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Deposited on: 04 February 2014
Political geographies of the object

Katharine Meehan
Ian Graham Ronald Shaw
Sallie A. Marston

Acknowledgements

We thank the Oregon Humanities Center at the University of Oregon for support in writing this article. We are grateful to Majed Akhter, Morgan Apicella, Geoff Boyce, Conor Cash, Jessie Clark, Nell McCallum, Jen McCormack, Paul Robbins, and the reviewers for helpful comments on earlier versions. All shortcomings and errors are our own.

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of objects in the constitution and exercise of state power, drawing on a close reading of the acclaimed HBO television series *The Wire*, an unconventional crime drama set and shot in Baltimore, Maryland. While political geography increasingly recognizes the prosaic and intimate practices of stateness, we argue that objects themselves are central to the production, organization, and performance of state power. Specifically, we analyze how three prominent objects on *The Wire*—wiretaps, cameras, and standardized tests—arrange and produce the conditions we understand as ‘stateness’. Drawing on object-oriented philosophy, we offer a methodology of power that suggests it is generalized force relations rather than specifically social relations that police a population—without, of course, ever being able to fully capture it. We conclude by suggesting *The Wire* itself is an object of force, and explore the implications of an object-oriented approach for understanding the nature of power, and for political geography more broadly.

KEYWORDS

Prosaic stateness; object-oriented philosophy; state theory; power; *The Wire*
“We’re building something here . . . and all the pieces matter.”

-Detective Lester Freamon, *The Wire*, Season 1, Episode 6

**INTRODUCTION**

Hunkered down in the basement of the Baltimore police headquarters, two officers struggle to patch together the clues of a criminal case (Figure 1; insert Fig 1 about here). Detectives Lester Freamon and Roland ‘Prez’ Pryzbylewski are surrounded by monitoring equipment—telephones, a wiretap, a computer screen labeled ‘Pit Phone 2’—all of which track digital movements made by a local drug cartel. The desk is littered with blank notecards, black Sharpie pens, maps. A few miles away at the Pit—the outdoor nerve center of a West Baltimore housing project—a pay phone rings. Bodie, a young dealer, picks up the receiver. Hidden on a nearby rooftop, Detective Thomas ‘Herc’ Haulk quickly dials the station.

Herc [with binoculars]: One of ours on the line.

Prez: Got it.

Prez clicks a button, and the wiretap connects with the call. Freamon and Prez listen intently. “Yo, Stink, what up,” Bodie starts, but Anton ‘Stinkum’ Artis cuts him off. The two dealers talk briefly, as the computer silently logs the data: dialogue, the cadence of their voices, a time stamp. Freamon selects a mug shot, smiles, and scribbles numbers on a notecard. Prez grins, too, but clicks ‘non-pertinent’ on the computer database.

Freamon: Non-pertinent? How do you log that non-pertinent?

Prez [shrugs]: No drug talk?

Freamon: They use codes to hide their pager phone numbers. And if someone does use a phone, they don’t use names. And if someone does use a name, he’s reminded not to.

All of that is valuable evidence.
Prez: Of what?

Freamon: Conspiracy.

Prez [looks confused]: Conspiracy?

Freamon: We’re building something here, Detective. We’re building it from scratch. All the pieces matter. [Holds up a notecard and photo of Stinkum. Prez re-labels the call ‘pertinent’].

The scene—from the acclaimed HBO television series The Wire—reveals a complex space, full of tools used by police for drug and murder investigations. “The show’s title referred to the wiretap that a unit of the Baltimore police force was using to keep a local drug organization under surveillance,” explains writer Margaret Talbot (2007), “Ultimately, the term suggested more—the way that the show allowed viewers to eavesdrop on various recondite power plays, and the ways that poverty, politics, and policing were interconnected in a struggling post-industrial city”. In this article we unravel the thread further: by analyzing how the wiretap itself is key to power—defined as the ability to police the appearance and distribution of objects in the world—we call for a new approach to understanding objects in political geography. Specifically, we examine how three prominent objects on The Wire—Lester Freamon’s wiretap, but also cameras and standardized tests—produce and police the conditions we understand as ‘stateness’.

Definitions of state power are legion, emerging from centuries of debate into the nature of the ‘state’. In political geography, understandings have evolved from reified views of the state as a ‘thing’ that orders civil society from above, to more grounded, horizontal analyses that probe the manifestations of state power in everyday life. Joe Painter’s (2006, p. 753) examination of “the more prosaic manifestations of state processes and of the ways in which everyday life is permeated by stateness in various guises” marks a crucial entry point to our argument. The state is defined by Painter as a prosaic set of practices that insert themselves into, for example, “giving birth, child rearing,
schooling, working, housing, shopping, travelling, marrying, being ill, dying” (2006, p. 753). His approach is critical for capturing the intimacy of state power, but we here also recognize its blind spot: the role of objects. Painter’s focus on social relations is both legislative—attuned to the rules and regulations of state bureaucracy (e.g. licensing laws, anti-social behavioral orders)—and also phenomenological: concerned with human consciousness and intentionality, symbolized by “policy papers, advertisements, political tirades, official labeling regimes for consumer goods, highway signage, public information services, tax demands, public service announcements, school prospectuses” (2006, p. 761). Such human-centered accounts of state power are undeniably important, but they leave out the nonhuman traffickings of power. If a broadly defined political ecology has intuitively understood the role of objects in nature-society interactions, the same cannot so assuredly be said of political geography, which has only recently begun to broaden its orbit away from the human (Robbins, 2003).

