

## It's Not History, It's HBO

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### The Wire and the “New Wars”: the American City as Global War Zone

The Wire situates the organized violence it depicts in a global historical frame, creating analogies that link American cities to other war zones around the world. As a chronicle of modern Baltimore, the series requires that we recognize and accept certain similarities connecting the city to Baghdad, Mogadishu, and Bogotá, to name a few places evoked by the show. Ultimately, I want to approach the comparisons that The Wire draws between Baltimore and other global war zones from an activist, anti-war perspective: Does the series merely call on the viewer to *acknowledge* global warfare within the territorial boundaries of the U.S., or, by contrast, does it encourage the viewer to reflect on appropriate action?

Urban violence in The Wire takes on features of what political scientists call “new wars” or “low-intensity conflicts.” All analysts agree that the old style of Clausewitzian warfare, in which highly centralized state armies fought against each other on circumscribed battlefields until one side surrendered to the other, no longer obtains in contemporary war zones. I will focus here on three ways in which The Wire’s treatment of Baltimore references the environments in which new wars take place: First, the show’s focus on child soldiers; second, its attention to *asymmetrical* warfare, pitting state armies against poorly equipped non-state organizations; and third, its effort to collapse the distinction between battlegrounds and secure zones of spectatorship.

Across the landscape of the new wars, child fighters who lack any place in the global economy have replaced highly trained soldiers, subject to military discipline and international law. The Wire is, of course, preoccupied with these child soldiers. In season one, Wallace is innocent enough to play with a bionical toy, but also complicit in the murder of another teen (Brandon). Ultimately, his closest friends kill him. In later seasons, the writers focus on the distorted lives of child soldiers through memorable images: The character Donut drives down the street in a stolen Escalade, barely able to see above the dashboard, clearly unable to manage his machine. Marlo Stanfield, who, like the teen soldiers in Sierra Leone, orders brutal atrocities against civilians, sucks a lollipop (and steals them too) as his signature activity.

In The Wire, child soldiers populate a landscape shaped jointly by non-state actors and the intervention of a state army struggling (unsuccessfully) for control over urban territory. It is the intervention of the state that renders the conflict “asymmetrical,” pitting technological advantage against familiarity with an urban environment. Encapsulating this asymmetry, a burnt-out police car, once belonging to young cops, stands like a monument at the entrance to the Franklin Terrace Towers (season 1, episode 2). Drawing on the iconography of modern war, the directors create a visual metonymy between the Baltimore projects and war zones such as Mogadishu, site of the Blackhawk Down incident, where the technology of western warfare has been destroyed and appropriated by residents wearing street clothes and carrying

few if any arms. Here, the burnt-out car has been folded into the urban landscape, leaned against by dealers and junkies who have effectively demilitarized it and reclaimed it as public art and outdoor furniture.

Finally, the show comments on the blurry line between spectatorship of war and participation in its violence. Following the demolition of the Franklin Towers, the camera focuses on a street corner, ominously empty and quiet before being overwhelmed by a cloud of spreading dust unleashed by the explosion. The shot of the dust cloud rushing into the frame places the viewer in the position of victim, linking The Wire's audience to spectators poisoned by the implosion. The scene includes in its scope of historical reference not only urban demolition trends of the 1990s, but also the singular event of September 11. More significantly, however, it comments on the speed with which a secure space of viewing can become one of damage and injury. The global elite, whose conscious participation in modern war was previously limited to CNN viewing, have become—in the aftermath of 9/11, Madrid, London, and Mumbai—the explicit targets of contemporary war. We are all spectators, and we are all potential casualties, as well.

Framing Baltimore as a global war zone is crucial to the realism of the series, its claim of historical accuracy. The show refuses to allow the fantasy of an American city sealed off ahistorically from the contemporary reality of war. The lingering question, however, is what to do about this descent of the city into war, and the spread of warfare more generally. In the end, The Wire presents the new warfare as ubiquitous, unending, and irreversible. As viewers, the only consolation we have is that our eyes remain open to a history that has already been scripted.