arq (2014), **18.2**, 135–144. © Cambridge University Press 2014

The creative methods behind HBO's *The Wire* evoke original ways to experiment with speculative work that reveal the merit of the imaginary as a pragmatic research device.

The Wire as speculative research

Benjamin Leclair-Paquet

Created by David Simon in 2002, the HBO series *The Wire* presents the established moral code of a society that lies outside mainstream America and depicts institutions designed to maintain the status quo. Terry Eagleton suggests of Dickens, that his 'grotesque realism is a stylistic distortion in the service of truth, a kind of astigmatism which allows us to see more accurately.'[1] The content of Simon's programme operates in a similar way. It proposes an alternative to academic narratives able to disseminate knowledge beyond the closed-off world of peer review.

The richness, uniqueness and intricacy of *The Wire* has made it difficult to trace its thematic and stylistic heritage. The programme has been referred to as a 'lyrical sociology',[2] 'a type of urban sociology',[3] 'a rendering of urban theory',[4] a 'font-less social science',[5] a 'theoretical archetype',[6] a 'Dickensian show',[7] and more. At an aesthetic level, *The Wire* has been qualified as a work of 'psychological realism',[8] 'social realism',[9] as something aspiring to Fredric Jameson's aesthetics of 'cognitive mapping',[10] or even a 'rich counterpart to actor-network-theory'.[11] Linda Williams' synopsis of the HBO programme is particularly efficient in introducing the themes central to this series:

> *In the microcosm of one decaying American city, we see the interconnected truths of many institutional failures – rampant drug trade and thus the failure of police and law, declining unions and thus the decrease of the very value of work, a cynical city government and the failure of reform, the poignant waste of schools, and a media that cannot see the truth of what is revealed before its very eyes.*[12]

Written from the liberal perspective, *The Wire* explores themes relating to urban inequity and systemic urban dysfunction. Each season brings into focus separate institutions and reports on ways by which each of these microcosms is in fact connected despite their apparent distance.

While the root causes for the inner-city's vulnerability are grounded in historical contexts outside the reach of *The Wire*'s narrative, the programme points to a range of contemporary agencies that continue to negatively affect disenfranchised individuals. It presents a world difficult to understand and hard to access. For architects interested in the humanist dimension of design work, *The Wire* introduces a social milieu able to inform design programmes and potential projects. More than that, it introduces a method that could allow projects and programmes to be tested through experiences built from techniques that are central to the discipline of architecture.

The Wire foregrounds what Michel de Certeau explored long ago regarding the relation of tactics to strategies; the latter belonging to the strong and forms of established power, while tactics are 'determined by the *absence of power.*'[13] As opposed to the common use of 'the speculative' in architectural research and experimental practices, *The Wire* does not primarily engage with utopianism to stimulate visions of alternative futures; first and foremost, it uses speculation to identify failure-points within a network. In this process, the HBO programme foregrounds the importance of multi-sited approaches for the progression of tactics into strategies. As a result, *The Wire* is able to test speculative scenarios and locate forces that keep utopian developments separated from reality. This method relies on devices such as the programme's narrative structure, which follows the logic of actor-network-theory (ANT).

Drawing a story, line by line

For Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, the notion of the 'line' is used to map the cartography of social space as a process defined by dynamic elements and actors.[14]

> *As individuals and groups we are made of lines which are very diverse in nature – we have as many entangled lines as a hand. What we call with different names – schizoanalysis, micro-politics, pragmatics, diagrammatics, rhizomatics, cartography – is nothing else but the result of the study of the lines that we are.*[15]

Defined as such, these lines correspond to what Bruno Latour refers to as 'social'. In Latour's actor-network-theory, the term 'sociology' refers to the 'tracing of associations'; it refers to the architecture of collectives.

doi: 10.1017/S135913551400044X

https://doi.org/10.1017/S135913551400044X Published online by Cambridge University Press





1 Harlem Park, West Baltimore (2013)

2 Boarded-up houses, Harlem Park, West Baltimore (2013)

https://doi.org/10.1017/S135913551400044X Published online by Cambridge University Press

The task of the ANT researcher is to transcribe on paper the travels of the actors and the encounters that affect their paths by sticking to description. Latour opposes the dichotomy between description and explanation. 'If a description remains in need of an explanation, it means that it is a bad description.'[16] ANT forbids 'free rides to all-terrain entities like Society, Capitalism, Empire, Norms, Individualism, Fields, and so on.'[17] Connections should instead be through more description, leaving aside encompassing concepts. The aim is to achieve a scientific relevance that escapes the reach of other sociologies by resisting social explanations and to instead return to empiricism.

