CLASS : CULTURE

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It is tempting to regard *The Wire* as a work that transcends its medium. The show is certainly regarded by most critics as one of the greatest, if not the ultimate, works of television fiction, but its accolades usually exceed the bounds of the television medium. Hailed by many for its novelistic scope and tone, the show has also been named on lists of the top films of the 2000s, and is often framed as an updated Greek tragic drama by way of Zola and Dickens. It has been embraced by academics across the disciplines as an object of analysis both in scholarship and in pedagogy, with courses dedicated to the series in diverse disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, urban studies, and criminology, as well as the more obvious realm of media studies. It would be fair to say that no work of television is seen as more legitimate and important across the academy than *The Wire*, but through this process of legitimation, scholars frequently ignore or downplay its context as grounded within the structures and systems of American television.

If *The Wire* teaches us anything, it is the importance of context. The individual stories of characters ranging from Bubbles to Bunk are less the tales of individuals than narratives of pieces within a larger whole. As one of the series's promotional taglines argues, “all the pieces matter.” We can only understand the individual elements of the series, whether it's the portrayal of urban geography or arguments about the decline of the manufacturing and labor economy, as parts of a whole televisual portrait of a city that shapes what is said and how it is re-
ceived. First and foremost, *The Wire* is a work of television, and only by framing it in the context of twenty-first-century American television can we hope to understand its origins, its cultural achievements, and its representational strategies. Thus even in a book such as this one, focused on what *The Wire* tells us about the social world it represents on screen, we need to step back and remember how it got to the screen in the first place, and how that context of television impacts its representational strategies.

This is a core argument that I make in my own course about the series—we focus on the show's hot-button social issues like crime and urban decay, but always keep one eye on the *The Wire*'s context as a work of televised fiction. Media studies as a discipline is similarly devoted to the importance of context, and thus as a teacher and scholar of the show, I always emphasize that its portrayals and politics must be viewed within the particular opportunities and possibilities of the television medium. This essay emerges directly from that course, and was written originally for my students as an opening crash course in American television as it pertains to *The Wire* and its unique place within the medium's history. Thus instead of offering a critical argument about the show's content or form, I offer a more descriptive outline of the specific industrial, technological, aesthetic, and genre contexts of television that helped shape *The Wire*, and enabled it to make it to commercial television in the first place. I dodge specificities of plot so as to make it appropriate for a new viewer looking to avoid spoilers. Hopefully, the essay can serve as a useful overview for the show's viewers and students as it becomes less a piece of contemporary culture and more of a historical artifact of a particular moment in the medium's and country's history.

**Television Industry**

*The Wire* emerged at a particular moment in the history of television that was uniquely situated to allow such an original series to flourish. The American television industry has traditionally been a closed market dominated by a small number of commercial national networks, making it quite difficult for innovative programming to find its way to the air. The 1980s and 1990s saw the rise of the multichannel era, with dozens of cable channels entering the marketplace and providing alter-natives to traditional broadcast networks. Even though most of these channels were initially owned or later purchased by the same corporate conglomerates that owned the networks, an effect of the multichannel era was to create alternative options for producers looking to place programs. Until the late 1990s, few cable programs directly matched the standard fictional fare of networks, with high-budget comedies and dramas clustered on networks while cable focused on cheaper nonfiction genres, like news, sports, how-to, and talk shows, alongside a back catalog of reruns and films. The lower production costs for such programming meant that cable channels could turn a profit with lower ratings and less advertising revenue than networks, setting the standard that a cable "hit" had a far lower threshold of popularity than traditional television shows.¹

Home Box Office (HBO) was an early cable channel starting in the 1970s that followed a different business model than most of its cable counterparts. HBO defines itself as a premium channel, charging an additional subscription fee beyond the standard monthly cable or satellite bill; in exchange, HBO features no advertising (aside from its own internal promotions) and can include greater degrees of nudity, violence, profanity, and controversial content than on network and basic cable programs. The effect of HBO's business model is that it is not driven by getting high ratings to sell slots to advertisers, but instead looks for programming that is sufficiently desirable to convince viewers to spend an extra ten to fifteen dollars a month for the service.²

