TEXTUAL AGENCY: QUENTIN SKINNER AND POPULAR MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper makes a case for how scholarship on popular film and television can potentially be inspired by the methodological writings of intellectual historian Quentin Skinner. While Skinner's approach is canonical in the field of intellectual history, his thoughts on textual analysis have rarely been applied to material other than philosophical treatises and that article shows that Skinner's thoughts on texts are applicable to studying television serials. The paper further suggests that intellectual historian Mikkel Thorup's work is useful for pondering the challenges of contextualist readings of television serials and that Skinner and Thorup's work provide useful ways of analyzing how politically charged television serials like those of David Simon take issue with discursive and social realities in an American context.

Much of the wealth of scholarship on David Simon's *The Wire* speaks to how it engages with social and political realities in contemporary America (e.g. Williams 2014, Lavik 2014, Corkin 2017). One example is how the serial's fourth season introduces a storyline about how the lives of four middle-school boys from West Baltimore are shaped by poverty, sexual abuse, parents with drug addictions, severe bullying, and social marginalization. With tacit reference to this storyline, writer-producer George Pelecanos later said that *The Wire* rebutted a discourse concerning the lack of upward social mobility in America's inner cities:

> We answered the scurrilous claim and lie I've heard all my life, "Why can't those kids just work hard and get out of the ghetto?" We showed people why things are the way they are in an East Coast urban environment like that. Achieving that alone was something major and made me proud to be involved (Pelecanos in HBO 2017).

Noting how a specific element in the text functions as response to a real-world phenomenon ("answered the scurrilous claim"), Pelecanos envisions *The Wire* as one interlocutor situated in larger socio-political discussions on American urbanity. But how are we to understand a television serial in this way: as an interlocutor in dialogue with its context? I suggest that Quentin Skinner's theoretical reflections on textual agency are particularly well suited to studying this phenomenon. To this end, I will show how Skinner's ideas can contribute to discussions about how to study the way cultural texts like film and television serials engage in socio-cultural discussions.

Quentin Skinner argues that one cannot uncover the historical identity of texts without seeing what they were doing at the time of publication. You cannot tell if texts "are satirizing, repudiating, ridiculing, ignoring, accepting other points of view" (Skinner in Pallares-Burke 2002: 219) if you read them without heeding their contexts. Just as Pelecanos argues that *The Wire* engaged with victim-blaming discourse in the U.S., Skinner argues that we should find out how texts engage(d) with social realities or other texts. Sometimes this task is almost a given, such as in the cases of parodies and pastiches, where the text is always related to another text in a very direct manner. But Skinner implores us to find out how any text, say, reproduces a prevalent trope, because in that case we find out how that text navigates within a discursive field. The advantage of using Skinner's approach to studying

popular media texts is that it is eminently able to encompass both an attention to texts and their contexts and the relationships and interactions between the two.

To illustrate how Skinner's approach is a useful one for studying popular media I will outline how it can productively connect close textual analyses of David Simon's television serials with social-historical matters such as deindustrialization, residential segregation, gentrification, the war on drugs, and dehumanization of inner-city drug addicts.

Born in 1960, Simon worked from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s as a journalist in Baltimore before becoming a writer and producer of television serials. Working his way up on NBC's *Homicide: Life on the Street* in the 1990s, Simon has since 2000 been a leading producer and writer on seven different HBO productions: *The Corner* (2000), *The Wire* (2002-2008), *Generation Kill* (2008), *Treme* (2010-13), *Show Me a Hero* (2015), *The Deuce* (2017-19), and *The Plot Against America* (2020). This makes him a very successful writer-producer[1] in the television industry despite the fact that his productions have never achieved the stellar ratings of shows like *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999-2007) or AMC's *The Walking Dead* (2010-).

1. THE HISTORICAL IDENTITY OF TEXTS

Central to Skinner's approach is an effort to understand texts in the discourses they engaged in at the original time of writing and/or publication. His ambition is to uncover the argumentative position that a text had in a specific era's discursive landscape. This ambition makes Skinner dismiss what literary studies scholars often refer to as close reading, i.e. to focus on the text without considering its context (Skinner 1969: 3-6). Skinner argues that we must contextualize texts in order to understand their 'direction' and their original argumentative purpose. He consequently distinguishes between understanding what a text *means* and what it *does*.