The Wire constitutes a remarkable achievement as a typically descriptive ANT account – slow and precise – and more resistant to leapfrogging than most academic texts. Partly because of its format, it cannot rely on shortcuts such as 'capitalism' or 'globalisation' to explain the partial disappearance of blue-collar jobs in an American city once renowned for its thriving port and factories. It does not summarise the effect that this has had on working-class families by using labels like 'urban poverty', nor through unemployment statistics. It demonstrates the meaning of globalisation on the local scale by taking viewers into the everyday life of affected individuals. Through storytelling, it simulates the effect that such economic transformations have had on families and places. It recreates a scene where Baltimore longshoremen are introduced to the use of robotics in the port of Rotterdam to express how the need for labour is slowly disappearing in first world economies; it shows how international technologies and knowledge threatens local jobs. It foregrounds the reliance of foreign narcotic markets through storylines that never directly speak of global interconnections or the primacy of capital gain over people. The impact, instead, is only described through a narrative that never departs from the localism of Baltimore. Capitalism and globalism remain unnamed in the drama, even if their effects transpire throughout much of the programme's five seasons.

Following the paths of ANT, *The Wire* reveals that 'things might authorise, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid, and so on'[18] rather than 'determine' actions. Or, as Jonathan Hill would have it, '[t]he user decides whether architecture is immaterial. But the architect, or any other architectural producer, creates material conditions in which that decision can be made.'[19] The distance that exists between things, such as material architecture and their intended function, is illustrated nowhere better than in Baltimore's inner city. Copper plumbing pipes installed throughout historic rowhouses are commonly used as a currency on the streets of Baltimore, leaving vacant dwellings especially vulnerable as walls get stripped away to reach the bankable matter. In these abandoned constructions once designed as homes, stable human life has withered away *[1]*. Doors and windows designed to grant passage between the home and the uncertain world that lies outside it have since become holes to patch *[2]*. For ANT, the social is not structuring any more than Hill's architecture; both are constantly made and remade through 'lines' that carry in them certain forces. As Jeremy Till writes, '[a]rchitecture is [...] shaped more by the external conditions than by the internal process of the architect',[20] and so is the social. One of *The Wire*'s remarkable achievements lies in the show's ability to demonstrate this, thereby exposing the influence that things, people and institutions have on each other in the fictional Baltimore of HBO.

Multi-sited ethnographic imaginary

The process behind the creation of *The Wire* plays a strong role in setting this programme apart from other films or television shows and positioning it as a unique cultural object. Three strategies have had a particularly important effect in achieving this: characters are based on existing individuals, the show was filmed on site whenever possible, and most importantly, the plot lines are rooted in primary sources and ethnographic research. Together, this triad of elements allows *The Wire* to perform as a 'multi-sited imaginary ethnography'.[21]

The first scene of *The Wire*'s pilot opens on the warm corpse of Snot Boogie, a young black man laying face down on a wet pavement in the inner city of Baltimore. Detective Jimmy McNulty is sitting on a small porch, boarded vacant housings to his back as he engages a mourning eyewitness in conversation. He listens to the accounts as he fails to conceal his disbelief. 'Let me understand you. Every Friday night, you and your boys would shoot craps,[22] right? And every Friday night, your boy Snot Boogie ... he'd wait till there was cash on the ground, then grab the money and run away? You let him do that? [...] I gotta ask you ... if every time Snot Boogie would grab the money and run away ... why'd you even let him in the game? [...] If Snot Boogie always stole the money, why'd you let him play?' After a short pause, the young man answers, 'Got to. This is America, man.'[23] The story of Snot Boogie was real, most of it anyway. It is in fact part of Simon's 1991 non-fiction novel *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets*.[24]

David Simon spent twelve years writing for the *Baltimore Sun*. He was assigned on the police beat from day one in 1983.[25] Simon later took a year-long leave of absence at the *Baltimore Sun* to carry out research for his novel. As he followed the lives and cases of a homicide unit, Simon gained insights of the department and of the darker side of a murder-ridden city, which directly informed *Homicide*, later fictionalised for NBC. As ethnography has been defined as a method that 'privileges an engaged, contextually rich and nuanced type of qualitative social research, in which fine grained daily interactions constitute the lifeblood of the data produced',[26] Simon's first book may be considered as ethnographic. But as Linda Williams points out, 'Simon was not a professional ethnographer' and while his methods of studying the cops, 'can be described as ethnographic from the very beginning', his personal involvement with his

https://doi.org/10.1017/S135913551400044X Published online by Cambridge University Press

subjects may have made him 'too identified for good ethnography.'[27]

In 1993, Simon spent another year away from the newspaper to team up with Ed Burns, a former Baltimore City homicide detective. To Simon, 'Burns had an encyclopaedic knowledge of the Baltimore drug trade, a conviction that he was right about most things, and an autodidact's intellectualism.'[28] Burns, who had by then left police work to become a middle-school teacher, had been involved in wiretap cases similar to those portrayed on *The Wire*.[29]

