



## Broadcast Fiction Case Study: *Breaking Bad*

The aim of this factsheet is to consider the television programme *Breaking Bad*

- to consider how it reflects new **audience** behaviours and **institutional** practices
- to consider the show in light of media concepts including media language, **genre**, **narrative** and **representation**

*Whilst efforts have been made to avoid major plot spoilers, inevitably some information about the events of the programme will be discussed.*

### Institutional Context/Audience Behaviour

*Breaking Bad* was one of the main TV stories of 2013 when it came to the end of its five season run. It had become a phenomenon in the UK and the US and was one of the most written about and discussed television shows of the year. Broadcast by AMC in the US, the show was created by Vince Gilligan who had previously written for television shows such as *The X-Files*. Each season received increasingly positive reviews and attracted more viewers in the US. In the UK audiences found it was difficult to watch the show. The first season was broadcast on FX - a cable channel - and it was later picked up by Channel 5 but the later seasons were never shown by a UK broadcaster, so British audiences grew through the purchase of DVD box sets in the first instance and then later via **Netflix**. Whilst audience anticipation grew for the final episodes of the series, **Netflix** made all previous seasons available to stream, allowing the existing audience to remind themselves of past events and, most importantly, allowing new audiences the opportunity to catch up. By the time the final season was broadcast in the US, **Netflix** were reporting that many people were subscribing to the streaming service primarily to have access to the show. The success of *Breaking Bad* was being assisted by **Netflix** and in turn the streaming service was promoted by the show.



that audiences will watch television shows in line with their schedules and audience viewing is not limited to the shows selected by the broadcasters. UK broadcasters were also slow to realise the potential of *The Wire* (HBO: 2002-2008) and it only appeared on the **BBC** after the final season had been released on DVD. With the increased use of the internet, social networking and more globalised entertainment media, audiences are more likely to be made aware of television programmes that receive positive reviews and audience commentary. DVD box sets radically altered the way audiences accessed long-form dramas from the early 2000s, so when *The Wire* was repeatedly called the 'greatest television programme ever made' (*The Telegraph*: April 2009), curious audiences were able to find out for themselves. Later, when debates were being held as to whether *Breaking Bad* was better than *The Wire* or *The Sopranos* (HBO: 1999-2007), asserted as the 'best TV drama of all time' (*The Guardian*: Jan 2010), British audiences found themselves having to find their own way to access the programme.

### Activity

Search YouTube and watch 'Top Ten Breaking Bad Scenes' or '9 Minute Breaking Bad'. There are spoilers in both videos but they both provide idea of the style, tone and content of the show.

**Care! The videos contain 'adult' content.**

### The Show

*Breaking Bad* tells the story of Walter White, a mild mannered, inoffensive, unremarkable, and unappreciated chemistry teacher. His life is simple and unremarkable. He has a beautiful wife (Skyler) and home; he has a good relationship with his teenage son Walt Jr and, as the story opens, his wife is heavily pregnant with their second child. The White family lead an average life - their son is disabled and their second child was unplanned so, like so many ordinary middle class people, they find themselves stretched financially and concerned about the future. Walt has a second job in a car wash and this dents his pride. His conventional and somewhat mundane world is rocked when he is diagnosed with inoperable lung-cancer. He fears the cost of his cancer treatment and the fact that the family will lose its breadwinner after his death which will leave his wife and two children in poverty.



**Exam Hint:** You should show an awareness and understanding of current issues and debates within the media; being able to discuss the impact the technological developments and globalisation has had on the current media landscape will demonstrate this skill.

This is evidence of the way audience behaviour is changing in response to technological development. Traditional broadcasters can no longer assume



His brother-in-law, Hank, is a DEA agent and Walt goes on a 'ride-along' to witness the agency raiding a meth lab. Staying in the car

while the police investigate the lab, Walt sees Jesse, one of his ex-high school students, making a quick getaway from the lab and starts to consider the possibility of using his knowledge of chemistry to get involved in making crystal meth. He can see that this would be a quick and relatively easy way to provide his family with economic security after he dies. His initial plan is to work with Jesse to make just enough money to pay for his cancer treatment and provide for his family after his death. It is this decision that leads Walt into a range of situations and experiences that take him from low-level local meth cook to international drug king-pin. Along the way he makes decision after decision that shows his progression from a mild-mannered man to a sociopathic killer.

