

REVIEW: THE WIRE

*Inge Schilperoord**

Introduction

‘It’s a thin line between heaven and here.’¹

Many critics have called the modern, Western, individualistic society ‘narcissistic’. They mean that the great emphasis on our self-interest today is similar to the self-centredness of children in the developmental phase psychologists call ‘narcissism.’ Since narcissism is a normal phase in the psychological development, it can be stated that it, in and of itself, is not pathological. Narcissism, according to psycho-analytical theory, as first developed by Freud, is on the contrary possessed by every infant who has no interest in the external world yet, simply because it has not yet been discovered.

In the first ‘symbiotic’ relationship between the infant and the mother, the child experiences his mother as an ‘extension’ of itself, satisfying his every need. Hence the child experiences itself to be the centre of the world, leading to a sense of omnipotence. In the normal course of development this sense is readjusted, after numerous frustrating clashes with a reality that is far from gratifying. This first leads to anger on the part of the child, who wants the outside world to behave exactly the way that fits his needs. This anger slowly disappears and the experience of the self, as well as of the outer reality, becomes more and more realistic.

Nowadays, the narcissistic lack of a realistic sense of ourselves and of the way the world is organized, seems to be just what is missing in society. According to essayist Ethan Bayer,² present day narcissism gained force in the 1970s. With the political chaos of the 1960s, he states “people moved in the opposite direction and began to escape from the world by creating havens within themselves.” From the 1970s onwards, he finds a “bare need for survival” in a harsh, capitalist society that demands “a focus into the self and a disregard for large-scale societal issues.” Theodore Millon and Roger Davis also state that narcissism “[s]eems to have gained prominence only in

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¹ Quote from *The Wire*.

² Ethan Bayer, *A Society of Narcissists*, at: http://www.swopnet.com/religion/society_of_narcissists.html (13 October 2010)

the late twentieth century." Narcissism, according to them, may be associated with "higher levels of Maslow's hierarchy of needs."³ They, like Christopher Lasch before them, attribute narcissism to "a society that stresses individualism and self-gratification at the expense of community. In an individualistic culture, the narcissist is 'God's gift to the world'". Also, Lasch points to the structure of (the economics of) modern society, in which hierarchical relationships are sharper than ever but at the same time invisible or underplayed, and "[t]herefore, hierarchical relationships have to be expressed in symbols of material wealth and hedonistic life style."⁴

Exploring the causes of our current narcissism, authors like Bayer point to the way we raise our children. In our society, life on the one hand is 'bare survival'. On the other hand, some of us reach huge materialistic wealth: "parents encourage narcissism in their offspring by pressing them to chase after their wildest dreams, saying that failure is impossible." This, he says, "gives children a false sense of perfection."

Starting from this principle, one can wonder how children that are raised this way learn how to deal with the frustrations that inevitably arise if they fail to reach this perfection. If they end up living in a non-perfect world, wouldn't that lead to a 'childish' narcissistic anger, as well as an insistence that the world should adjust itself to our ideals, instead of the other way around?

In my opinion this is the case. The media is a large reinforcing factor in this process. The magazines we read constantly confront us with an unrealistic, ideal image of a world in which everything – from the white teeth of the models, to the impeccable clothes and the luxury homes we see – is clean and spotless. This image, combined with a constant emphasis on 'making the most of yourself', not only gives us the message that this kind of 'perfect' world is what we should reach for, but also that it's reachable for all, if we just work hard enough.

At the same time though, the media also plays a huge role in our feelings of unsafeness. Paradoxically, while we demand our immediate world to be a quiet and comfortable haven, we're very eager to read exciting stories on crime – the 'underworld' stories that we can agitate ourselves about, which in turn stirs our need for blame and for holding someone responsible for the blemishes taking place in society. Someone always needs to be 'punished', whether it is a 'criminal' or a politician failing in the execution of his policy that aimed at keeping us safe.

A dangerous side effect of our odd need to read about such topics is that the media, by selling us the satisfaction of this need, gives us so much of it that

³ Theodore Millon & Roger Davis, *Personality Disorders in Modern Life*, New York: John Wiley & Sons 2000, p. 333.

