Breaking Bad: on the Western Genre and Audience Reception

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Abstract

*Breaking Bad: on the Western Genre and Audience Reception*

“*Breaking Bad: on the Western Genre and Audience Reception*” examines the recent TV series *Breaking Bad* making use of cultural scholar Stuart Hall’s encoding and decoding theories in order to better understand what meaning is imbued into the series and what meaning is extracted by the audiences. By treating *Breaking Bad* as a cultural artifact moving across what Hall defines as the parts of the circuit of culture – production, identification, representation, consumption and regulation – I will be able to answer the question of why the show is so popular and to consider the significance of that popularity. While the popularity of the TV series can simply be attributed to the excitement and pleasure surrounding an average father’s secret life as a meth kingpin, I am discovering that there are gaps between the meanings imbued by sources like the network, writers, actors, and producers and those that the audience interprets and receives. Following my interest in the show’s popularity, I read *Breaking Bad* as a Western narrative and explore how the updated tropes of the Western genre create a strong identification with the American audience, which in turn provides a springboard for examining all five parts of the circuit of culture. While the cultural scholar and political philosopher Robert Pippin argues that the Western genre is the building of modern bourgeoisie law abiding society, I argue the opposite — that *Breaking Bad* reverses the Western narrative by updating the concept of ‘winning the west.’ The character of Walt asserts a masculine force of mastery, which is so crucial to a Western Hero’s image of dominance, but he does this in a way that documents the change from law-abiding social order to its dissolution into lawlessness.

The production chapter focuses on the gap between the motivation of AMC to gain affluent viewers and the show’s dominant message of financial struggle and the failing middle class. The representation chapter explains how this dominant message is represented through camera angles, visual composition, audio, and *mise-en-scène*. This chapter also examines *Breaking Bad* in relation to Classical Westerns like *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* and *The Searchers* to see how *Breaking Bad* preserves the Western aesthetic while reversing Pippin’s Western. The consumption and identification chapter switches to the audience’s perspective. A demographic breakdown of *Breaking Bad* fans by age and sex is examined, but demographics can only tell us who watches the program, not what meanings they extract. In order to take this information a step further, I combine Stuart Hall’s theory of decoding with the TV gratification typology developed by Denis McQuail, a communications scholar, in order to extract the identities fans form with the *Breaking Bad* characters through online posts and comments by the fans. The chapter on regulation concludes my cultural study and further builds on the previous chapters by bringing in the post-modern theorist Jean Buadrillard in exploring how fans’ reactions and strong connection with the series reflect our epoch’s visual culture and dependency on simulation and reproduction to receive gratification.
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**Introduction**

Talking in person, on the phone, texting and chatting over the internet are powerful ways to circulate meaning, but they are not the only ones. Media and its’ signifying practices are also among the most dominant systems for circulating meaning (Hall “The Centrality of Culture”). Using the cultural scholar Stuart Hall’s framework for studying media and culture, this thesis focuses on one TV show of this powerful system, *Breaking Bad*, and how meaning is imbued into the series and then how meaning is interpreted. Meaning, when produced by institutions and technology becomes more complicated and involves ways in which culture can be understood. Culture is a complex evolving form and in TV, it is shaped by producers, writers, actors, time, space, money, and other forces, that are different from other cultural artifacts. By treating *Breaking Bad* as a cultural artifact moving across what Hall defines as the parts of the circuit of culture – production, representation, consumption, identification and regulation – I will offer some thoughts about why the show is so popular and the significance of that popularity. Hall argues that this circuit of the five major culture processes has no set entry or exit, but one must go the whole way around before the study is complete. In addition, each part of the circuit reappears in the analysis of the others (Du Gay 4). I start with production and conclude with regulation because the production of *Breaking Bad* explains what meanings are imbued in to the series, allowing the rest of the thesis to explore how these meanings are represented, consumed, identified by the audiences and regulated.

I read *Breaking Bad* as a reversal of the Western narrative and explore how the updated tropes of the Western genre create a strong identification with the American audience, which in turn provides a springboard for examining all five parts of the circuit of culture. While the cultural scholar and political philosopher Robert Pippin argues that the Western genre is the
building of modern bourgeoisie law abiding society, I argue the opposite — that *Breaking Bad* reverses the Western narrative by updating the concept of 'winning the west.' The character of Walt asserts a masculine force of mastery, which is so crucial to a Western Hero's image of dominance, but he does this in a way that documents the change from law-abiding social order to its dissolution into lawlessness. Walt becomes someone who is unafraid to act and to fight against the regulatory controls of society that constrain him. This says something greater about our society and culture at-large.

What does it mean when a father turns to cooking meth for money? This is complicated to decide and everyone can interpret that situation differently. Culture gives meaning to things and makes us understand and organize the world through shared conceptual ways. Studying culture will aid in finding out how meanings enter into and constitute an event. Hall expresses that the language through which media converses is multifaceted:

The televisual sign is a complex one. It is itself constituted by the combination of two types of discourse, visual and aural. ("Encoding/Decoding" 131)

*Breaking Bad*’s visual and aural discourses contextualize meaning. The term ‘discourse’ “refers to a group of statements in any domain which provides a language for talking about a topic and a way of producing a particular kind of knowledge about that topic” (Hall “The Centrality of Culture” 222). Hall points out that because visual discourse translates a three-dimensional world into a two-dimensional surface it therefore cannot be the referent or concept it signifies. He gives the example that the dog can bark but cannot bite ("Encoding/Decoding” 131). While the dog is represented visually, it is virtual and an image, and cannot be a real physical dog. *Breaking Bad* represents a view of America through the microcosm of Walt’s world but it is not a concrete reflection of our world; it is one distorted by the mixture of meanings which constitute it.
Hall’s theory subverts any straightforward notion of representation. As mentioned before multiple forces imbue meaning into the image’s representation, and this can complicate what an image means. The one dominant message isn’t always the message that gets across to the audiences, because of the multiple forces shaping it and the multiple forces decoding it. Hall has identified “three hypothetical positions from which decoding of a televisual discourse may be constructed” (Hall “Encoding/Decoding” 136). According to Hall a viewer can take on one of the three decoding positions to interpret a message. The positions he defines are the dominant-hegemonic position, the negotiated position and the oppositional position.

Out of the many possible mappings of events in a television program, a preferred reading does exist, but one that is not one-sided. Simply, in conversation with another person, pointing to the trash and saying “take out the trash” if decoded dominantly, would mean that the gesture signifies to take out the trash. But more complex transmissions bring about a mix of ways the text is encoded and decoded and therefore a direct correspondence between what is encoded and what is decoded will not exist. The dominant-hegemonic position does allow the process to come close to a ‘perfectly transparent communication,’ where the decoder operates inside the dominant code. What Hall means by a perfectly transparent communication is that the dominant message is being received as intended by the encoder. Even though this ideal scenario is what is intended by broadcasters, they have to confront not transparent communication but ‘systematically distorted communication’ (“Encoding/Decoding” 135). This occurs because the tension between the viewers’ personal agency along with systemic forces of culture prevent a dominant decoding.

Working in a similar way is the professional code which operates within the ‘hegemony’ of the dominant code. It does this by transferring the dominant definitions with professional coding such as “visual quality, presentational values, televisual quality, and
‘professionalism’ and so on” (Hall “Encoding/Decoding” 136). In this case the ‘broadcasting professionals’ would be AMC, the network that decides how *Breaking Bad* is represented, and has full control over the show’s visual style. Hall states because the professional discourse is reproducing the “hegemonic signification of events” there are conflicts that arise between the dominant and the professional significations and signifying practices (Hall “Encoding/Decoding” 136-37). This is the main focus of the production chapter, which in this context examines the dissonance between AMC’s professional message and the writers’ dominant message. Particularly, AMC’s visual quality and presentational choices which aim to target a wealthy audience are in opposition with the writers’ message of America’s economic state and its effects on the middle class.

Hall states, the majority of audiences understand what has been dominantly and professionally signified (“Encoding/Decoding”137). Dominant definitions connect events to the views of the world, relating events to ‘national interest.’ The universal topic in *Breaking Bad* is corruption of capitalist society. How this dominant definition and the Reverse Western structure of *Breaking Bad* are portrayed in the program will be discussed in the chapter on representation. Each viewer interprets the dominant message differently based on his or her own personal experiences in the negotiated decoding process. What makes this position ‘negotiated’ is that the viewer ‘negotiates’ the meaning between the dominant message and his or her own agency. One operating under the negotiated code therefore understands the dominant meaning but mixes this meaning with the decoder’s own personal experiences. One way of examining the decoding process is to see what fans write about the show on the internet. Comments on blog posts and articles reveal that audience members feel a certain way towards the characters or towards “the message” by negotiating the dominant message with personal experiences.
My focus is on the negotiated position, so the third position will just briefly be discussed here. This position understands both the dominant and implied messages, but decodes them in a generally conflicting way. It is called the oppositional code, and occurs when a viewer applies the message to an alternative context, creating a political opposition. Hall gives the example of a “viewer who listens to a debate on the need to limit wages but ‘reads’ every mention of the ‘national interest’ as ‘class interest’” (Hall “Encoding/Decoding” 138). Hall also says that a message decoded in a negotiated way can be given an oppositional reading.

The decoding process outlined here provides a solid framework for understanding how I analyze the comments of fans in the consumption chapter. In order to assess the popularity of the show and how fans interpret it, I will analyze what meanings are extracted by the audience. Consequently, questions of how culture regulates popularity arise throughout this study. Examining representation, production, consumption, identification and regulation does complete a cultural study according to Hall. It is the first step in figuring out why *Breaking Bad* is popular, but more research needs to be done regarding cultural trends of popularity of TV show genres in relation to audience reaction for a more thorough understanding of this problem. Reading the Reverse Western trope through the lens of cultural studies, I hope to show that the popularity of the inversion of the Western is dependent on active viewership and the negotiated decoding process.
Chapter 1: Production: the Conflicting Encoded Messages of *Breaking Bad*

**Introduction**

Production—when understood within the context of an analysis of a cultural artifact—encompasses everything from its creation to how it is being made. For a TV show or movie, one may think production is only what happens on set. However, for my purposes production implies more than just what happens in the field or in the studio; production provides an answer to what meaning is injected into a cultural artifact or text, and who creates this meaning (Du Gay et.al 3). Just like as an IPod, an Alienware computer, or a skateboard goes through a production process where certain meaning is ascribed, the making and designing of *Breaking Bad* encodes the program with social meaning. Encoding in this context simply means the translating of an idea into a visual message. During the production process an intended social meaning is absorbed by the product. For *Breaking Bad* this means the writers, the actors, AMC, and other people involved, all contribute to how the program is interpreted in society. But meaning is not completely produced through production; the other parts of the circuit of culture contribute a great deal. Focusing on the production of *Breaking Bad*, I will examine what meaning is imbued in the show during the creation stage, the writing process, and on set, as well as what AMC’s role is in the program’s development.

**The Creation: On Set and Writing**

The creation of *Breaking Bad* was triggered by a convoluted suggestion of Gilligan’s friend Thomas Schnauz, who is also a writer. Like Gilligan, Schnauz was worried about the opportunities for writers in the entertainment business, and had thought about what he could do instead of writing to earn some money. In response to Gilligan’s suggestion that they become greeters at Walmart, Schnauz said “maybe we can buy an RV and put a meth lab in the back”
This image proved to be powerful to Gilligan, and he instantly envisioned a normal man becoming a criminal (Martin 267). The concept from which the show evolved was itself a direct reaction to the job market, and problem of making enough money to survive. The show even felt the effects of the economy when the 2007 Writers Guild of America strike cut the first season from thirteen episodes to seven (Rose). The writer’s strike is one of the external forces that affected the story line. The writers of *Breaking Bad* saw the positives in the strike, since it allowed them to take a “break” and decide where the show was going (Rose). And during the writer’s strike Gilligan decided it was a “huge colossal mistake” to kill off Jesse Pinkman, Walt’s young partner (Gilligan “Breaking Bad – Aaron Paul Almost Got Killed Off” 00:01:55). Gilligan wanted Walt to feel an enormous amount of guilt by having Jesse die in a horrible way as a result of a drug deal gone wrong. But because of Aaron Paul’s talent, Gilligan modified the story to have Jesse continue playing a huge role. Gilligan stresses that a story is going to change once the actor’s abilities shine. It was in Aaron’s performance that the full potential of the character was realized. When Gilligan casted Anna Gunn as Walt’s wife, he didn’t know that she would be so funny and therefore have some comical moments with her character, until working with her progressed (Gilligan “Breaking Bad – Aaron Paul Almost Got Killed Off” 00:02:33). The plot of the series isn’t set in stone from the beginning; it is affected by other forces than the writers’ minds. Even the actors on the show affect how the series will develop.

As not only the creator but also the writer, director and producer for many of the shows in the series, Gilligan attempts to perfect all the visuals. Segal in his article “Art of Darkness” for the New York Times recounts that during production of an episode Gilligan personally picked out a pair of sunglasses for an extra with a nonspeaking role (23). Even someone that might be on camera for a split second or blurry in the background is still crucial to the aesthetic of the
story. Dean Norris (who played Hank Schrader) said that Vince had to go through five shirts in
different shades of grey before he found the one that he wanted Hank to wear (Segal 23).
Gilligan treats his extras and his main characters the same way to make sure everything is set up
perfectly to convey what he wants in each scene. What the audience sees on the screen is a lot of
Gilligan’s vision but it is also influenced by other writers, crew members and actors. There are
other members of the production process like Peter Gould and Thomas Schnauz who write full
episodes under Gilligan’s approval and direct as well. Gilligan’s meticulous process of picking
different styles of glasses, or different colors and types of clothing for various characters
including extras is only one contributing factor to the production of the show. Monetary concerns
are another force.

Due to a fiscal constraint, *Breaking Bad* was set in New Mexico. Vince Gilligan says that
it was actually the 25% tax rebate program that attracted the crew to New Mexico (Gilligan
“Interview”). Probably AMC and Sony Pictures urged for the filming to occur there because of
the attractive price. This monetary pressure pushed the show in a different direction than was
intended. The New Mexico desert with its flat sandy terrain and ragged red rocks make up a
great deal of the Western aesthetic of the program, which would be lacking if filmed elsewhere.

**Network Influence on *Breaking Bad***

AMC encouraging slow dramatic narratives, long takes, wide shots and location shooting
may be a reason why *Breaking Bad* exhibits all these features to begin with. The motive is to
increase profits and popularity by allowing these long scene durations. While AMC hopes that
these techniques will attract a wealthier audience, they actually underscore the content of the
show, emphasizing the landscape as enduring, compared to Walt’s quick transformation.
While there is a longer timeframe of production encouraged by AMC there is a shorter timeframe of character change in Walt’s character arch. Walt doesn’t start out as a Western hero; he develops into a manly, assertive, in-charge, shoot-then-talk type of man as the series progresses. This transformation perfectly complements the slow, dramatic narrative of the story. It is slow in the sense of long scene duration, such that a one hour episode can be dedicated to hunting down a fly in the lab, or the camera can linger on a shot for more than three seconds in order to strengthen character development. But Walt’s transformation from dying man to being alive is actually very quick and happens in the first episode when he becomes sexually revitalized from killing two men and cooking meth in an RV out in the desert. As Gilligan states in an interview relating to Walt’s development: “It's not a slow burn. He really does come alive, so to speak, pretty quickly” (Tannenbaum). With the transformation happening in the first episode, the rest of the season is dedicated to showing the consequences of that transformation.

In *Breaking Bad* the landscape facilitates his transformation from a passive humble father into an intimidating, powerful yet aggressive, selfish, ruthless drug lord by flattering the “human figure and making it seem dominate and unique” (Tompkins 74). The landscape is a prominent image in the show that is just as domineering as Walt strives to be. An American Western Film aesthetic exists in the show not just because the production company decided to film in New Mexico, but because the writers purposely draw on a lot of the elements from *The Good the Bad and the Ugly* as well as *The Searchers* and other classic Western films that will be discussed in the chapter on representation. The desert landscape literally means a sense of freedom for Walt and a place for him to retreat to in order to live his secret life. The open space of the New Mexico desert provides Walt with freedom by acting as an outlet for his investment in the meth industry. The desolation of the desert provides opportunity to conduct his secret illegal affairs.
Not until Walt decides to cook meth and step into the body of an anti-hero does he depend on the desert. The Western genre expert Jane Tompkins says the awe-inspiring landscape reflects “self-transcendence, an urge to join the self to something greater” (76). Walt wants to become more than just an average chemistry teacher; he craves power. And what Tompkins asserts about power in relation to landscape in Classical Westerns is also portrayed in *Breaking Bad*:

Power, more than any other quality, is what is being celebrated and struggled with in these grandiose vistas. The worship of power, reverence and dread emanate from these panoramic, wide-angle views (76).

