

The Wire and Realism

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...to teach...

Cicero once proposed that a true orator capable of explaining ‘forensic disputes’ was characterized by ‘a style of speaking calculated at once to teach, to delight, and to move.’ At some point in the rhetorical tradition, this three-pronged formulation of the use value of forensic speech was transposed to the literary work of art, and during the Renaissance it was common to say with Sir Phillip Sidney that poetry is ‘a speaking picture, with this end: to teach and delight.’¹ In the main line of modern aesthetics descending from Kant, however, the first of these use values of the literary text was subtracted from its appreciation, which was henceforth to be conducted under the sign of ‘disinterest’ and ‘impersonality’—qualities scarcely to be associated with the didactic drive of the rhetoric of instruction. As Michael McKeon notes, ‘modernity conceived pleasure and instruction, the ‘aesthetic’ and the ‘didactic’, as essentially incompatible ends.’² Indeed, so thorough had been the Kantian disengagement of the pedagogic function from the aesthetic contract that Fredric Jameson could write, in the mid-1980s, that the imperative ‘to teach’ had ‘virtually been eclipsed from contemporary criticism and theory.’³ Inasmuch as that was the case, it could simultaneously be proposed that, if there was any sub-tradition within aesthetics that ought never to cede on its commitment to

¹ Sir Phillip Sidney, *An Apologie for Poesy*, in James Harry Smith and Edd Winfield Parks (eds), *The Great Critics: An Anthology of Literary Criticism*, 3rd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1951), p. 196.

² Michael McKeon, from *Prose Fiction: Great Britain*, selection in McKeon (ed), *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), p. 611.

³ Fredric Jameson, ‘Cognitive Mapping,’ in Lawrence Grossberg and Cary Nelson (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988), p. 347.

the didactic principle, it was the Marxist one: 'the pedagogical function of a work of art seems in various forms to have been an inescapable parameter of any conceivable Marxist aesthetic.' Contrary to the Kantian problematic, Marxism has always insisted on what Jameson follows Darko Suvin in calling a 'cognitive aesthetic'—an imperative to 'make known' from within the protocols and conventions of artistic production; to represent the unrepresentable social object (its totality or systemic nature) by way of tactical figural devices that 'map' it allegorically; without at the same time abandoning those other imperatives—to move, and to delight—without which the aesthetic can hardly distinguish itself from routine instruction.

Marx himself is known to have admired the Royalist Balzac ('a novelist who is in general distinguished by his profound grasp of real conditions'⁴), a preference that informed Engels' later enthusiasm: '*There is* the history of France from 1815 to 1848, far more than in all the Vaulabelles, Capefigues, Louis Blancs *et tutti quanti*. And what boldness! What a revolutionary dialectic in his poetical justice!'⁵ Then there is Marx's extraordinary valuation of the mid-nineteenth century flowering of English realism, in one of his dispatches for the New York *Tribune*: 'The present splendid brotherhood of fiction-writers in England, whose graphic and eloquent pages have issued to the world more political and social truths than have been uttered by all the professional politicians, publicists and moralists put together, have described every section of the middle class from the 'highly genteel' annuitant and Fundholder who looks upon all sorts of business as vulgar, to the little shopkeeper and lawyer's clerk.'⁶ Here the claims on behalf of literature's cognitive yield approach the hyperbolic, and it was through rhetorical gestures such as this that the relationship between Marxism and realism would be cemented into a critical convention—the kind that imagines it knows what Georg Lukács has to say without ever having to read him. Subsequent generations of Western Marxists would attempt to reroute Marxist aesthetics away from their association with realism (and graft them on to the modernist trunk), but it would be fair to say that there remains an inescapable gravitational pull between a critical political economy geared towards a cognitive

⁴ Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 3, trans. David Fernbach (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 130.

⁵ Friedrich Engels, Letter to Laura Lafargue, December 13, 1883. Reprinted in *Marx Engels on Literature and Art* (Progress Publishers, 1976), p.

⁶ Karl Marx, 'The English Middle Class', August 1, 1854, *Dispatches from the New York Tribune*, ed. James Ledbetter (London: Penguin, 2007), p. 143.

disambiguation of capitalism, and a literary aesthetic similarly invested in a pitiless anatomization of the bourgeois social terrain. The perverse thing about realism being that, precisely where it is most distorted and unlikely, most given to caricature, there it is most truthful, as Terry Eagleton has proposed of Dickens:

Dickens's bunch of grotesques, perverts, amiable idiots and moral monstrosities ... are realistic ... they are true to a new kind of [urban] social experience. Dickens's grotesque realism is a stylistic distortion in the service of truth, a kind of astigmatism which allows us to see more accurately. ... [H]is imagination is inherently biased and partisan, seizing on a few salient features of a situation rather than giving us a rounded portrait.⁷

This is, indeed, how the contemporary Marxist tends to settle his debts with the realist tradition: reading it against itself in order to show how it comes closest to the truth where it deviates most strongly from the plausible. It is a version of this very manoeuvre that I will be trying out on our own representative realist text, somewhat later in this essay.

Dissing Dickens

But not before introducing its author, David Simon, who has been heard to insist that (like Marx) 'I'm not a Marxist,' even though, on the basis of his masterpiece, the five-season HBO sleeper-hit crime series *The Wire*, 'I'm often mistaken for a Marxist.'⁸ And there are good reasons, given the ongoing conventional relationship between Marxism and the kind of realism for which his show is generally celebrated, why the label continues to be applied; though it pays to attend to Simon's fateful words, 'We're stuck with [capitalism] and hey, thank God we have it.' For *The Wire* concerns itself with the same kind of social canvas as was assayed by that 'splendid brotherhood of fiction-writers in England' whose members (Thackeray, Dickens, Gaskell, etc.) first began to make of their contemporary social space a proper object for aesthetic pedagogy—via a diversity of character types; an extensive narrative duration allowing for an analysis of the causes of social change; a journalistic commitment to the

⁷ Terry Eagleton, *The English Novel: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), p. 149

⁸ Quoted in an interview for *Vice*, p. 2.

minutiae of everyday life, including mimetic fidelities with regard to speech patterns, dress styles, and gestures; the incorporation of real-life urban figures; a more or less comprehensive survey of a selected urban domain; a critical analysis of various social institutions; and perhaps above all, realism's modern touch, a critical and negative relationship with previous exercises in a genre. That all of this now takes place on television, rather than a triple-decker novel, is the signal innovation of a program that patently advertises itself, and tends to be discussed, in terms usually reserved for literature. Indeed, the cultural barometer being what it is right now, the time has never been more auspicious for a novel conceived along precisely these lines—critical fortune today favoring the 1989 call of Tom Wolfe for

the big realistic novel ... a highly detailed realism based on reporting ... a novel *of the city*, in the sense that Balzac and Zola had written novels *of Paris*, and Dickens and Thackeray had written novels *of London*.⁹

