‘Wiring’ *The Wire*: Transtextual layers and tragic realism in *The Wire*

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Abstract

The Wire’s (2002–08) creator David Simon has contended that it is neither a ‘cop’ nor a ‘crime show’ and has called it a ‘visual novel’ and associated it with Greek tragedy instead. These associations have been contested by critics like Amanda Ann Klein and Linda Williams, who, while praising *The Wire*, reject its consideration as a Greek tragedy and propose its analysis as television melodrama. This article deals with the different transtextual layers in *The Wire*, from its obvious connections with cop shows, police procedurals or the hard-boiled detective novel, to its deeper associations with melodrama, going through the more or less veiled references to Dickens, the Greek tragedy, gangster films, westerns or Edgar Allan Poe. By means of this analysis and by applying Jonathan Franzen’s concept of ‘tragic realism’, I reconsider the show’s features and generic affiliation, and engage in the debate initiated by Williams contrasting tragedy and melodrama.

Keywords

The Wire

tragedy

melodrama

transtextuality

tragic realism

Jonathan Franzen

Introduction

The Wire's creator David Simon has repeatedly insisted that *The Wire* (2002–08) is neither a 'cop' nor a 'crime show', and has called it instead an 'anti-cop show': 'I pitched *The Wire* to HBO as the anti-cop show, a rebellion of sorts against all the horseshit police procedurals afflicting American television' (Hornby 2007: n.pag.). In a similar vein, he has called it a 'visual novel' (Simon 2009: 23) and linked it with Greek tragedy: 'We've basically taken the idea of Greek tragedy, and applied it to the modern city-state' (Talbot 2007: n.pag.). These associations have been contested by critics like Amanda Ann Klein or Linda Williams, who, while praising *The Wire* as an exceptional TV series, reject its consideration as a Greek tragedy and propose its analysis as television melodrama. Williams, in particular, has called Simon 'not a particularly insightful critic of his own work' (2014b: 3) and claimed that *The Wire* is not a tragedy but melodrama, 'a great melodrama of dysfunctional systems and not just a Manichean study of personal villains and victims' (Williams 2014b: 83). Other critics have tried to answer the 'big question' asked by Busfield (2009: n.pag.) – 'What is *The Wire*?' – and have called the series a '21st-century costume drama' (2009: n.pag.) or a 'novel cop show' (Bruhn and Gjielsvik 2013: 1), and have even coined a new broadcast genre, the 'obsodrama' (Billington 2010: 1).

To engage in this debate and reconsider the show's features, this article applies Genette's categories of transtextuality (intertextuality, hypertextuality, metatextuality, paratextuality and architextuality) so as to consider the different transtextual layers

present in *The Wire*, a process that I have termed 'wiring' *The Wire*. By means of this analysis, we will establish *The Wire*'s connections with other forms of fiction, from its obvious debt to cop shows, police procedurals and the hard-boiled detective novel, to its deeper associations with melodrama, going through the more or less veiled references to Charles Dickens, the Greek tragedy, gangster films, westerns and Edgar Allan Poe. The final section of the article will rescue the concept of 'tragic realism' proposed by Jonathan Franzen in 1996 to find 'a reason to write novels', 'in an age of images' (1996: 1). We will show how all the features proposed by Franzen for this category can be found not in a novel but, very ironically, in a television series that can therefore be considered 'tragic realism' rather than tragedy or melodrama.

Transtextuality

The term *transtextuality* was coined by Gérard Genette building on Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas of *dialogism* and *heteroglossia*, and Julia Kristeva's concept of *intertextuality*. Genette proposed the term transtextuality to refer to 'all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts' (1997: 1) and posited five types of textual relations, presented here in a progressive order of complexity:

1. *Intertextuality* is 'the relationship of co-presence between two texts or among several texts' (Genette 1997: 1) in the form of quotation, plagiarism or allusion. In Genette's work, intertextuality seems to be applicable to more superficial references or influences than the following term, hypertextuality.

2. *Hypertextuality* is defined by Genette as the relationship between one text (the hypertext) to a previous text (hypotext), which the former transforms or modifies. Genette uses *Ulysses* (Joyce [1922] 2000) and the *Odyssey* as an example. As opposed to intertextuality (where the allusion is obvious, but is not

taken any further), hypertextuality incorporates the reference (the hypotext) into the very nature of the new text. John Fiske talks about 'horizontal' references (to a work belonging to the same medium) and 'vertical' references to works belonging to other media, or intermedial references (1987: 108-128).

3. *Metatextuality*: this category refers to works where a text 'makes comments' about another one. 'This is the critical relationship par excellence', according to the French critic, including reviews or literary analyses (Genette 1997: 4).

4. *Paratextuality* is the relation between the text and its 'paratext' (titles, prefaces, dedications, etc.). As an example, Genette offers the chapter headings in *Ulysses*, which appeared in its prepublication in instalment form and made explicit their relationship with different episodes from the *Odissey*. When the book appeared as a volume, they were removed, but never completely forgotten by critics or readers.

5. *Architextuality* refers to the generic taxonomies suggested or evoked by a text. In a general sense, Genette defines it as 'the entire set of general or transcendent categories – types of discourse, modes of enunciation, literary genres – from which emerges each singular text' (1997: 1).

