Revisiting the Dickensian echo of the HBO TV series The Wire

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ABSTRACT
This article analyzes the alleged Dickensian echo of the highly-acclaimed HBO TV series *The Wire*. Charles Dickens is probably the literary author to whom the series has most frequently been likened. This correspondence is scrutinized here, as it seems to have been built upon impressionistic references, rather than on methodical intertextual analyses of both the series and the Victorian author. The analysis is intended to throw new light on the Dickensian ambience of *The Wire*, which seems to be different than previous critical appreciations of the series have suggested.

KEYWORDS: *The Wire*, Charles Dickens, influence, intertextuality, cultural studies.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article analyzes the alleged Dickensian echo of the highly-acclaimed TV series *The Wire* (2002-2008). *The Wire*'s well-known literary ambitions have frequently been endorsed by comparison of the series to literary genres, including the Greek tragedy (McMillan, 2009: 50), and also to specific authors, such as Shakespeare, Joyce, and Dickens (Vest, 2011: 203). The Victorian novelist is probably the figure to whom the series has most frequently been likened (Mittell, 2015: 323; Owen, 2010; Vest, 2011: 14; Williams, 2014; among others).

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This correspondence is scrutinized here. As in any transdisciplinary analysis, a note of contextualization is in order before we proceed further. As Mittell suggests with regard to the increasingly frequent comparison of *The Wire* to the literary form, television "shouldn't be understood simply as emulating another older and more culturally valued medium" (Mittell, 2009: 429). In his view, emphasizing the literary aspects of the show may obscure its audiovisual qualities and virtues, "setting it up to fail when measured bysome of the aesthetic aims of the novel" (Mittell, 2009: 430). This is of course not the aim of this article, but to scrutinize a well-established point of comparison in critical appreciations of the series. It is indeed commonplace to compare the show to the novel. This link to the literary form is sometimes seen as an attempt to "legitimize and validate the demeaned television medium by linking it to the highbrow cultural sphere of literature" (Mittell, 2009: 430). However, the comparison of *The Wire* to the literary form goes well beyond legitimization. Not only did David Simon conceive the TV series as a "visual novel" (Álvarez, 2004: 24), but there are alsonovelistic aspects that have inspired *The Wire*. Take of example the sweeping storytelling scope, which has traditionally been the purview of the novel. Unlike other popular TV series, made up of interchangeable episodes, *The Wire* demands to be viewed in sequence and strict continuity, functioning as what might be television's only example of a serialized procedural (Mittell, 2009: 435).

The serialized nature of *The Wire* brings the show closer not only to the novel, but also to Dickens, known for publishing his novels in installments (Vann, 1985: 61ff). This is probably one of the reasons why Dickens seems a more frequent point of comparison than other novelists, like Joyce or Melville. Of course, serialization alone is not enough to consider *The Wire* Dickensian (see Section 3). However, publishing in parts brings about a series of stylistic implications, which Dickens mastered. And some of them are used to shape the fictional universe presented in *The Wire*, as I intend to show here. It is in this regard that the present analysis intends to throw new light on the Dickensian ambience of *The Wire*, as the correspondence is normally built upon impressionistic references, rather than on methodical intertextual analyses of both the series and the Victorian author.

The article is organized as follows. The first part of the article, which comprises Sections 2 and 3, addresses the aspects on which the Dickensian echo of the HBO TV series has traditionally rested, such as the episodic nature of the show, the large cast of characters that populate the story, or the social criticism that permeates the series. As will be discussed, the way in which these aspects are dealt with in *The Wire* is not necessarily Dickensian *sensustricto*, but these similarities happen to be major structural and thematic shared aspects that are developed in the TV series and Dickens's novels in significantly different ways. The second part of the article analyzes several well-known Dickensian technical devices that are used in *The Wire* to build the fictional universe presented to viewers. These include the use of characters' symbolic names, their repeated speech and body language, the use of

symbolism, and the use of repetition to aid comprehension. Albeit less conspicuously, these aspects seem to constitute a more solid Dickensian echo than has traditionally been alleged. Hopefully, the analysis will serve to contribute to a better understanding of the TV series and its common ground with the Victorian author.