At first, HBO primarily programmed unedited feature films, making it a desirable way to see movies at home before VCRs were widespread across America. HBO's earliest original programming featured sports programming, especially boxing, stand-up comedy shows full of raunchy profanity, and titillating "documentaries" like *America Undercover* (1983-present) and *Real Sex* (1992-present). Such programming made HBO a popular option for many cable subscribers, but established its reputation as a fairly lowbrow channel catering to prurient interests, not the highbrow purveyor of quality television it's known as today. From early in the channel's history, HBO appealed to a comparatively large African American subscriber base, in large part due to its sports programming and inclusion of black comics in its stand-up specials.³

The mid-1990s saw a shift in HBO's strategy—the channel started offering fictional series comparable to the genres of network television,
but with an edgy approach to stand out from more conventional network shows. Earlier attempts at programming more mainstream television genres, like sitcoms *1st and Ten* (1984–90) and *Dream On* (1990–96), were most notable for their use of profanity and nudity to spice up otherwise conventional programs. *The Larry Sanders Show* (1992–98) was never a huge hit, but its critically acclaimed satirical take on late-night talk shows did appeal to a group of upscale viewers that could afford the channel’s premium cost and helped build HBO’s reputation for quality. Subsequent sketch comedies like *Mr. Show with Bob and David* (1995–98) and *Tracy Takes On . . .* (1996–99), along with edgy talk shows *Dennis Miller Live* (1994–2002) and *The Chris Rock Show* (1997–2000), helped improve HBO’s reputation as a sophisticated channel that could appeal to hipper and more affluent adult audiences.

Three programs from the late 1990s paved the way for *The Wire*. HBO’s first dramatic series, *Oz* (1997–2003), established that the channel would push boundaries of controversial content and portray a world never seen on television before. Set in a maximum-security prison warc with a diverse cast portraying hardened criminals and corrupt prison guards, *Oz* took advantage of HBO’s loose content restrictions by featuring sex, violence, profanity, and extreme representations of homosexuality, rape, drug use, and interethnic gang wars. While never a hit, the show’s dour and grim tone demonstrated HBO’s ability to create a series that aimed less to entertain through comforting formulas than to shock and challenge viewers’ sensibilities and expectations. The series also helped establish HBO’s reputation as a creator-centered channel, as the show’s head writer and producer Tom Fontana was able to push boundaries and pursue his vision in ways that would never be allowed on broadcast networks.

With *Oz* HBO launched a notable slogan that effectively encapsulated its strategy: “It’s Not TV. It’s HBO.” HBO’s first real hit fictiona series followed this slogan by taking advantage of the channel’s loose content regulations and boundary-pushing attitude. *Sex and the City* (1998–2004) featured an overt sexual tone, frequent nudity and profanity, and an explicit attitude matching its female-centered vision of upscale New York as a consumerist utopia. The series straddled the line between comedy and drama more than HBO’s previous efforts, creating a genre mixture that typified the channel’s willingness to avoid formula and convention. While little in *Sex and the City* resembles *The Wire*’s take on urban America in content or form, the show demonstrated the viability of HBO creating high-profile buzz-worthy original programs that broke television conventions as a strategy to attract and retain subscribers.

The show that truly established the HBO brand as “not TV” and set the stage for *The Wire* was *The Sopranos* (1999–2007). The groundbreaking series took a film genre rarely seen on television, the gangster story, and offered a highly serialized tale of a mafia family in contemporary America. The series was hailed as one of the masterworks of the television medium, winning numerous awards and firmly cementing HBO’s reputation as a highbrow channel with sophisticated original programming. It demonstrated the possibilities of HBO creating programming that not only justified its subscription fees, but also expanded the aesthetic and creative possibilities of the television medium. *The Sopranos* quickly became the most critically praised and highest rated show in HBO’s history, creating a template for groundbreaking original drama that pushes boundaries of content and form.

