From Scandinavian Detective Films to The Wire

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The HBO TV series *The Wire*, has, in one of the numerous enthusiastic reviews, been dubbed "The Greatest TV Show You've Never Seen" (Lee 2007). The "never seen" could be read both as a critique of its insufficient popularity in the USA (a frequent interpretation being that the general public's *Erwartungshorizont* was ill equipped for its generic experiments, in terms of form as well as the different racial and other social issues the series raises), and a reference to the uniqueness of the series' hybridity (the-cops-and-robbers plot expanding in each season to include a "Balzacian network" of Baltimore city institutions--school system, city authorities, media etc.--changing the genre designations from *police* to e.g. *urban drama*).

After compiling a generic description of *police procedural* and highlighting the "realistic" elements commonly ascribed to the sub-genre in comparison with other crime narratives, the following analysis will discuss how *The Wire* shifts from the conventions of that sub-genre, as well as from the more general concept of the crime genre's semantic and syntactic devices. The contextualisation of crime, as a feature of *The Wire* and comparable texts, has been approached from different perspectives, such as the field of cultural geography: Hausladen, for instance, notes that the status of place in certain police procedurals takes on an importance far beyond a mere backdrop of crime (1995: 63-64). In other words, unlike the stories that could easily be transferred to other locales, these insist on the links with the specific framework, which functions as an "essential catalyst for the plot" (64). This rootedness in the social space develops in *The Wire* to such a degree that it becomes the structuring principle, causing the text to transgress the crime genre, and the reception to produce hybrid designations like *urban*

procedural (in other words, turning from "generically modelled" to "generically marked films", where the genre gives the necessary backdrop for both production and reception of films, but doesn't define them (Moine 2006: 99)). The last section of this paper will draw comparisons with examples of a distinct Swedish tradition of police procedurals that have long been recognized as a "socially critical" or even as "the socio-crime" sub-genre (Brönnimann 2004: 11).

Police procedurals

A critical consensus on the *police drama,* or more precisely, *police procedurals*, sees this sub-genre as a relatively new phenomenon in the development of crime fiction and films, and (sometimes consequently) as one most driven by ''realism'' (in Dove 1997; Rafter 2000; Malmgren 2001; Knight 2004; among others). Commonly described as a sub-genre of the crime or mystery story that depicts the activities of a police force as they investigate crimes, police procedurals are often reduced to several common denominators. Rather than focusing on the activities of an individual detective hero (with his optional "Watson" i.e. sidekick or other satellite figures), procedural follows the *teamwork* of the police squad assigned to the mystery, "stressing the importance of collective and *cooperative* police agency" (Scaggs 2005: 87). Another trait, "the multiple focus of characters and crimes" (Knight 2004: 88) logically follows: unlike the predominantly single or major plot detective story, the police procedural typically depicts investigations into several (unrelated) crimes in a single story. Its most distinctive feature, however, is the replacement of the mystery story's whodunit with 'howdunit'--rather than adhering to the convention of concealing the perpetrator's identity till the climax, stressing what Kristin Thompson and others called the "hermeneutic delay" as the crime or mystery genre's constructive principle (Neale

2003: 180), the police procedural will often reveal this fact at the outset, placing the stress inevitably on police work and police-related topics. These will range from crime-scene investigation, gathering of evidence, dealing with search warrants, informants, stakeouts and interrogation, to the forensic activities and sometimes even the neighbouring institutions. Depending on these choices, further categorising will often distinguish the *forensic procedurals* or *forensic shows*, such as *CSIs*, from *psychological profiler* series or, for example, *Law & Order*, which follows two halves of the criminal justice system: the police investigation, and the subsequent prosecutions by the district attorney's office.

Accounting for the "inherent realism of [this] sub-genre" (Scaggs 2005: 97)--when it is not attributed to different borrowings from 'reality' (rather than fiction)--regularly sets out from the above named characteristics. The story of its genesis typically notes how, despite the continuing production of the private-eye narratives, the generic shift to police procedural has been prompted by a recognition that the marginal position and the limited perspective of the PI hero or heroine made for an ineffectual figure, as far as the representation of crime and its containment goes (Messent 1997: 2). So the commitment to greater verisimilitude is ascribed primarily to the characters who have replaced the improbably isolated figure of a loner private detective, a marginal figure within the wider social system of containing and controlling crime (89). This is furthermore seen as opening the possibility of a critical investigation of the inward and outward dynamics of the police force, challenging the heroism of the detective figure and making the procedural "the ideal vehicle for interrogating both the social order and the structures that support it" (97).

