Serial engagements : viewer allegiance and contemporary crime television

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SINGAPORE

**SERIAL ENGAGEMENTS: VIEWER
ALLEGIANCE AND CONTEMPORARY CRIME
TELEVISION**

**SARAVANAN MANI
SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES**

2020

Serial Engagements: Viewer Allegiance and Contemporary Crime Television

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School of Humanities

A thesis submitted to the Nanyang Technological University in partial
fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

2020

Statement of Originality

I certify that all work submitted for this thesis is my original work. I declare that no other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement. Except where it is clearly stated that I have used some of this material elsewhere, this work has not been presented by me for assessment in any other institution or University. I certify that the investigations were conducted in accordance with the ethics policies and integrity standards of Nanyang Technological University and that the research data are presented honestly and without prejudice.

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I have reviewed the content of this thesis and to the best of my knowledge, it does not contain plagiarised materials. The presentation style is also consistent with what is expected of the degree awarded. To the best of my knowledge, the research and writing are those of the candidate except as acknowledged in the Author Attribution Statement. I confirm that the investigations were conducted in accordance with the ethics policies and integrity standards of Nanyang Technological University and that the research data are presented honestly and without prejudice.

4 August 2019

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kevin Riordan', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Kevin Riordan

Authorship Attribution Statement

This thesis contains material from 1 paper accepted to be published in an edited book, 1 paper accepted at conference and 8 blog entries in which I am listed as an author.

Chapter 5 contains material from the forthcoming essay titled “Not So Black and White: Race, Police and Double Standards in *The Shield*” to be published in the essay collection *Representations of African American Professionals on TV Series Since the 1990s* edited by LaToya T. Brackett. McFarland (2020, forthcoming).

Chapter 5 contains materials adapted from a conference paper titled “Cultures of Violence and Justice in *The Shield*” collected in *Questions of Cultural Value: The London Film & Media Reader 5* (2017), edited by Philip Drummond.

Chapter 2 contains material adapted from a series of longer posts discussing the history of TV Studies from the personal blog www.screenethics.com, titled “Previously on American TV.”

Chapter 6 contains material adapted from a series of longer posts discussing the Rodney King video from the personal blog www.screenethics.com, titled “Rodney King Retrospective.”

7 August 2019

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Date

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Saravanan Mani

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SUMMARY

What is the “good” of watching TV? Despite the many technological advancements, formal experiments, and narrative innovations over the past 70 years, TV texts are still treated collectively as passive, distracting, and distracted entertainment that bear little value for its viewers. Cultural studies scholars from the 1970s position TV as mass media, without differentiating the individual texts and their narrative constructions. Since TV studies emerged from cultural studies, its methods continue to relegate the textual dimensions of TV in favor of its technological and sociological aspects. Among the many dimensions of the viewer–TV relationship, this study examines the viewers’ response to serial engagement with narrative TV programs built over a long period of time. By bringing together approaches from literary criticism, TV studies, and image studies, my project examines the social, political, and ethical value of the viewers’ relationship with TV texts.

The close analysis of three longform TV crime dramas from the 2000s—*The Wire*, *The Shield*, and *Breaking Bad*—examines how TV texts build on their genre and engage with contemporary social crises. Chapter 1 sets up the premise of the thesis by arguing that the “good” of TV lies in the viewer-text relationship informed by TV’s serial conventions, since they elicit responses beyond narrative engagement. Chapter 2 examines historical debates in TV studies and argues that an exceptional approach that privileges some TV texts and genres further harms the perception of TV in the public eye. This study argues that the value of TV texts arises from conventions native to their respective genres. Then, chapter 3 offers a close textual analysis of antiheroic protagonists from *The Shield* and *Breaking Bad* to examine the significance of viewer allegiance to terrible behavior on screen. Chapter 4 presents an overview of viewer engagement with law and order narratives represented in police dramas. It attends to the basis of procedure and ethics offered by such shows. Chapter 5 furthers the analysis of distortion and representation of police procedure in *The Wire* and *The Shield*. It examines the ways in which narrative and ethical priorities compete for viewer attention in police dramas. Chapter 6 concludes the thesis by looking at how meta-textual aspects of TV shows shape viewer alignment and offering possible avenues of expanding the project for future iterations. Thus, the study aims to carve out a space for a literary approach to TV texts.

Chapter 1: The ‘Good’ of Watching TV

The first episode of *Breaking Bad* (AMC, Vince Gilligan, 2008–13) opens with three unhurried shots of the New Mexico desert, followed by a pair of khaki trousers floating through the air with a belt still on the waistband, slowly falling to the ground. A middle-aged man in his underpants is driving an RV while wearing a gas mask. Unable to control the vehicle, he crashes to a halt against a bush and stumbles out of the trailer. On hearing a siren at a distance, he reenters the RV to retrieve a gun, a wallet, and a video camera before dashing out of the vehicle. As the siren approaches, he starts recording a message on the camera, stating that his name is Walter Hartwell White (Walt). The camera angle shifts from a side close-up to the point of view of the handheld camera as he declares that the video is “not an admission of guilt. I am speaking to my family now.” Before he continues, Walt covers the camera lens with his palm as he gathers his resolve for the rest of the message. Walt makes a trembling, heartfelt appeal to his family saying that “there are going to be some things... you’ll come to learn about me... I just want you to know that no matter how it may look I only had you in my heart. Goodbye.”

This ominous declaration intrigues the viewers, as it hints at a dangerous world that this seemingly harmless man is entangled in. Walt’s disruption of the viewer’s access to the visual scape calls into question TV’s more general negotiation with the viewer. The impending sense of doom and the finality of his message draw the viewers’ interest with the promise of a dark and thrilling tale. As Walt wordlessly walks to the road and draws the gun, pointing it at the direction of the siren, the screen cuts away to the now-iconic guitar riff of the title credits. This scene serves as a ‘hook’ for the rest of the episode and it cultivates viewer allegiance for the series. On first viewing, this scene offers a strange context (the other-worldly New Mexican desert) juxtaposed with familiar elements (well-known comedic actor Bryan Cranston playing a

character who addresses his family), creating an intriguing scenario. As Babette Tischleder notes, “the diverse settings of a series are usually established early on and are revisited from episode to episode, producing a growing familiarity with places and characters over time” (“Thickening Seriality” 122). Similarly, for the engaged or even the repeat viewer, the desert setting of the scene is a contrast between Walt’s near-justifiable beginnings and his terrible end. His desperate plea is an appeal to his family, and by extension – the viewers, to not judge him too harshly and consider the circumstances of his actions. For the engaged viewer, Walt’s video recording seeks a response that goes beyond the desire to merely know what happens next. Their familiarity with the text allows them to consider the thematic and symbolic resonances in the show. The encounter places an ethical responsibility on the viewer, to critically engage with the meaning of their relationship with Walter White. What does their continued investment in the character and the show reveal about their own lives and their viewing context? What is the nature of their response to a character who has carried out terrible things in the narrative world? And what effect does the narrative elements have on their perception of their own world? This study analyzes the mechanics of the sustained viewer engagement with TV texts and add to the conversation about the value of the viewers’ experience of TV.

In order to attend to the significant ethical dynamics of the viewer’s encounter, this project requires a broader, empowered sense of textual reading. Derek Attridge argues for “creative reading” as a way of fully experiencing the possibilities in the text. He writes:

To respond responsibly to a work, then, is, in the first place, to read attentively and, in the second place, to read with an openness to that which one has never encountered before. An attentive reading, deploying all the codes and conventions one regards as relevant to

the work, is the necessary foundation for the second kind of reading, what might be called ‘literary’ or ‘creative’ reading (*The Work of Literature* 72–73).

The aim of this study is to offer a literary perspective that arises from a deeply engaged and sustained relationship between the viewer and the text. Attridge explains that the need to read creatively is to ensure that the reading resists stock responses triggered by specific situations and linguistic use, while also not allowing the criticism to amorously subjective responses that have no basis in the text. Attridge emphasizes the importance of being alert to the relationship between individual text and the general field of its norms and conventions. He notes that the “response to that [particular] text is singular” and the critic’s obligation is to acknowledge its textual singularity (*The Work of Literature* 115). Thus, creative reading offers nuanced textual criticism that unique way in which the text opens the viewer towards alterity.

This project takes for granted that contemporary TV texts are worthy of this same kind of engaged scrutiny given their complexity, as Jason Mittell and Alberto García have shown. Within the context of Television, Noël Carroll similarly calls for an exploration of the complex ways in which viewers relate to the serial narrative in his analysis of *The Sopranos*. When examining the pro-attitude elicited by terrible characters on TV, Carroll rejects formulaic explanations including identification, wish-fulfilment, and sympathy.¹ This project moves this important conversation further by examining the implications of viewer response to TV texts beyond current approaches to affective and narrative engagements. It argues that a deeper and more evaluative response is created through the viewers’ familiarity with the narrative world.

¹ See Noël Carroll’s “Sympathy for the devil,” in *The Sopranos and Philosophy*, (Eds.) Richard Greene and Peter Vernezze.

Their prolonged exposure to the narrative produces a more nuanced reading that is alert to the ethical and political implications of the narrative world.

The “creative reading” method places equal importance on both the reception as well as textual aspects of the reading experience. When the reader goes beyond merely reading the text for information and endeavors to bring out the text’s operations to fruition, they come into contact with something entirely other, “which is, at a given moment, outside the horizon provided by the culture for thinking, understanding, imagining, feeling, perceiving” (*The Singularity of Literature* 19). This encounter with the Otherness is a way of ethically engaging with the reader. Attridge’s description of such an encounter is applicable to visual texts like TV, as the engaged viewer relates to it both as a serial encounter as well as a complex text. The engaged viewer in this study is not defined by their social, geographical, cultural, or gendered position, but by their commitment to the text. This is not to say that these aspects are irrelevant to TV viewing, as they offer vital perspectives about important issues. While this study borrows heavily from the vocabulary and questions generated by these approaches, it resists reading texts with preconceived notions of what the lessons from the text ought to be. Instead, it examines the unique experience generated through a creative reading of the text. In this case, as Attridge points out, the ideal viewer is anyone with “the openness to new thoughts and feelings, the readiness to be surprised, the capacity for careful attention that literature demands” (*The Work of Literature* 23).

The opening scene of *Breaking Bad* plays a vital role even if its narrative significance is not immediately evident. It is a narrative trope that alerts the viewers to the textual possibilities, as the show’s heightened sense of dramatic consequences is perfectly captured in its opening moments. The scene’s construction makes them curious about the events that lead to and fall out

from that moment. The decontextualized scene that teases the episode—the cold open—calls the viewers to form their expectations for the show. Adopting one of the conventions of Greek drama, the story begins in the middle of the action. The abruptness of the break does not disengage the viewers' attention, but rather surprises the viewers, making them seek answers about the narrative world: Who is Walter White? Why is he wearing a gas mask? What is he afraid of his family finding out? Although first-time viewers may not consider the critical or evaluative implications of the character, they engage with the mystery of the text that needs resolution. Regardless of the familiarity with the text, the cold open urges the viewers to continue watching the show by interrupting the viewing experience. By shifting away from Walt's tense situation and offering a view of the events leading up to his circumstances, the text asks the viewers to consider the choices and the limits that build the scene in the desert.

The narrative disruption found across most TV texts allows the viewers to choose to return to the text; be it after the commercial break, or the longer breaks between episodes and seasons of the show. And while digital video streaming has reduced the wait time between episodes in a single season by releasing them all at the same time, the viewers' serial engagement transpires on different scales, as they still wait for long periods of time between seasons. In the absence of scheduled interruptions like advertisements and other programs, the viewer is temporarily taken out of the immersive experience with the end credits and are made to choose if they want to continue to the next episode. Thus, narrative disruption becomes a method of cultivating serial engagement by the show's producers in the viewers as the strategically placed breaks offer points of reflection about the text.

Despite seemingly taking the viewers out of the viewing experience, the break in the narrative prompts viewers to choose to return to the text. The interruptions caused by the

advertisement breaks and title credits are integral aspects of the TV text's form, as they allow viewers to evaluate the meaning of things they have just seen and consider the possibilities of what could happen next. The structural and narrative interruptions draw viewers' attention to the artificiality of the medium by amplifying the frame of the TV encounter. The interruptions prevent viewers from completely being immersed in a narrative world and blocks them from accepting the experiences offered uncritically. The viewer brings their own memories of settings, actors, and scenarios to bear on the present watching experience. Bryan Cranston's erstwhile performance as Hal Wilkerson from the comedy *Malcolm in the Middle* (Fox, 2000–2006) was an iconic light-hearted TV fixture—a character also best known for traipsing around in his white underwear—and a striking contrast to the grim and vulnerable Walter White.

The dissonance created between the images and their significance offers a sharp insight for the viewers with a wider pop-culture knowledge. In fact, actor Bryan Cranston explains the underlying significance of the visual symmetry between the two characters in “tighty whitey” underwear as follows, “why would a grown man wear a boy’s underwear? Hal wore them because he always wore them, and it never occurred to him to wear anything else. He is still a boy. Walter White wore them because he stopped growing... He has given up” (“Bryan Cranston Talks”). Walt’s failure to grow gestures towards his stunted career, where he falls from once being “a former contributor to [a research project] awarded the Nobel prize, to become equated to anyone with a pedestrian understanding of chemistry” (Freeley “The Economy of Time” 39). The first episode’s contrast between the glory of earlier work and his present vulnerability calls viewers to reflect on his deteriorating social circumstances. Freeley notes that the contrast in his circumstances forces Walt to shift his focus from “time remaining to time lost” (38). The

viewers' sustained engagement allows them to both experience the ludic play of solving the narrative puzzle, as well as critically reflect on the implications of the narrative elements.

The well-timed and predictable intervals are useful to tease new information, structure prolonged anticipation between segments of an episode, a season, and the entire series, as well as developing a serial engagement that evolves concurrently with the lived experiences of the viewer and the narrative experiences of the characters. The perpetual uncertainty that looms during the moments of waiting for the TV text to resume encourages viewers to cultivate a long-standing relationship with its characters and narrative. Not only does the viewer encounter the text at a specific time, but they also face the possibility of the show never reaching its completion due to reasons extraneous to the plot.² The uncertainty of TV created by its seriality holds the potential to address social, political and ethical questions in a way that other “complete” visual texts like cinema cannot. As viewers experience the duration between two consecutive viewing experiences, be it the next episode or the next season, they think about the consequences from unresolved narrative elements, while anticipating various developments for the show. The period of waiting allows the viewers to endure the possibilities of the text.

As Pulitzer-winning serial journalist Tom French puts it, the power of “a serialized narrative has to do with that delicious sense of enforced waiting” (“Serial Narratives”). TV’s forced waiting is comparable to paragraph breaks and brusque sentences for French, since they both break the reader’s flow, prompting them to ruminate over the textual meaning. TV’s episodic breaks not only strengthen our narrative engagement for what comes next but also give pause for viewers to consider the way characters evolve across episodes. Ironically, TV’s

² The 2000s TV graveyard of critical darlings that were cancelled too soon is populated with shows like *Firefly* (Fox 2002), *Terriers* (FX 2010), and *Luck* (HBO 2012).

commercialized mode and its many interruptions are among the reasons for dismissing its potential as an important narrative and cultural medium, as critics view it as an advertisement delivery mechanism. This feature of TV viewership strengthens viewer loyalty to characters and complicates the ethical encounter, making it worthy of closer scrutiny.

The narrative disruption stages the mystery of the unknown and allows viewers to experience narrative information as a novelty during their first encounter of the text, and to live with the characters and their yet unresolved attitudes and crises. The narrative disruption also plays another function when the engaged viewers re-watch the text. Since revisiting and re-watching have become more easily possible with the emergence of stored media and instant access to older shows, repeated encounters allow viewers to cumulatively examine the impact of the show as they notice narrative and stylistic elements that they missed on first viewing.³ Rather than lowering the impact, the viewers familiarity with the narrative enhances these repeat viewings by allowing viewers to discover new layers of inventiveness that were eclipsed by other elements in the first viewing. Attridge terms this phenomenon, the “repeated suspense,” since “knowing how a fictional narrative ends need not diminish the experience of increasing tension during the reading” (*Singularity* 89). This phenomenon serves as the bedrock of serialized narratives, as TV viewers often re-evaluate their opinions about different narrative elements with repeated viewings. Other serialized texts such as comic books and serialized novels from 19th century also engage their readers similarly. However, the nearly perpetual continuation of comic books leads for its serial memory to be selectively enforced and dismissed according to the

³ See Horace Newcomb’s essay “Magnum: The Champagne of TV?” for a compelling case about the cumulative nature of TV experiences.

current narrative.⁴ TV dramas, on the other hand, are conceived with an end goal, even if it is deferred due to other factors.

The engaged viewer delves more on the ethical possibilities of the text's meaning in repeated encounters which allows them to "remain well aware of the fabricated (and authored) nature" of the text (*Singularity* 89). While re-watching, we labor upon the strangeness of the text and its departure from our own idioculture—the sum of social, political, and ideological influences that shape our viewing positions. Thus, in examining the viewers' experience of the text, we are also inherently addressing a secondary question about which is the most inventive aspect of the text. Since textual inventiveness is not something predicated entirely on the viewers interpretation, it arises from textual features that combine familiar and strange elements to surprising effect. Attridge notes that "the inventiveness of a literary work can, in part, be measured by its capacity to be re-read without loss of power" (*Singularity* 89). In fact, he distinguishes between literary and other texts on the basis that "works that operate as literary works of art tend to gain richness and power with re-reading, while those that are literature only in the broad, classificatory sense tend to gain nothing, and perhaps to lose something" (*The Work of Literature* 16). The TV text subtly alters the characters and narratives, and calls viewers to reflect on the degree to which they have changed.

Attridge's characterization of literary value offers another mode of engaging with the TV experience, since TV texts have been designed for repeated encounters ever since the emergence of re-runs in the 1950s. In his discussion of Over-The-Top (OTT) TV services, John Hartley comments that TV's greater complexity is a direct result of greater viewer freedom. Jason Jacobs

⁴ Comic book narratives provide a particularly compelling parallel, as they too stage the conflict between good and evil. However, they are more mercurial due to their longevity and changes in production and reception landscapes. TV has a coherence forced upon it by the limited span of a few years within which the characters evolve.

and Steven Peacock comment that the traditional understanding of TV as a throwaway medium is linked to its broadcasting past with a fixed schedule and a presumed live-ness. They note that “the advent of VCR, DVD and PVR has changed this relationship, allowing repeat viewings of individual series, episodes and moments” (*Television Aesthetics and Style* 7). These changes have altered the way we access TV texts and strengthened our serial engagement. They wrest away the scheduling authority from networks to create a more focused viewing environment. Hartley writes that “television’s domestic setting, live immediacy, leisure - time availability, casual continuity, operational simplicity (two knobs), and the human scale of its screen were all suited to the context in which it thrived best: private life and family – building in conditions of expanding consumer affluence, otherwise known as the suburban experience” (*Digital Futures* 119). The changes in the operational simplicity that Hartley refers to highlights the kind of viewer profile that contemporary prestige dramas seek to cultivate.

Since viewers control the viewing experience, they can watch as many episodes in any order they want. However, in encounters of new texts, the viewers still experience the episodes sequentially, and the narrative operates on our prior encounters with seriality to build the narrative from one episode to the next. In fact, newer texts take advantage of the viewers’ ability to go back and re-watch critical or inscrutable moments from prior episodes to offer texts with even more intricate and complex seriality. Even though Hartley considers continuity in TV as “a representative model of the broadcasting relationship” (121), it remains a central feature of nearly all TV experiences. As Jason Mittell observes “television’s narrative complexity is predicated on specific facets of storytelling that seem uniquely suited to the series structure that sets television apart from film” (“Narrative Complexity” 29). The limited duration of engagement with 22 or 44-minute episodes, and sustained, repetitive serial encounters expands

the viewers' capacity for narrative complexity, as the incremental addition of new elements allows them to co-construct the narrative world.

The affordance of re-watching is an important aspect that creates the conditions of viewer experience described in this study. It is not that re-watchability is an exclusive feature of the contemporary text, considering that older shows were particularly designed to be distributed across a broader syndication network without concerns of series continuity. The difference is that re-watching is now an active encounter that systematizes previously incidental encounters. This allows them to fully experience the non-linear nature of narrative seriality, as the viewers can come back to earlier moments in the narrative and reinterpret events in view of new narrative and extra-textual information available to them. In the case of the opening scene from *Breaking Bad*, the narrative leaves Walt with the gun and retraces his steps to that moment only at the end of the episode. The viewer, with new information, sees the situation in a different light. Viewers who re-watch the scene are not intrigued by the mystery of the show but by their own concern for Walt's fate. The text achieves this idea of moving through time by intercutting moments from earlier events in contrast with newer scenes.

The viewers' repeated and incremental familiarity with the text allows for latent encounters with characters which present a variety of social, economic, ideological and political positions. TV texts interrupt the complacency of the viewers' perspectives through unresolvable narrative questions. Even though TV texts are produced by corporations, "tight institutional control what is produced in the medium cannot control how it is made sense of, cannot prevent dissenting interpretation" (Tim Dant 3). TV serves a discursive function by presenting a wide range of perspectives and opinions. TV's seriality leads viewers to consider unresolved narrative

issues and allows them to relate to the text in more nuanced ways. Thus, the narrative uncertainty brought about by seriality distinguishes TV encounters from other narrative experiences.

TV remains to be a socially significant medium and scholars from different disciplines continue to write about its various aspects. Horace Newcomb notes that he is not concerned about the specific aspect that is being written about, as long as the research offers more insight into why TV continues to be important (“Studying Television: Same Questions, Different Contexts” 111). I argue that the unique viewer-text relationship deserves more attention from textual and literary perspectives. The literary method sharpens the cultural studies approach which focuses largely on the broader implication of production and reception of a text and the meaning it generates in society. It also shows how TV continues to lurk at the margins of cultural studies while it is at the forefront of narrative innovation. While mass media approaches like media effects theory and cultivation theory have produced remarkable scholarship about TV’s role as a medium, their emphasis on the statistical measurement of viewership does not lend itself to an examination of the viewer-text relationship as social and ethical experience. Instead, this study draws threads from textual, industrial and reception contexts to address social, political and ethical implications of encountering TV. I believe that this study tries to establish TV’s continuing significance for the individuated viewer, who finds camaraderie, comfort, and at times, critical self-evaluation in TV. While qualitative and quantitative studies have demonstrated how significant TV is in contemporary society, my interest takes that relevance as a given and pursues TV as a personal textual encounter.

TV form operates in a liminal space between the public and the private. Roger Silverstone argues that even though TV is a domestic medium, its domesticity is the product of a historically defined and constantly shifting relationship between private and public spaces and

cultures” (*Television and Everyday Life* 25). Tim Dant comments about the dual nature when he argues that “the medium of television offers a *different* form of public sphere, one that is better able to communicate feelings, emotions and practical consequences” (*Television and the Moral Imaginary* 134). On one hand, it offers a shared cultural experience that cuts across local and global divides, uniting viewership for both niche and mainstream shows. On the other hand, it sets up intimate encounters where the viewers relate to the text and character as individuals. Although the flow of information remains unchanged from content producer to the viewer, TV has evolved to the point where the viewer’s desire for narrative completion is not immediately (or at all) satisfied.

TV’s presence in a variety of domestic spaces across the world makes it a focal point for divergent perspectives. As Dant puts it, since “TV programs can promote discussion and sharing of views and opinions in a variety of ways” (134) anyone can participate in the TV’s public sphere. Similarly, Silverstone offers that “Television is part of the seriality and spatiality of everyday life” (20), attesting to the significance of TV as a shared communal experience. Instead, the viewer’s response becomes an important element of shaping textual meaning, as viewers are called to notice the strangeness of the narrative world. These gaps between the viewers’ expectation and text challenge the status quo by drawing attention to elements that are outside of the main narrative. This study examines the presentation of broader social, political and ethical questions through the viewers’ relationship with TV texts constructed by their operational aesthetics. The analysis presented here does not seek to understand the meaning of the texts alone. It uses close textual analysis to attend to the link between narrative necessities, character behavior, and viewer response, and consider how they are shaped by repeated and long-term serialized encounters. This project engages with critical voices ranging from classical

philosophy to reviews and blog posts—an approach made necessary by the variety of critical voices that TV’s position as a medium that flits between high- and low-brow texts. In this way, this study builds on the conversation between critical and popular reception of TV texts to ask what TV texts *do*, and what kind of relationships they cultivate with their viewers.

TV functions as both a personal encounter that allows individual negotiations of meaning, as well as cultural texts that comment on broader social perspectives. It examines the effects of narrative disruptions on the viewers’ serial engagement with TV texts. By drawing on three longform crime drama series from the 2000s—*The Wire*, *The Shield*, and *Breaking Bad*—this study demonstrates how the viewers’ experience of TV texts is shaped by their understanding of narrative constructions and operational aesthetics. It offers resistant readings of TV texts by using an interdisciplinary approach to illuminate the ethical dimension of the viewers’ engagement with the text. The interdisciplinary approach attends to the different aspects reflected in the text without flattening them in one broad theory. TV seriality presents an opening that generates critical and ethical reflection in the viewers. The complicated viewer relationship with crime and punishment and their allegiance to negative characters shape the viewers’ perspectives on justice and ethics. At its heart, this study engages with the paradox of crime narratives that seemingly promote law and order, and yet often align viewers with norm violations.

TV texts draw viewers to continually engage with their favorite characters, even after their narrative outcomes are revealed. Stephen Battaglio comments that *The Fugitive*’s continued popularity years after its finale in 1967 indicated that viewers cared for their beloved TV characters beyond the narrative mystery (“50 years before peak TV”). Like any valued literary work, the viewer can get most out of a text which they enjoy, and therefore the engaged viewer is

not an impassionate observer tolerating the show merely to gain specific knowledge about the issues in the show. In the context of TV viewing, the creative reader has access to and is committed to watching the show in its entirety. While viewers, like readers, are from diverse contexts, they are emotionally invested in the narrative and characters, as they engage with serial texts that could span possibly over many years. Although texts cannot claim to directly influence social and political actions in the wider community, they inform and challenge the viewers to evaluate their own standards and principles by repeatedly making them choose to renew their allegiance to the texts. The viewers' serial engagement with TV texts cause them to concurrently enjoy the narrative pleasure and examine the ethical cost of their enjoyment.

Since TV encounters happen over a long period of time, even subtle changes in the text could have a significant impact on the viewer. The narrative structures of TV texts question both the viewers' and characters' responsibility, intentionally and inadvertently, through the many different, minute narrative turns, and choices made at levels of production and reception. The viewer's experience of TV produces meaning that is unique to their context of viewing, and each new iteration of this experience offers the possibility of re-evaluating their relationship with the text and its characters. Therefore, even if the content does not deliberately address social and political issues, the critical distance created by TV's fictionality and self-referentiality provokes viewers to engage with the social landscape portrayed. Drawing on the fields of image studies, TV studies, and textual analysis, this study reads the ethical and political implications of the viewer response to selected TV texts. This introductory chapter outlines critical and theoretical debates about TV texts that inform the approach to the viewer-text relationship, and summarizes the arguments presented in the following chapters.

TV as Text: a Literary Approach

Writing about the disciplinary placement of TV studies, Timothy Havens notes that “much as a doctoral student in English cannot hope to master the field of Television Studies in a single semester, even graduate students with training in fields that may seem closer – Film, Communication, Media Studies – can only begin to scratch the surface of Television Studies in a single graduate seminar” (172). So, as a graduate student of English literature my aim is to position TV texts as literary texts full of ethical possibility. Rather than engaging with the communication and media studies-based approaches that examine crucial aspects of the production economy, viewership statistics and trends in TV reception and circulation, this study aims to engage with the viewers’ experiences of the text from textual and literary perspectives. The use of literary approaches is not new in TV studies, as Charlotte Brunsdon commends its value for “the elevation of the act of reading, over the text, as the point of meaning production” (“Television: Aesthetics and Audiences” 64). Horace Newcomb, on the other hand, was skeptical of literary approaches that serve the archaeological function of excavating obscure shows as important texts (“Same Questions” 110). This thesis does not make a case for outlier or popular shows as being equal or superior to prestige shows. Instead, it argues that good shows—regardless of whether they are treated as prestige TV or not—produce meaningful viewer experience through established modes and convention of TV genres. In line with Newcomb’s conception, this study engages with how and why TV works from the perspective of TV’s narrative complexity and serial engagement with viewers. Building on existing approaches, this study adds to the literary corpus of TV studies by privileging viewer relationship with the depth, meaning and implications TV texts.

This study examines the development of viewers' relationships with TV texts through both form and content. By positioning TV texts *as* texts, this study draws not only from TV studies but also from cultural and literary studies to offer an interdisciplinary reading of the viewer-text relationship. TV studies has a wide range of approaches that examine both the medium as well as specific texts. Theodore Adorno dismisses the effectiveness of individual programs, as he is "concerned with the nature of present-day television and its imagery" ("How to look at Television" 213). Adorno's voice influences much of TV criticism which treat the technological and narrative aspects interchangeably. On the other hand, Stuart Hall is critical of approaches to TV that engage only with content analysis as he insists "we must recognize that the discursive form of the message has a privileged position in the communication exchange" ("Encoding/Decoding" 508). Newcomb and Hirsch try and reconcile these two challenges, when they seek "a cultural basis for the analysis and criticism of television is the bridge between a concern for television as a communications medium, central to contemporary society, and television as an aesthetic object, the expressive medium" ("TV as a cultural forum" 45). Since any approach that engages with either aspect independently of the other falls short of grasping TV's value to the viewer, we need to draw from both its technological and narrative aspects. Therefore, both the conventions of interaction with the medium, as well as the content of the specific texts help demonstrate the impact of TV on social thinking and dispositions. In this section, I assess both classical and contemporary approaches to TV studies and offer Attridge's creative reading as a useful method of addressing questions about textuality, viewership, and contemporary society.

This study builds its method from the "creative reading" of outlined by Attridge, which examines the singular ethical experience of textual encounters. In Attridge's view, good works of

literature go beyond their aesthetic value by offering a completely new experience to the readers. He writes,

Literature as art does more than provide pleasure, then: these are works that open the reader to new horizons, or, following [Emmanuel] Levinas, bring the ‘other’ into the reader’s habitual frameworks of consciousness and affective life, and effect some degree of change in the reader (*The Work of Literature* 17).

Attridge’s sees his theory of literary texts as agents of change as applicable to other texts, especially the temporal arts music and film (27). In this study, by analyzing some of the most accomplished and well-received TV texts, I present a case for the ethical value of narrative and character-driven analyses of such texts.

While providing a method, Attridge resists an instrumentalist approach because “[judging] the literary work according to pre-existing scheme of values... reflects a primary interest somewhere other than literature” (*The Singularity of Literature* 13). Attridge’s observation about the limits of interpretation resonates with the context of TV texts, where meaning is not generated solely by one author, but by a large array of collaborators, including: the network, the writers, the technicians, the actors, and the audience. Trying to limit TV texts to one interpretational framework would not yield rich results because such a structure would not account for the contradictory and incomplete nature of TV texts. Instead, this study brings in a variety of theorists and perspectives as different points of inquiry into issues of political, ethical, and social functions of TV.

To examine viewer response to TV texts and the critical perspectives they can offer on contemporary issues, this study resists frameworks that draw their authority from law, religion or ideology, and uses the textual structures and the way they are interrupted by narrative

uncertainties. Emmanuel Levinas, whose philosophy of alterity heavily influences Attridge's method of creative reading, warns readers that "it is of the highest importance to know whether we are not duped by morality" (*Totality and Infinity* 21). In other words, any compelling code of behavior or moral law is convinced of its own absolute rightness. As the world grows more polarized due to ideological fundamentalism coupled with technological isolation, TV can be used to offer seductive images that simply reaffirm our perspectives. Contemporary media culture distills the problem of partisan moral certainty by feeding the same kind of stories and encourages people to stay within the comforts of their echo chambers. Since fictional programs can be read in different ways by different audiences, the same show could be an indictment of the police system for one viewer, and an ode to the necessity of extralegal force in law enforcement to another. Regardless of the TV texts' position on specific issues, they call the viewers to examine their viewing positions by drawing attention to their own fictionality.

While the textual features present the conditions which provoke, they generate more meaningful experiences for engaged readers who are invested in the characters and the narrative consequences. Sarah Cardwell calls for an "attentive and directed" in contrast to widely accepted "notion of 'disinterested and sympathetic attention'" ("Television aesthetics: Stylistic analysis and beyond" 35). This engaged reader responds to "thematic, formal, and stylistic elements" rather than "'use' television to study something else" (Cardwell "Television aesthetics" 72). These meditations of textually engaged approaches to TV inform my examination of TV's textual operations, viewer response, and the connective tissue that brings them both together, serial engagement. Viewing experiences become provocations that challenge viewer complacency perpetuated by simplistic moral binaries of popular texts. The disruption of the

textual engagement generates uncertainty in both the narrative as well as viewers, causing them to question the stability offered by simplistic moral affirmations.

This approach draws from ethical film theorists who find cognitivist approaches inadequate to address perplexing moments, and instead, propose non-normative theories of spectatorship. Ethical film theorists argue that narrative uncertainty is the opening to examine a world beyond the representation on screen. In *Selfless Cinema?* Sarah Cooper argues that visual elements in documentary cinema gesture towards other irreducible elements that exist outside the narrative world. Cooper contends that the *mise-en-scène* of the narrative world is experienced by the viewer in contrast to the world outside of the text. Regardless of the differences between narrative and narrative worlds, the *mise-en-scène* provokes viewers to reflect about the relationship between the two. Likewise, Brian Bergen-Aurand's positioning of "filmic uncertainty" as a possibility of film ethics resonates when we consider the relationship between the seen *mise-en-scène* and the unseen real world ("Of Redemption: The Good of Film Experience" 60). In serialized TV, the notion of filmic interruption and uncertainty are reinforced by the viewers' periodic encounter with the text.

Many critics saw the value in embracing the film-ethics approach to TV. Jonathan Bignell notes that "television could benefit from adopting the methodology of detailed analysis which derives from the tradition of analyzing relationships between style, meaning and *mise-en-scène* in film studies" ("The Police Series" 64). TV's serialized engagement encourages viewers to anticipate the resolutions of unresolved plotlines and character outcomes. Thus, these narrative programs initiate important conversations about social and political issues in order to cultivate viewer engagement with the text. Many programs fail to draw attention to the unresolvable nature of the problem, as they often appease the diverse viewers with the much less controversial

“all solutions are problematic” solution. However, the very structure of TV shows and the ways in which they are received draw attention to the artifice of a satisfactory narrative conclusion. It is important to consider how such moments of openness disrupt the viewers’ narrative enjoyment. This examination should not be limited to the content of the TV texts, as the structures of interaction with the TV medium, namely the production, distribution, and reception, also constitute our relationship with TV.

The film-ethics approach resonates with Attridge’s approach to literature, as they both posit the ability of the text to provoke deeper critical reflection. Attridge argues that an encounter with literature is ethical because it stages an encounter of something completely other. He writes that “to create an artwork, then, is to bring into existence a configuration of cultural materials that, at least to a certain group and for a certain time, holds out the possibility of a repeated encounter with alterity” (*Singularity* 28). Attridge’s argument recuperates TV’s much-maligned passivity, since it constitutes the condition for ethics by calling the viewers to seek the texture of otherness in the narrative presented. Attridge theorizes that such an encounter with the other, even when not capable of transforming the readers entirely, can destabilize the readers’ perspectives, at least temporarily. TV texts also perform similar disruptions of the viewers’ perspective by presenting narrative worlds that are strange and familiar at the same time. TV’s seriality subtly challenges viewer perspectives by repeatedly presenting a recognizable world that remains unfamiliar until we start relating to it by investing our time and attention. The viewers’ experience of the emotional and narrative arcs of characters encourages them to reassess their expectations of the text. TV goes beyond simply evaluating the truth-value of representation by provoking viewers to evaluate our perspectives as we revisit our previous states of self with every encounter with the text. Attridge describes the power of an artwork to

“retain its inventiveness as long as it finds a responsive audience, which is to say as long as it is not wholly and permanently accommodated” (28). The repeated encounters with the text bring viewers into contact with the other and can potentially shift their worldview. By allowing viewers to reflect on their potential for change, TV frames the viewers as commentators rather than mere spectators.

Traditionally, TV texts were excluded from serious debates due to their perceived position as simplistic entertainment. Theodore Adorno warns that the inferiority of TV texts to all other visual arts is “inevitable... [as] the short time available for preparation of the scripts and the vast material continuously to be produced call for certain formulas” (“How to look at Television” 229). Adorno’s view does not consider culturally and critically significant programs like *I Love Lucy*, *The Twilight Zone*, and *Star Trek*, which were produced under severe network constraints. Adorno supposes that TV is incapable of developing complexity or providing moments of intellectual curiosity, for it merely echoes the “prevailing ideology of [its] time” (215). Contrarily, I argue that TV encourages viewer reflection due to its serial engagement. TV’s narrative conventions create the possibility of uncertainty. The anticipation generated by interruptions makes TV viewers more open to unexpected changes in the narrative. While some interruptions are predictable and regular, such as advertisements, weekly and seasonal breaks, others, like network cancellation and changes in the production or cast, are unexpected. These interruptions turn passing viewer interest and curiosity into genuine care for the character’s narrative outcomes. It is the viewers’ engagement with characters that forms the basis of deeper critical examination. To expand on TV ethics scholarship, I appeal to related discussions in film, photography, literature, and spectatorship to shed light on viewers’ relationships with TV texts.

The evolution of TV technologies, maturation of TV genres, and changing tastes of viewership have allowed TV texts to rise above their erstwhile designation as a distracted and distracting domestic fixture. Hartley writes, “what constitutes ‘television’ now is quite different from when its broadcast form emerged in the 1950s” (*Digital Futures* 118). With the emergence of cable in the 80s and the 90s, as well as DVD and internet video-streaming in the 2000s, the modern era of TV viewing has progressively moved away from time- and channel-bound configurations of the Televisual community space. Hartley notes the transformation from the network era when people were concerned that “the lay-audience were at the mercy of powerful persuaders” (120), to the post-network or “convergence” era, where the Do-It-Yourself and Do-It-With-Others culture has challenged the direction of informational flow. Instead of being passive recipients, “consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content” (Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* 3). This has also affected the way in which TV studies scholars deal with the value of TV. Kim Akass and Janet McCabe point out that “modern critical traditions have explored the multi-accentuality of signs (Bakhtin’s dialogism), borne out of ethnographic audience studies (Morley 1992) that confirm variant readings, suggest that people may gain insights into their lives (‘learn from’ and be ‘informed by’) by popular fantasy products” (*Quality TV* 50–51). Thus, TV went from being an ephemeral and transient medium to a conduit for precious texts that generate meaningful debates. These transformations highlight the greater control and the corresponding increase in the agency of viewers of TV texts who can access multiple combinations and interpretations of the texts.

This mode of interaction is reminiscent of Roland Barthes’ classification of the reader-text relationship as those evoking textual pleasure (readerly texts) and those provoking critical understanding (writerly texts). Readerly texts absorb the readers into the narrative world, as they

derive pleasure from their suspenseful relationship with the characters. Writerly texts draw attention to its own devices that produce such effects on its readers. Barthes describes writerly texts as “ethical artifacts” whose “connotation permits (this is its moral advantage) positing a law with multiple meanings and thereby liberating reading” (*Rustle of Language* 35). Attridge builds on this distinction and offers a way of distinguishing between passive and creative ways of receiving the text. TV does not function in exclusively readerly or writerly ways, as it provides both the immersive pleasure of narrative continuity as well as the awareness of considering the constructed nature of the text. Barthes’ observations about the personal investment in the act of reading serve as an analog for viewers’ engagement with TV texts. Similar to his observation that a reader can get entangled in the act of reading so that “the whole world is abolished” and the reader is “entirely transposed into the register of the image-repertoire” (39), TV encounters could also collapse the distance between the narrative world and the viewing subject. Barthes notes that the pleasure of reading is “visibly linked to the observation of what is unfolding and to the revelation of what is hidden” (40). Certainly, our serial engagement with TV texts fulfills such a teleological desire of completion.

However, serial engagement also draws the viewers out of the narrative engagement when the continuity is interrupted from time to time. The operational aesthetics of a TV viewing experience engages viewers at two levels: the gaming impulse, which builds on the viewers’ our preexisting familiarity with the narrative tropes to seek the most compelling narrative sequence and the critical impulse which considers questions of social significance and evaluates the consequences of characters’ actions. The viewers’ pleasure depends on the negotiation between the desire to suspend one’s disbelief and their awareness of incredulity. Umberto Eco notes that the modern aesthetics deployed by mass-media products like film, TV, and detective fiction use

“repetition, iteration, obedience to a pre-established schema and redundancy” (“Innovation and Repetition” 162) to generate narrative pleasure through their serial encounters. Eco observes that the readers’ familiarity with traits in established characters like Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot allow them to enjoy the scheme of the text. To this effect, Eco argues,

the writer plays upon a continuous series of continuations... to such an extent that their reappearance in each story is an essential condition of its reading pleasure... Vices, gestures, habits of the character portrayed permit us to recognize an old friend. These familiar features allow us to “enter into” the event. (162–163).

These familiar elements allow viewers to recognize and preempt the structures of a show. According to Eco, the viewers’ allegiance to the character renders the plot of the narrative irrelevant, as it is merely an “accessory” which allows viewers to “[follow] certain ‘topical’ gestures of ‘topical’ characters whose stock behavior we already love” (164). The viewers’ investment in the characters allows their response to narrative situations to evolve with the characters. Eco argues that “the series consoles us (the consumers) because it rewards our ability to foresee” (168). In other words, the cycle of anticipation and the reward of satisfaction are because of the viewers’ engagement with character and consequences rather than narrative and plot. Ultimately, Eco’s opinion that the openness of the TV medium could have a pedagogical effect by giving the viewer the feeling that life “is not confined to the story [they] so eagerly follow” (*The Open Work* 122) resonates with longform serial TV, which also hints at the continuation of the world outside the main narrative.

On the other hand, Jason Mittell suggests that the viewers’ relationship with TV texts is not simply a matter of discovering the narrative, but to enjoy the method in which the narrative is accomplished. Mittell notes, “We watch these shows not just to get swept away in a realistic

narrative world (although that certainly can happen) but also to watch the gears at work, marveling at the craft required to pull off such narrative pyrotechnics” (“Narrative Complexity” 35). The viewers’ fascination with the operational aesthetics of a text, leads them to reflect on the method of the text rather than its content alone. Mittell argues that even TV texts recognize the viewers’ desire to foresee and be surprised, that it starts to misdirect viewers “through the lens of metafiction, these plotlines reinforce the series’ function as a site of social realism and critique” (*Complex TV* 330). Since viewers’ familiarity with the narrative conventions of the show allows them to subvert their expectations in later seasons, the shows’ creators feel compelled to offer deconstructed examinations of such structures. The creators inevitably recontextualize and accommodate their structures based on the viewers’ responses to the texts. This plasticity of the narrative suggests that Mittell’s argument could be extended to say that the viewers’ serial encounter with TV texts become a way of interrogating their relationship with the text. Mittell’s view on the aesthetic pleasure of the text through an understanding of its mechanics reinforces Umberto Eco’s perspective about repetition and innovation in characters, as they both build on the viewers’ familiarity with genre tropes to examine the narrative. Their approaches provide a basis for examining how the viewer-text relationship builds on the vastness of the narrative world beyond the plot.

The viewer’s alignment also disrupts the narrative, as they do not always respond in the manner that the text directs them. In his seminal essay “Encoding/Decoding,” Stuart Hall argues that meaning in TV texts are not fixed by the producers alone, as communication is “a ‘complex structure in dominance,’ sustained through the articulation of connected practices [of production, circulation, distribution, consumption, reproduction], each of which, however, retains its distinctiveness and has its own specific modality, its own forms and conditions of existence”

(508). In Hall's view, TV texts are not completed until they are decoded by the viewers and the viewers play a critical role in negotiating its meaning. In his view, "the discourse must be translated—transformed, again—into social practices if the circuit is to be both complete and effective" (508), reaffirming the viewers' power to negotiate and interpret texts. From reading Hall, we gain a central idea that the textual meaning of the narrative is not a certainty because it is determined through the communicative process. Hall theorizes that the text could be read through the modes of resistant, dominant, and negotiated readings. By extension, the same reader could switch between these positions depending on their level of engagement and enjoyment of the text. Therefore, it is important to see how the construction of the text and its reception inform each other to create different readings of the text.

The viewers' fascination with the way the text operates—what Jason Mittell calls the Operational Aesthetic—works in tandem with their critical impulse for evaluation. Viewers derive emotional satisfaction from their character-relationship, as well as their ability to decode the structures, and these impulses are alternately activated according to the demands of the narrative. However, the text alone does not determine the viewers' response to it, as Stuart Hall insists that the viewers also contribute to the way it is interpreted. The viewers' situated response to the text makes its message more ambiguous, as they can set the limits where they intervene critically or aesthetically. The tension between the viewers' experience of aesthetic pleasure and critical evaluation plays a big role in the way we access and relate to terrible behavior on screen. At one level, viewers derive narrative pleasure from terrible actions when they satisfy the narrative necessities in an unexpected and compelling way. At another level, these terrible actions provoke viewers to examine the social and political conditions in which such actions were performed. This tension calls upon the viewers to reserve judgment for the characters they

are invested in, without excusing them. Mittell perceives that the viewers' critical evaluation could be limited to the episodic level, saying that "most viewers judge programs on the basis of single episodes (or even partial episodes), so the idea that we must consume something in full before evaluating it seems both practical and misguided" (*Complex TV* 228–229). While Mittell is right in assessing the judgment formation, viewers also continue to accumulate information over time and their response to the text also keeps evolving with their serial encounter.

Of course, privileging subjective experiences is not the same as viewers determining the meaning of TV texts. Hall also insists that "polysemy is not the same as pluralism" ("Encoding/Decoding" 513), and the viewers' role in the reading of the TV texts is not without limitations. The viewer's relationship with the text opens new possibilities through critical reflection, however, this relationship does not exempt the producers of the TV texts from the responsibility of representation and the messages they send out through the narrative world. The mere presence of oppositional characters and perspectives does not assure that such perspectives are granted a considered and detailed voice. These perspectives are used to simply reaffirm the values of free speech or create a strawman to strike down, rather than engage in critical debate. At a structural level, this necessary contrarianism emphasizes narrative progression and seldom elevates the text to become a criticism of itself. Emily Nussbaum writes that that television is "gorgeous not despite but because of its own wonky elasticity, the way it altered with time, in conversation with its own history... Television was an art form that was somehow permanent and ephemeral at once, a record of its own improvisational creation" (*I Like to Watch* 21). Oppositional ideas drive the narrative as obstacles for the protagonist to overcome. However, despite being designed to justify and further the dominant perspective, the contrarian impulse undoes the unquestioned legitimacy of that view by inadvertently sparking a complexity that

cannot be attributed to the show's creators. While we must guard against the risk of overstating the value of narrative encounters, we can safely say that they challenge the ideas in a persistent way, asking viewers to rethink their assumptions.

Since the meanings of TV texts are not fixed, they are best studied as interpretations of the world rather than representations of it. In a similar vein, Susan Sontag observes that "photographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire" (*On Photography* 2). For Sontag, the image is a perspective and not a representation of the world. She reinforces the idea that texts are not necessarily received in the stipulated order of the narrative or the intentions of the author when she says, "the photographer's intentions do not determine the meaning of the photograph, which will have its own career, blown by the whims and loyalties of the diverse communities that have use for it" (*Regarding the Pain* 39). Similarly, Rudolf Arnheim remarks that besides its photo-realistic factual authenticity, the image also has an expressive authenticity, which communicates a specific message. Thus, the image is not limited to representing an image as it is ("The Two Authenticities of the Photographic Media" 53). Although TV is a very different medium from the photograph, TV texts operate in a similar way as their constituent fragments can be interpreted in many ways. Therefore, it is more productive to examine how TV texts question viewer certainties, reflect on the mechanism and the effects of the encounter, rather than ask if an image is authentic or not. In this sense, an image could, and often does, ask questions unrelated to the narrative.

Both Cooper and Sobchack comment on the image's power to provoke viewers to think beyond the text. The expansive coverage of subject matters on TV offers a sidelong view into the many situations that the viewer does not directly encounter. As Stuart Hall puts it, "The dog in

the film can bark but it cannot bite! Reality exists outside language, but it is constantly mediated by and through language: and what we can know and say has to be produced in and through discourse” (“Encoding/Decoding” 511). Similarly, TV need not be a stand-in for reality for it to address real issues. When TV decenters important social issues and presents them as background to the narrative, its repetition offers the viewers time to think about the implications of the questions.⁵ TV texts could have varying aesthetic and social goals, from calling viewers to action or lulling them with appeasements. Due to the plurality of political ideologies of those involved in creating and distributing such texts, it is entirely possible that appeasements are made to seem like calls to action. Since the fictional narrative by its nature presents a variety of social classes and perspectives, it is not compelled to give a single message. However, the sustained viewer relationship calls them to reflect upon the images and examine the construction of the image itself.

Watching, Interpreting, and Experiencing TV

The meaning of visual texts has always been a product of the interaction between the viewer and the text. The meaning generated in the encounter shifts according to viewers’ expectations and degree of engagement with the text. In “Toward a Phenomenology of Nonfictional Film Experience” Vivian Sobchack contends that the viewer can shift between fictional and non-fictional modes of viewing to generate varying readings of the text. Sobchack builds on Jean-Pierre Meunier’s phenomenology of cinematic identification which contends that

⁵ Even a light-hearted sci-fi comedy *The Orville* (Fox, 2017–) could disrupt the viewers’ engagement in unexpected ways. Episode 1.3 examines the cultural and ethical implications of sex reassignment at birth, when a female child is born in an all-male species. The episode leaves its characters and the viewers to consider the limits of respecting cultural boundaries across societies, rather than presenting a simple resolution to the problem. This seemingly one-off episode continue to shape the attitudes of the characters in the following season.

the viewers' dependence on the screen for *specific knowledge* prevents them from seeing beyond the screen and into the real world. Meunier believes that the viewer contributes little to building the diegetic world in fictional programs, as they depend entirely on the screen for the information about the narrative. Sobchack rejects this notion that viewing experiences are so rigid, as viewers shift from a fictional viewing mode to a documentary viewing mode depending on the context of viewing. Instead, Sobchack emphasizes on the visceral nature of the encounter, as she describes it as "familiar as it is intense, and it is marked by the way in which significance and the act of signifying are *directly* felt, sensuously available to the viewer" (*The Address of the Eye* 8). Sobchack's variable modes of viewing offer a lens to further understand the viewers' dynamic relationships across different types of texts. Viewers relate to documentaries without expecting a causal logic in their narratives, since documentaries are factual accounts. They respond to the experience by perceiving both the "world *within* the [text] and *without* it" (10). The reliance on the factual authenticity of documentaries leads to viewers being more open to accepting narrative contradiction in documentaries, even though, according to Meunier, they are presented information that can independently be verified. Besides, the truth-claim of a documentary could emotionally sway the viewers.

