

Theorizing Place and Space in Television

“Space and Political Economy in Realist Texts: The Case of *The Wire*”

Stanley Corkin, *University of Cincinnati*

In television shows with a realist inclination, like *The Wire*, the rendering of space is, in effect, a distinctive interpretive map of the world. Indeed, a necessary analytical emphasis is on the series' representation of distinctive relative geographies. Analysts and critics of the neoliberal regime, many of whom were trained as geographers, have come to see that what Edward Soja calls "the spatial turn" has an explanatory power that is a necessary complement to the temporal, and that this concern with relative space is a particularly powerful when dealing with visual texts.¹ That is, representational visual texts provide viewers with a map of relational places and spaces. David Simon's *Baltimore* creates certain emphases that are lodged in his visual definitions of places and their connections with other places and spaces. On the other hand, certain places and spaces fall from his world completely.

Our intellectual and cognitive understanding of relative space is a vital determinant for defining the logic of a particular temporal moment. As Edward Soja iterates, these concepts are mutually necessary: "Putting space first does not mean that spatial thinking should be practiced alone, divorced from life's social and historical realities. . . . [A] spatial perspective does not represent a rejection of historical and sociological reasoning but an effort to open them up to new ideas and approaches."² The spatial turn emerged from a group of Marxist geographers in the late 1970s who employed the precepts of postmodern thought to allow the concept of space to be decoupled from absolute empiricism. Space then became a relative term, one with

significant implications for analyzing the post-Fordist regime of capital, a mode of production that employed the idea of space flexibly and conceptually. In The Wire, sometimes a precondition for a season's narrative, as in season one, and sometimes a condition, as in season two, commodity production is not place-dependent. It can occur anywhere. "German" automobiles may be assembled in Brazil from parts made in South Asia. And all those places involved in the production of such automobiles can be other places in a virtual wink of the eye. This is the domain of the postmodern, an era when the concept of place is subordinate to that of space. It is less a matter of where production occurs, than of how far in cost and time it occurs from targeted markets. Thus, place becomes a particular or lived locale, while space (or location) is general and tied to operative meanings of relative distances.³

In addition to Soja's seminal writings on time and space, I employ the considerable works of David Harvey and, to a lesser degree, Henri Lefebvre as aids to comprehending the role of space in defining a place and its broader meaning within a more expansive relative geography. Lefebvre's work is foundational in the conceptual recasting of space as a social construct, subject to the shifting definitions of its use by a broad undifferentiated public, as well as by elements of civic authority, including the state and its incarnations--the police, planners, housing inspectors, and so forth. When Lefebvre discusses "the production of space," he casts this conceptual process as being subject to the logic of a given historical situation and to the relative power of particular constituencies. This recasting of space as other than reductively material and as broadly plastic allows for figures such as Soja to argue for its efficacy as an analytical category. In addition, George Lipsitz's How Racism Takes Place enhanced my understanding of the

spatial dimension of race and class. Lipsitz discusses The Wire in a chapter focused on the series. He shows how segregation and ghettoization have become historically embedded practices defined by what he terms the "white spatial imaginary." He describes this means of conceiving of urban spaces as racialized and characterized by policies that "hoard amenities and resources." Such strategies, Lipsitz astutely shows, become a "nearly universal strategy for class advantage [that] follow a distinct racial pattern in the United States."⁴

¹ Soja, Seeking Spatial Justice, 14-18.

² Ibid., 17.

³ Agnew, "Space and Place."

⁴ See Lipsitz, How Racism Takes Place, 28.