

RESEARCH PAPER

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FROM RATIONALISM TO REALISM IN *THE WIRE*

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One of the most striking and frequently praised aspects of HBO's cult TV series *The Wire* is its purported realism. Why this series is virtually unanimously perceived as realistic is the main question that this paper will attempt to answer. The question is addressed from the perspective of Robert Brandom's neo-pragmatist rationalist philosophical project in general, and his account of the appearance/reality distinction in particular. The first part of the paper introduces Brandom's neo-pragmatist rationalist account of the relation between appearance and reality as explicated in his book *Reason in Philosophy*. The second part addresses the question of the verisimilitude of *The Wire* in these Brandomian rationalist terms. It is thereby suggested that, first, *The Wire* appears to be real because it is rational—i.e. because it rationally integrates all its commitments into a single unified whole—and second, it is recognized as real because it exhibits an *expressively progressive* structure—i.e. it gradually makes *explicit* the commitments that were held *implicitly* throughout the course of its five seasons.

Keywords: *The Wire*, Robert Brandom, neo-pragmatism, rationalism, realism, verisimilitude.

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INTRODUCTION

“Don't seem possible. That's some Spiderman shit there.” As every fan of HBO TV series *The Wire* will recognize, these memorable words are uttered by Marlo Stanfield, as he gazes in disbelief at the fourth story balcony window through which Omar Little jumps and disappears, while being shot at by Marlo's 'muscle' (“The Dickensian Aspect”, S05E06). It is safe to say that Marlo's disbelief was shared by most of the show's long-time viewers, unaccustomed as we were to that kind of action-hero imagery. The scene in question, although it might not have been the first, was one of very

few instances in all five seasons that actually seemed (in this case, wildly) implausible. These few exceptions aside, with regard to the often-mentioned and praised verisimilitude of *The Wire*, a simple rule of thumb can be applied: If you have seen it on *The Wire* it is not only possible that it could happen in real life, but it is highly likely that it did. In fact, as unlikely as this scene appeared during the first viewing (and indeed on any subsequent viewings), according to David Simon (and later confirmed by the man in question),¹ it was based on a real life event. Larry “Donnie” Andrews, one of the real life counterparts of Omar Little, really did escape death in a similar fashion, the only difference being that Donnie had to jump from a sixth story window.

In his pitch to HBO for *The Wire*, David Simon states his ambitions with regard to the realism of the show:

The style of the show can be called hyper-realism [...] *The Wire* – by using precise geography, a fully conceptualized city and police bureaucracy, and story developments culled from actual casework – should present itself as something so clearly real that the traditional concepts of police melodrama are seen as such. Nothing should happen on screen that hasn’t in some fashion happened on the streets, and the show will utilize a series of veteran detectives and Baltimore street figures for story lines and technical assistance. (Simon 2000: 2)

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That *The Wire* was extremely successful in achieving its stated ambition of “presenting itself as clearly real” is of little doubt, and that it was precisely this perceived realism that attracted and elicited virtually unanimous critical and popular acclaim is also a matter of scant debate. But what is less clear, and what we propose to examine here, is the question: why do we recognize *The Wire* as real?

This question will be addressed from a somewhat peculiar vantage point: the perspective of Robert Brandom’s philosophical project, which will be presented here in its neo-pragmatist rationalist guise. The decision to employ the work of an analytic philosopher best known for his contributions to the field of the philosophy of language to address what is essentially a question of the verisimilitude of a work of narrative fiction warrants a few explanatory remarks. First, it is important to emphasize that this Brandomian reading of *The Wire* should be interpreted in the context of the *realist turn*, which has significantly marked the last ten years of continental philosophy.

¹ For Simon’s version, see Pearson 2009. For Donnie Andrews’ first person account, see Walker 2009.

The “Speculative Realism” workshop held at Goldsmiths College, London in April 2007 is usually regarded as the inaugural event of this turn towards realism and away from what was perceived as the idealism of continental philosophy at the turn of the twentieth century. What started as a small gathering of four then lesser-known philosophers (Ray Brassier, Quentin Meillassoux, Iain Hamilton Grant and Graham Harman) has since exploded into one of the most significant tendencies in contemporary continental philosophy. Of the many divergent lines along which this realist tendency developed throughout the years, of particular import for us here is that which finds its guiding thread in the work of Wilfrid Sellars, and by extension, that of Robert Brandom. The most prominent figures of this strand of thought are Ray Brassier, Peter Wolfendale and Reza Negarestani, towards whom numerous other philosophers, political theorists, artists and curators have gravitated. What binds them is a shared commitment to Sellars’ normative-rationalist account of knowledge² and the belief that it contains the resources to develop a realist ontology,³ and a Promethean, emancipatory, universalist ethics and politics.⁴

The present paper pursues this line of thought, and suggests that post-Sellarsian philosophy has the resources to make an important contribution to the domains of art and literary theory, because it provides a new philosophical framework in which the classical notions of *mimesis* in general, and verisimilitude in particular, can be reformulated in a way consistent with the demands of the aforementioned realist turn in continental philosophy. It is not our ambition to elaborate this suggestion into a fully developed theoretical account. Instead, we will present a case study on the question of the verisimilitude of *The Wire* as an expression of the viability of such a project. The choice of subject matter stems from the hypothesis that *The Wire*’s perceived realism is a result of its rationalism. By the same token, the choice of Robert Brandom’s work as the interpretative framework is dictated by the singular significance his project has to the post-Sellarsian

² Sellars’ crucial formulation regarding knowledge can be found in his seminal work *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, in which he famously claims: “in characterizing an episode or a state as that of *knowing*, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says” (Sellars 1956: 169).

³ See Brassier 2011; Wolfendale 2010; Ralón 2016.

⁴ See Brassier 2014; Wolfendale 2017 and 2018; Negarestani 2014; Srnicek and Williams 2015.

philosophical landscape as a whole, and for our present case study in particular. Brandom's impressive *oeuvre* represents arguably the most systematic development of Sellars' normative account of thought and knowledge. In light of this, Brandom's project is best described as *neo-pragmatist rationalism*. It is to be considered a form of *rationalism* because it affirms *reasoning* as the defining trait of the human mind. And to the extent that Brandom construes reasoning in terms of a normative, social, linguistic or discursive practice, his rationalism is to be considered *neo-pragmatist* in nature (Sachs 2014: 72–73).

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To elaborate on this in order to understand how realism (albeit of a deflationary kind [see Wolfendale 2010]) follows from such a neo-pragmatist rationalism, it is necessary to become acquainted with Brandom's treatment of the age-old philosophical problem of the relation between appearance and reality. The first part of the paper will therefore consist of a close reading of Part One of Brandom's book *Reason in Philosophy* (2009), which is entitled "Animating Ideas of Idealism: A Semantic Sonata in Kant and Hegel," wherein Brandom articulates his philosophical project as a discussion of the appearance/reality distinction. Interestingly, Brandom addresses this problem from a historical perspective, through engagement with some of the greatest figures from the history of philosophy, such as Descartes, Kant and Hegel. If, as Sellars famously claims, the history of philosophy is indeed the *lingua franca* of philosophy (Sellars 1967: 1), then this text constitutes the best possible introduction to Brandom's complex philosophical system, especially for the continentals, who might find the analytical jargon of Brandom's other works off-putting and impenetrable. Admittedly, this might be a double-edged sword, for Brandom's readings of the history of philosophy could easily be found wanting from a strictly exegetical-historical perspective; his treatment of historical figures is highly selective, he cites the sources of his claims sparsely, and he barely mentions any secondary literature.⁵ By the same token, our presentation of Brandom's ideas might be found wanting for a similar reason: namely for not engaging critically with Brandom's readings of these historical greats. It should be emphasized in this regard that the aim of the first part of the paper is not to engage critically with Brandom, but merely to present his account of the appearance/reality distinction as consistently as possible, and to introduce the reader to Brandom's thought in an accessible manner. The second part

⁵ For Brandom's justification of his methodology regarding his readings of the history of philosophy, see Brandom 2002: 90–120.

of the paper will use the resources developed in the first part to address the problem of the verisimilitude of *The Wire*.