The viewers' expectations, familiarity with the genre, and alignment of viewing allow them to recombine the narrative and characters in different ways. The viewers' sustained engagement allows them to see beyond the fictionality. Shows like *The Wire* or *Friends* both insinuate that a corresponding Baltimore or New York exists while prompting viewers to evaluate the rules of the narrative world for consistency with our documentary knowledge. In this regard, Baltimore and New York are no different from Narnia or Mordor, in that they are all fictional constructions of landscapes observed under certain narrative conditions. However, these

shows are also perceived differently by those with lived experiences of the situations represented on the show compared to their European or Asian viewing counterparts. The difference lies in our ability to venture outside the textual authority to question the limits imposed by fictional worlds on non-fictional towns. Whereas Mordor lives and dies within the world created by Tolkien, fictional New York and Baltimore are measured against the real world. In this case, it is easier to misrepresent texts which claim a higher degree of verisimilitude than those that are evidently fictional. Viewing communities which actively respond to the texts are more attuned to the show's mythology, and hence they produce more detail-oriented critical evaluations compared to lay viewers. Therefore, the viewers' degree of involvement plays a critical role in the way they respond to the text. As Sobchack points out, the viewers' ability to differentiate the levels of fictionality within a text disrupts their reliance on the narrative's claim of authenticity.

In contrast to documentary texts, fictional programs are expected to be consistent and coherent, and regardless of how engrossing the narrative, the viewers are clear about its fictionality. The fictional program operates on the persistent awareness of the viewer's suspension of their disbelief. Any conversation about the merits and failures of the text calls into question a common vocabulary about the changes in its tone, mood, and thematic focus. Such engagement is not always possible with a documentary where the very mode of encounter instructs the viewers that the text is simply documenting the truth. The fictional program does not lull the viewers into thinking that they are witnessing an authentic image, as it reminds them of its fictionality through narrative disruptions and the viewers' recognition of the situated encounter. The fiction, in its fictionality, creates a critical distance that jolts viewers from their passivity by allowing them to see how the subject matter is constructed.

Attridge makes a similar observation when he comments that the readers' recognition of the mechanics of the text informs their engagement with the text, he says, "our awareness in the BBC adaptation of *Parade's End* that it is Benedict Cumberbatch uttering words written by Tom Stoppard (who derived them from Ford Madox Ford) does not diminish our intellectual and emotional involvement in the character of Christopher Tietjens; in fact, our involvement is enriched by that awareness, and by our pleasure in the skill evident in the language, acting, *mise-en-scène*, and so on" (*The Work of Literature* 58). Once a narrative text signals to the viewers that they are no longer obliged to act upon the images as if they are the truth, the viewers are more willing and open to exploring the way the images operate on the narrative world. In this way, Sobchack's approach presents two central ideas: firstly, narratives leverage on our shifting modes of viewing to allow the viewers to consider significant issues presented in an incidental manner, and secondly, despite being the only source of narrative information, fictional texts alert viewers to be more skeptical of the narrative.

Especially in the context of crime dramas, the emphasis on narrative TV texts over docuseries and reality TV is due to the distortion caused by nonfictional texts. Dan Taberski, the host of the podcast *Running from Cops* comments on the dangers of the vicarious "access to the exercise of power" provided by the popular police reality show *Cops* (Fox, 1989–). He says,

[*Cops*] presents a world that is much scarier than the real world. It has three times the amount of drug arrests... Four times the amount of violent crime ... On the show, it is the core of what the police do. But in real life, it is barely 17% ("What 'Running from Cops' learned from Cops").

Taberski accuses the show of distorting not just the public perception of the police, but also the police's own perception of what they can and cannot do. In this sense, nonfictional texts are

extremely unreliable in their representation of police procedure. While similar concerns apply to fictional texts, its seriality and viewing circumstances remove the viewer from the viewing context of “watching reality.”⁶ The metatextual recognition of witnessing actors performing different characters, the awareness of a summer-long break between two seasons of the show and anticipating cliff-hangers that correspond with episodic breaks are just some of the ways the viewers are alerted to the fictionality of the narrative. In contrast to a reality show which presents an endless stream of unexamined segments of police encounters, the narrative text examines causes and the consequences of the events in greater depth.

A Brief Overview of TV Crime Drama

Raymond Williams wondered if “before the epoch of television serials and series, anything like the current proportion of dramatic attention to crime and illness had ever existed” (*Television* 57). However, crime drama has been a popular genre long before TV. Although literary scholarship dates the crime genre as originating between the 18th and the 19th century, some of the earliest works of literature from Greek tragedies to Indian epic poetry are peppered with element of crime fiction.⁷ Crime narratives present an opportunity to explore taboo and forbidden things, while reassuring the readers that norm violations will be punished. David Platten observes that the pleasure of a crime narrative lies in “outlandish scenarios that the reader may just feel could occur in some reality existing beyond the narrow vistas of his or her window on the world” (*The Pleasures of Crime* 12). And while crime narratives have long existed at the

⁶ Taberski notes that the phenomenon of viewing police encounters with civilians as entertainment reaches its apotheosis in *Live PD*, a show that combines sports commentary with live police situations from across the USA. The show was cancelled in June 2020 after widespread protests against police brutality.

⁷ See *Crime Fiction* by John Scaggs (2005) and *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction* edited by Martin Priestman (2003) for a historical account of the literary genre.

margins of respectable literary genres as “pulp fiction,” it has become a marker of “serious” TV programs. Crime drama’s popularity and their ability to present viewers with experiences of unknown and strange contexts make it a compelling genre to observe when studying the significance of viewer encounter of TV.

This project studies three American crime TV dramas from the 2000s to examine the ways in which TV offers a way of “interrogating our relationship with the world” (Rodowick “Ethics in Film Philosophy”). The three shows—*The Wire* (David Simon, HBO, 2002–08), *The Shield* (Shawn Ryan, FX, 2002–08) and *Breaking Bad* (Vince Gilligan, AMC, 2008–13)—offer compelling commentary on various contemporary concerns including policing, drug culture, authoritarianism, and the failure of the middle-class. Unlike other genres, the viewers’ enjoyment of crime drama does not come from a light-hearted relaxation or the distracted viewing-pleasure generally associated with TV. Instead, crime shows demand that their viewers engage with character outcomes more seriously than other genres. Thus, crime drama shows offer an incisive point of entry to examine viewer relationship more than other genres. The popularity of the crime drama predates TV shows, as Sue Turnbull notes that “stories of crime and punishment play a central role in the story-telling matrix of most cultures” and that the purpose of these stories is so that people “may better understand that a life of crime may not turn out so well” (*TV Crime Drama* 20). Their popularity has allowed crime dramas to branch out into many different sub-genres from straightforward procedurals to prestige drama. This section situates crime shows with a social and ethical focus like *The Wire*, *The Shield*, and *Breaking Bad* within their broader genre history. It highlights how these shows deploy TV elements such as episodic narratives, character arcs, serial cliff-hangers, and narrative interruptions to both sustain the viewers’ engagement and provoke critical and evaluative responses.

Often, TV crime drama is synonymous with police drama, although vigilante dramas, gangster narratives and specialists are not uncommon subject matters (see Turnbull, *TV Crime Drama* 29–31 and 125–152). The more successful iterations of the genre blend traditional conventions with innovative narrative elements. A close examination of the police crime genre’s evolution shows how the TV medium alters the way in which procedure is presented. Lee Siegel comments that the crime drama genre has endured in popular imagination due to our desire for mythological stories about good overcoming evil (“Crime Scenes” 25). TV’s obsession with crime is no surprise to Jared Keller who sees crime TV shows as “the logical heirs of decades of our cultural fixation with crime and punishment” (“*The Night Of* and the enduring power”). Keller especially highlights the “widespread ambivalence about the processes of justice in America” which operate simultaneously with the viewers’ desire to see narratives about good and evil. While these texts bear great value in raising questions about the texture and flavor of law and order we encounter, viewers must note that they present narrative worlds that are approximations by the realist aesthetic rather than real situations.

Before TV, the crime drama significantly shaped the perception of law enforcement in American culture through radio drama (Sargent 1767). The hit TV series *Dragnet* (NBC, 1951–58, 1967–70) evolved from its radio predecessor and emphasized a high degree of verisimilitude by drawing on real cases. Authenticity was quite important to the show, as Ken Dowler observes that “[*Dragnet*] was filmed as a pseudo-documentary” which tried its best to create a sense of realism with “visual inserts of contemporary Los Angeles... authentic police lingo, as well as procedure and protocol” (“Police Dramas on Television” 2016). Each episode started with the disclaimer: “The story you are about to see is true. The names have been changed to protect the

innocent.”⁸ The episodes also ended with an inter-title that explained the outcome of the actual cases that inspired the show, reassuring viewers of the certainty of justice. Sue Turnbull notes *Dragnet* outlines the dual intention of TV shows to “offer social commentary and moral education” (“Crime as entertainment” 823). The didactic element of the show invariably aligned its viewers with the police, as the show’s creator, Jack Webb, intended it as an educational tool. It presented police officers of unimpeachable character and conduct like Sergeant Joe Friday, who risked their lives to protect civilians. Friday’s characterization is indicative of the idealized version of police endorsed by popular culture. However, Friday was never presented as an arbiter of justice even though he was a “crime fighter” in the sense of actively combating criminals. Friday was more interested in “the facts” which would help him carry out the due process.

Although Joe Friday’s brand of righteous policing is associated with the 50s and the 60s, TV did not shun mature themes and dark imagery even in that era. *The Untouchables* (ABC, 1959–63), *Naked City* (ABC, 1958–59, 1960–63) and *The Fugitive* (ABC, 1963–67) were popular shows that presented ambiguous characters and situations. These shows featured fictional narratives that inspiration from real life.⁹ These shows presented police with greater moral complexity. *The Fugitive*’s primary antagonist, Lt. Philip Gerard openly questions the guilt of his target, the titular fugitive, Richard Kimble even though he continues to fulfill his responsibilities. Through the 1970s, police drama became one of the most popular genres on TV, and they featured an array of super-cops who solved crimes through their unique methods. The

⁸ The 1996 fictional crime drama *Fargo* and its 2014 TV revival also use a similar disclaimer at the beginning: “This is a true story. At the request of the survivors, the names have been changed. Out of respect for the dead, the rest has been told exactly as it occurred.” The disclaimer acknowledges *Dragnet*’s influence on the evolution of police representations on TV.

⁹ Fictionalized versions of Eliot Ness, the leader of the police unit that eventually arrested Al Capone and Sam Sheppard, wrongfully accused of his wife’s murder, were represented in *The Untouchable* and *The Fugitive* respectively.

titular protagonist of *Columbo* (NBC, 1968–78) appeared as a bumbling detective, but used his investigative acumen to arrest the unsuspecting perpetrator. Sue Turnbull writes that “the pleasure for the audience lay not so much in finding out ‘whodunnit’ as it was in watching Columbo outsmart the criminal through a process of deduction and inference” (25). Some shows in this era portrayed a grittier world in stark contrast to Joe Friday’s Los Angeles. The anthology series, *Police Story* (NBC 1973–77) openly dealt with problems of police corruption and brutality (Dowler 11) and is considered a precursor to the modern police drama of the 21st century. However, the tone of the shows remained largely conservative, as matters of drugs and sex were still off-limits for TV networks. Despite the changes in the tone and subject matter, most shows continued to present police officers as crusaders against crime, as their exceptional skills “enabled them to solve crimes in spite of the incompetence of the legal system” (Dowler 11).

The 1980s built on the expanding representation from the 70s, and featured minorities and women in more prominent and complex roles. Shows like *Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1981–87), and *Cagney & Lacey* (CBS, 1982–88) grew the genre in different ways, as they challenged contemporary norms and provoked debates about prejudice. While a few shows attempted at coherent serial structures, the era is marked by the simultaneous development of the procedural template that featured numerous interchangeable episodes aimed at easy viewing which also provided a cumulative seriality that was not contingent upon watching every episode in order. Horace Newcomb commends *Magnum PI* from this era, as it “stands between the traditional self-contained episodic forms and the open-ended serials” and terms this the “cumulative narrative” where “each week’s program is distinct, yet each is grafted onto the body of the series, its characters’ pasts” (“Magnum” 24). Some commentators like Pamela Donovan consider this era

as a period of decline which contributed to the commonly held view that TV shows possess less value than a crime novel or film of the same period due to their episodic nature (Pamela Donovan, “Television Crime Drama”). However, as Mareike Jenner notes, this period’s hybridity blended elements of legal and detective dramas, signaling an evolution in the genre. Jenner observes that the protagonists in these new shows “use methods that would be illegal for police detectives” and “necessitate irrational-subjective undercover work” rather than “rational-scientific police procedure” (*American TV Detective Dramas* 100) hinting at the darker and edgier contemporary TV shows to come.

During the late 1980s and 1990s TV crime dramas like *Miami Vice* (NBC 1984–1990) embraced the more glamorous notion of “MTV cops” (Jenner 102). Mareike Jenner notes that crime drama from this period resembled hardboiled crime narratives, “often featuring convoluted plots with several layers of deceit” (110–111). The turn of the millennium was marked by the emergence of the “scientific” procedural sub-genre which focused on a unique method rather than a specialist crime-solver. *CSI* and *Law & Order* (CBS 2000–2015) represented “police work as an exact science” (Sargent 1773) and in turn, legitimized contemporary policing methods. The emergence of new technologies in forensic sciences and advances in computer storage and retrieval of criminal databases gave rise to a new kind of support systems for the police. Popular programs successfully adapted more complex contemporary concerns of terrorism, espionage, and loyalty within the scope of their established format. However, since these shows tended to return to an equilibrium at the end of each episode, viewers did not develop sustained critical engagement with the text as the narrative closure insinuated that order was restored in the world and there was no further need to dwell on the problem.

Some shows from the 1990s showcased nuanced, realist reimaginations of the police drama genre, becoming precursors to the more realist and gritty shows from the 2000s. *NYPD Blue* (ABC, 1993–2005) and *Homicide: Life on the Street* (NBC, 1993–99) were landmark departures from the episodic drama, as they abandoned the ‘villain of the week’ style for gritty realism and transformative characterization in a serialized format. These serious-minded shows focused on the personal lives of characters as inextricably linked to their professional lives. As Helena Sheehan and Sheamus Sweeney note that these shows updated the police drama genre as, “[the cops] are no longer untainted and uncomplicated agents of righteousness, but morally conflicted, psychologically complex men and women struggling with difficult personal lives as well as a crumbling social contract. They cross many a line, both ethically and legally” (“*The Wire* and *The World*” 2). They provoke viewers to critically engage with not just the success of inventive policing methods, but also the effects that the methods have on the people enacting them. In these newer iterations, character arcs spanned across seasons, plots were more detail-oriented, events were intricately interconnected, and the shows engaged with fewer procedural beats. These shows mixed a dramatic style driven by character within conventions of the police procedural to pave the way for critically provocative TV texts.

Thus, crime shows reframe the general perception of TV as least objectionable programming and demonstrate the ability to engage with complex, socially significant issues that call viewers to respond in ways beyond the narrative encounter. Kathryn VanArendonk notes that the history of TV programming suggests that “crime has always been a part of TV’s DNA from the very beginning” (“Why is TV so addicted to crime?”). VanArendonk attributes this popularity to escapist fantasy, saying it allows “behavior we could never do because it would blow up our regular lives, but which would make things so much more exciting if we did.”

However, the enduring power of crime drama goes beyond a perverse pleasure of indulgence. Sue Turnbull notes that while there could be many reasons why people watch crime dramas, “the central preoccupation in much of the scholarly and popular literature on the genre has been that of crime and its representation, whether this be the representation of the forces of law and order and their procedures, the victims, the perpetrators, or indeed the crimes themselves” (*TV Crime Drama* 14).

Forensic psychologist Paul Mattiuzzi offers a different perspective, as he notes that crimes are fascinating as “there are so many different ways to judge each crime. We wonder about the victim, about the perpetrator, and about the circumstances. We are intrigued by the motive and the method and how they got away” (“Why are we so fascinated with murder?”). Ultimately, whether a crime drama is “dark and gritty or silly and escapist, or voyeuristic or drily distant... it is always about disrupting the everyday” (VanArendonk). Particularly, these shows offer perspectives on the collapse of the moral order that props up the ideals of the American dream, and in turn engage with the reality of the American dystopia that their characters live in.

Building on these narrative and generic traditions, serialized shows attained greater importance in the 2000s, with a slew of HBO dramas including *Oz* (1997–2003), *The Sopranos* (1999–2007), *Sex and the City* (1998–2004) and *Six Feet Under* (2001–2005) finding mainstream success. *The Wire* and *The Shield* were able to translate the success of serialized storytelling to the police drama genre, with mature, transformative narratives that went beyond day-to-day crime-solving. Andrew Sargent observes that *The Wire* and *The Shield* “took police drama into darker and deeper territory than it had ever been before by offering sociologically grim, dramatically layered examinations of crime and corruption in the urban ghetto” (“Police in Television” 1773). These shows offered a more nuanced approach to presenting police

procedures, having derived their procedural method from gangster drama (Jenner 147). Despite not being a police drama, *Breaking Bad* engages with the themes of crime and punishment in detail, warranting its placement in this study. It owes its textual lineage to other crime dramas like *The Sopranos* and *Weeds* (Showtime 2005–2012) which examined antiheroic figures and the murky world they operate in. Often, these shows find closer parallels in gangster movies and crime dramas like *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972) and *GoodFellas* (Martin Scorsese, 1990) which feature organized crime, and others like *Falling Down* (Joel Schumacher, 1993) which portray a common man fighting against the injustices of a brutal system.

The Wire and *The Shield* build on the viewers' familiarity with the genre and distinguish themselves from the rest by subverting expected procedural expectations. Other police dramas also have offered morally ambiguous characters and edgy socio-political representations. However, these two shows fully dismantle familiar structures that align the police with "good" and substitute lawful procedure with extralegal crime-solving to offer "natural justice." *The Wire* rejects the typical moral binary offered in TV by seeking to represent the complexities and systemic failures that have preordained the war on drugs to be a failure. *The Wire's* broad social canvas approach challenges procedural clichés by suggesting that when it comes to crime and social deprivation, there is no such thing as a "non-primary" character since social problems involve all levels of society. *The Shield* examines the circumstances that have enabled self-serving and psychopathic characters to thrive in a police department. Mike Chopra-Gant observes,

the shift in focus from the maverick law enforcers of earlier cop shows to their bureaucratic counterparts in the later shows provided fertile ground for the development

of a tension within the cop genre between an ill-defined sense of individual justice, on the one hand, and codified, bureaucratized law, on the other (125).

These two shows present law enforcement officers as both mavericks as well as part of a bureaucracy. They study American cities that are constantly transitioning from one state of ruin to another, ravaged by cycles of abuse and neglect. While a cop-killer like Vic Mackey in *The Shield* might only be an offensive figure in the American popular imagination which had lionized cops like Joe Friday and Frank Pembleton, that portrayal also conjures a world which is out of joint. These two shows expose the irony of trying to have tougher law enforcement in a world where law enforcement has already failed its stated purpose of protecting and serving the community.

These shows demonstrate the power representational images hold over the viewers. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag cautions that “Beautifying is one classic operation of the camera, and it tends to bleach out a moral response to what it is shown” (81). TV texts are symptomatic of this problem, as they often present images which simplify and stylize issues and conflicts that require more context and nuance. To prevent this, Sontag offers that, “Uglifying, showing something at its worst, is a more modern function: didactic, it invites an active response” (81). Shows like *The Wire* and *The Shield* embrace the murky and disturbing aspects of the narrative world they represent and “uglify” pristine images of Prestige TV in general or attractive cityscapes like the redeveloped Baltimore harbor district or the glamorous neighborhoods of Los Angeles in favor of a degraded world in order to provoke viewers to “moral adulthood.” *Breaking Bad* also tried to showcase the ugly truth of being middle-class when the myth of the American dream had completely failed its protagonist. Walter White, a man of considerable intellect and skill sees his entire life collapse around him when he cannot

afford to pay for his medical expenses through any legitimate means. By stripping away the layer of glamor and excitement that was often featured in TV dramas, these shows called upon its viewers to consider the pain of fictional characters.

From a historical perspective, these shows respond to the presidential policy of their time, and by extension, reflect contemporary attitudes about the law, economics, and society. *The Wire* shows a world still reeling by the massive domestic war on drugs waged through the Reagan, Bush and Clinton years leading to tougher sentencing guidelines and military-style police enforcement. It also marks the growingly antagonistic relationship between the minority black underclass and the authoritarian police, reflecting the troubling disparity with which the black community was affected by law enforcement policies. *The Shield* reflects the tough-on-crime attitude that grew more stringent during the Bush years when a global war on terror reinforced American exceptionalism and dismissed the rule of law. These shows comment on the uneasy relationship between police and the community in the context of a post-9/11 world. *Breaking Bad* shows the aftermath of George W. Bush's conservative fiscal policies that further weakened the social security net, as the growing price of healthcare put it beyond the reach of middle-class Americans. The precariousness of the American Dream that Walter White and his family enjoy on the surface ominously foretells the signs of the impending economic collapse. All three shows also foresee the divided political and economic landscape that Barack Obama would inherit from the previous administrations, as they reflect the disillusionment with structures that were considered foundational to American life.

At the levels of narrative, character, aesthetics, and reception, these shows reveal a systemic failure in law and order and evoke an evaluative mode of viewing in a disillusioned audience. *The Wire* exceeds its fictionality by demonstrating how administrative priorities are

more enduring than operational procedures. *The Shield* stages a perpetual state of exception by presenting the violation of the law as the only way it could be enforced. *Breaking Bad* unmoors our very bases for forming ethical positions as it romanticizes the drug manufactured by the protagonists, by either eliding or distorting the effects of its uses. All these issues question the status quo offered by dominant social structures. Most importantly, these specific texts represent the period where TV took a turn toward a more serious engagement with the world represented in narrative texts. The following chapters elaborate on the challenges and possibilities presented by the engaged viewers experience of these TV texts.

In the Next Chapters...

2. Perspectives on Quality TV

This chapter argues that the ‘good’ of TV is located within practices and conventions native to the TV medium. It explores the production, distribution, and reception of celebrated shows and examines how their exceptionality is linked to taste preferences. It situates a tradition of TV criticism against broader issues of ethical, social, and political implications of the individual’s role in society. The shows discussed in this study are among the best examples of TV seriality, as they both inherit and reinvent TV and genre conventions. By exploring the definition of exceptional TV put forth by prominent TV scholars from Robert Thompson to Jason Mittell over a three-decade period, this chapter argues that the cumulative nature of viewer relationship to TV texts are not necessarily confined to the limits of Quality TV. Instead, this chapter outlines the way in which complex questions raised by contemporary TV texts are framed by the special conditions in which viewers access and relate to TV texts. It foregrounds

the structures of TV texts such as its seriality, disruption, and repetition in viewer engagement as the foundation of studying the operational aesthetics of TV texts.

3. Antiheroes in American Crime TV

This chapter explores the complicated relationship that viewers cultivate with characters who do decidedly negative things with selfish motives and cruel intentions. Viewers' uneasy loyalty to dreadful characters is attributed to repetition, familiarity, vicarious pleasure, and the perceived "coolness" which softens the impact of terrible actions. Invariably, these characters possess redeeming qualities which, in comparison with others, frame them in a better light. However, their positive attributes do not fully address their negative shortcomings. Viewers enjoy such pleasures since the moral order is restored when characters are ultimately punished. A creative reading of this relationship posits that viewer allegiance goes beyond vicarious pleasure, as the viewers juxtapose their erstwhile admiration with their condemnation through their cumulative engagement. This chapter builds on Noël Carroll and Alberto García's perspectives on viewer allegiance to argue that the progressive deterioration of negative characters constantly challenge the viewers' alignment. This chapter examines the ethical significance of the viewers' sustained exposure to terrible characters. By examining the evolution of antiheroes in American television from around the turn of the 21st century, this chapter suggests that viewers do not abandon their critical and ethical mode of viewing through their encounters with amoral characters. Contrarily, viewers are called to reflect on their own principles through these encounters with antiheroes.

4. Cops and Cameras: How we see the Police on TV

This chapter examines the viewers' engagement with police procedure represented in TV texts and the implications they bear for popular understanding of law enforcement. The force of

exceptional police officers and extralegal methods presented in the text illustrates the complex relationship viewers have with texts, as they seem to endorse totalitarian views simply because they are offered as a comforting alternative to lawlessness. The presentation of popular disillusionment with law enforcement strategies and the viewers' skepticism with police in the real world is examined vis-à-vis the contrary dependence on police narratives in fictional texts. This chapter studies the biases in the representation of police in narrative fiction and questions the elision of police authoritarianism under the guise of upholding law and order. By examining the factors that contribute to an acceleration of the legal process and erasure of certain institutions in TV shows, this chapter comments on how the changing priorities of TV shows reflect the corresponding anxieties of their times. It then contends that the studied texts generate moments of resistance through narrative disruption where the viewers are called to examine the failure of procedures and professional ethics by officials who are meant to uphold the law.

5. Police Procedure in The Wire and The Shield

This chapter takes a closer look at TV's authorization of police power and brutality by reinforcing the threat of criminality over the viewers. It contrasts the different types of representations of police power in *The Wire* and *The Shield* and examines the insidious ways in which the notion of commonsense law is manipulated and redeployed to accelerate narrative pacing, at the cost of compromising individual civil liberties. Close readings of police power at the level of the individual as well as entire departments in these shows, are used to examine the way serial crime narratives compound viewer allegiance to certain characters. By examining the ways in which these two shows comment about the bureaucracy and politics, this chapter looks at the authorization of "street justice" in lieu of qualitative policing. However, these shows do not simply endorse police power. Instead, they question the glorified presentation of police

authority in crime dramas, by leaning on the viewers' sustained engagement with the TV text. These shows both affirm and subvert the notion of police power as a substitute for that lawful procedure in a context where quantitative arrest statistics is used to signify police achievement.

6. Conclusion: Responding to TV Images

The concluding chapter recaps the aims of the study and evaluates some of the limitations in its texts, methods, and approaches. It looks at the role played by non-textual aspects of TV, including production, circulation, and reception in shaping them as cultural artifacts. It contends that limiting attention to texts that are already authorized through popular and critical consensus furthers the risk of increasing exclusivity in TV texts. Since TV texts constantly reinvigorate traditional modes to provide new perspectives on society and culture, we need to pay attention to forms both new and old. Therefore, the concluding chapter suggests ways in which future iterations of the project could be expanded to accommodate a broader range of texts from varied viewing contexts.

Chapter 2: From Junk TV to Complex TV: Texts for Creative Reading

The episode “Such Sweet Sorrows” from *Star Trek: Discovery* (2.13) is a culmination of an ongoing narrative when the eponymous spaceship is all set to jump time 950 years into the future while fleeing from a rogue Artificial Intelligence. This episode adds little to the plot as it focuses on the emotional journey of characters preparing for a journey into an uncertain future. Writing for *Gizmodo*, a popular science fiction website, James Whitbrook struggles to evaluate the episode, which is a set up to the epic conclusion of the season. He comments that “as a piece of standalone television, it doesn’t really work—but as an emotional climax before *Discovery* could do the boldest and bravest thing it’s ever done? It works” (“The Die Is Cast on an Emotionally Exhausting *Star Trek: Discovery*”). The critic’s strange comment is akin to saying that the penultimate chapter in a book does not work as a standalone work of literature. It is especially ironic in the context of *Star Trek*, as it is serially linked to its predecessors through callbacks, revisits, unexpected connections and recurrent themes over five decades. If anything, *Star Trek* demonstrates how TV works, through its incremental seriality and not as a complete text. The result of the longstanding bias against TV in cultural studies has resulted in TV criticism that ignores how TV works for its viewers, narratively.

Many academics and critics have argued against TV being subsumed under the broader classification of popular culture. Emily Nussbaum writes, “Television deserved a critical stance less hobbled by shame—a language that treated television as its own viable force, not the weak sibling to superior mediums” (*I Like To Watch* 17). For a long time, academic criticism also treated TV as a sub-category of film, making no allowances for its medium and genre-specific

features. However, a growing number of scholars have called attention to the fact that the unique viewer-TV text relationship predicated on the medium's ability to elicit viewer anticipation through serial engagement and narrative uncertainty deserves to be studied on its own terms. One of the biggest challenges in this pursuit is the inordinate emphasis to elevate the texts in consideration above other TV texts, to the point of obscuring the structures that determine the unique features of TV. This elevation of "Quality TV" as worthy of study can have the side effect of marking other TV texts as inherently and perpetually inferior. This exceptional approach limits the engagement with the evolution of TV genres and overlooks the crucial fact that Quality TV is simply TV done well.

Quality TV is a useful categorization that has drawn critical attention to TV texts and their contexts. However, this prescriptive categorization of good TV limits our engagement with the open nature of the text. While privileging some TV shows as Quality texts generate key analyses, we stand to gain by a more porous conception of Quality, where we observe how these texts learn from, influence and interface with non-quality texts. We need to attend to the fact that TV texts can offer significant insight through their viewer interaction. This is not to say that all shows are equal in their cultural and social significance. Also, more modern TV shows seem to outstrip their predecessors in matters of representation, technological innovation, and experiments with form and content. TV critics Alan Sepinwall and Matt Zoller Seitz summarize the debate about the improvement in TV texts as follows,

We don't believe that TV suddenly became good when *The Sopranos* debuted. But it would be foolish to disregard the fact that for the first twenty, maybe thirty years of its existence, television was more of an appliance or advertising delivery mechanism than an artistic medium. We don't mean to say that it was impossible to produce art on television;

clearly, it was. We just mean that the commercial constraints were so severe that shows were lucky to show flashes of artistry (*TV (The Book)* 16).

However, we need to consider the improvements in contemporary TV texts without disengaging from their responses to broader categories of TV texts. Therefore, we need to consider different approaches to the changes in production value, subject matter and pedigree of shows that inform our understanding of Quality TV values. By scrutinizing the existing critical terminology, we examine how they are co-opted by the TV industry. Only when we exit the limits of Quality TV, can we explore the precarity and potential for change in TV texts, and consider the use of TV tropes as the bases of evaluating the viewers' cumulative engagement.

The three landmark shows discussed in the study—namely *The Wire*, *The Shield*, and *Breaking Bad*—are complications of their respective genres. And while they are exemplary texts, their compelling and complex narratives are not exclusive to these texts. The popularity of the crime drama genre has attracted master storytellers who have found inventive ways of manipulating genre conventions. TV writers' craft operates on the presumption of viewers' familiarity with TV tropes and conventions, allowing them to design new combinations of the tropes to provide compelling encounters. TV's serial engagement subverts and reinforces viewer expectations across all genres. Even the most celebrated shows like *The Wire*, *The Shield* and *Breaking Bad*, operate as cumulative narratives that use repetition and reinforcement to stitch together individual segments, narrative tropes and character arcs and cultivate viewers' allegiance to them. Their distinction comes in their ability to engage viewers and reflexively examine the narrative mechanisms that operate in the texts. A TV text's prestige value has limited utility in examining the social, political, and ethical significance it holds for the viewers.

In contrast to Quality TV, Jason Mittell's Complex TV offers a more rigorous method of engaging with viewers' response to the operational aesthetics of the selected shows. Jacobs and Peacock observe that "[Mittell] stresses the importance of engaging 'fully and attentively' with complex works and is careful to avoid elevating complexity to a prescriptive criterion of value" (14). Mittell's aims concur with the creative reading approach as they examine the textual and contextual relationships that inform the viewers' appreciation for TV texts. This textual approach attending to the viewers' responses to the TV text draws from historical and contemporary perspectives—from both within TV studies as well as other disciplines—on narrative complexity, serial memory, and ambiguous characterizations. Attridge's creative reading approach allows us to read TV texts through the commentary of scholars as different in their approaches as WJT Mitchell, Vivian Sobchack and Susan Sontag. These thinkers model how to engage with visual culture and viewer response, as the engagement with the openness of the text leads to more compelling readings about the narrative world. Most of all, the outcome of such a reading, as Attridge hopes, "is a change in the reader, perhaps not only in the way he reads other works but more widely too" (*The Work of Literature* 305).

This chapter presents a brief survey of the evolving debates in TV studies to contextualize the academic landscape and evaluate current approaches. Historically, the acerbic dismissal of TV's value by cultural critics has provoked defensive responses from TV scholars who draw attention to some exceptional shows. By examining Neil Postman's criticism of TV texts as static objects, we reframe them as ever-expanding, serial events that allow viewers to re-examine their own perspectives about various issues. The quality-centric criticism runs the risk of authorizing some shows—especially in the dramatic and law-and-order genres—as special, authentic or realistic, and in turn, allowing such shows to enact and normalize acts of police

power. Instead, we study Quality TV debates to reinforce how native TV conventions continue to influence the production and reception of TV texts. Especially, we turn to Robert Thompson's criteria of Quality TV as a basis of suitably developing an approach that is grounded in the viewers' experience of complex texts. Since TV texts respond to feedback from viewers and critics, they allow viewers to engage with nuanced textual operations incrementally, and their configurations keep changing bit by bit. Then, the chapter pays special attention to how the three selected texts illustrate the tenuous relationship between our understanding of the quality and wider TV practices. It argues that a creative reading of TV texts explores the distinguishing features of the text without making value judgements based on taste preferences.

Legacies of the Frankfurt School

Apologizing for TV's presumed inferiority starts with the 20th century cultural studies approach which considered TV as a technological intrusion into the domestic sphere rather than a medium of artistic or cultural potential. Umberto Eco notes this problem when he says, "this sort of misunderstanding is common among those who decide to elaborate on an aesthetics of television without bothering to distinguish between television as a generic medium of information, a service, and television as a specific medium of communication with artistic pretensions" (*The Open Work* 187). For such critics, TV is a domestic appliance rather than a means to engage with a variety of texts. While the changing narrative and cultural contexts have long since overcome the criticisms leveled against TV in the 1960s, TV continues being subjected to much condescension, prompting critics to defend TV's role as an artistic medium. Even as academics from social sciences and humanities critically engage media texts in the world of fake news and corporatized media, narrative TV is still skeptically dismissed as "soft-

humanities,” as if narrative TV is immune to false information and propaganda. Brunsdon notes the problem with this approach saying, “the constitution of television as the bad cultural object creates a critical abyss when we try to shift the gaze, to look at television, not through it to the Real or High Art” (61).

Many academics from the 1970s and the 1980s emulated the Frankfurt school and held TV responsible for moral panic and cultural erosion due to its “production-line culture” (Adorno & Horkheimer 1979). Others accused it of preventing viewers from making “active choices” (Tom Carson qtd. in Toby Miller *TV Studies: The Basics*) and exclusively offering “mindless, infantilizing, and consumerist entertainment” (Postman 1985). The fear towards TV as an agent of social control can be summed up with George Gerbner and Larry Gross’s assessment that “television is a medium of the socialization of most people into standardized roles and behaviors. Its function is, in a word, enculturation” (“Living with Television” 175). Cognitive psychologist Albert Bandura’s influential research links TV viewing with aggressive behavior in children. He supposes that “adults who pursue a life of crime improve their criminal skills by patterning their behavior after the ingenious styles portrayed in the mass media” (“Social Learning Theory of Aggression” 15). These negative perceptions continue to influence debates about the social effects of TV, even though other critics and academics have challenged the universality of these observations.

Writing about the history of TV criticism, Toby Miller designates this first wave of reactionary response to an emerging popular medium as TV studies 1.0. Miller notes that this approach presumed the captive and passive nature of the audience who were unwillingly dominated by the institutions that control TV production (*TV Studies: The Basics* 25). TV studies 1.0 framed the TV debate in terms of morality since it feared that TV’s domestic presence across

the globe would lead it to be pervasive while being overlooked, deteriorating its viewers with repetitive and inoffensive entertainment. This age of TV studies was concerned with the medium as a whole and commented on its “political economy and psy-functions” rather than individual texts. TV studies 1.0 often dismissed TV’s essential modes of communicating with the viewer—its seriality and repetition—as negative attributes that diminished its own artistic value as well as cultural significance due to its simplicity. Even today, the shadow of cultural studies stokes commonly held views of TV’s degenerative effects, when critics ignore what TV *does* and how viewers respond to it. As Sudeep Dasgupta notes, TV critics have generally “[responded] defensively rather than proactively to the historical shifts in programming, genre-hybridisation, and television production” (“Policing the people” 30). Significantly, these approaches continue to perceive the TV box as the dominant mode of receiving TV texts, despite the changes in technology.

Neil Postman’s scathing polemic *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985) is one of the most enduring critiques of the manipulative power of TV. Postman considers the impermanence of TV images, TV’s production structures and its habituation of viewers to pay attention only to entertaining things, as impediments to factual presentation of issues.¹⁰ He argues that TV medium essentially trivializes issues by constantly preparing the viewers to shift their focus to something else. He illustrates his point as follows,

There is no murder so brutal, no earthquake so devastating, no political blunder so costly—for that matter, no ball score so tantalizing or weather report so threatening—that it cannot be erased from our minds by a newscaster saying, “Now... this” (99).

¹⁰ In his foreword to his father’s book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Andrew Postman explains that the expectation of amusement is even more worrying in the Internet age, as social media cycles out news and entertainment faster and more effectively than television (xiv).

For Postman, the disruption between news segments indicates TV's commercial purpose, as it rushes through events without allowing the viewer to think about them. Postman suggests that such interruptions cause TV to circulate decontextualized and discontinuous images so that "the possibility of anyone's knowing about the world, as against merely knowing of it, is effectively blocked" (113). Like Theodore Adorno, Postman believes that the very fact of watching TV creates viewers who prioritize textual pleasure over meaning.

However, Postman's concerns do not evaluate the utility of TV's interruptions. 24-hour news demonstrates that the length of news segments or their accompanying interruptions are not the reasons for viewer indifference. In fact, editorialized news presentations overexpose a subject by trying to elicit emotional viewer responses rather than examine issues in depth. In today's immersive and multi-screen media environment, viewers are oversaturated with screen interactions just as Postman feared, and therefore, it is more important to go beyond summarily rejecting the medium and examine how its narrative structures shape our interactions with the medium. In viewer-encounter with TV texts, the momentary disruptions of breaks play a vital role in foregrounding its fictionality and allowing viewers to pause and reflect on textual and contextual questions. In narrative texts, when viewers suddenly turn away from serious moments, the gravity of the questions raised persists through the forced break, foregrounding the implications of what they have witnessed. The viewers' serial engagement allows them to return to the text, more involved due to the anticipation generated by the break. This interruption performs a role similar to the Shakespearean use of comic relief to diffuse serious moments and heighten the narrative crisis. These interruptions are useful in provoking viewers to examine the significance of a piece of information that no longer haunts the screen.

Ultimately, Postman's skepticism towards television reflects a continuation of the Platonic skepticism towards the image widely seen in Western culture. He writes that "on television, discourse is conducted largely through visual imagery, which is to say that television gives us a conversation in images, not words" (7). Postman concedes that "it is a strange injunction to include as a part of an ethical system *unless its author assumed a connection between forms of human communication and the quality of culture*" (Postman's italics, 9). Postman's comment reveals his implicit value judgment that an image-based epistemology would deteriorate the quality of culture. WJT Mitchell critiques the gaps in the cultural studies approach in a tongue-in-cheek manner saying, "everyone knows that television is bad for you and that its badness has something to do with passivity and fixation of the spectator" (*Picture Theory* 2). Mitchell rejects a traditional skepticism of the image by calling for a more careful engagement with the immense power of representative images. Rather than discussing if TV is good or bad, Mitchell engages with its utility. These methods allow us to return to the site of the popular image without having to apologize for it.

While skeptical of TV, Postman finds value in harmless "Junk Television," because "nothing is seriously threatened by it" (*Amusing Ourselves* 16). By "junk," Postman's recognizes a place for television where its aims are unmistakably entertainment. In contrast to the 24-hour news cycle or reality TV, narrative programs are deliberately fictional, and they are directly aimed to entertain. Viewers may need to accommodate a high number of coincidences to accept the premise of a narrative show, like extraordinary crime-rate, but they are not tricked into accepting the narrative world as a stand-in for reality. Postman's remedy for TV's problem is to create parodic or critical television programs "whose intent would be, not to get people to stop watching television but to demonstrate how television ought to be viewed" (161). Narrative texts

demonstrate how TV works by calling viewers to recognize their fictionality. In these concessions towards narrative content, Postman opens the possibility of evoking viewers' critical engagement through seemingly trivial and entertaining texts. On the other hand, Postman reserves his harshest criticism for TV shows produced without the self-awareness of their entertainment and profiteering purposes—or make conscious efforts to hide them—in order to parade a lofty moral message. He says that “television is at its most trivial and, therefore, most dangerous when its aspirations are high when it presents itself as a carrier of important cultural conversations” (16). Postman argues that when TV takes itself seriously, like sensationalist TV news it is polemic at best and propaganda at worst, as it aims to manipulate viewers through both its content, and its guise as a neutral and unbiased source of information. Such programs suppress critical evaluation in favor of narrative urgency and authorize totalitarian authority.

Although Postman takes TV's power seriously, his genre-level characterizations preclude TV texts from participating in the very critical framework he models. In contrast, Mittell's approach demonstrates how even melodramas have their uses. Therefore, it is important to engage with the tension between the image and the text rather than its seek its authenticity. WJT Mitchell comments on the need to engage with popular texts by saying,

the path of criticism can no longer be imagined, as it once was, to be the high road toward a utopian realm of truth or toward the conservation of a secure cultural legacy. Criticism has no choice but to work through the conditions it is given, to question the rightness of its own place and time. When “history as it happens” in the movies and the news takes the form of melodramas that induce paranoia in their audiences, we have to remember that even melodramas have their uses (*Picture Theory* 416).

Mitchell's comments remind us that the increasing visibility of the world demands that we pay more attention to the ways in which images affect our lives. He rightly urges that we "need a critique of visual culture alert to the power of images for good and evil and that is capable of discriminating the variety and historical specificity of their uses" (3). For this purpose, a detached skepticism proves unsuitable, and we need to adopt a critical method that is more clearly engaged with the meanings and the possibilities of the text.

Like WJT Mitchell, later TV scholars also rejected the notion of viewers being entirely passive. The second wave of scholars called TV as "the height of modernity" (Miller, *TV Studies: The Basics* 27) with a democratizing potential "to bring global peace" (Arnheim, *Film as Art* 160) and "to make a classroom of an entire nation" (Hubbell, *4000 Years of Television* 221). Toby Miller notes that TV studies 2.0 believed that TV could empower its viewers by vesting the authority of choice with them, causing "central political and commercial organs and agendas [to become] receptive to the popular classes" (27). Their argument was two-fold. Firstly, discerning viewers are capable of critically and selectively engaging with the content offered to them. Secondly, TV disperses the elitist snobbery of traditional high-culture forms by allowing a greater number of people access the same kinds of cultural materials. Where TV studies 1.0 presented an all-powerful apparatus controlling the masses, 2.0 posits that an active and critical viewership could overturn the influence of the apparatus. These perspectives were often subsumed under audience research and mass-communication approaches. They rarely studied how the texts shaped the viewer experience, focusing rather on the larger democratizing power of the medium.

Approaches stemming from TV studies 1.0 and 2.0 have produced remarkable debates in TV studies. However, they primarily deal with TV as a site of studying *something else*, like its

use as a leisure activity, the society, structures of capital and industry, and political economy (Geraghty 2003, Silverstone 1994, Arp & Watson 2011, and Dant 2012). In short, TV studies 1.0 and 2.0 focus on TV only because “it spoke *about* us” (Miller, *TV Studies: The Basics* 145). Christine Geraghty contends that “it would seem that the content of television still matters to viewers... and that the quality of content is an important factor in debates about policy and provision in which television professionals are engaged” (“Aesthetics and Quality in Popular Television” 26). To Geraghty, there is a great need to engage with the TV content rather than focusing on its role as a mass-medium. Similarly, Toby Miller notes that while existing models of TV studies look at the technology, ownership and control, textuality, and audiences of TV independently of each other (23), we need to bring them together for a deeper perspective. TV texts and their institutions are not just signs to be interpreted, or coefficients of political and economic power that need to be analyzed—they operate at multiple levels and must be analyzed from different perspectives to generate different meanings. Therefore, it is important to bring together both textual and contextual issues when examining viewership.

Creative Reading: The Viewers’ Work

Two decades after *The Sopranos* first aired, there are many contemporary shows both on traditional TV and streaming services that have inherited, adapted, and emulated the legacies of shows that have inspired the Quality debate. They offer complex narratives with characters from different backgrounds, representing a variety of personal experiences and social perspectives. These shows have challenged the traditional privileging of cinema in the hierarchy of popular culture. These shows have not achieved their cultural significance by imitating cinematic conventions, but by embracing TV seriality. Even shows like *Game of Thrones* and *Westworld*,

which are produced at a cinematic scale with budgets that exceed mid-sized blockbusters, unmistakably use TV conventions to build deeply layered characters and intricate serial consequences spread over many hours. The serial relationship cultivated between the viewer and the TV text is not limited by its classification as prestige fare or traditional TV. These long-term relationships offer a dual experience where viewers engage with the text purely for its teleological drive as well as consider its critical value within its wider social contexts. This study seeks to examine the ethical implications of the viewers' engagement with texts at these two levels.

When seeking to address viewers' relationship with TV texts, we must recognize the impossibility of examining TV's utility and its social and political functions by any one method and of isolating TV technologies from its structures of narrative, production, and reception. In an effort to look at the TV encounter as an intersection of text and context, this study engages with the textual aspects of complexity outlined by Jason Mittell through the creative reading approach modeled by Derek Attridge. In principle, this study heeds to John Hartley's view that TV studies 3.0 should examine the "commodification of textuality, the global exchange of cultural and communications infrastructure and content, the suburbanization of First-World politics, and the interplay between physical and visual power" (*Uses of Television* 13). In this intersectional approach, Hartley suggests that besides positivist, social sciences approach, reading TV must also suitably modify theories from various relevant fields to account for the modal specificity of the TV experience. Toby Miller writes that TV studies 3.0 "requires a radical contextualization that acknowledges the shifts and shocks that characterize the existence of institutions and programs" (147) and foreground questions of "POLICY (public bureaucracies, private bureaucracies), DEBATES (press, congressional/parliamentary, lobby-group, activist, academic),

BUDGETS, LAWS (labor, copyright, environmental impact, censorship), HISTORY, PLACES, PEOPLE” (148). Only a multipronged approach to TV studies can overcome the false separation of political, social, and ethical significances of TV texts.

TV viewership has been examined as a mass phenomenon by studying the correlation between viewing statistics and the nature of the program in the tradition of Bandura, Gerbner & Gross. Adorno and Horkheimer’s concept of culture industries furthered the idea of viewership as a passive encounter of industrial products that determined popular taste. In this context, contemporary approaches from Mittell and García build on the semiological approaches to TV pioneered by Stuart Hall and Ien Ang to consider viewership as a relationship constructed by textual and contextual aspects. It is important to note that these different approaches are porous in their use of production, distribution, and reception. Mittell and García’s emphasis on narrative structures offers the means to productively examine TV’s ethical dimension by linking textual features to a potential viewer’s responses. On balance, Attridge’s creative reading helps position the experience of the text as not only an intellectual but also an emotional exercise. In sum, this study draws from these approaches to consider how “spectatorship may be as deep a problem as various forms of reading” (Mitchell *Picture Theory* 16).

The viewer-text relationship is developed diachronically, and therefore the most prominent sites of analysis are serial construction and character arcs. By treating TV texts as open encounters rather than completed events, we address the evolving and uncertain nature of TV viewership. Most crucially, seriality shapes the viewers’ response through its manipulation of the temporal aspect of the viewing experience. Emily Nussbaum writes about the visceral nature of the affective experience as follows:

more than nearly any other artistic medium, television took place over time—it took time to make, it took time to watch, it happened *over* time. [Unlike films or novels] television takes weeks, seasons, years, even decades. A fan had to keep inviting her favorite show back in. The result was a messily intense feedback loop between viewers and creators, a sadomasochistic intimacy that both sides craved and resented (*I Like to Watch* 21).

TV's seriality and the time frame over which it unfolds play a crucial role in understanding viewers' investment in characters goes beyond actions and outcomes. As they experience the text with their own evolving context, their emotional and intellectual responses also change correspondingly. In order to elucidate this unique nature of experiencing TV texts—where a viewer persists watching despite threats of cancellation or degradation—we need to contextualize TV analysis from the viewers' position. In the following chapters, I examine relevant narrative, imagistic and political and philosophical theories to comment on how texts modify and are modified by the viewers' serial encounter.

Instead of resynthesizing all relevant aspects discussed above, this study uses literary approaches draw attention to ethical encounters between viewers and TV texts. By looking at theories of reading that allow for the intervening of other real-world discourses (textuality), and reader reception which values the reader even without knowing them, I seek to consider serious engagements with storytelling and character. Attridge notes that “if there is an opportunity for further exploration of the text's content context, a responsible reading is one that takes this further step” (*The Work of Literature* 127). The textual ambiguity is met with the viewers' responsibility to do justice to its fullest possibilities. TV images may clarify unresolved social issues, or they could elide and flatten such issues to simplistic types. In both cases, they call upon viewers to reexamine the politics and social structures beyond the screen. When the narrative

prioritizes character and plot development, viewers experience a plurality of social perspectives without feeling targeted by a specific agenda. Therefore, we must address how TV texts shape viewers' experiences.

Earlier strands of cultural studies argument against TV simultaneously serve as an argument against viewers, who are passive beings acted upon by the medium and devoid of agency. Gerbner and Gross summarize this negative perception of TV viewers as follows:

Unlike print, television does not require literacy. Unlike the movies, television is “free” ... and it is always running. Unlike radio, television can show as well as tell. Unlike the theatre, concerts, movies, and even churches, television does not require mobility. It comes into the home and reaches individuals directly. With its virtually unlimited access from cradle to grave, television both precedes reading and increasingly, pre-empts it (“Living with Television” 176).

This strong critique does not distinguish between the specific content of the show and considers TV as an appliance rather than a medium that presents varied materials. Also, this attack overlooks that while TV does not require literacy, as in the ability to read and understand words, it demands a certain fluent visual literacy to decode and interpret the order in which the information is organized and communicated. My own approach remains within the discipline of cultural studies, as it uses literary tactics to read broader social phenomena. Its emphasis on creative reading stems from Attridge's observation, that viewers, at the very least, distinguish between what is real and what is not. The viewers' discernment goes further, as they recognize “that the matter recorded [by the camera] is itself a product of art (scriptwriting, make-up, acting, etc)” (*The Work of Literature* 272).

