

The Crystal Ceiling and the Mess Below. Fantasy and Erosion of Privilege in *Breaking Bad*

Abstract: In this essay, I discuss how AMC's award-winning series *Breaking Bad* creates an oscillation between the thematic and symbolic poles of messiness and cleanness, playing with this polarity and ultimately blurring it. This blurring is predicated upon the series' peculiar construction of material objects – among which money – accumulated in space, as well as upon its “bending” time to create alternate realities. This has ramifications in sociohistorical and sociopolitical terms: *Breaking Bad* speaks to a number of concerns typical of contemporary neoliberalism, and carves a parallel reality, where messiness and cleanness relentlessly trade places, thanks to an investment in fantasy; this parallel reality is, however, rather than in opposition, in continuity with reality-as-we-know-it, in the sense that it constitutes only a temporary, or a partial, escape for its subject(s). In the end, I maintain, *Breaking Bad* suggests that fantasy as supplemental to reality-as-we-know-it is a mirror that both connects and separates privilege, and the right to a liveable life, from their slow but steadfast erosion in the current sociohistorical and sociopolitical situation.

Keywords: *exception, fantasy, law, neoliberalism, privilege, television*

1. Introduction: A Cruel Intentionality

In “The ‘Stuff’ of Archives”, Martin Manalansan IV reflects upon the lives of six queer people sharing a crammed one-bedroom apartment in Jackson Heights, Queens, NYC.¹ Among these people, whom the scholar calls “the Queer Six”, are sex workers and illegal immigrants; Manalansan employs both spatial and temporal elements in his analysis and, out of great care and respect for their lives, he manages to offer an interesting and nuanced reflection on the concept of “mess”. Spatially speaking, mess is the accumulation and visibility in space of items that, at a glance, do not add up, whose presence is at odds with the (cultural) expectations about the environment they find themselves in.² By contrast, an orderly archive of material items naturalizes culture: the collected elements appear to “naturally” fall into place. This is often accompanied by a teleological tension into posterity: a preoccupation about leaving material things behind for one's dear ones, a healthy projection into the future in the anticipation of one's death. This teleology, I would add, presupposes a will, and a powerful intentionality, behind the act of discerning and decreeing what must be kept, passed on – and, to the contrary, what must be left back and/or discarded. From a radically different perspective, a “messy” archive, Manalansan suggests, is not easily read. In temporal terms, mess does not allow for a smooth, consequential, univocal reading of the past of the objects – how did the items ever get there? What intentions, or series of random circumstances, resulted in their accumulation in a certain place? A messy archive is

¹ Martin Manalansan IV, “The ‘Stuff’ of Archives”, *Radical History Review*, 120 (Fall 2014), 94-107.

² I provide this description of mess keeping in mind Mary Douglas's culture-based definition of dirt as “matter out of place”. See Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966) (London and New York: Routledge, 2001). Well aware of the cultural weight behind such expectations, in order to render the full “aliveness” (Manalansan, “The ‘Stuff’ of Archives”, 100) of the inhabitants of the apartment, Manalansan juxtaposes the lived experience of the Queer Six to the popular media representation of hoarders. The figure of the hoarder, as represented in TV shows such as *Hoarders: Buried Alive*, Manalansan argues, is “always already pathologized” (ibid., 98). This TV show is based on a “narrative of normalization” (ibid., 98): former hoarders develop a capacity to discern “which objects are valuable and need to be kept for posterity and which are trash and should be thrown away” (ibid., 98); “the movement from pathology to normality, from impossibility to tenability, from mess to order can also be portrayed in terms of the teleological routes of value” (ibid., 99).

³ A “messy” archive can actually be the result of a combination of various “intentionalities” and random events: “the Queer Six rely on contrasting moments of detachments, letting go, moving away, the pleasure of discovery, and the reality that nothing is ever really permanent in order to enable themselves to move literally and figuratively through times and spaces, beyond days and rooms” (Manalansan, “The ‘Stuff’ of Archives”, 102). Last but not least, the intentions, attachments, and sometimes random events that originated a messy archive cannot always be followed through. In an almost Buddhist-like fashion, despite the attachment to something – or someone, sometimes you cannot but let go. Manalansan explicitly refrains from subscribing to the pejorative implications of the concept of “mess”; at the same time, he forgoes any idealization of mess per se as a subversive and/or desirable – i.e., subversive hence desirable – quality or condition.

also problematic with regard to its relation to the future: what is the fate of such items? Will they be passed on to posterity, or left behind?³

The final two years of Walter (Walt) White (Bryan Cranston), the protagonist of the highly acclaimed AMC series *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013), are, at a manifest level, intensely driven by an all-powerful “master” intentionality: making money. Initially at least, this is grounded in an ethical imperative. Diagnosed with inoperable lung cancer immediately after his fiftieth birthday, he desperately wants to leave something behind for his wife Skyler (Anna Gunn), his teenage (disabled) son Walter Jr. (RJ Mitte), and the baby daughter Skyler is pregnant with. In order to provide for the financial security of his family in the limited life span he has left, he decides to maximize his chances for profit: he blackmails his former, not-too-bright student Jesse Pinkman (Aaron Paul) into partnering with him, and he becomes a methamphetamine producer/dealer. (By Season Five of the series, the welfare of the family as a pretext disappears, and Walt appears to be propelled by the sole drive of his – by then ruthless – ambition.)

