

Intertextual Representations of Drugs, Violence, and Greed in *Breaking Bad*

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Douglas Rasmussen

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Wendy Roy
Head of the Department of English
9 Campus Drive
University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon, SK, S7N 5A5

OR

Dean Trever Crowe
College of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
116 Thorvaldson Building
110 Science Place
University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon, SK, S7N 5C9

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Abstract

In the last two decades there has been a spate of what is considered quality television. The success of these shows, especially in regards to critical approval, has broadened the perspective from which the medium of television is viewed. Television now affords the viewer and critic alike the opportunity to examine and scrutinize elements of these shows in much the same way literature can be examined.

A notable example of this phenomenon is the AMC cable show *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013), the subject of my research. Specifically I am focusing on the idea of intertextuality in order to unravel, in much the same way a critic examines allusions, symbolism, and the imagery of a printed text, an interpretation of *Breaking Bad* which requires multiple and subsequent viewings.

My methodology is to examine the sampling of the intertextual references in *Breaking Bad* with the specific focus of discussing their relationship to the show's themes of neoliberalism and medical debt. I have chosen a selection three different types of intertextual reference: music, poetry and film. I have opted to focus on the references that engage in a critique of neoliberalism. By looking at these examples of each type of reference and how they connect to series protagonist Walter White (Bryan Cranston), I read the series' narrative arc and the psychological split of its main character, Walt, into the Heisenberg persona he uses as a drug kingpin, as related to the effects of unregulated capitalism brought on by neoliberalism. I will analyze examples of intertextuality from the show and then conclude by illustrating how the overall response of frustration to the advent of neoliberal economic policies can be determined from each of these references and *Breaking Bad* as a whole. It is my contention that by looking at these elements and how they contribute to the narrative of *Breaking Bad* that the show is drawing a parallel between Walt's psychological corruption and the corruptive influence of neoliberalism.

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Introduction

1.1 The History of Television as a Medium

The AMC cable television show *Breaking Bad* is notable for its complex storylines and the use of long-form serial narrative to develop an ambitious and unique progression for the main protagonist Walter White (played by Bryan Cranston) and is a prime example of what is referred to as quality television. Television, as a form of mass-produced art where episodes are often written, produced, and completed in rapid succession, is often perceived as a medium solely driven by consumer demands rather than artistic merit. The proximity of television to its commercial interests is one of the primary factors in the perceived divide between mass-produced art and art defined as more valuable to the human experience. Dwight MacDonald goes so far as to express a fear that mass-produced art (referred to as *kitsch* in his essay), “threatens high culture by its sheer pervasiveness, its brutal, overwhelming *quantity*” (4). While MacDonald casts a wide net for what he deems *kitsch*, including not only television under that umbrella but also detective novels and even film, the main ideological thrust of the academic mistrust of television largely stems from a perceived divide between art as an authentic means of self-expression and art as a purely commercial endeavor. As John Corner, in his essay on the nature of television criticism, has pointed out, “The various forms of criticism have a long tradition of wrangles over quality, but few bodies of writing can rival that on television in regularly seeing not only individual works but, often, the medium itself as deserving of negative judgement” (364). The constant defensive posture required of television criticism in evaluating the creativity of individual works is problematic in that the perceived disposability of the medium adds the extra burden of having to also defend the potential of the medium itself. Evaluating *Breaking Bad* on its own merits and how it interacts with the long-form narrative, particularly in both how it builds the gradual progression of Walt into the Heisenberg persona and how it uses intertextuality, provides a valuable metric for evaluating television as a medium capable of narratively challenging material.

In the contemporary media climate, however, there is now the phenomenon of quality television. The term quality television as it exists now tends to apply to cable subscription shows such as *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) and *The Wire* (2002-2008), shows which have adult content, provocative story arcs, and the option to use violence and/or profanity. Defining *quality* proves difficult and elusive. While the term *quality* might seem self-evident—a term that denotes excellence or superiority of an object or person—the application of the term in the context of narratively complex television on pay cable and streaming services can be ambiguous, even though there is something of a notable taxonomy to the description of quality television. This taxonomy is evident in series such as *Oz* (1997-2003), *The Wire* (2002-2008), and *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), FX producing *The Shield* (2002-2008), and AMC producing *Mad Men* (2007-2015), to name but a few.

With the advent of what has been deemed quality television—and it should be noted the word ‘quality’ is itself subject of debate—questions concerning distinctions between high and low culture come into effect. As Sarah Cardwell points out, even the terminology denotes a perceived divide between television as an easily accessible and domestic cultural product, as television tends to be labelled as a ‘medium,’ which emphasizes its place as “part of ‘the media’: one of the various forms of mass communications” (9). This terminology frames the study of television within a sociological framework as a product of industrial and commercial processes rather than a cultural product capable of aesthetic and narrative excellence. By comparison film is now a well-regarded medium with its own established canon of theorists. The study of television is a relatively new and emerging phenomenon, and therefore does not have the established vocabulary as the study of film has.

This perceived gap between film and television, and the inherent difficulties in analyzing seriality’s effect on different modes of storytelling, has contributed to a categorization of television as the poor cousin to cinema. John Ellis theorized that television warrants a glance rather than the focused gaze of cinema: “Broadcast TV proposes itself a very different spectator from that of cinema. The viewer for TV is far from being in a position of producing a totalizing vision of the truth from an initial stance of curiosity” (160). The emphasis here is on television as a novelty predicated on twists and surprises to keep the distracted viewer interested. In Ellis’ determination the phenomenological basis for television viewing is inattentiveness and a distinct lack of the intensity that characterizes the experience of watching a film in a theatre. Noël

Carroll reiterates this view when he writes that, by comparison, the scenography of film is “highly detailed and elaborate, whereas TV imagery is minimal” (17), the presumption being that the movie-going experience is a more specific and rarefied experience in comparison to the mundanity and the ‘everyday-ness’ of television. Following improvements in technology and hardware, however, the assumption that television imagery is minimal and of low quality is now easily disputed. Jason Mittell instead offers up an inversion of the glance-versus-gaze model by making the claim that the seriality of television allows for “extended character depth, ongoing plotting, and episodic variations,” which in his determination, “are simply unavailable within a two-hour film” (32). Mittell proposes that television is in fact marked by an even greater degree of complexity than film, owing to its extended length. While the standard narrative of television is distinct from film, I would be reluctant to generalize that any one medium, whether film or television, has an inherent superiority over the other. But a case can be made that television now has the creative potential to produce shows which are serially complex and do require a focused gaze akin to film.

The taxonomy of shows considered as the label of quality television is empirically evident in the taxonomy of shows considered to be examples, such as the selections I mentioned. From those examples, among many others, a theory of what constitutes quality television can be extrapolated. Indeed, Robert J. Thompson argues, “What emerges by the time we get to the 1990s is that ‘quality TV’ has become a genre in itself” (Thompson). Thompson’s statement places the corpus of quality television in a contemporary context, illustrating that while the genesis of quality television originates in the 1980s—Thompson cites *Hill Street Blues* (1981-1987) as an example, but concedes that it was an outlier and not representative of the medium as a whole—it was only relatively recently that there existed enough shows to create a corpus of quality television. The 1990s as the genesis of our contemporary understanding of quality television is a chronology echoed by Mittell, who writes: “Narrative complexity is sufficiently widespread and popular that we consider the 1990s to the present as the era of complex television” (31). Despite Mittell’s disagreement with Thompson’s terminology of “quality TV,” he nonetheless concurs with the general assessment of the timeline of the phenomenon, as well as a general consensus on the features of quality television, specifically in regards to attention to serial memory and controversial or provocative subject matter.

Thompson's criteria does provide a useful, although somewhat incomplete, rubric for locating the ontology of shows that can be considered *quality*, particularly as they relate to their 1980s/1990s antecedents. Cardwell, writing a chapter for an edited collection called *Quality TV: Contemporary Television and Beyond*, adds in her own extensive list of criteria:

American quality television programmes tend to exhibit high production values, naturalistic performance styles, recognized and esteemed actors, a sense of visual style created through careful, even innovative camerawork and editing, and a sense of aural style created through the judicious use of appropriate, even original music. This moves beyond a 'glossiness' of style. Generally, there is a sense of stylistic integrity, in which themes and style are intertwined in an impressive and expressive way. Further, the programmes are likely to explore 'serious' themes. (26)

While I would debate the inclusion of "recognized and esteemed actors" to the list, the criteria established by Thompson does help to determine quality television in its contemporary context. Cardwell's emphasis on the aesthetic and narrative possibilities of television points to a more contemporary interpretation of quality because current trends in technology allow shows to emphasize camerawork and editing, thereby negating Carroll's obsolete criticism of the minimal use of scenography in the television image.

The other attributes listed by Thompson include attention to serial memory, genre hybridity, controversial and provocative subject matter, a literary or cinematic approach, and a self-reflexive nature (Thompson). The first criteria; that of attention to serial memory, is an identifier of the quality/complex television category espoused by both Thompson and Mittell. Taking all these considerations into account, an empirical basis for evaluating quality television becomes more evident, if somewhat subjective. This collection of attributes also indicate a sufficient basis to posit a corpus of quality shows and therefore refute the assumption that television is simply the poor cousin to film and is more concerned with securing advertising dollars than with being a venue for creative expression. As Jason Jacobs writes: "The continued sense that the television text is mostly inferior to the film text and cannot withstand concentrated critical pressure because it lacks 'symbolic density,' rich *mis-en-scene*, and the promotion of identification as a means of securing audience proximity, has to be revised" (433). Historically, television has been associated with mass media, advertising, superficiality, and distracted viewers as

consumers. With cable channels and streaming services, television has now seen a paradigm shift where narratively complex stories can appeal to a niche audience among its subscribers and not have to depend on the network model of ratings and advertising money for its profit..

In the post-*Sopranos* era, specialty cable stations provide original content without any of the network restrictions that make the medium purely the engine of a perpetual industrial product, rather than, as Corner writes, “the site for discrete creative activity” (365). A viewer willing to purchase a cable package can pay for the privilege of adult content. This has given rise to what has been categorized as “quality television,” a “brand” of television intended for a more selective audience. There is a certain class value associated with the term, but as a descriptive category, the term “quality television” provides a taxonomy that proves useful in discussing what has been labelled the new golden age, which as Brett Martin adds, “isn’t bad for a medium with a reputation somewhere beneath comic books and just above religious pamphlets” (9). Cable and other subscription services are less affected by external commercial factors and commercial network considerations.

1.2. The Rise of Quality Television

Having established that there is a continuum in which television shows evolve and progress I will specify the details of television’s historical framework in order to illustrate where *Breaking Bad* fits and how it benefits from such a categorization. I find Amanda Lotz’s characterization of three main periods in television history useful for tracing the trajectory of television shows in general. Lotz first identifies the network era (1952-1980) as “fairly static in its industrial practices. It maintained modes of production, a standard picture quality, and conventions of genre and schedule” (7). This era of television is marked by strict adherence to norms regarding the depiction of sexuality and violence, low aesthetic quality owing to the technological limitations of the time, and the only available channels being NBC, ABC, and CBS. The network period accommodates the description of television as a mass-produced medium where shows are made and distributed as quickly as possible.

The next period Lotz identifies is the “multi-channel transition,” which spans from the early 1980s to the early 2000s (8). The identifying feature of this period is a shift in technology:

the advent of VCRs to record and playback shows at one's leisure, remote controls, and an increase in the number of cable channels. The multi-channel era is where I posit that the framework of the television industry as being capable of complex narratives begins to shift because of the availability of alternate cable channels beyond the standard broadcast model. If the broadcast channels that persisted from the network era (NBC, CBS, ABC) did not provide diversity in their content, then a viewer could switch the channels to one of the newer, cable options, such as CNN (1980), Bravo (1980), TSN (1984), MTV (1984) and Fox (1986). The multi-channel transition anticipates the advent of a show such as *Breaking Bad*, even if restricted by the specific considerations such as requiring a certain number of episodes per season for syndication, having to follow a traditional three-act structure, and to complete storylines within individual episodes to accommodate a first-time viewer. The multi-channel transition, however, begins to generate more sophisticated narrative approaches, such as the development of anti-heroes or more extended storylines, even if the shows produced during this transition tended towards soap opera and melodrama.

The final period Lotz offers, into which *Breaking Bad* fits, is the post-network era (early 2000s to present). The post-network era offered an even wider spectrum of options due to another dramatic shift in technology, particularly with improvements in large screen television sets. Now that large-screen television sets are affordable, and as are Netflix or Hulu subscriptions, the cinematic experience could be replicated on a lower-to-middle-class income and there was a financial impetus for cable channels to provide content that would be enough of an attraction to justify staying home.¹ Improvements in the hardware are, I believe, one of the reasons television shows such as *Breaking Bad* became what can be called “appointment television.” Television in this context became a social and communal experience, the focal point for fans to gather and appreciate the aesthetics, the writing, or the psychological complexity of a television show in much the same way as audiences used to do for films.

One effect of this development is that television shows, particularly premium cable subscription shows, are able to place more emphasis on aesthetics, editing, and camera work to

¹ For a general comparison, a high end, 26 inch Sony Trinitron CRT television set in 1982 retailed anywhere from \$1000.00 to \$1400.00. Adjusted for inflation the lower price is the equivalent of \$2,622.60 in 2018 dollars, \$3,671.65 at the higher end. A 1986 Sylvanna, which retailed for a more affordable \$540 would retail for \$1,217.95 when adjusted for inflation. Nowadays a LCD flat screen television set often retails in the \$300-\$500 range. In 2017 a 40 inch, 1080p flat screen television set retailed for \$450 at Best Buy Electronics, a franchise that often prices at the higher end.

take full advantage of large screens and LCD displays. In the multi-channel period the emphasis was more on speed and efficiency in producing a weekly television series, the prevailing assumption being that the viewer is not a discerning one but is only consuming the content as a form of quick entertainment. As Noël Carroll points out, “the distinction between the glaze and the glance is also reinforced fact that paradigmatically we watch films in darkened theaters where the only thing to attend to is the enormous, imposing, brightly lit screen” (17). Television, by contrast, is a domestic activity where all sorts of distractions can occur. However, the multi-channel period started to open up the possibilities of available content, and now with the wider array of digital services, the medium is able to operate in an artistic mode with attention to detailed and complex narratives. Television in the post-network era does not have to make the same accommodations in its narrative structure for commercial space as network television did. Affordable plasma screens, LCD, Blu-ray players, and now 4K discs, have closed the gap between cinema and television and allow for a television show to create a fully immersive experience, as opposed to a disposable cultural product made with expediency to accommodate network scheduling. A show like *Breaking Bad* can dwell on the cinematography and landscapes in which the show is filmed, or use the opening teaser for, say surreal images rather than simple plot exposition. For *Breaking Bad* this means using panoramic camera shots, unusual camera angles, and distinct color schemes, to experiment with the televisual format in a manner not previously used very often in television.

Consumers willing to spend the time and the money to engage in appointment viewing of programs such as *The Wire*, *The Sopranos*, and *Breaking Bad*, which offer deeper and morally ambiguous explorations of villainy on a weekly basis, can do so with more ease due to these technological improvements. Rebecca Williams comments on how technology changes a viewer’s consumption of a series, stating how DVD and Blu-ray box sets affect the pace at which a fan of a show can watch (including the option to wait until a series has ended to view the show in a singular and compressed time span) and noting how “ontological security can be felt differently when watching a series unfold or when watching via box sets” (152). Like DVDs and Blu-ray discs, streaming services provide a significant shift towards viewer control in terms of viewing habits and consumption. With VHS tapes the viewer was still beholden to weekly programming, taping a preferred show as it aired or waiting a longer period for commercially available VHS tapes to become available. As Mittell suggests, “DVDs allowed television to be

consumed and collected in new ways that drastically changed the place of the television series in the cultural landscape, as well as altering the narrative possibilities” (36). Even earlier Henry Jenkins postulated, “Videotape expands control over the programs, allowing us to view as often or in whatever context desired” (73). Building on that premise it is apparent that the VHS tape is in many ways the progenitor of how people watch television shows in a contemporary context, except that the prohibitively expensive nature of early VHS tapes has now given way to DVD box sets, then Blu-ray and 4K box sets, and now streaming services. Viewers of *Breaking Bad* are now able to revisit the show multiple times or binge on a series all at once in order to parcel out all the different layers, themes, or the subtle little clues embedded in the show and begin deciphering the intertextual references more easily. Streaming services have, in recent years, only added to this possibility, transferring the viewing experience to an ever-widening array of mobile technologies.

While distinctions of quality and/or complexity in television are always bound up in a certain degree of subjectivity and personal taste, there is, I believe, enough of a general consensus on the taxonomy of shows which point to a progressive trend in the modern media landscape. Logan addresses this concern in his article: “Even as the term ‘quality’ points towards a presumably coherent grouping of programmes of an identifiable type, it seems unavoidably to involve making an evaluative claim” (147). Discussions on quality/complex television tends to list the same genus of shows—*Oz*, *The Wire*, *The Sopranos*, *The Shield*, *Mad Men*; the examples I listed earlier, usually figure into the conversation—so that even with variations there is still enough of a consistency in the selection to exhibit a noticeable pattern of improvement in television programming. Since the 1990s there has been a significant paradigm shift that has done much to dissuade the perception that television is, as Newton Minow warned in his 1961 speech, “Television and the Public Interest,” a “vast wasteland” (Minow). Elliott Logan’s article also notices a shift in the stylistic and narrative progression of television which “moves away from ‘zero-degree style’ and towards what have been called ‘cinematic’ modes of visual and aural presentation” (148). The Post-Network era the evolution of technological hardware of television viewing has allowed viewers the opportunity to experience television shows, such as *Breaking Bad*, which are better equipped to mimic the cinematic experience, and in a quantity previously unavailable in broadcasting history.

1.3. A Summary of *Breaking Bad*

To establish a context for my analysis of the intertextual references in *Breaking Bad* and my argument for its place in the canon of important television, it is important to foreground the discussion with a look into how the show depicts the psychological profile of Walt. My interpretation of the intertextual references is built on the central concept of Walt's duality as the meek and passive Walter White who transitions into the drug kingpin alter ego known only as Heisenberg. The transformation of Walt into a ruthless drug kingpin forms an essential theme of *Breaking Bad*: Walt's metamorphosis into an anti-hero. While the anti-hero trope is an old one, Walt differs from other representations of the anti-hero because of his gradual psychological disintegration and descent into criminality. Even in the post-network era anti-heroes tend to be presented on screen fully formed. Tony Soprano, for example, is depicted in the pilot as the de facto don of the New Jersey DiMeo crime family. Don Draper has already assumed his persona at the start of *Mad Men*, and the viewer only discovers later in the series how he arrived at that persona. In a significant break with even the tradition of "quality television," the viewer witnesses Walt's transformation from good guy to anti-hero during the course of the series. Intertextuality in this regard, foreshadows the character's path into criminality via the Heisenberg persona and as subtle clues to the psychological roots of his disaffection and disenfranchisement. For *Breaking Bad*, then, intertextuality is a vehicle for understanding the negative consequences of neoliberalism and deregulation, the economic pressures of medical debt, and the toxicity of American exceptionalism. Not beholden to any social or moral strictures, Walt feels as if he is free to commit acts of violence, even while they are driving a wedge between him and his family as he emerges more completely into the Heisenberg persona.

