

Shakespeare's Wire

Elisabeth Bronfen

IT'S ALL IN THE GAME

Early on in the third episode of *The Wire*'s first season, a conversation takes place which serves as my point of departure for reading David Simon's TV series in conjunction with Shakespeare's first tetralogy of English history plays, *Henry IV.1-3* and *Richard III*. Two of Avon Barksdale's foot soldiers, Bodie and Wallace, are sitting in »the pit,« a courtyard in one of the West Baltimore projects where his drug business is flourishing. D'Angelo, their sergeant, approaches them, and, noticing that they are playing checkers with a chess set, explains to them the rules of what he considers to be »a better game.« Taking the key piece into his right hand, he kisses it before declaring, »this is the kingpin... he the man.« If you get your opponent's king, he goes on to explain, »you got the game.« At the same time he warns his two buddies that they must protect their own kingpin, because the other player is trying to get it. To illustrate for them the moves that are possible on a chessboard, D'Angelo adds that the king can move in any direction he chooses but only one space at a time. This means that he has no hustle, but because all the other pieces on his team have his back, he does not really have to do much.

Bodie, who has been listening attentively, immediately catches the analogy to the rules of the game governing the drug world of Baltimore's West Side and compares the kingpin to his boss. D'Angelo then moves to the next piece, and, having called the queen smart and fierce, explains that because she moves any way and as far as she wants, she is »the go-get-shit-done piece.« This reminds Wallace, who has been watching silently, of Avon's right hand, Stringer Bell. D'Angelo proceeds by comparing the castle to the stash which they have to move each week, while the knights and bishops stand for Avon's muscle, the men that move with their product to protect it against both their competitors and the Baltimore police. Suddenly Bodie notices the »little bald-headed bitches,« prompting D'Angelo to explain somberly that the pawns are »like the soldiers.« To underscore the dramaturgic turning point in their witty conversation, the camera moves into its first close-up of the chess board, so that we can follow in

detail D'Angelo's instruction about how it is above all these pieces that are in the field, fighting on the front lines.

Because he, too, has begun to sense a connection to his own position in the Baltimore drug game, Wallace wants to know how one gets to be the king, prompting D'Angelo to announce the cardinal rule which also serves as the motto of this particular episode: »the king stay the king.« To underscore the rigid hierarchy at issue, he somberly explains that everyone stays who he is except the pawns. If one of them, in turn, actually makes it all the way to the side of the other player, he gets to be queen. Bodie, projecting his own self-image onto the rules being described to him, cockily asks whether that would mean that he would be top dog. This brings D'Angelo, who has begun to harbor secret doubts about the validity of what they are doing in his uncle's criminal forces, to embellish his description of the rules of chess one last time. Precisely because he wants his two buddies to understand the fragility of their own position as Avon Barksdale's soldiers, he ends by warning them that the pawns »get capped quick ... they be out the game early.« While Wallace looks on bemused, Bodie, who recognizes his own potential fate in what D'Angelo predicts, nevertheless boldly retorts: »unless they're some smart-ass pawns.«

D'Angelo can only smile in response to the grin with which his buddy puts an end to a repartee that calls upon us to recognize in the rules of chess a description of the feudal system of the drug world which *The Wire* seeks to make visible. Yet if chess serves as a template for the codes regulating the network of power which this TV show wants to draw our attention to, at issue is also the status of the allegory on which this correspondence is predicated.¹ As Michel de Certeau notes, »games give rise to spaces where moves are proportional to situations« (1984: 22). As such they not only formulate and formalize rules that organize all possible moves, but also constitute a memory of schemes one might act out in particular circumstances. In other words, both in chess and in the drug game, each figure has a clearly defined place and role within a strictly hierarchical order in which power is incessantly renegotiated by virtue of political acts. The moves individual players can make are highly codified and ritually predetermined, based on a shared memory of what schemes are possible. At the same time, if, in accordance with equating the drug business to chess »it's all in the game,« as the rogue player Omar proclaims at the end of the first season, there is also nothing outside the game. All the players are restricted to the delimited field in which both the drug traffic and the law enforcement seeking to prohibit it are carried out. Not to play is not an option.

1 | For a discussion of this chess game as an allegorical mapping of the drug world, see Paul Allen Anderson, »The Game Is the Game: Tautology and Allegory in *The Wire*,« in Kennedy/Shapiro (eds.) 2012: 84-109.

By anticipating the succession of a new kingpin in Baltimore's criminal underworld, D'Angelo's scene of instruction, however, also underscores the one hope that those who start out as pawns can harbor. With a combination of luck and audacity, or perhaps because the top dog has become too weak to stop an advance, it is precisely the pawn who can by-pass all the other ranks and immediately become royalty. While the pawn thus emerges as the most endangered position (capped early in the game), it is also these »little bald-headed bitches« that render most visible the fragility of royal legitimacy. As such, they open up a poignant line of connection between David Simon's TV series and Shakespeare's first historical tetralogy. In chess, the pawn is the piece that stands in for that particular circumstance within the rules of the game, which allows for a self-declared right to absolute power. Having arrived at the other end of the chess board, this figure can proclaim itself royalty. It is precisely this audacious self-legitimation that *The Wire* fuses with its own debunking of the American dream when, in the course of season five, the Barksdale rule has ceased and the newcomer Marlo has successfully taken over Avon and Stringer's empire. In Shakespeare's history plays such claims, of course, remain the prerogative of members of the ruling class: The Yorkist lords that repeatedly challenge Henry VI to abdicate and give up the throne to their leader, and finally Richard III, who usurps the throne, killing brethren and foes alike, only to himself be vanquished by the Earl of Richmond in the Battle at Bosworth Field, thus clearing the throne for the first Tudor King, Henry VII.

It is, thus, worth recalling that chess was initially an aristocratic form of the »art of war,« introduced by the Arabs into medieval Europe, which is to say in the historical period during which, in the wake of the Hundred Years' War, the English Wars of Roses (1455-1485) was fought. Indeed, at issue in crossmapping these two sets of texts is the way both imaginatively refigure a civil war along the lines of a game in which the situation individual players find themselves in determines the moves open to them. Yet decisive about the proposed analogy between the pawn's role in chess and the fragility of the king's position in situations of domestic strife – be it medieval England or early 21st century Baltimore – is that while the rules of the game governing power relations remain the same, individual players can bring about a significant change as to who will occupy the key position precisely by remembering the possibility of schemes open to them, given certain circumstances. At the same time, another aspect of cultural memory is at issue when one revisits *The Wire* through the lens of Shakespeare's history plays. Such a crossmapping, after all, is predicated on a further claim, namely that on the level of dramaturgy, the American TV show recalls, albeit implicitly, similar dramatic schemes that are acted out for political power in a series of early modern history plays.

