



TRUTH BE TOLD

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THE RULES OF THE GAME

Given the general customs of American filmed entertainment utilizing crime and criminals as its subject matter – gripping narratives that resolve in satisfying endings that reaffirm the audience’s sense of the fundamental justice of the world – there is no reason for anyone to watch *The Wire*. We, the audience, are warned from the first that there will likely be no grand victories, no vanquished enemies, no heroes riding off into the sunset in police-issue SUVs. There are rules to this “game” of the TV crime drama, and *The Wire* flouts all of them, bringing us into a world where those charged to serve and protect are often more concerned with career advancement and bureaucratic number-crunching than with any conventional notion of justice. Our ragtag band of hero cops are flawed far beyond the threshold of easy sympathy. The bad-guy criminals they haphazardly pursue are portrayed as being so deeply, at times poignantly, circumscribed by the mean streets to which they themselves contribute meanness that easy hatred of them is likewise difficult. *The Wire* is playing its own game.

I confess to a secret life as a dedicated consumer of crime drama. From a childhood ordered by *Streets of San Francisco*, *Hawaii Five-O*, and *Rockford Files*, through a young adulthood of *Miami Vice*, *Hill Street Blues*, and *Homicide*, to a maturity of *CSI*, *NYPD Blue*, and *Law and Order*, I have consciously, deeply, and cheerfully imbibed the rules of the genre. Throughout *The Wire*’s Season One I kept stubbornly waiting for drug kingpin Avon Barksdale to die: to be killed in a gruesome fashion commensurate with the sum total of the lives his criminal activities had destroyed. I actively wanted it. Barring this, I wanted him sentenced to life without parole in the Hole at Marion. Week by week, *The Wire* kept alive these expectations; in fact, deliberately manipulated and toyed with them; but ultimately, in the end – meaning the end of Season One – betrayed them.

If Avon Barksdale was the villain in *The Wire*’s first season, then it would follow that Jimmy McNulty was the hero, the knight-errant whose self-appointed task was to set the corrupt city of Baltimore to rights. Such

was my expectation: McNulty was the Percival who, however bumbling, would ultimately attain his goal, be granted a sight of the grail of perfection and heal the unhealed wound of the land. He failed spectacularly in his role as triumphant hero just as Avon failed in the role of vanquished villain. Judged by the rules of TV crime drama, the show was a monumental failure. “Monumental” being the operative term. *The Wire* was only masquerading at the form, deliberately turning its conventions inside out in the service of a different end.

Drama was first defined in Aristotle’s *Poetics* as the “imitation of action in the form of action.” “Action” (praxis), as Aristotle meant it, referred to human life as it is actually lived and experienced: reason, emotion, desire, suffering. This is where *The Wire*, I think, begins to expand and redefine its genre. As literary critic Francis Fergusson wrote of great drama in *The Idea of a Theater*, “the realm of experience it takes for its own is the contingent, fallible, changing one which is this side of final truth, and in constant touch with common sense.” Its elements of composition are not qualities of feeling or abstract concepts, “but beings, real people in a real world, related to each other in a vast and intricate web of analogies.” *The Wire* was not interested in McNulty’s ultimately futile quest so much as it was in probing the unhealed wound itself: in fingering the jagged grain of Baltimore; beyond that, of the human suffering in America’s urban core.

TV crime drama has its origins in the western, in America’s mythic Wild West and the novels and movies that engendered and sustained this myth. The traditional western rests on a belief in a world that is in essence innocent, albeit eternally menaced by evil: the hero plays a role in purging a specific threat. *The Wire* by contrast assumes a fallen world. There is no specific threat. Corruption is the state of things. Or rather, *innocence*, not evil, is the threat to the status quo, because when you set off a chain of events in *innocence*, a nice word for “ignorance,” you have no way of knowing, or even suspecting, how much damage you might cause.

Jimmy McNulty and D’Angelo Barksdale occupy roughly the same positions in their respective chains of command; both rage in various ways, both suffer, against the strictures of the hierarchies in which they find themselves, but both lack any real power to effect change. They are the catalysts of the chain of events in Season One – D’Angelo, through the crime that sets the scene for the opening trial, Jimmy, through his outrage

at the result of this trial and “mouthing off” to the judge (who has his own motives for setting the hunt for Avon in motion) – but both are ultimately horrified by the changes they do effect, the trail of wreckage and bodies they leave in their wake. D’Angelo is unable to look at crime-scene photos when finally in custody; Jimmy, looking back toward the end, says, “What the fuck did I do?”