Even though Genette's textual categories are sometimes hard to tell apart and tend to overlap (as he himself pointed out), it is my belief that they can be a useful analytical tool to investigate the transtextual relationships of a text as comprehensibly as possible. Although admittedly there are references that could be included in more than one of the categories, following the example of Robert Stam (2005) and other scholars like Cartmell (2010) or Constantinides (2010), who have used Genette's taxonomy for film adaptations, I will use Genette's taxonomy flexibly to uncover the rich transtextual

palimpsests that *The Wire* hides or displays in an effort to do justice to the complexity of this TV series and engage in the debate initiated by Williams about its textual nature.

Transtextual layers in *The Wire*

(1) Intertextuality

If we start then at the intertextual, more superficial level, and even though Simon said on different occasions that it was an 'anti-cop show', if someone had to describe the series in a sentence, it would be inevitable to mention the policemen and the investigation (the 'wire' itself). The promotional pictures of the first season show us the typical buddies in a cop show: Bunk Moreland (Wendell Pierce) and Jimmy McNulty (Dominic West) – or McNulty and Kima Greggs (Sonja Sohn). And in all the other seasons, there is always a 'wire', an investigation based on audio recordings and photographs that provides the overarching element throughout the season. Therefore, it seems obvious that, particularly in its first season, *The Wire* can be superficially defined as a TV cop show in terms of characters and plot development, but if we compare it with other cop shows, it becomes obvious that it is 'far more than a cop show' (Simon 2000: 2), as we will show in the following sections.

Another aspect that can be included in the category of intertextuality are the referential winks to reality, or, following Lavik, 'the interconnections between real life and fiction' (2011: 57), since it can be argued that there is an allusion, a 'co-presence' of reality in this fictional story. In this sense, *The Wire* has two obvious palimpsests, the two books that Simon wrote based on his own experience in the streets of Baltimore: *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets* (1991) and *The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner-City Neighborhood* (1997, co-written with Edward Burns). For the former book, Simon was allowed to take a year off from *The Baltimore Sun* to follow the lives and

cases of the Baltimore Police Department's homicide unit; for the latter, he spent another year with former cop-turned-schoolteacher Ed Burns to investigate the cops' antagonists: the drug dealers and drug addicts in West Baltimore. The books are essentially an extension of Simon's journalistic practice to bring home the reality of events taking place in the streets of Baltimore. As Williams has pointed out, 'both books employ the basic methodologies of ethnography: a long term –one year – stay in a field where a particular set of social relations can be observed' and transcribed (2014b: 12). Simon's first book was the origin of *Homicide: Life on the Street* (1993–99), a seven-season-long cop TV show where Simon worked as a scriptwriter, building the skills that he would later contribute to *The Wire*; *The Corner* (2000), on the other hand, became a six-hour *faux-documentary* miniseries that follows the life of an addict and his family in the streets of Baltimore.

This 'journalistic' approach to, and interferences with, reality is emphasized in two different ways in *The Wire*. On the one hand, there are real well-known Baltimore people playing roles in the series (former drug kingpin Melvin Williams playing a character called The Deacon, former mayor of Baltimore Kurt Schmoke playing a health commissioner, or murder convict Felicia 'Snoop' Peason playing herself). Although these references may introduce a ludic, postmodern element in an otherwise very realistic show, in the end their main effect seems to be to connect it to a specific location and 'anchor it in something outside the text, granting the series […] a certain gravity' (Lavik 2011: 61). On the other hand, the show's visual style is closely connected to documentaries, and specifically to the work of Frederick Wiseman, a key proponent of the observational mode of documentary film-making. As Lavik has shown, *The Wire* often displays a *cinema-vérité* look, with the camera 'sneaking up' on scenes, creating the impression that the audience is eavesdropping on something actually taking

place, and showing characters in a group once they have started to speak (rather than switch to them beforehand, as if it 'knew' they were going to speak following a script). The use of a 4:3 aspect ratio, and the near-total absence of flashbacks, dream sequences or other stylistic indulgences, all add up towards a realistic *mise en scène* and a restrained visual style that focuses on *showing* reality rather than *telling* the audience about it (Lavik 2012).

(*2) Hypertextuality*

Going deeper into Genette's hypertextuality, we can find several hypotexts or former texts modified by *The Wire*. The first is closely related to cop shows and is a subgenre of detective fiction called police procedural, a type of fiction that, rather than focusing on the mystery that an individual detective needs to solve (the *whodunit*), depicts the activities of a police force as they investigate crimes: forensics, autopsies, the gathering of evidence, the use of search warrants and interrogations, and glimpses into the detectives' personal lives. Although there are interesting examples of this subgenre in written fiction, it found its most fertile niche in American television, from *Dragnet* (1951–2004) to the more recent *CSI* (2000–15) or *NCIS* (2003–present), through other popular shows like *Hill Street Blues* (1981–87), *Homicide: Life on the Street* (1993–99) and *NYPD Blue* (1993–2005). Carlo Rotella has highlighted how '*The Wire* offers the genre a new formal and thematic synthesis', assimilating and synthesizing street policing (characteristic of the cop shows from the 1970s and the 1980s) and 'the box' (interrogation room scenes more typical of the 1990s) 'by framing both with a third element, the wiretap' (2012: 119), an element that, until *The Wire*,

> had not been fully exploited by police procedurals as a way for an investigation to peel away layers of surface crime to open up the strata of deep crime, turning an account of police work into a dissection of social and political order. (Rotella 2012: 119)

In this sense, a more specific hypotext for *The Wire* is a subtype of post-9/11 police procedurals that concentrate on surveillance practices, the gathering of intelligence by technological means to apprehend the villains, like *24* (2001–10) or *Homeland* (2003–present). In contrast with the fantasy of a 'technological sublime of ubiquitous surveillance' (Williams 2014b: 141) that some of these series may foster, *The Wire* shows that these new surveillance technologies can be defeated with simple, old-fashioned mechanisms, like pagers and street pay-phones, or even, as shown in the credit sequence, an accurate stone throw.