2. THE DICKENSIAN ASPECT REVISITED

The alleged Dickensian resonance of *The Wire* has undoubtedly been buttressed by the explicit references to the 19th-century novelist throughout the series. The most apparent of these can be found in the fifth season: the sixth episode is even called "The Dickensian aspect." James Whiting, the executive editor of the *Baltimore Sun*, repeatedly urges junior reporter Templeton to develop the Dickensian aspects of stories that address difficult social issues (Vest, 2011: 205), even cancelling a planned series of stories on education. Templeton, who fabricates the stories in order to advance his own interests, eventually wins a Pulitzer Prize for his Dickensian stories about homeless people. Another example is found in the third episode of Season Four ("Home Rooms"), in which Boadie Broadus uses the name of the English author as a sexual euphemism: "I'm standing here like an asshole holding my Charles Dickens" (Vest, 2011: 206).[1] However, these explicit references to the Victorian novelist do not mean that a direct parallelism between Dickens and the show exists —even though Vest suggests that Boadie's line "both punctures and authorizes *The Wire*'s similarities to Dickens's 19th-century fiction" (Vest, 2011: 206). In fact, Simon himself has denied that these references were a nod to Dickens to show the novelist's influence in the series. Quite on the contrary, he acknowledged in an interview that "there was a little bit of tongue-in-cheek satire on the show directed at people who were using Dickens to praise us" (quoted in Owen, 2010). Thus, the adjective "Dickensian" is used in a mocking manner throughout the series,[2] as Simon seems to be perfectly aware that this adjective "means contrived happy endings, pure villains and victims and a failure to address the deepest social problems that keep the underclass down" (Williams, 2014). And this is far from the spirit of *The Wire*.

By the same token, it also does not seem to be correct to speak of a Dickensian echo in the series on the basis of loose references, such as the serialized nature of the series, its social-reform component, or the large cast of characters that populate the story. This is particularly the case because the way in which these aspects are addressed in the series seems to differ from the way in which they are dealt with in Dickens's novels. Consequently, a more detailed study needs to be carried out in order to look into the Dickensian ambience of *The Wire*. This is what I intend to do here. Specifically, I will first analyze how the aspects of the series that have traditionally been alleged to be Dickensian are not exactly Dickensian. I

will then look into some well-established Dickensian stylistic traits that are found the creation of the fictional universe of *The Wire*. It is hoped that the discussion of the aspects that follows will contribute to a better understanding, not only of the Dickensian echo of the series, but also of the literary ambitions with which the series was conceived.

3. WAYS IN WHICH *THE WIRE* IS NOT NECESSARILY DICKENSIAN

Due to length constraints, this section will only focus on the three main aspects on which the alleged Dickensian echo of *The Wire* is usually built: its serial-like nature, the social criticism that dominates the series and the large cast of characters that populate the story throughout the five seasons. I will discuss how each of these aspects is dealt with differently in Charles Dickens's novels and in the TV series. They are analyzed separately.

Firstly, some critics claim that "the serialised form of 19th-century authors such as Dickens […] finds its modern equivalent in Simon's weekly 'television novel'" (Owen, 2010). However, the fact that both the TV series and Dickens's works are serialized does not seem to be a good enough reason for considering *The Wire* to be Dickensian, as this would mean that almost every TV series with an episodic storyline would then be Dickensian. By the same token, *The Wire* could also be considered as Thackerayan or Meredithean, as William Thackeray are George Meredith were two of the many Victorian novelists who published their works in parts during the 19th century. Besides, as Simon asserts, *The Wire* "isn't really structured as episodic television and it instead pursues the form of the modern, multi-POV novel" (Vest, 2011: 194). It lacks the more formulaic elements of serials, including those of Dickens. Dickens's novels, for instance, were characterized by the succession of incidents within the same installment, a feature that was intended to sustain the readers' interest (Fido, 1968: 5). This cannot be observed in *The Wire*, which lacks "self-contained climaxes to reward the single episode viewer fifty-five minutes later" (Rose, 2008: 87).

The same can be applied to Dickens's well-known cliff-hangers, which were used as an attention-getter (Coolidge, 1967: 56). Cliff-hangers had a clear commercial purpose in Victorian fiction: they were intended to make readers buy the next issue of the magazine in which the novel was published. In *The Wire*, however, this device is rarely used, probably because its creators "were not interested in sustaining a universe merely for the sake of continuing to have a show" (quoted in *The Wire Odyssey*). Finally, Dickens frequently changed his storylines during the course of the serial publication in response to the opinions and preferences of his readers (Horton, 1981: 4), "who made their views known during the progress of a novel both by writing to him and by reducing or increasing their purchases" (Butt &Tillotson, 1957: 16). Take, for example, the role of Sam Weller, who became one of