Our examination situates us within contemporary debates over the role of objects in social, political, and ecological life. We recognize that objects—the militarized and the mundane—have long been central to political analyses: witness how comic books transformed notions of nation and identity (Dittmer, 2005; Dittmer, 2011), how photographic images of President George W. Bush curtailed analyses of contemporary American democracy and power (Thomas & Coleman, 2009), how the border fence and biometric surveillance technologies have opened up new geopolitical practices in the US and Mexico (Amoore, 2006; Boyce, 2012; Boyce at al., 2012; Coleman, 2005; Sundberg, 2011), or how unmanned aerial drones have reshaped the contours of national sovereignty and the security of everyday life (Shaw & Akhter, 2012). Located in the realm of the everyday, popular icons and texts—from postage stamps to superheroes—reveal deep struggles over political ideology, identity, power, and territory (Dittmer & Gray, 2010; Raento, 2006, 2011). Beyond political geography, objects have been key characters in studies on the co-evolution of barbed wire and modernity (Netz, 2004), sugar and the industrial revolution (Mintz, 1985), and lawns and citizenship (Robbins, 2007). Yet even as matter and
materiality have pluralized discussions of the ‘political’ in recent years (Bakker & Bridge, 2006; J. Bennett, 2010; Braun & Whatmore, 2010), it has become evident that we sorely lack a rigorous theory of objects—beyond just a theory of human access to objects (Harman, 2002, 2005; Shaw, 2012).

Our specific contribution is to think through the metaphysics of objects themselves—positioning them not as mere vessels of human intentionality, but as starting points for power. What we hope to demonstrate is that there is an entire carnival of objects that work with, alongside, and in-between the performances and spaces of power: sometimes objects behave as expected, other times they fundamentally transform the networks in which they are enrolled. By inviting objects to the table of political geography then, we want to be clear from the outset that we are not trying to rewrite the rules, or detract from the important discursive, embodied, and historical insights regarding state power. Rather, our shift is more parallactic than it is paradigmatic. A parallax is defined as an apparent change in the direction of an object, caused by a shift in the observational position that provides a new line of sight (Oxford English Dictionary, 2011). We likewise want to shift how objects are viewed in political geography. Specifically, we use The Wire to argue that objects enable, disable, and transform state power, beyond just reflecting it. Drawing on object-oriented philosophy, we offer a methodology of power that suggests it is generalized force relations rather than specifically social relations that police a population—without, of course, ever being able to fully capture it. We finish by suggesting The Wire itself is an object of force, and explore the implications of an object-oriented approach for political geography.

AN OBJECT-ORIENTED APPROACH

Object-oriented philosophy is part of a wider ‘speculative realist’ turn in continental philosophy (Bryant, Srnicek, & Harman, 2011). Speculative realism is a loosely defined paradigm that seeks to go beyond theories of human access to reality—known as ‘correlationism’ (Meillassoux, 2008)—and focus on the
absolute nature of existence itself. While its proponents are diverse, including such figures as Ray Brassier, Ian Bogost, Levi Bryant, Ian Hamilton Grant, and Graham Harman (see Bryant, Srnicek, & Harman, 2011 for a more definitive overview of key thinkers and their diverging intellectual lineages), they share a distrust of human constructivism and textual critique of all shades, encapsulated in the so-called ‘linguistic turn’ found in the social sciences during the 1990s. Harman’s object-oriented philosophy (Harman, 2002, 2005, 2009) has a similar agenda: to overthrow the Kantian obsession with subject-centered accounts of reality. We find in Harman’s work an accessible toolbox for unscrewing the scaffolding of the world to reveal its nonhuman composition. Moreover, his focus on objects has an analytic immediacy to it, while the metaphysical twist he adds—going beyond even that of Bruno Latour—fundamentally denaturalizes our relationship to the bits and pieces of the world, revealing an altogether alien armada of force.

Human geography is well attuned to the excessive forces of life that cannot be captured by words, thoughts, or feelings: consider the ‘more-than-representational’ (Lorimer, 2005) and ‘more-than-human’ (Braun, 2005) turns it has unevenly navigated. Explaining what counts as ‘social’ then has never fallen on the shoulders of humans alone (Meehan & Rice, 2011), since agency is always a result of interactions between a multitude of forces—such as rivers, roads, or rain—which means that “no single line divides the human from the nonhuman” (Mitchell, 2002, p. 34). Moreover, actor-network theory (Latour, 2005) and assemblage theory (DeLanda, 2006) both provide templates for connecting the human and more-than-human together.

And yet, object-oriented philosophy is different. It refuses to reduce an object to any other force—be it a network, an assemblage, or any relation. By way of contrast, Deleuzian and Marxist approaches define objects as derivative of external processes, whether these are neo-vitalist ‘becomings’ or dialectical contradictions. We find that such approaches raise several ontological and political dilemmas. Under a processual ontology, causality is always-already ‘elsewhere’ and ‘elsewhen’,
since objects are understood as the ‘effects’ of a greater and transcendent force that sparks them into life. This means that objects cannot ‘speak for themselves’ and become analytic ornaments best left for a philosophical curiosity shop. If objects are to seriously matter, then we must repatriate them with the ontological force they themselves generate.

What, then, is an object? An object is not a passive clump of matter rusting in an otherwise vital universe. An object is force-full; by its very existence an object breathes “life into a world that would not have been the same without it” (Harman, 2002, p. 219). Put another way, there is not a world that first exists and is then populated by objects: worlds are built on the backs of objects. Paraphrasing Latour’s thesis of irreduction, Harman (2009) also argues that objects are not inherently reducible or irreducible to any other: “a windmill, screwdriver, blueberry, or star is not the sum total of its effects or even its possible effects, but only the totality of internal notes without which it would collapse” (Harman, 2005, p. 193). Bryant adds, “whether animate or inanimate: all objects are defined by their affects or their capacity to act and be acted upon” (2011, p. 274). In short, an object is precisely what it does (Shaw, 2012, p. 621).

