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The Wire, Big Data, and the Specter of Naturalism

Bieger, Laura

Published in:
Studies in American Naturalism

DOI:
[10.1353/san.2017.0007](https://doi.org/10.1353/san.2017.0007)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2017

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Bieger, L. (2017). The Wire, Big Data, and the Specter of Naturalism. *Studies in American Naturalism*, 12(2), 127-139. <https://doi.org/10.1353/san.2017.0007>

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Laura Bieger

Studies in American Naturalism, Volume 12, Number 1, Summer 2017, pp.
127-139 (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/san.2017.0007>



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The Wire, Big Data, and the Specter of Naturalism

Laura Bieger, *Groningen University*

A data-gathering device is the namesake of the TV series *The Wire* (2002–2008). Shorthand for the surveillance technology around which the story revolves, the wiretap is used by a special unit of the Baltimore Police to gain insight about the increasingly sophisticated drug trafficking going on about town. On the receptive level, the wiretap links the show's viewers with the work of the detectives, with the effect of instructing us to read the crime-ridden world of the show as they do. Scholars have noted that watching *The Wire* takes an unusual degree of commitment, the pay-off being a strikingly truthful encounter with an otherwise inaccessible social milieu.¹ In aesthetic terms, this commitment thrives on a mode of reception that, regardless of the often-appraised social realism of the show, is not that of a sociologist or a journalist, but that of a detective. From the very first scene, in which Detective Jimmy McNulty sits on the doorsteps of a rundown brownstone in Baltimore's notorious black ghetto and talks to a teenage homicide witness, it is the work of the detectives that takes us into an urban underworld of crime and corruption, asking the viewer to gather and decipher data along with the cops. Like the trickles of blood on the pavement in the opening scene, flickering meaningfully in the blue light of the police car, data trails lead the way into *The Wire's* dense and complex storyworld. And if data are in the most basic sense bits and pieces of information, the rationale behind the show's data-gathering mania—manifesting itself beyond the title-giving wiretap in the widespread use of surveillance cameras and undercover informants, secretly taken photographs, rummages through housing registers and real estate files, etc.—is to fight the *Octopus*-like organization of crime wrecking post-industrial American cities like Baltimore on a mind-boggling scale.

I argue that the resemblance to Frank Norris's naturalistic epos evoked here is more than merely superficial. Yet where *The Octopus* (1901) exploits the raising of wheat as its primary plot-driving force, *The Wire* supplants wheat with data. In approaching data as the crop that organized crime cultivates, I assume that an octopus-like network rather than a clear-cut group of individual actors—the criminals—raises this crop. The criminals cannot do without leaving data trails. Yet being acutely aware of this inbred vulnerability of their operations, they develop ever more sophisticated strategies for dispersing and encrypting the trails they are doomed to leave by sheer virtue of being organized. The police work engaged in rein-ing in organized crime cannot do without tracing and deciphering these trails. But the brilliance of *The Wire* lies in bringing into clear view that any effort at detection involves interfering, redirecting, and ultimately *co-producing* these trails. As sites in which criminal and criminological activities are mutually invested, data trails are thus exploited to the end of telling a story that, riffing on Walter Benn Michaels, repeats naturalism's perfidious logic to serve "the interests not of any individual or any group of individuals but of the [surveillance] economy itself" (178). The specter of naturalism that haunts *The Wire* springs from this uncanny replication.

David Simon's deep-seated conviction in the legitimacy of surveillance operations like the wiretap of his much-acclaimed show has made him an outspoken defender of the National Security Administration in the recent scandal. Not only is data out there anyway, Simon states in an entry on his personal blog on June 7, 2013, but most of us tacitly *consent* to leaving data trails by using Google, Facebook, the fast-track lane, etc. So why, Simon asks, "should law enforcement in the legitimate pursuit of criminal activity pretend that such data does not exist"? Those who gather it in the name of the law should, of course, not abuse their powers—to which he swiftly adds: "We don't know of any actual abuse." Stressing the importance of measuring "privacy rights" against "the legitimate investigate needs of law enforcement," he finds comfort in a surveillance operation he once covered as a local reporter:

In Baltimore thirty years ago, after the detectives figured out which pay phones were dialing pagers, and then did all the requisite background checks and surveillance to identify the drug suspects, they finally went to a judge and asked for a wiretap on several pay phones. The judge looked at the police work and said, okay, you can record calls off those public pay phones, but only if you have someone watching the phones to ensure that your suspects are making the calls and not ordinary citizens.