Literary criticism has a long tradition that argues for the agency of the spectators to respond to TV texts. Gerbner and Gross' suspicions regarding the passivity of TV viewing does not take into account the kind of choices Jacques Rancière recovers in the emancipation of the spectator. Rancière observes that the "theatre accuses itself of rendering spectators passive and thereby betraying its essence as community action. It consequently assigns itself the mission of reversing its effects and expiating its sins by restoring spectators' ownership of their consciousness and activity" (*The Emancipated Spectator* 7). Instead of this self-critical outlook, Rancière offers the idea of an emancipated spectator who "also acts, like the pupil or scholar. She observes, selects, compares, interprets. She links what she sees to a host of things that she has seen on other stages, in other kinds of place" (13). The passive experience of viewing does not lead to a mental passivity, because the spectator has the power to "to translate what she perceives in her own way, to link it to the unique intellectual adventures" (16–17). The emancipated spectator, like Attridge's creative reader "[blurs the boundary] between those who act and those who look" (19). This close engagement—and the openness that is pre-requisite for such an encounter—allows us to take a literary approach to TV texts.

Tim Dant brings this sensibility of the emancipated spectator by examining the viewers' phenomenological experience of the TV text. The value of TV lies in its mimetic force for Dant, who writes that "it is able to *show* rather than just tell what people do, and what the consequences of their actions are" (*TV and the Moral Imaginary* 2). The viewer's engagement with TV has an "interpretive fluidity" (3), as the viewer dictates the extent to which they engage with the text. This leads to viewers "[watching] matters of moral importance without thinking about it that way; what the viewers regard as 'entertaining', 'amusing' or 'interesting' is so because of its relevance to their life" (2). For Dant, TV offers a continuous present where its

information constantly flows from one segment to another. While this accurately describes the nature of the TV encounter, the viewer's response is not always immediate, as they reflect on the text when there is an interruption due to the serial nature of viewing. As Rancière suggests, viewing too is a performance. He writes that, "the effect of the new idiom [of the performance] cannot be anticipated. It requires spectators who play the role of active interpreters, who develop their own translation in order to appropriate the 'story' and make it their own story" (22).

The viewers' experience of the TV calls them to question their own perspectives as they evaluate the content presented. WJT Mitchell comments about the discerning work of the viewer when he notes the challenge of locating truth in non-fictional TV programs.¹¹ He observes that while "the news is just another kind of movie" (*Picture Theory* 397), the aura of authenticity accorded to 'news' images heightens TV's potential for avoiding responsibility. Mitchell points to the widely televised Gulf War and its accompanying images of devastation from Operation Desert Storm on CNN as a part of a well-constructed narrative that was deliberately designed to evoke "horror, anxiety, and fascination at the spectacle of war" (397). Mitchell writes that the "American electorate can witness the mass destruction of an Arab nation as little more than a spectacular television melodrama, complete with a simple narrative of good triumphing over evil" (15). By eliding the images of the victims from appearing on American TV news, televisual images evoked both a sense of victory while nurturing a sense of dread and paranoia. Narrative TV texts operate similarly, as they too evoke affective responses which are subverted or augmented by the viewers' awareness of the fictional experience.

¹¹ Mitchell recognizes that he shares with Rancière, "a belief in the deep imbrication of words and images, and a conviction that their relationship is one of dialectical interchange rather than a strict separation into binary oppositions" (*Image Science* 79).

Instead of denouncing the beguiling effects of TV, Mitchell calls viewers to carefully examine the immense power possessed by representative images. He challenges the age-old primacy afforded to the written word by arguing that images also carry deep signification to viewers. Therefore, TV is not something that acts on an unsuspecting and passive viewer—its value is in its ability to posit a world for the viewers to consider. Mitchell's complication of TV's function shows that TV studies must account for both the viewers' experience of the content as well as its interactions with the distinguishing features of the medium. Privileging the 'Not TV' aspects over the TV experience limits the study of form and content of TV, which are inextricably linked to each other. Mitchell's turn of discussing events depicted on TV, while emphasizing the process of depiction and interaction between the image and medium offers a deft method of examining TV texts without neglecting their medium-specific conventions.

Rather than providing authenticity, fictional TV texts stage a theater of justice. Hannah Arendt comments about the importance of performing justice through public events in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. A brief anecdote from Arendt's famous essay on Adolf Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem offers a critical insight about the dual role played by television in the ethical domain. During the trial, the prosecutor was prominently featured in televised interviews for an American audience. Arendt observes that the televising of the trial reveals how closely witnessing, thinking, judging, and acting are linked. She notes with irony that the prosecutor's interview was interrupted by real-estate advertising, undercutting any sense of seriousness that such an interview could have conveyed. For Arendt, the interruption is befitting the bizarre and overly dramatic nature of the trial which seemed to prioritize the staging of justice over preserving the legality of the actual proceedings. This critical observation illustrates the duality of TV both as a stage to witness the process of justice as well as a mercenary whose profit motive comes first.

Even the most intricately plotted and meticulously researched programs could reduce its core issues to puzzles to be solved due to the narrative engagement from the viewers. TV offers solace with a promise of certain justice, but it also normalizes the event as a visual spectacle that we can watch as a sport.

Arendt considers the advertisement an unintentional subversion which disrupts and exposes the theater of justice as a public performance. However, the very disruption also alerts the viewers to the levity of the moment by contrasting it against the monetary significance of TV encounters. Without the advertisement, the viewer accepts the theatre of justice at face value as a document of truth. The disruption irritates the viewer by revealing the entertainment value that the text offers. The viewer is called upon to think about the theatricality of the Eichmann trial, where one person is symbolically tried for the crimes authorized by a state. The advertisement reminds the viewer that TV could fuel justifiably indignant rage in one moment and quietly dismiss it with another narrative beat. The interruption highlights how TV shows offer simplified tropes of good and evil as substitutes for justice and unsettles the viewers by revealing the frame within which such a theatre of justice is staged. At one level, it is important to be wary of the illusion of involvement, where the viewer equates their witnessing of the theatre of justice to the process of justice itself. However, TV has historically contributed to consciousness building by not only normalizing new ideas which are difficult to process but also by preparing viewers for changes that have not yet occurred in their region. While TV's seriality uses repetition as a chief mode of sustaining audience expectations about character and plot, Umberto Eco observes that "seriality and repetition are not [necessarily] opposed to innovation" (*The Limits of Interpretation* 93). The viewers' textual encounters intensify over time and aid a critical transformation in public thinking about the critical function played by TV texts.

The politics of the texts' authors have little effect on the viewers, since TV texts have multiple contributors. Attridge, who does not consider political outcomes as a primary aim of textual experiences, argues that the interaction between the viewers' idioculture and the text offer a mode of self-examination that is independent of the political inclinations of the texts themselves. *The Wire's* inscrutable narrative development, complex and evolving characterization, continued engagement with the deep-rooted institutional problems that cause the violence and street-level crimes, are all signs that position the viewing as a socially motivated program. Similarly, *The Shield* and *Breaking Bad* also present unfamiliar narrative contexts that become familiar to the viewers only because of their sustained interest in the narrative world. To study the viewers' response to these aspects we must be open to the textual quality of these shows. In some contexts, the viewers' investment in a character may not concur with their assessment of the beliefs that the character lives by. However, the viewers' familiarity with genre conventions allows them to experience and evaluate outcomes that need not affirm their own worldview.

Limits of Quality TV

Two decades ago, Robert Thompson remarked that "the publicly voiced opinion of many thinking adults still holds that entertainment TV in general is usually at best a waste of time and at worst a toxic influence" (*Television's Second Golden Age* 19). Thompson's comment continues to reflect a generally held popular opinion, despite the considerable technological, industrial, and social changes in our encounter of television. Thompson contends that the increased critical interest in TV studies since the 1980s reflected the demand that TV ought to have a value for its viewers. Not only do the viewers and critics need to "justify the time they log

in front of the set... waiting for art to come out of a box” (19), but they also seek to distance themselves—and their beloved texts—from the lowly company of ‘common’ television.

Elevating some texts over others ignores the porous nature of complexity used in the TV medium. This section continues the work that questions the celebration of TV texts through exclusionary practices, as seen in Newman and Levine.¹²

Thompson, like many who defend TV’s value against attacks, emphasizes the significance of critically celebrated texts as more important than regular TV. However, linking the importance of TV texts solely to its critical significance ignores that TV texts are most useful as cultural kaleidoscopes to consider narrative, contextual, and industrial issues at once. In their book *Legitimizing Television* Elana Levine and Michael Newman take exception to the approach of celebrating some texts by disparaging others. They write, “while such exceptions get figured as displacing the television of the past, they can only achieve their stature by lending credence to the long history of the TV-as-corrupter-of-all-that-is-good theme” (18). Instead, we need to consider the agency that the viewer has in being able to respond to the text, and the value that they can generate through their response. We need to position the emergence of Prestige and Quality shows as contiguous with existing TV genres, since their departures in visual and narrative style from their predecessors do not change the central structures of TV seriality that cultivate viewer relationship.

Quality TV (Robert Thompson, Janet McCabe, and Kim Akass) and Complex TV (Jason Mittell) are among a busy field of scholarship that distinguishes their areas of study. Good TV

¹² TV watching is used as a shorthand here for both, the traditional methods of watching texts on a schedule as well as the OTT methods of video streaming or boxset viewing. Although these two experiences are not interchangeable, the aspects examined in this study, namely narrative aesthetics, seriality, and interruption are common to the two experiences and require no immediate distinction.

(James Carlin Watson, Robert Arp) and New Television (Martin Shuster) also invoke an imagined fracture in TV production history as starting points of serious TV. This study uses Quality TV as a catchall term to draw on the common features of these different approaches. Emily Nussbaum notes that in the 1990s, even positive criticism seemed to imply that “TV might, in fact, be worth watching—but only when it stopped being TV” (*I Like to Watch* 7). We need to inherit the critical methods to examine narrative structures and aesthetics of TV texts, while also considering the changes in the exceptional categorization of TV. The viewer-text relationship raises important questions about society by the virtue of its medium and genre-specific narrative conventions and Quality categorizations limit our engagement with TV texts as popular artifacts open to engaged readings that seek ethical possibilities. A closer look at the main arguments against TV from the evolving history of TV studies shows the need for a new vocabulary to address the industrial and audience contexts of contemporary TV texts. They also highlight how quality-centric arguments elide problematic assumptions about class, gender, and viewership.

Thompson notes that the paradox of Quality TV saying, “In the eyes of many serious viewers, TV can only aspire to art when it’s pretending to be something else” (*Second Golden Age* 20). Joyce Carol Oates articulates this mode of thinking when she commends *Hill Street Blues* as “Dickensian in its superb character studies, its energy, its variety; above all, its audacity” (qtd. in Sue Turnbull, *TV Crime Drama* 78).¹³ Turnbull sardonically observes the irony of Not TV critical vocabulary saying, “quality television is judged to be so on the basis that it is less like television and more like something else, in this case, ‘a good book’” (78). The rhetoric

¹³ Oates’ defense of *Hill Street Blues* was featured in the June 1985 issue of *TV Guide*, a magazine then known for its participation in the cultural conversation.

of exclusivity in discussions of visual culture prevents the inclusion of TV texts as it is viewed as bourgeois middle-brow culture. The cultural studies influence on TV studies limits how often “unimportant” texts are considered in a positive light. TV plays a significant role in shaping popular culture by disseminating cultural information through texts of contemporary value. Thus, TV informs the way we perceive and judge texts. Despite legitimizing the study of TV texts, Quality TV limits its scope to exploring a few critics’ opinions of what people should watch, rather than what people really watch. Newman and Levine summarize this problem with TV’s reception when they write that “the cultural legitimation of television is premised upon a rejection and a denigration of “television” as it has long existed, whether in the form of conventional programming, low-tech viewing (real time, with commercials), or the elite conception of a mass audience too passive or stupid to watch differently” (*Legitimizing Television* 2–3). These attempts to distinguish some TV texts over others fail to recognize that “quality ultimately implies an appreciation of ‘taste’” (Barthes *The Rustle of Language* 62).

Similarly, commenting about the popularity of ‘critically acclaimed’ shows in academic circles, Henry Jenkins wonders if viewers need PhD’s to enjoy them (“Picking Favorites”). Jenkins’ observation that “there is a kind of academic canon of television” suggests that watching TV in an academic sense is about taking TV seriously, perhaps at the cost of separating the texts from their context of reception. The academic debate over the function of TV has largely been drawn along the lines of its role as a domestic indulgence versus a cultural artifact. Therefore, to categorize critically acclaimed TV shows as ‘cinematic,’ ‘quality,’ or ‘prestige’ programming validates *some* TV as high-culture products. The dichotomy between “regular” TV texts as simple entertainment and socially committed “Not TV” exposes a fundamental bias against the TV medium. When contextualizing TV texts against their genre and history, we gain

insights about competitive network practices that have shaped American TV around the idea of “Least Objectionable Programs.”¹⁴ While specific programs or episodes were treated with critical interest, TV shows from the major broadcast networks were generally seen as lacking cultural value. Dasgupta summarizes the problem with the quality-centric approaches when he argues that they fail from “focusing on the meaningful implications of the narrative strategies” in the text (42). Therefore, we need to challenge these assumptions to locate the significance of these texts in textual features and viewer response to them.

Scholars like Patrice Petro have noted that the overemphasis on exceptional TV texts is to “masculinize” a medium that was considered “feminine.” Petro notes that “theoretical discussions of art and mass culture are almost always accompanied by gendered metaphors which link ‘masculine’ values of production, activity, and attention with art, and ‘feminine’ values of consumption, passivity, and distraction with mass culture” (“Mass Culture and the Feminine” 6). Reframing TV as an acceptable activity through exceptional language like prestige drama overlooks the significance of viewer engagement through distraction and passivity. Petro’s critique calls out the gendered notion of textual importance accorded by the imagined audience. Similarly, Emily Nussbaum contrasts between the popular reception of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as a “a girl show” and *The Sopranos* as “serious TV.” The persistent characterization of masculine TV as worthy of critical attention is also perpetuated by an exceptional categorization of TV texts.

Often, celebrated elements in prestige texts like intricate seriality have been in use in less prestigious forms like soap operas for decades, and this history is rarely acknowledged. In

¹⁴ NBC executive Paul Klein coined the term to describe the three-way status quo of audience share between NBC, ABC, and CBS until the emergence of cable TV in the 1980s.

“Historicizing Influence of Soap Opera,” Elana Levine outlines the problematic history of the gendered erasure of soap operas due to their perceived feminine status. Levine calls the refusal to acknowledge soap operas’ influence in peak or golden age TV as “classist and masculinist denials of an association between aesthetically legitimated content and the feminized world of daytime drama” (105–106). Levine establishes that the prime-time serial narratives developed as a genre due to the popularity of daytime serials. In fact, serial dramas like *Breaking Bad* and *Dexter* drew on the groundwork laid by prime-time soap operas like *Dallas* (CBS 1978–1991) and *Dynasty* (ABC 1981–1989). Since mass culture is reduced to memes rather than elevated to literary texts, the desire to engage with TV programs as texts has ironically led TV scholars to claim that their texts are exceptional. By venerating a few selected texts, TV remains a much-maligned medium whose critical value continues to be assessed by literary qualities. Both inadvertently and deliberately, judgements of taste come with reproducing ideology and paradigms of value. Instead, as seen in the reading of Neil Postman, an engaged exploration of a text’s complexity does not preclude an assessment of its cultural significance.

Thompson’s list of distinguishing markers is helpful to further examine the porous nature of the quality and non-quality TV texts. He names the pedigree of the makers, the intended audience, a noble artistic style, ensemble cast, series memory, genre-blending innovations, writer-centricity, self-consciousness, controversial subject matter, realism, and critical reception as essential features of Quality TV. Where Postman writes off entire genres, Thompson’s criteria reveal the desire to develop the vocabulary to talk about serious endeavors in TV, and forego the repetitive, formulaic, and simplistic narratives TV was known for. His criteria also show that the notion of quality is tied to the tensions between content and its production. Thompson’s central claim was “Quality TV is best defined by what it is not. It is not ‘regular’ TV” (*Second Golden*

Age 13). Thompson's list outlines the ways in which TV genres have grown and how TV texts are perceived across different eras. The industry-wide adoption of Quality TV markers is seen in shows like *CSI* (CBS, 2000–2015), while attracting little of the critical veneration that accompany quality shows. As the TV medium continually updates itself in accordance to the latest technologies and narrative styles, its criticism must also adapt its methods. The ability to critically engage with social issues is no longer the domain of eclectic TV shows. TV texts evoke empathetic viewer relationships which aspire to critically engage with the text. This amorphous nature of the medium suggests that the way TV aspires to higher ethical functions is not through specific messages, but through its reflexivity, seriality and the subsequent questioning of its messages.

The quality argument keeps evolving to reflect both the industrial and cultural shifts that have taken place correspondingly. Critics writing in the 2010s like Alan Sepinwall, Brett Martin, Jason Mittell and Marcus Maloney consider the new millennium as the dawn of Quality TV as it features shows like *The Shield*, *The Wire*, *The Sopranos* and *Six Feet Under*. A slightly earlier generation of critics featured in Kim Akass and Janet McCabe's seminal volume from 2007 take after and expand upon Robert Thompson's idea of a Second Golden Age that includes programs from the 90s and the 80s like *ER*, *St. Elsewhere*, *Hill Street Blues*, *Oz*, *Homicide* and *NYPD Blue*. The first Golden Age of TV in the 1950s was also defined by the exceptional aesthetic of anthology programs and televised theatre productions. These discussions place the value of TV lies in their modes of production, and its situated reception and cultural significance. In addition to the issues raised by quality-centric approaches, we must also account for the critical self-examination triggered in the viewers by the show's aesthetic and affective dimensions. The

viewer-text encounter is shaped by both textual elements as well as the viewers' response to them.

Exceptional Authorship and Seriality

A decade after Thompson, Janet McCabe, and Kim Akass further refined the term Quality TV by positioning it within the context of cable channels. They argue that these programs need not be studied just as “‘artifacts of popular culture’ but also ‘rich, complex artworks’” (*Quality TV* 4). In their view, the Quality-centric TV programming is free from compulsions of market forces, viewership, and ratings, leading TV to become more concentrated on its narrative strategies to deliver more compelling storytelling. The essays in the collection question assumptions that dominated the quality divide on TV. These discussions reflect the critical community's attempt to articulate value judgments in an objective manner. While Thompson's criteria describe some features as unique to a certain kind of TV text, this revised iteration brings more nuance to trace how such features have operated for a long time. For instance, seriality has been a part of TV programs from the days of *Dragnet* and *I Love Lucy*, even if they were not like the intricately linked longform content we are accustomed to now. In particular, expectations about authorship, melodramatic evolution of characters and narrative priorities and incremental seriality have all played vital roles in constituting the viewer-text relationship.

The quality perspective on textual authorship celebrates critically significant TV as achievements of individual authors and overlook the collaborative process that constitute the texts. TV's exceptional quality is constructed through the idea that it is made by renegade

auteurs, but these figures are neither outsiders nor singular. Robert Thompson emphasizes that Quality TV is produced by “artists whose reputations were made in other, classier media, like film” (*Second Golden Age* 14), breaking away the shackles of Lowest Common Denominator programming. The assumption that TV texts are conceived, designed and executed as one completed idea elides the fact that they are constructed bit by bit, accounting for feedback from the viewers, critics and other factors that traditionally influence a show’s reception. He also valorizes the auteur as a tragic figure who “must often undergo a noble struggle against profit-mongering networks and nonappreciative audiences” (14). The entanglements with authority further narratives about iconoclastic auteur figures who go against the monolithic industry.

TV has had its share of boisterous and erratic (almost exclusively) men who are considered auteurs. Their larger-than-life personas have fueled the aura of genius who authorize every aspect of the text. The cult of TV’s auteur figures is best summarized by Brett Martin as follows,

in the hands of these all-powerful, all-knowing showrunners, television became nothing less than the dominant art form of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the equivalent of what the Big Novel had been to the 1960s and the “American New Wave” cinema had been to the 1970s. TV is now the place you go to see artists grappling with the big questions of late-stage, decadent American capitalism: family and work, sex and violence, addiction and warfare. (“The Night Tony Soprano Disappeared”).

Martin’s view is an understandably romanticized extension of Thompson’s characterization of the struggling auteur. While showrunners influence the shows’ critical and popular reception, they are only a part of a collaborative unit. Almost every American TV show is written by creative teams and the showrunner maintains the tone of the show rather than authorizing on

every narrative element. Individual episodes are developed by different writers after the team decides upon the season's narrative arc. The showrunner's role is to ensure that the narrative world is consistent, rather than execute some unilateral creative vision. Auteur-centricity is often a retroactive qualification that justifies the attention given to specific shows rather than a true and valid classification of the shows.

Crucially, auteur-centricity obscures the important contradiction that burdens even the most socially-minded texts—TV shows are produced by large corporations with the purpose of generating profits. Even when such texts perform important social functions, we cannot obscure the industrial questions that inform the politics of a text. For instance, an episode addressing black athletes and police brutality from *Black-ish* was not aired due to network pressure in 2018. Despite being an influential writer with a successful show that had completed multiple seasons, Kenya Barris was not allowed to comment on the issue. While publicized authorship signposts what viewers can expect about the aesthetic style and thematic concerns, its main function is as a branding tool which generates popular and critical interest in a program, making it a commercially viable product. The emphasis on the all-powerful show-creator is an attribute transposed from cinema—which, ironically, is also a product of many people working together. Studies of authorship must always engage with the fragility of the auteur's power, the collaborative nature of all TV texts and the negotiated construction of textual meaning. The overemphasis on authorship brings BoJack Horseman's humorous observation on TV production to mind that “the whole point of television, is it's a collaborative medium, where one person gets all the credit” (*BoJack Horseman*, 5.10 “Head in the Clouds”).

In fact, every critically acclaimed showrunner has worked on “regular” network TV before their accomplishments in the era of the so-called “Peak TV.” Critics have celebrated cult

filmmaker David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* (ABC, 1990–91) as ushering in a new era of TV, while conveniently ignoring series co-creator Mark Frost's long career as a writer on TV, including *Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1981–87). Famously, *The Sopranos* creator David Chase spent years resenting his prolific and successful career writing procedural TV shows before he developed his mafia-drama in the late 1990s. Showrunners like Vince Gilligan (*Breaking Bad*), Jenji Kohan (*Orange Is The New Black*) and Tom Fontana (*Oz*) built their careers working on network TV shows like *The X-Files*, *Weeds*, and *St. Elsewhere* respectively. Many of the maverick showrunners were not able to replicate their successes in subsequent shows, suggesting that a free reign does not always result in success. Showrunners like Ryan Murphy, Shonda Rhimes, and Jenji Kohan who have achieved the most success with multiple shows are those with many years of network TV experience. For every David Chase who completed *The Sopranos* as he envisaged it, there is a David Milch who has had a series of abandoned projects from *Deadwood*, *John from Cincinnati* and *Luck* due to his inability to keep up with the demands of TV production. Even adaptations are not entirely author-backed, as some features are changed to fit the TV medium and some narratives are elongated or shortened according to popular demand.

An examination of critical and popular viewership shows that prestige TV is “a category that doubled as a social-class distinction and an intellectual one” (Nussbaum 10), and auteur-figures were overemphasized because “it was harder to assign genius to a group” (20).

Thompson bases his ideal auteurs on real-life TV writers like Norman Lear (*All in the Family*), Rod Serling (*Twilight Zone*), and Gene Rodenberry (*Star Trek*) who produced thematically rich, creatively ambitious and well-loved TV shows under the duress of extremely stringent timelines and limited budgets. However, singular authorial vision gives way to negotiated texts, whose meaning and narratives perpetually shift from episode to episode and season to season. It cannot

be denied that some of the best shows in and out of the “Peak TV” narrative have benefited from such collaboration. That some channels were willing to take risks in the kind of programming they produce is less reflective of the sudden rise to prominence of auteurs, and more an indicator of the changes in the style of production and taste of the audience across all television formats.

Like authorship, seriality and narrative memory are features attributed to Quality TV to distinguish it from the return to status quo found in regular TV shows. In many cases, episodic scripted TV programs demand that the story-world is reset to its “normal” state at the end of each episode, regardless of the events that took place within the episode. This return to a baseline makes national and international syndications of shows easy, which require loose episodes that could be watched interchangeably.¹⁵ In turn, this drive towards syndication prevents content producers from deviating too far from familiar tropes, since new viewers must also find the show accessible. A quality-centric argument posits that only a select few shows which take on serious subject matters and aspires towards realism can subvert these expectations and offers serial memory. However, seriality is a persistent aspect of viewer engagement with TV texts, as disjointed episodes still contribute to the viewers narrative experiences of the story. Besides the variations in which quality TV shows deviate from earlier TV shows, we also see resonances between the texts, affirming the way TV genres evolve.

As outlined by Horace Newcomb, cumulative seriality is an integral aspect of the viewer-TV relationship regardless of the text’s prestige value. In 1985, Newcomb mounted a passionate defense for the value of *Magnum PI* as the “champagne of TV” amidst more prestigious fare like *Hill Street Blues* and *St. Elsewhere*. He foresaw other critics and urban audiences dismissing

¹⁵ Syndication is the leasing of a show to other regional networks which air reruns of episodes, often without heeding to the episode order. These reruns generate profit for the production companies, as they are paid per airing.

Magnum PI as trivial entertainment. It would be “nothing more than a ‘hunk’ show, catering to viewers who want their men tall, their cars fast and their guns hot” (23) to audiences used to “spectacular departures from the norm” (24). Newcomb resisted this categorization of taste as a marker of value, as *Magnum PI* “[avoided] predictability by exploring all the elements in its genre,” (24) whereas experimental or innovative shows like *Hill Street Blues* quickly became the formula to rework other genres by populating them with “world-wise, world-weary perspective, with irony as a way of being, with cynicism that passes for humor” (24). In contrast to the individual episodes of the show, the viewers’ cumulative experience of *Magnum PI* perceived “a world grounded in melodrama of the first order, inviting us to be as concerned about character, values and emotions as about adventure and mystery” (23). Like Newcomb, Dasgupta also problematizes the equation of quality TV with rich, affluent and middle-class audiences. He asks, “could it be that non-white, non-elite audiences also watch and enjoy [*The Wire*]?” (40). In order to move away from these biases, seriality serves as the basis of viewer engagement with textual aspects that evoke innovative viewership.

The ambient and atmospheric nature of the narrative worlds presented in TV constitutes the viewers’ experience in a slow and cumulative manner. For instance, *The Wire* uses its *mis-en-scene* to slowly uncover the decaying city landscape, and in turn demonstrating the failure of the American Dream. Besides the Shakespearean tale—or Greek Tragedy, according to its creator David Simon—that unfolds with varying outcomes for many of its characters, *The Wire*’s incidental revelations about the drug culture, its policing, and the racial and social attributes that shape those encounters call the viewers to delve deep in the narrative world. In this sense, TV operates like a puzzle where the viewers access the elements one by one due to its serialized nature. Due to the serial engagement, however, the anticipation for narrative resolution stemming

from our puzzle solving impulse is suppressed by the more compelling engagement with characters. Thus, we engage not only with the plot, but also with the choices presented for characters in the narrative world and background elements that shape such choices. As the serialized encounter repeatedly asks the viewers to immerse themselves into the narrative and disengage from the world at the end of the episode, the background elements become more important aspects of evaluation for the viewer.

The conflation of popular cultural products with art insinuates that the only context in which popular cultural texts could be studied is when they meet the notions of high culture. The comparison with art minimizes the fact that the TV encounter about the perpetual postponement of a show's summative evaluation from the viewer's perspective. Since movies and books are complete and self-contained texts, we relate to them retroactively. Whereas, TV texts operate cumulatively, and our serial engagement allows us to reflect on the characters growth over a long period of time. These implications divert us from the social context in which we encounter TV texts. The next section shows how the texts selected for this study both affirm and subvert the expectations set out by Quality TV. Then, we consider how Mittell's term "Complex TV" offers a more useful approach to contemporary texts, as it accounts for a more personal and situated examination of the operational aesthetics of TV texts.

The Complexity of *The Wire*, *The Shield* and *Breaking Bad*

The Wire, *The Shield*, and *Breaking Bad* use subtle shifts in the narrative rhythm to prevent the viewers from getting complacent about the outcomes for the characters. As scripted

longform TV expands in volume to reach “Peak TV,”¹⁶ viewers are called to think about the conventions and strategies that are native to TV. They illustrate social, ethical and political questions through viewers’ response at moments of narrative undecidability. The quality-centric approach is useful to consider how elements of textual complexity have evolved over the years. It also recuperates the value of shows that were once sidelined from the pantheon of great TV like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* or *Sex and the City*. Its rigidity in terms of drawing on value judgements restricts an engagement with a broader variety of texts. While affirming similar observations about TV, Mittell’s Complex TV offers a more useful way of addressing textual and industrial issues as he notes complexity is a “storytelling mode and set of associated production and reception practices” (*Complex TV* 233). By bridging Attridge’s creative reading approach with Mittell’s conception of TV complexity, we find new perspectives in viewer alignment and examine how their responses call into question ethical and social dimensions of the text.

The selection of texts in this study also runs the risk of continuing an exceptional mode of TV criticism, since these texts have been widely recognized for their pedigree and cultural significance as “Not TV.” And yet, drawing on the most acclaimed texts helps illustrate that serial memory, narrative complexity, and ensemble casts are integral aspects of all narrative TV. The three shows—*The Wire*, *The Shield*, and *Breaking Bad*—acknowledge, borrow and evolve from other texts in their genre history. Despite their narrative complexity, they operate work within the realm of narrative expectation and offer satisfying, if unexpected, conclusions. Their textual and contextual features of these shows resonate with some of Thompson’s Quality TV

¹⁶ The term “Peak TV” is used by FX CEO John Landgraf, who commented in 2015, that there was too much TV in America. In 2018, Landgraf admitted that had underestimated the volume. He cautioned that “everything feels vaguely familiar” to viewers and the challenge is not to produce more, but better programs (Adalian, “Forget Peak TV”).

criteria while exceeding others, demonstrating that the notion of quality keeps evolving as the TV medium matures. Therefore, the unique deployment of TV features by these shows reaffirm their position as inheritors of, rather than exiles from, TV's narrative conventions. A creative reading of these texts show how viewers question the meaning and alignment conveyed through the texts. These texts provoke viewers to reject simple moralizing in favor of critical evaluation, as the resulting creative reading brings forth the unresolvable dimensions of ethical, political, and social implications.

Quality markers are often coopted by the industry to promote their own shows as superior to the rest. Dasgupta cautions quality-centric TV scholarship against adopting a “dubious marketing logic of the television industry” (39). The fragmented viewer-bases from the turn of the 20th century allowed niche programs to flourish, leading to cable TV channels embracing shows with smaller but more loyal viewership. Emily Nussbaum observes that “once there was less pressure on every show to please every viewer, creators took risks” (*I Like to Watch* 17). Relatively free from the rigid rules about not offending broad audiences, TV programs were able to explore contemporary concerns in greater depth, albeit to appeal to its intended viewers. HBO's famous claim that it was “Not TV” is a deliberate branding exercise that supports their channel name, Home Box Office.¹⁷ This strategy of identifying themselves as “Not TV” was used to justify their premium cable price-tag. The subscription-based, ad-free premium model of HBO allows its shows to disregard scheduled narrative interruptions compared to basic-cable and network channels. HBO's differentiated content affirmed its self-identification as Not TV and featured shows like *The Larry Sanders Show* (a sitcom satirizing late-night talk shows—which

¹⁷ Its tagline since 2017, “It's what connects us” is a callback to earlier TV conventions tied together with scheduled, collective viewing experience.

happen to be network staples), *Oz* (a drama set in a prison) and *Sex and the City* (a comedy about affluent social elites). Similarly, rival basic-cable channel FX used “There Is No Box” for a promotional campaign in 2008, cleverly indicating both their creative, outside the box programming as well as stepping outside the bounds of TV—disparagingly addressed as a box. The rise of streaming services in the 2010s and their model of distribution have only accelerated the perceived alienation from traditional TV models.

Especially, the three shows selected in this study highlight the changing nature of both popular and critical viewership. All three shows have enjoyed success in stored-media and streaming services compared to their first broadcast. Even though critics tout *The Wire* as amongst the best shows ever made, its initial critical reaction was mixed due to its confusing and intricate seriality. Despite the threat of cancellation due to its perpetually low viewership, *The Wire* survived due to the goodwill and critical acclaim it created for HBO, a channel owned by media megalodon WarnerMedia. Unlike *The Wire*, *The Shield* quickly became the most popular program on the fledgling FX channel, hitherto known for playing reruns of other Fox programs. *The Shield* blended the traditional episodic TV structure with a serialized arc, pitting viewer allegiance to negative characters against the narrative pleasure of instant justice. *Breaking Bad*’s low ratings were above average for AMC, which had just started producing original programs. It achieved popular success around Season 3 due to the emerging success of the streaming platform Netflix, where it became a binge-watching phenomenon in 2011. They reflect the developments in technology and media landscape, as they offer more intricate narrative details for engaged viewers. Viewers who are attuned to genre conventions respond more readily to the ironic reversals in the narrative. In line with Vivian Sobchack’s observation, the viewers take up

multiple viewing positions depending on the context of their viewing and the content, allowing their experience to produce both aesthetic and critical responses.

While Mittell updates and adopts some “Quality” markers in his approach to serial TV, he argues that the ever-growing variety in both content and form challenge the idea of quality as a production marker. He rejects Thompson’s classification because “the slippage between notions of value, prestige, and audience and the need for quality to assert its equally vague opposite of assumed ‘low quality’ or worthless television make the concept aesthetically incoherent and not particularly useful either as a textual category” (*Complex TV* 212). Instead, Mittell contrasts TV’s serialization and characterization as processes distinctly different from other audiovisual forms like films. Moving away from a historical approach that focuses on industry practices, Mittell deals with the internal logic of the shows and how it frames the shows’ reception. In Mittell’s work, complexity is offered as a more demanding criterion where serial memory is replaced by serial causality. Morally ambiguous characters oust edgier but clearly defined moral motivations. Complex TV builds on Quality TV’s view of a more affluent, educated and niche audience served by smaller networks.

In *Revolution was Televised*, TV critic Alan Sepinwall posits that this new kind of programming gradually emerged from cutting-edge programs of an earlier era. He identifies HBO’s *Oz* (1997-2003) as a departure from established norms with its ability to present risqué storylines aimed at a mature audience. While his opinion differs from the others on the exact moment when the shift to quality occurred, he also emphasizes aspects like a serial memory, lasting consequences for character actions and incorporation of narrative modes as unfamiliar to regular TV. These critical approaches engage with the operational, structural and historical aspects of TV programs. They also engage with the limits of the quality markers and examine

how they serve as cultural and industrial innovators. In looking for “quality” criteria, “operational aesthetics” (Mittel) and a lineage of shows (Sepinwall), critical approaches trace the similarities—and the differences—between experiences of texts like *The Wire* and other quality programs like *Veronica Mars*, *Lost* and *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*. A creative reading incorporates aspects of these approaches to form the basis of examining other shows like *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* and *Supernatural* which flit between non-quality (in term of prestige) and quality (in terms of production and lineage) boundaries.

Realism is a common feature among the shows featured in quality-centric discussions. The realist aesthetic plays a central role in building viewer familiarity with the narrative world before disrupting it by drawing attention to its fictionality. Stuart Hall writes that “discursive ‘knowledge’ is the product not of the transparent representation of the ‘real’ in language but of the articulation of language on real relations and conditions” (“Encoding/Decoding” 511). In fact, its artifice is one of the ways in which it evokes our response to a world beyond its narrative constructions. When we wait for an episodic fulfillment to arrive after a week or a month or even years, we do not take the narrative world as a substitute for reality. We anticipate the narrative for its fictionality, and our anticipation presents an important way in which TV calls on us to engage with it. In fact, TV has always been about this intricate dance between fact and fiction—not just when they are recognized under the “quality” tag. Privileging realist TV texts prevents the engagement with non-naturalistic elements in shows like *Fargo* (FX, 2014–2017) and *Hannibal* (NBC, 2013–2015). Therefore, it is important to recognize the realist aesthetic as a narrative strategy that aligns the viewer to the text.

The three shows deploy realism to varying degrees in framing their perspectives towards the war on drugs. In *The Shield*, the drug network is presented as a social problem while

examining the violent cost dismantling it by whatever means necessary. The protagonists use the War on Drugs to allude to an exceptional situation to justify their own violations of the law. In *Breaking Bad*, we are positioned to empathize with a drug manufacturer while cops are reduced to narrative antagonists whose moral positions are irrelevant to the plot. The viewers' relationship with these two shows is irreconcilably contradictory, alternating between desires of destruction and consolidation of the drug distribution networks. The viewer encounters the glamour of stopping a drug network in one show and orchestrating one in the other. Neither show presents a sustained engagement with the social consequences of the drugs that are controlled and distributed. Both diminish the effects of the drugs by substituting in its place the power and influence acquired through the drugs. *The Wire* tries to deglamorize the drug trade and War on Drugs, by presenting the drudgery of the chase on both sides. It subverts the heroic trope of overcoming the odds and interrogates the viewers' alignment with the aura of "coolness" associated with the drug trade. These shows derive their subject matters from regular TV tropes, such as police procedures and crime and punishment. They are inextricably linked to the viewing context because our familiarity with the genre tropes make us appreciate these texts more.

The realist rhetoric surrounding *The Wire* evinces strong affective responses, as viewers experience nostalgia, feeling of lost hope and the perpetual nature of the decaying world. The casting of local actors and non-actors in small parts acknowledges the reality behind the fiction without claiming that the fiction is an authentic stand-in for reality. The show is a tribute to a memory of Baltimore in the 1980s, reimagined for contemporary audiences. For instance, the opening scene of the series features detective Jimmy McNulty at a crime scene of meaningless violence, where local craps-cheat Omar Isaiah "Snot Boogie" Betts lies dead on the street while his friend is stunned at the murder. The scene is a crash-course to the world of *The Wire*, as we

are presented a random, bizarre vignette that paints a grim portrait of Baltimore. This scene is a reimagining of an identical scene with the same victim and similar supporting players from the streets of Baltimore in the 80s, as reported by David Simon in his non-fiction novel *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets*. Simon transposes this scene across time and sets it in 2002, implying that the stories he witnessed nearly two decades ago are still relevant to contemporary Baltimore. Many locations and narrative tropes, including the drug-corners, high rises, power-hungry mayors, and the redevelopment of the port, have already taken place in the 80s and the 90s, despite being portrayed as contemporary events in the show. All this demonstrates that realism is a mode used by the show to offer an impressionistic view of the city and must not be taken as a documentary account.

An exaggerated focus on the realist aesthetic smoothens the frayed social and political by presenting a singular political ideology in the text. The more complex a text, the easier it is for it to slip into a dangerous obsession with defending their narrative authenticity. Rather than considering if TV shows are authentic, we must consider how they represent reality in the narrative world. If it can be argued that, historically, TV aimed to keep its audience trapped in a sedated state, it must also be conceded that it often revealed the mechanisms with which these aims were achieved. Where TV does not hold a mirror to the society it presumes to represent, it holds a mirror to itself, revealing the various narrative and industrial strategies that have shaped its messages. In this way, TV serves an ethical and iconoclastic function regardless of the specific contents of the scripted programs. This reflexivity is embedded in the TV medium as seen in the aesthetic and narrative modes which never allow total immersion into the narrative world.

Amanda Ann Klein offers a perspective on *The Wire*'s simultaneous use of and resistance to melodramatic TV conventions. *The Wire* devotes considerable screen time to explore the characters' interior worlds, as we come to learn about their values and perspectives on relationships between different social groups. This lingering exposure is also suddenly interrupted when the violent nature of the narrative world abruptly intrudes on these characters. Klein notes,

The Wire relies on melodramatic conventions... in order to generate sympathy for characters that may not otherwise deserve it (drug dealers, murderers, corrupt politicians), but it diverges from other socially engaged, melodramatic texts by constantly undercutting its ability to generate viewer affect ("The Dickensian Aspect" 179).

Klein claims that the use of melodrama in *The Wire* reneges from allowing viewers to enjoy a moment of clarity arising from "the triumph of justice or anguish over the destruction of it by clearly identifying innocence and villainy" (183). Klein's ideas build Aristotle's model of tragedy, where he offers catharsis as the purging of the audiences' excess emotions through an experience of pity and fear. The moment of catharsis is achieved when the audience experiences the falling action, completing the narrative journey.

Klein argues that *The Wire* offers little melodramatic pleasure in the end by not allowing narratives to reach a satisfying success or a devastating failure. For instance, the Baltimore Western police district's unofficial zoning of Hamsterdam as a restricted area where drug use is tolerated, reduces the wasteful deployment of police resources as more officers are freed up to work on bigger criminal cases. It also clearly improves the healthcare assistance given to some of the drug users, as volunteer groups find users to facilitate needle exchange more efficiently. When the city officials find out about the free drug-use zone, they promptly shut down the

operation. However, Klein points out that the show “[refuses] to tell the audience whether the loss of Hamsterdam is something to be mourned or celebrated” (183). In Klein’s view, *The Wire* challenges the idea of TV offering a solution to a problem that has haunted many American cities. Although the show’s creator has expressed his view that using law enforcement to combat the drug epidemic is a mistake, the show refuses to affirm the idea of solving the drug crisis through public health measures. With Hamsterdam, a slew of other problems arises, from disturbances to residents in the area to the escalation of addiction for some users. By calling the viewers’ attention to the unresolvable nature of the crisis, *The Wire* highlights the interconnected nature of social problems. The denial of a narrative completion prevents viewers from treating this moment as just another story, and the lack of resolution provokes engagement with the world beyond the text.

While *The Wire* uses the mode of melodrama to subvert expectations, the viewers’ affective response does not dissipate when narrative closure is denied. Instead, it becomes compounded with frustration for the forgotten characters. Clearly, the loss of Hamsterdam—despite its attendant problems—is to be mourned, as it is the bravest attempt at helping people rather than slavishly following the policies and ideologies that do not match social reality. The viewer’s affective response cannot be measured by narrative success in terms of whether Hamsterdam unequivocally improves the quality of life for all the residents. The narrative successfully underscores Hamsterdam as an inadequate plan which was doomed to fail due to punitive policies and attitudes towards drug control. The show invites viewers to respond with acute frustration to the stark and cynical narrative world, as they look beyond the screen at the

way these narrative events comment on society. Unresolved moments offer commentary about the relationship between the real and the narrative world.¹⁸

The text invites the most conflicted responses for viewers when relating to the unexpected outcomes of characters. When Omar Little is killed, the *Baltimore Sun*'s editorial team ignores the murder in favor of covering a Charles County house fire (5.8 "Clarifications"). After remaining a central and sympathetic character for the length of the show, Omar abrupt and muted send-off allows viewers to experience the character's loss and his erasure from public record. This unglamorous departure subtly presents how the death of yet another 30-something black male does not warrant more newspaper space in the world of *The Wire*, and likely in the real world too. The cynicism conveys a tragedy, not of a single character but of an entire ecosystem. While characters appear and disappear, for the tragedy of those that remain is in the repetition of the same. In place of simplistic moral dilemmas, the viewers' confront their own expectation of moral development by facing characters stuck in futile loops. Detective Jimmy McNulty's failure to hold on to his family is not presented as a consequence of his inability to balance personal and professional priorities. Although McNulty's repeated frustrations from work seem to fuel his infidelity, they really reflect his poor impulse control. The viewers' serial memory and their familiarity with other shows in the genre allow them to reflect on the failure of the system that mirror the listless lives of the characters.

Klein makes a good case for *The Wire* as a TV show that is not limited by the expectations of character success and failure. She argues that the melodramatic tropes in *The Wire* deny the viewers "narrative pleasures [including] the catharsis of tears, narrative closure,

¹⁸ Unresolved narratives have a rich lineage in the literary tradition. Marjorie Garber qualifies *Hamlet*'s remarkable prominence, its strangely persistent surfacing, its continuous invitations to scholarly speech, by calling it the "origin—or the marker of the unknowability of origins," like the navel of a dream (*Profiling Shakespeare* 59).

moral legibility, individualistic solutions to social problems, and nostalgia” (179). Indeed, the show achieves a more nuanced engagement with the melodramatic impulse. In *TV Crime Drama*, Sue Turnbull takes issue with Klein’s argument, as she notes that Klein’s perspective “implies that viewers who watch ‘ordinary’ crime dramas are neither active readers of the text nor socially engaged citizens” (*TV Crime Drama* 91). The subversion of melodramatic expectations in *The Wire* succeeds only because the viewers are familiar with the genre expectations set out by other crime TV shows. Turnbull’s comments suggest that the subversion of viewer expectations cultivated through serial engagement has been a long-standing feature of narrative TV.

While Turnbull and Klein debate how viewers respond to *The Wire*, they both agree that its unresolvable narrative position enacted by its seriality allows *The Wire* to offer critical perspectives for its viewers. Crucially, their approaches are creative readings that go beyond a sociological understanding of the text, since their readings do justice to the textual possibilities that are left ambiguous. *The Wire* recognizes moral certainty as a pacifying narrative feature that reinforces the status quo. Its uncertainty opens the viewers towards more complicated questions, and it achieves the uncertainty through familiar TV narrative structures. It confronts the impossibility of dramatically altering reality and foregrounds the amount of work it would take to mount an upheaval. Politically and socially engaged narratives can indeed be featured across different genres, telecast modes and aimed at different audiences like *Black-ish* (a sitcom on ABC) and *American Crime Story: The People vs. OJ Simpson* (a true-crime show on FX). The shared attribute among these shows is their ability to disrupt viewer expectations is built on viewers’ recognition of the serial structure inherent to the genre.

Thus, TV shows disrupt viewer expectations by challenging the viewers’ conception of narrative worlds as sterile and unchanging spaces. The *mise-en-scène* in shows like *The Wire*,

The Shield and *Breaking Bad* gesture towards larger social and institutional failure that are only hinted at in the narrative. The brokenness of the visual world in these shows is an aesthetic choice that destabilizes the glamour traditionally associated with crime drama. The ruined landscapes of post-industrial Baltimore street corners and the rundown and grizzled streets of the Farmington district filled with Latino and Black gangs challenge contemporary narratives of redevelopment and progress in Baltimore and the bright lights of Hollywood in Los Angeles. These devastated landscapes are not stylized portraits, but suggestions of a restless, simmering product of systemic neglect and inequity. TV uses these decaying images of mundanity to invite viewers to both avert their eyes as well as prevent them from doing so. The broken images of prosaic things are glaringly out of place in TV, offering a glimpse of larger institutional failures. TV's engagement with the depiction of ordinary and mundane landscapes allows it to present compelling issues without the trappings of aesthetically pleasing content.

Some critics characterize TV as a formerly simple and naïve medium which has pivoted to become a new, culturally important form that exists outside popular culture. This underestimates the value of texts that came from an earlier era. Another commonly held view is that TV texts are meaningful only due to the democratic choice they afford viewers rather than its specific content. By privileging exceptional texts, or by obscuring the value of specific textual elements, these approaches inadvertently suppress serial engagement and repetition as aspects of “ordinary” TV. Mittell observes that repetition plays a key role in developing serial memory in TV texts, as the “process of retelling continues to remind viewers as each scene cycles back from a commercial break but gradually advances the plot by highlighting the new story elements rippling out from past events” (*Complex TV* 237). In these cases, approaches that have a prior frame of analysis stifle the unexpected ways in which the narrative develops. For Attridge, a

critical approach to a text must relate to our own experience of the text. He notes that “the more powerful the critic’s technique, the less reliable the critical judgements it is used to make” (*The Work of Literature* 162). Therefore, it is important to incorporate existing approaches to TV to situate the viewers’ relationship in the evolving TV context.

Chapter 3: Antiheroes in American Crime TV

In *The Sopranos* episode titled “College” (1.5), New Jersey mobster Tony Soprano kills Fabian Petrulio, a former associate who lives under witness protection after informing against the mob to the FBI. The suspense of Petrulio discovering Tony’s motel, only to back off due to the presence of other witnesses sets up a moment of triumphant reversal when Tony easily tracks Petrulio to kill him. However, the exchange just before Tony kills Petrulio reminds viewers that there is no moral reason to support the protagonist. Petrulio pleads Tony to spare him, describing the earlier scene and claiming that he spared Tony because of his daughter. The viewers, however, know that Petrulio is trying to trick Tony into letting him go. In that moment, the viewers want Tony to see through Petrulio’s lies and punish him for trying to deceive their beloved protagonist. Their expectations are fulfilled as Tony tightens his grip on the wire around Petrulio’s throat while delivering a chilling message, “One thing about us wiseguys, the hustle never ends.” The viewers are left with a conflicting experience of narrative satisfaction of our protagonist’s success and having rooted for Tony to murder someone. The viewers’ collusion with Tony is not entirely attributable to a longstanding viewer relationship, since this is only the fifth episode of the entire series. There must be something particularly compelling about Tony, then, for the viewers to condone his actions and continue their investment for another eight years.

Tony Soprano was not the first antihero on television, but he is arguably the first to kill someone without the slightest suggestion of a moral dilemma. The episode “College” illustrates the viewers’ uneasy relationship with Tony, as they vicariously enjoy the thrill of Tony and Petrulio stalking each other. Tony’s actions are consistent with the violent world represented in the show. Tony’s murder of Petrulio seems inevitable, not for moral or practical reasons, but

because Tony needs to enforce an important tenet of their shared world, where betrayal has only one outcome. Brett Martin points to this scene as the moment where TV crossed an unspoken line—not only does the protagonist do something truly terrible, he does it without remorse or consequences (*Difficult Men* 101). Unlike other TV protagonists who resort to extreme measures under dire circumstances, Tony's actions are a natural part of his life as a mafia boss. The viewers are left to come to terms with their alignment and complicity with Tony and his terrible ways, since their desire to see his narrative success must suppress, albeit temporarily, any lingering remnants of wanting to see him pay for his crimes. This complex viewer response to terrible characters offers an interesting point of examining the viewer-text relationship.

Murray Smith comments that “rough heroes” like Tony Soprano need not evoke our compassion or pity, to call upon the viewers’ allegiance. He says, “Allegiance refers to... assessing a character’s attitudes, traits, and actions, a process that results in sympathetic or antipathetic attitude on our part toward a character.” For Smith, allegiance makes viewers “feel for a character without necessarily mimicking their states” (“Just what is it” 84). When Tony returns to the motel to meet his daughter, his more tender side is on display as he tries to unconvincingly explain his temporary absence and the wound on his palm to his daughter. This scene humanizes the ruthless killer and foregrounds his duality to the viewers, juxtaposing Tony’s brutality with his tenderness. His role as a loving father does not undercut his brutality but rather augments it. For Tony, Petruccio’s murder is as important a responsibility as visiting prospective colleges with his daughter, since both families demand his attention. However, when the same tone of normalcy is extended to his brutal side, it challenges traditional assumptions about viewer alignment. The show does not differentiate Tony’s familial side from his mob life as it presents both aspects of his life without judgment. Babette Tischleder observes that “we do

not have to like Tony Soprano in order to realize the stress he is under trying to juggle his various ‘families,’” since our allegiance is built through “serial familiarity [that is] produced through frequency” (“Thickening Seriality” 124). The viewers’ response to the episode shows that the impulse to evaluate Tony’s actions critically and the enjoyment of his dramatic narrative are not competing tendencies, as they inform each other.

