

## The Rhetoric of *The Wire*



Building upon creator David Simon's previous projects – his long books of investigative journalism, *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets* (1991) and (with Ed Burns) *The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner-City Neighbourhood* (1997), both of which later provided the basis for a television series – *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-8) is the product of years spent following and listening to Baltimore homicide detectives, patrol officers, drug addicts, dealers, city officials, and so on. In a retrospective chapter written for an edition of the *Homicide* book prompted by the success of *The Wire*, Simon recalls reaching a stage in the research and writing process for that book where 'notepads were stacked on my desk, a dog-eared tower of random detail that confused and intimidated me' (2006: 625). This is one side of the work of *The Wire*: a degree of research into its subject enviable by any standards. Another side is the transformation of the 'dog-eared tower' into an engaging dramatic fiction whose narrative progressively guides the viewer to an in-depth understanding of numerous large and complex city organisations, the relationships between them, and the roles of individuals within them.

In what follows I explore some aspects of the rhetoric of *The Wire*; that is, some ways in which the text is organised to communicate its central concerns, and to persuade its viewer of the point of view it adopts. My use of 'rhetoric' is not limited to 'overt and recognisable appeal[s]' to the viewer / reader (though as we shall see, certain devices in *The Wire* lean towards that end of the spectrum). Rather, it is 'an aspect of the whole work viewed as a total act of communication' (Booth, 1983: 415, original italics).<sup>1</sup>

My account is organised under three sub-headings: 'Procedural Aspects', 'Metaphors and Epigraphs' and

'Mood and Feeling'. I will draw my examples principally from the first three episodes of the first season.

### Procedural Aspects

Eighteen minutes into 'The Target', the first episode of the series, Jimmy McNulty (Dominic West), the closest thing the series has to a protagonist, arrives at a crime scene to meet his fellow homicide detective and working partner Bunk Moreland (Wendell Pierce). As the two stand over a dead body, McNulty lectures Bunk about having answered the telephone call that brought him here when it was the other homicide squad's turn to do so. Bunk pleads for Jimmy's help: 'You gonna cut and run on the Bunk? That shit ain't right, Jimmy'. But McNulty is waiting for Bunk to observe a detective's ritual with which they are clearly both familiar. 'Say the words Bunk', he insists, ignoring the cigar his partner holds out to him. 'Speak to me'. With a show of reluctance, Bunk obliges, and delivers the required words: 'Alright then, this is my case, my file. This shit comes back a murder you ain't gotta do shit but stand there and laugh at me. You happy now you bitch?' McNulty's reply: 'It'll teach you to give a fuck when it ain't your turn to give a fuck'.

It is immediately clear that McNulty is chastising Bunk because he has failed to observe the rule of self-preservation and the protection of one's closest colleagues within an organisation. However, there are other elements of shared understanding that exist between the characters in this scene which may elude us, but which are revisited later in the episode. When McNulty returns to the homicide unit in the evening, his sergeant, Jay Landsman (Delaney Williams) quizzes him about Bunk's case, and reacts with frustration when told that the body was 'a decomp in a vacant apart-

ment'. We thus learn the label that a seasoned homicide detective has placed on the scene we saw earlier. It is not spelled out to us, but McNulty's description and Landsman's reaction might prompt us to deduce that Bunk has lumbered his squad with a category of murder that is particularly difficult to solve (the body is in an advanced state of decomposition; there is little physical evidence in the location and there are no residents who might provide sources of information).

This pair of scenes together provide a good example of both *The Wire*'s subtle and piecemeal approach to exposition, which presents viewers with an experience of being gradually led to an enlarged understanding of what they are seeing and have already seen, and of the way in which it blends a concern with the mechanics of police work and the politics of the institution within which that work takes place.

