

# Dramatizing Individuation: Institutions, Assemblages, and *The Wire*

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*Whether you're a corner boy in West Baltimore, or a cop who knows his beat, or an Eastern European brought here for sex, your life is worth less. It's the triumph of capitalism over human value. This country has embraced the idea that this is a viable domestic policy. It is. It's viable for the few. But I don't live in Westwood, L.A., or on the Upper West Side of New York. I live in Baltimore.*

– David Simon (O'Rourke)

Often hailed as the ‘best show on television,’ and described by its creator David Simon as “a novel” (Kois), HBO’s *The Wire* is a weighty drama that cries out for (and receives) a great deal of critical interpretation. Critics have justly heaped their praise upon the series, citing its realism and the sheer scope of Simon’s narrative vision. It might once have been mistaken for a conventional ‘police procedural’ (in the vein of Simon’s earlier *Homicide: Life on the Streets*), but it gradually became a sweeping critique of contemporary urban society. Over its five seasons, *The Wire* transcended any conceivable genre or narrative formula, sketching out a comprehensive portrait of life in Baltimore, a “postindustrial American tragedy” (Havrilesky<sup>1</sup>) of a minor metropolis and its decaying, dysfunctional institutions. It seems, therefore, that it may ultimately offer as much material for the social critic as for the critic of popular culture. It is not only ‘the best,’ but the most Foucauldian show on television, the show which reveals the most about the technologies and techniques of contemporary discipline and punishment.

1. Unless otherwise specified, all citations from interviews with David Simon are Simon’s words.

We can map Foucault’s theories about institutions fairly directly onto the Baltimore presented in *The Wire*, demonstrating how his ideas about power and discipline<sup>2</sup> remain vitally important for social theory. At the same time, however, the series illustrates how the forms and functions of power have diverged from those of the nineteenth-century disciplinary revolution. Disciplinary power still seeks to produce and control docile bodies, but its mechanisms as depicted here have changed a great deal since Jeremy Bentham first sketched out his Panopticon. When examining *The Wire* – and, by extension, ‘postindustrial’ urban society – we must move beyond a conventional ‘disciplinary’ and ‘institutionalized’ reading of Foucault. This does not, however, prevent us from reaffirming the core of Foucault’s approach, described quite perceptively by Giorgio Agamben as “an unprejudiced analysis of the concrete ways in which power penetrates subjects’ very bodies and forms of life” (5). Cast in these terms, the general concerns of Foucault and *The Wire* are clearly alike in spirit, regardless of how their specific strategies and conclusions may differ. It is therefore in this spirit that I present my own broadly ‘Foucauldian’ reading of *The Wire*,<sup>2</sup> one which is both a critical reading of *Discipline and Punish*, and of discipline and punishment in a wired, postindustrial state.

2. In this text I will be citing almost exclusively from *Discipline and Punish*, although a concern with discipline certainly animates much of Foucault’s work before and after, articulated in different terms. I will in fact be making informal use of a few terms from the later work on biopolitics and governmentality, but a systematic exegesis of these concepts is impossible in the space allotted here. These concepts could, however, certainly be deployed in a more purely ‘Foucauldian’ analysis, substituting for the ‘Deleuzian’ vocabulary I adopt in the third section.

**T**he *Wire* shares one fundamental question with Foucault's work: what are the functions and effects of institutions in the formation of the 'individual subject'?<sup>3</sup> We might begin, however, by pausing to consider what the series is actually 'about.'<sup>4</sup> Its narrative deals (at least initially) with the 'War on Drugs,' depicting the inner workings of both an investigative unit of the Baltimore Police Department and a network of criminal organizations under surveillance. In a sense, then, it's a show 'about' the police and the criminals they pursue, one which naturally gets mistaken for a 'police procedural.' Simon claims, however, that the show was in fact pitched to HBO as "a rebellion of sorts against all the horseshit police procedurals afflicting American television" (Hornby). Such procedurals focus on seemingly-independent police departments, populated by noble detectives still cast in the mold of *Dragnet's* Joe Friday. *The Wire* calls both sides of this equation into question. It offers a much more than the pseudo-context of a show like *Law & Order*, and it avoids simply rehashing the same old 'good cop, bad

stitution woven into this web. Wiretaps allow the narrative to "dig up the ways that legal and illegal Baltimore talk to each other every day" (Kois). 'The wire' lets the show sneak past the closed doors of the city's institutions, to dramatize how they discipline, manipulate, and betray their subjects. The series is ultimately less concerned with any one institution or its procedures than with a whole institutional fabric held together by wires. The territories and powers of such state, civil, and criminal institutions are never definite or absolute; they determine each other reciprocally in a variable configuration of political, technological and economic power. *The Wire* clearly demonstrates how disciplinary power today comes to govern subjects and subjectivity with an unprecedented proliferation of panoptic techniques, penetrating the networks (whether literally 'wired' or wireless) by which individuals communicate. This is not to idealize panopticism, or to presuppose that Bentham's model has survived 'intact.' Rather, it is simply to recognize that the Panopticon – in Foucault's sense, of a "machine for dissociating the seeing/being seen dyad" (1977, 201) – remains a pillar of disciplinary power in the twenty-first century. Although not always 'optic' in its

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# The profits of delinquency tend to fill the pockets of discipline