For an explanation of how *Breaking Bad* contributes to the psychological metamorphosis of Walt into Heisenberg, a definition of the principle of neoliberalism is necessary to give a framework. As an economic principle neoliberalism involves policies centered on the accumulation of capital and a faith in the individualistic ethos of personal responsibility. A personal responsibility (to acquire capital) which is achieved through extensive deregulation of industries, such as banks, the privatization of previously public services (health care, utilities), the removal of policies that would negatively affect competition (no matter how ruthless the free

market might get as a result), and the stripping of social support systems like health care and unions. David Harvey in his *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* states the inevitable consequence of neoliberal policies are:

Suppression of rights to commons; the commodification of labor power and the suppression of alternative (indigenous) forms of production and consumption; colonial, neocolonial, and imperial processes of appropriation of assets (including natural resources); monetization of exchange and taxation, particularly of land; the slave trade (which continues particularly in the sex industry); and usury, the national debt and, most devastating of all, the use of the credit system as a radical system of dispossession (159).

Read in this context, the economic policies of neoliberalism render Walt's brutal ascendancy as a natural outgrowth of capital accumulation. Walt, being a middle class male with a highly marketable skill, has the means and opportunity to elevate himself above his station and alleviate his medical debt. And as Harvey indicates, stepping outside the bounds of legality is permissible as long as it falls within the idea of individualism. Indeed, it seems as illicit or outright criminal activity is a response to the expanded freedoms afforded corporations and large industries within the neoliberal framework.

Neoliberalism's misguided faith in the individual at the expense of social support systems fits in with Walt's own hubris and greed. Neoliberalism in its distorted interpretation of personal responsibility ignores the systemic privilege built into an economic model which, as Harvey outlined, benefits colonial power structures. Eschewing the care ethics of Medicaid, welfare, trade unions, and so forth, negatively affects marginalized and poor populations more than it does the stock brokers of Wall Street or CEOs of large investment banks. And while *Breaking Bad* is careful to present Walt as a legitimate victim of a system that strips away the financial aid that would have paid for his cancer treatment, it also depicts the consequences of an individual who, once stripped of any moral or ethical constraints by this very system, builds a business that, while illegal, also fits perfectly into an economic model where ruthless competition is promoted. Walt's murderous actions are not entirely out of place in a neoliberal paradigm, and even his product, the Blue Sky methamphetamine, is fully in accordance with neoliberalism in that it is a product whose sole purpose is to impose upon the consumer an addictive need to purchase more of the product. It is this facet of excessive capitalism without checks and balances that form a

psychological split in Walt in the pilot episode, once it becomes clear that the only recourse for Walt to escape the frustrations imposed upon him by an unfair system is to become fully engaged in its unethical practices.

Neoliberalism and its damaging effects on society are encoded into the skeleton of the series: that of a middle aged man struggling with medical debt. Advocates of the neoliberal economic model, most famously Milton Friedman, who was a consultant for both Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, always proffer up the free market as some sort of magically self-regulating system that somehow autocorrects itself as if by divine intervention. Friedman makes the claim: “Wherever the free market has been permitted to operate, wherever anything approaching equality of opportunity has existed, the ordinary man has been able to attain levels of living never dreamed of before” (146). In Friedman’s assertion the deregulation of any government bureaucracies—health care, social security, fair employment practices, welfare, even vocational licensers such as medical doctors—confers upon the poor and rich alike an economic freedom that is commensurate with political freedom.

So Walt, starting the series as an “ordinary man,” should have no difficulties in prospering under a deregulated, free market economy without having to resort to acts of violence and brutality. However, as the series effectively illustrates, once stripped of the social support systems that would help pay for his cancer treatment, it becomes an insurmountable task for Walt to prosper until he does engage in duplicitous and criminal activities. By focusing on Walt’s transformation from affable chemistry teacher to drug kingpin, *Breaking Bad* is depicting just how untrustworthy a faith in the free market truly is. Walt begins the series with the best of intentions and as a victim of circumstances who only wanted to provide for his family, but once the barriers are removed he is consumed by greed and the allure of power. Walt’s moral center is degraded because there are no checks and balances to mitigate his violent actions.

The pilot episode alludes to this process of a psychological metamorphosis stemming from economic pressures that Walt, a high school chemistry teacher, will undergo when we see him instructing his class on how he views chemistry “as the study of change” (1.1). Mittell identifies this transition from Walter White to his criminal Heisenberg persona as the strength of the series:

Walter White’s characterization presents a critical vision of ineffectual masculinity striving to find redemption in a changing world, yet choosing a path that leads to the

dismantling of the very things he claims to be trying to protect: his family and sense of self. *Breaking Bad* is a highly moral tale, in which actions have consequences, and thus we expect it is unlikely that Walt emerges from this story as a victorious hero—even though he proclaims “I won” when he finally kills Gus, we recognize that the cost of that victory is another part of his dwindling morality. (162)

The transition of Walt into Heisenberg to the point where he fully emerges into the criminal persona (rather than just puffing himself up as a tough guy for appearance’s sake, as he does early in the series’ run) is the main narrative technique separating *Breaking Bad* from other depictions of the anti-hero. The viewer is introduced to an affable, yet meek, individual who has to moonlight in a car wash in order to make ends meet. Walt lives in a passionless marriage, is often abused, mocked, or emasculated by various people: his boss at the A1 Car Wash, his wife Skyler (Anna Gunn), his aggressively hyper-masculine brother-in-law and DEA agent Hank Schrader (Dean Norris), and even his students. So while family might have been the catalyst of Walt’s initial decision to use his chemistry skills to cook a pure formula of methamphetamine, but it is through his ascension in the criminal underworld and this gradual evolution of the Heisenberg persona that Walt discovers within himself a deeply repressed desire to express absolute control over other individuals. Without constraints, moral or familial, Walt is free to become what David P. Pierson identifies as a rational economic actor who, “exemplifies the tenets of neoliberal entrepreneurship” (23). Walt becomes a drug kingpin because he is, in a sense, unregulated by any external factors in much the same way neoliberalism removes any social support systems in order to promote a distorted view of individualism.

The duality of family man and drug kingpin is reflected in the name Walt assigns his criminal persona: Heisenberg, an intertextual reference to physicist Werner Heisenberg who theorized the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. The Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle proposes that the measurement of a subatomic particle’s position or velocity lacks precision because the act of measuring one vector changes the other. Moreover, it is not until the moment of observation that a subatomic particle’s reality coheres—the classic example being the photon’s simultaneous existence as both a wave and a particle. The division between Walt/Heisenberg operates with the same ambiguity, as in some instances when the difference between Walt, the beige-colored family man, and Heisenberg, the black-clothed drug kingpin with a porkpie hat and goatee, becomes blurred. Walt himself, in some instances, cannot distinguish between the

two halves of his identity and confuses the puffed up bad-guy persona for the real thing. As the series progresses these two selves become absorbed into each other, a process of merging foreshadowed in the second episode “The Cat’s in the Bag...” with Walt’s classroom lecture on Chiral molecules:

So, the term Chiral derives from the Greek word for hand. Now, the concept here being that just as your left hand and your right hand are mirror images of one another, right? Identical, yet opposite. Well, so too, organic compounds can exist as mirror images of one another, all the way down the molecular level. But though they may look the same, they don’t always behave the same. (1.2)

Walt wants to preserve a distinction between Walter White and Heisenberg, but managing the diverging personalities of family man and drug kingpin is impossible for him. Walt needs the presence of family to enable his rationalization and contribute to his self-delusion. By contrast, Walt’s main nemesis for a few seasons, Gustavo Fring (Giancarlo Esposito) maintains the image of family man and community leader far easier, if only because his family is noticeably absent and seem to only exist as photographs in his house. Gus only needs an iconographic representation of family and has subsumed his separate selves into one pseudonym (In “Hermanos” it is revealed that Gus had a murky past as an enforcer in Chile, meaning that Gus Fring is likely an alias, 4.8), while Walt is still attempting to differentiate the separate aspects of his family life and criminal life.

The schism between Walter White and his repressed anger and the emerging Id of violence and callousness that is Heisenberg begins in the pilot episode with his cancer diagnosis, long before the persona is even given a name. In the pilot episode when Walt receives the news of his inoperable and terminal cancer, his reflection in the glass on the desk of the doctor when he first hears the diagnosis foreshadows the split between the competing versions of Walt (1.1). Rather than having to confront his mortality, Walt’s cancer diagnosis acts as a liberating force in the psychological development of the character. Indeed, the series then progresses through the dissolution of Walt’s sanity as he unravels further and further into the criminal persona of Heisenberg. The chirality alluded to in the pilot about two mutually co-existing entities becomes more and more difficult to maintain and the threads start to come apart. Just as chemistry studies the transformations of elements and substances into other elements and substances, so does *Breaking Bad* explore Walt’s shift from innocence into criminality. The change from Walt into

Heisenberg and how he succumbs to his repressed anger is the guiding rubric for the series and informs the viewer's understanding of *Breaking Bad*'s thematic focus.

In this *Breaking Bad* is doing critical sociology on the destructive influence of unchecked capitalism through its depiction of Walt's psychological transformation. Walt's descent into criminality examines just how corrosive unrestricted capitalism and neoliberal economic policies can be and how they can dissolve an individual's moral compass. In Walt, as a beleaguered white male, which could be considered a problematic angle, *Breaking Bad* is showing how misguided and distorted this faith in an unregulated free market can be and how it fails to take into account the abuses of power that can (and will) occur amongst the powerful.

This incremental path towards the Heisenberg persona and the depiction of the minutiae of Walt's life up until this point is a process uniquely suited for the pace of a television series. The long-form narrative of serial television allows for a slow progression of a character from Walt to Heisenberg with intertextuality acting as a code to Walt's psychological degeneration. In this context intertextuality can be read as an implication of neoliberalism because the intertextual elements reinforce the notion of Walt's increasingly corrupted self through a recognition of what these codes indicate. Whether the codes are the *narcocorrido* "The Ballad of Heisenberg," Marty Robbins' "El Paso," the various poetic references, and the film *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. Once the viewer sees the patterns of behavior that emerge in Walt and his continued denial these codes act as signposts to Walt's self-justification for his violent actions. The viewer cannot rely on Walt himself because despite his litany of sins, Walt tries to preserve the illusion that he is a family man and these actions are necessary to procure financial stability for them right up until the final episode.

1.4 Intertextuality and Television

The intertextual references in *Breaking Bad* are narratively important to Walt's story arc, and as such require a definition of intertextuality. The term intertextuality was first coined by Julia Kristeva, but the theory has its origins in the semiotic criticism of Mikhail Bakhtin. In her essay "Word, Dialogue and Novel," Kristeva offers a definition of intertextuality based on Bakhtin:

Bakhtin was the first to replace the static hewing out of texts with a model where literary structure does not simply *exist* but is generated in relation to *another* structure. What allows a dynamic dimension to structuralism is his conception of the “literary word” as an *intersection of textual surfaces* rather than a *point* (a fixed meaning), as a dialogue among several writings. (35-36)

To theories of intertextuality, cultural texts exist along multiple and diachronic lines as a network of collected quotations and references rather than as a fixed and static or synchronic object viewed in isolation. Intertextuality builds on the principle of dialogism to form a mutable interpretation of a cultural text. The meaning of words in a polyphonic cultural text, in this case a polyphonic television show, opens up the lexicon to an almost infinite degree, because rather than being bound by a self-contained set of signifiers the cultural text expands the range of codes. No interpretation is ever complete because words respond to other words and to other combinations which evolve and mutate as society, with all its social stratifications and ideologies, evolves and mutates. As Roland Barthes writes, “text is a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centers of culture” (146). Cultural texts do not exist as simply monologic constructs with singular, transcendent, and universal meanings or interpretations, but instead they exist in a continuum of ever-changing interpretations.

To clarify how Bakhtin’s metalinguistics contributes to an understanding of intertextuality as a modern phenomenon it is important to comment on his theories of the monological and the dialogic in literature, and thereby trace their philosophical development. For Bakhtin the dialogism of the novel is a critique of the monologic poem and his theory of heteroglossia has its roots in this separation between poetry and prose. In Bakhtin’s estimation the poet conceives of his as universal in meaning whose words, as he states, “plunges into the inexhaustible wealth and contradictory multiplicity of the object itself, with its ‘virginal,’ still ‘unuttered’ nature; therefore it presumes nothing beyond the borders of its own context” (278). In this the monological exists as a unitary language and as a centripetal determination of meaning in of itself as the pure and direct voice of the poet themselves. It is, essentially, the author-as-God view where, as Bakhtin continues, “outside of which nothing else exists” (286). Reader interpretations to this unitary language are irrelevant to the creative inspiration of the poet, who is presumed to be speaking in his own authorial voice.

Dialogism as an opposition to the monological resides more in prose, according to Bakhtin. The novel, with its numerous characters and therefore numerous independent voices, with its reflection of past novels, is by necessity a dialogical process: “The decentralizing of the verbal-ideological finds its expression in the novel and begins by presuming fundamentally differentiated groups, which exist in an intense and vital interaction with other social groups” (368). The novel, then, rejects the linguistic stratification of the poem where one authoritative voice commands meaning for a mutable and pluralistic narrative of multiple hierarchies and multiple voices. The text, at least as far as prose is concerned, is incapable of linguistic virginity, as every word, phrase, idiom, sentence, and image exists in relation to many divergent socio-historical contexts.

Dialogism, then, is in continual dialogue with other works of literature and builds on those previous works. By doing so the process becomes twofold, as an interpretation of the past work becomes altered by the present work. Characters also interact in such a way as to comment on those previous works, rendering dialogism as a conversational and open-ended process without definitive closure. The process is by its nature subjective and open-ended, as every word’s history of usage responds, interacts, and changes depending how it is used in future works. In this manner the novel, with its myriad characters, its various idiolects and registers, makes everything relational and essentially *in media res*.

Starting from Bakhtin’s theory of the novel as dialogical a path can be traced towards an understanding of intertextuality. María Jesús Martínez Alara contends, “Dialogism is the name not just for a dualism, but for a necessary multiplicity in human perception” (272). In this way the continuous and open novel, and by extension the film or television show, resists socio-linguistic hierarchies and, as an outgrowth of this heteroglossia of language, which as Alara argues, tends towards “revolutionary popular trends” (273). The textual autonomy of a singular meaning is subjected to a progressive dissolution as different influences, both anonymous and deliberate, different narrative voices, and different cultural and historical spheres contribute to our reading of a text.

While Bakhtin’s model of heteroglossia is largely focused on distinctions between poetry and prose, particularly as it relates to the nineteenth century, a modern view of intertextuality can be extrapolated from this theoretical framework. For Bakhtin heteroglossia means that the author is not the sole-determinate of meaning, but merely one among many determinates of meaning.

The text is polysemic because, as Bakhtin states, it contains “a multitude of concrete worlds, a multitude of bounded verbal-ideological and social belief systems” (288). The echoes of our lives, our various beliefs, biases, perceptions, clichés, inherited folk wisdom, become absorbed and transformed within a text. With this understanding of the novel as inherently dialogical it then becomes evident how intertextuality, whether it is the form of a novel or a television show such as *Breaking Bad*, has revolutionary potential. Kristeva and the *Tel Quel* circle of critics and writers proposed as such, that the concept of dialogism in the novel is a rejection of authority, and therefore a rejection of bourgeois ideology.

Studying intertextuality as a methodology is especially well-suited for contemporary media, and *Breaking Bad* exemplifies just how effective the method can be in questioning certain prescribed norms (in this case, neoliberalism). The reliance on prior codes of meaning and a text’s dialogue with other texts reshape the symbols of a cultural text in radically different ways because that text is participating in a discursive space. The historical contingency of these prior codes as well as the individual reader’s perceptual biases and personal backgrounds means that, as Jonathan Culler states, “to read is to place a work in a discursive space, relating it to other texts, and to the codes of that space, and writing itself is a similar activity” (1382). Readers become authors as their relationship to a cultural text’s prior codes changes. As Barthes contends, “everything is to be *disentangled*, nothing *deciphered*” (146). The author is less the arbiter of a monolingual theology of the text than the generator of an open-ended discourse for others to interpret and reshape. The search for meaning in a text is itself a revolutionary act of active decoding.

Intertextuality is a particularly well-suited lens for examining contemporary film and television where there is a confluence of media influences and a diverse group of writers, directors, and producers affecting the direction of the narrative. Popular culture is by nature cross-sectional and often invokes media from a disparate range of influences, both so-called high culture and a more accessible popular culture. As such I will examine intertextual references from music, poetry, and film to establish an argument for how *Breaking Bad* uses literary and cinematic techniques to explore social commentary on the American dream. *Breaking Bad* shares in Bakhtin’s view that a narrative text is heteroglot because it depicts a multitude of voices from a multitude of characters, thereby rejecting the singular authority of capitalism. This is especially true of a show that depicts the frustrated middle class angst of Walter White, the mainstream

values of DEA agent Hank Schrader, and the Mexican population that borders Albuquerque. Intertextuality also provides another means of injecting a multitude of voices into the narrative, whether explicitly or implicitly, through its selection of music, poetry, and film. In the case of *Breaking Bad* I will trace the numerous voices, whether they belong to the dispossessed and marginalized, or to those who occupy a position of power, to examine how these differing influences disrupts stratified views of the monological, or, rather a disruption of the monological voice of capitalism.

1.5. Argument

Music plays a significant role in *Breaking Bad*, and my first chapter will investigate how the show interacts with it in a manner that does not just establish a mood or atmosphere but also helps reorient the series' narrative focus toward how neoliberal policies affect other countries. I begin with an exploration of the *narcocorrido* and connect it to a specific aspect of Walt's psychological profile. I also connect the *narcocorrido* to Marty Robbins' country song "El Paso" which appears in the series' finale "Felina." Taken together these examples of popular music in the series provide a portrait of Walt's narrative trajectory from a meek, emasculated individual to the power-obsessed drug kingpin personality of Heisenberg. While many of the series' musical selections provide clues and insights into the world of *Breaking Bad* and Walt's psychological unravelling, these two songs are notable for how they inform the duality of Walt and how he has changed from earlier seasons to the final episode. While the *narcocorrido* addresses a particular aspect of Walt's rationalization and self-mythologizing, "El Paso," broadens the psychological portrait of Walt and how his romanticized vision has become fully incorporated into his identity. Both selections also work well within the Neo-Western genre the series is operating in and because of the Neo-Western's connection to the border it also acts as a social commentary on neoliberalism. The frontier in American history is deeply rooted in capitalist excess and the expansion of land at great human cost, making the genre an appropriate vehicle to explore this facet of the country's history.

The next section addresses the show's intertextual references to poetry. There are two major poetic selections employed in the series: Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ozymandias" and multiple references to the works of Walt Whitman, most notably with the poems "When I Heard

the Learn'd Astronomer" and "Gliding O'er All" and the inscribed copy of *Leaves of Grass* that allows Hank to solve the mystery of Heisenberg. I contend that a reading of these poets in general and various other selections from Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* helps reinforce the primary thematic concerns of the series, namely that of individualism, the tenets of democracy (and how Walt appropriates them), as well as his overall mythologization of cultural icons. As such I think a reading of the themes and ideas Whitman is preoccupied with in that book are pertinent to a psychological reading of Walt, and as such I will explore *Breaking Bad*'s explicit and implicit references to *Leaves of Grass*.

