Naturalism and Reality in *Treme*

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RÉSUMÉ

Cet article se propose d'analyser l'impact de la construction polyphonique des personnages sur l'évolution narrative de la série télévisée Treme *(HBO, 2010-2013), qui raconte comment les habitants de la Nouvelle Orléans reconstruisent leur vie – et leur communauté – après le passage de l'ouragan Katrina. Le mouvement de va et vient entre vie collective et vie privée, mouvement qui donne corps à l'intrigue, permet d'aller au-delà du personnage individualisé et de démontrer la résilience de toute une communauté en évitant toutefois, grâce à la mise en valeur de la spécificité de la culture créole, toute généralisation. Les procédés narratifs naturalistes que les scénaristes appliquent à* Treme *confirment qu'un récit fictionnel permet non seulement de raconter la réalité mais qu'il peut aussi l'expliquer, et montrer ce qui aurait pu advenir.*

Watching *Treme* (2010-2013), HBO's critically acclaimed series about post-Katrina New Orleans, with its multitude of characters and slow meandering plotlines, constantly feels like experiencing a Chekhov play. The creators of *Treme*, David Simon and Carl Overmyer indeed mention "the most rigorous Naturalist" playwright as an important source of inspiration.[1]

In this article I would like to analyze how this naturalism in *Treme* functions, with a focus on the narrative construction of the main characters, and how this process influences the evolution in the plotlines throughout the series and even has an impact on the narrative arcs that structure a specific season. Before engaging in a close reading of the functioning of the characters it might be useful to point out some elements in the problematic relationship between the idea of realism/naturalism and television.

On realism and naturalism in television in general and how it applies to *Treme*

In a now famous open letter in the local newspaper *Times-Picayune* dated April 11, 2010, addressed to the people of New Orleans, David Simon writes that, "yes it's all about New Orleans and yes, it's also a fiction."[2] By doing so, Simon reveals that he is well aware of the problematic relations between television and realism/naturalism, of the thin line between "veracity of reference" (or documentary quality) and "verisimilitude" (*vraisemblance* in fiction).[3]

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[1] Scott Tobias, "David Simon (Interview)," *A.V. Club – TV-Club Interview* (2008), Web. 2 April 2014 <http://www.avclub.com/article/david-simon-14209>; Chris Love, "Greek Gods in Baltimore: Greek Tragedy and *The Wire*," *Criticism* 52. 3-4 (2010): 487-507; and Dave Walker, "Reader Questions Answered by 'Treme' Co-Creators David Simon and Eric Overmeyer," *Nola.com/ The Times-Picayune*, 24 Apr. 2011, Web. 28 May 2014 <http://www.nola.com/treme/hbo/index.ssf/2011/04/reader_questions_answered_by_t. html>. The label "most rigorous naturalist" comes from Martin Esslin, "Naturalism in Context," *The Drama Review* 13.2 (Winter, 1968): 73.

[2] David Simon, "HBO's 'Treme' Creator David Simon Explains It All for You," *The Times-Picayune,* 11 April 2010, Web. 29 Dec. 2013 <http://www.nola.com/treme-hbo/index.ssf/2010/04/hbos_treme_creator_david_simon.html>.

[3] John Corner, "Presumption as Theory: 'Realism' in Television Studies," *Screen* 33.1 (1992): 98.

Realism and naturalism in television and film are frequently considered as near synonyms[4] and have become commonly associated with a documentary quality that represents *life as it is* with "allegedly unscripted or spontaneous moments that supposedly reveal unmediated reality."[5] Descriptions and definitions of realism/naturalism merely touch upon the form, most often viewing naturalism as a kind of enhanced *mimesis*, a kind of hyperreality, photorealism,[6] or, as David Trotter describes it, "realism with an attitude."[7] Discussions of what exactly naturalism could mean besides a "style" are rare and the polemic exchanges between John McGrath and Marcel Ophuls in the James MacTaggart Lectures in the late Seventies are the exception.[8]

