

Montage Sequences, Diegetic Music and Narcotics in Vince Gilligan's *Breaking Bad*

A. Aiswarya Ramakrishna Pillai, P.V. Ramanathan



Abstract: *Vince Gilligan's "Breaking Bad" is a neo-Western television crime drama series that was broadcasted on AMC (American pay television channel). Crime Films can be comprehended as a cinematic genre that was inaugurated by crime fiction in literature. The crime film is a complex and variegated object of study. Unlike the other existing genres, "crime film" is not defined as a cinematographic genre. This genre is characterized by stories where there is an impending crime, in some cases the crime would have already taken place and is followed by the consequences. The advancement in technology especially the invention of VCR, DVD and many such affordable machines have made viewing television easy and affordable, which in turn paved the way for the success of critically acclaimed serials such as "Breaking Bad" to embrace the success it deserved. The arrival of large screens and quality visuals largely contributed to an increase in viewership and audience. "Breaking Bad" was recognized for its complex and violent plot structure, where in the protagonist, Walter White is an antihero who is diagnosed with cancer. The disease aids as a catalyst to bring out the passive demon and narcissist within him and this in turn wrecks his familial and professional life. The present paper proposes to explore how advancement in technology and the use of music successfully brings out the narcissistic tendencies in Walter White's character.*

Keywords: *Crime Film, television series, metamorphosis, music, Walter White*

I. INTRODUCTION

Television serials are a form of art where several episodes of a particular storyline are presented in quick succession. The deciding factor of such productions and telecast solely depends on the taste of the consumers. One can say that, more often than not, the focus is less on the quality of the content and more on the needs of the consumers. Dwight MacDonald eloquently verbalizes his trepidation that such art, "threatens high culture by its sheer pervasiveness, its brutal overwhelming quantity" (4). The length of some of these television soaps often span a decade due to mass production of episodes giving little or no care for the quality of what they intend to present before the anticipating consumers. John Corner declares, "The various forms of criticism have a long tradition of wrangles over quality,

but few bodies of writing can rival that on television in regularly seeing not only individual works but, often, the medium itself as deserving of negative judgment" (364). The *Breaking Bad* series is a substantial example of quality television.

In the present generation Netflix, Hotstar, Amazon Prime and Hulu subscriptions very easily duplicate the cinematic experience and are of a huge financial advantage. The advancement in camera works, aesthetics, music, subtitle and several other graphical representations offered serials like *Breaking Bad* a precedence, due to the use of panoramic camera angles, thrilling shots from various angles and surreal settings, not employed previously. Rebecca Williams eloquently details how the creation of technical devices such as that of DVD and Blue-ray allocates a huge freedom that allows the viewer to enjoy the entire series in a single sitting or view it multiple times taking intervals and observing how "ontological security can be felt differently when watching a series unfold or when watching via box sets" (152). Therefore it can be rightfully stated that it is essentially due to advancements in technology that cinematic experience has become affordable, easily accessible and aesthetically appealing.

II. SUMMARY OF BREAKING BAD

Breaking Bad opens with Walter H. White, the protagonist, a high school chemistry teacher, diagnosed with stage-3 lung cancer. Proximity to death compels him to divulge in creating and distributing methamphetamine, produced in its purest form. He is a middle-aged man with a son and a pregnant wife and was financially not so stable. What begins as a means to create some extra money for the family and his treatment, later turns into his most satisfying passion. The plot presents Walter's character, drastically altering, from a meek school teacher to a treacherous and ruthless drug dealer. A former student, Jesse Pinkman, tempted by Walt, joins and assists him in his illegal production of methamphetamine and together they create a meth lab in a recreational vehicle. Walter acquires the name Heisenberg as he gradually develops into a scar-faced drug dealer and 'blue sky' becomes his trademark drug. Walter's wife Skyler is a homemaker and a wonderful woman who is pregnant with their second child and Walter Junior is Walter's only son who is depicted as a wonderful young boy who loves his family and endures a disability. Skyler's brother-in-law, Hank Schrader is a dedicated and honest DEA agent. In the second season, Jesse's friends who work as drug dealers prove unsafe and Walter entrusts Saul Goodman with the task of connecting them to Gus Fring, the owner of Los Pollos, also a ruthless and wretched drug dealer.

