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A Sanctuary for “Good Police”

The Wire's major crimes unit as a melodramatic space of innocence

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1. Introduction

Within the emerging critical evaluation of the show, various generic labels have been attached to the acclaimed HBO serial *The Wire*. These have been as diverse as “detective fiction” (Kraniauskas, 2012:175), “epic” (Jameson, 2010:359), and even “American Western” (Viti, 2009:79). But, until recently, “melodrama” has not been virtually excluded from these classifications. In her contribution to the first critical assessments of the serial, Kathleen LeBesco even claims that the show’s audience appeal is partly based on “its general lack of melodrama” (LeBesco, 2009:219). In 2014, the film scholar Linda Williams challenged this view by classifying *The Wire* as an institutional melodrama (Williams, 2014:122). In this paper, I will test and partly also contest her analysis based on a case example. First, I will briefly survey how various classifications of *The Wire* as a realistic or tragic narrative influenced Williams’ new idea of an institutional melodramatic mode. In doing so, I will also contrast her modal concept of melodrama with earlier generic notions. Based on two analytical gaps in Williams’ assessment, the constantly disbanding and reuniting police unit at the narrative center of *The Wire* (cf. *ibid.*:86) will be analyzed as a “space of innocence” (cf. Williams, 1998:65). In her initial reconceptualization of melodrama as a narrative mode, Williams sees the existence of a monolithically virtuous place as one of the mode’s central features. Yet, she does not identify such a spatial manifestation of innocence in her assessment of *The Wire*. On first sight, such a virtuous sphere seems indeed inconsistent with a serial that is frequently praised for the absence of singularly good or evil characters. I will present how the show’s narrative structure and its visual aesthetic accentuate the police detail as a “space of innocence”. In this chapter, particular emphasis will be placed on Williams’ idea of *The Wire* as a melodramatic narrative of contesting institutions and whether the police detail could be seen as a spatial manifestation of “good police”.

Subsequently, I will focus on another aspect of Williams’ concept of the melodramatic mode: the dualism of “too late” and “in the nick of time” (cf. Williams, 1998:72). Williams herself negates that this temporal interplay of ostensible doomed and last-minute rescue at play in *The Wire* (cf. Williams, 2014:123-124). Nevertheless, I will argue that the instability of the police detail can be viewed as instances of this temporal dynamic beyond the character level. This analysis will therefore test whether Williams’ theory of a melodramatic mode might be even more applicable on *The Wire* than she originally asserted.

2. The Wire between realism, tragedy and (institutional) melodrama

Ever since its TV debut, *The Wire* has been celebrated for its realism and for successfully capturing urban American reality (cf. Klein, 2009:177; Marshall & Potter, 2009:8-13). The show's creator, David Simon, admitted that he was highly concerned that viewers would recognize the show as a candid portrayal of a contemporary American metropolis (cf. Talbot, 2007). Undoubtedly, the longing for a non-embellished depiction of post-industrial culture immensely contributed to *The Wire*'s enormous critical success. While reviewers and critics have acknowledged the serial's fictionality, it has been repeatedly praised as an undistorted chronicle of everyday police work and also of the austere social life in the underprivileged parts of Baltimore (cf. Weisberg, 2006). In her critical assessment of the show, Leigh Claire LaBerge has even labeled *The Wire* "as unique to the televisual medium for its use of a realist mode" (LaBerge, 2010:550).

For LaBerge, the show's realism is partly based on the absence of pictorial excess prevalent in a range of genres including melodrama (cf. *ibid.*). Melodrama is here understood as a well-established, inherently exaggerated genre that dominates mass-culture. Among its features is a clearly recognizable struggle of monolithically good and evil characters. In traditional assessments, melodrama is additionally defined as a genre that features a high degree of pathos and sensationalism (cf. Smith, 1973:6-7). Superficially, *The Wire*'s bleak realism seems to evade a classification as melodrama. For instance, the show portrays Baltimore's corrupt police structure. The law enforcement system is obviously not fueled by altruistic motives, but by internal hierarchies, nepotism and ego-centered careerism. Yet, these are the character entrusted with fighting the cities enormous drug trade. Here, the viewer is unable to class these characters as representatives of either good or evil in a Manichean manner. Such a straightforward moral legibility is seen as constitutive of melodrama (cf. Williams, 2014:113). David Simon himself adds that "we were bored with good and evil. To the greatest possible extent, we were quick to renounce the theme." (Simon, 2009:3) Frederic Jameson affirms that *The Wire*'s realism transcends the simplistic, Manichean dichotomies apparent in generic melodrama. He even states that the show's reality-like complexity might herald a future "end of melodrama" (Jameson, 2010:368).

