
From the Instructor

Ryan Chernin's thesis constitutes an original and insightful contribution to the scholarship on *The Wire*. He is, in large measure, correct in his claims that others have yet to dial into that element of this complex work that hearkens back to that earlier phase of the detective genre and his careful attention to the literary texts in the 'hardboiled' genre above and beyond their rendering in film of the post-war period proves a well-conceived and fruitful gambit. Chernin properly belongs to a second generation of scholars of *The Wire*, who, along with Bramall and Pitcher, and Thompson too, all whom he cites, demonstrate how with the passage now of a decade we are entering the period where the initial quite defamiliarizing impact of the program is giving way to increasingly successful generic analyses. While provocative and very well executed, Chernin's argument may nonetheless be open to countervailing systemic criticisms, such as has been inaugurated by Kinder, whom he also cites, that might question whether the stolid individualist figured in the hardboiled detective protagonist stands in the avatar of Jimmy McNulty quite so proudly, quite so self-reliantly, quite so self-assured, or whether the system he bucks is perhaps with the turn of the next century bucking him back in a new, ironic, and ultimately more problematic way.

— Michael Degener

WR 150: Renaissance TV: Serial Drama and the Cable Revolution

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HARDWIRED: HBO'S *THE WIRE* AND THE HARDBOILED DETECTIVE TRADITION

The first season of HBO's serialized crime drama *The Wire* has been called a milestone in the evolution of television drama, and the show has been discussed in academic essays and conferences as well as in the popular media. In fact, whole books and even university courses have been devoted to the analysis of its sociological and ethnographic implications (Bramall and Pitcher 86). Critics have praised *The Wire* for seeming "to challenge a dominant regime of representations" (86)—especially in the inclusion of women, minorities and gay characters—and for making "contemporary social life more comprehensible" (88). However, these critical analyses do little to account for the popularity of the show. After all, ethnographic studies rarely command the kinds of ratings needed to sustain a television series for five seasons, so *The Wire* must indeed be something more. Moreover, more than a decade after the first season of *The Wire* premiered in 2002, it is clear that the show has not had the profound influence over the nature of popular television in America that some critics predicted. Indeed, not a single show has tried to imitate either its style or its subject matter. Why, then, does *The Wire* stand out from the mainstream, even after its own success, as if it were something new and different, and yet engage audiences so compellingly, as if it were cast in a guaranteed formula for success? *The Wire* is, in fact, cast in a tried-and-true format, and yet it is one not commonly associated with contemporary television entertainment: the form of the "hardboiled" detective novel most closely associated with the 1930s and 1940s.

Some authors have argued that *The Wire* combined a unique set of qualities that gave the show its distinctive character and that made it

a particularly popular subject for critical analysis. For example, Marsha Kinder compares *The Wire* to earlier crime dramas such as *The Naked City* and *The Godfather* and argues that, unlike these productions, *The Wire* does not concern itself primarily with a single case or a single crime family. Rather, *The Wire* “is committed to a systemic analysis of Baltimore” (50), the city in which the series takes place, and Kinder argues that *The Wire* is unique not only for this reason but because it depicts the social forces that give rise to criminal organizations. Conversely, Daniel Herbert notes that many of *The Wire*’s contemporary television dramas, such as *24* and *Battlestar Galactica*, are in fact concerned with broad social issues, but he argues that these shows address these issues in the context of escapist fantasy. *Battlestar Galactica*, in particular, presents an allegory of contemporary political conflicts, whereas *The Wire* takes “an actively *anti-allegorical* stance toward the representation of social issues” (192). These authors, then, argue that *The Wire* is unique in its combination of social awareness and a realistic depiction of the social environment.

Kinder, Herbert, and other critics have failed to find a precedent or parallel for *The Wire* because they have confined their search to contemporary popular film and television drama rather than encompassing earlier forms of popular narrative. For this reason, they have failed to recognize that many of the qualities that they praise in *The Wire* are characteristic of detective fiction, particularly the so-called “hardboiled” American detective novels of the 1930s and 1940s. Kecia Driver Thompson comes closest when she analyzes *The Wire* in the context of naturalist fiction (81), but her analysis is concerned primarily with the tradition of African American fiction. Rather, I believe, *The Wire* finds its clearest parallels in the novels of writers like Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, which today’s audiences probably know best from numerous film adaptations. This affinity may not be initially obvious since these films offer less detail than the books from which they were adapted, as well as because the hardboiled detective novel is mainly associated with the 1930s and 1940s, the social problems and issues of which may seem more like history than realism to today’s reader or viewer. Nonetheless *The Wire* reflects the central qualities of this genre: cynical characters trying to maintain their integrity in a corrupt world. Moreover, like *The Wire*, the hardboiled detective writers were,

in their own day, celebrated (and often criticized) for their realistic depiction of the urban environment.

