

## *The Wire* and the World: narrative and metanarrative

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Baltimore detectives monitoring a wire tap. © HBO

Considered by many critics to be the best television drama series ever, *The Wire* ran from 2002 to 2008.<sup>1</sup> It was made and set in Baltimore, employing a large ensemble cast playing cops, junkies, dealers, lawyers, judges, dockers, prostitutes, prisoners, teachers, students, politicians, journalists.<sup>2</sup> The dramatis personae range not only horizontally but vertically, from the foot soldiers of the drug trade, police department, school system and newspapers through the middle management to the higher executives, showing parallel problems and choices pervading the whole society. Starting with the pursuit of a major drugs operation by city cops, the drama moves outward, inward, upward and downward to the docks, city hall, the media and the schools. There are murders, affairs, bribes, trials, exams, elections, promotions, statistics, bylines, prizes, careers rising and falling and much more.

Summing up the surface plot does not tell the real story. There is an HBO podcast called '4 seasons in 4 minutes'.<sup>3</sup> For those who have not seen *The Wire*, it looks like one more hyped-up tv drama and makes the critical acclaim surrounding the series seem incomprehensible. For those who have seen it, it is ironically funny and heightens the sense of how much more there is to it than can possibly be conveyed by simply recounting its plotlines. David Simon, its co-creator, admits that 'the raw material of our plotting seems to be the same stuff of so many other police procedurals'.<sup>4</sup>

### 'We're not as smart as *The Wire*.'

Although it bears many similarities to other police procedurals, it also marks a new departure. As the genre has evolved over the decades, dissonance, disruption and ambiguity of resolution have increased. The gap between law and justice has widened in tv drama as it has widened in social consciousness. Cops such as Andy Sipowicz [NYPD Blue], Frank Pembleton [Homicide: Life on the Street], Vic Mackey [The Shield] and Olivia Benson [Law & Order: SVU] are a different species from Joe Friday [Dragnet]. They are no longer untainted and uncomplicated agents of righteousness, but morally conflicted, psychologically complex men and women struggling with difficult personal lives as well as a crumbling social contract. They cross many a line, both ethically and legally. *The Wire* bears many of the characteristics of the best of its predecessors. Indeed some of its set-ups recall strikingly what went before. For example, the roll call scenes in the western district station, particularly in the final season, seem to pay homage to those starting every episode of *Hill Street Blues*.

Nevertheless *The Wire* has represented a leap in the evolution of the genre. It has moved the process of complexification up a level and in the process opened it out in terms of social context, showing a social order in steep decline in which cops, judges, teachers, politicians, journalists as well as criminals are overwhelmed by corrupting forces which often prevail over all other impulses.

It has also broken from the standard narrative structure to which most cop shows still adhere. In these a relatively harmonious status quo is disturbed by a murder, rape or assault, followed by an investigation combining elements of pavement pounding, interrogation and forensic detection. The killer, rapist or assailant is brought to justice by the final scene and harmony is restored. The narrative structure of *The Wire* unfolds according to a much longer and less predictable story arc. It also reveals a more astute social analysis. It particularly unfolds a more intricate view of the underclass. As Simon observes:

On shows where the arrest matters ... the suspect exists to exalt the good guys, to make the Sipowicz and the Pembletons and the Joe Fridays that much more moral, that much more righteous, that much more intellectualized. It's to validate their point of view and the point of view of society. So, you end up with same stilted picture of the underclass. Either they're the salt of earth looking for a break and not at all responsible, or they're venal and evil and need to be punished.<sup>5</sup>

Simon includes in the pantheon of standard cop shows *Homicide: Life on the Street*, based on his own piece of narrative journalism *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets*, published in 1991. The book was adapted into a long-running series for NBC. While critically acclaimed, it suffered throughout its run from poor ratings and was occasionally tied in with the more conventional ratings winner *Law and Order* through crossover episodes.

However, even within the confines of network television, *Homicide* strained against generic constraints and showed something of the world that would be explored more fully in *The Wire*. Many episodes did indeed centre upon Detective Pembleton and his attempts to break suspects in the box (interrogation room) by virtue of his superior intellect. It also drew into the audience's purview the political wrangling whereby the least deserving were promoted and integrity was punished, the numbers game that turned detection into an annual balance sheet, the economic priorities that constantly hindered effective police work. The status quo was not a harmonious one. In *The Wire* such resolution as there is is achieved in the face of institutional hostility and the demand for media friendly drug busts. As often occurred in *Homicide*, drug dealers and murderers are charged, but do not always face justice, regaining their liberty via plea bargains or investigative irregularities.

*The Wire* also takes aim at the seemingly omnipotent and omniscient *CSI* type procedural drama, where the labour of detection is effectively reduced to a glamourised quasi-science pursued by investigators who look like

fashion models in designer clothes and hairdos in crime labs that look like night clubs. In contrast, an early episode of *The Wire* shows detectives waiting at a crime scene for forensic investigators who are tied up with the theft of a city councilman's lawn furniture while the corpse is decaying. On another occasion, the evidence for multiple murders is inappropriately amalgamated because a temp has failed to understand the meaning of 'et al'. Most consequentially, in season five McNulty contrives a serial killer scenario through manipulation of forensic evidence (after discovering that post-mortem bruising can be mistaken for strangulation) in a convoluted scheme to get funding for real police work. The crime lab itself is down at heel and its personnel look like ordinary working people dressed for a days work not for a cat walk.

Highlighting the gulf between *The Wire* and more conventional cop shows is an anecdote from the actor Andre Royo (Bubbles), recounting his experience on *Law and Order*:

In one scene, the cops come to my house because someone is killed and I have the weapon there. While we were shooting, I saw an open hallway and I ran out. And the director yelled 'Cut' and said, 'We're not as smart as *The Wire*. On our show, you put your hands up and get handcuffed.'<sup>6</sup>

Another point of comparison might be *The Sopranos*, another HBO production that took crime drama into new territory, where the story unfolded in such a way as to open out into a commentary on contemporary culture. It took moral ambiguity to a whole new level. David Simon has praised this aspect of *The Sopranos* and said that he is not interested in good and evil.<sup>7</sup> However, despite what he says, the series itself, as well as his other utterances in interviews, belie this. While *The Wire* casts virtually every character in a stance of moral compromise and shows sympathy for criminals, it nevertheless has a strong moral compass and does not seduce its audience into moral dissolution as *The Sopranos* arguably does. *The Wire* constantly raises the question of a moral code, even if along unconventional lines, and challenges its audience to moral reflection.

#### **'storytelling that speaks to our current condition'**

Breaking from the norms of the genre on many levels, *The Wire* has gone beyond even the best of previous police procedurals. It has set out to create something more panoramic and more provocative: 'storytelling that speaks to our current condition, that grapples with the basic realities and contradictions of our immediate world',<sup>8</sup> that presents a social and political argument. It is a drama about politics, sociology and macroeconomics.<sup>9</sup>

The drama unfolds in the space 'wedged between two competing American myths'. The first is the free market rags-to-riches success story: 'if you are smarter ... if you are shrewd or frugal or visionary, if you build a better mousetrap, you will succeed beyond your wildest imagination'.<sup>10</sup> The second is that 'if you are not smarter ... or clever or visionary, if you never do build a better mousetrap ... if you are neither slick nor cunning, yet willing to get up every day and work your ass off ... you have a place ... and you will not be betrayed'. According to Simon, it is 'no longer possible even to remain polite on this subject. It is ... a lie'.<sup>11</sup> The result is an economic and existential crisis.

