

## Teaching HBO's *The Wire*

**Dr. Andrew Moore, St. Thomas University**

### **Author's Contact Information**

*Dr. Andrew Moore*  
*Assistant Professor*  
*Great Books Programme*  
*St. Thomas University, Fredericton, NB, E3B-5G3*  
*Phone: (506) 292-5007*  
*email: [ajmoore@stu.ca](mailto:ajmoore@stu.ca)*

### **Abstract:**

*My intention in this paper is to address some of the challenges and advantages of incorporating television programming into a traditional liberal arts course, drawing upon my own experience teaching the third season of HBO's crime drama *The Wire*. First appearing on HBO in 2002, *The Wire's* incisive and expansive analysis of contemporary urban communities has increasingly made it a subject of scholarly interest. My argument here is that the series is culturally significant and potentially useful in a wide variety of courses on diverse subjects. However, there are problems with teaching television at the university level, such as limited class time, and students unaccustomed to critically engaging with the medium. I describe how my class addressed those challenges, and suggest ways other teachers might overcome them when teaching *The Wire* or any other television program. Also, citing student reactions to *The Wire* from our course blog, I outline the key lessons our class was able to derive from the series. Their comments suggest the wide array of pedagogical possibilities for HBO's critically acclaimed crime drama, and for television more generally.*

### **Key Words:**

*The Wire*, crime drama, teaching television, student blog, justice, urban studies.

### **Introduction**

There is no convenient way to use television programs in university classrooms. Our timetables are built around the notion that we are using print medium and or lecture. They are just flexible enough to accommodate a film now and then, but television – because of the length and complexity of its narratives – can only ever be studied piecemeal, an episode here, a scene there. And this is a problem, because since the late 1990s at least, the quality of television programming has improved radically. HBO has been at the forefront of this movement, first with shows like *OZ*, *Sex and the City*, and *The Sopranos*, and later with series such as *The Wire*, *Treme*, and *Boardwalk Empire*. Other shows on other networks such as AMC's *Mad Men* and Showtime's *Dexter* have also received critical acclaim. The comedy genre has likewise reinvented itself with sit-coms such as *Arrested Development*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, and *Flight of*

*the Conchords*. While many formulaic and derivative television programs continue to be produced – just as many trashy novels and uninspired films continue to be produced – television has become more daring and more interesting in recent years. Writers and producers have begun testing the limits of the medium; shows have become more self-reflexive; plots and characters have become more complex. The artistic value of many programs is undeniable, and so they warrant space in our classrooms and on our syllabi.<sup>1</sup> The problem is that the traditional university classroom is not very hospitable to television's intrusions. My intention in this article is to address some of the challenges and advantages of incorporating television programming into a traditional liberal arts course, drawing upon my own experience teaching the third season of HBO's crime drama *The Wire*.

First appearing on HBO in 2002, *The Wire* has been called “the best show on television” (Goodman, 2004) and even “the best TV show ever broadcast in America” (Weisberg, 2006). *New York Times* writer Nicholas Kulish claimed *The Wire* was “the closest that moving pictures have come so far to the depth and nuance of the novel” (Kulish, 2006). Set in modern-day Baltimore, *The Wire* is a cop show, but “not a kicking-down-doors-and-busting-heads kind of cop show” (Dignan, 2006). Unlike *Law & Order* or *CSI*, the show does not revolve around a crime-of-the-week, or hour-long mystery, which the show's law enforcement protagonists almost invariably solve to the audience's satisfaction. *The Wire* is different.<sup>2</sup> Not so interested in the dramatic capture and prosecution of exceptional criminals, the show focuses instead on poverty, racial discrimination, and institutional collapse: the socio-economic conditions that give rise to criminal activity. In other words *The Wire* examines the process by which a city's poorest citizens are gradually but steadily criminalized. The show's creator, David Simon (2008), claims his is a show about “the other America,” the nation of people victimized by the logic of post-industrial capitalism, and forgotten by their more affluent neighbors in the upper class.

Due to the incisiveness of its analysis of contemporary urban communities, *The Wire* is increasingly becoming a subject of scholarly investigation. Special issues of the journals *darkmatter* (2009) and *City* (2010) were recently dedicated to the show. In 2009 a conference called “*The Wire* as social science fiction?” was organized by academics in the U.K. (Leeds, 2009). In the same year a symposium was organized at the University of Michigan called “Heart of the City: Black Urban Life on *The Wire*,” which examined the program “as both a *topic* and a *model* of critique,” and identified it as “a text worthy of careful and extended investigation” (Michigan, 2009). A collection of critical essays on the series entitled *The Wire: Urban Decay and American Television* (Potter & Marshall), was published in 2009 as well.

---

<sup>1</sup> Cantor (2001) has written on the pedagogical potential of television programming, arguing that we should not approach the medium only as “an ideological smokescreen designed to hide from people the forces that are oppressing them” (p. 37), but also as an art form with the potential for making substantive commentary on important matters.

