

ANALYZING HBO'S THE WIRE IN THE EFL CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

Second language learning profits not only from explicit study of the language, but also from studying texts in the language that were not designed for the express purpose of language learning, such as reading novels, listening to radio programs, and watching movies and TV. One television series that EFL students can benefit from is HBO's *The Wire*, which received praise not only for the realism of its portrayal of Baltimore's Black population, specifically those engaged in the drug trade but also for its show-don't-tell style of depicting events with a minimum of commentary on them so as to allow viewers to draw their own conclusions without feeling that they were being told what to think. In good art, showing instead of telling can have a greater impact. But in a television series the express purpose of which was to make social commentary, avoiding direct messages completely holds the danger that the message will never get through. The express purpose of the show was to critique the war on drugs, the decline of institutions, and the loss of economic opportunity for the working class in Baltimore. It is not clear that it achieved those goals. The purpose of this article is to assess the attainment of the show's stated goals and to show how EFL students can engage with it and evaluate whether it achieved its goals or if more direct social commentary would have had a greater effect.

Keywords: EFL pedagogy, Communicative approach, racial stereotypes, HBO's *The Wire*

INTRODUCTION

David Simon created *The Wire* with the express purpose of providing "a damning indictment of the war on drugs and a broader dissection of institutional collapse...to explore the decline of working-class opportunity and the public education system, among other American civic pillars." (Abrams 2022) He wanted to shed light on "what stories get told and what don't" (O'Rourke 2006) because he was unhappy with the lack of important stories about Baltimore in the news media. (Bowden 2008) One aspect of the show that has received positive commentary from critics is its vivid realism. Instead of telling its story in a dramatized and didactic fashion, it endeavors to show in granular detail what life is like on the streets and in the trenches of the drug trade in an emblematic American city, Baltimore. It attempts to avoid passing judgment on the characters and their actions, setting out instead to show what they do and let the audience come to its own conclusions. The show also received praise in that it was popular with Black audiences. But it is not clear that a lack of some direct social commentary or the show's popularity amongst Black viewers demonstrates that Simon's goals were realized. Some critics have also cautioned that audiences might come away with the idea that all of the characters' problems stem from racism and that other factors such as personal responsibility were not adequately explored. Despite these criticisms, there seem to have been tangible positive effects of the show. This paper will examine the efficacy of the show's show-

don't-tell avoidance of "preaching" aspect, the contention that its popularity amongst Blacks is evidence of its success in social commentary, the role of racism in the lives of the characters, and whether the show had an overall positive impact on audiences. Finally, it will suggest how the show might be used in EFL classrooms around the world.

Did the avoidance of "preaching" increase the impact of *The Wire's* commentary?

In explaining the evolution of series creator, David Simon, Linda Williams, in her monograph, *On the Wire* states that "...we find Simon...learning to avoid the impassioned 'op-ed' rants of his earlier journalism by locating the drama in the mouths of his characters...In this case, we do not (quite) feel lectured..." (Williams, 2014) Indeed one of the aspects of great art is that it shows—it doesn't tell. But art that has the explicit purpose of social critique, as this show purports to have, actually has to make that critique. And what comes out of the mouths of the characters in the show perpetuates rather than alleviates stereotypes about them. Some well-placed explicit critique would not "ruin" the show with excessive didacticism. Just showing us a picture of what wrong looks like on the ground does not do anything. It is of no use without the context of how things got to be so wrong in the first place. Showing inequality doesn't do anything if the causes of inequality are not set in context, especially when the establishment context has already been set for us through countless portraits in both entertainment and news media of those on the lower end of the socioeconomic scale as being there because of some deficiency, either of action or character. Highlighting inequality is only effective if those who have little are portrayed in the context of a counternarrative, a factual narrative, in which they are shown to be where they are as a result of being exploited or otherwise treated unfairly, rather than as people who "deserve" their position on the inequality continuum due to their personal failings in life.

