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DAVID SIMON:
GENERATION KILL,
THE WIRE

LEBANESE CINEMA

VERTIGO

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to them. I don't know that anybody working in film who has been involved in an Iraq project has come to it with that thought.

Generation Kill is very interested in the details of bureaucracy, in depicting mid-Level Army soldier-administrators. Many war movies either show you the President with his cabinet or grunts a foxhole.

In all of our storytelling—*The Wire* and *Generation Kill*—the sympathies are with labor and middle management. We are with NCOs and the corporals. In a platoon of recon marines we're not with the officers. Most people do not want to detail bureaucracy, and it's really hard to do in a two-hour film. But in long form, to me it's fascinating. I'll tell you a place where I thought it was done well in a film, which is *The Thin Red Line*. A lot of people don't dig that film, but I do. That movie gets chain of command exactly right, and does so in a way that I think most civilians don't want to understand.

What do you mean by that? Do you find that audiences are resistant to the kind of storytelling you want to do?

There are people who want to be told that the world is what they already think it is, or they want to be very quickly told what to think. And I'm never going to be able to figure out how to get near those people because we're not using the same vocabulary. The language is fucked between us. *The Wire* had definite ideas about where we've gone wrong as a culture. *The Wire* had definite ideas about where the cities' dystopia came from. But it wasn't one overriding idea. There were many different themes, all of which were acting on each other. So here comes *Generation Kill*, and it's got issues of rules of engagement and civilians. And marines *are* being mortared from those villages, and the *fedayeen are* mixing in with the civilian population, and it *is* hard to tell combatant from non-combatant. And they are worrying about it, yet the tragedies are happening anyway because that's war. I don't want you to feel like you've arrived at some place you can live with. I don't want you to disrespect these marines, and I want you to admire, to some degree, the professionalism. But at the same time I want you to feel like these civilians really did get killed.

So there's not a lot of preaching to the choir going on.

Even liberals get tired of that. Even if you're in the choir it's boring. I want to be thrown. I want to have ideas that are challenging and worth being challenged. A substantial story is one that has two sides to it. And if you don't cheat, and stumble into one side and stick up the other one as a straw man, you've got something that's actually worth thinking about. It stays with you after you watch it or after you read it. Now you're playing an adult game in storytelling.

Generation Kill ends with a sort of home movie—marines call them Motivational Videos, or MotoVideos—which we see Jason Lilley filming throughout the miniseries. Did the real Cpl. Lilley actually make a montage video of his unit's Iraq war experiences?

He was going to make a MotoVideo. That was his plan to make home movies of the invasion. But when he got home, for whatever reason, his wife—they're broken up since then—erased all the film. He had tons of film. So Bravo never had its Moto. But we incorporated real footage into the video that appears at the end of *Generation Kill*. We wanted the film within the film to say everything and not be politically biased. It's them fooling around, it's kids giving the victory sign, it's them being good with the locals, it's them playing around with each other and having a great time—that's the real Brad Colbert trying to mount that donkey. Lilley's stuff was all gone, but other people—some of it's from Afghanistan, some of it's from different places. Eric collected everything that was left. And we used pieces of it.

RICHARD BECK is editor-in-chief of *Cinematic*, Harvard's student-run film journal.

ABSTRACT In this interview, David Simon, executive producer and writer (together with Ed Burns), talks about *Generation Kill*, the seven-part HBO adaptation of Evan Wright's book about the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq and the early days of occupation. Simon emphasizes the desire to stay as faithful as possible to the book as well as discussing particular characters and scenes.

KEYWORDS *Generation Kill*, David Simon, Ed Burns, Evan Wright, Iraq War

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Rebekah Darksmith, Assistant Journals Manager

RE-WIRING BALTIMORE: THE EMOTIVE POWER OF SYSTEMICS, SERIALITY, AND THE CITY

MARSHA KINDER: *THE WIRE*'S SUCCESS DERIVES FROM THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN SYSTEMIC ANALYSIS AND EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT WITH COMPELLING CHARACTERS

Among the most striking things about *The Wire* are the breadth and depth of its systemic analysis of urban corruption in Baltimore and the emotional power it elicits. I will argue that these dynamics are made possible by leveraging the full narrative potential of television, particularly the expansive narrative space provided by seriality and ensemble casting, which accommodates the city as the primary unit of analysis.

THE NETWORKED CITY AS INTERTEXT

Through its network of intertextual allusions (to TV, cinema, literature, theater, and journalism), which continues growing through the final episode (with its pointed references to Shakespeare, Kafka, and H. L. Mencken), *The Wire* explicitly mentions both precursors and foils, with which it should be compared, training us how to remix or resist what we previously have been encouraged to admire. In season 5, metro editor Gus Haynes (Clark Johnson) tells his staff of writers at the *Baltimore Sun* (the paper where series creator David Simon was a crime reporter for twelve years): "There are a million stories in this naked city, but you mooks only have to bring in two or three." When Simon came to visit TV critic Howard Rosenberg's class at USC on March 3, 2008, he acknowledged *Naked City* as an important influence on *The Wire*. (Unless otherwise noted, quotations from Simon in this article are taken from this visit.) Running from 1958 to 1963 on ABC, this classic TV cop series broke new ground with its gritty realism and its narrative focus on New York City. Yet an urban focus doesn't guarantee systemic analysis, as demonstrated not only by *Naked City* but also by one of *The Wire's* primary foils, *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, the most popular crime series currently on TV. In the final season of *The Wire*, a glib psychologist offers his services as a criminal profiler, citing his previous work for *CSI*, and is summarily rejected. Set in glamorous Las Vegas, the city where no one is held accountable for their actions and where chance rules supreme, *CSI* uses its location as ironic backdrop for its optimistic depiction of infallible scientific police work, which spares no expense. But *CSI* never illuminates its urban context—either its actual setting of Las Vegas or the city of Los Angeles, whose race-based trials of O. J. Simpson and the cops who battered Rodney King and their disturbing outcomes help explain the popular appeal of this escapist procedural series. As strategic sites for its formulaic spin-offs, *CSI* chose Miami and New York, cities associated thematically with international drug wars and the terrorist disaster of 9/11, and commercially with popular precursors like *Miami Vice*, *NYPD Blue*, and *New York Undercover*.