BRANDOM (WITH KANT AND HEGEL) ON REPRESENTATION

According to Robert Brandom (2009: 27–28), the history of philosophy is divided in two regarding the problem of the relation between appearance and reality. While the premodern world conceived of this relation in terms of *resemblance* (to be an appearance of something is to share properties with the thing in question), Descartes' inauguration of philosophical modernity came about through his realization of the inadequacy of this model. The Copernican revolution made this obvious: the reality of the Earth rotating around the Sun is nothing like the appearance of the Sun revolving around the Earth. Descartes saw clearly that if philosophy were to respond to the challenges put forth by the new sciences, it was paramount to reconceive the appearance/reality distinction. Instead of thinking of this distinction in terms of resemblance, a more abstract concept of *representation* would be necessary. And, as Brandom pithily concludes, “we’ve been worrying about it ever since” (Brandom 2009: 28).

The model of representation devised by Descartes had two major consequences. First, representation was to be conceived in *holistic* terms: contrary to the traditional notion of resemblance, which was local and atomistic (i.e. concerned only with “the intrinsic properties of the item itself”), Descartes showed that understanding the representational properties of an item was only possible by taking into consideration the “whole structured system of representings” to which it belonged (Brandom 2002: 25–26). From this follows the second consequence: vertical relations between representings and representeds (thoughts and things) were to be understood in terms of horizontal relations between representings and other representings, or thoughts and other thoughts (Brandom 2002: 25–26).

Following in Descartes' footsteps, Kant acknowledges the centrality of these two insights to any account of representation. But while Descartes focused his attention on the epistemological problem of representational *success* (how an idea can count as a successful representation of a thing), Kant realized that a more fundamental question must be addressed first. This is the semantic question of *intentionality* or representational *purport*: “What

is it ... for our ideas so much as to *seem* to be about something? What is it for us to take or treat them as, for them to show up to us as, representings, in the sense of something that answers for its correctness to what thereby counts as being represented?" (Brandom 2009: 29).

Kant's answer to this question is based upon his *normative* conception of the mind. Instead of thinking of the distinction between minded and unminded creatures in *ontological* terms (the minded being defined by the presence of a special kind of substance: *res cogitans* or mental substance), as Descartes does, Kant conceives of it in normative *deontological* terms: "what distinguishes judging and intentional doing from the activities of non-sapient creatures is not that they involve some special sort of mental processes, but that they are things knowers and agents are in a distinctive way *responsible* for" (Brandom 2009: 32). To endorse a judgment is to undertake a *commitment* as to how things are. The content of a judgment, or what one is committed to, is determined by the concepts applied therein. Given that for Kant, concepts are rules that specify how something *ought* to be done (Brandom 1994: 8), by applying a concept in a judgment, we are binding ourselves by norms and therefore making ourselves susceptible to *normative* assessment as to the *correctness* of our claims. This is why, for Kant, "discursive, concept-mongering creatures" are rule-governed, "normative creatures – creatures who live and move and have their being in a normative space" (Brandom 2009: 33). Contrary to Descartes, who considered our grip on concepts to be of central import, Kant puts at the forefront of his (and our) philosophical interests the grip that concepts have on us: "the most urgent philosophical task is to understand the nature of this normativity, the bindingness or validity [...] of conceptual norms" (Brandom 2009: 33). Given that judgment is the minimal unit for which we can be cognitively responsible and committed to, Kant considers judgment as a whole to be the basic unit of cognition and experience. Consequently, concepts are to be understood only in terms of the role they have in a given judgment.

With regard to the form of judgment, Kant distinguishes its subjective and objective aspects. The subjective form of judgment (the "I think" or the emptiest of the representations that can accompany all our judgments) reveals *who* is responsible for the judgment; that is, it "indicates the relation of judging to 'the original synthetic unity of apperception' to which it belongs" (Brandom 2009: 34). The objective form of judgment ("the object=X"), on the other hand, expresses the objectivity or intentionality of judgments: the fact that every judgment represents, or is about, something. That is, it indicates what one has made oneself responsible *to* by endorsing a judgment

(Brandom 2009: 34). As previously stated, by endorsing a judgment we make ourselves susceptible to normative appraisal regarding the correctness of our claims. The object of judgment exercises a special *authority* over the correctness of our claims. Therefore, Brandom concludes, "representational *purport* is a normative phenomenon", and "representational *content* is to be understood in terms of it" (Brandom 2009: 35).

To pursue this line of thought, two related questions need to be addressed: 1) "What is it that one makes oneself responsible *for* by judging?"; and 2) "What is it that one is *doing* in making oneself responsible, committing oneself, endorsing?" (Brandom 2009: 35). The second question is crucial here, because its answer holds the key to all the questions posed previously: what one makes oneself responsible *for* in judging, what one makes oneself responsible *to*, and finally, *who* is the subject of these responsibilities. For Kant, the responsibility undertaken in endorsing a judgment is "generically a kind of *task* responsibility: a responsibility to *do* something"; and "specifically, it is the responsibility to *integrate* the judgment into a *unity of apperception*" (Brandom 2009: 35). The synthetic unity of apperception (a self or a subject) is nothing but a whole, comprising all the various judgments one is committed to. *In endorsing a judgment, one is responsible for integrating a new commitment with the previous ones.* This process of integration consists of three distinct but interrelated task-responsibilities: a critical one, an ampliative one, and a justificatory one. The first responsibility is to evaluate critically whether the judgment that one is considering endorsing is materially incompatible with one's previous commitments. Here, one is also responsible for relinquishing previously held commitments if, in light of the newly acquired judgment, these turn out to be incompatible with the new constellation of commitments that has developed as a result of this integration process. Second, one's ampliative responsibility is to extract the material inferential consequences from a judgment one has committed oneself to, and to acknowledge that one is already implicitly committed to them because they follow from the judgment in question. Finally, one is responsible for justifying the new commitment "by citing prior commitments that inferentially entitle one to those new commitments" (Brandom 2009: 36). These three integrative task-responsibilities produce, sustain and develop the original synthetic unity of apperception.

As Brandom emphasizes, this integrative task-responsibility can be formulated in another way: by integrating a commitment into a synthetic unity of apperception, one is responsible for "having *reasons* for one's endorsements, using the contents one endorses *as* reasons for and against the endorsement

of other contents, and taking into account possible *countervailing* reasons" (Brandom 2009: 38). In other words, insofar as we are "*normative* creatures, we are *rational* creatures"; regardless of whether we have valid reasons for thinking and acting as we do, "we are the kind of creatures that we are – knowers and agents, creatures whose world is structured by the *commitments* and *responsibilities* we undertake – only because we are always liable to normative assessments of our *reasons*" (Brandom 2009: 38).

In light of this, we will return to some of the questions raised previously. As mentioned, the content of a judgment, or what we are responsible for and committed to, is determined by the concepts applied in judging. Kant talks about concepts in terms of rules or norms that determine how something ought to be done. Now that we have a better grasp of what we are responsible for *doing* in endorsing a judgment, we can give a more precise answer to the question of what concepts are *rules for* doing: they are rules for "synthesizing the unity of apperception"; i.e., rules "articulating what is a reason for what" (Brandom 2009: 39). Furthermore, concepts determine "what *follows* from a given claim(able), hence what (else) one would have committed oneself to or made responsible for by endorsing it", and "what counts as rational *evidence for* or against, or *justification of* a judgeable content, hence what would count as a *reason for* or against endorsing it" (Brandom 2009: 39). Finally, concepts articulate the content of a judgment by "specifying the material inferential and incompatibility relations" that the content of a given judgment stands in to the contents of other judgments (Brandom 2009: 39). Therefore, for Kant, the *conceptual content* of a judgment is also to be explained in terms of the *activity* of synthesizing the unity of apperception.