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cop' tropes visible in any number of other procedurals. Not only are corruption and 'excessive force' ubiquitous in the BPD, such individual indiscretions seem positively insignificant in comparison to the dysfunctional status quo upheld by the institutions and administrators themselves. Even though "the spine of each season is a Baltimore police investigation, one that leads inevitably to electronic surveillance – 'the wire'" (Kois), the show is not specifically 'about' the police at all. As its title indicates, *The Wire* is 'about' electronic surveillance. Here the inevitable parallels with *Discipline and Punish* begin: 'the wire' (shorthand for 'wiretap') is a tremendously panoptic phenomenon. Invariably, the detectives of *The Wire* either *have* a wiretap on a criminal organization, or they're trying to get one. Nor does the series skimp on the methodological details: it catalogues the entire process, from obtaining probable cause to deciphering slang and determining 'pertinence,' on to the construction and prosecution of a criminal case.

*The Wire* is not, however, *just* a show about surveillance. In due course, it becomes apparent that the narrative has more to do with the wires themselves, and the individuals and in-

etymological sense, electronic surveillance in *The Wire* operates according to deeply panoptic principles. The individual citizens of Baltimore (like those of any modern city) may be electronically observed at any time by powerful institutions, without any immediate knowledge of their being observed. Caught up within a panoptic system, one in which "the gaze is alert everywhere" (Foucault 1977, 195), subjects in postindustrial society tend to surveil themselves in the absence of any direct supervision, thereby internalizing the discipline of their institutions.

While the gaze of the 'hidden watcher' in Bentham's Panopticon was contained within the prison – a space of incarceration and exclusion<sup>5</sup> – electronic surveillance in *The Wire* pans across the entire social field. It does not simply facilitate 'carceral' *punishment* within the prison walls, but works to ensure general social *discipline*, governing and producing docile subjects. We can and should repeat certain standard conclusions at this point: modern technology has made society into a panoptic assemblage, as an ever-growing stream of once-'personal' information is recorded and catalogued by a proliferating group of powerful institutions. This

3. This process of subject-formation is essentially 'individuation,' although this will be made clearer below.

4. Viewers will be aware that summarizing *The Wire* is a nearly impossible task; accordingly, I will begin by outlining the general structure of its narrative rather than any specific details of plot or character.

5. Here we might recall Foucault's distinction between the 'leper colony' model and the quarantine of plague victims, but also how discipline operates by blending and recombining these two technical models (1977, 199).

proliferation comes coupled with a tendency for the diffusion of institutional methods into previously ‘undisciplined’ fields, corresponding with a phenomenon clearly described by Foucault. The mechanisms of discipline are ‘de-institutionalized’ as “the massive, compact disciplines are broken down into flexible methods of control, which may be transferred and adapted” (1977, 211). Techniques originally established for the management of illness, madness, or criminality are predictably adapted as general principles for any institution which seeks to discipline individuals and render them docile. Recalling Simon’s initial assertion about the ‘triumph of capitalism over human value,’ we might note that capitalist institutions have always been great contributors to the evolution and diffusion of disciplinary techniques. The production of monetary capital and the reproduction of capitalist institutions both presuppose the production of *human capital* in the form of docile bodies. As indicated by this talk of ‘capitalism’ and its institutional apparatus, this critique is not entirely distinct from a broadly ‘Marxist’ political-theoretical orientation. Foucault’s method simply implies a focus on the specific encounters of the human body with the technologies of State, capital, and ‘power’ in general. In such encounters, power is expressed as ‘biopower,’ actual power over bodies.<sup>6</sup> Nowhere is the relevance of this method more apparent than in *The Wire*, as it dramatizes (in particularly epic fashion) the contemporary infiltration of the sphere of ‘human value’ by a foreign disciplinary logic. For the Baltimore it depicts, carceral surveillance and panopticism have long since broken out of the prison, and its ostensibly ‘free’ subjects are all being progressively assimilated into regimes of civil and corporate discipline.

What, then, of the well-organized and undeterred delinquents of *The Wire*? The series’ disciplined criminals necessitate that we reaffirm the panoptic thesis, while simultaneously recognizing why panopticism has never lived up to its lofty ideals: organized criminals can always subvert, manipulate, and appropriate its techniques.<sup>7</sup> This does not imply that the basic structure of panoptic discipline has been transformed or overthrown. The subversion of the disciplinary Panopticon, the turning of panopticism against one another – ‘sousveillance’ *contra* surveillance – is simply one enduring result of panopticism, persisting as its indivisible remainder. The Panopticon certainly aims to suppress deviance and delinquency, but it indirectly ‘produces’ those delinquents which it fails to suppress. In this sense,

6. These questions of ‘biopower’ and of the docile body will be addressed more directly in the next section. It may also be noted that none of this precludes the potential value of a more orthodox Marxist critique (whatever one takes that to mean today). Foucault’s methodology just seemed like a natural choice for my analysis of this series.

