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| |  | | --- | |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | [Judith Grant](http://oak.cats.ohiou.edu/~grantj1/index.html)  Ph.D.  is an Associate Professor at the Ohio University.       |  | | --- | | **Read other reviews:**  [Internet Movie Database](http://us.imdb.com/Title?0306390)  [Readers' comments](http://docs.google.com/user_feedback3.htm#comshield) |       Hollywood and many Americans have been conned into accepting the kind of police hero whose propensity for rule-breaking is the cost of keeping us safe from serious criminals. This is a dubious trade-off. However, even if one accepts this, it is very not clear that one ought to make the same moral adjustment for a cop who breaks the law merely to line his own pockets. In the second case, the police become identical to the criminals they stalk. | |  | | --- | | ***THE SHIELD***  by Judith Grant  Since HBO's success with what the "Industry" likes to call "edgy" original TV shows like *The Sopranos* and *Sex and the City*, network and cable television has had major sex and violence envy. How could it compete with television shows that have no limits on nudity and profanity? The FX network appears to have met that challenge with its new police drama, *The Shield*. It is already a success with viewers and critics. TV Guide called the drama "dramatically tantalizing and morally perilous," and The Hollywood Reporter favorably compared it to *NYPD Blue*. *The Shield*, whose promo proclaims, "The road to justice is twisted," presents an interesting case study in Hollywood's ongoing fascination with antiheroes and their relationship to the law.  The figure of the cop-as-antihero has never had to stretch its parameters as much as it does in this series. Comparisons that have been made between *The Shield* and the Mafia drama *The Sopranos* are misplaced. Bernard Weintraub wrote in the New York Times, Detective Vic Mackey, "seems to evoke the same ambiguity as Tony Soprano." But is Vic really like Tony Soprano? I suspect that those who have seen a common moral ambiguity see it in the fact that these are both occasionally likeable characters that do bad things. Both shows are also very well crafted using innovative topics and flashy film techniques. However, in the case of Tony, we have a hard-core criminal with a conscience. In the case of *The Shield*'s Detective Vic Mackey, we have a police officer who openly engages in criminal behavior. The two scenarios are not the same. Vic is supposed to be protecting people from people like Tony, not emulating them. Hollywood and many Americans have been conned into accepting the kind of police hero whose propensity for rule-breaking is the cost of keeping us safe from serious criminals. This is a dubious trade-off. However, even if one accepts this, it is very not clear that one ought to make the same moral adjustment for a cop who breaks the law merely to line his own pockets. In the second case, the police become identical to the criminals they stalk.  Police antiheroes are usually differentiated from criminal antiheroes by the fact that cops break laws to serve some higher purpose. For example, Dirty Harry is fun to watch to the extent that one can forgive his law-breaking-- insofar as it is portrayed as being a necessary evil used only to lock up bad guys. In contrast, Tony Soprano of *The Sopranos* is fun because he's a Mafia boss with a heart of gold. Yes, he commits crimes to line his pockets, but that's his job. He is, after all, in the Mob. Tony and Harry are true antiheroes. In contrast, *The Shield* presents us with a lead character; Detective Vic Mackey, who is a kind of Dirty Harry meets Tony Soprano. That FX wants to treat him sympathetically and to link him to vigilante pop culture cops rather than to criminals, is evidenced by the way FX describes Vic on the show's elaborate website. He is, they say, "an effective cop who operates under his own rules." FX's writers leave out the part about him being a common criminal. Make that a common criminal with a heart of gold. It was established within the first few episodes that Vic can't stand to watch kiddie porn, and just hates it when kids get killed in gang cross-fires. He also has an autistic son. What a guy.  So far, we have seen Vic having an affair with a co-worker, lying, stealing cocaine and re-selling it, covering up a murder, beating up a suspect during interrogation, and being responsible for a gang hit. In the latter case, there is a clear link made between Vic and the gang activities he is supposed to be curtailing. Intervening in a conflict between two rappers, Kearn and T-Bone, who are connected to two rival gang factions, Vic tries to arrange a truce. Failing in an attempt to stop drug traffic until a flap about a homicide dies down, Vic arranges a meeting between the two rappers at the station. "Give me the money, bitch," says one rapper to the other. Vic comes up with a solution. "Kearn," he says, "you take tonight and come up with a number." Turning to T-Bone, "You