<sup>2</sup> The lack of any discernible protagonist is one of the things that makes *The Wire* so unusual. Contrary to the heroic leads on many network cop shows such as Gilbert Grissom and Horatio Caine, the police on *The Wire* are rarely valorized, or even rewarded, for their efforts. And though the show is sympathetic to its criminal characters, it stops short of glamorizing them.

A number of universities have also begun offering courses on *The Wire* (Bennett, 2010). In his course at Harvard University, "HBO's *The Wire* and Its Contributions to Understanding Urban Inequality," William Julius Wilson's students "watch, critique, and discuss selected episodes of *The Wire* along with assigned readings on urban inequality that relate to these episodes" (Harvard, 2010). Linda Williams' Film Studies course at UC-Berkeley examines how the series "grapples with the institutional totality of what ails contemporary America" (Williams, 2010). Boyd Blundell at Loyola University has taught the series in a Religious Studies course entitled "Social Justice and *The Wire*." The syllabus suggests the course will help students grapple with "the problem of structural injustice," which Blundell claims is "the single most dominant theme of Catholic teaching in the 20<sup>th</sup> century" (Blundell, 2009).

I taught *The Wire* in a course at St. Thomas University as part of the school's interdisciplinary Great Books Program. Courses in the program are team-taught by two professors and organized around a particular theme. The course I ran in the fall of 2010 along with my colleague, Dr. Christine Cornell, brought together a variety of philosophical, literary, and historical texts on the subject of justice.<sup>3</sup> The idea was to give students a broad historical introduction to the various definitions of justice that have been operative throughout western history. In my class, students read Plato's *Republic*, Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Cicero's *On Duties*, William Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, John Locke's *Second Treatise of Government*, and J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* along with several other texts. Throughout the course we grappled with a number of central questions. Is justice real or merely constructed? Does might really make right? How do we tell the difference between just and unjust laws? What do citizens owe the state? What does the state owe its citizens? *The Wire* provided us with a twenty-first-century examination of these questions, and demonstrated their significance in a post-modern, North American context. Part of our reasoning for including *The Wire* in this course was that many of the writers we studied, such as Plato and Locke, give students somewhat abstract or historically peculiar definitions of justice; *The Wire* though illustrates vividly the complexity of creating just communities and enforcing the law in a contemporary, real-world context.

Given *The Wire*'s diverse subject matter – law enforcement, the drug trade, unions and industry, municipal bureaucracy, schools, the media – I believe the series could be productively incorporated into a variety of courses on topics such as criminal justice, surveillance, urban politics, American politics, African American studies, education, political philosophy, social justice, and journalism. In the hopes of identifying pedagogical possibilities for other teachers, I will spend the rest of this article addressing the challenges and advantages of using *The Wire* in the classroom, and detailing the various lessons that can be derived from the material. I will conclude by suggesting ways in which I think the series might be incorporated into other classes most effectively.

---

<sup>3</sup> I would like to thank Dr. Cornell for helping me understand *The Wire* better, both through her in-class contributions, and through our discussions about the show afterwards. I am also grateful for her comments on this essay, which have broadened and deepened the analysis.

## Pedagogical Problems and Partial Solutions

Time is the biggest obstacle to teaching material from a television program in the university classroom. *The Wire* was on television for five seasons between 2002 and 2008. Each season included between ten and thirteen episodes, totaling over 60 hours of programming. At my university, which I believe is quite typical, we have somewhere between 30 and 35 hours of class-time per course per semester. To screen *The Wire* during class-time then, would take roughly an entire academic year, leaving almost no time at all for discussion. There are a couple of obvious solutions to this problem. The first is to select one of the show's five seasons on which to focus; another is to choose particular episodes (or even particular scenes) from throughout the series that illuminate the themes and ideas that a particular course is designed to address. Neither of these is a perfect solution. On the syllabus for his course "Inside HBO's America: A Case Study of *The Wire*," Todd Sodano insists that "An examination of *The Wire* necessitates an in-depth, semester-long, full-season commitment" (Sodano, 2008). However, James Trier (2010) has suggested how even selected excerpts from certain episodes of season four of *The Wire*, which focuses on the public school system, could be used in education classes. These "vignettes," he writes, "become powerful case studies of fictional (yet all-too-real) educators whose experiences students can vicariously identify with" (p. 195).

The strategy I adopted was to take the middle road. My course was not exclusively on *The Wire*. Rather, as Trier was hypothesizing, I was trying to use the show in the context of a broader investigation. However, I was simultaneously sympathetic to Sodano's concern that showing the students six or eight episodes from a twelve-episode season might drain the narrative of its power. To mitigate these problems my colleague and I had the students watch only the third season of the show, and on their own time. We told them simply to finish the season by a certain date in November, at which point we dedicated about four hours of classroom time to discuss the season in its entirety. This is essentially the same strategy we might use for a play, a novel, or a philosophical treatise: assigned reading for a specified date.