*The Sopranos* solidified a key difference between HBO and other channels: its focus on being “creator-centered.” In typical American commercial television, programs are dependent on network approval and high ratings to remain on the airwaves, which leads creators to yield to network pressures and suggestions, often in reaction to market research and “testing” with focus groups. This system often results in “least objectionable programming,” where producers and networks strip away any controversial or challenging content to avoid alienating audiences or advertisers. The history of commercial network television is littered with examples of programs that get watered down and reshaped by network pressure, with innovations often becoming huge hits when networks are least involved in providing notes and suggestions, such as *The Simpsons* (1990–present) and *All in the Family* (1971–79).

Because HBO is not worried about pleasing sponsors, they are less concerned with week-to-week ratings and avoiding controversy; instead it established itself in the late 1990s as a channel where creators were free to experiment and take risks. After the success of *The Sopranos*, the channel became known as a place for innovative writers to pursue unique projects that did not fit the mold of conventional networks, and where executives would provide the opportunity for risk-taking and creative vision more than is typical for television. *The Sopranos* pointed to the possibilities of serialized television as a complex storytelling me-
medium in ways that had rarely been seen before, and HBO was known as the innovative laboratory for ambitious creators. Additionally, it signaled that HBO would tackle content that could not possibly survive the scrutiny of commercial sponsors on broadcast networks, as the advertising system privileges programming about aspirational lifestyles, sympathetic characters, and nonobjectionable content—all edicts that *The Sopranos* and later *The Wire* would flout. Additionally, the channel's popularity with African American viewers enabled it to include more racially diverse programs that the ratings-conscious networks would dare to—*Oz* was a notable precedent in featuring a range of roles sympathetic characters, and nonobjectionable diverse cast unprecedented within network programming.


HBO's success led to similar edgy and risky programming emerging on other cable channels, including both premium competitor Showtime with *Queer As Folk* (2000–2005), *The L Word* (2004–9), *Weeds* (2005–present), and *Dexter* (2006–present), and basic cable channels like FX (2002–8), *Nip/Tuck* (2003–10), and *Rescue Me* (2004–11) and AMC (2005–present) and *Breaking Bad* (2008–present). All of these series could be considered successful, despite rarely getting ratings that would be considered passable on broadcast networks. The alternative programming model pioneered by HBO in the late 1990s emphasized shorter seasons, more complex serialization, and programs that appealed to a smaller niche audience to thrive in the multichannel television era.

*The Wire* came to HBO through the precedent of another facet of its unconventional programming strategy: the miniseries. While miniseries of three to eight episodes had been quite popular in American network television in the 1970s and 1980s, they had fallen from popularity by the 1990s, as they proved to be too risky to gamble on with advertising dollars. While HBO programmed them infrequently, it has been willing to explore miniseries as a midway point between stand-alone made-for-TV movies and ongoing series, resulting in such acclaimed projects as *Tanner '88* (1988), *From the Earth to the Moon* (1998), and *Band of Brothers* (2001). HBO first worked with *Wire* creator David Simon on the 2000 miniseries *The Corner*, based on his nonfiction book cowritten with Ed Burns chronicling a year in the life of the inhabitants of a drug corner in Baltimore. *The Corner* was a critical success for HBO, garnering the Emmy for Outstanding Miniseries and a Peabody Award for excellence in broadcasting. The miniseries brought together the key production team that would later run *The Wire*, including Simon, Burns, executive producer Robert Colesberry, and producer Nina Kostroff Noble, established a precedent for on-location shooting in Baltimore, and built an effective working relationship with HBO executives, thus paving the way for creating *The Wire*.

