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Breaking Bad Case Study

Rob Miller | Monday August 18, 2014

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Institutional Factors

Breaking Bad has, in a short period of time become iconic, 'must see TV' that in terms of **genre conventions** can be categorised as Crime Drama but also as **AQT** (American Quality Television). The programme has eclipsed the status of **critical and commercial success** and become widely accepted as one of the 'greatest television programmes of all time' in a range of polls canvassing a broad **demographic** – it entered the Guinness Book of Records in 2014 as the highest rated show of all time. **Synergy** has been evident with Breaking Bad, reflecting the increasing **convergence** of television programmes into a range of online **platforms** reflecting in turn declining traditional television audiences. Netflix sold Breaking Bad and Breaking Bad sold Netflix as an increasingly successful distribution platform.



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Based on a simple, initially **single stranded high concept narrative** premise, Walter White is a Chemistry teacher who is diagnosed with inoperable lung cancer after his 50th birthday. He is given less than two years to live and decides to turn to crime, specifically making crystal meth (which he is very good at doing) as a way of securing his family's finances. The crime narrative soon becomes complex and **multi stranded** and also character led but throughout each season however, Walter's cancer is an omnipresent secondary narrative – in season one his family push him to visit the Doctors to undergo chemotherapy while in season two it is revealed his tumor has shrunk by 80%. Season three sees his wife Skyler wanting a divorce, threatening to reveal how he dealt drugs to pay for his costly cancer treatment while in season four and five Walter remains in remission but planting **narrative enigmas** in season five seeing him developing a rasping cough. Five seasons reflect two years of real time and he is seen celebrating his 52nd birthday, two years after his diagnosis but hiding out in New Mexico.

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The show was created and executive produced by Vince Gilligan who was also head writer – previously he had been producer and writer for the X-Files which is where Gilligan first came across Bryan Cranston (Malcolm in the Middle) who plays White after working with him on an episode of the **hybridised** science fiction crime drama. Cranston played an **anti-hero** who is both sympathetic and loathsome to audiences making him ideally suited to playing Walter White. Cranston also brought with him the comedic values of *Malcolm in the Middle* to the role of White except turning the humour much darker and at times, bleaker. The concept of the anti-hero is not unfamiliar to AQT with Jack Bauer in **24** and Dexter Morgan in *Dexter* as prime examples of characters like White who audiences can both identify with and aspire to, but also despise and place as the stereotypical villain in a 'good versus evil' narrative. White was both **protagonist and antagonist**.

Genre and AQT

What further **anchors** Breaking Bad's status as AQT is the writing pedigree of Gilligan but also its higher than average production values for a basic cable programme – it took a sophisticated approach to programme making targeting an educated, 18-55 ABC1 demographic. One of the key reasons for the extent of Breaking Bad's critical success is its ability to target younger and also older audiences, the latter who tend to be the primary consumers of AQT. Running from 2008 to 2013 it was, like much AQT shot on 35mm and then transferred to video to give it more **filmic connotations** (see *CSI*). Each episode cost just over \$3m and was produced by Sony Pictures Television and initially broadcast on AMC. In the UK it was broadcast by Channel 5 who also had acquired the rights (not exclusively) to show Jerry Bruckheimer's CSI but unlike the commercial success of CSI, Breaking Bad was not initially popular on 5. Netflix stepped in and made their platform the crime drama's permanent home after the suggestion that **scheduling** Breaking Bad too late on 5 was the main reason for its lack of success.



click on image to enlarge

Other AQT conventions of Breaking Bad include the **USP** of a protagonist turned antagonist although *Weeds* has a similar narrative with a widowed mother of two boys selling marijuana to support her family. Breaking Bad takes risks up to a point, typical to AQT with the controversial idea of a teacher turning to crime and becoming a cult hero central to the narrative premise – this in turn however furthers the AQT categorisation with many other texts focusing on one central character e.g. in **24**, *Monk*, *Dexter* and *The Sopranos*. Other AQT programmes like *CSI*, *NCIS* and *Bones* tend to have **ensemble casts**. Often this character, like Walter White is a maverick who makes his or her own decisions very much against the perceived wisdom – Jack Bauer in 24 is an all American patriot but very much on his own terms. Breaking Bad struggled initially with the critical success versus commercial success conflict but not least in part thanks to Netflix managed to straddling both barriers in appealing to an upscale, urban dwelling ABC1 demographic but as identified earlier, from a wide age range and also across gender.