In this essay, I propose to read the series’ fluid conception of mess – i.e., the series’ peculiar intertwinement of chaos and order, purity and filth, in-placeness and out-of-placeness – as the in/visible counterpart of different chronotopes, i.e. different forms of space-time continuities, and/or discontinuities. Moreover, while, in aesthetic terms, the aforementioned intertwinements are the result of artistic creativity – namely, of narrative and visual choices on the part of the series’ creator Vince Gilligan and the rest of its developers – I also maintain that they have implications in sociohistorical terms. Reflecting on a certain intertwined configuration of space and time is made possible, it seems to me, through a reflection on items and their materiality, their relation to place, and their journey in time – a relation and a journey which often determine our perception of what is in place and what is out of place, what is orderly and what is messy/chaotic, what is clean and what is dirty, and how it came to be so. This also involves a reflection on the attachments we develop with respect to commodities (produced and diffused) in different spaces, as well as on the shifting socioeconomic dynamics that are related to such attachments.

The narrative core of *Breaking Bad*, namely, the production, selling, and consumption of methamphetamine – colloquially known as “crystal” – is by definition a “para-site”, situated on the dark side of a “normal”, apparently healthy society. In most cases, the circulation of drugs touches a number of “unsanitized” spaces that are, as underlined by the series, the often unacknowledged mirror image of the spaces wherein healthy citizens reside.⁴ In Manalansan’s discourse, a de-pathologized idea of mess accompanies an attempt at de-pathologizing (neither trashing nor idealizing) the lives of marginalized subjects such as the “Queer Six”. By contrast, the lives of disenfranchised and marginalized subjects are both central and far removed in *Breaking Bad*, to the extent that they are inescapably involved in

⁴ David Lynch’s work perfectly exemplifies such a contrast. The opening sequence of *Blue Velvet* (1985) presents a series of clean, idyllic suburban scenes, then the camera frames a lawn and slowly zooms in / pans down to the grass blades, revealing the nauseous writing and squeaking of the insect life hidden by the green. The whole TV series *Twin Peaks* (1990-91), developed by Lynch and by Mark Frost, is centered on unveiling the dark underbelly of a seemingly friendly and decent small town in the Pacific Northwest. This Lynchian approach has branched into products as various as Sam Mendes’s Academy Award-winning *American Beauty* (1999) and ABC’s series *Desperate Housewives* (2004-2012).

a free-market circulation of money and commodities: they are those who consume the drugs that others produce. The series shows them only cursorily and occasionally and it centers, instead, on those who accumulate money profiting from this consumption.⁵ The latter enjoy a freedom of movement that consumers do not have; in James Bowman's terms, "the violent, frequently deadly criminal world exists alongside the more recognizable one of the show's intended audience, and its main characters live in both, moving with greater or lesser ease between them".⁶

⁵ This may be one of the reasons behind some accusations of "romanticizing" the drug world in the series.

⁶ James Bowman, "Criminal Elements", *The New Atlantis*, 38 (Winter/Spring 2013), 163-173. <http://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/criminal-elements>, accessed February 5, 2017.

In our present of permanent international tension, economic crises, steady erosion of various welfare systems, and resulting endemic precariousness, apparently healthy and "normal" citizens move in and out of the para-sites of the law. In *Breaking Bad*, an always impending threat of downfall is exorcized by means of a fantasy-fueled "triumph of the will" (Nazi overtones intended) that attempts to maximize mess – investing in it, getting dirty, thriving at the margins of the very space of socioeconomic precariousness that is increasingly becoming the norm, even for the apparently privileged components of the social body. "Apparently" points to a *fantasy* dimension. Jacqueline Rose maintains that "[f]antasy is not ... antagonistic to social reality; it is its precondition or psychic glue".⁷ In other words, fantasy can be as socially disruptive as it can be conservative. Fantasy provides a moment of suspension, when change may occur and/or be reabsorbed by a habituated cycle that refurbishes the status quo. This is at the origin of what Lauren Berlant names "cruel optimism":

⁷ Jacqueline Rose, *States of Fantasy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 3.

"Cruel optimism" names a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility. ... [T]he subjects might not well endure the loss of their object or scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being, because whatever the *content* of the attachment, the continuity of the form of it provides something of the continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world.⁸

⁸ Lauren Berlant, "Cruel Optimism", *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 17.3 (2006), 21.

What I wish to suggest is that, in some cases, fantasy is conservative in the sense that it enacts a separation between those who hold on to their privilege while it is eroding and those who were never privileged. Holding on to privilege while it is eroding is tantamount to deferring a loss and a ruin that, in the present historical condition, appear to be increasingly inevitable. Part of the enormous appeal of *Breaking Bad*, and a reason for its success, lie, I contend, in the fact that, at the very core of contemporary neoliberalism, Walter White's parable points to the ultimate im/possibility of an alternative existence.

