

**The wire. A profane illumination**  
**The wire. Una iluminación profana**

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***Abstract***

*Introduction:* Considered the best television series of the 21st century, *The Wire* stages the city of Baltimore, one of the most violent in the world, taking the cheap drug industry as its central axis. The dynamics to which this illegal economy gives rise serves as a matrix in fiction to understand the institutions of contemporary cities and the current context of the social bond. *Methodology:* Taking as reference the social texts of Sigmund Freud and the critical review carried out by Jacques-Alain Miller based on the work of Jacques Lacan, this article addresses the function of the toxic in this series from current discussions in the psychoanalytic field. *Results:* It is possible to corroborate that the drug culture to which David Simon refers on several occasions implies a push to obtain a plus as the main horizon of his characters and institutions of which they are a part. The reading proposed in this article suggests that this cultural mutation can be analyzed from the notion of object plus jouissance proposed by Jacques Lacan.

***Keywords***

The wire; Toxic; Culture; Plus de jouissance.

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## Resumen

*Introducción:* Considerada la mejor serie de televisión del siglo XXI, *The wire* pone en escena la ciudad de Baltimore, una de las más violentas del mundo, tomando como eje central la industria de las drogas baratas. Las dinámicas a las que da lugar esta economía ilegal sirve de matriz en la ficción para entender las instituciones de las ciudades contemporáneas y el actual contexto del lazo social. *Metodología:* Tomando como referencia los textos sociales de Sigmund Freud y la revisión crítica efectuada por Jacques-Alain Miller a partir de la obra de Jacques Lacan, el presente artículo aborda la función del tóxico en esta serie desde discusiones actuales del campo psicoanalítico. *Resultados:* Es posible corroborar que la cultura de las drogas a la que se refiere David Simon en diversas ocasiones implica un empuje a la obtención de un plus como principal horizonte de sus personajes e instituciones de las que forman parte. La lectura propuesta en el presente artículo plantea que esta mutación cultural puede ser analizada desde la noción de objeto plus de goce propuesto por Jacques Lacan.

## Palabras clave

The wire; Tóxico; Cultura; Plus de goce.

Thirteen years after the broadcast of its last episode, *The Wire* (Simon, 2002-2008) is selected by critics, academics and people from the television industry from more than forty-three countries as the best television series of the 21st century (BBC, 2021). The series drives much of its stories from the work of a police homicide detective team in Baltimore, United States, considered one of the most violent cities in the world.

*The Wire* uses the police genre resource to dissect the institutional functioning of the city. In this way, each of its seasons focuses on a certain social space. The first is dedicated to the streets of the West of the city, particularly the cheap drug industry that flourishes in the most impoverished sectors, and the correlation of violence and marginalization that this brings with it. The second season is focused on the remains of the port, an emblem of its industrial past that now participates in different illegal traffick-

ing circuits. The third season is dedicated to investigating the city council and the political dynamics that by action or omission contribute to institutional dysfunction. The fourth is dedicated to public schools and young people who can hardly use educational institutions to enter other contexts outside the drug and crime economy. The fifth and final season addresses the crisis of the traditional media, particularly the city's main newspaper, and explains the reasons why public opinion does not obtain quality information about the context that the city is going through.

The starring role of cheap drugs in *The Wire* is not an anomaly in television series. It is enough to see *Mad Men* (Weiner et al., 2007-2015) and *Breaking Bad* (Gilligan et al., 2008-2013), located in second and third place on the BBC's winning list, to perceive the central role assumed by toxics in the narrative structures of the best series of the



first decades of the 21st century. Donald Draper, *Sterling Cooper*, and Matthew Weiner's own city of Manhattan, are inconceivable without the huge amounts of alcohol that circulate in the most diverse formats episode after episode of *Mad Men*; and it goes without saying that without methamphetamine the *Breaking Bad* plot would become unfeasible.

