

Introduction

Considering only its narrative premise, it might seem surprising that the AMC television series *Breaking Bad* (2008–13) became such a strong cultural force that, throughout the mediasphere, we routinely encounter references to the series even today. Ultraviolent and yet suffused with a playful—if dark—humor, the narrative of *Breaking Bad* begins when the mild-mannered and aptly named Walter White, an underpaid yet overqualified high school chemistry teacher in Albuquerque, New Mexico, is suddenly—and ironically, given that he has never smoked—stricken with stage-four lung cancer, with little in the way of financial wherewithal to cover the kind of treatment that his employer-provided health insurance plan would not. After seeing television news footage of a local drug bust, he convinces his brother-in-law, Hank, an agent for the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), to let him ride along on the next bust, where he notices one of his ex-students, Jesse Pinkman, escape from the scene. Convinced that he can use his expertise in chemistry to produce a finer-quality meth than anyone on the street has ever seen, Walter blackmails Jesse into partnering with him as he begins a new career as a drug “dealer.” This is only the first episode. In the course of the series, we will see the enterprise move from local, artisanal production to a centralized, industrialized production controlled by drug cartels, and finally to the decentralized, just-in-time production characteristic of today’s post-Fordist economy. We will see Walter’s marriage disintegrate then get reborn as a *mariage de convenance* and business arrangement, only finally to end in utter ruination. We will see Walter and Jesse go through every variation of the father-son relationship, only

to have the relationship end with murderous rage and utter contempt. And we will see Walter engage in increasingly brutal acts of violence that slowly detach themselves from the need for self-defense that marks his earliest violent acts.

A dark series indeed. And while the story lines are carefully and cleverly plotted, and no doubt provided much by way of narrative pleasure to the many fans of the series, it was *how* the series presented its story that became the subject of so many critical accolades. In a period that some have characterized as television's third golden age, when innovations in the content and style of dramatic serials were flourishing, *Breaking Bad* seemed to push the expressive possibilities of serial television even farther, by employing expressive devices that were generally considered the province of cinema. This is not to say that cinematic expression was unheard of in television before this point (and I will get to the debates over "cinematic television" in the pages that follow). But *Breaking Bad* was unrelenting in its inventive rethinking of how image and sound might be configured within the televisual system. Indeed, as I will argue, the series seems to be so steeped in the history of cinematic forms that its images often acquire a haunted quality, as if the archive of cinematic expression were hovering in a virtual space just outside every sequence.

This book is an attempt to understand just what this means. And while it might seem that a relentless attention to style over narrative content might lead us to miss the social, cultural, and ultimately political relevance of this series, this study will show that, on the contrary, such an attention to the cinematic (as a concept) can allow us to see how the social and political are treated in the series as purely immanent to our present world. The chapters thus move in ever widening circles: from an examination of how the series presents the domestic spaces and the object world of our contemporary moment, to the ways in which it explores the modes of experience characteristic of neoliberal capitalism, and finally to how a renewed televisual aesthetics can bring us toward a politics of pure immanence. To do this, I bring in ideas from a number of philosophers and theorists, from Walter Benjamin to Gilles Deleuze. I have tried to do so in such a way that the arguments are accessible to nonspecialist readers. And in any case, the moves to theory are always

driven by problems presented by the series, in keeping with my fundamental commitment to aesthetics and to immanent critique.

Before the television premiere of the final half season of *Breaking Bad*, the Film Society of Lincoln Center programmed a screening marathon of all the previously aired episodes.¹ For some—especially the proponents of the idea of a second (or a third) golden age of television—this welcoming of a TV series by one of the leading gatekeepers of the world cinematic canon was evidence that a certain kind of television had acquired the cultural prestige heretofore accorded to the cinema. For the purposes of this study, however, this event is better seen as articulating a *problem*: the problem of what a cinematic television might mean. For in the first place, the cultural distinction accorded to the cinema is still only a relatively recent phenomenon, coinciding with the postwar emergence of art cinema, the reorganization of the film canon around the idea of the auteur, and the diffusion of television as a rival to the box office. The cinema's meteoric rise to distinction thus attests to the permeability of judgments of high and low, especially in relation to popular or industrial art. Second, following Lynn Spigel, we can note the ways in which network television even from the beginning aligned itself with modernist values in graphic, industrial, and architectural design. As Spigel's research shows, this led to collaborations between television and the Museum of Modern Art, New York (MoMA), and—perhaps even more telling—the production in the 1950s of a short-lived series called *Point of View*, which attempted to rethink the city films of the 1920s avant-garde cinema for the medium of television.² Which is to say that cinematic expression found its way into television early on.

