

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

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

One of the many glories of *The Wire* is the way it blows apart the traditional limits in depicting African Americans on television. We have at last a program that covers almost every major aspect of urban black life; that cuts across age, class, and sexuality; and captures in each case the appropriate idiom, including authentic street vernacular. This achievement survives the shaky final series, where some of the show's most potent and groundbreaking black characters are either written out (Omar peremptorily felled by a kid gangsta), reduced to caricature (the dynamic, out-lesbian detective Greggs reversed into a demure and practically desexualized part-time foster-mother), or simply lose their way (cool sleuth Freamon allowing himself to become mired in the improbable plot to fabricate a serial killer).¹ One might wonder, too, why it is that Bubbles has to clean up his act so literally in order to emerge from underground and take his place at the table, renouncing in the process all trace of his earlier life of addiction on the streets, including his propensity for intense male relationships. These are questions that will no doubt be analyzed at length in the context of *The Wire's* general politics of representation and its success in not only exposing the fatal ideology of racist thinking and profiling but also critiquing and transcending it (for example, the recurring association of "black" with dirt, as when Officer Colicchio states after being tricked by some corner boys into picking up a brown bag of dog excrement as opposed to a drug stash: "They're all dirty anyway").

What I would like to do here is something very specific: to explore the representation of black masculinity and sexuality in *The Wire*. My inquiry is inspired by the brilliant way the show establishes and develops a range of clearly defined homosocial spaces, from the crack dens of the hood and the gangsta boardroom to the office detail, prison, neighborhood gym, and high-school classroom. These produce a series of

close male buddy relationships between, for instance, Bunk and McNulty, Michael and Duquan, Carver and Hauk, and, of course, Bubbles with first his white junkie sidekick Johnny, then the young black addict Sherrod. They also create a proliferation of competing father figures, including Cutty, Colvin, Proposition Joe, Prez, Carver, even Marlo, who oversee the perilous passage from boyhood to manhood in the ghetto and help to make the fourth season set in the public school system perhaps the most gut-wrenching. Yet these are only the most obvious thematic and narrative markers of black masculinity, and do not account for all the mysteries and complexities of male representation in *The Wire*. What I will attempt to do, therefore, is focus on the specifically visual and stylistic features that recur in the show, no matter the different directors, directors of photography, and editors involved. I hope in the process to reveal some of the concrete reasons why the show makes for such original and utterly compulsive viewing.

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

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curity, such that he immediately suspects the intentions of the benign Cutty and is even prepared to shoot him in the thigh. He engineers the murder of his own delinquent stepfather for reasons that crucially cannot be articulated, although Chris somehow intuits them, perhaps because he has suffered something similar himself. After summarily interrogating the father with Snoop, accusing him of being a pedophile and having sexual relations with men while in prison (the latter is not denied—“A man gotta bust his nut”), Chris then beats him into a pulp, beyond all recognition. This recalls an earlier moment in *The Wire* when Omar’s lover Brandon was first tortured then brutally murdered by the Barksdale crew before being left for public view as the unspeakable gay horror. Chris, Michael, and Snoop will come together later to eliminate a member of their own gang, June Bug, who had dared to cast aspersions on Marlo’s gangstahood.

Yet by way of compensation *The Wire* also offers something that is of largely visual power, namely an eroticization of the hood. This process, what I call the lure of the aesthetic, is already set in train by the instruments of police surveillance (CCTV camera, telephoto lens) which make the black figures caught in the dead zones of the mid-rise projects and on the steps of row houses an object of the camera’s obsessive, almost voyeuristic gaze. We are continually presented with *tableaux vivants* of corner boys, hoppers, drug slingers, and hustlers, whether alone or in formation, isolated in a frame that remains curiously silent and impervious to the sounds and distractions of popular youth culture like hip-hop and dating. Gang members must observe the code of no drugs and alcohol, even, it would appear, sex, or, like Wallace, risk being eliminated altogether (one of the very few occasions the Barksdale crew enjoy a house party with girls, drinks, and drugs occurs when their leader Avon is away in prison). Occupying such a rarefied and ascetic screen space, they appear all the more primed and accessible yet also disposable and endlessly replaceable. In fact, *The Wire* evokes at times the imagery of black homo-thug gay porn websites which revolve on the daily turnover of virtually indistinguishable fresh hot dudes (an impression furthered by the official HBO-*The Wire* website where the images of the cast are arranged in series and displayed with brief bios). The (literally) “to-die-for” black gangsta *thugz* like Stringer, Marlo, Avon, Bodie, D’Angelo, Wee-Bey, and Chris compete for the viewer’s attention with dashing black officers such as Carver and Sydnor, complemented by their closely cropped white colleagues, hunks Colicchio and Dozerman. With their mean poses, impassive stares, and fixed killer smiles, these sad and doomed lost boys constitute in their heightened availability and vulnerability one of the great unavowed pleasures of



