James Zborowski

Complexity and clear-sightedness in *The Wire*

Towards the end of 'The Buys', the third episode of the first season of *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-8), we see an argument between two members of the Baltimore Police Department. Detective McNulty (Dominic West) is berating his immediate superior, Lieutenant Daniels (Lance Reddick). The case that they are working on has reached a critical juncture, and McNulty is accusing Daniels of bending to internal politics, while he (McNulty) is maintaining his commitment to real policework.

Described thus, this type of exchange between characters in a television series featuring police detectives sounds familiar, but fuller description of the exchange and its context can identify complicating additions to the trope of a maverick cop clashing with a bureaucratic and careerist superior. Firstly, Daniels is not entirely blinkered. It has been made clear repeatedly that he shares McNulty's awareness that the course of action he is about to lead is not in the best interests of their investigation, and we have seen him struggle with his decision, prompted by pressure from above, to pursue it. These scruples, specifically concerning a choice between obeying superiors and pursuing real policework, constitute an early stage in Daniels' character development over the course of the first season. Perhaps the most important deviation from the detective fiction trope just alluded to is that, in an inversion of typical character desires and motivations, it is company man Daniels who is leading his team into the field to take the direct action of arrests and drug seizures, and it is the maverick McNulty who, arguing that such action will prematurely alert the drug ring to the fact they are being watched, wants to stay in office and build a careful case. The episode, as we shall see further below, has taken considerable care to ensure that we share McNulty's view of the situation. *The Wire*'s advocacy of careful, cumulative detection over the more kinetic, perhaps somewhat gratifying, but less effective practice of arresting a handful of street-level dealers and trying (unsuccessfully, as it will turn out) to raid a drug stash house, is both an embodiment and a demonstration of its own method of slow-burn serial storytelling and cumulative narration.

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The Wire, which concluded over ten years ago, has received extravagant praise within the realms of popular reviewing and criticism, as well as substantial academic attention, both within television studies and in a range of other disciplines. It is accurate to state that much of this praise and attention is focused, in one way or another, on various ways in which *The Wire* achieves complexity. My intention in what follows is not to overturn this judgment, but rather to offer some complications to it. The binary at the heart of this collection can be used to formulate an initial statement of my argument (with other cognate terms to be introduced later): *The Wire* is indeed complex in many ways, but its particular brand of complexity is achieved thanks in part to aspects of simplicity in the programme's structure and presentation.

The first part of this chapter continues the analysis of 'The Buys' begun above, and challenges the idea, advanced by Erlend Lavik, that *The Wire* contains an unusually low level of narrative 'redundancy'. It then explores the particular nature of, and, we might say, the limits to, the programme's complexity, using as a main focus of analysis the musical montages that close each season of the series, and introducing as a focus for analysis and evaluation the notion of 'clear-sightedness'.

Redundancy in *The Wire*

Lavik in many ways characterises the particular complexity of *The Wire* with accuracy and nuance. Building upon Mittell's work, Lavik suggests that texts which embrace narrative complexity i) 'offer a "cognitive workout"' and ii) deploy 'narrational flourishes that draw attention to the process of narration' (2010: 78). Lavik's assertion that '*The Wire* is highly complex in the first sense, but not in the second' (2010: 78) is correct, and illuminating.

Lavik goes on to assert that *The Wire*'s narration is 'exceedingly non-redundant' (2010: 81). In the context of narrative theory, a text's degree of narrative 'redundancy' is the degree to which it repeats narrative information. Although the term might be considered derogatory, in this context, it is not necessarily so (though it might well, of course, be a textual feature pointed to as part of an

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artwork that is evaluated negatively on the basis of being too obvious, simple, patronising, and so on). It is closely related to the notion of narrative 'exposition' – that is, the establishing of narrative information, which Lavik (2010: 83) describes in *The Wire* as being 'scarce'. Both of these contentions seem to me to be very misleading. Further analysis of 'The Buys' can begin to demonstrate why.

How do we know that McNulty is right to tell Daniels that a drug bust will fail? Because we have been put in a position to share his understanding of how drug dealing in the low-rise 'pit' run by D'Angelo Barksdale (Larry Gilliard Jr) is organised. We have been shown, and told about, this organisation from a range of perspectives, and, we might say, with a high level of redundancy.