TV critic Emily Todd VanDerWerff describes “College” as an episode that “takes the show from just a TV show to a fully realized fictional world, with people you care about and settings you might like to visit” (“*The Sopranos*: Meadowlands/College” 2010). VanDerWerff suggests that Tony’s terrible behavior has little effect on the viewer’s alignment with him. Viewers are loyal to characters even when they do not face consequences for their actions. VanDerWerff’s assessment seems accurate, as this episode encapsulates everything the viewers need to know about Tony Soprano’s moral code.¹⁹ Tony Soprano is a direct predecessor to the current crop of TV antiheroes as his character simultaneously demystifies the terrible strangeness of an unfamiliar world and normalizes it with the bizarre banality of their everyday life. The serial nature of longform TV necessitates that the narrative consequences for terrible central characters are deferred from episode to episode, and season to season until the narrative reaches an inevitable point of no return. Characters like Tony Soprano, Vic Mackey and Walter White appear to escape the consequences of their actions, begging the question if this tolerance towards terrible behavior reflects a shift in viewer preference. However, while viewers seem to tolerate terrible figures in individualized instances, the persistent accumulation of narrative fragments and character choices call viewers to evaluate the characters and reflect on their own position.

¹⁹ Ranked 2nd on *TV Guide*’s list of “Top 100 Episodes of All Time,” this episode is considered a milestone for both *The Sopranos* and Prestige TV. Writing for *Slate*, Julia Furlan calls it a “gateway episode” which “gets us to root, at least a little bit, for a ruthless bad guy to win so that his smart daughter can go to an Ivy League school.”

The predominant view about viewer engagement with terrible characters argues that viewers see the characters as offering redeeming qualities which make up for their flaws. Summarizing the debates around the emergence of TV antiheroes, Alberto García quotes Daniel Shafer and Arthur Raney to say that antiheroes are “criminal but redeemable... [who] despite engaging in improper actions... still function as ‘forces of good’ in many narratives”²⁰ (“Moral Emotions” 54). Jason Mittell argues that an antihero invokes “*relative morality*, in which an ethically questionable character is juxtaposed with more explicitly villainous and unsympathetic characters to highlight the antihero’s more redeeming qualities” (*Complex TV* 143). However, viewers still experience intense emotional response even when encountering some antiheroes without any redeeming qualities. This chapter takes the view that our engagement is formed due to the transformative power of repeated and periodic serial narrative encounters which cause subtle and incremental changes in both characters and their viewers. The serial structure of the narrative allows for sympathetic to slowly allow their moral outlook to deteriorate, leading viewers to renegotiate every stage of their transformation, even to the point that they no longer resemble their original selves. Inversely, terrible characters could also become episodically more sympathetic. In either case, the serial engagement with TV plays a critical role in shaping popular perception as it prompts viewers to reflect on the characters at different points in narrative time.

The viewers’ enjoyment of a terrible character makes the critical response weigh more heavily on them. Shakespeare scholar Peter Saccio observes that a charismatic villain like Iago has a “mesmerizing” effect on the audience, as his monologues always include the audience in

²⁰ García notes that such characters could “change and be perceived as a ‘force of evil’ as the narrative progresses” (“Moral Emotions” 54).

his conspiracy throughout the play. The audience overlooks their complicity in his malice, as they are exhilarated to follow the string of narrative improbabilities that Iago constructs to achieve his villainous outcomes. Saccio notes,

for a while, we follow this man as he exerts his great cleverness, his cynicism, his resourcefulness, we even maybe amused by him as he plays tricks on other people until we realize how empty, narrow and destructive it is. How much it hurts other people who we like much more. Other people who have the possibility for heroism, love, and self-sacrifice (“Othello”).

By the end of *Othello*, Iago’s admirable attributes are negated by his treachery. The audience’s critical self-examination of their response to Iago cannot occur without their enjoyment of his terrible actions. Unlike Shakespearean drama, contemporary TV does not always contrast terrible characters with more likable protagonists. Often, antiheroes are placed against characters who are more virtuous than them, but not necessarily more likable, further complicating viewer alignment with antiheroes. Tony Soprano appears sympathetic when contrasted to his conniving and murderous uncle. However, when his presence endangers characters like Dr. Jennifer Melfi, Tony becomes less sympathetic.

BoJack Horseman (Netflix, 2014–) attempts to unravel the fascination with antiheroic-protagonists. Diane Nguyen, the show’s voice of conscience, comments on how images could make strange things seem more familiar. She says, “pop culture inherently normalizes things... It can normalize things for good, like how dancing Ellen makes middle America less afraid of gay people. But it can also normalize things for bad, like what Jack Bauer did for torture” (5.3, “BoJack The Feminist”). Diane’s comments highlight the way in which unpalatable acts are recuperated as acceptable through TV narratives. García echoes this sentiment when he writes,

“TV fiction, given its serialized structure, is equipped to develop a ‘structure of sympathy’ that allows us to identify with morally defective characters who—beyond some obvious virtues—commit crimes, abuse and deceive; the type of person that would repel us in real life” (“Moral Emotions” 53). García’s structure of sympathy warns viewers of TV’s deceptive power.

However, the same sympathetic mechanism also allows viewers to examine social, political, and ethical values of the relationship between viewer and character. The affective relationship prompts viewers to re-examine the meaning of the terrible things that a character does and the nature and extent of our complicity to such actions. In other cases, the relationship elides the political and social implications of characters who escape the consequences of their actions. Since these tendencies act concurrently, this chapter locates viewer response to antiheroic characters as the point where both critical and emotional engagements inform each other.

In the viewers’ encounter with Tony Soprano, the critical impulse operates despite their apparent collusion with antiheroes. The viewers’ ambivalent allegiance to Tony persists to his bizarre and abrupt end. In the last moments of the show, Tony and his family gather for a peaceful dinner as a pop song blasts over the scene. When Tony’s daughter Meadow runs towards the diner just as a stranger at the diner moves suddenly, the screen cuts to black. This moment has been extensively discussed in terms of action, meaning, and outcome for the characters.²¹ To some, it represents Tony’s escape from consequences of his actions yet again, while others see it as a final reckoning through an unceremonious demise. However, the significance of the cut to black is that it allows viewers to imagine it either as an escape or the perpetual uncertainty of his life. The nature of Tony’s is distinctly different for each viewer as

²¹ Laura Bradley’s *Vanity Fair* article “*The Sopranos*: Everything David Chase Has Said About That Notorious Ending” (2019) summarizes the controversies that refuse to die.

they each respond to him from their experiential vantage point. He may not go to jail or die, but he will perpetually be suspended with the anxiety over the suddenness with which his inevitable end would come.

Vicarious pleasure does not adequately explain terrible protagonists who continue to earn the viewers' support despite their damnable actions. In her essay, "Robust Immoralism," A. W. Eaton discusses viewers' response to vicious fictional characters, saying "I do sometimes bear a strong affection for characters whom I plainly consider blameworthy" (281). Noël Carroll rejects Eaton's perspective that "sometimes an intrinsic ethical defect in an artwork can be aesthetically meritorious" ("Rough Heroes" 371). Instead, he argues, "it would be a mistake to look only at one component of the work—one character, for instance—for the ethical perspective the work endorses. One needs to attend to the way in which the character is embedded within a larger representational context—such as a narrative—and at the perspective embodied there" (372). Carroll challenges Eaton's reading of Tony Soprano, saying that in the show, Tony's "is not a life to be envied or endorsed" and Tony's filial nature and intelligent behavior make him attractive only insofar as "a cautionary warning" against his world.

Carroll frames the viewers' relationship with Tony Soprano in terms of morality. Even though Tony may not be moral in the absolute sense, he is "the most moral" and therefore "the safest to interact with, the most trustworthy and the most reliable" relative to the other characters in the narrative (132). Carroll discusses the affective response generated by the mobster as follows:

Juxtaposing mundane family life with life in the "crime family," while enabling the two terms of the comparison to inform each other in insightful (sometimes comic, and sometimes unsettling) ways, also relieves the banality of everyday family life with a dash

of excitement, much in the manner that an evening of crime shows leavens the routine of actual family existence either after or even during dinner (“Sympathy for the devil” 121).

The contradictory and evocative affective response to characters like Tony Soprano or Walter White goes beyond sympathy, care or pro-attitude for Carroll, as it is mixed with a “fascination [towards the] bizarre amalgam of the ordinary and the exotic” (123). The viewers’ experience of an awe-inspired, affective response flickers between our sympathy for the protagonist and “antipathy for an actual gangster with all the same intrinsic properties” (134). As Attridge points out, this indescribable experience allows viewers to engage with the originality of the text and respond to the otherness it posits for the viewer to confront.

In fact, viewers do not condone the terrible aspects of terrible characters when they harass witnesses, poison children, or distribute crystal meth. Instead, they admire the resilience of these characters as they fight an unfair society and weak institutions and overcome the odds imposed on them. As George Lipsitz points out in *How Racism Takes Place*, the viewers’ witnessing of terrible things in itself is not a noble act. However, viewer allegiance with such characters is also a way of interrogating the justifications offered by the text and the viewers. Popular and charismatic antiheroes are not just cautionary figures, but an indictment of the social structures that have condemned them to their lot in life. The viewers’ alignment with terrible characters allows them to experience the context in which such characters choose their path. Due to TV’s seriality and the viewers’ persistent engagement with the actions, the final retribution faced by the antiheroes stages a theatre of justice which goes beyond rewards and punishment and asks what it means to be accountable for your choices. Yet, every serial encounter of the episode serves as a barrier that prevents viewers from being completely absorbed into the narrative world. The viewers’ allegiance is tested when antiheroes go unpunished because the

viewer relates with the escape at the level of narrative engagement as well as engagement with a fictional text. Eventually, when antiheroes face consequences for their actions, the text becomes a way of questioning the viewers own allegiance as well.

This chapter examines the significance of viewer relationship with terrible characters and how they help raise political and social issues in contemporary life. It contends that TV texts represent some aspects of social realities while eliding others, and these narrative choices are evaluated according to the viewers' response. Fictional characters draw viewers in with their own interior lives, as narrative structures encourage viewers to identify with characters in broad narrative landscapes which allow for multiple perspectives to exist simultaneously. WJT Mitchell writes that representative images tend "to absorb and be absorbed by human subjects in processes that look suspiciously like those of living things... It is not just a question of their producing 'imitations of life', but that the imitations take on 'lives of their own'" (*What do Pictures Want* 2). These images offer deeper characterization as characters change over time and resonate with human counterparts they seek to represent. Narrative texts allow characters to have moments of humanity, eccentricities, irrationalities, and foibles that remind the viewers of the things that representations foreground and elide.

Drawing on close critical analyses of TV texts, this chapter uses antiheroic figures in the American crime TV drama to comment on the encounters between the viewers and TV texts. The next section outlines the presentation of the viewer encounters with terrible TV characters. Then through a close analysis of antiheroic figures from *The Shield* and *Breaking Bad*, this chapter examines how viewers' alignment and complicity with terrible behavior also allows them to question the behavior presented on screen. *The Shield* and *Breaking Bad* are particularly adept at alternately aligning the viewers with the protagonists and making them uncomfortable with their

continued complicity.²² These shows use the anticipatory relationship between the viewers and the texts to surreptitiously use narrative failure to offer a commentary on the larger social failure of the American dream, where the promise of success and wealth have turned into dust, leaving much of society in an American dystopia. They express the viewers' frustrations with social institutions that have failed them, increasingly and more intentionally over the passing years. The bitterness and cynicism translate into terrible characters who reflect the anxieties about social structures that have betrayed the people.

Viewer Allegiance and Remorseless Villains

The question of terrible behavior on TV has preoccupied many critics, scholars, and TV producers. From *The Sopranos* to *Game of Thrones*, 21st-century TV is dominated by antihero-centric programs. Critics attribute the popularity of antiheroes to vicarious pleasure, disillusionment with social structures or cultural decline. Stephen Garrett considers the prevalence of antiheroic behavior as symptomatic of underlying social anxieties. He says that antihero shows “are emphatically 21st-century creatures. They hold up a mirror to the century and find in their reflection a universe that is at best broken, at worst rotten” (“The Rise of the Anti-hero”). The various economic and political crises that coincide with this period validate Garrett’s assessment, or at least suggest the possibility, that society is rotten. In his article, “Why We Love TV’s antiheroes” Garrett overzealously states that “there are no more heroes.” While

²² *The Wire* is not discussed here despite its morally complex characters, because it resists discussing any one character as an antiheroic figure. The well-rounded perspectives of *The Wire* reject moral scales as the basis of evaluating characters and favors individual behavior as symptomatic of social ills. Characters like Stringer Bell (a drug dealer) or Omar Little (a stick-up artist) transcend their character positions, as the show treats it as a matter of fact that the viewers find them just as sympathetic as a police chief or a teacher, because all of them are similarly trying to make sense of failed economic and social systems.

numerous programs with earnest and lawfully good protagonists show that Garrett's fears are overstated, the plethora of morally ambiguous characters suggests that viewers find them appealing, and even heroic. Perhaps a more accurate way of reckoning viewer response is to note that the viewers' notion of what seems heroic and acceptable has changed.

TV columnist Logan Hill's tongue-in-cheek article titled "The 13 Rules for Creating a Prestige TV Drama" lists, "Start with an antihero" as its first rule. In his humorous column, Hill comments that the antihero is a middle-aged, white male, with a health problem and/or a traumatic memory who excels at his job and harbors a dark secret. Hill astutely observes that for a Prestige show to resonate deeply with the viewers, the antihero's business must be a "microcosm of the American Dream." Although Hill exaggerates for comedic effect, it is undeniable that TV channels—cable, network or online streaming—see anti-hero-centric programs as a prerequisite to be taken seriously for award-winning programming.²³ With the displacement of the traditional apparatus of watching TV—in a fixed time and place, simultaneously with a wider shared audience—in favor of personalized encounters of serialized televisual content through screens of varying sizes at a time and place of our own choosing, there is a corresponding increase in morally complex characters. Some early critics argued that such alignments are dangerous, since "people form impressions of the social realities with which they have little or no contact partly from televised representation of society" (Bandura "Social Learning Theory" 16). However, we must also recognize that just as critically thinking and well-informed readers engage with unfamiliar contexts in literary and historical texts, similar viewers can engage with crime narratives to reflect upon their attitudes towards crime and punishment.

²³ *The Sopranos*, *The Shield*, *Breaking Bad* and *House of Cards* all signaled a change in the kind of programming that HBO, FX, AMC, and Netflix respectively featured.

Changes in the modes of viewer reception have allowed antiheroes to thrive as modern narrative sensibilities place fewer limits on antiheroic characters. Moments of reckoning for characters are no longer an inevitable narrative convention but rather a part of narrative progression.²⁴ Viewer response to such moments offers further insight into the complexity of the serialized text and our relationship with it. However, the growing disengagement from questions of redemption and traditional melodramatic expectations in TV texts reflect their move away from the certainty of consequences, law, and reward and punishment, in favor of uncertainty that allows for the narrative subject to be constructed by their situation, and individualized anxieties. García explains audience disillusionment as follows,

As the fragmentation of contemporary, post-1968 Western societies has provoked a collapse in moral and political consensus, there is now an intellectual substrata guided by moral relativism that has given rise to the idea of good and evil—central themes in classical heroism—being replaced by cynicism and contradiction (“Moral Emotions” 54).

While TV characters from earlier eras also presented complex characterizations reflective of the socio-political anxieties of their times, contemporary TV texts indicate a turn in both the construction of characters as well as the viewer response.

The TV antihero can be traced most directly to film and radio predecessors, but all these media of course draw on the long cultural history of storytelling, going back as far as the Greeks. In *Poetics*, Aristotle notes that a tragedy represents “events terrible and pitiful” (IX. 11, SH Butcher’s translation) and “the best tragedies are founded on... [characters] who have done or suffered something terrible” (XIII. 5). Since tragic protagonists go against insurmountable

²⁴ Jamie Lannister from *Game of Thrones* is a recent example of a negative character who goes from pushing a child from a tower window in the first episode to become an honorable knight.

cosmic adversaries, their struggle—however futile—comes across as admirable. While Greek tragedies featured characters who were otherwise good, the tragic flaws of their medieval successors like Macbeth, Tamburlaine, and Lucifer had more terrible effects due to their selfish motivations, and were used as cautionary tales governed by the Shakespearean principle that their “violent delights have violent ends” (*Romeo and Juliet* II. 6). In his polemic “Tragedy and the Common Man,” Arthur Miller updates the flawed protagonist as a character “who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing—his sense of personal dignity.” Miller describes tragic protagonists “[attempting] to gain his ‘rightful’ position in his society,” reframing the adversary from a divine being to society. Miller’s quotation marks around the word rightful question the legitimacy of the protagonist’s perception of their entitlements. However, their principled struggle and sympathetic portrayal allow viewers to engage with the inadequate social structures that have quietly abandoned people to undignified failure. Unlike the divine adversaries in Greek tragedies, society’s attack on the individual could be traced to oppressive forces which design social advancement as a cutthroat game.

Jason Mittell uses Murray Smith’s definition that “an antihero is a character who is our primary point of ongoing narrative alignment but whose behavior and beliefs provoke ambiguous, conflicted, or negative moral allegiance” (*Complex TV* 142–143). In the same vein as Aristotle’s description of a tragic hero, TV antiheroes are neither too pure nor too vile. In some cases, they balance their irredeemably evil traits with admirable aspects of behavior. The viewers are made to consider the antiheroic character’s terrible behavior in the context of the terrible life circumstances endured by the character. This introspection is structured through the serialized viewing mode of encountering TV shows. Both TV viewers and the tragedy’s audience are involved in the emotional stakes of the antihero’s actions. However, unlike the tragedy’s

audience, the TV viewer does not have a clear moment in the narrative where they can no longer support the protagonist. TV's progressive seriality makes such moments of transformation imperceptible, making the viewers more tolerant of terrible actions. While both *The Shield* and *Breaking Bad* examine the moral degradation of their respective protagonists Vic Mackey and Walter White, they do not offer singular moments where these characters go from good to bad. In fact, the viewers' ability to return to the character in subsequent episodes allow antiheroic characters to be more complex, as they allow viewers to consider the myriad possibilities between two episodic encounters. Although viewers persist with such characters due to narrative engagement and their desire to see the resolution, their allegiance to such characters is cultivated through the serialized viewing. The viewers' alignment evolves with the changes in narrative and character over the course of the series due to a gradual reflection of their relationship with the text as well as their own viewing position.

Viewers are aligned with terrible actions when the characters are left without any other choices. During the active process of viewing, the narrative prevents viewers from trying to imagine other choices or make other choices seem even worse than the bad choices. In his account of viewers' sustained allegiance to antiheroic characters, García notes that antiheroes are presented as victims who "carry out these morally reprehensible actions because they cannot do anything else given the situation in which they find themselves" (*Moral Emotions* 62). García highlights that viewers continually evaluate antiheroic figures. He offers ideological, industrial, and narrative reasons that sustain audience acceptance of antiheroic behavior. Like Garrett, he posits that "the mainstream has been taken over by a pessimistic and defeatist intellectual atmosphere and this has influenced TV fiction" (54). This, he opines, gives rise to the swell of antiheroic characterization across a variety of programs, so much so that it has become an

industry standard or “a paradigm of high-quality television” (54). Morally ambiguous programs are also a way of cable channels’, and more recently, digital streaming or Over-The-Top (OTT) content providers’ way of distinguishing their content from traditional network shows. García argues that the narrative construction of serial TV allows for more development where “the conflicts and dilemmas multiply, enriching the moral, emotional and political diversity of the story” (55). Effectively, he attributes the viewers’ tolerance of antiheroic behavior to “the length of the serial story and the viewer’s memory that allows us to gauge the accumulation of evil caused by a character until causing us to lose sympathy for him” (64). García’s perspective on antiheroic figures resonates with Aristotle’s description of a tragic protagonist, as both operate in the space between their flaws and their sympathetic features.

TV’s serial engagement and cumulative effect allow viewers to experience a pertinent affective response to each encounter, while also generating larger evaluative responses. While they pledge their allegiance to some characters, viewers also simultaneously question it. García writes that “the novelty introduced by American cable TV series, as compared with films, is that they question our allegiance to the protagonists as a way of constantly renewing our dramatic and narrative interest” (63). However, the viewers’ evaluation is not one-directional, as they are able to re-watch texts and return to earlier affective experiences despite their foreknowledge of the characters’ terrible actions. In such encounters, even after questioning their allegiances with characters, the viewers’ affective responses of elation, disappointment or triumph remain. While the viewing experience is developed through serial encounters, the viewers need not draw on their response to a character in a linear fashion. Hence, viewers’ continue to enjoy the character’s narrative successes despite recognizing problematic characters, as their evaluation is activated in varying degrees depending on the context. Therefore, the viewers’ critical evaluation seems to be

tempered by the presence of their narrative pleasure. In this chapter, I seek to extend García's argument by suggesting that the viewers' serial memory and moral engagement operate concurrently, allowing viewers both the ludic pleasure of solving the narrative puzzle, while critically evaluating the problems of such experiences.

“Al Capone With a Badge”: Vigilantism in *The Shield*

Premiering just months after the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Centre, *The Shield* reaffirmed the policing mentality of total war as inevitable and necessary.²⁵ The show commented on police excess by reflecting the attitudes of many police departments that ran by their own rules. Its protagonist Vic Mackey and his Strike Team present a gritty but glamorous view of law enforcement as an unstoppable and precise force, whose extralegal actions are always mitigated by exceptional circumstances. The viewers allow this extralegal authority because of the characters' upholding of an inviolable code that is separate and above the law. Columnist Leonard Pitts Jr. praises the show for its ability to raise questions about the extent to which society is willing to compromise civil rights for the guarantee of safety. Pitts observes that “if television reflects what we want and expect from the police—this guy ought to give us pause” (*The Spokesman-Review*). The viewers' enjoyment of Mackey's actions are framed against their consequences, positioning viewers to evaluate their alignment.

Vic Mackey's vigilantism makes him a dangerous yet attractive protagonist as his violence comes with a promise of swift and effective justice. His actions reveal an underlying

²⁵ In an interview with Television Academy Foundation, actor Michael Chiklis notes that that after the attack on the World Trade Center, the thematic question of the show transformed to “what are we willing to accept from law enforcement post-9/11 America to keep us safe?” (*The Interviews* 00:02:00 – 00:02:10).

presumption of guilt about his targets that the show never allows the viewers to forget. *The Shield* shapes Mackey by adopting thematic and stylistic elements from both crime and police narratives on TV and cinema. The idea of the outlaw-cop antihero has predecessors in cinema from Harry Callaghan (*Dirty Harry*, 1971) to Alonzo Harris (*Training Day*, 2001) among others. *The Shield* also builds on TV shows like *Police Story* and *Homicide*. Viewers are positioned to evaluate Mackey's paradoxical roles as a lawgiver and a lawbreaker. By emphasizing the policing methods of Mackey and his team, the creative direction raises important questions about the viewers: why is Mackey's vigilantism so important to the narrative world? And more importantly, why is it so attractive to its viewers? The show's creators seem to justify Mackey's extralegal authority due to his adherence to an inviolable code that is separate from, and above the law. The popularity of Mackey's code among the viewership reflects their disillusionment with law enforcement.²⁶ In turn, the viewers channel their disillusionment wanting the police to act like the figures from the TV shows. Tropes of "whatever it takes" attitude leading to law enforcement excesses are normalized in police dramas to a point where characters targeted by these actions are denied empathy or recognition.

Nicholas Ray argues that the viewers' accommodation of Mackey's exceptionalism is cultivated by presenting police excess as a necessary evil in the quest for justice. In the essay "A Different Kind of a Cop: Exception and Complicity in *The Shield*," Ray draws on Giorgio Agamben's theory of police exceptionalism and sovereign power to explain the viewers' complicity with Mackey's totalitarian excess. By consistently positioning Mackey against worse characters whose threat and potential for evil are far more significant, the show recuperates

²⁶ Conor Friedersdorf's chilling account of police-civilian clashes in *The Atlantic* article "Calling Someone Other Than Cops" (2015) offers community neighborhood watch as an alternative to police power.

Mackey's image as a lawgiver despite his lawbreaking tendencies. Even explicitly criminal actions like robbery and grand theft are mitigated when considering the nature of Mackey's targets—in this case, the Armenian mob. Ray argues that the show's structured ambivalence toward Mackey's moral choices sanction his exceptionalism and strengthen his position. He contends that while Mackey's tactics may be “discomforting [to] the audience... *The Shield's* symbolic universe is so constructed that when Mackey suspends or is required to suspend the law in the name of the law, the result is habitually engineered to be safely to the benefit of the juridical order” (“A Different Kind of a Cop” 181). Ray believes that the viewers are willing to compromise on the ethics of policing as long as they feel secure and protected. Actor Michael Chiklis who plays Vic Mackey also offers a similar explanation to the sympathetic reaction that his character gets from the viewers. He says, “[Mackey] is doing it for the greater good... If you are a citizen, you had nothing to fear from Vic Mackey, but if you are a bad guy then you had everything to fear from him... People can justify all kinds of heinous deeds if they believe that his heart is in the right place” (interview for the Academy of American Television).

While the exploits of the Strike Team are aimed at providing viewing pleasure, the Team's exceptional vigilantism is always presented as a deplorable model of policing. The show's creator Shawn Ryan reaffirms that “[his show] isn't about bashing cops. It's about asking tough questions on what it takes to be a good cop” (Braxton, “Cop-show streets get meaner”). The narrative presents the significant aftermath of Mackey's actions for the viewers' consideration and will not allow the Strike Team's vigilantism to stand as a simple and unquestioned pleasure. The show's writing does not placate viewers with compensatory justice, as events like planting a gun on the innocent Chaco Orozco after having shot him in a dark alley (1.9 “Throwaway”) tear through the Strike Team's self-assuredness as “the good guys” and

demonstrate the implications of the viewers' complicity to their actions. While the show seems to take shortcuts by deactivating detainee rights and allowing the primary characters to get away with their violations, the viewers respond to it within its larger context and are led to condemn the police exceptionalism in *The Shield*. In rejecting contemporary TV tropes of the hero-cop, *The Shield* challenges the unquestioned moral authority of the police who are always portrayed as "one of the good guys." TV critic Chris Petit extolls the show's morally intriguing narrative, calling it "Shakespearean in its epic corruption and Jacobean in plotting and darkness of its soul" ("*The Shield* versus *The Wire*"). These critics concur with the assessment that although Vic Mackey is a very attractive protagonist, he is not an admirable figure. Thus, the show explores the limits of police power while seemingly eroding them.

The text balances the viewers experience of Mackey's extralegal successes with the brutality of his actions and the spiraling consequences for innocent characters over the course of the series. Mackey's deals, coercion, and plots, all in the name of "keeping the peace" in the streets, prompt us to question his actions as well as the context of law enforcement in LA that normalizes his actions. When Mackey attacks child molesters and rapists, the viewers see his extralegal behavior as the only option that would offer the necessary, if brutal and unpalatable, justice. The show's writing portrays Mackey as admirable for doing the dirty work that no one else is willing to do. However, in addition to the narrative victories authored by Mackey's extralegal authority, we also encounter the selfish ways in which he harms others. In the first episode, he guns down Terry Crowley—a new addition planted in the team to spy on Mackey—to protect the drug-protection racket he and his team runs to enrich themselves. The scene where Aceveda asks Crowley to be his cat's-paw is a set in a vibrant, well-lit park in contrast to the dingy Farmington Police Headquarters. Crowley wonders if Captain Aceveda's decision to spy

on Mackey is due to his collusion with a drug-dealer, the Captain replies “I’m suggesting that the drug dealer’s working for Mackey,” demonstrating the extent to which Mackey has abused his position as a police officer. While this comment seems like an exaggeration, the episode also shows Mackey and his Team serve as a landlord to a street-level drug dealer named Rondell Robinson. Any lingering questions of taking the relationship out of context is laid to rest when they eliminate Robinson’s competition to protect his market, affirming their abuse of power.

The viewing experience is interrupted by subversions of narrative expectations that build on the viewers’ prior experience with the cop drama genre. Mittell observes that TV seriality “teaches viewers how to watch and what to expect” from future developments (*Complex TV* 168). Crowley’s murder in the final moments of the episode derails viewer expectations and challenges their earlier authorization of Mackey’s actions because the person on the receiving end is no longer a pedophile or a drug dealer who somehow “deserves” the violence. The show maximizes the impact of Crowley’s death by placing it after a “false finish” in the episode, where all plot complications already seem to have been resolved. Kid Rock’s energetic song “Bawitdaba” playing over quick cuts of an action sequence signals that the episode is ending, and the raid montage is merely recapping the show’s themes. When the viewers no longer expect anything dramatic to happen, Vic Mackey shoots Crowley in the face. Brandon Nowalk writes,

[Crowley’s murder] changed the story twice over. Cops get shot in pilots. Hill and Renko walk into a dilapidated building half an hour into *Hill Street Blues*, and they get carried out... After *The Shield* pilot, the headline for the audience is that Terry got hit by one of his own. But that isn’t all. Hill and Renko return to duty in the second episode... Terry Crowley gets buried in the first act of [the next episode]. This main character actually dies. (“*The Shield* (Classic): Our Gang/The Spread”).

Also, Crowley was played by Reed Diamond, well-known for portraying a lead role as a detective in another gritty police drama, *Homicide: Life on the Street* (NBC, 1993–1997), building viewer anticipation that his character would be a long-term foil to Mackey. By gently leaning on the viewers’ familiarity with the genre, the show lulls its viewers before Crowley’s sudden death. The brutal act contextualizes all the minor violations of the law that we have seen Mackey perform and subtly reminds us that there is no juridical compensation for this murder. Here, Mackey suspends the law, not for any moral purpose, but simply to protect himself.

The viewers witness the unraveling guilt and how narrative consequences of that murder haunt the protagonists throughout the series. Mackey tries to distance himself from his murder of Crowley, while Shane Vendrell (Shane), his closest friend from before the murder becomes a thorn in Mackey’s side due to their collusion in the murder. In “The Spread” (3.1), while on a security detail, Shane gets irritated with a basketball star and tells Mackey that “somebody needs to teach him a lesson,” to which Mackey incredulously asks, “By doing what? Executing him?” Shane replies on the verge of breaking down, “Well, why not? I mean, isn’t that what we do now? We killed a cop.” For Shane, Crowley’s murder has thrown them both into uncharted waters. Shane finds this newfound absence of limits both empowering and terrifying. Like the viewers, Shane revisits the event of Crowley’s murder and allows it to become more significant in its retelling. Unlike Shane, Mackey tries to rewrite his memory of the event according to the official version, robotically droning that, “Lem and Ronnie failed to clear the room, and Two-Time [the drug dealer] killed Terry.” The rift between Mackey and Shane becomes deeper when the former does not stop thinking of himself as a hero, while the latter recognizes the irreversible threshold they have crossed. Shane is racked with guilt, as the unconfessed murder takes a toll on him, making him swing between extremes of rage and fragility. Mackey’s denial of Crowley’s

murder is not just a safeguard against the repercussions of his actions, but also a defense mechanism to protect his self-assessment as a hero-cop.

The show's narrative contrasts the justifications of the Strike Team with the representation of the victims who suffer due to their actions. In the earlier stages, the show's creative direction sanctioned their behavior by foregrounding the moral justifications for their actions. The narrative implied that Mackey's vigilantism, at some fundamental level, is inspired by his desire to protect the innocents. This echoes with Richard Maxwell Brown's assessment that vigilantism originated as "a violent sanctification of the deeply cherished value of life and property" ("Vigilantism in America" 81). The first time Mackey and his team frame a suspect, they call it a "one-time deal" (2.9, "Co-Pilot"). Their success through extralegal police methods serves as an encouragement to persist in that path. However, when we consider that the moment occurs in the episode after the Strike Team carries out armed robbery against the Armenian mob, their insistence of moral reasons sounds hollow. This startling experience, from Attridge's creative reading perspective, is the opening to ethics. The ethical significance of the text is not in measuring if the antihero performs their duties, or honors certain virtues, but in offering a continuous engagement that allows the viewer to step out of the viewing relationship and be able to comment on the quality of their experience.

The narrative's ambivalence towards Mackey's motivations creates a critical distance for the viewers. The show's emphasis that these methods get results does not validate the methods themselves, but rather highlight the failure of the structures that have allowed figures like Mackey to emerge. If Mackey's vile actions do not produce virtuous results, then it is easier for the viewers to condemn him. His success complicates the viewer-text relationship by providing a stark contrast to his methods. Indeed, the narrative certainty and circumstantial compulsions

prevent the viewers from questioning the Mackey's actions. His shortcuts used initially for solving cases and saving lives no longer carry moral authority when they are revealed to primarily satisfy his selfish demands. The initial justification allows the viewers to align with the characters and when the justifications are removed, the viewers must contend with the full weight of the characters' failure. As García points out, the viewers' allegiance is not unconditional, as the sympathetic perspective "can be combined with contempt for immoral or violent actions" ("Moral Emotions" 57). Despite cultivating the viewers' allegiance toward the vigilante authoritarianism of Mackey through his goals, the show uses Internal Affairs Lieutenant Jon Kavanaugh (played by Forrest Whittaker) in Season 5 and Detective Claudette Wyms (played by CCH Pounder) throughout the series to challenge Mackey's legitimacy. These two characters serve as foils who mirror and contrast Mackey's methods respectively.

The viewers' alignment with the narrative makes us privilege Mackey's outcomes while minimizing his violations. The viewers' position is further complicated especially when the show's realist aesthetic presents a challenging issue like racial attitudes in policing. In *The Shield*, minority characters are made to seem villainous for simply going against Mackey, when in fact, they insist on ethical policing. Despite not directly addressing the complicated racial relationships in the LAPD, these conflicts of policing style expose the double standards of police ethics enacted along racial lines. Initially, *The Shield's* prominent African American characters seem to be recycled versions of popular black stereotypes who reaffirm the power given to white characters. Michael Wayne notes that the academic reception of *The Shield* has either affirmed the show as a realistic portrayal of a multicultural city or denounced it as a regressive text that relies upon problematic racial hierarchies ("Mitigating Colorblind Racism" 183–184). Wayne further expands on the problematic racial structures in the show by stating that "Farmington's

minority populace remains largely invisible when not serving a narrative function related to the district's primarily white police force" (185). By positioning Kavanaugh and Claudette to question the viewers' alignment with unlawful police methods, the show overcomes simplistic and stereotypical portrayals that have long since plagued African American police officers in popular culture. The viewer is responsive to the way such images perpetuate the racially coded nature of police operation.

As a narrative device, antiheroic exceptionalism subtly foregrounds how mainstream TV texts authorize racial hierarchies. *The Shield* reveals a nuanced approach to race, which challenges conventional power structures ordered around Mackey's exceptional antiheroic behavior. Mike Chopra-Gant notes,

although minority characters are invested with legal and moral authority, this sense of 'natural' justice is unambiguously the possession of the middle-aged white man: Vic Mackey... by constantly privileging Mackey's maverick solutions to the problem of law enforcement, it elevates those solutions to a position of privilege over the values of law and morality represented by [David] Aceveda [the Captain, played by Benito Martinez], Wyms and the other ethnically and sexually marked characters who stand in opposition to Mackey ("Masculinity, Race, and Power" 132).

Chopra-Gant's observations reflect the repeated narrative failures faced by characters like Jon Kavanaugh and Claudette Wyms (Claudette) when they go against Mackey's methods. Despite their position as legitimate police authorities, on an episodic basis, the narrative does not align the viewers to root for them. However, when we consider the long-term impact of these characters, Kavanaugh's behavior is jarring to the viewer who recognizes the cognitive dissonance of backing Mackey and rejecting him. Claudette, on the other hand, has the final say in the moral

universe of the show through her relentless and dedicated policing. So, while *The Shield* offers the narrative pleasures of outlaw justice and traffics in the usual problematic casting and characterization practices, it also exposes the hypocrisy of the show, the genre and the viewer in their relation to antiheroic exceptionalism.

Kavanaugh's uncompromising ethics and his sinister actions in pursuit of his targets position him as Mackey's foil. In episode 8 of Season 5, Kavanaugh's mentally ill wife Sadie begs him not to book her for filing a false police report, to which an emotionally distraught Kavanaugh replies "I can't, there are rules... What I do is stop cops from breaking the rules. I can't stop them if I can't stop myself." However, Kavanaugh's personal code deteriorates over the course of the story as his legitimate actions are deactivated by Mackey's disregard for the rules.²⁷ Eventually, the parallel to Mackey becomes more evident when Kavanaugh manufactures a false witness, plants evidence and tries to suppress other police officers who question his methods. Unlike Mackey, he recognizes that he has betrayed his principles and surrenders his investigative powers. When he sees his witness falling apart under interrogation, Kavanaugh intervenes and stops the questioning by admitting his guilt by saying that "[he] framed a guilty man" (6.2, "Baptism by Fire"). Kavanaugh's admittance is not so much a concession of defeat to Mackey, but rather a recognition that he has failed to meet his own standards. Kavanaugh's undeniable accusations that "Vic Mackey kills cops. He deals drugs, he beats suspects" (5.10, "Of Mice & Lem") and their awareness of relief at Kavanaugh's removal discomfort the viewers by interrupting their alignment with Mackey.

²⁷ When Kavanaugh catches Lemansky with stolen heroin, he refuses to betray Mackey or the Strike Team.

Kavanaugh's character serves to challenge Mackey's methods by calling for reform of police oversight. Show-creator and lead writer Shawn Ryan observes how the Kavanaugh-Mackey storyline raises questions about viewer alignment on TV,

If I said to you: I'm going to have a story about a corrupt cop who murdered another cop and stole a bunch of money. And that there's a pretty virtuous Internal Affairs detective who starts digging into the case and becomes hell-bent on bringing this man to justice. Who would be the hero of the piece? But our audience viewed Vic as the hero. They wanted Vic to get away with it... They knew who to root for. (qtd. in Brett Martin, *Difficult Men* 226).

Ryan interestingly frames the question of viewer alignment in terms of heroism, despite Kavanaugh's behavior being decidedly unheroic. Like Chopra-Gant, Ryan conflates the viewers' desire to root for someone and the viewers' moral evaluation of their actions. The viewers' desire for narrative pay-off suppresses their knowledge of the character's virtues temporarily. Both Chopra-Gant and Ryan do not account for the relationships that viewers have cultivated with the characters over time.

While some viewers root for Mackey because of their desire to see a middle-aged white male to be reaffirmed as the ultimate authority figure, others do so because they are invested in the outcomes of Mackey's actions over time. Here, Ien Ang's notion that "fictional characters may be polysemic just as they can take on a plurality of meanings depending on the ways in which diverse viewers read them" (*Living Room Wars* 74) leads us to a more nuanced reading. While viewers are aligned with Mackey, they respond differently to him depending on the circumstances offered by the narrative. Therefore, viewers who flinch at the blatant racism in the Season 1 recontextualize Mackey's behavior in the later seasons, not because they perceive him

as any less racist, but because the narrative priorities have shifted. The viewers' alignment with Mackey is not an endorsement of the power structures that allow him to exceed the law selfishly. In fact, their alignment only deepens their examination as they position Mackey's present action in the context of his previous misdeeds.

Ryan also glosses over that Kavanaugh's character is designed to make the viewers hate him. Quentin Huff notes that "Kavanaugh must be the 'bad' guy because success for him means disappointment for the viewers" ("The Detective and The Lieutenant"). Kavanaugh is an isolated figure within the department due to his position as an Internal Affairs officer who polices the police. The suspicion directed towards him within the narrative world extends to the viewers when he ruthlessly harasses Mackey's friends and family for not cooperating with the investigation. While well within his jurisdiction, his attempted coercion of Mackey's wife and Strike team partners mirrors Mackey in ignoring their individual rights. The viewers' alignment against Kavanaugh makes his final moment of recognition more poignant because Kavanaugh mirrors Mackey's "at whatever cost" tactics. When he concedes his case rather than stooping to Mackey's level, Kavanaugh highlights his transformation from strict moral authority to yet another vindictive police officer who could not "stop himself," allowing the viewers to question their own alignment with Mackey. Instead of copying Mackey's criminal exceptionalism, Kavanaugh acknowledges his terrible actions; highlighting that Mackey's actions go unchecked.

In contrast to Mackey, Claudette rises above the murky practices in day-to-day policing even when it affects her career. In the episode "On Tilt" (3.15), during a murder investigation, Claudette and her partner Dutch Wagenbach (Dutch) discover that the victim Lisa Kensit was a public defender who abused the drug OxyContin for three years. Despite explicit warnings from her superiors to suppress this information, Claudette proceeds with her case. Even though

defendants who were represented by Kensit could have their judgments overturned or cases retried due to the deceased being an unfit legal counsel, Claudette does not budge, as she is willing to let free “as many [guilty people] as it takes to fix a wrong [conviction].” Claudette succeeds in ensuring that an innocent suspect is exonerated, even though she is overlooked for a rightful promotion for her ethics. In contrast, Mackey and his crew witness a series of murders committed as a direct consequence of their robbery of an Armenian gang in Season 3. This gradual but final reversal of viewer allegiance created by the juxtaposition between Claudette Wyms and Vic Mackey has a Shakespearean bent to it, similar to Peter Saccio’s contrast of Iago with more virtuous characters.

Claudette’s respectability grows when she resists using underhanded methods to produce favorable results. During the Kavanaugh investigation, she confronts her partner Dutch and asks if he is reluctant to pursue the inconsistencies in Kavanaugh’s case against Mackey because he believes that Mackey deserves to be framed. She insists that “the truth may not lead us down the path we want, but it’s the only way to fix this place” (6.2, “Baptism by Fire”) and refuses to gloss over critical details. And yet, Claudette is not reduced to a virtuous-minority stereotype, as she fully understands the reality of day-to-day policing.²⁸ Mittell notes that serial engagement prompts viewers to “think about and discuss characters, imagine what the characters might be doing outside the presented episodes” (*Complex TV* 128). This manner of engagement is both maximized and disrupted when the show uses subtle inconsistencies in behavior to draw out the complexity of her position. Thus, the viewer reckons the limits of Claudette’s practicality, where

²⁸ In the episode “Dominoes Falling” (2.13), Claudette insists on finding a different way of solving a murder case rather than calling her daughter as a witness because she does not want her family getting involved with a gang-related crime. While she uses her discretion, she does not bend the law to achieve her intentions.

she tolerates extralegal methods as an inevitable part of the job. However, she does not endorse it as a legitimate method of fighting crime.

Claudette's ambivalence to Mackey's methods is clear from the very first episode. When the Captain compares Mackey to Al Capone, she retorts,

Al Capone made money by giving people what they wanted. What people want these days is to make it to their cars without getting mugged. Come home from work, see their stereo still there. Hear about some murder in the barrio, find out the next day the police caught the guy. If having all those things means some cop roughs up some nigger or some spic in the ghetto, well, as far as most people are concerned, it's "don't ask, don't tell." (1.1, "Pilot").

Jason Vest reads her harsh words to mean that "[while Claudette] does not approve of Mackey's brutality, but in this situation, she cannot suggest a more expedient alternative" ("Glass Ceilings" 148). Vest's analysis paints her as a pragmatic veteran who has lived through the everyday constraints on policing to the point that she is willing to compromise her ethics. However, her words are loaded with bitter cynicism directed towards the callous tyranny of the police towards racial minorities and the conspiratorial silence of the upper-middle class who are willing to turn a blind eye to police brutality as long as it does not affect them. Claudette spits out the racial slurs as an expression of her suppressed anger against a department which tolerates and rewards of Mackey's methods, which often target minorities as its victims. Her words are not an endorsement of Mackey's methods but rather an exasperated outburst at the conditions that have allowed people like Mackey to become key players in the police department.

By witnessing the destruction caused by Mackey, the viewers grow disillusioned with his actions. By Season 7, the law finally catches up to Mackey, and it seems that he must pay the

price for his actions. In a final scramble, he yet again overcomes his circumstances by making a deal with the Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) by trading information on a high-value target in exchange for immunity for himself. However, the show offers no triumph in this final victory, as it lingers on the heavy costs incurred by his actions. Michael Chiklis notes that “everyone was thinking that [Mackey] would either die in a blaze of glory or he would end up in jail... but because we were in shades of gray, [the ending is] perfect, purgatory. He’ll lose everything, all of his friends, he’ll ‘get away’ with it” (*Larry King Live*, 8 May 2013). He might have gotten away with it, but he is completely isolated and powerless. Mackey causes the disbanding of the Strike Team, as its members end up jailed or dead. The growing antagonism and hatred lead to his erstwhile partner, Shane Vendrell, committing murder-suicide with his family when he realizes that they cannot escape Mackey’s vengeance.²⁹ Mackey’s own family is permanently separated from him, effectively invalidating one of his longstanding justifications for his extralegal methods. Mackey had always reinterpreted his actions within the frame of expedient circumstances. In a turn of poetic justice, the fiction of protecting the innocent and the power to enact it are forever denied to him.

The viewers witness the full extent of Mackey villainy which was diffused when encountered in small increments. The ICE officer who records Mackey’s confession to prepare his immunity deal looks on with unshielded horror when he admits, “I planned [Crowley’s murder], and I carried it out. I shot him once just below the eye.” Mackey’s erstwhile defense that he was merely enacting “swift, sure, and certain” justice, evaporates when he recognizes the significance of his actions and takes responsibility for them for the first time (Brown R. M.,

²⁹ When he succeeds in fooling the ICE authority by getting them to sanction his total immunity, he gloats to Shane and threatens harm to his family.

“Vigilantism in America” 93). When Mackey admitted as much in previous moments in the series: “I took some for me. Me,” he followed it with a justification that the “city got their money’s worth” (5.7, “Man Inside”). However, during this confession, he finally recognizes that “he has done worse.” Mackey’s lawyer’s comment that Mackey has lied so much that he has forgotten what the truth is (5.11, “Postpartum”), helps focus the viewers’ attention to Mackey’s perpetual postponement of consequences. In this moment, the show juxtaposes him with Claudette, who has not achieved many narrative victories against Mackey. She becomes instrumental in making him confront his moral failure by displaying the devastation he has caused on his family and his team, making it clear that while he has found a loophole to escape legal repercussion, he will forever be condemned in the eyes of the “natural justice” that he prided in serving.

After securing his deal with ICE, Mackey’s interrogation by Captain Claudette Wymys in the final episode becomes an interrogation of the viewers. During the interrogation, she reads out Mackey’s former partner Shane Vendrell’s suicide note,

The guilty ones are me and Vic. Vic led, but I kept following. I don’t think one’s worse than the other, but we made each other into something worse than our individual selves. I wish I’d never met him. I see it all now, there’s no apologies I can make, no explanations I can give. I was who I was, and I can’t be that person anymore. (7.13, “Family Meeting”).

Shane’s words resonate with the viewers, who also followed Mackey until the very end. Unlike Shane, the viewers need not face inescapable consequences. They can switch off the TV or change the channel to watch something else. This power to disengage with the text due to its fictionality serves as the basis of critical evaluation and introspection in the viewers. When

Claudette confronts Mackey with Shane's letter, he has no words. His silent and pained glare recognizes that Shane's murder-suicide is another casualty to the terrible path Mackey led his team into. Shane was an over-eager apprentice to Mackey whose worst impulses, including the murder of their fellow Strike team member Curtis Lemanski, were lessons learned from Mackey—who had justified killing a cop to protect the rest of the team. Mackey's refusal to speak during the interview is the moment of reckoning where the viewers turn inwards seeking answers, trying to understand their own complicity towards a terrible figure. Like Iago, Mackey too recognizes the inescapable evil of his actions and refuses to speak further when asked to answer for them. This moment also offers the final narrative victory to Claudette's integrity rather than Mackey's brutal methods.

In the final scene, Mackey hears a police siren and decides to head to the scene despite being assigned to desk duty. Mackey chooses to sustain the fiction of being a useful law-enforcement officer who protects the innocent, even at the cost of risking the comfortable deal he has secured for himself. Ironically, the only way he knows to be a cop is by breaking the law further and replacing it with his totalitarian authority, as represented by the personal firearm that he takes with him when he goes towards the scene of action. Mike Chopra-Gant argues that the last scene “in its ambiguity, preserves the possibility that Mackey has not been defeated at all” (“Masculinity, Race, and Power” 143). Chopra-Gant overlooks the repeated narrative cues which highlight that Mackey is not as sympathetic as the viewers initially perceived him to be. Despite aligning its viewers with Mackey, *The Shield* does not hold up Mackey's exceptional vigilantism as a model to emulate. When Mackey kills his adversary in the first episode (1.1, “Pilot”), we do not see a cop-killer, we see a problem-solver who is willing to do “whatever it takes.”

However, as the text evolves and our alignment with the character is challenged incrementally, we are unable to condone his actions. The show uses a series of escalating scenarios to test the viewer's tolerance for totalitarian power. The show punishes Mackey by anti-climactically sending him off into obscurity, compared to other terrible characters like Walter White or Tony Montana (*Scarface*, 1983), who died in a heroic blaze of glory. In the end, Mackey is a compromised human being who is unable and unwilling to let go of his perception of himself as a hero cop while being forced to confront his disgrace. Whether we are still sympathetic to Mackey or judge him harshly, we are left unequivocally disenchanted with his brand of justice and the power that he wielded. The complex response of the viewer is "a reflection of the poverty of our understanding of this domain of our lives, but also the capacity of literature to engage powerfully and subtly with the extraordinary complexity of emotional responses, in which the psychic and the somatic are so inextricably entwined." (Attridge, *The Work of Literature* 260). The viewer too confronts the cost of their alignment with Mackey's charismatic and unlawful presence. In this way, TV texts challenge our cultivated alignment through an unexpected narrative interruption.

As much as the show builds up Mackey as an extralegal enforcer of the law, it also spends enough time to allow the viewers to witness his character's undoing. Mackey may not have "gotten his" in a conventional sense, but the final moment conserves the severity of Mackey's punishment by denying him the hope of redemption. He must come to terms with his own actions, rather than being held accountable by an external legal authority. Mackey's end seems fitting, as he is effectively stripped away of all his power, and the only way of redeeming some of his dignity is under the condition of parting with his ill-achieved success and safety. Douglas Howard considers that the world portrayed in *The Shield* is too complex and does not

fix a “knowable truth” (“Scenes from the Interrogation Room” 122). The viewers’ conflicting response to Mackey and his unresolvable position pushes them to examine the contexts which produce characters like him and their own complicity in watching.

“The One Who Knocks”: Transformation in *Breaking Bad*

Breaking Bad debuted in the 2008 against the backdrop of a decade-long international war on terror, an even longer domestic war on drugs in the USA, and the looming economic crisis. Its protagonist Walter White (Walt) captured the imagination of a vulnerable middle-class viewership amidst declining social security and healthcare due to economic policies that catered to the wealthy. At the surface, Walt’s suburban life seems ideal with a loving wife, a teenage son, and a steady job as a chemistry teacher. However, an unexpectedly late second pregnancy, his son’s special needs, and his degrading second job at a carwash to supplement his inadequate teacher’s salary threaten his fragile normalcy. His world is shattered when he finds out that he has inoperable lung cancer. The staggering treatment costs for his terminal illness would wipe-out his family’s meager savings. Painted into a corner, Walt abandons his middle-class values of hard-work and lawful living to seek an alternative path as a crystal meth manufacturer. Walt’s transformation from a meek-mannered chemistry teacher to a drug lord is presented as an outlaw fantasy.

