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Media Culture Society 2010; 32; 373

DOI: 10.1177/0163443709361168

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Viral manhood: niche marketing, hard-boiled detectives and the economics of masculinity

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Recent decades have seen an upsurge in media studies of masculinity. This body of scholarship began in earnest in the 1990s and has continued to grow into the early 21st century (e.g. Baglia, 2005; Berger et al., 1995; Catano, 2001; Cohan, 1997; Craig, 1992; Cuklanz, 2000; Hanke, 1998; Jackson, 2006; Jeffords, 1994; MacKinnon, 2003; Malin, 2005; Messner, 2007; Stecopoulos and Uebel, 1997; Trujillo, 1991; Whannel, 2002). Recognizing the importance of theorizing how ideas about manhood have been constructed alongside notions of femininity, this research has supplemented an already rich collection of studies of women and media. Concerned with how gender is represented in a range of discourses, these studies have tended to explore specific sorts of representations and to ask questions regarding how these images reflect, influence or otherwise speak to the culture in which they are produced.

This article takes a different approach from such questions, tracing the economics of the US hyper-masculine detective from the hard-boiled pulps to the contemporary cable television program *The Shield*. While the male images of this edgy police drama can be seen to reflect a post-9/11 understanding of American manhood (Malin, 2005: 171–87), focusing on recent changes brought about by deregulation, transitions in television syndication, and the growth of the digital after-market, illustrates the extent to which this program's imagery is an outgrowth of a new US television economics as well. Viewing *The Shield* and the program's masculine anti-hero Vic Mackey through the lens of 'critical industry studies' (Caldwell, 2006) offers a means of appreciating how the economic practices of media conglomeration might themselves lead to particular representations of masculinity.

In exploring these issues, this article ultimately pulls together both cultural and economic analyses of masculinity. The hard-boiled masculinity depicted

in *The Shield* draws on a longer history of masculine representation and refigures it for the economic conditions of the 21st-century television industry. In the hands of 21st-century US television producers, the hard-boiled detective provides for a controversial version of quality television that generates cross-media buzz, rationalizes cheaply produced programs through a 'raw', masculine aesthetic, and opens a range of avenues for after-market sales. Recognizing how economics inflects masculine representations illustrates the complex manner in which these images adhere within US culture industries and suggests that scholars must take economics seriously if they hope to understand the kinds of representations that populate various television environments.

Production culture and the economics of hard-boiled masculinity

After the successful debut of *The Shield* on cable network FX in 2002 one review declared 'police show has humans, not heroes'. The article described lead character Vic Mackey as 'a seething, corrupt, shaved-head bull of a detective' and 'an ambiguous detective who gets the job done, often with his fists' (Weinraub, 2002). Another review claimed that Mackey 'crosses the moral line between good and evil', suggesting that the program 'echoes reality closely enough to create a chilling resonance and an often gripping show' (James, 2002). The program's creator, Shawn Ryan, has claimed that *The Shield* is 'about flawed individuals pretending they're heroes', adding 'we wallow in the mud a bit on *The Shield*... We really delve into some ugly personality traits' (Frutkin, 2006). Although earlier American shows such as *Hill Street Blues* had featured conflicted cops that pushed beyond the stereotypical good guys of *Dragnet*, Mackey and *The Shield* seemed to have pushed the bad cop image to a new extreme. By the end of the first few seasons, Mackey had beaten confessions out of suspects, slept around on his wife, embezzled money and killed a fellow cop who threatened to expose him. As another early review told it, 'FX's "The Shield" doesn't simply push the envelope, it blows it away' (Chunovic, 2002).

The ambiguous morality and raw humanness identified with Vic Mackey accords in many ways with the complex 'production culture' – as John Caldwell (1995, 2008) has called it – of early 21st-century US television. In addition to thinking about the 'production of culture' by considering how media companies use their economic resources to promote particular ideological views, Caldwell has encouraged scholars to consider the 'culture of production'. From this vantage, media theorists approach the industry in an anthropological spirit, considering not only concrete economic conditions, but how industry players perceive, discuss and frame these conditions, and how this cumulative culture of discourse plays out in the production and marketing of media products. While ratings may not be an effective measure

of the actual audience for a program (Meehan, 1990), the fact that US television producers and advertisers act *as if they are* makes them an important component of television's production culture. For Caldwell, industry trade magazines and producer interviews provide glimpses of this culture of production and clues to the inner logic – and superstitions – of the industry. Understanding the culture of production surrounding television portrayals of masculinity means attending to how media producers capitalize on cultural resources about gender within the contemporary economic conditions and trade stories of the industry.

