

**AMST/FMMC 0277 - Urban American & Serial Television:  
Watching *The Wire***

Professor Jason Mittell, Axinn 208, 443-3435

Office Hours: Mon 10-12 / Wed 10-12 / Thu 11-12

Class Meetings: T/Th 1:30 - 4:15 pm, Axinn 232  
Mon 7:45 - 9:45 pm, Axinn 100

*The Wire* is dissent; it argues that our systems are no longer viable for the greater good of the most, that America is no longer operating as a utilitarian and democratic experiment. If you are not comfortable with that notion, you won't agree with some of the tonalities of the show. I would argue that people comfortable with the economic and political trends in the United States right now -- and thinking that the nation and its institutions are equipped to respond meaningfully to the problems depicted with some care and accuracy on *The Wire* -- well, perhaps they're playing with the tuning knobs when the back of the appliance is in flames. - David Simon

Frequently hailed as a masterpiece of American television, *The Wire* shines a light on urban decay in contemporary America, creating a dramatic portrait of Baltimore's police, drug trade, shipping docks, city hall, public schools, and newspapers over five serialized seasons. In this course, we will watch and discuss all of this remarkable—and remarkably entertaining—series and place it within the dual contexts of contemporary American society and the aesthetics of television. This is a time-intensive course with a focus on close viewing and discussion, and opportunities for critical analysis and research about the show's social contexts and aesthetic practices.

The goals of this course are two-fold. First, we hope to understand *The Wire* in the context of its medium: how does it fit within and go beyond the norms of television? What makes it distinct from other media? Second, we will examine the show's portrayal of urban America as a window into a number of social problems and conditions distinct to contemporary society, including the drug war, the underclass, urban policies and development, post-industrial cities, political corruption, urban education, and mass media coverage. How does *The Wire* get us to understand, and to feel, these conditions in a novel and affecting way? And where does it leave us, in terms of the potential for solving these social ills?

**Required Reading** (available for purchase at College bookstore and on reserve at library):

Philippe Bourgois, *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

Richard Price, *Clockers* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992).

David Simon and Edward Burns, *The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner-City Neighborhood* (New York: Broadway Books, 1998).

There are two copies of *The Wire* on reserve for use at the library under PN1992.77 .W53 2008D. Additional readings are linked from the course website at <http://blogs.middlebury.edu/thewire>

### **Assignments & Assessment:**

Students will be assessed on their participation in the course, both in-class and online; on their contributions to a group online project; and on two assigned essays. More details will be forthcoming throughout the semester on these assignments.

### **Online Participation:**

Since much of the in-class time will be spent viewing *The Wire* collectively, students are expected to extend their discussion outside of class onto this blog. Students are expected to make at least 2 postings of significance per week - these can be detailed comments on another posting, including discussion questions posted by the professor, or original posts on a topic of your choosing. The goal is not to quantify participation, so students who contribute to the blog in a variety of ways will be considered active, while students who do not participate regularly or with substance will be penalized.

### **In-class Participation:**

Students are expected to attend class punctually and ready to watch *The Wire*, with reading accomplished each week and prepared to engage in discussion. Students who miss more than 2 class meetings without excuse will be penalized significantly, as will students who are frequently late or disengaged.

### **Grades:**

You will be graded based on the following scale, using a 4.0 scale on all assignments:

- A (4.0) indicates truly excelling on assignments, demonstrating mastery of the material and significantly surpassing the expectations of the assignment.
- B (3.0) indicates above-average work, clearly achieving the course goals and completing all assignments in a strong fashion.
- C (2.0) indicates satisfactorily meeting the course requirements in an adequate fashion.
- D (1.0) indicates not achieving course goals and not adequately meeting expectations.
- F (0.0) indicates dramatically failing to meet course goals and course expectations.

### **Submitting Work:**

Late papers are highly discouraged, as they throw off schedules for both student and professor. If you must hand in any assignment later than the deadline, please contact the professor in advance as soon as the situation becomes apparent – together arrangements can be made, often without penalties. If a paper is not turned in on time

without making advance arrangements with Professor Mittell or a Dean's excuse, the paper will be penalized by one mark (e.g. an A- becomes a B+) for each day of lateness.

All papers should be submitted via email as an attached .doc or .rtf file format document – Professor Mittell will reply via email within 24 hours when a paper has been received. Unless you have received such a notification, you should email him to ensure that the paper was in fact received. Note that emailing using non-Middlebury addresses increases the likelihood of attachments failing or spam filters blocking messages, so please use your middlebury.edu address. Please do NOT slip papers under the door to Professor Mittell's office.

***Academic Dishonesty:***

All work you submit must be your own and you may not inappropriately assist other students in their work beyond the confines of a particular assignment, in keeping with the Middlebury College Honor Code. All papers and exams must include the statement of the Honor Code along with the student's name (as a digital signature) in order to be graded. There is a no-tolerance policy for academic misconduct in this course! The minimum penalty for academic misconduct will be a failing grade (F) for the course – further academic and disciplinary penalties may be assessed. The definitions of plagiarism and cheating used in this course are consistent with the material in the College Handbook, Chapter V.

***Course Policies:***

Any student with a disability or who otherwise needs accommodation or assistance should make arrangements with Professor Mittell as soon as possible. If you know that you will have conflicts due to athletics or other college activities, you must notify Professor Mittell in advance and arrange to make up missed work – athletic absences are not excused and it is the student's responsibility to make all arrangements.

