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"From the Mind of David Simon"

A Case for the Showrunner Approach

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"FROM THE MIND OF DAVID SIMON": A CASE FOR THE SHOWRUNNER APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

This article makes a case for the academic soundness of reading together several television shows by the same showrunner. Zeroing in on the case of David Simon, the essay traces the difficulties that one faces if one aims to view together *The Corner, The Wire, Generation Kill,* *Treme, Show Me a Hero* and *The Deuce*. It also aims to point out the reason how one can study an oeuvre without overemphasizing the agency of the individual in a highly collaborative medium. To that end, the article considers how intellectual historian Quentin Skinner's concept "the mythology of coherence" can help qualify some of the issues with reading several television series together. The article further argues that television scholar Erlend Lavik's term "focused overarching authorship" supports the validity in trying to tease out a collected vision in Simon's television serials. For while David Simon is a *sine qua non* for the programs he has served as the showrunner on, the paper argues that it is crucial that we do not let all textual components point back to Simon as the originator of the textual utterance.

In the summer of 2017, HBO marketed their then-upcoming series *The Deuce*, created by David Simon and George Pelecanos. Wanting to build up to the release, HBO added a page to their website titled "What David Simon and George Pelecanos Want You to Know About Their Shows", where Simon and Pelecanos outlined the motivations behind a number of shows they had worked on: *The Deuce* (2017-), *Show Me a Hero* (2015), *Treme* (2010-2013), *Generation Kill* (2008), and *The Wire* (2002-2008). HBO thus presented these shows – works, if you will – as a collected whole and invited its viewers to see them as part of an elaborate and sustained statement. The content of this interview, however, framed these TV series as something "more" than mere entertainment. "*The Deuce* takes a look at the remarkable paradigm of capitalism and labor," Pelecanos says, "where money goes and how it's routed; who has power and who doesn't; who is exploited and who's not". This new series, which was scheduled to be released three months later on 10 September, is thus framed as a highly serious political statement on capitalism as such – in line with the serious subject matter of the other shows that focus on topics such as public housing, deindustrialization, Hurricane Katrina, the state of inner-city schools, and gentrification. There is no mention of what is exciting, funny, or thrilling about these shows; this paratext focuses on thematic underpinnings in a vernacular of political seriousness.

At the bottom of the page, however, the website featured a link that clearly signposted that the viewer/reader should understand these television serials within the discourse of an author: "Start watching now with the HBO Collection *From the Mind of David Simon*" (HBO 2017). This appeal to the viewer is very much in line with how the title of the webpage assigns ownership over the series to Pelecanos and Simon; the series are framed as "Their Shows", not "HBO's shows". HBO thus uses the persona of David Simon as a gateway for leading its viewers to these television serials, which are presented as something decidedly different from the content on an "idiot box". HBO's promotional material, then, aims to elevate the television serial while emphasizing "the author". Both strategies can be seen as HBO's attempts to push an agenda that aims to promote the cultural capital of both Simon, these shows and – by extension – HBO itself. So while HBO – as well as the television industry more broadly – has an interest in promoting the idea that people watch shows "through" the notion of the showrunner, it is also something that is of academic interest. For it does seem reasonable to try and view together several series by the same showrunner

and this paper makes a case for the academic soundness of doing so. Important to this venture, however, is the idea that we do not let all textual components point back to Simon as *the sole* originator of the textual utterance, for in the case of studying an oeuvre of television serials – a highly collaborative format – it is important not overemphasize the agency – or "authorship" – of the individual.

Television scholars Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine argue that "[i]n aesthetic cultures from music and painting to theater and cinema, it is exceedingly rare to find art without authorship discourses, and the legitimation of newer art forms like cinema is often accomplished through the identification of artworks with artists who create them" (2012: 38). This logic is reflected in how HBO presents Simon as an artist and their/his series as works of art. David Bordwell similarly argues that, in film, "art cinema foregrounds the *author* as a structure in the film's system [...] the author becomes a formal component, the overriding intelligence organizing the film for our comprehension" (Bordwell 2009: 719, emphasis original). The last part of Bordwell's comment about the author organizing our comprehension surely depends on the individual viewer, but I do believe that his comment is relevant in pointing out how some television content (high-end drama) is framed as authored in a way that is not seen in other forms of programming (e.g. quiz shows and reality shows). Bordwell, however, maybe overstates the notion that only art cinema functions in this way. One could certainly argue that some viewers would have certain expectations of a drama framed as a "David Simon" series, as HBO certainly frames *The Wire*, *Treme*, and *The Deuce*, among others. Viewers might not only expect a David Simon show to have specific formal attributes, themes and tonal qualities, they might well also explain and understand those attributes as "Simonian". This piece of marketing material is thus part of HBO's attempt to label the program as art; i.e. to add to it an air of cultural capital as Bourdieu would have it.

