Post–Network Era Television, Cultural Hierarchies and Sociological Uses of *The Wire* Beyond Urban Inequality

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Although David Simon has cited a work of sociology as his inspiration for the second season of HBO's *The Wire* (Bennett), sociology's pedagogical use of *The Wire* is largely confined to structural issues. A sociology/criminology capstone course at the University of West Virginia, for example, addresses topics such as poverty, inequality, segregation, violence, and education as they relate to urban populations (WVU Today). Lest students be confused about the nature of a Northeastern University sociology course titled "*The Wire* and the Study of Urban Inequalities," the professor states on the first page of the syllabus, "Please note that it is structured as a sociology course, not a media or screen studies course. Thus, the primary focus is not the show per se, but rather what the show reveals about aspects of racial and class inequality that have been the concern of urban sociologists for decades" (Kimelberg). Most notably, in an op-ed piece for *The Washington Post*, Harvard's William Julius Wilson justifies building a course around the show that addresses urban inequality by noting, "*The Wire* is fiction, but it forces us to confront social realities more effectively than any other media production in the era of so-called reality TV. It does not tie things up neatly; as in real life, the problems remain unsolved, and the cycle repeats itself as disadvantages become more deeply entrenched" (Chaddha and Wilson).

For all of its usefulness in illustrating the myriad factors that shape structural inequality, I have found *The Wire* has just as much pedagogical value

regarding the social forces associated with cultural inequality. My undergraduate course, "Mass Media & Society," which has taught both seasons one and four of *The Wire*, is scheduled as a two hour and forty minute block divided between lecture, screening, and discussion, allowing a full season of *The Wire* to be shown over the course of the fourteen week semester. The first half of the course uses urban ethnography, including Anderson's *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner-City* (2000) and Moskos's *Cop in the Hood: My Year Policing Baltimore's Eastern District* (2009), to address structural inequality. The second half of the syllabus approaches cultural inequality by considering cultural capital and status hierarchies. "Cultural inequality" refers to differential access to the knowledge and behaviors most valued by the dominant structural system and is closely related to French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's notion of "cultural capital."

I begin this essay by discussing the ways in which I have used scenes from *The Wire* to illustrate Bourdieu's (1984) conception of "cultural capital" and Sennett and Cobb's (1973) ideas regarding the "hidden injuries of class." In the next section, I position *The Wire* alongside other culturally legitimated prime-time cable serials. In particular, I focus on the relationship between such texts and the broader post-network discourses of legitimation which necessitate "the construction of divergent conceptions of television texts, technologies, and audiences" (Newman and Levine 7). In using *The Wire* to address a range of sociological issues including those related to the creation and maintenance of cultural inequality, it is necessary to walk a fine line between explaining the social processes that result in status hierarchies and unthinkingly reinforcing them by positioning the show to be the outcome of a chronological progression in which the "good," "complicated," "intelligent" TV of the present is an improvement upon the medium's past. In the third section, I explain how I have walked such a line by emphasizing the inherent tension between popularity and status, explaining the social mechanisms by which the opinions of some come to systematically matter more than the opinions of others, and describing the ways in which the importance of status hierarchies varies with social location.

Cultural Capital and the Hidden Injuries of Class in The Wire

Although first used to describe the non-monetary assets associated with social and intellectual knowledge, Bourdieu later argues that to possess cultural capital is to demonstrate competence in any socially valued practice. In a practical sense, cultural capital is a collection of habits and tastes that can be used to acquire economic and non-economic advantages in particular social contexts when others grant such habits and tastes symbolic importance. Like economic capital (money or resources) and social capital (access to money or resources through one's social network), cultural capital is closely related to structural inequality. In the context of the educational system, cultural capital reproduces inequality by conferring advantages to children with high cultural capital. Cultural capital is also central for Boudieu's concept of "habitus." As a set of dispositions structured by one's social position, habitus is reflected in a range of individual behavior from one's likes and dislikes to the way in which a person carries themselves through social space (body language, posture, etc.).