As David Baguley has pointed out, "[n]aturalism creates a critical distance,"[9] which Trotter explains thus: "Description unhinged from narrative is Naturalism's supplement to that art of observation [= Realism, RG] which requires that the world observed yield a meaning and a value, if not necessarily for those who inhabit it, then for those who observe them inhabiting it."[10] I want to argue that *Treme* indeed qualifies as "naturalist fiction" and might even be considered as "experimental" in the Zolian sense: all of the characters and their respective story arcs are created to carefully describe a community through both a horizontal axe and a vertical one that meet inside the characters.[11] The horizontal axe will become visible in the development and the evolution of the narrative across the different seasons and will be closely related to locations. The vertical axe is formed by the ways in which the multitude of characters in *Treme* represent what Hamon defines as "une volonté *décryptive*," which allows a better comprehension of the real.[12]

John Fiske claims that "television produces 'reality' rather than reflects it."[13] He means that fiction draws upon "reality" and, while resembling reality, it does so without documentary or mimetic intentions. In *Treme* the construction of the narrative world is pushed even further: elements from historical reality (veracity of reference) mix with fictional "reality" (conventional or coded realism).[14] As John Corner points out:

> Realism of form has included conventions of staging, directing, acting, shooting and editing. Realism of theme obviously connects with the normative plausibility of characterization, circumstance and action as well as being shaped within particular national and political pressures towards such categories as the "socially ordinary," or the "socially problematic" (often prescriptively inflected − what art ought to be about). The shift between these two

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[4] This is the generally case, with the exception of early silent films that draw upon naturalism and thus belong to the historical literary movement that we call naturalism. As we will see, the idea of naturalism in film and television today should be considered more as a "mode" than as a genre or a movement.

[5] Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn, *Reality TV: Realism and Revelation* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2005) 4.

[6] Virginia Konchan, "What's Natural about Naturalist Cinema?" *Bright Lights Film Journal* (2013), Web. 4 Sep. 2014 <http://brightlightsfilm.com/79/79-wuthering-heights-andrea-arnold-2012-film-naturalism-konchan.php#.VBr-Z-fTg8Y>.

[7] See Trotter's website on naturalism, that supports a course on "Naturalism in Literature and Film," Web. 10 Sep. 2014 <http://www.mml.cam.ac.uk/gradstudies/smc/naturalism/>.

[8] Both lectures published in Bob Franklin, ed., *Television Policy. The MacTaggart Lectures* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005) 35-52.

[9] David Baguley, *Naturalist Fiction. The Entropic Vision* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 193-94.

[10] David Trotter, "Naturalism's Phobic Picturesque," *Critical Quarterly* 51.1 (2005): 42.

[11] Philippe Hamon, *Le Personnel du roman* (Genève: Droz, 1983) 30-38.

[12] Hamon 35 (emphasis in the text).

[13] John Fiske, *Television Culture* (New York and London: Routledge 1987) 17.

[14] I put fictional "reality" in quotation marks to distinguish it from the documentary type of realism, based on the recording of actual events.

ways of conceiving realism troubles many critical commentaries; producing either a straight conflation, or a tacking to and fro, or a complete ignoring of one side altogether.[15]