2. Im/Purity, Space, and Time in *Breaking Bad*

How does *Breaking Bad* thematize/formalize mess in spatial as well as temporal

terms? The series presents two recurring motifs: mess as im/purity and mess as loss of control. With “im/purity”, I refer to the thematization, and mutual highlighting, of filth, defilement, pollution, and contamination on the one hand, and cleanness, sanitization, and purity on the other. While there are obvious reasons, with regard to the subject and the plot of the series, to insist on such motifs, their recurring presence points to symbolic overtones and a broader sphere of signification. Moreover, the presence of a repeated oscillation between the extreme poles of chaos and order fundamentally relies on the series’ investment in the discontinuities and fissures in the fabric of space-time continuum.

The implementation of a whole structure of efficient disposal, and the dangers of abandoning clues in one’s wake, are prominent in the series. Moreover, keeping mess at bay is a preoccupation that especially runs throughout Seasons One and Two. During the initial episodes – including the Pilot – in which he begins his venture in the world of meth manufacture and trade, Walt attempts to bring order into chaos: for instance, he decides to regulate the space in his young partner’s RV, which initially serves as a makeshift lab, not only supplying the appropriate chemical equipment (stolen from the chemistry lab of the school where he teaches) which the naïve Jesse lacks, but also deciding where everything belongs – for instance, declaring that only equipment fits in the workspace, and that their workstation should be clear of any other objects.

A visually flamboyant display of mess comes as early as Episode Three in Season One, “And the Bag’s in the River” (10 Feb 2008). Producing a toxic gas by means of a chemical reaction, Walt has (in strict self-defense) killed Emilio Koyama, Jesse’s former associate, and Krazy-8, Emilio’s cousin, a drug distributor whom they were trying to reach with a collaboration proposal. After imprisoning Krazy-8 (whom will eventually be killed by a hesitant and torn Walt) in the basement of Jesse’s house, they are left with the hideous task of disposing of Emilio’s corpse. Ignoring Walt’s recommendations to strictly use a plastic container for dissolving the body in acid, Jesse proceeds to use his bathtub: the acid dissolves the ceramics and eventually the floor/ceiling itself, and in a memorable black comedy moment, a red mass/mess, interspersed with barely distinguishable solid parts, cascades down in the corridor before Walt and Jesse’s horrified eyes. So much for getting rid of the body of evidence.

While not leaving clues behind may be central to any crime-related fiction, the presence of – to use Mary Douglas’s definition – “matter out of place” is also emblematic, in structural as well as visual terms, of how evil and corruption spread from within an enclosed area to the rest of the social (not to mention the human) body. From spaces charged with symbolic value, the invisible progressively seeps into the visible, despite any attempts to maintain it hidden. The basement of Jesse’s house is a paramount example:

Krazy-8’s death, the disastrous attempt to dissolve the body of Jesse’s ex-partner

Emilio, and the strong, fish-like odor given off by methylamine as it is processed fundamentally change Jesse's home, and what started in the basement has moved into the main areas of the house. This most intimate of places is corrupted, and the taint cannot be contained within the basement/unconscious.⁹

⁹ Ensley F. Guffey, "Buying the House: Place in *Breaking Bad*", in David P. Pierson, ed., *Breaking Bad: Critical Essays on the Contexts, Politics, Style, and Reception of the Television Series* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014), 158.

The subject of im/purity in *Breaking Bad* is, of course, directly related to the production of methamphetamine and the related presence of chemistry. The level of purity of the meth produced by Walt – and, eventually, by Jesse – is the key to the success of the product, and the necessity of purity is emphasized continuously and consistently throughout the series. At one level, this is naturally related to Walt's mastery as a chemist, which is made clear from the very beginning: in the Pilot (20 Jan 2008), we are shown a plaque that reads "Science Research Center, Los Alamos, New Mexico, hereby recognizes Walter H. White, Crystallography Project Leader for Proton Radiography, 1985, Contributor to Research Awarded the Nobel Prize". Our awareness of Walt's ability is later reinforced from the perspective of Gale Boetticher (David Costabile), a qualified and rather nerdy chemist who temporarily becomes his assistant. Gale worships Walt; among else, in the cold open to "Box Cutter" (17 Jul 2011), he observes that the meth produced by Walt is ninety-nine percent pure, versus the ninety-six purity percentage he himself can guarantee, and that the three-percent difference, albeit apparently minor to a non-trained person, is in fact "tremendous".

The purity of the meth is repeatedly related to the cleanness, the almost anodyne quality, of the spaces wherein it is produced. A paradigmatic case, and at the same time one that brings such a relation to extreme consequences, is the much-quoted "Fly" episode (23 May 2010) in Season Three. This episode revolves around Walt's obsession about a fly that has made its way into the lab: he is convinced that it will contaminate and ruin the whole batch he and Jesse are working on, so he stubbornly insists on finding and killing it, in an absurd crescendo of failed attempts.