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What remains to be seen is how the two dimensions of conceptual content—what we are responsible *for* and what we are responsible *to* in making a judgment—are related to each other. In order to pose this problem more precisely, Brandom introduces a further distinction between two types of intentionality: the *representational* "of"-intentionality refers to the idea that our thoughts are semantically directed at objects, i.e., what we are thinking *of* or *about*; while the *expressive* "that"-intentionality refers to the content of our thoughts, or to *what* we are thinking about an object (Brandom 2009: 42). The challenge now is to understand the representational "of"-intentionality, or what we are responsible *to* in a judgment, in terms of the expressive "that"-intentionality, or what we are responsible *for* in a judgment. Brandom's answer lies in acknowledging the fact that the expressive "that"-intentionality already implies the representational "of"-intentionality:

The relations of material incompatibility and inferential consequence among judgeable contents that we have seen are a necessary condition of synthesizing a rational unity of apperception (which is to say judging) already implicitly involve commitments concerning the identity and individuation of *objects* they can accordingly be understood as representing or being *about*. (Brandom 2009: 43)

For Brandom, taking two judgments to be materially incompatible with one another *is* taking them to refer to or represent the same object. It is impossible for one object to exhibit two materially incompatible judgments. By the same token, drawing a material inferential consequence from one judgment to the other *is* taking both judgments to refer to the same object (Brandom 2009: 43–44). Therefore, by making ourselves responsible *for* a judgment, we make ourselves responsible *to* the object of that judgment (Brandom 2009: 44–45).

This brings us to the solution of the problem of representational purport, with which we started this investigation into the nature of representation: “what is it for something so much as to *seem* to be a representation (a representing of something represented)? What does one have to *do* to count as taking or treating it *as* a representing *of* something?” (Brandom 2009: 45) Brandom’s answer to this question should be familiar by now: “treating something as standing in relations of material incompatibility and inferential consequence to other such things *is* taking or treating it as a representation, as being *about* something” (Brandom 2009: 45). Insofar as it construes the vertical relations between representings and representeds in terms of the horizontal relations between representings and other representings, this way of solving the problem of representational purport clearly fulfills Descartes’ requirements for a holistic account of representation. By formulating his account of representation in holistic terms, Kant clearly follows in Descartes’ footsteps. But where Kant departs from Descartes, as we have seen, is in construing the mind not in ontological but in normative, deontological terms. Understanding Kant’s views on normativity is thus paramount if we are to have a complete grasp of his account of representation.

Kant’s normative turn in philosophy revolves around his conception of freedom. Freedom, for Kant, is not to be conceived in negative, but in positive terms: not as freedom *from* a constraint, but as freedom to *do* something (Brandom 2009: 58). Specifically, this positive freedom consists in “the *rational* capacity to adopt *normative statuses*: the ability to *commit* oneself, the *authority* to make oneself *responsible*” (Brandom 2009: 59). Therefore, instead of being opposed to constraint, freedom, according to Kant, is to

be construed precisely as the capacity to constrain or bind ourselves by the norms of rationality. Kant's conception of positive freedom is based upon the Enlightenment idea of the *attitude-dependence* of normative statuses. Normative statuses such as commitment, responsibility, and authority are dependent upon and instituted by the attitudes of the subjects of such statuses. Without human beings adopting normative attitudes towards one another, there would be no normative statuses. That is, without people taking or treating each other as committed, responsible and authoritative, there would be no commitment, responsibility, or authority (Brandom 2009: 61).

270 Kant's idea of *autonomy* is a direct result of this Enlightenment idea of the attitude-dependence of normative statuses: "we, as subjects, are genuinely *normatively* constrained only by rules we constrain *ourselves* by, those that we adopt and acknowledge *as* binding on us" (Brandom 2009: 62). Therefore, only we have the *authority* to bind or constrain ourselves, and we do so by acknowledging certain norms as binding us. Positive freedom, for Kant, consists precisely of "our *authority* to *make* ourselves *rationally* responsible by *taking* ourselves to be responsible" (Brandom 2009: 63). According to Kant's model of autonomy, it is up to us whether we are bound by a particular norm. But if we are to consider ourselves to be truly *bound* by the norm in question, the *content* of that norm, or *what* we are bound by, surely cannot be up to us. For if it were up to us to determine right and wrong with regard to a norm that we acknowledge as binding us, then, as Wittgenstein's private language argument states, "whatever seems right to us would be right" (Brandom 2009: 64). It would then be impossible to establish the very distinction that determines the content of a norm, i.e. the distinction between what is correct and what is incorrect according to the norm in question. If the notion of *normative constraint* is to be intelligible, normative force (the fact that we are bound by a certain norm) and the content of the norm in question (what the norm involves, what it prescribes as correct or incorrect) should have relative independence.

Tension clearly exists between Kant's autonomy model, with its commitment to the attitude-dependence of normative statuses, on the one hand, and the requirement for the relative attitude-independence of the content of the norms by which the autonomous subjects bind themselves, on the other. While the subject has the authority over the act of judging (i.e., over deciding which concepts to apply in a judgment), the content of the concepts applied (i.e., what the subject becomes responsible for) must be independent from the subject's act of judging, or taking of responsibility.

Or, the content of the judgment itself “must have an *authority* that is independent of the *responsibility* that the judge takes for it” (Brandom 2009: 67). But if authority is a normative status, and therefore attitude-dependent, the question now becomes “Whose attitudes is the authority of conceptual contents dependent on?” (Brandom 2009: 67) Given the requirement for the relative independence of normative force and normative content, Kant’s autonomy model cannot provide the answer. For, as the latter has it, the authority of conceptual content must be dependent on the attitude of the one taking responsibility for the content in question, which is precisely what the former precludes.

In Brandom’s reading, Hegel’s *social* model of *reciprocal recognition* was designed with the intent to resolve this tension (Brandom 2009: 68). Hegel accepts the Enlightenment idea of the attitude-dependence of normative statuses, and acknowledges the merits of Kant’s autonomy model: normative statuses are dependent upon the attitudes of those who are their subjects. But Hegel disagrees with Kant in relation to the nature of this dependence. Contrary to Kant, Hegel considers the attitudes of the subjects of normative statuses as *necessary* but not *sufficient* conditions of the normative statuses in question. Hegel’s crucial advance over Kant lies in his insight that normative statuses, such as authority and responsibility, are essentially *social* phenomena. Authority and responsibility are the result of the *attitudes* of not only the subjects of these normative statuses, but also of *others* who hold or acknowledge them as such. “Taking someone to be responsible or authoritative, attributing a normative deontic attitude to someone, is the attitude-kind that Hegel (picking up a term of Fichte’s) calls ‘recognition’ (Anerkennung)” (Brandom 2009: 70). It is only by considering the attitudes of those who *recognize* someone as authoritative or responsible, and those who are *recognized* as such, together, that we arrive at the necessary and *sufficient* conditions for instituting normative statuses. Therefore, according to Hegel, normative statuses are instituted by a social process of *reciprocal recognition*:

Someone becomes responsible only when others *hold* him responsible, and exercises authority only when others *acknowledge* that authority. One has the authority to *petition* others for recognition, in an attempt to become responsible or authoritative. To do that, one must recognize others as able to *hold* one responsible or *acknowledge* one’s authority. This is according to those others a certain kind of authority. To achieve such statuses, one must be recognized by them in turn. That is to make oneself in a certain sense responsible to them. But they have that authority only insofar as one grants it to them by recognizing them as authoritative. (Brandom 2009: 70)

The same social process of reciprocal recognition synthesizes "a normative recognitive community of those recognized by and who recognize the normative subject: a community bound together by reciprocal relations of authority over and responsibility to each other" (Brandom 2009: 70). It is only by being recognized as a fully-fledged member of this normative recognitive community that one becomes a normative subject. But this community itself is composed only of the attitudes of those who reciprocally recognize each other as its members.