Nonetheless, there is a widely talked-about sense that in the past two decades, some new relationship between cinema and television has been forged, enough to give traction to the phrase “cinematic television.” In February 2001, for example, MoMA screened the first two seasons of *The Sopranos*, complemented with a film series curated by *Sopranos* showrunner (and notorious cinephile) David Chase, as if to suggest a new continuity between contemporary television aesthetics and the canon of cinema.³ Much more recently, in a special feature on

the “merging” of film and TV, *Chicago Tribune* television critic Steven Zeitchik suggested that the new blurred boundaries between the media might be better served by “the idea of a more general screen critic.”⁴ Whether or not one takes *The Sopranos* as paradigmatic, there is nevertheless a wide consensus—among critics and scholars alike—that somewhere around the turn of the century, the nascent forces that had been reshaping the television industry away from the network model finally became visible in the programming.

As early as 2004, in the collection *Television after TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition*, there was a sense among some of the most prominent television scholars that a decisive shift was happening in television. In her introduction to the collection, coeditor Lynn Spigel noted that over the past decade, television had “reinvented itself,” and that “in the face of these changes much of the existing literature in television studies now seems as dated as network shows like *Dallas*.”⁵ Such a reinvention of television involved a conjunction of forces at the levels of industry, economics, technologies, and regulatory regimes, and the now voluminous work (both scholarly and journalistic) on how these factors interacted to produce the kind of television we see today is well beyond the scope of the present study, which will be focused on one aesthetic regime that emerged out of this conjunction. I can, however, sketch out very broadly some of these “conditions of possibility” for a series like *Breaking Bad* (at the risk not only of being reductive but also of stating “what everyone already knows by now”): immersive technologies that allow for greater engagement with the audiovisual sensorium; diversification of viewing practices; new modes of dissemination of product; loosening of restrictions on content; increased economic viability of niche audiences—in short, all those elements that characterize the postnetwork era.⁶

This study will focus on aesthetics: and more specifically, what it means to talk about aesthetics in the context of cinematic television. Aesthetics here is not to be taken as purely formal analysis or as identification of styles or “looks.” Rather, it is to be taken in its most far-reaching sense: as the Frankfurt School understood, the formal innovations of the art of an era must be seen as expressive of invisible, macrological shifts in social and economic organization, but also as deeply connected to

micrological changes in the experience of everyday life. It is this latter—the imbrication of aesthetic innovation and the lived experience of the everyday—that makes television today an especially fertile ground for aesthetic study. Scholars are beginning to do work in this area—for example, in the section on comedy in the collection *Television Aesthetics and Style*, where James Zborowski writes, “If we think of aesthetics as being concerned with renewing perception and of studies of the everyday as being concerned with reclaiming experience, then it is not hard to see the connections between the two endeavors.”⁷ And in their introductory overview of the field of television studies, Jonathan Gray and Amanda D. Lotz assert that aesthetics, tied to critical analysis, is “a key frontier for the field.”⁸

“The cinematic” is the aesthetic concept driving the argument in this book. I will leave the term undefined for the moment, since the entirety of chapter 1 is devoted to a detailed elaboration of the concept. But the charged and politicized arguments that still swirl around the phrase “cinematic television” must be addressed here, at the outset. My argument in the pages that follow will be that the phrase “cinematic television” has been used much too casually and with too little conceptual rigor. The result is that enthusiasts of the phrase claim that television has (“finally”) achieved the aesthetic sophistication of the cinema, which then leads nay-sayers to charge that the enthusiasts never really understood television to begin with and are simply reviving an outmoded and elitist taste culture to celebrate what is, in the end, just another example (however well made) of serial television.⁹ So let me be clear: by making the argument that *Breaking Bad* is cinematic (and televisual), I am decidedly not weighing in on whether we are in the midst of a new golden age of television; nor am I making claims about the fundamental nature of the television medium. I am simply saying that—given the large-scale shifts in television mentioned earlier, along with the specific needs of a network like AMC¹⁰—an opening appeared, and *Breaking Bad* took advantage of that opening in an aesthetically decisive way. My focus is on one aesthetic regime that has emerged in relation to this opening; the extent to which this regime manifests itself in the many dramatic series constituting the landscape of television today will remain here an open question.

