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Exclusive David Simon Q&A (posted August 16, 2006)

Q: David, what are your personal and professional goals for the "The Wire"? To change minds, to make money, to employ people, to be successful? [Jim King]

A: Change minds? Nobody changes anyone's mind anymore. People strain facts through their own ideology and ignore that which is happening before their eyes. Alive in this millennium, Orwell would be embarrassed for having so grossly understated his case.



My goal is to tell the best story about that which matters most to me and that which I believe to be true. Truth is subjective and so are any writer's choices, but you have to at least believe in what you believe, don't you? Everybody has to be somewhere and to believe in nothing is to be a cynic. I'm often accused of being cynical, but I'm not sure the word is being used properly. I'm being carefully realistic, I think.

It's nice to work with people I admire and respect and I'm glad we all have jobs, but that isn't really the ultimate point of any act of storytelling. And it's nice to be paid well for doing this gig, but if money was the goal I would not be trying to construct a television drama anything like *The Wire*. I think I've demonstrated, with *The Wire* and *The Corner* both, that I am capable of marginalizing myself in a niche within television's mass communications model. Specifically, I've shown the television networks that I can produce stories that receive critical acclaim but do not draw big Hollywood numbers, and therefore, my opportunities to make big Hollywood money are not there. Don't misunderstand: I am well paid. But if money were the purpose here, my bad guys would be Irish or Italian, my cops would hunt them down to great gratification, and the city depicted would be whiter, more affluent and filled with big-titted, long-legged women. *The Wire* is either not the work of someone thinking about payday, or if I am that someone, I am quite incompetent.

If you can do what you want to do in this world and say what you want to say and make enough of a living to support your family, then you are successful. Too many people - most people, perhaps - have to do things they don't want to do to make a living, and they can't speak their mind while they go about doing it. That's the nature of the modern world and, come to think of it, a theme of *The Wire*. So by standards of most human beings, I'm successful, whether *The Wire* achieves all that I might hope for it or not. And I have too much regard for people who get up every day and go to work at jobs far less interesting and self-absorbed than making television or writing books to seriously sit here and consider my success based on what happens to my writing or how much credit/money/attention I receive for that writing.

Q: Could you share the names of a few people who are your inspirations or influences? [Jeffrey Bufano]

A: Among playwrights, the Greek fellas - Sophocles, Aescylus, Euripides. O'Neill, Chekov, Shaw, some of the earlier Gus Wilson. I enjoy Shakespeare but *The Wire* is decidedly not influenced by the good-evil continuum that seems to begin with Shakespearean drama. It's more about fate and systemic predestination, with the Olympian gods supplanted by postmodern institutional authority.

Among novelists, I'm poorly read, though I am partial to the work of Hawthorne and Melville, and I like them big-ass Russian books, especially Dostoevsky, and no one I've ever read exhibits more wit when it comes to the human condition than Twain. Among more modern writers, I'll shout out for James Baldwin, Cormac McCarthy, Richard Price, Martin Amis and Updike. I think Robert Penn Warren's "All The Kings Men" is the great American novel, though Fitzgerald came close once or twice. Having said all that, I am just now getting to Nabokov and that big long shelf of Phillip Roth, so I'm probably just citing what I've gotten to and what stayed in my own head, rather than what should've influenced me if I'd been more

deliberate and less autodidactic about my reading. And aside from a certain Ms. Lippman, I know for certain I haven't read enough female authors, which is why, I suppose, my own writing is so gender-biased. Jane Austen, here I come.

Among narrative journalists, I admire James Agee's "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men," and Michael Herr's "Dispatches," as well as Jim Bouton/Irwin Shecter's "Ball Four." They are the most influential templates for my own journalistic misadventures.

Among filmmakers, I learned a lot from watching documentaries of various kinds, especially the work of Frederick Wiseman. Documentarians are more of an influence on my style - or lack of style, perhaps - than many auteurs. Having said that, I'm a devoted fan of the Coen Brothers, and I think "Miller's Crossing" is magical. Also, I'm fairly convinced that "Chinatown" may be the most perfect screenplay ever.

Among musicians, I count Woody Guthrie as my only remaining hero in life, save for Ella Thompson. I admire the songwriting of Steve Earle, Tom Waits, and Shane MacGowan, but I listen to just about everything from Bill Monroe to Thelonious Monk to Kanye West.

Q: What key things have you learned about making television while doing "The Wire"?
[Drew Johnson]

A: These "key" things only apply to filmmaking in the style of *The Wire*. There are lots of different films and lots of different ways to tell different kinds of story. But for the purpose of what we have attempted to do in Baltimore, with these particular tales:

Black people all look alike. Not so much to me, but to a lot of white people, apparently. Therefore, if you don't do everything you can to distinguish between characters early and often, you will end up having some fucked-up flashback stuck into the end of your pilot episode. Moving on from that small lesson:

Less is more. Musical score, unless it is an earned moment, is a sign of weak storytelling. You are cueing your audience what to think and when to think it.

Less is more. Explaining everything to the slowest or laziest member of the audience destroys verisimilitude and reveals the movie itself, rather than the reality that the movie is trying to convey. The audience need not understand everything at the moment they see or hear it, and some small details need never be explained - if they get it, great, if not, that's a lot like life. On a larger scale, however, every character and every plotline must, in the end, pay out and be therefore justified.

Less is more. There are relatively few moments that require dramatic action or dramatic acting, and those moments must be earned.

Less is more. The camera should only move to tell the story. The camera should not be the story. And the camera should only know what it is reasonable for the camera to know given the facts that have already been revealed. If a camera move "fishes" for a punchline or a telltale moment, we're probably ruining the reveal through an inelegant move.

