BALTIMORE IN *THE WIRE* AND LOS ANGELES IN *THE SHIELD*: URBAN LANDSCAPES IN AMERICAN DRAMA SERIES

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ABSTRACT

The Shield (FX 2002-08) and *The Wire* (HBO 2002-08) are two of the most ever critically acclaimed TV-shows and they both can be seen as the finest developed film noir proposals produced in television. *The Wire* transcends the cop-show genre by offering a multilayered portrait of the whole city of Baltimore: from police work to drug dealing, getting through stevedores' union corruption, tricks of local politics, problems of the school system and some unethical journalism practices. On the other, *The Shield* offers a breathtaking cop-show that features in the foreground the moral ambiguity that characterizes the noir genre. Both series display complementary realist strategies (a neorealist aesthetic in *The Wire*; a *cinéma vérité* pastiche in *The Shield*) that highlight the importance of city landscape in their narrative. Baltimore and Los Angeles are portrayed not only as dangerous and ruined physical places, but are also intertwined with moral and political issues in contemporary cities, such as race, class, political corruption, social disintegration, economical disparities, the limitations of the system of justice, the failure of the American dream and so on. The complex and expanded narrative of *The Wire* and *The Shield*, as Dimemberg has written for film noir genre, "remains well attuned to the violently fragmented spaces and times of the late-modern world". Therefore, this article will focus on how *The Wire* and *The Shield* (and some of their TV heirs, such as *Southland* and *Justified*) reflect and renew several topics related to the city in the film noir tradition: the sociopolitical effects of showing the ruins of the centripetal industrial metropolis, the inferences of filming in actual places, the dramatic presence of what Augé coined as "no-places", the *bachelardian* opposition between home and city, or the streets as an urban jungle where danger lurks in every corner.

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The Shield and *The Wire* are two of the most critically acclaimed TV shows ever produced, and both programs bring to the forefront the relevance of the urban landscape. *The Wire* (2002-2008) transcends the cop show genre by offering a multilayered portrait of the city of Baltimore, including police work, drug dealing, union corruption, problems in the school system, and unethical journalism practices. On the other hand, *The Shield* (2002-2008) takes the form of a fast-moving cop show set in a dirty, corrupt and disturbing Los Angeles, where the law seems inadequate to contain the constant threat of crime. Both shows have many things in common: they share, for example, Clark Johnson as the director for both the pilots (where the template of the show was established) and the series finale; this fact reinforces how important location was for *The Shield* and *The Wire*.

The two shows also constitute a bitter reflection of the twilight of the heroic that has characterized the Third Golden Age of Television (Vaage 2015; García 2016). Jimmy McNulty and Vic Mackey are distorted reflections of the legal system. They are anti-heroes in search of an impossible redemption. As police officers, they are unorthodox by necessity, trying to maintain order while the powers that be sweep their misfortunes under the rug. Like some of the best examples of 'Quality TV', both series are deliberately cloaked in moral ambiguity, where the notions of good and evil become blurred, drawing dramatic force from their permanent contradictions. Furthermore, both series adopt complementary realist strategies – a neorealist aesthetic in *The Wire*; a *cinéma-vérité* pastiche in *The Shield* – that give particular narrative significance to city landscapes. Baltimore and Los Angeles are portrayed as dangerous and ruined physical places, because these narratives raise moral and political issues such as race, class, social disintegration, economical disparities, the limitations of the justice system, and the failure of the American dream.

In order to analyze how both cop shows depict the urban landscape, first we will explain how the "spatial turn" can be linked to contemporary high-end TV drama. Once we have sketched this context – of a contemporary trend in TV production towards a certain emphasis on spatiality – we will focus on how two of the most acclaimed cop shows[1] reflect and renew several topics related to the city in the film noir and crime drama traditions: the inferences of filming in actual places, the dramatic presence of what Augé coined as "non-places", the *bachelardian* opposition between home and city, and the sociopolitical effects of showing the ruins of the centripetal industrial metropolis.

