In *America*, Baudrillard famously states:

>The American City seems to have stepped right out of the movies...To grasp its secret, you should not, then, begin with the city and move inwards towards the screen; you should begin with the screen and move outwards towards the city.¹

For Baudrillard, city space is always already sensed through the cinematic image and this image of the city exerts a powerful influence over how the ‘real’ city is grasped and understood. Indeed it is difficult to distinguish between the ‘real’ and the filmic city and in Baudrillard’s statement there is a sense that it is the image which is more ‘real’ than the city itself. If cinema has transformed the way in which urban space is understood, then television further collapses distinctions between real and imagined space. For David Morley, television is the site of ‘radical intrusion of distant events into the space of domesticity’;² it is a point at which boundaries between domestic space and the outside world are both demarcated and destabilised. Television therefore not only blurs the distinction between the ‘real’ and imagined city but can also serve to collapse boundaries between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ space.

This essay will consider *The Wire* in terms of televisual representations and will suggest that whereas the city is frequently positioned as an environment ‘out there’, populated by ‘others’, *The Wire* offers a reading which moves beyond this. While it is not my intention here simply to set up a binary between *The Wire* and ‘other’ series, nor will I consider the production contexts which contribute to how series differ, it would seem reasonable to assume that many viewers will come to *The Wire* familiar with these televisual experiences of the city. And if, as Baudrillard suggests, the American city is to be understood through the screen image, then these representations themselves significantly inform how the urban environment is perceived. I will argue that *The Wire* both acknowledges these televisual representations and moves beyond them. I examine how, from the very first season, *The Wire* makes apparent the way in which space is constructed and space is elided. At the same time, *The Wire* itself engenders a sense of the city in its entirety, although not as a unified or homogeneous whole and the city takes on the spatial qualities of a social and lived environment. This moves beyond a reading of the city based on notions of essentialised difference and ‘others’, while pointing to the power structures and social inequalities inherent in city spaces and playing on the unstable location of the television city itself.

Just as cinema and the city share a long history, so do the urban and the crime genre, and the city frequently serves as a backdrop to the crime drama series. Indeed the name of the city is often embedded in the title (*CSI: NY, CSI: Miami, NYPD Blue, Miami Vice*). Typically, in dramas such as *NYPD Blue or CSI* the cityscape appears as snapshots (and indeed this is also the case in other genres such as sitcoms or hospital dramas which are ostensibly
set in a particular city). An episode will begin with a few establishing shots which serve to remind the viewer in which city the series is located. Frequently these shots will be aerial views or a few iconic buildings, reminiscent of postcards. This may be followed by an exterior shot of a building (such as the 15th Precinct building in *NYPD Blue*) or a crime scene, but there is little sense of a relationship between the opening shots and the next location. Views of the city also serve as links between scenes; a scene may begin with a car drawing up outside a building with a street view in the background, but in fact much of the key action and dialogue then takes place inside. Clearly, one reason for this is that dramas such as *NYPD Blue* and *CSI* are filmed primarily in LA, so recognisable landmarks are essential to locate the series in a particular city (and it is striking how many times events will occur in the proximity of these landmarks). But this engenders a sense of the city as an abstraction, not as a lived environment. The city space is visited rather than inhabited and is frequently positioned as threatening and alien.

*The Wire*, however, puts the city centre stage; series creator David Simon has said that he set out to ‘build a city’ and described the series as a ‘travelogue’. Clearly the decision to film on location in Baltimore opens up the city in a manner which cannot be achieved on an LA studio lot. There is a sense in which Baltimore is not a ‘postcard city’ like LA, New York or Miami; it is a less obvious TV location and although it has a thriving tourist industry, is less well-known, particularly outside the US, as a tourist destination. Baltimore can be perceived more as an ‘every city’, although at the same time, its specific historical, geographic and economic situation is significant. It is an East Coast city which has suffered economically as a result of the collapse of heavy industry. Within each episode characters, and consequently the camera and the viewer, move through and across the city’s spaces, and each season extends further into the city’s institutions and geography. *The Wire* is not unique in being filmed on location and in a recent article in *Flow TV*, Alisa Perren points to the growing trend to use less obvious locations. *Homicide: Life on the Street*, which could be considered to be the network forerunner of *The Wire*, was likewise filmed on location in Baltimore and the link between location filming and authenticity extends back to series such as *Dragnet* and *Hill Street Blues*. However what distinguishes *The Wire* is the multitude of locations, the number of scenes filmed outside and the fact that it self-consciously plays on the way in which space is constructed and viewed.