the protagonists of *The Pickwick Papers* because readers enjoyed him, or Martin Chuzzlewit, who was sent to America to revive flagging sales (Lewis, 2011: 5). *The Wire*, on the other hand, is "far more intent on serving the demands of its almost sociologically driven story arcs, which are planned several seasons in advance" (Rose, 2008: 87). This is best reflected in Simon's reaction to disappointed fans after the murder of compelling central characters: "(h)olding on to a character and then twisting the story to serve the character? […] There's no gratification in that for anyone. We're not doing a soap opera here" (quoted in Rose, 2008: 87). It seems clear, therefore, that the serialized nature of both Dickens's novels and *The Wire* should not automatically be understood as a Dickensian echo in David Simon and Ed Burn's TV series, as the more formulaic elements typical of the serial mode of publication with which Dickens created and developed his stories cannot be found in *The Wire*.

The social criticism that permeates *The Wire* is frequently considered as another Dickensian echo of the TV series. Owen (2010) offers a good example by stating that "there are undeniable similarities between Dickens's writing and that of Simon and his colleague Ed Burns, and the most obvious is surely their shared grand theme: social reform." Indeed, it cannot be denied that this theme contributes to shaping both fictional universes. However, referring to a Dickensian echo in the TV series on the basis of the theme that underlies the series does not seem to be entirely appropriate, since the way in which the series approaches the social reform is quite different from the way in which this theme is addressed by the Victorian novelist. It is true that both the TV series and Dickens's novels rely on melodramatic conventions "as a method for generating viewer empathy and engagement" (Klein, 2009: 178) through this grand theme. However, these melodramatic conventions are dealt with in diametrically opposed ways.

The Wire, on the one hand, engages viewers using melodramatic conventions, only to let these viewers down later on. This seemingly cruel strategy is intended to leave the audience feeling dissatisfied by constantly challenging its own affect (Klein, 2009: 179). As Simon notes, *The Wire* is "a very angry show" (quoted in Rose, 2008: 85), and it is less interested in changing the world than in showing that change is not possible (Sternbergh, 2008). Dickens, on the other hand, does not subvert melodramatic pleasures, such as the salvation of the individual or the solution of social problems, but uses them to eventually purge outrage in a final moment of emotional release, thus providing the reader with a bright and optimistic vision of life (Schilling, 2001: 108). This distinct way in which melodramatic conventions are used in both Dickens's novels and *The Wire* can best be seen in the ways in which endings are dealt with in both the series and in Dickens's novels, which are also very different. As Williams (2014) states, "what Simon really objects to in the epithet 'Dickensian' is the happy ending that produces moral clarity too easily, as in the hollow triumph of virtue that occurs simply because of a personal change of heart. The 'nice old uncle' or guardian who comes along in the end to 'fix things' is Simon's true objection to

Dickens." *The Wire* is known for largely avoiding "the sort of outrageous coincidences that Dickens routinely relies on" (Owen, 2010). Instead of problems being solved "in the nick of time", the series is filled with "too lates." Klein (2009: 186), for instance, discusses the "too lates" presented to the viewer in the montage of the second season's finale: Frank Sobotka's office is empty (after his murder in the previous episode by the Greek's henchmen); his son Ziggy, who has been arrested for murder, appears frightened in his orange prison jumpsuit; detective Freamon places a lid on a box of surveillance photographs entitled "Port Investigation 2003", symbolically indicating the end of a not wholly satisfactory investigation; and, more disappointingly, several prostitutes are shown exiting the back of a cargo container, along with other illegally imported merchandises.

In sum, not only are innocent victims left behind, but justice does not work for the good guys and "key criminal elements behind the drug trade once again elude prosecution" (Rose, 2008: 86). This sort of unhappy ending is far from Dickensian, and reinforces the fact that the social-reform component present in both fictional universes is dealt with in significantly different ways. David Simon himself rejects the correspondence, as he considers that "*The Wire* was actually making a different argument than Dickens, and the comparison, while flattering, sort of fell badly on us" (Simon).