Less is more. If I was smarter or less voluble, I would not write stuff like this or do interviews and I would just let the work speak for itself. But the truth is, I have felt from the first that *The Wire's* survival on television was an improbability and so I have done everything possible to connect with audience and maintain the show's presence at the distant edge of the zeitgeist in the hope that we will be able to complete the project. So here I am drawing your attention as best I can.

Q: Are you satisfied with HBO's commitment, promotion, and marketing of the show? [Glen in Pennsylvania]

A: I am grateful that they have so far financed and broadcast 56 hours of storytelling on my behalf. Could

The Corner or *The Wire* have been better marketed and achieved better viewership?

I don't know. The material is atypical for television, which is not usually known - in this country, anyway - as a thoughtful, deliberate medium. My stuff is a hard sell even if a network is doing all it can, particularly since so many Americans regard their television sets as a means of relaxation rather than a means of provocation, and since many of us limit our capacity for empathy and understanding to people who look like us, sound like us and live in neighborhoods that we recognize as our own, or would like to imagine as our own if we made more money and could hang out, party with and fuck a prettier class of people.

If *The Wire* resembles a novel for television - and I will claim that it at least has the pretensions of a literary novel - then the question is obvious: How many Americans read novels? Not many at all. If you sell 80,000 hardbacks in this country you're likely to be on the NYT bestseller list. Eighty thousand book sales in a nation of 300 million. Jesus, that's appalling, especially considering the fact that a prose novel remains the most complex and comprehensive storytelling form in our culture. And so now someone is trying to make a television show more like a novel? Why? And to what purpose? It's amazing to me that HBO let us get this far and I have to credit their courage and intellectual commitment before I begin complaining about their promotion and marketing.

That said, I do wish Time Warner had gotten the DVDs of previous seasons out to market in advance of the new seasons. This is the first time that they've done so and here we are at the fourth season. But that's water under the bridge, isn't it? We're here now and we've been allowed to tell our story, our way, with very little interference from anyone at HBO. That is a real commitment and I recognize it as such.

Q: Is "The Wire" too "black" to get top ratings? [pauline]

A: Yes, I'm afraid that I believe this.

I do not believe the average white viewer catches a glimpse of *The Wire*, screams "Negros!" and grabs the remote in a cold sweat. It is nothing as venal or racist as that.

But human empathy has its limits and some of those limits are based on race and culture. Personally, this has always been a disappointment to me, but it is simply human nature. Witness the horror in the Middle East currently, where Arabs cannot fully feel the pain of Israelis being rocketed randomly in their cities and towns and Israelis cannot feel the tragedy of the Lebanese being bombed in their homes and streets. Once politics and race and religion do their worst work, everyone only fully feels their own humanity and the other is somehow a little less human. At that point, of course, any horror is possible.

With somewhat less extremity, I believe there are many white viewers who see so many black faces - and many of them discomfiting black faces from the nation's underclass - staring back at them on a television screen and they say, to themselves, this is not my show and this is not my story.

I think they're wrong, of course. *The Wire* is everyone's story. It's about the America we've built and the America we've paid for, and therefore the America that all of us deserve, sadly. And I think it's also worth noting how much "white" programming has been embraced by minority viewers, simply because black and Hispanic consumers of mass media have for years sipped on the majority culture in dramas, comedies, commercials, etc. They have more experience translating the image and sound of white America to their own range of experience simply because they've been required to do so. Conversely, white folks are not used to being in the minority and we're not as good at it.

I would urge everyone to get hold of Andrew Hacker's "Two Nations," a thin but telling book that gently examines the cultural presumptions of white folk and lays bare the sociopolitical and racial chasm in this country. A notable fact from that book: Studies show that most whites want some black representation in their neighborhoods and schools - we want our children to experience a certain degree of multiculturalism, we want to regard ourselves as racially progressive, we want a handful of black friends and neighbors and

playmates. White neighborhoods do not bristle when the black population is less than seven percent or so, but if home sales to black buyers increase and the percentage of black representation in a neighborhood reaches say, fifteen percent, white flight ensues. We are not racists, for the most part, but we want to be progressive in small, modest increments.

I think the same sentiments govern whether some significant portion of the American viewing public watches *The Wire* or prefers the *Sopranos*, *24*, or *Desperate Housewives*.

Some might argue the point and cite other elements that make *The Wire* less likely to be a breakout hit and they, of course, have a point. But I would ask them, before continuing their argument to any degree, to point to a single majority-minority continuing drama that has ever been successful on American television. Single-shot miniseries epics like "Roots" and sitcoms do not count. Few such dramas have been attempted and those that have are usually marginalized and ghettoized, with no one expecting anything but a majority-minority viewership.

All that said, we did not conceive *The Wire* to make any sort of racial statement. We are merely depicting the city of Baltimore in its specifics. The city happens to be 60-65 percent black. Our drama reflects this and we would not cheat the demographics to achieve more viewership just as we would not cheat other elements of the production.

Q: Who makes the conversations feel so real? Is it on the page or do your actors make it happen? Who writes or vets the street dialog? [Sandy Sarro, Karen Neuman, Glen in Pennsylvania]

A: If you read the novels of Price, Pelecanos or Lehane, you will find that they are artists when it comes to the verisimilitude of human dialogue. And if you get around to scanning either *Homicide* or *The Corner* in book form, you might consider that Ed Burns and myself have a good enough ear as well. Writers listen. The cadences of human conversation are their stock in trade, or they ought to be, if the writers are trying to capture the real.