Let us return to the previously posed question of the relative independence of normative force and content. As we have seen, if this requirement is to be fulfilled, the content of a commitment (or what a subject is responsible for) has to be independent of the subject's act of committing himself or making himself responsible. Hegel's social reciprocal recognitive model of normative bindingness shows how this is possible. By granting authority over the content of the commitment not to the one committing himself, but to *others*, to those to whom the subject makes himself responsible, Hegel affirms both the attitude-dependence of normative statuses and the relative independence of normative force and content. The content of the commitment is independent of the attitudes of the one taking responsibility, yet at the same time is dependent on the attitudes of those towards whom the person undertaking a commitment takes responsibility.

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By applying a concept in a judgment we exercise our authority over the act of judging: we decide which concepts to apply. But we do not have the authority to determine the content of the concept applied; only the social recognitive community of which we are members has this authority. We will now turn to the question of how conceptual content is determined.

For Kant, the process of determining conceptual contents is to be conceived of as prior to and distinct from the act of judging. In fact, to him the existence of fully determinate conceptual contents constitutes the conditions of possibility of judgment itself. If we are to apply a concept in a judgment, surely the content of that concept must be determined in advance. Following Quine's objection to Carnap's similar two-stage account, Brandom highlights the difficulty of such a position. While in formulating artificial languages it is not only possible but necessary to define the *meaning* of an expression prior to its *use*, this procedure clearly cannot be appropriate when dealing with natural languages. For in the latter case, only our *use* of a particular expression can fix its meaning (Brandom 2009: 83).

Hegel was among the first philosophers to acknowledge this. Contrary to Kant, who uncritically assumed the content of a concept as given (i.e. always

already available to applying a concept in a judgment), Hegel insists that the practice of applying concepts in judgment is at the same time the practice of determining conceptual contents. From this it follows—again *contra* Kant who postulated conceptual contents as completely and definitively determined in advance of applying a concept in a judgment—that the process of determining conceptual concepts can never be fully completed. For without a prior explicit definition of a concept, only the prior applications of that concept in actual judgments can determine its contents. Given that prior uses of a concept cannot settle in advance whether the concept in question ought to be applied in new circumstances, the content of that concept can never be fully determined (Brandom 2009: 89).

To consider this open-ended process of determining conceptual contents by the application of concepts (both actual prior and possible future ones), we need a new conception of *determinateness* that is able to account for both the retrospective and prospective aspects of this process. Hegel develops just such a temporal and perspectival conception of determinateness under the name *Vernunft*, so as to better distinguish it from Kant's static conception, to which he refers as *Verstand* (Brandom 2009: 89). As we have seen, for Kant, to apply a concept in a judgment is to undertake a commitment. In committing, we make ourselves responsible for the rational integration of this new commitment into a whole that consists of all our previously held commitments, which is the synthetic unity of apperception. This Kantian model of judgment, based on the *Verstand* conception of determinateness, assumes the conceptual contents of our commitments as given, and is therefore only concerned with the *prospective* dimension of the process, that is, with rationally integrating our *new* commitments with the previous ones. Hegel takes up this Kantian model of judgment as rational integration, but adds to it a *retrospective* dimension: by applying a concept in a judgment we are responsible not only to rationally integrate the new commitment with our previous ones, but also to *rationaly reconstruct* the developmental process by which we arrived at our current set of commitments. That is, we have to show that our current set of commitments forms a rational unity, and that the process by which we acquired them was also rational. Hegel calls this process of rational reconstruction *recollection* (*Erinnerung*) (Brandom 2009: 90). By reinscribing this process in terms of Hegel's model of reciprocal recognition, Brandom argues that while in rationally integrating a commitment we are "taking a *responsibility*, making a commitment, by petitioning future concept users to be recognized", in recollecting we are "asserting *authority*, vindicating an entitlement, by recognizing past concept users" (Brandom 2009: 91).

Exercising authority over past applications of concepts by rationally reconstructing the process that led to our current commitments, and undertaking a responsibility to rationally integrate the new applications of concepts with previous commitments, are two complementary perspectival aspects of the unitary process of determining conceptual contents by the application of concepts. Hegel's *Vernunft* conception of determinateness is supposed to explicate this. The retrospective aspect of the process consists of recollective reconstruction, by which we turn the past applications of concepts, which might seem contingent and irrational at first, into a *history* or *tradition* of our current set of commitments, which exhibit a necessary and rational developmental structure. We do so by *discovering* the norms that were *implicit* in our practices all along. It is precisely by *finding out* what the real boundaries of our current concepts are (i.e. what really follows from what, and what is incompatible with what), that we can be said to *determine* their conceptual contents (Brandom 2009: 92).

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The *prospective* aspect of the process of determining conceptual contents consists of the rational integration of *new* commitments with previous ones. With every new application of a concept to novel particulars, we can be said to further *determine* the content of the concept in question by "drawing new, more definite boundaries where many possibilities existed before" (Brandom 2009: 93). When we apply a concept to an object, we undertake a commitment as to how things are: that is, we take our application of the concept to be *correct*. Given that every application of a concept is based on prior uses of the concept in question, we are thereby exercising our authority over those past applications. But, as Hegel's model of reciprocal recognition has it, we are simultaneously making ourselves responsible to the concept we apply. By applying a concept and by taking it to be correct, we grant authority to future users of the concept to judge whether our application was correct. It is only if our use of a concept has been recognized as correct by subsequent rational reconstructions of its conceptual contents that we can be certain our rational integration of new commitments with previous ones has succeeded.

Finally, we have at our disposal the resources necessary to address the problem with which we opened our discussion—that of the relation of appearance and reality. In Brandom's pragmatist reading of Hegel, this problem takes the following form:

what do we have to *do* thereby to be taking or treating the conceptual contents (senses), which we understand by grasping their material consequential and incompatibility relations to one another, *as* subjective *appearances* of some

underlying objective *reality* to which they answer for their correctness *as* appearances of *it*? (Brandom 2009: 99)

Hegel's answer is based on a crucial insight: "the idea of *noumena*, of things as they are in themselves, the reality that appears in the form of *phenomena*, can be understood practically in terms of a distinctive role in a recollectively rationally reconstructed historical sequence of phenomena" (Brandom 2009: 99). To elaborate: in making a judgment we are undertaking a commitment as to how things are. In doing so, we make ourselves responsible for rationally integrating this new commitment into the whole of our previous commitments. According to Hegel, it is only when this latest rational integration of a new commitment is accompanied by a rational reconstruction—which shows how the process that led to our current constellation of commitments was *expressively progressive*—that we can claim that this new commitment is a commitment to how things *really* are. It is not only an appearance of reality, but a *veridical* appearance, in which things appear as they are (Brandom 2009: 100). If our rational reconstruction of the history of our current set of commitments is to be expressively progressive, it must satisfy two requirements. First, it has to show how each of our prior sets of commitments *progressed* towards our current constellation of commitments. And second, it has to construe this progressive process as gradual making *explicit* what can be seen retrospectively as having been *implicit* all along (Brandom 2009: 100). Therefore, Brandom concludes: "In taking our current set of commitments as the standard to judge what counts as expressive progress, one *is* taking them as the *reality* of which previous constellations of endorsements were ever more complete and accurate *appearances*" (Brandom 2009: 100).

