

CHAPTER ONE: Newspapers on the Small Screen

The project to compare and explore the differences between writing for stage and for screen, specifically television, involved seeing how the medium in which a story is told influences the story itself, and the way that impacts on the viewer. So, I started watching television more frequently. Used to watching newsreel and documentaries, I included soap operas, dramas, series, and screen plays – for the comparison in writing styles and the critics for their objective overview on both television programmes and theatre. For genre in theatre, and underlining all drama, I read Aristotle's *Poetics*¹, and to see it applied to television, the simplification from classic three-Act drama and the definitions of comedy, tragedy and catharsis, turned to Glen Creeber's *Television Genre Book*² which helped my choice of television series to study. In this chapter, I look at two very different television programmes, one series made in America by HBO, *The Wire* (2002-2008)³, and one made in the UK by BBC One called *State of Play* (2003)⁴.

Both series set some of the story in a newspaper office, showing us here and there a glimpse of life on the newsroom floor, the Diary desk, the Picture Desk where the "paps" (paparazzi) were summoned each night for their sly peeks at fake tan décolleté and short skirts, the subs desk where the writers were lucky if they were allowed to hover over the Back Bench to see if the interviewee they had promised anonymity, or £10,000, or a truly verbatim quote were going to be waking them up at midnight when the first editions hit the streets. *The Wire*'s newspaper office was the Newsroom of the *Baltimore Sun*, where the writer David Simon used to work before he began work on *The Wire*. The six-part UK series *State of Play* is set against the backdrop of a London newspaper called *The Herald*, and told the story of a star Mancunian MP whose affair with his researcher set off a crime investigation by the Metropolitan Police and tore apart his already fragile marriage.

There was a marked difference in pace and tone between the two. In 2009, *The Wire*, which had been electrifying audiences across the States since 2002, began to be shown in

¹ James Hutton (transl), *Aristotle's Poetics* (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1982).

² Glen Creeber, *The Television Genre Book*, (London: British Film Institute, 1998), 5.

³ David Simon, creator, *The Wire*, HBO, 2002-2008.

⁴ Paul Abbott, creator, *State of Play*, BBC One, 2008.

the UK. It was an introduction not just into the mid-American underworld of drugs, gangs and teenage hoodlums, but to the way American film-makers were now depicting that world in a new way, a way which seemed faster, more realistic, more as it really was. It was designed not just for television screens, but kids were watching it on their mobiles on their way to school, people were watching box sets into the night, the makers were wooing and catching a new generation.

The Baltimore Sun newspaper was the focus of season five of *The Wire*, and its reporters were filmed in a way that showed the Press still has the power to tell and re-tell stories of the street, politics and the precincts, and of what was going on in the grand mansions of the rich and powerful. There they were, detectives and reporters, wielding the sword of truth for good and ill, to bend the truth to their own advantage or cut through lies and tell it like it really is. The connecting thread throughout the seasons was a wiretap to the drug gangs' mobiles, particularly to gang leader Marlo Stanfield's telephone. In Season Five, it is one of the stories that gets dropped in the Mayor's budget cuts, to the speechless fury of the hero, charming but brutal Detective McNulty (Dominic West) and his team, who have been keeping the dealers under surveillance for over a year. Cutting the budget means no further surveillance of the crooks despite it being an ongoing case, causing an explosion of bad feeling – seen as both bad policing and bad for the reporters following the story. The story of *The Wire* is the story of the city of Baltimore, like any city its newspaper is vital to its citizens, and like any newspaper worth its salt, is multi-layered, it is not just the story of the men keeping watch, policing the street, but of the streets themselves, the bureaucracies which rule over them (Mayor, Governor, Police Commissioner) and the reporters whose iPhones and keyboards record them. This web of fact and fiction kept millions of viewers glued to their sets, their tablets, their screens, for years. It swerved my own writing from stage to small screen. I suddenly saw the potential for television as a means to tell the story of newspapers and watched a great many hours of *The Wire* with a notebook at my side. David Simon says that when he and Ed Burns, both sons of Baltimore, who began their careers in that city - Simon as a journalist, Burns as a member of the Baltimore Police department, started writing *The Wire*, it “began as a story wedged between two American myths”⁵. Simon knew he needed to put this across in the storyline and recalls having looked at the Wall Street pyramid schemes, the shocking frauds at the heart of Enron and

⁵ Rafael Alvarez with an Introduction by David Simon, *The Wire: Truth Be Told* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2009), 5.