7. Throughout the series, for instance, the gangs purchase leaked grand jury and pre-trial documents to learn of impending wiretaps or cooperating witnesses.

the adaptation of organized crime to police surveillance only reaffirms and reduplicates an essentially panoptic structure. Although institutional surveillance never actually ‘deters’ the organized criminal institutions of *The Wire*, such organizations are structured by the panoptic gaze in almost every respect. They operate according to procedures nearly as strict as those of the police. Dealers maintain a network of lookouts<sup>8</sup> to warn them of approaching police, hiding their drugs in the bushes and their guns on the tires of parked cars in order to avoid any serious possession charges in the inevitable raids. The more ‘administrative’ levels of the organization are insulated by design from such raids. Nevertheless, they must still avoid discussing criminal activity in their own automobiles (for fear of listening devices), and are forced to constantly adapt their communications in increasingly elaborate schemes<sup>9</sup> to avoid ‘the wire.’ The discipline of the criminal organization paradoxically works to *empower* delinquency, but is nevertheless a necessary consequence of some original surveillance. The originary decision of discipline is likewise responsible for the bloody institutional combats that ensue: in this case, the manifest body count of the ‘War on Drugs.’

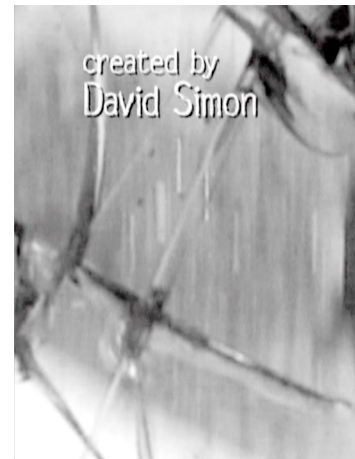
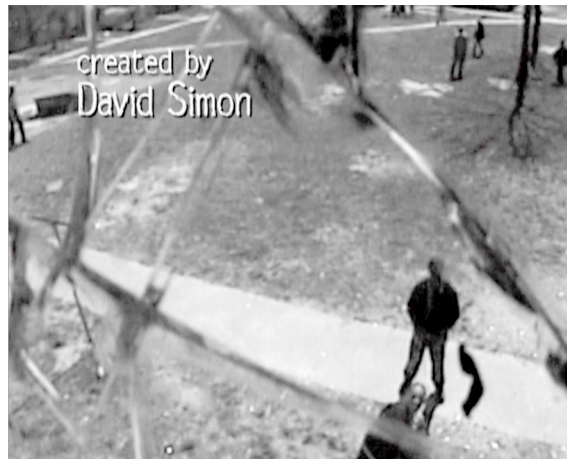
In adapting themselves to institutional surveillance, criminal organizations must themselves become counter-disciplinary institutions. This constitutes the single most significant distinction between ‘organized crime’ and simple delinquency. The actions of individuals within criminal organizations are clearly determined by their distinctive relationship with the legal institution. As Foucault states, “the delinquent is an institutional product” (1977, 301). Not only is the profitability of the criminal organization predicated upon prohibition – the drug prohibition to which Simon states he is “unalterably opposed” (Hornby) – its internal discipline is produced by institutional surveillance. Such production takes place by ‘natural selection’ in a cultural context, as undisciplined criminal institutions are rapidly eliminated by the forces of law in the ongoing War on Drugs. Simon rightly claims that “what began as a war against illicit drugs generations ago has now mutated into a war on the American underclass” (Hornby). Police surveillance in this war has produced an entire disciplined ‘underclass’ of professional delinquents, one which ultimately comes to include whole segments of society driven to silence by resentment and intimidation. Such an underclass is always “a result of the system; but it also becomes a part and an instrument of it” (Foucault 1977, 282). The wiretaps in *The Wire* carry the viewer past the façade of

8. They also use ‘touts’ and ‘runners,’ whose respective tasks (at least as far as I’ve been able to tell) are to shout the ‘brand names’ of the drugs being sold, and to shuttle either money or drugs between customer, dealer, and stash. Runners never perform both functions: this would allow police to photograph the entire transaction.

9. One gang, for example, eventually develops a code in which the images of clock faces sent over cell phones correspond with coordinates in a road atlas. Indicating the character of this ‘arms race,’ their code in turn is cracked by police in the course of an *illegal* wiretap run by two detectives.

independence presented by legitimate and illegitimate organizations to reveal a world behind the scenes of disciplined society, one in which delinquents truly are both result and instrument of the system.<sup>10</sup> Crooked police and politicians sustain themselves on a flow of drug money, while even the ‘good police’ must cultivate a stable of informants and manipulate low-level dealers in their futile attempts to disrupt the flow.

‘business model.’ The second season ends with the escape of ‘the Greeks,’ an always-mobile group of smugglers, while the third season closes with the deaths and arrests of key Barksdale figures, and the collapse of the organization. The fourth season then focuses on the subsequent assimilation of Barksdale’s organization by that of Marlo Stanfield and Stanfield’s own assimilation into a ‘cooperative’ run by a diplomatic gang leader named Proposition Joe. The fifth season offers no more



