

CHAPTER 8

Dickensian Realism in *The Wire*

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In the fifth season of the HBO series *The Wire* (2002–08), James Whiting, the fictional managing editor of the *Baltimore Sun*, decides that his staff needs to explore not only the murders perpetrated by a serial killer preying on the city's homeless population but also 'the Dickensian aspect of the homeless. The human element ... the nature of homelessness itself'. In one little phrase, 'the Dickensian aspect', *The Wire* manages to capture precisely what is wrong with Whiting's approach to journalism: he is more interested in telling sentimental stories than exploring an issue in depth and documenting as many perspectives as possible. Whiting can only understand homelessness in the abstract: he sees it as an alien yet intriguing phenomenon, something to be romanticised and theorised. To ground the issue of homelessness in its very real and, oftentimes, unexciting causes would complicate the story and make it difficult for readers to seize on a single, compact image of homelessness. Whiting would rather reduce a story to an uncomplicated, palatable narrative than make the newspaper's readers face the hard, difficult-to-solve realities of their world, the very issues *The Wire*, with its gritty realism, has been lauded for exploring in their full complexity.

But is the Dickensian truly antithetical to realism? Certainly, there is precedent for applying the term 'Dickensian' to contemporary fiction, and recently published realist novels have frequently been described as such. In particular, Donna Tartt's *The Goldfinch* (2013) was hailed as a modern, 'Dickensian'

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masterpiece. As Rob Jacklosky argues in Chapter 6, however, a more rigorous assessment of what exactly constitutes the Dickensian reveals that Tartt's novel, like many others, comes close to Dickens's style without fully embracing it. *The Goldfinch* in particular, Jacklosky asserts, does not possess, quite probably by choice, the pathos and humour characteristic of Dickens's writing. What this example illustrates is the commonplace status the word 'Dickensian' has taken on and the loose, ill-defined manner in which it is often applied. In Chapter 7, Francesca Arnavas also examines in detail what the Dickensian looks like in the context of contemporary fiction, in this case Neal Stephenson's science-fiction, post-cyberpunk novel *The Diamond Age* (1995). This chapter, too, will formulate a more precise understanding of the Dickensian, specifically in the context of Dickens as a realist writer.

In *The Wire*, Whiting's usage of the word 'Dickensian' may point to a particular reading of Dickens's fiction as extravagant and far-fetched, but, of course, this is not the only way to read the author's work. *The Wire* treats the concept of the Dickensian far more seriously than Whiting does. Despite praise for the realism of the series's first four seasons, critics deemed the plot of the fifth season too implausible, even absurd. The critics' complaints echo those made against the more romantic elements of Dickens's fiction, and this is precisely because the fifth season so deliberately appropriates Dickens's realism. Rather than placing Dickens in a simple, static category – realist or non-realist – the series is attuned to the ways in which Dickens's realism balances the mundane, unromantic aspects of life with the absurdities we so often overlook. Taking on such a recognisable (and contentious) mode of realism as Dickens's allows the series not merely to represent reality but to consider *how* reality is represented.

On the relationship between Dickens and *The Wire*, and that of the 19th-century novel and modern television in general, critics such as Jason Mittell and Ivan Kreilkamp have argued that the impulse to assume an uncomplicated, direct relationship between the novel and television is misguided. *The Wire* has been described as a novel for television by both its creator, David Simon, and also critics writing for popular media.¹ In light of this tendency to see *The Wire* as closer to literature, 'better than television' somehow, the objections of those advocating for media specificity make sense. These critics argue that to see the 19th-century novel as the immediate, and possibly only, forbear of the modern television serial is reductive and ignores the many other influences that have shaped the newer medium.² However, being mindful of, for instance, television's unique medium and history does not necessarily exclude recognising the connections it has to earlier modes of storytelling.

As scholars such as Frederic Jameson and Caroline Levine have made clear, there is still value in determining how a television series, *The Wire* in particular, relates to novelistic genres and forms because the narrative structures used in television are, at least in part, influenced by what came before it. Jameson argues that *The Wire* simultaneously navigates both realist and utopian plots: 'Utopian elements are introduced, without fantasy or wish fulfillment, into

the construction of the fictive, yet utterly realistic, events' (371). I too will argue that the series, despite its reputation for gritty realism, does introduce elements that fall outside the scope of what we typically call 'realism'. However, I agree with Levine that Jameson does not fully outline what supposedly distinguishes the series's realist plots from its utopian plots, and I share Levine's belief that 'it is the genius of *The Wire* to show that *both* kinds of plot are plausible' (*Forms* 135). To take Levine's claim one step further, I will also argue that these two plot types are, in fact, not wholly distinguishable at all in the series – they are intertwined in such a way as to produce a specific mode of realism, which I trace back to Dickens's representational practices.

