

The Hook behind the Rapper: The Tension in a Diegetic Rhetoric of Music in *The Wire*

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The Wire, often considered one of the best shows on television, utilizes long-form storytelling techniques to great success. Scholars have often looked at the show from the perspective of cultural theory and rhetoric, often considering both at the same time. However, one rhetorical element of the show is often overlooked: its music. This is not surprising, since the show primarily utilizes diegetic music—that is, the music is part of the narrative and not used as a direct emotional manipulator or hailing device, which is often the case in other TV shows. In this essay, I argue that music is an important rhetorical device in the show, one that displays a tension between its use as a purely diegetic sonic prop and its function as a device that draws the audience into a deeper, subtler rhetoric occurring between characters.

The Wire, a show that first aired in 2002, followed the wave of long-form storytelling in American television that began in the 2000s. HBO, which aired *The Wire*, led this wave, with shows like *Oz*, *The Sopranos*, *Six Feet Under*, and *Deadwood*. The show received numerous accolades despite its not-quite-stellar ratings—though after its cancellation, HBO's DVD sales were high (Mittell, "All in the Game"). It was, and still is, frequently called "the best show on television."¹ As a long-form TV narrative, the show is quite complex. It would be unfair to describe the show as merely about the power struggles of drug dealers and how the Baltimore Police Department deals with them. While drug dealing and the war against drugs play large roles in the narrative, matters of politics, human trafficking, education, and drug legalization all play a role in what the show's characters call "the game." The show portrays a wide variety of characters,² from all sorts of socioeconomic backgrounds—from the state senator Clay Davis to the errant junkie and police informer Bubbles. The show focuses on Baltimore's institutions, their dysfunctionality, and how that dysfunctional power or power (im)balance governs the lives of Baltimore's citizens, mostly in a negative way. As will be discussed, there is a great tension within the use of one specific rhetorical device in the show: music. There is a tension between music as merely a prop (since music in *The Wire* is only diegetic, it is part of the narrative world) and music as something more than that, as a device that hooks the audience into a deeper rhetoric between the characters.

At this point, it may be useful to mention the various critiques leveled not only at TV narratives about the U.S. underclass, but also at the academic theorists who attempt to interpret them. For example, discussing Raymond Chandler's detective-hero Marlowe, in *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction*, literary critic Stephen Knight claims that the detective's elitism "proclaims itself; it basically resides in intellectual and emotional superiority, but the blank disinterest in poor and black citizens" reveals the author's "strong underlying political attitude, that of the educated middle-class" (176). A more caustic critique comes from anthropologist Philippe Bourgois, who deplores the entertainment industry's "voyeuristic celebration of street dealers and inner-city street culture." In his view, academic theorists who address urban poverty and its media representations through the lens of postmodern theories may actually do more harm than good:

Deconstructionist "politics" usually confine themselves to hermetically sealed academic discourses on the "poetics" of social interaction, or on clichés devoted

to exploring the relationships between self and other. Although postmodern ethnographers often claim to be subversive, their contestation of authority focuses on hyper-literate critiques of form through evocative vocabularies, playful syntaxes, and polyphonous voices, rather than on engaging with tangible daily struggles. Postmodern debates titillate alienated, suburbanized intellectuals; they are completely out of touch with the urgent social crises of the inner-city unemployed. Scholarly self-reflection often degenerates into narcissistic celebrations of privilege. Most important, however, radical deconstructionism makes it impossible to categorize or prioritize experiences of injustice and oppression. This subtly denies the very real personal experience of pain and suffering that is imposed socially and structurally across race, class, gender, sexuality, and other power-ridden categories. (12)