My last section focuses on the type of intertextuality with the most direct relationship to *Breaking Bad*: cinematic references. Creator and executive producer Vince Gilligan is a noted film buff, and he populates *Breaking Bad* with numerous cinematic references. My focus centers on a reference to John Huston's film *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. In the *Breaking Bad* episode "Buyout" an extended dialogue between three of the series main characters evokes a dialogue in Huston's film. (5.6). Not only is this intertextual reference a more subtle, potentially missed clue for a viewer unfamiliar with the source material, but the themes of the film parallel the themes of the series: paranoia, greed, obsession with wealth, downtrodden individuals struggling against capitalist hegemony, the consequences of violence, and the inevitable results of rampant neoliberalism. Because cinema shares a similar vocabulary it is more easily translatable into the vocabulary of television, meaning that the philosophical pre-occupation of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* with greed and obsession can be accommodated with a more lateral transposition of intertextuality into *Breaking Bad*.

Intertextuality is the subject of my research, but this highly interconnected narrative also implicates neoliberal capitalism. *Breaking Bad* addresses how neoliberalism's deregulation and dissolving of social supports systems, like the affordable health care that would have alleviated Walt's medical debt, have drastic consequences of the American public. Capitalist competition without restrictions or the capacity to take into account processes such as welfare and fair trade practices, is not unlike the violent methods used by Walt to ensure his own personal economic growth, even if it is at the expense of his morality and familial bonds.

Music, Narco-culture, and Identity in *Breaking Bad*

2.1 Music and Neoliberalism

The international flavor of *Breaking Bad*'s musical choices confirms just how narrow Walt's perception of the world truly is, how isolated his suburban existence is, and by extension just how geographically limited the United States is in its political framework. Executive music producer for the series Thomas Golubic has selected songs which features a broad range of musicians, such as French-Chilean rapper Ana Tijoux, New Zealand indie rockers The Black Seeds, the Mexican singing duo Rodrigo y Gabriela, Cuban singer Moisés Simons, and Jamaican reggae singer Yellowman (Winston Foster), to name but a few. The international playlist of songs provides the viewer with a narrative that extends beyond the centripetal narrative focus of Walt's distorted sense of outrage and anger. The songs point to a world beyond the narrow perceptual confines of Walt's more privileged world and his feeling of being marginalized and disenfranchised. Walt presents himself as a victim, yet his experience dictates that he really is not as disadvantaged as other marginalized groups. Walt's myopic view of his own circumstances and his own inability to examine the conditions that precipitated his suburban banality rather than the scientific glory he had envisioned in his youth are analogous to the myopic view neoliberalism has of its own principles. The international musical selections in *Breaking Bad* serve to remind the viewer of how Walt's self-centered view, much like the self-centered view of neoliberals appropriating classical liberalism for their own purposes, is largely a self-mythologizing that appropriates what it needs while remaining ignorant of the world extending beyond his perceptual limits.

2.2 Walter White and the *Narcocorrido* as a Counter-Hegemonic Narrative

The cold open of the episode "Negro y Azul" includes a *narcocorrido* as an intertextual reference and reinforces a thematic concern of the series with capitalism and borders (2.7). The *narcocorrido* is an example of how *Breaking Bad* uses external cultural texts as supporting and interrelated documents that, while not directly influencing the show's narrative, still provide significant thematic contexts. The cold open in "Negro y Azul" features a *narcocorrido* called

“The Ballad of Heisenberg,” performed by real life *narcocorrido* band *Los Cuates de Sinaloa*. The viewer is introduced to a *narcocorrido* in the form of a music video with choppy camera work, low-angle camera shots, and a polka sound (2.7). Once *narcocorridos* are understood as fulfilling the complex role of bolstering a narco-trafficker’s reputation as a powerful figure not to be trifled with, as well as that of a community provider and altruistic philanthropist, the framework appears for evaluating Walt’s metamorphosis into intrepid drug dealer, drug kingpin and ruthless killer, as well as his eventual downward spiral. To this effect *Breaking Bad* employs intertextuality to both act as signifier for Walt’s psychological split and to connect the drug trade with capitalist excess. In the case of “The Ballad of Heisenberg,” the historical background of the *narcocorrido* helps to inform the viewer of the narrative arc of Walter White’s transformation into the drug kingpin Heisenberg (2.7).

The *narcocorrido* is a transcultural and contemporary musical genre which evolved out of the traditional ballad form of the *corrido* in the Southwest border between Mexico and the United States. The *corrido* dates back to the Spanish romances of the medieval era, although as Américo Paredes and Maria Herrera-Sobek point out, scholars did not take much notice of the art form until the Mexican Revolution of the 1920s, largely due to poor transcription of the material (34). The *corridos*’ narratives of freedom fighters and revolutionaries such as Gregorio Cortez and Pancho Villa have been translated into a contemporary hybrid of popular music and traditional folk music known as the *narcocorrido*. Ioan Grillo, in discussing the early formation of *narcocorridos*, outlines their role as both a rallying cry for the impoverished and an information delivery system:

The ballads were especially popular in the ragged hinterlands of Chihuahua and Texas, in the days when the Lone Star State was in Mexican hands. Small communities separated by arid plains and thick forests were starved for newspapers, so wandering musicians were relied on to bring the news of conquests and coronations. Their role became crucial during the bloody war of independence in 1810. Tales of the priest Miguel Hidalgo ringing the church bells and crying, “*Viva Mexico*,” were spread in rhyming verse. From these early days, the ballads were rebellious and subversive. (174)

While the *corrido* is focused on an assertion of national identity, its modern counterpart has widened its audience through the use of mass media. The popularity of *narcocorridos* arises from the presentation of the drug dealer as a romanticized folk hero and from its use of *valiente*

(brave and heroic) iconography. From the early 1970s to the mid-1980s bands such as *Tigres del Norte* and singer/drug trafficker Rosalino “Chalino” Sanchez took advantage of mass media technology (cassette tapes, records, television, and eventually the internet) to mythologize narco trafficking as a heroic and virtuous occupation. The narrative of the narco trafficker is a politically appealing image for an impoverished population familiar with border conflicts and the devastating economic effects of neoliberal policies. Examining the functions of the *narcocorrido*, the self-presentation of the narco-trafficker, and its correlations to Walt’s rise as drug kingpin provides insight into the thematic message of the series.

While the *corrido* and the later evolution of the *narcocorrido* are initially shaped by Mexican cultural roots, the resonance of the art form is as a contemporary and transcultural adaptation built around the narco-trafficker persona and into popular mass media. The narco-trafficker persona in this instance is a reflection of the sociological concerns of the powerless and those of lower socioeconomic strata attempting to achieve wealth and status through alternatives to the neoliberal paradigm. The immorality of the capitalist system, according to the ethos of the *narcocorrido*, forces the economically powerless to adopt such personas as a necessary financial measure to insure their family’s prosperity.

The *narcocorrido* as a cultural signifier of social stratification and class struggles functions as a tool for Walt’s self-mythologizing. Walt’s distorted, self-perceived victimhood is emblematic of an inner monologue on how a lifetime of obeying rules and social conventions has rewarded him and his family with medical debt that cannot be covered by insurance. Walt even informs Skyler in the third-season episode “I.F.T.”²:

I’ve done a terrible thing. But I’ve done it for a good reason. I did it for us. That [*pointing to a duffel bag full of money*] is college tuition for Walter Jr. And Holly, eighteen years down the road. And it’s health insurance for you and the kids. For Junior’s physical therapy, his SAT tutor. It’s money for groceries, gas, for birthdays and graduation parties. Skyler, that money is for this roof over your head. The mortgage that you are not going to be able to afford on a part-time bookkeeper’s salary when I’m gone.” (3.3)

Walt’s narrative of disenfranchisement is integral to assuaging his guilt over his use of excessive violence as a drug kingpin. Walt reaches the point where not only has he exceeded the \$737,000

² “I.F.T.” is a reference to the last line of the episode when Skyler tells Walt (in a deliberate attempt to hurt him), “I Fucked Ted.”

he calculated he needed, but the body count has surpassed what can be justifiably defended (2.1). Walt is trying to validate his own actions under the pretense of doing everything for family while in fact more invested in building his own criminal empire and legacy as New Mexico's methamphetamine kingpin. In the episode "Gliding over All" Skyler reveals to Walt a storage locker of cash, and when Walt asks the amount, she answers, "I have no earthly idea" (5.8). The massive pile of cash dissolves Walt's fabricated idea of disenfranchisement and financial necessity. The storage locker scene emphasizes just how far beyond necessity Walt has gone and how invested he is in his new identity. The Walt who was petrified by the violence of fellow drug dealer Tuco Salamanca (Raymond Cruz) is now beginning to transform into the mythical figure depicted in the *narcocorrido* "The Ballad of Heisenberg" that opened the episode "Negro y Azul." As the series progresses Walt seems to buy into the propaganda of the *narcocorrido*, which while never really addressed as existing within the world of *Breaking Bad*, allows Walt to conflate his fabricated persona with his real identity, such as in "Green Light" (3.4), when he violently approaches a highway patrol officer who stops him for speeding. Walt's angry outburst, however, results in his getting maced and arrested, effectively puncturing the myth of the *narcocorrido* and even how Walt has conflated his Heisenberg persona with his everyday life.

In *narcocorridos* the narco-trafficker persona constructs and disseminates a narrative of the oppressed and marginalized, and he epitomizes a Robin Hood-like figure of resistance against American law enforcement whose encroachment on the border is viewed as an extension of capitalist ideology. As Edberg points out about the *narcocorrido* genre in general, "Examining *narcocorridos* and their social context and role provides an excellent vehicle for the examination of broader questions related to the construction, production, and interpretation of media images of archetypes as they relate to poverty and social stratification" (28-29). The heroizing tendency of the *corrido* and the accompanying imagery of resisting the American establishment has been appropriated by the contemporary form of the *narcocorrido*. Valid or not, a significant portion of drug traffickers employ *narcocorridos* as rhetorical justification for acts of extreme violence. For Walt this self-justification and imposed affiliation with the underclass is necessary in order to continue engaging in acts of violent disregard for human life even after he has achieved his goal of \$737,000. Walt needs to rationalize to himself that he is separate from a brutal killer like Tuco, someone who will pummel his own henchman No-Doze (Cesar Garcia) to death for the egregious act of speaking out of turn (2.1), and that his motives are more sincere.

Walt is positioning of himself as a subaltern figure doing what is necessary for his family.³ By extension *narcocorridos* rely on a deliberate crafting of self-identity to justify their violent activities in the drug trade as morally legitimate. The popularity of the *narcocorridos* resides in the singer's "truth-telling capacity," as Hector Amaya points out, to lend credence to the notion that any extreme acts of violence and depravity reflect a particular social reality and power differential (232). Using the *narcocorridos* to evoke the rural Mexican population's marginalization and disenfranchisement from the political process does, however, raise the question of representation and cultural appropriation. *Narcocorridos* tend to produce a voice for the under-represented in the Mexican community. Jaramillo addresses this point and notes that *Breaking Bad* incorporates "a more nuanced and culturally informed characterization of the Mexican narco—one that notably impacts the relationship of the white protagonists to their new illegitimate occupations" (1589). I would concur, and I am advocating that *Breaking Bad* is going beyond the good-guy-versus-bad-guy trope of standard police procedurals and engaging in a sophisticated critique of United States hegemony.

Yet, there is another intertextual reference which illustrates the disconnection between Walt's middle-class life and the marginalized and disenfranchised figures that appear in *narcocorridos*. It is an intertextual reference that places Walt's economic frame of reference entirely within a capitalist power structure and also reinforces how Walt's self-identification as being uniquely talented echoes that of American exceptionalism. The second-season episode "Peekaboo" provides the viewer with valuable insight into Walt's perception of his powerlessness against the machinery of large-scale capitalism. Specifically, the episode contains a scene, in which Walt lectures his class on the history of synthetic diamonds, that illustrates Walt's tendency towards appropriating images and texts that reinforce his self-mythologizing ideology as a perpetual victim of society:

Dr. Hall invented the first reproducible process making synthetic diamonds. I mean, this is way back in the fifties. Now today, synthetic diamonds are used in oil drilling, electronics, multi-billion dollar industries. Now at the time Dr. Hall worked for General Electric and he made them a fortune. I mean, incalculable. You want to know how General Electric rewarded Dr. Hall? A ten dollar U.S. Savings bond. (2.6)

³ The term subaltern in this context is from Gayatri Spivak's work on imperialist and/or colonialist views of other countries as "Others" and a "deviation from an ideal" (27).

While Walt does identify a legitimate criticism of the capitalist economy, it is important to note the example he chooses is of a middle-class chemist who was deprived of the profits from his synthetic diamond drilling press. The narrative is not only parallel to Walt's story arc, in which he was ousted from the corporation Gray Matters Technology (and thereby deprived of potentially millions of dollars), but of his misdirected priorities in identifying the source of his financial difficulties. Walt, displaying palpable anger when relating this bit of history to his class, illustrates a fundamental disconnection between the legitimate concerns of unchecked capitalism taking advantage of individuals and the bottom line of profit. Walt does not punctuate his thesis on the exploitative nature of capitalism with examples of migrant workers mining in harsh conditions for tin to use in an iPhone, child slaves in the blood diamond industry, or sweatshop workers in a clothing factory earning pennies a day to produce underwear or socks. Walt instead focuses his rage at the exploitation of a fellow middle-class scientist. Walt is pinpointing a valid problem with neoliberal economic policies, yet he is also guilty of using the example as a rationalization for his own perceived mistreatment.

Breaking Bad offers cultural signifiers of Walt's increasing obsession with obtaining power and presenting himself as an image of absolute ruthlessness. In the episode "Cornered" an exchange between Walt and his wife Skyler after she discovers that hitmen have indeed been deployed to assassinate Walt reveals the nature of his ruthlessness:

Who are you talking to right now? Who is it you think you see? Do you know how much I make a year? I mean, even if I told you, you wouldn't believe it. Do you know what would happen if I suddenly decided to stop going into work? A business big enough that it could be listed on the NASDAQ goes belly up. Disappears! It ceases to exist without me. No, you clearly don't know who you're talking to, so let me clue you in. I am *not* in danger, Skyler. I *am* the danger! A guy opens his door and gets shot and you think that of me!? No. *I am the one who knocks!* (4.6)

Walt's warning to his wife reveals how his intentions have gone beyond concern for his family's welfare, and he clearly enjoys positioning himself as a figure of power and strength, so much so that he has confused his criminal persona Heisenberg with his everyday life and believes his own self-created mythology. Edberg notes that this justification occurs frequently in *narcocorridos*, taking on the shape of *canciones fuertes* (strong and powerful songs), a "Self-creation of an image that is more powerful than the person who is 'doing the creating' may actually be" (267).

Unlike in the *narcocorrido*, Walt's success as Heisenberg can largely be attributed to his employment of neoliberal economic policies, even while he maintains a sense of entitlement and a moral justification for his criminal empire. While implementing a medical debt crisis as the impetus for Walt's actions does produce audience sympathy for the character, in effect questioning the iconography of the American dream and the idea of suburbia by presenting a world where violence lurks underneath a placid exterior, the series also incorporates into its narrative structure a gradual descent into criminality that is concordant with free market excess.

An important signpost to Walt's deviation from his professed ideals is Walt's final story arc where his close association with a group of Neo-Nazis led by Jack Welker (Michael Brown) eventually ends in betrayal in the episode "Ozymandias" (5.14). Walt's partnering with a white supremacist group, who end up stealing most of Walt's money and killing his DEA brother-in-law Hank and Hank's partner in the DEA Steven Gomez (Steven Michael Quesada), can be read as both a symbolic linking of neoliberal economic policies with fascism as well as a rebuttal to any potential criticism that the series is glorifying or promoting violence through this explicit connection between tyranny, violence, and rampant greed. Michelle MacLaren, who directed the episode "To'hajiilee," mentions a visual signifier to this effect at the point in the episode when Uncle Jack (as he is known among his associates) shoots Hank and Gomez and then extends a hand of friendship to Walt to ensure his silence: "on his right hand Jack has a swastika. So what Bryan [Cranston] was looking at was... was the swastika tattoo" (podcast 514). Walt's collusion with a white supremacist group not only brings him face to face with the consequences of his actions and the lengths to which he had to go to in order to maintain his criminal empire, but it also provides a plot thread that functions as the impetus for Walt's decline and, in a certain sense, a parallel decline of the capitalist superstructure.

Walt's final conflict with the Neo-Nazis results in a pyrrhic victory. Walt does eliminate them but at the cost of his own life and only after his lab partner Jesse Pinkman suffers so much loss, a narrative that coincides with Edberg's theoretical framework for how *narcocorridos* function: as inevitable tragedy (265). *Narcocorridos* as fatalistic narratives ontologically stem from the earlier *corrido* traditions' use of the rise-and-fall structure. In the modernized *narcocorrido* this narrative device is applied to narco-traffickers who fight and die when rising against the oppressive totalitarian system of the United States' DEA or Texas Rangers. The lyrics of "The Ballad of Heisenberg," which are sung in Spanish and appear as English subtitles

on the bottom of the screen, point to this as well with a refrain: “But that homie’s dead / He just doesn’t know it yet” (2.7). In this sense the *narcocorrido* is functioning as a portent for the series’ ending. While Walt does receive a death sentence at the beginning of the series with his cancer diagnosis, it is ultimately a ricochet from the M60 that Walt has in the trunk of his car that spells his doom in the final episode (5.16). The brutality and violence of the series finale, where Walt goes out on his own terms and kills the group of Neo-Nazis who double-crossed him (getting himself killed in the process), parallels the dramatic nature of a *narcocorrido* and the consequences of his actions.

In an interview Gilligan discusses how the violence of *Breaking Bad* differs from conventional broadcast police procedurals and crime dramas where morality and guilt are often ignored as facets in character development: “Marshall Dillon doesn’t shoot down a guy on the street in *Gunsmoke* and feel bad about it. He has to be the same Marshall Dillon next week” (25). So while Walt might empathize with the idea of a cowboy on a mission of vengeance and the highly romanticized iconography of the western film, he is living in a world with moral and psychological consequences. Walt eventually loses everything, including the family for whom he was making money by producing “Blue Sky” methamphetamine in the first place. Walt’s initial fascination with the power and control he has as Heisenberg has now since been affected by reality. The iconography of the tough cowboy, the unrepentant Marshall Dillon killing swaths of bad guys week after week, has now infected Walt’s psychological make-up, leading to a situation where both the Walt and Heisenberg sides of his identity have synthesized into the singular Lambert identity.

2.3. “El Paso” and the Musical Conclusion to Walt’s Life

The series finale draws on Western iconography by featuring the 1959 song by Marty Robbins, “El Paso,” with a scene where Walt plays a cassette tape. “El Paso” is about a cowboy who is violently gunned down, evoking the gunslinger mythos of solitary outlaws living by a code of violence. The unnamed gunslinger of “El Paso” falls head over heels for a Mexican

cantina girl named Feleena, a fateful encounter which draws the gunslinger into a life on the run when he fights another cowboy for her affection⁴:

I challenged his right hand for the love of this maiden

Down went his hand for the gun that he wore

My challenge was answered in less than a heartbeat

The handsome young stranger lay dead on the floor (Robbins, 1957)

“El Paso” in part reflects the hegemonic masculinity about which Walt finds himself daydreaming as he interprets his role as Heisenberg as emblematic of this unfulfilled, romanticized version of himself. Walt feels he has already been drained of life by the lower socioeconomic strata he occupies, so death by gunfire is at least heroic (in Walt’s mind, conditioned as it is by the romanticized vision of “El Paso”).

