests that *The Wire* "sprawl[s] a story over a city," and indeed narrativization and spatialization go hand in hand to reveal the mechanics of a deindustrial city, from its addicts to its union members, from its politicians to its developers, and, of course, from its police force to its drug dealers. And, finally, in its trenchant socioeconomic study of Baltimore as both specific and typical, *The Wire* implicates the late capitalist urban sphere as such.

There are many potential sites from which to examine *The Wire*'s realism. Raymond Williams has said that the realist novel needs "a genuine community: a community of persons linked not merely by one kind of relationship—work or friendship or family—but by many, interlocking kinds."¹³ Realist television requires something similar, and *The Wire* meets that requirement through demarcating the circulation of what actually does link us all: money.¹⁴ The ostensible object of the Major Crimes Unit is the drug trade and the violence necessary to sustain it, but, as Lester argues in the first season, "if you follow the drugs, you get drug dealers and drug addicts, but if you follow the money, you don't know where it will take you" (1.8). Indeed, by the series' end, Lester's claim that, if we "follow the money" we realize that "we're all vested, [that] every one of us [is] complicit," has been understood to be the simultaneous foundation and destination of the show. Lester's claim also emphasizes that the difference between a specific commodity, in this case heroin, and its abstract incarnation as money will be treated as a narrative problem in the series.

In this section, I analyze how *The Wire*'s representation of money structures its capitalist realist aesthetic but also how, as with all money forms, a tension emerges between money's dual role as a medium of exchange and as a store of value.¹⁵ In the first four seasons, the tension is managed through tracing money as it is exchanged, representing otherwise obscure connections as they come into contact. Money is the narrative device that places the socially legitimate characters in the same contemporaneous time/space as the mostly black, criminally illegitimate ones; money is also the narrative device that places the viewer in that same time/space. Every-

one has an interest in money, after all; money also, quite literally, has an interest in everyone. In the fifth season, however, there is a structural reversal between money being exchanged in order to enable representation and representation being *sold* as though it were simply another commodity, a store of value that may now circulate as freely as any other. It is the narrative maintenance and exfoliation of this contradiction—between money as medium and store of value—as a narrative problem that renders *The Wire* what I am calling a kind of *capitalist realism*. This is a term that literary and cultural studies have yet to incorporate, although Patrick Brantlinger's claim that realistic fiction "is always in some sense about money" certainly sets a foundation for such a move; it also shows how necessary it is to specify the operations of money that will become realism's objects.¹⁶

My claim is that each of these aspects of money—medium of exchange and store of value—is marked by a distinctive symbolic and iconographic vocabulary through *The Wire*'s representations of racialized, serialized violence. When money is represented in the service of exchange, the viewer sees an illicit economy of mostly black entrepreneurs whose representation seems to disallow symbolic abstraction or self-critique; violence is seen as interpersonal and purposefully economic. This connection among race, violence, and economy in the service of realism is represented most dramatically by Marlo, a serial killer whose race and economic acumen prevent him from appearing as one. But it is also present in the representations of money that obtain through various characters' conceptions of it. If those characters of the street have more varied, interesting, and contradictory philosophies of money, it is because in *The Wire* money itself is being marked as a racialized form, and money has its own narrative limits and possibilities when it operates in an illicit context. Variations on money are a key preoccupation of the series since they offer a site for the maximum exploration of the formal properties of money as money in the maintenance of an even, disinterested, and realistic representation of the act of exchange. Throughout the first four seasons, and particularly in the context of the drug trade, a respectful distance is observed: money can buy everything except the truth, because the truth is, as Marlo himself claims, that "money is money." This tautology is both adhered to and criticized throughout the series; it tracks a structural transformation that is deeply implicated in the relationship between money and realism. If capitalist realism is the realistic representation of the commodification of realism, then it must also identify the difference between money that represents money and money that represents realism.

Many characters on the show possess a distinctive philosophy of money, and these philosophies are in frequent contact and tension. Lester is a Georg Simmel–like philosopher of money whose dedication to tracing and thus narrating its circulation, to “routing it all over town,” is the verbalization of Simon’s sprawling city. When State Senator Clay “Cash and Carry” Davis tries to buy him off, Lester responds, “I don’t get paid like that. I get paid when I come back with questions and you, sir, have answers” (5.9). Clay Davis is, in fact, a veritable mediating institution between formal and informal economies. With the arrival of a subpoena, he exclaims, “Money laundering? They gonna talk to me about money laundering in West Baltimore? Where do they think I’m gonna raise money? . . . I’ll take any motherfucker’s money if he’s giving it away.” Proposition Joe simply states that the only worthwhile business ethos is “buy for a dollar, sell for two” (4.2). Each of these philosophies is distinct but also commensurable, and that is a result of the money form itself. On *The Wire*, characterization is almost always action based, and characters repeatedly narrate, act out, and represent their own philosophies of money.