Making a case for the latter reading protocol, Skinner argues that while close reading can uncover a textualist (i.e. acontextual) understanding of a text's *meaning*, it is only by situating a, say, television series in its context that we can uncover what Skinner calls its "historical identity" (in

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1   David Simon is a showrunner, which is not an official title like "executive producer" or "creator." Being a showrunner means that he is both a lead writer and a lead producer on the serials he works on. He both has central creative duties as well along with his considerable administrative tasks. This also means that he has a decisive say in creating his television serials (Lavik 2015).

Koikkalainen and Syrjämäki 2002: 51). To Skinner, the term "historical identity" is the antithesis to what we may call its thematic or textual identity that we can uncover through close reading. The historical identity of a text is only visible by situating it in its original discursive context(s) and then identifying what role it played in that context. This is Skinner's idea of texts *doing* things.

It is this central claim that enables us to study how David Simon's television serials in a manner that is attentive to their polemical engagement with contemporary American culture. All of Simon's serials feature an 'argumentative direction' in that they engage with specific interlocutors and certain issues; they are not just statements about the American city, Simon's central topic (Jensen 2020). They are better seen as utterances that reach out into the world and try to engage with it in specific ways. The content of Simon's serials thus motivates a reading protocol attuned to such textual agency, which demonstrates why Quentin Skinner is relevant for studying popular media.

Treme takes issue with Katrina and the problematic aftermath of the hurricane and devotes long storylines to exploring issues of cultural belonging and the rehousing of exiled New Orleanians. *Show Me a Hero* eschews the way that many films traditionally depict the civil rights movement. Such films usually locate the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s in the South,[2] which comes at the expense telling a long civil rights narrative which historians such as Jacqueline Dowd Hall, Thomas Sugrue, and Stephen Tuck are advocates for (Hall 2005, Sugrue 2009, Tuck 2012, Jensen 2018b). Simon's productions engage rather openly with these issues and my point is that these serials' argumentative direction only becomes visible when we read them in context.

2. **TEXTS DO THINGS**

Inspired by British historian R.G. Collingwood's empirical work, Skinner theorizes "that we should try to recover the questions to which the texts we study can be construed as answers" (Skinner 2002: 47). To understand one of Simon's serials in Skinner's perspective, then, means to look beyond

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2   The last few episodes of the PBS documentary series *Eyes on the Prize* (1987-1990) is a notable exception to this rule. While the first episodes chronicle the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the murder of Emmitt Till, the Little Rock Crisis, and the sit-in movement and much more, its last episodes take the narrative all the way up to the Boston Busing Crisis in the 1970s-1980s and the 1983 election of Harold Washington as the Mayor of Chicago.

its textual boundaries and see that serial as a response to other people's utterances or as a response to specific social realities. In this sense, the serial comes to appear as an 'answer' to the questions that its context 'asked' at the point in time when the serial was produced. Drawing on Collingwood and Peter Laslett's historical research, Skinner articulates his methodology through the vocabulary of speech act theory as developed by J.L. Austin in *How to Do Things with Words*. Austin coined the term "performative," which, to him, refers to a kind of speech "in which to say something *is* to do something" (1975: 94).

One of Skinner's most clear examples about how to distinguish between what utterances *mean* and what they *do* is the statement: "The ice is very thin over there" (Skinner 1988: 273). The *meaning* of this sentence is to provide information about the quality of an area of ice on a lake, but what this sentence *does* is to warn people, who otherwise might hurt themselves by falling through the ice. The first understanding is rather static while the second way of deciphering the utterance also considers how the utterance reaches out into the world and tries to affect people. This dynamic of *textual agency* is a productive way of examining Simon's serials. They depict with intricate nuance the American city, but they do so in a way that is not only interested in describing — i.e. pointing out 'where the ice is thin,' — but also in *rebutting, rearticulating*, and *redressing* dominant discourses about, say, the state of the city and other topics.

Skinner stresses this *performative* function of language in the sense that an utterance does not only have a *semantic content* but also has a function in that it represents an *action*; it is aimed at *doing* something. Skinner refers to Wittgenstein's notion that "words are also deeds" (Skinner 2002: 4) to argue that philosophical works — his main area of expertise — do not 'just' articulate political ideas, but that they *do* things in their cultural context. Intellectual historian Ben Rogers explains how Skinner's early work "established that Hobbes's *Leviathan,* published in 1651, which defended the authority of de facto government, was, in part, a contribution to the controversy over the legitimacy of the newly formed English Commonwealth" (Rogers 1990: 266). This is one of the ways that Skinner demonstrates that while his research focuses mainly on sophisticated works of political philosophy, his readings do not center only on the philosophical content of these works: he is always interested in uncovering the historical identity of the text in question.

