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**New Television as Neo-Naturalism: *The Wire* and *The Shield***

In *New Television*, Martin Shuster discusses *The Wire* creator David Simon's understanding of the show as a version of contemporary (or postmodernist) tragedy. While Shuster voices reservations with regard to transposing Greek tragedy onto the TV series, he is not concerned with presenting alternatives to Simon's interpretation. One alternative to tragedy that critics including Laura Bieger, Walter Benn Michaels, Keica Driver Thompson, and Agustin Zarzoza have advanced is to read *The Wire* as a contemporary refiguration of naturalism.[1] That model is taken up in this essay, which argues that a resurgent twenty-first-century form of naturalism offers a more effective perspective than tragedy through which to understand key narrative structures in the show. Moreover, in order to illustrate the pervasiveness of the neo-naturalist mode in contemporary American culture this essay discusses a contemporaneous TV crime series, *The Shield*, alongside *The Wire*. I argue that naturalism offers numerous valuable perspectives on these shows (alongside many otherwise diverse examples of new television including *Dexter*, *Breaking Bad*, *Better Call Saul*, and *The Night Of*), not least in terms of providing greater insight into the political context and content of both series.

**Naturalism, American Naturalism, Neo-Naturalism**

Naturalism emerged in the late nineteenth century as a mode of writing borrowing heavily from contemporary evolutionary theory. Neither truly a literary form nor a genre, but more precisely a philosophical position, literary naturalism purported to provide the means for authors to conduct experiments into how human lives are governed by internal and external forces.[2] Émile Zola is considered the principal architect of the philosophical principles of literary naturalism, which demanded that the author withdraw from control of their creation once an initial scenario is devised, allowing deterministic forces to decide the characters' experiences. Characters in naturalism are thus largely dominated by forces greater than

themselves. In the works of Zola and his American inheritors, free will is highly circumscribed and characters' actions are broadly determined by inherited biological traits and external environmental factors. While naturalism was briefly popular in America at the turn of the twentieth century it rapidly fell out of favour. More so than in Europe, however, naturalism has enjoyed periodic resurgences of popularity with authors and readers, most recently in the early years of the twenty-first century.

Nineteenth- and twentieth-century American naturalism is generally understood as less committed to determinism than its European counterpart, and more open to synthesis with other discourses. Determinism has nevertheless always been a significant component; indeed, the recent manifestation of naturalism in American culture is arguably more committed to determinism than any other manifestation, European or American, since Zola. This resurgence arguably reflects a sense that individuals' choices are diminished in contemporary America, that behaviour is more narrowly determined. The heightened emphasis on determinism in twenty-first-century naturalism also holds significant moral implications. Characters whose behaviour is largely determined by forces outside their control arguably bear diminished moral responsibility for their actions. This is a crucial observation both in terms of the wider resurgence of naturalism, and the particular cases of *The Wire* and *The Shield*.

For both an American public and the narrower political class struggling to justify policies such as the Patriot Act and the War on Terror, and the resulting depredations such as Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay, conceiving of the self as lacking in free will and being forced to act in particular ways might be an attractive proposition. A model of highly deterministic naturalism which absolves characters from blame has become central to a broad range of twenty-first-century American cultural production. A number of naturalist television crime series of this period, for example, depict those in actual positions of power

incongruously placed in situations where they find themselves compelled to bend or break laws in order to bring criminals to justice. As we shall see, repeatedly in *The Shield* those in policing, most frequently white males, excuse deplorable actions by insisting that they had no alternative. On the other hand, numerous texts such as *The Wire* are constructed more sympathetically from the perspective of those genuinely disempowered by the results of the period's rampaging neoliberal and neoconservative policies. In these, protagonists from marginalised groups – whether due to issues of class, race, gender, or a combination of those factors – find themselves overwhelmed by societal forces.