But *The Wire* is a TV series, a fact that could not render the relationship between it and its fictional forebears more fitting, since for most of that 'splendid brotherhood' of realists, their novels' publication occurred first of all in serial format, installments arriving each month (twenty for *Bleak House*) just as Simon's show went to air on HBO in ten-to-thirteen weekly episodes per season, over five years.¹⁰

The parallels appearing inescapable, it is then instructive to note that Season Five (aired in 2008) is strewn with references to Charles Dickens. In the second episode, the executive editor of *The Baltimore Sun*, James Whiting, following a story about inner-city children being failed by the state education system, asks that his journalists attend to the situation in a

⁹ Tom Wolfe, 'Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast: A Literary Manifesto for the New Social Novel,' *Harper's Magazine* (Nov., 1989): 45-56.

¹⁰ Mark Bowden observes that 'Some years ago, Tom Wolfe called on novelists to abandon the cul-de-sac of modern 'literary' fiction, which he saw as self-absorbed, thumb-sucking gamesmanship, and instead to revive social realism, to take up as a subject the colossal, astonishing, and terrible pageant of contemporary America. I doubt he imagined that one of the best responses to this call would be a TV program, but the boxed sets blend nicely on a bookshelf with the great novels of American history.' See *The Atlantic* (Jan/Feb, 2008), <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/01/the-angriest-man-in-television/6581/>, accessed on 30.9.10.

literary register: 'The word I am thinking of is Dickensian. We want to depict the Dickensian lives of city children, and then show clearly and concisely where the school system has failed them.' When the attention of the city is redirected, later in the season in episode six, to the plight of Baltimore's homeless, he returns to the epithet, now encouraging staff to highlight the 'Dickensian aspect' of that growing army of indigents. The knee-jerk contempt with which this suggestion is met by city desk editor Gus Haynes (our moral exemplar) sends a clear signal to the viewer that the word is loaded with pejorative connotations, which on first pass appears an odd thing. Indeed, Dickens seems to have hovered to this point like a totem over the entire series, as commentators and critics were swift to argue during the first run. A *New York Times* editorial referred to the show as 'Dickensian,' for instance, and *Atlantic* writer Mark Bowden proposed that "'Wire-world', as [creator David] Simon calls it, does for turn-of-the-millennium Baltimore what Dickens's *Bleak House* does for mid-19th-century London.'¹¹

Simon himself, however, while acknowledging that *The Wire* was conceived and executed along the lines of a nineteenth-century novel (it is 'sort of a visual novel,' he suggests, written in chapters that are not self-contained¹²) has insisted that Dickens was not his elected model.

I understood what [the critics] meant by Dickensian when they said it. You get this sort of scope of society through the classes, the way Dickens would play with that in his novels. But that's true of Tolstoy's Moscow. That's true of Balzac's Paris. ... I'm just saying if you use those tropes you can go to a lot of places other than Dickens.¹³

Literary realism, international in scope but rooted in a nineteenth-century horizon, has always remained the unimpeachable standard for Simon, but Dickens fails one specific ideological test that this hard-nosed journalist's sensibilities will supposedly not sanction: sentimental and providential humanism.

¹¹ Mark Bowden, *The Atlantic* (Jan/Feb 2008).

¹² See Ian Rothkerch, 'What Drugs Have Not Destroyed, the War on Them Has,' June 29, 2002, Salon.com; and Raphael Alvarez, *The Wire: Truth Be Told*, with David Simon (New York: Grove/Atlantic, 2010), pp. 28, 35-39.

¹³ Interview with David Simon for *Vice* magazine, reprinted at <http://www.nycine.com/2009/12/interview-with-wires-david-simon-and.html>; accessed 28 September, 2010.

Dickens is famous for ... showing you the fault lines of industrial England and where money and power route themselves away from the poor. He would make the case for a much better social compact than existed in Victorian England, but then his verdict would always be, 'But thank God a nice old uncle or this heroic lawyer is going to make things better'. In the end, the guy would punk out.

So it turns out that the overuse of 'Dickensian' by the executive 'suit' James Whiting 'was a little bit of tongue-in-cheek satire on the show directed at people who were using Dickens to praise us.'¹⁴ Such, it would seem, is televisual realism today: incorporating its own critical canonization, and satirically deflating it for getting the cardinal terms wrong (one can not imagine the words 'Tolstoyan' or 'Balzacian' being subject to such ridicule in *The Wire*: there isn't a character who could utter them in the first place).

Realism and the Urban Object

There are realisms and realisms, as Simon suggests. If the irreducible quality of a realist work of fiction is its abiding commitment to the cognitive yield, to what can be 'learned' through its offices, then clearly for Simon the pedagogical techniques of Dickens (sentimental affect-manipulation; a providential and Christian reward system) no longer apply to the social object with which *The Wire* is concerned—the post-industrial American city. 'It's an accurate portrayal of the problems inherent in American cities,' says Simon, in a formulation that raises many more questions than it answers.¹⁵ What are the criteria of 'accuracy' as regards the cultural representation of as large social object as this one? Why are Dickens's aesthetic solutions for 'portraying' mid-nineteenth-century London no longer applicable to the post-industrial dereliction of early twenty-first-century Baltimore? What aesthetic strategies suggest themselves, and how do these partake of the ongoing critical relationship with exhausted representational paradigms on which Realism rightly prides itself? As for this last point, George Levine has observed that, just like Modernist texts, Realist ones

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

struggle to reconstruct a world out of a world deconstructing ... all around them. With remarkable frequency, they are alert to the arbitrariness of the reconstructed order toward which they point as they imply the inadequacy of traditional texts and, through self-reference and parody, the tenuousness of their own. But they proceed to take the risk of believing in the possibility of fictions that bring us at least a little closer to what is not ourselves and not merely language.¹⁶

That being the case, it is worth suggesting that Simon's realism is the result of a critical relationship with the established ways of seeing the American city enshrined in shows such as *Hill Street Blues*, *Law and Order: Los Angeles*, and *C.S.I. Miami*—there being little question that if realism survived the modernist and postmodernist maelstroms, it did so in part by migrating into such sub-generic precincts as crime fiction, where the attempt to 'map the urban totality' could go ahead without any interference from those high-aesthetic tribulations of form.