Second, while an object is traditionally opposed to a subject (the latter, a thinking being that presides over a non-thinking entity), such a binary devalues the importance objects have in an all-too-human world and blunts their political edge. Many theorists have attempted to redress this asymmetry with a return to ‘reality-in-itself’ (Bryant, Srnicek, & Harman, 2011). Graham Harman is especially energetic in his critique, arguing that “philosophy has withered from a theory of reality to a theory of human access to reality” (see also Meillassoux, 2008), despite the fact that “human activity is object-oriented by its very nature...our specific knowledge of things is not ‘ontic’, but object-oriented, and masonry and welding are no less in contact with the world than is critical epistemology” (2005, p. 18 and p. 237). Moreover, objects are not limited to a crude materiality. Like a monsoon battering an island or a bridge crossing a river, so too can a character in a novel produce new relations within the world and
should not simply be discounted as ‘fictional’ or ‘unreal’ by virtue of its presumed intangibility. The point is not to adjudicate on the supposed reality of an object, but ask instead, how does it affect force relations? What work does it do? How does the object generate and transform power?

Finally, objects may relate in forceful but also partial and mysterious ways. For Harman (2005, p. 81), objects ‘unlock’ other objects only to a limited extent: “an object may drift into events and unleash its forces there, but no such event is capable of putting the object fully into play. Its neighboring objects will always react to some of its features while remaining blind to the rest. The objects in an event are somehow always elsewhere, in a site divorced from all relations”. In other words, relations among objects occur on their inside—in their ‘molten core’—and this core is not fully knowable (Harman, 2002, 2005). Yet objects do relate, producing the very contours of reality as they go about affecting each other. As Harman writes, “objects are retroviruses, injecting their own DNA back in this nucleus of everything they encounter” (2002, p. 212). An object-oriented philosophy positions objects as the forces that morph and deform reality around their own contagious DNA. The value of this approach is immediate: to explain the exercise of power requires us to take notice of the constellation of objects that produce the world, without falling back onto either distinctly ‘human’ or ‘nonhuman’ tropes.

While Harman clearly maps the ontological coordinates of objects, offering a rigorous theory of things-in-themselves, we feel he steps over the question of power—how objects police, what asymmetries they create, and why that matters. In our analysis, objects need to be seen as political forces, precisely because of their ability to execute (as well as subvert) a certain, particular reality. To illustrate the logic of this new approach to state power, we now turn back to The Wire.

“A NOVEL FOR TELEVISION”
For many critics, *The Wire* is one of the most poignant and forceful texts about the American city ever produced. “*The Wire,*” argues creator and director David Simon (in Talbot, 2007), “was never a cop show. We were always planning to move further and further out, to build a whole city”. Over five seasons and with narrative complexity rarely seen in serial television, *The Wire* dramatizes life in contemporary Baltimore. Set and shot on location, the show premiered on HBO in 2002 and ran until 2008 for a total of 60 episodes (HBO, 2011). Each season draws out a different narrative thread: Season 1 tackles street life and the drug trade; Season 2 examines the social ricochet of Baltimore’s deindustrialized dockyards; Season 3 depicts election battles and cartel wars; Season 4 portrays the struggles of the public school system; and Season 5 chronicles the crises of print media. The show’s compelling characters and narrative arc transcend the “usual whodunit formula” (Jameson, 2010, p. 361), leading many critics, including Slavoj Žižek, to call *The Wire* more tragic than a Greek tragedy (Haglund, 2012).

*The Wire* never gained a massive audience: in 2006 the typical weekly viewership was 4.4 million, a low figure when compared to cable hits like *Big Love* at 6 million and *The Sopranos* at 13 million. Yet the show inspired a rabid fan base among educated elites (including critics) and working-class people of color who identified with the inner-city characters (Talbot, 2007). “I don’t know how popular *The Wire* is on the Upper West Side of New York or Westwood or Des Moines,” commented Simon (in O’Rourke, 2006), “but I know that in West Baltimore, Omar can’t get to the set, because we have people going nuts. Or Stringer Bell or Pop Joe. The show has an allegiance in that community. That’s its own answer—not that it’s popular, but that it’s credible”. Bootleg copies of DVDs circulated through Baltimore; message boards and news media filled with passionate testimonial; new college courses based on the show cropped up across the country—all of which point to its political saliency and enduring appeal. “*The Wire* is dissent,” explains Simon (in Talbot, 2007), “It is perhaps the only
storytelling on television that overtly suggests that our political and economic and social constructs are no longer viable, and that no, we are not going to be all right.”

The city itself plays a key figure on the show, informed by Simon’s career at *The Baltimore Sun* as the police beat reporter and by co-writer Ed Burns’ tenure as a Baltimore teacher and homicide detective. In the eighteenth century Baltimore was home to a growing population of free blacks, even as many residents continued to support slavery (Dantas, 2008). Over the twentieth century, capital flight, demographic shifts, and neoliberal reforms slowly corroded the city’s shipping and manufacturing base (Harvey, 1993). Baltimore was a forerunner in redlining and blockbusting, resulting in a largely African-American city core and surrounding white county (Pietila, 2010).

Since the 1960s, Baltimore’s manufacturing has been decimated; likewise its port employment. The post-1968 ‘white flight’ equally hurt its tax base, and these days the middle-class suburbs and edge cities dotted around the Beltway get along fine on their own. Baltimore is two-thirds African-American, but with Southern-style race relations, a kind of plantation town run by a few big financial institutions but without the level of black militancy of Philadelphia, New York, or Chicago. ...A lot of the city’s housing is structurally sound but unoccupied; vast numbers of buildings are abandoned and derelict, ravaged and blighted by decades of redlining and blockbusting (Merrifield, 2002, p. 135).

While Baltimore is not usually a prominent part of the American urban narrative, “in many ways [Baltimore] is emblematic of the processes that have molded cities under US capitalism, offering a laboratory sample of contemporary urbanism” (Harvey, 2000, p. 79; see also Pietila, 2010). With much of its backstory based on actual characters, events, and places, *The Wire* has been hailed as a “Marxist dream” and has directly inspired a cottage industry of critique on neoliberal capitalism and its pernicious social and institutional effects (Alvarez, 2004; Franklin, 2009; Mason, 2010; Potter & Marshall, 2009;
Read, 2009; Sharma, 2009; Sheenan & Sweeney, 2009). Indeed, the show’s writers crafted “a story of a city, not only the story of Baltimore in its particularity, but with a metaphoric drive toward the story of Everycity” (Sheenan & Sweeney, 2009).