As well as colour and mise-en-scene, *Breaking Bad* was experimental in its production using different camera angles and presentation styles, often creating unusual and sometimes dreamlike (or nightmarish) images. Cameras were often placed in unusual locations



providing the audience with unusual and unexpected points of view and some shots felt familiar as the codes of a range of film genres were often used - but updated and adapted to suit the story being told.

**Reading *Breaking Bad*: The Application of Media Concepts**

**Exam Hint:** When providing a textual analysis in the exam, you need to ensure that your response is saturated with embedded media terminology. The following analysis provides an exemplar of how to embed your terminology without merely describing events on the screen.

**Media Language**

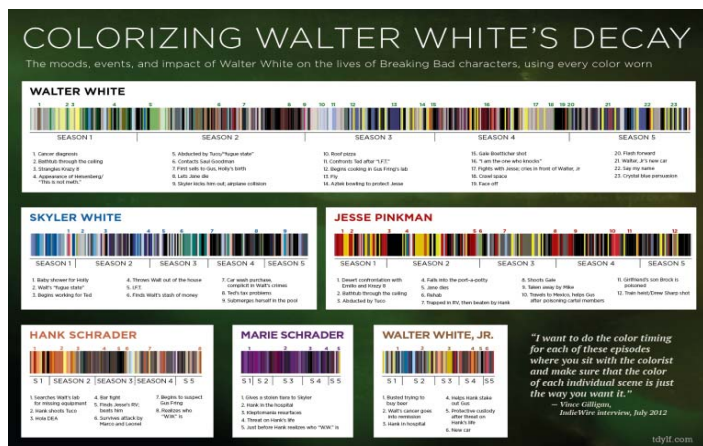
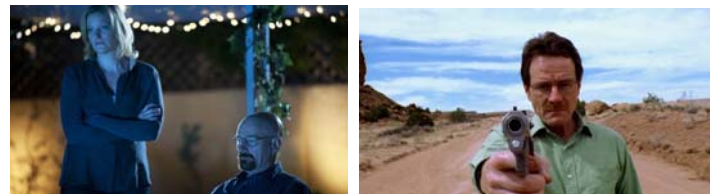
The show mixes realism with surreal imagery. Whilst there are a range of locations that are shot with low-key lighting (Tucco's office, *Season 1, Episode 6*) and the meth addicts' house (*Season 2, Episode 6*) the over-riding look of the show is bright and sunny. The show is set in New Mexico and there are a couple of trips to Mexico itself, so much of the action is set in a desert landscape with gold, red and yellow dominating the mise-en-scene. This brightness often juxtaposes with the darkness of the story being told and the arid, dry desert landscape starts to become oppressive, representing the pressure and the heat Walt and his family are under.

The programme uses colour symbolically to identify characters and certain ideas. For example, green is used to symbolise greed and envy and this is the colour worn by Walt as he starts to cook meth and when he tells Skyler he has won the power struggle with Gus Fring (*Season Four, Episode 6*). Walt's sister in law Marie is associated with purple - her house is decorated and accessorised in the colour and she is depicted wearing shades of purple clothes. Skyler often wears blue (a colour associated with her name of course) but the shades of blue become darker as she is dragged into the world of drug production and distribution. The dominant colour of Hank's clothes change with each season.



**Activity**

Look at these still images below from *Breaking Bad*. What choices have been made in the construction of the shot and what effects do you think the directors were trying to achieve?



(<http://tdylf.com/2013/08/11/infographic-colorizing-walter-whites-decay/>)

**Genre**

It is almost impossible to put *Breaking Bad* into a simple genre category. Its form could be called long-form serial drama as it fits into a broad category of television programmes that are categorised by their structure, their institutional backdrop and their target audience more readily than their content. *Breaking Bad* ran over 6 years in 5 seasons - the fifth season was split in two and shown in 2012 and 2013. It was made by an American cable company (AMC) who, like HBO (e.g. *Games of Thrones*) and Showtime (e.g. *Dexter*) create complex television shows with adult themes. They are able to do this as they are subscription channels in the US and so their mechanism for making money is different to more mainstream commercial producers who rely on advertising revenues generated during broadcast for profit.

