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# It Was TV: Teaching HBO's The Wire as a Television Series

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## Abstract

Unlike most courses dedicated to The Wire that have examined race, class, criminal justice, urban studies, or education, Sodano foregrounds The Wire as a work of television and examines how it was taught to media majors and non-majors from aesthetic, cultural, technological, economic, and sociological perspectives. It is crucial to recognize The Wire as a piece of television because the circumstances surrounding its appearance on HBO provide context for how it was produced, distributed, and received.



## Keywords

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## Disciplines

Broadcast and Video Studies | Communication

## Comments

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Part I

# *Media*

## It *Was* TV
## *Teaching HBO's* The Wire *as a Television Series*

Todd M. Sodano

Described as a "somewhat angry show" by its creator David Simon (qtd. in Penfold-Mounce et al. 154), *The Wire* examines what happens when social institutions fail the individuals they are supposed to protect. According to critic J.M. Tyree, "The show's implicit argument condemns a criminally negligent and culturally pervasive *failure to notice*" (38). This failure, represented by the characters who work in law enforcement, politics, education, and media, is a leitmotif in the series, as each season tackles a different institution in the city of Baltimore, Maryland.

Similarly, the discourses surrounding *The Wire* have spotlighted pressing sociological and cultural issues in lieu of unpacking it as a television show. Through its slogan "It's Not TV, It's HBO," the premium cable network that aired Simon's series repudiated any notions of having its programming be associated with "TV" and any inherent pejorative connotations. Simon boasted that his series was a visual novel, a notion that supplants the medium in which he was working in favor of a more respected one. Journalistic television critics, whose praise sustained the low-rated series during its five-season run, often lauded his work by drawing similarities to Charles Dickens novels. Moreover, like some TV dramas before and after it, *The Wire* was considered a work of art. In sum, according to film scholar Linda Williams, "much of this praise borrows a literary prestige that corresponds to the series' excellence but not closely enough to its actual serial television cultural form" ("*The Wire:* Realistic").

Like most of the research written about *The Wire,* more attention has been paid to themes and problems inspired by the series and less to how it represents a television text.[1]

Renowned sociologist William Julius Wilson, whose own work inspired the second season's theme of the death of work in America, said of his Harvard class on the series, "To be clear, this course was not intended to teach students *about* the show, per se. Instead, the course integrated academic research *with* the series to develop a rigorous examination of urban inequality" (qtd. in Lageson, Green, & Erensu, 11). Former Baltimore City Health commissioner Peter Beilenson said his Johns Hopkins University class was "based loosely on the [show's] five seasons" (Lageson et al. 13). Marc Levine, a history professor at University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, makes sure his students "get an interdisciplinary, social science handle on the complex layers of the urban crisis," and resists "the temptation to get caught up in the brilliant drama, the humor, and the inherently interesting, multi-faceted nature of the characters" (qtd. in Lageson et al. 14).

These courses represent the prevailing approach to teaching *The Wire,* which consciously ignores it as a television series, disregards any stylistic choices made by the show's creators (by urging that we do not "get caught up in the brilliant drama"), minimizes the medium's power, and prevents students interested in TV production and filmmaking from learning about writing, dramatic storytelling, cinematography, production design, and so on.

My course, however, was intentionally different, as it appeared in a television-radio-film program, where learning objectives for my students who were pursuing careers in these media industries were different from those in classes taught in the liberal arts and social sciences. These objectives included learning how social issues are mediated through a cable television series, examining HBO's influences on American culture, discussing important issues surrounding the current landscape of television, engaging in meaningful dialogues (written and oral) with classmates, and writing effectively and persuasively about *The Wire,* HBO, and television.

## *Pedagogy*

In the spring of 2008, when HBO was airing the show's fifth and final season, I taught "Inside HBO's America: A Case Study of *The Wire*" at Syracuse University, a class that positions the series primarily as "a serial television cultural form" (Williams, "Mega-melodrama"). As Simon looked at the Amer-

ican city through the microcosm of Baltimore, my course took a similar "inside-out" approach by examining the then-current state of the U.S. television industry through an in-depth look at *The Wire*'s production, distribution, and reception, a template I also used for my doctoral dissertation on the series ("All the Pieces").

My 500-level course was offered to upperclassmen and graduate students, most of whom were television-radio-film majors with some journalism and Pan African Studies majors. Twenty-seven students registered for the three-hour seminar that met once a week. The structure was uniform each week: I opened with a 20- to 30-minute lecture, the topics of which were inspired by the show's production (e.g., how it was written, shot, produced, and edited), distribution (HBO's role in greenlighting, renewing, and promoting it), reception (professional television critics' influence over the show's improbable survival and the TV Academy never bestowing it with any Emmy Awards), and some of the social issues (e.g., the war on drugs, sexual orientation, language and violence on television) inscribed in it. For instance, from the famous scene in which homicide detectives Jimmy McNulty and "Bunk" Moreland investigate a murder by communicating to each other using different expressions of the word "fuck," we examined broadcasting indecency and freedoms afforded by premium cable outlets like HBO (1.4). From another episode that provides insight into the character development of lesbian narcotics detective Kima Greggs, we examined televisual representations of sexual orientation (1.10).

Lectures were followed by—and not always connected to—a screening of the next episode of the season. One of the most common pedagogical struggles for today's instructors of modern television is deciding which moment(s) or episode(s) to screen for their students. This difficulty becomes more pronounced when teaching serialized television because of the amount of exposition it takes to bring uninitiated students up to speed. While it might be instructive and entertaining to show the humorous courtroom scene in which stick-up man Omar Little accuses a drug organization defense attorney of being exploitative just like him—"I got the shotgun; you got the briefcase" (1.6)—these scenes mean little, as it were, outside of the context of the series. The student would have a fuller understanding of the scene if she or he knew better the characters of Omar and Maurice Levy. Moreover, by the time the instructor supplies the exhaustive background information, interest in watching the scene has waned. I consistently face this struggle in a television history class, in which I can devote only one week of the semester to *The Wire;* by watching the first episode in class, students do not even see Omar, who makes his first appearance in the third episode.