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In contrast, *The Wire* is committed to a systemic analysis of Baltimore, combining narrative strategies from two earlier TV Baltimore crime series, with which Simon was personally connected. *Homicide: Life on the Street* (1993–99), a realistic TV police series based on Simon's nonfiction book, *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets*, focused primarily on cops rather than criminals who changed from week to week; and Simon's own 2000 HBO miniseries, *The Corner*, based on a nonfiction book he co-wrote with Ed Burns (*The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner-City Neighborhood*), had a narrower narrative field (one year in the life, on one corner, in one season comprised of six episodes). This series was better suited to the family as the basic unit of analysis, for it lacked the broad canvas of *The Wire*, whose first season combined cops from homicide with drug dealers on the corner. (The casting of Clark Johnson, one of the cops from *Homicide*, in *The Wire* emphasizes the connection between the two series.) Simon says when he first proposed *The Wire* series to HBO, he mentioned only the drug war—not his goal of building a city and performing a systemic analysis that would dramatize the dire need for policy reform.

Yet this narrative focus on the city distinguishes both *The Wire* and *Naked City* from other successful serial crime fiction structured around the family—like the HBO series *The*

Bubbles on the way home

Photo: Paul Schiraldi, Courtesy HBO

Sopranos (1999–2007) and Francis Ford Coppola's cinematic *Godfather* trilogy (1972, 1974, and 1990), neither of whose systemic analyses rivals the breadth of that found in *The Wire*. Instead, their focus on the multi-generational crime family brings a strong dimension of melodrama into the gangster genre. The Corleones may stand in for America, but it is the family's ups and downs and internecine betrayals that raise the story to tragedy, and Coppola's casting of Robert De Niro, Marlon Brando, and Al Pacino that keeps us sutured into who's in charge. *The Sopranos* (which ran for six seasons) used its enlarged canvas to go into greater emotional depth for its array of complex characters. But, despite the breadth and high-quality acting of its ensemble cast, there was never any doubt over who was the protagonist: it was Tony Soprano's family that was being investigated and his memories, phobias, and dreams that were being subjected to depth analysis.

SYSTEMIC SUTURE

While *The Wire* is not the first work of crime fiction to perform such a systemic analysis of corruption, it may be the most successful in making it emotionally compelling; for systemics usually demand a critical distance that is incompatible with most forms of character identification. I am arguing that the uniqueness of the series depends on this combination, whose most interesting precedents (both precursors and foils) come from cinema rather than television. As foils, I'm thinking of the emotional distance in political films like Francesco Rosi's *Salvatore Giuliano* (1960), a dialectic reconstruction of the famous bandit's relationship to political and economic power, or in most of Jean-Luc Godard's reflexive works from the late 1960s and early 1970s, including *Weekend* and *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* (both 1967), which reject realism and emotional suture altogether. Significantly, Simon cites Stanley Kubrick's *Paths of Glory* (1957) as his primary cinematic model and "the most important political film in history," a war film that succeeds in combining systemic analysis with more traditional forms of realism and emotional identification. Yet one can also find this combination in other cinematic precursors *within* the crime film genre, like Fritz Lang's *M* (1931) and John Mackenzie's *The Long Good Friday* (1980). In moving their focus from a fascinating individual criminal to a broader analysis of the culture that creates and destroys him, they design narrative strategies that are expanded in *The Wire*.

M moves from the compulsive pedophile (played by Peter Lorre) to the police and criminals pursuing him, who increasingly become mirror images of each other. This reflective relationship (like the one between drug dealers and cops in *The Wire*'s first season) proves more terrifying than the irrational acts of the child-killer (however heinous his uncontrollable urges and crimes). The relationship becomes central to the film's systemic analysis of Germany, which prefigured the rise of the Third Reich. This kind of reflective relationship between both sides of the law can also be found in later serial crime fiction like the *Godfather* trilogy, but nowhere is it developed more expansively than in *The Wire*.

The Long Good Friday focuses on an ambitious London gangster, Harold Shand (Bob Hoskins) who, like *The Wire*'s equally charismatic drug dealer Stringer Bell (Idris Elba), tries to go legit by investing in his city's docklands as a future site for the Olympics. Describing himself as, "not a politician, but a businessman with an historical sense and global perspective," he fails to understand how the emergent power of the IRA challenges his old-fashioned conception of empire. His political naivety prevents him from seeing beyond the gangster paradigm. In the final close-up when Harold is about to be whacked, he finally realizes his opponents are international terrorists rather than local mobsters, that this movie is a European political thriller rather than an Anglicized Hollywood gangster film, and that he has misunderstood the power dynamics both of the genre and of globalism. If we can't read this close-up, then we misunderstand the movie and its prophetic analysis of Thatcherism in the 1980s. Similarly, despite Stringer's intelligence and driving ambitions, he is still too naive to understand the power dynamics that drive the so-called legitimate worlds of business, law, and politics (dynamics that his young successor Marlo Stanfield [Jamie Hector] will also have to fathom). In both crime narratives, this last-minute gain in systemic understanding helps reconcile these gangsters to their premature death, as if it's a fitting tragic payoff for their respective transformations.