Yes, the dialogue is on the page. *The Wire* is not big on ad libs, as the plotting is too ornate and detailed to allow for such. In the case of a few of those portraying our characters, for whom professional acting is a relatively new endeavor, we allow a certain leeway. But even in those cases, there is a writer on set making sure that the specific intent of every line is being achieved. And with the majority of the cast, comprised as it is of experienced actors, we want them to stay on book. If an actor has an idea for an ad lib, he runs it by the writer on set for that episode and a decision is made on a line-by-line basis. Sometimes an actor's idea for a phrase or sentence can enhance a script; just as often, such a change can prove problematic, and it is the writer, who is aware of the context of the dialogue and who is responsible for protecting the story, that makes the decision. At least on this show that is how it works.

No one vets the "street" dialogue. And if you read the prose work of the writing staff, it will become clear why no one needs to do so.

Q: Who chooses the music? What's the process? Will we ever get a soundtrack? [Emily, Dennis Kleen]

A: Any of the writers or producers can suggest a song for a particular moment and frequently, musical choices are suggested by Blake Leyh, who is our music supervisor. Often, songs that are specifically featured, as in the closing montages, are subject to a lot of discussion and consideration.

Generally, a primary consideration is whether a song would credibly be playing out a rowhouse window or through a car radio at the moment we hear it, because we are using music as ambient background rather than score. A way to consider this is to note that the perfect song is rarely playing at the perfect moment in real life. So when McNulty is trying to trail Stringer and he's boxed in by parking lot traffic, he's listening to the Tokens' "Lion Sleeps Tonight," and when Bodie is trying to get hip-hop on his car radio he gets "Prairie Home Companion."

Exceptions would be when you see a character actually program his own tunes on a boom box, say (Prez with Johnny Cash, or Nicky Sobotka with Iggy Pop) and certainly the final montages, which are the only scored moments in the film, and are required to imply a significant passage of time between events.

This year, Blake has made a particular effort to emphasize homegrown Baltimore rap and club music. For those interested, Darkroom Productions in Baltimore has issued a "Hamsterdam" CD that constitutes a sampler of up-and-coming Baltimore rappers and we've drawn from some of those artists. Also, I think a NY Times reporter is doing an article on Blake and the show's musical choices and that should be published shortly, if you're still more interested in the process.

An effort to issue a *Wire* soundtrack was undertaken before this current season. The company we were dealing with revealed itself late in the process to be uninterested in presenting any of the music actually featured in the television program, even though we agreed to allow them to concentrate on hip-hop. Turned out they were going to use a version of the Tom Waits theme song and little else, utilizing *The Wire* name to market new cuts by various artists. On discovery of the sham, I killed the project. I felt that this was a misuse of the program's name and a manipulation of consumers. Whether we get a more honest representation of *The Wire's* musical logic out there, I don't know. I guess we'll try to do so if we get a fifth and final season.

To take some personal credit, the choice of "Way Down in the Hole" for the theme is my own, using the Blind Boys for first season and going back to the Waits original for the second, as was Johnny Cash for Prez, Jesse Winchester's "Step By Step" for the first season montage, Steve Earle's "I Feel Alright" for the second, The Pogues' "Body of an American" for Ray Cole's wake, and Lucinda Williams' "2 Kool 2 Be 4-Gotten" for when McNulty and Pearlman stumble into some sex. I also wanted D.C.'s own Nighthawks playing their version of "Sixteen Tons" in the longshoreman's bar as I grew up with them among my every-weekend, they're-playing-the-Psychedelly-again-tonight musical heroes. The Hawks have been playing blues and rock 'n' roll out of D.C. since 1971 and for those who are interested in experiencing more of them, I can recommend their albums as well.

Producer Joe Chappelle found the third season montage in Solomon Burke's cover of Van Morrison's "Fast Train," and the fourth season montage is a discovery of Blake's. I believe it was Karen Thorson's idea to reach out to Nawlins' great Neville Brothers for the third season theme, and Nina Noble led the charge to have Baltimore teenagers take their shot this year. George Pelecanos picked the Pogue's "Transmetropolitan" for the scene where McNulty wrecks his car, the traditional Greek ballad for Sobotka's last day, and keeps fighting the good fight to get some new-school, comin-where-I'm-comin-from R&B by Anthony Hamilton in the show. One day, George, one day soon.

One last credit: Blake gets some help on Baltimore hip-hop authenticity from DeRodd Hearn, who is an apprentice editor in our postproduction department. Fans of *The Corner* will remember that DeRodd is DeAndre's younger half-brother and he is doing well learning the craft of film editing. His work as a local bullshit meter for our hip-hop choices does not pay extra.

Q: Does HBO send you notes and ask for changes? Can you give us an example? [anonymous]

A: They asked for that flashback in the pilot episode. And being dependent on their goodwill in proceeding with the first season, I gave in and regret it to this day. In a film like *The Wire*, flashbacks or voice-overs are simply destructive.

On a more positive note, Carolyn Strauss is a smart exec and a fan of the show. If she thinks a plotline is being overstated - as she did this season where she felt that the fate of a particular character was way too telegraphed - she tells me so, and because she is watching with a sympathetic eye, but from outside the writers' room, she is usually right. Similarly, if she doesn't understand what is happening in a story line, we are probably explaining too little. She is a good barometer of our storytelling in that sense.

But it is hard for an HBO exec to give us story notes because the story is so ornate. To pull out one scene is often to pull on the thread of a sweater. Often times, our response to a note is to explain that yes,

something does not yet make sense. It will in two episodes.

In the first season, HBO wanted us to pull out a sequence in which Omar's crew robs a drug corner unrelated to the Barksdale organization (the first sequence in which Omar whistles his tune - "The cheese stands alone.") They thought it confusing to have this moment where Omar, as yet a barely known quantity who had only been seen monitoring and then robbing a Barksdale stash, is now robbing someone else who has no relation to our story. We urged that the sequence remain intact, if only to hold a place in the narrative for Omar until McNulty and Greggs sought him out in episode five. Again, the HBO concern was legitimate only if you don't yet know who Omar is going to become in the context of the entire story. So it's hard for the HBO guys to weigh in, I think.

