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### HBO's *The Wire*

HBO's critically acclaimed series, *The Wire*, is a show that doesn't have large audience numbers but has been called one of the best written shows on television. The plot tells the dramatic story of urban life in Baltimore, MD. It explores cultural issues involved in daily life, including race, gender, class and sexuality. *The Wire* will be evaluated in a cultural approach, through textual analysis, audience study and political economy theories.

*The Wire* is the longest running dramatic series on HBO. *The Wire* is an American television drama set and produced in Baltimore, Maryland. It was created, produced, and primarily written by author and former police reporter, David Simon. *The Wire* premiered on June 2, 2002 with 54 episodes airing over the course of its five seasons. The fifth and final season premiered on January 6, 2008. (HBO.com/thewire) Each season has centered on an institution in the city of Baltimore. The first season centered on the ongoing struggles between police units and drug-dealing gangs on the west side of Baltimore, and the story is told from both points of view. The second season portrayed the decline of the Baltimore's shipping port. Season three focused on politics and season four looked into the education system. The final season will focus on the media, mainly the city's newspaper The Baltimore Sun. *The Wire* uses a cast of little known actors and actresses that seem to exude Baltimore characteristic, terminology, and drawl. For example, UK actor, Dominic West, plays Detective McNulty, and his Baltimore

accent is uncanny. The show is filmed in Baltimore, which also gives it a very authentic feeling.

Cultural studies focus on how people make meaning, apprehend reality, and order experience through their use of cultural symbols in print and visual media (Campbell 537). The Frankfurt school established critical studies of mass communication and culture in the 1930s. They developed a critical and transdisciplinary approach to cultural and communications studies, combining critique of political economy of media, analysis of text, and audience reception studies of the social and ideological effects of mass culture and communications (Kellner). The first analytical approach to cultural research is textual analysis, which looks at rituals, narratives, and meanings (Campbell 539). A textual analysis will look at how audiences come to understand urban living through *The Wire*. It analyzes how the show's writers frame or present urban living. *The Wire* presents a realistic look at urban life in Baltimore. It tends to present the city very gritty at times which often contributes to negative views toward urban living in Baltimore. While *The Wire*'s characters are thoroughly developed showing all sides of the character, the city of Baltimore tends to suffer by being framed mostly in a negative light. This framing shapes audience's understanding of urban living. "Communities understand themselves largely through the media -- the morning paper, the six o' clock news, the minute-to-minute sketch provided by the Internet" (Seiler). Viewers are exposed to authentic events that provide insight into urban society. Amy Finnerty from the Wall Street Journal discusses how the writers portray rituals of the society in an unbiased way:

It's not what happens to the characters, or the societal trends the script explores, that matter so much as the authentic and precise way in which events are represented. Drug lords don't behave as we expect them to. They dress and speak like street urchins yet conduct their affairs in the manner of corporate managers, convening in a hotel

conference room to carve up the city. The writers convey the depressing decay the drug lords represent without preaching, and with economy. They avoid generalizations, for the most part.

The show's drug dealers may symbolize what's wrong with society but they are presented in a way that gives them more depth. This depth gives more meaning to the characters and allows more understanding of the urban society.

The next analytical approach to cultural research is audience studies. Audience studies focuses on how people use and interpret cultural content (Campbell 539). *The Wire*'s audience is comparably smaller than HBO's popular show *Sopranos*, about 4 million viewers to the *Sopranos*' 8 million. However, this smaller audience has an almost cult like following with a dedicated fan base. "The show has become an object of worship among critics and culture snobs -- Barack Obama told TV Guide that it's his favorite show" (Gordon). The series requires attention and dedication. Loyal *Wire* viewers exercise their brains every week on this complicated series. Audiences follow the characters and plots intensely. Some provide a critical review each week on blogs and online forums, even remarking on the symbolism and underlining meanings of each episode. Here is an example from *The Wire* fan blog input:

Hi, My name is t

I stumbled over *The Wire*, when it first came on.....

It's been a trip worth taking...

You could say addictive.....

*The Wire* has intricate plots. Stories within stories...

Morality is depicted across society, virtue like gold is where you find it.....The

characters drawn realistically with honesty, understanding, and compassion....

We are all sparrows in this often hurricane of life...

take it from an old man this is classic stuff.....

The B. B. C, must be jealous.....(Hbothewirefans.com)

The purpose of *The Wire* is to entertain, however, its latent function is to inform. Audiences are taking the intricate plots of *The Wire* and learning about problems plaguing inner cities. The show inspires critical thinking about the characters, plots and socially important issues. “Working at both the level of realism and allegory, the show can be a very heady literary experience, requiring multiple viewings in order to catch all the verbal and visual symbolism as well as simply to have time to contemplate all the issues that emerge” (Heidkamp).

The final analytical approach to cultural research is political economy. Political economy encompasses economics and politics and the relations between them and the other central dimensions of society and culture (Kellner). *The Wire* is more than just a cop drama it's a sociopolitical series that presents the conflicts on the streets of Baltimore as similar to broader American conflicts, economic, bureaucratic, and educational. Casey Seiler from Business Tribune News describes *The Wire*'s political connections:

The plot of '*The Wire*' is driven less by personal demons than by economics and its enforcer, politics. As the series opens, Baltimore's new mayor Tommy Carcetti (Aidan Gillen) is applying desperate measures to desperate times: a fiscal crisis -- created partially by his own ambition for the Maryland statehouse -- that's put every city bureaucracy under the gun.

Analyzing *The Wire* through political economy calls attention to the fact that culture is produced

within relationships of domination and subordination and thus reproduces or resists existing structures of power (Kellner). These relationships are often explored in *The Wire*, with the drug dealers resisting the police force, the police force's power struggle with the Mayor's office and the Mayor's power struggle with the Governor's office. It's a never ending cycle of domination and subordination. *The Wire* shows this struggle through a balance view of race, class, and gender as each group struggles with structures of power. *The Wire* has taken on just about every institute in American during its five seasons, taking every institute and exposing its good and bad side. This season it takes on the newspaper, The Baltimore Sun, and explores threats to old-fashioned American journalism in an age of out-of-town ownership and new media. They take on this institute just as past seasons have explored the failures of the drug war, political corruption and other woes that beset cash-strapped cities (Finnerty). Political Economy analysis provides a critical look at *The Wire* messages and themes that are achieved through its dramatic view of the streets of Baltimore.

*The Wire* is a critically acclaimed series that has been referred to over and over again as "the best show on TV". It's more than your average cop drama, it delves into character and plot development that provokes critical thinking. Evaluating *The Wire* through cultural research can provide insight into the series. Analyzing *The Wire* through textual analysis, audience study and political economy can provide this critical knowledge.

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