Omar’s approach to money befits his own occupation as a stickup boy: “Money ain’t got no owners, only spenders.” When McNulty searches Stringer Bell’s apartment after his murder, he finds a copy of *The Wealth of Nations*. But minor character Slim Charles is the true Smithian economist. When he learns that other drug crews’ expansions are threatening certain profitable corners in East Baltimore, he says, “All this theorizing about how it all product and not territory; you can’t talk that shit if a nigga’s snatching all of your territory and won’t take none of your product” (4.4). Slim Charles thus presents the classic dilemma of any political economy: how to balance the relationship between control of space and the rate of profit, a problem complicated by the fact that money does not necessarily buy real estate within the drug trade.¹⁷ When Avon Barksdale declares, “Since when do we buy corners? We take corners,” he is making a claim that delineates the limits of money in the drug trade. But just as forcefully Stringer Bell responds, “You’re gonna buy one way or another . . . [You buy with] time in the joint that’s behind us or ahead of us. You gonna get some shit in this game but it ain’t shit for free” (3.6). Marx describes money as a “general equivalent” for its ability to bring disparate spheres of social life together and to “level all distinction.”¹⁸ It is Stringer, more than anyone, who maintains the hope that money *can* be a general equivalent, that all time and space can be monetized and circulated. For Stringer, of course, this philosophy of money turns out to be a utopian promise; he is gunned down by Omar and Brother Mouzone in his nascent downtown condo-

minium site but not before being told, “You still don’t get it, do you, huh? This ain’t about your money” (3.11).

It is Marlo, however, whose approach to money rivals Lester’s in determining the series’ denouement. Marlo, the only character to succeed in getting himself with his money out of the ghetto, cannot (or will not) think metaphorically about it. When Andre, one of his dealers, is robbed by Omar, Marlo tells him that he still expects to be paid. Andre then enters into an elaborate discussion about risk and insurance, about the need to be exempt from debt in extraordinary circumstances. He then proffers a metaphor: “You know what he’s [Omar] like?” he asks Marlo. Omar is “like a terrorist” and he himself is “like Delta Airlines”; when there is a terrorist attack, the government supports legitimate institutions because the chief object of a terrorist attack is legitimacy itself. Marlo responds with his characteristic intense gaze, both empty and evocative at the same time: “Omar ain’t no terrorist. He’s just another nigga with a gun. And you ain’t no Delta Airlines. You just another nigga who got his shit took” (4.4).

In this instance, a lack of metaphorical approach toward money showcases Marlo’s power; in season 5, however, the same lack seems like it might limit his ability to transact outside the illicit economy. When he attempts to circumvent Proposition Joe and deal directly with the wholesaler and chief heroin supplier Spiros Vondopolous, he brings a briefcase full of cash, which is summarily refused on the grounds that the money is “dirty.” Confused, Marlo replies, and this is perhaps the key narrative tension of the entire series, “Money is money. What’s the difference who bring it to you?” (5.4). Vondopolous responds that he was “talking in symbols,” but Marlo, of course, doesn’t traffic in symbols, a characteristic on display again when he flies to the French Antilles and asks to “see my money,” after it has been laundered and deposited there. Just as Marlo does not engage with money’s symbolic qualities, *The Wire* does not engage with Marlo symbolically: his economic violence represents economic violence, and he lacks any interiority.

These philosophies of money, each with their own idiosyncrasies, are related through exchange; in turn, the representation of exchange creates connections, just as it also creates an extended present within the story frame. The traveling shot—repeatedly used on the street, and particularly in scenes with Joe and Marlo—is one formal mechanism for representing how monetary circulation connects temporal development with a spatial situatedness. In one such shot from season 4, we see Joe and Marlo sitting on a hilltop bench while discussing which agency might be conducting surveillance of Marlo. The shot opens from the left of the screen, and we see a line of row houses behind the characters as their bodyguards stand in

the immediate background. As the conversation progresses, however, the camera begins traveling toward the right so that the background opens up and reveals an expansive cityscape. This single take continues for upwards of fifty seconds, and during its course Joe and Marlo travel from the far right to the far left of the *mise-en-scène* while the depth of the shot remains constant (4.7.16 minutes). This shot, which is almost circular but never completes the full pan, is repeated in many scenes in which an illicit transaction transpires. In a remarkably similar scene, Joe calls the police department from a phone booth and pretends to be a lawyer. The camera travels around him upward of thirty seconds, providing a 270-degree panorama (4.8.29 minutes). Indeed, such transactions demand the outdoor setting and panoramic vision it provides, while the circularity reveals movement without progress and a momentary equality through exchange that, we know, will be soon fractured only to be immediately reestablished elsewhere. In both scenes, the camera movement recapitulates the narrative movement as it “follows the money.”

The *different* economies that result from the circulation of a *general* equivalent ground the show’s realism at several levels. Realism must always be economic realism in that capital itself is what is most obfuscated. Capital itself, then, becomes a kind of apotheosis of the potential of realist representation; and the only narrative of realism must be to follow the money, as *the money* is the original condition for the realism itself.¹⁹ Poverty has long been a site of realist fixation because it is what is most economically necessary and simultaneously what is most ideologically disavowed within capitalism.

