TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, fictional television has been dominated by serials focusing on anti-hero protagonists who are unsympathetic and immoral. *The Sopranos*' (1999-2007) Tony was perhaps the first main character in a television series that viewers truly loved to hate. Being a mob boss, he was a horrific villain, but one that viewers nevertheless enjoyed rooting for. Many other anti-heroes have followed in his footsteps since, such as the mean, manipulating and asocial doctor Gregory House in *House* (2004-2012), and the pot-dealing housewife Nancy in *Weeds* (2005-2012), as well as the unsympathetic protagonists of *Californication* and *Mad Men* (both from 2007 and ongoing), who both struggle with having real relationships with other people, their families included. *Boardwalk Empire* (2010-) features perhaps a more 'classic' gangster anti-hero, who is willing to kill whoever it takes to stay in his position, whereas *Dexter* (2006-) is centred around a serial killer, whom viewers enjoy cheering on as he finds his next victim amongst other serial killers.
Within this 'trend' of television serials, the successful *Breaking Bad* (2008-) is undoubtedly one of the frontrunners centred around Walter White, chemistry high school teacher turned meth-amphetamine producer, who, through the five (ongoing at time of writing) seasons of the serial, breaks increasingly bad as he commits more and more awful acts, including murder, yet while still managing to keep the viewer 'on his team'.

It is this demand for bad guys that has inspired this Master thesis, in which I wish to analyse how viewers respond emotionally to a character such as Walter, who undergoes an increasingly immoral transformation. In order to carry out this analysis, I will examine the character of Walter using the cognitive film theory by professor Murray Smith as his 'Structure of Sympathy' deal with how viewers are motivated to feel empathy for and sympathise with characters.

As a result, the research question for this thesis becomes as follows:

Why do viewers continue to root for a protagonist who, as the show progresses, grows increasingly unsympathetic, and how it possible to become emotionally engaged with such character?

THEORY

Responding emotionally to characters in films is most commonly described using the term 'identification': '*I enjoyed the film because I identified with the main character*'. We also often talk about 'empathy' - being able to put oneself in another's position. This 'everyday concept' of identification can be referred to as the 'folk model' or 'folk psychology' (Smith 1995, 2): The technique(s) we use every day to make sense of our own as well as other people's behaviour. Another classic way of analysing characters in literature is to use E. M. Forster's distinction between 'flat' or 'round' characters. Where a flat character is two-dimensional and unchangeable, a round character encompasses more complex and dynamic characters, which the viewer is naturally more likely to respond emotionally to (Abrams 2005, 33).

However, when talking about film and television, how often can we really say that we truly identified with a character, and how often will we agree with each other? And is it really *necessary* for the viewer to be able to identify with a character in order to become emotionally involved with him/her? Moreover, what about those films whose protagonists have unethical goals and use questionable methods to achieve them? Few viewers will identify with the psychopathic Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho*, but that obviously does not mean that we do not find the character interesting and compelling.
I thus find these approaches much too simple and inadequate especially since the kind of morally complex characters that this thesis focusses on are particularly difficult to fit into boxes of good or bad, and the viewer will undoubtedly find it problematic to identify with them. For example, in *Dexter*, the protagonist is a sociopathic serial killer, but one who only murders other serial killers, which leads the viewer to justify the bad in Dexter's character while (hopefully) being utterly unable to identify with him. As we will learn in the analysis chapter, *Breaking Bad*'s Walter White likewise challenges the viewer's perception of good and bad, resulting in the viewer supporting a character that he/she ought not to.
Such complex characters are exactly what makes television such an interesting topic to study, and thus I find it important to examine how the viewer understands such characters and responds to them emotionally, which leads me to make use of cognitive film theory.

According to cognitive film theory, the viewer perceives and makes sense of a film and its narrative similarly to how he/she would of real life. Characters are assumed to have feelings and personalities just like real people, and the fictional world functions like the real world. However, this is not to be mixed up with the 'illusion of reality' where the viewer, in the viewing situation, is thought to experience the fictional world as real. The viewer is well aware that the narrative is fiction, and that the fictional world is separated from reality. We

commonly talk about how unlikely situations *'only happen in films'*, but this awareness does not prevent us from responding emotionally.

CHARACTER ENGAGEMENT

According to Murray Smith, the viewer experiences feelings of *engagement* and not necessarily *identification* towards characters in films. More often than not, it will be difficult to feel the *same* as the fictional characters, however feeling *with* the characters is much more feasible. Engagement is encouraged when a character meets the viewer's expectations of a realistic person with human traits, which naturally depends on both the actor's performance and the direction, but also relies heavily on the narrative. This distinction between identification and engagement can also be termed central and acentral imagining. Even though Smith's main theory, the *structure of sympathy*, is an acentral structure, Smith doesn't completely reject central imagining - or *empathy*, as he also terms it - but rather suggests an interaction between the two processes: Acentral imagining calls for some of the "comprehension mechanisms" (Smith 1995, 82) of central imagining, and central imagining likewise "contains and draws upon acentral imagining" (ibid., 81).

EMPATHY - CENTRAL IMAGINING

Empathy refers to situations where the viewer experiences a direct and unconditional simulation of or response to the character's feelings, while not necessarily also sharing the character's values, beliefs or goals (ibid., 96). Furthermore, this central imagining can be sub-categorised into voluntary and involuntary mechanisms.

'Emotional simulation' is voluntary, and involves instances where the viewer projects him-/herself into a character's situation and thus responds emotionally to the *thought* of the character in the particular situation, as opposed to believing he/she in fact *is in* that situation (ibid., 79). For example, when Walter in the pilot episode of *Breaking Bad* is diagnosed with lung cancer and told he only has a few years left to live in, the viewer puts him-herself in his situation, imagining what emotions Walter might be going through. Moreover, emotional simulation aids the viewer in making sense of a character's behaviour when an explanation for such does exist (ibid., 97), such as in the opening sequence of *Breaking* Bad*'s* pilot episode, where the viewer is thrown *in media res* and finds it difficult to make sense of what

is going on. The viewer thus hypothesises as to the reasons for Walter behaving as he does: Is he being chased? Is he under the influence of alcohol or drugs?
Within television serials, viewers are often reminded of their past feelings of empathy in previous episodes through starting new episodes with recaps, which, however, can also withholding certain memories and thus manipulate viewers to assume a certain approach to characters. Thus, the finale of *Breaking Bad*'s fourth season begins with a "previously on *Breaking Bad*"-sequence, in which Jesse, a supporting character, witnesses drug kingpin Gustavo Fring visit his old enemy, Hector Salamanca, at the nursing home where he lives due to being paralysed, to tauntingly tell him: *"All dead. As is your grandson"*. The viewer is instantly reminded of the maliciousness of Fring's character re-establishing him as the antagonist. The previous scene of course proves to be relevant to the episode, but what the recap does not include is another previous situation where Walter is the bad guy as he pressures Jesse into killing one of Fring's employees, the talented chemist Gale, because he poses a threat to Walter's superiority within meth production.

'Affective mimicry', on the other hand, is the involuntary " registering and reflexive simulation of the emotion of another person via facial and bodily cues" (ibid., 99), meaning that the viewer, when faced with a character showing strong emotions, such as unhappily crying or screaming in pain, experiences a reflexive reaction, such a choking up or tensing one's muscles. Another way a viewer will experience involuntary central imagining is through autonomic reactions, for instance being startled by a loud noise, resulting in an identical emotion as the character, without the feeling originating from sympathy.

STRUCTURE OF SYMPATHY - ACENTRAL IMAGINING

The structure of sympathy is the more extensive category, and consists of three 'levels' of the viewer's engagement in a character, elicited through the narrative; recognition, alignment and allegiance. There is, in other words, a dynamic relationship between the viewer and these levels: The more insight we gain into the character, and his/hers motivations, opinions and moral concepts, the more interest we take in him/her. Character engagement is crucial to television serials, since the span of the narrative is much longer than in films, and thus calls for characters compelling enough to make viewers return each week. Moreover, narration plays an essential part in terms of guiding the viewer response as the "ultimate organizer" (ibid., 75), which can work to both avert the viewer from engaging in a character through withholding information about him/her, as well as encourage engagement through

emphasising certain aspects of a character to make him/her more favourable than other characters.

Recognition is the basic level of the structure where the viewer, based on the character's appearance, constructs an image of the character as a "continuous whole" (ibid., 83). Despite being aware of the fact that a character is a 'device' in a narrative, the viewer nonetheless assumes that characters posses 'personalities' similar to those of real persons. This 'blurring' of fiction and reality is important to any narrative as it facilitates character engagement.