Alongside the focus on the serial's bleak realist style, another label recurrently attributed to *The Wire* is classical tragedy. Simon has further identified the show as a

modernized version of “Greek tragedy” (Hornby, 2009:384f). Like ancient playwrights, he declares that his ambition was to portray the hopeless existences of irreversibly condemned individuals. Nonetheless, Simon admits that it is not the Olympian Gods that doom the tragic heroes of his Baltimore but the all-pervasive, capitalist institutions of postmodern society (cf. Talbot, 2007). While the individuals may attempt to change the system or use it for lasting improvements such as limiting political corruption, the economy-driven institutions are always able to overpower them and render all attempts at systemic progress futile (cf. Cuntz, 2014:150). Chris Love expands Simon’s remarks by stating that *The Wire*’s fundamental tragic struggle is between the altruistic ambitions of individual characters and the narrow economic, institutional and political limitations. Coupling this with Simon’s ambition to recreate the capitalist reality of contemporary urban America, he concludes that the show achieves its sense of realness through its use of Greek tragedy (Love, 2010:502-503).

Film scholar Linda Williams fundamentally disagrees with these analyses. She acknowledges *The Wire*’s ambition to be a realist tragedy, but states that the show should be considered an institutional melodrama. This classification is based upon a reconceptualization of melodrama. Breaking with the established generic notion, Williams redefines melodrama as a mode of narration (cf. Williams, 1998:42). As a narrative expression of American democratic ideals, it aims at exposing either monolithic innocence or guilt of characters so that it can be easily recognized by the recipients (cf. *ibid.*:81). Thus, melodrama stages a straightforward “moral legibility” (*ibid.*:53) of character constellations. Furthermore, melodramatic narration includes an insistence on initial innocence. This innocence is lost throughout the narrative and the quest for its restoration emerges as the narrative engine; “Melodrama begins and wants, to end, in a space of innocence” (Williams, 1998:65).

Lastly, Williams establishes that melodramatic narration plays with the temporal dynamic of being “too late” and being rescued “in the nick of time”. In her framework, melodramatic narratives play with the pathos of being ostensibly lost or defeated. Characters coded as morally virtuous are repeatedly brought into severe, frequently life-threatening situations, only to be saved at the very last moment (cf. *ibid.*: 58-59). Likewise, Williams sees the fundamental difference between melodrama and tragedy in their respective stances on justice and suffering. While the

tragic heroes' suffering is inherently futile, melodramatic misery always includes the possibility that it might not be too late. Tragedy stages unalterable injustices. It foregrounds the characters' struggling, their acceptance and endurance of sealed fates. Melodrama, on the other hand, elicits not just outrage about the portrayed injustices but also invokes hope and a yearning for the restoration of justice (cf. Williams, 1998:74; cf. Williams, 2014:84-87).

Ostensibly, just like with the melodramatic genre, it seems that *The Wire* is not structured in such a melodramatic mode. The serial's insistence on almost unavoidable systemic injustice and all-pervasive corruption in the ever-bleak Baltimore appears inconsistent with the hope of melodrama to return to a state of innocence. Additionally, the ambiguity of characters virtues appears to elude the mode's Manichean outline of a struggle between good and evil. Given the exceptionality frequently attributed to *The Wire* (cf. Bell & Farber, 2010:356), it would seem reasonable for Williams to exclude the serial from the dominant narrative mode in America (Williams, 1998:42).

