

***THE WIRE* AND THE DEMOCRACY OF FICTION**

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ABSTRACT

Beyond its oft-praised “realism”, *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-2008) – precisely because of its closeness to non-fiction – explores the modalities and functionalities of fiction and investigates what fiction is and what fiction can do. The series above all reflects on the ethical stakes of fiction-making. In the game it establishes with its non-fiction

antecedents, and in its meta-narrative story arc in season 5, the show reflects on the fictional process and on the different media which filter reality to try and represent it. This article analyzes how *The Wire* explores the moral implications of fiction-making and the different meanings of the term, from fiction as counter-fact, or counter-truth, to fiction as experimentation. Through the case study of the final season, we see how the series plays out its ambivalence toward fictional codes and advocates a mode of critical fictional representation as an alternative to the current, devious modes of safety policy and journalism. This article demonstrates how, by delegating fiction-making to characters as it does, more particularly in season 5, *The Wire* inscribes itself in what Jacques Rancière calls “fictional democracy”.

It is a truth universally acknowledged that *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-2008) is a realistic series, based on a close observation of the reality of Baltimore by its co-creators David Simon and Ed Burns. A proof of this often-invoked realism is that the series has entertained a relationship of “mutual fascination and reciprocal legitimation” with sociologists, who have used it in their classes on urban poverty for instance (Fassin 2014: 131)¹. But the adjective “realistic” – implying close referential precision – is in essence ambiguous, since it is merely a set of “discursive and textual conventions”, the realistic convention being just as arbitrary as any other, whether it applies to literature, cinema or TV series (Pavel 1988: 145). In the case of *The Wire* indeed, “realism” is often supposed to imply a closeness to situations that the creators witnessed directly, but variations in reception are likely to counter this, as shown by Sudhir Venkatesh’s experiment of watching an episode of the show with high-ranking members of the New York drug trade who questioned the verisimilitude of its representation (Venkatesh 2008). Then, “realism” also applies to the aesthetics of the show, implying a lack of embellishment, the reliance on linear time, the refusal of non-diegetic music or explanatory voiceover, and the presence of many “effects of reality” (Barthes 1968) for instance – but the series does not limit itself either to what is often considered as “documentary” (or faux-vérité) aesthetics (we seldom find shaky handheld shots, for example)². Most of the time, on the contrary, mise en scène, lighting and sound design are precise and elaborate, and the screenplay and casting choices offer a complex mix between “real” references and fictional treatment, rather than an attempt at “seeming real”. Having first established himself as a journalist, showrunner David Simon came to television late and almost by accident; the series reflects his ambivalent attitude towards fiction. In interviews, Simon demonstrates little patience for fan reception of the show and tends to shift attention away from fictional elements (such as characters or story arcs) to focus on “real” issues such as poverty, ghettoization, or the damaging excesses of corporate neoliberalism (Wickman 2012). But reflection on the show should not limit itself to Simon’s plethoric discourse. In a meta-narrative dimension which culminates in the final

season, the series does indeed explore the moral implications of fiction-making and the different meanings of the term, from fiction as counter-fact, or counter-truth, to fiction as experimentation, in the line of the diversity of meanings explored by the major studies of fiction which have multiplied in the past decades (see for instance Pavel 1988, Schaeffer 1999, Cohn 1999, Caïra 2011, Rancière 2014, 2017, Lavocat 2016). I will suggest that the series does more than blur the lines between fact and fiction. It more deeply participates in the investigation of what fiction, in the form of TV series, can do. Precisely because of its closeness to non-fiction, *The Wire* can explore the modalities and functionalities of fiction and suggest a functionalist conception of fiction, as Linda Williams has shown: “it does not transcend its mass culture bases in city desk journalism and television drama; rather, it is woven out of this very cloth”; for her, *The Wire* is literally a product of the “warp and weft of the nonfictional and the fictional elements” (Williams 2014: 4).

This article will focus specifically on season 5 – the least studied, and the most critically debated season – because it integrates a specific metanarrative reflection on fictional practices and on the different media which filter reality to try to represent it³. Season 5 follows the same logic as the previous ones, by adding a new fold to the story: in this case, the written press, and more precisely the corporate mutations of *The Baltimore Sun*, which echo the turmoil that David Simon lived through and is prone to ranting against. By setting issues of reporting and fact-checking in parallel with a fiction constructed by detective McNulty (who makes up a fictional serial killer in order to attract media attention, and consequently sufficient funds to do “real police work”), this last season brings home the point that *The Wire* is not only about “politics, sociology and macroeconomics” (Sheehan and Sweeney 2009: 3) – it is also about storytelling and fiction-making. One of the central metaphors of *The Wire* is that of “the game”, a term which designates the parallel economy of the drug market, and social interaction more generally. In a reflexive way, the recurrence of the term can also apply to another parallel economy – the narrative and aesthetic economy that the series builds to try to represent the specific reality of Baltimore at the dawn of the 21st century. Thus, the series thematizes the difference between fiction and lies, implicitly advocating an ethical conception of fiction as sense-making in a world which increasingly vanishes behind

1 Such as the course taught by Anmol Chadha and William Julius Wilson at Harvard. The latter, who specializes in social and racial inequality in the United States, wrote *When Work Disappears*, a book quoted by David Simon as one of the influences for season 2 of *The Wire*. See Bennett (2010), Chadha and Wilson (2010, 2011).