WorldCom, but he and co-writer Burns found them “too shameless and absurd for even our fevered imaginations. We could not have fathomed the empty lies and self-delusions that brought about the senseless misadventure in Iraq. We had a good argument, but in the beginning we did not know how good.”⁶

After five seasons, the writers and producers and viewers across the world did know how good the argument was and were passionately involved. *The Wire* was by then one of the most watched TV programmes in America. This highlighted for me the importance of the deep background, the social and political context of the story to a complex episodic project like *The Wire*, and even for a smaller undertaking, such as the proposed six episodes of my own *Brief Lies*, which I had begun to write two years before.

The Wire ran in the States for five seasons over seven years, 13 episodes in each season, covering five different aspects of Baltimore life including famously innovative investigations into corruption by *The Baltimore Sun* addressed in season five. Each season told stories based on real life events of policing, politics, drug gangs and, finally, the Press. The semi-documentary style in which it was filmed, drew in citizens of Baltimore, and reporters from *The Sun* itself as extras injecting authenticity from the source. As the institutional changes start on film, part of the storyline, and the (real life) buyouts and closing of foreign bureaux are announced along with other cut backs, the storylines run parallel to what is happening in the real world. For instance, to show a city budget “crunch” at *The Sun*’s City Desk, the real City Editor discusses lay-off rumours with reporters in a scene which could be documentary. This time, actors are playing reporters named after real-life *Baltimore Sun* reporters⁷, one of them a woman, and according to the Rafael Alvarez book of the making of the series, the reporters themselves often became street celebrities, with viewers stopping them to ask for an autograph or details of the next plot twist. These events from real life emerged when I started to research how the series was made, how it became such a groundbreaker, and the methods used to help give the series its raw authenticity, although when *The Sun*’s TV critic played himself, in his critique he went out of his way to stress how terrible he thought the reporters were at playing themselves. From Alvarez’ ‘Bible’ on *The Wire*, which is a look at the backstories and a daily journal of life on set, it

⁶ Ibid., 5.

⁷ Tiffany Potter, C.W. Marshall, *The Wire: Urban Decay and American Television* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2010).

becomes clear that there were, in fact, many, what the film-makers term, “stunt cameos” on *The Wire* over the years - the former Governor, the Mayor, and a Police Commissioner, for example, all played themselves in cameo, illustrating the broad range of the stories, and how many institutions were held up to the light to be examined throughout the seasons.⁸

Each of the five seasons focused on an aspect of the city’s life and each episode showed a facet of that life - in the 60 hours of television the seasons addressed and reflected not individuals or specific characters so much as the city of Baltimore itself, using it as a symbol of every rust belt city in middle America, what Donald Trump calls the “lost” America, the America he wants to make great again, the world Simon calls “the America left behind”.⁹ *The Wire* looks at the vicious hold of the drug culture, at corrupt politicians, failing education, joblessness, hopelessness and, in the end, by setting Season Five in the offices of the *Baltimore Sun*, shows up the media, and how it so singularly failed to report what is really going on in its city, so allowing the nation to what Simon describes as “comfortably tolerate”¹⁰ the failures and corruption. Simon was a journalist before he became a television script writer, he speaks from the heart and writes from experience so the way he presents the crumbling ethics of modern journalism has the ring of reality, the sound of how it actually is. For years, he wrote for the *Baltimore Sun*, and learned the geography of the city by reporting from its streets. He remembers, and presents on screen, what is really going on in the city, how “the police department in Baltimore really did cook the stats so the mayor could become Governor”¹¹, the school system failed, the unions and the dignity of work disappeared, and the war against the drug trade became a brutal force. The *Baltimore Sun*, instead of reporting the facts of a city self-destructing, spent decades reducing its staff and concentrating on “impact journalism” and celebrity culture, abandoning coverage of almost every aspect of the city which might affect its citizens, and “misses nearly every story which actually matters to the life of Baltimore”.¹² This is what is happening to newspapers all over the world as the tablet and the grey screen take over from newsprint and the feel of paper between your fingers as you hold the news in your hands, is sacrificed in the name of speed and easy access.

⁸ *ibid.*, 457.

⁹ *ibid.*, 9.

¹⁰ Rafael Alvarez with an Introduction by David Simon, *The Wire: Truth Be Told* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2009), Prologue.

¹¹ *ibid.*, 29.

¹² *ibid.*, 30.

Simon points out that the writing room of *The Wire* was full of men who had done the job they write about in the seasons, one was a policeman, one a teacher, one a politician. This brought to the writing a strength which brings the force of truth and experience to the stories being told. The result is dialogue so realistic, or naturalist, the boxed sets had to have subtitles for people who were not from the Baltimore streets to understand.