⁴ Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*, New York: Norton & Company 1991, revised edition.

we increasingly feel the outside world to be an unsafe and violent place. A place inhabited by ‘bad people’; people that are completely different from ourselves, and that we distance ourselves from in order to maintain our ideal, narcissistic, self-image. We feel the need to fight the unwanted behaviour of unwanted people in our communities, and fail to realise that if we start a repressive war without looking at the underlying causes – like the current ‘war on drugs’ – we are starting a repressive war on ourselves, and on the society we all live in.

I. Failure of the War on Drugs in ‘the Wire’

The television series ‘the Wire’ brilliantly portrays this complex interplay of factors in a narcissistic free market society. Here we see all these mechanisms at work, concretized in the failure of the ‘war on drugs.’

Over the course of five seasons, ‘the Wire’ shows us the battlefield of the city of Baltimore. At first glance, the characters can be divided into two clearly separated groups, or rather two separate worlds. On the one hand there is the ‘upper world’, inhabited by ‘the good guys’ who fight the war on illegal drugs and drug related crime: the Baltimore police, the Public Prosecution, the criminal court, the local politicians, and the schools. On the other hand, there is the ‘underworld’ they fight against, specifically the drug scene with its dealers, users and gangsters.

What makes ‘the Wire’ so extremely fascinating to watch is the way in which the ‘war on drugs’ is portrayed; in ‘the Wire’ we get a multi layered, and multi perspective view on this brutal war. As viewers, we closely follow the individual lives of war participants in all layers of the Baltimore society; from the mayor to the poor black kid selling crack on ‘the corners’ of the neighbourhood streets. And while we become more and more involved in all of their daily struggles, and see the complexities and subtleties in how the two worlds function and interact, the boundaries between them start to blur.

One of the main reasons for this, I think, is that the more we learn about these two worlds, the more parallels between them become obvious and the more we see how intertwined and co-dependent they are, which eventually leads to a point where they can hardly be pulled apart. Let alone that we are able to answer the fundamental questions that ‘the Wire’ raises: who is good and who is bad in this war, who is part of the problem and who is part of the solution? The only, rather unsatisfying, answer that arises, – an answer that does however administer justice to reality – is that most people we meet in ‘the Wire’ are all of the above.

II. Parallels

While following the private lives of the Baltimore cops, journalists, politicians, judges, gangsters, street kids and the organisations they work for,

the parallels between the way they are structured and the way they function are abundant.

Most of the people we meet in 'the Wire' work for large organisations. These can either be institutionalised and legal, or underground and illegal. The cop works for the police- department, the journalist for the Baltimore Sun, the gangster for one of the rivalling criminal organisations, and so on. The goals of these organisations and the ways in which these goals are implemented are very different. For example, lowering the murder rate, selling more papers and maximizing the profit made on drugs, while keeping out of the hands of the police. The amount of violence used is, by a long shot, the highest in the criminal world – physical violence, that is. By observing the fierce mutual competition in the 'upper world' and the often ruthless way opponents fight one another (blackmail, intimidation, abuse of power), we do see countless instances of non-physical violence. That put aside, the way these organisations try to achieve their goals, and the way they are structured are quite similar. They all have an extremely hierarchical structure, with a small, powerful top controlling the large working mass underneath them. A striking parallel between the way the top of these organisations survive is how they project a certain image outwards that can be (and often is) quite different from reality. In other words, what they appear to be is more important than what they really are.

For example, in order to be re-elected, politicians have to project an image to the media and the public of power and control over the war on drugs. They have to convince the public that they are making progress in reducing drug related crimes. To accomplish this, they need to present 'good' crime statistics (in the 'Wire' referred to as 'stats'); statistics that show that the crime rates are dropping under their term in office.

This not only puts the political system itself under great pressure, but also the police force. They receive their targets 'top down' – targets they have to reach, but oftentimes hardly have any control over, like the amount of murders in the 'underworld'. Failure to reach these targets leads to a decline in funds, staff, and, hence the possibilities for prosecution. Not surprisingly, both politicians and police chiefs are very tempted to give a creative, favourable twist to the 'stats' they present to the outside world (i.e. the media). In one of the series, for example, the police suspect a large amount of bodies of murdered gangsters in vacant houses that are found boarded up in the ghetto. This discovery, however, would lead to a substantive and unwanted raise in the murder statistics, resulting in an initial attempt by the police force to ignore the murders altogether.

In the criminal organisations we also see a strict hierarchical division of power; high rank gangsters control the dealers and street kids, and the image they project downwards as being violent, harsh, not to 'be fucked with', is crucial to their survival.