The romanticization of “El Paso” correlates to Walt’s own feelings of frustration and disenfranchisement. After years of unsatisfying marriage with a wife by whom Walt feels emasculated, he is humiliated to the point where the emergence of the Heisenberg persona becomes a way for Walt to engineer a romanticized death in a haze of bullets rather than the slow death of a cancer that eats away at him. And despite the obvious affection the narrator has for this Mexican girl in the song, the first-person narrator describes her as, “wicked and evil while casting a spell” (Robbins, 1959), a chauvinist view that clearly resonates with Walt’s own misguided perception of his wife Skyler. Both “El Paso” and *Breaking Bad* offer the same conflicted approach to women. Walt, who approached the illegal drug trade with the intent of providing for his family—which is in itself an old-world and hyper masculine ideal of the husband and father as the sole provider—begins to resent Skyler, even telling her dismissively at one point after she catches him lying about who Jesse is, “So right now, what I need is for you to do is climb down out of my ass. Can you do that for me, honey?” (1.2). The image of a “Wicked Feleena, the girl that I loved,” in Robbins’ song presents a conflicting view of affection and chauvinistic dismissal in much the same Walt does, and in a larger context, in the same way that Western films often portray women in a negative light. Even *Breaking Bad* has prompted actress

⁴ The spelling of Feleena is inconsistent. *Breaking Bad* uses Felina, and some sources on the internet site use that spelling when transcribing the lyrics. Yet Marty Robbins released a song called “Feleena (From El Paso) in 1966, which is a direct sequel of the original song. The name itself is a derivative of Fidelina, the name of a girl Robbins knew in grade school. For my purposes I will use Feleena when referencing the Robbins song specifically, but Felina when discussing the *Breaking Bad* episode.

Anna Gunn to pen a New York Times op-ed called discussing the online vitriol a certain group of toxic fans have levied at both her character and the actress herself for preventing Walt from carrying out his drug trade.⁵ In essence, Walt is committing acts of mass murder with the stated intention of familial obligation, but the inclusion of the song “El Paso” posits how dangerous this romanticized version of the Old West can be on a psyche. Walt has affixed himself to the same blindly chauvinistic and idealized version of the past as these toxic fans have done in their assessment of Skyler’s role in the show.

Breaking Bad also uses the climax of “El Paso” and its Western iconography of dying in a blaze of glory to parallel Walt’s final journey and to give clues as to Walt’s final fatal fate:

Something is dreadfully wrong for I feel
A deep burning pain in my side
Though I am trying to stay in the saddle
I am getting weary, unable to ride
But my love for
Felena is strong and I rise where I’ve fallen
Though I am weary I can’t stop to rest
I see the white puff of smoke from the rifle
I feel the bullet go deep in my chest (Robbins, 1957)

Walt’s fatal encounter is foreshadowed in the song’s details. His final encounter with the group of Neo-Nazis who betray him involves an M60 machine gun spraying bullets in an almost indiscriminate fashion, mowing down both the Neo-Nazis and puncturing Walt’s side. Walt stumbles to his meth lab, his beloved “Felina” of chemistry tanks and Blue Sky methamphetamine (5.16). Walt is reunited one last time with his most cherished love, chemistry, to die with the one aspect of his life that made him happy and that allowed him to die on his own terms.

“El Paso” also resonates with the iconography of the gunslinger on the United States/Mexico border, which has symbolic importance to *Breaking Bad* and its narrative tensions between American law enforcement and drug cartels. Alex Hunt argues that the regionalism of

⁵ The opinion piece “I Have A Character Issue” details incidents of fan disapproval for Skyler White, often manifesting in Facebook fan pages or chat rooms discussions called “I Hate Skyler White” or refer to her character as a harpy, bitch, or nagging shrew.

New Mexico is evident in the cinematography of the series, with its wide open spaces and desert landscape: “Such scenery often implicitly invokes language of the Western genre, as when Walter White and Jesse Pinkman find isolated scenes of canyon and prairie, notably To’hajiilee, in which to cook methamphetamine” (35). *Breaking Bad* is effective in borrowing the visual language of the West and in incorporating the gunfighter tropes into its Neo-Western iconography of both the desert and the globalized marketplace of neoliberalism and the drug trade (particularly with Gus Fring’s connections to the international conglomerate of Madrigal Electromotive). The border is a transition zone, a geopolitical boundary always in flux. Gloria Anzaldúa discusses this transitory nature of border conflicts: “The U.S.-Mexico border is *una herida abierta* [an open wound] where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds” (3). The bleeding of the third world, as Anzaldúa describes it, is emblematic of power enforcing its political and cultural will on an impoverished and marginalized community, and power is what Walt craves. Walt’s cognitive dissonance is that he secretly lusts after this sense of power and control but also needs to position himself as a subaltern in order to justify and rationalize his violent actions. Walt is in a psychological border territory, a state of cognitive dissonance, where one aspect of his consciousness re-imagines himself as a gunslinger, as in the Marty Robbins song, while the other positions him as a victim.

It is easy to see why Walt identifies with the cowboy mythology and the iconography of a stolid, tough, hard bitten but noble hero on the frontier of the United States’ border, even with all of its imperialist connotations (or, perhaps, even because of it). Jane Tompkins summarizes the cowboy hero in a way that emphasizes the aspects of the tough cowboy that Walt likely admires:

To be a man in the Western is to seem to grow out of the environment, which means to be hard, to be tough, to be unforgiving. The ethical system the Western proposes, which vindicates conflict, violence, and vengeance, and the social and political hierarchy it creates, putting adult white males on the top with everyone else in descending order beneath—this code never appears to reflect the interests or beliefs of any particular group, or of human beings at all, but seem to have been primordially dictated by nature itself. (73)

Walt’s identification clearly connects with the idea of vengeance, and indeed, with the idea of placing himself, as a disenfranchised and angry middle-class white male, at the top of the hierarchy. This image of the cowboy justifies his instinct towards the violent accumulation of

capital, the neoliberal impulse writ large, as intrinsic to an older social order of border expansion and the rougher frontier life. It is more than merely an expression of his own narcissism, hubris, and sense of entitlement.

More significant, however, is that Walt appropriates this iconography of the hard bitten cowboy on the frontier not through a primordial nature, as Tompkins suggests, but via a cassette tape, a product of mass media and modernity. Walt, as was clearly established in the pilot episode, is most certainly not the image of a rugged, laconic cowboy defined more by his actions than his words (in fact Walt, for the most part, tends to respond to stressful and violent incidents in the early seasons by wildly gesticulating with his hands and jabbering non-stop until the lies and deception and self-excuses overlap and compound on each other). Walt's main recourse to appropriating this iconography of the cowboy, with all of its outmoded masculinist, colonialist, patriarchal, and nationalist aspects, is through the highly romanticized imagery of a country and western musical selection. Walt, even in the prime of his Heisenberg days, was never tough in the traditional cowboy sense, as an outlaw on the fringes of society and belonging to an archaic social order, such as the song depicts, but rather was cold and calculating and manipulated or commanded other individuals to do his dirty work (such as having Jesse shoot Gale or having the Neo-Nazis kill the prisoners who were part of Gus' operations, and thus potential witnesses against him). The cowboy, then, is an image that Walt wants to aspire to, not the image that Walt believes resembles himself.

It is also notable that the show's diegetic use of Marty Robbins occurs when Walt finds a cassette tape on the dusty floor of the vehicle he steals—a largely obsolete media technology conveying obsolete ideals. The cassette tape can be read as a signifier of Walt reaching into the past to a time before the emergence of Heisenberg, to a time before his marriage to Skyler when he felt he had a chance to make something of himself and before he felt henpecked and controlled—an unfair assessment to be sure, considering how Walt does act when he is untethered, but this is his perspective. The cassette tape is a signifier of Walt's distorted ideals and his attempts to reach into a romanticized history of loner cowboys and outlaws as well as a desperate grasp at his life before when he felt he had more opportunities to become an important and entitled individual. This cassette tape is also a form of mass media not relevant to contemporary society, just as the colonialist and racist views of the Old West are no longer relevant to contemporary society.

Walt is clearly a frustrated individual who feels the impersonal forces of capitalism have impinged on his health and happiness. From this the viewer can trace the narrative trajectory of Walt's descent into criminality and how an individual without a sense of a future who easily becomes addicted to obtaining power, respect, and the adrenaline rush of being the drug kingpin Heisenberg. The references I discussed earlier in this section, the *narcocorrido* known as "The Ballad of Heisenberg" and the Marty Robbins' song "El Paso" work in the same manner, extending the narrative through the use of intertextuality to provide a larger framework from which the viewer can intuit Walt's psychological state, his eventual split into dual identities, and his romanticized conception of his own self-importance. This psychological split is evident in the final scene with the moment where Walt affectionately pats a chemical tank from his lab equipment. The bloody handprint Walt leaves on the tank as he dies from the bullet wound he received earlier in his final confrontation with the Neo-Nazis who double-crossed him, informs the viewer that violence is Walt's true legacy, as well as the violent legacy of the United States and neoliberalism, and the consequence of perverting his love of chemistry for the purpose of pure financial profit, as well as his romanticized notions of being a cowboy outlaw.

The final scene with the chemical tank is also an echo of the pilot episode where Walt received his diagnosis of terminal cancer in a doctor's office. In that scene Walt's mirrored reflection appears in the desk of the doctor relating the news to Walt of his terminal illness. The mirrored reflection indicates the initial moment of Walt's psychological split of the family man he presents to the public and, in the mirrored surface occupying the lower half of the screen, his darker and more violent side. A darker side that is fully commensurate with neoliberalism's free market approach and would emerge once Walt's moral self is decentered. In fact when Walt receives news that remarkably his inoperable cancer has (briefly) gone into remission in the episode "Four Days Out" Walt punches his mirrored reflection on a washroom towel dispenser (2.). For Walt being cancer-free is a terrifying prospect because he cannot go back to his previous identity as a family man. Walt despises the idea of having to recede into this powerless identity and abandon having to play gunslinger in the guise of Heisenberg. Walt's excuse for living has eroded, yet he cannot relinquish control and has to continue on the path he has set up as Heisenberg, even if that means a brutal and violent death along the lines recited in the "El Paso" song, and even if it continues to corrode his sense of self. In the end Walt's trajectory into criminality became less about family and more about fulfilling a deep, repressed anger and

frustration within himself. However noble his original intent, Walt has become corroded by his inner demons and is on the path to becoming more like his nemesis from earlier in the series, Gustavo Fring (Giancarlo Esposito). Gus, by contrast, embodies a complete integration of the criminal persona with the public image of a family man and community leader. Gus is representative of the detached, corporate evil that is emblematic of neoliberalism. Walt needs the presence of family to enable his rationalization of his violent acts and to aid in his self-delusion, while Gus only requires the iconographic representation of a family in order to maintain the visage of responsibility and family values, much like many corporations that profit under the deregulation of neoliberalism.

Intertextuality and Poetry in *Breaking Bad*

3.1 Whitman and Shelley on Television

While some of the musical selections are more esoteric the two main poetic references of the series to American Transcendentalist Walt Whitman and British Romantic Percy Bysshe Shelley are more in the canonical tradition. As such, the use of poets who write within heavily individualist literary movements emphasizes how individualism operates within Walt's internal perspective.⁶ The perspectives of Transcendentalism and Romanticism confer a sense of how Walt, who in his desexualized and banal existence of the suburban United States is neither spiritually inclined nor sensual, manipulates and distorts ideology based on what is convenient for him to appropriate. The use of poets who write within heavily individualist literary movements emphasizes how Walt appropriates the notion of individualism to serve his own ends. Walt adopts the privileged perspectives of both Transcendentalism and Romanticism, most notably Walt Whitman and Percy Bysshe Shelley, when it is convenient for him to do so.

Walt's association with Whitman is reinforced with an important plot development when Walt's DEA brother-in-law Hank finds the inscription in the book *Leaves of Grass* in the episode "Gliding Over All": "To my other favorite W.W. It's an honor working with you, Fondly, G.B." (5.8). Similarity in handwriting allows Hank to finally discover that Walt is the "Blue Sky" crystal methamphetamine dealer he has been chasing since the first season (Figure 6). The multiple references to Whitman's poetry establish an important symbolic connection with Walt's love of science and his distortion of democratic principles and notions of individual freedom to serve his own selfish purposes. More than an alliterative connection between Walter White and Walt Whitman, or even the shared name of Walter Whit(e)man, there is the connective tissue between them of both science and perfectionism. Walt Whitman was known to be interested in science. Some of his columns in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* newspaper were about topics such as chemistry and agriculture. *Leaves of Grass* has a few poems dedicated to scientific thought: about decomposition and the cycle of grass and mulch, for instance, or about attending science

⁶ To avoid confusion over the similarity of the names Walter White and Walt Whitman, when I use the name Walt it is exclusively to indicate the character Walter White and I will rely on the last name Whitman when discussing the poet Walt Whitman.

lectures.⁷ Gary Sloan comments that Whitman’s admiration for science was well-known and that he had “a wide-ranging interest in contemporary science—astronomy, geology, physics, chemistry, biology” (52). Both Walt and Whitman also share a sense of perfectionism. Whitman spent most of his writing career perfecting and revising *Leaves of Grass*, just as Walt on *Breaking Bad* spends much of his time perfecting his “Blue Sky” meth formula. So while the two might initially seem to be an odd pairing, they nevertheless share enough in their respective psychological profiles that intertextual references to Whitman on *Breaking Bad* become significant.

Looking at Whitman as a recurring motif in *Breaking Bad* I posit that his poetry, and *Leaves of Grass* in particular, reflects the distorted lens through which Walt views himself. Legitimately or not, Walt does feel like a victim of the same oppressive capitalist forces that Whitman is critical of in his poetry. Walt is undone by the blind pursuit of the American dream and strives to break away from societal constraints through the constant perfection of his work. Walt exists as an inversion of Whitman’s democratic and individualistic philosophy. Whereas Whitman extols a transcendentalist and verdant vision, Walt’s artistic perfection takes place in the dry and barren New Mexico desert. Whitman was a sensualist in his poetry, and Walt works to perfect an illicit substance that people use to escape from reality which exaggerates, cranks up, and ultimately negates Whitman’s sensualism. In this manner, Walt can be viewed as a corruption of individualism for the purpose of satiating his own ego. The connections, I believe, extend beyond the poems cited in *Breaking Bad*, and a reading of Whitman’s larger *oeuvre* deepens this symbolic connection between the series and the intertextual references. To this end I will explore how Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* helps delineate Walt’s descent into corruption, and then I will examine how the series uses Percy Bysshe Shelley—particularly his poem “Ozymandias” in the episode of the same name—to explore the inevitable fall of Walt’s empire.

3.2 Walt, Individualism, and Science

Vince Gilligan explains in *Breaking Bad: The Official Book* how Whitman developed as a key theme: “Walt Whitman is integral to *Breaking Bad* now; in hindsight we did not set out to

⁷ Specifically “This Compost!” from *Leaves of Grass* which describes in poetic language the process of decay and regeneration.

make it way” (47). What originated as a reference in one episode when Walt’s lab assistant Gale Boetticher, who replaces Jesse Pinkman at Gus Fring’s insistence, recites the poem “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer,” evolved to become an important symbolic element in *Breaking Bad*. Gilligan also adds that Whitman’s presence in the series resolved an important plot complication: “Later on, my writers and I realized that Gale—having given that book of poetry to Walt in that episode—was an interesting backdoor to have Walt discovered by his brother-in-law Hank” (47). The gradual evolution of the importance of Whitman as a symbol in *Breaking Bad*, including his origin as a plot device, informs the viewer’s sense of the series’ overarching themes and ideas. The poetry of Whitman also expresses a unique function of intertextuality: incorporating disparate elements of high culture with a medium typically associated with low brow and popular culture. The use of poetry in a visual medium expands the methods by which the show can interrogate or question its subject.

Gale introduces Walt to the poetry of Whitman when he recites the poem “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer” (3.6):

When I heard the learn’d astronomer
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,
When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide, and measure them,
When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with much applause in the lecture-room,
How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,
Till rising and gliding out I wander’d off by myself
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,
Look’d up in perfect silence to the stars (228)

Gale recites the poem in the episode “Sunset” after being questioned by Walt about his particular path towards criminality, to which Gale responds, “I’m definitely libertarian. Consenting adults want what they want” (3.6). For Gale science means doing the public the service of providing a clean and reliable high, and it allows him the opportunity to do the actual lab work required for chemistry rather than having to follow a traditional academic route as a profession. The scene in which Gale recites the poem occurs just after he probes Walt with questions about the unusual dosage and cooking procedures for adding phenylacetic acid to his formula. At this point Gus is priming Gale to take over Walt’s position in the lab, and Walt, becoming more and more

suspicious of Gale's constant interrogation about the procedures he uses to create a 98% pure strain of methamphetamine, spends a few episodes being as vague as possible so as to prevent his inevitable demise at the hands of Gus once Gale is confident enough to cook on his own. Gale's speech thus has the unintended consequence of insuring his own death at the hands of Walt (who manipulates Jesse into shooting Gale under the guise of self-protection) in the episode "Full Measure" (3.13). Gale is a talented chemist in his own right, and when he relates to Walt his backstory about not wanting to jump through hoops and take orders he naively informs Walt of his own ambitions:

I was on my way, jumping through all the hoops, kissing the proper behinds, attending to all the non-chemistry that one finds occupied by. You know that world. That is not what I signed on for. I love the lab. Because it's all still magic, you know? Chemistry, I mean, once you lose all that... [Walt interjects]: It is. It is still magic. It still is. (3.16)

Walt, far from desiring freedom in the spiritual sense Whitman describes, only desires absolute control. Freedom for Walt is personal freedom to live according to his own design and selfish desires, and it precludes the potential for any other individual to adhere to freedom in a democratic sense if it interferes with personal financial goals and the fulfillment of his own egoist wishes.

In much the same way Whitman rejects the metrical rules of poetry in order to facilitate a new sense of aesthetic and literary democracy, Walt and Gale reject academic rules for a libertarian ethos which produces a better, cleaner, safer high without any added adulterants. The democratic citizen in Whitman's vision, as Patrick Redding contends, evokes a "plain style [that] would enable the poet to represent the shared patterns of speech and understanding necessary to a thriving public sphere" (673). Walt by contrast finds magic not in the plain speech of science, or even in the proliferation of science via education, but rather in an undemocratic and elite mastery of the discipline. In fact Walt expresses a distinct embarrassment at being resigned to such a plebeian fate as being a teacher when at a party with his more successful university colleagues in the episode "Gray Matter" (1.5). Gale's dubious self-designation as a libertarian is problematic in that, contrary to Whitman's democratic philosophy, his libertarian ethos leaves a wake of addiction and destruction behind that neither capitalist nor socialist medicine and policing, let alone libertarian medicine or policing, could fix. Much like Walt, Gale is

appropriating a politically convenient philosophy to justify his chosen profession in the drug trade. Gale's proposed justification is that at least he is offering methamphetamine users a clean, unadulterated product without any extra toxins, or, rather, toxins that are not natural to the process of making methamphetamine, while ignoring that he is essentially producing a product which requires the disguise of an industrial laundromat to cover up the heavy chemical smell. Gale's rationale proposes individual freedom at the expense of both the larger sociological problems with drug addiction as well as the environmental factor of chemical pollution—an environmental factor, it seems, radically discordant with Whitman's Transcendentalist vision of spiritual naturalism.