In terms of television, the cultural conditions for a resurgent naturalism have taken a while to coalesce. Writing more than twenty years ago, *New York Times Book Review* editor Charles McGrath noted the "depth and sophistication" of certain US television shows of the 1990s, which he referred to as the "prime-time novel" (243). McGrath argued then that these represented "the equivalent of the serial novel, unfolding epic stories instalment by instalment", and further that television drama of the period revisits, "the realism of Dreiser and Hopper: the painstaking, almost literal examination of middle- and working-class lives in the conviction that truth resides less in ideas than in details closely observed" (244). In the years since McGrath was writing, quality television has only increased its resemblance to the naturalist novel of the early twentieth century, with its focus on detailed plotting, sustained character arcs, and a commitment to sensationalist stories told through gritty realism. Even at a fundamental level, the sheer length of these series (*The Wire* comprises 60 episodes, *The Shield* 88) enables an expansiveness and thus the construction of the kind of complex chains and layers of cause and effect essential in the illustration of determinism which is at the heart of naturalism.

**Naturalism versus Tragedy, Determinism versus Fate: *The Wire***

> *The Wire* is really constructed as Greek tragedy …. But if you supplant the idea of those old Greek gods with postmodern institutions, with the police department, with drug organization, with government, with the union, with the Catholic Church, with Enron, you start layering over the institutions that determine how individuals are going to be served by or serve society. (David Simon quoted in Shuster 96)

As the above quotation suggests, Shuster interrogates Simon's assertion that – especially with regard to the storylines concerning D'Angelo Barksdale, Frank Sobotka, Stringer Bell, and Major Howard "Bunny" Colvin – *The Wire* is a refiguring of Greek tragedy. According to Simon, "postmodern institutions" take on such a socially deterministic role that capitalism becomes "the ultimate god in *The Wire*. Capitalism is Zeus" (Simon quoted in Shuster 96). To a limited extent, Shuster adheres to this interpretation. For instance, he notes that "as with so much that appears on *The Wire*," Stringer's downfall and death, "strikes the viewer as seemingly predestined, unavoidable – Stringer appears to be *singled* out, as if by fate" (95, original emphasis). What these arguments reveal is a tendency on the part of Simon and, to a lesser extent, Shuster to conflate determinism with predestination or fate. As Shuster argues regarding Stringer Bell, for example, fate "closes off any space for the possibility of critique: all is already determined" (95). This is an important statement in that it suggests reading *The Wire* as a fateful tragedy neuters possibilities of political critique. This is true, but it is to misread the deterministic forces at work in *The Wire* and other naturalist new television.

In his essay "The Novel as Social Science", Zola warns readers against conflating determinism with fate or fatalism. Determinism, Zola argues, provides the environment for particular phenomena and consequent behaviour: "the moment that we can act, and that we do act, on the determining cause of phenomena – by modifying their surroundings, for example – we cease to be fatalists" (281). In other words, determinism posits phenomena that determine behaviour in particular and specified ways, but which should not to be conflated

with the inexorable teleology of fate. Even the example from *The Wire* most explicitly cited as representing tragedy, Stringer's death in the third season, is perhaps better understood according to a deterministic naturalism. That is, while his death may be framed as inevitable fate – thus conforming to the tragedy of the "fall of a great man" – it is in fact brought about by decisions he made according to particular circumstances. That is, decisions such as ordering D'Angelo's murder in prison, organising the torture and killing of Brandon, Omar's lover, and setting Omar up to assassinate Brother Mouzone, respectively set Avon Barksdale, Omar, and Brother Mouzone against Stringer. In other words, Stringer's death at the hands of Omar and Brother Mouzone is identifiable as part of a deterministic naturalist narrative. Stringer takes actions which bring about his demise, no matter the degree to which he felt compelled to take these decisions at the time.

To read *The Wire* as tragedy, on the other hand, is to posit the forces at work as fatalistic rather than deterministic, something Shuster expresses doubts about, but nevertheless endorses at least once, as when noting the show's depiction of the pervasiveness of capitalist oppression: "[e]xactly in virtue of the alleged totalizing nature of capitalism it is appropriate thereby to speak of the return of fate" (98). The danger of interpreting *The Wire* as tragedy driven by fate is that one becomes inclined to understand the forces at work as depersonalised and morally blameless. If we read it instead as deterministic naturalism, then the mask of inevitability obscuring the actual social forces is dislodged. In fairness, Shuster begins at this point to articulate unease with the implications of Simon's tragedy reading, tacitly distancing himself: "to the extent that Simon rejects revolutionary politics as unnecessary, Simon's reliance on fate seems to be rhetorical, since in an important way the contours of capitalism are *not* like fate: they are seemingly contingent" (98, original emphasis). This is indeed the case and, as Shuster continues, Simon's tragic interpretation is finally, "artificial and does not adequately capture the sense of contingency *and* necessity that

a viewer experiences with *The Wire*" (100). In other words, it is both more accurate and instructive to interpret the action of *The Wire* through the lens of determinism and naturalism than as tragic fate. To do so explicitly does capture that contingency and, moreover, is less politically neutered, allowing us to perceive with greater clarity the sources of powerful deterministic force within the urban societies depicted in *The Wire* and *The Shield*.