There is an awareness of how space is frequently conceived as abstract, as image and that this invariably produces a partial view where space will be missed out. The abundance, particularly in Season 1, of images seen through camera lenses and on CCTV screens is central to a drama about surveillance. But the cameras also point to the way in which space is itself often experienced and understood through images; the photographic lenses used by the police bring distant objects or people into close proximity. The CCTV camera in the lift shows a whole space, but distorted, and the CCTV camera in the projects offers only a partial view. The cameras are an attempt to control space, but space is never fully contained. Space as an abstraction is also signified by the maps which adorn the offices of the Homicide Unit, the Western District, the Detail (and later Major Crimes Unit), the stevedores’
union building, the Mayor’s office, Carcetti’s campaign offices, the Maritime charts (and tide charts) and the newsroom. Even the code used by the ‘Greeks’ and Marlo in Season 5 refers to map grid references. While the maps suggest the ‘real’ city of Baltimore and its geography, they are also attempts to colonise space: the city is divided into voting districts, areas to be policed, zones to be redeveloped or spaces to be surveilled.

*The Wire* therefore knowingly points to the gap between the attempt to represent space and lived social space, but in doing so the series itself seeks to address this gap. This becomes apparent from the beginning of Season 1. Most obviously, there is no privileging of one view. Much television crime drama tends to follow in the tradition of the white male noir detective who, in spite of visiting many of the city’s spaces, is an individual alienated from the city.\(^5\) While dramas such as *CSI* and *NYPD Blue* include detectives who are black and female, the white male view frequently predominates (Sipowicz, Grissom, Horatio Caine, Mac Taylor). Even where this is not necessarily the case, as in *Homicide: Life on the Street*, the city is positioned as an environment ‘out there’ populated by people ‘other’ than the detective(s). The city’s spaces are primarily seen as crime scenes where there are either victims or criminals. That *The Wire* is not simply told from the point of view of the police detectives itself opens up the city to the viewer and the camera and allows it to be experienced as a lived social space rather than as an abstraction.

The significance of this multiple perspective can be seen from the very first episode. Many scenes are in long or medium shot, which, as David Simon suggests in the DVD commentary, allows the characters to be seen in their environment. (\((The Wire, The Complete First Season [DVD], Episode one commentary by David Simon (New York: HBO Home Video, 2003.))\) There is an abundance of detail and scenes begin with the camera showing a location before a known character appears. In 1:1 ‘The Detail’ D’Angelo arrives for his first day back at work after jail. The camera focuses first on a woman waiting at a bus stop. It is a bright sunny autumn day and in the distance, slightly hazy in the sunlight are the high rises of downtown Baltimore. The bus comes into view and as the woman gets onto the bus, D’Angelo steps off. The woman is wearing a pass around her neck, suggesting that she, like D’Angelo, is on her way to work, but in this case legitimate work. It is unclear who will descend from the bus or who is to be the focus of this scene, so the viewer has an opportunity to take in the location first. This place exists before D’Angelo arrives there, and the bus and the street are a shared public space where everyday life goes on. Unlike the ‘postcard’ establishing shot, the viewer here is positioned at ground level in the lived social space. The camera focuses on D’Angelo as he walks along the street and then cuts to show him approaching the towers and Stringer Bell.

The next scene begins with a view from above of Bodie on the orange sofa. The camera takes in a child looking out of a window and two women sitting on their steps talking, before D’Angelo meets Bodie, Poot and Wallace for the first time (he has been demoted from the towers following his jail term). In the next scene in the low rises, the camera once again lingers on Bodie on the
bright orange sofa, a child watching from a window, a woman sitting outside her house, D'Angelo sitting on a plastic chair, eating, next to someone’s washing flapping in the wind. The wealth of detail suggests a ‘real’ space and a lived space. This is not merely an anonymous crime scene, but a place where ordinary life goes on. This may be an area where drugs are bought and sold, but it is not positioned as a murky underworld. In 1:4 ‘Old Cases’, while D'Angelo, Bodie, Poot and Wallace talk, in the background someone is hanging out the washing. The scene finishes with a view from above of one child pushing another in a shopping trolley. The camera then pans up to show the city, from the lower buildings in the foreground towards the gleaming high rises of downtown.