The "insects" motif is given another twist in the final season, when the Vamonos Pest fumigation company becomes the cover for the production of meth. Looking for a new space after the lab underneath the Lavandería Brillante (an industrial laundry facility serving as a cover) of Seasons Three and Four has gone up into flames, Walt and Jesse begin an itinerant cooking in the houses of ordinary people, while they are being fumigated by a group of professionals in the field who double as burglars. Ensley F. Guffey notes that this epitomizes the final collapse of an ideal border between "normal" spaces and "polluted" (literally, as well as in the translated sense of "corrupted") spaces:

The invasive nature of Walt and Jesse's new operation is clearly and chillingly emphasized by the noise of children playing nearby as the toxic gas from Walt and Jesse's first cook is released into the neighborhood and the gas is vented into a backyard full of children's toys and a swing set. The lab is not removed

from the everyday places of the innocent. Walt and Jesse are not cooking in the desert anymore, or even underground, but right in the middle of residential neighborhoods.¹⁰

¹⁰ Ibid., 168.

The seeping of “rot” into (apparently) clean spaces, and the correspondence between chemical purity on the one hand, and social/moral corruption on the other, create a tension between two conceptual and imaginative poles; this problematizes the cultural importance of orderliness and cleanness as epitomized by the presence, in space, of items that teleologically arrived at their place after a journey through time. The whole series can be read as epitomizing, in many ways, the failure of Walt’s attempt at remaining unsoiled, free of dregs and residue, despite his journey to a corrupted world. At the beginning of the series, Walt makes clear to Jesse that he does not even want to know about “his end of the business”, i.e. distribution: he just wants to deal with the chemistry. In a show so preoccupied with actions and their consequences, this is tantamount to refusing to see the consequences of what he does embodied in the real lives of flesh-and-blood people. Walt’s condition for entering the business is that he is spared to witness the by-products of his actions, in a futile attempt at separating the anodyne space of the lab from the fly-ridden, bodily world outside. I will return to this in Paragraph Three.

I shall now discuss mess as loss of control, taking this in two possible directions: one medical/existential and one formalistic/narratological. Mess as loss of control over his own life is what Walt fights throughout the series. The mere escalation of his ruthless actions is presented as necessary to survive – and only those who are masters of their fate survive, because they act preventively to eliminate danger. Donatella Izzo has observed that Walt’s actions are an implementation of the doctrine – theorized by the G. W. Bush administration and enacted in the attacks on Afghanistan in 2002 and Iraq in 2003 – of “preventive attack as the best strategy of defense”.¹¹ The decision to kill Gus Fring (Giancarlo Esposito) – Walt and Jesse’s employer in Seasons Three and Four, a powerful drug lord masquerading as the irreprehensible owner of the fast food chain “Los Pollos Hermanos” – emerges from such an attitude. It may be maintained that, in the series, Walt and Gus face each other as the sovereign and the homo sacer in Giorgio Agamben’s discourse on the foundation of sovereignty. The sovereign is the detainer of absolute power who is simultaneously within and without the law; the homo sacer is the one who can be killed with impunity, because her/his life is not protected within the sphere of law. This opposition is, however, both absolute and *reversible*: the sovereign and the homo sacer both inhabit the sphere where law and violence transmute into each other and found each other.¹² (Fittingly, the title of the episode in which the showdown between the two takes place is “Face-off”.) After having succeeded in killing Gus, Walt flaunts his supposedly regained control, maintaining that the family is safe and that no one else will ever get killed

¹¹ Donatella Izzo, “Some Sort of Need for Biblical Atonement”. *Breaking Bad* e altre variazioni sul tema di Giobbe”, *Iperstoria – Testi Letterature Linguaggi*, 6 (Fall 2015), 326; my translation.

¹² See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1995), trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford U. P., 1998).

because now he and Jesse are “in charge” – a vindication that is patently absurd, and that no one believes.

The illusion of being in full control of one’s fate is embodied in Walt’s relation to cancer. Cancer is embodied mess; it is “matter out of place” spread in one’s body. In “Hermanos” (Season Four, Episode Eight, 4 Sep 2011), Walt explains the life view he has come up with to a fellow cancer patient, a young man who expresses his sensation of both profound vulnerability and disorientation at finding out about his illness. Walt offers a merciless response:

To hell with your cancer. I’ve been living with cancer for the better part of a year. Right from the start, it’s a death sentence. That’s what they keep telling me. Well, guess what? Every life comes with a death sentence. So, every few months I come in here for my regular scan, knowing full well that one of these times – hell, maybe even today – I’m gonna hear some bad news. But until then, who’s in charge? Me. That’s how I live my life.

Several critics have explored the series’ engagement with time. According to Dustin Freeley, *Breaking Bad* is a “narrative that explores our anxieties over time and the multiple existences that thrive within the converging past, present, and future of Walter White”.¹³ When he is diagnosed with inoperable cancer and told that, best case scenario, he has a couple of years to live, Walt is suddenly faced with the inescapable reality of his own mortality: the clock is ticking. At the same time, he immediately faces the insufficiency of what Freeley calls the “clock time” of our ordinary existence, which is (at least in the cultural space that we inhabit) orderly and consequential. Accordingly, the series “bends” time – or, better, the space-time continuum – at many levels, both thematic and formal. Among else, this is one of the possible resonances of Walt’s criminal pseudonym – Heisenberg.¹⁴

How does this relate to issues of narrativity, control, authorship? The impulse to make order out of chaos has a narrative counterpart: in the series finale, the narration finally obeys a conclusive, even teleological pull, according to which all loose strands need to be pulled together. As it has been noted on several occasions, the finale makes a big effort – to some, not a fully convincing one – to close/resolve as many open issues as possible, so as not to leave fans with a sense of incompleteness or irresolution.¹⁵ Nonetheless, does this make up for the amount of uncertainty and unpredictability repeatedly evoked throughout the show, especially exemplified in the “one step forward, two steps back” pace of Seasons One and Two, and culminating in the collision of two planes in the sky over Albuquerque?