Walter Benn Michaels is amongst those critics who interpret *The Wire* as a naturalist text. Like Simon and Shuster quoted above he argues that the show "is about institutions – unions, schools, political parties, gangs. It's about the world neoliberalism has … produced." Michaels understands this as explicitly naturalist: "*The Wire* is like a reinvention of Zola or Dreiser for a world in which the deification of the market is going out rather than coming in." It would be useful here briefly to rehearse certain elements of the naturalist interpretation this essay is proposing of *The Wire* alongside other new television. Obviously comparable to earlier manifestations of naturalism is the depiction, in both *The Wire* and *The Shield*, of urban life, "the city, the brutal urban environment" (Thompson 83), as a viciously combative jungle, populated by a cast of venal humans but one remove from animals. *The Wire* "has at its heart the limited possibilities the city offers to many of its citizens, the crushing blow of heredity and environment" (Thompson 83). This "crushing blow" is notable, in *The Wire*, in that every time some reform of or challenge to the existing system is presented, powerful institutional forces work to prevent or contain any change. In this sense, these powerful institutions revisit the deterministic forces which overwhelm the individual in earlier manifestations of naturalism. Likewise, *The Wire* presents relatively powerless individuals railing against systems from within and trying, largely unsuccessfully, to effect change, such as the efforts of Prez or Bunny Colvin in the school in series four. As in classic naturalism, the individual is relatively powerless against systemic institutions: "[q]uestions about what would constitute good teaching, good police work, good politics, or good parenting are

ancillary to the thesis that any personal efforts are insufficient in the context of systemic failure. Everyone eventually succumbs to the logic of institutions, and the cycle repeats itself" (Zarzoza 103).

Before moving on to *The Shield*, it would be helpful to consider one of the most explicitly naturalist storylines in *The Wire*, the downfall of Frank Sobotka in series two. Frank, a familiarly working-class industrial naturalist protagonist, is the treasurer for the Baltimore branch of the International Brotherhood of Stevedores, and is involved in smuggling drugs and other contraband through the Baltimore docks. This is motivated by his determination to sustain his members' way of life, working in the docks, in the face of the effects of de-industrialisation: Frank uses the money he makes from drug smuggling to bribe local politicians into supporting operations which will revive the docking industry. Frank is thus motivated by money, in a similar way to protagonists from earlier naturalist fiction, although his actions are arguably more altruistic, in that he is perpetrating serious criminal acts as part of an attempt to preserve the union members' jobs. Certainly, though he meets an arguably tragic end – murdered by his drug paymasters when he threatens to turn informer – his narrative is more usefully read as naturalistic than as a version of Greek tragedy. Despite a moderately powerful position as a union boss, he is not the great figure brought down by the gods for hubris, but an ordinary and in many ways dispossessed working man who finds himself compelled into certain acts by his immediate circumstances and his environment.

Shuster argues for the importance of family in new television, albeit "not invoked in a traditional, conservative context" (129). This is an overarching theme of his monograph, wherein family is positioned as new television's "sole remaining site of anything that might resemble normative authority" (123), and also specific to *The Wire*, in which "familial life is essentially the only site where reconciliation or happiness is available within late capitalism" (119). *The Wire*'s focus on family is indeed a further significant element in Frank's storyline.

A key factor motivating Frank's criminal acts is his continual effort to cover for his troubled and wayward son, Ziggy, and to help his nephew, Nick. Nick is also a strongly recognisable naturalist figure, pressured economically by insufficient work at the docks to be able to save enough money for a house for him, his wife, and young daughter. Compared to Frank, Nick is drawn more directly into the world of drug dealing by familial aspirations. Tellingly, in terms of Shuster's family thesis, Frank is killed, whereas Nick barely survives. The Sobotka family saga may have tragic consequences, but ultimately conforms readily to a naturalist reading. The schematic structure of two generations of brothers and their sons, for example, emphasises the typical naturalist concern with heredity. More significantly, reading this as naturalism rather than refigured Greek tragedy dispels the need to ascribe credibility to "fate" as a force. That is, Nick and Frank's actions are determined by concrete structures of economic oppression rather than predetermined by a nebulous notion of fate.