Why use a television show to study the relation between objects and state power? We do not contend that *The Wire* is ‘beyond representation’, but we tether our analysis to the show for other reasons. First, the series is ripe with objects—shipping containers, a nail gun, a missing camera, Bubbles’ depot—that ignite storylines and function as protagonists, in effect breaking with the human-centered narrative structure of conventional television. In a sense, *The Wire* is so complex—in terms of character depth, interwoven storylines, and the non-resolution of issues—that it arguably condenses life into a useful analytical device (Penfold-Mounce, Beer, & Burrows, 2011). Cop cars and computers, pagers and pay phones, maps and math tests “act as objects that [draw] in the viewer to the narrative drive of the show” (Sharma, 2009). Pushing this approach, we suggest that such objects operate with more significant force: as potential catalysts, as humming generators of conflict and affect. In this sense, *The Wire* is a metaphysical heuristic, a device for discovery, a site for determining how objects come into political force.

Second, and perhaps more provocatively, we recognize the show itself as an object, a poignant force doing all sorts of important work, a political object no less real than passports, border fences, or armed drones. Of course, we are not so naive as to think that someone who has watched *The Wire* is fully prepared to navigate the brick-and-mortar city with some sort of special acumen or empathy. *The Wire* is neither news nor documentary film, and like both mediums its portrayal of Baltimore is partial and limited. But the show has unleashed real effects on audiences—including Baltimoreans (Tolbert, 2007), academics (Sodano, 2008), ‘real thugs’ (Venkatesh, 2008), college students (D. Bennett, 2010), US President Barack Obama (Coolican, 2008), and of course, us. In a sense, *The Wire* is *force-full*—brimming with affect, productive of difference, and generative of power (Shaw, 2012). Our object-oriented
approach thus differs from major fields like popular geopolitics and cultural studies, in which prominent scholars such as Sean Carter and Derek McCormack (2006), Simon Dalby (2008), Jason Dittmer (2005), Klaus Dodds (2011), Kathleen LeBesco (2009), Amanda Ann Klein (2009), and Todd Sodano (2008) mobilize textual or discursive readings of visual media like films, comics, graphic novels, and television. In contrast, we follow Harman (2012, p. 200) who calls his approach a “countermethod”, focusing on how objects (including texts) resist dissolution and why certain things are connected rather than others. To add traction to our analysis of state power, the next section examines three prominent objects in *The Wire*.

“ALL THE PIECES MATTER”

The wire

The wiretap is perhaps the series’ most obvious but forceful mediator. Early in Season 1, Lieutenant Daniels’ special investigation squad obtains a warrant and installs a wiretap—an electronic device to monitor phone conversations—on the pay phones used by the Barksdale drug organization. While the Barksdale clan is at first unaware of the wiretap, the technology immediately shifts the temporal rhythms and spatial labor of police work: from mass busts of corner boys to late nights of monitoring and recording evidence, from an intimidating physical presence on the streets to the largely sedentary management of data, evidence, and code. When Herc, a meathead cop in the conventional sense, openly complains about the “bullshit” nature of surveillance—with its tedious stakeouts and paper trails—Lester Freamon doesn’t veil his frustration: “What did you expect? This here is the job.”

Indeed, wiretaps have dramatically expanded the practices of state surveillance over the 20th century. During Prohibition in the United States, federal agents used relatively new wiretapping technologies to eavesdrop on private conversations of Seattle bootlegger Roy Olmstead, who was later convicted of unlawfully possessing, transporting, and selling massive amounts of alcohol. *Olmstead v.*
United States was the first wiretap case to reach the US Supreme Court and to raise the issue as a potential violation of the Fourth Amendment. The Court reviewed whether the use of wiretapped private telephone conversations—obtained by federal agents without a warrant and then introduced as evidence—amounted to a constitutional violation. In a 5-4 decision, the Court held that neither the Fourth nor Fifth amendments were contravened, a decision later overturned by Katz in 1966 (Hendricks, 1967).

What interests us about the Olmstead case, however, is how the wiretap unleashed a new geography of state power. Even before it was officially sanctioned, the wiretap captured conversations, extended the reach of the state into private spaces, and engendered new practices of policing. The wiretap introduced the auditory dimension to state surveillance, causing new legal conundrums. For example, under Olmstead the Court established new parameters for what constituted an object, restricting its definition to tangible matter. Under the Olmstead decision, “since the fourth [sic] amendment applied only to “material” objects, a conversation passing over a telephone wire could not be “seized,” and the use of electronic devices to intercept it was not a “search” within the meaning of that amendment (Hendricks, 1967, p. 428). ‘Physicality’ was thus the initial litmus test for object-ness.

By 1961, however, the line between tangible and intangible objects was blurred. In Silverman v. United States, the Court recognized so-called ‘immaterial’ objects—like telephone conversations—as real things, and thus prone to seizure and subject to protection under the Fourth Amendment.

[The] Court for the first time specifically held that eavesdropping accomplished by an unlawful invasion of a constitutionally protected area violated the fourth amendment. There a “spike mike” was inserted several inches into a party wall until it made contact with the heating duct of defendant’s house, turning the duct, in effect, into a “gigantic microphone, running through the entire house.” While emphasizing that “eavesdropping was accomplished by means of an unauthorized physical penetration
into the premises,” the Court for the first time found that the scope of the fourth amendment reached “intangible” objects and that the interception of conversations could constitute a search and seizure (Hendricks, 1967, p. 429).

In other words, intangibles like ‘conversation’ passed the trials of object-ness and became ‘property’. These and a series of later judicial decisions not only defined the scope of constitutional protection against eavesdropping (Hendricks, 1967), they also redefined the legal parameters of what constitutes an object, but not before the wiretap proved itself to be a real governing force.