The representation of money produces a realism that hopes to render not a metonymic totality, in which a temporal part stands in for the historical whole, but rather to render all equivalent, to show that any one point in space may be exchanged for or through any other. This spatial logic is, of course, central to *The Wire*’s focus on the economic spaces hidden behind regulatory and juridical structures. The narrative does not provide totality by representing “the other half” of what usually remains unseen; rather, it shows how what remains unseen produces the conditions for sight itself. In a similar manner, the war on drugs is not futile (although it is futile in ending the drug trade). The war on drugs is *productive*, and through the regulation of vice, capital creates a new channel for itself to circulate ever more freely as more and more material becomes available for monetization.²⁰

But if all is rendered equivalent, then at some point representation itself must meet a similar fate: representation, too, enters a circuit of exchange. And this, I think, should be the mark of a narrative form of capitalist real-

ism. Season 5's final confrontation between McNulty and the state attorney, Rhonda "Ronnie" Pearlman, concerns identifying "who lost the money trail": those who refused to follow it (i.e., the state) or those who followed it illegally (i.e., McNulty and Lester). Ronnie argues to McNulty and Lester that "you lost the money trail when you decided to start coloring outside the lines." Within the police department's own administration, the accusation is different. Police Deputy of Operations William Rawls criticizes McNulty by asking, "This was all for money? You couldn't live without the OT [overtime]?" McNulty answers, "It wasn't about the money," but he can hardly disagree with Rawls's retort that "you got paid." With the collapse of the Marlo Stanfield case, the fact that there will be "no assets investigation" is essentially the coda that ends the series. Even *The Wire* cannot follow the money as far as it goes. And this is a dichotomy that the series cannot rise above—its own medium of narrative exchange (money equals realism) is also its own store of value (realism requires money)—but rather must find a way to incorporate within its own content/form dichotomy. If these problems cannot be structurally overcome, then they can be made manifest. Following the exchange of money produces realism, but, at a certain point, what is valued—that is, realistic representation of exchange—is traded *for* money. Season 5 does this by deviating, however briefly, from the money trail only to reveal how it is constituted at multiple levels, and this process allows for an emergence of the series' own interpretive system.

SERIAL KILLERS AND SERIAL REALISM

Each season of *The Wire* offers a critique of selected institutions as money circulates through them, and the differential aspects of these representations of money form what is perceived as the show's realism. The two institutions that ground the series—the police department and the drug trade—will be present in all seasons while each individual season will have a mediating institution such as the port union, the schools, the city's democratic political machine, etc. The specificity of these institutions provides a technical language, a work ethic, and ethos for each season. The narrative of the show is to follow the money, but ultimately, of course, it is possible to follow the money only to the extent that everything is for sale, including, as revealed in season 5, representation itself. Now, with this understanding of what constitutes *The Wire's* realism, I want to consider the continuities and discontinuities of the realist mode in season 5, and how season 5 both critiques and ultimately, I think, completes the series' realism.

Of course, there are also structural differences to consider in an analysis of the fifth season: there is the necessary limitation that it is the last, so there will be a certain amount of abruptness to new characters and institutions; there is more of a focus on individual action and its effects, and therefore more of a theme of causality, which is pitted against description in a manner that previous seasons had avoided; and, finally, one of the selected institutions represented in season 5, homelessness, remains a kind of empty signifier inasmuch as we are never given a sympathetic portrayal. Consequently, one of the show's chief reality effects—the transposition of local sites of work and knowledge into an immanent critique—is missing in its homeless narrative thread, which serves only to confirm its fraudulence in the story line. That said, many of the aforementioned formal features remain consistent, and many of the criticisms of season 5 are directed at the level of plot—that this type of fraud could not *really* happen—or at the level of character—that the staff at the newspaper is underdeveloped.²¹

I claimed earlier that the series' realism is structured through the representation of money as it is exchanged in illicit spaces between black, male bodies: the context of these exchanges is social and interpersonal violence. In season 5, this structure is abstracted, as it were: the groundedness of economic violence is transformed into the psychological violence of the serial killer. This psychological, serial violence both critiques and undercuts the series' realism by self-consciously moving the narrative from following the exchange of money to create representation to now following the sale of representation for money. This meta-exchange produces the series' first sustained moments of self-referentiality and self-critique. Indeed, Simon himself suggests that realism should avoid such tendencies. "Less is more," he argues. "Explaining everything to the slowest or laziest member of the audience destroys verisimilitude and reveals the movie itself, rather than the reality that the movie is trying to convey."²² For Simon, then, a focus on form is enough to compromise a realist mode, yet this is precisely the turn that season 5 makes. Indeed, the key institution of season 5 isn't so much "the media" or the *Sun* as it is realism itself and particularly realism in its serial form.

