Down to the Wire

How Popular Narratives about the Criminal Justice System Influence the Clinical Experience

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Grit

- The Wire: a show renowned for its grit
  - Equal attention to "criminals" as to cops
  - Attention to details
    - Place
    - Language
  - Unsparing, complex view of people and institutions
  - ***Disclaimer: violence, profanity, death***

- Useful mirror for the gritty work of representing clients at the Remington Center

Grit

- Not surprising that we started noticing students referencing The Wire in their Remington Center work

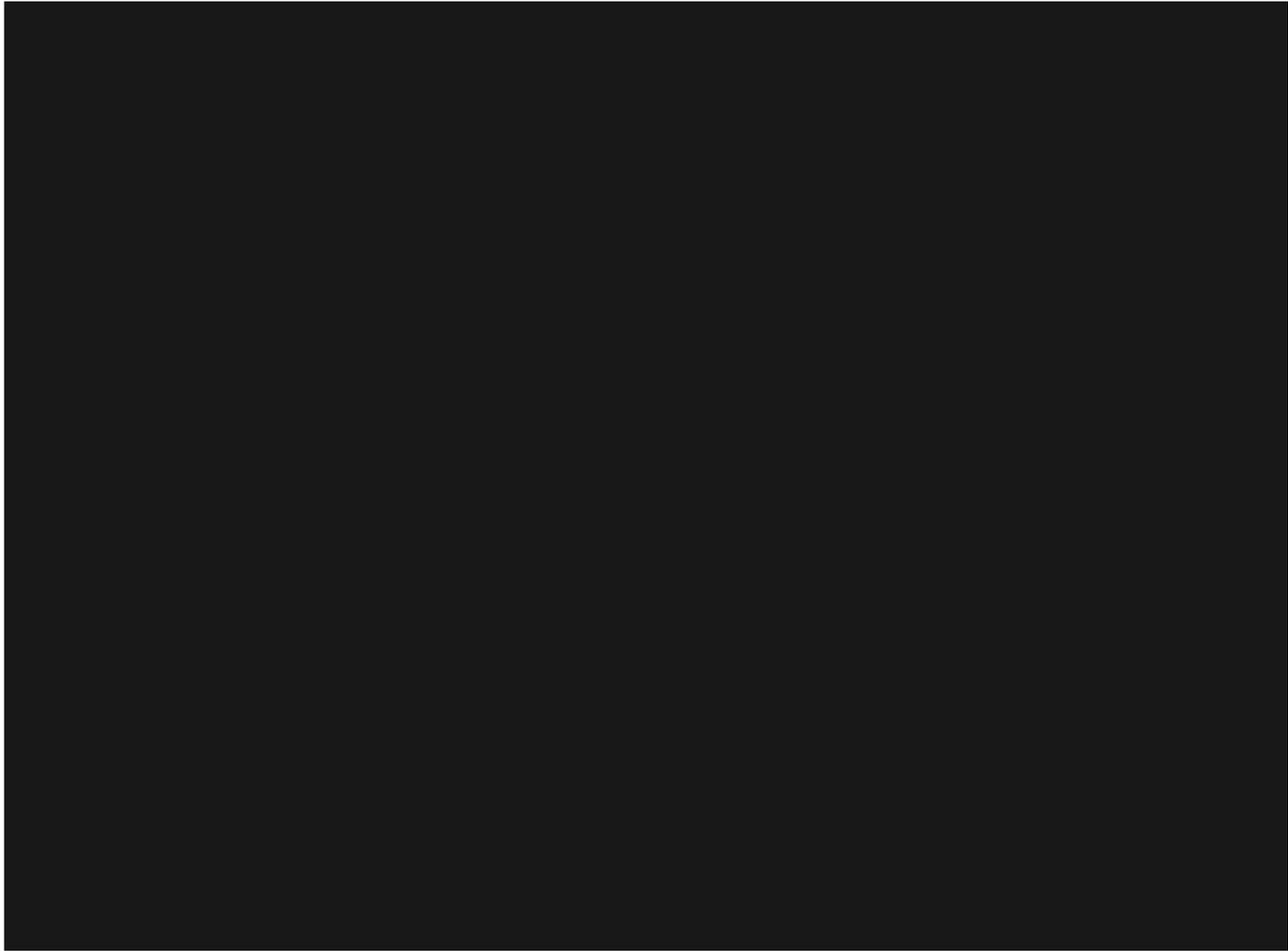- We wanted to explore why that is, how it works, and how it can help or hinder us as educators

Influence on Students

- We know that students reference The Wire (and other media accounts) in their work, but how exactly does that work?

Cops

- Complex view of police
  - Sometimes posed as renegades, breaking the law and terrorizing the population

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Lawyers

- Very cynical view
  - Prosecutors: even the sympathetic ones are posed as ambitious and unwilling to buck the system because of selfish career interests
  - Defense lawyers: equivalent to criminals; posed as law-breaking, greedy, and willing to sell out clients for self-preservation.

Criminals

- Again, complex view
- Most illuminating in its focus on children involved in the drug trade
  - Shows total lack of opportunity other than the drug trade
  - Shows kids/families struggling to stay out of drug trade
  - Shows how kids who start out good get roped in and end up doing awful things

Themes

- Apart from archetypal characters, The Wire also develops major themes about the system
  - Good/evil too simplistic
  - Crime is caused by social pressures
  - System isn't working
  - In a broken system, ends justify the means
  - Individuals and new ideas have no chance
    - David Simon: show is about "the death of work"

- Mark Bowden: "The show's most exceptional police officers, detectives Jimmy McNulty and Lester Freamon, find their initiative and talent punished at almost every turn. Their determination to do good, original work disturbs the department's upper echelons, where people are heavily invested in maintaining the status quo and in advancing their own careers."

- Lorrie Moore: "The most intriguing phrase Simon has used regarding *The Wire* is to say that it is about "the death of work." By this he means not just the loss of jobs, though there certainly is that, but the loss of integrity within our systems of work, the "juking of stats," the speaking of truth to power having been replaced with speaking what is most self-serving and pleasing to the higher-ups. In a poker game with the mayor, one folds on a flush to allow the mayor to win. (As opposed to the freelance stickup man Omar, who, beholden to no one, shows up at a kingpin's poker night with two pistols and the Dennis Lehane line "I believe these four 5s beat your full house.") Police departments manipulate their stats for the politicians; schools do the same; newspapers fake stories with their eye on prizes and stockholders. Moreover, in the world of *The Wire* almost everyone who tries to buck the system and do right is punished, often severely and grotesquely and heartbreakingly. Accommodation is survival at the most basic level, although it is also lethal to the soul."

"Death of Work": Hamsterdam

- Major theme: individuals trying creative new ideas will be crushed by the bureaucracy

- Hamsterdam (give intro about Bunny Colvin)

Hamsterdam

- Matt Iglesias: "A modern-day tragedy in which human beings are dashed on the rocks of impersonal institutions that make a joke of any efforts at reform."

- Reihan Salam: ""an elaborate, moving brief for despair and (ultimately) indifference."

Influence on Students

- Student references to The Wire
  - Understanding clients
    - Comparisons to Stringer Bell, Bubbles, the kids
  - Understanding major drug investigations
    - Assumptions of illegal police behavior
  - Understanding lawyers and judges
    - Prosecutors and judges worried about their careers and unwilling to stick their necks out

What to make of all this?

- Not surprising that students use TV archetypes/ narratives to understand their work

- Helps to be familiar with what preconceptions students are relying on

- TV narratives useful basis for understanding and discussing issues students are confronting in their work