Alignment is the next level of engagement, and here, the viewer gains deeper access to the character's actions, feelings and what they know (ibid.). This knowledge about the character forms the basis for developing feelings of sympathy, but does not necessarily lead to it, since alignment simply causes an *understanding* of the character. Alignment consists of two interconnected sub-categories, *spatio-temporal attachment* and *subjective access*, the former of which refers to how the narrative may focus on the actions of a single or more characters. Subjective access, on the other hand, permits access to a character's thoughts and feelings - their subjectivity. The level of access may vary from character to character, but is especially important in television serials, where the viewer through the time spent with a character over the course of the serial establishes a 'relationship' with and an understanding of the character to the point where the viewer is often able to 'guess' what the character is thinking only by looking at his/her facial expression. 'Displaying' subjective access, however, can prove difficult unless the character narrates over the narrative, as is the case in *Dexter* where Dexter, in a voice-over, tells the viewer about his thoughts. This is of course a clever way of initiating the viewer into a character's subjectivity, but the strategy can often come across as forced, especially if describing something the viewer is able to understand without its presence, which in turn reminds the viewer of the fictional aspect of what he/she is watching. Another way of conveying a character's inner thoughts is through their appearance, which naturally becomes very reliant on the performance of the actor, as well as through dialogue with other characters. The subjective access is important to the last level of engagement, *allegiance*, where a moral evaluation of a character is conducted based on the viewer's emotional response to the character. The viewer performs this moral judgement based on the aligned character's personality, emotions and actions within the narrative context, while being influenced by the narrative, iconography (e.g. the character's appearance, way of speaking) and even music (ibid., 84). A viewer can naturally forge allegiance with several characters within a narrative, and these are then structured, meaning that some characters are favoured over others.

FILM VS. TELEVISION

In general, television fictions includes two types of shows within several different genres (drama and comedy are the most common): The episodic show and the serial. The 'self-contained' episodic show is the simplest structure, in which each episode consists of a storyline that is concluded (Jones 2011). Of course the episodic show often also contains an overall narrative, but one that develops relatively slowly and thus do not demand that viewers watch all episodes. Sitcoms are good examples of episodic shows, such as *Friends* (1994-2004) where each episode centres around typically one to three storylines that are wrapped up during the 22-minute long episode. This structure makes it possible for any viewer to 'jump in' at any time in the show and still be able to understand, and, even more importantly, enjoy an episode. The narrative structure of the serial is decidedly different in that each episode "denies closure" (ibid.) and instead contributes to an ongoing 'series narrative' that span over the duration of a season or the entire series. Nevertheless, the serial still has some story-lines that reach closure at any time in the series, but these always function to further the macro narrative. As Mike Jones suggests, the two can also be combined to include 'micro-macro' and 'tiered' serials, where the series has an ongoing macro narrative, while each episode still contains a self-contained micro-narrative (ibid.). A good example of a series that employ the macro-micro structure is *House* (2004-2012), in which each episode contains a 'mystery' in the form of a sick patient who by the end of the episode is diagnosed (although not always cured). Each episode works in combination with, and thus contributes to, a macro-narrative that reaches a conclusion at some point in the series and is often centred around romances between characters.

Since Smith's theory was developed with film analysis in mind, and not analysis of television, I find it useful to hold the two up against each other, even though using film theory when examining serial television should not pose any significant problems, as they are merely two different formats under the same media category, i.e. audiovisual fictions. Both also share the same objective, namely to tell a story, and utilise the same devices to do so. Moreover, the film industry appears to be affected by the popularity and prestige attached to today's television serials, attracting already established film actors, screenwriters, directors and producers to the television media. Likewise, actors who gained their success from television are often cast in cinema productions. In addition, the two formats have developed into being increasingly similar, s is apparent through the emergence of increasingly many films with narratives that span over several films; so-called 'trilogies' and 'sagas' - or perhaps 'film serials'. Serials are also popular within literature, mainly within the fantasy genre, with book

sagas such as the *Twilight Saga, A Song of Ice and Fire,* and *the Hunger Games*, which furthermore have all been remade into either film or television serials.

With the increase in popularity of television serials in recent years, we see more and more grand productions with enormous budgets and more experimental, provocative, and innovative narratives. This new 'Golden Age' of of television fiction started around the turn of the century with quality productions by the cable network HBO such as *Sopranos* (1999-2007), *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005) and *The Wire* (2004-2008), to name a few. The network's slogan "It's not TV, it's HBO" furthermore emphasises their ambition to develop television that has a certain standard of its own. HBO's success of course led to other networks, cable as well as commercial, to likewise produce fictional television of a certain standard, such as Showtime's *Dexter* (2004-2013) and ABC's iconic *Lost* (2004-2010). Common to all these serials is that they revolve around creating a compelling fictional universe with interesting characters (Schelepern 2010, 76). Where a film must conclude its narrative and the corresponding conflicts within the span of the film, the serial is not confined to this restriction, but rather has continual and intricate conflicts and storylines that are ever-changing as well as intentionally evasive to carry on the storyline over the span of many seasons - and often for as long as possible. Thus, it is demanded that viewer is attentive, both to narrative details, but also in terms of returning to watch the show each week. In other words, the engagement of the viewer is crucial to the success of a television series. Missing a few episodes of *Game of Thrones* (2011-) will undoubtedly leave most viewers confused when they return, and it is difficult to imagine to start watching the show mid-season. Moreover, a serial often includes a large number of characters (again, consider *Game of Thrones*), who often come and go (only to return later). The characters can also potentially undergo several degrees of developments, since the serial has so much time to tell its story in. As a consequence, keeping up with the characters can prove somewhat of a task, but the reward is also that much more enjoyable: Following the development of both the narrative and the characters enables the viewer to become somewhat of an 'expert' in the serial's fictional 'universe'.

ANALYSIS

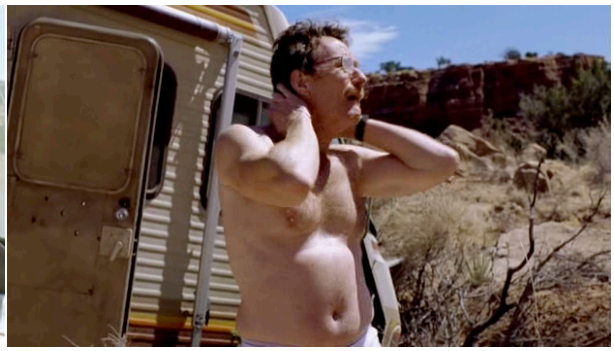
In order to conduct a character analysis of *Breaking Bad*'s protagonist Walter White, I will focus mainly on two episodes chosen because Walter is portrayed very differently in each episode, thus emphasising the transformation his character undergoes during the serial. I have chosen the pilot episode firstly because I find it interesting to examine how the narrative is designed to capture the viewer's attention and create interest for more. Secondly, because such interest is undeniably connected to the characters, some of whom must from the very beginning be interesting enough for the viewer to become engaged in. Pilot episodes are thus always interesting in terms of character engagement. In *Breaking Bad*'s pilot episode, the viewer meets Walter for the first time, and decides whether or not he is worthy of engagement. As the analysis will show, Walter is portrayed as a perfectly normal and sympathetic character, who is nevertheless forced to face many misfortunes resulting in him making some questionable decisions. The episode "Face Off", which is the finale of *Breaking Bad*'s fourth season, however, is relevant because it shows a completely different version of Walter, who has transformed into a self-centred and deeply immoral character. The two episodes thus frame the development of Walter's character, and form the basis for an examination of how the viewer responds emotionally to such a change.

Since the levels of Smith's Structure of Sympathy provide not only different ways of responding to characters, but also a gradual way of bonding with or creating an attachment to characters (or the opposite), I find that it makes sense to divide this chapter similarly. Recognition deals with characters on a different level than alignment and allegiance, so I have chosen to separate it into its own section where I will look at recognition across the series, but focus mainly on the pilot episode. Next, I will analyse the chosen episodes chronologically, focusing on the terms of alignment and allegiance simultaneously, since especially these are connected. Even though I can only suggest where the possibility for allegiance occur since this level of engagement is an individual experience depending on the viewer, I nevertheless wish to demonstrate the transformation of the character of Walter from 'the underdog' in the pilot episode to 'top dog' in the season four finale, and thus explore how viewers respond emotionally to such changes. As Walter changes, is the viewer's attitude likely to change as well, causing a shift in allegiance? Or do we rather cheer him on during his rise to the top, despite his moral decline?

RECOGNISING WALTER

Despite the elementary function of this level - to understand a character as a whole through his/her exterior; body, face, voice - some points are worth making in relation to *Breaking Bad*. In the pilot episode, we are introduced to Walter for the very first time during the opening sequence. However, *how* he is presented is is a little out of the ordinary: He's only wearing underwear and a gas mask (1). His reckless driving of an old-fashioned recreational van and hyper-ventilation gives the impression that he is in a state of panic, and as we learn that he is not alone in the vehicle, but is accompanied by another gas mask-wearing person, who is, however, unconscious, as well as two seemingly dead bodies floating around in the back of the vehicle, the situation grows increasingly bizarre. When he exists the vehicle after crashing the RV, his body language tells us that he is clearly on the verge of a breakdown as he is sobbing, displaying frustration (he aggressively tosses his gas-mask away), and walking back and forth while mumbling to himself (2).