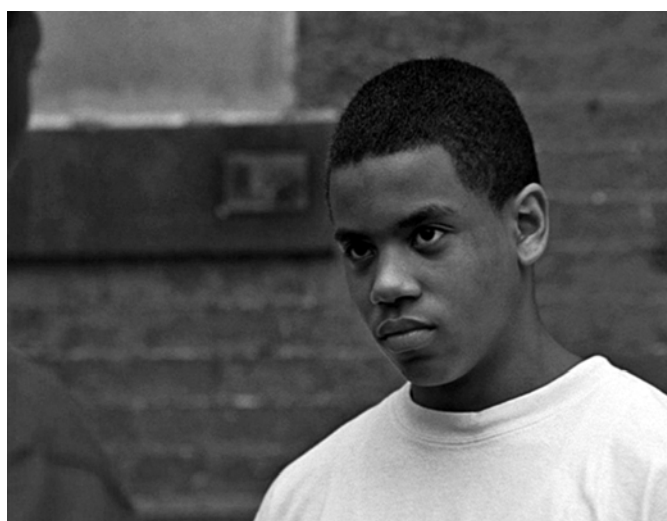
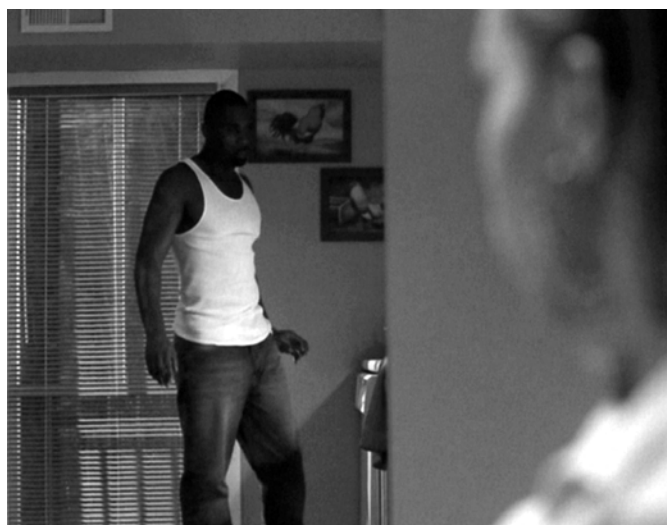
The ambiguity of a glance

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The Wire. What is one person’s urban nightmare is another man’s fantasy.

A homoerotics of style is created by the very way the camera “takes” its young male figures. We are drawn into rituals of spectatorial desire through the stylized representation and mise-en-scène of the black body. Typically, we encounter it first in moody long shot and at an oblique angle before zooming gently toward it in extreme close-up (occasionally also from behind) and finally panning or tracking away. The effect created is of a depth of field magnified by framing, the play of light and shade, focusing and refocusing, and the extended duration of the shot. The camera is almost always moving in *The Wire*, but these elegantly choreographed and discrete scenes stand out dramatically from the rest of the action, cutting as it were vertically into a horizontal continuum and, in the process, queering *cinematically* the standard codes of television realism. Only young black male characters receive this degree of visual investment which at times achieves a Cocteau-like intensity and sensory rhythm. By contrast, both the female and the white male figures (including those “as-good-as-white” like Former Mayor Royce and Commissioner Burrell) are filmed largely in flat mid-shot without any significant play of focus, distance, or speed. The domestic scene between Stringer and D’Angelo’s former girlfriend, Donette, is instructive: whereas he moves and “flows” (a key term in *The Wire*), she is held static within the frame. The same occurs when Stringer encounters his lawyer Levy in his office: while Levy remains fixed in his seat in medium shot, we move slowly and irresistibly towards Stringer in close-up on the other side of the table.