By retrospectively tracing an expressively progressive trajectory through past rational integrations, we exercise our *authority* over the activity of those who performed them. It is up to us to decide which of these past integrations should be recognized as correct and progressive, and which should be discarded. But given that the only rationale for our current rational integration and recollection is provided precisely by those previous integrations, we are at the same time *responsible* to them. It is not up to us to decide whether our latest rational integration and recollection have been successful. Only the future rational integrators and recollectors have this authority, and they get to decide whether we have fulfilled our responsibility towards the past tradition, and hence deserve to be recognized as expressively progressive with respect to it. "This structure of reciprocal authority and responsibility is the historical form of *recognition*, which institutes at once

both a distinctive form of *community* (a *tradition*) and individuals exhibiting determinately conceptually contentful normative statuses: commitments representing how things objectively are” (Brandom 2009: 103).

FROM RATIONALISM...

Having acquainted ourselves with Brandom’s neo-pragmatist rationalist account of the relation between appearance and reality, we can now use these newly acquired conceptual tools to address the central question of this paper: why do we recognize *The Wire* as real?

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The most facile and tempting answer is to claim that the verisimilitude of *The Wire* stems from the construction of the world it creates being so deeply rooted in the real world that it purportedly depicts, to the extent that it is virtually impossible to tell where reality ends and fiction begins. The factual research that went into the writing of the show is awe inspiring, and the real world of the city of Baltimore is inextricably intertwined with the fictional world of *The Wire*. Not only are most of the show’s main characters composites of real people, but some of those who were inspiration for characters also played minor roles in it.⁶ Furthermore, most storylines and narrative sequences are based on real life events, documented in actual police casework, journalistic reporting, or anecdotal experience. Finally, the language of the show is so faithful to the vernacular of the groups depicted that it presents a serious challenge to anyone who is not a Baltimore native, and probably even to some who are.

David Simon is unambiguous about his ambitions regarding the verisimilitude of his writing in general, and *The Wire* in particular:

Beginning with *Homicide*, the book, I decided to write for the people living the event, the people in that very world. [...] I also realized—and this was more important to me—that I would consider the book or film a failure if people in these worlds took in my story and felt that I did not get their existence, that I had not captured their world in any way that they would respect. [...] In terms of dialogue, vernacular, description, tone—I want a

⁶ The most notable appearances are by Donnie Andrews (the real life Omar Little, who plays Omar’s associate in the show), and Melvin Williams (one of Baltimore’s major drug dealers from the 1970s and 80s, who was the inspiration for the character of Avon Barksdale), who plays The Deacon.

homicide detective, or a drug slinger, or a longshoreman, or a politician anywhere in America to sit up and say, Whoa, that’s how my day is. (Simon qtd. in Alvarez 2009: 394)

Sure enough, countless testimonies from people belonging to these social groups confirm Simon’s success in portraying them as authentically as possible.⁷ Given this, we might be excused for concluding that we recognize *The Wire* as real for the simple reason that, for the most part, it *is* real, or at least as real as any investigative journalism or documentary can be. But an obvious rejoinder springs immediately to mind: although diverse groups of people depicted by the show (police officers, drug dealers, longshoremen, teachers, politicians) recognize themselves in its characters, what about the rest of us? Why have we almost unanimously recognized *The Wire* as one of the most (if not the most) realistic works of narrative fiction around? Simon attempts to explain this: “Well, here’s a secret that I learned with *Homicide* and have held to: if you write something that is so credible that the insider will stay with you, then the outsider will follow as well” (Simon qtd. in Alvarez 2009: 394). But Simon’s claim merely begs the question: what is it that makes a piece of fiction so credible to the insider?

Brandom’s account of the appearance/reality distinction teaches us why this and any similar attempts to answer the question of the verisimilitude of *The Wire* are essentially flawed: they all assume that the distinction between appearance and reality is to be conceived in terms of *resemblance*. That is, they all presuppose that if this is a veridical appearance, *The Wire* has to be in some sense similar to the reality it purports to represent. *The Wire* does indeed resemble the real world, but this is not enough to explain its purported realism. Rather, it is necessary to address the question of the verisimilitude of *The Wire* in terms of *representation*.⁸

As we have learned from Brandom, while resemblance is local and atomistic—i.e. concerned only with the relation between that which denotes and the denoted object—the notion of representation is to be conceived in holistic terms. The representational properties of an item can only be made

⁷ Of the many testimonies found online, the most famous is that containing the opinions of real drug dealers (see Venkatesh 2008).

⁸ Here, a general remark on the notion of *mimesis* is in order: while it could be argued that the premodern world conceived of *mimesis* in terms of *resemblance*, it would be a mistake to conflate our rejection of *resemblance* with the rejection of *mimesis*. Instead, as suggested in the Introduction, a potential task for Brandomian aesthetics today could be to reconceive the notion of *mimesis* in terms of Brandom’s account of *representation*.

sense of in the context of the whole structured system of representings to which it belongs, implying that the vertical relation between a representing and a represented are to be conceived in terms of the horizontal relations between a representing and the other representings with which it forms a system. This means that if we conceive of *The Wire* in terms of representation and not resemblance, we must first stop enquiring as to whether a certain character or narrative sequence has a real life counterpart. Instead, we must examine the role of each single element of *The Wire* in the show as a whole. To make this claim more specific, we will proceed further in Brandom's footsteps.

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Brandom makes an important distinction between the notions of representational *purport* and representational *success*. Before we can address the problem of the representational success of a particular representing (what is it for an idea to count as a *successful representation* of a thing), we must first answer the question of representational purport (what is it for an idea to even *seem to be about* something). The same holds true for *The Wire*. If we are to explain why we recognize it to *be real*, that is, why we recognize it to be a *successful representation* of the real, we must first answer the question of the representational *purport* of the show: why does it *seem* to us that *The Wire* is *about* the real? After all, however realistic it might seem it is still a work of fiction. Brandom's answer to these questions is based upon his normative-deontological conception of the mind. By endorsing a claim, we undertake a commitment as to how things are. In doing so we make ourselves responsible for rationally integrating this new commitment into the synthetic unity of apperception that comprises our previous commitments. The responsibility to rationally integrate a new commitment into the constellation of those already held consists of critical, ampliative, and justificatory task responsibilities. In short: we are first responsible for critically evaluating whether the new commitment is materially incompatible with the rest of our commitments; then we are responsible for extracting the material inferential consequences of endorsing this new commitment; and finally we are responsible for justifying our new commitment by citing those among our prior commitments that inferentially entitle us to it. Brandom's answer to the question of *representational purport* follows from this: by treating something as standing *in relations of material incompatibility and inferential consequence* to other such things, we take it to be a representation of something.

The Wire as a whole is a complex structure, composed of numerous commitments as to how things are. Following Brandom's lead, this is our first contention: by taking all the commitments that *The Wire* endorses

as standing in *relations of material incompatibility and inferential consequence to one another*, we take each of these commitments, and consequently *The Wire* as a whole, to be a *representation*. In other words, we treat *The Wire* as a representation not because we suppose it to be rooted in meticulous research of the real world, but because of its utmost commitment to rational consistency. Virtually every commitment of *The Wire* is either justified, discarded for being incompatible with other commitments, or has its consequences drawn out over the course of the show's five seasons. This is without a doubt *The Wire's* most impressive aspect. Consequently, our answer to the question of the representational purport of *The Wire* could be formulated thus: *The Wire seems real because it is rational*.