While Williams agrees with LaBerge that *The Wire* shows an austere realist style (Williams, 2014:81;83), she establishes a clear difference between style and mode. For Williams, it is about "what this [realistic] style does" (Williams, 2014:81). In her theory, melodramatic narration might quarry from realism but these realistic elements only serve as a backdrop for the melodramatic struggle of good versus evil (cf. Williams, 1998:67). She also agrees with David Simon and others, that the show's characters are too ambiguous to license a Manichean struggle; undoubtedly, the drinking adulterer Jimmy McNulty hardly qualifies as a virtuous victim-hero. Also, the street-level drug dealers cannot be classed as purely evil nemeses of justice in Baltimore. Nevertheless, Williams is able to salvage the *The Wire* as a melodramatic narrative by transposing the moral struggle to the level of institutions. She argues that the show stages a conflict of clearly good and evil version of Baltimore's institutions such as police, public administration, newspapers and school. Dismissing David Simon's claim of having created a tragically doomed Baltimore, she highlights that *The Wire* narratively confronts the city's dysfunctional institutions with an image of how things ought to be. For instance, the wiretap unit shows the lack of "good" or virtuous police work in a corrupted, capital-driven law enforcement system. For Linda Williams, the serial does not only show urban suffering and dysfunctionality but always includes the hope for a turn towards a

resolution of these problems (cf. Williams, 2014:86; Klein, 2009:188-189). “[T]ragedy is too catastrophic, too inevitable [...] to make the kinds of claims for justice that *The Wire*, as a whole, makes.” (Williams, 2014:103)

As this brief survey showed, HBO’s serial resonates with all three labels presented. While critical categorizations of the show as hyper-realistic invoke notions of radically new type of narratives, Simon’s idea of “Greek tragedy” points to a modernization of an ancient genre. Despite recognizing the realist style and the miserable fates of various characters, Linda Williams highlights the show’s usage of a melodramatic mode of narration. For her, the mode-specific moral conflict is transposed from the personal to the institutional level.

Yet, two inconsistencies remain in Williams’ classification of *The Wire* as an institutional melodrama. First, despite seeing an initial “space of innocence” to be constitutive of melodrama, she does not identify a specific spatial manifestation of innocence in *The Wire*. Secondly, she explicitly denies that the dynamic of “too late” and “in the nick of time” can be observed in the serial (cf. *ibid.*:123-124). In her original framework, this temporal alternation between being seemingly doomed just to be saved at the very last moment was also described as essential to the melodramatic mode. These analytical gaps lay the basis for the following case analysis. The spatial and narrative center of the serial, the wiretap unit, seems to be a straightforward candidate for spatial innocence. Then, if the unit should qualify as a space of innocence, it can be asked whether the dynamic of “too late” and “in the nick of time” which Williams claims to be lost in *The Wire* is not restored on a spatial level.

3. The major crimes unit as a melodramatic space of good police work

The major crime unit is the narrative engine of *The Wire* (cf. *ibid.*:86). Reading this wire-tap surveillance detail within Williams’ classification of the serial as an institutional melodrama, this work place can be seen to host the positive version of the institution “police”. Both narratively and aesthetically, the detail provides a spatial counterbalance to the pervasive corruption and careerism that resides in Baltimore’s downtown police headquarters.

3.1. The wiretap detail as a narrative space of innocence

In *The Wire*, the vision of creating a space for effective, non-corrupted police work is present from the very first episode. Non-conformist detective Jimmy McNulty is

exasperated by the Baltimore homicide department's unwillingness to go after the crime organizations behind a series of drug-related murders. By jumping the police hierarchy and neglecting the almost sacred "chain of command", he is able to force the commission of a major crimes unit, a so-called detail, to track down the criminal kingpin Avon Barksdale (*The Wire* Season 1. Episode 1, 56:58-57:02 [henceforth abbreviated]). *The Wire's* police detail is born out of contempt for the inefficiency of the city's dysfunctional police institutions (cf. Brooks, 2009:66-67).

From the very beginning, the major crimes unit is a place where laborious, long-term oriented police operations can be carried out within an otherwise inefficient and lazy system. While the downtown homicide department and the district police are concerned with quick busts of low-level drug dealers to meet statistical goals (cf. Brooks, 2009:70-71), the detail is focused on capturing the criminal bosses. Within these operations, the detail emerges as a stage for effort, expanses and sacrifice. The members have to overcome financial and institutional barriers to acquire a range of sophisticated surveillance systems (TW 1.5, 08:38-09:44). They painstakingly decipher various pager codes (TW 1.5, 45:15-46:41; 1.7, 00:00-02:33; 1.11, 35:00-35:50) and minutely recreate the intricate hierarchies of the Barksdale and Stanfield criminal empire on organizational charts (TW 1.9, 19:36-20:58). While few of the unit's investigations are entirely successful, the personal effort and foresight shown in the ambitious attempt to significantly reduce the city's drug problem is a clear antithesis to the egotism and parsimony of the downtown homicide department. Thus on an operational level, the detail is indeed presented as an idealized version of the institution police or, in Williams' terms, constitutes a "space of innocence".