And here I simply want to single out one factor distinguishing *The Wire*'s 'realism effect' from that of previous crime series—and that is that the urban object at issue is precisely *not* New York, Los Angeles, or Miami. It is *not* a city of spectacle, an over-exposed American cosmopolis or 'world city,' but what Baltimore geographer David Harvey calls

a mess. Not the kind of enchanting mess that makes cities such interesting places to explore, but an awful mess. ... [A] metropolitan world of chronically uneven geographical development.¹⁷

This 'Third World in the First', a decimated urban fabric of 40,000 abandoned homes, epic concentrations of homelessness and unemployment, and lamentable divisions of social access to health and education, is far indeed from the glamorous locations where most TV crime drama continues to be shot; and to the extent that Baltimore is (or was, prior to *The Wire*'s success) effectively 'off the map' of America's spatial

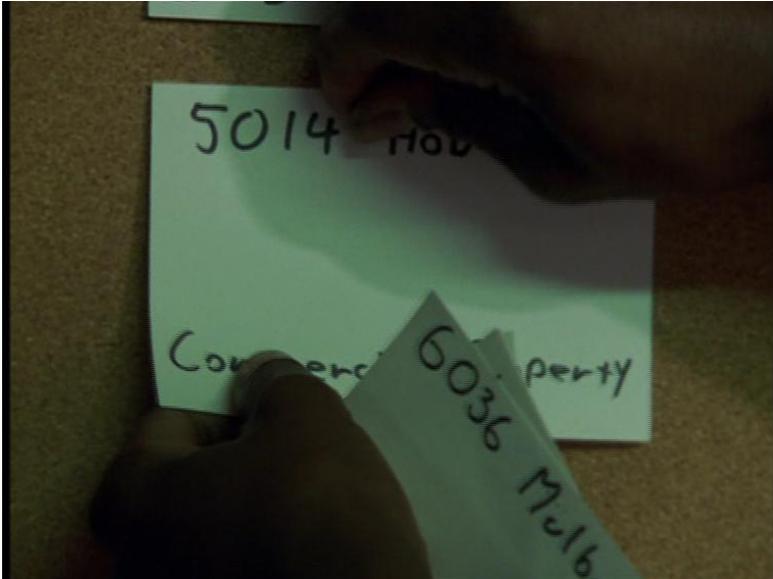
¹⁶ George Levine, from *The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley*, selection in McKeon (ed.), *Theory of the Novel*, p. 614.

¹⁷ David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley, LA: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 133, 148.

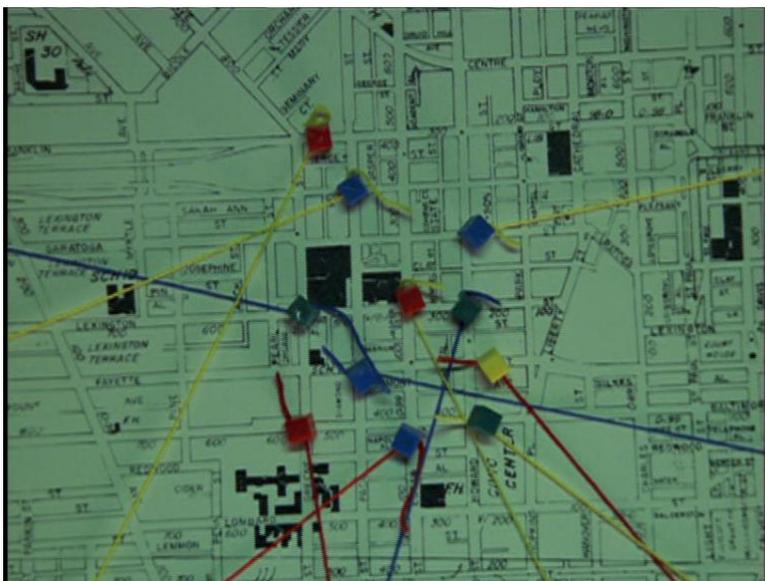
imaginary, it offers a strong node of generic resistance and negativity within the still very active generic constraints of a serialized crime drama. It is vital, for this reason, that the show exploit wherever possible the sense of disconnection from the national grid that Baltimore's residents and officials feel, despite the fact (and increasingly because of it) that it lies only forty miles from Washington, D.C., and the greatest concentration of economic and political power in world history. The uneven geographical development that Harvey notes as characteristic of Baltimore's local topography is made to be allegorical of the grotesque uneven development of urban nodes within the national distribution of wealth and power in the USA. Throughout the whole series, not only the local drug dealers and users, with their neo-feudal battles over street turf, but the police force, teachers, stevedores, journalists, civil servants and elected officials, are in turn confronted with the invisible wall separating them from the high-speed capital transfers and labor mobility that dictate the flows of investment and accumulation in an unevenly developed capitalist urban landscape. Throughout Season Three, for instance, Detective Jimmy McNulty (the series' primary protagonist) conducts a frustrating, long-distance affair with a high-octane political strategist from Washington—the point of the failure of their relationship being that Baltimore cannot understand Washington, and Washington does not even see, let alone recognize, Baltimore. 'The only way these guys [Washington in general] would know where West Baltimore is,' grumbles McNulty, 'is if Air Force One had to crash land in the district.' (Season 3, ep. 9) The corner kids whose plight is so achingly evoked in Season Four are made to feel that, Baltimore being effectively destiny, there is nowhere but back to the corner to take their labor power; the rest of Maryland, let alone America or the world, has receded to some fabulous and inaccessible distance that cannot be traversed. One boy, in Season Five, asks the boxing instructor, Cutty, 'How do I get from here to the rest of the world?'—to which the only conceivable answer is, 'I wish I knew,' since Cutty himself has been unable to force an opening in the iron curtain of Baltimore's existential penitentiary for the African-American male. The stevedores in Season Two are bitterly bearing witness to the decline of Baltimore's shipping industry, and the migration of local dock-work out of Maryland; Frank Sobotka raises funds illegally in order to bribe city officials enough to convince them to dredge the Chesapeake and Delaware canal, and reverse the laws of uneven geographical development; but the union is beaten, shipping moves inevitably up and down the coast, and the informal economy swallows up the dignity of organized labor.

Benefits of Uneven Development

But by far the most pressing of the series' engagements with uneven geographical development, and the visibility/invisibility dialectic that underpins it, concerns the agencies of law enforcement—a fact that allows the 'invisibility' trope to migrate into the very apparatuses of surveillance with which the show is preeminently fascinated. For it is a recurrent theme that the Baltimore City Police Department is, to all intents and purposes, not only not a twenty-first century institution, but not yet a twentieth-century one either, and off the map of national policy making and federal funding. The equipment with which a cash-strapped and chronically understaffed police department is obliged to track the street-level operations of the Barksdale and Stanfield crime syndicates, in order to follow the chain of command up the ladder of pawns, lieutenants, and generals, ultimately to the bosses themselves, is ludicrously antediluvian by the future-fetishistic standards of *CSI* and *Dexter*-style technophilia. Season One's definitive figure for this is a prehistoric corkboard onto which mug-shots of the various dealers and soldiers are pinned with rusty thumbtacks.