Levine has argued that there are formal similarities between Dickens's work and *The Wire*. In her response to Mittell's argument that *The Wire* should be treated as a specifically televisual work rather than compared to novelistic genres, Levine asserts that 'a sharper take on form enables a more rigorous inter-media analysis, I would argue, than a focus on genre, and this sharpness allows us to grasp the specific ways that texts in different genres and media actually mediate our relations to social inequality' ('From Genre to Form' n.pag.). To demonstrate her point, Levine maps the ways in which the forms, or 'specific and defined principles of organization', within Dickens's *Bleak House* (1852–53) compare to those within *The Wire* ('From Genre to Form' n.pag.). Levine argues that 'a closer analysis of the forms of *Bleak House* and *The Wire* suggests some surprising similarities in their experiments with representing social class and agency. Both texts use unusual formal strategies to try to shift us away from conventional accounts of status and power' ('From Genre to Form' n.pag.). These 'unusual formal strategies' shared by both texts consist of frequent shifts between first- and third-person narration and perspective; movement through a large cast of characters, institutions, and networks; and an emphasis on the significance of coincidence and minor events. In addition to the work of other critics who have found compelling parallels between the realist serial fiction of the 19th century and the television serial today, Levine's analysis of *Bleak House* and *The Wire* demonstrates that, despite their differences, there certainly are connections between the two media worth analysing.³

While I too see the benefits of intermedial analysis and find the comparison of *The Wire* with *Bleak House* immensely productive, I will diverge from Levine by emphasising mode over form in my analysis of *The Wire*. I use the word 'mode' not because of any critical disagreement as to the importance of form to *The Wire* but rather because it is the most apt term available to describe precisely what I mean by 'Dickensian realism', which I see as a broad representational style comprised of many different aesthetic and social forms. Indeed, I am taking Levine's claims that forms 'overlap and intersect' as well as 'travel' as starting points in my analysis of *The Wire*'s appropriation of Dickensian realism (*Forms* 4). I agree with Levine that, 'rather than seeing realism as closing down strange and unfamiliar plots, we can understand *The Wire* as making strange, unconventional plots plausible—realist' (*Forms* 135). However, instead of

focusing on the workings of the different individual forms that converge within *The Wire*, I will analyse how the series borrows a specific author's – Dickens's – mode of storytelling in order to place the fantastic, seemingly unreal elements of life within a more recognisably realist story.

In what follows, I will examine how *The Wire* appropriates and reworks Dickens's realist mode to contemplate the concept of realism itself. Ironically, through the fifth season's use of seemingly unreal, fantastic plots, *The Wire* is able to make its most extensive commentary on realism and storytelling. The season's engagement with the popular reception of Dickens prompts viewers to question their understanding of the author's work, the mode of realism in which he wrote, and what 'Dickensian' means today. The series critiques realist storytelling, represented by institutions such as the newspaper, the educational system, the law, and the government – many of the same institutions that Dickens satirised. The newspaper office is the centre of this critique, the place where all those institutions, telling their supposedly 'real' stories, converge. The writers' decision to make the 'Dickensian' central to the drama of the newspaper office, where notions of truth are most directly interrogated, reflects the direction that the series's realism takes in its fifth season. The season pushes the boundaries of realism, as Dickens did in his own writing, for the purpose of prompting its viewers to question how the world is typically narrated and represented to them. At stake in the series's adoption of non-televisual modes of realism and, more importantly, in its interrogation of all realist modes of representation is the idea of truth itself. Instead of holding up any one institution, such as the newspaper office, as the definitive representative of truth, *The Wire* explores the ways in which truth is a complex, subjective idea. Before analysing how Dickensian realism operates within *The Wire*, I must first delve into the three major pillars of my argument: what realism means in the context of film and television, how *The Wire* explicitly participates in the debate surrounding realism (and Dickensian realism in particular) as a representational mode, and how realism functions within Dickens's fiction – in other words, what I mean by the term Dickensian realism.

Dickens's work has long been seen as a precursor to the narrative modes used in film and television. Sergei Eisenstein's seminal essay 'Dickens, Griffith and the Film Today' (1944), following D. W. Griffith's own claim that he drew on Dickens's work for filmic techniques, identifies several links between the narrative techniques, such as montage, found in Dickens's novels and those employed by film. Griffith's films were foundational in the development of classical Hollywood style, which was notable for the realism it introduced into cinema, so the fact that he claimed to have drawn on Dickens's work in particular suggests a link between Dickensian realism and the techniques influential in the development of realist filmmaking. Long after both Griffith's heyday and the publication of Eisenstein's essay, scholars of film and adaptation studies have followed their thinking by positioning great works of literature (especially novels) as the 'parents' and 'pedigree' of cinema (Eisenstein 232). Although

new ways of understanding literature and film have been proposed, we are far from abandoning consideration of their relationship.⁴ Moreover, as television writers have proven the medium capable of producing not just entertainment but also ambitious art, writing on the relationship between literature and television has increased. As the critical response to *The Wire* suggests, television is now often considered the heir to the novel's legacy just as film was before.⁵ Therefore, it is reasonable to ask how television, like film, may draw on other realist modes of representation, such as those found in the 19th-century novel.