1. THE "SPATIAL TURN" AND THE THIRD GOLDEN AGE OF TELEVISION

The issue of urban geography has witnessed a recent upsurge in academia. Spurred by the work of authors such as philosopher Henri Lefebvre (*The Production of Space*, 1974), social theorist Michel Foucault (*Discipline and Punish*, 1977), and geographer Edward Soja (*Postmodern Geographies*, 1989), several fields from the humanities and social science have developed a so-called spatial turn over the past twenty-five years. As Warf and Arias explained, this trend assumes that "geography matters, not for the simplistic and overly used reason that everything happens in space, but because *where* things happen is critical to knowing *how* and *why* they happen" (2009: 1). As expected, screen studies have not been oblivious to this close attention to "spatiality" (Shiel 2001: 5). In fact, film studies have specifically paid considerable attention to the relation between location, settings, places, and their cinematic depiction (Clarke 1997; Shiel and Fitzmaurice 2001; Barber 2002; Mennel 2008). However, it is also necessary to point out how, traditionally, some genres or movements were especially keen on encouraging critics and academics alike to study the relation between space and cinema—the Western, American film noir, and Italian neorealism being some of the most prominent examples.

Regarding TV fiction, this Third Golden Age has also brought a renewed interest in analyzing how the setting of a series influences narration and vice versa. Some of the most critically acclaimed Quality TV series of the last 15 years – shows as geographically and thematically diverse as, to name just three big hits, *The Sopranos* (1999-2007)[2], *Rescue*

1 Noted TV critic Alan Sepinwall, for instance, includes both *The Wire* and *The Shield* among the 15 essential TV shows that revolutionized TV Fiction, generating the so-called "Third Golden Age" (2013; see also Zoller Seitz and Sepinwall 2016).

2 *The Sopranos* proposes quite different images of the city: it is a pretty ambivalent image, echoing the moral hesitancy of the whole show. On the one hand, it offers a negative picture of New Jersey, presenting the stereotype of Italo-American cultural geographies. Largely through atmosphere, "Sopranoland" offers an urban landscape of sleaziness, corruption, and violence around not so glamorous places such as Satriale's and the Bada Bing. New York is the other side of the ambivalent urban illustration that *The Sopranos* echoes. As Sadler and Haskins argued, in *The Sopranos* New York City is a "constant backdrop of the storyline (even in the opening), a postcard to contrast with the dark New Jersey world of the main character" (210). Just that: an escape from the gritty space depicted in the Garden State.

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Me (2004-2011)[3], or *Dexter* (2006-2013)[4] – can also be studied from a spatial approach, reflecting on how the city intertwines with narrative and dramatic development, a regular trope in *noir* and police drama.

2. **COP-SHOWS AND VISIONS OF THE CITY**

Given its nuclear essence as part of the genre, landscape, cityscape, and location have been a very fruitful field of study for recent cop dramas. As Roberts has stated:

> Given the topographic and locative nature of much television procedural drama – the detective being essentially a mobile subject: a figure whose procedural enquiries take her or him to and from specific location points as s/he goes about trying to piece together bits of the narrative puzzle – it is a genre that has much to offer for the purposes of spatial analysis (2016: 370-1).

Accordingly, in a decade where Nordic Noir has reached a worldwide aesthetic influence and audience success, it is logical that Scandinavian and British TV scholars have given serious attention to the urban topography of crime (Waade 2011; Agger 2013; Eichner and Waade 2015; Peacock 2015; Agger 2016; Pheasant-Kelly 2016). Some stimulating essays have been published which have focused on the British equivalent: "Celtic Noir" (Cubitt 2014; Roberts 2016). It would go beyond the purpose of this article to study in depth how numerous cop shows depict cities, exhibiting disparate portrayals of the urban landscape. However, as this article focuses on two very influential TV shows, it would be beneficial to take a closer look at some of the landmark American cop shows of the Third Golden Age. We can find suggestive insights from TV series offering distinctive and complementary views of the city before diving into *The Wire* and *The Shield*. We will briefly analyze the politics of space in three popular cop shows, because the comparison can enhance our further reasoning when we, in the next sections, address our case studies. We have chosen three shows that differ notably in narrative format, dramatic tone, and the kind of city they depict. *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (2000-2015) – referred to from here as *CSI* – is a highly episodic TV series, a forensic procedural drama set in the biggest city of Nevada. *Justified* (2010-2015), a neo-western noir set in Harlan County (Kentucky), offers a canonical hybrid of the series/serial, flexi-narrative format (Nelson 2007). Finally, we have chosen also *True Detective* (2014-) for this briefly comparative overview because, with its protracted, nonlinear story arc, it is the most popular example of the so-called anthology series. The first season of *True Detective* proposes an existentialist crime drama that takes place in several locations in Louisiana.