As I wrote in my syllabus, "An examination of *The Wire* necessitates an in-depth, semester-long, full-season commitment" ("TRF"). The show's sheer size and scope make it almost impossible to examine the entire corpus in one semester; accordingly, I focused only on the first season. Furthermore, because my class situated the series as a work of television and was not topical (i.e., rooted in urban inequality, state power, heteronormativity, etc.), I required us to watch all thirteen episodes together. The shared viewing experience represents a critical component of teaching visual media. Akin to watching a film in a movie theater, emotions can be magnified when viewers are surrounded by others, as my class learned when we all viewed the murder of teenaged boy Wallace (1.12). One student, who had already seen the show, grew upset and ran out of the classroom before Wallace's friends pulled the trigger and killed him. In a dark classroom where texting and second-screen devices were prohibited, distractions were minimized and students offered more detailed and precise descriptions of particular moments. I also did not have to jog their memories about what they might have watched in the week leading up to class. Unfortunately, though, watching the episodes together meant we lost approximately 60 valuable minutes per session that we could have devoted to in-class discussions. In fairness as well, watching television this way—in the dark, on a large screen, with 26 other people—does not necessarily mirror the traditional TV-viewing experience that we enjoy at home.

We capitalized on the nearly equivalent 14-week semester and 13-episode seasons that many HBO (and cable dramas) employ, and watched in order one episode each week, which created gaps between episodes that mimic the traditional broadcasting schedule. In his article on HBO's *Deadwood* and serial fiction, Sean O'Sullivan writes, "[I]t is in that between-state that we as readers or viewers do most of our interpreting—speculating about plot developments or resolutions, wondering about characters and their choices, luxuriating in the details of the story's construction" (123). Despite the ability (through DVDs and HBO On Demand) to binge-watch more of *The Wire,* our class viewed the first season weekly, akin to how HBO had aired them. We treated each episode as an individual installment and tried to limit our discussions to what took place in that particular episode (and what preceded it). Students who so desired were more than encouraged to "read ahead" and watch as many episodes as they wanted. In fact, numerous students had already seen the first four seasons and watched the final one as it aired concurrently with our class that spring, and at least one newcomer binged the entire series in less than two months.

Following a short break after each week's screening, two or three students

individually delivered 10- to 15-minute oral presentations on topics (chosen by the students) that either advanced what we discussed in class, such as how and why the Emmy Award eluded *The Wire* or representations of homosexuality on television, or on material that we could not fit into this class, such as public education in Baltimore or the science behind police interrogations. These presentations supplemented one of the two 5-page essays that students had written on these same topics. Since my class appeared in a communications school, I assessed students' oral presentation skills along with the content they included.

The final 30 to 40 minutes of each class were reserved for discussions that (re)visited issues related to the lectures, episodes, presentations, and reading questions posed by students. Prior to each week's meeting, two to three students took turns composing questions to guide their classmates through the readings for that unit, which served as prompts for our class-wide discussions. For example, one student asked, "How does acceptance of Kima's and [her partner] Cheryl's sexuality differ from acceptance of Omar's? Would you argue that class is a more important factor than race in measuring their acceptance?" Another student, in preparation for our discussion about the influence of TV critics, asked, "How much cultural production can occur if critics are writing about the show, but the viewing audience remains comparatively small?" We were able to incorporate social issues into our dialogues while remaining rooted in our examination of a television series and the surrounding industry. At the conclusion of the semester, students recommended that more time be allocated to our discussions and less time for their presentations.

Students were not permitted to reveal spoilers—or plot points from upcoming episodes or seasons—for their classmates who had not seen the show. This became particularly challenging when discussing the execution of certain writing techniques. We could not discuss the irony of drug lord Avon Barksdale's defiant proclamation in his first scene to his naïve nephew D'Angelo that he doesn't "know shit about jail," only to end up there by the first season's end (1.1). We could not discuss how Avon's right-hand man Stringer Bell's murder in season three (3.11) or Omar's in season five (5.8) might have been foreshadowed. We could not discuss the eventual murders of the three low-level dealers who appeared in the popular scene in which D'Angelo explains to his uncle's low-ranking dealers Bodie and Wallace how to play chess through a metaphor for their standing in the world (1.3).

I carefully chose where I, the instructor, adhered to this rule, though. After Detective McNulty in the first episode tells his partner that he was the one to disclose to a judge how powerful Avon's crew is, which forces the nar-

cotics and homicide departments to investigate, he confesses to his supervising sergeant how he would prefer not to be demoted to the Marine Unit. Twelve episodes later, in the season finale, after the Barksdale case is closed, McNulty ends up on the boat. Discussing this narrative plant as soon as we watched it in class allowed us to explicate it across numerous contexts. More specifically, in addition to the scene showing us that McNulty's well-intentioned actions were met with indignation by his colleagues, we discussed how Simon blurs the line between good and evil by having two superior law enforcement officials castigate a detective for doing the right thing, i.e., by eradicating a successful, violent drug ring. Moreover, what might appear to be a throwaway scene actually pays off at the season's other end, evincing the expansive structure of *The Wire.* Having watched all thirteen hours of the first season in a few days, a binge-watcher could certainly recall what McNulty said to his sergeant. However, the attentive viewer, who remembered that moment from twelve weeks earlier, might enjoy that payoff considerably more: Simon and his writers intended for their show to be viewed weekly, since they were working within the traditional scheduling paradigm of one episode airing per week and not all of them at once, à la HBO rival Netflix's full-season releases of *House of Cards* and *Orange Is the New Black.* The students who knew of McNulty's fate could then discern other signposts throughout the season that foreshadowed his demotion and make meaningful contributions to our dialogues.