However, as one might anticipate, our solution to the time problem raised certain pedagogical questions. If students are not watching the show from the beginning, can they fully appreciate the work? Can they even be expected to understand the nuances of the narrative? Moreover, are we doing a disservice to the material by excerpting a single season and studying it out of context? I wondered if watching the third season of *The Wire* was a bit like asking students to read the middle six chapters of *Pride and Prejudice* or the second act of *Hamlet*. But in reality excerpting is common practice in traditional humanities teaching. For example, Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* and John Milton's *Paradise Lost* are both long and complex early modern epic poems; they are dense and somewhat intimidating works. As a consequence it is a challenge for teachers to fit either (let alone both) of these texts onto a single syllabus. At the same time though, both works are significant in the history of English literature and warrant space in historical surveys and courses on Renaissance poetry. As a compromise it is quite common for teachers of English to teach books 2-4 of *Paradise Lost*, or Books 1 and 3 of Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. Such an approach ensures that students are exposed to these important works (which they may go on to study further in an upper-year course or an honors seminar) and also recognizes the practical limitations of

undergraduate teaching. Teachers in other disciplines may have made similar 'editorial' decisions when teaching Plato's *Republic* or Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. Given some thought, it seems the things we are forced to do to fit an important television show into our courses may not be so different from the things we are forced to do to fit a long text into our courses.

My colleague and I were however concerned that spending only four hours of class discussion on the show would be inadequate. To compensate, I created a class blog using Wordpress and asked each student to write a 500-750-word critical response to an assigned episode. This assignment gave the students opportunities to discuss the show as they were watching it, before our scheduled class discussion in November. I encouraged the students to read each other's submissions and to post comments on the blog. My hope was that that blog would become a kind of online discussion forum and supplement our in-class investigation. Results were mixed, for reasons that I will explain towards the end of this essay. The blog did however effectively encourage students to think critically about the material they were watching, which was another one of the challenges associated with incorporating television into the classroom. Students are accustomed to reading a novel or a philosophical dialogue critically; they have less formal training analyzing film and television. The blog provided space for students to wrestle with the show's many difficult questions. I will be making reference to their insightful comments as I recount several of the key lessons we learned from *The Wire*.

### Lessons From *The Wire*

In Simon's Baltimore the scope of individual agency has been radically diminished. *The Wire* presents a city whose problems are so overwhelmingly complex that it is no longer possible for individuals of goodwill and ability to solve them. Precisely because "every part of society is somehow connected to every other part" (Dignan, 2006) the exact cause of Baltimore's evils and the cure for its ills cannot be easily identified. Describing his ambition for the show, Simon said in an interview, "We want to build a city. If we get on a run, we want people to say, 'That is an American city, those are its problems, and that's why they can't solve its problems'" (O'Rourke, 2006).

Each season of the series is a kind of essay on the devaluation of human industry, as characters with good intentions and noble motives are consistently slowed by inept and calcified institutions or caught in a tangle of bureaucratic red tape.<sup>4</sup> *The Wire*, Simon claims, sets out to demonstrate that the fates of everyone living Baltimore are determined by enormous institutional forces beyond their control:

---

<sup>4</sup> As Sheehan and Sweeney (2009) write, *The Wire* "explores the social crisis resulting from a world in which many people will not succeed or necessarily even survive, even if they are smart or honest or hard working, indeed they might even be doomed because they are." Atkinson and Beer (2010) have also recognized *The Wire*'s examination of "the smallness of the social actor (whatever type of social institution they may be located within)" (p. 532). Potter and Marshall (2009) echo this sentiment as well in an essay entitled "The Life and Times of Fuzzy Dunlop: Herc and the Modern Urban Crime Environment," claiming that "in the police world of *The Wire* success is independent of ability or intention (p. 1).

We've basically taken the idea of Greek tragedy and applied it to the modern city-state... What we were trying to do with *The Wire* was to take the notion of ... fated and doomed people and instead of these Olympian Gods [who are] indifferent and venal and selfish, hurling lightning bolts and hitting people in the ass for no reason, instead of those guys whipping it on Oedipus or Achilles, it's the post-modern institutions. Those are the gods. Those are the new gods. Those are the indifferent gods of our lives. (Simon, 2007)

*The Wire* makes a convincing case for the fated nature of contemporary urban life. The show is thus pedagogically very useful for illustrating the difficulties inherent to correcting and improving a modern justice system, which was our hope when we decided to include the show on our syllabus. For our purposes the third season of the series, which examines the flaws and failures of police and municipal bureaucracies, was particularly useful.