The first episode of Season Two opens with a black-and-white scene of a deserted back garden, which we soon realize to be the Whites’. We are shown a plastic eye floating on the surface of the pool and hear faint sirens in the background. The camera moves below the surface of water and a color object appears against the whiteness: a bright pink teddy bear, half singed and missing an

¹³ Dustin Freeley, “The Economy of Time and Multiple Existences in *Breaking Bad*”, in Pierson, ed., *Breaking Bad: Critical Essays*, 33.

¹⁴ Alberto Brodesco has discussed the applications of Werner Heisenberg’s “uncertainty principle” in the series in “Heisenberg: Epistemological Implications of a Criminal Pseudonym”, in Pierson, ed., *Breaking Bad: Critical Essays*, 53-69. The connotations accompanying the use of the name Heisenberg have also been explored by Philip Poe, “Patriarchy and the Heisenberg Principle”, in Jacob Blevins and Dafydd Wood, eds., *The Methods of Breaking Bad: Essays on Narrative, Character, and Ethics* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2015).

¹⁵ This work of narrative “cleaning up” occurs after the series has left some “excellent” corpses in its wake and destroyed virtually all hope for some kind of reconciliation between Walt and his family, or all hope for an alternative to the protagonist’s progressive descent into a hell of his own making. Despite these “voids”, at the end of the series, blood money is allocated, the corpses will be located, and despite the torture and death of a number of (more or less) innocents, those who are worse-than-bad will have a reckoning with (supreme) justice. The puzzle must not present any missing pieces. On *Breaking Bad* and justice, see Izzo, “Some Sort of Need for Biblical Atonement”.

eye. The cold opens of episodes Four, Ten, and Thirteen add elements to this scene, showing debris little by little – and, in Episode Ten, two bodies. These items remain unreadable until the very end of the season, when we are shown – from Walt’s perspective, while he is sitting alone in the back garden after Skyler has left him – two planes colliding and exploding in the sky above, and the teddy bear plunging into the pool. Putting the pieces together we realize, at this point, that the debris we were previously shown comes from this incident.¹⁶

¹⁶ This disaster is Walt’s indirect – and to an extent disproportionate – responsibility. Walt causes, by non-intervention, the death of Jesse’s heroin-addicted girlfriend, Jane Margolis. Her father, Donald Margolis, apparently still recovering from grief and shock, goes back to his work as flight controller despite being mentally unstable and causes the collision (“ABQ”, 31 May 2009).

The show itself mirrors in aesthetic terms, before the ultimate attempt at closure, what Walt does in plot terms: it manipulates time, and plays with chaos theory, in order to create a sense of alternate storylines that may, in some parallel reality, be pursued. Freeley discusses the show’s manipulation of time, especially through the use of the “cold opens” (or teasers) that introduce each episode: “*Breaking Bad*, through the flashbacks or flash-forwards that begin each episode, ... manipulates our perception of time and injects moments that constituted the past, present, or future”.¹⁷ This is not only “play[ing] in a self-conscious way with the audience’s knowledge”¹⁸ but also “offer[ing] variations and repetitions regarding previous structures”.¹⁹ These variations take place in the folds of time, imbuing the substance of fantasy to a possibility. The series’ highly original and significant use of the cold opens creates unexpected connections not only among different moments in time, but also among alternate realities: “what is” versus “what could have been”, and how the two are related. The opening of the Third Season finale, “Full Measure” (13 Jun 2010), is a case in point. We are offered a frontal shot of a clean fireplace within an empty house; immediately afterwards, the camera pans all around the room until the frame is filled by a door, in front of which a man dressed in a suit is standing, taking notes. The door opens; a younger Skyler and a younger Walt step into the house. Skyler is visibly pregnant. Viewers begin to realize, and they are confirmed as the scene unfolds, that she is pregnant with Walter Jr. and that the house they are visiting, and considering for purchase, is the one at 308 Negra Arroyo Lane, where the family lives when the series begins. After an initial moment of intense disorientation – what fireplace is this? – the viewer can grasp the importance of this moment and its resonating with promises, linking this beginning to another one – namely, the opening of the series, the Pilot, in which Skyler is also pregnant, but with Holly. Moreover, *both* a difference *and* an analogy are established. It is immediately clear that Skyler is inclined to buy the place, while Walt is not impressed: he claims that they should have a bigger house. When Skyler points that for “[their] price range, this is as good as it gets”, Walt replies that they should aim higher: “Why be cautious? We’ve got nowhere to go but up”. At this point, viewers know that the promise of upward mobility has been realized, but only in the para-sites where the law gives way to (quoting Agamben again) the state of exception. Accordingly, the scene is both the past of an unrealized future *and* the anticipation of a future promise that has been (“divergently”) fulfilled.