It is also worth recalling that Shakespeare's first tetralogy re-imagines the thirty year battle between two branches of the royal House of Plantagenet

as a visceral aristocratic war game, in which lords and citizens alike find themselves lined up either on the side of the white rose of York or the red rose of Lancaster, while geographically England turns into the territory on which this battle is fought through. David Simon's teleplay, in turn, calls *The Wire* a »deliberate argument against the American drug prohibition – A Thirty Years' War that is among the most singular and comprehensive failures to be found in the nation's domestic history,« with Baltimore, the particular playing field, standing in for the more global condition of urban centers in early 21st century capitalism.² Both the television series and Shakespeare's series of history plays thus reconceive actual historical domestic strife (the English Wars of Roses, the American War on Drugs) as a theatricalized game, in which shifts in political power are embodied by individual actors, playing through the schemes open to them. *The Wire's* connection to Shakespeare's history plays is explicitly made by Lester Freeman, when, watching Stringer Bell on a surveillance tape after a drug war has broken out once again on the West Side, he alludes to King Henry IV's lament that he alone of all the men in England cannot sleep because »uneasy lies the head that wears a crown« (*Henry IV.2*; 3.1.31).

Many fans and critics of *The Wire*, have, of course, noticed a Shakespearean connection, albeit often in a cursory manner (see Moore 2010). Thus Marshall and Potter speak of the way this TV show juggles »a Shakespearian cast of dozens of individuals, some of whom have names for us, some of whom are recognized or perhaps only partly recognized by their faces« (2009: 9). Other critics pick up on David Simon's claim that *The Wire* is a postmodern refiguration of Greek tragedy, which replaces the Olympian gods and Fate with postmodern institutions (cf. McMillan 2009; Mittell 2012). If this essay, in turn, foregrounds Shakespeare's history plays as its point of reference, it does so in part because the particular rules of the game of the drug trade which regulate moves in relation to situations recall the feudal loyalties constitutive of the battle among the supporters of the houses of Lancaster and York.³ At the same time, what *The Wire* also takes from Shakespeare's history plays is the way these draw us in by virtue of their inclusion of compelling portraits of individuals struggling within and against the system of rules that define their fate.

By casting themselves as pawns, D'Angelo asks Wallace and Bodie to acknowledge their personal risk in a game they cannot *not* play. And yet, by moving into a close-up of their faces during the scene of instruction, the camera's dramaturgy draws our attention to each as an individual, whose fate is singular. Indeed, all three will die in what one might call a tragic Shakespearean mode. Like Romeo, the day-dreamer Wallace returns to the pit even though he

2 | See David Simon's »Prologue« in Alvarez (ed.) 2009: 11.

3 | See Read 2009, although he is more concerned with a discussion of primitive accumulation and capitalism than power relations.

has cooperated with the police, explaining that this is the only world he knows. He will be executed by Bodie, who, as loyal soldier in the Barksdale command, can do nothing but follow the orders of his commanders. D'Angelo, who like the melancholic Hamlet wavers about staying in a game he has discovered to be corrupt, finds himself forced by his mother Briana not to take a plea bargain and instead goes to prison where he, too, is executed on Stringer Bell's orders. Bodie, in turn, recalls all those who, in the history plays, are compelled out of loyalty to fight to the end and finds his death defending his corner against Marlo, the smart-ass pawn who, in his stead, achieves the royalty he had aspired to.

Thus at issue in my proposed crossmapping is yet a further analogy, given that in their re-imagining of a civil war both sets of texts make use of the affective power of a dramatic re-conception of political disorder as a game so as to offer a systemic analysis of the violence subtending and sustaining all power relations.⁴ Writing in the context of Elizabethan England, Shakespeare's history plays transform the chronicles of the Wars of the Roses into dramatic texts to be performed on stage as a series (premiered from 1591-1593), while David Simon taps into news reportage and his own documentaries (*The Corner*, *Homicide*) to produce a quality TV show (that ran from 2002-2008). Over the span of four plays, Shakespeare's lords and their supporters, encouraged by the power vacuum which Henry VI's ascension to the throne calls forth, repeatedly declare themselves the rightful rulers of England only to either be overwhelmed in battle by the King's forces or counter his challenge. In a similar manner, as will be discussed in more detail, the rivaling kingpins in David Simon's drug world repeatedly declare sovereignty over a given territory, only to find it incessantly reclaimed by an opponent from the other side. Thus in both sets of texts, regardless of who is in the key position, the game, and the repetitive cycles of violence inherent to it, continues. Equally decisive about the rhetorical force of both Shakespeare's history plays and Simon's *Wire*, however, is that each pits against this systemic repetition of martial power relations a set of individual portraits of failure, sacrifice and redemption, infused by tragic sensibility, so as to appeal to our awe and pity. As Marsha Kinder notes, we »experience a conflict between this systemic analysis of Baltimore and our emotional engagement with the characters with whom we choose to identify.«⁵

4 | See Patrick Jagoda's reading of *The Wire* as an example for the way network aesthetics »attends to the systemic nature of human suffering in the early twenty-first-century America« (2011: 199).

5 | Marsha Kinder, »Rewriting Baltimore: The Emotive Power of Systemics, Seriality, and the City,« in Kennedy (ed.) 2012: 78. See Eschköttner (2012) for a discussion of the double perspective *The Wire* deploys as it incessantly moves between a systemic discussion of institutions of power and an empathetic discussion based on the position of the individual subjects in the drug game.

As will be shown in more detail below, at the heart of the aesthetic re-imagination in both cases is, thus, the way particular domestic strife is theatricalized so as to reflect on cultural anxieties, bringing about a national self-study. Graham Holderness argues that the first tetralogy's exploration of the succession of the first Tudor monarch in the context of a political culture in which the »killing of kings, by secret murder or open battle, was virtually a national sport« (5), is above all a reflection on the dominant ideology of Shakespeare's own time and the cultural anxieties surrounding the reign of Elizabeth I. Yet if what Shakespeare foregrounds is the way power is seen »to depend not on legitimacy but on legitimation, on the capacity of the contender to seize and appropriate the signs of authority« (12), this is precisely the overall scheme David Simon's *Wire* remembers when it uses a particular instance of urban domestic warfare to speak to the destructive aspects of both late capitalism and the war on drugs.⁶ To offer a crossmapping of *The Wire* and Shakespeare thus not only tracks analogous games of power succession, predicated on where the players are situated within the system, but also draws attention to the way both use a self-conscious theatricalization of this game to reflect on the world of their audience. By re-imagining a particular political strife (be it early modern or recent American history) as a game in which individual players vie for the position of kingpin, they produce not only a form of national self-study; they also forge an imaginary community of which the spectators partake by taking the one or the other side, and sometimes even both.