According to Rogers, Skinner's approach makes it possible to see dimensions in texts that are "usually obscured by those

textualist critics who insist on treating the classical works as if they addressed a problematic that existed outside history" (Rogers 1990: 266). This point about seeing more layers in a text when putting it into context surely applies to all forms of contextualization. Skinner's contribution lies in showing how a philosophical work like *Leviathan* engaged in a then-current political debate about a very concrete political fact: the formation of the ultimately short-lived Commonwealth of England in the mid-17th century. *Leviathan*, then, is not 'just a text.' It is an *attack* aimed at specific interlocutors. Like Pelecanos argues that *The Wire* was a reply to a victim-blaming discourse in the U.S., Skinner argues that we are wise to try a find out how a text can be said to engage with social realities or other texts.

But though Skinner was inspired very much by Collingwood and Laslett's historical research, it is often his inspiration from — and discussions of — speech act theory that has drawn much criticism. Several scholars have taken issue with the fact that Skinner extends the concept of speech acts to encompass all intellectual activities, including texts.[3] I, however, do not find that it is its philosophical grounding in speech act theory that qualifies Skinner's approach. Indeed, I find that Skinner's methodological approach of looking at texts as acts is valid without the theoretical baggage from speech act theory and it seems perhaps more productive to see Skinner's engagement with speech act theory more as being inspirational; this terminology helped him articulate his argument about textual agency. Austin simply provided Skinner with a vocabulary that enabled him to articulate his ideas about textual agency in the 1960s and 1970s, but the productivity and usefulness of his ideas do not depend on his use of Austin.

The usefulness of his approach is evidenced through how he alongside the rest of Cambridge School of intellectual history — e.g. John Pocock and John Dunn — have been part of the most important trend within the field of intellectual history since the early 1980s as well as the fact that their methodologies have inspired a wealth of interesting scholarship (Thorup 2012: 182). By examining texts that openly engage in cultural debates, Skinner's approach has proven fruitful in that it opens up a discussion of how texts *engage in debate* with their cultural surroundings. This offers a rigorous way of avoiding the reductionism that can arise from the idea that

texts merely *reflect* their cultural surroundings (Thorup 2013: 98). The Skinnerian approach avoids reducing texts to have that very passive role in culture.

Indeed, it makes little sense to see David Simon's serials as reflections of general trends in American culture. The ideas his serials express have certainly found sympathetic ears but to consider his serials to be reflections of larger cultural trends would be to miss the aspects about these serials that are most interesting. These serials are all produced by creative contributors within a specific company, HBO, that is interested in producing such content. Not the mere by-product of 21st century American cultural trends.

3. **INTENTIONS**

Any effort of adapting Skinner, however, is wise to note the criticism his approach has faced. When he argues that a text *does* something he touches on the issue of intentionality and here he has been criticized for trying to get 'into the heads' of the philosophers he studies. Critics have claimed that Skinner has tried to uncover what past philosophers *thought* instead of focusing on the words on the page. These critics rightfully argue that the former is impossible (Lassen and Thorup 2009: 30),[4] but that point does not mean that their intentions are not relevant. It is merely a theoretical and methodological objection that reminds us that there are some limitations to how we can study people's intentions.

Political scientist Mark Bevir, however, has pinpointed how Skinner goes about studying intentions. Bevir makes the important point of distinguishing between texts as "intentions-in-doing" and as "intentions-to-do" (1992: 295). This is to say that Skinner's approach does not try to uncover what the intention is *behind* an act (or a text). Skinner seeks to decipher an intention by looking at the act itself (the text) in relation to its context, which in the case of David Simon' series means looking to paratexts such as interviews, lectures, and DVD bonus features in order to qualify what Simon aims to say with his serials.

Skinner writes that "intentions and meanings, whether with respect to actions or utterances, are a public matter, and are to be understood not by trying to get into the heads of past actors but simply by observing the forms of life with-

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3 Skinner clarifies that when he says "texts" he has "in mind the widest possible sense of that term, so that buildings, pieces of music and paintings, as much as works of literature and philosophy, are all texts to be read" (in Pallares-Burke 2002: 232).