Ultimately *The Wire* is a highly deterministic, and thus highly naturalistic, text. As a final example of the extent of this determinism, we might consider a lengthy stream of consequences where Herc, a characteristically slipshod officer, fails to protect an informant, Bubbs, from repeated attack on the streets. When Bubbs phones Herc for the previously promised emergency assistance, Herc is in a meeting and fails to take his call. This failure has notably serious consequences: Bubbs is forced to try to defend himself and poison his persecutor, but the poison inadvertently kills Sharrod, a young man whom Bubbs had taken under his wing. Bubbs, in revenge for Herc's failure, also sets up Herc to arrest a church minister. The minister's subsequent complaint lands new mayor Carcetti in trouble and loses Herc his job, before he winds up in series five working for the gangsters' lawyer, Levy, and incidentally in a position to help Carver by supplying him with gangster Marlo's phone number.

This evidently complex chain of consequences more significantly foregrounds issues regarding moral responsibility for determined actions and behaviour. That is, when Carcetti finds himself under media pressure because of Herc's actions and the minister's complaint, responsibility for dealing with Herc is shifted rapidly down Carcetti's chain of command, ultimately to (then) Major Daniels. There is a concerted effort to avoid responsibility, both through delegation and a refusal to take responsibility for actions which are conceivable as unavoidable. As Carcetti's Chief of Staff, Mike Steintorf, acerbically comments during a later meeting about the $54m hole in the city's education budget, "OK, we got it. No-one's responsible" (4.12 "That's Got His Own"). In other words, *The Wire* occasionally dramatizes such chains of consequences as a means to critique those in positions of authority seeking to avoid moral responsibility through an exonerative determinism. As we shall see, *The Shield* is much less inclined to criticize such practices, instead frequently offering tacit support for authority figures who refuse responsibility by appropriating positions of relative powerlessness.

### *The Shield* and Naturalism

*The Shield* was the first drama production of *FX*, a cable offshoot of the Fox network. Like *The Wire*, the programme ran between 2002 and 2008, through the George W. Bush administration, albeit for seven series rather than five. This periodization is not insignificant, with both shows being very much part of a cultural moment during which, as Shuster notes, "public trust in US institutions is at an all-time low and where, whatever promise the project of the United States of America might be taken to suggest, such a promise is shown forcefully – perhaps even irreparably – to be in danger of disappearing" (6). As already suggested, whereas *The Wire* employs a deterministic naturalism largely from the position of those disenfranchised by the failure of social institutions, *The Shield*'s general tendency is to use the same framework as a means to shore up faith, albeit equivocally, in the institution of

policing. In particular, *The Shield* frequently employs naturalism's deterministic universe as a means of exonerating its principal characters from blame for ostensibly poor moral choices.

Based in a police precinct in the fictional Los Angeles district of Farmington, *The Shield* was notable for its sensationalist violence, a compelling and lengthy arc narrative, and its verité shooting style.[3] The show depicts the actions and eventual downfall of a corrupt police unit – the "Strike Team", four white men assigned to combat drug- and gang-related crime – including its leader, Detective Vic Mackey (Michael Chiklis). Mackey is a wildly unconventional cop, a believer in natural justice rather than legal procedures. He and his team, working to a broadly utilitarian ethical code, achieve some positive results, but often at considerable cost. Although comprising numerous subplots, the main story arc of *The Shield* concerns Mackey and the members of his team gradually being brought to justice. This narrative impressively spans the entirety of the show's run, from Mackey's murder of an undercover cop sent to investigate the Strike Team in the very first episode, through the Strike Team's successful heist of an Armenian mob's money, to the Team's subsequent rancorous fall out regarding that robbery, and its gradual downfall.