The message is driven home across three consecutive scenes in the middle of the episode. The first of these scenes shows the planning phase of a bit of undercover policework: Detective Sydnor (Corey Parker Robinson) is being taught by confidential informant and drug addict, Bubbles (Andre Royo) how to pull off the appearance of a 'dope fiend'. McNulty, though impressed by Bubbles' insight, is not impressed by the strategy. 'Touts and children, that's all you're gonna get', he tells Detective Greggs (Sonja Sohn). Perhaps, for a first-time viewer, McNulty's meaning is not fully comprehensible. However, in the very next scene, McNulty's words help us read the action, and the action fleshes out the meaning of McNulty's words. We see Sydnor hand money to and receive drugs from a series of young men working at the bottom of the Barksdale hierarchy. At the end of the 'hand-to-hands', Sydnor and Bubbles sidle to Greggs in an unmarked van, and Sydnor offers a helpful summary of what we have just seen: 'You don't hand no money to nobody that matters, you don't get no product from nobody that matters.' At the start of the next scene, the camera roves across photographs, mounted on a pinboard, of the hand-to-hands we have just witnessed, while offscreen dialogue once again reinforces how we should be reading the action: 'Nothing but touts and runners here', Greggs acknowledges to McNulty.

This is not all: there is another strand running through the episode which further explains to the viewer the logistics of low-rise drug-dealing. The character we will come to know as Omar Little

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(Michael K Williams) makes his first appearance in the series, and features in three scenes. In the first, from another unmarked van, he and his crew watch a runner enter what they deduce, correctly, to be the 'stash house', where the supply of drugs for the low-rise is kept. In a second scene, the crew briefly appears again, watching Sydnor and Bubbles talk to Greggs. And finally, Omar and his crew ambush the stash house and steal the Barksdale supply. In the first of these scenes, the dialogue that passes between Omar and his crew is terse – much more so that that between McNulty, Sydnor and Greggs summarised above – but still revealing and instructive. After they watch the runner go directly from the queueing addicts to a house door, their exchange is as follows:

> OMAR: Man, you see that?
>
> BRANDON: Oh yeah!
>
> JOHN: Third from the end. That's the stash.
>
> OMAR: Some real raggedy-ass shit here boy. Very sloppy.

It is not wholly implausible that John would be so explicit as to state 'That's the stash' to his partners in crime, who are presumably just as able to read the scene as he is, but it certainly feels like a partial concession to exposition. As well as adding 'stash houses' to the viewer's mental schema of low-rise drug-dealing, the scene offers a *judgment* on what we are seeing. Omar judges the set-up to be sloppy. We need to work a little harder with this piece of information than we do with the stash house comment, but it is not too difficult to put this comment together with the other things we are learning about the organisation we are seeing, and surmise that, just as key figures in the Barksdale empire are insulated from direct connection with the drugs through layers of subordinates and an obfuscating division of labour ('You don't hand no money to nobody that matters, you don't get no product from nobody that matters'), so the supply of drugs should be protected from prying eyes by a system that makes it difficult for a casual onlooker to deduce the location of that supply.

The issue of the stash house's location is the second element of failure in the anticlimactic drug bust that, despite McNulty's protests, goes ahead towards the end of the episode. We have been given, as we have already seen, the epistemic pleasure of understanding before the bust occurs that the arrests will mainly comprise 'touts and children'. We also understand why the stash house is an elusive target. When Daniels first tells McNulty that the bust is imminent (that is, before the confrontation scene we began with, in another example of redundant exposition), McNulty tells him 'Lieutenant, these guys change stash houses every other day.' By the time the bust occurs, the stash house has, unbeknownst to the police, been raided by Omar and his crew. And when it does occur, we receive instantaneous commentary, courtesy of one of the junior members of the drug crew, Bodie (J D Williams). 'Wrong door', he tells his boss. 'Switched it yesterday.'