revise yours down a bit, then you bring me the numbers and I decide what's fair." "Yeah, who are you supposed to be? Judge Judy?" inquires a smirking T-Bone.But this fails too, and Vic decides the best course of action is to lock the two rivals in a truck overnight. The plan goes awry, as when he arrives the next morning. Kearn has killed T-Bone. "Oh, shit," exclaims Vic. Indeed, he now cannot arrest Kearn for the murder as he has basically arranged and made possible. Moreover, at least in real life this would only escalate the gang conflict. Vic's reaction is telling. After his initial shock, he turns reflective, and looking admiringly at Kearn he follows him slowly to the edge of the dock. The camera shows the back of the two men in silhouette against the sunrise. Vic looks at Kearn. "You hungry?" he asks. The end. Vic and Kearn are linked, not in moral ambiguity, but in a macho and violent street ethic.  New York Times writer Weintraub quotes Peter Liguori, chairman of FX, who affirmed the importance of the recent film *Training Day* in pointing to a previously unknown audience for a "fully dimensionalized representation of the police." Just as the parallels to *The Sopranos* are problematic, so are the ones made to the film, *Training Day*. True, like Vic Mackey, the lead character in *Training Day* (played masterfully by Denzel Washington) is both a vigilante and an outright criminal. However, he is not held up as the hero (or even a true antihero) the way that Vic Mackey is on *The Shield*. The hero in *Training Day* is an honest rookie cop (played by Ethan Hawke) who upends Denzel's criminal career. In fact, Denzel's character is so unsympathetic that even we root for the gangbangers to help rid the neighborhood of his bad influence in the film's penultimate scene. In contrast, the honest rookie cop in *The Shield* is not the hero. He is portrayed as an uptight bible-thumper who is also, by the way, a closeted gay, black man. He has a conscience, but his own struggle with being a gay, which he believes to be a sin, places him dramatically as merely a different kind of hypocrite with a psychological axe to grind.  It is undoubtedly the case that a slew of police corruption scandals also helped to create an audience for *The Shield*. People seem to have significantly lowered their standards for law enforcement officers, and have accepted these kinds of portrayals as entertainment. The connection to the Los Angeles "Rampart" scandal, for example, is indicated by the series of name changes undergone by *The Shield*. It was originally called *The Barn* (an ironic use of the name of the place where pigs live). The show's title was then, quite remarkably, changed to *Rampart*. This was an allusion to the 1998 Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) corruption scandal of the same name. At that time an LAPD spokesperson lamented to The LA Times that the show capitalizes on sensationalistic headlines and "negatively influences youth." FOX, the parent company of FX, countered that the show was not intended to be about the actual police department, citing the dubious distinction that they were "not setting the program at the actual Rampart Station." Attempting to take a naïve high road, Lt. Horace Frank, LAPD's director of media relations, said, "I think it's very unfortunate that FOX would seek to capitalize on such a disturbing and depressing part of our history for money." It is, of course, quite a bit far from unimaginable that a television corporation would try to capitalize on something for money! Still, the LAPD complaints appear to have prevailed, and FX ultimately chose a third name for the show, settling on *The Shield*. They then set the show in the fictitious town of Farmington. Farmington, of course, looks a lot like the seedier sections of Los Angeles.  Despite FX's protestations that *The Shield* had nothing to do with Rampart, the LAPD Rampart District scandal, in fact, had a lot of cops who looked a lot like Vic and his friends. Both have cops who stole cocaine from the evidence room for later re-sale, were part of a high- prestige, anti-gang task force with a great deal of autonomy, hired themselves out as security to rap record labels, and ran their own versions of street justice. These included physical intimidation, covering up of criminal activity, murder, robbery, and in the case of Rampart, framing innocent people. *The Shield*'s website announces that the show takes place in a "tough morally ambiguous world." But seen in the context of its distinct similarities to Rampart, *The Shield* is less "morally ambiguous" than it is just morally irresponsible.  Works Quoted:  "[When Cops Attack!](http://www.themediadrome.com/content/articles/tv_articles/when_cops_attack.htm)" by John Nelson  When"In FX's Hit 'The Shield,' Means Justify Ends," April 3, 2002, New York Times, By BERNARD WEINRAUB  [www.fxnetworks.com](http://www.fxnetworks.com/)  Posted May 22, 2002 |   **Would you like to comment on this article? 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