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## Who Loves Ya, David Simon?

Jane Gibb and Roger Sabin | 29 May 2009 | 4-The Wire Files [May 09]

### Notes towards placing *The Wire's* depiction of African-Americans in the context of American TV crime drama

Critics have justifiably praised *The Wire* for its rounded African-American characters, and the risks it took in foregrounding 'black Baltimore' - risks that have harmed its ratings, according to its makers.<sup>1</sup> They have concluded that the crime genre has been taken somewhere new.

But how new is 'new'? What the critics couldn't do - weren't tasked to do - was to contextualise the show in terms of the history of crime drama on TV. This article will therefore seek to survey a number of key shows from the past that purported to convey a liberal viewpoint, and which have made race a focus. This is in order to suggest ways in which *The Wire* might be part of a genre tradition - and equally how it might be seen as expanding the parameters of that tradition and saying something genuinely original.

In terms of our overall framework, it is taken as axiomatic that changes in any genre - in this case, the quality of the depiction of African-Americans - are driven by changes in society, and by broadcasters' attempts to gauge what viewers are willing to buy into. (It's a curious irony that crime drama often exploits the irrational fears expressed by communities in the face of increasing crime, in a dual effort to provoke anxiety as well as to reassure.) Thus, within any given historical period there will be political agendas linked to crime which get picked up by television and re-interpreted through genre-based storytelling that relies on innovation as well as repetition in an effort to maintain audience interest.

The term 'competing narratives' helps explain this process, specifically how crime TV stories function within different historical and institutional contexts by capturing a broad and often contradictory dialogue about the origins of, and solutions to, the 'crime problem'. David Simon has said that so far as Americans are concerned the 'crime story [like the western] is elemental to our understanding of ourselves'.<sup>2</sup> That being so, and because of the status the crime story maintains within the national culture, American crime TV is one of the most relevant contemporary forums through which competing narratives and ideas about race, class and gender are contested rather than guaranteed.

Underpinning this relationship is a host of factors that might include: The circumstances of TV production which influence programming strategies - for example, whether tied to advertising, the level of government regulation, etc. This depends on whether a show is produced in the 'network era', 'neo-network era' or 'HBO-era'.<sup>3</sup> Linked with this, there's the question of how the media (TV included) is inclined to report crime: it is not irrelevant that crime drama tends to get scheduled near the news and historically has used plots 'ripped from the headlines' in order to manufacture an illusion of unmediated authenticity.

Then there's the notion of what audiences have come to expect in terms of representation from films, novels, comics, etc. (other aspects of culture), and more specifically what they might anticipate from TV and in particular TV drama (what is the status of portrayals of women, homosexuals, ethnic minorities, etc. in war series, period dramas, westerns, etc.?). The same applies to what they might have come to expect from TV crime drama specifically, including how one show argues with, responds to, is inspired by, another. Similarly, we shouldn't forget factors that might prompt audiences into receiving the message in a particular way - via trailers, advance information in the press, the internet, and so on (sometimes termed 'ancillary' material' in Reception Studies). And, of course, how any viewer's reading of a particular show is always negotiated according to personal circumstances.

The list could continue. It amounts to a complex matrix, and one that is constantly changing. With regard to the depiction of African-Americans, it explains, for example, why they have been more 'acceptable' in some kinds of TV show than others (e.g. comedy - a phenomenon dating back to before vaudeville); how the criminalisation of 'the black man' on the TV news might have an effect; why cop shows have taken a certain viewpoint during the Civil Rights era or after Rodney King, etc.; and how such shows have fed off 'Blaxploitation' and 'Hood' movies (for example). Above all, it underscores the importance of reading TV as being orientated primarily towards the kind of white, middle class demographic that advertisers want to reach, and why, therefore, any claim to 'realism' in TV crime drama has to be problematised. In other words, there is a need constantly to ask what a 'positive' representation might be, and how far 'blackness' is the otherness against which white viewers define themselves.

We don't have the space in this essay to explore these ideas in any detail, but we can hope to use some of them to offer an analysis of *The Wire* that situates it in the context of its TV genre - a genre that has been woefully under-explored at an academic level.<sup>4</sup> To this end, we would now like to turn our attention to the past, in order to remind ourselves very briefly of five key crime shows from the post-Civil Rights era which purported to be liberal, and which made it their mission to make race a feature.

In surveying these shows, the 'police procedural' has been privileged over other kinds of crime show (prison, legal, private eye, etc.) because this is the tradition into which *The Wire* most comfortably fits - though this is not a categorisation without controversy, as we shall see. However, our main aim is to highlight the varying degrees of dramatic agency invested in African-American characters and to identify any potential transformative power these character representations might possess in terms of challenging racism and/or enhancing our understanding of the diversity of African-American experience. (We're also interested in tracing the relative importance these programmes attribute to 'race' in relation to other factors such as class and gender orientations which also contribute to the construction of African-American identity/identities.)