2 Which were the aesthetics chosen for *The Corner*, the HBO adaptation of David Simon’s second non-fiction book.

3 Other metanarrative aspects have notably been previously studied by Sheehan and Sweeney (2009).

distorted or biased representations, behind “rigged games”. By placing fiction at the heart of season 5, *The Wire* encourages the audience to reflect on the processes and moral stakes of fiction making. We will first show that however close the series may be to the reality of urban poverty in Baltimore, it is also the result of a succession of re-mediations (Bolter and Grusin 1998) and fictional games, which make it an object lending itself to multiple perspectives – not just sociological, but also aesthetic, literary and filmic (see for instance Busfield 2009). Despite its dark subject matter (the decline in working-class labour; the failure to reform; the ways in which systems smother individual initiative), we will suggest that *The Wire* never becomes coldly cynical (Atlas and Dreier 2008), partly thanks to its metafictional dimension, to its ability to question the form it uses – not in an intellectualized or theoretical reflection, but rather in a playful engagement with its own mode of representation. Through the case study of the final season, we will see how the series plays out its ambivalence toward fictional codes and advocates a mode of critical fictional representation as an alternative to the current, devious modes of safety policy and journalism.

1. PLAYING “THE GAME” OF THE REAL

Mapping out the connections between *The Wire* and its real antecedents in Baltimore is a substantial enterprise, one which was successfully completed by both Linda Williams (2014) and Jonathan Abrams (2018). We will select a few elements to demonstrate how the series deliberately plays on the confusion between what could be considered as real, and the fictional process that integrates these allegedly “real elements” into the œuvre, so that it encourages the audience to question issues of representation rather than merely aspire to catch a sense of an underlying “reality”. It is well known that the two co-creators of the series, David Simon and Ed Burns, do not belong to the televisual world originally, but for years worked in direct contact with police activity in Baltimore. After serving in Vietnam, Ed Burns worked as a homicide detective in the Baltimore Police for twenty years, and then became a teacher – an experience that inspired the story arc of character Pryzbylowski (Jim True-Frost) in season 4. David Simon worked as a journalist for the *Baltimore Sun* from 1982 to 1995, specializing in criminal matters. Both came to TV fiction almost by accident. David Simon distanced himself from the *Baltimore Sun* when a large conglomerate bought the paper, and the new managers of the newspaper, longing

for a Pulitzer Prize, encouraged a spectacular treatment of news and a narrow focus on individual stories rather than the “broad sociological approach” that Simon values (see Williams 2014: 28). He then spent one year embedded in the homicide department, an experience he relates in his non-fiction book *Homicide* (1991), whose numerous characters and “real” facts nourished the NBC series of the same name, adapted by Tom Fontana and Barry Levinson (1993-1999). Simon participated in the enterprise, first as a consultant, then as a screenwriter in season 2, and finally as a producer in season 6, thus deliberately leaving the *Baltimore Sun* behind and frequently insisting on his disillusionment and anger towards what journalism had become (Hornby 2007).

When he decided to spend one year in the heart of one of the poorest, drug-ridden neighborhoods in Baltimore, this time to chronicle the other side of what he had represented in *Homicide* (addicts and small-time dealers), he asked Ed Burns to join him. Both men had met when Simon had spent a year with the homicide police. This led to the publication of *The Corner* (Simon 1997), which Simon then adapted for HBO in the form of a miniseries. *Homicide* and *The Corner*, books and series, would deeply shape *The Wire*, which was the outcome of long years in close proximity with Baltimore urban poverty and crime. The series also manifests the belief on the part of its creators that televised fiction now allows more freedom, more accuracy and greater impact than modern forms of journalism.

A great number of characters or elements of the plot of *The Wire* are inspired from facts that David Simon or Ed Burns themselves witnessed, or heard about from direct participants. They were then remodeled through the collective creation which TV series rely on. This close adherence to the real has led many commentators to wonder about which parts of the series were “true”, so that Simon felt obliged, at some point, to write a brief article in the *Baltimore Sun* to comment on the fictional status of the series, and remind viewers that it would be pointless to try and establish a strict concordance between the characters of “real Baltimore” and what would be their “HBO equivalents” (Simon 2004).