## *The Most Important of the Five W's*

*When* an instructor teaches television—especially an individual series—is just as important as *what* he or she covers. Ranging from the increase in programming options to the advances in distribution platforms, the television landscape of early 2008 is drastically different from today, changes that can shed light on how a particular series was created, delivered, and consumed in the contexts of when we examine it along with when the series aired. When my class commenced in January 2008, HBO and television were at a crossroads, which was an important context for my TV and film students, who were merely months away from moving to New York City and Los Angeles to pursue careers in entertainment. Our class began flush in the middle of the writers' strike, which began the prior November and ended three months later, a work stoppage that shut down productions on scripted programming (and films) while writers sought an increase in financial compensation from their work that was being distributed through new media such as DVDs and online

platforms. The strike afforded my students an additional, unforeseen backdrop from which they could examine *The Wire.*

Simon's series, which had begun its final season a mere ten days before our first class, premiered at a pivotal moment in the channel's history: *The Sopranos,* HBO's signature show, had completed its six-season run just seven months earlier, and the network decided not to continue its popular western drama *Deadwood;* worse for the network, a month before the highly anticipated *Sopranos* finale, then–CEO and Chairman Chris Albrecht, who had developed HBO's groundbreaking original programming, resigned after he was arrested for physically assaulting his girlfriend in a Las Vegas parking lot outside of a boxing match that his network had broadcast; and HBO began to face stiffer competition from other cable outlets such as AMC's *Mad Men,* Showtime's *Dexter* and *Weeds,* and FX's *The Shield, Nip/Tuck,* and *Rescue Me.*

Throughout the run of *The Sopranos, The Wire, Six Feet Under, Oz, Sex and the City,* and *Deadwood,* "It's Not TV, It's HBO" was seared into the psyches of TV watchers. In examining the medium's evolution in the current post-network era through the success of *The Sopranos,* television studies pioneer Horace Newcomb challenges the catchphrase's meaning: "[W]hat once was known as 'television' is no longer 'TV.' HBO's slogan is, in effect, dependent on a set of assumptions about the medium that no longer hold, a retro activation—and implicit denigration—of older general meanings and attitudes" (574). He also acknowledges the "aesthetic conventions" of today's programs that have supplanted what once was "television" (574). My media students have examined these conventions—from television's past and present—as well as their implications.

Recognizing this backdrop reveals more layers of context from the moment when our class examined *The Wire,* which undoubtedly would be different had the course been offered today with the benefits of hindsight and the outburst of scholarly articles that have been written since the series concluded. Furthermore, HBO might not have green-lighted or renewed *The Wire* at a different time in the company's history.

## *Distribution*

In order to teach *The Wire* as a piece of television, it is essential to understand not just what took place on the screen but also the impact of the series' distribution mechanism, HBO. Without the network's "remarkable sustained support of the program" (Hanson 67) and despite the critical adoration the

show received, *The Wire*'s continuously low ratings and inability to earn any Emmy recognition might have been enough to interrupt Simon's vision for a five-season series (Sodano, "All the Pieces"). In their analysis of *The Sopranos* as "brand equity," Mark C. Rogers, Michael Epstein, and Jimmie L. Reeves examined the series' "overlapping economic, technological, regulatory, and corporate *contexts*" that "constitute the enabling conditions that make possible the production" of HBO's original series (43). A common (mis)perception from students is that writers flock to premium cable outlets merely because they are permitted to include foul language and nudity in their scripts. Fleshing out writers' freedoms and challenges allows students to understand the differences between television's various economic models and their influences over narratives.

HBO is neither advertiser-supported nor regulated for indecent content by the Federal Communications Commission. Thus, the channel can tell stories in a cutting-edge way that provides value to the viewer but that would make the conservative, ratings-driven broadcast networks nervous. According to media scholar Deborah Jaramillo, "This pay cable chauvinism not only holds broadcast TV to a different standard but also implies that pay cable consumers can handle graphic language, sex, and violence in a more thoughtful and productive way than broadcast viewers" (66). In other words, those elements need not appear carelessly and gratuitously—though, of course, they often do. Furthermore, because HBO is commercial-free, its stories need not ramp up to a climactic break every six to eight minutes with a cliffhanger to keep viewers tuned in during the advertisements, an economic model, according to Simon, that limits the possibilities of complex storytelling and "has kept television a juvenile medium" (qtd. in Egner).

Cable outlets such as HBO that offer original programming call for far fewer episodes than their broadcast network competitors. Jaramillo adds, "Fewer episodes ordered means more money to spend and more production time in which to spend it" (63). This discrepancy explains how *The Sopranos* produced only 86 one-hour episodes in eight-plus years and *The Wire* 60 episodes in six years, compared to broadcast series that tend to eclipse the 60-episode mark by the end of their third season. This fundamental difference between broadcast and cable (and streaming) television as well as HBO's cultivation of its auteurs (discussed later in this section) allow for the 21-month breaks between *The Sopranos*' fifth and sixth seasons and *The Wire*'s third and fourth seasons, compared to the traditional four-month summer break for network shows.

HBO and its premium cable counterparts Showtime, Starz, and Cinemax

endure challenges and freedoms that these "enabling conditions" provide. For instance, subscriber-based channels regularly battle "churn," or the turnover rate at which customers discontinue their monthly subscriptions. Because ratings do not translate into advertising revenue, pay cable channels instead must continuously provide incentive to their subscribers, which might take the form of original programming, on-demand or streaming services, the manufacturing of "buzz,"[2] or the development of a "strong brand identity" (Rogers et al. 47).

In 2001, HBO introduced HBO On Demand, a video on-demand (VOD) service, and HBO GO, a streaming service for online and mobile devices, in 2010. Both services offer subscribers access to original series, movies, comedy specials, sports, and documentaries. Aside from borrowing a friend's username and password to access HBO GO, nonsubscribers may watch through DVDs,[3] the preferred binge-consumption practice in the early 2000s before streaming video became more desirable.[4]

A common practice today is for studios to release the most recently completed seasons of their series just before the premieres of upcoming ones in order to allow new viewers to catch up. However, the seemingly infallible HBO made crucial errors while *The Wire* was on the air by releasing the first season DVD set in October 2004, when season three was still airing, and the second season set in January 2005, after the third season had finished ("*The Wire*"). This unusual blunder marks an exception that proves the rule with respect to HBO's meticulous crafting of its brand and content. As the next section describes, the series builds as a novel would—by expanding slowly and focusing on character, story, and setting—which makes it difficult for new viewers to start watching without having seen the first season(s). For students pursuing careers in entertainment, understanding how a leading television brand distributes its properties and promotes its work is critical.