So when the realism of the *setting* is described as central to the police procedural it is not so solely because of the depiction of, for example, the localised beat of the

small-town British series or, more typically, the "reality'' of large urban centers as a credible backdrop for a crime. As Scaggs concludes, the specificity of the procedural lies in its projection of a *social world*, both in terms of tackling the social concerns of modern urban life more explicitly than the Golden Age or hard-boiled fiction, as well as focusing on the way individuals, separated by age, experience, gender, race and ethnicity, work collectively to preserve the social order (103).

The multiple plot lines provide another contribution to the realistic effect by undermining the convention of closure-reassurance, i.e. balancing the successes and failures in the narrative where not all crimes investigated are ultimately solved. Whether it is the case of *police drama TV series*, or feature-length films and novels which can both function as autonomous texts but are also perceived as a part of a series, these (unsolved) cases can unfold over many episodes or seasons, forming longer stretch narratives i.e. story arcs.[1] Additional realistic contribution of such *seriality* was discussed by Molander Danielson, who uses the term for the dependence on intraserial references and intradiegetic order within the series or set of texts, as a conventional device in latter-day detective fiction (13). Recurring protagonist(s), depicted as existing in a world in which actions in narrative number one have an effect in subsequent ones, increasingly become developing characters, both privately and professionally, with continuous references to personal life as well as prior investigations. The disregard of time and continuity seen in Agatha Christie or Ed McBain's stories are thus replaced by an ambition towards realism in terms of intradiegetic time (14). But while Molander Danielson focused on the individual characters as the unifying element of serial plots (i.e. *seriality* as crucial in shifting emphasis from the investigation plot to the evolving

[1] The "(story) arc" is commonly used in reference to TV serial storytelling, and it is also the *cop-shows* i.e. *police drama TV series* that is most common association to police procedural, even if the precedent is literary. So even when the topic is literature, the TV seems to loom large, as Symons notes that, unlike the locked-room and similar crime plots, the routine of police work "makes excellent TV", setting the pace for development of the police-procedural novel as well (231).

story of the detectives lives), 'more realistic' effects have also been attributed to story arcs.

'Reality' Effects

Such widening of the social scope of crime predictably inspires associations with the literary conventions of (19th century) realism (Messent 1997: 1), but the automatic implication of the ideological critique of such texts is of course misleading. Quite the contrary, in what is now the standard Foucaldian critique of the Dickensian gaze, the totalising vision or disciplinary surveillance of the *public eye* which replaces the *private eye* offers the possibility of an intensified illusion of policing i.e. "social monitoring and control" (Scaggs 2005: 88-89). From the Pinkertons' "we never sleep" credo to the modern *cop-show* incarnations, procedural is therefore seen "as a sort of textual Panopticon", offering reassurance i.e. re-establishing the status quo at every corner so that the anonymity of the city provides no shelter (101). However, the scenario in which the procedural functions like a tool in reassurning the dominant social order is not considered as the only option. Such criticism is rather targeted at what these authors perceive to be the mainstream development of the sub-genre, which rather fails to exploit the 'realistic' potential of the procedural in what is often diagnosed as dwelling on the formulae of more archaic crime sub-genres. A Dove concludes, very few writers have even moderately succeeded in accomplishing any of these realistic goals: "the police story is still a tale of detection, shaped by hermeneutic structure and demanding heroes" (29).