### ***Kojak (1973-78, CBS)***

A phenomenally popular show, based around discrete storylines in a pulp tradition, and created by a writer who was a friend of Martin Luther King (Abby Mann), and who set out to use the crime genre to shine a light on injustices.<sup>5</sup> As such, for Kojak 'the police force is the community', and his duty is to a New York that is shown in all its gritty multi-ethnic glory (and frequently from the perspective of very run-down districts). Kojak himself was of ethnic origin (Greek), a foreshadowing of his re-casting in 2005 as an African-American, and it was his smart-talking charisma that floated the show ('Who loves ya, baby?', etc). However, lest we forget how hard-hitting the series could be, and that it was not just about catchphrases and lollipops, the pilot episode (based on a real case) featured an unjustly imprisoned black youth, racist cops, and a lawyer who tells the court that 'Law and Order is being used as a catchphrase for Stop the Nigger'.

Later episodes toned down the social rhetoric, much to the disappointment of Mann, though individual examples still made points (e.g. about ethnic gang warfare, the police shooting of a Puerto Rican and the reaction of the community, etc.). There were plenty of African-Americans in supporting parts, and not simply as criminals (jewellers, cabbies, students and cops) though beefier roles were rare (e.g. Salathiel Harms, the private eye who intrudes on Kojak's patch). Similarly, the Kojak character continued to differ from other TV cops through the ways in which his 'ethnicity' facilitated his equivocal positioning as both 'white' and 'non white'. Like many hardboiled detectives he was defined by his intimate knowledge of the 'streets' and through his own 'eccentric' urban city vernacular. However, both these traits were presented as intrinsically linked to Kojak's New York 'immigrant' status and not simply used to reproduce the sort of 'white' male-encoded cynical and superior detachment that would conventionally be associated with a Marlowe clone.

Thus, from a 2008 perspective, *Kojak* is self-contradictory for the way that it includes African-American characters who lack dramatic agency, in terms of both the contributions they can make to the episodic action of the show and as fully integrated members of an 'ideal community' in the form of the police force. It is really only in one-off episodes that focus directly on racism that African-American characters are foregrounded through scenarios which feature shootings of black characters by whites or other miscarriages of justice. Although these individual shows still retain their power as anti-racist indictments, the series taken in its entirety remains tied to more familiar Hollywood modes of representation through which African-American characters are either marginalised and shown in relation to whites, or depicted in terms of a 'black identity function' as the privileged indicators of an ongoing racial problematic.

### ***Hill Street Blues (1981-87, NBC)***

Debuting just after the election of Ronald Reagan, and the lurch to the right of US politics, this was a cop show that was also a soap opera - a genre hybrid - with an ensemble cast and returning characters. Co-created by Steven

Bochco, race was always intended to be at its centre, and the intertwined storylines and psychological complexity were groundbreaking. This structure allowed space for character development - including a significant number of African-American characters - and for the generation of atmosphere, specifically the claustrophobic setting of a police precinct in a 'city under siege', where ethnic gang warfare is rife.

The moral tone was similar to Ed McBain's 87<sup>th</sup> Precinct novels, and indeed, McBain (real name Evan Hunter) was encouraged to sue for plagiarism. This tone was especially evident in the racial politics: both *Hill Street* and the McBain novels were procedurals that increasingly honed-in on white reactions to racism. As scholar Eric Macdonald has written: 'In the novels, "good" men are fair and objective in their quest for justice and in their dealings with diverse peoples, whereas "bad" men are either overtly racist or at least non-compassionate....'<sup>6</sup> In *Hill Street* this was demonstrated particularly in one episode that featured a racist cop who shoots a black teenager, and in a later story arc about an African-American street gang (led by a young Danny Glover).

Although there were many more black characters than in any show of its kind previously, this didn't necessarily always mean 'progressive' depictions (especially with regard to women). However, the inter-racial cop pairing of characters Bobby Hill and Andy Renko was a hit with audiences, and underlined a take on masculinity that involved personal revelation and emotional problem-sharing. Again, this soap operatic angle was very unusual in the crime genre.

Thus the show was innovative for the way it utilised inter-racial partnerships and a racially integrated ensemble cast to address issues of policing in relation to expanded concepts of male heroism - a structure that made it possible for the writers to base individual episodes largely around African-American characters, though this only happened rarely. Along with *Miami Vice* (below), it was indicative of a 'new' trend within the genre which was concerned with subverting ideologies of race and ethnicity as the markers of identity. That being said, there is a possible counter-argument, namely that the characters are primarily male-identified rather than racially defined and that therefore masculinised forms of social bonding are being deployed in order to diffuse racial differences and the need to question white-centred power relations as a potential barrier against the social inclusiveness of African-Americans.