Finally, the third of the main alleged Dickensian echoes of *The Wire* is the large cast of characters that populate the fictional universe presented to the viewer throughout the five seasons. It is true that "both Dickens and Simon/Burns construct an entire culture from the ground up, from the lowest criminals to the highest reaches of the upper class" (Owen, 2010). However, the fact that both fictional universes are populated by many characters does not necessarily mean that *The Wire* is Dickensian in this respect, particularly if we consider what these characters are like. In Dickens's works, the characters are mostly flat. Almost every figure is characterized by a lack of psychological depth, being "trapped in his uniqueness and his obsessions, and condemned to be himself without any possibility of escape" (Miller, 1958: 90). Quite on the contrary, *The Wire*'s characters are known for their "psychological depth and sociological plausibility" (Toolan, 2011: 164). Omar Little is probably the example that best illustrates this difference between the TV series and Dickens's novels. Omar is a gay stick-up man who robs drug dealers. He is a complex and unconventional character, not only for being "openly homosexual in a way that a gay man within the organized drug trade or within the police department could not be" (Delaney, 2008), but also because he carries a shotgun with which he conducts raids on stash houses to rob drug dealers. At the same time, he "detests profanity, never takes drugs, gives money to down-on-their-luck neighborhood residents, and takes his grandmother to church every Sunday morning" (Vest, 2011: 197). This complex morality makes Omar cross "all boundaries between the legitimate world of law enforcement and the illegitimate world of drug dealing to unseat the cultural codes that define the former occupation as socially acceptable and the latter as socially deviant" (Vest,

2011: 198). This degree of complexity is definitely not Dickens's strong suit when building his characters, about whom there exists a sort of consensus regarding the failure of the psychological characterization of his figures (Andrews, 2006: 78).

The differing degrees of psychological depth in the portrayal of characters is directly related to the way in which they are classified in both fictional universes. In Dickens's novels, figures are known by their "fixity of characterisation," as they "are born basically either good or bad, and have no chance, if not born good, of ever becoming so" (Gomme, 1978: 64). *The Wire*, however, eschews "easily classifiable protagonists and antagonists by creating characters that defy conventional expectations about how they should behave" (Vest, 2011: 194). As a result of the "morally tangled social system" (Vest, 2011: 178) presented throughout the five seasons that comprise the series, "(t)he various combatants engaged in this all-consuming armed conflict —whether police, judges, lawyers, politicians, drug dealers, or drug users— are not portrayed as selfless defenders of the good or brutal psychopaths or hopeless losers, but rather as complicated individuals ensnared in and driven by larger social forces" (Rose, 2008: 85). Unlike in Dickens's novels, the viewer of *The Wire* "cannot comfortably classify characters as good or bad depending on their occupation" (Vest, 2011: 178). These differences should make it clear that the shared large cast of characters in both *The Wire* and Dickens's novels does not automatically mean that the series is Dickensian.

In light of these examples, it seems clear that the traditionally alleged Dickensian ambience of *The Wire* is the result of well-meant comparisons based on aspects that the series and the works of the Victorian novelist have in common. However, these aspects are dealt with in different —and sometimes almost diametrically opposed— ways. For this reason, it is not entirely appropriate to call *The Wire* Dickensian on the basis of the large cast of characters that appear in the series, its serial-like nature or the social criticism that dominates the story. Therefore, if the alleged Dickensian echo of the series is to be scrutinized, a more detailed approach to both the series and Dickens's novels would be required in order to ascertain whether or not this echo actually exists. A preliminary approach to this Dickensian echo of the series is presented in the next section. Specifically, several well-established Dickensian stylistic devices which are also used in *The Wire* are discussed, in what seems to be a more solid Dickensian resonance in the TV series than the one traditionally alleged.

4. SOME DICKENSIAN TRAITS FOUND IN *THE WIRE*

The storytelling strategies and the modes of narrative for 21st-century television are significantly different from those of 19th-century novel writing (see Mittell, 2006; 2015),

which makes it difficult to compare *The Wire* to Dickens's novels from a stylistic perspective. However, David Simon himself conceived the series as "visual novel" (Álvarez 2004, 24). Therefore, it should be possible to search for novelistic qualities in the show and look into its alleged Dickensian ambience. It is my contention that the characters and the fictional universeof *The Wire*are shaped using some of the devices that Dickens employed in his novels and for which his craftsmanship was best known. Specifically, in this section I will discuss traits related to the construction of characters, such as the use of symbolic names, characters' speech, and their body language. I will also focus on some of the techniques with which the Victorian novelist built his fictional universe, such as the use of symbolism and repetition to aid comprehension. Interestingly, these aspects are systematically found throughout the five seasons of *The Wire*; this will hopefully reinforce both the novelistic style of the series and its traditionally alleged Dickensian echo.