One key way that *The Wire* differed from other prestigious cable channel programs is the background of the creators. Most fictional television programs, whether on network or cable, are created and produced by experienced television writers. Other HBO shows were run by well-established television writers, such as *Oz*'s Tom Fontana [previous experience on *St. Elsewhere* and *Homicide*], *Curb Your Enthusiasm*'s Larry David [*Seinfeld*], *Sopranos* David Chase (2000), *The Wire* creator David Simon known primarily as a journalist and nonfiction writer with a short writing stint on *Homicide*, based on his nonfiction book), and executive producer Ed Burns drawing from his experience as a Baltimore police officer and schoolteacher. Other writers include crime novelists George Pelecanos, Richard Price, and Dennis Lehane and journalists Rafael Alvarez and Bill Zorzi. The only staff writer on the show beside Simon who had significant background in television was David Mills, a journalist friend of Simon’s who had broken into the industry in the early 1990s on *Homicide* and worked regularly on crime dramas throughout the decade, but Mills only came to *The Wire* in its later seasons. Virtually no other American fictional television series has a writing staff full of television outsiders, marking *The Wire'*s strong connection to HBO's motto, "it's not TV, it's HBO."

However, we should not overstate the degree to which HBO's slogan separates *The Wire* from its medium of television. While it is less driven
Wire production staff draw upon diverse real-life backgrounds and blur with on-screen personas. From left: Wire writer Bill Zorzi is a real-life political reporter-editor for the Baltimore Sun and plays a fictionalized reporter Bill Zorzi in season 5; creator David Simon drew upon his background as a Sun reporter; and actor Clark Johnson plays fictional Sun editor Gus Haynes as well as directing four episodes of the series.

by ratings, commercial constraints, and network interference, HBO still is ruled by many of the norms of production and episodic structure that typify television. Episodes of The Wire were produced following the factory-style division of duties common to virtually all film and television, and required significant budgets that mandated a potential for return revenue on HBO's investment. Even though its economic model differs from advertising-supported broadcasting, HBO is still a commercial enterprise owned by the multinational corporation Time Warner, not a public service broadcaster on the model of the BBC or American public television, and thus we must always consider the industrial and institutional motivations behind the series.

Television Technology

Certainly The Wire could have only emerged out of the world of premium cable, with its acceptance of controversy and profanity and tolerance for a small but devoted audience. The show was also dependent on the particular context of television technology in the 2000s, making certain modes of viewership and fan engagement possible.

Traditionally television has been a schedule-driven medium, with networks programming series with prescribed time-slots. Decades of research within the American television industry has suggested that most viewers typically only watch around one-third of the episodes of a favored series, and that even ardent fans could not be guaranteed to see more than half of a series during its first run. Thus producers realized they could not assume that a viewer had seen previous episodes or were watching a series in sequential order, leading to a mode of storytelling favoring self-contained episodes that could be consumed in any order, and built-in redundant exposition, a form that also served the highly profitable rerun market. Even heavily serialized programs like daytime soap operas include a great deal of redundancy to fill in gaps of missed episodes or distracted viewers.

The rise of home video helped change this limitation. VCRs became more widespread in the 1980s, although the difficulty of programming timers to record a show made it relatively uncommon for viewers to use the technology to "time-shift" favorite programs. The rise of DVRs in the 2000s made time-shifting a much more common practice, with viewers automatically recording their favorite series and watching at their convenience—even though DVRs are still only found in a minority of households, they helped change the television industry's assumption that viewers could not be expected to watch a series regularly and in sequence.

For HBO, scheduling has always been more flexible than networks, as it regularly shows the same program numerous times throughout the week; with the rise of digital cable, HBO multiplied into a number of subchannels (like HBO2, HBO Comedy, and HBO Family), allowing a series to air dozens of times throughout the week and viewers to catch up at their convenience. The Wire also took advantage of video-on-demand technology, with HBO making the later seasons available on demand in advance of the regular schedule, as well as allowing viewers to binge in the archives of the show at their convenience. This flexible schedule and on-demand viewing allows HBO to support programming like The Wire that refuses episodic closure and demands in-sequence viewing.