Their first collaboration cumulated in the book *The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner-City Neighborhood* published in 1997, which can be read as the prequel to *The Wire*. Written as a novel, the book recounts actual events and uses the real names of its characters. Simon and Burns engaged in up-close and personal observation in the research phase of their co-authored publication later turned into a mini-series for HBO:

> *For* The Corner, *Simon and Burns, who had not been given any institutional permission to observe, hung out on the West Fayette Street neighborhood corners practicing what they unpretentiously call 'stand-around-want-watch-journalism'. This journalism transmutes into ethnography at the point at which the two men became fixtures on the scene and began to understand its day-to-day rhythms and dramas.*[30]

Their dissociation from their subjects assured a more objective approach than Simon had achieved with *Homicide*. The work, however, remains a 'single-site' ethnography, which does not do justice to the larger system as it abstracts micro-worlds (the lived space of cops, gangs, politicians, educators, etc.) that are instead constructed through other means than ethnography. Anthropologist George Marcus developed 'multi-sited ethnography' precisely to address this shortcoming. 'The only problem, as Marcus freely admits, is that no single ethnographer has enough knowledge of enough worlds and enough time to show enough parts to reveal a whole system.'[31] For Marcus, this impossibility for a thorough multi-sited ethnography is solved through what he refers to as the 'ethnographic imaginary'.

As opposed to *The Corner*, which focuses on the lived spaces of addicts, *The Wire* comes as a close realisation to Marcus's 'multi-sited ethnographic imaginary'; a paradigm useful for cases 'where there is very little actual contact or exchange between two sites but where the functioning of one of the sites (the more strategic one?) depends on a very specific imagining of what is going on elsewhere.'[32] For such research, the imaginary is crucial in drawing the lines forming a social cartography. Fieldwork in an initial site should thus aim at identifying the 'complex nature of the relation between disjunctive sites, how they are coordinated, if they are', in order to define where and how connections occur.[33]

The Wire's fiction is informed by ethnographic work and professional experiences as Simon and Burns belonged to three of the institutions central to the show: the Baltimore City Police Department, a Baltimore middle-school and the *Baltimore Sun*. What is more, 'stand-around-want-watch-journalism' was undertaken for two other micro-worlds covered by *The Wire*: the spaces of inner-city drug addicts and the world of homicide detectives.

As David Simon and Nina Noble explain in the DVD audio commentaries of the episode 'Time After Time',[34] the programme was shot entirely in Baltimore.[35] The court scene from 'The Target'[36] was filmed in a Baltimore courtroom. Orlando's strip club is the Ritz Cabaret, a nude dancing joint located in Baltimore's Fell's Point. Simon's stubborn preoccupation with on-site filming did not deter from scenes taking place in Baltimore's renounced neighbourhood where the open-air drug scene remains poorly disguised.

Casting for *The Wire* also suggests a predisposition to showcase the real Baltimore. As pointed out by former Mayor Kurt Schmoke (who acted in *The Wire* as Baltimore City's Health Commissioner):

> *The characters and the major events on* The Wire *are composite images reflecting the reality of Baltimore. Long-time residents of the city could provide you with the names of people bearing great resemblance to the politicians, policemen, drug dealers, dock workers, teachers and preachers portrayed in this television drama.*[37]

Some of the cops on the show were closely inspired by detectives that Ed Burns had the opportunity to work with and David Simon studied and covered as an author and journalist. *The Wire*'s inclination for casting actors playing themselves is pushed to the extreme with extras:

> *The decision to use local Baltimore residents as extras became especially poignant for the cast and crew during the fourth season. Jermaine Crawford, who played Duquan 'Dukie' Weems, said in an interview, 'I was confused, and Ed Burns, when we were filming in the classroom, said to me, "The [extra] kids you're filming with, a lot of these kids in this classroom right now are real Dukies".'*[38]

Omar Little represents a different type of 'real' character. Like other figures of the show, he was built as a montage of different local infamous gangsters. This exquisite cadaver is reconstructed from 'a range of individuals who robbed drug dealers between the 1980s and early 2000s.'[39]