In Season Five, Episode One, when one of the long-running characters, the detective Bunk, says, “The bigger the lie, the more they believe”, he is remarking on the veracity of the news stories, and the readers’ gullibility. His colleague, Hanning, replies: “A lie ain’t a side of the story. It’s just a lie.” Even then it reflected public doubt in the accuracy of reporting, which in 2017 in Trump’s America is known as “fake news” or “alternative facts”.¹³ When writer Simon says, “In the back of my mind is a man looking upon the world as a newspaperman, even though I don’t have a newspaper...”¹⁴, it is misleading.

In fact, with the writing of the seasons, particularly on the newspaper-focused fifth season, he did have a newspaper, on screen. He reinvented the world he knew and presented to his audience the news via cable television. The first episode of Season Five, set mainly in his old newspaper offices, tells the story of an over-enthusiastic reporter who blurs the moral lines and in the race for a story invents part of it – alternative facts are easier to get to than the truth. Top editors, “chasing Pulitzer Prizes” as Simon puts it¹⁵, chose not to investigate the fabrications. In the first episode, the audience sees the start of the downward spiral, the dwindling resources, no money to entertain sources for essential contacts, the unproductive profit-driven cutbacks - too few reporters doing too many jobs. Simon writes that, as well as the usual interesting plots and arcs in this last season, “the big drama was the slow ugly death of the American newspaper.”¹⁶ Both Simon and Burns felt that when they wrote Season Five, in 2006 and 2007, *The Sun* was “not going to be a newspaper where anyone wanted to work. That was the message of Season Five.”¹⁷ In April 2006, there was a night of the long knives, when a quarter of what was left of the staff was sacked. 60 journalists, sub-editors and veteran correspondents, experienced star

¹³ Phyllis Zagano, ‘Fake news, alternative facts, and the information competition’, *National Catholic Reporter*, 27 February 2017. (accessed 10 April 2017).

¹⁴ David Simon, *The Wire: Truth Be Told* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2009), 401.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 401.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 405.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, 406.

writers and distinguished editors, columnists and photographers were laid off in a single day at the *Baltimore Sun*.

At the *Mail*, we used to call it “blood on the walls” when the staff of a UK newspaper shrank before your eyes, amid shouts and the sound of slamming doors and – in those days – a few hours hard drinking in the bar. It was starting to happen in 2006, as we all began to see the creeping shadows and to realise the enormity of the change the internet would bring. Former *Sun* reporter (and one of the actors to play himself in *The Wire*) David Ettlin wrote that “the extent of the slaughter was unimaginable”¹⁸. But, of course, it did happen, it was remembered, and it did reach the screen, revealing in almost every sitting room in Maryland, if not America, the nature of the death of an entire culture, which was happening outside the front doors, a culture made more personal by the characters’ individual stories. In *The Wire*, it was events like Bubbles’ rare triumph over his addiction to heroin, or the death by shooting of a legend of the streets, Omar Little, who strides through the seasons like the charismatic killers he is based on, robbers of the drug lords, the Robin Hoods of Baltimore. His death is not even noted let alone properly covered by the crime desk of his local newspaper “because no reporter is familiar enough with the streets to realise the sun has set on a legend”, says Simon.¹⁹ Bringing wry sarcasm and a kind of laid back dismissiveness to the opening moments of the first scene, Gus Haynes, editor of the *Sun*, says: “Someday I want to find out what it feels like to work for a real newspaper.”

Later in the episode, titled “More is Less”, Detective McNulty, exasperated by constant cutbacks in the Police Department and being taken off a long-running murder investigation for which he has already put in hours of unpaid overtime, repeats the sentiments in a different context: “Someday I want to find out what it feels like to work for a real police department.”

We, the viewers, have watched through his eyes as the drug dealers deal their drugs and the mayor “fixes the stats” to ensure he can cut the budgets, take away the cars, get the men to work overtime for nothing. “Some shameful shit going on here”, says Gus Haynes the News Editor on the City Desk. “Unless somebody is threatening to commit an act of

¹⁸ “Baltimore Sun Massacre”, *The Real Muck*, April 29 2009 <http://ettlin.blogspot.co.uk/2009/04/baltimore-sun-massacre.html> (accessed 24 May 2017).