From a psychoanalytic point of view, if one takes *The malaise in culture* (1930) or *Totem and Taboo* (1913), two very relevant texts by Sigmund Freud to try to situate the traditional function of poison in civilization, it could be said that crack, alcohol and methamphetamine would constitute access routes to a mode of satisfaction that is excluded from the symbolic regulations implied by culture. The impossibility of total satisfaction of the drive is equivalent to an axiom of Freud's social reading since, within the framework of his theoretical approach, entering the world of language implies an irreducible loss of an amount of satisfaction. From this perspective, any practice—from violence to intoxication—could be registered in the search for that lost satisfaction. The recovery of this excess within the framework of a culture governed by certain ideals, traditions or symbolic references of different types allows us to understand that the origin of the culture coincides with the intoxication practices carried out at established moments. As an example of this idea, it is enough to read the abundant historical evidence present in *A brief history of drunkenness*, the hilarious book by Mark Forsyth (2017), to verify that the consumption of alcohol in ritual or social contexts is a transversal element to cultures as dissimilar as Sumerian, Egyptian, Chinese or Aztec. From Freud's perspective, the institution of certain moments of permitted excesses can be explained as an escape valve

from the excessive pressures and constraints that culture imposes on subjects. However, this reading scheme would be inadequate to understand what happens with drugs in 21st century seriality.

From *The Wire* to *Euphoria* (Levinson et al., 2019-present), series avoid the commonplace of toxic as a transgression of the cultural order to sit squarely in what David Simon—one of the main creators of *The Wire*—describes as a drug culture in numerous passages of *The corner. A year in the trenches of the drug business* (Simon & Burns, 2011).

If the Freudian myth of the origin of culture has as its founding moment the fraternal pact after the murder of the father at the hands of a primitive horde and the correlative resignation of the portion of satisfaction that that leader enjoyed exclusively (Naparstek, 2005, p. 50), *The wire*—read as one of the great myths of contemporary civilization—states that this portion of satisfaction would be the North that presents the current context to the subjects. For this reason, *The Wire's* incisive critique of the justice system, work in the immaterial economy, politics, education and journalism in the age of media convergence can be reduced to the phrase that David Simon and Ed Burns pick up in *The corner* of a crack-addicted family man: it is a very particular type of satisfaction, "the satisfaction one experiences when he manages to get something for nothing" (2011, p. 26).

The first season of *The Wire*, devoted entirely to the cheap drug trade in the city's West, illustrates a dynamic that serves as a matrix for addressing the logic of what happens in subsequent seasons in Baltimore's industrial port, City Hall, the public school and the newspaper. Gary's story, developed in *The Corner*, a chronicle written by David



Simon and Ed Burns about the ecology of drugs in poor sections of the city, inspires a substantial part of the plot devoted to the drug economy in *The Wire*. This is particularly true in regard to Bubbles' character, a drug addict, drifter, *scrapper*, peddler and seasoned police informant. The daily pilgrimage of Gary and Bubbles in fiction amounts to a model worker who in *The Wire* serves as a model for other characters. In this way, the stevedores union, the police, school and political authorities, lawyers, judges, teachers and newspaper editors seek by their own means to obtain something for nothing.

The city of Baltimore that *The wire* presents, which the Catalan writer Jorge Carrión described in terms of a "polycentric network" (Carrión, 2011, p. 188), finds in the proletarians of the drug economy the model of a new work dynamic that does not privilege material production but rather an experience of the same characteristics that Gary describes. This makes it possible to understand that the only institution in which a certain dynamism and inventiveness is verified for the solution of different situations is precisely the drug industry. In this way, the type of satisfaction that in Freud's perspective could be considered an excess situated with respect to a given cultural order, in the series becomes a compass that guides the subjects towards obtaining a plus that, insofar as pure profit, takes on a leading role in all aspects of life.