Even when the first wiretap finally gets up, in episode six, the phones being tapped are fixed public telephones, relics of the 'plain old telephone service' (POTS), using a bi-directional voiceband path with limited frequency range, not that dissimilar from the one Alexander Graham Bell invented. Moreover, the device used to tap them (even though it is monitored on a computer terminal interface) is an analog bugging instrument, as we are informed in Season Three. And to add further insult to the injury of this pre-digital fate, any tapping conducted under these conditions has to be supplemented by a full portfolio of analog corroborations: clandestine 35mm photographs taken by hidden officers of every call made from the tapped booths; hand-written notes; and first-person testimony in the painstakingly type-written police reports (shots of Jimmy McNulty single-digit typing on what looks like a 1976 machine exude the full aroma of period nostalgia, even though the show is set in the early 2000s).



Although the detectives working the Barksdale case are constantly complaining about the superannuation of their equipment, and appealing to the FBI and other agencies for technological assistance, in fact the very 'authenticity' and ultimate success of their investigations, their reliance on antiquated analog machines and manual labour, turns on this period anachronism. Old, analog technology functions figurally in *The Wire*, just

as Baltimore does more generally, as a centre of ideological gravity, a critical negation of the fully computerized crime-scene analyses of the glitzier cop shows. If realism depends for its aesthetic modus operandi on a tactical resistance to the conventions governing a genre, then paradoxically the 'realism effect' can now and then operate via figural regression, a return to an apparently exhausted device for representing the acquisition of knowledge, which is after all the holy grail of this aesthetic. In a situation where, nearer the epicenter of the system, digital technology largely does the thinking for its subjects (and thus deprives them of the 'realism effect'), perversely the reliance of the peripheries on outcast and superseded technology charges them with the capacity for a genuine rush of cognitive pleasure—as when Detective Pryzbylewski cracks the Barksdale crew's 'dumb' telephone code in Season One simply by flipping the three-by-three grid of the touch-tone phone pad on its head. Just as the show affiliates itself with the old-fashioned aesthetic equipment of realism, so too it nostalgically locates the figuration of cognitive labour in pre-digital techniques of knowledge production: manual code breaking, film photography, analog telephony, note-taking, etc.

Defunct technology operates as a working allegory for the geographically uneven development within Baltimore and the USA more widely—the uneven distribution of technology and information 'maps' the unequal national and international distribution of power and finance capital, and in this situation it is the underdeveloped regions that (unexpectedly) retain the capacity for *knowledge* of a system that remains opaque to those nestled closer to its centre of operations. But only, to be sure, if they use their relative subalternity to 'think back' at that other America, whose cracked mirror and Dorian Gray portrait they unsuspectingly 'are'; the supermodern USA, after all, has no particular need to know anything about its underdeveloped zones, its interiorized 'Third World,' let alone the real one. But

the third world obviously cannot *not* know about the first world. The third world *has* to know. The periphery must be aware at every moment that everything that happens to it is somehow determined by absent forces elsewhere.¹⁸

¹⁸ Fredric Jameson, Interview with Sara Danius and Stefan Jonsson, in Ian Buchanan (ed.), *Jameson on Jameson: Conversations on Cultural Marxism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), p. 160.

And it is here, at this reflexive disjuncture between an obsolete and a futuristic America, that we can detect and isolate the symptomatic ideological fault-line in the series as a whole, and diagnose it as such.

For it will not do to 'choose' between the two Americas:

the junk or Third World side of American life today—the production of poverty and misery, people not only out of work but without a place to live, bag people, waste and industrial pollution, squalor, garbage, and obsolescent machinery. All this is surely a very realistic truth, and an inescapable fact, of the most recent years of the superstate. The cognitive and representational problem comes when we try to combine that palpable reality with the equally unquestionable other representation of the United States that inhabits a different and unrelated compartment of our collective mind: namely, the postmodern United States of extraordinary technological and scientific achievement; the most 'advanced' country in the world, in all the science fictional senses and connotations of that figure, accompanied by an inconceivable financial system and a combination of abstract wealth and real power in which all of us also believe, without many of us ever really knowing what that might be or look like.¹⁹

Jameson's striking formulation makes it above all imperative for a contemporary 'cognitive' aesthetic worth its name to strike some sort of paradoxical synthesis between a commitment to the 'palpable' 'realistic truth' of underdevelopment, and an acknowledgement of 'inconceivable' overdevelopment and postmodernization, neither of which have proved particularly amenable to realism's antiquated mapping devices. A genuine 'realism effect' would therefore have the obligation somehow to mediate between an aesthetics of the real, where nothing is yet adequately represented, and an aesthetics of the 'hyperreal,' where everything is already saturated by its own representation. There are clear indications that such an aesthetic synthesis would be unlikely to take place adequately within the domain of narrative art, since narrative, while it is supremely suited to 'mapping' the coordinates of an individual or group existence

¹⁹ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London & New York: Verso, 1991), p. 128.

within the 'known community' of some smaller area or region,²⁰ seems ill-equipped to deal with the inevitably global perspective from which (as we have seen) even the small-scale local operations of a Baltimore drug dealer or a surveillance detail henceforth need to be viewed. Old-style narrative machinery, like that adopted by *The Wire*, even as it is defensively allegorized by the heavy emphasis on obsolete technology, must experience a crisis the moment it attempts to traverse the yawning ontological chasm between its preferred local territory, and the complex social matrices of national and international uneven development by which that locality is ultimately defined. It is at points like this, diegetically, that the fog of unknowing seems to descend, and the program itself evinces all the topographical anxiety of the child who asks 'How do I get from here to the rest of the world?' The show rarely does, and, true to his own lights, Simon admits as much about the decision to choose between the two Americas on offer:

Are there other parts of those cities that are economically viable? Of course. You can climb higher up on the pyramid that is capitalism and find the upper-middle-class neighborhoods and the private schools. You can find where the money went. But *The Wire* was dissent because of its choice to center itself on the other America, the one that got left behind. That was the overall theme and that worked for all five seasons.²¹

Realism or Naturalism?