¹⁹ David Simon, *The Wire: Truth Be Told* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2009), 407.

daily journalism.” He strides down the room remembering, when asked about the newsroom: “A newsroom is a magical place where people argue about anything and everything all the time.” Meanwhile, the other story, running neck and neck with the hopeless Newsroom where the journalists do not even go out in the street to cover a fire, are the city office’s cutbacks where the Colonel, an elegant black policeman, says wryly: “One thieving policeman trumps 22 dead bodies”. Because of lethal budget cuts to his department, he is ordered to take his detectives, including McNulty, off a case they have been working on for a year.

McNulty’s response to being without a car, without his overtime, but pulled off the investigation he has put his life into (because it turns out to implicate people in the political stratosphere), is to kick his chair painfully, ferociously, and silently. As I have seen it done if not by cops, but by hacked off journalists certainly.

By contrast, the journalists do not kick the furniture in the UK’s *State of Play* (2003), a six-part series written by Paul Abbott and later turned into a Hollywood film starring Russell Crowe and Helen Mirren (2009).²⁰ In 2003, the makers of *State of Play* - a very British version of the inside workings of a national newspaper, its links to London’s drug culture and Parliament, with an undercurrent of corrupt dealings with the police - approached their story differently. Written by BAFTA award-winning writer Abbott, it was made before the decline of print newspapers and their circulation became so shockingly obvious to the general public, and long before Leveson hauled the hidden, but often practiced black arts of phone tapping, bribery and mobile phone hacking, out of the shadows and into broad daylight.

Intrigued by the different techniques being used by television writers in different countries to tell a story about newspapers, I switched from writing the stage play I had started, to the idea of writing an episode of a television series, a screenplay for *Brief Lies* which might become something more if I could devise an arc for a whole series, not for five series on the same subject lasting five years, but perhaps six episodes, as it was in *State of Play*. At that time, I was trying to settle on how best to illustrate daily life and work on a newspaper, to show the audience how journalists get a newspaper out to their readers day

²⁰ Kevin McDonald, Director, *State of Play*, Working Title Films, 2009.

after day. It was 2008, and I remembered seeing *State of Play* when it was televised in 2003. I also remembered not thinking much of it, not feeling it a realistic version of the life I was living, the work I was doing, so using a DVD version I went back to look at the first episode to see why.

The episode, directed by feature film director David Yates, starts well, although it is developing almost immediately into a tense crime thriller rather than a close look at a newspaper in action. In the first five minutes the viewer has seen flashbacks of a black man running, a killers' shoes, a few seconds of a scene where a man's brains are shot through his head and smeared on the wall behind him, a courier on a speeding motorbike, a girl sitting desolate in a café with a black bin bag under her feet, a suave man folding his newspaper on the tube while a loudspeaker proclaims over the tannoy that there is a body on the line at Green Park, as the tube grinds to a halt. Those first minutes, like the opening scenes of *The Wire*, hold all the ingredients of the drama about to unfold. They are brilliant, taut, gripping, well shot and emotionally involving though one knows nothing of the characters on screen.

It is not until we are 20 minutes into the 52-minute episode that I begin to realise why I questioned this production, or rather, its presentation of a newspaper on screen. The structural flaw is that it does not work the way a newspaper works and however clever Abbott's writing, that flair for dialogue does not make up for the fact the things happen which would not happen in a newspaper office. When the journalist, who used to be the politician's campaign manager, meets the guilty politician in a café to find out what is going on, the politician, who knows he is meeting a journalist, hands him his own mobile phone so he, the reporter, can listen to his now-dead girlfriend's voicemail. A seasoned politician would know not to be so naïve. Not to test the moral strength of a man whose job is to report the news, not lend a shoulder to a possibly guilty victim. Added to which the reporter would immediately either go back to his office, or at the least make notes of what he heard.

The politician, whose name is Stephen Collins, then has a row with his wife, what a surprise, but the next scene shows this high-flying Manchester MP having bacon and eggs at a kitchen table with the journalist who, it turns out, has invited Collins to stay in his bachelor pad. The likelihood of this happening, from any point of view, is laughable. Conflict of interest, compromise and corruption all leap to mind. If it had happened, there would be

a reporter, or several, on the journalist's doorstep in a flash. Then, the paper's first conference scene, half way through the episode with Bill Nighy as Editor sporting an odd accent, part North London, part public school, and a gaggle of writers talking politely in turn, has all the tension of a W.I. tea party. We learn from a woman writer that Collins is "chairing the Energy Commission very early in his career", and now he's tipped to rise to the top in Westminster. "Everyone's betting on him to make Cabinet next year." Not exactly gripping revelations to lay before the Editor in Chief when the MP in question has just been snapped by the paparazzi leaving a Press conference in tears on learning of the death of his research assistant.