While the two shows are similar in terms of making use of naturalist traditions, given that both series typically depict characters in straitened, determined circumstances, there are considerable political differences. Gang members in *The Shield*, for example, tend to be sketchily drawn, whereas in *The Wire* they are fully realised at every level of the organization and often notably sympathetic. This means that the latter series is considerably more nuanced with regard to notions of criminality. In *The Shield* drug and gang culture is an omnipresent evil to be opposed, not least since the narrative is generally focalized through police characters. By contrast, in *The Wire* the selling of drugs is simply "the game" on the streets, depicted as just another form of late capitalism which happens to be more or less arbitrarily criminalised, as Bunny Colvin's Hamsterdam experiment illustrates. This represents a general

pattern in the series, whereby in *The Shield* it is more usually the police who act in ways determined by the criminality of the society which surrounds them, while in *The Wire* characters are drawn into culturally-defined criminal behaviour by impoverished social circumstances and resultant lack of agency.

Besides narrative focus, the visual language of *The Shield* also bears much responsibility for the show's problematic treatment of ethnic minority characters, especially those involved in gang culture. Numerous episodes include montages of images depicting a deprived urban jungle, soundtracked with rap or other music associated with ethnic minority groups. On the one hand the urban jungle is a metaphor as old as American naturalism itself, but on the other *The Shield* frequently employs it in order to paint ethnic minority status as a convenient but problematic shorthand for criminality. That is, the gaudy and chaotic streets of Farmington as depicted in these montages are inhabited almost exclusively by people of colour, predominantly homogenous and faceless gang members. The cold open of episode 1.1 ("Pilot") for example, is an establishing montage of the "war-zone" environment of Farmington. As elsewhere, it serves to instil in the viewer a sense of the damaging determining effects of the urban milieu, populated by a deprived ethnic minority underclass. These montages, buttressed by other signifying structures such as the casually racist language used by Mackey and others on the force, reinforce racialized ideologies familiar from earlier forms of American naturalism. Compared to *The Wire*'s fully humanised African-American cast, whether criminal, police, or civilian, *The Shield*'s broad brushstrokes tendency is to depict an ethnic minority criminal underclass en masse.

Mike Chopra-Gant has argued that opposing these stereotypical ethnic minority depictions in *The Shield* is Mackey's reaffirmation of the power of white, male, family values. Chopra-Gant concludes that *The Shield* "conveys a compelling sense that a successfully integrated multicultural society is inevitably dependent on the continuing power

of the white patriarch" (133). Although female and/or non-white characters such as Detective Claudette Wyms (an African-American) and David Aceveda (the precinct's Hispanic captain) hold legal power, a "sense of authentic 'natural' justice is unambiguously the possession of the middle-aged white man: Vic Mackey" (132). While Chopra-Gant is correct that Mackey represents this figure – the importance to him of his family is relentlessly reemphasised and used as mitigation for his criminal acts – Mackey is, as mentioned above, ultimately punished, along with the rest of the Strike Team, who end up either dead or imprisoned. Indeed, Mackey's punishment calls to mind Shuster's sustained illustration of the importance of family in new television, since he is not only bound to a desk job, kept away from inflicting further damage on the streets, but his wife gives crucial evidence against him before she and his children are forever separated from Mackey into witness protection.

Further destabilising the centrality of Mackey's central role in maintaining white male authority, the true moral centres of the programme are ultimately more clearly established as non-white, non-male, and/or non-heteronormative. As mentioned, Captain Aceveda is Hispanic, although by the end of the series he has significantly fallen as a figure of moral leadership, being embroiled in political corruption. More significantly, the two police officers who are closest to representing the series' moral centre (although they, too, typically for *The Shield*, are also frequently compromised) are African Americans, Detective Wyms and a junior cop, Julien, who through the series struggles to reconcile his homosexuality with his Christian beliefs. It is therefore reductive to claim that *The Shield* unquestioningly endorses the view of the white male-centred family, even while it is nevertheless impossible to deny that its use of a deterministic framework to locate crime as an issue predominantly specific to ethnic minorities is hugely problematic.