It may be worth our while, in that case, to call the bluff on Simon's various protestations about his mid-nineteenth-century literary allegiances, and their alleged realist credentials. My sense is that they are not particularly realist at all. Georg Lukács once wrote of the critical turning point in literary history associated with the aftermath in France of 1848, and whose principal protagonist and theoretician was Emile Zola, that Zola's completion of 'the transition from the old realism to the new, from realism proper to naturalism' depended on his unequivocal sense that, in the new

²⁰ See Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Hogarth Press, 1993), pp. 165-181.

²¹ Interview with David Simon for *Vice* magazine, <http://www.viceland.com/int/v16n12/htdocs/david-simon-280.php?page=2#>, accessed 30/9/10.

dispensation, 'the writer no longer participates in the great struggles of his time [like Balzac and Stendhal], but is reduced to a mere spectator and chronicler of public life.'²² For Lukács, the 'liberal positivism' of Zola led him, and the institution of the novel itself under his leadership, into an artistic zone where 'a mechanical average takes the place of the dialectical unity of type and individual; description and analysis is substituted for epic situations and epic plots,' and in general 'tiny, haphazard people move to and from and live their haphazard lives' against the 'gigantic backdrop' of the brilliantly rendered 'outer trappings' of modern industrial life.²³ Naturalism, the aesthetic still-birth of realism's attempted transcendence of its romantic and melodramatic proclivities (all those Dickensian 'punkings out'), ends up as a 'monotonous commonplace,' deriving from its 'direct, mechanical mirroring of the humdrum reality of capitalism.' (93) And while it is this latter-day narrative positivism that wins out over all rivals at the end of the nineteenth century, ultimately spreading far and wide across imperial vectors to become probably the world's most successful literary formal export, to the extent that it could be said (in its affirmation of verisimilitude, data-sets, and painstaking research) to have supplanted the very definition of realism from within, nevertheless it carries within itself an inherent epistemic 'falsity' towards the social object it professes to have mirrored faithfully in its prose. For whereas that 'object' of its own nature must move and change according to the balance of power within the social antagonism, the naturalist work of art freezes that object over into a series of tableaux. From within what Zola himself called a 'hypertrophy of detail,' the work, rather than sink into its own quicksand, is therefore obliged to 'leap to the stars' via an oratorical supplement of grandstanding 'social monumentality' and 'great social significance'.²⁴

It would be unfair, and inaccurate, simply to level this same criticism at David Simon's television series, since it is hard not to agree that, even if there is a strong naturalist cast to his presentation of the social fabric, it is leavened by an openly humanist ethics at the level of characterization (which therefore has a good deal more in common with Dickens than it does with Zola). As Simon once put it, *The Wire* is

cynical about institutions, and about their capacity for serving the needs of the individual. But in its treatment of the actual

²² Georg Lukács, *Studies in European Realism* (London: Merlin, 1978), p. 89.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 91-92.

²⁴ Georg Lukács, 'Narrate or Describe?', in *Writer and Critic* (London: Merlin, 1978), pp. 116, 115.

characters, be they longshoremen or mid-level drug dealers or police detectives, I don't think it's cynical at all. I think there's a great deal of humanist affection.²⁵

Now, this may be perfectly true, but even so the alibi does not exonerate the program itself from the charge of naturalist 'falsity,' since there is one aspect in which, no matter how 'humanist' its commitment to investing the 'tiny, haphazard lives' it depicts with credible and complex motivations, a reification of the environment glacially forecloses any tendencies to realistic totalization. And that is simply its maintenance of an inflexible perspectival frame—the very commitment to Baltimore itself as a principal subject and condition of visibility, the 'main character' of the series and its enigmatic hero.²⁶ With this perpetual deference to an unblinking 'gigantic backdrop' constituted by an interpenetrating series of cynically conceived inhuman institutions, and thus to a blanket 'pessimism' of which Simon has spoken repeatedly, the centre of gravity inevitably shifts away from the characters and towards a clearly recognizable naturalistic topos. The show is irradiated by a grim fascination with the abundant social cruelty, poverty, racism, crime, prostitution and drug use that supposedly 'defines' modern existence. Yale sociologist Elijah Anderson, a chronicler in his own genre of black inner-city life, has suggested that *The Wire's* 'bottom-line cynicism' trumps whatever flimsy humanism is trotted out on its treacherous boards.²⁷ One of Simon's recent lectures, to Georgetown University, was entitled 'The Audacity of Despair,' in satiric reference to the best-selling book by President Obama, and carried the subtitle 'The Decline of American Empire, and What's In It for You.' All of this is perfectly consistent with a Zola-esque naturalism in temperament and aesthetic proclivities.

The show dovetails with yet another naturalist propensity that I can characterize by reprising some of Raymond Williams's discussion of 'Region and Class in the Novel'. Here Williams attends to a late naturalist deformation of the novel which, at first pass, seems progressive and defensible—the limitation of the novel's scope to a neglected 'region' in

²⁵ Interview with David Simon at Reason.com, <http://reason.com/archives/2004/10/01/david-simon-says> accessed on 30/9/10.

²⁶ In an interview for *Rolling Stone*, Simon was asked which of the characters he would miss writing for the most, to which Simon answered simply, 'I think I'll miss writing about Baltimore.'

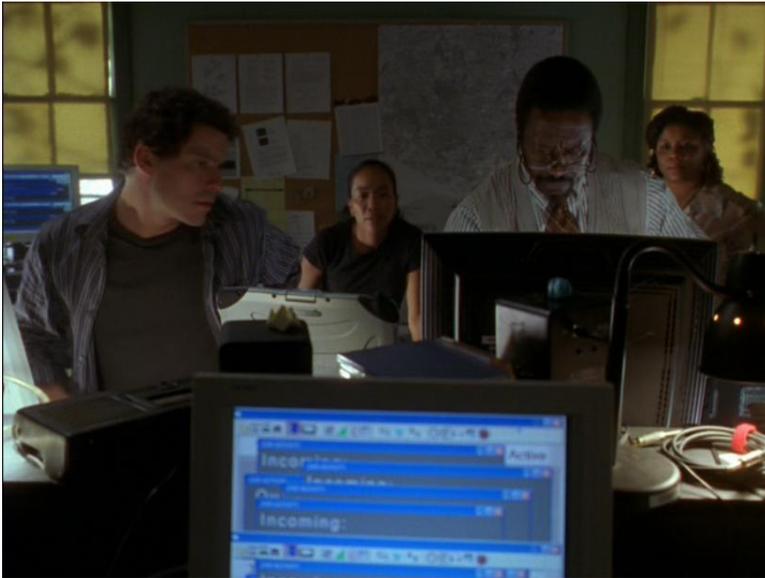
²⁷ Quoted in Mark Bowden, 'The Angriest Man in Television,' *The Atlantic*, op. cit., p. 2.