And if you make a mistake and record a non-drug-involved call, you will of course “minimize” the call and cease recording. (“We are shocked”)

Aside from elaborating at some length how *The Wire* is based on a real-life event acutely familiar to its creator, the blog entry bespeaks a tremendous will to dismiss how substantially surveillance technology has changed in the last thirty years. In fact, in Simon’s scenario, Big Data appears as a negligible factor in the anti-terrorism surveillance operations run by the NSA. “The only thing new here, from a legal standpoint, is the *scale*”; “legal and moral principles”—boiling down, for Simon, to “a preliminary process involving the capture, retention and analysis of *raw data*”—have presumably stayed the same (“We are shocked”; emphasis mine). Tempting as it is, this is not the place to delve into a lengthy quarrel with Simon’s statement. But I want to at least gesture toward the problematic tendency of the notion of “raw data” to eclipse the fact that no matter how little technology might be involved, gathering information always entails mediation—because it is part of the self-reflexive mechanism by which a random bit or piece comes to present itself as “information.” And I want to stress the absolute rather than relative dimension at stake in the recent change of scale from “data” to “Big Data,” a shift that marks the advent of an entirely new world of data availability through the nearly omnipresent use of digital technology that, in radically altering notions of privacy, must also affect their legal and moral bearings.

But what does all of this have to do with *The Wire*’s naturalistic storytelling? Much has been written about the series since it became a dependable critics’ favorite, but even as scholarly interest persists to this day, surprisingly little attention has been paid to its naturalism.² I have written elsewhere more generally about the topic; here I want to focus on the data-driven narrative that I take to be key to this legacy, and I choose to begin with Simon’s recent endorsement of the NSA’s broadband surveillance measures to cast *The Wire*’s surveillance practices in a more glaring light than it is usually done. The willful suspension of disbelief expressed in Simon’s blog (“we don’t know of any actual abuse”), possibly fueled by his desire to protect a last bit of faith in America’s democratic institutions, is all the more surprising if we remind ourselves how little time passes in the fictional world of *The Wire* until the detectives start bending the “investigate needs” (Simon, “We are shocked”) of enforcing the law in ways that may not be easy to condemn, but that are crystal clear violations of precisely those legal parameters that Simon affirmatively mentions in his blog: to record a phone call only if a detective on site verifies that a drug

dealer is making it, and to instantly stop listening if a call is not drug-related. Toward the end of season one, two detectives overhear a call in which one of the corner boys engages in phone sex. Only long after the designated cut-off time of 90 seconds does the “conversation” veer toward a recent shooting, yet with practically no hesitation the call is nevertheless used for the incriminating information that it contains. Other calls are recorded although it is an open secret that no one is verifying the caller, since all the detectives of the understaffed unit are busy with tasks more vital to propelling the investigative action. Whether legal and moral transgressions like these are invented or not, the fact that they are so easily conceivable for *The Wire*’s creators gives us a keen sense of how vulnerable to abuse the whole practice of surveillance actually is.

And yet in the world of *The Wire* there is no alternative to the pursuit of data, without which there would, indeed, not even be a story. The reason for this is that the storyworld of *The Wire* has a singular rallying point: the game. The data trails that it leaves connect all the various sites and all the numerous characters of the show in a way that drives both the “plot of actions” and the “hermeneutical plot,” what happens and how to make sense of it (Barthes, *S/Z*). But the self-explanatory ease with which the phrase operates on the semantic level—“it’s all in the game,” “the game is out there,” etc.—is treacherous, for it refers to an arcane network that, all-pervasive though it may be, nobody is able to fully understand, let alone control in full scope. The game is, indeed, perfidious in this regard, for contrary to the game of chess that D’Angelo uses as its analogy to the other corner boys, the success of the game of organized crime—or rather, its efficiency: it is not played to win but to keep going—does not depend on the players understanding it. All they need to do is play. And if they play it, the game pays for new church windows and election campaigns, tampers with the police force and public schools, channels (and often derails) prospected futures, choreographs (and often destroys) relationships and lives. *The Wire* fathoms the game as a natural force that determines life and death, a force that generates an environment in which some specimens are better equipped for survival than others.