Film scholar Kara Keeling—who has in her own work developed and mobilized a concept of the cinematic (one that differs somewhat from the concept I will develop here)—found the need early on in her study to address the problem of the extent to which a concept like the cinematic might be “subsuming things specific to other audiovisual media, such as television, under the rubric of *cinema*.”¹¹ Her answer to this, with which I concur, is that cinematic images are distributed all across the landscape of modern life: the cinema might at one time have been the primary vehicle for the dissemination of these images, but that does not mean that other audiovisual media do not traffic in them. Following from this, I propose that we think of the cinematic as a kind of flickering across the audiovisual landscape. Here, I borrow from Jacques Lacan his notion that the unconscious functions via a kind of flickering that interrupts the smooth flow of the symbolic/imaginary narratives that construct our world of “common sense.”¹² Lacan’s intent here was to insist that the unconscious was not a deeply buried secret but instead was always there on the surface, if only we had the eyes to see it. So too, throughout the history of television, the cinematic has flickered—perhaps more or less brightly—and we can see it in Lucy Ricardo’s channeling of the gestures of Charlie Chaplin as she negotiates what it means to be a housewife in 1950s America, or in Hitchcock’s television series’ defamiliarization of the new object world of a modernizing nation; in the sudden appearance of the cinema verité camerawork in the Grant Tinker procedurals; and in myriad other examples of decisive aesthetic moments in television.

Keeling’s concept of the cinematic is extremely broad, so that the cinematic image becomes the principal mode for organizing perception and constructing notions of common sense; it is thus for her one of the central mechanisms for the reproduction of capitalist social relations. There are, for sure, cinematic images that open onto excess and thus have the potential to disrupt the oppressive narratives of common sense, and these are images that Keeling valorizes and looks for in the works she analyzes. The intellectual infrastructure organizing Keeling’s entire project is formidable; nevertheless, in this study I want to argue for a more narrow conception of the cinematic. As will become clear in chapter 1, I argue that the cinematic should be seen as a kind of inter-

ruptor within the regime of images. When we talk about common sense, we are ultimately talking about narratives, however much they have been generated by images, and the organization of images always has the potential to introduce gaps, uncertainties, contradictions in the narrative of which they are a part. In this book, “the cinematic” will be the term I use to name these particular types of images. As such, it names the occurrence of *an aesthetic event*: one that opens onto the indeterminate, one that leaves us “without criteria” with which to assess its sense—or, indeed, its common sense.¹³

Before moving into a discussion about the uniqueness of *Breaking Bad* to an understanding of cinematic television, I must take up one very interesting line of argument about contemporary serial television. In this argument, there is a curious parallelism going on, in which the textual narrative, often centered on the vicissitudes of the beleaguered white American male, can be seen as a reflection of the battles of those lonely, courageous new showrunners—themselves of course white males as well—against the entrenched and conservative bureaucratic businessmen who run television in the postnetwork era. In other words, just as the showrunner—often well tutored in the works of neorealism, the European new waves, and the great American auteurs—must fight the philistines in order to produce television that is “cinematic,” so too the new wave of antiheroes crowding the ether are battling the more invisible economic and social forces that have rendered the white middle-class family man, once a staple of prime-time television, more and more precarious. Yet another layer of complexity can be added to this picture when we consider the ways in which the cable networks themselves, at the narrative level, look to shows that will align with their “brand.” For example, HBO can favor the entrepreneurial heroes of *The Sopranos* or *Six Feet Under* because those heroes stand in for HBO itself, as it historically saw itself as the little guy battling the entrenched networks, while it can pass on *Mad Men*, whose retro stylings then become the perfect expression of AMC’s library of classic American films.¹⁴ These lines of thinking lead us to engaging arguments about contemporary premium television—especially in relation to a neoliberal socioeconomic regime that is at once its condition of possibility and at the root of its narrative and thematic terrains.

In the case of *Breaking Bad*, these thematic and narrative connections to neoliberalism are almost too obvious to need recapitulating here. Extensively written about in the press and among fans, they constitute what everyone already knows about *Breaking Bad*. Cancer might just as well be a metaphor for the white middle-class male, here caught in the throes of midlife crisis, sexual inadequacy, ineffectuality, inability to provide for family, and “bad” life choices (and let’s face it, within the logic of neoliberal self-fashioning and the entrepreneurial creation of one’s “career trajectory,” being a high school teacher must be seen more and more as something one is consigned to, after all one’s “better options” have played out).¹⁵ More than that, though: crystal meth, it has been argued, is the neoliberal drug par excellence, and the story of its wildfire spread across the American heartland is closely connected to the de-industrialization (and de-unionization) of vast swaths of this heartland, forcing an increasingly impoverished (and largely white) former middle class to work impossible hours for less money and no benefits. These conditions lay at the heart of the meth epidemic across the nation.¹⁶ Meth was situated within a contradiction whereby on the one hand, it brought marginalized workers “up to speed,” so to speak, with the impossible demands of the de-unionized job market, while at the same time, it physically and financially ravaged them.¹⁷ As for the geopolitics of the meth trade, *Breaking Bad* seems attuned to the history here, in which the white biker gangs originally centrally involved in meth production and distribution were gradually displaced by the Mexican cartels. In *Breaking Bad*, of course, the cartels are the dominant players, but the neo-Nazis who appear in season five become something of a “return of the repressed,” once Walter White destroys Gus Fring’s drug empire.