In this sense, state power is an ongoing project—always malleable, labor-intensive, and object-oriented. During Season 1 of *The Wire*, the police investigative squad uses a wiretap to listen to phone conversations, to trace secret codes passed through pagers, and to build a case for arresting and convicting drug dealers. By Season 2, the kingpins of the drug organization have caught onto the squad’s surveillance techniques and utilize new communication technologies to evade state control. Figure 2 provides an illustration (insert Fig 2 about here). In this clip from Season 2, Episode 10 (“Storm Warnings”), Prez surveys the detail’s investigative work, posted on a bulletin board filled with mug shots, names, phone numbers, thumb tacks, and bits of string that connect all the actants together. Johnny Cash’s “Walk the Line” plays in the background. The scene’s flow and focus on Prez is punctuated by close-ups of key police officers and technologies used to catch the criminals: subpoenas, undercover detectives, GPS tracking devices, geospatial technologies, cop cars, tablet computers, electronic maps, binoculars, police cars, undercover detectives, and disguises. Prez focuses intently, trying to puzzle together the bodies and technologies necessary to crack a case. “Fucking-a,” he says, with a touch of awe in his voice.

As a montage set to music, the Figure 2 clip is somewhat atypical within the gritty narrative structure of *The Wire*. Toward the conclusion of each season, musical montages serve to ‘summarize’ the season’s events and provide a glimpse into some characters’ futures. What is unique about Figure 2,
however, is how it condenses and reveals stateness: the wiretap enrolls a variety of objects, from subpoenas to binoculars, which enable police work, extend surveillance, and stabilize a space of stateness. The wiretap does not function in isolation: in order to unlock new surveillance capabilities, the wiretap requires time, labor, and additional objects like a court order, a judge’s stamp, a computer database, human eyes and ears. Such ‘intermediaries’—Latour’s term for things that carry meaning or force without transformation (Latour, 2005)—are neatly arranged on the bulletin board, in the style of a flow chart, observed by Prez, and observed by the audience (in no stretch of irony) through another key object: the camera.

The camera

Cameras are everywhere on The Wire. As the opening credits roll, cameras of all kinds—security, news, video and photo—record evidence of murder victims, monitor trucks and cargo, stage politicians and press conferences, track students in a school cafeteria. In one scene, the character Bodie throws a rock and breaks the surveillance camera gazing down at the housing project in West Baltimore (Season 1, Episode 4, “Old Cases”). The scene is first viewed through the unblinking ‘eyes’ of the camera itself—framed by a narrow lens, in grainy black-and-white—until the lens cracks and its neck snaps forward, the camera now limp and focused on the ground. “Bomb!” Bodie yells, triumphant, “Housing must think we just dumb.” Uncharacteristically (because The Wire features little visual repetition), Bodie’s sure shot is looped through The Wire’s opening credits for every season, a fleeting but powerful reminder of the fraught relations among the watchers and the watched.

Since the 1990s, the increasing presence of cameras and video technologies—and in particular, closed-circuit television (CCTV)—has profoundly shaped the geographies of state surveillance (Koskela, 2000; Neyland, 2006). Early on, surveillance cameras were installed in private spaces like banks and shopping malls, but by the mid-1990s CCTV was common in public urban spaces (Fyfe & Bannister,
—such as the security cameras posted on lampposts in both fictional and real-life Baltimore, marked by the label “24-7 BELIEVE”.

With the recent shift from analog to digital, the use of surveillance cameras has intensified. “Building on the massive and rapid diffusion of analogue CCTV which relies on the (expensive) ‘MKI eyeball’ of human operators scanning monitors and recording footage using banks of domestic-style video recorders, a major effort is now being made to replace such systems with much cheaper, automated facial recognition, or ‘event-driven’, CCTV” (Graham, 2005, p. 572). And yet, while the amount and type of data has increased, the impact of surveillance cameras on illegal activity is questionable. CCTV has been effective in reducing crime in parking lots, but studies find such technology holds little to no visible effect on violent crimes (Welsh & Farrington, 2003).

Perhaps more so than to deter crime, the surveillance camera produces a space of stateness. The camera shapes where crimes occur, how power is exercised, how proof is assembled, how ‘reality’ is conceptualized and understood (Koskela, 2000). CCTV is often used as a social and spatial ordering strategy that serves the interests of the elite, producing data that codes particular bodies in unequal ways (Hier, 2004; Neyland, 2006; Wilson, 2011). In the European Union, for example, CCTV coincided with increased state racism in cities, new types of policing, and legitimized visual monitoring through the trappings of representative democracy (Bunyan, 2010). “There are grave dangers that algorithmically controlled CCTV systems might work to deepen already establish [sic] ecologies of normalization, and demonization, within neoliberal urban landscapes of power” (Graham, 2005, p. 574).

Cameras do so by making visible certain practices (such as drug dealing, sex work, smuggling), and thus allow certain sites (the Pit, the dockyards, the corner) to become policeable. Of course, surveillance cameras are not the only visual collectors on The Wire. One of the storylines of Season 3, for example, traces the bloody electoral battles of candidates competing for the Baltimore mayoral seat. Politicians constantly jockey for the evening news slot, performing for the camera in media conferences.
at electoral headquarters, staged events in retirement homes, and photo opportunities in low-income housing projects. The newsroom of the fictional Baltimore Sun is hip to the dramatic shift of news content from the printed word to visual medium. “Do you remember the good ol’ days when nobody in their right mind would stage a perp walk without calling the daily newspaper?” asks Gus Haynes, city desk editor, in episode 4 of Season 5, “Nowadays all they care about is the goddamn video.”