To explain cultural capital during lecture, I show a restaurant scene from *The Wire*'s fourth season episode "Know Your Place" (4.9). I set up the scene by explaining that, as a result of winning a teamwork contest, Bunny Colvin (a former high-ranking police officer) takes three "at-risk" students—Namond, Zenobia, and Darnell—to dinner at an upscale steak house. In the car on the way to the restaurant the mood is cheerful and upbeat. Once inside, however, the students' positive attitude begins to fade. Namond and Darnell give the hostess looks of distrust as they refuse to let her take their jackets. At the table, Darnell asks a question that seems to presume the hostess will be joining them for the meal. Of the three students, Zenobia has the best grasp of appropriate behavior, as evidenced by mocking Namond for his conflation of restaurant specials with retail discounts and chiding Darnell for failing to appropriately put his napkin in his lap. Nonetheless, by the time the server describes the evening's specials, which include "king salmon with sweet corn, chanterelles, and basil ravioli," all three have shut down completely. The tension only subsides when the group returns to Colvin's car, a neutral space where the corner kids can institute a familiar set of social norms.

After asking students for their interpretations of the scene, I propose the increasing discomfort is a reflection of shame. I explain that unlike guilt, which is produced through the transgression of moral values, shame is the sense of failure resulting from being seen as lacking in the eyes of others. Shame, as Rita Felski observes, "has less to do with infractions of morality than with infractions of social codes and a consequent fear of exposure, embarrassment, and humiliation" (39). In relation to cultural capital, shame is particularly significant because individuals tend to understand society's social arrangements as legitimate. On one hand, status, privilege, and similar social rewards allegedly are "earned" by individuals; that is, they are perceived as resulting

from intelligence, talent, effort, and other strategically displayed skills. On the other hand, the absence of status and privilege is perceived to be the result of individual failure. I conclude my discussion of cultural capital by restating Bourdieu's position that an individual's social position is not based on merit but rather that privilege reproduces itself.

To address other components of cultural inequality, Sennett and Cobb's canonical book *The Hidden Injuries of Class* is particularly valuable. In this qualitative study of working-class families in Boston, the authors find that, despite achieving material success, individuals who began life in poor, ethnic enclaves often struggle with feelings of inadequacy. To illustrate this titular concept, I use a different restaurant scene from season one, which includes several exchanges between D'Angelo Barksdale and Donette, the mother of his child (1.5). Although the hidden injuries of class are related to cultural capital, they are not identical. I explain that if cultural capital is the habits, tastes, and behaviors through which inequality is reproduced, then hidden injuries are the toll that the reproduction of inequality takes on those disadvantaged by the class system. I ask students to read Sennett and Cobb's discussion of their interview with third generation Italian-American Frank Rissaro and then compare the hidden injuries of class with the ideas D'Angelo expresses during his date with Donette.

In the scene, after asking Donette if she thinks the other diners can tell that he is in the drug trade, D'Angelo continues, "Come on, you know, it's like we get all dressed up, right? Come all the way across town. Fancy place like this. After we finished, we gonna go down to the harbor. Walk around a little bit, you know? Acting like we belong down here, know what I'm saying?" Donette responds, "So? Your money good, right? Dee, we ain't the only black people in here." Yet, the issue is not racial and D'Angelo replies, "It ain't what I'm talking about ... I'm just saying, you know, I feel like some shit just stay with you, you know what I'm saying, like, hard as you try you still can't go nowhere, you know what I'm saying?" Failing to see the cultural impact of class, Donette invokes a version of the American dream, asserting, "Boy, don't nobody give a damn about you and your story. You got money, you get to be whatever you say you are. That's the way it is."

I argue this scene depicts the hidden injuries of class in three ways. First, by characterizing getting "dressed up" and eating at a "fancy place" as "acting like we belong," D'Angelo is evaluating himself on middle-class terms. According to Sennett and Cobb, Rissarro similarly believes that "people of a higher class have a power to judge him because they seem internally more developed human beings; and he is afraid, because they are better armed, that they will

not respect him" (25). Second, in having achieved a measure of material success ("Your money good, right?") yet still feeling "like some shit just stay with you ... hard as you try you still can't go nowhere," D'Angelo understands this unhappiness as proof of his own inadequacy. Like Rissarro, D'Angelo has "played by the rules, he has gained the outward signs of material respectability" while also internalizing the belief that if "he still feels defenseless, something must be wrong with him" (25). Third, the contrast between D'Angelo's feelings and Donette's claim about "the way it is" points to the difficulty of becoming culturally middle-class. As Sennett and Cobb observe, this "tangle of feelings" is common among individuals who "have been successful in making the sort of material gains that are supposed to 'melt' people into the American middle class" (26). As *The Wire* makes clear, however, such melting is often impossible and, when possible, fraught with anxiety.