Seeing how American filmmakers effectively dealt with today's American newspaper world helped illustrate how the writers, working collaboratively, conveyed the lifestyle of reporters, editors, the police and the people of Baltimore. *The Wire* was different to anything we had seen to date (it was first shown on late night BBC Two in 2009 in the UK). It was fast, furious, with an underlying drumbeat of tension and danger, which connected with a younger generation of viewers because it was more like a rap lyric than a script, using and reflecting the sound of the streets. When it came to season five, *The Baltimore Sun* was the hub of the action for an entire season, but throughout the story, if the main characters were not policemen or politicians they were hacks (reporters in any slang). Some reporters played themselves, some were brought in as extras, whatever the story it seemed as real as a documentary. This was exactly the world I wanted to emulate.

Several of the lead actors playing charismatic Americans were Englishmen. Leading detective Jimmy McNulty was played by actor Dominic West, in reality a suave Old Etonian, but he convincingly adopted an American drawl to become the tough-talking, expletive-ridden, streetwise detective, whose job it was to oversee the wiretap in his own police station - the underlying plot from which the series takes its title. Once I had understood the fit between the medium and the message, its power and relevance to daily life, I understood why theatre was no longer my first choice of medium to convey this intense, multi-layered modern way of life. I began to think the speed of modern life is best reflected by the fast editing cuts and camera techniques of television.

It was not quite the conclusion I came to in the end, as I will explain in the final chapter when I analyse the experience of writing both scripts, the television pilot episode and the

stage play. At the beginning of the work though, the decision to start with television related to different elements of writing – rhythm of speech, the pace and stresses of life, the way television can move from location to location, backwards and forwards through time, from character to character, story to story – as fast, unpredictable and elastic as newspapers – always and irrevocably driven by deadlines. It seemed to me to be a deft way to convey this life, no matter how fevered. The story needed the freedom I perceived the techniques of television would offer.

There were British television programmes which tried to bring the reality of the newsroom or the features office to the small screen, such as *Drop the Dead Donkey* (1990-1998)²¹ and Armando Iannucci's television series *The Thick of It* (2005-2012)²², which satirised the relationship between government and media with Peter Capaldi as biting spin doctor Malcolm Tucker, based on Labour's own Alastair Campbell (2005, 2009, 2012). But *The Wire* was a master class in realism, with many of the characters based on real people and the action on real life, written by two journalists whose skills balanced one another, whose different experiences enriched the stories, especially where the action is set in the newsroom of the *Baltimore Sun*. It was different to anything ever seen on British television. Its stories of the street vendor, the petty criminal, the dealers and burglars, its police, press and pedestrian local life and the people who reported it made up a ballet of crime. The series had a vital urgency and viewers responded to its raw authenticity. Using hand-held camera techniques, it was shot like a documentary, unlike the high-cost, episodic television drama where the money and talent is poured into the productions – programmes like stylish HBO series *Mad Men* (2007-2015)²³, *Heroes* (2006-2010)²⁴ and *Homeland* (2011-)²⁵, or *Downton Abbey* (2010- 2015)²⁶, stretched beyond its story limits to six series by British writer Julian Fellowes, who, like the writer of *The Wire*, knows his (upper-class English) "world" inside out and uses it, whereas Abbott, with *State of Play*, does not, so however good the story, the film itself does not work as a true representation of life in a daily newspaper.

²¹ Andy Hamilton and Guy Jenkin, Writers, *Drop the Dead Donkey*, Channel 4, 1990–1998.

²² Armando Iannucci, Creator, *The Thick of It*, BBC, 2005–2012.

²³ Matthew Weiner, Creator, *Mad Men*, AMC, 2007–2015.

²⁴ Tim Kring, Creator, *Heroes*, NBC, 2006–2010.

²⁵ Alex Gansa and Howard Gordon, Creators, *Homeland*, Showtime, 2011–2017.

²⁶ Julian Fellowes, Creator, *Downton Abbey*, BBC, 2010–2015.