The Wire also includes thematic, 'vertical' (Fiske 1987: 108-128) references to the two most important subgenres of detective fiction: on the one hand, classical detective fiction (sometimes referred to as 'armchair detective fiction') is represented by detective Lester Freamon (Clarke Peters), particularly in the first season, where he is presented as an eccentric investigator (like Poe's Auguste Dupin or Sherlock Holmes), able to solve riddles and whodunits from his armchair while methodically making dollhouse furniture. On the other, hard-boiled detective fiction is exemplified by detective McNulty (and occasionally Bunk): a tough guy with a cynical attitude, a womanizer and alcoholic with severe family problems, always ready to bend the rules to satisfy his personal sense of justice. When McNulty starts manipulating evidence in the fifth season, and gets to the point of making up a serial killer to get municipal funds to

solve real crimes, he is in fact following the example of hard-boiled detectives of very dubious morals, like Dashiell Hammett's Sam Spade or Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer. In the end, neither Freamon's nor McNulty's approach works: 'In this drama, the institutions always prove larger, and those characters with hubris enough to challenge the postmodern construct of American empire are invariably mocked, marginalized, or crushed' (Hornby 2007: n.pag.).

In an early draft outline of his ideas for *The Wire*, David Simon already mentioned the police procedural hypotext: 'It will be, in the strictest sense, a police procedural set in the drug culture of an American rust-belt city' (2000: 2), and, as we have seen, it certainly fits the definition of the police procedural: the detailed depiction of the activities of a group of policemen attempting to hunt down the criminals. However, different critics have qualified *The Wire*'s relationship with the genre. Jason Mittell, for example, has emphasized a structural feature of the series: its episodes are never conclusive, but are 'parts of a cohesive whole', and has therefore called it 'television's only example of a serialized procedural' (2009: 435). Kennedy and Shapiro, in turn, have defined it not as a 'police procedural', but as an 'urban procedural': '[*The Wire*] develops its own distinctive sub-genre, the urban procedural, a fabrication of urban spatial relations that intercuts worlds usually unrelated in political and social studies never mind television cop shows' (2012: 2). In fact, from the very beginning, Simon had claimed that *The Wire* should 'be judged not merely as a descendant of *Homicide* or *NYPD Blue*, but as a vehicle for making statements about the American city and even the American experiment' (2000: 2). Therefore, each season focuses on a different institution within the American city: the police and the drug dealers, the unions, politicians, schools and the press, so as to offer a complete portrayal of 'the American city'.

Accordingly, the hypotexts are not only police procedurals but also 'school procedurals' for the fourth season, and 'newspaper procedurals' for the fifth, that is to say, films or TV programmes focusing on the way these institutions work. In 'school procedurals', called by Williams 'generic school melodramas', 'a charismatic [often white] teacher enters a racially mixed or strictly minority classroom and, against all odds, manages to teach at least one or even a group of hardened, often black or Latino inner-city kids' (2014b: 139). The first movie to start this subgenre was *Blackboard Jungle* (Brooks, 1955), and they became quite popular in the 1980s and the 1990s, with films like *Dead Poets' Society* (Weir, 1989) or *Dangerous Minds* (Smith, 1995). As opposed to these films, *The Wire* shows that the magical intervention of an individual (Roland 'Prez' Pryzbylewski [Jim True-Frost]) is not enough if the institution does not change, although there may be room for occasional success, as seen in Namond Brice (Julito McCullum)'s story in the fourth season.

'Journalistic procedurals' started with *Citizen Kane* (Welles, 1941), and, although there are a few novels describing the way newspapers work, the best-known examples of the sub-genre are to be found in the cinema, with films like *All the President's Men* (Pakula, 1976), *Good Night, and Good Luck* (Clooney, 2005) or *Spotlight* (McCarthy, 2015). The subgenre is also well represented on TV, with series such as *Mary Tyler Moore* (1970–77), *Murphy Brown* (1988–98) or *Breaking News* (2002). Shaeda Isani has highlighted two main features for the subgenre: the presentation of a choral protagonist and the 'the representation of the individual professional as a flawed hero-protagonist' (2009: 10). Both features appear in the fifth season of *The Wire*, particularly if we consider the rise of reporter Scott Templeton (Thomas McCarthy), who, supported by the owners of *The Baltimore Sun*, builds a career based on lies that enables him to win a Pulitzer Prize.[1]