Film criticism has long expressed concerns about the ideological implications of the realist mode. The aim of realist, also called 'illusionist' or 'escapist', cinema is to obscure from viewers the fact that they are watching a film. Walter Benjamin argues that, through reproduction, a work of art loses its 'aura', or the 'unique appearance of distance' one feels when looking upon the work (669). In the case of film, this loss of aura and distance – and the inability of the actor 'to adjust to the audience during his performance', as a dramatic actor can – enables the viewer both to critique and to identify with the camera: 'This permits the audience to take the position of a critic, without experiencing any personal contact with the actor. The audience's identification with the actor is really an identification with the camera. Consequently, the audience takes the position of the camera' (Benjamin 674). That consequence, the audience being subsumed into the camera's perspective, is what Benjamin and later critics find troubling ideologically; an audience directed by a camera can be trained to accept any number of beliefs and feelings, such as reverence for a leader and hatred of a supposed enemy. Jean-Louis Baudry famously argued that the work of a film is to obscure the camera apparatus, to hide the process by which the film is made:

Between 'objective reality' and the camera, site of the inscription, and between the inscription and projection are situated certain operations, a work which has as its result a finished product. To the extent that it is cut off from the raw material ('objective reality') this product does not allow us to see the transformation which has taken place. (40)

By hiding the process that leads to the 'finished product', film gives the viewer the sense that they are watching reality as it is. Of course, this kind of argument assumes that viewers are completely passive and that only 'disturbing cinematic elements', as Baudry calls them, can jolt a viewer into awareness of the film as a medium (46).

How, though, might film and television that do rely on realism produce active viewers? With regard to *The Wire*, Galen Wilson argues that the series 'represents the blending of cinematic realism and journalistic methods' and that, by examining the series in light of its neorealist aesthetics, we can see how it calls attention to itself as a mode of representation (60). One other way that the series addresses its own representational practices, especially in its fifth season,

is through its portrayal of alternative modes of representation within the series's world. The newspaper plotlines and the 'Dickensian' allusions repeatedly bring the issue of representation to the viewer's attention. Moreover, the shared background of Dickens and Simon as journalists suggests a close connection between the two writers' approaches to storytelling: both began their careers as reporters and moved on to write fiction while remaining interested in journalistic detail and the exploration of social issues.

In working on the fifth season of *The Wire*, Simon directly drew on his experience reporting for the *Baltimore Sun*. The circulation of the phrase 'the Dickensian aspect' throughout Simon's fictionalised version of the newspaper office signals to viewers a particular kind of storytelling. Before the murders of the city's homeless men start gaining attention, Whiting, the newspaper's managing editor, tries to frame a series on the city's educational system in the same 'Dickensian' light he later shines on the murders: 'The word I'm thinking about is Dickensian. We want to depict the Dickensian lives of city children and then show clearly and concisely where the school system has failed them.' The newspaper's city desk editor, Augustus 'Gus' Haynes, responds to Whiting's remark by proposing a broader exploration of the lives of the city's children: 'You want to look at who these kids really are, you got to look at the parenting, or lack of it, in the city. The drug culture, the economics of these neighborhoods'. However, Whiting does not want to hear what Gus has to say, so he turns away and rolls his eyes. Upon noticing this, Scott Templeton, one of the writers present, says, 'You don't need a lot of context to examine what goes on in one classroom', to which Gus responds, 'Really? I think you need a lot of context to seriously examine anything'. Unsurprisingly, Whiting agrees with Scott (eventually making him the lead writer on the story) and argues that 'We need to limit the scope, not get bogged down in details ... what I want to look at is the tangible, where the problem and solution can be measured clearly'. Whiting asks the newspaper staff to collapse a massive, systemic problem and fit it into a space just large enough to hold a simple story that produces a sufficient amount of outrage or compassion. Near the end of the meeting, Whiting exclaims, 'I don't want some amorphous series detailing society's ills', which is precisely how one might describe *The Wire* ('Unconfirmed Reports').