The landscape in *Breaking Bad* while being reminiscent of that of Classical western movies is displayed with a different meaning than just open spaces, power, and awe. Gilligan presents the landscape differently by editing the landscape in post-production. One example is the beginning of episode two of season three, “Caballo Sin Nombre,” where the landscape shots are sped up so there is change in a short amount of time: the clouds move quicker, the wind blows the brush quicker and the sounds of the wind are harsh and dramatic like ocean water hitting rocks on a beach. This type of time-lapse photography is used frequently throughout the series perhaps to emphasize how the landscape endures as time moves on, and after Walt passes, the landscape will still be the same and time will still continue. This notion is explained further in the analysis of the use of Percy Shelley’s poem “Ozymandias” in the chapter on representation. There is another example of editing a landscape shot in the third to last episode of the series, “Ozymandias,” where the story flashes back to Jesse and Walt’s first cook. The wide shot of the desert landscape is composed with Walt in the foreground off to the right and balanced out with Jesse in the background off to the left with the RV dead in the center also in the background. The scene is framed by the ridged rock behind the RV and off to the left and
right of it, creating a three-walled box around the scene. After Walt calls his wife, he holds his phone in his hand, and his presence slowly disappears from the landscape, then the same happens to Jesse, and then the RV slowly fades away as well. The camera then lingers on the vacancy, which is emphasized by just the sound of wind. Immediately after the shot of the empty landscape, the show cuts to the title sequence. The point of having these figures disappear is to show how that spot of the landscape has not changed since Walt began his transformation. Therefore, the landscape has an ongoing dialogue with the past, present and future. The landscape endures, while Walt fades away. After Walt’s transformation in the first episode, the long takes of the landscape along with time lapse-photography and other techniques to capture power and reverence of the New Mexico desert underscores Walt’s individual quest for power and authority. The technical innovations of TV cinematography, such as the forward time lapses, produce a distinctive aesthetic different from Western movies like *Shane, The Good, the Bad and the Ugly, The Searchers* and Western TV shows like *Gunsmoke* and *Bonanza*. These innovations also distinguish filming and editing as a more technical medium than the writing described above. Both the camera and editing software used in the production process supplement the writing of the story, giving it a visual meaning that is different from Classical Westerns. This reasserts how production is a collaborative process that also includes incorporating elements from previously produced movies. *Breaking Bad* engages in a conversation with Classical Westerns, shifting the landscape to the present time, showing that as the world changes, the landscape stays the same.

Differently from movies, TV shows have commercial breaks and time constraints. Scenes of more than five minute durations are normal for movies that are not interrupted by commercials. But basic cable TV shows need to have commercial slots available. Producers of
Premium Cable series on HBO such as the *Sopranos* don’t need to worry about changing the pace of their show to accommodate advertising. Therefore, generally these programs are more slowly paced with lengthy scene durations. In “Putting the Premium into Basic: Slow-Burn Narratives and the Loss-Leader Function of AMC’s Original Drama Series,” Anthony N. Smith conducted extensive research regarding how AMC diverges from the typical economic model of Basic Cable. Typically ad-supported series are supposed to have “abrupt edits that close act-break scenes” (Smith 154). AMC is an anomaly to the basic cable model, since its drama shows contain lengthy scenes and character exchanges despite its commitment to filling advertising spots. The “slow-burn narrative” that Smith talks about should not be confused with character development. Ironically the narrative’s “slow burn” style of silence, slow pans and tilts, without many quick cuts between shots are dedicated to showing the consequences of Walt’s transformation and the suspense in his attempts at climbing higher in the meth industry. Including camera angles from odd places, buzzing out conversations and other innovative techniques all compliment the use of the lingering camera. There definitely is a sense of slow movement in the program, but while this is happening, Walt’s transformation is moving constantly ahead. Not only, then, do the writers, actors and directors of the show influence production but so does the network. Taking Smith’s argument about AMC utilizing the slow-driven narrative structure of its drama shows and applying it to what is encoded in *Breaking Bad* during production demonstrates that the producers intentionally choose drama programs that can create long scenes of silence and suspense. Certain components required by AMC mold the show as well, and are encoded in its discourse.

Smith is suggesting that AMC chooses to have these narratives compete with HBO. The network as he reports follows in HBO’s footsteps, attempting to attract its “upscale audiences”
Mazart 17

(159). In order to do this, besides allowing “slow-burning” storytelling, AMC also decides to spend a great deal of money on producing a drama series, such as *Breaking Bad* while contracting twelve or thirteen episodes per season to maximize episode expenditure (158-59). For example, AMC permits “extensive location shooting” in *Breaking Bad* in order to compete with HBO’s productions (156). This methodology, Smith argues is so far successful for AMC especially with its original drama series *Mad Men*; the show causing AMC’s overall ad revenue to increase by twenty-three percent (161). The network is successful especially when it is smart at scheduling; according to Smith, AMC “develops associations between its original series and its catalogue of feature films” (161). Showing related movies targets an audience that will be interested in the genre and narrative style, while keeping them tuned in to watch an episode from an original series. This scheduling style in addition to having slow-paced, tension-filled narratives on a cable model is unique to AMC and makes the shows on this network stand out and therefore increase the channel’s popularity. To lead into *Breaking Bad*’s second season premiere AMC débuted the movie *Batman Begins* to secure its reputation for big movies as well as encourage viewers to watch its original programing (Lafayette). Scheduling it this way, draws an association between the movie and the show. The connection between the comic-book based *Batman Begins* and the drug-related *Breaking Bad* might seem nonexistent, but the action, crime film-noir style of Christopher Nolan’s Batman films is similar to the dark, crime, film-noir component of *Breaking Bad*. In addition, as the Batman symbol is iconic, “Heisenberg” also rises to a hero status, where his picture is idolized by those in and outside of the meth industry. By scheduling this movie before the premiere, AMC draws in an audience who likes action-packed and dramatic films, and therefore draws attention to the same qualities in *Breaking Bad*. 
Emulating HBO’s productions allows AMC’s programs to be elevated to the next level and provides more meaningful material per episode and a way to increase revenue. AMC uses four commercial pods per episode for Breaking Bad. And these pods are shorter than the typical length, allowing for four extra minutes of show time; therefore, more is able to develop in the narrative, similar to HBO’s programming. This can be an economic strategy, even though reducing advertising time means not getting as much money, it does not outweigh the popularity of the show that comes with this decision. By using this methodology AMC is trying to attract the “upscale audience” of the HBO shows. Smith quotes Business Weeks’ article “How Mad Man glammed up AMC” saying that BMW chooses to advertise during Breaking Bad because of “the show’s ability to attract difficult-to-reach wealthy young males” as evidence of AMC getting through to the wealthy (160). But this argument does not consider the content of the show. Rich people would not appear to connect with Walt’s struggles and especially the depiction of his self-centered colleagues Gretchen and Elliot Schwartz who became millionaires off of Walt’s idea. Smith’s article does not provide definitive evidence that wealthy hard-to-market-to males watch the show intensely. There is a dissonance between what the writers of the show are trying to communicate and what audience the Network is striving for. AMC operates in what Hall coins the ‘professional code,’ influencing how the show is presented to the audience. So by AMC generating the ‘televisual quality’ and ‘presentational values’ (such as slowing down the narrative after Walt’s transformation, having long scene durations and long takes etc.) that would attract a wealthy population, then these people would decode the show the way the network wants them. Also if wealthy people do watch the show, maybe at one point they were struggling to make ends meet, and know how tough it is to make money to support themselves or their family and therefore are attracted to the story-line (possibly statistically unlikely). This also
brings out the complexity of the ‘negotiated’ position, because it is possible for viewers to misread their own class status by assuming that they are struggling when they are quite wealthy and vice versa. Also what complicates this process further is that one does not need to see a reflection of oneself in the show to like it. One’s own self-perceptions can also become reconfirmed by watching characters which are far outside of one’s own class. It is possible that the struggles of others can make one feel secure. To add to this concept, the show can reach the wealthy because the depravity or struggles of others can make one feel secure, smart, etc. Thinking how the wealthy view the show this way, triggers the question of what meanings they extract from the series to make them connected to the show rather than the amount of affluent individuals who watch the show. This process will be explained in more detail as I analyze viewer comments in the chapter on consumption.¹

As the President of AMC, Charlie Collier says that the themes of the show are relatable to more of a broad audience:

The themes are about the everyman who has got his back against the wall, and certainly I think there are plenty of people in the world right now who are feeling a little down on their luck, feeling like they aren’t making enough money to support their family the way they want to (Lafeyette).

Collier’s comment expresses that if AMC is aware that the show will appeal to a wide audience, then they can zoom into grabbing the wealthy sector with the way they present the show. The Network recognizes that *Breaking Bad* has a great potential because of it being about “the everyman” and therefore having universally relatable themes. The content of the show as Collier mentions relates to national interest. And this national problem is decoded personally by each viewer under the negotiated position. The bulk of the show deals with people who are not in
high society but rather are drug-addicts, high-school drop outs, and people involved in the scummy international drug trade. While Gilligan’s message focuses on the transformation of a typical everyman father, AMC focuses on showing this story in a way that would target a richer audience, which is not who the content of the show would appeal to. While the viewer will decode a negotiated message related to capitalism and the erosion of the middle class, AMC Ironically tries to attract an affluent audience with its professional code. The gap between the motivation of the Network to gain affluent viewers and the show’s interest in financial struggle and the failing middle class reveals how despite the two messages in existing in conflict; one coherent story is the result.

The Production process is a collaborative one and for Breaking Bad does not just include writers, producers, directors, actors and the Network but also relies on classical Westerns to draw influence. The dominant meaning that erupts out of the show has to do with the national interest of America’s economic state and its effects on the middle class, and this is artfully done with imaginary reminiscent of Classical Western movies. The classical Western imagery is updated with innovations in production to match the content of the show, dealing with science and the problems of the 21st century. Despite the dissonance between the two messages conveyed by the Network and the writers, one coherent and impactful message is delivered, as shown by the millions of people who watch the show, who tweet comments, and purchase merchandise. In the consumption chapter I will switch perspectives and analyze the meanings that are extracted from the viewers who comment on the internet about the show.

**The Messages of Breaking Bad’s DVD Covers**

The DVD covers further exemplify how AMC’s intended message and the writers of Breaking Bad’s intended message are separate but work together to provide a high quality show
worthy of awards. AMC’s marketing team produces eye catching covers that stand out and display the show’s awards to attract consumers to purchase the product. The succession of the DVD covers reflect the arch of the new Western hero, Walt, conveying how the awkward man on the first season DVD cover transforms to the intimidating creature on the last cover.

Despite being produced by AMC’s marketing team, the DVD covers do closely represent Walt’s character arch. The DVD covers carry the distinctively innovative Western style over from the show, to closely represent the filmic style of the series. Walt’s middle class status is missing from the DVD covers. This might be because AMC as noted in the previous section wants to target affluent individuals, and therefore having an ambiguity around Walt’s social class will attract a broad audience and possibly the wealthy as well. In addition, the DVD covers emphasize the amount of money Walt attains, without showing the downside of having all that money and how it becomes a burden to him. The series on the other hand, deliberately demonstrates that Walt taking advantage of the corrupt drug market has alienated him from his role as a loving father.

The DVD covers of Breaking Bad don’t show all the characters up-close in the foreground like typical movie covers, or like the covers of HBO’s TV Western Deadwood. Skylar, Gus, Hank, Walt Jr. and Saul (who are other prominent characters besides Jesse and Walt) do not appear on one DVD cover. Even Jesse’s face only appears on the front of the season two and three DVD covers. The choice to include predominantly the image of Walt on the DVD covers demonstrates not only that his change is a personal transformation but also that it is a self-centered one. Walt honestly reveals to Skyler in the last episode of the series that everything he did was for himself. He said “I liked it and I was good at it, and I was really— I was alive” (00:33:14). Diving into the risky life of a meth cook even if one does have a fatal
disease is a completely idiotic decision because it puts one’s family at danger, not helping them in the future. But it is a decision Walt did in the long run for himself. It made him feel alive in the wake of feeling mentally and physically dead. All the other main characters in the show including Hank, Walt Jr., Skyler, Jesse, Gus, Mike and Saul are all victims of Walt’s transformation. Walt’s choices all directly affect what happens to these characters; therefore, his image is the most dominant one, and usually the only one on the DVD covers.

The season one DVD cover is uncertain to what genre classifies the show (see fig. 1). It appears as a comedy with the beautiful Western Landscape sitting in the background while Walt is in his underwear holding a gun and his meth lab RV is emitting a toxic red smoke just behind him. The smoke is fake looking, but draws the viewers’ eyes up to Walt’s face. Walt’s attempted dominance is undermined by his age, partial nudity, half tucked in shirt, awkward wide stance and scared stare. One wouldn’t take Walt seriously based on the season one DVD cover. The imagery of this cover aptly represents Walt’s first attempt at cooking meth shown in the first episode. Despite the sense of drama in the beginning of the season, from seeing dead
bodies and Walt’s anxiety, the image of Walt with the gun is not taken seriously. An older man, who folds his clothes before he steps into an RV does not translate into a mastermind criminal and expert meth cook. His image seems awkward on this DVD cover because Walt is attempting to be the Western Hero but his appearance doesn’t match his attitude. Having a comedic first season cover would attract those interested in comedies. The show is not a comedy, and therefore either the first season DVD was a marketing tool to target audience members that favor other genres, or else it was uncertain what type of show it would become. The DVD cover depicting a middle-aged man standing in the desert half naked with a gun is salient. The DVD cover’s poignant imagery is a memorable representation of Walt’s character at the beginning of the first season. The second season DVD cover also has a comical affect from Walt’s puzzled stare as he sits in a hazmat suit on a lawn chair out in the desert (see fig. 2). From the season one DVD cover to the fifth, the images of Walt grow darker transforming Walt’s confused look into a hard angry countenance. From the season one DVD cover to the fifth, the images of Walt grow darker transforming Walt’s confused look into a hard angry countenance.

Fig. 2. Season 2 DVD cover
By the Final season DVD cover, the image does not evoke comedy, but rather violence and darkness. The third season DVD cover shows the characters as more intimidating than the last two seasons’ DVD covers and evokes more of *Breaking Bad*’s distinctive style (see fig. 3). The background and landscape is in black and white, while Walt and Jesse are in color along with the yellow hazmat sign on the barrels of methylamine. As the landscape gets darker in the third season DVD cover, so does the content of the show. Jesse and Walt stand to the right side of the frame while the barrels on the ground are more toward the center. The tag line of “Unstable, Volatile, Dangerous” carries a double meaning that can be applied to the chemistry process that Walt is a master at, and also Walt’s behaviors. The contrasts of dark and light along with the pop of yellow intensify the image, creating as the tag line states a more unstable, volatile and dangerous environment. In this season Walt’s immoral and risky acts include breaking back into his house, running over two dealers with his car, and forcing Jesse to murder Gale. On the DVD cover the camera angle looks up at Jesse and Walt as they look out into the distance in front of them, to show their dominance. Jesse has his back slightly turned so the viewer can see he conceals a gun. Jesse is the one holding the gun on this cover because the season finale ended with the emotional moment of Jesse killing the oblivious scientist, Gale, when he opens the door to his apartment. Also, it is noted on the bottom right corner of the image that this program won the 2010 Emmy award for best actor and supporting actor (Brian Cranston and Aaron Paul respectively). The show winning an Emmy, and displaying it on the DVD cover “shows AMC’s efforts to boost its profile” to attract a richer audience has paid off “by generating column inches and award wins” (Smith 159). This would entice a viewer that hasn’t seen the show to start watching because of its high quality and ability to compete with shows of equal merit like *the Wire.*
The fourth season DVD cover also validates the quality and greatness of the program by presenting a quote from the New York Times that “Breaking Bad is brilliant.” Again this information like the Emmy award box on the previous season would attract viewers to watch the program. The cover of season four is dominated by Walt’s face (see fig. 4.). The extreme close up shows the seriousness of Walt’s hard mature countenance. His age is an intimidating factor, rather than it being comedic as in the first two season DVDs. Walt’s eyes on this cover stare out intensely. The yellow tint of the image intensifies his furrowed brow, forehead lines, glasses and beard, making his physical features even the more intimidating. This is the season where the ongoing battle between Walt and Gus Fring comes to an end and as Walt clarifies at the end of this season, he has won. Walt believed from killing Gus, that he outsmarted the sneaky and experienced business man, and in turn gained a sense of self-worth and power.
The fifth season DVD is separated into two DVDs. The one entitled the “Fifth Season” contains the first half of the season’s episodes, while the cover entitled the “Final Season” contains the last half of the fifth season’s episodes. Both season 5 DVD covers connote a whole different meaning from the DVD covers of the previous seasons. The last season covers are more dark and dramatic and personify Walt as a scary and dangerous man. In the fifth season cover Walt sits dead center in a warehouse, wearing his yellow hazmat suit, surrounded by blocks of money (see fig. 5).
He has a threatening glare conveying that money and power are the only things he enjoys attaining, as he sits on his throne. But in the show it is clear that the amount of money he owns has reached the point of being excessive and worthless, rather than being an asset to Walt. He cannot launder it anymore, store it all or spend it all. The dissonance between the two separate messages of the writers and the Network is shown explicitly through the season five DVD cover, because the amount of wealth Walt has is looked upon as something that will increase his status, while the show comments on the emptiness of excessive money. In episode 8 of season 5 Skylar brings Walt to a storage facility to show Walt where she has been hiding the excess money. After Skylar removes the sheet covering the piles of cash, the camera zooms to Walt’s face to show an expression of uncertainty and disbelief, which emphasizes the problem that they have too much money (00:32:54). She says “This is what you have been working for…I rented this place because I didn’t know what else to do, I gave up accounting it, it’s just so much so fast” (00:33:13). The camera circles slowly around the money and then looks down over Walt’s shoulder, allowing the viewers to gain Walt’s perspective of looking down at that enormous pile.

Fig. 5. Season 5 DVD cover
Even he looks at it as a burden. It has come to the point where they can’t even launder it any more or spend it all and therefore is worth nothing. This scene is paramount because the money symbolizes the culmination of all that Walt has done in the drug trade. It is fitting that on the back of the fifth season DVD there is a still image from this scene of Walt and Skyler staring at the enormous cash pile (see fig. 6).