And I think as the show has aged, they have learned to trust us more. In the current season, all but two of the episodes were produced without a single note from HBO. The two notes they sought were both good ones, however, and we honored them.

Q: What part of the production crew is the most under-appreciated or under-rated? [Jim King]

A: The entire production is under-appreciated, isn't it? Have you seen any of our production components -- our cinematography, our locations work, our set design, our casting, our make-up and wardrobe, our sound work, our editing - acknowledged with any award nominations or even routine attention? I am loath to single anyone out and risk alienating the rest of the best crew in television.

But I will commend the entire production for this:



For more than a decade, we have filmed in neighborhoods in Baltimore that most people would find inhospitable and alienating, if not, in some ways frightening to many outsiders. We have done so without incident, without losing equipment or having anyone hurt - and without alienating people in the neighborhoods where we have worked. We get the work done when extraordinary, unscripted events are often taking place a block or two away, with police helicopters flying overhead and sirens blaring to threaten our audio, with entire

neighborhoods coming 'round to watch the filming and interact with the cast ("Ho, shit. It's Omar. Hey, Omar. Come rob me, yo!"), or when our choice of location has obliged us to displace actual drug corners.

We have routinely been able to convince the law-abiding residents of many of these neighborhoods that we will respect their concerns, that we will not trash these streets, that we will leave our film sets better than we have found them. And we have been able to convince the corner boys that we are not the police, that we will film our scenes and move on without provoking any police response against them. It is a delicate process, but we make it work for us and for the communities as well, regardless of where we find ourselves in Baltimore.

Out of these neighborhoods, too, we have found and hired actors, crew members, and office staff and we have been able to channel our resources to charitable endeavors that have nothing to do with filmmaking. One of our wardrobe supervisors began his career by following the *Homicide* crew around the city as a kid, standing behind the video monitors and asking questions. Once an adolescent mascot, he is now a reliable member of the film team. And at all points, we have recognized that we are visitors to these places and that after our film is shot and our trucks depart, other people will continue to live and struggle there. I am very proud of how we have interacted with so many communities in Baltimore and how welcome we still are in the city - at least on the street level.

Q: Where do most of the police gallows humor and funny moments come from? Is that your experience with the Homicide squad or is it Ed or Jay or what? [Jim King]

A: We're funny guys. But mostly, human beings - regardless of what they do, what they confront or where they are headed - have a capacity for humor that is endless and heroic.

Cops have their own interior wit and it is savagely funny on their side of the police tape. Corner boys have their inside jokes and they are bitterly clever on the other side of that tape. Politicians have their own comic voice, as do longshoremen, as do reporters and teachers and, well, film crews.

Everyone knows the small twists and hypocritical absurdities of their workplace, of their neighborhoods, or their families and lovers and children. The trick is listening long enough to catch glimpses of such wit at play. Because without the humor and the camaraderie that humor brings in squadrooms, on drug corners, on the docks or at city hall, the story itself would be too tragic for anyone to bear.

A fan once asked Alfred Hitchcock if he might one day direct a comedy. He looked at the woman, surprised, and said, "My dear, all my movies are comedies."

There are moments where I like to flatter myself by claiming that *The Wire* is the funniest show on television. It may be more accurate to say it's the funniest show about the decline of the American empire on television.

Q: My favorite *Wire* moment is the desk move in one of the teases in season 2. Do you have a favorite moment? [Jim King]

A: "I can't wait to go to jail." ...or... "Okay, maybe I ain't all that humble."

I wrote the first line as an on-set add as I watched the camera move that occurred as Landsman & Greggs walked past the crowded witness dump. George Pelecanos wrote the second exchange and when I first read the line in the script, I laughed so hard I hurt, then laughed until I cried when I saw Wendell's delivery in the dailies.

For a speech-like moment, I am very proud of the paper-bag soliloquy from Colvin in season three. That was Richard Price, but he was channeling Ed Burns directly from *The Corner*. It was Ed who first made the analogy between the drug war and the practical application of the open-container law and it stands for me as the smartest thing ever said about why drug prohibition can never work and why it has destroyed so much, so uselessly. Ed is a smart fella.

But on the whole, I confess that I'm a sucker for the throwaway bits of humor. I expect the dramatic moments to work. We plan those with care in the writing room. But comedy always seems improbable to me, even when we plan for it. Comedy is ineffable.

Q: Do you have a favorite character? [Karen Neuman]

A: Baltimore. The city. I love when she is authenticated within the storytelling, particularly in the smallest details. When Bunk lifts crab guts to his lips and McNulty reads a headline beneath broken crab debris in an interrogation room, or when Lieutenant Mello or Vice Principal Donnelly utters a line in a flawless Baltimore accent, or when West Baltimore club music is pumping through a houseparty scene, or when the real kids in Calvin Ford's actual Pennsylvania Avenue boxing gym are shown going about their craft - these things make me happy.

Q: Do you write Snoop's speeches or do you just roll the camera, let her talk, and then write it all down? How much improvisation do you allow your actors to do?

A: As stated above, improvisation is kept to a minimum. In the case of Felicia Pearson, she is learning the craft of acting quite quickly and with each successive scene we press her to stay closer and closer to the page. The first episode of the new season, which features Snoop, is one in which she was



required to follow the script, simply because the dialogue established a metaphor for the coming season, as all of our first scenes have done for each of our seasons. We needed her to be precise and she obliged us. We're proud of her and at the end of the day, she was, I think, proud of herself for doing the job much like any other actor.