Another instance is provided by the scene which immediately precedes McNulty and Bunk's exchange. In the Narcotics Division of the BPD (the location established by a shot of the embossed glass door to the open plan office), Officer Kima Greggs (Sonja Sohn) works diligently at a typewriter while her colleagues Carver (Seth Gilliam) and Herc (Domenick Lombardozzi) horse around behind her. 'You got submission numbers for the ECU?' Kima asks. It is clear that she is completing paperwork, and given that in an earlier scene we have seen these three officers stop a car and take guns and drugs from the occupants, it is reasonable to infer that the paperwork relates to this case. Thus, we have a good handle on the scene. However, again, not everything is spelled out for us. The programme-makers do not feel the need to create a pretext within the scene to communicate to us explicitly that 'ECU' stands for Evidence Control Unit. Reviewing a novel by Richard Price, one of *The Wire*'s writers, literary critic James Wood (2008) speaks of the pleasure of 'being inducted into a parallel verbal universe', and this is certainly one of the satisfactions that *The Wire* offers. Small enigmas of this kind are also a typical strategy of procedural narrative. They keep viewers on their mettle, and create a feeling akin to a first week at a new job, necessitating extrapolation from context to allow one to get by among those who know the procedures and what they are doing, and who talk in shorthand and acronyms.

Chain of command, an abiding concern of the series, is both dramatised and humorously commented upon in the scene. Lieutenant Daniels (Lance Reddick) walks by and refers to the Major throwing 'some kind of piss-fit'. 'Deputy know?' Kima asks. 'He's up there now', Daniels replies. 'With a mouthful of piss probably', Carver quips, once the lieutenant is out of earshot.

While the two male officers continue their scatological commentary ('Shit always rolls downhill' / 'Motherfucker we talking about piss ...'), Kima carries on with the paperwork. 'Not to change the subject on you two charmers,' she interrupts them, 'but why are there only two ECU numbers?'. 'Dope and guns' Herc replies, uncomprehendingly. 'Two guns, right?' Kima replies, 'That's three'. This reprises a moment in the earlier scene where Kima has to intervene and retrieve a second gun from the car that the three have stopped because despite the fact that they have gone in with the intelligence that there are two guns, Herc and Carver have only removed one.

These are important 'clinging' moments in both scenes, and together they constitute a clever rhetorical device. Kima's competence and diligence are appealing and persuasive throughout, but there is also an attractiveness to the gung-ho jocular of Herc and Carver. Introducing into

the structure of each scene a moment which crystallises Kima's more thorough policework and its importance helps us to see this as the point of the scene – or one of them – and to read the scenes as – in part – lessons. We may be amused by and perhaps even sympathise to a point with Herc's 'Fuck the paperwork. Collect bodies, split heads', but if we are attending to the rhetoric of the scene, we cannot endorse it over Kima's perspective.

This preference for precision over sound and fury (or 'shock and awe') is developed across the entire span of *The Wire*, but pays dividends quickly. By the third episode, we have witnessed the head of a drug crew upbraid one of his subordinates for the sloppiness of the way the transactions are organised, reminding him that 'You can't serve your customer straight up after taking their money. Somebody snapping pictures they got the whole damn thing!', and we have seen a member of the newly-formed Major Crimes Unit go undercover in the guise of an addict to buy some drugs, only to have to report afterwards that 'You don't hand no money to nobody that matters, you don't get no product from nobody that matters'. We have also learnt that the 'stash house', where the ground supply of drugs is kept, is moved frequently. Thus, we have been brought to an epistemic position that allows us to understand why it is that when, towards the end of the third episode, an insufficiently-informed drugs raid is forced upon the Major Crimes Unit by those further up the chain of command, only by sheer chance will the result be any 'dope on the table', and the only people with drugs on their person will be 'touts and children' – 'nobody that matters'. When the guys in yellow jackets swing their battering ram, we view them from a distance – a distance subtly underlined by a tree in the foreground of the shot, which tempers our involvement in the excitement of the raid. Our point of view is more closely aligned, spatially and epistemically, with the Barksdale gang, to members of which we immediately cut. 'Wrong door', foot soldier Bodie (J D Williams) comments, looking on calmly. Afterwards, when the raid has left the police empty-handed, even Herc ('Collect bodies, split heads') dryly observes 'Pick any door in the projects, what are the chances?'



