

Breaking Bad and Cinematic Television



ANGELO RESTIVO

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A production of the Console-ing Passions book series

Edited by Lynn Spiegel

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*Not to mention
that most terrible
drug—ourselves—
which we take
in solitude.*

—WALTER BENJAMIN

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Note to the Reader

While this is an academic study, I have tried to write the book in such a way that it will be accessible to the generally educated reader.

The reader need not have had a deep engagement with the series; however, the book presumes a basic familiarity with the characters and larger, overarching story line. Such information is easily available on the web, and I have not prefaced the book with a detailed description of characters or narrative development. Often, I am analyzing single shots or images, or larger recurring stylistic motifs of the series. However, whenever I am describing a scene that seems to require an understanding of the story line leading up to it, I provide the background.

I am hoping that, by the time the book is in print, I will have completed a series of video essays to go along with the argument in chapter 3. Interested readers should go to the Vimeo website and search my name.

Finally: there will be spoilers.

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program at Georgia State University (of which I am a part), my thinking benefited from conversations with Amy Villarejo, Amy Herzog, and Eugenie Brinkema. I also thank my friends Kara Keeling and Rich Cante. Finally, Tim Kelley, my friend dating back to our undergraduate years at the University of Chicago, meticulously (and sometimes ruthlessly!) copyedited every single sentence of the manuscript; any stylistic infelicities that remain are entirely my own.

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The color frame grabs would not have been possible without the generous support of Wade Weast, dean of the new College of the Arts; Greg Smith, director of the new School of Film, Media, and Theatre; and David Cheshier, director of the new Creative Media Industries Institute. (The three “new”s in that sentence are evidence there’s a lot happening in film and media now at GSU.)

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Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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