CSI is widely accepted as the great procedural series of the 21st century. Vegas is a city of paradoxical extremes. Fountains and deserts, gambling and addiction, entertainment and vice, wealth and bankruptcy, reality and simulacrum, fraudulence and authenticity—*CSI* plays, from the very beginning, with this constant dualism. If Las Vegas has been built on speculation (Borchard 2007: 81), the methodic plot within the TV series is quite the opposite. Facing a city full of mirages, illusions, passions, and simulacra, the forensic team offers scientific truth, reason, and logic. Therefore, Las Vegas constitutes the *mise-en-scène* of horrendous crimes but, as Palatinus has said, "the glowing lights of the Strip are counterpointed by the dim blue sterility of the autopsy rooms" (2009: 3)[5]. Consequently, the cityscape of Las Vegas is not dramatically or politically relevant as such. It is just a backdrop for the criminal plots that Grissom and his team must solve. The proper landscape for crime is the human body: it is a trace, an "object of scientific scrutiny, and finally, ... a piece of art in its own right" (Palatinus 2009: 2). The city of Las Vegas is not the real scenario: the surface of the body is.

3 *Rescue Me* offers a darker image of the city of New York, quite the opposite from the Big Apple reflected in the ambivalent *The Sopranos*. In dealing with the effects of 9/11, *Rescue Me* offers a grey landscape: an amputated skyline without the twin towers is the very first scene of the series. In parallel with the landscape, the characters – a group of firefighters – are also emotionally crippled. It is portrayed as a distressed city that cannot heal its physical and emotional wounds. That is why, from time to time, we see shots from the core place of the tragedy.

4 Opposed to the *Rescue Me* dull palette of New York, *Dexter* is set in the dazzling city of Miami. The duality of the anti-hero is also reflected in the urban landscape that the series exhibits. Even from the opening sequence, "*Dexter* deliberately subverts any sense of a Gothic *mise-en-scène* and instead locates its horror narrative within its incongruous bright and sunny Miami location" (Brown and Abbott 2010: 210). Miami is portrayed as being full of life, music, and color; a beautiful place expelling joy and light. Even the interiors of the dark side of Dexter – his apartment, his boat, the places where he performs the murders – are neat, tidy and sterile spaces, much like the city we see in the show. The landscape, thus, reinforces the moral ambiguity of the main character, a regular trope in *noir* and police drama.

5 In fact, the whole *CSI* franchise displays an overall strategy of "visual city coding". The use of individual color palettes marks each *CSI* installment as distinct from each other: *CSI: Miami* (2002-2012) employs oranges, reds and whites, while the more psychological *CSI: New York* (2004-2013) plays with muted greys and dull blues (Allen 2007: 66). I would like to thank Tobias Steiner for pointing out this idea to me.

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If *CSI Las Vegas* takes a "touristic" approach to its settings, *Justified* – one of the most critically acclaimed recent cop dramas – negotiates its space from a much more ambiguous stance. Location in *Justified* serves both a symbolic and narrative function. The adventures of Raylan Givens are strongly tied to Harlan County, Kentucky, where he grew up. Several actual features of Harlan are relevant to *Justified*'s plot: the coal mines, the southern accent, the rural surroundings, the idiosyncrasy of its social heritage, and the presence of hillbillies. The whole narrative of *Justified* can be understood as an attempt to make peace with the place. It is a curse – that is, the reason why the protagonist is so conflicted – but also the only way of salvation – that is, Raylan Givens needs to correct all the wrongs in Harlan in order to be able to break free from Harlan's burden. Consequently, the portrayal of Harlan County is affectionate, nostalgic, gentle, but also dangerous and violent – a contradiction that spurs the dramatic energy of the narrative.