The rationalism of *The Wire* manifests on several levels. First, as already adumbrated, it is most obvious and insistent in the show's commitment to rationally integrate its elements into a unified whole. Aristotle was the first to recognize that every element of a poetic work of art has to be presented as either "probable or necessary" (Aristotle 2001: 1463). Following this, Boris Tomashevski put forward a similar requirement: every motif must be justified in such a way that its introduction seems necessary to the reader/viewer. Finally, Roland Barthes states this idea even more forcefully: everything in a narrative *has* a function and a meaning (Barthes 1975: 245). Art, according to Barthes, is "a pure system: there are no wasted units, and there can never be any, however long, loose, or tenuous the threads which link them to one of the levels of the story" (Barthes 1975: 245).⁹

If ever a work of narrative fiction fulfilled these requirements almost perfectly, it is certainly *The Wire*; virtually any scene could be chosen to confirm this. We will take as our example the most famous, and arguably most important scene of the whole show, in which D'Angelo Barksdale tries to teach Bodie and Wallace the rules of chess. At the beginning of the episode "The Buys" (S01E03), D'Angelo walks in on Wallace and Bodie playing checkers with a chess set. He immediately realizes that the main reason they are doing this is that they don't know how to play chess. D'Angelo sits down to teach them how to play this "better game". While

⁹ To explain further: bringing these three important historical figures into a single genealogical line is not meant to erase the many important differences in their respective accounts of verisimilitude. Instead, it is intended to foreground what they have in common: an insistence on the centrality of *necessity* to any notion of verisimilitude. It is precisely in the notion of *necessity*—construed as the necessary condition of any account of rationality—that the link to Brandom's neo-pragmatist rationalist project is found.

Bodie is reluctant to learn at first, Wallace seems eager. But Bodie is first to interpret the rules of chess in terms of another game, one he knows well: the drug trade. In this game, Avon Barksdale is the kingpin, Stringer Bell is his Queen, the drug stash is the castle, and the innumerable corner kids ("young'uns" or "hoppers") are the pawns ("them little baldheaded bitches"). No sooner do they learn the basic figures than the boys want to know how one gets to be king. D'Angelo's answer is telling: "It ain't like that. See, the king stay the king, a'ight? Everything stay who he is. Except for the pawns. Now, if the pawn make it all the way down to the other dude's side, he get to be queen. And like I said, the queen ain't no bitch. She got all the moves." Bodie sees an opportunity and goes for it: "A'ight, so if I make it to the other end, I win." D'Angelo's answer is far from reassuring: "Nah, yo, it ain't like that. Look, the pawns, man, in the game, they get capped quick. They be out the game early." But Bodie is hardly discouraged: "Unless they some smart-ass pawns."

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The brilliance of this scene is matched only by the significance it holds for the show as a whole. Its singular import lies in the fact that it makes explicit several threads that will guide us through the rest of the show. First, it introduces the notion of "The Game". As already noted, this scene revolves around the ambiguous use of the word "game": while D'Angelo ostensibly tries to teach the two young'uns the rules of the game of chess, the lesson that Bodie and Wallace learn instead is about the game of the drug trade. These two quite different activities fall under the same concept of "game" because of their rule-bound nature. The game of the drug trade is subject to a set of rules as strict as those that rule the game of chess. But the analogy between chess and the drug trade is further reinforced by the proximity of the two worlds, constructed by their respective sets of rules. In D'Angelo's terms, in chess, just like in the drug trade "everything stay who he is". That the rules of chess determine conclusively what the figures on the board can and cannot do is unsurprising; the striking part of D'Angelo's analogy is his claim that the same applies to the drug trade. In this game too, "the king stay the king." That is, the fate of the figures in "the game" is just as predetermined as the fate of the pieces on a chessboard. And no matter how "smart-ass" some pawns may turn out to be, they will never get to be king.

In an important interview, David Simon highlights the main ideas behind *The Wire*:

Much of our modern theater seems rooted in the Shakespearean discovery of the modern mind. We're stealing instead from an earlier, less-traveled

construct—the Greeks—lifting our thematic stance wholesale from Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides to create doomed and fated protagonists who confront a rigged game and their own mortality. The modern mind—particularly those of us in the West—finds such fatalism ancient and discomfiting, I think. We are a pretty self-actualized, self-worshipping crowd of postmoderns and the idea that for all of our wherewithal and discretionary income and leisure, we’re still fated by indifferent gods, feels to us antiquated and superstitious. We don’t accept our gods on such terms anymore; by and large, with the exception of the fundamentalists among us, we don’t even grant Yahweh himself that kind of unbridled, interventionist authority.

But instead of the old gods, *The Wire* is a Greek tragedy in which the postmodern institutions are the Olympian forces. It’s the police department, or the drug economy, or the political structures, or the school administration, or the macroeconomic forces that are throwing the lightning bolts and hitting people in the ass for no decent reason. In much of television, and in a good deal of our stage drama, individuals are often portrayed as rising above institutions to achieve catharsis. In this drama, the institutions always prove larger, and those characters with hubris enough to challenge the postmodern construct of American empire are invariably mocked, marginalized, or crushed. Greek tragedy for the new millennium, so to speak. Because so much of television is about providing catharsis and redemption and the triumph of character, a drama in which postmodern institutions trump individuality and morality and justice seems different in some ways, I think. (Simon qtd. in Alvarez 2009: 384–385)

The previously described chess scene introduces the viewers to the laws of this tragic world of “doomed and fated protagonists who confront a rigged game and their own mortality”. While D’Angelo plays the role of the old sage, who knows and explains the rules of this tragic game to the uninitiated, Bodie intimates that he might just have enough hubris to challenge these rules. As it turns out, all three characters from this scene will attempt to challenge “the game” in one way or another. And as professed, all three will be crushed in the process.

In the course of his four seasons as a character on the show, Bodie proved time and again that he was indeed a “smart-ass pawn”. Of the numerous occasions that could be recalled as confirmation of this, the most telling (and entertaining) is in a short scene from the final episode of the third season (“Mission Accomplished”, S03E12), in which Bodie invokes “contrapment” (the correct legal term being “entrapment”) in order to free himself from the drug trafficking charges Rhonda Pearlman tries to level against him. And as Jimmy McNulty is happy to point out, “the kid has a point”. But far more

important, both for the development of *The Wire* as a whole, and for our present purposes, is a scene from the last episode of the fourth season, in which Bodie is seen having a conversation over lunch with McNulty, after the latter got him released from Central Booking. The scene takes place in Northwest Baltimore's Cylburn Arboretum, which Bodie never even knew existed. After making it clear to McNulty that he "ain't no snitch", Bodie utters some of the most memorable lines of the whole show: "I feel old. I been out there since I was thirteen. I ain't never fucked up a count, never stole off a package, never did some shit I wasn't told to do. I've been straight up. But what come back? ... They want me to stand with them, right? But where the fuck they're at when they supposed to be standing by us? ... This game is rigged, man. We like them little bitches on the chessboard." "Pawns," McNulty adds.

Bodie has finally learned the lesson that D'Angelo was trying to teach him at the beginning of the first season: the game is rigged. No matter how hard you try, or how good a player you are (and, as Bodie is right to recall here, he was indeed a great player), your fate is sealed. Interestingly, it was precisely this realisation that drove Bodie to try to challenge "the game," as personified by Marlo. But just as D'Angelo foretold, Bodie would be "capped" soon after. The next scene in which we encounter Bodie will be his last in the show. Gunned down on his corner by Marlo's assassins, his last words are: "Yo, this is my corner! I ain't going nowhere." Bodie lived and died on the corner, like the "true soldier" (McNulty) that he was.

To echo Barthes, although the thread that links the chess scene with the Arboretum scene is neither loose nor tenuous, it is certainly long, spanning four seasons of the show. What better way to demonstrate that in *The Wire* there really "are no wasted units," and that everything has a function and a meaning? That this achievement is a result of *The Wire's* sustained commitment to rationally integrate its elements into a unified whole is further reinforced by another famous example. In a scene from the sixth episode of the first season titled "The Wire", detective Lester Freamon scolds his young colleague, detective Roland "Prez" Pryzbylewski, for not recognizing the pertinence of a phone call the two of them intercepted on the wiretap. In trying to teach Prez that every seemingly trivial detail is important for building their case, Lester utters the now famous words: "We're building something here detective, we're building it from scratch. And all the pieces matter".