Beyond the more or less “real” origins of characters and facts (which can actually apply to a great number of fictional works), the series stands out for using non-professional actors for many secondary roles – whether they be former Baltimore cops, members of the criminal world, or simply people having lived in these neighborhoods⁴. Thus, drug

4 See notably Penfold-Mounce, Beer and Burrows (2011).

lord Avon Barksdale, the kingpin in the first three seasons, is a fictional character that is also an amalgam of real men – in this case, “Nathan Bodie” Barksdale who dominated the drug trade in Baltimore’s West Side for several years (and who later had his own docudrama, see Lefait 2013) and gang leader Melvin Williams, on whom David Simon wrote a series of articles in *The Baltimore Sun* in 1987⁵. The same Melvin Williams, who spent several years in jail for crime and drug trafficking following a police investigation led by Ed Burns, plays a secondary character in the show, that of the mild-spoken, benevolent deacon in seasons 3 and 4. Likewise, Omar Little, the gay, manly Robin Hood of the West Side who only robs drug dealers and never harms “citizens”, is also drawn from several “real” figures, among them Donnie Andrews, who had been arrested, then helped by Ed Burns for his reintegration. Donnie Andrews himself plays a minor character (called Donnie), in the last two seasons. The correspondence between reality and fiction is deliberately blurred when the series chooses to give the name “Jay Landsman” to one of the fictional detectives, the name of one of the policemen in the unit Simon joined as an embedded journalist, and whose “real” counterpart also joined the team of *The Wire* and played a secondary role from season 3 onwards (that of lieutenant Dennis Mello). Why so many mixes and false equivalents? Should we see this as a treasure hunt set up for viewers willing to research the production context and the connection with Baltimore history? The audience is indeed encouraged to launch their own investigation, to find information via other sources (for instance in non-fiction antecedents *Homicide* or *The Corner*). In the digital age, the series also exists as a possible version, a fiction caught in an intertextual game with other sources of information, which encourages us to explore the distinction between fiction and reality, between journalistic documentation and narrative construction. David Simon unequivocally explains this when asked about *Treme*, his series on post-Katrina New Orleans that also closely weaves together facts and fiction:

“Fuck the exposition [...]. Just *be*. The exposition can come later [...]. If I can make you curious enough, there’s this thing called Google. If you’re curious about the New Orleans Indians, or ‘second-line’ musicians—you can look it up.” The Internet, he

5 Reading Simon’s 1987 *Sun* series, entitled “‘Easy Money’: Anatomy of a Drug Empire,” is akin to viewing the organs of *The Wire*’s first-season wiretap investigation.” (Abrams 2018: 2). See also Williams (2014: 11).

suggests, can provide its own creative freedom, releasing writers from having to over explain, allowing history to light the characters from within. (Nussbaum 2010)

This complex game between real antecedents and fictional treatment thus allows the series to question what we mean by “realism”: by deliberately integrating “real” names, and non-professional actors, in the cast and storylines, the series enhances its critical, social, and ethnological ambition⁶. Long before *The Wire*, many crime shows had found the source of their characters and stories in real police cases, and relied on precise documentation to chronicle social issues. As early as Jack Webb’s series such as *Dragnet* (NBC, 1951-1959) or *Adam 12* (NBC, 1968-1975), “cop shows” were inspired by true facts, used precise police lingo in the dialogue, and stressed the administrative aspects of the job rather than any great, spectacular action. Later on, *Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1981-1987) and *NYPD Blue* (ABC, 1993-2005) also explored the moral ambiguities of their characters, and stressed the daily routine of police work. What distinguishes *The Wire* then, is the special combination of all these factors: its attention to detail and procedure, its refusal of Manichean logic, its emphasis on the intricate connection between the different institutions, and the link between individual (or institutional) decisions and their repercussions, far beyond their initial circle of application. This construction is made possible by the long duration and expansive scope of the serial form, and by the fictionalizing process which, in a quasi-experimental manner, creates model forms of the phenomena that Simon, Burns, and other screenwriters observed in real life. Sometimes, this modeling process veers away from realism to implement what Grégoire Chamayou calls “quasi-utopian sociopolitical experimentations,” as in season 3 when Major Colvin legalizes drugs in a circumscribed Baltimore neighborhood (Armati 2011). In the way it adheres to realistic principles as well as when it moves away from them, the series constantly questions issues of representation, placing this interrogation in an ethical framework. It implements fiction as a condition of experience (close to mathematical fiction), that allows sense-making. In this way, the conception of fiction demonstrated in the series strongly relies on what Jean-Marie Schaeffer calls a “specif-

