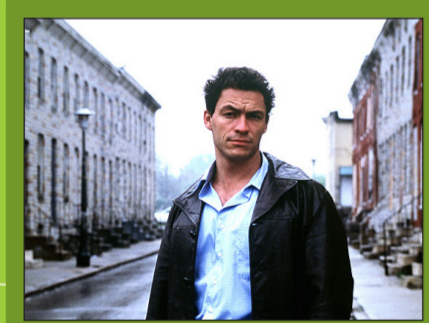# Wired

He might be amused by the success of 'The Wire'
in the UK, but he isn't surprised by it.
After all, David Simon isn't one for modesty

BY **OLIVER BURKEMAN**
THE GUARDIAN, BALTIMORE

People are occasionally surprised, David Simon says, to find that he still lives in Baltimore, the city that is the lead character in his epic television series *The Wire*. They assume that the man behind all those box sets would have found himself a luxury penthouse in Los Angeles, or Manhattan at least, far from the devastated neighborhoods his show portrays. But on a cold, bright morning at the headquarters of his production company in downtown Baltimore, he seems as enmeshed as ever in the life of the city — bemoaning the latest antics of the police department and the failure of the *Baltimore Sun*, his former employer, to cover them. "If I want to find out what's going on in this city, I've got to go to a fucking bar and talk to a police lieutenant and take notes on a cocktail napkin," he says. Simon is 48, bald and stocky, and prone to grumbling aggressively in a manner that is, for some reason, wholly likable. "That's what passes for high-end journalism in Baltimore these days."

One irony of *The Wire*'s global success is that there are now, presumably, plenty of middle-class Britons more familiar with the drugs economy, failing schools and corrupt politicians of Baltimore than they are with any part of inner-city Britain. So faithful is *The Wire* to the specific vernacular of its setting, indeed, that there may be Londoners or Mancunians whose knowledge of west Baltimore drugs slang exceeds that of dealers in Philadelphia or New York.

They will have a new opportunity to embellish their vocabularies next month with the first UK publication of *The Corner*, the 1997 non-fiction book that inspired *The Wire*. Written by Simon and his collaborator Ed Burns, a former Baltimore police detective, it is a forensic document of one year in the inner city, told through the prism of a single street corner, and the addicts and dealers for whom it's the frontline in the struggle to survive. The publication is part of a high-profile year for Simon in Britain: he will appear at this year's Hay literary festival, while the BBC will give *The Wire* its first airing on mainstream UK television.

Simon purports to be amused by his British success — "It's hilarious to me that there are two people walking through Hyde Park right now, arguing about *The Wire*" — but it would be wrong to imply he's surprised by it. Modesty isn't part of the Simon repertoire. He freely describes *The Wire* as revolutionary television, capturing "the truth" about the "universal themes" of life in the era of unrestrained capitalism; you sense that, ultimately, he considers the global adulation only fitting. When people call *The Wire* Shakespearean, he demurs, but only because he considers it a Greek tragedy instead: Aeschylus updated, with urban institutions as the Olympian gods, destroying human lives on a whim. "It's the police department, or the drug economy, or the political structures, or the school administration, or the macroeconomic forces that are throwing the lightning bolts and hitting people in the ass for no decent reason," he has said. (In a show loaded with symbolism, it's no coincidence that the coldest expression of pure capitalism in *The Wire* is the criminal mastermind of season two, The Greek.) You can watch *The Wire*, of course, as no more than a gritty soap opera, charting the lives of the alcoholic-but-brilliant detective Jimmy McNulty, the sociopathic kingpin Marlo Stanfield or the heartbreaking dope fiend Bubbles. But don't imagine Simon isn't also operating on another plane entirely.

It's part of the price of admission to Simon's worlds, both fictional and non-fictional, that you'll have almost no idea what's going on for the first few episodes, or the first few hundred pages. Turning on the subtitles will help you only marginally with the Baltimore-speak of *The Wire*; within the first few pages of *The Corner*, Gary McCullough, the real-life inspiration for Bubbles, is shown concluding that "the issue is 30 on the hype," no explanation provided. The soldiers of

Generation Kill — Simon's Iraq war mini-series, based on a *Rolling Stone* journalist's book-length account of being embedded with the US Marines during the 2003 invasion of Iraq — speak for minutes on end in impenetrable military lingo, and *Treme*, a show about the New Orleans music scene on which he's currently working, promises similarly opaque music jargon. This is quite deliberate. The key principle of Simon's storytelling was encapsulated in a remark that caused raised eyebrows when he uttered it, late last year, on the BBC's *Culture Show*: "Fuck the average viewer."

When you want to write the truth, Simon argues, writing for those who know nothing sets the bar too low. "That's how they taught us to write at the *Baltimore Sun*: 'For the average reader with a seventh-grade education.'" But when he took a leave of absence to write *Homicide*, his account of a year with Baltimore murder detectives — it later became an acclaimed TV drama of the same name — he realized it was time for a new approach. "There came this point where I sat down with all my notebooks and I had to start to write," he says, "when I thought: this whole notion of writing for the person who understands nothing, the average reader … He has to die! I can't have him in my head. And so the person I started writing for was the homicide detective." He wasn't aiming to please his subjects themselves, he insists; many of the detectives emerge from the book as racist, homophobic, sexist or some mixture of all three. "My guy in my head was some guy in Chicago I'd never met. Not the average reader. Fuck him! I want to write for the guy living the event. When I criticize him, I want him to think, 'That was fair.' When I don't criticize him, I want him to think, 'He gets it.'" *Generation Kill*, meanwhile, unsparingly presents America's finest fighters as video game-obsessed frat boys. But even though one of them was forced out of his battalion as a result of the original book, Simon maintains that the Marines involved are "in virtually every case" happy with their portrayal.