There is a sense of the city in its entirety, as well as the ‘real’ place of Baltimore, but also of the relationship between spaces. The juxtaposition of scenes is a technique used frequently in *The Wire* to underline the similarities of institutions, whether law enforcers or law breakers but here it also points to a geographical proximity and separation. The high-rises of downtown, which commonly feature in the television city in isolation, are here situated in relation to the projects. Neither space is merely an abstraction, as the following scene takes place downtown, in the opulent offices of the court, where Judge Phelan meets Burrell. Rather each space has a geographical, social and economic location within the city; they are at once a part of the same city and yet separate. Difference is both real and imagined; imagined because the activities within each space mirror each other, but very real in terms of economic and social conditions.

The relationships between spaces in the city are also apparent in the many scenes which take place in corridors, stairwells, lifts, outside on the street or inside cars travelling along streets. These interconnecting spaces are not simply areas which are passed through, or missed out altogether, but spaces where key conversations and action take place, and crucially these are also the spaces where people live. In 1:4 ‘Old Cases’, there are two scenes where Bubbles travels by car. In the first journey with Kima, the camera shows the view out of the car window of brightly coloured row houses against a clear blue sky. Some houses are boarded up, some are better maintained; there are people in the streets and cars parked outside buildings. The camera then cuts to an exterior shot of Bubbles through the car window, with the buildings reflected in the window. For Bubbles, this way of seeing the city is unusual, as he normally walks or takes the bus. Here, the view through the car window is seen from Bubbles’ perspective, but in fact this is how the city is frequently experienced and is a way in which the city’s spaces can be kept ‘out’, avoided or escaped altogether.

This is underlined further when McNulty takes him to watch his son’s soccer game. Here, the large houses and leafy front gardens contrast starkly both with the earlier scene in Kima’s car, and the next scene, the night time alleyway where McNulty drops Bubbles off. The organised soccer game also contrasts with the children playing in the street and chasing each other round a woman carrying her shopping. The affluent suburbs are unfamiliar territory to Bubbles and accessible only by car, but in fact they, like the projects, are a
part of the city. This is the city as it is, in all its parts and in all its lived spaces. The contrast in spaces points to an economic and social gap, but the camera does not privilege any space and neither McNulty’s nor Bubbles’ view is privileged in these scenes. The McNulty family’s world seems far removed from Bubbles, but while McNulty and Elena argue publicly about McNulty’s lateness, the camera stays on Bubbles’ face. Later, when McNulty drops Bubbles off, the camera remains on McNulty’s face as he watches Bubbles walk down the alley. As Bubbles leaves the car he tells McNulty ‘thin line ’tween heaven and here’. Each watches an existence which is at the same time distant and familiar. McNulty has been banished from the family home and his drinking is not dissimilar from Bubbles’ addiction. Bubbles himself has a sister, to whom he turns in both Season 1 and Season 5 for a place to stay. It is indeed a fine line between an existence which is socially acceptable and one that is marginalised.

There is a sense then, of a whole city and of social and lived spaces. The street, to which Bubbles returns, is not necessarily threatening or dangerous (although of course it can be) but it is also a place where children play. This is not just a city experienced by those who visit (and McNulty acknowledges to Bunk that this is the relationship the police have to the projects), but as a lived environment. However, there is no sense that this is an organic or homogenous whole, and in opening up the city, The Wire not only shows the spaces frequently elided but also the socially constructed divisions which are obscured as a consequence.

Movement across the city may be physically possible, but it is circumscribed. The city is connected but economic and social class, race, ethnicity and gender intersect to determine access to space, although not all of the time or in the same way. While Bubbles may visit the white suburbs and McNulty visits the black projects, The Wire moves beyond any such simplistic binary. There is an awareness of history; poverty has affected the black population most and The Wire also points to the complex ways in which race, class and gender interact. In the spaces of Kavanagh’s bar and the St Clement Street bar, black police socialise with white police (singing Irish songs) and black stevedores mix with white stevedores. In their professional space, Rhonda Pearlman, a white woman and Cedric Daniels, a black man appear equal and in their domestic space they are better matched personally, in terms of education and class (and reliability), than Rhonda and Jimmy McNulty. But in the projects, Bunk and McNulty, ‘white and black together, ties and jackets on’, can only be police.