6 I chose the term “ethnological” rather than “sociological” according to the distinction that considers the latter to use “quantitative method” whereas the former rather resorts to “qualitative methods” such as long-term field study and participatory observation, using the researcher’s subjectivity as a basic component of their work. See Poirier (1984: 6).

ic, epistemological conception of non-fiction”⁷, based on a strong belief in truth and fact-checking. Conversely, fiction is depicted as an epistemological tool in social and human experimentation. This tension between the rich, experimental nature of fiction, and the circumspection towards the dangers of distorting representation, culminates in the final season, which presents fiction as dangerous when it is performed out of place, notably in the journalistic or police context. But rather than considering this last season as a mere dismissal of the dangers of fiction, we will see how this precise representation of fiction making actually reflects on the overall project of *The Wire*.

2. POLICE-GENERATED FICTIONS: INVERTING REALITY

Let us briefly summarize the premise of season 5: Jimmy McNulty, a maverick detective who doesn't hesitate to disregard chain of command, agrees to come back to a special investigation unit (he had been almost absent in season 4, back to being a beat cop), after the new administration of young mayor Tony Carcetti has promised “a new day”. Hoping for a breakthrough in the fight against organized crime, McNulty is thus back in the special unit investigating the gang led by Marlo Stanfield, the current kingpin in Baltimore's West Side. Season 5 opens with bitter disillusion. The city is in dire financial straits, and as a consequence the special unit investigation is suspended. Policemen work in deplorable conditions: unpaid extra time, unrepaired service cars (at some point McNulty is reduced to taking the bus to go to a crime scene) – morale is low and anger is growing. At the *Baltimore Sun*, the situation is not much better. After the newspaper was bought out, the new management launches a drastic redundancy program, often laying-off the most experienced (and best paid) journalists. The new managers' obsession is to obtain a Pulitzer prize, even if it means adopting a looser code of journalistic ethics, and privileging narrow perspective on individual stories rather than shedding light on systemic causes.

A fiction is going to bring police and press together when McNulty, revolted by the inaction of his hierarchy and the lack of funding of “real police work”, has an idea. Called to witness the death of a homeless man, who obviously died of natural causes, he decides to tamper with the scene in order

to turn it into a crime. He will then link it with similar cases to manufacture the fiction of a serial killer who attacks homeless men, in the hope that these sensational cases will lead the administration to allot new credits to the homicide department, which he intends to use to secretly pursue the investigation on Marlo. Media coverage is necessary for his story to work, for authorities to consider it a priority and allow substantial funding. But this media coverage exceeds McNulty's expectations when Scott Templeton, one of the *Sun* journalists, pretends he spoke with the serial killer on the phone – a scoop which, he hopes, will finally set him in the good graces of the new managers and bring professional recognition.

This use of invention and storytelling to produce more effects and bypass the limits of reality allows season 5 to build a meta-narrative reflection on the fabrication of the series itself. Verisimilitude may be seen as a problem here because this specific narrative arc relies on an extreme, somewhat incredible act (see for instance Hoad 2017), but this also materializes the interrogation, throughout the series and mostly in this final stage, of an aspiration to a “fair” representation, and the danger of compromise by fiction. It also associates police work and representation, and stigmatizes the media's reliance on the spectacular. If Templeton is an absolutely negative character, whose motivations are never clearly revealed, McNulty's invention is presented as “the only solution” to try and change things for the better. Nicolas Vieillescazes associates these characters with two distinct philosophies: McNulty would be “Hegelian, considering that the false is a moment in the true”, while Templeton would follow Guy Debord's diagnosis “for whom, today, the true is only a moment of the false”; he seems to have understood that “the spectacular and bureaucratic society is nothing else but the reign of the false” (Vieillescazes 2011: 140). But the act of bringing the two characters together also signals that, in spite of the noble cause he tries or pretends to be serving, and although his stratagem does work up to a point, McNulty does not escape the logic he is opposing, and the system finally catches up with him – thus, his fiction is represented through many images of inversion, which question identities and subvert the policeman's project.

The most obvious phenomenon of inversion is that which transforms the policeman into a murderer. McNulty has just learnt that if strangulation takes place shortly after death, it can produce the same symptoms as if it had been the cause of death. He thus decides to strangle the homeless corpse himself (5.02), then another body later on. Even if these

7 Preface, in Cairra (2011: 11).



FIGURE 1. MCNULTY STRANGLING THE ALREADY DEAD HOMELESS MAN (2.02).

bodies are already dead, the sober, precise *mise en scène* of these two sordid scenes shows us McNulty in the position of a strangler.