Even in this surge of new ways to tell stories on television, and perhaps aware of some of the critiques of the phenomenon, *The Wire* was the odd one out. Unlike other shows also running at the time, it was not written by television veterans but by a journalist turned television writer, David Simon. As Jason Mittell notes in his article “*The Wire* in the Context of American Television,” *The Wire* is unique in that it pursues a different naturalistic style that “draw[s] upon the conventions of documentary and social realism to match Simon’s own background in non-fiction journalism.” Mittell argues that Simon’s background as a journalist trained to report facts and to render situations accurately led to a narrative style that, although it depicts a fictional world, presents its environment and characters realistically. Even though other contemporary shows like *The Sopranos* purport to offer “realist” narratives, *The Wire* is different, in that it has a naturalistic tendency, reinforced by its distinct “visual style,” and does not use flashback, montage, or narration.³

A unique “visual style” is not *The Wire*’s only distinguishing trait. It is, after all, a multimodal text: utilizing multiple media, such as images, sound, and script, to convey its author’s message, instead of relying upon a single medium as a printed text, such as a novel or poem, does. Many critics notice *The Wire*’s naturalistic visual style, but its music and sound are often overlooked. *The Wire*’s music and sound are diegetic. They are native to the show’s environment, Baltimore, and crucial to the show’s overall style. There is no background filler music. Like its set, the real Baltimore, the music appears to be part of the scenery, fulfilling the needs of viewers who expect the show to be realistic—especially since *The Wire* was part of HBO’s wave of shows that had a similar realistic feel.⁴ In other words, the show’s music and background noise are diegetic, part of its narrative universe—heard by characters as someone actually on the scene might hear it—emitted from car stereos, police radios, and boom boxes. Given Simon’s naturalistic style, one may assume that he made a rhetorical choice to include only diegetic music; it was no accident. Music does play a more significant role in *The Wire* than many viewers might at first think.

The Wire does not seem to use music as a rhetorical device to manipulate emotions and to work as a hailing device (Gorbman 16), luring and cueing the audience to the show and also giving the show an identifiable aural feel—as when a show has a specific soundtrack for the moment when characters unravel the episode’s mystery, letting the audience members know, even if they are out of visual range, that a specific event is happening. For example, when the main characters of a police procedural show such as *CSI* or *NCIS* uncover the mangled remains of the episode’s victims, the music will intensify in a way fitting to the characters’ reactions; likewise in a scene where there is a lot of action. *The Wire*, by contrast, has no nondiegetic music to enhance a scene’s emotional content.⁵ The music of *The Wire* seems just to be *there*. It does not cue the audience to anything specific—at first, that is. Music and sound can tell us where we *are*—the street corner boom boxes and the police radios—but it cannot immediately tell us what is happening. As Adrienne Brown says of *The Wire*, music is both everywhere and nowhere. She also argues that music in *The Wire*

is used as a tool for characters to develop social and personal connections (445) and that the show denies that music can be used by the underclass as such a tool (456). Music is everywhere “in that to deny its presence would damage the show’s claim to realism.” It is also nowhere, “meaning that the show does not have to portray music beyond the level of authenticating sonic prop” (445). Music has to be everywhere because it authenticates the show’s naturalistic intent. If Simon and company had chosen, as other HBO dramas did, to use music as an enhancement of the narrative, the show could not claim its naturalistic status, showing reality in its “antiromantic convictions” (442). Music is also nowhere in that it often seems as if it were a prop.

But the show does not use music merely as a prop, as an incidental detail. Instead, I propose that music in *The Wire* is used as a rhetorical device, serving to legitimate the show’s status as a realist work with naturalist tendencies and to show characters’ attempts to individuate themselves, or generate individual identities.

Previous studies of *The Wire* and TV music seem to concentrate on issues in cultural studies. Such studies provide valuable insights, such as Josh Kun’s conception of music itself as an “audiotopia,” a “space that we can enter into, encounter, move around in, inhabit, be safe in, learn from” (2). Music, for Kun, is an individuating space where an individual can find solace and knowledge—of not only her or his larger surrounding culture and its intricate subcultures, but also of oneself. This insight, linked with Brown’s concept of “praxis of musicality” (445), works in a fine way. Brown argues that in *The Wire*, characters can, and sometimes do, use music as an individuating tool. In this way, music is not only a passive transmission but, like the multimodal text of *The Wire*, a text that requires active interpretation.

