

Eike Rüdibusch

You want it to be one way, but it's the other way

How David Simon's *The Wire* Maintains
African American Stereotypes



Anchor Academic Publishing

disseminate knowledge

Rüdebusch, Eike: You want it to be one way, but it's the other way: How David Simon's The Wire Maintains African American Stereotypes, Hamburg, Anchor Academic Publishing 2015

Buch-ISBN: 978-3-95489-391-1

PDF-eBook-ISBN: 978-3-95489-891-6

Druck/Herstellung: Anchor Academic Publishing, Hamburg, 2015

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek:

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

Bibliographical Information of the German National Library:

The German National Library lists this publication in the German National Bibliography. Detailed bibliographic data can be found at: <http://dnb.d-nb.de>

All rights reserved. This publication may not be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publishers.

Das Werk einschließlich aller seiner Teile ist urheberrechtlich geschützt. Jede Verwertung außerhalb der Grenzen des Urheberrechtsgesetzes ist ohne Zustimmung des Verlages unzulässig und strafbar. Dies gilt insbesondere für Vervielfältigungen, Übersetzungen, Mikroverfilmungen und die Einspeicherung und Bearbeitung in elektronischen Systemen.

Die Wiedergabe von Gebrauchsnamen, Handelsnamen, Warenbezeichnungen usw. in diesem Werk berechtigt auch ohne besondere Kennzeichnung nicht zu der Annahme, dass solche Namen im Sinne der Warenzeichen- und Markenschutz-Gesetzgebung als frei zu betrachten wären und daher von jedermann benutzt werden dürften.

Die Informationen in diesem Werk wurden mit Sorgfalt erarbeitet. Dennoch können Fehler nicht vollständig ausgeschlossen werden und die Diplomica Verlag GmbH, die Autoren oder Übersetzer übernehmen keine juristische Verantwortung oder irgendeine Haftung für evtl. verbliebene fehlerhafte Angaben und deren Folgen.

Alle Rechte vorbehalten

© Anchor Academic Publishing, Imprint der Diplomica Verlag GmbH
Hermannstal 119k, 22119 Hamburg
<http://www.diplomica-verlag.de>, Hamburg 2015
Printed in Germany

Table of contents

1. Introduction.....	1
2. Theoretical Background.....	4
2.1 Representation and Discourse	4
3. Stereotypes	7
3.1 Origin of the term.....	7
3.2 The Definition and History of the Concept	7
3.3 Stereotypes in the Media	10
4. Race.....	12
4.1 Race as the Basis for Stereotyping	12
5. The Changing Depictions of Blacks in the US	14
5.1 Depictions of Blacks in Cinema and on Television	15
5.2 Stereotypes of African Americans today	25
5.3 African Americans on TV in the 21 st Century	29
6. The Wire.....	31
7. Analysis in Regards to Representation and Stereotypes	34
7.1 The Simultaneity of Transformation and Recurrence	35
7.2 Transformation of Stereotypes in The Wire	36
7.2.1 Discursive Practices of Representation	36
7.2.2 Changes in the Representations of Blacks.....	37
7.2.3 Character Analysis with Regards to Changed Stereotypes.....	47
7.3 Recurrence of Stereotypes on The Wire	50
7.3.1 Reappearance of Stereotypical Representation of Blacks	51
7.3.2 Character Analysis with Regards to Reappearing Stereotypes.....	60
8. Conclusion	73
Works Cited.....	78
Appendix A	85
The Development of Race in the US	85
Race as Justification for Slavery.	85
Race as Justification for Social Exclusion After Slavery.....	87

1. Introduction

The Wire, David Simon's and Ed Burns' HBO show about the war on drugs in Baltimore and the de-industrialized American economy, has been praised by critics, authors and scholars. It was called the “best show since the invention of radio” (Brooker as quoted by Toscano) and compared to 19th century classical literature of Balzac, Dickens and others. Even Barack Obama named the show to be his favorite.

