

That said, many may regard these stories, in their universality, to be cynical and despairing of the world as a whole. I am not so sure. The problems of urban America are worthy of some genuine despair, certainly. Just as much of the institutional response to many of these problems thus far entirely justifies a degree of cynicism.

But in all of these Baltimore stories—*Homicide*, *The Corner*, *The Wire*—there exists a deep and abiding faith in the capacity of individuals. They are, in small and credible ways, a humanist celebration in which hope, though unspoken, is clearly implied.

True, the stories themselves don't exalt the bricks and mortar and institutions of Baltimore. But they at least reckon with the city honestly, and they are written with a homegrown affection that should be readily apparent. Watching *The Wire*, true citizens of the city will smile when they see the mallet hit a crab claw, or when an a-rabber's cart trundles past in the background.

If the stories are hard ones, they are at least told in caring terms, with nuance and affection for all the characters, so that whatever else a viewer might think about cops and dealers, addicts and lawyers, longshoremen and whoever else might wander into these tales, he will know them to be part and parcel of the same tribe, sharing the same streets, and engaged in the same, timeless struggle.

David Simon
Baltimore, Maryland
March 2004



> LETTER TO HBO

Date: June 27, 2001

To: Chris Albrecht, Carolyn Strauss

From: David Simon

Re: *The Wire*

So, why do this?

Let me be direct about addressing what I believe to be HBO's predominant concern, to wit: HBO has succeeded in the past 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. So, why do a police show when the networks trade in such? And if we are to do a police show, how does *The Wire* differ from what viewers have before encountered?

The past is a prescription for the past only. What HBO has accomplished with *The Sopranos*, *Sex and the City*, *Six Feet Under*,

and *Oz* is to seize a share of the drama market by going to places where no network could compete. This was sound programming and it has achieved, for HBO, a cultural resonance and viewership.

But creatively, I would argue that you guys are at a crossroads now: Either you continue to hew to this formula to the exclusion of other ideals, or you find a different—perhaps even more fundamental—way to differentiate your programs. If you continue to seek worlds inaccessible to other networks, it will, creatively, become a formula of diminishing returns. The networks can't or won't do sex, serious, thoughtful violence (now there's an oxymoron I like), and character-based dramas in which characters are fundamentally, or drastically, flawed. Having achieved with prisons, drug corners, criminality, and the young and sexually active, HBO has, I would argue, gone about as far as it can in bringing fresh worlds to television.

At the same time, this formula has—by default—ceded the basic dramatic universe of politics, law, crime, medicine, to the networks. In the past, this was wise. These things were the networks' bread and butter and they are at their most competitive in the hour-long ensemble drama.

But *The Wire* is, I would argue, the next challenge to the network logic and the next challenge for HBO. It is grounded in the most basic network universe—the cop show—and yet, very shortly, it becomes clear to any viewer that something subversive is being done with that universal. Suddenly, the police bureaucracy is amoral, dysfunctional, and criminality, in the form of the drug culture, is just as suddenly a bureaucracy. Scene by scene, viewers find their carefully formed presumptions about cops and robbers undercut by alternative realities. Real police work endangers people who attempt it. Things that work in network cop shows fall flat in this alternative world. Police work is at times marginal or incompetent. Criminals are neither stupid nor cartoonish, and neither are they all sociopathic. And the idea—as yet unspoken on American TV—that no one in authority has any reason to care what happens in an American ghetto as long as it stays within the ghetto is brought into the open. Moreover, within a few hours of viewing,

the national drug policy—and by extension our basic law enforcement model—is revealed as calcified, cynical, and unworkable.

In the first two episodes, the impulse to assert control over one housing project in one city—a microcosm for what America is trying to do in every one of its cities—results in threatened careers, murdered witnesses, a near-riot in which a fourteen-year-old child is nearly killed. All of this brings no one any closer to a solution. These are costs paid for their own sake, and slowly, viewers discern that unlike every other cop show that they have been raised on, this one refused to play the card of good vs. evil. We want McNulty to succeed, yes. But we also feel for D'Angelo, trapped by an equally malevolent bureaucracy. We feel, too, for Daniels, leading an investigation no one wants, but resent his unwillingness to commit. And though we have been taught to despise someone like Bubbles, no one consistently shows more fundamental humanity.

The argument is this: It is a significant victory for HBO to counterprogram alternative, inaccessible worlds against standard network fare. 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 than a show that was marginalized because it

offered a world (prison, gangsters, sex) where some viewers are reluctant to tread on any terms.

I know the basic fear and I share it: Some critic somewhere watches ten minutes of *The Wire* and says, it's good, but it's a cop show. Guess what: It's not HBO. It's TV.

It's for that reason that I have spent so long thinking about the exacting structure and the inherent message of these episodes. The journey through this one case will ultimately bring viewers from wondering, in cop-show expectation, whether the bad guys will get caught, to wondering instead who the bad guys are and whether catching them means anything at all. This could be a remarkable journey and a brave one for HBO. But the payoff is enormous. You will not be stealing market share from the networks only by venturing into worlds where they can't, you will be stealing it by taking their worlds and transforming them with honesty and wit and a darker, cynical, and more piercing viewpoint than they would ever undertake. You leave them the warm fuzziness of *West Wing* and *Providence* and little else.

I also know that there is concern that because the full maze of the wire and electronic surveillance scenes is not employed up front (it is far better that the best police work—rather than a given as in all other cop shows—must be first earned by the struggle to merely identify and isolate the Barksdale gang in the first episodes), a less than discerning critic might wonder how this is different from other police shows. I can only answer: Go scene by scene. Read this dialogue. These cops are behaving, thinking, surviving, and struggling with issues as no predecessors on TV ever have. These drug dealers are more complex than anything the networks can imagine. An example: From Episode 102, as additional manpower is brought into the case and we learn that is not only a gathering of menials and incompetents—but is meant to be such. Has any such scene occupied the screen time of *CSI* or *NYPD Blue*? Or the drug dealers discussing chicken nuggets, until their own sense of their stunted place in the world overtakes them: Have criminals ever been allowed this kind of sadness or complexity on a network show?

■ ■ ■

As with *The Corner*, most critics will be discerning if the quality is there. But more than that, I would argue that we can eliminate the risk entirely by filming the full season, so that all the ironies and all of the darkness and the entire point of the undertaking is utterly apparent. And for this first season at least, we can offer the critics the entire package or most of the package at the premiere so that no one could possibly miss the point. This strategy worked on *The Corner*. Anyone armed with only the first ten minutes of that miniseries could have concluded that it was a stereotypic ghetto drama. Instead, the critics had four episodes before the first one aired—and with that much material to see that we were after fresh ideas and bigger game, they did not turn away. If we do this right—and we will—the critical response will be that HBO has turned its gaze to a standard of television fare: the cop show. And the cop show can never be the same.

Episode 103 should be polished by week's end. I wish I could have sent it with 102, but I had some personal circumstances that prevented me from finishing last week. Indeed, I am concerned that because 102 contains much of the setup for what follows, the full sense of what 103 does in terms of upending this universe may not be clear. If you still have doubts, wait until 103 arrives and then scan the first three. And if that doesn't convince you, 104 and 105 will follow. I'm going to keep honing this story until you admit that it needs to be told and that HBO, for obvious reasons, is the place to tell it.

This is a smart series. It is good storytelling. And it could be the best work on television that I've done so far. Pull the trigger, guys. As with *The Corner*, you will only be proud.

David Simon