### Metaphors and Epigraphs

As these examples demonstrate, much of what *The Wire* wants to teach us about the world it depicts is absorbed into the action and exchanges within and across individual scenes. In this section, I want to focus on two other, more explicitly or obviously rhetorical, devices that the series systematically employs.

An especially celebrated scene from episode three of the first series, 'The Buys', shows D'Angelo Barksdale (Larry Gillard, Jr.) – nephew to Avon (Wood Harris), the head of the Barksdale organisation – teaching two of his young crewmembers, seated at a makeshift table in the middle of a housing project quadrangle, how to play chess. As D'Angelo describes the functions of various pieces, Bodie and Wallace (Michael B Jordan), and then D'Angelo himself, relate the pieces to their own lives. The king is like Avon; the queen like Avon's second in command, Stringer Bell (Idris Elba). The castle is like the drug stash house, and the pawns, 'out on the front lines', are like Bodie and Wallace themselves.



A similar scene occurs in the previous episode, 'The Detail'. On a sofa in the middle of the same quadrangle, Wallace waxes lyrical about chicken nuggets and about the person who invented them. 'You think the man got paid?' asks Poot (Tray Chaney), another crew member. 'Shit, he richer than a motherfucker' Wallace replies without hesitation. 'Why?' challenges D'Angelo. 'You think he get a percentage?'. The key dialogue of the scene soon follows:

*D'Angelo:* The man who invented them things, just some sad-ass down at the *basement* of McDonald's, thinking up some shit to make some money for the *real* players.

*Poot:* Nah man, that ain't right.

*D'Angelo:* Fuck right. It ain't about right, it's about money. Now you think Ronald McDonald gonna go down that basement and say 'Hey Mr Nugget, you the bomb! We selling chicken faster than you can tear the bone out. So I'm gonna write my clowny-ass name on this fat-ass cheque for you'. Shit. Man, the nigga who invented them things, still working in the basement for regular wage thinking of some shit to make the fries taste better, some shit like that. Believe.

I have used 'metaphor' as a catch-all term that can span the range of figurative possibilities represented by these two scenes. In the first, a set of similes is articulated by the characters, who communally engage in an act of conscious reflection upon their lives and how they fit in to the broader 'game' of organised crime. In the second, such personal reflection on the part of the characters is only present as a possibility: a more antagonistic exchange precipitates for the viewer an allegory, or microcosmic representation, which is a compelling blend of stripping-down and cartoonish embellishment. The system of wage labour and its ineq-

uities are condensed into a two-person, face-to-face exchange: Ronald McDonald meets Mr Nugget.

Although these scenes seek to use the stories they tell to teach their viewers socioeconomic lessons, they do not feel forced. Brilliantly, the exchanges which precipitate these metaphors for power relations simultaneously show in action the power relations and self-understandings of the characters on screen. The chess metaphor feels compelling, and also feels as though it possesses the backing of the programme-makers, but it is not hard to find fault with it: the 'drug war' is not a battle between (only) two (identically constituted) armies fighting each other (and never themselves). However, as an expression of D'Angelo's own feelings of entrapment and frustration as a middle management figure, it is revealing and apt. D'Angelo observes and sincerely decries (but accepts as inevitable) the fact that power and wealth accrue to those who control the means of production rather than being justly distributed to those who work to generate that wealth, but exerts his own power by countering and dismissing the views of his subordinates whilst doing so. (We should add that he is also trying to educate these young boys. The fact that these exchanges occur in the open air and in public, begin with the everyday, and then move quickly towards accounts of a whole mode of existence might even put us in mind of Socratic dialogues. The importance of education in *The Wire* will be returned to below). In their turn, the foot-soldiers cling tenaciously to the idea that hard work is not undertaken in vain in the lines that close each scene. Having been told that in the game pawns are 'capped quick', Bodie maintains 'Unless they some smart-ass pawns ...'. After D'Angelo's 'Mr Nugget' outburst, Wallace counters 'He still had the idea though'.