Williams also praises the show for not playing the race card, opting instead to take the high road of just showing life on the streets. But objecting to "playing the race card" is like going back to the 17th century and criticizing Galileo for playing the "physics card." There was no "physics card" for Galileo to play. The "card" he was playing was instead the reality card. He was simply describing the universe as it actually is, and that that view of reality needs to be conveyed explicitly. Those who "play the race card" today are doing exactly the same thing. They are simply describing reality as it exists, a reality where race matters, and matters decisively. Unlike many who deny that racism is a problem today and excoriate people for "injecting" it into the conversation (some typical examples of this are given in Leonard and Hazelwood (2014)), Williams doesn't object to playing the race card because racism is "over" in America and that it is thus an unfair trump card to play. She instead says that it is simply unproductive. It opens up new wounds and colors conversations with divisive emotion that gets in the way of advancing the cause of addressing racism. While it is laudable to recognize that racism is still very much a problem and seek solutions to it, it is wrong to suggest that not addressing it head on is the right way to go about it.

A valuable addition to the show would have been some explicit acknowledgement of the factors that were largely responsible for the conditions and characters inhabiting the troubled streets of the show's Baltimore. A possible place for this would have been in the mayoral campaign of city council member, Thomas Carcetti. He could have run on a platform of reform that explicitly addressed the realities of the conscious and systematic discrimination and oppression

of the black community that had led to the conditions it had found itself in at the time of the race.

If the show's creators had actually wanted to make some relevant commentary about the political process, a major theme could have been the dilemma of how much explicit commentary could be part of his public campaign without alienating constituents necessary for electoral victory. Valuable context and commentary could have been placed into the mouth of Carcetti, who could have lamented privately to friends and colleagues about how much he could not say on the campaign trail without alienating necessary votes.

It would also have been easy to seamlessly insert some real history into the show by having one of the characters, say Detective Greggs, and make occasional observations about history in the course of her daily interactions with colleagues. She could have made remarks to the effect, for example, that it was sad that the parents and grandparents of some of these street criminals got redlined out prospects for getting ahead in the past since it is such a big factor in putting their children behind in the present.

It would be very easy, and cinematically viable, to have a sparing, but regular, sprinkling of relevant factual history and explicit commentary about relevant social issues spread throughout the 60 episodes of the show. This could have added both educational benefit for the audience and dramatic depth to some of the show's characters without inserting too much "preaching." It could be a cop who has conversations with her partner while riding around on patrol. It could be a journalist who wants to write stories with context but who is unable to due to editorial constraints, and so on.

But it is true that putting facts on the screen unfiltered by artistic license does often turn viewers off, that it is more effective to let the drama do the talking. However regrettable, though, it is what it is and audiences like what they like, which is why the suggestion is placing a palatable amount of commentary in the mouths of characters like Carcetti and Greggs. Just as in politics, confronting issues head-on can lose votes. But without at least some judicious use of actual history and context *The Wire* becomes the Barak Obama described in an interview with Joy-Ann Reid:

In order for you to run for office if you're a black candidate you have to be sort of an ironically black candidate...you have to be softly black, meaning you don't put race on the front burner...you don't talk about race. Or you talk about it in a way that mollifies and really soothes white America rather than accuses white America, even in the distant past. And so Barak Obama really became that candidate... But... once he got into office...every time he's spoken about race, it has caused not just controversy, but it's caused his literal poll numbers with white America to plunge—every single time. (Reid, 2015)