HBO has also been a leader in the TV-on-DVD trend. Since many of its original series receive much more publicity and buzz than actual viewership, HBO sells DVD sets of most of its series, allowing nonsub-
scribed to purchase or rent a series (thus augmenting the channel’s revenue). The Wire’s DVD sales certainly exceeded expectations given its overall low ratings on HBO, and the availability in the bound volumes of DVD box sets enabled the series to develop into a cult phenomenon, passed along among friends. DVD viewing allows more flexible viewing, of DVD box sets enabled the series to develop into a cult phenomenon, overall low ratings on HBO, and the availability in the bound volumes of HBO subscribers. File-sharing software like BitTorrent and illegal streaming sites are filled with illegally shared copies of HBO series, enabling the shows to be watched without cost via computers. The Wire has another robust realm of illicit distribution—pirate DVDs of the series circulate in the urban underground economy. Watching the show via these pirate copies has reportedly made the series a favorite among the African American urban underclass who are portrayed on screen. Many of these viewers lack the residential stability or spare income to subscribe to HBO, but embrace the informal distribution of black-market DVDs as part of the underground economy portrayed on the show.

Digital technologies also helped create a dedicated fanbase around The Wire. While the show did not get the mainstream press coverage of The Sopranos or Deadwood, a number of dedicated fans used blogs to promote the show and convene fan discussions, such as popular blogger Jason Kottke and online magazine Slate. Additionally, television critics have moved into blogging, with group critic blogs like The House Next Door and individual critics like Alan Sepinwall and Tim Goodman emerging as important online advocates for the series. These distribution and consumption technologies have enabled The Wire to reach a broader audience than HBO’s ratings might suggest, and fostered a dedicated viewership for the series that developed over time and continues long after the finale aired.

Television Aesthetics

Shifts in the television industry and technology since the 1990s have enabled the creative possibilities of television to expand in interesting new ways that would have been unthinkable in earlier eras. The Wire fits into many of these trends, while also establishing its own norms and style.

One key development is in a mode of storytelling that critics have labeled “narrative complexity.” Breaking down the boundary between highly serialized daytime soap operas and strictly self-contained episodic series in primetime, the 1980s saw the growth of more serialized primetime programs, like Hill Street Blues (1981–87), St. Elsewhere (1982–88), and Cheers (1982–93). While such programs did incorporate more long-term story arcs, they primarily used serial formats to narrate relationship dramas of romance or character development; such shows typically avoided complex plot structures that required viewers to watch every episode in sequence to follow the story.

The 1990s saw more serialization emerge in action and mystery plots—Twin Peaks (1990–91) focused on a murder mystery over the course of two seasons, The X-Files (1993–2002) weaved a complex conspiracy narrative for years, and Buffy the Vampire Slayer (1997–2003) featured season-long battles between the heroes and a “big bad” villain. While such shows were cult rather than mainstream hits, they opened the door for a series to focus its efforts on telling longer stories across a range of genres, as comedies like Seinfeld (1989–98) and dramedies like Northern Exposure (1990–95) played with long-form storytelling.


For prestigious premium cable programs, complex storytelling became the norm, a reward for elite audiences willing to pay for more sophisticated entertainment and eventually collect series on DVD.

In many ways, The Wire is part of this trend of narrative complexity. The show is highly serialized, with each episode serving as a chapter in a much larger volume. No episode stands alone, and it is virtually
inconceivable to watch the series out of order with any coherence. The story being told is quite complex, portraying a wide array of characters and asking viewers to follow along with complicated procedures and systems without their being spelled out. Plotlines dangle for years, re-emerging without notice or explicit exposition. Certainly a show like The Wire depended on the trails blazed in the 1990s that allowed its mode of long-form storytelling.