Both Walt and Gale misuse science for their own selfish needs, whether they are Walt's financial rewards or Gale's desire to pursue life according to his own design. Yet neither can truly be said to be scientific freethinkers in a rationalist sense. Walt's appropriation of the free thinker role in Whitman's poem is evident in the episode "...And the Bag's in the River." In this episode a flashback of a younger Walt during his university years shows him with his first girlfriend Gretchen Schwartz (Jessica Hecht), working out the biological composition of the human body and coming up 0.111958% shy of a complete chemical profile (1.6). Walt and Gretchen ponder what the inexplicable missing element could be, with Gretchen postulating that it could be the soul. Walt rebuffs her: "The soul? There's nothing here but chemistry" (1.6). This scene places Walt closer on Whitman's spectrum to the stuffy lecturer, comfortable with his columns and measurements, the chemists and geologists Whitman also writes about in "Song of Myself": "Gentlemen, to you the first honors always! / Your facts are useful, and yet they are not my dwelling" (43). According to David S. Reynolds, "Whitman also found in science confirmation of his optimistic instincts about the origin and nature of humans and their place in nature" (79). Walt rejects the rules of society because they do not accommodate his individualistic vision, but the rules of science are the profitable means by which he can establish his legacy, not a mystical transcendence in the way Whitman views science. Walt does not fully fit within the conceptual framework of Whitman's democratic ethos, yet much like the show's appropriation of the subaltern folklore of the *narcocorrido*, Walt's adoption of Whitman's spiritual democracy is an incorporation of whatever is psychologically convenient for him in his self-rationalizing project of reconstructing his identity.

The poem that entrances Walt when he hears Gale recite it, “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer,” extols a mystical, navel-gazing view of science that Walt, in his demanding and exacting nature—Walt’s condescending attitude towards Jesse in the pilot clearly mark him as the stuffy lecturer obsessed with the charts and diagrams Whitman finds sickening—would not likely abide by. Joseph Beaver argues, “There is nothing anti-science in Whitman; but he nearly always reserves a higher function for the poet” (131). Beaver’s optimistic appraisal, however, is far from consensus. As M. Jimmie Killingsworth puts forth, “Overall, scholars are reluctant to see the poet at odds with the science of his day” (156). Regardless of which aspect of Whitman’s approach to science is valid, at the very least it could be argued that Whitman’s view of science is unorthodox. So while Whitman’s reverence for science unrestrained by the limitations of his profession as a schoolteacher might appeal to Walt, he all but ignores that Whitman viewed science as an instrument of poetry. Mark Noble comments, “Whitman drew his ‘common air’ from a popular scientific culture of the 1840s and 1850s in which thinkers were recovering the axioms of a material universe from eighteenth century deism and incorporating them into a progressive consensus regarding humanistic principles” (256). So while Whitman and obviously Walt share a common interest in science, Whitman is arguing for the fusion of poetry, art, and science into a progressive democratic ideal, whereas Walt is manipulating those ideals into a distinctly individualistic and neoliberal philosophy that best benefits his endeavors.

In Whitman’s vision of a spiritually-informed democracy everyone and everything is connected in a larger, somewhat mystical, and collective: “For every atom belonging to me as good as belongs to you” (24). This belief is an equalizing gesture, one where every aspect of the natural world, regardless of size and scale, has an impact on the rest of the world through interconnectedness. The corollary to everything being interconnected is that “Whoever degrades another degrades me” (43). Walt’s subconscious copying of the traits of his victims is an example of the negative consequences of Whitman’s collective philosophy of interconnectedness and an absorption of the toxicity of his criminal underworld, as well as emblematic of a power dynamic. Visually this idea of absorbing the negative aspects of an interconnected world where every atom belongs to everyone is rendered on screen by Walt adopting the traits of the people he has killed, even if he has not witnessed these characteristics personally, such as when he unconsciously imitates Gus’ habit of laying out a rolled up towel at the base of the toilet before vomiting in a later episode titled “Salud” (4.10). Bryan Cranston identifies this strategy as a

deliberate one on his and the writers' parts in the DVD audio commentary when he discusses how to perform for a particular scene:

Something that you [Vince Gilligan] wrote earlier on, after the demise of Gus, was that Walt was somehow gaining some of his tendencies. And that's why I didn't want to move in this scene. I just wanted to sit there patiently while [Walt's lawyer Saul Goodman] is gesturing and figuring it out." (Cranston 2014)

Walt's calm and detached demeanor in this scene is markedly different from his usual nervous sputtering and resembles more the quiet calm of Gus, who rarely gesticulates, speaks, or even make movements that are not precise and necessary. This is evident in the episode "Box Cutter" where Gus kills his own henchman Victor, played by Jeremiah Bitsui (4.1). Esposito performs the scene in a very exacting and precise manner, remaining speechless while Walt is gesticulating wildly and talking non-stop in defense of his own life. The imitation of a rival drug dealer like Gus functions as a sign that corruption is starting to take hold of Walt's psyche and that his core identity is eroding as he begins to embody a simulacrum of various personalities. In multiple instances Walt copies rival drug dealers or individuals he has killed: he starts cutting the crusts off his sandwich like Krazy-8 (Max Arciniega) does in "No Más" (3.1); he warns another high-level dealer, Lydia Rodarte-Quayle (Laura Fraser), to "learn to take yes for an answer," in "Gliding Over All" (4.2), a strikingly similar warning to the one Mike Ehrmantraut (Jonathan Banks), Gus Fring's right-hand man, gave Walt in "Thirty-Eight Snub" (4.2); and after killing Mike, he changes his preference for neat scotch to Mike's preference for scotch on the rocks in "Gliding Over All" (5.8). Cumulatively, these incidents of copying act as an indicator of how Walt's toxic environment is affecting his character. Walt conceives of himself as immune to the consequences, convinced that he can be involved in the drug trade without any negative effects to him or his family. Walt's copying is reflective of the consumerist mentality brought on by neoliberal excess and what Zygmunt Bauman categorizes as an essential element of capitalism's "liquid modernity": "Given the intrinsic volatility and unfixity of all or most identities, it is the ability to 'shop around' in the supermarket of identities, the degree of genuine or putative consumer freedom to select one's identity and to hold it as long as desired, that becomes the royal road to the fulfilment of identity fantasies" (83). Walt, very much a participant in postmodern consumer culture, is shopping around for a new identity beyond his previously

emasculated and meek self, appropriating identities of dangerous individuals who he feels occupy a more masculine or authoritative role in society.

Walt is psychologically adrift and, as such, is beginning to lose his core self, in a sense echoing the “many, many deaths I’ll sing” in the episode named after Whitman’s poem, “Gliding O’er All” (232). Much like Heisenberg’s wave function, the two Walters—the genial family man Walt and the ruthless drug kingpin Heisenberg—cannot co-exist and as the Heisenberg persona comes more into force the Walt of previous years disappears. The two halves cannot be observed at the same time. Robert S. Schaible addresses Werner Heisenberg’s wave function in connection with Whitman’s mystical Self: “Whitman’s Self stands to some postulated metaphysical reality in virtually the same fashion as the wave function stands to Heisenberg’s prephysical reality, the *potentia*, or potential-for-being” (41). In this case rather than a spiritual self, as in Whitman’s poem, Walt’s dormant *potentia* is a corroded and decayed self, and once that aspect of Walt’s identity comes into full effect the ordinary self of Walt ceases to exist.

That Walt is losing his core self is evident in the episode “Crawl Space.” The final scene of that episode depicts a harried and frantic Walt rushing home after being threatened by rival drug kingpin Gus in the desert (4.11). In fear of his life, Walt contacts lawyer and money launderer Saul Goodman (Bob Odenkirk), who in turn employs the services of a professional “disappearer” named Ed (Robert Forster) whose skill is in forging new identities, social security numbers, and associated documents. In essence, escaping with the disappearer would constitute a final and complete erasure of the Walter White identity, since he would have to eliminate any familial, professional, or personal contacts other than his immediate family. Walt flees to his home to gather the half a million dollars required to make himself and his family disappear, only to discover a large portion of his money is gone. We see Walt scared, rooting around in the crawl space for the money, and eventually crumpling into a fetal position in tears when he finds a large portion of it is missing (Skylar having given it to her boss Ted Beneke, played by Christopher Cousins, in order to bail him out of back taxes incurred by Ted after he attempted to deceive the Internal Revenue Service), fearing that he will not escape Gus. The soundtrack is that of a heartbeat, as if Walt is connected to a life support machine, figuratively in his death throes, signaling one of the “many deaths I’ll sing” (232). Walt changes position and begins to cackle maniacally, and the camera angle shifts to a vantage point looking downward at him as the frame slowly zooms out. The soundtrack has shifted to white noise, the heart monitor flat lining, and

the image consists of a receding shot of Walt surrounded by the black frame of the crawl space (figure 1). The change in the camera's trajectory from the ground level looking upward to a bird's-eye view looking down on Walt, the change in the soundtrack to indistinct white noise, and Walt's laughing in the face of terror are all emblematic of the dissolution of Walt's old identity and the emergence of Heisenberg. The image evokes a grave, with the square space surrounding Walt resembling a coffin.⁸ Even the similarity in clothing between the two images (figures 1 and 2) reveals that Walt has no need to don the black Heisenberg apparel and pork pie hat. By this point Walt has been degraded to the extent that he is now too far into the Heisenberg persona and has lost nearly everything, and all that remains is his plan for revenge on the Neo-Nazis who betrayed him. The terminal cancer that was in remission briefly in "Crawl Space" has returned in "Felina" and has spread and consumed both Walt's physical life and his sense of self, leaving only his desire to eliminate the Heisenberg persona by eliminating his corporeal existence.



Figure 1. Image Courtesy of AMC Network

⁸ This bird's-eye view is also replicated in the final episode "Felina" when Walt is fatally wounded, evoking the metaphorical death of Walt in "Crawl Space" to echo the literal death of Heisenberg in "Felina." (5.16)



Figure 2. Image courtesy of AMC network.

At this point in the series Walt has gone too far into a psychological abyss of violence and has given in so much to a lust for power that he has become a false identity, with Heisenberg lurking underneath the thin veneer of normality. One of the visual indicators foreshadowing this inevitable decline is the painting in the doctor's office in the pilot episode: a Winslow Homer knock-off of a man in a sailboat looking back on his family on the shore, which reappears in "Gliding Over All" (5.8). This time, however, the painting is dingy and in the den of the Neo-Nazis that Walt is working with. Its initial appearance in the doctor's office, like the mirrored reflection that signifies the beginnings of the schism, appears here to signify Walt's complete isolation from his family (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Image courtesy of AMC network.

The appearance of the painting in “Gliding over All” echoes the line in Whitman’s poem: “As a ship on the waters advancing / the voyage of the soul—not life alone” (232). Walt might have procured the necessary funds for his family, but working with Neo-Nazis—in effect bringing about the full collusion of capitalism with fascism—is a pollution of the soul that contravenes Whitman’s promotion of *vox populi* and constitutes a step too far for Walt. For Whitman democratic commitment is obtained, as Jason Frank states, “through the poetic depiction of the people as themselves a sublimely poetic, world-making power” (403). Freedom in Whitman’s conceptual framework is about true aesthetic, rather than political, equality, and not about a self-interested notion to do as one pleases according to one’s own needs. Now that the impetus for Walt’s criminal career is negated by his desire to claim some sort of legacy in a selfish act of hubris, any claims of freedom and disenfranchisement have to be weighed against the violence of his actions and the parties involved in those actions—all without any self-justifying rationalizations.

Walt's view of freedom does not accord with Whitman's sense of the term but instead with attempting to gain control of life and direct his own destiny. Walt initially rejects chemotherapy as a method to manage his own fate and control his own death, which in his mind is correlated with ultimate freedom. In "The Fly" Walt expresses anguish that even his terminal cancer has decided to thwart his control over his mortality by going into an unexpected remission (3.10). Not only can Walt not control his own death, but his life with his family and Skyler's reactions to his criminal lifestyle cannot be controlled. The facade of a happy family man forces Walt to subsume his Heisenberg persona and revert back to who he was in the first season. Reverting back to a banal, suburban existence leads to a sense of hubris in which he lets down his guard, convinced that no one can pose a threat to him anymore and that finally now he is in complete control of his fate, which leads to the events that spell his death in a hail of bullets and glory. Hubris and the base desire to enact revenge are what begin Walt's final journey and what end his quest for revenge in the final season of *Breaking Bad*. It becomes apparent that Walt's admiration for the individualism of Whitman is a gross distortion of its democratic ideals in order to support what is essentially a neoliberal project of serving only his own needs.

The multiple references to the poetry of Whitman add insight into how Walt appropriates psychologically convenient explanations for his behavior beyond what can be justified under the rubric of family. When Walt hears the poem "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer" he incorporates it into his rationalization for his non-traditional career pursuit as a chemist of illegal substances, identifying with the sense of freedom and autonomy Whitman professes in the poem. Yet by all accounts Walt was a fairly traditional and strict teacher, placing him more in the position of the stuffy lecturer in Whitman's poem than in that of the poet leaving the lecture hall to stare at the stars Walt truly admires chemistry, and I would even say that he was not lying or distorting the truth when he told Gale that it is still magic, but it has been corroded by his pursuit of power. Much like Heisenberg's wave function Walt occupies two simultaneous positions as both Walt and Heisenberg, existing as both quanta at once until he decides to occupy the Heisenberg role solely. Walt exists as both wave and particle because until a certain point in the series he could have reformed and truly atoned for his past misdeeds (while he does briefly abandon his career in the methamphetamine business, it was only under duress from Skyler, and even then he was tempted all too easily back into the business). In the end Walt has to die many deaths, to paraphrase Whitman's poetry, because of the various identities residing in him. Walt's

love of chemistry is now a regret for his past love and a realization that he has tainted his one true calling in life with a selfish pursuit of rapid capital growth and the base appeal of exponential wealth.

3.3. “King of Kings”: The Rise and Fall of Walt’s Empire

Breaking Bad highlights the work of another poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley, whose poem “Ozymandias” is also the title of the third-to-last episode in the final season of the series (5.14). The use of Shelley’s poem is indicative of Walt’s crumbling empire. In both Shelley’s “Ozymandias” and the *Breaking Bad* episode of the same name the concept of hubris and being punished for grandiose projects that serve an individual’s egotism are central aspects of the each work. The episode is not only titled after the poem, but also features the poem in an advertisement put out by AMC in which Bryan Cranston recites the poem in its entirety to time-lapse images of the New Mexico desert:⁹

I met a traveler from an antique land,
Who said — ‘Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert... near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal these words appear:
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings,
Look on my Works ye mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away’ (310-311)

The themes of the poem and those of the series connect and give the viewer insight into where the character of Walt/Heisenberg is heading. The lines “Round the decay / Of that colossal

⁹ “Ozymandias- As Read by Bryan Cranston: *Breaking Bad*.” July 29, 2013, www.youtube.com.

wreck” evidently foretell a dim and unpromising future for him. Like *Breaking Bad*, “Ozymandias” also works with a strict narrative focus. Despite the presence of multiple voices in the poem, just as there are multiple supporting roles in *Breaking Bad*, the imagery of the poem centers around a singular character, the despot Ramses II, who serves a similar role in “Ozymandias” as Walter White does in *Breaking Bad*.

One of the most notable similarities between Shelley’s “Ozymandias” and the *Breaking Bad* episode is the use of multiple voices to narrate the story. In Shelley’s poem there are at least three voices, potentially four if the sculptor’s vision is considered another voice. The first voice in Shelley’s poem is a vaguely defined “I” acting as an omnipresent narrator commenting on the past, while *Breaking Bad* introduces the viewer to perspectives on Walt from outside his personal voice, beginning with a flashback. The flashback is to Walt and Jesse’s first cook and almost resembles a deleted scene from the pilot episode (5.14). The flashback acts as a reminder of Walt’s origins as an inexperienced and somewhat inept distributor of methamphetamine, in contrast to the fully formed Heisenberg persona, but it also evokes the “traveler” in Shelley’s poem. Theo D’haen notes, “Shelley’s narrator has knowledge of Egypt only through someone else’s eyes. In other words, he got the tale filtered through the ‘traveler’s memory” (113). With *Breaking Bad* this multiplicity of narrative voices means the viewer who has encountered in earlier seasons Walt’s first-person perspective as a struggling family man is now confronted with the image of Walt as a violent and dangerous monster. The filtered perspective of a second-hand viewer is echoed in *Breaking Bad*’s “Ozymandias” where, perhaps for the first time, it is the perspective of his family that is privileged. Just as Ozymandias’ monument fades into dust, leaving only the bottom half of a grand statue, Walt’s Winnebago dissolves and leaves the viewer only with an image of the vast New Mexico desert that lingers for a few seconds before the viewer is thrust into the present and the conclusion to the conflict with the Neo-Nazis (5.14). The viewer is reminded that Walt has descended too far into his Heisenberg persona to ever reclaim his past life as a family man.

This multiple perspective is evident in the scene where Walt rushes home, just after being double-crossed by the gang of Neo-Nazis who have killed Hank and his fellow DEA agent Steven Gomez (Steven Michael Quezada). In a frantic state and covered in dirt and blood, Walt demands his family pack up everything and go on the run with him (5.14). In the hectic scramble Walt fails to take into account that his wife and his son do not want to risk their lives because he

is in danger by his own actions. There is a spatial distance between the characters as the viewer sees Skylar and Walt Jr. (RJ Mitte) from Walt's perspective of looking down at them. Walt bellows at them in confusion, "WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU!?! WE'RE A FAMILY! ... [then quietly mumbles] we're a family" (5.14). Walt's final illusion has been shattered and any pretense of normality has been stripped. Walt can the finally, if reluctantly, admit to himself that instead of being the hero of his own narrative he has indeed become the villain in his family's narrative.

The multiple perspectives in the episode "Ozymandias" also serves to remind the viewer of just how isolated and insular Walt's view of the world truly is. The series, by necessity, focuses on Walt's transformation into the Heisenberg persona, and the perspectives of other individuals, even that of his family, is not explored as deeply until this episode. This narrow focus, however, is important to establishing not just how self-centered Walt's view of the world is, but by extension just how narrow the view of American exceptionalism is as well. When Walt is finally without the support of his family his psyche finally cracks and disassembles, much in the same way the colossal titan of American neoliberal policies crack and disassemble without social support systems (such as unions, affordable health care, welfare, unemployment insurance, etc.) because it devalues the populace that comprise its nation. Heisenberg's fall, becoming the colossal wreck of the poem, is also the United States' fall as it becomes increasingly destructive in its capitalist excess.

Walt as Heisenberg has become the colossal wreck of the poem, leaving only the wreckage of his disrupted family life. Indeed, as we see in the flash forward to this final season Walt's home has been abandoned with only graffiti of a hastily scrawled Heisenberg left on the wall as a reminder. Everything is gone, and just as Ozymandias left only part of a statue as a reminder of his legacy, Walt has left only a husk of a house whose only occupants are squatters using the pool as an impromptu skate park. While Ozymandias had at least an artifact, though one partially eaten away by the sands of time, Walt has even less of a legacy: only graffiti as a reminder of his previous life. As Heisenberg, Walt was truly the king, but capitalism being as ephemeral and transitory as it is, all that Walt has to remind him of his Heisenberg glory will likely fade away with the paint or crumble if the house is taken down. And yet, as Walter Stephens asserts, hubris and punishment are not the only themes of the poem: "Shelley's Ozymandias was a braggart, but the enormous fragments of his statue assure us that the

achievements he vaunts were real—a city, perhaps a whole civilization, once stood here, even if time and the elements have destroyed it” (S156). By contrast Walt’s house is a squatter’s den and far less impressive than the monuments of the Egyptians. While the sands have eroded some of their significance and previous glory, enough archaeological evidence of the artistic achievements achieved by Ozymandias remain, far past the best before date of Heisenberg’s achievements in the drug trade.