The Wire's poll numbers were never stellar, but they surely would have taken a plunge if the show hadn't been the TV equivalent of "softly black" by avoiding specific criticism and context. Don't accuse white people of doing anything wrong. Just show black people's struggles without any uncomfortable context. Be black, but not "too black." Be black enough for politically correct whites not to be unduly frightened, but not black enough to scare them away by bringing up any uncomfortable facts from history. (Of course Obama gave his famous speech on race, which was a soft attempt at addressing the issue of race—but only after he was

safely in office.) In supporting a complete absence of direct social commentary, such as by lamenting “playing the race card” as opening up old wounds and continuing old controversies in favor of “just showing” things the “way they are,” one is (almost certainly inadvertently, and thus more concerningly) encouraging a “softly black” approach to issues of race, one that soothes white people and makes them feel good (an unconscious sigh of relief exuding as white people are told that their racism is not really racism at all, but “sympathy.”). In this way, Williams becomes the embodiment of Reid’s criticism in cautioning creators of shows like *The Wire* against playing the race card.

Another thing this soft approach does is relieve whites of any responsibility they had (and have) for creating the conditions that led to places like the Baltimore neighborhoods portrayed in the show coming to be the way they are. Matthew Hughey’s now classic paper, *Cinathetic racism: White redemption and black stereotypes in ‘magical negro’ films* (Hughey, 2009) details how “magical negro” characters in film redeem their white onscreen counterparts. In *The Wire*, what is redeemed (and relieved of responsibility) is not an onscreen character but an offscreen entity—the entire white viewing audience. This redemption takes the form of convincing white viewers that they feel the pain of the Black characters on screen in agonizing empathy (armchair empathy), made possible by the fact that the show is devoid of any context that implicates whites in the problems faced by the black community, context that George Lipsitz (2011) rightfully states must be present. If it is not present, what results is a colorblind stage on which to let events play out. And according to López (2013), Nosek (2010), and Bouie (2023) the fallacy of colorblindness is that failing to explicitly factor race into one’s view of how the characters in the show came to be where they are avoids taking into account this major cause of their situation and also avoids the famous admonition by Martin Luther King, Jr. (1964) that equality isn’t enough. Blacks need and deserve extra assistance for the hundreds of years (Kendi, 2016) of inequality that has disadvantaged them up to the present.

So just as the show *Mad Men* perpetuated stereotypes (Nilson 2014), *The Wire* talks about race the way whites like to hear about it, by reinforcing all the stereotypes of Blacks built up over the years in all media from local news reporting to crime drama (the Blacks in *The Wire* who are the main focus of the show are the dipolar opposite of “softly black”). The show is “softly black” by portraying Blacks as stereotypically Black (i.e. criminal), a portrayal that is comforting to white audiences. For those labeled conservatives, it is a straightforward validation of the vilification of blacks. For liberals, it is, “Oh those poor Blacks. It’s so sad that our economic and political system has made them have to live that way”—and then an unconscious “but I’m sure glad it’s not me.” Or, “We really need to morally rehabilitate those poor black people,” all the while taking no responsibility for creating the facts on the ground that resulted in the dire conditions the inhabitants of the show’s neighborhoods exist in.

The show was popular with Black audiences

One defense of the legitimacy of the show is that it was not enjoyed just by white audiences but Black ones as well. That defense is immediately rendered defenseless, though, by the fact that in psychological tests determining racist tendencies, which, as mentioned above, show that Blacks actually exhibit racist thoughts towards other Blacks due to the long history of black stereotyping in white-dominated media. So just because Blacks enjoy a show does not mean it

succeeds in debunking stereotypes of Blacks. It simply shows that Blacks have become the victims of the same stereotypes whites (and other ethnic groups) have of them.

Are all the problems today in communities like the Baltimore of *The Wire* are due to racism?

No. Valuable work by African American scholars like John McWhorter (McWhorter 2003; 2021) and Coleman Hughes (2023) prevent thoughtful commentators from swinging to the extreme horizon of the victimhood end of the spectrum, cutting down objections in their path not because those contrary facts are not facts, but just because the facts happen to be inconvenient truths. McWhorter and others argue persuasively that indeed the residents of the neighborhoods bear a good deal of responsibility for how their lives have turned out and how their community is plagued with problems. In his support of colorblindness, Hughes echoes the famous statement by Martin Luther King, Jr. that Blacks “will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.” (King, 1963)

But the problem with the show is that countervailing examples—real life exemplars of which were living and toiling in the Baltimore of the show who were authentic counterexamples to the stereotypes such as revered educator, Charles Duggar (McCabe, 2021)—were not given the prominence warranted them. And the result? A strengthening of stereotypes.