It is not only HBO, however, that is interested in putting Simon forward as a sign of cultural value.[1] Simon also has

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an interest in being seen as a public intellectual since such a position enables him to engage in public discourse about topics that are important to him, and to provide interviews and give lectures about politics in general. Certain types of critics and viewers have also been interested in seeing the figure of Simon as a guiding force behind *The Wire* and the other celebrated dramas that bear his name as author. Michael Newman and Elana Levine argue that the process of elevating the status and legitimacy of television drama only becomes possible when cultural elites invest "the medium with aesthetic and other prized values, nudging it closer to more established arts and cultural forms and preserving their own privileged status in return" (2012: 7). As television scholar Jason Mittell notes

> we read the politics of *The Wire* and *Treme* off each other and in the context of David Simon's copious writings and interviews, providing an interpretative frame based on an authorial identity that is more unified and consistent than are actual creative processes (Mittell 2015: 115).

The above points are important to note, because with the rise of complex television (Mittell 2015), discourses surrounding the showrunners of programs like *The Wire*, *Mad Men*, *The Sopranos*, and *Breaking Bad* (to name just some of the most canonized shows) have strengthened. This raises the question of what it means to approach these shows through the lens of the showrunner – for example, to find and trace a common thread through the oeuvre of a writer and producer such as David Simon. Such an approach surely aligns with HBO's marketing strategy, which positions these dramas as originating from a single, central authorial figure. The problem is, however, that these shows didn't spring only "from the mind of David Simon".

Television scholar Robert Thompson stresses that film and television productions are created "not only for a mass of people but by a mass of people", and though some minor roles in production are interchangeable, "one is still left with a number of 'above-the-line' personnel who make a meaningful contribution to the final product" (Thompson 1990: 2).[2] So

we might say that *The Wire* and other series bearing Simon's name spring "From the mind and work of quite a lot of people, *including* David Simon". But though Simon's productions have a complex authorship, they are nonetheless presented as a somewhat coherent whole, and I believe it does make sense to see them as such. The sustained interest of his series with urban issues in the US form an interesting intervention in public debates in contemporary America, and by seeing them in relation to each other we are able to uncover a more complex cultural critique than is possible by examining "only" one of the series in isolation from the others. This approach, however, raises the issue of how several discrete works can be treated a coherent whole – a notion that is fraught with methodological challenges. For British intellectual historian Quentin Skinner, treating disparate texts as a whole may reinforce *the mythology of coherence* – that is, the tendency to underemphasize difference, and overemphasize coherence, across an individual's oeuvre.

1. **THE MYTHOLOGY OF COHERENCE**

Sarah Cardwell provides a useful summary of the auteur approach to a body of films. It seeks out "recurrent thematic, generic and stylistic details within the films, and observ[es] variations, fluctuations and developments across the works" (2005: 11). This ambition is also central to the showrunner approach, but seeing as the creative personnel change from series to series, one could argue that for the showrunner approach the mythology of coherence is even more pressing as a potential fallacy. As I will later show, it is mainly producers and writers that recur across individual productions, and because Simon is able to create television serials that share quite a few similarities, it does seem he has a lot of power in shaping them.

Traditional auteurist discourse is sometimes marked by the mythology of coherence in the sense that it may overstate the extent to which a range of films can be seen as a whole rather than as a "body" of separate parts; it is in want-

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2014: 8). Mittell has created a typology of the different ways of stopping shows (*stoppages*, *wrap-ups*, *conclusions*, *cessations*, and *finales*) and *The Wire* ended with a proper 'finale.' *Treme*'s fourth season, which has only five episodes, represents a less narratively motivated 'conclusion' (Mittell 2015: 319-322).

2   The notion of television being intended for a mass of people is arguably related to how, in the US context, there was a long-standing practice of producing

least objectionable programming (LOP) that, seeking to avoid offending many demographics, modified televisual content to fit this industrial logic. With the change from broadcasting to narrowcasting, however, the focus has changed from least objectionable programming to most repeatable programming (Newman and Levine 2012: 139-140). Television scholar Dean DeFino writes that "the HBO brand is and has always been built upon the principles of exclusivity and specialization known collectively as "narrowcasting"" and "in 1970s, HBO touted itself as elite, offering content unavailable on broadcast television" (DeFino 2014: 39). In other words, narrowcasting as a phenomenon is historically linked in the US to HBO's practice.

ing seek out the coherence in an auteur's productions that the auteur approach – as well as the showrunner approach – face the same problem that Skinner is interested in addressing. By challenging the fallacies inherent in the once-prevailing methodologies within the field of intellectual history, Skinner has played a key role in its methodological debates. One of his key critiques centers on the issue of reading together several (in his field, philosophical) texts (Eriksen and Kjærgaard 2001: 11). His expression "the mythology of coherence" refers to the practice of seeking out, in the works of a single author, a systematic and coherent "message" that transcends his/her texts, even to the extent of trying to create coherence where there are only scattered ideas and even downright contradictions (Lassen and Thorup 2009: 23). "It may turn out that some of the classic writers are not altogether consistent," Skinner writes, "or even fail to give any systematic account of their beliefs. [...] It will then become dangerously easy for the historian to treat it as his or her task to supply these texts with the coherence they may appear to lack" (Skinner 2002: 67). Skinner's warning of the mythology of coherence thus helps us be wary of tracing a "unified and consistent" argument through Simon's series. Skinner's wording of his methodological points reflects the focus of his work on philosophers like Hobbes and Machiavelli, but this does not make his ideas any less relevant to our current purposes.

