

TALKING THROUGH *THE WIRE*

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David Simon claims that the authenticity and depth that *The Wire* achieves stem primarily from the local knowledge and research of its writers, and secondarily from that of other show participants. The writing staff includes former Baltimore police officers and newspaper reporters; their situated knowledge of local history, institutional processes and occupational details suffuse a narrative built within the kind of self-contained and infinitely-referential story universe for which fantasy series are renowned, but within an aesthetics and ethical discourse of realism. *The Wire* establishes a new hybrid drama based on history and reportage rather than fantasy and metaphor.

The show's lack of immediate resolution, ontological status as an ongoing record of small variations within an unchanging social structure, and focus on urban life and politics are all shared by newspapers. Every newspaper story is its own episode, but rarely contains climaxes or resolutions, and only can be understood in larger contexts of presentation, as with *The Wire*. Each edition of the paper contains multiple stories with implicit links to each other, but often it takes months or years of following stories to make the connections. *The Wire* benefits from making those connections more explicit over time, imparting a more historicist and structuralist perspective than is usually found in newspapers. Indeed, as the series eventually focuses on the decline of the Baltimore *Sun* as a strong preserver of local knowledge and depth reporting, *The Wire* counterposes itself as a source of knowledge, albeit fictionalized, of Baltimore politics, neighborhoods, and social institutions, and the relations among them. By relying for its narrative on history rather than fantasy, and reportage over metaphor, *The Wire* holds a middle ground between the pedagogical and exhortative position of documentary and the veiled and allegorical position of science fiction and other fictional forms of social commentary common to television. As a docudrama of the contemporary and everyday, *The Wire* offers a more direct challenge to its viewership to respond in the world outside television to its revelations, than do either docudramas of famous historical moments and personages, or fictions of metaphor and spectacle.

As production resources and capabilities continue to be diffused beyond the major production centers, *The Wire* has raised the possibility for greater embeddedness of stories based on the local and historical experiences at sites of production. The fate of *K*Ville*, the first post-*Wire* American drama, however, shows that the constraints of most network television remain problematic for the creation of such series. The creators of *K*Ville* sought to tell the story of New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. The show runner did some research in New Orleans, the series was shot on location, and scripts often centered on New Orleans politics, racial dynamics, and economic development issues. However, the writing staff remained Los Angeles-based, made mistakes in scripts obvious to local residents, and often resorted to relying on the most familiar landmarks and aspects of New Orleans life, even as characters occasionally took verbal potshots at the notion that local life was limited to the

French Quarter and other famous spots. Moreover, while storylines raised many issues of contemporary power, they never achieved the density, acuity, and historical knowingness of *The Wire*, as the series relied on the action scene/interrupted narrative/quick resolution triad of the most traditional police genre network series. Some local residents bemoaned its cancellation, believing it to be improving in its depiction of New Orleans' complexities as it went along in its only season, but *K*Ville's* commercial failure in following *The Wire's* emphasis on local history and contemporary issues likely means few others will try. David Simon's next project is about New Orleans' music culture, and we shall see if he can portray it with the depth, detail, and complexity of his previous productions, when no longer on home ground.