The Wire was broadcast between 2002 and 2008 and thus is part of the cultural representation of the years before Obama became the first African American president of the United States of America. That might seem to be just a chronological fact on the sideline, but can be considered quite important instead. That is, because media mirrors a society's development and its recent state of mind. With Obama in office, it might seem that America has had a significant change of mind in terms of its conduct toward African Americans. *The Wire* was widely praised to be a multicultural show, if not even a post-ethnic show, that avoided all forms of negative, stereotypical depictions of Blacks and included Blacks in numbers never seen before on TV.

Until today, the representation of Blacks in the media is something academics and journalists, political activists and authors write and discuss about. It is stained by the American past of slavery and segregation. Certain stereotypes and prejudices about Blacks have endured time and can be found in American society, among all races and all classes. However, *The Wire* with its huge number of Black characters along with their quality and depth, is seen as an exception from the usual TV program. The show was praised for its politics of representation, for putting Black characters in a drama, for including them in all depicted classes, all levels of hierarchies – Blacks are part of the street, the law, politics, the harbor, the media (Buehler 55) – and for the sheer range of Black roles that was said to make stereotyping nearly impossible (Morsch 216).

[*The Wire*] might be considered essentially as a black series; the bulk of its cast is black, drawing on scores not only of underemployed black actors but also on local nonprofessionals, as well; just as Baltimore itself is a predominantly black city. But as has been observed of its predecessor series, *Homicide: Life on the Streets* (1993 – 99), this very preponderance means that you see so many different types of black people (social, professional, even physical) as to utterly dissolve the category. Here there is no longer any such thing as “black” people any longer, and by the same token no such thing as black political or social solidarity. These former “black people” are now in the police; they can be

criminals or prison inmates, educators, mayors and politicians; *The Wire* is in that sense what is now called *post-racial* [...]. (Jameson 370)

Hence, it is said that *The Wire* has been a breakthrough in the representation of Blacks on TV.

On one hand, Frank Kelleter claims that popular serial narration, such as TV shows like *The Wire*, have worked as a category to observe groundbreaking social and technological transformations since the 19th century (31). With *The Wire* being described as a Black show, dominated by Black characters in all classes and in all possible positions, it might be argued that the show has been an indicator for a change in the depiction and perception of African Americans in the media and in society.

On the other hand, it is argued that race still matters in the US. That is also valid for the media and their representation of Blacks. Since racism has not yet been overcome, it can be assumed that a show like *The Wire* can not yet avoid a mass medium's politics of racial representation without failing commercially. But *The Wire* turned out to be a huge success. How does its acclaimed groundbreaking changes in racial representation and its success go together? Although heavily praised for that, has *The Wire* really turned its back on stereotypical representation of Blacks? This is what this study is going to analyze.

In order to find out how far *The Wire* has maintained a negative and stereotypical representation of African Americans, I will first briefly explain what representation means and how it works in regard to television and the depiction of minorities on TV programs. This goes along with a short explanation of the terms discourse and hegemony. Both will not be actively used in the further analysis but are a sufficient introduction to stereotyping and to the analysis of stereotyping on US television shows.

Second, I will give a summary of the history of stereotypes, its definitions and its applications with a special focus on stereotypes in the media. Stereotypical depictions in the media, especially in the , are significantly influenced by race and its perception in society.

The perception of Blacks as racially inferior since the times of slavery has been influential on the history of African Americans in the US until today. Race was made a justification for slavery, segregation, social exclusion of and disadvantages for Blacks.¹ That is closely connected to Black representation in the media. What has been thought about Blacks was also reflected on air. Media, vice versa, has been influential on people's opinions ever since. With that in mind, the history of Black representation in American media will be discussed. In order to do so, American movies and TV shows since the invention of the

1 A detailed historical account from the times before slavery until today will be available in Appendix A.

cinema, and that of television, respectively, will be taken into account. This will be concluded with a description of African American representation in the media in the 21st century and a psychological study about prejudices and stereotypes about Blacks in the 21st century.