What Jimmy *did* (and stubbornly did again in Season Two) was simply to shake one thread of the “vast and intricate web” of relationships by which the city generally, seamlessly, runs itself; and in so doing, to make the invisible visible, before it inevitably settles back into place. No one is above or below this web, no one is immune. *The Wire* casts its unblinking eye on the upper and lower echelons of cops and criminals: each of them suffers, in various ways, from the malady of the city; even Avon Barksdale is perpetually menaced by competitors and by his own crew.

In the beauty and fullness of the show, Wallace, a lovely boy stranded at the bottom rung of the drug trade, is granted his challenges and trials of soul; the addict and informant Bubbles, motivated by love and a sense of responsibility, has moments of dignity; even Omar, the pitiless stalker of the pitiless, is shown to have human qualities and impulses. Every character is granted his reasons; *The Wire*, again to quote Fergusson, “catch[es] the creature in the very act of creating those partial rationalizations which make the whole substance of lesser dramas.” There is no abstract principle of justice operating in this world, only real people; there is no good and evil, but there is right and wrong; actions do have consequences: lives are broken, shattered, lost, or saved, in a game that has no end.

I am, along with being a lover of crime drama, also a student of true crime: corporate malfeasance, from John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie to Enron and Worldcom; political corruption, with a special fascination for the morass of greed, brutality, and inhumanity that went into the making of my home city, Chicago; police corruption, from Boston to New York City to Los Angeles; and drug crime, having lost relatives and childhood friends to what might be termed “the game.” In none of these various permutations of crime is there ever an end to the human cost involved; in none, given the vast interwoven chain of cause and effect, and the ultimate mystery of context or fate versus individual free will, can the journey of one individual, one Percival, stand for or redeem the whole.

This is the real – the fallen – world, an under-acknowledged aspect of our country, the United States, that *The Wire* so thoroughly, brutally, and compassionately portrays.

This brings me to what I would argue is the true achievement of *The Wire*: its subtle awareness and understated indictment of the larger game that occurs off-screen. As much as I enjoy crime drama, I am always on some level wary of shows that use urban suffering as a forum for entertainment. I am constantly searching for the escape, the “letting off the hook,” that these shows give the predominantly middle-and upper-middle-class audience; the ritual purification that allows the audience – myself included – to go on with their lives while the predominantly poor and African-American body count continues to accrue in real projects, in Bridgeport, Camden, St. Louis, Dallas, Denver, Oakland. In *The Wire*, there is no grand public outrage or outcry for the murders to be solved; these deaths have become so commonplace, as they have in our world, as to seem unremarkable. Even Jimmy McNulty comes to realize that the motivations behind his various quests have more to do with ambition and arrogance than they do with outrage at injustice.

I admired *The Wire*'s matter-of-fact awareness that the lives of inner-city blacks – to the cops, the community, and the larger public – are not worth a dime. But the show goes a step beyond this: it is aware that these lives are also, paradoxically, worth quite a bit. The profits of the drug and sex trades travel out from the projects to banks, corporations, politicians, developers, while the unutterable suffering through which that money is made remains geographically contained. For me, the most plangent of the show's many great lines was spoken in Season One, by the sacrificial lamb, 16-year-old Wallace: “If it ain't West Baltimore, I don't know it.”

As articulated by D'Angelo in his classic set piece on the rules of chess, the pawns suffering on the game board don't see the larger game; to them, it *is* all in the game. The forces that profit from the game, that allow the carnage to occur – without outrage, without fear, without shame or guilt – include us, the audience and wider public off-screen, with our own comfortable notions of justice, our own necessities, our own reasons and partial rationalizations for doing nothing to demand that it stop. *The Wire*'s true greatness is its chilling awareness of this fact,

that the wire that links society, that ties us all together – in this case symbolized by the pen register following the trail of money and ultimate responsibility – will be allowed to trace and implicate only so far. Beyond its scope, as the old maps of the flat and undiscovered world used to caution, there be monsters.

Anthony Walton