For the average reader or viewer, "the promise is that, as they go along, they'll understand more and more, and maybe by the end they'll understand most if not all of it." This sounds daunting, but watching *The Wire* or *Generation Kill*, that's not how it feels: the ingenious effect is to leave the viewer with the smugness-inducing sense of being smarter than before. "I love people who get to the end of the first episode and say, 'That's the show they're calling the greatest show in television? What?'" Simon says. "The first season of *The Wire* was a training exercise. We were training you to watch television differently."

The startling narrative compression of *The Wire* and *Generation Kill* means that no scene is ever a throwaway: miss a 10-second plot point in episode three and you'll regret it in episode nine, when it's suddenly crucial. "Even with shows that are somewhat sophisticated, you can take a phone call, you can have a conversation with your boyfriend or your spouse, and still pretty much grasp the show. *The Wire* will fuck you if you do that."

Isn't it arrogant to presume to retrain viewers in the art of watching television? "You know what would feel arrogant to me? What would feel arrogant to me would be asking you to spend 10 or 12 hours of your time a year watching my shit, and delivering something where we didn't hold that time precious. Last year, with *The Wire* and *Generation Kill*, HBO gave me 17 hours of uninterrupted film — almost US$100 million of production value. What would be arrogant would be to waste that — to tell anything less than the most meaningful possible story. Whenever I see a good subject ruined with a bad film or a bad book, I feel: shit, now it'll be harder to go back there again. How dare you presume to tell me a story, and then not tell me the best possible story?"

Scenes from and posters for hit US television series *The Wire*, which premieres in Taiwan in May of this year.
PHOTOS: AP AND COURTESY OF HBO

[**TECHNOLOGY REVIEW**: TAIWAN]

BY **GARETH MURFIN**
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These days you can barely get through a day without hearing about global warming, energy saving or green living. Most people probably know that electric cars are quieter, cleaner and cheaper to run than gas-powered cars. So why have they failed to catch on? One Taiwanese company has asked itself this very question. Its answer? The Ecooter.

The Ecooter is a new electric car from the Industrial Technology Research Institute (ITRI) in Hsinchu City. Despite its odd name this new car delivers some great features while actually looking quite pleasing. Feeling a little bit *Alien* with a pinch of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the Ecooter actually looks like it has been inspired by the most modern scooters that you see zipping around Taiwan.

Sporting four wheels in a diamond shape and diminutive dimensions allow this tiny car to be very nimble in confined city areas such as the capital city of the country in which it was born. Parking in ludicrously small spaces is no longer an issue with the car being only 1.1m wide, 2.45m long and 1.5m high. Miraculously, the Ecooter can house a driver and a passenger in the back — and what's

more, once the car is parked it can automatically go into a mode where it knows its passengers have exited and will actually rise up on its hind wheels to make itself even more compact. This allows Ecooters to be virtually stacked alongside each other for ultimate space saving. Couple this with built-in wireless communication and navigation, integrated cameras all around the car and the ability to rotate 360 degrees on its unique wheel arrangement and it is clearly a desirable vehicle.

The Ecooter is designed for densely populated areas and touted as being much safer and easier to drive than a motorbike. The usual worries about electric cars seem to have been addressed — the battery charges to 80 percent in 15 minutes, which is hours faster than the nearest alternative. A charged battery can power the vehicle for 100km and at a top speed of 65kph.

Of course the drawback, as with all electric cars, is that it needs some kind of special charge station to "refuel."

DOOMED TO FAILURE?

Ecooter has not yet hit the production lines, but ITRI is hoping that it can bring new business opportunities to Taiwan. Even though electric cars have never become dominant, the Ecooter represents the latest in an aging industry dogged by failure and even, some say, conspiracy. The theories behind the failure of the electric car in the US vary, but some suggest that oil companies fearful of losing business to a competing technology helped stamp out the electric car by literally buying patents to prevent modern (NiMH) batteries from being used in US electric cars. According to another commonly held belief, automakers have a history of destroying competing technologies such as electric cars since they require less maintenance and will ultimately lead to smaller profits for car dealers. Those less skeptical remain fans of the theory that electric cars are simply bound to fail right now because of poor

battery performance and lack of charging points. There is also the argument that electric cars may not actually be greener at all in the grand scheme of things.

Whatever happens, the Ecooter is a bold move that is more likely to survive in the Asian economy than anywhere else. A quick look at any road in Taipei suggests that a small, safe and cheap vehicle has a much better chance of survival here than in countries such as the US, for instance, where space is less of an issue, car owners are more affluent and attempts to introduce electric cars have failed for quite some time.

While the Ecooter faces tough times ahead, as long as it's priced sensibly it has a chance of surviving — even a chance of becoming the dominant budget electric car. Let's not forget the raging success of the EeePC, which came out of Taiwan last year and has already spawned an era of its own. Could the Ecooter do for budget electric cars what the EeePC did for budget ultra-portable computers? One thing is for sure: if price is a major concern, then using Taiwanese production processes should guarantee it a smaller unit cost than almost anywhere else in the world.

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Will the Ecooter do for automobiles what the EeePC did for computers?
PHOTO: HONG YOU-FANG, TAIPEI TIMES