Much tv drama has shown the slippage in the grip of these myths, but they still remain in thrall to them. *The Wire* has broken more decisively from them and explored the social crisis resulting from a world in which many will not succeed or necessarily even survive, even if they are smart or honest or hard working, indeed they might even be doomed because they are. In the current atmosphere of economic crisis, it is likely that such slippage will accelerate. *The Wire* can be read as a realisation that the US must come to terms with the fact that it is coming down in the world. Neither the nation itself nor its individual citizens can go on pretending.

#### **'Capitalism is Zeus.'**

Rarely, if ever, has a television drama constructed a narrative with such a strong thrust to metanarrative. Its stories point toward a larger story. Its intricate and interwoven storylines dramatise the dialectical interaction of individual aspirations and institutional dynamics. These build into a story of a city, not only the story of Baltimore in its particularity, but with a metaphoric drive toward the story of Everycity. Every character and storyline pulses with symbolic resonance radiating out to a characterisation of the nature of contemporary capitalism. While the text itself does not name the system, the metatext does so with extraordinary clarity and force. David Simon, the primary voice of this collective creation, has engaged in a powerfully polemical discourse articulating the world view that underlies the drama. The metanarrative, the story about the story, is implicit within the drama, but explicit in the discourse surrounding the drama, going way beyond that of any previous tv drama.

Shakespearean is a term often used to describe what is perceived as quality television drama and it has been used to describe *The Wire*. David Simon is, however, quick to correct his interviewers with regard to its dramatic provenance:

*The Wire* is a Greek tragedy in which the postmodern institutions are the Olympian forces. It's the police department, or the drug economy, or the political structures, or the school administration, or the macroeconomic forces that are throwing the lightning bolts and hitting people in the ass for no decent reason.<sup>12</sup>

This is a recurring theme in interviews. *The Wire* is not a drama about individuals rising above institutions to triumph and achieve redemption and catharsis. It is a drama where those institutions thwart the ambitions and aspirations of those they purportedly exist to serve. It is a drama where individuals with hubris enough to challenge this dynamic are invariably mocked, marginalised or crushed by forces indifferent to their efforts or to their fates. It is a drama where truth and justice are often defeated as deceit and injustice are rewarded.

Of all the forces in motion – in politics, education, law and media - most crucial are the macroeconomic forces, which underpin and determine the operation of the other institutions. For David Simon:

Capitalism is the ultimate god in *The Wire*. Capitalism is Zeus.<sup>13</sup>

The world view underlying ancient Greek tragedy was one in which individuals do not control the world. They are at the mercy of forces beyond their control. This is akin to Marx and Engels's anatomisation of capitalism as a sorcerer who 'is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells'.<sup>14</sup> The hidden hand of the market is as capable of 'hitting people in the ass for no decent reason' as the capricious deities of ancient tragedy. It is a drama of fated protagonists, a rigged game, where there is no happy-ever-after ending.

### **'Balzac of Baltimore'**

Literary references abound in the discourse surrounding the series. Explaining why he thinks it to be the best series in the history of television, Jacob Weisberg argues:

no other program has ever done anything remotely like what this one does, namely to portray the social, political, and economic life of an American city with the scope, observational precision, and moral vision of great literature ... The drama repeatedly cuts from the top of Baltimore's social structure to its bottom, from political fund-raisers in the white suburbs to the subterranean squat of a homeless junkie

... *The Wire's* political science is as brilliant as its sociology. It leaves *The West Wing*, and everything else television has tried to do on this subject, in the dust.<sup>15</sup>

The 19<sup>th</sup> century realist novel often comes into the analysis. The word Dickensian peppers numerous articles and reviews. Indeed within the drama itself, much irony surrounds the phrase 'the Dickensian aspect' used in the newsroom to capture their aspirations for their coverage of homelessness. A corner boy Bodie uses the words 'Charles Dickens' as a euphemism for penis. Critics have also made reference to Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Chekhov, Zola and Balzac.

The blog Scandalum Magnatum posted an entry on Simon entitled 'Balzac of Baltimore', arguing that Balzac, Marx's favourite novelist, sought to portray society in all its aspects, always thinking of it as a whole, showing how it was falling apart at the hands of the rising bourgeoisie. Engels observed of Balzac that, although his sympathies were with the class doomed to extinction, there was more to be learned from his fiction than from all the professed historians, economists and statisticians of the period together.<sup>16</sup> In building a whole world, *The Wire* rivals the breadth of vision of the realist masterworks. It too anchors its sympathies in a class doomed to extinction, living in the shadows of the 'brown fields and rotting piers and rusting factories',<sup>17</sup> 'dead-ended at some strip-mall cash register',<sup>18</sup> 'shrugged aside by the vagaries of unrestrained capitalism'.<sup>19</sup>

David Simon began his working life as a print journalist, a crime reporter on the *Baltimore Sun*, then wrote factual books before becoming a tv writer and producer. His principal co-writer, Ed Burns, a Vietnam veteran, became a homicide detective and then a social studies teacher. He teamed up with Simon in 1993 to write *The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner-City Neighborhood*, published in 1997 and later made into a mini-series for HBO. Their influence on the world of *The Wire* is central. The vision of the other writers is also important. Of particular note are George Pelecanos (DC quartet of novels), Richard Price (*Clockers*) and Dennis Lehane (*Mystic River*). These writers share a commitment to portray 'the other America'.<sup>20</sup> Lehane recounts his initial reaction to Price's *Clockers* in terms that could equally apply to *The Wire*:

It just rattled me to my core. Reading it I remember feeling ... this, right here – is literature. This is what it's supposed to do. It's supposed to go out into a part of the world ... where few dare venture and return with a testament.<sup>21</sup>

Simon has favourably compared *Clockers* to Steinbeck's naturalist *Grapes of Wrath*.<sup>22</sup> Crucially what makes any narrative outstanding is the thrust toward metanarrative. Such works are shaped by an intent to portray a wide social panorama at a particular moment in history. *The Wire* dramatises a post-industrial American rust-belt city. It could be described as a series of linked novels. Simon has seen in long form tv drama possibilities akin to those offered by the multi-point-of-view novel 'where you get the whole world'.<sup>23</sup> The scripts reflect this, written as chapters and largely devoid of cliffhanger endings. The HBO model, based on subscription and devoid of ad breaks, frees *The Wire* from the necessity to write in fifteen minute blocks, each segment ending on a mini-climax to hook the viewer in after the commercial. What distinguishes *The Wire* most of all, however, setting it apart even from other high quality HBO productions, is that it is driven by a coherent world view, by a socio-historical analysis. It signals the return of the grand narrative to the tv screen, but at a level of complexity and nuance never before seen in a television drama.

### 'the other America'

It is significant that the writers are novelists and journalists who live in close proximity to the experience of 'the other America'.