Columbia University's Sudhir Venkatesh viewed *The Wire* with a group of current and former gang members for a nine-part article he developed for *freakonomics.com*. A key segment of Venkatesh's entries relates to the controversial killing of Omar, whose fictional death was reported in the obituaries of *Newsweek*.[40] According to critics and bloggers, the beloved thug's inevitable death was denied the grandeur it deserved. In the fifth season, Omar retires from his career as a stick-up artist and leaves Baltimore for Puerto Rico, before returning to avenge the killing of Butchie, his confidant, broker and father figure. Careless and angry, he roams the streets of Baltimore on his own, looking for only one man and robbing his drug corners for spite and attention. After dumping a drug package he has just snatched from Marlo Stanfield's dealers down a sewer, he walks into a corner store. He heads

https://doi.org/10.1017/S135913551400044X Published online by Cambridge University Press

straight to the counter: 'I need a pack of Newport … soft pack.' The camera moves into the clerk's booth to focus on Omar from behind the scratched bulletproof window – a common sight in Baltimore *[3]*. The sound of the shop's door opening catches his attention. He looks towards the noise and slowly returns his gaze to the clerk when the bang of a gunshot violently interrupts the ambiance music sourced from the store's radio. Omar Little falls to the ground. The camera shifts to the shooter, Kenard, a 12-, maybe 13-year-old hopper, part of Namond Brice's 'Fayette Street Mafia' crew. Calm and afraid, he walks towards the fallen local legend laying flat on his back as he keeps his Beretta 92F straight on target. The handgun[41] looks especially big in the boy's small hands. Kenard gives the body a push – his way to verify the death – takes a few steps back, drops the piece and walks away.

The killing of the most feared man in *The Wire*'s Baltimore is credited to a kid whose name very few viewers even know. Venkatesh's thug friends are less surprised than the disapproving viewers. 'It can happen to any of us, just like that. You think you're going out to buy some chicken and Pepsi, and the next thing, some kid wants to make a name for himself by taking you out.'[42] The refusal to heighten Omar's death through dramatic suspense adds to *The Wire*'s realism at the cost of dramatic effect, while foregrounding the banality of death in the inner city.

Some institutions achieving invaluable community work are surveyed rather rapidly or left out of *The Wire* altogether. As Marcus points out, a complete multi-sited ethnography is impossible. Nonetheless, the spaces central and covered at length throughout *The Wire* – those of Baltimore's underworld and of the darker side of underperforming public institutions – are described with commendable authenticity. The story of witness intimidation by gang members is not undone because Nakeesha Lyles is fictional. Simon comments, 'I saw this once, I saw this two-thousand times. In real court rooms.'[43] As Latour writes, '[t]o endow an agency with anonymity gives exactly as much a figure as when it is endowed with a name, a nose, a voice, or a face. It's just making it *ideo*- instead of *anthropo*-morphic.'[44]

On the other hand, with the freedom of artistic expression, *The Wire* 'can weave together the range of forces that shape the lives of the urban poor.'[45] Precisely because of this, this HBO programme outperforms any other attempt to date to depict the American inner city and the institutions that work against the welfare of the urban poor. This use of the 'imaginary' is indeed central to *The Wire*'s capacity to explore the reasons behind each decision being taken, politically or otherwise.

Spaces of change

Simulation platforms allow research to go further by experimenting with complex adaptive organisations that are impossible to investigate by other means. 'The simulation framework by its very nature is able to demonstrate dynamic interactions and to yield empirical outputs.'[46] By using the universe of *The Wire* as a simulation platform, the show's operators were able to test speculative development. As 'we can envisage alternative futures whose very propagation might help them be realised',[47] *The Wire*'s development of speculative scenarios hints at the possibility of overcoming dysfunctional aspects in contemporary urban systems by opening the imagination to potential alternatives. The programme's departure from the real Baltimore emerges from a realist narrative, following the logic of 'science-fiction' as defined from Frederic Jameson to Darko Suvin.

The specific difference between science-fiction and other estranging genres, such as fantasy, is that science-fiction's displacements must be logically



3 Harlem Park, West Baltimore (2013)

https://doi.org/10.1017/S135913551400044X Published online by Cambridge University Press



4

4 Broadway, East Baltimore (2013)

5 Harlem Park, West Baltimore (2012)

consistent and methodological; in fact, they must be scientific to the extent that they imitate, reinforce and illuminate the process of scientific cognition.[48]

This feature allows the scenario to develop in a way that mimics reality, while keeping the freedom to overwrite very specific aspects of the real world with something unreal and perhaps utopian. A clear example of this can be found in *The Wire*'s pilot episode, which was filmed two months after the attacks of 9/11. Before the FBI announced a shift in priority away from drugs to re-focus on the issue of terrorism, creators of *The Wire* accurately speculated on this significant change. As McNulty pays a visit to Agent Fitzhugh at the FBI's office to share some intelligence on an ongoing drug case, the Baltimore Police detective is surprised to learn about Fitzhugh's disinterest. While the FBI has not formally announced a withdrawal of its commitment in prosecuting drug-related offences, the fight against controlled substances has become secondary to counter-terrorism ever since the attacks on the Twin Towers. In fact, '[s]hortly after filming the pilot, it was announced that the FBI would be reducing their drug effort.'[49]

The Wire's detractors such as Peter Dreier and John Atlas contend that *The Wire* fails 'not because the show wasn't upsetting, but because it portrayed urban life as hopeless.'[50] The two scholars overlooked the programme's precious utopian openings and the value of *The Wire* as a study of failure-points. Stringer Bell's stance for violence-free gang activities, Major Colvin's Hamsterdam project for a drug-tolerant zone, Frank Sobotka's dream for a revitalised port in a post-industrial economy and Detective McNulty's scheme for strategic policing, open up utopian moments while paving the way for speculations on the possibility of change in Baltimore. The move from representation to simulation is in fact chiefly used to portray the possibility of alternatives and the potential impact of reform.