Before we proceed to another less obvious hypotext, I would like to mention the influence on *The Wire* of a detective writer who is generally considered to be the creator of the hard-boiled novel, Dashiell Hammett. He was born in southern Maryland in 1894, but moved to Baltimore when he was six, and lived there for several years, in houses on Lexington Street and North Stricker St., just a few blocks away from the corner where Snot Boogie was fictionally murdered. While in Baltimore, he worked as a stevedore in the same port where the second season takes place and as a detective for the Pinkerton Agency. Several years later, he used an unnamed Eastern city very similar to Baltimore as the backdrop for a novel that is probably an unnamed hypotext for *The Wire*: *The Glass Key* ([1931] 1989). This was Hammett's favourite novel and tells a story of urban political corruption that shows the connections between gangsters, politicians and newspaper owners. Apart from this hypertextual reference, Hammett has probably served as a model for Simon for two main reasons. First of all, Hammett used his own experience as a detective not only to write a new type of detective story but also to 'sell' his fiction as realistic, contrasting (in paratexts like letters to the editors, introductions and reviews) his own reality-based detectives with fictional detectives like Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes or S. S. Van Dine's Philo Vance. Simon and his team, in turn, have also used their previous hands-on experience as 'authorial validation' (Mittell 2015: 100) both to write and to promote the show as a realistic description of an American city: Simon was a journalist, Ed Burns a policeman and a teacher, Rafael Alvarez, a stevedore, and even some of the actors (as we have seen) had actual 'street experience' as drug users and criminals (Simon 2009: 9–10).

Following Hammett's example, *The Wire*'s realism is also contrasted 'horizontally' with other 'escapist, socially irrelevant' (Lavik 2011: 59) TV shows by means of subtle intradiegetic references of a more metatextual nature: for example, a

self-promoting FBI director brags that he has acted as consultant on *CSI* (5:2 of *The Wire*)[2] and Duquan 'Dukie' Weems (Jermaine Crawford) mentions a TV programme about 'a serial killer who kills other serial killers' (most probably *Dexter* [2006–13]), highlighting the disparity between the media's fascination with serial killers and the kinds of everyday crime afflicting America today (5:9). The second reason why Hammett has probably been a model for Simon, and that is related to the *The Wire*'s metatextual comments about Greek tragedy (which we will see later), is that he was the first writer of detective fiction who consciously tried to take this popular genre to a different stage, and is credited by the critics as the first to demonstrate that 'the detective story can be important writing […] not "by hypothesis" incapable of anything' (Chandler [1950] 1988: 17).

Another hypotext that may not seem so obvious at first sight is the western genre. In general, we cannot forget that there is a very close relationship between westerns and the most obvious hypotext of *The Wire*, detective fiction. Some critics have in fact highlighted that the hard-boiled detective is the heir of the western hero, a protagonist who, after running out of western spaces, takes refuge in the city: 'The distinctly American detective story is by and large a genre Western transposed into an urban environment [and] the cynical and disillusioned gumshoe is but a twentieth-century gunslinger in a cheap suit and a fedora' (Witschi 2011: 382). In *The Wire*, West[3] Baltimore certainly feels like a frontier town, a lawless space with no safety and constant shoot-outs, which could therefore easily meet Frederick Jackson Turner's definition of the frontier as the place where civilization and wilderness meet. In fact, as different critics have pointed out, the violence that took place on the US western frontier shifted to urban frontiers, transforming it 'from a moving western boundary into a

relatively fixed partitioning of urban space', a racial frontier with 'black urban communities […] on the criminal side of the urban frontier' (Crooks 1995: 68, 71).[4]

In this new frontier, we find several extradiegetic references that connect *The Wire* to the western film genre. For example, there is a stand-off between Brother Muzone (Michael Potts) and Omar Little (Michael K. Williams) staged as a Sergio Leone western-style shoot-out (3:11), and another scene in the first season where a group of policemen go to an area called 'the canyon' to be attacked by the inner-city African Americans from above, as a clear reminder of the typical western scenes of cowboys being attacked by the Indians from the hills surrounding them (1:2). Furthermore, as Lavik has pointed out, there are several dialogues reproducing *verbatim* lines from revisionist westerns like *The Wild Bunch* directed by Peckinpah (1969), *Unforgiven* by Eastwood (1992) or *The Searchers* by Ford (1956) (Lavik 2011: 65–66).

This lawless space is the appropriate environment for protagonists akin to western heroes, characterized by different critics as 'men in the middle' between opposing groups (Cawelti 1999: 74). Characters like Leatherstocking in James Fenimore Cooper's novels or Tom Doniphon in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (Ford, 1962) need to resort to their own moral conscience and often end up alienated by society since 'the hero's violence is primarily an expression of his capacity for individual moral judgment and action, a capacity that separates him from society as much as it makes him a part of it' (Cawelti 1999: 97). In this sense, the most atypical and idiosyncratic character of the whole series is, without a doubt, Omar Little, who becomes a contemporary rewriting of the western anti-hero, the bandit epitomized by characters like Jesse James, Butch Cassidy or Billy the Kid. Omar is a 'man in the middle' between the drug dealers and the police, characterized by weapons and clothes that remind us of the West, and has a 'Wild West mentality, the lone frontiersman

taming the wilderness of the drug trade' (Marshall and Potter 2009: 4). He is extremely dexterous with weapons, whistles a song to announce his arrival and develops his own conscience and very personal moral code.