ARISTOCRATIC WAR GAMES AMERICAN STYLE

In Shakespeare's first tetralogy, the civil strife sets in after a military campaign against France has been won. The politically inept King Henry VI, more interested in religious contemplation than court intrigue, marries the impoverished French aristocrat Margaret de Reignier even while ceding valuable territory as part of the dowry arrangements. In the course of the four plays, she will take charge as a ruthless warrior, and in this Shakespeare's Queen Margaret is as fierce as D'Angelo suggests in his description of the rules of chess. She will forcibly remove those advisors to her husband who refuse to acknowledge her power. She will, furthermore, not only favor those who promise to help her assert her own political interests (and those of her son) but also fatally enter into alliances with those who side with her only as long as they have an enemy in common. Her forces ultimately vanquish the primary challenger to her husband's throne, the Duke of York, and yet, in the final battle staged in *Henry*

VI.3, Queen Margaret's son not only finds his own death but the surrender she, as commander of her vanquished troops, must accept, also forces Henry VI to abdicate and give the crown to the victor, who will become King Edward IV. And yet, once the throne is his, this King, too, will be forcibly challenged, in his case by his own brother Richard. While clandestinely stabbing to death the deposed King Henry, this villainous contender declares his own power as being based not on legitimacy but self-proclaimed legitimation: »I have no brother, I am like no brother: [...] I am myself alone« (*Henry VI.3*; 5.6.80 and 5.6.83).

In Shakespeare's historical re-imagining, the deposed Queen Margaret, in turn, remains in England long enough for her woe-tinged accusations against the murderer of her husband to spill over to Edward's wife, Queen Elizabeth, as well as his mother, the Duchess of Gloucester, both of whom, once Richard has successfully usurped the throne, chime in with her cursing of a tyrant she calls »hell's black intelligencer« (*Richard III*; 4.4.70). Queen Margaret will ultimately leave the game, having been sent into exile by this shrewd political strategist, only to assure the other royal women before departing: »these English woes shall make me smile in France« (*Richard III*; 4.4.115). Left behind in the playing field, the other two women, in turn, will have the satisfaction of partaking in the demise of their mutual enemy and witness the resolution of the »dire division« between York and Lancaster. In the closing lines of *Richard III*, the marriage between Elizabeth and Richmond, the »true successors of each royal House,« is proclaimed as the promise that »civil wounds are stopp'd; peace lives again/ That she may long live here, God say Amen« (5.5.40-41).

While *The Wire*, in turn, renders visible various hierarchically structured domestic battle zones, including the Baltimore police and City Hall, this essay will focus primarily on the civil war erupting within the drug world itself, not least of all because it is this strife which is most clearly modeled on the rules of a strictly regulated feudal system. As Read notes: »From the beginning, Avon is presented as a »soldier,« as someone whose control of the drug trade is less about turning a profit than it is about controlling territory and respect« (Read 2009: 128).⁷ If, in *Henry VI*, the power vacuum opens up at home after an external enemy has been contained, in *The Wire* domestic battling – inside the drug world as well as the police force and City Hall – is fostered when, after 9/11, investigative energy and federal money shifts to Homeland Security's war on terror. As Fitzgerald, an FBI agent clandestinely cooperating with Detective McNulty's wiretap explains, his battle with the Barksdale clan is the wrong war. With the dramaturgic development of Shakespeare's history plays in mind it is worth noting, however, that while Avon and his muscle consistently think of themselves and their business in terms of war, the competition between

6 | See Kelleter's essay, in which he discusses this TV series as an example for American self-studies (2012: 60).

7 | For a discussion of the actual wars *The Wire* implicitly makes reference to, see Eschköttler 2012: 54-55.

Barksdale's West Side and Proposition Joe's East Side is initially contained, surfacing primarily in the passionate investment each side has in the outcome of the annual basketball game. In contrast to the Baltimore police which, in its relation to the Court as well as City Hall, is characterized by insubordination, mistrust, betrayal and an overall lack of loyalty, Barksdale's muscle, furthermore, work as a disciplined team.

While in Shakespeare's *Henry VI* the internal battle begins because the Duke of York feels that his King has deprived him of valuable territories in France that he had hoped to be rewarded with for his victory in battle, in the first season of *The Wire* the stage is set for an eruption of a civil war once Avon and Stringer begin thinking about opening up fresh territory by taking over corners from their opponents. As Prop Joe explains to Omar, who is willing to join forces with him owing to a purely personal revenge crusade, he wants Avon gone because before he arrived the projects were an open market. Recalling the shifting allegiances in the history plays, Prop Joe will seek to broker a peace once the assassination in which he involves Omar fails, and, true to his name, he will continue to make propositions to various players aimed at maximizing his own profit. After Kima Greggs, member of the special unit which, under Lt. Cedric Daniels, is investigating the Barksdale clan, is wounded in an undercover operation, police raids break the fragile balance of power within Baltimore's drug world. The kingpin Avon and his queen Stringer find themselves compelled to take stock of their weaknesses and look for the key mistake that got the police to notice them in the first place. With the ruthlessness of any Shakespearean Lord, they are willing to sacrifice all players that made them visible as well as those who might testify against them in court.

Comparable also to the dramaturgy of Shakespeare's tetralogy, while royalty like Prop Jo and Stringer shift their alliances whenever the positions in the game require them to do so, the muscle on both sides abide by strict rules of loyalty, accepting the moves assigned to them, even if this means taking a prison sentence to protect their team. Yet mapping *The Wire* onto these history plays also renders visible that while Avon is presented as a warrior kingpin, who thinks in terms of a war to be fought out viscerally on the streets of Baltimore, he, like Henry VI, is weak as a political strategist. He, too, fails to grasp that a shift in the particular circumstances at hand require a renegotiation not of the game's rules per se, but of the schemes that are open to its key players. After Avon has been sentenced to a light prison sentence, the fragile line of demarcation between East and West Baltimore no longer holds and, like Queen Margaret, who is forced to shift her alliances in accordance with alterations in the network of power relations, Stringer is forced to cede territory in order to procure from Prop Joe the good product he needs to keep his business running. Also like Shakespeare's Queen, he is far more shrewd in assessing the changed circumstances of the game, notably the new scheme he must embrace in

order to ward off further attention from the police. By founding the New Day Co-Op with his former opponent, he is able to unite all the key players in a mutual business enterprise, whose ruse consists in suspending all battling on the street and instead sharing the profits of the drug trade collectively. While, during the first meeting of this fragile cooperation, Prop Joe lauds the others for showing themselves able to put aside petty grievances, Stinger forcefully spells out the new rules of the game. Commanding the others to explain the benefits of this new arrangement to their soldiers, he insists: »No beefing, no drama, just business. Anybody got problems with anybody else here we bring it to the group. We ain't gotta take it to the streets« (S3E05; 27-28.30).

Convinced that war is bad for business, Stringer's new scheme is predicated on the wager that if the game is no longer about territory but only product and competition, the bodies on the street disappear and with it police surveillance, interception and incarceration. Once Avon has been released on parole, he will try to persuade him that there is no longer any need to fight for individual corners, because his investment in real estate development on the waterfront has procured for them a new and utterly legitimate arena for business. To stop him from going to war with Marlo (the young challenger who has begun to take over some of their corners), Stringer insists that they have moved beyond thinking in terms of a legitimation predicated on seizing and holding turf. Instead, the New Day Co-Op has made it possible for him to base their power on legitimacy. With enough clean money to their name, Stringer assures Avon, they can do much more than run corners. Recalling the legacy of a gangster »back in the day,« who made a fortune on number money, he is convinced they could even run the city if they played their hand right. Yet Avon, invested in his feudal world view, can think of himself only as a gangster and, in turn, commands: »I want my corners« (S3E06; 17-19.39). Faced with his partner's stubborn insistence on a self-legitimation based first and foremost not on the accumulation of wealth but reputation on the street, Stringer finds his own American dream of upward mobility into legitimacy radically threatened.