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In the third season, Jesse dates his neighbor Jane who dies as a consequence of Walter's error in judgment. Gus opens a meth lab for Walter and offers him an assistant but Walter preferred Jesse over Gus's assistant, Gale and later instructs Jesse to kill him. Skyler who finally learns about her husband's illegal activities is shattered and hopes for a divorce from him. Meanwhile Jesse is caught by Hank and repeatedly questioned although he receives no input regarding his main target, the unknown meth king operating right under his nose. Two assassins attempt to murder Hank but he escapes although paralyzed. In the fourth season Gus attempts to create a rift between Jesse and Walter but Walter manages to convince Jesse into murdering Gus. Walter is caught in the fifth and final season, and is forced to divulge all his secrets to Skyler, who accepts her fate and launders his money, and to Hank who successfully catches the unknown meth king. The entire family is shattered on account of Walter's actions and he still continues to cook meth, not to help his family financially, but for himself.

III. MUSIC IN BREAKING BAD

Thomas Golubic, the executive music producer, has presented a wide range of international music in *Breaking Bad*, such as Ana Tijoux (French), The Black Seeds (New Zealand), Rodrigo y Gabriela (Mexican), Moises Simons (Cuban), Badr-Ali-Khan (Pakistani). Providing an international astringency delineates Walter's narrow mindedness as an individual. The selections of songs also offer a chronicle that allows the viewers to look through and beyond Walt's narcissistic tendencies. It is essentially an understanding of Walter's marginalization and victimization, although his sufferings and experience tell us that he is not as marginalized or ostracized as he thinks.

Ana Tijoux's "1977" is an album in which she talks about how she left other forms of singing which she pursued earlier in order to concentrate more on rap music. The song is highly autobiographical in nature and explores serious themes that she wrote based on her own experiences. The inclusion of this song in *Breaking Bad*, reflects Walter's choice to do what he was passionate about, by leaving behind a life that he was forced to live. "One By One" is a song by "The Black Seeds", where the singer is highly motivated and wants to pursue his dreams. The narrator is fearless and wants to face all his challenges on by one. The lyrics depict Walter's inner calling and his readiness to become fearless like TuKo and Gus Fring.

The series conclusion presents Walter playing a 1959 music by Marty Robbins, "El Paso," which is a song narrating the story of a cowboy, who falls in love with Feleena, a Mexican girl. The gunslinger is forced to be on the run because he has to fight another cowboy to win her heart:

I challenged his right hand for the love of his maide
Down went his hand for the gun that he wore
My challenge was answered in less than a heartbeat
The handsome young stranger lay dead on the floor
(Robbins, 1957)

The song "El Paso" reflects Walter's inner craving to prove his masculinity to his wife and the world. He constantly was let down by fate. He was smarter than an average man of his age, yet he was living a boring monotonous life. Both in the song and in *Breaking Bad* the lovers seem to depict an evil and chauvinistic approach towards their lovers. Walter is feels abjectly emasculated by Skyler and his transformation

in to Heisenberg offers him an outlet to navigate his inner masculinity. He considers his death as a meth king is better than the cancer killing him, because that way he dies the death of a hero not a coward or an ordinary individual.

IV. EXPLORING THE ELEMENTS OF NARCOTICS AND NARCISSIM IN BREAKING BAD

From being an ordinary middle-class high school chemistry teacher to becoming one the largest and most well-desired drug producer and dealer, the central character Walter White undergoes tremendous transformations as an individual and in the dynamics of his relationships to his family members. The present paper is an attempt to establish the fact that all the trials and tribulations that the White family endures is due to the protagonist, an antihero who also turns out to be a narcissist. Thus, the theory of Narcissism can be applied fruitfully for a study of the character of Walter and the gradual readjustments that happen in his behavioral pattern which ultimately affects decisively his rapport with all in his circle.

Narcissism is the quest for regalement and satisfaction from vainglorious self admiration of one's own romanticized self image and traits. This triggers off several traits in the person including self-glorification, arrogance and egocentricity. The origin of the term can be found in the myth of *Narcissus* in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, in which the character Narcissus, deeply in love with his own image, bemoans his inability to attain his object of love and eventually dies. Narcissism has been a recurring discourse for research papers popularized by Freud's 'On Narcissism: An Introduction' (1914). Narcissists manifest an array of irritating behaviors and feelings such as impulsiveness, short temper, aloofness, depression, anxiety, loneliness and identity crises.