Turning into a stage-manager and set designer of his own fictional crimes, McNulty also plays the part of the murderer he pretends to investigate, which creates a feeling of gnawing schizophrenia. In episode 8, he is forced to go to Quantico, the FBI's behavioral unit, where he listens to the agent's description of the alleged murderer, a description which fits McNulty so closely that it seems to work as a form of indirect therapy: the killer is "a white male between 25 and 40, suffering from a superiority complex, having problems with authority, probably a tendency to drink too much". For most of the agent's speech, the camera stays on McNulty, gradually moving closer to him and revealing barely discernible movements of his eyebrows, eyes and mouth, or variations of breathing, indicating that McNulty recognizes himself in that description, as do we. The use of the slow camera pull in makes him appear literally framed by that description.

This logic of inversion also applies to the way the series proposes, through this specific story arc, a mirror image of

the absurdity of the statistical logic of efficiency which dominates police work as depicted in season 3. The obsession with statistics leads city officials and police management to "juke the stats", that is, to reconfigure the way crime is categorized to make it appear on a downward trend, whereas in reality the trend remains flat. Here, McNulty applies the same logic, only he inverts it. He "jukes" the bodies to shift them from one category to another, from "death from natural causes" to "homicide". But reality catches up with him when his fiction generates real facts. In 5.10, once the truth is out and his scam has been revealed, a new murder of the alleged serial killer takes place – and this time it is a real murder, the work of a copycat. The simulacrum has replaced reality so well that now reality is imitating the simulacrum. This late twist leads to a resolutely non-realistic solving of the whole story arc: it brings McNulty back to his initial identity as a policeman, and to a sense of ethics. He is the one to find and arrest the murderer, in a resolution that is as swift as it is improbable. We can see this specific story arc as an ironic commentary on the frequent use of serial killers in TV series (at the time season 5 aired, season 2 of *Dexter* was running and was highly popular



FIGURE 2. THE MORGUE AS STUDIO (5.03).

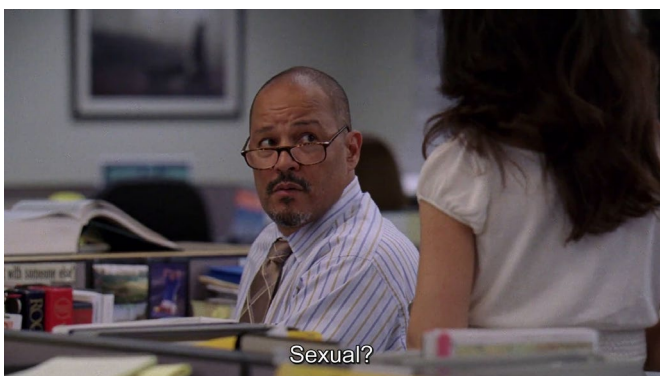
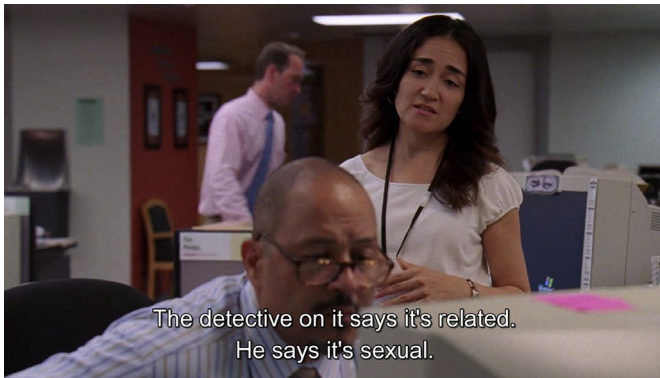
on *Showtime*, and is probably referenced by Dukie in 5.09 (“Dude you gotta see this! There’s a serial killer but he only kills other serial killers!”), as is shown also by the frequent references to screenwriting and *mise en scène*. This specific story arc in the last season thus shifts the focus away from verisimilitude to develop a metanarrative reflection on the very project of the show itself.

3. REFLEXIVITY AND META-NARRATIVE DEVICES

The metanarrative dimension has been a strong feature of the show from the beginning⁸, but it climaxes in season 5 in the way McNulty is depicted as the screenwriter and producer of his own work, a device that enhances the ambivalence of the series itself. First, it is a means to target the mediatization of

some police actions more than others. The interdependence between the police and the media is enhanced by the use of parallel editing connecting, for instance, a speech from the lieutenant to his troops, and a similar motivational speech from the editor in chief to his journalists. Above all, this season criticizes the flawed selection of what matters, and of what does not, in terms of media coverage and public funding. The press and the police constantly miss out on important things – a perverted effect of the connection between the spectacular dimension of criminal cases and the funds the police will obtain. McNulty is thus an amateur screenwriter who gradually learns his trade, and fleshes out his story with alluring detail. His fiction is elaborated as a series would be. In order to be produced, he needs to pitch it. After the first “murder” at the end of 5.02, he explains to his baffled partner Bunk, “There’s a serial killer in Baltimore. He preys upon the weakest of us all. He needs to be caught”. McNulty then becomes a director and prop man – when he ties the red ribbon (his serial killer’s trademark) around the wrist of the corpse, a long shot literally transforms the morgue into a studio, with lights and a camera on a tripod.