![Fig. 6. Back cover of Season 5.](image)

The choice of this image, alongside the other cover imagery demonstrates how his transformation is affecting him psychologically. At the same time this image, showing the physical pile of cash reasserts the cover image of Walt as a king, further supporting AMC’s goal to target a wealthy audience. But Jesse in the next episode of the fifth season reasserts the show’s claim about the emptiness of cash when he decides to throw away thousands of dollars that Walt gave him onto people’s porches instead of keeping it for himself, since it reminds him of all the deaths that occurred and the awful things that happened as a result of his involvement in Walt’s empire. The money that Walt has strived so hard to get turns into a burden and evokes a feeling of emptiness from consumption. The image of Walt surrounded by his money as AMC presents it, makes Walt look like royalty with “All Hail the King” at the bottom of this picture—royalty to the drug business at least, because of the grungy warehouse, the lawn chair he sits in and his regal garb of a yellow hazmat suit. While AMC hints at the quantity of money Walt has as being
a good thing, and making this increase his status, and pride, Gilligan actually draws attention to the opposite in season five.

The image of Walt on the final season DVD cover which houses the last half of the season’s episodes, sharply contrasts to the image of him on the first season DVD cover (see fig. 7). The final season DVD cover shows him closer in the foreground than the season one cover, creating a more intimidating portrait that is intensified by Walt’s hard face and clenched fists. It is in black and white, with the western landscape in the background. The sunlight poking through the clouds is a distorted green color and the words that cover Walt’s body say “Remember My Name.” This truly shows that he has turned into a ruthless villain. The desert’s horizon line still sits in in the background but matches the sinister look on Walt’s face. Through editing, the designers transformed the landscape to match Walt’s transformation in order to illustrate the character arch of Walt and make both Walt and the landscape homogeneous.

Fig. 7. Final Season DVD cover
While the DVD covers stretch Walt’s transformation along seasons one through five, his transformation was quick, happening in the first episode of the first season. The DVD covers show his transformation spread out among each season. Walt’s power and authority isn’t displayed until the third DVD cover because the image of him standing erect with Jesse is more powerful than the first two images of him on the season one and two DVD covers. The DVD covers capture the switch in Walt’s mindset rather than in his actions, by showing his confused face change into a menacing, hard countenance by the final season DVD cover.

Conclusion

Gilligan targets *Breaking Bad* to the majority of Americans because Walt’s depression is relatable to the middle class and others striving to make a living while keeping themselves and their family happy, despite AMC targeting the wealthy with particular presentational techniques and high visual quality. What comes out of the collaboration, the pressures and constraints, is an American Western aesthetic mixed with dark crime, film-noir and science. The process of production is what steered *Breaking Bad* into what it has become. It is not just the creator of the show that makes all the decisions, but the actors, producers, and the network all affect what is seen on screen and the way the story unfolds.
Chapter 2: 
**Representation: Breaking Bad’s Revival and Reversal of the Classical Western**

**Introduction**

Camera angles, editing, sound, setting, dialogue, *mise-en-scène* and all other components of a TV show are central to the process by which meaning is produced. According to Hall, members of the same culture “must share sets of concepts and ideas which enable them to…interpret the world, in roughly similar ways” (“Introduction” 4). Translating feelings and ideas into these various languages produce meaning. “Meaning is a dialogue – always only partially understood, always an unequal exchange” (Hall “Introduction” 4). The meaning of *Breaking Bad* is unequal because its message is not just delivered, but decoded through a series of negotiations. Stuart Hall describes all of the different ways to produce and communicate meaning (images, sounds, body language, facial expressions, feelings, ideas etc.) as ‘working like languages’ – all of which, taken together, operate as a system of representation (Hall “Introduction” 4). This chapter will explore *Breaking Bad*’s discourse by concentrating on how filming techniques signify meaning.

**What kind of Western is Breaking Bad?**

Before delving into how Breaking Bad fits into the Western genre and exactly what category of Western it is, the debate about the form of the Western genre needs to be taken into account. Jim Kitses in his essay “The Western: Ideology and Archetype,” declares that one of the main conventions of the genre is its use of history to address America’s past, underscoring that the Western genre is firmly associated with a time and place in American history. This essay written for a 1974 anthology falls short of recognizing the genre’s ability to retain its core themes while setting the storyline in the present time. Even though he does recognize the adaptability of
the Western genre, he does not take into account that these adaptabilities can change the way the audience engages with the program as well as transform the classical conventions. He claims that the Western relies on mastering narrative and dramatic structure to create a “personally meaningful story,” instead of commenting on our life (71). *Breaking Bad* on the other hand demonstrates that narrative and dramatic structure along with life commentary create a dedicated audience. And I will examine just how much impact *Breaking Bad* has on the fan-base in the chapter on consumption. Phil Hardy, another scholar of the Western genre, treats the Western in the same way as Kitses. In the introduction to the *Overlook film Encyclopedia: the Western*, Phil Hardy writes, “the western is fixed in time in a relatively straight forward way,” confining the genre to a 19th-century setting (x). His point of view like Kitses does not take into account how the Western genre keeps building upon itself and transforming as time moves forward.

The Western genre is not static. The shifts and changes of the Western genre make it difficult to classify a movie or TV show just as a typical Western. As Philip French states in his monograph, the list of sub-genres of the Western is only an “incomplete list” but “suggests some of the apparent variety within the genre” (18). He goes on to list a litany of different titles such as the ‘Adult Western,’ ‘Comedy Western,’ ‘Psychological Western,’ ‘Allegorical Western,’ ‘Modern Western’ and the ‘Spaghetti Western’ among others (18). *Breaking Bad* adds to the incomplete list of the Western genre’s assortment of forms by reversing what the cultural scholar and political philosopher Robert Pippin claims the Western is about. Pippin in his book *The Hollywood Western and American Myth: The Importance of Howard Hawks and John Ford for Political Philosophy*, claims that many Westerns “are about the founding of modern bourgeois, law-abiding, property owning, market economy, technologically advanced societies in transition – in situations of, mostly, lawlessness (or corrupt and ineffective law) that border on classic
‘state of nature’ theories” (19-20). The films that Pippin analyzes (*Red River*, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* and *The Searchers*) are those that are about “America and the self-understanding of rapid American modernization in the West in the nineteenth century” (Pippin 21). *Breaking Bad* by contrast is not about the establishment of social order and political authority, but rather the breakdown of order and moral values to critique what America has evolved into. *Breaking Bad* undermines the national self-understanding that is exhibited in Classical Westerns according to Pippin by exposing the consequences of a corrupt political system. In the microcosm of Walt’s world the reversal of lawfulness into lawlessness and property owning to propertylessness is shown through the transformation of a law-abiding middle class father into a criminal.

Karl Marx the famous German philosopher, economist and author of the *Communist Manifesto* argues how capitalism, as a mode of production, alienates workers who are tied to operating machines. His theory of alienation elucidates why *Breaking Bad* is a Reverse Western. The reasons behind Walt’s transformation into a criminal are partly personal, but they are also party external, influenced by what Marx calls ‘alienation.’ The reason why he needs to break the law to feel connection to his own labor and money is because he starts as an alienated worker.

Marx advocates for a factory worker’s (proletariat) revolution against the capitalist owners of the means of production (bourgeoisie). Marx explains that worker alienation is connected to money, monopoly and competition, meaning that capitalist exploitation of labor results in worker alienation (“Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts” 78). Alienation simply happens when a worker’s labor and product are separate material things from the worker; therefore, the worker is not selling his product but his labor. This is what Marx says happens in a capitalist society and because of this “society must fall into the two classes of property owners and the propertyless workers” (“Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts” 77).
To demonstrate how the concept of alienation is represented, I will take a closer look at three ways in which Walt’s relation with labor is objectified. Walt’s labor is not alienated in the same way as the proletariat factory workers; however, I argue that Walt’s alienation can still be understood through Marx’s framework. We can make this connection by examining his sale of Grey Matter Technologies, his work as an underpaid high school science teacher, and his work as a meth cook. The first two cases are similar to Marx’s factory workers because Walt’s labor is being undervalued like the workers Marx speaks about. The third is a different type of objectification because when Walt becomes a meth cook he actually enjoys doing this, even though he feels his labor is worth more than the millions Gus pays him.

Walt’s transformation is jump-started by being diagnosed with cancer and not being able to afford chemotherapy which leads into the first instance concerning the buyout. In the episode “Cancer Man” Walt says he would need to spend “90,000 dollars out of pocket” in order to receive chemotherapy treatment (00:42:33). Christopher Keelty, an artist and fan of *Breaking Bad*, cleverly created a parody of this scene in the form of a comic strip. Through this he demonstrates that if the show took place in a country other than America, Walt would continue being a high school teacher because the government would have paid his medical bills (see fig. 8).
If Walt would pay 90,000 dollars out of pocket, this would create too much debt for the family, so that even Skyler going back to work would not help. But when his former colleague and business partner Elliot offers Walt a job and to pay for his treatment, he refuses due to his pride and his ego (00:12:29 “Grey Matter”). He thinks it is out of pity, and Walt would rather work hard for the money than just accept an easy way out. By selling his intellectual property to Gretchen and Elliot for an insignificant amount compared to the billions “Grey Matter Technologies” is worth at the present moment in the show is an economic and financial mistake. According to Marx “the worker puts his life into the object and this means that it no longer belongs to him but to the object” (“Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts” 79). Marx describes what I believe is reverse consumption taking place between a worker’s product and the worker. Grey Matter consumes his life, and therefore is extremely meaningful to him. And the life that he lends to the business becomes worth more than his own life, making Walt’s human spirit and rational being deteriorate as a result of the buyout. By selling his labor and product for a low cost to Elliot, he is valuing his life at a low cost. Walt realizes the work that he put into the company is worth a lot more than five thousand dollars. He does not want to make that same
mistake again. This raises the question of whether there is any amount of money that Walt would accept for something that he completely identifies with. Perhaps it is the amount of money that Skyler shows to him in the storage facility in episode 8 of season 5 (mentioned in the chapter on production), since in the same episode he tells her he is going to stop being involved with the drug trade.

Secondly, his alienation is also because he feels the effects of the externalization of labor as a science teacher. In Gilligan’s Western, the hero appears where he may be least expected: in a suburban town as a high school chemistry teacher, a carwash attendant, and father. Walt is unsatisfied with the amount of money he is making and therefore feels miserable instead of happy. It is clear that he loves science, but his unmotivated students make it hard for him to get satisfaction. The audience is introduced to this in the first episode of the series. After the title sequence, Walt is lying in bed in his suburban home, staring into the darkness of his room. The clock shows that it is 5:02 am. The camera cuts to pan over baby gifts, hinting that his wife is pregnant. The camera also shows stills of diapers and pans over the wall where color chips are pinned up to help decide what color to paint the baby’s room. Over these images there is a steady clip-clop of the miniature stair-master Walt is using to exercise. The camera cuts to a close-up of Walt’s face, showing his exhaustion. He stops to take a breath and stares at his plaque on the wall in front of him. An extreme close-up shows that he was awarded the Nobel Prize in chemistry in 1985. In the next scene the audiences find out it is Walt’s 50th birthday, and Walt is not overly happy. Walt seems indifferent to this day, he just eats his breakfast and goes to work, despite his wife making him a special breakfast and wishing him a happy birthday. The composition and organization of the camera positioned first to show Walt looking isolated and sad, and then followed by images of baby items in the dark room, is connoting that the arrival of
his new child is not the happiest thing. By seeing Walt examine his prestigious award that morning and then going into teach a high school class, the audiences feel like Walt does: upset over his job, thinking that with his talent he can do more than just work in a suburban high school and carwash. Walt knows that he will not have enough money to raise another child from these two jobs. At the carwash, being forced to wash a car that turns out to be his bratty students’ father’s humiliates him and then, when he drives home, the glove compartment in his car won’t close. The constant sound of the glove compartment door hitting and retracting reflects how things in his life are not working out the way he wants. Little things from his job spill over into his home life making him feel depressed and distant even at his own surprise birthday party. In the birthday party scene Hank, his bother-in-law is shown as the epitome of manliness as he whips out his gun to show everyone what he gets to do as a DEA agent. What further effeminizes Walt is when he picks up Hank’s gun and says that it’s heavy, and Hank replies “that’s why they hire men” (00:11:59). Hanks biting comment implies Walt is not manly enough to be a DEA agent. Besides being depressed by his lack of wealth, Walt is also depressed because of his lack of manly dominance. The profit of selling his blue meth at first was money, but by the end of the last season the profit that was more important to Walt was that of being “manly” and feeling in-charge and powerful. The pride Walt gets from being a kingpin of the meth industry is a personal issue, but tied to ways in which his financial hardships and job as an underpaid high school teacher emasculate him.

Marx says that the result of the externalization of labor is that “(the worker) only feels himself freely active in his animal functions of eating, drinking, and procreating, at most also in his dwelling and dress, and feels himself an animal in his human functions” (“The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts” 80-1). Walt doesn’t even feel himself “freely active” when his wife
tries to pleasure him, until after he gets a rush from cooking meth, killing two men and getting away with it. Walt is unhappy with his life and does not even feel what Marx says the externalized laborer feels, which is feeling “at home when he is not working” (“Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts” 80). Walt’s alienation instead is also felt at home. Walt’s jobs as a science teacher and car wash attendant emasculate him, do not compensate him with enough money, and in turn alienate him from feeling his human functions. Walt’s new home becomes his RV or the lab he cooks at: he feels ‘at home’ when he is cooking meth, rather than with his wife and children. This brings us back to Pippin’s claim, and acts as further support of how the family dynamic represented in Breaking Bad actually dissolves the idea of the values of a bourgeois family.

Despite Walt’s feeling of vitality as a meth cook Walt does suffer in a third instance a type of alienation under this occupation. When Walt becomes a meth cook he relies solely on his ability to produce a great product to provide an income. His earnings and property gained at the start of his journey through manufacturing methamphetamine grants him his masculine pride and makes him feel ‘alive.’ The ‘alienation’ in this case de-personalizes him quite literally. Being in the illegal drug business literally strips Walt of his previous identity as a high school science teacher and modest husband to a ruthless worker climbing the power ladder.

Walt, through the alienation he feels from his work since his start at Grey Matter up to being a meth cook, influenced his immoral choices and provoked his transformation from a law-abiding ordinary father into an immoral lawless criminal. Walt’s depression and alienation are expressed by his lack of money, lack of prestige in addition to his lack of manliness. His transformation as a meth kingpin supplies him with his needs. At some level, cooking meth makes Walt invigorated and happy (and so he continues to do it), but he is most happy when he
is his own boss and makes his own rules. Walt goes into the meth business blind, with only the knowledge of how to produce the product, once he realizes he can make more money than just the cook, he tries to switch positions from the laborer to the capitalist in his search for money and power. When he is the king of the meth business in New Mexico his main concern is making money off of the product and the labor of others. Walter is the product of capitalism, craving money and power to the point where he obsesses over Mike paying the middle men out of his share of money. In this scene of the episode “Hazard Play,” Walt argues with Mike, telling him to take all the money out of his portion instead since they are “his men.” Immediately after Mike says how much Walt will receive, Walt questions why it is three-hundred thousand dollars short. The reason is because the drivers get a twenty percent cut. Walt didn’t even know about the “mules,” or the drivers that deliver the product for him until Jesse told him. And Walt still questions why “transportation is worth twenty percent” (00:39:25). This scene builds up tension between Walt and Mike, where Walt is constantly in disbelief of how much money is being cut, despite Mike trying to reason with him. Clearly for Jesse the amount of money he gets doesn’t mean as much to him as to Walt. Jesse intervenes and says “hey hey hey, we still have over one million and that’s just for one cook” (00:40:05). The camera at Jesse’s eye level, shows him shake his head and roll his eyes at the ridiculousness of the argument. Walt’s reasoning is irrational and further shows how he has turned greedy and became inconsiderate of others. This is an important characteristic of him as capitalist because Walt was a laborer like the “mules” while he worked under Gus; nevertheless, he cannot identify with them. Reading this behavior under Marxist theory, it becomes clearer that the Walt’s role in this instance is abiding by the laws of competition, forcing him to exploit others in order to survive. Walt hates that he is being told to pay his workers properly. Walt asks “why are we paying them?” and unsatisfied with
Mike’s answer of “it’s what you do” Walt mocks him sarcastically (0:42:23). Walt is upset with just the $137,000 he is making after all the other workers are paid. Even though when Walt essentially becomes a capitalist by being the head of a meth empire and exploiting the workers under him, he doesn’t fall into the category of property owning like he should. The result of his career in the illegal drug business not only creates a lot of turmoil at home, forcing Walt to move out, but it also forces him to go into hiding and leave his family and his home for good. He can’t even take his newborn infant with him. He has no more property, other than his money, which is also taken away from him by Jack and his crew towards the end of the series. Instead of becoming property owning through attaining wealth, Walt is propertyless. What is left is just his Machiavellian persona. This demonstrates how wealth creates a vacancy and is insignificant in the long term.

In order to transform his relationship with his own labor and money Walt needs to break the law. By Walt breaking the law rather than founding it, the series reverses the typical narrative of the Western. Before Walt started cooking meth he was a passive father and an enthusiastic science teacher, but he transforms to become a greedy, selfish, outspoken criminal and murderer. He was law abiding and now he is not. Breaking Bad is not about the establishment of social order and political authority, but rather the breakdown of order and moral values to critique what America has evolved into.