### **Hamsterdam**

Season three of *The Wire* focuses largely on Major "Bunny" Colvin's frustration with the ineffectiveness of the war on drugs. After almost thirty years on the force, Colvin has become disillusioned by the seeming futility of conventional police work. As he says in episode two: "The city, it's worse than when I came on. What does that say about me? About my life?" The situation prompts Colvin to develop a revolutionary response to the city's drug trafficking problem. Without informing his superiors, he systematically herds drug dealers into an unpopulated corner of Baltimore's Western District. In what he refers to as a "free zone" Colvin allows the dealers to operate with impunity, provided they refrain from violence and stop dealing on populated street corners, in effect creating a miniature Amsterdam within Baltimore city limits, which the dealers call "Hamsterdam." Using the free zone, Colvin tries to quarantine those members of the community infected by the drug trade. This daring strategy proves effective as the crime rate in Colvin's district drops as much as 14%. However, the free zone quickly deteriorates into something nightmarish. As the site becomes overpopulated with prostitutes, dealers, and various kinds of predators, one character on the show aptly compares Hamsterdam to a hell on earth.

Colvin's experiment elicited various responses from the students in our class. Some students sympathized with his position:

I see Colvin as a victim of the screwed up system he has given 30 years of his life to. He's tried everything and still crime, drugs and murder persist, and it really isn't his fault.

Others described visceral, negative reactions to the free zone:

This makes me sick to my stomach. I know the officers feel like they are in control because the drug dealing is happening in one spot; I know that innocent people are not forced to live on the drug dealing corners of town. But is that all that justice is?

One scene in particular struck a chord with students. In episode seven the popular character Bubbles, a heroin addict who struggles with his affliction throughout the series, tours the free zone after dark. As one student described in her post "As he

walks, Bubbles is faced with a city that resembles more the Sodom and Gomorrah of the bible [sic] than Baltimore: there are children playing next to drug addicts, prostitutes performing sexual favours in the open and men fighting in the street over drugs." Hamsterdam is a place where citizens are permitted to pursue their most self-destructive impulses without fear of legal reprisal. Students variously likened it to a Hobbesian state of nature and Dante's *Inferno*.

The free zone experiment brings several of the *The Wire*'s major themes into focus. First, though the free zone constitutes an unorthodox and even absurd response to Baltimore's drug trafficking problem, that response must be measured against the absurdity of the problem itself. Conventional policing is utterly ineffective in the Baltimorean context, and to persist in arresting an endless stream of young, black men for satisfying an insatiable public appetite is, as Simon (Rastogi, 2011) says, "little more than amoral." The ineffectiveness and brutality of the city's war on drugs prompted one student to ask: "if a law is ultimately unenforceable, should we still try to enforce it?" Colvin's Hamsterdam is ultimately a response to this question. Rather than trying to stop the drug trade, the Major tries to reduce its impact on the broader community.

The justification for Hamsterdam is that innocent people in Baltimore, those uninvolved in criminal activity, are endangered by the criminal choices of others, primarily addicts and dealers. Following this logic, separating the criminals from the law-abiding – segregating them – makes sense. Those who choose to risk their health and safety using or selling drugs can, while those who do not make that choice are not put at risk by those who do. There is a certain justice in allowing those who want to destroy themselves the freedom to do so. But freedom is a complicated thing. The degree to which addicts have a "choice" is controversial. This issue in particular prompted a spirited debate in our classroom. One could argue that Colvin is putting chronically sick individuals in harm's way and endangering their chances of receiving any kind of treatment. Beyond that, we also must consider the degree to which *even the dealers* have a choice here. This is the fundamental flaw in Hamsterdam that Colvin does not see. The educational and vocational options for the young, black men working in the free zones are severely limited. Thus dealing drugs loses the quality of moral choice, which is the founding premise of Hamsterdam. Sentencing these young men to live and work in "Sodom and Gomorrah" begins to appear unjust, as the clear distinction between individuals who choose criminal activity and the innocent by-standers who suffer crime against their will becomes blurred and distorted. Moreover, as *The Wire* consistently demonstrates through its representation of familial and pseudo-familial relationships, drug users and drug dealers are inextricably connected to mothers, brothers, and friends who may or may not be involved in the drug trade; thus the decision of any individual to pursue a criminal occupation, or by contrast to reject the financial benefits of such an occupation, necessarily effects a broad network of other people (Lucasi, 2009).<sup>5</sup> For all of these reasons the clear demarcation attempted by

---

<sup>5</sup> One is reminded of the brotherly relationship between Avon Barksdale and Stringer, or Bubbles' dependence on his sister late in the series. Season four of the series is especially good at exploring this theme as it focuses on four young boys each of whom is either tormented by his family unit or puts his family in harm's way because of his proximity to the drug trade. After his father's arrest one boy named Namund is pushed into the drug trade by his mother, who depends on her son's criminal activities to

Colvin through Hamsterdam actually reveals the difficulty of drawing distinctions between innocent and guilty in the post-industrial city-state.

Hamsterdam is a metaphor for what Simon believes is happening in urban communities throughout the country. There are two Americas. One nation is economically viable, protected and served by American political institutions. The other is none of those things. The citizens of the other America, such as those citizens of Baltimore who are dependent on the drug trade for survival (primarily young, black men) have been abandoned by the state, just as dealers on *The Wire* are banished to the hellish free zone.