Out of fear for extremely long sentences in horrible prison facilities, the leaders of the criminal organisations do almost anything to keep out of the hands of the police. They structure their organisations in such a way, that the lower rank criminals do the dirty work, while they remain invisible. Some even follow business courses in college to make the way they run their organisations as smooth and efficient as possible. Here they learn about ‘fluid markets’, the dynamics of supply and demand, and the importance of selling a product that is superior in quality to that of their competitors.

Furthermore, they by all means have to make sure that their inferiors are so intimidated by them that they will under no circumstance ‘snitch’ to the police (i.e. tell the police incriminating information in exchange for a favour, like a low sentence). To prevent this from happening, the top gangster not only has to maintain a tough image, but literally kill those they deem too weak.

Since the politicians on their side of the line try to gain more popularity with the public by promising hard repercussions to criminal acts, this leads to a counterproductive, self-reinforcing, vicious circle. Because, the longer and more brutal criminal sentences are, the more paranoid the gangsters become, and at the same time, the more efficiently they organise and operate. This leads to more criminal executions, raising more media attention and leading (again) to a public call for even longer sentences.

III. The Widespread Need for Drugs

It is intriguing to see how ‘the Wire’ on the one hand is all about the tough and expensive war on illegal drugs in the ‘underworld’. At the same time, we do not just see massive drug-use and addiction in the ‘underworld’, but also get a view of the ‘drug’ use on the ‘good’ side of the line.

Drugs, of course, come in all shapes and forms and can be defined in different ways. Also, some drugs are physically or mentally more addictive than others, and some substances are legal while the use of others can lead to criminal prosecution. Why some narcotics are illegal and others are not, and whether or not that strict distinction is always appropriate, is beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, it is interesting to see certain parallels between the behaviour of the ‘underworld’ users of illegal drugs (crack, cocaine, and heroine) and the ‘upper world’ users of the legal substance alcohol.

Especially under the Baltimore police force, there is a strong tradition of frequent heavy drinking. The cops in ‘the Wire’ come together in downtown bars where they booze for a wide variety of reasons. They get drunk to release their tensions and frustrations, to fight their boredom, to celebrate a victory (like the catch of a big gangster), or to commemorate the life of a partner who has died in the trenches of the drug war. This drinking fraternizes the cops, but it also leads to problems that are oftentimes

strikingly similar to those of the junkies they chase after: the loss of work, poverty, neglect of duties, illness, aggression, depression, and sometimes illegal activities and corruption.

If we would expand the definition of 'drugs' outside of the realm of narcotics and include addictive thrill-seeking behaviour, there are even more resemblances. In 'the Wire' we see gangsters who get their kicks out of the use and abuse of power over their inferiors. But we also see cops addicted to the adrenalin rush they get during their drug razzias in the ghettos, where they chase 'bad guys' with guns, and arrest 'corner kids' with more violence than necessary. We see politicians and journalists, who get so high from climbing the career ladder, from gaining more and more money as well as power that once they get going, they cannot stop.

IV. The Importance of Small, Individual Goals/Motives

At the end, all players of the two worlds are, of course, human, and each of them has its own weaknesses, desires and frustrations. Not all of them make it to the top; those who remain at the bottom of the pyramid sometimes cherish ideals (ideals for a better world, or life) but often lose them in the harsh struggle for survival. Watching 'the Wire', we see how similar the needs of people really are. Whether we are watching the life of a small time gangster, a journalist, or a police officer, their needs are not that different. It is about gaining respect, money, and financial security for themselves and their families.

Once these individual needs become stronger and can no longer be fulfilled through 'honest' work, people become more vulnerable for corruption. Betrayal of superiors grows – like the cop who lets drug money slip into his own pocket, the journalist who twists a story to get it published and the drug dealer who kills a superior out of fear of being killed first.

V. Interrelations & Co-Dependency

The participants of the 'war on drugs' are interrelated on various levels and dependent on one another for their survival. In fact, it is dazzling to think of all the ways they interact, and, given the way they interlink, the challenges they will have to confront in order to break the status quo and end the war.

It is even more disturbing to realize how strong this co-dependency is at the economic level. Not only can corruption, and money laundering be found in the real estate market, but a whole economy is built on the 'war on drugs.' What will happen to the jobs of all of those policemen, prosecutors, judges and lawyers, if drugs were to be proclaimed legal, if the 'war on drugs' was put to an end?