Given all this, *Breaking Bad* seems particularly suited to the kinds of ideological and representational analyses that have grounded television studies from the beginning; and, in fact, the series has generated several scholarly collections that by and large follow these general approaches in understanding it.¹⁸ Given television studies’ foundational investment in feminism and the politics of identity, one can understand how this particular story—with its relentless focus on the beleaguered, angry, middle-aged white male, deceiving his wife, mowing down a host of ethnic others, and making alliance with neo-Nazi thugs—might pre-

sent real stumbling blocks to its critical assessment. Indeed, the entire issue of the “difficult men” of contemporary quality television brings to mind Robert B. Ray’s understanding of post-1960 developments in Hollywood’s portrayal of American mythology, which he characterizes as being divided into “left” and “right” cycles.¹⁹ In a nutshell, Ray argues that in a period (not unlike today) of both intense aesthetic innovation and deep political polarization, Hollywood genre filmmaking split into two cycles, based on the way each cycle handled its approach to American mythology. In today’s television, *The Wire* would be the paradigmatic example of the left cycle in prestige series, and would any series be a better candidate for the right cycle than *Breaking Bad*?²⁰

But here I would return more closely to Ray’s argument: he notes that the two films that “complete” the cycles—*The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972) in the case of the left cycle and *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976) in the case of the right—are both “critical” works in the sense that they expose the unspoken assumptions and implicit contradictions that drove the cycles to begin with. Now, both *The Godfather* and *Taxi Driver* are crucial intertexts in the series *Breaking Bad*. But rather than argue that *Breaking Bad* performs some kind of synthesis of the two tendencies, I would instead claim that it performs critical work on contemporary American mythology similar to that being done in the two films. And if it seems now a precondition of their cultural work that those two films were steeped in knowledge of cinema culture—both Coppola and Scorsese being among those “movie brats” of New Hollywood who were the first directors to come out of film schools—I will argue in the following chapters that it is precisely the cinematic that allows *Breaking Bad* to do its own critical work.

I am not the first commentator to create a binary opposition between *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad*. Notably, Jason Mittell has also done so, in relation to the idea of “narrative complexity” that he argues has characterized some dramatic television since the 1990s. Given how I’ve presented the concept of the cinematic so far—namely, as an interruptor of narrative logics—it may be no surprise that this study will be coming at *Breaking Bad*, and contemporary television more generally, from a completely different angle to Mittell’s. But since his argument has achieved a certain degree of traction in television studies, I will lay out my objec-

tions. The first has to do with his argument that one of the main appeals of complex narrative concerns how such complexity keeps the audience focused on the pyrotechnics of the moves in the storytelling, awed by the twists and turns that have emerged from the writers' room. He calls this the "operational aesthetics" of complex television;²¹ and while it may be true that audiences react this way, this kind of logic can never take us beyond audience response, toward the kinds of work the narrative details are doing beyond producing some kind of Pavlovian (or more complex) reaction. D. A. Miller is very clear on the limitations of technician approaches to criticism in his wickedly funny analysis of the "hidden" cuts in Hitchcock's *Rope*, where the critics' relentless focus on technique obscured what was *really* going on with those simulated long takes, just as it kept at bay any consideration of what was *really* going on between Brandon and Phillip (and David? and Rupert? and . . .).²²

My second objection has to do with how Mittell uses *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad* to construct an opposition between "vast" and "dense" seriality, with *The Wire*'s narrative moving outward in ever wider circles of the sociopolitical, and *Breaking Bad*'s narrative moving inward to ever deeper depths of interiority and backstory.²³ But can the "inner" and the "outer" really be separated so conveniently? In the case of *Breaking Bad*, this reifies a certain bourgeois conception of "psychology" in a series that in fact continually distances itself from such a conception. As I will argue, the cinematic in *Breaking Bad* makes any such division between interiority and exteriority problematic.

In the first single-authored scholarly work on *Breaking Bad*, Elliott Logan, after noting the same tendencies in the critical analysis of the series that I have just sketched out, argues that "such frameworks may actually somewhat inhibit more nuanced understandings of what is going on in *Breaking Bad* at the granular level of style through which the series' story is presented."²⁴ Logan aligns himself with a relatively recent strand of television criticism that attempts to understand how the repetitions, delays, and patterns within serial television create unique tensions between the part and the whole.²⁵ At the same time, he embraces a much older tradition within film studies which insists that the work itself be taken "on its own terms," that we come to understand the work through its own expressive unfolding.²⁶ This is a position I'm in

general agreement with. What I find limiting in Logan's nonetheless elegant study—and where my work will differ from his—is the way everything that happens “at the granular level” (and here I would say, at the level of *mise-en-scène*) ends up getting enchained to the series' character development and narrative lines. This is what David Bordwell calls “the way Hollywood tells it”: all of the expressive elements of the frame must exist in the service of telling the story, or else they are consigned to the realm of “excess.”²⁷