### **Justice Among Thieves (or Drug Dealers)**

In the first episode of *The Wire*'s third season we see Stringer Bell, the acting commander of one of the city's most powerful drug organizations, in a meeting with his lieutenants. What is remarkable is that the meeting is being conducted using Robert's Rules of Order. Stringer addresses the assembled dealers from a podium, refusing to let others speak until they have raised their hands and been "recognized by the chair."<sup>6</sup> In a later episode (five) we see Stringer conducting a similar meeting of the leaders of the city's major drug cartels. The meeting takes place in a hotel conference room at The Executive Inn. The sign out front reads: "WELCOME NEW DAY CO-OP, TOMORROW'S SUCCESS STORIES START TODAY." The purpose of the meeting is to establish cooperation between Baltimore's rival drug organizations. Stringer's drug-dealing co-op functions as a shadow chamber of commerce concerned with the economic viability of the city's underground industry. Part of what the show seems to be examining in these two scenes is the relationship between law and justice. Stringer's use of due process and formal organizational structures reveals the morally ambiguous nature of law. These two episodes demonstrate to the audience how laws can be used for anything; they can be designed to serve any purpose, both just and unjust. The show therefore argues: just because a community of persons is governed by law does not mean that community is a just one.

However, the rules Baltimore's drug dealers use to govern themselves are not wholly superficial. This is illustrated vividly in episode nine when Stringer orders his subordinates to kill stick-up man Omar Little as he escorts his elderly grandmother to church on a Sunday morning. Stringer's colleagues, even his partner, Avon Barksdale, are troubled by the callousness of Stringer's command especially because it violates a long-standing prohibition in criminal circles against violence on Sunday morning. The controversy surrounding Stringer's violation of the Sunday truce reveals the possibility

---

support her luxurious lifestyle. Another boy named Dukie struggles as the only member of his immediate family not addicted to drugs. Similarly, though he initially resists the pull of the drug trade, the charismatic and capable Michael is eventually convinced to join Marlo Stanfield's operation in order to protect his younger brother from an abusive step-parent. Lastly, Randy is a foster child who has found comfort in a relatively stable household, until a brush with the drug trade results in an attack on his foster mother, Miss Anna.

<sup>6</sup> According to Kraniauskas (2009): "Like so many subaltern outlaw groups, the Barksdale crew have internalized and replicated state-like repressive structures that are ferociously hierarchical, and, within their own terms, strategically meritocratic" (p. 28).



of real, substantive justice existing among and between criminal organizations. For one student the show brought to mind Socrates' question in Plato's *Republic*, "Do you think that a city, an army, a band of robbers or thieves, or any other tribe with a common unjust purpose would be able to achieve it if they were unjust to each other?" (1992, 351 c). The question comes from the first book of the *Republic*, as Socrates tries to convince the sophist Thrasymachus that justice is more powerful than injustice. To make his point Socrates argues that even criminal gangs depend on justice to achieve their ends.<sup>7</sup> For example, bank robbers cannot rob banks if they are not just at least to one another, honest, trustworthy, and selfless. Similarly, drug dealers can more efficiently sell their product if they cooperate and are willing to wait their turn before speaking.<sup>8</sup>

Students also noted that these criminal commitments to regulations and moral codes are paralleled by a certain disregard for rules on the part of the police. One student characterized the question of whether or not to use unjust means to achieve just ends as "the essential question of the series." Sophie Fuggle (2009) has similarly argued that characters on the show are frequently challenged "to do the wrong thing for the right reasons or the right thing for the wrong reasons" (p. 4).<sup>9</sup> For example, in episode four Detective Jimmy McNulty lies to a female college employee, telling her that Stringer has a history of domestic violence – "really ugly stuff" – so that she will give up Stringer's personal information without a warrant. More problematic still, on *The Wire* police routinely use physical violence to intimidate or interrogate suspects. This was troubling for some students. Responding to a scene from the first episode in which a teenage boy is first threatened and later beaten for hiding from the police, one student wrote, "This sequence is difficult for me to wrap my head around. It's the most obvious and unapologetic example of police brutality that I have ever seen depicted."

As a whole, students were challenged by the show's muddled depiction of right and wrong. Several attempted to read certain characters in Machiavellian terms – citing their willingness to ignore laws whenever convenient as evidence. But the central argument of *The Wire* is decisively not Machiavellian. The show frequently undermines individual agency. Its central lesson is that the post-modern city-state devalues human industry, rendering most individual actions futile.

There is an anecdote that Simon tells about an early meeting with Ed Burns, his collaborator on *The Wire* and other projects. Burns, at the time a Baltimore police detective, impressed Simon when he arrived to the meeting carrying, among other things, a volume of essays by Hannah Arendt (Cech, 2006, p. 6). It is perhaps not

---

<sup>7</sup> "[Un]just people] would never have been able to keep their hands off each other if they were completely unjust. But clearly there must have been some sort of justice in them that at least prevented them from doing injustice among themselves at the same time as they were doing it to others. And this is what enabled them to achieve what they did" (Plato, 1992, 352 c-d).