isolation from its broader social environment, and correlatively the working-class novel as a form that treats of that class's overlooked experiences in abstraction from the class struggle more generally. But far from being progressive, these developments mire themselves in aesthetic backwaters to the tune of a pedagogic diminuendo. The 'truly regional novel,' writes Williams, 'has initially so isolated its region, and thus projected it as internally whole—'organic'—that it is unable to recognize the complex internal processes, including internal divisions and conflicts, which factually connect with those wider pressures.' Similarly for the working-class novel, 'the central creative problem is still that of finding forms for a working-class fiction of fully developed class relations. The problem has in some ways become more objectively difficult. Further tendencies in monopoly capitalism have removed to an even greater distance the decisive individuals and functions and institutions by which most working-class life is formed.'²⁸ To be sure, *The Wire* is a finely, internally differentiated narrative product with a great deal to say about those 'individuals and functions and institutions' affecting working-class life; but it is also fair to say that these are determinedly *local* individuals, functions and institutions, and that the principal decision-making agencies with greatest impact on proletarian and lumpenproletarian existence in West Side Baltimore are shrouded in a veil of unrepresentable foreignness whose true face we are unlikely to glimpse simply by reloading back-episodes of *The West Wing* or *The Apprentice*. No, for as long as Baltimore remains the inescapable horizon of *The Wire*'s narrative, we are trapped in a naturalistic aesthetic that is an analogue of the 'geography is destiny' fate of those 'tiny, haphazard people' swallowed up in the season-finale montage of Season Five. We are back at the irresolvable aesthetic conundrum of Jameson's 'two Americas,' one of which calls for a naturalism of surface detail and palpable realities, the other of which, meanwhile, spins us off on an altogether different trajectory of high-tech postmodernity, hyperreality and simulation. Opting for one pole at the expense of the other, Simon commits his project to a kind of aesthetic dead-end, immensely provocative at the level of its critical engagement with dominant genre conventions, but unlikely to inspire work in the same vein; or at least, so it would appear, though in my concluding section, I would like to explore a determinate 'return of the repressed' at the level of technological figuration, where that 'other America' of postmodern cultural excess can be glimpsed and reframed.

²⁸ Raymond Williams, 'Region and Class in the Novel,' in *Writing in Society* (London & New York: Verso, 1991), pp. 231, 237.

Digital Processes

Here it needs to be said at once that as a show shot (according to IMDb) on 35mm film stock, its basic narrative dimension is constantly being affected, aesthetically and figurally, by its visual drive—a drive which, in David Bordwell's estimation, cannot be identified with the cinematography per se, since the show is 'uninspiringly shot.'²⁹ Rather, the visual drive is to be associated with a certain fetishism of regard, a fateful tendency within the *mise-en-scène* to abandon itself to a fascination with the computer screen. The cameras that shoot *The Wire* are increasingly (over the five seasons) drawn to the apparatus and digital technology of postmodern surveillance, and one of the most familiar visual tableaux is a medium shot of a small group of detectives hunched, absorbed, around a small laptop computer as one of them (usually Freamon or Pryzbylewski) explains the consequences of what they are seeing or hearing.



²⁹ David Bordwell, 'Take It from a Boomer: TV Will Break Your Heart,' *Observations on Film Art* at <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=9977>, accessed 1/10/10.

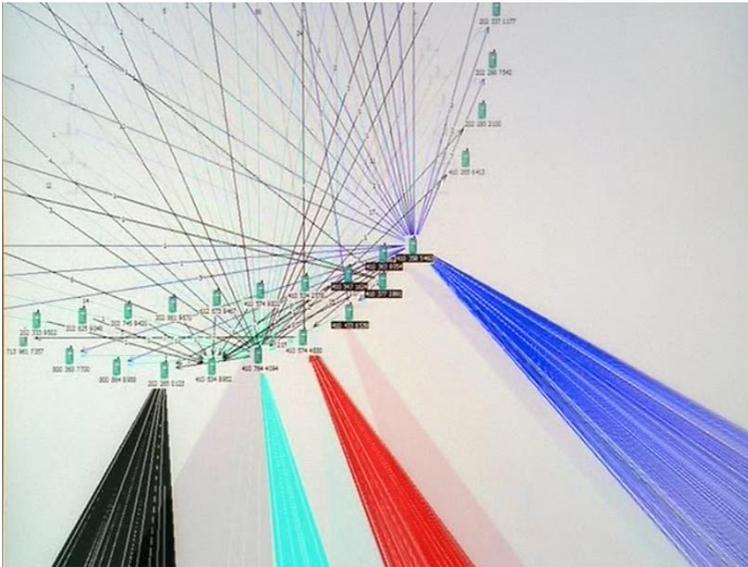
For as long as this tableau is still oriented principally around analog bugging devices (in Season One), it remains stunted in its capacity to generate a frisson of real visual pleasure with cognitive overtones. In that season, it is the hand-written notes of Prez and Freamon, and the exhaustive manual paper trail erected to 'follow the money' of the Barksdale empire and its links to Senator Clay Davis, that fashions figures of epistemological capture and mastery.

In Season Two, however, we experience the first real departure from an analog epistemological frame, when the investigation into the stevedore union takes a decisive step forward by accessing its computers. The primitive visual interface that charts the unloading, carriage and collection of international freight canisters generates a sudden jolt of cognitive pleasure across the detail, since it displays via crude colour icons the sheer extent of theft and embezzlement on the docks, and simultaneously makes cracking Bunk's case of the twelve dead Eastern European 'white slaves' possible in the first place.



For the first time, computer technology is placed at the centre of the frame, not for its relaying of analog information, but for its graphic rendering of digitally coded data, the knot in which both major crimes will be solved. It is a point of no return in the series as a whole, since Season Three will

concern itself with the rash of disposable digital mobile telephones with which the Barksdale gang is now organizing its re-ups across the West Baltimore corners—even as Stringer Bell is looking to ‘sublate’ this micrological criminal operation into a legitimate business enterprise. The technical and legal challenges of tapping mobile telephones in use for a week or less (the titular ‘wire’ is only a vestigial and metaphorical one in this instance) occupy the better part of the season’s history lessons for us; the premier obstacle only being overcome when Freamon and McNulty conspire to sell the syndicate pre-tapped phones in an elaborate scam. But we should not overlook the quantum leap in investigative labour required in the passage from POTS bugging to mobile and disposable digital telephony, and the consequent transformation of the cognitive yield involved—since in the first case, as in Season One more generally, the point was to ‘map’ a series of trunk calls between vertically arranged members of a static system, whereas now the effort involves the ‘mapping’ of a dispersed and integrated network of users.