Cultural Legitimation in the Post-Network Era

Beyond depicting the importance of cultural capital, *The Wire* itself illustrates the social process of legitimation—the way in which a text, genre, or form comes to have value as cultural capital. This is particularly significant because, for most of its history, television could not have been considered cultural capital. From Minow's "vast wasteland" to the anti–TV activist groups of the 1990s who believed the medium to be a public health concern akin to illegal drug use (Mittell), television was largely considered a low-status cultural form. In reference to this history, the only way in which a show like *The Wire* could become culturally legitimated is through broader transformations in the medium itself.

In the context of a convergence culture, television is now another form of new media characterized by an increasingly diverse array of forms and contents. Technological innovation (digital video recorders, video on demand, the internet, etc.) and industrial shifts including conglomeration produce an environment in which choice has increased to such a degree that producers like advertiser-supported-cable networks can afford to create programming that will only be seen by very small portions of the available audience. In addition, increasing efforts to pursue diverse audiences led to the creation of niche content for premium networks, allowing culturally elite understandings to gain legitimacy. This economic and cultural context, as Amanda Lotz explains, creates the possibilities for "phenomenal television" as "programming affirmed by *hierarchies of artistic value and social importance*," and no network has cap-

italized on these opportunities for status acquisition like the subscriber-based cable channel HBO (40).

Home Box Office (HBO), which began broadcasting in 1972 as a subsidiary of New York City's Sterling Manhattan Cable, which was itself partially owned by Time, Inc. (Mullen 108), initially distinguished itself from other cable networks with uncensored movies and sports programming. By the late 1990s, however, the network had become "the TV equivalent of a designer label" (Edgerton 9). Both the expectations of viewers and the network's brand image are frequently associated with the introduction of the marketing slogan "It's Not TV" in 1996. Yet, as a host of scholars have noted, HBO's marketing strategy relies upon the long-standing marginalization of television and its audiences. Regarding television as a cultural form, Horace Newcomb observes, "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). According to Newman and Levine, however, HBO's efforts to distinguish itself from the medium more broadly are part of a larger social process.

While the cultural legitimation of television has been an ongoing effort since the 1940s, it is only during the first decade of the post-network era that television becomes bifurcated with the support of "cultural elites (including journalists, popular critics, TV creators and executives, and media scholars)" who invest "the medium with aesthetic and other prized values, nudging it closer to more established arts and cultural forms" (Newman and Levine 7). In particular, the increasing status of some post-network content results from its association with the active viewing experiences of elite audiences while the devalued status of other content remains unchanged in connection with presumptions regarding the passive viewing experiences of mass audiences during the network era. As the most prestigious post-network content, long-form storytelling and serialized narratives of original premium cable series like HBO's *The Sopranos* and *The Wire* "are seen as more engaging, addressing a committed and passionate viewer" in relation to episodic narratives of network procedural dramas like CBS's *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*; specifically, the use of "terms such as 'original,' 'edgy,' 'complex,' and 'sophisticated'" in the discourses surrounding premium cable texts "functions to privilege serialized storytelling above other kinds of TV narrative" (Newman and Levine 80–81).

Although anti–TV branding defines television by emphasizing what it is not, like the intellectualizing discourses surrounding film use of language associated with French art criticism in the 1960s (Baumann), other post-network discourses of legitimation explicitly attempt to bring the medium

more closely in line with traditionally highbrow cultural forms. According to Newman and Levine, "auteurist notions" (41) regarding "showrunners" of culturally legitimated prime-time serialized drama, like Terrence Winter of HBO's *Boardwalk Empire* and Vince Gilligan of AMC's *Breaking Bad*, for example, connect post-network television to "cinema, literature, painting, and other forms of serious, highly respected culture" (57). While not an official title, using the term "showrunner" in reference to the head of television production for shows in a variety of genres provides ideological support for other discourses of legitimation by drawing attention to the artistic status of some programming both promoted and consumed as authored texts. Like 1960s film directors' self promotion as artists, showrunners employing this strategy and critics who repeat such assertions rely on tropes of authorship familiar from older, already legitimated and aestheticized cultural forms, including Romantic notions of the author as a guarantee of art supported by autobiographical narratives in which the connections between experience and expression further guarantee the artistry (Baumann 64–66).