Because this kind of organized crime is both institutionalized and entrenched, these attempts are as futile in *The Wire* as they are in reality. As a necessary element of its ‘realism,’ *The Wire* discards that other genre-myth of the police procedural, according to which the legitimate institution almost always prevails over the criminal one. Not only do investigations simply fail, but criminal institutions are closely linked with powerful ‘legitimate’ ones. To cite just one prominent example, the character of Senator Clay Davis (Isiah Whitlock Jr.) was evidently corrupt since the very first season, but with his political clout managed to deter any systematic investigation of his criminal activity until the fifth season. As veteran detective Lester Freamon observes early on in the series (after his unit catches Davis’ driver accepting drug money), for police to investigate the flows of drugs and the drug dealers themselves is generally acceptable. Investigating the flows of capital generated by the drug trade, however, is just a quick way to ruin a career<sup>11</sup>: the profits of delinquency tend to fill the pockets of discipline. This is not to say that there are no raids and convictions in *The Wire*. More prominent than any raid, however, are the mechanisms by which criminal institutions adapt and restructure themselves (or simply get replaced by new ones). This is especially obvious at the end of each season. The arrests of key members of the ‘Barksdale Organization’ in the first, including its leader Avon, causes only a restructuring of the institution according to a new

by way of a decisive criminal ‘defeat,’ although Stanfield is no more satisfied with the end result than the police conducting the investigation. Unlike the apparently ‘evil’ perpetrators of the traditional crime drama, the criminals of *The Wire* aren’t symbolic bogeymen to be decisively defeated and deservedly punished. These are systemic, organized phenomena, both initially produced and continually reproduced by a panoptic configuration of disciplined institutions.

## 2. Individuating docile bodies

Given its subject matter, *The Wire* deals more with the failures of panoptic discipline than its successes. Criminality is the exception to the legal rule, as that which its institutions aim to exclude, suppress, or confine. The law exists in a real sense *for the sake of* such exceptions. Its institutions strictly define and circumscribe exceptionality<sup>12</sup> by incarcerating the delinquent and “individualiz[ing] the excluded” (Foucault 1977, 200) through discipline. The institution of law thereby sets out to produce law-abiding individuals and docile bodies; in the process, it invariably produces some delinquents, however ‘accidentally’ or ‘exceptionally.’ Disciplinary power is never absolute, regardless of how far electronic surveillance may extend its reach. As Foucault claims, “there are no relations of power without resistance” (1980, 142). This is affirmed even in the montage

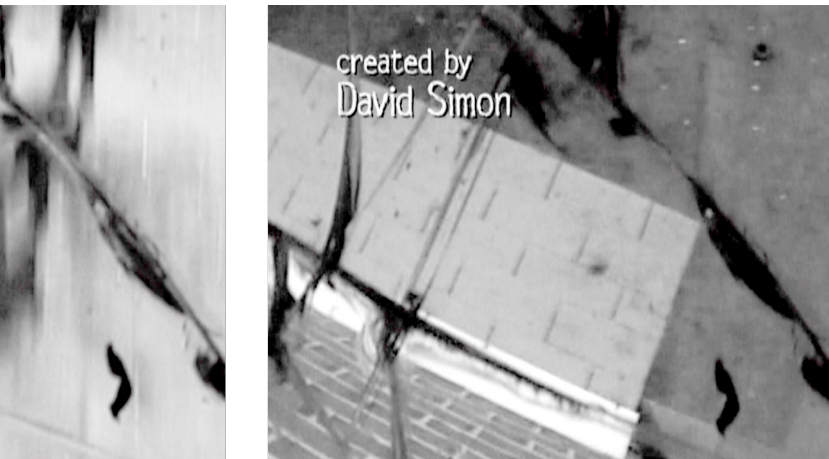
10. This is, of course, the very same façade upheld by all those “horseshit police procedurals” Simon loathes.

11. When Freamon is first introduced, he had (apparently for this very reason) been sitting at a desk for years, processing reports in the Pawn Shop Unit and spending most of his time making dollhouse furniture.

12. We may recall in this respect Kierkegaard’s maxim that “the exception explains the universal and itself” (227). This is cited by both Carl Schmitt (15) and Agamben (16) in turn, as support for their claim that the original (sovereign) prerogative of power is the decision “over the exception” (Schmitt 5).



which runs during the opening credits of *The Wire*, which changes each season to suggest themes and foreshadow events to come. Each incarnation features the same key segment, however, in which a youth uses a rock to smash the surveillance camera which films the footage. With one casual throw, he shatters the disciplinary gaze: a gaze which is in fact our own. This scene typifies the ease with which panopticism is subverted by delinquency in *The Wire*. Surveillance alone can



never guarantee discipline. As one officer says early on in the series, policing still comes down to “knocking heads and taking bodies.” Disciplinary institutions are ultimately founded upon this power over bodies, the ‘biopower’ deployed not only as they capture and arrest *delinquent* bodies, but also in the regimes of ‘correct training’ by which they produce and govern *docile* bodies.

*The Wire* confirms another of Foucault’s maxims: the individual subject is “a reality fabricated by this specific technology of power that I have called ‘discipline’” (1977, 194). Power only occasionally functions prohibitively. This is the exceptional function of punishment, produced at the margins of power in its encounters with delinquency. Initially and for the most part, however, power *produces* and *individuates*. Disciplinary techniques work to produce a subject whose individual will and bodily forces can be channeled according to institutional needs: not a ‘free’ subject, but a *productive, docile* body that “may be subjected, used, transformed and improved” (Foucault 1977, 136). *The Wire* breaks with even the most basic conventions of the ‘character drama.’ It isn’t a dramatization of an individual character’s development, but of the character of *individuation* in postindustrial society. It demonstrates how contemporary institutions accumulate biopower, producing (and destroying) individual subjects by penetrating their ‘forms of life’ with disciplinary power. Simon claims that *The Wire* “isn’t really structured as episodic television and it instead pursues the form of the modern, multi-POV novel” (Hornby). Amidst its huge ensemble cast, there is no one strong protagonist who truly dominates the narrative (*à la* Tony Soprano), although the series certainly has its share of memorable characters. There’s Jimmy McNul-