These residues in the procedural that come under criticism are pinpointed as, firstly, relying on the mystery-story plot (with imperative of closure, endorsing the status quo (Messent 1997: 16)) and secondly, on heroic qualities of the *central* detective

figure (ranging from the anti-authoritarian, unothordox macho alcoholic divorcee to its more feminised incarnations). The third point--the 'monstrosity' of crime--is argued to have become a common trait of police procedurals since the 1990's: representing criminal as essentially evil, an isolated case of Otherness, exonerating the social order of all responsibility, i.e. "construing disorder as pathologically transgressive, emptying it of complex economic, political or cultural determinants" (Nestingen 2008: 247). Bearing in mind this variant of the genre, it seems hardly surprising to find generalizations where the procedural is contrasted to the ambiguousness of *noir* and is said to offer a "less politicized" vision of crime that pits the social order against a deviant criminal (Goulet and Lee 2005: 3). Such formulaic procedural structure builds the suspense, i.e. fills in its hermeneutic delays depending on the sub-sub-genre: by means of the detective's personal life's twists and turns, by the appliance of the machinery of sophisticated toys for ''fingerprinting, DNA profilling, ballistics, scanning electron mycroscopy, blood splatter patterns, forensic entomology, post-mortems, shoe- and tyre-treads" (Scaggs 2005: 101) in eg. *CSI* etc. The alternatives to such Patricia Cornwall type of procedurals, are, as mentioned, identified as challenging these formulae in various ways: by, for example, immersing themselves into the politics of police departments, with images of corruption and similar blurrings of the thin blue line with "realistic shades of gray", or by feminist appropriations of the sub-genre that the interrogate the position of women within the dominantly white, male, heterosexual world of the procedural (Scaggs 2005: 99-100).

The tension seems to be between isolation and contextualisation; between the individual detective persona and the sociology of the police force,[2] between crime as

[2] This does not imply a distinction of private/public i.e. ignoring the possibility of investigating private-as-political, as the latter examples include texts that interweave the two dimensions. One only has to remember the DCI J. Tennyson (Hellen Mirren) story right from the first episode of *Prime Suspects* (1991), when she steps into the headquarters with "lads" only, or H. Mankell's narratives about detective

morally monstrous, identifiable and tractable and open-ended links, even networks between crime, police and adjacent institutions and the social sphere. The story around the NBC series *Homicide: Life on the Street* can be read as an illustration of this divergence as well as the mainstream tendencies in the genre. A *cop-show* following the squad of Baltimore city detectives, *Homicide* began by using long-form arcs that developed over several episodes or even entire seasons to describe criminal investigations, as well as complex internal politics of the police. Although critically praised, it was continually struggling in the ratings, so the network (NBC) urged for changes, requesting to make plots more conclusive and uplifting (Mittell 2008: 2006). These included pulling out some of the numerous cast and adding more on-screen romance and violence: in addition, NBC began airing some of the more attractive episodes out of order, tampering with the logic of the story arcs. In other words, catering to the ratings meant dealing with the slow narrative pace that the series was criticised for (e.g. not enough grip in the long scenes of police drudgery and street talk, endless plotlines in the early seasons, such as the investigation of a murdered child that ran through thirteen episodes and ended without even conclusive proof of who committed the crime). It also meant that the recourse would be the formulae that sucessful procedurals abounded in, such as the personal intrigues of a lesser number of protagonists (love affairs, detective Sipowitz's (Dennis Franz) fight with prostate cancer in *NYPD Blue* etc.) or action scenes (street violence being more adaptable to the series' logic than flashy editing of chemicals rushing through the bloodstream or flashbacks of murder scenes from the *CSI* labwork).

The Wire's **Social Turn**

Wallander, whose marked introspectiveness is boggled by recurrent questions that reach well beyond his intimate affairs.

In contrast to the readings that drew parallels between *The Wire* and earlier examples of HBO's TV series, D. Simon, a much quoted author of both *Homicide* and *The Wire* stories, repeatedly set his latter show against the cosmetic and in-depth changes other procedurals, including *Homicide*, went through (Mittel 2008: 6). Following similar claims coming from both the production team and the audience, one can trace ways in which *The Wire* diverges from the *cop-show* devices, to focus on the genesis of crime in a broader contextual framework.