Every episode of *The Wire* possesses an epigraph, presented onscreen at the end of the opening credits.<sup>2</sup> Each epigraph (with the exceptions of the final episodes of some seasons) is taken from the episode's dialogue, and is attributed to the character who will later utter it (or occasionally, has already uttered it in the pre-credits sequence). The effect is to lend extra rhetorical weight to the utterance – and, usually, authorial support to any statement or argument advanced. *The Wire*'s epigraphs often crystallise the significance of dramatic exchanges or metaphorical figures within the episodes. The epigraph for 'The Buys', for example, is 'The king stay the king' – taken from the scene described above.

The second episode's epigraph is the advice that Marla Daniels (Maria Broom) offers to her husband, who has been handed the Catch-22 special detail charged with the task of tackling highly organised drug crime, but doing so at the level of 'street rips' – so, it is later articulated, that powerful members of the 'legitimate economy' are not implicated. 'You cannot lose if you do not play', she tells him. This returns us to a major theme of the series touched upon earlier: the difficulty of self-preservation in organisations chasing measurable results and dodging the disapproval of journalists, judges, politicians and voters. (And given the centrality of this 'individuals and institutions' theme, it is fitting that the epigraph for the very first episode should be (an elliptical version of) McNulty's counsel of self-preservation to Bunk, which echoes Marla's advice to her husband: '... when it's not your turn'.)

Each season of the programme adds new organisations to its depiction of Baltimore, and the presentation of all of these organisations together serves a central overarching theme. Season 1 introduces us to the Baltimore Police Department and the Barksdale organisation; Season 2 focuses

on longshoremen and their relationship with a European organised crime group who import drugs and traffic prostitutes; Season 3 adds City Hall; Season 4 the public school system; and Season 5 the *Baltimore Sun* newspaper. Within and across the seasons, extensive and intricate parallels are drawn between each institution. Even in the first episode, we can see this process at work: both D'Angelo and McNulty receive a dressing-down from their superiors before they are shipped off to a new assignment, partly as punishment. For shooting someone in a panic and thus incurring an expensive trial, D'Angelo loses 'his' high rise tower and is sent to take charge of one of the crews in the 'low rises'. For discussing police work with a judge, and thereby disregarding the chain of command, McNulty is banished from homicide to the special unit. That this judge is the same one who presides over the Barksdale case serves to underline the comparison.

The chess scene; the chicken nugget scene; McNulty and Bunk's exchange; the 'You cannot lose if you do not play' scene: all revolve around one character trying to teach another or others something about how organisations operate and how to survive within them. There are a remarkable number of scenes of education in *The Wire*, and that they do not seem contrived, as well as being testament to achievements in scenario construction, dialogue writing, and performance and direction, which credibly root the exchanges in each episode's world, might well be explained by the fact that they do not feel as though they exist solely for the viewer's benefit. Rather, characters are shown to feel it to be important and urgent that they educate their peers.

This desire to educate is a trait that unites many of the most appealing characters in the series: Bubbles (Andre Royo), Lester Freamon (Clarke Peters), Bunny Colvin (Robert Wisdom), Gus Haynes (Clark Johnson); the desire and capacity to learn is a trait that also ennobles or redeems other characters: Kima and Carver, for example. The programme's educators are often motivated by a desire to prepare their pupils for the harsh environment in which they all live. More positively, we also see instances of the desire to pass on professional craft. Sometimes, this is tied to the broader desire to pass on knowledge and experience so that the standards of an organisation, and by extension, the society it serves, might not deteriorate yet further. Such impulses, which show an individual thinking beyond themselves, emerge as all the more admirable when contrasted with the avarice and careerism that are on display with at least equal prominence and frequency.

As a recurring trope in *The Wire*, and one which makes many of its characters both admirable and purposeful, education also has an effect on the type of experience that *The Wire* offers its viewers in terms of its mood. It is this topic to which I shall now turn.