### ***Miami Vice (1984-89, NBC)***

Made at the high point of Reaganism, when the war against drugs was entering a new phase, and during the transition in the TV industry from the 'network' to neo-network era, this was a black/white buddy series based around the characters of Tubbs and Crockett. Thus, it was made with the existing audience for the police drama in mind, but also to target the 18-34 year-old male viewers who were switching to cable. The concept was described by one NBC executive as 'MTV Cops' and 'Hill and Renko with a

music video feel'.<sup>7</sup> As such, *Miami Vice* was never interested in investigating race relations in America and the impact of drugs on inner city communities, but instead offered a glossy package with an underlying political message about the drug trade as a confrontation between the law and drug-runners, 'trans-border commodity flows'<sup>8</sup> and the US government's vested interest in keeping the drug trade going.

Michael Mann's presence as an auteur in the role of executive producer - a noted liberal - subverted to some extent the show's critical reception as 'hip fluff'. When he said that, 'We loved the way a dark star and a blonde star played off each other - visually, it's very exciting'<sup>9</sup>, he was unwittingly (wittingly?) referencing one possible reading of the show in which the noir connotations of 'dark' and 'blonde', as opposed to 'black' and 'white', linked Tubbs and Crockett to the mulatto figures of hardboiled fiction, and the idea that both men were attempting to 'pass' as something they were not i.e. undercover cops posing as high level drug dealers. The fact that Tubbs was played by a light-skinned African-American caused some critics to question his authenticity as 'black', but within the context of a show predicated on masquerade and passing, it's at least conceivable that Tubbs' disturbance of racial signifiers actually worked in favour of the idea that 'race', like masculinity, is 'performed'.<sup>10</sup>

### ***NYPD Blue (1993-2005, ABC)***

A Clinton-era show, again co-created by Steven Bochco, again featuring an ensemble cast based in a police station, and again with the stated intention '...to address race'<sup>11</sup> In order to do this, the primary vehicle was the character of Andy Sipowicz, a white, alcoholic middle aged cop who happens to be racist (as well as homophobic). It is his redemptive journey that propels the show: he is the everyman figure a white audience is asked to identify with, and his common use of words like 'nigger' and 'spade' are there as a provocation. Such language is challenged by his fellow cops (especially his much-loved 'ethnic' partner Bobby Simone) until he reaches the point where he has modified - at least to some degree - his politics. In this regard, despite the many black characters in the show, *NYPD Blue* is part of a tradition centring on white attitudes to racism, with 'blackness' as the other against which a flawed white liberalism is defined (in terms of its intolerance of men like Sipowicz). The influence of Ed McBain is again clear.

More subtly, Sipowicz is a Vietnam veteran who often gets nostalgic about the past (though not the war), and so the show can be read as a dialogue with the 1960s and what happened to America post-Civil Rights. For example, it is about coming to grips with the Clintonian era of 'political correctness', and the relationship of language to everyday racism (Sipowicz often has a swipe at Clinton). Similarly, affirmative action is problematised: when the African-American Arthur Fancy rises quickly through the ranks, becoming a Lieutenant in charge of the Squad and finally Captain, it's not clear whether this was because of or in spite of his ethnic background, and audiences could anticipate Sipowicz's unease. Ironically, the actor who played Fancy once referred to himself as 'the highest paid extra on television'.<sup>12</sup>

### ***Homicide: Life on the Street (1993-2000, NBC)***

Based on a David Simon book, with Simon as a scripter for some episodes, this was a precursor to *The Wire* in important respects. It focused on the work of an ethnically diverse police homicide unit, and like *Hill Street* and *NYPD Blue*, was an ensemble piece and decidedly glamour-free (like those shows, it combined the serial structure of its melodramatic plots with more contained, case-based narratives, typically closing down these procedural arcs within one or two episodes). It was also arguably the show that finally made the breakthrough into a 'de-centred' view of race within the crime genre: the reason given by the creators was that it was set in Baltimore, and therefore had to reflect the city's ethnic population (i.e. black-majority). In short, it provided a platform for more complex discussions of race identity. Here we see a re-constituted squad room in which African-Americans are represented as one ethnic group among others (and so are 'whites'). The programme's strength lies not only in the way it articulates differences of race and ethnicity but also in how it invokes a dispersed notion of subjectivity by incorporating gender and generational differences as the basis of tension within and between ethnic characters.