These considerations especially apply to *Treme*. Mike Miley's essay in the *New Orleans Review* typically floats between admiration for the veracity of the series ("*Treme* is hands-down the best cinematic representation of New Orleans around. The first season gets so many things right that local viewers rediscover their city"[16]) and criticism on the formal construction ("thin, clichéd and repetitive plotlines, passive characters" and "an overwrought reach for significance, reducing a dramatic moment to little more than a formulaic plot device − too neat, too forced, too obvious.").[17] Balancing between these two extremes, veracity and verisimilitude, is deployed as a narrative strategy in *Treme*. A number of scenes are partial re-enactments of historical events, such as the second line parade that opens the series. Other fictional scenes will make use of actual events such as Mardi Gras. Concert scenes with fictional characters (such as Batiste or Delmond) are actually "real" concerts with the fictional characters pretending to play their instruments. In a remarkable move, Flemish TV channel *Four* deliberately framed (or bracketed, if you will) the fictional within historical reality. Clips from Spike Lee's documentary on Hurricane Katrina (*When the Levees Broke*, 2006) preceded each episode of *Treme*. As strange as this decision might seem on the part of the broadcaster, it definitely reinforced the feeling of authenticity and "veracity of reference" − in particular when the documentary images combine with the opening credits of *Treme*, which contain the only "authentic" footage used in the series. *Treme* credits creator Karen Thorson and even describes them as being "documentaries; they are not traditional main title sequences [...They] are more abstract and raw presentations, but still grounded in actual events".[18] Thus, most Flemish viewers unaware of the magnitude of Hurricane Katrina's devastation are gradually oriented from reality to fiction, with the opening credits functioning as a "limen" or threshold in which historical reality and fiction become mingled, in which the all-too-real mold on the humid living room walls turns into an abstract painting and the aftermath of Katrina into a fictional narrative.[19] This is a narrative that, as Simon claims in his open letter, tries to explain something about reality.[20]

As a conclusion to our reflections on realism/naturalism in film and on television, I would posit that it is clear that naturalism (and realism) should be considered "as a mode of conception and expression, as a certain fictional system for making sense of experience"[21] and thus as a way of representing reality, of telling a history about that reality, constantly actualizing or, more precisely, historicizing the notions of realism and naturalism. Since naturalistic narrative is "thin on plot, dense in social and psychological implication"[22] or, in the words of Hamon, plot is "[c]onformément aux présupposés de l'écriture naturaliste, […] nettement considéré comme secondaire,"[23] characters will be more interesting to analyze if we want to look for meaning.

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[15] Corner 100.

[16] Mike Miley, "*Treme* and The Battle for a Certified New Orleans," *New Orleans Review* 37.1 (2011): 94.

[17] Miley 99.

[18] Eric Elie Lolis, "Deconstructing the 'Treme' Opening Credits," *Inside Treme* (2011), Web. 26 June 2014 <http://www.inside-treme-blog.com/home/2011/5/6/deconstructing-the-treme-opening-credits.html>. For interesting analyses of the *Treme* credits, see: John R. Smith, *Branded Developments: The HBO Serial and Beyond,* diss. Emory University, 2011 and Kevin Dowler, "Dismemberment, Repetition, and Working-Through: Keeping Up in *Treme*," *Canadian Review of American Studies/Revue canadienne d'études américaines* 43.1 (2013): 145–65.

[19] I borrow the term "limen" from anthropologist Victor Turner who adopted it from Arnold Van Gennep. Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1987) 25.

[20] David Simon, "HBO's 'Treme' Creator David Simon Explains It All for You," *The Times-Picayune* 11 April 2010, Web. 29 Dec. 2013 <http://www.nola.com/treme-hbo/index.ssf/2010/04/hbos_treme_creator_david_simon.html>.

[21] Baguley 47-48, see also: Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination* (New Haven, USA, and London: Yale University Press, 1979) vii.

[22] Jean Chothia, *André Antoine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 20.

[23] Hamon 260.

Character construction in *Treme*

The ways in which characters are constructed in *Treme* are rather complex. Characters are not only defined as they are described in the teleplay; they are also defined by the physical appearance of the actors, whether or not the actors are known to the audience from other shows and movies, or simply because they play themselves. We will begin by establishing the different types of characters that appear in *Treme*.

1) Firstly, some characters are not really fictional, but appear as themselves. Most obvious examples are the musicians who "play" themselves: Allen Toussaint, Dr. John, Troy "Trombone Shorty" Andrews, Elvis Costello and many, many others have cameo appearances. Their presence suggests a close link between the story and historical reality. They enhance the "authenticity" level of the narrative. Other persons, such as politicians, who were directly involved with the societal and political aspects of Katrina are only indirectly present. The infamous former mayor Ray Nagin never appears directly but his shadow taints the political plotlines. The election of President Obama is mentioned but only as mediated through posters and other visual devices.