The Shield takes advantage of a long history of hard-boiled masculinity, remaking these images within the specific context of early 21st-century American television. Although literary scholars generally trace the crime fiction genre back to 19th-century writers such as Edgar Allan Poe and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the hard-boiled story is a decidedly 20th-century product (Brucoli and Layman, 2002; Haut, 1995; McCann, 2000; Smith, 2000). This period saw an eruption of cheap fiction, first through 'pulp' magazines and then through paperback pocketbooks. The general-interest magazines of the 19th century had maintained a decidedly genteel appeal and their relatively high prices guaranteed this wealthier readership. At the turn of the century, however, a number of publishers cut their prices and made their magazines available to a wider audience. In 1912, when readers could purchase a monthly edition of *Harper's* or *Century* for 35¢, such early pulps as *Argosy*, *Popular* and *Adventure* cost only 15¢ (Mullen, 1995: 145). The 1920s saw a still greater increase in cheap titles that paralleled technological innovations in the pulp and paper industry. Owing to a series of developments in Fourdrinier machines, the 1920s saw percentage increases in the speed of paper production that were unmatched by those in the previous or following decade (Cohen, 1984). This made pulp paper available at still lower prices and helped to fuel the revolution in cheap paper magazines. The development of crime fiction magazines such as *Black Mask*, whose stories included work by Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett, reflected attempts to target the growing working-class audience that made up the majority of pulp fiction readers (Smith, 2000). The pulps provided entertainment for workers who labored under the very conditions that made the magazines possible in the first place, offering them both tough stories and advertisements for correspondence courses in electrical repair and Charles Atlas-type muscle-building regimes.

The pulp magazines and their paperback offspring took up a niche-marketing approach that focused explicitly on class and gender by packaging a sense of authentic, working-class masculinity. When *Black Mask* began in 1920 it was subtitled 'An Illustrated Magazine of Detective, Mystery, Adventure, Romance, and Spiritualism'. By 1927, the magazine had dropped the romance and spiritualism and was now subtitled 'The He-Man's Magazine' (Smith, 2000: 27–8). In this way, *Black Mask* and its contemporaries set themselves in opposition to the more bourgeois 'slicks', which focused on the family and women's issues that

advertisers believed appealed to the middle-class housewives seen to be the largest buyers of consumer goods. The slick pages of such magazines as *Vanity Fair* expressed contempt for the presumably lowbrow fiction published in the pulps even as *Black Mask* and its brethren mocked the effete nature of these fancier publications. The pulps targeted a less moneyed audience, taking advantage of connections between manhood and class that had linked America's working-class men with toughness and authenticity as far back as the founding of the country, when the self-made man had been offered as a counter to the aristocratic British Dandy (Bederman, 1995; Kimmel, 1996; Rotundo, 1993). When the pulp magazines were replaced by paperback books these same class and gender themes remained. A 1940 review of Raymond Chandler's *Farewell My Lovely* commented: 'this is a tough one: superlatively tough, alcoholic, and, for all its wisecracks, ugly rather than humorous' (Anderson, 1940). Another review would call the novel 'the real thing in wickedness', offering its publishers a perfect tagline for their marketing materials ('About a Murder in Los Angeles', 1940). The authenticity identified with the 'mechanic accents' (Denning, 1987) of the hard-boiled detective's urban world created a sense of lower-class cultural capital that drew in readers who found points of identification with this presumably tougher, more realistic manhood.

Even as the pulps were largely replaced by radio, film and television dramas, the presumed authenticity of the hard-boiled detective endured. In addition to Hollywood films that paid homage to these hard-boiled men, a number of French directors would take up their stories as well, with no less a figure than New Wave impresario Jean-Luc Godard taking his crack at the hard-boiled detective. In the literary world, boutique publishers such as Black Lizard kept hard-boiled novels in print throughout the 1980s, reissuing titles by such lesser known writers as Charles Willeford, David Goodis and Jim Thompson, whose novels *The Grifters*, *The Kill-Off* and *After Dark My Sweet* were made into films in the 1990s. Thompson's revival offers a telling example of the new success of hard-boiled fiction in the late 20th century. One of the grittier hard-boiled authors, Thompson, made heroes not only of detectives, but of conflicted criminals as well, pushing the connections between masculine heroism and the criminal underworld to an extreme. In the early 1980s, American poet Geoffrey O'Brien would call Thompson a 'dimestore Dostoevsky', and a 1990 essay on the 'Jim Thompson revival' argued that Thompson 'offers us an unsparing view of the human condition' (Block, 1990). Academics found reasons to celebrate hard-boiled crime writing as well. Building on developments in semiotics and cultural studies, Ray Browne's Popular Culture Association and critics such as John Cawelti (1976) suggested that crime fiction deserved a place alongside the 'highbrow' literature that had traditionally dominated the academy. Celebrated as a sort of mass-produced folk culture, the hard-boiled story had been elevated from the cheap paper racks to the heights of avant-garde realism.