The dominant position that cultural prohibitions and regulations assume in Freud's work is replaced in *The Wire* by objects capable of producing numbers. The grams of drug that Gary's pills contain are the paradigm of other objects capable of providing the same effect: hours of work, school grades, conviction rates, votes, profits or readership numbers. In *Codes Vs. Numbers*,

the French psychoanalyst Marie-Hélène Brousse (2015) describes this relay of the word as a founding instrument of the cultural pact by numbers in the following terms:

The current management of human resources is oriented, organized, by the religion of numbers. Before, profitability only organized the economic world. Today it rules in a succession of quotas, proportions and counting practices. Numbers and results backed by figures rule over those who make decisions, whoever they are: politicians, technicians, scientists, moral or religious personalities. Statistics ceased to be a means, to become an end. They determine if someone should be rewarded or threatened. Every act or decision is subjected to the power of statistics. (p. 238)

It is surprising that this psychoanalytic reading is consistent with the reading that Richard Price (2013), one of *The wire's* writers, outlines a few years before the start of the series. In the prologue to *Homicide. A Year on the Streets of Death* (2013), David Simon's extensive chronicle dedicated to the "war on drugs" an essential institutional context for the series' plot, Price does not hesitate to reduce the complex engineering of the justice system that Simon dissects in *Homicide* to a transversal addiction to the myriad of actors that make up the story: the addiction to numbers.

[*Homicide* ] Reveals, with no small amount of irony, how survival tactics on the streets mirror survival tactics on the town hall, and how everyone involved in the drug war lives and dies by numbers: kilos, ounces, grams, pills and benefits for those on one side; crimes, arrests, percentage of cases solved and budget cuts for each other. (Price, 2013, p. 12)



The toxic, an object that—as demonstrated by Roberto Saviano (2014) in *Zero Zero Zero. How cocaine rules the world*—generating profit margins that far exceed any other marketable product—becomes an inescapable element in addressing the context of contemporary social bonding. In *The Other that does not exist and its ethics committees* (Miller & Laurent, 2005) Jacques-Alain Miller referred to this mutation as a rise to the zenith of what Jacques Lacan named with the term object *a* and a correlative fall of the symbolic references that traditionally regulated culture. In this seminar, given in 1996, Miller proposes that the effect of this fall condemns the subject to the hunt for extra satisfaction and that this is configured as a great contemporary neurosis. In this sense, the satisfaction of obtaining something for nothing—transversal to the characters in *The Wire*—must be located in the place occupied by prohibitions, ideals and duty in Freud's interpretation of the culture of his time. *The wire* verifies that the discomfort of the characters is determined by the relationship they maintain to that additional satisfaction that determines their actions.

In fiction, the relationship to this plus is staged through a particular way of conceiving work today. In “Baltimore Time”, an article that appeared a couple of years after the end of the series, Rodrigo Fresán summarizes the main component of *The Wire* in his work:

So the real theme of *The Wire*—above and below its police atmosphere and more *noir* than ever—is WORK. The work of law enforcement officers, drug traffickers, unions, judges and lawyers, school teachers, politicians, journalists. *The Wire*, yes, it is the most “hard-working” series ever put on the air. (Fresán, 2010)

The particularity of this work lies in the fact that, strictly speaking, it does not produce anything other than loss, and a plus that is always to be recovered through different profit margins. Perhaps the best explanation of this dynamic is provided by a dealer to one of his sellers:

The thing is, it doesn't matter what we call heroin; it will be sold. If the drug is strong, we will sell it. If the drug is weak, we will sell it double. You know why? Because a drug addict is going to try to get it no matter what. It's crazy. The worse we do, the more we earn. If the government does things right, no one notices. Dee, this shit is forever (1.8).

In Lacan's work, the origin of the notion of surplus *jouissance* is related to the work of Karl Marx, particularly to the concept of surplus value. In *Profane Illuminations*, Jacques-Alain Miller (2022) synthetically explains the origin of this term that allows us to understand the logical function that—like the poisons in *The wire*—can assume the different types of objects from which it is possible to extract this plus.