2) Other characters appear more or less fictionalized. Jazz musician Kermit Ruffins incarnates a "persona," meaning that he plays both his real self and a fictional character.[24] Singer-songwriter Steve Earle plays a fictional musician. He is not himself but no effort was made to "hide" the actor behind the character he is playing: the fictional character very much resembles the real Earle.

3) Some characters refer to or are inspired by real people: Radio deejay Davis MacAlary; blogger, literature professor, and failed writer Creighton Bernette; his wife Toni Bernette as a civil rights attorney; and chef Janette Dusautel. References to the real persons are only decodable for "insiders" or die-hard fans of the show who will inform themselves through contextual media (blogs, the official HBO *Treme* website, the NOLA.com articles, the commentary tracks on the DVD's, etc.).

4) Sometimes the confusion between the real and the fictional increases: in Spike Lee's documentary, *When the Levees Broke*, Phyllis Mantana Le Blanc appears as herself, a witness of the Katrina catastrophe. In *Treme* she plays the fictional character of Desiree. Actor Wendell Pierce, known from *The Wire*, also appears as a witness in Lee's documentary, and as one of the main characters in *Treme*, the struggling musician Antoine Batiste.

5) The cast of *Treme* actually consists of a mix of professional and amateur actors.[25] Some of the professional actors might be better known than others, while some of the amateur actors will certainly be recognized by their fellow New Orleanians watching the series.

The first four character types exploit the ambiguity between reality and fiction. The fifth character type acts on a more complex, almost allegorical level. These characters are not constructed as "realistic" and psychology-driven. In addition, they exemplify something else. Often they personify a certain aspect of New Orleans culture or they express a certain type of response to the Katrina catastrophe. Catherine Dessinges et al identify some of these characters.[26] For example, Janette Dusautel stands for creole cuisine and resilience. According to Miley, the scene in which she improvises a dessert from a Hubig's pie "marvelously distills the gallant culture of the city into a selfless gesture, providing a complete portrait of New Orleans at its most

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[24] See Philip Auslander, *Performing Glam Rock: Gender and Theatricality in Popular Music* (Ann Arbor, USA: University of Michigan Press, 2006).

[25] Joy V. Fuqua, "'In New Orleans, We Might Say It Like This...': Authenticity, Place, and HBO's *Treme*," *Television & New Media* 13.3 (2012): 239.

[26] Catherine Dessinges, Dominique Gendrin, and Wendy Hajjar, "Fiction and Reality in HBO's *Treme*: A Narrative Alchemy at the Service of Political Truth," *TV/Series* 1 (2012): 164-87.

basic: it is a place where, since its founding, people have turned making do into an art form."[27] Creighton Bernette represents the raging anger, "one of many voices trying to be heard in the screaming deafness of post-Katrina New Orleans."[28] Further, Antoine Batiste incarnates music, LaDonna Batiste Williams embodies the voice of loss, and Albert Lambreaux the voice of injustice. Toni Bernette also "voices the tensions between the local residents she represents and the authorities."[29] Typically these characters are portrayed by well-known actors, a choice that generates a specific double bind with historical reality. On the one hand, a character references directly to reality because based on a real, existing person. On the other hand, this strategy creates a distance because the viewer recognizes the actor behind the character. He or she experiences simultaneously the character and the actor. Wendell Pierce and Clarke Peters are familiar to those who watched *The Wire*. John Goodman, because of his characteristic physique, always resembles... John Goodman, no matter what role he plays. Melissa Leo is an Academy Award winning actress, whereas Steve Zahn often is branded as the most underrated actor.[30] Kim Dickens, for her part, is known from moving pictures and television series. Their familiar faces and stature differentiate them from the lesser-known or amateur actors and thus the characters they perform stand out as marked.