Even without the hints from the series's writers, who lionise Gus while they represent Whiting as the deterioration of modern journalism, Whiting's shallowness is apparent because the audience knows what the editor does not: the murders he goes on to sensationalise are a lie. In order to obtain the funds necessary to pursue a real investigation, detectives Jimmy McNulty and Lester Freamon invent several 'murders' of homeless men by staging natural deaths to look like the work of a serial killer. Whiting's participation in the lie exposes the lack of substance in the brand of sensationalism, or 'the Dickensian aspect', he encourages his writers to embrace. Because he decides to capitalise on the scandal surrounding the murders, Whiting becomes an unwitting, though still quite culpable, participant. Just like the fake murders, what Whiting envisions

as ‘the Dickensian lives of city children,’ along with ‘the nature of homelessness,’ is revealed to the series’s audience as just another fiction.

Whiting’s character, however, is not entirely fictional: he is based on a managing editor at the *Baltimore Sun* with whom Simon worked. In an interview, Simon described one interaction with this editor that echoes Whiting’s treatment of the education series:

He came to me and said, ‘I want to do the stories that are about the Dickensian lives of children growing up in West Baltimore.’ What he was saying was, ‘If you give me a nice, cute eight-, nine-year-old kid who doesn’t have a pencil, who doesn’t have a schoolbook, who lives in poverty, who’s big eyed and sweet and who I can make the reader fall in love with, I can win a fuckin’ prize with that. Write me that shit. ... Don’t give me a guy who’s, like, trying to get high but maintain his dignity. Don’t give me anything complicated.’ And he really used the word ‘Dickensian.’ (Interview with Jesse Pearson, December 2009)

This blurring of the line between reality and fiction occurs throughout *The Wire*: many of the series’s actors are Baltimore locals, characters are frequently named for the actors who play them, characters are based on real people, and many events in the series are based on actual stories Simon researched or even reported himself. Therefore, it is unsurprising that Simon has more than one reason for making ‘Dickensian’ a keyword in the fifth season.

Simon has said that the decision to use the term ‘Dickensian’ was also meant as a response to the comparisons critics have drawn between the modes of storytelling in *The Wire* and those in Dickens’s novels. Critics have often, sometimes purposefully and sometimes carelessly, compared Simon’s television series to the 19th-century novel, and, when they name a specific author, they tend to cite Dickens. While Simon has acknowledged that he understands the source of the comparisons and has even praised Dickens’s writing, he finds the comparisons unsuitable in one respect:

[Dickens] would make the case for a much better social compact than existed in Victorian England, but then his verdict would always be, “But thank God a nice old uncle or this heroic lawyer is going to make things better.” In the end, the guy would punk out.

Whereas Dickens’s stories conclude too neatly for Simon’s taste, he sees *The Wire* as a starker, more complete vision of the real world, claiming that ‘*The Wire* was actually making a different argument than Dickens’ (interview with Jesse Pearson, December 2009). However, as Simon said in that same interview, the comparisons are not without warrant, and his choice to engage directly with those comparisons in the series’s fifth season functions as far more than a joke at the critics’ expense. Indeed, *The Wire*’s Dickensian allusions and

appropriations participate in a longstanding debate regarding Dickens's reputation as a realist novelist.

Dickens has variously been cast as a serious, realist writer and an entertaining, fanciful storyteller. However, more recently, critics have largely abandoned the practice of classifying Dickens's work according to this dichotomy alone. Terry Eagleton argues that it is precisely Dickens's seemingly unbelievable characters that enable his realism:

'Character' in literature, so we are informed, should be complex, rich, developing and many-sided, whereas Dickens's bunch of grotesques, perverses, amiable idiots and moral monstrosities are none of these things. But this is because they are realistic, not because they are defectively drawn ... they are true to a new kind of social experience. Dickens's grotesque realism is a stylistic distortion in the service of truth, a kind of astigmatism which allows us to see more accurately. (149)

I find Eagleton's formulation far less reductive and more helpful in examining how Dickens's fiction actually works than the earlier practice of placing Dickens in one sharply defined category over another. Eagleton's description of Dickens's realism as a 'stylistic distortion', like an 'astigmatism', informs my own approach to Dickensian realism.

Dickens himself expressed an idea very similar to Eagleton's when commenting on his own novels. In the preface to *Bleak House*, he wrote, 'I have purposely dwelt on the romantic side of familiar things' (6). Dickens laid claim to the right to push the boundaries of realism and explore that which, obscured by a narrow-minded understanding of accuracy, is true in the wider sense of the word. In his preface to *Little Dorrit* (1855–57), Dickens identified the novel as *Bleak House*'s 'next successor' and defended himself against charges of hyperbole:

If I might offer any apology for so exaggerated a fiction as the Barnacles and the Circumlocution Office, I would seek it in the common experience of an Englishman, without presuming to mention the unimportant fact of my having done that violence to good manners, in the days of a Russian war, and of a Court of Inquiry at Chelsea. (7)

Dickens offered several more remarks like this as he satirically apologised for the supposedly unrealistic features of *Little Dorrit* and slyly identified their very real counterparts. In mock-defeat, Dickens wrote, 'But, I submit myself to suffer judgment to go by default on all these counts, if need be, and to accept the assurance (on good authority) that nothing like them was ever known in this land' (*LD* 7). Of course, Dickens was clearly hinting that such 'exaggerated' fictions as exist in his writing can also be found in life. Dickens's realism satirises the problems of human life and social institutions in order to cast them in a light so far from mundane that his readers cannot ignore them.