When the path of stereotypical depictions has been shown from the start until the present, *The Wire* will be introduced in terms of its story and its themes and topics. Afterward, *The Wire* will be defined within the threefold discourses of African American media representation according to Herman Gray. Also, *The Wire* will be analyzed for stereotypical depictions of Blacks as defined by Donald Bogle.

Frank Kelleter has argued that serial narration depends on a twofold structure which includes recurrences of well-known structures in order to have a familiar setting for the viewers, and transformations of structures in order to built up excitement. Since *The Wire* has been praised for its new approach toward the depiction of African Americans, it will be analyzed for positive, changed aspects as well as for negative, reoccurring aspects in regards to those two criteria mentioned above as well.

In the end, this study will prove that David Simon's monumental 60-hour-long show may be an exceptional TV show but nevertheless works with long-known and well-established schemes of representation and stereotypes of African Americans. The praise it has received will be made understandable on one hand, but will be shown as incomplete and ignorant on the other.

While this study tries to give a fully comprehensible and coherent analysis of *The Wire's* use of stereotypical representation, this has to be done using examples from the show. The show in its huge quantity in characters, storylines, developments, backgrounds and its sheer length cannot be analyzed in its entirety. Also, the theories and historical background information used to develop this study, cannot be regarded as complete. That is, because the information used has been adapted to the question asked in this study. Other focuses might change the theories and information needed. This paper gives the best answer to the question posted with regard to its allowed extent.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Representation and Discourse

Representation is a term that goes back to the linguist Ferdinand De Saussure and his model of *langue* and *parole*. While *parole* is considered the act of speaking itself, *langue* is considered to be the system of signs that language is made of (Hepp 28). In the abstract system of language, Saussure distinguished two basic parts. One is the signified, the concept of something that is described by speaking, and the other is the signifier, the sound by which it is described. Together they form the sign itself. Saussure pointed out the arbitrariness of representation in language in which the signifier, the word, has no direct connection to the signified, the concept, it describes (Hepp 29). The meaning of signs depends on culturally specific conventions (Hepp 29).

De Saussure's model works as a basis for cultural media analysis because it shows that signs and meanings have a relation within a certain structure, a specific system (Hepp 27). Their meaning depends on the structure, the culture, in which they are used. Signs such as linguistic signs do not reflect an objective reality, rather, they construct reality and mirror their specific culture (Hepp 30).

We give meaning to things by how we present them – the words we use about them, the stories we tell about them, the images of them we produce, the emotions we associate with them, the ways we classify and conceptualize them, the values we place on them. (Hall 2003 3)

Meaning is found to be similarly produced in specific cultures. “Culture is about shared meaning”, Hall argues (2003 1). Meaning can be shared through our common understanding of signs of language and their interpretation.

The process through which members of a culture use linguistic and other signs in order to produce meaning is called representation (Hall 38). There are two approaches of how to look at representation. One is the semiotic approach, the one that is concerned with the “how” of representation. It is known as the poetics of representation. The other one is the discursive approach which is more concerned with the effects and consequences. It describes the politics of representation (Hall 2003 6). The latter approach

examines not only how language and representation produce meaning, but how the knowledge which a particular discourse produces connects with power, regulates conduct, makes up or constructs identities and subjectivities, and defines the way certain things are represented, thought about, practiced and studied. (Hall 2003 6)

Representation and its politics have to be studied and seen in connection to their historical and cultural specificity (Hall 2003 6), their specific 'web of meaning', their discourse (Hepp 32).