Objects also refuse the straightforward production of stateness—they catalyze events and mediators that resist the intentions of police, underscoring how state space is constantly deterritorialized and re-stratified by shifting configurations of ocularcentric and aural technologies (Sui, 2000). Take, for example, the figure of Marlo Stanfield, a ruthless drug kingpin who challenges both the dominant Barksdale organization and Baltimore police detectives. In Season 3, Marlo realizes that his crew is under police video surveillance, and decides to ‘punk’ the police (and specifically Herc) by staging a false drug exchange at the train station. Marlo is arrested, drawing the police out of their undercover roles, but then is triumphantly released because he hasn’t broken any laws (Officer: “He’s clean. Unless you got another idea, we got to cut ‘em loose”). Marlo has his soldiers drive far outside Baltimore to discreetly purchase ‘burners’—pre-paid, easily disposable cell phones—which complicate wiretap eavesdropping and necessitate tracking calls with the help of cellular phone companies. Later on, Marlo infuriates Herc by capturing the police squad’s expensive surveillance camera, holding the camera hostage and transmitting footage of his passenger pigeons—an event that leads to Herc’s dismissal from the investigative squad. By Season 5, Marlo and his crew go low-tech and remove themselves completely from aural surveillance. In a scene from episode 1 of season 5, Marlo and his right-hand-man Chris meet and talk business in an abandoned lot, next to a derelict row of houses, in broad daylight but removed from the digital or human ears of the police. Marlo and Chris know they are being watched: the “po-po” are hot on their trail, binoculars in hand. But they “do like this” in order to avoid eavesdropping. Their meeting is brief, maybe 30 seconds long. Kima, a police detective, watches nearby
and vents frustration. “That’s it,” she sighs, “All of that so that they can swap a few words. How do you wiretap that?”

Surveillance, then, is not passive: it is an active form of capturing life. Perhaps more alarmingly, we recognize that the frontiers of new surveillance technologies (visual or auditory) are increasingly intensive, microspatial, and ubiquitous. Recently, the US Supreme Court ruled that police must obtain a search warrant to place a GPS (Global Positioning System) device on a suspect’s vehicle (Totenberg, 2012). While the ruling was unanimous, the justices split three ways as to whether the decision went far enough. Moreover, the Court ignored problematic objects like cell phones, emails, tracking by remote devices, or long-term tracking by aerial surveillance, such as by drones or unmanned aerial vehicles. Here, the law constantly collides with new digital and geospatial objects, sometimes tangible and sometimes intangible, but always proliferating in indeterminate ways. Indeed, as news analyst Orrin Kerr comments (in Totenberg, 2012): “This [judicial decision] is not the usual 5-4 ideological split. This is nine justices trying to figure out how does the Fourth Amendment apply to a new technological world, and the answers are really uncertain. It’s going to be a wild ride.”

The test

Surveillance technologies like wiretaps and cameras are perhaps the lowest-hanging fruit, the most obvious tools in facilitating a state effect. The mundane and routinized school test of Season 4, however, is perhaps the most potent of all objects on The Wire. In the process of examination to determine competency, a test elicits excitement, hope, determination, confidence, and even hubris; it also upsets stomachs, causes anxiety and headaches, euphoria and suicide. A test may evoke strong emotions, but it achieves more: the test—and its allies—increasingly organizes and cultivates a state effect in the lives of children. Tests restrict the exchange of information between teachers and students to a circumscribed set of possible connections and pathways, standardizing the discovery of knowledge.
The test, too, is an object. The reduction of a test, however, to its brute materiality—pens and paper, or computers and mice—completely misses the action that the test itself mobilizes in the world. An object like the test doesn’t replace the ‘human’ as the sole explanandum of stateness (any more than the human is able to fully produce the state effect); rather it enlarges it, opens it up, and sees power as it is performed in action, constantly made and remade by the bits and pieces of the world. While educators design and create the test, tests are also autonomous, able to transform their ‘creators’ through the (metaphysical) conditions they set in motion. This is the ‘reverse adaptation’ that Langdon Winner (1977, p. 229) describes as “the adjustment of human ends to match the character of the available [technological] means.”

Over the past 25 years, standardized tests have reversed engineered the US public educational system. The Season 4 test is a simulacrum of the mandated achievement test that emerged in response to the 1983 report of the US National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk*. The report warned that if the country were to remain economically competitive at the international level, the skills of the nation’s workforce would have to improve dramatically. By 2001, the standardized achievement test became the cornerstone of the Bush Administration’s No Child Left Behind policy. Nearly all US states have reset content and performance standards, intended to enforce more rigorous teaching and learning expectations, through new systems of school and teacher accountability for test scores (Hurst et al., 2003).

In Season 4, administrators, teachers and students, textbooks, classrooms, and the teacher’s lounge at Edward J. Tilghman Middle School are pulled into the test’s force field: shaping how lessons are taught and ultimately reinforcing the already limited options of these underclass students from inner city Baltimore. Not only is the test deployed to assess the capabilities of students but it also becomes, by association, a test of Tilghman (as an institution) and of the teachers (and their ability to teach effectively). As such, the test becomes one of a multitude of objects (including books, computers,
pencils, uniforms, hall passes, school lunches, etc) that collaborate to affect how the students relate to each other and to their teachers and how the teachers relate to each other and to administrators.

Importantly, the test also resists the aims of its original formulation. Based on the premise that setting high standards and establishing measurable goals can improve individual outcomes in education, the test instead tends mostly to measure how well students are trained to take it. Moreover, the incentives for continued improvement of student scores has caused many states to actually lower their official standards. One result of this variability in standards was identified in a study by the National Center for Education Statistics (2007), which reported that the differences in the fifty states’ observed test scores were largely due to differences in the stringency of each state’s standards.