In the traditional melodramatic mode, this "space of innocence" is inhabited by virtuous characters within the staged Manichean struggle (cf. Williams, 1998:65). But the detail's initial roster is filled with detectives anchored and groomed in the ego-centered, capitalist ideology of the downtown police system. These repeatedly struggle with the high-profile work conducted in the detail; gradually, various characters quit or are forced to leave the unit. The financially motivated and frequently drunk elders, Patrick Mahon and Augustus Polk, prefer early retirement to duteous assignments in the detail (TW 1.4, 06:15-07:30; 1.5, 28:30-30:55). Additionally, the prying Detective Carver is temporarily removed from the unit (1.13, 42:00-45:25). In other words, the detail's rooms are cleansed of members that

are unwilling to comply with the high standards of police work and camaraderie maintained within these halls. Various other members are reminded to fulfill these high standards. For instance, Thomas “Herc” Hauk and Ellis Carver are prompted not to bully their fellow detail member Roland “Prez” Pryzbylewski (TW 1.8, 05:30-06:36) and are disciplined for allegedly pocketing money from a drug raid (TW 1.9, 48:00-49:07). In Williams’ terms, one could assert that the innocence of the space is temporarily lost through their actions but immediately sought to be restored by the others (cf. Williams, 1998:65).

During the serial, the detail emerges not only as a place of camaraderie, but of communal advice against the individualism of the homicide department. Commissioner Ervin Burrell and Homicide’s Major Bill Rawls frequently hold intense internal reviews to reprimand their subordinates for not meeting short-term statistical goals (TW 3.1, 36:45-37:58); the detail, on the other hand, repeatedly features moments of collegial assistance. Whereas Homicide’s Sergeant Jay Landsman loves to boast about his colleagues’ misfortunes (TW 1.2, 48:08-48:36), veteran detective Lester Freamon repeatedly guides the novices Pryzbylewski and Shakima “Kima” Greggs (TW 1.6, 22:45-23:20; 1.8, 49:31- 51:25). Similarly, a recognition of individual detectives as representatives of “good police” can be staged in the detail. In the unit’s rooms, Jimmy McNulty can recognize the investigative ambitions of the initially distant Freamon and Lieutenant Cedric Daniels whom he suspected of being careerist (TW 1.4, 50:20-52:10; 1.6, 56:10-57:13). This is a clear contrast to the homicide department where each detective’s egotism is explicitly understood (cf. McMillan, 2009:54-55).

Additionally, rebellion against the demands of the police system can only be shown in the detail. Repeatedly, detail members voice their unwillingness to comply with the orders handed out by the downtown headquarter. Jimmy McNulty refuses to take part in a raid aimed at short-term relief (TW 1.3, 45:45-50 47) and Lester Freamon can confront his superior, Cedric Daniels, about his inability to secure the required surveillance equipment (TW 1.5, 53:01-54:05). These transgressions of hierarchy would be met with severe repercussions in the downtown homicide department. On a TV in the unit, they likewise watch the premature celebration of the downtown police officials after a series of busts that made the unit’s previous work worthless (1.11, 53:35 - 54:50). On the whole, it is primarily in this major crimes unit where the discourses of “good police” and “bad police” can openly

collide (cf. Brooks, 2009:72-75). The detail's goodness is not based on a monolithic innocence of the people that work there. As virtually all the unit's members have personal flaws, the ethical virtue attributed to this space is based on the high-profile investigations, the work ethic and the ideals of camaraderie that are located here. These codes of conduct are not present in the hierarchy-driven downtown homicide department. In other words, the detail emerges not as a place of good policemen and policewomen but as a space where a different, idealist version of the institution can be enacted. This clearly resonates with Williams' classification of *The Wire* as an institutional instead of an character-based melodrama (cf. Williams, 2014:120). The detail is a space not of innocent individuals – but of an innocent version of the institution police.