The Wire sets off as a procedural, with Baltimore Police Department unsuccessfully trying to tackle the sprawling drug infrastructure, but with *the street* (i.e. the protagonists, actions and inner morale of the criminal network) taking up more narrative space than police work. The first season already spreads to a variety of locales connected with Baltimore's gang trade (clubs, drug corners, inner-city slums etc.) and police (court, DA's offices, city politicians, FBI, state politics), and this story arc will continue to develop in the following four seasons, but only as a subplot opening up different social spheres. As the seasons progress, other social groups or civic institutions are drawn into the story (the second season focuses on the Baltimore docks and the disappearing working class culture, the third season switches to the city's political top, the fourth to public schools, and the fifth and final one to the media/newspapers). So even though the procedural provides a generic thread through all five seasons (central to the plot is the use of electronic surveillance and wiretap technologies by a varying group of policemen, explaining part of the "Wire" semantics), the other themes, like the working class spheres, develop so meticulously that they establish story arcs of their own, at the same time merging and intertwining with both the drug gang narrative and with characters and themes from the previous plotlines. This network, with its astounding array of characters and spaces, all bound through different intraserial links,

can either be seen as a generic hybrid, mixing police drama with the conventions of film noir, the gangster film, legal drama, political exposé, social drama etc., or, as several commentators have argued, proclaimed to be a new generic category of "urban drama" (Mittell 2008: 6).

Obviously, a project such as this one affects and alters the crime genre's conventions. Semantically, a whole iconographic repertoire is included that would either not exist or would appear as a peripheral part of the mise en scène of a *cop-show*. For example, the appearance of docks and trade unions in Season 2 is motivated by their role in the drug supply chain, but it develops into "pop-culture ethnography" (Wilson 1997: 721) providing insight into that subculture and its forced transformation; the same goes for school system, not introduced as a simply a setting or a catalyst in the *bildungsroman* of a drug dealer to be, but as one of the most porous sections of the community, exploring its links with a variety of other fields, that include city government, the social services and, of course, the police. One might therefore say that the crime genre syntax is "neutralized" (Nestingen 2008: 250), as *The Wire*'s hermeneutic project rather becomes, as is often noted, an investigation into the social genesis of crime. The procedural's wiretap peripeties certainly produce suspense, but, instead of providing spectacular action sequences, the narrative flow seems to follow the logic of documentary genres (like travelogues) where the plot is secondary (not much happens on the road but sporadic accidents) while descriptions, otherwise marginal elements in a plot-driven story, come to the fore. Not surprisingly, the series was often criticized for testing the attention span of its audience, or faulting in ratings because of the stories' complexity and the slow development of the plotline.

Furthermore, the absence of closure is something of a trademark of the series: neither individual episodes nor seasons, nor even the whole series offer more than the

occasional pseudo-closure, or, as the quote from the series concludes, “nobody wins, the one side just loses more slowly”. There are almost no crime mysteries in *The Wire*: the contemporary crime fiction’s staple case of a shipping container full of murdered illegal immigrants that begins Season 2 is a proof of how the whodunit is downplayed in the narrative, with the final revelation becoming just an afterthought with the focus shifted to the larger scale social pathology (Mittell 2008: 8). Various signals of the imminent restart of *the game* at the end of the last season are paradigmatic of the open and cyclical structure of the crime plot as represented by *The Wire* that offers no artificial solutions to the pathologies whose roots persist on the wider social canvass.

So it is logical that the series focus is often said to be not on individual characters but on institutions, or as often claimed, the complexity of relationship between these two (e.g. Kinder: 2008). The result is a type of de-essentialized variant of heroism, distributed on all sides of the law and treated as alternative humanist efforts of characters working within and against institutional frame: the overall police impotence resulting from bureaucratic inertia, careerism, local and state politics etc.--with same pattern of disillusionment replicated in other spheres. Mittell even develops this interpretation into an analogy with *SimCity* and similar videogames, and compares *The Wire*’s characters to avatars in a social game that functions like a simulation of the complexly interrelated systems, i.e. institutions. His interpretation is that the show’s cynical vision of corrupt institutions treats change as necessary failure, as the parameters of the corrupt system are too locked-in to allow for an imagined solution to systemic social problems (5). The comparison is useful to my argument as it indicates the extent to which the narrative is immersed in the social background, i.e. the relevance and complexity of characters’ social motivation. The following description of *Homicide* and other “True Crime” narratives of the 1980s seems therefore to be even more true of

the type of characterisation featured in *The Wire*: "Each post [police, newspapers, etc.] is manned by individuals equipped with what Bourdieu calls 'dispositions', culturally produced sensibilities, generated by religious training, social upbringing and education that can take shape reciprocally within fields full of their own contradictions" (Wilson 1997: 721).