Lastly, it is worth noting the politics of space in the celebrated *True Detective*, particularly in the series' first season, set in Louisiana and starring Matthew McConaughey and Woody Harrelson. Brian Black notes that the first season of *True Detective* can be seen as an image of the sinister "sacrificial landscape" (2000: 60). And as Kelly has argued, the petrochemical *mise-en-scène* of coastal Louisiana "enlivens the toxic image with inferential power, or *visual enthymemes*, that invite audiences to draw connections between trauma that unfolds through narrative action and omnipresence of toxic iconography" (2016: 41). The director of the season one, Nic Pizzolatto, expands this idea of how damaged landscapes strengthen the representation of damaged people: "These lost souls dwell on an exhausted frontier, a fractured coastline beleaguered by industrial pollution and detritus, slowly sinking into the Gulf of Mexico. There's a sense here that the apocalypse already happened" (in Madrigal 2016).

The Wire and *The Shield* do not take their image of the city that far, because the urban landscape is not such a literally toxic place to live. As we will investigate in the following pages, Baltimore and Los Angeles appear as fractured urban landscapes which resemble the damaged social contract depicted through the narrative. Unlike popular cop shows such as the *CSI* franchise, *Law and Order* (1990-2010), *The Mentalist* (2008-2015) or *Lie to Me* (2009-2011) – where overwhelmingly the cityscape appears only as snapshots – *The Wire* and *The Shield* really throw light on the urban context where their stories unfold, bringing them to the foreground in the narrative.

3. **SHOT ON LOCATION WITH TWO EYES OPEN**

The physical preeminence of the urban landscape has been favored from the very conception of both series, as Clark Johnson, the director of th*e The Shield*'s pilot episode, explained: "Los Angeles, in particular the area we were shooting, in Boyle Heights, Rampart, downtown L.A., really plays a character" ("Pilot" DVD commentary, 1.01). David Simon has argued that the same thing is true in the case of *The Wire*, which "was shot entirely in Baltimore by Baltimore craft and labor unions" ("The Target" DVD Commentary, 1.01). Because it is a team that knows the city well, they succeed in imbuing the characters' life stories with the contrasts and the inequalities of the raw urban setting. The streets, the abandoned houses, the port, the public housing, the façades of the public buildings, the skyline of the financial district, and even many of the interiors that mark the series, are real: the courtroom, the morgue, and the Maryland Hospital.

In this attempt to convert Baltimore into another character and to give its physical spaces symbolic and moral significance, the constant presence of images from security video cameras stands out, as the eyes that see everything. *The Wire* shows off its objectivist pretensions of being a mute witness by describing all the corners and points of view of a city divided by race and class; it also goes a step further by making sense of it all. *The Wire*, just like the unfolding police investigations ("All the pieces matter", Detective Freamon assures us in episode six ["The Wire," 1.06]), collects these diffuse fragments of Baltimore and uses them to give the city the form of a coherent discourse, "while pointing to the power structure and social inequalities inherent in city spaces" (Speidel 2009). By including all the social, cultural, and economic areas of the city – while avoiding giving any one of them priority – *The Wire* presents a Baltimore that conceals many different cities. According to Soja, this clarifies how "relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life, how human geographies become filled with politics and ideology" (1989: 6).

In order to achieve its ideological proposition, *The Wire* demonstrates a stylistic sobriety that separates it from the rules of other cop shows. In contrast to the scientific hyper-visibility of *CSI* or the accelerated editing of *24* (2001-2010), *The Wire* opts for a storyline with multiple threads and more than 100 characters, and it maintains a slow and anti-climactic pace without cliffhangers or formal emphasis—there is no extra-diegetic music, for example, the only exception

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being the ending montages for each season finale. For stories that accentuate the physical description of the sets where the action takes place, it is customary to present the characters in medium and long shots so that they can be seen interacting with their surroundings. This aesthetic austerity "eschews the use of special effects" and insists "on the frontality and 'thereness' of the subject" (James 2008: 63). This is why it is so significant that filming takes place in exterior locations, on the corners of the real west side of Baltimore, on Fayette and Monroe, and Homer and Franklin Avenues. The series takes place in real locations.