Programs such as *The Sopranos* and *The Shield* demonstrate how contemporary versions of this hard-boiled masculinity can earn both profits and critical acclaim within the context of present-day television economics. Early reviews noted that Tony Soprano had opened the door for *The Shield's* corrupt Vic Mackey by humanizing the Mafioso and blurring American television's typical line between good and evil characters. Soprano was as much a child of the hard-boiled story as he was of *The Godfather*. His trips from suburban household to strip-club and murder scene to psychiatrist's couch demonstrated the kind of fluid identity that fascinated Jim Thompson and other hard-boiled writers. Likewise, while Soprano lived an upper-class lifestyle, he regularly celebrated working-class values. While sitting in an old church with his daughter Meadow, he explains that 'stone and marble workers that came over here from Italy built this place', adding 'go out now and find two guys who can put decent grout around the bathtub'. Here and elsewhere, Soprano is positioned against a more effete masculinity which he feels has taken over his contemporary America. 'Whatever happened to Gary Cooper, the strong, silent type?' he asks his therapist in an early episode. 'That was an American. He wasn't in touch with his feelings.' Like the hard-boiled detective who was posed against the gender representations of the slicks, Soprano is regularly placed in tension with the new-age masculinity that dominated much of the 1990s American media scene (Malin, 2005).

As with many hard-boiled characters, Soprano's conflicted personality and killer instincts have been celebrated for their authenticity. James Caryn (2001) called the program 'brutally honest', drawing explicit connections between its violence and realism. Discussing the program's third season, Caryn observed that:

... maybe the violence in Seasons 1 and 2 made it necessary to raise the stakes this year, but making the brutality more explicit was the only way to remain true to the complex reality of Tony's life, and it was worth doing. (2001: E1)

Paul Brownfield (1999) similarly called the program 'television in the key of real life' and Tom Shales (2001) argued that, in the midst of so-called 'reality' television, only *The Sopranos* put forward a realistic view of the world. Shales wrote that he 'wouldn't trade one episode of HBO's "The Sopranos" for every episode of "Survivor" ever made'. Similarly to hard-boiled writers such as Thompson, the brutality of *The Sopranos* earned it recognition as a more realistic glimpse into the human condition, demonstrating how a fascination with the supposed authenticity of brutal masculinity continued to pervade both critical and popular appraisals of hard-boiled fiction.

The success of *The Shield* illustrates how this fascination has remained lucrative for media producers. Just as the pulps took advantage of a set of economic conditions (e.g. cheap paper production) to craft a market package targeting a specific version of masculinity, *The Shield* built its own masculine product within the economics of 21st-century American cable television. The

pulp magazines had illustrated an early version of ‘narrowcasting’. Rather than try to compete for the broad audiences of mainstream magazines, their hyper-masculine stories and advertisements targeted the subgroup of workers otherwise ignored by middle-class presses. As pulp style masculinity won the esteem of artists, critics and academics, it found itself remade for a new narrowcast audience of educated, hip elites – from Godard to the Popular Culture Association and the readers of Black Lizard publications. It is this new audience for whom *The Shield* – like *The Sopranos* before it – is geared. The remainder of this article considers how the version of hard-boiled masculinity put forward on *The Shield* lines up with the economics of 21st-century television and the new marketing strategy of ‘viralcasting’.