Dickens's writing straddles the line between the 'familiar' and the 'romantic', the former being what his readers would recognise as the real and the latter what they may mistake for the impossibly fantastic. Dickens may exaggerate and satirise, but, as satire necessitates, he draws the 'romantic' aspects of his writing out of the 'familiar'. Dickens's romance is not actually at odds with his realism because, as his prefaces to *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit* indicate, the distinction between those two modes is one not of fact and fiction but of perspective. In his writing, Dickens does not appeal to some notion of 'objective' truth but instead demonstrates just how subjective truth is. For Dickens, truth changes largely according to the position from which you look at it. In *Bleak House*, the reality of Jo, a crossing sweeper and a classic Dickensian waif, is vastly different from that of Lady Dedlock. However, even those two characters are inextricably linked within the network of Dickens's world, and, as the novel progresses, the reader comes to find that both characters represent very real perspectives. While the ways in which the two characters inhabit the world may seem so different as to preclude their living in the same world at all, they are actually so near that each can exert an influence over the other's life. By refusing to adhere to a more restrictive mode of realism, Dickens offers readers a world like theirs but alien: a world with the same problems but one where they are made visible. Dickens does not so much invent the absurdities that colour his writing as he derives them from the daily absurdities to which we are so often inured. In his novels, Dickens acts on his right to 'dwell on the romantic side of familiar things', to explore the facets of life that the inhibited, socially trained mind can often miss. In its fifth season, *The Wire* takes up this right and goes even further by challenging the notion that there is any one kind of supreme truth. Through its allusions to Dickens and appropriation of the author's realist mode, *The Wire* 'dwells on the romantic side of familiar things' and, in doing so, asks the viewer to question not just realism but reality itself.

How then does *The Wire* resist the realist impulse to subsume the viewer into its own perspective? How does the series register an awareness of itself as a representational genre and pass that awareness on to its audience? According to Simon, the fifth season of the series is in fact 'about the media and our capacity to recognize and address our own realities' (interview with Nick Hornby, August 2007). Despite Simon's intentions, the season was criticised for its supposedly unrealistic plot (a criticism that recalls objections to Dickens's writing). This raises the question of how the series, within the traditionally realist medium of television, manages to utilise an especially outlandish plot in order to interrogate 'our own realities'. By exploring *The Wire*'s critique of realist modes of representation in its fifth season, it becomes possible to see how the series turns this critique back on itself and, in doing so, encourages its audience to think critically about how the world is represented to them. In what follows, I will analyse key moments in the fifth season that speak to the issues of realism and representation. In doing so, I will demonstrate how *The Wire* makes use of Dickensian realism, dwelling 'on the romantic side of familiar things', to underscore just how absurd reality can be.

I will begin with what has been deemed *The Wire*'s most absurd, unrealistic plotline: the fake serial killer. The first 'murder' occurs at the end of the fifth season's second episode, 'Unconfirmed Reports'. Early in the episode, Detective Jimmy McNulty learns that it is possible for natural deaths to appear identical to murders through the infliction of post-mortem injuries. Throughout the episode, Jimmy and his fellow detectives bemoan the fact that the department declined to continue funding an investigation against Marlo Stanfield, a drug kingpin responsible for 22 murders the previous year. In one scene, Jimmy, Lester Freamon, and Bunk Moreland muse that, if the 22 dead bodies had been white, the police department would have given them the resources necessary to close the case. Near the conclusion of their conversation, Lester says to Bunk, 'You think that if 300 white people were killed in this city every year, they wouldn't send the 82nd Airborne? Negro, please', to which Jimmy adds, 'There's got to be some way to make them turn on the faucet'. By the end of the episode, Jimmy has found a way to make the department 'turn on the faucet': he stages the first fake murder by strangling the corpse of a homeless man who had died of a drug overdose. What is remarkable about these scenes in 'Unconfirmed Reports', aside from how they advance the plot, is the motivation they clearly ascribe to Jimmy's actions. At the root of the murder Jimmy fabricates is not a perverted, homicidal desire but mundane bureaucracy: the department's budget has been greatly reduced because Mayor Tommy Carcetti has allotted more money to the indebted, failing city school system. By relating the 'familiar' issue of a bureaucratic funding struggle to the more 'romantic' serial killer plotline, *The Wire*'s writers, through Jimmy, draw attention to the inherent absurdity of bureaucracy.