Media historian Christopher Anderson has elevated HBO's programming, namely its dramas, by aligning it with more highly regarded art forms in the hierarchical scale of American culture, in which television is traditionally at the bottom. More specifically, the network has required its viewers to adopt "an aesthetic disposition [that] brings to television the cultivated expectation that watching certain television series requires and rewards, the temperament, knowledge, and protocols normally considered appropriate for encounters with museum-worthy works of art" (24). Invoking cultural theorist Pierre Bourdieu, Anderson claims that HBO has "cultivat[ed] an aura of aesthetic distinction" (29). Inherent in this distinction is how the channel positions itself—and is recognized by cultural critics—more as art and less as broadcast entertainment. Anderson acknowledges HBO's public relations for

"promot[ing] a television culture in which it is possible to think of a television series as a work of art. This is a crucial step in the creation of HBO's distinctive cultural value" (35). Referring to creators on his network, HBO co-president Richard Plepler said, "Great artists want to be with a gallery owner who gets them, and with whom they have a shared vision" (qtd. in Aspden). Tyree, in his review of *The Wire*'s fourth season, which earned the series its highest praise and a renewal for a final season, says to "[c]redit the Medici-like largesse of HBO; there was something decidedly Florentine about how the funding kept coming through for such a ratings dog" (32). Enjoying the subscriber-based economic model, where low ratings do not translate into lower advertising revenue and higher cancellation rates, HBO looks elsewhere to decide a series' fate, often to the intangible buzz that the network craves.

According to Anderson, HBO's public relations has "masterfully pulled the strings of a credulous press," adding how the network "feeds the press coverage of its programs back through the public relations machinery, so that people begin to speak about the positive press coverage" (38). Leading up to *The Wire*'s fourth season premiere in the summer of 2006, Albrecht and Simon took their puppet show to the biannual Television Critics Association (TCA) Press Tour in Los Angeles, where at the show's presentation they baited many critics into heaping hyperbole and superlatives into their reviews in hopes of persuading more viewers to watch the new season and thus avoid what seemed to be an imminent cancellation. By dangling this threat—as well as Simon's to write the last season as a novel if HBO did not renew (Zurawik, "David Simon")—over the heads of the press and the show's cult following, Albrecht and Simon successfully galvanized many critics from the TCA, in large part by giving them the full season of screeners in advance rather than just a few episodes as HBO had done with the first season. This brilliant maneuver yielded the following reviews from critics who binged on the fourth season: "Thirteen hours ago, I was a different person" (Buckman, "Re-*Wired*"); "This season of *The Wire* will knock the breath out of you" (Heffernan); "[*The Wire* is] surely the best TV show ever broadcast in America" (Weisberg).

Before the premiere, Simon suggested that the show's ratings, its DVD sales, and critical responses would contribute to whether or not HBO would renew one last time ("Exclusive David Simon Q&A"). Considering the series' meager 1.53 million viewers who tuned in on September 10 (Martin) as well as the undisclosed DVD sales figures, the renewal seemed to hinge on the journalists to reach their readers and persuade them to watch. Or did it? After the

show was renewed 48 hours after the fourth season premiered, Simon said, "As ridiculous and wonderful as the reviews were, they gave me a lot more confidence than I had.... But I really think we won the battle with HBO before we aired" (qtd. in Martin). Despite HBO's exceptionalism, though, it is usually impossible to isolate one particular criterion for any of its renewals or cancellations.

Coincidentally, another drama in the "greatest TV show ever" conversation aired its first season on the same Sunday nights that *The Wire* aired its last: AMC's *Breaking Bad* (2008–2013). Creator Vince Gilligan's basic cable series, which also initially struggled to produce high viewership, enjoyed a freakish ratings increase of 442 percent over its final two seasons due to Netflix's ability to attract new viewers who could catch up in advance of the bifurcated fifth season (Hibberd, "*Breaking Bad*"). To ensure my students can understand this type of growth, my television history and *The Wire* classes always include a brief introduction to ratings and shares.[5] Students who enter careers in broadcasting, advertising, public relations, sales, or media research must know the distinctions between these two figures and how complicated calculating television viewership has become in an era of fragmentation and multi-platform viewing.

Comparing the histories of two of the most critically acclaimed dramas of all time may be an enjoyable conversation on its face (see Koo), but since *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad* were contemporaries of each for just a few months, it is crucial for students to note how the technological landscape that developed alongside Gilligan's series revolutionized the medium just as its precursor was concluding. Gilligan said, "I don't think our show would have even lasted beyond season two if it wasn't for streaming video on demand.... It's a new era and we've been very fortunate to reap the benefits" (qtd. in Koo). Compare this to Simon's reliance upon the show's ratings, DVD sales, and pre–Twitter TV critic conversations for survival, and *The Wire* creator sounds as if his era featured VHS tapes, television set knobs, and newspapers, not one that still enjoyed its own technological advantages such as HBO On Demand and repeat airings on HBO's multiplex channels (e.g., HBO2, HBO Signature, HBO Zone).

## *Television as Visual Novel*

In a self-referential newsroom scene from the show's final season, *The Baltimore Sun* staff gathers around a table to hear their executive editor declare

the topic for one of their next series (5.2). Thinly developed as a straw villain, James Whiting proudly uses the word "Dickensian," an unsubtle nod to the critics and journalists who used a similar adjective in describing *The Wire*.[6] More controversially, however, is how Simon positioned his series as a visual novel, a notion we debated in my class. He said, "If you give me 13 hours of a visual medium, I should be able to give you a story as detailed as a 400-page novel, in terms of its use of characters" (personal interview). Referencing *Moby Dick,* Simon noted how we do not see the whale in the first chapters of Herman Melville's book. Not coincidentally, the first season of *The Wire* is more than halfway completed by the time the Baltimore Police Department's investigative detail actually sees their mysterious target Avon Barksdale, which builds suspense and anticipation, and the eponymous surveillance device that gives the series its name is not implemented on the payphones in the Western Baltimore projects until the sixth episode.