Viralcasting the hard-boiled cop

The Shield's Vic Mackey was not the first hyper-masculine cop to appear on television. As the hard-boiled stories discussed above illustrate, there is a long history of representing masculinity through stories of crime detection. While hard-boiled fiction took advantage of a narrowcasting strategy that gave them access to a specific demographic, however, early television operated under the broadcast programming model that characterized television's younger years. Networks such as NBC, ABC and CBS tried to appeal to as wide a demographic as possible and predominantly produced shows they believed most mainstream viewers would watch. Rather than the more edgy representations that characterized the pulps, the broadcast networks produced safer versions of the masculine detective. In place of the independent ‘Private I’, who seemed to blur the line between good and evil, the networks offered the likes of Sergeant Joe Friday of *Dragnet*. Finding their place on the earlier broadcast medium of radio, Friday and his partners were legitimately sanctioned police officers sanitized for sale to a wider audience. If Mickey Spillane was a stereotypically working-class man who was brash, violent and rubbed elbows with criminals, Joe Friday was stereotypically middle-class. With his controlled speech and ‘just the facts’ attitude, Friday was ‘the man in the gray flannel suit’ both literally and figuratively.

If *Dragnet* demonstrated a broadcast version of police masculinity, the early 1980s program *Hill Street Blues* pointed towards the more narrowcast approach that would proliferate in the 1990s and later. As Todd Gitlin's (1983) classic study of the program illustrates, NBC's low ratings and third-place status encouraged the network to grant producers Steven Bochco and Michael Kosoll an uncommon level of artistic freedom. The program's ‘knitted’ narratives, dense sets, shaky camera work, and less black-and-white heroes, defied the television conventions of the time. Despite low first-season ratings, NBC renewed the program because of its critical acclaim and coveted demographics. Though small in number, the viewers of *Hill Street Blues* were

predominantly the 'relatively younger, more male, more prosperous viewers whose attention was worth proportionately more to advertisers' (Gitlin, 1983: 305). More so than *Dragnet*, *Hill Street Blues* moved towards a hard-boiled vision of masculinity, depicting a range of officers who struggled to do their best and didn't always come out on top. However, NBC's Broadcast Standards division's insistence that the program not 'show a cop as a casual criminal' (1983: 288) guaranteed a cleaner story than Jim Thompson might have written. Despite the program's success, Kozoll would leave the program during the second season, feeling that it had been compromised by the pressures of broadcast television and that his original vision had been sacrificed in favor of economically safer storylines.

If *Hill Street Blues* hinted towards a niche vision of the police series, the FBI series *The X-Files* found success in a more fully narrowcast market. The US cable industry had begun to expand in the 1980s with networks such as youth-targeted MTV (1981). But it was not until late in the decade that cable subscriptions accounted for one-third of television viewers – seen as a watershed moment within the industry – and the new cable economics truly began to take hold. Networks such as TNT (1988), Sci-Fi Network (1992) and the News Corporation-owned FX (1994) promised advertisers access to more focused demographics. They also provided new sources for syndication revenue as their programmers worked to fill their daily schedules. Although *The X-Files* aired on broadcast network Fox, its storylines and characters reflected the narrowcast trends and heightened syndication possibilities that accompanied the growth of cable. *The X-Files*' blend of science fiction, fantasy and crime drama, illustrated the then fourth-place Fox network's attempt to go after markets not targeted by typical broadcast fare – an approach that risked alienating large numbers of viewers even as it delivered specific demographics. Likewise, its storylines blended both episodic and serial elements. While FBI agents Fox Mulder and Dana Scully would generally solve some specific case within each episode, overarching storylines about government conspiracies and the abduction of Mulder's sister stretched across the episodes as a whole. These multiple storylines served to attract both occasional viewers and the more loyal viewers ('loyals') increasingly seen as an important target by advertisers (Jenkins, 2006). The success of cable narrowcasting had demonstrated the financial possibilities of targeting specific subgroups of people, even as the expanded possibilities for syndication allowed for a growth in serial narratives. The fact that hour-long dramas could be syndicated in succession more easily on cable networks allowed producers to develop more serial programs that demanded regular viewership.

This growth in narrowcasting prompted changes in masculine representation as well, as the character of Fox Mulder demonstrates. Unlike Joe Friday, Mulder's character blended stereotypically masculine and feminine characteristics (Bellon, 1999), though in ways that often privileged traditional conceptions of whiteness (Malin, 2005). Bending typical gender roles,

Mulder embraced mysticism, spirituality and emotion in contrast to Dana Scully's highly rational, scientific approach. Far from the hard-boiled masculinity of Mike Hammer, Mulder nonetheless depicted a complex mixture of personality traits that found a strong cult following. Despite low first season ratings – which seemed to confirm industry fears that the program was too weird for mainstream viewers – the program ultimately stayed on the air for nine years. Still, competing with such relative ratings hogs as *Seinfeld* and *E.R.*, *The X-Files* remained outside the top 20 rated programs for most of its years on the air.