¹⁷ Freeley, “The Economy of Time and Multiple Existences”, 49.

¹⁸ Rossend Sánchez-Baró, “Uncertain Beginnings: *Breaking Bad*’s Episodic Openings”, in Pierson, ed., *Breaking Bad: Critical Essays*, 139-153, 148.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 148.

What I wish to underline here is that Walt's venture liberates an amount of "fantasy time" that he can invest in, stretch and bend, creating alternate realities before the reality of illness catches up with him. This is his chance of "really" living – of feeling, before dying, the intoxicating pull of a colourful, exciting reality, one that is better than fiction. Walt is, in this respect, a paradigmatic prey to what Slavoj Žižek calls the (post 9/11) "passion for the real": a lust for a contact with reality that is, however, revealed to be another variation on a fantasy. Facing his own mortality, Walt is also faced, as Žižek would say, with "the hard kernel of the Real which we are able to sustain only if we fictionalize it".²⁰ Walt fully is, in this respect, a man of our times. Discussing the impact of the 9/11 attacks, Žižek has noted how, when they occurred, the attacks were accompanied by an uncanny sense of déjà vu. This is both a psychic mechanism *and* a historical shift in perception: "reality is 'transfunctionalized' through fantasy, so that, although it is part of reality, it is perceived in a fictional mode".²¹ A discourse typical of the post-9/11 world is a cycle or continuum wherein, while fiction envelops the Real (which is, in the Lacanian sense, unknowable per se), in so doing, it also contributes to reproduce material reality – i.e. reality-as-we-know-it, keeping its structures of inequality intact.

²⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real! Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates* (London: Verso, 2002), 19.

²¹ Ibid., 19.

3. Through the Mirror: Neoliberal Mess

In one of the most chilling scenes in the whole series, Gus slices his loyal henchman Victor (Jeremiah Bitsui)'s throat in front of Walt and Jesse. Of his own initiative, Victor had been cooking a batch of meth in order to prove to Walt – who believes that Gus will not kill him as long as he remains the only one who can attain a ninety-nine percent level of product purity – that the production may as well continue without him. The motives for Gus's shocking gesture are left to interpretation, but, in all likelihood, Gus both wishes to punish Victor's initiative and to make clear to Walt that he is both investing in him and keeping him under his power of life and death. The dissolution of Victor's body in a barrel of acid on the part of Walt, Jesse, and the hitman Mike (Jonathan Banks) is the first of several disposals of this kind throughout Seasons Four and Five. This "sanitized" disposal contrasts with the messy episode of Jesse's tub in Season One.²² Overall, it seems to me, *Breaking Bad* both constructs a progression from messiness to orderliness – Skyler laundering Walt's drug money; Walt and Skyler buying, to launder Walt's illicit earnings, a car wash – and underlines a paradoxical coexistence of the two, as well as of purity and filth, thus creating a standing but ultimately untenable opposition between the manufacturing, the peddling, and the consumption of meth. In what way is the aforementioned opposition standing, and in what way is it untenable? For whom, to which uses, *both* the opposition *and* its untenability assume different values – depending on *who* can traverse the frontiers of this

²² When Todd (Jesse Plemons) kills a young boy in cold blood in "Dead Freight" (Season Five, 12 Aug 2012), both the boy's body and the bike he was riding are dismembered and dissolved in acid.

Manichean, chiasmic world?

By Season Five, providing for the family as the pretext for Walt's venture in the criminal world has vanished for good. Frightened by Walt, Skyler is totally estranged from him, and has entrusted Walter Jr. and baby Holly to her sister Marie (Betsy Brandt) and her husband (and DEA agent) Hank (Dean Norris). In "Buyout" (19 Aug 2012), talking to Jesse, Walt remarks: "this business is all I have left". This leads to an escalation of the enterprise and to an accumulation of money beyond any "reasonable", foreseeable necessity. This outburst of excess and uncontrolled accumulation is visually rendered in "Gliding Over All" (2 Sep 2012), in one of the most iconic scenes in the whole series. Skyler takes Walt to a storage unit she has, unbeknownst to him, been renting for a while, where she has been amassing stacks and stacks of dollar bills, in a pile that rises up to their knees. When asked how much money is in the pile, Skyler answers that she has no idea. Walt has been bringing her more money than she could ever launder. Fluid money has become an unruly object, a big pile of dirt to be swept under the rug, since it cannot be exposed. It is *literally* "uncountable", the equivalent of a bare life held in a state of suspension: "(SKYLER) I want my kids back. I want my life back. Please tell me. How much is enough? How big does this pile have to be?"