<sup>8</sup> For an analysis of the show's anti-Platonic moral framework, see McMillan (2009).

<sup>9</sup> There is a related tension in the show, which Brooks (2009) describes. In *The Wire* we routinely see police "disciplined precisely for [their] commitment to public rather than institutional security" (p. 68), as officers like McNulty, Colvin, and Daniels are repeatedly told to prioritize public relations over public safety.

coincidental, then, that this depiction of the post-modern city as a machine-like thing that consumes human beings as it pursues ends independent of human interests bears some resemblance to Arendt's (1976) account of totalitarian regimes. Arendt claims that totalitarian regimes "strive constantly, though never with complete success, to establish the superfluity of man" (p. 457). Through the lunacy of the concentration camps especially, totalitarian states try to render all human action meaningless by destroying the rational relationship between actions and consequences, crimes and punishments (p. 447-55). Simon's Baltimore offers a disturbingly similar representation, one in which human industry is rendered almost meaningless, as characters' actions often go unpunished and unrewarded. In such a context the justice or injustice of particular actions becomes almost impossible to judge.

### **Tyranny in the Post-industrial City**

While race is definitely one of *The Wire*'s major concerns, the growing gap between rich and poor is arguably the show's chief preoccupation. The series is a narrative analysis of America's class crisis:

There are two Americas – separate, unequal, and no longer even acknowledging each other except on the barest cultural terms. In the one nation, new millionaires are minted every day. In the other, human beings no longer necessary to our economy, to our society, are being devalued and destroyed (Simon, 2008).

Perhaps this disparity is why virtually every time a corner boy is arrested on *The Wire*, he meets his punishment with a sense of righteous indignation, as if it were the police who were violating the law. To the average law-abiding viewer these responses may seem wrong-headed and juvenile. However, this frustration is not without cause. According to Simon, *The Wire* exposes the "lie behind our national claim to equality of opportunity" (Simon, 2008). If one accepts that equality of opportunity is a "lie," then one could argue that the dealers are unjustly arrested for pursuing the only viable means of achieving financial security.<sup>10</sup> This is, no doubt, a challenging argument, but there is a sense within Simon's Baltimore that the rules *imposed upon* the urban poor do not *serve or support* the interests of the urban poor. Law enforcement on the show essentially amounts to one America imposing its will upon the other. As Gibb and Sabin (2009) argue, the show depicts a "divided city," which functions as a metaphor for "an America that remains segregated along race and class lines" (p. 7). One student articulated the situation this way:

*The Wire* left me wondering how a universal justice could possibly be implemented at all political levels. It seems that each social group has its own kind of justice. The drug dealers seem to have their own code of rules, while the

---

<sup>10</sup> In a response to the 2011 drug-related arrest of one of his former actors, Felicia "Snoop" Pearson, Simon argued that "the drug economy is now the only factory still hiring" in parts of Baltimore and "the educational system is so crippled that the vast majority of children are trained only for the corners" (Rastogi 2011).

police do as well... This show seems to ask the question of whether or not one type of justice is actually practical in terms of the state today.

What the show demonstrates through its sympathetic and nuanced portrayal of the city's criminal element is a twenty-first-century form of liberal democratic tyranny. In Baltimore, citizens who receive none of the benefits of living in the community are still forced to adhere to the community's laws and restrictions. The city fails to educate its poorest members. It cannot protect them from violence, and it provides no viable means for them to live. Yet within that inhuman context the city continues to flex its muscle, demand obedience, and incarcerate those citizens who violate its laws. For the corner boys, receiving none of the city's benefits while simultaneously being forced to obey its laws feels a bit like tyranny. Feelings aside, it may in fact *be* a kind of tyranny. As Anderson (2009) cogently writes, *The Wire* illustrates how "The war on drugs has played a significant role in the creation of a body of rights deprived people – people who no longer fully belong, but who are 'amongst' us" (p. 6). This is perhaps the show's most troubling and challenging lesson.

## Evaluations and Recommendations

While the blog provided a space for students to meditate on *The Wire*'s many complex lessons, the assignment was flawed in a couple of important respects. First, I overestimated the students' computer literacy. Wordpress is a relatively easy blog platform to use, but some students still found it difficult to register as contributors and upload their posts to the web. More instructions were needed. The new breed of twenty-first-century student who navigates the web as easily as chewing gum has apparently not yet arrived, despite proclamations to the contrary. Also, our original intention was for the blog to provide an online discussion forum, promoting online class participation. However, students seemed reluctant to comment on one another's posts. Several students suggested in their course evaluations that they rarely visited the blog site after posting their own observations; they were not motivated to read or comment on the work of their peers. One student recommended that we "make it a requirement to add comments (2 or 3) to engage students with each other's work." Another wrote, "I think that regarding the blog, you should ask us to respond to two or so blogs of others. It would keep us up on watching and monitoring the blog site." Still another student wished the blog could have been "more interactive." Recommending that students comment on each other's work is apparently not sufficient. Students needed to be compelled to participate in the conversation, and interestingly, they recognized this about themselves. Somewhat surprisingly some students *want to be compelled* to be more active participants in the class dialogue.