However, my main concern is with music’s rhetorical use in *The Wire*’s season 1. In my conception, music serves as a form of both direct rhetoric (between characters) and indirect rhetoric (between text and audience): reinforcing the characters’ environment as real, allowing their praxis (and the punishment that comes with it), and persuading the audience that *The Wire*’s characters are potentially real human beings in natural scenarios. Added to cultural studies’ practice of laying bare different societal structures, it would be useful to consider how the show attracts us via music. The show not only invites us to watch *it* as a show, but to notice its music as more than either a prop or a piece of traditional emotional rhetoric.

Part of an author’s or director’s work is being a *rhetor*, one who persuades us, the audience, of something, be it an ideology—Simon’s conception of institutions and institutionalization—or convincing us to see the show as realistic. To use John Kirby’s terms, there is both a direct and an indirect rhetoric at work, in which characters act as rhetors to themselves (direct) and authors persuading the audience (indirect) (1–3).⁶ To connect these two levels of rhetoric found in a text, Kirby borrows the Aristotelian concepts of *muthos* and *ennoia* from *The Poetics*. As a whole, Kirby’s model is a process of creation and interpretation. The first step is the creation of the *muthos* by the author. This *muthos* is “literally the ‘putting-together-of-events’ or plot” (15). Thus, the author creates the *muthos*. The next step is the indirect rhetoric, the relationship between the audience and the text. This interaction generates the *ennoia*, or the interpretation of the *muthos*. The audience forms an *ennoia* in this stage, generating its own interpretation of the text. In the last stage, the audience returns to the rhetor, but not to the actual person. Instead, the audience generates its notion of the author, or the “implied author” (16),⁷ meaning that what it creates is its own notion of the author based upon its *ennoia*, and not an objective concept of an author that is known *a priori* by audience members. In other words, meaning, generated by the audience about both the author and the text, is the result of this cycle of interpretation.

The *muthos* is generated by Simon and company and transformed into a multimodal text. This *muthos* is an argument for the display, via a naturalistic narrative, of the struggles of the underclass, police, politicians, etc., within Baltimore. Primarily, the show highlights how what Simon calls “the

abandoned inner cores of our urban areas” (qtd. in Joyner), are pinned down and kept in a state of chronic poverty and misery by a stagnant post-industrial society. His argument is established at the start of the show, in season 1’s first episode, with the story of Snot Boogie. Every Friday, Snot and his friends would play craps. Every Friday, Snot attempted to steal the cash from the pot. Every Friday, until Snot Boogie was killed, he did the same thing. When a friend of Snot Boogie tells this story to McNulty, a stubborn detective who is constantly thwarted by the Baltimore Police Department’s stagnant system and one of the many main characters of the show, he is flummoxed. McNulty asks the friend why they let Snot play every Friday. The friend answers, “You got to. This America, man” (“The Target”). The *muthos*, then, is preestablished in this scene by showing that members of the underclass, who are playing a game of craps, are trapped in this endless routine. The only way one can liberate oneself from such a routine, or “game,” at least in this preparation for the show’s *muthos*, is through death.

The audience watches *The Wire* and interprets it, generating *ennoia*. In the case of music, the audience generates an *ennoia* that it is part of the background; it is a prop. However, in a deeper layer of *ennoia*, the audience can recognize music as something more than that. Whether the audience sees music as part of Simon’s argument for the decay of American urban centers, as simply a prop, or as something completely different, is a choice each viewer makes, as this is a subjective process (Kirby 5). Finally, in direct rhetoric the characters consider music to be an unnecessary, yet good, element. In brief, music, as an element within a multimodal *muthos*, is an element that reinforces the naturalism of the show’s *muthos* and also, to a certain extent, acts within the *muthos* as an element that is considered both superfluous and desirable by characters.