As such, the show included the most rounded African-American characters yet seen, perhaps anywhere in TV drama. In particular, there was the troubled Detective Pembleton, a fiery individual with a Jesuit upbringing, and Lt Giardello (played by Yaphet Kotto, previously a heavy in Blaxploitation flicks), who has Sicilian ancestors and who reminisces about the difficulties of being a black cop during the 1960s. Occasionally the show would focus on issues directly concerned with racism (e.g. Pembleton confronting a white supremacist in the interrogation room; Giardello's negotiations with a black separatist; the shooting of an unarmed African-American drug dealer, etc.) But more commonly the intersection of race politics with other factors that contribute to the construction of human identity would be on a more subtle level. One New York Times TV critic 'couldn't believe [her] ears' and asked 'Is this Friday night television or a Spike Lee movie?' upon watching an episode in which Giardello gets turned down for a date with an African-American professional woman, blaming it on the fact that 'women like that never find me attractive - I'm too black.'<sup>13</sup>

Thus, we can see from this briefest of surveys that - on a surface level - a lot of what *The Wire* achieved in terms of black representation was not new (certainly not as new as much of the media response to the show has implied). Thus, for example, its portrayal of the city as a melting pot with un-meltable elements was pre-figured in *Kojak*, and became a trope in many shows since - indeed, Baltimore itself was the setting for *Homicide*. Its depiction of middle class black characters (Cedric Daniels, Bunny Colvin, etc.) was presaged by *Homicide* and, to a lesser extent, *Hill Street Blues*. Its inter-racial buddy characters (Herc and Ellis, McNulty and Bunk) were pre-figured most strikingly in *Miami Vice* and *Hill Street*. Its take on the everyday racism of white Irish cops was there in *NYPD Blue*. And its inter-racial romantic elements (Daniels and Rhonda Pearlman) were foreshadowed particularly in *Miami Vice* and *Homicide*. The list could continue.

This isn't to say that these ideas were pioneered in TV crime drama. Sometimes, they were already a part of other kinds of TV fare (the first interracial kiss famously happened on *Star Trek* in 1968, and American audiences were already familiar with middle class black depictions from comedies like *The Jeffersons* and *The Cosby Show*). Indeed, commonly, such tropes were pioneered in other mediums - in the case of crime fiction, for example, the novels of Chester Himes and later Donald Goines were considered particularly hard-hitting when it came to the depiction of urban black experience, and pre-dated the appearance of anything like it on TV by many years.

But on a more sophisticated level, we can see that *The Wire's* claim to originality lies in its openly class-based politics. David Simon has said that it is 'a political tract masquerading as a cop show',<sup>14</sup> and is 'more interested in class than race'.<sup>15</sup> In order to pursue this line, he made sure to structure the show around two inconvenient truths. The first concerns the idea of the divided city (i.e. Baltimore) as a metaphor for an America that remains segregated along race and class lines. The second rests on the implication that the drug trade is itself a by-product of a larger capitalist economy; an economy via which the lives of those who are no longer useful to it are being devalued and destroyed.

These truths are only capable of being expressed due to the circumstances of TV production. Simon has stated that '*The Wire* could not exist but for HBO', or the economic model upon which HBO is based. Network television executives, he argued, would have shuddered at the thought of the show's premise for its first season: 'an argument against American drug prohibition - a Thirty Years' War that has mutated into a brutal war against the underclass'. Such bald politics, he went on, could never have been compatible with network advertising sponsorship commitments, and the need to 'sell sports utility vehicles and pre-washed jeans to all the best demographics'.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, the fact that *The Wire* is an HBO show facilitates degrees of experimentation with the idea of 'televisuality' that would not be possible for more mainstream network fare. Although the show retains an implied and sometimes muted dialogic relationship with other police dramas (particularly those we have focussed on) it can do things that these programmes were never able to achieve, such as breaking with the idea of episodic action and semi-serial formats. By fully embracing long-form serialization *The Wire* can adopt a novelistic approach to storytelling which favours a more subtle development of characters over time.

This is why the makers of *The Wire* could so easily co-opt the hipper writers from the world of crime novels (Dennis Lehane, Richard Price, George Pelecanos) who in their work had shown how it might be possible to build on the foundations laid by Himes, Goines and others to present a grittier and more nuanced view of black urban experience. Because previously TV had been so beholden to advertisers and a middle class white demographic, it was bound to be the case that this kind of content would be elided - and, indeed, that a 'softer' and more white-centric author such as Ed McBain should be



relatively much more influential. It was only with the advent of HBO that anything like a level playing field with other mediums began to emerge.