In terms of genre conventions, Breaking Bad is clearly a crime drama but hybridised with black comedy, often seen through the relationship of Jesse, Walter's ex student and partner in crime with whom he makes the meth (Walter's own brand of Meth is called Sky Blue named after his wife, furthering the importance of family within the narrative). Audiences identify with a father and son style relationship which sees them often bicker and argue

about darker issues and moral judgements – both men kill with the killing increasing in each episode as Walter amasses his millions which he hides in ridiculous places like the cold store under his house, in a storage unit covered with a blanket and ultimately in the desert. After one killing, Walter and Jesse argue about how to dispose of a body using hydrochloric acid with Walter insisting on a metal container while Jesse puts the body in a bath, which melts along with the body creating a difficult, but comedic moment. Walter ultimately fails in his struggle with his final days seeing him estranged from his family while seeking to free Jesse who has been kidnapped – Walter is shot himself in the process a part of the final moments of season five. His semi smiling face as he lays dying perhaps allows audiences to return to their original relationship with him as the theme of consequences and family are left burnt onto the memory – similar to The Sopranos audiences constantly are asked: 'What makes a man bad?'



click on image to enlarge

Walter is good and bad in so many ways – audiences want him to survive but are challenged on many occasions when he crosses moral boundaries making it almost impossible to empathise or sympathise with him. He on one level is devoted to his family but misses his daughter's birth as a result of his criminal activity, he constantly lies to his wife and has an amusing relationship with his Policeman brother-in-law who doesn't know he is looking for Walter. Audiences seemed to turn against him fundamentally however when Jesse's junkie girlfriend dies – she smokes weed and takes heroin with Jesse and both are found by Walter in a comatose state. As Jane starts to choke Walter goes to wake her up but makes the decision to leave her in the knowledge that his life will be easier if she dies (later her father causes an air traffic accident as an air traffic controller because he is grieving for Jane).

Representation

Breaking Bad is a fully loaded text in terms of representation with a key focus on gender in part through the characters of Walter and Skyler, age in particular through Jesse, disability through the representation of Walter White Jr. and ethnicity up to a point though the Mexican character of Tuco Salamanca and his extended family who becomes Walter and Jesse's crystal meth distributor. Ethnicity can be further examined with Jack Walker, a recurring although not central character who is the leader of a white supremacist gang. National identity is a common underlying theme, specifically with the location shooting and narrative taking place in New Mexico but fundamentally with Walter White embodying the **American Dream** – in the same way Cuban immigrant Tony Montana in **Scarface** travels to the US and becomes a hugely respected gang boss, Walter achieves great wealth and power but at a cost and it is these costs that Breaking Bad is interested in through representation of the family. In the same way that Lester Burnham in **American Beauty** turns his back on his respected, picket fenced middle class American lifestyle, Walter dramatically turns his, and his own family's lifestyle upside down through his criminal activity.



Series 5, Episode 1, 2012 (00-03 – 00-09)

The following clip analyses all areas of representation but also touches on genre and

narrative for the benefit of OCR, WJEC and AQA exam boards.

The crime drama genre is immediately established through the **iconography** of violence – Walter, the central protagonist opens the boot of his car to see a rifle and other weapons of violence in his boot. His stern facial expressions suggest his intent as in an **intertextual reference to Reservoir Dogs** we see Walter in **low angle** from the **'point of view'** of the boot. The lack of **non-diegetic sound** and silence anchors the genre conventions and plants narrative enigmas in the minds of the audience as the short, green iconic title sequence starts.

Skyler is **framed to the right in close up** – her facial expressions **signify** fear, as does her dialogue as a low toned, gruff male voice reassures her that: "It's over, we're safe" ensuring audiences understand the protective relationship he has with his family and clear **binary oppositions** between his life and theirs (see intertextual links in terms of family structure to *The Sopranos*).

The camera then cuts to a **close up** of Walter looking dominant and expressing his **patriarchy** with the statement "We won". The **mise-en-scene** reveals Walter with a plaster over his nose and serious facial expressions signifying male violence, his voice is controlling as he ends the call. The following scene sees Walter in his kitchen, **low key lighting** creates an anxious mood which is anchored by the foreboding non-diegetic music. Walter begins to hide evidence as binary oppositions are further created between his criminal behavior and a **stereotypically** innocent, domestic family kitchen. After he is seen to frantically hide the last piece of evidence (again in boot point of view) it cuts to Walter in the same environment, changed into a blue shirt awaiting the arrival of his family – **connotations** of normality.

A close up sees his controlling hand on a glass of brandy as a **hand held** following shot behind Walter sees him greet his family. His wife, disabled son and new born daughter reinforce these connotations of 'domestic normality' but as Skyler, his wife walks past him without greeting him, audiences without narrative **cultural capital** would understand that there is a fundamental problem in their relationship. Walter and his son are left in **two shot** with his son's enthusiastic, naive body language and dialogue in conflict with his father's serious facial expressions – this changes to and from point of view shots from both characters which establishes their relationship. Audiences understand one of the main themes in Breaking Bad of representation of family as it becomes clear that Walter has hidden his criminal activity in particular from his son. The mise-en-scene still reveals a dark domestic environment as a **metaphor** for the dark narrative that is unfolding – as they talk about the drug bust Walter's new born daughter is deliberately **framed centrally signifying innocence** and purity, everything he is not.