Soundtracks for TV dramas are tailored to follow the narrative of the show. Music is often used as a way to manipulate emotional responses. Claudia Gorbman states that television studies are dominated mostly by rhetorical studies of the medium (15). This, she notes, is caused mainly by the commercial nature of TV shows, how they are “consumed in highly regulated discrete eight-minute chunks timed to the second for the commercials that are the *raison d’être* of television’s economy” (16). The music follows the characters and basically tells the audience which emotions the characters are feeling, and which emotions the audience should be feeling. *The Wire* does away with such conventions. Its music is diegetic, made to enhance the show’s realism; it is not a way to manipulate emotional responses. If, on the other hand, there were no diegetic music, the environment that *The Wire* is trying to re-create would be somewhat sterile, as if, whimsically, Simon had decided that no one would ever wear white T-shirts in the show. The projects of season 1 would not seem as alive if the show were devoid of background music.

Characters come and go in the background, and so does the music. It seems it is just another member of the extras, like a computer-generated image prop. At a basic rhetorical level, then, the music of *The Wire* serves as a way to confirm the show’s realism to its audience. It tells us that we are watching a realistic rendition, which is what Simon intends. The indirect rhetoric at work here is Simon and company using music as yet another means of immersing the audience into a realistic Baltimore in which every neighborhood is alive and diverse not only visually, but aurally. Unlike other contemporary shows, such as *Law and Order* or *CSI*, which use music as a manipulator of mood, *The Wire* barely uses any sort of music most of the time. In fact, what strikes the audience is its peculiar silence. Music, then, is, at a limited level, used as a device of indirect rhetoric, to tell the audience it is now entering a naturalistic fictional environment.

In this case, music is added in post-production (Brown 443), and seems to be a purely indirect form of rhetoric, drawing the audience into a naturalist rendition of Baltimore and its drug and police enterprises. The preceding, that music is not present in the filming set, may seem somewhat contradictory to my first statement that music is more than a prop, but consider this: the actors may not be aware of what music is “playing” in the background, but the characters, as part of a hermet-

ic naturalist depiction, would have to know that music is playing; otherwise the naturalism would be violated if the audience is allowed to know there is no music being played at the time of filming. Thus it seems that the value of the music, whether added post-production or not, adds to the naturalist narrative as a confirming agent. However, more personal music, created or interacted with by other characters, and not simply acting as a prop, serves a different purpose.

A useful example of the difference between the indirect rhetoric of large public background music and personal music acting as direct rhetoric would be when, in season 1, Bubbles steals heroin from a drug dealer in the episode "Game Day." Bubbles uses a hook to snatch the stash, which is lodged in a tire, while the dealer raps. This innocuous distraction allows Bubbles to get the stash, with the consequence that he watches someone else get beaten for the theft instead of himself. The dealer's rapping is not only a diegetic element but also a case in which a character engaged in a personal act of making music gets punished—after all, he will have to account for the stolen stash. Thus, something else lies behind the music Simon and company lay down. Brown argues that characters engage in music through what she calls "praxis of musicality," "the use of music as a space of production of either social or personal networks" (445). Music, for an individual, acts as a space of creation and interaction, one that is strictly personal and interpersonal. Such creation does not extend to the superstructures within which characters are bound, in this case, the drug trade. She also points out that characters, like the drug dealer above, are punished for such individuating acts. Yet the audience itself is, up to a point, engaged in such a praxis when affected by the authors' rhetoric of naturalism. If the audience engages in significant praxis, it will be able to notice that music also serves as (almost) a character. This may seem odd, since music is mostly diegetic and does not seem to transmit anything in particular besides the impression that the audience is in a naturalist environment. Music serves as a type of warning for the audience that the character who engages in individuating acts of musical production or listening will be punished. Thus, music serves a double rhetorical purpose.