The above description of a couple of interrelated plot threads in a single episode of *The Wire* begins to describe one of the series' key achievements: it renders comprehensible the complexity of human organisations, and places an unusual and gratifying degree of emphasis upon these institutions, rather than the personal motives of individual characters, as being the level of causality at which we can best understand why things are the way they are. This is a difficult task, skilfully executed. We receive the pleasure of being attached to many characters, and benefiting from their insight, and of occupying an epistemic position that is superior to any one of those characters. Bramall and Pitcher (2012: 88) put it beautifully when they suggest that 'the show is a machine for the production of epistemological gratifications'.

I agree with Lavik that *The Wire* achieves complexity; I disagree, however, with the idea that this achievement is founded upon strategies of narrative non-redundance, or scarce exposition. *The Wire* is in fact full of characters who love to stand back and analyse 'the game' that they play a part in, and share this knowledge with their peers and protegées (Zborowski 2010). This zeal for explanation is one of the defining features of the series as a whole.

If we accept that *The Wire*'s narration is more 'redundant' than has been generally accepted, is this an element of simplicity, or simplification, that qualifies the series' complexity? Not

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necessarily. Firstly, some further reflection on the notion of 'redundancy' might be in order. As we have seen, various scenes in 'The Buys' communicate the same key pieces of narrative information. But, crucially, that is not *all* that they do. The 'same' narrative information is delivered in different ways, from the perspectives of different characters, and at the same time as the viewer is experiencing and enjoying other things that the scenes offer: listening to dialogue, hearing actors' voices, observing the details of the fictional world, and so on. 'Redundancy', like its close relative, exposition, is, to use a piece of conventional screenwriting wisdom, rendered invisible, or at least unobtrusive, when it is integrated plausibly into scenes which are driven forward by characters and their actions, desires, and goals (Yorke 2013: 156). It might be useful to briefly invoke two axes of narration used by David Bordwell (who is drawing upon Meir Sternberg), and suggest that *The Wire*'s degree of narrational *communicativeness* perhaps appears lower than it is because of another feature of the series correctly identified by Lavik: its stylistic self-effacingness and sobriety, which Bordwell would characterise as a low degree of 'self-consciousness' – this being a measure of the 'extent [to which] the narration display[s] a recognition that it is addressing an audience' (1985: 58).

A second reason to reject the idea that 'redundancy' straightforwardly reduces complexity can be found by adapting comments made Wayne C Booth in relation to a similarly multi-faceted and emergent property of a work of narrative fiction: distance. As Booth argues:

> "Aesthetic distance" is in fact many different effects, some of them quite inappropriate to some kinds of works. More important, distance is never an end in itself; distance along one axis is sought for the sake of increasing the reader's involvement on some other axis. […] When Brecht […] asks for a "pervading coolness" […], he may seem at first to desire an increase in distance of all kinds. But what he really wants is to increase the emotional distance in order to involve the reader's social judgment more deeply. (1983: 123)

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This can help us to appreciate that 'complexity', like distance, is an emergent property, and part of a dynamic system. It is difficult to imagine an artwork embracing maximum complexity across all possible axes. To return to the point, made by Lavik, with which we began this section: *The Wire* pursues complexity principally in its representation of the world it depicts, not the mode of depiction (in its fabula rather than its syuzhet, we might say). In this pursuit, it embraces a mode of presentation which we might call simple, or redundant, but which we equally, and perhaps more appropriately, call clear, or straightforward.

The Wire's clearly-presented complexity

Within *The Wire*'s generally abstemious mode of presentation and style, its end-of-season montages stand out as flourishes. The series' restriction of the inclusion of music to that which is present in the world of the fiction is suspended. Non-diegetic music, in the form of a song played from start to finish, provides the soundtrack for a montage of moments that caps off each season. The idea I aim to defend in the analysis below is that although these montages are a stylistic departure from the rest of the series, it is also important to recognise them as a continuation (and in some ways, a distillation) of the series' particular way of seeing, and of the combination of complexity and clarity this way of seeing constitutes. I suggest that these closing montages are complex in terms of their treatment of narration and closure, and their tone, but that the overall point of view, or way of seeing, that they present should not be described straightforwardly as complex, and instead requires other terms.