In *The Wire* the strength of narrative linked to documentary has all the ancient power of oral storytelling heightened by screen technology. It hooked in American audiences and was then shown across the rest of the world through Netflix. While *Downton Abbey* was formulaic in the class-dominated British tradition, *The Wire* broke the mould for television worldwide. It appeared to use stereotypical good-cop/bad-cop stories, but, in reality, it did more, it changed public perception, not just of the city where it was filmed, but of life in suburban and urban America – what David Simon calls, “the part of America that Hollywood flies over and never sees”.²⁷

As Simon continues:

The Wire is a drama that offers multiple meanings and arguments...it is in the strictest sense, a police procedural set in the drug culture of an American rust-belt city, a cops-and-players story that exists within the same vernacular as other television fare. But *The Wire* (is) far more than a cop show, and to the extent that it breaks new ground, does so because of larger, universal themes that have more to do with the human condition, the nature of the American city, and, indeed, the national culture. But more than an exercise in realism for its own sake, the verisimilitude of *The Wire* exists to serve something larger. (...) It will be hard for other police procedurals (dramas) to ignore the implications.²⁸

What was it that gripped the world and helped to make writing for television what it is now – the most exciting place for a writer to be in a medium considered to be creatively and commercially one of the most progressive arenas in the world?

The first episodes begin with what appears to be a straightforward pursuit of a violent drug gang that controls one of the myriad high-rise housing projects studding the city of Baltimore – constantly referred to in the dialogue as the “projects” or the “precincts”. However, it is a far from ordinary policing story since the police themselves come to question their own methods, motivations, their role in the never-ending drug war and in the city as a whole. In the fifth and final season, we see how the reporters deal with the crimes on their doorstep, and, in the end, the story takes on the proportions of a Greek tragedy, the hopelessness of endemic corruption, of life taken daily, carelessly, for money, for drugs, for power.

²⁷ Rafael Alvarez with an Introduction by David Simon, *The Wire: Truth Be Told* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2009).

²⁸ David Simon, “The Wire Bible”, 6 September 2000. http://kottke.org.53.amazonaws.com/the-wire/The_Wire_Bible.pdf, 2.

As Simon comments: “At the end of thirteen episodes the reward for the viewer is not the simple gratification of hearing handcuffs click. Instead the conclusion is something that Euripides or O’Neill might recognise: An America at war at every level with itself.”²⁹

These are high aims indeed and the impression at first viewing is they are achieved at low cost (the photography is more like a gritty black and white documentary than a slick technicolour feature film). In fact, it was an expensive production. Simon was trying to recreate street life in a tough middle American city. He used language to create this hyper-realism, although to the untutored ear it is often incomprehensible jargon. Moreover, some of the DVD box sets were among the first to be sold with subtitles.

To achieve Simon’s “nothing less than a national existentialism”³⁰, he and Burns created a complex, but logical structure. Each season exists as a standalone narrative, with the same main characters running throughout. Most episodes have their stories resolved within the first season although it is clear Simon wrote it to extend beyond one season. In fact, five seasons were made over seven years, when the success of the first exceeded all expectations. He points out that this design allows for greater latitude in casting as presumably actors could be hired who might be committed to other projects at a later date. Each story arc produces episodes that stand alone as dramatic television, but the whole makes a cogent argument about the American condition, its culture, using Baltimore as a microcosm of the macrocosm rather as, at one level, the British soap operas *EastEnders*, or *Coronation Street*, provide a microcosm of city life.

The title *The Wire*, refers to a wiretap surveillance – a thread which is only resolved in the final fifth season when much of the plot is set in the offices of *The Baltimore Sun*, one of America’s great state newspapers. The continuing story provides, like an invisible octopus, tentacles into intricacies and connections within the urban landscape which would normally pass unnoticed, unseen, unheard. The wiretap is the magic object, the key held only by the reader or audience. As each wiretap reveals its secrets, its subjects are put on the spot and in the limelight, wherever it operates in the power hierarchy, discomfiting both

²⁹ Ibid., 3.

³⁰ Steve Busfield and Paul Owen, *The Wire Re-Up: The Guardian Guide to the Greatest TV Show Ever Made*. (London: Random House, 2009), 51.

the authorities and their targets, using knowledge as a double-edged sword – and only the viewer can see both sides.

There is a specific shape to the filming, which is shot on 16mm film and on hand-held cameras using Scorsese-like techniques appeared to invite even more experimental film-making in the future.³¹ *The Wire* uses a precise geography, a fully conceptualised city and police bureaucracy, using actual cases so that it not only seems real, it is real. The aim is that nothing will happen on film which has not in some form happened on the streets of America. It uses veteran Baltimore detectives, street figures, and named journalists in the final newspaper season. It sets itself up as a blueprint for realistic television drama.