Walt’s ruined and desolate house in the flash forwards of *Breaking Bad* reflects another facet of Shelley’s poetic imagery: the dissolution of political power and the inevitable decay of art and architecture. In Shelley’s Romanticist estimation, the distortion of art as a means of strengthening imperialistic ambition, such as seen with Ramses II (Ozymandias), is a gross distortion of art as an authentic means of personal expression. For both Ozymandias and Walt their respective empires have been built on cruelty, whether it was on the backs of slaves, as with Ramses II, or Walter building his empire through violence and ultimately at the expense of the health of those who become addicted to his product. In Shelley’s poem there is at least a trace of sentimentality with the lost artistry of the Ozymandias’ monument. Walt, however, denigrates the purity of his love for chemistry by using it to produce a highly addictive narcotic with no lasting value other than to create the desire to consume more methamphetamine.

Methamphetamine as a product is entirely predicated on the process of consumption, much like capitalism itself. Even though Walt declares to Jesse at one point that, “I’m in the empire business,” the reality is otherwise (5.6) What Shelley’s ambiguity reveals is that Ozymandias, in a sense, did form a legacy in that archaeological remnants are now on display at the British Museum in London. Walt, as an expression of pure capitalist greed, attempts to create legacy by a product whose sole purpose is to be consumed and devoured and replaced by a craving for more, not entirely dissimilar to how capitalism creates false desires.

So while Shelley denigrates the tyranny of Ozymandias for exploiting the labor of slaves to fulfill his imperialist ambition through efforts to immortalize his image, there is also a feeling of loss over the impressive nature of what must have been a great work of artistry now lost to time. By contrast, Walt’s grand project was purely to produce a product for the sole purpose of profit. The growth of Walt’s product is dependent on catering to the most harmful instincts of an individual, in essence a perfect example of the hollowness of neoliberalism. Walt’s Blue Sky methamphetamine encapsulates the neoliberal model because, by nature of its status as an illegal

substance, it cannot be regulated and the people imbibing the narcotic are unable to rely on any social support systems that neoliberalism seeks to dismantle. The inevitable consequence of unchecked capitalism which allows for the distribution of harmful substances, whether it is methamphetamine, the pollution of the industrial laundromat Walt operates out of for a few seasons, or even fast food chicken, is that nothing will be left afterwards but wreckage, not even the decayed remains of a monument. Shelley's line, "Tell that its sculptor well those passions read" (310), as if the poet cannot truly find himself dismissing such a monumental work of art, even if it is a statue celebrating the subjugation and enslavement of those beneath his station. As Anne Janowitz comments on the lines regarding the sculptor's passions: "The de-monumentalization of the statue is recouped by the ghostly image of a monument restored by and to the imagination" (319). The passions of the sculptors achieve distance from a purely historical reading of the colossi in much the same way that Heisenberg became a legend in the drug dealing community.

In the same way, Walt is not presented as purely evil, and the show ensures that our own "passions" mimic that of the sculptor's artistic passions for a tyrant. Audience sympathy needs to comprehend Walt as a corrupted figure whose nobility has been slowly dissolved by his ever-increasing ambition to the point where the allure of Heisenberg erodes his moral compass. Up to the point Walt witnesses the murder of his brother-in-law Hank he has been able to rationalize his violent actions. Even with the death of Jesse's girlfriend Jane Margolis (Krysten Ritter), whom Walt watched overdose on heroin in "Phoenix", he could absolve his own moral conscience by fooling himself into believing that the overdose would have happened regardless of what actions he took (2.12). Although, as Bryan Cranston notes in his memoirs, the original script by John Shiban involved Walt actively turning Jane onto her back to ensure that she would choke on her own vomit. Cranston notes his shock and outrage at reading this interpretation of Walt:

Walt had killed in the past, but his brushes with violence could always be ascribed to self-preservation. Killing Jane would make him a murderer. Worse. Jesse was more than Walt's partner, he was something like a son. And Jesse loves Jane. If Walt pushes Jane onto her back, to her death? That would be the most diabolical betrayal. (204)

Even with the individuals Walt was responsible for killing (either directly, or, as more often the case, indirectly), Walt could rationalize that their involvement in the criminal underworld mitigated any moral culpability he had in engineering their murders. With Hank, who was fulfilling his moral and legal obligation as a law enforcement officer to arrest a drug kingpin, Walt has no escape from the moral consequences of his actions. When, during the flashback sequence, he says to Jesse, “The reaction has begun,” he is not only referring to the chemical reaction, but to a causal chain of events reaching a point beyond even his capacity for self-denial (5.14). Just as Shelley notes the cyclical nature of all things, so too is Walt now part of the process of decay and death.

While Jane’s death might have been a catalyst for Walt’s downward spiral, it is Hank’s death that signifies a point beyond redemption for him. Immediately after Jack shoots Hank, the camera zooms into Walt’s startled expression to provide a close-up of Walt looming large in the frame, invoking the line “Half sunk a shattered visage lies” (310). To emphasize this scene as the inevitable conclusion to Walt’s trajectory the episode director Rian Johnson added the effect of puffs of sand billowing out from Walt’s head, as if this was the collapse of a colossus. In effect Walt’s psyche is cracking and disassembling like the earth beneath him in much the same way Ozymandias’ statue cracks, leaving only the “colossal wreck” (310). Nature as an overwhelming force also reminds us of one of the primary themes of the western genre, that of the brutal conditions of frontier life. As Jane Tompkins writes, “The classical Western landscape is a tableau of towering rock and stretching sand where nothing lives. Its aura of death, both parodied and insisted on in place names like Deadwood and Tombstone, is one of the genre’s most essential features” (24). The desert is an unforgiving landscape that indiscriminately levels the king and rancher alike. For Tompkins, “The apparent emptiness makes the land desirable not only as a stage on which to perform and as a territory to master” (74). This is an appealing idea for those who want to prove their toughness by being able to survive, and even possibly prosper in, the harshness of the desert. The unfortunate reality is that the desert eventually claims everyone, whether kings or cowboys, and their artefacts become “half sunk” in the sand.

The lines in Shelley’s poem “Ozymandias,” “half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown / And wrinkled lip of cold command,” are visualized in the *Breaking Bad* episode “Ozymandias” when we see a close up of Walt hitting the dirt (Figure 4). In a visually similar image in the episode “Hermanos,” we see Gus fall, and a similarly framed camera angle displays

his tortured expression as he sees his friend and business associate Max gunned down (figure 5). For Gus this was the moral turning point where he went from a selfless individual willing to mentor someone and pay for their university education to a ruthless and calculating figure. There is a point when Walt could have stopped and redeemed himself. He does attempt to extricate himself from the drug trade and from producing “Blue Sky” methamphetamine, but the international profits generated by Madrigal Electromotive, the company that lures him back into business, prove too alluring to resist for long. Walt continues his path well past the point where he can be redeemed (either internally through self-forgiveness or by his family), eventually corroding the man who was Walt and is now fully Heisenberg. The two images also bring into focus the line from “Ozymandias” of “half sunk a shattered visage lies,” reinforcing the cyclical nature of tyrants (figures 4 and 5). Both Walt and Gus originated as sympathetic characters (although in terms of the series, the viewer does not see this aspect of Gus’ personality until a fourth season flashback in the episode “Hermanos”), and both become addicted to the (temporary) power and prestige they wield.

The lines “half sunk a shattered visage lies” also bring into mind Gus Fring’s death in “Face Off” when the viewer sees Gus being mortally wounded. In that episode a bomb planted on Gus’ rival Hector “Tio” Salamanca (Mark Margolis) explodes and ravages half of Gus’ face, although the viewer only knows that after the camera slowly pans from his clean, undamaged side to his burned, skeletal side (4.13). This imagery reflects the two sides of Gus as family man and business leader and the darker, hidden side of his role as a drug kingpin who finances Walt’s methamphetamine operation. A parallel can also be drawn between Gus’ two-faced death and the lines which refer to Ramses II and the decaying remains of his monument to power partially submerged in the sand. Ramses II, much like Gus, desires to present himself as a great and magnanimous leader, but beneath this public image is a cruel and malevolent aspect hidden deeply and out of sight. The inevitable consequence of living a double life, for both Walt and Gus, is that there is a constant need to suppress this hidden self until it ends up causing a decay in anything that Walt and Gus may have had in their lives prior to their entry into drug dealing.



Figure 4. Image Courtesy of AMC Network



Figure 5. Image Courtesy of AMC Network

The “Ozymandias” episode of *Breaking Bad* essentially functions as the octave portion of a sonnet. In a sonnet, such as Shelley’s “Ozymandias,” the first eight lines are grouped together as an octave, while the last six, the sestet, operate as the poem’s conclusion. The octave establishes the poem’s concerns, and the sestet represents the resolution to the issue posed in the first section of the poem. The refracted appearance of Walt’s image in mirrored or glass-like surfaces, and even the distant camera angle when Walt and his family clash violently and he sees his frightened son Walt Jr. (R.J. Mitte) trying to protect his mother, embody the more objective or distant nature of the octave section of the sonnet (5.14). Walt cannot objectively determine just how far gone he is and the extent of his violent actions, so the poem’s problems have to be established by external observers. Throughout the episode Walt is refracted in various mirrored surfaces, such as the rearview mirror of his car at the beginning of the second act, the panel of his car just above the gas tank (above a bullet hole, acting as a prophetic indicator of Walt’s fate), in the reflection of another person’s window, and in the mirrored surface of his closet door when he rushes home to pack after his encounter in the desert with the Neo-Nazis (5.14). Just as Shelley introduces Ozymandias through the viewpoint of an explorer hearing legends of his rule, *Breaking Bad* shows Walt through the reactions and perspectives of others because Walt has been in self-denial for so long that any sense of clarity or authenticity is impossible. Even after the family suspects Walt is responsible for Hank’s death, Walt still desperately tries to assure his family, “everything is gonna’ be okay, everything’s gonna’ be fine. I promise you” (5.14). At this point the illusion is starting to crack, but Walt needs to maintain the family unit at all costs, even going as far as kidnapping his daughter Holly from Skyler as a last grasp at keeping that familial link (5.14). Walt’s world is falling apart, and at this point he has crossed the line past which his family will not follow him. He has gone beyond redemption. The viewer is clued in to his irredeemable state earlier in the episode in a scene, just after Hank is shot dead by Jack and his crew, where Walt informs Jack, looking to kill Jesse, he is hiding under a vehicle (5.14). Even though Jack is standing to the immediate left of Walt, the scene is filtered through a shallow focus lens that slightly blurs Jack, while Walt’s face is crystal clear and resembles the “sneer of cold command” from Shelley’s poem (310).

Hank’s death establishes the conditions for the octave, while the remaining episodes are indicative of the sestet of a sonnet which conveys a dramatic emotional turn and a more subjective tone. In Shelley’s poem this emotional shift is marked by the irony of contrasting

Ozymandias' arrogant boast of "My name is Ozymandias, king of kings / Look on my works ye mighty, and despair!" with the description of "lone and level sands stretch far away" (310-311). *Breaking Bad* does much the same by having the once formidable Heisenberg now left alone in a cabin for the last two episodes, "Granite State" and "Felina" (5.15, 5.16). Not only is Walt's legacy largely erased, now replaced by news reports and the public knowledge of his criminal misdeeds, but his solitary existence as a recluse hiding from law enforcement narrows the perspective to solely that of Walt. More significantly, Walt is using the pseudonym of Mr. Lambert (his wife's maiden name), having now lost everything from his previous life as a family man (5.16). Walt has had everything about his identity stripped from him and is left with only a guilty conscience. The octave of the series—which in terms of poetry establishes the essential problem the poet is grappling with—is analogous to Walt's medical debt and subsequent descent into criminality to support his family. The sestet of the series—the latter half of the poem that forms the resolution to the poet's argument—traces Walt's growing obsession with power and control that leads to his inevitable downfall and estrangement from family, his initial reason for pursuing a drug trade. In this context it can be argued that *Breaking Bad* is indeed making a deliberate political argument about neoliberalism through artistic expression.

In Shelley's vision the artist and his intuition about metaphysics and nature are of absolute and supreme value, which is he cannot fully divorce himself from Ozymandias' tyranny, which was at least in service to the art of a monument. However impermanent art is against the corrosion of time and nature it still has sentimental value to Shelley in his preference for a British Romanticist interpretation of life. Neoliberalism does not value art with the same reverence (unless it happens to be profitable, and even then it is not the intrinsic nature of art that is valued, it is the financial rewards stemming from the production of art), so in effect it is the tyranny of Ozymandias without the monument. *Breaking Bad*, by using Shelley's poetry, aligns itself with the perspective of the artist and castigates Walt because of his disposition as a rational economic actor choosing to proliferate empty desire among addicts only because it is of personal benefit to him. By referencing poetry, particularly in a medium more noted for its ephemeral and disposable nature, the writers and producers of *Breaking Bad* are leveling a criticism against Walt and those who trade in empty consumerism and are establishing the inevitable collapse of both Walt's empire and the imperialist tendencies of the United States. Walt's downfall is concordant with the downfall of the British Empire that Shelley was alluding to in his poem

because these figures ignore the importance of creation over consumption. H.M. Richmond notes the moral of the sonnet that needs to be emphasized: “The ruin of imperial grandeur was a theme after Shelley’s own heart. His own treatment at the hands of authority made him delight in any demonstration of its impermanence and the supremacy of the artist” (71). Because Walt perverts his skills in chemistry for a purely profit-based motive, and in doing so commits numerous heinous acts, his dismal fate is ensured. Walt is representative and neoliberalism’s economic motives and as such the show’s use of Shelley’s poem “Ozymandias” constitutes an ideological critique on empty desire. On an even more Meta level, the poem can also be said to be an indictment of television that is content with getting ratings and not striving to elevate the medium to its highest potential. Television as distraction is another form of empty consumerism not unlike drugs, and therefore are perfectly suited within a capitalist system.

The Cinematic Vocabulary of *Breaking Bad*

4.1 The Influence of the Western Genre

The final intertextual reference that I will discuss is an extended dialogue borrowed by *Breaking Bad* in homage to John Huston's classic 1948 film *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. Before delving into my analysis, however, it is necessary to establish a framework for the Western genre and how *Breaking Bad* fits within the genre. As with many film genres, the Western is replete with variations and sub-genres within the genre itself (spaghetti westerns, revisionist westerns, comedic and horror variations, even niche sub-genres like the drug-fueled surrealism of acid westerns, Mexican-made *Charro* westerns, and the martial arts focused Eastern/Western *Wuxia*). For my discussion, however, the two most relevant Western genres are the classic Western and the Neo-Western. The difference between classic Westerns and Neo-Westerns is in part identified by chronology, with the classic Western being set in the Old West, but also in how the Neo-Western genre modernizes the tropes of the classic Western. *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, while produced and released at the peak of popularity for the classic Western genre, takes place in the California Gold Rush of 1925, designating it as a Neo-Western because of its chronology. In many ways *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* does closely resemble the style of a classic Western, taking on the appearance of an adventure story about survival against the odds and against Mexican bandits. As with quite a few Neo-Westerns, however, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* resembles the classic Western in appearance only and deliberately subverts the tropes of the good and noble cowboy against villainous outlaws. In that sense, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* it is a Western adventure which ends with a bleak, desolate, and despairing commentary on greed and paranoia, a state in which humanity, stripped of its context of civilization, resorts to brutality and murder.

The Treasure of the Sierra Madre is centered on the decline into paranoia of Frank Dobbs (Humphrey Bogart), who begins the film panhandling for coins, or for wealthy marks to stake him a meal, using what little money he does receive to buy lottery tickets in hopes of instant wealth. After being robbed of a few day's pay after working on an oil rig with a boss who gives Dobbs the slip, Dobbs and another individual he meets in a bar decide to use the services of an aging prospector they overhear in a bar to search for gold. What follows is a series of

misadventures as the trio fight off Mexican bandits, train robbers, competition from rival prospectors, and, worst of all, Dobbs' own increasing paranoia. The film is very much a Western in its tone, relying on the genre conventions of an adventure film set in Tampico, Mexico. The contemporary setting (1925), and more significantly, the content of the film, however, are rooted in the Neo-Western genre. The classic adventure setting of the Western genre masks the subversive and even somewhat anarchistic interpretation of the greed that truly fuels humanity's inner desires.

The Neo-Western may share many of the characteristics that identify the classic western, but it uses the western tropes in a contemporary context and with a sense of self-consciousness about the genre. For *Breaking Bad* this process is exemplified by its display of the recognizable set of tropes of the western, such as the desert setting, wide open areas, tracking and crane shots (to emphasize those wide open spaces), gunfighter showdowns (a notable example of which, between Hank and Walt in the fifth-season episode "Blood Money," is even framed from the waist down in homage to the western's classic iconography of the gunfighter duel), dust, outlaw imagery, and the stolid frontier hero of few words and tough grit. In each case, *Breaking Bad* subverts these tropes; for example, Walt appropriates the iconography of the loner/tough guy with the cassette tape of "El Paso," since Walt is most certainly not the tough-guy type, and in his showdown with Hank, the men do not carry six-shooters but a garage clicker and a cellphone. In these cases Walt is appropriating the iconography of a rugged frontier mythology, but through the veil of technology, as if he truly does not understand the historical reality of cowboy life and can only affix on a highly mediated interpretation of the past.

As Neo-Westerns, *Breaking Bad* and *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* also revolve around border conflict, a central theme in the classic western. The frontier looms large in both the history of the American Old West as well as the mythic symbolism of many western films. The frontier as an aspect of American exceptionalism, and the cinematic preoccupation with it, is particularly evident in Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis. The frontier thesis, as Turner outlined it in his address, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History, 1893," acts as a justification for the United States colonialist expansion of the "meeting point between savagery and civilization" (Turner). As Turner outlined it, the border of the frontier, "is an elastic one, and for our purposes needs no sharp definition" (Turner). The implication in Turner's claim is that the delineation of boundaries have the military and political capacity to partake in a colonial

expansion and define the borders according to the needs of American imperialism and to edge out populations it has deemed “savage.” Turner, however unfortunately, was not incorrect when he stated, “The frontier is the line of most rapid and effective rapidization of Americanization” (Turner). The Western, then, resonated with audiences because of its historical and mythological relationship to the American expansion of its borders and the inherent views of exceptionalism associated with colonialism. *Breaking Bad*, which is situated on the New Mexico border and Walt’s involvement with the cartel, as well as *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* focusing on white males who use violence and trickery to obtain wealth in Tampico, Mexico, both reinforce this uncomfortable association with imperialist and colonialist ideologies.

The Western, with its rugged, tough, loner cowboy iconography, conveys an essentially masculinist, patriarchal, and isolated view of the United States. As Stanley Corkin observes, the Western, “had an impact on the nationalist feeling in the United States in their constant dramatization of the relationships between a definable national identity and contiguous unsettled lands” (2). The Western, with its desert landscape, dust bowl towns, and perceived boundaries between civilization and wilderness, between the tamed and the untamed parts of the frontier (to use the rhetoric of the times), places the cowboy as the central image of American exceptionalism. The individualism of a hard man taming this unsettled frontier is concordant with the individualism expressed by neoliberal economic principles, at least in its most utopian conception of internal capitalism expanding and reorganizing borders to accommodate its accumulation of land and resources.