And this brings me to another feature of *The Wire*’s conspicuous kinship with naturalism. Not only is its theme strikingly reminiscent of *The Octopus* but also its epic sweep. Strung together by an overarching investment in gathering and deciphering data of social decline, its five seasons cover Baltimore’s predominantly black, drug-ridden ghettos, its ailing and failing infrastructure, the corrosion and corruption of its democratic institutions (among them police, courts, prison, unions, city govern-

ment and administration, federal politics, public schools, news casting), the post-industrial devaluation of wage labor, and the endemic reproduction of poverty, drug addiction, and violence. Each season thrives on taking its viewers out of the comfort zone of their ordinary lives and into what Frank Norris famously described as the world of “rags and wretchedness, . . . dirt and despair” that exists, largely unknown to most of us, just “across the street” (“Plea” 77, 76). This world becomes accessible to us as we follow the detectives in their daily routines, which, besides listening in on the wiretap, include patrolling the streets, talking to corner boys and undercover informants, secretly taking photographs of suspects, and monitoring pay phones from rooftops and abandoned buildings. And even in scenes devoid of detectives, their surveillance mode of close observation of an utterly strange and unfamiliar world guides the viewer’s perception, for in one way or another all scenes are linked to the game that we are asked to figure out. In its desire to engage its viewers with this world, *The Wire* bears a striking resemblance to Norris’s conviction that worlds like these *must* be explored to shed light on the real problems of our time. Yet in doing so, *The Wire* also rekindles some of naturalism’s generic pitfalls: the voyeuristic “prying, peering, peeping” into spaces otherwise hidden from view and the spectacle of otherness that such a gaze routinely involves; and a strategic sentimentalization (“These, too, are my children, look at them, know them, and, knowing, help!”) that became palpable as early as in Stephen Crane’s *Maggie*, and that Norris deems a romantic necessity to get beyond superficial infatuations with “the ordinary, the untroubled, the commonplace” (“Plea” 77, 78). Perhaps *The Wire* even revives the missionary zeal of what Norris tentatively called the “novel with a purpose”: to not only tell something and show something, but also to prove something, and thus take Émile Zola’s positivistic notion of literature as a scientific experiment to a crucial next level (Norris, “Novel”).

In writing *The Octopus* Norris’s ambitions in this matter peaked, yet what he “proved” in the end—that the value of the wheat trumps and tramples everything else—is often considered to be the novel’s great failure. *The Wire* runs into similar problems, but just like *The Octopus* it does so in interesting ways. For what if the imperative of trailing data that drives its plot just as singlehandedly as the imperative of raising wheat drives the plot of *The Octopus* becomes fused with the desire to generate proof? Is the resulting narrative enterprise not especially vexed in an age in which the distinction between information (as data) and knowledge (as the result of interpreting something, possibly data) has begun to look like a thing of the past (and what critical mind wants to be associated with that)? The

rise of Big Data that we are caught up in today thrives on the positivistic implications of precisely this approximation of data and knowledge and on the materialistic worldview that it affords (interpretation is doomed to become superfluous is a world that believes that data are facts and facts are self-evident). The term Big Data has been around since the 1990s, and while the exact size of Big Data is a moving target, it is safe to say that *The Wire* was conceived at a time when storage devices and analysis technology led to an exponential increase of data (shortly after the show ended, the existing amount of data started to double each year).³ And while *The Wire* is hardly a series *about* the rise of Big Data, with its focus on the organized crime-related use of communication and surveillance technologies around the time when this development took off, it is deeply entangled with it. Bringing to the present the concern of this special issue with naturalism as a meta-fictional commentary on the evolution of data, this essay locates *The Wire* at the threshold of the age of Big Data to argue that its manic and, indeed, mostly pleasurable concern with gathering, deciphering, and connecting bits and pieces of information to a meaningful and narratively compelling whole is its naturalistic *modus operandi* as well as its critical fault line.

***The Wire's* Noir Naturalism; or, Reading for Details as Data**

Not naturalism but realism is usually considered to be *The Wire's* outstanding feature. Its rigorous documentation of Baltimore's diverse, conflicted, and often quite inaccessible social milieus has gained it the reputation of a quasi-empirical study, supposedly used by drug dealers to inform themselves about the surveillance practices of the police, and taught in a Harvard sociology class by Anmol Chaddha and William Julius Wilson for its effective illustration of "the fundamental nature of systemic urban inequality" (188).⁴ A substantial share in this truly uncommon "use value" of a television series made, first and foremost, for commercial entertainment purposes must be attributed to the creators' acute knowledge of their material. Simon used to work as a reporter—a background he shares with the old guard of naturalists, writers like Norris, Crane and Dreiser—for Baltimore's main local newspaper, *The Sun*, whose decline is dissected in season five. Ed Burns, Simon's closest collaborator on *The Wire*, used to be a member of the Baltimore Police and a teacher in the kind of ailing public school that plays a central role in season four. And Raphael Alvarez, another staff writer who is also an ex-reporter for *The Sun*, grew up in the harbor milieu that serves as the main setting of season two. No doubt that the authentic air of the series benefitted immensely from this broad spectrum of first-hand experience.