ty (Dominic West), the determined (and frequently drunk) detective, and of course Omar (Michael K. Williams), the gay ‘stick-up man’ who robs drug dealers for revenge and for profit. There’s Bubbles (Andre Royo), the on-again/off-again heroin addict and informant, and Michael (Tristan Wilds), a teenager for whom joining a gang seems like the only way to protect his younger brother from his abusive father. By the end of the series, we’ve followed Councilman (and then Mayor) Tommy Carcetti (Aidan Gillen) through the trials and tribulations of an election, and we’ve even met the reporters that covered it. Instead of exploring the individual neuroses of one dominant protagonist, *The Wire* weaves together a multiplicity of characters, each attempting – neuroses and all – to resolve the conflicts between their own drives or principles and the imperatives of powerful institutions.

The traditional police procedural is all about the machinery of *punishment* and the conflicts *between* institutions. *The Wire*, by contrast, is only superficially about investigation or punishment: in this series, the crippling bust and the defeat of the criminal mind are false promises, occasionally even delusions. On a deeper level, it is a show about *discipline* and the processes *within* institutions by which they produce docile bodies (regardless of the ‘human cost’). As Foucault states, discipline ‘makes’ individuals and governs individuation as it “‘trains’ the moving, confused, useless multitudes of bodies and forces into a multiplicity of individual elements” (1977, 170). In *The Wire*, sometimes the ‘forces’ at work in this training are clear, and the human cost of their deployment all too evident. When ‘the Greeks’ bring Eastern European women into the country as prostitutes, for instance, their bodies are rendered docile simply by the promise of a new life (and, failing that, the threat of a quick death). The forces at work are often much less evident, however. The most docile bodies produced by the Baltimore Police Department are not to be found in the public being policed, but within the ranks of ‘the bosses’ themselves. This is most clearly depicted in the character of William Rawls (John Doman), who manages over the course of the series to ascend from the rank of Major to Acting Commissioner, assisted by both his myopic faith in statistics and some shrewd political maneuvering. Rawls, like all the other ‘bosses,’ adapts himself wholeheartedly to the criteria of institutional selection and promotion. As with any group of ‘career-minded professionals,’ their training makes them docile, malleable, *productive* workers. Having internalized the disciplinary structure of ranked progress and permanent registration, bosses like Rawls seek only to advance their careers by upholding (and occasionally manipulating) the status quo.

*The Wire* makes it painfully obvious that even as this discipline makes the hierarchical system of institutions ‘governable,’ it prevents it from fulfilling its social functions. As Major in command of the homicide unit, Rawls’ docile acceptance of institutional imperatives handed down from the mayor’s office leads him to demand a high ‘clearance rate’

from his department. This in turn compels his underbosses to demand that the unit avoid looking too hard for murders. When fourteen of the above-mentioned prostitutes are murdered in a cargo container, for instance, it nearly gets written-off as ‘accidental’; only because Detective McNulty was out to exact revenge on Rawls is ‘justice’ pursued. The human cost of docility is thereby made clear on a very personal level. The ‘good’ police officers, for their part, retain some semblance of free will and individual principles only at the cost of their careers. Of all the police in *The Wire*, only Cedric Daniels (Lance Reddick) actually manages to sustain both a principled commitment to law enforcement and a promising career, rising to the post of Commissioner by the end of the final season. His hopes of improving the quality of law enforcement and effecting some operational changes in the department are dashed, however, once the mayor’s office obtains evidence of some (unspecified) past misdeeds on his part. Mayor Carcetti uses this evidence as leverage, attempting to make Daniels play the very same ‘stats game’ as Rawls and all his other predecessors, underreporting crime and thus improving the mayor’s image in time for election season. In the final episode, Daniels is essentially forced to choose between his career and his principles, and he chooses the latter. Told of his intention to resign, his estranged wife offers a platitude: “The tree that doesn’t bend, breaks, Cedric.” His response is telling: “If you bend too far, you’re already broken.” Discipline produces docility by bending individuals until they are for all intents and purposes ‘broken,’ their principles made as flexible as the institution demands. This kind of ‘training’ produces generally obedient individuals that are easily controlled by their superiors, and so they naturally rise through the ranks of their institutions. En masse, however, such docile bodies sustain an ineffectual, Kafkaesque bureaucracy: not only dysfunctional, but systematically incapable of remedying its dysfunction.