The civil war that explodes in the third season once Avon hits back so as to make sure that others don't think the boy Marlo is punking him, not only pits the East Side against the West Side but also the kingpin against his Queen. Indeed, it is precisely the unsolvable difference between Stringer's vision of drug trafficking as pure business and Avon's conception of it as a war to be fought out on the streets over and over again, which actually encourages Marlo's own dream of power based on seizing and appropriating signs of authority. Although, in contrast to Shakespeare's warrior Queen, Stringer is the one to argue against rather than for war, his position is analogous to Margaret in that, like the French aristocrat, he finds himself fatally caught between two camps. Neither in her home country, France, nor fully belonging to the camp of the Lancaster lords, Shakespeare's Queen is repeatedly shown to forge alliances

with English Lords who will never fully accept her authority. Once Henry VI accepts the terms Edward, the Duke of Marsh (later Edward IV) proposes for a cease fire, namely that the crown will remain Henry's only as long as he lives, battle seems to be the only scheme open to Margaret, if she is to successfully hold onto the throne for her own son, Edward.

To Stringer, in turn, war is precisely what will prevent him from sustaining his lineage, yet like Shakespeare's Queen, he, too, finds himself tragically betwixt and between; torn between Avon's feudal lust for war and his own vision of legitimacy without further battling. He is unwilling to join the furor of the other soldiers, yet cannot prevent the war he knows will bring down B + B Enterprises. Happily re-installed in his war room, Avon astutely notes: »I see a man without a country. Not hard enough for this, right here, and maybe, just maybe not smart enough for them out there« (S3E08; 53-57). If, during their tearful conversation on the night of Avon's homecoming, the two had assured each other that they would always be brothers, they are now forced to acknowledge that, because their conception of the game has become incompatible, they are no longer fighting on the same side. To prove that he is, after all, »hard enough,« Stringer finally confesses to the assassination of D'Angelo, and yet, after he and Avon have had their tussle, the camera leaves them panting in silence once their angry energy is spent.

Even if Shakespeare's king is willing to capitulate to his opponent, the Duke of Marsh, so as to remain on the throne, whereas Avon embraces war as a way to retain his reputation and reclaim his territory, what they share is their attitude toward power. Both are concerned first and foremost with the legacy they embody in the present. Along the same lines, while their position on the civil war they are unwittingly drawn into is reversed, both Queen Margaret and Stringer Bell are invested in the future sustainability of their vision, be it the succession of their own kin to the throne or the preservation of a legitimate business enterprise. Forced to make what can only be seen as a false choice, both find themselves compelled to fall back on a scheme that will ultimately destroy their rule. Queen Margaret can only persist in leading her troops into a battle which, once Edward has captured her king, will have the obliteration of all her dreams as its outcome. She will be forced to accept not only King Henry's abdication but also his assassination in The Tower.

Along similar lines, Stringer also finds himself compelled to make a choice that is false in that it is no real choice. Fully aware that Prop Joe will force them to leave the Co-Op if they do not end a war that is bringing the police down on them, he, in a move far more radical than that of Shakespeare's Queen Margaret, sacrifices his own king, hoping, in so doing, to protect their business. Attacked on three fronts – by Marlo on the corners, by the police raiding their stash houses, and by Avon, who refuses to accept a change in the rules of the game, Stringer makes his fateful phone call to Maj. Colwin at the Western District

police, whose Hamsterdam experiment has come to impress him. The *mise-en-scène* presents this false choice – which will ultimately destroy the very business that to preserve he has recourse to betrayal in the first place – as the solitary gesture of tragedy. The surveillance cameras can only catch him pacing in front of his copy shop before he decides to place the call, prompting, as noted before, Lester's cynical quote: »heavy is the head that wears the crown.« We then see Stringer return to his office in the back of the shop, careful to shut the door behind him. Initially, through the window of the door, we only see him hesitate which phone to use, then, as the camera moves into the room, we hear him dial the Western District Police (S3E10; 34-37-35-55). Ironically he tells the operator that it is not an emergency. The editing cuts away from him before his call is placed through to the man whose help he is desperate to solicit.

The nocturnal meeting between these two unlikely allies at a graveyard picks up the Shakespearean tone invoked by Lester's citation. Walking amongst the dead, Stringer Bell confesses to Bunny Colwin that it was his alternative to policing that enhances rather than contains drug related crime which made him turn to him in the first place: »Looks like you and me both trying to make sense of this game.« He then hands him the address where, since the war started, Avon and his soldiers are camping out, armed with heavy artillery. While Colwin reads this betrayal amongst brothers as a form of revenge, quietly noting »he must have done something to you,« the tragic pathos of the scene is augmented by Stringer's laconic reply: »no, it's just business« (S3E11; 30-49-32-10). The fact that Avon's own act of betrayal will bring about the death of his queen, while the police raid that acts on Stringer's information will merely bring him a heavy prison sentence, does more than confirm what Stringer ominously declared during their own last nocturnal meeting: »We ain't got a dream no more, man« (S3E11; 47-08). David Simon's dramatic resolution to this war among brothers also brings forward the bleak political point already made by Shakespeare's early history plays. Even if an overt civil war can periodically be contained, notably by a prodigious marriage such as that between Richmond and Elizabeth, systemic violence underwrites all politics.

After Stringer's death, Avon has his own moment of doubt, explaining to one of his last trusted muscle that perhaps their war with Marlo over a couple of corners is, indeed, pointless. Slim Charles, in turn, offers an assessment bespeaking to the necessity of war as politics with other means: »Fact is, we went to war, and now there ain't no going back... it's what war is, you know... once you in it, you in it! If it's a lie, then we fight on that lie. But we gotta fight« (S3E12; 7:16-7:56). In other words, what, in David Simon's bleak re-imagining of America's war on drugs, succeeds is neither »Bunny« Colwin's experiment with concentrating drug traffic to select areas in the city, nor Stringer's vision of achieving power based on legitimacy, nor Prop Joe's scheme of selling drugs without open bloodshed on the streets. Instead, *The Wire* follows Shakespeare's

first tetralogy in its nostalgia for periods of political crisis, because the war these call forth is the necessary precondition for peace, precarious as it may be, to be installed. If, at the end of *Richard III*, the Wars of the Roses can finally be contained in the symbolic authority with which the marriage between Elizabeth and Richmond is endowed, this peace requires the brilliant if deadly machinations of the »black intelligencer« Richard III to come about. Only by deposing the self-proclaimed King whose rule in Shakespeare's re-imagined early modern history is shown to be most radically predicated on a ruthless appropriation of power, can the Tudor monarchy establish its royal legitimacy.