4 For Skinner's reply to his critics regarding the issue of intentionality, see Chapter 5 of *Visions of Politics – Volume 1: Regarding Method*, "Motives, intentions and interpretation" (Skinner 2002).

in which they act" (in Koikkalainen and Syrjämäki 2002: 46). This delimitation avoids the philosophical pitfalls of trying to look 'into the heads' of writers. Intellectual historians Mikkel Thorup and Frank Beck Lassen use John F. Kennedy's famous 1963 "Ich bin ein Berliner" speech to clarify this point. Did Kennedy label himself as a sweet piece of pastry (a Berliner) or did he utter a public declaration of solidarity with the people of Berlin who at that point had lived enclosed by the Berlin Wall for almost two years? Skinner's position is clear. By looking at the context of Kennedy's speech it only makes sense to understand Kennedy's objective as a declaration of solidarity with Berlin (Lassen and Thorup 2009, 31-2). This way of looking to context to establish what Bevir terms an "intention-in-doing" thus qualifies Skinner's position on intentionality. In studying David Simon's television serials, this calls for examining their form, content, and context in order to decipher the politics embedded in the texts.

Skinner's contextualist strategy entails positioning the writer in her contemporary culture, which then was the starting point for her writings to her contemporaries. In his classic *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*,[5] Skinner argues that a writer is first an *observer* of her culture and that that culture confronts the writer with certain issues that she then *addresses*: "I take it that political life itself sets the main problems for the political theorist, causing a certain range of issues to appear problematic, and a corresponding range of questions to become the leading subjects of debate" (Skinner 1978: xi). In this view, texts are not understood as ahistorical standpoints on certain issues, but rather *responses* to the questions that seemed pressing at the time of writing.[6] In the 1990s, Simon wrote two books of journalism — *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets* (1991) and *The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner-City Neighborhood* (1997, co-written with Ed Burns) — and it seems clear that his experiences with researching and writing these two books and his thirteen years as a crime reporter for the *Baltimore Sun* inform the political drive that runs through especially both *The Corner* and *The*

Wire. The "range of issues" which from that perspective "appear problematic" are issues like the war on drugs, residential segregation, and the loss of manufacturing jobs. This lived experience in Baltimore is then the background that causes "a corresponding range of questions to become the leading subjects of debate." But while the general aim and strength of contextualization is to uncover in texts elements that otherwise are difficult and understand, Mikkel Thorup stresses the difficulties inherent in this endeavor. A methodological guiding light for him is the principle of "textual primacy".

4. TEXT AND CONTEXT

To Thorup, textual primacy simply refers to how some scholarly interests focus on textual analysis while other interests zoom in on more structural matters such as deindustrialization (Bluestone and Harrison 1982) or industrial changes in television production (Lotz 2007). Thorup uses this concept to distinguish between different *Erkenntnisinteressen*[7] in historical studies. He argues that while social history is interested in action, intellectual history is interested in meaning (Thorup 2012: 183).[8] The former is interested in the atextual matters of real life and the latter is interested in text.[9] This point would almost be too basic to mention, were it not for an inherent methodological challenge of contextualist reading: the almost Janus-headed form of attention that looks simultaneously at both the *text itself* and *context* at the same time.

This is the challenge of maintaining a strict analytical focus. Thorup argues that for researchers who embrace the principle of textual primacy it is "essential not to let the *Erkenntnisinteresse* slide from text to context".[10] Context

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5   According to historian Maria Pallares-Burke, this work established Skinner "as a compulsory reference in the historiography of political ideas" (2002: 212).

6   This argument extends from Skinner's belief that there are no "perennial problems," i.e. problems that are relevant for all time: "there are only individual answers to individual questions" (Skinner 1969: 50). This view aligns very much with the reading protocol Jane Tompkins has championed within literary studies. She sees "literary texts not as works of art embodying enduring themes in complex forms, but as attempts to redefine the social order" (1985: xi). Employing a central concept in her theorization of literature's social function, she argues that novels perform "a certain kind of *cultural work* within a specific historical situation" (1985: 200. Emphasis added).

7   This old Habermasian term is most commonly translated as 'cognitive interest' which, however, comes with too much semantic slippage and connotative baggage for it to be useful for my purposes. 'Epistemological interest' would maybe be a closer translation but I nonetheless opt for the original German word.

8   While Thorup's distinction finely sets up different *Erkenntnisinteressen* of social and intellectual history, it eschews the fact that a core feature of social history is its interest in societal structures. To historian Knud Knudsen, both the French *Annales* school and the German tradition of social history seek out links to sociology in order to move away from a focus on actions and events to instead uncover the structural dimensions in society (Knudsen 2004: 45-7). While Thorup's aphoristic distinction is helpful in pinpointing a core feature of intellectual history, its view of social history is somewhat reductive.

