**Season 1, Episode 1, Again**

At the end of the first episode of The Wire, the homicide detectives roll over a dead body. As we see his face, there’s a flashback to an earlier scene, and we see that the dead man is a witness who testified against the Barksdale gang at the beginning of the episode.

This moment is semi-infamous because it is the only flashback in the entire five-year run of the Wire. It was, according to David Simon’s commentary, urged upon the creators by HBO, who were concerned that viewers wouldn’t be able to follow the story without the extra nudge. Simon admits it might have been the right thing to do for the first episode, where they were still setting the stage and trying to hook some kind of audience. After that though…never again. The Wire went forward, and if you missed a plot point, you were stuck until it got reshown or you bought the DVD with miraculous rewind technology.

The Wire, with its labyrinthine plot and characters piled on characters, is definitely meant for rewatching. That first courthouse scene, for example, is almost entirely different the second or fifth time through, when all the players —nervous D’Angelo Barksdale, the oleaginous lawyer Maurice Levy, the smoothly, cheerfully dangerous Wee-Bay, the even-more-smoothly and not at all cheerfully dangerous Stringer Bell — are known quantities. But going back also brings out some surprises. Stringer, always the businessman, is making notes on a pad; Detective McNulty tries to see what he’s writing. Stringer looks up at him over his glasses and turns the pad around…revealing that he’s been drawing a black superhero with what appears to be Africa on his chest insignia, raising his fist and declaring “Fuck You Detective”. Stringer the smart-ass project kid isn’t a Stringer we get to see much — not least because Stringer himself tries to bury that kid more and more thoroughly as the show progresses. In the second season, Stringer probably would have been too cautious to have a note pad; by the third, he wouldn’t have been anywhere near that courtroom. We never see any of Stringer’s drawing again, either. The second time through, that picture seems more like an end than a beginning.

Rewatching though doesn’t always add layers. Sometimes it points out holes, or roads not taken which might have been better explored. One of my favorite moments from the first episode occurs a little later, after D’Angelo Barksdale has beaten the murder rap. The judge in the case calls in McNulty to find out (a) why a key witness changed her story, and (b) why McNulty was in court, since it wasn’t his case. McNulty explains to the judge that D’Angelo is the nephew of the current West Baltimore drug kingpin, and that the gang has beaten a number of cases in court, including a past case of McNulty’s. The judge finally asks, “If it’s not your case, why do you care?” To which McNulty replies, “Well who said I did?”

As I noted, that’s one of my favorite lines of dialogue probably from the series: McNulty (Dominick West) sells it nicely, looking flat at the judge, slightly amused and quite unconcerned. The point is emphasized later when he chews out his partner Bunk for picking up the phone on a murder call when another squad was up. “This’ll teach you to give a fuck when it ain’t your turn to give a fuck!” he says.

The point here for rewatching is, of course, that McNulty actually does give a fuck — way, way too much of a fuck as it turns out. He cares so much that, over the course of five seasons, he destroys his marriage, his career, and almost/maybe a second committed romantic relationship.

Which is all well and good as irony goes. But the thing is…I liked it the first time through better. David Simon on the voice over natters on incessantly about how different the Wire is from other television cop shows — and it is different in many ways. McNulty doesn’t really care about doing right, for example, as he would if he were on *Bones*. He cares about being the smartest guy in the room and about being smarter than the crooks. It’s not about good and evil for him; it’s about ego. Which is, as Simon says, a refreshing change.

But whatever he cares about, the point is that he does…and that is not especially new in a cop protagonist, on television or elsewhere. There was something really refreshing for me about having our protagonist declare, boldly and apparently in earnest, that it really was nothing in particular to him if the West Baltimore drug gang beat murder number four, or twelve, or whatever. I kind of like that potential McNulty, the decoy McNulty, more than I like the funny, smart, but ultimately perhaps more predictable McNulty that we got.

So we have revealed depths, roads not taken…and finally, maybe a dropped ball. Two thirds of the way through the episode, D’Angelo Barksdale’s crew catches an addict, Johnny, who has been trying to buy drugs using counterfeit money. The moment is presented as a dilemma for D’Angelo, who (as Simon says in commentary) is not a brutal man, and clearly doesn’t want to order Johnny beaten. But the boy’s ripped him off and there’s little choice; he turns away saying nothing, and walks into the camera, his face expressionless. Over his shoulder, and from a distance, we see Bodie, Wallace, and Poot start to beat Johnny. We learn later that they hurt him so badly he ends up in the hospital and had to undergo a colostomy operation.

The reason this is a missed opportunity is because of Wallace. Later in the season, the D’Angelo crew is robbed; Wallace provides information that leads to the brutal torture and death of one of the robbers. Seeing the torture victim upsets Wallace so badly that he falls apart, a disintegration that eventually leads to his own murder at the hands of his friends, Poot and Bodie.

Wallace’s execution is perhaps the grimmest, most emotionally wrenching moment of the entire season. In retrospect, his character is almost as important as D’Angelo’s. And, in retrospect, this scene of the beating should be telling us something, not only about D’Angelo, but also about Wallace. The Wallace we know later is so upset by brutality that he first becomes an addict and then turns his cohorts in to the police. The Wallace here is so comfortable with brutality that he joins in beating someone almost to death.

The point isn’t that the characterization is inconsistent. It’s not necessarily; people are capable of different levels of brutality at different times, and there is, after all, a line between “beaten almost to death” and “beaten to death.” Still, there’s something to be said about that line, and about Wallace’s differing reactions, and the Wire doesn’t make them. For that matter, Simon doesn’t mention it in his voice over, which is all about D’Angelo and not at all about Wallace. Rewatching here doesn’t so much add resonance as reveal that there isn’t any. The creators didn’t link what Wallace does here to what Wallace does later, so the possible connections just sort of sit there, looking a little lost.

People often argue that the sign of great art is that you can go back to it again and again and find new depths and meanings. I’m not entirely sure I agree with that — it seems like first impressions have their own aesthetic worth. There’s no doubt, though, that rewatching the Wire is not wholly beneficial. While some bits foreshadow or show new nuances of character, others come apart or point to missed opportunities. When I finished watching this episode the first go round I think I was ready to call it great. After seeing it a few more times, I still like it, but I think I have more reservations.