1



2

We see Walter's face for the first time, which is of course a very important component when talking about recognition, but it is difficult to make the connection between what we see and what is going on. Smith points out: "bodily attributes can and often do imply psychological traits" (Smith 1995, 113), and here is a good example. Offhand, Walter's physical appearance leads us to believe that he is an 'average Joe'; he is middle-aged, unfit, wearing glasses and 'tighty whitey' underwear. The incoherence between this perception of his personality and the situation he is in makes the scene seem bizarre, which results in the viewer immediately wondering how this normal man ended up in such an unusual situation. This is a very clever way of setting up a 'mystery' that needs solving and thus attracting the viewer to keep watching. But it is also a way of manipulating the viewer to naturally assume that Walter actually *is* that normal guy, which proves the importance of physical portrayal of a character. Had Walter looked more like mafioso Tony Soprano (main character in *Sopranos* (1999-2007)) or drug kingpin Avon Barksdale (character in *The Wire* (2002-2008)), the understanding of the situation might very well have been completely different. Moreover, at

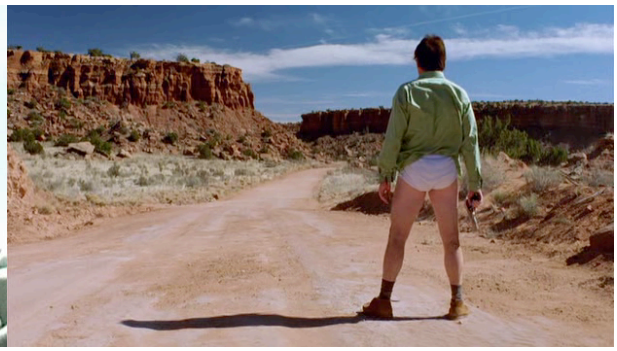
this point in the opening sequence, many viewers will have made a different kind of recognition; the recognition of the actor behind the character, Bryan Cranston, who, before *Breaking Bad*, was best known for his role in the television comedy series, *Malcolm in the Middle* (2000-2006), where his character Hal was a family man and also a pretty 'average Joe'. Whether or not it was intentional to cast Cranston to play a role so different than the one he was best known for, is difficult to say, but one might argue that the intertextual recognition and the similarities between Hal and Walter work to enhance the notion of Walter as a likeable character that the viewer is likely to sympathise with, despite the fact that Walter turns out to be more Tony Soprano than Hal.

At this point in the pilot episode, we have yet to know Walter's name, and in fact, no words have been neither uttered nor displayed in written form. But when Walter grabs a camera from the vehicle and starts recording a message, we finally have a name and a voice to attach to the body and face. Furthermore, it is indicative that the very first words to be spoken are *"My name is Walter Hartwell White"* as Walter is the focal point of the entire series as he increasingly 'breaks bad' and develops several 'versions' of Walter White (the Father, the Teacher, the Patient, the Chemist, the Drug Dealer, the Murderer, the Master Manipulator, to name a few). A name can carry certain connotations, and both 'Walter' and 'White' are common English names, but when put together they form a catchy alliteration. In addition, the colour white is often associated with 'innocence' or 'purity', and both terms are relevant to the character of Walter. Keeping his methamphetamine the purest possible becomes essential to Walter, who strives to be the best and to create the most desirable - and valuable - product. On the outside, he seems perfectly innocent: He is the last person anyone would suspect of being involved with drugs, and as the series progresses, we learn of the extremes Walter will go to in order to avoid getting caught and admitting guilt and, thus, keep up his innocent appearance. The next thing he says to the camera in the opening sequence is *"To all law enforcement entities, this is not an admission of guilt."* which, however, seems to work contradictory, since the denial suggests *guilt* rather than innocence. As a result, we get the sense that Walter possesses duality, which in turn makes him even more intriguing.

The recording of the video message also cleverly functions as a way to quickly get the viewer acquainted with some 'Walter facts', like the fact that he's married to Skyler, has a son named Walter Junior, and we even learn his exact address in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Walter, then, is a loving family man and the initial understanding of him as a 'normal guy' is thus enforced. The voice of a character is powerful in relation to a viewer's emotional response, and Walter, during the video recording, is clearly struggling with keeping his voice

composed resulting in it cracking into a sob. This effect paired with an uncomfortable close-up of Walter's face (3) has the impact of showing us Walter at his most vulnerable and portraying him as a complete emotional wreck, who is finding himself in a desperate situation. So desperate that he chooses to grab a gun and approach the sirens we hear in the background, which is a little surprising given the impression of him as a presumably harmless family man. This presents us with another bizarre and perplexing image (4): The desert setting, the long shot framing, and the composition of the shot with Walter's back turned towards us as he spreads his legs is reminiscent of a typical scene from a Western, but the only thing that connects Walter to a cowboy is the gun in his hand. Instead, he is a 'fish out of water' who is attempting to take on a role very different from the one we just saw in his video recording.

3



4

5

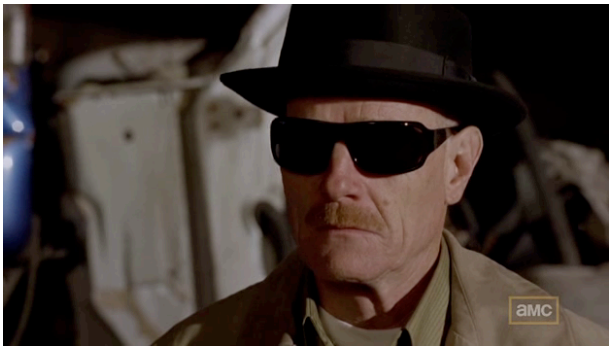
As we cut to the front of Walter (5), the look on his face has also completely changed from what we saw in image 3. As he raises the gun, he looks more composed, he does not blink and he is clenching his jaw which suggests that he is focussed. It is at this moment that the scene is cut to reveal the title sequence and thus we are reminded of the name of the show; *Breaking Bad*. How did Walter go from the loving family man we saw in the video recording to the person in image 5? And who is he pointing the gun at? The following scene opens with the text "Three weeks earlier", and we understand that we are about to find out. Of course, throwing the viewers into a confusing opening sequence in order to catch their attention and create a desire to know what led up to this moment, is by no means a new narrative device. But where *Breaking Bad* stands out is how the situation we are thrown into is transformed

from a typical car chase type action scene into an increasingly bizarre and unexpectedly comical situation. Walter is completely out of his element resulting in his actions becoming unintentionally funny, such as when he has to hold his breath to enter the vehicle because he just threw away the gas mask, or when he clumsily wrestles the gun out of a dead person's hands (who, on top of this, is lying in a pool of blood and cash) and tucks the gun into his underpants. Consequently, when Walter steps onto the road with the gun as in images 4 and 5, he becomes a parody and a cliché of the 'lonesome cowboy' we - and Walter - know from the western film genre. However, at this point in the narrative, the absurdity of the situation is clear only to the viewer, furthering the comical aspect.

A last remark on recognition calls for a jump in time within the show, as Walter changes his physical appearance somewhat dramatically from the 'goofy' tighty whitey, sweater wearing teacher, whose domineering wife makes him eat 'veggie bacon' (6), into, like his son points out, a *"bad ass dad"* when he in the sixth episode of the first season shaves his head due to his chemotherapy treatment (7). However, the changes to Walter's physical appearance facilitate and reinforce a change in his attitude: It is clear that the simple action of shaving his head leaves Walter feeling more powerful, which is expressed both in the scene from image 7 where Walter opposes his wife's wishes for him to keep a healthy diet and asks for the butter, and later in the same episode where he develops his pseudonym, Heisenberg (8).

6

7



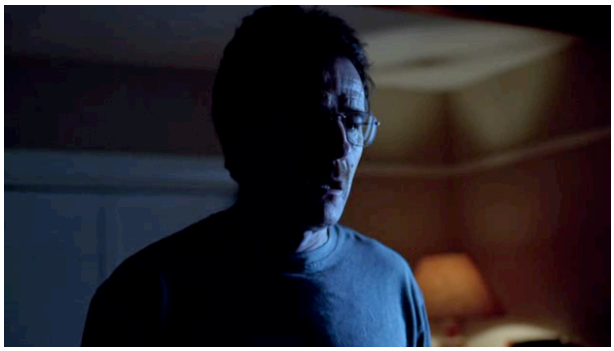
8

This persona is the complete opposite of Walter White; someone who stands out from the crowd (most notably because of the trademark 'Heisenberg hat' and dark sunglasses), and someone who is fearless and in control. But as the series progresses, Walter becomes more and more like Heisenberg in his daily life, which he seems to accepts when he decides to keep shaving his head even after his cancer is in remission and his hair start growing back. Thus, simultaneous with Walter altering his appearance, he also gradually changes his personality, which ultimately results in a 'fusion' of Walter and Heisenberg.

WALTER, THE UNDERDOG

Continuing the analysis of the pilot episode, I wish to examine the pilot episode, and demonstrate how Walter is portrayed as 'the underdog' and as a result, someone the viewer is likely to root for and form allegiance with.

Following the short title sequence, we are presented with scenes from Walter's home which stand in stark contrast to the dramatic opening sequence. A text informs us that the following occurred *"three weeks earlier"* and hence implies that we are about to be told the story of how Walter ended up as despairing as we saw him in the opening sequence. Despite the shortness of this scene, it nevertheless functions to change the pace dramatically from the action-driven and panicky opening sequence: The camera slowly pans to show a restless Walter getting up in the middle of the night to work out on a stepping machine (although he does so slowly and not particularly dedicated), but he stops, coughs, and exhales with a depressed look on his face (9) while looking at a framed certificate that tells us he was a *"contributor to research awarded the Nobel prize"* in 1985. At this point, most viewers will already be aligned with Walter because of his emotional video message to his family in the opening sequence, where, through his exposed feelings and declaration of love for his family, the viewer gained a degree of subjective access. As a result, some viewers will have experienced immediate feelings of empathy (emotional simulation) towards Walter as well. Moreover, so far in the episode, the narrative has been exclusively attached to Walter, which cleverly positions him as the *only* character the viewer is able to align with. One could even argue that the


9

viewer is somewhat manipulated by the narrative to align, and consequently establish allegiance, with Walter, which becomes further apparent in the following scenes where Walter is repeatedly portrayed as an underdog and most other characters seem to function only to enhance this position.