Utopias are related to the notion of change, to alternative spaces, to critical and hopeful speculation on future forms. As such, they may represent end goals, or spaces necessary to move along the continuum towards a wished (perfected) future. Bertolt Brecht contends, '[r]eality, however incomplete, has to be altered by being turned into art, so that it can be seen to be alterable and treated as such.'[51] His realist theatre allowed him to speculate on potential alternatives, which prepares the mind for change to come.

Brecht maintained that change always brings 'the new', which can never be retrogressive or degenerative. His method transmitted 'the new' through a popular media of his time: the theatre. He developed this theatre into an apparatus of dissemination for new ideas, thereby allowing transformative thoughts to travel across a network and potentially scale up. Like David Simon, he relied in part on a realist aesthetic to allow his plays to reflect the everyday experience of his audience, wide and varied as it was. His defence for 'the new' draws a similar argument as Hegel's for the 'speculative':

The way in which the very idea of a concept carries within it its own utopian energy, projects a world 'equal' to the concept in question, at the same time as it passes judgement on worlds that have not yet raised themselves to that level.[52]

Brecht's insistence on the value of 'the new' through speculations is also supported by the work of Anthony Giddens. Writing on the concept of 'utopian realism', Giddens follows the thoughts of Brecht:

Anticipations of the future become part of the present, thereby rebounding upon how the future actually develops; utopian realism combines the 'opening of

https://doi.org/10.1017/S135913551400044X Published online by Cambridge University Press



5

> *windows' upon the future with the analysis of ongoing institutional trends whereby political futures are imminent in the present.*[53]

As opposed to grand utopias (perfected spaces), utopian realism relies on the *novum*, much like *The Wire*'s temporary utopias. The term *novum* denotes the 'historical innovation or novelty in a [science-fiction] text from which the most important distinction between the world of the tale from the world of the reader stem.'[54] By definition, the *novum* is rational and logically derived. It allows the narrative to unfold through realist events by changing the behaviour, character or modalities of one or more actors in a network. As the *novum* is grounded in a plausible fiction, it offers to narratives the potential to transmit alternative possibilities through rational speculations, testing their feasibility at the same time.

Aligning with the objectives of Brecht and Giddens, *The Wire* criticises and speculates through the folding and unfolding of utopian moments. In *The Wire*, '[u]topian elements are introduced, without fantasy or wish fulfilment, into the construction of the fictive, yet utterly realistic, events.'[55] These utopian elements are generally muted early, however. As the *novum* is introduced at only one place in the network, utopian openings tremble when faced with actors sticking with the status quo. *The Wire* does not reinforce the notion that 'change is impossible'. It conveys that change in one part of a network does not guarantee the rebalancing of entire structures. Michel de Certeau's differentiation between tactics and strategies encapsulates the fragility that characterises singular actions developed without the support of wider institutions. Tactics are not comprehensive acts but timely actions, de Certeau notes, which blow-by-blow take advantage of opportunities.[56] Sometimes referred to as 'micropolitics',[57] tactics are concerned with the inscription of a being in a place, which is central to the notion of politics such as it has been defined from Plato to Rancière. However, as *The Wire* demonstrates, such tactics can be absorbed back any time because of the relations of power between tactics and strategies.

The Wire explores the reasons behind each decision being taken, politically or otherwise, and as it achieves this, it sketches networks, outlines failure-points and recreates their effects on other nodes of the web. As the drug epidemic spiralled out of control in the Baltimore of HBO,[58] Major Colvin proposed an amnesty with street-level drug-dealers willing to relocate their illegal activities to deserted areas in East and West Baltimore, away from plain sight and decent people. Sergeant Carver explains to a group of street dealers, '[b]eginning today, you can sell drugs in West Baltimore, but only where we say you can.'[59] The proposition seems appealing. For viewers familiar with 'The Platzspitz', Zurich's defunct 'Needle Park' – an open drug scene that lasted from the late 1980s until 1992 – the project dubbed as 'Hamsterdam' does not seem far-fetched. The Major explains to mid-level dealers, 'I want to salvage what's still worth salvaging in my district. And I can't do that with a bunch of young hoppers running around scaring the district.'[60] For most viewers, Colvin's tactic is logically derived and presumably attractive for the countless corner boys and drug users being constantly hassled by the police. At first sight, Hamsterdam seems to bring

https://doi.org/10.1017/S135913551400044X Published online by Cambridge University Press

a welcome plateau of stability to the otherwise trembling world of dealers and users.