**Breaking Bad’s use of a Romantic Poem to Perpetuate the Notion of a Reverse Western**

Other elements of the show also support this idea that Breaking Bad operates as a Reverse Western. An important example is the intertextual reference to Percy Shelley’s poem “Ozymandias” in the episode with the same name. It signals to the viewer to read the poem if he or she does not know it, therefore adding a supplemental text to the story of a similar character to
Walt. Secondly, it combines the transcendent feeling of awe from the Romantic poem with the show’s socio-political discourse. The writers of *Breaking Bad* borrow the essence of the Romantic poem to underscore the series’ emphasis on the dissolution of moral values by bringing out the concept of ruins. Percy Shelley was a Romantic poet rather than a Western author, but in AMC’s promotion for the episode of “Ozymandias” the combination of the poem’s language (read by Brian Cranston) and the still images of the landscape as time is fast forwarded creates an image of sublimity and mystery (“Ozymandias as Read by Brian Cranston: Breaking Bad”).  

Walt’s influence remains after his death, with the “Heisenberg” image in circulation and the name “Heisenberg” spray painted in his house. These tokens left over from his rule, conveying his immortality like that of King Ozymandias in Percy Shelley’s poem. The poem emphasizes how the everlasting stamp of one individual can be passed down through language from one generation to the next:

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.” (Shelley 356)

The narrator is telling the reader a story he hears from a traveler who saw a ruin with an etching of an exclamation by “Ozymandias.” The transfer of information stemming from the ruin emphasizes the power of storytelling to perpetuate the author’s intent from creating the etching. Like how the inscription is the only thing left of Ozymandia’s reign, what is left of Walt’s is an iconic drawing of “Heisenberg” as well as this name spray painted in what was left of his home. Walt’s legacy is not monetary as he intended, but the immortality of his essence as a kingpin. “Ozymandias” supports the program as a Reverse Western, by emphasizing ruin, decay and wreck. The show is not about a founding or the building of society, but its destruction. The microcosm of Walt’s world is left in a ruin, but the name of “Heisenberg” stays spray painted on the walls of his home after he has passed.

**Breaking Bad’s Manifest Destiny**

To continue examining *Breaking Bad’s* representation as a Reverse Western, I will compare its elements against Classical Western conventions to see how the ‘Manifest Destiny’ of the hero has transformed. This raises again the question of why it has transformed, and why audiences are deeply connected to this new anti-hero. An answer to this question is complex and cannot be answered without looking at the full circuit of culture. I hope by the end of this study the answer will be in greater clarity.

David Lusted in his book *The Western* demonstrates how genre needs to build upon itself and transform. He says “successful popular genres are maintained over time by the emergence of
renewable cycles of films that create new relationships between similarity and difference” (27).
In other words, in order to keep a genre alive, each generation of the genre needs to have similarities to the classics of the genre, as well as differences, building on the foundation of the genre by extracting new and interesting meaning. *Breaking Bad* does this by using not only core Western themes but also technical elements attributed to famous Western directors in combination with its own unique story line and commentary on the corrupted capitalist system of America.

Indeed “what is a Western” continues to be redefined today. The Western genre is being constantly reinvented and modified. Segal, a *New York Times* writer states of *Breaking Bad* that “The story and setting were an update of the spaghetti Western, minus the cowboys and set in the present” (Segal 19). I agree that it is like a Spaghetti Western in its cynical and dark aura, dealing with the problem of attaining money in an immoral way. In *the Good, the Bad the Ugly* Tuco and “Blondie” constantly use each other for their own benefit to attain treasure and also “Angle Eyes” is an amoral and selfish mercenary who always ‘finishes’ the job for a monetary reward. Like in this spaghetti Western, in *Breaking Bad* Walter turns into a mercenary who would rather gain wealth than stay true to moral values.

In classic Western films the hero rides in from the landscape and at the end we see him retreat back into the landscape. This happens in *The Searchers*, in *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, in *Shane*, and it happens in *Breaking Bad*, only Walt doesn’t ride in on a horse.³ *Breaking Bad*’s style is clearly influenced from Sergio Leone’s. The use of silence that is symbolic in Leone’s works like *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* and *Once Upon a Time in the West*, also functions in *Breaking Bad*’s narrative to create suspense, but differently. In *Breaking Bad* silence emphasizes the dichotomy of dialogue and absence of dialogue. In an interview with Vince
Gilligan, Bret Martin in his book *Difficult Men*, calls attention to a special moment during the writing of season three that specifies the important role of silence in the series. Peter Gould urged Gilligan to look at this script because he was satisfied with its amount of silence: “five uninterrupted pages where not a word of dialogue is spoken!” (Martin 276). While Leone uses silence to emphasize natural sounds, and provide reverence to the landscape, Gilligan uses silence to underscore Walt’s choices and character development. The use of silence in the prologue of the first episode creates an emphasis between sounds of science and sounds of nature that is in constant motion with the story. In the prologue of the first episode of the first season, the silence of the landscape is just waiting to be broken. As Tompkins says “the typical Western movie opens with a landscape shot,” and true to the form, *Breaking Bad* opens with wide shots and close ups of the desert’s red rocks (Tompkins 69). But *Breaking Bad* is not typical in the sense that interfering in the silent landscape is a speeding RV running over a pair of men’s khaki pants.

The prologue to the first episode occurs before the title screen. It is, as we find out later, a flash forward. This movement in time from forward to backward, or backward to forward in other episodes, juxtaposes the present against the future and past, creating another binary opposition. This section starts with still images of the red rock mountains of the desert. It is peaceful with complete silence. The camera gazes toward the sky to capture the gracefulness of a pair of pants flying in the wind and the chime-like and vibrating non-diegetic sound gets louder as the pants fall anticipating a human interruption of the beauty of nature. Once the pants hit the road, an RV zooms into the frame and runs over them. The camera jump cuts to show a naked man with a gas mask driving, appearing nervous and worried. He is the one who interrupts the quiet frontier. He is the Western Hero. Except he doesn’t appear strong, in-charge or intimidating
like Ethan in *The Searchers*, and “the Good” in *The Good, The Bad the Ugly*. Walt does not have the intimidating and tough male quality of the Western Hero—not this early in the series at least.

The prologue of the first episode creates suspense surrounding who this man is, and what he is doing and why. The music in the background as Walt hectically drives the RV is low in volume but adds intensity to this scene by having a steady and fast beat. Another binary opposition is introduced when the camera alternates between showing the exterior of the RV and then switching to the interior of the mobile home. Like the binary of the confined domestic space is represented in Classical Westerns like *Shane* and *The Searchers*, the alternation between inside the RV and outside contrasts the restriction of the RV to the vast landscape. But what is added to this juxtaposition is the association the RV has with science and the contents of the meth lab inside. The RV is not a domestic sphere but rather a means to cook meth privately. There is tension between what is outside and what is inside the confining space of the vehicle. The camera shows two dead men sloshing in a liquid in the back of the RV. The naked driver crashes the vehicle and rushes out. All sounds stop when the RV crashes. He angrily yells “shit,” takes off his mask, throws it, and puts on his glasses. The camera continues to jump cut between the desert and the inside of the confining RV, juxtaposing the two spaces, with the ugly sloshing and spilling sounds in the RV against the quiet peaceful outside. Then a police siren is heard in the background. The man is panting and gasping nervously at the sound of sirens. He runs in the RV and takes a gun from one of the dead men and shoves it in his underwear. He exhales when he is out of the RV and coughs. Again his entry and exit of the RV separates the space of the RV from the desert. The RV is the technology, the science, with all the fumes from the chemicals, while the outside is free, clean air and open spaces. The RV operates within the freedom of the desert but it is not a greater entity; Walt reaches towards the outside to breath rather than succumbing to
the fumes inside. A dark gloomy image of the inside of the trailer contrasts to the bright sunlight and red rock of the desert evoking a more happy, optimistic picture then what is found in the RV.

Walt takes out a camera and speaks urgently “My name is Walter Hartwell White, I live at 308 Negra Arroyo Lane Albuquerque, New Mexico, 87104” (00:02:22). As if in a confessional even though he says “this is not an admission of guilt” he is speaking to his family, apologizing for what bad things may happen in the future. The first image of Walter White is a disheveled older man who thinks he will be in a lot of trouble. Even though the viewers do not yet know that Walt killed the men and that he was cooking meth, his emotional monologue to his family automatically attracts sympathy. Vince Gilligan humanizes Walt, making the audience sympathize with his condition. The camera angle switches to view him straight on with an extreme close-up of his face from the camera he is talking into. Walter covers the camera, then takes his hand away to show that he is still uncertain about leaving this message, and nervous. While his hand is over the camera the camera angle switches to show his hand. This is one of the unique camera angles that are seen throughout the series which emphasizes technology’s presence as well as departs from traditional camera angles of the Western genre. Walter in this emotional video speaks directly to Skyler, his wife, telling her she is the love of his life and expressing his love for his son also. He is warning them about what will happen in the future saying “I had only you in my heart.” He says good bye and places the camera down next to his open wallet and walks out on the road, with his back facing the camera. Then the camera moves to see him pointing the gun at the direction where the siren noise is coming from. Covering the siren noise is a high vibrating sound effect, similar to the one used when the pants were falling, which increases in volume covering up the noise of the sirens, and making one loud suspenseful noise. This noise just like silence also creates suspense. Here this siren combined with the loud
ringing noise reflects what Walt is hearing, and his anxiety that the police are going to catch him. The absence of sound at the beginning of the prologue is used to anticipate the presence of sound, cumulating in this final moment at the end of the prologue. After the introduction there is an urgent cut to the title screen, and three weeks earlier is where the first episode starts.

This prologue revises the Classical Western themes. It tempts the audience at first to believe that it can be like the Classical Western with its still shots of the landscape, and silence providing reverence to the desert’s powerful appearance. But then, suddenly this vision is interrupted by a speeding RV and a man driving it with a gas mask. Instantly technology and science interrupt the landscape. This contrast of technology/science and nature is another binary opposition out of many the audience is introduced to in just the first episode. While binary oppositions are frequent devices in Classical Westerns, *Breaking Bad* presents and updates these binaries through unique and relatively new filmic techniques. The new architecture, cars, computers, law enforcement procedures, and science equipment that exist today, are vital to *Breaking Bad*. Besides this content that adds a heavy science and technological aspect; it is also the science behind the unique camera angles, camera lenses and editing techniques that intensify this binary between technology/science and nature. Perhaps this demonstrates that there is no more Classical Western; but that there are only remnants of the Classical Western left in this modern world. Even though Gilligan does focus on technology and science of the modern era, there is still homage paid to the massive desert landscape that has not changed from its depictions in Classical Western movies. The landscape in this new paradigm is not like the old Western wilderness, where cowboys sleep at night and rustlers steal cattle. It hasn’t physically changed, but in the time of the 2000s the landscape satisfies a different need: to house secret drug showdowns, labs and money. People in the drug trade, like Walt and Gus, take advantage of
the landscape’s absence of human civilization to conduct their business. Just as the show switches from past, present and future, the audience also switches from being distanced from the Old West with images of the meth labs in the desert, to being reminded of the Old West again with still images of the desert landscape that do not have any hint of human development.

Landscape in *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* is marked by civil war, while *Breaking Bad*’s landscape is subjected to drug wars. The beginning of *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* opens with still shots of the landscape and the little windy town, alternating with close-ups of three men. The first shot is a quick second of the desert mountains until an older-looking man interrupts the frame. He stares into the distance past the camera. The camera switches to show that he is looking at the small deserted town. And then the camera shows two men riding in on horses, appearing out of the landscape. They both stare at the older man. The only sounds heard are the wind and a dog howling. The wind emphasizes the desolation of the area. It creates a tense atmosphere: there is something brewing. There is a constant motion of the wind. And as the men walk closer to the town the wind increases. The camera catches the harshness of the wind, as it blows sand right towards the camera.

Just as Leone uses wind to create suspense and a violent atmosphere, so does *Breaking Bad*. The use of silence and natural sounds, especially wind in *Breaking Bad* can be attributed to Leone’s realistic style. Besides borrowing from Leone, the show also borrows from John Ford’s filmic style, especially from *The Searchers*. Particularly the opening of season three episode six combines both styles of Leone and Ford. The scene opens with natural sounds such as the sounds of wind and birds chirping. A police officer drives to an old stone house in the middle of the desert to investigate the disappearance of Ms. Peyketewa. The earthy stone façade and wooden gates along with its placement on a desert plain resembles the home of the Edwards family in
*The Searchers.* And the inhabitants of both these houses were victims of murder. There is only silence as the policeman knocks on the front door. He then walks slowly around the house trying to peek in to see if anyone is home, but only sounds of nature are heard. The camera positioned inside the house reveals an iconic “Heisenberg” hat and glasses drawing (00:00:1:50). An intense sound of flies buzzing draws the policeman to look behind the shed where the dead body of Ms. Peyketewa is lying. Telling from the name, she was probably of Native American descent, which further links the scene to the Western genre, where Native Americans also served as victims. In this series of frames one of the Salamanca brothers steps out of the domestic sphere of the home. He has a violent and domineering aura about him as he confidently faces the policeman (00:03:40). The composition of the shot as he is walking out of the house is similar to that of that same shot of Martha Edwards in *The Searchers* (see fig. 9 and fig. 10).

![Fig. 9. Salamanca brother stepping out of house in *Breaking Bad*](image1)
Source: “Sunset.” Dir. John Shiban. *Breaking Bad.* 00:03:45. TV.

![Fig. 10. Martha from *The Searchers* stepping out of her home](image2)
Source: *The Searchers.* Dir. John Ford. Warner Bros, 1956. 00:01:43. Film.

In the latter, a silhouette of Martha is captured by a camera positioned behind Martha as she stands in the doorway looking out into the open landscape (see fig. 10). The silhouette of the Salamanca brother is more sinister. While the shot from *The Searchers* shows a domestic scene – a mother looking out to the landscape in longing – *Breaking Bad* positions a criminal stepping out of his new sanctuary into the open land communicating that he is on his own turf and is dangerous. The door creeps open as the man looks out and the camera moves swiftly behind him,
creating suspense and tension while the emotion conveyed from the shot of Martha is the opposite. The upbeat classical music that plays in the background as the wind blows Martha’s hair is romantic and beautiful not dark and scary like the scene from *Breaking Bad*. *Breaking Bad* borrows the composition and framing of the shot from *The Searchers*, but changes the meaning it connotes. In addition, the use of wind, natural sounds and silence reflects Leone’s style. This exemplifies how the program relies on Classical Western influence and builds upon these conventions.

Another similarity between *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* and *Breaking Bad* is the use of first impressions. The first impression of Tuco, also known as “the Ugly,” relates to how the audience is introduced to Jesse. Going back to the opening scene of *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, after the three men run into the building a man breaks through the large glass window. He is dirty, with ragged clothes. He carries a half-eaten chicken leg in his left hand. He looks primitive, like a caveman. The first music that is played, plays when he jumps through the window. It has a harsh and dramatic sound like a whip, and is comical when matched with the freeze frame of “the Ugly” on the screen, as noted by the red cursive. This seems like an accurate description of Tuco just by the first image that is presented to the audience: since he is being targeted for a reason by three men, has a dirty snarling grimace and holds a chicken leg like an animal.

Like the three men in *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* were looking for Tuco, the DEA agents Hank and Gomez (and Walt since he accepted the invitation to join) were looking for “Captn Cook” (Jesse). Instead they found his partner, assuming he is the head of the operation. Jesse, startled by the break in, climbs out of the second story window half naked. A girl throws his clothes at him and rushes him out. He trips and falls to the floor. He bounces right back up
trying to put his shirt on over his tattooed chest. Walt looks out of the back of the cop car, and Jesse’s twisted smile paired with knowing he is involved with drugs, and possibly prostitutes, paints a similar picture to that of Leone’s Tuco (00:26:18). Jesse looks like a mess just like Tuco. And like Tuco, Jesse flees from the crime scene. Even though Gilligan doesn’t write “the Ugly” right next to Jesse’s face, the first impression we get of him is that of a dirty delinquent teenager. And just like “Blondie” saves Tuco from two bounty hunters and partners up with him to collect reward money for his capture, Walt saves Jesse from being captured by the DEA and partners up with him to cook meth. Both films classify their characters in a similar manner, by focusing on first impressions.

Besides the similarities between the usages of silence, binary oppositions, frame compositions and wind in Classical Westerns and Breaking Bad, the building of suspense is another prominent technique that influences Breaking Bad. Similarly to Leone, Gilligan intended for the slow pace of his show to create suspense:

My general philosophy now more than ever is to give the audience the least possible — which sounds like a weird philosophy, but you want to parcel things out as slowly as you can. Of course what that means is, you want to parcel things out as slowly as you can while keeping things gripping and interesting (Callaghan 89).

The slow pace that Gilligan refers to is reminiscent of Leone’s filmic style. It also brings attention again to the ‘slow burn style’ noted in Smith’s article in the chapter on production. The long takes, and lingering camera gives a professional quality to the program while recalling Leone’s Westerns. Gilligan does change the style of taking these shots by experimenting with odd camera angles and camera filters. He underscores the concepts of science and technology through the technical aspects of producing the show. Gilligan’s Reverse Western is influenced by
Classical Westerns, but at the same time it moves away from their conventions by modifying them with prominent characteristics of our time such as the emphasis on new technology and science.

Innately the tension caused by conflict will leave the viewer in suspense for the draw. The scene in *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* where Stevens and Angle Eyes sit at Steven’s kitchen table exemplifies the slow pace (00:08:58-00:14:22). This scene is only around five minutes long, but it seems longer because of the time the camera spends on each shot. Leone uses eye-line matching to follow the intensified gaze between the two characters. These two opposed men sit at opposite ends of the table, looking at each other in the eye cautiously. The one who is clearly in charge, is calm (“Angle Eyes” or “the Bad”) and the other man, Stevens, is nervous. Stevens did not invite “Angle Eyes” to his home, rather he was sent to acquire the name of the man who is in possession of confederate gold from Stevens and then kill him.