We are none of us from Hollywood; soundstages and backlots and studio commissaries are not our natural habitat ... Consider that for generations now the televised reflection of the American experience – the cathode-ray glow that is our national campfire – has come down to us from on high.<sup>24</sup>

In Simon's opinion:

So much of what comes out of Hollywood is horseshit. Because these people live in West LA, they don't even go to East LA ... what they increasingly know about the world is what they see on other tv shows about cops or crime or poverty. The American entertainment industry gets poverty so relentlessly wrong ... Poor people are either the salt of the earth, and they're there to exalt us with their homespun wisdom and their sheer grit and determination to rise up, or they are people to be beaten up in an interrogation room by Sipowicz.<sup>25</sup>

The priority is credibility. This means, according to Ed Burns, 'you've got to know the world ... otherwise it's medical crap here and cop crap there and a love story' all by the numbers.<sup>26</sup>

They are professional writers, so 'it's not some sort of proletariat revolution where longshoremen and drug dealers have seized the means of storytelling, but it's as close as you get to an east coast, rust belt, postindustrial city telling its own story'.<sup>27</sup> Despite their distance from the dominant television industry, these writers have learned the craft of tv drama production impressively. The production is of the highest standard. Nevertheless everything - from the writing to the shooting - is honed to the purpose of showing the world. Even the directorial practice of staying wide is shaped to this intent.<sup>28</sup>

Its visual style highlights the social structure, particularly in the way it shows lives constricted by the physical space confining them in relation to the physical space surrounding them. We see characters and events against the backdrop of the city from its grandest views: from executive offices or luxury condos overlooking the harbour to the windowless basement offices where wire taps are monitored to the grim abandoned houses where addicts inject. The beauty and space open to some sections of the population is always in sharp contrast to the ugliness and claustrophobia circumscribing the others. One cannot exist without the other.

### **'who gets paid behind all the tragedy and the fraud'**

*The Wire* is

about untethered capitalism run amok, about how power and money actually route themselves in a postmodern American city, and ultimately, about why we as an urban people are no longer able to solve our problems or heal our wounds'.<sup>29</sup>

It is a show in which, the excesses of capitalism are not reduced to the actions of a few proverbial bad apples. As Scandalum Magnatum has argued:

Most 'progressive' Americans think in terms of 'corporations' rather than 'capital'. The former has people in charge who are evil; the latter is a faceless and diffuse social force, which controls simply by going about its business in a banal and unthinking manner. In not giving capital a face, Simon removes the easy way out.<sup>30</sup>

The detectives constantly come up against a continuum between legitimate and illegitimate capital accumulation. They also continually come up against attempts to contain and limit the scope of their

investigations. Lieutenant Cedric Daniels observes that when 'you follow the drugs, you get a drugs case; you follow the money, you never know where you end up'. Detective Lester Freamon suggests that if he could 'show who gets paid behind all the tragedy and the fraud,' he would die happy. In opposition to a perception of evil corporations, he posits a system in which there is collective culpability: 'we are all of us vested, all of us complicit.'

Nevertheless, capitalism, as Zeus, is largely invisible within *The Wire*. Yet, there is a sense in which, like the Greek in season two, it is hiding in plain sight. The Greek sits foregrounded, but silent and unacknowledged at a café counter while underlings conduct business on his behalf. The Greek 'represented capitalism in its purest form'.<sup>31</sup> He only becomes a visible actor when his interests are directly threatened. He reappears briefly in the final montage of season five, still sitting in the cafe, still present, still barely observed.

In its main incarnations, however, capitalism remains unseen and unnamed in the drama, but it shapes all that transpires. The commanding heights of the system are off screen, but nevertheless powerfully present in all that happens on screen. Its modus operandi is revealed in multiple details. Market norms and corporate structures are replicated in every sector from the drug organisations and the police force through the schools and the newspapers. All micro-struggles for power are shaped by the macro-dynamics of an all-powerful system.

**'I got the shotgun. You got the briefcase.'**

Narco-capitalism is seen as the only viable 'economic engine' in neighbourhoods where no other path to wealth exists. Those who are excluded from the fruits of the dominant system create their own alternative. For Simon and Burns it is 'a wealth-generating structure so elemental and enduring that it can legitimately be called a social compact'.<sup>32</sup> An unskilled and maleducated underclass is trapped between the drug economy and the war on drugs. *The Wire* compresses decades of the Baltimore drug trade into its five seasons. Its depiction is a masterclass in the history of the capitalist mode of production and accumulation. When Detective Jimmy McNulty observes, 'everything else in this country gets sold without people shooting each other behind it', the irony is implicit. Within legitimate capitalism, what violence there is remains largely hidden. Only in the primitive accumulation of the drug economy is violence shown as a visible and integral part.

Even within this process, there is an impetus to launder the money, to bring greater order and to reduce the overt violence, all the more effectively to accumulate further. Of enormous assistance in this endeavour is lawyer Maurice Levy, who defends drug dealers in court, procures their political connections and facilitates their property transactions. While cross-examining Omar Little, who describes himself as a 'rip and run' artist who robs drug dealers, Levy suggests that he is a parasite:

You are amoral, are you not? You're feeding off the violence and the despair of the drug trade. You're stealing from those who themselves are stealing the lifeblood from our city. You are a parasite who leeches off the culture of drugs.

At this point, Omar interrupts:

Just like you, man. I got the shotgun. You got the briefcase. It's all in the game though, right?

The camera shifts to the judge who shrugs in recognition of the irresistible logic. In another scene, Omar is seen sporting a t-shirt emblazoned with 'I am the American Dream'. The visuals often underline the ironies and incongruities of the situation: the powerless adopting the icons of power with crowns on their t-shirts, drug

dealers and murderers wearing crucifixes, a statue of the Virgin Mary on display at the wake of the promiscuous McNulty.

A key figure in the trajectory of transformation from primitive to more advanced accumulation is Stringer Bell, second-in-command of the Barksdale drug organisation. When McNulty tails him, he finds that his destination is Baltimore City Community College, where he is taking a course on macroeconomics. As he progresses in his course and tightens his control of the organisation, we see him explicitly applying his lessons to the drug trade. From the start, Stringer conceptualises the process at a level inaccessible to street dealers: 'Every market-based business runs in cycles. We're in a down cycle now'.

Indeed, under his leadership, we see the organisation progress from making on-the-fly decisions in the grubby back room of a strip club to holding formal meetings in a funeral home according to *Robert's Rules of Order* to forming a cartel that meets in an upmarket hotel conference facility laid out as a corporate boardroom. He comes to recognise that traditional ideas about control of territory are meaningless if the product is bad. Moreover, it's the fight for the territory that brings the bodies and the bodies that bring the police, which forces dealers off the streets, affecting productivity and profits. Eventually he uses illegal profits to buy legal property, to mix with the movers and shakers of the propertied class, to bribe politicians, to accumulate further capital, to integrate into the dominant system. When police enter his upscale apartment, the camera settles on the book McNulty pulls down from the shelf: Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*. McNulty ponders who it was that they were chasing.

#### **'The game is rigged.'**

Ultimately however, Stringer is felled by hubris. Despite, or perhaps because of, his education, he fails to see the true nature of the system that confronts him. He takes his lessons in economics at face value. Consequently he is conned out of millions of dollars by the corrupt state senator, Clay Davis. Simultaneously, he is betrayed by Avon, unimpressed by Stringer's attempts to reform the drug trade. Avon stands for a more traditional criminal subculture in contrast to the technocratic approach espoused by Stringer. He is 'just a gangster' who believes in holding territory for its own sake. He poses as a community leader, serving food at a cook-out and financing a boxing club. When Barksdale enforcer Dennis 'Cutty' Wise finds himself repelled by the violence on his return from prison, Avon allows him to walk away. It is Avon's loyalty to his family that finally seals Stringer's fate, when he discovers that Stringer ordered D'Angelo's death. Family loyalty is seen to be hollow, however, despite the Sopranoesque code articulated by the Barksdales, as it is coerced family loyalty that really betrayed D'Angelo and led to his death.