As *The Wire* follows the lines connecting a myriad of actors affected by the Hamsterdam project, reality sets in; the impossibility of Colvin's plan comes into view as the utopian dimension of the scheme can no longer hide. One of Marlo Stanfield's dealers protests: 'Look, we grind[61] and ya'll gonna try to stop it. That's how we do. Why you gotta go fuck with the programme.'[62] At this point it becomes obvious how street corners themselves have become strong actors in the Baltimore drug scene. They enable dealers to reach specific markets, they grant upon the gangs who run them street credibility – social status in the inner city – and are thereby worth fighting over. Having the right to sell drugs on a specific corner is meaningful to old school thugs, such as Avon Barksdale and his real-life counterparts. The Hamsterdam project unsettles the network of Baltimore's underground economy. It reduces the value of certain actors – the corners and other 'real-estates'[63] – thereby destabilising the actor-network configuration of the collective in place.

Eventually and through ruthless tactics, Major Colvin and the Western District division of the Baltimore Police impose upon dealers their will to relocate drug-dealing to any of the three designated 'free-zones', thereby clearing out most corners in the inner city of Baltimore.[64] The street level drug trade is thus pushed to areas so blighted that no citizen is believed to still live around. Such ghosts blocks exist in *The Wire* as they do in the real city of Baltimore, where well over 16,000 residential dwellings are currently vacant *[4, 5]*.[65]

The Hamsterdam project meets its ultimate demise as Colvin's superior discovers the rogue major's experiment. The reduction of crime in the district and piles of supportive letters by local citizens are brushed aside as Colvin's efforts function against the strategy for the war on drugs. The project is immediately condemned to its end, as is Bunny Colvin's career with the Baltimore Police.

Fredric Jameson points out, '[i]f the plot of *The Wire* were to show its success, the representation would imply the Utopian (or revolutionary) transformation and reconstruction of all society itself.'[66] By stopping these realisations, *The Wire* pinpoints failure-points in the transformative endeavours, where attempts to introduce 'the new' are either slowed down or completely stopped by actors who have not embarked on the transformative mission. It highlights the shortcomings of reformist programmes that only consider a limited set of sites and actors in the network.

The Wire's cynical conclusion does not necessarily come as a result of the author's pessimistic views on the future of America's inner city, as some of the show's critics have suggested.[67] *The Wire*'s downbeat ending implies that Simon does not have the solution; that a hopeful ending could not be defined within the genre of *The Wire*, which is retrospective science-fiction, not fantasy.

The Wire as Method

The Wire's method is composed as a rhizomatic assemblage; a crossing between categories of sorts. Conceptually, it mimics multi-sited ethnography; methodically, it follows Bruno Latour's actor-network-theory; performatively, it aligns with Bertolt Brecht's alternative entertainment as it extends a political message by other means. *The Wire* also presents a definitive political intention as it showcases ways by which tactics designed to address urban problematics cannot be maintained as a result of the dysfunctional institutional arrangements in place. While it has become clear that the content of this celebrated television programme constitutes a unique cultural object, the method behind *The Wire* also has much to contribute. What could it mean to read *The Wire* as an allegory for new methods in architectural research? As it has become apparent through this deconstruction of the television programme, *The Wire* foregrounds the political value of utopian realism. More importantly, *The Wire* is in the vanguard of qualitative simulation platforms and corroborates the significance of 'multi-sited' approaches in architecture and urban studies; a timely contribution that legitimises the imaginary as a valid and valuable research device.

As *The Wire*'s utopian openings result from the logical transformation of narrative lines, 'the new' introduced through this programme maintains a realist aesthetic. This is achieved from the reliance on actor-network-theory as a way to define and present the context in which interventions take place, which always follows the logic of the *novum*. Because of this, 'the new' remains entirely credible to the viewers. What becomes surprising and even remarkable is not *the introduction of the new*, but rather the *termination of the new*. At the moment when the failure-point(s) responsible for the collapse of an intervention becomes clear, the primacy of multi-sited approaches to the progression of tactics to strategy is proven anew.