3. 2. Visual aestheticization of the major crimes unit as a space of innocence

Linda Williams initially thought of prototypical spaces of innocence as “[g]ardens and rural homes” (Williams, 1998:65). In post-industrial Baltimore, visual innocence takes different shapes. Located in run-down basements and remote buildings, the wiretap unit's virtue is apparent in the unit's aesthetic otherness in comparison to the dysfunctional police institutions. From the very beginning of the serial, the detail's setting is stylized in opposition to the corrupted homicide department. This extends not only to the unit's site or its equipment, but also to the editing and lighting.

From the beginning, the peripheral location of the wiretap unit is antithetical to the Homicide skyscrapers. After descending a steep staircase, the detailed members find a dingy basement under the city police building as their worksite. Initially, these underground rooms are a nearly unfurnished construction site (TW 1.2, 33:44-34:57). While the large, glass-fronted homicide department towers over metropolitan Baltimore, the sparse detail is kept hidden from public sight below street level. After its revival in the second season, the unit is relocated to an equally meager and remote highway-patrol outpost (TW 2.2, 45:00-46:08).

This discrepancy of venue is further accentuated by the editing. Scenes in the subterranean unit are regularly introduced with a high-angle or eye-level shot of the city police building, or later the highway outpost, and then a cut to the dark, austere rooms of the detail (TW 1.3, 45:44-45-47; TW 2.10, 37:39-37:43). Parts set in Homicide are repeatedly introduced with a low-angle shot of the departmental towers (TW 5.1, 19:38). These different camera perspectives reflect that we deal with two different versions of police; looking at the homicide towers from below can be seen

as a filmic realization of the extremely high degree power situated there. Conversely, showing the detail from above hints at its powerlessness and low rank in the police system's top-down hierarchy. On the whole, the aesthetic difference in location foregrounds the asymmetrical power relations between the two versions of police; while the good work is buried in a run-down basement on the city's periphery, the corrupted authorities claim the city center. The detail's glum existence on Baltimore's margins and the central location of the stately downtown headquarters enhance the moral legibility of the conflict between the good and the evil version of the institution police.

A similar aesthetic function can be attributed to the conspicuously weak lighting of the detail. Throughout all episodes, the detail remains poorly illuminated. Yet, in almost every scene, there is a weak incidence of natural light through the shuttered windows (TW 1.3, 30:39-31:00; 2.2, 45:00-46:08). This can be again seen as a visual realization of the difference in institutional power. Unlike the sun-drenched homicide towers, the detail remains dark except for the little source of light. While the evil version of police can work in the open, the good version is forced to operate almost conspiracy-like in dim basements. Additionally, the glimmer of natural light in the detail resonates with Williams' theory of melodrama. She points to the flicker of hope always included in melodrama (cf. Williams, 2014:113); Therefore, the weak but constant infiltration of natural light can be regarded as a visual translation of the major crime unit's role within an otherwise corrupted system.

The aesthetic interplay of sparsity and innocence is further reflected by the detail's equipment. The unit revolves around a common work area furnished with a set of mismatched chairs and a worn table. At this table, internal meetings are conducted where all the members of the detail are allowed to converse in a relaxed manner regardless of their police rank (TW 2.5, 52:53-54:16). This contrasts with the homicide department that assigns individualized, small cubicles to its lower-ranked detectives (TW 1.1, 20:55-21-22). These subordinate police men and women are then only invited into the majors' or commissioners' offices to be disciplined for a lack of statistical success. Whereas the detail members can converse freely about upcoming operations at the table, the homicide departments' hierarchical architecture of cubicles and offices underscores the isolation of the detectives. Group-meetings are held in the stat-focused downtown headquarters to discipline subordinates during

intense internal review – but never on an operational level.