To Alberto Brodesco, this is the evidence of a (scientific) rationality gone awry: "Faced with mountains of dollars the complete irrationality of his actions is apparently evident even to Walter. Other than being loads of money it is a symbol of excess, a manifest revelation of Walter White's ultimate hubris".²³ The series has been rightfully read according to a tragic paradigm. Within the framework of such a reading, the tragedy is Walt's, first and foremost, and the world around him is little more than a backdrop to the fateful escalation of his mad hubris. However, this – totally plausible – reading, I contend, obscures in more than one respect the sociohistorical context wherein (t)his tragedy takes place. Our historical time, in which neoliberalism appears to be the increasingly unquestioned socioeconomic status quo, has invented its own historically specific ways of dealing with its own historically produced mess. Neoliberal mess is formed by the "side effects" that accompany the acts of various subjects – individual or collective. In a world, using Christian Moraru's terms, of "cosmodernist"²⁴ interconnection, each subject's actions produce "leftovers", like waste in an ecosystem; such waste can impact a very broad environment, thus evoking the problem of scale and the proportions of one's action range, and/or range of responsibility. Representations of the impact of each subject's actions can assume very dark tones if paired with the "sudden failures" of the institution(s) of liberal democracy, i.e. with the emergence and instantiation of repeated "states of exception" (to paraphrase Agamben again) at the heart of the current political constitutions. Neoliberal precariousness is often (darkly) revealed in the establishment of a number of para-sites that interrogate the law – once again, unveiling the "state of exception" at its core.²⁵ To use Judith Butler's terms, in neoliberalism, life itself is precarious, and some lives are

²³ Brodesco, "Heisenberg", 59.

²⁴ This idea is elaborated in Christian Moraru, *Cosmodernism: American Narrative, Late Globalization, and the New Cultural Imaginary* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2011).

²⁵ The "state of exception" which is established when the (ordinary) law is suspended – whose establishment unveils, once again, the founding relationship between law and violence – is discussed by Agamben in *Stato di eccezione* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2003).

constructed, against others, as “not worth” living.²⁶ When speaking to a fellow cancer patient, as we have seen, Walt expresses his attachment to life; it is a life, though, that has removed from itself any sense of vulnerability intended as empathy, experiencing vulnerability only as the limit to a personal range of action.

²⁶ See Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004).

Which lives are not worth living in *Breaking Bad*? In Season Two (Episode Six, “Peekaboo”, 12 Apr 2009), we are offered a foray in the world of consumers: we follow Jesse into the house of a meth-addicted couple. This house, where they live with a little boy, is messy to say the least: it looks like a dumpster. Other (few) scenes reveal the filthy spaces inhabited by drug addicts and/or those devoted to drug consumption. At the beginning of Season Three, for instance, Walt finds Jesse hidden in a “den” with a number of addicts whose bodies and appearance blatantly display their addiction. The permeable boundary between the orderly surface of things and the dirty, messy, unruly underworld is differently traversed and traversable, depending on the actors involved. There are different ways to deal with mess, and different ways and reasons for sully – or refusing to sully – one’s hands. After gruesomely slicing Victor’s throat in “Box Cutter”, Gus literally leaves his mess to be cleaned up by Walt and Jesse, with the humiliating line: “What are you waiting for? Get back to work”. In Season Four, Episode Six (“Cornered”, 21 Aug 2011), to spite Gus, Walt refuses to clean the lab without Jesse’s help, and pays instead three ladies – immigrants, probably illegal – working in the Lavandería Brillante, despite the fact that he is clearly putting them in the position of trespassing, seeing what they are not supposed to see. The unfortunate ladies are picked up by Tyrus (Ray Campbell), Gus’s new henchman, and nothing is known of them afterwards.

For Bowman, “[t]he point of inflection between Walt’s civilized and frontier selves is his glorification of autonomy”.²⁷ More than one scholar has written on *Breaking Bad* as speaking to a number of concerns typical of neoliberalism.²⁸ Walt’s body, and the relationship between his body and his psyche (and will), are the pivot of *Breaking Bad* as a neoliberal fantasy. At the beginning of the series, Walt is immediately presented as a man struggling to make the ends meet: he has a poorly paid job as a high school chemistry teacher and is forced to moonlight as the employee of a car wash in order to support his family. This strained work condition is immediately set off against the unfulfilled promises of his own potential. Against this background, Walt’s enterprise as a meth producer and, finally, as a wealthy and dangerous drug kingpin, is the late-coming fulfilment of his potential as a self-made man, a homo oeconomicus master of his own destiny.²⁹ The fact that this venture results in breaking the law is merely accidental, because legal and illegal enterprises form, so to speak, a continuum of alternate realities. In David P. Pierson’s terms:

²⁷ Bowman, “Criminal Elements”.

²⁸ See David P. Pierson, “Breaking Neoliberal? Contemporary Neoliberal Discourses and Policies in AMC’s *Breaking Bad*”, in Pierson, ed., *Breaking Bad: Critical Essays*, 15-31; also see Jeffrey R. Di Leo, “Flies in the Marketplace: Nietzsche and Neoliberalism in *Breaking Bad*”, in Blevins and Wood, eds., *The Methods of Breaking Bad*.

²⁹ Patriarchy and Masculinity in *Breaking Bad* have been discussed in: Jason Landrum, “‘Say My Name’: The Fantasy of Liberated Masculinity”, in Blevins and Wood, eds., *The Methods of Breaking Bad*; and in Brian Faucette, “Taking Control: Male Angst and the Re-Emergence of Hegemonic Masculinity in *Breaking Bad*”, in Pierson, ed., *Breaking Bad: Critical Essays*, 73-86.