Q: The sex scenes and violent scenes seem very real and provocative. Are you particularly proud of those scenes? [Jim King]

A: No more or less than other scenes. In most instances, we try to keep the violence disturbing and abrupt, rather than choreographed and romanticized. I'm not sure what we try to do with sexual scenes except to keep them credible within the context of the characters and their relationship to each other at the given moment.

Q: Was the canon on Omar's motives, ethics, sexual orientation, charisma, and language set from the start or did it evolve when you hired Michael and started writing the character? [Mike, specifik]

A: He was gay from the start - my choice, as I thought Omar, as an unaffiliated character, could be boldly and openly homosexual in a way that a gay man within the organized drug trade or within the police department could not be. His motivations and ethics were in the writers' heads from the start. We decided that he would not curse after watching the singular moment in the first robbery sequence, when Brandon uses his name during the robbery, and Omar, in his surprise, lets slip a curse.



At that moment, his loss of poise felt telling, and it was Ed who first suggested that Omar should prize his own self-control in a way that so many other characters in *The Wire* do not. At that point, I agreed, coming to the realization that Omar alone - un beholden to the institutions that leave everyone else in the show debased and betrayed - would never curse again. Sometimes, one of the writers forgets the rule and an early draft of a script will contain a profanity for Omar. Michael Williams always remembers, however, and he corrects the page.

The charisma we will credit to Michael as much as to the part we've written, but reports that we expanded the part based on Michael's achievement are not really accurate. We always conceived of Omar as a critical entity - along with Bubbles, a perversely moral force and a bridge between the police and street worlds.

Omar is very much based on several stickup artists who preyed on the drug culture in Baltimore, a number of whom were at times informants to Ed Burns. Here's a shout-out to Ferdinand Harvin, Anthony Hollie, Shorty Boyd, Cadillac & Low, Donnie Anders, et al. - all of you live on a bit in Omar, though of course, they'd all probably want me to affirm their heterosexuality along with their local legend. Ah well. The limits of human empathy, again.

Q: Are you disappointed that there has not been Emmy or Golden Globe recognition for your actors or the show? [Glen in Pennsylvania]

A: As to the Emmys, yes, somewhat, especially for the actors who have done so much fine work. But in television, even more than feature films, the awards academy does not seem to vote for the work that is the most creative or ambitious. And that is reflective of many more quality productions than merely *The Wire*.

As to the Golden Globes, which are wholly a reflection of a handful of foreign critics seeking to have a televised dinner with the freshest celebrities they can muster, I have to regard them as McNulty regards Baltimore lawyers.

Q: We heard about your frustration over the critics not noticing the train symbolism. What else don't we get that bothers you? [Jim King]

A: Frustration is overstating it, perhaps. But I am often surprised that sometimes the most fundamental thematic symbolism is ignored in television, where in a feature film it would be acknowledged and discussed. So much of television has for so long been filmed in a rapid-fire, utilitarian fashion that when filmmakers attempt to use the medium in any kind of visual or allegorical way, it rolls right past many people. This is true of some other well-made dramas on HBO as well.

There's better work being done nowadays on television, but I think critics of the medium, generally, are not accustomed to regarding television as a visual craft in the same way that film critics are comfortable doing so. As a result, a lot of discussion about high-end television is limited to a literal recounting of story. The words and the plot and the acting are all important of course; perhaps they are most important. But sometimes the unspoken, as the next level of understanding, is important too.

Bob Colesberry would not have worked in television if the above wasn't true. It is what he brought to the table as a filmmaker and his love of the visual was infectious.

To break the film down and reveal any thematic or visual cues as a didactic exercise seems to defeat whatever sense of discovery viewers might experience. I've let slip some of our metaphors and visual cues in the DVD commentaries and that's probably not for the better. But it's true that the position of the blinds in the Comstat room are metaphorical, and it's true that the interactions with trains in the railyard are symbolic as well. The first scene of every season speaks to the theme of the ensuing season, just as there is a thematic correlation between the personal lives of characters or lack thereof, and their dependence or independence of the institutional imperative.

There are visual and audio links - repetitions, if you will -- between worlds, indicating that cops and dealers and longshoremen and imported sex workers and even political functionaries are challenged by similar circumstances and are vulnerable to the same sociopolitical or economic fundamentals. We think about this shit too much perhaps, but having the opportunity to do so is what makes the project matter to us.

Q: Where did the idea for *Hamsterdam* come from? Were you advocating a particular position? [Shane Faulkner]

A: We followed Ed Burns' analogy of the paper bag to its logical - and I do mean logical - conclusion. A true-life *Hamsterdam* would not be pretty and we captured that, I think. But without a truce in the war on drugs, this country is only going to continue to squander precious resources that might be better utilized to rebuild human lives and to continue to demonize its underclass and turn its inner cities into war zones. What drugs have not destroyed, the war against them has. Until we admit this, we are destined to fail and fail miserably.

I am against drug abuse on a deeply personal level, but I am against drug prohibition on every level, personal and political. But it doesn't matter that I am or that *The Wire* reflects this, because our political culture cannot and will not produce the selfless courage necessary for a political leader to address the problem honestly. Our political culture only produces politicians and it serves only the relentless ambition of those willing to tell us what we think we want to hear.

Q: If you could recommend specific alternatives to the "War On Drugs" to lawmakers, what would you and Ed advocate? [Wirehead you met in New Orleans, Dennis Kleen]

A: I shouldn't speak for Ed. But I would decriminalize drugs and use the billions spent on interdiction, enforcement, prosecution, incarceration, etc. into drug treatment, job training and yes, more effective investigation of violent crime. There are now more than 2 million Americans in federal prisons; tellingly they are less violent than ever before - most are there for narcotics violations and most are serving longer sentences without the possibility of parole.