I have since included a blog assignment in another course, adjusting the requirements based on the feedback I received from *The Wire* students. In this second attempt I did not assign students a particular topic or word count, but rather a number of posts – nine over the course of the semester. Students were encouraged to comment on that course's main themes either in their own words, or by posting links to relevant news articles or YouTube videos. This model was more effective. While a few students left almost all of their work to the very end of term, most of the class engaged in a

broad-ranging discussion throughout the duration of the course. The next time I teach *The Wire* I will adopt a blogging model more like this one.

Our classes on *The Wire* were some of the liveliest of the semester. I was pleased to see that many students who did not participate in discussions on Shakespeare or Plato were active participants in our discussions on *The Wire*. In their course evaluations a number of students said they “loved” studying the show. One described it as a “breath of fresh air,” another as “a good change of pace.” These comments, I think, reveal some of the potential benefits of incorporating quality television programming into a university course. However, other comments reaffirmed the structural problems inherent to studying television at the university level. One student said that twelve hours of television viewing was too cumbersome. Another suggested that study questions might be useful since he or she was unsure of what to look for when watching the show, how to interpret the narrative critically. Still another suggested that we should have spent at least one class on *The Wire* earlier in the semester so that students could have had more of an introduction to the material before diving in on their own.

I should mention that there was no prohibition on discussing *The Wire* during the semester, rather it was encouraged, and on many occasions students did spontaneously make reference to the show when they saw connections between it and another text we were studying. In this respect, having students watch the show on their own as we progressed through the course worked very well. The show's realistic representation of a contemporary urban community – a mode of representation that Penfold-Mounce, Beer & Burrows (2011) have termed “social science fiction” (p. 154) – provided students with ready-to-hand, concrete examples to which they could apply theoretical models found in texts like Locke's *Second Treatise* or Cicero's *On Duties*. This was enormously useful. Being able to draw on examples from *The Wire* reduced the need for students to rely on personal stories (often requiring long explanations) or emotional reactions (often unreflective, sometimes prejudicial) as they made their points and posed questions in class.

Ultimately there was a sense that the incorporation of television into the course was simultaneously exciting and a little disorienting for students. In order to maximize the potential benefits of this educational resource, I think students unaccustomed to studying television at the university level require a fair bit of guidance regarding how to watch the show and how to analyze the narrative. Students also want answers to practical questions. They want to know how to cite the show in an essay and how to go about researching scholarship on television shows, for example. In short, while the inclusion of television in the curriculum is attractive for a wide variety of reasons, it is important that the teacher carefully prepares his or her students – even in this media-saturated age – for studying something other than a book.