The case that Lester and Prez are building at this point is that against Avon Barksdale. But the investigation that starts with the intent to bring down the Barksdale organization will eventually lead Lester to much bigger

targets. As he states later in the first season: "You follow drugs, you get drug addicts and drug dealers. But you start to follow the money, and you don't know where the fuck it's gonna take you" (S01E09, "Game Day"). The money trail will take Lester from the drug addicts and drug dealers all the way up to corrupt politicians and property developers. Lester's attempt at building a case against these bigger players will form one of the most important storylines of *The Wire* as a whole. Its significance is that it shows not only the complicity between street level criminals and corrupt politicians and businessmen, but also, and more importantly, that the drug game is merely a part of a bigger game: nothing less than capitalism itself. Therefore, it could be argued that in trying to build a case against some of the most influential politicians and businessmen of the city of Baltimore, Lester is mounting a case against Capital itself, or at least against one node of this all-encompassing network: a formidable opponent, indeed. In line with the basic tragic tenet of the show, Lester's challenge will eventually be neutralized and he will be punished for his hubris. Luckily for him, Lester won't be forced into an early grave for his sins, but merely into early retirement from the police force. As Ellis Carver succinctly states, "They [street level criminals] fuck up, they get beat. We fuck up, they give us pensions" ("Sentencing," S01E13).

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Time and again, throughout the show's five seasons, Lester proves the truth of the words he directed at Prez: in building a case, all the pieces matter. But if we step outside the world of *The Wire*, there is another sense in which Lester's famous words can be understood to refer to, and describe the logic of the world of *The Wire* itself. As much as Lester tries to teach Prez about building their case, his words can also be taken as trying to teach us, the viewers an important lesson about *The Wire* itself: in the world of *The Wire*, all the pieces matter.¹⁰ If we are to comprehend *The Wire* in all its complexity, we'd better start paying close attention to the details, no matter how small and insignificant they might seem on the first viewing. Often, these details are virtually impossible to catch the first time, which is why watching *The Wire* over and over again is such a rewarding experience. Therefore, our previous claim that *The Wire* is committed to integrating all its elements into a unified whole is explicitly confirmed in the words of one of its main characters.

¹⁰ Several cues reinforce this interpretation. First, the words "...and all the pieces matter" figure as an epigram for the beginning of the episode entitled "The Wire" (S01E06). Second, they are an epigram for David Simon's "Introduction" to the book *The Wire: Truth be Told* (2009). Finally, Simon explicitly cites them on the audio commentary to the first episode of the first season ("The Target") in the DVD edition of the series, and offers precisely the reading we have given here.

What remains to be proven, though, is that this integration is supposed to be *rational*. Before we proceed, it is paramount to recall that in Brandom’s neo-pragmatist usage of the term, rationality is to be understood in the weakest possible sense: as a *practice*, or, to draw on a famous phrase often attributed to Sellars by Brandom, as a “game of giving and asking for reasons”. In other words, to be rational is to be able to determine in practice what follows from what, and what is a reason for what. Of the myriad examples that could be drawn upon to confirm that *The Wire* is deeply committed to a rationality thus defined, the most pertinent to our case is in the opening scenes of the episode “Straight and True” (S03E05), featuring Reginald “Bubbles” Cousins and his protégé Johnny Weeks. Walking down an alley, Bubbles and Johnny engage in the following discussion about “snitching”:

Johnny: “No, Bubs. I mean there’s gotta be rules, or else things get fucked up.”

Bubbles: “Ain’t no rules with dope fiends.”

Johnny: “When the police got you shackled up, you make a move, right? You help yourself out. But to just start snitching for no reason, that doesn’t make no...”

Bubbles: “Let me track this. You hypopulating that you can tattletale when you locked up but you can’t do it straight up for the money? I mean, no offence son, but that’s some weak-ass thinking. You equivocating like a motherfuck.”

Johnny: “OK, so a snitch is a snitch, right?”

Bubbles: “There you go.”

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A perfect example of the game of giving and asking for reasons, if ever there was one. The rules of this game are simple: we are responsible for having reasons for each claim we make, for providing them if challenged, and for taking into account possible countervailing reasons. In other words, we are responsible for justifying each claim we make, for relinquishing those claims that are materially incompatible with our other claims, and for extracting the material inferential consequences of all our claims. Each claim that we make is a petition for recognition by our fellow players in the game of giving and asking for reasons, and is therefore open to being challenged.

What Johnny fails to realize, and what Bubbles is quick to point out, is that by endorsing the first claim, i.e. that it is acceptable to “snitch” in order to free oneself from legal prosecution, Johnny has committed himself to what follows from this claim—that it is acceptable to “snitch” in exchange for money. To put the same point the other way around: Johnny fails to realize that these two claims are materially incompatible, and that he ought

to renounce one of them. Either it is acceptable to be a “snitch” or it is not, regardless of the circumstances. Bubbles, as Johnny’s mentor and fellow player in the game of giving and asking for reasons, is there to correct the errors of Johnny’s inferential ways, and he does so (quite colorfully) by warning Johnny that he is “equivocating like a motherfuck”. As Johnny’s first line in this exchange testifies (“No, Bubs. I mean there’s gotta be rules, or else things get fucked up”), his error of judgment is to be attributed to his desire to abide by the rules of “the (drug) game”: “soldiers” (drug addicts) don’t “snitch”. But what Johnny can’t seem to grasp is that, to borrow a phrase from Stringer Bell, “there are games beyond the fucking game” (“Reformation”, S03E10). And beyond and above them, only one game’s rules bind us all: the game of giving and asking for reasons.

...TO REALISM IN *THE WIRE*

Now that we have elaborated on the rationalism of *The Wire*, we return to the question of its realism. Or, more precisely, after answering the question of the *representational purport* of *The Wire*, we can now address the question of its *representational success*: why do we recognize *The Wire* as a *veridical representation* of the real?

Let us first recall Brandom’s answer to the question of *representational success*. According to Brandom’s reading, Hegel’s crucial move in relation to Kant’s account of judgment is to add a *retrospective* dimension: by applying a concept in a judgment we are responsible not only to rationally integrate the new commitment with previous ones, but also to *rationaly reconstruct* the developmental process by which we arrived at our current set of commitments. That is, we have to show that our current set of commitments forms a rational unity, and that the process by which we acquired them was rational too. We do this by making *explicit* the norms that were *implicit* in our practices, but that governed them all along. Brandom’s answer to the question of representational success follows this line of reasoning: a claim can be said to be a veridical appearance or a successful representation of reality if its rational integration into the whole of our commitments is accompanied by a rational reconstruction that shows how the process that led to our current constellation of commitments was *expressively progressive*. For this rational reconstruction of our current set of commitments to count as expressively progressive it must first show how our prior constellations

of commitments made progress towards the current one, and then construe this progressive process as gradually making explicit what can retrospectively be seen as having been implicit all along.

Following Brandom once again, this is our final contention: we *recognize* *The Wire* as a *veridical appearance of reality* precisely because it exhibits an *expressively progressive structure*, which culminates in the final constellation of commitments endorsed by the show, and gradually makes *explicit* these commitments, which can retrospectively be seen as having been *implicit* throughout its five seasons. In this way, *The Wire* not only rationally integrates all its commitments into a unified whole, but also rationally vindicates the process by which it gradually came to endorse these commitments, i.e., to show that this process was rational as well, thereby fulfilling Brandom’s requirement for *successful representation*.