And to what end? Drugs are more potent and more available than ever, and the drug trade has been rendered more violent than ever before. Human desire cannot be defeated by lawyers, guns and prison cells; it can only be mitigated by giving human beings choices about what they might legitimately desire and achieve within the context of their lives. And the drug war has little to do with any of that.



Q: What are one or two things we should look for that are new in Season 4? [anonymous]

A: It's election year in Baltimore. Uh oh.

And number two? There are some children we are going to meet. And as Ed Burns likes to point out, they are going to get an education, one way or another. They are young, but they are not fools, and they are going to learn the truth about their world and their place in it, about what we expect of them and what their options and opportunities truly are.

Q: Will the Carcetti for Mayor storyline comment on the state of political discourse in this country the way Season 3 echoed Iraq with "fight on the lie"? Tell us about the Carcetti mini-series. Was that a serious possibility? [Glen in Pennsylvania, John]

A: The election-year story will continue to examine the possibilities of reforming our mythical version of Baltimore. It will also echo the theme of education in that political characters will receive their own instruction in the limits and circumstances of municipal government. And because the political structure acts on the police department, the school system and every other municipal facet, the political storyline informs all of the others, in that sense.

The use of the Barksdale-Stanfield drug war as a metaphor for our terrible misadventure in Iraq was something of a bonus theme in season three, which was largely an examination of reform and its possibilities. Nonetheless, we saw an opportunity to address ourselves to Iraq with Avon Barksdale's willingness to risk his authority, his treasure and his empire in a war of choice against an insurgency that he naively underestimated. Consider that something of an extra bang for the HBO buck, and if you happen to see Mr. Rumsfeld, Mr. Cheney or Mr. Wolfowitz on the street, feel free to tell them the following:

- 1) If we were all Japanese, and they were confronted with all the death and disaster perpetrated in their names and behind their wrongheaded geopolitical assumptions and outright lies, honor itself would require each to grasp an ancient, ceremonial knife and eviscerate himself.
- 2) Unless of course, they are men without honor, which is apparently the case, so never mind the above.
- 3) Instead, just mention that they can kiss my white ass.

As to the political project you mention, we greatly desired the opportunity to write the election as an eight-part series that would have aired between seasons three and four of *The Wire* and would possibly have launched a companion show, *The Hall*, to focus on American municipal politics and provide something of an antidote to the Father-Knows-Best tonality of more popular political drama. We felt that with a detailed examination of how American politics actually works on a day-to-day level, we could go even deeper into our examination of American urban culture and the circumstances in which we find ourselves. We wrote two scripts and submitted them, along with a bible for the remaining episodes, to HBO.



Chris Albrecht was impressed with the scripts - he wanted to see some of that material covered in season four of *The Wire*. But he was not willing to have two under-watched dramatic series out of Baltimore, and so we folded some aspects of the political into season three and ran the election simultaneous to the school story. Obviously, we could not therefore address everything that we hoped to address with a separate political drama and for that matter, there were elements of the school system and the urban educational environment that we could not address in full detail.

We contemplated a second season of *The Hall* between seasons four and five of *The Wire*, and, if the drama succeeded as we believed it would, additional seasons of *The Hall* going forward after *The Wire* concluded its run, with Carcetti edging ever closer to the national political scene. There is a great drama to be done in exactly how an American city is governed - or not - and Bill Zorzi, as a veteran political reporter, is just the fella to lead the charge. But we did not achieve that goal with HBO. Perhaps another time and in another circumstance. It's hard to blame Chris for his reluctance. Perhaps if *The Wire* had *Sopranos*-like numbers, there would have been a call for us to provide more episodes about Baltimore. But our numbers are what they are and we are grateful for the commitment that HBO has made in allowing season four to go forward.

Q: What about "Way Down In The Hole" for season 4? Did you get someone to newly-record the song or did you pick a previously-recorded version? [Glen in Pennsylvania]

A: In keeping with the theme of the season, we sought out voices of middle-school-aged students from Baltimore. Rather than seek out a particular recording artist this year, we tried for the essential voice of our adolescent characters.

Beyond the musical choice, I think it works emotionally.

Specifically, our theme was arranged and produced by Doreen Vail, Maurette Brown-Clark and J.B. Wilkins. The young voices featured are those of Ivan Ashford, Markel Steele, Cameron Brown, Tariq Al-Sabir and Avery Bargasse. The musicians are Ronald Lindsey and Thomas Crosson. Mike Potter engineered the session.

All of the boys are from Baltimore and Tony Small, who directs a boys choir locally, found them for us.

Q: Obviously Jim True-Frost (Prez) is Ed's proxy this year. Do you have a proxy character (other than that pushy reporter)? [Jim King]

A: I don't think Prez is Ed's proxy. Ed is Ed. Prez is Prez. They were both cops and they both went to the Baltimore School System to teach, but the similarities end there.

We have allowed Prez to experience some of the first-year adventures typical of Ed's journey and that of other city teachers, but he experiences this as Prez, not Ed Burns. That said, this year really reflects a great deal of Ed wants to say about his seven years in the school system. Although he is hugely influential and essential to all of *The Wire*'s storytelling, this particular story arc is more his own than any other.

Q: How did your famous writing staff work out for you in season 4? [anonymous]



A: We missed having George around all the time, as he went back to his book career full-bore, having signed a big-ass book contract and feeling like he needed to really deliver on the next novel, which, having read "The Night Gardener," I can say that he has.

George did write the season's penultimate episode for us, though. Price and Lehane also stepped up as they are wont to do. At this point, it's business as usual for these guys and I feel that we are even more at ease with each other as now, that we all know what to expect. All of us have the tone of the show in our heads and can execute on behalf of all of the characters. I have nothing but admiration for their talent and professionalism in seeing this project through the way they do.