This is especially apparent through the portrayal of Walter's wife, Skyler, who is introduced in the following scene, where we learn that it is Walter's 50th birthday. This information of course also points to why Walter seems so depressed; he could be suffering from a mid-life crisis. To make turning 50 even worse, Skyler serves Walter *"veggie bacon"* for his birthday breakfast, which immediately makes the viewer (vegetarians excluded, perhaps) assume an oppositional stance towards her - and this even before her face has been shown. Just as the camera cuts to show Skyler's face, she says *"Believe it or not"*, which seems ironic since that is very much likely to be what the viewer is thinking: It is Walter's birthday, and he is not allowed real bacon? She looks at Walter and says, as if reciting a advertisement, *"Zero cholesterol, you won't even taste the difference"* with raised eyebrows and a look that tells us that Walter had better agree (10) It is clear that the dynamic between the couple is unequal, and that Skyler is the one is charge, which is emphasised through her lecturing way of talking to Walter as well as their teenage son, Walter Jr., whom she greets with a reproachful *"You're late... again!"*. Unlike his father, Walter Jr., however, has the guts to criticise and refuse to eat the *"fake crap"* veggie bacon, and his cheeky spirit portrays him as likeable and someone the viewer will feel aligned with, although we do not have much other information about him. Nevertheless, Skyler steps in and commands him to *"Eat. It."* while again raising her eyebrows (11), suggesting that she has the same kind of authority over both of the Walters.

10

11

Walter Jr. goes on to joke with his father asking what it feel like *"to be old"*, and the mood rises as they all smile, but again, with only a look, Skyler is able to control Walter who ends up telling Walter Jr. to *"Eat your veggie bacon"* and thus agreeing with Skyler, despite the fact he did not seem to enjoy the veggie bacon himself. The look on Walter's face suggests his guilt of having double standards as he looks down instead of back up at Skyler (12). Even though Walter's feelings are only expressed physically and not verbally in this scene, the

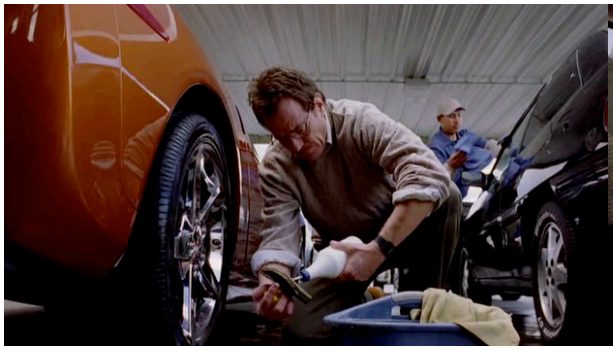
viewer nevertheless gains insight into his motivations, and understands Walter as a complaisant family man. The negative first-hand impression of Skyler as well as the subsequent portrayal of Walter as an underdog strengthen the viewer's alignment with Walter, and thus build the basis for allegiance. The underdog is someone most viewers will typically grant allegiance, simply because it is pleasurable to see this type of character succeed.


12

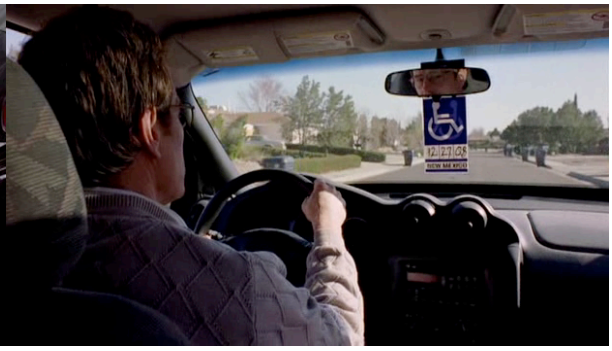
As the episode progresses, we learn more about Walter's character, but the theme of him as an underdog is persistent, even at his workplace. We learn that he teaches high school chemistry, a subject that he is very passionate about, which is apparent in his enthusiastic body language and facial expressions. For the first time, we see a genuine smile on Walter's face (13); *"It's fascinating, really!"*, a fascination he, however, fails to transfer to the students, none of whom seem particularly interested. As he tries to reprimand a student who is loudly talking to his girlfriend, it becomes clear that the students do not respect him and that he has no authority in the classroom: The student gets up and provocatively drags his chair back to his own table, and, instead of apologising, looks directly at Walter with raised eyebrows resemblant of Skyler's. Just as in the 'breakfast scene', Walter avoids the conflict, and thus again fails to assert himself. We also get the sense that Walter is a loner through a brief shot showing him eating his lunch alone while reading a book, and the way he eagerly turns the page suggests that he prefers the company of the book to that of his colleagues. His passion for chemistry reminds us of the certificate Walter contemplated earlier, pointing out a disconnect between his job as a high school teacher and being a Nobel price level researcher, perhaps suggesting that Walter is depressed because he feels he did not meet his full potential. The certificate is constantly reminding him of this, and thus functions as yet another instance that belittles him. It is likely that the viewer will take pity on Walter and consequently sympathise with him, while also being disposed to feeling frustrated with his lack of action, which leave a great desire to see Walter break free of his pattern.


13

However, observing Walter at his second workplace, a car wash, only adds fuel to the fire, as he, albeit reluctantly, obliges to leave the register, where he usually works, to go wash cars. Despite the fact that he works among other adults here, Walter is still not respected, and it is clear that he finds the job humiliating, which is enhanced through the low level of the camera which show that Walter is literally and figuratively as low as he can get, squatting on the ground doing manual labour (15). The situation is worsened when it is revealed that the owner of the flashy car is the same student from earlier who impertinently instructs Walter to *"make those tires shine, huh?".* Yet again, Walter refrains from responding to the insolence, and instead obeys the order and continues cleaning the car's tires. It seems no matter where Walter is, other people are disparaging him without any objection on Walter's behalf. Even his car seems to be against him: As Walter is driving home, his reflection is seen in the rear-view mirror directly below which a disabled sign is hanging (15). The sign is of course addressed to Walter Jr., who is suffering from cerebral palsy, but indirectly also refers to Walter's despondent attitude and disability to take action. Consequently, the sign appears mocking, and Walter takes it down and puts it away, but the glove compartment repeatedly refuses to stay shut, resulting in Walter giving up once more.



14



15

At home, a surprise party is waiting for him, and although Walter is genuinely surprised, he does not seem particularly happy. Skyler greets him similarly to how she greeted Walter Jr. at breakfast with a nagging *"You are* so *very late!"*, reminding the viewer of Skyler's controlling personality and way of talking to Walter. He faces additional degradation from his brother in law, Hank, who, while Walter has literally faded into the background, evidently is the centre of attention (16), loudly boasting about his job as a DEA agent while displaying his gun. Even though Walter disapproves when Hank hands the gun to a clearly impressed Walter Jr., all Walter manages to utter is a dejected *"uhhmm"*, and this objection, just like Walter himself, is completely ignored. Accordingly, Walter ends up holding the gun against his wishes, leaving him awkward and uncomfortable, which leads to some mocking remarks from Hank, such as *"That's why they hire* real *men"* to which all the guests react with loud laughter. Hank then briefly toasts Walter, but not without yet again making him the laughing stock of the party,

and he even takes Walter's drink out of his hands so he - but not Walter - is able to toast, which none of the guests pay any attention to. As soon as the toast is over, Hank turns the attention back to himself as he is about to be on television for seizing a methamphetamine lab, and ignores Walter who is left still holding the gun. As everyone gathers around the television, Walter, clearly an outsider, keeps to himself with a glass of wine and a depressed expression, inviting the viewer to feel sorry for him. As opposed to his disinterest in the gun, Walter's attention is suddenly captured when the television news feature displays the bundles of cash confiscated during Hank's bust, which make Walter exclaim a fascinated *"Wow!"*. Hank, however, immediately deflates Walter's excitement by inviting him on a "ride-along" to *"get a little excitement in your life!"*, which of course both ironically refers to the intense 'excitement' Walter was experiencing in the opening sequence, as well as functions as a set-up with the pay-off being that the ride-along is where Walter develops his plan to become involved with the drug trade.

