The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same: Serial Narrative on *The Wire*

Erika Johnson-Lewis | 29 May 2009 | 4-The Wire Files [May 09]

*The Wire* has been lauded for its uncompromising look at the failure of institutions in contemporary Baltimore. The city of Baltimore functions as a microcosm of the larger problems effecting contemporary U.S. urban life. Each season the writers tackle diverse topics from the ‘war on drugs,’ to under funded inner-city schools as the Baltimore police’s major crimes unit works a case. Unlike the ‘ripped from the headlines’ stories of more episodic television series like *Law and Order* and *CSI* franchises in which a case is opened and closed within the span of an hour, the narrative on *The Wire* slowly unfolds over an entire season. In this essay, I shall begin to examine how the broad narrative structure of the series aims to produce a sustained and powerful institutional critique. After this brief analysis, I shall turn to question whether the series is successful in its attempted critique and what the political implications of this might be.

The serialized narrative has emerged in prime time television, in part, as a reaction to the changed political economy of the U.S. television industry; ‘it is probably not surprising that the serial format appears as a significant trend in the late twentieth century at a time when competition for audiences has increased.’ HBO, *The Wire*’s home network, has cultivated a blue chip audience who are willing to pay a premium for the ability to see its ‘not TV’ brand of television. HBO’s place as a premium pay television channel has allowed it to push boundaries and cultivate a loyal brand and audience following. In so doing, network and basic cable outlets have had to alter their content to entice audiences back.

Formally, other television scholars have noted the serial’s appeal, its narrative openness and complexity and how it ‘better responds to and reveals the complexity, ambiguity and lack of closure that typifies the contemporary world.’ Jason Mittell argues that the ‘narrative complexity’ of contemporary television ‘moves serial form outside the generic assumptions tied to soap operas’ and that ‘narratively complex programs invite temporary disorientation and confusion, allowing viewers to build up their comprehension skills through long-term viewing and active engagement.’

*The Wire* is a narratively complex series that seizes on these aspects of the contemporary serial. In particular, David Simon has stated that ‘[the writers are] looking at this thing as a 66-hour movie.’ There is a small irony here, in that, only through exploiting the conventions of television is Simon able to achieve his goal. Depth and detail are hallmarks of the program and this is achieved through the following strategies: narrative framing, compelling characterization, and attention to the minutia of everyday life, criminal investigations, and the rules of each respective ‘game’ (the street, good ‘police,’ political maneuvering, etc.).

This essay is not making value claims about the use of seriality as somehow implicitly better than episodic television. Instead, I want to emphasize the way
in which the aim of *The Wire* - to throw light on the entrenchment of the status quo in various U.S. institutions - relies on the formal conventions of serialized narrative. This is not to say that one needs the conventions of seriality to throw light on social, political, and cultural issues, but that the level of engagement that Simon desires would be impossible in any other screen based medium.

*The Wire* unlike most other television series was conceived with five seasons in mind. The overall thematic arc is the inability of institutions to serve the public; ‘it’s about the very simple idea that, in this Postmodern world of ours, human beings-all of us-are worth less.’ The different levels of the narrative frame and reinforce one another. Each season arc focuses on a case worked by the major crimes unit that, in turn, frames a narrative that follows a specific institution and its individual failings. These season long arcs then frame the individual character’s arcs, some of whom are followed throughout the entirety of the series. These character arcs work back out again to the larger series wide narrative as they confront the institutional machine. This use of repetition and framing works to reinforce and strengthen the dehumanization of contemporary urban life. The repetition is continued in both the program’s characterization and attention to detail.

*The Wire* uses a number of different strategies to highlight its preoccupation with emphasizing inconsequential moments, thoughts, bits of information, backgrounds, rules, and events. I would like to highlight two integrated tactics, the opening sequence and the individual character quotes that appear at the beginning of each episode. The opening sequence of any television program generally draws attention to key aspects of the program. *The Wire* is no different in this regard. In the first season, the opening montage sequence is a series of mostly close-up, decontextualized images from events that will occur throughout the season. The song *Way Down in the Hole* written by Tom Waits and covered by The Blind Boys of Alabama plays over the sequence of images, which come together to give the viewer a sense of the overall crux of the series. As the viewer watches the story unfold from episode to episode the previously decontextualized images begin to make sense as their relationship to the overall narrative is revealed. The viewer begins to see how the various pieces fit together; this mirrors the narrative structure as the disparate bits of information come together to create a case.