Was there nothing good about the show?

Given the facts presented about the show in this article, the question might be asked, “So was there nothing good about the show?” The answer is no. Some very valuable contributions to society arose in connection with it. There were very real off-screen accomplishments made by some involved with the show, such as the work of actor, Sonja Sohn, who played Detective Kima Greggs in the series and founded an organization to help disadvantaged youth from the very neighborhoods in which the show was set. (Zabriskie, 2012) And actors Jamie Hector, who played the cold-blooded drug kingpin, Marlo Stanfield and Felicia Pearson, one of Stanfield’s “soldiers,” co-founded an organization to discourage real-life violence off-screen after discovering that some people idealized their onscreen characters (Burkeman, 2008). These efforts had tangible effects on bettering Baltimore. So the deleterious effect of the show’s onscreen perpetuation of stereotypes was somewhat offset by these real off-screen accomplishments, which provides some compensation for the damage that the show has caused by emblazoning even more strongly old stereotypes on the mind of the casual viewer of the show.

Using media analysis in the EFL classroom

Educators could present classroom material such as the analysis given above and then assign students to watch episodes of excerpts of the show. As students watch, they would give their opinions on specific questions about the show. In this case students would watch the assigned material and give their initial impressions about 1) Does the show’s realism and avoidance of “preaching” help or hinder its intended effect? 2) Does its popularity with Black audiences guarantee that it is a valid commentary on Black life? 3) Is racism solely to blame for the problems of the characters in the show? And 4) did the show have positive impacts on society?

This not only gives students a chance to practice critical thinking skills but it also allows them to practice listening skills in the target language.

In class, learners could choose one of those questions and write a short paragraph answering it according to their analysis of that aspect of the show. If the goals and objectives of a course include practicing specific types of academic writing such as reasons-examples, cause-effect, and opinion with counterargument paragraphs, instructors could specify that students write according to the format that is being practiced at a current time in the class. This gives students valuable academic writing practice.

After students have completed the written portion of the lesson, they move on to speaking practice in the form of a discussion with their classmates. This gives learners practice in speaking skills, which is arguably the most important component of communicating in a foreign language. Further, students must listen to and cognitively process the ideas of other students and take notes on them. This is more practice listening and writing in the target language. After learners have presented their ideas and their partners have taken notes, they can debate and discuss those ideas. Not only is this more speaking and listening practice, but success in the task requires real-world communication, which accords with the communicative approach to language learning and teaching in which “learning language successfully comes through having to communicate real meaning.” (British Council, 2017)

CONCLUSION

The Wire was not successful in achieving its goals of criticizing society and its institutions concerning urban problems in major U.S. cities like Baltimore because its show-don't-tell realism omitted the context and history of the communities it addressed. It also portrayed only the negative aspects of the show's communities, neglecting to have any characters who could have provided positive role models. The claim that Black audiences enjoyed the show does not give it extra credibility because it has been shown that in many cases Blacks have incorporated stereotypes about African Americans into their own worldviews. However, while racism is a problem, it is only one factor in the inequality that Blacks experience in society. And though the show failed in its stated objectives of productively shining a light on the ills of urban America, there were some positive outcomes, such as the volunteer work some of the actors in the show did in Baltimore as a result of being associated with the production. Finally, foreign language classrooms around the world can make use of material originally crafted for native speakers by focusing on specific aspects of a productions, writing about them, and discussing their ideas with classmates in a classroom that accords with the communicative approach to language learning and teaching.

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