In other ways, The Wire is much more conventional in its aesthetics than other contemporary serialized programs. Unlike The Sopranos and Six Feet Under, The Wire uses objective narration, unfiltered by individual characters—we never get dream sequences, internal monologue, or restricted perspectives. The Wire draws its presentational mode more from traditional workplace dramas like medical or cop shows, than its more experimental predecessors on HBO. The Wire avoids the temporal play of other complex series, like Lost and 24, and refuses self-conscious techniques like flashbacks, voice-overs, and reflexive captions common on other contemporary programs—the only flashback is a brief cutaway of D’Angelo recognizing William Gant in the pilot episode, a moment that Simon still regrets, citing it as mandated by HBO to ensure viewer comprehension. The visual and storytelling style of The Wire is more naturalistic, drawing upon the conventions of documentary and social realism to match Simon’s own background in nonfiction journalism.

One of the show’s chief strategies might be called “productive confusion.” While traditionally commercial television has demanded redundancy and clarity at all costs, to allow for new or erratic viewers, Simon and the writers have always assumed that viewers should have to work to understand their fictional portrait of Baltimore. They refuse to dumb down the worlds they portray, or offer expository dialogue to explain terms, procedures, or motivations; instead, they want viewers to feel disoriented and confused, with the accompanying satisfaction when a narrative element becomes clear weeks or even years later. Even more than its narrative techniques, The Wire’s internal storyworld is arguably the most complex ever to appear on American television, providing a rich experience that encourages—or even demands—multiple viewings.10

While the show’s aesthetics certainly build on a multitude of influences that offer options to both the creators and the industry, virtually no programs that have followed The Wire seem to have embraced its innovations, aside from Simon’s follow-up HBO series Treme (2010-present). The Wire remains the most densely packed and populated world ever seen on American television, and demands more of its audience to understand its narrative than virtually any other show. Whether the show will prove to yield a new branch of possibilities for television creativity, or be remembered as a truly unique exception to the norms of the medium, there is no doubt that The Wire stands as an exceptional peak within the terrain of fictional television.

Television Genres

American television tends to rigidly adhere to genre categories, structuring the names of individual channels, like Cartoon Network or Game Show Network, and defining scheduling blocks, like daytime soap operas and late-night talk shows. In the mixed realm of network prime-time, the norm still assumes clear delineation between genres, with sitcoms, medical dramas, family melodramas, news magazines, and reality programs all occupying their own particular slots in the schedule. Cop shows are possibly the most prevalent genre in prime time, filling network schedules in the 2000s with successful multishow franchises Law & Order (1990-present), CSI (2000-present), and NCIS (2003-present), as well as stand-alone series such as Without a Trace (2002-9), Cold Case (2003-10), and Criminal Minds (2005-present).11

The Wire emerged within this context of a heavily saturated television environment full of crime dramas and police procedurals that mostly followed a set of distinct formulas and conventions, many of which were established by the first hit crime show, Dragnet (1951-70). In a standard cop show, each episode focuses primarily on a single case that is wrapped up by the end of the episode, typically resolved with a sense of closure, if not with justice being served. The only continuing characters in such shows tend to be the police themselves, as criminals rarely repeat beyond a single episode and the crime narratives are told nearly exclusively from the perspective of the police. The personal lives and relationships among police are ignored completely or marginalized as background stories with little connection to the primary cases. Each series focuses on one police unit within an urban police department, often with little connection to other aspects of city government and other institutions. Additionally, crimes themselves are rarely explored
as a facet of larger social ills or systemic problems, but rather are treated as the acts of psychotic or corrupt individuals.

When David Simon pitched his series, he made it quite clear that he would not be offering a conventional cop show. In his letter to HBO accompanying the pilot script, Simon highlights how HBO had established its reputation by "creating drama in worlds largely inaccessible to network television, worlds in which dark themes, including sex and violence, can be utilized in more meaningful and realistic ways than in standard network fare," referencing series like *Sopranos*, *Oz*, and *Six Feet Under*. In pitching *The Wire*, he argues that HBO could take a similar approach to deeper and more realistic storytelling by tackling and revising the network staple of the cop show:

But it would, I will argue, be a more profound victory for HBO to take the essence of network fare and smartly turn it on its head, so that no one who sees HBO's take on the culture of crime and crime fighting can watch anything like *CSI*, or *NYPD Blue*, or *Law & Order* again without knowing that every punch was pulled on those shows. For HBO to step toe-to-toe with NBC or ABC and create a cop show that seizes the highest qualitative ground through realism, good writing, and a more honest and more brutal assessment of police, police work, and the drug culture—this may not be the beginning of the end for network dramas as industry standard, but it is certainly the end of the beginning for HBO. The numbers would still be there for *CSI* and such; the relevance would not. We would be stepping up to the network ideal, pronouncing it a cheap lie, and offering instead a view of the world that is every bit as provocative as *The Sopranos* or *The Corner*. But because that world of cops and robbers is so central to the American TV experience, *The Wire* would stand as even more of a threat to the established order.13

Clearly in Simon's own pitch, if not actual creative vision, the conventions of the cop drama are a central target to be debunked and re-conceived, and thus we need to situate the series within that context to understand its meanings and impacts.

*The Wire*'s most evident revision to the cop show is its rebalancing of the relationship between cops and criminals. Throughout the first season, the narrative focuses with relative equal time on the Barksdale criminal operation and the police unit investigating them. Given the single-case scope of the entire season, the effect of this structure is to re-focus the narrative away from the genre norm of protagonist cops chasing relatively anonymous criminals, and toward an in-depth portrait of two competing organizations that refuse clear heroes and villains amid the moral complexities of urban life. Via this rebalancing, *The Wire* merges the police procedural with the more immersive vision of criminal life pioneered by HBO on *The Sopranos* and *Oz*.

The procedural elements of cop shows, pioneered by *Dragnet* and sustained throughout decades of popular programs, are quite vital to *The Wire*, although they are revised in two crucial ways. Typically, a police procedural highlights the practices and tactics used by cops to crack a case, providing viewers with an immersive look into the mechanics of crime fighting over the course of an episode. On *The Wire*, the focus on procedure is drawn out across episodes, as the major crimes investigated each take at least a season and often leave elements dangling unresolved for the next season. Thus while network procedurals are typically viewed as the most episodic form of drama, *The Wire* creates the hybrid of the "serial procedural" to highlight the long-term, messy, and often frustrating elements of police work.14

The second way that *The Wire* reframes television's cop show conventions is by extending the procedural attention to detailed practices beyond the police precinct. In the first season, we learn the procedural details of the Barksdale crew, such as their telephone codes, division of labor, and system of distribution. Subsequent seasons broaden the scope even further by incorporating a range of institutions that surpass the typical terrain of the cop show, with the shipping docks, City Hall, school classroom, and newsroom all serving as the site of procedural drama to document how various systems function as part of urban life. The narrative approach to people doing their jobs and navigating the politics of hierarchical systems remains consistent across the different sites, but by broadening the storytelling scope beyond the cops and criminals of the first season, *The Wire* transforms from a revisionist cop show into a multifaceted urban procedural drama.

In the end, *The Wire* refuses the generic identity it was originally pitched as, turning into an urban drama unique to the history of the medium. Cop shows nearly always focus on cities, but only portray one facet of urban life rather than highlighting the intersections between multiple institutions and sites. They rarely portray the social reasons
or conditions for crime, treating each case as an isolated incident to be solved within forty-five minutes of screen time, not as symptomatic of larger issues or contexts. The Wire treats Baltimore as a multifaceted city of interlocking institutions, portraying the citizens of the city as beholden to the forces created by the microprocedures of bureaucracies, politics, and individual players. Even though nearly every character has a robust, distinct personality, they are all secondary to the systems they both serve. While many crime dramas boast that their specific cities function as a character in the narrative, in The Wire Baltimore is the lead character with dozens of supporting players.