But what *The X-Files* might have lacked in broadcast success it more than made up for in syndication. When it debuted in syndication on Fox owned FX in 1997 it garnered a 3.3 rating – the highest cable primetime rating that night. As a result of its strong performance, by the following year, *The X-Files* was drawing higher ad revenues in syndication than *Seinfeld* (“‘X-Files’ Usurps ‘Seinfeld’ for No. 2 Barter Price Slot”, 1998). The serial storylines of the program were ideal not only for syndication, but for the burgeoning DVD market as well; the first DVD box set, released in 2000, featured the *X-Files*’ opening season (Kompore, 2006). The show demonstrated that cult programs could sell by taking advantage of the narrowcast interests of loyal viewers. Fans seemed obsessed with the gender-bending crime fighters Mulder and Scully and they would engage them in whatever ways they could, as studies of *X-Files* fans (X-Philes) have demonstrated (Bury, 2003; Wakefield, 2001; Wooley, 2001).

The representation of Vic Mackey on *The Shield* reflects still another change in media economics brought about by several related policy and market developments. On the policy level, the Financial Interest and Syndication Rules (Fin-Syn) were abandoned in the mid-1990s. Originally put in place in the 1970s, these rules limited the hours of primetime programming a network could own and ended an era in which television networks claimed the complete rights to the programs they broadcast. From the 1970s until the 1990s, production companies retained the syndication rights to the programs they produced. With the Fin-Syn Rules repealed, the networks would reclaim the power they had in the earlier days of broadcasting, allowing them greater control over the syndication of programs they broadcast. As of 2002 ‘ABC, CBS, NBC, and Fox collectively had an ownership stake in over 70% of the pilots developed for prime time’, and these networks ‘owned or co-owned over three-quarters of the series scheduled to debut on the 2002–2003 prime-time schedule’ (Bielby and Bielby, 2003: 587). The deregulatory nature of the Telecommunications Act of 1996 also increased the power of media companies by offering them greater vertical and horizontal integration (McChesney, 1999, 2004). When Disney bought ABC in 1996, the company brought together an expansive television network and a series of production companies with a wide range of film and television properties. In 1999, CBS was acquired by Viacom, merging the broadcaster with such cable networks as CMT, TNN, MTV and Showtime, and production company Paramount Television. Now, the same company could

produce a program, broadcast it on a major network, 'sell' it into syndication and re-exhibit it, without ever going 'out of house'.

At the same time, the television industry saw a still more extreme movement towards niche marketing. The growth of cable throughout the 1990s taught the media industry that advertisers were increasingly interested in the more focused demographics of narrowcasting. As Henry Jenkins (2006) has explained, by the early 21st century, corporate wisdom held that targeting those loyal consumers most invested in a product brought the largest financial return. While loyals make up a small percentage of a product's overall audience, they are reportedly 'twice as likely to pay attention to advertisements and two to three times more likely to remember product categories than more casual viewers' (2006: 76). The importance of loyals has also been reinforced by the so-called 80/20 rule. Corporations assume that 80 percent of product purchases will be made by 20 percent of their consumer base (Kozinets, 1999), and have thus made increasing efforts to target that more dedicated 20 percent. As a fledgling network, Fox had taken up this strategy with *X-Files* and such a-typical fare as *Married ... with Children* and the network had found a great deal of success. By the end of the 1990s, their approach had become corporate commonsense. For a cable network such as FX (like Fox, a subsidiary of News Corporation) this would prove all the more true. Already considered a 'second choice' network relative to the broadcast networks (Malin, 2003), FX and other cable networks were particularly well suited to serve up extreme narrowcast programming.

The increasing concentration of the media conglomerates and the added emphasis on loyals have led to the new industry strategy that I call *viralcasting*. Rather than targeting viewers at the specific sites of broadcast station or cable network, the industry has increasingly sought to follow viewers through a host of parallel channels of consumption. When Fox bought the online site MySpace, one executive suggested that the company's 'success depends on combining these 1.0 sites like Fox Sports and 'American Idol' with this 2.0 beast that has the power to spread and drive traffic with huge force' ('MySpace Blossoms into Major Web Portal', 2006). This desire to 'spread and drive traffic with huge force' reflected larger shifts in industry economics. The deregulation of the 1990s had left media producers looking for new sources of revenue. If the 1990s had been the golden age of cable syndication, the abolition of Fin-Syn and the deregulation introduced by the Telecommunications Act of 1996 had effectively killed it. Fox's strategy with the *X-Files* is a good example of this. Because Fox had been waived from the Fin-Syn rules in order to compete with the other networks, News Corporation-owned Twentieth-Century Television produced the program for broadcast on the News Corporation-owned Fox network. When it came time to syndicate it, they chose to 'sell' it to sister network FX. Doing so allowed the company to control when the show would be on and to avoid the problem of it competing with their regularly scheduled broadcasts. They chose to retain more control over the horizontal flow of their programs in exchange for a less lucrative syndication deal (in fact, *X-Files* star