As the serial killer plotline makes clear, the actions of the police department, the city government, and the newspaper are inextricably linked to Jimmy and Lester's lie. Those institutions create the conditions that instigate the lie and even propagate it. One revealing moment that illustrates how the series's writers play with notions of storytelling, truth-seeking, and lying appears in the season's first episode, 'More with Less'. The episode opens with a scene in which several detectives from the Homicide Unit, led by Bunk, rig a copier to act as a 'lie detector'. As they interrogate a suspect, they make copies of papers reading 'true' and 'false' and convince the suspect that the machine can read his heart-beat and confirm whether he is lying. After tricking the suspect into confessing, Bunk says with sage wisdom, 'The bigger the lie, the more they believe', which serves as the episode's epigraph in the title sequence. *The Wire*'s epigraphs, almost always taken from the mouths of its characters, tend to highlight ideas important for the episode and even the season and series as a whole. This epigraph, the first to appear in the fifth season, marks a central theme: lying. While lying of course occurs throughout the series, the fifth season gives the most attention to how lying functions as representation.⁶ The logical conclusion of a remark like Bunk's is that people are unlikely to recognise the biggest lies as lies at all. Instead, they are more likely to see those lies as truth, mundane fact even.

What the fifth season shows its audience is that the biggest lies always emerge from institutions, which are more capable of generating and maintaining lies than individuals are. Much as Dickens, in the preface to *Little Dorrit*, identifies the real counterparts to his fictions, or 'lies', *The Wire* juxtaposes its characters' lies (as well as its own, as a fictional, representational text) with institutional lies in order to emphasise the magnitude of the latter.

One lie significant to the police department is its constant falsification of crime statistics, or 'stat games' as the characters call the practice; this practice is seen throughout the series. In 'Not for Attribution', Mayor Carcetti uses falsified statistics as leverage to force Police Commissioner Ervin Burrell to resign. In the series's final episode, the newly appointed commissioner Cedric Daniels refuses to participate in the lie:

I'll swallow a lie when I have to. I've swallowed a few big ones lately. But the stat games? That lie? It's what ruined this department. Shining up shit and calling it gold, so majors become colonels and mayors become governors. Pretending to do police work while one generation fucking trains the next how not to do the job. And then—I looked Carcetti in the eye, I shook his hand, I asked him if he was for real. Well, this is the lie I can't live with. ('-30-')

The stat games, like the misrepresentations perpetuated by the city's other institutions, reflect the same impulse to lie and cover up the reality of Baltimore. What makes those lies more insidious than the fake serial killer scheme is that they are far 'bigger' and thus more easily believed. The same applies to the lies perpetuated by the mayor's office. Equally entangled in the homeless murder plotline (and equally ignorant of its reality), Mayor Carcetti decides to capitalise on the so-called murders and push the issue of homelessness in his campaign for governor. As a result, Carcetti generates his own lies in the form of false promises: he pledges resources he does not have to the investigation and gives grand speeches proclaiming his intention to fight homelessness despite not having any clear plan of action. In his self-interest and appeals to a vague, abstract notion of homelessness, Carcetti rivals even the *Baltimore Sun*'s managing editor, Whiting.

While many institutions represent, and misrepresent, reality in *The Wire*, the newspaper office is the site most closely associated with the act of representation itself. The *Baltimore Sun* office makes its first appearance in the series's fifth and final season, and, as the season's episode titles indicate (they are all related to the newspaper or journalism in general), the newspaper is central to the action of the season. Lying occurs just as often in the newspaper office as it does in the police department and City Hall. While Whiting's sensationalism and the institutional and commercial constraints to which the newspaper is subject lead to some questionable reporting, the most flagrant model of journalistic lying is the reporter Scott Templeton. Scott's character arc in the fifth

season revolves around his increasingly exaggerated stories. While he begins by embellishing the language of his stories, he progresses to adding whole lines to quotes, inventing people to interview, and, eventually, claiming that the (fake) serial killer spoke with him by phone. While city desk editor Gus Haynes grows suspicious of Scott throughout the season, Scott is not directly called out until a homeless veteran he interviewed visits the newspaper office to accuse him of making drastic additions to the veteran's story. The veteran, Terry Hanning, making his case to Gus, vehemently declares that 'A lie ain't a side of a story. It's just a lie' ('Clarifications'). Like Bunk's quip in the season's first episode, 'the bigger the lie, the more they believe', Terry's assertion serves as the eighth episode's epigraph, and it calls out the kind of storytelling privileged at the *Sun*. When a journalist thinks he does not 'need a lot of context to examine what goes on in one classroom' or to examine one 'side of a story', it becomes incredibly easy to lie (both intentionally and accidentally) and miss the truth of a story ('Unconfirmed Reports' and 'Clarifications').