In its capacity to function as a simulation platform, *The Wire* allows its operators to locate failure-points responsible for the collapse of transformative programmes. This is no small feat as falling short of recognising such failure-points would impair the likelihood of ideas moving beyond the space of drawing pads and into the spaces we physically inhabit. Through considering the various elements necessary for the construction of a qualitative simulation platform, as this paper has detailed, it becomes apparent how architects might design similar platforms: through fieldwork, desk-based research and the drawing of the lines – making the cartography of an architectural project. While the architect of visionary transformation empowers through the drawing of ideas, the opening of minds – the architect speculating within realism and through failure-points discovers and exposes the stumbling blocks standing between her and her capacity to turn tactics into strategies.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S135913551400044X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Notes

1. Terry Eagleton, *The English Novel: An Introduction* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004), p. 149.
2. Ruth Penfold-Mounce, David Beer and Roger Burrows, '*The Wire* as Social Science-Fiction?', *Sociology* 45, no. 1 (2011): 162.
3. Rowland Atkinson and David Beer, 'The Ivorine Tower in the City: Engaging Urban Studies after *The Wire*', *City* 14, no. 5 (2010): 532.
4. Elvin Wyly, 'Things Pictures Don't Tell Us: In Search of Baltimore', *City*, 14 (2010): 498.
5. Atkinson and Beer, 'The Ivorine Tower in the City', p. 537.
6. Ibid., p. 532.
7. Alessandra Stanley, 'No Happy Ending in Dickensian Baltimore', *The New York Times*, 6 January 2008, sec. Arts / Television, available online: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/06/arts/television/06stan.html> [accessed on 7 July 2014].
8. Slavoj Žižek, in David Haglund, 'Slavoj Žižek and Fredric Jameson on *The Wire*', *Slate.com*, 1 March 2012, available online: <http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2012/03/01/the_wire_slavoj_i_ek_and_frederic_jameson_weigh_in_on_the_hbo_series.html> [accessed on 7 July 2014].
9. Mark Bowden, 'The Angriest Man In Television', *The Atlantic*, February 2008, available online: <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/01/the-angriest-man-in-television/306581/> [accessed on 7 July 2014].
10. Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle, 'Baltimore as World and Representation: Cognitive Mapping and Capitalism in *The Wire*', academic, *Dossier Journal*, available online: <http://dossierjournal.com/read/theory/baltimore-as-world-and-representation-cognitive-mapping-and-capitalism-in-the-wire/> [accessed on 10 February 2013].
11. Patrick Jagoda, 'I Wired', *Critical Inquiry* 38, no. 1 (2011): 193.
12. Linda Williams, 'Ethnographic Imaginary: The Genesis and Genius of *The Wire*', *Critical Inquiry* 38, no. 1 (2011): 208.
13. Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), p. 38.
14. Doina Petrescu, 'The Indeterminate Mapping of the Common', *Field* 1, no. 1 (2007): 90.
15. Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues*, trans. Barbara Habberjam and Hugh Tomlinson (London: Continuum International Publishing, 1987), p. 151.
16. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 137.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid., p. 72.
19. Jonathan Hill, *Immaterial Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 3.
20. Jeremy Till, *Architecture Depends* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), p. 1.
21. George E. Marcus, *Ethnography through Thick and Thin* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).
22. Craps is a gambling game played with two dice.
23. Clark Johnson, 'The Target', DVD, *The Wire* (HBO, 2002).
24. David Simon, *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets* (Boston: Houghton Miffin, 1991).
25. Lawrence Lanahan, 'Secrets of the City', *Columbia Journalism Review*, available online: <http://www.cjr.org/cover_story/secrets_of_the_city.php> [accessed on 24 May 2013].
26. Mark-Anthony Falzon, *Multi-Sited Ethnography: Theory, Praxis and Locality in Contemporary Research* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2009), p. 1.
27. Williams, 'Ethnographic Imaginary', p. 212. The same remark could be extended to ethnographic work produced by renowned academics, such as, Loïc Wacquant, *Body & Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
28. Margaret Talbot, 'Stealing Life', *The New Yorker*, 22 October 2007, available online: <http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/10/22/071022fa_fact_talbot> [accessed on 7 July 2014].
29. Dan Attias, 'Straight and True', DVD, *The Wire* (HBO, 2004). Audio commentaries by David Simon.
30. Williams, 'Ethnographic Imaginary', p. 211.
31. Ibid., p. 213.
32. George E. Marcus, 'What Is At Stake – And Is Not – In The Idea And Practice Of Multi-Sited Ethnography', *Canberra Anthropology* 22, no. 2 (1999): 7.
33. Ibid.
34. Ed Bianchi, 'Time After Time', DVD, *The Wire* (HBO, 2004).
35. Attias, 'Straight and True'. Audio commentaries by David Simon.
36. Johnson, 'The Target'.
37. Kurt Schmoke, '*The Wire* and the Real Baltimore', *The Guardian*, 11 January 2008, sec. Comment is free, available online: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/jan/11/thewireandtherealbaltimor> [accessed on 7 July 2014].
38. Penfold-Mounce, Beer and Burrows, 'The Ivorine Tower in the City', pp. 159–60.
39. Kecia Driver Thompson, '"Deserve Got Nothing to Do with It": Black Urban Experience and the Naturalist Tradition in *The Wire*', *Studies in American Naturalism* 7, no. 1 (2012): 113. Dukie is a young inner-city kid of *The Wire*'s Baltimore living with drug-addicted parents and siblings, who constantly hold him down and completely fail at their parenting duties.
40. Joshua Alston, 'Obituaries: Omar Little', *Newsweek*, 3 March 2008.
41. This is a poignant example supporting ANT's insistence on including objects as actors. The gun allowed (without determining) a young boy to dramatically affect a collective by eliminating one of its actors; the prominent and dangerous Omar Little.
42. Tony-T in, Sudhir Venkatesh, 'What Do Real Thugs Think of *The Wire*? Part Three', *Freakonomics.com*, 25 January 2008, available online: <http://www.freakonomics.com/2008/01/25/what-do-real-thugs-think-of-the-wire-part-three/> [accessed on 7 July 2014].
43. Attias, 'Straight and True'. Audio commentaries by David Simon.
44. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, p. 53.
45. Ruth Penfold-Mounce, David Beer and Roger Burrows, '*The Wire* as Social Science-Fiction?', *Sociology* 45, no. 1 (2011): 154.
46. Linda N. Groat and David Wang, *Architectural Research Methods* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2002), p. 283.
47. Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p. 154.
48. Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr (2003), 'Marxist Theory and Science Fiction', in Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
49. Attias, 'Straight and True'. Audio commentaries by David Simon.
50. Peter Dreier and John Atlas, '*The Wire* – Bush-Era Fable about America's Urban Poor?', *City & Community* 8, no. 3 (2009): 330.
51. Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht On Theatre*, ed. John Willett (London: Methuen Drama, 1978), p. 219.
52. Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method (Radical Thinkers)*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2011), p. 214.
53. Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, pp. 177–8.
54. James and Mendlesohn, *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, p. 119.
55. Haglund, 'Slavoj Žižek and Fredric Jameson on *The Wire*'.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S135913551400044X Published online by Cambridge University Press