The most obvious parallel between *The Wire* and the hardboiled genre is in the character of the detective. While *The Wire* is an ensemble show, Detective Jimmy McNulty is arguably the protagonist of at least the first season. He appears in the first scene, before the opening credits have rolled, and he initiates the investigation that runs throughout the plot of that season. He is introduced as a jaded and sarcastic character, particularly when he chides his partner for “giving a fuck when it’s not your turn to give a fuck.” However, it is clear that he cares about his job: he attends a trial that was not one of his cases, and he later complains to the judge about drug dealers literally getting away with murder. When a task force is formed to make a case against the drug gang, McNulty makes it clear that he is not willing to just play the game and make a few quick arrests. He wants to do “real police work” and get a conviction against Avon Barksdale, the leader of the gang. In this respect, *The Wire* is consistent with Chandler’s observation that the hardboiled story “does not believe that murder will out and justice will be done—unless some very determined individual makes it his business to see that justice is done” (II 1017).

McNulty is well educated, and he has a sense of the world beyond the demands of his job. In the first episode he makes a reference to the classic film *A Bridge Too Far* that his partner fails to recognize. However, over the course of the season, the viewers learn that he has sacrificed all that he has in order to do his job. He is, in Chandler’s words, “a lonely man . . . a poor man, or he would not be a detective” (II 992). McNulty’s apartment is bare, with minimal furniture and no decorations. This mirrors the description of Philip Marlowe’s apartment in *The Big Sleep*: “In it was everything that was mine. . . . Not much; a few books, pictures, radio, chessmen, old letters, stuff like that. Nothing” (I 708). His marriage has ended, and his work even intrudes into the time that he spends with his children. In one episode he takes them with him to a morgue, and in another he loses them in a crowded market after teaching them to trail a suspect. To some extent, this sense of isolation and commitment is an inevitable part of any detective story since personal relationships tend to detract from the main plot; for this reason, however, it is a recognizable characteristic of the genre.

Another of the hallmarks of hardboiled detective fiction is its use of gritty language. As Walter Mosley explains, “hardboiled language . . . is elegant and concise language used to describe an ugly and possibly irredeemable world. . . . [I]t is a blunt object intent upon assault and battery” (599). The language of the hardboiled detective is the common language of the streets, but it is not plain-spoken or simple. Rather, it is full of similes and allusions meant as much to conceal as to express the speakers’ meanings. This is a feature of the urban dialect spoken by many of the characters in *The Wire*. As Thompson notes, “many critics have confessed to watching Season One with the subtitles on, despite the fact that all the characters are speaking English” (87). However, the language spoken by the detectives can be equally cryptic. For example, in a five-minute scene from episode four McNulty and his partner have no other dialogue than a constant repetition of the word “fuck.” According to David Simon, one of the series’ creators, this dialogue is taken from a comment made by veteran detective Terry McLarney on the use of profanity among the Baltimore police (20). Despite the real-life source, however, the device goes back to the approach of Chandler and his contemporaries. As Chandler puts it, “All language begins with speech, and the speech of the common man at that” (II 989); common speech, in the hardboiled detective story, is used to create a world that is both recognizable and alien, coded so as to be accessible only to those already on the inside.

While the use of rugged character types and gritty language gives the hardboiled detective story its style, the substance of the genre is found in the world that the writers create. As Simon explains, *The Wire* “was not about crime. Or punishment. Or the drug war. Or politics. Or race. Or education, labor relations or journalism. It was about The City” (3). It is in this respect, in fact, that *The Wire* comes closest to the world of the hardboiled detective:

[A] world in which gangsters can rule nations and almost rule cities . . . where the mayor of your town may have condoned murder as an instrument of money-making, where no man can walk down a dark street in safety because law and order are things we talk about but refrain from practicing; a world where you may witness a holdup in broad daylight and see who did it, but you will fade quickly back

into the crowd rather than tell anyone, because the holdup men may have friends with long guns. (Chandler II 991)