HOMOEROTIC FLOW,
UNNAMEABLE ATTRACTION



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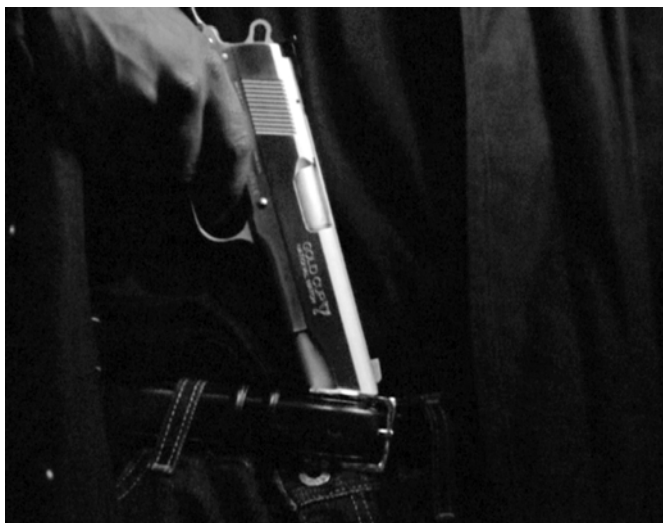
Such is the erotic “follow-through” of the black male figure in *The Wire*, and it produces some remarkable homoerotic sequences. Here are just a few: stirred out of bed one morning and fully naked, Omar looks out of the window (a subjective point-of-view shot) before then turning round to meet our gaze in a long shot from the adjoining room, the precise framing emphasized by the open doorway (he eventually leaves for the grocery store in a silk dressing-gown accompanied by the kids’ refrain “Omar strollin”); Omar in prison kissing below the ear the black inmate he is just about to knife brutally and bloodily in the buttocks (Omar: “Shame we hadn’t more time together. We could have made us a couple of babies”); Marlo’s face juxtaposed with that of Avon caught as a reflection in the glass partition of the prison visitors’ room (Avon nods fraternally at Marlo having declared he has “nuthin’ but love” for the Westside crews, a gesture that neatly reprises their first act of recognition during an arraignment hearing when Avon mouthed “Marlo?”); the sultry love scene between Greggs and her new fling photographed naked on bed from a high angle (the only fully fledged sex scene in *The Wire*); Stringer and Avon wrestling on the floor in sweaty close-up, the movement of the camera suddenly suspended when blood seeps through Avon’s white vest and all one hears for a good half-minute is the throbbing sound of intense exhalation and physical ache; the extraordinary meeting of gazes between Marlo and his potential new henchmen Bodie and Michael, each a visual seduction sealed by the use of shot/counter-shot (in the case of the latter, a doe-eyed Marlo wets his lips and breaks into a smile: “We cool”). It is, of course, because Omar is already a half-mythical figure living in the shadows that he attracts a cinematic glow whenever he appears. When he whistles his way into frame at the start of the penultimate episode of season 3, he provokes what can only be described as an urban Western duel with Brother Mouzone complete with atmospheric night-time lighting, low angles, and a stunning series of shot/counter-shots that alternate between long shot and extreme close-up. With its impressive high production values and Omar threatening with his hangdog grin to “empty out half his mag,” this sequence alone reinvents the entire standard iconography of the hood.