What about the unknown and often anonymous characters? Here we have to qualify nuances. For non-New Orleanians these characters will always stay more or less anonymous, as they are part of the New Orleans population. In contrast, New Orleans locals will recognize some of the amateur actors. When watching the series together – as frequently was the case – their performances were discussed and commented upon, similarly to what happens when watching amateur theatre performances.[31]

What all of the *Treme* characters have in common is contradiction: no character is entirely good or bad. Davis MacAlary starts out as the man you love to hate but will develop more amiable traits later on. Terry, the "good cop," has to cope with a troubled past. Hidalgo, the ruthless contractor, is also very much fascinated by New Orleans culture and he divulges an ambivalent view on the rebuilding of the city. Even at first glance, the very affecting Mardi Gras Indian chief Lambreaux conceals a violent streak that gets exposed when he loses his temper and fiercely beats up a thief. The complexity of the characters certainly allows for more intricate plotlines that illustrate Stuart Hall's definition of culture as "a form of resistance through its own rituals and everyday practices which, "in a problematic world culture must perforce take complex and heterogeneous forms, *not at all free from contradictions.*"[32] The characters in *Treme* embody these contradictions.

Treme: a polyphonic narrative

Treme's characters live in a society in crisis and the story revolves around how they try to deal with this crisis. In *Treme* the drama starts after the disaster and it distressingly shows how a crisis brings about reflection, renewal and a fundamental change in a community. Gaëlle Clavandier describes it as: "Disaster is creation, and introduces all by itself a whole new universe that has

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[27] Miley 95. Hubig's pie – a famous honey fruit pie – is a New Orleans institution.

[28] See Catherine Dessinges *et al.* 169.

[29] Dessinges *et al.* 175.

[30] Thus a Google search on March 5, 2014 for "Steve Zahn underrated" returned more than 50,000 hits.

[31] See for instance Melissa Harris-Lacewell, "Katrina Is Not a Metaphor," *The Nation* 2-9 August 2010: 10. I also refer to the many blogs and articles on *Nola.com* and what friends from New Orleans have explained to me.

[32] John Clarke, Stuart Hall, Tony Jefferson, and Brian Roberts, "Subculture, Culture, and Class," in *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, ed. Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (London: Hutchinson, 1976) 10. Quoted in Dominique M. Gendrin, Catherine Dessinges, and Wendy Hajjar, "Historicizing the Mardi Gras Indians in HBO's *Treme*: An Emancipatory Narrative," *Intercultural Communication Studies* 21.1 (2012): 294 (my emphasis).

just collided with the routine, the commonplace and the ordinary."[33] She also points out the theatrical and mediatic elements of catastrophe/disaster, aspects that also have been studied by Richard Schechner and Victor Turner. They more specifically looked into how disaster functions as a catalyst in exposing and solving problems in a society/community. According to Schechner, a crisis situates itself in the middle of a continuum of different types of performance (varying from art-making to shamanism and rites).[34] Anthropologist Victor Turner asserts that crises are often coped with through social ceremonies, which he describes as a "ludic deconstruction and recombination of familiar cultural configurations."[35] Schechner himself puts it more tersely: a community deals with a catastrophic crisis "through art."[36]

Following this reasoning, *Treme* functions as such as a "ludic deconstruction" and it can hardly be an accident that the series starts with a re-enactment of a social ceremony that really took place: the very first second line parade after Katrina. Second line parades originally fulfilled − and they still do − the function of mastering a crisis: the death of a beloved one. This one honors Austin Leslie, a famous New Orleans chef who died as a result of the flood.[37] The scene combines two of the axes along which *Treme* tries to explore how the crisis can be challenged: through music and cooking as social ceremonies and as art. Meanwhile the precariousness of the situation shines through in the negotiations amongst the musicians over the money they will receive for playing in the parade.