Something similar can be said of *The Shield*, created by Shawn Ryan. Filmed in 16mm with natural lighting, numerous zooms, hand-held cameras, and re-framed shots, *The Shield* imitates a *cinéma vérité* style centering on neighborhoods where racial turmoil goes hand in hand with crime[6]. By means of the fly-on-the-wall documentary aesthetic, the city shapes the series right from the production process. Scott Brazil, one of the executive producers, makes reference to the frenetic pace of filming that characterizes *The Shield* – one episode completed every seven days – as "desperation cinema" ("Behind *The Shield* featurette," DVD Season 1). The film crew had to take advantage of buildings and shops with all of their authentic fixtures instead of constructing sets. In addition, filming was done with "two eyes open" ("Behind *The Shield* featurette," DVD Season 1) thus allowing the incidental and the spontaneous to become part of the narration. A paradigmatic case in the relationship between the real city and the metropolis presented in the series took place during the filming of the fourth season. The crew went to film a church on 77th Street (north of Watts, nestled between South Los Angeles and Huntington Park)[7]. Several days earlier, a murder had been committed in the area, which "belonged" to a gang known as the Swan Crips and, logically, there was concern for the safety of the crew. In the story, Captain Monica Rawlings, played by Glenn Close, explains to area residents the measures she intends to take in order to reign in crime in the area, in front of 200 extras who were actual residents of the district. As the actor Jay Karnes recalled: "She was talking to those people about the actual problems in their neighborhood" ("Under the Skin" documentary, DVD Season 4).

4. THE AMBIGUITY OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL SPACE

This anecdote illustrates – just as Shiel explained when discussing the fragility of the neorealist city – the way in which *The Wire* and *The Shield* explore the mechanisms of the documentary. It reveals how fictional TV shows can also give priority to the referential effect when setting characters and ideas from the fictional world in a real universe. A universe that geographically and temporally is perfectly defined, such as the Baltimore and the Los Angeles of the beginning of the twenty-first century, instead of a post-war Italian city. In this way, *The Wire* and *The Shield* succeed in using a representational strategy based on realism to reproduce "the visual and thematic ambiguity and metaphysical alienation" (Shiel 2012: 103-4) of reality, which is to say of space and time, by means of a "fragmented narration" – a mosaic of stories, spaces, characters and points of view. Just as in film noir, the narration "remains well attuned to the violently fragmented spaces and times of the late-modern world" (Dimendberg 2004: 6).

These fragmented spaces make up the cities in which the characters of both series move through. Because the job of a police investigator is nomadic, his or her professional identity is largely defined by the spheres – amorphous, abstract, and disordered – in which he or she is constantly moving while attempting to impose order. While scenes include street chases, searches in dangerous buildings, and stakeouts in parks, all paths eventually lead to the same destination: police headquarters. It is the anthropological space that makes sense of the dangerous daily journey in the fight against crime because, as Augé writes, "place becomes a refuge to the habitué of non-places" (1995: 107). The police station is, as a result, the professional home as it provides security, a place where anonymity – a badge number or a nameless suspect – assumes a personal identity: police officers and criminals both assume personal names, a specific identity over and above their innominate professional identities.

6 *Southland* (2009-2013), the most honorable aesthetic heir to *The Shield*, works the space in a similar manner. The Ann Biderman drama set in contemporary Los Angeles exhibits a scorching city, an unrelenting grim landscape where the characters patrol a wounded city, flooded with loonies, perverts, and criminals. One of the most memorable narrator intros states, "Cops are supposed to hold the line between chaos and civilized society. Every now and then chaos gets the upper hand" ("Chaos", 5.09). In order to depict this muddled city, *Southland* employs the harsh energy of a hand-held camera, reflecting a relentless space where violence can assault you suddenly without warning.