Beyond legitimizing discourses associated with notions of showrunners as auteur, by the start of the show's fourth season, the critical discourse surrounding *The Wire* explicitly began aligning the show with traditionally legitimated cultural forms. In an article for *TV Guide* Matt Roush claims, "This is TV as great modern literature, a shattering and heartbreaking urban epic about a city (Baltimore) rotting from within." Similarly, *Time* magazine's television critic observes, "They have done what many well-intentioned socially minded writers have tried and failed at: written a story that is about social systems, in all their complexity, yet made it human, funny and most important of all, rivetingly entertaining" (Poniewozik). In addition, an increasing number of cultural elites had come to believe that *The Wire* was "surely the best TV show ever broadcast in America" (Weisberg).

Yet, as literary critic Laura Miller argues, it makes little sense to consider *The Wire* in reference to American popular culture more broadly. As she explains, "American culture is fundamentally Romantic, individualistic and Christian; when it's not exhorting you to 'follow your dream' it's reassuring us that in the eleventh hour, we will be saved. American culture is a perpetual pep talk, trafficking in tales of personal redemption and the ultimate triumph of good over evil" (Miller and Traister). Despite, or perhaps because of, its distance from typical American popular culture, *The Wire* continues to be celebrated as the zenith of television's artistic and creative potential years after its conclusion (Zoller Seitz). Yet, as I have discovered, critical praise and HBO's anti–TV branding are more meaningful to some audiences than to others and

it is precisely such issues that extend *The Wire*'s pedagogical value beyond the structural by providing opportunities to explore cultural inequality as a lived reality rather than as a product of shifting macro-level forces revealed with historical analysis.

Status, Taste and The Wire

At present, there is much scholarly debate regarding the best way to understand the relationship between social class and popular culture. On one hand, there is a significant amount of research demonstrating that cultural choices are diverging, which indicates the increasing importance of class and other categorical identities such as race and gender (Fischer and Mattson). On the other hand, research also demonstrates that cultural choices made by those in different socioeconomic locations are in fact converging, which indicates the decreasing importance of class (Peterson and Kern). Yet, as Herbert Gans notes, the boundaries separating the highbrow from the lowbrow have weakened and individuals, particularly the young, are no longer required to make cultural choices that have been deemed class-appropriate (12). Nonetheless, taste remains constitutive of the systems of classification that both shape and express social interaction while remaining linked to processes of identity formation and status-based exclusion. For educators addressing cultural inequality in the undergraduate classroom, the choice to use *The Wire* presents the opportunity to make explicit several uncomfortable, taken-for-granted realities for our students.

One such taken-for-granted reality is the tension between popularity and status. I refer to this as the "Hootie and the Blowfish paradox," which reveals the inverse relationship between quantitative popularity and cultural status. The band's debut album, *Cracked Rear View* (1994), was the best-selling album of 1995 (New York Times Staff), went on to be certified platinum sixteen times (Billboard News Staff), and remains the sixteenth best-selling U.S. album of all-time (David). Yet, when a cultural product is so widely embraced, questions of quality and substance are inevitable. Describing the band's follow-up effort *Fairweather Johnson* (1996) as "its predecessor's artistic equal" and "the musical equivalent of Mom's chocolate chip cookies and a big glass of milk ... paired with lyrics that reek of Hallmark-card sentimentality," music critic Jim DeRogatis concludes his scathing review by asking, "More than 8 million buyers can't be wrong. Or can they?" The crux of the paradox is the following: for something to be so massively popular, it must build an audience across a

wide variety of demographic groups; yet, by appealing to a variety of demographic groups, including whomever constitutes the derisively labeled "lowest common denominator," a cultural text is no longer able to reward high status audiences' cultural capital.

In the context of contemporary American television, the tension between popularity and status is revealed in the inverse relationship between audience size and critical esteem, as the most popular shows have little cultural status while the highest status shows are significantly less popular. *The Wire*'s audience, which peaked at about four million viewers before dipping below one million during the show's final season (Bianco), was dwarfed by that of CBS's *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, which, over the same time period, consistently drew more than twenty million viewers (ABC Television Network). As one observer has recently noted, "More than other entertainment industries, TV seems to play by the rules of a peculiar Faustian bargain: *Be popular and scarcely acknowledged; or be praised and scarcely watched*" (Thompson). This tension also points to another essential truth of cultural inequality: all audiences are not equal. Put another way, the opinions of some matter more than the opinions of others. How, then, can we account for the cultural significance of *The Wire* in light of its minuscule audience?