### Mood and Feeling

When considering the way *The Wire* shapes its story-world and guides our attention through what it emphasises and what it downplays, it is instructive to return to the scene between McNulty and Bunk in the vacant apartment, discussed above. The first shot inside the apartment is characterised by elegance, and what one might call restraint, or tact. A door frame creates a narrow vertical aperture in which we see McNulty and Bunk standing over a pair of feet. In the small strip of the apartment which we can see, there is no furniture, and the walls are bare. The miscellaneous objects strewn across the floor offer further confirmation that this is an apartment that is not being lived in.

The sequence proceeds as a series of medium singles



and two-shots of McNulty and / or Bunk. All of its shots make use of a lighting set up in which sunlight from a window casts a block of bright white on the apartment's pale walls to create attractively-lit compositions (reminiscent of an Edward Hopper painting such as 'Morning Sun'). Only in the final shot does the camera tilt down from Bunk to the corpse, and when it does, the shot continues the restraint of the sequence as a whole: the man is fully dressed, only a little bloated, and his eyes are closed.

The camera's relationship to the corpse does not encourage the viewer to linger upon the potential grotesquery of a decomposing body or the tragedy of a life prematurely ended. The location does not possess the atmosphere of squalor which would have been one possible treatment of the setting. Dramatically, the scene's emphasis is almost entirely upon McNulty and Bunk's playful chiding and underlying camaraderie. And, as discussed above, the show is introducing its central theme of individuals and institutions through the characters' actions.

In short, visual style works with the scene's dramatic flow to focus our attention not on death or decay (which are present in the scene, but not emphasised), but on the sharp-eyed living doing their jobs, and talking about what doing their jobs entails. I would suggest that this is typical of the programme and its priorities as a whole. The point can be glossed a little further by briefly outlining points of contrast between *The Wire* and the other two television series that have emerged directly from Simon's two books of investigative journalism: *Homicide: Life on the Street* (NBC, 1993-9) and *The Corner* (HBO, 2000).

The first scene of the pilot episode of *Homicide* begins with the line 'If I could just find this damn thing I could go



home'. Two detectives are out in the streets at night, scouring the ground for an unspecified piece of evidence. The camera is handheld, first tilting up from the walking characters' feet, then panning between them as they talk. There are frequent jump cuts. The characters' faces are often completely darkened by shadows. Their exchange is characterised by repetition: 'I read about it in this book.' / 'Now since when did you ever read a book?' / 'I read this book. An excerpt of this book.' / 'See that's what I'm saying man – you said you read a book but you didn't read nothing but a excerpt'.

Noting this set of decisions can help us to feel *The Wire*'s aesthetic choices more keenly. *Homicide* employs aspects of a particular rhetoric of authenticity and immediacy that *The Wire* chooses not to. *The Wire*, for all its commitment to a brand of realism, does not try to look or to sound like actuality footage. Its framing, its lighting, its decoupage and its characters' lines are, by contrast, evidently designed: polished and deliberate, in contrast to the jumpiness, messiness, muttering and stuttering that *Homicide* embraces. *The Wire*'s first scene (in which McNulty learns from a reluctant eyewitness the story behind the corpse in the middle of the road in front of them) is also set at night, but as the following frame begins to demonstrate, its approach to lighting, as well as framing and dialogue, is completely different.



Each of the six episodes of *The Corner* bears the name of the character it focuses upon ('Gary's Blues', 'Fran's Blues', etc.), each a resident of a city corner dominated by the open air drugs market located there. Before the credits, the episode's protagonist is interviewed by an off-screen voice, always to the point where the questions become awkward for the interview subject and they become evasive. This device is not sustained for the rest of the episode, but we stay with each individual character for almost all of their eponymous episode. This focus upon often destitute individual inhabitants of a Baltimore drug corner is a more intense, claustrophobic and oppressive mode of character alignment, and therefore narrative construction, than that offered in *The Wire*. In the latter, there is a much greater freedom of movement between characters – and the characters themselves as a rule possess greater freedom of movement, as well as greater purpose. *The Corner*'s construction leads to many passages where the emphasis is on frustrated desires and ambitions, regrets, humiliations, plans that come to naught, and time spent waiting. In the first episode ('Gary's Blues'), for example, we follow Gary as he repeatedly tries to 'get started' – that is, secure a fix. He is betrayed by his female companion and accomplice, who tricks

him into leaving the room and switches the drugs they have scored for water, and later, when he scores and does not share with her, she reports him to the police for assault. Gary later gets his hands on another fix, but then has to drop it when the police arrive. A failed shoplifting scam lands him in prison. He is treated with a mixture of pity and contempt by his offspring, ex-partner, and parents (in whose basement he lives). *The Corner* aligns us with characters who live in an eternally recurring present, tied to a short cycle of ever-renewing desire.