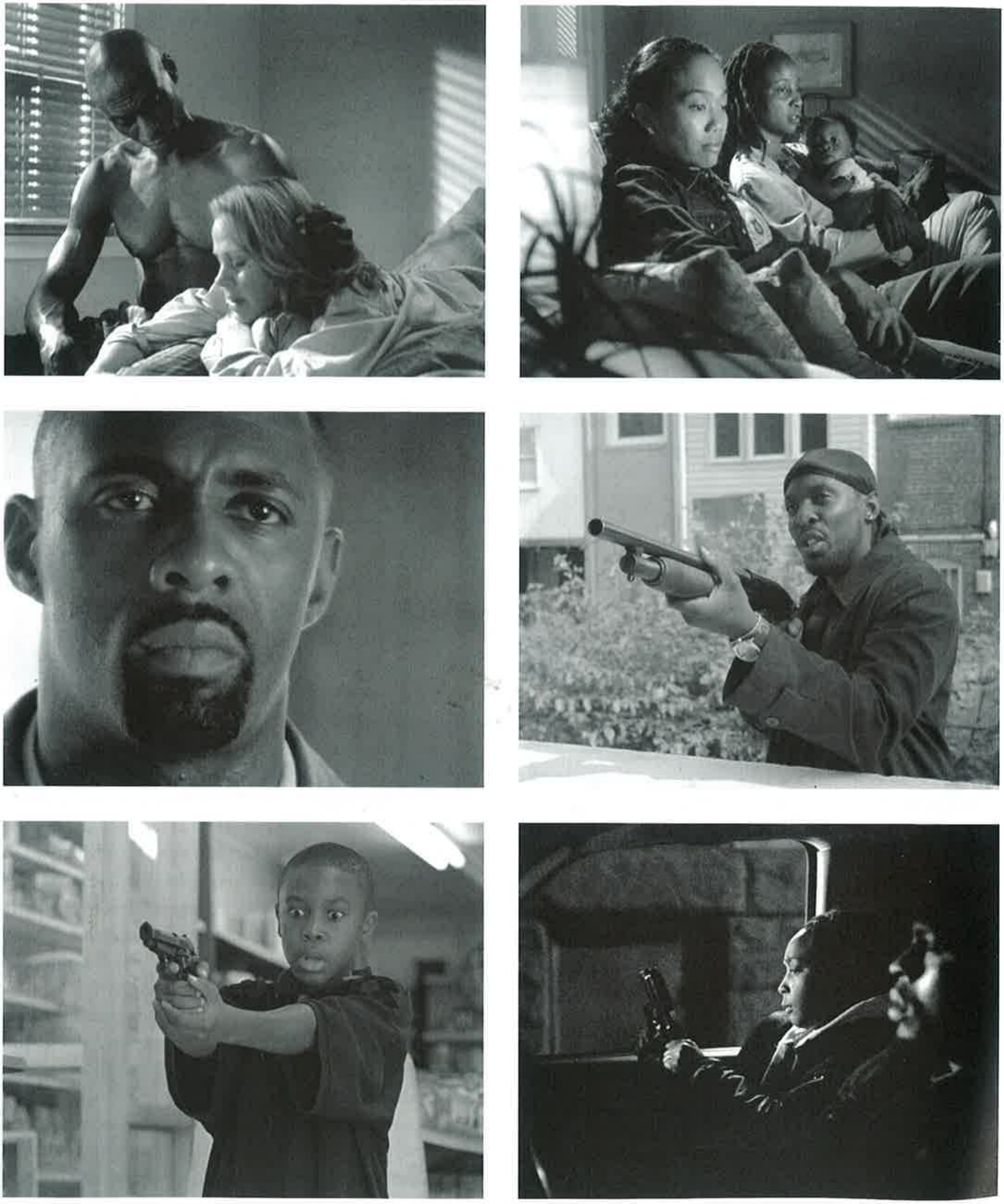
Despite the deep pessimism of *The Wire*'s systemic analysis of our crumbling cities and pervasive corruption, unlike these precursors, it achieves a delicate emotional balance, for it is not merely one charismatic outlaw who must be transcended, but several promising yet vulnerable characters who generate a series of transformative moments season after season. As actor Jamie Hector put it in an article titled "*Wire* Leaves a Legacy of Hope," which appeared in the Sunday *Los Angeles Times* on the night the final episode was aired, "I believe he [David Simon] is saying there is hope through the people in the institutions" (March 9, 2008, E1). Not restricted to any single family, race, class, gender, sexual persuasion, or generation (though the youngsters from season four are the most poignant), these promising characters keep emerging on both sides of the law. The emotional power of the series depends on this dynamic tension between, on the one hand, having so many vibrant characters with enormous potential and, on the other hand, seeing how the culture is wired to destroy them. What results is serial tragedy with a systemic form of suture, which inspires awe and pity week after week and makes it difficult for viewers to turn away.