One particular aspect of *The Shield* crucial in terms of its political context is its portrayal of Mackey's frequent use of torture as a means of extracting information or

confessions from suspects, an element closely bound up with the show's determinism. That is, Mackey's use of torture is always presented as a final resort, a means to an end, something he is forced into using by the pressures of an urgent investigation, thus limiting his moral responsibility. As Nicholas Ray observes, these scenarios call to mind Giorgio Agamben's description of the State of Exception. This is when a state uses geopolitical circumstances to declare a state of emergency as a justification for adopting tyrannical extreme measures, which represents a good description of the post-9/11 US in which *The Shield* is set.

As Ray discusses, Mackey and the Strike Team acting according to a self-declared state of exception is perhaps most clearly seen in a flashback episode in season two (2.9 'Co-Pilot'), although in this case the actions involve planting evidence rather than the use of torture. This episode depicts Mackey's first day in charge of the Strike Team, and the extreme pressure put upon the team by Aceveda to bring in a suspect. Mackey tries to persuade his team that they need in this single instance to plant evidence: "Maybe we need a shortcut … 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" (2.9 "Co-Pilot"). The show asks viewers to believe, therefore, that Mackey's serial criminal behaviour in securing arrests is a product of – that is, determined by – the pressures of the moment. The implication is that once such an ostensibly utilitarian step is taken to overcome apparently exceptional circumstances, it is very difficult to return to doing things "the right way". In other words, in this episode we witness, as Ray observes, "the moment in which the supposed exceptionality of the Strike Team's inaugural case becomes tacitly structured into the very operation of the team's normal functioning" (168). What is also significant is that presenting this flashback as the first instance of Mackey and his team adopting criminal tactics, and only apparently as a response to external pressures, is actually not particularly convincing, given how engrained such practices clearly are by the time we

join the Team only a few weeks later, in the first season. This particular moment is supposed to represent the first significant step in Mackey's descent into degeneracy, but that it is so unconvincingly represented underlines how spurious is the state of exception as a justification for Mackey's tactics, including torture, throughout the show.

A second, and especially problematic, characteristic of Mackey's use of torture is that it almost always produces the desired results. In the first episode, for example, once Detective Holland "Dutch" Wagenbach's cerebral methods have failed in soliciting a confession from a suspected paedophile, an argument ensues between Dutch, Wyms, and Aceveda over what to do next, not least since a young girl's life is at stake. As the editing cuts between shots of the three, the camera on Aceveda very slowly zooms in as he gradually loses his temper with the two detectives and leaves to get Mackey. The space closing around Aceveda underlines how his options are diminishing, and that circumstances determine his calling on what he knows will be Mackey's brutal interrogation tactics. Aceveda's blunt line to Mackey "I need you," emphasises the utilitarian link between these two characters who generally disdain each other. The point is, in the viewer's first encounter with Mackey's use of torture, it is reluctantly sanctioned by his captain, and thus given official approval.

Mackey, comfortable in the knowledge that his methods have been permitted, begins to beat the suspect with a telephone directory. From an observation room, Aceveda turns off the CCTV monitor, halting the viewer's access to the interrogation and, as Ray observes, making us complicit in sharing with Aceveda our reluctant approval (178). While the viewer, Aceveda, and by implication the more morally upstanding Wyms and Dutch, do not in this instance have to stomach the violence, as Mackey afterwards gloatingly points out to Dutch, it gets the result they all wanted, securing the information to rescue the abducted girl. It is heavily implied that the ends in this case justify Mackey's brutal means, when Aceveda, Wyms and Dutch rescue the girl in a softly-lit scene accompanied on the soundtrack, as Ray

notes, by "a contextually very distinctive *Alleluia Melisma*" (178). Thus we are faced with a situation where the use of torture is given quasi-official sanction and is successful. The dice are loaded, moreover, by the programme-makers' construction of a storyline based on these methods being used in a race against time to prevent the actions of a paedophile. These are precisely the circumstances, in other words, identified by Agamben as enabling a state of exception to be declared, and in this instance they make it almost impossible for the viewer not to feel considerable sympathy for Aceveda's choice. Such ingredients work alongside naturalist deterministic narrative codes which work to persuade the viewer that the police had no options other than to use unofficial and violent measures. That this episode originally aired on 12th March 2002, almost 6 months to the day after 9/11, is significant, since this coincides with or narrowly precedes the start of US forces overseas employing similar, quasi-officially sanctioned methods of interrogation. As with the contemporaneous *24*, it is hard not to assume that *The Shield* thus offers tacit endorsement of such actions. *The Shield*'s portrayal of numerous successful instances of torture operates as part of a broader televisual discourse in support of less accountability on the part of police, legal, and military authorities.