56. De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 38.
57. Tom Holert, *Civic City Cahier 3: Distributed Agency, Design's Potentiality* (London: Bedford Press, 2011), p. 17.
58. There were around 55,000 addicts in Baltimore in 2010, nearly 10 per cent of the population. There are around 35,000 receiving drug treatments at any given time in Baltimore in 2005. See Peter L. Beilenson and Patrick A. McGuire, *Tapping into The Wire: The Real Urban Crisis* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012).
59. Attias, 'Straight and True'.
60. Ibid.
61. 'Grinding' or being 'on the grind' is synonymous with 'hustling' in street parlance. The meaning can extend to most types of criminal work, chiefly that performed at street levels, such as drug dealing, pimping, operating fraudulent schemes, etc. It is also but less frequently used to refer to liminal petty work, such as collecting cans or disposed items for resale.
62. Bianchi, 'Time After Time'.
63. Gangs refer to each space where they have earned the right to sell drugs as their 'real-estate'. These rights are of course not legal but granted upon negotiations, contests and violent combat between street gangs. As *The Wire* demonstrates, real-estate is precious. Beyond allowing sales points that generate substantial illegal incomes, they are a status item.
64. The delay for high-ranking dealers (such as Avon Barksdale and Stringer Bell) to be informed of the new situation on the street underlines their distance from pawns, and even lieutenants. Much like the Baltimore Police Commissioner and Mayor, the transformation is near complete by the time high-ranking officials are notified of this significant change. This again draws parallels between both institutions while underlining the efficacy of Barksdale's crew, which realises that the street level sales have been completely reorganised much before his counterpart at city hall.
65. 'Vacant Buildings | OpenBaltimore | City of Baltimore's Open Data Catalog', *OpenBaltimore*, available online: <https://data.baltimorecity.gov/Housing-Development/Vacant-Buildings/qqcv-ihn5> [accessed on 12 March 2014].
66. Fredric Jameson, 'Realism and Utopia in *The Wire*', *Criticism* 52, no. 3 (2010): 371.
67. Bowden, 'The Angriest Man In Television'.

Acknowledgements
I wish to thank Marc Angélil and Camillo Boano for their support in this research project, and the two referees, as well as Martyn Dade-Robertson for sharing insightful feedback on an earlier version of this text. And, finally, the Future Cities Laboratory of ETH-Zurich in Singapore for funding my research.

Illustration credits
arq gratefully acknowledges: Author, all images

Author's biography
Benjamin Leclair-Paquet is a researcher with the Territorial Organization module of the Future Cities Laboratory, ETH Zurich and Marc Angélil's Chair for Architecture and Design. He followed graduate studies and tutored at The Bartlett before completing a residency with Decolonizing Architecture in the West Bank. His current research addresses the construction and maintenance of dysfunction in the inner city of Baltimore.

Author's address
leclair@arch.ethz.ch

https://doi.org/10.1017/S135913551400044X Published online by Cambridge University Press