However, instead of merely celebrating Walt’s successes in the underworld, the show uses his journey from a gentle teacher to a ruthless drug-lord to challenge viewers who continue to support him even when his actions are no longer justifiable. Amidst growing social inequality, Walt’s narrative offered a fantasy where the frustrated common man violently took back what

was due to them. He embodies what Arthur Miller calls the essence of the tragic hero by “[throwing] all he has into a contest, the battle to secure his place in the world” (“Tragedy and the Common Man”). The narrative performs an interrogative function that unsettles the simplicity of Walt’s heroic posturing by subverting viewer expectations. Walt’s popularity is checked when viewers consider the devastating real-world effects of meth. By invoking character clichés such as the macho cop, the meek husband, the nagging wife, and comic-relief lawyer, the show self-reflexively challenges audience expectations of these tropes. Despite the ongoing thrills of outwitting the police and his competition, Walt’s narrative constantly returns to his personal domain where he struggles to maintain a respectable appearance for and in front of his family. We desire Walt’s success and his family’s stability, even if that assures the destruction of other invisible lives in New Mexico and elsewhere due to his methamphetamine production.

The viewers are alerted to the incongruity between Walt’s self-justification of crimes due his helpless situation, and his desire for recognition for his achievements, regardless of their legality. In the episode “Cornered” (4.6), fearing that his employer Gus Fring, would replace him with another meth-cook Gale Boetticher, Walt has the latter murdered. Similarly, when Walt’s brother-in-law and DEA agent Hank concludes his investigation thinking that Boetticher was the meth-cook Heisenberg, Walt cannot help himself but suggest that “this genius of yours, maybe he’s still out there” (4.5 “Shotgun”). Walt reignites the legend of his Heisenberg persona, partly because he believes he can outsmart cops like his brother-in-law, and partly because he cannot tolerate someone else being recognized for his work. This desire for glory drives him to return to the dangerous drug business even after making enough money to retire in Season 2. The narrative experience of seeing Walt refuse to play by Fring’s rules to the unexpected murder of

Boetticher and the eventual uneasy truce between Walt and Fring offers a thrilling ride, as viewers witness Walt's descent further into the criminal underworld. Echoing Vic Mackey from *The Shield*, Walt's actions are filtered through heroic lenses, because Walt matches wits with much more threatening foes due to his superior intellect. However, the viewers recognize that while Fring is presented as a more dangerous villain, Walt not only attempts to diffuse the threat of adversary but replace him.

The viewers' allegiance to Walt is checked when his egotistic desire to be recognized for his newly acquired social power costs his family's safety. By Season 3, Walt's wife Skyler has found out about his crystal meth business and is willingly helping him launder the ill-obtained money. Skyler fears for Walt's life when she hears that Boetticher was found shot dead in his own flat (for she does not know it was Walt who had him murdered). She tries to persuade Walt to go to the police and get out of the business, saying that he is "not a hardened criminal" and begs him to "admit that [he is] in danger." In a now-famous monologue, Walt declares, "I am not in danger, Skyler. I am the danger! A guy opens his door and gets shot and you think that of me? No. I am the one who knocks!" This iconic scene shows that Walt desires to inhabit his criminal alter-ego "Heisenberg" in his daily life. The man who pleaded with his wife and son in the first episode (1.1 "Pilot") has been replaced by someone who takes pleasure in berating his wife to feel powerful. What was more surprising is that the fan reaction to this moment was not just overwhelmingly positive, but also extremely critical of Skyler for being a "nagging bitch wife." Actress Anna Gunn who played Skyler comments about receiving death-threats for not being supportive of Walt, saying "viewers have expressed similar feelings about other complex TV wives — Carmela Soprano of *The Sopranos*, Betty Draper of *Mad Men*. Male characters don't seem to inspire this kind of public venting and vitriol" ("I Have a Character Issue").

Gennifer Hutchinson, a writer on the show expresses her bafflement with the backlash against Skyler as it pits the viewers with “this guy who has done a lot of terrible things.” She says,

[the quote] “I’m the one who knocks,” [is] presented like it’s super badass. If you think about the scene, it’s [Walt] bullying his wife because she’s made him feel small. He’s not actually doing anything heroic, and it’s interesting, because people were like, “Oh yeah, he’s great. Skyler’s the worst.” It was always hard for us [the writers] to negotiate that. The only [way some] people were going to like Skyler was if she started going along with what Walt was doing, but that would have been a betrayal of the character. We would talk about this. How do we turn it, so people understand he is the bad guy and she is the good guy? (in Maureen Ryan, “*Breaking Bad* 10th Anniversary”).

As Hutchinson notes, authorial intent has little effect on the viewers. Walt’s actions appear heroic in the context of his narrative journey, however, Skyler’s reaction foregrounds that he has acted without considering the effects on his family. When the camera lingers on Skyler, the scene reminds the viewers that they are cheering on, for however briefly, Walt’s bullying of his terrified and concerned wife.

The wide circulation of this scene in popular culture and the catchphrase, “I am the one who knocks” show how the viewers amplify Walt’s expressions of power and internalize that character’s perspective as the final say on the matter. Actor Bryan Cranston comments that “Walter White and his hubris, his ego and his avaricious nature, greed that he never knew he had, unravel in this episode” (“Inside Episode 406 *Breaking Bad*: Cornered”). The narrative tension between Walt’s precarious position and his unwillingness to accept it shows his desire to sustain an illusion of power, and the viewers’ support of Walt reveals how deeply invested they are in

his success. Walt, just like the viewers, is in denial of the poisonous effect his greed has had on his family. The narrative enjoyment in the scene comes from witnessing the dramatic transformation of Walt pushing back against the systems of control in his life. He rejects Skyler's valuation of him as a vulnerable figure not only because of his newfound power but because admitting that would yet again position him as a victim. However, paradoxically his poor treatment of Skyler erodes his tether to his own humanity. In the final episode (5.16 "Felina"), when Walt apologizes to Skyler and admits that his ego drove him in his actions, and that "I did it for myself. I liked it. I was good at it," his words reflect the apology that the viewers owe Skyler as well. As series creator Vince Gilligan points out, "[Skyler] was the voice of morality on the show" (Brown, "In Conversation: Vince Gilligan"). And for a long time, the viewers were willing to compromise an ethical evaluation of the show in favor of more compelling narrative engagements. This deferred evaluation of Walt's character, however, does not result in a denial of his nature. Eventually, viewers who recognize the text's thematic concerns in its entirety are compelled to examine their own continued enjoyment of Walt's actions.

Margrethe Bruun Vaage comments that the figure of the antihero helps examine the viewers' own perspectives on their alignment. She draws a parallel between impulses of intuitive moral response and deliberated, reflective response when viewers react to terrible behavior on-screen. Vaage explains that our encounter of fiction is one of the times where "a more purely intuitive, emotion-based morality is activated" ("On the Repulsive Rapist" 433), allowing for a dual-process of morality where our judgment of characters operates both on rational deliberation as well as emotional intuition. Vaage proposes that this duality allows the viewers' affective relationship with morally ambiguous characters to mature, because "the intended response [to the text] is not only to like the antihero but also, at least ultimately, to dislike him too" (*The Antihero*

in *American Television* 5). Vaage's reading supposes that *Breaking Bad* fans who critique Skyler are motivated by their desire to see the completion of the morally ambiguous protagonist's arc. Vaage notes that negative backlash towards Skyler is because she is seen as an impediment to Walt's progress. Her concern for Walt's unfamiliarity to the world of drugs and crime is perceived as emasculating, as she does not acknowledge that Walt is no longer the same person she knew before. The viewers come to terms with Skyler's point of view when they reassess Walt's actions in the context of his impact on his family.

Actor Bryan Cranston's interpretation of and performance as Walt also helps to align the viewers with the character despite his terrible actions. Cranston compares his preparation to play Walt to "psyching yourself up before a boxing match. You have to completely buy into that mentality, to call on all of your strengths... he is trying to draw everything he can" ("Inside Episode 406 *Breaking Bad*: Cornered"). The frenzy generated by his performance helps viewers to momentarily overlook the ethics of the character. Cranston's analogy to boxing indicates his antagonistic relationship with his wife. However, the performance can make a terrible character sympathetic only to a point, as evidenced by writer Moira Walley-Beckett's comment that Cranston had a "moral crisis... [when] he couldn't protect the character anymore, and he had to start accepting the darkness within" ("*Breaking Bad* 10th Anniversary"). Cranston's portrayal erodes the "reservoir of goodwill and likability" (Mittell, *Complex TV* 152) he had accumulated playing the affable Hal in the sitcom *Malcolm in the Middle*. The transformation from good to bad is made exciting for the viewers when framed as a case of an unlikely hero overcoming the odds. The very same narrative structures expose the way the viewers' empathy has ignored the actions of an egomaniac.

The viewers who were aligned with Walt when he was hunted by dangerous criminals develop an ambivalence about their continued support for him even when he turns into a dangerous criminal. On one hand, the viewers want to see Walt succeed, and on the other, their sympathetic responses are recontextualized when his actions become harmful to others. As Mittell points out, “the series pushes Walt further and further across the moral line, making us root for him to do hideous things for our entertainment, while calling attention to his hideousness in a way that refuses to glorify violence or celebrate depravity” (*Complex TV* 159). Walt’s ruthlessness creates a dilemma for the viewer when his actions threaten innocent by-standers like Brock, the 6-year-old son of Jesse Pinkman’s girlfriend Andrea Cantillo. The initial excuse for Walt’s behavior that he is doing it for his family and to be able to afford his cancer treatment no longer seems legitimate when “[he] is the danger.” Drawing on Jack Katz’s *Seductions of Crime*, Albert Kopak and Ophir Sefiha comment that becoming a “badass usually consists of projecting threatening behavior. A badass intimidates those around him by developing a tough identity that is enveloped in volatility” (“Becoming Badass” 98). Walt aggressive posturing is fueled by his ego as much as his social conditions, even when they are self-destructive. As he deteriorates with every passing week, people persist with him despite their recognition of his vileness, leading to an evaluation of both the characters and their own viewing position.

The tension between the viewers’ desire to see Walt victorious in his pursuits and the desire to see him held accountable for his actions forms the basis for the investment in his character. Cranston’s nuanced portrayal of Walt balances between the sinister and sympathetic, making him, like Chiklis’ Mackey, hard to root for but tough to bet against. Walt’s inoperable lung cancer and an unaffordable healthcare system justify his attempt at finding a way of protecting his family, but when his actions go beyond securing their future and causing harm to

others, the viewers become less certain about Walt's motives. The show's creator Vince Gilligan pitched the show to as "a story about a man who transforms himself from Mr. Chips to Scarface" (in MacInnes, "*Breaking Bad* creator Vince Gilligan"). Gilligan's comment reveals the desire to seek greater prestige by transforming Mr. Chips, best known through the 1984 BBC Television adaptation, to *Scarface*, the eponymous antihero of a successful crime film. Unlike the universally beloved Mr. Chips, Walt does not command the respect of his peers or his students—an inadequacy that he tries to fix with his Heisenberg persona. Ultimately, Walt "never gets to be fully Mr. Chips or fully Scarface. He is always somewhere in between, a mixture of the two" (Paul Cantor, *Pop Culture and the Dark Side* 88). Walt forgoes his social responsibility when he declares that he is in the "empire business" (5.6 "Buyout"), causing the viewers to no longer assess him by his intentions, but by the effects of his empire on the society.

Like his antiheroic predecessors Tony Soprano and Vic Mackey, Walt draws the viewers to vicariously experience a terrible world beyond their daily experiences. His terminal illness becomes an unjustifiable excuse when he willingly foregoes legitimate, but less egotistical, options available to him.³⁰ Over the course of the show, the narrative relies heavily on its seriality by using callbacks, references and unexpected connections to challenge the viewers to pay attention to the intricate details in the narrative. The fast-paced narrative style calls the viewers to care about Walt's fortunes without looking too closely at the consequences of his behavior. However, the show recollects the devastation caused by Walt's actions through a series of cold-open flashbacks at the beginning of the Season 5 episodes. In these sequences, familiar objects and places from the series are shown in states of disrepair, and Walt himself looks like a

³⁰ His friends Elliott and Gretchen Schwartz, with whom Walt had founded the company Gray Matter Technology, are willing to pay for his medical treatment. Walt, however, secretly resents them for making billions of dollars based on his research and rejects their well-intentioned gesture.

defeated old man. Instead of serving a wish-fulfillment that focuses on the power and success of the protagonist, *Breaking Bad* examines the cost of Walt's actions and emphasizes how he pays for his crimes.

Breaking Bad simultaneously calls on the viewers' sympathy and identification towards a vulnerable protagonist, while also making them uncomfortable with the extent of their sympathies and positions the viewers to examine their complicity. The visually impressive and narratively satisfying reversals—when Walt sits and watches as a car explodes, runs over drug dealers and shoots them down like an action hero, or negotiates with powerful drug lords by using scientific solutions—are undermined by the viewers' prior experiences of Walt's ego. Walt is simultaneously a pitiable and a dreadful figure because he achieves notoriety instead of the widespread acclaim that he desires. Ultimately, the show presents the transformation of a socially centered being, connected to his family and his community, to a self-centered who disregards all but himself. Paula Brown notes the transformation is heartbreaking because “[*Breaking Bad*] was resolutely, uniquely teleological rather than episodic, firmly focused on the inexorable doom not just of the protagonist's life but of his virtue” (“The American Western Mythology” 78). *Breaking Bad* uses these conflicting impulses in the viewers to examine the social entanglements and their influences on the subjective experience of the protagonist.

The idea of the transformation from “good to bad” is central to the show's narrative structure and the viewer experience. The first three seasons of the show present the tension between the priorities of Walt, the mild-mannered high-school teacher and family man, and Heisenberg, the menacing meth-lord. The two figures are presented as competing tendencies that battle for Walt's soul. In popular culture, the popularity of Heisenberg as an anti-establishment “badass,” overwhelms his mild-mannered persona completely. Although he confesses to Skyler

that “he did it for himself,” undoubtedly, his first misadventures in meth manufacturing were aimed at avoiding a financial burden for his family. His ambition relegates the idea of protecting his family as a way of simply shielding his fragile masculinity and need for dominance. We may reinterpret his confession to Skyler as a vestige of his ego, as he tries to stake claim for his actions. Eventually, the viewers are left wondering if there was any substance in Walt’s character at all, or if Heisenberg was his true face. This is true only to the extent that Walt is characterized as an underachiever whose potential is wasted until he embraces a life of crime. The legend of Heisenberg remains elusive, as Walt keeps pursuing it throughout the show. Despite the danger it poses to his life, Walt does not abandon the image of Heisenberg, because it is a success of his own making.

The viewers’ alignment with Walt shifts when his desire to control his partner Jesse leads him to condemn his partner’s girlfriend Jane Margolis to die. Walt considers Jane, a recovering drug addict, a negative influence on Jesse, as they fuel each other’s drug habit. In a paternalistic move, Walt refuses to hand over Jesse’s share profits to discourage their drug habit. When they blackmail him, Walt bristles at first, but decides to reconcile with Jesse, considering him a “troubled nephew.” In the episode “Phoenix” (2.12) Walt visits Jesse’s home to find both his partner and his girlfriend sleeping after a drug-binge. This scene shows Walt considering the drug paraphernalia and general disarray of Jesse’s home with deep sadness and disgust. When Walt tries to wake Jesse up, he accidentally shoves Jane, causing her to roll and lie flat on her back. Jane throws up in her mouth and starts choking on her own vomit. Walt instinctively reaches to help Jane but checks himself. The camera lingers on Walt’s hesitant face, as he considers the dilemma of choosing between saving Jane and protecting his friend from a destructive drug habit. Paula Brown notes that this moment best exemplifies the dehumanization

that accompanies the transformation from innocence to toughness (“The American Western” 88). She notes that Walt’s action is “complex and ambiguous, and his choice is hard” (89) as he must quickly evaluate the benefits and dangers of rescuing Jane. Walt decides to simply stand back and do nothing as she dies. This moment calls back to the other times where Walt has solved a problem in simple but inventive ways, which Dale Koontz describes as “overly elaborate” born out of a need to “be the smartest guy in the room” (“*Breaking Bad*: Felina” 55). However, this time, his solution is murder.

The terrible acts committed by the antihero are often balanced by their circumstances, thus inviting a deeper reflection about the ethical limits of the choice. However, Walt is only too happy to interpret the situation to suit his own needs even when the limiting circumstances are merely inconvenient. Walt’s guilt is cemented by his cold and calculating erasure of evidence of his presence at Jesse’s apartment after Jane’s death. The camera’s attention to Walt’s hardening face alerts the viewers to his selfish cover-up. Walt not only allows Jane to die but also lets Jesse blame himself for her death, who wallows in his guilt. Walt excises himself from the story when he retells the events of that night to Jesse in the episode “Fly” (3.10), completely masking his guilt. He presents the strangeness of having met Jane’s dad in a bar the night she died.³¹ Walt offers a non-specific apology about Jane’s death and does not contradict Jesse’s assessment that he and Jane were “two junkies with a duffel bag full of cash. Like you [Walt] said, we both would’ve died within a week.” Walt appeases himself by believing that his role in Jane’s death was inconsequential.

³¹ Jane’s father Donald Margolis is an air-traffic controller, who in his inconsolable state makes a fatal mistake at work causing a mid-air collision between two airplanes leading to the death of 167 people. Like Walt’s indirect victims who use his crystal meth, this random tragedy mirrors the cascading effect of his actions on the world. The revelation of the flight tragedy unfolds over a series of cold opens which make full use of the viewers’ serialized encounter with the text.

Ultimately, when Walt reveals the circumstances of her death to Jesse, he uses it as a weapon. In the episode “Ozymandias” (5.14) Walt lashes out at Jesse saying, “I watched Jane die. I was there. And I watched her die. I watched her overdose and choke to death. I could have saved her. But I didn’t.” He says this just before handing off Jesse to Todd Alquist, effectively condemning him to a life of slavery as a meth-cook. In his selfishness, Walt chooses to hurt Jesse simply because he wants to punish Jesse for betraying him. From the viewers’ perspective, Walt’s anger towards Jesse is contrasted with their camaraderie as an unusual mentor and reluctant student at the beginning of the same episode. The episode’s cold open revisits the first time Walt and Jesse cook meth together in the desert. Walt’s passionate instructions ignore the moral and social implications of cooking meth and revels in the scientific marvel of it. Their playful banter becomes a haunting contrast when the memory is replaced with the nothingness of the desert. The show plays on the viewers’ serial memory to evoke pathos by contrasting the gentler times with the terrible fate that has befallen its protagonists. Umberto Eco notes that “to serialize means... to repeat” (“Innovation and Repetition” 166). The serialized experience of the text allows for subtle variations that examine the same scene from other perspectives. Although this scene is a recreation of a memory that was not televised in earlier episodes, the viewers are able return to the site through their cumulative serial experience.

The narrative thrill of seeing Walt repeatedly finding ways to grasp power that seems out of his reach lies in the viewers’ familiarity with his frustrating life as an underachieving chemistry teacher. Walt’s desire to control the people around him expands to include the entire New Mexican underworld due to his own lack of control over his illness and his family’s future. Like a Shakespearean villain, Walt draws in the viewers as confidants, as we root for his success by justifying his behavior through his unique circumstances. It is too late before we realize that

Walt has hurt too many innocents around him. Eventually, Walt falls victim to his self-conceived fantasy as he fails to recognize the signs that foretell him of his imminent failure. His egotistical failure draws attention to itself when he is humbled in the episode “Ozymandias” (5.14) by the gang of neo-Nazis who worked for him. The episode’s teaser overlays Bryan Cranston’s narration of Percy Shelley’s eponymous poem on iconic images from the show, to indicate that Walt, like the Egyptian ruler, cannot defend his empire from the effects of time. The show telegraphs the narrative’s tragic potential and Walt’s inevitable fall with the title which resonates with Shelley’s bombastic words on transience and human pride, “Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!” Walt’s crystal meth empire shatters before his eyes, and his self-created legend of Heisenberg meets its inevitable demise.

In this episode, Walt is confronted by his brother-in-law Hank Schrader, an Assistant Special Agent in Charge of the Drug Enforcement Authority who has discovered the truth about Walt’s drug business and wants to put a stop to it. Walt has nowhere to run, as he faces jail and disgrace as the only end to his notorious career. Just when it seems that Walt is finally getting his comeuppance, Walt’s collaborators, a gang of neo-Nazi criminals under Jack Welker, come to his aid. Despite Walt’s protests and desperate attempts to bribe them with his fortune, they gun down Hank and his partner Steve Gomez. Welker, the leader of the gang, presses his advantage and takes almost all of Walt’s fortune amassed producing crystal meth. At this moment, we witness Walt’s reckoning as he realizes that in his attempt to enlarge the myth of Heisenberg, he has destroyed both his fortune and his family. Mittell calls this final sequence of episodes in the show “an elongated moral reckoning that stems from Walt’s hubris in thinking that he could transcend the drug game” (*Complex TV* 159). When his empire crumbles, Walt pays for his

pride, and the viewers' enjoyment of the narrative fantasy is abruptly broken as they confront the horrors that he has wreaked on his family.

Narratively, the appearance of Welker's crew resonates with the familiar trope of Walt in a corner, only for him to stage an unlikely but plausible escape—out of coincidence or ingenuity. The trope of dramatic reversal where the hero snatches victory from the jaws of defeat is an age-old feature of TV drama. The subversion of the viewers' expectation of this familiar trope happens in the least expected way in *Breaking Bad*. In one such devastating inversion, Walt is punished by and for his ego which refused to let him fade into obscurity. Ironically, Welker's coincidental arrival would not have occurred if not for his new protégé Todd who figured out Walt's location from the GPS coordinates. Walt's anger at Welker for the murder of Hank and Steve feels like a feeble deflection of his own guilt for his role in their deaths. Like Vic Mackey, Walt also escapes the law, as the knowledge of Heisenberg's identity dies with Hank and Steve. Viewers who have encountered the narrative pleasure of seeing Walt narrowly escape the law or his opponents during past encounters recognize the cost of his narrow escapes. The text questions the viewers' complicity by highlighting the conflict between our desire for narrative completion with critical perspectives.

When we evaluate the events from "Ozymandias" in terms of causality and dramatic payoff, Walt's destruction is a deserved comeuppance for a character who had become comfortable with his extreme and terrible actions. Walt's ability to outsmart his adversaries comes at the cost of manipulating those close to him. When Hank first finds out about Walt's drug empire, Walt outsmarts his brother-in-law by making a confessional video where he pins the blame on Hank, preventing him from revealing Walt's secret identity to the DEA (5.11, "Confessions"). His rescue by Welker's gang is the culmination of the fallout, as Hank and Steve's deaths and the

loss of his fortune are irreversible. Walt channels his anger against Jesse and hands him over to Jack's gang. Walt's spiteful betrayal is a cruel abandonment of familial structures, as he gives up his surrogate son. Like Tony Soprano, Walt moves between his two families and lashes out against them when they challenge his authority. In the series finale, Walt seems to seek forgiveness when he urges Jesse to shoot him, only for Jesse to tell Walt to "do it himself." Walt recovers some of his humanity by helping Jesse escape the devastating world he has created. Walt's narrative journey is completed as he not only pays the price for his actions and but also redeems himself through an act of goodness. Paula Brown compares Walt's final sacrifice to Oedipus blinding himself, as it signifies that Walt "acknowledges and takes full responsibility for his actions... enacting justice by both paying for [his] errors and by saving Pinkman from slavery" ("The American Western" 92).

In "Ozymandias," narrative elements are recombined to raise questions about the narrative's operational aesthetics—Walt's strategy for escape, Welker's rescue and the reversal of Walt's fortunes—when Walt bargains with Jack, his betrayal of Jesse and his recognition of his total failure. The viewers' encounter of these elements allows them to experience conflict about their support for Walt. This seems inevitable, as the narrative premise of *Breaking Bad* is poised toward Walt's actions finally catching up to him. By the final season, with no enemy to defeat and Walt going further into his criminal life, it seemed inevitable that the consequences of Walt's actions would catch up with him. Walt seems to get his due when he pays for his crimes by sacrificing himself to save Jesse who was trapped in slavery due to Walt's actions. Walt's death also seems like a final atonement, as he manages to pay for his actions with his death.

In a parallel to *The Shield*, the motif of Walt's escape is used to question the value of his moment of freedom. In the penultimate episode "Granite State" (5.15), Walt has finally achieved

the impossible. He has completely evaded the law and has a barrel full of money. Yet, his narrative victory rings hollow as he is utterly alone in a wintry cabin, having failed the people he wanted to protect. When he offers thousands of dollars to the handler who arranged his escape to spend a while longer with him, the viewers recognize Walt's crushing humiliation. In his time alone, Walt reflects on his actions, and the viewers witness his pathetic state. He decides that his half-life is not worth living and tries to redeem himself by fixing his mistakes. This inversion plays a significant role in the way the show presents viewers' narrative satisfaction and their critical evaluation. The engagement with the form of TV itself leads to a separation of the viewing self from the critical self, leading us to simultaneously pity and condemn Walt.

The show returns to the trope of Walt's genius one last time when he conjures a plan to overcome his adversaries in the face of certain death. Having effectively ruined the lives of his family, Walt attempts to provide them some financial respite by setting up a trust fund for his children through his former-friends Elliott and Gretchen Schwartz. In a humbling moment, Walt realizes that the only way he could help his children is by erasing himself completely from their lives. He seeks revenge on Jack Welker and his gang of neo-Nazis by sacrificing himself in a blaze of glory and kills everyone in the room with an elaborate contraption. Walt tries to recover his relationship with Jesse by saving his former partner from a life of slavery caused by his earlier actions. When Walt dies in a meth-lab admiring the equipment, he recognizes that he has wasted his talent and meticulous skill by inhabiting careers which did not suit him, both as a high-school teacher and a meth-cook. This moment of reckoning causes Walt to face the futility of his actions. Paula Brown comments that the song "Baby Blue" played over his Walt's final moments "articulates this point explicitly in the lines, 'I guess I got what I deserved.' The sword

of judgment hangs over Walter White throughout the series, and when it strikes, its aim is true” (“The American Western” 98).

Walt’s death is a heroic sacrifice as well as a fitting punishment. Despite seeming to give him closure for his misdeeds, Walt is not able to make amends for his earlier mistakes, since his family hates him for ruining their lives. The viewers’ narrative engagement is disrupted by this unresolved crisis, as they realize that Walt’s attempt to make amends has come too late. The satisfying narrative conclusion lies in presenting an inexplicable narrative moment, as viewers are left pondering over matters of Walt’s accountability, Jesse’s fate, and their own complicity. By framing terrible behavior within a theatre of justice, TV foists questions of ethics and responsibility on viewers who must weigh the injustice endured by characters against their terrible behavior. Brett Martin notes that “these were characters that conventional wisdom had once insisted Americans would never allow into their living rooms: unhappy, morally compromised, complicated, deeply human” (“The Night Tony Soprano Disappeared”). When a TV series is successful, narratives are stretched over multiple seasons, and in turn, terrible characters dodge the consequences of their actions. However, this denial of reckoning does not deter viewer evaluation, as they engage with the way terrible behavior progresses on screen and reflect about how they gradually stop tolerating such behavior.

Morality Plays in Reverse

Thus, the antiheroic protagonists from *The Shield* and *Breaking Bad* are symptomatic of the institutional abandonment encountered by an individual from law enforcement and social security. These characters are not absolved of their individual responsibility and agency. The

popularity of these two texts, and the way they have influenced other texts, make them important case studies to examine viewer alignment. They best demonstrate criminologist Jack Katz's chilling assessment that "evil is seductive." However, by contextualizing their moral compromise, we account for the viewers' tolerance for terrible behavior on screen. The antiheroic figure represents not just the anxieties about contemporary living, but also a response to the changes in social structures in the new millennium. Mareike Jenner notes that the TV shows of the earlier crime dramas *The Mod Squad*, *Hawaii Five-0*, *Quincy M.E.* were about "[re-legitimizing] institutions charged with institutional racism and corruption... by showing them as open to reform instead of just reinforcing the status quo" (*American TV Detective Dramas* 92) and demonstrating sensitivity to diversity and reform. The characters reassured the viewing public that social institutions were capable of change and improving themselves, in order to serve the public. Similarly, contemporary crime shows articulate the anxieties and frustrations with the institutions that have failed the individual. They demonstrate a growing mistrust in institutions that have failed to keep their end of the social contract.

The viewers' tolerance, if not admiration, of antiheroic characters, stems from a dual desire for vicarious indulgence and moral evaluation. Mittell notes that "most of [character] changes in a serial are either temporary, attributed to an external factor that dissipates over the course of an episode, or short-arc, or mid-level shifts in behaviors and attitudes, rather than high-level transformations of core morality and ethics" (*Complex TV* 134). However, the residual consequences of their past actions never stop haunting them. While terrible behavior in the real world is addressed by the law, they do not always sufficiently address affective and ethical dimensions. The social and cultural dimensions of terrible can be processed by our witnessing of it in fictional form. The prevalence of antiheroic behavior on TV channels society's

disengagement with the way justice is administered in contemporary society and paves the way for expression of social concerns in a narrative medium. TV critic Emily Todd VanDerWerff notes that “the best antihero dramas are not vicarious thrill rides. They are morality plays in reverse” since “the antihero dramas are not just about the bad choices their characters make—they are about the good choices the characters *don’t* make, too” (Vox 2017). The viewers may enjoy the vicarious experience of terrible behavior, but at the same time, they also hope for the protagonists to find redemption in some way.

However, such redemption is not possible when the law treats people differently based on their class, status, and race. Any system of ethics that does not address the differences created by privilege and class fails as a universally viable model for all. In such an environment, a vigilante who holds people accountable regardless of their social position is an attractive idea. A serial killer who kills serial killers (*Dexter*), or detectives who overlook procedural norms to inventively (*The Shield*, *Elementary* among others) provide an attractive alternative to legitimate methods that treat people unfairly. As Murray Smith points out, the viewers’ “moral evaluation lies at the core of allegiance” (“Just what is it” 84). When characters behave consistently within their moral universe, we are willing to endorse their behavior in murkier conditions. Smith points out that viewer allegiance to Tony Soprano is due to his “strong sense of moral duty, and that sense of responsibility (toward his immediate and extended families)” (84). The ambivalence with which we receive Tony’s character is indicative that the viewer-text relationship goes beyond simply judging characters as good or evil.

By framing Tony’s behavior in terms of cause and effect rather than moral bases, the show rejects traditional structures of reward and punishment. Despite the show’s demand that viewers do not assess it in terms of justice, viewers invariably do so. David Chase comments that

he was shocked at the viewers' response to the ending. He sees Tony Soprano as "people's alter ego. They had gleefully watched him rob, kill, pillage, lie, and cheat. And then, all of a sudden, they wanted to see him punished for all that. They wanted 'justice.'" (qtd. in Brett Martin's *The Sopranos: The Complete Book* 184). By resisting the narrative offered and challenging the alignment of the show, the viewers' response shows that the aesthetic and critical dimensions are inseparable.³² The relationship between narrative structures and viewer response is fluid and dynamic, as it does not produce predictable outcomes. It is a fickle relationship that turns acutely from one affective response to another, with vastly different moral consequences and evaluations. Thus, the viewer relationship with terrible characters allows viewers to examine their own behavior as well as the inner workings of such characters.

As TV texts revisit such encounters where terrible protagonists face their pasts, their methods become more self-reflexive. Viewers are provoked to confront the simplicity of a moral balance when the titular protagonist attempts to admit his mistakes and seek redemption in *BoJack Horseman*. In Season 5, BoJack asks his friend Diane to expose his past misdeeds and hold him accountable for his actions that have hurt people around him. He says, "Diane, please, I need this. I am a bad guy and the world needs to know." To which Diane responds,

There's no such thing as "bad guys" or "good guys." We're all just guys who do good stuff sometimes and bad stuff sometimes. And all we can do is try to do less bad stuff and more good stuff, but you're never going to be good. Because you're not bad. So, you need

³² Sansa Stark's rape in Season 5, episode 6 of *Game of Thrones* (HBO 2011–2019) drew a lot of negative criticism, as the show frames her trauma as an instrument of character development for Theon Greyjoy, who looks on and recognizes *his* degradation. *Vox* editor Jen Trolie writes "That close-up left viewers with the impression that her rape was ultimately about *him*" ("*Game of Thrones*' Latest Rape scene..."). Joanna Robinson echoes this sentiment asking "was it really important to make that scene about Theon's pain?" ("*Game of Thrones* Absolutely Did not..."). The episode's writer Bryan Cogman denied that the violence on Sansa is gratuitous ("*Game of Thrones* producer explains Sansa's wedding night horror"), but the viewer response and the cultural conversation around that moment demonstrate that the creators' opinions have little say in the cultural circulation of TV texts.

to stop using that as an excuse... Whatever you put in that story, no one is gonna “hold you accountable.” You need to take responsibility for yourself. (5.12, “The Stopped Show”).

Diane remarks that unlike TV, there are no simple moral dichotomies in real life, and most often, people must continue living with the consequences of terrible things without a dramatic redemption. The fitting conclusions that characters receive on TV may not reflect or recognize the irreversible pain caused to others. However, TV uses the viewers’ desire to see the resolution of narrative puzzles to show how they always seek some sort of accountability where good behavior is celebrated, and bad behavior is punished. More nuanced articulations portray a disillusionment with traditional notions of character consequences and redemption. The antihero trope allows the viewers to both enjoy the heroic traits, as well as witness their flaws and consider them against our own lives. In this sense, TV characters respond and comment to their own condition, seeking viewers to go beyond simple recognition.

Chapter 4: Cops and Cameras: How we see the Police on TV

Instead of a poetic shot or a reflective conversation, *The Wire*'s final episode (5.10 “–30–”) ends with a montage of disconnected images, reminding of ongoing and incomplete storylines. The viewers' narrative expectation is subverted as the show invites a critical reflection about a city abandoned by its institutions. The five-minute-long montage offers a final but inconclusive look at the various characters, situations and power relationships explored in the show. For Jason Mittell, the montage suggests that “the cyclical nature of Baltimore's institutions and crises sees the same stories being replayed with a new generation of characters” (*Complex TV* 332). In a visually striking moment, a group of six young boys is observed from the perspective of a street surveillance camera in grainy black and white footage. Their matching clothes of oversized white t-shirts and jeans resemble the street gear of a drug gang. When one of the boys points to a Baltimore Citiwatch surveillance camera, the viewers are reminded of the grim reality of pervasive police power in the city.³³ The conspicuous placement of the camera with the word “Believe” written below the Baltimore PD emblem suggests how the police role of protecting the people turned into constant surveillance.

For the viewer, the camera acts as a barrier that reminds us that the narrative world is separated from us by the mediation. The frame shifts to a low angle shot behind the boy as he takes aim at the surveillance camera, and when he throws the rock, the perspective shifts back to the black and white footage as the lens cracks, shaking the screen and jolting the viewer's experience. The moment is a distinct echo of a similar frame from the opening credits in every

³³ In 2005, then-mayor Martin O'Malley authorized installing 50 cameras in Baltimore, starting what has become one of “the most sophisticated municipal surveillance networks in the [USA]” (“Inside Baltimore's CitiWatch”). By 2016, there were 700 cameras with the additional aerial surveillance that civilians did not know about. See Monte Reel's “It is not spying if they are always watching.”

episode. The boys might have successfully challenged the invasion of their community space, but the broken camera also ironically contributes to the perception of its necessity, since they have destroyed public property. This moment—placed at the series’ conclusion—reflects the uneasy position of police power as both a justified response to social problems and an ineffective way of addressing them. This final scene, in C.L.R. James’ formulation, shows how screen violence reflects the “mood in the population” (*American Civilization* 122). Like the rock-throwing boy, the audience are not “merely passive recipients of what the purveyors of popular art give them,” and they are brought into the social tension, between the police, the policed, and the bystanders. The police genre, more than its generic peers, “works over and worries at the anxieties and exclusions of contemporary citizenship” (Brundson “Structures of Anxiety” 225). Engaged viewers recognize these anxieties and respond to textual invitations to examine how the tensions of the drug business and its policing redraw the role of a citizen in *The Wire*.

Michael Ravenscroft notes the ironic failure represented by the surveillance camera in *The Wire*, as it shows that “the state has the ability and technology to monitor, protect and prosecute its citizens through surveillance, however, it consistently neglects to do so where such monitoring, protection, and prosecution are most needed” (304). The viewer recognizes the abandonment of the boys in the white T-shirts as a haunting reminder of the class structure that ruthlessly discards people it deems no longer useful. David Simon’s words from elsewhere that “there is no profit to be had in doing anything other than marginalizing and discarding them” (*Bill Moyers’ Journal* interview) echo through the fragmentary interaction with the children who fight back the surveilling society with spurts of violence before fading away into the crowd. By resisting narrative closure and presenting the unresolved nature of the world represented, *The Wire* foregrounds the unchecked police power through the surveilling camera and the viewers

who witness the event. Despite sowing discord between the police and those permanently designated as suspects due to its invasive function, surveillance also serves as a safeguard against police abuse by placing the burden of proof with the prosecuting authority. The use of surveillance is indicative of totalitarian police power as it is invasively deployed before the fact of evidence, once the police decide upon their suspects' guilt. At the same time, it also checks arbitrary police discretion, preventing police from exceeding their roles as enforcers of the law by documenting the steps taken by the police in the pursuit of their targets. The tension brought about by considering surveillance as capable of rights preservation and rights violation reflects the tenuous relationship between police power and its representation.

Great thinkers of the 20th century like George Orwell and Aldous Huxley have forewarned the collusion of police authority and censorship in supporting totalitarian state power. They warn that popular culture's soft power could potentially be harnessed to shape public opinion and encourage compliance with authority. Giorgio Agamben ominously thunders against the insidious link between the manipulation of images and social control, stating "truth and exposition are today the objects of a global civil war, whose battlefield is social life in its entirety, whose storm troopers are the media, whose victims are all the peoples of the Earth" ("Sovereign Police" 94). In the age of social media where ideology dominates fact as the basis of information, it is important to examine how the portrayal of police power in TV texts are sanctioned or challenged by viewer attitudes. To this end, Derek Attridge's commentary on idioculture situates the relationship between the viewing context and the meanings generated from a text. The idioculture is "the internal, singular manifestation of the broader cultural field, registered as a complex of particular preferences, capabilities, memories, desires, physical habits and emotional tendencies" ("Context, Idioculture, Invention" 683). Since the idiocultures of both

the viewers and the creators of a text are largely unconscious, viewer response to textual complications stage the tension between our professed perspectives and underlying biases. This plays a key role in narrative authorizations of the police, where viewers simultaneously contend with real-world police authority as well as restorative representations of sympathetic and lawful detectives.

Police authorities—both the individual officers and the institutions that authorize their power—attempt to ameliorate their cultural image because the negative perception caused by documented police brutality undermines their credibility as unbiased lawgivers. Whereas narrative TV had previously reinforced the positive image of the police as an all-powerful authority, contemporary TV dents that with accounts of police fallibility. However, even when critical of police power, TV crime dramas counter the negative real-world images of the police by restoring viewers' faith in the *status quo* of police fortitude and calming viewer anxieties about the moral intentions and efficacy of the police. Malicious police authority in TV crime dramas are often isolated “bad apples” who are contrasted with a sympathetic law enforcement figure who represents the *rightful* law-giving authority.³⁴ By aligning viewers with the law-giving authority, TV narratives prevent them from questioning the gap between the fact of police power and the fiction of necessity. TV police have their own method which rarely helps the viewers to understand the “procedures” that the police ought to follow, as they aim to maximize narrative pleasure and viewer engagement with the text. This leads to TV texts presenting conciliatory images which allay the fears of the viewers by perpetuating a false harmony through assurances of safety and the inevitability of justice.

³⁴ Richard Kimble in *The Fugitive* is an interesting example, as he is relentlessly pursued by the police lieutenant Philip Gerard who is both the misguided agent as well as the lawful authority, for he insists that he does not care whether Kimble is innocent or guilty, for Gerard “enforces the law. The law pronounced [Kimble] guilty.”

Since the restoration of social order is seen as a necessary part of narrative resolution, TV crime dramas often slip into a binary view of good and evil. *The Sopranos* creator David Chase expresses his frustration with such approaches as follows:

it's a very simplistic moral... Good versus evil, bad versus good. And the problem with that is it's all about order. There's something fascistic about it. It's this corporate fascism that seems like it's all about making you feel you are living in the best country on Earth; that all the problems are created by troublesome outsiders. In the end, what it's saying is that all of our authority figures have our best interests at heart. ("Mark Lawson Talks to David Chase" 214).

Chase believes that TV becomes an instrument of control when it reduces complex problems to binary definitions that equate the police with good and their targets with evil. He argues that TV texts do not account for the ways in which police power can be deployed to totalitarian ends.

Chase's comments contextualize his own show, which challenged the equation of morality with police. Most narrative TV crime dramas endorse police behavior even when they are portrayed in an anti-heroic light, by shrouding such actions with an aura of "cool." The markers of "cool" are powerful signs that can denote identity and social position Roland Barthes explains its influence as follows: "each man regains the identity of a world surrendered to purely gestural vocabulary, a world which will no longer slow down under the fetters of language: gangsters and gods do not speak, they nod, and everything is fulfilled" (*The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies* 45). Police authority is easily legitimized in impressive portrayals where the gestural codes of authority conveyed in the uniform, including the stylized gunplay are reminiscent of the cowboy trope. The *mise-en-scene* constructs these characters to personify the law, satisfying the viewers'

narrative expectations rather than attempt to accurately represent the way in which police power is deployed.

The cool image cultivated by TV texts promote viewer alignment with unchecked police power by naturalizing excessive policing. Giorgio Agamben warns us that the manipulation of viewer perception is symptomatic of a modern police state. In Agamben's view, the modern state does not draw its authority from a totalitarian law, but a suspension or suppression of the juridical order (*State of Exception* 23). The enforcement of the law under the state of exception is a deactivation of the rights of the individual in the name of the greater good. Agamben makes eerie predictions of deploying extralegal power to suppress the rights of people by eliminating them from the political order when they are deemed as surplus due to their inability to participate in the economy. Agamben observes that a "military order" which "authorized 'indefinite detention' and 'trials by military commissions' of non-citizens suspected of involvement in terrorist activities" (3) following the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center is one of the ways in which security is evoked to suspend civil liberties. His views reflect the state of a broader category of unwanted citizens who have been denied of their identity and social and political function through systems of mass incarceration, the war on drugs, and racially and economically targeted policing.

Similarly, the War on Drugs allowed procedural ethics to be suspended indefinitely and replaced with a war mentality that justified police excesses. Hannah Cooper comments on the ineffectiveness of the War on Drugs which "appears to increase police brutality, even as they make little progress in reducing street-level drug activity" ("War on Drugs" 15). Its rhetorical power authorizes social and political control rather than address drug activity. Agamben notes that the parallel between the war on terror and war on drugs is uncanny, as the latter seems to

have inherited much of its rhetorical constructions and juridical legitimacy from the former. The critical attitude towards drug crimes and criminals of a social class (and racial group) brings about a devastating life of uncertainty, just as the Patriot Act deprived suspects of their legal status by changing their position from a prisoner or accused to a detainee. Stop-and-frisk³⁵ and traffic violations as probable cause undermine the constitutional protection against unreasonable searches offered by the Fourth Amendment, ominously foreshadowing the violation of detainee rights in post 9/11 America. WJT Mitchell echoes Agamben's fear of manipulating images to conjure a false binary of morality and lull the general public into compliance with terrible policies. He notes that during the news coverage of the gulf war, "the main function of this caricature was reductive and emotional: to simplify the issues to a straightforward moral choice, to whip up war fever and mass hatred against the enemy, and to make rational debate and opposition to the war seem like an act of treason" (*Picture Theory* 404). The evocative images of law enforcement similarly draw viewers to adopt an antagonistic mentality. This combination of paranoia and fervor for justice as narrative resolution is elicited by TV crime dramas as well.

On the other hand, narrative TV also plays a vital role in enabling viewers to question the legitimacy of police actions. The average viewer is not necessarily well-versed with the nuances of police procedure, demographics and government bureaucracy. In fact, it is nigh impossible to differentiate between a real and a fictional police method, since TV writers strive to convincingly passing off the narrative method as a believable substitute for police procedure.³⁶ And yet, TV shows provoke the viewers to evaluate their relationship with the juridical order implied by the

³⁵ Stop-and-Frisk data from New York shows that during its peak in 2011, nearly 9 out of 10 persons stopped and frisked were innocent (NYCLU Stop-and-Frisk data).

³⁶ Some shows like *CSI* have done this job so well in fact, that they have significantly and irrevocably altered not only the way in which the procedure of law enforcement is perceived, but the way it is carried out (See "The CSI Effect" by N. J. Schweitzer and Michael J. Saks).

text, by portraying the implications of living in the narrative world. As Attridge points out, the context of reading is often minimized in comparison to the context of writing, even though the choices an individual reader makes with the text is informed by their perspectives. Attridge notes that there exists a paradoxical impulse where the reader has “[a resistance] the pressure of the context, and... a willingness to be surprised” (“Context, Idioculture, Invention” 688). When the narrative text associates extralegal methods with extraordinary results, the viewers’ context alerts them to the fallacy of equating textual causality to real-world authenticity. Agamben notes that the viewers’ experience of a fictional text is improved by their ability to recognize its constructed nature. Agamben argues that “the image appears more convincing if it shows openly its own artifice” (“Sovereign Police” 93). Viewer alignment with the cops is interrupted through repeated and serial engagement with the text and these interruptions make us question the fictional frame which naturalizes police power.

A creative reading of police shows allows viewers to engage with the unresolvable dimensions of these troubling aspects of police representations. The police dramas in this study have enjoyed significant critical praise due to their perceived authenticity and the effect they have on the perception of police representation. *The Wire* examines the effects of policing in a city overwhelmed by both the drug trade and the war on drugs. In each of its five seasons, the show uncovers another social layer to explore in the city of Baltimore, examining how social institutions have failed the citizens. The run-down police offices, the grungy public housing towers, and battered street corners of *The Wire* are specific to the context of Baltimore as well as the larger urban American experience. The show portrays that while the police succeed in arresting their targets, they do not alter the structures of drug trafficking in the city. This cyclical continuity seen in every season’s closing montage cynically exposes the futility of a system of

governance that merely interrupts crime without addressing its causal problems. There is no magical reversal of fortune, as Baltimore struggles to survive its systemic violence. The bleakness is not just an aesthetic choice, but also a deviation from established norms of TV crime drama where viewers are used to being rewarded with a sense of compensatory justice as the world is made safe from another allayed threat.

The Shield presents complicated encounters of police excesses that the viewers must balance with their continuing allegiance to the show. This show follows the policing methods of detective Vic Mackey and his Strike Team as they disregard the procedures demanded by their role, and engage in vigilante justice, while profiting from their protection racket. *The Shield* is both a straight-forward police melodrama that adheres to conventional tropes as well as a path-breaking character study on the inevitable consequences of police excesses. These shows not only provide narrative pleasures but also offer critical perspectives about the worlds represented in the shows. The viewers could be shocked by the excessive use of force and totalitarian power of police in the show, and yet, they are strangely seduced by the comfort offered by the certainty of justice and sense of security. The conflict between security and freedom takes center-stage as exceptional police methods get immediate and visible results, despite causing repercussions that further destabilize the city that they are trying to police.

This chapter argues that while police shows run the risk of eliding the problems of policing in contemporary society, by engaging with the ethico-political dimension of the viewers' relationship with the text, they also provoke questions on the nature of police authority.

The broader scholarship³⁷ focuses more on the negative effects of TV on the public's understanding of the police, and this view seems justified as crime TV shows are generally sympathetic to police power. However, the frayed singularity of the individual texts questions the conventions of the genre, by challenging the police's suspension of the law under the guise of protecting the public. *The Wire* goes to great lengths to reveal the underlying reasons that turn good cops indifferent to society and explain the context that makes it hard for "good police" to survive the force. *The Shield*, on the other hand, transforms the viewers' enjoyment of the police authority at the beginning of the series to an interrogation of their complicity with police excess. While the shows differ in their use of police violence, they both indicate the viewers' endorsement of it. These newer iterations of police TV dramas have altered the viewers' perception of policing, just as the ubiquity of cameras has influenced how the police operate in the real world. They demonstrate that there is greater nuance to the effects of TV crime dramas—they distort the image of the police, yes, but also give the viewer the vocabulary and occasion for evaluation, and therefore, something like civic engagement. Thus, TV texts may self-reflexively call viewers to evaluate their alignment with police dramas. This chapter examines the common understanding of police procedure and the way in which TV texts distort them. Then, by tracing the evolution of the crime procedural genre through TV history, the chapter evaluates the way police procedures are presented on TV. Finally, it uses police brutality as a test case to demonstrate how viewer complicity is cultivated and examined by TV texts. Through these analyses, the chapter argues that police shows perform a dual function of

³⁷ See Kathleen Donovan and Charles F Klahm IV's "The Role of Entertainment media in Perceptions of Police use of force" (2015), Valerie Callanan and Jared Rosenberger's "Media and public perceptions of the police: examining the impact of race and personal experience" (2011), Ken Dowler's "Media consumption and public attitudes toward crime and justice: The relationship between fear, crime, punitive attitudes, and perceived police effectiveness" (2003), NJ Brown's "A comparison of fictional television crime and crime index statistics" (2001), and Mary Beth Oliver's "Portrayals of Crime, Race, and Aggression in 'Reality-based' police shows: A content analysis" (1994).

providing narrative pleasure while also creating fissures that allow viewers to consider the ethical implications of the pleasure.

Screening Human Rights and Police Authority

When TV dramas conflate procedures of law enforcement with other aspects of legal proceedings, they obscure the fact that the enforcers of the law are not meant to be the adjudicators between the guilty and the innocent. Presumption of innocence is integral to the fair due process assured by the American Constitution which commands that no one shall be “deprived of life, liberty or property without due process of law” at both the federal (Fifth Amendment) and state (Fourteenth Amendment) jurisdictions.³⁸ Along with the Bill of Rights, the due process clause dictates the terms of interaction between the state and the individual, and serves as the foundation of police procedure in the USA. This principle resonates with Article 11 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that every defendant has “the right to be presumed innocent until proven guilty.” US Supreme Court Justice William J. Brennan foregrounds due process as a fundamental right, since “the Framers of the Bill of Rights did not purport to ‘create’ rights. Rather, they designed the Bill of Rights to prohibit our Government from infringing rights and liberties presumed to be preexisting.” (qtd. in *Introduction to the Law of the United States* 466). The defendant’s rights—including the right to a speedy and public trial by an impartial jury and to have legal counsel for defense (Sixth Amendment), the right against unreasonable search and seizure (Fourth Amendment) and a declaration of detainee rights during custodial interrogation procedure (Miranda warning)—present a formidable defense for the individual against state power. These procedures presume to treat every person equally,

³⁸ See Wex Legal Dictionary entry on Due Process.

regardless of their position in life. Most importantly, they ensure that civil liberties are not ignored by indifferent state authority.

