

Jason Mittell's Response to *The Wire*

One of the formative debates within media studies concerns the social implications of realism as a style of representation. Encapsulated by Colin McCabe vs. Colin McArthur in the late 1970s, this debate asks whether realism can effectively provide a site of social critique—to radically oversimplify, McArthur claims realist texts can highlight bleak social conditions to inspire political action in viewers, while McCabe contends that conventional modes of realism encourage passivity and romanticize social conditions, calling for a more Brechtian style of emotional distancing and critique.

The history of American television sees far more works embracing a McCabian mode of anti-realist critique than McArthyite realist exposé. The dominant strain in American televisual social critique is satirical, commenting on social ills by poking fun more than holding up a mirror—Norman Lear's 1970s comedies were excessive in their style and tone, a model followed later by cartoony comedies, both animated like *The Simpsons* and *South Park* and live-action like *Married... With Children* and *Malcolm in the Middle*. Realist programs have more commonly been either apolitical (although McCabe would deny the existence of such a category), or explicitly supportive of the status-quo, as with the model of *Dragnet* and its many police procedural progeny, culminating in the temporally authentic *24*, which now appears to dictate American foreign relations rather than represent them. Even *Hill Street Blues*, whose gritty realism is often remembered as exposing hidden facets of society, used excess and satire for its most biting critiques, as in the hyper-militaristic Sgt. Howard Hunter or violence-prone dirtbag Mick Belker.

On its face, *The Wire* stands as exception to this trend in American television, offering a realist exposé of urban America akin to the fiction of Zola, Dickens, and Upton Sinclair, and built upon the journalistic tradition of David Simon's own ancestral newspapermen. Certainly much of the show's power comes from this realist glare, presenting institutions like urban schools, city hall, and the police precinct with an eye and ear for details that imbue authenticity and make viewers feel as if they truly know what life is like in Baltimore. However, *The Wire* has always seasoned its main dish of gritty realism with the garnish of satirical humor. Often it is the gallows humor of the condemned laughing to keep from sobbing, as in the misadventures of Carter and Herc pursuing Fuzzy Dunlop, or the baroque profanity of McNulty and Bunk dissecting a crime scene.

But satire plays a starring role in seasons 3 and 5 in ways that seem to run counter to *The Wire*'s commitment to journalistic authenticity and social realism. The third season, with its theme of reform, presents three outlandish attempts to create a new day: a cop decriminalizing drugs, a gangster corporatizing the drug trade, and a reformist white politician striving to win election in a black city against a corrupt political machine. None of these plots belong within the social realist milieu (despite the improbable real life victory of Martin O'Malley), as they are as far-fetched and excessive as the scenarios featured on *The Simpsons* or *All in the Family*. But as far as I can tell, viewers accepted these storylines, and many even embraced moments like Stringer's enforcement of Robert's Rules and Bunny's paper bag speech as among the program's finest hours. There was no outcry that this satirical excess undercut the show's core realism, even

though these were clearly writerly inventions designed to portray the limits of what cannot be even contemplated within the political realities of corrupt institutions.

Season five was another story, however, as McNulty's fake serial killer scheme raised the satire to *Strangelovian* proportions. And while diehard *Wire*-heads still embraced the final season, there was widespread discontent with this storyline and the dark place it took many beloved characters. I believe that the tepid reaction to season 5 is due in large part to the disjunction between the modes of social realism and excessive satire, as the serial killer plot escalated the absurdities that typically bubbled beneath the surface of the show's dysfunctional systems. Viewers were willing to accept season three's satire in large part because the plots were motivated by noble intentions, reducing violence by making the drug trade more regulated and businesslike. McNulty's plot is much more driven by the extremities of a broken man than a noble reformer, as his desperation to beat the game pushes him to game the system. Thus the excesses are not motivated by the goals we share with characters as in season 3, but instead the demons we thought McNulty had purged in season 4—we see the scheme as more absurd and extreme because it comes from a much darker and dehumanized place.

The excessive and satirical mode of season 5 enabled an additional narrative dimension, allowing the writers to address the show itself on a meta-level—many of the newspaper's discussions about the role of reporting, the attempts to capture “the Dickensian aspect” of Baltimore, and the debate over which stories get covered all offer commentaries about *The Wire* itself in relation to other television programs. It's almost as if David Simon was offering an outlandish serial killer plot as a dare to Emmy voters (and their diegetic stand-ins, the Pulitzers): “if you won't reward our commitment to realism, how about this load of crap more typical of network crime dramas?” And since the entire plot of the serial killer and its journalistic coverage revolves on the process of creating fiction and selling it as reality, the season meditates on the show's own role of truth-telling fiction. Mixing these differing rhetorical modes within the same show suggests a fusion of the two Colins' arguments, using both realism and anti-realism to craft a perfect epilogue to one of television's masterworks, a social critique that transcends simple categorization and analysis.