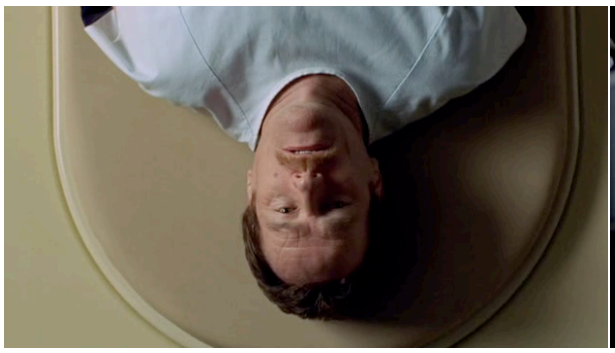

16

It is difficult not be be irritated with Skyler and Hank, and their way of treating Walter, but when Walter continually refrains from defending himself this also gives rise to feelings of annoyance towards Walter. He is portrayed as a sympathetic person who does not wish to cause any kind of conflict or hurt anyone's feelings, but this to the detriment of never voicing his personal opinions or giving expression to his real emotions. As a result, his 'good guy position' becomes too much thus causing the viewer to feel frustrated with Walter. However, the viewer expects to be relieved of these frustrations, especially because we already know from the title and premise of the show that Walter will eventually 'break bad', and the previously mentioned desire to see Walter let go of his self-possession is emphasised. Even though the viewer is prevented from subjective access to Walter, we get the sense that it is a matter of time before Walter 'explodes' and shows those *real* emotions that he is undoubtedly keeping bottled up inside.

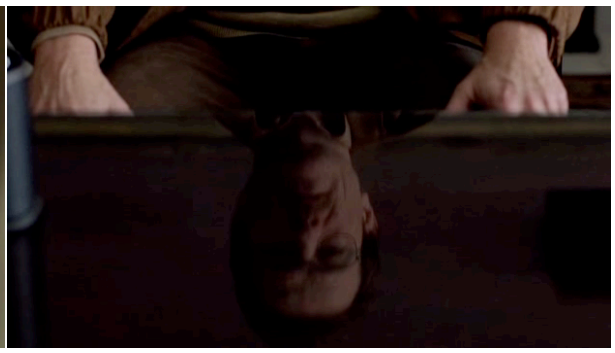
The obvious opportunity for such emotional outburst presents itself when Walter is rushed to the hospital in an ambulance after fainting at the car wash the day after his birthday. In the ambulance it is made clear how Walter will do anything to not be a burden to his family: Even though he is being rushed to the hospital, ambulance sirens loudly sounding, he tries to understate the seriousness of the situation by requesting to be *"dropped off at the next corner"*, which the paramedic naturally dismisses, resulting in Walter revealing what he is

truly worried about: His lack of medical insurance. Rather than being worried about his health, Walter is is more concerned about the economic consequences of him fainting, and how an extra expense is sure to cause additional nagging from Skyler. When the paramedic asks Walter if anyone should be contacted, he replies *"God no",* which is both sad and surprising. It is completely justifiable to be concerned when you are being rushed to the hospital in an ambulance, but Walter has such low self-esteem that he finds it better not to worry his family.

At the hospital, Walter is shown upside-down as he is being scanned (17), which indicates that the narrative is likewise about to be turned on its head. The viewer thus expects the outcome of the examination to be negative, and accordingly anticipates an emotional response from Walter. After all the adversity we have seen Walter face, a cancer diagnosis must certainly be the final straw? After the examination, Walter is again shown upside-down, this time in his reflection on the doctor's table (18). This mirroring suggests and foreshadows the duality that Walter will come to possess and the double-life he is about to embark on. As the camera pans upwards to show a perplexed look on Walter's face, we hear a long, high-pitched sound which is mixed with incomprehensible speech, implying that Walter is in a state of shock. A point-of-view shot which pans from a close-up of the doctor's mouth to a stain on his white laboratory coat furthermore indicates that Walter is not listening or understanding what the doctor is saying, and the doctor calls his name several times. When Walter finally comes to, the doctor want to make sure he understood what was just said, and to our surprise, Walter answers with a calm voice *"Yes. Lung cancer. Inoperable."* and goes on to recite the consequences: *"Best case scenario, with chemo, I'll live maybe another couple of years."*



17



18

Naturally, the viewer may already be aware of the fact that Walter is diagnosed with lung cancer before watching the episode due to taglines or other marketing devices, but being influenced by such may have even worked to emphasise the surprise of Walter's lack of reaction to his terminal diagnosis. Where Walter remains ever composed even when facing

the greatest adversity so far, the viewer is nevertheless disposed to feeling empathy towards Walter when imagining stepping into his shoes.

We assume that he is in denial about only having a few years left to live in, which is why he chooses to tell Skyler that his day was *"fine"* when he returns home. However, it is clear from Skyler's preoccupation with a $15.88 bill that the family is having severe financial struggles, thus suggesting that perhaps it is not the illness that worries Walter the most, but how the bills for his chemo therapy treatments will destroy the family's already terrible economy, and, even worse, how heavily indebted he will leave his family when he is no longer there to support them. Subjective access is usually what permits the viewer to evaluate a character's moral concepts, but with Walter this access is very limited as a result of his reserved personality. However, this limitation turns out to nonetheless reveal information about his morals - i.e. that he puts other people's feelings before his own - which many viewers are likely to find admirable thus providing a basis for the viewer to feel allegiance towards him.

Walter returns to work at the car wash the following day, and is naturally affected by the previous day's events as we see him staring out the window and hear the same long, high-pitched noise as in the doctor's office, but this time, the muffled speech comes from his employer, Bogdan. It turns out that Walter is yet again commanded to do "wipe-downs" on the cars even though he fainted while doing just that only the previous day, and Bogdan even rudely remarks *"Are you here to work or to be staring at the skies?"*. Walter looks perplexed and stunned by Bogdan's lack of sensitivity, and as if he suddenly realises that working at the car wash is never going to be enough to pay his bills, Walter looks Bogdan directly in the eyes and says *"Fuck you, Bogdan."*, reversing the roles so that it is now Bogdan who is completely perplexed. Although Walter proceeds less coolly, and childishly shouts *"I said fuck you!* And *your eyebrows!"*, the viewer takes great pleasure in *finally* seeing Walter align with the goal for him to stand up for himself. The fact that he chooses to direct this insult to Bogdan's eyebrows furthermore feels like a small triumph since it refers back to both Skyler and the disrespectful student, who both used their raised eyebrows to make Walter feel undermined and powerless. The situation grows increasingly enjoyable, both due to the humour of the situation as Walter clumsily takes his frustration out on the wall display scattering air fresheners and other car accessories everywhere (19) and when he grabs his crotch and provocatively shouts *"Wipe down this!"* (20). Moreover, Walter, the underdog who would never dream of starting an argument, is at last giving vent to his true emotions and showing us a completely different side to himself - an expressive and angry side as is apparent in images 19 and 20. This radical change in Walter's behaviour furthermore

presents a deeper insight into his personality and subjectivity, thus creating opportunity for allegiance.

19

20

After this incident, Walter starts the journey that will eventually take him to where he was when the viewer first met him: Half-naked in the desert in a state of panic. He ends up getting the idea to make money from producing methamphetamine, and decides to take Hank up on his offer about a ride-along, which ironically refers back to Hank's mocking suggestion to *"get a little excitement in your life!"* since what he is about to embark on will undoubtedly cause a considerable amount of excitement. The viewer is not surprised by Walter's choice to become involved with drugs since certain expectations about this turn of events already exists with the viewer, as also mentioned above, due to the title of the show and the prior knowledge of its premise. What is unexpected, however, is how it affects Walter's behaviour positively, and how he approaches this obviously insane idea.

Walter learns that a former student of his is involved with drug production, but instead of passing along this knowledge to Hank, he chooses to pay the student, Jesse Pinkman, a visit, seemingly because he is *"curious"* about how someone like Jesse, whom Walter clearly did not have high hopes for in high school, is able to successfully produce methamphetamine - and make a lot of money from it. Walter takes advantage of the knowledge he has about Jesse, and blackmails him into including Walter in his methamphetamine business, leaving the viewer baffled both because it is very out of character for Walter to be so straightforward, but also because Walter takes complete control of the situation without so much as a single "uhhmm". The seriousness in Walter's voice and facial expression is indisputable when he proposes *"You know the business. And* I *know the chemistry."* (21), making it clear to the viewer that Walter is acting not on an impulse, but based on practical thinking. Now even though Walter has decided to become a criminal, there exist somewhat of an 'understanding' from the viewer, because it is clear that he chooses this path to be able to financially secure


21

his family's future. As a result of how the narrative has portrayed Walter as an underdog who suffers misfortune in regards to both his personal life, health, and economy, the viewer desires to see him succeed. We are on his side, and thus do not regard Walter's actions in this scene as unsympathetic or detestable. It could even be argued that the viewer to some extent justifies Walter's way of taking charge of the situation, albeit unusual and morally questionable, because of this allegiance with his character. Even when Walter decides to venture to the wrong side of the law, the viewer remains on his side.

Starting up a methamphetamine production proves to be very exciting to Walter, whose demeanour changes notably: Similar to how he was passionate when teaching chemistry at the high school, Walter displays emotions of genuine enthusiasm when he brings the equipment needed for the methamphetamine production, which he stole form the high school, to Jesse's house. With a big smile on his face, and even laughter, Walter is suddenly expressive and cheerful (22), and from the way he passionately talks about the correct use of the different laboratory flasks it is easy to deduce that he is excited about using them. In other words, the prospect of "cooking meth" makes Walter feel *happy* as opposed to apprehensive or guilty, and this despite just having witnesses the seriousness and risk of being involved with the drug trade on his ride-along with Hank, where a DEA SWAT team seized Jesse's old laboratory.