Just like the money Lester memorably works to 'follow' in his investigations of Marlo Stanfield and other drug dealers in Baltimore, modes of representation and the lies that stand in for them circulate throughout the city, creating connections among *The Wire*'s different characters and institutions. In the first episode of the season, the serial killer plotline is prefigured by a photograph Gus declines to run in the newspaper. Among the rubble pictured in the photograph, meant to accompany a story about a fire in East Baltimore, is a burnt doll. Gus is suspicious of this detail and the photographer, so he calls the photo desk to ask for another picture to accompany the story. Upon hanging up, Gus exclaims of the photographer, 'Every fire photo he brings in there's just got to be some burnt doll somewhere in the debris. I can see that cheating mother-fucker now with his fucking harem of dolls pouring lighter fluid on each one. You check his fucking truck, you'll find a whole collection of them' ('More with Less'). While this scene introduces some comedy into the episode, its function extends well beyond that. Although the serial killer plotline does not begin until the second episode, the burnt doll featured in the first foreshadows how Jimmy manipulates the dead bodies of homeless men in order to replicate the injuries of murder victims. From the first episode of the season, the fabrications of the newspaper staff are linked to the fake serial killer story.

In the third episode, 'Not for Attribution', an early scene utilises cross-cutting between journalist Alma Gutierrez as she tries to get hold of a copy of the day's newly printed edition and Jimmy as he falsifies evidence for the serial killer case. One particularly effective cut occurs as Alma enters the newspaper's printing factory: upon seeing the newsheets circulating via the factory's conveyor belts, the camera cuts to Jimmy crumpling red ribbon (the serial killer's signature, which he leaves tied around the wrists of his victims) to plant in the evidence folder for a past case. The meaning of the comparison drawn by the cross-cutting sequence is clear: Jimmy's lies are not unlike those of the newspaper. Fittingly, the story Alma is so eager to see printed, what should have been a prominent front-page piece about a triple homicide perpetrated against a family, has been

moved down 12 inches below the fold. Actions like this indicate what the newspaper does and does not prioritise in its representation of Baltimore.

In that same episode, Jimmy defends his actions to Bunk, who wants nothing to do with the scheme, by saying that 'Upstairs wouldn't jump on a real serial killer—fuckin' Marlo, who's got bodies all over him. Maybe they need the make-believe'. Jimmy, frustrated with how little attention and resources a serious murder case has received, argues that the only way to make people care about crime is to give them 'make-believe'. As much as this is a comment on his superior officers and the government of Baltimore, it is also a critique of the way murders are covered by media outlets. This constitutes an address to the viewer as well: *The Wire*, for all its realism, is 'make-believe', and the series's writers want their audience to be aware of this and to think more critically about the ways they consume entertainment and news media. Lester, upon being let into the secret later in the episode, essentially tells the viewer what they want as he informs Jimmy of how he can best capture attention:

I mean, if you want to do it right, a straight-up strangle's not enough. Not if it's some vagrant. Sensationalize it. Give the killer some fucked-up fantasy, something bad, real bad. It's got to grip the hearts and minds, give the people what they want from a serial killer. ('Not for Attribution')

While Lester is more blunt about the matter, what he describes is not that different from Whiting's 'Dickensian aspect': both Lester and Whiting have a clear idea of what 'the people' want from the objects represented to them, and both realise that the only way to represent those objects as desired is to sentimentalise, sensationalise, and alienate them. Whether the object is a child living in poverty, a homeless person, or even a murderer, what 'the people' want, apparently, is an Other against whom they can position themselves. By openly discussing the way crime is represented in news and entertainment media, *The Wire* calls attention to both its own narrative mode and its viewers' desires. Moreover, by placing the newspaper's faults alongside the serial killer hoax, the latter appears far more plausible than it might otherwise. After all, the serial killer Jimmy and Lester invent is precisely the kind that fits into a recognised narrative and seizes attention from the press and government – the kind that becomes most visible because of that attention.

When the truth comes out near the season's end, there is a parallel between how Jimmy's and Scott's lying is revealed. While the serial killer plotline and the placement of scenes throughout the season alert the viewer to their similar situations, one scene in the final episode emphasises this beyond anything else. When Scott arrives at the Homicide Division to ask Jimmy questions about the 'murders', Jimmy grows frustrated and gives up the pretence of being ignorant of Scott's lies:

Jimmy: 'You lying motherfucker, you're as full of shit as I am. And you've got to live with it and play it out as far as it goes, right? Trapped in the

same lie. Only difference is, I know why I did it. But fuck if I can figure out what it gets you in the end. But, hey, I'm not part of your tribe.'

Scott: 'You're not serious?'