Eric Overmyer stepped in for George and is a total pro as well. His two scripts are stellar, particularly since he had the job of synthesizing the Election Day script, which is the moment where the political story is at its height, yet all other plotlines are progressing as well. It was a neat trick. For those of you wishing to learn a little more about the mysterious Mr. Overmyer, get hold of his playwriting, notably "On The Verge." I will also remark that Eric is the only member of our writing team to successfully pen a musical.

He runs television shows (*Law & Order*, *Homicide* as a supervising producer) because he can, but he dances with the English language because he must. The motherfucker can write.

Eric did much of the labor on McNulty's domestic arc this year, which feels smartly fleshed out in several key scenes. In addition, my writing partner on *The Corner* and one of my best friends going back to our time on the student newspaper at College Park, David Mills, helped us break story this year and wrote the second episode. Some may remember Mills from his Emmy-nominated work on *NYPD: Blue* and the short-lived, but deserving *Kingpin* on NBC. We tried to keep David for a second episode, but he has a development deal and continues to bang at the doors of network television, trying for his own big score. I keep telling him that premium cable is the shiznit and to come back East, but every time I get to L.A. he looks a little more at home. I worry for the man.

Playwright Kia Corthron, whose work *Breath, Boom* captured the voices of adolescent girl gangbangers, contributed a script that achieved a lot with the voices of our young actors, and Zorzi guided the political story and contributed a script on his own this year. Chris Collins, our script coordinator and a staffwriter on the show, worked through the Bubbles storyline in many episodes.

Q: What can you tell us about your new HBO series? [Jim King]

A: Nothing much yet. The aforementioned Eric Overmyer, a producer on *The Wire* this year and an old friend from *Homicide: Life on the Street*, is a resident of New Orleans and I love that city and have been a constant visitor for many years. Even before Katrina, we asked HBO for the opportunity to write a series about the culture of music in New Orleans, centering the story on a working-class black neighborhood. Katrina happened and the story seemed to gain a new import.

We have just started the research and we have a commitment from HBO for a pilot script only. There is no green light on the project yet, but as ever, we are hopeful.

Q: What are the prospects for Season 5? Do you have to sell the show to Chris Albrecht again? Does it depend on the success of the on-demand experiment? Are your actors contracted for season 5? When will you know if it's a go? [Emily, Mike, specifik]

A: Yep, I'm always pimping my shit to someone who is less impressed than I want him to be, it seems. It is a little disheartening because like anybody who works hard at something, I feel that what I've helped to create in *The Wire* has a unique value and is deserving of more than it receives and I want others to feel the same and do right by the project without me getting on my knees every six months. But get on my knees I do because to not finish the story properly and in the manner we planned to finish it would be, from my point of view, frustrating and tragic.



I think the future of the show depends on the critical attention it receives next month, on the DVD sales, and on the viewership during HBO's various broadcasts and on-demand. We will know if it is a go by early fall, I would guess.

My actors are not under contract, but I spoke to all of them before the options lapsed and expressed my commitment to finishing the show and my belief that HBO would want us to finish on those terms once viewers got a look at season four. To a man (and woman), the actors expressed the same commitment. That includes Dominic West, who, although given a lighter role this year because of both the needs of story and Dom's own career trajectory, is an essential and elemental component for season five. Dom called from London to say he wanted this show to conclude as it deserves to conclude - as professional a response as I can and would expect and indicative of the reaction I received from the entire cast. So I am not

concerned about the option issue; if HBO wants to finish this show, I'll be filming in Baltimore with *The Wire* cast by spring.

Q: Any tidbits on what media you would love to skewer in season 5? [Wirehead you met in New Orleans]

A: No medium in particular. But having presented all these facets of the urban power structure, and all these attendant urban problems, the next logical question for us to ask is this:

Why don't we see the problems for what they are? What are we looking at? What are we paying attention to? What are we ignoring? What do we read and watch and consider and what is it that never comes to our attention? And why? Having built our city-state, explored its problems and examined government's willingness or lack of willingness to address those problems, the last question we want to ask is why all of us allow things to remain as they do?

To quote Pogo, perhaps "we have met the enemy and he is us." Perhaps part of the blame resides with us as citizens, with our own capacity for self-delusion and with what we regard as meaningful or important. For that we need to introduce and examine the great biofeedback loop that is the mass media. Not in a caustic way, but with the affection of writers, some of who have actually been reporters and admire the craft of journalism. We are not trying to skewer newspapers or broadcast news or this talking head or that columnist. We are trying to finish our treatise on the American city and why it cannot heal thyself.

Q: What are you reading that you can recommend? [Wirehead you met in New Orleans]

A: Reading currently? At my bedside right now:

"Ace of Spades," by David Matthews, a memoir of growing up mixed-race in Baltimore. It's a reader's copy; soon to be released by Henry Holt.

"The Bang-Bang Club, Snapshots of a Hidden War" a memoir by two photographers of the township war in South Africa at the end of apartheid, by Greg Marinovich and Jaeo Silva.

"The Wrong Case," by James Crumley. (I just finished Crumley's "The Last Good Kiss" earlier this year. Fantastic.)

"At Canaan's Edge," by Taylor Branch, third in the civil rights trilogy.

"Proof," The play by David Auburn.

"The State of Africa: A history of fifty years of Independence," by Martin Meredith.

"Sister Carrie," by Drieser.

I've also been rereading "Last Exit To Brooklyn" by Hubert Selby and slowly working my way through the Everyman Library's edition of the Qu'ran.