Although Simon claims that *The Wire* is more about class rather than race ("I just happened to be doing a series about a city that's 65% black ... *Homicide* already covered race"), the fact that most of these complex characters are African American and most of them brilliantly played by actors we've never previously seen—these facts alone create a sense of hope. As actress Sonja Sohn, who plays Kima Greggs, puts it in the same *Los Angeles Times* feature: "This cast might not be here if there was no hope in the ghetto" (E22). *The Wire*'s emphasis on black characters marks an important departure from successful serial crime precursors like the *Godfather* trilogy and *The Sopranos*, whose more traditional Italian American characters share middle America's racism against African Americans, a dimension that might regrettably make it easier for white viewers to identify with them. Aware that this emphasis on race might reduce the size of his audience but determined to pursue it as part of his systemic analysis, Simon acknowledges: "We have more working black actors in key roles than pretty much all the other shows on the air. And yet you still hear people claim they can't find good African-American actors." It is this "richness of the black community," as actor Lance Reddick (who plays Cedric Daniels) calls it, that makes the series "so different from anything that's been on television" (E22).

Yet we also are aware that every character in the ensemble cast (whether black or white, and no matter how seemingly central) can be killed off at any moment, as in real life, without threatening the systemic level of the series. Nowhere is this awareness more painful than in the murder of the courageous black homosexual assassin Omar Little (brilliantly played by Michael K. Williams), one of the most powerful characters in the series. This chilling event catches us off-guard as much as it does Omar, for he is gunned down not by Marlo's "muscle," Chris (Gbenga Akinnagbe) and Snoop (Felicia Pearson) who are doggedly hunting him down, but by the vicious little street-corner kid, Kenard (Thuliso Dingwall). In Rosenberg's class, Simon reminded us that midway through season 3, there's a shot of Kenard playing in the street with other kids and picking up a stick and shouting, "It's my turn to play Omar." *The Wire* presents three generations of street killers (Kenard, Marlo, and Omar) as victims of the city, whose failed institutions waste their potential. That's why the *Baltimore Sun*'s failure to cover Omar's death, and the dysfunctional police lab's misidentification of his corpse, are almost as chilling as his murder. As Simon says, the series is all about subtext (what's omitted) and the need to change policy. Yet we care deeply about these issues because of our emotional engagement with these characters who emerge from the ensemble cast.

SERIALITY AND THE ENSEMBLE CAST

As a miniseries spread over five seasons, *The Wire* has been structured to take full advantage of television's expanded narrative field. It doesn't merely track the longitudinal history of a police investigation or repeat formulaic situations. Each season *The Wire* shifts the focus to a different segment of society: the drug wars, the docks, city politics, education, and the media. It thereby avoids the endgame of the ordinary TV series, as described by Janet Murray in *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (Free Press, 1997): "When every variation of the situation has been played out, as in the final season of a long-running series, the under-



Clockwise from top left: Daniels and Pearlman, Greggs growing distant from her partner, Omar at work, Snoop and Chris, Kenard the unlikely assassin, Stringer at the point of death.

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lying fantasy comes to the surface . . . We can look at it directly, with less anxiety, but we also find it less compelling" (169–70).