7 This location is also significant because this area was the focus for the 1992 Los Angeles riots (also known as "South Central Riots") after the exoneration of officers involved in beating Rodney King, in April-May 1992. The uprising led to South Central being renamed South Los Angeles in an attempt to "clean up" the image of the area. I would like to thank Elliott Logan for providing me with this fact.

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Nevertheless, the dramatic originality of both series lies in the subversion of this idea: both Baltimore's police headquarters and Farmington (*The Shield*'s police station) lose their condition as anthropological place, since they have become unclear spaces that, citing Augé, do not make sense "for the people who live in it" nor do they provide "intelligibility for the person who observes it" (1995: 52). The precincts in both *The Wire* and *The Shield* are unsafe and uncomfortable spots for their characters. Therefore, the individuals in both series are forced to look for alternate spaces. McNulty is a busybody who does not trust his superiors and questions the police system and, as a result, ends up confined to a dull room in a basement (the entire special unit from season 1 is provided with this dump of an office) and later to a patrol ship at the docks (where, in season two, he works completely alone). As McMillan explains: "The disciplinary mechanism of ranked progress can serve equally as punishment. Insubordination and political machinations like McNulty's are shown to be the only ways to accomplish anything worthwhile in an institution as broken as the BPD [Baltimore Police Department]" (2009: 55). Broken institutions in line with a broken space.

Vic Mackey, on the other hand, makes the office of the Strike Team his home, the place where the members of the team truly feel safe, as a family. The office explicitly excludes those who do not belong to the team, its door bearing the following, handwritten message for outsiders: "STRIKE TEAM ONLY! (That means you, Asshole!)". The rest of Farmington is hostile territory, where they are constantly under suspicion and have to prove their innocence to Aceveda and the Department of Internal Affairs. However, just as the narrative reaches its agonic end, any familiarity or safety disappears for Mackey in the Farmington police station. When the Strike Team is dismantled, they are forced from their private setting, and even Mackey and Gardocki end up alienated from the precinct.

This *delocalization* also influences other relevant, more neutral settings, such as the interrogation room. In a TV show full of lies, hidden agendas and deceptions, the interrogation room, as Howard has analysed, "is one of the few places on the show where *reflection* is truly possible, where hows and whys can be openly discussed, where some unusual nods to spirituality take place, and where some attempt is made, on both sides of the table, at thoughtful understanding" (2012: 118). Consequently, it is no coincidence that Mackey savagely tears off the monitor when he is confronted with the truth in the series finale. Cornered by an ironic and fierce Claudette Wyms, Mackey is forced to stare at the pictures of Shane's dead family, the dreadful legacy "the hero [Mackey himself] left on his way out of the door" ("Family Meeting", 7.13). By trashing the interrogation room, Mackey is symbolically denying the significance of that room as a place of truth, redemption, and absolution.

5. THE FAILURE OF DOMESTICATED NON-PLACES

From an anthropological point of view, it is interesting to observe the conversation between space and narration: the greatest narrative crises of the characters are reflected by means of a corresponding spatial crisis. In *The Shield*, the deaths of both Lemansky and Shane happen while the characters are fleeing, without having either a professional or a personal place to return to. Vic Mackey ends up far from his family's home, in a cold office that feels unbearable to him, a bureaucratic prison for the intrepid super-cop of yesteryear who dominated the city to the cry of "my streets, my rules!" ("Slipknot", 3.09). On the other hand, although they are not great narrative crises, in *The Wire*, McNulty, Bunk, and Kima's drunken binges end up "dislocated", taking place close to the train tracks, some darkened parking lot, or some other non-place.

At the same time, there are many characters living outside the social order who desperately desire to convert the non-place into inhabited territory. Augé labels the non-place as a space that "cannot be defined as relational, historical, or concerned with identity" (1995: 77-8). *The Wire*, given its systemic nature, is more prodigal in this domestication of non-places. During the first season, a run-down courtyard becomes an "itinerary, crossroads, and center" (Augé 1995: 72) that completes the individual, social, and even work identity of Bodie, Poot, and the other boys in the Barksdale gang, crammed around an orange sofa that acts as a living room. The spatial identity of this open-air home becomes so important that Wallace, the emotional center of the first season, cannot stand living in the country with his grandmother and returns to "the Projects", only to end up meeting a tragic death.