Using the messiness of *Homicide*'s simulated authenticity and the weight of *The Corner*'s sustained attachment to destitute characters as salient points of contrast can help us to see the dynamism and purposiveness of *The Wire*'s visual style, dialogue and dramatic flow. Aesthetically, in terms of what are often called 'production values' – lighting, set design, and so on – and also with respect to the programme's choices of actors and how they are presented, *The Wire* displays a commitment to beauty that is surprising. Not only this: the programme's characters are on the whole extremely charismatic, often downright charming. The series abounds in humour. It offers a penetrating and deeply satisfying analysis of the public institutions of a large, modern city. We leave *The Wire* convinced that our home towns must similarly pulsate with stories hiding in plain sight, if only we had the tools to read them. And we are provided with all the epistemic pleasures one would expect of a long form serial drama.

In short, *The Wire* possesses so many sources of pleasure and achievement that while the social world that it depicts might well provoke despair, the experience of watching the series is a truly invigorating one. I do not offer this observation as a critique of the series, analogous to Ian Cameron's critique of *The Guns of Navarone* (J Lee Thompson, 1961) in his article republished in this issue; I am not suggesting that *The Wire* makes the milieu it depicts appear attractive, or that the viewer's pleasure in watching is that of 'slumming'. This is the crucial difference: there is not a contradiction, as there is in *The Guns of Navarone*, between what *The Wire* invites the viewer to take delight in and to despair at. We are thrilled by the intelligence and penetration with which the problems of the large modern city are analysed, rather than being seduced by the spectacle of dysfunction or the glamour of criminal activity.

I hope these observations help us begin to appreciate how finely poised the development of the programme's overarching theme of the relationship between individuals and institutions is. *The Wire* is clearly committed to offering a systemic analysis, and demonstrates that the problems of modern municipal organisations will not be solved by a few good people. However, it never loses its source material's way of seeing, which places at the centre of its quest to understand the world the close observation of individual human lives.

And if *The Wire*'s characters spend a lot of time trying to educate others, they also frequently articulate understandings that their interlocutors already share. The result is that they spend a vast amount of time commenting, often eloquently, upon the forces that shape their lives. Thus, *The Wire* does not bypass its characters when offering insights to its viewers; it does justice to the former by investing them with similar knowledge. Its analysis is supra-individual in scope, but it is not dehumanising. Most of the programme's characters are not miserable defeated dupes, but focused players of 'the game'.<sup>3</sup>

They therefore emerge as clear-sighted but stoical, aware that they are hemmed in but doing their best given

the circumstances. 'All in the game' is an eloquently general explanatory summary that echoes through the show's five seasons. The characters are governed by restrictions not of their making, and they know this, but that will not stop them trying to analyse their situation, and come up with some inventive moves.

James Zborowski

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James Zborowski was awarded his PhD in Film Studies (funded by the AHRC) by the University of Warwick last year. He is currently working on his first monograph, *The Camera's Character: Point of View in Studio Era Hollywood*, to be published by Manchester University Press.

<sup>1</sup> My understanding of the term is therefore broadly congruent with that adopted by Wayne C Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (first published 1961).

<sup>2</sup> Every episode also has a title, nowhere presented within the episode itself, but available paratextually (eg. on the DVD menu screens and the HBO website).

<sup>3</sup> Sherrod (Rashad Orange), Bubbles's companion from Season 3 onwards, is such a singular and disturbing character in *The Wire* because he comes to closest to possessing a completely downtrodden demeanour.