Email is Professor Mittell's preferred mode of communication (besides face-to-face conversation!), generally checking regularly during the work week – if you email him asking for a response and do not receive one within one working day (M-F), assume that your email may not have been received. Office voicemails will typically be answered less promptly. Please do not call Professor Mittell at home.

## Course Schedule

*Monday nights meet in AXN 100; T/Th screen in AXN 232, discuss in AXN 109  
All readings should be completed by Monday each week*

Feb 10: Course Intro

WATCH: #1 "The Target" & #2 "The Detail"

Feb 12: Context: Television

WATCH: #3 "The Buys"

READ: David Simon, "Letter to HBO"

Feb 13: special screening at 1:30, AXN 232

WATCH: #4 "Old Cases" & #5 "The Pager"

Feb 16: WATCH: #6 "The Wire" & #7 "One Arrest"

READ: Richard Price, *Clockers*, parts 1 & 2 (through p. 292)

Feb 17: *The Wire* as Crime Fiction

WATCH: #8 "Lessons"

Feb 19: WATCH: #9 "Game Day" & #10 "The Cost"

Feb 23: WATCH: #11 "The Hunt" & #12 "Cleaning Up"

READ: Richard Price, *Clockers*, finish book

Feb 24: Context: Baltimore

WATCH: #13 "Sentencing" (end season 1)

Feb 26: WATCH: #14 "Ebb Tide" & #15 "Collateral Damage"

Mar 2: WATCH: #16 "Hot Shots" & #17 "Hard Cases"

READ: Philippe Bourgois, *In Search of Respect*, Intro - Ch. 4 (to p. 173)

Mar 3: Context: Post-Industrial America

WATCH: #18 "Undertow"

Mar 5: WATCH: #19 "All Prologue" & #20 "Backwash"

Mar 9: WATCH: #21 "Duck & Cover" & #22 "Stray Rounds"

READ: Philippe Bourgois, *In Search of Respect*, finish book

Mar 10: WATCH: #23 "Storm Warnings" & #24 "Bad Dreams"

Mar 12: Context: The Drug War

WATCH: #25 "Port in a Storm" (end season 2)

Mar 16: WATCH: #26 "Time After Time" & #27 "All Due Respect"  
READ: David Simon & Ed Burns, *The Corner*, "Winter" (through p. 182)

Mar 17: WATCH: #28 "Dead Soldiers" & #29 "Amsterdam"

Mar 19: Essay #1 due before class  
WATCH: #30 "Straight and True"

### **Mar 20-29: Spring Break**

Mar 30: WATCH: #31 "Homecoming" & #32 "Back Burners"  
READ: David Simon & Ed Burns, *The Corner*, "Spring" & "Summer" (183-390)

Mar 31: Context: Urban Politics  
WATCH: #33 "Moral Midgetry"

Apr 2: WATCH: #34 "Slapstick" & #35 "Reformation"

Apr 6: WATCH: #36 "Middle Ground" & #37 "Mission Accomplished" (end of season 3)  
READ: David Simon & Ed Burns, *The Corner*, finish book

Apr 7: WATCH: #38 "Boys of Summer"

Apr 9: WATCH: #39 "Soft Eyes" & #40 "Home Rooms"

Apr 13: WATCH: #41 "Refugees" & #42 "Alliances"  
READ: Jason Mittell, "All in the Game: *The Wire*, Serial Storytelling and Procedural Logic"  
David Schwartz, "Kings and Pawns"  
Dana Polan, "Invisible City"  
Shaun Huston, "Balancing on *The Wire*"

Apr 14: Context: Urban Education  
WATCH: #43 "Margin of Error"

Apr 16: WATCH: #44 "Unto Others" & #45 "Corner Boys"

Apr 20: WATCH: #46 "Know Your Place" & #47 "Misgivings"  
READ: Nelson George, "Across Racial Lines"  
Janny Scott, "Who Gets to Tell a Black Story?"  
James Williams, "The Lost Boys of Baltimore: Beauty and Desire in the Hood"

Apr 21: WATCH: #48 "A New Day" & #49 "That's Got His Own"

Apr 23: Context: American Racial Politics  
WATCH: #50 “Final Grades” (end season 4)

Apr 27: WATCH: #51 “More with Less” & #52 “Unconfirmed Reports”  
READ: Kent Jones, “Down in the Hole”  
Lawrence Lanahan, “CJR: Secrets of the City”  
John Atlas and Peter Dreier, “Is *The Wire* Too Cynical?”  
Anmol Chaddha, William Julius Wilson, and Sudhir Venkatesh, “In Defense of *The Wire*”  
Atlas & Dreier respond

Apr 28: Context: Urban Journalism  
WATCH: #53 “Not For Attribution”

Apr 30: WATCH: #54 “Transitions” & #55 “React Quotes”

May 4: WATCH: #56 “The Dickensian Aspect” & #57 “Took”  
READ: David Simon, “Down To *The Wire*”  
David Simon, “A Newspaper Can’t Love You Back”  
Alan Sepinwall, “David Simon Q&A”  
Mark Bowden, “The Angriest Man In Television”  
David Simon, “Deleted Scene from *The Wire*”

May 5: WATCH: #58 “Clarifications” & #59 “Late Editions”

May 7: WATCH: #60 “-30-” (end of series)

**May 15: All work must be submitted via email or posted to web by noon**