The overarching premise is realism, as with *cinéma vérité* in Sixties France, when François Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard's cinematic reality was black and white and often unscripted, ushering what came to be known as "Nouvelle Vague" or "New Wave"³². But to achieve this, an enormous amount of work goes into first the structure, then the storytelling. As Simon puts it, "More advance work has been done on the beats than might otherwise be necessary with another drama."³³ In his commentary, Simon says, "It seems to be a cop show, but it masks something else, how institutions have an effect on individuals. Character and plot should drive you on to the next show, which is unique for most episodic drama on television."³⁴

This makes the unfolding action gripping. The backstory is the heartbeat, the pulse beneath the daily rhythm. But first, the setting, what Simon calls "an Eastern rust-belt city, majority black, but with white ethnic elements still clinging to certain quadrants as well as parts of the power structure."³⁵ In this case, there is an ethnic mix typical of most major cities in the Western world: a black mayor and a black police commissioner, who signal the advent of the black voting bloc, but most of the bureaucrats remain white – deputy commissioners,

³¹ David Simon, 'The Wire Bible' 6 September 2000. http://kottke.org.53.amazonaws.com/the-wire/The_Wire_Bible.pdf, 3.

³² Raymond Durgnat, *Nouvelle Vague: The First Decade: a Motion Monograph*. (Essex: Motion Publications, 1963).

³³ David Simon, 'The Wire Bible' 6 September 2000. http://kottke.org.53.amazonaws.com/the-wire/The_Wire_Bible.pdf, 3.

³⁴ Rafael Alvarez with an Introduction by David Simon, *The Wire: Truth Be Told* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2009).

³⁵ David Simon, 'The Wire Bible' 6 September 2000. http://kottke.org.53.amazonaws.com/the-wire/The_Wire_Bible.pdf, 5.

prosecutors, police officers, firefighters, and, of course, the key protagonist, Jimmy McNulty, are white. We learn from the first cityscapes, street shots and conversations (never speeches or monologues) that the city is poor and undereducated, some of the buildings empty or falling down, factories and warehouses stand empty, but the overall engulfing suffocating problem is obviously drugs, the entire population it seems is struggling with a heroin and cocaine problem, which, unlike the less visible drug corruption in European cities, is right there in your face.

The settings and location are important. The director and cameraman use architecture like punctuation underlying an impoverished lifestyle or a rich one, setting the context of the story in the blink of an eye, either run-down, turn-of-the-last-century elegance – such as the courthouse, which is central to many of the stories – or contrast the Seventies glass, high-rise buildings or the quadrants where the poor live in new red-brick blocks with no feeling, no charm, the residents as disaffected as the buildings themselves, the people as dysfunctional.

“The past is always present here,” says Simon. “We are in the remnant of old America as it struggles to make itself into part of the new.”³⁶

In 2003, *State of Play* was first broadcast on BBC One and continued in six one-hour episodes. Abbott started his writing career as a trainee on England’s best-known soap opera *Coronation Street*, winning awards for a self-contained drama, *Clocking Off* (2000-2003)³⁷, based on the tough life of factory workers - and later for the groundbreaking late-night comedy *Shameless* (2004-2013)³⁸, a domestic tragi-comedy which he later admitted was based on his own dysfunctional family, some of which also seeps into *Coronation Street*. Abbott’s mother had left her nine children when Paul was three years old and until he left home he shared a room with his six brothers. When he wrote *State of Play* he was diverging from his tough, working class North Country roots to try his hand at a political thriller set in a world he did not know, using his knowledge of the universal in human nature to observe people from another class; another more educated background. This shows not so much in the writing which is compelling, but in the series as a whole, which lacks the muscular

³⁶ *ibid.*, 5

³⁷ Paul Abbott, Creator, *Clocking Off*, BBC One, 2000-2003.

³⁸ Paul Abbott, Creator, *Shameless*, Channel 4, 2004-2013.

urgency in sound track, dialogue, acting and even lighting, *The Wire* brought to the small screen.

Cool and sophisticated rather than druggy and scattered with expletives and gunshot, in comparison to *The Wire*, the British programme is less physical in its language, in its presentation both body language and dialogue is that of the buttoned-up office interaction. The dialogue less visceral. It is a cerebral jigsaw puzzle, telling a story of what the public relations people called “the hostile twilight world where politics meets the Press.”³⁹ This is a familiar setting in the UK. Media reports politics, they are part of the same world, but not the same world. The *State of Play* story is driven by a complex investigation set up to catch a criminal, possibly a murderer. On camera this reveals the mechanics of how an investigation like this is put in motion, how and why the reporters are sent on their various missions, the way each one goes about enquiring into other people’s lives – both legitimate and illegitimate - with tools and techniques newspaper readers knew little about in the days before Lord Justice Leveson’s inquiry into Press conduct and the hacking scandals brought those possibilities to the forefront of public consciousness.⁴⁰ After the Leveson Inquiry (2011-2012) people knew murder victim Milly Dowler’s mobile had been hacked and Hugh Grant’s privacy invaded illegally. Until then it was a dirty secret belonging solely to members of the Press.