There are in fact four serial forms that structure season 5: (1) The *Sun*'s initial *series* on the failing Baltimore schools, which will be suspended in favor of reportage on the fictitious serial killer—and which also had been the subject of the fourth season; thus this strain manifestly gestures toward the problem of self-reflexivity and critique; (2) Marlo Stanfield, the drug dealer/*serial* killer from previous seasons whose ruthless managerial style placed twenty-two murdered corpses in various abandoned houses throughout Baltimore; (3) the fictitious *serial* killer, invented by McNulty and Freamon, whose well-publicized terror causes the city to fund the police

department again; and (4) *The Wire* itself, a realist television *series* that investigates the coconstruction of race, violence, and money itself in the representation of urban space, moving seamlessly between the tropes of regulation and accumulation. If we accept, as I'm arguing, that serial realism is the key institution, then we have to restructure our perception that the institutional doubling that happens in all seasons is between the police department and the *Baltimore Sun*; rather, it is now between serial violence and serial realism.²³ Under what conditions does the first constitute the second, and under what conditions does the second constitute the first?

Serial realism, is, of course, a very different institution than courts, ports, unions, or schools. But it does retain one feature common to all institutions on *The Wire*: its manifest representation reveals that it is failing. The *Sun* is the gateway to this critique: "This is not a good time for newspapers," one of the editors explains by way of introduction.²⁴ But, by this point in the series, we know that "this" is not a good time for anything: not dealing, not policing, not unionizing, not teaching, and not reporting. Indeed, as we move through the series, we might be tempted to believe that the one institution that isn't failing is precisely the realist television series. The fourth season, the series' best, offered finally only an affective truth of indiscriminate suffering amidst structural poverty and racism, and the more punishing the characters' lives and livelihoods became, the more adept the series seemed to be at representing this truth. But the affective truths of "James-like authenticity" are seemingly jettisoned in season 5 with the arrival of the serial killer who has the ironic effect of killing the realism in the series and nothing else.²⁵

Can the language of seriality contribute to the show's own immanent critique in a manner similar to that in which the language of industrial labor did in season 2? The term *serial killer* was coined in the 1970s by the cofounder of the FBI's behavioral science unit, who recalled that he had two things on his mind: first, the British designation, "crime in series" and, secondly, "the serial adventures we used to see on Saturdays at the movies."²⁶ Thus, the term is a result of detectives watching narrative violence, not fictional producers mimicking the language of detectivity. The structure of serial violence is itself already a narrative form. Now, just as an accurate representation of the economy of drug dealing was used to ground the series' realism, an economy of sensational, violent narrative will take its place and critique that realism. Season 5 presents this problem as a kind of challenge to its own realist mode: Can *The Wire* represent serial killing without itself succumbing to the discursive sensationalism that defines the serial killer? Can the realist series escape the serial killer?

One of the challenges of the fifth season, then, is to manage another genre, to collect its expectations in an almost novel-like manner and syn-

thesize these extrageneric elements into its form. Indeed, the focus on the number of corpses left by Marlo, and the fact that the Major Crimes Unit had had a betting pool on the number of bodies at the end of the fourth season (4.13), already intimate a certain idea of seriality in its fixation with numerical representation. Bodie Broadus offers a characterization of Marlo that seems to indict him as a serial killer: “This nigga kill motherfuckers just cause he can, not cause they’re snitching, not cause it’s business, but cause this shit just come natural to him” (4.13). But, of course, Marlo is not a serial killer; his context forbids such a definition, and it is the differential racial, economic context that grounds the series’ realism. Indeed, the realist serial killer would seem to be an impossibly mixed generic construction.

Throughout the fifth season, we are given a window into how the substitution of serial (white, psychological) violence in place of interpersonal (black, economic) violence reflects the construction of an aesthetic. “Work it like a real case, and it will feel like a real case. More importantly, it will read like a real case,” advises Lester as he and McNulty wander through a homeless encampment. Lester’s claim is true enough: after all, the police always in some sense invent their object, and it is the working of it as though it were real that has guided the series’ realism thus far. In response to his direction, McNulty asks Lester, “What do you want me to do?” “What detectives do, detective,” Lester replies. Each phrase contains an ironic doubling of the keywords: real, real; do, do; detective, detective. As they search for their fictitious killer so that their case may appear real, they actually create a serial killer. McNulty hands a card to the man who will enact the killings that he and Templeton have been fictitiously describing and thus provide narrative closure to the season. Here, description produces the conditions it itself describes, a problematic that is a continual preoccupation of the fifth season and, in many ways, a deconstruction of a realist aesthetic. Thus, the doubling here is between serial violence and the form the serial takes. As McNulty walks among the homeless, he is bewildered. None of the photography, freeze-frames, or formal evidence of viewing are present; the viewer is not reminded of the viewing. Instead, the viewer recognizes a now-homeless stevedore from the second season—McNulty does not—which further highlights the self-referential motif within the show’s own narrative frame.