With regard to the construction of fictional characters, the symbolic way of naming some figures in *The Wire*, for instance, reveals a clear Dickensian echo. As is well-known, Dickens frequently named his characters after a defining trait that contributed to their memorability. He used a wide range of techniques in this respect, such as animal-like surnames to illustrate the "predatory natures" (Brook, 1970: 214) of certain figures, as is the case with Mulberry Hawk (*Nicholas Nickleby*) or Mr. Wolf (*Martin Chuzzlewit*). Sometimes, he altered the spelling of a surname in order to disguise its meaning. This is true of Esther Summerson (*summer sun*) in *Bleak House*, a character that "personifies true equity shining like the summer's sun through the legal and other institutional fogs of the novel" (Watt, 2009). On other occasions, two adjectives were and used to form a proper name. This is the case with Sleary (*sleazy* y *bleary*) in *Hard Times*, whose name "seems designed to remind us constantly of his flabby exterior and his always being in drink" (Gomme, 1978: 59). These types of characterizing names are also found in *The Wire*. For instance, Proposition Joe, the Eastside drug kingpin who gets his name from his trademark phrase "I've got a proposition for you," as he normally opts for the peaceful resolution of disputes. Another clear example is Little Kevin, the young drug dealer who works for Boadie Broadus. His nickname is clearly a joke about the fact that he is overweight, and it is used in the series as a comic device —detectives Herc and Dozerman, for instance, are looking for a *little* Kevin in Bodie's crew and arrest everyone under 150 lbs., not realizing that the nickname was ironic (Season Four, Episode Nine, "Know Your Place"). This symbolic way of naming characters clearly suggests a Dickensian characterizing device in the TV series (other examples would be Horseface, the Greek, or even Clay Davis),[3] which is further reinforced by the way in which characters' speech and their body language are used to build fictional characters.

With regard to characters' speech, the street argot of Baltimore is certainly one of the trademarks of the TV series (Akbar, 2009), very much in the same way that Cockney English is used in Dickens's novels (Page, 1970). Rather than focusing on this broad aspect, which

would require a deeper analysis than editorial constraints permit, I will instead focus on Dickens's characterizing device par excellence: the use of catchphrases to individualize characters' speech (Paroissien, 2000). Indeed, the use of catchphrases helps to single characters out in the large cast of figures that appear in every novel. Examples of such catchphrases include Mr. Snagsby's favorite apology "not to put too fine a point upon it" in *Bleak House*, or Mr. Grimwig's constant threats to eat his head in *Oliver Twist* ("I'll eat my head if…"). These habitual phrases become characters' "signature tune" (Brook, 1970: 144), thus making them an effective device for characterization in the course of a serial novel. In *The Wire*, some characters are also known for the use of a certain speech tag. The best known example is, without a doubt, Clay Davis, whose 'sheeeeee-it' becomes his best known trademark. This speech tag is even used by characters to make fun of him, as when deputy campaign manager Norman Wilson impersonates him when talking to Mayor Carcetti after a meeting with Davis (Season Four, Episode Ten, "Misgivings"). Another clear example is Omar Little and his whistling of the "The Farmer in the Dell" melody, which, together with his extensive use of "yo" and "you fill me?", contributes to the individualization of his speech and, therefore, to his characterization. Proposition Joe and his previously discussed recurrent use of "I've got a proposition for you" is another illustrative example. These catchphrases are often less noticeable, but equally meaningful. This is true of D'Angelo and his use of "most def" (*most definitely*). Although not as conspicuously as Clay Davis's "sheeeee-it" or Omar's whistling, D'Angelo's use of this filler helps to portray his submissive role. This can be seen when Avon and Stringer pay him a visit in order to encourage him to carry on working hard (Season One, Episode Six, "The Wire") or when Orlando suggests to him the possibility of selling some drugs alongside D'Angelo's work for Avon (Season One, Episode Seven, "One Arrest"). D'Angelo's use of "most def" to respond to his interlocutors serves to enhance his submissive role in a gangster world that is dominated by power relationships. In sum, the use of catchphrases in *The Wire*, very much in the manner of Dickens, serves the purpose of characterization, as these speech tags help to individualize figures in the large cast of characters that appear throughout the five seasons.