Walter White and his friend Elliott Schwarts founded Gray Matter Technologies in their early days when Walter was dating his lab assistant Gretchen. Gretchen belonged to a wealthy family and this made Walt feel inferior, eventually resulting in him breaking off the relationship, leaving the company and Gretchen marrying Elliott instead, and together they successfully conducted the business. Walter essentially felt that Gray Matter Technologies was his intellectual property and that Elliott and his wife were making a success out of his creation. It was nothing but Walter's low self esteem that resulted in him abandoning Gretchen, the company and settling down as a high school teacher, a job that provided him no satisfaction as it was way below his intellectual capacity. This, we find, was the primary consequence of his psychic disorder.

After his marriage to Skyler, a sensible and self-made woman, Walter settles for an ordinary life enduring bouts of self-deprecation, self-loathing and monotony. It is at this juncture he is diagnosed with stage-3 cancer and his low-self esteem leads to bouts of aggression, moral decline and an imminent need to make more money to ensure that his family won't be ruined even if he fails to survive cancer.

Narcissism can be conceptualized as one's capacity to maintain a relatively positive self-image through a variety of self-, affect- and field- regulatory processes,

and it underlies individual's need for validation and affirmation as well as the motivation to overtly and covertly seek out self-enhancement experiences from the social environment. (Pincus et al. 2009)

On his fiftieth birthday party, as everyone watches the television news, Walter is amused by seeing a group of drug dealers caught by the police with piles of money that he has never seen before in his life even in movies. He asks Hank, "That's got to be unusual, right? That kind of cash?" ("Pilot"). This is a turning point in the plot as Walter realizes that the only way to make quick money is by doing something illegal and decides to produce methamphetamine, making Jesse Pinkman as his assistant in order to make some money for the family, forgetting the illegality of his actions. Together they produce and sell drugs and build their own meth empire. It is a voyage down into hell, full of errors and repeated failures but nothing interrupts Walter's motivations as he finally enjoys the freedom and the power he had always wanted to experience and exercise in life. In the meth business he is the king and supreme authority and nobody not even Jesse can surpass him. Everything is controlled and maneuvered by Walt.

All individuals have normal narcissistic needs and motives (Kohut 1977, Stone 1998); however, pathologically narcissistic individuals appear particularly troubled when faced with disappointments and threats to their positive self image. Since no one is perfect and the world is constantly providing obstacles and challenges to desired outcomes, pathological narcissism involves significant regulatory deficits and maladaptive strategies to cope with disappointments and threats to a positive self- image. (Horowitz 2009; Kernberg 1998, 2009; Ornstein 2009; Ronningstam 2005b)

Cooking meth opened new gates to acquire easy money, but most importantly it offered him the opportunity to make full use of his full potential as a talented chemist. It was the Elliott and Gretchen episode that had made deep marks in him and set in motion a huge transformation in his character: "Chemistry is the study of matter, but I prefer to see as the study of change" ("Pilot"). A suspicious Skyler confronts Jesse and threatens him to stop selling drugs to her husband. Walter lies about his business by saying that he began to smoke marijuana, given to him by a former student, and he manages to keep his disease a secret for as long as he could. When he finally discloses the truth to her, she agrees to launder his money, even though the entire family goes through a rough patch. The journey of his life did present him with many occasions when he could easily have given up the dangerous and disgusting business to swing back to a normal life. But he almost disdained them all, as it was now much more than just making money. It had become his most satisfying privilege, and a greatly fulfilling passion. As for Walter Junior, Walter's seventeen year old son, his father's cancer and the family discord affect him adversely. Yet he manages to comfort both his parents and stands up for each of them when the situation demands. Although physically disabled, he was a level headed boy who wanted the best for his family and loved his baby sister Holly in a heartfelt way. Despite having a wonderfully supportive family, Walter continues to pursue his passion, gradually becoming the cause of several ruthless deaths remorselessly. Violence and murder could move him no more. Tangey and Fischer rightly dictate,

Emotions such as shame, guilt, pride and embarrassment are founded on social relationships, in which people not only interact but evaluate and judge themselves and each other. Self conscious emotions (such as pride) are built on reciprocal evaluation and judgment. (4)

When Skyler persuades him to report everything to the police and surrender in order to be safe, Walter's response is emphatic, "You clearly don't know who you're talking to, so let me clue you in," he shouted back at her. "I am not in danger, Skyler. I *am* the danger! A guy opens his door and gets shot and you think that of me? No. I am the one who knocks!" ("Cornered"). The 'need to provide for the family' eventually becomes a mere excuse for Walter to continue cooking meth and any confusion or repentance is easily clouded by Gus Fring's smart manipulation,

Walter White: I have made a series of very bad decisions and I cannot make another one.