These rights of the individuals and the corresponding restrictions placed on the police are designed to defend the public from extralegal use of police power. The tenets of due process dictate that these rights are to be protected even at the cost of impeding an investigation. Writing in the *California Law Review*, Henry J. Friendly explains,

The basis for excluding real evidence obtained by an unconstitutional search is not at all that use of the evidence may result in unreliable factfinding... *The sole reason for exclusion is that experience has demonstrated this to be the only effective method for deterring the police from violating the Constitution.* (my emphasis, from “The Bill of Rights as a Code of Criminal Procedure” 951).

Friendly sees the Bill of Rights as a safeguard against excessive police power. A summary prohibition of evidence sourced from unauthorized searches stem from the temptations present in everyday policing to act on their own intuitions and assessment than waiting for proper procedure to take its course. The Law Enforcement Code of Ethics (adopted in 1957, revised in 1989) directs the police to “protect human dignity and uphold human rights” (Chuck Klein, “Police” 403). These principles may lose some of their nuance in day-to-day policing due to the asymmetrical balance of power between the individual and the police, however they are perceived as ethical and practical guidelines that ought to govern police action. TV drama narratively distinguishes between the common individual who deserves protection from police power and the suspect whose adept evasiveness precludes them from such protections.

While surveillance is a potent tool of police power that are guided by strict rules in society, it is routinely deployed with little accountability in police shows, since the latter are

structured around simple templates of good versus evil. This narrative logic becomes particularly worrying when they are translated to reality-based entertainment shows like *Cops* (Fox, 1989–).³⁹ When videos of police encounters with suspects are used to showcase police effectiveness, they in turn offer a vicarious experience of law enforcement as adventure to the viewers with little regard for the rights of the viewed subjects. Although surveillance ought to be exercised with restraint and caution, its narrative prevalence has simplified its function as measure of control and unchecked police power. Attempts at using the ubiquitous phone video technology that allows common people to record and globally distribute their police encounters have not deterred police excess. Despite performing limited acts of reverse surveillance, these videos merely fuel outrage rather than serving as the bases of concrete legal actions. Even the body cameras adopted by many police departments are not effective safeguards, as cameras have the peculiar habit of malfunctioning at important moments.⁴⁰ In popular cases like the Rodney King beating, videos of police brutality have been used to exculpate violent police officers. As Norman Finkel notes, the videographic evidence is not foolproof, for the jury has the power to “construe and interpret what is happening, attributing causality and its direction to one of the actors. These jurors were saying that Rodney King’s ‘resistant behavior’ was causing the police officers’ ‘reactions’—that is causing the officers to use their batons” (Commonsense Justice 45). In sum, videos of police encounters do not establish truth or justice but make juries and viewers its arbiter.

On balance, narrative TV glosses over the possibility that police officers rarely face consequences for breaking the code of conduct during civilian encounters. The Thin Blue Line

³⁹ Three decades after its inception, the show was cancelled in May 2020 amidst protests against police brutality.

⁴⁰ See Radley Balko, “80 percent of Chicago PD dash-cam videos are missing audio due to ‘officer error’ or ‘intentional destruction’,” 2016.

mentality—a phrase originating from the police’s responsibility to protect society from chaos, has devolved to represent a sinister protectionism among the police fraternity. This protectionist attitude demands that no shadow of doubt can be cast over police actions.⁴¹ The police enjoy special privileges when under investigation, as noted in the police version of the Bill of Rights called the LEOBoR (Law Enforcement Officers’ Bill of Rights). Even though these rights are applicable only within the structures of internal inquiry, they are often used to deflect further investigation from external agencies (Riggs, “Why Firing a Bad cop is Damn Near Impossible”). Countless police officers have escaped the consequences of their action, as civil rights lawyer David Rudovsky observes, “there is a tendency to believe an officer over a civilian” (Lopez “Cops are almost never prosecuted and convicted for use of force”). The police, along with other government agents, enjoy Qualified Immunity, a principle meant to protect police against frivolous lawsuits unless they are found to be “violating a clearly established legal right” (Balko, “What is *Qualified Immunity*?”), but has come to mean that the police cannot face consequences except in cases of flagrant and deliberate violations of defendant rights. Besides, the police also collect metadata about people’s activities in a digital environment. Our scrutiny of these gaps in narrative TV help us to calibrate procedural integrity in real-world police-civilian encounters.

Narrative TV’s reliance on conventions of heroic storytelling in representations of police officers lead to unequivocal affirmations of police prudence and rationalism in the face of adversity. This reverential portrayal have a direct bearing on the real world, as Gerbner and Gross point out that “even the most sophisticated [viewer] can find many important components of their knowledge of the real world derived wholly or in part from fictional representation”

⁴¹ Errol Morris’ documentary *The Thin Blue Line* (1988) describes a case where a police department seeks retribution for a police officer’s life, even though the target is innocent, simply to send a message about violence against police officers.

(“Living with Television” 179). This counter-intuitive reliance on TV to produce authentic knowledge is manipulated when individual rights are implied to be routinely upheld. The Miranda Warning is a standard part of taking anyone into custody which declares the defendant’s rights, including the right against self-incrimination and the right to having an attorney present during interrogation. Commentators like Stephen Schulhofer note that even when this procedure is followed, it may not be really meaningful, since the Miranda warning “assumes that a free choice can be made by an isolated prisoner who must communicate his decision to the very people whose hostility has created the need for counsel in the first place” (“The Constitution and the Police: Individual Rights and Law Enforcement” 151). In narrative representations, protagonists who wield police power voluntarily recognize the primacy of procedural safeguards. Instead, narrative TV focuses on the notion of police as heroic crime fighters rather than enforcers of the law, violating one of the fundamental principles of policing put forth by Sir Robert Peel that the “police should always direct their action strictly towards their functions and never appear to usurp the powers of the judiciary.” The attractive idea of a police officer as a crime fighter is troubling to Cyndi Banks, who notes that “the *crime fighter* sees criminals as the enemy, and police and the community as the ‘good guys.’ In other words, police see their role in punitive terms, for example, treating suspects as though they were already guilty” (*Criminal Justice Ethics: Theory and Practice* 24). Since arresting innocent suspects does not establish police as providing justice, TV arrests overwhelmingly feature criminals. In turn, TV shows eliminate narratively uninteresting but critically important role of the justice system itself.

The TV police procedural offers simple and easy to follow methods which reinforce the image of good police. Every episode begins with a mysterious complication that is just outside the grasp of explanation known to the non-primary characters, as well as the viewers. The action

is catalyzed by a figure who deploys a specific procedure directly causing a slow untangling of the mystery. This procedure could involve a special set of skills, such as scientific analysis of evidence (*CSI*), deduction (*Sherlock* and *Elementary*), or even magical reanimation of the deceased (*Pushing Daisies*). In all these cases, the narrative is defined by its affirmation of the relationship between the process and the purpose of the characters, and in turn, the institutions they represent. Even when such narratives behave unpredictably or deviate from their established patterns, they subvert the audience's expectations momentarily before returning to the formula in subsequent episodes.⁴²

The popularity of police shows reinforces skewed perspectives on policing. Jonathan Nichols-Pethick observes how police responsibilities are framed differently in TV shows because “Americans are fascinated with images of crime and punishment and becoming more so every day” (*TV Cops* 1). In this popular genre, complex procedures are distorted by TV in three main ways. Firstly, TV elides or misrepresents the jurisdiction of police procedure to maintain quick narrative pacing, and vests excessive authority in recurring law-giving figures like the beat cop or the urban detectives. Secondly, TV supplies narrative justifications to characters who break police procedure and offer compensatory justice to transform their rule violations into morally complex and intriguing narrative scenarios. Lastly, within its limited presentation of police procedure, TV always shows unwaveringly strict enforcement of the rules, and in turn, glossing over the actual elision of procedure by cops. Although these incompatibilities make it seem that TV police have little to offer in our understanding of real police, their incompatibility can teach us about the gaps between the expectations and rules that govern social order. TV crime drama

⁴² For instance, in *The Shield*, after an emotionally draining interrogation with a serial killer, detective Dutch Wagenbach reverts to his wise-cracking ways. However, we notice his character's growth only later in the show when he foregoes his career ambitions to stand by his partner.

narratives teach us how textual representations could further develop our understanding of encounters with the police and their procedures in the “real world.”

Over the years, the portrayal of police has remained largely positive regardless of the changes in the evolving genre of crime drama. Among the omissions in TV dramas is the overwhelming volume of work handled by police departments and courts, which directly result in an uneven quality of justice rendered. Very few shows explore how the defendant’s right to legal counsel has been gutted due to poorly run and underfunded public defender programs.⁴³ TV shows do not focus on suspects who are coerced to accept plea bargains rather than going to trial, under the threat of harsher sentencing if they choose the latter.⁴⁴ A common TV trope presents the violation of defendant rights in custody as the only way of solving a crime, where the resulting victory provides episodic resolution and confirms viewer expectations. From pedophiles to criminal masterminds, TV crime drama defendants who have their rights violated deserve it, and rarely are they presented as victims in a ruthless system. TV’s desire for interesting narratives means that the banal nature of common crimes are replaced with exceptional criminals and bizarre events. TV insinuates that defendants *are* criminals who could get away with their guilt, and the presumption of innocence is an unaffordable luxury.

As the police are vested with the authority to suspend laws only due to their position as protectors of civilians, mediated images in TV dramas erase the possibility that such power can be wielded willfully or illegally. TV dramas often affirm the image of the police as protectors, even when non-fictional media and reportage from around the world reveal a contrary view of

⁴³ See Heather Baxter’s “Too many clients, Too Little Time: How States are Forcing Public Defenders to Violate Their Ethical Obligations” (2012).

⁴⁴ In “The Effect of Punishment Severity on Plea Bargaining,” Richard T. Boylan notes that despite sentencing guidelines, there is positive a correlation between severity of punishment and a case going to trial.

police power as authoritarian, if not totalitarian. If TV imagines the world as it ought to be and aligns its viewers to admire police figures, then it is worrying when it offers exceptional police methods as heroic or necessary, or both. Rather than exposing the presentation of totalitarian police behavior in the name of good policing, TV narratives abet these authoritarian narratives by cloaking them in excitement and intrigue. The most important way in which TV allows the unchecked use of police power is by persistently framing the police as strictly adhering to the rules of police procedure. Even when the police are portrayed poorly, they are shown as inventively deactivating or circumventing procedure instead of brazenly ignoring them. This framing strengthens the belief that police procedures are inviolable, furthering the public's inherent trust in police authority. TV does not want to acknowledge that the law can be deactivated by individual agents—like police officers or judges—who wield the power to alter the way in which the narrative is recorded, transmitted, and adjudicated.

The circulation of TV cops as crime fighters instead of law enforcers has the insidious consequence of presenting quick and exceptional policing as a superior alternative to the bloated and glacial real-world justice systems. The power of a militarized police force is seductive to the public and lawmakers, who concede greater authority to them in exchange for an illusion of total safety. These changes in the police departments affect matters like due process and individual rights which seem disposable in favor of speedy justice. However, the cost of this compromise could slide from exceptionalism into totalitarianism. Exceptionalism frames the vigilante, the extralegal cop and the maverick detective as operating above others by the virtue of necessity. The endorsement of violating legal procedure due to some compelling conceit or narrative requirement sets a precedent for arbitrary use of police power. Gerry Conway, the creator of the comic book antihero *The Punisher*, denounces police identification with vigilantism saying that

“the vigilante antihero is fundamentally a critique of the justice system, an example of social failure” (“The Creator Of *The Punisher* Is ‘Disturbed’ By Police Who Embrace The Skull Symbol”). As Roshan Singh notes, “intrinsic to almost all police narratives is the interplay between crime, victims of crime and the restoration of justice through law enforcement and the audience’s expectation of retribution” (“*The Wire* Moral Ambiguity” 107). In effect, TV cops displace the purpose of justice from fairness and deterrence to revenge and retribution.

The structures within a show, including the overall plot, pacing or narrative necessity, could potentially drive a show towards a totalitarian viewer alignment. Mittell offers the example of *24* (Fox, 2001–2010), whose politics is influenced by its structure of near real-time episodes which present each hour of action over the course of a single day. This structure prevents the protagonist Jack Bauer from following the rule of law or procedures, as waiting for authorization from the court or maintaining proper interrogation methods in real-time would break the conceit of all the events occurring within one day. The structural novelty also reflects the viewer anxiety in a post-9/11 world, where they can no longer bear with the procedural necessities which could afford rights to potential terrorists at the cost of their own safety. Many crime dramas offer similar ticking clocks as excuses for violating procedural integrity. Invariably, this hasty pace of dramatic escalation also masks the narrative urgency without which any TV show could be adjudged dull and boring by both the viewers and networks. The viewers’ familiarity with the narrative rhythms of a TV procedural and their anticipation that a crime presented is solved within the end of the hour are dominant parts of its operational aesthetics. Since TV is primarily distributed as a consumer product, it consistently distorts procedural representation in favor of more palatable narratives which gloss over the rights and sufferings of those marked as criminals.

Inevitably, narrative priorities in TV texts insist that the substitution of legal procedure is essential for the practical reason of isolating the police force from the larger structures of the justice system. *The Wire* and *The Shield* also reflect these anxieties about public-police encounters, as they pause and linger on issues that other shows go by more quickly. In TV police dramas, lawyers and district attorneys vanish all but in name, as they are reduced to recurrent tropes of impediments to the course of justice charted out by the police (The DA's office from *The Shield* are at times portrayed as minor antagonists), unless they are a part of the narrative premise of the show—as in the case of *Law & Order*. Judges become quirky supporting characters who can enable or disable the ambitions of the police officer according to the demands of the narrative (Judge Phelan in *The Wire* who whimsically redeploys police resources as a favor). Legislators and policymakers also completely disappear from the legal procedure. In turn, the justice offered in the typical TV show does little more than allay the emotional suffering of the victims and the viewers aligned with them.

However, even TV's distortions heighten the rigor applied to police procedures in the real world. *The Wire*'s creator David Simon has strong opinions about the differences between police procedures in the real world as opposed to TV. Simon writes,

television has given us the myth of the raging pursuit, the high-speed chase, but in truth, there is no such thing... And, most certainly, there are no perfectly righteous moments when a detective, a scientific wizard with uncanny powers of observation, leans down to examine a patch of bloody carpet, plucks up a distinctive strand of red-brown Caucasoid hair, gathers his suspects in an exquisitely furnished parlor, and then declares his case to be solved. The truth is that there are very few exquisitely furnished parlors left in Baltimore (*Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets* 29).

Simon attempts to bridge the gap between the meticulous and mundane work that the police do on a day-to-day basis rather than add to celebrate crime-solving super-cops. However, Simon acknowledges that TV shapes public perception of law and order procedures, as he notes that jurors in criminal cases expect an “undisputed truth” constructed by forensic data, rather than be swayed by the lawyers’ arguments and unreliable testimony.⁴⁵ He quotes prosecutor Lawrence C. Doan who patiently explains to the jury that “unlike TV shows, motive is not an element of the crime of first-degree murder. You don’t know exactly why it happened. It’s something you would like to know, it’s something the person trying the case would like to know, but it’s not necessary to know it to prove the crime” (*Homicide* 489). The viewers’ expectations of police procedure to resemble TV complicates the process of law enforcement, but it clearly helps remind that the burden of proof lies with the prosecution.

Despite its nuanced portrayal of a multi-faceted Baltimore, *The Wire* does favor sympathetic portrayals of the police. In contrast to shows which offer police exceptionalism as a substitute for procedure, *The Wire* distinguishes between those who take shortcuts and those who persist with the law. Hugh Breakey notes that *The Wire* distinguishes between police as the staff in the police department and ‘*police*’ (the first syllable is italicized by Breakey to indicate the stress and distinguish it from regular ‘police’) as a “special ethic and the small coterie of police officers who abide by it” (“Wired to Fail” 54). Breakey characterizes police who possess this special ethic as those who keep the peace by preventing, apprehending, and bringing criminals to justice “not as vigilantes, but within legal constraints. [Real *police*] make a ‘case’” (69). Breakey makes the important distinction that not all the cops of *The Wire* could be ‘real *police*’ because it

⁴⁵ In fact, Simon notes that prosecution is compelled to mount expert witnesses to distance jurors from their expectations as TV viewers and prepare them for the absence of such clinching evidence (*Homicide* 489).

requires internal excellences of superior intellect and an elite operational mindset which can see the bigger picture. Breakey ascribes virtues of justice, courage, and honesty described by Scottish philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre as necessary traits of ‘real *police*’ in the Baltimore of *The Wire*.

In Breakey’s perspective, sympathetic viewers are discriminating in their allegiance as they extend their support only to ‘real *police*’ as they share the characters’ nuanced values. To expand his argument, the positive qualities of ‘real *police*’ in the show are co-opted to authorize extralegal behavior even when the cops do not meet the high standards demanded to be *police*. In fact, by distinguishing between the abusive, authoritarian cops and ‘real *police*,’ the show portrays unremarkable cops as surprisingly well-behaved drones who do not engage in daily acts of malpractice in their course of work. They may reveal glimpses of racial or class-based biases towards their targets but are generally egalitarian within their police brotherhood. Even though only the core group of cops in the show might qualify to be called *police* as Breakey describes, all cops are assessed favorably for doing their best within a corrupt system. Cops are presented as boring, apathetic to the victims, indifferent about morality and reluctant to do paperwork—in short, they are like us. In this familiarity, the inherent criticism leveled against the police institution excludes the individual cop. It is as if, they are all *police* by simply trying to do their job in Baltimore. And yet, within this generally favorable portrayal, *The Wire* still provides unsettling moments when cops who have been erstwhile authorized as ‘real *police*’ suddenly act in bad faith and use shortcuts instead of rigorous police work.

TV narratives seem inherently opposed to a critical presentation of police as they prioritize change and transformation, whereas police power is about permanence and preservation. TV narratives fail to sustain viewer interest without dramatic action and character

growth, and police power—good or corrupt—asserts itself as an unquestionable authority. However, this tension could be used to explore the incompatible and contradictory nature of the narrative and social functions of TV cops. The unchanging police principles frame the police behavior being assessed. In some scenarios, characters like Rustin Cohle from the first season of *True Detective* (HBO, 2014–) or Jimmy McNulty from *The Wire* persist with a single case, doggedly outlasting organizationally superior foes. In other cases, the indisputable authority of a cop like Vic Mackey from *The Shield* is undermined when his actions no longer align with the principles that he claims for himself. The contrast between the transformative narrative and the unchallenged police authority reflects two levels of viewer engagement with the narrative puzzle as well as critical viewership.

In this way, TV crime dramas hold the potential to exceed simplistic moral binaries. The sustained relationship with characters who change and evolve incrementally over the course of the series helps viewers to cultivate critical engagement with the narrative. TV allows for this nuanced portrayal where the static nature of police authority is contrasted with the transient nature of its perception and operation. *The Wire* and *The Shield* offer a close examination of the portrayal of physical violence as a signifier of police power, allowing viewers to critically engage with such representations. Since the viewers' relationship with the text is contingent on the order in which narrative information is revealed, these shows highlight their narrative power to enlist, yet also prohibit viewers from participating in their portrayals of violence. These shows test their own limits with their more equivocal inclusion of brutality and provoke viewers to respond to the startling otherness represented in the narrative situations.

Police Representation and Uneasy Realism

Real-world police are more conscious about the perception and circulation of their images in the media, as fictional police have generated expectations that have simultaneously valorized and demonized them. In 2018, The South Carolina Police Union objected to a summer high-school reading list which included Angie Thomas' *The Hate U Give*, claiming that the material negatively influenced young people against the police, as it is "an indoctrination of distrust of police and we have got to put a stop to that" (Flood, "South Carolina Police Object to high-school reading list"). The novel's protagonist witnesses a police shooting of her childhood friend. Given the many incidents of police shootings in recent public memory, the police's resistance to the book is a clear attempt to defuse public anxiety in a manner that carries worrying implications about police power. Although understandably defensive, the police department's assertive language insinuating censorship of circulation of a critical novel furthers a sinister image of the police.

The rigid power structures circulated through TV crime drama are felt in the way vulnerable and minority groups are rendered as glaring clichés. Stuart Hall rightly points out that representation plays an important function in cultivating viewer identity. He notes,

...identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps, instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished historical fact, which the new cinematic discourses then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a "production" which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation ("Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation" 68).

The way a community is represented in popular culture significantly alters the community's perception of itself. Hall observes that "popular culture always has its base in experiences, the

pleasures, the memories, the traditions of the people. It has connections with local hopes and aspirations, local tragedies and local scenarios that are the everyday practices and everyday experiences of ordinary folks” (“What is this Black” 108). Considering that popular culture continues to cast minority figures as stereotypes, it is important to offer wider representation to balance its contradictory nature.

In its weakest moments, TV not only fails to meaningfully address race but also turns people into “passive voyeurs who think of themselves as noble because they feel sorry for others from the safety of their living rooms” (George Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place* 112). In *By the Color of Our Skin*, Leonard Steinhorn and Barbara Diggs-Brown term the false consciousness created by popular media as “virtual integration.” They note,

[television] gives white Americans the sensation of having meaningful, repeated contact with blacks without actually having it. We call this phenomenon virtual integration, and it is the primary reason why the integration illusion - the belief that we are moving toward a colorblind nation - has such a powerful influence on race relations in America today (146).

At its best, TV raises important questions which always face the threat of being easily ignored by viewers who do not want to engage with the problems of race. TV becomes a medium of serious engagement only through its seriality, periodic encounter, and anticipation, as they generate affective significance for its viewers. TV becomes a site of examining the popular imagination of race because it allows viewers to return to the texts over time and rethink their perspectives from the vantage points of their changing contexts.

The colorblind aesthetic inadvertently stifles representation on TV, as shows create an illusion of racial plurality while sidestepping uncomfortable social tensions arising from racial

caste systems. This is especially damaging in TV crime dramas, as they prioritize the creation of thrilling narratives at the cost of examining the racialized contexts of the stories. Linda Williams comments that “racialized victims and villains abound in the mainstream melodrama of black and white” (*On The Wire* 178).⁴⁶ Alternately, they are entirely erased from the scene of crime in the interest of not circulating negative stereotypes either due to political correctness or due to network imperatives to appear as non-racist.⁴⁷ As contemporary TV moves away from directly racist representations, its new colorblind regime ends up being avoidant rather than corrective. In doing so, they ignore the structural problems in the processes of determining which TV shows get made and who watches those shows. Effectively, this creates a realist TV which is not about real life.

Adilifu Nama observes that nearly two-thirds of all prime-time law enforcement dramas feature at least one African American series regular, whereas half of all TV dramas do not feature any (“More Symbol than Substance” 29). However, Nama is skeptical of token representations which serve only to “enhance the ‘look’ of the internal reality of the show” (34). He takes exception to police drama which used African American characters to “[elicit] recognition from the viewing audience that the television police set was ‘realistic’ in its resemblance to a real urban police station” (34). Mike Chopra-Gant observed a similar decline of African American characters in TV by the end of the 1990s (“Masculinity, Race and Power” 130). Even in the crime drama genre where “there is a reasonably good presence of non-white characters in key roles” Chopra-Gant notes that those roles are crafted to “not problematize race

⁴⁶ Adilifu Nama notes that “just over 70% of African American characters occupy professional or management positions on network television” (“More Symbol Than Substance” 24).

⁴⁷ Kathleen Donovan notes that criminals in procedural shows like *Elementary*, *CSI* or *The Mentalist* tend to be white, middle-to-upper middle class, have a job and no prior criminal record (“The Role of Entertainment media in Perceptions of Police use of force” 1264).

or ethnicity” as they aim to “transcend race,” ironically “[rendering] race and ethnicity almost invisible despite increasing the number of roles for non-white characters” (131). It then follows that African American police officers in popular culture are reduced to playing a small repertoire of roles that ranges from the wise-cracking detective (Odafin Tutuola from *Law & Order*), the tough angry cop (John Luther from *Luther*) to the no-nonsense authority figure (Maria LaGuerta from *Dexter* and Al Giardello from *Homicide: Life on the Street*). However, these tropes keep evolving in TV texts, portraying how decaying social institutions have abandoned the citizens.

The realist aesthetic found in contemporary crime shows highlight the distortion between viewers’ experience of the text and their perception of the world beyond it. Robert Stam notes that “although live transmissions form but a tiny proportion of programming, that tiny portion sets the tone for all of television” (qtd. in *Reality Squared 2*). Even in the case of fictional programs, TV’s domestic association translates into its being received within a frame of a realist aesthetic. David Platten writes that crime drama on TV is often designed to insinuate that the imaginary world in the text is our own (“Mediatized Realities”). The cognitivist Bandura believes that “because the world of television is heavily populated with villainous and unscrupulous people it can distort knowledge about the real world” (“Social Learning Theory” 16). The compulsion for a realist conception of the world of crime stems from the text seemingly adhering to the rules of our own world. The debate goes to both extremes, with many critical theorists having already assigned media narratives to the realm of representation rather than reality. Jane Feuer observes that “to equate live television with ‘real-life’ is to ignore all those determinations standing between ‘event’ and our perception of it—technology and institutions to mention two” (*Reality Squared 2*). Realism is a key aspect that over-states the threat and fear of

crime, legitimating police authority. Therefore, it is very important to navigate realism with an eye on their ethical and social dimensions.

Viewer Complicity with Police Brutality

In real cases of police brutality, officers routinely use the defense that they were afraid for their lives.⁴⁸ This is almost never presented in TV narratives, since TV cops—either as a positive or a negative figure—are by default, courageous and self-assured, and the implied meekness of accepting the “feeling under threat” defense would not sit well with TV viewers. Instead, TV crime dramas legitimize and authorize injustices enacted in the name of the law by cultivating viewer allegiance. In the essay “The Role of Entertainment media in Perceptions of Police use of force” Kathleen Donovan compares police statistics with media narratives, drawing the conclusion that viewers perceive the police as more brutal than they really are. While Donovan’s report does not account for racial distribution, the brutality of its lived experience or how it colors future police-civilian encounters, it illustrates the link between media representations and the viewer’s relationship with the wider world. When individual defendant rights are placed in contrast to speedy justice, TV texts exculpate police brutality as an indispensable tool to expedite the police process.

Police shows justify the deactivation of rights of certain characters by identifying them as the perpetrators and aligning the viewers with those trying to solve the case. When the stakes are high, *not* violating the rights to get to the information is presented as illogical, if not unjust. Besides unimpeachable detective skills and the gift of coincidence, the greatest power TV cops

⁴⁸ See Benjamin Wallace-Wells’ “Police Shootings, Race, and the Fear Defense” and Brando Simeo Starkey’s “The words ‘I thought my life was in danger’ allow police to kill.”

possess is the absolute certainty of both the role of the accused in the wrongdoing and the circumstances of the crime. By reducing complex social elements into simple pieces of a narrative puzzle, TV police drama treats defendant rights as an impediment to the pursuit of justice. It furthers the contradictory idea that the suspension of individual liberties takes place only under extraordinary circumstances which warrant the violation. Crime TV shows often portray the defense of rights as narrative impediments that come in the way of the course of justice, and condone police brutality as a way of resolving narrative crisis at the cost of an ethical crisis. Through the polyvalent and complex construction, shows often provide viewers with the material to push against the simplicity of teleological plots. As Eugene Richmond observes, the distinction between warranted and excessive use of force by the police is crucial to the broader viewership. He says, “if a policeman in pursuit of his job shoots, that’s real life. If he handcuffs and pistol-whips someone, that’s excessive and unnecessary to the plot” (*Television Broadcast Histories: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Communications* 280). However, as TV shows aim to present gritty and more shocking viewing experiences, this distinction gets erased. As more shows explore the psychological implications of violent behavior, they seldom shy away from excessive violence even from beloved protagonists.

TV’s representation of policing hinges on blurring the lines between fact and fiction to insinuate that the events depicted are possible and therefore extraordinary measures are necessary. Paul Mason claims that TV crime dramas perpetuate the idea of police exceptionalism to the point that they start normalizing such behavior. He writes,

The heroic cop is justified in bending the rules in the fictional world of the police drama. Corruption in a noble cause, allows him or her to continue fighting to clean the streets of crime and protect the public. When we shift to fact-based entertainment: the more

nebulous realm of the Reality police show, the audience is presented with similar but less grand examples of rules being broken. In adopting the tone of police fiction, the media conspire in such rule-breaking, enabling transgressions of the law to be justified in the same way as they are in police drama: namely, the villain is caught, justice is done, and the public is served. (“Thin Blurred Line: Reality Television and Policing”).

Mason draws attention to the eerie similarities between extralegal police actions documented in fictional and non-fictional forms. In fact, reality-based shows perpetuate the necessity of police excess more easily since the documentary aesthetic signals the police as holding the line between chaos and order. TV texts uphold the virtues of extralegal police power as a way of combatting the limits of the justice system. The glimpses tenuous police-civilian interactions from recent history offer contradictory versions of police reality to the ones represented in fictional TV.⁴⁹ However, even depictions that portray terrible police behavior limit their focus to the actions of a “few bad apples” rather than show broader lapses which always favor police officers over civilians.

In an episode titled “One Arrest” (1.7, *The Wire*), police violence on a suspect in custody is framed as a narrative reward. Marquis ‘Bird’ Hilton is a highly dispensable pawn in the Barksdale drug organization. Hilton is in custody at the Baltimore Police Department’s Homicide unit as a suspect in the murder of a state’s witness. Hilton is uncooperative, defiant, and verbally abusive to the police who try to interrogate him. Once the police find evidence to tie Hilton to the crime, they punish him by viciously beating him up in the interrogation room, for having wasted their time. Hilton’s handling and the viewers’ alignment with the police in this

⁴⁹ Police shootings in the USA have led to nearly 1000 deaths annually from 2015 to 2019, of which a quarter of the suspects shot dead had mental illnesses and a fifth did not carry any weapons (*The Washington Post*, “Fatal Force, Police Shooting statistics”). Of these cases, nearly 90% of police officers are not convicted.

case draw out the tension between a personal code and due process in the show. In an important way, this beatdown contributes to the viewers' perception of the 'real *police*' ethic that Hugh Breakey observes, as the attack on Hilton is framed as a righteous if unlawful retribution.

The viewers' sense of dramatic irony elevates the pleasure of the text, as Bird Hilton does not recognize that his utility to the police is dependent on his willingness to help them arrest his higher-ups in the Barksdale organization. Detective Kima Greggs explains this in no uncertain terms, stating that the ballistics evidence would result in the most severe punishment unless he cooperates. As a veteran of the police interrogation process, Hilton deflects Greggs' questions by hurling abuses at her and refuses to speak without his lawyer present. His unpleasant behavior coupled with the narrative certainty of his crime and past violence frames his defiance as a brazen effort to prove his invulnerability to their authority, rather than an innocent defendant standing up for his rights. At this stage, the operational aesthetics direct us to identify with the police who act within the norms of proper procedure. In the face of his defiant behavior, Detective Sergeant Jay Landsman reinforces the due process by taking a photograph of Hilton before explaining, "We really wanted to show all the jurors that you left our little interrogation here without any more scuff marks than what you brought in." Hilton overestimates the extent to which his impudence would be suffered, as the police have both the murder weapon and a witness that connect him to the crime. Their patience is only due to the hope that he would make a deal and expose the people who tasked him to kill the witness.

When their patience runs out, four officers led by the generally calm and composed Lieutenant Cedric Daniels enter the interview room and menacingly tear up the polaroid photo, implying that Hilton is about to be served street justice through a beatdown. In a series-defining moment of procedural irony, the scene cuts to a shot of the closed door of 'interview room 1' as

the sound of Hilton getting beaten up is heard for good measure. Hilton turns more pliant when he realizes that his tirades could have immediate consequences, and he half-threateningly pleads them to not “do him like that,” requesting that he at least be given a fair chance at defending himself without the handcuffs. The officers ignore his plea, reinforcing that despite their patience, they hold all the power in that interaction. The episode’s operational aesthetics carefully earn the beatdown as a heroic victory for the “good guys” by contrasting their restraint and correct behavior with Hilton’s abusive language throughout their interactions. The moment of Hilton’s beatdown is intercut with Omar Little observing that “Bird sure know how to bring it out in people, don’t he?” Since Little is the witness against Hilton as well as a beloved character, his comment notifies the viewers that the scene is to be interpreted in a humorous way. The door is kept closed to allow viewers to continue empathizing with the police officers and prevent them from being discomforted by the violence that they are implicitly sanctioning. The show suggests that the officers’ righteous anger at Hilton’s tireless arrogance is warranted. However, a closer examination of the beatdown leads viewers to question their alignment.

The punishment meted out to Hilton has no bearing on the proceedings, as the ballistics evidence and eye-witness testimony have already solved the case. The punishment is not accompanied by any compensatory feeling of serving a larger purpose. The police beat him down because of his disrespectful behavior and their wider frustration with the antagonistic relationship between the police and the community. While the beatdown feels justified in Hilton’s case, the premise is uncomfortable if extrapolated beyond the particulars; that offending the police leads to battery. The moment is unsettling as it challenges the viewers’ expectations about the procedural method of the show. The beatdown unmask the disinterested cynicism of the cops and shows how their personal judgment affects their policing. Daniels’ tearing of the

photo is a declaration of his judgment on Hilton's impunity. Hilton's beatdown erases the line between police and criminal behavior—as they administer their own unlawful punishment instead of waiting for the law to take its course. Just as William Gant's murder is a warning to other civilians about testifying against the Barksdale organization, the beatdown is a message that the police will not tolerate those who lay hands on the state's witnesses or disrespect them. Besides satisfying the viewers' narrative expectations, the scene also interrupts the viewers' complacency and calls them to recognize their complicity to the totalitarian use of police power. Although it is one of the rare moments of vigilantism enacted by the 'real *police*' in *The Wire*, it reminds viewers that police violence is an affordance of the structures that place unchecked power with police officers.

The viewers' satisfaction from the assault suggests that a gap exists between the viewers' expectations from real cops and their tolerance for norm violation on TV. When it satisfies their desire for narrative closure and poetic justice, the viewers will tolerate, if not enjoy, narratively justifiable compensatory violence. This fleeting and inconsequential moment reminds the viewers that even *The Wire* is not above justifying the abuse of police power for dramatic payoff. The question is not whether the brash and irritating Hilton deserves the violent punishment, as the show points out that "deserve's got nothing to do with it." The viewers' satisfaction from the suspension of a subject's procedural rights affirms Umberto Eco's perspective that narrative innovation causes viewer allegiance. However, as viewers confront the fact that it is the police who decide that he deserves punishment and not a jury of his peers, they question the absolute authority vested with the police. This encounter subtly reminds us that Hilton is effectively stripped of his fundamental rights because action against him is sanctioned by the certainty of his guilt. Thus, the viewers recognize that the most dangerous form of police power is the

approximation of justice, where punishment is rendered for unproven crimes based on the certainty that the suspect would have done something else anyway.

Through its endorsement of violence in Hilton's interrogation, the show questions the way in which some types of violence are allowed, and others are prohibited in presentations of police processes. In an earlier scene from the episode, the police plan to arrest Hilton near one of his regular haunts. Once Hilton is identified by an informant, the arresting detective masquerading as a homeless drunk person jumps into action and subdues the suspect by hitting him with a liquor bottle. The use of force is presented as an organic extension of the dangerous setting, as the suspect reaches for the gun in his waistband. Although offering a stylized presentation of the arrest, the scene reassures the community and the viewers that the arrest was carried out in a fair manner and force was used only to the degree warranted in that specific scenario. At the Bird Hilton interrogation, however, Omar, the only non-police witness present, seems to condone the violence, indicating its similarity to his own brand of vigilantism and shotgun-wielding street justice. While positioning the viewers to accept the police vigilantism as necessary and just, the episode also ironically undercuts its legitimacy. The duality of the scene brings out the dark humor and poetic justice implied by the assault, as well as the chilling normalcy with which the event is received in the narrative world. This unresolvable moment allows viewers to experience opposing feelings of both thinking about the ethical implications of norm violation as well as the justice served through extralegal police methods. While examining police procedure and its failure, this scene also serves as an interrogation of the viewers who have been recruited as collaborators to police power.

In *The Shield*, police violence is a central trait of the protagonist Vic Mackey's method. The show's first episode (1.1, "Pilot") frames Mackey's violence as an essential part of the job

that no one else will do, when he extracts information from a suspected pedophile, Dr. Bernard Grady, leading to the rescue of the 8-year-old Jenny Reborg. Grady's sneering attitude towards the police and the resident profiler terming him a "domination-control" pedophile aligns the viewers against him. When Grady denies any knowledge of the missing child even though the police are certain of his involvement, Captain David Aceveda has little choice but to allow Mackey to gain information at any cost. When Mackey enters the interrogation room with a phonebook, a bottle of whiskey and a zippo lighter, Grady asks with a smirk if it is Mackey's turn to play bad cop. Mackey chillingly replies, "Good cop and bad cop have left for the day, I'm a different kinda cop." When a visibly uncomfortable Grady looks up to the camera and says that he is ready to see his lawyer, Mackey proceeds to inflict unimaginable harm to the suspect until he comes out with the required information. Douglas Howard calls this scene "extreme, nightmarish" but draws attention to the fact that "Mackey's results are undeniable" ("Scenes from the Interrogation Room" 108). The success comes at the cost of blatant disregard for the suspect's right to seek counsel, and yet the viewers cannot help being exhilarated by Mackey's victory.

The expediency of the situation where anything less than an immediate confession would put the child at risk justifies Mackey's actions to the viewers. The Captain considers two other ways of handling the case before turning to Mackey. Detective Dutch Wagenbach (Dutch) suggests an extended interrogation to break the suspect down psychologically, as he had succeeded with a similar suspect earlier in the episode. Detective Claudette Wyms recommends letting Grady go and tailing him to his hideout, where he has ostensibly hidden the child. Both these legitimate procedures come with their respective risks. The longer the interrogation goes on, the greater the risk of the child dying from suffocation or thirst, as they had little information

about the nature or duration of her confinement. Alternately, if released, Grady is just as likely to abandon the child in his secret hideout to avoid the risk of getting caught. As Jenny Reborg runs out of time, the emergency course of action enacted by Mackey seems like the only alternative. By raising the stakes, and effectively confirming the suspect's guilt through his manner and tone, the show dismisses any moral compunctions that viewers may have with Mackey's methods.

The viewers are at ease with the violence since the physical torture of Grady is cleverly hidden off-screen. The violence is implied to be so graphic that Captain Aceveda is unable to continue watching the scene and turns off the video feed from the interrogation room. This turning away is both a loophole that allows the TV show to avoid upsetting the advertisers and viewers as well as preventing viewers from thinking about their endorsement of Mackey's violence. A directorial decision also supports the notion that the imagined violence on Grady is much more grotesque and severe, since a scene was removed from the episode which showed Dutch Wagenbach reentering the interrogation room to find Grady crying in a corner, having urinated on himself (Ray 179). The viewers enjoy the crime-solving aspect of the interrogation without getting entangled in the ethics of sanctioning violence as a method of law enforcement. The implied torture protects Mackey's image as a heroic cop who gets results without alienating the viewers with the bloody consequences.

Keeping the violence sight unseen, *The Shield* echoes a similar narrative gesture from *The Wire*, wherein the viewers are simultaneously released from culpability and reminded of unseen horror authorized in the narrative. These scenes continue the narrative TV convention of enlisting the viewers by obfuscating visual violence in favor of a humorous or heroic narrative flourish. Since the viewers are not yet called directly to evaluate the ethical significance of the narrative, they build viewers' tolerance to extralegal police power. The narrative strategy of

placing these scenes within the first few episodes helps ease the viewers into complicity since few people would have qualms about the means of stopping a confirmed pedophile or a brazen murderer. With that, the viewers expect—and even sanction—Mackey to do anything he can to protect the innocent. By cutting away quickly after the violence, the director makes the viewer's choice for them. If for Sontag the ethical move is to look away from the pain of others, the editing does not even offer the viewer that option.

However, when we re-examine this scene in the context of the rest of the episode, Mackey's violence is not universally authorized by the show's moral order. Instead of sanctioning police brutality as a useful method of investigation, the most dependable character in the show, Detective Claudette Wyms, questions the captain's decision by asking, "You know what you're doing, son?" When Mackey starts attacking Grady, Claudette shakes her head in disapproval and leaves the room. The scene is clearly not designed to put the viewers at ease, as evidenced by Mackey's disturbing language during the interrogation. Mackey says, "I've got a little girl back at home. Eight-year-old daughter. Name's Cassidy. What do you say I bring her down her, let you stick your dick in her? How'd you like that?" Grady is incredulous and baffled, as are the viewers who are made uncomfortable by his words. Unlike Dutch, who also spoke provocatively about genetic predisposition towards pedophilia and his make-believe 13-year-old daughter's attractive friend in an earlier scene to tease out information from a suspect, Mackey taunts Grady without the slightest hint of trying to get him to cooperate. The intended target for the shocking language is not just Grady, but also the viewers. Mackey's language and manner signals for the viewers to recognize that Mackey uses his familiarity with the criminal's interior world to outwit them.

The viewers' thrilled complicity with the narrative pleasure offered by Mackey's strategy unsettles previously held views about experiencing TV violence. Jib Fowles, an outlier voice against the negative perception of mediatized violence and crime, emphasizes the ritualistic and cathartic nature of TV violence.⁵⁰ He says "all its genres produce resolution: the winner wins, order is restored, and crime does not pay. The troubled mind is set to rest one more time" (*The Case for Television Violence* 118). Although Grady's punishment is cathartic, it does not supply the clear restoration of moral order that Fowles anticipates. Mackey's menacing grin indicates that he relishes the opportunity to beat down a pedophile, and he channels the viewers' desire to see Grady get his due. The scene ends unsurprisingly with Mackey punching Grady in the throat, and the viewers are further conflicted about their alignment with Mackey. Instead of cathartic relief, the viewers are startled at their own tolerance to extralegal methods. This discomfort opens them to an ethical reappraisal of their narrative pleasures.

Mackey's casual violence does not allow for any consideration that his suspect could be innocent. In fact, throughout the show, Mackey's extreme behavior is rewarded with the certainty that his suspects are inevitably guilty. However, on many occasions, especially in the latter seasons of the show, viewers encounter scenarios where Mackey's targets are indeed innocent. In Season 6, Mackey kidnaps and tortures a drug dealer named Guardo Lima, whom he wrongly suspects of having murdered a Strike Team member, Curtis Lemansky. By the time Mackey finds out that Lima was not Lemansky's murderer, he has gone too far and is forced to kill Lima to cover his tracks. While not entirely an innocent character, Lima raises an important question about the viewers' enjoyment of Mackey's exceptional methods. Giorgio Agamben

⁵⁰ While Fowles' hypothesis of a cathartic use of TV violence has been heavily contested in the case of children, we cannot disregard its value for discerning adult viewers.

writes that “the rationales of ‘public order’ and ‘security’ on which the police have to decide on a case-by-case basis define an area of indistinction between violence and right that is exactly symmetrical to that of sovereignty” (“Sovereign Police” 103). Mackey’s unchecked success through the first seasons seems like a narrative endorsement of his dubious methods. The stakes for these cases appeal at an emotional level, as Mackey uses his extralegal power to protect vulnerable members of the society, diminishing the significance of his abuses. The viewers’ tolerance towards police violence is constructed through the police’s dual authority to enact violence as well as determine when it is legitimate.

The interrogation of the suspected pedophile merely reinforces what has been communicated throughout the opening episode about Mackey’s brutal policing. The episode’s initial moments intercut Captain Aceveda’s press-conference launching his new community policing initiatives with a scene of Mackey and his team chasing down a drug-dealer named Booty. Just as Aceveda declares that “with the continued help of community leaders and ordinary citizens, we can make the Farmington district a safer home for all of us,” Mackey punches Booty in the gut and conducts an unauthorized strip-search to find a bag of dope stuck to his inner-leg. Besides highlighting Aceveda’s hypocrisy, the scene insinuates that while Mackey’s method is unlawful, his instincts about Booty were right. Just when we think that the show is making a case for the necessity of his extralegal power, the juridical compensation is denied by Mackey putting away the bag of dope in his jacket pocket rather than file it as evidence. As noted by Friendly, the evidence gained illegally could just as easily be planted to create a false accusation. The defendant’s rights here is not a matter of his individual guilt, but the last line of defense against the totalitarian use of police power.

Similarly, in another scene, one of Mackey's previous arrests is called into dispute when the arrested subject Miguel Estellana files a complaint of excessive force during arrest. In particular, he complains that Mackey had used pliers to inflict wounds while questioning him. Few scenes later, Mackey visits Estellana and coerces him to withdraw complaint back using similar methods of abuse. In fact, the final moments of the episode show Mackey murdering Terry Crowley, a fellow cop, and framing it as an accident during a drug raid because he found out that Crowley was spying on his team for Aceveda. These scenes challenge whether Mackey's actions are necessary to combat crimes. While Mackey justifies his violence with his effectiveness, the show always interrupts the viewers' complacency by highlighting that his violence is often directed by an accompanying selfish motivation.

While there are some similarities between the way police violence is presented in the two shows, *The Shield* deals with police violence more extensively. It uses violence as a tool for enforcing the law and at times, accelerating the speed of investigation. Violence is a powerful currency of coercion in the narrative world of the show. Mackey's violence is a way of finding justice for victims, and at the same time, it is also an unsettling element which protects the illegally accrued wealth of Mackey's team. Contrarily, in *The Wire* police violence is used as a punishment not for Hilton's crimes, but for his unwillingness to play his part in the procedure. Hilton's punishment occurs after obtaining evidence to secure his arrest, and there is little to gain from the assault, except asserting the pecking order and making it clear to others like Hilton, that they will not tolerate disrespect quietly. In both cases, viewers cultivate an uneasy relationship with police violence, as they are invited to enjoy its narrative outcomes while also being called to treat it with suspicion. The viewers situate police power through what Vivan Sobchack calls "lateral consciousness," where "past images are accumulated and inform present meanings"

(“Phenomenology” 250). These images continues to shape their perspective and generalize their impressions as the show progresses, diffusing them across a broader spectrum of real and fictional encounters. Thus, the portrayal of police power performs the dual function of calling viewers to normalize as well as question it.

Evaluating Viewer Response to Police Power

At first blush, the danger of TV crime drama seems that its moral universe is aligned with the police when presenting extralegal violence. Cases of police excess are either humanized or declared morally valid—even though they are unlawful. In procedural shows, otherwise morally upright characters to take shortcuts including breaking and entering by claiming that the door was unlocked or that they heard a call for help from within the house.⁵¹ TV shows authorize police power by reinforcing procedural elements like the reading of the Miranda warning as an integral and ritualistic part of making an arrest. At the same time, they distinguish between the perception and the fact of law by suggesting that while an individual has the right to remain silent, doing so is a sign of guilt. TV crime dramas side with manipulative police methods for more engaging viewer experiences than defending individuals’ rights against self-incrimination. For instance, the confession’s strong presence in TV justice has made it a legitimate mode of police inquiry in popular culture. TV detectives goad, threaten and cajole confessions from defendants with little regard for the Sixth Amendment. The viewers are complicit in ignoring, if not desiring extralegal police authority in crime narratives.

⁵¹ A trope used quite often in *Elementary* (CBS, 2012–2019). In this show, detectives routinely coerce witnesses to confess in the absence of a lawyer in order to get a more favorable deal from the DA.

However, these same narrative actions allow the viewers to identify, prioritize and subvert the assumptions about the moral code and behavior of the police. Mittell contends that although viewers want to “gauge a character’s interiority, [they] judge characters mostly by what they do” (*Complex TV* 135). The evolving viewer alignment questions the agenda set forth in earlier episodes when the Strike Team’s actions no longer benefit vulnerable civilians. Thus, TV texts expose the failure of a totalitarian system through moments of narrative uncertainty which challenge the certainty of characters abusing police authority. The power of a literary work, for Attridge, is its ability to give “the opportunity of glimpsing possibilities foreclosed by the frameworks that govern daily living” (*The Work of Literature* 265). Similarly, when TV goes beyond providing narrative satisfaction by raising questions that cannot be satisfactorily resolved, the gap between viewer expectation and narrative significance offers points of textual inquiry, causing the viewers to consider the innate otherness of the encountered text.

Despite conforming to some TV procedural clichés, shows like *The Shield* and *The Wire* evoke viewer reflection through narrative interruptions that challenge the viewers to go beyond accepting the suspension of disbelief for the sake of narrative enjoyment. *The Shield* endorses police violence by having it happen (‘justifiably’) from its very first episode, and *The Wire* shows us that it happens without any oversight or consequence, with both being reflective of the viewers’ authorization of the police violence. However, in both cases, we are not allowed to watch the moment of violence, and this denial of witnessing is a dislocation of the viewers’ alignment, which cause viewers to engage with meta-questions about transparency in policing. While the absence of screen violence attempts to preserve the positive image of cops, it also performs an important secondary function of highlighting viewer complicity with actions done in the name of public safety. When the viewers engage with the text as a puzzle that remains

unsolved after the credits roll, the inexpressible strangeness of the text provides critical openings for the viewer to linger on the issue longer than the duration of the episode.

The police violence in these shows is deeply rooted in the problematic presentation of vulnerable peoples by state authority. George Lipsitz criticizes *The Wire* for overlooking the effects of structural racism that the black citizens of Baltimore have inherited through Jim Crow laws and housing discrimination. He comments that “without a systemic analysis of how housing discrimination creates the ghetto, *The Wire* is left with the default positions inscribed in the white spatial imaginary” (*How Racism Takes Place* 112). Lipsitz accuses the show for not examining the root causes of the problems faced by racial minorities. He finds it imbalanced to attempt realistic representations of school segregation and police discrimination, while ignoring unfair housing policies and fraudulent health-scare-driven zoning codes which caused them. Lipsitz laments that the worst outcome of the show is that it allows “self-satisfied suburbanites who use portrayals of Black criminality to absolve themselves of any responsibility for the inequalities that provide them with unfair gains and unjust enrichments” (112). While Lipsitz’s criticism raises an important issue, it also unfairly expects a narrative drama to address the historical context of every problem.

Linda Williams’ responds to Lipsitz’s accusations by pointing out that the imperfect complexity offered in the show engages directly with some of the most toxic tropes about race in popular culture. She writes that “unlike so many stories about race, we are not asked to hiss a white racist villain in order to feel racially just ourselves. Nor need we root for the black macho hero who proves his proper masculinity by beating up ‘whitey,’ as in the traditions of blaxploitation” (*On The Wire* 176). Instead, she offers that “race matters in *The Wire* and consequently does not go unmentioned in the prescribed ‘color-blind’ way” (208). *The Wire* may

not address every gap and social concern, but it raises important questions about the problems of the poor and racial minorities which are largely ignored in the media.