9   Social history can be seen as the relevant context for studying a specific text or phenomenon. But social history can only be called context when *we use it* as the context for studying something else, e.g. a text.

10   All translations from Danish to English are my own.

must remain an auxiliary component that facilitates a better understanding of something else, namely the text (Thorup 2013: 100). In terms of studying Simon's serials, then, this challenge has to do with how the contextual matters of television history or the topics that the serials speak to — e.g. gentrification or the war on drugs — do not 'overpower' the primary analytical interest in understanding Simon's serials. Thorup conceptualizes this as "the schizophrenia of contextualization." Contextualist readings, Thorup argues,

> [...] are always interested in explaining the individual case — this text, this concept, this dogma, this truth — but [...] it has to go outside the individual case in order to explain it. At the same time, it cannot reduce the individual case to an indifferent subset of a whole. It is this schizophrenia that explains the frustration of contextualization, but which also explains the temptation to either declare the wholly universal or the wholly particular as the whole [object of study] and thereby strip away context (Thorup 2013: 79-80).

As Thorup suggests, a fallacy in contextual readings arises if the critic — inadvertently it seems (otherwise it would not be contextualist analysis in any sense) — *only* pays attention to the text. In that case, the critic runs the risk of losing sight of the cultural landscape that the text in questions exists within, and one would therefore not be able to identify the full range of the text's communicative potential. What was supposed to be a contextual reading ends up being an acontextual close reading, and without contextualization one cannot see how a text fits into a cultural landscape.

Simon's miniseries *Show Me a Hero* depicts the real-life story of an ambitious young politician, Nick Wasicsko (Oscar Isaac), who in the 1980s and 1990s ended up fighting to make the city of Yonkers, New York comply with a federal court decision to desegregate the city's public housing by building low-income housing units in the more affluent eastside of the city (Belkin [1999] 2015). The creators wanted to create a "musical identity" for the character and ended up using 12 different Bruce Springsteen songs in the miniseries (Miller 2015). Springsteen's long career of singing songs about troubled working-class characters and his public image thus comes to connect to the Wasicsko character. However, this appreciation of what *Show Me a Hero* achieves by using Springsteen's music depends on connecting the miniseries with an understanding of Springsteen and his image. This

cultural knowledge is important in terms of deciphering the textual intricacies of the miniseries in relation to what it tries to communicate. At the heart of this approach, then, lies the historian's challenge: the task of figuring out how a text fits into a certain context – and, to add the Skinnerian ambition, to identify what that text *does* in its context.

The Corner makes for a good example here. This miniseries rejects conservative discourses about inner-city problems but it does not conform to dominant trends in liberal discourse about inner cities (Jensen 2018a). Sociologist William Julius Wilson argues that there is a long-running tendency in liberal discourse in the U.S. that evades discussing the role that culture plays in creating and perpetuating untoward social realities in impoverished areas. This reluctance stems from a fear of potentially playing into a discourse of victim-blaming (Wilson 1997: xxviii). While *The Corner* is certainly more left-leaning than conservative,[11] it does not shy away from problematizing some of the cultural issues that conservatives tend to emphasize more than many liberals traditionally do.

This way of positioning *The Corner* in a discussion about inner-city problems depends on an awareness of the discourses that Wilson describes; without that insight it would be very difficult to identify how *The Corner* navigates within these discourses about inner-city problems in the U.S. Just like some texts come to take on different semantic levels if a viewer picks up on specific intertextual references, so too does such contextualization add to our understanding of the text. Things that are invisible to some viewers become visible only in the light of specific contextual knowledge. Skinner's focus on texts that do things enables us to uncover how *The Corner* engages in cultural dialogue.

5. TYPES OF CONTEXT

As mentioned, Thorup's concept of the schizophrenia of contextualization reminds us that both (1) an understanding of the text itself as well as (2) an understanding of the background(s) from which the text emerged are prerequisites for contextualist readings. This raises the challenge of determining what kind of context we position these texts in. While the insistence on seeing texts as doings things clarifies Skinner's ideas about the relationship between texts and their contexts, there remains the issue of qualifying the different kinds of contexts that texts can engage with. Thorup argues

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11   David Simon labels himself a Democratic Socialist (Baldwin 2013).

that texts can be situated in four different types of context: an individual one, a situational one, a linguistic one, and a social-historical one (Thorup 2013: 86-96). This typology outlines the different scenarios in which we can study texts' argumentative agency. Indeed, one can study David Simon's television serials in all four contexts.