This view coincides with the American entertainment industry's own understanding of what it does, so that the primacy of story and character is a veritable mantra for Hollywood's creative class. But there is another tradition, at least as old as the surrealists, for engaging with the cinema. In this tradition—arguably at least partly shared by the practitioners of *photogénie*, Walter Benjamin, the *Cahiers* critics of the 1950s, assorted other champions of *mise-en-scène*, and recent work that engages with these traditions, such as Miriam Hansen's *Cinema and Experience*—the magic of the cinema comes from its ability to set forth new and unexpected relationships between bodies, spaces, and worlds, and in such a way as to reprogram the human sensorium.²⁸ In this view, character and narrative become subsidiary to the more fundamental operations of the filmic image, as is evident from the surrealist practice of strolling randomly into movie theaters to watch fifteen-minute snippets of films. In recent film studies, this line of approach to moving images has been taken up most notably in the trendy turn toward the concept of “affect,” or—to put it simply—the distribution of forces and energies within the image.²⁹ Affect, which in the moving image is produced through formal aesthetic relations within and among images, has the potential to become that *interruptor* of narrative I have already claimed as the province of the cinematic. As philosopher Davide Panagia notes, narrative too often becomes “narratocracy,” a kind of common sense that occludes real thought, and the aesthetic event is what potentially suspends these narratives of common sense and pushes them in unexpected directions.³⁰

In this book I will argue that the achievement of *Breaking Bad* lies precisely here, in how it affectively reconfigures the elements of our lives and our world via its cinematic manipulation of the elements of

image and sound. In chapter 1 I specify very clearly what I mean by “cinematic” and establish that cinematic expression is a rare achievement even in cinema. But, as will become clear in the subsequent chapters, it is precisely through this suspension of representational politics that we can uncover richer and more profound ways that *Breaking Bad* finds expressive forms for—and ultimately even allegorizes—everyday life under the regime of neoliberalism.

There is a way in which *Breaking Bad* is cannily aware that the “straight corridor” of narrative cause and effect is only a surface effect, that underneath we can see odd effects of resonance, actions-at-a-distance, and radical indeterminacy.³¹ This is nowhere more evident than in its use of the teaser or cold opening, which is often talked about in relation to nonlinearity but—in light of my argument here—is better thought of as presenting us with virtualities, or “possible worlds,” only some fraction of which will ever be actualized. Perhaps this is one of the ways in which *Breaking Bad* most exploits its televisual form: the extended form of serial television enables things to come back, but with variations, and at greater distances than the feature film allows. Vince Gilligan has talked about the “chemical reactions” governing the way the narrative unfolds, and clearly he sees that in the realms of the social and of inner life—and the field of affects that lies at their juncture—chemical reactions often leave behind an indeterminable surplus or residue.³² This is the fly in the ointment of cause and effect that the series continually plays with.

And in fact, it is with the literal fly that we can see this most easily. The fly is a recurring motif in the series, and an entire episode (310, “Fly”) is, famously, devoted to the attempt to kill a fly that has contaminated the lab.³³ It is telling that this is a “bottle episode”—concocted “on the fly,” so to speak, to economize on an overbudget production season by setting an episode in one location—for a bottle episode has exactly this character of being a surplus or leftover, so that once again the series is thematizing its own formal procedures. After the teaser, early in the episode Walter is fretting about how the numbers don’t add up, the meth yield is consistently a fraction lower than it should be, as if even within

the mathematical certainties of chemical cause and effect, something will always remain mysteriously unaccountable. He calls this a “vestige.” The fly then comes to stand in for this unaccountability, something that Walt must stamp out at all costs, for if there is one thing he cannot abide, it is the existence of this mysterious “nothing” that underlies and drives everything. Significantly, then, after Jesse drugs him with sleeping pills in an attempt to calm his obsession with the fly, Walt mentally revisits his random encounter with Jesse’s girlfriend Jane’s father shortly before he watched her die, and spins out an alternative possible universe: if only he had died before going out that night . . .

