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The Wire as Soap

The Wire has met with accolades among critics, fans, and academics. Much of this discourse celebrates The Wire as innovative, as a program that rises masterfully above the patterns and platitudes of TV norms. But I'd ask that we, temporarily at least, turn these narratives of televisual progress on their heads, by considering the interconnections between The Wire and the more popularly-maligned TV form, the soap opera. What meanings and cultural work come to the fore when we view The Wire as connected in form and history to the soap opera?

The celebratory language that surrounds The Wire is part of HBO's contribution to the public conversation about quality TV, best exemplified in HBO's tagline "It's Not TV, it's HBO." This famous tagline strives to define HBO as an altogether different medium because of the quality of its programming. The Wire specifically is often framed in connection with a medium other than TV: the novel. Various critics have associated The Wire's scope and style of storytelling with the 19th century novel, and this association is affirmed in the producer commentaries in the DVDs. In addition to these literary associations, the producer commentaries also associate The Wire with heralded moments of cinematic history.

In TV studies, we have interrogated questions of quality, and yet they still sometimes frame our conversations. This isn't necessarily a bad thing. As we reintroduce and revalue subjectivity, passion, and emotion (the figure of the scholar fan or acafan) in our critical work, we eschew a value-free "objective" point of view as ultimately impossible. Certainly there is much to celebrate about The Wire, and perhaps it does have the potential, at least, to do "new" things like enliven public debate, as the language of this roundtable prompt suggests.

However, to concentrate on how *The Wire* is new runs the risk of reifying the divide invoked by HBO's "it's not TV, it's HBO" campaign. This has led me to propose thinking about *The Wire* more closely in relation to soap operas—exploring continuities and their ramifications (while not overlooking differences.) In his work on narrative complexity, Jason Mittell explores the connection between daytime soap operas and contemporary prime time serial television programming, but does so in order to ascertain where prime time serial programs have established their own specific formal traits and patterns. These distinctions are indeed valuable; we would not want to equate prime time serial programming with daytime soap operas, nor overlook the specific formal qualities emerging in serial programming like *The Wire* or *Lost*. However, considering the continuities between so-called "quality" serial TV programming and daytime soaps might help us to fit *The Wire* in a larger history of TV traditions, and might also give us access to a fuller picture of its narrative workings and of the experiences of its viewers.

So—some points of continuity:

- Serial plot complexity: Like soap operas, the narratives of *The Wire* intertwine and reemerge years later, flirting with, at times invoking, and at times overturning closure.
- Characters connected by the social local of a geographic space or by an institution: One could argue for significant differences in realism between *The Wire*'s social local of Baltimore and the fantasy spaces of most soap operas, or between the institutions of government, education, and commerce featured in *The Wire* and the fantasy hospital space of, for example, *General Hospital*. However, the basic parallel remains: both *The Wire* and many soap operas use as their organizing principle the setting of a shared geographic location or institution which links together diverse webs of micro-communities into a larger community.
- Multifaceted performances of an extensive cast: As in soap operas, fan documentation and auxiliary material for *The Wire* offers maps of the various characters and their interconnections with one another. Fans celebrate the performances of individuals within this cast of many.
- Character archetypes that generate followings, through a combination of identification and magnification: In processes not unlike those of soap opera fans as explored by various scholars of soap opera fandom, Omar and Marlowe, Stringer Bell and McNulty, to name a few, all serve as figures of personalization (to borrow Nancy Baym's term) and glamorization within *The Wire*'s somewhat diffuse fandom.

- Pleasures of viewing: Fans follow the intricacies of plot and character development across the seasons, debating details and ramifications.

It's worth noting that all of these elements, elements which I would argue *The Wire* shares to a degree at least with soap operas, have been used to herald *The Wire*'s quality. I'd suggest that rather than frame these elements as new or old, we examine them within a range of contexts and histories. Indeed, to do so might shed light on soap opera engagement, ideologically reframing considerations of elements such as seriality and character personalization, leading us to new (there's that word again...) questions, such as: Can we use the hype surrounding "quality" TV like *The Wire* to reconsider the compelling dimensions of soap operas and soap opera fandom?