



The Drug War Goes Prime Time

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Sergeant Joe Friday would probably flip in his fictional grave at the sight of HBO's new cop show, which just concluded its first season last month.

The Wire looks at the war on drugs as it is waged in the inner cities of Baltimore by an inter-agency team of federal agents and local police officers. The cop genre has come a long way from the strait-laced corn served up on *Dragnet*, the mother of all TV police dramas, but *The Wire* may be pioneering a sub-genre of its own. Created by David Simon, a former reporter for the *Baltimore Sun*, and co-written by ex-police officer Ed Burns, *The Wire* challenges some of the core assumptions that underlie the typical cop show.

While most such series allude to the broader politics that drive law enforcement, *Wire* takes the next step. Here the agencies are portrayed not as zealous guardians of the public good, but rather as political entities pursuing their vested interests - whose actions often have unjust and cruel consequences. As Simon told *Salon* magazine when the series debuted in June, "Once you're at war, you have an enemy. Once you have an enemy, you can do whatever you want...I'm not supportive of the idea of drugs, but what drugs have not destroyed, the war on them has."

Here is the story set-up in brief: D'Angelo Barksdale, a young lieutenant in a large Baltimore drug organization run by his uncle, Avon Barksdale, is acquitted on a homicide charge after the star witness is intimidated into recanting her story. Detective James McNulty is brought in by the presiding judge to assess just how the case went south and finds out that the Barksdales appear to be linked to quite a few murders. The deputy commissioner then calls for a task force to wipe out Barksdale's operation; it includes federal agents, the tenacious McNulty, hot-shot undercover cop Shakima Greggs and another savvy detective, Bunk Morehead.

Corrupt cops, burnt-out cops, even homicidal cops are not new in Hollywood. But *The Wire* is different in that we see how department politics affect the execution of the drug war. The series makes clear, for example, that the task force is intended as a public relations measure after the botched homicide prosecution. "Keep the papers off it, make an arrest or two," directs one higher-up. The policemen also don't always show great commitment to their job. Two officers balk and get testy with McNulty when he dispatches them to cross-check some records, a basic, ground-floor tactic in a thorough investigation.

Kevin Zeese, founder of Common Sense for Drug Policy, hasn't watched *The Wire* regularly, but welcomes its realism about the conduct of the war on drugs. "All these shows with a more realistic portrayal open the conversation to a more sensible level of discourse about the issue instead of one based on emotion," he says. *Traffic*, the surprise Hollywood blockbuster directed by Steven Soderbergh, did portray the futility of the drug war. But Zeese says, "It didn't show how blacks are treated differently by the criminal justice system at every step of the way."

What is most unusual about *The Wire* is that the series depicts both sides of the drug war. Darnell M. Hunt, professor of sociology, says *The Wire* takes an unconventional approach to its depictions of African-Americans. Hunt, who is also Director the UCLA Department of African-American Studies, and is conducting a five-year study of the depictions of African-Americans on prime-time television, loves the show.

"It's rare to see African-American characters portrayed across the spectrum like that -- in terms of sexuality, motivations. I'm not one who typically likes these kinds of shows, but I am struck by the nuanced, very interesting portrayals," he says.

The law enforcement task force is racially mixed. McNulty (played by Dominic West) is Irish-American, while his colleagues Greggs (Sonja Sohn), Morehead (Wendall Pierce), and Lt. Cedric Daniels (Lance Reddick) are African-Americans. Greggs is revealed as a lesbian when she arrives home and is greeted by her sweetheart, who is also African-American. Morehead is a genial and dedicated veteran, while Daniels is a careerist, for whom the badge often trumps race. When two white members of the task force get liquored up and harass and humiliate the African-American residents, Daniels advises them get their story straight to avoid an investigation. "He did not piss you off," he says of the black teenager the two cops beat up. "He made you fear for your safety and that of your fellow officers."

And the people selling the drugs are just as complex and fully drawn. "Even the quote-unquote bad characters are humanized in ways you don't usually see on television," Hunt says. "This show just strikes me as being the most balanced and realistic portrayal of people involved in drug culture." We watch D'Angelo (Larry Gilliard, Jr.) as his qualms about the violence of his trade increase; we see his Uncle Avon (Wood Harris) in an apron as he cooks at a community event and cuddles D'Angelo's toddler son. "In one episode, we saw one of the (drug syndicate) lieutenants in the organization going off to a junior college to take a business management course," Hunt says. "It was to get better at managing his drug business, but it was an unexpected twist, there was a feeling of reality about it."

The series also makes clear the fact that a drug economy is the logical outcome of the overwhelming problems facing the inner cities. Series creator Simons told Salon that the government has created "war zones where the only economic engine is the self-perpetuating drug trade...they've spent 34 years taking neighborhoods and basically divesting them from the rest of America. We've embraced a permanent war of attrition against the underclass, and it can't work."

But despite its innovative style and message, there are those who find the cop/drug war genre objectionable in general. "I saw one episode for maybe 10 minutes and then shut it off," says Anthony Papa, visual artist and activist working to reform drug law.

"I don't think it neutralizes it just because the cops are corrupt," Papa says. Someone who knows nothing about drug sales or use would look at *The Wire* "and see the violence and would support the war on drugs," Papa says.

Papa has personally experienced the harsh reality of the drug war -- he served 12 years of a two 15 years-to-life concurrent sentences for passing 4 1/2 ounces of cocaine in an envelope. Governor George Pataki granted Papa clemency after his art work, done in prison, was displayed in New York's acclaimed Whitney Museum and at the Outsider Gallery.

For Papa, *The Wire* is just the latest example of long history of Hollywood racism. He points to the fact that the drug dealers are all African-American. "Most drug users I know are white. I've worked in mid-town Manhattan, around Wall St., where people were using drugs. I never saw the police raid Wall Street," Papa says. Virtually everyone depicted as part of the drug trade in *The Wire* is black. In the pilot, the one white addict gets killed after passing a phony \$20 bill, in a scam devised by his African-American lover -- reinforcing the notion that blacks are dangerous to whites. But it doesn't come off with the same volatility as the scenes in the film *Traffic* where the white drug addict daughter of the "drug czar" is seen turning tricks with African-American customers to feed her habit. "It's like [the ongoing HBO prison series] *Oz* -- it's all about exploitation of the marginalized and disenfranchised," Papa says.

"Most drug dealers are white, many people in the drug trade are white, and if you didn't already know that, you wouldn't know it from watching the show," agrees Hunt. But in defense of the series, Hunt says the plot is based on the real-life case of a drug organization and its young leader in Washington D.C.

The Wire's shortcomings, however, are important because the view of African-Americans is still defined by media images. "In an ideal world we'd have enough variety in representations out there that no one show would have to represent the racial experience," Hunt says. So while *The Wire*'s unconventional approach to writing and depiction of the mixed motives of the drug warriors make it a landmark show, its failings reveal just how much further we still need to go.

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