

## **It's Not History, It's HBO**

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### Race, Audience, and *The Wire*

As a show that is clearly for a knowing and elite public, does *The Wire's* reading of contemporary urban history from the viewpoint of a second-tier city simply impose another narrative of the insolubility of urban problems on an extant mass narrative of such despair? Do its naturalistic styles and narratives reify notions of the connections between race and the urban underclass for an already insulated and isolated white elite? As Barack Obama's favorite show and as an HBO production, *The Wire* targets a specific subset of the viewing public and draws on prior successes at that network. Unlike those shows, it anchors itself clearly in contemporary history, offering references to actual events and places. But in doing so does it further define the problems of the inner city as wrought up in the complexities of a global system of exchange and therefore not subject to redress as a matter of local policy?

In his introduction to the casebook, *The Wire: Truth Be Told*, David Simon affirms that the show could never have been produced if there were no "pay-subscription model such as HBO" (11). Indeed, *The Wire* is clearly a distinctive production; while this is a matter of its frankness in matters of sex and violence, it is also a matter of its narrative scope and structure. That is, moving beyond the most daring of the Stephen Bochco shows of the 1980s, it eschews friendly narrative hooks and almost completely does away with characters that viewers can readily identify and sympathize with, as well as with stories that offer closure. Not to mention that its vision is one of almost constant critique and despair. And while such daring certainly takes the relative mass out of the idea of a mass medium, it clearly works within the HBO strategy of targeting a specific demographic and defining an adequate audience as opposed to a vast one. Indeed, the show's fan base has been frequently described as "small but loyal." But in targeting a narrow audience that is predominantly male, educated, and economically elite, what are the implications for the politics of reception?

*The Wire* projects as its audience not a casual and visceral viewer but one who engages the show deeply and intellectually. Indeed, one could argue that it mitigates its veneer of racial determinism with a nuanced treatment of the nexus of race and class that delves into the historical dimension of seemingly entrenched social hierarchies. For example, criminality is not defined simply in racial terms; rather, it is more compellingly a matter of entrenched geography, which is a matter of class. In season two, White Mike is a secondary dealer and the power behind the flow of drugs is revealed as "The Greek." Certainly the abilities of figures such as Lt. Daniels and Bunk Moreland are beyond question, a fact that rebuts simple biological narratives of fitness. And even among the drug dealers, criminality is a matter of situation and not of disposition.

For example, in season one, D'Angelo Barksdale, a nephew of the drug kingpin Avon, has the look and behavior of a criminal who has assimilated all of the negative behaviors of the urban lower classes. Yet, there is always something about this character that suggests introspection and depth beyond a viewer's expectation. With a device that is clearly literary in its use of metaphor, and related to the projection of an HBO audience, David Simon and Ed Burns have D'Angelo show disappointment when

he finds his underlings playing checkers with a chess set. “Chess is a better game,” says D’Angelo. Shot in intermittent close ups and with D’Angelo always physically somewhat above his soldiers, he goes on to teach Bodie and Wallace the more advanced game, showing them its connection to “the game” of the drug trade. “The King stay the King,” and “the pawns get capped quick.” The translation of the language of the drug trade to the chess board is indeed subtle and notable for the engaged viewer. And that’s the point of *The Wire* as an HBO series: It extends and perhaps transcends genre—it is not just a police show, says David Simon—but only for an involved viewer. Its pleasure and even its basic narrative structure defy the practices of a casual viewer. It assumes and creates an audience and in doing so mitigates against the kind of surface judgments that would result in its being causally defined as racially deterministic.

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