Both *Breaking Bad* and *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* deal with borders in the context of neoliberalism and an individualistic philosophy and use the classic genre tropes of the Western to comment on the United States’ fixation on a romanticized interpretation of the past. Neoliberalism’s concern with individualism, as David M. Kotz states, where “freedom of choice is seen as the fundamental basis of human welfare, with market relations understood as the institution that allows individual choice to drive the economy. The state, by contrast, is seen as an enemy of individual liberty, a threat to private property” (11). Neoliberalism’s absolute and total rejection of care ethics, even at the expense of unions, health care, and social programs, is of a similar type to the romanticized and distorted individualism espoused by the iconography of the Western film and its stoic cowboy on the edge of the frontier. For Walt this means going down a path that leads to the death of a young boy rather than accepting financial help from

Gretchen and Elliot Schwartz (Jessica Hecht and Adam Godley). For Dobbs and his two associates this is manifested in their willingness to shoot a man rather than sharing in the gold.

Analyzing Dobbs brings into focus much of the self-deception and excessive greed that also characterizes Walt. There is a profound connection between how these two individuals, both of whom originate as down-on-their-luck and even sympathetic characters, respond to economic pressures and immediate wealth. As John Engell observes, both the movie and the original novel by the mysterious German author B. Traven both focus on an individualistic anarchism:

Dobbs, Curtin and Howard—the three goldminers who strike it rich, then lose their fortune—illustrate through their aloneness the dehumanization of the individual by institutions. Their lives suggest the way in which political, social, and moral bonds among men have been severed by the modern world. Their lives show that the individual cannot combat either the institutionalized power or the personal greed and corruption encouraged by that power. (246)

In both *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* and *Breaking Bad* the protagonists have been, to a certain extent, victimized by this impersonal system of capitalism. Dobbs, for instance, is hired to work on an oil rig by a landowner named Pat McCormick (Barton Maclane) who works him for days and then disappears without paying his workers. The viewer's first view of Dobbs is of an individual willing to do the work who nonetheless gets robbed by the ruthless capitalist system seeking only to exploit the vulnerable and needy. As such we can see how Walt's greed is a corollary to Dobbs' greed, and how once they obtain the means of power become just as corrupt and ruthless as the system itself. Comparing the motivations and psychological development of these two characters provides an insightful look into the dehumanizing machinations of excessive wealth and unchecked capitalism as a destructive influence.

More than just establishing a parallel between the two properties through an extended homage to the dialogue of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, *Breaking Bad* has a subversive effect on neoliberal values by drawing from a classic film which is noted for its anarchistic tone. Sharing such a large portion of dialogue from John Huston's film in a sense intertwines *Breaking Bad* with the ideology. Both Huston and the B. Traven's novel upon which the film is based upon were not shy about incorporating anarchistic views on capitalism, greed, and the inevitable consequences of wealth, so by extension *Breaking Bad* is engaging in a similar critique as well. Particularly since *Breaking Bad* is not just referencing the Huston film, but rather is borrowing a

significant portion of dialogue, which in itself is at the heart of the film's ideological critique of American greed, namely in how the scene depicts the willingness of people to consider murder as a viable option to sharing their (potential) gold. Walt obviously entertains the same notion, and even the death a young boy does not deter him from procuring even more wealth than his already large stacks of untaxed cash. It is through this connection that I will analyze just how deeply connected these elements are in *Breaking Bad* and how the film reference acts as the series' characterization of Walt as a Dobbs-like figure of greed and paranoia.

4.2 Cody, Dobbs, and Walt: Manifestations of Greed

In this section, I focus on a specific intertextual reference to the 1948 film *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* because it arrives at a significant moment in the series when the viewer witnesses just how callous Walt has become. The dialogue in both *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* and *Breaking Bad* exist as signposts to how greed corrupts an individual. The reference in question occurs in the episode "Buyout" and consists of an extended scene of dialogue that borrows heavily from John Huston's film. Stylistically, *Breaking Bad* resembles *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, and indeed, both belong to the genre of the Neo-Western genre. *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* belongs to the Neo-Western genre because of its setting in the desert landscape and its dramatization of American expatriates struggling in Tampico, Mexico, as its main focal point. *Breaking Bad* depicts a similar encroachment on territory through Walt's foray into the drug trade on the United States and Mexico border. The parallel between *Breaking Bad* and *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* extends beyond setting and also appears in the similarities between the down-on-his luck Frank C. Dobbs in Huston's film and the middle-class medical debt difficulties of Walt, as well as in their eventual falls into excessive greed and paranoia. Both Walt and Dobbs even begin with similar motives, with Walt declaring he will quit once he reaches his goal of \$737,000, and Dobbs stating a similar lie when the grizzled veteran prospector Howard (Walter Huston) warns him of the dangers of gold and how there's never enough. Dobbs responds, "It wouldn't be that way with me. I swear it wouldn't. I'd only take what I set out to get, even if there was still half a million dollars' worth waitin' to be picked up." Dobbs, as we see, does not hold true to his stated intention. However honest Walt and Dobbs are about not going beyond their established goals and being excessively greedy, their prior

experiences on the low end of the economic scale and repressed anger over their powerless positions in society charts another course for them once they obtain the means of power.

In *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* Dobbs successfully procures gold with the help of a prospector named Howard and a partner named Curtin (Tim Holt), but the paranoia and resentment settles in, and the isolation of the mountain becomes the perfect place for murder. Despite striking it rich with a profitable amount of gold, Dobbs grows increasingly suspicious of his partners and any potential interlopers. This insatiable desire to hoard as much gold as possible begins a downward spiral into mania and violence, in particular when an outsider named James Cody (Bruce Bennett) follows Curtin from town and attempts to wrangle his way into the group by offering the other three an ultimatum:

Oh, I know quite well you can bump me off any minute you wish, but that's a risk worth running, considering the stakes. Let's lay all our cards on the table. As I see it, you fellows have three things: kill me, run me off, or take me in with you as a partner. Let's consider the first. Another guy might show up tomorrow, or maybe a dozen guys. If you start bumping guys off, how far are you prepared to go with it? Ask yourselves that. Also, don't forget that the one actually to do the bumping off would forever be in the power of the other two. The only safe way would be for all three of you to pull your cannons and bang away at the same instant like a firing squad. [Points to Dobbs] He'd be all that I'm sure, but you two haven't the look of born executioners.

After the prospectors reject this option, Cody continues, "as for choice number two, if you chase me off I might very well inform on you," which only inspires Howard to object by stating that they would chase him down later on as an incentive against collecting the substantial reward money Cody would gain. The prospectors can only return to the first option: killing Cody and leaving him to die in the desert, unnoticed by the authorities. It is, at least as far as Howard, Curtin, and Dobbs are concerned, a fairly convincing argument that they should indeed eliminate Cody. Cody does attempt a weak protest, admitting, "I don't deny it, but let's see what number three has to offer. If you take me in as a partner you don't stand to lose anything. I will not ask to share in what you've made so far, only in the profits to come. Well, what do you say?" In the end, all Cody has accomplished is to argue his way into being killed as the prospectors all decide

to get rid of Cody. The act itself is interrupted by bandits, but morally, they have decided upon a violent course of action in order to protect their potential wealth.

This scene illustrates the ruthless nature of gold prospecting and how the blind pursuit of absolute wealth corrupts individuals. As Robert Emmett Ginna, Jr. argues, “Huston’s direction of the scene declares that each of the three seekers have committed murder in his heart” (85). It is only because a group of Mexican bandits attack, leaving Cody fatally shot, that they are exempted from the guilt of committing the actual act. Janne Lahti echoes this point, adding that the film, “showed how promising avenues for redemption and respectability could very easily lead to greed and disaster” (341). In this regard greed, paranoia, and the desire for gold are closely linked with masculinity and violence as a corruptive influence. For Dobbs this scene proves to be the emotional linchpin of the narrative and a point beyond redemption because, unlike Howard and Curtin (who finds a letter on Cody’s body about his peach orchard back home and vows to return the letter to Cody’s wife and child as a form of recompense), Dobbs refuses to allow himself to feel guilt and persists in his self-deception.

A similar scene and narrative turning point occurs in the fifth season of *Breaking Bad*, in the episode “Buyout” (5.5), a scene that also functions as a moral turning point for Jesse and signals to the audience Walt’s continued self-denial about the consequences of his actions. “Buyout” follows the episode “Dead Freight” (5.6), in which Walt and some accomplices commit a train heist, and Todd Alquist (Jesse Plemons), one of Walt’s co-conspirators, suddenly shoots a young boy who happens upon the criminal act. “Buyout” picks up immediately after the end of “Dead Freight” with an opening teaser where we see Walt, Todd, and enforcer Mike Ehrmantraut disposing of the evidence and dissolving the boy’s bike in an acid solution. Afterwards Walt, Jesse, and Mike discuss Todd’s continued partnership in their drug outfit, which uses an exterminator company called Vamonos Pest as a front, in a scene which shares a similarity to the stranger’s proposition in *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. Walt lays out the options:

It seems to me we have three options here and none of which are ideal. One, we fire Todd. I’m not a fan of this option seeing that he knows way too much about this business at this point. And we’d most likely have to pay him to keep quiet. And God only knows we’ve got enough of that going on. Two, we dispose of him. Which leaves us with option three; we keep him on the payroll. Put him back on tenting

houses, setting up the lab and so forth. We keep him close, under our control. Now option three would be my choice. Shall we vote? (5.6)

As the episode teaser for “Buyout” unfolds the quiet scene and minimal music focuses the viewer’s attention on the bleak and remorseful expressions on the faces of Walt and Mike. As Walt and Mike break down the boy’s bicycle in an acid solution Walt’s face takes on a notable expression of turmoil and conflict (5.6). Elliott Logan states in his book on *Breaking Bad* that the scene exemplifies “Walt’s application of an instrumental mentality to human affairs that turns people into parts of things, to be used to his ends and disposed of” (23). Grief and regret is subsumed by Walt’s need to control and his inherent tendency to reduce everything to its scientific components; an element which he can control. Prior to Walt laying out the options and just after Jesse makes his case on the basis that he has connections with the Neo-Nazis who could act as muscle for Walt (a case made as an apparent olive branch but with an undercurrent of an implied threat against Walt), Walt is already rationalizing the boy’s death: “Well, the boy had seen us. And no, it didn’t look like he knew what he was seeing. But what if he told somebody? What if he just mentioned it in passing?” (5.6). Even after Walt felt the weight of his actions and is seen to be affected deeply by the guilt, it is only moments later that he compartmentalizes the guilt and begins pragmatically to place a value on the life of the boy, weighed against the profit he would make by continuing his drug operation and by generating connections with known gun dealers and Neo-Nazi associates.

The most direct correlation between the film and the episode is Cody’s proposition and Walt’s rationalization. Cody and Walt are similar in that they both attempt to use logic in a situation where logic and rationality has to compete against the irrationality of greed and desire, and as a result, they get in over their heads. William Graebner profiles the Cody character in a way that a viewer of *Breaking Bad* would recognize as characteristic of Walt as well: “Cody combines science and logic. On the one hand, he claims to have the ability to locate gold by examining geological formations; on the other hand, he purports to know something about how human beings will resolve ethical dilemmas” (35). This overconfidence and egotism is a trait shared by Cody and Walt. Cody’s arrogance does not take into account the insatiable nature of greed which supersedes the morality of the prospectors. For Walt, his arrogance does not take into account the randomness of a psychopath like Todd. Walt, much like Cody, and also much like Gus, suffers from an overconfidence in his ability to outsmart his enemies. Walt believes in

the supremacy of his own intellect to the point where he fails to take into account just how truly random the violence of the drug trade is, or does not care how violent it is, because despite his overconfidence in his mental abilities, Walt's greed triumphs over everything, just as it does for Cody.

Walt and Cody share a sense of entitlement and believe their own suffering necessitates any moral wrangling needed to generate wealth. One difference between the two is that Walt survives longer and is able to build up enough of an immunity to pain and suffering that he can recover more quickly than Cody. Even Walt's appeal to Jesse in "Say my Name" is, as is typical of Walt, a mixture of honest confession and emotional manipulation:

What, am I gonna' curl up in a ball in tears in front of you, or am I gonna' lock myself in a room and get high to prove it to you? What happened to that boy was a tragedy and it tears me up inside. But because it happened, am I supposed to just lie down and die with him? It's done! It makes me sick what happened, just like everyone else who has died in our wake. What Todd did... you and I have done things that are just as bad. (5.7)

Accepting that Walt is honest about his feelings of guilt and regret over the boy's death—and I do think that there is at least a grain of truth in his estimation of his feelings of regret—this equivocation to Jesse constitutes a rather quick recovery from trauma. Dobbs also offers up a very similar rationalization when he says at one point, after attempting to murder Curtin—who is left for dead by Dobbs but is only wounded—“Conscience. What a thing! If you believe you got a conscience, it'll pester you to death. But if you don't believe you got one, what could it do t'ya? Makes me sick, all this talking and fussing about nonsense.” For both Walt and Dobbs expressing regret over murder (or in Dobbs' case, the intent to commit murder) is repressed and rationalized as an inconvenience in their goal. The main difference, however, is that Dobbs succumbs to a King Lear-like madness much sooner, whereas Walt more effectively represses his pangs of guilt; his psychological unraveling, while undeniable, is a more gradual process because Walt compartmentalizes them into the distinctly different personas: that of Walt, the family man, and Heisenberg, the cold and calculating drug kingpin.

In this way *Breaking Bad* also connects Walt to the logic of Cody (they even share the same familial impetus for their actions) as well as to that of Dobbs. Cody and Dobbs exist as the two poles of Walt's personality: the rationalist who can think his way out of anything, whether

that means avoiding seemingly impossible no-win scenarios or compartmentalizing guilt, as well as the Walt who has been thoroughly corrupted and, as such, is prone to fits of anger when his empire is threatened. This is a Walt who, much like Dobbs, has become increasingly greedy and paranoid that his fortune is simply not enough. Walt is exceptionally good at rationalizing his guilt when it comes to the consequences of others, but by mid-series, he has become so corroded by the pursuit of wealth and power that any criminal or immoral actions can be filed away in the deep recesses of his psyche. Where Jesse admits to himself and to others, “I’m the bad guy,” Walt in that same episode is already in the process of self-denial when he trots out justifications such as, “I’m not a criminal... this is not me... I’m a manufacturer, not a dealer” (3.1). It is rationalization taken to its extreme, and it is a primary factor in Walt’s eventual fall, as depicted in its strongest form in the episode “Ozymandias.” Just as Dobbs betrays the other prospectors in order to protect his own interests (which he fails to do, resulting in his own demise), Walt has lost so much of his soul that he turns against Jesse and reveal his hiding place under a car so the Neo-Nazis can kill him (5.16). Having lost his family all Walt has left is his empire, his legacy as Heisenberg, to which he fully commits. The Walt who began this criminal endeavor for the sake of his family, much like Cody embarking on his pursuit of wealth for the sake of his family back home at his peach orchard, has now fully emerged into the criminal identity of Heisenberg, a villain like Dobbs.

Walt, however, has no actual frame of reference for his eventual bravado in his Heisenberg persona and, as such, appropriates hyper-masculine images from cinema (*Scarface*, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, etc.) to incorporate into his own psychological profile, much as he does with the personality traits of those who become his victims during the series. When Walt tells Skyler “I am the danger” he comes across as cartoonish and in full ignorance that it was only by Gus Fring’s grace that he survived a potential assassination by the cousins Leonel and Marco Salamanca (Daniel Moncada and Luis Moncada). There is also the sense that Walt is beginning to believe in his own inflated reputation as a powerful and ruthless drug kingpin. As Mike warns him in “Hazard Pay:” “Just because you shot Jesse James, don’t make you Jesse James” (5.3). Mike’s warning, with its intertextual reference to the gunslinger myth of a tough man on the frontier, as well as the traits Walt has unconsciously copied from his victims, informs the viewer that all of Walt’s rationalizations about his illegal criminal career and, more

significantly, his violent lapse in moral judgement that resulted in many innocent deaths, are signifiers of the corrosion of Walt's core self and his descent into the Heisenberg persona.

Using such a large section of dialogue from *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* implicates the Western genre as a whole in the construction of the national character of the United States. Because the iconography of the Western is so intrinsic to the American character and is a distinctly American art form intimately connected to conquering the frontier through colonialism and oppressing or displacing Indigenous and Mexican populations, the reference cannot help but act as an indictment of western democracy expanding its borders. The Western is a cultural product so ingrained in the national character of the United States that some consumers, much like Walt, gloss over the tragic and gory details of the Old West. Walt affixes himself to the romanticized image of a cowboy largely in ignorance of the racism and frontier violence of life in the Old West. *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, despite its cynical tone, is itself rife with stereotypes of hard men fighting against the ruthless Mexican bandits. The American experiment was formed by an aggressive accumulation of land regardless of the human cost, the model out of which neoliberalism seems to be born. Walt, who very much wants to identify with a hyper-masculine ideal of an intimidating tough guy, as well as being obsessed with ever-increasing profits from his methamphetamine operation, glosses over the brutal, historical reality of the past in the same way he glosses over the violence of the *narcocorrido* and the individualism of Whitman. The intertextual references either warn the viewer of his inevitable fate, such as the fatal end of the cowboy in "El Paso" or the fate of empires in "Ozymandias," or they relate to Walt's inner distortion to reveal how damaging his split of Walt and Heisenberg is having on his psyche.

The Treasure of the Sierra Madre, when compared to the other intertextual references in *Breaking Bad* both solidifies the show's positioning as a Neo-Western as well as that genre to criticize the American mindset that led to the rise of Neoliberal economic policies. The references I have discussed in my research, such the *narcocorrido*, which depicts the drug dealer as a morally justified gunslinger, or the heroically tragic romanticism of Marty Robbins' "El Paso," which figures as a diegetic reference in the series finale, helps contextualize to the viewer how Walt has idealized his own criminal persona of Heisenberg as a mythical archetype. In essence, Walt is a cowboy in his mind, and the series' use of a distinctly Neo-Western iconography implicates and interrogates the hazards of such an individualistic and narcissistic

mentality. The cowboy or gunslinger, whether it is the noble and rugged frontiersman or the morally justified drug dealer, unmoors the viewer when placed in an immediately recognizable style. It is a self-reflexive gesture by the writers and producers of *Breaking Bad* to illustrate the pitfalls of desperately clinging to such obsolete notions, of which Neoliberalism is no less guilty. When compared to the Walt figure seen early in the series, as a meek, passive individual on an elliptical machine, running in place and unable to move forward, staring at his Nobel prize for his contribution to proton radiography in 1985 (1.1), the identification with heroic archetypes becomes evident. Walt is emotionally stagnate, frustrated by the impersonal forces of capitalism and seemingly without a sense of the future, can easily be seduced by obtaining the power and respect afforded to the hard-lived cowboy, if by radically different means.

Conclusion

5.1 Complex Television and Criticisms of the Medium

More than almost any other medium television seems particularly well-suited for being able to incorporate a variety of multi-media influences and intertextual references. The cross-modality of visual, aural, and linguistic signifiers allows for a broad range of meanings and interpretations across a wide demographic of viewers, or, to use an appropriate terminology, readers of the show. I use the term readers deliberately, drawing attention to the idea that a television show such as *Breaking Bad* can in fact be read as a text rather than passively consumed as a work of entertainment and triviality. In using the term readers, as opposed to viewers or an audience, I am echoing John Fiske's assessment when he notes that "viewer" tends to be ascribed to the television experience whereas the "reader" occupies the privileged position of an active participant and active decoder of meanings (14). By using the term reader in regards to television I am contextualizing the televisual experience as a process which has the potential to engage the television "viewer" in the same productive manner as a "reader" of a printed text.