Originally, discourse is a linguistic concept, referring to passages of connected writing or speech (Hall 2003 44). In regard to Foucault's definition, discourse refers to “a group of statements which provide a language for talking about – a way of representing the knowledge about – a particular topic at a particular historical moment” (Hall 2003 44). This discourse, this web of meaning of a specific culture and time, influences representation. Representation is not a reflection of society but rather a sociocultural construction of a reality. This, again, is dependent on the so called discursive formation and the concept of the subject or subjectivity (Hepp 38f.). The discursive formation describes a totality of discursive statements that have the same strategy and refer to the same object. The matter of subject or subjectivity describes the position the subject has in the representation. Foucault argues that subjectivity itself is a discursive construction. No one can exclude his position from the context of the discursive regime he is part of. The subject itself is less important and less influential than the discourse in which it works (Ruoff 92). Therefore, representation is influenced by discursive formations as is the subject that the object of representation is presented to (Hepp 38f.). As an example, Hepp says that although porn must not necessarily be made by or for men specifically, the underlying male perspective could not be dismissed from the genre (Hepp 39). The same goes for American films and TV shows which can hardly be separated from the point of view of a predominantly white American society that contrasts numerous minority groups.

Reading sings is always connected to and influenced by power. Foucault says that ideas could only gain power through discourse (Hall 2003 48). He defines knowledge as power and argues that power grows out of the application and effectiveness of knowledge, not out of truths. The former derives from its historical circumstances and its surrounding discursive regime. Knowledge and power are thus dependent on historical and discursive circumstances only² (Hall 2003 48f.). Foucault thinks of power as a circle. Power, he says, permeates all levels of society and existence and is “a productive network which runs through the whole social body” (Foucault 1980 119, as cited by Hall 2003 50).

A dominance of certain groups on discourse can be explained with Antonio Gramsci's definition of hegemony (Hepp 52). Gramsci says that hegemony is a complex state of social authority which is won through a combination of force and agreement by a so called historic bloc, built from all powerful layers of society (Hepp 52). This authority is said to lay founda-

2 For detailed information about what controls and forms discourse, see: Foucault, Michel. *Die Ordnung des Diskurses*. Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag. Frankfurt/Main, 2003.

tions for the representation of all intellectual and moral questions and thereby constructs a social identity through a collective will of a majority instead of destroying differences (Hepp 52). This definition is used by Stuart Hall in order to define racism and its representation.

Racism for Hall is a “historically specific articulation of different economical, political and cultural elements in a discourse of exclusion of certain ethnicities” (Hepp 54). This leads to a definition of one's own cultural identity through the distinction from a certain “Other” (Hepp 54) and in return to a self definition of this defined “Other” (Hepp 55). This is also argued by W.E.B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk*, and Charles Cooley with their theories of the Double Consciousness (Du Bois 3) and the Looking-Glass-Self theory, respectively. Both describe that a group's self-perception is influenced by the way it is seen by others.

“Representation involves processes of 'speaking for' and 'speaking of' those who are represented.” Through representation, the discursive definition of a group gets spread through society, and also through the media, depicted as mirroring the “real world” (Rayner 61). Media is a crucial means to gain knowledge about the world. While it can help to gain understanding, it also shapes our attitudes and beliefs about the world (Rayner 61). Television, as part of the media, is not an objective and trustworthy medium. It uses iconic images in combination with language in order to represent a three dimensional world in a two dimensional form (Rayner 62). Hence, it simplifies the world it tries to show. Media are formed by discourse and, at the same time, influence it. What they depict is part of a reality constructed by them and by cultural conventions that are arbitrarily defined. This is the general frame in which every sign of every text has to be read. Whatever is shown through a medium has to be seen in the context of its specific historical and cultural circumstances and the majorities forming the discourse in their society and hence defining who the self is and who the so-called “Other” is.

Every representation of minorities does not only show the current state of a society's discourse, but also influences the direction in which it is going. Difference is already stressed by it being shown. Hence, the representation of minorities is of crucial relevance to understanding a society. With representing difference, with making it visible, it always attains meaning as well (Hall 2004 112). This is created through an accumulation and repetition of such meanings. Only when certain connotations appear repeatedly in different contexts, depictions appear that deliver a certain stereotypical meaning. What a stereotype exactly is will be explained in the following chapter.