In *State of Play*, the young female MP who worked for a leading New Labour MP, fell to her death in front of an underground train while travelling to work at the Palace of Westminster. She is the lover. This is conveyed on screen in quick close-ups of the MP’s boss reading his daily paper, the sudden halting of the train, the broadcast announcement that “there is a body on the line at Green Park”. It is enough to tell the story. The MP Stephen Collins (played by David Morrissey) is told of the death by his secretary. Resolution at the end never really comes. Unlike *The Wire*, which shows its murder victims’ dead bodies in merciless detail, the revelation in the last episode of *State of Play* is off-screen, told not shown, a subtle subtext, which loses the impact it might have had with a jolt of reality, the sort of scene so often used in television to heighten tension.

³⁹ State of Play – Endor Productions, < <http://endorproductions.co.uk/show-item/state-of-play>> (accessed 05 June 2016).

⁴⁰ Lord Leveson, *An Inquiry into the culture, practices and ethics of the press: report* (London: The Stationary Office, 2012) <<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20140122145147/http://www.official-documents.gov.uk/document/hc1213/hc07/0780/0780.asp>> (accessed June 05, 2016)

State of Play went into production for television in 2003, a year after *The Wire* was first on screen in America. The creative approach of each of these productions is different. *The Wire* uses television's key technical advantage over theatre, the ability to move around in time and location. It makes more use of streetscapes and architecture and follows not only the main wiretap story, which runs through the whole season, but also multiple other smaller stories and relationships. In *State of Play*, the approach is more stately and influenced by stage methods – the murder is off-screen, the relationships carefully drawn, the interactions between newspaper colleagues take place almost entirely in the office itself, so is focusing on the life of the paper, which lends it a slower pace, but tensions and reactions around him always identify the Editor (played by Bill Nighy) as the boss.

Brief or otherwise, lies are lies, in any language, and the truth should at least be based on facts however interpreted whether shown on the screen or not. It is finding the right language and format in which to tell the story which counts, and choosing the medium which makes the message believable. The differences between them are practical as well as philosophical and moral. Philosophical and moral belong to the mind, live in the dimension of ideas, the cerebral cortex – dream and feeling has to be expressed but the way we do it is practical, and in practical terms scenes for the stage are usually much longer, dialogue more verbal – there are intervals between acts, the acts are usually clearly defined and often divided into the classic Aristotelian three act structure. Writing for the screen as we have seen presents its own challenges, much of which is as much about directing as writing, since the director has to direct the camera, describe the shot, the point of view of the actor, the often swift and extreme change of location or time.

In practical terms when you reach the vital stage of pushing your script out into the world, to sell the idea to the people who make it happen, to impress and excite your reader, your script has to look professional. Use a proper format such as the software Final Draft, used by most writers who write scripts for BBC television or indeed Hollywood films. According to William Smethurst's guide to writing for television they must be:

- “Original in concept;
- well constructed;
- confidently plotted;
- have good dialogue;

have good characterization;
be professionally presented.”⁴¹

The same could of course be said for stageplays, which I will look at in more detail in the chapter to come. Stageplays, like television scripts, must be what script editors are looking for, of the moment, in the news, fashionable; writers must make themselves aware of what kind of scripts are popular. As there are many theatres, particularly in London, but also in the provinces, cities like Manchester, Birmingham, Bristol and Bath, which are known for their active encouragement of young writers. For playwrights, small theatres such as the Bush Theatre and the Soho in London. Almost all of these companies have Literary Managers out and about in the theatre world looking for new talent. In the television world, it will be the independent companies, as well as the BBC’s Writer’s Room, Sky Arts, Channel Four and ITV’s many channels. With the massive move to digitalization now Netflix and Amazon are investing hundreds of thousands of dollars into new scripts and series.

In my next chapter, I shall examine the different constraints and possibilities of putting the world of journalism, and the media, on stage, investigating how it is done, explaining what and how I did it in theory and practice.

⁴¹ William Smethurst, *How to Write for Television: A guide to writing and selling successful TV scripts*. (Begbroke: How to Books Ltd, 2009), 6.