Barring *Generation Kill*, Simon's productions have consistently examined urban issues in an American context. With a nod to Skinner's point above, however, it cannot be the critic's task to find in the political argument of these serials a greater coherence than their textual form supports. Intellectual historians Mikkel Thorup and Frank Beck Lassen note that many philosophers take it on themselves to save their favorite philosopher from their own ideas (Lassen and Thorup 2009: 23), and though the showrunner approach is interested in exploring recurrent issues in a particular individual's output, it surely cannot be an ambition to do "repair work" on Simon's political arguments. Being able to point out a contrast between *Treme* and *The Wire* is surely an interesting analytical focus insofar as it opens up an interpretative framework that had otherwise been difficult to see without reading these texts within the showrunner framing. But though there may very well be a common thread running through the works of David Simon, it cannot be the critic's task to try and tease out a coherent politics if these shows tend more often towards contradiction of each other.

The showrunner approach is thus also interested in seeing how the various works across an oeuvre depict a topic in dif-

ferent ways, maybe even in contradictory ways. The purpose is not to call out inconsistencies (as in a deconstructionist approach), but to point out how Simon's series – whether intentionally or not – inflect their shared themes differently. For his part, Simon has presented *Treme* as "an argument for the city" which thus can be understood as a more positive take on the American city than was presented by *The Wire* (Simon in Beiser 2011).[3] I would argue, however, that the critic's task here is to try to answer the question of why these two series are so different in this way. A tentative answer might be that *The Wire* is "pessimistic" or "bleak" because it seeks to explain how the war on drugs could be perpetuated across several decades; the more "positive" *Treme*, on the other hand, tries to argue that New Orleans was worth saving in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Had *Treme* been as "pessimistic" as *The Wire*, it would be difficult to present a story of New Orleans' value. So one might explain the different tonalities of these series in terms of their respective aims with regard to their distinct subject matter and historical contexts. That, however, is an issue for further research.

One should note, however, that the mythology of coherence is very much premised on a reading strategy that reads texts *with the grain* and not *against the grain*. Literary theorist Rita Felski argues that critical approaches to fictional narratives have been dominated by attitudes that "share the conviction that the most rigorous reading is one that is performed against the grain, that the primary rationale for reading a text is to critique it by underscoring what it does not know and cannot understand" (Felski 2011: 217). By emphasizing literary works' biases and blindnesses, such approaches are, with a nod to Paul Ricœur, based on *a hermeneutics of suspicion*. Sharing a core *Erkenntnisinteresse*[4] with ideology critique, this form of criticism looks "suspiciously at works of art" and debunks "them as tools of oppression" (Felski 2004: 30). In her latest book, *The Limits of Critique* (2015), Felski notes that "[s]eizing the upper hand, [such] critics read against the grain and between the lines; their self-appointed task is to draw out what a text fails – or willfully refuses – to see" (1). While much crit-

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3 Several critics have argued that *The Wire* seems rather bleak in its portrayal of the contemporary American city. Television scholar Erlend Lavik, however, argues that some of the criticisms levelled against *The Wire* for being too "pessimistic" generally ignore the reasons why the show is structured as it is. He argues that to blame *The Wire* for being too pessimistic or bleak is the equivalent of complaining that a fire alarm is too noisy (Lavik 2014, 142).

4 This old Habermasian term is most commonly translated as 'cognitive interest' which, however, comes with too much semantic slippage and connotative baggage for it to be useful for my purposes. 'Epistemological interest' would maybe be a closer translation but I nonetheless opt for the original German word.

icism on Simon's works surely read his serials with the grain (and, for instance, examines how *The Wire* offers a critique of institutional failure), *Treme*, for instance, has been met with the hermeneutics of suspicion (Rathke 2012; Thomas 2012). Another example could be the criticism of *The Wire*'s depiction of women (Vint 2013: 93-7; Lavik 2014: 143-52).

So while on the one hand we have Skinner's mythology of coherence, which issues a warning to those critics who would see an oeuvre as a collected whole, on the other hand we have Felski's hermeneutics of suspicion. While the showrunner approach surely should not shy away from critiquing a show from the perspective of a "suspicious hermeneutic", it is, nonetheless, an approach that has its chief interest in seeing connections – whether consistent and coherent, or contrasting – between several serials and miniseries. In this sense, the two approaches serve as guiding lights – as well as cautionary tales – for the analytical reading protocols with which we can meet Simon's series. It should also be noted, however, that there are connections that may be drawn between these series which may not be the product of Simon's – or anyone else's – consciously deliberate intentions.