Each season's closing montage lasts approximately four or five minutes, and is accompanied by a rock, soul or blues track (performed in each case by a male vocalist or group). The song is the most prominent element of the sound mix, but diegetic sound often remains audible, and some sequences within the montage include brief exchanges of dialogue between characters. Each montage, with the exception of the first season's, includes approximately fifteen 'beats', including

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various kinds of action or information (more on this below). (Season one's montage contains only around nine beats, and is shorter, at less than four minutes.)

The montages continue the series' much-vaunted paralleling and interweaving of multiple plot strands, giving the viewer a lot of information, and a rich and varied world of characters, to experience in a short span of time. The first element of expert balancing achieved by these montages that we can point to is their mixing of moments which function as epilogues to the main plotlines of each season, those which show characters engaged in reflection, those which show passages of time and experience ending, those which show new chapters beginning, and those which function as concrete visualisations of the expression '…and life goes on'. To take the season one montage as our example: the sequence begins in a courtroom, marking the culmination and the (at least partial) success of a criminal investigation (seasons two and three's montages also include such moments, though not at their beginnings). Later, we see a scene of Detective Greggs looking down, with something like longing, at a police car racing through the Baltimore night, standing at a window, and behind a walking frame, as she recovers from being shot in the line of duty. Detective Pryzbylewski (Jim True-Frost) boxes up the photos and tags on the pinboard that served as a visual overview of the Barksdale investigation, leaves the basement room that housed the investigation, and (in a moment that further serves to underline closure) turns out the light (again, such a moment will recur in later season-end montages). We see Detectives Moreland (Wendell Pierce) and Freamon (Clark Peters) go to wave off McNulty as he begins his work on a police boat. In a neat piece of parallelism, Freamon has had a professional resurrection, after being 'buried', as punishment, in a menial and cut-off role within the force for a long time; McNulty's career has temporarily gone in the other direction. Season one's montage ends with a beat that will appear somewhere in the ending montage of every season except the fourth: a sequence of images of drug-dealing activity which feature unknown characters and are shot with long lenses, thus creating briefly the rhetoric of a documentary (albeit an exquisitely lit one), and a further expansion of the series' already-expansive gaze.

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The interweaving of multiple narrative strands and the balance of openness and closure with respect to those strands are crucial contributors to the particular kinds of complexity achieved by the end-of-season montages. First, consider tone. Endings to the kinds of narrative action explored by *The Wire* will often, in terms of character outcome and experience, be addiction, prosecution, death, destitution, despair, and defeat. These experiences are present in the closing montages, but are offset by moments of completion, success, rehabilitation, renewal, and continuation. Second, we should note that in order for an ending not to compromise or lessen the complexity achieved in the rest of the artwork, it must pull off a delicate balancing act. Both too much and too little openness are risks here. Too much openness, and the *work* of the artwork in organising and unifying its elements is felt not to have been achieved; there is not felt to be a sufficiently compelling reason for the artwork to have made these choices and not others. Too little openness, and there is the feeling that complexity is being cut off or destroyed by excessive neatness and implausible or impoverishing 'wrapping-up'. The balancing and blending in each end-of-season montage of openness and closure, and of different tones, is, therefore, both an achievement in itself, and a crucial contributor to (and preserver of) the series' overall complexity.

The tone and stance achieved by the montages also rely on elements of point of view. Music and montage fulfil some of the typical roles of the rhetoric of an ending by detaching us slightly from the characters, preparing us to take our leave of them. The music is placed in the audio 'foreground' and the diegetic sound and dialogue in the 'background', thus distancing us from the action to a slightly greater degree than in a regular scene. The vignette format of the montage sequences similarly encourages a moderately-detached vantage point, which is helpful in smoothing the emotional transitions between sequences presenting disparate character outcomes and experiences. The songs chosen contribute further to the tone and point of view we are encouraged to adopt. At the risk of being overly general, we might state that what these songs have in common is that they offer us either a voice reflecting on the tribulations of worldly (and principally, non-romantic) experience with insight but without sentiment (though Solomon Burke's 'Fast Train' at the

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end of season three comes closest), or an endorsement of continued striving and stoicism, or at least motion – and in many cases, they offer both of these features. It is also worth briefly noting that the montages that conclude seasons two and four are bracketed by, and very loosely positioned as somehow relating to the reflections of, two characters – Nick Sobatka, played by Pablo Schreiber, and Michael Lee, played by Tristan Wilds – who have been presented as being markedly tougher and more stoical than their friends and associates. The songs are very much *not* 'on the nose', being connected to the world of the series and the sequence of images only by mood, rather than rhythm, or any clear paralleling between lyrics and images (the moment that comes closest to being on the nose is when we hear Steve Earle sing 'betrayal and conspiracy' moments before we see crooked politician Clay Davis, played by Isiah Whitlock Jr, pose for a photograph at the launch of a property development from which he is illicitly profiting).