The next scene represents a typically family bedroom – double bed, chest of drawers, wardrobe etc. as his estranged wife dutifully unpacks his suitcase. Walter is framed as dominant - glass of brandy in one hand, confident and trying to win back her affections. Silence reflects the relationship between the two characters as Walter tries to communicate with her. His protective family focus is then revealed as he talks to his baby saying he has missed her signaling to audiences a passage of narrative time has passed since he has seen them all. This also serves to create binary oppositions between her innocence and his tainted, corrupted lifestyle. As his wife leaves the room he self reflects with a shot of him looking into the mirror and ironically raising a glass to his situation.

Familiar, dark comedic conventions become apparent however when he clearly remembers that he has made a mistake in his last criminal activity by stating "Oh shit" which allows for **intercutting** to a crime scene that clearly he is responsible for. The crime scene suggest classic genre conventions – a **tilt up** reveals an investigator in a scene of crime suit and gas mask who is walking through a dark, wet subterranean setting that looks like a sewer – enigmas already suggest this may be where Walter has stereotypically buried his evidence, whether bodies, money or weapons. The investigator walks with the aid of a stick suggesting either his age or his pivotal role in the investigation as having sustained an injury while attempting to track the gang down. He is then **framed in high angle and low angle camera** as audience begin to see what he finds.

Mini Glossary

- **Iconic:** Well-known and often well respected – Breaking Bad for example is now part of popular culture with most audiences familiar with the title and many devoted fans.
- **Genre Conventions:** The typical aspects you see in a crime drama for example.
- **AQT:** American Quality Television – programmes that are commissioned and imported by British broadcasters to appeal on the whole to an educated ABC1 demographic e.g. *House*, *Lie to Me*, *Grey's Anatomy*, *24: Live Another Day*, *Game of Thrones*, *Dracula*. They normally represent high production value entertainment, have a good writing pedigree and utilise star marketing.
- **Critical Success:** Good reviews, awards and word of mouth.
- **Commercial Success:** When a programme makes money.
- **Demographic:** An in-depth description of the target audience.
- **Synergy:** Where one media text sells another – in Breaking Bad the synergy is with Netflix.
- **Convergence:** A media form that is distributed to be made available on more than one platform.
- **Single Stranded Narrative:** A story that is based on a single narrative premise.
- **High Concept:** A text that is based on a simple idea that can be easily marketed to audiences – this was the case with the USP of Breaking Bad although producers and writers were concerned that Weeds had a similar narrative.
- **Multi Stranded:** A story that has a range of stories linked to a range of characters, often interconnected.
- **Narrative Enigma:** A question that is posed to the audience to ensure maximum audience engagement – crime dramas like Breaking Bad frequently ask "who, what, why, when and how"?
- **Hybridised:** Where the conventions of one or more genres are apparent – Breaking Bad is a crime drama but also borrows from comedy and the gangster genre (arguably a sub genre of crime drama).
- **Anti Hero:** The central character does 'bad' things but is ultimately 'good' – Dexter Morgan is a good example of this as he is a serial killer who kills criminals but who also works for the FBI.
- **Protagonist:** Central character, normally morally correct who audiences identify with.
- **Antagonist:** The character who the protagonist battles against, often the villain.
- **Anchorage:** Something that has a definite meaning – this can be achieved through narrative but also cinematography, mise-en-scene, sound and editing.
- **Filmic Connotations:** When a television programme looks like a film, often revealing higher production values.
- **Scheduling:** The time a programme is broadcast – this is crucial in appealing to the right audience. Although CSI was broadcast post watershed on Channel 5 it was not so successful for Breaking Bad. The importance of scheduling has less value now as a result of streaming, video on demand/pay TV and multi channel television.
- **USP:** Unique selling point – arguably a chemistry teacher with lung cancer turning to drug crime was a unique idea to Breaking Bad.
- **Ensemble Cast:** Lots of characters e.g. CSI and NCIS – often a stand-alone episode is based on one of these characters. Although technically Breaking Bad has an ensemble cast, Walter is the pivotal protagonist that the narrative revolves around.
- **American Dream:** The ability to follow your ideas, beliefs and goals and succeed regardless of background and history.
- **Iconography:** The visual elements common to the genre.
- **Intertextual Reference:** When one media text makes reference to another – in some scenes in Breaking Bad the characterisation is similar to The Sopranos while in some shots there are links to established gangster films.
- **Non Diegetic Sound:** Sound that is overlaid in post-production, most commonly music which is used in Breaking Bad to create tension and emotion.
- **Patriarchy:** Male dominated society – Walter on one level is the ultimate patriarch.
- **Cultural Capital:** The knowledge, skills and experience a reader of a media text has with a certain media product. Many people understand and know Breaking Bad in intricate detail.
- **Metaphor:** Something that stands for something else.

Activities

1. Watch the new series of *24: Live Another Day* and try to draw parallels with the narrative of Breaking Bad.
2. Identify three other dramas, American or British with an anti-hero. Describe in one paragraph what makes them an anti-hero?
3. How do you watch television - why is online streaming television programmes leading to a decline in traditional, television audiences?
4. Identify three crime dramas that challenge the cultural stereotype of a central male protagonist, prepare a short, 5 minute audio-visual presentation on the programme.
5. How is age represented in Breaking Bad? Choose one other AQT drama and compare how age is represented.