8 See Sheehan and Sweeney (2009) for other instances of the metanarrative trend in the show. For them, “[r]arely, if ever, has a television drama constructed a narrative with such a strong thrust to metanarrative”.



FIGURES 3 AND 4. GUS HAYNES STARTS PAYING ATTENTION WHEN HE LEARNS ABOUT THE SEXUAL NATURE OF THE KILLINGS.

But a good screenplay cannot be written alone – you need a writing team and a writer’s room, and writing needs to be collaborative. Thus detective Lester Freamon becomes the perfect co-screenwriter from season 3 onwards. When McNulty presents the facts to him, he doesn’t resent the idea of that fiction (unlike Bunk, who considers the whole thing disastrous madness), but the details of the plot, which he thinks need to be sexed up. All along the season, Lester is the *script doctor* who advises edits, improves the story, and encourages McNulty to “stick to the script” (5.07). This collaborative effort bears fruit, since Gus Haynes, the *Sun*’s editor in chief, starts paying attention only when he hears about the sexed up detail.

Ethical issues aside, McNulty and Freamon’s fiction indeed turns out to be effective. They are allotted a substantial budget which allows them to pursue their investigation on Marlo. Even if McNulty’s actions are subverted by the show’s defiance towards any form of deceit, one can see how the

series’ authors strongly identify with a character who, when faced with an untenable situation, resorts to fiction-making, as David Simon did in his own life. When McNulty goes beneath the freeway overpass to question real homeless people, he is appalled by the absurdity of his situation, carrying out a real investigation on an imaginary premise. Lester’s response then contains not a lesson on how to achieve spectacular effect, but a screenwriting principle which can apply to *The Wire*: “Work it like a real case, it will feel like a real case... most importantly it will read like a real case”. Verisimilitude and closeness to the real will guarantee the quality and the efficiency of the fiction.

Simon and the creative team thus introduce an ironic counterpoint to their own series, since *The Wire* is often considered as situated somewhat outside the narrative and aesthetic norms of mainstream series (no car chases or gunshots, little suspense, no Manichean opposition between right and wrong, no flashbacks or flash-forwards, no real cliffhangers, a quasi-systematic sticking to diegetic music, a general refusal of spectacular effects). The series also criticizes the scripting of some police actions, the main goal of which is to be spectacular (often referred to in the series as “dope on the table”), rather than having a long-term effect on crime or the drug trade. The media are also targeted, especially the written press as it was remodeled by corporate restructuring, budgetary constraints and acute competition. Several years before the age of “fake news”, the show represents how the prime focus on sensational news has led the press to sometimes disregard the frontier between fact and invention, as Scott Templeton’s success indicates.

Sensationalism is a recurrent target in season 5, notably when the simplifying elements of sensationalism seem to contaminate the language of some of the characters. McNulty’s motivation, for instance, is reduced to unsophisticated, binary logic when he explains his reasons to Bunk: “Marlo: he does not get to win. We get to win”. This simplistic rhetoric is also used by Deputy of Operations Daniels when he is asked to comment on the massive arrests taking place at the end of episode 9: “It’s a good day for the good guys”. Beside these Manichean remarks, Daniels later on uses a vocabulary specific to seriality in 5.10. At that point, McNulty knows that his superior found out what he did, and they find themselves alone for the first time in an elevator. The scene is a single take by the security camera of the elevator. They do not speak nor look at each other until Daniels gets out of the elevator, turns around towards McNulty and declares just before the doors close: “to be continued”.

This works as an ironic cliffhanger in a series that is strikingly devoid of them. By appropriating the fictional register, Daniels implies that McNulty is no longer the only one writing the script.

When the screenplay escapes the original author's control, or clashes with other versions, it leads to utmost confusion, as the end of the season demonstrates. The fiction becomes a machine which no one knows how to stop. In episode 7, Mayor Carcetti has been convinced by his advisers to use this serial killer story as a main theme of his campaign for governor. He had then considered this new element as an interesting, unpredictable twist to his own story. The final episode of the series opens precisely when he has been told the truth. We see him speechless for nearly thirty seconds, an exceptional thing for Carcetti who is generally eloquent and talkative. The politician at that point does not know his lines any more. He thought he was controlling his own storytelling but realizes someone else had been writing

his part without him knowing. Among the other characters present, only Norman, his ironic, critical adviser, is amused by the dramatic and fictional quality of the situation: "They manufactured an issue to get paid. We manufactured an issue to get you elected governor. Everybody gets what they want through some make-believe [...] It does have a certain charm to it". He will conclude the scene expressing his regrets that he is not a journalist any more, and so cannot write about it for posterity. There is too much to lose in the political and police circles – McNulty and Freamon will be discreetly dismissed, without any legal action, without ever revealing the true facts to the public.