Simon succinctly describes the general ‘message’ of *The Wire* in any number of interviews. It’s about “the effects of institutions on individuals” (or on individuation), and how “whether you’re a cop, a longshoreman, a drug dealer, a politician, a judge, or a lawyer, *you are ultimately compromised*” (Kois). Elsewhere, he is even more direct:

Whatever institution you as an individual commit to will somehow find a way to betray you on *The Wire*. Unless of course you’re willing to play the game without regard to the effect on others or society as a whole, in which case you might be a judge or the state police superintendent or governor one day. Or, for your loyalty, you still might be cannon fodder. (Havrilesky)

This institutional command to ‘play the game’ is a recurrent theme in *The Wire*; regardless of which specific ‘game’ is involved, the imperative is universal. The basic message is the same, whether it’s the mayor’s office pressuring Rawls and Daniels to play the ‘stat game,’ or it’s Snoop telling Michael that his death was ordered simply because he didn’t “carry

himself properly” and asked “why?” a bit too often. “Do what you’re told; stop asking ‘why?’” Whether you enforce the law or the dictates of a gang leader, your institution demands docile obedience. As Omar says in the last season, it’s “all in the game.” Independent, principled characters on *The Wire* inevitably find themselves betrayed by their institutions and the games they play. Panoptic surveillance remains, as always, an essential mechanism for enforcing this discipline and enacting this betrayal. The fundamental role of video surveillance is as evident in the visual form of the show as its content. As co-producer Joe Chappelle states, they tend to use long lenses when filming to provide ‘a voyeuristic view’ from the perspective “of someone observing but slightly removed from the action” (Griffin), thus emphasizing the panoptic dissociation of the ‘seeing/being seen dyad.’ Chappelle goes on, however, to say that this is actually “about limiting information to the viewer so hopefully he is trying to figure out what he’s actually seeing... it’s not all laid out in front of you” (Griffin). The panoptic gaze is eminently fallible. In this respect, the promotional slogan for its fifth season was telling: like any surveillance project, *The Wire* demands that you “read between the lines” and beyond the images. Institutional surveillance never tells the whole story: to organize and distribute docile bodies, it must operate in conjunction with a myriad of other forces and powers.

### 3. Institutions and assemblages

As a ‘postindustrial American tragedy,’ *The Wire* only occasionally deals with well-behaved institutions like the preindustrial ones analyzed by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*. More prominent are the *de-institutionalizing* forces at work, both in the form of human resistances and ‘flexible methods of control.’ As such flexible methods and technologies circulate freely, new loci of control are constantly being created and destroyed. These powers cannot always be readily assimilated into the old institutional paradigm, and may in fact demand a renewal of our interpretive paradigm. I turn in this respect to the concept of ‘assemblage,’ employed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari as an abstract description for a heterogeneous multiplicity of individual entities. This term encompasses both disciplinary institutions and informal (or delinquent) groupings without reducing the distinction between the two.<sup>13</sup> These flexible Deleuzian concepts are valuable for analyzing why some institutions in *The Wire* seem more ‘disciplined’ than others, and how discipline subverts itself by enforcing docility in an inflexible way. Criminal organizations in the series are usually two steps ahead of the police, substantially more flexible

13. Deleuze and Guattari use this term in a very general way. Manuel de Landa has developed a theory of social complexity founded on this broad concept, which treats not only social organizations but entities ranging from “atoms and molecules to biological organisms, species, and ecosystems” as assemblages (3).

and nomadic than the massive, rule-bound institutions of the State Apparatus.<sup>14</sup> By conceiving these organizations as assemblages of individual bodies, we can come to terms with the complex networks they form, and from which something like ‘postmodern society’ emerges (along with electronic surveillance, and the ‘triumph of capitalism over human value’ Simon describes).

This is not, however, to diverge from a basically Foucauldian paradigm.<sup>15</sup> Deleuze argues that the de-institutionalizing shift of postindustrial society was anticipated by Foucault, who recognized that his ‘disciplinary society’ was a transient model that

succeeded that of the societies of sovereignty, the goal and functions of which were something quite different (to tax rather than to organize production, to rule on death rather than to administer life) [...] In their turn the disciplines underwent a crisis to the benefit of new forces that were gradually instituted and which accelerated after World War II: a disciplinary society was what we already no longer were, what we had ceased to be. (Deleuze 3)

The same disciplinary institutions that once supplanted sovereign power now simply find themselves challenged by an explosion of decentralized assemblages. The techniques of traditional discipline as described by Foucault – registration, training, division, incarceration – have certainly not been ‘replaced’ as mechanisms for the production and control of docile bodies.<sup>16</sup> Instead, these techniques are proliferating at a remarkable pace, infiltrating assemblages which may once have been far less ‘disciplined.’ Capital itself takes on an increasingly active role in the production of docile bodies: market controls and consumer debt now induce docility with greater efficiency than incarceration or the threat of death. The assemblages that exercise such control on and within markets are increasingly heterogeneous. The police department is the ‘spine’ of every season, and so the central institution of *The Wire* is still constructed according to the technical model outlined in *Discipline and Punish*. But as the scope of its narrative expands well beyond the police department, it begins dealing with other, much less hierarchical or regimented assemblages. Wiretaps carry us into the marginal spaces of the ‘societies of control,’ as the series delves further and further into the “erosions of frontiers” and the “explosions within shanty towns or ghettos” (Deleuze 7). Each season adds a

new dimension of complexity to the ongoing war between the police and the drug traffickers, beginning with Baltimore dockworkers and moving through municipal politics and the elementary school system, eventually closing with the *Baltimore Sun* (the newspaper that *should* be covering all of this).