Even so, the narrative exploitation of this experience in *The Wire* is explicitly data-prone and, as such (for reasons that will soon become clear) it is naturalistic rather than realistic. One can think of the non-fiction books—*Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets* and *The Corner*—that Simon wrote in the 1990s as a viable database on which he could rely when creating *The Wire*. *Homicide* covers his year as an embedded journalist with the Baltimore Police, and *The Corner*, co-authored with ex-detective Ed Burns and again based on a year of careful research, explores Baltimore's drug trafficking milieu from its most mundane and embattled site: the street corner where drugs are sold to their users.⁵ But in drawing on this database, *The Wire's* "purpose" was less to document (this was the purpose of the non-fiction books) and more to enhance documentation (not unlike what was done by New Journalism in the 1960s and 70s) with the power of fiction to tell once again, and ideally in a more effective way, what the non-fiction books had already covered. Murky as the boundary between fact and fiction certainly is in *The Wire*—because of its creators' inventive re-use of their documentary material, the story's palpable truthfulness to the vast amounts of data gathered in this previous work, the accurate use of sites, actors, and insider jargon stemming from the real-life milieu that is depicted—I would still insist that it asks to be watched as a piece of fiction with *dramatis personae*, an invented plot, and a heavy investment in trailing characters and data. In fact, *The Wire* may best be approached as a naturalistic piece of fiction that promises to show, tell, and possibly even prove something about our crisis-ridden contemporaneity by means of engaging the trailing of data.

As mentioned above, *The Wire* does so by taking its viewers to a naturalistic world and teaching them to read it like a detective. Getting a grasp of this world demands an unusual degree of commitment. One of the first television series to radically break with expectations of easy consumability, its narrative is complex with long and intricately arching and meandering storylines. It takes the liberty to plot and develop its characters sluggishly, with the effect that the viewer often simply does not know what is going on. New characters often appear without introduction in nondescript places (a street, a parking lot, a hardware store), and at times we have to wait for episodes—sometimes (as in the case of Snoop, the coldblooded killer of the rising drug lord Marlo Stanfield) even for the next season—until we can begin to discern their stakes in "the game." For a viewer cast in this persistent search mode, what characters say assumes heightened importance. And yet it takes work to understand them, not only because of the frequent lack of context, but also because they all speak in their special

and at times impenetrably thick vernaculars and insider languages (that of the drug milieu, the police force, the political class, etc.), which one has to learn in the process of watching. Visual narration is equally laborious. Many scenes are set in the dark or in dimly lit rooms, and even when we see a close-up of a person's face we can usually only guess what is going on inside. That there are almost no flashbacks or other subjective modes of visual storytelling that could give us further clues in this regard is hardly coincidental (see Paefgen). In the resiliently strange and unfamiliar world to which we are introduced, codes and codifications, concealment and disguise are quintessential assets of success and survival, and often the two are not far apart.

Reminiscent of hard-boiled detective fiction and film noir (and keenly aestheticized as such), the task of reading cool and opaque surfaces settles well with the existentialist mood of a world run by accident and chance, a world in which people act upon their lower instincts and morals are a disposable code. As viewers, we are intrigued, but we do not want to get too close. In presenting us with a puzzle of opaque bits and pieces of information and giving us eventual hints how they might connect, this narrative asks for a way of watching that replicates the surveillance work of the detectives and extends it to the entire city and everything that happens in it. It is, indeed, this search mode that gives *The Wire* its highly consistent visual style and narrative form that is atypical for TV. Like a ritual, the basic choreography on which it thrives is rehearsed at the beginning of every episode. A random scene without explanatory context unfolds before our eyes, impossible to understand, but for the schooled viewer nevertheless readable—as an allegory for the episode to come. After the same pattern, the opening credits following the random scene always end with an allegorical statement that one of the characters will say over the course of the episode. Such intricate plotting and self-reflexivity make almost necessary the option to go back and re-watch the episode. For, needless to say, the viewer is more or less on her own to figure out the pattern, and as characters are quite numerous in *The Wire* it takes time and effort to remember their names and be able to match the opening quotes. The opening credits themselves—a collage of short and chronologically unordered sequences and close-ups that over the course of the season all become meaningful bits and pieces of the story (of evidence?) for the viewer who is willing to engage in this long-term memory puzzle—turn this allegorical search mode into a self-reflexive art-form in which everything is “in the game.”