While The Wire's focus remains fixed on Baltimore throughout its run, the fifth season returns to some of the themes Simon raised about crime dramas in his pitch letter. In season 5, the new institution added to the urban panorama is the Baltimore Sun, the city's venerable newspaper and Simon's former employer. A main function of the newspaper plotline is to highlight how the news media misses the vital stories of urban life, relegating characters whom we know to be major players in the underground economy and street life to marginal mentions or unreported stories. While the press around the fifth season focused on how the story line was merely a vehicle for Simon's ranting retributions toward his former employers or his misdiagnoses of the state of twenty-first-century journalism, I believe the more important issue was what The Sun plot has to say about the limits of television storytelling.

In many ways, The Sun stands in for the media as a whole, including both nonfiction journalism and fictional television. Every debate in the newsroom over the importance of context, being true to memorable characters regardless of their power or economic status, and the priorities between realism and sensationalism mirrors the very issues Simon's pitch letter raises between his vision of The Wire and the conventional cop show. In the episode "Unconfirmed Reports," the debate in the newsroom over how best to tell the story about Baltimore's failing schools is a thinly veneered comment on how The Wire approaches the same story in season 4. The managing editors want an easy-to-digest, self-contained series that will resonate with awards committees, while Gus argues for a broader contextual look at the urban system—which Whiting mocks as "an amorphous series detailing society's ills," a dismissive critique that might equally apply to The Wire itself. Instead, season 5 plays with a sensationalist, faked story of a serial killer that stands in for the type of crime drama that Simon held in opposition to The Wire's goals of realist detail and social complexity. The Pulitzer awards that the Sun strives for might as well be the Emmys, the television insider recognition that The Wire never received despite universal critical acclaim.

We cannot forget to place The Wire in the context of television because the show itself reminds us that it both belongs to and departs from its medium. The cynical read of season 5 is that the Sun, like other media forms, fails to make a difference by falling short of informing and engaging its audience about what is truly important in the contemporary city. But The Wire itself serves as an example of what television can do to inform, engage, move, and inspire viewers through an innovative form of urban drama. We can examine, praise, and critique the ways that the series represents Baltimore as a stand-in for the postindustrial city, but just as the final season reminds us that the way the story of the city is told helps shape the urban condition, we need to remember that the way The Wire tells its story through its televisual context is vital to understanding its meanings. By telling the stories that neither other fiction nor most nonfiction covers, The Wire highlights the power and possibilities of television, emerging out of its medium's context and, instead of transcending it, pointing television in new directions.

Notes
2. For more on the history of HBO, see Gary R. Edgerton and Jeffrey P. Jones, eds., The Essential HBO Reader [Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008].
default.aspx?search_input-the+wire&x=0&y=0&search_loc=on&qt=the+wire &id=3944.


13. Ibid., 37.

14. See Mittell, “All in the Game.”

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**The Wire and Its Readers**

*Frank Kelleter*

What is *The Wire* to American culture? What work does it perform? Which actions, which actors, does it set into motion? Which discourses and practices are channeled, challenged, or stabilized by this television series?

Such questions, though hardly esoteric, were rarely asked in early analyses of *The Wire*. Instead, the importance of this text—the importance of its arrival on American screens and the importance of its aesthetic innovations—was taken for granted by most writers. Early commentators on *The Wire* treated such questions as if they were already answered or their answers only in need of exemplifying confirmation. Much was certain before the various “studies” set out to do their work of explication, even as the show was still running. *The Wire*, one could read, revolutionizes American television with dense storytelling. It paints an uncompromising image of the institutional, economic, and racial dimensions of inner-city decline. In painstaking detail and epic breadth, it brings to light what the American media have so far kept in the dark. It formulates a sophisticated indictment of postindustrial capitalism. It critiques the state of a nation that thinks it can afford to ignore these harsh realities. In a word, *The Wire* is “the best television show ever.”

How did everyone know?

By watching *The Wire*, no doubt. But what does that mean? When Jacob Weisberg, in his influential *Slate* article on September 13, 2006, called *The Wire* “surely the best TV show ever broadcast in America,” he [and other commentators making similar assessments at the time] did not, properly speaking, initiate this topos.1 True, a look at the first