A focus on the individual context is what film studies scholars usually refer to as the auteur approach (Grant 2008) or what television scholars may call the showrunner approach (Jensen 2017). This form of contextualization focuses on seeing a specific text (e.g. a film or a television serial) in the context of a range of texts created by the same person(s). In this perspective, layers emerge in the specific text that would maybe not come to appear significant had one not read that particular text in relation to other texts. In other words, *Show Me a Hero* looks different in the context of, say, *The Corner* and *The Wire*. It makes a difference whether or not one reads a specific text in relation to this "individual context".

American Studies scholar George Lipsitz's reading of *The Wire* offers one example of how stressing the individual context can shape our understanding of an individual text. Lipsitz is generally very sympathetic to *The Wire,* but he nonetheless criticizes the fact that it does not dramatize the historical reasons why Baltimore became residentially segregated. That social reality is merely a part of how it depicts the city (Lipsitz 2011: 103-5). In this perspective, *Show Me a Hero* adds an important dimension to Simon's depiction of the American city: this miniseries zooms in on the struggles connected to residential segregation and thus attends to what Lipsitz considered to be one of the *The Wire*'s blind spots (Jensen 2018b). This is the kind of perspective the individual context can contribute with: we understand these two serials in a different way when we see them in this individual context.

The situational context is the local context in which a text was produced. In the case of studying television serials this would often entail a focus on the production and/or reception of a serial. This emphasis would, for instance, call for examining autographic and allographic paratexts[12] surrounding Simon's serials. Many of *Show Me a Hero*'s paratexts are articles and interviews published in August and September

2015 when that miniseries was first broadcast on HBO. This illustrates how these paratexts — despite their political content — are supposed to promote the miniseries for HBO. Journalistic commentary also falls under the category of the situational context, like how *New York Times* journalist Ginia Bellafante's commented how *Show Me a Hero* arrived "at a particularly relevant moment [in] the national conversation about race and criminal-justice reform prompted by the loss of so many black lives at the hands of white law enforcers" (Bellafante 2015). Such material is surely relevant in placing *Show Me a Hero* in its situational context. This context is very local and often bound to a specific point in time. The third category is much broader.

Thorup's term *linguistic context,* however, is unfortunate for discussing how Skinner and Thorup's ideas may be translated to studying popular media. This term refers to Skinner's focus on the way linguistic contexts can help us understand past writers' political vocabulary by seeing how a writer used an era's dominant rhetorical norms to reevaluate a political standpoint. Skinner writes that "if we succeed in identifying this [linguistic] context with sufficient accuracy, we can eventually hope to read off what the speaker or writer in whom we are interested was doing in saying what he or she said" (Skinner 1988: 275). This sort of comment extends from the fact that Skinner's source material is philosophical texts from the early modern period like Hobbes' *Leviathan.* To reference Hans-Georg Gadamer's notion of horizons, Hobbes' context is so much foreign land to us that it is a task in itself to become conversant in the linguistic norms of that past era. That linguistic competence, then, becomes a prerequisite for studying 17th century writing.

In terms of studying Simon's serials, however, it is perhaps better to call this category *discursive context* as that category includes not only written language but also the context of contemporary complex serials. This televisual mode of expression is the discursive context that provides Simon with the storytelling affordances he uses to tell his stories (Mittell 2015, Dunleavy 2017). The term discursive context is more open and more appropriate for discussing several forms of texts (e.g. interviews and articles) that are not only linguistic but often audiovisual (the serials themselves as well as interviews and other forms of promotional material). Indeed, to situate Simon's serials within HBO's production culture and recent developments within American television drama is only one form of discursive contextualization (Mittell 2012). Another way of understanding Simon's serials in their discursive context is to examine their use of intertextuality.

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12   Gérard Genette distinguishes between autographic and allographic paratexts. The former are paratexts that are produced by the same person(s) who created the main text. In the case of, say, *Treme* this would be an interview Simon gave in which he speaks about that serial (e.g. Mason 2010, Beiser 2011). Allographic paratexts, on the other hand, are reviews, blog entries, essays, etc. by critics, fans, etc. In other words, paratexts that were not created by David Simon or other people who helped make *Treme* (Genette 1997: 8-9).