So, how, exactly, does *The Wire* capitalise on these new circumstances to make its case? Most obviously, the storylines are famously political and complex. In each of the five seasons, a single criminal case-based narrative forms part of an expanded social critique which takes the form of a 'systemic depiction of American institutions' and their culpability in perpetuating the city's flourishing drug trade and the high murder rate associated with it. (The city itself seems to be on trial when the opening titles for Season 1 visually reference an actual street wall in Baltimore with the graffiti 'Bodymore Murdaland'.) The series targets the police force and the profound failure of its war on drugs, the public education system and the 'fraud of equality of opportunity', and mourns the decline of unionized labour and the death of the working class. It documents the failure of the city's political structure to address any of these social problems and indicts the city's media culture for its failure to provide mechanisms of accountability, particularly in the form of an 'aggressive, surly press'.<sup>17</sup>

The issue of 'race' is at the centre of most of these plot-lines, though the overall pessimistic nature of the show might suggest that any positive message would be hard to generate. Yet Simon has argued that *The Wire* remains 'humanist' in its approach, and that the stories are 'told in caring terms with nuance and affection for all the characters', including those who are ethically compromised or on the wrong side of the law. By 'nuanced' and 'humanist', Simon also means that audiences should not regard the identities of characters as necessarily fixed or defined by any one single factor - be it race, religion or anything else (just as, on a personal level, Simon dislikes being reduced to his happening to be a Jew).<sup>18</sup> This sense of fluidity also extends to the moral identities of many of the characters who although depicted as flawed also achieve momentary redemption.

With this in mind, the writers of *The Wire* pay meticulous attention to the social stratification of Baltimore and its higher ethnic demographic ratio of African-Americans to white Europeans. The former are visible at every level of Baltimore society and fully integrated within the institutions they are committed to. For example, the series retains the multi-ethnic dynamic of the squad room that featured so prominently in *Hill Street*, *NYPD Blue* and *Homicide*, but makes an additional intervention by extending the range of African-American characters on offer outside this milieu and by connecting each of them to communities of more than one or two (token) African-Americans.

However, although race is up-front, *The Wire* is interested in the divided city, and as such its focus is on 'establishment Baltimore' and the world of its underclass. These two entities mirror each other. For example, through the dual perspective established in Season 1 the seemingly separate world of the underclass emerges as having its own economy - a predominantly African-American organised drug trade, which is depicted as just another institution, with its own bureaucracy. The cleverness of *The Wire* lies in the ways which

these two worlds are ultimately shown to be interconnected through the web-like symbolism of its interweaving stories and the often dysfunctional relationships it establishes between characters caught up in these narratives across the series.

In this way, *The Wire* implies an active engagement with race politics. In moving within and across the institutional frameworks of the city the drama of the series facilitates a panoramic series of black 'looks' - often fragmented and contradictory - in an effort to constitute an overall perspective which draws on a number of different aspects of African-American experience. Audiences familiar with *Homicide* will see that *The Wire* reproduces the same character inflections based on class, gender and generational differences, though this time for the purpose of complicating the view of race identity presented in that show. Where *The Wire* differs from *Homicide* is through the implied magnitude of its class-delineated vision of African-American Baltimore society and the degree to which it is able to de-centre whiteness as a result of this extended focus.

True, there are compromises. *The Wire*, like *Homicide*, features white characters, and one in particular is prominent: Jimmy McNulty. In an interview with *The Guardian*, the actor Dominic West said; 'It was always accepted that there'd be a white lead. I was rather uncomfortable with that...' <sup>19</sup> If this is/was the case, then even an ostensibly 'ensemble' format had to be shaped with old-fashioned crime TV tropes in mind, and the fact that the show was an HBO production no more guarded it against this than had been the case with *Homicide* and NBC. (HBO, being a subscription channel, has always been patronised by an affluent white audience.)

Yet even with this in mind, the task of de-centring whiteness is undertaken in a variety of ways. For example, *The Wire* goes further in the way it takes delight in its momentary foregrounding of black/white social relations that imply a reverse power dynamic: the carpeting of William Rawls by Erwin Burrell for example; the mock shooting of Landsman in the back by a hung-over Bunk; the roadside philosophizing between Jimmy McNulty and the ('old soul') street kid; the way the kid then tutors McNulty in the finer points of Snotboogie's life history and the crap game etiquette that leads to his murder. However, because these moments are shot-through with humour they work in a self-reflexive way against the idea that *The Wire* is in favour of valorising hierarchies whatever form they take.

In terms of visual style, this overall perspective is reinforced. To sustain its deeper commitment to characterisation, *The Wire* rejects the high-on-adrenalin visual style of *Miami Vice*, and also the wobbly camera effects of *Hill Street Blues* and *Homicide* (which have since also become the primary stylistic signifier of 'True Crime' reconstructions). Instead *The Wire* opts for a vintage documentary fly-on-the-wall feel that studiously avoids flashbacks and reserves the use of visual montage and non diegetic sound effects for the final episodes in each season. The strategic deployment of wide angle camera shots is also significant for the overall look of *The Wire*. Characters appear within the context of their habitual environments (or are placed against the

slightly removed back drops of other visualised Baltimore based social settings and milieus). The camera's positioning of characters is thus instrumental in establishing an important visual parallel to the narrative focus of the series on the idea that 'there are two Americas separate and unequal'.<sup>20</sup>

This aesthetic also contributes to the formal rhetoric of *The Wire* which suggests that its writers are in the business of telling stories that are rooted in local reality (but nonetheless fiction). In this way, it self-consciously utilizes the idea of the TV police drama as a method of drawing-in the viewer, but disrupts any expectations that this will provide access to the familiar Manichean universe of TV law and order discourses based on good versus evil (discourses which arguably had their origin in *Dragnet* (1952)).