But here I want to focus on the return of the fly in the teaser to episode 508 (“Gliding over All”), which ends the first half of the final season. The teaser begins as a fly alights on a desk lamp, and the camera rack focuses back to a close-up of Walter staring at the fly. Walt sits at the desk of the Vamanos Pest Control company (which is the front for the new meth operation) in a state of depressed paralysis. Here we should recall that the previous episode (507, “Say My Name”) ended with Walt shooting business partner Mike because of Mike’s refusal to give up the names of the jailed henchmen Mike has been paying to stay silent and who are now under DEA pressure to “flip.” But this shooting, far from being an assertion of power by Walt, is instead the result of a hysterical loss of control, and almost as soon as he shoots Mike in the stomach, he realizes he has made a mistake and could easily have gotten the names from his new partner, Lydia. In a sense, we could say that he finally uses the gun we saw in the very first episode of the series—the gun that Hank forced him to handle, that he was so inept and uncomfortable holding, and that came to signify all his weaknesses—but only to reveal to himself and the world that despite his violent rise to the top, he remains a fundamentally reactive person: small, petty, insecure, afraid. It is interesting that when Mike makes his way to the river to die, the *mise-en-scène* has strong resonances to the scene in Sam Peckinpah’s *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (1973) in which the mortally wounded Lemuel (Chill Wills) lies at the river bank with Mrs. Baker (Katy Jurado) looking on, as Bob Dylan’s “Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door” plays on the soundtrack, so that Walter is additionally feminized by this intertextual association.

But (back to 508) when Todd—Walt’s new young partner and rival to Jesse—comes to the office looking for Walt and discovers him immobilized before the fly, there ensues a series of striking shots in which Todd, standing in the doorway, looks at the back of this lone figure sitting in the distance slumped in a chair (fig. I.1). It is at this point that a savvy spectator might note that these shots curiously resonate with one of the most iconic moments in classical Hollywood cinema: the climax of *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) when Lila Crane (Vera Miles) goes into the fruit cellar and sees from behind the body of “Mother” slumped in a chair in the distance (fig. I.2). At once, the opening shots with the fly take on an entirely new set of meanings, as we recall the scene in *Psycho* when Norman-Mother (now merged) contemplates the fly on her hand and resolves not to kill it, to show the world that “she wouldn’t hurt a fly” (figs. I.3 and I.4). Once we see that *Psycho* has become the intertext governing the orchestration of the mise-en-scène in this opening scene, it then comes as no surprise that shortly after that, when Todd rouses Walt to get to the task at hand (the disposal of Mike’s body), we then see them standing before the trunk of a car into which Mike’s dead body has been stuffed, just as Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) puts the body of Marion Crane (Janet Leigh) into a car trunk after the shower murder (figs. I.5 and I.6). This set of associations continues after the teaser and into the episode proper, where the first thing we see is an overhead shot of Walter in the shower, in a composition strikingly similar to an early shot of Marion Crane’s famous shower in *Psycho* (figs. I.7 and I.8).

We will get soon enough to the question of how to interpret all this; but in fact, the resonances with *Psycho* don’t end with those shots. The methodical preparations Walt and Todd make as they prepare to dissolve the body in hydrofluoric acid echo the methodical way Norman Bates cleans up after “Mother,” and the hydrofluoric acid Todd removes from a cabinet comes to stand in for the quicksand that Norman uses to erase the crime. But then, to end this reprisal of *Psycho*, there is yet another, more direct shot repetition: during Walt’s shower, the camera moves outside the shower to observe, in the background, Walt reaching out from behind the curtain for a towel, while prominently in the foreground, sitting atop the toilet tank, is the volume of *Leaves of Grass* given to him by Gale Boetticher and inscribed with a dedication that



I.1. Todd finds Walt in the Vamanos office



I.2. *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960): Lila finds “Mother” in the fruit cellar



I.3. Walt studies the fly (the flesh-toned smear in the background is Walt's face, which will take form in a rack focus)



I.4. *Psycho*: Norman-Mother studies the fly



1.5. Disposing of the body



1.6. *Psycho*: Norman disposing of the body



1.7. *Psycho*: Marion's cleansing shower. Too late!



1.8. Walt's shower. Way too late?

could potentially expose Walt as the infamous drug kingpin Heisenberg (figs. I.9 and I.10). This resonates with two shots of the motel room in *Psycho*, in which Marion's newspaper is in the extreme foreground of the shot. In both cases, the foregrounded objects can potentially incriminate, but while Norman Bates finally notices the newspaper, Walter fails to see the Walt Whitman volume (and one can only think that some unconscious logic is making him not see that such a charged object is out of place).

It is important that we not take this extensive invocation of *Psycho* to be just another example of postmodern recycling. I would claim that there is nothing about the procedure here that smacks of pastiche or blank parody.³⁴ In a sense, this strategy (of which there are myriad examples throughout the series, some of them to be explored more deeply in the chapters that follow) is the formal equivalent of the fly itself: it gives the *mise-en-scène* a surplus (or remainder) that *keeps returning* in other guises. If what's happening at the granular level of *mise-en-scène* is a relentless pushing toward some Outside of narrative logic, then the repeated restaging of images from other films adds another, spectral dimension to the images. With all of these elements that cannot find their proper place, what psychoanalysis tells us is that such elements must keep returning. And so these hauntings within the images work alongside—and indeed as a constitutive element of—the *mise-en-scène*, to construct affective levels of possibilities within the images, to construct the possible worlds out of which the world of *Breaking Bad* is actualized.