With regard to characters' body language, a Dickensian echo is also evident in the way in which *The Wire* constructs fictional personalities. In the case of the Victorian novelist, body language constitutes, in itself, a whole system in his repertoire of characterization techniques. Due to length constraints, I will concentrate on characters' habitual gestures; in Dickens's novels, these serve to remind the reader who the characters are when they reappear later in the story (Brook, 1970: 185). Examples of this technique include Blandois' moustache going up under his nose and his nose coming down over his moustache in *Little Dorrit*, or the way in which Mr. Merdle clasps his wrists as if he were taking himself into custody, also in *Little Dorrit*. In this respect, *The Wire* also offers some illustrative examples, the most obvious of which is probably Little Kevin. In addition to his symbolic name, his

characterization is also prompted by the systematicity with which he rubs is hands. This gesture becomes his trademark and helps viewers to recall him throughout the course of the story, as he is a character that only occasionally comes to the fore. The conspicuity of this gesture is so apparent that other characters use it to refer to him when they cannot remember his name. This happens, for instance, when Slim Charles drops by Boadie's corner to let him know that Kevin has just been murdered by Marlo's gang. Charles cannot remember his name, but refers to him as "the one who rubs the hands all the time" (Season Four, Episode Ten, "Misgivings"). Clearly, the scriptwriters know that viewers have learned to associate Little Kevin with his hand rubbing, as they use it to inform Boadie of his passing. Boadie Broadus is another good example. When he is first presented to the viewer in Season One, he is portrayed as a character who frequently spits (and who does so in a very particular way); this helps to single him out from the other young drug dealers that appear in the first episodes. It is not strange that this defining trait is emphasized when he is first introduced, as the portrayal of the characters needs to be reinforced when they are first presented to viewers. This emphasis at the beginning of the life of a character in the story is also somewhat Dickensian, as characters' defining traits are highlighted at the beginning in order to enhance their memorability within the serial publication of the Victorian author's novels (see Vann, 1985: 4).

Body language is also used less conspicuously in Dickens's novels to help readers understand what is going on. Throughout his fifteen novels, for example, Dickens repeatedly presents his male characters standing with their backs to a chimney —the so called fireplace pose (Korte, 1997: 212). This pose suggests power and dominance, and stands in contrast to the sitting position in which female characters are frequently portrayed (Mahlberg, 2013: 112). In the case of *The Wire*, body language is carefully deployed in the dialogue scenes; this also helps viewers to understand what is going on (Toolan, 2001: 176). Toolan mentions the moment at which Wallace and Broadie are playing checkers with a chess set as an example (Season One, Episode Three, "The Buys"). The importance of this moment for the development of the story (which is discussed below in terms of symbolism) is enhanced by the subtle use of the characters' hands. As Toolan(2011: 179) emphasizes, "the importance of *hands*, especially D'Angelo's hands, touching the chess pieces, holding them up, moving them around, knocking them over, as a vehicle of communication. I invite the reader to watch the chess scene (e.g. on *youtube*), and imagine the whole being performed with D'Angelo's hands invariably out of shot. A hugely different, and diegetically-impoverished, effect would be achieved"

Scenes with Avon Barksdale also provide us with illustrative examples. He frequently laces his hands and situates them close to his chin, a gesture which helps to convey his dominant role in the series. A clear example can be seen when he calls his cousin D'Angeloover in order to ask him which member of his crew is passing information to the

police (Season One, Episode Seven, "One Arrest"). Another interesting example can be found in season three, when brother Mouzone confronts him in a barber shop to ask him why he tried to murder him (Season Three, Episode Eleven, "Middle Ground"). It is interesting that he is sitting down in both scenes, like a king on his throne (which is in fact the term Avon uses to refer to his ruling status in the drug market), as this also helps to project his power. In sum, this use of less noticeable repeated body language, together with the conspicuous examples discussed above, constitutes another parallelism with Dickens with respect to the use of technical devices in the construction of fictional characters.

Leaving the construction of characters aside, *The Wire* also makes use of well-known Dickensian devices in the construction of its fictional universe. For example, symbolism and repetition are used to aid viewers' comprehension of significant aspects of the storyline. With regard to the use of symbolism, Dickens frequently makes use of blatant images to reinforce the main idea around which the plot revolves. Take, for example, the prison in *Little Dorrit* (Davis, 1964: 225) or the fog in *Bleak House* (Miller, 1958: 168), which serve as symbols of the institutional oppression that permeates both stories. Another interesting case is that of the river in *DavidCopperfield*, which is used blatantly in an attempt to force the reader's moral sensibilities towards Martha Endell (a prostitute). Here is an example:

> "Oh, the river!" she cried passionately. "Oh, the river!" "I know it's like me!" she exclaimed. "I know that I belong to it. I know that it's the natural company of such as I am! It comes from country places, where there was once no harm in it —and it creeps through the dismal streets, defiled and miserable— and it goes away, like my life, to a great sea, that is always troubled —and I feel that I must go with it!" (*David Copperfield*, chapter 47).