The same creation of spatial sense can be applied to the "free zone" of Hamsterdam, where a neighborhood of abandoned houses is turned into a market and shelter for hundreds of drug addicts. Something similar could be said of the streets frequented by the children of the fourth season, a real home for many of them, given their bad experiences with their families and/or foster homes. In every one of these cas-

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es, however, these "territorialized non-spaces" end up being a failure; as De Certeau would say, these marginalized citizens of the social order "inhabit a textual system—the city—of which they themselves are not the creators" (Fielder 2001: 272). This is why D'Angelo in *The Wire* can say he feels more at home in jail than he does on the streets. It seems the non-place can never become a home in these modern cities, where danger is lying in wait on every corner and from which there exists no possibility of escape.

That is why Bubbles, the nomadic drug addict and *flâneur* of the slums, finally ends up redeeming himself when he has the chance to move out of his sister's basement; it is also why Detective McNulty invokes the return to his true home following his investigative adventure on the streets. "Let's go home", he says in the series' final episode to Larry, a homeless man for whom indeed the streets of Baltimore are the only home he has. And, not by coincidence, McNulty expresses this last wish while on the expressway, the prototype of the "non-place" *par excellence*. Bachelard wrote, "All really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home" (1994: 5). That is to say, in the face of a dismantled and uninhabitable Baltimore, McNulty and Bubbles do not flee but rather return to those "virtues of protection and resistance" (1994: 46) that Bachelard attributes to the house. These values contrast with those of Marlo Stanfield, the new emperor of the drug world, who, in a visual metaphor, ends up abandoning a luxurious hotel with lawyers, politicians, and financiers to return to his "home": the dark, filthy streets, where he feels protected—a similar thing happened to the corner boys starring in the fourth season: they are more comfortable in the streets than in their de-structured family homes. As Clandfield noted, this Marlo Stanfield ending links, although too simplistically, urban policies and capitalism, "precisely because he [Marlo] seems to be without Stringer's desire for legitimacy, his prospective involvement with real estate underlines the critique of urban redevelopment in *The Wire* as an industry driven by amoral pursuit of profit rather than by principle" (2009: 48).

The Shield plays with the same "home/city" dichotomy from a different perspective, digging deep into the moral uncertainty that characterizes the series. This idea can be condensed in the final sequence of the pilot episode, where "the domestic sphere as a place of safety and the outside world as a place of danger" (Chopra-Gant 2007: 667) are graphically opposed to one another. This final sequence summarizes the life of each character and plays with a Machiavellian confrontation: in order to have the security of a home (or of a Dodgers game) there have to be "Mackeys" out there imposing their rules in the asphalt jungle. It is as if the narrative were asserting that Mackey and his henchmen are rotten apples, that the civilized society despises their methods, that it is mandatory to defend the empire of the law, but that people need the Strike Team to guarantee that the person knocking on our door at five in the morning is just the paperboy. In other words, to ensure, according to Bachelard, that when "faced with the bestial hostility of the storm and the hurricane, the house's virtues of protection and resistance are transposed into human virtues" (1994: 46).

6. CONCLUSION: LANDSCAPES AS SOCIOPOLITICAL CRITIQUES

The landscapes of Baltimore and Los Angeles reveal themselves as arbitrary and dangerous places, where death can come at any moment. Following the genre's elegiac tradition, *The Wire* and *The Shield* graphically show the ruins of the centripetal industrial metropolis, the mirror of the moral ruin of society and its institutions. The image of both cities is the same spatial dehumanization that Sert discovered in post-industrial cities:

> The natural frame of man has been destroyed in big cities (...). Cities have fallen short of their main objective, that of fomenting and facilitating human contacts so as to raise the cultural level of their populations. To accomplish this social function cities should be organic social structures (1944: 395).

Los Angeles is a sprawling, diverse city of numerous, very different neighborhoods. *The Shield* centres on the most hidden and squalid areas of Los Angeles: the back patio of Hollywood and Rodeo Drive, where the palms of Beverly Hills and the glamour of Venice Beach are replaced by the blood of the immigrant gangs in Pico-Union. *The Wire*, on the other hand, takes this dehumanization to extremes by painting a portrait of not only the most depressed and dismal areas of the city, but also by literally converting the city into a cemetery where bodies are buried in empty houses, with the wave of murders in the fourth season.