We would argue that the positioning of African-American characters at the centre of *The Wire* in the ways we have discussed is in keeping with the kind of transformative strategy Maureen T Reddy argues for in relation to crime fiction. In *Traces, Codes and Clues* she states:

Writing about African Americans without assuming the normativity of whiteness - removing the white veil, so to speak would require placing white readers in the position of eavesdroppers, their consciousness not central but marginal. Conceiving of white readers as marginal would certainly push the boundaries of the genre in a way that white authored crime about people of colour currently avoids...<sup>21</sup>

Yet this potentially radical impulse, that stems from the formal construction of *The Wire*, sometimes sits uneasily with the writers' deterministic commitment to portraying individuals as compromised by the institutions they are committed to. Running parallel with this theme is the diminishing depth of characterisation which occurs whenever the action shifts upwards to the higher echelons of power. Senator Clay Davies, Mayor Royce and Erwin Burrell are the most obvious examples in this respect. They lack that 'extra layer of complexity' that bell hooks has alluded to her in her discussions of 'common representations of black people'.<sup>22</sup> If these particular African-American characters still have the power to engage us it is because whether in the guise of politicians (Davies and Royce) or as the pragmatic tactician (Burrell) they know how to hold an audience. Their function in *The Wire* is purely as satire and there is an implied social critique in their ability to self consciously exploit what Charles Burnett has referred to as the perennial re-assuring stereotypical 'image that suggests that black people are first and foremost entertainers'.<sup>23</sup>

The flattening-out of character does not continue further down the social scale. In keeping with *The Wire's* class-based analysis, it is not surprising that it is more interested in characters from the underclass. This is exhibited in a number of ways, often having to do with characters' stores of cultural capital. So, for example, much pleasure is to be had by the viewer in checking-out Stringer Bell's suits, Omar's long duster coat and Marlo's T-shirts. These fashion choices have little to do with Hollywood notions of gangsta cool, and

everything to do with letting the characters articulate themselves and their aspirations through their clothes.

Similarly, cultural capital exists in terms of speech patterns, which again subvert conventional stereotypes. Voicing the underclass through characters' use of what Simon has described as an 'esoteric' form of urban slang is one of the great strengths of *The Wire*. What this means is characters use an idiom in which profanity is counter-balanced by a figurative form of speech that is closer to poetry. Often they use esoteric slang to communicate their intelligence as well as their misdirected potential. The drug dealer D'Angelo's explanation of the game of chess through the analogy of The Game which in turn is a metaphor for the drug trade is one memorable example. Another is how gangster kingpin Marlo sums up his philosophy about status with the line, '*my name is my name*'.

In developing this theme of subversion further in relation to images of the underclass, it is clear that Reddy's ideas about eavesdropping are particularly germane: for in *The Wire*, surveillance is key. It not only inspires the title of the show (as in wire-tap), but provides a plot device where everybody is being watched/eavesdropped-upon, in one way or another - with the viewer implicitly included in the act. If *The Wire* is a picture of a city, built up episode-by-episode, and if the drugs trade is a metaphor for a bigger capitalism, then the individual with the best vantage point over how the pieces fit together is the viewer. Uncomfortably, the idea of surveillance and the distance it requires is also used to imply the casual indifference of mainstream America to the problems of the underclass (the viewer might as well be being told, 'If the cap fits...').

One final example reinforces the point: Early on in the series the female cop Kima Greggs is shown on a roof behind wire fencing observing and photographing the activities of drug dealing teenagers and the customers they allude to as 'dope fiends'. The action takes place in 'The Pit' (the courtyard in the low-rise projects of Baltimore). Viewed from Kima's perspective the projects could be mistaken for an 'open prison' and this connotation gains greater credence as a metaphor throughout the series as it relates to members of an underclass who are denied any hope of their situations changing. In subsequent scenes we repeatedly see the teenage drug dealers, D'Angelo, Bodie and Wallace holding court in The Pit on a cast off dilapidated orange crushed velvet sofa. The dumped orange sofa has been termed 'a life relic of the 1970s' according to Vince Perranio, the Art Director of *The Wire*. The dating of the sofa is significant in that it refers to an era before drug dealing and addiction became rife in the Baltimore projects.<sup>24</sup> The sofa therefore takes on a poignant metonymic visual symbolism in its questioning of the junkie stereotype and the idea that the people now involved in drugs don't have a life outside of them, or didn't exist as human beings before drugs, or indeed never had any self-worth. The sofa also has other functions in relation to the teenage drug dealers. It shows the audience that this is where the family is now located - on the street. As part of their youth culture they virtually live on the street as this is where their significant others

are. The brightness of the sofa also makes it a focal point for the viewer - as it is for the young men.