As I explain to my students, part of the answer lies with the power of elite audiences like critics and academics. In the case of the former, many contemporary scholars follow Bourdieu and consider critics to be "cultural intermediaries" (325). As part of a broader category, the term refers to those sets of occupations and workers involved in the production and circulation of symbolic goods and services in the context of an expanding cultural economy in postwar Western societies. Specifically, critics writing for high status publications help create broader social views of what constitutes good or bad television. In addition, their approach to evaluating television frequently reflects the dominant cultural hierarchy and its views on mass and popular culture. Although there is a hierarchy of critics and criticism, as an occupational group, television critics can be understood as members of an increasingly college-educated middle-class.

Like critics, academics also play an important role in cultural consecration. Although Bourdieu argues that the composition of legitimate culture is a site of constant struggle and there can be little doubt that scholarly attitudes towards *The Wire* vary dramatically, among many academics the show's image is largely positive. This is particularly significant because, as Baumann explains regarding Hollywood film, "if an intellectual subject gets taken seriously by the academic community, it will likely get taken seriously by the rest

of the public, particularly those who have post-secondary degrees, as well" (66).

Beyond the tension between popularity and status and the role of elite audiences like critics and academics, using *The Wire* in the undergraduate classroom creates an opportunity to discuss the ways in which the significance of cultural hierarchies vary with social location. As such, recognizing that the critical and academic adulation heaped upon *The Wire* is in fact the outcome of a social process is often difficult for many students. At the start of one lecture, for example, I asked the class if anyone recalled Bourdieu's position regarding the significance of cultural capital, "Why does taste matter?" A young man towards the back of the room turned to his female neighbor and, in a failed attempt to speak under his breath, said, "It doesn't!" After trying to deflect the sting of his comment with levity, I thanked the young man for his input as a reflection of what Janice Radway describes as "middlebrow personalism"—a mode of cultural engagement requiring and supporting a worldview where taste is a reflection of "individual, idiosyncratic selves" (283). As she observes and as this student reminded me, the middlebrow, the most common American taste culture, is frequently constructed in opposition to the highbrow cultural imperatives of academics and professionals.

Regarding *The Wire* itself, the importance of subjective assessment often comes to the forefront when addressing the show in a broader sociopolitical context. After reading the scholarly exchange between Chaddha, Wilson, and Venkatesh and Atlas and Dreier, I ask my students to complete a writing assignment weighing in on the debate as to whether or not *The Wire* is too cynical. Many students side-step the question by referencing the subjective nature of assessment. One student writes, for example, "One of the key ways to ascertain whether *The Wire* is too cynical would be to determine what should be viewed as 'too much' or deviating too far outside of the realm of what should be portrayed. The answers to these questions are relative in nature, contingent upon the thoughts and views of the person who is making the judgment." Nonetheless, for individuals concerned with social mobility, such middlebrow opposition to highbrow cultural imperatives can be self-defeating. In an effort to emphasize the ways in which the significance of status hierarchies varies with social location, I often discuss these issues using myself as an example. I admit that although I might study television academically and teach a course structured around *The Wire*, in fact, my favorite show is FX's *The Shield*. Only half kidding, I add that with sixty minutes to live, I would want to watch *The Shield*'s pilot episode one more time. I explain that in a middlebrow context dominated by an ethos of "different strokes for different folks," perhaps my

feelings about *The Shield* would be interpreted as a reflection of my distinct personality. Yet, in higher status cultural contexts, interpretations would likely be quite different. I mention that it is unlikely the department head would have responded in a similarly positive manner if I had proposed structuring a course around *The Shield*.

In addition to struggling with *The Wire*'s cultural status, some students find the show's narrative unsatisfying and overly cynical. This hesitancy, I suspect, is related to dominant cultural attitudes. According to Gans, cultural products intended for the numerically dominant "lower-middle culture" are "user-oriented," meaning that they were produced with the intention of being entertaining for the audience rather than fulfilling for the creator (110–111). The importance of critical assessment associated with highbrow cultural forms is mirrored by the significance of individual, subjective assessment in the cultural world of many middle-class Americans.

In addition, Gans notes that a central characteristic of drama in lower-middle-culture is the tendency to "express and reinforce the culture's own ideas and feelings" (111). In such a cultural context, definitive moral conclusions are particularly important because they encourage the ideological belief that large-scale social problems can be addressed with individual-level resolutions. Of course, *The Wire* fails to provide its audience with this type of conclusion and, as a result, further distinguishes itself from typical television texts and increases its distance from middlebrow norms. Not surprisingly, among students who find the show to be overly cynical, the absence of narrative closure is particularly problematic. One young woman asserts, the show "offers no justice at the end of season one.... Instead of change, [D'Angelo] was sentenced to twenty years in jail and his hope for a better future has completely disappeared." Another similarly claims, "The show never promised a happy ending ... but that still does not take away from the fact that its viewpoint comes from quite a cynical and bleak place, leaving viewers with a message that in the inner-city, yes, things are sad and unfortunate, but that's just how they are and nothing can be done to change it."