*Breaking Bad* can be called a drama but at times it used humour - often in very dark situations - and the absurdity of some of the situations the characters found themselves in often made the show feel comedic. This was balanced with high tragedy and, at times, extreme violence. It was a show about a family - but it was not a soap. It was a show about a criminal being hunted by the police - but it wasn't a cop show. It did use codes from these genres as well as Westerns, thrillers and, every now and again sci-fi so the programme is difficult to pigeon-hole. This may be part of why it was so successful. Without a clear genre, audiences would not feel confident in being able to predict future events and so its lack of genre helps maintain audience interest. At the same time, its references to lots of other genres help provide some familiarity for the audience.

**Activity**

Look at the images above again. Do any remind you of any other film/fiction genres? What media language choices are creating these references?

**Narrative/Representation**

On one hand the narrative of *Breaking Bad* is quite conventional. It largely follows a linear chronological structure and takes the audience through a whole host of 'cause and effect' chains (Bordwell) to show how events cause further conflicts and so move us through a story. The problems and perils escalate until season five presents the audience with the climactic resolution to the story. The show very occasionally uses flashbacks to provide further backstory but it also uses flashbacks (or more accurately flash forwards) to create more narrative tension. A flash forward shows the outcome of a set of events and decisions and this means the audience immediately has to ask 'how did the character get here?' and 'what led to this?' Seasons of *Breaking Bad* were framed this way. Each episode of season two begins with a flash forward showing a bright pink teddy bear floating in Walt's swimming pool. Each episode provides a little more information about this scene but not enough to explain why the bear is there or where it has come from. This is only explained in the last episode of the season.

In conventional narratives, characters tend to stay the same. The pleasure for the audience comes from getting to know a character and how they will react. This familiarity is reassuring for audiences and allows them to predict responses to events. The characters in *Breaking Bad* develop as the narrative progresses. This creates a more complex and more realistic narrative with characters changing in response to events that occur and decisions that are made.

When we first meet Skyler, she is a stereotypical housewife and mother. She becomes an accomplice to Walt's money laundering and, as a result, turn out to be a darker, more independent character.



At first, Hank is a stereotypical cop. He is loud, crude and aggressively masculine but he becomes the solid moral centre of the story.

Jesse develops from being a stereotypical 'loser' stoner who wears oversized clothes and speaks almost exclusively in rap culture clichés by proving to be a sensitive and loving young man who suffers guilt and self-loathing as he realises the effects of decisions he and Walt make.

Walt begins the story as a mild mannered father and husband and is the character who attracts the audience's sympathy. As the series progresses Walt changes and becomes an egotistical, greedy and violent man who is prepared to sacrifice others to survive. The decisions he makes changes him and his relationships and his lust for power makes it increasingly more difficult to see Walt as a sympathetic character. Where he begins the series as a 'pawn' (McConnell) type hero (a hero who is a victim of circumstances) he later develops into a conflicted hero. As he gets more involved with the drug trade it becomes increasingly more difficult to sympathise with him. Early in the narrative we see him as a character who feels trapped by circumstance and so when he makes poor decisions we can see what has motivated him. Towards the end of the story, he has become the villain. He has killed innocents and destroyed his own family. His actions have changed the lives of everyone he has come into contact with and rather than the audience feeling for Walt, Walt is shown to be the problem.



All these characters began as clichéd stereotypes but they developed, subverting their simple narrative roles becoming more complex and realistic.

**The greatest TV show ever made?**

*Breaking Bad* is a complex story that shows how circumstances can cause a person to change and it deals with the inevitability of cause and effect. It begins by showing how a person can compromise their own moral code if they feel they are in a desperate position. The cost of medical treatment and the fear of financial ruin pushes Walt into making some bad decisions. As the series progresses it becomes a study on how power corrupts and turns a good man into a killer. Perhaps it is this complexity and lack of moral certainty that, like *The Wire* and *The Sopranos*, means that *Breaking Bad* will always be part of any debate that attempts to define 'the greatest ever TV series' (*The Huffington Post*: September 2013).

**Images taken from *Breaking Bad* (AMC) and advertising from www.amctv.com**

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