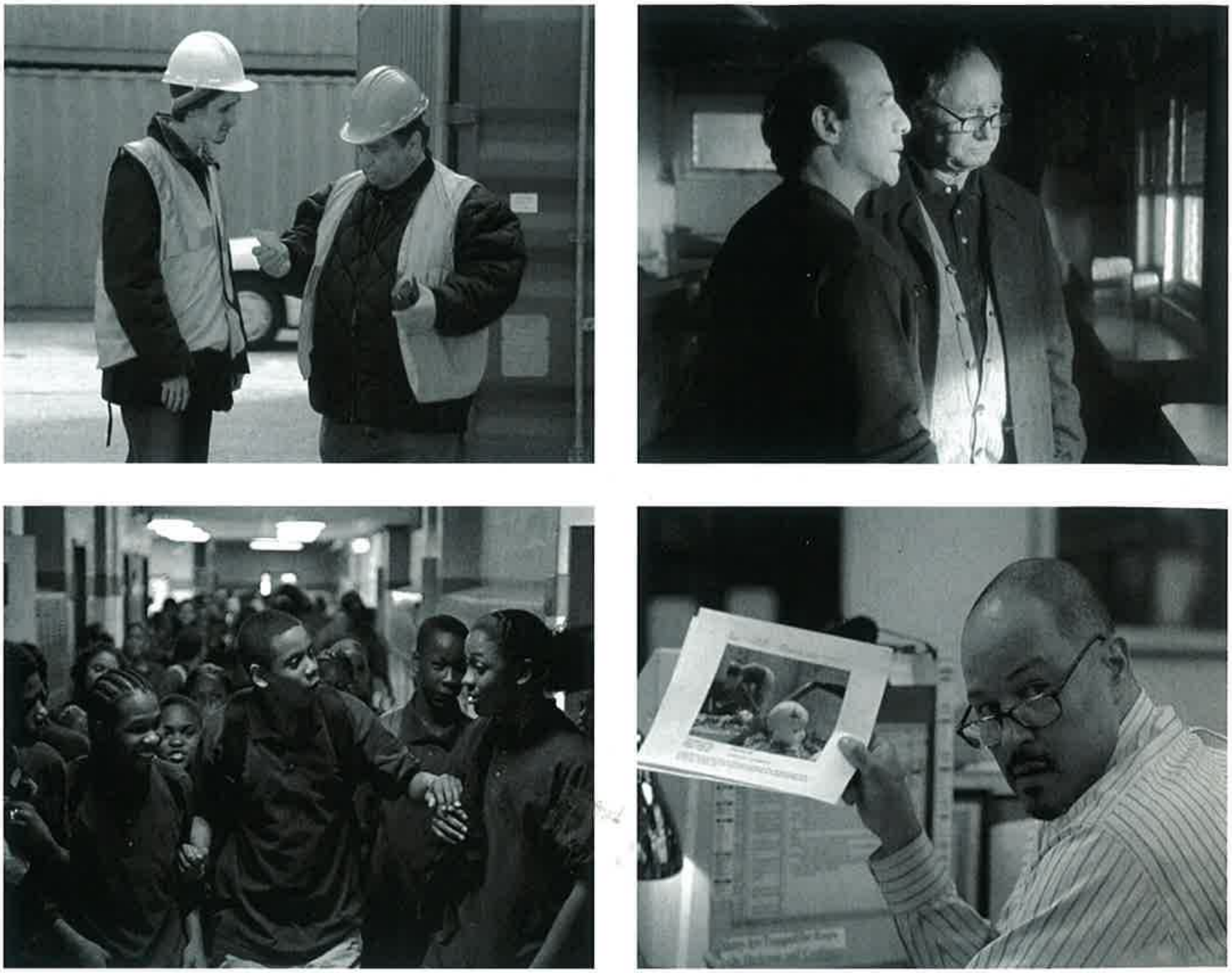
Despite its hyper-realism and its array of black characters, the first season is the most conventional segment, for the drug war is a typical topic for crime fiction. Though the series transforms the genre, it first hooks us with the traditional lures of what is being transformed. Like the *Godfather* trilogy, *The Wire* begins with a compelling narrative segment (season 1) that is firmly positioned within the genre, and lets the second segment perform the dramatic rupture. Titled "The Port," season 2 focuses on the loss of blue-collar jobs at the docks, the weakening of unions, and the rise of global capitalism—a dramatic shift that felt like it was introducing an entirely new series. Not only is a new set of characters introduced, but their networked crimes go global. The mysterious bad guy (played by Bill Raymond) is called "the Greek," though his "muscle" is Ukrainian and Israeli, and the new crime family is East European, as are the prostitutes being illegally imported and victimized. This move evokes another cinematic precursor about dock workers (made by a Greek)—Elia Kazan's Oscar-winning *On the Waterfront* (1954). The evocation encourages us to compare what has happened in the interim not only to the unions but also to the rivalries between movies and television for hyper-realistic representation and systemic analysis, as if the narrative format of cinema is now insufficiently expansive for covering the complex networked society. The tragic ending of season 2 was even bleaker than that of its cinematic precursor, with two generations of the Sobotka family totally wiped out and with the only survivors being the cops, the female love interest Beadie Russell (Amy Ryan), who hooks up with Jimmy McNulty (Dominic West) in season 3, and the mysterious Greeks. This allusion also underscores Simon's claim that his primary dramatic model is Greek tragedy, where characters with potential are doomed by larger forces (in this case failing institutions rather than fickle gods). This is the season that feels most unified and self-contained. According to Simon, they got it right and had nothing more to say on this subject. This season performed its function of raising the series to a systemic level of tragedy.

THE CONFLICT BETWEEN SYSTEMIC ANALYSIS AND EMOTIONAL SUTURE

In season 2 we also begin to experience a conflict between this systemic analysis of Baltimore and our emotional engagement with the characters with whom we choose to identify. Although in season 1 it's the combination of these two dimensions that define the uniqueness of *The Wire*, over the arc of the series the conflict between them keeps building until it reaches a climax in season 5, with the storyline of the fake serial killer. Significantly, this scheme is concocted by McNulty as a "creative" way of getting the funding Homicide needs to take down the reigning drug lord, Marlo Stanfield. But by the end of the series, viewers are forced to choose between their commitment to a sympathetic character like McNulty or to the truth, which, as in tragedy, is made to seem an absolute value, only because characters are willing to sacrifice anything for it.

Despite the emphasis on black characters, from the very first episode *The Wire* tempts us into thinking that Jimmy McNulty might be the protagonist of the series. Not only is he one of the cops who provide continuity across all five seasons, but he gets the first credit in the opening titles and his face was prominently featured on the posters and on the cover of season 1's DVD. Although Simon claims he cast British actor Dominic West because all the American actors who read for the part had seen too many American cop series and were unable to go beyond the stereotypes, McNulty evokes Al Pacino's Serpico (who is mentioned in one of the episodes)—a self-destructive, white anti-hero who has trouble with authority and whom many female characters find appealing. The fact that he fits this stereotype becomes ironic in season 5 when an FBI psychologist profiling the alleged serial killer comes up with a description that perfectly evokes McNulty. The show continues to monitor McNulty's ups and downs (on the job, on and off the wagon, and in and out of relationships with women), perhaps because, like the black, gay drug addict Bubbles (one of the most likeable characters in the series, played by Andre Royo), he is willing to accept blame for his own actions and their impact on other underdogs.