In a similar manner, the dramatic logic of *The Wire* needs Marlo, an equally self-obsessed opponent to the kingpins already in place in Baltimore's drug game, so that, in the end, the New World Co-Op, under the leadership of Slim Charles and his team, will once again win the day. Their collective succession is predicated on the sudden rise and equally swift fall of David Simon's most audacious pawn.⁸ Like Richard (who in *Henry VI*, 3 is still Duke of Gloucester), Marlo thinks of the world exclusively in terms of a private war of ambition. Indeed, Richard's confession could be his: »Why then I do but dream on sovereignty;/ Like one that stands upon a promontory/ And spies a far-off shore where he would tread,/ Whishing his foot were equal with his eye;...So do I wish the crown, being so far off« (3.2; 135-140). In contrast to Avon (who actually admires his young challenger for his single-minded ferocity), for Marlo, seizing territory is not an end in itself but rather a means to gain the one thing he dreams of – the insignia of royal authority. If, initially, Prop Joe had hoped to contain Marlo by offering him a place in the Co-Op and grooming him to be his successor, it soon becomes clear that he is vying to become the absolute sovereign, much along the terms Richard III formulates: »I am myself alone.«

Yet decisive for the affective dramaturgic force of Marlo's play within this TV show as a whole is the way his individual portrait of radical personal ambition feeds on the systemic violence governing the drug game, even while it endows his dream with the tragic pathos of hubris. Indeed, while Prop Joe and Stringer are businessmen concerned with prosperity and Avon a warrior concerned with his feudal domain, Marlo's emotional investment is purely in the royal position as such. After he has made his first hit against Barksdale, an older player in the game warns him that Avon will retaliate. Rather than showing concern, Marlo is thrilled at the prospect. In response to his advisor's bleak recollection of the »prison and graveyards full of boys who wore the crown,« Marlo sharply responds: »Point is, they wore it. It's my turn to wear it now.« Indeed, while the Barksdale clan he is challenging see themselves living the legacy of an

8 | When Marlo initially surfaces on the wiretap which Lt. Daniels' special unit has installed in Season three, his street name is »Black.«

extended family that has always been in the crime game, his is a dark version of the self-entitlement proclaimed by the American dream. By the last season of *The Wire*, Marlo, like Richard III, will have used a combination of astute intrigues and ruthless executions to position himself such that he can declare to have all the power to himself, alone.

Indeed, what he also shares with Shakespeare's »black intelligencer« is political savviness. Well aware that the police are surveilling them, he only holds court outside, surrounded by his most trusted muscle, even as he makes sure that the people they kill for him drop out of sight. At the same time, he, like Richard, plans his territorial takeover of the East Side shrewdly, meeting up with Avon in prison first, so as to get »the connect« to the Greek, the invisible hand at the head of the drug supply line. The dramatic *peripeteia* equally worthy of Richard III, in turn, occurs during the meeting of the Co-Op when Marlo, sure of his allies, takes the final steps necessary for his claim to absolute sovereignty. Recognizing that Cheese can be bribed to betray his uncle because Prop Joe publically castigates him for making unlawful incursions into territory marked for another member of the charter, his silent gaze forges a fateful bond. Oblivious to this shift in circumstances, Prop Joe, still hoping to civilize the boy he sees as his son, suggests to Marlo after the meeting that he should focus a bit on what can be gained by working with people. Yet *The Wire's* black intelligencer already has the key player in position to carry through his fatal incursion working not with but against him.

On the night Prop Joe prepares to leave the house his grandfather had bought, hoping to bypass the drug war which is once more about to erupt, Marlo enters his living room. Wearing a black t-shirt with white letters spelling »Royal Addiction,« he is finally able to check-mate his mentor because Cheese, waiting outside, will no longer protect this kingpin he, as his nephew, should be loyal to. Making his last proposition, Joe insists, »I treated you like a son,« only to be somberly informed: »I wasn't made to play the son.« Marlo cannot spare him, because, like Richard III, his self-declared legitimization is predicated on proclaiming the death of his opponents in public. Instead, with the cool severity appropriate to an absolute sovereign, he softly cajoles the older man, telling him to close his eyes and breathe deeply while his assassin pulls the trigger. When, after Joe's death, he becomes the sole owner of »the connect,« indeed the only one the Greek's contact will deal with, he can finally be certain that he has, indeed, procured the signs of authority. Walking away from the meeting, he joyfully proclaims to his trusted muscle, Chris, that he is now wearing a crown on his head. Though invisible, this royal insignia empowers him to perform his final *coup d'état*. With the chairs at the head of the table empty after Joe's sudden demise, Marlo takes control of the next meeting of the Co-Op, first redistributing the territory that belonged to the murdered man, only to finish by dispensing with all further meetings.

As the sole owner of »the connect« he can now not only dictate the price of their product, but, having disbanded the Co-Op, he can also declare that all future issues concerning their business will no longer be discussed collectively. Instead, he proclaims himself the sole arbitrator of any differences that might arise amongst the various factions of the drug business. Yet the absolute power Marlo has seized needs to be acknowledged by those he controls, and his downfall, like that of Shakespeare's Richard III, hinges on his inability to retain his reputation on the street. When his muscle finally confesses to him that the rogue player Omar, once more involved in a personal revenge vendetta, is putting it out on the street that Marlo is not man enough to battle with him, he, for a brief moment, breaks his austere pose. Outraged that his name has been used in the street, he shouts, »my name is my name« (S5E09; 20.34). Indeed, precisely because his name is the only thing he has to base his legitimation on, losing it is tantamount to losing the crown he has striven for with such single-minded passion. Thus, while in contrast to Richard III he does not find death on the battlefield, the end of the drug war has predicated his symbolic death. The deal his lawyer is able to broker with the District Attorney's office is that all charges against him will be dropped on the condition that he retires from the drug business altogether.

Though not fatal, this sentence is tragic because, without his name on the street, Marlo, whose self-definition was based entirely on his self-declared usurpation of sovereignty, no longer exists in the game. His also is a false choice, because while giving up his crown may mean freedom from incarceration, it is the end of the only world he knows. He is compelled to make the very move which Stringer Bell had dreamed for himself, though he is transformed from gangster to businessman against his wishes. In the penultimate scene of season five we see the price at which this move comes. Having abruptly left an elegant evening event with his new peers, he finds himself on a dimly lit street. At one corner, two young punks are deep in conversation. Hearing them discuss one of Omar's mythic exploits, he approaches, only to discover that they no longer know who he is. After a brief tussle, he stands alone in the night, a knife wound to his right arm, bemused at the turn his luck has taken. The future that is open to him is one of complete invisibility, which is to say the end of his existence on the stage that was his world.

ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE

With Shakespeare's historical re-imagining of the succession of royal power from Henry VI to Henry VII in mind, one could summarize the narrative trajectory of *The Wire* as follows. Initially a battling over territory in Baltimore's East and West Side brings legitimation to the Barksdale clan, yet the bodies

on the street get Avon and some of his most trusted muscle into prison, thus opening up a breach in the power structure of the drug game out of which two opposing schemes can emerge – The New World Co-Op and Marlo's challenge for the crown. In the course of the civil war that follows, he, like Richard III, so successfully either eradicates his opponents or turns them into allies that he can declare himself absolute sovereign of the drug game. Yet in the final battle with the police his troops are caught and the price for his defeat is an abdication from the game which brings with it – and therein lies the poignant correspondence to the closure *Richard III* has to offer – a second generation Co-Op. At the end of *The Wire* we have business as usual, not necessarily the peace which Shakespeare's royal wedding promises, but at least a containment of excessive bloodshed on the streets of Baltimore. Among those sacrificed are players who had an alternative vision: Stringer Bell's dream of »going legit.« Prop Joe's privileging of business over battling, »Bunny« Colwin's Hamsterdam experiment. Ironically, of course, the king does ultimately stay the king. Re-installed as kingpin within the prison world, Avon, along with his most trusted muscle, WeeBay, continues to influence Baltimore's drug traffic from the inside.

Yet if I began my discussion with a reading of the chess game scene, then in part because it also speaks to the very theatricality of power that connects Shakespeare's world to that of *The Wire*. As Jacques explains in *As You Like It*: »all the world's a stage,/ And all the men and women merely players./ They have their exits and their entrances« (2.7; 138-140). The point of chess, after all, is that it foregrounds the issue of staging power not only because all the positions and moves are determined in relation to a clearly delimited playing field. Rather, as already discussed, it draws attention to the performative nature of legitimation, given that it includes the possibility of declaring oneself to be ruler by appropriating the signs of authority, namely the queen's crown. This also, however, means that the position key players assume in the drug game is predicated on accruing recognition from the other players as well as those on the periphery, looking on. Or put another way, for power based on legitimation to have any effect, it must have an audience. If preserving their name on the street is the only guarantee players like Avon, Marlo or Omar have for maintaining their power, it involves not only a constant war to maintain this self-declared legitimation but also a perpetual public display of it, be it in person or as a narrative installed in collective memory.

The significance of a theatrical display of power contestation finds a particularly effective articulation in a late scene in season five. With Marlo willing to sell »the connect,« the other members of the Co-Op meet in an open lot at night to discuss how much each can contribute to buying him out. Cockily, the traitor Cheese claims he can put up more than his share because he trusts in the future. When one of the other men points out that they were doing fine as long as his uncle had »the connect,« implicitly accusing him for having

forced them to put up with Marlo in the first place, Cheese, putting his gun to his interlocutor's face, counters by giving his reading of the past civil war: »Joe had his time and Omar put an end to that. Then Marlo had his time, short as it was, and the police put an end to that. And now motherfucker it's our time, mines and yours.« A circle has formed around the two combatants, watching a performance in which the proper narrative interpretation of their legacy is as much at stake as the money they need to reinstall the Co-Op. Cheese derides the other man, shouting at him, »there ain't no back in the day, nigger. Ain't no nostalgia to this shit here. There's just the street and the game and what happen here today.« His is the unsentimental attitude of a pure opportunist, lacking all sense of loyalty, or respect for past royalty, but also all responsibility for his own actions: »When it was my uncle, I was with my uncle,« he concludes: »When it was Marlo, I was with him.«

At the precise moment that he is about to finish his diatribe by saying what is now, Slim Charles, who had so presciently assured Avon that they could do nothing other than fight a war once they had started it, shoots him in the head. Asked by the bemused onlookers why he had done this, he knowingly explains »that was for Joe.« Sentimental as the move may be, it illustrates the degree to which a collectively performed nostalgia is necessary for the game to hold. The name of the man who, if only for a brief moment, had brought them prosperity with his vision of how business could be done peaceably, needs to be preserved over and against all challengers interested only in the chances the present holds. The *mise-en-scène*, in turn, draws attention to yet another Shakespearean legacy. As in the history plays, violence in *The Wire* is necessarily theatrical. If one's name is the only guarantor for legitimation, this requires an audience for whose benefit it can be fought through. Someone needs to witness and to report the struggle incessantly played out on the streets, even when the contests take place in nocturnal alleys or abandoned lots.

If, then, the Baltimore drug world is a stage in which everyone must play his or her part, this theatricality plays to various audiences. First and foremost, the visceral power play between opponent kingpins is pointedly staged for the players themselves as well as members of the community at large, often just innocent bystanders accidentally drawn into their war. When, in the first season, D'Angelo and his friends hold council on an orange sofa placed in the middle of the pit, they embody the center of a panopticon-like visual regime. Their control over this small part of the drug game is predicated on a theatrical display of themselves as privileged observers. Those they watch – their hoppers, their customers as well as the police – are meant to take note of the four soldiers, looking out at them from this exposed stage. Marlo will also hold council outside, in a stone arena that even more explicitly recalls a theater, even if the audiences he stages are far less public, while the Co-Op meetings recall early modern aristocratic mores, with the most powerful figure

standing in front of the others, as though addressing his courtiers. Yet what *The Wire* inherits from Shakespeare's histories is not only the manner in which the kingpins stage their own authority but also the way they perform their triumph over selected opponents. If, on the Shakespearean stage, the heads of vanquished enemies often come to be prominently displayed, so, too, in *The Wire*, corpses function as encoded messages, sent out to the community.

It is useful to recall that the entire series begins with a corpse and the discussion it prompts between McNulty and one of his informers as to why the dead man was called Snot. They are looking at a crime scene that has been blocked off with yellow tape: a stage *in nuce*, with the police the actors, moving around a dead body they are trying to read, passing information about its identity and the probable cause of death to each other, while the onlookers stand around them in a semi-circle. In the many public crime scenes to come, these corpses may merely signify the continuation of the drug war and as such function as a symptom of urban malaise, evoking outrage or disinterest. To those who share the code, in turn, they often have a further, specific meaning, functioning as admonition, and also, in the case of Brandon's cruelly disfigured corpse, as a prompt for revenge. Or, as with Gant's corpse, while to most of the »soldiers« on the ground it serves as a warning not to testify in court against a member of the Barksdale clan, for D'Angelo it gives body to his rising mistrust of his uncle's *modus operandi*. To knowledgeable viewers of the series, furthermore, it also anticipates D'Angelo's own fate once he, like Gant, shows himself willing to cooperate with the police.

The world of crime, however, is street theater in the further sense that the routine that regulates the trafficking in drugs itself already involves a public display. The buying and selling, as well as the communication between those on the corners and their superiors, is presented in David Simon's re-imagination of the drug world as a ritualized performance, played out in the open, with the inhabitants of the projects, be they involved or disaffected, as audience. Once the wire that McNulty has fought so furiously for is up, this routine turns into a performance that – explicitly or unwittingly – has the police as its privileged spectators as well, albeit once removed. The scene in which Bubbles, for example, uses hats to signal to the surveillance team who the key players in Barksdale's team are, while to these men themselves he is performing an act of buffoonery worthy of any Shakespearean fool, is a particularly salient example of this doubled spectatorship. Indeed, once the police wire begins to track the corpses, left on the street as evidence of the ongoing drug war, this second degree theatricalization of power fully comes into play. What was initially clandestine theater, put on for those living in the Baltimore projects, becomes a performance for the police as well. Cracking the pager code in the first season allows Lt. Daniels' special unit to capture dialogs between individual players and begin to map the *dramatis personae* of the game according to which side they are fighting on.