Gus Fring: Why did you make these decisions?

Walter White: For the good of my family.

Gus Fring: Then they weren't bad decisions. What does a man do, Walter? A man provides for his family. ("Mas")

V. DISCUSSION

Excessive pride, ego and the intensifying narcissism experienced by Walter, transform him into a figure castigated by fate and providence. Walter White, the high school teacher, who in the "Pilot" episode, attempts to hide from his students, becomes Heisenberg by the end of the series, "Now: say my name! {'Heisenberg', says the man} You're goddam right" ("Say My Name"). This reference from the fifth season elaborates Walter's growing pride (hubris) and a desperate need to prove himself and his talent. Lewis opines that hubris is a "transient but addictive emotion"(10) where the individual himself would "seek out and invent situations likely to repeat this emotional state"(10). This very pride instructs him to murder Gale, as he simply could not tolerate sharing credit for his cooking skills and intellectual property. The character Mike (works for Gus Fring) makes a reference to Walter's false ego and states that it alone is the source of all his issues;

We had a good thing, you stupid son of a bitch, we had Fring(...) You could have shut your mouth and cooked and made as much money as you would have ever needed. But no, you just had to blow it up! You and your pride and your ego, you just had to be the man! If you'd done your job, known your place, we'd all be fine right now. ("Say My Name")

Pride and guilt are the two dominant emotions that cloud Walter's relationship with his wife and son. Initially he is overcome by shame and fears judgment. He lies in order to avoid any sort of confrontation of his reprehensible actions. The guilt and shame later transform into pride, a dominant emotion throughout the later seasons. Vince Gilligan himself states that deception is his talent: "Walt's superpower is that of being the biggest liar in the world. There is no better liar in the world of Breaking Bad and the person that he is most capable of deceiving is in fact himself"(En las Entranas, 52). By the end of the show, Walter becomes a remorseless and irreproachable individual, who possessed unquestionable power and his own value constructs.

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Walter's final interaction with Skyler in season five depicts his intentions and for the first time he opens up to his wife about exactly why he did what he did and how he felt about it:

Walter White: Skyler, all the things that I did, you need to understand...

Skyler White: If I have to hear, one more time, that you did this for the family...

Walter White: I did it for me. I liked it. I was good at it and I was really... I was alive. ("Felina")

VI. CONCLUSION

Gilligan's *Breaking Bad* is unique, thrilling and captivating. It offers quality content, successfully showcasing Walter's inward transformation and how his quest for identity ends in his own death. The advancement in technology has a major role in allowing people to enjoy shows like *Breaking Bad* on a larger screen with quality graphics that provide a unique visual treat to the audience. Music plays a striking role in reflecting the inner persona of the characters and making the situations more comprehensible without employing dialogues. *Breaking Bad* transgresses the television protocol by dethroning the conventional ideas of a moralistic hero and presenting a challenging, self loving, power greedy, narcissistic antihero as the protagonist.

"Jesse, you asked me once, if I was in the meth business or the money business. Neither. I'm in the Empire Business" ("Buyout"). These words spoken by Walter to Jesse, sum up his intentions and his moral disdain and the ultimate revelation that a destroyed family life, the pain he endured or the immense and uncountable wealth he has amassed is going to stop him from doing what he enjoys. His brother-in-law had caught him and surrendering was no more an option. His cancer which had temporarily subsided had also returned towards the end of the story. The end of Heisenberg and Walter White, indirectly, was inevitable. But the return of his disease, fear of writhing in pain or death itself could not kill the passion brewing inside the man. He lived a narcissistic life with absolutely no reverence for law; in total disregard for the sanctity of being faithful in a marriage; an of oblivion towards his duties as a father- dominated by his pride and a drug more powerful than the one he produced: the arrogance that he is above all the laws.

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