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How Black Lives Matter in ‘The Wire’: A video essay

Jason Mittell

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As Black Lives Matter activists pushed the issue of police violence against African-American citizens onto the broad public agenda in the summer of 2014, my mind turned to *The Wire*. I had watched the landmark HBO series five times, written a fair amount about it, and taught courses about the series, which portrayed the lives of the black urban underclass and inner-city policing in more depth and complexity than previously seen on television. Although it is fiction and I always am sceptical toward claims of its perfect ver-

isimilitude, *The Wire* is driven by a journalistic impulse to reveal many realities of urban America that remain invisible to many white Americans, including me.

As Ferguson, Missouri was gripped in protests, I thought back to *The Wire* and its fictionalised Baltimore, trying to reconcile what I was watching on live newscasts with what I had seen many times on HBO. The absence of police violence against black citizens on the series was striking, and my mind kept replaying a scene from the second episode, one of the very few instances of such a representation. My support for the Black Lives Matter movement and suspicions of the police felt dissonant with my love and respect for *The Wire*.

As months and years passed, that dissonance lingered in the back of my mind, and I tried to write about my thoughts, but to no avail – nothing I wrote effectively captured either intellectual insights or emotional responses to the imperfect reconciliation between my political and aesthetic commitments. In the summer of 2017, I decided to try to express my thoughts via moving images and sounds instead of written words, embarking on a videographic essay on the topic. Working with footage from both the series and the news, grappling with the ethics of showing actuality footage of police violence, and watching Officer Pryzbylewski cold-cock a kid in slow-motion allowed me to move forward with this project. I hope this video succeeds in conveying this dissonance, and recreates the challenges of working through the fraught politics of representation in an era when police regularly murder black citizens without legal consequence.

Author

Jason Mittell is Professor of Film & Media Culture and American Studies and founder of the Digital Liberal Arts Initiative at Middlebury College. His books include *Complex Television: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (NYU Press, 2015), *The Videographic Essay: Criticism in Sound and Image* (with Christian Keathley; caboose books, 2016), and *How to Watch Television* (co-edited with Ethan Thompson; NYU Press, 2013). He is project manager for *[in]Transition: Journal of Videographic Film & Moving Image Studies* and co-director of the NEH-supported workshop series Scholarship in Sound & Image.