We can locate a similar dynamic when McNulty confronts Templeton after the fictitious attempted abduction of a homeless man near the *Sun*’s headquarters. When McNulty asks for a physical description of the serial killer, Templeton offers the following: “White guy, not heavy, not skinny either, six foot, nondescript.” “Nondescript?” asks McNulty, as this conversation transpires between two of the few characters on the show who

actually fit this description (5.10.23 minutes). “Yeah, nondescript,” Templeton confirms. Like the previous dialogue between Lester and McNulty, this dialogue again contains an ironic doubling. *The Wire*’s serial killer is, above all, an effect of the descriptions of McNulty and Templeton. This conversation is yet another instance of this production process, but it here transpires through a repetition of the term *nondescript*.

To this analysis we can add the fact that a serial killer *can* be nondescript. Serial killing is a genre unto itself—“Give people what they want from a serial killer,” Lester encourages McNulty. Thus, together they decide to add bite marks to their corpses and consequently their fictitious case files. The serial killer offers the pleasure of genre, but so does the serial television program *The Wire* itself.²⁷ The viewer of *The Wire*, however, does not want a serial killer, but an economic killer. The joke, then, is to flatter the viewer and give her the pleasure of generic differentiation and identification. But this joke is also an insult: What does the viewer have invested in the economic killer, and, at the level of form, what is the difference between preferring one generic pleasure to the other? *The Wire*’s attempt simultaneously to manage two genres provides a site for a critique of genre and for an understanding of its own generic construction. Once put in place, the serial killer will circulate discursively. Indeed, discursivity is his place. This is not because, as *Sun* metro section editor Gus claims in classic newsroom phraseology, “if it bleeds it leads”—indeed, the entire series has been dedicated to showing just how contingent that claim is—rather, it is because if it bleeds and is noneconomic and nonstructural, then it leads.

But we could also rephrase this as: violence committed in the commission of accumulation produces realism, whereas violence committed in the commission of gratification produces melodrama. The viewer of *The Wire* again is in an odd place: for her it is the violence committed in the commission of accumulation that produces gratification. On a structural level, the crucial difference between the serial killer and *The Wire* as a television series is that the serial killer disavows economy in the construction of his personal melodrama, whereas *The Wire* uses the representation of economy to ground its realism and disavow personal melodrama. Psychology disavows economy; economy disavows interiority. The narrative force, and challenge, of the fifth season is to bring these two together and attempt to hold them in tension. We know that Lester is “proud to be chasing Mr. Marlo Stanfield,” and that “stupid criminals make stupid cops,” but what effect do fictitious, fantastic criminals have on cops?

At one level, the fictitious serial killer kills the series by destroying for the viewer the fantasy of this, or perhaps of any, realism. The structural

irony of the fifth season, of course, is that by fabricating noneconomic, de facto white, psychological violence, McNulty and Freamon hope to produce a return of the economic scene. Indeed, it is only through the production of a fictitious serial killer that Marlo is killed and his crew is finally decimated, with some killed and others imprisoned. Obviously, this makes no difference at the level of drug distribution or saturation, but it certainly does make a difference at the level of narrative form and, specifically, how the series' content shapes and is shaped by its divergent narrative structures. When the fabrication of the serial killer is revealed, again we are returned to a critique of serial form. "The cases are not connected in any way," Lieutenant Cedric Daniels explains to Mayor Tommy Carcetti. The claim is the converse of the show's most important narrative insistence, that, if we follow the money, we realize that we are all connected in many ways. Obviously, the fact remains that the homeless are being murdered and are dying, but, without a sufficient and sensationalist narrative thread, that fact is uninteresting. And, of course, this is the point of the whole *series*. A narrative thread is needed to render the violence, but what the fifth season implies is that only certain narratives can render certain violence: realistic violence is only rendered interpersonally and requires the presence of an illicit black economy; there is no abstract, symbolic violence. We are given the shadowy, ambiguous figure of "the Greek" who is not Greek as a segue into the global economy, but this figure is really more of a hint at what remains *not* narrated and *not* represented in the show. Indeed, the serial killer is the first representation of a kind of abstract violence, and this violence is unable to be contained by the realistic narrative.

We might see this, however, as an effect of the type of capitalist realism that *The Wire* pursues. The old adage that "it takes money to make money" is here transformed into something like "it takes money to follow money." To obtain funds means, on some level, to relinquish the money trail narratively with the hope of returning to it again at some future moment. The economic narrative, then, has been seemingly misplaced: the serial killer produces a structurally different narrative whose object is not to represent money, but actually show how it is not represented. At some level, the serial killer kills the series by exposing the structural limits of the realist mode; at another level, the serial killer reconstructs the series by rendering visible its own conditions of production, circulation, and reception. The series asks its viewer to consider that realism dwells now in a new historical moment; it remains agnostic on the relationship between capitalist realism and older realisms of yore. And, of course, the serial killer plotline mocks the fact that *The Wire* itself has never garnered the

kind of prize that the *Sun* does through its fraudulent reporting and shameful self-promotion.²⁸

It falls to Lester to summarize, finally, the condition of possibility and limitation of the serial itself. Not only is representation being systemically sold off by Templeton and McNulty, but the hoped-for end of Lester's money trail, the information that leads to a grand jury indictment, is also revealed to have been for sale all along with the realization that city prosecutor Gary DiPasquale's gambling addiction has led him to sell sealed grand-jury information to criminal defense attorneys. Still, Lester is indefatigable: "If we can turn Levy and some of these other drug lawyers, we can route the money all over town. Sad business I know, but at least we know the truth now." For Lester, money produces information when it is *not* sold; but, for the political establishment, the journalistic establishment, all establishments, money is valued in itself, they want more of it, and that accumulation is realized through selling a certain kind of information. *The Wire* is not above this metabolism. It, too, begins to offer its viewer the kind of sensational, individualistic, melodramatic violence that it had spent the previous four seasons rejecting.