Effectively, these shows construct narrative worlds with familiar problems, whose solutions are strange echoes of reality. Such fictional attempts offer narratively convenient solutions rather than realistic engagements with issues. The convoluted solutions work only because of the intricate ways in which narrative logic and necessity dictate the actions of the characters. While the viewer does not equate the narrative world with its real counterpart, the lessons learnt offer counsel to the way we handle reality. In such moments, the narrative world is analogous to the image that Susan Sontag describes, which retains its duality as an objective representation of facts as well as a subjective account of an event from a limited perspective (*Regarding the Pain* 26). In this regard, these texts inherit structural and narrative conventions from their generic predecessors, as the operational aesthetics of police crime dramas become sites of examining the ethics of the behavior they portray. Tropes of recuperating illegitimate violence as signs of legitimate authority are invariably moments that ask viewers about witnessing the pain of others. While witnessing is not equal to action, Sontag reminds us that “remembering is an ethical act, has ethical value in and of itself” (*Regarding the Pain* 114). The viewers’ encounter of narrative violence passes into memory and it can be called upon to address the wider world.

Chapter 5: Crime and Punishment: Police Procedure in Contemporary TV

In the episode “Dominoes Falling” (2.13) of *The Shield*, Police Chief Tom Bankston tells Vic Mackey that he has been considering disbanding the Strike Team. When Mackey defends the Strike Team, asserting that it responsible for more than half the arrests in the Farmington district, the Chief responds that their results are impressive but “it’s the methods that have me concerned.” Mackey assures the Chief that he would maintain the arrest rate while following proper police procedure. However, in the case of Armadillo Quintero, a drug lord and serial rapist, the viewers are left reeling wondering if such a thing is possible at all. Over the course of eight episodes, Armadillo’s threat escalates as he calmly commits crimes that cannot be traced back to him. He murders other drug dealers to consolidate his power and coerces witnesses to remain silent by intimidation and assault. He toys with law enforcement by quietly seeking revenge against those who implicate him in any crime. The first season of the show had refrained from introducing an overarching villain and the viewers’ reference to earlier textual codes of short-term compensatory justice is disturbed by a character who refuses to go away. Even Mackey is frustrated when Armadillo goads him into losing his temper during interrogation. Armadillo finally gets his comeuppance only when the Strike Team arranges for a rival gang member to stab him to death in custody. Besides being a formidable foe to the Team, Armadillo also affirms the enduring trope in TV crime dramas that not all criminals can be handled through lawful methods.

TV crime dramas implicitly undermine proper police procedure by emphasizing the need for extraordinary police measures to combat crime. Norman Finkel distinguishes between

“black-letter law” and “*commonsense* justice” which “reflects what ordinary people think is just and fair... It is what ordinary people think the law ought to be” (*Commonsense Law* 2). When TV shows suggest that individual police officers hold the authority to judge which procedures are pedantic and which protect “real citizens,” they strengthen the idea that police personnel can always differentiate between the letter and spirit of the law. TV crime dramas present a seductive “method” of police procedure where exceptional police officers solve crimes consistently by deploying special skills. TV shows imply that exceptional cops authorize their own use of extralegal methods. The more hard-hitting and grittier a show’s depiction of social horrors, the more effective is its presentation of extralegal power as the only course for justice. Also, TV shows cleave police officers from their racial and class contexts, further flattening complex social tensions into simpler narratives of good and evil. In these cases, we must be wary of TV shows that use a social realist aesthetic, as they are more sophisticated and convincing in their normalizing of extraordinary police power by projecting a veneer of ‘reality’ and appealing to authenticity.

The underlying reason for TV’s apparent indifference towards proper police procedures is that its commercial priorities lie in the viewers’ satisfaction and narrative reassurance. They do not need to be deliberately misleading to be dangerous, as they unintentionally render unpardonable things as exciting and compelling through serial familiarization. TV’s operational aesthetics sustain viewers’ interest in the familiar narrative world while offering surprises that uphold the rules of the show rather than rules of real institutions. Police shows accomplish this with the idea of a “code” that overrides procedures that ought to govern the police. They offer a false dichotomy between individual rights and collective safety, where a sense of justice—even vigilante justice—is a more efficient substitute to the letter of the law. Often, this code is framed

as an ethic unto itself, which does not always adhere to actual police procedures. This ethic founds an “absolute” or “natural” law, derived from some code which determines itself as above any other law. The “code” is selectively adopted and enforced under the condition that the power to do so must be vested in the police. In many cases, the “code” is authorized by the viewers’ identification with characters over time. Through attractive protagonists who operate under the moral guidance of their code, TV subtly blurs the distinction between the fictional code and real police authority.

The code is an oblique phenomenon which switches between characters according to their narrative priorities. “A man must have a code” notes Omar Little in *The Wire*, and his understanding of the idea is resigned to every person following their own code in the absence of a universal code that maintains order in Baltimore. Since these codes evolve from their context and social expectations, violent encounters lead to volatile codes that have a narrow perspective of things. Omar Little who comes forward as a witness in a murder investigation because the suspect “killed an everyday working man” (1.7 “One Arrest”) has no qualms about robbing drug dealers at gunpoint. As Noël Carroll puts it, “Omar Little’s vigilantism in *The Wire* may be illegal, but viewers, even morally upright ones, can view it as morally justified since the legal system is not doing its job” (“Rough Heroes” 373). However, the code is revealed to be an illusory construction evoked by characters to hold on to a sense of permanence in a world that keeps changing and moving ahead without them. The code often reflects the individual’s attempt to hold on nostalgically to a past that no longer exists. It serves as a substitute for social structures that have abandoned most of the city’s population in favor of global capitalism. As the “game” becomes more aggressive and both the police and the criminals slowly abandon the code in favor of quick results, the code becomes a legend rather than a practice.

In the case of the police, personal codes become extensions of their justification to exceed and deactivate the law when the situation demands it. Extralegal methods, such as illegal entry into a suspect's house and manipulation and coercion of witnesses, are presented as necessary parts of law enforcement. This kind of recognizable character traits that indicate a worldview is typical of TV's narrative structures because it allows viewers who return to the text to resume from their previous encounter, as well as providing an easy access point for those who are watching it for the first time. *The Wire* manipulates these serial conventions to give rise to new combinations by deliberately hiding a character's operative code in our first encounter. When we encounter the detectives Lester Freamon and Roland Pryzbylewski for the first time, their beliefs are shielded from the viewers in order to present shallow and typical background figures. Jason Mittell observes that *The Wire* does not offer much in terms of direct exposition, but by contrasting character actions from their earlier selves, the show calls upon viewers to assess how much characters like Lester Freamon "have fallen, dehumanized by their attempts to fight the good fight against an intractable system" (*Complex TV* 331). As the narrative progresses, the show rewards the viewers' sustained engagement with new information that adds depth to their history, and in turn calling viewers to examine their viewing positions.

Since law enforcement agencies selectively deploy their resources to tackle law and order issues only as instructed by the politician or community leader *du jour*, the unironic affirmation of a code—any code—by a shotgun-wielding stickup artist is instantly sympathetic to the viewers of *The Wire*. Similarly, *The Shield's* code of vigilante justice is a response to a brutal world where policing is not about solving crimes and helping citizens but holding the line to create a sense of security in a city vulnerable to uncertainties. The emphasis on a code that holds together a fractured community is used to comment on the morally bankrupt world where it has

replaced the rule of law. The difference between individual characters' codes and institutional policy calls viewers to consider the ever-growing alienation that creates such a rift. A code's extralegal methods satisfy viewers only because they demonstrate the inadequacy of existing procedures and offer a more effective set of standards and procedures. However, the code also decays over time when it is no longer able to meet its own standards and needs further compromises to be effective. The extralegal codes of figures like Omar and Mackey present viewers with the tension between the effectiveness of vigilantism and its unintended victims. However, these codes also dismantle the safeguards placed on police behavior. The extralegal codes show how the rights and protections afforded to civilians are disrupted.

TV's seriality works at an intertextual level as well, as TV cops continually reinforce previously held biases in all social strata of their viewership, by creating a clear distinction between the "citizen" and the "criminal element." TV cops are not interested in the way citizens turn into criminals—they are interested only in protecting this illusory divide, often drawn along the lines of class and race. TV reinforces biases held by affluent viewers by presenting crime as a problem of the underclass which is plagued with problems of drugs and poverty. On the other hand, TV viewers who belong to the underclass see the cops as a suitable response to the rampant violence in their streets and lives. Shannon Campbell's "African American Representation and Current Cop Doc Portrayals" exposes the inherent racial structures of shows that use clips from real encounters between police and civilians. TV cops reinforce stereotypical associations between racial and social backgrounds and criminal behavior not only to people who already have such beliefs, but even to people who may themselves belong to such backgrounds. While an engagement with only the textual elements foregrounds this unresolved tension, a creative reading calls us to respond to the unique changes and narrative combinations

that occur in a text. Attridge writes that creative reading “involves the shifting of ingrained modes of understanding in order to take account of that which was systematically excluded by them” (*Singularity* 123). While viewers do not fully step away from their narrative expectations, their familiarity with the conventions of the genre allows them to respond to departures from establish patterns. The sprawling seriality of shows like *The Wire* and *The Shield* resists simplifying the process of law enforcement to a 44-minute procedure of familiar and repeatable beats. The viewers then must contend with a system that keeps evolving according to the circumstances and expediencies of the individual characters.

The serialized storytelling that spans over weeks and, at times, years builds on actual police procedure and the viewers’ familiarity with it to show variation across different instances. In the case of *The Wire*, the narrative expands its scope across seasons to ask broader questions beyond a simple police investigation. It laments the loss of labor at the Docks as a problem of the American underclass (Season 2), interrogates the complicity of an ineffective city administration to handle the drug crisis (Season 3), eulogizes the lives lost to an indifferent school system (Season 4), and decries the failure of journalism which no longer seeks to provide a context for these failures (Season 5). This cumulative narrative structure allows viewers to visualize the interlinked nature of city institutions, where funding for police initiatives could mean cuts for education. In *The Shield*, the Strike Team quickly becomes a more fearsome gang than any of the street gangs they are supposed to police. The show expands its narrative concentration from the team’s violence and criminal activities to account for the political and social games that often take precedence over day-to-day policing in the city. The recurrent images of violent neighborhoods that suffer from both gangs and the police slowly alienate viewers, as their initial tolerance of police authority in exchange for social order evaporates. In

this way, the two shows demonstrate that while they have inherited generic conventions and viewer familiarity from other shows, they also exceed, subvert, and reexamine such conventions.

This chapter studies the serial encounter of police imagery in *The Wire* and *The Shield*. Through a close analysis of the exceptional police power represented in these shows, this chapter considers how TV seriality helps viewers to overlook the authoritarian nature of police practices, while paradoxically enabling them to question the same police power. In contrast to the generally uncritical portrayal of police authority in TV crime dramas, *The Wire* and *The Shield* explore the systemic corruption in police departments and examine the causes for degradation of policing standards from staffing problems to antagonistic attitudes. Both shows provide opportunities to critically examine the gaps in police representations as well as the way in which TV texts grapple with totalitarian authority. *The Wire* and *The Shield* use viewers' familiarity with aspects of the TV police procedural to destabilize and undermine police power. TV police derive their power in the way they affirm and reflect police authority in the real world. Their power is augmented when individualized narratives of crime-solving are translated to community-wide policing policies. However, their power is also checked in serial crime narratives which offer alternative ways of engaging with the inconsistent nature of police expertise. By drawing on the viewers' serialized encounter of these narrative aspects, this chapter argues that TV crime dramas function as a means of questioning the narrative constructions of police by disrupting their familiarity with genre conventions.

The Valorized Police Code

In TV texts, the police code is dictated both directly through written laws and indirectly through the interpretation of the spirit of those laws. Since the police are in control of their

selective deactivation of the law in the name of reinforcing it, their method could simultaneously be unethical and legal. Giorgio Agamben contends that the state's power to distinguish between order and the state of exception always justifies exceptional power in ways that strengthen its own authority. The code of law enforcement has the absolute authority of the law, simply because it is backed by the power to enforce it. Agamben writes,

If the sovereign, in fact, is the one who marks the point of indistinction between violence and right by proclaiming the state of exception and suspending the validity of the law, the police are always operating within a similar state of exception ("Sovereign Police" 103).

In turn, the law operates from a state of exception where its own authority is omnipotent and possibly extralegal to inflict whatever its agents decide are appropriate and judicious under the circumstances.⁵² TV police procedurals then further their authoritative power by equating police integrity with the cops' selective, yet always judicious, adherence to due process. *The Wire* and *The Shield* also follow genre conventions in allowing cops to wield exceptional authority. However, they also present how exceptional authority fails to resolve complications, questioning the effectiveness of such methods.

TV narratives tend to omit common instances of police corruption and abuse of police power in a day-to-day setting. In *The Wire*, other than one instance of an outburst by narcotics officer Anthony Colicchio (5.4), the police are polite and sometimes even friendly to their targets and civilians. While *The Wire* presents the problems of police departments at the institutional level, almost no cop is deliberately selfish and police brutality is almost entirely absent in the narrative. Even in Colicchio's case, the attack is presented as an extraordinary outburst rather

⁵² See Balko, "What is *Qualified Immunity*."

than a reflection of his general temperament. Unlike the lawyer Maurice Levy or the drug dealer Marlo Stanfield—who act with great agency and deliberate malice—even the worst cops in *The Wire* are merely petty and self-serving and seem to affirm the general good of their roles. Critics like George Lipsitz take exception to this omission of day-to-day police brutality, as it presents a fiction of fairness. It affirms Michel Foucault’s warning against perpetuating “toleration of illegality, [and] non-application of the rule” (*Discipline and Punish* 82). The police are not held to the same standards as common citizens despite holding power over them. Instead of questioning the procedural integrity of individual officers, *The Wire* contrasts them from an indifferent police administration to evoke viewer sympathy. Rogue detective Jimmy McNulty undermines his superiors and protocol in order to carry out his plan and solve his cases. By aligning the viewers with individual characters like McNulty, the show implies that the individual’s code of ethics and their goal-achievement are more important than following the operational procedures of the department.

The framing of individual codes in *The Wire* as the last surviving ethic is an indictment of ineffective institutions that have rendered proper policing impractical. While presented as a valiant, desperate effort to maintain peace, this code also enables and routinely authorizes police power to manage the streets. In the essay “The Narrative Production of Real Police” Ryan Brooks uses D.A. Miller’s frame that a disavowal of power is a way to normalize certain characters and behaviors and to marginalize others. Brooks notes that through the characterization of Lieutenant Cedric Daniels and Detective Lester Freamon, the show distinguishes between “digging in to do good police work” and other “garbage” responsibilities of policing (67). *The Wire* intentionally or inadvertently normalizes the notion of “good or natural police” which privileges some tactics of crime prevention over others. It repeatedly

highlights the frustrations of street cops in their daily duties due to poorly thought-out policies. However, it also ends up insinuating that even a bad cop is not as bad in *The Wire* as in other shows, since they are also victims of the system. Cops are not held accountable because the show implies that they are not going to be effective anyway. Cops have been deactivated from actual policing through a variety of restrictive policies and statistical manipulation. This cynicism becomes an excuse for stepping away from narrative responsibility and examining the consequences of police abuse.

Similarly, the universal praise that *The Wire* receives for its authenticity obscures the fact that it only presents a palatable authenticity.⁵³ It highlights the problems of everyday limitations in the process of effective policing, such as resource-thin, understaffed, underpaid, and overworked police officers who barely manage to cover their cases. It critiques bureaucratic priorities that emphasize statistical reductions in crime, causing departments to massage the numbers (or as David Simon calls it, “juking the stats.”⁵⁴) to make their compromised policing seem effective. It holds policing accountable only to the extent that it questions the practical benefits of measuring police effectiveness through the number of arrests rather than the quality of policing. These features do not question the basic assumption that cops hold the line between good and evil. It ignores the fact that most cops operate on the premise that they have the first and final authority on distinguishing between perpetrator and innocent. In fact, the presentation of the problems within law enforcement legitimizes police authority by advocating reform of resource-distribution rather than question operational procedures. Even though *The Wire* presents the everyday nature of law enforcement, it still presents an idealized version of it.

⁵³ Emma Jones’ “How *The Wire* became the greatest TV show ever made” attributes its authenticity to the verisimilitude created by David Simon’s casting and aesthetic choices.

⁵⁴ See *Bill Moyers’ Journal* interview.

This idealized presentation of the police abets in the minimizing of other embedded systemic problems like racial bias in policing. Characters like Howard ‘Bunny’ Colvin (a highly educated, black police captain) and Reginald ‘Bubbles’ Cousins (a black drug-user and street hustler) offer nuanced articulations of different African American life experiences and socio-economic circumstances. However, a similar degree of racial veracity is not sustained in police interactions with civilians on the show. Crucially, the distinction between whether someone is a good or a bad police officer is determined exclusively by their efficiency or goals. In other words, the show seems to suggest that suspects of all races receive the same kind of policing, even though the larger police policy suggests that drug-related policing is limited to neighborhoods with a heavy concentration of black people.⁵⁵ Inadvertently, this idea is reinforced in Season 2 which targets crimes perpetrated by white suspects at the shipping yard, where the framing of the Sobotka family is more sympathetic as a labor-class turning to crime, compared to the Stanfield or Barksdale organizations which are clearly cast as criminal. This duality disrupts the viewer’s engagement with the perceived authenticity of the show. The sweeping scope of *The Wire* which raises important questions about the drug war, the death of labor, city administration, the education system, and the media, seems to stop short of asking if minorities are policed differently and more harshly compared to white people.⁵⁶

In contrast to *The Wire*, *The Shield*’s scope is specifically about extralegal police power, as it examines the nature and consequences of police behavior when the police do not see themselves as answerable to the law that gives them power. Although the formula of exceptionalism is routinely deployed and normalized in the narrative world of *The Shield*, the

⁵⁵ Nick Sobotka, a stevedore with connections to the drug-network in Baltimore, is the only white character arrested for a drug crime in the show.

⁵⁶ The skewed perspective has serious implications in our contemporary context, where police mistreatment of minorities have evinced strong popular protests both within and outside the USA.

viewers are not allowed to ignore the costs of extralegal actions. The show balances its critique of extralegal methods with the immediate judicial compensation offered due to the methods. In this way, by aligning them with the antiheroic protagonist, the show prompts viewers to ask themselves, “Is this how we want to be protected?” By escalating the action of the violent Strike Team, the show calls the viewers to evaluate the cost of safety and the compromise of justice and the structures that have made these trade-offs seem inevitable. The show’s style and narrative pacing seem to provoke a contradictory desire in the viewers to authorize more power to police who will do whatever it takes to keep the public safe and to fear the effects of allowing selective deactivation of the law as a necessity of law enforcement.

Shot in a grainy, handheld style that mixes hard-hitting action with a quick documentary aesthetic, *The Shield* is a police procedural only in the sense that it follows cops solving crimes. It discusses larger social issues including racial profiling, selective enforcement of the law with different social groups, and civil assets forfeiture in order to explore the tension between everyday law enforcement and the constitutional standards of justice. By highlighting disparate police attitudes drawn along racial lines in a city like Los Angeles, *The Shield* looks back to Rodney King riots and foresees Ferguson and the many other incidents of filmed police violence to critique extralegal police authority.⁵⁷ Linda Speidel argues that the rundown condition of the Barn—the police headquarters in Farmington—reflects the “down and dirty” tactics and the corresponding brutal nature of the neighborhood (149). We could extend this notion to the entire

⁵⁷ Ferguson was not the last police-civilian encounter with terrible outcomes. George Floyd’s death in May 2020 is just the most recent in a long line of ceaselessly repetitive of tragedies that includes Trayvon Martin (2012), Tamir Rice (2014), Eric Garner (2014), Breonna Taylor (2020). In these cases, video evidence becomes a method of battling false narratives that could potentially cover up police misbehavior. While very few TV shows portray fictional cops behaving in this manner, the viewers’ narrative experience cannot completely disengage with the specter of truth from outside the narrative world.

show, where the murky everyday practices of policing challenge the viewers' association of police authority with lawfulness.

Despite providing narrative pleasure when characters exceed their lawful authority, the show also critically engages with the exceptional use of police power. The show presents police corruption at a practical and moral level, through a Captain who cares about fueling his political career with the precinct's image and an overworked and underpaid department that cuts corners to combat rising crime. Vic Mackey operates by a code that tolerates non-violent drug trade in order to control gangs and reduce violent crime. This uneasy peace is achieved through the suspension of drug prevention laws in favor of averting more serious crimes. Mackey's solutions may not be legitimate or permanent, but they show an effort at tailoring unique solutions under dire circumstances. As Glyn White argues, "To acknowledge that someone like Mackey might actually be necessary is uncomfortable but not something to be ducked, for *The Shield* succeeds in bringing to the surface the inequalities of a deeply divided society." ("Quality, Controversy, and Criminality: *The Shield* as a Post-Sopranos Cop Show" 101). Mackey represents the last resort in an oft-ignored, poverty-stricken, minority-majority city like Los Angeles. However, when his expedient solutions are intertwined with his selfish motivations to enrich himself, the viewers are less accepting of his rationale.

The viewers' alignment breaks with the Strike Team when it perverts its own code, and instead of natural justice, its members simply emerge as more capable criminals. When the Strike Team—the group of elite detectives led by Mackey—takes protection money from the gangs to create their own "retirement fund," and play "landlord" to the drug dealers, their intentions are revealed to be more obviously exploitative. By focusing on the severity of the Strike Team's harmful practices, the show exposes the argument of public safety as a mere ploy used to protect

the concentration of police power. In subtle ways, the deactivation of law is often used to target racial minorities and reduce them to criminal elements that need to be removed from society. While the protagonists in *The Shield* are not directly framed as racist, they are repeatedly shown to use racist language to berate criminals, as if their criminal status automatically strips away their civil dignity and individual identity and collectivized in pejorative terms.

The Shield's declared intention of examining the moral nature of police behavior often achieves the opposite effect of reaffirming the need for exceptional police practices. However, this inversion allows us to recognize when people in positions of power lose their moral authority when they enforce their power with violence. Giorgio Agamben foresees the collapse of the limits of authority when the police set their own jurisdiction. He observes that “the sovereigns who willingly agreed to present themselves as cops or executioners, in fact, not show in the end their original proximity to the criminal” (106). By extension, he also indicts those who condone such powerful sovereignty as a necessary evil. Nicholas Ray builds on this idea and argues that Mackey’s actions are not an enforcement of the law, but “an ad hoc *deactivation* of law that drastically enhances both its means and its reach” (“A Different Kind of Cop” 174). The show’s style and pacing help mask its contradictory nature of calling for more stringent enforcement of the law through a selective deactivation of the law. Hence, narrative necessity renders the proclaimed aim of the show irrelevant. At the same time, it also leads viewers to question the totalitarian impulse offered as narrative satisfaction. This duality persists in procedurals by their serialized mode of interaction with viewers, as every repetition replaces narrative satisfaction with a growing doubt of the police’s goodness. Thus, the narrative world and story-telling strategies in *The Wire* and *The Shield* shape the viewers’ ambivalent position to critically engage with exceptional police power while also enjoying it.

Destabilizing Procedural Certainty

TV police dramas cultivate viewer allegiance by routinely ensuring that the procedural method of the show is rewarded with positive results. The investigative medical drama *House M.D* (Fox, 2004–2012) illustrates the procedural format, where the titular protagonist often resolves the unidentifiable disease in the last five minutes, after the rest of his team fall short throughout the episode. Similarly, in *Elementary*, through a combination of inductive reasoning, friends with special talents, and unusual skills, Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Joan Watson solve cases that baffle the police. These methods become signature conceits that are combined in surprising and unexpected ways to resolve the problem in an episode. *The Wire* and *The Shield* also have identifiable procedural methods of the wiretap and the Strike Team respectively. Instead of using these methods to routinely solve problems, these shows complicate the certainty with which the police carry out investigative procedures and subvert the authority vested in the methods portrayed in other shows. The viewers' serial engagement with the changes in procedure allow subtle ways through which they question the ethics of TV characters. *The Wire* and *The Shield* resist grand rhetorical flourishes about good and evil and use procedures—and their failure—to ask of the responsibility that the police owe to the public. Even though these shows present cops who do not follow proper procedures and take shortcuts in order to get ahead in their cases, the moral authority is vested with other characters who do not tolerate such norm violations.

The Wire engages with the social dimension of policing by exploring the ethical implications of the wiretap. The titular wiretap remains a recurrent trope which sets up narrative expectations throughout the series. It serves as a metaphor for sustained, long-term investigations

that could lead to important arrests and potentially dismantle a crime network, rather than clearing the streets in a meaningless and temporary display of police power. Unlike other shows, the procedural methods are used to expose the processes and mechanisms that keep the institutions of law and order running. Diligent police work and meticulously monitored surveillance are presented as ethical alternatives that do not compromise the rights of the accused. The show calls for a return to a community style of policing, and laments the impossibility of such a return, as institutions of law enforcement and public administration demand short-term statistical upticks that confirm their own effectiveness. Law professor Adam M. Gershowitz writes that *The Wire* “fills a doctrinal hole [in] the law of wiretapping” as it highlights generally hidden features such as “the heightened standard for obtaining a wiretap, the statutory requirement that police minimize their listening, or the need for officers to provide magistrates with progress reports about a wiretap” (“*The Wire* as a Gap-Filling Class on Criminal Law and Procedure” 117). By demonstrating the limitations placed on police power, *The Wire* challenges the unchecked authority of law enforcement.

Titular conceits in TV crime dramas generally align viewers to see the procedural methods as effective and necessary. In *CSI* (CBS, 2000–2015), the viewers can be certain that the Crime Science Investigation unit will provide the breakthrough that solves the narrative puzzle. Commenting on the effective procedural trope in *CSI*, Sue Turnbull expresses her doubt about “the pace at which the scientific evidence is processed, given that the timeline of each investigation is compressed to a scant forty-plus minutes of television time” (*The TV Crime Drama* 89). *The Wire*, however, challenges procedural efficiency by showing how the painful and critical delays caused by bureaucratic handwringing and petty politics could derail cases. The wiretap never becomes a standard, repeatable feature with few variations throughout the

show. Instead, the wiretap comes to represent the resistance from institutional attitudes against prolonged investigations. At the beginning of the series, the wiretap is used as a shorthand for good police work rather than an instrument of crime-solving—an alternative to the rip-and-run style of street-level policing that led to a new era of mass incarceration in the USA. Over the course of the series, its meaning evolves to account for technological, practical and policy limitations to police surveillance. In Mittell's words, since *The Wire* aims to present “a world where characters and institution are immutably locked together into a larger system” (*Complex TV* 220), it resists offering the wiretap as a catchall solution to fight crime. Instead, it balances its function as the last resort against criminality on one hand and a symbol of invasive police power on the other.

The Wire adopts the procedural structure without advocating simplistic resolutions. The procedural makes a narrative promise to the viewers that its method will always bring triumphant results. Turnbull points out, each episode [of CSI] concludes with the discovery of the perpetrator who will be subjected to some form of moral, if not legal, admonishment... [*The Wire*] provided no such moral certainty (92). Instead, the procedure simply offers depth to character motivations, such as the obsessively naïve belief of a cop who thinks that a wiretap alone would help him bring down a crime empire and an overseer in the drug-trade who finds inventive methods to evade police surveillance. Neither of them realizes that their endless pursuit is futile, as “the game” keeps discarding individual players regardless of their skill at playing their roles. Marlo Stanfield, who replaces Avon Barksdale as the primary target of the wiretap, implements a more intricate method of communication through untraceable use of prepaid “burner” mobile phones that renders it nearly impossible to wiretap his crew. Lester Freamon, the detective in charge of the case, cracks the code to see that Stanfield's gang is using images to

communicate. In this cyclical presentation of tougher targets and new methods of tracking them, *The Wire* redeploys a traditional procedural trope of raising the stakes. Instead of providing a more dramatic resolution, it uses the escalation to suggest that no matter how many crimes are solved, the underlying problems can never be fully removed when only the punitive instruments of law enforcement are deployed. Thus, *The Wire* also delivers on its narrative promise as a procedural, albeit in a cynical and frustrating manner. The aim here is not to compare *CSI* unfavorably to *The Wire*, as they perform very different narrative functions. Instead, these texts complement each other, as the viewers' familiarity with procedural conventions seen in shows like *CSI* allows them to recognize the critical questions raised in *The Wire*.

Over the course of the series, the viewers' alignment with police surveillance is challenged when it is revealed as a limited and inadequate tool to combat crime. In some cases, it achieves modest successes as Marlo Stanfield and Avon Barksdale are eventually arrested due to meticulous surveillance work. Ironically, neither face serious consequences, as the evidence from surveillance is squandered by bureaucratic grandstanding. Others like the lawyer Maurice Levy and the state senator Clayton Davis avoid the sting of surveillance completely, due to their familiarity with police procedure and its loopholes. The show also demonstrates how police surveillance could be weaponized for petty vengeance, as seen by District Commander Stan Valchek's arbitrary targeting of shipyard union leader Frank Sobotka. These moments weaken the authority of the central method, by highlighting its failures. Ryan Brook's distinction between "good policing" and "garbage" in *The Wire* becomes more porous as the series advances, as viewers recognize the diminished certainty and legality of police surveillance.

The show perpetuates the efficacy of the wiretap by affirming its utility in potentially taking down entire drug networks, even though the internet boom has completely changed the

way in which drug dealers communicate. Despite the deglamorized presentation which foregrounds the limits of the wiretap, the show still causes viewers to perceive its methods as indicative of policing in Baltimore, eliding the problems with modern surveillance, which has become more intrusive to even have the chance of being effective. Griselda Pollock writes that “we can’t just look at the TV program and think by studying it we know what’s happening in Baltimore” (“University of York offers degree course on *The Wire*”). Therefore, instead of considering it a reflection of reality, we need to consider the surveillance as a procedural method to examine pervasive and arbitrary use of police power. Ultimately, the show does not directly side with surveillance as essential to “good policing” or criticize it as a failure of individual civil liberties. It strings along the wiretap as an element of serial melodrama which fuels both the targets as well as the pursuers to keep improving their technological and strategic methods in order to survive a little longer in the game. In this way, the repetition of the procedural method alerts the viewers to the cyclical futility of the world they operate in.

In *The Shield*, the Strike Team plays a central role in authorizing the unlawful use of police power. The team is constituted of four primary members: Vic Mackey, the de facto leader who blurs the boundaries between lawful procedure and vigilante justice, Shane Vendrell, Mackey’s partner and best friend who seems to compensate for his brash behavior with his extreme loyalty to Mackey, Ronnie Gardocki, the quiet, intelligent and reliable figure who is trusted by all his other team members, and Curtis “Lemonhead” Lemansky, an impulsive and sensitive detective who is the conscience of the team. From the first episode, the Strike Team is framed as a group within a group, whose modes of operation are unique in their effectiveness in the troubled Farmington district. Their method is defined amorphously, as they sometimes canvass confidential informants to gain intelligence, and at other times, prefer intimidating local

gang members instead of following leads. The team's propensity to take shortcuts in processing suspects, collecting evidence, and working on cases is presented through charming banter and everyday pragmatism. However, over the course of the series, the viewers come to recognize that despite being the dominant method of crime-solving in the show, the Strike Team is not an ethical response to the situation. The team is revealed to be an embodiment of uncontrolled police power, all the while offering a vicarious experience of righteous violence. Like the real-life CRASH (Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums) unit from the LAPD Rampart division, the Strike Team becomes indistinguishable from other gangs except for the police badge and the protection it affords. They become a symbol for police corruption, which is tolerated, if not encouraged, by various authority figures in the show.

The team members' toxic co-dependence becomes more apparent with the passage of time when new members are forced on the team. Each new member is seen as a threat to the security of their sustained conspiracy to siphon some of the resources seized from criminals to enrich their own coffers, becoming a further indictment of the team's criminality. Terry Crowley, a bright, young detective planted to spy on the team for Captain David Aceveda is shot and killed in the very first episode to the shock of the Strike team-members as well as the viewers. The team also proves to be a similarly hostile environment for Tavon Garris, whose tussles over his spot in the team with an insecure Shane escalates into a violent fistfight and a career-threatening car accident (3.4 "Streaks and Tips"), effectively removing him from active duty and the Strike Team.⁵⁸ Kevin Hiatt, brought in by Captain Claudette Wymys to replace Mackey, ends up being

⁵⁸ Troublingly, this is not the only time an African American member is sidelined from the team. While the main characters, except Shane, are not portrayed as overtly racist, the team's exclusion of black characters is further complicated by their victims mainly being minorities. In fact, Tavon is added to the team only after Lanie Kellis, civilian auditor notes "An all-white unit smashing down doors in a heavily minority neighborhood? It's just bad policy."

manipulated by the incumbent and gets removed from the team (6.10 “Spanish Practices”). The incorruptible uniformed officer Julien Lowe is the only one to survive the team until it is disbanded (7.9 “Moving Day”). However, Lowe is effectively kept out of the extralegal side-projects, partially restricting his access to the team’s membership. The team preserves its power by discarding anyone who comes in the way of its authority.

The Strike Team cultivates viewer allegiance through their camaraderie and group-loyalty in the earlier seasons. Initially, their actions are framed as slight deviations from the letter of the law to help preserve the spirit of justice.⁵⁹ Brandon Nowalk notes that Lemansky’s positive effect on Mackey tethers the team to the essential goodness of their intentions. Even during their robbery of the Armenian mob, Lemansky does not allow a gangster to bleed to his death. The show mirrors the team’s descent into more dubious acts with Lemansky’s physical illness, as he develops stomach ulcers due to the escalating guilt of compromising their duty. Ultimately, when Lemansky is killed by Shane for the fear of exposing the crimes committed by the team, the viewers’ certainty of Lemansky’s status as a core-team member is disrupted. The serial memory stuns the viewers with the extent to which the team has abandoned their responsibility and loyalty in favor of self-preservation. Any moral pretensions held by the team is severed as the grenade Shane throws explodes in Lemansky’s lap, and the team implodes when Mackey and Gardocki seek revenge on Shane for his actions. The viewers witness the complete desolation of the team when Shane kills himself and his family, Gardocki bears the brunt of the teams’ misdeeds and Mackey is stripped of his position and power.

⁵⁹ The Shakespearean appeal to the spirit of justice rather than the letter of the law in *The Merchant of Venice* arises from the need to prevent cruel and unusual punishment.

Even Mackey's escape from the consequences of the Strike Team's collapse with a last-minute immunity deal with the Immigration department does not seem like a victory to viewers who are familiar with the character's priorities. When he confesses that the "Strike Team was committing criminal acts on a regular basis" (7.12, "Possible Kill Screen"), he lets slip the heroic façade of the team. As Mackey recounts their terrible actions, the immigration officer recording his confession is stunned. Along with her, the viewers and Mackey himself, to a certain degree, are shocked when collating and confronting all the actions together. He recognizes the serial escalation of their actions when he says, "At first it was just taking drugs from busts, turning it around, and selling it for profit. We were able to do this by making partnerships with local drug dealers and gangs, you know, that we knew we could leverage." What starts as a way of maintaining peace in the community becomes an unchecked abuse of police power.

When viewers think that the extent of police power authorized by the show must be a work of fiction, they are reminded that the show generally scales down the same kind of power enjoyed by the LAPD for decades. Kevin Starr observes in his book *Coast of Dreams* that for nearly twenty years, the CRASH unit had become the "most formidable gang in the region, its members fully armed, acting under color of authority, and having at their disposal—provided they were willing to plant evidence and commit perjury, which they were—the remorseless resources of the criminal justice system" (92). Its fictional counterpart operates for a comparatively shorter three-year period and does not enjoy as much systemic complicity as its inspiration, but the insidious collusion—both active and passive—goes right to the top. Even Aceveda, who challenges the extralegal authority of the team, pursues his course only to seek political mileage. The attempt of clamping down on the team's illegitimate activities is tainted with self-interest, as Aceveda wants to make an example of Mackey as "a poster boy of

corruption” to boost his own public perception. This obsession with image and posturing is hinted at as one of the reasons why the police department has festered with corruption.

The Shield derives its title from the police badges which often evoke the imagery of the protection of common people by knights in medieval times (Roufa, “The History of the Police Badge”). It comes as no surprise then that the knights of the modern era also demand protection money, for the services rendered to the community. What ought to be a shield of protection for the public, transforms into a protective mechanism that shields police misbehavior from public scrutiny. Most importantly, it shows how the power of a Strike Team—a unit created exclusively to handle the gang problems in the city—falls victim to its own power when the team acts on a certainty that is not dictated by the due process of investigation. In the episode titled “Co-pilot” (2.9), Mackey explains to the newly formed team how important it is for them to get their target. He says,

You just hear me out. A high-profile bust gets us credibility out on the street and with the bosses. Once we get our feet on solid ground, get a couple of wins under our belt... we go back to doing it the right way.

(Everybody looks at each other)

Hey, we need this. Just this once.

The Strike Team colludes with Mackey because of their knowledge that their suspect is a criminal. However, they have inadvertently sanctioned a totalitarian action which becomes the dominant method of policing in their team. The show uses the conceit of their exceptional power and considers the consequences over time.

The subject matter of the two shows seem vastly different, as *The Wire* builds a systematic examination of society's ills, and *The Shield* presents an escapist fantasy of exceptional police behavior. However, they both help viewers to see how police procedurals gesture towards guilt and responsibility. They achieve similar results of deglamorizing the police procedural, allowing their viewers to critically respond to representations of police practices due to their sustained serial engagement. Through their manipulation and affirmation of procedural certainty, policing is presented as uniform and standardized across the different kinds of people enforcing it. However, these shows do not limit themselves to the homogenized idea of what good policing looks like, as they explore the effectiveness of other approaches as well. Like other TV crime dramas, these shows cultivate and question viewer allegiance over the course of the series.

Politics of Community Policing

Both shows engage with the consequences of crimes at a social level and examine how policing policy affects the broader community. Instead of offering idealistic policies as a panacea for the problems of a community, these shows engage with the consequences of community-wide policing plans. *The Wire* examines the effects of legalizing drugs in a controlled way. In *The Shield*, community policing initiatives become political gambits in two different storylines. The Assistant Chief of Police Ben Gilroy restructures police patrolling to increase the value of his real estate holdings, while Captain Monica Rawling decides to combat crime through a controversial civil assets forfeiture policy that unduly targets minorities. These community-wide solutions are narrative experiments that refresh the specific TV show, as they call the viewers to evaluate the way other approaches succeed or fail. That is, if wiretap cases and tyrannical Strike

Teams are the defaults, then the community policing initiatives show aberrations that the viewers consider in contrast to familiar tropes. All these methods show the gaps in which some members of society are left to fall through the cracks even in seemingly progressive plans.

The Wire recognizes the irreducible complexity in every problem and resists offering simple solutions based on an arbitrary moral standard. David Simon has been a vocal advocate against drug prohibition, and yet the show does not offer liberalized drug use as a simple solution to the problem.⁶⁰ In Season 3, the pressure from the police administration to improve crime statistics from all the districts in Baltimore leads the Western district's Police Major Howard 'Bunny' Colvin to decriminalize drugs in a small area of his precinct. Since drug policy enforcement took up a lot of police time without leading to any improvements in the situation, Colvin decides to de-emphasize drug-related arrests and reallocate his officers to handle more important or "real" police cases. His "brown paper bag" strategy—dubbed "Hamsterdam" by the drug-dealers—seems like a more grounded take on zany procedural set-ups seen in other TV crime shows, as it uses an extraordinary and fantastical measure to handle a serious problem.⁶¹ However, instead of merely showing the benefits of his strategy, *The Wire* also presents the problems of enforcing and managing a controlled zone of liberal drug use. While it highlights Colvin's attempt at shifting attitudes towards drug use in society, it also points out that the impact of the drug trade on civilians is not reduced, merely redistributed.

Colvin's policy is not without its merits, as it creates a space where health department workers can access drug users easily and help them in recovery or at least, promote the practice

⁶⁰ See "David Simon: 'I don't want anybody in jail for using drugs'" interview by Andrew Anthony, 2013.

⁶¹ Colvin compares his strategy to the unspoken agreement between police and public in the matter of alcohol consumption in public places. When someone drinks an alcoholic beverage in public, as long as the container is hidden—usually by a brown paper bag—the police will ignore the norm violation unless the drinker causes trouble.

of safe use of drugs. The contained space is useful to facilitate needle and syringe exchanges to prevent drug users from further harming themselves and others.⁶² While his superiors are only concerned with crime statistics, Colvin's methods have a real and positive impact in the community. His actions reflect the policy of former Baltimore mayor Kurt Schmoke who has urged politicians to stop thinking of drugs as a law and order issue and address it as a public health issue. As law professor David Sklansky notes, "*The Wire* aims less for verisimilitude and more than for the power of myth." ("What *The Wire* Gets Right" 473). However, unlike other shows like *Bull* (CBS, 2016–) or *The Blacklist* (NBC, 2013–) where an interesting inversion serves as a setting for other narratives, this event is not a static premise in *The Wire*. When drug users are herded together in a small area, they create problems for those already residing there. The police officers themselves are not used to the idea of tolerating drug sales, to the point that they find it difficult to follow their captain's orders. Most of all, some users become more dependent due to the easy access to drugs. In a way, the improvement of policing in the rest of the district comes at the cost of the drug users as well as their immediate neighbors. The viewers become uncomfortable with his strategy when we encounter an aged resident who suddenly discovers that her neighborhood has been condemned to be a free zone for drug fiends. Also, Colvin's actions alert viewers to consider the extraordinary suspension of the law, reflecting the deeply authoritarian structure of police power. While his motives were positive, his unquestioned power could have been used to justify any extreme action. The show condemns the stagnant public administration that will not allow itself to break free of existing practices, but it also does

⁶² The Needle Exchange Program (NEP) is a social service that allows drug users to get clean needles for free. While it does not lower drug use, it reduces the risk of cross contamination.

not overlook the consequences of Colvin's willful action. The ambivalent results of Colvin's actions leave viewers uncertain about their allegiance to his policy.

Colvin echoes David Simon's criticism against the overemphasis on measurable statistical crime reduction by police departments, which may strengthen their profile but contribute little to making the streets safer.⁶³ By highlighting the city officials' outrage over Colvin's actions despite their recognizing the value of his strategy, *The Wire* demonstrates that the visceral reaction to drug-use as a crime stems from a moral perspective rather than a legal one. This provocative view pits the viewers' priorities of narrative enjoyment and critical evaluation against each other, as they have hitherto been aligned to sympathize with both drug dealers who are trying to make their quota of sales and the police with their quota of arrests. Colvin's actions are a response to the pressure from the city administration which does not want to implement any long-term reforms that could hurt its image as tough on drugs. The show comments on the collusion between the police and civil administrations of Baltimore, as they both seek high media visibility and recognition of the "dope on the table" image (1.11 and 5.10) rather than trying to reduce the effects of drugs in communities. By drawing attention to the subtle ways in which policy decisions fail to resonate with social problems, *The Wire* breaks down the simplistic procedural trope in favor of social commentary. In this way, the show uses a typical TV trope to offer a pressing sociological inquiry into the legitimacy of the drug war, calling viewers to rethink their perspectives about crime and punishment.

The Shield presents two important moments where community-wide policing policy have consequences that disrupt the viewers' engagement with the text. By the end of Season 1,

⁶³ Besides being illegal, arrest quotas have been shown to have adverse effects seen through police targeting racial minorities as well as "manufacturing illegality" (Ossei-Owusu, "Race and the Tragedy of Quota-Based Policing").

Assistant Chief Ben Gilroy is revealed to have suppressed police patrolling in a specific neighborhood in order to drive down the property value and assist him in his real estate racket. This deliberate negligence of a neighborhood with a higher concentration of African Americans has terrifying consequences, precipitating in an unsolved double-murder of two young women. The police take a long time to respond to the emergency call due to the reduced police presence in the area. Unlike *The Wire*, where personnel problems take place due to staff shortage or routine mistakes, it is Gilroy's direct actions that cause poor policing.⁶⁴ His actions drive an antagonistic wedge between the police and the community, and the events quickly spiral out of control when cops are lured with emergency calls and killed as revenge. While the situation is diffused when the murders are solved, the viewers get a glimpse of the scope of police power in the community, where entire neighborhoods can vanish from a patrol schedule without any major consequences. The show uses Gilroy's policy decision to subtly comment about how race also divides the police and the people. The viewers are shocked that an entire neighborhood could be neglected by the whims of one corrupt cop. The narrative promise which justified police violence in exchange for greater safety for the public is disrupted by this failure.

Gilroy's actions also highlight how the racial dimension of policing serves as a persistent backdrop in *The Shield*. Gilroy's strategy is implied to have worked successfully because the ignored neighborhood is made up of black residents. The community backlash to the double-murders remind the viewers of the many conflicts between police and African American protestors over the years. The troubling neglect and equally worrying targeting of African American citizens by the police are often brushed aside in the narrative order of the show. The

⁶⁴ This is also indicative of the wider distinction between the two shows in their approaches, as *The Shield* is more concerned with individual personnel and their actions while *The Wire* takes a bird's eye view of the entire city administration.

viewers encounter the show in the context of the long-standing combative attitude of LAPD. Former Police Chief Daryl Gates notes that the mindset during his tenure between 1978 and 1992 was “very aggressive” as the police “went out every single night trying to stop crime before it happened, trying to take people off the street that they believed were involved in crime... [making them] a proactive department” (interview with *PBS Frontline*). The resulting racialized police scrutiny is brushed off as an inevitable and unimportant consequence of Gates’ proactive and preemptive police strategy. The dissonance between LAPD claiming to be one the best police departments in the world and the series of investigations and commissions following the numerous allegations of excessive force and racial profiling reveals that harsh and disproportionate treatment of minorities often draws police indifference.

The Shield frames other controversial community-wide policing initiatives through an examination of its effects on all members of the society. In Season 4, the newly appointed Captain Monica Rawling tries to combat the district’s drug problem by targeting the resources at the disposal of the gangs to ensure that their families are comfortable, namely their assets and property. However, Rawling’s civil assets forfeiture policy targets minority communities, leading backlash from the community and her own officers.⁶⁵ Rawling’s perspective does not consider the racial implications of her actions, as she only engages with the effectiveness of her actions in punishing drug dealers. Rawling does not take responsibility for the splash damage she causes; the show, however, holds her accountable by presenting how other members of the neighborhood suffer because of this heavy-handed policy. While *The Shield* does not portray Rawling as a racist, her indifference is scrutinized as her policies affect the vulnerable in the

⁶⁵ Only Julien Lowe and Claudette Wymys, two black officers, speak up against Monica Rawling’s civil assets forfeiture policy without worrying about their own position. Their concerns are dismissed by showing the effectiveness of the policy as proof of its legitimacy.

community.⁶⁶ Concepción Cascajosa Virino notes that Rawling attempts to reform the community, but “she receives only criticism from the citizens she is ostensibly seeking to protect” (“The Derivation of a Television Crime Drama” 22).

Rawling’s indifference is indicative of the privileged attitude that makes her blind to the significance of race in her policing. Her method disenfranchises an already vulnerable community and renders people homeless even when they have not done anything wrong themselves. In particular, Rawling’s police disproportionately affects African Americans and other minorities who do not have the same degree of protection afforded by financial acumen. The viewers are conflicted about her position, as she is a fair cop who, unlike the Strike Team, would not cut corners to enrich herself. However, her blatant disregard for the constitutional limits of the fourth amendment shows a ruthless side to the otherwise fair-minded captain. She declares that the forfeiture policy would enable the police to “distinguish between the criminals and the citizens.” She wants to use the funds generated for social welfare programs that contribute to the communities plagued by the drug trade. She fails to notice that her policy would render her quite unpopular with the community as well, as she continues to believe that firing her would cause outrage in the community. Her agenda seems to vary from episode to episode, as the viewers are still uncertain about her relational dynamics with the rest of the precinct, especially Mackey. Eventually, we are called to reflect on her misguided attitude which attempts to solve problems arising from the racial divide with heavy-handed policies.

Rawling’s approaches at the personal and policy level demonstrate the perspective that abuse of power will be tolerated when it achieves the right outcome. This variation within the

⁶⁶ Even when it addresses race, TV shows hesitate to present a truly racist character as a sympathetic figure. Besides the political implications, race does not generate further narrative interest since the racism is always unjustifiable. A meaningful analysis of race is not possible when the narrative needs to be surprising.

theme of authoritarian policing helps the viewer to consider which kinds of exceptionalism they are willing to tolerate. In Rawling's view, jail time alone is no longer an adequate deterrent to criminals, and her policy shows the criminals that their actions affect their own families and the community at large. She believes that the assets-forfeiture will deprive criminals of the comforts and lifestyle afforded by their crime. When questioned about the defenseless poor who will not be able to contest the seized assets in court, she chillingly replies "I'm not worried about pissing off dealers because we swiped their pimp rides. We're gonna target the right people" (4.2, "Grave"). Viewers recognize that she does not see past the narrow scope of criminality that will be curbed due to the seizures, as the show foregrounds the innocent lives affected by her policy.⁶⁷ Nor does she recognize that she indirectly invests the power of deciding which is the right outcome and who are the right targets exclusively with the police.

Rawling's philosophy draws from her pragmatic experiences as a street cop where she is trained to pragmatically suspend her judgment based on principles and evaluate them for their utility. She is a flawed human being whose personal prejudices strongly influence her discretion and perspective of using police power. Ultimately, she is fired when she goes behind the police administration and the DEA by breaking a deal which would have provided total immunity to a cop killer, Antwon Mitchell, in exchange for intelligence that would have brought down a Salvadorian drug cartel. A review written by Grant Nebel observes that "getting into fights with federal agencies poses a greater risk to police officers' careers than seizing the assets of citizens" ("Ain't That a Shame," *The Solute*). At this moment, she forsakes her pragmatism in favor of a more compelling motive, vengeance for the two police officers murdered at the behest of

⁶⁷ Besides a drug-dealer's old mother who is left homeless due to a seizure, Rawling also shuts down a foster home which leaves four children without care. When confronted about it, she retorts, "You think it's about shutting down one home? This system fails thousands of kids every year. This is about not putting up with this shit anymore" (4.13, "Ain't That A Shame"). Rawling effectively excuses herself by shifting the blame to the entire system.

Mitchell. The way her priorities shift on a whim reveal the real problem with her community-wide policy—both are fallible because of the vast discretionary powers vested with authorities with limited information and a short time to act upon it. At a textual level, like Forrest Whitaker who played Jon Kavanaugh, Glenn Close, a movie star playing a recurring role on a small cable show as Monica Rawling, is expected to be a limited engagement. The viewers' awareness of this structural limitation interrupts the immersive experience of the text, as they must reckon with the eventuality of her character's departure in a limited span of episodes. Viewers are positioned to see Rawling's actions, no matter how significant, as temporary and secondary to the more enduring code of Mackey and his team.