Since no single individual can solve all of the systemic problems raised in the series, we soon realize that it's the relations that count. From the beginning we are led to compare McNulty with at least three other sets of characters. First, he is compared with his former black partners in the Homicide Division: Bunk Moreland (Wendell Pierce), who is more reliable and less flashy, and his subsequent partner, Kima Greggs, a lesbian who shares similar domestic problems with her partner that McNulty experiences with his ex-wife. Despite McNulty's close emotional ties to both, they harshly condemn his "fake serial killer" plot. Secondly, McNulty is compared to two brainy black cops who share his antagonism toward authority and his passion for inventing creative ways of fighting crime. Yet their schemes (unlike McNulty's) are *not* based on lies. Lester Freamon (Clarke Peters) designs the original plan for wire-tapping the Barksdale gang, and thus is willing to use resources from the fake serial killer plot to revive his own scheme. Bunny Colvin (Robert Wisdom) sets up



Clockwise from top left: the docks, smugglers' diner, newsroom, school

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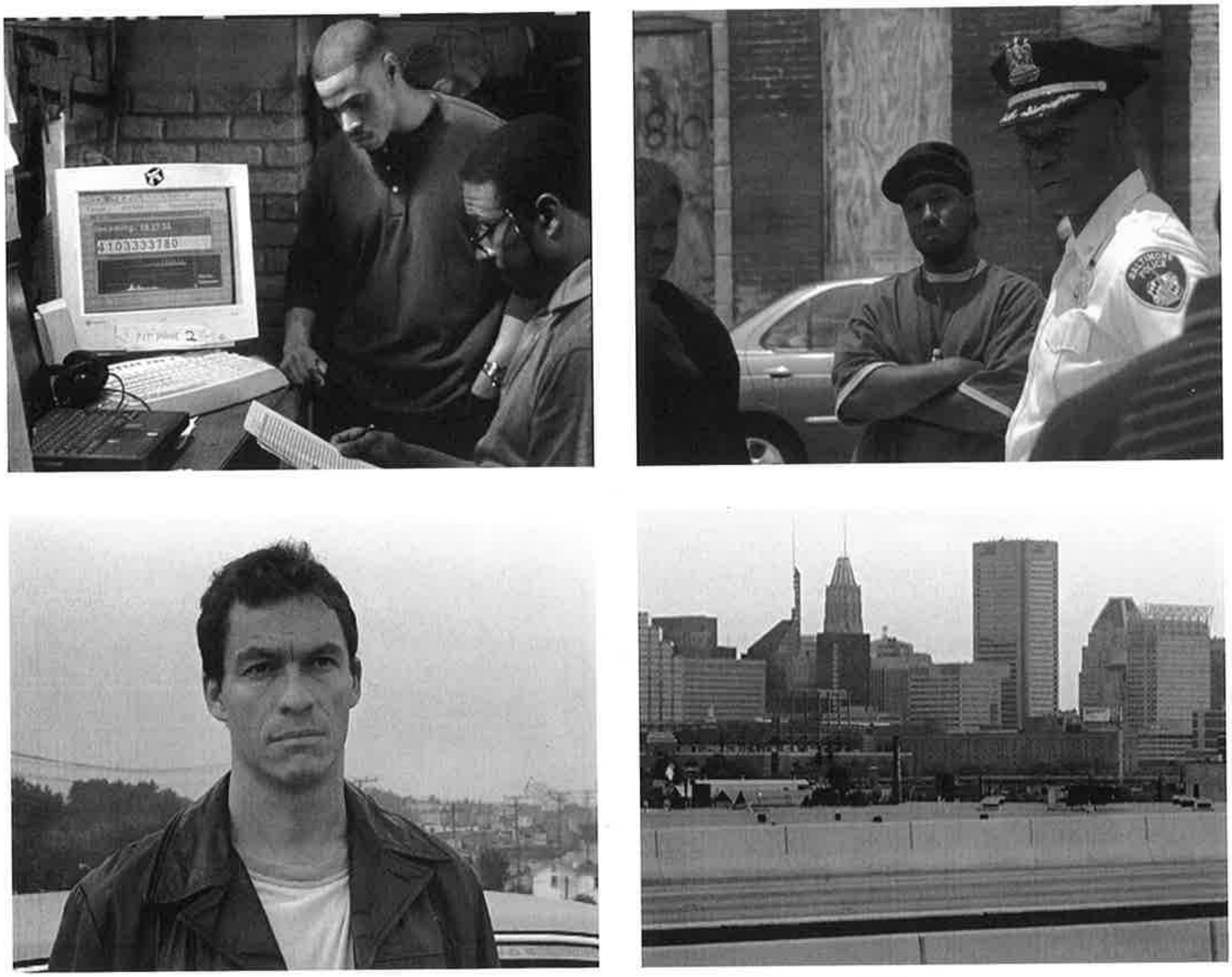
an unauthorized buffer zone called "Hamsterdam" where dealers and addicts are not arrested, a scheme (like McNulty's) that enables cops to focus on other more important crimes. Although this plan brings down Baltimore's crime rate, Bunny is forced to retire. The schemes of all three characters prove successful, yet once the authorities discover them, the outcomes are reversed, which demonstrates there's something terribly wrong with public policy. All three schemes demonstrate that individuals *can* make a difference, even if they can't single-handedly solve all of Baltimore's systemic problems.