The paradoxical relationship between testing and learning is demonstrated in The Wire through the character of Prez, who by Season 4 has left the police force and now teaches math at Tilghman. By mid-season, after some false starts, Prez actively engages the students in math exercises that encourage them to use their knowledge of the streets and the illicit economies in which many of them operate. Students are ecstatic: they solve probabilities using dice games, building confidence, joking around, and working in teams. But during later episodes, Prez is increasingly pressured to switch from this organic form of learning to working through abstract problems—phrased in the dry language of the Maryland State Assessment test—as ‘test day’ gets nearer. In a scene from episode 9, assistant principal Marcia Donnelly informs Tilghman teachers that they all must dedicate class time to help students prepare for the reading comprehension section of the upcoming state test, in order to raise the school’s overall test score. Even Prez, as a math teacher, must take on reading comprehension. In ensuing scenes, his students grow bored and restless while he attempts to instruct them on how to correctly answer test questions through reference to material on classical Rome. Unsurprisingly, the topic has no intuitive resonance with the students and it soon becomes clear that the lesson is a terrible failure, signaling as it does, future failure. In episode 4, Howard ‘Bunny’ Colvin—a former police major who eventually
becomes a field researcher on a University of Maryland grant studying repeat offenders among Baltimore youth—makes a cogent observation:

Bunny: Kid’s right. This is bullshit.

Parenti: Test material doesn’t exactly speak to their world.

Bunny: Yeah, it don’t speak loud to mine, neither.

Bunny’s terse observation recognizes the test as having the power to configure learning as a theoretical activity rather than a situated educational moment in the lived experience of the students. As viewers, we can also see the test at work organizing a set of expectations about students as laborers-in-training being prepared to participate in an imagined future workforce and a way of life that simply isn’t open to them.

Perhaps the most forceful aspect of the test is its ability to produce statistics that script the future of the schools, its students, and its teachers. *The Wire* demonstrates how the test unleashes a catalogue of statistics that drive teacher and course preparation; circulate between the classroom and the teachers’ lounge; and cause anguish and disagreements as well as resignation and defiance. US educational research has demonstrated how statistics are a highly problematic measure of achievement (Popham, 1999) forcing students to become consumers of certified knowledge rather than guided producers of enabling knowledge and informed action. As research by Porter-Magee (2004) found, in the United States the standardized test and the resultant focus on achievement statistics also inhibits teacher quality by constraining the autonomy of teachers as situated pedagogues and turning them instead into agents of mass production. Even more powerfully, the statistics open or close doors to student futures, producing myriad practices that in most cases aggravate rather than solve their problems of underachievement. Again, Bunny Colvin, in episode 10, makes a telling point about the test in a conversation with his University of Maryland boss, Dr. David Parenti.
Bunny: Hold on, hold on. Look, what he’s saying is this: you can put a textbook in front of these kids. Put a problem on the blackboard, teach ‘em every problem on some statewide test—it won’t matter, none of it. Cuz they not learnin’ from our world, they learnin’ from theirs. And they know exactly what it is they training for and exactly what it is everyone expects them to be.

The test—and the subsequent statistics that facilitate its generalizable meaning—serves to draw a boundary around teaching and learning practices. It enables some ideas to be thought while others become peripheral, outside the bounds of legitimate knowledge. The result is that the subjects being taught in school get narrowed down to put more emphasis on the subjects being tested, which inevitably constrains the students’ range of knowledge, not to mention their confidence and expectations. Ultimately, as Guisbond and Neill (2004, p. 13) argue, the emphasis on the standardized test in the United States “ignores real factors that impede improvements in teaching and learning, such as large class sizes, inadequate books, and outmoded technology, as well as nonschool factors like poverty and high student mobility”. These problems are no more apparent than at Tilghman, where students like Dukie face homelessness and Michael has to care for his little brother (even picking him up at parent-teacher night) and drug-addicted mother, while scrimping together a household budget from welfare.

The test also reconfigures the spaces in which it operates. While it would be exaggerating the power of the test to suggest that it determines everything that happens in the middle school classroom, it would be equally problematic to ignore the profound effects and affects it produces. When the mode of teaching shifts from students solving math problems by relating them to calculations that are a part of their daily lives to one where they are expected to solve standard abstract word problems based on unfamiliar normative assumptions, the classroom becomes a site of frustration and boredom where pleasure, excitement, enthusiasm are curtailed along with improvisation, creativity, and questioning.
Not only does the test shape the intimate spaces of the classroom, it also affects—as Guisbond and Neill (2004) contend with respect to US education more generally—the ability of all schools to attract teachers, with low achieving schools in poor neighborhoods being doubly disadvantaged. Because academic progress is measured through the test—with all the problems that attend to it such as cultural bias, failure to measure higher-order thinking, and the problem of measurement error—an urban geography of uneven educational achievement results.

As Season 4 reveals, when the schools in the largely white and more affluent suburban Baltimore County get compared to the schools in the largely black and lower socioeconomic neighborhoods of the city of Baltimore, a geography of achievement and failure becomes solidified, condemning some schools to further impoverishment while others grow more affluent in resources. As well, the test produces a hypothetical and homogeneous national space of content standards and curricular preferences while the sites of its actual application are ones where heterogeneity proliferates. The test generates a force field that reorients bodies, other objects, and spaces—all of which must, in the words of Assistant Principal Donnelley, “teach to the test”. Encountering the test in The Wire is to recognize it not as a benign entity that neutrally proceeds along innocuous pathways; instead, it activates, sorts, elevates, rejects, overpowers and deactivates the objects and assemblages of objects it encounters constituting a geography of success and failure that reshuffles life chances by devaluing organic and experiential knowledge production for the sterility of certified facts.