We can see a glimpse of what would happen in the third season of ‘the Wire’, when a police chief designates a certain small, mostly vacant, area of town to be a refuge for drug dealers and users. In this area called ‘Hamsterdam’ – the name of course comes from the Dutch legal situation around (some) drugs – the gangsters and junkies can sell and buy drugs without the fear of being arrested. The cops turn a blind eye, and the senior police and politicians are kept in the dark about this project.

Yet the project lasts too short a time to evaluate the societal effects of it, like the collapse of the drug-war economy. Still, we do already see some interesting changes. ‘Hamsterdam’ is not organised well enough for drug addicts to improve their quality of life (there is not enough time to set up a healthcare system for example), but there is an immediate drop in the crime rate. Now that the fear of the police is gone, the atmosphere on the streets becomes calmer, resulting in less paranoia, and fewer murders. In addition, since the police have more time on their hands, they can finally focus on other tasks, rather than focusing exclusively on making arrests, such as establishing a good rapport with the inhabitants of the poor areas in Baltimore. This leads to an overall gain in safety and the well-being of the city.

While watching this transpire throughout the series, you cannot help but wonder whether it really could be this simple. Could the (partial) legalisation of drugs and the creation of a special zone for drug sellers and users be, at least partially, a way out of the mess we witness in ‘the Wire’? We will never find out, at least not in ‘the Wire’. As soon as the press finds out about Hamsterdam, they jump right on top of it by writing juicy stories that stir up the public anger. While many Baltimore politicians, even the mayor, see the benefits of Hamsterdam, the people of Baltimore are appalled. Illegal drugs are openly used in their city, with no repercussions. This is not how they want their impeccable world to be! Who is responsible for this?

In a matter of days, every politician in Baltimore publicly takes distance from ‘Hamsterdam’ and the police chief who was in charge is put on non-active leave until his retirement. In no time, everything in Baltimore is back to ‘normal’ – back to the paranoia, the razzias, and the murders, back to a war that will never end. As Prez, a cop-turned-teacher said: *“No one wins. One side just loses more slowly.”*

Conclusion

‘The Wire’ portrays the ‘war on drugs’ as a war in which one part of a materialistic, free market, narcissistic society is fighting the other, because the latter doesn’t fit the ideal image of what that society ought to look like. By doing so, it brilliantly illustrates the shortcomings and self-destructive nature of such a war in society.

This stems from the underlying (narcissistically) distorted images of reality of which the war is fought on. Images that appear to be so vital to those that uphold them, that they defend them aggressively.

In a narcissistic society characterised by strong individuality, competition and the quest for material status symbols, the image of the self is that work that will inevitably lead to success, comfort and respect. This is unrealistic, and it depicts an unrealistic image of 'the other', which is portrayed as the unwanted part of society that is responsible for society's misgivings. 'The other' undermines the ideal self and should be eliminated accordingly.

Hence, being mostly blind to all the parallels and co-dependency that exist between the societal 'upper world' – inhabited by hard working people, that demand a comfortable, safe life in exchange for their work – and the 'underworld' that is in no way accepted, but is instead aggressively fought, this war leads to a vicious and self-reinforcing circle.

Top down violence is used to fight violence in the underworld, which in turn gets worse; harsh arrests, extremely long sentences in horrible prison facilities lead to fear and paranoia in the drug world and hence to more murders. Criminalisation of 'drug areas' in town, leads to social stigmas, more isolation and a quicker resort to drug use and trafficking. The increase in drug-related crimes eventually spills over to the public, which will call for harsher measures, and in effect close the circle. Instead of making headway, conditions will worsen the longer the war persists.

At the same time, the paradox gets greater – a narcissistic society is after all at its root a society that aims for beauty and comfort and that, like Narcissus, wants to fall in love with itself while looking in the mirror. But how can it when the reflection shows not only wealth but also the ugly stain of ghettos characterized by addiction, poverty, and blood shedding?

What 'the Wire' shows us, in my opinion, is that the solution is not to try to wipe that stain off the mirror with ever fiercer aggression. But instead, that we should have a good look at it and identify its character, see it for what it really is, beyond the parts that we created ourselves. Only then, we can start looking for real solutions. Maybe our search will take us back to Hamsterdam.