Ironically, it is Marlo Stanfield, successor to the Barksdale organisation, who reaps the rewards of Stringer's education. He too understands that it is the bodies that bring the police, but rather than eradicate the violence, he hides the bodies, rendering the violence invisible. Unlike Avon, he views any wavering of commitment, such as that represented by Cutty, as a threat to be eliminated. In the end, Marlo achieves everything that Stringer wanted, but has no idea of where to go with it. He meets with the city powers at a reception in a high rise office block, looking out across the city they each in their different ways control. The contrast with Stringer is striking, as he was never truly admitted to the circles of power. Stringer was forced to meet with property developers in restaurants or restricted to the lobby of corporate tower blocks while Clay Davis claimed to graft on his behalf. (29) For all of his frequent callousness, Stringer believed he could tame the system. Marlo is on the verge of admission to the inner circle, his extreme ruthlessness seemingly marking him out as one of its own. However he cannot find a place for himself there and descends into the streets, now belonging in neither place.



Most characters for most of the time do not understand the nature of the system in which they live and work. Yet even those with least education, least mobility, sometimes have their moments of insight. Zinovia, in a school programme for difficult pupils remarks: 'We got our thing, but it's just part of the big thing.' Namond Brice in the same programme exposes the hypocrisy of moral outrage over the drug trade by drawing parallels with Enron, the use of steroids and the tobacco industry. Street dealer Wallace, speculating on the provenance of chicken nuggets, decides that whoever invented them must be rich, but D'Angelo corrects him. They were invented by 'some sad ass' in the basement of McDonalds, while the real players made all the money. The sad ass is still in the basement, working for a wage, thinking up ways to make fries taste better. When one expresses moral outrage, D'Angelo counters, 'it ain't about right. It's about money.'

When D'Angelo attempts to school Wallace and Bodie in the game of chess, he uses the metaphor of the drug trade. The king stays the king, protected, like Avon Barksdale. The queen is Stringer, 'the go get shit done piece', who has all the moves. Pawns are soldiers. They are expendable and get 'capped' quickly. Unless, as Bodie observes, 'they some smart ass pawns.' Later, in conversation with McNulty as the nature of narco-capitalism becomes apparent, Bodie realises that 'the game is rigged. We like them little bitches on the chess board.'

The institutional structures of this rigged game are replicated in the police force and the organisations they pursue. McNulty and Bodie develop a grudging respect for each other, in their mutual attempts to do a good job in their respective sectors. In season four they share something of a heart to heart about their roles in organisations that are either indifferent or openly hostile to their efforts. Bodie becomes disillusioned after the Barksdales are destroyed by Stringer's death and Avon's incarceration. He is forced to sell drugs for Marlo, who has taken Stringer's technocratic tendencies to their most callous extreme. Even though he killed his friend Wallace on Stringer's orders, he is repulsed by the arbitrary killings and Marlo's disregard for his own workers, remarking 'I do what I gotta ... just don't ask me to live on my fuckin' knees'. McNulty, recognising elements of himself in the corner boy, notes 'you're a soldier, Bodie.' It is one of a number of revealing encounters between cops and criminals.

### **'How do you get from here to the rest of the world?'**

The corner boys come from an underclass severely circumscribed by their conditions of life. They are an inexhaustible labour supply for the drug organisations and can hardly imagine being other than they are and doing other than they do. Yet sometimes they try. They reach beyond, usually groping in the dark. D'Angelo Barksdale, born into the drugs trade and given a preordained role in it, is never offered a hint of an alternative path, no matter how ill-suited he is to his assigned role. On several occasions, he speaks of being unable to breathe, of wanting 'to go somewhere where I can breathe'. In prison, he participates in a reading group operating under the custodianship of Richard Price, in a cameo appearance. This is the nearest he comes to breathing. Ironically, tragically, he is killed in the library. Even more ironically, they had been discussing F Scott Fitzgerald's assertion that 'there are no second acts in American lives'. D'Angelo's interpretation of *The Great Gatsby* is that 'the past is always with us' and that 'what came first is who you really are.'

Similarly, Roland Pryzbylewski, coerced onto a career path for which he has no aptitude by his police major father-in-law, is a hopeless street cop who develops a talent for electronic surveillance and breaks the Barksdale communication code. On the docks, Ziggy Sobotka has none of the qualities appropriate to being a docker or trade unionist, yet he is doomed to flounder around ridiculously in that world. By contrast, his cousin Nicky has all that it would take, if only the world in which such skill mattered weren't disintegrating all around him. He shames himself, his family and his union by taking up the drugs trade.

Although such failure is found in all strata of society, it is the black underclass who have the most difficulty and the least room for maneuver. Season four shows this underclass even earlier in the life cycle, going into their schools as well as their homes. Duquan 'Dukie' Weems, the son of hopeless junkies who sell his clothes and leave him behind when evicted, begins to blossom in school, but cannot find his way after that. He tries working the corners, then looking for a proper job, but nothing works out for him. He asks Cutty Wise, the boxing coach: 'How do you get from here to the rest of the world?' Cutty confesses that he doesn't know either. Neither ever do find out.

There are rare moments of redemption. Namond Brice, son of a top player in the Barksdale organisation, is pushed by his mother to fill the shoes of his imprisoned father. He comes under the wing of a cop turned teacher-social-worker, who eventually adopts him and he thrives, becoming an articulate speaker in a debating competition. Unlike more conventional tv drama, which is structured around such individual triumph against social obstacles, this outcome is shown as marginal. Namond's transition to a secure, ordered environment is contrasted with Randy Wagstaff's arrival at a group foster home and the approaching violence as he is marked out as a snitch. Sergeant Carver, having attempted unsuccessfully to foster Randy himself, pounds his car horn in anger and despair as he leaves him there.

Of the four pupils foregrounded in season four, three come to tragic fates. Michael Lee, the strongest and smartest, goes into dealing at first to bear the burden of a child rearing a child. Appalled by the violence of the game, especially when he realises that his own organisation is about to kill him, he adopts his own moral code and becomes a stick-up artist robbing drug crews. Randy, brutalised in the group home, in turn becomes brutaliser. One of the saddest scenes of the whole series is when we see Dukie settling into in a homeless camp and shooting up.

**'the fewer we need.'**

These children are the discarded surplus of a world in which capital has triumphed over labour. According to David Simon:

Every day, human beings are worth less. That is the triumph of capital. ...  
The more we become post-industrial, the fewer we need.<sup>33</sup>

The marginally employed dockers of season two are shown a presentation featuring the use of robotics on the port of Rotterdam, a chilling vision of the future where there will be even less use for their labour.

What becomes clear through viewing *The Wire* is that the triumph of capital over labour is accentuated by the triumph of finance over manufacturing capital. Ironically, the economic sphere in *The Wire* that comes closest to producing a commodity and offering full time employment is narco-capitalism. The dockers are on their way down in the world, existing on five or six days paid work a month. They have been reduced to smuggling, bribing and drug dealing. In the larger picture, they are pitched worker against worker, competing directly with other ports for survival. All they have to offer is their superior labour, undermined by the crime to which they turn for short-term survival. They are merely one link in a global distribution chain, in which everything from cars to guns to dope to women can be imported cheaply from overseas. Union leader Frank Sobotka succinctly summarises the situation:

We used to make shit in this country, build shit.  
Now we just put our hand in the next guy's pocket.

Catastrophically Frank Sobotka has accepted the dominant systemic logic. He hires a lobbyist, using the proceeds of smuggling operations to bribe politicians. Union militancy is absent in a situation where there are few jobs to defend and where workers are effectively reduced to fighting over scraps. Season two is an exploration of what a union does when its *raison d'être* is dying.