The Wire ultimately offers two alternative suggestions for representation at the end of the money trail: the first at the level of form, here realized as genre (from cop procedural to melodrama), and the second at the level of content. I claimed that "the money" can be followed only to the extent to which the perceptual world of representation is itself for sale. One reading of season 5's self-critique would posit that its own turn to sensationalism is a representation of the show "selling itself." But this is not the same as "selling out," since *The Wire* maintains a critical posture. Furthermore, this self-reflexivity contains an important formal lesson: When you follow the money, the one position that you are assured to reach is an understanding of the vantage point that enabled you to get there. Because you realize that perception/representation is ultimately for sale, you now understand why it was so important to have followed the money in the first place. The generic transformation of season 5 indicates how such a claim may be made at the level of form.

The second suggestion is located in one of the few stories of individual redemption in the series: Bubbles overcomes his heroin addiction and the trauma of his accidental killing of his protégé, Sherrod. The point of this narrative thread in the series is not exactly individual redemption or personal development per se, but rather that Bubbles's transformation is coincident with him standing on a street corner and selling his own story to the *Sun*. His journey has been painfully but accurately represented. Not until he has a *Sun* reporter following him and willing to transform his suffering

into a commodified narrative does he finally find the strength to narrate his own life at his Narcotics Anonymous meeting.

Both suggestions, however, insist that all narrative constructs—the first of realism and the second of real life—will, at some point, be sold. This conclusion—of my essay and of the series—should not be read as cynical. Indeed, it is actually more utopian and critical than the regressive fantasy that lurks throughout every season of *The Wire*: namely, the fantasy of a better capitalism, of a return to the Keynesian days of yore when community policing reigned, newspapers were robust sources of information, unions were powerful, schools taught children to read, and the CIA had not yet facilitated the importation of heroin into the United States from Southeast Asia.²⁹ One of the narratives that neoliberal capitalism generates is a haunting social nostalgia that “things were better then.” But the logic of capital requires something different: things were better then on the condition that they are worse now. It is not until the realist mode, what *The Wire* distinguished itself in—indeed, what *The Wire* redefined in the world of television—is put up for sale in season 5 that the finality of this claim is realized: there is no going back. There is only going forward into new forms, new genres, and new epistemologies; *The Wire* as a whole exemplifies precisely such a movement.

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NOTES

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1. *The Wire*, season 5 episode 4, “Transitions” (New York: HBO Video, 2006), DVD.
2. In Jason Mittell:

For many critics, bloggers, fans, and even creator David Simon himself, *The Wire* is best understood not as a television series, but as a *visual novel*. As a television scholar, this cross-media metaphor bristles—not because I don’t like novels, but because I love television. And I believe that television at its best shouldn’t be understood simply as emulating another older and more culturally valued medium. *The Wire* is a masterpiece of television, not a novel that happens to be televised, and thus should be understood, analyzed, and celebrated on its own medium’s terms. (“All in the Game: *The Wire*, Serial Storytelling and Procedural

Logic," in *Third Person: Authoring and Exploring Vast Narratives*, ed. Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip Fruin (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 429–38, available at JustTV, 22 May 2007, para. 2, <http://justtv.wordpress.com/2007/05/22/the-wire-and-the-serial-procedural-an-essay-in-progress/#more-76> [accessed 18 February 2011]).

3. T[heodor] W. Adorno, "How to Look at Television," *Quarterly of Film Radio and Television* 8, no. 3 (1954): 213–35, quotation on 215.
4. The irony that *The Wire* and its claims to a new realism have circulated alongside the rise and expansion of reality television should not be missed (and probably should be explored further).
5. For the Adorno quote, see Theodor Adorno, Georg Lukács, Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, and Ernst Bloch, "Reconciliation Under Duress," in "Presentation IV," in *Aesthetics and Politics: The Key Texts of the Classic Debate within German Marxism*, ed. and trans. Ronald Taylor, Radical Thinking Classics series (London: Verso, 1977), 151–76, quotation on 160. For *The Wire* as the aesthetic apotheosis of the televisual medium, see, for example, J. M. Tyree's "The Wire: The Complete Fourth Season," *Film Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (2008): 32–38.
6. See, for example, Georg Lukács, "Narrate or Describe," in "Writer & Critic," and *Other Essays*, ed. and trans. Arthur D. Kahn (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1971), 110–48.
7. See, for example, the *Sun*'s own review of the fifth season: David Zurawik, "'The Wire' Loses Spark in Newsroom Storyline," *Baltimore Sun*, 30 December 2008, www.baltimoresun.com/entertainment/bal-al.wire30dec30,0,266826.story (accessed 18 February 2011).
8. All realism could, in some sense, be said to be capitalist realism with the exception of socialist realism, which, by definition, separates itself from capitalist realism. I am going to rely here on the best social contextualization of realism that I know, that of Fredric Jameson, who describes *realism* as