In each subsequent season, images from the current season are incorporated in with previous season images. The instrumentation and style of the opening credits also changes from season to season. For the audience this serves as an indication that a change in the main interest of the investigation has occurred, while also emphasizing a fundamental similarity to seasons past. The initial change might be distracting, but the familiarity of the tune and lyrics keys the viewer into the narrative world of the series.

At the close of the opening sequence a quote taken from within the episode appears. The viewer learns that the opening thought encapsulates some larger thematic concern of the episode or series. It focuses the viewer’s attention by setting the tone and indicating what aspects to be on the lookout
The remarks are often said in mundane situations drawing attention to the minutia of everyday life and lending it a sense of weight. On *The Wire* moments of revelation and clarity happen at a small scale, in daily interaction with the world. These moments are perhaps the closest the series ever gets to didacticism, in that, they do often work to focus attention on a specific lesson learned by a character and through that character the lesson is imparted to the audience. This technique is successful in how it guides the viewer and establishes the rich narrative world of the series. For example, in episode 1.03 ‘The Buys’ the opening quote is ‘The King Stays the King.’

In perhaps one of the most memorable scenes in the series, D’Angelo Barksdale teaches Bodie and Wallace how to play chess using language of ‘the game.’ This scene serves the practical purpose of introducing the viewer to the workings of the Barksdale clan, and it also works metaphorically to explain the logic of the world that the people in *The Wire* inhabit. In the game, as with chess, the king or kingpin, doesn’t have to do much, since there will always be readily available and expendable pawns who ‘be out in the field [...] They get capped quick. They be out the game early.’ The queen, ‘the go get shit done piece’ reminds Wallace of Stringer. Stringer, until his death in season three, does indeed hold a lot of power, but doesn’t learn D’Angelo’s lesson, that ‘the king stays the king’ and this ultimately leads to his demise. D’Angelo explains to Wallace, Bodie, and the viewer that the world is one in which there’s always a king on top: through out the series the viewer meets the king in his many incarnations, Avon, The Greek, the Governor, and Marlo to name a few.

Character development (or in some cases devolution) throughout the series works as another strategy of critique. Of course character growth adds a necessary interest for the viewer, without compelling, interesting, and generally flawed characters the story would become a bland exercise in didacticism in which the writers instruct the viewers on the ills of society. *The Wire* rejects a conspiratorial model of critique in which a singular and often inherently evil individual is responsible for social decay and destruction, for example, the sadistic gangster or the megalomaniacal politician. The ‘villain’ on *The Wire* is the institutional machine, which transcends any of the individuals within it. To emphasize this point, the writers are very careful not to demonize one side of the law over the other, choosing instead to humanize most of the characters as much as possible. These multifaceted characters reiterate the institutional critique. A few manage to overcome personal tragedies or setbacks, but most of the characters are consumed by the cycle of violence and indifference.

For example, Stringer Bell’s story highlights his inability to reform the drug trade. He wants to stop the violence, not for altruistic or humanitarian reasons, but for economic reasons. His ultimate aim is to go legit, but his desire to do so is continually thwarted. Clay Davis and the real estate investors take advantage of him. He betrays his long time friend, Avon Barksdale, which ultimately leads to his downfall. In an act of poetic justice he’s gunned down in the building he was hoping would offer him freedom. He may be a kingpin (or the ‘queen’ as we learned in ‘The Buys’) on the street, but he’s still just a
street thug in the eyes of those with the real power. Omar Little, who despite the fact that he’s a murderer and thief, attempts to live his life according to strict code, but he is ultimately taken down by a young child after being forced to return to the game to avenge his friend Butchie’s death. The impact of these events would be impossible in a more episodic series. The emotional and intellectual implications of these character’s sad outcomes would fail to effectively reinforce *The Wire*’s critique.

All of the discussed devices are employed by the writers to emphasize the larger thematic element, the dehumanization of the characters by various institutional machines, that ‘*the game is the game.*’ The critique builds through the slow time of the narrative arc through all five seasons. If the viewer wishes to have a thorough understanding of *The Wire*, it demands the viewer watch closely and carefully to catch the details, to sweat the small stuff, and to live and die with the characters. Otherwise the final upshot, that the more things change, the more they stay the same, will be lost. And this final upshot is ultimately what makes *The Wire*’s critique fall flat.