### 'juking the stats'

The political structure, as portrayed in *The Wire*, is one that has adopted the priorities of finance capitalism. Commodity value is consistently prioritised over use value. The public sector is increasingly impoverished to the point where it cannot meet basic needs, while money accumulates in other sectors, particularly in the drug trade, beyond any possible need or use. Marlo has no idea what to do with all the wealth he has amassed, although he does invest in the future loyalty of his prospective workers by handing out money for new school clothes in the manner of a feudal lord dispensing favours. Meanwhile the public sphere is stripped of resources. Politicians cut budgets and police and teachers cut corners on the job and go into debt at home.

To defend their declining position, they take on the prevailing modes of justification. Public services appear to produce little in the way of real results. The school system struggles but fails to educate and the police force strives but fails to reduce crime. In this social reality, where nothing of market value seems to be produced, how is performance to be measured? Paradoxically, measurement cloaks the lack of performance. Even further, producing the metrics disincentivises meaningful performance.

From the first episode this is made starkly clear. McNulty, after talking to a judge, unwittingly brings to the bosses' attention a series of related murders linked to the Barksdales. He is, in the harshest terms, reprimanded for violating the chain of command. Major Rawls, head of homicide, is most outraged, however, by the fact that one of the murders is a case from the previous year and therefore has no bearing on the current year's statistics.

The massaging of crime figures is clearly illustrated in *The Wire*, where it is regularly described as 'juking the stats'. In season three we are introduced to COMSTAT meetings. Via powerpoint presentations police produce figures to suggest decreases in crime. They are brutally berated and often demoted for their failures. To defend themselves, they find ways to reclassify crimes, making aggravated assaults into common assaults, and effectively doing everything but make bodies disappear. Sometimes they even try that. When the bodies concealed by the Stanfield gang are discovered, the homicide sergeant suggests to the detective that he might want to leave them where they are, as there are only three weeks left in the year and the unit clearance rate is already under 50%.

There are other relevant metrics as well as the year and body count. There is the fact that some bodies are found dead in a zip code that doesn't matter, a statistic with strong undercurrents of race and class. Dozens of black, poor bodies in Baltimore count for less than one white suburban ex-cheerleader in Aruba, the cops comment. There is such a conversation in the newsroom as well. Overtime pay is another metric. One lazy detective insists that 'cases go from red to black via green'.<sup>34</sup>

The tyranny of numbers extends beyond the police department. When Roland Pryzbylewski is dismissed from the police force for the accidental shooting of a black officer, he becomes a public school teacher. Sitting in a meeting to discuss how to 'teach the test' for the forthcoming 'no child left behind' standardised tests, he experiences a flash of recognition. 'Juking the stats,' he comments to a colleague, explaining:

You juke the stats and majors become colonels.  
I've been here before.

The manipulation of teaching to achieve test scores is the exact equivalent of the manipulation of crime statistics at COMSTAT. He sees the progress made by his adopting unconventional teaching methods and by the experimental programme designed to resocialise troubled children eviscerated. Tellingly a seminar on teaching strategy is counterposed with a police meeting on anti-terrorism in a succession of scenes ironically juxtaposed with each other.

There is a constant tension in the series between those who want to do the job well and those who want to climb the career ladder, even though this usually means doing the job badly. We see it play out over and over, whether between cops, politicians, lawyers, teachers or journalists. Conversely, there *is* no career ladder for the dockers of season two.

The police are the most sustained presence in the series. There is a strong commitment to building strong but difficult cases, tracing how the money and power are routed, on the part of Freamon, McNulty, Daniels, Greggs. They are constantly under pressure from those higher up the chain of command, who are in turn under pressure from city hall, to produce easy street rips that will produce arrests and drug seizures that will provide positive press conferences and impressive crime stats. Daniels worries that one generation is training the next how *not* to do the job.

The good guys do not win. By the end of the series some of the best police must go - Daniels, McNulty, Freamon, Colvin – while the worst thrive – Valchek, Rawls, Burrell. Yet some – Greggs, Moreland, Carver – survive to do another decent day's work. The police exhibit the same moral ambiguity as does the society as a whole. The venal but eloquent Sergeant Landsman reflects: 'We are policing a culture of moral decline'.

#### **'We had us a community.'**

Not that anyone in this series believes that there was a golden age in the past, but citizens at neighbourhood meetings do articulate fond memories of chatting with the cop on the beat when they knew each others' names and stories. Various characters contrast the present with a time in the past when there was productivity and community. A striking confrontation between past and present comes in an exchange between Omar Little and Detective Bunk Moreland. Bunk calls Omar to account for the decline of the neighbourhood where they both grew up:

As rough as that neighbourhood could be, we had us a community. Nobody no victim who didn't matter. And now all we got is bodies. And predatory motherfuckers like you. And out where that girl fell, I saw kids acting like Omar, calling you by name, glorifying your ass. Makes me sick, motherfucker, how far we done fell.

This is paralleled by another scene between cop and criminal. Ex-major Colvin, when visiting Wee-Bay Brice in prison to ask for custody of his son, gets into a conversation where they both recall the west side they once knew and contrast it to what they see now: a place where there is no family, no code, no respect. The difference between what places were and are and how that is experienced by different characters is marked in a myriad of ways. Daniels visits the hall where the dead bodies from the vacant houses are brought to be processed and remembers that it was where he went to school.

Unemployment, underemployment, the priorities of the stats game, the victory of rampant capitalism have destroyed not only this world that made sense, but the prescriptive narratives and solidarities that grew from it.

The labour movement, the black power movement and the ideals of empowerment through education have all been debased and eviscerated. Marcellus Andrews has suggested that:

The end of the American segregation system a half century ago put black people onto the blue-collar road to the middle class just when the on-ramp shut down.<sup>35</sup>

47% of black males in Baltimore are unemployed. The police in this scenario are caught between enforcing a war on drugs that has become a war on the underclass and containing the chaos unleashed by it.<sup>36</sup>

### **‘sharing a dark corner of the American experiment’**

Some of the scenes where we see most clearly the identity, contradictions and solidarity of the police subculture and its relation to the wider culture are at their wakes. The ritual involves going to an Irish bar, laying out the corpse on a pool table, drinking whiskey, singing *The Body of an American* (The Pogues) and eulogising the dead cop.

At Cole’s wake, one of the most memorable scenes in the series, Landsman characterises their lives as ‘sharing a dark corner of the American experiment’. In a montage of brief shots, the character of Cole, the Irish cop, is visually reconstructed. Some of the elements are contradictory, even outlandish. On a pool table draped with a police flag are arranged a photo of the dead officer in dress uniform, rosary beads hanging over one corner and a St Bridget’s cross lying in front of it. A shot of a bottle of Jameson Irish whiskey held in his left hand cuts quickly to the wedding ring on his third finger. Shots of cuff links, cigars and tie follow in quick succession before settling briefly on his police shield. The figure of Cole as a symbol of policing, albeit a chaotic and contradictory one, is thus established, a perception heightened by Landsman’s observation that he was neither the world’s greatest cop nor its worst. Neither was he the world’s greatest husband nor the worst. A wider angled shot during the eulogy completes the picture: a candle, a celtic cross and a statue of the Virgin Mary.