This same composition of shots is seen in *Breaking Bad*. The series also has a tension filled dinner scene in the eleventh episode of the third season when Gus invites Walt over to his home, acting like it is a casual dinner of two workers (00:40:13-00:44:12). No one dies at the end of this dinner scene, but Gus’s character is similar to the intimidating persona of “Angel Eyes.” At the end, Gus gives threatening advice to “never make the same mistake twice.” This scene takes place for four minutes, and it seems twice as long because of the tension instilled between the slow paced camera movements. The scene starts when Walt carefully approaches the front door. Gus answers and exhibits his same kind yet stern demeanor that he shows when he manages his meth factory and his decoy chicken restaurant ‘Los Pollos Hermanos.’ He wants Walt to help prepare dinner, and it is clear that Walt is uncomfortable. Gus ignores the rivalry brewing between them, making his meticulous actions all the more daunting. Especially when
the camera captures the moment when Gus swiftly takes a knife out of his wood block and hands it to Walt to cut the garlic. The camera angle switches to capture the reflected image of Walt’s worried face on the shiny knife blade. The chopping sound when the knife slowly hits the cutting board adds to Walt’s feeling of uneasiness. The camera uses eye-line matching to capture the two characters talking to each other as well as wide shots of the two men sitting at the table. Since the *Breaking Bad* scene is not an interrogation, and more like a didactic meeting and warning, the camera shots aren’t as concerned with zooming in on the eyes as in the scene mentioned from *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*. Similarly though, how the slurping sounds are used to create tension in *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, the light Spanish music playing in the background of the *Breaking Bad* episode adds an eerie quality to this not so casual meeting.

In another instance, silence provokes suspense in the climactic moment when Hank finally captures Walt in episode thirteen of season five (00:29:59-00:40:58). In addition to these conventions re-worked, the character path of a Classical Western law-enforcer as shown in this episode is kept and modified as well to fit *Breaking Bad*’s theme of lawfulness to lawlessness as a Reverse Western. As Walt races to the desert to protect his money in his black Chrysler, yelling on the phone to Jesse, a steady, thumping and clanging beat as non-diegetic music presses on as Walt steps on the gas. When Walt gets to the spot in the desert, the music fades until just a clapping sound is heard. This sound is like a heartbeat, and then it is overcome by Walt’s breathing. The camera movement is quick, handheld for the moment, following Walt out of the car and circling around him as he looks for Jesse (00:30:52). Then the camera angle switches to a steady view from a point high above, capturing Walt throwing down his phone and kicking sand in the air yelling “son of a bitch!” (00:31:40). And when Walt sees that it is Hank in the car with Jesse and Gomez approaching him, while he is on the phone with Jack telling him to
come and kill Jesse, Walt suddenly stops talking altogether. Walt gasps, and looks like he is about to cry, knowing that he is caught. He sighs and tells Jack not to come, in order to protect Hank. And when Hank shouts out for Walt, the echo hits Walt’s ego harder than ever. A camera zooms in on Walt’s face as a tear forms in his eye, while the only sound that is heard is the echo of Hank calling Walt. And this sound is ironic, because it is not the friendly Hank that is Walt’s brother in-law but it is the justice-driven DEA Hank that is calling Walt’s name repeatedly (00:35:38). After a still shot on Walt’s face as his tear glistens in the sunlight, the camera cuts between different rock formations of the desert like it did in the first episode of the series. When Walt gets up and walks over, it is very slow and steady. The camera switches from bouncing behind him as he walks to a wide shot of him walking from the right to left. This confrontation recalls moments in Classical Western films where there is a final showdown, and the hero captures the villain. Hank repeats the ‘Miranda Rights’ to Walt telling him he has the right to remain silent, which is a poignant phrase after the dramatic silence of Walt walking over to Hank with his hands up. Walt, ironically actually has to scream at the top of his lungs to try to warn Hank as Jack and his crew arrive. In the moment when Walt is slowly walking over, it appears that law enforcement and justice has won. Except there is a twist, and Hank is shot. Hank has the same persistence, like the character Kane in High Noon, and does not give up on killing (or in Breaking Bad’s case capturing) the bad guy. But differently from movies like High Noon, Hank dies, reversing the role of justice in the Western. It shows the diminishing of lawfulness, and how society is breaking down. Walt’s emotional reaction to Hank’s death along with the very death of the law-enforcer challenges the typical antagonism between outlaw and lawman and further demonstrates how Breaking Bad reverses the Western.
Breaking Bad’s Reverse Western storyline can also be compared to classical TV Westerns. Gunsmoke, the longest running Western in TV history is a story of a marshal maintaining order during the 1880s (Jackson 65-6). This falls into Pippin’s profile of the erection of a law abiding society. Also the second longest running Western, Bonanza, is another story of America trying to conjure a sense of self-understanding in rapid modernization (Jackson 128-9). Breaking Bad is also doing something fundamentally different from current TV Westerns like Justified, Deadwood and Hell on Wheels. While the world in Deadwood is simultaneously both 19th century in setting and subject matter and 21st century American in language, Breaking Bad examines power and politics of purely the 21st century using a Western film aesthetic. Hell on Wheels, borrows some of the camera techniques, structure and dark dramatic tone, perhaps because it is also owned by AMC, but once again the story concerns a historical time with problems that are similar to Pippin’s classification of Westerns. Justified is also set in present day, but recalls Classical Westerns with the character of Raylan Givens, who is an old-style cowboy quick on the draw and concerned about keeping order, not destroying it. This story is similar to Hank’s point of view of the world rather than Walt’s, and also lacks the high-tech science feel of Breaking Bad.

Breaking Bad sheds the old-cowboy feeling of the Western for deconstruction of moral values and the middle class society. Examinations of the Western tropes of Breaking Bad demonstrate that they are in a constant conversation with the past and the present form of the Western. Like a TV show evolves into what it is because of all the collaboration during the production process, Breaking Bad is what it is due to all the elements it borrows from works in history. It is in the creative use of the composition of camera angles, sounds, editing and
everything that is *mise-en-scène* that changes the representation of the Classical Western
conventions of silence, binaries, the landscape and the Western Hero.

As I argue and demonstrate, the Western is not fixed in time because the genre constantly
builds upon itself and incorporates topics of national interest from the time periods in which they
are made. Keith Grant supports this notion in his book *Film Genre: Iconography to Ideology* by
stating that “the Western is not really about a specific period in American history” (33). Grant
takes the mythic structure of Westerns and claims that this allows them to be about the time in
which they were made rather than the historical period of the development of the Western
frontier in America. Grant continues to say that Westerns are also about the “mantra of Manifest
Destiny and the ‘winning’ of the West” (33). If Western movies are not about a specific time
period in history but about the time in which they were made and represent ‘winning the West’
and ‘Manifest Destiny’ then the civilization that is advancing is always bourgeois American
society. But Walt’s quest does not advance bourgeois society, it rather deconstructs the notion of
greed and power associated with ‘winning the West’ and ‘Manifest Destiny.’ Going off of
Grant’s comment, *Breaking Bad* is a Western that is about the time in which it is made;
therefore, it will only naturally have to reverse what Classical Western movies are about. As
Walt’s alienation progressively increases and his role transforms, he becomes the exploiter, and
is further disembodied from his original role as a father. The hero in the Reverse Western is the
reversal of a typical Western hero: Walt does not try to maintain the social order, instead he
challenges it. Walt takes on more sinister and evil attributes that resemble the antagonists in
Western films.

*Breaking Bad* reflects our social order and brings out the economic, political, gender and
ethnic issues of our time. The dominant message of this Reverse Western is about the financial
crisis of 2007-2008. As seen in the chapter on production, *Breaking Bad* was created out of a comment that was directly related to the recession. The series created in 2008, embodies the sentiments towards the financial crisis, a problem that can be globally recognized by the audience. Keeping Hall’s circuit in mind, similar to how the network, writers, directors, actors, producers and viewers imbue meaning into the program; the Reverse Western is represented by the underlying cultural forces of our time period. The series builds upon the conventions of the Classical Western in order to represent the dominant message of declining middle class values in the form of a Reverse Western.
Chapter 3:  
**Consumption and Identification: How Walter White is coming to life**

**Introduction**

The meaning imbued in *Breaking Bad* doesn’t stop or start at any particular moment in the circuit of culture. Meaning is even actively created by the consumers. Consumption is interconnected to production and without consumption there would be no production. For the purpose of a cultural study, it is important to specify the difference between economic consumption and the consumption of a cultural artifact. Consumption usually refers to the purchase of a product, and its price or exchange value (Du Gay et. al., 86). Anytime where money is exchanged is economic consumption (such as buying gas for your car, or a pair of pants). Some examples I consider in this chapter do have to deal with the exchange of money, such as buying merchandise or the physical DVD, but my main focus is on treating *Breaking Bad* as a symbolic good and examining how this symbolic good is received by the audiences. The identification process is also related to consumption. It explains how the audiences identify with the TV show and therefore why the audiences would want to watch the TV show and buy related merchandise. \(^4\)

The first two chapters on representation and production explore the tension that exists between the representation of how capitalism affects an individual and family, with its professional discourse imbued by AMC to compete with other TV networks. In *Breaking Bad* we can see Gilligan’s dominant message of the effects of a capitalist society on one individual and the personal change this fosters, while the professional meaning conveyed by the program’s length, slow pace, and how it is scheduled dictated by AMC has more to do with creating a higher quality program to compete with HBO and appeal to wealthier audiences.
This chapter will incorporate how the roles of consumption and identification play into how viewers decode *Breaking Bad*. The two sections that follow will explore these concepts including how the show is being received among different age groups of males and females, and more specifically, how the representation of fatherhood follows in the Western film discourse, allowing the audience to identify with Cranston’s character.

Concentrating on the consumption of this cultural product, there will be great attention focused on how the dominant meaning is not just transmitted but negotiated with the decoder’s own personal experiences. I will use Hall’s ‘decoding’ process as the central mechanism of analyzing the consumption sphere of the circuit of culture. It is important to keep in mind the complexity of how TV is consumed. Just like there is more than one meaning imbued into a cultural object, viewers can extract different meanings based on their personal experiences. The preferred reading of a program is not usually interpreted transparently. As Hall asserts throughout his research, viewers meaningfully interpret actions through negotiating personal ideologies and background with the dominantly signifying message of the program and the systemic forces of society. Viewers read *Breaking Bad* through the negotiated decoding process and based on their experiences along with the cultural forces around them most viewers support Walt’s actions whiledisliking his wife Skyler. Despite Walt’s transformation into a lawless and corrupt individual, viewers still support his actions and continue watching his journey throughout the series. Posting comments on the internet isn’t enough to satiate gratification felt from the show, and viewers continue to replenish their feeling of gratification from buying series-related ring tones for cell phones, toys, clothing, or anything that will bring them closer to the characters.
Reception

In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* Pierre Bourdieu relates consumption to taste and lifestyle. He relies on data from surveys to map out the differences between the goods that different social classes adhere to in French society during a particular time. He goes into explaining how different social classes have separate lifestyles and tastes. Appropriating this notion of the difference in taste between different social classes to television studies particularly, one can see that AMC is trying to target the wealthy through ‘taste,’ by modeling the structure and quality of *Breaking Bad* to successful HBO drama programs, which also target the wealthy as discussed in the chapter on production. Bourdieu’s work is also widely critiqued. One major critique of his work by cultural scholars is that his statistics can only say who is buying what, not what meanings are extracted (Du Gay et al. 102). Bourdieu also explains how decoding is subjective and refers to our social positioning (Bourdieu 2). His heavy reliance on social status as the main determinant is another critique of his theory (Du Gay et al. 98). My analysis of consumption demonstrates that it is not just social positioning but also age and sex that influence the decoding process. While it is important to map out demographics like Bourdieu does, which I will do in this section, it is also important to examine what meanings those who consume the product extract. Similar to Bourdieu’s surveys, the researchers Denis McQuail, Jay G. Blumler and J. R. Brown in the 1970s distributed questionnaires to figure out why quiz programs are popular. While Bourdieu focuses just on social positioning, these researchers map types of gratifications and connect them to social status to see who watches the program for what reasons. This survey is able to reveal what meanings the consumers of quiz programs extract by having questions related to what the show means to them, and why they keep watching. But this form of survey also has limitations because the participants rate their
personal standing to the already written statements on the survey. I am going to take the
gratification schema they created from their data and apply it to comments posted on the internet
by *Breaking Bad* fans as well as actions of the fans after the season finale to fully explore the
audience’s reactions. With the freedom of viewers actually writing their thoughts on the
program, I will be able to get a better look at what meanings are extracted. First let’s start with
demographics to get an overview of who watches *Breaking Bad*.

The International Movie Database supplies a demographic breakdown of those who rate
*Breaking Bad* on their website (see table 1).^5^

![Table 1. Demographics of IMDb users who rated *Breaking Bad*](image)

Source: “User Ratings for *Breaking Bad.*” *International Movie Database.* Internal Movie
Out of the 427,745 users who rated the show 365,360 chose to identify themselves as male or female. Even though this sample is only limited to those who have an IMDb account, the statistics still provide relevant information regarding consumption. Registration to IMDb.com is free, so one cannot infer the class status of those who vote. The breakdown shows age (under 18, 18-29, 30-44, 45+) and sex, which is enough information to get a general idea if more women, or more men like the show and at what age. Firstly, the chart shows that more males in all age categories voted than females, suggesting the possibility that more males watch the show than females. Also the average female rating of *Breaking Bad* of 9.4 out of 10 is .2 less than the male’s average of 9.6. This slight difference does provide evidence that out of these IMDb members men like the show slightly more than women. The high rating in general does display that both men and women hold the series in high regards. But as age increases in both females and males, the rating of *Breaking Bad* decreases. For males the rating decreases .4. For females the rating decreased by .1. There is more of a decrease in likeness as age increases with males rather than females, revealing that elder males do not like the show as much as younger males. The statistics also demonstrate that for both males and females more people aged between 18 and 29 watch the show than any other age category. The age range of men between 18-29 (185,826 men) comprise (60.6%) of the total 306,808 male viewers who rated on IMDb. Comparatively, the age range of women 18-29 (32,736 women), comprise 55.9% Out of the 58,552 female viewers who rated on IMDb. This means that 4.7% more men than women in the age group of 18-29 (IMDb users who rated *Breaking Bad*) watch the show. From this data, I cannot draw conclusions about the whole population but can infer the trend that more men than women in the age group of 18-29 watch the show. Overall what this sample infers is that the consumption of *Breaking Bad* declines slightly with age, mostly males and females 18-29 watch the series and
that more males watch the show and like the show more than females. The main social
determinants examined here are age and sex, but class status and region are other important
determinants that cannot be located as easily on IMDb.com. In addition, examining an audience
breakdown by education, income, gender, ethnicity, and region will give a comprehensive profile
of the audience. But demographics, as mentioned earlier, can only tell us who watches the
program, not what meanings they extract. In order to take this information a step further, I will
combine Stuart Hall’s theory of decoding with McQuail’s gratification typology in analyzing
what meanings are extracted though posts and comments by *Breaking Bad* fans.

Stuart Hall’s encoding and decoding theory about how meaning is encoded into a
product or text and decoded by the consumer clarifies the process of the transference of a
message in TV programming from writer and network to the intended audience. In order for the
message to yield meaningful discourse and have an ‘effect,’ it “must first be appropriated as
meaningful discourse and be meaningfully decoded” (Hall “Encoding/Decoding” 130). At a
certain moment the coding process deploys a message and at another moment the message is
decoded into social practices. The decoding is made possible by the audience’s need for
gratification. By conducting a study on gratification received from quiz programs, Denis
McQuail, Jay G. Blumler and J.R Brown create a model of gratifications in “The Television
Audience: A Revised Perspective.” They asked the sample population to answer questions about
the reasons they watch quiz programs. These questions dealt with getting gratification from
personal experiences, social interaction, learning, and excitement. The researchers do not specify
the path they took to create their final gratification model, and they also say it is a hypothetical
representation of the relationship between “user and communicated content” (McQuail et al.
397). Despite these weaknesses they argue that while the TV audience uses TV as an escape, the
“typography of media-person interactions” explains more reasons: ‘diversion,’ ‘personal relationship,’ ‘personal identity,’ and ‘surveillance.’ The researchers apply the study that was done by Herzog in 1944 on the serial radio soap opera *The Dales* to their typology to show how their categories can apply more broadly. Even though their research was directed towards quiz programs and not a TV serial drama, the concept of gratification applies the same for *Breaking Bad*. I am going to explore each of these categories, examining how viewers of *Breaking Bad* receive these types of gratifications. Combining theory from Hall, I will also examine how viewers identify with the character of Walter White.