In this respect, we should briefly consider further examples of Mackey's brutal interrogation techniques. At the end of the first season, Mackey tortures a suspected cop killer with the pin stolen from the dead cop's badge, which again – this time symbolically – suggests official endorsement of his practices (1.13 "Circles"). At other times, he variously uses a mock-Russian roulette routine (2.13 "Dominoes Falling"), forces a gang member to inhale heavily from a crack pipe (3.5 "Mum"), hoods a Russian crime boss and his arsonist (4.7 "Hurt"), and in the penultimate episode he forces the head of a suspect into a tank containing a rattlesnake (7.13 "Family Meeting"). Troublingly, all these uses of torture are successful in Mackey gaining the information he requires. As suggested, Mackey's use of

torture gestures towards American abuses carried out following the Iraq invasion. In the case of the use of the hood mentioned above this explicitly recalls the practices of US forces in Iraq, this in an episode which aired in 2005. Nearer the show's end, however, in the penultimate season which aired in 2007, at a time of growing disillusionment with the US campaign in Iraq, we encounter almost the sole example of Mackey's use of torture resulting in failure. In episode 6.3, "Back to One", Mackey abducts a Salvadoran, Guardo, whom he suspects killed Strike Team member Lem, who was in fact killed by another member of the team, Shane. As Shane watches, knowing of Guardo's innocence, Mackey brutally beats Guardo with a chain. Failing to extract a confession, Mackey finally kills the bound and tortured Guardo, before learning a few episodes later that Guardo wasn't even in the US when Lem was killed (6.5 "Haunts") and that in fact Shane carried out the murder in an attempt to cover the Strike Team's tracks (6.6 "Chasing Ghosts"). Significantly, this rare instance of Mackey's brutal methods failing comes near the end of the programme's run, at just the same time as American public opinion was turning heavily against the war in Iraq. If viewers are perhaps by the end of *The Shield* starting to recognise the appalling cost of Mackey's brutal natural law, then this reflects a growing consensus with regard to similar methods used in actuality overseas.

**Conclusion**

Mackey's crude summation of the sources of the high crime rate in Farmington, "Mexis … plus black gangs, Russian mob, Salvadorans, Asians, Armenians and more. All in the same square mile" (6.4 "The New Guy"), is indicative of the starkly different depictions of race in *The Shield* and *The Wire*, and the political perspectives these depictions suggest. While this essay has demonstrated that both shows offer numerous examples of the advantages of reading new television according to deterministic narrative structures, it has also shown that naturalism can produce vastly different – indeed, opposing – perspectives on important issues

such as race and criminality. Thus while both *The Wire* and *The Shield* employ highly naturalistic narrative models, these are put to contrasting ends in terms of the shows' wider political projects. *The Shield* takes pains to establish a deterministic framework which frequently functions to excuse those wielding power from blame. *The Wire* uses a similar model to focus upon the disenfranchised of twenty-first-century America, those whose lives are more truly determined by institutional forces beyond their control, and who indeed bear diminished responsibility for the perceived moral failures in their lives. In other words, while both series employ heavily deterministic naturalism, usage in *The Shield* is inclined to lend tacit support for authoritarian social control, while similar narrative architecture in *The Wire* is a means to advocate urgent institutional reform.

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[1] Thompson's and Bieger's are the most sustained naturalist readings. Thompson focuses on three naturalist attributes of the show: "the use of physical space, the negotiation of boundaries and thresholds, and the body and the tension between actions and articulations" (84), while Bieger understands the show's preoccupation with the gathering of data as an intrinsic component of its naturalist orientation.

[2] Shuster similarly refers to new television as a "mode" (5, 170, and passim) rather than a form or genre, further suggesting a degree of compatibility between new television and neo-naturalism.

[3] To a certain extent, this verité style is in deliberate tension with the show's naturalism: "[t]he messy, disorientating, and choppy style … distracts from the editing that was done as a process of production, giving the viewer an impression that *The Shield* is less constructed and less mediated than other television fictions" (Needham 38). That is, the obvious shaping of a deterministic narrative is offset by a production style which heavily emphasises contingency.