By rendering the clandestine drug trafficking visible, the wire produces theater within theater. The computer screens transform the police into the audience of schemes and movements they can only partially understand. Recorded by hidden microphones, photo and video cameras, individual scenes of the game are rendered visible as snippets of coded dialog, as freeze frames or silent movie footage. On their pinboards, Daniels' special unit repeatedly draws out connections between the labeled photographs, trying to reconstruct the position of each player in the overall hierarchy, thus enacting what any theater audience (or reader of a play) does. They are looking for points of orientation in the dramatic action so as to make sense of the dialogs they have overheard, and particularly the effects these have had on the stage they are clandestinely privy to. The manner in which these surveillance cameras produce a stage within the stage of the drug game, furthermore, becomes self-consciously exposed when the gangsters, cognizant that they are being watched, explicitly perform for the police, play to their expectations or ludically thwart their reconnaissance efforts. At the same time, these self-reflexive moments, playing with the rhetorical force of visual estrangement, force us to think of ourselves in terms of a spectatorship in which we function as the extradiegetic counterpart to the police, who are the diegetic audience of a game staged for both their and our edification.

When it self-consciously goes public, the police work, of course, is equally theatrical. Repeatedly McNulty and his team, angered at precipitous raids that will shut down the wire, note that the brass upstairs want a circus, and indeed, the attacks on stash houses are shown to be staged for the press and the politicians. Like the signifying corpses, the arrests the police make are conceived as theatrical acts with multiple significations. More than mere warnings to all involved in the drug game, they serve to legitimate a particular law enforcement policy which declares itself to be effective even though – or precisely because – those on the ground know it is not. To underscore the TV show's own comment on the theatricality of police interventions, we find at the end of season three, in a particularly self-reflexive scene, Dep. Com. Ops Rawls playing Wagner's »Ritt der Walküren« during his raid on Hamsterdam, explicitly citing the infamous attack on a Vietnamese village in Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*. During the press conferences following these raids, the commanding officers and politicians repeatedly present their show of force as evidence of their authority, while – and this brings in the final aspect of theatricalization of power in *The Wire* – David Simon deploys this public display ironically. His unequivocal assessment of this war on drugs is, after all, that while it may make for good theater it fails as good police work.

In other words, we, the audience, are called upon to look with a double vision. Thought of as a pinboard, unfolding in five acts, *The Wire* displays for us a complex network of players, their positions and moves, yet, in contrast

to the work by Daniels' special unit, it does more than disclose the lines of connection between them. The radical contingency of the present moment that Cheese calls »the street and the game and what happen here today« transforms into dramatic personalized narratives involving several orders of viewing. We look at the police looking at the crime and with the onlookers at crime scenes looking at signifying corpses. We follow the police as they capture and then comment on the drug game. Yet decisively David Simon calls upon us to offer a commentary on this theatrical display of violence that is also different from that of the police, press or the politicians precisely because we are privy to the emotionally charged portraits he presents of his *dramatis personae*, be they pawns, muscle or royalty. His point is that these players are precisely the warriors from whom, especially since 9/11 our attention has been withdrawn. As the police surveillance sheds light on their clandestine activities, they gain visibility for us as well. The wire may be legally and morally dodgy, but from a narratological point of view, its function is to make sure that this part of American culture does not remain invisible. By turning Baltimore into a stage, where each must play a part, this overlooked world becomes our stage as well. We empathize in pity and awe, as we would with Shakespeare's players, even if we don't condone, perhaps don't even fully comprehend what we have become privy to.

As Michael Wood notes, the final montage sequence at the end of season five allows us to »hold the city (home of dealers of all kinds) and the City (the imaginary civic stage on which we watch what we imagine we have become) in a single thought. Business as usual is an unending nightmare; but this grand nightmare is ending with a terrific grace« (Wood 2010: 21). It is useful to recall that the sequence comes right after McNulty, bringing back the homeless man he had abducted, has stopped his car and gotten out to look at the skyline of Baltimore. The camera begins to pan into a close-up, catching a brief smirk on the face of this former detective, and then moves to vignettes of what has become of the surviving players. The pawns are still on the corner, the cops are still in the bar, some players celebrate their success in public, some in private, others have silently cut their losses. The ordinary power relations, subjecting individual fates into their all-encompassing network, have once more been reinstalled. The individuals we have come, over five seasons, to invest with our sympathy fade back into oblivion as the editing moves to even shorter snapshots of urban street life. Seamlessly we return to short clips of scenes from *The Wire*, including D'Angelo's scene of chess instruction, so that for a brief moment of nostalgia, the past is resuscitated. Then, just before this montage sequence ends, we get a final parade of anonymous faces. We are about to withdraw our gaze, and yet, for these few seconds, they are part of the visual kaleidoscope that stands for the City of the early 21st century. The editing returns to McNulty, whose smirk is now more ambivalent, and who, facing the camera while he

looks one last time at his view of Baltimore, implicitly appeals with his gaze to us, before telling his passenger: »Larry, let's go home.«

In contrast to the montage sequences that put closure on the other four seasons, this one is marked as McNulty's dream; a dream, to boot, about the many scenes that have made up (or could be part of) a TV show called *The Wire*. After McNulty's car has driven out of the frame, the camera tarries with a final image of Baltimore's skyline. His final (re)vision prompts the return to a home that is more than a concrete place; that is an imaginary visual composite signifying the place one belongs to because it is familiar, because it has become known. The end of this final montage sequence is also a form of waking up, not just for McNulty (who, discharged from the Baltimore NYPD, will no longer pursue his dream of ruthless law enforcement) but also for us. As bleak as this single contemplation of business as usual may be, it leads us to a different genre, recalling the closure of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Here Robin consoles us that the visions that appeared before our eyes are »no more yielding than a dream« (Epilogue: 6). *The Wire* ultimately proves to be a dream, nightmarish perhaps, about watching a series of dreams unfolding on screen, in actual urban locations but above all in the minds of those who, as the intended spectators inside and outside of this TV show's diegesis, came to be part of it. Gently nudged by David Simon's puck, we are asked to return to a home, altered by this dream we have shared.

WORKS CITED

- Alvarez, Rafael (2009): *The Wire*. Truth be Told, New York: Grove Press.
- Burdeau, Emmanuel/Vieillescazes, Nicolas (2011): *The Wire*. Reconstitution Collective, Paris: Capricci.
- De Certeau, Michel (1984): *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley: U of California P.
- Eschköttler, Daniel (2012): *The Wire*, Zürich: Diaphanes.
- Holderness, Graham (ed.) (1992): *Shakespeare's History Plays*. Richard II to Henry V. New Casebooks, London: Macmillan Palgrave.
- Howard, Jean E./Rackin, Phyllis (1997): *Engendering a Nation*, London: Routledge.
- Kelleter, Frank (2012): »The Wire and Its Readers,« in: Kennedy/Shapiro, *The Wire*, pp. 33-70.
- Kennedy, Liam/Shapiro, Stephen (eds.) (2012): *The Wire*. Race, Class, and Genre, Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P.
- McMillan, Alasdair (2009): »Heroism, Institutions, and the Police Procedural,« in: Potter/Marshall, *The Wire*, pp. 50-63.