The showrunner approach tries to trace connections between texts, so it seems more fruitful not to overemphasize a reading strategy based on the hermeneutics of suspicion, whose arguments, according to Rita Felski, "are a matter of not only content but also of style and tone" (Felski 2015: 4). Criticism in this vein is more akin to the OLD's definition the word: "a statement showing disapproval" rather than explorative, inquisitive critique. Though Felski does emphasize that the hermeneutics of suspicion "is by no means a pejorative term" (2015: 4), she laments the tendency that, in literary studies, skepticism has become dogma (2015: 9). Indeed, Felski points to Michael Roth's argument that if scholars in the humanities saw themselves "more often as explorers of the normative than as critics of normativity [...] we would have a better chance to reconnect our intellectual work to broader currents in public life" (Roth 2010). As such, Felski's skepticism towards skeptical readings points out a path that is probably not too useful for the showrunner approach. It does not seem terribly fruitful to stress the suspicious mode of reading a collected body of works. Indeed, the motivation for wanting to write (or read!) an interpretation of a collected body of work is surely that one wants to find out more about that body of work. It is an endeavor that has curiosity and not suspicion as its starting point.

That does not mean that we completely refrain from criticizing these television serials. American Studies schol-

ar George Lipsitz criticizes *The Wire* for not examining the historical development of the Baltimore it portrays, and he draws upon interesting historical context regarding social and economic conditions in the city. "By the 1930s", Lipsitz writes, "Baltimore had the third worst housing stock of any city in the nation", a fact which surely informs our understanding of the Baltimore portrayed on *The Wire* (Lipsitz 2011: 103). In a similar fashion, journalist Jake Blumgart argues that the legacy of Oscar Newman's defensible space theory "is more contested than *Show Me a Hero* suggested" (Blumgart 2015). Such criticism surely qualifies the debate around these shows and I would argue that such socio-historically grounded critique certainly does not do any disservice to Simon's overall project. In one of the partly promotional, partly political interviews Simon did in the weeks around the release of *Show Me a Hero*, Simon said in an interview with Charlie Rose that "I think there are arguments that we need to have in this country and they need to be brought forward and they need to progress as arguments" (Simon in Rose 2015). In their engagement in a critical discussion with these series, both Lipsitz and Blumgart point to aspects of Simon's shows, and their relationship to historical reality, that might be subject to a negative or skeptical critique[5]. In that sense, Lipsitz can be seen as making an important criticism of *The Wire*[6] but, in another perspective, Lipsitz's comments can be seen as helping *The Wire* further contribute to a discussion on the state of the contemporary American city.

While the showrunner approach and the hermeneutics of suspicion point out different interpretative paths, the question remains of how one should understand the interrelation of the different series. For one cannot ignore how canonized *The Wire* has become. It has been the subject of several monographs[7], special issues of journals[8], and several anthologies[9] alongside an ever-growing list of journal articles. *The Wire* thus takes a central place in the canon of complex television, and for that reason the showrunner approach might be inclined to center much of its attention on this show in particular. But to do so is to risk diminishing the status of

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[5] Lavik argues that *The Wire* features more social-historical context than any other show and as such it is a bit of a stretch to ask for even more (Lavik 2014: 142).

[6] To be fair, I should add that Lipsitz does laud *The Wire*, writing that it "may well be the best program ever to appear on television" (95).

[7] Vint 2013, Lavik 2014, Williams 2014, Kelleter 2014, Corkin 2017.

[8] *Criticism*, *Critical Inquiry*, and *Darkmatter*.

[9] Marshall and Potter 2009, Bzdak et al 2013, Dillon and Crommey 2015, Keeble and Stacy 2015.

the other shows such as *Treme* and *The Corner. The Wire* ought not become a sun around which the other shows orbit. It is important that all the shows are seen on their own terms, allowing *Treme* and *Show Me a Hero* to be treated as more than simply belated adjustments to the "central" utterance of *The Wire*. This concern also falls under Skinner's mythology of coherence, which, one could argue, is an even more pressing concern with a collaborative format such as television serials.

Skinner argues that this mythology "gives the thoughts of the major philosophers a coherence, and an air generally of a closed system, which they may never have attained or even aspired to attain" (Skinner 2002: 68). Now, while Simon – in various paratexts – discusses his shows in relation to each other, it seems problematic to suggest that a group of people – many of whom change from series to series and from season to season – can be said to "aspire to attain" a coherent, sustained argument over several series. Kristin Thompson argues that the amount of plot required for writing a television drama series requires a group effort (Thompson 2003: 39-40), but Lavik describes how writers in a writers' room work to serve the showrunner's overall vision. He quotes playwright and television writer Diana Son's explanation of the difference between writing for television and writing plays: "You're always trying to fulfill the aesthetic of the show and of your showrunner. When you're writing a play, you're writing in your own voice" (quoted in Lavik 2015: 26). So the writing of a serial drama is a group effort characterized by service to an overall voice, one shaped at the outset by the creator and managed by the showrunner through their rewrites. Skinner argues that "[i]f it is first assumed in the case of Edmund Burke that a 'coherent moral philosophy' underlies everything he wrote, then it will cease to seem problematic to treat 'the corpus of his published writings' as 'a single body of thought'" (Skinner 2002: 68). This speaks to the core of the mythology of coherence. While I aim to uncover and discuss the common thread running through Simon's series, it must be stated that *Treme* and *The Wire* are to be seen as separate statements, diverging, as they do, in both style, perspective, and tone.