This is why I don't think we need to muddy the waters with questions of intention at this point (chapters 1 and 2 address questions of the production system and its ethos in more detail). Certainly, we could come up with a number of explanations for why *Psycho* would be a critical intertext here. In episode 508, the series is looking toward its dark, final half season, and Hitchcock's *Psycho* is pervaded by a sense of things ending, not least of all classical Hollywood cinema itself. Then too there's *Psycho*'s dark vision of the American family, coming at a time when television—at least in the sitcoms—was constructing a phony and idealized image of the American family. But these “molar” or large-scale explanations keep returning us to the narrative of *Breaking Bad*, when the resonances with *Psycho* are happening at a granular level. At this level, we



1.9. The camera foregrounds incriminating evidence



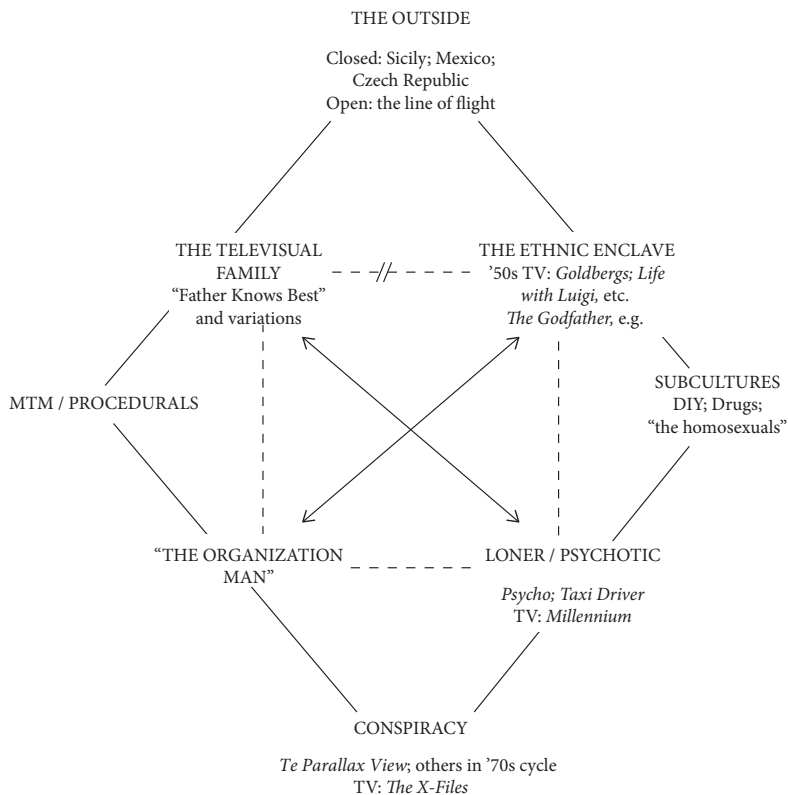
1.10. *Psycho*: The camera foregrounds incriminating evidence

see Walter White being positioned alternately as Norman Bates, Marion Crane, and a stuffed dead corpse. It is as if, once the specter of *Psycho* begins to assert itself in the mise-en-scène, it cannot let go until all its associations play themselves out—failure of masculinity, failure of the nuclear family, failure of crime, failure of the American Dream.

This reading strategy does not mean that I will leave narrative and character considerations out of the picture. But in the interactions between form and narrative, I will attend at least as much to the tensions, contradictions, and leftovers or surpluses in this relationship as to the ways in which they are in accord. This, I wager, will deepen our understanding of the cultural work *Breaking Bad* is doing. Thus, to conclude this introduction, I think it would be useful to perform a mapping (via a semiotic square) of the cultural field *Breaking Bad* is situated within and working upon (fig. I.11). This should be taken as a preliminary starting point for the investigations to follow.

In this figure, the top axis—televsual family and ethnic enclave—is connected by an interrupted line. This reflects the historical fact that in early U.S. television, there is a move to repress the ethnic in situation comedies such as *The Goldbergs* and *Life with Luigi* and substitute for it the “white” middle-class family of the *Ozzie and Harriet* type. To a certain extent, despite all the morphings of the televsual family, this remains a central reference point in American television. At the two poles of opposition, we have the “Organization Man” and the loner/psychotic, both of which find all sorts of filmic and televsual representation. These compose the starting points of the semiotic field to be elaborated. In the case of *Breaking Bad*, Walter White moves across the line from the televsual family at the series’ beginning to the psychotic at the series’ end, while the ethnic enclave is seen largely through the Mexican drug cartel, and the Organization Man through Hank, the DEA, and the Madrigal corporation.