- Mittell, Jason (2012): »The Wire in the Context of American Television,« in: Kennedy/Shapiro, *The Wire*, pp. 15-32.
- Moore, Lorrie (2010): »In the Life of »the Wire«« in: *New York Review of Books*, 14 October, pp. 23-25.
- Jagoda, Patrick (2011): »Wired,« in: *Critical Inquiry* 38.1, pp. 189-199.
- Potter, Tiffany/Marshall, C.W. (eds.) (2009): *The Wire*. Urban Decay and American Television, New York: Continuum.
- Jason Read (2009): »Stringer Bell's Lament. Violence and Legitimacy in Contemporary Capitalism,« in: Potter/Marshall, *The Wire*, pp. 122-134.
- Shakespeare, William (1962): *King Henry VI. Part 1*. The Arden Shakespeare, ed. by Andrew S. Cairncross, London: Routledge.
- (1962): *King Henry VI. Part 2*. The Arden Shakespeare, ed. by Andrew S. Cairncross, London: Routledge.
- (1964): *King Henry VI. Part 3*. The Arden Shakespeare, ed. by Andrew S. Cairncross, London: Routledge.
- (1981): *Richard III*. The Arden Shakespeare, ed. by Antony Hammond, London: Routledge.
- Wood, Michael (2010): »This is America, Man,« in: *London Review of Books*, 27 May, pp. 20-22.

CHRISTOPH ERNST, HEIKE PAUL (Hg.)

Amerikanische Fernsehserien der Gegenwart

**Perspektiven der American Studies
und der Media Studies**

[transcript]

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

© 2015 transcript Verlag, Bielefeld

Die Verwertung der Texte und Bilder ist ohne Zustimmung des Verlages urheberrechtswidrig und strafbar. Das gilt auch für Vervielfältigungen, Übersetzungen, Mikroverfilmungen und für die Verarbeitung mit elektronischen Systemen.

Umschlaggestaltung: Angela Nentwig

Satz: Justine Haida, Bielefeld

Printed in Germany

Print-ISBN 978-3-8376-1989-8

PDF-ISBN 978-3-8394-1989-2

Gedruckt auf alterungsbeständigem Papier mit chlorfrei gebleichtem Zellstoff.

Besuchen Sie uns im Internet: <http://www.transcript-verlag.de>

Bitte fordern Sie unser Gesamtverzeichnis und andere Broschüren an unter:

info@transcript-verlag.de

Inhalt

Einleitung

Christoph Ernst und Heike Paul | 7

Mr. White Breaks on through to the Other Side

Agency, Genre und die Repräsentation soziokultureller Dichotomien
in Vince Gilligans *Breaking Bad*

Philip Dreher/Lukas R.A. Wilde | 35

»Whatever Happened, Happened«

Serial Character Constellation as Problem and Solution in *Lost*

Frank Kelleter | 57

Shakespeare's Wire

Elisabeth Bronfen | 89

(Post-)Feminism and Gender Politics in *Mad Men*

Katharina Gerund | 111

Truth, Justice, and Contingency in *The Good Wife*

Katja Kanzler | 133

30 Rock: Complexity, Metareferentiality and the Contemporary Quality Sitcom

Katrin Horn | 153

Paranoia in Serie – Zur Strukturlogik von Ereignisnarrationen in der Fernsehserie *Fringe*

Carolyn Lano | 185

Verschwörung gegen Amerika

True Blood und die Politiken des Vampirs

André Grzeszyk | 207

»How Is It Possible That This Was Kept a Secret?«

Representation, Realism, and »Epistemic Panic« in *The West Wing*

Sebastian M. Herrmann | 225

Der mögliche Untergang der Republik

Zur Verschränkung von Möglichkeitsdenken und politischem Diskurs
in der Historienserie *Rome*

Christoph Ernst | 249

Slices of Life

Killing and Seriality in *Dexter*

Karin Hoepker | 277

»Folge dem auteur!«

Serielle und transmediale Autorenschaft am Beispiel von Joss Whedon

Sven Grampp | 305

Verzeichnis der AutorInnen | 343

Einleitung

Christoph Ernst und Heike Paul

I. EINE »NEUE« ÄRA? »QUALITY TV« UND »NEUERE SERIE«

Die zeitgenössische, zunächst in den USA, inzwischen international produzierte »neue« Fernsehserie darf als ein Phänomen gelten. Es handelt sich um eine große und quasi täglich steigende Zahl von Serien, die vor der Folie der Markierung einer historischen Zäsur Anfang der 1990er Jahre unter dem Begriff des Qualitätsfernsehens (»Quality TV«) besprochen werden.¹ Allerdings bleiben die Maßstäbe, die es rechtfertigen, von »Qualität« zu sprechen, häufig vage. Robert J. Thompson bot in seinem Buch *Television's Second Golden Age* aus dem Jahr 1996 einen losen Merkmalskatalog, um festzulegen, was eine Quality TV-Serie ist (vgl. Thompson 1996: 11ff.).² In der anschließenden Forschungsdebatte hat das Etikett Quality TV an Kontur gewinnen können (vgl. McCabe/Akass [Hg.] 2007). Die Debatte um eine Ära des Quality TV verortet die »neue Fernsehserie« an der Schnittstelle übergreifender kultur- und medientheoretisch relevanter Entwicklungen. Aus kulturtheoretischer Perspektive avanciert die Fernsehserie zur neuen »großen Erzählform« der Gegenwart, die durch US-amerikanische Erzählschemata geprägt und dominiert wird.³ Aus medientheoretischer Perspektive sind Phänomene wie die Abkoppelung der Fernsehserie vom Fernsehdispositiv zu nennen. Anhand von dem Quality TV-Feld zugerechneten Serien wie *Lost* (2004-2010) werden Medienumbrüche wie der Umbruch vom »Post-Network« zum »Post-Television« festgemacht (vgl. Pearson 2007).⁴

1 | Einen guten Überblick über die Strukturen, Motive und Themen der »älteren« US-amerikanischen Serie geben die Beiträge in Schneider (Hg.) 1995, vgl. zur aktuellen Forschung die Beiträge in Lillge et al. (Hg.) 2014.

2 | Vgl. zur Vorgeschichte des Quality TV-Begriffs, die bis in die 1980er Jahre reicht, auch Klein 2012: 226ff.

3 | Vgl. auch den Bezug auf die »großen Erzählungen« bei Haupts 2010: 95f.

4 | Vgl. die sowohl fernseh- als auch serientheoretisch sehr gut kontextualisierten Ausführungen bei Schabacher 2010: 20ff.