When I get through a few of these - I read back and forth, picking up books in tandem - I'm going to start Madison Smartt Bell's trilogy of Haiti novels, and some Philip Roth to correct a glaring hole in my education. My better half recommends starting with Portnoy, of course.

I'll recommend everything. Nothing I'm reading currently is disappointing me in any sense, although I'll offer the caveat that the Qu'ran - like most religious works, my own tribe's Old Testament included -- is a slow, careful slog. Much genuine wisdom, much ancient idiosyncrasy, much self-affirming dogma. How anyone in this modern world - Jew, Christian, Muslim, Druid - can be a fundamentalist in his or her religious pursuits, to the exclusion of all other ideas not contained in a single, solitary text, eludes me. The world is a complicated and confusing place, but determined efforts to simplify it are, I think, to be regarded with great suspicion. Still, I'm enjoying the chance to expose myself to the core values of a religion otherwise maligned and stereotyped by the recent violence done in its name.

Q: Do you read the online message boards, discussion groups, and web sites? Do they make you laugh or cry? [Jim King]

A: We don't look at them to get ideas about what we should do with our characters or plot. My sense of what viewers say they want from serialized drama is what they experienced before and enjoyed before. This is understandable, but it is not the role of the storyteller to keep telling the same stories over and over to gratify his audience. Too much of television - if not prose writing - involves a commercial calculation wherein writers begin to conclude that if they can keep their serial running for season after season, or keep their books in the display racks at the storefront and do so by repeating their best riffs and rerunning their best character moments, then they are succeeding.

It is good to have lots of viewers or readers. Having some is certainly an economic necessity. But if writers forget that their primary purpose is to move a story forward and to remain original in content, then they are, well, hacks. Consequently, in scanning the web or any other interactions with our audience, we are cautious about allowing any feedback to induce us to appease or please viewers. Frankly, and not to sound parental or anything, but viewers generally don't know what is good for them as an audience, or for *The Wire*. Given their own way, they'd eat dessert all the time and leave the vegetables on the plate. So I'm afraid we are not at all open to suggestion or petition when it comes to character or story.

We do look online to get a general sense of viewer reaction and whether or not our themes are getting through or whether we need to explain ourselves a little better, or perhaps, a little less. Some of the reaction to what we do delights us (we are, with only modest exception, human), some of it inspires indifference and some of it is simply off the point.

The only reaction that actually disturbed me enough to comment at one point was when a great many viewers seemed to feel that Carcetti was speaking for the filmmakers in his political demagoguery at the end of season three. His eloquence, his effect on his audience, the camera gliding in on his face as he achieves the crest of a political summit - all of this clearly indicates that it is his moment and he is ascendant. None of it was intended as a validation of his call to recommit to the drug war or a repudiation of the truths that Bunny Colvin confronted and ultimately, to his own sacrifice, tried to address. That many viewers thought so proves the power of get-tough-on-crime political showmanship and helps to explain why this country continues to pursue failed policies for generations and why voters tolerate such waste and insanity.

I probably should have said nothing, but the misapprehension of that key scene just threw me. I thought that viewers who had seen Colvin wrestle honestly with the problem for episodes on end would not be so easily beguiled by a solitary moment of political theater. I guess I went all *Candide* on myself and forgot my own premise.

The other aspect that takes up a lot of discussion on the internet seems to be race. I'm not particularly interested in race as a point of discussion and in fact, I think *The Wire* speaks to sociopolitics, economics and issues of class more than race. Even when the racial aspect is referenced in the plotting, it is usually in a manner that mocks someone's over-obsession with it, or messes with someone's racial preconceptions.

This is not to say that racism isn't a residual problem in this country and will not remain a problem for a long time to come. But what really ails America, in my opinion, is this: Raw, unencumbered capitalism is an economic force and a potent one. But it is not social policy and amid a political culture of greed and selfishness, it is being made to substitute for social policy. The rich get richer, the poor get fucked, and the middle class of this country - the union-wage consumer class that constituted the economic strength of postwar America - is fast disappearing as the need for union-wage work disappears.

Raw capitalism - absent the moderating aspect of a political system that cares for the great mass of voters (or non-voters) who uphold that system - is not good for most of us. It is great for a few of us. We are building only the America that we are paying for, and ultimately, it is going to be an ugly and brutal place, much like the city-state depicted in *The Wire*. So when Congress fails to raise the minimum wage for the first time in fifteen years because they will do so only if at the same they can eliminate an estate tax for the

wealthiest 8,000 families in the country, as they did this month, I at least manage a smile to know that the content of my little television drama is not the stuff of hyperbole; if anything we've been gentle about what the American future is.

Race and race-consciousness - which seems to occupy so many viewers, black and white - seems almost beside the point when all of us, regardless of our melanin, are being subjected to such diminished opportunities and when the political structure is so indifferent to the social and economic fabric of the nation as a whole. I guess the more they keep us arguing about such chicken-and-egg stuff as say, whether crime is the result of individual failures of responsibility - nature - or whether it results from denial of opportunity and societal dysfunction - nurture - the less time we spend examining who is marginalizing whom in this country and to what possible and profitable end. Yet whether Stringer Bell was born a bad guy or was made a bad guy by events seems to be what viewers want to debate endlessly.

The answer, I would suggest, is that he was both and I offer that answer in the hope that such horseshit debates about good-versus-evil and whether or not all these crazy ghetto Negros in Baltimore are deprived or deprived can be discarded in favor of a discussion about why there are still entrenched ghettos (black, Hispanic, and yes, white, now that the union wages are gone) in a city that was once a great port and manufacturing center within the greatest economic power the world had ever seen.

Debate that for a while, perhaps.

Q: Thanks, David.

A: No, thank you for the opportunity, Jim. And thanks for maintaining the Yahoo group and Homicide: Links on the Sites.

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