In conclusion, by moving the voices and insights of members of an underclass from the margin to the centre *The Wire* aims to disrupt the complacency of viewers in terms of their attitudes to race and social inequality. Its starkest achievement lies in the way it catalogues the sheer waste of young lives across the five seasons as the casualties of the drug trade mount up. This is the root of the show's power: when one fan wrote the following comment on a newspaper blog, he/she hit upon what makes *The Wire* so different from what has come before: 'How often does a TV programme engage your emotions to such a level, or give you so much to think about?'.<sup>25</sup>

Before we close, a post-script on genre. Our analysis thus far assumes that *The Wire* is a 'crime' show - but is this necessarily the case? Many critics have used other terms to describe it - an 'urban drama' (The Guardian), 'tv as great modern literature' (TV Guide), 'novelistic urban saga' (LA Weekly), 'David Simon's version of Dante's Inferno' (Entertainment Weekly), etc.<sup>26</sup> Even *The Wire*'s creators have distanced themselves from the idea of a cop show - with Simon openly comparing it to Greek tragedy. Both Simon and Ed Burns have claimed they never wanted *The Wire* to be a cop show.<sup>27</sup> You get the impression they want *The Wire* to be something else. They want it to be art.

The problem with this claim - good as *The Wire* may be - is that it takes a narrow view of what genre might be capable of. It may even imply a number of prejudices against TV (low culture, commercial, etc.) and crime drama more specifically (formularised, politically conservative, etc.), without taking into account how malleable and dynamic this forum can be. For, as we have seen, it was never one, fixed, entity: just as *Hill Street* was a long way from *Kojak*, so *The Wire* is a long way from *Hill Street*. And in ten, twenty years time, *The Wire* will look as creaky as those shows appear today.

True, by analysing *The Wire* in terms of one genre, there is a risk of closing down discussion of what other generic conventions might be in play (e.g. soap opera). But in the end, *The Wire* is filed under 'crime drama' in DVD stores for good reason, and David Simon himself reinforced that categorisation when he originally pitched the show to HBO with the words '...no one who sees [this] take on the culture of crime and crime fighting can watch anything like "C.S.I." or "N.Y.P.D. Blue" or "Law & Order" again without knowing that every punch was pulled on those shows...'<sup>28</sup> It is perhaps worth noting that although Simon does not readily admit to being influenced by any previous TV cop show, when pushed he acknowledged that: 'I saw some episodes of *Hill Street Blues*, and could see that it was well put together.'<sup>29</sup>

He succeeded in that aim, we think, and *The Wire* remains the latest in a succession of crime shows that have had a dialogue with each other, as well as with their broader sociological context, and in so doing have allowed America to talk to itself about the most pressing political issues of the day - not the least of which is race.

## Notes

1. David Simon, speaking at the National Film Theatre, London, 18/06/2008. Ed Burns echoed the sentiment in an interview with the authors, 26/06/2008. [[↔](#)]
2. David Simon DVD audio commentary for *The Wire*, Season 1, Episode 1: 'The Target' first broadcast 2 June 2002. [[↔](#)]
3. The division of TV history into the 'network' and 'neo-network' eras is usually attributed to Michael Curtin e.g. 'On Edge: Culture Industries in the Neo-Network Era' in Ohmann, R (Ed) *Making and Selling Culture*, Hanover, NH, University Press of New England, 1996, pp.181-202. The best text so far on how HBO has changed the TV landscape is Leverette, M, Ott, B and Buckley, C (Eds) *It's Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era*, Routledge, 2008. [[↔](#)]
4. While studies of crime TV are few and far between (there are a few outstanding books on individual shows, but much of the best work remains buried in unpublished PhDs), the crime genre per se has been the focus of a huge literature. For an overview of themes in the post-1970 period, we have found Paul Cobley's *The American Thriller* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2000) to be especially useful. [[↔](#)]
5. A filmed interview with Abby Mann can be seen on the 'Archive of American Television' at: <http://www.emmytvlegends.blogspot.com> and also on YouTube. [[↔](#)]
6. Erin E. Macdonald 'The Rhetoric of Race: The Use of Racial Stereotypes in Ed McBain's 87<sup>th</sup> Precinct Novels', *American@* (journal), vol 2, issue 1, 19/07/2005 viewable at: <http://www.uhu.es/hum676/revista/macdonald.pdf>. [[↔](#)]
7. Brandon Tartikoff quoted in Tom Shales, "The Re Decade", *Esquire*, March 1986, 72. [[↔](#)]
8. David Buxton, *From the Avengers to Miami Vice: Form and Ideology in Television* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 149. [[↔](#)]
9. Steven M. Saunders, "Noir et Blanc in Color: Existentialism and *Miami Vice*," in *The Philosophy of TV Noir*," ed. Steven M. Saunders and Aeon J. Skoble (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 97. [[↔](#)]
10. The occasional homo-erotic elements of such buddy partnerships should not be ignored - a long-standing theme in American fiction (as analysed by literary critic Leslie Fielder, for example). [[↔](#)]
11. Laura Schiff, "Maestro in Blue," *Creative Screenwriting*, December 1997: 5. [[↔](#)]
12. James McDaniel quoted by actor S.Epatha Merkerson in Sandra P. Angulo, 'Cop to it', *EW.Com*, 19/09/2008 at: <http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,84423,00.html>. [[↔](#)]
13. Karen Durbin, 'Shakespearean Soaps for Complicated Times', *New York Times* 18/10/1998. [[↔](#)]