One particular item that represents the major crime unit's innocence of this focus on crime statistics is the worn corkboard situated next to the table (TW 3.7, 03:51-05:38). On this wall, the detail members pin mug-shot pictures of suspects and hand-draw lines between them to delineate their possible relationships. Throughout the investigations, the corkboard gradually fills, giving the investigator an ever-more complete overview of the targeted crime organizations (TW 1.6, 51:10). Antithetically, the homicide department uses modern flip charts and computer presentations reminiscent of corporate culture to assess success or failure (TW 1.6, 54:01; 3.1, 36:45-37:58). Furthermore, Homicide displays a chart where all the unsolved murder cases are listed in red and solved cases are written in black (TW 2.2, 34:29-34:46). These open cases are then assigned to the homicide detectives in a top-down manner. Contrarily, the wiretap unit's simplistic but thorough corkboard chart can be seen to represent a bottom-up mentality. It underscores the detail's will to solve the case – not just to meet statistical goals. The business-like assessment of crime rates and the indifferent, top-down tally list of unsolved murder cases, on the other hand, reflect Homicide's focus on retaining numerical success (cf. Brooks, 2009:70-71). Again, the institutional conflict of good and evil version of police identified by Williams finds its visual expression in both spaces.

Lastly, the homicide department and the detail also differ in their respective dress codes. Downtown detectives are expected to wear formal business attire, normally consisting of a light shirt, a neck tie and a full suit including a jacket (TW 1.2, 25:35). Higher ranking officials tend to dress in uniform (TW 2.2, 33:47). In the rooms of the detail, more casual clothing is permitted (TW 1.4, 43:00-45:00). Only the unit's supervisor, Lieutenant Daniels, constantly wears suit pants and a tie; yet, he also omits the formal jacket which he wears when in the downtown headquarters (TW 1.1, 36:09; TW 2.4, 08:36; TW 1.2., 08:11). Even William "Bunk" Moreland, otherwise strictly "suit and tie" (TW 4.11, 37:41-37:44), first enters the unit's room as a unit member in a tracksuit, stating that "he was under the impression that when detailed against his will to some backwards-ass [...] drug investigation, a veteran police of means and talent can wear whatever the fuck he damn well pleases" (TW. 2.8, 10:43-11:42). Such a difference in dress codes can be seen as signifying the opposing versions of the institution police on an aesthetic level. Like the statistics chart, the prevalence of a formal attire in the homicide department invokes

associations with a cooperate culture. Additionally, the suits of the low-ranking detective and the uniforms of the higher-ranking officials reflect the rigid internal hierarchy that structures the downtown departments: the chain of command. Similar to the table in the wiretap unit's common work area, the absence of a hierarchy-based dress code allows the detailed detectives to plan their actions as equals. The details final dissolution is very telling of the significance of different dress codes. Briefly after Cedric Daniels had been promoted to commissioner, he became involved in the decision to close the detail in the wake of new austerity measures. Clad in the seamless uniform of a downtown commissioner, the unit's former supervisor informs the members that their detail will be closed (TW 5.1, 18:18-20:20).

Throughout the serial, the detail is presented as the place where an alternative version of the institution police can be enacted. Standards of camaraderie and work ethic are formulated and maintained. In the detail, effort is invested for a cause beyond statistical goals and rebellion against the dysfunctional police system can be staged. In addition to the ambitious police operations, the unit is also visually aestheticized as a space of institutional innocence. Lighting and editing foreground that the ethical but weak version of police hosted in these rooms is constantly at odds with the more powerful, yet dysfunctional institutions downtown. The relaxed collegial atmosphere is reflected by the absence of a formal dress code and the non-hierarchical architecture of the unit. In conclusion, the detail's narrative and aesthetical presentation warrants a classification as one of Williams' "spaces of innocence". The major crimes unit is the only place in *The Wire's* Baltimore where uncorrupted police work can be carried out; it emerges as the spatial home for individual detectives that attempt to significantly improve the city's crime problem. While not taking its prototypical pastoral shape, it is clearly the spatial manifestation of innocence within this moral struggle of police institutions.