*The Wire* thereby aims to uncover the power relationships and eroding frontiers between all kinds of social assemblages: formal and informal, large and small, disciplined and delinquent. These different assemblages often articulate and distribute their individual components (bodies) in very different ways. Like any traditional disciplinary institution, the police department is a highly *territorial* assemblage, which implies both a definite jurisdiction and a fixed internal hierarchy (cf. Landa 13). Many social assemblages (particularly ‘delinquent’ ones) are of necessity profoundly *detrterritorialized*, however. The clearest example of such an institution in *The Wire* would be the criminal syndicate of ‘the Greeks.’ The leaders of this organization<sup>17</sup> operate without any definite territory. As such, they are able to evade territorial law enforcement quite easily, packing up and leaving its jurisdiction at the first sign of trouble. The hierarchical institutions of discipline are rigid and territorial, while informal and delinquent assemblages tend to be more detrterritorialized and chaotic. The criminal assemblages of *The Wire*, bereft of the assurances offered by legality, must enforce their discipline with far greater violence. Nevertheless, their flexibility is what allows them to adapt to the methods of law enforcement and what makes them so incredibly profitable.

The organizations of drug traffickers depicted in *The Wire* are viciously territorial, but simultaneously detrterritorialized. The ‘corner boys’ who distribute the drugs are confined to a particular territory, while the upper echelons of their organizations certainly are not.<sup>18</sup> This flexible structure actually mirrors that of the modern corporation: the bottom rungs are fixed to a territory, while the upper management is practically nomadic, manipulating and consolidating its territories of production and distribution for maximum profitability. Whether legitimate or illegitimate, businesses are profit-directed assemblages, structured according to basically similar principles. Their flexible methods of control can readily be transferred and adapted to novel situations. This is clear in *The Wire*: when gang leader Avon Barksdale (Wood Harris) is imprisoned in the second season, his second in command Stringer Bell (Idris Elba), a business school graduate, attempts to restructure the organization for increased stability.

14. See Deleuze and Guattari on smooth space and striated space; the spaces of the nomadic war machine and the sedentary State apparatus (474). In postindustrial states, royal science does its weaving and striating with the wire.

15. See the ‘core’ of Foucault’s approach as defined by Agamben and cited at the outset.

16. de Landa outlines a far more detailed argument for the interpretation of Foucauldian institutions as ontologically equivalent to assemblages (see chp. 4 of his text). It seems, however, that for clarity’s sake we ought to continue referring to well-disciplined, hierarchical institutions as such.

17. These leaders (played by Paul Ben-Victor and Bill Raymond) go by Greek aliases, but are not actually Greek. The narrative suggests an indeterminate Russian or Eastern European origin, never implying a definite territorial affiliation.

18. The corner boys are of course quick to abandon their territory when confronted by law enforcement. The mechanisms referred to in the first section, by which these dealers define a territory for drug-dealing (positioning of stash-houses, avoiding surveillance, exclusion of rival dealers, etc.) are all interesting examples of disciplined spatial organization that subsists on the margins of the dominant ‘rational-legal’ mode (cf. de Landa, 69).



He invests in housing developments and acquires a variety of legitimate businesses to launder the organization's money and account for his income. Of course, this stability more or less vanishes when Avon is released and starts a war with Marlo Stanfield. As Stanfield would be in the series finale, Bell is left disillusioned with the world of business. It seems that no matter how many bribes he offers to people like Senator Davis, his building projects never come to fruition.

In *The Wire*, politics, industry and the streets meet on the margins of the law to exchange money for favours – but the atmosphere is always one of palpable unease. By the end of the third season, Omar and his shotgun finally catch up with Stringer Bell, and he ends up dead (with two of his 'legitimate' associates) in one of his half-finished developments. The disciplines of legitimate and illegitimate organizations often prove themselves to be incommensurable. Yet a figure like Omar is produced by the disciplinary techniques of criminal assemblages, functioning just as they did in the institutions that produced them: imperfectly. Power produces its own exceptions to its own rules. Violence simply begets more violence: when Barksdale brutally murders Omar's boy-

produces just as surely as it produces compliance (cf. Deleuze & Guattari 224). All this simply reaffirms that the principal techniques of disciplinary power in criminal society are violent. Even though criminal assemblages police themselves according to a set of procedures simultaneously more informal and brutal, we must not mistake this unfamiliar discipline for a lack of discipline.

The transgressions and delinquencies produced by discipline are not inherently 'negative' phenomena, although they may certainly be defined as such by its institutions and administrators. Such exceptions are the positive products of discipline and the affirmations of its rule. In *The Wire*, they also often appear to be the only way for individuals to accomplish anything substantial from within their dysfunctional institutions. This seems, at least, to be the theory of Detective McNulty, presented from the beginning as an exemplary investigator and expert manipulator of power dynamics. Setting himself up in the first season against all the unprincipled bosses who want to avoid digging up real crimes, he breaks rank by complaining to a judge about the murder of a witness by Barksdale's organization. The judge then pressures the

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friend in the first season, dumping his corpse in the projects as a display of sovereign power, he only spurs Omar to wage an extended campaign of robberies and murders against his organization. In order to sustain this fever pitch of violence, criminal institutions don't just need docile bodies: they need to train soldiers. *The Wire* dramatizes this process as well, once Michael joins Marlo Stanfield's gang in the fourth season. He becomes the protégé of enforcers Chris and Snoop, who put him through a pseudo-military program of training in firearms and urban tactics. When the 'means of correct training' give the trainee the resourcefulness to subvert the institution, however, an inherently volatile situation is produced. In a scene from the penultimate episode to which I alluded earlier, Michael's death has been ordered by Stanfield, who suspects (incorrectly) that he is an informant. While being driven to his death, Michael has already recognized the danger and pulls a gun on Snoop, after persuading her to pull into an alley. When she asks how he knew, his answer is simple: "Y'all taught me." Michael's training doesn't just enable him to recognize the betrayal of his institution in advance, though. In the finale, we see that he's already begun exacting revenge on his former organization, taking up the role of neighbourhood 'stick-up man' so recently vacated by Omar. Characters like Omar and Michael are the delinquents produced by delinquency, the 'breakaways' and 'inversions' which all discipline