Simon's latest multi-season serial, *The Deuce* (2017-2019),[13] is riddled with references to classic films like Jack Conway's 1935 adaptation of Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, Michael Curtiz' *Mildred Pierce* (1945), Boris Sagal's *The Omega Man* (1971), and Gerard Damiano's *Deep Throat* (1972) (*The Deuce*, 1.01, 1.03, 1.08). Indeed, while all of Simon's serials stress the reality of what they depict,[14] they also engage openly in intertextual dialogues with different texts, especially with American films (Lavik 2012; Jensen 2018a). Skinner labels his approach as being "pro-intertextualist" (in Pallares-Burke 2002: 236), yet a purely intertextualist focus on, say, *The Wire* would only emphasize how the serial relates to other *discursive* points of reference. In this line of inquiry one finds Charlotte Brunsdon's monograph *Television Cities* (2018). She argues that "Just as *The Wire* owes debts to network television, so too does its Baltimore draw on previous Baltimores," (2018: 22), which reflects how she is interested in seeing connections between *The Wire* and other *depictions* of Baltimore. This is *The Wire* situated in a discursive context.

In a similar manner, we may note how *The Corner* engages in intertextual dialogue with Martin Luther King's 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech, *Boyz n The Hood* (1991), and *Schindler's List* (1993), and how *The Wire* engages with the tradition of revisionist westerns (Lavik 2012). In a similar manner, *Treme* negotiates different narratives of jazz history (George 2012). When Simon's serials are so heavily intertextual, this discursive context is surely important in terms of understanding how these serials engage with specific interlocutors or texts in American cultural history. But it is also important in terms of understanding the strategies they employ to take issue with specific social problems in the U.S.

However, Thorup further argues that, unlike Skinner's focus on linguistic contexts, historian Ellen Wood has opted for incorporating Skinner's approach to analyze texts in their social-historical context, which is Thorup's fourth and final category of possible contexts (Thorup 2013: 85). Wood argues that:

> To understand what political theorists are saying requires knowing what questions they are trying to answer, and those questions confront them not simply as philosophical abstractions but as specific problems posed by specific historical conditions, in the context of specific practical activities, social

relations, pressing issues, grievances and conflicts (Wood 2008: 3-4).

Wood's mention of "knowing what questions [political treatises] are trying to answer" reveals her Skinnerian inspiration, but her mention of social relations, conflicts, and "specific historical conditions" reveals her inclination towards social-historical contextualization. Her way of contrasting "philosophical abstractions" with "specific problems posed by specific historical conditions" points to how the content of a work is a response to a social reality that is both textual *and* non-textual. To explain this with the sub-disciplines of historical studies, Wood argues that a text's context need not be identified within the confines of intellectual history, but that a relevant context can also be social history. This would mean paying attention to issues like housing, employment issues, and schools, which are central in the case of David Simon's productions.

While political treatises, literary works, or television serials may treat different issues at an advanced level of abstraction, Wood argues that the background for such abstract discussions is partially founded in the, maybe rather pedestrian, observations a writer makes and the grievances she has with what she sees. This connects to how social history is interested in writing history-from-below and in examining the living conditions of the masses (Knudsen 2004). In this sense, the Skinnerian position — with Wood's broadened scope — stresses both the discursive and the *social* context in which a text is produced.

During his years as a crime reporter at *The Baltimore Sun*, Simon engaged with a social reality that would be an inspiration for both *The Corner* and *The Wire*. In 1995, he wrote the article "The Metal Men" that chronicles how a few drug addicts went through vacant houses in Baltimore in order to collect scrap metal to sell to get money for drugs (Simon 1995). Elements of this story resemble both Gary McCullough (T.K. Carter) of *The Corner* and *The Wire*'s Bubbles' (Andre Royo) metal scavenging. Both serials reference this social-historical reality very directly. In line with the mode of realism that it embraces so strongly, *The Wire* insists that it points to something outside of itself. It points to a social, non-textual reality, and this fact motivates that we understand Simon's serials in this social context.

Ed Burns and David Simon's journalistic book *The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner-City Neighborhood* portrayed the lives of people in an impoverished urban area, and reading this account of their experiences is a poignant reminder of

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13   George Pelecanos was the co-creator of *The Deuce*.