While both *The Wire* and *The Shield* frame the community-wide policy as the idea of an individual, *The Shield* does not separate the political and ideological premise from the lived experiences of the characters who come up with the ideas. Rawling's methods are shown to work to a certain extent, and when they fail, the show does not write it up to social or moral reasons but rather because her goals are no longer aligned with those in power. Similar contradictions are seen in characters like Vic Mackey and David Aceveda, whose political and ethical positions are not always resonant with their personal actions. On the other hand, *Hamsterdam* folds when the city administration is unable to justify a radical approach to the wider community despite its positive effects. In both cases, the social policies are examined for both their merits and their problems, allowing the viewers to consider the trade-offs to be made at the policy level as well as the way perception trumps utility. The serialized narrative builds on the viewers' ability to look forward to the way narrative challenges are resolved as well as follow the consequences for the various characters who risk their well-being or career in order to achieve these ends. The

viewers' relationship with the text is strengthened when they discuss, revisit, and evaluate the innovative police policies on display over a sustained period of time.

Self-Reflexivity and Character Evolution

The serialized nature of the text also makes use of the cross-episode memory and makes viewers more invested in the longer and murkier careers of these cops through narratives of serial crime. The episodic structure and the set frequency of the episodes makes the TV medium ideally suited to discuss the way serial crimes are shaped by the context of viewing. *The Wire* does not use extralegal practices of police merely as a plot-device, but also as a method to further scrutinize the consequences of such actions. *The Wire* routinely redeploys, subverts and, as in the case of the serial killer plot, challenges the effectiveness of TV conventions by presenting the aftermath and long-term consequences of the method. Blanchet and Vaage and Robert observe that besides the narrative tropes of familiarity and surprise, TV seriality itself is an essential aspect of our alignment as it creates a shared history between the characters and the viewers.⁶⁸ By drawing out narrative fulfillment across episodes and seasons, *The Wire's* seriality causes viewers to see both the skills and limitations of its characters.

In Season 5, *The Wire* highlights the limits using a fictional program to deliver procedural justice when detective Jimmy McNulty tries to circumvent bureaucratic hurdles in the police department by creating a spectacular false case to generate resources to carry out a real but less glamorous investigation. At first, this story arc seems like a typical big finale narrative as it converges on Marlo Stanfield, the new primary antagonist who will “do anything to climb the

⁶⁸ In the essay, “Don, Peggy, and Other Fictional Friends?” Blanchet and Vaage argue that the para-social engagement of viewers with TV characters can be considered similar to friendship.

ranks of Baltimore's drug game and build his reputation" (Mittel, *Complex TV* 192), is a ruthless version of his predecessors. When the Major Crimes Unit is rendered ineffective by a severe budget-cut, McNulty capitalizes on the public outrage whipped up by a fictional serial killer, and secretly diverting allocated resources towards Stanfield, a real serial killer, whose case ironically is about to be dropped from the investigation due to lack of viable leads, mix-ups and conflicts over jurisdiction.⁶⁹ However, *The Wire* upends the viewers' familiarity with the genre by denying the closure offered in other narratives, by demonstrating that McNulty's plan was always doomed to fail, and there is no one case that could effectively solve all of a city's problems.

The Wire's serial killer plot shows McNulty's escalating obsession across the seasons as he progressively hedges his sense of self-worth to the case. McNulty's narrative journey portrays him becoming bitter and disillusioned with the police department. Although he seems to conform to the trope of a maverick cop who battles alcoholism and a god complex at the beginning of the show, his obsession markedly grows more desperate over the years. In Season 5, when McNulty and his partner Bunk Moreland investigate a homeless person's death, McNulty hatches a scheme by connecting it to a previous murder and inventing the presence of a serial killer. McNulty's ruse typifies the convoluted procedural premise that *The Wire* had always stayed away from. McNulty's partner—not to mention the viewers—is unimpressed when he discovers that McNulty is planting false evidence by tying red ribbons on the homeless victims and using dentures to inflict post-mortem bite wounds to evoke media interest in a chimerical serial killer and divert funds back to the department to continue with their ongoing investigation of Stanfield,

⁶⁹ Besides the repeated frustrations caused by the police and city administration, one of the biggest drug suppliers, The Greek, is let off the hook for being a confidential informant for the FBI.

whose organization has killed at least 22 people. His fabrications have the desired effects as top police and public administration officials, including Baltimore's mayor, Tommy Carcetti, scramble to make grand gestures of protecting the city's "weakest and most vulnerable" (5.6, "The Dickensian Aspect"). The viewers cannot help but get caught up in a moment of genuine compassion as the mayor appeals for immediate action. However, without missing a beat, the narrative exposes that the mayor hopes to gain political mileage from his rousing speech. Thus, the show's subtle gesture towards Carcetti's earlier two-facedness during his "Tough on Crime" speech from the episode "Mission Accomplished" (3.12)—where he uses evocative rhetoric to stir a crowd without following it up with action—alerts us to remain distrustful of the politician.

McNulty's transformation from a frustrated but rule-abiding police officer into a stereotypical maverick was one the most widely criticized plotlines of *The Wire*. Many critics were baffled by the unrealistic suspension of disbelief demanded by this storyline. In a column dedicated to TV retrospectives titled *Jump the Shark*,⁷⁰ critic Phil Hoad writes that "the series [teeters] on the edge of the trap over-extended TV shows often fall into, indulging crowd-pleasing characters"⁷¹ ("When good TV goes bad: how *The Wire* lost its spark"). Mittell's kinder reading suggests that "*The Wire*'s final season fell short of its earlier heights primarily because it forsook its full commitment to realist storytelling" (*Complex TV* 221). However, a closer look reveals that far from becoming a crowd-pleasing character, McNulty is alienated from the viewers not due to his misguided attempts at trying to save an entire city with one case, but due to his unwillingness to learn from his past mistakes. Throughout the show, other characters mock McNulty's self-perception as a hero-cop. Despite that, he forgets the lesson that his colleague

⁷⁰ The title alludes to "when the Fonz jumped the shark in *Happy Days*," a phrase used to remark the moment when TV shows start deteriorating.

⁷¹ Other critical voices from around the time of the show's telecast were similar, as evidenced by the telling title of the *Washington City Paper*'s review that simply asks, "What Happened to Our Show?"

and friend Lester Freamon tries to teach him—a lesson that Freamon also seems to forget when he colludes with McNulty for the serial killer plot—that no matter how big the case, the job will not save him (3.9). The show critiques McNulty’s attempt to “save” the police department because his actions undermine his proclaimed code of police ethics.

Instead of glorifying McNulty’s actions, the show draws attention to the unintended casualties to his rash actions. McNulty imagines himself as a crusading hero when he uses the extra resources afforded to him to help an ongoing investigation that was gutted due to deep cuts in the police budget. The show highlights his obliviousness to the effect his demands have had on limited police resources. Initially, the consequences are minor as he contends with a few disgruntled officers who do not get what they want. As his fabrication becomes more elaborate, the negative effects also grow, as detective Kima Greggs demonstrably wastes her time researching profiles for a serial killer who does not exist. McNulty realizes his mistake when he finds out that she had set aside a shooting with three victims to focus on the serial killer case. The serial killer plot is not offered as a remedy to crime, it highlights the competing needs within a police department that cannot be met equally. McNulty’s meddling has impeded a case which ironically would have had significant consequences to the Marlo Stanfield drug enterprise—the same organization that McNulty wanted to investigate in the first place. Effectively, the narrative does not reduce *The Wire* to the “McNulty Show” as Phil Hoad calls it, but rather examines the nuanced and interlinking machinations within a police department. McNulty’s transformation offers viewers some critical insight into the hopelessly self-serving bureaucracy of the city administration.

Lester Freamon’s entanglement in the serial killer plot is more striking to the viewers, considering how he was always characterized as strictly adhering to procedure throughout the

series. Freamon's participation in McNulty's scheme further frames their action as the last resort to carry on with their duty. In contrast to McNulty's aggressively personal approach to crime-solving, Freamon is portrayed as someone who is interested only in the minutiae of a case. Even when resorting to the use of illegal wiretaps, Freamon does not allow the desired outcomes to distract him from the data he needs to collect. Unlike McNulty, Freamon engages with surveillance procedure as a puzzle which needs to be solved; he never sees himself as a law-giving authority. In his perspective, while he carries out an essential function of a police officer—he does not extend his role from an enforcer of the law to that of an interpreter and adjudicator of the law. Freamon's attention to the intricacies of the case is a part of his due diligence. He is also resigned to the fact that procedure can always be suspended by those who have the power to do so. He is eventually driven to break the law to continue his investigation when he is stunned by the irony of a mayor who was elected on a law and order platform cutting funding for active police investigations. Instead of justifying Freamon's extralegal response or attacking it as an unethical strategy, *The Wire* frames it in the context of a failing justice system.

This narrative mode is not new to the world of *The Wire*, as it uses denial of character goals to interrupt the viewers' relationship with the text. The Major Crimes Unit's repeated failures throughout the show present the limitations placed on police procedures. The Unit's attempt at investigating the nexus between City Hall and the drug-trade is prohibited by higher-ups who allow state senator Clay Davis' aide to be released when caught with unaccounted drug money (1.8). Similarly, the intelligence gathered through the wiretap is wasted in a quick but highly visible drug bust, which only leads to street-level arrests while rendering the wiretap useless. The investigation on the Marlo Stanfield organization is also similarly abandoned under the ineffective leadership of Charles Marimow, who also favors a quick drug bust instead of an

extended wiretap. Major Colvin's controlled legalization of drugs in his district is thwarted by a statistics-driven approach to policing that does not distinguish between drug users and hardened criminals. In all these cases, the show seems to insinuate that procedural ineffectiveness is not just due to corruption or misconduct because of the nature of policing itself. While these frustrations contextualize the serial killer plot, it is not presented as an acceptable law enforcement strategy, but as an inevitable result of institutional stubbornness. While the viewers were previously aligned with McNulty, his actions are now characterized as erratic and unacceptable, and he is opposed by other characters like Bunk Moreland and Kima Greggs who are shown to have more integrity. Moreland even runs a successful parallel investigation without underhanded tactics, while McNulty's wiretap is ironically rendered useless when Stanfield's lawyer leverages on its questionable legality to secure a good deal for his client.

By drawing parallels between the police and the media, *The Wire* exposes how two institutions which should ideally protect public interest often end up caring more about their own success. Jimmy McNulty's ill-hatched serial killer plot enables journalist Scott Templeton to discard his journalistic integrity to further his career.⁷² The serial killer plot is a cynical narrative strategy which exposes the self-serving nature of those who prey on the anxieties of the public rather than addressing deep-rooted systemic problems. Even the mayor inadvertently fuels the plot, using the case to promote himself as a gubernatorial candidate. *The Wire's* adoption of the serial killer plot exposes the collusion between the police, the media and the City Hall to avoid larger social issues in favor of sensational headlines. All of them believe that their solution is the best one—catching the serial killer (or Marlo Stanfield in McNulty's case) or embellishing a

⁷² The villainous Templeton is seen as a result of Simon's disenchantment with "intellectual fraud and prize lust [that made him realize] whatever he loved at *The Baltimore Sun* was disappearing" (*Homicide* 632).

story to make it award-worthy instead of reporting it—as it grants them a sense of accomplishment without acknowledging the larger failures of their system. Ultimately, viewers who expect the show to have a happy or heroic ending, despite having witnessed the repetitive and cyclical nature of procedural failure, have their expectations thwarted when the primary targets of the wiretap—Avon Barksdale and Marlo Stanfield—escape with lighter sentences, not because the evidence was invalid, but because the system of law enforcement is compromised.

The Shield uses the serial killer plot as a recurring serial trope to illustrate the limits and consequences of crimes on the crime-solvers. Serial killer narratives showcase the protagonists' intelligence and skills by outsmarting someone who has deployed their own intelligence for evil. However, *The Shield* subverts viewers' anticipation of the trope, as serial killers are used to check the ego and destabilize the notion of police expertise. Over the course of the seven seasons and through four serial criminals, Detective Dutch Wagenbach—the intellectual antithesis to the central protagonist Vic Mackey's brutality—expands his policing method through failure and self-reflection. TV's seriality allows viewers to dwell on Dutch's limitations as a detective when he translates his theories into the real world. He believes that the criminal's psychological profile could help identify them, while Mackey and his team prefer street-level detective work to track leads. It seems as if the show uses the cerebral Dutch as a poor contrast to the effectiveness of Mackey's methods.⁷³ However, these attributes are not used to weaken Dutch, as his methods are shown to work with the precision of a scalpel in contrast to Mackey's hammer.⁷⁴ Nor does the show present him as the unlikely hero who is able to solve every serial crime he encounters.

Instead, Dutch's encounters with serial crimes become a way of exploring the emotional cost of

⁷³ Dutch's unreciprocated affection for his colleague Danny Sofer and her preference for the already-married Mackey further contrasts them.

⁷⁴ The very-capable Captain Claudette Wymms calls Dutch her "best detective" in the face of an important case where a fellow officer is murdered.

policing, shown through the intimate experience with the killers brought about by these investigations.

By allowing the viewers to experience Dutch's vulnerabilities from the perspective of a serial killer, *The Shield* highlights the heavy toll that the job takes on detectives. When two murder investigations seem to have similarities, Dutch suspects that the crimes could be connected. When a garage owner, Sean Taylor is first found masturbating in an alley near a murder site 30 minutes from his home, Dutch brings him in for questioning. During the interrogation, Dutch's line of questioning is built mostly around his theories, which draw the ire of the other police officers. The situation becomes worse for Dutch when the suspect Taylor draws up a profile to mock the detective's intelligence, characterizing him as someone who "craves respect. Fantasizes about being well-liked yet shows no outward manifestation of his low self-esteem. Feels ignored, unappreciated. Inadequate with women" (1.10, "Dragonchasers"). Taylor's attack on Dutch's psychological profile reveals that he sees himself as an intellectual superior to the detective. Dutch endures the mockery which is witnessed by all the other police officers in the precinct. The officers' disdain for Dutch's intellectualism and approach to crime-solving as a puzzle is palpable. These conditions set up Dutch's triumph as the viewers are thrilled with the intellectual contest between the two.

The moment of comeuppance is delivered when Dutch reveals that he had delayed Taylor enough to gather evidence against him. He tells Taylor that he "had the chance to leave earlier. Instead [he] decided to stick around and show off." By carefully piecing together evidence from the crime-scene and building a psychological profile, Dutch had obtained a warrant for the search of Taylor's aunt's residence and found two more bodies. Taylor's egotistic desire to show off makes him admit to a total of 23 murders and claims that his crimes made him special, to

which Dutch retorts, “If you’re so special how come a lowly civil servant like me just caught you?” The scene is played out as a dramatic success for Dutch and he gets the recognition he desires from his colleagues, including Mackey. However, underlying the heroic flourish, *The Shield* affirms that this was an excruciating task for someone who “just liked solving puzzles.” After he exits the room, Dutch makes polite conversation to the congratulatory messages before retreating to his car where he cries. Taylor is Dutch’s foil, as he matches the detective’s analytical process and erodes his pride. The serial killer trope is subverted when the only way of outsmarting Taylor is to allow him to undermine the detective, blurring the line between a tactic and enduring assault on his own weaknesses. Most importantly, the episode highlights how Dutch succeeds through his diligent approach to solving the case through police enquiry rather than his intellectual ability alone.

Over the course of the series, viewers witness meaningful growth in Dutch as a serial-crime expert. In Season 3, Dutch successfully recognizes a pattern in a series of rapes committed against elderly women. Dutch tries to leverage media attention to draw out the criminal, dubbed the “cuddler” due to his tendency to hold his victims after the assault, by calling him impotent and challenging him on TV (3.10 “What Power is...”). This ploy fails as the “cuddler” commits his first murder due to Dutch provocation. The serial crime narrative is not resolved even after the criminal, William Faulks, is caught because he manipulates the detective into examining his own tendencies. When Faulks tells Dutch that he commits his actions to feel the power of taking a life, the detective’s insecurities are explored further as he strangles a stray cat to experience the very same thing. For the viewers, the significance is unmistakable, as the toll that these cases take on the police is not something that they are equipped to handle. As crime author James Ellroy points out, “the public has no idea what justice costs the men who perform it” (*White Jazz*

36). The parallel between Faulks and Taylor are striking, as they both consider themselves special because of their desire for murder. Both serial criminals think themselves as above the law and intellectually superior to the detectives and treat crime as a game. This idea is affirmed in the other two serial criminals featured in the show as well.

The third serial killer encounter demonstrates the limits of legal procedure, as the suspect cannot be apprehended when the police do not have evidence for his crimes. Kleavon Gardner, a notorious serial killer, evades the law due to insufficient evidence and becomes an elusive figure during the final four seasons of the show. Gardner succeeds in evading arrest despite a lengthy interrogation sequence due to the lack of evidence. Later, when there is suspected activity in his area, Dutch and his partner Claudette Wyms accuse him of his sister's murder. This accusation provokes Gardner to commit another murder to send a message to the detectives. Later, when confronted with false evidence of his sister's death, Gardner breaks down, and in an emotional state, he blurts out that he never saw the other women as people, unlike his sister. This set-up seems like a classic "one that got away" narrative, where a villain who almost makes his escape falls prey to the cops in the final moment. The viewers notice how subtle changes in approaching serial criminals are due to the cumulative experiences gathered by the detectives over time.

The viewers' knowledge of Dutch's skills are subverted with Lloyd Denton, who is not yet a serial killer, but his behavior makes Dutch believe that he could become one. Denton is still a teenager when he fatally shoots an intruder in self-defense. Dutch suspects that the shooting was not an accident because the person who was shot was in the same high school as Denton. Dutch uses his interrogation tactics to little avail, and he is called out on the questionable legality of his actions, as Denton is still a teenager. Dutch later befriends Lloyd's mother, Rita Denton, with the intention of keeping an eye on him. The viewers see Dutch's success with Rita as an

inversion of his usual lack of success with women. The viewers recognize that he has exceeded the ethical norms of police behavior by getting too close to the case. The tables are turned on Dutch when Lloyd returns to the police precinct and mentions that his mother is missing, insinuating that Dutch might have had something to do with her disappearance. Surprisingly, the narrative is not concluded by the end of the series, as Rita is still missing and Lloyd, while under suspicion, is not held responsible for her disappearance. Not only is this ambiguity unusual in a police drama, but the casual way in which Dutch accepts the ambiguity reflects a maturation in his crime-fighting tendencies.

Lorna Jowett writes that “*The Shield* has shown enough of the system’s flaws for viewers to know that the kind of prevention Dutch Wagenbach seeks may not be possible” (“Fitting the Profile” 85). A more sobering realization also occurs, as Dutch recognizes that in his attempt at preemptively targeting Lloyd, Dutch might have triggered Lloyd’s most recent actions instead of preventing him from becoming a serial killer. The parallels between the “cuddler” and Lloyd are remarkable, as they both are seeking greater power. As if to acknowledge the convergence of the different serial killer plots and their effects on Dutch, he consults with Kleavon Gardner on handling Lloyd. Gardner affirms Dutch’s suspicions and the detective seems to find validation in that, without recognizing the problem of treating Gardner’s assessment as an acceptable way of supporting his theory. In this way, the show uses the serial killer trope as a way of developing character through an exploration of their vulnerabilities. The serial killer trope keeps returning in *The Shield*, but instead of positioning it as triggers for the eventual narrative victories enjoyed by the protagonists, it is used to question the learning and presumption that characters develop about serial killers. The show undoes the accepted serial killer plot trajectory by offering a different

perspective of experiencing the motivations instead of reducing the arc to a narrative puzzle about simply finding the serial killer.

Between Narrative Pleasure and Criticism

Both shows disrupt the viewing experience by drawing on and subverting established narrative conventions. TV narratives suspend the distance between necessary and excessive force by making sure that the stakes always remain clear, simple, and unmistakable for the viewers. In police dramas, extralegal force and methods are always justified as inevitable methods, because every norm violation is revealed to have prevented something more disastrous. TV police dramas offer compensatory justice that placates the audience's outrage at the extralegal actions of their protagonists. Although the fictional aspect of the narrative masks this tension when it is essential to the plot, the very same fictionality draws viewers' attention to the institutional failures represented by the failure of procedure and enable us to question the disproportionate power invested in state institutions. David Skalansky's observation about *The Wire* helps us understand the interrogative function that TV texts perform. He says,

[The usual way of thinking about criminal justice]—seen as negotiating between binary tensions: due process vs crime control, paramilitary law enforcement vs community policing, majority vs minority interests... [But *The Wire*] repeatedly pushes against that way of thinking, not because it suggests that the tensions do not exist, but because picturing them as neat dualities is hopelessly oversimplified. ("What *The Wire* Gets Right" 476).

Shows like *The Wire* do not stop with presenting a personal code in place of the rule of law; they also examine the fragility of such a code. Their self-reflexive turn builds on the viewers' serial memory and presents the different ways in which flawed characters use and abuse a personal code of responsibility.

Both *The Wire* and *The Shield* examine the narrative pleasures of police behavior. Instead of using crime narratives to offer extralegal punishment as poetic justice, these shows call viewers to examine how narrative tropes challenge the authority and legitimacy of characters in positions of power. As Attridge notes, traumatic and intense textual experiences evince complex emotions which combine "horror and fascination, repulsion and attraction, dismay and pleasure" (*The Work of Literature* 268). By presenting the tension between viewers' enjoyment and the critical evaluation, these texts evoke complex emotions. The fiction of a vigilante's code reveals characters as merely acting out of self-interest more so than any ideological drive. This ironically draws a parallel between characters who abandon their moral positions and viewers who seek to wrangle their moral perspectives to conveniently justify their allegiance to such characters. Instead of offering extralegal entanglements as necessary actions in the pursuit of law enforcement, these shows question the consistency of the characters' code of ethics and expose their hypocrisy. Eschewing the excuse of broken-down institutions from unlawful policing, these shows reiterate the virtue of diligent policing as the only responsible action that an individual can take against an indifferent system. *The Wire's* creator David Simon contends that morality is a shameless solution when offered to an underclass that faces a systematic decimation of their world. Instead, he seeks for a more radical response to handling social crises. In *The Wire* and *The Shield*, personal failures are presented as an indictment of systemic and structural failures that have allowed the unchecked growth of corruption and social degradation.

In its assessment of police behavior, *The Wire* challenges the basis of police power by wresting away the legitimacy of the code dictated by individual police officers. While many TV programs use the social or professional roles of a character to affirm or contradict stereotypical moral behavior, *The Wire* questions the moral certainty founded on a rigid system of principles and operations. Similarly, *The Shield* offers a ruthless totalitarian protagonist and seems to endorse his exceptional methods. However, as the narrative progresses, it turns into a critique of his violent methods that deactivate the law instead of enforcing it. Despite their authorization of police authority, both address the unresolvable nature of the problems that are raised in the shows, as narrative elements are not simply resolved and restored to a status quo. Instead, these shows examine the values and priorities of our society, through a subversion of the very compact that the viewers initially make with exceptional police methods. At the end of *The Wire* and *The Shield*, the problems raised at the beginning remain unresolved despite the characters' best efforts to drive towards satisfying narrative conclusions. Such terse endings resist the policing conventions expected from conventional police dramas.

Chapter 6: Conclusion: Thinking Through TV

We are here to say to the white men that we no longer will let them use clubs on us in dark corners. We're going to make them do it in the glaring light of television.

- Martin Luther King Jr. at Montgomery County courthouse, 1965 (qtd. in Garrow 111).

American Civil Rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. saw TV as a national stage for the theatre of justice and was among the most effective users of the medium. By calling for televised attention of racial violence, King staged a confrontation for the white audience to recognize the brutal power structures that they accepted as the norm. Television was spoken of as the “chosen instrument of the revolution”⁷⁵ as King’s speeches and important Civil Rights protests were televised across the United States. King’s polarizing presence on TV created a sense of urgency to the Civil Rights movement by broadcasting racial injustices for the nation to witness. Besides this directly political function, King also understood that popular culture could subtly push boundaries in promoting racial representation and urged the nation to rethink its attitudes through the popular image.⁷⁶

Indeed, TV was ahead of the rest of the nation in representation and integration, as *The Buddy Deane Show* (1957–64 WJZ-TV Baltimore) was one of the first shows to feature black dancers on a weekly basis, and even featured an integrated episode in 1963.⁷⁷ US Congressman and civil rights activist John Lewis reiterates the power of TV when he succinctly notes, “If it

⁷⁵ Bill Monroe, quoted. in Alexis Madrigal’s “When the Revolution was Televised.”

⁷⁶ Nichelle Nichols continued in her role as Lieutenant Nyota Uhura in *Star Trek* on King’s insistence. (Ohlheiser, “How Martin Luther King Jr. convinced”).

⁷⁷ Following the integrated episode, the channel faced many threats causing the show to be cancelled (see Goldstein, “On Hairspray’s 25th anniversary”). *Hairspray* the musical (1988, 2007) offers a more optimistic ending as *Buddy Deane Show*’s fictional analogue *The Corny Collins Show* is declared as integrated to applause and adulation.

hadn't been for the media... the civil rights movement would have been like a bird without wings, a choir without a song” (*The Race Beat* 407). This reiterates TV’s potential for positive change, as it has the soft power to cultivate viewer alignment and shift attitudes about sensitive issues over time. It disrupts the standard narrative in seemingly innocuous ways, heralding change by asking viewers to confront the problems in the narrative world. Historically, TV has been perceived as many things, such as a domestic feature, entertainment, a mirror to society. By approaching TV as a text—not in the sense of a completed idea but more in terms of an open work which morphs and evolves with time—adds to the conversation because there is no fixed truth or one universal experience of the TV show.

TV’s potential for positive social change by casting injustice and social problems under the “glaring light,” is tested when its power is used to generate and circulate stereotypical images that could suppress certain narratives. The 1991 case of Rodney King beating shows how TV images both enrage and deactivate viewer response to real-world events. The video captured by George Holliday became a touchstone of public outrage against police brutality targeting minorities, evidenced by the 8,426 calls that the KTLA-TV station received after the video was telecast (Troy, “Filming Rodney King’s Beating”). The brevity and brutality of the video emphasized King’s helplessness and sent shockwaves across America. The video escalated something that was a known commodity in the African American community and provoked national debate about racial attitudes. In this sense, the Holliday video captured the source of trauma and paranoia cultivated in an entire community and the resultant visceral anger and outrage against police brutality. To this day, this event demonstrates how TV persists as the site where the public encounter images of violence in the context of color-based power structures.

TV images show their ability to highlight racial tension and injustice in society, but they also prevent people from accessing justice. Rodney King's claims were scrutinized, criticized, and endlessly debated, as technological limitations of the video obscured the perception of two most incendiary moments from the event. As Hayden White notes, "the very precision and detail of the imagistic representation of the event threw it open to a wide variety of interpretations" ("the modernist event" 23). Just before the beatings start, King raises his hands in the air and moves away from the police. King alleged that he ran because an officer threatened him by saying, "we're are going to kill you, nigger" (qtd. in Reeves, *Independent* 10 Mar. 1993). This gesture was used to distinguish between "necessary" and "excessive" force in the trial, where the attacking officers were acquitted. The video is open to interpretation because this central utterance cannot be verified by the viewers. For many TV viewers, King's actions were proof of his fear and disorientation, and the televised event became a rallying cry to combat racism. For others, when King ran towards a police officer, the action could be construed as threatening and it would warrant a swift and hostile takedown. Joost Van Loon argues that strong racial bias influenced the way in which the video was perceived in King's case, as "it was at odds with the 'reality' of policing as *doing a job*" ("Whiter Shades of Pale" 126). Oren Harari observes that the frame-by-frame analysis of the tape desensitized the jury and the audience by intellectualizing an otherwise visceral encounter ("Lessons from the Rodney King Tape" 21). The ambiguity of the image favored King's attackers in the context of his blackness. Regardless of the interpretation, the video and its circulation on TV becomes the central tool method of discussion, since they demonstrate that narratives are always constructed by the discourses surrounding them. In such cases, TV images become the sites of examining our engagement with society.

In this study, we have seen how fictional TV texts have evolved and adapted TV conventions to provoke its viewers to think about broader social concerns. Through a close analysis of key American crime drama series in the 21st century, it offers ways of thinking about the viewer-text relationship and in turn, the meaning constructed through TV seriality. By considering contemporary approaches to TV and textuality, this study offers an interdisciplinary method that draws on a variety of sources and critical thought. Then, it engages with the viewers' allegiance to the antihero and the implications of such an encounter of terrible behavior. The textual approach shows the more complicated response a viewer has to terrible behavior. It argues that TV texts construct viewer alignment and elicit competing responses from viewers' narrative pleasure and critical impulse. These narrative elements and their interplay with the viewers shape their attitudes towards policing represented by TV crime drama. Through a close analysis of the three selected texts, this study examines TV's role as a cumulative serial encounter that both inscribes the rules of different settings, as well as revealing how the rules are determined and enacted.

This study demonstrates the central role played by the temporal arrangement of the serial encounter with TV texts. As Babette Tischleder notes, TV's complexity manifests itself in "the extended narrative scope, intricacy, and open-endedness of the worlds that producers and viewers build over time" (122). The discussions in the preceding chapters delve into how viewers are alternatively drawn into and made aware of the elisions and the inadvertent gaps that occur in TV texts due to narrative priorities. In these cases, TV texts, when creatively read, provoke viewers to think about ethics, both at a personal as well as social level and the responsibility that they owe each other. By examining visual texts from an ethics that do not conform to the virtue or normative positions, this study considers the intersubjective approach

outlined by D. N. Rodowick. Continuing in the footsteps of Horace Newcomb, this study offers TV criticism which does not apologize for TV texts.

TV remains dense and complex and its life as “text” (therefore open to the network of signification) means attending to the narrative world but also considering the remainders such as production histories and its role in how the show’s message continues to change after its initial reception. This concluding chapter outlines how other non-textual aspects of TV, such as its short-term and long-term circulation and viewer response, raise critical questions about the viewers’ relationship with TV texts. These elements demonstrate that the cultural politics of the text and its production are at times more important than their stated textual claims. This chapter also comments on rationale behind the scope of the selected texts. Then, it concludes the project by proposing further areas of expansion, by outlining other viewer-text encounters that demand similar attention.

Examining Production Narratives

We must examine TV’s utility to think about society in the context of the corporate and hegemonic structures that benefit from TV texts. Attributing social significance to TV texts inevitably conflate the brand associated with the texts along with the writers, producers, and performers and equate the politics of the text with the benevolence of its makers. As noted earlier, well-received prestige drama serves as a branding exercise by lending an aura of authenticity and special significance to the companies behind them. Therefore, we must avoid endorsing dominant structures of institutional power and inadvertently aggrandizing profit-centric industrial products. By examining the production elements and testing them for

consistency against their proclaimed narrative logic, we can see the distance between the viewers' perception of a text and its political significance.

A TV drama's production narratives offer further insight for viewers about the challenges in presenting complex narrative situations. David Simon's works are known for their authentic representation of local experiences in minority-majority cities like Baltimore and New Orleans. However, when African American director Charles S. Dutton was hired to direct the HBO mini-series *The Corner* (2002), he ran into difficulties trying to ensure that not only the cast, but also the crew represented the actual demographics of Baltimore. Dutton insisted that they would not make a show about black people with an entirely white production, affirming them as the experts on all aspects of life, regardless of their lived experiences.⁷⁸ Dutton argued that "the way to impress me with your liberalism or your humanity or your honesty or your integrity where the black community is concerned is to share the damn pot" (Scott, "Who gets to tell a black story?"). Dutton's comments are reflective of the industry where minorities are largely under-represented. Structural and industrial reasons ranging from lack of trained black technicians to union laws regarding seniority made it challenging for the production to be as diverse as Baltimore, which had a 65% black population.⁷⁹ This scenario reveals that industrial limits may inadvertently restrict the way texts treat their subjects, despite the narrative's sympathetic view of their plight. While this event has little bearing on the viewers enjoyment of the narrative, it informs them how crucial production elements subtly influence industrial preferences of what gets produced and who gets cast.

⁷⁸ David Simon is very cautious to avoid depicting the ruination of a racial group through stereotypes. Simon says "The only ethic that I can find that you can hang your hat on says: Now that I have the material, how do I treat my subjects? Do I accord them all the humanity they deserve, or do I write a crude and simplistic exposé?" (Scott, "Who Gets to Tell...").

⁷⁹ Eventually, Dutton's demand was met by bringing in technicians from other cities, ironically allowing more people who did not know about the context of Baltimore to work on the show.

However, viewers are not silent participants in all such asymmetrical encounters. A production incident from the show *Homeland* illustrates how a poorly represented community could resist the totalizing narrative perpetuated in the story world. Known for its fast-paced examination of American responsibility in the Middle East, *Homeland* was also guilty of reducing Middle Eastern characters to tropes of fundamentalist terrorism. While its American characters were given a lot of depth and complex motivations, the terrorists were mostly reduced to menacing figures. During the fifth season's filming, artists were tasked to create graffiti in Arabic to represent a street in a generic Middle Eastern refugee country. In response to the arbitrary and one-sided portrayal in the show, the artists inserted phrases critical of the show, which the producers—as the artists expected—did not detect. Phrases like “*Homeland* is racist,” “This show does not represent the views of the artists” and “*Homeland* is a joke, but no one is laughing” were embedded in the text, turning the show into its own criticism.

The artists—Heba Amin, Caram Kapp, and Don Karl—published a statement saying that “it was our moment to make our point by subverting the message using the show itself” (“Arabian Street Artists bomb *Homeland*”). They wanted to draw attention to the “horror fantasy of the Middle East” perpetuated by the show which “created a chain of causality with Arabs at its beginning and its outcome—their own victims and executioners at the same time.” While this degree of viewer participation is rare, their protest demonstrates that is not impossible for a text to carry a dissenting voice unbeknownst to those creating it. These production narratives present an opportunity to examine the distance between the shows’ intention and its actual practices. Due to the secretive manner of TV production and its public circulation, these imperfect fissures in the texts are the closest we come to witnessing the process by which artistic, economic, and

political priorities come into conflict. Thus, viewers experience the uneasy compromises made in order to present a completed narrative.

The Viewer Writes Back

TV texts also become flashpoints of cultural debate when viewers respond to the thematic or stylistic choices that influence society. The viewers' response could generate critical and social aftershocks beyond the text's original scope in unexpected ways. Due to its enduring presence in popular culture, TV texts transcend their immediate narrative context and replicate themselves as culturally significant memes. In 2012, a late-night satirical TV show called *Totally Biased with W. Kamau Bell* (FX 2012–13), featured a segment by Asian-American stand-up comic Hari Kondabolu criticized the circulation of the negative stereotype of the Indian American character Apu Nahasapeemapetilon by the beloved American sitcom, *The Simpsons* (Fox 1989–). Apu ran a minimart, had an arranged marriage with a woman he had never met before and spoke with a heavy accent that Kondabolu describes as “an impression of a white guy making fun of my dad.” Kondabolu's accusations are exacerbated by the fact that the character is a stereotypical impression of an Indian by Hank Azaria, a white actor. While the show features other stereotypes as well, Kondabolu argues that the Indian American stereotype is especially damaging because of the rarity of positive representations of that segment in popular culture. Kondabolu argues that stereotyping reduces the everyday struggles of immigrants into ridiculous caricatures by dressing racial prejudice in the garb of comedy. Apu—regardless of the good

intentions of the creators or the harmless nature of the character himself—presents an important way of looking at representation in popular culture.⁸⁰

Stereotypes are not just inauthentic images circulated to limit the perception of the racial others in terms of the dominant cultural imagination. They also “justify practices and institutions” (Kellner 481) and reinforce adherence to the dominant ideology. Jannette L. Dates and Thomas A. Mascaro note that “racial images in mass media are endowed with color-coded positive and negative moral ‘features.’ When these symbols become familiar and accepted, they fuel misperceptions and facilitate misunderstandings among racial or cultural groups” (“African Americans in Film and Television” 52). In the essay about the minority representation in popular culture, they argue that “honoring minority representations may not serve the old mainstream but are reflective of the new and respecting the dignity of all citizens by paying attention to their realities, even when they are initially different from one’s own experience” (53). While some shows have always offered nuanced portrayals of minority characters, most lean on stereotypes to further the plot. As Adorno had warned us, “the more stereotypes become reified and rigid in the present set up of the culture industries, the less people are likely to change their ideas with the progress of experience” (“Television and Patterns of Mass Culture” 484). Changes in the viewers’ response to stereotypes correspond to shifting standards and perspectives of contemporary society. The rising viewer discomfort with Apu show that textual elements which communicate incongruent messages become less palatable to accept.

⁸⁰ *The Simpsons* creators have denied that Apu is a negative stereotype and call him a well-intentioned representation of the hard-working Indian American migrant. In an interview with *USA Today*, creator Matt Groening summarily dismissed the controversy over Apu saying that “it’s a time in our culture where people love to pretend they’re offended” (Keveney, “*The Simpsons* Exclusive”).

Ironically, neither Apu's actions nor the construction of the episodes directly encourage the taunting bullies or provoke the indignant critics. Apu is a mostly sympathetic figure who suffers ridicule and racial abuse with a self-awareness that should demand more understanding and less racial hatred. The unintentional effects of Apu show that a character's cultural circulation can easily overwhelm the narrative perspectives offered to the viewers. As WJT Mitchell notes, images are not passive objects that seek "image replacing words" (*What do pictures want?* 5). Instead, Apu's case shows that TV images can far exceed their subject matter, as they create ripples through their broader circulation. It shows how TV texts generate serious engagement even years after their original telecast. Apu and *The Simpsons* became central conversations about popular culture and representation in a way not determined by its production history or narrative content.

The relationship between the viewer and the popular image keeps evolving, as the meaning changes according to the context. Iconic characters may be interpreted, coopted or transformed over time by either the producers or the viewers, as we have witnessed with Walter White, who became a champion of the angry middle-aged white men or Buffy the Vampire Slayer, who became a gay icon. What remains is the vulnerability between the viewer and their beloved image, and this vulnerability reminds viewers to stay vigilant and calls them to critically respond when the narrative alters the relationship. Despite some rumors that the producers were planning to summarily drop the character from the show without addressing the backlash, Apu remains a part of the show as of Season 30.⁸¹

⁸¹ In January 2020, actor Hank Azaria announced that he would not voice the character any longer. The character's fate on the show remains uncertain.

Texts, Contexts, Limits and Reflections

At the beginning of my research, I had conceived this project as a positivist analysis of universal psychological motivations behind morality in popular TV texts. More precisely, the project was aimed at why viewers felt sympathetic towards characters that performed decidedly malicious things. I was interested in questioning psychological motivations behind viewers' tolerance for moral deviations to accommodate complicated relationships with TV characters. At this stage, I was keen on collecting empirical data that noted the degree of sympathy and tolerance of morally ambiguous behavior by viewers. However, an empirical approach collectivized viewers when studying shows that had concluded. It would potentially flatten the nuances of watching the show at different time periods. There are considerable differences in the cultural feedback that surrounds shows during the initial telecast compared to reruns or watching them on streaming sites.⁸² Similarly, an empirical approach also limits the textual and analytical perspectives that come through what remains essentially a subjective experience of a text. Therefore, I pursued a textual approach that emphasizes the viewing experience constituted through an engaged viewer. While this approach focuses on a rhetorically singular viewer, both the text and the encounter remain open to more important and more diverse considerations. Primarily, a project driven by critical theory and ethical subjectivity finds greater value in the textual encounter rather than wider viewership.

Over the course of the project, the structure of morality as an intuitive human reaction did not adequately account for the ambiguity of the viewers' relationships with TV. Therefore, the questions evolved to accommodate problems beyond the original scope and asked how to use

⁸² In fact, shows like *The Office* (NBC 2005 – 2013) and *Community* (NBC 2009 – 2015) achieved modest success during their initial traditional broadcast. Both shows have enjoyed a massive upswing in their cultural visibility since they were featured on Netflix.

viewer engagement with TV as a critical method to examine ethical and political questions in contemporary society. In this thesis, I have presented three specific texts from a narrow period in TV history as symptomatic of the way viewers relate to TV texts. These three texts have become cultural milestones and have influenced other TV shows through their deliberated style and head-on approach to the subject matter. By treating TV texts as “texts” and paying attention to their generic and serial features, this study argues that the viewer allegiance provokes critical thinking and that allegiance is in turn, informed by textual seriality. Despite acknowledging their significance, this study does not assert that only such texts could be used to make critical observations about society.

This study offers a phenomenological approach of creatively engaging with TV texts. It aims to add to the corpus of literary approaches to TV. It draws on the cultural studies approach to use literary criticism as a way of relating to aspects of popular culture. The method outlined in the study also tries to avoid the limitations of exclusivist attitudes to TV criticism. Instead of treating the TV medium as an indistinguishable whole, this study differentiates between the specific kind of content that is presented on TV. Drawing from the critical approaches of Attridge, García and Mittell, this study examines the effects of sustained serial engagement with negative characters on TV. Comparing the attractive but dangerous protagonists in *The Shield* and *Breaking Bad*, this study attempts to address the viewers’ sympathetic alignment with such characters. Next, this study takes a detailed view of the complex portrayals of police power in two contemporary shows from the 2000s, and offers comments about the basis of police authority, the challenges in its representation on TV and the way narratives can subvert and question tropes that are deployed to satisfy the viewers’ expectations. In sum, this study offers serial engagement and critical self-evaluation as key features that allow viewers to recombine

textual elements of TV shows to consider social, political, and ethical issues in the broader society.

Having considered aims and scope of this study, I would also like to briefly address some of the areas in which the study could be further expanded. In selecting the shows for the study, some hard choices were made. Only completed shows were studied, which meant texts like *The Americans* (Joe Weisberg 2013–2018), *Fargo* (Noah Hawley 2014–), *Game of Thrones* (David Benioff and D.B. Weiss 2011–2019) and *BoJack Horseman* (Raphael Bob-Wakesberg 2014–2020) were not included. While examining ongoing series offer interesting perspectives about viewer anticipation (as well as reinforce the disruptive potential of TV seriality), the unreliability with which TV shows get renewed and canceled makes their inclusion challenging in a time-bound research project. While this study focuses on critically acclaimed shows, it is important to think of how this project's method would be adapted to study other shows like *The Big Bang Theory* (CBS 2007–2019) or *CSI* which have a wider social circulation, and a less enthusiastic critical reception. These shows generate an entire ecosystem of spin-offs, popular culture tropes, and memes, and regardless of their critical acclaim, enter the cultural lexicon of its period. Rather than solely studying culturally rich representations, the next step would be to examine texts that people know about even when they do not watch them.

The geographical and cultural contexts of the texts selected for this study poses an important challenge to the politics of its argument. Limiting this study to American texts from the 2000s allows for a detailed examination of the viewers' engagement with textual elements. However, it also runs the risk of legitimating a narrow segment of the field as representatives of the entire English-speaking context. Especially, the premise of the study implicitly ignores local and regional TV as less worthy of study than American texts. While these considerations are

important, the widespread reach American TV shows, both directly in over-the-top services like Netflix and Amazon Prime, as well as indirectly through licensed or subsidiary channels, warrant studying them. The cultural and contextual differences of the texts are effective as narrative features that viewers decode in their serial encounters. Selecting three of the most legitimized TV shows is reflective of how public imagination, and international perception of American landscape are shaped through these texts. Therefore, questions of policing and relationship between class and public institutions which carry a special meaning for the American audience, stages a theatre of justice for international viewers to evaluate and interpret.

The genre of crime drama was selected due to its ubiquity, and its scope was limited to American shows due to practical constraints as well as thematic resonance within the subject matter. The growing cultural significance of international shows demand that we attend to shows from the English-speaking world and beyond. In the anglophone context, shows from the UK (*The Fall*, *Broadchurch*) and Oceania (*Top of the Lake*, *Secret City*) have challenged American dominance over crime and prestige shows. As TV becomes a global phenomenon due to streaming services, and fan communities arrange themselves transnationally, more people can refer and relate to shared experiences of TV experiences. The popularity of Scandinavian noir TV like *Forbrydelsen* (*The Killing*, Danish, 2007–2012), *Borgen* (Danish 2010–2013), and *Broen* (*The Bridge*, Swedish/Danish, 2011–2018) and their reception in the global context offers an interesting look into contemporary visual culture. Besides Scandinavian shows, the global growth of viewership of Korean and Japanese TV shows are ripe for an examination of linguistic, cultural, and inter-textual transferences across the different traditions. These shows explore topical sociological issues specific to their setting and their success proves that their universal themes are appealing to a wider audience.

As critics have noted, these shows also equate legitimacy with masculinity, which poses another challenge for the viewer. To a large extent, this is indicative of an industry where shows with male protagonists are more likely to get made compared to shows featuring women. Even in cases where woman-centric shows precede male-centric ones, they do not get the same degree of critical attention as the latter. For instance, Jenji Kohan's *Weeds* (2005–2012) is a comedic-drama that presented a middle-class home maker turning into a drug dealer much before *Breaking Bad*, but it is treated with less levity at least partly due to its female protagonist. A growing number of critically and socially significant shows featuring women protagonists does not automatically imply they are offered the same depth of character or complexity as male figures.

In her incisive criticism against hypermasculine flavor that dominates Prestige TV, Emily Nussbaum is appalled by the vacant characterization of female characters. Nussbaum is tired of paper-thin women who are “wives, sluts, and daughters—none with any interior life” (*I Like to Watch* 58). She calls the protagonist's wife Maggie Hart from *True Detective*, “an utter nothing-burger, all fuming prettiness with zero insides” (58). In contrast, Nussbaum sees the portrayal of women in shows like *Top of the Lake* less exploitative. The selection of the texts in this study inadvertently contributes to the critical perception that male-centric shows are somehow more important than shows about women. However, my intentions for selecting these texts are based on my interest in portrayals of law enforcement and crime narratives as a way of interrogating viewer alignment. Charlotte Brunsdon articulates a similar view in her seminal critique of gender and policing when she notes that outlier shows like *Prime Suspect* demonstrated the masculinized and gendered nature of the game of detection (234). Therefore, the study's

apparent male-centric bias is an unfortunate reflection of the genre of crime drama and procedural itself.

Viewer allegiance with terrible characters is notable in comedies, since the use of humor makes viewers treat such characters with greater indulgence. While the likes of Tony Soprano, Vic Mackey, Omar Little, and Walter White get their fair share of critical attention, Lucille Bluth (*Arrested Development*, 2003–2019) and Selina Myer (*Veep*, 2012–2019) are rarely discussed in the same light, despite being equally despicable and compelling figures. These dark comedies push the formal limits of TV, while presenting pettiness and selfish cruelty in ways more relatable than the wrath of a mafia boss. Their cruelty is stunningly offhanded, and without purpose or malice, making it more real than the carefully orchestrated evil plans of their dramatic counterparts. Unlike dramas, these are not awe-inspiring characters, but pitiable monstrosities, who find striking ways to say and do things that are amusing because of their transgressive nature. In this sense, they are less like Macbeth and more like Falstaff. Interestingly, these characters do not have a moment of tragic reckoning or a redemptive arc like their dramatic counterparts and are able to questions viewer alignment in an incidental manner. Yet, the brazenness with which they perform terrible actions calls viewers to rethink similar encounters where people do not own up to their misdeeds. In that regard, comedy strips away viewers' notions of nobility and compels viewers to confront a bleak world.

More immediately, the method in which viewers access TV texts has changed the way they think about TV texts. Companies like Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon all produce shows and distribute them digitally.⁸³ This model drastically alters the viewer's relationship with the channel as they make available the entire set of episodes simultaneously. This change wrests

⁸³ Disney, CBS, NBC, Apple, and Warner Media are launching their own streaming platforms by the end of 2020.

away control of scheduling from marketing executives at the networks and vests that authority directly with the viewing audience. Besides streaming platforms which have changed the accessibility and cost of watching TV content, social media sites that serve as forums for viewer response have made the reception of a text more visible. If cable TV changed the pacing and seriality of TV dramas, streaming shows have embraced intricate seriality even more, as they no longer depend on viewers waiting for the next episode on a weekly basis. All this has increased the diversity of shows that get produced, as market domination is no longer a feasible goal for TV texts. Obscure international shows are now accessible to a wider audience, both on cable channels and on streaming. TV texts no longer aim to please the broadest viewer categories, and in turn, they have greater freedom to explore themes like mental illness, addiction and political intrigue that were previously off-limits.

The changes in accessibility to shows have also altered the way viewers relate to TV texts. No longer are viewers dependent on periodic appointments with a show, as they are available on a variety of personal devices. TV is a more isolated experience now than ever before, but at the same time, viewers are also able to engage with a much larger viewing community. While the scope of this thesis has been focused on genre and period-specific text for the sake of comparative clarity, cohesion and rigor, other avenues of enquiry into areas gender, cultural influences, and production and reception of texts in translation remain areas of future interest and expansion.

TV's Cultural Value

To conclude, I would like to reiterate that instead of using critical methods to interpret and understand TV texts, it would be more productive to use TV texts to think about ethics,

politics, and society. I hope that my work from a literary studies perspective contributes meaningfully to TV scholarship. *The Wire's* Season 5 is often criticized for offering a bitter portrayal of the newsroom as well as a fantastical serial killer plot that did not seem to resonate with the show's earlier style of social realism. Contrary to the popular view, Jason Mittell comments that rather than failing to address broader social concerns, "[through] the lens of meta-fiction, these plotlines reinforce the series' function as a site of social realism and critique" (*Complex TV* 329). He argues that the show presents the frustration that builds with endless repetition experienced by people who are trying to work on specific problems. Mittell calls this the "big lie of fiction" which forces McNulty to invent a fictional serial killer to gain resources to continue his case of a real serial killer, Marlo Stanfield, since "it is only through the fiction of *The Wire* that these true stories of Baltimore are told" (330). In this reading, Mittell offers the show as its own commentary. Considering that TV texts are always in conversation with other texts in their genres, it is within reason to suggest that all TV texts could serve as their own commentary. Perhaps TV is starting to (or has always) provide its own theory and to learn it, we need to watch television. This self-reflexive aspect of TV resonates with Rancière's observation that "the fable that tells the truth of cinema is extracted from the stories narrated on its screens" (*Film Fables* 6). Therefore, it becomes essential to use TV texts themselves as tools to critically examine viewer engagement with their genres. The popularity of a specific text, in contrast to other texts from the genre, is telling not just of its operational aesthetics, but also the way it connects to the cultural zeitgeist.

TV is not reality. However, as a part of popular culture, it could help its viewers process the way reality changes around them. BoJack Horseman deliberates the problem of trying to

learn about good and evil from TV characters who are expressly designed to evoke affective responses through compelling narrative journeys. He observes,

All I know about being good I learned from TV, and in TV, flawed characters are constantly showing people they care with these surprising grand gestures. And I think that part of me still believes that's what love is. But in real life, the big gesture isn't enough. You need to be consistent, you need to be dependably good. You need to do it every day, which is so...hard. ("Free Churro," 5.6).

BoJack restates the idea that being good may not come as a result of watching TV, but it shows how to be consistent through its repetition and dependability (and its failure to keep to those standards). While at its worst, TV merely reaffirms our indulgences, at its best, TV tells us to keep trying.

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