When I began thinking about *The Wire*, I wanted to explore how it exploited the conventions of seriality to articulate a powerful critique of modern institutions. However, the more I thought through this argument the more I found that *The Wire*, despite what David Simon asserted when he said, ‘in its treatment of the actual characters, be they longshoremen or mid-level drug dealers or police detectives, I don’t think [The Wire is] cynical at all. I think there’s a great deal of humanist affection’ is far too cynical to successfully engage the inadequacies of institutions and ‘their capacity for serving the needs of the individual.’ Though *The Wire*’s use of seriality makes for well crafted and high quality television, its critique ultimately fails; it wallows far too long in the decay and dejection of contemporary urban life revealing the general conclusion of the entire series: the more things change, the more they stay the same.

The imperative of most of the institutions (with the obvious exception of the drug trade) is to effect change, to make the city and its inhabitants better. The government and its various agencies (the police, politicians, social policies, etc.) are tasked with working in the public interest. However, more often than not, as is made explicit in season five’s examination of the news media, the public interest is then massaged in the interest of the status quo; for example the ‘dope on the table’ and the superficiality of the bust as a band aid to cover over larger problems that the ‘war on drugs’ has created. There’s no real incentive for long-term structural change. The ‘new day’ Carcetti promised crumbles under the weight of bureaucracy. What the slow pace and build-up of the narrative exposes (or reinforces) is that to understand the complexities of how the system works and why it doesn’t change one needs to understand the entrenchment of the reasons to keep the status quo, power and profit. Instead there is so often an illusion of change - the ‘juked’ books, emphasizing that the 3rd grade test scores went up, the reduction of crime through the surreptitious legalization of drugs, and exposing a corrupt union because of a petty dispute over a church window. They all point out that real change would
require a complete upheaval of the entire system, because the system is beyond hope.

This is particularly disheartening given its engagement with the deep entrenchment of racism with U.S. culture. Racism is so often addressed in superficial ways. *The Wire*’s series long story arcs do not erase the complexity of racism and its imbrication with classism. But what are the people of Baltimore to do? What is left? Is it enough to explode stereotypes? To reveal as D’Angelo does to a room full of lawyers and police who stare at photos of brutally murdered people that,

> You all don’t understand, man. You’ll don’t get it. [...] I grew up in this shit. All my people, my father, my uncles, my cousins. It’s just what we do. We just live with this shit ’til you can’t breath no more. I swear to god [...] I was freer in jail then I was at home.

What does he want,

> I want to start over [...] I just want to go somewhere where I can breathe like regular folk.

Though the *The Wire* does explode the stereotypical representation of the street thug with characters like Stringer Bell, D’Angelo Barksdale, Avon Barksdale, Omar Little, Bubbles, Proposition Joe. Despite these compelling portrayals the possibility that those, often white characters who appear so little in the actual program, who wield most of the actual power, to whom all these players are simply ‘one of them little bald headed bitches,’ will one day be called to task for their exploitation and insurance that the status quo continues to function. *The Wire* offers no possibility that D’Angelo, or anyone else like him, can be free and breath air like regular folk.

What *The Wire* can do by trading on its ‘not TV’ status is leave the viewer to feel secure in his or her moral superiority for watching the gritty realism of *The Wire* and not the obscene consumption of vapid teenagers on *My Super Sweet Sixteen*, while simultaneously excusing herself from any complicity with the system or responsibility to see it changed. It’s become irredeemable. It’s not simply a matter of arguing that *The Wire* doesn’t validate the power of the individual to overcome adversity. In completely dehumanizing institutions, it elides the importance of the interplay between structural issues and the individuals who make them up.

The repetition within the narrative underscores this issue. *The Wire* is deeply frustrating in this aspect. After investing so much time in following a case or individual only to see to them shot down repeatedly can leave the viewer feeling unsatisfied and hopeless. Bubbles’s final ascent to his sister’s dinner
table in the final episode seems to be the exception that proves the rule. But even there, his triumph is bitter sweet as we see Duquan, ‘Dukie’ take his place. Micheal takes Omar’s place. Detective Syndor takes McNulty’s place in Judge Phelan’s office trying to drum up support for his case. ‘There ain’t no nostalgia to this shit here. There’s just the street and the game and what happen here today.’

*The Wire* is a deeply pessimistic and bleak series. Though the characters are (mostly) fully humanized there is very little of any kind triumph. In most cases the crippling inadequacy of the institution is far too large and all consuming to allow for any hopeful way out. *The Wire* could be seen as a failure; while it throws a necessary light on the failure of the modern institutions to create a ‘great society’ it offers little indication that the situation can be any different.

Notes

7. O’Rouke
8. ’The Buys’ 1.03.
10. Walker.
13. ’The Buys’ 1.03
14. Though it toys with a neoliberal solutions to social problems, it does not go so far as to suggest that privatization is the cure for every social ill
15. ’–30–’ 5.10.