The controversy of the visual novel claim has rested not necessarily in placing one's work next to one of the greatest American novels but, rather, in situating it alongside the printed text. As media scholar Jason Mittell wrote in his exploration of *The Wire* as more an interactive video game and less a novel, "[T]elevision at its best shouldn't be understood simply as emulating another older and more culturally valued medium. *The Wire* is a masterpiece of television, not a novel that happens to be televised, and thus should be understood, analyzed, and celebrated on its own medium's terms" ("All in the Game"). Over the course of the five seasons, the exploration of how the social institutions have failed the people of Baltimore grows richer as the story expands and the number of characters increases.

In my class, I introduced "television as literature" as our second-week topic as a way to discuss the structure of the series, not knowing how heated discussions would grow surrounding this notion. Mittell echoed my students' aversion to this characterization: "By asserting *The Wire* as a televised novel, Simon and critics are attempting to legitimize and validate the demeaned television medium by linking it to the highbrow cultural sphere of literature" ("All in the Game"). Once again, despite the advances that television and television studies have made over the last decade and a half, the medium is still maligned, leading its most notable writers to defend it (and themselves) and modify the conversation about how it is legitimized.

The viewer can experience this deliberate, novelistic story development symbolically. In my class, I performed what I call the Kima Greggs Finger

Analysis, in which I explore the symbolism surrounding the detective's near-fatal shooting. In her first scene in the pilot, after she and narcotics detectives Thomas "Herc" Hauk and Ellis Carver make a street arrest, Greggs admonishes her careless colleagues for not finding the second gun in the backseat of a car (1.1). She flashes her index and middle fingers to remind them that there were two guns that they should have retrieved during the bust. Nine episodes later, Greggs again is in the backseat of a car—this time, as an undercover detective—in a botched drug-dealing sting (1.10). The driver, a nightclub manager who was a police informant, ends up dead and Greggs is critically wounded. Unlike the first episode, though, this time she cannot reach the gun taped unsuccessfully under the front seat of the old vehicle, and thus her fingers cannot reach the weapon to protect herself. In the last scene of the next episode, Greggs lies in a coma in a hospital bed with machines beeping around her (1.11). A close-up of her still left hand is shown, perhaps to suggest the finger-twitch that assures the familiar TV viewer that she will be fine. However, *The Wire* resists predictability and cuts back to the long shot of a motionless Greggs in the bed as the episode fades to black.

In the season finale two episodes later, Greggs, awake and talking, is asked to identify the two men who shot her.[7] Homicide detective Moreland shows her photo arrays of men whom he and Greggs know were responsible and subtly suggests (with what he later calls his "fat finger") that Avon's henchman "Wee-Bey" Brice was the second shooter. Moreland says Greggs' ability to identify the two shooters would "play a whole lot easier" in court, but she cannot—nay, *will* not—finger (i.e., identify) him because she did not see Wee-Bey through the dark that night. She concedes, "Sometimes things just gotta play hard" (1.13).

Whether one envisions *The Wire* as a book, a video game, or a television show, these four moments that all symbolically involve Detective Greggs' fingers both literally and figuratively illustrate its expansiveness, its subversion of television drama conventions, and the complex construction of its characters. From a pedagogical perspective, this scaffold analysis requires students to recall what they learned throughout the semester and apply it across numerous contexts, including the series specifically and television generally. For the many students who proclaim to be visual learners, seeing these contexts in action can be much more illuminating than the instructor merely lecturing about them. Nevertheless, as Mittell advises, "the best insights about the show can be found not by looking at it as either a novel or a game but in terms of what it truly is: a masterful example of television storytelling" ("All in the Game").

## *Production*

Students often characterize *The Wire* as "realistic" and "authentic," two controversial yet nebulous terms in media storytelling. It is important to tease out these words, and on what students base these characterizations. The instructor who teaches *The Wire* as television, in turn, ought to impart to the class how it was produced, a vital education for students who seek work in the field.

Before creating *The Wire,* Simon adapted *The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner-City Neighborhood,* a nonfiction book he co-wrote with Ed Burns in 1997, into an Emmy-winning HBO miniseries in 2000. Simon also wrote *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets* in 1991, which NBC turned into a fictional drama series called *Homicide: Life on the Street* in 1993.[8] He wrote this book after taking a leave of absence from *The Baltimore Sun,* where he ultimately worked for 13 years as a crime reporter, to spend a year with the Baltimore Police Department's Homicide Unit.

His background in journalism and ethnographic writing informs our understanding of him as a television storyteller, as evidenced by his complicated characters who erase the proverbial line between good and evil. The characters' complexity differs from the narrative complexity that many of today's popular dramas employ. The latter refers to a shift towards serialized programs whose story lines traverse episodes and seasons. Stand-alone episodes, which do not require the viewer to have a prior understanding of the characters and events, have largely disappeared in programs from this genre. In addition, according to Mittell, who has written extensively about this form, "narratively complex programs invite temporary disorientation and confusion, allowing viewers to build up their comprehension skills through long-term viewing and active engagement" ("Narrative Complexity" 37). Fans who struggle to summarize *The Wire* in one sentence also likely warn the new viewer to pay close attention when watching it for the first time. They also rewatch episodes not only to revisit a favorite moment but also to catch what they might have missed, be it an unclear line of dialogue, a meaningful glance, or a subtle plot development. Through this "productive confusion," Mittell adds, "Simon and the writers have always assumed that viewers should have to work to understand their fictional vision of Baltimore" ("*The Wire* in").

Simon's journalistic pedigree explains his series' quest for authenticity. Episodes are layered with insider jargon, nuanced characters (ranging from law enforcement officials, politicians, and school officials to drug dealers, longshoremen, and newspapermen), and a lack of expository dialogue written by

journalists and novelists. On numerous occasions, Simon has declared he does not care if the viewer can follow his series, an approach that he modified from his time at *The Sun*. "I was always told to write for the average reader in my newspaper life," he said. "He knows nothing and he needs everything explained to him right away, so that exposition becomes this incredible story-killing burden. Fuck him. Fuck him to hell" (qtd. in Hornby 76–7). Simon's quest for authenticity undoubtedly caught the attention of the journalism majors in my class.