Last but not the least, like his western precursors, Omar Little is a very individualistic hero, a feature underlined by a T-shirt that he wears in the tenth episode of the second season emblazoned with the words 'I am the American Dream'. These words establish, first, a connection with another Omar, Omar Isaiah Betts, better known as Snot Boogie, the dead character who only appears in the 'cold open' of the first episode of the first season. As a witness explains to McNulty, he had been killed because he always stole the pot when they were playing dice. When McNulty asks him why they even let him play if he always did that, the answer is paradigmatic: 'Got to. This America, man'. The dream of equality and opportunity has been internalized by every American, but for young black men (like both Omars) the only freedom is a twisted, distorted version of the Dream: to become a thief and later be imprisoned or killed. Thus, the words on Omar's T-shirt also make a connection with Simon's intention to make statements about 'the American experiment' quoted before, and describe the failure of the American Dream in a country where the rules of 'the game' – which Zarzosa defines as 'nothing other than neoliberal capitalism' (2017: 102) – have been rigged. In this sense, the hypertextual reference to Westerns is fundamental, as Lavik points out: '*The Wire* invokes the Western genre to reflect, and reflect on, notions of where America is coming from and where it is going' (2011: 68).[5]

(*3) Metatextuality*

The next category in Genette's classification of transtextuality is metatextuality, used for works that 'make comments' about other works. In *The Wire* we can find

metatextual ‘vertical’ comments about a literary genre (the Greek tragedy) and about two writers: Charles Dickens and Edgar Allan Poe. Dickens is mentioned explicitly in the fifth and last season, when a newspaper editor urges reporter Scott Templeton to develop the ‘Dickensian aspects’ of a story about homelessness. By the time Simon introduced that intradiegetic reference, *The Wire* had already been related to Dickens by several critics, like Mark Bowden, who claimed that *The Wire* ‘does for turn-of-the-millennium Baltimore what Dickens’s *Bleak House* does for mid-19th-century London’ (Bowden 2008: n.pag.). Apart from the urban portrayal, other points in common with the English writer are the serial periodicity of the works, the critical perspective and the totalizing ambition. The connections seem so obvious that there is even a Dickensian novelization of the series, complete with period illustrations and a fake scholarship to support it, suggesting that *The Wire* is a Victorian novel and inventing one ‘Horatio B. Ogden’ (aka HBO) as the unjustly forgotten author of this nineteenth-century tale of the streets (DeLyria and Robinson 2012: 6). One character in particular, Bubbles (Andre Royo), has been associated by different writers (like Hornby) with Jo the Crossing Sweeper (the good-hearted vagrant in *Oliver Twist* [(1837–39) 1992]) both by his function connecting different institutions and by his Dickensian personal history of redemption. Despite these similarities, the differences also seem obvious since *The Wire* refuses to allow individual solutions to bigger social problems, and provides ambiguous, nuanced characterization and almost no happy endings. Simon also seemed to resent the connections because he has not mentioned Dickens in interviews as often as Greek tragedy. In fact, when he refers to Dickens intradiegetically in the fifth season, he seems to criticize the implications: in the editors’ words, the ‘Dickensian aspects’ seem to have negative connotations, like Manicheism, simplification and dubious journalistic ethics.

The next writer to receive comments in *The Wire*, Edgar Allan Poe, actually lived, like Dashiell Hammett, at different stages of his life in West Baltimore, right in the area where most of the action in the first season takes place. Poe is mentioned explicitly when a tourist looking for 'Poe House' (a house lived in by the writer on Amity St., which is now a museum) asks a corner boy where it is, who misinterprets the question as 'poor house' and answers 'Look around! Take your pick!' (3:2). Following the reference, we cannot forget that Poe (himself poor and a drug addict while living there) was the creator of detective fiction, whose importance in the series we have already highlighted, but he also used in his gothic stories (like 'The Fall of the House of Usher' [(1839) 1993]) a motif that reappears in *The Wire*, the vacant house. As urban geographer David Harvey has pointed out, Baltimore's vacant houses numbered 'an estimated 40,000 out of a total housing stock of just over 300,000 units' (2000: 135), a fact that explains the complete abandonment of inner-city areas and the expansion of the drug trade in those areas. As Clandfield has perceptively noticed, both in Poe's fiction and in *The Wire* the empty houses are threatening, uncanny, since they 'stand for families or communities once built in and around them but now hauntingly absent […] a hostile environment that is all the more menacing because it could and should have been a place of safety' (2009: 41). When, in the fourth season, the vacants are used by Stanfield's thugs to hide the corpses of their victims, the vacants become 'Poe houses' in new senses: they become tombs (as in Poe's 'The Cask of Amontillado' [(1846) 1993] or 'The Tell-Tale Heart' [(1846) 1993]) and 'take on new power as metonyms for the ordeals of the living neglected people of the area' (Clandfield 2009: 46).

As mentioned before, Dashiell Hammett's attempts at 'gentrifying' the popular genre of detective fiction can easily be related to Simon's own efforts to compare *The*

Wire to classical literature like the Greek tragedy, the literary genre that receives most vertical 'comments' in *The Wire*. Simon has talked about it at length in interviews:

> We have ripped off the Greeks: Sophocles, Aeschylus, Euripides […]. We've basically taken the idea of Greek tragedy, and applied it to the modern city-state […] What we were trying to do was take the notion of Greek tragedy, of fated and doomed people, and instead of these Olympian gods, indifferent, venal, selfish, hurling lightning bolts and hitting people in the ass for no good reason […] it's the postmodern institutions … those are the indifferent gods. (Talbot 2007)

Chris Love has studied in detail the relationship between *The Wire* and Greek tragedy, and highlighted the intradiegetic references within the series. Senator Davis (Isiah Whitlock), for example, arrives at the courthouse with a copy of *Prometheus Bound*, by Aeschylus, comparing himself to the titular character and trying to present himself as a tragic victim (5:7); more significantly, the appearance of Frank Sobotka (Chris Bauer)'s corpse is staged in imitation of 'the structure of the ancient Greek performing space' (Love 2010: 502), with a crane like the one used in Greek tragedies to lift and lower the *deus ex machina*, and with a chorus of stevedores contemplating the corpse (2:12). Sobotka is in fact a tragic character, who tries to change the rules of the game even at the expense of his own death. Like the characters in Greek tragedies, he is a noble character with an important flaw (or *hamartia*), whose good intentions end in disaster. He tempts fate and provokes his own tragedy and that of his family and his co-workers. His fatal mistake is to tie up with a group of ruthless drug dealers (significantly led by a

character known as 'The Greek') to try to fight against globalization and neo-liberalism and save the stevedores' jobs.