Delving deeper into the direct rhetoric of the show, the audience can detect music serving its purpose as a type of character or harbinger. In the episode "The Pager," Omar, a fascinating character who goes against the grain of the drug game by robbing drug dealers of their stashes and refusing to use vulgar language, goes on one of his usual hits. As he approaches his targets, he whistles "The Farmer in the Dell." All of his intended victims escape except for one dealer, who was unable to hear Omar coming, nor notice his companions fleeing, because he was listening to music on a Discman. There is also the example of Bubbles stealing from the rapping dealer. There is the return of the Discman in the hands of the murdered Wallace—the teenage drug dealer who works in the Pit, or the Barksdale's low-rise projects dealing spot—in which we are reminded of the Discman in the hands of one of his younger brothers, whom he cares for; he had an interior life and probably dies because of it, since the game does not allow for such a thing. Music seems to be much more than just a prop when taken out of the impersonal realm of background music. In the ears and mouths of characters, music is a tool or a way out of the game, a way to be oneself. As Brown says, referring to Rey Chow's work, music allows the listener "to disappear from both the present and from history" (451). In other words, music is an escapist device. However, something else is also at play. Music, as embodied by Omar's whistling and Wallace's demise, is also a harbinger of death or exclusion.

In order to develop the point of *indirect* rhetoric as well, it would be useful to consider Anderson's emphasis on the use of allegory in *The Wire*. As he puts it, the series itself "reads nearly every narrative meant to legitimate official institutional authority as a thin ideological veneer covering a latent reality of dysfunction, corruption and failure" (376). Anderson also discusses the matter of the allegory made by D'Angelo in "The Buys." In this episode, D'Angelo uses an allegory of chess for the Barksdale crew. This allows the crew members to gain "a more abstract per-

spective on their everyday lives in the mercurial game” (377). Likewise, music’s use as a harbinger, instead of as a potential positive factor in characters’ lives or simply as a mood modifier, adds much more weight to music. The audience may consider the background bass as just a prop, but every time a character is actually *engaged* with music, something bad will happen. The point here is that music is something that allows characters to go inward, into themselves. It is like the allegory of chess in that it allows for some sort of higher cognition, but it is unlike the allegory in that it seems to localize that knowledge. To take this further, it is a ray of utopic light that shines out from the show’s bleakness, in the sense Jameson develops the “Utopian impulse” (364), meaning that characters wish for this superior future and seek it out. Jameson does not mean that the show as a whole argues for a utopic future; he means that individual characters have these impulses. However, he does not use the instance of music. Considering its potential, with its praxis of musicality, it would seem plausible that the characters desire a better, even utopic future through music.⁸ Thus the show tells its audience that music is not simply a prop but also an important entity—at least in season 1—that, when used by characters, points to something dangerous.

For the majority of characters, music does not seem to play a big role. This is part of the show’s realism, or its grittiness: it is much easier to see gloom without a soundtrack, or with a veil of background bass as crumbling projects teeming with misery are shown. When music is used, it is significant. Omar, for one, uses music as his signature call. As a hawk screeches as it swoops toward its prey, so Omar whistles harmless-sounding songs to signal his approach. However, with Pryzbylewski, there is something else at play. In the episode “One Arrest,” the detective is able to decipher gang slang for drug-trafficking information. His explanation for such prowess is his reciting the first two lines of the Rolling Stones’ song “Brown Sugar.” He then says, “I bet you’ve heard that song five hundred times, but you never knew, right? I used to put my head to the stereo speaker and play that record over and over.” It seems Pryzbylewski is in one of Kun’s audiotopias. As Kun puts it, “Building my record collection was my way of building my own world” (2). I am not sanguine about Kun’s point that popular music is a utopia where difference and heterogeneity are the norm and not otherwise, since my concern here is mainly rhetorical, not cultural, though I do agree that texts’ cultural contexts inform rhetoric. His point about music creating one’s own world, however, does seem to be fitting for Pryzbylewski, as well as the distracted rapping dealer and Wallace. Pryzbylewski does, after all, find his place through sound. It is not music exactly, but he has found his place by being submerged in the dissonant symphony of gang conversation. His whole job is listening and linking these aural factors together into a coherent whole. In the case of both the rapping dealer and Wallace, each attempted to enter his own world, but was denied access. The dealer rapped, punished the wrong person, and will probably be punished for his inattentiveness to the game. Wallace attempted to create his own interior life, though not exactly through music, and he dies.