Such 'sociological' readings have in the meantime become a common target of *The Wire*-response criticism that typically contrasted the authors' statements on the programme's critical ambitions with the series' "*simulacrum* of realism", appealing to "left-wing academics working in the fields of sociology, cultural studies and cognate disciplines" (Bramall 2009). But arguments around the reception and effects of *The Wire* rarely developed into audience research and analyses, and tended to linger on questions of (social) realist conventions--often mistaken for documentary or soc-realist, even though the series itself was recognised for its complex treatment of such themes as authenticity, truth/fiction etc. (e.g. in Minton 2009; Penfold-Mounce 2009; Tyszczuk 2009).

"**Sozio-krimi**"

By pointing out the mentioned generic shifts and by emphasising the work of institutions as the focus of the show, as well as with frequent references to the "social" or "sociological" vision of *The Wire*, different readings of the series bring to mind descriptions of the so called *socio-crime* genre.

Swedish authors Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö are usually considered to be the pioneers of the *socio-crime* tradition with a series of ten novels about inspector Martin Beck and his colleagues in the Stockholm homicide squad written in the period 1965-75. In comparison with *The Wire*'s narrative complexity, the Beck series seem to

function at first glance as a conventional procedural, with a central detective figure and his crew solving crime(s) in every episode, their private lives featured in the serial development, featuring whodunit plots, etc. But the police agency in the series was depicted as markedly a *collective*, and the ensemble of characters' (detectives, criminals, etc.) motivations furthermore deduced from their diverse and elaborate social backgrounds, developed through the sequels to the extent that the functioning of these social fields became the main object of investigation. Like in *The Wire*, a descriptive insight into the politics of the police force and the system of contemporary institutions logically produced a slow-paced narrative, as well as undermined the classical Manichean ideology of the genre. The film adaptation of the seventh novel in the series, *The Man on the Roof* (Bo Widerberg, 1976), thus typically reversed the genre's logic by portraying society as pathological, the victim as its representative agent, and the criminal as the real victim of a dysfunctional police force, the health system and adjacent institutions. The catching of a minor criminal at the end of the film adaptation of *The Fire Engine That Disappeared* (Hajo Gies, 1993), while the businessman pulling the strings escapes by merging with the mass of silhouettes with briefcases at the airport, is symptomatic of the series' overall reflection on closure as pseudo-closure. Furthermore, the individual stories were part of a cycle, and this seriality is crucial to the procedural's social project: the whole series was entitled *The Story of a Crime* and was supposed to tackle different institutions i.e. crimes-as-social-symptoms in each sequel to produce an overall picture of the failings of the welfare society. A famous graphic statement of the authors highlighted this ambition by claiming that they were using police novel: "as a scalpel with which to cut open the belly of a sick society" (Lundin 1981: 29). Their ideological standpoint was thus explicit both in the episodes' critical content as well as in the structural form of the cycle that, as Brönnimann points

out, follows Marx's concept of the dialectal progression of history: as the stories evolve so does the intensity of criticism of the institutions producing the society's deterioration, thus following the Marxist dialectic process that inevitably leads to the breakdown of capitalism (11-12).

This is obviously not the social or the textual paradigm found in *The Wire* or contemporary upholders of the socially critical tradition of Swedish crime fiction (the most famous being Henning Mankell's ''Wallander'' stories, on Ystad police fronted by detective Kurt Wallander). But what is common to all these examples is the narratives that stretch the generic categories in specific ways, i.e. by employing and radicalizing the mentioned devices of the 'realistic' pole of police procedural--diverging from the monstrosity of crime scenarios, the whodunit as the narrative drive, from focusing on an isolated detective's heroic persona, the spectacle of high-tech forensics, etc.--in order to produce an investigation into the social framework generating crime.