The Wire sets in motion a surveillance economy that playfully turns viewers into data-gathering detectives. Engaging us in a carefully calcu-

lated and visually pleasing game of piecing together bits of information into a compelling and plausible whole is key to the narrative and aesthetic strategy that *fiction* brings to *The Wire*'s documentary database. And because this game thrives on credibility more than on suspense, a compelling description of social reality is key to keeping it going. It is here that the difference between a naturalistic and a realistic use of detail becomes crucial: in a most basic sense one can think of realism's avid investment in detailed description as geared toward creating a narrative world that demands close observation, a world in which orientation (including the careful reading of social codes and conventions) potentially leads to inner growth and moral maturity. Naturalism rejects this educational (and essentially Victorian) model of literature. Is morality not a mere social code, a thin varnish that easily breaks, and, indeed, needs to be broken to get beyond the pleasant surface of social conventions? For what really drives human actions in naturalist fiction are passion and instinct, and both are notoriously eruptive and unpredictable (see Fluck 203).

Good reading skills are thus still essential assets in a naturalistic world. *The Wire* puts in the place of realism's trust in the restorative capacities of exemplary development and inner growth cultivated through detailed description first and foremost a trust in fostering good reading skills. But verisimilitude asserts an entirely different function once it is detached from the possibility of bringing moral maturity. Going back to the notion that both realism and naturalism exploit detailed description for the sake of credibility, it makes sense to think of realism's investment in the abundance of detail (as referent or sign) as serving the creation of a vivid and accurate picture in the mind of the reader. With Roland Barthes we might say that the "reality effect" employed here is clearly directed inward; the narrative world is meant to appear as believable as possible, and verisimilitude is employed to achieve precisely that (see Barthes, "L'Effet"). But as June Howard has so compellingly argued, the detail that we encounter in naturalistic storyworlds diverts from the aim of producing a maximal resemblance of reality in the reader's mind. Naturalistic details, she claims, are not mere signs; they are facts, or rather: *data*. And as such, they are prone to generate not inner growth but *knowledge*: a positivistic kind of knowledge that not only affects the world of the story but reaches beyond it; a knowledge that takes shape and gains momentum in the fictional world, yet promises objective insights into the enigmatic facets of social reality from which the detail-as-data is drawn (Howard 147).

In the orbit of this kind of reality effect, data are literal inscriptions of reality into the fictional world of the story. And this also means that in-

tegrating them into the storyworld does not transform them into mere signs—it has the effect of creating a positivistic surplus of knowledge that is geared toward the extra-fictional world.

The Devil is in the Data

In *The Wire*, the telephone is the privileged detail. Within its fictional world, the arcane network that coordinates “the game” becomes tangible in the materiality of the telecommunication devices that are essential for it to exist. And to the degree that “the game” becomes understandable at all, it is through the detail of the telephone—that is, if one learns along with the detectives how telephones are used. This lesson is more difficult than one might expect because in the world of *The Wire* telephone use is both rigidly codified and in constant flux. And this means, in turn, that it is encrypted with the perpetually changing rules of “the game.” In the first season a combination of pagers and pay phones orchestrates the drug trafficking. In the third season the dealers have switched to mobile phones with prepaid cards disposed with at high frequency. And in seasons four and five disposable cell phones stay in use, yet no longer for voice messaging (which is interceptable) but for sending codified images. Hence the telephone comes to stand for both the intangibility of the network through which “the game” is played and for the material basis of telecommunication through which it is run. Untouched by all transformations that it could possibly undergo, the telephone remains the one thing that allows the detectives to stay on the drug-traffickers’ tracks. Simon not only lifted this privileged detail-as-data from his earlier work as a reporter and inscribed it into the narrative world of *The Wire*, but he was also involved in keeping the telephone from becoming a mere sign by stressing its link to the real-life surveillance protocols of the Baltimore Police in his blog. The telephone detail thus continues to promise factual knowledge about the world of drug trafficking and beyond—all the way down to the ongoing surveillance practices of the NSA.