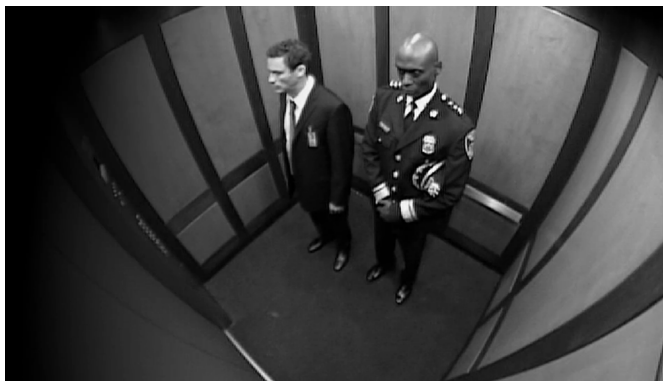
If McNulty's fiction is presented as flawed and doomed, its antithetical counterpart is journalist Mike Fletcher's article on Bubbles' story, based on the time Fletcher spent with him at the soup kitchen, at NA meetings, or distributing newspapers. Bubbles's story becoming a successful non-fiction narrative (it seems implemental in helping Bubbles complete his rehabilitation at the end of the show) emphasizes the circularity of the exploration of fiction in *The Wire*, a fiction which started in non-fiction (with Simon's journalistic work), and points back to non-fiction in its final moments.

Season 5 was criticized by disappointed viewers and critics for this serial killer arc, considered "too implausible" (Kois and Sternberg 2008), because unacceptably breaking with the aesthetic and narrative norms of the series. More recently, however, reviewers have acknowledged the enduring relevance of this thematic focus on fact and fiction:

Rewatching it, the McNulty-Will-Kill-Again swerve stands out a bit less as a conspicuous drop in standards, perhaps because fabrication has gone mainstream. Fake News is now a trademark and – caught in the social-media hothouse – we all understand the conditions under which it has run rampant. (Hoad 2017)

Season 5 indeed demonstrates the seduction and efficiency allowed by the spectacular dimension of well-scripted "fake news" – although the term is of course never used in *The Wire*, which ended long before it became widespread from the 2016 election onwards⁹. Watching season 5 again today, in the light of recent political questionings of truth vs. deceitful, spectacular fabrications, especially as spread by social media, allows us to take some distance with the

9 See Lazier et al. 2018.



FIGURES 5 AND 6. AFTER AN AWKWARD ENCOUNTER IN THE ELEVATOR CAPTURED BY THE SECURITY CAMERA, DANIELS' OMINOUS COMMENT BORROWS FROM THE VOCABULARY OF SERIAL FICTION.

phenomenon. Fake news is far from being a new phenomenon, and has always been characterized by its “sensationalist and extreme” nature, often leading to dismal, violent consequences¹⁰. In season 5, our attention is rather drawn to the common responsibility we share when dealing with fiction-making or what is shown to be a necessary companion: fact-checking. Of course *The Wire* is neither the first nor the last series to develop a metanarrative discourse. From *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (the WB/UPN, 1997-2003) to *Lost* (ABC, 2004-2010) or *Fringe* (Fox, 2008-2013), and more recently, *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008-2013) or *WestWorld* (HBO, 2016-), the form of the TV series has become increasingly self-referential, multiplying elements of screenplay and mise en scène pointing to the constructedness of the narrative or the fictional status of the characters, for instance. But the use of fiction-making in *The Wire* stands out for its openly political agenda: it demonstrates not so much a mistrust towards fiction, but an ethical conception of fiction-making and the responsibility it entails. McNulty’s fiction follows other fictions devised by the characters of *The Wire* to attempt to change things for the better. These individual fictional enterprises (Frank Sobotka’s dream of revitalising the port activity and Major Colvin’s legalization of drugs in Season 3 are other examples) participate in what Fredric Jameson has called the series’s “Utopianism” (Jameson 2010) which defies the tragic dimension that David Simon often brings up (Alvarez 2009). Although the series is overwhelmingly dark, and although these individual enterprises do lead to spectacular failure (Frank’s death, Major Colvin’s retirement, McNulty’s dismissal), they do still manifest a belief in the fact that an unacceptable situation should be changed, and acknowledge the inventiveness of the human brain to come up with alternate ideas, however flawed they may be. Linda Williams has already argued that the shift from the op-ed (David Simon’s writings in *The Baltimore Sun*) to the serial form strengthened the political impact because the distribution of “discourse among a plurality of voices” avoided the “sanctimonious tone that we find in op-ed pieces” (Williams 2014: 27-36). Just as the series manages to “disperse and interweave narrative threads so thoroughly through so many different worlds that it becomes difficult to distinguish between A, B, C or D levels”, or to “to say who is a main character” (Williams 2014: 49), the delegation of fiction-making to some characters in season 5 demonstrates that *The Wire* is inscribed in what Jacques Rancière calls “fictional democracy”.