Things get more interesting when we look at the sublated terms in the square. Conspiracy, for example, which unites the Organization Man with the loner, is a strong part of Vince Gilligan’s résumé from his work on *The X-Files* but is largely absent from *Breaking Bad*. We could say, though, that conspiracy’s underlying psychic structures—paranoia, anality, and perhaps even homosexual panic—survive and attach them-



I.11. Semiotic square of the cultural field that *Breaking Bad* is situated within

selves to Walter White and other characters. (What might it mean that Walt consigns his enjoyment of Whitman—the poet who celebrated male-male love and “sang the body electric”—to those private moments when he is relaxing his anal sphincter?) So too the left-most term—the workplace as surrogate family—is largely absent in *Breaking Bad*, despite the scenes within the DEA offices. Instead, the workplace keeps invading the domestic spaces (and so begins to take on allegorical value as the nature of work continues to evolve in the U.S. economy).

By far the most interesting problems present themselves with the final two terms, what I am calling “the Outside” and “subcultures: ‘the homosexuals.’” Subcultures names the place of minor knowledges and prac-

tices, the kinds of “do-it-yourself” cultures that are transmitted orally and remain outside official science. As such, this pole lies opposite that of the procedural (a staple genre of television). This is the world of drugs seen from the inside: the meth, for example, cooked up from books of matches and decongestant tablets. The reason I am emphasizing homosexuality here—and using what might be seen as old-fashioned terminology—has to do with how the series itself imagines the homosexual. In a certain way, it accords with the cultural demand—in force until only recently, and perhaps not entirely dead—for presenting homosexuality as “the open secret.” It accords with the signifiers through which cultural production envisioned the homosexual, as member of an invisible “tribe,” and as stigmatized and unhappy outsider to the reproductive fecundity of family. In other words, “the homosexuals” is presented here as a figure, and as queer theory has taught us, this figure is mobile and has the ability to attach itself to just about anyone.³⁵ This is how homosexuality is handled in *Breaking Bad*, and while it may seem politically retrograde in today’s terms, it nevertheless may provide us with something of importance. Certainly, the character Gale Boetticher is queer. Gale is presented to us less as a unified, coherent person and more as an assemblage of disparate and incompatible traits: a Libertarian with *Fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism* on his bookshelf, a vegan, a chemistry geek, an aficionado of obscure Italian pop songs of the 1930s, a coffee perfectionist, and a hookah smoker. Together, these work to create a quirky, likeable character, although one senses with Gale that “there’s no there there.” But then isn’t the support he received from his mentor Gus Fring a case of “gay tutelage”? This entire motif of the open secret is given expression by the circulating volume of Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*.

Within much popular cultural production, the Outside has been figured as that utopian “elsewhere” where the characters might finally achieve wholeness. Mexico is paradigmatic here: think, for example, of how Mexico functions as such in Nicholas Ray’s *They Live by Night* (1948), in which the young lovers on the run see Mexico as the place where they can finally be free. Or we could consider the role Sicily plays in the first *Godfather*: it becomes the place where Michael can finally resolve his conflict between family and “America,” where he achieves

wholeness through his meeting of Apollonia (*nomen est omen*). But in *Breaking Bad*, Mexico is already enfolded into the ethnic enclave; it is as if, in Fredric Jameson's terms, the Outside no longer exists as a viable alternative to globalized capitalism, and instead we get the meth market in the Czech Republic, liberated from communism and now in the throes of drug consumption.

But the Outside can designate a more abstract elsewhere. Drugs, for example, might provide a line of flight from the present, though they are dangerously unreliable in that regard. However, aesthetic experience, insofar as it forces us to reinvent the coordinates through which we see the world, throws us outside of the common sense of everyday life. Here, then, is where *Breaking Bad* reflexively folds in on itself, such that we find the opening onto the Outside to lie deep within its haunted (and haunting) images.

As we move through this study and begin to look more closely at the cinematic archive that haunts the images of *Breaking Bad*, we will understand just how profound are the stakes of this procedure. For by and large, these haunted images harken back to films that were—in their critical orchestrations of the world—sounding alarms at the state of American culture. Today, television allows these disparately strewn alarm bells to ring week after week, now in the context of a present state of emergency. It shows us the ways in which our present is inextricably tied to these earlier cultural moments, even as it holds to the optimism that television might just be able to perform that reconfiguration of sensibility we have long hoped the cinema would bring to fruition.