The 1990s Beck films (with Gösta Ekman as Beck) and especially the post-1997 *Beck* series--with only characters Beck (Peter Haber) and Gunvald Larsson (Mikael Persbrandt) remaining from the original stories--were accused of radically altering the original's structural criticism by introducing changes (new plots with forensics, action scenes, Beck's intimate life twists, etc. weighing heavily) in tune with generic and social transformations after the 1990. Furthermore, rather than systemic anamnesis, the list of dark and disturbed crimes in the new *Beck* series were said to repeat the formulae of actual mainstream procedural topics or "new gothic thrillers" (Brodén 2008: 214), echoing the generic shift of focus from a social to a personal perspective. "As the consensus model of the welfare state breaks down, discourses of individualism emerge just as a sense of social life's increasing opacity becomes definitive" (Nestingen 2008: 29). Such readings parallel the broader visions of the Hollywood crime film's recent

development to reflect the social discourses of New individualism i.e. displacement of social and cultural problems from the public sphere to the realm of the personal, with the effect of a subject's helplessness and anxiety in the face of social change (García-Mainar 2009).

The predominance of such tendencies in Swedish and Scandinavian contemporary crime films has a number of other popular illustrations: the inadequacy of regular police work in dealing with contemporary crime is vivid in, for example, 'Johan Falk' films, where the recourse is the model of the private sphere--private security firms and special units, or, ultimately, heroic action of the police renegade J. Falk himself. The first two sequels of Stig Larssons' *Millenium* trilogy on film also underlined this impotence of police and social institutions, and offered instead a phantasm of individualised agency in a Modesty Blaise type of asocial heroine. Such a shift from a systemic and social to personal perspective becomes even more pronounced when viewed in the context of the Swedish police procedural tradition and the changing patterns of its social reflection that Brodén systematically traces. But rather than focusing on the adjustments of the Swedish *socio-crime* to mainstream international procedural trends, one might be more interested in specific (residual cultural) forms in the post 90s Swedish examples of the genre, like Beck or Wallander series, in contrast to *Johan Falk*, *Millenium* films or *CSIs* and other globally popular procedurals.

In other words, rather than interpreting the series with detective Wallander (Krister Henriksson) as symptomatic the shift to the personal realm i.e. as accounts of Wallander's individual crises in the face of all too complex social transformations, one might be intrigued by the serials' attempts to construct a social canvass in which to reflect on such changes or patterns of collective agency. As Slavoj Žižek noticed, the Wallander narratives evoke "all the traumatic topics which give rise to New Right

populism: the flow of illegal immigrants, soaring crime and violence, growing unemployment and social insecurity, the disintegration of social solidarity … [bringing out] the hidden side of the Swedish Welfare-State miracle in decay" (Žižek 2003: 24). The seriality in Wallander films thus compiles representations of a distinct social context generating the plotlines, bringing forth in the process more than solutions to episodic detection--being notorious for pseudo-closure--or pessimism of an individualized detective as the only available response. Even one of the recent Wallander productions like *Hämnden* (Charlotte Brandström, 2009) brings to mind the Sjöwall and Wahlöö's sequel *Terroristerna* with the critique of global terrorist paranoia that is brought round to its local social cause by Wallander and the unit of predominantly old fashioned provincial policemen (rather than by Säpo's, military or minister of defense caricatures of actions), echoing *The Wire's* combination of disillusionment with smaller-scale agency within the same institutional frame. Finally, the ascetic visual quality of older Beck or Wallander adaptations and their slow narrative pace might be less interesting in such a reading as examples of generic anachronism and more as a trait of its descriptiveness, also found in *The Wire's* storytelling, its minimized aesthetics, avoiding flashbacks, voice-over or fantasy sequences (Mittell 2008: 7).

The Wire can therefore be associated with a set of conventions developed within Swedish serial procedurality, one going back to the Sjöwall/Wahlöö articulations of the genre as a vehicle of social criticism--not simply because the authors' programmatic statements on replacing the crime genre's entertainment with ''realism, sociological analysis and even social awareness'' (in Lundin 1998: 46) bring to mind D. Simon's interpretations of *The Wire's* social project:

"We tried to be entertaining, but in no way did we want to be mistaken for entertainment. We tried to provoke, to critique and debate and rant a bit. We wanted an argument. […] If you followed us for sixty hours, and you find yourself caring about these issues more than you thought you would, then perhaps the next step is to engage and to demand, where possible, a more sophisticated and meaningful response from authority when it comes to such things as the drug war, educational reform or responsible political leadership. The Wire is about the America we pay for and tolerate. Perhaps it is possible to pay for, and demand, something more" (Simon 2008).

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