Literary theorist Søren Schou argues that two of literary studies' approaches – deconstruction and the oeuvre approach – stand out by representing two decidedly different forms of *Erkenntnisinteressen*. To Schou, deconstruction is able to find more voices and more dissonances within a single poem than the oeuvre approach is able to tease out from an entire author's production (Schou 1987: 90). But it is the oeuvre approach that is able to engage with a readership that is interested in literature, or in our case, television drama. Discarding neither approach, Schou argues that one can see different texts in an author's production as inscribing themselves in an overall vector that slowly emerges as an author's career progresses (1987: 91-2). Indeed, though one will undeniably be able to find many voices in the works of David Simon, to uncover the common thread(s) running through these TV series enables us to look beyond *The Wire* or *Treme* to see a more multifaceted portrayal of the American city, and to appreciate a more nuanced statement than any one series puts forward. But in order to warrant our treatment of Simon's series as a whole, we need to look more closely at the creative and managerial roles he fulfils, to better understand his degree of agency in producing these series.

2. DAVID SIMON

Whereas Andrew Sarris sought to determine who was and who was not an auteur (Sarris 1962), I do not believe it is fruitful to assess whether or not Simon is to be seen as an "auteur." Auteur theory's predilection for separating the wheat from the chaff was premised on an active interest in establishing and elevating a canon, and thus embraced a process of hierarchical canonization. My non-labelling of David Simon is not to suggest that his series do not share central themes or express similar political statement – indeed, it would run counter to the showrunner approach to argue so – but I shy away from such labelling due a reluctant attitude towards auteurist discourse' embrace of hierarchical canons. As Matt Hills points out, however, the very practice of discussing Simon, as opposed to many other showrunners, always already adds weight to his canonization (Hills 2007). The critic thus needs to find specific reasons for studying *a particular showrunner*. I will therefore outline below the key reasons for reading "Simon's" television series together, as a whole.

According to Alisa Perren and Thomas Schatz, the term 'showrunner' first emerged in the US in the first half of the 1990s though the role is much older. It refers to writer-producers who have both creative and managerial responsibilities but, as television scholar Erlend Lavik argues, it is impossible to determine, on any general level, *how involved* showrunners are in other creative decisions outside of writing (Perren and Schatz 2015: 87; Lavik 2015: 19, 31). While some shows change showrunners mid-way through a series' run (e.g. *The*

West Wing and *The Walking Dead*), other shows have what Tara Bennett has termed "cradle-to-grave showrunners" (Bennett 2014: 213), and Lavik notes that it is more difficult to attribute any one person with the creative responsibility for a series when the roles of creator[10] and showrunner aren't performed by one and the same person (Lavik 2015: 20). But whereas Simon is the showrunner on all "his" shows, on *Treme* Eric Overmeyer is also credited as a "creator." Any study embracing the showrunner approach must take this into account as one could also read *Treme* as part of Overmeyer's oeuvre and thus see it in relation to his stage plays and to the series *Bosch* (2014-), which he developed for Amazon Studios. It is therefore particularly important that Simon has consistently been a cradle-to-grave showrunner as he has both conceived a vision for these shows and has been involved in developing and administering the execution of the initial idea. This makes his role more central and adds weight to the rationale of viewing his productions in relation to each other. By contrast, consider the case of *The West Wing*, where, as Janet McCabe notes, the "abrupt exit" of showrunner Aaron Sorkin "changed everything" (2012: 36). This means that although Sorkin's role in shaping that show was essential, his departure nonetheless leaves the issue of *The West Wing*'s authorship murkier than is the case with series overseen by David Simon as showrunner.

However, while Simon played a part in shaping the narrative structure of his shows, their visual outcome is – by his own description – something that directors and cinematographers (especially director Robert Colesberry on *The Wire*) have played an important part in conceptualizing (Simon 2014). Indeed, it is a common practice for series to have a "conceptualizing director"[11], i.e. the director who is responsible for the first (few) episodes of a series like David Fincher on *House of Cards* (2013-) or Søren Kragh-Jacobsen on *Borgen* (2010-2013). According to Eva Novrup Redvall, such "directors naturally take on a special position when creating the visual style of a series" (Redvall 2013: 118).[12] Production designers,

who "supervis[e] the overall look of a film", are surely also to be counted among those who help shape the visual style of a series (Wille 2017). From that starting point, other writers work to support the vision founded by the showrunner, or creator. That, however, does not mean that these writers – like George Pelecanos and William F. Zorzi – do not make a difference in the final outcome of a series (they most certainly do), but they do so within a paradigm laid down by the creator(s) of the show, which is an important reason for examining and discussing Simon's works as an oeuvre.