Just as *The Wire* is always moving us centrifugally out of any reassuring fixed central urban space like the Westside ghetto (and within that the micro-space of Colvin’s short-lived “legal” drug zone) into new communal spaces (the port, suburbia, upstate correction centers, etc.), so it forces us continually to extend our notion of male desire by confronting us with an unnameable longing for male intimacy. In addition

to the highly crafted visual scenes just mentioned are the regular instances of grace and flow when we “ride,” as it were, with the black male characters in privileged, intimate moments. They include Avon and Wee-Bey leaning against the fence during an outside basketball game to parade their buffed upper torsos; Omar tenderly putting his hands around his new young lover Renaldo who sports a Free Love T-shirt; a close-up of Avon whispering softly into Stringer’s ear that he is his “baby”; the camera slowly alighting on Marlo perched statuesquely on the steps of a row house; the changing play of focus when Omar is filmed chatting with his blind banker Butchie outside the latter’s bar from a range of distances. And many more. The teasing play of distance and proximity is a key factor here, and one of the real joys of the series is the way we move *physically* closer to certain characters as they evolve, notably Carver who becomes progressively more natural and loose—more “street”—as he begins to understand with greater sensitivity the precarious condition of boys like Randy. His moment of bonding with Cutty at the gym, filmed in shot/counter-shot and culminating with beaming smiles in a tight two-shot, is a beautiful moment. As for Marlo, we catch him at his most tender with his pigeons which he claims to admire for the way they “take care of the young’uns.” We don’t need to refer back to the phallic birds of Ancient Greece, nor indeed ponder the titles of films like Mike Nichols’s *The Birdcage* (1996), to appreciate the homoerotic frisson when he fondly caresses the head of one pigeon with his long, delicate fingers. Marlo is a model of sublimated desire and controlled aggression, a fact accentuated by his slender physique and almost feminine grace (his only serious sexual encounter with a woman, we note, results in her brutal murder). The increasing, baroque excess of senseless violence in the final series threatens, however, to turn the homoerotic into the gratuitous and even camp, for instance, the frankly absurd spectacle of Dozerman suddenly stripping off to the waist (due to nits in the grass, he claims unconvincingly) when surveilling a warehouse with Sydnor; or Mayor Carcetti, in the words of one unimpressed journalist, acting “oh so butch.”

The Wire’s peculiar insistence on the aesthetic is unlike anything ever seen before on television, and that includes its NBC forerunner, *Homicide: Life on the Street* (based on David Simon’s nonfiction book *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets*), where no formal distinction is really made in the visual representation of the different groups in Baltimore and where a more uniform documentary style characterized by rapid, jump-cut editing prevails, along with the occasional use of musical montages and shot repetition. In fact, *The Wire* recalls more the lyrical moments of Charles Burnett’s

**CINEMATIC SHOWDOWN:
OMAR AND BROTHER MOUZONE**



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self-conscious art film, *Killer of Sheep* (1977), perhaps the only comparable all-round visualization of the urban black male experience in the U.S. (in this case Watts). The formal portrayal of its young boys and men is very different, however, one might say almost innocent (close handheld camera, fixed-frame compositions, motivated tracking shots). This is because the family circle still remains intact, however weak and troubled its paternal figures, and united by the signs of a recognizable black culture in song and music. By eschewing any kinds of special effects and insisting on the frontality and “thereness” of the subject, the aestheticization of the black male form in *The Wire* has arguably more in common with Robert Mapplethorpe’s controversial late portraits of black men in graphic close-up, though without the deliberate shock value.

There remains, of course, a fundamental paradox and irony to *The Wire*’s homoerotic representation of young black men, since it is reliant on the very distance it maintains toward its black characters. After all, we are never made privy to the daily personal lives of Marlo, Avon, and the rest, any more than we know much about the private circumstances of the main black police officers like Bunk, Freamon, and Carver (the exception being Daniels once he leaves his estranged wife and moves in with his new white partner, Assistant State’s Attorney Pearlman). For the most part they remain strictly on business and on call, to the point even that when Michael goes to the theme park with Duquan and becomes a teenager again, joking and chatting up girls, the effect is strangely unreal. Moreover, we never enter “naturally” into all-black private spaces outside gangsta hours, as we do, for instance, in the case of the white dockers where we are invited almost too easily into the extended family home of the Sobotkas. Michael’s junkie household is presented, by contrast, as a clinical case study of parental abuse. The exceptions to this rule—which serve, of course, merely to prove it—are the rather shortlived family space shared by Greggs and Cheryl, and the unashamed intimacy enjoyed by Omar and Renaldo who even find time to watch videos together. Complete with Omar’s predilection for Honey Nut Cheerios, this is gay domesticity pushed virtually to the level of parody. Does this narrative strategy signal an implicit acknowledgment by *The Wire*’s predominantly white creative team that they do not have the necessary background experience and knowledge to attempt such a comprehensive portrayal? Either way, the selective “discretion” of the much-vaunted realism of *The Wire* serves all the more to highlight those privileged moments of aesthetic contact with black male figures, when they are thrown into affective, cinematic relief and the viewer is actively encouraged to project.