4. (Re-)creating the detail between "in the nick of time" and "too late"

In Williams' framework, melodramatic narratives stage a clearly legible moral conflict between virtuous (victim-) heroes and unethical villains (cf. Williams, 1998:66-67). These moral characters are recurrently brought into seemingly inescapable, often life-threatening situations, only to be dramatically saved at the very last minute. According to Linda Williams, this dynamic of irreversible doom and late salvation is unique to the melodramatic mode of narration; "Melodrama offers the hope that it may not be too late." (Williams, 1998:74) However, Williams

explicitly states that these rescues “in the nick of time” do not occur in HBO’s serial *The Wire* (cf. Williams, 2014:123-124). She sees the show to be a melodrama of competing good and evil versions of institutions, not individuals. As a result of this, she asserts that unlike in traditional melodrama, individual characters fall prey to the “negative” versions of institutions such as the corrupt police system or the drug trade. Characters that undoubtedly show virtuous qualities, such as young Wallace, are not saved but abandoned and murdered. For Williams, the elevation of the moral conflict between justice and injustice from the individual to the institutional level therefore renders these last-moment rescues obsolete (cf. *ibid.*:123-125). In this chapter, I would like to argue against this. If *The Wire* is an institutional melodrama, the dynamic of irrevocable loss and restoration of innocence should consequently revolve around institutions. As analyzed in the preceding chapter, the wire-tap unit can be seen as spatially representing the good –or innocent – version of the institution “police”. While the previous chapter highlighted the narrative and aesthetic depiction of the unit as a “space of innocence”, this chapter analyses whether the detail’s innocence is placed within such a dynamic of apparent loss and last-minute restoration.

First of all, the wire-tap operations conducted in the detail are subject to this dualism. The Barksdale crime organization constantly searches for more sophisticated encodings of their drug-related communication, using ever-more elusive devices. The detailed detectives reactively try to adjust to the criminals’ new methods of hiding their businesses. In this race of encoding and deciphering, the unit appears underprivileged. Not only are they located in an ill-equipped basement, they have to resort to judicial trickery or even have to steal to acquire the needed surveillance material (cf. Cuntz, 2014:178-180). At various moments in the serial, all chances at tracking down the criminal bosses and their highly ethical ambitions seem to be rendered futile. For example, the dealer’s opaque pager code, or the criminals’ later switch to disposable phones (TW 3.7, 13:00-13:30) leave the detail’s members at a loss on how to circumvent these difficulties. In these instances, there is a feeling that they reached a premature end of their investigations. The combination of criminal, institutional or judicial obstacles (cf. Cuntz, 2014:168) appear to have overpowered the unit’s ambitions and will have the detail indefinitely terminated. Frequently, this idea of a “lost wire” is visually underscored by blank computer screens (TW 1.8, 05:04-05:06). These are clear instances of what Williams refers to

as the “pathos of too late” (Williams, 1998:74); the narrative revels in the apparent failure of the detail. But, last-moment solutions are always generated to save the detail. Pryzbylewski serendipitously solves the pager code (TW 1. 5, 45:15-46:41), and Freamon and McNulty find sophisticated technology in a police basement that can track dialed numbers instead of the physical mobile phones (TW 3,11, 13:00-13:30; 18:20-19:13). At the last moment, or “in the nick of time”, the unit’s functionality is restored. While the detail does disband in the final season, the viewer is so familiar with situations of ostensible loss that they expect yet another tardy rescue. While the faked murder series does not lead to a re-establishment of the detail, the narrative once again plays with the idea that it might not be too late.

This dialectic of losing a space of innocence only to reinstate it at the last possible moment is also tangible with regard to the detail's individual members. Following the Barksdale convictions at the end of the first season, several members are promoted, or assigned to new departments. Apparently, the ambitious wiretap operation was just a short, hopeful episode in their otherwise conformist police careers. Expelled from their refuge, the detectives are re-integrated into the dysfunctional system facing its flaws on a daily basis. Shakima Greggs is reassigned to a monotonous desk job in the police’s bureaucracy (TW 2.1., 21:08-23:09), Jimmy McNulty tows party ships (TW 2.1., 00:10-03:07) and the former supervisor Cedric Daniels is assigned to the evidence storage room in punishment for his disobediences of the chain of command (TW 2.1., 15:43-16:51). Again, the viewer sees a melodramatic indulging in the loss of a space where an alternative version of law enforcement was possible. Also, on the character level, it seems too late for the good police. However, a last minute rescue is again created. Despite the unit’s dissolution, the former members’ urge to recreate the detail remains a driving force of the narrative. Hoping to retransfer to their coveted space of promising police operations, they even accept that Deputy Commissioner Stanislaus Valchek solely revived the unit only to launch a personal vendetta against dockworker Frank Sobotka (TW 2.4, 42:27-43:30). As the detail later separates again, Jimmy McNulty and Lester Freamon go so far as to forge a series of murders to force the system to revive the unit. Although the detail remains closed, the longing to return to the detail’s rooms continues throughout the rest of the serial.