Students often mischaracterize *The Wire* as an improvised show because of the raw, unfiltered language and street jargon that its actors deliver so naturally. Simon and his writers quickly note that mostly all of them stay "on book" and deliver their lines as written. Nevertheless, that these lines are so poetic, memorable, and believable speaks, as it were, to the ears for dialogue that the writing staff possesses. In striving for authenticity and realism, Simon's goal through his show is for "a 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'" (qtd. in Hornby 77).

The incorporation—and purposeful exclusion—of sound is also an important element in the show's production. Unless it explicitly appears in a class dedicated to audio production, how television programs and films record, manipulate, and incorporate sound is largely ignored in the college classroom. In my class, we examined how the series used music and sound to contribute to the stories. For example, save for each season's closing montage, *The Wire* does not include nondiegetic music. Rather, the only music that plays in each episode, in addition to the opening and closing credits' theme songs, comes from the characters playing it—for instance, in their cars, at work, or in a club. Furthermore, no musical score guides the viewer's emotions. One of the series' most suspenseful moments is achieved without the aid of music. When Detective Greggs is shot in the above-mentioned buy-and-bust operation, the subsequent moments when her fellow officers struggle to find her car is riddled with palpable confusion, tension, and anxiety, all of which were created by a carefully constructed montage of sound effects (approaching cars, wailing sirens, screaming officers, a hovering helicopter) and facial expressions of dread and concern. In class, we identified each of these elements and discussed how they were edited together to produce these emotions.

Simon's "standard for verisimilitude" (qtd. in Hornby 76) applies to visual codes as well. In calling *The Wire* "social science-fiction," Ruth Penfold-Mounce, David Beer, and Roger Burrows suggest "a sense of the authentic is achieved ... [through] lighting, sound, setting and scenery, language, props"

(158). The series was filmed in and around Baltimore. Despite building the soundstage and offices for the last two seasons in Columbia, a wealthy nearby suburb, keeping the show on location supported the claim that Baltimore was a major character and the appropriate backdrop for this gritty series.[9] Simon said, "People ask me who I loved writing for the most and I always tell them, the city of Baltimore. And that's totally true. I've never said anything more honest about the show" (qtd. in Egner).

To match Simon's writing approach with a visual aesthetic that depicts the "city as character," the show employed an "unusual emphasis on wide shots, in which groups of human figures merge with their environment" (Tyree 36). Furthermore, with most of their master shots in motion, via tracks or dollies, *The Wire* used long lenses and moving shots to match one of the show's overarching themes and produce what one of its directors, Joe Chappelle, called "that sense of constant surveillance, of eavesdropping" (qtd. in Griffin).

The authenticity of the mise en scène for which Simon and his cast and crew strived is also achieved through the show's scenery and props. For instance, when the show moved its season-long focus to the media, the art and construction departments recreated the *Baltimore Sun*'s newsroom on the soundstage by using the same carpeting from rooms the actual newspaper no longer used. When I visited the set during filming of the fourth season, producer Laura Schweigman, who was Simon's assistant at the time, pointed out how the trash cans in the police department were lined with items that actual Baltimore police would use (e.g., certain brand-name products) and how the vending machines (not functional, though) featured snacks that would be found in the Baltimore Police Department. In addition, the cubicles from the Homicide Unit's office would be dressed to match the holiday season in the show's diegesis. No matter if they ever intended to shoot inside the trash can or offer a close-up of the desk, the set designers filled those receptacles with crumpled coffee cups and filled out Christmas cards that a homicide detective *would* hang up at his cubicle (Schweigman, personal interview). Despite this meticulous attention from story and dialogue to scenery and props, *The Wire*'s aesthetics tend to be "conventional," at least according to Mittell, who notes the show's "objective narration" (i.e., no voice-overs) and refusal to incorporate "flashbacks, voice-overs, fantasy sequences" ("*The Wire*"; "All in the Game"). The only flashback in the series' sixty hours appears at the end of the first episode, when the viewer is reminded that the murder victim was seen earlier testifying against D'Angelo Barksdale, who was on trial for murder. After Detective Moreland rolls over William Gant, the viewer sees the victim's face and hears the officer identify him, followed by the flashback to Gant nervously testifying (1.1).

In every class in which I have used *The Wire,* ranging from the dedicated class on the series to a topical HBO course to a television history survey course, after we watch the first episode together, I ask students if they needed the flashback to remind them who the murder victim was. Invariably, about half of them raise their hands, prompting a discussion about the various codes that inform the viewer that the victim was, in fact, the man who had testified at D'Angelo's trial, all of which could (and, to some students, *should*) have obviated the need for the flashback: a police officer informing the homicide detective of the victim's name and age, the nametag on his work uniform that reads "W. Gant," and Gant's distinguishable facial hair.

HBO executives insisted Simon include this flashback to jog viewers' memories of what took place fifty-five minutes prior. Simon joked that he should have said to HBO, "Brother, if you think you need a flashback here, you're gonna need 17 flashbacks an episode, 'cuz nobody's gonna follow this fuckin' show." He called the flashback a "visual affront" and "an interesting artifact of somebody seeking an old TV remedy to try to fix something that they thought was wrong with a new TV show" (Simon, personal interview). Simon listened to his executive producer Robert Colesberry, a film veteran, who advised him to concede this battle.

Through such examples, students in television and film programs learn about the contentious relationships between creators and network/studio executives, the histories of these visual artifacts, and how to produce meaningful content within them. Regardless of whether a student pursues a career in pre-production, production, or post-production, filmmaking classes serve as critical foundations for understanding better how these works are made. Learning how a show like *The Wire* was written, shot, produced, and edited in the context of its distribution provides an important backdrop for a student.

## *Reception*

In addition to production and distribution, the third prong I deemed essential for my class to achieve a fundamental understanding of *The Wire* as a work of television looked at how the series was consumed (received *and* interpreted)—by the medium's arbiters of taste, the industry, and its fans. The disconnect among these pockets of viewers epitomizes today's niche programming in which critical consensus is impossible to reach.