In every season there appears in the narrative a culminating moment in which the *communitas* of the people of New Orleans is emphasized: Mardi Gras. Mikhail Bakhtin has pointed out the utopian potentiality of Carnival[38] and in *Treme* Mardi Gras is singled out as that privileged moment of social ceremony when everything is turned upside down and anything is possible, in which the characters converge, meet and come closest to being that one plural character: the soul and culture of New Orleans.

Treme thus presents itself as a polyphonic or heteroglossic character-driven narrative in a Bakhtinian[39] sense: the viewer witnesses how a number of individual characters try to survive and make sense of the catastrophe that happened.[40] Each voice in the polyphony sounds different and − as we saw earlier − represents not just an individual but simultaneously embodies broader social, cultural or economic ideas or groups.

How the polyphony develops throughout the series

In *Treme* the approach to the construction of this polyphony changes according to the series' seasons, and the song titles serving as a logline for each season reflect this. The characters' story arcs are essential in composing the polyphony.

Season one has *Won't Bow, Don't Know How* as a logline and the polyphony of the characters' "voices" sounds *unisono*. The accumulation of characters results as it were in an

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[33] Gaëlle Clavandier, "Getting to Grips with Disaster," *books&ideas.net*. (2011): 3, Web. 12 Dec. 2013 <http://www.booksandideas.net/Getting-to-Grips-with-Disaster.html >.

[34] Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (New York and London: Routledge, 2006) 17.

[35] Turner quoted in Schechner 76.

[36] Schechner 76.

[37] Web. 12 Dec. 2013 <http://www.nola.com/dining/index.ssf/2005/10/chefs_jazz_funeral_a_symbol_of. html>.

[38] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington, USA: Indiana University Press, 1984).

[39] Michael Holquist explains and interprets Bakhtin's thoughts on polyphony, dialogism and heteroglossia in a comprehensive way. See Michael Holquist, *Dialogism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990).

[40] Ariane Hudelet even goes as far as saying that the narrative structure of *Treme* is actually constructed or "composed" as a musical jazz piece, but her arguments are not very convincing. Ariane Hudelet, "*Treme*: New Orleans Remix," *TV/Series* 3 (September 2013) 47-60.

actant collectif,[41] a multiple character in "the first person plural" as Augusto Boal puts it.[42] This polyphonic voice represents the resilience of New Orleans as a community. The "first person plural" or *actant collectif* position is clearly demonstrated in the pre-Katrina flashback at the end of the first season. The flashback sequence starts when LaDonna – at the funeral of her brother – recalls what happened just before Hurricane Katrina hit. What we witness are LaDonna's individual memories. However, before long, these subjective and personal images unmarkedly shift to what other characters were doing or thinking. The focalization moves from LaDonna to Davis, Creighton or Antoine preparing for the arrival of Katrina. The narrative construction of the flashback thus turns into a collective memory, the memory of New Orleans.[43]

Season two bears the logline: *Wrap Your Troubles in Dreams*. The song title indicates a move from the collective to the individual. The polyphony breaks down into a fragmented narrative with separate story arcs that concentrate on how each character individually attempts to deal with her or his problems. Interestingly enough, spatial or geographical relations often change accordingly and result in what Philippe Hamon has described as the *territorialisation du personnage*.[44] In *Treme* characters get linked to locations that take on symbolic meanings. New Orleans is contrasted with New York, where the future seems brighter and ambitions can be realized, something to which Janette and Delmond each in their own way aspire: Janette as a chef and Delmond as a musician. Texas in its turn symbolizes an even darker conception of the future than New Orleans. It compels street musician Sonny to relapse into his drug and alcohol addiction when he moves to Dallas; and it is from Texas that Hidalgo arrives, a shrewd contractor who sees opportunities for huge profits in rebuilding the city of New Orleans. The disparity of the locations also stresses the *altérité* and authenticity of New Orleans. This *altérité* is embodied in the characters. In New York Janette sticks to Creole cuisine and is successful in doing so. And Delmond gets caught between modern, contemporary popular music and the old school of the New Orleans jazz tradition.