14. David Simon at the NFT, op cit. [[↔](#)]
15. David Simon speaking at The Times Center, New York, 30/07/08. [[↔](#)]
16. David Simon, "Introduction," in *The Wire: Truth be Told*, Rafael Alvarez (New York: Pocket Books, 2004), 12. [[↔](#)]
17. David Simon at the Times Center, op cit. [[↔](#)]
18. David Simon, interview with the authors, 30/07/08. See also the article by Sara Taylor in this Issue for a critique of humanism in *The Wire*. [[↔](#)]
19. Quoted in Andrew Anthony, 'Way Out West', 26/10/2008 [[↔](#)]
20. David Simon, "There are two Americas, separate, unequal" Weekend Guardian, 06.09.08, 24-28. [[↔](#)]
21. Maureen T. Reddy, *Traces, Codes and Clues* (New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 76. [[↔](#)]
22. bell hooks, *Reel to Real* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 153. [[↔](#)]
23. Charles Burnett quoted in bell hooks, op cit., 168 [[↔](#)]
24. Ed Burns dates the Baltimore 'drugs deluge' to the Reagan era (interview with the authors, op cit.). However, it seems clear that other urban centres (especially New York and San Francisco) felt the effects earlier. [[↔](#)]
25. 'Joedoone' on the Guardian Wire Blog, 16/09/2008:  
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/organgrinder/2008/sep/15/television.television>. [[↔](#)]
26. Richard Byrne, 'Ink-Stained Wretches', *The Guardian*, 22/01/2008 (on [www.guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk)); Matt Rousch, 'Save the Children: Wire Taps Into a Broken School System' TV Guide, 6/09/2006; Robert Abele, 'Child in Time: *The Wire*', *LA Weekly*, 14/09/2006; Stephen King 'Setting off a Wire Alarm', *Entertainment Weekly*, 25/08/2006. [[↔](#)]
27. Interviews with the authors, op cit. [[↔](#)]
28. Quoted in Margaret Talbot, 'Stealing Life: The Crusader Behind *The Wire*', *New York Times*, 22/10/2007. [[↔](#)]
29. Interview with the authors, op cit. [[↔](#)]

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This analysis of common ways African Americans are typecast in film and TV reveals why stereotypical roles are detrimental to the Black community.Â Nadra Kareem Nittle is a journalist with bylines in The Atlantic, Vox, and The New York Times. Her reporting focuses education, race, and public policy. our editorial process. Nadra Kareem Nittle. Updated January 20, 2020. African Americans may be scoring more substantial parts in film and television, but many continue to play roles that fuel stereotypes, such as thugs and maids. This practice originated in the American theater tradition of minstrelsy, in which racist stereotypes about black people were a staple. Blackface occurs much less frequently now, after a long period of criticism of the practice: In Dear White People, for example, college fraternity members throw a blackface-themed party, which the film, as well as the Netflix series of the same name, use as the basis for a discussion of racism at colleges across the United States.Â Hollywood's stereotypical depictions of black people mostly refer to black Americans.Â Now, the "Germans Love David Hasselhoff" trope is used by the TVTropes community as a shorthand for any person or character who receives unexpected popularity outside of their home country. A British accent is an indicator of evil. I'm David Simon, a Baltimore-based journalist, author and television producer. I'm a former crime reporter for the Baltimore Sun, and the creator of HBO's The Wire, which depicts the political and socioeconomic fissures in an American city. My other television credits include the NBC drama Homicide and HBO's The Corner, Generation Kill and Treme. My most recent project, Show Me A Hero, an HBO miniseries, depicts the 1987-93 housing desegregation battle that divided Yonkers, N.Y. I'm currently in production on the upcoming HBO drama, The Deuce, which follows the legalization