22

When Walter gives him *"all the money I have in the world"* to buy a vehicle for them to produce the methamphetamine in, Jesse addresses the incoherence between Walter's 'good guy personality' and his choice to become a drug dealer: *"Some straight like you, giant stick up his ass, all the sudden aged, what, 60, he's just gonna break bad? It's weird... is all."* Here, Walter could have explained his situation with "I have cancer and no money to pay the impending bills", which perhaps could have even gained Jesse's sympathy, but instead he philosophically replies *"I am awake."*, which supports Jesse in his suspicion that Walter has gone crazy, but also suggests that Walter does not want any pity. Finally, he has something

to be proud of (although not publicly), although it is suggested that he might be too proud for anyone's pity, including his own family's, whom he continues to keep unaware of his condition. Furthermore, it indicates that Walter may have reasons other than just making money. His clear excitement with and insistence on making a *"chemically pure and stable product that performs as advertised"* indicates that he has realised that producing methamphetamine gives him the opportunity to truly make use of his chemical genius. This becomes apparent when they take the RV-turned-meth-lab to the desert, and we experience Walter really being in his element as he handles the chemical production with meticulousness and professionalism, which results in an impressive finished product and Jesse excitedly exclaiming *"You're a damn artist! This is art, Mr. White!"*. Walter has thus earned both Jesse's respect and the success of his product being superior. Moreover, the viewer's desire to see Walter experience success is being met, causing the viewer to take enjoyment from the event.

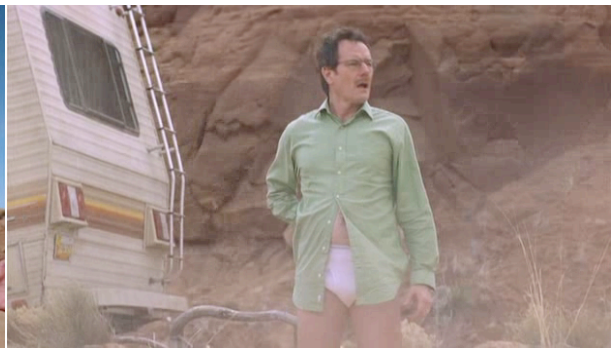
The viewer is worried, however. But not about Walter's moral decline, but rather whether he will get caught thus turning his success into a disaster and aggravating the already difficult situation his family is finding themselves in. With the drama from the opening sequence in mind, a turn of events is anticipated and occurs when Jesse brings his former partner and another drug dealer to the desert. They are impressed with the purity of Walter's meth-amphetamine and initially want him to work for them, but when they suspect Walter to be with the DEA, they threaten to kill Walter and Jesse. Walter suggests that he teach them his 'recipe', but during the production he mixes the chemicals to create a gas that suffocate the two men. The viewer almost does not get a chance to grasp what just happened as the pace accelerates, and the narrative suddenly changes back to the bizarre chaos and confusion of the opening sequence. Nevertheless, the fact that Walter apparently just killed two people remains shockingly out of character for the usually conflict-averse Walter, but it does not create a disassociation from Walter. His actions become somewhat justifiable, as these men were definitely the 'bad guys' (they were trying to kill him first), which the viewer instantly recognised from their stereotypical physical appearances and way of speaking.

The narrative picks up from where the episode began, but the viewer now knows that Walter's reckless driving has nothing to do with being chased, since he just eliminated his two biggest threats. Instead, he is driving away from a fire started by a cigarette that one of the drug dealers was smoking earlier. We are taken back to the bizarre moment where the

23

opening sequence was cut. Walter stands on the dirt road assuming his awkward 'cowboy position' (23), but the scene is turned upside-down as Walter breaks down crying, brings the gun to his throat and pulls the trigger. But in line with all the adversity he has been facing during the episode, the gun - almost mockingly, like the disabled sign in Walter's car - fails to cooperate, leaving Walter frustrated and despairing. The 'new' Walter, who is confident and in control, disappears in favour of the 'old' Walter, who gives up and assumes a position of surrender (24). But the narrative takes yet another unexpected twist when it turns out that the sirens come from fire engines on their way to put out the fire, and both Walter and the viewer breathe a sigh of relief as it is clear that Walter is not about to be arrested after all, which is furthermore promoted through the music. Aggressive alternative rock was playing during the scene where Walter drives the RV, and worked to enhance the chaotic and adrenalin-pumping atmosphere, but when Walter crashed the RV, the music stopped as well, and the scene was cut directly to Walter holding the gun as in image 23. When we first see the fire engines, the music slowly resumes and intensifies concurrently with Walter realising that he is in the clear, indicating that he is experiencing yet another adrenalin-rush. Along with the change in the narrative and music, the mood also radically shifts from being rather intense with Walter's suicide attempt, to being bizarrely comical. Walter simply hides the gun behind his back as he observes the fire engines hurry by, open-mouthed and dumbfounded (25).

24



25

He cannot believe his own luck, which is clear from the emotional roller coaster ride he takes the viewer on: Walter is in a state of shock, but when Jesse, who has been unconscious, awakens and asks Walter about the two dead drug dealers, he calmly explains how he created phosphine gas which kills from only *"one good whiff"*. As if the reality of this only just dawned upon him, he proceeds to vomit, but perhaps it is also a way of 'cleansing' himself of the murders as well as his suicide attempt (which Jesse does not know about), as he then

relatively unaffected reassumes control, although while clumsily waving the gun around, and acts rationally: *"We've gotta clean this up."* This quirky way of ending such a dramatic scene leaves the viewer surprised and curious as to what Walter will do next, and creates questions of exactly how he and Jesse will conduct this 'clean-up'.

The episode concludes with Walter bringing both the drug dealers' cash, but also his newfound confidence into his home environment. As if his traumatic near-death experiences have given him renewed energy and passion, he reacts atypically to Skyler's nagging questions, and takes control in the bedroom to Skyler's astonishment: *"Walt, is that you?"* It is apparent that Walter's decision to lead this double life has resulted in him feeling happier, and more confident, and the frustration the viewer had with his lack of action has thus been relived. Even though Walter is perhaps less sympathetic now than in the beginning of the episode, the viewer remains engaged with Walter's character and roots for him to continue his success.

WALTER, THE TOP DOG

For the main character in serial television to experience a change as complex as Walter's in *Breaking Bad* is unusual, since such change inevitably has an impact on the viewer's character engagement and attachment, and thus potentially causes the viewer to stop watching the show. In order to examine how Walter's development affects the viewer's attitude towards him, I have chosen to analyse the final episode of the fourth season as the episode marks an important milestone in Walter's transformation, both because he manages to eliminate the threat of drug kingpin, Gustavo Fring, and thus assume that position himself, but even more so because Walter's most heinous act is revealed; the willingness to intentionally jeopardise the life of a child for his own benefit.

As professor Jason Mittell explains, viewers enjoy following characters in serial television as they develop over the course of the show, but they usually retain a stability and only experience changes that are "either temporary, attributed to an external factor that dissipates over the course of an episode or short arc, or only mid-level shifts in behaviors and attitudes, rather than high-level transformations of core morality and ethics that would prompt a change in our allegiances" (Mittell, chap. 5, par. 29). As we see in this episode, Walter has undergone a transformation on several levels: He has battled cancer, separated and got back together again with Skyler, as well as become a business owner, albeit a business - the car wash he worked at in the pilot episode - used, by Skyler, to launder his illegal income.

But these changes are temporal or mid-level changes with the only consequences being that Walter and Skyler's relationship is strained and that the family no longer struggle financially. Where a high-level change has occurred is within Walter's personality and morality as a result of his rise to the top within the drug world, which in this episode in particular reaches its culmination when Walter assumes the position of 'top dog'. Of course, the viewer was always aware that Walter would break bad, and increasingly so over the course of the show, hence the present continuous tense of the verb in the title; *"breaking"*, but Walter nevertheless continues to surprise and intrigue the viewer. As examined in the analysis of the pilot episode, it was implied from the very beginning of the serial that when Walter decided to get into producing methamphetamine, he was moved by motives other than the prospect of making money. His enthusiasm for finally being able to realise his chemistry potential and the ensuing strive for being the 'number one meth cook' has now completely replaced the immediate need for money, and instead, Walter's main objective is to defeat the 'number one kingpin', Gustavo Fring. The family has enough money, but Walter does not retire, partly because he believes that to be an impossible task while Fring is still alive, but perhaps even more due to the fact that Walter *enjoys* being 'number one' as well as takes pleasure in the power that follows. However, Walter continues to regard himself as an underdog who does what he does for the greater good of his family, and thus feels that his actions are justified. His motives have nonetheless become purely selfish, he has changed his ethics, and Walter has thus undergone a change on a much higher level, which is apparent in the first scene of the episode, where Walter brings his homemade car-bomb designed to kill Fring into the paediatric intensive care unit of a hospital.