10 See Soll (2016) for a historical perspective on fake news.

The metafictional dimension indeed places *The Wire* in a literary tradition that now also encompasses TV series. Rancière showed how the changes in novelistic fiction during the 19th century played a major role in the type of knowledge specific to humanities and social science. He explains the role that modern literature played in questioning the binary split between (poetic) fiction and (historical) reality, and in implying the idea of the superiority of fiction as the realm of necessity and universality, whereas reality would be the realm of particularities and contingency. *The Wire*, by its explorations of the “edges of fiction” (be it through the play between real names, non-professional actors or closeness with the journalistic reality of Baltimore, or through metafictional story arcs, especially in season 5) embodies a similar notion of fictional democracy that attempts to account for the sensible experience of anonymous lives, for the common experience shared by numerous characters, however separate and opposed they may be. Through its egalitarian attribution of discourse to all characters, its refusal of Manichean dichotomies, its turning away from the individual hero, and its preference for the common sharing of fictional and narrative space, the series, like Balzac or Flaubert’s novels, negates the separation between the heroic and the common, and refuses to privilege some forms of life over others. This is true on the level of the screenplay as well as in terms of editing, framing and mise en scène, or sound treatment (see Hudelet 2014, 2016). *The Wire* can thus be seen as an example of a televisual equivalent to Rancière’s “democratic revolution of fiction”, which according to him is not “the great arrival of the masses on the Historical stage”, but “the process by which those who were nothing become everything [...] That is to say, to become the fabric within which – through the weft and warp of which – events hold on to one another” (Rancière 2017: 152). Just as for Rancière, fictional democracy “implements a very specific form of equality” (Rancière 2014: 34), *The Wire* chooses to distribute its political discourse through the “common breathing” of all characters, all placed on the same narrative level.

The concept is particularly effective for *The Wire*, with its openly “socialist” agenda, in David Simon’s own words (Simon 2013), but it does not set it against the bulk of other TV show so much as it sheds light on the common ground it shares with other shows characterized by their ensemble cast and equal sharing of multiple storylines, demonstrating a “strict equivalence of the represented subjects” (Rancière 2014: 23-4; 84-5). Compared with a cinematic production increasingly dominated by heroes that stand out from the common folk (Marvel, DC, *StarWars* or *Lord of the Rings* franchises),

a certain type of TV series – *The Wire* in particular – stands out because of this place they have acquired in our cultural environment as inheritors of the modern novel, in the way they enact a form of equality, “the egalitarian power of the common breathing which animates the multitude of sensible events” (Rancière 2014: 34).

CONCLUSION.

“THE CERTAIN CHARM” OF FICTION

Rather than being uniformly “realistic”, *The Wire* interrogates the very notion of realism and most importantly, of what fiction is and what fiction does. Rather than aspiring “to fracture the image to reveal reality itself, as such, beyond all mediation”, to achieve a sort of “representation without representation” (Vieillecazes 2011: 130), the last season of the series demonstrates the fact that fiction is not dismissed but explored and analyzed. Simon often evokes the influence of Frederick Wiseman and of his “observational cinema”, a documentary approach devoid of narrative voiceover, of diegetic music, or direct interviews in front of the camera, which represents reality as closely as possible, with a mix of empathy and humor. But this Wisemanian influence concerns mostly an ethical conception of aesthetics rather than confusion between documentary and fiction. As season 5 indicates (and sometimes to the displeasure of some viewers), the series acknowledges the impossibility of absolute realism and salutes the “certain charm” of fiction. *The Wire* encourages us to enjoy the pleasures of fiction while constantly questioning the codes of the spectacular which tend to trigger our empathy or identification.

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Corner (The) (HBO, 2000)
Dragnet (NBC, 1951-1959)
Fringe (Fox, 2008-2013)
Hill Street Blues (NBC, 1981-1987)
Homicide (NBC, 1993-1999)
Lost (ABC, 2004-2010)
NYPD Blue (ABC, 1993-2005)
Westworld (HBO, 2016-)
Wire (The) (HBO, 2002-2008)