Department to set up an investigative detail: when the institution is dysfunctional, a transgression of its rules might just become a small victory for justice. McNulty's investigative vigor has more to do with his own rebellious streak, however, than with some principled commitment to law and order. While almost every episode from the first season ends with him driving under the influence, in the final season he actually concocts an imaginary serial killer by mutilating already-deceased homeless men, leaving tell-tale clues and fabricating evidence of violent struggles.<sup>19</sup> Of course, his intentions are 'good': he uses the serial killer case as both cover and funding for unauthorized surveillance of Marlo Stanfield's organization. His transgression ultimately bears little fruit, however. Not only does the illegal wiretap end his career, but it permits Stanfield to avoid prosecution altogether.

Sooner or later, it becomes apparent to the viewer that McNulty is motivated more than anything by a single-minded drive to dominate the criminal underworld of Baltimore (and stick it to the 'bosses') with his own ostensibly superior intellect. Simon claims that, as an alternative to the 'good guys chasing bad guys' framework of the police procedural, he wanted to raise questions "about the very labels of good

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19. Viewers will know that this is only a *minuscule* sampling of McNulty's various transgressions in this 'case.'



and bad, and, indeed, whether such distinctly moral notions were really the point” (Hornby). We are beyond genre *and* ‘beyond good and evil’ here: McNulty is driven by nothing more than a basic will-to-power, channeled into an institutional framework which it perpetually overflows. McNulty’s driven single-mindedness makes him ‘good police.’ It also often makes him less of a ‘good person,’ and inevitably draws him into conflict with any number of assemblages and their respective demands. Not only does he actively incur the wrath of the bosses, but his insatiable drives lead him to a divorce, a drinking problem, and eventually his absurd plan to invent a fictitious murderer.

Of course, such a plan could never have gotten off the ground without the collaboration of the media. The fifth season of *The Wire* also takes us into the newsroom and business offices of the *Baltimore Sun*, where the ‘wall’ that once ostensibly divided the two is nowhere to be found. According to Simon (a former *Sun* reporter), this season basically asked the question “why aren’t we paying attention?” (O’Rourke). The immediate blame in this regard seems to be spread fairly evenly between the editors demanding ‘Dickensian’ human-interest stories with one eye on the bottom line and the other on the Pulitzer, and the unscrupulous writers who readily fabricate stories (or simply embellish McNulty’s fabrications) to satisfy such demands. And satisfy them they do: the ‘fabulist,’ as Simon calls him, ends up winning the Pulitzer in the series finale, although as Simon admits, “that was a bit beyond the historical reality; at the historical *Baltimore Sun*, he was a mere Pulitzer finalist” (Simon). Even when fabrications like these are uncovered, the dysfunctional institutions sweep them back under the rug. To reveal one lie is far too great a risk in a system sustained by half-truths. *The Wire* concludes masterfully, demonstrating in its final chapter not only why its own stories – often only *slightly* fictionalized – simply don’t get told in the news media, but why *none* of these slowly-dying institutions are capable any longer of *assembling* the mass of docile bodies into an ‘active citizenry.’

#### 4. Conclusions

With its unprecedented breadth and depth, *The Wire* demonstrates how institutions have a borrowed life of their own, individuating and disciplining the bodies they capture. This drama enacts a useful maxim for social theory, privileging the agency of neither the individual nor the institution. Instead, it examines the material encounters and abstract mechanisms by which individuals produced by social institutions come to reproduce or subvert those institutions in turn. Living bodies, after all, are never wholly docile, constantly transgressing the limits fixed by their institutions. Such transgressions testify to those “*focuses of instability* where groupings and accumulations confront each other, but also confront breakaways and escapes, and where inversions occur” (Deleuze & Guattari 224). In the

end, *The Wire* is driven by these transgressions and focuses of instability. It shows us not just how institutions produce and consume individuals, but how the drives of individuals necessarily resist and break free of institutional discipline run amok. It is not simply a great television show, but *great art*, for reasons which extend well beyond the ones offered here and the standard critic’s glosses on production values, social commentary, or realism. *The Wire* doesn’t simply reproduce or ‘comment’ upon social reality, but sets out instead to unravel the twisted fabric of social assemblages (beginning, of course, with the wires). For the social critic, it offers a comprehensive, faithful portrait of contemporary urban life, an essential case study for any theory of social organization. For the fan, this kind of social theory might be a handy critical supplement to the bleak sociopolitical ‘message’ of the series. Either way, one must recognize that this is not a ‘police procedural,’ having almost nothing in common with the formulaic cop stories to be found in any other ‘crime drama.’ Instead, this “66-hour movie” (Simon, in O’Rourke) goes far beyond the limits of genre, becoming one of the most profound artistic statements since Kafka of the individual condition – and the conditions of individuation – in a society dominated by dysfunctional institutions.

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