Television criticism represents more than employing a zero- to four-star

rating system for a program, offering its highlights, or telling a reader or viewer (not) to watch it; critics cover industrial trends and patterns as well. Television scholar Amanda Lotz, who has written extensively on the field, adds, "Understanding how critics and audiences talk about television informs our perspective of what 'television' is, which is particularly important during periods of profound institutional change" ("Seventeen" 23). We are in the midst of such change, as streaming straight-to-series programs (Rose), "zero TV" homes and "cord-cutters" (Nakashima), and second-screen viewing (Bauder) have become common practices well after *The Wire* concluded. When I taught my class, though, the industry was experiencing its own changes: a writers' strike, a proliferation of new programming outlets, and the emergence of the dilemma of how to monetize social media. During both of these transformative times, TV critics have been especially needed to help viewers navigate the landscape and keep them apprised of technological, industrial, regulatory, and cultural developments.

In cultivating its premium status, HBO for years has used popular criticism as a way to reach its fans, validate its offerings, and increase its "cultural value." Anderson writes, "By drawing attention to the aesthetic claims of TV critics, HBO has contributed a measure of legitimacy and cultural authority to those who would speak about television series as works of art" (38). As mentioned earlier, this legitimacy better serves HBO's economic model than merely airing a show that earns high ratings.

*The Wire* earned much critical praise while it was on the air; in its afterlife, though, more academics and scholars have taken to teaching and researching it. However, the volume of praise the show received overall belies the critical responses to its first and last seasons. The *New York Post*'s Adam Buckman, who "was a different person" before binging through the fourth season, wrote in 2002 that the first season "looks and feels like an ordinary show from some other network that snuck on to the air while the HBO execs' backs were turned" (para 14). David Bianculli, then of the *New York Daily News,* wrote the show "seems to take the real-time aspect of [FOX's] *24* and reduce it to slow motion." He continued, "When it comes down to *The Wire,* this show falls short" (para 10).

Some of my students had similar reactions, finding the series' pacing slow. My task as instructor was not to correct them, agree with them, or mitigate their concerns, but rather to give them an outlet to express their views. One particular pedagogical challenge I found was tempering the fanaticism that many students exhibited: ranging from effusively praising the series and wearing to class a t-shirt featuring Omar's face to offering perspectives of why they

did not like the show. In the latter, at least two students regularly apologized to me—privately and aloud in class—for disliking *The Wire*, citing its slow pace and its perpetuation of African American stereotypes. I enjoyed these contrarian views and cultivated a classroom environment that encouraged students to feel comfortable disagreeing with each other without resorting to ad hominem attacks or taking offense to criticisms of a show with which some were obsessed. Nevertheless, it was a challenge for both my students and me to include those perspectives.

Simon's relationship with fans and television critics, another topic we examined in class, has often been contentious. Perceptions of the first season were less than favorable, in large part due to its pacing coupled with critics—having received only a few screener episodes from HBO—who might have been unfamiliar and/or not in favor of Simon's novelistic approach. Bianculli gave the show a 2.5-star (out of 4) rating and found that the show improved over the course of the season. In reference to the plot line in which Greggs was shot, he wrote, "It took until just a few episodes ago, in fact, when one of the officers was unexpectedly ambushed and shot, that it really took hold" ("Home Box"). Of the many critics whose opinions changed, Simon said, "I would think to myself, 'It's going at the same speed.... You're now getting the rewards of the accumulation of plot and detail and character'" (Simon, personal interview).

Critics lambasted the show's final season, which examined how the media have ignored the issues that have plagued Baltimore. *USA Today*'s Robert Bianco, who previously championed *The Wire*, called the stories of *The Sun* "the series' weakest and worst-acted subplot" and concluded that the show "simply went on too long." David Zurawik, the actual *Sun*'s TV critic, characterized the newsroom scenes as the season's "Achilles' heel" ("*The Wire* Loses"). One week after the show ran its last episode, Simon posted an essay, or what one critic called "an ill-advised kiss-off" (Goodman), in which he castigated critics for their misinterpretations of the final season. He wrote, "[E]veryone stayed dead-center and literal, oblivious to the big-ass elephant in our mythical newsroom" (Simon, "*The Wire*'s Final"). Simon wondered how they could "studiously avoid any sustained discussion about whether the depicted newspaper is, in all respects, capturing the meaningful narrative of the depicted city" ("*The Wire*'s Final").[10] Having journalism students in our classroom—two of whom created their own blog about television—enabled us to have a more informed discussion about this disagreement between TV critics and a former reporter.

A few years later, Simon found himself at loggerheads with critics and

fans. After being asked about a bracket posted on a popular culture and sports blog that resembled the annual college basketball tournament, in which characters from the show squared off against each other as fans determined who was the greatest, he again criticized viewer interpretations and expressed his dissatisfaction with latecomers to the show who were only admiring characters' coolness. Simon added, "That this stuff singularly crowds out any continued discussion of our real problems and the show's interest in arguing those problems is the disappointing part" (qtd. in Sepinwall).

He also criticized the popular recaps that professional and amateur TV critics write after each episode, finding their criticisms to be premature and incomplete. Simon advised, "Nobody knows what anyone's building until it's built" (qtd. in Egner). He expressed his desire to see an episode's merits and faults be dissected after the season concludes so that the viewer has a complete picture of what the show tried to achieve, adding, "You would never see anyone review a novel in similar fashion. No one would read three chapters of a novel and go, 'What so and so's trying to say here'" (qtd. in Sepinwall). A course on *The Wire* offered today, i.e., after its conclusion, would have to incorporate Simon's relationship with critics, as it sheds light on an important component of the show's history as well as the distance between fans and creators, and fans and critics, that social media has enabled to shrink. Studying audience reception need not target only the average viewer; professional and amateur (re)viewers, i.e., television critics, deserve scholastic attention as well, something to which we invested a full week in my class.