**DISCUSSION: A METHODOLOGY OF POWER**

Throughout our engagement with objects in The Wire we have demonstrated how cameras, wiretaps, and tests are central to the performance of state power. We do not claim that such items are inherently state objects (despite this being an obvious conclusion to draw), but rather, that they contribute towards the policing of a world (Rancière, 2004; Shaw, 2012). Here, we elaborate upon the basic
conclusions of Painter and Mitchell, the latter of whom writes that “we should address the state as an effect of mundane processes of spatial organization, temporal arrangement, functional specification, supervision and surveillance, and representation that create the appearance of a world fundamentally divided into state and society or state and economy” (1999, p. 77 and p. 95). For us, such a state effect is far more metaphysical: an ontological consistency that forces objects to appear under a certain set of conditions. This understanding leads to a world bursting with caricature and half-truths, because "relations between all real objects, including mindless chunks of dirt, occur only by means of some form of allusion" (Harman, 2007, p. 221, our emphasis). We especially want to signal that the form of allusion used to caricature an object is not always arbitrary—it can be engineered, replicated, enforced. Such an understanding erodes the dominant effects of ‘social relations’ not by erasing people from the equation, but by considering ‘force relations’ as the primary field through which a whole manner of different objects, bodies, and doings are policed.

We therefore offer a methodology of power that is rooted in the hustle and bustle of objects themselves. We believe that objects are questions that invite investigation; they are forces to be reckoned with. The world is not a slab of substance from which humans go about inventing objects, sculpting them with their hands and imaginations. Instead, the congeries of the world exist and operate on the same ontological level, such that difference must be understood as the outcome of power, and so too must stability be understood as the outcome of the battle between forces. Here then, we specifically argue that power is the power to affect: both extensively (the ability to affect many other objects) and also intensively (the ability to change how objects appear, the ability to caricature or ‘implant DNA’). State power is therefore located in the interaction or passage between objects, implicated fully in what extensive alliances are assembled, and how these alliances are assembled (which affects are brought to the surface of an object, and which are left behind). Here, it is worth quoting Graham Harman (2009, p. 21-33) at length:
Even power, that favourite occult quality of radical political critique is a result rather than a substance. The supposed ‘panopticon’ of modern society stands at the mercy of the technicians and bureaucrats who must install and maintain it, and who may go on strike or do a sloppy job because of bad moods. The police are outwitted by seven-year-olds in the slums. The mighty CIA, with its budget of billions, loses track of mujahideen riding donkeys and exchanging notes in milk bottles... Actants must constantly be kept in line; none are servile puppets who do our bidding, whether human or nonhuman. The world resists our efforts even as it welcomes them.

What we call state power is constitutive of an ontological equilibrium, a decisive policing of things that blocks the contingencies of the world. Our aim has not been to replace humans as agents of power, but to see them as part of a wider distribution of power that is not always under the executive control of people, parliaments, and legislation. Speaking to this point, Latour states that “ANT is not the empty claim that objects do things ‘instead’ of human actors: it simply says that no science of the social can even begin if the question of who and what participates in the action is not first of all thoroughly explored, even though it might mean letting elements in which, for lack of a better term, we would call non-humans” (Latour, 2005, p. 72). We find in Painter’s (2006) work the stepping stone to a political geography of objects, concerned as it is with the prosaic appearance of the state in everyday life, and we find in The Wire the canvas to demonstrate the art of state power in all its nitty-gritty object-ness: the wiretap, the camera, and the test all produce a particular state of reality because all the pieces matter.

CONCLUSION

Now, when we were doing The Wire, we were speaking directly to the country's political priorities, to its hypocrisies and frauds vis-à-vis the drug war, and to its economic
priorities. You watch *The Wire* by following the money, following the power and the votes, and by acknowledging the dissonance between policy and reality on the street, and how power and money moved around that dissonance. It was a political story, overtly. (David Simon in Freñan, 2010).

This paper has used *The Wire* to understand the role of objects in the exercise of state power. We are not saying *The Wire* constitutes the ‘real’—a problematic category lodged in postmodern binaries that choked cultural studies and helped fuel the science wars of the 1990s. Perhaps more provocatively, we insist that the show itself is an object, unleashing real forces on the world, stimulating our imaginations through a kind of ‘lyrical sociology’ (Penfold-Mounce, Beer, & Burrows, 2011), breaking open and closing down future possibilities in the form of a mass-cultural narrative (Jameson, 2010).

Scripted television—drama or comedy—serves as a political force in contemporary America. The goal of David Simon and his writers, partially revealed in the above quote, was to compel viewers to take account of what happens in cities across the United States. These issues include the political and economic abandonment of impoverished racial minorities; the loss of well-paying jobs for individuals, families, and communities; the relentlessly creeping corruption and self-aggrandizement of politicians and government’s failure to maintain public services that once made cities decent places to live; and the troubled condition of print media as it negotiates its very existence amid economic breaking and re-making. Simon quite deliberately meant for his program to affect, to change minds, to alter practices, to force thought. *The Wire* demands commitment. This is the position that Simon cultivates so much so that in one interview he exclaimed, ‘Fuck the average viewer’” (in Sharma, 2009).

What are the implications of our approach for how we ‘do’ politics in a more-than-representational way? While our analysis of *The Wire* shares much with popular geopolitics—a field ripe with unconventional and provocative objects—we are keen to move beyond the textual and symbolic realm, where objects are often containers or reflections of power, and toward an approach that situates
objects as generative of power. Our aim in this paper has been to advance a political geography of objects, by considering objects within The Wire as forces that complicate human-centered accounts of state power. We were inspired by Harman’s (2002, p. 19) clever injunction that “inanimate objects are not just manipulable clods of matter, not philosophical dead weight best left to ‘positive science.’ Instead, they are more like undiscovered planets, stony or gaseous worlds which ontology is now obliged to colonize with a full array of probes and seismic instruments—most of them not yet invented”. We agree with Harman. Yet we have extended his metaphysics to argue that the relations between objects are not always accidental or ambiguous, not always naive or innocent. Instead, we have examined how such objects can come together to force themselves upon other objects: to effectively patrol urban spaces and populations to prevent the world from becoming-other. We have therefore offered a methodology that complicates state power without abandoning decades of insights: we situate it among the nuts and bolts of the world, where according to Harman (2002, p. 220), “We stand at the mercy of the invisible kingdom of equipment, stationed unwittingly in a cryptic empire of force-against-force”. In this way, as ‘Slim’ Charles of The Wire reckons, “The game still the game. Just got more fierce.”
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