David Duchovny would sue Fox, charging that they had sold the program for less than its market value and cheated him out of his deserved residuals). Once the Fin-Syn era ended, the other networks were in a similar position to Fox and undertook similar strategies. Rather than allow competing networks to bid competitively on their programs, most media companies would opt for the same horizontal control that Fox had chosen.

As syndication monies diminished, media companies sought new ways to earn revenue from their programs. As a result, the digital after-market of DVD and online webcasting took an especially important role (Barlow, 2005; Bennett and Brown, 2008; Caldwell, 2005). Industry leader eMarketer reported that, in 2008, 155.2 million people in the US would watch videos online. According to the company's widely cited report, online ad sales would reach \$4.3 billion by 2011 ('50% of US Population Will Watch Online Video in 2008', 2007). Likewise, the emergence of DVD box sets helped to create the first true home video television market; DVDs allowed full seasons to be captured in a convenient way not possible with the lower capacity and larger-sized VHS tape (Kompore, 2006). The importance of these new revenue sources was not lost on the Writers Guild of America, which placed DVD sales and online downloads at the center of their 2007–8 strike negotiations. The kind of traffic control that prompted Fox's MySpace purchase reflected a developing strategy of the media conglomerates more broadly. In order to recoup money lost through changes in syndication and the broadcast networks' dwindling market share, viewers needed to move across a whole range of parallel media channels and portals. Producers sought to cultivate loyal viewers who were willing to engage a program in all of the multiple-ways available in the new digital environment. The quest for loyalists and the move towards digital 'repurposing' had converged into a new media environment.

The masculinity depicted on *The Shield* aligns with this new economics in a variety of ways. Even more so than the *X-Files*, *The Shield* is a product of extreme narrowcasting. When the program first aired, such companies as New Balance, Office Depot and Tricon Global Restaurants (owner of KFC, Pizza Hut and Taco Bell) pulled their advertising support because of the show's graphic nature (Forkan, 2002). In working to brand FX as an edgy network distinct from its mainstream counterparts, its producers had offered a program that might have fit just as comfortably on HBO and anxious advertisers had taken notice. Despite this exodus, the network reported that the program's first season had made more money per hour than any in its history ('Fx Renews *The Shield*', 2002). While the show had lost a series of more mainstream advertisers, it eventually won a new group interested in the program's more targeted demographic. New Balance and Office Depot were replaced by 'video-game makers Activision and THQ, as well as Diageo's Captain Morgan Gold, an alternative malt liquor' ('Fox's "Shield" Lures 11 New Advertisers', 2002: 6). In its second season, despite continued difficulty in attracting sponsors, sources reported that the show's advertising revenue

had risen by as much as 50 percent per 30-second spot over season one (Frutkin, 2002). The network had capitalized on its second-choice status to craft a more specific market package for edgier advertisers.

Because of the realism and humanness attributed to its edgy portrayals, *The Shield* capitalized on its rough depictions of masculinity in other ways as well. Like the graphic *Sopranos*, *The Shield* won a series of Emmy awards that brought publicity to the program's graphic stories. Commenting on an Emmy award's value, an executive at HBO told *Broadcasting and Cable* that: 'anything that burnishes the brand and shines it up you like to have' (Higgins, 2004: 12). The buzz produced by Emmy awards and positive coverage in the trade and popular presses is seen by producers as one way of driving traffic through and across a company's various holdings. *The Shield's* critical acclaim also allowed it to attract high-profile talent who further added to its brand identity. Both Glenn Close and Forest Whitaker joined the cast for several seasons, and episodes of the program were directed by such figures as Frank Darabont and playwright David Mamet. Mamet, whose own work focuses on questions of masculinity and class (Goggans, 1997; Greenbaum, 1999; Zeinman, 2001), added still more cultural capital to the program's portrayal of hard-boiled manhood and helped to guarantee press coverage of the quality of its writing and directing.