The process of reading television as a text alleviates much of the skepticism that I discussed in my introduction. Television has had many detractors, especially sociologists expressing a concern over the deleterious effects of television and modern media. Walter Benjamin went so far as to criticize the process of acting for the screen, which in his time was film but could be extrapolated to include television acting for its electronic artifice:

The camera that presents the performance of the film actor to the public need not respect the performance as an integral whole. Guided by the cameraman, the camera continually changes its position with respect to the performance. The sequence of positional views which the editor composes from the material supplied him constitutes the completed film. It comprises certain factors of movement which are in reality those of the camera, not to mention special camera angles, close ups, etc. (25)

In Benjamin's assertion, then, the entirety of digital media is diminished as being less than a theatrical performance or even a painting because the emphasis is not about contemplation, but rather that of passive consumption. In this view editing disguises the natural flow, or aura, to use

Benjamin's phrase, and that "while facing the camera he [the screen actor] will face the public, the consumers who constitute the market" (27).

Consumption, however, implies a passive process. For critics of the medium, or of mass culture in general, this poses no significant problem in their appraisal of television and popular culture. Theodor Adorno frames this negative assessment in terms of a specific agenda by corporations for generating passivity in the consumer to the point where, as he states. "The products of the culture industry are such that they can be alertly consumed even in a state of distraction" (45). And certainly Dwight MacDonald's quote that I mentioned in my introduction, on the sheer amount of *kitsch*, or mass culture, that permeates contemporary society, lends validity to the idea that television producers are more or less just concerned with the number of shows rather than the quality of shows. I would contend that despite the proliferation of media, even in a media landscape where there is quite a significant amount of content providers, whether it is YouTube, network television, cable subscription services, and/or streaming services, there are a number of shows that do produce content which lends themselves to being read and not just watched.

The quantity of media that Adorno and MacDonald are critical of is indeed a cause for concern, but in the current media climate where subscription services can offer material targeted at a niche audience and not have to rely on ratings and advertising for their profit means that specialty cable channels and streaming services have less risk in offering unconventional material. John T. Caldwell addresses this in his discussion of the sheer amount of programming needed to fill the hours, leading to a "manic cauldron of experimentation" (91). The amount of shows needed to fill slots in the television schedule, as well as the rapidity of program development (especially in comparison to film), means that television producers often have to take chances in order to fill the television schedule. Indeed, *Breaking Bad* profited from AMC's desire to move into original programming, and managed to stay on the air despite not being a commercial success until after the mid-way point when Netflix began streaming the show. In response to MacDonald's criticism of the overwhelming quantity of *Kitsch* culture I am reminded of the humorous aphorism known as Sturgeon's law, or Sturgeon's Revelation. Writing in a 1958 issue of *Venture Science Fiction* as part of an editorial series called "On Hand: A Book" science fiction author Theodore Sturgeon offered up his answer to critics of the genre

who viewed science fiction as cheap, pulpy, and mindless, much in the same way some critics have denigrated television:

It is in this vein that I repeat Sturgeon's Revelation, which was wrung out of me after twenty years of wearying defense against the attacks of people who used the worst examples of the field for ammunition, and whose conclusion was that ninety percent of SF is crud. The Revelation:

Ninety percent of everything is crud. (66)

In this television and science fiction share a similar reputation for only appealing to the masses in the most derogatory manner as quantity entertainment—quick and easily accessible—rather than quality entertainment. In this manner television is not any different than any other medium. For Sturgeon the corollary of Sturgeon's Revelation is that “the best science fiction is as good as the best fiction in any field” (67). I would add that the same principle can be applied to television, with the corpus of shows considered to be quality television are not only increasing because of the overall volume of material being produced, but that the best of television rivals that of the best in film. And as the late success of *Breaking Bad* reveals, there is an audience for this level of challenging material.

Media consumption is perhaps better understood with Stuart Hall's reception theory in mind. For Hall the process is not as simple as decrying how popular culture lures the masses into passive receptivity: “Though we know the television programme is not a behavioural input, like a tap on the knee cap, it seems to have been almost impossible for traditional researchers to conceptualize the communicative process without lapsing into one or other variant of low-flying behaviourism” (166). This is not to dismiss the possibility that there is in fact a producer-encoder agenda, but that television is too heterogeneous to be classified with such a simplistic denigration of the medium. Fiske notes that this is difficult as the economics of the industry preclude such a narrow targeting: “Television is, above all else, a popular cultural medium. The economics that determine its production demand that it reaches a mass audience, and a mass audience in the Western industrialized societies is composed of numerous subcultures” (29). In Fiske's estimation the demographics of the medium and the amount niche audiences out there mandate a more heterogeneous approach to program development. I would argue that while Adorno's view of the Cultural Industry certainly does exist to a degree, that the variety of shows available—especially now with specialty cable channels and streaming services dominating the market—

leads to a diffusion of controlled messages and programmed agendas. Permutations exist in any medium, including television, allowing for viewers to in fact read a show as if they were reading a text.

In reading a television show as a text, or, more specifically, reading *Breaking Bad* as a text with an eye towards deciphering how it uses intertextuality to comment on neoliberalism, does pose a challenge. A cynical interpretation of intertextuality presumes that intertextuality as a feature can be abused as a branding strategy where the familiar is repackaged in another product, thereby even further diminishing the aura of the original (to use Benjamin's term). Fredric Jameson is dismissive of the postmodernist obsession with the cultural sphere of, "schlock and kitsch, of TV series and Readers' Digest culture, of advertising and motels, of the late show and the grade-B Hollywood film" (55). For Jameson the danger is that in the postmodern media landscape the logic of repetition and the dependence on recycling cultural products, contributes an excessive analytics of 'degraded' art forms. Intertextuality specifically is a product of this postmodern fetishization of Paraliterature, and they "no longer simply 'quote,' as Joyce or Mahler might have done, but incorporate into their very substance" (55). The issue here is one of class distinction, with quoting being the providence of high art and intertextuality being relegated to the domain of popular culture. The novelty of popular culture and the "frantic economic urgency," as Jameson says, that places more emphasis on consumer demands means that an analysis of a television show becomes a meaningless pursuit still fully immersed within the project of late capitalism.

I would counter that television is particularly well-suited for incorporating multi-media influences and therefore able to use intertextuality as an integral aspect of *Breaking Bad's* theme of Walt's psychological split. The cross-modality of visual, aural, and linguistic signifiers available to film and television allows for a broader range of meanings from which the viewer, or, rather, the reader, can extrapolate. For Fiske, television, "to be popular, must not only contain meanings relevant to a wide variety of social groups, it must also be capable of being watched with different modes of attention (58). The hegemonic uniformity ascribed to popular culture, and in particular television, is commercially unviable and therefore not a dominate strategy (which is not to say that such examples do not exist, only that it does not exist as a uniform strategy). As John T. Caldwell points out, the sheer number of programming for television means that as a result it is, "a manic cauldron of experimentation, nightly competition, serial failure,

perpetual, perpetual brainstorming/regrouping, and systematic overproduction” (91). In this manner *Breaking Bad* contravenes the conventions of television that causes so much skepticism in that it has room to draw intertextual references from a range of popular media, folk art, and poetry to depict the gradual descent of Walt into Heisenberg and the corrosion of his identity by capitalist greed. The series, which did not gain significant ratings until its third season when it premiered on Netflix in a “bingeable” format, was able to incorporate many divergent media influences and experimentation into its narrative because of AMC’s need to meet their newly acquired status as a programmer of original content in much the same way as HBO before them.

My process for analyzing *Breaking Bad*, then, is to look at a few examples of the more prominent and insightful intertextual references individually and then to connect them to the narrative of the Walt/Heisenberg split. I would contend that the integration of intertextual references in *Breaking Bad* do in actuality perform a vital narrative function of speaking to Walt’s psychological split and the corrosive effects of neoliberalism on the American psyche. Jameson’s criticisms are coming from a distinctly Marxist perspective, while *Breaking Bad* creator Vince Gilligan and his staff of producers and writers are coming from a perspective that is critiquing neoliberalism, but not attempting to subvert capitalism as a system. As a cable television show we cannot divorce the commercial interests of *Breaking Bad* from its narrative focus, yet it is also indicative of class bias to presume, as Jameson does, that popular culture and genre material are inherently the products of *kitsch* and to reserve the capacity for meaningful quotation for Modernist writers and Classical musicians.

5.2 *Breaking Bad* and its Intertextual Signifiers

To conclude my argument, and to prove my position that *Breaking Bad*’s intertextuality is a meaningful quotation rather than mere recycling, requires a brief reiteration of the examples I have discussed, starting with the *narcocorrido*. The *narcocorrido* dramatizes the rise-and-fall of a sympathetic drug dealer and, as such, provides a catalyst for understanding Walt’s rationalizations and appropriations of border culture in response to an oppressive capitalist system. As a starting point for intertextual analysis, the *narcocorrido* is valuable because the subject of the song often positions himself as a figure of dissent against the imperialism of the United States and/or corrupt Mexican law enforcement. *Breaking Bad* is thus not dissimilar to a

narcocorrido, and having appropriated a folkloric art form from Mexico to relate a tale of a Caucasian drug dealer, it dramatizes Walt's justifications for his actions. The use of the *narcocorrido* is a deliberate cultural appropriation that exemplifies Walt's incorporation of other narratives of the marginalized and disenfranchised into his own psychological profile in order to commit brutal acts, associate with Neo-Nazis, and alienate his family, all the while hiding under the rubric of preserving his family.

Much like the subject of a *narcocorrido* Walt is presented initially as the hero of the narrative, the ostensible protagonist of the series, before his turn into its antagonist. The first explosion of anger the viewer witnesses from Walt is in the pilot and is in defense of his son who is being bullied for his disability (1.1). The dichotomy between Walt and Heisenberg is set up perfectly in this scene when we see a glint of enjoyment in Walt's eyes as he physically assaults one of the bullies. *Breaking Bad* thus builds Walt up as a sympathetic character whose first use of violence is for the selfless protection of his disabled son (an emotionally justifiable act, for who has not fantasized about exercising revenge on their high school bullies?) which helps build audience sympathy for Walt as he then goes on to respond to economic pressures the only way he can: with his chemistry skills. In this moment in the pilot the viewer sees the duality of Walt/Heisenberg, his chirality, where his noble intentions eventually give way to his negative impulses. Or, to use the symbolism of the show, his anger and frustration become like a cancer spreading inside and consuming his entire being. The intertextual references build on the idea that the Walt/Heisenberg split is not one of mutually exclusive polarities, but rather one of mirror reflections of good/evil and active/inactive co-existing the way the molecules do in his chirality lecture. Both aspects lurk within Walt, and he is a figure of contradictions.

In light of these contradictions, the poetry of Walt Whitman is also a significant intertextual clue to Walt's identity as a figure of suffering who is eventually corrupted and perverted by his obsession with power. In the episode "Gray Matter" we see a young, virile Walt being romantic with his first girlfriend Gretchen while discussing the chemical basis of the human body (1.5). By comparison, the Walt of the pilot is impotent even while receiving a sexual favor from his wife as a birthday present, and only seems to be aroused by an abusive display of power or an illegal act, such as in the parking lot after a Parent-Teacher conference in "A No-Rough-Type Deal" (1.7). Years of teaching chemistry to apathetic high school students, being constantly emasculated by his hyper-masculine brother-in-law Hank, and being exploited

by his boss at the A1 Car Wash where he moonlights have eroded and numbed Walt to the point where he has become a permanently desexualized and powerless figure—powerless and desexualized, that is, at least until he disavows the rules of society just as Whitman rejects the metrical rules of poetry and, for that matter, many of society’s sexual norms. Walt’s desire for personal freedom is in line with Whitman’s, and it is the exercise of autonomy that inspires sensuality in both Whitman’s poetry and in Walt who cannot go back to his previous self as a morally upstanding, but ultimately powerless, family man. Viewed in context it is obvious why Walt becomes obsessed with power to the extent that he would assume the Heisenberg guise, a theme supported by the incorporation of Shelley’s poem “Ozymandias” in the final season. Shelley’s poem also focuses on the corruptive nature of power and the brutal exercise of tyrannical power which can seduce anyone into abandoning morality for wealth and a reputation as a fearless, ruthless, and hyper-masculine figure.

It is difficult to pinpoint when Walt goes past the point at which he could be redeemed, but the final major intertextual reference I discuss, that of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, helps compel viewers to remove their sympathies from the series’ protagonist. While the final turning point in Walt’s transformation into Heisenberg is somewhat ambiguous, the intertextual reference to the John Huston film operates as a rubric for evaluating Walt’s moral compass. In *Breaking Bad*, Walt, who does initially display authentic shock and disgust after Todd shoots the young boy, then rationalizes the action with the same logic exemplified by *the Treasure of the Sierra Madre*’s Cody in order to maintain his criminal empire. In *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* Humphrey Bogart’s character Dobbs ends up alone and is killed by a group of bandits, his gold left behind after being mistaken for bags of sand by the bandits. In *Breaking Bad* Walt, knowing that his cancer will overtake him soon, stages a last solo attack on the bandits who robbed from him, the group of Neo-Nazis lead by Uncle Jack. Much like Dobbs’s treasure, the barrels of money stolen by the Neo-Nazis are never recovered. The similarity in trajectory and the scene in which the intertextual reference occurs can be interpreted as a moral signpost of when Walt goes beyond salvation.

By using *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* Vince Gilligan is not only aligning Walt with Dobbs, thereby also morally aligning Walt with Dobbs’ descent into paranoia and greed, but he is also aligning the series with an ideological critique similar to that of the film. By using the tropes of the Neo-Western genre, and in fact subverting them, the series acts as a critique of the

United States' own relationship with one of its most revered genres; the Western. The Western is closely associated with frontier mythology and colonialism, so by connecting the two genres, *Breaking Bad* is connecting the frontier mythology with a disreputable form of patriotism, American exceptionalism, and modern neoliberalism. The Western, with its nostalgic glossing over of U.S. imperial and genocidal relations, is endemic of the same mentality that gave rise to unregulated capitalism. Walt occupies an interesting place in an unregulated and unchecked capitalist structure, because despite his feelings of anger and frustration over his economic and social status, he is still in a position where he can profit from neoliberal economic policies. Walt is complicit in an economic system where deregulation becomes an acceptable avenue for profit because it permits an individual in Walt's position to commit acts of violence and exploit others in the name of profit.

Walt's overwhelming obsession with profit and power is such that he has no qualms about associating with Neo-Nazis if they serve that end. If being a cowboy (to return to *Breaking Bad's* use of the Western genre) grants him power, regardless of how corrupt the neoliberal paradigm is, then so be it. By invoking the Western genre, *Breaking Bad* is connecting the roots of the American psyche with the frontier mythology as a colonialist expression of dominance and control, and connecting Walt with the Neo-Nazis provides an implicit dimension of criticism levied at the willingness of capitalism to associate with fascist elements in society as long as the mandate of profit is being served.

Walt's descent into the violent and ruthless Heisenberg persona is fully commensurate with the disreputable tactics and strategies of capitalism itself. To illustrate this *Breaking Bad* uses a variety of strategies and techniques to act as a morality tale about the consequences of Walt's production of methamphetamine and how the toxicity of neoliberalism led him to such a dangerous path, aided by unregulated markets and a capitalist structure where being unfettered by social and legal constraints are determining factors in not only the marginalization and dispossession of large sections of people, but conversely allows an individual untethered by morality to profit from neoliberalism.

Overall, I would also contend that intertextuality is most insistently manifested in the long-form narrative in that it builds upon previous works of literature, film, poetry, and comic books. Extrapolating on Bakhtin's concept of dialogism that I outlined earlier, it becomes evident that intertextuality interacts with the characters and their various narrative registers to

provide a potential avenue for subjective interpretation. Conversations, literature, and film do not exist in a vacuum of self-determined and autonomous meaning. Examining how different cultural codes influence and alter the meaning of a text becomes a useful methodology for interpretation, especially when these cultural codes are read with an eye towards the patterns inherent in a serial narrative where traces and echoes of not only previous works, but also previous episodes and installments, are considered.

Barthes, in examining the potential for intertextuality, uses Balzac as an example of where an intertextual reading is useful as an interpretative tool:

One could reread Balzac, seeking out cultural intertextuality (the references to knowledge), a rather dense, sometimes even nauseating, layer in the Balzacian text. This would be a good problem to tackle, because then we could doubtless see that these cultural codes have marked each author in a different way. (137)

By this Barthes is intimating that reading a body of work, whether that of multiple novels of an author, or as is the case with my research, multiple episodes of an expansive body of a serial narrative spanning years, exposes many underlying currents of the text. Intertextuality is the relationships that exist *between* the texts and under the surface. A re-reading of a text for its intertextuality, for its various repetitions and intertextual references, means that this new reading, as Barthes also comments, “Could lead to new horizons” (137). Whether these intertextual sources are of a declared origin (as is the case with *Breaking Bad*), or an indeterminate origin (clichés, folk wisdom, etc.), uprooting the text opens up interpretation. In this manner intertextuality becomes an effective tool for closing the gap between the author and reader, between the acts of writing and reading. Intertextuality redefines the process as two aspects of a continuum, a dialogical process where each of progression of art builds upon the previous work, as well as each reading of a text builds upon our interpretation of the material.

While Barthes and Bakhtin are theorizing specifically about novels, I do think their models of interpretation can be applied to the apparatus of mass media. If we are to take into account that television can, in fact, be viewed as art, following Cardwell’s assertion that art is a non-evaluative category, then it stands to reason that literary and artistic methodologies can be used to examine television. A reading of *Breaking Bad*, to use my own example, can be as illuminating as a reading of Honoré de Balzac with an eye towards intertextuality.

In my final summation I posit that *Breaking Bad* contravenes television conventions by subverting the heroic formula of the good-guy protagonist so prevalent in network shows, thereby placing the show among examples of artistically challenging material. *Breaking Bad* also uses a sophisticated approach to narrative in which serialization is paramount to an understanding of the series, in contrast to the typical method of syndication where episodes are likely to appear as reruns and potentially out of sequence. This model of syndication usually promotes a crime-of-the-week format where dramatic progressions arrive and end within the same hour. *Breaking Bad* is aimed at a knowledgeable audience familiar with Walt's narrative trajectory and, as such, uses intertextuality to depict the gradual corruption of Walt by capitalist excess and greed. By using intertextuality in this manner the series writers are refuting the criticism that television only caters to what Ellis characterized as the distracted glance of the audience.

The goal of my research, then, was to employ intertextuality as a method for interpreting how *Breaking Bad* builds and comments on previous texts to provide a subtextual meaning of the series as a social commentary on the American dream. Critical discourse on the series tends to focus on structural aspects of *Breaking Bad*, or even as a discourse on masculinity of the middle class American, but more often than not the text itself is not perceived with a socio-political context in the same way as, say, *the Wire* is. While not overt with its commentary, I would argue that reading *Breaking Bad* with a focus on how the intertextual references work in concert with the repeated narrative patterns of the series and our perceptions of those specific references alters not only the viewer's interpretation of the series, but an interpretation of those works of art as well. The viewer's understanding of the Western, for instance, with its colonialist leanings, the *narcocorrido*, with its representation of marginalized populations, to use just two examples from my research, affects our reading of *Breaking Bad* and how it is critiquing neoliberalism. More than that, however, closely analyzing these intertextual references also affects our reading of those texts as well, enabling an open-ended conversation with art and its historical contingencies.

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