McNulty is also compared with two deceptive white men from other sectors, who at first seem to have enormous potential. In season 3, Thomas Carcetti (Aiden Gillen) wins the electoral race for mayor as "the great white hope," but by the end of the season proves to be just as corrupt as the black politicians he replaced. Carcetti's connection to McNulty is strengthened by their boyish good looks and their sexual involvement with the same powerful woman (Carcetti's abrasive, campaign manager, Theresa D'Agostino, played by Brandy Burre). In season 5, McNulty's compared to the ambitious journalist Scott Templeton (Tom McCarthy), who also fabricates stories. Early in the season, McNulty says, "I wonder what it feels like to work in a real fucking police department," a line later echoed by Scott: "I wonder what it's like to work at a real newspaper." Although it's easy to condemn both Carcetti and Templeton as self-centered careerists with their eyes on the prize (the governor's mansion or a Pulitzer), it's harder to condemn a self-destructive figure like McNulty, whose motives are rarely self-serving. He plays Huck Finn to their Tom Sawyers, yet all three schemers become (as McNulty puts it in the final episode) "trapped in the same lie." The plot of the fake serial killer violates the commitment to truth and realism that *The Wire* demands



Clockwise from top left: Freamon's wire, "Hamsterdam," Baltimore cityscape, McNulty

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throughout the series. In the final season we are forced to choose between our commitment to a truthful systemic analysis and our emotional engagement with McNulty, a painful choice already made by his former partners—by Russell (who was ready to leave him), Bunk (who continually condemns him), and Greggs (who exposes the plot to Commissioner Daniels, played by Lance Reddick).

Without betraying McNulty, Bunk chooses the truth, which is hardly surprising. In the first episode of the final season, one of Bunk's lines of dialogue is chosen as an epigraph: "The bigger the lie, the more they believe." Though Bunk was referring to standard interrogation methods found on most conventional cop series, *The Wire* makes us read it (like the other epigraphs) systemically—emphasizing its resonance across the entire series. Like Bunk, the series ultimately chooses truth over emotion, a priority that distinguishes *The Wire* from other TV crime series, yet it acknowledges that many of its careerist characters still stick with the lie. When his fake plot is exposed and he's still not arrested, McNulty rewrites Bunk's line: "The lie's so big, people can't live with it."

That's why *The Wire* ends with the media and focuses on the city newspaper, an institution whose mission is to discover and disseminate the truth. Yet city newspapers across America are rapidly disappearing. Forced to compete with the Internet as a primary source of news, they can no longer afford to retain expensive international bureaus (which are supposed to gather rather than merely remix the news). And their local coverage is forced to compete with the entertainment model of television journalism. According to Simon, in some ways papers like the *Baltimore Sun* may *deserve* to disappear because they have failed to cover the most important stories in their city, a journalistic task that has been taken over by his own fictional TV series. *The Wire* clearly blames these failed institutions more than the individual criminals they create and destroy. As Snoop puts it, just before she is whacked, "Deserve got nothin' to do with it."

Before the first episode of this final season had been broadcast, some critics were already claiming that its analysis of the media would be less complex and more Manichean than that found in earlier seasons, perhaps anticipating the usual endgame for a series. Or maybe it was because the final season was focusing on Simon's former home base, the *Baltimore Sun,* where he had worked several years as a crime reporter (and might have personal scores to settle). But no matter how thorough the show's indictment against the media might be, *The Wire* itself is still a powerful counter-example—even though it attracted a relatively small audience (around four million viewers per episode, less than half of what *The Sopranos* normally drew). Despite all the critical praise (for its innovative structure, hyper-realism, and brilliant array of black characters), *The Wire* never won an Emmy (whereas *The Sopranos* won twenty-two). Maybe its cast was too black and its analysis too systemic for middle America. Yet, *The Wire* still stands out as a subversive alternative—one that maintains the delicate balance between hope and desperation and makes Snoop's dying words reflexive: "Deserve got nothin' to do with it."

THE FINAL EPISODE: SYSTEMIC CLOSURE

The final ninety-minute episode leverages a number of *The Wire*'s earlier strategies to deliver narrative closure while still maintaining systemic suture. The system of rewards and punishments remains consistent with Snoop's realistic analysis. Corrupt careerists like Templeton, Carcetti, Commissioner Bill Rawls (John Doman), and double-dealing Herc Hauk (Domenisk Lombardozzi) are rewarded for their dishonesty with big prizes or promotions. In contrast, those with integrity who tried to improve the system—Daniels, McNulty, Freamon, and honest reporter Alma Gutierrez (Michelle Paress)—are shut out of their institutions where their commitment could (or should) have made a difference. Yet the systemic analysis also enables us to perceive a generational pattern of replacements that might leave us with a glimmer of hope. Michael (Tristan Wilds) steps up to replace Omar; Marlo is forced to follow the path pioneered by Stringer; and (if he's lucky and honest) Dukie (Jermaine Crawford), whose parents were junkies, begins the painful cycle of addiction and recovery that was earlier pursued by Bubbles. As the only character in the series who deserves the modest reward he receives, Bubbles is the one exception to this corrupt system of injustice: for, he is finally welcomed upstairs and allowed to dine with his sister and nephew. Unlike the others, he can go home again. As actress Sonja Sohn puts it, "Bubbles is the only character on the whole show that represents hope, and hope that has succeeded at the end of the series" (*Los Angeles Times*, E22).