What I would now like to suggest is that we can go a long way towards characterising *The Wire*'s particular effects and achievements by hanging them on the term 'clear-sightedness', which we can express, using the key terms of this collection, as presenting complex information and relationships as clearly and simply as their inherent complexity allows. Additionally, the term carries a moral evaluation: it is about seeing the world dispassionately, free of fear or favour. In the worldview that the series promulgates, clear-sightedness emerges as one of the cardinal virtues. It is what the series wants to cultivate in its viewers. It is a trait that appears abundantly among a surprisingly large proportion of *The Wire*'s characters, and acts as one that can secure our esteem for characters who are also unscrupulous murderers. (There are limits, however: the series distinguishes between characters, such as Omar and Avon [Wood Harris], who abide by a code that places limits on the legitimate targets and methods of violence, and characters, such as Marlo [Jamie Hector], who do not.)

The tonal qualities and the point of view suggested above as characterising the end-of-season montage sequences can be assimilated to this notion of clear-sightedness. We are given an overview of the story-world that is poised between sympathy and detachment, permitting understanding, but

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holding back – through pace, duration, and tone – from full emotional engagement with any single character's fate. It is a way of seeing characterised by presenting the world as it is, not as one would wish it to be, and doing so with human sympathy, but without sentiment or despair. It is worth briefly adding some extra-textual context that constantly informs the experience of watching *The Wire*, even for those with limited knowledge of the specifics of this context: the programme's way of seeing is built upon the sustained, close scrutiny of the real Baltimore by its creators, principally in the form of David Simon's experiences as an investigative journalist in Baltimore's homicide unit and on the city's drug corners, and co-creator Ed Burns's experiences as a police detective and a school teacher. Clear-sightedness stands as one of *The Wire*'s principal qualities, and at the centre of its extraordinary achievements. It is also a quality that possesses an intricate relationship to the programme's overall complexity, enabling it in some respects, and – perhaps – qualifying it in others.

To return briefly to some of the qualities of *The Wire* suggested during the earlier discussion of redundancy: the series' narrational communicativeness, its self-effacing encouragement to the viewer to form perspicacious hypotheses about its storyworld, and its provision of epistemological gratifications are three hallmarks of a *classical* approach to structure and style. We can draw upon the debates surrounding the classical in film and television studies to inform our exploration and characterisation of the way of seeing embodied by *The Wire*, and to clarify both its virtues and its potential limitations.

The best model of the classical within film studies is to be found in Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson's seminal tome, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (1985), and elsewhere in Bordwell and Thompson's work; however, the most *useful* account, for the purposes of this chapter, is Colin MacCabe's extremely influential article, and central articulation of several key strands of 'Screen theory', ''Realism and the Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses' (1974). Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson's principal purpose is to describe, in detail, the classical Hollywood cinema as an historical mode of film production and a stylistic system. MacCabe's principal purpose is to subject the 'classic realist text' to ideological critique.

The shortcomings of MacCabe's model as a basis for detailed structural or stylistic analysis have been highlighted on several occasions (see Zborowski 2013 for an overview); however, MacCabe's higher-level observations about the different *subject positions* implicitly offered to the beholder by the classic realist text and its alternatives remains suggestive and useful. MacCabe argues that the classic realist text 'cannot deal with the real as contradictory' and, 'In a reciprocal movement [it] ensures the position of the subject in a relation of dominant specularity' (1974: 12). MacCabe's model is an example of ideological formalism, which is both too prescriptive and deterministic regarding how people engage with works of art and fiction (to echo Murray Smith's excellent question: 'How critical is the spectator who can only be constructed as such by an estranging text?' (1996: 139)), and too dismissive of the possibilities of classical artworks (see Britton 2009: 317-19 and *passim*). But although we may need to qualify and soften MacCabe's assertions, that should not necessarily lead to a wholesale rejection which blinds us to their potential usefulness. We overreach if we use MacCabe's model as a mechanical way of dividing radical or modernist wheat from classical realist chaff, and assigning value accordingly, but the model can prompt us to consider how point of view works in particular artworks, and how we ought to evaluate it. That *The Wire* might be said to place its viewer in a position of 'dominant specularity' is not *necessarily* a shortcoming or a culpable failure which must lead us to judge it to be limitedly simple rather than rewardingly complex. But it is a feature of the series' construction that is worth considering, especially if it qualifies claims for excellence that have been made on its behalf.