that processing operation variously called narrative mimesis or realistic representation [which] has as its historic function the systematic undermining and demystification . . . of preexisting inherited traditional or sacred narrative paradigms which are its initial givens. In this sense, the [realist] novel plays a significant role in what can be called a properly bourgeois cultural revolution—that immense process of transformation . . . [in which populations] are effectively reprogrammed for life and work in the new world of market capitalism. ("Realism and Desire: Balzac and the Problem of the Subject," in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981], 141–75, quotation on 152)

See note 19 for a more complete genealogy of capitalism and realism. In the visual arts, *capitalist realism* hails from the 1960s and refers to the work of painters such as Gerhard Richter, who himself coined the term in 1963; the term has now been expanded to suggest that corporate advertising should be understood as art (see David Hopkins, *After Modern Art: 1945–2000*, Oxford History of Art series [London: Oxford University Press, 2000]). More recently still, Mark Fisher's short book *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (London: Zero Books, 2009) uses the term to discuss the seemingly overwhelming presence of capitalism. My main engagement with the term will be nominal; that is, I would like to introduce it as a generic category. What strikes me as the biggest difference between older realisms and newer realisms is that *totality* as a category is arguably given over to *exchange*, a possibility of worldly equivalence. Other structural

hallmarks of realism, particularly operations of *typicality*, of characters standing in for a social world larger than their immediate present, are still operative here.

9. As Mark Seltzer notes, serial killing is generically racialized as white even though, in relative terms to population, serial killers are no more likely to be white as to be black or Latino; they are, obviously, more likely to be male (*Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture* [London, Routledge: 1998]).
10. In addition to the *Sun*'s review, see the *Washington City Paper* review: Mark Athitakis, "What Happened to Our Show? For Four Seasons *The Wire* Reinvented the Crime Drama: Now the Viewer's the Victim," *Washington City Paper*, 1 February 2008, www.washingtoncitypaper.com/articles/34511/what-happened-to-our-show (accessed 18 February 2011).
11. I am thinking of melodrama as Linda Williams has conceived of it in "Melodrama Revised" (*Reconfiguring American Film Genres: Theory and History*, ed. Nick Browne [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998], 42–88). Using Williams's reformulation, Martha P. Nochimson has a wonderful reading of *The Sopranos* (1999–2007) and focuses, in particular, on Tony Soprano's relationship to his own body as a site for the staging of innocence. *The Wire* certainly does not approach this level of melodrama, but season 5's literal concerns with innocence and guilt do intimate a kind of melodramatic tone not seen in the earlier seasons ("Waddaya Lookin' At? Re-reading the Gangster Genre through 'The Sopranos,'" *Film Quarterly* 56, no. 2 [2002–3]: 2–13).
12. See Zurawik, "'The Wire' Loses Spark." Margaret Talbot claims,

This final season of the show, Simon told me, will be about "perception versus reality"—in particular, what kind of reality newspapers can capture and what they can't. Newspapers across the country are shrinking, laying off beat reporters who understood their turf. More important, Simon believes, newspapers are fundamentally not equipped to convey certain kinds of complex truths. Instead, they focus on scandals—stories that have a clean moral. "It's like, find the eight-hundred-dollar toilet seat, find the contractor who's double-billing," Simon said at one point. "That's their bread and butter. Systemic societal failure that has multiple problems—newspapers are not designed to understand it." (see Margaret Talbot's profile on David Simon, in "Stealing Life," Profiles, *New Yorker*, 22 October 2007, www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/10/22/071022fa_fact_talbot [accessed 18 February 2011])

13. Raymond Williams, "The Social History of Dramatic Forms," in *The Long Revolution* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1975), 271–99, quotation on 286.
14. Raymond Williams:

"Let's be realistic" probably more often means "let us accept the limits of this situation" (*limits* meaning "hard facts," often of power or money in their existing and established forms) than "let us look at the whole truth of this situation" (which can allow that an existing reality is changeable or is changing). (*Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* [London: Oxford University Press, 1985], 259)
15. Money has a formal specificity different from the commodity or from finance; it has a different critical resonance, as well. It was of course a central economic heuristic used in displacing the commodity form in literary criticism during the 1980s New Historicist moment. Fredric Jameson summarizes this problem well by claiming that in such literary and cultural criticism "money enters the picture here insofar as only exchange"