26

As image 26 shows, we are dealing with a notably different Walter in terms of his appearance which already indicates a dramatic alteration to his attitude: As discussed earlier, his shaved head, which at this point is self-imposed and no longer related to his chemotherapy, signifies his change of character as he is more aligned with his Heisenberg persona than the old Walter (tighty-)White. That his face is bruised and he is wearing a nose bandage due to a broken nose, as well as the low camera angle which positions the viewer looking up at Walter, further the perception of him as intimidating and powerful. He is, however, not only

powerful due to his high status within the drug world, but, in this particular situation, he holds the power over the lives of other people in the hospital as he is carrying a bomb. Walter goes to meet a clearly worried Jesse who is waiting outside the intensive care unit where his girlfriend's son, Brock, is hospitalised after falling critically ill in the previous episode. Walter, however, is only worried about himself, and shows no sympathy towards Jesse as he starts questioning him right away, accusingly asking *"What did you say to Gus? 'Cause he's on to us. Yeah!"*. The bomb was initially placed under Fring's car, but Fring suspected something was awry after a conversation with Jesse, and decided to leave his car in the hospital car park. Jesse addresses Walter's insensitivity and indifference towards the danger he is putting innocent people in by bringing the bomb into the hospital, as well as points out just how unsympathetically Walter is behaving towards Jesse who in this particular situation is experiencing a family crisis, by asking in disbelief: *"Could I ask my own question right now, at this point? Did you just bring a* bomb *into a* hospital*?"* This disbelief is shared by the viewer, and we question Walter's ethics, especially because we know that he is a father himself, as we are reminded of by the presence of his infant daughter's changing bag which he ironically carries the bomb in. It is apparent that Walter is no longer the loving family man we saw in the pilot episode, but has transformed into an unsympathetic egotist, who half-heartedly excuses his behaviour with having no other options, which neither Jesse nor the viewer have any appreciation for. Walter is unaffected by the resentment, however, and simply continues to question Jesse, preoccupied solely with his own goal of finding a way to kill Fring. He even goes as far as to intimidate Jesse as he is convinced that the key to defeating Fring is to be able to surprise him where he least expects it: *"If you can't tell me... We're dead."* Walter is thus leaving the responsibility of their survival up to Jesse, which seems additionally callous given that Jesse is already under a lot of emotional pressure.

Walter shows the same indifference towards putting innocent people's life in danger when he, at a later point in the episode, goes home to collect some cash, but realises that Fring could have henchmen waiting for him inside. Instead of simply turning around, he calls his elderly next-door neighbour, and tells her a terribly cliched lie that he and the family have left for the weekend but are afraid that they have left the stove burning thus having her go into the house and obviously risking her life. Walter sits in his car further down the road from his house, and observes how the neighbour obeys his request while 'narrating' with self-satisfaction in his voice: *"There go you.*"; leaving the viewer shocked by his cold-heartedness. Walter's suspicion proved correct as two men are seen leaving the property, but the uncertainty of whether or not they killed the neighbour is sustained for more than 30 seconds, which builds tension and accentuates Walter's selfishness and immorality. When the neighbour calls Walter to assure him that the stove was off, both Walter and the viewer

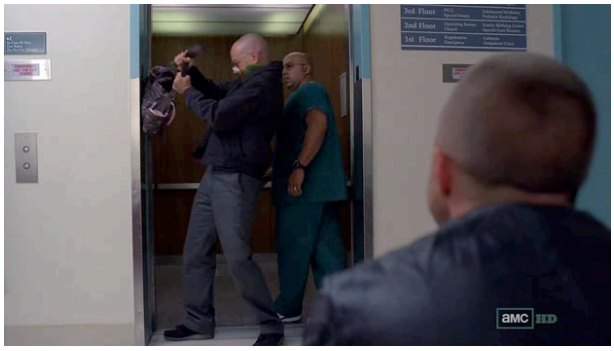
breathe a sigh of relief, but the fact that Walter risked her life to protect his own shows just how unsympathetic Walter has become.

The point where the viewer realises just how deeply immoral Walter has become is of course during the very last scene of the episode, where a lily of the valley plant is seen in Walter's back garden. As the camera slowly moves closer and closer to the plant, it dawns on the viewer that Walter, and not Fring, was behind the poisoning of Brock, which has a shocking effect as the viewer realises that this was all a part of an elaborate plan made by Walter to manipulate Jesse to return to Walter's side. Walter's willingness to risk the life of an innocent child is the most despicable and cold-blooded act he has yet committed, and proves that Walter has changed his core ethics.

As a result of the high-level change in Walter's moral concepts, the viewer finds it problematic to feel allegiance towards Walter, quite possibly triggering a shift in favour of Jesse, who, despite also having committed terrible acts during the show, is nevertheless portrayed as sympathetic through his solicitude for Brock. Jesse, however, is not the main character of *Breaking Bad*, but a supporting character. Walter remains our protagonist, and after four seasons of the narrative being attached mainly to his perspective, the viewer's alignment with Walter has been reinforced, meaning that despite his transformation into a morally questionable anti-hero, the viewer remains engaged, and thus 'loyal', to his character. Mittell compares this to a "fictionalised Stockholm Syndrome" where "time spent with hideous characters engenders our sympathy as we start to see things from their perspective" (ibid., par. 47), while in the context of serial television this 'relationship' is very much dependent on the character being compelling enough to ensure that viewers return to watch the show every week. Moreover, since the viewer has been positioned on Walter's side through the spatio-temporal attachment of the narrative, any oppositional characters are perceived as 'worse' than Walter, which is what Mittell terms '*relative morality*': In this episode, Walter is clearly very unsympathetic, but the viewer's knowledge of Fring's character positions Walter as the lesser of two evils, thus facilitating alignment with and justification of his goal of killing Fring. While the viewer perhaps does not feel allegiance with Walter in the traditional sense as a result of his changed ethics, we are nevertheless rooting for him to succeed. As Mittell suggests, the viewer instead forges an "operational allegiance" (ibid., par. 77), where character engagement is tied to the construction and fascination of the immoral character, resulting in an allegiance operational within the narrative in that the viewer roots for the character while disapproving of his actions.

Mittell furthermore suggests that the charisma and fascination of a character are key to making an anti-hero intriguing enough for the viewer to remain 'on their side'. Important in regards to especially charisma is how the viewer has gathered information about Walter's character throughout the preceding episodes, and thus remembers and recognises the old Walter. This "serial memory" (ibid., par. 66) is tied to Walter's charisma since the viewer, via the alignment with him, enjoys Walter's company "despite their moral shortcomings and unpleasant behaviors" (ibid., par. 47).

In this episode, the viewer is thus able to detect parallels from this new, immoral Walter to the charming and clumsy Walter from the pilot episode, and this as early as in the first scene at the hospital. As mentioned, Walter carries the bomb in his daughter's changing bag with a serious and intimidating look on his face (as in image 26), but when he exits the elevator, the bomb gets stuck to the doors due to magnetism, resulting in an awkwardly comical situation as well as an abrupt interruption in the characterisation of Walter as an intimidating figure (27). This interplay between seriousness and humour has become a trademark to *Breaking Bad*, and functions to make the terrible and gross on-screen violence more bearable, but it also reminds the viewer of the humanity that nevertheless does exist somewhere inside Walter, who, when we first got to know him, was an underdog bullied by everyone and everything.



27

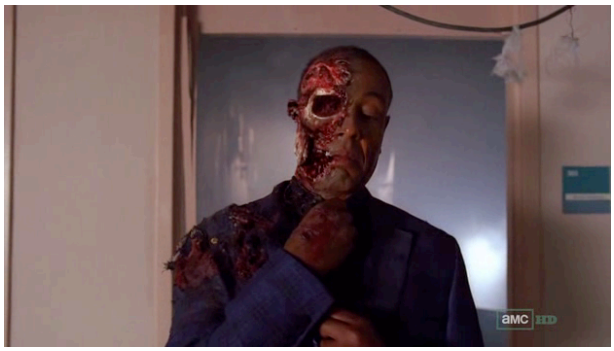
Another example of Walter loosing his grip around his badass attitude is when he a little later in the episode desperately tries to get in contact with his lawyer, and chooses to break into his office when his insistent pounding on the door is not answered. Walter clearly has not thought the situation through as he throws a huge stone through the door and clumsily climbs through the hole fumbling to keep his balance (28), and thus completely looses all his credibility as a 'tough guy'. Of course, only his lawyer's secretary is present making the already embarrassing break-in completely useless. Instead, it turns out that Walter meets his match in the secretary who is completely unaffected when Walter tries to intimidate her as she scoffs and cuts him off mid-sentence to mockingly say (about Walter and Jesse) *"-are in danger? Whoopdee-*

28

freaking-doo!". The situation is thus turned completely on its head, as the secretary ends up scolding Walter for breaking the door and even blackmails him into paying her $25.000 for giving up the lawyer's phone number. Walter makes one last feeble attempt at intimidating her, but gives up and to the viewer's amusement decides to exit the office through the hole in the door instead of opening it, and he does so even more clumsily than before as he gracelessly slips in the pieces of the broken glass. In the midst of all Walter's morally questionable behaviour and actions, these types of scenes serve to remind the viewer of the charming and human side to Walter's personality which does resurface from time to time, as well as making the viewer continue to associate Walter with someone who is enjoyable to follow in the narrative. Moreover, the fandom tied to *Breaking Bad* is centred around the fascination with Walter as is evident through numerous posters and t-shirts all featuring his image. Especially his Heisenberg persona have become the manifestation of the fascination, and Mittell even admits to using it on his Twitter profile: "[...] I find myself connected to Walt to the point of using the iconic Heisenberg line-drawing as my Twitter avatar, an emblem of self-identification as a fan of this transformed monster" (ibid., par. 77).