The hyper-masculine storylines of *The Shield* played into 21st-century television economics in other ways as well. As the pilot episode begins, in an attempt to expose Mackey's criminal activities, his chief, David Aceveda, plants another officer on Mackey's team to infiltrate his inner circle and document his actions. By the end of the episode Mackey has killed the officer, launching a cover-up and investigation that would span the program's seven seasons. This and other plot twists and back-dealings would encourage the loyal viewing practices important to viralcasting, in that in order to understand any episode after the pilot, viewers would need to be familiar with each earlier episode. In the broadcast era, stories had predominantly been episodic; each episode was more-or-less self-contained so that new viewers could begin watching at any time. This began to change in the increasingly narrowcast environment that produced *The X-Files*, as its mixture of episodic and serial stories demonstrates. *The Shield* – like a number of programs contemporary with it – offered storylines that only a loyal could follow. In crafting the program's serial narratives, its producers risked driving away new viewers who were unwilling to play catch-up with previous episodes. However, they also promised to deliver the focused demographics of loyal viewership that have become central to television economics. Although this seriality could be driven by different themes and topics (daytime soap operas have long employed these kinds of narratives), the hyper-masculine stories of murder and police corruption that drove *The Shield* proved an exemplary form for the viralcast serial, particularly as they benefited from the authenticity and quality that had come to be associated with portrayals of hard-boiled masculinity.

The serial nature of *The Shield* capitalized especially well on the new revenues of the digital after-market. Each season was released on DVD during the following summer, urging both loyal and new viewers to immerse themselves in the program's complexly intertwined storylines before the new season began (and the price tag of these DVD box sets could be rationalized by the same buzz about quality that may have driven viewers to the program in the first place). The third season debuted on DVD in March 2005 with a top-25 ranking relative to other movies and television programs being sold at the same time. It and *South Park* were the highest-selling television programs on DVD and their \$49.98 price tags meant they cost nearly \$20 more than all of the other top 25 performers ('Top DVD Sales', 2005). These DVD sales not only added revenue but also brought publicity to the program itself. Its sixth season DVD contained an advertisement for the seventh and final season, including the date and time it would premiere. As has been the case with films and other television programs on DVD (Brereton, 2007; Brown, 2007; Hight, 2005; Skopal, 2007), the add-ons for *The Shield* served to develop its brand identity and to promote and reward loyal viewing practices. The program's DVD releases featured running commentaries and behind-the-scenes documentaries with Shawn Ryan and other talent discussing aesthetic choices, character motivations and the rationale behind various scenes – all of which served to reinforce the quality of the program. In addition, the sixth season DVD contained a trailer for the upcoming FX program *Sons of Anarchy*, a hyper-masculine story about an outlaw biker gang. Part of the larger traffic of the FX network, *The Shield's* DVDs were both a site to which viewers were pushed and a source for moving them towards other products with similar takes on masculinity.

Episodes and behind-the-scenes videos were also available on iTunes and through the program's website. In one set of videos, viewers could listen to the show's actors as they discussed their favorite plot twists and storylines. These videos played on loyal viewership by offering an inside look at the program. They also provided a venue for viewers to see advertisements for other FX programs and brought fans into the larger traffic of the network's brand. The show's producers also released a 15-minute 'promosode' during the summer between seasons five and six. Viewable online, the short story offered additional details about the season five finale, in which Curtis (Lem) Lemansky, a member of Mackey's strike team, is murdered by his friend and fellow strike team member Shane Vendrell. The producers had done little to foreshadow this surprising murder and the promosode offered a set of explanations of Vendrell's confused motivations and a recap of Lemansky's life on the team. First shown on Anheuser-Busch website 'BudTV', this episode aimed to keep the program in viewers' minds during the summer months and to build reciprocal branding between FX and Budweiser, both of which rely upon conceptions of edginess and hyper-masculinity.