The incongruity of these elements is replicated even more forcefully at the wake held for McNulty when he leaves the police force. He is symbolically dead, having left the brotherhood. Ironically for this uniquely promiscuous and self-destructive detective, the table is positively cluttered with religious kitsch, votive candles, plaster hands draped with a rosary, alongside the obligatory bottle of Jameson and statue of the Virgin Mary. The verbose and articulate Landsman is momentarily lost for words, but must ultimately admit to a grudging respect for the ‘dead’ detective, the black sheep. In the only positive words he ever spoke to or about him, Landsman declares that, if his body was found lying dead on the street, there is no one he would rather have standing over him, investigating the case, than McNulty.

Journalists too find themselves inhabiting a dark corner of the American experiment. They too find themselves in a different relationship to the city from that they once had. Beset by pressures of bylines and deadlines and prizes alongside problems created by cutbacks, out-of-town ownership, buyouts of the most experienced staff and declining circulation, the result is a rupture between reporters and the city they are charged to report. Some go for the fast track to promotion and prizes, undercutting the process of building long-term knowledge of long-term situations, cultivating contacts, creating trust, constructing context.

Simon believes that the indifferent logic of Wall Street has poisoned the relationship between newspapers and their cities. The management of the *Baltimore Sun* in the series are preoccupied with the pursuit of Pulitzer prizes. The formula, according to Simon, is:

Surround a simple outrage, overreport it, claim credit for breaking it, make sure you find a villain, then claim you effected change as a result of your coverage.<sup>37</sup>

Much journalism focuses on the symptoms rather than the disease, which Simon compares to coming to a house hit by a hurricane and making voluminous notes on the displaced roof tiles. One type of story is 'small, self-contained and has good guys and bad guys', whereas the other is informed by a bigger picture and a longer history and reveals what is happening in society.<sup>38</sup>

In *The Wire* we see journalists who know the city and write about it with high standards of accuracy and context increasingly being marginalised by those who are cutting corners, going for the glittering prizes, sometimes even at the expense of the true story. Scott Templeton, who gets into the habit of making up what he can't find, is lionised by the managing editors and wins a Pulitzer. Those who start to wonder and check the facts, particularly the honourable and meticulous city editor, Gus Haynes, are undermined. It mirrors perfectly what happens in the police force and the school system and city hall.

The scene structure of *The Wire* is such that throughout the series there are scenes that parallel each other almost exactly. In one episode a cop vents his frustration and remarks that he would like to experience what it would be like to work in 'a real police department'. Later in the same episode we hear a journalist lament that he would like someday to find out what it would be like to work in a 'a real newspaper'. In city hall and in the school system, we hear echoes of the same regret and aspiration. While cops and journalists are both speaking from within the restricted viewpoints of their respective positions, the viewer is aware of the grander narrative sweep. The problems these workers identify are not isolated and unconnected but part of a deeper systemic logic that pervades all such institutions and encumbers all of their efforts. Each season ends with a stylish and stirring montage that pulls together the various storylines and projects them into the immediate future, leaving the viewer pondering the problems and reflecting on their causes and consequences.

In the newspaper the problems are not just the stories that they get wrong for one reason or another, but the fact that they fail to get at all all the major stories that dominate the drama. That, according to Simon, is the 'big ass elephant in our mythical newsroom'.<sup>39</sup> They do not uncover the stories about juking the stats on crime or education. They do not reveal that this is being driven by city hall or that the mayor is reverting to the practices he pledged to reform. They do not probe the connections between property transactions and political corruption. They have no idea of how the drugs trade works. The death of Proposition Joe, a major player in East Baltimore, is relegated to the inside pages and the death of Omar, a semi-mythic figure in West Baltimore, is bumped from the paper altogether.

We do see the underworld of drug addiction and homelessness as pursued by two different journalists in diametrically opposed ways. One inflates his investigation and pitches it for career advancement. The other looks and listens carefully and opens that world through a life story sensitively told.

In depicting the world of print journalism, there is a strong sense of social decline, driven by the Simon's own experience of reporting for the *Baltimore Sun* and following its transformation over the past few decades. In one scene two journalists remember why they wanted to be newspapermen. One recalls seeing his father read the paper every morning at breakfast so thoroughly and intently that he wanted to be part of something so important as to require that sort of concentrated attention. Another told of a man he saw on the bus every day and how he folded his paper in sections and read it with such great care. There is a sense of a loss of coherence in a society where the daily newspaper was once part of a wider workaday ritual.

**'That black pride bullshit.'**

Another absence, evoking a sense of social decline, is that of political protest. There is little sense of any organised opposition to the deindustrialisation and demoralisation of the city and to the macroeconomic forces driving it. The protests we do see are effectively stunts, stage-managed from the top. On one occasion new mayor Tommy Carcetti is seeking to divert attention from the failings of the law enforcement and education systems. He jumps on board the growing sense of outrage surrounding an apparent spate of homeless murders. He organises a candlelight vigil outside city hall. The result is a masterful piece of politicking in which the blame for homelessness is laid at the door of the federal and state administrations, both Republican, as opposed to the city administration, which is Democratic. Carcetti knows better than what he does. On one occasion, he anticipates what his advisor is thinking with 'truth to power ... say it'.<sup>40</sup>

On another occasion, when Clay Davis, corrupt state senator, goes on trial, he manages to transform the issue from one of gross corruption to a racist witch-hunt. He presents himself as a beneficent patron of the city's black poor, his pockets never full for long, as he hears the troubles and pays the bills of his constituents. He arrives at the courthouse carrying a copy of *Prometheus Bound* by Aeschylus, the tale of 'a simple man, who was horrifically punished by the powers that be for the terrible crime of trying to bring light to the common people'.

Davis skillfully manipulates the discourses of race and class against his opponents, who, he claims, have no idea how things are for the black poor, drawing on the rhetoric of the civil rights movement. He refers to those pulling the strings above the black state attorney's head. He enlists a corrupt former mayor to his cause, who makes reference to those 'persecuting ... our leaders'. This courthouse rally culminates in a chorus of *We shall not be moved*. While it is apparent that significant sections of the black political establishment are engaged in graft, the enduring and systemic character of inequality enables them to draw on a radical tradition and to distort it to nefarious ends.

The spirit of the sixties finds such echoes elsewhere in *The Wire*. Avon Barksdale and Stringer Bell regularly use the black power handshake. In one conversation Avon refers teasingly to their youthful enthusiasm for 'that black pride bullshit'. Brother Mouzone is a ruthless gun for hire, whose appearance evokes Malcolm X, but he is without substance. He prides himself on reading *The Nation*, *New Republic*, *Atlantic Monthly* and *Harpers*, but how he relates the political debates in them to his role as enforcer in the drugs trade is unclear. A philosophy of collective liberation has morphed into a Hobbesian war of all against all.

This tradition is sometimes evoked in a more positive way. When Cutty Wise is released from prison and finally escapes the drug trade to open a community boxing club, his new optimism is underlined during an election day jog, accompanied on his walkman by Curtis Mayfield's *Move on up*. This is a significant piece of scoring in a series that largely eschews the use of a musical soundtrack. Such optimism is undercut, however, when he is canvassed and admits that he is barred from voting, a mechanism by which the black underclass is further disempowered.

The echoes of the sixties are weak enough considering the scale and dynamism of the upheaval that shook the US and the world in the 1960s and 1970s when masses marched against war, racism, sexism, imperialism, when there was a longing for liberation, when there was such striving to live in a new way. *The Wire* cannot be blamed, however, for what is absent or attenuated in the wider culture that it is representing. There is a strong sense that this movement has been both co-opted and defeated. It has left a lack of confidence in collective action, a lack of faith in alternative possibilities.<sup>41</sup>

**'All the pieces matter.'**

Contemporary political references abound in the series. The aftermath of 9-11 surfaces in the re-ordering of FBI priorities towards the war on terror to the detriment of drug investigations. An INS agent points out a sign for the Department of Homeland Security and asks McNulty if he feels any different. McNulty admits that he didn't vote in the 2004 election, because neither Bush nor Kerry had any idea of what was going on where he works.