Another important aspect to Walter's character is the fascination the viewer has with him as a result of following him through various dramatic situations and witnessing his transformation. The viewer is ever intrigued to learn what Walter will get himself into next, how he will manage to get away with it, as well as whether he will continue to surprise us during his journey to the top of the drug trade. The title of the episode I have chosen for analysis is "Face Off", which is significant on several levels: Firstly, because Walter's main objective in this episode is to achieve a confrontation with Fring, where Walter can outsmart and thus defeat him, and, secondly, because when Walter accomplishes this, he even manages to literally take Fring's face off. Of course, the title also contains an intertextual reference to the film Face/Off (1997) in which a cop in his search for revenge over a powerful criminal assumes the identity of said criminal. When Walter defeats Fring, he likewise takes over his position as the most powerful person within the drug trade, completing his transformation from underdog to top dog. It is, moreover, Fring's blind desire for revenge over an old enemy that ultimately leads to his demise, which Walter cleverly figures out. Fring's enemy, Hector Salamanca, a former high-ranking member of a Mexican drug cartel is now living in a nursing home as he is in a wheelchair due to being paralysed, and Fring often visits him to 'torture' him by flaunting his success and thus reminding Hector that he killed all his family as well as the cartel members. Walter proposes a way for Hector to get revenge over Fring by installing the bomb on his wheelchair and connecting the trigger to the bell Hector uses as his only way of communicating. Where Walter is clever enough to let Hector perform the actual killing for him, Fring, however, insists on being the one to kill Hector, which he sees as the only

option after he suspects Hector to have given information to the DEA about him. The scene where Hector kills Fring is powerful, albeit rather unrealistic, both in its visual appearance as Fring is seen exiting Hector's room at the nursing home while the camera pans to reveal that half of his face has been blown away in the explosion (29) whereafter Fring collapses. But it also leaves the viewer feeling triumphant over the fact that the little guy has outsmarted the big guy. In doing so, Walter has, however, become the big guy himself. The viewer nonetheless continues to support and cheer Walter on, and takes part in his success of realising this grand scheme, resulting in a promotion of our fascination with his character.



29

CONCLUSION

In order to answer my research question, I employed the theory by Smith, which presented a relevant basis for analysing the unique case of character development and engagement that *Breaking Bad*'s Walter White constitutes. As demonstrated in the analysis chapter, Smith's structure of sympathy regarding character recognition demonstrated how Walter's change in appearance facilitates his moral transformation, as the act of shaving his head led to him feeling more confident and 'badass'. Moreover, the theory served to prove some valid points about the viewer's emotional response to Walter in the pilot episode where the spatio-temporal attachment of the narrative leads the viewer to be in alignment with Walter through the portrayal of him as an underdog, constantly belittled by everyone and everything around him. In spite of his reserved nature, a degree of subjective access was nevertheless available to the viewer through his physical expressions, and as a result, the viewer feels both sympathetic towards Walter as well as frustrated with his passive behaviour, which leads to the development of a desire to see Walter succeed and break free of his patterns. This goal is furthermore fuelled by the viewer's expectation to be relieved of the feelings of frustration which is emphasised through the title of the serial, ultimately leading the viewer to cheer Walter on when he chooses to 'break bad'. Instead of the outcome of Walter's decision to get involved with methamphetamine production being negative, the viewer witnesses as Walter changes for the positive: He becomes more happy and confident, and takes control of his life even though he learns that it is most likely about to end, consequently leaving the viewer to understand and thus justify his otherwise questionable actions.

Even though the attachment subsequently changes to include the perspective and subjective access of other characters, the viewer nevertheless remains allied with Walter, and aligned with his goals to ultimately assume the position as drug kingpin in the season four finale "Face Off". Throughout the serial, Walter has undergone an increasingly negative high-level transformation of his core morality, which in this episode reaches its peak as the viewer learns of several examples of him being willing to risk the lives of innocent 'civilians', most horrific is the poisoning of the young Brock. Accordingly, the viewer's allegiance with him becomes extremely problematic in regards to the moral evaluation of his actions, which ultimately prompts a shift in allegiances towards other characters, such as Jesse. A definite disassociation from or antipathy against Walter does not occur, however, as the alignment with his character is so strong that the viewer remains engaged in and loyal to Walter, despite the fact that he has truly become an unsympathetic anti-hero. In other words, the portrayal of the character of Walter is so compelling that the viewer is, as Mittell suggests,

‘held captive’ by his charisma, apparent in the trademark dark humour of the serial, which provides both relief from the on-screen violence, as well as reminds the viewer of Walter’s humanity and ‘former life’ as an underdog. Just as important is his fascinating appeal, intriguing the viewer to hypothesise as to what he will do next, how he will react, or what he is thinking. As a consequence of this special ‘relationship’ that the viewer has constructed with him, the viewer remains sided with Walter in what Mittell suggests an ‘operational allegiance’, in which it is possible to root for Walter’s success although not ethically approving of his actions.

In this thesis I have demonstrated how the protagonist of *Breaking Bad* successfully developed from complaisant underdog to cold-blooded top dog, while still leaving the viewer wanting more. The character of Walter White is constructed in such a compelling way that the viewer becomes emotionally engaged with witnessing his fascinating transformation, although perhaps finding it difficult to continue feeling sympathy for him. Nonetheless, the viewer remains sided with Walter, and *proudly* too, as some of us even pronounce our support outside of the serial through using his image on social media platforms or wearing ‘Heisenberg t-shirts’ or hats. As *Breaking Bad* draws to a close, we are left with questions of how we desire for this ‘relationship’ to end, which naturally is very individual amongst viewers. Some will be disappointed if Walter ends up getting caught, while others ultimately want an, if not ‘happy’, then, morally redeeming ending where Walter must pay for the horror he has caused. Regardless, we all feel connected to Walter, once an underdog and an Average Joe - just like ourselves and the people around us - who in desperate times saw the need for desperate measures. Even though we do not approve of who he has become, we understand where he came from and what led him here, and thus we have come to be emotionally engaged in him. We have come to root for the bad guy.

WORKS CITED

PRIMARY TEXT

Gilligan, Vince. 2007-2013. *Breaking Bad.* Produced for American Movie Classics (AMC) by High Bridge Productions, Gran Via Productions and Sony Pictures Television.

SECONDARY TEXTS

Jones, Mike. 2011. “Episodic Appeal - Patterns of Serialised Stories.” *AFTRS Screen Culture & Research blog,* January 10. http://blogs.aftrs.edu.au/screenculture/?p=656

Mittell, Jason. *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*, pre-publication edition (MediaCommons Press, 2012-13). Accessed September 17, 2013. http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/mcpress/complextelevision/

Schepelern, Peter. 2010. “Den uendelige historie”. *Filmmagasinet Ekko* #50: 74-78

Smith, Murray. 1995. *Engaging Characters. Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

DANISH ABSTRACT

DANSK RESUME

Dette speciale tager udgangspunkt i den forholdsvis nye trend inden for amerikanske tv-serier som omhandler hovedpersoner, der er usympatiske og begår amoralske gerninger. Inden for denne type narrativer er dramaserien *Breaking Bad* en af de mest succesfulde eksempler, der med sin blanding af sort humor og grafisk vold omhandler Walter White, en ganske almindelig kemilærer, som dog efter at få konstateret dødelig lungekræft begynder at fremstille methamfetamin for at kunne sikre sin families økonomiske fremtid.

Opgaven undersøger hvordan sådanne serier formår at tiltrække seere og skabe følelsesmæssigt karakterengagement.

I opgaven bruges Murray Smiths kognitive filmteori som behandler hvordan seeren engagerer sig i fiktive karakterer, hvilket sker på to forskellige plan: Via følelser af henholdsvis empati og sympati. Af disse er sympati den mest interessante, da den omhandler seerens tilknytning til karakteren, hvilken hænger sammen med hvor megen indsigt seeren får i karakteren og dennes motivationer og moralbegreber. Smith inddeler således sin 'Structure of Sympathy' i underkategorierne *recognition, alignment* og *allegiance,* som hver omhandler et niveau af engagement.

I analysen af *Breaking Bad* kom jeg således frem til, at Walter i seriens pilotafsnit fremstilles som en kikset 'underdog', hvis passive holdning betyder at alt og alle omkring Walter synes at være til for at nedgøre ham. Som følge af denne fremstilling danner seeren et ønske om at se Walter frigøre sig fra denne rolle og træde i karakter, hvilket i sidste ende resulterer i at seeren reagerer positivt på Walters beslutning om at involvere sig i narkohandel. I seriens fjerde sæsons finaleafsnit har Walter gennemgået en komplet forvandling til at være 'førerhund' inden for narkohandlens verden, hvilket medfører at hans moralbegreber har gennemgået et drastisk forfald, som kun synes at forværres som afsnittet skrider frem. Til trods for at seeren finder det problematisk at sympatisere med den dybt amoralske Walter, opretholdes alligevel en loyalitet over for hans karakter som resultat af en fængslende karakterskildring og fascinationen omkring Walters transformering fra underdog til førerhund. Selvom seeren ikke billiger den person, Walter har udviklet sig til, findes alligevel en forståelse og retfærdiggørelse af hans handlinger, hvilket udmønter sig i et følelsesmæssigt engagement i hans karakter.