The masculine stories of *The Shield* made it perfect fodder for another important new repurposing stream: videogames. At the turn of the century, annual US videogame sales totaled over \$6 billion and had become an essential part of the post-industrial economy (Consalvo, 2006; Postigo, 2003). *The Shield* videogame was released by ASPYR for Playstation 2 and PC in 2007. A third-person shooter game in which players inhabit the role of Vic Mackey and ‘serve justice by any means necessary’, the game allows them to ‘experience the gritty recreation of the controversial television hit *The Shield*’. It opens with a sequence of actual scenes of the program that recount the plot-lines and characters from earlier seasons. Its missions likewise rely on characters and scenes from various episodes, suggesting that the player must know the program in order to fully succeed at the game. Playing on Mackey’s moral ambiguity, in certain missions players must kill suspects in cold blood and then plant weapons in order to make it look like a legitimate shooting. Players also have the option of turning in confiscated drugs or money – and decreasing the ‘heat’ on their character – or keeping it and increasing their ‘retirement fund’. Further ensuring the connection between player and fan, the videogame includes an advertisement for *The Shield*’s online ‘official fan club and store’. Although the game has not been especially successful, it illustrates the important relationship between various repurposing streams. In an era of ‘transmedia storytelling’ (Jenkins, 2006) the best stories are those adaptable to as many different media as possible and hyper-masculine stories are highly media-adaptable.

The economics of masculinity is reflected in the aesthetics of *The Shield* as well. Following in the footsteps of *Hill Street Blues*, as well as a series of later police programs, *The Shield* utilized hand-held cameras to produce a ‘messy’ look that *Hill Street Blues* producers had suggested would mimic the messiness of actual police work (Gitlin, 1983). Using two Super 16mm Arriflex film cameras (the same sort used in many lower-budget documentary films) *The Shield* looked grainy and rough compared to most primetime fare. Series creator Shawn Ryan went after this rougher look from the inception of the program. ‘It’s hard to tell a DP, “Don’t make it look pretty”’, Ryan told the trade magazine *Post*. ‘The look we’re after is down and dirty’ (Restuccio, 2003). The program’s ‘down and dirty’ aesthetic fits perfectly with the hard-boiled narratives of the program more generally. Like the rough paper of the pulps, the aesthetics of *The Shield* highlight the program’s supposed connection with the grittiness of a detective’s life on the street. Likewise, just as pulp paper offered a low-cost means of producing magazines, the aesthetics of *The Shield* lowered production costs as well. The trade magazine *Broadcasting and Cable* reported that the program’s ‘budget was about \$500,000 less per episode than a typical network primetime cop show’ (Albiniak, 2004: 14). Justified for its supposed realism, the rougher look of the program meant that producers could spend less of the money others would use to make programs such as *CSI*:

Miami 'look pretty'. The economically influenced masculine storyline of the program served to justify an aesthetic that itself reflected economic forces. The handheld camera had become the pulp paper of 21st-century television.

Conclusion

Like the pulps before it, and perhaps as a result of them, *The Shield* illustrates the complex relationships between hard-boiled masculinity, economics and aesthetics. Targeted towards less moneyed audiences, pulp detective stories reflected a raw masculinity that resulted from its narrowcast focus on working-class readers. These magazines could focus on this specific group of people precisely because of their lower production quality and cheaper price. In an interesting twist of fate, these economically influenced aesthetics would eventually be celebrated in their own right. Praised for the ways in which they seemed situated in working-class sensibilities, a collection of more moneyed, avant-garde audiences would eventually champion these rough stories for their raw humanity.

If masculinity scholars are to take these matters seriously, they need to pay careful attention to the production culture in which any particular masculine representation is produced. Hard-boiled cops are not the only gendered images available on television or in the media industry more generally. Other images are likely to articulate with their own production cultures in ways both similar to and different from those that I have explored here, and the same culture of production that produced *The Shield* is likely to have produced alternative images as well. Television programs such as *Lost* and *Heroes*, which build their storylines around some particular cataclysmic event, share elements of seriality with *The Shield*, though their larger, more international casts tend to showcase a broader range of identities. Similarly, *24* and HBO's *The Wire* both heavily depended on DVD sales. However, the real-time structure of *24* and the pay-cable possibilities of *The Wire* inflected their depictions of masculinity in ways that differ from that of *The Shield*, despite the investigatory themes shared between all three programs.

Finally, thinking about the hard-boiled depictions of *The Shield* suggests how ideas about masculinity might pervade television's culture of production more generally. To what extent might handheld camera aesthetics, or even television's aesthetic of 'liveness' itself, articulate with cultural or economic understandings of masculinity? How might critics evaluate the narrative quality of a program such as *The Shield* – which does seem to have complex storylines and character development – without simply falling into a cultural appraisal of masculinity? What is the best way to challenge troubling representations while still celebrating interesting storytelling? Answers to these questions will be found in the interrelationship between television representations, industry strategies and cultural conceptions of masculinity.

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