Apart from *Homicide* (1993-1999), Simon's role has consistently been to initiate, write, and produce the series he has worked on, and although many people recur from production to production, Simon's series have been produced by different groups of people. Firstly, not many editors recur from series to series, and they have all had different conceptualizing directors. Vince Peranio, however, served as the production designer on both *The Corner* and *The Wire*, and Ivan Strasburg was the cinematographer on *The Corner, Generation Kill* and *Treme*. Laurence Bennett did production design on both *Show Me a Hero* and (alongside Beth Mickle) *The Deuce*. It is especially producers and writers that recur from series to series. David Simon, Ed Burns, and George Pelecanos often contribute to the writing, while Nina Kostroff-Noble consistently plays a central role as a producer.

David Simon and David Mills co-wrote *The Corner* and both were credited as executive producers alongside Robert F. Colesberry and Nina Kostroff-Noble. Simon was both the creator as well as the showrunner of *The Wire*.[13] He was also a writer, together with Ed Burns and Evan Wright of *Generation Kill*, and on *Treme* both Eric Overmeyer and David Simon are credited as "creators". Simon and William F. Zorzi are the sole writers of *Show Me a Hero*. None of the miniseries use the credit "created by". As such, Simon has a central role in all of these shows and is also particularly visible as a showrunner. While I have been able to find numerous interviews with Simon regarding *Show Me a Hero*, I have found only a few in which Zorzi is also interviewed (Radish 2015). Ed Burns and Paul Haggis, however, appear in numerous interviews. Whatever explains this, it foregrounds Simon's role as a public intellectual. He is a creator of many paratexts, which, when Simon discusses these shows in relation to each other, be-

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10   While "showrunner" is an informal title, "creator" is a formal one. The former is often listed as an executive producer in the opening credits of a show, while the latter is listed as the "creator." Creator, in turn, can either refer to the person who has developed the overall concept for a series or the person who wrote the first episode of a series (Lavik 2015: 19-21).

11   This is a translation of the Danish term "konceptuerende instruktør", which refers to the director who directs the first episode(s) of a show and thus sets the style and feel for that series. Redvall uses the term in her *Writing and Producing Television Drama in Denmark* (118).

12   Two out of Simon's three miniseries have been directed by a single director. Charles Dutton directed all six episodes of *The Corner* and Paul Haggis directed all

six episodes of *Show Me a Hero*. Susanna White and Simon Cellan Jones directed four and three episodes of *Generation Kill*, respectively.

13   Sometimes, Ed Burns is credited with being a co-creator of *The Wire* but in the opening credits of the show's episodes only David Simon is listed as the creator.

come invitations to read the shows together. This is especially the case with the paratext cited at the start of this article[14].

In addition to his importance as a writer on these shows, Simon's role as an on-set collaborator is also important. As Christina Kallas suggests, "whether a writer is on set or not" is in fact "one of the most important factors behind American TV drama's success, perhaps even more so than the writers' room concept" (Kallas in Lavik 2015: 86). Simon has made a similar point in an essay praising the input of actor Oscar Isaac to a scene of *Show Me a Hero*: "Filmed narrative is intensely collaborative. And the script is just a script; until you film the sonofabitch, it doesn't actually exist in a form that matters to anyone" (Simon 2016). Adopting the showrunner approach, then, it is crucial that we do not let all textual components point back to Simon as *the* originator of the textual utterance. For it seems that a key problem with the auteur approach is that all textual elements are considered to originate with the director. While David Simon is a *sine qua non* for the programs on which he has served as showrunner[15], his creative control only goes so far. This, however, is directly related to the key danger on which the "showrunner approach" may run afoul: the possibility of giving too much emphasis to the power of the showrunner in a collective production, at the expense of the many other writers, producers, actors, directors, and other creative personnel involved in shaping the final outcome of a show.[16]

One should not, however, go in the other direction and completely downplay Simon's degree of agency in the production of these series. If the showrunner approach is useful it is because we are interested in seeing how several texts taken together form a more complex vision of the themes a particular showrunner continuously revisits and examines in different ways. By comparison, the significance of certain

series could be brought into relief through an approach that minimized concentration on Simon's authorial imprint. One could, of course, read *Treme* in relation to other depictions of New Orleans such as the late 1980s TV series *Frank's Place* (Tyree 2010) or the film *Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call New Orleans* (2009) (Parmett 2012). The merit of that approach would surely lie in its comparative affordances, which would mirror a central value of the showrunner approach: that is, to compare the depictions of a given topic, such as residential segregation, across a number of series. The key interest of the showrunner approach, however, lies in the way several shows contribute to a collected utterance – albeit one co-created by many people. Thus it makes available comparative readings of, say, *The Wire* and *The Corner* (Vest 2011; Williams 2014) which would be understood differently from comparisons between *Frank's Place* and *Treme*. So though one should be mindful of the mythology of coherence, it is precisely by reading *Treme* and *The Wire* together that one is able to see the different depictions of the American urban landscape that Simon's series engender, whether those are complementary or contradictory.