Even so, at a closer look the knowledge to be gained from this detail makes palpable that the surveillance operation run by the detectives has a precarious and, indeed, volatile counterpart. Without a technological “ear” wired to the communication network of “the game,” the police are doomed to remain clueless. But once this network is tapped, it begins to mutate and change its code—with the effect of turning the detectives themselves into players. In fact (and quite perversely so), any surveillance-driven attempt of containing “the game” in the world of *The Wire* also stimulates it, both on the level of its organization (in the constant muta-

tions of its communication technology) and on the level of its players. A figure like Marlo Stanfield can only rise so quickly because the arrest of Avon Barksdale creates a power vacuum in a marketplace in which the exchange of data is the single most powerful currency. Not only does the marketplace regulate the flow of supply but also the vendor hierarchies. The narrative arc of *The Wire* leaves no doubt that Barksdale was the lesser evil of the two. Stanfield discards the old code of honor, kills his opponents even more ruthlessly, and refuses to join the city-wide “coop” of drug dealers out of an Al Capone-like disregard for territorial borders. Tied back to the police’s interference with “the game” enabled by the wiretap, “the game” not only remains virtually unaffected in its basic operations, but it also becomes more radical and exuberant as an effect of interference. As a more or less direct effect of police interference, the drug milieu bears ever more resilient and cold-blooded life-forms over the course of the series. In the figure of a barely six-year-old boy who shoots Omar, the romantic hero of *The Wire*, in the head when off-guard because he keenly understands that this is an important player, we might already be catching a glimpse of the next generation.

The logic of deterministic decline that becomes tangible here is a typical feature of naturalistic narratives. With the Victorian ideal of reading for moral growth discarded for a reading for empirical evidence, the aspired effect is to mobilize the reader to take action against the seemingly unstoppable forces that cause a similar threat in the world outside of the text due to an increase in factual knowledge. In *The Wire* all of the main plotlines feed into this logic. The code of conduct in the drug milieu deteriorates, the city has less and less money to take care of its problems, projects that promise alleviation peter out without new ones in sight, the car pool of the police force is in increasingly sad shape, detectives become criminals to secure funding for their cases, and kids become orphans for plotting the death of their hazardous junkie parents. So if *The Wire* sets out not only to show and tell but also to *prove* something, it would be the systemic nature of the social crisis that it so minutely maps and measures. Its purpose could then be to bring into both macroscopic and microscopic view a late capitalist *Octopus*-like scheme of exploitation that devours everything in its reach to the sole end of optimizing itself. Yet as we gain insight—knowledge—from its epic account, spiked not only with surveillance data about an increasingly sophisticated drug trafficking operation but also with homicide clearance rates, unemployment statistics, records of public funding, campaign material for local elections, etc.; and as we watch how some of those involved in gathering and presenting all this data

recognize and, indeed, strive to secure some humanity in that wrecked world of decay, we also learn the harsh lesson that tampering with the system only invigorates it.

This is the specter that haunts *The Wire* despite what I take to be its creators' sincerest intentions to enlist fiction to the end of social critique. Exploiting the data-reverend logic of naturalism to amplify their heartfelt concerns about a corrosive conjunction of organized crime, post-industrial capitalism and the slow death of democratic institutions comes at the cost of embracing an economy that in the end only serves itself. The only difference is that money has been replaced by surveillance.

Laura Bieger is Chair of American Studies at Groningen University. Her essays have appeared in *New Literary History*, *Amerikastudien/American Studies* and *ZAA*. Her first book, *Ästhetik der Immersion* (transcript 2007), examines public spaces that turn world-image-relations into immersive spectacles. Her second book *Belonging and Narrative* (forthcoming) considers the need to belong as a driving force of literary production and the novel as a primary place and home-making agent.

NOTES

1. See Kelleter (22–24); Chaddha and Wilson; Jagoda; Warren; and Williams.
2. See Tyree; Ariello; Bieger; and Kelleter 17–18, 23.
3. The series aired from 2002 to 2008, but the use of pagers in season one and the type of cell phones used throughout suggests that it is set slightly earlier.
4. Chaddha and Wilson not only taught *The Wire* at Harvard, but they also published a much-noted essay about their unorthodox choice of teaching material in a *Critical Inquiry* Special Issue dedicated to the series. For Frank Kelleter, the essay is part of a critical discourse on *The Wire*, which he aptly describes as a “selective duplication” of *The Wire*'s own aspirations (see Kelleter 33–48).
5. Both books were also used for television documentaries: the first for the NBC production *Homicide: Life on the Street*, which accompanies Simon as a reporter; and the second for the HBO mini-series *The Corner*, produced by Simon, which subsequently opened the door for further cooperation with this channel.

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