14   See Lavik 2014 for more on *The Wire*'s relationship with realism.

the importance of distinguishing between whether we examine television serials in their *discursive* contexts or their *social* contexts. To view it in this way, "The Metal Men" is testament to what Simon experienced in the 1990s as a reporter and, to quote Skinner, this slice of "political life itself" sets a problem for Simon and thus causes a "certain range of issues to appear problematic, and a corresponding range of questions to become the leading subjects of debate." So though television scholar Erlend Lavik shows how *The Wire* makes important intertextual references to the western genre (Lavik 2012: 64), which can open up for a (Skinnerian) understanding of *The Wire*'s engagement with American culture through intertextualist analysis, the importance of the social-historical reality of U.S. urban issues opens for an understanding of the real world issues that Simon's serials tackle.

6. SKINNER AND POPULAR MEDIA

In recent years, literary theorist Rita Felski has argued that critical approaches to literary and media texts have come to overemphasize the hermeneutics of suspicion. This reading protocol looks with suspicion at art works in order to counter their untoward cultural significance: "The critic probes for meanings inaccessible to authors as well as ordinary readers, and exposes the text's complicity in social conditions that it seeks to deny or disavow" (Felski 2011: 574). Skinner's reading protocol runs counter to this tradition. Skinner's approach is one that reads *with* the grain and not *against* the grain of the text as is the case with the hermeneutics of suspicion. However, Felski has also taken issue with contextualization itself, claiming that "context [...] will invariably trump the claims of the individual text, knowing it far better than it can ever know itself" (Felski 2011: 574).

Felski is surely right in pointing out how contextualization always entails some form of reductionism. Because when you choose to see a text in one specific context, you are also highlighting some of the elements in the text that speak to that context. Had you chosen another context for your contextualist reading you would be highlighting other textual elements of the text you are interested in examining. But while Felski is critical both of the hermeneutics of suspicion as well as being critical of contextualization, Skinner's approach is fruitful for readings that do not emphasize suspicious reading but which do put a premium on contextualization. Contextualization, as I have outlined it here, does not claim to know a text "far better than it can ever know itself."

That is not what contextualization entails in the Skinnerian tradition, and I believe that Skinner's approach is eminently suitable for scholars who want to maintain a contextualist interest but who do not want to emphasize suspicious styles of interpretation.

For those scholars who study the relationship between audiovisual texts and their contexts much inspiration is to be gained from Skinner's style of intellectual history. A productive part of Skinner's work is that it both leaves room for close reading and the consideration of textual minutiae, while also qualifying *how* texts can be said to engage with their contexts. It is thus open to considering both what we may call the aesthetic aspects of a text at the same time that it puts a premium on uncovering its politics in an effort to establish a text's historical identity.

My outline of Skinner's ideas here focuses on the way texts engage with social-historical issues like gentrification (*Treme*) and social marginalization (*The Wire*). I have shown how this approach's focus on establishing texts' historical identity is relevant for studying popular media texts and I have outlined some of the issues that require attention in such contextualist approaches. But there may even be perspectives to glean for scholars with a greater interest in texts' aesthetic identity.

Lavik argues that one of *The Wire*'s accomplishments lies in how dialogic — in a Bakhtinian sense — the series is, especially compared to many other American television series (Lavik 2014: 152-174). *The Wire*'s way of depicting the American city gives voice to different and contradictory points of view. Season three gives voice to both Major Howard 'Bunny' (Robert Wisdom) Colvin's and the Deacon's (Melvin Williams) distinctly different takes on Colvin's attempt to establish Hamsterdam. Though *The Wire* in general showcases some of the potential positive aspects the Hamsterdam project, the episode "Back Burners" (*The Wire*, 3.07) shows Bubbles going through this area at night where we see the troubling aspects of concentrating many social ills in a small area.

The Wire thus does not only 'make a case for' the Hamsterdam project. Such a Bakhtinian focus on the aesthetic identity of a text may also be approached from a Skinnerian angle: which texts is it that *The Wire* implicitly criticizes when it shows a social world where we do not only see a crime committed and the perpetrator caught and put before a judge? What monologic texts is it that *The Wire* implicitly criticizes through its dialogic form? Choosing to focus on either a text's historical identity or its aesthetic identity is not a matter of

one over the other but rather of which perspective takes prominence.

For these many reasons, I believe that Skinner's ideas offer a relevant, suitable, and nuanced approach for studying how politically engaged works of popular media engage with their ideational and societal contexts. I therefore believe that it will prove fruitful to incorporate Skinnerian textual analysis into the toolbox of studying popular media texts.

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