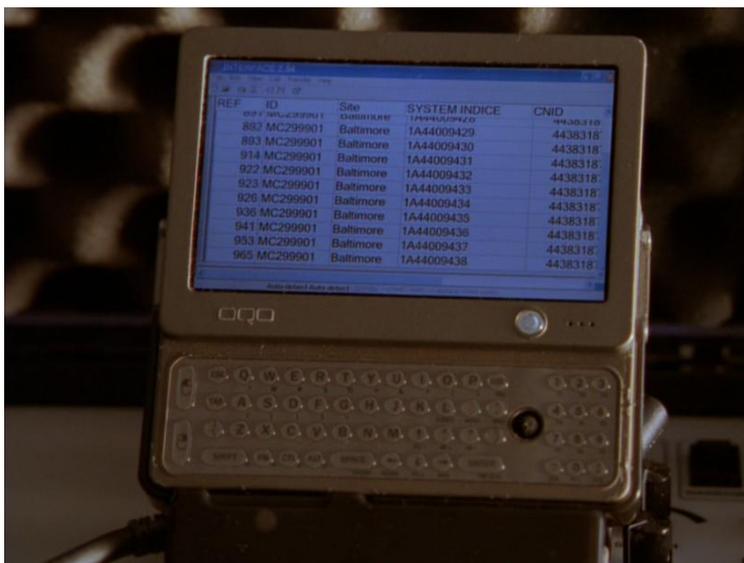


And if, in that earlier dispensation, it was enough to have recourse to a corkboard and some stick-it notes, here only a fully computerized tracking system will do. The borrowed technology of the FBI, the ‘trigger fish’ pattern tracer, allows the detail to read all the calls being routed by the cell tower nearest to Stringer Bell’s cover business, and thus by progressive

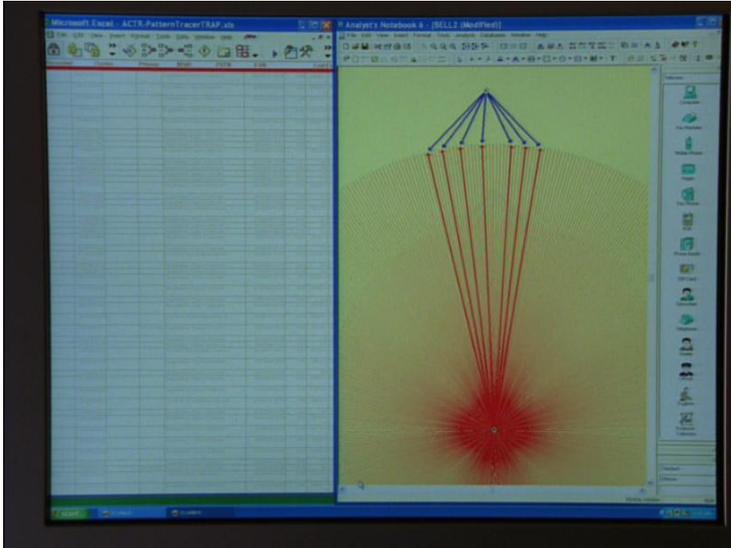
computer-managed elimination, to deduce his 'secret' cell number. The dialogue and accompanying imagery ensnare us in the epistemological pleasures of digital surveillance:

Freamon: So. We aim this at the nearest cell tower. The one that will be a conduit for the calls coming to and from our boy Bell. And... we let rip.

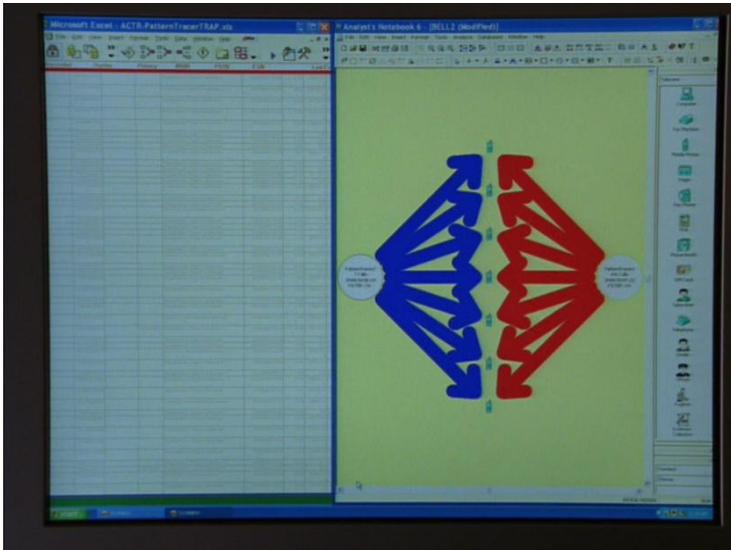
McNulty: Fucking hell.



Freamon: Looks like Baltimore White Pages without any names. But the pattern tracer will pull that down. You know, if we know the approximate time of Bell's call we could start just by pulling calls off that tower at that time.

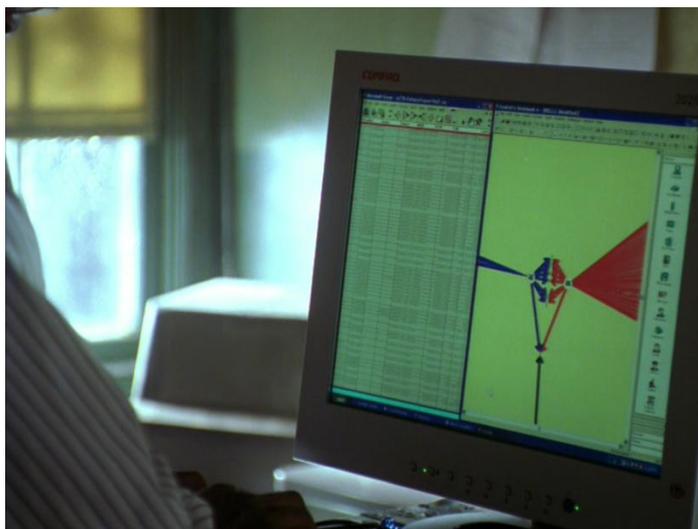


McNulty: There could be thousands.