According to the researchers, the ‘diversion’ category includes the sub-categories of ‘escape from the constraints of routine,’ ‘escape from the burdens of problems’ and ‘emotional release’ (McQuail et al. 398). *Breaking Bad*, even as a show where a normal family struggles with daily life, diverts the viewers from their own daily activities and problems through Walt’s adventure as a meth kingpin. It is not routine for a loving father to become a drug lord. While echoing the putative American family, *Breaking Bad* puts a twist on how typical American families solve their problems. The show does provide vehicles of escape and emotional release as shown by the following viewer comments. One fan comments on how *Breaking Bad* acts as a vehicle of escape:

it’s all fake, pretend, not real…and we all know it as we watch…I don’t happen to be in the meth business, but I’m pretty sure that if I experienced any of the drama this show portrayed, for real, that experience would be radically more ‘negative’ than the experience of watching a television show…so it’s all about a vicarious, but safe, thrill…

(string_berry)
What this person is hinting at is that watching the show is a safer form of escape than going out and cooking meth, which is a foreign experience for most Americans. The show allows a viewer who doesn’t have Walt’s burden of secretly fighting to stay alive to make money in the meth business, gain a thrill from the suspense in the adventure. Being a serial drama, *Breaking Bad* would not provide the same type of emotional release at the conclusion of each episode as it would for sitcoms, cartoons or quiz programs that come to a conclusion in the allotted time. *Breaking Bad* however, does provide catharsis during the finale of the series. A fan ‘lizzybelle’ describes the “high” she felt from watching the last episode of the series as “giving birth” (lizzybelle). She also says that she immediately gave the ending a standing ovation. The strong identification this fan has with the characters on the screen makes her excited and thrilled, so that she emotionally released all the tension gathered from the bulk of the suspenseful series at the conclusion of the series. In addition, a standing ovation is a natural theatrical response, suggesting that she identifies and appreciates the artistic aesthetic of *Breaking Bad*. Examining her reaction tells not just about what meanings she extracts from the show but also about her own identity.

The second category refers to receiving gratification from personal relationships that form from talking about the show. Under this category are the two sub-categories of “companionship” and “social utility” (McQuail et al. 398). Companionship suggests that the audience member “enters into a vicarious relationship with media personalities…as if he was on friendly terms with them and as if they could stand in as real persons” (McQuail et al. 399). While fans are obsessed with loving Walter White, fans are equally obsessed with hating Skyler White. Companionship in this context is more like enmity. Fans who hate Skyler do not stop watching the series; instead they get gratification from promoting their feelings on Facebook
pages entitled “I Hate Skyler White,” and on AMC message boards. Anna Gunn, the actress who plays Skyler, speculates in her article “I Have a Character Issue” that the hatred stems from the viewers’ “own perception of women and wives” (Gunn). She also questions that these viewers are not accustomed to women standing up for themselves because they believe that a woman should always support her ‘man’ (Gunn). The character of Skyler possibly reminds these hateful viewers of women in their lives that kept them back from achieving a goal and so immediately call the character a ‘bitch.’ But whatever the reason, the hatred is based on the combination of viewers’ personal experiences and the cultural forces of our society (one factor possibly acting stronger than another). Some viewers have taken the ‘companionship’ gratification or the ‘enmity’ gratification (which I will call it) in this case to the extreme, where they cannot separate Gunn from her fictional character. As Gunn expresses, viewers started attacking her rather than her character. She quotes a post that reads: “could somebody tell me where I can find Anna Gunn so I can kill her?” (Gunn). This exemplifies that the “vicarious” relationship the viewer has to the character has been exceeded, targeted now towards the living human actress rather than a fictional character. On the opposite side of the spectrum, loving fans felt like they knew Walter White, so they personally put together a funeral for him in Albuquerque, New Mexico, after the series concluded (Starr). By conducting an actual ceremony, as if Walt were a real person, these fans take the ‘companionship’ gratification to the extreme. Both examples show a stronger connection the fan-base has to both Walt and Skyler than what is expressed by the gratification typology. Why this may be will be explained later in the chapter.

The second sub-category, ‘social utility’ is the gratification fostered from communicating about the series. It is exemplified by *Breaking Bad* being number one for the week of September 22nd on the ‘social media top 10’ during the season finale with 1.3 million viewer tweets about
the show (“Top10”). Also Nielsen’s twitter TV ratings put *Breaking Bad* in the number one seat of the top ten series of 2013 with “an average of six million people viewing tweets about each new episode of the program” (“Tops of 2013: TV and Social Media”). This demonstrates that millions of viewers look forward to talking about the show with others and hearing what others have to say.

The third category, ‘personal identity,’ addresses what identity the audiences appear to form with the characters on screen. This category is broken down into ‘personal reference,’ ‘reality exploration,’ and ‘value reinforcement.’ Personal reference means the viewer identifies with a character or situation, reminding them of things that happened in their own life. Reality exploration is very similar to personal reference, further demonstrating how fictional content stimulates a viewer’s own personal experiences. Reality exploration is different, by allowing viewers to understand the problems in their own life better from identifying with a character or situation. The following example suffices both personal reference and reality exploration. A comment by the fan ‘Kate’ explains her personal identification with the program and how her personal experience growing up makes her read Walt in a certain way:

Personally Walt reminds me so much of my father, so I saw the sociopath in him very early on in Season 1, and I'm amazed at anyone who didn't completely hate the man after Season 2, but then I suppose I was always amazed by how few people saw through my father. (Kate)

Kate decodes the show through the negotiated position, gaining gratification from exploring her identity by watching the series. Like Walt Jr. eventually suffers the consequences from his father’s amoral actions, Kate can relate to his similar problem since Walter White is just like her father. From realizing Walt is like her father, Kate better understands how “few people saw
through [her] father” (Kate). This example demonstrates that the actions of Cranston’s character remind Kate of her father; therefore stimulating her to remember her life experiences and to explore her own personal identity.

Clearly *Breaking Bad* asserts the identities of fatherhood and motherhood as seen in the above analysis of the gratification categories of ‘personal relationships’ and ‘personal identities.’ Fatherhood is an identity that impacts all of us like the identity of motherhood described by Kathryn Woodward in *Motherhood: Identities, Meanings and Myths*, but is one that is overlooked. Just as we can identify what constitutes good and bad mothering, we can also determine what is good and bad fathering. The roles and responsibilities of a mother and of a father are constructed socially through prevailing discourses (Woodard 269). What is at work in *Breaking Bad* is a conventional picture of the White household, with a stay-at-home mom and a father working two jobs. *Breaking Bad* tells us what it feels like to be a middle class father from the start of the series, creating an identification between him and the audience through perceived similarities. The emphasis is put on the man providing for the family rather than the alternative of the woman providing for the family. Presenting the father as the head of the household, the one who has a job and the one who supports the family, places the White family within the putative or ‘pure’ family paradigm. But this notion is subverted as the family dynamic gets more irrational, violent and unloving as Walt’s role as a father is transformed. Subverting the notion of a typical family brings attention to what the assumed function of a family is supposed to be in our culture. While Skyler is hated after having an affair with her boss Ted Beneke, the horrible lawless acts and murders Walt commits are seen by viewers as heroic and ‘bad ass.’ Walt initially became a meth dealer to be a better father and provide more for his family, but it ultimately was a selfish decision that put his family in danger. While living the secret life of a
meth kingpin, Walter was not there to spend time with Walt Jr. and his new born daughter Holly. Consequently, when Walt takes Holly from Skyler in the episode “Ozymandias,” Holly cries for her mother, not Walt. Walt is similar to what a father is in the Western genre. The Western hero is not a father, usually does not have family, and rides alone. Walt alienates himself from his family with his quest as a meth kingpin like the character Ethan in *The Searchers* distances himself from his family by fighting in the civil war and by rejecting Debbie when she is assimilated into Comanche culture. As Walt gains mastery and power he assumes the ‘bad ass’ role as a Western Hero. The Western cowboy was marketed already as a ‘bad ass’ to audiences in the mid-1900s, but Walt has a greater appeal because the triumphant and powerful acts he commits are not expected from the passive Mr. White of the pilot episode. By contrast, a woman’s power is not seen by many viewers in a positive light. Fans view Skyler insidiously because when a women breaks a rule, or a moral value it is seen as appalling and dangerous because in our society “mothers are constructed as the nation’s and the family’s moral guardians” (Woodard 257). The identities of both Walter and Skyler are upheld or attacked by our values.

While hate comments about Skyler flood the internet, there are some viewers who see Skyler differently. One such viewer, ‘KrisVal’, reads the text in a way that indicates his or her awareness of the supposed identity of a mother. In response to attacks against the character this viewer says:

I definitely see it completely differently. Skylar didn't start acting out, attempting to get some level of control or satisfaction through things like smoking or having an affair until she was so frustrated with Walt and all of his bullshitting and lies that he kept refusing over and over and over again to admit to… I almost never viewed her actions as selfish
(or at all equivalent in immorality to Walts!), but always as a reaction to having to clean
up Walt's mess or protect Walt from himself. (‘KrisVal’)

The viewer sees beyond the impulse to hate Skyler because she cheated on Walt and tried to
keep her children away from him. ‘KrisVal’ doesn’t read Skyler’s actions as skewed, or selfish,
but more as a mechanism to protect herself and her family from Walt’s rampage. Clearly, the
viewer supports Skyler rather than Walt. The viewers’ various interpretations are direct results of
the negotiated decoding process. While each response is individualized, there are clusters of
similar responses such as responses attacking Skyler, and responses defending Skyler.

Once again, ‘value reinforcement’ under the category of ‘personal identity’ determines a
viewer’s appeal to a program based on whether the show upholds the values that the viewer
believes in. McQuail, Blumler and Brown mention that The Dales “uphold certain values that
[the viewer] believes in” and therefore has a ‘value-reinforcing’ relationship with the viewers
(402). Alternatively Breaking Bad deconstructs putative family values to expose the hardships of
the middle class. Breaking Bad challenges moral family values, stimulating the audience. For
David Zahl author of the article “No Such Mercy,” the series upholds his biblical beliefs in
“existential consequences” (88). He sees Walt’s life crumble as moral retribution and Jesse
advocating for the necessity of consequences at a Narcotics Anonymous meeting similar to the
“Christian understanding of forgiveness” (88-89). The show doesn’t provoke people to mimic its
controversial values, but rather allows people like Zahl to think about what the right
consequences are for Walt and the other characters in the series.

The final gratification category is ‘surveillance,’ which addresses the audiences’
connection to global matters. While the researchers mention how this category strongly applies
to news programs and their aim to communicate information and opinions about a larger world,
*Breaking Bad* also functions under this category. The series provides a commentary on the 2008 recession and America’s economic state. While audiences are able to identify from a personal standpoint, they are also able to identify as Americans, dealing with financial issues like Walter White.

McQuail, Blumler and Brown demonstrate that it is impossible to quantify the reasons people watch a program to just one, and that the reasons vary from person to person. Their research supports Hall’s negotiated decoding process because as these authors assert, the viewer “occupies a particular position in relation to what he is viewing, a position affected by a large number of factors, including those deriving from his personality, social background, experience, immediate social context and, of course the content itself” (McQuail et al. 397). The audiences’ relationship with the program is psychological, because the show speaks to a person’s background, personality and experience.

The negotiated decoding process allows for messages to be decoded between one’s own personal experience and the structural forces of our society. The meanings that are extracted by the comments in this section articulate the viewers’ connection to society, including their beliefs and identity. For example, the comment by ‘KrisVal’ demonstrates that he or she believes contrary to the assumptions relating to the role of mother, and defends Skyler’s actions. What is also shown from this analysis is that despite the different types of gratifications viewers receive from the program, they continue to want to receive gratification after the show is off the air. They are doing this by bringing the fictional characters into reality. The viewer who wrote the hateful comment targeted at Anna Gunn associates the actress with the fictional character she plays, making the character of Sklyer a real person in which the viewer can threaten. Other fans who idolize Walt, pay their respects to the fictional characters’ death by creating a funeral for
him in our world. The next section on merchandise will continue exploring what meanings are extracted by the ‘Breaking Bad’ audiences and will demonstrate how fans continue to bring the fictional characters into reality by buying related merchandise and customized *Breaking Bad* paraphernalia.

**Merchandise**

Because *Breaking Bad* is a TV show, analyzing the merchandise surrounding it will provide a better idea of how the show is being consumed than just relying on the public’s reactions to the series. *Breaking Bad* along with the products that are associated with the show are produced in order to target consumers who identify with the series. There is no doubt that TV consoles populate the majority of American homes. And if a TV is not found, then a home will most likely have a computer where it is possible to watch TV shows on websites like Hulu, HBO GO and Netflix. Fans were able to watch *Breaking Bad* once a week on AMC when it was aired, but now can also re-watch episodes if they have a subscription to Netflix instead of buying the DVDs. So consumption of *Breaking Bad* is generally done digitally by different media. In addition to consuming the show through TV or the computer, a consumer can also purchase merchandise through AMC’s ‘Breaking Bad’ webpage as well as through the web-sites of retailers like Urban Outfitters, Target and Hot Topic. Also *Breaking Bad* inspired toys, clothing and artwork are sold by companies that are not endorsed by AMC, and looking at these products can also determine what meanings are extracted from the show.

The merchandise that you can buy online in common retailers is similar if not identical to what is available on the official ‘Breaking Bad’ store website, although there is some variation in design.\(^8\) This online store is owned by ‘MyPlay’ but is in affiliation with AMC and linked to on AMC’s official ‘Breaking Bad’ website. As this website proves, besides examining the
production of the show, looking at the merchandise gives insight into what type of audience AMC is trying to attract. By skimming the website, it is easy to see that the *Breaking Bad* clothes and designs are targeted to male audiences. The unfitted shirts have a crew neck and are unflattering to the female figure and have designs that wouldn’t appeal to the majority of women, like a skull and cross-bones behind the cartoon ‘Heisenberg.’ On this website most of those who commented about the merchandise are male, and the women that do comment say that they are buying these items for their boyfriends. The comments on the website do not reflect the quantity of people who are purchasing the products, but provide a sample of who does. It is clear that not only through the comments but through the style of clothing, the merchandise is aimed at male audiences. This makes sense since as analyzed above with the statistics from IMDb, more men watch and like the show than women. As mentioned in the section on production, Smith in his article “Putting the Premium into Basic” claims that AMC is trying to get an upscale audience and that BMW thinks that the show will target wealthy males. The merchandise provided by AMC supports their attempt to attract male audiences and also audiences that have enough money to buy expensive fan merchandise. But clearly not all the fans can afford to buy a 3-foot tall wall sticker of Walter White surrounded by Heisenberg paraphernalia priced for $79.99. The several comments about this item all say something on the lines of how cool the product is and also asking ‘Santa’ to bring them this for Christmas (“I am the Danger” Fathead”). But no comment says anything about ordering it, or that someone bought it, or any problems with ordering like the comments that are on the slightly more realistic priced t-shirt and sweatshirt pages. This is not saying that no one has purchased the wall clings because of the price, but the comments do present a section of people who like it but cannot afford it. *Breaking Bad* merchandise is targeted to wealthy male audiences rather than the broad middle class audience.
that includes females that the show’s content appeals to. The IMDb statistics discussed in the reception section shows that thousands of females watch and enjoy the show, not as many as males, but their interest is still present. AMC stays to true to their intended audience, and continues to market ‘Breaking Bad’ merchandise to wealthy males.

Another extremely high priced but a one-of-a-kind collectable is the Walter White mask. The silicone mask was not made by AMC, but by Landon Meier of Hyperflesh.com with Cranston’s approval. Cranston even wore it himself at a Comic-Con convention, endorsing himself as Walter White (Couch). The mask was bought on eBay for $41,400 (“Breaking Bad, Walter White”). Whoever bought the mask would be a fan of the show, so possibly the show does have at least one crazed wealthy fan. Many fans of the show would be extremely interested in this unique collectable, but comments on the mask’s page before it was sold on the website ‘thisiswhyimbroke.com’ exemplifies how it is a wanted item but one that the average person cannot afford: “yes because we are SO gonna spend that much money on a mask” (Jacob Dunn). Another comment reads “$31,500 ... where’s my wallet?” (Junior Ngoma). These comments both show that the product is extremely expensive for an average-income American and relatively useless besides its novelty. The person who bought the mask therefore wouldn’t typically be from a household that has an average income of $50,000 or less. The person would be from the upper class and be able to leisurely spend $40,000 on something useless. Also another article about it before it was sold states that it “it’s great for Halloween, making your own fan movies, scaring people, or just staring in the mirror telling yourself that you are the one who knocks” (Flynn). It therefore has no use besides the novelty. This is not a product used in everyday life; rather it is bought for pleasure and possibly the sense of power that it embodies from the character of Walter White. The mask is a collectable item, but unusual in the sense that
it fully resembles an actor who also wore it before and when worn allows the wearer to resemble
the actor’s facial features. There are other collectable items that go for thousands more than the
mask, like baseball cards that are deemed to be worth over a hundred thousand dollars. But it’s
not the price of the mask that is astonishing; it is the material value. It is different from a baseball
card or action figure. The mask is not just a typical mask that would resemble a fictional
character like Darth Vader, or the real person Bill Clinton, the Walter White mask is a replication
of both the fictional character Walter White and the real person Brian Cranston. The realistic
Walter White mask associates the actor with his character, blurring the lines between the real
Brian Cranston and the fictional Walter White. Brian Cranston is a commodity, a type of
physical capital similar to a model or an athlete whose body holds high status. Cranston is not the
type of worker that Marx describes as being “employed in the production of the articles of
consumption” because Brian Cranston is the article of consumption; he is producing himself as a
commodity, which can be the same situation for many other actors who thrive off of their image
(Marx “Production and Consumption” 410). Brian Cranston by wearing the mask and showing it
off in front of thousands of people recognizes its ability to perpetuate the image of not only
Walter White but of Brian Cranston. The mask is used to promote Brian Cranston’s career and to
bring the fictional character Walter White into reality.