I single out these two other approaches as contrasts to the showrunner approach as a way of pointing to the fact that a notion of authorship is necessary in order to read these shows together as a collected statement or utterance[17]. Philosopher Aaron Meskin argues that there is not "any inconsistency in applying the idea of authorship to works of mass or popular culture" (Meskin 2008: 15). As Meskin also elaborates, however, such authorship is very complicated. In the case of media texts, authorship is an ambiguous concept and several scholars have accordingly established a terminology that helps us distinguish between different facets of the term. Jason Mittell distinguishes between *authorship by responsibility* and *authorship by management,* which are his terms for how authorship works in films and television shows, respectively (Mittell 2015: 88). Whereas the former term has to do with the responsibility that comes with the *creative* decisions around which material is included in the film – and, just as importantly, what is left out – the latter has to do with the decision making that goes into overseeing a *production* schedule on ongoing productions in television drama. The first is most often seen with film directors and the latter is a producer's role. Mittell further qualifies this distinction by arguing that "most showrunners earn their authorship by both responsibility and management

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14   It is interesting that Simon's first mini-series *The Corner* (2000) is missing from that list. That show is not on HBO's online platform and is thus left out of HBO's promotional material; Simon and Pelecanos' political statements are thus framed by HBO's choice of shows they want to promote on that platform.

15   As Simon's 1991 journalistic account of a Baltimore homicide unit, *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets*, was the basis of NBC's six-season show *Homicide: Life on the Street* (1993-1999), one could argue that *Homicide* should also be included in any study of Simon's oeuvre. Simon, however, only wrote or co-wrote seven *Homicide* teleplays (out of 122 episodes), and as such he was never a leading force on the series, playing a relatively minor role in a production spearheaded by Tom Fontana.

16   One should also note that the showrunner's administrative power is particular to the American context of TV drama production. It is, for instance, a different situation in the Danish context where head writers do have a lot of creative freedom but generally don't have the same administrative power as showrunners in the US context (Lavik 2015: 35-37).

17   Skinner, however, stresses that there is no such thing an abstract, overall position in the works of an author. As such, I do not want to suggest that seeking out the common thread in Simon's works implies such overall coherence.

for countless leadership decisions and [are thus] regarded as the primary authorial figures within an intensely collaborative medium" (Mittell 2015: 92).[18] As such, Mittell argues that some showrunners are able to assume both forms of authorship. David Simon represents such a "strong" showrunner, which provides a further justification for reading his series together.

Whereas Mittell's two terms point out the difference between authorship in film and television drama, Lavik operates with four categories that qualify some of the finer points in discussing the showrunner approach. To Lavik, the term *literal authorship* is the formal crediting (regulated by collective agreements) of who penned the manuscript for a specific episode. Showrunners, however, routinely rewrite scripts in order to better integrate another writer's work into the overall plotting of a TV serial. Lavik's term *general authorship* refers to those who exert influence over the overall production. His last two terms are *distributed* (or weak) *overarching authorship* and *focused* (or strong) *overarching authorship*. The former refers to those cases where the creator, producer, main writer, and showrunner are not one and the same person, whereas the latter term refers to a figure like David Simon who "administers his own vision" (Lavik 2015: 18-21). The important thing to note is the overlap between the role of creator, producer and writer which strengthens the case of *focused overarching authorship*. That concept supports the validity of trying to tease out a collected vision in Simon's television serials. One could, of course, argue that the phrase "Simon's television serials" is itself problematic, as it seems to assign full authorship or ownership of these serials, and one should therefore avoid using that expression altogether. While the expression does belie the true nature of the *material authorship* (in Mittell's terminology) in these shows, the need for linguistic and stylistic elegance and brevity suggests that one can use those terms as long as one is clear about the caveats that must accompany the showrunner approach. Another question, however, is how one can see 'a body of work' as a coherent statement.

To HBO, presenting David Simon in a certain way plays a role in the marketing of their product as elevated above "commercial" content. This strategy, however, entails notions of auteurism. Sarah Cardwell argues that the auteur approach "posits a set of films made by one director as an oeuvre (a body of work), seeking out recurrent thematic, generic and stylistic details within the films, and observing variations, fluctuations and developments across the works"

(Cardwell 2005: 11). In this sense, the showrunner approach shares the core *Erkenntnisinteresse* that the auteur study approach embraces. As Lavik notes, however, auteur theory's argument that the director 'writes with the camera' does not acknowledge the degree of collaboration that characterizes work on a film and actually diminishes the efforts of other professions than directors (Lavik 2015: 18). James Naremore, on the other hand, argues that "[r]eaders or viewers always decode messages by positing a source, even if only an imaginary or unconscious one, and the source has a political meaning" (Naremore 2004: 22). Naremore's argument thus builds on Foucault's notion of the author function. Sherryl Vint also draws on Foucault's author function in arguing that showrunners "are not solely responsible for the text but serve as a site that unites various discourses into a coherent meaning" (Vint 2013: 5). The danger with this approach, however, is the possible conflation of *Simon as author function* with the *actual Simon* who appears in authorial paratexts such as essays and interviews. Literary historian Tore Rye Andersen argues that authorial paratexts and marketing material can affect scholarly criticism to such an extent that criticism reproduces the initial authorial paratexts published alongside a literary work. While Andersen's focus is on literary history, his point is further relevant to television serials:

> In an ideal world, readers, reviewers, and critics might approach the text without a glance at the material get-up or paratexts wrapped around it, but in practice the packaging of the text has proven to be a decisive factor in the reception's construction of the work (Andersen 2012: 271).