Neo-liberalism seeks to construct practical subjects whose moral quality consists of their ability to rationally assess the costs and benefits of any particular action

among alternative acts. Neo-liberalism promotes individuals to conceive of themselves as entrepreneurs in every facet of their lives.... Within this scenario, crime is just another activity among many to choose from and a criminal entrepreneur can be seen as a person who invests his human capital to produce a surplus-value of capital to partake in his or her personal interests.³⁰

³⁰ Pierson, "Breaking Neoliberal?", 22.

Cancer as embodied mess also highlights another type of continuum: the vicious cycle between unaffordable health care and the spread of a vulnerability that threatens society as a whole, despite the denial of those who feel untouched by the issue. In Izzo's terms, "capitalist individualism [in *Breaking Bad*] literally presents itself as a *pharmakon* – simultaneously a poison (the impossibility of paying for treatment counting only on the family's finances) and a cure (a criminal enterprise for a solution)".³¹

³¹ Izzo, "Some Sort of Need for Biblical Atonement", 326; my translation.

I would suggest that the whole series can be read as a fantasy, whose functioning may be summed up as follows: (social) order and chaos are revealed to be a continuum, and we, the series' audience, can fantasize moving in and out of such spaces, alternate realities that are actually contiguous to each other, as Walt ends up doing. This movement makes bearable a life of eroding privilege that is increasingly perceived as suffocating. The fantasy of such a movement both questions and reconfirms not only the separation of licit and illicit spaces, but also the increasingly fluid structure of social inequality that makes such fantasy accessible to some and inaccessible to others. As noted by Bowman:

Not only Walt and Jesse but the series as a whole seems to regard with contempt the people who actually use the chemical product of their labors, casualties of a form of social breakdown increasingly common in civilized society. Walt and Jesse's meth sales thrive on account of the weaknesses of those who have dropped out of that society and become lesser criminals than themselves.³²

³² Bowman, "Criminal Elements".

In "Cruel Optimism", Lauren Berlant analyzes three (fictive) "scenes" in which characters experiencing different forms of marginalization are faced with the possibility of changing their lives, but "shifts in the affective atmosphere are not equal to changing the world. They are, here, only pieces of an argument about the centrality of optimistic fantasy to reproducing and surviving in zones of

³³ Berlant, "Cruel Optimism", 35.

compromised ordinariness".³³ One of the scenes described is taken from "Exchange Value", a short story by Charles R. Johnson: two young brothers, minor criminals, break into the house of a neighbor, and unexpectedly discover a hoard of various items and, stacked amongst those, a huge sum of money. The sheer discrepancy between the new, possible, future scenarios opened up by this discovery and the habitus of their unprivileged lives is untenable to the point that the two take two disastrous, psychotic courses: one spends compulsorily and unhappily, while the other becomes a paranoid, self-enclosed hoarder.³⁴ A moment of suspension on the verge of the future can be ultimately self-defeating if it is not

³⁴ Ibid., 27-31.

accompanied by a change in the socioeconomic order of things. In all likelihood, Walt's promise of privilege has been eroding for a long time when the series opens: the increasing cost of living, attacks perpetrated to the welfare, lack of funding in public education, and the inequality inherent in an insurance-based healthcare system make life less and less liveable for him and his family, trapping them on the verge of an existence deprived of tranquillity, as members of an increasingly impoverished middle class. Taking the cue from Berlant and Žižek, I would suggest that *Breaking Bad* explores a fantasy that both suspends and immediately reactivates the reproduction of reality-as-we-know-it. Such a fantasy (momentarily) exorcises the deep socioeconomic fear of becoming like the society dropouts that are, nonetheless, closer than at first sight, because they are also caught in the violent maelstrom of the market:

DECLAN: I need you to listen to me. We're not gonna give up this deal to be your errand boys, do you understand? For what? To watch a bunch of junkies get a better high?

WALT: A better high means customers pay more. A higher purity means a greater yield. That's 130 million dollars of profit that isn't being pissed away by some substandard cook ("Say My Name", Season Five, Part One, Episode Seven, 26 Aug 2012).³⁵

To sum up, fantasy is a mirror that both connects and separates privilege and its erosion: it only delays the fulfilment of the threat of sliding out of privilege – and of life – once and for all. The mirror, once traversed in reality, cannot be traversed in the opposite direction. Can one fool time and death and the inevitability of loss by the sheer drive of one's intentions? Embodied in Walt's parable, *Breaking Bad* emphatically provides "no" as an answer, but simultaneously stretches that space of suspension to its utmost possibilities, before letting go and finally, so to speak, fading to black.

³⁵ Gale's perspective is, by contrast, grounded in a belief in the ultimate responsibility of all "consenting adults [who] want what they want. And if I'm not supplying it, they'll get it from someone else. At least with me they get exactly what they pay for — no added toxins or adulterants" ("Sunset", Season Three, Episode Six, 25 Apr 2010). According to this view, meth production is merely the supply to a legitimate demand of the market, despite the tautology involved ("[they] want what they want"). Jesse is the problematic element here: as both meth cook and consumer, and as an extremely wavering character, he finds himself, alternatively, on both sides of this divide.