Another high-priced product developed that holds novelty is the meth lab playset. The
original cost of the play set was $500 and is currently sold out (“Superlab Playset”). With the
explicit drug business and meth lab content of the show Brick Citizen developed this playset of
mini figures similar to the style of Legos. Even though the design resembles the popular children
Lego set, it does not mean that children will be playing with this product. The company’s
collectable items and little figures are directed to an adult audience. It is ironic that this
collectible set resembles a children’s toy because of the adult content of the show, but anything that provides a platform for viewers to manipulate characters in their environment would be thrilling and fun to ‘Breaking Bad’ fans. It is not endorsed by AMC, so Walter’s name is “Chemistry Enthusiast,” and the set does not include a ‘Jesse’ figure (Tickle). Another item made in the same vain is the Anna Gunn ‘shut up’ ringtone.

The Anna Gunn ringtone is a digital product that can be downloaded for free on multiple ringtone websites and is another type of replication. The ringtone copies Skyler repeatedly yelling “shut up” over and over to Marie in season five. Conan brought up the popularity of this ringtone when Anna Gunn along with other Breaking Bad cast members where on his late night talk show on TBS in September 2013. Like how the fans put together a funeral for Walter White, or bought a ‘Breaking Bad’ meth playset, the replication of Anna Gun’s voice demonstrates that fans want to bring the fictional Breaking Bad characters to life. These examples reveal how society today is reliant on images and digital culture to satiate their obsessiveness with fictional characters. Fans do not just receive gratification from watching the show but also from buying products related to the show. Fans are immersed in replications of Breaking Bad to fill a void when not watching the series. The products that have been made because of the series’ popularity reinforce the fan base and create a collective identity. Because of the strong connection the viewers of Breaking Bad have with the series, as explained in the section on reception, they continue to buy and make products that resemble the show’s characters and themes in order to continue to have a relationship with the show after it is off the air. This process suggests a collapsing of the space between a work of art, fictional characters and reality. As the walls between these categories collapse, viewers increasingly meld the fictional story of Breaking Bad
into reality. The responses to the program vary in level of relationship and this affects the individual reactions to the series.

There is a difference between ‘lizzybelle,’ who gave a standing ovation at the conclusion of the series, and the individual who buys the Walter White mask or the meth lab playset. These are different degrees of connection to the series, and enthusiasm to preserving the fictional characters. Not having all viewer reactions on the level of the extreme can also be due to the negotiated process of extracting meaning; nevertheless, viewers are attempting in some form to create a space in real life for these fictional characters.

**Breaking Bad’s Dedicated Audience is a Product of Time**

In the chapter on representation I quoted Jim Kitses’s essay “The Western: Ideology and Archetype,” demonstrating his view of how the Western genre addresses America’s past. It is clearer after detailing audience members’ reactions that *Breaking Bad’s* adaptability changes the way the audience engages with the program by commenting on our life. *Breaking Bad* demonstrates that narrative and dramatic structure along with life commentary create a dedicated audience. Examining viewer gratification can’t clarify a shared audience experience, because every viewer gains different types of gratification from watching TV, but it can tell us why viewers are watching the program. Websites that have comment sections for virtual venting for fans of TV programs are preferred tools in gathering data about how viewers react to TV shows like *Breaking Bad*. This outlet opens up a greater sample than just those who respond to a questionnaire, but is also limited because not everyone who watches *Breaking Bad* will post on the internet. The approach of reading viewers’ own words about what they think about *Breaking Bad* is important because viewer comments reveal what *Breaking Bad* means to them. There are millions of other comments, blogs, tweets, and articles posted about *Breaking Bad* beyond what
is analyzed in this section, but these examples prove that the show is so popular and continuously talked about because it stimulates the viewers’ own personal experiences and the discussion of global issues. The examples addressed in this chapter are more passionate and obsessive than the responses of the quiz program research and ‘The Dales study’ which shows that those who listened to the radio program just felt that “the characters have become like close friends…” (399). But not such close friends that a real life funeral would be organized. There is a link to the gratifications felt from the radio drama in the 1940s and the quiz programs in the 1970s to the gratifications felt from *Breaking Bad*, but what is different is the intensity of the gratification. While McQuail’s research documents thoughts of the fans and not physical actions, my research demonstrates that *Breaking Bad* contains a much stronger set of stimuli which trigger obsessive and aggressive reactions compared to quiz programs or the older radio dramas.

Some fans of *Breaking Bad* are taking verbal and physical action to the extreme, including targeting the actress Anna Gunn, conducting a funeral ceremony for Walter White, bidding thousands of dollars for a Walter White mask, reprinting Cranston’s face all over clothing, and creating a meth lab playset. Perhaps the difference is grounded in history and time: different forms of technology and a different economic state reflect different personal experiences. The reactions can also be provoked by what direction society is moving toward; as we become more engaged and obsessed with virtual reality and digital media we become more obsessed with consuming fictional characters to make them come alive and step into our world, with our own individual experiences.
Chapter 4: 
**Regulation: The Cultural Forces that Shape TV Show Popularity**

**Introduction**

As stated in the chapter on consumption, the visual culture of our epoch facilitates a stronger affinity between audience and TV characters than previously. There is definitely room for further research regarding gratification from various genres of TV over time. But with our small sample of genre we can still spot a pattern of gratification. Hall states that “in particular, the means of producing, circulating and exchanging culture have been dramatically expanded through the new media technologies and the information revolution” (“The Centrality of Culture” 209). The internet specifically provides an outlet for fans to receive greater social gratification form creating virtual relationships with one another by talking about the episodes as they air on tweets, blogs and forums. Fans are so deeply immersed in visual and digital means of communication that in order to continue to receive gratification from a virtual reality, they bring the characters of *Breaking Bad* into reality. This is exemplified particularly by the Walter White mask, fans simulating Walter White’s funeral in New Mexico, and fans substituting in Anna Gunn for her fictional character’s actions. This notion of replication is elucidated with Baudrillard’s post-modern theory of hyperreality. According to Baudrillard media seduces us with a stream of visual images into a world of ‘hyperreality,’ composed of simulations. Baudrillard’s theory contributes to our discussion of the regulation of culture and by culture because *Breaking Bad* perpetuates the norm of our visual culture of reproduction and simulation by provoking collective participation through spectacle and public drama. By examining every part of the cultural circuit in detail it is easier now to understand how the production of *Breaking Bad*, the representation of its themes, the identities it manifests and how it is being consumed regulate audiences’ behaviors. As I explained in the chapter on consumption, our culture is
consuming the fictional characters of *Breaking Bad* to make them a reality. In this chapter, I will further explain the connection between the intense consumption of *Breaking Bad* and the regulatory systems of our historical moment.

Regulation can cover all aspects of a culture including its economic, political and social functions, but determining the popularity of *Breaking Bad* requires a focus separate from the typical modes of regulation. A cultural artifact is regulated by the structural forces of the moment, just as our personal beliefs are impacted by societal values. An individual has his or her own capacity to see a cultural artifact as he or she does. But these individual choices are in tension with the structural forces that regulate them. The tension created by the objective and subjective cultural forces will be explored in the discussion of fans’ reactions to the characters of Walt and Sklyer later in this chapter.

First, Hall’s definition of cultural regulation will provide groundwork for delving into this study further. Hall defines cultural regulation as a force that shapes and governs all aspects of culture in our lives. Culture is both substantive and epistemological according to Hall. ‘Substantive’ simply refers to how culture exists in a certain place or institution and its activities. Examples of this are the culture of the stock market and organizational culture (“The Centrality of Culture” 208, 227). In “The Centrality of Culture: Notes on the Cultural Revolutions of our Time” Hall focuses on the substantive changes of our culture in history and “the transformations in the way ordinary people live” today and how new technologies have contributed to the shift in economy, society, industry and culture globally (214, 220). In relation to this study the change in culture over time reflects the change in the Western genre, changing what themes and depictions resonate with the audience. And besides culture shifting, the ideas and meanings surrounding culture change as well. Hall defines this facet as the epistemological aspects of culture which
include how culture affects our understanding and knowledge of the world. He focuses on the paradigm shift in the humanities and social sciences called the ‘cultural turn,’ which involves the relationship between language and meaning and emphasizes culture as “the sum of the different classificatory systems and discursive formations, on which language draws in order to give meaning to things” (“The Centrality of Culture” 222). Culture is now used to understand and analyze all social relations and institutions. Hall says that not everything is culture, but every “social practice depends on and relates to meaning” and because of this “every social practice has cultural or discursive conditions of existence” (“The Centrality of Culture” 225-26).

I see the culture surrounding *Breaking Bad* as two separate entities that are in articulation with one another: the culture of the TV industry, and the culture of *Breaking Bad’s* fan base. The rules and forces that govern the television industry constitute its culture — and one of these forces that shape the industry’s culture is the audience. And the viewers of *Breaking Bad* help shape the show and the TV industry in general through their reaction and decoding processes. And it is in this sense that cultural regulation is inter-twined and relies on itself. A question that Hall poses in regard to culture is whether, “while having its own distinct and autonomous existence, [it] is itself influenced and regulated by other determining factors?” (“The Centrality of Culture” 228). It is possible that economic and political factors can shift a culture. But by conducting a cultural study on the show *Breaking Bad* it has come to my attention that each culture can shape itself internally, rather than through external factors of the economic and political. Because while economic and political factors can affect the practices and activities of AMC and the TV industry so can other types of cultures existent in the social practices of the audience members. Cultural regulation can encompass both how culture is regulated and how culture regulates. The relationship between TV and its viewers has separate social practices that
regulate and rely on each other to function. If there is no TV there are no viewers and vice versa. And other cultural practices related to technology in particular, such as the internet and its regulations, act as pressures on both spheres to further regulate behavior. For my analysis on regulation, I will analyze the discourse of *Breaking Bad* to see how the underlying cultural forces of our society impact its representation of societal values. Jean Baudrillard’s theory of hyperreality provides further groundwork for explaining our cyber and technologically attuned culture which plays a central apart in creating and regulating *Breaking Bad*.

**Satiating Gratification through Replication**

Jean Baudrillard explains simulation as “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” (“Simulacra and Simulations” 166). Baudrillard in “Simulacra and Simulations” uses the example of a map to describe how hyperreality is not tangible. A map is a tangible object but also a type of simulation that reproduces territories. Baudrillard addresses the time period he writes in as a world where simulation does not have substance or tangibility like a map. Where a map is a mirror of a territory, simulation ‘today’ is further and further from the real – it is the virtual. There is no more imaginary coexistence between the real and its representation (such as the representation of territory by the map) as he explains, because the representation can be reproduced a number of times. The more it is reproduced the further it is from the real and then becomes “no longer real at all” (“Simulacra and Simulations” 167).

Baudrillard characterizes simulation as “the ecstasy of the real” (“Fatal Strategies” 187). Ecstasy, Baudrillard says is a form of emptiness. In his essay “Fatal Strategies” he tells the reader to turn on the TV to experience this ecstasy. He describes TV as a body that “spirals in on itself until it has lost all meaning” (“Fatal Strategies” 187). In other words, TV becomes a hollow and empty shell of real events, an imaginary representation of real events. So, the phrase,
“simulation is the ecstasy of the real,” insinuates that simulation is just an empty form of reality. But Hall verifies that TV and other cultural domains are not empty in the sense of meaning. Even though TV and the reactions to TV can be classified as a simulation, meaning is still imbued and interpreted. Baudrillard doesn't recognize that meaningful messages are being decoded in what he calls simulacrum because he thinks that we are all passive beings incapable of response. He describes mass media as a “speech without response” and “forbids response … except in the shape of a simulation of a response, which is itself integrated into the process of emission, and this changes nothing in the unilaterality of communication” (“The Masses: The Implosion of the Social in the Media” 207). This view argues against Hall’s interpretation of audience decoding processes. In Hall’s view, communication does not affect only one side, but both sides – the party who encodes the message and the party who receives. The receivers are not passive or silent. For Stuart Hall, decoding meaning is an active process on the viewer’s part done through different decoding positions. Fans are undergoing active watching; they are not passive spectators or ventriloquists’ dummies. Even though our responses can be in the form of simulations and reproductions, this should not insinuate that they are devoid of meaning.

Our technology-driven culture is a vehicle for fans to be active watchers. As exemplified in the chapter on consumption, viewers utilize the internet as a means to continue to receive gratification from Breaking Bad after they watch it in these ways: by downloading the ‘shut up’ ringtone and ringtones of other character phrases, creating a simulated funeral for Walt, having discussions about the show and its characters on message boards and comment sections, and by buying merchandise. Another way that fans actively engage in the program is by extracting meaning from it through a decoding process. If a fan embraces Walt’s transgression then the fan becomes dissatisfied with Skyler. On the other hand, if the fan identifies more with Skyler than
the actions of Walt will seem less heroic. Subjugated to cultural authority and each person’s own personal identities fans are pulled towards one instance or the other. This active watching is connected to the process of identification. Forming identification with the characters and the story relies on the conversation between the viewers’ personal values and the representation of cultural discourses in *Breaking Bad*.

The ‘selective process,’ described above in regards to decoding Walt’s transgression and Skyler’s actions, complicates the decoding process further. In part this process has to do with the ‘subjective capacity’ of a viewer. ‘Subjective capacity’ refers to the individual choice and agency in the way we see and do things. I presume that this is the basis of the negotiated code: a combination of both objective and subjective values. Hall argues that the referent of a televisual discourse, such as *Breaking Bad*, can be interpreted on an individual level in the scope of objective forces. This implies that each viewer has capacity to interpret the meanings of the show, but then these interpretations are categorized into clusters by our cultural norms (“Encoding/Decoding” 135). One interrupts subjectively while the objective “delimits and prescribes into what ‘awareness of one’s total environment’ these items are arranged” (“Encoding/Decoding” 135). The force of ‘subjective capacity’ reacting with the systemic force is a better explanation according to Hall to explain decoding rather than ‘selective perception.’ One does not merely select what they want the meaning to be from a program, as the term ‘selective perception’ suggests, rather the process of understanding or misunderstanding the dominant discourse is more complex.

The tension between the objective and subjective cultural forces are catalysts for the negotiated code. Let’s take the viewer referred to in the consumption chapter who targeted Anna Gunn directly for her fictional character’s actions as an example. The viewer’s threat is evident
of how our culture has developed basic gender divide between masculinity and femininity. The masculine reference in this case emulates what the Classical Western movies define as masculinity, which is a dominant in-charge male figure, who carries a gun, is dangerous and mysterious. Favoring the side of masculinity, the viewer supports Walt’s transgression and therefore is opposed to Skyler’s role. The viewers’ choice to see things one way is not purely subjective or objective but rather a combination of the two forces. Going more in depth into the process behind decoding a message one can reconcile that the cultural regulation of our environment dictates and influences what is popular. Seeing how the structural forces of our culture directly impact our subjective forces helps in understanding how a cultural object like *Breaking Bad* becomes popular.

Culture is a driving force that shapes our lives. And our cultural environment has shifted over time. The evolution of TV and Film can support this. As our culture continues to take on different forms, movies and shows that were once popular become obsolete. *Gunsmoke* was popular in 1950s to the 1970s but *Breaking Bad* is popular now. Even though both share a genre, they are created in two completely different aesthetics and levels of artistic design. And *Gunsmoke* is about maintaining order while *Breaking Bad* is about challenging order. These differences are effects that arise from their creation at separate moments in history. To understand this change in popularity we have to recognize the shifts of our attitudes to the social order.

**Underlying Cultural Forces Attached to our Visions of the World**

This section explores the moral values and rules that regulate the representation of violence. Violence in *Breaking Bad* is both domestic and drug related. The crimes of violence depicted are not just show downs and gunfights like in Classical Western Films and TV shows,
but are emotional brawls, carefully planned out scientific schemes, competition over business control and domestic violence. It is hard to pinpoint why our feelings toward regulating these issues have changed. Perhaps the Cultural Revolution Hall speaks about in “The Centrality of Culture” which he saw as occurring during the 20th century is reaching its peak in the 21st century, allowing for more leniencies among images and concepts being shared. The depiction of violence in photographs, movies and TV shows has become more prevalent and more intense. Robert Bocock asserts in his essay “Choice and Regulation: Sexual Moralities” that “policing the newer technologies has become increasingly difficult, and may prove impossible with the internet, and even with satellite television” (80). With a constant flow of information it is difficult to regulate everything. It is hard to say that this cultural and technological revolution definitively causes less, or more, ‘conservative’ TV programs without looking into the issue more deeply. What is more important to this study is how Breaking Bad regulates audience behavior, and how cultural forces regulate the production, representation and consumption of its discourse. Let’s focus now on Breaking Bad’s amoral depiction of violence.

Breaking Bad poses interesting questions about the politics of representation. The program speaks to our cultural understanding of violence in a complex way. It does not replicate our values on screen. Rather what is represented challenges our values. Breaking Bad questions the moral values that regulate our culture by imagining a social order of unlawful acts, murder, illegal business activities, and domestic violence. The White family is not your typical nuclear family. They appear to uphold that structure while Walt leads a secret life in the drug business and his wife launders his money, all of which eventually cancels out that idea of a loving family. Skyler and Walt try to keep up a façade of the happy married couple expecting a baby, and when
problems arise they lie to keep their secret safe. The traditional moral discourse of putative family values crumbles in the story of *Breaking Bad*.