The question at this point is: what is the constellation of commitments in which *The Wire* culminates? But if we are to establish the show’s end point, surely we must first determine its starting point. In other words, to establish the claim that *The Wire* endorses by its end, we must first determine the problem to which this claim responds.

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If, as stated above, *The Wire* is to be seen as expressively progressive—that is, as both progressing towards a final set of commitments and gradually making them explicit—then both the problem and the solution are present in an implicit form from the show’s beginning. Although it would be interesting to identify and unfold all the implicit instances in which these could be recognized, here we will focus on those instances where both the initial problem that *The Wire* poses and the final answer to this problem are given an explicit formulation.

The first explicit formulation of the problem to which *The Wire* as a whole can be seen to respond is found in the opening scenes of the episode entitled “Hamsterdam” (S03E04), featuring Major Howard “Bunny” Colvin. This episode begins with a young police officer at a Westside community meeting trying to convince the residents of that district that the crime rate is down in their neighborhoods. Those present at the meeting are not reassured by the officer’s (empty) words, or by the statistics shown in charts beside him. In an attempt to calm the situation, Major Colvin takes the podium. His monologue is worth quoting in full:

I’m Major Colvin. I apologize for giving you the wrong impression tonight. We mean no disrespect. I know what’s going on in your neighbourhoods. I see it every day. Ma’am, it pains me that you cannot enter your own front door in safety and with dignity. The truth is ... I can’t promise you it’s gonna get

any better. We can't lock up the thousands out there on the corners. There'd be no place to put them even if we could. We show you charts and statistics like they mean something. But you're going back to your homes tonight, we're gonna be in our patrol cars and them boys still gonna be out there on them corners ... deep in the game. This here is the world we got, people. And it's about time all of us had the good sense to at least admit that much.

The sincerity of Major Colvin's approach catches the audience off guard. After listening to his speech in silence, someone asks the obvious question: “So, what's the answer?” Major Colvin's retort follows from, and poignantly concludes, his preceding monologue: “Well, I'm not sure. But whatever it is, it can't be a lie.”

In the context of this scene, both Major Colvin's claims and the question that they prompted clearly refer to the world of the drug trade. But it doesn't take much perspicuity to notice that this whole scene can and should be extrapolated so as to refer not only to that world, but also, more importantly, to the world of *The Wire* as a whole. As each of its five seasons show, all the aspects of this world—that is, all the institutions that constitute it (the police force, city and state politics, macroeconomic forces, the school system, the media)—are equally corrupt, and in need of radical change. How this change is to be effected is *the* central problem of *The Wire* as a whole, and it is precisely in the scene described above that this problem is first explicitly formulated. If we reformulate this question slightly, it could be argued that the central problem of *The Wire* is none other than the “hard problem” of all leftist political thought, first formulated by V. I. Lenin: What is to be done?

Although Major Colvin refuses to commit to an answer to this difficult question at this juncture, it is he who will eventually provide the explicit formulation of its resolution as proposed by *The Wire*, and therefore of the final commitment that it endorses. Colvin's answer comes in a short scene from the penultimate episode of the fifth season, entitled “Late Editions” (S05E09). The scene begins with Mayor Carcetti giving a short press conference after the citywide school debate, for which he tries to take credit, saying, “What you have seen here today is indicative of the progress that city schools are making under this current administration”. A segment of this debate was shown earlier in the episode, in a scene featuring Namond Brice as one of the debaters, and Bunny Colvin and his wife as proud spectators of Namond's academic success. Seeing Colvin walking to the car with his family, Mayor Carcetti interrupts the press conference to approach him, and tries to apologize for his actions regarding Colvin's Hamsterdam experiment in season three: “You know, I always wanted to

say how sorry I am how things turned out. There wasn't anything I could have done with your experiment in the third district. There wasn't anything that anyone could have done with that.” Seemingly irritated at first, Bunny cools down. After a short glance at the media in the background, he turns to Carcetti and with an expression of indignation mixed with resignation, he utters: “Yeah, well, I guess, Mr Mayor ... There's nothing to be done.”

There's nothing to be done. With these words *The Wire* responds to the question of what is to be done. And it is with these words that *The Wire* makes explicit what was implicit all along: that any and every challenge to the established order of its world is doomed to fail. There is nothing, and never was anything, to be done. All there is is a world of “doomed and fated protagonists” oblivious to the fact that their fate is sealed, and with hubris enough to believe that their individual efforts might bring change. This is the tragic world of *The Wire*.

To recognize *The Wire* as real is to recognize its tragic world as our own. And it is precisely because it forces us to confront the tragic condition of our current predicament that *The Wire* resonates so strongly. Just like “the doomed and fated protagonists” of *The Wire*, we too seem incapable of conceiving of a meaningful answer to the question “What is to be done?” let alone doing anything sensible about it. We might be excused, then, for concluding along with Bunny Colvin that there really is nothing to be done. *The Wire* then becomes a testament to the heroic acceptance of our tragic fate. There is nothing to be done, and we'd better learn to accept it. Or, in the words of Bunny Colvin, “This here is the world we got, people. And it's about time all of us had the good sense to at least admit that much.”

But surely this cannot be all there is to *The Wire*. And indeed it is not. If we are to comprehend in full the singular import of *The Wire*, we have to take a closer look at what it *does* in what it *says*. In *saying* its fatalistic conclusion “There's nothing to be done”, *The Wire* makes this claim *explicit*. In doing so, it does the only, and arguably the most important, thing to be done at this point: it introduces this claim into *the space of reasons*. And to echo Slim Charles' memorable pronouncement, “once you in it, you in it!”¹¹ In other

¹¹ After Avon Barksdale reveals to Slim Charles (“Mission Accomplished”, S03E12) that Marlo wasn't responsible for Stringer's assassination (although this was presented as the main reason to continue the “war” against Marlo), Slim responds: “Don't matter who did what to who at this point. Fact is, we went to war, and now there ain't no going back. I mean, shit, it's what war is, you know? Once you in it, you in it. If it's a lie, then we fight on that lie. But we gotta fight.”

words, once a claim has been placed into the space of reasons, it is forever after open to being rationally assessed, and thus challenged or defended. As we have seen, *The Wire* as a whole can be interpreted as a long slow rational reconstruction, and therefore vindication, of the process by which it arrived at its fatalistic conclusion. It has presented its case in defence of its fatalistic claim, and it is a compelling one indeed. Insofar as we recognize *The Wire* as real, we accept its arguments and recognize its claim as true. But no matter how compelling an argument *The Wire* presents, and no matter how inevitable its fatalistic conclusion might seem at the present juncture, nothing precludes us from questioning its claims further. Quite the contrary: not only are we *entitled* to pose such a challenge but we are *obliged* to. For, unlike the tragic world of *The Wire*, ruled as it is by indifferent gods who determine the fates of their subjects once and for all, our world is governed by a peculiar force: the normative force of the better reason. As subjects in the space of reasons, we are responsible for having reasons for each and every act and commitment that we undertake. Further, we are liable for our reasons to be normatively assessed and challenged, but we are also obliged to normatively assess and challenge the reasons given by others. Finally, when presented with a better reason, we ought to renounce any commitment that might be seen as weak in the face of a given challenge.

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What makes our world, governed as it is by the force of the better reason, so peculiar, and so different from the tragic world of *The Wire*, is that we are at once its creatures, and its creators. We are bound by its norms of rationality only insofar as we bind ourselves by them. It is precisely by constraining ourselves by its conceptual norms that we achieve the degree of positive expressive freedom that makes us the only masters of our world and the sole creators of our fate. As Nietzsche (2000) knew perfectly well, rationalism always was and always will be the best antidote to tragedy. Or, as Omar Little would say, "All in the game, yo, all in the game". The game of giving and asking for reasons. Indeed.

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