Just as its reputation as a programme that uses minimal redundancy is somewhat misleading, the idea that *The Wire* presents the world as a complex system viewed from a large range of perspectives is true, but it is not the whole truth. *The Wire* does indeed use a range of individual and institutional perspectives to give a fuller view of contemporary Baltimore than would be possible from fewer perspectives, or a singular one. However, it is also the case that *The Wire* deals often in ironclad certainties which reduce the viewer's experience of complexity, and offer a central vantage point and set of principles from which to view and interpret narrative events. When Detective

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Freamon, in one of the series' many moments of rhetorical instruction to its viewers, tells a junior police officer that 'all the pieces matter', his comment highlights the fact that although *The Wire* offers a truly impressive and expansive survey of characters and happenings in the city of Baltimore, those characters and happenings are interwoven into intricate but highly unified narrative threads, subtended by a deterministic worldview: each character's narrative outcome is primarily a result of the logic of the systems to which they belong, not a more personalised level of causality. The metaphor of the jigsaw can serve to highlight the fact that the series, perhaps unusually for one so often celebrated for its high degree of realism, tolerates surprisingly few loose ends, or chance outcomes.

David Simon is fond of comparing the postmodern institutions he sketches to Greek gods, but what ought to be added is that the position the viewer is invited to adopt is itself Olympian: we sit alongside the implied author and survey, with quasi-omniscience, what unfolds below. *The Wire* is probably at its worst, its least complex, and its most simplistic during season five, in its depiction of a venal journalist whose unethical practices are aided and abetted by a circulation- and prize-hungry management team. The series flatters its audience's desire to be on the right side by clearly and continuously distinguishing between the good guys and the Pulitzer Prize-chasing assholes. This is a flaw and a lapse that can be (and indeed, has been) highlighted with some confidence. However, when it comes to evaluating the way of seeing offered by the series as a whole, the matter of judgment becomes more delicate.

The disciplinary conversations that have evolved within film and television studies have had the unfortunate side-effect of making it rare to hear enough about the potential virtues of the classic style. MacCabe's intervention is avowedly and solely a critique. Within television studies, it stands alongside Troy Kennedy Martin's 'Nats Go Home' as an intellectual justification for preferring modernism to classicism (or naturalism). In film studies, it has served a similar function. Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson's model, within its description, highlights the art-historical virtues of a classical style, but has in general received a cool reception among film scholars who practice

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evaluative criticism (see, for example, Britton 2009 and Pye 1989). A brief digression to a non-screen-specific and recent articulation of the virtues of a classic style can help provide some terms for discussion. In his book *The Sense of Style* (2014), psychologist Steven Pinker celebrates the classic style as a mode of writing, or more broadly, for presenting information about the world. In Pinker's account, all of the features of the classic style that constitute epistemological blind-spots or naivete for MacCabe are re-cast as positive qualities:

> The guiding metaphor of classic style is seeing the world. The writer can see something that the reader has not yet noticed, and he orients the reader's gaze so that she can see it for herself. The purpose of writing is presentation, and its motive is disinterested truth. It succeeds when it aligns language with the truth, the proof of success being clarity and simplicity. The truth can be known, and is not the same as the language that reveals it; prose is a window onto the world. (Pinker 2014: 28-9)

I do not want, here, to adjudicate the epistemologies of MacCabe and Pinker. What is striking about Pinker's words in the context of the present discussion is that they could go some way towards articulating, and defending, *The Wire*'s approach to its material, and the series' achievements and virtues, aesthetically and ethically. In the context of this collection more broadly, Pinker offers a useful defence of the virtues of simplicity. It is also worth noting that the terms of evaluation being proposed here apply even more strongly and straightforwardly to one of the key professional contexts from which *The Wire* emerges: investigative journalism.