Despite the lavish, sometimes excessive, critical praise piled on *The Wire*, which often bolsters students' own fervor, the series never managed to win any Emmys, the industry's most recognizable award for television excellence. Having earned only two writing nominations, *The Wire* represents one of, what I call, today's "critic-adored, award-ignored" series, which puzzles many students who cite a show's successful Emmy record to validate their passion for their favorites and who in class then learn how to explain the evident disconnect between cultural arbiters and industry insiders.

Many reasons might explain why *The Wire* was consistently shut out by the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences. First, its enormous ensemble cast, featuring more than 80 regular and recurring characters across all five seasons, comprised mostly actors of color ("HBO: *The Wire*"). Despite his claim that the show has "precious little to do with race," Simon suggested that race could have been a reason for the show's low ratings; that is, viewers—including Emmy voters—were not used to seeing that many faces of color on their TV screens and therefore changed the channel when *The Wire* came on ("Exclusive David

Simon Q&A3"; "Talking with"). Another reason is the "geographic bias," wrote Emmy historian Tom O'Neil, in which the show, filmed and set in Baltimore, might have been penalized for being produced outside of entertainment capitals New York City and Los Angeles (qtd. in Zurawik, "From HBO").

Third, a paucity of entry points into the expansive "visual novel" might explain why it was continuously snubbed. Emmy voters who missed the first season might not have understood stories from subsequent seasons in spite of the cast's powerful performances. Ultimately, the simplest explanation might be *The Wire*'s low viewership numbers. Ratings continued to decrease over its five seasons; a larger audience might have increased buzz as well as the Academy's awareness. In his article on surveillance and spectacle in the show, media scholar Joseph Christopher Schaub writes, "This inverse relationship between *The Wire*'s stellar reviews and marginal audience was just one of many contradictions that made the series unique" (122). Simon responded to the Emmy oversight defiantly: "I don't give a fuck if we ever win one of their little trinkets.... Secretly, we all know we get more ink for being shut out. So at this point, we *wanna* be shut out" (qtd. in Gordon). His antipathy towards awards was made clear in the show's fifth season, when he developed Pulitzer Prize-hungry characters at *The Sun*.

*The Wire* was not completely ignored by industry tastemakers, however, winning a prestigious Peabody Award in 2004, which annually recognizes excellence in television and radio broadcasting. The show won a Writers Guild of America Award for Dramatic Series in 2007 and appeared on the American Film Institute's list of top TV programs of 2006. Furthermore, in 2008, it earned the Television Critics Association's Heritage Award, which recognizes a "long-standing program that has had a lasting cultural or social impact" ("AMC Scores"). The paradox, of course, is that the series made little impact while it was on the air.

## *Conclusion*

*The Wire* is being studied inside and outside the classroom more now than when it was on the air. Such is the life—or, afterlife—of a niche series in today's fragmented television culture. Not surprisingly, considering the substantial space that has been devoted to the social and political implications of Simon's fictional world, a conspicuous gap in the classroom conversations surrounding *The Wire* has emerged. The "enabling conditions" (Rogers et al. 43) along with the "industrial, technological, and aesthetic contexts" (Mittell "*The*

*Wire* in") that made the show possible and that have contributed to its popular and critical acclaim have been largely ignored in favor of examining questions of social inequality that the series has provoked. This does not mean, though, that those social issues do not deserve that level of attention or that foregrounding *The Wire* "as television" would minimize the show's relevance or cultural impact. If today's students and tomorrow's storytellers—filmmakers, TV producers, journalists—wish to illuminate other pressing areas of social inequality by emulating "surely the greatest TV show ever broadcast in America," they will need to have a strong grasp of how this exemplar was written, designed, shot, acted, recorded, edited, distributed, consumed, and interpreted.

Mittell suggests, "[W]e should view *The Wire* using the lens of its actual medium of television to best understand and appreciate its achievements and importance" ("All in the Game"). It would not bode well for the future of television if we judge its best work only thematically; we would be resigned to share Baltimore Police Major "Bunny" Colvin's incredulity after learning that his collaboration with a local sociology professor might culminate in something that only other academics would find interesting: "What, they gonna study your study? When do this shit change ..." (4.13).

## Notes

1. Jason Mittell has "outline[d] the specific industrial, technological, and aesthetic contexts of television that helped shape *The Wire,* and enabled it to make it to commercial television in the first place" ("Narrative"); Linda Williams ("Mega-melodrama"; "*The Wire*") has redefined the term melodrama through *The Wire*; Marsha Kinder has examined how the seriality of *The Wire* enabled its "systemic analysis of urban corruption" (50); and Joseph Christopher Schaub has positioned the show as a "dramatic alternative to reality TV" (129).

2. "Buzz," according to television scholar Amanda Lotz, is "discussion, excitement, or interest in the network" ("Promotional" 7).

3. See Derek Kompare's article that examines how DVDs "reconceived" the relationship between television series and its viewers.

4. In the spring of 2014, HBO joined forces with Amazon Prime to stream its older and recent content to Prime members at no additional cost (Hibberd, "HBO Makes").

5. Ratings are percentages of households with television, for instance, watching a particular program, and shares are percentages of households using television during that time tuned to a particular program.

6. Simon made it clear, though, that his show wasn't taking a leaf out of Dickens's novels, despite how both used bleak stories to examine social inequalities and poor work conditions. Instead, he and his writers borrowed from Greek tragedians such as Euripides, Aeschylus, and Sophocles. See Mark Chou's analysis of *The Wire* as a contemporary Greek tragedy.

7. See Rabia Belt's article on disability in *The Wire,* which addresses the implications of how the show mostly ignores Greggs's suffering, recovery, rehabilitation, and caretaking.

8. The network subtly substituted "life" for "killing" because it sounded more positive.

9. *The Wire* was not the first HBO series whose location served as a character: *Sex and*

*the City* (1998–2004), *The Sopranos* (1999–2007), and *Six Feet Under* (2001–2005) had already done so.

10. *Time*'s TV critic James Poniewozik's response featured the humorously alliterative meta-headline: "David Simon Criticizes Critics' Critique of *The Wire*'s Critique."

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