The second tragic figure highlighted by different critics (Tyree 2008; Gibson 2011) is Stringer Bell (Idris Elba), who finds death while attempting to apply the rules of neo-liberal economy to the drug business. His tragic flaw seems to be the excessive pride (or *hubris*) typical of many tragedies. However, in the American context, there is a very relevant transtextual reference: classic gangster films from the 1930s, like *The Public Enemy* (Wellman, 1931) or *Scarface* (Hawks, 1932), and their postmodern rewriting in HBO's *The Sopranos* (1999–2007). Those films presented the rise to power of a gangster figure who tried to achieve his own version of the American Dream. Although the gangster was punished at the end, all the narrative codes of the studio system collaborated to create a tragic hero, a character who was punished by the official moral codes but became a cult hero among the films' audience. As Robert Warshow famously commented in his essay 'The gangster as tragic hero', 'the imaginary city produces the gangster: he is what we want to be and what we are afraid we may become' (2001: 84). One of *The Wire*'s original ways of reworking the theme of the gangster as tragic hero is to provide Stringer Bell with a counterpart who also has classical cinematic references: Avon Barksdale (Wood Harris) is a more traditional *capo*, in the line of *The Godfather* (Coppola, 1972), somebody who inherits his job and cares about the family and traditional values, without realizing that business has changed. Using Nietzsche's definition of tragedy as the fight between Dionysian and Apollonian forces, Brittingham has highlighted the Dionysian character of Avon and the Barksdale crime syndicate ('an orgiastic revelry in the suffering and shortness of life'), and opposed it to Stringer's 'Apollonian' efforts to transform the drug game 'into a rational, legitimate, and thoroughly organized business' (2013: 207–11).[6] By using

these opposing but complementary characters, *The Wire*'s creators are able to update the 'criminal procedural' gangster movies and contrast the criminal world with the less effective 'police procedural' world.

(4) Paratextuality

Genette expanded his ideas about paratextuality in *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (Genette 1987), to include all the texts that prepare the readers for other texts, and that therefore make up the 'threshold' between the inside and the outside of a text. He distinguished between two types of paratexts: 'epitexts' or paratexts outside the book (interviews, reviews, advertisements), and 'peritexts' or paratexts within the book (covers, titles, prefaces). In the field of television studies, Jonathan Gray has stressed the importance of paratexts in our media-saturated age: 'paratexts are not simply add-ons, spinoffs, and also-rans: they create texts, they manage them, and they fill them with many of the meanings that we associate with them' (2010: 6). He has also redefined Genette's two types as 'entryway paratexts' (those that control and determine our entrance to a text) and 'in medias res paratexts' (those that inflect or redirect the text following initial interaction) (Gray 2010: 35). Mittell has further differentiated between two types of online and offline 'epitexts' outside the book: 'transmedia storytelling', or ongoing narrative paratexts that expand the 'storyworld' and extend narrative engagement with the series in different media, and 'orienting paratexts' that serve to help viewers make sense of a narrative (2015: 294).

In the case of *The Wire*, and although there are all sorts of very interesting 'epitexts',[7] I would like to mention three specific 'peritexts' that seem particularly relevant to our purposes here: the epigraphs, the song in the credit sequence and the title. First, Chris Love has studied the epigraphs in *The Wire* (the fragments of a

dialogue that appear without a context at the beginning of each programme and that viewers carry in their head until they reappear uttered by a character) and highlighted their connection with similar narrative mechanisms in Greek tragedies (Love 2010: 491–92). Second, the credit sequence combines extreme close-ups of drug-dealing scenes in the street with images of acoustic and visual surveillance, and is accompanied by five different versions of a Tom Waits song titled 'Way Down in the Hole' – the only extradiegetic music in the series except for the season finales. The lyrics of the song ('When you walk through the garden, you gotta watch your back […] if you walk with Jesus, he's gonna save your soul, you gotta keep the devil, way down in the hole') allude to the 'rules' of another game, the game of religion, as established by '*The Wire's* missing institution: the Church' (Peterson 2010: 481). Peterson has analysed in detail the transtextual connections between the music styles of the different versions of Waits' song and the history of African American literature and culture and considered the different meanings and implications of the lyrics (2010); for our purposes here, suffice it to say that, aside from the religious meaning of the 'devil' as temptation in the 'garden', it also seems to point to the 'devil' of drug addiction, which needs to be kept at bay, 'down in the hole' in a specific location. Clanfield has related that meaning not only to the 'Hamsterdam' experiment in the third season but also to the phenomenon of ghettification (Clandfield 2009: 42), and the ideological construction of 'the inner city as a hell-hole where all the damned (with plenty of underclass racial coding thrown in) are properly confined' (Harvey 2000: 158). Finally, Simon has added another nuance to the literal meaning of the title that I find particularly relevant, *The Wire* as the boundary between two Americas, and the Americans walking on a 'high wire' careful not to fall on the side of the 'devil':