One example – perhaps the most explicit example of the dissolution of traditional family morals – is when Walt and Skyler physically fight in front of their son and new born infant in the episode ‘Ozymandias’ (00:25:09-00:37:23). Skyler swings a kitchen knife at Walt’s hand after he told her Hank is dead; she yells “get out” and slashes his skin. A rack focus is used to switch from drawing attention to the gash to drawing attention to Walt’s astonished face. Having the gash first clear and then blurry as Walt’s face becomes in focus accentuates Walt’s emotional state and the violent act rather than the physical result. When the camera switches to a wide angle view of this violent scene, one can see illustrated portraits of Skyler and her son displayed in the hallway (00:36:36). The happy portraits contrast to the dark image of violence that is happening directly in front. Walt grabs Skyler by the hands trying to pry the knife away. When they fall to the ground and he pushes on her chest, Walt Jr. intervenes, making Walt get off of Skyler. Once Walt gets up the camera zooms in on his face as he yells “What the hell is wrong with you, we’re a family!” (00:37:05). The statement directly calls attention to the concept of a family, and what values express a familial relationship. Society has an ideological perception of what a family is and the roles of mother and father. The moral agenda of any father does not include leading a secret illegal life that results in another family member’s death, committing murder, physically and emotionally abusing his wife, and lying to his wife, son and other family members. Despite Walt’s agenda including these immoral acts, he still is aware of at least the structure of a family shown through this comment. What Walt utters puts the notion of a family under erasure. While they are supposed to be a family, and looked to be one to their extended family and neighbors, the notion of a loving family was obliterated when Walt stepped away
from his moral duties as a father. The ontological presence or existence in reality of the family is non-existent except through the physical notions of mother, father and children. Walt is a father at the same time he is not. He is supposed to be a father in the philosophical sense of what it means to be a father, but he is only biologically the father of his children. He does not care or love his wife or children the way that he should. His perceived role of father shifts into his competitive, exploiting, amoral role as drug kingpin. And this is because he breaks away from the moral regulations that govern him, in sacrifice for personal happiness.\(^{11}\)

Both in the case of violent depictions and Walt’s transformation, moral values and regulations that govern our lives in reality break down and disappear as Walt becomes more of an anti-hero. The depiction of the White family underscores that traditional family values are vanishing. What this tells us is that our moral beliefs help regulate the content of the show. The aim of the program is to call attention to the effects of corrupt capitalist society on the middle class. So instead of choosing to depict and reinforce the familial morals by showing a family that upholds them, showing a family that dissolves these values that govern what it is to be a family is far more effective.

Our moral values regulate the violence depicted on cable networks, while broadcasters have to abide by the regulations of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). Congress has given the FCC authority to enforce regulations on obscenity, indecency and profanity for “radio and television broadcasters, and has never extended it to cover cable operators” because “cable and satellite services are subscription-based” and therefore the control over the programming content is extended to the viewers who are watching cable TV in their homes (Federal Communications Comm.). Since there is a lack of restrictions on content for cable TV, each network can self-regulate their programming. \textit{Gunsmoke} aired on CBS, a broadcasting
channel, which would fall under the rules and regulations of the FCC. One reason *Gunsmoke* and *Breaking Bad* have different representations of violence is because of these federal regulations for broadcast signals. A central agency does not stop *Breaking Bad* from being aired, but rather the individual networks’ own rules can prevent them from picking up a visually graphic series. The reason TNT turned Gilligan down was because the story had to do with meth. The executives told him if they bought the show they would be fired (Martin 268). In this case the self-regulatory policies of TNT deemed the drug related content too graphic to air.

Another explanation for why *Gunsmoke* and *Breaking Bad* have different politics of representation is because of the moral values governing our society in the 1950s as opposed to now. As *Gunsmoke*’s name reflects, the main mode of violence is the gun fight. And these gunfights are through the perspective of the Marshal, in order to uphold order and justice. *Breaking Bad*’s violent scenes are more shockingly scary because they challenge order and law, and are shown from the perspective of the criminal. The newer filming technology also makes the violent scenes in *Breaking Bad* more real and dramatic. The unique aesthetic of *Breaking Bad* that focuses on silence, close-ups in long durations, using unusual camera angles and lenses are all representative of the technology-driven age we live in. With these new technologies we can envision violence in a new way.

There are many other violent scenes in *Breaking Bad*, ones bloodier then the fight between Skyler and Walt. The episode “Box Cutter” in season four exposes the intense and threatening violent act of Gus Fring murdering his assistant with a box cutter. The scene is suspenseful; Walt and Jesse both believe they are going to die because Jesse murdered Gail and Gus won’t give any hint to the expected consequences. Gus puts on a protective suit over his work clothes and silently walks towards Jesse and Walt with a box cutter in his hand. As Walt is
rambling on to try to save his and Jesse’s life, Gus swiftly turns to Victor, his assistant, and stabs his neck, continuing to puncture him until he is lifeless (00:34:42). The blood spurting from Victor is not the only instrument that makes this a violent scene. It is more so the threatening and intense motive behind the act. Gus purposely makes Jesse and Walt witness the murder, and as the blood spatters on their clothes and faces Gus stares straight at them with a threatening glare.

The scene was so emotionally shaking that Giancarlo Esposito, the actor who plays Gus was concerned about acting this scene: “I had no doubt in my ability to be able to make it all happen, but I had some deep concern about being able to do it and coming out of it unscathed, without really hurting my spirit and my soul” (Keller). Esposito does not want to carry the brutality of Gus’s action with him. This proves the emotional impact that this one violent scene can have on even the actor, besides the audience who is watching it.

Gilligan says *Breaking Bad* is “about the problems and choices” life throws at us (Gilligan “Voices”). Our values and beliefs are a part of how we deal with our life-long problems. As Gilligan and the other writers write the program, their beliefs about violence become imbued into the series to shape and regulate the characters. Gilligan’s opinion is that “violence in the story is intended to have a transforming effect on the characters” (Gilligan “Voices”). Gilligan says that violence is utilized as a vehicle to personal transformation, interacting with the characters’ hopes, fears, goals and obstacles (Gilligan “Voices”). The emotions conveyed through the reactions of the actors in the ‘box cutter’ scene and the domestic violence scene are done with verisimilitude. For example when Gus creeps closer to Jesse with box cutter in hand, Jesse leans away from him as much as he can as he sits in the seat placed for him (00:32:41). When Gus grabs Victor by the neck, the camera turns urgently to show the shocking and gasping facial expression of Walt and Jesse as they squirm in their seats (0033:41).
Both Walt and Jesse stay in their seats as they are told to do so, mesmerized and surprised at the turn of events. Naturally, at the sight of Gus twisting Victor’s neck, Walt turns away putting his hands in front of his face as if in attempt to push the violent scene in front of him away from him (00:33:45). After Gus drops Victor to the floor in front of them it looks like they are both about to throw up (00:35:00). The amount of blood that pools from Victor’s wounds is also accurate and believable, in addition to the squashing sound heard as Gus walks across the floor creating bloody footprints (00:34:56). The camera even shows blood spatter on Walt’s wrist (00:34:11). This sense of realism leads back to how Breaking Bad functions as a simulation. But again this simulation connotes meaning, meaning that is regulated by cultural values. Our culture has begun to accept or even enjoy the dark psychology behind scenes of violence, like that of Gus killing his worker with a box cutter. In earlier historical moments such as the early 20th century, the time of the Classical Western, violence was represented differently. As exemplified through the comparisons in the chapter on representation, movies like Shane, The Good, the Bad and the Ugly, and The Searchers contain a significant amount of violence. But this violent is more tacit compared to the brooding, dark, and disturbing violent scenes exhibited in Breaking Bad. Both the structural determinants of our society as well as the subjective choices of the filmmakers, actors and writers have changed over time, now allowing for more disturbing, shocking and painful images of violence.

The examination of violence and regulation leads us back to this recurring question: why do viewers support the new anti-hero that Breaking Bad presents? Perhaps Frederick Jameson’s theory of a Utopian glimpse can bring us closer to the answer.
Putting Jameson’s Theory of Iconography and Utopia to Use in *Breaking Bad*

Fredric Jameson, in his article “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture” responds to issues in cultural studies regarding the relationship between mass culture and manipulation by focusing on TV and Film. After presenting many different theories of consumption and post-modernism, he favors a model of culture that allows “us to grasp mass culture not as an empty distraction or mere false consciousness, but rather as a transformational work on social and political anxieties,” which then are present in the “mass cultural text” in order to be repressed (141). In other words, TV and Film re-represents the social order and anxieties of our time while simultaneously providing and repressing a glimpse of something outside that order. He calls this glimpse a Utopian dimension which is “ritual celebration of the renewal of the social order and its salvation, not merely from divine wrath, but also from unworthy leadership” (142). He reads both the films *Jaws* and *The Godfather* through his model proving that works of mass culture do not just operate ideologically but also always explicitly or implicitly with a Utopian vision (144).

Any cultural object is contained in (or regulated by) ideological forces of the moment. For example, *Jaws* reflects class antagonisms between rich and poor which persist in consumer society through the characters of Hooper and Brody in order to bury these anxieties and offer an image of political partnership (143). Jameson asserts that viewers rejoice at this camaraderie, without realizing that he or she is excluded in reality from it. So there is a glimpse of something outside the bounds of objective cultural forces but then this feeling of escape is repressed by the very same cultural forces. The glimpse that Jameson describes could explain the popularity of a TV show. Instead of speaking directly about popularity, Jameson mentions that “the drawing power” of a mass cultural artifact is measured by its capacity to serve as a vehicle of Utopian
Fantasy (147). *Breaking Bad* does have a large capacity to serve as a vehicle of a Utopian Fantasy, but in an interesting and complicated way, different from that of *Jaws* or the *Godfather*.

Where can we place a show that seems to want to give us a glimpse of escaping the big business society obsessed with commodities that Jameson defines as our reality if it uses these attributes to attain something outside that order? This is what occurs in *Breaking Bad*. The anti-hero Walt becomes the head of a corrupt free market in order to achieve a sense of self-worth, the self-worth that was taken away by him from capitalist ventures. He attained happiness from exploiting what was initially repressing him – America’s capitalist system. He lost on his buy out, he couldn’t get a competitive job, he couldn’t make enough money to support his family, and health care wouldn’t pay for chemotherapy. Walt then takes advantage of the market system, creating a deadly commodity in order to utilize his expert knowledge of chemistry and assert masculine dominance. While the Utopian glimpse of the show is about being able to combat the political, economic and social restraints of our everyday lives, Walt attained this freedom by embracing capitalist schemes to acquire money and power. In this instance, it is difficult to differentiate between separate utopian and ideological views as in *Jaws* and the *Godfather*, since what is being escaped in *Breaking Bad* is simultaneously being embraced.

The mythic dimension of Walt is his ability to act and be free from or fight against constraint. This masculine dominant aspect goes back to Classical Western discourse but is revitalized in *Breaking Bad* by presenting today’s social and economic anxieties (such as the duty of a father to provide for his family and attain wealth) in order to manipulate the ideology of a ‘pure family’ and to present a Utopian glimpse of freedom from the underlying cultural forces that help to define our reality. We are drawn to the Western hero like the gangster hero, because these two figures act and take charge. Walt acts against the forces that regulate him: capitalism,
home life etc. The audience then is able to see a glimpse of something outside our individual capacity to do things, and then the moral values of our culture represses that glimpse. The glimpse is even suppressed by the medium of the offering – TV as a simulacrum, replicating our society while characterizing its commodity production and consumer capitalism erases any notion of escaping the process.

While we may be getting away from the ‘real’ and rely on virtual images for a type of ‘empty’ gratification, we are doing this through transferring meaning and regulating culture. Hyperreality didn't create itself; rather culture created it, and now culture regulates it. *Breaking Bad*, a show about disobeying the law, has a different regulatory function since Walt embraces capitalist society to escape it. Walt is a free and dominant man, and no one but himself regulates his actions, but he depends on the social order that capitalism enforces to be seen as an all-powerful meth kingpin with petty laborers beneath him. In a way *Breaking Bad* does not just demonstrate regulation, but is actually *about* regulation, and regulating the acts of those in American society. And the dissolution of lawlessness is a direct consequence of breaking away from regulatory function. The story itself advocates for freedom from everyday controls and then re-asserts the need of regulatory functions by providing a hero who achieves personal happiness by embracing the capitalist economy. Simulation is a constraint controlling the gratification of the people. And by receiving gratification from watching the program, viewers want to commemorate and even be or be empowered by Walt — to be free from regulation like Walt is. Paradoxically, by wanting to be free from this they are embracing it by continuing to receive gratification through simulation and therefore regulate our culture of hyperreality.

The reason *Breaking Bad* is popular could be because it is re-presenting reality by deconstructing the ideologies that constitute it. Or, it could be because the show provides a
Utopian glimpse of escape. Perhaps it is both of these reasons, or neither. The popularity of a TV show is multifaceted and complex. A central reason for popularity is difficult and presumably impossible to locate because of the various meanings and cultural forces that our world abides by. *Breaking Bad* is a complex cultural artifact that offers a dynamic reflection of the contradictions of its historical moment, while at the same time exceeding that moment. The dynamic is captured by the endless number of culturally dependent ways of producing meaning, representing meaning, consuming meaning, identifying with meaning and regulating meaning. Some of these ways that I have discussed thus far include relationships between studios, producers, actors, writers, advertisers, the technologies of film, the distribution processes, the pluralist nature of the audience, the communities of viewership that arise, the genres and aesthetic expectations and innovations, and the broader social formations (such as race, class, gender).

The world of *Breaking Bad* is regulated by our underlying cultural forces, just as it is regulated in reality as a cultural object. The reason society today has created a father who turns to cooking meth is due to the structural forces of our particular time. Today’s society admires a figure who can act against regulatory constraints. As much as viewers attempt to bring the fictional characters into reality and to be empowered by Walt, they cannot bring the concept of escaping the regulatory functions of society into reality because the form of escape Walt achieves is suppressed by the very same idea of capitalism that constrains him. In other words, our culture simply won’t allow it. The Utopian glimpse of escape, as Jameson claims, is repressed. *Breaking Bad*’s medium as a TV program as well as its message perpetuates the regulation of our cultural practices in our hyperreal and capitalist society.
Notes

1. Unfortunately it is difficult to acquire comments of viewers who reveal their class status, as well as statistics on how many wealthy viewers watch the show. But this data is not necessarily needed when figuring out meaning behind viewers’ identification with *Breaking Bad*, which is exemplified in the chapter on consumption.

2. The use of the Romantic poem brings up questions about genre. I just want to mention here that combining the Romantic poem with a modern day show that draws influence from Westerns complicates what *Breaking Bad*’s genre is, and calls attention to the ambiguity regarding genre classification. It brings up another issue about the different forms of Westerns and how overlapping categories are possible.

3. Walt doesn’t retreat back into the landscape but rather into science, as he dies on the floor of Jack’s meth lab in the last episode “Felina.” But Jesse in this final episode drives out into the landscape, suggesting that he has become more of a hero in this story than Walt.

4. This identification process brings up one of the questions that arose in the chapter on production, related to how a wealthy audience might find pleasure in watching characters from a different class. This is important to keep in mind while reading this chapter and the thesis as a whole, but once again there is difficulty focusing purely on this issue with the lack of viewer comments specifying class status.

5. This website is updated daily, so the statistics I have recorded are subject to change. See website details in works cited.

6. This is interesting because middle aged men and older would be assumed to like the show greater because they can relate to Walt’s mid-life crisis, but possibly the content of illegal drugs lessens the likeness. Also possibly, younger viewers may like the show more because Jesse becomes gradually more likeable as the series moves on as he is hit with hardship, and Walt grows more unlikeable as he murders and takes advantage of people like Jesse.

   Searching the internet for comments to support these speculations and to see why certain age groups like the series is a difficult task because most websites do not require for the commentators to write or show his or her age.

   Conducting an ethnographic study would be the best way to find this information but it is beyond the scope of this thesis, perhaps I will conduct this study in a later installment dedicated just to consumption.

7. Here I am going to address a concern related to this data. Perhaps the 18-29 demographic is the most likely age demographic to go online and rate the show. But this is not definitive. Shows that appeal to an older audience can
have a greater amount of older individuals rating the show than those from the 18-29 age groups. *Gunsmoke*, a TV Western popular during the late 20th century has been off the air since 1975, but fans still log into IMDb to rate it. 897 males and 225 females from the category of 45+ rated the show as of May 1st 2014, while only 198 males and 72 females from the ages of 18-29 rated the show as of May 1st 2014 (“User Ratings from Gunsmoke”). So it should not be concluded that the reason why the age group of 18-29 on IMDb is the most populous because it is most likely that individuals aged between 18 and 29 would use a computer or rate the program, it rather can be assumed that the content of the show appeals to them more than an older group.

8. Website of the official ‘Breaking Bad’ store:

http://www.breakingbadstore.com/?utm_medium=affiliate&utm_source=LS-/P8QKu9zE0E&utm_campaign=LOFFER-301095&utm_content=LSCR-10-1&cid=LOFFER-301095&siteID=%2FP8QKu9zE0E-CrV8eFSuTK3wSCxUoG+Z%2Fw

9. Thisiswhyimborke.com is a website that displays descriptions and links to a variety of innovative and unique collectables and inventions.

10. This is a different type of regulation than cultural regulation. Here I am talking about entity regulation, where one entity controls another. This other form of regulation is also important to mention in a cultural study. The regulation or monitoring of internet and TV has a lot to do with our cultural values as well and says something about what our society deems okay to publicize.

11. Walt believes that what he is doing is upholding his fatherly duties, when in fact his decisions are warped. This issue brings up a very interesting question. How has the duty of a father gotten so warped that it produces a drug kingpin out of a suburban dad? There is no simple answer to this question. It can be answered by conducting another more focused cultural study which travels through the spheres of the cultural circuit with this question in mind. The influence of the Western anti-hero schema to the storyline, the national interest of America’s economic state, and the comment that triggered the start of this show all can contribute to Walt’s warped sense of fatherly identity. But there are more complex cultural reasons as well, which require a more thorough examination to explain.
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