- “Culture and Finance Capital,” in *Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983–1998* [New York: Verso, 1998], 136–61, quotation on 145). See also Marc Shell, *Money, Language, Thought: Literary and Philosophic Economies from the Medieval to the Modern Era* (Berkeley: California University Press, 1982) for an examination of what Jameson refers to as *exchange*, a construct that dominates New Historical approaches and the inheritors of this tradition. But money is not simply about equal exchange; rather, it is also about the forms that value takes and the tension that results from these seemingly contradictory positions. See, for example, Karl Marx, “Part 2: The Transformation of Money into Capital,” in *Capital* (New York: Penguin, 1973), 1:247–80.
16. See Patrick Brantlinger, “Debt, Fetishism, and Empire: A Postmodern Preamble,” in *Fictions of State: Culture and Credit in Britain, 1694–1994* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 1–47, quotation on 14. In a recent publication, Richard Godden has also used the term *capitalist realism* (“Money and Things: Capitalist Realism, Anxiety, and Social Critique in Works by Hemingway, Wharton, and Fitzgerald,” in *A Companion to the Modern American Novel, 1900–1950*, ed. John T. Matthews [London: Blackwell, 2009]).
 17. For a new “Smithian Marxism” that considers the interplay of time and space, territory, and capital, see Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1994), and, more recently, his *Adam Smith in Beijing: Lineages of the Twenty-first Century* (London: Verso, 2007).
 18. See Karl Marx, “Part 2,” 282.
 19. There are different genealogies of realism that could produce such a claim. For example, there is the Lukácsian imperative to demonstrate a kind of totality, in that this is what is most challenging; Barthes’s insistence on representation of the quotidian as what produces a reality effect; the Jamesonian narrative of basic fault, a reification, where senses and sensibilities are enclosed and elongated so that reification at the perceptual level mirrors a fracturing at the historical level. Perhaps the most apt study of *The Wire*, however, is Raymond Williams’s narrative of secularization, social extension, and contemporaneity in his “A Lecture on Realism,” *Screen* 18, no. 1 (1977): 61–74.
 20. See R. T. Naylor, “Treasure Island: Offshore Havens, Bank Secrecy, and Money Laundering” (in *The Wages of Crime: Black Markets, Illegal Finance, and the Underworld Economy* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002], 133–95, esp. 136–37), although this whole book is of great interest for thinking through narrative constructions of capitalism. Rosa Luxembourge claims that capital must have a geographical outside to expand (i.e., *The Accumulation of Capital*, 1913), while for David Harvey that structurally similar outside is a temporal one (i.e., *The Limits to Capital*, 1984).
 21. See Zurawik, “‘The Wire’ Loses Spark”; and Athitakis, “What Happened to Our Show?”
 22. Simon, quoted in Mittell, “All in the Game.”
 23. Each season is structured through a kind of institutional doubling, a process by which the narrative truth of any season is negotiated between opposing institutions. There is no causality per se; indeed, causality is repeatedly displaced by the constructions of coincidence and proximity. For example, with the so-called killing of the state’s witness in season 4, a productive tension, and a productive truth, emerges between the police department and the city’s democratic political machine. In season 5, this technique is most evident in episode 7, in which both the police department and *The Sun* radically increase the resources they will devote to the investigation of the serial killer and its reportage, respectively.
 24. Indeed, those who promote realism, from Georg Lukács to Simon to even someone like Tom Wolfe, have a complicated relationship with newspapers. On the one hand, realism

traffics in information, and this is precisely what a newspaper provides. On the other hand, newspapers transform fact into information, whereas realism transforms information into worldview, and reveals how information is always immanent to its own time and place, to its own local codes and relations. In Margaret Talbot's interview ("Stealing Life"), David Simon uncannily echoes Lukács, who, some seventy years earlier, was already explaining how newspapers obstruct, not reveal, the essence of a certain goal of realism: that is, totality itself. For Simon, however, this is the result of a decline of ethics and standards in the newspaper business, whereas for Lukács it is endemic to the form of the news itself.

25. The "James-like" reference is from Tyree, "*The Wire*."
26. Seltzer, *Serial Killers*, 16.
27. Lauren Berlant defines genre as "an aesthetic structure of affective expectation, an institution of formation that absorbs all kinds of small variations or modifications while promising that the persons transacting with it will experience the pleasure of encountering what they expected." For Berlant, pleasure does not connote a positive or negative value judgment; rather, it implies the return to an "affective scene" ("Introduction: Intimacy, Publicity, and Femininity," in *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* [Raleigh, NC: Duke University Press, 2008], 1–32, quotation on 4).
28. Apparently this kind of overt racism in the television industry (i.e., that minority-dominated casts aren't prizeworthy) has become a kind of badge of ironic pride amongst the cast: what critics repeatedly deem the best show in the history of television cannot garner an industry award (Tyree, "*The Wire*").
29. See Alfred W. McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin: CIA Complicity in the Global Drug Trade* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2003), for this fascinating history. It sounds almost too conspiratorial, but, as Dehlia Hannah frequently reminds me, with a system like *this*, you don't need a conspiracy.