One scene in which these complex interactions are particularly apparent occurs in 1:5 ‘The Pager’, when D’Angelo takes Donette to a fancy restaurant. It is clear from the moment they enter the restaurant that this is unfamiliar territory. D’Angelo is surprised that he should have made a reservation and has to make do with an inferior table. While he may be an authority in the low rises, here he is unsure of himself and Donette tells him he should have been more assertive with the waiter. Towards the end of the meal, D’Angelo asks her ‘Do they know what I’m about?’ The camera cuts to show their fellow diners, two elderly white ladies and a middle-aged black couple talking.
Donette responds: ‘Your money good, right D.? We ain’t the only black people in here.’ D’Angelo replies that that is not what he means, rather ‘hard as you try, you still can’t go nowhere’ and Donette tells him ‘You got money, you get to be whatever you say.’ But this is not quite the case as D’Angelo then takes the wrong cake from the dessert cart. While there is nothing to prevent D’Angelo from going to the restaurant if he can afford it, money is not enough: social class and education are necessary to know restaurant etiquette. Even though he lives in the city, he will walk around harbour only ‘acting as if’ he belongs: these are spaces in which the middle classes, black and white, feel at home. He is not out of place in the restaurant because he is black, but because he is the wrong class, but the fact that he is black means that he is less likely to have access to the education and money of the middle classes. And his feeling that it is in fact incredibly difficult to escape his background proves to be correct, as ultimately he is killed in jail, just at the point where he has decided to cut himself off from Avon.

_The Wire_ engenders therefore a sense of both a connected and divided city. Lives may mirror each other, such as Bubbles and McNulty, but it is not the case that everyone’s experiences are the same and Bubbles’ experiences are much harsher than McNulty’s. The police tactics may echo those of the corner boys but the risks for each are not the same. However, there is never a sense in which the city is a space occupied by ‘others’. The spaces are all inhabited and lived spaces; the camera and the viewer are not positioned as visitors in these spaces, even though the detectives occasionally are. It is perhaps troubling that Season 1 appears to position McNulty, a white male detective, as the central character, but arguably he occupies this position only for it to be deconstructed and indeed in Seasons 2-4, he moves very much into the sidelines.

Homi K. Bhabha suggests that: ‘The Western metropole must confront its postcolonial history, told by its postwar migrants and refugees, as an indigenous or native narrative internal to its national identity’. I would suggest that _The Wire_ re-presents the city as a space where all narratives are internal. These are not alternative stories of the city but are integral to any understanding of the city. In a recent article in _The Guardian Weekend_ magazine, David Simon raises the concern that his reading of Baltimore ‘has more appeal the farther one travels from America’. But while particularity is important, _The Wire_ also resists a reading which sees the narratives as internal only to Baltimore. The expressways and railways, not to mention the seaport, connect Baltimore not only to the rest of America, but also to the rest of the world. Baltimore does not exist in an economic, historical and social vacuum and its narratives are internal not only to this specific city but extend outwards nationally and globally.

It is this play on inside and outside space which inflects _The Wire_ and its televisual representation of the city. _The Wire_ endeavours to show Baltimore as it ‘really’ is and yet of course it is a fictional representation. In the same _Guardian_ article, David Simon points out that even _The Wire_ cannot say everything about Baltimore and indeed, in drawing attention to the constructed nature of space, the series acknowledges this at the outset. Yet
there is a sense that the viewer of The Wire does, as Baudrillard suggests, begin with the screen and move out into the city. The Wire is not quite the ‘real’ Baltimore, but the city is experienced as a lived social space, not as a nightmarish alien urban wasteland. In opening up the city’s spaces, showing the viewer spaces which are often missed out, The Wire does not so much bring Morley’s ‘distant events’ and places into the home as move the viewer into the city’s streets. For Morley, the concern is that television should not be used to reinforce a sense of space which continues to rest on a binary of inside and outside, home and foreigners. But television is also a border site, and it is these border sites which Bhabha suggests are critical in order to move beyond identity based on binaries or notions of essential difference. If television is a point where distinctions between inside and outside, real and imagined space dissolve, then in taking on the spatial qualities of the lived environment, The Wire creates a television city which offers more than a view from a window on an ‘outside’ world, populated by ‘others’.

Notes

1. Jean Baudrillard, America, (London: Verso, 1988), 56; and quoted by David B. Clarke in his introduction to The Cinematic City. [↩]
3. David Simon in Conversation at the BFI, 18 June 2008. [↩]
4. Alisa Perren, ”I Don’t Think We’re in Hollywood Anymore: Television Series Go On Location” Georgia State University, Flow TV June 2008 http://flowtv.org/?p=1473. [↩]
5. Jason Mittell, Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture, (London: Routledge, 2004), 133. [↩]
7. Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture, (London: Routledge, 1994), 6. [↩]
8. David Simon, “There are two Americas, separate, unequal”, The Guardian Weekend, September 6, 2008, 24-28, 26. [↩]
9. Simon, 27. [↩]
10. Bhabha, 5. [↩]