> The title really refers to an almost imaginary but inviolate boundary between the two Americas […] *The Wire* really does refer to almost a boundary or a fence or the idea of people walking on a high wire and falling to either side. (Andelman 2007)

(5) Architextuality

The last category defined by Genette refers to the deeper generic taxonomies suggested or evoked by a text, and I think this is the section where we should consider *The Wire*'s debatable features as melodrama. Amanda Ann Klein claims that *The Wire* uses the conventions of melodrama to produce 'viewer empathy and engagement', by means of a 'focus on powerless victims, an emphasis on corruption and injustice as the primary source of conflict, and the characters' frustrating inability to effect change around them' (Klein 2009: 178). To these features, we should also add the element of social reformism or 'Utopianism' that Fredric Jameson has underlined (2010: 364), the 'Utopian impulse' that drives characters like Sobotka, Colvin (Robert Wisdom), McNulty or Pryzbylewski, and that becomes essential for the consideration of *The Wire* as melodrama. However, although Klein identifies the basic characteristics of melodrama in *The Wire*, she rightly points out that the show 'engages and then denies or subverts several key melodramatic pleasures', like the catharsis of tears (since there are no happy endings), narrative closure, moral legibility, individualistic solutions to social problems and nostalgia (Klein 2009: 179).

Linda Williams, instead, uses a more open definition of melodrama not as a genre but as a mode, away from the terrain of excess typical of so many melodramas. For her, melodrama quite simply 'offers the contrast between how things are and how

they could be, or should be' (2014b: 84) and links this moral purpose with an engaging emotional response and forward-moving storytelling. Within this broader definition, she considers *The Wire* as institutional melodrama, where we can see that the 'magical' intervention of an individual (any of the characters with the 'Utopian impulse' mentioned by Jameson) is not enough to change things (as it was the case in nineteenth-century Dickensian melodrama): we need to reform institutions, modify laws and change mentalities. For Williams, then, *The Wire* is not a 'visual novel' or a 'Greek tragedy', but a 'serial melodrama of institutional connections' (2014b: 35), a melodrama that describes the failure of institutions and how, in fact, institutions prevent personal attempts of reform.

Williams' definition of melodrama has been accepted by scholars like Jason Mittell (2015: 244), but is still being questioned by others. Zarzosa, for example, refutes Williams' analysis of melodrama, and highlights instead the connections of *The Wire* with American naturalism, a tradition as important as melodrama to understand the series (Zarzosa 2017). This connection had already been pointed out by other critics like Tyree (2008) or Michaels (2009), who situates *The Wire* in the lineage of Dreiser and Sinclair. Aiello and Kelleter have highlighted some naturalist features in the series, like the fascination with the lower classes and inner-city life, the 'adherence to determinism', the 'reliance on journalism' (Aiello 2010: 13–17) and the 'priority of environment over character' (Kelleter 2012: 37). More specifically, Keica Driver Thompson has proposed *The Wire* as part of African American naturalism, a tradition recognizable in the works of W. E. B. Du Bois and Richard Wright. She singles out three aspects of naturalism present in *The Wire*: the use of space (with environment limiting movement), the crossing of moral boundaries (through which characters become aware that they are powerless to make choices) and the struggle between action

and articulation (Thompson 2012: 85–99). Finally, Zarzosa has related *The Wire*'s 'scrutiny of institutions' and its 'institutional determinism' (where 'individuals become helpless to repeat the cycle of violence, addiction, and corruption') to Dreiser, Norris and Sinclair (Zarzosa 2017: 103).

In the end, the debate about *The Wire* as tragedy (Simon), melodrama (Williams) or even part of the naturalist tradition (Zarzosa) narrows down to the definition of the constitutive features of these categories and their respective combination of emotional and moral impulses. In this sense, I would like to add another term to the debate about the architextual, generic taxonomies evoked by *The Wire*: Jonathan Franzen's notion of 'tragic realism' as developed in his essay 'Perchance to dream: In the age of images, a reason to write novels' (1996). Franzen wrote this piece as a defence of reading and writing literature for its own sake in a modern world dominated by technology and images where 'television has killed the novel of social reportage' (1996: 38). Although he never mentioned explicitly suffering from a writing block, many critics have interpreted this essay as a literary manifesto and a turning point in his career, after which he wrote *The Corrections* (2001) and other novels with a new sense of social responsibility that his two previous novels seemed to lack. He used the concept of 'tragic realism' to talk about American authors like F. Scott Fitzgerald or Flannery O'Connor and advocated the possibility of using it as containing potential for social change.

In the essay, he defines his perception of 'tragic realism' as novels with a 'conviction of complexity' ('any fiction that raises more questions than it answers') and he defines that vision of the world as 'tragic', using Nietzche's description of the birth of tragedy (the best theory of 'why people enjoy sad narratives' according to Franzen) as the fusion between the Dionysian 'insight into the darkness and unpredictability of

life' and the Apollonian aesthetic experience, giving us a 'formal aesthetic rendering of the human plight', which becomes cathartic or 'redemptive' (Franzen 1996: 52–53). He then uses the expression 'tragic realism' in an American context for the novels that study the dark side of the American Dream, highlighting their 'distance from the rhetoric of optimism that so pervades our culture' and therefore preserving 'access to the dirt behind the dream of Chosenness' (Franzen 1996: 53). The last defining feature of tragic realism is that the shift from 'depressive realism to tragic realism, from being immobilized by darkness to being sustained by it […] requires believing in the possibility of a cure', and therefore 'tragic realism has the perverse effect of making its adherents into qualified optimists' (Franzen 1996: 53–54).

