

Wednesday, February 3, 2016

## "Hamsterdam" - David Simon's Imaginative Intervention into Urban Politics

by Christopher Schliephake — University of Augsburg



### Curator's Note

Commentators have always noted the social realism of *The Wire*. The way David Simon's celebrated TV series portrayed its characters' lives against the depiction of post-industrial American urbanity invited comparisons to realistic novels. Inner-city Baltimore comes alive in *The Wire*. The city's idioms, its secret codes, and hidden backstreets were populated with local extras and the soundtrack captured the noisy, muffled sound of the urban environment. Yet, *The Wire* self-consciously employs these realistic elements to cleverly subvert, undermine, and to finally transform them in order to weave its own version of Baltimore. From the outset, Simon's main narrative strands are concerned with uncovering the dysfunctional institutions and social systems of the city. All of the characters are pawns in an unforgiving social-Darwinist milieu and their failed relationships and personal estrangement echo the de-humanized logics of social conflicts out of bounds. Especially America's War on Drugs is perceived as a failed attempt to regulate the drug trade. Because law enforcement, housing policies, and zero-tolerance policing do not take into account the fragile social fabrics of the inner-city communities and do not engender equality in access to employment, education, and recreational spaces, they miss the chance of tackling the inherent problems by their roots. David Simon had addressed these issues in his journalistic writing before. *The Wire* was a new step, because the imaginative medium of the TV series allowed him to come up with his own creative take on the problem. In Season Three, Mayor Colvin becomes the advocate of a policy that perceives the drug trade not in terms of a criminal issue, but rather as one of public health. In this scene, he has invited some of the local corner boys to an abandoned part of his district. The death-in-life motif of the boarded-up vacants and the weeds overgrowing asphalt are a strong reminder of the critical state of the community. Colvin explains his approach that legalizes the open sale and consumption of drugs in these deserted areas. What soon comes to be called, in an allusion to Amsterdam's liberal drug laws, "Hamsterdam" is Simon's most interesting imaginative intervention in America's urban politics. And in a series where there is no moral compass to judge good or bad, this counter discourse invites the viewers to draw their own conclusions.