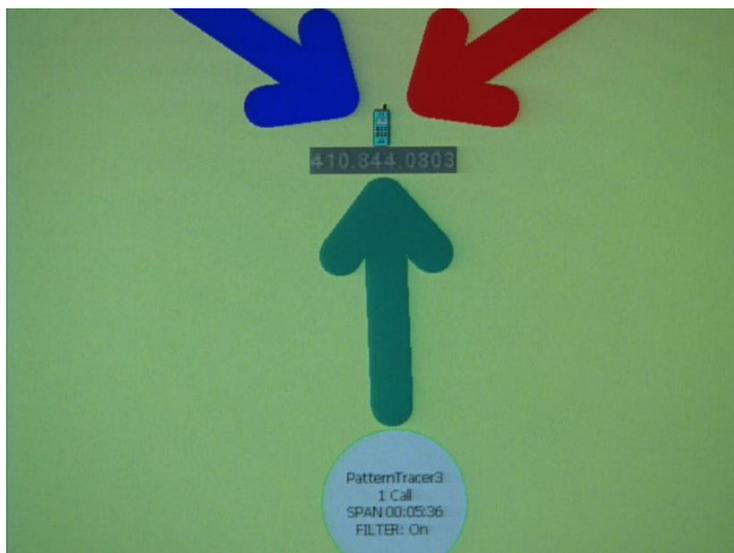


Freamon: Yeah, that's the base-line, but we get a second hit and that list comes down to dozens.

McNulty: And a third or fourth...



Freamon: And then we got his number.



So it is that the team, and the visual pleasure of the series, is dragged kicking and screaming into the early twenty-first century epistemological frame that it has been explicitly denying having any real part of.

But nothing can quite compare with the sheer exorbitance of this pleasure in Season Five, where it is to be felt pushing up against precisely the army of dereliction, homelessness, and despair that best characterizes the 'Third World' qualities of post-industrial Baltimore. For Season Five develops a devious juxtapositional logic, according to which the sudden disambiguation of the vast indigent population of the inner city is exploited (by McNulty and Freamon, of course) as a media *representation* in order to motivate an injection of police funds that can be used to 'map' the elusive communications network of the Stanfield syndicate using state-of-the-art computerized mobile-hacking technology. That is to say, in this scenario, homelessness is already 'homelessness,' its own media imago and stereotype, its 'Dickensian aspect' preceding its actuality in a satisfying squaring of the 'two Americas' circle—given that the institutional focus of this series is the print media itself, a flailing Baltimore paper on the verge of a digitally-enhanced extinction (overseas bureaus closing, management tightening the screws, all journalistic responsibility sacrificed for the bottom line and the whiff of a Pulitzer), which puts in train a series of sensational accounts of homeless 'killings' (themselves the artificial product of police misrepresentation) in order to achieve syndicated copy and attain national attention (needless to say, though it is said often here, Baltimore does not feature much in the national news). At the same time, the Machiavellian 'young white hope' of the political scene, Mayor Carcetti, with his eyes on the gubernatorial prize, exploits the same news in order to enhance his own profile and win the notice of Washington Democrat heavyweights. Simon surely doesn't want to suggest that homelessness is nothing but a spectacle (there are copious naturalistic details relating to the 'issue'), but he has at last managed to approach local immiseration through the optic of its spectacularization and postmodernization, in a nesting of three institutional frames, each with its own reasons for wanting it to 'go national.'

The pay-off for this dizzying excess of 'simulation,' as far as our detail is concerned, is the sudden availability of city funds and up-to-the-moment mobile wire-tapping technology to crack the code whereby Marlo Stanfield now controls the totality of heroin distribution in the West Baltimore region. The usual audio-signal tapping is useless, since the SMS messages arranging re-ups turn out not to be verbal at all, but visual.

Cryptic digital photographic images of old analog clock faces are distributed across the network, in a manner that stymies the capacities of the detail's initially ageing technology to tap into and map the information, let alone crack the code. In the seventh episode, thanks to the ever-escalating notoriety of the fictional 'homeless serial killer,' the unit finally gets the two computers and software it needs from a better-equipped neighboring county, to hack into the visual images and begin bearing down on the clock-face code; meanwhile McNulty deploys a combination of land-line public and mobile digital telephones to convince his superiors that the homeless killer is a real individual, by staging a series of fake calls, and (as the Department tracks the signals) attracting a massive police response using GPS technology.

In all of this, technology is being used as an allegorical figure in which, at last, the series can genuinely feel its way through the 'two Americas' problematic, and nowhere so exhilaratingly in cognitive terms as when Detective Sydnor finally cracks the Stanfield code. For what this ingenious deduction discloses is that the digital images of analog clock faces ('Definitely a code, and definitely not having much to do with time,' 5.7:46) make use of a very old and analog means of *spatial* orientation (in that sense, the antithesis of the police force's GPS tracking system): the hour hand, minute hand, and second hand refer numerically to the page numbers, y-axis and x-axis coordinates of city locations represented in an old paperback Baltimore street directory. When Stanfield wants to meet with his troops and advisers he does so (in typically underdeveloped and post-industrialized city spaces) by distributing a visual hypostasis of a grid coordinate to his people, each of them with a tattered street directory to hand. It is as ingenious a means of rendering the contradictions between futuristic technology and underdeveloped social space in a single figure as could be imagined—for in these pixilated palm-sized images of the twelve-hour analog clock dial, we recognize the acute torsion of an unevenly developed social imaginary, where time morphs into space (in a logic of postmodernization), and space ineluctably senses its own nature as temporal congealment and stasis (in a logic of sheer Naturalist despair). And it is as though, after five seasons, the series has truly learned how to 'teach' what it began by not even admitting or wanting to know, but which, by the ineluctable logic of prolonged narrative development, it has had to confess: that a knowledge of the present is best conveyed not by a singular aesthetic, but by a paradoxical synthesis of the irreconcilable.

Most fans have tended to discount Season Five as the most far-fetched and weakest, as McNulty's eccentricities and the overarching absurdity of the serial-killer conceit dissipate the concerted atmosphere of 'realism' built up so immaculately over four years. But I cannot help feeling that, as Eagleton wrote of Dickens, it is just where such 'realism' (in truth, a very heavy Naturalism) touches on its own inner absurdity that it attains to a truth that is inadmissible within its own representational matrix. Such 'grotesque realism is a stylistic distortion in the service of truth, a kind of astigmatism which allows us to see more accurately';³⁰ and it only remains to say that the 'astigmatism' of Season Five, its paradoxical focusing of two distinct aesthetic frequencies, cashes in the ethical gravity of its 'realism' in order to map an altogether more elusive object than that Baltimore which the series believes to be its true 'subject.' Baltimore undergoes an anamorphic distension here and, in symptomatic visual figures of digital-analog knowledge production, gives on to a farcical domain where the utmost poverty and wretchedness flip over into the highest levels of affluence and privilege; a paradoxical and comical kingdom of topsy-turvy registers and distributions of the visible; a place where the decisive struggles are as much about culture as they are about class. Call it 'America.'

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³⁰ Eagleton, op. cit.