I find Franzen's choice of words particularly apt for *The Wire* since the term 'tragic realism' underlines both the strong link with reality (and even naturalism, as we have mentioned) and the existence of tragic elements that highlight *The Wire*'s 'distance from the rhetoric of optimism that so pervades [American] culture'. Besides, all the characteristics that define Franzen's 'tragic realism' have already been mentioned in slightly different ways in this study of the transtextual layers that constitute *The Wire*. For example, it is easy to relate Franzen's 'conviction of complexity' to the interrelated analysis of institutions of this 'urban procedural', the 'centrifugal complexity' created by the 'web of interconnectivity forged across the social system' (Mittell 2015: 222) that certainly 'raises more questions than it answers'. Similarly, Franzen's ideas about the 'qualified optimism' shared by writers who believe in the possibility of improvement can easily be linked to the 'Utopian impulse' of the characters in *The Wire* mentioned by Jameson and that is essential to understanding *The Wire*'s relation with melodrama and naturalism. Similarly, the combination of Apollonian and Dionysian impulses that Franzen finds essential for novels to be defined as 'tragic' has also been

mentioned as an important feature of *The Wire* by Brittingham and is really fundamental to understand the conflicts within the different institutions depicted in the series. Finally, *The Wire*, like the books of 'tragic realists' like O'Connor, Fitzgerald or Franzen himself, also focuses on 'the dirt behind the dream of Chosenness', the dark side of the American Dream. In fact, Simon's main objective in this series seems to have been precisely to look into the 'dirt behind the dream' of the 'American experiment', the casualties like Snot Boogie who have been left out 'down in the hole' because they fell on the wrong side of the 'high wire'.

Conclusion

As we have seen, *The Wire* is a complex, multi-layered series that draws from many different transtextual sources. Even though at the intertextual level it can be considered a local cop show firmly rooted in the reality of Baltimore, from a hypertextual point of view it is clear that it is far more than a police procedural (with characters originating in classical and hardboiled detective fiction) since it includes elements of 'criminal procedurals', 'school procedurals' and 'journalistic procedurals' to offer a complete portrayal of the dynamics of the American city's institutions. The more concealed hypotext of the western genre helps us bring to light an essential element in *The Wire*: its scrutiny of the American experiment and its unveiling of the urban nightmares behind the American Dream. The metatextual analysis reveals comments about two writers with a very strong presence in the series (Dickens and Poe), and about a classical genre: the Greek tragedy. Frank Sobotka's life and death is presented as an explicit commentary about this genre, whereas Stringer Bell is exposed as a tragic, Apollonian gangster in the tradition of classic American gangsters from the 1930s, in opposition to Avon Barksdale, depicted as a Dionysian character in the line of *The Godfather*. The study of the paratext has helped us to highlight peritexts related to the failure of the

American Dream and David Simon's scrutiny of the 'devils' at the wrong side of 'the high wire', whereas the architextual level shows *The Wire*'s deep relations with melodrama and American naturalism. Finally, considering *The Wire* as a form of 'tragic realism' as defined by Franzen helps us to do justice to the series and relate it to works of fiction like those created by Fitzgerald, O'Connor or Franzen himself. The fact that we can find all these features of 'tragic realism' in *The Wire* is extremely ironic because, as we have seen, Franzen coined the term in the 1990s to find something that only novels could do, to provide 'a reason to write novels' 'in the age of images', as mentioned in the title of the article itself. Just a few years later, *The Wire* has proved that 'tragic realism' is not exclusive of the novel, but can also be found in twenty-first century complex television.

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Notes

[1] An interesting hypotext for the second season's focus on the docks is the film *On the Waterfront* (Kazan, 1954), although there is no established 'harbor procedural' subgenre.

[2] Season Five, Episode Two of *The Wire*. I am using this system to reference episodes throughout the article.

[3] Although other areas of Baltimore are also depicted, most of the criminal action takes place in the Western District.

[4] Michael J. Shapiro has studied the connections between the western frontier and the urban frontier in two HBO's series: *Deadwood* (2004–06) and *The Wire* (Shapiro 2015). We can find a hypertextual 'horizontal' reference to *Deadwood* in the Season 4 finale, when Dennis 'Cutty' Wise's (Chad Coleman) companion in hospital is watching this series (4:13).

[5] Another visual hypotext alluded to in *The Wire* is the war film, and specifically *Apocalypse Now* (Coppola, 1979), in the scene where Colonel Williams Rawls (John Doman), getting ready for his raid on 'Hamsterdam' (the *free zone* in which drugs are legally used and traded), plays the Ride of the Valkyries (3:12). The use of the same operatic piece that can be heard in the film accompanying the bombardment of a Viet Cong village connects a senseless, cruel war (Vietnam) with another tragic war that cannot be won: the war on drugs.

[6] According to this writer, '*The Wire* is a tragedy of Nietzschean proportions because it is a tale of struggle' between the 'Apollonian' and the 'Dionysian' impulses in modern American culture (Brittingham 2013: 214). Another example that he provides is the conflicts between the Apollonian police force and the Dionysian McNulty.

[7] See, for example, apart from the many interviews where Simon has talked at length about *The Wire*, LeBesco (2009), Jason Kottke's blog or the blogs on *Slate* and *The Guardian*.