According to Krutnik's observations about the *noir* settings, *The Wire* and *The Shield*'s vision "of the abysmal city flaunts ambivalences about the relationship between the individual and the community" (1997: 88), presenting the modern city as a threat to the American community. This idea, as opposed to the epic construction of the Western genre, reaffirms the

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"evaporation of social allegiances" (Krutnik 1997: 99) as characteristics of these cop shows with political and social messages. The city—violent, criminal, tragic in the Greek sense of the word—is portrayed as "a melting pot with un-meltable elements" (Gibb and Sabin 2009). The system is rotten, the city fractured and the races and classes in conflict with one another. The justice system is ineffectual and a "different kind of cop" an "Al Capone with a badge" – as Vic Mackey is portrayed at the beginning ("Pilot", 1.01) – is essential.

By means of the realistic depiction of the urban landscape as a daily menace, the two series trigger a sociopolitical critique. In the first place, *The Wire*, as Ethridge has written, questions two interwoven American myths, one economic and the other socio-political. The first is the myth of the American dream, in which hard work leads to wealth, and the other is the myth of America as a place of inclusion in which there exists "a place for you" (Ethridge 2008: 154). In regard to the first myth, although *The Wire* does not offer any solution to the crisis, it does clearly identify the root of the problem: "Capitalism is the ultimate god in *The Wire*. Capitalism is Zeus" (Ducker 2006). Through its naturalistic portrait, and expansive and complex narrative, the idea that surfaces again and again in the series is that capitalism has destroyed the social fabric – the idea of the community – spreading degradation and an everyone-for-himself mentality. Regarding the myth of America as an inclusive space, *The Wire* offers a story that shines a light on "the other America", the dark side of the American dream, a "rigged game" – as one of Bodie complains to McNulty in "Final Grades" (4.13). The very first anecdote of the series (about Snot Boogie) voices that everyone is forced to play this rigged game. As Sheehan and Sweeney have written, "Underlying *The Wire*'s story-arc is the conviction that social exclusion and corruption do not exist in spite of the system but because of it" (2009). Corruption permeates the depressing, neglected, and violent urban landscape which *The Wire* exhibits (see also Lerner 2010: 213).

On the contrary, in *The Shield*, the system does not fail; rather the people fail. The creator of *The Shield,* Shawn Ryan, has stated that the program seeks to address the following question, "What are we, as a society, willing to put up with, in terms of civil rights, in order to increase our own personal safety?" (DVD Season 1). Thus, the series depicts a racially agitated city, as uncomfortable for its inhabitants as the visual style it puts before the viewer. It is a Los Angeles dominated by murder and corruption, where multiculturalism and integration present a real problem. In this environment, it seems that neither the law nor public morality is enough to combat crime. Chopra-Gant argued that the series infers the message that a sort of natural justice – namely Vic Mackey's maverick solutions – is "an essential precondition for the existence of a social order" (2012: 133). However, as the vibrant, tragic series finale displays, justice is done, everyone pays a high price for their sins, and good – with all the nuances in such a morally ambiguous narrative – triumphs over evil. Bellafante wrote, "In a view radically at odds with the position of *The Wire* on urban corruption, *The Shield* believed that institutions were salvageable when decent people acquitted themselves ably" (2008). In other words, it is possible to maintain a social organization that we can call the city. Never before had a cop drama depicted a city, a savage urban jungle, as skillfully as *The Shield* or *The Wire*.

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CSI: Crime Scene Investigation (2000-2015)
CSI: New York (2004-2013)
Dexter (2006-2013)
Justified (2010-2015)
Law and Order (1990-2010)
Lie to Me (2009-2011)
The Mentalist (2008-2015)
Rescue Me (2004-2011)
The Shield (2002–2008)
Southland (2009-2013)
The Sopranos (1999-2007)
True Detective (2014–)
The Wire (2002-2008)

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