As Ingham (1996: 25) suggests, Martha's comparison of herself to the river turns the narrator's subsequent descriptions of it into an image for her, thereby enhancing her portrayal as a fallen woman. Thus, she "is the vessel that transmits human pollution as the river does. She stands for a corruption that is merely enacted by the physical plague of disease and goes beyond it" (Ingham, 1996: 25).An even clearer case is that of the birds that Miss Flite owns, in *Bleak House*. Miss Flite is a secondary character awaiting a trial that never comes. Her birds, which have names such as Hope, Joy, Youth, Peace, Rest, Life, etc., are "all caged together and not to be released until she receives judgement" (Gomme, 1978: 50). This apparent criticism of the 19th-century English legal system is one of the many examples that illustrate how Dickens frequently made things easy for his unsophisticated readers (Brook, 1970: 143).[4]

In a series as complex as *The Wire*, we would not expect this kind of obvious symbolism. However, it is indeed interesting to note the existence of blatant images that

seem to be used in a somewhat Dickensian manner. One of the most illustrative cases is, without a doubt, the aforementioned scene in which Wallace and Boadie are playing checkers with a chess set, and D'Angelo teaches them how to play chess (Season One, Episode Three, "The Buys"). D'Angelo not only explains to Bodie and Wallace how the pieces can move, but the young drug dealers "repeatedly see telling analogies between how the chess pieces function and how elements in Barksdale's drug-trafficking 'kingdom' function: Barksdale as the king who may get trapped but 'stays the king;' Stringer as the Queen with 'all the moves,' the castle as the stash, the pawns as the foot-soldiers who 'be out the game early' unless, as Bodie remarks, 'they some smart-ass pawns'" (Toolan, 2011: 180). This moment is, in fact, "radically proleptic" (Toolan, 2011: 182), as we get to know who the different characters are and what Avon Barksdale's criminal organization is like. It is also interesting that, as is the case in *Bleak House* with the fog, this symbolic image comes early in the series, thereby "helping to establish characters whom the audience can begin to understand and care about, and even feel some empathy for" (Toolan, 2011: 182). Another interesting example is found later on in Season One when Wallace is murdered (Season One, Episode Twelve, "Cleaning Up"). This is clearly one of the saddest deaths of the series, to which the imagery used contributes decisively. In addition to being murdered following his attempt to escape the world of drugs, his best friends kill him "in the same room where his young charges sleep at night, thus converting this space of innocence and safety into a terrifying and bloody crime scene" (Klein, 2009: 179). The symbolism is very powerful, as this "violent tableau serves as a reminder of Wallace's suffering and offers a wordless condemnation of the Baltimore system in which the innocent are passively slaughtered" (Klein, 2009: 179). These examples suggest a Dickensian use of symbolic images, as they contribute to explaining significant aspects of the storyline in an obvious way, thereby making it easy for viewers to form an impression of the universe being presented to them.

Finally, particular aspects of the storyline are also emphasized in *The Wire* through the use of scripted repetition, in what seems a Dickensian resonance too. Repetition is often mentioned as one of Dickens's "stylistic 'tics'" (Horton, 1981: 11). Throughout his works, this device is frequently used to emphasize the tone of the story or to depict a character. Take, for example, the aforementioned example of the foggy atmosphere in *Bleak House*, enhanced by the repeated use of the word "fog" (more than twenty times) in the book's opening paragraphs; or the repeated use of the word "facts" at the beginning of *Hard Times*, which is used to stress the importance of reason over feelings and imagination in Mr. Gradgrind's school (Gomme, 1978: 51). This device is also used in the depiction of Littimer in *David Copperfield*. In order to emphasize "this slimy personage's superficial respectability" (Golding, 1985: 60), Dickens uses the words *respectable* and *respectability* as many as fifteen times in only a couple of pages.