There is, as a starting point, a skewed circuit of exchange on the market price, with the production of an additional quantity called «surplus value». On the side of the capitalist there is that additional quantity marked by the term «plus» that Lacan will pass off as the side of the analytical discourse, baptizing it as «plus-de-jouissance». In this way, its supplementary character is accentuated. If another perspective is followed, it is also a lost part because it is not found again in the exchange circuit. By following the homologies that Lacan proposes, according to one angle there is a plus, the gain, and according to another angle, it

is the very principle of loss, the lost object.  
(Lacan, 2008, p. 7)

This Lacanian invention implies a way of approaching subjectivity that is homologous to the narrative procedure followed by *The Wire* and other series associated with David Simon's name. Wherever in the plot the viewer hopes to find a truth or a decisive fact that resolves the *impasse* situations that the series presents, what appears is the possibility of obtaining some benefit.

In the first issue dedicated to television series of one of the most important film magazines in Argentina, the critic Esteban Schmidt refers to this dimension of *The Wire* without resorting to analytical discourse:

And the great tragedy is that it is all for nothing. In this sense, in each of the five seasons the researchers have a blackboard on which, with photos and cards, with key words or telephone numbers or hierarchies, they make the research tree. The investigation is complete, someone goes to jail, some other bad guy dies, and at the same time, nothing structural has been resolved. (2009, p. 45)

For his part, Manuel Trancón refers to the plus produced in a transindividual way by the non-solution that structures the plot as a function:

*The wire* made a monumental description of the functioning of an American city (not just any: Baltimore, one of the most violent and with a high rate of black population) through its institutions: police, drug traffickers, schools, journalism, unionists, councilors, Administration) (...). The paradox that the program hides is that it showed not only how institutions do not work, but also how, in the end, they do work. Horribly, but all

systems reproduce monstrously beyond the more or less miserable actions of each one. (2009, p. 43)

Referring to the introduction of this perspective in Lacan's work, and taking a figure proposed by Ricardo Piglia, Jacques-Alain Miller (2022) described this procedure as *profane illumination* since it is a demonstration that does not point to the existence of a meaning or a truth but to something closer to logical demonstration. These are stories constructed with the aim of illuminating the immediate in such a way that what seems to be a hidden truth emerges everywhere. This style of profane lighting is useful to understand what allows the narrative logic of *The Wire* to change its characters and institutional contexts each season without changing in the slightest the effect produced by the story.

The situation of stagnation or the absence of structural transformations with which the structure of history could be described from the categories proposed by Casetti and Di Chio (1991) can be considered from the Lacanian perspective as the effect of a story that is not oriented towards deciphering, but to demonstration. This procedure allows the series as an artistic object to be flexible to the analysis of an infinity of contexts, institutions and daily practices of the contemporary world, without constituting something of the order of theory. In this way, taking drugs as a central element to explain the relationship of the subject to culture, this great series of the 21st century invites us to carry out a passage from a context in which heroes oriented by ideals, traditions or values inevitably shipwreck to a plus culture in which subjects are confronted to exist at the expense of any function while the numbers decide on them.



At the Dangerous Ideas festival in Sydney, Simon (2013) places this perspective at the heart of the series:

And that's basically what *The Wire* was about. About people who were worth less and who were no longer needed, and maybe ten or fifteen percent of my country is no longer needed for the functioning of the economy. It was about how they were trying to resolve, for lack of a better term, an existential crisis. In their irrelevance, their economic irrelevance, however, they were still there, occupying this place called Baltimore, and they had to survive somehow. That's the great horror show.

In the context that the series describes, toxic substances and their extraordinary profit margins are proposed as a paradigmatic object to respond to this crisis. As such, the dynamics that cheap drugs give rise to in the streets is transferred to the objects around which the life of the institutions of an entire city revolves.

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