The intertextual in-joke of Renaldo reading the 2005 crime novel *Drama City* by one of its writers, Georges Pelecanos, confirms that artistic self-reflexivity and knowledge in *The Wire* is linked directly to its elaboration of homoerotic desire. The brief glimpse of Deputy Commissioner Rawls in a predominantly black gay bar (a thread that most uncharacteristically for *The Wire* is never pursued) serves as a tacit recognition that the series is also addressing—and indeed catering to—forms of (white) gay fantasy. In a supremely indulgent moment of dramatic irony, Rawls will later quip disingenuously to his colleagues that he, like everyone else, is not adverse to a little perversion. While such consummate self-awareness on the part of its white characters (and creators) may not help to answer or cancel out some of the concerns I expressed at the beginning, nevertheless *The Wire* offers without doubt one of the most far-reaching formal explorations yet of the relations between race and spectatorial desire and opens up the possibility for new forms of gay realism both in television and film. The last shot of Michael stepping out of the darkness to rob Vinson and other dealers hints strongly that he may be a reincarnation of Omar—an exciting and tantalizing prospect.

‡ Cast listing of characters named in this essay (in the order they are mentioned): Omar Little (Michael Kenneth Williams), Detective Shakima “Kima” Greggs (Sonja Sohn), Detective Lester Freamon (Clarke Peters), Bubbles (Andre Royo), Officer Anthony Colicchio (Benjamin Busch), Detective William “Bunk” Moreland (Wendell Pierce), James “Jimmy” McNulty (Dominic West), Michael Lee (Tristan Wilds), Duquan “Dukie” Weems (Jermaine Crawford), Sergeant Ellis Carver (Seth Gilliam), Officer Thomas “Herc” Hauk (Domenick Lombardozzi), Johnny Weeks (Leo Fitzpatrick), Sherrod (Rashad Orange), Dennis “Cutty” Wise (Chad L. Coleman), Howard “Bunny” Colvin (Robert Wisdom), Joe “Proposition Joe” Stewart (Robert F. Chew), Roland “Prez” Pryzbylewski (Jim True-Frost), Marlo Stanfield (Jamie Hector), Sergeant Jay Landsman (Delaney Williams), Chris Partlow (Gbenga Akinnagbe), Felicia “Snoop” Pearson (Felicia Pearson), Brandon White (Michael Kevin Damell), Wallace (Michael B. Jordan), Avon Barksdale (Wood Harris), Russell “Stringer” Bell (Idris Elba), Preston “Bodie” Broodius (J. D. Williams), D’Angelo Barksdale (Larry Gilliard, Jr.), Roland “Wee-Bey” Brice (Hassan Johnson), Detective Leander Sydnor (Corey Parker Robinson), Officer Kenneth Dozerman (Rick Otto), Former Mayor Clarence V. Royce (Glynn Turman), Police Commissioner Ervin H. Burrell (Frankie R. Faison), Brother Mouzone (Michael Potts), Donette (Shamyl Brown), Maurice “Maury” Levy (Michael Kostroff), Renaldo (Ramon Rodriguez), Butchie (S. Robert Morgan), Randy Wagstaff (Maestro Harrell), Colonel Cedric Daniels (Lance Reddick), Assistant State’s Attorney Rhonda Pearlman (Deirdre Lovejoy), Cheryl (Melanie Nicholls-King), Deputy Commissioner for Operations William A. Rawls (John Doman), Vinson (Norris Davis).

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ABSTRACT This article argues that despite the omnipresence of homophobia relayed linguistically and thematically in *The Wire*, the show also includes some remarkable instances of male homoeroticism in the way it visualizes “cinematically” its black male characters. The result is a groundbreaking exploration of the relations between race, television realism, and spectatorship.

KEYWORDS *The Wire*, African American, masculinity, television realism, homoeroticism