A similar use of repetition is found in *The Wire*. As Toolan argues, there is indeed "more repetition of phrases and sentences in *The Wire* (to aid comprehension) than in comparable TV crime series" (Toolan, 2001: 174). He discusses an excerpt from the tenth episode of the first season ("The Cost"), in which Detective Wiggins visits the surveillance team to let them know that he has just arrested Orlando Blocker, who is offering information about Avon Barksdale to avoid prosecution. According to Toolan, scripted repetition in the scene "is used to compensate or repair dialogue" (Toolan, 2011: 174), one of the aspects that viewers —even native speakers of English— find more complicated. Through the repetition of certain terms, comprehension is facilitated. An even clearer example would be the references to "the game" throughout the series, the slang term for the street drug trade that covers all of the show's institutional settings. As Mittell asserts, "(n)early every episode has at least one reference to 'the game'" (Mittell, 2009: 431). These references do more than simply recalling the drug trafficking in which many of the characters are involved, also contributing to the overall tone of the series. After all, the game "is the social contract that just barely holds the world together" (Mittell, 2009: 433) and the unifying thread throughout the series' five seasons. The continuous references to "the game" by the characters —mostly drug dealers, but also policemen, politicians, journalists, etc.— help to reinforce the main idea around which the plot ultimately revolves.

This use of scripted repetition to aid comprehension, together with the symbolism and the previously mentioned aspects of the construction of fictional characters (symbolic names, their speech, and their gestures), suggests the existence of a Dickensian echo in *The Wire* with regard to the way in which the fictional universe and the characters are created and presented to the viewers of the TV series. As has been shown, the aspects discussed throughout this section are well-known stylistic devices typical of Dickens's novels, and thus constitute a seemingly more solid Dickensian echo in the TV series than has traditionally been alleged.

5. CONCLUSION

The frequent comparisons of *The Wire* to literary genres, such as the Greek tragedy, or specific literary authors, such as Shakespeare, Joyce or Dickens, are not far-fetched. Not only was the series conceived as a visual novel, but contemporary crime novelists also served as scriptwriters throughout the series. The literary echoes of the HBO TV series, however, are not normally based on methodical intertextual analyses, but on well-meant comparisons of major structural and thematic shared aspects. Dickens, as I have tried to show here, is a good case in point. Traditionally, the alleged Dickensian echo of the series has been built on the basis of aspects such as the serial-like nature of the show, its large cast of characters, or its

grand theme, i.e. the social reform. However, these aspects are dealt with in rather different ways in both the series and Dickens's novels. Therefore, it does not seem entirely appropriate to suggest that the series has a Dickensian resonance in the series on the basis of these general shared aspects. If *The Wire* shares aspects with the literary genre, and if it is to be compared with the English novelist par excellence, a more detailed approach is in order. Specifically, throughout the article, I have set out to illustrate that the reasons for which *The Wire* may be labelled Dickensian have more to do with the use of certain technical devices that contribute to shaping the fictional universe presented to viewers. As has been shown, devices such as the use of symbolic names, characters' speech and their repeated body language, the use of symbolism, or the use of repetition to aid comprehension are well-established Dickensian traits that can systematically be found in the TV series. Due to length constraints, only a few examples could be discussed. Nevertheless, these examples have illustrated that the parallelisms between the Victorian author and the series can also be found in meaningful stylistic hitherto underexplored in critical appreciations of the series. In this regard, it is hoped that this article has contributed to a better understanding, not only of the Dickensian echo of the series, but also of the literary ambitions with which the series was conceived.

NOTES

1. Even in *The Wire Odyssey*, the documentary bonus feature included as part of the program's Season Five DVD set, we find repeated allusions to the Victorian author. The columnist Joe Klein, for instance, claims that *The Wire* "is the closest I have seen to Dickens," while the critic Jacob Weisberg believes that "people are going to be watching *The Wire* in fifty years the way they are reading Dickens 150 years later."

2. It is only fair to state that Simon considered that the way in which the Dickensian aspect is conveyed in the series —to pour scorn— "was sort of an affront to Dickens almost. I mean, if Dickens heard it, I think he would have gotten mad" (quoted in Vest, 2011: 15). It should be clear, then, that the adjective "Dickensian" was used as a hyperbolic deformation intended to attack people using Dickens to praise the show rather than to attack Dickens himself.

3. In the case of Senator Davis, his name (Clay) seems to suggest his capacity of adaptation, as he constantly goes uninvestigated despite his constant pocketing of bribes. This suggestive way of naming characters is also found in Dickens. Take the example of Silas Wegg, the wooden-legged character in *Our Mutual Friend*, who seems to "got his name because it rhymes with, and is a telescoped form of, *wooden leg*" (Brook, 1970: 208).

4. For further information on Dickens's use of symbolism, see Carey (1973: 105-130), who devotes a whole chapter to analyzing the Victorian author's particular use of this device, providing examples from all his major novels.

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