Season three's logline runs: "Hurricanes. Floods. Exile. Crime. Corruption. Betrayal. Greed. Neglect. *Is That All You Got?*" In the third season the different plotlines start converging again toward polyphony, but it sounds rather grim amidst the violence of crime and corruption that set the tone. The logline moreover suggests that "the hurricane laid bare flaws that had dogged New Orleans for decades: a decaying infrastructure, underfunded social services, a corrupt police force, and an endemic culture of corruption that allowed public officials and shady businesspeople to line their pockets with public funds while pretending to care about the city's greater good."[45] In the third season the polyphony develops into the auto-analysis of a community that reaches beyond Katrina's aftermath. The hurricane and the flooding are used here as that catalyst moment that uncovers the real crisis of a dysfunctional society.

Season four's logline refers to *Just a Little While to Stay Here*, a gospel song with lyrics that talk about dying, death and going to heaven, all set to upbeat music. In a way it recalls a second line parade accompanying the funeral of the series. The "little while" might also refer ironically to the fact that production company HBO allowed the *Treme*-creators only half a season (five episodes) to wrap up the story arcs. The individual plotline for each character is resolved, but often in an improbable way, bordering on a *deus ex machina* resolution. Though the characters' problems might be fixed, the problems of New Orleans itself are not settled. To

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[41] Hamon 67.

[42] Augusto Boal, *The Rainbow of Desire* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995) 45.

[43] Zack Godshall's post-Katrina film *Low and Behold* (2007) produces the same type of first-person plural character when it deliberately accumulates close-up after close-up of faces of anonymous witnesses: they blend into one group, becoming one character, embodying post-Katrina New Orleans.

[44] Hamon 207-08.

[45] Matt Zoller Seitz, "Seitz Takes the David Simon Challenge and Reviews *Treme* Season Three as a Whole" (2012), Web. 30 June 2014 <http://www.vulture.com/2012/11/tv-review-a-look-back-at-tremes-third-season.html>.

indicate this, the writers create a symbol that exteriorizes what the characters stand for. New Orleans's resilience is offered a new emblem in the form of the pothole marker that Davis puts up. The pothole itself symbolizes the wounds of New Orleans and each episode, it becomes more and more rigged, thus transforming from a simple traffic sign into a totem that absorbs as it were the problems that so far were embodied in the characters. As such, the pothole marker points to where the problems actually reside: not inside the characters but in the real world. In this capacity it also points to the future. Together with the *deus ex machina* strategy, the pothole marker takes on an almost Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* quality, a distancing effect that brings the viewer back to historical reality.

Conclusion

Although Brecht can be mentioned, his spirit seems not to be overtly present in *Treme*. A number of critics and scholars indeed deplore the absence of open political criticism (as compared to *The Wire*, for instance). In their view *Treme* represents a form of televisual tourism, rather than political analysis.[46] A similar criticism can be detected in the reproof that New Orleans is not a figure for the whole of American society:

> That is a shame because the close-up shot of New Orleans post-Katrina reinforces the misguided notion that New Orleans is somehow apart from America and that Katrina can somehow be isolated as a natural disaster due to precarious geographies and regional idiosyncrasies.[47]

Fredric Jameson, in an essay on *The Wire*, writes that the Baltimore in which the series is located, does not exist. It could be anywhere.[48] This kind of universalization is typical for traditional crime fiction. It strips actual reality from its individual and unique characteristics in order to create a feeling of recognition and identification. The representation of New Orleans in *Treme* rather claims the opposite: the *altérité*, the *créolité*, makes it difficult to extrapolate and to consider it as a metaphor for the United States as a whole. Nevertheless the analysis made in *Treme* might not be that uncritical or unpolitical even without many distancing effects. Lukács, who disagreed with Brecht's theatrical tactics maintained in a dispute with the playwright that " [e]ven without alienation effects, writers have succeeded not just in surprising the audience, but in moving them profoundly by dramatizing the contradictions of a given social order."[49] Interestingly enough for our analysis of *Treme*, he argues his case using the narrative construction of characters:

> [Chekhov's] plays are built on the conflict between the subjective intentions of his characters and their objective tendencies and significance. This constantly creates a divided impression in the minds of the audience. On the one hand, they understand the characters' feelings and can even sympathize with them. At the same time, they are forced into an

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[46] See for instance Emily Nussbaum, "Roux with a View," *The New Yorker* 1 October 2012: 82-83; Wade Rathke, "*Treme* for Tourists: The Music of the City without the Power," *Television & New Media* 13.3 (2012): 261-67; and Lynnell L. Thomas, "'People Want to See What Happened': *Treme*, Televisual Tourism, and the Racial Remapping of Post-Katrina New Orleans," *Television & New Media* 13 (2012): 213.

[47] Matt Sakakeeny, "New Orleans. Louisiana, USA," *Contemporary Political Theory* 10.3 (2011) 397. See also John McWhorter, "Please 'Treme', I Beg You – Get Over Yourself," *New Republic* 7 May 2010 and Rolf Potts, "Treme's Big Problem: Authenticity," *The Atlantic* 27 November 2013.

[48] Fredric Jameson, "Realism and Utopia in *The Wire*," *Criticism* 52.3-4 (2010): 359-72.

[49] Georg Lukács quoted by Edward Braun, "The Cherry Orchard," in *The Cambridge Companion to Chekhov*, ed. Paul Allain and Vera Gottlieb (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 111.

intense experience of the tragic, tragi-comic or comic conflict between these subjective feelings and the objective social reality.[50]

Lukács actually describes an effect of *cognitive dissonance*, which in the minds of the spectators can provoke an awareness of some "objective social reality." While watching *Treme*, the viewer is challenged with a similar *cognitive dissonance* incited by the complex and contradictory personality traits of its characters that we discussed earlier in this essay.

From this cognitive dissonance are born the utopian moments in *Treme* that come together in Davis's pothole marker. David Simon affirms: "We have depicted certain things that happened, and others that didn't happen, and then still *others that didn't happen but truly should have happened*."[51] The tale of *Treme* reveals itself as a historical parallel[52] that tries to explain the mechanisms of reality and that is exactly where its "naturalism" can be detected. David Simon himself very eloquently summarizes what *Treme* is all about: "By referencing what is real, or historical, a fictional narrative can speak in a powerful, full-throated way to the problems and issues of our time. And a wholly imagined tale, set amid the intricate and accurate details of a real place and time, can resonate with readers in profound ways."[53]

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[50] Lukács 111. The fact that Lukács singles out Chekhov confirms *Treme*'s creators' assertion that Chekhov's work has served as a source of inspiration, especially in its polyphonic aspects and character construction.

[51] David Simon, "HBO's *Treme* Creator David Simon Explains It All for You," *The Times-Picayune* 11 April 2010, Web. 29 Dec. 2013 <http://www.nola.com/treme-hbo/index.ssf/2010/04/hbos_treme_creator_david_simon.html> (my emphasis). Simon ironically adds: "This is a nice way of saying we have lied." Compare Simon's attitude with Bernardo Bertolucci's response to the violent criticism by the then very powerful Italian Communist Party when Bertolucci's Marxist-inspired epic film *1900* premiered in the mid-seventies. He responded that he wanted to show the utopian moment, what could have happened, but did not. See the interview with Bertolucci by Jean A. Gili in *Bernardo Bertolucci. Interviews*, ed. Fabien Gerard, T. Jefferson Kline, and Bruce Sklarew (Jackson, USA: University Press of Mississippi, 2000) 126.

[52] Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method* (London: Verso, 2000) 123.

[53] David Simon, "HBO's *Treme* Creator David Simon Explains It All for You," *The Times-Picayune* 11 April 2010, Web. 29 Dec. 2013 <http://www.nola.com/treme-hbo/index.ssf/2010/04/hbos_treme_creator_david_simon.html>.