Indirect and direct rhetoric of the show connect, in accordance with Kirby’s scheme, into a general double narrative. There is the intended narrative of the rhetor and that which we create. The multimodal nature of the show adds another problem, since music is just one of many elements—visual, aural, linguistic, and so on. Whether Simon and company intended music to be seen in its more personal way, in the direct rhetoric, as I have interpreted, is not known. On the other hand, the audience can see the *muthos* of the show enhanced by its music. Not only is music a prop, it acts as a character of sorts, a harbinger of death, and also something which some characters may yearn for, something better than their corner lives. Though they do not explicitly yearn for a utopia, as Jameson puts it, characters such as Wallace wish for a semblance of a healthy inner life. Even McNulty, who is constantly boozing with his friend Bunk, hopes for the reform of the system he inhabits, even as his own life crumbles. This all builds the audience’s *ennoia*. As in other sorts of literature, there is a plethora of ways to see one image. The *ennoia* developed in this essay leads to

the interpretation that Simon and company use music in the indirect sense to enforce the show's naturalism and in a direct way to show characters a way out—of the game and life itself in Wallace's case.

Thus, music draws us into *The Wire* through its use as a prop and as a “character” of sorts, a harbinger of destruction and, with Pryzbylowski's exceptional case, progress. The show's lack of music does reflect its naturalism (Brown 442), which demands that it be antiromantic and, quite simply, bleak, as the “real” world seems to be. Every attempt to use music positively is denied, as are other forays into a utopian world. There is an essential tension to the show's rhetoric, in that even as *The Wire* affirms the value of music, its rhetoric denies any use of music, just as it denies any escape, however temporary. That this rhetorical technique succeeds can be seen in its imitation by later TV shows, such as the critically acclaimed *Breaking Bad*.

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Notes

¹Media sites that have lavished such praise on *The Wire* include *Slate* magazine (Weisberg), *Salon* magazine (Traister and Miller), and the *Telegraph* (“*The Wire*”).

²There are so many characters that online forums have generated top-fifty lists for best characters.

³A minor exception to this rule is the montages at the ends of the seasons, which serve as a type of wrap-up for the entire season.

⁴That is to say, shows like *The Sopranos*, *Oz*, and *Deadwood* did not follow *The Wire*'s naturalistic tendencies, according to Mittell, but it is reasonable to expect that they created a set of expectations about HBO's products. During this wave, it would be implausible to consider audience members looking for HBO to deliver a show like *Gilmore Girls* or any run-of-the-mill police procedural.

⁵For an example of this type of “emotional” music, see “*NCIS* Death of Special Agent Kate Todd” on YouTube, where Kate Todd, a main character in *NCIS* in the first two seasons, is killed. Notice how the music builds up the tension. If, hypothetically, one was out of the visual range of one's television set, one would still be able to be hailed, or cued, into knowing what may have happened.

⁶Kirby's essay seems to be a response to the post-structuralist definitions of text and its relation to the audience. As Kirby says, “Use of the unresolved term ‘text’ has caused much bloodshed on the battleground that is post-structuralist literary criticism; and some systems seem to dissociate the audience unnaturally, even violently, from the text and the author” (3).

⁷For a full definition of the “implied author,” see Wayne C. Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 67–77. It's also useful to mention Booth's stance on purportedly unbiased narratives. Speaking of the nineteenth century's naturalist and realist works, he writes, “What is more, we all know by now that a careful reading of any statement in defense of the artist's neutrality will reveal commitment; there is always some deeper value in relation to which neutrality is taken to be good” (68).

⁸See Josh Kun's *Audiotopia* for in-depth study of the cultural aspects of music as a sort of utopia.

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