Andersen thus argues that authorial paratexts help guide the critic's hand when she writes her scholarly articles about a given work, and he further argues that the "focal points of the reviews will thereupon often help determine which areas the first academic articles about the work concentrate on, and these early articles in turn help peg out the course of the subsequent monographs and anthologies" (2012: 271). Similarly, Frank Kelleter identifies how scholars sometimes "duplicate statements from [*The Wire*'s] paratexts" and often "transform them into statements of fact or treat them as if they were results of analysis" (Kelleter 2014: 34). Andersen and Kelleter thus both point to the core metaphor of Genette's original French term for paratexts, *seuils*, meaning thresholds. When the critic reads a paratext, it may well guide the critic along certain interpretive paths. That is not

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18 It is interesting to note that both Mittell and Simon use the same exact wording of "intensely collaborative" work.

necessarily a bad thing, but it is a route one should traverse only with reflection. Especially in the case of a showrunner as vocal and outspoken as David Simon is on many issues, it is pressing that the critic remains conscious of his potential influence on their own viewpoint.

SUMMING UP

Although the auteur approach has been challenged for years within film studies, the project of seeing film makers or showrunners' collected works in relation to each other has not dwindled (Agger 2016: 86). As Lavik rightfully notes, the idea of the director "writing with the camera" has relegated the contributions of many creative personnel to footnotes in media production. In that respect, the auteur approach is rightfully criticized, but the idea of looking at, for example, *The Corner* and *The Wire* in relation to each other ought not to be discredited for the same reason. While HBO's motivation to grant Simon a large degree of creative freedom is rooted in economical rationales (self-promotion and profit), this creative freedom nonetheless gives Simon the chance he needs to tell stories that (with the exception of *Generation Kill*) all concentrate on the ills and appeals of the American city. And in that sense, it makes sense to see him as a strong showrunner who warrants a view of his oeuvre as a sustained statement, one that – taken as a whole – certainly does change both its area of focus and its overall mood or tone, but which consistently speaks to important issues about America's urban realities. In Simon's works, there is a consistent interest in exploring the challenges of disadvantaged minorities but that is something that is explored in different ways in the different series. The mere fact that race is a key interest in Simon's oeuvre foregrounds this as a key concern. But to identify something as a key concern is not same as exploring *how* that theme is developed in different ways in the different series. I believe, however, that to see *Show Me a Hero*, *Treme*, *The Wire* and others in relation to one another is not to attribute David Simon full responsibility over the final form of these series. It seems fruitful to view the depiction of impoverished neighborhoods in *The Wire* and *Show Me a Hero* as different angles on the same issue; these depictions surely differ, but they are nonetheless complementary.

The danger is to trace *all* textual elements back to a single individual – but as long as one does not do that nothing should stand in the way of this endeavor. However, one should not ignore that doing showrunner oriented studies plays into the ambitions of television networks (such as HBO's) to elevate the showrunner as a cultural figure who contributes to the cultural and economic value of HBO's brand. Such studies also lend cultural capital to the showrunner himself. As the "auteur" discourse around a showrunner is also a marketing ploy (though not only that), Lavik argues that it is a discourse one should approach with critical distance (Lavik 2014: 84-7). To approach marketing paratexts critically, however, is something other than rejecting the merits of looking at several texts "by" one showrunner in relation to each other.

The mythology of coherence thus warns of the approach that sees several texts cohere perfectly as *one* statement. Skinner's useful term, then, points out the danger of overemphasizing the unitary nature of an oeuvre. *The Wire*'s first three seasons (2002-2004) occasionally allude to the war on terror and this, of course, must be read as a response to 9/11[19]. That is not to say that *The Wire*'s criticism of institutional failings are only a response to *these* historical circumstances, but we cannot overstate how such criticisms feature across Simon's shows. *Treme*'s celebratory depiction of New Orleans musical culture is surely also to be understood as a defense of the value of that city's survival in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. For Simon's series are statements in and of themselves but so is the entire oeuvre; *The Wire* and *Treme* present a synchronic portrayal of segregated cities, while *Show Me a Hero* breaks new ground in Simon's oeuvre by offering a new angle on this topic, depicting the historical roots of residential segregation. It is only by watching these series in relation to each other that we are able to paint the bigger picture of the ways in which Simon's serials speak to current social and urban issues in American culture.

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19   In *The Wire* episode "Slapstick," it is clearly presented to the viewer that the war on terrorism takes precedence over the narcotics and homicide cases worked on by the series' protagonists. Two FBI agents explain to McNulty and others that "Ghetto drug stuff just doesn't rate, I'm sorry to say" as "the Bureau's a little busy with counter terrorism." As the viewer is aligned with McNulty and his co-workers, it is clear that the viewer is supposed to see the folly in this (3.9).

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