Additionally, its institutional antagonist, the powerful homicide department, constantly threatens the detail’s existence. As the wiretap unit challenges the

systemic ethos of statistical efficiency, the detail is always the target of criticism from higher-ranking officials. Ervin Burrell or Bill Rawls even repeatedly prophesize to shut down the unit (TW 1.8, 21:55-22:37). During the show, the police institutions seem only to impede the details ambitious operations (cf. Linkon & Russo & Russo, 2012:253). In the fourth season, the corrupt system even “invades” the detail by installing the acrid Lieutenant Charles Marimow instead of the lenient Jimmy Asher to supervise the officers (TW 4.3, 39:30-41:01). While the detail seems not lost in a sense of disbandment here, the unit’s quality as a stage of ethical police operations seems to be gone under the thumb of a stat-focused overseer. This infiltration of the virtuous detail by an emissary of the downtown police lasts five episodes. Over this period, the narrative again foregrounds the loss of the institutional innocence of the detail. But eventually, also the caustic Marimow is forced to leave the unit to the delight of its members that see the possibility of good police work restored.

Repeatedly, the detail seems to have been just a brief, hopeful episode in the unethical police system of Baltimore. It appears not only too late for the detail, but for the overall possibility of police ethics in this city. Difficult operations, the re-assignment of detailed members and the power of the homicide department make the wiretap unit recurrently appear defeated and lost. Still, always a late turn of events allows the detail to be re-instated or permits a continuation of previous surveillance operations. Despite Williams’ negation, *The Wire* can be read as a melodramatic serial that stages last-minute rescues. In an institutional melodrama, this interplay of ostensible loss and late rescue just does not save individual victim-heroes, but the space that hosts the morally good version of the institution police.

5. Conclusion

Over the last decade, *The Wire* was one of the most researched serials. As the brief survey of criticism on the show highlighted, Linda Williams’ recent claim of *The Wire* to be a melodramatic text broke with various established assessment of the show as a tragic or realistic antithesis to melodrama. Even to a higher degree than she herself claims, the conducted case study substantiated Williams’ inclusion of the show into her theory of a melodramatic mode. Transposing her theoretical concept of a “space of innocence” and the dialectic of “in the nick of time” and “too late” onto *The Wire* showed that neither is obliterated by the institutional nature of this melodramatic narrative. The enactment of an alternative, non-corrupted version of

police within the unit's rooms identifies this place as a space of innocence. Aesthetically, the innocence of the major crimes unit is created in contrasting with the corrupt homicide department. Lighting, filmic presentation, and interior accentuate the detail as a virtuous counterbalance to the unethical downtown police. Throughout the show, the good police work conducted in the unit's sparse rooms is in constant jeopardy. Repeatedly, the homicide department's insistence on efficiency appears to have ended the detail's endeavors. Yet, a last minute turn-of-events almost always materializes and saves the unit. This interplay highlighted that while characters are indeed not rescued "in the nick of time", the "space of innocence" is. Nevertheless, viewing *The Wire* as a melodramatic artefact still leaves unanswered questions. Other aspects of the complex serial would warrant further investigation. For instance, one issue not taken into account in the constrained space of my analysis was paratext. Arguably, the title *The Wire* might serve as a reminder or indicator for the viewership that the wiretap operations will continue. Even if the unit disbands, the title might prompt the viewer to expect a late rescue. This relationship of paratextual material and Williams' "pathos of too late" appears to be a particularly promising topic for further study.

In conclusion, this analysis highlighted the immense scope of the concept of a melodramatic mode. Williams' re-calibration of melodrama turned a traditionally unappreciated genre into an all-pervasive narrative expression of American democracy. The added complexity of serials such as *The Wire* does not resist the Manichean dichotomies of melodrama; on the contrary, their new institutional focus allows the mode to depersonalize moral struggles from individual heroism and villainy to a contrast of systemic dysfunctionality and resisting spheres of virtue.

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