Nevertheless, MacCabe may still have a point. Politically, or aesthetically, or ethically, a position of 'dominant specularity' does not seem to be a good position to be placed in. The key critical question for our discussion is: does *The Wire* indeed place us in such a position? And in doing so, does it go beyond virtuous simplicity into the territory of damaging over-simplification? Let us return to the end-of-season montages to try to offer a provisional answer.

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We have already noted Bramall and Pitcher's astute characterisation of *The Wire* as 'a machine for the production of epistemological gratifications'. We have also noted the care with which the series teaches its viewer how to understand the complex interlocking systems (and 'games') that make up life in contemporary Baltimore. If *The Wire* is like a long course of instruction, the end-of-season montages feel in part like graduation ceremonies. The learning is over, and what remains is to enjoy possessing the knowledge one has acquired. I am not in the least suggesting that the closing montages are superfluous, or lazy, or that they encourage laziness in the viewer. I think it is fair to say, however, that they grant the viewer the enjoyment, and the cognitive activity, of deploying already-acquired knowledge of complex systems to quickly and confidently grasp the significance of the brief moments they see (new *information* comes in relation to characters – for example, Bubbles finally being allowed to go up from his dwelling in his sister's basement to join her and his niece at the dinner table – but not, and this is the point I am making, new ways of *understanding* information). Sometimes, the effect is that one now possesses a pair of sociological or organisational X-ray spectacles that allows one to pierce the public façade of a ceremonial occasion (for example, a promotion, or an election success – many such moments feature in the montages) and see both the private guilt or resentment simmering beneath, and the systemic logic that has created the outcome that is being publically marked. The effect is exhilarating, perhaps surprisingly so for a television series whose principal subject matter might be described as urban dysfunction and decay. In short, although both effects are in play, the viewing experience is weighted towards confirmation, rather than contemplation.

One way of phrasing what is at stake here would be to state it is a good thing to learn about the world, but it is a bad thing to presume that one has learned everything there is to know about the world. There is no inherent virtue in confusion, ignorance, or uncertainty, and no inherent vice in conviction. Accordingly, there is no obligation for any form of discourse – for example, writing or screen drama – to insist upon or foreground epistemological caution or doubt at every juncture. We can legitimately defend the clear-sightedness that characterises *The Wire*'s style and presentation,

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and see it as a form of simplicity (of presentation) that enables complexity (of context). On the other hand, the confidence that arises from the achievement of knowledge can erode the virtues that produced it in the first place, and promote the pleasurable activity of the swift reaching of further conclusions over the more arduous one of gathering further experience and information.

What we are talking about here is both what the viewer does, and what the text can be seen to encourage. In the case of *The Wire*, I have attempted to highlight the ways in which I think the text might encourage what MacCabe might call 'dominant specularity', thus qualifying the text's complexity, and its value. But an important part of the activity of criticism is to make clear the respective weights of the elements of judgment being presented. To argue that *The Wire* invites its viewer to enjoy at its end knowledge and ways of seeing acquired across its duration is not a damning condemnation of the series. Many narrative texts do precisely this, and it is a legitimate, and even often meritorious, compositional feature. One could also point out that the stylistic distinctiveness of the end-of-season montages serves to circumscribe and contain the mode of rhetoric and the way of seeing that I have suggested that they embody. Neverthless, I would wish to add that there are more widespread elements of the show – chiefly, the degree of determinism it embraces, and the 'epistemological gratifications' and feelings of elation and intoxicating knowledgeability that are my experience of watching the show – that are markers of the show's achievements and forms of excellence, and *at the same time*, invitations to a problematic perspective of over-certainty. While feeling it important to note these invitations, I would want to give them a carefully calibrated weight within an overall critical appraisal, and would suggest that they remain as underlying risks rather than thoroughgoing faults, and, moreover, that they arise at all mainly as a negative extension of one of the series' most important and distinctive virtues: its deep and thoroughgoing clear-sightedness.

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