Furthermore, in the context of such forms of cultural engagement, whether *The Wire* can or cannot be appropriately categorized as Dickensian frequently matters less than a given student's ability to identify with and relate to something in the text. For students who cannot find anything in the text with which they can identify, I encourage them to develop a variety of critiques that they can hopefully apply to other forms of popular culture in the future. For those who question the image of post-industrial Baltimore, I recommend Michael Johnson Jr's analysis of the show's authenticity. For those who find

the depiction of poor women problematic, I suggest Elizabeth Ault's critique regarding African American motherhood. For those who find the social critique to be overly cynical, I suggest Erika Johnson-Lewis's treatment of the show's serial narrative. Using *The Wire* to help students develop a reflexive sense of themselves culturally is not always possible; therefore, I believe helping students strengthen their critical skills is an acceptable alternative.

In the broadest sense, the amount of academic attention paid to *The Wire* is nothing short of remarkable as the historically low status of television ensured its exclusion from established taste hierarchies. Regarding the discipline of sociology in particular, Penfold-Mounce, Beer, and Burrows claim that the show is "an uncommonly effective and deep exploration of contemporary socio-political themes" that can "best be approached as a form of *social science fiction*. As a work of fiction it certainly accomplishes the telling of a certain kind of 'truth'..." (154). As this essay indicates, however, the binary proposed by their assertion that "the kind of 'truth' being generated is less attuned to the aesthetics of the humanities and more aligned with the sensibilities necessary to stimulate the sociological imagination of the viewer" is a false one (154–155). Furthermore, in claiming *The Wire* for sociology, these sociologists rely upon established cultural hierarchies to assert, without irony, that the show is "a new take on reality TV" and offer the following semantic suggestion: "Using 'authentic television' rather than reality TV helps differentiate *The Wire* and its realism from reality shows such as Big Brother" (159). Even if one assumes these authors have more familiarity with the genre of reality TV than is implied by such a suggestion, their argument certainly indicates that taste both distinguishes oneself from others and reveals one's status. From the cultural legitimation of post-network era television to the critical and academic embrace of some texts but not others, it is clear that the social forces surrounding *The Wire* extend far beyond the structural inequality portrayed over the course of five seasons and sixty episodes. Indeed, it seems unreasonable to expect otherwise from a text created by a producer with enough disdain for the medium in which he works to proclaim, "Fuck the average viewer" (Burkeman).

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PART II

Writing and Narrative

"Dope on the damn table"

Narrative Discourse in The Wire *and African American Literature*[1]

PAUL D. REICH

Once restricted to convenient and self-contained forms, contemporar[y] television series like *Breaking Bad* and *Game of Thrones* now require a[n] engaged and consistent viewership that allows for these programs to becom[e] "finely crafted, adult-minded serials built around arcs of interconnected actio[n] unfolding over the life span of the series" (Doherty). In a 2012 *Chronicle* essa[y] entitled "Storied TV: Cable is the New Novel," Thomas Doherty argues tha[t] "long-form episodic television"—a genre he calls "Arc TV"—poses a seriou[s] challenge to the critical aspirations of feature films and novels. Like the nove[l] these shows focus on character development and back story; as viewers becom[e] immersed in the series, the emotional payoffs occur not only at the end of a[n] episode but at the end of a season.

Doherty and others correctly point to two "foundational models" fo[r] this tele-revolution: HBO's *The Sopranos* and *The Wire.* While the forme[r] certainly enjoyed a wider popular appeal, the latter has received more con[-] sistent critical attention. In its five season run from 2002 to 2008, *Th[e] Wire* presents its viewers with an uncompromising look at the city of Balti[-] more and has become a darling of television critics and academics. Labele[d] by many as the best television series ever, *The Wire* has found its way int[o] essay anthologies, special issues of journals, and academic conferences— including a special session at the 2008 Modern Language Association con[-] ference. The series has also found a place in the classroom as instructor[s] across disciplines—from film and media studies to sociology—employ its na[r-]