This idea of honest characters caught up in a corrupt world best defines the hardboiled detective story, and this theme is reflected in *The Wire* and in the narrative arc of Season One. In the course of that season, the task force uncovers a world in which following the money from drug deals can lead to real estate schemes and campaign contributions. In this world the detectives are forced to make compromises in order to maintain their integrity. At one point McNulty covers up the murder of a gang member because the murderer, Omar Little, is a witness to the murder of an innocent civilian. At another time McNulty prevents FBI agents, who want to make a case against certain corrupt politicians, from offering a deal to Barksdale. Of course, by doing so McNulty is letting the politicians off the hook in order to make his own case against Barksdale. Thus, priorities are always at least potentially in conflict, and right and wrong are never unambiguous terms.

This bleak and compromised view of society is new to commercial television. When Simon was writing *Homicide: Life on the Streets* for NBC, he was frequently asked, “Where are the victories?” and “Where are the life-affirming moments?” (12–13). There are relatively few victories in *The Wire*, and the life-affirming moments are carefully disguised. In fact, it often seems as if the characters’ efforts to achieve better lives only lead to worse defeats. In one plot strand or narrative arc, Wallace, a young gang member, becomes traumatized over his role in a brutal murder, and he decides to leave the gang. In a rare act of insubordination, Barksdale’s nephew, D’Angelo, tries to protect the boy and refuses to tell his uncle where Wallace has gone. However, Wallace eventually returns to the only life he knows, and he is killed because the gang no longer trusts him. This leads D’Angelo to question his loyalties and to make a deal with the police—until his mother forces him to choose between protecting his family and doing what is right. In the final episode, D’Angelo chooses his family and ends up facing twenty years in prison.

There are no victories in this story, but that does not mean that it is without hope. Indeed, the life-affirming moments in *The Wire* do not come from the victories. Rather, they come from the struggles. They can be seen in D’Angelo’s willingness to protect someone like Wallace even at the risk

of his own safety. Similarly, in episode ten, Detective Greggs agrees to help her confidential informant, Bubbles, kick his addiction to drugs. Unfortunately, before she can fulfill her promise, Greggs is shot in an undercover operation, and by the time anyone else can reach out a hand to Bubbles, he is “using” again. However, a “life-affirming moment” can still be found in Bubbles’ desire to “get clean” and in Greggs’ willingness to help him to do so. In other words, despite the odds stacked against them, and despite their frequent defeats, the characters in *The Wire* continue to struggle, and they continue to reach out to one another. Without this struggle there would be no victories—and, one can argue, without this struggle the show would not be worth watching.

The similarities between *The Wire* and the hardboiled detective novels of the 1930s and 1940s no doubt arise to some extent from the effort of the writers, in both cases, to depict the criminal world as accurately as possible. Indeed, Dashiell Hammett was a detective before he became a writer, and the two creators of *The Wire* were a former police officer and a former newspaper reporter. Thus, one might say that others have failed to imitate the successful model of *The Wire* either because they failed to recognize this model or because their creators stood at too great a remove from urban reality. This view, however, understates the role of creativity—of fiction—in realistic drama. As Chandler pointed out, “You must remember that Marlowe is not a real person. He is a creature of fantasy. He is in a false position because I put him there” (quoted in Speir 106). Herbert, in an interesting contrast to this reminder of the *created* character of fiction, argues that *The Wire* does *not* represent fiction’s most artificial extreme: a work of allegory. This seemingly obvious conclusion regarding a realistic drama, however, may miss an important insight. Bramall and Pitcher, in fact, counter Herbert’s argument by comparing the narrative arc of *The Wire* to the complicated internal politics of their own area of experience: the field of academic cultural studies at British universities. Following their argument, *The Wire*’s popularity derives *precisely* from its function as allegory. After all, anyone who has dealt with bureaucracy and with the frustration that red tape and petty squabbling can cause *in any sphere or profession* can relate to the struggles of the police task force that form the basis of the plot of *The Wire*, and anyone who has been caught up by forces beyond his or her control can empathize

with D'Angelo or Wallace. In their efforts to do right in a world that is inherently corrupt, these characters simply play out the petty struggles of modern life—though on a grander, more dangerous scale and with higher stakes than most of us typically experience. Despite the odds and despite the risks, they weigh their priorities and maintain their integrity—and, when they can, they reach out a hand to help those around them. This is the core of the narrative arc and the basis of the appeal of *The Wire*: who, after all, could fail to relate to that?

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