One journalist refers to a call that a colleague supposedly received from a serial killer and remarks that it must be strange to talk to a psychopath. Another reminds them that he interviewed Dick Cheney once. A woman in the city informs an old friend that her sister is working at a school in the county 'teaching every nigger to speak like Condoleeza'. As the seminar on anti-terrorism descends into farce, one officer calls out 'Brownie, you're doing a heck of a job', a reference to George Bush's infamous post-Katrina comment to the head of FEMA.<sup>42</sup> Police patrolling the streets of Baltimore compare it to Fallujah, with one recommending the use of air strikes and white phosphorous. Iraq is a recurring point of reference, not only directly, but analogically. The whole war on drugs is meant to mirror the war on terror. After the demolition of two housing project towers, alluding to the twin towers of 9-11, indirectly triggers a protracted and pointless power struggle, one gangster even says 'if it's a lie, then we fight on that lie'.<sup>43</sup>

As the series moves to conclusion, there are a number of scenes that evoke the beginning. In the final episode Detective Sydnor meets with Judge Phelan as McNulty did in the first episode. Detectives come to a crime scene in the low rises where a body is found in the shadow of the same statue as where the body of the witness murdered in season one was found. We see Michael become the new Omar and Dukie become the new Bubbles. The concluding scenes, particularly the final montage, are marshalled to show that the police department, the drugs trade, the school system, the newspaper and city hall all carry on in the same way. No matter what characters have risen or fallen or died, the cycle continues and the system survives.

The series is more diagnostic than prescriptive. Nevertheless, Simon has said that the show is meant to be a political provocation. It is natural that interviewers should ask him what sort of political response he means to provoke. He has replied that he is not a social crusader, claiming that he is a storyteller coming to the campfire with the truest possible story he can tell. What people do with that story is up to them.<sup>44</sup> Simon admits to being pessimistic about the possibility of political change, as the political infrastructure has been bought, journalism has been eviscerated, the working class has been decimated and the underclass has been narcotised. *The Wire* has exhibited the 'audacity of despair'.<sup>45</sup>

While sometimes Simon speaks of politicians lacking courage to take on the real problems, ultimately he sees the problems as rooted in systemic failure. The undercurrent underlying *The Wire's* whole story arc is that social exclusion and corruption do not exist in spite of the system but because of it. Its scepticism of reform is recognition that substantive social change is not possible 'within the current political structure'.<sup>46</sup> Simon has declared the series to be about 'the decline of the American empire'.<sup>47</sup>

No such critique of the American empire is detectable in the most recent production of Simon and Burns on HBO, the Iraq war drama *Generation Kill*. Based on the writings of an embedded journalist Evan Wright, it stands in strong contrast to *The Wire*. The miniseries abandons multi-perspectival structure and systemic critique. It does have some features in common with *The Wire*: the sense of institutional imperatives, a perception driven bureaucracy and the conflicting aims of the troops and their commanding officers. The recon marines just want to do their job, while the officers want headline busting tactical and strategic coups. Yet there is no questioning of what that job is. The drama is myopic. Despite the fact that Simon and Burns oppose the war, the critique of the war is absent and the system driving it is unquestioned in the drama. The voices of Iraqis are all but silent.



While *The Wire* offers a critique of the war on drugs, *Generation Kill* does not offer a critique of the war on Iraq. While it does demonstrate that the war is badly organised and executed, there is no sense that the war itself is illegitimate or immoral. It identifies all too fully with the point of view of the soldiers on the ground and indicates that if they were not frustrated by their commanders, a worthwhile job would be done well. Hopefully, their new project *Treme*, set in post-Katrina New Orleans, will be a return to form.

### **'A Marxist's dream of a series'**

The narrative and metanarrative of *The Wire* have prompted some commentators to see it as 'a Marxist's dream of a series'.<sup>48</sup> In a session at the Museum of Television and Radio, Ken Tucker introduced Simon as 'the most brilliant Marxist to run a tv show'.<sup>49</sup> While Simon did not contradict him on that occasion, he has asserted that he is not a Marxist. When asked if he is a socialist, he has declared that he is a social democrat. He believes that capitalism is the only game in town, that it is not only inevitable but unrivalled in its power to produce wealth.

However he opposes 'raw, unencumbered capitalism, absent any social framework, absent any sense of community, without regard to the weakest and most vulnerable classes in society – it's a recipe for needless pain, needless human waste, needless tragedy'.<sup>50</sup> He is for radical redistribution - 'no trickle down bullshit'<sup>51</sup> – but not 'to each according to his needs' either.<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless, everything in *The Wire* calls for a system requiring from each according to their abilities and giving to each according to their needs.

As to class struggle, characters struggle individually, but there is no sign of concerted class struggle likely to emerge as a counter-force of significant consequence. Simon identifies with the position of Camus: to commit to a just cause against overwhelming odds is absurd, but not to commit is equally absurd. Only one choice, however, offers the slightest chance for dignity, he insists.<sup>53</sup> He also refers on a number of occasions to Sisyphus rolling the rock up the hill. *The Wire* has told a 'darker, more honest story on American television ... indifferent to the calculations of real estate speculators, civic boosters and politicians looking toward higher office'.<sup>54</sup> Simon is 'proud of making something that wasn't supposed to exist'.<sup>55</sup>

What Simon thinks of Marxism is one thing (and it is not always clear), but what Marxists think of him is another. *The Wire* is a Marxist's idea of what tv drama should be. Its specific plots open into an analysis of the social-political-economic system shaping it all. It has demonstrated the potential of television narrative to dramatise the nature of the social order, a potential that has long been neglected or inadequately pursued in the history of television drama.

In probing the parameters of the intricate interactions between multiple individuals and institutions, it excavates the underlying structures of power and stimulates engagement with overarching ideas. It bristles, even boils over, with systemic critique. While it offers no expectation of an alternative, it provokes reflection on the need for one and an aspiration towards one. It may not have been written by Marxists to dramatise a Marxist world view, but it is hard to see how a series written on this terrain by Marxists would be much different from *The Wire*.

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Notes:

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- <sup>1</sup> *The Wire* was a Home Box Office production. See <http://www.hbo.com/thewire/>. The title is meant to refer literally to the wire tap, used in surveillance through the whole series, but also symbolically to the boundary running between different strata of society.
- <sup>2</sup> *The Wire* 'was shot entirely in Baltimore by Baltimore craft and labour unions.' David Simon, audio commentary on episode 1.1 (The Target) on *The Wire: The Complete First Season* (HBO Video/Warner Home Video, 2005)
- <sup>3</sup> See <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=4969254136607732929>
- <sup>4</sup> David Simon, "Introduction" in Rafael Alvarez, *The Wire: Truth Be Told* (New York: Pocket Books, 2004), 2
- <sup>5</sup> Meghan O'Rourke, "Behind *The Wire*: David Simon on where the show goes next," *Slate*, December 1, 2006, [http://www.slate.com/id/2154694/pagenum/all/#page\\_start](http://www.slate.com/id/2154694/pagenum/all/#page_start)
- <sup>6</sup> Aileen Gallagher, "Andre Royo on Playing Bubbles on 'The Wire,' Snitching, and His Emmy Speech," *Vulture: New York Entertainment*, January 2008, [http://nymag.com/daily/entertainment/2008/01/andre\\_royo\\_on\\_playing\\_bubbles.html](http://nymag.com/daily/entertainment/2008/01/andre_royo_on_playing_bubbles.html)
- <sup>7</sup> David Mills, "Q&A: David Simon (pt 1)," *Undercover Black Man*, January 22, 2007, <http://undercoverblackman.blogspot.com/2007/01/q-david-simon-pt-1.html>
- <sup>8</sup> Simon, "Introduction", 4
- <sup>9</sup> *ibid*, 8
- <sup>10</sup> *ibid*, 5
- <sup>11</sup> *ibid*, 5-6
- <sup>12</sup> Nick Hornby, "David Simon: Creator-Producer-Writer of HBO's *The Wire*", *The Believer*, August 2007, [http://www.believermag.com/issues/200708/?read=interview\\_simon](http://www.believermag.com/issues/200708/?read=interview_simon)
- <sup>13</sup> Eric Ducker, "The Left Behind: Inside *The Wire*'s World of Alienation and Asshole Gods," *Fader*, December 2006, <http://www.thefader.com/articles/2006/12/08/listening-in-part-iv>
- <sup>14</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* 1848 (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1998), 8.
- <sup>15</sup> Jacob Weisberg, "The Wire on Fire: Analyzing the best show on television," *Slate*, September 13, 2006, <http://www.slate.com/id/2149566/>
- <sup>16</sup> Scandalum Magnatum, "Balzac of Baltimore," January 13, 2008, <http://scandalum.wordpress.com/2008/01/13/balzac-of-baltimore/>
- <sup>17</sup> Simon, "Introduction", 6
- <sup>18</sup> *ibid*, 7
- <sup>19</sup> *ibid*, 12
- <sup>20</sup> Margaret Talbot, "Stealing Life: The crusader behind *The Wire*," *The New Yorker*, October 22, 2007, [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/10/22/071022fa\\_fact\\_talbot?printable=true](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/10/22/071022fa_fact_talbot?printable=true)
- <sup>21</sup> Dennis Lehane, "In Retrospect: Dennis Lehane on *Clockers*," *Critical Mass*, February 23, 2008, <http://bookcriticscircle.blogspot.com/2008/02/in-retrospect-dennis-lehane-on-clockers.html>
- <sup>22</sup> David Simon, "David Simon on Homicide, Truth and Journalism," *Bay Weekly*, March 12-18, 1998, [http://www.bayweekly.com/year98/lead6\\_10.html](http://www.bayweekly.com/year98/lead6_10.html)
- <sup>23</sup> David Simon on *The Tubridy Show* Ireland: RTE Radio 1, January 24, 2008, <http://www.rte.ie/radio1/thetubridyshow/1179937.html>
- <sup>24</sup> Simon, "Introduction", 10-11
- <sup>25</sup> Talbot

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- <sup>26</sup> Ed Burns, audio commentary on episode 4.1 (Boys of Summer) on *The Wire: The Complete Fourth Season* (HBO Video/Warner Home Video, 2008)
- <sup>27</sup> Ducker
- <sup>28</sup> Simon, audio commentary on episode 1.1
- <sup>29</sup> Hornby
- <sup>30</sup> Scandalum Magnatum
- <sup>31</sup> O'Rourke
- <sup>32</sup> David Simon and Edward Burns, *The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner-City Neighborhood* (New York: Broadway Books, 1998), 58
- <sup>33</sup> Mills
- <sup>34</sup> On the whiteboard that lists open homicide cases, an open case is marked in red and a closed case in black.
- <sup>35</sup> Laurence Lanahan, "Secrets of the City: What *The Wire* reveals about urban journalism," *Columbia Journalism Review*, January-February 2008, [http://www.cjr.org/cover\\_story/secrets\\_of\\_the\\_city.php?page=8](http://www.cjr.org/cover_story/secrets_of_the_city.php?page=8)
- <sup>36</sup> Scott Tobias "Interviews: David Simon" *The AV Club*, March 10, 2008, [http://www.avclub.com/content/interview/david\\_simon](http://www.avclub.com/content/interview/david_simon)
- <sup>37</sup> ibid
- <sup>38</sup> ibid
- <sup>39</sup> David Simon, "The Wire's final season and the story everyone missed," *The Huffington Post*, March 17, 2008, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-simon/the-wires-final-s\\_b\\_91926.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-simon/the-wires-final-s_b_91926.html)
- <sup>40</sup> The writers of *The Wire* wanted to make a companion series to *The Wire* titled *The Hall* that would have focused more specifically on the political system. According to Simon, it would have acted as 'an antidote to the *Father-Knows-Best* tonality of more popular political drama'. Jim King, "Exclusive David Simon Q&A, *The Wire* on HBO", 16 August, 2006, <http://members.aol.com/TheWireHBO/exclusive-1.html>
- <sup>41</sup> The 'yes we can' mobilised to elect Obama might seem to have revitalised faith in alternative possibilities, but post-election demobilisation and lack of real change might come to be experienced as co-optation and defeat again. Barack Obama, incidentally, when asked about his favourite tv programme, declared that it was *The Wire* and that Omar was his favourite character.
- <sup>42</sup> Simon and Burns are currently working on *Treme*, a series set in post-Katrina New Orleans.
- <sup>43</sup> The latest HBO drama involving Simon and Burns is *Generation Kill*, a drama based on the experiences of an embedded reporter in Iraq in 2003.
- <sup>44</sup> O'Rourke
- <sup>45</sup> Matthew Iglesias, "David Simon and the Audacity of Despair," *The Atlantic*, January 2008, [http://matthewyglesias.theatlantic.com/archives/2008/01/david\\_simon\\_and\\_the\\_audacity\\_o.php](http://matthewyglesias.theatlantic.com/archives/2008/01/david_simon_and_the_audacity_o.php)
- <sup>46</sup> O'Rourke
- <sup>47</sup> King
- <sup>48</sup> Adam Kotsko, comment posted on March 23, 2008 on Joseph Kugelmass, "A Little Something You Can Touch: HBO's *The Wire* and the Politics of Visual Media," *The Valve: A Literary Organ*, March 20, 2008, [http://www.thevalve.org/go/valve/article/a\\_little\\_something\\_you\\_can\\_touch\\_hbos\\_wire\\_and\\_the\\_politics\\_of\\_visual\\_media/](http://www.thevalve.org/go/valve/article/a_little_something_you_can_touch_hbos_wire_and_the_politics_of_visual_media/)
- <sup>49</sup> Ken Tucker, Q&A with David Simon and Creative Team, special features on *The Wire: The Complete Third Season* (HBO Home Video/Warner Home Video, 2006).
- <sup>50</sup> Mills
- <sup>51</sup> David Simon, comment posted on Alan Sepinwall, January 27, 2007, "For *The Wire* Fans, What's Alan Watching?", <http://sepinwall.blogspot.com/2007/01/for-wire-fans.html>
- <sup>52</sup> Mills
- <sup>53</sup> David Simon, comment posted on Matthew Iglesias
- <sup>54</sup> David Simon, "Down To The Wire," *Baltimore Magazine*, 2008, <http://www.baltimoremagazine.net/article.asp?t=1&m=1&c=32&s=466&ai=65969>
- <sup>55</sup> David Simon, "The Game is Real", special features on *The Wire: The Complete Fourth Season* (HBO Home Video/Warner Home Video, 2008)