Yet McNulty also reaps both rewards and punishments. Once his fake serial killer plot is exposed by his former partner Greggs, he has to relinquish his job as detective, which has been the center of his life. Like Freamon, Alma, and Marlo, he can't go home again. Yet his refusal to blame all the fake murders on the copycat killer helps him regain other positions that easily could have been lost. He is allowed to stay at home in the relationship with Russell; he is paired with Freamon as "partners in crime"; he is eulogized by Sergeant Jay Landsman (Delaney Williams) in his "fake wake" as "the black sheep" who is "natural po-lice"); and, perhaps most important, he re-emerges as potential protagonist. In the process, our emotional engagement with him is restored. Besides being the center of attention at the wake, McNulty is singled out from the ensemble cast in several long takes. These singular moments with McNulty are followed by montage sequences either of Baltimore's cityscape, the fates of other characters, or the city's ordinary citizens, sequences that use the ensemble to reaffirm systemic analysis. Thus the combination of emotional engagement and systemic analysis is restored, and we are left having it both ways: the protagonist is both McNulty and the city of Baltimore, both the individual and the ensemble.

The interplay between individuals and ensemble is also emphasized by a series of key words and phrases that recur throughout the episode like a musical refrain. Some of the phrases express fear ("keep my name out of it"); other words are more hopeful—like the recuperation of "clean" (as in Gus's "I remember clean" and Daniels's insistence on "clean stats"), and the reaffirmation of "home" (which reasserts *The Wire*'s commitment to Baltimore). In this final episode, although several characters refer to the many meanings of home, it is McNulty who gets the last word. As he stands at the side of the freeway, looking at the cityscape, he turns to the homeless man he has brought back to Baltimore, and says: "Let's go home."

Illustrations for this article were selected by Victor Bautissta.

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KEYWORDS David Simon, *The Wire,* Baltimore, serial tragedy, systemic suture

ABSTRACT *The Wire* is distinguished by the depth of its systemic analysis of Baltimore's urban corruption and by the emotional power it elicits. By presenting so many vibrant characters with enormous potential and showing how our culture is wired to destroy them, it creates serial tragedy with a systemic form of suture.

THE LOST BOYS OF BALTIMORE: BEAUTY AND DESIRE IN THE HOOD

JAMES S. WILLIAMS ARGUES THAT *THE WIRE* PUSHES THE BOUNDARIES OF RACE, TELEVISION REALISM, AND SPECTATORSHIP

One of the many glories of *The Wire* is the way it blows apart the traditional limits in depicting African Americans on television. We have at last a program that covers almost every major aspect of urban black life; that cuts across age, class, and sexuality; and captures in each case the appropriate idiom, including authentic street vernacular. This achievement survives the shaky final series, where some of the show's most potent and groundbreaking black characters are either written out (Omar peremptorily felled by a kid gangsta), reduced to caricature (the dynamic, out-lesbian detective Greggs reversed into a demure and practically desexualized part-time foster-mother), or simply lose their way (cool sleuth Freamon allowing himself to become mired in the improbable plot to fabricate a serial killer).[†] One might wonder, too, why it is that Bubbles has to clean up his act so literally in order to emerge from underground and take his place at the table, renouncing in the process all trace of his earlier life of addiction on the streets, including his propensity for intense male relationships. These are questions that will no doubt be analyzed at length in the context of *The Wire*'s general politics of representation and its success in not only exposing the fatal ideology of racist thinking and profiling but also critiquing and transcending it (for example, the recurring association of "black" with dirt, as when Officer Colicchio states after being tricked by some corner boys into picking up a brown bag of dog excrement as opposed to a drug stash: "They're all dirty anyway").

What I would like to do here is something very specific: to explore the representation of black masculinity and sexuality in *The Wire*. My inquiry is inspired by the brilliant way the show establishes and develops a range of clearly defined homosocial spaces, from the crack dens of the hood and the gangsta boardroom to the office detail, prison, neighborhood gym, and high-school classroom. These produce a series of close male buddy relationships between, for instance, Bunk and McNulty, Michael and Duquan, Carver and Hauk, and, of course, Bubbles with first his white junkie sidekick Johnny, then the young black addict Sherrod. They also create a proliferation of competing father figures, including Cutty, Colvin, Proposition Joe, Prez, Carver, even Marlo, who oversee the perilous passage from boyhood to manhood in the ghetto and help to make the fourth season set in the public school system perhaps the most gut-wrenching. Yet these are only the most obvious thematic and narrative markers of black masculinity, and do not account for all the mysteries and complexities of male representation in *The Wire*. What I will attempt to do, therefore, is focus on the specifically visual and stylistic features that recur in the show, no matter the different directors, directors of photography, and editors involved. I hope in the process to reveal some of the concrete reasons why the show makes for such original and utterly compulsive viewing.

Let us first fully acknowledge that *The Wire* is propelled by the crude and often sordid vocabulary of homoerotic innuendo and homophobic machismo. At one extreme is the playfully aggressive linguistic dicking around by police officers that serves to bond them together. Bunk to a fellow black colleague: "Did he [McNulty] fuck you?"; "He fucked himself." Nothing is left unverbalized in the unit, and the term "homoerotic" is even employed by Landsman in the very last episode. At the other extreme is the endemic misogyny of gangsta-speak where words like "bitch," "bushwhacker" and "faggot" carry far greater weight. Homosexuality can never be simply a laughing matter in the ghetto, and the corner boys frighteningly in advance of their years are always watching their backs, literally. Indeed, a destructive, almost primitive fear and paranoia stalks the hood. The physical threat of Omar—a lone gay wolf referred to as "dicksucker" and, in even more ugly abbreviated form, "dick-suck"—is permanent and real. In the case of the adolescent Michael, his continual need to assert his masculinity is born out of a profound inse-

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