Jimmy: 'No, no, I'm a fucking joke. And so are you.' ('-30-')

Jimmy's frank discussion of the lie and his assertion that both he and Scott are jokes draws the viewer's attention to their characters as fictional constructs, specifically constructs meant to entertain and mislead. If a joke is something too ridiculous to be believed or taken seriously, then many might see Jimmy or Scott as just that. These two characters participate in and perpetuate the serial killer plotline, contributing to what many critics have called the most over-the-top aspect of *The Wire's* fifth season, if not the series as a whole. However, the circumstances under which they get involved in the lie – a detective frustrated with the lack of support from the police department and a journalist looking to rise in the ranks and win fame for himself and his newspaper – are not at all uncommon. What grounds the seemingly unrealistic elements of Jimmy's and Scott's stories in reality is how those stories emerge from institutional structures.

The Wire, like Dickens's *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit*, balances its 'romantic' elements with 'familiar things': by placing the questionable and bizarre situation of the fake serial killer within the context of ordinary, institutional problems, the series's fifth season forces its audience to acknowledge that those ordinary problems are actually quite extraordinary in their reach, complexity, and difficulty. *The Wire* creates a resemblance between the seemingly exaggerated fictions of its individual characters and plots and the more believable absurdities of the institutions it portrays. This juxtaposition allows the viewer to see institutional failures for what they are. Instead of passively accepting the inefficiencies and injustices of the institutions that govern both the characters' lives and their own, the viewer is given a way of seeing and critiquing those faults. Like Dickens's fiction, *The Wire* illuminates the problems of ordinary life in such a way that the series's audience cannot miss or ignore them. By giving its audience a plotline that directly calls into question its 'realism', which it constantly returns to through the newspaper office and its Dickensian allusions and appropriations, the series reveals itself as representation rather than reality. No longer is the viewer encouraged simply to adopt a perspective and watch reality being represented to them. Instead, *The Wire* asks its viewers to take a critical, analytical stance to both the institutions and texts that represent the world to them.

Endnotes

- ¹ During a 2007 interview with Nick Hornby for *The Believer*, Simon said that '[*The Wire*] isn't really structured as episodic television and it instead pursues

the form of the modern, multi-POV novel'. Simon has been quoted expressing this sentiment on several occasions, and he even pitched the series as a televised novel to HBO and hired novelists to write for the series (Talbot). For critics who have compared the series to a novel, see Charlie Brooker writing for *The Guardian* (2007), *The Telegraph* (2009), Adam Kirsch and Mohsin Hamid writing for *The New York Times*, and Brian Lowry writing for *Variety* (2015). See also Joy Delyria and Sean Michael Robinson's novel *Down in the Hole: The Unwired World of H.B. Ogden* (2012), which places characters and scenes from *The Wire* in a Victorian setting.

² In *Network Aesthetics* (2016), Patrick Jagoda acknowledges how *The Wire* 'draws heavily from the multiplot novel and the classical cinema it inspired' and asserts that the series diverges from these media in order to develop 'its own network realism' (115). Jagoda also claims that, through its characters' invocations of the Dickensian, '*The Wire* sharply contrasts the realist melodrama of the Dickensian multiplot novel with its own network realism' (115). While I agree with Jagoda that *The Wire* does more than merely imitate earlier iterations of realist storytelling, I argue that the series is actually performing a sophisticated sleight of hand by presenting characters who misconstrue the Dickensian while the series itself simultaneously adopts a Dickensian realism in its fifth season.

³ See one of Levine's other essays 'Extraordinary Ordinarity: Realism Now and Then' (2013). See also Liz Maynes-Aminzade, 'You're Part of Something Bigger: Macrorealist TV' (2013) and Matthew Kaiser, 'From London's East End to West Baltimore: How the Victorian Slum Narrative Shapes *The Wire*' (2011).

⁴ See Brian McFarlane, 'Reading Film and Literature,' in the *Cambridge Companion to Literature on Screen* (2007), for one example of this trend.

⁵ For example, John Romano argues, in 'Writing after Dickens: The Television Writer's Art' from *Dickens on Screen* (2003), that Dickens's work has actually informed the ways in which television writers work today. *New York Times* critic Nicholas Kulish offers a similar claim: 'If Charles Dickens were alive today, he would watch "The Wire," unless, that is, he was already writing for it.'

⁶ While I have previously invoked Dickens's argument that 'romantic' elements are crucial for the representation of 'familiar things,' here I find another revealing analogue to *The Wire* in Oscar Wilde's dialogue essay 'The Decay of Lying' (1889). Through the figures of Vivian and Cyril (named for Wilde's children), the essay argues that all representation is in fact 'lying' and that the liar is the supreme artist: 'Art, breaking from the prison-house of realism, will run to greet [the liar], and will kiss his false, beautiful lips, knowing that he alone is in possession of the great secret of all her manifestations, the secret that Truth is entirely and absolutely a matter of style' (981).

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