### References

- Anderson, Angela. (2009). No Such Thing as Good and Evil: *The Wire* and the humanization of the object of risk in the age of biopolitics. *darkmatter*, 4. Retrieved from <http://www.darkmatter101.org>.
- Arendt, Hannah. (1976). *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York, NY: Harcourt.
- Atkinson, Rowland & Beer, David. (2010). The ivory tower in the city: Engaging urban studies after *The Wire*. *City*, 14 (5), 529-44.
- Bennett, Drake. (2010, March 24). This Will Be on the Midterm. You Feel Me? *Slate*. Retrieved from: <http://www.slate.com>.
- Blundell, Boyd. (2009). Social Justice and *The Wire* [Syllabus]. Retrieved from <http://img.slate.com/media/8/WireSyllabus.pdf>.
- Brooks, Ryan. (2009). The Narrative Production of "Real Police." In Tiffany Potter & C. W. Marshall (Eds.), *The Wire: Urban Decay and American Television* (pp. 64-77). New York, NY: Continuum.
- Burns, Ed (Writer), & Attias, Daniel (Director). (2006). Strait and True [Television series episode]. In David Simon (Producer), *The Wire*. New York, NY: Home Box Office.
- Cantor, Paul A. (2001). The Art in the Popular. *The Wilson Quarterly*, 25 (3), 26-39.
- Cech, Scott J. (2006). Burning Man. *Teacher Magazine*, 18 (1), 34-9.
- Dignan, Andrew. (2006, September 22). The Wire and the Art of the Credit Sequence. *Slant Magazine*. Retrieved from: <http://www.slantmagazine.com>.
- Fuggle, Sophie. (2009). Short Circuiting the Power Grid: The Wire as Critique of Institutional Power. *darkmatter*, 4. Retrieved from <http://www.darkmatter101.org>.
- Gibb, Jane & Sabin, Roger. (2009). Who Loves Ya, David Simon? *darkmatter*, 4. Retrieved from <http://www.darkmatter101.org>.
- Goodman, Tim. (2004, September 16). Fine, don't watch 'The Wire.' But that would be a big mistake. *San Francisco Chronicle*. Retrieved from <http://www.sfgate.com>.
- Harvard University, Department of African American Studies. (2010). *New Course: HBO's The Wire and its Contribution to Understanding Urban Inequality*. Retrieved from <http://www.aaas.fas.harvard.edu/news/new-course-hbo's-wire-and-its-contribution-understanding-urban-inequality>.
- Kecken, Joy Lusco (Writer), & Van Patten, Tim (Director). (2006). Back Burners [Television series episode]. In David Simon (Producer), *The Wire*. New York, NY: Home Box Office.
- Kraniaukas, John. (2009). Elasticity of demand: Reflections on *The Wire*. *Radical Philosophy*, 154, 25-34.
- Kulish, Nicholas. (2006, September 10). Television You Can't Put Down. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com>.
- Lucasi, Stephen. (2009). Networks of Affiliation: Familialism and Anticorporatism in Black and White. In Tiffany Potter & C. W. Marshall (Eds.), *The Wire: Urban Decay and American Television* (pp. 135-48). New York, NY: Continuum.
- Marshall, C. W. & Potter, Tiffany. (2009). The Life and Times of Fuzzy Dunlop: Herc and the Modern Urban Crime Environment. *darkmatter*, 4. Retrieved from <http://www.darkmatter101.org>.
- McMillan, Alasdair. (2009). Heroism, Institutions, and the Police Procedural. In Tiffany Potter & C. W. Marshall (Eds.), *The Wire: Urban Decay and American Television* (pp. 50-63). New York, NY: Continuum.

- O'Rourke, Meghan. (2006, December 1). Behind *The Wire*: David Simon on where the show goes next. *Slate*. Retrieved from: <http://www.slate.com>.
- Pelecanos, George (Writer), & Dickerson, Ernest (Director). (2006). Hamsterdam [Television series episode]. In David Simon (Producer), *The Wire*. New York, NY: Home Box Office.
- Penfold-Mounce, Ruth, Beer, David & Burrows, Roger. *The Wire* as Social Science-Fiction? *Sociology*, 45 (1), 152-67.
- Plato. (1992) *Republic* (G. M. A. Grube, Trans.) Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.
- Price, Richard (Writer), & Shill, Steve (Director). (2006). All Due Respect [Television series episode]. In David Simon (Producer), *The Wire*. New York, NY: Home Box Office.
- Rastogi, Nina Shen. (2011, March 10). David Simon, Creator of *The Wire*, Speaks on Felicia "Snoop" Pearson's Arrest. *Slate*. Retrieved from: <http://www.slate.com>.
- Sheehan, Helena & Sweeney, Sheamus. (2009). *The Wire* and the world: narrative and metanarrative. *Jump Cut*, 15. Retrieved from <http://www.ejumpcut.org>
- Simon, David (Writer), & Bianchi, Ed (Director). (2006). Time After Time [Television series episode]. In David Simon (Producer), *The Wire*. New York, NY: Home Box Office.
- Simon, David (Writer), & Zarzewski, Alex (Director). (2006). Slapstick [Television series episode]. In David Simon (Producer), *The Wire*. New York, NY: Home Box Office.
- Simon, David. (2007). David Simon on the End of the American Empire No. 3 of 3 [Video file]. Retrieved from [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8z42m\\_J8t18](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8z42m_J8t18).
- Simon, David. (2008, September 6). The escalating breakdown of urban society across the US. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from: <http://www.guardian.co.uk>.
- Sodano, Todd. (2008). Inside HBO's America: A Case Study of *The Wire* [Syllabus]. Retrieved from <http://img.slate.com/media/4/CaseStudyWire.pdf>
- Trier, James. (2010). Representations of Education in HBO's *The Wire*, Season 4. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 37(2), 179-200.
- University of Leeds, Faculty of Education, Social Sciences and Law. (2009). *Call for papers: The Wire as social science fiction?* Retrieved from <http://www.polis.leeds.ac.uk/research/events/the-wire.php>.
- University of Michigan. (2009). *Heart of the City: Black Urban Life on The Wire*. Retrieved from [http://sitemaker.umich.edu/heart\\_of\\_the\\_city/heart\\_of\\_the\\_city](http://sitemaker.umich.edu/heart_of_the_city/heart_of_the_city).
- Weisberg, Jacob. (2006, September 13). *The Wire* on Fire: Analyzing the best show on television. *Slate*. Retrieved from <http://www.slate.com>.
- Williams, Linda. (2010). What's So Great about *The Wire*? [Syllabus]. Retrieved from <http://www.slate.com/id/2245788/sidebar/2245787/>.